

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

THE STRANGE CASES OF MARCUS CARMODY

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

About 58,000 words

CHAPTER ONE

LOW WENFOLD

The lane narrowed to a single track beyond the cattle-grid, and Colonel Marwood reduced to a crawl, the Land Rover's tyres crunching slowly over the dry summer gravel.

"There," he said.

We had crested a shallow rise, and below us the little valley opened like a cupped hand. Heather stretched in every direction, purple and dense in the late afternoon light, the slopes closing it in on three sides. Four tall Scots pines stood sentinel at the valley's bottom, and in their shadow, couched in the hollow of the dip, lay the house—long and low and irregular, a building that seemed less to have been designed than to have accumulated itself across several centuries, each generation adding its piece and hoping for the best.

"That's the new wing," Marwood continued, gesturing through the windscreen towards the eastern end of the building, where a more recent range projected at an angle from the older body of the house. "Only addition I've made. The original structure had no proper rooms for guests, and we wanted to be able to have people to stay."

"It's extraordinary," I said. And I meant it. After twenty minutes of moorland driving, with nothing to see but heather and dry-stone walls and the occasional baffled-looking sheep, the sight of Low Wenfold was genuinely arresting. There was something about its situation—enclosed by those purple slopes, screened by

the pines, the whole valley cut off from the road above—that produced an immediate and slightly vertiginous sensation of isolation. It was the kind of place that the surrounding landscape seemed designed to keep secret.

“Parts of it are fifteenth century. The oldest rooms are in the north range—some of the floor-beams have been dated.” He pulled through a white five-bar gate onto a short gravel drive and parked on a level patch in front of a low, arched doorway with roses trained up the stone on either side. “Marjorie loves it, or she did, until this business started.”

His wife met us on the step. She was, as Marwood had intimated, considerably younger than he—perhaps thirty-two to his fifty-eight—and striking in a composed, fair-featured way that the photographs on his study mantelpiece had failed to capture. She wore a light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and had the look of a person who had been doing something practical shortly before our arrival and had not entirely composed herself. I thought she seemed pleased to see her husband, which I counted in her favour.

“This is Marcus Carmody,” said Marwood, introducing me with the practised terseness of a man accustomed to issuing orders. “We were at Sandhurst within a few years of each other. He writes about—unusual phenomena.”

“I know your podcast,” said Marjorie Marwood, shaking my hand. “Unsolved. I listened to the whole of the second series when we moved in here. The Borley Rectory episode.”

"That one has a lot of listeners," I said. "For better or worse."

She looked at me directly and smiled—briefly, at something private—and then led us inside.

The interior was cool after the August heat, and the contrast was immediate. The kitchen smelled of coffee and something baking. Marjorie had made the most of the afternoon in a thoroughly domestic way: there were cut flowers on the table and a couple of cardboard boxes half-unpacked against one wall. She poured coffee without ceremony and set out cups, and for twenty minutes we talked about nothing in particular—the drive up from London, the moorland roads, the extraordinary summer. It was, I thought, a deliberate exercise in normality—Marwood's way of maintaining the fiction, for his wife's benefit, that I had simply called in for an old friend's sake.

Marjorie did not believe it. But she was too clever to say so.

Presently Marwood said something about showing me the new wing, and Marjorie waved us off with the mild indifference of a woman who had seen enough retired soldiers find reasons to disappear into their own quarters. I followed him through a passage that connected the newer range to the main body of the house, and noticed, as we went, that the floor level changed by three steps at the junction—a small architectural oddity I filed away without yet seeing any significance in it.

The study occupied the eastern end of the new wing and was an entirely characteristic room—the room of a man who had spent

thirty years doing a demanding outdoor job and now required a space that confirmed he had once done it. A large-screen television was fixed to the far wall. Framed photographs of military groups stood on the windowsill: desert backgrounds, body armour, squinting faces. A glass-fronted cabinet held an impressive assembly of single malts. On the small desk, a laptop sat open beside a stack of Ordnance Survey maps, folded in the assertive way of someone who has used them rather than merely collected them.

Roses crowded the outside of the single window. Through them the purple slopes of the valley were visible, darkening as the sun moved west.

Marwood closed the door, uncapped a whisky, and we sat.

"I'm listening," I said.

He picked at the arm of his chair. "It's not easy to explain—that's the trouble. You know me well enough to know I'm not a fanciful man. Done two tours in Afghanistan, one in Bosnia, and the Falklands with my father's regiment. I've never been in a situation, however bad, where I didn't know what I was afraid of. And I'm not afraid of this."

"But?"

"I don't know what it is." He looked up. "Carmody—I moved here ten months ago. Marjorie and I both loved the place, despite its reputation. And for eight months, nothing at all unusual. Not a thing. And then, three nights ago—" He stopped. "You'll want the full sequence."

"Please."

"Right. Low Wenfold has an unpleasant history. You can find most of it with half an hour on Google, so I won't pretend it isn't there. A man named Thwaite died here in the nineteen-thirties—officially a natural causes verdict, but the coroner's notes mention ligature marks that were never properly explained. Various tenants across the following decades reported unpleasant experiences. Sightings—usually of a figure, described variously, but consistently in one particular detail. The face."

He paused and pulled at his drink.

"Always the face. Contorted, the witnesses said. Eyes rolled, features working in a way they found not merely frightening but profoundly wrong—as though the face were doing something that faces do not do." He shook his head, sharply, once, as though dismissing something he felt he had said too well. "I assumed all of it was nonsense accumulated over eighty years of local gossip. The house had been empty for two years before I took on the lease—at a rate that reflected its reputation very clearly. I had it renovated and thought nothing more of the stories."

"Three nights ago, I was woken at roughly two in the morning by a noise I could not identify. Not a crash or a voice. More like a sustained, irregular movement somewhere in the house. I lay and listened for several minutes, then decided to check."

"The house was otherwise empty at the time?"

"Marjorie was here. And we have a local woman who helps with the cleaning—Val Holsworth, who lives down in the village—but she had gone home the previous afternoon. So it was just the two of

us." He reached for the bottle and topped up his glass. "I went out onto the landing. The corridor runs towards the connecting passage—back into the main body of the house. The landing light was on a motion sensor and had gone off. I had my phone out and used the torch. And halfway along the corridor—" He stopped again.

"Go on."

Marwood set down his glass with precise deliberateness, as a man does when he wishes to make clear that his hand is not shaking. "Halfway along the corridor, coming towards me, there was something crawling. Moving along the floor, close to the wall, in almost complete silence. Moving in a—strange way. Too low, somehow, and with a lateral motion I could not account for, as though the normal mechanics of movement were wrong. And the face—" He looked past me towards the window. "I'd been using the torch. But even in that light, even for the second or two I was looking at it before it stopped and looked up at me—the face was like nothing I have ever seen on a human being. I have dealt with injuries, Carmody. I've had to be present at the aftermath of two IED detonations. I am not an easy man to disturb. But I turned around, went back to the bedroom, locked the door, and sat on the end of the bed until it was light."

The roses shifted slightly against the window glass. Somewhere outside, a pigeon repeated itself.

"Did Marjorie hear anything?"

"She didn't wake."

"Have you examined the corridor in daylight?"

"I have. Nothing to find." He looked at me steadily. "I want to know what's in my house, Carmody. I want the honest answer, whatever it is."

"I'll find it," I said.

And I meant it; though even then, with nothing to work from but a retired colonel's testimony and a bad night I had not witnessed, I felt the particular quality of attention that certain cases produce in me—a sharpening, rather than excitement, as of something distant beginning to come into focus. In twelve years of investigating anomalous events for the magazine and the podcast, I had rarely encountered a case that opened this way: a credible witness, an inexplicable image, and a house that felt, from the moment of arrival, as though it were keeping something in reserve.

I was still considering this when a face appeared at the window.

Or rather—a face moved into the frame of the glass at precisely the same moment that the study door came open, so that for a startling fraction of a second I had the impression of a face pressing itself against the roses from outside. It was not that at all, of course. It was a young man, perhaps twenty-eight, who had come around the side of the house and paused at the window before trying the door. He was dark-haired and good-looking in a slightly self-conscious way, wearing the sort of deliberate informality—an open linen shirt, a worn canvas jacket—that requires some thought to achieve.

"Aubrey," said Marwood, in a tone that managed to convey both resignation and the effort not to convey it.

"Colonel." The young man came fully into the room. His eyes moved to me with mild curiosity. "I hope I'm not interrupting—"

"Business in hand. Half an hour."

"Of course." He retreated without embarrassment, and we heard his footsteps move back along the passage towards the kitchen.

"Aubrey Walsh," said Marwood, once the sound had faded. "His family own the next farm up the valley. He calls in regularly."

I offered no comment. There are things that a man in Marwood's position—a wife twenty-six years younger, a property acquired in the middle of life's disruptions, an expensively renovated house in an isolated valley—does not need explained to him by anyone else.

"Tell me about the dog," I said instead.

Marwood looked up. "What?"

"When we came in. There was an Airedale in the kitchen. Where does he sleep?"

"Rex? The kitchen, mostly. Why do you ask?"

"I'll explain in the morning," I said. "After I've had a proper look around."

The sun had dropped behind the western slope by now, and the valley was filling with a blue-grey shadow that seemed to rise from the ground rather than fall from the sky. Looking past Marwood through the rose-crowded window, I watched the light go out of the heather by degrees, and reflected that in all my years

investigating the peculiar and the inexplicable, I had rarely arrived at a case already feeling—not afraid, exactly, but watchful. Low Wenfold produced, in the very first hour of acquaintance, the subtle but unmistakable impression that it was watching me back.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AIREDALE

I left Marwood with his whisky and the fading light, and went out to make my own survey of the house.

My custom, in any investigation of this kind, is to begin outside and work inward: the exterior of a building tells you things that interior décor, however recently renovated, cannot conceal. I started at the front and worked slowly around. The portion of the house flanking either side of the arched entrance was the oldest—fifteenth century at the latest, the stonework deeply weathered and patched with lichen, the window surrounds worn to soft curves by five hundred years of rain. Moving westward along the façade I passed into what was clearly a later addition: broader windows, a slightly different stone, the proportions subtly more generous—Jacobean, I thought, possibly early Stuart. The westernmost range, overlooking a small lawn that fell away towards the valley bottom, was Georgian, regular and restrained, a polite amendment to all the asymmetry behind it.

The new wing, Marwood's addition to the eastern end, was something else altogether. Built in a style that aspired to sympathy with the older structure without quite achieving it, it pushed out from the main body of the house in the direction of the firs and the dense belt of bracken and gorse that here crowded right up to the foundations. I noted that the ground on this eastern side was noticeably higher than at the front of the

building—the land rose in a long, shallow mound running parallel to the wing. I photographed it with my phone, more from habit than from any particular theory.

There was no passage around the eastern end; the gorse made it impassable. I went back inside and worked through to the north side via the kitchen.

The kitchen was large and old-flagged, with an Aga against the inner wall and a deal table that had seen many decades of use before the London contractors had thought to sand and seal it. The low ceiling beams were the colour of old teak. Whatever the renovators had done to the rest of the house, they had had the sense to leave this room largely alone, and it retained a quality of accumulated life that the lighter rooms to the south had lost. Rex was asleep on a folded blanket near the Aga. He opened one amber eye as I passed, judged me harmless, and closed it again.

Beyond the kitchen lay a utility room, then a door onto the north garden—a kitchen garden, now only partly productive, with raised beds that showed signs of recent replanting. Beyond a low stone wall the ground fell into a rough paddock, and beyond that an old orchard, the trees unpruned and leaning, dropping unripe fruit into the long grass. The place had the particular quality of land that has been well tended for generations and then abandoned for a period and is only now being coaxed back—a slight wildness still in it, a slight resistance, as though it were not yet convinced the abandonment was over.

I made a circuit of the paddock and returned through the kitchen, pausing to check the utility-room window—secure—and to

note that the back door had a good modern deadlock, newly fitted. Then I went through to the main body of the house and began the interior survey.

The ground-floor rooms yielded nothing of immediate interest. The drawing room, recently redecorated in a pale grey that was almost certainly Marjorie's choice, showed no anomalies of structure. The dining room—the long room in the Jacobean range—had a fireplace that had been blocked and re-opened at least twice, judging by the different generations of brick visible in the recess, but this was unremarkable in a house of this age. I moved through each room methodically, checking window catches, tapping walls, running a hand along the bases of skirting boards where they met internal walls. I found nothing.

The staircase repaid more attention.

It rose from the entrance hall in a manner that could only be described as reluctant—not a straight climb but a winding, twisting ascent that changed direction three times before reaching the first-floor landing, as though the original builder had been working around something or accommodating some feature of the ground that no longer existed. The treads were of original oak, worn to a slight concavity in the centre, and the newel posts were carved with a repeating motif—acanthus, I thought, though worn almost smooth. The panelling on the inner wall was dark with age, the grain raised where generations of hands had touched it.

I went up and down it twice, pressing each tread in turn, tapping the panels at intervals, testing the joins and corners

with a small torch. Houses of this age and construction frequently concealed priest-holes or secondary passages—spaces carved out during the persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when concealment was a survival skill. I found no hollow sound, no unaccounted gap. The staircase appeared entirely solid. Whatever had been seen on it three nights ago, it was not making use of any hidden mechanism.

I descended and stood in the entrance hall.

It was here that I registered, for the first time with full attention, something I had noticed subliminally when Marwood showed me through to his study that afternoon. Low Wenfold had, like many houses of its age and complicated history, floors that moved up or down by a step or two as you passed between rooms of different periods—a step down from the entrance hall into the Georgian drawing room, a step up from the kitchen into the utility room. These small variations were entirely natural, the product of different foundations laid at different times on ground that was not quite level.

But the three steps that connected the hallway to the passage leading into the new wing were different.

