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THE DREAM READER

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

About 68,000 words

PART ONE

ZAHNIR THE DREAM READER

Chapter One

A Message for Hartfield

Monte Hartfield, city councilman and prospective mayoral candidate for New York, paced restlessly from end to end of the well-appointed study of his Park Avenue townhouse. Between his teeth he gripped the cold stump of a burnt-out cigar. A small spaniel lay on the Persian rug beside the gas fireplace, his beady black eyes tracking the nervous movements of his master.

At forty-five, Monte Hartfield was not ill-looking, and was sometimes spoken of as handsome. His figure was full without being heavy; his well-groomed dark hair and close-trimmed beard, together with an unconscious authority in his bearing, gave him something of a commanding presence. He had cultivated this quality carefully, as befitting a man who had served three years as an officer in the National Guard—though, having seen no active duty, he made no use of the rank.

In fact, Monte Hartfield had made a success of every affair in life, with the lamentable exception of his marriage. Of late his forehead had grown lined, and those associates who had long known him as a man of careful habits had observed, at the midtown club where he lunched almost every day, that whereas he had once been a notable trencherman, he now ate little but drank much.

Suddenly the spaniel sprang up with the electric urgency of the toy breed and began to bark.

Monte Hartfield paused and listened.

"Quiet," he said. "Down."

The dog ran to the study door, sniffing eagerly. A muffled exchange of voices became audible, and Hartfield, after a moment's hesitation, crossed and opened the door. The spaniel ran out yapping in its irritating staccato way, and the expression of hope faded from Hartfield's face as he recognized the tall, fair-haired young woman standing in the entrance hall talking with Connors, his house manager. She wore a field jacket, leather ankle boots, and the kind of unhurried, natural-looking confidence that served as its own fashion statement. Hartfield would have retreated, but the girl glanced up and caught him standing at the study door. He put together a smile and came forward.

"Good evening, Miss Verity," he said, doing his best to sound easy—for of all his wife's circle he liked Margaret Verity the best. "Were you hoping to find Rita at home?"

The girl's expression was faintly troubled. She had the clear skin and steady eyes of someone who took care of herself, but tonight her eyes seemed too bright, and her face was a shade too pale.

"Yes," she replied. "That is, I was hoping she might be."

"I'm afraid I can't say when she'll be back. But please—come in, and I'll have Connors check—"

"No, please don't trouble yourself. I won't stay, thank you. I expect she'll text me when she gets in."

"Any message I can pass along?"

"Well—" She hesitated briefly. "You could tell her, if you would, that I only got home at eight, so I couldn't come any

sooner." She glanced rapidly at Hartfield, worrying her lower lip. "I wish I could have caught her," she added quietly.

"She wanted to see you in particular?"

"Yes. She left a note at my building this afternoon." Again she gave him that faintly troubled look. "Well, I suppose it can't be helped," she added, and extended her hand with a smile. "Good night, Mr. Hartfield. Don't bother with the door."

But Hartfield followed Connors out and walked with Margaret Verity to the top of the front steps. A light November rain drifted through the amber glow of the street lamps, haloing the parked cars along the avenue.

"Miserable night," he said.

"Isn't it?" said the girl with a quick laugh, turning on the step so that the light from the open door caught the flash of her white teeth and the brightness of her upraised eyes. She was pulling on her gloves—good leather, well-broken-in—and Monte Hartfield found himself, not for the first time, silently contrasting her easy, athletic vitality with the carefully wrought, fragile allure of his wife.

She went quickly down the steps to her car, a compact dark Tesla, and got in. She gave a single wave as she pulled away from the curb, and Hartfield watched the red tail-lights dissolve into the wet darkness of the avenue.

When he came back inside and re-entered the study, he stood before the full-length portrait above the fireplace—Rita in the silver-and-black costume she had worn in the third act of *The Maid of the Masque*. If only all his wife's friends were Margaret

Verity's sort, he thought, he might have been spared the corrosive suspicions that had been driving him toward something very close to madness. His mind ran once more through its familiar circuit of doubt and dread. He resumed his pacing—always pacing—unaware that he still held the dead cigar stump between his teeth.

Then came what he had been expecting. His cell phone buzzed on the side table.

Monte Hartfield stared at it. He drew a slow breath, and his color shifted in a way that would have interested a physician. He crossed the room and picked up the phone.

"Yes."

"Mr. Hartfield? This is Spurling."

"Go ahead, Spurling. What do you have?"

Hartfield's voice, deep and ordinarily assured, was not quite steady.

"The subject left Park Avenue by Uber to East Fifty-Seventh Street. She went up to Lucien Calvert's building and was buzzed in."

"And?"

"Twenty minutes later she came out. Calvert was with her. They walked together down to Spring Street in SoHo. Quentin Frayne—"

"Ah," breathed Hartfield.

"—got out of an Uber right there and joined them. All three went upstairs to the offices of some kind of psychic advisor, calls himself Zahnir—'the dream reader.'"

A puzzled expression began to steal over Monte Hartfield's face. At the buzz of the phone he had gone pale. Now the florid color was seeping back.

"Go on," he directed.

"Seven to ten minutes later," resumed Spurling in the flat, methodical tone of a man reading from notes—the tone, Hartfield thought, of a detective giving evidence—"Mr. Frayne came downstairs alone. He tried to get a cab, couldn't. He was agitated. He walked toward Houston. My colleague followed. Near the corner of Houston he got a cab and came back down to Spring Street in it. He ran upstairs and was there four to five minutes. He came back down looking pale and shaken. He let the cab go and walked. Colleague stayed on him. He went into Arnaud's on West Broadway. In the foyer he ran into a man my colleague didn't recognize. After a brief conversation both went in to dinner. They are there now. I'm calling from the corner of Spring and West Broadway."

"Yes, yes. But the lady?"

"An associate of Zahnir's—a man, looks like building staff—came down a few minutes after Mr. Frayne left the first time and walked off. Calvert and your wife are still in Zahnir's suite."

"What!" Hartfield pulled the phone from his ear and checked the time. "But it's past eight o'clock!"

"Yes, sir. The suite is dark, and the rest of the floor has been empty since six. The door to Zahnir's is locked. I knocked. No answer."

"That's absurd. There must be another way out."

"None that I can find, sir. My colleague has just come back. The two men are still at their table."

The color slowly left Monte Hartfield's face.

"Then it's Calvert," he said, barely above a whisper. The hand holding the phone was not steady. "Spurling—meet me at the corner of Spring and West Broadway. I'm on my way now."

He set the phone down and crossed to the intercom panel beside the door.

The dead cigar stump clenched between his teeth, he stood on the study rug with his back to the fire, facing the door.

"Connors."

"Sir?"

"Bring the car around."

"Right away, sir."

Connors withdrew, and Monte Hartfield stood a long moment staring across the room at the portrait above the mantel—his wife in the silver-and-black costume, frozen mid-turn, her smile directed at something just beyond the frame.

The hall clock struck the half-hour.

Chapter Two

The Apartments of Zahnir

It was rather less than two hours earlier on the same evening that Quentin Frayne came out of an artisan chocolate shop on Spring Street carrying a neatly wrapped box. The amber dusk of early November was settling over SoHo, and many of the dealers in rare objects, vendors of fine clothing, and purveyors of overpriced essentials had already lowered their security grilles. Gallery assistants, boutique clerks, and office workers crowded the sidewalks, which at midday had been thronged with the fashionable and the well-heeled. Here a gallery's staff, there a small restaurant's crew, lingered to lock up, calling good night to one another before dispersing toward the subway or pulling out their phones for rides. The working day was over. The city was getting dressed for dinner.

Frayne was about to get into the Uber idling at the curb, his fresh-colored, boyish face wearing an expression of eager expectancy that would have told any experienced observer where he was hurrying. Then, his hand on the car door, that expression changed abruptly to one of sharp suspicion.

A tall, dark man, accompanied by a woman wrapped in gray cashmere and wearing a silk scarf over her hair, had passed on foot along the opposite side of the street. Frayne had caught a glimpse of them through the window.

His smooth brow tightened and his mouth drew into a thin straight line. He fumbled in his jacket pocket for his phone, tapped to cancel the ride, and stepped onto the sidewalk.

Walking at the curb's edge to get around the pedestrian traffic, indifferent to the fact that his good leather oxfords were picking up the wet of the sidewalk, Frayne set off after them. Twenty yards ahead he caught them as they were passing a gallery window from which warm light streamed into the humid dusk. They were walking slowly, and Frayne stepped around in front of them.

"Hey, you two," he said. "Where are you off to? I was on my way to meet you, Rita."

Flushed and slightly boyish, he stood blocking their path, and his annoyance grew when they made no real effort to conceal that his arrival was unwelcome. Rita Hartfield was a small, lovely woman, though some of the richer bronze tints of her hair suggested a colorist's assistance, and her naturally fine complexion was artfully enhanced by makeup. Nevertheless, the flower-like face emerging from the folds of her cashmere wrap, like a rose from gray mist, her soft chin nestled into the fabric, might have explained even in an older man the infatuation that Quentin Frayne was at no pains to hide.

She glanced up at her companion, Lucien Calvert—lean, dark, sardonic, imperturbably composed. "I left you a note, Quentin," she said quickly. She seemed to be in a dangerously high-strung state.

"But I've booked a table and a box," said Frayne, with a touch of juvenile petulance.

"My dear Frayne," said Lucien coolly, "we are worldly men—we've long since stopped expecting consistency from anyone. Mrs. Hartfield has decided to consult some manner of psychic advisor before dining with you this evening. Doubtless she wants reassurance that the show you're taking her to is worth her time."

His smile of sardonic amusement was almost more than Frayne could endure, and though Lucien refrained from looking at Rita as he spoke, his words plainly carried some private meaning, for:

"You know perfectly well I have a particular reason for seeing him," she said.

"A woman's particular reason is a man's feeble excuse," murmured Lucien with practiced rudeness. "Or so the philosophers tell us."

"I was going to meet you at Arnaud's," said Rita hurriedly, glancing again at Frayne. There was a pathetic hesitancy in her manner—the hesitancy of someone adhering to a purpose only through supreme effort.

"Might I ask," said Frayne, "the name of this oracle you're so set on consulting?"

Again she hesitated and glanced at Lucien, but he had turned to study the gallery window with elaborate detachment.

"Zahnir," she said, in a low voice.

"Zahnir!" cried Frayne. "The man who sells incense and claims to read dreams? What an extraordinary idea. Couldn't it wait until tomorrow? He'll surely have closed by now."

"I took the trouble to confirm," replied Lucien, "at Mrs. Hartfield's express request, that the man of mystery is still in session and will receive her."

Beneath the nonchalance he wore it might just have been possible to detect excitement under tight control; and had Frayne been less consumed by jealousy, less fixed on the conviction that Lucien had deliberately cut in on his evening, he could not have missed the fact that Rita was feverishly preoccupied with something entirely unrelated to dinner and a show. But his private suspicions only sharpened.

"Then if the dinner's still on," he said, "may I come along and wait for you?"

"At Zahnir's?" said Rita. "Of course." She turned to Lucien. "Will you wait? There's not much point, since I'm dining with Quentin."

"If I don't intrude," replied Calvert, "I'll walk you as far as the cave of the oracle and then say good night."

The three moved along Spring Street. Quentin Frayne regarded Zahnir as a transparently improvised excuse, concocted on the spot. Had he been less infatuated, his natural sense of dignity would have dictated offering to release Rita from the engagement altogether. But jealousy sharpens the worst instincts and blunts the best. He was determined to attach himself as stubbornly as the Old Man of the Sea clung to Sinbad, until the lie was

unmasked. Rita's visible nervousness and embarrassment he put down entirely to her awareness of his intent.

A cluster of people waiting at a crosswalk made it impossible to walk three abreast, and Frayne, falling back, stepped squarely on the foot of a small man who was following close behind their group.

"Sorry," said the man, suppressing an exclamation of pain—the fault having been entirely Frayne's.

Frayne muttered a distracted apology, too anxious to regain his place beside Rita, who appeared to be speaking quickly and urgently to Lucien.

He caught them up as the two turned in at a lighted doorway. On the wall beside the entrance was a slim directory panel, and among its listings—a yoga studio, a talent management office, a fragrance atelier—appeared a single line in an elegant serif font:

ZAHNIR

Suite 202

Frayne had fully expected Rita to suggest he come back later. But without a word she began to climb the stairs. Frayne followed, Lucien standing aside to let him go first.

On the second floor was a door finished in lacquered panels of dark wood, the surface inlaid with interlocking geometric patterns in brass and ivory. It possessed neither bell nor knocker, but as one stepped onto the threshold the door swung open noiselessly, as if silently inviting the visitor inside. The room discovered was square and richly furnished in a Middle

Eastern manner, lit by a large brass lantern suspended from the ornate ceiling on lengths of chain. The lantern's perforated shell was inset with panels of colored glass, and the result was a warm and intimate illumination in amber and rose. Long-necked jars, narrow-spouted ewers, and broad engraved bowls occupied shadowed niches around the walls. A low divan with vivid cushioned mattresses extended from the doorway around one corner of the room, ending beside a tall cabinet in the Moroccan style, its carved lattice-work shutters closed. Beyond this stood a long, low console bearing small bronze figurines, strands of ancient beads, and stoppered bottles of blue enameled glass. Two glass cases held further antiquities. A faint scent of oud hung in the air.

Lucien entered last, and the door swung silently shut. From behind the carved cabinet a young man stepped out. He wore a white robe, a red sash, and a small red fez. He moved without hurry to a door at the far end of the room, slid it soundlessly open, and bowed with grave composure.

"The Sheikh Zahnir will see you," he said.

It was apparent even to the jealousy-fogged Frayne that Rita was in the grip of some intense inner distress. She turned to him quickly, and he thought her face looked almost haggard, her eyes somehow paler, though he could not be certain this was not a trick of the lantern light. Her voice, when she spoke, was not steady.

"Would you mind going to find a car?" she said. "It's so hard at this hour, and I'll ruin my shoes. I won't be more than a

few minutes." She passed through the open doorway, the attendant stepping aside to let her through. He followed her in but emerged almost at once, reclosed the door, and returned to his station behind the cabinet.

Silence settled over the room. Lucien arranged himself on the divan with easy nonchalance and drew out a slim cigarette case.

"Have one?" he offered.

"No thanks," said Frayne, in a tone of barely suppressed hostility. He was ill at ease and moved restlessly around the room. Lucien lit a cigarette and snapped the spent match into a brass bowl.

"I think," said Frayne abruptly, "I'll go look for a car. Will you be staying?"

"I'm dining at the club," answered Calvert, "but I can wait until you're back."

"As you like," said Frayne. "I don't expect to be long."

He walked quickly to the outer door. It opened at his approach without a sound and closed behind him in the same way.

Chapter Three

Zahnir

Rita Hartfield entered the inner room. The air was heavy with the perfume of frankincense smoldering in a brass vessel set upon a low tray. This was the audience chamber of Zahnir. In marked contrast to the crowded appointments, divans, and cabinets of the outer room, it was sparsely furnished. The floor was thickly carpeted, but save for an ornate inlaid table bearing the tray and its incense burner, and a long, cushioned seat placed directly beneath a hanging lamp burning dimly in a globular green shade, it was bare of decoration. The walls were draped entirely in green curtains, so that except for the painted door through which she had entered, the four sides of the room appeared uniform and without feature.

Having conducted Mrs. Hartfield to the seat, the attendant bowed and withdrew through the same doorway. She found herself alone.

She moved restlessly, staring at the blank wall before her. She tapped the carpet with the toe of her shoe, biting her lower lip, and seemed to be listening. Nothing stirred. Not even the faintest trace of Spring Street's noise reached this place. Rita unfastened her wrap and let it fall back on the cushioned seat. Her bare shoulders looked waxen and unnatural in the strange light falling upon them. She was breathing rapidly.

The minutes passed in unbroken silence. The room was so still that she could hear the faint crackling of the charcoal in

the brass vessel beside her. Wisps of blue-gray smoke rose through the perforated lid, and she began to watch them as though fascinated, they moved so fluidly—like wraiths of serpents creeping up the green draperies.

She sat this way, her foot still tapping, her gaze arrested by the hypnotic movements of the smoke, until at last a sound from the outer world reached the room. A church clock struck the hour of seven, its tone arriving only as a muffled boom through the thick walls and heavy drapery. Almost with the last stroke came the sweeter note of a silver gong from somewhere close at hand.

Rita started, her eyes going instantly to the green-draped wall before her. Her pupils had widened suddenly, and she clenched both hands tight in her lap.

The light above her head went out.

Now that the moment had come—the moment she had moved toward with equal parts hope and terror—long-pent emotion threatened to overwhelm her, and she trembled violently.

Out of the darkness a vague light began to dawn, and within it a shape seemed to take form. As the light increased, the effect was as though part of the wall had grown transparent, revealing the interior of an inner room where a figure was seated in a massive ebony chair. The figure was richly robed in deep burgundy, wearing a white turban. His long slim hands, pale as old ivory, rested upon the arms of the chair, and on the first finger of his right hand gleamed a large talismanic ring. His

face was lowered, but from under heavy brows his abnormally large eyes regarded her without blinking.

The light remained so dim that the details were impossible to discern with any clarity, but that the clean-shaven face of the man with those extraordinary eyes was strikingly and intellectually handsome there could be no doubt.

This was Zahnir, the dream reader, and although Rita had seen him before, his statuesque stillness and the unsettling fixity of his gaze thrilled her with something she could not entirely name.

Zahnir raised his hand slightly in greeting. The large ring glittered in the subdued light.

"Tell me your dream," came a voice with a curious mocking quality, "and I will read its portent."

Such was the set formula with which Zahnir opened all his interviews. He spoke with a faint and not unmusical accent. He lowered his hand again. The gaze of those brilliant eyes remained fixed on the woman's face.

Moistening her lips, Rita spoke.

"Dreams! What I have to say has nothing to do with dreams—it belongs to reality!" She laughed, a sound utterly without mirth. "You know perfectly well why I'm here."

She paused.

"Why are you here?"

"You know! You know!" Suddenly into her voice had come the unmistakable note of hysteria. "Your theatrical tricks don't impress me. I know what you are—a spy, an eavesdropper who

watches and listens! But you may go too far! I am nearly desperate—do you understand me?—nearly desperate. Speak! Move! Answer me!”

But Zahnir preserved his uncanny repose.

“You are distracted,” he said. “I am sorry for you. But why do you come to me with your stories of desperation? You insisted upon seeing me. I am here.”

“And you play with me—taunt me!”

“The remedy is in your hands.”

“For the last time—I will never do it! Never, never, never!”

“Then why do you complain? If you cannot afford to pay for your pleasures, and you refuse to settle things in a simple manner, why do you come to me?”

“Oh, God!” She moaned and swayed dizzily. “Have pity on me! Who are you, what are you, that you can bring ruin on a woman because—” She uttered a choking sound, then continued hoarsely, “Raise your head. Let me see your face. As God is my witness, I am ruined—ruined!”

“Tomorrow—”

“I cannot wait for tomorrow—”

That quivering, hoarse cry betrayed a condition of desperate febrile excitement. Rita was capable of proceeding to the most reckless extremes. Clearly Zahnir recognized this, for slowly raising his hand:

“I will be in touch with you,” he said, and the words came almost hurriedly. “Depart in peace”—the formula with which he concluded every session. He lowered his hand.

The silver gong sounded again, and the dim light began to fade.

Thereupon the woman acted; the long-suppressed outburst came at last. Stepping rapidly to the green translucent veil behind which Zahnir sat, she wrenched it apart and lunged toward the figure in the black chair.

"You will not trick me!" she panted. "Hear me out or I go straight to the police—now—now!"

She seized the hands of Zahnir where they rested motionless on the chair-arms.

Complete darkness came.

Out of it rose a husky, terrified cry—a second, louder cry; and then a long, wailing scream, horror-laden as that of one who has touched some slumbering reptile.

Chapter Four

The Closed Door

Rather less than five minutes later, an Uber pulled up on Spring Street and Quentin Frayne jumped out and ran in at the doorway leading to Zahnir's stairs. He was moving so fast that he collided squarely with a small man who, carrying himself with a pronounced stoop, was slinking furtively out.

The little man staggered at the impact and nearly went down.

"Watch it!" cried Frayne irritably. "What's the matter with you?"

He found himself staring into a peculiar and memorable face— notable for a long, sharp, pointed nose and quick, close-set eyes that darted away from his like a small animal's; a sly face, watchful and closed, topped by a knit cap pulled down over the ears. Something about it nagged at Frayne.

"Wait—" said Frayne. "You're the same man who was walking behind us tonight."

He was fairly certain: the same small stooping figure that had been following himself, Rita, and Lucien Calvert along Spring Street earlier.

A smile intended to be conciliatory appeared on the pale face.

"No, sir, I think you're mistaken, sir—"

"Don't bother," said Frayne. "If I had the time I'd have you picked up as a suspicious loiterer."

He turned from the man and ran up the stairs to the second-floor landing. He stepped onto the threshold before Zahnir's door and waited. The door did not open. He stepped back and forward again, then stamped his foot, with no better result.

Since there was neither bell nor knocker he raised his fist and knocked loudly.

No one answered.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Open up! Calvert! Rita!"

He knocked again, and again, then pressed his ear to the door and held his breath.

Nothing. No sound of movement. No voice. Nothing at all.

He stood back, fists clenched, staring at the closed door, and the color slowly left his face.

"Damn him," he muttered. "He played me."

Passionate and headstrong, he was shaken by a storm of black anger. That Lucien Calvert had engineered this, with Rita's knowledge if not her full participation, he did not doubt, and his long-standing dislike of the man curdled into something rawer. He had regarded Calvert as a rival for a long time, and the fact that his own infatuation was with another man's wife did nothing to diminish his sense of injury.

He pressed his ear to the door again and held it there. Perhaps they were hiding inside. Perhaps Zahnir was in Calvert's pay. Perhaps this was some private arrangement, some agreed-upon place of concealment.

He knew the idea was absurd even as it formed. But he was helpless and he had been made to look a fool, and with a last

muttered curse he turned and went slowly down the stairs. His lingering hope dissolved when he looked both ways along Spring Street and found no trace of them.

He dismissed his waiting car and stood on the sidewalk in the light rain.

He did not notice the small, stooping figure that had taken up a position in the shadow of a recessed doorway across the street, watching him from the darkness with unhurried, professional patience. Nor did he see the heavysset man who emerged from a building entrance ten yards along the block and fell into step a discreet distance behind him as Frayne finally squared his shoulders and headed toward Houston Street.

The little man in the doorway watched until both figures had gone, licked his lips with quiet satisfaction, and drifted back to take up his station below the entrance to Zahnir's building.

Frayne crossed Houston and walked the few blocks to Arnaud's. He pushed through the door and checked his phone. Seven-twenty-five.

He canceled his reservation and was standing in the foyer staring at nothing in particular when the restaurant door opened and a man entered who came straight toward him with his hand extended.

"Good to see you, Frayne," he said. "You look like a man with problems."

Quentin Frayne stared as if he hadn't quite processed what he was seeing, and then the relief in his voice was unmistakable.

"Carrow! Carrow Pasha!"

The frown vanished from Frayne's face. He gripped the other's hand with both of his.

"Just Carrow," said the new arrival quietly, with a brief glance around the room. "The other name tends to open conversations I'd rather not have."

The man called Carrow was of arresting presence. Above medium height, lean and precisely built, his face carried a deep outdoor tan that no northern winter could account for. He wore a close-trimmed beard and mustache, and the bronze of his cheeks made his gray eyes startlingly bright, and threw into sharp relief a frost of silver at his temples that had no business on a man of his apparent age. He had the indescribable quality of someone you would want beside you if things went badly wrong; and looking into that quiet, rather spare face, Quentin Frayne felt suddenly foolish about the evening. From Carrow he knew he could hide nothing. He knew that before long he would be telling this man the whole humiliating story, and that Carrow would not soften his judgment one degree.

"My dear fellow," said Frayne, "you'll have to forgive me for that. When I left you in Kabul the name Carrow Pasha was on every lip. But are you here alone?"

"I am. I only got into the city tonight—into the country this morning."

"Were you coming here to eat?"

"No. I saw you through the window as I was passing. But this will do as well as anywhere. It looks like you're suddenly free. Will you have dinner with me?"

"God, yes," said Frayne. "Hold on—let me see if they can put us back."

He went off in his boyish, impulsive way and Carrow watched him go, his expression quietly amused.

The table was still available, and before long the two were settled over a good dinner. Frayne shed most of his agitation and managed to talk about other things for a while. Then, after a stretch during which he had been covertly watching his companion:

"You know, Carrow," he said, "you're the one man in New York whose company I could have stood tonight."

"My timing has always been fortunate."

"Fortunate." Frayne looked at him with an expression of baffled admiration. "I'll never understand your appearing out of nowhere two hours before the Kandahar operation. Do you remember? I was embedded with the advance unit."

"I remember perfectly."

"Then you were gone the same way, and the CO was a wall on the subject. Next time I saw you, you were walking out of the Green Zone in Baghdad, looking like you'd stopped in for coffee. How you got to Baghdad—God only knows."

"No," said Carrow, with the air of someone giving a matter genuine consideration as he studied his wine glass, "when one looks at it objectively it is a little odd. But tell me—do I know the lady whose absence I have to thank for your company tonight?"

Quentin Frayne looked up blankly.

"Really, Carrow. Did I say anything about a lady?"

"Frayne. I walked past this restaurant and saw a man biting his thumbnail and staring at the door. Then I came in and learned he'd just canceled a table for two."

Frayne laughed, a short, slightly helpless sound. "You always make me feel about twenty-two years old."

"Good."

"Yes, it's good to feel young. It's less good to feel like a young fool, which is exactly what I feel and exactly what I am. Listen."

Leaning across the table so that the lamp caught his flushed, earnest face full on, Frayne told his companion—with rather more embarrassment than he'd expected—the story of the trick Lucien Calvert had played on him. At the end of it:

"What would you do, Carrow?" he asked.

Carrow sat regarding him in silence with a level, assessing look that some people read as arrogance, absently tapping his teeth with the small gold rim of a monocle—a prop he habitually carried and apparently never used for any other purpose—and it was at roughly this moment that a long dark car turned off the avenue onto Spring Street and drew up at the curb below Zahnir's building.

Monte Hartfield got out and told his driver to wait. Ten steps along the sidewalk he was met by a small, stooping figure that separated itself from the shadow of a doorway. The light of a streetlamp fell on a sharp, pointed nose and quick, watchful eyes. Hartfield checked his stride.

"Spurling," he said. "Are they still inside?"

"Most probably, sir." Spurling moistened his lips. "My colleague Rooke reports no one came out while I was away calling you."

"It still seems impossible. Are there no other offices in the building where they might be?"

"I personally observed Mr. Frayne, Mr. Calvert, and the lady go into Zahnir's suite. At that time—roughly ten to seven—all other offices on the floor had been closed for approximately one hour."

"There is absolutely no possibility they came out without being seen?"

"None, sir. I wouldn't have troubled a client if I had any doubt. Here's Rooke now."

Spring Street was quiet and nearly empty at this hour, the rain having cleared most people off the sidewalks. Rooke was sheltering under the overhang of a building entrance nearby. He was a broad, rumpled figure wearing a puffy down jacket over what appeared to be a second, equally bulky garment beneath it, with a baseball cap pulled flat across his forehead and turned up at the back in a way that suggested he had wrestled with it and arrived at a compromise. The effect was one of considerable novelty. He touched the bill of his cap with the air of a man performing a gesture of immemorial dignity.

"All snug, sir," he said, in a hoarse and confidential near-whisper, bending forward to deliver the words about six inches from Hartfield's face. "Tight as a drum. Far as the law's concerned, sir, you're a free man right now."

Monte Hartfield mentally recoiled.

"Take me to the door," he said shortly.

"Yes, sir, right this way, sir. Mind the step. You'll note the street door is still on the latch—last one out of an evening's supposed to lock it, which means the last one hasn't gone yet. Here we are, sir. Door on the right."

The landing was dark, but Rooke produced a small flashlight and directed its beam at the panel bearing the name Zahnir. He settled one hand on his hip with an air of ceremony.

"Tight as a drum," he repeated. "Open and shut, if you'll pardon the expression. As a city councilman and officer of this city you are entitled to summon a police officer and—"

"Be quiet," said Hartfield. "You've been drinking, and I place no reliance on your report. I do not believe my wife or anyone else is on these premises."

The aggrieved eyes of the insulted man bulged to a remarkable degree. "Drinkin'!" he breathed. "Drink—"

But outrage had cost Rooke the rest of his sentence.

"If I may, sir," interrupted Spurling's nasal voice, "I can vouch absolutely for Rooke. Reputation of the agency is at stake. He's worked with us three years. The parties are on the premises exactly as reported."

"Drink—" whispered Rooke.

"I'll thank you both," said Monte Hartfield, and his voice was not quite steady, "to go back downstairs. I may need that light. Will you please both go down."

The two men went, Rooke murmuring indignantly to Spurling on the way, and Monte Hartfield was left standing on the landing with the small flashlight in his hand. He waited until the sound of their footsteps told him they had reached the street. Then he turned and pressed his arm against the closed door and rested his forehead against his sleeve and stood there for a moment in the dark, the flashlight hanging loosely at his side, its beam pooled on the floor.

His lips moved, and almost without sound he murmured his wife's name.

Chapter Five

The Door Is Opened

Quentin Frayne and Carrow came out of Arnaud's and paused on the sidewalk while Carrow lit a long black cheroot.

"Shame to waste those theater tickets," said Frayne. "What do you say we find somewhere for a drink first?"

His mood had improved markedly, and he watched the passing foot traffic with an expression far better suited to his boyish good looks than the anger and humiliation that had sat on him an hour before.

Carrow tossed the spent match into the gutter.

"My obligations for the day are discharged," he replied. "I place myself entirely in your hands."

"Well, then," began Frayne—and stopped.

A dark sedan, its driver briefly held up by a delivery truck blocking the lane, had slowed to a crawl within three yards of where they stood. Frayne seized Carrow's arm.

"Carrow." His voice was tight. "Look. That's Monte Hartfield."

"In the car?"

"Yes, yes—but he has two police with him. What does that mean?"

The car moved off, swinging right across the street and heading clearly for Spring Street. The color left Quentin Frayne's face and he turned to Carrow with an expression that had gone suddenly white.

"My God," he whispered. "Something has happened to Rita."

Without regard for the traffic he plunged off the curb, threading between cars, moving after Hartfield's sedan. He was unaware that his friend was close beside him until, at the corner of Spring Street, a firm hand closed on his shoulder. Frayne spun around in fury. But the grip was immovable, and he found himself looking into the composed face of Carrow.

"Carrow, for God's sake—don't stop me. I have to know what's happened."

"Slow down, Frayne."

Quentin Frayne set his jaw.

"Listen to me. This is not the moment for interference. I—"

"You are about to walk headlong into something very unpleasant, and I am telling you to slow down. In a minute we'll know everything there is to know. But are you genuinely determined to insert yourself openly into Monte Hartfield's affairs?"

"If anything has happened to Rita I'll find Calvert and I'll—"

"You are determined to force yourself on this man, in your present state, at what is clearly a moment of crisis in his life?"

Frayne was deaf to everything prudence and decency might have said to him.

"I'm going to see it through," he said, his voice rough.

"Quite so. I'll stay with you. But try to conduct yourself like a rational adult rather than a public danger, or we are going to fall out very seriously."

Frayne audibly ground his teeth, but the level gray stare was hard to face, and as their eyes met a brief and genuine sympathy softened the lines around Carrow's mouth.

"I understand entirely, old man," he said, putting his arm through Frayne's. "But don't you see how important it is—for everyone, including her—that we handle this without making it worse?"

"Carrow—" Frayne's voice frayed at the edges. "I know I'm being irrational. But I was with her barely an hour ago, and now—"

"And now her husband appears accompanied by a detective and a uniformed officer. What is your standing with Monte Hartfield? Does he know you?"

They were walking quickly along Spring Street.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean does he know you as his wife's friend, or is this something he's been kept in the dark about?"

"There's nothing clandestine about it. I was on my way to their apartment to meet Rita when I spotted her with Calvert this evening."

"Good. That simplifies things somewhat. There's his car."

"Parked at Zahnir's door. What in God's name is happening?"

"It means we will get a poor reception if we simply walk in. Talk to the driver first."

But Frayne had already reached the man, who recognized him with a nod.

"What's going on, Coyle?" he demanded. "I saw police in the car a moment ago."

"Yes, sir. I'm not entirely sure myself. Mr. Hartfield drove here from the house about fifteen minutes ago and told me to wait, then came back and had me drive him to the First Precinct to bring the police. They went in a few minutes ago."

Even as he spoke, a uniformed officer came out of the doorway.

"Move along, please," he said to Frayne and Carrow. "You can't loiter here."

"Officer," said Frayne quickly, "if this concerns Mrs. Monte Hartfield I have information that may be relevant. I was with her tonight."

The officer looked at the two of them—both in evening clothes—and his manner adjusted accordingly.

"Your name, sir?"

"Quentin Frayne. Please tell Mr. Hartfield I'm here. I want to speak to him."

"Wait here, sir." He turned back to the driver. "Hand me that bag you were given at the precinct." Coyle leaned across and passed out a heavy black duffel. The officer took it and went back inside.

"Whatever this is," said Carrow quietly, "we're in it now."

Frayne said nothing, moving restlessly back and forth in front of the entrance in a fever of dread. Presently the officer reappeared.

"Step inside, please."

He led them up to the second-floor landing. It was faintly lit by two flashlights propped on the floor. Four men stood there, all of them watching the stairhead as Frayne and Carrow came up.

Monte Hartfield spoke. His face was the color of ash.

"That you, Frayne?" Quentin Frayne would not have known the voice. "Thank you for coming forward. God knows I need whatever help I can get. You were with Rita tonight. What happened? Where is she?"

"I have no idea where she is," said Frayne. "I left her here with Calvert just after seven."

He stopped, his eyes having found Spurling, whose own gaze slid away and who had begun working his lips in the manner of a dog that has caught sight of the leash.

"I know you," said Frayne. "You've been following me all evening."

He started forward, but:

"Leave it, Frayne," said Hartfield. "That was my doing. He was following my wife, not you. Just tell me—why did she come here?"

Frayne raised a hand to his forehead.

"To consult Zahnir. I watched her go into the inner room myself. Then I went out to get a car, and when I came back the door was locked."

"You knocked?"

"I made considerable noise. No answer. So I left."

Monte Hartfield turned, a figure reduced to something small and helpless, to the plainclothes detective beside him.

"We may as well go ahead, Detective Tranter," he said. "Mr. Frayne's account tells us nothing new."

"Yes, sir," said Tranter. "We have the warrant, and we've given the required announcement. Ackroyd."

The uniformed sergeant stepped forward, set the duffel on the floor, and unzipped it, revealing a compact set of entry tools.

"Try cutting through the panel?" he asked.

"No—no time for that," said Hartfield, his voice cracking. "Use the bar. Force it."

"It doesn't open on hinges," Frayne broke in. "It slides to the right—there's some mechanism under the threshold mat. A pressure plate, I think."

Ackroyd crouched with a flashlight and examined the floor at the base of the door.

"Metal plate," he confirmed. "Weight triggers a lever, which releases the latch if the lock isn't thrown. Lock'll be on the left as the door opens right. Let's see what we can do."

He stood, took the pry bar from the bag, and worked the flat blade into the gap between the door edge and the frame.

"Hold steady," said Tranter, positioning himself at Ackroyd's shoulder.

The dull ring of steel on steel echoed strangely up and down the stairwell. Spurling and Rooke had retreated to the bottom step of the staircase to the floor above and stood watching with the uncomfortable attention of men who have done nothing wrong but feel somehow implicated. Hartfield and Frayne were fixed on the door itself. Carrow, cheroot in the corner of his mouth, observed everything and everyone with quiet equal interest.

"There!" Ackroyd called.

The hammering stopped.

He threw his weight against the bar. A dull crack and a grinding of metal. The door shifted slightly.

"That's where it locks," said Tranter, shining his light into the gap. "Three inches lower. Could be bolted as well."

"I'll get to the bolt," said Ackroyd, the task having fully absorbed him now.

He shifted the bar to the lower panel and attacked it with purpose. A sharp splintering, then a larger crash, and a hole appeared—large enough to pass an arm through.

Tranter reached in, felt around, and let out a short sound of satisfaction.

"Bottom bolt's off. If there's nothing at the top you should be able to force it. Try now, Ackroyd."

The bar went back into position.

"Stand clear!" Ackroyd threw his weight against it, once, again.

"Drive it further in!" said Hartfield, and without warning seized the hammer from the bag and began striking the bar himself, hard and fast. "Now try."

Ackroyd bore down.

"Someone up here—" he said, straining. "Two of us together."

Frayne stepped in and grabbed the bar above Ackroyd's hands, and the two of them pulled.

A sharp report as something inside gave way, more splitting wood—

—and the door rolled open.

A moment of complete silence.

"Anyone in there?" Tranter called out sharply.

Nothing came back from the dark interior.

"Light," said Monte Hartfield.

He stumbled into the room. A thick, sweet reek of perfume swept out past him onto the landing. Frayne snatched up one of the flashlights from the floor and came in behind him.

"Find the switch," said Tranter, following.

Frayne had already found it. The outer room of Zahnir's suite came up in its warm amber light.

Empty.

Frayne crossed quickly to the carved cabinet and pulled the lattice shutters open. No one inside. A chair and a small table. On the table, a laptop, a telephone handset, and a few papers.

"In here!" he called, his voice sharp and high.

He pushed through the doorway into the inner room. The frankincense smell was stronger here, thick and almost suffocating.

"Bring a light—I left one on the cushioned seat."

But Hartfield had taken it up and was already at his elbow. His hand was shaking so badly that the beam lurched and swung—across the carpet, up the green walls, back to the floor.

The inner room was also empty. A ragged gap in the green curtaining showed where the fabric had been torn roughly apart. Then:

"God," said Tranter, very quietly. "Look at that."

A thin dark line was running out from beneath the torn curtains and spreading slowly across the carpet.

Blood.

Monte Hartfield staggered and fell back against the detective, grabbing at him to stay upright. Ackroyd, who had the second light, crossed the room in four strides and wrenched the green drapery from its fittings in one pull.

What had been concealed behind it was a wooden partition—a stout false wall—with a sliding panel at its center. The space beyond was perhaps five feet deep and contained the massive ebony chair. Behind the chair a second partition divided off yet another section, and in one end of that partition was a plain office door. At the back of the chair, three feet off the floor, a small opening like a window or pass-through had been cut into the wood.

A groan from the outer room was followed by the thud of a body going down.

"Mr. Hartfield has fainted," said Tranter. "Somebody—"

"I have him," said the quiet voice of Carrow.

"Carrow—" Frayne's voice dropped to a whisper. "Carrow."

"Touch nothing in there," Tranter called from the outer room, "until I'm back."

But the narrow hidden space was already filling with the rest of them, all but Monte Hartfield, and Spurling, who had gone to help the stricken man.

Flat on the floor between the sliding panel and the ebony chair, arms flung wide, eyes open and fixed on the ceiling, lay Lucien Calvert. His white dress shirt was soaked red from the collar down.

In the hush that had settled over all of them, the footsteps of Detective Tranter were very loud as he crossed to the plain office door, forced it, and swept the inner room with his light.

A barely furnished office. Another door at the far end, half-glazed, giving onto a narrow service corridor. That door was locked.

"Calvert," Frayne breathed. "Do you see it, Carrow? It's Calvert. He's been stabbed."

Sergeant Ackroyd knelt and pressed two fingers carefully against the stained linen over Calvert's chest.

"Dead?" asked Tranter from the office doorway.

"Yes."

"You're saying this is Lucien Calvert?" Tranter looked at Frayne.