Three steps up, not down—rising steeply into the east-facing corridor that gave onto Marwood's study. I stood at the bottom of them and turned the problem over. A modern builder, constructing a new wing in the present century, would level his foundations as a matter of course. There was no reason—no architectural reason—to raise the floor of the new wing above the level of the original house. And yet here it was, three steps up, which meant

that the ground on the eastern side was appreciably higher than the main building's floor level, and that whoever had designed the extension had chosen to follow the existing ground contour rather than cut into it.

I added a note to my phone: east wing floor raised approx. 18 inches above main house level. Why? Ground higher on E side. Mound.

I was still standing at the foot of the three steps when Rex appeared from the kitchen.

He had heard me moving about, apparently, and had come to investigate. He was a well-made dog—compact, wire-coated, with the alert, slightly sceptical expression characteristic of the breed. He pushed his muzzle against my hand and I scratched behind his ears, and he fell into step beside me as I resumed the survey—back through the kitchen, out through the north door, around the paddock perimeter, and in again.

He was excellent company. He trotted alongside with easy confidence, showed mild interest in the rabbit-runs along the orchard wall, and accepted with equanimity my habit of pausing to photograph things and mutter notes to myself. There was nothing in the least extraordinary about his behaviour—until we came back through the kitchen and I turned towards the three steps.

Rex stopped.

He had been at my heel. Now he simply stood, four feet planted, and did not follow.

I turned back and looked at him. He was not cowering, not growling. He looked, if anything, attentive—in the way that dogs

look attentive when they have heard something their owner has missed. But there was nothing to hear. The house was quiet. The only sound was the distant complaint of a wood pigeon somewhere outside.

"Come on, then," I said.

Rex did not move.

I tried the usual things—a pat of the thigh, an encouraging word, crouching to his level and calling his name. He watched me perform these invitations with evident interest but showed no inclination to accept any of them. I tried walking up the three steps myself and calling him from the top. He took two steps towards me and then stopped again, and the look that came onto his face was one I had not seen before in a dog of his temperament: not fear exactly, but something beyond reluctance—a deep and apparently reasoned refusal, as though he had weighed the matter and arrived at a firm conclusion.

I went back down, took hold of his collar, and pulled.

He came up the steps under protest—a low, continuous whine that he seemed unable to help—and I walked him the length of the corridor to Marwood's study. His claws dragged on the floorboards. At the study door he braced himself with all four feet and leaned back with everything he had, which was considerable, and the whine modulated into something higher and more distressed. I got the door open and manoeuvred him inside, then shut the door behind us both and latched the window.

What followed I do not find easy to describe, because the terms available are inadequate to the reality of it.

Rex went to pieces.

Not in a violent way, not at first. He crouched against the door and looked up at me with an expression that, in a person, I would have called anguish—a direct, unbearable appeal, asking something I could not provide. Then the sound began: not barking, not simple howling, but a sustained, fluctuating cry that seemed to occupy several registers simultaneously, and which had in it something so nakedly distressed that it was genuinely difficult to listen to. I felt the hairs on my forearms stand up.

He threw himself at the door, scratched at the base of it with extraordinary speed and force, then wheeled and came back to me. His eyes never left my face. He was not angry, not threatening—he was asking. Whatever he was registering in that room, he wanted me to understand that it was not tolerable and that I should open the door immediately.

I did not open the door.

For thirty seconds or so he held my gaze with that expression—attentive, anguished, imploring—and then, apparently concluding that I was not going to act on the information he was providing, he made his decision.

He crossed the room in two bounds, drove his head and shoulders into the closed window, and went through the glass and the rose stems and out into the garden.

The sound of his exit—the smash, the brief scrabble of claws on the outer sill, then silence—was extraordinarily loud in the quiet house. I stood looking at the ragged hole in the glass and

the scatter of petals on the study carpet, and I did not move for some time.

Outside, somewhere beyond the roses, Rex could be heard moving through the undergrowth at speed, putting distance between himself and the east wing of Low Wenfold with every intention of not returning.

I took out my phone and added another note: Dog will not enter new wing. Forced entry: acute distress. Self-defenestration. Check E foundations tomorrow—what is under the mound?

Then I went to find a dustpan and brush, and to think about the three steps.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

Aubrey Walsh stayed to dinner.

This was established by Marjorie with the cheerful efficiency of a woman who sees no reason to consult her husband on a domestic matter that has already been decided. The kitchen produced a cold poached salmon, new potatoes, and a salad of improbable ambition for a Monday evening in August, which suggested that Marjorie Marwood, whatever else she was, was a more capable household manager than her apparent ease implied. Walsh helped carry things to the table and opened the wine with the familiarity of a man who had performed these services here before.

The evening was close and airless, the heat that had pressed down on the valley all day now concentrated inside the house, and the four of us sat without appetite in the kitchen with the back door open to a garden that offered no breeze whatsoever. Marwood had recovered his courtesy, at least formally, though I noticed that whenever Walsh addressed a remark to Marjorie—which was often, and always accompanied by a sideways smile of which I suspect he was not entirely unconscious—Marwood's hand tightened on his wine glass by a precise and measurable degree.

Walsh was better company than I had initially given him credit for. He was genuinely interested in the work I did—the podcast, the magazine column, the broader question of what

constituted evidence in anomalous cases—and he asked intelligent questions rather than the credulous or the dismissive ones I was more accustomed to. He was twenty-nine, he told me, and managed the farm he had inherited from his father. He had grown up in this valley and knew the stories about Low Wenfold the way local people always know such stories: casually, as part of the background furniture of a place, neither believed nor disbelieved, simply there. He had heard the name Thwaite. He had heard about the face.

“Has Marjorie—” he began, and then caught himself.

“Mrs. Marwood knows nothing about any of it,” said Marwood, without raising his eyes from his plate. “And I’d like it to stay that way.”

A brief silence occupied the table. Marjorie refilled her own glass and looked at the ceiling with the expression of a person who has heard this instruction before and finds it more patronising than protective. I thought she was unlikely to remain ignorant for long regardless of her husband’s preference, and I thought she probably knew it too.

Walsh left at half past nine. He shook my hand on the doorstep and said he hoped we would meet again. Marwood, who had drunk more than was advisable and less than was visible, found a reason to return to his study almost before the sound of Walsh’s car had faded up the lane. Marjorie said she was going up and did not trouble to make this sound like anything other than what it was—a signal that the evening was concluded and she wished to be left in peace.

I said I was tired from the drive and intended an early night.

I was not tired in the least.

My room was on the first floor of the main body of the house, in the old east-facing range—not the new wing, but the original building, looking across the narrow side passage towards the firs. It was a low-ceilinged room with oak beams and a window that opened inward on old iron latches. A wardrobe of Victorian mahogany occupied most of the north wall and had been retained from some previous tenancy; its three mirrored doors, slightly foxed at the edges, reflected the room at a slight angle, catching the window and the door simultaneously when both were open. I noticed this at once. It is exactly the sort of thing I notice.

I opened both windows to their full extent. The scent from the nicotiana in the beds below was heavy and sweet and slightly sickly in the still air. Outside, bats moved past the glass at irregular intervals, their small voices at the edge of audibility. The heat was extraordinary—not the close, humid heat of a thundery evening but a dry, radiating heat, as though the stonework of the house had spent the day accumulating the sun and was now returning it. I could not recall a night so warm in England. The moors should have been cool.

I do not sit still when I am thinking, and so I paced.

My previous work on anomalous phenomena—collected in a series of podcast episodes I had titled The Atmospheric Record, which had attracted rather more academic attention than I had

anticipated—had led me to a working hypothesis that I found more productive than the available alternatives. The hypothesis was this: that reported hauntings, when they could not be attributed to fraud or to misidentification of ordinary phenomena, tended to cluster around specific environmental conditions—not merely around specific locations, though location was always a factor, but around atmospheric events. Temperature fluctuations. Pressure changes. Electrical charge in the soil or air. The genuinely inexplicable cases I had investigated with any rigour had consistently presented themselves in conditions of climatic instability—the onset of heat-waves, the approach of electrical storms, the sudden release of pressure after sustained cold.

Low Wenfold, in the middle of an exceptional August heat-wave, offered one half of the pattern. The other half would be the break—the moment when the sustained heat finally turned, and the temperature began to fall. I had a feeling, not quite deducible from the available data, that I should not have to wait long for it.

I was at the window end of the room, turning to pace back towards the door, when I saw it.

I should be precise about what I mean. I did not see it directly. I saw it in the mirror.

The wardrobe stood on the north wall to my left as I faced the door. The central mirror panel, slightly angled by the hinge of years, caught the reflection of the open door and, beyond it, a portion of the dark landing. The landing light had gone off—the same motion sensor, I assumed, as the corridor in the new wing.

The stairhead lay in shadow, and the upper part of the stairs beyond it was darkness.

Something was crossing the threshold.

I stopped walking. I cannot say that I stopped breathing, though it felt as though I did. What I saw in the mirror was not a standing figure. It was not anything that moved in the way that a person moves. It came in low—very low, pressed to the floor, advancing in a slow, lateral, flowing motion entirely unlike any normal human movement. The body, what I could see of it, appeared unclothed. The head was held sideways and down, one ear almost grazing the carpet, so that the face was turned upward at an unnatural angle. And the face—

I have spent twelve years investigating things that most people do not believe in. I have been in houses where the temperature dropped eight degrees in a locked room with no ventilation. I have heard sounds with no identifiable mechanical source. I have spoken to witnesses who were telling the absolute truth about things that had no rational explanation. None of this had prepared me adequately for that face.

It was a human face. That was precisely what made it so profoundly wrong. It was not monstrous in the way of fiction—no fangs, no inhuman colouring, nothing that could be dismissed as a mask or a costume. It was a human face arranged in a way that a human face should not be able to arrange itself. The lower jaw had been drawn up and forward so that the upper lip was almost entirely concealed. The nostrils were distended to an extraordinary degree. The eyes—this was the worst of it—the eyes

protruded in a way that suggested enormous internal pressure, and they were fixed directly on my reflection in the glass.

It was looking at me.

Not at the room. Not past me. At me—in the mirror, meeting my gaze with a precision that implied full awareness of what a mirror was and how to use one.

I am not ashamed to say that for a time I could not move. I was not paralysed in any physiological sense. I simply stood, and the thing in the mirror advanced, inch by measured inch, across my threshold, and I watched it come, and could not make myself turn around. Some part of me—the investigator's part, the part that records and classifies and does not flinch—was noting details with a cold and slightly hysterical precision. The sound of the body being drawn across the carpet. The absence of any other sound. The quality of the eyes, which were not empty but very much occupied—alert, intent, focused on mine with something that was not quite intelligence and was not quite anything else I had a name for.

Then it stopped.

The eyes moved—rolling sideways in the head with a nauseating ease—and the whole body, which had been pressing forward, seemed suddenly to register something in the air of the room or the house. A sound had reached it. From outside the window, below and to the right, came the murmur of voices—low, unhurried, Marjorie's and then Walsh's, in the soft interchange of people talking in a garden late at night.

The thing retreated.

It withdrew in the same flowing, serpentine movement by which it had advanced, and the landing shadow took it, and then there was nothing in the mirror but the dark rectangle of the open door and the empty landing beyond.

I turned around. The landing was empty. I crossed to the door in three strides and leaned over the stair rail, looking down into the hall. Nothing moved. The house was entirely still, as though it had not, a moment ago, contained whatever I had just seen.

I stood irresolute for a moment—the researcher in me furiously wanting to pursue, the rest of me freshly aware of what had been in that face—and then went to the window.

Marjorie was at the window of the room next to mine, leaning on the sill in the moonlight with her arms folded on the ledge. Three metres below her, Walsh stood on the gravel path with his hands in his jacket pockets, looking up. They were talking quietly. The sound was clear enough in the still night but the words were not.

The moonlight was unusually strong. The valley lay in silver and deep shadow, the heather bleached to grey, the firs very black above the eastern wall of the house. And at the base of those firs, moving through the narrow strip of shadow that lay between the trees and the house wall, something was crossing the ground.

Lizard-fashion. That is the only word for it. Flat to the ground and moving sideways, in and out of the patches of moonlight, towards the angle of the house where Walsh stood.

The consciousness of what was about to happen arrived perhaps three seconds before it did. I leaned out of the window and opened my mouth. But Walsh was already moving—he leapt backward and upward with the reflexive violence of a man who has felt a hand close on his ankle in the dark, and the sound that came out of him was not a shout but a scream, high and terrible and stripped of all dignity—the sound of someone in the grip of something they cannot identify or comprehend or resist.

“Marjorie—” he cried. “Marjorie! For God’s sake—”

And then he was down, and the screaming sank into a wet, effortful panting that was worse than screaming, and then that too stopped.

I was out of the room and on the stairs before the silence fully registered. The front door was bolted; I dragged the bolt and got it open and ran around the angle of the house onto the path.

Walsh was lying face-up on the gravel. The moonlight fell fully on him and I could see the colour of his face, which was a colour I had seen once before in a clinical photograph and hoped not to see again. I dropped beside him and got my fingers to his throat—the pulse was there, fast and already, but present—and then I moved my hand to check his airway and found, pressed along the line of his jaw on both sides, the marks.

Two hands had been at his throat. There was no other explanation for the pattern.

"What's happened—" Marjorie appeared from the side door in a dressing gown, her phone already in her hand, screen lit. "I heard—I'm calling—"

"Wait," I said. "He's breathing. Come here."

She came and knelt across from me without hesitation, and in the moonlight I could see her reading his face with the quick, focused assessment of someone who has had first-aid training rather than merely first-aid theory. "Recovery position?" she said.

"Yes. Help me."

We rolled him and she kept his airway clear while I checked the marks on his throat again. They were vivid now, reddening as I watched. His breathing was rough but regular. After perhaps ninety seconds he made a sound and his right hand moved.

"Aubrey," said Marjorie, in a voice of deliberate calm. "You're all right. You're on the ground outside Low Wenfold and you're all right."

Walsh's eyes opened. He stared at the night sky with the expression of a man who is not yet certain he is relieved to be alive.

I heard the side door again and Marwood appeared in his dressing gown, blinking in the moonlight.

"What the devil—" He stopped when he saw us. "Good God. Is that Walsh?"