"Yes."

Detective Tranter removed his hat. The smell of Carrow's cheroot drifted in above the heavy oriental perfume that saturated the place.

"Ackroyd."

"Sir."

"Try that phone in the office—see if it's live. Looks like an extension from the outer room."

While the others stood in a loose circle around the still figure on the floor, Ackroyd went into the office.

"Hello—yes." A brief pause. "It's working, sir. What number?"

"Gentlemen," said Tranter, his tone carrying the flat authority of someone accustomed to making himself heard, "I am going to call this in to the precinct. No one leaves these premises."

In the silence:

"First Precinct," Ackroyd called out. "Asking for the duty captain."

Chapter Six

Red Halloran

Detective Lieutenant Halloran, of the NYPD Major Case Squad, stood before the cold and undecorated radiator in his office at One Police Plaza, one hand thrust into the pocket of his blue reefer jacket and the other twirling a malacca cane with a heavy silver mount that must have provoked the envy of every patrol sergeant who had ever laid eyes on it. Detective Lieutenant Halloran wore a narrow-brimmed bowler hat with two ventilation holes placed conspicuously above the band. He wore it tilted forward and to the right.

"Red Halloran" had earned his nickname without effort, for the man was red as a lit match. His hair, cropped close as a middleweight's, was a vivid and unapologetic red, as was his short, wiry, combative mustache. His complexion was red, and from beneath straight red brows he regarded the world with a pair of unblinking, intolerant steel-blue eyes. He never smoked in the office—his private tastes ran to a short clay pipe and a particular cut of tobacco difficult to find in Manhattan—but he chewed gum incessantly, and as he chewed he revealed a perfect row of large, white, and distinctly predatory teeth. High cheekbones and prominent jaw muscles added to the general impression of barely-contained aggression.

But next to that aggression, which was the first and most unsettling thing to announce itself to anyone meeting him, the defining quality of Detective Lieutenant Halloran was his

precision. Of no more than medium height but with the shoulders of a welterweight, he had slim straight legs and the feet, improbably, of a dancing master. His attire, from his squared collar down to his neat black brogues, was without flaw. His jacket fitted him as though constructed on the premises, but his trousers were cut so unfashionably narrow that the line of a well-developed calf was perfectly legible. The hand working the cane was small, freckled, lightly downed, and notably muscular. Red Halloran was built on the lines of a whippet but carried the disposition of a dog bred for considerably rougher work.

The phone rang. Halloran moved his square shoulders in a way that suggested a wrestler settling his grip, set the cane on the radiator, and crossed to the desk.

"Yes," he said. His voice was high-pitched and precise.

He listened for a moment.

"Very good, sir."

He replaced the handset, took his rain jacket from the back of the chair and the cane from the radiator. He rolled his gum from one side of his mouth to the other, switched off the desk lamp, and walked out of the room.

He moved along the corridor with a quiet, lithe step, rolling from the hips and swinging his shoulders. Before a door marked Deputy Chief-Major Case he paused. From his breast pocket he produced a small silver convex mirror and examined himself in it with brief, critical attention. He adjusted his tie a fraction, returned the mirror, knocked, and went in.

The Deputy Chief was a man built on a large and generous scale, with a military bearing, tired eyes, and the mildly baffled manner of someone who had spent thirty years attempting to impose order on chaos and had reached a philosophical accommodation with his failure. He looked up from a desk buried under printouts, folders, and three phones and met Halloran's fierce gaze with one that was nearly apologetic.

"Ah, Lieutenant Halloran. Yes. I told you to come in. I should have been out of here two hours ago. It's remarkable how the work of five people can land on one desk. This is yours, is it not?"

He slid a single sheet across the desk. Halloran looked at it hard.

"Murder," Halloran said. "Lucien Calvert. Yes, sir, I am still on duty."

His speech, in moments of engagement, would have suggested to someone in the next room the operation of a machine pressing out clean, individual components. Every syllable received equal weight; certain words ended with an audible click of his teeth.

"Yes," said the Deputy Chief. "The responding detective—someone—has everyone held at the scene. You'd better get down to the First Precinct first for the full report. It appears to be a significant case."

He added this last observation with the air of a man who found most things significant in a weary sort of way.

"Very good, sir. With your permission I will take a moment to look at Calvert's background."

"Of course, of course." The Deputy Chief waved a large hand toward a terminal on the side table.

Halloran set his rain jacket and cane on a chair, sat, and pulled up a search. He read with the economical attention of a man who absorbs only what is necessary.

"Here we are," he said, just above a murmur. "Calvert, Lucien. Georgetown undergrad. Yale Law, didn't finish. Private equity, emerging markets. Six years in the Gulf, three in Southeast Asia. Significant social connections. No priors. No flags." He paused. "No flags."

He stood, took up his jacket and cane, and turned to the door.

"Very good, sir."

"Certainly. Good night, Lieutenant."

"Good night, sir."

"Oh-Lieutenant Halloran."

Halloran turned, his hand on the door frame.

"Sir?"

"I-what was I going to say. Yes. The profile of the deceased will attract considerable public attention. You follow me. Therefore I have selected you for your well-known discretion." A brief pause. "I encountered Calvert at a function last spring. Very unfortunate. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Halloran moved back along the corridor. The Deputy Chief was a man for whom he had genuine and considered respect. The mild

confusion was theater; behind it was an administrator of unusual capacity and essentially inexhaustible energy.

He looked into the next office.

"Coombes."

Detective Coombes—short, pleasantly round, with lank black hair and an expression of habitual sly contentment—came to his feet with the alacrity of a man who has learned what happens when he does not.

"First Precinct," said Halloran. "You're with me." He turned and went.

Coombes, collecting his jacket and his notebook, followed at a trot.

They took an unmarked car. Halloran drove, chewing with focused industry. Coombes, having recovered his breath, ventured conversation.

"Something significant?"

"Yes," said Halloran. "Do they send me to supervise parking disputes?"

Coombes, who knew the man and recognized the register, said nothing further for the entire drive. At the First Precinct Halloran went in alone, and came back out four minutes later.

"Spring Street," he said to Coombes. "Corner of West Broadway."

"Robbery?"

"Murder. And apparently there is no shortage of evidence. Sharpen your pencil."

"Oh," said Coombes.

They arrived almost immediately. Halloran left the car at the curb and set off along Spring Street with his quiet, swinging stride, looking about him with careful attention. The rain had stopped, but the air was damp and cold, and the sidewalk was nearly empty.

A dark sedan was parked in front of Zahnir's building, the driver walking small circles on the sidewalk and working his hands together against the cold. Halloran stopped.

"That car."

The driver looked up.

"Whose is it?"

"Mr. Monte Hartfield's, sir."

Halloran turned to the entrance. The street door was on the latch. He produced a small flashlight, directed it at the building directory, and stood a moment chewing and studying the name at Suite 202. Then he went up.

Zahnir's door was closed. Halloran knocked sharply and it was opened at once by Sergeant Ackroyd. Halloran went in, Coombes behind him.

The room was well populated. Monte Hartfield, gray-faced and hollowed out, sat on the divan beside Quentin Frayne. Carrow stood near the carved cabinet, smoking. The three of them had apparently been talking with a trim, clean-shaven man whose bag and folded umbrella rested on one of the inlaid tables. Just inside the inner doorway, conspicuously uncomfortable, stood Spurling and Rooke. Detective Tranter had been questioning them when the knock came.

Halloran chewed in silence for a moment, turning the fierce blue stare on each face in sequence, then:

"Who is in charge?"

"I am," said Tranter.

"Why is the street door open?"

"I thought—"

"Don't think. Lock the door. Post your sergeant inside it. Nobody leaves. Anyone who comes in, hold them. Where is the body?"

"This way," said Tranter quickly, and over his shoulder: "Ackroyd—downstairs."

He led Halloran toward the inner room, Coombes on his heels. Spurling and Rooke pressed back to let them through. Frayne and Hartfield moved to follow. At the doorway Halloran turned.

"All of you will please stay where you are." His gaze found Carrow. "And if the gentleman with the cheroot is not yet satisfied that he has thoroughly eliminated every clue perceptible to the sense of smell, I can have someone run out for additional combustibles."

He dropped his rain jacket and cane on the divan and went into the inner room, working with savage patience at a seemingly indestructible piece of gum.

The torn green curtain had been folded aside and the lights turned on throughout the hidden rooms. Lucien Calvert lay beside the ebony chair, pale and fixed, staring at the ceiling with an expression that had stopped being an expression.

Halloran moved through the room with his quick, scanning eyes going everywhere at once. He entered the narrow space between the two partitions and stood over the body, looking down without speaking. Then he dropped to one knee and brought his face close to Calvert's.

"He has not been moved?"

"No."

Halloran bent lower, studying a discolored abrasion on Calvert's forehead. His glance moved from the forehead to the carved ebony chair. Still on one knee, he drew from his breast pocket a magnifying lens in a chamois sleeve and began to examine the back and sides of the chair with methodical care. Once he touched a protruding point of the carving lightly with one finger and then examined the finger through the glass. He studied the dead man's hands, his nails, his clothing. He crawled a short distance across the carpet, peering at the surface.

He stood up abruptly. "The doctor."

Tranter withdrew and returned at once with the clean-shaven man.

"Doctor," said Halloran. "Your name. Coombes—notes."

"Dr. Wilbur Carlow. I have a practice on West Houston Street."

"Who called you?"

"Detective Tranter telephoned approximately half an hour ago."

"You examined the deceased?"

"I did."

"You avoided moving him?"

"It was unnecessary to move him. He was dead, and the wound was in the left shoulder. I opened his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt. Nothing more."

"How long dead?"

"He had been dead no more than an hour when I saw him. Probably less."

"Cause of death?"

"The penetration of a long, narrow-bladed instrument. A stiletto, or something comparable."

"Why a stiletto?" Halloran's eyes sharpened. "Have you seen a stiletto wound before?"

"Several. Two in Brooklyn, one in Miami. They're characterized by very little external bleeding."

"The heart?"

"Yes. The blow was delivered from behind."

"How do you know?"

"The direction of the wound is forward. I've seen a nearly identical wound in a domestic violence case—a narrow kitchen knife, also from behind."

"He would fall on his face."

"Almost certainly, yes."

"But he is lying on his back."

"In my opinion he was moved after death."

"Correct. I know he was. Good night, doctor. See him out, please, Tranter."

Dr. Carlow appeared mildly startled by the speed of this dismissal, but Halloran's eyes had already returned to the body, and the doctor, murmuring good night, took his leave with Tranter.

"Close that door," Halloran said to Tranter's back. "Call when you want me, you mean. Coombes—stay. Have you got all that?"

Coombes scratched the back of his head with his pencil.

"Yes," he said, with mild uncertainty. "Except the word after 'narrow-bladed instrument comparable to a'—I've got what appears to be 'steelhatto.'"

Halloran looked at him.

"Stiletto," he said. "S-t-i-l-e-t-t-o. Stiletto."

"Ah," said Coombes. "Thank you."

Silence between the two detectives. Halloran chewed, studying the gray face of Lucien Calvert. Then:

"Go through every pocket."

Coombes set his notebook on the seat of the ebony chair and went to work. Halloran stepped into the inner office. A desk with a phone and a laptop, a locked steel cabinet, two chairs. On one chair lay a folded overcoat and a cap. He checked the coat pockets—empty. Inside the cap a strip of tape bore the initials L.P. He noted the small pass-through window cut into the partition above the desk, through which the ebony chair was visible in the room beyond. He tried the locked cabinet—solid. He tried the far corridor door—also locked. He stood a moment at the window aperture, rolled his gum thoughtfully, and went back out.

"Nothing," said Coombes.

"Define nothing."

"His pockets are empty. Every one of them."

"Good. Note it. He's wearing a real pearl dress stud and a good signet ring. Also a gold watch—face broken, hands stopped at seven-fifteen. That was when he died." Halloran straightened. "He was stabbed from behind as he stood where I am standing. He fell forward, struck his forehead on the leg of the chair, and lay face down."

"Got it," murmured Coombes. "What broke the watch?"

"The fall. There are small fragments of watch crystal in the carpet that mark the original position of the body precisely. And for the love of reason, stop smiling."

Halloran threw open the door.

"Who first found the body?" he demanded.

"I did," said Frayne, coming forward. "Carrow and I together."

"Carrow Pasha," said Coombes helpfully from behind, reading from his notes.

Halloran's teeth came together with an audible snap. "I am not aware of anyone by that name in the room."

Carrow smiled without warmth.

"A nickname I acquired working overseas," he said. "My name is Greville Carrow."

Halloran glanced back. "Notes, Coombes. Ears open." He looked at Frayne. "Your name."

"Quentin Frayne."

"Who are you and what is your connection to this matter?"

"I—" Frayne paused and glanced at Carrow. He understood that the first mention of Rita Hartfield's name in the police record would have to come from him.

"Speak up, Mr. Frayne," said Halloran. "Coombes is constitutionally hard of hearing."

Frayne's face tightened and his eyes went bright.

"I would appreciate it, Lieutenant," he said, "if you could bear in mind that the dead man was a personal acquaintance and that other people I care about are caught up in this."

"Coombes will bear it in mind," replied Halloran. "He keeps notes."

"Now look here—"

Carrow put his hand on Frayne's shoulder.

"Let it go, Frayne." He turned his level gaze on Halloran, turning the cord of his monocle slowly around one finger. "I will observe, Lieutenant Halloran—since that appears to be your name—that your manner of conducting an inquiry is not consistently characterized by any great refinement."

Halloran chewed, meeting Carrow's eyes with an unblinking and entirely unimpressed stare. He moved his shoulders in that slight wrestler's roll.

"For my conduct I answer to the Deputy Chief," he said. "And if he finds it wanting, he is welcome to my written resignation at any hour of the day or night he finds himself short of something to start a fire with. If it would not inconvenience you to remain quiet for two minutes, I will continue my examination of this witness."

Chapter Seven

Further Evidence

The examination of Quentin Frayne was interrupted three times by calls from the First Precinct, and the growing irascibility with which Halloran received each one gave clear testimony to the unsatisfactory nature of the reports. Then the medical examiner arrived, and Ackroyd earned Halloran's considerable displeasure by abandoning his post at the street door to escort the doctor upstairs.

"If inspired idiocy is admissible as evidence," Halloran announced to the room, "the person responsible for this is as good as convicted." He turned the fierce blue stare on Frayne. "Thank you, Mr. Frayne. That will be all from you."

"Do you want me to stay?"

"No. Tranter—see these two gentlemen past the officer downstairs."

"Now just a moment!" Frayne's compressed emotions had found their limit. "I am not going to be herded around at your convenience while an unhappy woman is out there somewhere—while you stand here doing absolutely nothing—"

"I realize," Halloran said, showing his teeth in a way that had nothing of a smile in it, "that if you are not on the other side of that door in ten seconds there is going to be a considerable disturbance on the staircase."

Frayne, white with fury, was drawing breath for something that would almost certainly have made things worse, when Carrow took his arm in a grip that left no room for argument.

"Frayne." The word was quiet and final. "You leave with me now or I leave without you."

The two walked out, Tranter behind them. As they went:

"Read me the times," Halloran said to Coombes, with the undisturbed air of a man who has dealt with far worse interruptions. "Not the substance—just the times as given."

Coombes consulted his notebook with mild unease.

"'About six-thirty,'" he began. "'A quarter to seven.' 'Seven o'clock.' 'Seven twenty-five.' 'Eight o'clock.'"

"Stop," said Halloran. "That's enough."

He turned a baleful eye on Rooke, who had stationed himself at the most distant point from Halloran that the room's dimensions allowed, and was watching with the expression of a man counting down to something unpleasant.

"Who is the individual in the layered outerwear?"

"Sidney Rooke," said that greatly aggrieved man, in a hoarse and dignified voice.

"And what exactly is Sidney Rooke doing in my crime scene?"

"I'm employed by Caudle's Detective Agency, and—"

"Oh!" Halloran moved his shoulders and crossed the room until he was at extremely close range of Rooke's purple face.

"Caudle's Agency! Well, well." He pivoted to fix the same attention on Spurling. "You. I know you, don't I?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," said Spurling, beginning his characteristic lip-moistening. "The Pelham Bay matter. We have been retained in connection with—"

"You have been retained!"

He swung around sharply to face Monte Hartfield. An angry observation died before it left his mouth. What he saw instead was a man who had been emptied—sitting alone, colorless, diminished to something much smaller than his ordinary size. A subtle change moved through the fierce eyes, and when Halloran spoke again the high-pitched voice had dropped to something approaching gentleness.

"You had engaged these men, sir, to watch—"

He paused. Tranter had come back in. From the inner rooms came the quiet, methodical sounds of the medical examiner at work.

"To watch my wife, Lieutenant. Thank you for the discretion, but the whole world will know by morning. I had better start adjusting to that fact."

The pallor in Hartfield's face had reached a degree that began to constitute a medical question. He swayed slightly and put both hands out in a groping, unseeing way. Halloran stepped forward and steadied him.

"All right, sir. Take a moment. It's been a severe shock. And I want you to understand—your first fear, that your wife had been harmed—it appears that is not the case."

"But there's so much you'll need to know from me—"

"Tomorrow will do for that. I have enough to keep me here all night as it is. Come along. I'll walk you down to your car. Take my arm."

Monte Hartfield got to his feet with the careful movements of a man testing whether his legs will hold. He had known about the cardiac history on his father's side, but he had never until this moment felt what that inheritance might mean. He was physically ill.

"Lieutenant"—the voice was barely there—"have you any sense of what might explain—"

"Mrs. Hartfield's disappearance? Don't distress yourself, sir. I won't say I have a theory. But I will say that in my judgment she will turn up. And soon."

"God bless you," Hartfield murmured, as Halloran steered him toward the landing.

Tranter held back the sliding door, whose mechanism had been broken in the forced entry so that it now rested permanently half-open. The two men disappeared down the stairs.

"Odd, isn't it," said Rooke, in a philosophical undertone, once the footsteps had faded, "that a man takes on like that over a woman he was fixing to divorce."

"Hilarious," said Tranter, whose temper had been considerably worn by his evening in Halloran's company. "Have a good long laugh."

He went into the inner room to check on the medical examiner's progress. Rooke stared after him with the expression

of a man who feels the universe has turned against him personally.

"You don't get much in the way of sympathy from these people, Spurling," he observed. "That one's nearly as bad as the other one."

Spurling produced a thin and somewhat queasy smile.

"Red Halloran is a holy terror," he agreed, in a murmur, cutting his eyes briefly toward Coombes, who was reviewing his notes at the far end of the divan. "Heads up."

"Right then," said Halloran, coming back into the room with his characteristic rolling stride. "What's the conspiracy? Working out how to obstruct justice?"

He stood with both hands in his jacket pockets, feet planted wide, the fierce gaze moving from Spurling to Rooke and back again. Neither representative of Caudle's Agency found anything useful to say.

"How long had you been watching Mrs. Hartfield?" Halloran demanded.

"Nearly a fortnight," said Spurling.

"Written record?"

"Yes."

"Current through tonight?"

"Yes."

"Dictate it to Sergeant Coombes."

He turned on his heel and crossed to the divan where his rain jacket lay. With quick, methodical movements he removed his jacket and the slim-cut vest beneath it, folded both, and placed

them in a neat stack beside the jacket. The bowler hat remained at its angle. He deposited his current cud of gum in the brass bowl, produced a small foil packet from his shirt pocket, unwrapped a fresh piece, and put it in his mouth. The packet went back to its place. He stood slim and precise in his shirtsleeves, looking around the room with the focused attention of a man who has sent everyone else out of his head and is now entirely alone with a problem.

"Now then," he said quietly to himself. "What about it."

Chapter Eight

Halloran Consults the Oracle

The church clock on Skillman Avenue was striking one in the morning as Detective Lieutenant Halloran turned his key in the front door of his house on a quiet street in Sunnyside, Queens.

A light was burning in the hallway. From the small dining room on the left, the reflection of a gas fireplace danced orange on the white paint of the half-open door. Halloran hung his hat, cane, and rain jacket on the rack and went in, moving quietly, and turned on the light.

A modestly furnished and scrupulously neat room presented itself. On the hearthrug a Manx cat lay dozing beside a pair of carpet slippers. The table had been set with a cold supper, the plates covered. At a bottle of Guinness Extra Stout Halloran directed a look of particular appreciation.

He exhaled a long breath of contentment and opened the bottle. Having poured a glass of the dark and foaming liquid and addressed an evidently urgent thirst, he explored under the covers and presently was seated before a spread of sliced ham, sharp cheddar, tomatoes, and brown bread.

A door opened somewhere upstairs.

"Is that yourself, Dan?" inquired a deep but musical female voice.

"Sure it is," replied Halloran; and no one who had heard the high official tones of the imperious Detective Lieutenant would

have supposed them capable of such softening. "You should have been asleep hours ago, Mairi."

"Have ye to go out again?"

"I do, bad luck. But don't bother coming down. I've everything I need."

"If 'tis a new case I'll come down."

"It's the devil's own case. But you'll freeze."

Sounds of movement in the room above, and then footsteps on the stairs. Mrs. Halloran appeared in the doorway, enveloped in a woollen dressing gown that quite obviously belonged to her husband. Halloran directed at her a look from which all fierceness had been entirely erased, replaced by something that had not diminished one degree in ten years of marriage. And indeed Mairi Halloran rewarded it. Half an inch taller than Halloran, she came in with her long dark hair neatly braided, and it seemed to her husband—who had remained her devoted and somewhat astonished admirer—that he saw before him the clear-eyed young woman he had met and pursued with characteristic single-mindedness on the shores of Loch Broom a decade before. Their neighbors in Sunnyside considered Mrs. Halloran a reserved and rather proud woman who kept largely to herself since her husband's promotion; and Red Halloran's reputation in the precinct was that of an aggressive and unsociable man. Which made the scene in the dining room of that small house something that would have profoundly surprised anyone who knew them only by reputation.

Halloran had but one point of long-standing contention with Mairi. He was a devout Roman Catholic, and for the first several years of their marriage had maintained with bulldog persistence the hope of bringing her into the faith of Rome. She had remained true to the Scottish Free Church in whose precepts she had been raised, and eventually Halloran acknowledged defeat and admired her all the more for the Caledonian stubbornness that had produced it. Many a heated exchange had he held with Father Donoghue on the Woodside parish question, but of late years he had grown reconciled to parting ways on Sunday mornings; and as the early Mass was concluded before the Presbyterian service began, he was regularly to be found on the steps of a certain church on Queens Boulevard waiting for his unyielding wife.

He pulled her down onto his knee and kissed her.

"It's twelve hours since I saw you," he said.

She settled her arm along the back of the chair, her dark head close beside his fiery one.

"I knew ye had a new case on," she said, "when it grew so late. How long can ye stay?"

"An hour. No more. There's a great deal to manage before the morning papers come out. By the time people are eating breakfast, everyone in the city—including whoever did this—will know I'm in charge. I'd give a great deal to muzzle the press."

"'Tis a murder, then? Lord gi'e us grace. Ye'll be wanting to tell me?"

"Yes. I'm completely stuck."

"Ye've time for a rest and a smoke. Put your slippers on."

"There isn't time for that, Mairi."

She stood up and lifted the slippers from the hearth.

"Put your slippers on," she said again, in exactly the same tone.

Halloran stooped without another word and began to unlace his brogues. Meanwhile his wife brought from the side table a tobacco tin and a short Irish clay pipe. Slippers on, Halloran filled the blackened bowl with deliberate care, teasing the strong Irish twist carefully in his palm first. He managed to light it without incident, which remained somewhat mysterious given the proximity of the flame to his mustache, and presently was producing clouds of dense and pungent smoke with every evidence of deep satisfaction.

"Now then," said his wife, settling onto the arm of the chair. "Tell me, Dan."

What followed was the procedure that had characterized the beginning of every successful case in Halloran's career. He laid out the full complexity of the affair on Spring Street, rapidly and precisely, and Mairi Halloran considered it with the curious and almost preternatural detachment that was her particular gift—the ability to see from the outside what was invisible to the man immersed in it. With the clarity of a trained observer Halloran described Zahnir's suite, the exact location of the body, the construction of the rooms and hidden partitions. He gave the essential points from each witness, quoting exact times. Mairi Halloran, staring straight ahead at something only she could see, listened without interruption until he had finished. Then:

"There are really but two rooms," she said, in a far-away voice. "But the second of these is partitioned into three parts?"

"That's it."

"A door from the landing opens into the first room, a door from a passage opens into the second. Where does that passage lead?"

"From the main staircase along beside Zahnir's rooms to a small back stair. The back stair runs from top to bottom of the building, from the far end of the same hallway as the main stair."

"There's no other way out but by the front door?"

"No."

"Then if the Caudle man's evidence is beyond question, Mrs. Hartfield and Zahnir were still on the premises when you arrived?"

"Exactly. I had that confirmed at the precinct before I went on to Spring Street. The whole building was surrounded within five minutes of my arrival, and it still is."

"What other offices are in that passage?"

"None. Blank wall on the left, one door on the right—the one into Zahnir's office. Other premises on the same floor are across the main landing."

"What premises?"

"A small law office and a real estate broker."

"The floor below?"

"Entirely occupied by a women's clothing boutique, Renard."

"The top floor?"

"Montero Tobacco Imports, a talent management office, and an electrician."

"No more?"

"No more."

"Where does the back stair open on the top floor?"

"In a corridor identical to the one alongside Zahnir's. Two windows on the right overlooking a narrow roof, and on the left is Montero. The other offices are across the landing."

Mairi Halloran gazed into the middle distance.

"Zahnir and Mrs. Hartfield could have come down to the first floor or gone up to the top floor without being seen by the Caudle man," she said, as though noting weather.

"But they couldn't have reached the street, Mairi!"

"No. They couldn'a have gained the street."

Silence again, her husband watching her with patient expectation. Then:

"If Lucien Calvert was killed at a quarter past seven—the time his watch stopped—the attendant did not kill him. From the Caudle's evidence the attendant had left before then." She paused. "Mrs. Hartfield?"

Halloran shook his head.

"By every account, a slight woman," he said. "It was a strong hand that struck that blow."

"Zahnir?"

"Most probably."

"Mr. Frayne came back with a car and went upstairs, from Caudle's evidence, at about a quarter past seven, and came down five minutes later very pale and agitated."

Halloran enveloped himself and his wife in another stratum of dense smoke.

"We have only Frayne's own word that he didn't go in," he said. "But I believe him. He's a hot-headed fool, but straight."

"Then it was Zahnir," said Mrs. Halloran. "Who is Zahnir?"

Her husband gave a short, humorless laugh.

"That is precisely the point at which I ran aground," he said. "We've had reports on him at the office—we know that under the cover of dealing in imported perfumes he was running some kind of psychic consultation business, and he managed to avoid prosecution cleanly. It took me over an hour tonight to work out the mechanism for the thought-reading effect in there. It's a sophisticated stage magician's trick, worked from the inner room. But who Zahnir actually is, or where he's from, I know no more than the man in the moon."

"The perfume," said the far-away voice.

"Yes, Mairi. The outer room is a sort of small scent boutique. Little decorative bottles of Zahnir preparations—creams, perfumes, incense—and a stock of antique-style objects, beads, small bronzes, and so forth, which may be genuine for all I know."

"No books or correspondence?"

"Nothing. His own marketing materials, a phone directory, nothing more."

"The office cabinet?"

"Bare as a bone."

"The place was stripped by the same people who emptied the dead man's pockets," she said, in the same distant tone. "Mr. Frayne said he had a package with him. Where did he leave it?"

"Mairi, you're extraordinary," said Halloran with unaffected admiration. "The box was on the divan in the outer room, exactly where he said he'd left it before going out for the car."

"Does any of the evidence establish whether Mrs. Hartfield had been to Zahnir's before?"

"Yes. She went fairly regularly to buy perfume."

"Not for the consultations?"

"According to Frayne, to buy perfume."

"Had Frayne been there with her before?"

"No. Calvert seems to have been her regular companion for those visits."

"Do you think she was his mistress?"

"I believe Frayne suspects something of that kind."

"And Frayne himself?"

"He's a more recent fixture in her life than Calvert was. But I suspect it was Frayne her husband was really worried about."

"Do ye think the poor man had cause, Dan?"

"No," said Halloran, without hesitation. "I don't. The boy is young and well-off and thoroughly infatuated, but I believe she simply liked having him around. She was a stage actress

before she married Hartfield, Frayne is lively company, and it's a common enough arrangement that means nothing at all."

"I dinna ken such people," said Mairi Halloran, in a different voice—sharper, and slightly sad. "They almost deserve what they get, in a way. They drift into things for want of anything better to do." She paused. "Where did Calvert live?"

"East Fifty-Seventh Street—just a few blocks from the Hartfields."

"Ye told me he kept only two people: a housekeeper who came in by the day, and a personal assistant—a foreigner?"

"An American citizen by his own account, named Juan Moreno. Calvert's man for about three years."

"Ye dinna like Juan Moreno."

"He is a deeply unpleasant individual," said Halloran, with sudden heat. "I am watching Moreno very attentively. Coombes is going through Calvert's papers now. The man seems to have had no family living, and I can't find that he even kept a lawyer."

"Ye'll be searching for the attendant?"

"Yes. We'll have him by morning, and then we'll know who Zahnir is. Meanwhile—in which of the offices is Zahnir hiding?"

Mairi Halloran was silent long enough that her husband repeated the question.

"In which of the offices is Zahnir hiding?"

"In none of them," she said, in the distant voice. "Ye surrounded the building too late, Dan."

"But Spurling was at the door all night!"

"It doesna matter. They're gone."

Halloran scratched his close-cropped head with barely suppressed agitation.

"You're always right, Mairi. But I can't for the life of me—never mind. When we have the attendant we'll soon have Zahnir."

"Aye," said his wife. "If ye haven't got Zahnir already."

"Mairi! This is making it darker, not lighter!"

"It's not clear enough yet, Dan. But behind this mystery of Lucien Calvert's death there is a darker mystery still—a great deal darker. This is the biggest case ye've ever had. Don't look for Zahnir. Look to find why the woman went to him. And try to understand the meaning of the small window behind the big chair." She seemed to be watching something at a great distance. "Yes—watch the man Moreno—"

"But—Mrs. Hartfield—"

"Is alive."

"You don't think she's dead?"

"She is worse than dead." The distant look vanished from her eyes without warning and they filled with tears. She turned to her husband with sudden urgency. "Oh, Dan. Ye must find her. Ye must find her. She is not a wicked woman—she is a sick woman, and she is in the grip of something that will not let go of its own accord, and she is suffering in a way ye and I canna easily imagine—" Her voice broke.

"My dear," he said, putting his arms around her. "What is it? What do you see?"

She pressed the tears from her eyes and tried to compose herself. "'Tis something very like the second sight, Dan," she

said simply. "And it's slipped away from me again. I almost had the whole of it—oh, there's something horrible in it, and cruelty and waste, and it's been going on a very long time."

The mantel clock began to chime the hour. Halloran was watching his wife's face with the mixture of steady admiration and honest bewilderment that she had produced in him since the day they met. She looked so entirely capable and placid and clear-eyed that the strange and intermittent gift that visited her always struck him newly, as though for the first time.

"God keep us all," he said, kissed her thoroughly, and stood up. "Back to bed. I must go. I have Monte Hartfield to see in the morning as well."

A few minutes later he was moving through the empty streets, his mind occupied almost entirely with domestic reflections, the professional matters that should properly have been claiming his attention having been gently displaced. As he passed the mouth of a narrow alley near the elevated train station, the gleam of his silver-mounted cane caught the attention of two men who had positioned themselves in the shadows on either side of the entrance with the patient stillness of experienced work. The street was empty in both directions.

Twenty paces past the alley mouth they came off the wall and closed in from behind. The taller of the two reached him first. He received a sharp backhanded blow to the face that knocked him sideways into a parked car.

The man they had followed turned around.

"If you two want the full treatment," he said, in a voice of flat and cheerful menace, "say the word and I'll put you both on the ground."

As he turned, the light of a streetlamp fell full on the red hair, the red mustache, and the savage blue eyes.

A strangled sound came from the shorter man.

"Oh no. Nino—it's Red Halloran."

They ran. Halloran watched their retreating figures with a grin of fierce and uncomplicated satisfaction. He turned back to the avenue, swinging his cane, the night's professional difficulties having been most effectively restored to the front of his mind. He was fully himself again—alert, precise, and entirely undistracted—moving at his quiet, purposeful pace through the sleeping city toward whatever the darkness still had to offer.

Chapter Nine

A Packet of Cigarettes

After their dismissal by Detective Lieutenant Halloran, Carrow and Frayne walked around to Frayne's apartment in the West Village. They went in silence, Frayne too angry for words, Carrow occupied with his own reflections. Pardew, Frayne's house manager, opened the door.

"Any calls, Pardew?" asked Frayne.

"No, sir. Nothing."

They went into a large room that combined the character of a well-stocked library with that of a man who kept himself in serious physical condition—bookshelves on three walls, a worn leather sofa, a pull-up bar fixed in one doorway, a heavy bag in the far corner. Frayne went to the drinks table and poured two glasses. He placed one in front of Carrow and emptied his own in a single motion.

"Excuse me for a moment," he said. "I need to call and see if there is any news of Rita."

He took out his phone and stepped to the window. Carrow heard fragments of the call.

"Connors? Yes, it's Quentin Frayne. Is there any word of Mrs. Hartfield?... No. Nothing at all?... Thank you."

He came back and dropped into a chair.

"Nothing," he said, and made a short, angry gesture.

"Connors clearly doesn't know anything has happened yet."

Hartfield hasn't come back. Carrow, this is going to drive me out of my mind."

He refilled his glass and, checking his cigarette case and finding it empty, began pulling open the drawers of a side table.

"Not a cigarette in the place."

"I don't smoke them myself," said Carrow, "but I can offer you a cheroot."

"Too strong for me, thanks. Wait—" From the back of a shelf he brought out a small plain brown packet and extracted a cigarette, which he held for a moment, staring at it with a slightly odd expression.

Carrow, drawing on one of his inevitable cheroots, watched him, tapping his teeth absently with the rim of his monocle.

"Poor old Calvert," Frayne muttered, and looked up to find Carrow's inquiring glance. "Calvert left these here a few days ago," he explained, with a trace of awkwardness. "I don't know where he sourced them, but apparently they're something special. I suppose I might as well."

He lit one, exhaled a long and weary breath, and sank back into the leather chair. Almost at once he was on his feet again. His phone had buzzed on the side table. He snatched it up with eyes lit by sudden hope.

"Yes-speaking." His tone shifted immediately. "Oh. Margaret. Yes?... Of course—come over. No, no one here but Carrow. Yes, that Carrow—the fellows who were overseas have talked about him, I'm sure.... Come now."

He came back and settled into his chair.

"You don't propose to make a spectacle of me, I hope," said Carrow.

Frayne laughed, looking slightly abashed.

"Sorry—forgot you could hear me. That was my cousin, Margaret Verity. You'll get along with her. She's a remarkable woman, and somewhat eccentric by the standards of polite society."

"In what direction?"

"Medicine. She's an MD—emergency medicine. Board-certified at twenty-six, which tells you something. Makes me feel like I've wasted my entire life."

"Flat heels, sensible glasses, and a manner like a magistrate?"

"Flat heels, yes. The rest of it is entirely wrong. She's very attractive, and she looked extraordinary in the field. She was a physician with MSF for two years—Syria and South Sudan—and before that she did her residency at Bellevue trauma. She has a practice in Chelsea now. I wonder what she wants."

Silence fell between them. Each had his own reason for not wanting to revisit the events of the evening, and neither pressed the other. The silence held until the door buzzer announced Margaret's arrival. Pardew let her in and she entered composedly.

Frayne made the introduction.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Carrow," she said, with a direct and unaffected warmth. "From Quentin's accounts I'd begun to think you were something he'd invented."

"I'm glad to prove otherwise," said Carrow, finding something immediately refreshing about this woman—her practical clothes, the strands of bright hair that had escaped whatever arrangement she'd started the evening with, and the quality of her attention, which was the kind that takes things in and files them.

She turned to Frayne with a small frown.

"What have you been burning in here? There's a strange smell."

Frayne glanced at Carrow with sudden amusement.

"I'm afraid that's indictment of your cheroots," he said.

"It isn't," said Margaret, without particular heat. "It's not tobacco."

"I genuinely doubt they're made of tobacco," said Frayne, laughing more freely than he had all evening, though the laughter had an effortful quality.

Carrow accepted the joke amiably. But he had observed, the moment Margaret came in, that her brightness was a performance. Something specific had brought her here, and he noted now with interest how deeply the smell—real or imagined—had caught her professional attention.

She sat in the chair Frayne placed by the fireplace, and her cousin, with the casual thoughtlessness of people who have grown up together, reached over and pushed the plain brown packet of cigarettes across the low table toward her.

"Try one of these, Margaret. They're supposedly excellent—might cover whatever smell is bothering you."

Carrow was watching at that moment, and he saw the change cross her face with the precision of a passing cloud shadow. The clear, healthy color left her cheeks entirely. She was staring at the brown packet.

"Where did you get these?" she asked, in a voice that was very quiet and very steady.

The last trace of Frayne's laughter died. Those five words carried him straight back to the green-draped room and the body beside the ebony chair. He glanced at Carrow with the slightly helpless look that sometimes made him seem younger than he was.

"From Calvert," he said. "I should tell you, Margaret—"

"Lucien Calvert?" she interrupted.

"Yes."

"Not from Rita Hartfield?"

Frayne sat up sharply.

"No. But why do you ask about her?"

Margaret bit her lower lip. She glanced briefly and apologetically toward Carrow, who rose at once.

"Miss Verity," he said, "I've understood for some time that you have something private to discuss with your cousin. Please don't consider me."

But Frayne was already on his feet.

"Carrow—Margaret—" He looked from one to the other. "If you have anything to tell me about Rita, Margaret—do you? Do you?"

His eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made the question into something considerably more urgent than its words.

"Yes. I do."

Carrow moved toward his coat. Frayne stepped in front of him.

"Stay. Please." He turned back to his cousin immediately. "Margaret, Carrow has been with me the whole evening. With your permission I'd like him to hear whatever it is. And—you said you'd heard what happened tonight. To Calvert."

Both men looked at her quietly.

"Carrow's counsel is worth having," Frayne added. "I'd rather he stayed."

"Yes, quite all right," said Margaret. "I'd actually welcome another opinion."

Carrow gave a brief nod and sat back down without ceremony. Frayne was too agitated to sit. He stood on the hearthrug before the fire, watching his cousin and smoking with mechanical intensity.

"First," said Margaret, "please put that cigarette out, Quentin."

Frayne took it from his mouth and stared at it blankly. The clear gray eyes were watching him with an expression he could not immediately classify.

"Right," he said, and crushed it into an ashtray. "You used to smoke as if your life depended on it, Margaret. Is this a new position?"

"I still smoke considerably more than I should," she said, "but I don't smoke fentanyl."

The effect of this on the two men was immediate and distinct. Frayne turned a look of pure revulsion on the brown

packet lying on the table. "God," he said, and reached instinctively for his handkerchief.

Carrow stared at the speaker for a moment. Then he picked up the packet, withdrew a cigarette, and brought it close to his face, examining it with focused attention. Margaret watched him.

He split it open along the seam and examined the contents, pressing a few strands between his fingers.

"Frayne," he said quietly. "These have been laced with a synthetic opioid. These things are poisoned."

Chapter Ten

Calvert's Study Window

Spring Street presented a gloomy and deserted prospect to Detective Lieutenant Halloran as he turned off West Broadway and made his way toward Zahnir's building. He glanced at the shuttered gallery fronts and boutique windows as he passed and allowed himself a brief moment of professional satisfaction on behalf of the city's merchants, who slept in their beds while others kept watch on their behalf. An unsleeping eye—the phrase pleased him; he considered it apt.

A uniformed officer stood post before the building entrance. Red Halloran was known by sight and reputation to every member of the force, and the officer came to attention as Halloran approached.

"Anything to report?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go on."

"The body's been removed, sir. And another individual came through—about twelve-thirty. Came with Detective Tranter, and was inside close to an hour."

Halloran looked at him steadily.

"Another individual. What individual?"

"Couldn't say, sir. Tranter brought him in. They didn't introduce themselves."

"Tranter is off duty. Why wasn't this reported through channels?" Halloran chewed for a moment, then nodded and passed

on. "Another individual," he muttered, taking the stairs. "Why didn't Warley flag this? Who the devil—"

The second officer, posted at Zahnir's door, came to attention.

"Anything to report?"

"Yes, sir. Body's gone. And the individual who came in with Detective Tranter—"

"We've covered that. Describe him."

"Tall. Pale. Dark, clean-shaven. Fur-collared overcoat, collar up."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. About an hour ago I heard something on the floor above."

Halloran snapped on his flashlight and shone it briefly into the officer's face.

"What kind of something?"

"Slight, sir. Like something being shifted. Furniture, maybe, or a box."

"And you did what?"

"Went up to the top landing and listened."

"And heard?"

"Nothing. But I'm certain I heard something before that."

"How long after Tranter and the fur coat had gone?"

"About half an hour, sir."

"Top floor or an office?"

"An office, I'd say. It was very faint."

Halloran pushed through the broken door into Zahnir's suite, found the switch, and brought up the lights. He shed his rain jacket and tossed it on the divan with his cane. Then, tilting his bowler to its characteristic angle, he put his hands in his pockets and stood looking toward the doorway into the murder room.

"Who is he?" he said quietly. "What does it mean?"

He took up his flashlight and went through, switching on the lights in the hidden rooms. For a considerable time he stood staring at the small square window positioned low in the partition behind the ebony chair—exactly as his wife had told him to do. He had worked out the mechanism of the illusion earlier in the evening: the globular green lamp in the second room was controlled by a three-position switch panel located in the innermost office, allowing whoever sat at that office desk to fade the light up and down in the consultation chamber, bringing the figure in the ebony chair in and out of apparent visibility. The visitor who came to Zahnir experienced what felt like a gradual and mysterious darkening, followed by the slow materialization of a robed figure in a far room—and then, at the consultation's end, its gentle fading back to nothing. It was accomplished stagecraft, elegant and entirely effective.

But two things continued to trouble him: the small window low behind the chair, and the fact that all the lighting controls were located not in the chair chamber itself, but in the room behind it—the same room from which the small window gave its view.

The desk in that inner office sat directly below the window. The window had its own blind. The switch panel was within easy reach of anyone seated at the desk. Halloran rolled his gum and considered this arrangement with focused attention.

He tried the corridor door from the inner office—locked, as expected. He replaced his flashlight, collected his cane and jacket, turned out the lights, and went back out to the landing.

He took the back stair to the top floor.

The corridor up there was a mirror of the one below—narrow, two windows on one side overlooking a flat roof and the buildings beyond, and on the other side the door of Montero Tobacco Imports. Halloran tried the handle. Locked, as anticipated. He crouched, brought his flashlight to eye level, and peered into the keyhole with careful attention.

He stood, descended by the back stair, and went out to the street.

Calvert's loft was on Wooster Street, one block east—his actual residence, a SoHo address he had kept for several years, distinct from the uptown office suite where Spurling had first observed Rita's visit earlier in the evening. An officer admitted Halloran at the door, and he went directly through to the study, where Coombes, looking considerably tired but maintaining his characteristic expression of mild contentment, sat at a paper-covered table working through a stack of documents.

"Anything to report?"

"Moreno has gone to bed, sir, and the federal agent has been and gone—"

Halloran brought his cane down on the table with a crack that made Coombes flinch sharply.

"Federal agent," Halloran said, in a tone of quiet and absolute fury. "A federal agent. So that's the man in the fur coat. So that's what this is." He began to pace. "Coombes, I am done with this. If I am not to have complete and unobstructed charge of this investigation I will withdraw from it. I will not have a federal overseer checking my work behind my back. I will not have it. I don't care which agency it is. I will see the Deputy Chief at seven o'clock in the morning and if I am not satisfied I will hand this in writing. What in God's name has a federal drug agent to do with a murder that took place in my precinct?"

"Hard to say," murmured Coombes. "He's clearly senior, though, from how Tranter behaved around him. He had me sent to the kitchen to watch Moreno while he went through this room alone."

"Had you sent," said Halloran, each word its own separate object. "Had. You. Sent." His eyes produced in Coombes the familiar impression of emitting small blue sparks. "I will ask you a direct question, Detective Coombes. Who is in charge of this case?"

"You are, sir."

"I am. Good. What did he do in here?"

"He opened the window. I heard it from the kitchen."

"Did he." Halloran's tone shifted slightly. "Well. He hasn't cornered that particular idea."

The study was a large, high-ceilinged room—a former artist's loft, by the look of it. The original north-facing skylights had been covered over at some point, but a raised section of floor at the far end, approached by two broad steps, still spoke to the space's earlier life. Calvert had backed it with bookshelves, but left uncovered a set of tall French windows screened by a heavy curtain of dark blue.

Halloran pulled the curtain aside and threw the windows open.

He found himself looking out onto a flat rooftop terrace—the setback roof common to SoHo's older cast-iron buildings. No stars; the sky was solid gray cloud, but the ambient glow of the city gave the roofscape a dim and ghostly visibility. To his left rose the dark cylinder of a wooden water tower, a ladder running up its side. Ahead and to the right, an arrangement of iron fire escapes and exterior ladders connected his building to its neighbors in a utilitarian web.

He stepped out, moving carefully on the wet roofing membrane, and looked around with methodical attention. Beyond the water tower, the rooftop dropped away slightly where the adjacent building was one story shorter—and there, across that gap, two small windows looked back at him from a setback wall like a pair of watching eyes.

He crossed toward them, moving in the direction of Spring Street. Coombes watched from the open French windows. The nearer of the two windows was at knee height from the rooftop surface,

set into the building's upper facade. Halloran crouched and shone his flashlight through the glass.

Inside, a storage room. Shelving units stacked with cardboard boxes, each neatly labeled. On a rough wooden table positioned just inside the window lay a row of smaller packages. Halloran brought the flashlight closer.

Cigarette cartons.

He checked the window fastening. Unlocked. He set the flashlight on the roof surface, took the sash in both hands, and raised it slowly. It moved without noise—not the first time it had been used this way. He retrieved the flashlight, stooped, and stepped through onto the table beneath.

The table shifted under him. One leg was shorter than the others. He steadied himself and stepped down to the floor as quietly as possible, then switched off the flashlight.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs outside. A disk of light appeared on the frosted-glass panel of the office door—someone on the landing with a flashlight.

Halloran stood absolutely still and chewed with great patience.

"Anyone in there?" came the officer's voice from Zahnir's landing, one floor below.

Halloran said nothing.

"Hello? Is someone there?"

The disk of light held for a moment, then moved off down the corridor as the officer went to check the other doors.

The beam had lasted long enough. In the second or two before it moved, it had illuminated the frosted glass panel clearly—and Halloran, reading the reversed black lettering painted on the inside of the door, had read:

STROPMIL OCCABOT ORETNOM

Chapter Eleven
The Drug Syndicate

At six-thirty that morning Margaret Verity was woken by her assistant—the latter barely awake herself—and sitting up in bed and turning on the lamp, she looked at the card that had been brought to her:

DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT HALLORAN

Major Case Squad

NYPD

"Lord," she said. "What a brutal hour. Is the coffee on yet, Jana?"

"Not quite."

"Put it on now. Tell Lieutenant Halloran I won't be long."

Five minutes later Margaret came into her small consulting room, where Halloran had stationed himself before the mirror above the mantelpiece and was examining with frank appreciation a large framed photograph of Margaret in field gear—the practical, dusty working clothes of a medical officer in the field. The fierce eyes softened perceptibly as his glance moved from the photograph to the living original: tall, direct, clear-eyed, in a wool robe that had plainly been commandeered from someone larger. She had put her bright hair up in roughly thirty seconds, an arrangement that somehow managed to look both careless and entirely right. She was of that particular type that would prefer

to be judged on other grounds, an ambition her appearance made persistently difficult.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," she said, without fuss. "I was expecting you."

"Were you," said Halloran, studying her with interest. "Then you know what I've come about."

"I think so. Sit down, please. I'm sorry it's cold in here. Is it about Lucien Calvert?"

"It concerns him," said Halloran. "Though it's bigger than that. I spoke this morning with Connors, the Hartfields' house manager, and learned that you've been attending Mrs. Hartfield medically."

"I wasn't her primary physician, but—"

Margaret stopped, glancing at the inspector, then down at the desk in front of her. She picked up a pen and began tapping it slowly on the notepad. Halloran watched her.

"Miss Verity," he said, with quiet precision, "Mrs. Hartfield's life may depend on what you tell me."

"Oh—" She pressed her hands flat on the desk. "What can have happened to her? I was still trying to reach her at two o'clock this morning."

"There's something underneath this case that I can't see clearly yet. I need you to put me straight."

She turned to him directly.

"I'll tell you everything I know, Lieutenant. Completely frankly."

"Good," said Halloran. "How long have you known Mrs. Hartfield?"

"About two years."

"You didn't know her from her acting career?"

"No. We met at a benefit concert. She sang."

"Did she love her husband?"

"I know she did."

"Any prior attachment? Before him?"

"None that I know of."

"Quentin Frayne?"

Margaret smiled, but without warmth.

"He's my cousin, Lieutenant, and it was I who introduced him to Rita Hartfield. I've regretted it thoroughly. He completely lost his head."

"Nothing in Mrs. Hartfield's conduct toward him that justified her husband's jealousy?"

"She was always carelessly indiscreet—that was simply her way. It meant nothing. She was much admired and had grown used to men making fools of themselves over her. Her husband never quite understood that world. I knew it would lead to trouble eventually."

"And Calvert?"

Margaret tapped more quickly with the pen.

"Lucien Calvert belonged to the social circle Rita had moved in during her stage career. He admired her considerably—I believe he had at some point proposed marriage. She didn't feel anything of that kind for him."

"Then what kind of thing did she feel?"

"Now we come to the point." A brief hesitation, and then:

"They were both addicted—"

"Yes?"

"—to drugs."

Halloran's eyes sharpened and stilled.

"Which drugs?"

"Multiple. When I first became close to Rita Hartfield I realized she was dependent on prescription opioids—had been since an injury during a performance, or so the story went. I tried to help her reduce and eventually stop. I failed. By the time I understood the full picture she had moved well beyond prescription medications. Fentanyl, heroin, cocaine. She had tried most of what was available."

Halloran said nothing. Margaret raised her head and met his gaze.

"I can see this doesn't move you particularly, Lieutenant."

"I've stopped counting the funerals," he said flatly. "I'll be honest with you, Miss Verity—I've sat with enough families to have run out of fresh sympathy for the people who choose to start."

"I used to think it was a choice," said Margaret, without aggression. "After two years with MSF and four years running this practice I don't think that any longer. The women who come to me—and it's mostly women, though not exclusively—the ones who are trapped in this, almost none of them started by choosing it in any meaningful sense. Injury, grief, a doctor who wrote the

prescription without reading the room, a social environment where it was simply what everyone did. Rita Hartfield's case is almost textbook: performance pressure, exhaustion, a circle of people who treated it as recreation. Her will was compromised before she understood what was happening to it."

Halloran chewed, jaw set.

"Her husband knew nothing of this?"

"I believe he was entirely unaware. And Frayne—Mr. Frayne—had no idea either."

"Then it was Calvert who was her confidant in the matter."

Margaret nodded slowly.

"He had been her supplier, in effect, for some time. He facilitated her access to sources—private arrangements, exclusive clientele, the kind of supply chain that presents itself as something sophisticated rather than sordid. It was through these connections that she first became a regular visitor to Zahnir's."

"Ah," said Halloran, with careful restraint. "And where did Zahnir fit in, precisely?"

Margaret met the fierce stare steadily.

"In my view, Lieutenant, Zahnir's was a distribution point. The boutique was a front. I've believed this for the better part of a year and I've never been able to prove it."

"Zahnir's was a drug operation." Halloran said it as though tasting the words. "And I've been in those rooms tonight and missed it. I've been wearing blinkers without knowing it."

"The retail merchandise was completely clean—I made sure of that. I went there once myself, alone, and bought samples of

every perfume and every product on sale. I analyzed them all. Harmless."

Halloran's expression shifted noticeably.

"Miss Verity," he said, "we could find a use for you at the precinct."

She smiled briefly and without much humor.

"The product sold to casual walk-in visitors was genuine," she continued. "But I'm certain that regular clients—vetted, trusted clients—were supplied with something quite different. Since I left field work and established this practice, I've treated dozens of patients for serious addiction. In case after case, when I've been able to look through their things, I've found Zahnir's distinctive bottles. The same small blue enameled glass containers with the gilt stoppers. Consistently, Lieutenant. Far too consistently to be coincidence."

"These are patients—people who came to you specifically about their addiction?"

"Many of them came to me precisely because they couldn't face their regular doctor. A woman in the grip of this disease is capable of extraordinary maneuvering to protect her supply. She comes to a younger doctor, a newer practice, someone who might not ask the same hard questions. Since I came back from the field, my practice has quietly become something of an addiction specialty—not through intention."

"Have you ever confronted any of them about Zahnir specifically?"

"Not directly. It would have been counterproductive. These patients are, for all practical purposes, operating under a compulsion that overrides nearly everything else. They know that disclosure could mean a disruption of supply, and that is the outcome they most fear—more than illness, more than exposure, sometimes more than death."

"Did you examine the contents of the Zahnir bottles when you found them?"

"I rarely had the opportunity, and when I did the bottles contained exactly what the label said. Empty, or perfume."

Halloran worked his jaw in silence for a moment.

"Mrs. Hartfield had wanted to see you last night."

"Yes. She was facing a supply interruption. Her usual source had been cut off—deliberately, I believe."

"What drug?"

"Primarily opioids at that point. But she'd been cycling through several. You have to understand, Lieutenant—abrupt withdrawal in a person at her level of dependence is not simply unpleasant. It can be medically dangerous. And in the days before I saw her last, I had noticed symptoms I couldn't account for. Two days ago she finally told me: her supply had been closed to her. Not by accident. Someone was withholding it deliberately."

"To what end?"

"She didn't know, or wouldn't say. But she used the words 'they will drive me mad,' and she meant it literally—she was terrified. She said she was going to make one final attempt to

obtain what she needed. 'I cannot do without it,' she told me.

'But if they refuse, will you give me something?'"

"What did you say?"

"I told her what I had told her many times before—that I would help her, but only on the condition that she placed herself in my care for a proper course of treatment. No more managing the habit. A real attempt to end it."

"She agreed to those terms?"

"She said she did. She was supposed to come to me yesterday. Instead—" Margaret turned to the letter rack on her desk and removed a folded sheet of paper. "She came while I was out. She left this."

Halloran took the page. The handwriting was large, uneven, pressed hard in some places and barely visible in others.

He read aloud: "'Dear Margaret, Why aren't you home? I am wild with pain and feel I am going mad. Come to me the moment you get back, and bring enough to keep me alive. I—'" He looked up. "Nothing more."

Margaret Verity's eyes were bright with something she was controlling carefully.

"She gave up waiting and went to Zahnir," she said. "Can you doubt that was what she went for?"

"No," said Halloran, quietly and without any of his customary snap. "I can't." He set the note down. "But Miss Verity—are you telling me she had no other source? In this city?"

"That is precisely what I'm telling you. And it brings me to the thing that matters most." She looked at him directly.

"Someone has obtained effective control of the supply of high-grade contraband narcotics in this city. Not the street supply—that's a different ecosystem. I'm talking about the supply to a very specific clientele: wealthy, discreet, protected people who would never buy on a corner and who have been obtaining their drugs through channels that look, on the surface, like something else entirely. Zahnir was one point of distribution. There are others. Whoever controls this operation has the lives of hundreds of people—possibly more—in their hands, and they know it, and they are using it."

Halloran's jaw muscles stood out.

"A syndicate," he said.

"A cartel, with a distribution network specifically designed to serve the people least likely to report it and most likely to pay whatever price is set. The most methodically organized criminal operation of its kind I have ever encountered—and I have encountered several."

"Now," said Halloran slowly, "I understand what the federal agent is doing in this case."

Margaret's expression confirmed it.

"I submitted a detailed report to the DEA six months ago. I subsequently gave a formal interview to a special federal investigator who has been embedded in this city for some time. I submitted full documentation of what I had observed: patient case histories, the Zahnir connection, the pricing patterns, the supply control mechanism. Everything I've just told you, and more."

Halloran stood.

"And you did not," he said, in a voice that was absolutely level, "consider informing the NYPD."

"I informed the agency with federal jurisdiction over drug trafficking," said Margaret, meeting his gaze without apology. "I believed that was the appropriate channel."

Halloran picked up his hat, rain jacket, and cane from the chair with movements of precise and rigid courtesy. He turned at the door.

"Good morning, Miss Verity. I am considerably in your debt."

He walked out without waiting for an answer, and without waiting for Jana to open the front door.

PART TWO

LA SEÑORA

Chapter Twelve

The Maid of the Masque

The past life of Rita Hartfield—into which three distinct groups of investigators were by now digging, those of the federal government, the NYPD, and the press—was of a kind to have scandalized the judgmental and earned the compassion of the wise.

Rita Marle was the only daughter of a modestly situated insurance attorney in Stamford, Connecticut. At seventeen, from a slight and rather ordinary child, she began to become something else: a girl of unusual and elusive beauty, almost ethereal in her coloring, with large and remarkable eyes and a wealth of copper-red hair that seemed almost too heavy for her slender neck. Her father regarded his daughter's growing list of admirers with the cautious dismay of a man who had learned to treat good fortune as sorrow in disguise. Her mother, predictably, did the opposite—encouraging the girl's natural ambition and vanity with an enthusiasm that exceeded her usual effectiveness at anything, and Rita, proving to have both a good voice and a performer's instinct, was pointed toward the stage before anyone thought to ask her father's opinion.

After the brief and optimistic apprenticeship that passes for training in musical theater, Rita Marle—having added a syllable to her surname—set out to make herself known as Rita Vane.

Two years of hard work and small disappointments cleared her vision considerably. She learned the true market value of the

admiration she excited in men—which was considerable, though its currency tended toward a specific denomination. Those of her admirers who were positioned to advance her career were prepared to do so only on terms she was not prepared to meet. Those whose intentions were entirely respectable invariably had no influence whatsoever. She came to think of herself as persistently unlucky, not yet understanding that Fortune applies this same arrangement to every young woman who aspires to live under the lights.

Matters stood this way when a new figure appeared: Lucien Calvert. A private investor whose money was in several theatrical productions—and whose name, spoken among chorus girls, produced a complex mixture of awe and calculation—he had sent his card up to her dressing room after a performance, and Rita's first reaction had been a compound of triumph and fear that she did not fully understand. He had never taken any hands-on role in the productions he financed, holding himself with the patrician detachment of a man who regards commerce as something that happens to other people; but it was well understood that the right word from Calvert could take a girl from the chorus to a lead in the time it takes to make a phone call. His current favorite was tomorrow's name.

Before she had spoken a word to him, Rita had fought and won a private battle between the self she intended to be and the vain, calculating Rita Vane who kept advising surrender.

She understood what his card signified. It was a signpost at the junction where any number of girls had stood with racing hearts. The question was not simply whether to remain in the

chorus or accept promotion—it was a question of what she was willing to become, and to whom. She decided, with the particular stubbornness of a girl who has quietly made up her mind, that she would not find out the hard way.

Nevertheless, Lucien Calvert proved more complicated than his reputation. He was courteous and attentive and entirely respectful, and Rita adjusted her assessment accordingly, though she kept it under review.

Her colleagues drew their own conclusions when his car appeared at the stage door with some regularity, and Rita found it easier to leave those conclusions undisturbed. She was resigned to being misread. If she could achieve what she wanted at that price—the price of a raised eyebrow—she would consider it paid cheaply.

That Calvert was genuinely interested became clear soon enough; that he intended to remain in full control of that interest was equally clear, and this was the dangerous phase. Rita, who had grown up watching her father's honesty ruin his prospects, had inherited something of that honesty even while rejecting the ruin. She worked with it rather than against it, using a directness that consistently wrong-footed the men she encountered.

The turning point came over lunch at a corner table at Balthazar. Calvert, who had begun to notice that Rita Vane was not behaving according to established patterns, was applying a light but definite pressure. Rita, who had sensed the temperature change, rolled a breadcrumb across the tablecloth and said,

without apparent weight: "I'm thinking of taking a production in Los Angeles. Someone I know is putting together a show and the offer is serious. I've been going back and forth about it."

"Ah," said Calvert.

"The New York scene is very particular," she said, glancing at an acquaintance across the room. "It asks certain things. LA is different."

Calvert lit a cigarette with unhurried attention, considering her. If she was bluffing—and he suspected she was—she had the nerve to see it through. And if she did see it through? He found he was not entirely certain how he felt about that, which was itself an unfamiliar sensation. The girl was looking at a table across the room as though she had already half-forgotten he was there. He recognized the performance and was, despite himself, impressed by it.

That unremarkable lunch decided several things. A year later Rita Vane was playing the title role in *The Maid of the Masque*, the production that made her name. Lucien Calvert had discovered, with some surprise, that he was genuinely attached to her; a dangerous rival in the form of Monte Hartfield had accelerated a decision he might otherwise have deferred indefinitely.

Hartfield had much to offer. He was older than Calvert by a decade, considerably wealthier, and his reputation suggested a more reliable attachment than Calvert was likely to make. Rita liked him—which she had never quite managed with Calvert—and respected him, which was different from being impressed by him. There was a final reason, known neither to her mother, who still

visited from Stamford with opinions on everything, nor to anyone else.

On the evening before the first preview of the show that would define her career, Rita had discovered that she was in a state of complete, unmanageable panic. She had performed hundreds of times, but this was different in kind—the kind of fear that turns the legs to water and empties the mind of everything rehearsed. Calvert, who had been watching for precisely this, acted without delay. From his jacket pocket he produced a small lacquered box.

Rita looked at it.

"It will pass in five minutes," he said, setting it on the dressing table without urging. "Your entrance is in twenty." He checked his watch, as though the matter were already decided, and looked away.

She told herself afterward that she had chosen. In the most technical sense this was true. But the choosing had taken place in conditions—terror, exhaustion, the knowledge that everything she had worked for was about to be publicly won or lost—that reduced the available alternatives to something very close to none. She understood this only later, when it was no longer useful to understand it.

The cocaine transformed the evening. Not just the performance—the whole of it: the wait in the wings, the entrance, the sustained concentration, the curtain call. She felt capable of anything. The audience confirmed it. Rita Vane became, in the space of three hours, a name that people passed between them with

that particular proprietary pleasure of someone who was there first.

She had won the thing she had been working toward. But in winning it, she had surrendered something she could not yet account for.

The triumph left her hollowed out. She dreaded the second night almost as keenly as she had dreaded the first. She struggled with the dread, which only amplified it. She told herself she would not use the box again—and did not, for two performances. On the third, with the box on her dressing table and the orchestra tuning in the pit, and her hands not steady, she opened it.

She had walked onto the path that leads downward; and since cocaine is a thief that steals sleep as the price of energy, she soon found herself seeking other substances to reclaim what it had taken. By the time she was entrusted with the lead in *The Maid of the Masque*, she had ceased to recognize how thoroughly the habit had taken hold. In Lucien Calvert's company she met others in the same condition, who treated their pharmaceutical dependencies as an unremarkable feature of a sophisticated life—a way of managing the demands of an industry that had no patience for human limitation. To this it was very easy to become accustomed, and to its costs, for some time, quite blind.

It was her growing regard for Monte Hartfield that first disturbed this complacency—not because she attributed his admiration to the artificial energy of her best evenings, but because she began, in his company, to see her own life from the

outside. He was straightforward and open in a way that the people she had spent years among were not. His life had no dark side that needed managing. She found she wanted that.

She conceived a desire to be free of the other thing. She began to understand, for the first time, how far from free she actually was.

It was Lucien Calvert who presided over that darker half of her existence, and the network of suppliers he had introduced her to, and the arrangements—passed off as something discreet and exclusive rather than sordid—through which the drugs were obtained. Zahnir's in SoHo had few real secrets from her by this point: she knew that the dream-reading was theater, and that the establishment was a source of regular supply for people of her kind. She did not know who Zahnir was. She had stopped wanting to know.

The most insidious quality of what held her was its patience. It asked nothing dramatic—only that she continue, and continue, and continue. And when she tried to stop, what waited for her on the other side of that attempt was not freedom but a physical and psychological disintegration that no act of will she had ever performed was remotely equipped to address.

She had thought, when she married Hartfield, that love and determination would be sufficient. She had been wrong in the specific way that people are always wrong about addiction: she had believed she was choosing, when for some time the choosing had been done for her.

The cocaine had by now been joined by other dependencies, and among these—initially sought as a way to blunt the cocaine's edges and restore the sleep it stole—opioids had established the deepest and most authoritative hold. It was Lucien Calvert who first provided them; Lucien Calvert who facilitated the private gatherings of people like herself; and it was Lucien Calvert who, some months before the events of this story, had introduced her to a particular private evening in a penthouse apartment on the Upper West Side, hosted by a musician of some renown whose relationship with opioids was decades older than Rita's and considerably more settled.

There were perhaps a dozen people there, in the low-lit rooms overlooking the park, and the atmosphere was the particular atmosphere of people who share a secret they have decided, for the evening, not to keep. Rita went with Calvert, somewhat reluctantly, knowing by then what these evenings were and not knowing how else to obtain what she needed.

It was there that she first saw the woman known in certain circles simply as La Señora.

She was perhaps forty—though it was difficult to be certain—with a stillness in her bearing that was not stillness so much as perfect control. Dark-haired, dressed with the understated precision of someone for whom clothing is a tool rather than a pleasure, she moved through the room with the composed attention of a person who takes note of everything and is surprised by nothing. Her face was striking rather than conventionally beautiful—defined by strong features and eyes of an unusual shade

of amber-brown that seemed, in the low light, to hold their own illumination. She spoke quietly, and people listened.

Rita noticed her immediately, in the way one notices an anomaly—a person who does not quite belong to the taxonomy of a room, who has come for reasons other than the ones on general display. She caught the woman's glance once, briefly, and received from it an impression she was unable to account for: of being assessed, with complete accuracy, and filed.

Lucien Calvert, at her elbow, said: "That is Elena Vidal. She is someone it is worth knowing."

It was not until considerably later that Rita began to understand what this meant.

Chapter Thirteen
A Private Gathering

From the restaurant where she had had supper with Lucien Calvert, Rita went with him up to the penthouse on West End Avenue where Cyrus Mallory had lived, without apparent interruption, for the better part of a decade. One other guest was already present when they arrived—a slender, fair woman introduced as Mollie Larne, whose weakly pretty face Rita recognized as belonging to the kind of person who appears in the background of other people's photographs: a society regular whose defining quality was the speed with which she located whatever was newest and most fashionable in any given season, and the reliability with which she discarded it once it ceased to be either.

Mallory himself answered the door. He was a man who had been handsome in a loose-featured American way some years before, and whose face now carried the specific rearrangement that extended serious drug use imposes: a flattening and recession of energy, the eyes slightly remote, the whole expression suggesting a man watching events from the far end of a long corridor. He had the pallor and deliberate unhurried movement of someone who had long since negotiated a private settlement with time. His hair, once sandy and thick, lay thinly across a sloping forehead and touched the back of his collar. He had been, in his working years, a musician of real ability. He had not worked seriously in some years.

"My dear Rita," he said, in a voice that emerged slowly and with considerable satisfaction, as though each word were something he had been looking forward to producing. "At last. Welcome to our little circle."

He admitted them and led the way into a sitting room where the lights had been lowered and music played softly from somewhere—something without rhythm, without resolution, moving in slow circles. He turned the sleepy eyes toward Calvert.

"Do you seek relief from old sorrows?" he asked, with the air of a man who found the question genuinely interesting. "This is Calvert's case and mine. Or do you, as Mollie does, seek something new? Youth's eternal project."

Rita laughed with the careless freedom that belonged to the part of herself she kept concealed from Monte Hartfield and the world he represented.

"I'm with Miss Larne on this," she said. "There hasn't been quite so much happiness in my life that I want to forget what little I've had."

"Happiness," said Mallory, without much interest. "There's no real happiness. There's only the management of its absence. Sit down, everyone. She'll be here shortly."

"I'm curious and slightly nervous," said Rita. "I've been told it sometimes simply makes one ill."

"Oh, darling," said Mollie Larne, with a slightly unhinged giggle, "you'll adore it. The most extraordinary sense of everything being perfectly all right—perfectly, completely, permanently all right. You'll see."

"Other substances," said Calvert, in the dry drawl he used when he wanted to sound authoritative, "merely amplify what's already there—they work with your nerves, not against them. What Mallory provides is different in kind. It doesn't accelerate. It resolves."

"And if it doesn't work for me?"

"Some people find it does nothing," Mollie said, arranging herself more comfortably on the sofa. "The main thing is to get comfortable and let yourself go. Don't hold on to anything. That's the whole trick of it, really."

Mallory had drifted to where Calvert was standing, and offered him a cigarette from a plain brown packet—the same type Rita had seen before. Calvert looked at it.

"You still have these?"

"The last of what she brought in February," murmured Mallory, returning the packet to his pocket. "She charges considerably for them now, and releases them at her own pace. I'll be very glad when the new supply comes through. The right thing at the right price is not a simple proposition in this city."

Calvert lit his cigarette and Mallory's.

"I find the same," said Calvert quietly. "Everything except opioids is accessible at Zahnir's, and opioids are the only thing that interests me at this point."

"He supplies me with cocaine," murmured Mallory. "At a margin of profit I have on several occasions raised with him, without effect. I saw him about it two days ago, in fact—made a

personal appointment, which is unusual for Zahnir. He maintains that the receivers have consolidated, and that his margin is narrow. He is of course lying. The man is making an extraordinary amount of money."

"You have met him personally? Most people only see the attendant."

"Once. I had an introduction from a physician in New York who knew the arrangement. Zahnir received me without any difficulty—at a price. But for the other thing I depend on her. She keeps me on what I consider inadequate rations, and her theory is that this will keep bringing me back. She is correct. Her real business is filling the house."

"You've been there?"

"Many times. Opioids are better in company, like wine. She provides that."

"Does she deliver?"

"Not directly. One sends someone." He paused. "Ah—here she is."

Elena Vidal came in from the hallway, carrying a flat leather case. She had left her coat at the door, and wore dark trousers and a silk blouse, quietly expensive, with the ease of someone who does not think about clothes. Her figure was notable—the kind that announces itself without seeking to—and she moved through the room with the same quality Rita had observed the first time: absolute attention distributed evenly over everything present, nothing missed, nothing shown.

Her hair was that particular dense black that carries a blue sheen in certain light, and her eyes, dark and southern, swept the room in a swift inventory before settling, briefly, on Rita with an expression that disclosed nothing and recorded everything.

"Cyrus," she said, setting the case on the low table. "You have company tonight."

"Our circle grows," said Mallory, with the slow satisfaction of a man who genuinely believes this. "You know everyone, I think, except Rita."

La Señora—for so she was already known among those who supplied through her—looked at Rita with a brief, composed attention.

"I know who you are," she said, and smiled: white teeth, no warmth. She glanced at Mallory. "The cigarettes are gone?"

"The last of them tonight, yes."

She tossed her head slightly—a habitual gesture, quick and dismissive.

"Next week. I cannot make them appear sooner than they appear—you understand this. Five cases arrive Tuesday. Until then—" she spread her hands.

"The supply seems to grow smaller each time," Mallory observed, with the gentle persistence of a man lodging a complaint he has lodged many times before.

"The best is going to clients in Los Angeles now. I have what I have, Cyrus. Be patient." She patted his arm once, without affection, and opened the leather case.

"You should come to the house sometime," she said, not looking up from the case's contents, the words directed at no one in particular and at Mollie Larne in particular. "You have your own room there, and it's quiet—properly quiet—and you can take your time. No schedules."

"Oh, I must," said Mollie, with another of her slightly unhinged laughs. "I've been meaning to. Will you come, Rita?"

"I don't know yet if I'll even like it," said Rita.

"If you do—" Mollie began.

"I can arrange it for you," said La Señora, finally glancing across at Rita. The amber eyes assessed her with the same calm directness as before. "If you decide you'd like to come, it's simple. There's always room." She looked at Calvert. "You'll bring her?"

"Whenever she wishes," said Calvert.

Rita said nothing. She was watching Elena Vidal unpack the leather case with the unhurried precision of a craftsperson: a small heating element, a water pipe of dark glass and burnished copper, two smaller pipes—a matched pair in pale stone—a silver tool, and a lacquered box no larger than a deck of cards. Each item was placed on the tray in a specific arrangement, without consultation, as if following an internal order developed over long practice. Her jeweled fingers moved with perfect economy.

"What a strange woman," Rita murmured to Calvert.

"She is someone it is useful to know," he said. "And to remain in the good graces of."

There was a quality in his voice she had not heard before—something that was not quite respect and not quite fear, but occupied the space between them. She filed it, as she filed many things about Lucien Calvert, for consideration later.

Elena Vidal lit the heating element, which glowed a steady blue-orange, and opened the lacquered box. Inside, packed in a dark wax paper, was a quantity of pharmaceutical heroin of exceptional purity—the kind that moved through networks like hers precisely because it was reliable in a way that street product was not: reliable in its effect, reliable in its dosage, reliable in delivering exactly the experience its clients had paid a considerable premium to obtain.

She worked the silver tool through the contents of the box with practiced movements, preparing a measure with the care of a chemist, and looked at Mallory.

"You have your own pipe?"

"Of course."

She turned the amber eyes to Rita.

"Guest of the evening," she said. "Don't be afraid. Very small. Very slow. You know how to smoke?"

"The same as a cigarette?" asked Rita, aware of a warm and inexplicable excitement that had been building since she came into the room.

"The same, but patient. Very, very patient."

Rita took the small stone pipe and raised it to her lips.

Chapter Fourteen

In the Shade of the Lonely Palm

Pharmaceutical heroin of high purity, smoked rather than injected, produces an onset of effect within seconds and a peak that arrives faster and with less warning than the user typically anticipates. Because distillation occurs in the act of smoking, the precise quantity reaching the bloodstream is difficult to predict, and the character of the experience differs from other delivery methods in ways that reliably surprise even those who consider themselves familiar with the drug's effects. The hallucinations associated with smoked opioids of this quality are more vivid and more spatially coherent than those produced by other means, and they are distinguished by a quality: they are not obviously false. They feel, while they last, more real than the room from which they depart.

Rita found the preparation's taste not entirely unpleasant. Having overcome an initial reluctance caused by its faint pharmaceutical character, she grew reconciled to it, and finished the first dose without experiencing any other effect than a spreading sensation of placid and almost architectural contentment—as though the room's proportions had become precisely right, and her own position within them exactly correct. La Señora renewed the pipe. Silence had settled over the gathering.

She had only begun the second dose when a growing nausea seized upon her, advancing so rapidly that she let the small pipe fall and heard herself make a sound she did not intend.

Instantly, without noise, La Señora was beside her.

"Lean forward—like this," she said, very quietly, as if fearful of disturbing something. "In a moment it will pass. Then, if you feel faint, lie back. It is the sleep. Do not fight it."

The stronger will prevailed, as it always did. Self-command and analytical thought are among the first casualties of opioids at this concentration. Rita ceased to think with any longing of the clean cold air outside, of escape from the warm and thickening atmosphere that seemed now to occupy the room like something solid. She bent forward, her chin dropping toward her chest, and gradually the sickness retreated. Something else retreated with it—the active, vigilant part of her mind that under ordinary circumstances maintained a running commentary on events. She noticed its departure the way one notices the stopping of a sound one had ceased to consciously hear: only by the quality of the silence that replaced it. From an attitude of habitual self-preservation, her consciousness traversed a long declining curve and arrived at something that was not sleep but was sleep's close neighbor.

The floor had begun, apparently, to revolve. The pattern of the rug was forming concentric rings, slowly turning. She found this neither alarming nor absurd—found it, in fact, soothing—and surrendered to it almost willingly.

La Señora allowed her to fall back upon the cushions, and this operation—though it could not have taken more than a second—seemed to occupy several minutes and to be conducted through multiple layers of something extraordinarily soft. The figure

bending over her grew taller as each moment passed, until the dark eyes of Elena Vidal were looking down at Rita from a height that no room could rationally contain.

But surely, she thought dimly, this could not be Elena Vidal. No woman could remain that still for so many hours. And Rita understood now that she had been lying here for some hours—several hours, at least—beneath the shelter of that tall, graceful, and curiously protective shape.

Why, of course. It was not a woman at all. It was a palm tree.

Far above her the long dusty-green fronds fanned out from a mast-like trunk. The sky—directly overhead—was a sheet of hammered brass, and the sun hung in it like a copper coin at absolute zenith, so that the shadow of the foliage lay in a perfect circle at the tree's foot. What she had taken for Elena Vidal's eyes—wondering, with a comfortable vagueness, at their tendency to change color—proved to be two brilliantly plumaged parakeets perched on a branch so high above her that she had to squint against the light to see them at all.

This was an equatorial noon—noon in a desert that extended in every direction to the horizon without interruption: no other vegetation, no water, no movement. Nothing but the ocean of sand, the brass sky, the solitary tree, and the two birds regarding her with their bright sideways intelligence. She and the parakeets were the only living things in a landscape that appeared to have been in this condition since well before the invention of time.

But wait. Far out on the desert—many miles, perhaps—a point of movement. A figure, too distant to distinguish, but approaching. Hours would pass before it arrived, at its present rate. Rita contemplated the available infinity of time with pure delight. She watched the parakeets instead: one of them had noticed her, far below, and was attempting to draw the other's attention to this fact with an urgency that its companion declined to share. She watched this small domestic negotiation unfold for what might have been hours.

When at last she returned her attention to the horizon, the figure had drawn close enough to be recognizable.

It was La Señora.

Rita received this with the mild and pleasant sense of appropriateness that the dream provided in place of surprise. La Señora moved across the sand with that same absolute composure, carrying on her head a large lacquered casket bound with three hoops of dull gold. Her dress was suited to the desert—minimal, luminous—and she carried herself, as she always did, as though the specific nature of the surrounding circumstances were entirely irrelevant to her bearing.

She set the casket on the sand before Rita, knelt, and in a language Rita did not recognize but somehow understood without effort, murmured: "I am your servant, my queen."

She lifted the lid of the casket and drew from it a bronze lamp, which she placed on the sand. The lamp was lit without any observable process of lighting. From the casket then she drew a smaller box, a silver instrument, and then—one by one—pipes. Long

pipes and short ones, pipes of gold and of polished wood, of ivory and dark glass, their bowls carved into the shapes of flowers, of animals, of faces that were not quite human. They accumulated on the sand around the lamp in a circle that expanded outward with each new addition, gleaming in the desert light—emerald and ruby and topaz, diamond-pointed.

“Do you command that the pipes be lit?” asked the harsh voice.

Rita wished to say no. She heard herself say yes.

From a thousand bowls, stretching from the foot of the palm to the rim of the horizon, a thousand small blue flames arose. Thin lines of gray smoke climbed straight up into the motionless air, so that in every direction Rita looked the landscape was crosshatched with these countless vertical threads, each wavering faintly, weaving together into a gauze that thickened as she watched.

The casket on the sand had grown considerably larger than she remembered. She looked at it with the unhurried curiosity that the dream provided in place of ordinary attention, and gradually she understood why its shape had troubled her since the beginning.