"It is," I said. "An accident of some kind. Let's get him inside."

Marwood looked at his wife, then at me, then at Walsh. He was not a stupid man. He understood that the word accident was a courtesy extended for the moment, and he accepted it.

"Right," he said. "Come on, then."

The three of us got Walsh upright and moving, and brought him through the side door into the kitchen. Marjorie put the kettle on. Walsh sat at the kitchen table with his hand at his throat, coughing experimentally, and I watched the colour come back to his face by degrees and thought about the thing I had seen in the mirror, and in the garden, and I thought about the three steps up to the new wing, and the raised ground on the eastern side of the house.

I thought I was beginning to understand what Low Wenfold was.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BARROW

Marjorie had taken the car into Dorchester at eight in the morning and had not said when she expected to return. Marwood told me this without comment over coffee, which was itself a kind of comment. The gap between them had been opened by the previous night and neither of them had yet decided what to do about it—whether to close it or to measure its width.

Walsh had been collected at eleven the previous night by one of his farmhands. He had not telephoned. I had not expected he would, for a while at least. A man who has screamed for help in that particular way, in front of a woman whose opinion he values, requires a certain amount of solitary time before he can decide how to present the episode to himself.

"Well?" said Marwood, when we had sat down to lunch. "What have you found?"

I had been up since six. I opened my laptop on the kitchen table and turned it to face him.

"I want to start with a woman named Merrow," I said. "She appears in the parish records for this area in 1646, described as occupying a cabin—the record says, and I'm quoting directly—'close beside unto ye Low Wenfold.'"

Marwood leaned forward and squinted at the screen, on which I had a scanned image of the original document, sourced that

morning from the county archive's digitised collections. "Close beside this house?" he said. "That mound?"

"Almost certainly. But more important than where she lived is what happened to her. She was examined during the witch panic of 1646 by a local witchfinder working in the manner of Matthew Hopkins."

"Who?"

"Hopkins—the so-called Witchfinder General, a self-appointed title—had made that particular trade notorious. By 1646 his methods had imitators. Dame Merrow was, by the record, a woman of some age who lived alone beside Low Wenfold. She was swum in a local pond—the standard test—and, after conviction, hanged outside Reigate on the twenty-third of September, 1646."

Marwood was silent for a moment. "What was her crime, officially?"

"Practising witchcraft. Transforming herself, in the testimony of her neighbours, into a hideous and unrecognisable figure by night. The specific word used by one witness is"—I tapped the screen—"contorted."

The word landed. Marwood set down his fork.

"The relevant detail is the date," I continued. "The twenty-third of September. But before that, to be convicted by Hopkins, she would have had to be accused in the summer—and the trial record notes, almost in passing, that the accusation was made during a summer of extraordinary heat. A summer, the record says, 'such as had not been known in living memory.'"

"Right," said Marwood slowly. He was watching me with the look of a man following a map and not yet seeing where the road leads, but trusting the cartographer.

"Now. Thwaite." I turned over to a note I had made from a digitised inquest report, obtained from the same county archive. "Thwaite died in August. Cause of death recorded as misadventure, but the attending physician noted, and I'm paraphrasing, evidence of prolonged compression of the throat. The inquest was in 1934 and the compression was attributed to an unknown assailant who could not be traced. August, nineteen thirty-four, was—"

"—the hottest summer of the decade," said Marwood. "I know. My father used to talk about it."

"The Pykes left in September," I said. "A hot September. Val Holsworth—your cleaning lady—told me this morning, when I stopped in at the village, that the previous tenants before you, a family called Merton, had some kind of episode in the August before they moved out. She was vague on the details. She said there had been an incident with the husband that the family wouldn't discuss, and that they were gone by October."

Marwood had stopped eating entirely. "You're telling me the thing only comes out in hot weather."

"In phenomenally hot weather. The specific conditions seem to require a sustained and exceptional heat-wave—the kind that arrives in England perhaps twice in a decade. Not an ordinary warm summer. Something more extreme. Both this summer and the one before have broken records. The conditions right now, today, are close to what they were in the Thwaite summer and in 1646."

"And if the temperature drops?"

"I believe the problem ceases. I think that if the barometer falls tonight you will have no further trouble."

"The barometer," said Marwood, and I could see him reaching mentally for a certainty to stand on, "is showing every sign of falling. There are clouds building to the southwest." He paused. "But you said 'the barrow.' Before you called it a mound. Are you telling me the same thing twice or are you making a distinction?"

"I'm making a distinction," I said. "A mound could be anything—a natural rise in the ground, a drainage feature, a foundation spur from a demolished outbuilding. But I looked up the site this morning on the National Heritage List. There is a registered Bronze Age tumulus in this valley, or there was—it was last surveyed in 1987. The surveyor's notes describe it as a round barrow of the Beaker period, partially overgrown, situated on the eastern slope above the farmhouse then known as Low Wenfold." I closed the laptop. "Your wing is built over it."

The silence in the kitchen was complete except for the ticking of a clock somewhere in the passage.

"Over it," Marwood repeated.

"The survey pre-dates your renovation by nearly twenty years. I'd need to see the architectural plans to be certain, but the location matches precisely, and it explains the three steps. Your builders raised the floor of the new wing rather than excavate. They built over the existing contour of the mound rather than level it. I suspect the surveyor knew perfectly well what was under there and judged it simpler not to mention it."

Marwood pushed his plate aside. The food had been untouched for some minutes. "A Bronze Age burial mound," he said, in the tone of a man repeating something back to himself because the first hearing has not quite convinced him it is real. "Under my study."

"Under the study floor, yes. Three feet below it, roughly, given the rise of the three steps."

"Is it—are there remains? Is it—" He stopped. The question he was trying to ask was whether he had been sleeping above ancient human bones, and he found he did not quite want the answer confirmed directly.

"Almost certainly. Beaker burials typically involve a crouched interment. Single individual, grave goods, sealed under the mound. They've been undisturbed for somewhere between three and four thousand years." I paused. "Until your builders put a concrete slab over them and ran central heating pipes through the subfloor."

Marwood stared at the table. Then something shifted in his expression—the soldier's mind, the man accustomed to assessing ground. "The heat," he said. "You're saying the heat wakes it."

"I'm saying the heat coincides with it, reliably, across nearly four centuries of record. What the mechanism is—" I chose my next words carefully. "There are geological explanations worth considering. Ancient organic material, sealed in a barrow, can produce gases under certain thermal conditions. The soil chemistry changes with sustained surface heat. There are documented cases of prehistoric burial sites releasing compounds

that have measurable effects on people nearby—disorientation, hallucination, motor disturbance. Piezoelectric effects in certain stone formations are also associated with visual anomalies. These are not fringe theories; there is peer-reviewed literature."

"But?" said Marwood. He had heard something in my voice.

"But they don't account for everything I saw last night. The gas hypothesis explains a victim in close proximity to the source. It does not straightforwardly explain what I observed in the mirror, at a distance of several metres, moving with apparent intent." I stopped. "I have learnt, in this work, not to insist on a single explanation when the evidence supports more than one. What I can say with confidence is this: the source is the barrow. The conditions are extreme heat. And the thing—whatever it is, whatever its origin—has been here far longer than the house."

Marwood was quiet for a moment. Then: "Can it be got rid of?"

"Pulling down the new wing and leaving the barrow open to air would remove whatever the structure is concentrating. Whether it would remove the underlying cause I genuinely don't know."

"And in the meantime? Can we stay?"

I considered this with more care than the simple answer required. "I would not advise it during this heat. I would advise it less for Marjorie, whose room is directly adjacent to the new wing. Keep the doors between the old house and the east passage locked at night. Keep all ground-floor windows secured after dark when the temperature is high. Avoid the garden after dusk." I

looked at him. "And I would tell her the truth. Whatever version of last night you are planning to give her."

Marwood looked up sharply.

"She is not a foolish woman," I said. "She is in more potential danger from not knowing than from knowing. The choice is yours, of course."

He was quiet for a long time, looking out of the kitchen window at the valley, where the light had taken on the heavy, brassy quality that precedes a weather change. The clouds I had noticed that morning to the southwest were massing now, distinctly, above the ridge. The first whisper of a true breeze moved in the roses against the window.

"A barrow," he said finally, to himself rather than to me, in the voice of a man closing a door on something. "Three thousand years old. Under my study floor."

I said nothing. There was nothing useful to add.

The first low rumble of distant thunder arrived from somewhere beyond the hills, and the temperature in the kitchen dropped, almost imperceptibly, by a single degree.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE VIGIL

The temperature did not fall.

The thunder that had grumbled so promisingly behind the southwest ridge at lunchtime moved off during the afternoon without delivering anything. By early evening the clouds had dissolved and the sky above the valley was a deep, hard blue, draining towards the particular depthless grey of a hot English night. The barometer, which Marwood had checked three times between tea and dinner, remained where it was. The heat was, if anything, more concentrated than it had been the night before—the stonework of the house had now stored two full days of it, and the rooms breathed it back at you from every wall.

This suited my purposes exactly.

The atmosphere within Low Wenfold that evening was unlike anything I had encountered in my years of investigation, and I say that having spent nights in houses considerably more dramatic in reputation than this one. Fear—genuine, animal fear—had taken up residence in the building and was not troubling to conceal itself. It was present in the way Marjorie moved through the kitchen making dinner, quickly and close to walls, not turning her back on open doorways. It was present in Marwood's face, in the particular set of his jaw that told me he had not slept and did not intend to. The broken study window had been covered with

cardboard that afternoon, and nobody had suggested going in there.

I had been out twice more during the day. The second time I had driven to Dorchester and returned with several items from a builders' merchant and an outdoor equipment supplier. Marwood watched me unload the car without asking questions, which I thought showed considerable self-discipline.

We had arrived at a version of events to give Marjorie. It was, I was not entirely comfortable to admit, incomplete. We told her that the disturbances were almost certainly connected to natural causes—a geological phenomenon associated with the mound beneath the east wing—and that we intended to monitor the situation that night. We told her to lock her bedroom door and to open it for no reason until morning. We told her nothing about the gas, nothing about the handkerchiefs, nothing about what I had seen in the mirror. I had advised Marwood to tell her the truth, and I stood by that advice; but the immediate priority was to keep her away from the east wing, and if the incomplete version served that purpose for one night, the rest could follow in the morning.

She was not satisfied with this, and her expression as she went upstairs told me she knew it. She paused on the landing and looked down at us.

"Lock your door, Marjorie," said Marwood.

"I heard you the first time," she said, and went.

We listened to her footsteps reach the landing, and then the deliberate, rather pointed sound of a key turning in a lock.

In the study, I prepared.

I had brought a portable VOC monitor—a compact device the size of a television remote that measured volatile organic compounds in the air and logged them to my phone at thirty-second intervals. It was the kind of thing used by industrial hygienists and environmental surveyors, available to anyone with an internet connection and sixty pounds. I screwed a small L-bracket to the skirting board beside the saddle-bag chair and mounted the sensor at floor level, face outward, its indicator light a dim red in the corner of the room.

Then I rolled back the corner of the rug nearest the chair and examined the floorboards. The boards were original oak—old, dense, the gaps between them sealed with generations of grime. With the thin blade of a penknife I worked one of the gaps open slightly, and held my hand flat above it. There was nothing discernible. I sat back on my heels and waited.

“What are those for?” said Marwood from the doorway, looking at the two objects I had placed on the table.

“Masks. Tie one over your mouth and nose and don’t remove it unless I say so.”

They were not elaborate—damp cloths folded into squares, held in place by a length of thin cord. Not ideal, but organic compound filtration at low concentrations does not require much. I had brought proper half-face respirators as a backup, but they were cumbersome and loud, and tonight required stillness.

Marwood turned one over in his large hands, looked at it with the expression of a man who has given orders for thirty

years and finds receiving them a novel experience, and put it on without further comment. I did the same. We took our positions: Marwood on the couch, I in the chair nearest the sensor, angled so that I could see both the monitor's readout on my phone and the open door.

The windows were wide open. The night was absolutely still.

Half an hour passed. The sensor read clean. The house around us made the sounds that old houses make in heat—the tick and creak of timber drying in its joints, the occasional small percussion of a pipe somewhere behind the plaster. Once, briefly, something moved in the orchard—a fox, probably, or the remnant of Rex's anxiety still travelling the grass. Marwood was a large and restless presence on the couch, breathing audibly through the cloth, but he held himself steady and I gave him credit for it.

At the forty-minute mark I became aware of a sound above us. Not a creak of timber—a different quality altogether, softer and more directional. I looked up at the ceiling, then across at Marwood. He had not moved, but his eyes were on me. I shook my head fractionally: stay still.

The sound came once more and did not repeat. I could not have said with certainty what it was. The settling of a house in late-night heat is deceptive; sounds travel through old structures in patterns that defeat ordinary triangulation. I told myself this and watched the phone screen.

At fifty-three minutes, the sensor registered.

The readout climbed—slowly at first, then with more purpose, the numbers turning over on the screen with a quiet mechanical

regularity that was more unsettling than any sound the house had yet produced. I looked at the thermometer I had placed on the table. It had not moved. But the sensor was reading a sustained and rising concentration of compounds I could not yet identify—not carbon monoxide, not methane, something the device's classification matrix was logging as unknown organic, biogenic origin.

I looked at the corner of the room from which, earlier that day, I had lifted the saddle-bag chair and rolled back the rug.

The vapour was there.

It was not dramatic. It was barely visible—a faint thickening in the air above the gap in the floorboards, detectable first as a slight distortion, the way heat shimmer looks above tarmac in August, and then, as it rose, as something more definite: a thin, slow column, grey-white, ascending without haste towards the ceiling. It widened as it climbed. When it reached the cornice it spread outward like ink dropped in water, thin tendrils of it moving along the ceiling moulding, dispersing into the air of the room.

Marwood had seen it. I could tell by his stillness, which had changed from the stillness of a man exercising patience to the stillness of a man who has stopped breathing voluntarily and is doing so now by reflex. He was staring at the corner with the expression I had seen on him once before, the night he had described the thing in the corridor—not afraid, but arrested, as though something had pressed a hand flat against his chest.

Then I checked the thermometer again.

It had moved. One degree, perhaps a fraction more, downward. The heat-wave was breaking—not tonight, not dramatically, but the first hairline crack had appeared in it, imperceptible to any sense but the instrument's, and the barrow below us was responding to the change.

The vapour continued to rise and spread for perhaps three more minutes, then thinned, and the column at the floor became uncertain, and then there was nothing to see. The sensor's readout peaked, held, and began to descend. The process was complete—whatever the barrow had released, it had released in its entirety, and the room held the remainder of it, dispersed and fading.

I was still watching the phone when Marwood made a sound.

Not a word. A sound—involuntary, low—and when I looked up he was sitting rigid on the edge of the couch, both hands gripping the cushion on either side of him, his eyes fixed on the study door.

The door was opening.

It opened slowly, and low against the gap at the base of it, below the level of the door handle, below any ordinary line of sight, something was coming in.

The same crawling advance I had seen in the mirror—the same lateral, serpentine movement, the same unnerving silence, the body pressed to the floor with a fluency that belonged to no normal human gait. The face was turned upward and sideways, held at that wrenching angle, one ear nearly touching the boards, and the features—the same features, the same grotesque arrangement of

the same human elements—were pushing forward into the lamplight with a concentrated, terrible attention.

The eyes found mine.

Marwood made the sound again—this time it resolved, just barely, into the beginning of a word, and the word was her name.

The figure was fully across the threshold now, the door pushed wider by the press of the body, and the light of the study fell upon it completely. The hair was loose—dark and disordered—and the shoulders and arms were bare, and on the left wrist, catching the light with the blunt glint of eighteen-carat gold, was the wide cuff bracelet I had watched Marjorie turn absent-mindedly on her wrist during dinner the night before, when Walsh had been making her laugh about something, and Marwood had been pretending not to watch.

I understood.

The locked door had not held, or had been unlocked from the inside before she slept, or had never been fully engaged. She had come down—or been drawn down—through the old part of the house, and along the connecting passage, and down the three steps into the east wing, following whatever it was that the barrow called her towards. She had been breathing the vapour for how long I could not know. Long enough.

I reached the light switch in two steps and put the room in darkness.

Marwood cried out—a single, strangled, choking sound—and I heard him lurch to his feet behind me, and then there was a

heavier sound, the unmistakable sound of a large man going down, and silence.

Through the open door, into the long corridor beyond, poured the cold light of the moon. It was the first moonlight I had seen in two days—the clouds had evidently broken at last over the ridge—and it came in at the end of the passage from the high north window in a broad, pale column, and in that column, rising from the floor, was a figure.

She stood for a moment in the corridor as though startled by the dark behind her and the light ahead. The dishevelled hair, the bare arms, the posture of someone who has just woken and does not entirely know where they are. Then—not hurrying, not running—she turned and walked away from me down the corridor towards the main body of the house, and the moonlight took her, and the shadows took her, and she was gone.

I turned back to Marwood.

He was on the floor beside the couch—had caught it with one shoulder on the way down, which had slowed the fall. I got to him and checked his pulse, which was present but irregular, rapid and light in a way I did not like. His breathing was shallow. He was not conscious.

I picked up my phone and called 999.

CHAPTER SIX

THE EXPLANATION

It was close to four weeks later. Marwood and I were in my study in London—a room in the mansion flat in Clerkenwell that I have occupied for eleven years, lined on three sides with books and recording equipment and the accumulated paper residue of a decade's worth of investigations. September had arrived without ceremony and the city outside was going about its September business, cool and purposeful, indifferent to whatever had or had not occurred in a moorland valley three weeks before.

Marwood was altered. He had been in hospital for four days following the arrhythmia episode, and the cardiologist had reviewed a condition that had evidently been developing quietly for some time. He was now on medication, and on strict instructions regarding alcohol, exertion, and stress, all three of which instructions his face suggested he found equally unreasonable. He was drinking tea. He looked at it periodically with an expression of resigned contempt.

"Walsh hasn't been in touch," he said.

"I didn't expect he would be. Not yet."

"He screamed for Marjorie. In the garden, in the dark, like a—" He stopped.

"He was being strangled," I said. "It tends to override other considerations."

Marwood turned his teacup in its saucer. "He'll get over it, or he won't. Either way." He looked up. "I've got nothing to crow about myself, have I? Went down like a sack of coal."

"The arrhythmia was precipitated by the shock," I said. "I was wrong to have you there. I didn't know the cardiologist had been flagging the condition."

"I hadn't told anyone." He shifted in his chair. "Marjorie didn't know. She knows now. We're leasing a flat here while we find somewhere permanent. Low Wenfold goes back to the estate agents." He said this without inflection, a man crossing a line through an item. "Now. What have you got to tell me?"

I had my laptop open on the desk. I did not look at it.

"Low Wenfold is genuinely haunted," I said.

Marwood's eyes narrowed fractionally.

"By a vapour. What you witnessed in the study that night—the column rising from the floorboards, spreading along the ceiling—that was the source and the sum of it. Everything else was the vapour's effect on people."

"A vapour," Marwood said, with the care of a man repeating something he suspects is about to be used against him.

"The conditions are specific: the vapour forms at the exact moment a sustained, exceptional heat-wave begins to break. Not during the heat itself, but at the inflection point—the first drop in temperature. It does not form during ordinary warm weather. It requires something at the upper limit of what this climate produces, which is why incidents are separated by years and in some cases decades." I paused. "And it does not produce

hallucinations, which is how it differs from the other barrow-gas cases I've investigated. It produces a transient and highly specific behavioural state. The symptoms are unvarying: the subject strips, contorts the face into an unrecognisable arrangement, and moves in the way you witnessed—low to the ground, lateral, silent. The state passes. The subject returns to wherever they fell asleep and has little or no memory of the episode."

"Like sleepwalking."

"The neurological mechanism appears similar, yes. An inhibition of the prefrontal cortex, a release of more primitive motor behaviour. The face is the strangest part—the specific contortion is consistent across every recorded case spanning nearly four centuries, which suggests the compound acts on a very particular cluster of facial muscles. I sent the VOC monitor's log to an environmental toxicologist at UCL. She identified two compounds she hadn't seen in combination before—both biogenic, both consistent with the decomposition of ancient organic material under specific thermal pressure. She's written to me twice since asking for access to the site."

Marwood was quiet for a moment. "Thwaite," he said then.

"Thwaite was strangled by someone who had been sleeping on the mound. A vagrant, most likely—someone who had found the mound a dry and secluded place to spend a hot night. They were affected by the vapour, came into contact with Thwaite, and—the research suggests the affected subject is not inherently violent, but responds badly to perceived threat or disturbance. Thwaite

presumably tried to interfere with them. The vagrant recovered and left, never knowing what they'd done." I watched Marwood absorb this. "An innocent person, in the fullest sense. A victim of the same source as everyone else."

"And the Pykes," said Marwood. "The man with the face that Mrs. Pyke saw at the window."

"Was Pyke himself. He had fallen asleep outside the house on a warm night—the mound is immediately adjacent to that side of the building. He was affected, and his wife looked out and saw him at the window in the state the vapour produces, and she did not recognise him. She was not lying to you about what she saw. She genuinely did not know it was her husband."

Marwood set down his teacup with some precision. "And what I saw on the landing. The night I called you."

Here I was careful. "You described going out onto the landing with your phone and seeing something crawling towards you from the far end of the corridor. And then it was gone."

"Yes."

"You had been in bed. You woke overheated, in the early hours, went out onto the landing—and found yourself looking at the large mirror at the end of the passage, directly above the connecting steps to the new wing."

A silence.

"That mirror reflects the passage end-on," I said. "At the right angle, standing where you were, you would have seen—at the bottom of your own reflection—the lower portion of the corridor, where it meets the steps."

Marwood's face had gone very still.

"You had been asleep above the study. The vapour had been present at lower concentration—not enough to produce the full episode, but enough to have affected you before you woke. You were in partial recovery on the landing. What you saw in the mirror was the last movement of your own reflection as the state released you. Your mind, coming back to itself, interpreted it as external. As something else." I paused. "You told me you turned around and went back to your room and locked the door. That is precisely what someone in partial recovery from the vapour-state would do—return to the place they came from and sleep."

The clock on the bookshelf marked the seconds. Outside, a bus moved along the street.

"I've led bayonet attacks," said Marwood, very quietly.

"I know you have."

"You're telling me I was—that I was the thing on the landing."

"In part. Briefly. Without knowing it."

He picked up his tea, looked at it, put it down. "The night of the vigil. I was in my dressing gown. I'd gone upstairs, changed, come back down to finish some correspondence before you were ready to begin."

"And fell asleep in the study chair. Yes. A second, fuller episode—before I arrived, or very shortly before, while you were still alone. By the time I came down you had recovered enough to appear normal. But the episode had occurred."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Marjorie told me."

Marwood looked up sharply.

"She had heard something in the house. She opened her bedroom door—cautiously, not wide—and saw you in the corridor below the landing, moving in the way the vapour produces. She closed the door and locked it and said nothing, to anyone. She was protecting you. She thought it was a medical episode of some kind—a dissociative state, possibly a TIA—and she intended to speak to you about it privately, when the guests were gone and the moment was right." I looked at him steadily. "She did not know it would recur. She did not know what it was."

"She never said a word," Marwood said.

"She is not a woman who panics or who exposes people she loves to unnecessary humiliation. She saw her husband in a frightening state, said nothing that night to avoid alarming the household, and planned to deal with it in the morning. The morning produced its own emergencies and the conversation never happened."

Marwood stared at the bookshelf without reading it. "And on the last night—what she—what I saw in the study—"

"Marjorie had felt frightened being alone in the old part of the house with both of us in the east wing. She unlocked her door—or had not fully locked it to begin with—and came along to the new wing, meaning to wait in your room until you came up. She fell asleep in the armchair. The vapour was more concentrated that night than any previous night—the heat had accumulated for two full days, and the temperature break was sharper. She

received a larger dose. The full episode." I paused. "She has no memory of it. None. She knows she went to your room, and she woke in her own bed the following morning with a headache, which she attributed to the upset of the previous days. She does not know what happened between those two points."

Marwood had risen from his chair without appearing to notice he had done so. He was standing with one hand on the back of it, looking at the middle distance.

"God," he said. And then: "She must never know."

"That is your decision to make, not mine," I said. "My view, which I have given you before and won't repeat, is that she is not a woman who requires protecting from the truth about herself. But it is yours to make."

He stood for a moment longer, then sat back down. Something in him had settled—not resolved, but settled; the way a building settles after the ground beneath it has shifted, finding its new level.

"What is the thing in the barrow, Carmody?" he said at last. "Not the gas. The gas is a mechanism. What drives it? What has been in that mound for three thousand years producing this—this specific, unvarying—"

"I can tell you what the environmental toxicologist told me," I said. "I can tell you what the geological literature says about outgassing from sealed organic deposits. I can refer you to the research on Delphi—where the Oracle's fissure has now been identified as a real ethylene-emitting geological feature—and to three other ancient ritual sites in Britain where similar

compounds have been detected. That is the explanation I am able to give you."

"But?" said Marwood. He had heard it in my voice before, and he heard it again now.

I thought about the mirror. The eyes in the mirror, finding mine with that precise and occupied attention. The thing in the corridor that had turned at the sound of voices in the garden with what had looked, in that fraction of a second, very much like decision.

"You are about to suggest," I said, "that something very old, and not entirely explicable by the available chemistry, has been using the vapour as a mechanism. That the barrow contains something with purpose, and that the gas is how it acts on the world."

"Yes," said Marwood. "That is exactly what I'm about to suggest."

"Then you are taking us back to a theory I am not equipped to test, and to a conclusion I am not willing to reach on the current evidence." I closed the laptop. "I blankly refuse to follow you."

Marwood looked at me for a long moment. Then, for the first time in four weeks, something shifted at the corner of his mouth.

"Fair enough," he said, and picked up his tea.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SHAN HILLS

I had been in Mandalay for eleven days when Jack Harrington was found.

He was discovered by his compound's night guard at a little after five in the morning, unconscious on the path between the gate and the main building, with a head wound consistent with having been struck from behind. He was alive, and he remained alive, but for the first thirty-six hours the doctors at the Mandalay General were not making comfortable predictions. It was treated officially as a robbery gone wrong. The police noted the case and did not exert themselves. There are categories of incident in Mandalay that the authorities find it convenient to file quickly, and a foreign NGO director found beaten on his own property falls, with some regularity, into one of them.

I had been introduced to Harrington two weeks earlier through a contact at the Irrawaddy news service. He was the country director of a European development foundation, and he had been talking to me, cautiously and with many conditions attached, about the movement of looted antiquities out of the Shan and Kayah state conflict zones—a subject on which he had accumulated more careful documentation than anyone else in the country. He was a methodical man, softly spoken, with the kind of patience that the work required. I had liked him.

It was through Harrington's assistant—a young Bamar woman named Su Kyi, who called me the morning after the attack because

she had found my number in Harrington's contact list—that I first heard about Moira Fane.

"His colleague," Su Kyi said. "Mrs. Fane. She left Mandalay four days ago with her husband. She has not called in."

"Called in to whom?"

"To her organisation. The Myanmar Archaeological Trust. She was supposed to report by satellite phone every evening. She has not reported for three nights."

I asked where they had gone. Su Kyi did not know precisely—into the Shan Hills, she said, on a field survey. The husband had arranged it. She said this last detail in a tone that told me something about what she thought of the husband's arrangements.

What I am about to set down is the account of what happened in those hills. It is not a first-hand account—I was not there, and should be grateful that I was not. I have reconstructed it from two sources: Moira Fane's own account, given to me across a series of conversations during the days that followed her return, and the testimony of Shwe Bo, her colleague from the Archaeological Trust, who was present throughout and whose recollection of events was precise and unsparing. Where the two accounts diverged in detail I have given precedence to Shwe Bo's, not because I distrust Moira's memory but because the extremity of what she endured gave her every reason to have edited it, unconsciously, into something more manageable than it was. I do not think she has. But Shwe Bo's account had the flatness of testimony that has not needed to protect itself.