It was a coffin.

The smoke was closing in. The threads had become ropes, the ropes tentacles, winding around her wrists and throat with a cold, deliberate patience. She moved her hands for the first time since the palm—weakly, pushing at the smoke, finding it solid in ways that smoke is not supposed to be. The moon was setting, or

the lamp behind its shade was shifting; the light had changed from cold silver to the amber of a covered lamp. The sound of the fire behind a decorative screen—birds and palms painted on its surface in brilliant colors—emerged from somewhere below her like the sound of the real world reasserting a prior claim.

Rita pressed her hands over her eyes.

Reality returned in sections.

In her dim cushioned corner, Mollie Larne lay against the wall with her face slack and her mouth foolishly open. Mallory was a shapeless mass among the rugs, barely distinguishable from the pile. Of Calvert, only the outstretched legs and feet were visible, projecting from behind a folded screen. On an improvised divan near the piano, propped against a stack of garish cushions, sat Elena Vidal—legs crossed in a posture of absolute composure—the small pipe fallen from her loose fingers, her face wearing the expression of mystic suspension that Rita had no word for and no desire to examine more closely.

Fear arrived without warning and without apparent cause—unaccountable, uncontrollable, and complete. She felt weak and dizzy and thoroughly frightened, and she wanted, with an urgency that cut through the drug's residual fog, to be anywhere else.

"Lucy," she whispered.

The fire continued behind its screen. Nothing else moved.

"Lucy."

The sleepers slept. The empty rooms breathed their warm, sweet, stifling air. The idea of the street outside—cold, dark, ordinary—was the most beautiful thing Rita could conceive of.

She got to her feet, swaying, and held the wall. Step by step, she made her way across the room and into the hallway. Her coat was on the rack. Her fingers had lost most of their usual capabilities, but she managed the sleeve, then the other, and got the coat across her shoulders. She opened the front door as quietly as she could and went out.

On the landing she paused. The dizziness was already easing slightly. She found the stair rail and began to descend, one hand on the wall, the other on the rail. One flight—she remembered—and a short passage to the street.

She reached the door. The locks gave her trouble but finally yielded, and she stepped out onto West End Avenue.

The air hit her like cold water. She stood still for a moment, breathing. The avenue was deserted—not a pedestrian, not a car. She had no idea of the time, but from the quality of the silence she knew it was very late. She set out for home, walking slowly, thinking about what she would say if a police officer saw her.

Several blocks passed without incident. She had begun to feel something closer to herself when the headlights of a car appeared far down the block, moving fast on the empty street. The instinct to hide presented itself; but the car was moving too quickly and she was passing under a streetlamp, fully visible, as it went by.

She kept her eyes forward and walked on.

Then the sound of brakes. The dry friction of tires decelerating hard on the wet road. The car had stopped.

If her strength had allowed it she would have run. Instead she felt it leave her entirely—the reserves she had been drawing on since she left the apartment simply depleted—and she could only slow, and turn, as footsteps came running back toward her from the stopped car.

“Rita!” A man’s voice, slightly breathless. “Miss Vane!”

She stood and looked at him.

It was Monte Hartfield.

Chapter Fifteen

Metamorphosis

As Hartfield seized her hands and looked at her—eager and half-frightened at once—Rita found enough composure to speak.

"Mr. Hartfield," she said, and heard that her voice was not quite right. "What must you think—"

He held her hands and did not let go.

"I think you are very unwise to be alone on the street at three in the morning," he said, gently. "I had a late dinner that ran long and was driving back across town—fortunately, as it happens."

"How can I possibly explain—"

"I don't ask you to. I have no right to ask, and no wish to. I only wish I had the right to advise you."

"How good you are," she began, "and I—"

Her voice gave out entirely. Her lips began to tremble in a way she could not prevent. Monte Hartfield drew her arm under his own and walked her back toward the car, which his driver had turned and was now bringing slowly up the block.

"I'll drive you home," he said. "And if I might call in the morning—I should like to."

Rita nodded. Speech was not available to her. He helped her in, sat beside her, and reclaimed her hand, holding it steadily and without drama for the length of the drive. They parted at her door.

"Good night," said Hartfield, speaking carefully, because of an almost unmanageable impulse he was containing—to take her in his arms and hold her fast, to put himself physically between her and the influences he could dimly perceive around her, whose nature he could not have named but whose quality he recognized as something dangerous and dark.

"If I come at eleven will that be too early?"

"No," she whispered. "Please come early. There's a matinee."

"Today, I should say. Poor girl, how tired you'll be. Good night."

"Good night," she said, barely audible.

She went inside. Having closed the door behind her, she stood leaning against it for several minutes. Weakness and nausea threatened to return, and she felt that a step in any direction might put her on the floor. Her maid was asleep and had not been disturbed. After a time she groped her way to the bedroom, turned on the light, and sank down onto the bed.

Her thoughts revolved without resolution. A thousand times she mentally traveled the same few blocks from the avenue to her door, speaking the same words and hearing his replies. She had known Monte Hartfield for some months, and had always respected him, but this respect had been mixed with calculation in proportions she had never examined directly. His apartment on Park Avenue, his obvious financial security, his social standing—these had formed a pleasing backdrop to the figure of the man, and her mother had not missed an opportunity to paint and retouch the picture.

All that had dissolved. The backdrop was gone, and what remained was only the man: steady, reserved, with a deep voice that had spoken to her gently, and a devotion so genuine that it sought nothing in return except to protect her from follies whose nature he had not even tried to learn. She felt, in comparison, shabby and unworthy, and the feeling was not the agreeable variety of unworthiness that can be pleasurably indulged—it was the real and cold kind.

"I hate myself," she said softly to the room. "I hate myself."

She had wanted precisely this for years. Now that it had arrived she hesitated at the edge of it. One steadying thought: she would put everything behind her. She had grown tired of the stage—tired in a way that went deeper than physical exhaustion—tired of the false light and the manufactured glamour and the people it attracted. The audiences who envied her could not have imagined how little she wanted what they thought she had.

Real palms, she thought. He was offering her real palms, and a real life, and the opportunity to be done with the painted ones in the third act of *The Maid of the Masque*.

Her tired mind continued its circuit of the evening for the better part of an hour before she felt capable of undressing. She managed it finally, shuddering despite the warmth of the room. The nausea had passed but she was completely awake, her thoughts still circling.

She put on a robe and sat at the dressing table, studying herself critically in the mirror. Somewhat pale, a slight

dishevelment that no amount of touch-up had fully corrected, and beneath her eyes the shadows that had been appearing more frequently lately. Her pupils, she noticed, were contracted to an unusual degree.

Automatically, as though her hands were operating without instruction, she opened the small medicine case in the drawer and removed a prescription bottle. She tapped several small white tablets into her palm and held them there.

For a full half-minute she sat without moving, looking at her reflection.

"I won't sleep at all if I don't," she whispered then, as though answering an objection that had been raised. "And I'll be useless in the morning."

Thus, at the very height of her resolution to change, she drove one more rivet into the chains that bound her to Zahnir and Company.

She swallowed the tablets—lorazepam, prescribed months ago by a physician she had since stopped seeing—with a glass of warm milk that her maid had left on the nightstand. She slept deeply, and was not awakened until ten.

Breakfast was a cup of strong coffee. When Monte Hartfield arrived at eleven, Rita showed no trace of the previous night's disorder. She looked bright and composed, and the sight of her drove everything else briefly from his mind.

After a short conversation that neither of them was really attending to:

"May I speak quite frankly to you?" he said, drawing his chair a few inches closer.

She glanced at him quickly. "Of course. Is it—about my hours?"

He shook his head, smiling with a faint sadness.

"That's only one part of a rather feverish life," he said. "I don't want to lecture you or find fault with you. I only want to ask you if you are satisfied."

"Satisfied?" Rita echoed, turning a tassel from the cushion beside her between her fingers.

"You've achieved what you set out to achieve. You have a name, and admirers, and your photograph appears regularly in the kind of publications that matter to these things. You're clever and beautiful and you've earned everything you have. But—are you satisfied?"

She stared at the tassel, turning it more and more rapidly around her white fingers. Then:

"No," she said, quietly.

Monte Hartfield paused for a moment before leaning forward and taking her hands.

"I'm glad you're not," he said softly. "I always believed you wanted something better—something more real than all this."

She didn't meet his eyes, but he moved to the settee beside her.

"Would it be a great sacrifice—to give it up?"

Rita shook her head, still looking at the tassel.

"For me?"

She gave him a quick, half-frightened look and pressed her hands lightly against his chest, leaning back.

"You don't know me," she said, and her voice had something in it that was close to genuine anguish. "You don't know me at all. I don't deserve this."

"Rita." His voice was very quiet. "Don't say that."

"My friends—my life—you have no idea—"

"I know that I want you for my wife," he said, "so that I can protect you from those friends." He drew her close, and she let him, and gave him what he asked for.

"I cannot believe it yet," he murmured. "I cannot quite believe it."

The matter was settled. When Rita went to the theater that afternoon to dress for the matinee she had given her word to leave the stage when her contract ended. She had spent the interval at lunch with Monte Hartfield, listening to his plans in a state that was somewhere between astonishment and relief. His wealth was substantially greater than even her mother's most optimistic estimates, and the life he described made her own most cherished imaginings seem modest. He was solicitous about her health—he attributed her coloring and her electric, slightly overwound energy to a delicate constitution, and he intended to address it with the care it deserved.

They would spend a month in Tuscany, at a villa he had owned for years. Then the Amalfi coast. In winter, the Caribbean—a sailing charter, real sun, real water, real palms. She would not need to hurry back for anything.

Real palms, she thought again, with a guilt she could not entirely suppress. Not the ones that opium conjured at three in the morning.

She wondered whether she would ever be able to tell him the truth. Whether she ought to.

Calvert appeared in her dressing room just before the performance. He had telephoned early that morning and learned from her maid that Rita had come home safely and was sleeping. She had expected him, and had been braced for the encounter—but the steadying influence of the morning with Monte Hartfield had sustained her until she actually heard Lucien's voice in the corridor outside. Her resolve wavered in the same instant. She glanced involuntarily at the small engraved case on her makeup table—the one inscribed, in Calvert's handwriting, "From Lucy to Rita." She had been firmly not-looking at it for two hours. The imminence of the performance, and the dread that always preceded it now, broke her resolve. She opened the case, used the small implement it contained, and turned to face the door with composure restored.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you last night, Lucy," she said. "I woke up feeling ill and needed air."

"I was worried," said Calvert, whose dark face looked more worn than usual in the unforgiving light of the dressing-room mirror set against the gray daylight from the window. "Are you quite all right now?"

"Quite, thank you." Rita glanced at her left hand, at the ring which had not been there yesterday. "Lucy—I don't know how to tell you—"

She turned in the chair and looked up at him. He was standing behind her, looking at the hand, his jaw set. He cleared his throat once.

"Perhaps," he said, and his usual drawl briefly deserted him, leaving his speech oddly clipped. "Perhaps I can guess."

She watched him, and there were tears threatening at the corners of her eyes; for whatever his earlier intentions had been, Lucien Calvert had in the end proved a loyal friend, and by the standards of his own particular code, an honorable one.

"Is it Hartfield?" he asked.

Rita nodded. A tear caught the light on her lashes.

Calvert cleared his throat again, and then, with a visible act of self-command, extended his hand.

"Congratulations, Rita," he said. "The better man wins. I hope you'll be very happy."

He turned and walked quietly out of the dressing room.

Chapter Sixteen

Red Hook

It was the following Tuesday that La Señora came to the theater, accompanied by Mollie Larne. Rita had her shown up to the dressing room. Elena Vidal had established herself in certain circles of the city as a figure spoken of with the particular reverence reserved for things that are known to be dangerous and are admired for it. Not to have encountered her was to be outside a very specific and self-congratulatory inner ring. Her bold presence unsettled Rita, but the knowledge in those amber eyes—the sense of depths in which Rita could not quite read the bottom—exercised a pull that the unsettling quality only intensified.

"I have arranged Saturday for you," La Señora said, without preamble. "Mallory is coming with Mollie, and you bring whoever you like."

"Oh," said Rita, hesitating. "I'm sorry you've gone to the trouble—"

"No trouble," La Señora said. "A small matter of business, and you can settle with me when it suits you."

"I am absolutely thrilled," announced Mollie Larne, who was constitutionally incapable of managing her excitement at any volume below a stage whisper. "I've been wanting to go for simply ages. There's something about crossing the bridge at night and not quite knowing where you'll end up—doesn't it give you that

particular feeling, Rita? I had it the whole way here just thinking about it."

Rita, whose resolve to put herself beyond Elena Vidal's orbit had lasted the better part of forty-eight hours, accepted the arrangement for Saturday. Before her visitors had left the dressing room, her mind was already at work on a suitable cover story for Monte Hartfield. Something of Mollie Larne's breathless enthusiasm had communicated itself to her, and she did not examine this too closely.

Calvert looked in that evening. On hearing about Saturday he went quiet. Rita, watching his reflection in the mirror, caught an expression on his face that was darker than anything she had seen there before—something between anger and a fear he was suppressing.

"Don't you want me to go, Lucy?"

He produced his sardonic smile.

"Your wishes are mine, Rita."

"But you don't seem pleased about it. Are you angry?"

"Angry?"

"We're still friends, aren't we?"

"Of course. Do you doubt it?"

Her maid came in to help with the costume change for the third act, and Calvert stepped out. Despite his assurances, Rita could not stop returning to that expression—fierce and almost savage—that had crossed his face when she mentioned the visit.

She taxed him on it later, but he endured the inquiry with his usual impervious composure, and she remained no wiser about

its cause. In the days that followed, moments of genuine conscience visited her when she was in Hartfield's company, but she never once seriously contemplated canceling with Elena Vidal.

She told herself, as she had told herself many times, that she was on the point of cutting loose from all of it—the gatherings, the supply arrangements, the whole shadow-life. But the emotional certainty that had seized her on the morning Monte Hartfield had taken her hands and asked her to be his wife had not returned. Daily, by increments too small to feel individually, her intentions bent toward accommodation. The habit was doing its work: sapping will, softening resistance, rewriting the terms of what she considered possible. She was caught in the current of that sacred river seen in an opium dream by Coleridge, running—

Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

Calvert's car was at the stage door on Saturday night—Rita had brought an overnight bag to the theater, and they were to go directly, collecting Mallory and Mollie Larne on the way. Rita noticed, as she got in, that it was Moreno at the wheel rather than Calvert's usual driver.

"Why is Moreno driving tonight?" she asked, as the car pulled away.

Calvert glanced at her.

"He's in my confidence. Keddie isn't."

"Keddie would talk?"

"To everyone at the garage, and from there it would make its way through every level of every social circle you and I have the misfortune to inhabit."

Rita was quiet for a moment.

"You were thinking of Monte."

Calvert laughed, a dry sound.

"He would not approve, would he?"

"No. Was that why you looked the way you did when I told you I was going?"

"The 'look' to which you keep returning existed only in your imagination. But"—he paused—"you will have to think about your position now, Rita. You are going to be Mrs. Monte Hartfield. The future Mrs. Monte does not simply drift along unchanged."

Rita felt her face warm. She did not answer immediately.

"I don't understand you, Lucy," she said at last. "You're very strange about all this."

"Am I. We'll discuss my strangeness another time. Here's Cyrus."

Mallory was waiting outside his building, two leather bags at his feet, which Moreno loaded into the trunk without a word. Mollie Larne ran out behind him and squeezed in beside Rita.

"I woke up at seven this morning thinking about tonight," Mollie announced, seizing Rita's hand. "I haven't been able to think about anything else all day. How are you so calm?"

"I'm not," said Rita, and laughed.

The car moved downtown and across the bridge. The city gave way gradually—the theater district's lit marquees, then the midtown offices of the major newspapers and networks, their windows showing the particular yellowish light of places that never fully close, humming with work that would still be going at dawn.

Rita watched them pass, and felt, without being able to name it, a faint shadow of premonition.

It is well that we lack foresight. Neither Rita nor Lucien Calvert could know that a time was coming—not far off now—when those same buildings and the people who worked inside them would be occupied with the story of the murder of one and the disappearance of the other.

They crossed into Brooklyn. The neighborhoods changed character slowly as they went south—residential, then mixed, then industrial, the streets widening and the foot traffic thinning. Moreno drove without consulting anyone, steering through the dark waterfront blocks of Red Hook with the confidence of a man who has made the trip many times.

"Oh," said Mollie Larne, her voice dropping in spite of herself, "it's terribly dark down here. Are we nearly there?"

Mallory murmured something inaudible.

Neither Calvert nor Rita spoke.

The streets near the water were narrow and ill-lit, hemmed in by warehouse facades and chain-link fencing. The sounds of the port came and went—somewhere close by, the deep complaint of a ship's horn; the rhythmic clank of container equipment working a

night shift. Rita looked up through the car window at what she initially took for a section of building overhanging the street, and then recognized, with a small shock, as the hull of a moored vessel.

"We're right on the water," she said.

"The edge of a basin," said Calvert. "We're nearly there."

Moreno turned down a lane barely wide enough for the car and brought it to a stop. A single light burned above a metal door set into the side of a warehouse building, the brick around it patched with old paint and salt stain.

"We walk from here," said Calvert. "Moreno will bring the bags around separately. Mallory—go ahead with Mollie. Rita and I will follow."

Mollie, briefly subdued by the character of the place, climbed out without her usual commentary and went with Mallory to the metal door, which opened before they reached it.

"Someone's watching the street," Rita said quietly.

"Yes," said Calvert. "They always are. Don't look at them and don't stop. They're not concerned with us."

They followed Mallory and Mollie inside.

The entrance was a bare room with a concrete floor: a rough table, two wooden chairs, a ship's lantern hung from a ceiling hook, and in the corner a small cast-iron stove whose glow accounted for the only warmth. Two doors—one to the street, one to a corridor beyond. A stack of wooden crates occupied one wall, and on the nearest of these, utterly motionless, sat a man.

He was compact in build, perhaps fifty, with the particular kind of stillness that is not the stillness of someone at rest but of someone who has made a considered decision not to move. His face was broad and dark, with a deep scar that crossed above his left eyebrow and pulled the corner of that eye very slightly closed, giving his expression an asymmetry that was not grotesque but was distinctly unreadable. He wore plain work clothes and had the hands of someone who had done physical labor at some point in his life and had not entirely left it behind. He was watching the newcomers with his one fully open eye and the other, narrowed, and he said nothing.

On his shoulder sat a large raven, as black and glossy as lacquered wood.

Mollie Larne made a sound.

The raven turned its head with a rapid, precise movement and regarded the newcomers.

"El Sueño," it said, in a voice like a hinge. "El Sueño. Buenos Aires."

"That," whispered Mollie, "is not something I expected."

The man on the crate had not moved or changed his expression. The raven settled, tucked its head, and was still.

"Are we ready, Eduardo?" asked Calvert.

The man rose from the crate with the same economy he brought to everything—no preliminary shifting of weight, no waste motion—simply upright, as though gravity were a matter of preference.

"Ready," he said. His voice was low and carried no accent that Rita could place. "Lola has the upper rooms prepared."

He glanced at Rita with that asymmetric gaze, and she had the distinct and unpleasant sensation of being assessed with complete accuracy and found to be exactly what he had anticipated.

"Go ahead, Mallory," said Calvert.

He turned to Rita. She was surveying the bare room and the man who inhabited it with an expression she could not entirely school.

"This is merely the entrance," he said, with the slight smile. "The rooms upstairs are more comfortable."

"Oh," said Rita. And nothing more.

Mallory and Mollie were already moving through the inner door. Mollie turned back once.

"Loathsome and perfect," she said, and vanished into the corridor.

"El Sueño," said the raven, to no one in particular. "Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires."

Calvert stood aside for Rita. She went through. He followed, and pulled the door shut behind him.

Eduardo Reynosa settled back onto his crate without hurry, and the raven, closing its serviceable eye, appeared to go to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

The Black Smoke

Mallory led the way up an uncarpeted stair and into a storage room lit by a bare hanging bulb: broken furniture, stacked crates, rolled sections of industrial matting, a smell of damp concrete and old rope. He went directly to a large steel shelving unit against the far wall, reached behind a section of shelving, and knocked: three times, a pause, then twice.

A silence during which even Mollie Larne held still.

"Who is it?" said a muffled voice from somewhere behind the wall.

"Cy and the crowd," Mallory answered.

A mechanism turned, and the shelving unit swung inward to reveal a doorway and, in it, Elena Vidal. She wore a silk robe of deep green and high-heeled slippers, her dark hair down. Whatever lay beneath the robe was a matter she appeared entirely indifferent to, and her bearing had the characteristic quality of someone for whom other people's perceptions of them constitute a secondary consideration at most.

"Come in," she said. "Mind your head, Lucy."

They filed through into a carpeted corridor—the adjoining house, connected through the concealed door which Elena now closed and locked behind them, fitting a second panel flush against the wall. Viewed from this side, the door ceased to exist.

"The workmanship on those doors is extraordinary," murmured Mallory.

"Eduardo has his talents," said Elena, without particular warmth, and moved ahead down the corridor.

Mollie caught up and fell in beside Rita, speaking in a whisper that was considerably louder than she intended.

"She is magnificent, isn't she? That absolute certainty she has about everything. I think danger is simply the most compelling quality a person can have. Don't you?"

"I think," said Rita, "that it depends entirely on where the danger is directed."

Elena opened a door on the left of the corridor and showed them a room divided by lightweight partitions into three sections, each lit by a shaded lamp on a low table, each with a daybed, an armchair, and a small charcoal heater. The partitions were hung with lengths of dark fabric—simple and functional rather than decorative, but the effect was warm and enclosed. The whole of it was entirely quiet. Not the ordinary quiet of a room at night, but something denser—the room had been soundproofed, walls and ceiling, and the silence had a quality Rita had never encountered before, as though sound itself had agreed not to enter.

"Choose," said Elena, addressing Rita and Mollie. "No one else is expected tonight. You two share this room?"

She went out. Mollie pressed her hands together.

"These cushions," she said, dropping onto the daybed in the nearest section with an expression of theatrical rapture.

"Absolute luxury. I feel like someone in a very expensive novel."

Rita said nothing. She stood looking at the room, listening to its particular silence. She remembered that Elena had said, at the penthouse gathering: "It is quiet—so quiet."

"Aren't you excited?" demanded Mollie.

"I suppose I am," said Rita. "Mostly I feel strange."

When Calvert appeared she had shed some of the strangeness—replaced by a loosening, a kind of careless warmth that was in part the room's atmosphere and in part something more familiar. She crossed to him quickly.

"How long until our things arrive? I'm ready to start, Lucy."

His jaw set briefly, and when he answered the drawl was more pronounced than usual.

"Moreno will be here shortly."

The tone was a door quietly closing. Rita stared at him, cheeks warming, the warmth of the room retreating.

"You don't like me tonight," she said. "You've been like this all evening."

He looked at her for a moment, and something shifted in his expression—something harder than his usual sardonic composure.

"You know perfectly well you are always maddeningly attractive," he said, with an edge to it. "Shall I remind you again that you are shortly to be Monte Hartfield's wife? Or would

you prefer a reminder that you have declined the corresponding honor from me?"

He turned and walked away. But:

"Lucy," Rita said softly.

He paused.

"I know now why you didn't want me to come." She hesitated.

"I'm sorry."

The hard expression left his face and was replaced by something she had very rarely seen there—something she could not entirely name.

"You only know half the reason," he said quietly.

Elena returned at that moment, Moreno behind her with the overnight bags. She distributed them without ceremony, glanced at Calvert with an expression that took note of something without commenting on it, and addressed Rita.

"Which section do you want?"

"The middle one, please," said Rita.

Mollie, by now stretched full-length on her chosen daybed, turned her head.

"This is absolutely the most wicked and comfortable place I have ever been. Is that a promise of more wicked things to come, Elena?"

"That is a threat," said Elena, with a flash of her teeth that was not a smile.

Something in the way she said it—a quick shift in the register of her voice—made both women look at each other. It had

awakened an elusive memory in Rita, a half-recognition she could not pin down.

Moreno deposited the bags and went out without a word. Elena followed him into the corridor and then turned back once.

"You notice how quiet it is?"

"Yes," said Rita. "Remarkably."

"This whole block is warehousing and storage. Eduardo controls the leases. Nobody has reason to come here, and the walls and ceilings are treated against sound." She glanced around the room. "He calls it the House of a Hundred Sighs—after a place he ran once in Buenos Aires. He is a man with a sentimental attachment to names."

From somewhere down the corridor, Mallory's querulous voice called her name.

"He is impatient as always," said Elena, with something that might have been affection or contempt or both. "Good night, both of you. Happy dreams."

She went out. Calvert paused in the doorway.

"Good night, Rita."

"Lucy—" She lowered her voice. "Is it safe here? Really?"

Calvert glanced along the corridor toward the retreating sound of Elena's footsteps, then back.

"I shall not be sleeping," he said. "I wish you hadn't come. But since you have, you must see it through." Another glance down the corridor, and then very quietly: "You have never really trusted me, Rita. You were quite right not to. But you can trust me tonight. Good night, dear."

He walked down the corridor to a small room at the back of the building—better furnished than the rest, with a worn but decent armchair, a reading lamp, a gas heater. A working room rather than a decorated one: bookshelves, a writing table, a side table with a compact supply arrangement laid out on it. Functional, private, economical. On the wall above the writing table, half a dozen photographs had been pinned in a loose arrangement—Elena in what appeared to be performance clothes, younger, in settings Rita would have found unrecognizable. She radiated even from photographs a quality of complete self-possession that had nothing to do with the camera's presence.

Calvert sat in the armchair, lit a cigarette, and became absorbed in some private calculation. The room was silent in the particular dense way of the whole house—not merely quiet but sealed. Ten minutes passed.

Elena came in.

"Ah," she said, her voice dropping to its quieter register. "I wondered. You're waiting to smoke with me?"

Calvert turned his head slowly and regarded her where she stood in the doorway, one hand on the frame, the line of her figure defined by the light behind her.

"No," he said. "Not tonight. Are the others settled?"

Elena shook her head.

"Mallory is already demanding more. He is a glutton. But you are not going to smoke?"

"Not tonight, Lola."

The old name—the private name, the one she had used before she became La Señora—produced a small contraction around her eyes.

She was about to speak when Mallory's voice came plaintively from down the corridor: "Lola. Please."

She turned her head, made the dismissive gesture with one hand, and went out. When she returned, Mallory had apparently achieved his immediate purpose, because she closed the door and sat on the arm of Calvert's chair. She bent her head, resting her cheek against his.

"Smoke with me," she said.

"Not tonight," he said, and patted her hand. "Lola."

She was silent. Then:

"Something has changed in you," she said. "These past months. You are different."

"Others have said the same thing."

"Your investments have been performing well. You have real money now. You want to become respectable."

"Respectability is a matter of appearances," he said. "Whatever change you're perceiving seems to go somewhat deeper than that."

"Yes," said Elena. "I know what it is. You watch over your pretty friend—stay awake to make sure nobody touches her. You would not do that for any of the others."

"She is nervous," he admitted. "And I regret bringing her here."

"Then why did you?"

"She arranged it herself. I took the path of least resistance." He looked at her steadily. "And I'll be honest with you—I'm thinking of your operation as much as my own comfort. She is about to marry Monte Hartfield. He is a city councilman on his way to the mayor's office, with connections throughout every institution in this city. If he were to become suspicious and dig—"

"You brought her to Zahnir."

"She was not then engaged to Hartfield."

"Ah," said Elena. "And now everyone says you are changed." She turned her head and looked at him with the amber eyes. "Yes. She is quite a charming friend."

Calvert looked into those eyes.

"She is nothing more than a friend, Lola. She never has been and could not be."

The words were designed to smooth the moment and instead ignited it. Elena was on her feet in the same instant, standing over him, and the composure—the absolute, characteristic, unshakeable composure—was gone. In its place was something raw.

"I know!" she said, her voice low and fierce. "Do you imagine I am blind? If she had been like the others—if it had been that—do you think it would matter to me for one second?" Her hands were clenched, the knuckles pale. "But you respect her. You respect her. That is what I cannot stand."

He understood his mistake immediately and contained his reaction by an act of will. He took her arms—she resisted, rigidly—and drew her back down to the chair.

"What a fire you are," he said, holding her firmly, feeling the tension in her arms. His mind had already found the line. "You understand this perfectly well if you think about it calmly. Rita amused me, and then she was going to marry Hartfield, and I stopped thinking about her. I tried to keep her away from our arrangements—not from sentiment, from strategy. Monte Hartfield has the kind of influence that could make your operation very uncomfortable. And he is a decent man. Which is actually the more important reason."

Gradually, as he spoke, the rigid arms softened and the body beside him ceased to shake. Elena sank back against his shoulder, exhaling slowly.

"I don't believe you," she murmured. "You are telling me something convenient. You have always told me convenient things; I suppose one more changes nothing." A pause. "You are very strong. You have hurt my wrists. Smoke with me now."

Calvert hesitated for a moment.

"All right," he said. "Go and lie down. I'll prepare it."

Chapter Eighteen

The Dream of Eduardo Reynosa

For a habitual opioid user to abstain when the drug is actually being used in the same room calls for a quality of will that is genuinely difficult to estimate from the outside. An ordinary person cannot remain long among those who are smoking without beginning to want to smoke; to double that pull, and double it again, would still fall short of measuring the gravitational pull of opioids upon someone already in their orbit. Yet Calvert used once with Elena—a minimal dose, enough to satisfy the gesture—and then, observing her settle into the particular loosening stillness that preceded her dream state, loaded a second pipe for himself from a fragment of an ordinary cigarette, producing the correct amount of smoke without the effect. He had that uncommon quality: the capacity to remain the author of his own vices rather than their subject.

The fourth pipe claimed Elena. Her eyes closed in the slow-motion way of someone who has long since stopped fighting this particular current, and the expression that settled over her face was that of a person who has arrived somewhere she has been traveling toward all day. Whatever she dreamed in that state, she dreamed it in South America, or something like it—returning, as she always did, to the life of the woman called Lola before she became La Señora, to whichever nights in Buenos Aires or Cartagena or Medellín had been the best of her early life.

Opioids give much and take more; and the architecture of what they give is always the past.

Calvert stood looking at her. A single pipe had affected him only slightly, but for a moment something broke loose in his imagination and the full reel of his own life played before him in accelerated sequence, so that his jaw hardened and he closed his hands until the knuckles went pale. He had not chosen wisely in most things. He had not been a good man. These observations were familiar to him and had lost their power to produce anything more than this brief, controlled physiological response. He released his hands, cast a last sharp look at the sleeper, and walked out.

The carpeted corridor, the concealed door, the lumber room, the uncarpeted stair. He descended and moved along the passage toward the front of the building, and the raven, hearing his step, opened its single eye.

"El Sueño," it said conversationally. "Buenos Aires."

The entrance room was unchanged: the ship's lantern on the table, the stove burning lower, Reynosa on his crate in his characteristic posture of complete rest. The raven settled back on his shoulder. Calvert leaned in the doorway and lit a cigarette.

"Well, Eduardo," he said, shaking out the match. "You see I am not using tonight."

Reynosa glanced at him from under the scarred brow.

"I see it," he said. Nothing more.

They remained in silence for a time. The raven attempted something that might have been "Buenos Aires" and subsided into drowsiness.

Then Calvert, speaking in Spanish—the Spanish of someone who had spent real time in the countries it was spoken, not the classroom variety—said: "You're going to make a profit on whatever you sell the officers tonight, while simultaneously keeping them from asking questions about the address."

Reynosa's expression altered in the same way a landscape alters when clouds move off the sun—the change was not in the features themselves but in the quality of illumination behind them. His Spanish, when he responded, was something quite different from the clipped guarded English he used with visitors: precise, somewhat formal, with an older register to it.

"A man of the North once said that business is business," he replied. "He believed this was an original observation. The thought is considerably older."

"You surprise me."

"The attentive man is surprised regularly," said Reynosa. "It is how he learns."

Calvert lit a fresh cigarette from the end of the old one and looked at Reynosa with an attention he did not often give to people.

"I have wondered for some time," he said, "what it is you are actually working toward. Not the operation—I understand the operation. I mean what you want the operation to produce. You are not a young man, Eduardo. Whatever this is," he gestured at the

room and by extension the house and by extension the whole apparatus, "it cannot be the destination."

Reynosa was quiet long enough that Calvert thought he was not going to answer. Then:

"When I use, before I sleep, a particular image appears. Always the same one. It is a valley in Nariño—this is in the south of Colombia, near the border. My grandfather had land there. Coffee and sugarcane. The river comes down from the mountains cold and fast and runs through the valley in a curve, and there are trees along it. In the afternoons you can hear the water from anywhere on the property."

He paused, looking at a middle distance that was not the wall in front of him.

"I have not been there in twenty-two years. But I have the image. I have it exactly. Every time I close my eyes in a certain way, there it is."

"And you want to go back."

"I want to buy what remains of that land, and what is adjacent to it, and to build something there. Something quiet. Something that does not require me to be present except as myself."

"You have not gone before now because—"

"Because I am still accumulating what I need to be safe there. Land means nothing if you cannot hold it. And because—" He stopped.

"Because of Lola," said Calvert.

Reynosa performed a movement with his shoulders that was both acknowledgment and dismissal—something that belonged to his particular culture's lexicon of gestures and had no precise equivalent elsewhere.

"A man does not always have the same arrangements," he said carefully. "The woman who attends to what I cannot attend to, who manages what I cannot manage—she is useful and she is capable and she has her own purposes. Whether those purposes will continue to align with mine—" Another small movement. "Who can say."

"She will never be content with a valley in Nariño," said Calvert quietly.

"No," said Reynosa, without apparent distress. "She will not. But that is a question for the future. When a man has tasted this life long enough, the things he asks for become simpler. A place. Quiet. Someone to cook in the evenings. His eye resting on something worth looking at. This is not so much to want."

Calvert said nothing. He smoked and looked at the floor, and Reynosa looked at the same middle distance as before.

It was a moment before either of them heard the footsteps on the sidewalk outside—the heavy, measured tread of two people who were not being quiet about it. The raven opened its eye.

"El Sueño," it said.

"The patrol," said Reynosa, in English. "Go through."

Calvert moved to the inner doorway and pulled it mostly closed. Three short knocks on the metal door, unhurried.

Reynosa crossed the room without haste and let in two NYPD officers, bulky in their winter gear, bringing cold air and the

smell of the waterfront in with them. They came in with the relaxed ease of men who had opened this particular door many times.

"Evening, Eduardo."

"Officers." Reynosa gestured at the stove. "Cold out."

"Miserable," confirmed the taller of the two, pulling off a glove and holding his hand near the grate. "Dead quiet down here tonight. Nothing moving on the water." He glanced around the room with the thorough non-attention of a man confirming what he already expects to find. The raven regarded him with its single eye.

"Still got that bird," said the other officer.

"El Sueño," the raven offered.

"Ha. Still talking." He seemed to find this satisfying.

Reynosa had already produced from the cupboard a bottle and two cups. He set them on the table. The taller officer picked up the bottle, examined the label with the brief appreciation of someone who has checked it before, and poured two measures with the practiced generosity of a man spending someone else's money.

A folded bill appeared on the table. Reynosa's hand moved once and it was no longer there.

"Quiet building," said the taller officer, drinking.

"Storage," said Reynosa. "Nothing here."

"Yeah." He set down the cup, pulled his glove back on, and nodded once with the air of a transaction concluded. "Stay warm."

"And you."

The door closed. Reynosa bolted it and returned to his crate. Calvert came out of the passage.

The two men looked at each other for a moment with the shared understanding of people who have just watched something and reached the same conclusion about what it means.

"It is a large city," said Reynosa, in Spanish, settling back into his native register without apparent transition. "Large enough that the maintenance of certain arrangements is simply a matter of administration."

"Efficient," said Calvert.

"Practical," Reynosa corrected. He glanced at Calvert. "You stay here tonight. Not upstairs."

It was not a question. Calvert acknowledged it with a slight movement of his head.

"I gave my word she would be safe."

"She is safe. But you are more comfortable here." Reynosa looked at the wall. "You are not sorry to be out of that room."

Calvert considered denying it and did not bother.

Three raps on the door, a pause, then two. The raven lifted its head.

"The traffic," said Reynosa, standing. "A delivery. El Tuerto is punctual, at least."

He looked at Calvert.

"You want to come?"

Calvert checked his watch and glanced toward the ceiling, toward the rooms above.

"All sleeping?" he said.

"All."

"Then yes," said Calvert. "I'll come."

Reynosa opened the cupboard and the raven, with the resigned air of a small creature that has learned its wishes are not the primary consideration, stepped in. Reynosa closed the door.

"Come, then," he said. "I will find you something less conspicuous to wear. Your clothes would attract the wrong kind of attention in the other cellar."

He moved toward the inner passage without hurry, and Calvert followed.

Chapter Nineteen

The Traffic

Calvert came out into the alley wearing a knit cap pulled down over his ears and a canvas work jacket over a dark muffler that covered his jaw. The smell of the jacket was considerable. His double life had brought him into contact with enough varieties of squalor over the years that he bore it without complaint.

A young man—one of the several people employed by the operation whose faces Calvert had seen but whose names he had never been told—was waiting in the alley with his hands in his pockets. He said something in rapid Spanish to Reynosa, who had locked the warehouse door behind him and now moved to the front of their small procession without acknowledgment.

The three set off along the waterfront, heading south and east along the basin. The streets were entirely empty. From the water came the unceasing industrial noise of the harbor—the distant complaint of a dredge, the grind of cranes on the container terminals further along, occasional voices, the slap and suck of water against pilings. Above the roofline the glow of the city made a permanent amber ceiling that prevented any real darkness.

They crossed an inlet on a concrete bridge barely wide enough for a vehicle, circled around a fenced storage yard, and turned twice through streets that were less streets than gaps between warehouse walls, finally emerging before a low building

that gave onto one of the smaller wharves. A hand-painted sign in the window read SMOKE & SUNDRIES. The lights inside were on.

The young man unlocked the door with a key from his ring and admitted them. The interior was a narrow room with a counter, a refrigerated case of drinks, and shelves of tobacco products and lottery tickets—the obligatory inventory of a front business that has just enough of the right things to explain why the lights are on. Behind the counter, on a stool, sat an old man. He was extraordinarily old and extraordinarily still, so still that the only reliable evidence he was alive at all was the fact of his presence and the horn-rimmed glasses perched on what had once been a nose. He had no hair anywhere on his face that Calvert could see except a thin white fringe above the lip, and his skin had the quality of something that had been compressed and preserved. He did not acknowledge their arrival in any observable way.

Reynosa moved to a door at the back of the shop and through it to a storeroom stacked with cartons: cigarettes, canned goods, cleaning supplies. The concrete floor was dusty and undisturbed-looking. Reynosa crouched and moved a section of a wooden pallet aside, revealing a section of floor that differed from its surroundings only in the fineness of its dust—which was, Calvert had learned on a previous visit, because it had been disturbed more recently.

From a crack in the concrete Reynosa took a length of stiff wire. He inserted it, turned it, and a section of concrete that was in fact a trapdoor lifted on its hinge, revealing a steep

wooden ladder. Below it, a lamp had already been lit—the young man had come ahead, apparently.

Reynosa descended first, then Calvert. The trapdoor closed above them.

The passage below was low and timbered—shored up like a mine working, which in a sense it was, running under the building and beneath the wharf. It was perhaps thirty yards long, cold and damp, with the persistent smell of tidal water. Calvert moved in the stooping crouch it required, Reynosa ahead of him with a flashlight.

The passage ended at a heavy door with a modern lock. Reynosa opened it and they emerged into the receiving vault.

The space had the character of something older than its current use: brick arches, a stone-paved floor, the kind of construction that turns up unexpectedly under Brooklyn's waterfront and belongs to various periods of the borough's history. Someone had fitted it out as a storage and processing room—a long counter, metal shelves loaded with sealed packages and containers, a propane heater, a standing scale. A ship's lantern hung from the central arch. Behind the counter, on a stool with his hands folded on the counter before him, sat the old man from upstairs.

Calvert blinked. Then he understood: not the same man. Or perhaps the same man reproduced by some principle of necessity, as if certain operations require this particular type of ancient, motionless functionary and produce one when needed. He did not ask.

Bending over a canvas-wrapped package at one end of the counter was a large, red-bearded man in waterproof gear, working at the knots with thick fingers. As Reynosa and Calvert entered he looked up, showing a broad, weathered face with the particular puffiness under the eyes of someone who sleeps badly on water.

"Reynosa," he said, with the flat acknowledgment of someone who is here for business and not pleased to be so.

"George." Reynosa set his flashlight on the counter and looked at the package. "You have good material this time."

"I always bring good material," said George, continuing to work at the knots. "That's what I'm paid for."

"Mm," said Reynosa.

George looked up at the sound.

"What's that mean?"

"It means I have no use for cut product. Or for product that has been rested on something heavy for ballast."

"There's nothing wrong with what I've brought," said George, his face darkening. "I've never brought you anything wrong."

"No," said Reynosa. "You've always been reliable. This is why I mention it now rather than after."

George stared at him for a moment, then went back to the knots with increased energy. Reynosa waited with the patience of someone who is not in a hurry because he already knows the outcome.

The canvas fell open. Inside were several sealed blocks of compressed cocaine—South American, the packaging consistent with what Reynosa had been receiving through this route for three

years. He took from his jacket a thin steel probe—the kind used in food inspection, double-ended, finely pointed—and pressed it slowly into the first block. It entered and withdrew cleanly: the right resistance, the right color on the tip. He smelled it and tasted the residue.

He set the block aside. He picked up the second and pressed the probe in. It met an obstruction. Reynosa paused. He pushed slightly harder and the probe went through. He withdrew it, wiped it, inserted a second time an inch to the left. Another obstruction.

“What’s the game,” said George, who had been watching, “there’s nothing wrong with those—”

Reynosa produced a folding knife on a chain and cut the second block cleanly in half. He dug a thumbnail into the interior and extracted two small lead weights: the kind used for fishing, or for giving a package the correct feel without the correct weight of product.

He set them on the counter and looked at George with his asymmetric gaze.

“I didn’t put those there,” said George, going red. He pulled off his cap, revealing a thatch of damp red hair, and pushed both hands through it. “Bloody hell. Someone’s done me.”

“Someone has done you,” Reynosa agreed, in a tone entirely without sympathy. “Go through the rest.”

The remaining blocks were probed. Two more contained ballast of one kind or another. When all had been checked and weighed, Reynosa consulted a calculator and put a figure on the counter.

George, who had been watching with the expression of a man whose bad evening has continued to get worse, looked at the number.

"That's not what we agreed," he said.

"That is what the product is worth at its actual weight and purity. I pay fair prices for what I receive. I do not pay for lead weights."

George was quiet for a moment. Then: "Fine. Fine." He had the resigned air of someone who knows when an argument is over.

Calvert spoke two words in Spanish. Reynosa added a small amount to the figure on the calculator and showed George the screen. George looked at it, pocketed the cash that Reynosa counted out, and picked up his gear.

"Door's at the end," said Reynosa. "Water's low. You'll have room."

George went to the far end of the vault, descended three steps to a heavier door, and opened it. The sound of water came up immediately—closer and louder than it had been in the passage, lapping at the foot of the steps. Cold air pushed in. In the darkness below, a small boat shifted against its mooring ring.

"Night," George said, without looking back.

He got into the boat, unhitched the line, and pushed off. The sound of his oars faded quickly into the noise of the harbor.

Reynosa closed the water-gate and bolted it, then returned to the counter. The old man behind it had not moved throughout any of this—not when the door opened onto the night water, not during the argument about weight, not at any point. He sat with his folded hands exactly as he had sat before.

Reynosa began moving the packages to the shelves, placing each precisely, without waste of motion. Calvert watched him.

Those who control the traffic control something that, unlike most El Dorados, actually delivers what it promises. The city of gold is real: its revenues are reliable, its demand is steady, its clients are driven back to it by forces over which neither they nor anyone else maintains any real authority. It requires only ruthlessness, patience, and the willingness to be unknown. Eduardo Reynosa possessed all three in full measure.

The old man behind the counter, as the last package was placed on the shelf, moved for the first time. He nodded once, slowly, with the deliberation of someone for whom motion is a considered expenditure.

Reynosa nodded back. He picked up the flashlight.

"Back," he said to Calvert.

They went back through the passage in silence, Calvert stooping, Reynosa ahead with the light, the sound of the harbor receding behind them as they moved under the ground toward the smoke shop and what remained of the night.

Chapter Twenty

Zahnir's Methods

Rita Vane married Monte Hartfield in the spring and made her farewell to the stage. The goal she had worked toward for a decade was achieved at last. But another farewell—one she had once contemplated with something approaching eagerness—no longer seemed either desirable or possible. To her dependence on cocaine had been added a settled tolerance for opioids, and by the time she walked off that stage for the last time she was, by any objective measure, thoroughly and irrevocably addicted to both.

Calvert's altered attitude surprised and irritated her. He, who had first made the introductions—to Zahnir, to Elena, to the whole apparatus of her current life—seemed suddenly determined to convince her of the damage she was doing to herself. The effect was only to cost him her confidence. She visited the House of a Hundred Sighs twice with Mollie Larne and once with Mollie and Mallory, without Calvert's knowledge.

Then Calvert went abroad on business—the Gulf, he said, some investment situation requiring his presence for months. Mallory, having no professional reason to remain in New York, went back to Los Angeles. Rita found herself facing married life without her supply network, and with a watchful husband whose attention to her well-being was genuine and therefore the more difficult to manage.

This subtle shift in how she thought of Monte Hartfield was one she was incapable of recognizing in herself, because it

happened by degrees and because self-scrutiny was not among the skills the drug habit left intact. In less than a year from regarding Hartfield as a rock of refuge—her best chance of something like salvation—she had come to regard him as an obstacle to her private requirements. Not that she had stopped loving him. In fact, she had come to love him properly, for the first time, in the specific way that makes discovery by the loved person the thing most to be dreaded. His straightforwardness, his complete absence of hidden life, was the quality in him she most valued and most feared; the contrast with her own situation was not one she could look at directly.

She was, in any case, far from alone in her habits. She had met enough devotees by this point to have convinced herself that what she did was more or less universal among people of her former world—a part of a particular kind of life, not a disease but a preference. The truth was that she had become a core member of a network closely bound by mutual dependency and mutual silence—a fellowship of which Zahnir of Spring Street was, in effect, the grand master, and Elena Vidal the grand mistress.

The mechanics of Zahnir's supply system were elegantly simple, and a stranger watching from the outside could not have deduced them. Having been received once by Zahnir in his private chamber, a client was admitted to the system. From that point, she had only to appear at the boutique and make a purchase—a bottle of perfume, or a box of the small enameled sweet confections also sold there. Each variety of perfume corresponded to a specific drug; the sweets corresponded to morphine. The

attendant knew every client by sight, and with the boxed or bottled purchase would slip a second small package into the customer's hand. The elegance was in the cover: if a client were ever stopped and questioned leaving the premises, she had a legitimate purchase to show—a beauty product, a box of sweets—with every receipt available to support it.

No conversation was necessary. The client selected a scent, the money changed hands, and the attendant disappeared briefly to wrap the purchase. The second, smaller package was transferred without ceremony. The prices were extortionate by any standard, but Rita, in common with most of her set, had grown careless of expenditure in direct proportion to the degree to which the drugs had degraded her judgment.

Smoked opioids alone Zahnir did not supply through this method. He sold pharmaceutical heroin, tincture preparations, and synthetic opioids; but those who sought the pipe were handled separately by Elena Vidal, who would arrange private sessions at the House in Red Hook or, more rarely, supply the material directly. By maintaining this separation, La Señora kept a particularly firm hold on the devotees of the pipe, who were in the deepest dependency of all.

Drug users form a close fraternity and are as secretive outside their circle as members of any criminal organization. In this secrecy—which is, as Margaret had observed in Chapter Eleven, a recognized symptom of the condition—lay Zahnir's operational security. Rita had no real desire to penetrate the veil, literal and metaphorical, that Zahnir had arranged between

himself and the world. At first there had been vague curiosity, and she had asked Calvert and others, but no one seemed to know Zahnir's real identity and no one seemed to care particularly, provided the supply continued. They all lived secret, veiled lives, these clients, and that Zahnir should do likewise struck them as unremarkable.

Early in her curiosity she had suggested to Calvert that running a psychic consultation business alongside the other operation seemed an unnecessary risk.

Calvert had smiled in his sardonic way.

"It is an additional safeguard," he told her. "Think of it as the technique of a thief well known to the police as a pickpocket—they watch him for pickpocketing and overlook everything else. Zahnir's dream-reading business doesn't technically fall under any relevant statute, and he is careful to stay on the right side of that line. It also serves to discourage idle curiosity. People who come meaning only to consult the oracle and stumble onto the other operation find themselves, afterward, disinclined to discuss what they've seen."

By the time of the wedding Rita was too entangled to have left even if she had wanted to, and had been genuinely alarmed at the prospect of the extended foreign travel Hartfield had planned. The trip never happened: his political career intervened, as it increasingly did, absorbing him in the campaign and the council work that was steadily consuming more of his time and attention. Rita, alone in the Park Avenue apartment with her

assistant Nina and too much unstructured time, recognized this with a complicated relief she chose not to examine.

Hartfield, though he would have preferred a quiet ceremony, understood that Rita had wanted to leave the stage in a manner befitting someone who had genuinely been its brightest figure for three years. He arranged accordingly. The wedding was the social event of its season, covered by every relevant publication, attended by everyone of consequence, and the subject of more Instagram documentation than either of them could have managed to review. Even Rita's father, a Stamford insurance attorney not given to displays of sentiment, was observed to smile on two separate occasions. Rita's mother moved through the entire event in a state of gratified transcendence.

During the early months of marriage, while Calvert was still abroad, Rita began to find the drugs increasingly difficult to obtain. She had lost direct contact with several of her former associates; but she had kept Nina, who could be trusted for errands, and Nina regularly went to Zahnir's and returned with the small perfume flasks. When an established client's representative came, the system operated normally; but on each successive visit the prices had increased, and the increases were accelerating.

She mentioned this to another regular client, a woman of social prominence who used intravenously, and learned that she was being charged nearly twice what her friend was paying.

"Get the man to see reason," her friend advised. "I know a doctor—not currently practicing in any official sense, but

perfectly competent and quite willing to help. He'll be more reasonable about it."

Rita visited the physician the following day with a written introduction. He supplied her for several weeks at moderate prices, and then abruptly stopped. He claimed he was under surveillance and could not continue; his manner suggested he was lying, but he was immovable, and Rita found herself back at Zahnir's with the prices higher than before.

She tried once more—a man she was introduced to at a private members' club, who presented himself with professional smoothness and claimed access to anything she might require. She made an arrangement with him, reflecting that provided his product was reliable she had found an alternative to Zahnir.

She had not. Within a few weeks this man was gone too. His apartment was vacant, his phone disconnected. He simply was not there anymore.

Rita did not understand immediately what this pattern meant. Each alternative source she found was closed, not by accident or police pressure—though that was always the given explanation—but because someone was closing them. The syndicate that controlled the premium supply in this city tolerated no competition for its clients. What had seemed like bad luck was in fact management.

By the time this understanding arrived, it had ceased to be actionable. She was back at Zahnir's paying whatever was asked, because what was asked was irrelevant compared with the alternative.

It was her friendship with Margaret Verity—which began around this period, at the benefit concert where they met—that provided the first outside perspective she had trusted in years. Margaret's discovery of the truth about Rita's situation was hastened by a period of enforced withdrawal, when all sources collapsed at once and the resulting nervous collapse was visible to anyone with the training to read it. Margaret had both the training and the willingness to use it.

Zahnir's prices by this point were beyond any reasonable characterization. But Rita had no remaining leverage, and the need was not reasonable.

It was then that Calvert returned from abroad and called on her at the apartment. She welcomed him as she would have welcomed rescue, unfolding the whole situation, and her state bore its own eloquent testimony to everything she described.

Calvert paced the room. She watched him, hollow-eyed.

"Leave Zahnir to me," he said. "If you go to him yourself he will perform the dream-reader routine, or claim his margins are thin. He used similar tactics with Mallory. I'll deal with him in the morning. In the meantime, send Nina to my place in an hour and I'll see what can be arranged."

"Oh, Lucy," said Rita. "What would I do without you."

Calvert smiled, briefly and without warmth.

"You'd manage," he said. "But not well." He turned to face her. "Have you ever considered stopping? Not deferring it, not managing it better—actually stopping. Do you understand that

tolerance only moves in one direction, and that a day will come when—"

Rita suppressed a shudder that was not quite voluntary.

"You're trying to frighten me," she said. "You've tried before and I don't know why you bother. You know I can't stop."

"You could try."

"I don't want to try." The irritability was reflexive and she knew it was reflexive and couldn't prevent it. "When Monte's situation stabilizes—when he's not traveling every other week—then. Not now. In this life, with nothing I know how to do and none of the people I know how to be with, and no real idea of who I am outside of that—" She stopped. "I tell you I would lose my mind, Lucy, if I tried to do without it now. You must see that."

The hollow promise of reform deferred to a better future did not deceive Sir Lucien. He let the subject drop, and changed the conversation.

Chapter Twenty-One
The Cigarettes from Buenos Aires

Calvert continued.

"What I am trying to say," he said, "is this: suppose you were to be cut off—not from the opioids, but from cocaine and the sleeping medication. Do you understand what would happen?"

"Oh," said Rita, "why do you keep doing this? I am not going to be cut off."

"I persist because I want you to try—gradually, carefully—to depend on them less than you do. So that if the worst happens, you have some margin. Some chance."

Rita stood up and faced him, biting her lip.

"Lucy. Do you mean that Zahnir—"

"I mean that anything is possible. The DEA has been building a case against this operation for some time. Zahnir has protection, but protection is not permanent. One day there may be an interruption, Rita—a real one, not the kind manufactured to increase prices—and if it comes while you are at this level of dependency—" He stopped. "Will you try?"

She watched him steadily, and the pupils of her eyes changed slightly.

"You know something," she said slowly, "that you're not telling me."

He laughed and looked away.

"I know that I have to leave the city again, Rita, and that I would be considerably more comfortable if I knew you were not so entirely dependent on one source."

"Oh, Lucy. You're going away again?"

"For a time. Not long, I hope."

Rita sat down and was quiet for a moment. Then:

"I will try," she said. "I'll go to Margaret properly—the way she's been asking me to. A real course of treatment."

"Good," said Calvert quietly. "That's all it is. Making the effort. With Margaret's help you'll have a real chance."

He was in the city for another week before he left, and Rita spent a great part of that week in his company. Something had shifted in how she felt about him—not toward him in any romantic sense, but in a more complicated direction. She had used him as a stepping-stone, clearly and without much apology to herself, and the knowledge had not previously troubled her. Now it did. He had proved a more loyal friend than her conduct toward him had deserved, and the awareness of this was not comfortable. His reserve—so complete, so apparently impenetrable—had of late acquired a quality she could only call dignity, and she could not look at it directly.

Frayne, who was incapable of concealing anything for long, made his jealousy increasingly visible during these final days. He seemed to have acquired some proprietary notion regarding Rita's company, and during the week before Calvert's departure he came perilously close to making himself ridiculous on more than one occasion.

On an evening near the end of that week, leaving a theater, Rita suggested to Calvert that they go somewhere for an hour.

"Monte is expecting you," Calvert said.

"We'll text him and ask him to join us. He won't, but he can't reasonably object."

Hartfield, predictably, declined but offered no objection, and they made their way to a private members' club on the West Side that they had frequented in the earlier days. The room was full of the particular Saturday night energy of people who have determined to enjoy themselves and are working at it.

Just inside the entrance they paused. There, at a corner table—Frayne, Mollie Larne, and Elena Vidal. Frayne's back was to the door. Elena, who was facing it, saw them the moment they entered, and her expression did not change.

"There's Quentin," said Rita. "And he's glaring, poor boy."

"Do you see who is with him?" asked Calvert.

"Mollie—and Elena."

They crossed the room and joined the table. Elena greeted them with her rapid, mirthless smile. She was in a dress that occupied the attention of everyone in the room without any apparent effort on her part. Mollie Larne erupted into pleased exclamations. Frayne's color moved through several registers in quick succession before he managed to arrange himself into something approximately composed.

He lasted perhaps ten minutes before:

"I'm afraid I have to go," he said, too abruptly. "Business—rather urgent. Good night."

He left, navigating the tables with slightly excessive speed. Rita looked at Calvert, who looked back with an expression of neutral acknowledgment. Elena, who had watched the three of them throughout, did not miss the glance.

Mollie said something characteristically unhelpful about Frayne's abrupt departure.

"It is perhaps his heart," said Elena, in her low, harsh voice, and raised her amber eyes briefly to Calvert's face.

"Oh, please don't mention hearts," said Rita, which required no acting. "Monte has a cardiac condition, and it genuinely frightens me."

"Does he," said Elena. A small pause. "Poor man."

Frayne's exit had cast a shadow that Mollie's determined brightness could not fully lift, and when shortly after midnight Calvert took Rita back uptown they were largely silent in the car.

"Where does Elena actually live?" Rita asked, as they approached the apartment. It was not Elena she had been thinking about.

"She has a place in the city. Somewhere uptown, I think. And the house in Red Hook, of course."

He stayed only a few minutes at the apartment. On the way back downtown, passing through the West Village, he noticed a light in the upper floor of Frayne's building.

He stopped the car.

"Wait," he said to his driver.

He sat for a moment, faintly amused at himself, then got out.

Pardew opened the door, surprised.

"Is Mr. Frayne up?"

"Yes, sir. Come in, please."

Frayne was in his dressing gown, pipe in hand, standing with the forced composure of someone who has been pacing. He achieved a decent version of ordinary surprise.

"Calvert. Is everything all right?"

"Entirely. I wanted a word, and I leave tomorrow—I wouldn't have come at this hour otherwise. May I sit down?"

"Of course. Pardew—" He raised his voice. "Something to drink, please."

Calvert settled into the armchair and from his dinner jacket produced a plain brown packet of cigarettes and selected one. Frayne offered him a cigar.

"No, thank you. I tend to stick to these."

Frayne looked at the packet. "Don't think I've seen that brand."

"No particular brand. They come in from Buenos Aires, I believe."

Pardew appeared with a tray, and as he withdrew Calvert came directly to the point.

"I called because I wanted to clear up any misunderstanding there might be regarding Rita Hartfield and me. I'm going to speak plainly, Frayne, because I like her and I respect her, and I like and respect Monte Hartfield. What I want you to understand

is that Rita and I are friends—that is the whole of it, and it has always been the whole of it. She conducts herself with integrity and always has. Now—” he paused, looking at the younger man steadily—“you embarrassed me tonight. More to the point, you embarrassed her. It wasn’t necessary.” Another pause. “She is as important to me, Frayne, as she is to you. And we are both, I hope, friends of Monte Hartfield.”

Frayne’s temper flared briefly—the flush was visible—but Calvert’s composure absorbed it without reaction, the way deep water absorbs a stone. Frayne laughed, a little unsteadily, and stood up with his hand out.

“You’re right,” he said. “I know you’re right. It’s just—” He exhaled. “She’s devastating, Calvert. She really is.”

“She is,” said Calvert, and gripped the hand. His answering smile had something in it that was not quite sardonic for once. “If only she were not married.”

“If only,” Frayne agreed.

Calvert took his leave shortly afterward, with the particular economy of someone who has accomplished what he came to do and sees no reason to prolong it.

The brown packet of cigarettes remained on the side table.

It was an oversight—the kind that happens when a man has more on his mind than the contents of his pockets. He discovered it the following morning and did not go back. That was the account he gave himself at the time, and he may have believed it.

When the full truth of the events of those years eventually came to light, there were few who accepted that it had been an

accident. What would have been required to believe in the accident was the belief that Lucien Calvert—a man of detailed intelligence and nothing like carelessness—had simply forgotten a packet of cigarettes at the apartment of a young man he had just spent an hour warning against becoming entangled with the wrong people. The two beliefs were not easy to hold simultaneously. Most people did not try.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Strangle-Hold

Margaret saw at once that her friend's condition was serious. But she also recognized, with the particular clarity of a physician who has been waiting for an opening, that the crisis offered her the opportunity she had been waiting for. She wrote a prescription for a minimal dose of cocaine—enough to prevent immediate medical danger—but declined firmly to issue another unless Rita authorized her in writing to undertake a supervised course of treatment.

Rita's account of recent events, disjointed as it was, pointed unmistakably to a deliberate pattern of supply control—someone cutting off her alternatives and driving the price upward. Margaret understood this mechanism and understood better than to press Rita about it. To exhibit curiosity in these matters was simply to provoke evasion, and the only useful thing was to keep the door open.

A night of little sleep and considerable physical distress found Rita in the state that Margaret had predicted: prepared to consider any remedy that promised even temporary relief. Hartfield had gone out early. At around eleven she called Zahnir's, and the attendant informed her with practiced blandness that Zahnir was still unavailable. "He says this evening he will see your friend, if she comes, my lady."

As if to maximize her difficulty, Frayne called that morning and invited her to dinner.

Rita hesitated for five seconds that felt considerably longer. She had not forgotten what Zahnir's attendant had proposed on her last visit: if you bring your friend Mr. Frayne, matters can be arranged. The degradation of this had been clear to her in the moment of hearing it—she was to use a man's devotion to her as recruitment leverage for a drug operation. She had left immediately, trembling.

Now, alone in the apartment, exhausted and cold and in pain, she turned the proposition over again with the unwilling attention of someone who knows they are about to do something they will not forgive themselves for, and is looking for the angle from which it becomes acceptable.

She knew what the cigarettes contained. She had worked that out some time ago. Whatever Zahnir might arrange—whatever introduction he was proposing—it would not leave Frayne unchanged. She knew this. She believed, with the rationalizing certainty of someone whose judgment had been degraded by months of polysubstance dependency, that a single exposure would not be permanently damaging. She did not believe this. She told herself she did.

"All right, Quentin," she heard herself say. "Will you call for me?"

When he had gone Rita sat for the better part of half an hour without moving—hands pressed together in her lap, face held in the expression of someone who has made a decision and is waiting for their opinion of themselves to settle. Rooke, of

Caudle's Agency, dutifully reported the visit by phone to Monte Hartfield.

By the time late afternoon arrived, the symptoms of cocaine withdrawal that her prescription had briefly held back were returning. The particular quality of depression that attends upon cessation in a habitual user of long standing is not the ordinary depression of unhappiness—it is a gray, biochemical certainty that nothing will ever be right again, combined with a physical restlessness that makes sitting still feel like an act of violence against oneself. Rita searched through her jewel case, through the pockets of coats she had not worn in months, through every place where a stray tablet might conceivably have been forgotten. There was nothing.

Margaret was her last real option, and she was not prepared to accept Zahnir's terms if another way remained open.

She went quickly to Chelsea. Margaret was out. The assistant had no idea when she would be back.

Rita sat in the small waiting room and wrote a note without being entirely sure what she was writing—her hands not entirely steady, the headache that had been building for hours now at the point where thought required effort. She sealed it, left it on Margaret's desk, and went back to the apartment.

Of dressing for the evening she retained only a fragmentary impression: the mirror showing her a face that seemed to belong to someone who had not slept or eaten properly in longer than she wanted to count; Nina moving around the room with the careful manner of a person attending to something fragile; the small

logical part of her mind still working through permutations of escape.

Then Nina came to the doorway.

"Sir Lucien Calvert is on the phone, madam."

Rita was across the room before the sentence was finished. She had not known how completely she had been relying on Calvert returning until the sound of his voice produced in her something close to physical relief. He was at his loft on Wooster Street, just arrived. She gave him no opportunity for explanations—just asked him to wait for her.

She finished dressing in minutes, sent a message to Frayne asking him to go on to the restaurant and she would join him there, and went to Wooster Street.

Moreno admitted her. She did not wait to be shown to the study; she knew the way.

Calvert was standing when she came in. He looked drawn and grim in a way she had not seen before—lines about his mouth that had deepened, a quality of fatigue in his eyes that was not physical. But she was in no state to observe this closely, or anything else closely. The words came out of her in a torrent, barely coherent, while he stood behind her chair listening without interrupting.

The whole story: the systematically eliminated alternatives, the escalating prices, the attendant's proposal that she bring Frayne in exchange for supply, her brief terrible consideration of it, her visit to Margaret, the note, the return home. All of it.

"He dare not refuse you," she said finally. "Call him and tell him I am coming tonight. Tell him I must see him."

"I will go in your place, Rita."

She turned, wide-eyed.

"No. I am going myself. I am going to speak to that man directly, and if he is capable of listening he will listen. I understand what he has done, Lucy—I've understood for some time. Every alternative I found disappeared. He controls all of it. If he will not see reason—if he will not treat me like a human being and not a revenue stream—I will go to the police tonight. I mean it. I have nothing left to lose by it."

"Be calm," said Calvert quietly, and laid his hand on her shoulder.

She stood up, and something in her face at that moment—the dilation of the pupils, the set of the mouth—made clear to him that she was beyond persuasion by reasonable means.

"Ring him now," she said. "I have someone behind me. For the first time I can actually see what needs to happen."

"There may be a better way," said Calvert. "But—" He paused. "I have a small amount of cocaine here, Rita, which I can give you now."

He went out to the phone, pulling the study door closed behind him.

His purpose in giving her the cocaine was not simply kindness—it was strategy. A woman in the chemical state she had arrived in was not capable of a productive conversation with Zahnir or anyone else. He had counted on the drug's effect to

reduce her to a more workable condition. As they set out together on foot for Spring Street—the night November-cold and lightly raining, Calvert with his collar turned up and Rita moving with the slightly heightened focus that a small dose of cocaine temporarily provides—he reverted to something closer to his old ironic manner.

But Rita's resolve was fixed in a way that did not respond to irony, or to his more direct appeals. She walked toward the appointment he had made with the particular determination of someone who has stopped calculating and is moving on pure will. She did not know what was waiting for her in the green-curtained room. Neither did Lucien Calvert.

Unmoved by every appeal he could bring to bear, she walked on to the meeting she had demanded—ignorant of what it held in store for her—and Lucien Calvert, equally blind to what the next hour contained, walked beside her to meet his death.

PART THREE

THE MAN FROM WASHINGTON

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lieutenant Halloran Resigns

"Come in," said the Deputy Chief.

The door opened and Detective Lieutenant Halloran entered. His face was as composed and his attire as precise as if he had slept eight hours, bathed at leisure, and eaten a proper breakfast. In fact he had not been to bed in twenty-four hours, had breakfasted on coffee and crackers, and had been working without interruption since leaving his house in Sunnyside. He had, however, found time to stop at a barbershop, in deference to his own standards.

He set his hat, cane, and rain jacket on a chair and took out a large notebook.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Lieutenant," replied the Deputy Chief. "I imagine you have a substantial report. Some of the morning coverage already has Calvert's death."

Halloran smiled, showing his large white teeth in a way that was not entirely pleasant.

"Twenty-two journalists are sitting downstairs at this moment," he said. "One of them found his way to my office." He opened the notebook. "He didn't stay long."

The Deputy Chief gazed at his blotter and tapped the table edge with his fingers in a slow chord. He cleared his throat.

"Lieutenant-Lieutenant-I fully appreciate the difficulties involved. But the press is the press, and neither of us can fight

it indefinitely. Where direct resistance is futile, a degree of tact—you understand my meaning."

"Completely, sir. You have my word." Halloran produced the flat, even tone of a man who is saying the right thing and means none of it. "I have a précis of the evidence as it stands, written up by Detective Coombes. You may prefer to read it directly."

"Yes, I'll read it. Has Coombes been on all night as well?"

"He has, sir. I sent him home an hour ago."

"Ah."

The Deputy Chief took the notebook and settled his head in his hand. Halloran sat very upright in the chair opposite, chewing with unhurried regularity, watching the profile of the reader with the focused attention of a hawk that has spotted something worth watching. The reading was interrupted twice by phone calls, through which the Deputy Chief continued reading without apparent difficulty.

When he reached the final page he did not look up for some time.

"You have not yet established Zahnir's identity," he said.

"Not yet, sir." Halloran's delivery had the clipped precision of a man reading from an internal printout. "Tranter has questioned every officer in the Spring Street area, and we've spoken to staff from most of the offices and businesses in the building. No one is familiar with Zahnir's appearance outside the suite itself."

"The attendant?"

Halloran moved his shoulders with controlled impatience.

"We had a lead by five this morning—someone who knew where he was living, in Sunset Park. An officer went there at five-thirty. He was already gone. All traces lost."

"Considering that alongside the fact that no evidence was found at the premises and that Calvert's papers and safe were emptied, what do you conclude?"

"My report states what I conclude, sir. Someone inside Calvert's household was working with Zahnir. Zahnir and Mrs. Hartfield can only have left by going up to the roof and across to Calvert's loft on Wooster Street. I intend to charge Moreno."

"What does Moreno say?" The Deputy Chief had turned back several pages. "Yes, here—'claims US citizenship but has produced no documentation, engaged by Calvert in San Francisco, professes no knowledge of events, admits Mrs. Hartfield to the loft on the night in question, states Calvert and Mrs. Hartfield left together, states Calvert directed him to collect the car and wait outside a club where Calvert proposed to dine, claims he waited approximately one hour outside the club, learned from the door staff that Calvert had not arrived, returned the car and went back to the loft.' Is any of this confirmed?"

"Partially, sir. The door staff at the club confirm Moreno making the inquiry. The garage confirms he took the car out and returned it as described. But no one can confirm he was waiting outside the club for the hour he claims."

"Dark night. Car waiting in a side street."

"Precisely, sir. No one would have noticed him particularly. But I don't believe he was there."

"Regardless, it doesn't bear on time of death. The watch stopped at seven-fifteen, and Moreno doesn't claim to have left the loft until after that."

"I know it, sir. What I want to know is where he went after he brought the car back."

The Deputy Chief glanced up briefly.

"Is it possible Moreno is Zahnir?"

"It is not, sir. Zahnir has been described to me by multiple witnesses, all descriptions consistent: he has abnormally large eyes—Miss Verity described them as larger than any human eyes she had ever seen. Moreno has eyes like a man who doesn't enjoy being looked at and is not going to give you the opportunity. The two descriptions have nothing in common."

"Then accessory."

"Exactly. Someone removed Zahnir and Mrs. Hartfield from those premises and cleaned out Calvert's safe, and it was someone who knew the building, knew where the papers were kept, and had the keys. Only Moreno fits."

"The safe situation—"

"Opened at six this morning, sir. Hastily emptied. Calvert's keys were on his person when his body was found, which means whoever had access to the safe had a copy. Moreno is the obvious candidate."

"H'm." The Deputy Chief turned a page. "This Montero Tobacco Imports."

"Shell operation, sir. A back entrance to Zahnir's suite, nothing more. The lease was arranged through a legitimate commercial agent who was paid in cash each quarter by someone using the name Vance. The agent is reputable and was genuinely unaware of what the space was being used for. Vance cannot be traced—the address given was a mail drop in Midtown that closed two years ago. The money came from somewhere in Zahnir's cash flow."

"No business conducted there?"

"None. An office assistant employed by the law firm on the same floor recalls seeing two people go up to the third floor on several occasions—a man and a woman—but she assumed they were visiting one of the other offices. No useful description. No one in the building ever saw the Montero door open."

The Deputy Chief sighed.

"Setting aside Miss Verity's account, you have no hard evidence that Zahnir dealt in controlled substances."

"The evidence points unmistakably, sir. Miss Verity's testimony, the note Mrs. Hartfield left for her—'bring enough to keep me alive'—and Mrs. Hartfield's own statement to Frayne that she had a 'particular reason' for seeing Zahnir. In addition, I've interviewed Nina, Mrs. Hartfield's personal assistant. Mr. Hartfield is still too unwell to be seen. The girl was frightened but confirmed that she had been regularly collecting packages from Zahnir's boutique, nominally perfume. She claims she didn't know the contents. She did confirm that Mrs. Hartfield had been

dependent on controlled substances for several years, starting during her time on stage."

"Rita Vane," murmured the Deputy Chief, glancing up briefly. "I remember the show. Very talented." A pause. "The assistant is trying to protect herself."

"She is, sir. It won't accomplish anything. There's a further development. After this report was compiled, Miss Verity sent a message and I visited Frayne early this morning."

"Good God, man, when did you sleep?"

"I've set that aside for the moment, sir." Halloran produced the plain brown packet and laid it on the table. "I recovered these. Left at Frayne's apartment some weeks ago by Calvert. They are laced with a synthetic opioid—Miss Verity identified them the night of the murder."

The Deputy Chief looked at the packet with the expression of a man who would prefer not to touch it.

"If only you could trace the source of these."

"That brings me to my final point, sir. From Mrs. Hartfield's assistant I learned that her employer was acquainted with a woman known in certain circles as La Señora—Elena Vidal."

"And who is Elena Vidal?"

"In my judgment, sir, she is the link between those cigarettes, the missing Zahnir, and the supply network that has been operating in this city for at least five years. She moves through a certain social world—money, entertainment, the kind of people who consider themselves above ordinary consequences—as if she belongs there. She surfaces periodically in the reports of

three different precincts, always in connection with someone else's trouble, never as a principal. She has a known associate named Eduardo Reynosa, who has operated under the alias El Sueño, with documented ties to a supply chain running out of South America through Buenos Aires. I intend to make both of them the focus of the next phase."

The Deputy Chief rubbed his temple.

"It is a large and complex case, Lieutenant. And the suffering of Monte Hartfield—an honorable man, by all accounts—is not something one can contemplate easily. I find it difficult to construct any theory of Mrs. Hartfield's disappearance that does not implicate her in the murder."

"I am keeping an open mind on that, sir," said Halloran, with unusual restraint. "The drug angle gives us something concrete to pursue. Within the next twenty-four hours I expect to have considerably more."

He paused, cleared his throat, and produced a white envelope from his inside pocket, which he laid on the table in front of the Deputy Chief.

"With very considerable regret, sir," he said, "and after what has been a long and generally satisfying association with this department, I find it necessary to submit this."

The Deputy Chief looked at the envelope with the mild bewilderment of a man who has too much on his desk already.

"And what is this, Lieutenant?"

"My resignation, sir."

Silence for a moment. Outside, the city conducted its ordinary business.

"You have selected a singular moment for this, Lieutenant," said the Deputy Chief at last. "Your record has never been stronger and your prospects were never better. I assume you've considered the pension implications."

"I know what I'm walking away from, sir."

The Deputy Chief turned slowly in his chair and looked at Halloran with the sad, patient expression of a very large man who has survived many unreasonable people by outlasting them.

"You might care to offer me some explanation I can take to the Commissioner."

Halloran's teeth came together.

"If you accept my resignation, sir, I am a private citizen and I can say exactly what I mean. As your subordinate, I cannot."

"Lieutenant," said the Deputy Chief, with a mildness that cost him something, "it would be a novelty if you had ever found your subordinate status a barrier to saying precisely what you meant."

Halloran, despite himself, showed a brief flash of gratified vanity.

"Very well, sir. I will say it plainly. I am a detective. I have been one for twenty years. I have never taken money I didn't earn. I work in the open. Any man who says otherwise is welcome to make that statement in writing and send it to my address along with his next-of-kin information. If I am to be treated as a

suspect in my own investigation—if some anonymous federal operative is authorized to follow my movements and go through my work behind my back—then I am not willing to operate under those conditions regardless of the salary or the rank attached. I want a full inquiry, in public, and I want to know the specific grounds on which I or this department is considered compromised. That is what I have to say.”

He had delivered this at increasing speed, each syllable precisely struck, his face deepening in color, his eyes producing their characteristic impression of generating their own cold light. The Deputy Chief listened without flinching.

“Lieutenant,” he said, when Halloran had finished, “you pain me and you do not surprise me. And I think, if I explain my own position, you will reconsider.”

Halloran cleared his throat but said nothing.

“I am nearly as much in the dark as you are. That is not something I am accustomed to saying, and I would prefer it not to leave this room. What I know is this: late last night the Attorney General’s office communicated directly with the Commissioner—at his home. He was instructed to extend full cooperation to a federal investigator who has been empowered to conduct an independent inquiry into the drug trafficking operation behind this murder. This investigator has chosen, for reasons not yet explained to me, to operate without identifying himself. He carries credentials authorizing his access, but he has declined to introduce himself to any member of this department.”

Halloran stared. The Deputy Chief opened a drawer and removed a card—a plain white card of the kind a senior government official might carry—and passed it across the desk. Halloran took it.

On one side was printed the name and title of the Deputy Attorney General of the United States. On the other side, in a cramped and deliberate hand, was written a single line:

Full cooperation requested and authorized—719

Halloran looked at this for some time.

“Seven-one-nine,” he said, in a voice that had gone slightly high. “Why seven-one-nine? And what is the purpose of all this secrecy? Am I to understand that this department is under a cloud? That the Department is considered compromised?”

The Deputy Chief smoothed his hair.

“What you are to understand, Lieutenant, is that for the first time in my tenure I find myself not fully in the Commissioner’s confidence. And I believe the Commissioner finds himself in a similar position with respect to Washington. Evidently certain powerful interests are involved, and the decision to operate through an anonymous independent agent suggests—though this has not been stated directly—that whoever authorized this does not know which elements of the department can be trusted. That being so, they have decided—in what I consider a misguided excess of caution—to treat everyone equally, from myself down. It is irritating, it is professionally offensive, and it is, nevertheless, the situation. We are, Lieutenant, on trial.”

Halloran stood up slowly and moved his shoulders in the manner of an athlete settling under a load.

He picked up the envelope from the table and tore it into several pieces, which he deposited in the waste bin.

"Right," he said. "Thank you, sir. I know now what to tell the press."

Chapter Twenty-Four

To Introduce 719

The Deputy Chief glanced up.

"Not a word about 719 to the press," he said. "That goes without saying."

"If we don't exist as far as 719 is concerned, sir," said Halloran, in his sharpest register, "then 719 means precisely nothing to me."

"Quite so—quite so. I may be wrong in the motives I ascribe to this federal operative, but confusion is the inevitable result of deliberate anonymity. The precedent it sets is, I will say frankly, one I find troubling."

Half an hour later Detective Lieutenant Halloran came out of One Police Plaza and walked down to the subway station at Chambers Street, his long silver-mounted cane swinging. The weather remained damp and cold, but on the red face of Red Halloran rested an expression that could only be described as cheerfully aggressive. Where other commuters hunched into their coats and stared at their phones, Halloran looked about him with something close to pleasure.

He was going home to Queens, and he was in excellent humor. The investigation had just acquired a dimension which a man of less combative temperament might have found discouraging: a federal operative of unknown identity, authorized from Washington, was ahead of him in the field. Halloran found this bracing. It transformed what might have been a straightforward if

complex murder investigation into a race, and races were among the things he was best at.

On the 7 train, rocking through the tunnel under the East River, he rolled his gum from one side of his mouth to the other and worked through the structure of what he knew, identifying the next three moves required. By the time the train surfaced into Queens the preliminary plan was complete, and he allowed himself the rare luxury of looking at the passing rooftops without thinking about anything at all.

He walked from the station to his house in Sunnyside, letting himself in quietly. Mrs. Halloran, in her rain coat and with a basket on her arm, was standing by the dining room door. She had been waiting for him.

"I was watching for ye, Dan," she said simply.