They had left Mandalay before dawn on a Thursday. There were five of them: Moira, her husband Robert Fane, Shwe Bo, and two men Fane had hired—his contacts from a private security firm whose name I will not set down here for reasons that should become clear. The route took them southeast on the Thazi road and then into the hills on a track that deteriorated steadily above the two-thousand-metre line. The hired vehicle was left at a village whose name I am also not using. From there they continued on foot and, for the higher sections, on ponies that the village provided.

It was Shwe Bo who told me: the moment he saw the equipment Fane had packed—not survey equipment, not the standard field kit of an archaeological assessment, but collection materials, padded cases, the tools of extraction—he understood what the purpose of the journey was. He said nothing. He watched, and kept his counsel, and stayed close to Moira.

Robert Fane I met once, briefly, before all of this began, at a function at the British Council in Mandalay. He was a tall man with a face that had once been conventionally handsome and now showed the specific deterioration that heavy drinking produces in such faces: the puffiness beneath the eyes, the slight looseness around the jaw, the complexion that had gone from ruddy to something less healthy. He had served in the British Army—two tours in Afghanistan—and had come to Myanmar four years ago as a security contractor, first for the extractive industries and then for other clients he was less forthcoming about. He had married Moira, who was then working a cultural

heritage survey in Kayah State, two years before these events. Those who knew them both and were willing to say so told me the marriage had been in difficulty almost from the start.

This is what the march was like.

The sun on the Shan Plateau is not the diffuse, steaming heat of the river lowlands. It is hard and direct, without gradation, and the thin air at altitude strips away whatever mercy humidity might provide. The path climbed through mixed forest—pine on the upper slopes, teak and bamboo in the hollows—and the exposed sections between the tree cover were white with it, the rock faces on the higher ground throwing the light back doubled. By nine in the morning it was past thirty degrees. By eleven it was past thirty-five.

Moirá walked. She had sent the pony back at the first treeline—she was an experienced field worker, twelve years in Southeast Asian archaeological survey, and she could cover broken hill ground as well as anyone in the party. What she could not do, on the second day of a march that had begun at midnight with no explanation and no warning, was do so without cost. By midday her head was throbbing with the sustained, specific pain of dehydration and sun exposure, and the effort of maintaining her composure in Fane's vicinity was drawing on reserves that the march itself was simultaneously depleting.

Shwe Bo walked ahead. He had been with the Archaeological Trust for nine years, and before that had worked as a guide in these hills for a decade. He knew this ground as intimately as a man knows the rooms of his own house. He had said very little

since they left the village—not because he had nothing to say but because Fane’s two hired men were always within earshot, and Shwe Bo was a man who chose his words according to their audience. He set a pace that was sustainable without being gentle, and he held it with the mechanical patience of someone who has long since made his peace with distance.

Moirá watched his back and kept moving.

His right hand, she told me later, would occasionally clench and release as he walked—a small, deliberate gesture, barely visible, made when the path was steepest or when the sound of Fane’s muttering from the rear of the column was loudest. She had noticed it within the first hour and understood it for what it was: not a signal, not a code, simply a man telling her, in the only private language available, that she was not alone in what she was enduring, and that he knew it, and that they would come through the other side of it.

She said it was enough. It had to be.

Robert Fane rode at the back. He had kept the pony, which was a reasonable decision given that he was in no condition to walk, though it was not made for that reason. He stopped frequently—ostensibly to study the terrain behind them, ostensibly because the pony had lost its footing, ostensibly for any number of reasons that were all the same reason. He was watching the path below for pursuit. His drinking had moved in those four days from its ordinary concealment into something more open and more urgent, and the muttering that reached the front of

the column from time to time had the disconnected quality of a conversation being conducted with someone who was not there.

At midday they reached a natural clearing on a broad ledge of rock, where giant bamboos curved over a small level area of ground, and the jungle pressed in on three sides with a solidity that provided genuine shade. Fane called the halt.

Shwe Bo was at Moira's side before she had taken two steps. He positioned himself between her and the rest of the party with the easy naturalness of long practice, and she was able to sit down on a flat rock and close her eyes for a moment without Fane seeing the extent of her exhaustion. She heard him coming—the uneven crunch of the pony's hooves on the rock, then his footsteps—and she opened her eyes and looked up.

He stood over her with his hands in his jacket pockets and studied her with the pale blue eyes that had not changed since she had first known him, though everything else about his face had. She met his gaze without expression.

"Here we camp," he said.

She said nothing.

"Quite a landscape." He looked out at the valley below them, the green and yellow patchwork of the lower hills, the shimmer of the distant plain. "You always said you wanted to see more of the country. Beyond the conference rooms."

Moira kept her eyes on his face and her hands flat on her knees and said nothing. There was nothing that was safe to say, and she had learned, not quickly enough but thoroughly, exactly where that boundary lay.

Fane's expression did not change. He turned and walked towards the camp, where the hired men had begun unloading the equipment with the careful handling of people who have been told what the padded cases contain.

Shwe Bo stood the small tent in six minutes. When the entrance was tied back he stepped aside and met Moira's eyes with a look that said: in, now, before he comes back.

She stood, clenched her jaw against the wave of dizziness that rose when she moved too quickly, and walked to the tent with her back straight. Inside, out of his sight, she knelt down on the ground mat and pressed her forehead against it and let her hands unclench for the first time in four hours.

The bamboos above the clearing moved in a breath of wind that did not reach the ground. From somewhere in the canopy a bird called once and was silent. The hired men spoke in low voices by the equipment cases, and from the direction of the path came the sound of a hip flask being opened.

Moira lay still and breathed, and did not make a sound.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PHANTOM GUNS

Dusk in the Shan Hills does not arrive gradually. It drops. At one moment the light is amber and slanted and the bamboos are throwing long shadows across the ledge, and at the next the sky above the peaks has gone from deep blue to a blue so dark it is indistinguishable from black, and the stars—at this altitude, far from any city—appear all at once in their entirety, as though they have been waiting just out of sight and have now been given permission to proceed. Moira had seen this before, on other surveys, in other hills. It still stopped the breath.

The hired men built the fire in the centre of the clearing. It was good work—dry wood, properly constructed, burning clean and hot—and whatever else she thought of the men, she noted this. Shwe Bo had the cooking equipment unpacked and organised on a flat section of rock twenty minutes after the halt. He moved about his work with the compact efficiency of a man who has made camp in the hills more times than he has counted.

Robert Fane did none of this. He had left the clearing almost immediately after issuing the halt command, climbing the rock outcrop at its eastern edge until his figure was visible against the darkening sky above the treeline, standing with his back to the camp and his face towards the path they had descended. He was up there for a long time.

Moira watched him from the tent entrance. She had drunk water, and eaten a little of what Shwe Bo placed near her without

comment, and she had used the first twenty minutes of the halt—while Fane's attention was directed downhill—to retrieve the personal locator beacon from the bottom of her field pack and send a ping to the Archaeological Trust's monitoring service. She could not know whether it had gone through. The pine canopy was dense on three sides, and the steep ridgeline to the north further reduced the sky. She sent it twice, then replaced the device and said nothing about it.

She had been trying to reach Harrington for two days. He had not responded to any of her messages. His silence frightened her more than almost anything else about the situation she was in, because Harrington was not a man who went silent. He had been in contact with her every two or three days for the past three months, ever since she had told him what she had found in the equipment cases—the padded collection boxes, the extraction tools, the shipping manifests for Chiang Rai—and he had been careful and methodical about it, building the documentation steadily, referring her to people in the cultural property unit at Interpol, telling her to be patient and to say nothing and to keep records. He had not gone silent before. Not for two hours, let alone two days.

She filed this beside everything else that she could not think about directly without losing her composure, and watched her husband on the rock, and ate.

When Fane descended, he came down clumsily, slipping once on the lower face of the outcrop and catching himself with a hand that she could hear scraping the stone from twenty metres away.

He moved through the camp without looking at anyone, past the fire, and on to the dip of the path at the clearing's edge. He stood there for a full minute, facing downhill. Then he turned and walked straight to Shwe Bo.

"Come here," he said.

His voice was pitched low, but Moira heard it clearly. She did not move.

Shwe Bo straightened from the cooking equipment and followed Fane to the path without expression. At the top of the descent Fane stopped and turned.

"Listen," he said. "Tell me what you hear."

Shwe Bo stood still and listened. The forest sounds filled in around the edges of the silence: the sustained percussion of insects, a distant calling bird, the low creak of bamboo cooling after the day's heat.

"I hear the forest," Shwe Bo said.

"Lower on the path. An engine. A motorbike, possibly two. I heard it while I was up on the rock."

Shwe Bo looked at him without answering for a moment. Then he went to the path's edge, crouched, and pressed one hand flat to the ground. He held it there. He raised his head and looked down the slope, as though listening with his whole body rather than only his ears. He remained so for perhaps half a minute.

He stood up. "Nothing," he said. "The path carries sound from a long way, in these hills. If there were a vehicle within three kilometres I would feel it through the ground. There is nothing."

Fane moved forward very quickly—the quick, unbalanced movement of a man who has been drinking—and put both hands on Shwe Bo's shoulders.

"Are you sure?" he said. His face was close. In the firelight it was yellowish and slick with the day's accumulated sweat and something else, something that was not the residue of the sun's heat.

Shwe Bo looked at the hands on his shoulders, then at the face beyond them, with a steadiness that was not passive—it was chosen, deliberate, and entirely without fear. "I am sure," he said. "There is no one on the path."

Fane held the grip for another second, then released him and stepped back. He turned towards Moira's tent, and she let the flap fall and moved away from the entrance. She heard his footsteps on the ground, close, and then:

"Good night."

She did not answer. She heard him pause, then move away towards his own tent at the far corner of the clearing. She heard him stop again before going in—standing there in the dark, she thought, listening to the path—and then the rustling sound of the tent being entered, and silence.

After a while she moved back to the entrance and looked out through a narrow gap in the flap.

The fire had settled to a steady burn. The two hired men sat on one side of it, close together, talking in voices too low to carry. On the other side, at an angle that gave him a sight line both to Fane's tent and to the path, Shwe Bo sat cross-legged

with a cup of tea between his hands, watching the fire with the patient stillness of someone who is not thinking about the fire.

He looked up—briefly, precisely—in the direction of her tent. She understood: he was telling her that he would be there all night. She let the flap fall and lay down in the dark.

She told me afterwards that she lay still and listened to the forest, and that the forest in the Shan Hills at night makes sounds unlike anything else she had encountered in twelve years of fieldwork, though she had worked in parts of the world that were wilder and more remote than this. There were the ordinary sounds—the insects, the occasional animal disturbance in the undergrowth, the calls of nightjars and owls moving overhead. But running beneath all of these, or perhaps through them, was something harder to categorise: a quality of the silence between sounds, a density to the darkness, as though the valley below the clearing had a particular weight that the night air above it was carrying.

She had felt it, she said, the moment they had crested the final ridge above the valley that afternoon. She had thought at the time that it was exhaustion, or the sun, or simply the accumulated dread of the preceding days pressing on her perception. She was less certain of that now.

She was on the edge of sleep when the first booming came.

It was distant and deep—not the crack of a firearm, not thunder—more like the sound that very large artillery makes heard from many miles away, but without the directional quality of artillery. It seemed to come from everywhere at once, as though

the ridgelines themselves were producing it, or the valleys between them. It rolled and diminished and rolled again and died in the dark below.

The hired men were on their feet. Moira heard them and raised herself to look through the gap in the tent.

Shwe Bo had not moved. He spoke to the men in Shan, quietly, and after a moment they sat back down. His cup of tea was still in his hands.

The booming came once more near midnight, louder and closer and no less inexplicable, and then again at some hour before dawn that Moira could not name because she was by then in a shallow, uneasy sleep in which the sound moved through her dreams and continued after it had, in the world outside the tent, already ceased.

Shwe Bo told me—when I asked him about this, later, in Mandalay—that the booming is a known phenomenon in that part of the hills. The local name for it, translated, means roughly the voice of the valley speaking to itself. He said that in his experience it occurred more frequently at certain times of year, and more frequently in certain valleys than others, and that he had always found it difficult to determine whether it was purely geological—gas released through rock fissures, perhaps, or some harmonic effect produced by the ridgeline topography—or something that had a geological component and also something else.

He said this carefully, in the way that a precise man uses when he wants to be accurate about the limits of his knowledge.

I thought of the barrow under Low Wenfold's east wing, and the sensor reading on my phone, and the thin column of vapour rising in the lamplight, and I wrote it down and said nothing.

CHAPTER NINE
NIGHT THOUGHTS

Moirira did not sleep.

She lay in the dark for an hour after the second booming faded into the ridgelines, and then gave it up and lay with her eyes open, listening to the forest, which had resumed its layered conversation as though the interruption had not occurred. There was no discomfort in the sleeplessness beyond its practical inconvenience—she needed to be clear-headed tomorrow, and clear-headedness, at this stage, required sleep, and sleep required a stillness of mind she could not produce. She allowed herself to think instead, methodically, as she would approach any difficult problem in the field.

She had been trying to leave Robert Fane for seven months.

This is not as simple as it sounds when the person you are trying to leave has access to your professional contacts, controls the transport in the area where you work, and has made it quietly clear—not in words, never in words, but by other means—that the leaving will not be straightforward. She had stayed longer than she should have because the Cultural Heritage Survey was at a critical stage and because leaving in the middle of a field season would have required explanations she was not yet ready to give. She had stayed because she had believed, longer than the evidence warranted, that the situation could be

managed. This was a professional habit that had served her well in every other context and had been disastrous here.

Three months ago she had found the cases.