He kissed her, put his arm around her waist, and the two went into the warm small room. By no ordinary calculation should she have known exactly when he would arrive—he had not phoned, had not texted, and had left One Police Plaza at an unplanned moment. But Halloran was so accustomed to his wife's particular gift in this regard that he made no comment. She had always known. And there had been times when the peril was real and far away, when Mairi Halloran, asleep, had snapped awake trembling, though the specific danger was twenty miles from her and three in the morning.

"You'll be sleeping?"

"Three hours, Mairi. Don't let me oversleep."

"Is it coming clearer?"

"Nearly. The dark thing you saw in it—it's drugs, Mairi. Zahnir's is a drug operation. They've assigned a federal operative who's working independently of us." His teeth came together. "They think the department is compromised."

"Oh, Dan," said his wife. "A race, then. And the credit of the whole service at stake."

"Exactly so. I'm for the East Side in three hours, and after that I'll be making the rounds tonight. Don't wait up."

"I never do," she said, which was not entirely accurate.

"Go shopping. I'll have something to eat when I wake."

She kissed him once, deliberately, in the manner of someone making a deposit against future uncertainty, and went out with her basket.

Eleven minutes later Halloran was in bed, his short clay pipe between his teeth and his worn copy of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius open in his hand. This was his invariable sleeping draught, and it had never failed. Half a pipe of strong Irish tobacco and three pages of the sad imperial philosopher were sufficient to send Lieutenant Halloran into deep and restorative sleep under any conditions known to him—including, on one memorable occasion, a building that subsequently turned out to be on fire.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Night-Life of the Meatpacking District

It was close to midnight when Detective Coombes appeared in a certain narrow street in the Meatpacking District lined with idling town cars and rideshare vehicles. He wore a dark overcoat and a knit cap, and although his chin was buried in the folds of a wool scarf and the cap was pulled forward over his eyes, his characteristically sly smile could be detected even in the dim light of the street lamps. He appeared to have some obscure business among the waiting drivers—moving from car to car with a manner that suggested nothing in particular, which is the most useful manner a detective can cultivate—conducting a brief conversation with each and making entries in his notebook. Then he disappeared. No one actually saw him go. He had been there, and then he was not.

Five minutes later Detective Lieutenant Halloran turned into the same street. His dark overcoat and white silk muffler concealed an evening suit, a fact disclosed by the black-braided trousers, the near-gloss of his shoes, and the silver-mounted cane tucked under his arm. He had retained the narrow-brimmed bowler at its characteristic forward angle.

He passed the line of waiting vehicles and walked into the entrance of a private members' club whose address was not publicly available and whose membership requirements were described on their website only as "by introduction."

On a bench just inside the entrance a young man was fanning his companion and gazing at her with the vacant adoration of someone who has recently made a significant emotional investment and is waiting for the return. The woman was Mollie Larne.

Halloran paused and looked at the pair. The young man looked back with the expression of someone who feels he is being assessed and is not certain of the outcome. Halloran's gaze moved to the woman. He adjusted his hat minutely and stepped past them toward the reception desk.

"Oh," Mollie said, not quite under her breath, "what a magnificently alarming man. He looks genuinely uncivilized. I sincerely hope he's a member."

Halloran gave no sign of having heard, which he had. He was in excellent spirits. He had spent the afternoon at the First Precinct and two other commands in Lower Manhattan, and had succeeded, by his own measure, in thoroughly energizing a number of officers who had previously been moving at a velocity he considered inconsistent with the urgency of the investigation. He had left at least one duty sergeant audibly distressed.

"Member, sir?" said the woman behind the desk.

Halloran smiled, showing his large white teeth. From a nearby waiter's phone, a news notification chimed: SPRING STREET MURDER—SECOND NIGHT WITH NO ARREST. The woman at the next table leaned to look.

Halloran took up a pen and inscribed across two pages of the visitors' ledger in large bold handwriting:

DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT HALLORAN

NYPD Major Case Squad

He laid his card on the open pages, tucked his cane under his arm, and walked to the stairs.

"Cloak room on the right," said an attendant.

Halloran paused, chewing, glanced over his shoulder, and then settled his hat more firmly on his red head and went down.

The attendant went to inspect the ledger. Mollie Larne was there before him.

"It's Halloran!" she cried to her companion. "The detective in charge of poor Lucy's murder! Something is going to happen—come down!"

She ran for the stairs, and almost collided with a tall woman in a white dress who was coming up.

"You're not leaving, are you?" Mollie caught her arm.

"Ssh," said the other woman, in a low, quick voice.

"Halloran is here. Do you want to be subpoenaed? They're looking for everyone who went to Zahnir's—it's in every news feed tonight. Get out now."

She disengaged herself and went quickly up the stairs. Mollie wavered, then decided she would rather watch Halloran than avoid him. She descended.

Below, the room was in full swing: a hundred people in various states of expensively assisted enjoyment. Halloran stood with his feet apart near the bottom of the stairs, his overcoat pockets occupied by both hands and his cane under his arm, turning the steel-blue gaze with methodical slowness from face to

face. The look had the quality of a searchlight—not warm, not welcoming, entirely without hurry, missing nothing.

The room knew who he was within four minutes. A news notification had done it, or someone's panicked whisper, or simply the visible fact of him. In any case the name moved through the room the way a name moves through any enclosed gathering of people with uneasy consciences—rapidly, in murmurs, with consequences. Several visitors suddenly remembered pressing obligations elsewhere. Halloran appeared not to notice.

"It's preposterous," a young man was saying near Mollie, watching Halloran with reluctant admiration. "Sending a man who looks like that, who everyone knows by sight, to find a clever criminal. He can't possibly be trying to be subtle."

He was not. Halloran's "beating"—his word for it—was a deliberate policy founded on the accurate observation that his natural physical conspicuousness was more useful than camouflage in specific situations. The technique was simple: appear visibly in places frequented by the people you want to locate, note who runs, note where they run to. Coombes had already briefed the drivers outside. The people who left the club in the next twenty minutes would be followed; their addresses would be in Halloran's possession before morning. Most of them would turn out to be Zahnir's clients, or associates of clients. None of them would have bolted if they had nothing to conceal.

He had been in the club for less than fifteen minutes, during which time eleven people had made their way to the exit

with varying degrees of urgency. He gathered up what he needed from the air of the room and went upstairs.

At the door Mollie Larne stepped directly into his path, produced a glance of studied devastation through lowered lashes, and murmured an apology that contained no actual apology.

Halloran gave her the full-wattage smile, looked her up and down with brief, professional thoroughness, and walked past without looking back.

His genius for investigation had its limitations, and one of them was at work here. He expected flight and evasion from the guilty, and these were the responses he tracked. Mollie Larne, standing in his path and inviting scrutiny, violated his working model so completely that he did not know how to file her. He classified her as a woman seeking to make a detective's acquaintance—a recognizable type—and moved on. He would not have occasion to revisit this assessment until the cost of the error had become apparent.

Out on the street, he walked briskly north and then west, crossing into a district of narrower streets, and turned into a passage near a cross-street from which a soft whistle came. He answered it. Coombes, invisible in the shadows, was at his post.

Halloran came back out and proceeded to the end of the block, where a restaurant showed no lights in its front windows but had its door standing open. He went in without hesitation, crossed a darkened room, and found himself in a passage where a man at a small concierge station looked up.

"Restaurant's closed, sir."

"Tell me one I haven't heard," Halloran said. "Third floor. Lead the way, or I'll find it myself."

"Your credentials, sir."

Halloran revealed his teeth in a way that served the purpose, flipped his card onto the desk, and went to the stairs. A bell rang somewhere faintly above. On the first landing a heavy-set man in a good suit appeared and spread his hands.

"Lieutenant Halloran! What can I do for you? I trust there is no problem."

"No problem," said Halloran. "I want to look around."

"Of course—a few friends, they play cards with me this evening—"

"I'll bet they do," said Halloran. "Third floor. After you."

The second floor, which Halloran had visited before, was nominally a private dining room until midnight and a roulette table thereafter. Tonight three people bent over dominoes at one end of the long table, while the center of the room produced the particular atmospheric evidence of recent rapid evacuation: displaced chairs, abandoned glasses, a theater bag forgotten on a seat, and a haze of mixed smoke that had not quite dispersed.

"The dominoes players can stay," said Halloran, glancing at them. "Third floor. Move."

They ascended. The door of the upper room showed light beneath it; voices died as Halloran opened it.

The room was a supper club of the intimate variety: small tables, a piano and platform at the far end, velvet curtain. Approximately twenty people stood looking toward the entrance.

They represented, as these rooms generally did, a diverse cross-section of wealth and reputation, connected by the shared quality of preferring not to have their names in any official record.

Two Halloran recognized as office-holders of various kinds. One he knew as a figure from the entertainment industry. The others were unclassifiable by outward appearance, which was the point of the expensive clothes.

Halloran stood with feet apart and hands in pockets, turning the fierce gaze from face to face and chewing with unhurried patience. The proprietor glanced sideways at his guests and offered a small helpless shrug. Silence.

"Police," said Halloran. "You'll each pass by me on the way out. Card or ID from everyone. Name and address from anyone who has neither. Quick."

He produced a long envelope and a pen from his jacket, set them on the nearest table, and pointed at a young man in the front rank.

"You first. Move."

They went, one by one. A young man—the kind whose upbringing has never required him to be convenient—sidled close and offered, in a murmur, a contribution to whatever cause Halloran might find most useful.

"Card on the table," said Halloran, in a voice of flat and absolute zero temperature. "Then keep walking while I still have my hands in my pockets."

The young man complied hurriedly and departed.

Halloran moved through the collection with his characteristic economy: at some cards he barely glanced; others he set aside for Coombes. He spent no time on the women, on the grounds that they would give false names regardless, and Coombes's people would follow them anyway. When the room was empty:

"That's that," he said to the proprietor. "I have no instructions about this establishment, and I saw nothing improper. You're on notice that I know you exist, which is more notice than I'm required to give you."

He gathered the cards from the table, dropped them into his overcoat pocket, and was moving toward the stairs when he paused.

One card had come to his hand differently from the rest. He looked at it.

On one side, a plain white card. On the other, in a cramped and deliberate handwriting he had seen once before—on the back of a Deputy Attorney General's business card in the Deputy Chief's desk drawer—a single line:

The attendant will be at the house in Red Hook on Friday night—719

Halloran stared at this for a long moment. His face went through several shades of red, settling on a particularly vivid one.

"Hell," he said quietly. "Hell." He looked around the now-empty room. "Which one of them was it?"

Chapter Twenty-Six
The Moods of Mollie

Early the following morning Margaret Verity called on Mollie Larne.

Mollie's personality was not one that Margaret found easy to engage with. The two had nothing in common, and Margaret was under no illusions about the specific nature of the bond that had connected Rita Hartfield to this particular representative of a social stratum that had always puzzled her. But she was also clear-eyed about what Mollie might know, and she had not built a medical practice on squeamishness about unlikeable patients.

Mollie received her with extravagant expressions of distress and welcome, deploying both simultaneously in the manner of someone who considers all emotional states to be performance opportunities.

"My dear Miss Verity," she cried, gesturing at an array of news feeds open on multiple devices. "Poor, darling little Rita! What can possibly have become of her?"

Tears glistened on her carefully composed lashes. That she had spent most of the night at a club in Chelsea and had only just returned, and that her grief was being expressed to someone who had herself lost several hours of sleep, was not information she offered.

"It is a genuinely terrible situation," said Margaret. "And it seems extraordinary that she cannot be traced."

"Absolutely extraordinary," Mollie agreed, and opened a large decorative box of cigarettes. "Will you have one?"

"No, thank you." Margaret paused. "They're not from Buenos Aires, I suppose?"

Mollie stared at her with rounded eyes.

"What a remarkable thing to ask. Why ever would you suggest that?"

"Lucien Calvert used to smoke cigarettes of that kind," Margaret said pleasantly. "I wondered if you did too."

Mollie shook her head and lit her own cigarette.

"He gave me one once. It made me feel very odd."

Margaret noted this and filed it. She also noted that Mollie had made an immediate decision about what to acknowledge and what to deny, and that the decision had been made quickly and competently. She looked at the speaker more carefully.

"Do you quite understand," she said, very gently, "what every hour means to Rita right now? We have no idea whose hands she is in."

"Oh, don't," said Mollie, pressing her fingers together. "I can't bear to think about it."

"And Monte Hartfield, who is genuinely ill—"

"You're making me cry," Mollie said, which was accurate; tears were appearing. "If there were only something I could do."

Margaret watched her and saw that the tears were real, which was useful information. Real emotion was workable.

"Perhaps there is," she said. "You knew all of Rita's circle, and all of Calvert's. You must have met Elena Vidal."

Something changed in Mollie's face—the pupils slowly enlarging, the expression shifting from genuine grief to a more complicated calculation.

"Elena Vidal," she repeated softly. "What about her?"

"They believe that through her they can trace Zahnir. And wherever Zahnir is, one would expect to find Rita."

Mollie lowered her head briefly, then glanced at Margaret and away again.

"If I said I knew her—would I have to appear as a witness?"

"Certainly not. I can assure you of that. Anything you tell me will go to the federal investigator, and that office has guaranteed complete confidentiality."

"The federal investigator," Mollie repeated.

"Yes. A special agent has been assigned by the Justice Department to deal with this case independently of the police. Nothing you say would go through official police channels."

Mollie stood up, ostensibly to reach an ashtray.

"I really don't think I have anything useful to say, Miss Verity," she announced. "I have certainly met Elena Vidal, but I know nothing about her beyond what anyone in that world would know."

Margaret tried once more, gently and directly, appealing to whatever genuine feeling for Rita she had observed. Mollie's eyes remained sympathetic, her manner remained warm, and the answer remained no.

When Margaret left she sat for a moment in her car outside and thought about what had happened. The shift in Mollie had

occurred at the mention of the federal investigator. Margaret ascribed this to the natural hostility of someone in Mollie's position toward any official body with the power to disrupt the drug supply she depended on.

She was wrong. She would not know she was wrong for some time.

Mollie Larne, once the door closed, was standing at her window watching Margaret's car pull away with an expression of pleased decision. The calculation she had performed during their conversation was simple: Margaret wanted her to tell the federal investigator where Elena Vidal lived. But why would she do that, when the more attractive option was to tell Halloran himself?

She called the NYPD's public number and asked for Detective Lieutenant Halloran.

"Off duty, ma'am."

"Oh." She bit her lip. "Can you give me his direct number?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am."

"His address, perhaps?"

"Absolutely not, ma'am."

She ended the call and stood biting one finger, making a rapid inventory of her social connections. There was Theo from law school, now with the DA's office. Theo, who had been reliably devoted for two years and was unlikely to refuse a small request. She picked up her phone.

"Theo," she said. "Yes, it's Mollie. I need you to find something out for me, and I need it in half an hour. The home address of a Detective Lieutenant Halloran, NYPD Major Case

Squad. He's in charge of the Spring Street murder." A pause. "No, it doesn't matter why. Yes, I'll see you this week. Just find it for me, please."

Twenty-two minutes later Theo rang back, having spent the interval doing something professionally inadvisable with the departmental database. Mollie wrote the address in her phone's notes with a small, satisfied smile.

Detective Lieutenant Halloran, 14 Linden Place, Sunnyside, Queens.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Crown Evidence

The appearance of a chauffeur-driven black Mercedes—conspicuously expensive, conspicuously not from this neighborhood—produced a modest sensation on Linden Place, Sunnyside, Queens. Mollie Larne's car was known wherever the fashionable went, but to a street of neat two-family houses and small yards it arrived as a kind of communiqué from a different civilization. More than one window curtain shifted. The woman at the house next door, who had been waiting for an occasion, came out to check her mailbox.

She was rewarded with an unobstructed view of a woman whose clothes cost more than most people's furniture. Of Mollie's particular brand of disdainful prettiness she got only a glimpse as the car door closed.

A neat, plainly dressed woman who answered the door had a manner that Mollie would later describe as "very composed—almost disconcertingly so." This was Mrs. Halloran.

Halloran was asleep. He had come in close to dawn and would have preferred several more hours, but his wife woke him with the quiet efficiency of someone who knew how to deliver an interruption and step back from it. He was dressed and in the front room in slightly under five minutes, and the state of his attire would have satisfied the most demanding inspection.

As he came in Mollie blushed—which she had not expected to do, and which she found delightful.

Halloran was considerably larger than she had realized. The impression he had made at the club—compact, dapper, somehow small—had been entirely misleading. In the modest room he was clearly a substantial man, broad through the shoulder, built with the precise economy of someone who takes his physical condition as a professional instrument. The fierce blue eyes caught the light.

"Good of you to come forward, miss," he said. "I can use whatever you have."

He opened a side table, took out a writing pad and a pen.

"Excuse me," he said, and fixed the gaze on her with sudden full intensity. "Weren't you at the Meatpacking club last night?"

"Yes," she said. "I was just inside the entrance."

"I remember." He continued to look at her. "Before you go further I should tell you that I'm a police officer and you may be required to swear to any information you give me."

"I know that."

"Then we can proceed. Who gave you my home address?"

The question, delivered without preamble, produced the blush again. It was not an unpleasant sensation.

"I called the NYPD and they wouldn't tell me. So I asked a friend—he has access to personnel records. He found it."

"Rather than going to the nearest precinct."

"Yes."

"I see." Halloran did see. "May I ask what prompted you to come here rather than to Miss Verity?"

Mollie examined her fingernails briefly. "She called on me this morning. I told her I had nothing useful to say."

"And yet here you are."

"Yes." She looked up. "I thought you were the appropriate person to tell."

Halloran had the fruit of the night's work behind him—a list of twenty-odd names from the clubs and the restaurant, people who had fled or might be induced to speak. He also had long experience of how difficult it was to extract information from people in Mollie's social world when they chose not to give it. They could be compelled to appear in court, but anything produced that way was worse than nothing. He could not afford to be delicate about motives.

"You know where the house in Red Hook is," he said. "The one Elena Vidal calls the House of a Hundred Sighs."

"Yes," Mollie sighed. "I have been there. Oh, Inspector, you will think I am absolutely appalling when I explain."

"I'll reserve judgment. Just give me what you know."

"I could drive you there. I couldn't tell you the address from memory—I have no head for streets at all, and one drives over the bridge and through the most disorientating industrial neighborhoods—but I know the route, and I know the building. It is a warehouse on a lane near the water. Metal door, no sign. The man who runs it sits inside with a raven on his shoulder."

"Tell me about the man."

"Compact. Very still—almost unnatural stillness. A scar above one eye, so the eye is partly closed. He barely speaks. The raven talks more than he does."

"What does the raven say?"

Mollie raised one hand to her brow with the air of someone performing a feat of precise recollection.

"It says 'El Sueño' and something about Buenos Aires, over and over. It is completely ghastly and also somehow very funny, which makes it worse."

"Good," said Halloran, and made a note. "This man—the one at the entrance. Is he Elena Vidal's husband?"

"I believe so. Or her partner—I'm not sure they're married. His name is Reynosa, Eduardo Reynosa. People call him El Sueño."

"Who first took you there?"

"Cyrus Mallory. But both he and Calvert had been before, many times."

"Mallory is back in America. Calvert is dead. Mrs. Hartfield is missing." Halloran looked at her steadily. "Anyone else you know of who used the house?"

Mollie shook her head slowly.

"What was Zahnir's connection to Elena Vidal and Reynosa?"

"That I can tell you exactly," said Mollie, who now that she was talking found she rather enjoyed it. "Zahnir supplied most things—cocaine, heroin in various forms, the sleeping medications. But those who wanted the full experience—the pipe, the proper session—he didn't handle that himself. He sent them to Elena Vidal."

"He sent them?"

"No, no—the other way around. He gave her their details. Their names and addresses. And then she came to them, made herself known, and made the arrangement. She was the one who brought you into the house."

"I see," said Halloran quietly. "She called on the clients."

"Like a very elegant and dangerous social secretary, yes."

Halloran made another note. The operational picture was assembling itself clearly: Zahnir as the boutique point of supply; Elena Vidal as the recruiter and host for those who wanted something deeper; the house in Red Hook as the facility. Zahnir controlled the substances; Vidal controlled the experience—and through it, the people who had experienced it.

"Can you give me the names of any other clients—people you met at the house, or at any gathering arranged by Elena Vidal?"

Mollie hesitated, then named several people, all of whose names Halloran recognized from the night before's list. He wrote them down without comment.

"Would you be prepared to give formal evidence?"

"Oh, actually?" Mollie leaned forward slightly.

"Yes. You may be required to."

Mollie looked into the fierce blue eyes from a distance of rather less than was entirely professional.

"Not if I can help it in any way, Inspector," she said, "but if I can be of the slightest use to you personally—"

A theory, which Halloran would have dismissed as implausible if proposed to him twenty minutes earlier, was now establishing

itself with the force of demonstrable fact. He was a modest man—he had neither time nor inclination for the management of personal admiration—and this was the first occasion in his career in which valuable information had been delivered to him on the specific grounds of his appearance. He doubted the evidence even as he accepted it. But Mollie at that moment lowered her lashes with practiced deliberation and then raised them, and Halloran was left with no reasonable alternative to his own astonishing conclusion.

The daughter of a peer, he reflected, as he stood up with some urgency. No wonder the investigation had found certain witnesses unwilling to speak.

He moved to the door with the air of a man conducting an orderly retreat.

"I'm most grateful, miss," he said. "I'll be in touch if we need anything further."

"Oh, please do," said Mollie, producing a card from her bag with a practiced movement. "Any time. About anything at all."

Halloran accepted the card, showed her out, and walked her to the car. The street, he was aware, had produced four discreetly positioned observers in the time since her arrival. The car's chauffeur opened the door. Mollie, getting in, extended her gloved hand and waved it at him.

Halloran felt the heat spreading across his face with the helpless certainty of a man who has been ambushed by something he should have seen coming. He turned, nodded to the interested

neighbor at the mailbox with the flat geniality of a man who will acknowledge nothing, and went back inside.

Mairi was in the dining room doorway.

"Yon's a bad woman," she said.

"I believe you may be right, Mairi," replied Halloran, with rather more feeling than the words required.

"I kenned it when fairst I set een upon her painted face. And I kenned it again when she lookit sideways at ye. If yon's a great lady, she's a woman o' puir repute. The Lord gi'e us grace."

Halloran coughed once, cleared his throat, and went to find his cane.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Carved Bird

The Red Hook waterfront was fog-bound. It had come in off the bay in the early evening, settling into the basin and the narrow industrial lanes with the particular thoroughness of harbor fog—dense, cold, smelling of salt and diesel, indifferent to streetlamps. Detective Lieutenant Halloran, wearing a heavy jacket over his evening clothes, tapped the sidewalk ahead of him with the point of his silver-mounted cane like a man reading braille.

"Hell," he said, as his foot found a wall. "Where are you, officer?"

"Right here, sir," said Officer Doyle, of the local precinct, who had been attached to Halloran as a guide. He took Halloran's arm.

"We've walked straight into the building."

"Keep it on your left, sir. Twelve more paces and we'll find the door—assuming the lamp's been lit."

"And if it hasn't?"

"Still safe. We'd hit the iron post before the water."

"Very reassuring," said Halloran.

They found the door. The faint glow of the interior stove was visible beneath it. Halloran knocked. Bolts moved, and the door opened. The dim red warmth of the entrance room pushed against the fog. Eduardo Reynosa stood in the opening.

"You want me?" he said.

"I do," said Halloran, and stepped past him.

The raven, opening its eye from the cupboard shelf, said:
"El Sueño," and returned to whatever passed for sleep in a raven.

Halloran stood in the center of the room and looked at Doyle. "You've been in here before."

It was not a question. Doyle, who had been hoping it might be treated as one, cleared his throat.

"Once or twice, sir. Just to warm up—it's a cold beat on the waterfront."

"How often?"

"Six or seven times, maybe, over the past year."

"And in those six or seven visits, did you ever see or hear or notice anything in this building that struck you as requiring attention?"

"Never, sir. No complaints about the address, either."

"All very proper," murmured Reynosa, without inflection.

Halloran turned to him with the direct stare of someone who is done with preliminary conversation.

"I want to see Elena Vidal."

Reynosa looked at him with the asymmetric gaze for a moment.

"She is not here."

"Fetch her."

"I cannot fetch her. She left." A pause. "Some weeks ago."

"Left," repeated Halloran.

"Left," said Reynosa simply. "We had an arrangement. The arrangement ended." Another small pause. "She took a number of

things that were not hers to take. But that is not a police matter."

The composure of this was infuriating in direct proportion to its completeness. Halloran produced his handcuffs.

"For the last time—where is she?"

Reynosa looked at the handcuffs with the detached interest of a man examining something that doesn't concern him, and extended his wrists.

Halloran looked at the extended wrists, at the steady asymmetric gaze, and put the handcuffs away. He turned to Doyle.

"Have you ever seen his partner here?"

"I didn't know he had one, sir. I've only ever seen him alone."

"She left," said Reynosa again, with the flat finality of someone for whom the subject is genuinely closed.

"There is a concealed connection between this building and the one next to it," said Halloran. "I have that from a witness who used it repeatedly. Where is it?"

"Wrong," said Reynosa.

"What?"

"Wrong information. Whoever told you that is mistaken—or lying to cause you trouble, which is more likely."

He delivered this with exactly the same composure he brought to everything, which was the most aggravating possible method of delivering it. Halloran's jaw muscles stood out conspicuously. He chewed with visible force.

"Stay here," he said to Doyle. He took out his flashlight and went into the passage.

He mounted the stairs to the storage level—crates, pallets, the general organized disorder of a working warehouse—and made his way to the concealed shelving unit that he knew, from Mollie's description and from his own earlier visit to the floor above on Calvert's roof, was the entry point. He cleared the shelving systematically, knocking along the wall behind with his knuckles and the bone ferrule of his cane.

The wall was solid. He tapped the back panel of the shelving unit itself—solid. He pushed, pulled, pressed at various points. Nothing gave. The mechanism had been secured from the far side, or disabled entirely. From the outside it was indistinguishable from an ordinary structural wall.

He examined both rooms on this level, checked window fasteners, measured distances with his eye. The building next door—the former adjacent house that constituted the House of a Hundred Sighs—was certainly accessible through this wall. The access point was simply not accessible to him at this moment.

He came downstairs and stood with his feet apart, looking at Reynosa. Reynosa looked back with the attentive patience of someone with nowhere else to be.

"There is a door through that wall," Halloran said. "The information comes from someone who has used it many times."

"Wrong," said Reynosa again, in the same tone as before.

Halloran looked at him for a long moment, then:

"Doyle. Go back to the precinct and bring two men. And tell them to bring proper tools."

"Yes, sir." Doyle moved to the door with a relief he made no great effort to conceal. He opened it onto the dense yellow wall of fog outside. "I may be some time in this, sir."

"I'll be here."

The door closed. Halloran laid his cane on the table. He swapped out his gum, dropped the old piece into the stove, and produced a fresh piece from the foil packet in his pocket. He pulled a crate close to the heat and sat, and fixed his gaze on the glowing core of the fire.

After a minute Reynosa opened the small cupboard door. The raven stepped out with the air of a creature reasserting a right.

"El Sueño," it said, blinking in the lamplight. "Buenos Aires."

"Go to sleep," said Reynosa.

The raven considered this without apparent conviction. Reynosa extended his wrist and the bird stepped onto it with sedated dignity. He returned it to the cupboard.

"Buenos Aires," the raven said, by way of final commentary, and was quiet.

From somewhere within the same cupboard Reynosa withdrew a small carved wooden figure—a bird, perhaps a hawk or an eagle, rendered with patience in dark close-grained wood and worn smooth at the wings where it had been handled many times. He set it on his knee and produced from his jacket pocket a square of chamois leather and a small tin.

He began to clean it. His hands moved with the unhurried, automatic care of someone performing a task they have performed for years, at intervals, in the same way. The lamplight caught the carved lines of the bird, the careful definition of the feathers, the hooked precision of the beak.

Halloran stared into the fire.

The fog pressed at the door. The stove ticked. Reynosa continued his work with the cloth, turning the small bird slowly in his hands, saying nothing, as if the police officer three feet away and the fog outside and whatever was being dismantled on the floor above were all equally beside the point.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Doubts and Fears

Monte Hartfield raised his head and looked at Margaret Verity with an expression that had been stripped of everything except the effort to understand. It was very quiet in the library of the Park Avenue apartment. The small spaniel lay on the rug by the fire, and each time it moved or looked toward the door Hartfield started.

"Drugs," he said quietly. "Drugs."

Few of his council colleagues would have recognized the voice.

"You do understand why I've told you now, rather than waiting," Margaret said. "Dr. Ackroyd felt you shouldn't be told at all, but he didn't know you were going to ask me directly. And I believed the truth—as bad as it is—was better than uncertainty."

"Better than suspecting worse things," said Hartfield, in the same quiet way. "Of course you were right, Miss Verity. I'm grateful for it. I know what it must have taken." He looked across the room at his wife's portrait. "If only I had known."

Margaret had expected this to be harder. His composure confirmed something she had sensed since the night this began: that Monte Hartfield was a man whose essential character only became fully visible under pressure, and that it was quite good.

"I would have told you earlier," she said, "if I had thought it would help. I hoped to manage the situation myself. I believed

I might cure her, given time, and I still believe I could have done. It is a very treatable condition with the right approach."

"There's been no mention of it in the coverage," said Hartfield. "In any of the news."

"Not until this evening. There's a suggestion of it in one of the online outlets tonight, which is why I came when I did. I wanted you to have the full picture from someone who actually knows it, rather than a half-informed version from somewhere else."

"Thank you," he said, and meant it as he said few things. "I had felt for some time that Rita had confidants I didn't know about. I was getting further from her. Did Nina know?"

"I think she must have. She acted as a trusted messenger—collecting packages from Zahnir's, that kind of thing. I don't believe she understood what she was collecting."

Hartfield nodded.

"The police have spoken with her. She'll be watched." He paused. "I believe poor Calvert introduced Rita to all of this. Am I right?"

Margaret looked at the carpet for a moment. "I would rather not say what I cannot prove about a man who cannot respond. But I have sometimes thought so. Yes."

A silence settled between them, occupied on both sides by the same thought, which neither stated directly.

"You see," said Margaret carefully, "it is evident that Zahnir's clients include people who are well positioned and well connected. None of them will volunteer information. And some of

them, I think, are quietly using whatever influence they have—not to protect Zahnir, necessarily—but to protect themselves from being drawn in.”

“The drug syndicate has protection at various levels,” said Hartfield, speaking more steadily now. “I’ve understood that much from what I’ve heard. You’ve submitted formal reports to the DEA—I know that, Miss Verity. And I know you were instrumental in getting the federal investigation authorized.” He looked at her directly. “Was that the right thing to do? Is it fair to Halloran and his people to have a federal agent operating independently in the same investigation?”

Margaret held his gaze.

“Honestly—no, I don’t think it’s entirely fair. And I feel responsible for that, because I have been pushing for independent federal involvement for a long time. My concern was that the police were hampered—not corrupt, but blocked at various points. And these people who traffic in drugs have been consistently very good at evading prosecution. The federal agent reports to a committee that can move to special legislation if needed, which changes what’s possible.”

“I met Halloran twice,” said Hartfield. “I’ll swear there is no straighter man in this city. If his department is under suspicion, it’s a wrong done to him personally.”

“I don’t think active corruption is suspected,” said Margaret quickly. “Not of anyone like Halloran. I think the concern is more diffuse than that—the worry that the operation is so well-connected that pressure gets applied in ways that are

hard to trace. Halloran himself is above any such pressure. But not every link in the chain necessarily is."

"We've seen that," said Hartfield quietly, thinking of the patrol officers he had heard were taking money from the waterfront operation.

"The federal agent believes Rita is safe," Margaret said, shifting deliberately. "That is their considered view, and it's also Halloran's."

Hartfield's eyes brightened a little.

"Is that the agent's own assessment?"

"Yes. He—" She caught herself. "That is, the agent has said as much directly. The working theory is that Rita is in hiding—possibly induced to stay out of sight by people who have an interest in keeping her from giving evidence. The moment that pressure is lifted, they expect she'll emerge."

"Please God they're right," said Hartfield.

"It is the only theory that makes sense of everything we know," said Margaret. "I expect news at any time now."

"You don't think"—his voice dropped—"that anyone seriously suspects Rita of having any connection to Calvert's death?"

Margaret met the pathetic directness of the question.

"Of course not," she said firmly. "It would be absurd."

"Yes," he said. "It would be absurd."

Margaret stood up.

"I'm relieved to have done what I thought was right, Mr. Hartfield. And however bad the truth is, it is better than doubt. When Rita comes back we will have real work ahead of us—getting

her free of this. But we will do it." She met his eyes. "I mean that."

"You cheer me," he said, with feeling. "You are the truest friend Rita ever had, Miss Verity. Will you keep in touch?"

"Of course. I am perhaps the second most invested person in this room." She took his hand briefly. "Don't get up—Dr. Ackroyd has told you to rest. Any news that reaches me I'll share immediately."

He held her hand a moment longer.

"In times of trouble," he said, "we learn who our real friends are."

The spaniel looked at the door. Hartfield looked at the door. Nothing came through it, and the room was quiet again.

Chapter Thirty

The Fight in the Dark

Toward eleven o'clock the fog began slightly to lift. Halloran, crossing a bridge over the inlet near the Red Hook basin, could dimly make out the dark water below, and street lamps showed as blurred yellow halos in the mist. The sounds of the working port came and went—crane engines, the complaint of hulls against pilings, a foghorn somewhere out in the bay.

He turned right on the far side and walked for some distance before stepping suddenly into a recessed doorway and going still.

A conviction had been forming in him over the past twelve hours: that he was being followed, and followed by someone who was very good at it. He had first noticed the presence outside the warehouse, but the fog had defeated any attempt to see the face. He had picked up the same presence again near the precinct and again near the subway. Now he sensed it a third time, and he had decided to do something about it.

Footsteps on the sidewalk—cautious, spaced irregularly in the manner of someone who is trying not to be counted. Halloran stood close to the wall and waited.

The footsteps came on. A figure appeared barely a yard from where he stood. Halloran moved.

One fast step and he had the man by his collar, and the beam of his flashlight went into a face that went immediately white.

"Well," said Halloran with cold satisfaction. "Caudle's Agency."

The sharp hooked nose, the quick frightened eyes, the characteristic lip-licking: Spurling. In Halloran's grip he bore a close resemblance to a man who has made a serious miscalculation.

"So," said Halloran, shaking him with steady purpose, "we let the NYPD do all the work through the night and into the morning, and then we present ourselves to Monte Hartfield and say we've found his wife for him, do we? We follow lieutenants of the Major Case Squad through the fog, do we? We are a dirty, skulking, calculating little operation, aren't we?"

He released Spurling with the air of a man implementing a decision already made, and Spurling went approximately three feet into the air from the force of Halloran's right shoe making contact with his person.

The howl of pain was Spurling's last audible contribution to the evening. Hatless and moving at a speed that surprised everyone who witnessed it, he set off into the fog and did not come back.

Halloran directed a final kick at the hat lying on the sidewalk, snapped off his flashlight, and proceeded. The lesser mystery was solved.

He made his way without much difficulty to the street running parallel to Reynosa's warehouse lane, where he found Coombes in a doorway. Coombes, despite the hour and the general dampness, wore his characteristic expression of mild and indestructible good humor.

"Anything to report?"

"Reynosa went to bed an hour ago, sir. No visitors. He hasn't been out."

"Has anyone gone in or out of the building next door?"

"No, sir."

"Got the ladder?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

The building adjacent to Reynosa's warehouse was the former annex—the House of a Hundred Sighs. A detailed search of his own premises had produced nothing: no concealed door, no drugs, no evidence of any controlled substance ever having been on the premises. But the property next door was listed as owned by an offshore shell company that Halloran's financial investigators had connected to the same structure as the Montero Tobacco Imports lease. The address for correspondence was a law firm in Panama. The building had been recorded as vacant for several years.

By means of a short ladder Coombes had obtained, Halloran climbed the back wall and dropped into a narrow yard.

"Jemmy," he said quietly.

Coombes passed it over. In a few minutes Halloran had worked the planking off a ground-floor window without making excessive noise.

"Stay on the wall," he said to Coombes. "Whistle if anyone comes. If I need you I'll call."

He pushed the sash up and climbed in.

The room inside was empty and dirty—bare boards, a black ceiling, the specific smell of a building that has been closed for a long time and had something particular happen in it. He went through to a narrow passage and up a stair.

Mollie Larne's description had been vivid and detailed. He was prepared for divans, partitioned rooms, lamps, cushions, the whole apparatus of the house in operation. He found three stripped bare rooms with boarded windows and dust an inch thick on the floors.

"Hell," he said, to the empty building.

He changed his gum in the first room's empty fireplace, took a fresh piece from his pocket, and moved methodically through all three levels. The shelving unit that connected through to Reynosa's warehouse—the entrance he had found and failed to open from the other side—was gone. Where it had been, the wall was smooth and unbroken. The operation had been dismantled from the inside, the connection sealed, and every piece of evidence removed. What remained was a collection of empty rooms that could have been vacant for the decades the records claimed.

He examined the passage on the second floor with his magnifying lens. Nothing. He returned the lens to its chamois sleeve and pocketed it.

"One good eye," he said quietly, thinking of Reynosa. "But a very good one."

He raised his flashlight toward the ceiling and stopped.

The roof trap had moved. Not much—a fraction of its position had changed since he had last directed the beam at it. But he had

noted its position, because he noted everything, and it had moved.

He snapped off the light and stepped silently into the doorway of the front room.

He stood in the dark and waited, every sense attending.

The trap moved again—slowly, with care. A line of cold air reached him from above. Someone was opening it from the roof.

A thin blade of light appeared, widened as the trap lifted, swept the passage floor. It was moved in a searching arc, then went out. A careful creak of wood under weight.

A thud on the bare boards.

Silence.

Then soft rubber-soled footsteps, approaching.

Halloran stood behind the open door and kept absolutely still. He even stopped chewing.

The footsteps reached the threshold. A hand with a pistol appeared around the edge of the door, and a beam of light swept the room.

Halloran kicked. The pistol clattered across the floorboards. A muffled sound of pain. The light went out.

Halloran came out from behind the door and switched on his own flashlight, moving into the passage—

The crack of a second shot. Very close.

Halloran dropped flat on the floor. His flashlight, still lit, fell beside him. He lay on his side with one knee drawn up and his arm thrown across his face and did not move.

The second pistol had not been anticipated. He had counted on one weapon and there were two.

The intruder moved carefully, avoiding the flashlight beam. He was coming closer, bending to look at the man on the floor. Halloran heard him drop to one knee, heard the cautious breath very close to his face.

He whipped his arm around the man's neck.

The intruder went over and down with a force that produced a dull, solid impact from skull meeting floorboard, and then lay heavily and still across Halloran's legs.

"Good God," Halloran muttered, untangling himself. "I didn't mean to break his neck."

He retrieved the flashlight and shone it at the face on the floor. An unshaven face, unevenly tanned in the way of someone who had recently shaved off a beard worn in a hot climate. Work clothes, canvas shoes with rubber soles. He was beginning to breathe in the stertorous way of someone who has taken a hard blow to the head and is deciding whether to regain consciousness.

Halloran found the second pistol, pocketed it, and went quickly through the man's jacket. Breast pocket: a leather wallet of unexpectedly good quality. He opened it under the flashlight. Treasury notes. Several cards. On one of them, in the cramped handwriting he had last seen on the back of the Deputy Attorney General's authorization:

Full cooperation requested and authorized-719

"Good God," said Halloran again, rather differently.

The stertorous breathing stopped. A dirty hand was extended upward.

"I'm glad you said something, Lieutenant," said a familiar voice, dry and slightly amused. "I was just about to kick you in the back of the neck."