He had kept them in a locked room at the back of the compound, and she had found the key—not through any detective effort, simply because her field kit was in the same room and she needed a component from it, and the key was taped to the underside of the shelf above the door in the way that keys are kept by people who consider themselves secretive without having thought carefully about what that requires. The cases were padded, expensive, the kind used by collectors and museum couriers. They contained eight bronze ritual figures of the type produced in the Shan plateau region during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There were also a carved ivory tusk section, four decorated ceramic vessels, and two stacked trays of loose gemstones—mostly rubies, rough-cut, from what looked like an informal excavation rather than a registered mine.

She had photographed everything with her phone. She had replaced the cases precisely. She had not said anything to Robert. She had contacted Harrington that same night.

Jack Harrington had been country director of the European development foundation for four years. They had known each other professionally since her second survey season. He was a careful man—she had selected him for exactly that quality, the same quality that made him a good development worker—and he had taken the photographs she sent him and the documentary records she had compiled and spent six weeks verifying them before doing anything

with them. During that time he had also, with a methodical patience that she found both admirable and frightening in its implications for how serious the situation was, put together a separate file on Robert's activities over the previous two years: the shell company in Chiang Rai, the shipping contacts, the pattern of absences that coincided with known instances of site looting in the conflict zones.

The last message Harrington had sent her was at eleven-seventeen on the evening she had been dragged from bed and put in a vehicle. She had read it in the darkness of the back seat while Robert drove and his two hired men dozed in the front. She had read it four times before the signal dropped and the phone went dark.

It said: he knows. Someone told him I've submitted to the Interpol unit. He came to the compound tonight. I don't know what he intends. Get out of Mandalay if you can, get to the embassy, tell them everything. I've sent copies to three people who will know what to do with them. You are not alone in this. Be safe.

There had been no further messages. She did not know whether this was because he had been unable to send them or because there was nothing further to say. She had looked at the message chain in the dark on the second night of the march and then closed the app and placed the phone beneath the foam pad of her bedroll, where it was now.

She reached for it now, in the dark, and held it without turning the screen on. The battery was at thirty-one percent—she had been managing it carefully—and there was no signal and had

not been since the first morning. She turned it over in her hands. It was the only record she had left of the documentation that she and Harrington had compiled together: the photographs, the records, the message thread. She had kept it because it was evidence, and because losing it would mean that whatever happened in these hills would leave nothing behind.

She was still holding it when the tent flap opened.

Fane was not drunk, which was worse. He was at the controlled, precisely calibrated stage of whatever he had been drinking that produced in him not imprecision but a heightened and targeted acuity—a state she had learned to recognise and to treat with the greatest possible caution. His eyes in the dim light from the entrance were fully focused, and they went directly to the phone in her hands.

"Give that to me," he said.

She said nothing and did not move.

He stepped in and crouched beside her and held out his hand. He did not raise his voice. The low, controlled delivery was more frightening than shouting would have been. "Moirá," he said.

"Give. Me. The phone."

She gave it to him.

He straightened and moved back towards the tent entrance where there was more light and turned the screen on. She had not locked it, which had been a calculation: a locked phone, in his current state, would have been a provocation. An unlocked one was evidence that she had nothing to hide, even though the evidence

of everything she had done over the past three months was sitting three taps from the home screen.

He found it in two.

She watched his face while he read. He read the way he did most things now—with an attention that was absolute and slightly too intense, that had about it the quality of a man who knows that his perception is unreliable and is compensating by concentrating harder. He scrolled up through the message chain. He read for a long time.

When he looked up his face had changed. The controlled acuity was still there but something had been added to it, something that pulled at the muscles around his eyes and jaw in a way she had seen only once before—on the night she had told him she had found the cases.

"How long?" he said.

"Three months," she said, because lying would not help.

"Three months." He looked back at the screen. "And you've been—" He stopped. He put one hand flat against the tent pole and steadied himself, though he was not physically unsteady. "This is from Harrington," he said. "All of this. He's been—you've been working with Harrington against me for three months."

"He has been helping me report an illegal operation," she said, as steadily as she could. "That is all."

"That is all." He said the words back to her with a precise and careful contempt. Then he dropped into a crouch—it was a sudden movement, close to her, and she held very still—and held the phone in front of her face. "He knows. Someone told him I've

submitted to the Interpol unit. He came to the compound tonight." He read it in a flat voice. "Be safe." He lowered the phone. "Be safe. From me."

"Robert—"

"Don't." He stood up. He moved to the entrance and looked out at the fire-checking, she knew, whether Shwe Bo was in sight—and then turned back and leaned in the low entrance as though the tent were a room and he were standing in its doorway. He looked, at that moment, very much like the man she had met four years ago at the field site in Kayah State, the tall man with the controlled manner and the attentiveness that she had mistaken, for much longer than she was proud of, for something else. "He came to the compound," Fane said, mostly to himself. "He came to the compound, and I went there, and I—"

He stopped. The muscles in his face moved in a sequence she could not read.

"I had been drinking," he said. "I'd had rather a lot. You understand that doesn't—it doesn't excuse anything. That's not why I'm saying it." He pushed himself off the tent pole. "I went there. I went there to reason with him." His voice had dropped to something barely above a murmur. "I don't—I don't know what I intended. I went there and I found—" He stopped again.

Moira waited. She did not breathe.

Whatever he had been about to say, he caught it. He swallowed it whole, with a visible effort, and his face went through several changes and arrived at something blank and closed.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "None of it—" He pushed the phone into his jacket pocket. "You'll get this back."

He stepped out of the tent. She heard his footsteps on the ground, uneven, moving towards his own tent at the far end of the clearing. They slowed. She heard him stop, as he had stopped before, and stand in the dark and listen.

"No one can," he said, almost inaudibly, to the darkness. The words meant nothing to her, connected to nothing she had heard, as though the sentence had a first half that had remained unspoken. "Of course. No one can."

And then his footsteps again, and the rustle of his tent, and quiet.

Moira lay on her back in the dark and pressed both hands flat against the ground mat and breathed. From the fire, faintly, she heard Shwe Bo moving—he had heard all of it, she knew; there was no version of the conversation that had been quiet enough to miss—and then the small, deliberate sounds of him settling back to his watch.

Something passed over the tent. A shadow, immense and soundless, crossing the moonlit canvas from one side to the other—not the quick flicker of a bat but a slow, wide passage, the shadow of a wingspan that belonged to nothing she could immediately name. She heard the displacement of air in its wake, a low pulse, and then nothing, and the shadow was gone.

She lay still and listened to the forest, and after a long time the darkness above the tent canvas began, at its extreme edges, to pale.

CHAPTER TEN

THE VALLEY OF THE JUST

Dawn in the valley camp was not the tentative, gradual brightening of higher ground. The light arrived between the ridgelines in a single broad shaft that struck the clearing without preamble, and the forest around them, which had been absolute black, resolved all at once into its full green density. The hired men had the fire out and the equipment broken down before Moira had finished her water and her two biscuits. They worked quickly, without their usual conversation, and she noticed that they did not look into the jungle.

Robert Fane did not speak at breakfast. He appeared at the edge of the clearing, drank something from the hip flask he had stopped concealing two days ago, and stood looking at the pathhead below. His face had the specific, denuded look of a man who has not slept and has spent the hours of darkness in something more effortful than rest. He had the phone in his jacket pocket—she could see the shape of it. He had not returned it.

They changed direction that morning, angling northeast along a ridge before dropping into a narrow chasm valley through which a fast brown tributary of the Salween ran below its dense canopy of vegetation. The way was steeper and the bamboo here was denser than anything they had passed through, and for long stretches the

path narrowed to single file. The heat intensified as they descended from the ridge into the valley bottom, a different quality of heat from the dry hillside exposure of the previous days—wet, close, the air thick with the smell of decomposing vegetation and something mineral and very old.

Towards noon they came around a bend in the path and found themselves skirting the edge of a village—a scatter of wooden houses on stilts set back from a small cleared area, a garden of banana and papaya trees, a well, a spirit house on a carved post at the clearing's edge. Several people stood in the shade of the houses watching. Children had come to the edge of the clearing and stopped there.

Shwe Bo walked past without altering his pace, and Moira followed. She did not look back until they were well into the treeline beyond. When she did, she saw that one of the older men from the village was following them, about fifty metres back, at a steady walk. He kept that distance precisely for the next half-hour, then stopped at a point where two large trees flanked the path like gateposts, watched until they were out of sight, and did not follow further.

She did not know what the gateposts meant. Later—weeks later, in Mandalay—Shwe Bo told me what they marked: the entrance to the protected ground of the valley. The man from the village had followed them to confirm that they had crossed the boundary knowingly, having been given the chance to turn back. They had not turned back. He returned to report this, and the village spent the night in its own precautions.

They camped where the jungle pressed in on three sides and the river moved in its brown rush on the fourth. It was a miserable spot—damp, dark between the bamboo walls, the ground soft with rot—but Fane had chosen it, and Fane was past consulting about such decisions. The hired men set up the equipment without speaking, exchanging glances they thought no one noticed.

At the hottest hour of the afternoon Fane disappeared.

He went into the jungle on the western side of the camp, past the bamboo wall, without explanation and without telling anyone when he would return. One of the hired men looked at the other. Neither spoke. Moira was inside the tent, lying still, managing her resources with the same deliberate economy she had been applying to the phone's battery. She heard him go, heard the sounds of his passage in the undergrowth for several minutes, and then heard nothing but the river and the insects.

Shwe Bo set a mug of tea inside the tent entrance without comment and went back to his position at the camp's edge. Moira drank it and lay still and did not sleep. There was a spider on the tent ceiling above her—large, brown, entirely still—and she watched it and thought about nothing in particular, which was the best she could manage.

In the mid-afternoon a man came into the camp from the direction of the village. He was perhaps sixty, slightly built, wearing a longyi and a faded shirt, and he walked directly to Shwe Bo and spoke to him in Shan for several minutes. Shwe Bo listened without interrupting. The man did not look at the tent

or at the hired men or at anything except Shwe Bo's face. When he had finished speaking he turned and went back the way he had come.

Moirá had come to the tent entrance. "What did he say?" she asked.

Shwe Bo looked at her. He seemed to be deciding how much of his answer was immediately useful. "He said we must not camp here tonight," he said. "He said the men from his village will not come near this place after dark, and that the men who came with us will leave before dark if they have any sense. He said that if we intend to stay we should understand what kind of place this is."

"And what kind of place is it?" she asked.

Shwe Bo was quiet for a moment. The hired men were pretending to work on the equipment and hearing every word.

"Come and sit," he said. "I will tell you."

They sat on the fallen tree that served as the camp's one dry seat, with the river audible through the bamboo, and Shwe Bo told her what he knew about the valley. He spoke without flourish or apology, as he spoke about everything—as a man reporting what he has personally observed and what has been reported to him by people he considers reliable, and making clear which is which.

"In that jungle," he said, "there is an old temple. It is Shan—perhaps eight hundred years old, perhaps older. The man buried there was a teacher of great reputation in his time, and a healer. After his death his students maintained the temple and kept the tradition. Over many generations, the tradition was that

the valley around the temple was protected by what he had been—a just man, a man of great virtue. The protection was not against snakes or fever. It was against the unjust themselves. That is what the valley's name means, in the old form. Not that the valley judges—but that the unjust, in this place, cannot endure the night."

"How do they die?" Moira asked.

"In different ways," Shwe Bo said. "I have asked this question of people who know the valley well, and no two answers are the same. A snake. A fever that comes on quickly and passes no point of return. A fall in the dark. Something else that cannot be named." He looked at the river. "The mechanism is not what matters. The pattern is what matters. And the pattern has held, by the account of everyone who has lived in this area, for as long as anyone can tell."

"Have you been here before?"

"Once. I was twenty-two. I came here with two older men—a survey, for a different organisation. One of them knew the valley's name and its history. We camped on the near side of the marked boundary, and I slept easily. The man who knew the history slept easily. The third man was found dead before dawn. There was no mark on him. The doctor in the nearest town said cardiac arrest." Shwe Bo paused. "He had been dismissed from his previous position for taking money that was not his. I knew this. The other man knew this. We did not speak of it, then or after."

Moira looked at him. "And you're not afraid."

"I am not afraid for myself," Shwe Bo said, precisely. "I have been here before and I am here now."

The hired men had stopped pretending to work. They were listening openly. Shwe Bo glanced at them and said nothing. Fifteen minutes later both men gathered their personal equipment—not the shared kit, just their own packs—and walked out of the camp without speaking. They did not go back towards the village. They went uphill, along the path, in the direction of the first day's march.

Moira watched them go. "Should I—"

"No," said Shwe Bo. "Let them go."

The afternoon passed. Fane did not return. The quality of the light in the valley changed as the sun moved behind the ridge—it did not go dark in the ordinary way of dusk but rather went from green-gold to a deep, saturated green that was its own kind of darkness, full of the sounds of the forest rearranging itself for the night. Shwe Bo built the fire. Moira sat at the entrance of the tent and watched the jungle on the western side and waited, and tried not to think about the name of the valley and what it measured.

She heard him before she saw him.

A sound from the jungle—not a cry, at first, but a sound of violent passage, of something coming through dense growth without any effort at direction or care, crashing through bamboo, stumbling, recovering, coming on. Then a sound that she could only describe afterward as a kind of hoarse laugh that kept

losing its footing and turning into something else. Then both together.

Robert Fane came out of the jungle at the run and collapsed.

He fell at the edge of the firelight, among the objects that cascaded from his arms and pack as he hit the ground—bronze figures, four of them, each wrapped loosely in cloth he had clearly improvised from his own jacket lining; a carved ivory panel broken at one end from what looked like forced extraction; two ceramic vessels, one cracked; and a cloth bag heavy with loose stones that scattered across the ground when the bag split, red and dark in the firelight. He lay across all of it with his eyes open and a grey tinge to his face that belonged to neither the firelight nor any natural pallor.

Shwe Bo had him by the shoulders before Moira had crossed the camp. Together they dragged him to the tent and lifted him onto the bedroll. His eyes were open and glassy; his fists rose and fell in rhythmic, mechanical movements that matched the tremors in his legs. Shwe Bo opened his collar and began a rapid examination of his exposed skin—neck, arms, the backs of his hands. He checked the ankles and shook his head.