Halloran dropped the wallet and took the hand. The man who had been 719 got to his feet, somewhat carefully, and in the flashlight's beam smiled his characteristic grim smile.

Footsteps on the stairs below: Coombes, having heard the shot.

"Lieutenant," said Halloran, and his voice had a quality in it that the man had never heard from him before: something between respect and relief. "If you ever want a character reference, my address is 14 Linden Place, Sunnyside, Queens. I believe we've met."

"We have, Lieutenant," said Carrow Pasha. "At Zahnir's. And at a certain private club in the Meatpacking District."

He produced a cigar case from his hip pocket.

"I'm known as Carrow. Can I offer you a cheroot?"

Chapter Thirty-One

The Story of 719

In a top-floor room of the stripped building—commandeered for the next few hours by two men who had both already had far too little sleep—Carrow Pasha and Detective Lieutenant Halloran sat on opposite sides of an empty crate they were using as a table. A battery lantern burned between them. Two notebooks lay open beside it.

"It is certainly remarkable," Carrow was saying, "that you failed to break my neck. Since taking up residence in this building I have been wearing an extra layer in my cap as a matter of habit. I have some experience of improvised weapons at close quarters."

"The collar on that cap isn't made," said Halloran, "that can finish the job on you. I'd need something considerably heavier. What were you wearing under that disguise?"

"The clothes of John Smiles, able seaman, lately arrived from the Gulf, which I rented a room in this building under. It gave me access to the roof and a view of both properties."

"And your own escape was equally remarkable," Carrow added. "I rarely miss at that range. But you had nearly broken my wrist with that kick."

"Next time," Halloran advised, "open a suspected door with force before you step through it. Anyone behind it catches the edge with his head. Useful habit."

"I'm obliged, Lieutenant. We all have something to learn."

"Right. We've put our cards on the table and neither hand is as strong as it ought to be. I'd appreciate the full account, Mr. Carrow, if you're willing. I take it you've been at this since the night of the murder?"

"Since that night, yes." Carrow knocked a cone of ash from his cheroot onto the floor. "I was called back from an overseas posting—the specifics are not something I can share—because intelligence suggested that an operation I had been tracking abroad had extended into this city. I had not anticipated that its domestic arm would intersect with a murder."

"The cigarettes at Frayne's apartment," said Halloran.

"Exactly. I was present when Miss Verity identified them—you may recall a stranger in the room—and I recognized the product immediately. It is the same supply chain I had been following for two years in the field. That recognition was what led me to request the anonymized federal authorization, rather than simply approaching your department directly."

"Why the anonymity?"

Carrow met the fierce blue eyes with the level gray ones.

"Honestly, Lieutenant, I did not know at that point which elements of the local investigation I could rely on. Not you personally—I formed a view of your integrity within the first hour. But the operation I had been tracking had demonstrated considerable sophistication in maintaining protection at various institutional levels. I decided the safest approach was to operate independently until I understood the local landscape well enough to know who to work with."

"And now you understand it."

"I do. The department is clean. The compromises are lower down and in other places entirely. You were being watched from above, not corrupted from within."

Halloran chewed in silence for a moment. Then, with the contained restraint of a man declining to say what he actually wants to say: "I'm glad to hear it confirmed."

"Now. The financial structure." Carrow opened his notebook. "You visited Calvert's bank today."

"I did. His legitimate income came primarily from theatrical investments—he had genuine producing credits. But there was a second source: regular transfers from Santos Trading S.A., registered in Panama with a correspondence address in Buenos Aires. Substantial amounts, quarterly."

"Santos Trading," said Carrow quietly. "Yes."

"You know it."

"I know what it is. We traced Zahnir's bank account as well. It was opened in the name Mohammed el-Zahnir. The attendant—Zahnir's man—always made the deposits in person. No one at the bank has any recollection of Zahnir himself. From the size of what was moving through that account, it's clear that Zahnir's retail operation was a fraction of the actual revenue. The real proceeds went elsewhere."

"To Santos Trading."

"To Santos Trading. And here is what I believe." Carrow leaned forward. "Santos Trading S.A. is the financial spine of the Reynosa operation. Every node we can identify—Zahnir's retail

operation, the Montero shell company, the properties connected to the House of a Hundred Sighs, Calvert's secondary income stream—connects upward to the same structure. Reynosa, Zahnir, whoever Zahnir actually is, Elena Vidal, and Lucien Calvert: in financial terms, they were all shareholders in the same concern."

"And that concern is Santos Trading."

"Based in Panama, operational in Buenos Aires, with a distribution network that runs through New York and—I believe—through several other major US cities. This is not a small operation, Lieutenant. The scale of what we are looking at is considerably larger than the Spring Street murder suggests."

Halloran was silent for a moment, chewing with particular focus.

"Calvert's man, Moreno," he said. "He was in Buenos Aires when Calvert first met him. Calvert was there himself before he came back here and built his current life. That's when he made contact with the Reynosa organization."

"Yes. Calvert's Buenos Aires years are the connection point. Moreno has been in this city with Calvert for three years—which is the same period the domestic operation has been running at its current scale. And Moreno stayed behind after the murder, which he would not have done unless his continued presence served the operation's interests."

"He's covering someone," said Halloran flatly. "Same as Reynosa is covering someone. They're both staying put because as long as Zahnir and Mrs. Hartfield are successfully gone, there's nothing solid to charge either of them with. The most you could

do to Reynosa on current evidence is a possession charge that wouldn't survive a good lawyer for twenty minutes."

"Precisely. The store is somewhere near here—I am increasingly certain of it. Zahnir is hiding in it, or near it. And Mrs. Hartfield is being kept wherever Zahnir is. Once he and she are safely out of range, the remaining people simply wait for the evidence to cool."

Halloran banged his fist on the crate.

"We're stuck," he said, with a directness unusual even for him. "That's the honest position. Reynosa is too careful to lead us anywhere, and we can't break through what he's built here. The operation has been stripped to the walls while he sat three rooms away and watched me look for it."

"We have one real chance," said Carrow. "The syndicate maintains its control of the premium supply by paying top prices and buying out competition. If distribution is interrupted for even a week they lose the hold. The smugglers who bring product across will sell elsewhere if Zahnir and Company aren't buying. There are almost certainly waterfront connections—bars, meeting places—where people who move contraband by sea talk to one another. That's where the next thread will be."

"I've had men working the waterfront from the Atlantic terminal to the Navy Yard for two days," said Halloran. "Nothing yet. But there's a place—" He paused. "I know a place called The Anchor on the Van Brunt Street end of the waterfront. Maritime clientele, no questions asked, the kind of establishment that

knows things it doesn't officially know. If there's any movement going on through these docks you'd hear about it there."

"Then that's where we go," said Carrow.

"Now?"

"What else do we have?"

They looked at each other across the battery lantern. In that stripped attic room—both men unshaven, both wearing their respective disguises partly assembled, one holding the stump of a cheroot and the other chewing at a reduced pace—the physical dissimilarity between them was striking and the underlying similarity more so. The one lean and dark and prematurely graying, with bright gray eyes and a quality of amusement held in reserve; the other red as an open flame, all truculence on the surface, with the same iron beneath that the other kept out of sight. Both had the quality of men for whom personal safety has long since ceased to be a primary consideration.

"One thing," said Halloran, tearing a page from his notebook and passing it across. "My number. If we lose each other in this fog and you find something, ring me before you do anything about it."

Carrow took it with a nod that was the equivalent of considerably more.

"And if you find Zahnir first—"

"Same arrangement," Halloran said. "We're in this together now."

Carrow stood, ground out the cheroot, and pulled his cap down.

"The Anchor it is," he said. "Lead the way."

Halloran stood, tucked his cane under his arm, and smiled—briefly and savagely—in the manner of a man who has been told the game is still in play.

"Try to keep up," he said, and went to the stairs.

Chapter Thirty-Two

On the Erie Basin

As the police launch left the Red Hook pier, a damp southerly breeze coming off the harbor began to work at the fog in layers, lifting and settling alternately in a way that produced singular effects of light and darkness. For a moment the arc lamp above the grain terminal at the far end of the basin threw a pale line across the water; then it vanished as a bank of mist drifted before it. The creak of the launch's motor sounded muffled and private, and no one aboard seemed inclined to speak. Ahead lay the Erie Basin, and beyond it the industrial shoreline of the Sunset Park waterfront.

Navigation was slow. They reached midstream without seeing another vessel's lights. Then the breeze strengthened, pushing the fog apart in trailing curtains, and ahead of them they could make out the bulk of a container vessel lying at anchor, waiting for a berth at the terminal. The sounds of the working night came to them across the water—a crane engine somewhere, the bass complaint of a moored barge. Halloran stood at the rail in the bulky borrowed overcoat that made him look like someone who had lost a substantial portion of himself, and watched the fog.

The breeze stiffened further, and the last of the heavy fog moved off upwind in ragged banks. The lights of the Sunset Park shore showed ahead, and the launch reduced speed, feeling its way along the dark industrial waterfront past a series of silent wharves.

A single light—a window—shone from a low building set back from the water's edge, its brightness notable because everything else on this stretch of shore was dark. Halloran broke the silence.

"The Anchor," he said. "Put us in here."

They disembarked at a rusting iron ladder and climbed up to a crumbling concrete apron above the waterline. The launch drew off and held position.

"The place is being watched," Halloran said, as they crossed toward the light. "I told you. But the surveillance has produced nothing useful. These operations are too careful for the ordinary approach."

"Reynosa demonstrates that," said Carrow.

"Exactly. The only real link between his waterfront facility and the retail operation in SoHo was Elena Vidal—and she has conveniently departed. Without her we cannot prove the connection. He has positioned himself so that the most we can do is watch him."

"H'm," said Halloran.

He was wearing the borrowed cap and overcoat from Carrow's John Smiles wardrobe, and he had taken one look in a pocket mirror and formed a vigorous opinion of his appearance, which he had not shared. They crossed the waste ground between the water and the building, picking their way between piled rubbish and sections of old dock equipment, until they came to a long low structure of concrete block and corrugated metal—the kind of building that belongs to no era in particular and has probably

been there for several decades without anyone deciding to either improve it or demolish it.

"What is this place exactly?" asked Carrow.

"Coffee shop," said Halloran. "Officially. Used by the dock and warehouse crews, the night-shift workers, and certain individuals adjacent to the maritime economy. It has never closed in living memory, and if anyone tried to close it there would be a work stoppage on the docks within twenty-four hours. There are two sets of rules in this city, Mr. Carrow. The ones that apply in SoHo and the ones that apply here."

He pushed open the swing door.

The noise, heat, and smell hit them simultaneously: coarse voices at conversational volume plus several above it, the fug of tobacco and damp clothing and coffee and something more closely resembling rum than the establishment's license permitted, the specific organic warmth of a large number of people in a confined space. The Anchor had two counters against opposite walls, lit by bare bulbs under tin shades. The furniture was wooden tables and mismatched chairs. Two industrial space heaters glowed at either end. The clients were, in the main, exactly what the building suggested: men who worked nights on the water or near it—dockworkers, container handlers, crew from working vessels, and a peripheral category of individuals whose professions were not specified on any official document.

As they made their way toward the nearest counter, a large man in a dock laborer's clothes appeared at Halloran's shoulder

and clapped him on the back with the enthusiasm of a man greeting an old friend.

"Mike! Have a coffee with me. The coffee's particularly good tonight."

Halloran leaned close.

"Tenby. What have you got?"

"George Halsted is at the far counter," the detective murmured, his expression unchanged. "He's been drinking more than is good for his judgment. I've had a tip he has a job tonight. He's got a skiff beached below and I think he's waiting on the tide."

"Good man."

The three made their way to the counter. The proprietor—a thick-armed woman with the demeanor of someone who has maintained order in hostile environments for a long time and found it interesting—regarded their approach with calibrated hostility.

"Three coffees," said Tenby easily. "And is there any brown sugar left tonight, Pat?"

"One measure," said the proprietor, with the air of someone conferring a privilege. "And don't push your luck."

She produced three cups of coffee from the urn and set them down. Tenby put money on the counter. She swept it up and turned away with the practiced indifference of someone who has no interest in the specifics of any transaction that goes smoothly.

They withdrew to a relatively clear section of wall. Carrow tasted his coffee.

"Rum," he said. "Good rum."

"Whoever runs this place has kept it open for thirty years," said Halloran, sipping with appreciation. "The Health Department, the Liquor Authority, and the Fire Marshal have all made their attempts. None of them have managed it. At a certain point the city decides that some establishments are more useful intact."

He glanced toward the far counter, where the red-bearded figure of George Halsted stood heavily against the bar with the posture of a man who has been drinking for some time and is not yet where he wants to be.

"If he has a job tonight he'll want to be sharper than that," Halloran observed.

"Unless it's a simple enough job that it doesn't require sharpness," said Carrow.

"We need a boat," Halloran said to Tenby.

"There are several beached below, sir. We'll have to borrow one."

"That's fine. Go back and tell Detective White to stand by at the pier steps, out of sight. If we move before you're back, join him there."

Tenby nodded and moved off into the crowd with the unhurried ease of a man who belongs to it. They finished their coffee quickly—the rum had raised the temperature considerably—and made their way out.

The fog had cleared entirely now. A fresh salt breeze came off the harbor, carrying with it the cold smell of open water. Tenby led them down the slope to the waterline, where several small craft lay on the gravel above the tideline.

"George's is the end one," Tenby said. "I searched it this afternoon. Nothing."

"He knows better than that," said Halloran. "All right. We take the dinghy."

He turned to Tenby. "Stand by at the wooden steps. Keep White with you."

Tenby melted back into the dark. Halloran and Carrow ran the dinghy down to the water and pushed off, Carrow taking the stern and Halloran the oars.

The current pulled at them immediately, running hard with the tide.

"Fierce," Halloran said, pulling. "Give me a hand here, sir."

They rowed together until they found a sheltered angle beside a short pier jutting from the shore, where the current was broken and they could lie in relative stillness. They shipped the oars and waited.

"Quiet," Carrow said suddenly. "There."

Coming down the slope toward the water, swinging a hurricane lantern, was George Halsted. He reached the shingle, stopped, raised the lantern, and swung it slowly back and forth.

Halloran and Carrow watched from the shadow of the pier.

"He's signaling," Carrow said, very low.

Across the black water, from somewhere on the far shore—the Staten Island side, a mile or more across—a light appeared and moved. Not steadily: it swung in a deliberate pattern, answering.

Halloran held his breath. The two lights spoke briefly to each other across the dark harbor. Then the light on the far shore went out.

There was a moment of quiet. Then a curious thought came to Halloran, and having come would not leave: not about the crime, not about Reynosa or Zahnir or the mechanics of the supply chain, but about Rita Hartfield. That answering light, wherever it was, burned in proximity to wherever Rita was being kept. The distance between that light and this shore was the distance between her and the world she had vanished from. He heard, very clearly in the back of his mind, the echo of his wife's voice: "Ye must find her. Ye must find her. Puir weak hairt—dinna ye ken how she is suffering."

"If we lose him tonight," he said quietly, "we deserve to lose the case."

"We won't lose him," said Carrow.

On the gravel, George Halsted ran his boat into the water and clambered in. He took up the oars and began to pull—strongly, against the current, heading for the point on the far shore where the signal had showed.

Halloran and Carrow let him get clear water ahead, then pushed out from the pier and followed, keeping the dim outline of his boat just visible in the darkness.

"He'll follow the far shore upstream," Halloran said. "We'll drift across to meet him somewhere between the container terminal and the basin. If we're quiet enough on the oars he'll never hear us."

"Agreed," said Carrow. "Pull."

The harbor took them, dark and wide and indifferent, moving them northward with the tide while they rowed to hold their course, and the lights of the city made a soft ceiling above the dark water.

PART FOUR

THE EYE OF EL SUEÑO

Chapter Thirty-Three

Below the Wharf

Coombes and three officers watched Reynosa's warehouse through the remaining hours of the night, and any one of them would have been prepared to swear he had not left it. But a man who has spent years evading surveillance does not leave the obvious door. The warehouse had a back wall that opened onto a service lane. Reynosa had inspected this lane from a second-floor window well before the watchers arrived and had understood its geometry precisely.

He chose his moment with the patience of a man who has no need to hurry because he has already thought further ahead than the people watching him. From the service lane he extracted a length of rusted angle iron from the accumulated debris of years, and from a prepared position he threw it onto the corrugated roof of a building twice removed from his own, where it clattered and bounced and then fell noisily into the neighboring yard.

The officer in the lane turned immediately toward the sound.

Eduardo Reynosa was over the wall before the officer had taken four steps.

He moved with the canvas bag on one shoulder at a pace that was unhurried and unremarkable for this neighborhood at this hour. He crossed the lane, passed through the shadow of a container depot, and arrived at the rear entrance of the smoke shop three minutes after leaving his building. The door opened before he knocked.

"The young man was already inside."

"They heard her cry," he said, in Spanish. "The red detective and the agent who had the room. They are gathering men. They will search from door to door."

"George came?"

"I sent him the signal before they could close off the water. He moved off downstream. He'll wait."

"Good."

Reynosa descended to the storeroom, displaced the pallet section, inserted the wire, and raised the trap. He went down with the bag. The boy replaced the stone behind him.

In the vault: the ship's lantern on the counter, Sam Foon in his chair with his head lolling sideways on his chest, apparently asleep and possibly something further along the spectrum than that. He raised his head very slowly as Reynosa came in.

Reynosa set the bag on the counter and untied the neck. From inside he lifted out a wicker travel cage, and from inside that:

"El Sueño," said the raven, blinking in the lamplight.

"Buenos Aires."

"Come," said Reynosa.

He opened the cage front and the raven stepped onto his wrist with the air of a creature resuming a long-interrupted conversation. Reynosa raised his arm and the bird moved to his shoulder. He set the empty cage on the counter. From deeper in the bag he drew out the small carved wooden bird and set it beside the cage.

Without speaking to Sam Foon, who had lowered his head again, Reynosa walked around the counter to the far end of the shelving and grasped a section of the unit. He pulled it to the left. It slid on concealed runners—the same mechanism Halloran had spent twenty minutes searching for from the other side—and revealed a second, smaller vault beyond.

An oil stove. A paper-shaded lamp. Matting on the floor. Furniture that had been moved here from the dismantled House of a Hundred Sighs: two chairs, a divan, a folding table. In a curtained alcove a narrow bed.

Elena Vidal was standing beside the bed, looking down at the woman who lay in it.

She wore the green silk robe, her hair loose. Her hair was no longer its natural dense black. She had dyed it. The new color was a coppery red—not precisely the extraordinary color of Rita Hartfield's hair, but close enough, in poor light, to produce a second glance of uncertainty.

She looked across her shoulder at Reynosa with a glance that carried contempt and something beneath the contempt that was less certain of itself.

"So," she said, in Spanish. "You came. Eventually."

"They were watching the old fox," he replied. "But they were watching the wrong things."

"Are you sure you were not followed?"

"I am here." He moved to the bed.

Rita Hartfield lay very still. Her face had taken on a waxen translucency, the fine color of her skin reduced to something

almost spectral. The pinched quality around her nostrils and mouth suggested protracted withdrawal—the body stripped to its essentials, fighting from the inside. Her long lashes lay motionless on her cheeks. It required careful attention to detect that she was breathing at all.

Reynosa studied her for a time, his expression unreadable.

"She screamed," he said.

"The needle woke her. I was managing the dose and the prick brought her up. Someone on the water heard it. You heard them gathering."

"Yes." He looked at her a moment longer. Then, with a quality of observation that had nothing prurient in it and nothing sentimental either: "She is alive."

"For now," said Elena.

"El Sueño," murmured the raven.

"Yes," said Reynosa, quietly and to the bird. "Very soon. Nariño."

"Nariño!" Elena's voice was sharp with contempt. "Much—very much—you care about Nariño. Very little about the dollars and the traffic and the things we have built here."

"I have the papers?" He was already moving to the business.

"Ready. The identity holds. The booking is confirmed."

"You board as Elena Santos. The name connects to nothing that cannot be traced in circles your friends will not think to look. The vessel leaves from the Red Hook cruise terminal at six this evening. I have arranged your post as a service coordinator—it will get you through any checkpoint without a second look."

"And Moreno?"

"What can they prove against Moreno if you are not here to confirm anything?" He paused. "Nothing solid. He may be held for some time, but they cannot convict him on what they have. He knows this. He has always known this was the arrangement."

Elena nodded toward the bed.

Reynosa looked at Rita again. Then back at Elena.

"It must be the water," he said, quietly and without heat. "No marks. When she is found it must read as accidental."

"I know what it must read as."

"El Sueño," the raven said, with the tone of an editorial comment.

Elena looked at the bird with something very close to fury.

"Why did you bring that thing?"

"He goes where I go." Reynosa's voice was entirely without defensiveness. "We have one more matter to settle. The stock—we cannot move it. The police will find it when they complete their search."

"Then we lose it."

"We lose it." He said it with the equanimity of a man writing off an insurance loss. "We drew the last withdrawal from this operation three days ago. What is left here we are resigned to forfeit. The network has other nodes. This one is closed."

"And Santos Trading?"

"The account is structured so that it cannot be unwound quickly. By the time they work through the holding companies we will be elsewhere."

He moved back toward the sliding wall with the steady unhurry of someone completing a list.

"Failure," he said, almost to himself, "is nothing but taking seven risks when six were enough." He paused at the shelving. "We have one task remaining."

He looked at the woman on the bed—the waxen face, the motionless lashes, the barely perceptible rise and fall.

"Smartest—smartest," croaked the raven, and fell silent.

Elena looked at Rita with an expression that moved through several things in quick succession and settled finally on something that was neither pity nor its absence but something more complicated than either.

"She unmasked it," she said quietly—meaning Zahnir's secret. "That bloodless, nerveless creature in the dark. She unmasked everything. And she—"

She stopped.

"Yes," said Reynosa. "She did."

He pulled the sliding wall closed behind him.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Above and Below

"Thank God I see ye alive, Dan," said Mairi Halloran.

She was standing just inside the doorway of the dining room, her husband's dressing gown over her night clothes and her usually neat dark hair in disorder. Her face was haggard and the fey light was in her eyes. Halloran, in the armchair still dressed from the street, mud on his shoes and green slime from the waterfront on his jacket, raised his face from his hands.

"I woke wi' a cry before dawn," she said, coming toward him and reaching out her hands. "My heart beat fast and then went cold. I dropped on my knees and prayed as I have never prayed before. Dan, I thought ye were gone from me."

"Nearly was," said Halloran, with a faint spark of his customary self. "Carrow only missed me by a miracle."

"'Twas the miracle of prayer," said his wife, in a low voice. "For as I prayed a great comfort came to me, and a great peace. The second sight was wi' me, Dan, and I saw—no' yourself, which told me ye were safe—but a puir dying soul stretched on a bed o' sorrow. At the foot of the bed stood a fearsome figure, still and dark, wi' his hands in his sleeves. I thought the vision was opening up for me and all was about to be made clear, when as if a curtain had been dropped before my eyes it went away and I knew it no more. But plain—plain—I heard the howling of a dog."

Halloran came upright in the chair as if a current had passed through him.

"A dog," he said. "A dog."

"A small dog," said his wife. "Howling. I thought it was a portent, and the great fear came over me again. But as I prayed it was unfolded to me that the portent was no' for yourself—but for her. The puir weak heart ye have to save."

She stopped speaking. The fey light left her eyes and she dropped to her knees beside him, bending her head and throwing her arms around him. He looked down at her with the expression that nothing else in his life produced in him, and laid his hands on her shoulders. But his mind was already somewhere else.

"A dog," he muttered. "A dog."

Mairi Halloran did not move, until—a light coming into Halloran's fierce eyes that had nothing of weariness in it—he stood up.

"I have it," he said. "Mairi, the case is won. Twenty men spent the night and the early morning searching that waterfront—every house, every shop, every cellar within the reach of human legwork—and found nothing. Twenty men failed where a dog would have succeeded. It's you that sends me."

She caught his arm. "Ye're no' going out again. Ye're dead on your feet."

"I must, my dear. It is the only move left."

"Where, Dan?"

Halloran picked up his hat and cane from the sideboard.

"I'm going for the dog," he said, and was gone.

The night's search had been comprehensive in a way that its complete failure made almost unbearable. He and Carrow had mustered twenty officers through the early hours and had gone building by building, wharf by wharf, from the basin to the container terminal. Where entry had been refused they had forced it. Where basements and substructures were inaccessible they had broken through. They had found nothing.

Detective Coombes, for the first time in Halloran's recollection, had stopped smiling when the full extent of Reynosa's disappearance became apparent—that Reynosa had simply vanished from a building that was being watched on all sides, taking with him a drugged woman, an ancient associate, and a raven. The silence with which Halloran had absorbed this information had lasted nearly five minutes, during which Carrow had correctly judged it inadvisable to speak.

Halloran walked out to the main road and took the first available cab uptown, muddy and disheveled and indifferent to the driver's assessments of him.

The city was well into its morning routines. Fine November rain drifted through the amber of the street lights. Workers crowded the subway entrances. The morning was gray and ordinary and the only thing Halloran saw in it was the vault he had walked directly past, lying beneath a wharf he had tied his boat beside, while the people he had spent weeks looking for sat ten feet underground directly below him.

He beat his cane against the floor of the cab and swore, quietly and with feeling, until the driver increased his speed in the reasonable belief that this would help.

At the corner of Seventh Avenue and Twenty-Third Street, a car moving south through the cross-traffic drew his eye. In it: Margaret Verity driving, and in the passenger seat—Carrow, still in his John Smiles working clothes, his beard now a full three days old. They were heading south, moving fast.

"Where in hell has he been?" Halloran muttered.

The answer, which Halloran would learn later, was: the Metropolitan Detention Center in Sunset Park, where Moreno had been held since his arrest. Carrow had gone there at Margaret's suggestion—she had known Moreno by sight through her connection to Calvert's circle, and believed he might respond to a different approach than Halloran's. Carrow, in the gray suit and clean-shaven face he had reassumed after the night's work, had spent an hour with Moreno under the conditions the federal authorization allowed. Moreno had sat with his hands on the table and said nothing useful. Whatever arrangement he had made with himself about what he would and would not give, it held completely. Carrow had come away with nothing.

The arrest had been in every news feed for twenty-four hours. The city was asking: who is Zahnir, and where is Rita Hartfield?

Below the waterfront, Reynosa sat before the stove in the drug cache and polished the carved wooden bird with a fragment of chamois leather, crooning softly to himself in Spanish. The raven

on his shoulder observed this with its characteristic expression of weary expertise. Sam Foon, in the corner, nodded his ancient head at intervals that had nothing to do with the conversation.

The sliding door to the inner room stood partly open. Through it, the dim red glow of the paper-shaded lamp and, at intervals, Elena's voice—murmuring, half-audible, carrying the quality of someone speaking to a person who is not there.

She was propped against the divan cushions, the pipe lying loosened in her fingers. The high-grade pharmaceutical opioids she had administered to herself had opened the gates through which the past flows back with the quality of the present, and Elena Vidal—La Señora, who in the operational present was precise and controlled and gave nothing away—was somewhere in the past, speaking to Lucien Calvert.

"Something has changed in you," she murmured. "You are different—lately. You have money now. Your investments have been good. You want to be respectable, yes?"

A pause, as if listening.

"Very likely. Very likely." The red lips curved slightly. "I know why you don't smoke. You have promised your pretty little friend that you will stay awake."

Rita Hartfield lay white and motionless in the bed at the far end of the room, her face depleted of color, her breathing barely perceptible.

"Why do you bring her to the house?" Elena continued, softly and with a quality that was not quite a question. "And you

brought her to Zahnir. Yes. Now everyone says you are changed. Yes. She is a charming friend."

The expression on the drugged face contracted and then smoothed.

"I know! I know! Do you think I am blind? If she had been like any of the others—if it had been that—do you suppose it would matter to me? But you respect her. You respect her." The voice dropped. "I don't believe you. You are telling me lies. But you have always told me lies. One more does not matter."

Silence. Through the partly open door came the soft sound of Reynosa's crooning.

"You remember Buenos Aires," she said, in a voice that had gone somewhere else entirely. "When you had nothing and your 'honor' cost ten thousand dollars. I did not ask where you had been or how you had made those debts. I found the ten thousand. Did I ask you where your English pride had gone? I did not ask. I gave you the money and I said nothing, and you were free. And you forgot La Lola and you went back to New York and you became respectable."

She paused, apparently in some private exchange.

"No—I do not reproach you, my dear. You paid me back a thousand times over, and the old fox grows rich and fat. We have built something here, Lucy. The traffic is in our hands." A soft, sad laugh. "Let us go—you and I. Not Nariño—that is for him, not for us. Do you remember Havana? Two months. Let us go back to Havana, Lucy. Let Zahnir die. Let the whole apparatus go. We have enough."

Another pause.

"Very likely. Very likely you do not smoke because of your pretty little friend."

Her voice changed register, lower and harsher.

"And I do as you wish. How can I keep her from it except by making the price so high that she cannot afford to buy? I do it, Lucy. And I bargained for the pink and white boy—Quentin—because I wanted her to be in debt to him—because I wanted her to be so sorry for him that she lets him take her away from you. Away from you! Why should you respect her—"

Her voice died to a whisper, then stopped.

In the silence, Reynosa's quiet crooning continued through the partly open door. The raven said nothing. Sam Foon's head moved very slowly from one side to the other.

"Go, Juan," Elena said abruptly, in a voice that was not hers—lower, harder, with Moreno's cadence. "I say—go."

Rita Hartfield's lashes moved. Her eyes opened and looked straight upward at the ceiling. Horror gathered slowly in their depths, like water rising.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Beyond the Veil

Rita Hartfield's awakening was not awakening in any ordinary sense. It was not even a lifting of the veil between her and the world she had left—only a momentary perception that such a veil existed, and that somewhere on the far side of it something called life was still occurring without her. On the veil itself, in moving letters of gray smoke, the name Zahnir was written over and over.

She had been here before. She had stood at the border between where she was and where she had been, and the country on the far side was so remote that she could no longer be certain it was real. What was real was the pageant that played behind her eyes without ceasing—the same sequence of events in the same order, memory and delusion together, beginning always at the same moment and replaying without mercy.

She had grasped the hands of the man in the ebony chair, and the hands were cold.

Not the coldness of a room or a season—the specific, definitive coldness of hands that had not been warm for some time and would not be warm again. Long and pale and slim, resting motionless on the chair-arms, they had answered her grip with the rigid indifference of objects. Not a man. A body. Zahnir was already dead.

She had cried out. She had felt consciousness leaving her and had cried out again into the darkness.

And then—

Someone was beside her in the dark, holding her, speaking in a voice she would not have recognized if she had not recognized him by touch—the quality of his hands, the scent of tobacco and cedar that was specifically and unmistakably Lucien Calvert.

“Rita—my Rita. What have they done to you? Speak to me.” The voice shook. She had not known, in all the years she had known him, that his voice was capable of shaking. “Oh God. Let her hate me for ever, but spare her. Rita—I tried, heaven help me, to get you out of this. I only wanted you to be safe.”

He lifted her. She clung to his arm with both hands, feeling the world tilt and reorder itself around his presence.

“Lucy,” she whispered. “I’m so frightened. I’m so ill.”

“You’re alive,” he said, in the rough voice of a man controlling something very large. “Lean on me. We have to get out.”

She managed to stand. A pale square of light showed ahead—the passage, or the outer room, something. Against it, silhouetted, was the outline of the ebony chair. She made a small sound and turned away from it. Calvert spoke rapidly in Spanish, directing the words through a door she could not see.

A voice answered in the same language—rapid, furious.

Calvert said something back, sharp and hard.

What came next came without transition: a shriek—pure rage, a sound that belonged to no ordinary register of human feeling—and out of the dark a shape that moved with terrible speed. She

saw the knife by the light that glinted along it. She saw Calvert move.

He put himself in front of her.

She saw the knife enter his shoulder. She saw him stagger and not fall. She heard him say something in Spanish that was not, by its tone, the kind of thing that required a translation. Then the darkness took her again and she fell into it without a floor.

What followed belonged to the jurisdiction of fever. Great mechanical sounds clanged in her skull. Hands reached from every direction and were never connected to bodies. She was carried through spaces that had no dimensions, past rows of frozen faces that she could not identify. She tried to cry out and made no sound. She tried to run and could not move. Every time she found a handhold it dissolved.

Through the nightmare she heard voices she knew.

Calvert, speaking Spanish, sharp and decisive—the voice she had last heard real, not dreamed.

And then Zahnir.

"Tell me your dream," the deep voice said, with its mocking music, "and I will read its portent."

She opened her eyes.

The ceiling. Low, close, painted a shade that had been something else before it became this. She was in the bed. The lamp with the paper shade made its red circle above her.

"Why do you come to me with your stories of desperation?" the voice continued. "You have insisted upon seeing me. I am here."

Rita moved her head. On the divan at the far end of the room Elena Vidal lay propped amid cushions, the pipe fallen from her fingers, her face wearing the smooth, appalling contentment of someone who has arrived somewhere no one else can follow. She was talking. The voice was coming from her—Zahnir's words, Zahnir's cadences, delivered in Elena's drugged murmur as if she were reading from a text she had memorized long ago.

In the other corner of the divan, very still, watching her with those eyes—those extraordinary eyes that were larger than any human eyes had a right to be—sat Zahnir.

The eyes met hers.

Rita's lashes fell. She lay very still and breathed as slowly as she could manage, and let the horror settle over her with the practiced stillness of someone who has learned that stillness is the only available strategy.

She was alive. She was conscious. These were, for the moment, the only facts that mattered.

She began, very carefully, to remember where the door was.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Sam Foon Moves

The Red Hook waterfront was being watched at an intensity it had not seen outside of a major federal operation. Every precinct in South Brooklyn had men on the ground. The port authority had officers on the water. The detectives were distributed so thickly through the lanes and alleys of the waterfront industrial district that, as Halloran put it to Carrow, you could not throw a stone without hitting one.

Reynosa had vanished.

He had left his warehouse under the noses of four watchers and had not been seen since. That the House of a Hundred Sighs could have been stripped and dismantled within thirty-six hours while he sat calmly in the building next door—that a drug operation large enough to service a significant portion of the city's premium supply could have been reduced to empty rooms indistinguishable from genuine vacancy, in that time, while a search party of twenty officers turned the entire area over—this was the thing that Halloran could not accommodate and could not put aside. He had turned it over continuously since dawn.

He began, against his professional inclination, to feel a respect for Eduardo Reynosa that went beyond tactical acknowledgment. This was not a man who had been lucky or careless with his pursuers. This was a man who had built, over years, something so thoroughly conceived that it could be dismantled cleanly and completely in the time between one working night and

the next. Halloran had, in twenty-odd years, never encountered anything quite like it.

He found this, simultaneously, infuriating and clarifying.

Toward the close of an afternoon that had been producing cold drizzle since noon, Detective Lieutenant Halloran came out of a service lane near the Erie Basin onto the narrow riverside street, carrying the Hartfields' spaniel under one arm. The dog had been his companion for four hours and had expressed its view of the arrangement on three separate occasions, most recently leaving two clear toothmarks on the inside of Halloran's left wrist.

He had been to the Park Avenue apartment in the early morning to collect the animal from Connors—explaining nothing, taking it with the flat authority of a man who does not expect to be questioned about small dogs at seven in the morning—and had been walking the waterfront with it since. The dog had made clear, at various points, that it objected to him personally, to the rain, to the smell of the waterfront, and to the general concept of being carried by someone it had not chosen. Halloran had accepted these objections in the spirit of an investigation that had run out of alternatives.

On this fourth attempt, the spaniel sank its teeth into his wrist with the focused commitment of an animal that has identified its target and sees no reason to be subtle about it.

Halloran hooked a finger into the dog's collar, swung it once around his head, and flung it into the rain.

"That's it," he said. "I'm done."

He sucked his wrist, picked up his cane from the wet sidewalk where it had fallen, and stood for a moment in the drizzle conducting an inventory of his remaining options, which were not numerous.

A sound reached him from the near darkness: whimpering.

"Damn," said Halloran.

He went toward the sound, which was coming from the direction of a low building set back from the waterfront lane—the smoke shop he had been through twice already, once in the early-morning search and once in daylight. In the window, visible as he approached: SMOKE & SUNDRIES.

The spaniel was crouched at the door, shaking, pressing itself against the bottom of the frame. As Halloran came up it raised its eyes to him—not with forgiveness, but with the specific, urgent appeal of an animal that has found what it was brought here to find and wants someone with thumbs to deal with the door.

It was scratching at the threshold. Not whimpering now—scratching with focused, continuous energy, the way a dog scratches when it knows precisely what is on the other side.

Halloran stood watching it for several seconds while his pulse changed character. Then he tried the door. Open.

He went in, the dog streaming past him. It crossed the dark shop without hesitation, hit the storeroom at the back, and went directly to a corner where a wooden pallet sat against the concrete floor. It scratched there with everything it had, barking in short hard bursts and looking back at Halloran with a

ferocity that, under different circumstances, he would have found satisfying to observe in another creature.

In the storeroom, on his knees beside the pallet, was the young man Halloran had seen twice before—once in the dark entrance room with Reynosa, and once briefly through a window during the early-morning search. He had the concentrated expression of someone doing something quickly that requires care. His hands were moving over a section of concrete floor. He was spreading grit and debris over it from a small container—restoring the appearance of undisturbed surface to something that had very recently been disturbed.

He came to his feet in one motion when Halloran entered, and the expression changed to something that included murder as one of its available options.

Halloran shot out his hand and caught the man by the collar.

"Open that," he said, pointing at the floor where the dog was still scratching. "Now."

The young man looked at him with the eyes of someone doing a calculation.

"For the last time," said Halloran, pulling the collar back so that the man's breathing became audible. "Open the trap."

The young man made his decision: he lunged for the stairs. Halloran's fist caught him behind the ear as he moved, and he went down on the corner of the coal heap with the specific inertness of someone who has been removed from the conversation.

Halloran stood over him for a moment, breathing. The dog had stopped scratching and was now barking continuously with the

sustained energy of an animal that has done its job and wants acknowledgment.

"All right," Halloran told it, not unkindly. "Good dog."

He crouched over the young man and went through his pockets. A ring of four keys. Two Yale locks; one barrel key; one large and complicated key of a kind Halloran associated with heavy vault mechanisms. "Looks like the key of a jail," he said aloud, which was more accurate than he intended.

He took off his rain jacket, laid it with his cane on the pallet, and went back to the trapdoor. The dog was helping. He swept the scattered debris aside, found the slot, found the bent wire among the nearby rubbish—it was right there, as if it had been waiting—inserted it, turned it, and lifted.

A wooden ladder. Below: the mouth of the tunnel, timbered like a mine working. Halloran put the spaniel in the storeroom and pulled the upper door shut, plunging the cellar into darkness. He clicked on his flashlight.

The young man had not moved.

Halloran went down the ladder into the tunnel and bent himself into its low dimensions, moving forward with the flashlight in one hand and the ring of keys in the other. The tunnel was perhaps thirty yards. At its end: the heavy door with its massive lock. He looked at the large key. He put it in and turned it.

The lock moved smoothly. The door swung open.

Halloran stepped into the vault.

His movements from the moment he had opened the trap had been swift and as quiet as the circumstances allowed. He had no idea what waited on the other side of the door, which was exactly how he wanted it.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Carrow Pasha Reports

Halloran's movements through the tunnel had been swift and nearly silent, but not silent enough. The vault beyond the heavy door held only Sam Foon—the shelves stripped bare, a dense chemical smell in the air, the stove burning high. Halloran's eyes moved across the empty shelving and settled on the stove. A thick coat of white ash lay on the embers. Evidence, going up.

He crossed to Sam Foon and grasped his shoulder, pushing him back to look into the bleared eyes behind the horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Where are they?" he said. "The man with the scar. The woman. Where?"

Sam Foon nodded, with the rhythmic helplessness of advanced age, and said nothing.

A ball of compressed material lay on the floor beside the old man's feet—a product from the operation that had been missed in the cleanup. Halloran stooped for it.

Sam Foon's hand came out of his sleeve with a weighted rubber tube and struck Halloran across the back of the skull with the practiced precision of someone who has done exactly this before, in exactly this location, and has been waiting for the moment.

Halloran went down without a word and lay face-forward on the vault floor. His bowler hat rolled away across the concrete.

Sam Foon sank back into his chair. His hand, still holding the sap, shook visibly. He let it fall. His jaws worked.

The shelving unit at the far wall slid open, and Reynosa came through it. He stood looking down at the fallen detective, his hands in his pockets, his expression containing nothing that could be easily read.

"Well done," he said softly, in Spanish. "The dogs circle close, but the old fox does not sleep."

At approximately the time Halloran was stepping through the vault door, Carrow Pasha was sitting across a conference table from the Deputy Attorney General in the federal offices at 26 Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan. The John Smiles disguise had been retired. In his own person—lean, bronzed, the gray at his temples more visible than it had been six weeks ago—Carrow made a marked contrast to the figure who had sat in a Red Hook attic with Halloran and a battery lantern. And although his report was substantially a report of failure, the quality of the face and the bright gray eyes gave any thoughtful observer reason to believe the failure was not final.

Quentin Frayne sat at the window, unable to keep still, staring at the street below with the expression of someone managing a large internal disturbance.

"So your assessment," the Deputy AG was saying, "is that there has been no collusion between the distribution network and law enforcement?"

"That is my assessment," said Carrow. "The operation has been run on a monopoly model—smaller distributors bought out or

forced out over several years, until Zahnir and Company effectively controlled the premium supply across the city. Law enforcement hasn't been corrupted. It's been outclassed. Those are different problems, and the second is more solvable than the first."

"And the principals—Reynosa, the woman Vidal, the person operating as Zahnir—you believe they are still in the vicinity?"

"I believe they are within a quarter mile of the Red Hook waterfront. Reynosa is a marked man—the facial scar is distinctive, and more importantly he travels with a raven that he will not leave behind under any circumstances. Elena Vidal is harder to fix—she has been deliberately obscuring her appearance and has false papers prepared. As for Zahnir—" Carrow paused. "We have no usable description. Abnormally large eyes, according to every witness, but that is not a description on which you can detain someone at a port of departure. He could sail tomorrow and we would not know until he was gone."

The Deputy AG turned a page.

"Mrs. Hartfield."

Frayne turned from the window. His face had gone pale.

"Carrow. Please. Is she—"

"She was alive this morning," Carrow said, meeting the younger man's eyes directly and steadily. "We heard her. You have my word that no violence will be offered to her—they have specific reasons to keep her alive and undamaged. I will say no more than that now. But you may hold on to it."

Frayne turned back to the window. The line of his shoulders altered slightly.

The Deputy AG set down his papers and looked at Frayne with the expression of someone who has been postponing a necessary conversation and has decided to stop postponing it.

"Quentin. The State Department posting to Bogotá—your father confirmed it this morning. You're expected Thursday."

Frayne's reflection was visible in the dark window glass. He did not turn.

"You're sending me away," he said. "I don't know what I'm supposed to have done."

"You have done nothing that an honorable man wouldn't do," the Deputy AG replied, with more gentleness than his usual register. "But you are not going to help Rita Hartfield by remaining here, and your presence in the city at this point creates complications that are not fair to Monte Hartfield. The Bogotá position is a real appointment, not a consolation—it was arranged because your father and I believe in your ability to do the work. I would not have confirmed it otherwise."

Frayne was quiet for a moment.

"Margaret put you up to this," he said. Then, immediately: "I'm sorry. That was unfair."

"It was," said the Deputy AG, without heat.

Frayne turned. His color had come back, unevenly. He looked at Carrow.

"You agree with him."

"I do." Carrow held out his hand. "You've conducted yourself throughout this business with complete integrity, Frayne. I mean that. But the moment Rita Hartfield is found, the person she will need to see is Monte Hartfield—not you. The moment she is recovered, your being here becomes a complication for a man who has already had a very great deal to bear. Going to Bogotá is the right thing. The kind thing."

Frayne looked at the extended hand, then shook it.

"Good old Carrow," he said, not quite steadily. "All right. Thursday." He turned to the Deputy AG. "You're always right about these things. I hate it." He pulled on his jacket. "Find her. For Hartfield's sake. Find her."

He left, taking the particular energy he generated everywhere with him. The room felt quieter and larger afterward.

The Deputy AG looked at Carrow.

"Honestly. What do you think the chances are?"

Carrow stood and reached for his coat.

"Many people ascribe success to wit," he said, "and failure to bad luck. But there is an Arabic expression—Kismet. What is meant to happen, happens." He smiled, briefly and grimly.

"Halloran is moving heaven and earth, and I don't want to come in a poor second. Good afternoon."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Song of El Sueño

Elena Vidal came out of the inner room into the vault still wearing the green silk robe, her dyed hair disordered from sleep, her eyes carrying the specific unfocused quality of someone emerging from a chemical depth that has not yet fully released them. She moved with her habitual precision of carriage regardless, pointing her heels with the automatic grace of someone whose body has its own opinions about how it presents itself.

Then she saw Halloran on the floor.

Her pupils contracted to points and then opened wide. She stepped back. The half-drugged stupor in her eyes sharpened into something else entirely.

Halloran groaned. His arm moved in a convulsive sweep. He rolled onto his side, drawing up his knees—then lay still again.

Reynosa watched this from across the room with his characteristic expression of calibrated attention. Sam Foon, in his chair with his feet almost touching Halloran's shoulder, did not move at all.

Elena was already reaching through the slit in her robe. From a sheath against her thigh she drew a stiletto—thin, four inches, the kind of tool that belongs to someone who has thought carefully about what she might someday need to do quickly.

She crouched, moving with the particular quickness of someone who has committed to a decision.

Reynosa stepped forward and put his hand around her wrist.

"No," he said, in a voice that was entirely quiet and entirely final. "They will be here in numbers within the hour. One more is not a calculation that comes out in our favor."

Elena snatched her wrist free and recoiled.

"Let go of me," she said. "Fool. One more does not matter now."

"One more always matters," said Reynosa. "Put it away."

They looked at each other across the body of the unconscious detective. The specific character of that look—years of shared criminality, shared money, shared contempt—was not the look of people who trusted each other, but of people who understood each other completely and found neither warmth nor particular surprise in what they saw.

Elena dropped the stiletto on the counter and pressed her hand against her forehead.

"Tell me what happened. How did he find it?"

Reynosa told her, briefly: the dog, Ah Yee spreading the grit, the keys.

"Ah Yee?"

"Upstairs. He'll be all right." He crossed to the sliding wall. "I'll find rope. You watch him."

Elena stood over Halloran with her arms folded, her foot tapping once against the floor. Her eyes moved from the fallen man to Sam Foon and back. Sam Foon did not look up.

Through the sliding wall, in the inner room, Reynosa began searching through the materials he had moved here from the House

of a Hundred Sighs. He found a coil of rope. He began to work it free of the tangle around it, crooning softly to himself—a quiet, monotonous melody in the particular cadence of the Nariño highlands, where the Spanish has absorbed older things.

The words, in the regional dialect that Elena had never had occasion to learn:

“The woman of beautiful hatreds, the woman of many devotions... Lo, the river comes down cold from the throat of the mountain god... The beautiful betrayer, the one who remembers everything... Blood is the color of passion and the color of consequence... Lo, the river sweeps eastward carrying what the mountain has shed... The devoted one is abandoned, and the abandoner is devoted... She calls to her dead as the dead are beyond answering... See, the river does not stop for the one who weeps on its bank... The woman of beautiful hatreds. Lo, the river comes down cold.”

He worked the rope loose and came back through the sliding wall.

He was carrying the rope and, in his other hand, a pistol.

Elena watched him drop the rope to her.

“Top-side tie,” he said, with a small compression of his mouth that was the nearest he came to dark humor. “I’ll watch with the gun.”

Halloran lay very still. Behind the arm he had thrown across his face his eyes were open a precise fraction.

He had regained consciousness some minutes before Elena’s entrance, and had been thinking very quickly. He had heard the

confession. He had lain still to hear it, because the Lieutenant, for all his famous directness, understood the value of a confession heard in the dark over a confession extracted in the light. The woman had said it in her own voice to her own associate: I killed him. He belonged to me. She was not speaking for effect and she was not speaking under pressure. She had said it as the simple statement of a fact she was proud of.

Halloran had been contemplating attack at the moment Reynosa restrained the stiletto attempt. The restraint had stopped him, because it had also stopped the immediate threat; and then the conversation had started and he had lain still to hear where it went. A dead detective was not more useful than a living one. The rope changed that calculation.

He considered his options. His firearm was in the rain jacket he had left upstairs. The vault door behind him was his only exit and it stood between him and Reynosa. The pistol was real. Sam Foon was an unpredictable variable. Elena had the stiletto back in its sheath.

He thought about Carrow, who knew where he had gone. He thought about the dog, which was somewhere upstairs having presumably escaped Ah Yee. He thought about how long it would take for someone to find him after he failed to check in.

The rope touched his wrists.

Halloran lay like a dead man, because in the immediate circumstances that was the most useful thing he could be.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Empty Wharf

Carrow Pasha moved through the Red Hook waterfront in the dark with the particular patience of a man who has run out of plans and is waiting for something to suggest one. He had spoken to every picket on the perimeter. No one had seen Halloran since shortly before dusk. The police launch held its position on the water. The warehouse was buttoned up and Coombes had nothing to report.

He passed Reynosa's building—dark, padlocked, watched from two positions—and followed the waterfront south and east, tracing the route that the geography of the basin suggested. The rain had stopped but the air was cold, carrying the salt and diesel smell of the working harbor. Steam horns moved across the water at intervals. Somewhere behind the warehouse district a crane was still running, its cable singing in the dark.

He was moving without a clear destination, following an instinct he could not have reduced to procedure, when he found himself at a derelict wharf structure near the end of the commercial lane. He had searched this building himself, two nights previous, in the sweep that had turned up nothing. He paused at the gate.

Kismet, the Arabs say: what is meant to happen, happens.

He pushed the gate open.

The tide was running high and the water whispered in a complex, shifting voice under the piled structure below him. He

stood at the edge and looked out at the harbor—the glow of the city making its permanent ceiling above the dark water, a tug moving in the channel—and felt the particular chill of the place settle over him, which was not entirely physical.

Then a sound. Very faint, from the interior of the building. He turned.

A dog was whimpering.

He pushed further into the structure and put on his flashlight. In its beam, pressed against the interior wall and shaking, muddy from ears to tail, was the Hartfields' spaniel. It showed its teeth when the light hit it, then lowered its head and resumed scratching at the floor with the focused urgency of a creature that has been at this for some time and considers the presence of a human being to be a potential tool rather than a comfort.

Carrow switched off the light. He dropped to one knee, then prone, and pressed his ear against the dirty floor.

He held his breath.

Nothing. The tide below. The distant crane. The movement of water under the structure.

He lay still for a full minute and heard nothing human.

"There's nothing there, old boy," he said quietly to the dog.

The spaniel ignored this assessment and barked—sharply, repeatedly, with the single-minded certainty of an animal that knows it is right and resents being addressed in a condescending tone.

Carrow stood. He looked at the building around him: the boarded sections, the planking, the floor beneath his feet. He had searched it himself. He had been thorough. He would not have missed a trapdoor or a tunnel entrance.

And yet the dog was here. Halloran was missing. And this building stood directly above the waterline, above pilings, above whatever might or might not be below the wharf.

He had been wrong, he realized, about what to look for. He had searched for a room, a space, something within the visible structure. He had not stood still long enough to think about what might be beneath it.

He was already reaching for his phone to call in additional officers and the equipment needed to open a floor when the dog fell suddenly silent.

Then it began barking again—different from before, higher and more urgent, aimed at the floor. Not scratching now. Just barking, furiously, at the planking under its feet.

Below them, faint and strange, came an answering sound.

A bird. Or the sound of a bird, briefly, and then nothing.

Carrow looked down at the floor. He looked at the dog. He sent his text for backup and then held very still, because from somewhere beneath the floor—beneath the floor and the piling and the tidal dark below it—there were voices.

Chapter Forty

The Raven

Halloran lay in the inner room and thought.

His wrists were tied behind him, his ankles bound, and a wooden gag had been secured between his teeth with his own handkerchief. He could not speak, could not stand, could barely roll. The rope had been applied with what he recognized, grimly, as professional competence. His skull ached with the deep bone-ache of a serious blow, and the rope on his wrists had reduced his hands to the kind of numbness that precedes pain on the way back.

What he could do was listen and think, and he was doing both.

The confession was solid. He had heard it clearly, in the woman's own voice, without duress, directed at her associate. I killed him. He belonged to me. It would not carry the same weight in court as a statement made to investigators, but it was confirmation of a kind that changed the investigative picture entirely. Calvert had been killed by Elena Vidal. Whatever else remained to be determined about the mechanics of that night—and there was still the question of the stiletto wound in his back, and the question of Zahnir—the central fact was now established beyond what Halloran considered reasonable doubt.

He had heard Rita Hartfield moaning earlier. She was alive, somewhere on the bed at the far end of this room. He could not

see her. He could not reach her. Both conditions were, for the moment, facts to be accepted.

What he could do was wait for Carrow.

From the outer vault, at intervals, Elena's voice and Reynosa's: terse, lowered, the sound of two people managing a situation that had not gone entirely to plan. And beneath everything, the tide moving under the floor, and the faint creaking of the structure above.

Then Reynosa came into the inner room with a lantern. He set it on the table and stood looking at Rita for a time in the way he had—without emotion, without ceremony, as a man looks at something he has decided about. He spoke softly, in the private tone of someone addressing the room rather than a person.

"Not yet," he said. "Still here."

He looked across at Halloran, and the glance contained the same quality: a man assessing what is in front of him. Then he left, pulling the sliding wall almost shut behind him.

Halloran heard him say something in the outer vault. Elena replied, sharply.

"Cover it. Now. Ah Yee is ready to signal."

"The raven needs air."

"I don't care what the raven needs."

A pause. Then, very faintly—so faintly that Halloran first thought it was the creaking of the structure—a barking. Small, high, carried through layers of concrete and tidal water and earth. A dog.

The raven heard it before anyone else did. From the wicker cage on the counter, where a cloth had been thrown over it:

"El Sueño," it said, with sudden wakefulness. "Buenos Aires."

"Shut it up," said Elena.

"El Sueño—" the raven began again, louder.

"Shut that thing up now."

"Buenos Aires!" the raven announced, with the volume of an animal that has heard something interesting and wants to discuss it. "El Sueño! Buenos Aires!"

Halloran tensed. Above him, faint but building, the dog was barking.

"Someone is up there," Elena said. Her voice had changed register. "They found it. Get the signal to Ah Yee—"

"El Sueño! El Sueño!" The raven was fully awake now, rattling the cage, alert and loud in the way that ravens are when they have decided a situation requires comment.

There was a sound of something overturned. A brief struggle. Then a smothered sound from the raven, and then nothing.

Complete silence.

Then, from the dog above: continued barking. From the outer vault: nothing.

The sliding wall moved. Reynosa came into the inner room, and this time he did not bring the lantern. He stood in the lamplight from the paper shade and looked at the empty wicker cage in his hand. He set it down. He looked at Halloran, who lay perfectly still.

Halloran heard him cross to the outer vault.

What followed, Halloran heard through the almost-closed wall. It was not a long conversation. It was, in its essentials, very simple.

Reynosa's voice, very quiet: "Where is she."

It was not a question.

Elena's voice, with the edge of someone who feels entitled to her actions: "It was making noise. They're up there. We had no choice."

A pause. Then Reynosa, still quiet: "You had a choice."

"It was a bird."

"Yes."

"A bird, Eduardo. We are about to lose everything—"

"We have already lost everything."

A longer pause. Halloran heard Elena's foot move on the floor—one step, then her voice changing to a register he had not heard from her before, lower and careful: "Don't look at me like that."

"You killed my raven," said Reynosa. "Now we are finished."

"Finished? We are not finished. The boat is ready. Ah Yee has the signal—"

"We are finished," he said again.

Halloran heard him roll up his sleeves.

Elena laughed—the short, harsh laugh he had heard from her before, the one that contained contempt and something else beneath the contempt. "Are you going to threaten me, Eduardo? After everything? Are you going to make a scene?"

She said something else in rapid Spanish. Then: a sound of cloth and movement, and Elena's voice went up half a register: "Don't—"

Two quick sounds, very close together, that Halloran recognized as a blade entering flesh. Once. Twice. Reynosa made no sound.

Then there was a longer silence, and at its end a sound that was not a voice and not a word and did not last long.

And then nothing.

Halloran lay still and listened to the tide.

After a time, Reynosa came back through the sliding wall. He moved with some deliberateness, as a man moves when he is carrying two knife wounds in his shoulder and has decided they are not relevant to what needs to be done next. He brought the lantern. He looked at Rita—a long look, the last of several. He looked at Halloran. He said nothing to either of them.

He went back into the outer vault and Halloran heard him moving in the way of someone completing a list of tasks: systematic, unhurried.

At some point in the sequence—Halloran could not tell exactly when—Reynosa's crooning stopped, and a different silence established itself in the outer room. Halloran had been hearing Sam Foon's periodic nods as a kind of intermittent creak for hours. That creak had stopped before Reynosa came in with the lantern. Sam Foon had been ahead of all of them—had passed through his own door at some point after striking Halloran,

quietly, without ceremony, as befitted a man who had been practicing the art of stillness his whole adult life.

Halloran heard Reynosa's voice, very low, in Spanish. One or two sentences, addressed to the old man.

Then silence again.

Then, from just the other side of the sliding wall, sounds that required no interpretation: a man changing his appearance. Something set on the counter. A small tool. The particular sound of scissors on hair.

Reynosa was making himself into someone else.

Halloran worked at the rope on his wrists with the methodical attention of a man who has accepted that he has some amount of time and intends to use it. He had been working at it since Elena tied him—slowly, almost imperceptibly, rotating his wrists against each other in a rhythm no one watching could have distinguished from the involuntary movements of an unconscious man. It was not going well. It had been expertly done.

But above him, beyond the floor, the dog was still barking.

And Carrow was not an idiot.

Halloran worked at the rope and waited, and the tide moved under the floor in its ancient indifferent way, and in the outer vault Eduardo Reynosa prepared to become someone the world had never heard of, and leave this city that he had built something in and lost, and go toward a valley in the south of Colombia that he had been deferring for twenty years.

Chapter Forty-One

The Finding of Zahnir

The NYPD Harbor Unit patrol boat, running without lights at the south end of the Erie Basin, picked up George Halsted's dinghy shortly after it left the far shore, pulling strongly northward. The two men in the patrol boat watched it for some minutes without movement.

"He knows we're here," said Coombes.

"Maybe," said the harbor officer.

"Let him land," said Coombes. "Don't hide. Show him we're behind him. I want to see where he goes."

The harbor officer considered this and went with it. The patrol boat came out of the shadow of the pier structure and fell in behind the dinghy at a hundred yards.

George Halsted, seeing the patrol boat emerge, stopped pretending the current was carrying him and began to row in earnest. He was heading for the commercial waterfront—the section of the Brooklyn shore further north where The Anchor sat at the end of the Van Brunt Street piers. Coombes, watching his back, noticed the set of the oarsman's shoulders change when the patrol boat did not drop back.

"He's got a passenger," Coombes said, watching.

"I don't see anyone," said the harbor officer.

"Keep watching."

They ran in to the wooden dock steps below The Anchor. George Halsted tied his boat and went up, quickly. The patrol

boat was ten seconds behind him. On the steps, Coombes touched the dock cleat where George had tied off and found the stern line still moving.

"Someone came off the stern in the last thirty seconds," he said. "Grab Halsted."

The harbor officer had Halsted's collar before he made the door. Coombes went past them both and pushed into The Anchor.

The proprietor's shout of "Law!" reached every corner of the room simultaneously. Cups hit the floor. The crowd compressed toward the exits in the specific way of people who have things they would prefer not to explain.

"Nobody moves," said Coombes, loudly and without particular urgency, the way someone speaks who knows the exits are covered. "Papers and ID. Everyone in turn."

The check took twenty minutes. Coombes went through every person in the room with the methodical attention of a man who knows the face he is looking for and knows what he has been told to look for: a compact man with a scar above one eye, and a raven.

There was no raven in The Anchor. There was no raven anywhere on the waterfront. Whatever Reynosa was carrying in the canvas bag over his shoulder as he had come up from the stern of George's boat, it was not large enough for a bird cage.

His papers were for Eduardo Vásquez, merchant seaman, with a berth on a container vessel leaving at 0400. The photograph showed a man with a clean-shaved upper lip and no visible facial scarring—the makeup that had enhanced the scar now washed away in

the harbor, the mustache gone, the whole presentation altered in the methodical way of a man who planned his exit six months before he needed it.

Coombes looked at the photograph. He looked at the compact, still-faced man across the table from him. The man looked back with the patience of someone who has been through checkpoints before and knows that patience is the correct strategy.

Something in the quality of the man's stillness gave Coombes pause. He looked at the photograph again. He looked at the scar line—faint now, almost invisible, the swelling he had been told to look for absent.

"Where did you embark?" he said.

"Jersey City," said the man. His English was accented but competent.

"Where before that?"

"Panama."

Coombes put the papers down. He could not articulate what he was looking at. His instinct was shouting, but his instinct had nothing to attach itself to. Eduardo Vásquez had a valid seaman's book, a valid visa, a valid berth assignment, and a face that matched none of the descriptions in Coombes's briefing notes.

"All right," he said. "Go."

Eduardo Vásquez picked up his papers and his bag and walked out of The Anchor and down the dock steps and disappeared into the particular darkness of a working waterfront at four in the morning.

The container vessel carrying one Eduardo Vásquez sailed at 0417. The Red Hook Cruise Terminal vessel carrying one Elena Santos had already left without a service coordinator booked in that name. George Halsted was held for questioning and released fourteen hours later, his story of a chance passenger paid in cash supported by nothing and contradicted by nothing.

The man who had been Eduardo Reynosa—El Sueño—was gone.

Coombes stood at the dock's edge for a long time after the last papers had been checked, looking at the harbor. Then he went back to the waterfront to report.

He was halfway there when his phone went.

"Where are you?" said Carrow Pasha.

"Anchor. Halsted's clean. Lost the other one."

"Come to the wharf now. The one near the lane. Bring whoever you have."

The rain had fully stopped and the air was cold and clean. Carrow was standing at the gate of the empty wharf structure when Coombes arrived with three harbor officers. The spaniel, sitting at Carrow's feet, looked at Coombes with the expression of an animal that has been through a great deal this evening and considers its efforts insufficiently appreciated.

"How?" said Coombes.

"Listen," said Carrow.

Through the planking of the wharf floor, muffled and strange, a voice was calling. Not loud—a measured repetition, the voice of someone who has been doing this for some time and has settled into a sustainable rhythm.

"Smoke and Sundries. Storeroom. Trapdoor in floor."

A pause.

"Smoke and Sundries. Storeroom. Trapdoor in floor."

"Halloran," said Carrow quietly, and moved.

It took four minutes to break through to the vault from the smoke shop storeroom—the young man upstairs had recovered and locked everything, and the axe work was not delicate. Carrow was first through the door.

The vault was laden with chemical fumes. At the stove, in the chair, Sam Foon sat precisely as he had always sat, except that his head had found its final resting angle. Across his knees, arranged with deliberate care, lay the raven-black feathers spread, the single eye closed, given back to the old man's keeping.

On the floor between the stove and the counter, lithe and contorted, lay Elena Vidal. Her dyed red hair had come loose and lay spread around her. Her hands were at her throat.

The shelving unit at the far wall was ajar.

"End panel," called Halloran's voice, clipped and irritable, from beyond it. "Slides left."

Carrow vaulted the counter, put his shoulder to the shelving, and went through.

The inner room: the paper-shaded lamp, the Moorish table, the matting, the curtained alcove. On the narrow bed, motionless, pallid as bleached linen, Rita Hartfield. Breathing. Barely, but breathing.

"Good God," Carrow said. "This place is a—"

"Morgue," said Halloran's voice from the floor. "Yes. However, I appear to be a temporary exception if you could manage to untie me in the next thirty seconds."

Carrow dropped to one knee beside the bound and gagged and deeply furious figure of Lieutenant Halloran, and as he reached for the rope he became aware of a third presence in the room.

On the divan, in the corner, sat a figure he had not immediately seen: robed, turbaned, still. Long, pale hands rested on its knees. On the first finger of the right hand a large ring caught the lamplight. Beneath heavy brows a pair of eyes of extraordinary size regarded him with unblinking intensity.

Carrow's hand stopped on the rope.

"Halloran," he said. "Halloran—there is someone—"

"I know," said Halloran. "Been keeping me company for hours. Most unpleasant."

Carrow reached out and touched the hands. They were cold. Rigid. They had the specific quality of things that had never been warm.

He touched the face. He pressed his finger against the cheek. He understood.

"Halloran," he said, very quietly. "Zahnir is a wax figure."

"Hell," said Halloran.

There was a short, eloquent pause.

"That would explain the eyes," Halloran added, which was the most restrained thing he had said all week.

Chapter Forty-Two

A Year Later

Under the awning of a balcony in Heliopolis, in the long hour before African dusk, four people sat waiting for the sun to finish its business with the Libyan desert. The light at that hour had a quality particular to this part of the world—a warm, enormous clarity that made distances meaningful and small details precise, so that one could see, without effort, the faint outline of the old city against the sky.

"Only a year ago," Monte Hartfield was saying, "and thank God it seems more like ten. Time is merciful about the sad things, I find, and less merciful about the good ones."

He turned to his wife. Rita Hartfield, wrapped in white linen against the late-afternoon chill that came off the desert, looked back at him with the expression he had been learning to read for twelve months and still found, each time, surprising in its directness. She had been through something that most people did not survive and all the way through it and out the other side, and whatever she had lost in the process had been replaced by something he valued more.

"You are being sentimental again," she said.

"I am," he agreed, unabashedly, and squeezed her hand.

Carrow Pasha, who occupied the broad arm of the cane chair beside his wife, looked across at them and smiled. He had been posted to Cairo fourteen months ago and had arranged the Heliopolis apartment with the brisk efficiency he brought to all

logistics. He was browner than he had been, and the gray at his temples had spread a fraction, and he looked, on the whole, like a man who was precisely where he expected to be.

Margaret—Mrs. Carrow, though the name still made her color when she heard it unexpectedly—had her feet tucked under her and a glass of mint tea in both hands and was looking at the horizon with the private expression of a person who is thinking several things simultaneously and has decided not to share all of them.

"Nothing," said Hartfield, addressing Carrow, "will ever efface the memory of what you and Margaret did. For both of us."

"Margaret, please," said his wife. "It sounds odd when you say it the other way."

"It sounds," said Carrow dryly, "like my wife is being thanked, which she should be."

"I was away back," said Margaret, without looking away from the horizon.

A small car came along the road from the direction of the city, driving with the particular confidence of someone who knows this route well. It pulled up below the balcony. Quentin Frayne jumped out, waving upward with the enthusiasm of a man who has finally arrived and is not going to pretend otherwise.

He was taller-seeming than before, and brown, and he had acquired in his year in the field the quality of someone who has been tested in a direction that was good for him. He went in through the downstairs door. Carrow went to let him in.

"Sorry—the meeting ran long," Frayne said, taking in the assembled company with visible pleasure. "Are we doing the Zahnir account tonight?"

"After dinner," said Carrow, "with the full notes."

"I'm still in the dark on half of it."

He joined the others on the balcony. The infatuation was gone—had been gone, visibly, since some point in his first months in the field, where there was enough real work to occupy it. What remained was something more durable: a genuine regard for the Hartfields that had no claim attached to it. Rita had changed too; they were comfortable with each other in the way of people who have been through something together and emerged as friends rather than anything more complicated.

The five of them sat together while the sun continued its business, and the conversation moved in the way it moves among people who have earned the right to sit in a warm place and say whatever they like.

"We did hear one piece of news from the States," Hartfield said. "About Mollie Larne."

"Oh?" said Margaret, turning from the horizon.

"Someone wrote. Apparently she has a wellness retreat in Sedona, Arizona, with a former DJ—" He paused. "A man fifteen years her junior and apparently quite devoted to her."

Carrow laughed. So did Margaret and Rita.

"That is exactly right," said Carrow. "Somehow that is exactly right for Mollie."

Hartfield did not laugh, but smiled with a quality of genuine kindness.

"She might be perfectly happy," he said. "I hope she is. Her life might have gone many ways, and this one is at least her own."

"Halloran would not agree with you," said Carrow, "but Halloran is wrong about Mollie."

"Halloran," said Margaret, looking briefly at the ceiling. "Don't start."

"The man is magnificent," said Carrow, unabashed. "The Zahnir inquiry was the triumph of his career, and he will tell you himself, without much prompting, that it was."

Hartfield turned to him.

"You did your share, Carrow. The last thing Halloran said to me before we left was a very good thing about you, which I won't repeat because you would deflect it."

"Halloran is as straight as they make them," Carrow replied simply. "But we should never have known for certain who killed Lucien Calvert if he had not gone into that vault alone and been willing to lie on a concrete floor for six hours absorbing the evidence."

Rita drew her linen closer around her shoulders and did not speak.

"Shall we not—" Margaret began.

"No," said Rita quietly. "I want to hear it properly. Monte knows the shape of it, and I know the shape of it, but neither of us really knows the inside. We've been traveling since it was

over, and the news we received was thin." She looked at Carrow.

"Will you tell us tonight?"

"After dinner. With the notes."

"Tonight, then."

A servant appeared, carrying glasses on a tray with the soundless efficiency of someone who has learned not to interrupt things that are going well.

Margaret looked at the sky. The sun was touching the edge of the desert now, and the particular transformation that happens in that moment—when the color of everything shifts simultaneously to something more serious and more beautiful—was beginning.

"Before we go in," she said, settling her glass in both hands, "I want to propose a toast."

"Name it," said Carrow.

"Kismet," she said. "For the spaniel, and the dog, and the small dog Halloran dreamed of—" she glanced at Hartfield—"and for the things that happened because they were going to happen and brought us here, to this balcony, in that sequence."

"To Kismet," said Carrow.

They drank it, watching the light change over the desert, and the stars beginning to appear in the east while the west was still burning, as they have always appeared and always will, indifferent to everything beneath them.

"Right," said Frayne. "I want the whole story. Every detail. From the beginning."

He looked at Carrow expectantly. Carrow produced his notebook.

"From the beginning, then," he said, and opened it.

Chapter Forty-Three
The Story of the Crime

"There were three principal figures," Carrow said, tapping his notebook with one finger, "and in order of importance they were: Eduardo Reynosa, Lucien Calvert, and Elena Vidal. I will begin with Calvert."

He settled more comfortably against the chair arm and looked at his notes, though it was clear he had not needed them for some time.

"For some years before he returned to New York and built his current career, Calvert appears to have lived a somewhat irregular life in various parts of the world. He was a gambler in the old-fashioned sense—not as a profession but as a compulsion—and he was also, by all accounts, susceptible in the direction of certain women. In Buenos Aires, during a period when he had very little money and a growing number of debts, he met a variety performer known as La Lola—born Elena Moreno, the daughter of a Colombian family of the kind that produces capable and dangerous people in equal proportion."

"I was not aware," said Frayne carefully, "that she had a surname."

"She had two. Moreno was her birth name. Vidal came later, for professional reasons. I should say at this point that her brother—the man we knew as Moreno, who drove Calvert's car and was arrested on the night of the murder—is also a Moreno. Juan

Moreno. His surname was simply shorter than his sister's, and we failed for some time to make the connection."

Rita raised her head. "He was her brother."

"Her brother, yes. Devoted to her, in the specific way of men who watch a brilliant sister do things that frighten them and say nothing. He gave full evidence after her death, which accounts for the detail I can now offer."

He paused to consult an actual note.

"Calvert, then, in Buenos Aires, in debt, in difficulty. Elena Moreno was already in business with Eduardo Reynosa, who was at that period the operational backbone of what would eventually become the Zahnir enterprise. Calvert had social access that neither Elena nor Reynosa possessed—he was received in the kind of rooms where the people they wanted to reach moved—and so the arrangement they struck was, from the beginning, mutually useful. How Calvert came to be financially entangled with them I cannot say with precision. I believe opium had something to do with it, because Reynosa appears throughout as primarily a narcotics dealer, and Calvert's introduction to opioids coincides with this period. What is certain is that he emerged from Buenos Aires with his debts cleared, his connections to the Reynosa operation firmly in place, and the habit of secrecy about both."

"You said Zahnir was a wax figure," said Frayne. "Where did it come from?"

"From a stage illusionist who had been touring South America with an oriental act and came to grief financially. The figure

was his centerpiece—originally made in Paris to represent Rameses the Second for an exhibition, then acquired by this man and dressed in robes, given an operating mechanism to raise and lower the right hand, and exhibited as part of his performance. Reynosa bought it from the illusionist at a low point in the man's circumstances."

"My God," said Hartfield quietly. "All those people who went to see Zahnir, who thought they were speaking to something real."

"It was the work of a very good artist in wax," said Carrow. "The eyes in particular were extraordinary—made to be abnormally large, which in the context of an oracle in a dim room reads as hypnotic intensity rather than artificiality. No one who sat across from it in candlelight thought to doubt it was a living face."

He allowed a moment for this to settle.

"The Zahnir operation was established here on the same model that had already proved profitable in Buenos Aires. Calvert leased the Spring Street premises through Moreno, who used various names for the purpose. Reynosa took the adjacent building, and later the warehouse in Red Hook. The wax figure was installed in the consultancy suite. Moreno—who had a natural gift for the oracular voice, low and resonant and carrying an authority that people found difficult to question—spoke as Zahnir from the inner room, reading from notes that Calvert supplied about the clients. Elena provided the access to the clients who wanted the deeper experience. The Santos Trading structure handled the money. The operation ran for five years, generating

revenue I am not going to trouble you with, except to say it was considerable."

"And Calvert," said Rita, in a level voice, "was the one who knew which people to approach."

"Yes. His social access was the mechanism. He knew who was vulnerable, who had money, who had the temperament. He was the engine that brought people in." Carrow glanced at her briefly. "He also, as you know, came to regret this. There is evidence that he was attempting, in the months before his death, to extricate himself from the operation—to make enough from the Santos Trading structure to walk away from it entirely. Whether he would have succeeded is a question that cannot be answered."

"He tried to get me to stop," Rita said. "Repeatedly."

"Yes. For what it is worth—and I recognize it is complicated—I believe that was genuine."

She did not answer, and Carrow continued.

"We come to the night of the crime. On the evening that you decided, Mrs. Hartfield, to confront Zahnir directly, Calvert arranged in advance for Moreno to cross the roof from Wooster Street and take his place in the inner room—to speak as Zahnir and give you a message designed to quiet the situation. This was Calvert's attempt to manage it without exposing you to Elena. He also instructed the attendant, through Moreno, to admit you and then leave. The attendant obeyed. He was, so far as we can determine, never aware of the full nature of what the operation was. He was warned after the fact and given resources to leave the country. He did so."

Carrow set down the notebook.

"What Calvert did not know, and could not have foreseen, was that Elena had come to the Spring Street premises that evening on her own business. She was there when Moreno arrived. She heard what Calvert had arranged. She sent Moreno upstairs to the Montero office and took his place herself."

"She played Zahnir," said Frayne.

"She played Zahnir. She had done it before, for her own amusement—she had Moreno's voice perfectly, by mimicry. The taunting manner in which she spoke to you that night, Mrs. Hartfield—the refusal to negotiate, the specific cruelty of it—was Elena's, not the usual script. Moreno, who was upstairs waiting, had nothing to do with any of it."

Rita said nothing. Her face was turned toward the darkening sky.

"You burst through into the inner room. You found the figure in the chair—and the hands were cold, and did not respond, because they were wax. Elena was behind the partition, at the controls. You fainted. Calvert, who had been waiting in the reception room and had heard you cry out, came through in the dark."

A silence fell on the balcony. It was the kind of silence that five people make when they are listening to something that matters.

"He found you on the floor. He spoke to you—those words that came back to you afterward. He was trying to get you out. Elena came through from behind the partition. She was in a state that—

Juan Moreno, who arrived from above at some point in this sequence, has described it as the only time in his life he was afraid of her."

He paused.

"She came at you with the stiletto. Calvert put himself between you."

Margaret was biting her lip. Rita was looking down so that her face could not be seen.

"He died like a gentleman who had lived like a blackguard," Carrow said quietly. "He shielded her."

The desert light was almost gone. In the east the stars had fully arrived.

"The shock of it," Carrow continued after a moment, "seems to have restored Elena's usual cold competence. She and Moreno, working very quickly, cleared the Spring Street premises of everything that could be traced: every document, every record, the wax figure, Calvert's papers. They carried you, unconscious, across the roof to Wooster Street. Moreno took the car—the well-documented journey to the club, the inquiry at the door—while Elena stripped Calvert's flat. Then Moreno returned, and they drove everything to Red Hook, and Reynosa arranged the rest."

"And you knew none of this," said Frayne, "because Moreno said nothing."

"Moreno said nothing until Elena was dead. After that, there was no one left to protect. He came to us within forty-eight hours of the news reaching the detention center. The full account

took two sessions. He was, I will say, consistent and credible. We confirmed most of it from independent sources."

"And Reynosa," said Hartfield.

Carrow picked up the notebook, looked at it, and put it back down.

"Eduardo Reynosa sailed as Eduardo Vásquez on a container vessel out of Red Hook in the early hours of the morning after the vault was found. Coombes had him in front of him, checked his papers, and let him go. I do not blame Coombes. The papers were exceptionally well prepared, and Reynosa had altered his appearance in ways that the briefing notes did not account for. He was, as I believe I said at the time, a man of considerable operational intelligence."

"Do you know where he went?" Rita asked.

"Not with certainty. Santos Trading S.A. was unwound over the following year, which required considerable effort from the relevant financial authorities. Some of the funds were recovered. Some were not. There is intelligence—I will not call it evidence—suggesting that an agricultural property in the Nariño region of southern Colombia was purchased approximately eight months ago by a private individual. The records available to us do not confirm the buyer's identity."

Hartfield looked at him.

"You believe it was him."

"I believe it was him."

A moment of silence in which the desert completed its transition from gold to velvet.

"He was a terrible man," said Hartfield finally. "And I cannot help thinking that he was also, in some way I cannot precisely name, a person. Which is not a comfortable conclusion."

"No," said Carrow. "It rarely is."

"The true genius of the enterprise," Frayne said, with the tone of someone testing a phrase. "Is that your view?"

"The operational genius, yes. The architect of the whole structure, and of its dismantling. No one suspected the person they saw—the stoic warehouse keeper, the man of few words and complete stillness—was a constructed presentation layered over a different reality entirely. In ten years of this kind of work I have encountered perhaps three people of comparable ability. None of them were caught, either."

"There is some comfort in that, I suppose," said Margaret.

"Very little," Carrow agreed. "Though Halloran would disagree."

"Halloran gets the last word on most things," Rita said, and smiled—the particular smile of someone who has earned the right to find things slightly funny again.

Mahmoud appeared silently in the doorway behind them and announced, in his unhurried way, that dinner was served. The party gathered themselves and moved inside, into the light and warmth of the dining room, while outside the desert completed its ancient daily business of becoming night—vast and indifferent and beautiful, under a sky that had been witness to more and worse than this and would be witness to more and worse again, and which did not hold any of it against anyone.

THE END