"No bite," he said quietly. "No wound."

"Then what—"

"I don't know."

Moira went to work: airway clear, breathing present though laboured, pulse fast and irregular. She administered the contents of the field kit's emergency pack—what she had. It was not much.

Shwe Bo stood in the tent entrance watching her and watching the jungle.

Then the convulsions stopped.

It was as sudden as switching something off. Fane lay still, breathing regularly, eyes losing their glassiness by degrees. And then he spoke.

"You have no proof," he said, in a perfectly calm and conversational voice. "You have a string of speculation and a few photographs and you think that constitutes evidence. I have done nothing that any man in my position wouldn't have done."

He was not talking to Moira. He was looking at a point on the tent wall to her left, and his voice had the quality of someone midway through an argument they have been rehearsing—already past the preamble, already at the stage where the case is being made to its intended audience.

"I found the site. I excavated it. The state of Myanmar has no jurisdiction over unregistered sites in contested territory, whatever your Interpol friends may tell you. These objects have sat in a jungle for eight hundred years. I am the man who found them. That is what finding things means."

He paused, as though a response had been made.

"Don't talk to me about Moira. Don't use her name. Whatever she told you, whatever she showed you—she misunderstood what she saw and she went to you because you have always made her think she could trust you with things that are none of your concern."

Moira knelt beside the bedroll and kept her hands still in her lap and did not speak.

"I know what you kept on your desk," Fane said. His voice had changed—not louder, but stripped of the argument's control, something below it becoming audible. "I know what it is to go to a man's office and find his desk and see what he keeps on it. I went back to the compound. I had been drinking. You know I had been drinking. I went back because I wanted to—I went back to make you understand that what you were doing would have consequences. And you weren't there. Your desk was there and I found—your desk had—there was a photograph. Moira's photograph. On your desk."

He raised himself on one elbow and looked at the tent wall with an expression Moira had never seen on him, an expression from which all of the constructed things—the composure, the military bearing, the controlled delivery—had been removed. What was left underneath was something raw and confused and genuinely frightened.

"I struck you from behind," he said. "From behind, yes—I was standing behind you and you didn't hear me come in and I—I had been drinking, you understand that, I had had a very great deal to drink, and when a man has had that much to drink he isn't—he isn't fully accountable, that's—that is a principle of—"

He stopped. His head turned, slowly, until he was looking at the tent ceiling rather than the wall. When he spoke again his voice was barely above a murmur.

"Is it called the Valley of the Just," he said. "Is it. Well then." He swallowed. "Then let it be just. Let it weigh the drinking against the striking. Let it weigh everything it likes."

A man who strikes another from behind is still a man who was driven there by what that other man—by what that other man kept on his desk. That is a factor. That is a material factor in—

He stopped again, and this time the silence lasted long enough that Moira thought he had lost consciousness. Then:

"Moira."

She said nothing.

"Moira. You knew what I was. Long before any of this. You knew and you stayed and you—you documented it. Very methodical. Very like you." He seemed to find something sad and almost funny in this. "Very like you."

He fell back and did not speak again.

Shwe Bo moved from the tent entrance. He checked Fane once more—brief, thorough—and then straightened and looked at Moira, and what was in his face was not without compassion, but it was also clear and certain.

"Come outside," he said.

The camp was silver with moonlight. At their feet, scattered where Fane had dropped them, the bronze figures lay among the loose stones, their surfaces catching the light in dull, reddish gleams. Shwe Bo stood looking at them for a long moment.

"These must go back," he said. "All of them. Tonight."

"And—" She did not finish the question.

"He chose to take them," Shwe Bo said. "He chose to come here. He chose everything that brought him to this place." He looked at her steadily. "I chose to come here with you. That is also a choice, and I am not afraid of what it means for me." He

held her gaze. "You chose to try to stop him. The valley knows what it knows."

Moira looked at the tent. "I should stay—"

"There is nothing you can do for him that we can do here," Shwe Bo said. Not harshly. Simply as fact. "Come. Before the night goes further."

She looked at the bronze figures on the ground—the faces she had first seen in the cases at the compound, the objects she had spent three months trying to bring to account—and then she knelt and began to gather them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TEMPLE

The jungle path at night was nothing like the path through open bamboo forest they had walked in daylight. The canopy closed above it completely, admitting no moonlight, and the torchbeam from Shwe Bo's field lamp threw shadows that moved as he moved and gave the undergrowth on either side a quality of contained motion—not threatening, exactly, but aware. Something always retreated just ahead of the light. Something always filled the darkness immediately behind it.

Shwe Bo walked without hesitation. Not quickly—the path required care, and the objects Moira carried required more—but without any of the uncertainty that might have been expected of a man finding his way through dense jungle in the dark. He turned where the path divided, chose without pausing, ducked below a fallen trunk with the ease of a man who has ducked below it before.

"How do you know the way?" Moira asked.

He did not look back. "I have been here before," he said. And then, a moment later, very quietly: "We came this way. That night."

She said nothing. She understood what he meant and did not require him to say more.

The objects she carried were wrapped in the cloth Fane had used—his own jacket lining, improvised and inadequate, but better

than nothing. She had rewrapped each one with more care before they left the camp, and now she moved with the particular caution of someone carrying things that are both fragile and irreplaceable, things that represent a body of work she had spent three months trying to protect through legitimate channels and was now completing in the only way left available. She was tired beyond the ordinary calibration of tired. She did not notice.

The path curved, descended slightly, and then opened.

The clearing was small, perhaps thirty metres across, and the moonlight reached it fully, so that after the path's absolute darkness it appeared almost bright. The trees had been cleared here long ago and had not reclaimed the space entirely, though their roots pressed in from every side and the undergrowth at the clearing's edges was dense and old. In the centre—slightly left of centre, in fact, on a raised platform of stone that the clearing seemed to have been created to accommodate—stood the temple.

It was smaller than Moira had imagined from the account of its age. The main structure was perhaps eight metres long and four wide, built of a dark stone that the centuries had covered in patches of lichen and moss, with carved figures at the corners of the roof line and flanking the entrance—not Buddhist figures, or not only Buddhist; something older in the carving style, a combination of traditions, the faces worn smooth by rain and time but still legible as guardians, still facing outward with a purpose that the erosion of their features had not diminished.

Vines had colonised the upper structure extensively. The roof was partially collapsed at the rear. The entrance—a low arch, with stone steps leading down into the interior—was clear, as though the vegetation had chosen not to cross a particular threshold.

Shwe Bo set the lamp on the stump of a broken pillar at the clearing's edge, where the moonlight rendered its beam unnecessary. He turned.

"It is you who must restore them," he said.

Moira looked at him.

"I will carry the light and I will show you where they go. But the placing must be yours." He held her gaze. "You found them. You documented them. You tried to bring them back. This is the completion of that." He paused. "I think you understand why."

She did understand. She did not entirely know how she understood, or how the logic of it—which would have seemed arbitrary an hour ago—felt now, in this clearing, entirely self-evident. She shifted the wrapped objects in her arms and nodded.

He took the lamp and led her down the steps.

The interior was cooler than the night outside, and the air had a mineral density, like the inside of a cave—not unpleasant, not stale, simply old. Very old. The kind of old that has mass, that presses slightly against the skin. The entrance passage was short and low, with walls of dressed stone that had been carved with a running pattern she did not have time to examine. At its end a door stood open—heavy timber, iron-banded, the wood dark

with age and sound. Shwe Bo pushed it further and they went through.

The inner hall was perhaps five metres square, its ceiling supported by four stone pillars, their surfaces carved with figures she would have spent an hour examining under any other circumstances. Through a window high in the eastern wall—an opening perhaps thirty centimetres square, now framed with vegetation—a shaft of moonlight entered and illuminated the opposite wall in a pale, oblique band. The floor was clean stone, smooth with use.

At the far end of the hall, before the carved figure of a seated teacher—she recognised the style: a Shan teacher-monk of the medieval period, depicted in the posture of the earth-touching gesture—stood a long stone repository. It had the proportions of a chest or altar, waist-high, running the full width of the wall behind it. Along its top were three stone lids, each fitted precisely into a recessed frame, each with a handhold carved at its near edge.

Shwe Bo held the lamp while Moira unwrapped the objects one by one and set them on the floor before the repository: the four bronze figures, the ivory panel, the two ceramic vessels. She stacked the loose stones—the rubies and the dark semiprecious material she had not identified—carefully to one side. Then she straightened and looked at the three lids.

"The left and the right," Shwe Bo said. "The left for the figures. The right for the smaller objects."

"And the centre?"

He was already moving towards the left lid. "Leave the centre."

She took the left lid's handhold and lifted. It was heavier than it looked, requiring both hands, and it moved with the resistance of something that had not been opened for a very long time—a sound like an intake of breath, a brief resistance, and then it came up and she set it aside. The interior was stone-lined, dry, with fitted recesses carved to accommodate specific objects. She could see where the bronze figures had stood. She began to place them.

There is a quality to returning a thing to where it belongs that is entirely distinct from placing a thing down. She had never articulated this before and could not have done so now, but she felt it plainly—a rightness in the fitting of each object into its recess that had nothing to do with the physical fact of the fit, though the fit was exact. She placed all four figures. She moved to the right lid.

It came up more easily. She placed the ceramic vessels, the ivory panel, the piled stones.

She replaced both lids.

She stood with her hands flat on the stone surface and breathed, and the hall was quiet around her, and the carved teacher behind the repository looked past her with the particular patience of carved faces that have been looking at the same middle distance for eight hundred years.

She did not know what moved her hand to the centre lid.

She told me she could not explain it—not as compulsion, not as accident, not as curiosity, exactly, though curiosity was the nearest word available. She was reaching for the handhold before she had decided to, the way you reach for something in a familiar room in the dark. Shwe Bo's voice came from somewhere behind her left shoulder:

"Not that one."

But she had already lifted it.

The cold came first—a breath of air from below that was genuinely cold, cave-cold, the cold of underground spaces where the sun has never reached. With it came a smell: mineral and organic at once, the smell of guano and stone and the deep dark. The opening below the lid was not the confined recess of the other two compartments. It was a shaft, descending into blackness, and from its depths came a sound—or rather the precursor to a sound, a vibration of the air that preceded the movement it announced by just enough time to make the movement, when it came, almost expected.

It came from below. It rose through the opening with the unhurried certainty of something that has done this ten thousand times—pale beneath the moonlight shaft from the high window, immense in the confined space, the wings spreading to their full span as it cleared the stone rim. The wingspan was greater than the length of her outstretched arms. The face, turned towards her as it rose, was small and sharp-featured, the eyes catching the moonlight with a brightness that was not reflective but seemed generative, as though something behind them was lit.

It passed beneath her raised hands—she had thrown them up in pure reflex—and turned in the darkness to the right, and she heard the wings beat against the far wall and then against a pillar, and then it came back into the moonlight crossing the hall in a long, silent arc, and it was very large, and very white in that light, and very near.

And then Moira Fane, who had walked four days in brutal heat through hostile terrain with her jaw set and her hands steady and her composure intact through every extremity the journey had offered—who had watched her husband confess to violence and heard the valley pronounce on him and knelt in the dark gathering stolen objects from the jungle floor—sat down on the stone floor of an eight-hundred-year-old temple and knew nothing more.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE DAWN

When Moira opened her eyes the sky above the valley was the colour of pale ash and the birds had begun.

She was propped against a pack frame at the edge of the dead fire, covered with a field blanket that was not her own. Shwe Bo sat two metres away with his knees drawn up and his back against a tree, awake, watching the jungle on the western side of the camp with the focused attention of a man who has been watching it for some time.

"How did I—"

"I carried you," he said. "The objects are restored. Both compartments. I closed the centre lid before we left." He did not look away from the jungle. "Rest."

She sat up. Her hands were clean. Her arms. Whatever she had expected to feel, waking, was not this particular stillness—not peace, not relief, not the residue of fear, but something simpler: the quality of a room after a long noise has finally stopped.

The fire was ash. The hired men's equipment was gone—they had taken everything they'd come with and left the shared kit, which was orderly, which was not what she would have predicted of men who had fled in darkness. The camp had been emptied, not ransacked.

"The men—"

"Gone before we returned. They will be back at the village by now, or further." He paused. "Something came while we were at the temple. They did not stay to see it."

"What came?"

Shwe Bo was quiet for a moment. "There was a small object," he said. "A bronze disc—a dedicatory piece, a votive medallion from the inner passage. I saw it when he came back from the temple. It was in the outside pocket of his jacket. I knew where it came from." He stopped. "I meant to take it before we left for the temple. I forgot. In the—I forgot." He said this with the flatness of a man acknowledging a fact about himself that he would rather not have to acknowledge. "Something came for what was owed."

Moirra looked at the tent at the far end of the camp.

"He is gone," Shwe Bo said. "Before dawn."

She stood. He did not try to stop her. She crossed the camp to the tent and looked in. She stood in the entrance for a long moment and then came back and sat down by the dead fire, and they were both quiet for a while.

"I wanted to tell him," she said finally, "that he was wrong about Harrington. That it was never—that Harrington was helping me. That there was nothing else."

Shwe Bo said nothing.

"He knew that," she said. "On some level. He knew." She looked at the ground. "He just couldn't afford to know it."

The light in the valley had changed from ash to the first flat grey of actual dawn. Somewhere above the ridgeline to the

east the sun had not yet cleared the hill but was already pressing against it, and the sky above the ridge was beginning to go from grey to something warmer. The birds that had begun with single, tentative notes had now accumulated into a general conversation across the canopy, each species marking the moment in its own register.

Shwe Bo poured water from the field flask into a cup and held it out.

"We should go soon," he said. "When there is enough light for the path."

"Yes," she said, and drank.

She told me afterward that the walk back to the village took most of the morning, and that Shwe Bo led the way with the same steady pace he had held for four days, and that they did not speak much. The village knew, when they arrived, without being told. An elder met them at the marked boundary and looked at Moira and at Shwe Bo and asked one question in Shan. Shwe Bo answered. The elder nodded once and stood aside to let them through, and the village provided them with food and a place to rest and, in the late afternoon, a vehicle to the nearest road.

I was at the Mandalay General when Jack Harrington woke.

It was the third day after the attack. I had been at the hospital on and off since Su Kyi's call, partly because I was the person who had been working most closely with him and partly because, in the absence of family—Harrington had none nearby—someone needed to be there to speak to the doctors and to the police liaison officer who came and went with the routine

persistence of a man processing a file he expects to close quickly. I was there at six in the morning because I had been there at midnight and it had not seemed worth going back to the hotel.

The doctor came to find me in the corridor. She said he was awake and asking for Moira Fane.

I told her Moira Fane was alive and unhurt and on her way back to Mandalay and would be there within twenty-four hours. She went back in to tell him. When she came back she said that he had asked for a pen and paper, which she had provided, and that he had written something and then folded the paper and given it back to her sealed and said to give it to Moira Fane when she arrived and to no one else. She handed it to me for safekeeping and I gave it to Moira the following afternoon in the hospital corridor, unopened, and I do not know what it contained.

Harrington made a full recovery. The attack was officially attributed to persons unknown with a robbery motive, a verdict that suited several parties and that no one with the relevant knowledge was in a position to contest, Robert Fane being dead in a valley in the southern Shan Hills from what would eventually be listed, following a complicated series of jurisdictional conversations, as cardiac arrest. Moira came back to Mandalay and gave her account to the Interpol cultural property unit, whose officer flew in from Bangkok within the week. Three months later the documentation that Harrington had submitted, and that Moira had contributed to, resulted in the disruption of the network through which the looted objects had been moving. I wrote about

this for The Planet. It was the article I had come to Myanmar to write.

The bronze figures and the ritual objects from the temple are still there, as far as I know. The temple is not on any registered list. Shwe Bo has not told me its location, and I have not asked.

What I could not write about for The Planet—what I set down here instead, as I have set down everything else in these accounts that does not fit the frameworks I began with—is the question of what the valley is. I have spent time since Myanmar with the geological literature on the Shan Hills. There are documented instances of naturally occurring gas emissions in the volcanic rock formations of the region, associated with specific thermal conditions, that can produce neurological effects in humans exposed to them at close range over extended periods. There is a documented correlation between certain ancient sacred sites in mainland Southeast Asia and geological features that would explain, in purely physical terms, why those sites were chosen: because people felt something there, and the feeling was real, and its source was in the ground.

This framework is available to me. I have used it before. I used it to explain what happened at Low Wenfold, and I used it with confidence, and I stand by it as far as it goes.

In the Shan Hills it does not go as far.

The phantom guns. The selectivity. The timing—not just that Robert Fane died before dawn, but that it was the same dawn on which Jack Harrington opened his eyes in a hospital room two

hundred kilometres away and asked for a pen. I am not suggesting a causal connection. I am noting a coincidence, as I note all data, and declining to draw a conclusion from it, as I decline all conclusions that my evidence does not support.

I asked Shwe Bo, before I left Mandalay, whether he thought the valley was geological in its mechanism or something else. He considered the question carefully, as he considered all questions.

"Both, probably," he said. "I have always found it difficult to determine which part is which."

It was, I recognised, the same answer I had given Marwood about Low Wenfold. I was not sure whether this comforted me or not.

I left Myanmar two weeks later. The article ran the following month. I did not mention the valley by name, or the temple, or Shwe Bo, or the bronze figures restored to their recesses in the dark. I mentioned Robert Fane only as a contractor whose activities had formed part of a wider network now dismantled. I gave him as little as the story required and no more.

Whether that is justice I am genuinely unable to say.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BLACK GAP

The friend I shall call East—he would prefer that I did not name him at all, but some designation is necessary, and East will serve—had been attempting, for the better part of a fortnight, to do nothing.

He was not succeeding. The kitchen table of our rented cottage on Dartmoor was now covered, at the end of every day, with botanical specimens collected that morning in a condition of barely suppressed intensity, and he had spent most of three evenings organising and reorganising them with a grim precision that was far more suggestive of a man pulling apart a difficult problem than of a man on holiday. He was lean and brown and had the kind of coiled stillness that produced, in practice, a great deal of restless movement, and I had known him long enough to understand that the business of not working was, for him, considerably harder work than working.

"We came here for quiet and rest," I said, watching him above the rim of my glass. He was bent over the table under the lamp, rearranging a row of heather specimens with an attention that their objective qualities did not entirely warrant. "You specifically."

"And is it not quiet?" he said, without looking up.

"Remarkably. I don't dispute the quiet. But I can't say I've seen you rest from the moment we arrived. I exclude the hours of

sleep, during which I gather from the sounds that rest is also not quite the word."

"My nerves are not settled yet," he said shortly. "They will improve."

Whether the several months preceding our Dartmoor retreat had been harder on East than on me I was genuinely uncertain. The particulars of what we had both come through in that period are not relevant to the present account, and were in any case not the sort of thing that invites recounting, but they had left their mark on both of us in ways that the prescription of two weeks in a moorland cottage was meant to address. The cottage was remote—a long low building at the end of a track, in a fold of the moor that kept it hidden until you were almost upon it, with nothing but heather and granite and the occasional moorland pony in any direction. The nearest house, a place called The Warrens, was a mile and a half away across the moor. The nearest village was three miles by road.

We had been here eleven days and I had, in fact, achieved something resembling rest. East had achieved an extensive collection of Dartmoor flora and a deepening dissatisfaction with his own company.

It was a hot evening—the end of a day that had been oppressive in the specific, lidded way of late August on high ground when a front has stalled and the air has been building pressure all afternoon without producing the storm that would release it. The window was open. The moonlight on the moor outside was extraordinary—the kind of flat, brilliant light that

turns heather to pewter and makes shadows very black. I was on my second glass of something unremarkable and in no hurry to move.

Then the sound came.

It was from behind the cottage—or from somewhere on the moor to the rear, which was the higher ground—and it was not a sound the moor normally produced. I put my glass down and turned towards the window. East had gone motionless at the table.

"You heard it," I said.

"A woman," he said. He was already on his feet.

We went out through the back door without stopping for jackets or torches. The moon gave enough light to see the slope rising behind the cottage, and as we cleared the corner of the building a figure appeared on the crest of the low rise about two hundred metres ahead—a silhouette against the bright sky, a woman, who raised both arms when she saw us and then lost her footing coming down.

We reached her before she hit the ground. East caught her. She was in a condition I recognised: the specific physical state of someone who has been running on adrenaline past the point where the body can sustain it and has now cashed in the debt.

"It's Olive Falkner," East said. He knew her—Sir Jeffrey Falkner's daughter, from The Warrens. She was perhaps twenty-five, dark-haired, slight; East and I had spoken to her twice during the fortnight at a distance of neighbourly courtesy and no more. "Come on. Inside."

He half-carried her down to the cottage and got her onto the low sofa in the sitting room. I gave her water and then something

stronger, and she held herself together with the effortful deliberateness of someone who has decided she is not going to collapse and is keeping that decision under review.

When she could speak:

"My father," she said. "My poor father—"

"What's happened?" I said.

"At Black Gap. He's—he's lying on the path. I almost—" She stopped and pressed her hands together. "He's been murdered."

East was at the window, looking out at the moor. He turned. "Sir Jeffrey."

"Yes." She pulled a breath. "He went ahead on foot—the car was in for repairs—from Marlton station, after the auction. I stopped in the village on the way back and he went on alone. And when I came along the path past Black Gap I found him—I nearly—" She stopped again.

"Sotheby's," said East, and something in his voice changed quality. "The auction was today. The Shan Hills collection."

"Yes. He bought several things." She looked at East with swollen eyes. "He was carrying one of them back himself. He wouldn't put it in the car. He wanted to—he always carried things he cared about personally. He said he'd—"

"What was it?" said East. "What was he carrying?"

She blinked, apparently surprised that this was the question. "A figure. A blue porcelain figure of an ape. Quite large. He said it was Burmese, or possibly Chinese—he wasn't certain yet. He bought it at the last minute, I don't think it was even properly catalogued. He was pleased with it."

East's eyes were doing the thing they did when something had caught in them—a stillness that looked, to anyone who didn't know him, like blankness, and was in fact the precise opposite. He asked several questions rapidly: had the parcel been with her father when she found him; had she seen anyone on the path; had she touched anything. Her answers were no, no, and no. She had not been able to make herself look at him for more than a moment.

Then she looked at East directly and said: "Mr. East. I know that is not your real name. My father told me some time ago—not specifically, not in detail, but enough. He said that you work on sensitive matters for the government and that if we were ever in any serious difficulty and you happened to be available, we should trust you completely."

"Your father," said East, with a flatness that was not coldness, "was an indiscreet man."

"He trusted you."

East looked at her for a moment. Something behind the stillness shifted. "He was right to," he said. "Stay here. Don't open the door to anyone but us. I'll ring Dr. Locke in the village—she can come and sit with you."

He took out his phone and made two calls in rapid succession—one to Dr. Locke, one that he made standing in the doorway of the back bedroom with his voice too low for me to catch. Then he turned to me with the expression I had seen before and would see again: the expression of a man for whom the world has just rearranged itself into an interesting configuration.

"Come," he said. "And bring a torch."

Outside, the moon was enormous and the moor was silver and very quiet. We walked without speaking. I knew East well enough not to interrupt him when he was thinking, and he was thinking now—the slight forward lean, the pace exactly one notch faster than comfortable, the eyes moving between the path ahead and the ground on either side with the quality of a systematic search. He had always walked this way when something had caught him. The rest it was not.

Black Gap was half a mile. The moor path curved to skirt it on the south-east side, passing between the wet ground around the coppice and the raised clay bank above the tarn. In daylight it was a notable and slightly sinister landscape feature—a deep, black pool of unknown depth, locally believed to be the site of an abandoned Roman mine and associated, in the usual way of such places, with a sufficient quantity of legend to keep walkers on the path after dark. In the moonlight it was an unequivocal statement in silver and black, the water entirely still, the clay banks throwing sharp shadows, the coppice very dense beside it.

We found Sir Jeffrey Falkner eighty metres short of the Gap, on the path beside the coppice, in the attitude of a man who has been fighting hard and lost.

East crouched beside him and worked quickly, the torchbeam moving where he directed it. I came down beside him. The assessment was not long in taking.

"Blow to the head, first," East said quietly. "Something heavy—blunt. The hat absorbed some of it." He moved the torch.

"He fought back. Then—" He indicated the throat. "Strangulation. Bare hands."

"He's been dead—" I started.

"Not long. Two hours, perhaps less." East stood and moved the beam slowly across the ground around the body, outward, and then stopped. I came to stand beside him and looked at what the light was showing.

The body lay on soft ground—it had rained in the morning—and the area immediately around it was a confusion of overlapping marks, the evidence of a sustained and violent struggle. But leading away from this confusion, in the direction of the coppice, was a different kind of impression entirely. A trail. Small, regular, going forward in the characteristic alternating pattern of a creature on all fours.

"A child," I said slowly. "Or—"

"Look at the shape of the impressions," East said. "Look at the hands."

I looked. The handprints were not a child's. The spacing was wrong, the proportion was wrong, and the individual marks—fingers, palm, weight distribution—were wrong in a way I could identify but not immediately name.

East straightened and looked at the trail leading into the coppice. He looked at the scattered wrapping paper on the ground. He looked at the body.

"The blue monkey," he said, "is not here."

I said nothing, because there was nothing useful to say, and because the thought that had arrived in my mind in the last

thirty seconds was one that I was not yet ready to speak aloud to anyone.

THE WARRENS

East left for London before seven in the morning, and I did not know when he intended to return. This was characteristic. He had made his phone calls the previous night, had given what needed giving to the detective sergeant who arrived at Black Gap at eleven o'clock with a forensics team, and had apparently extracted from these interactions whatever he needed, because by the time I came downstairs he was gone and there was a note on the kitchen table that said: Back tonight or tomorrow. Ask Mavrides about the dimensions of the monkey. Do not speculate aloud.

The second instruction I found easier to follow than the first.

The Devon police had the crime scene from first light, and the forensics team worked through until mid-morning. By the time I took my coffee outside and looked across the moor towards Black Gap, the SOCO tent had come down and the vehicles were gone, and there was nothing to see from this distance but the flat pewter shimmer of the tarn between the clay banks. It had rained in the night—not heavily, enough to glaze the heather and puddle the track—and whatever the ground had preserved beside the coppice was gone, processed or washed away.

I sat with my coffee and did what East had told me not to do, which is to say I speculated.

The logic was unpleasant and I followed it anyway, because that is what it is to have spent enough time in East's company.

The tracks from the body led into the coppice. They had the character of an ape—not perfectly, and I had not committed to this conclusion aloud, but the hand impressions in particular, reviewed in my memory, had a spacing and a shape that did not belong to a human child. No tracks approached the body—none—which meant that whatever had made those retreating marks had not arrived by walking. It had arrived in Sir Jeffrey's arms, wrapped in brown paper, bought at auction that morning at Sotheby's.

A hollow china figure, completely modelled, that had apparently animated itself, freed itself from its wrapping, killed the man carrying it, and walked into the coppice.

"These are the reflections of a person who needs more sleep," I said aloud, to the heather.

The heather did not disagree. But East had been very interested in the blue monkey, and East was rarely interested in things that turned out to be nothing.

I found my thoughts poor company and decided, at around eleven, to walk across to The Warrens to ask after Olive Falkner. It was partly genuine concern and partly, I admitted to myself as I set out, the desire to do something with the restlessness that East's note and East's absence had left behind.

The path to The Warrens did not pass close to Black Gap—it skirted it from the north, keeping to higher and dryer ground—but the approach still required crossing the edge of the moorland section where, the previous night, we had found Sir Jeffrey. I made myself look at the spot as I passed it. The ground around it was a chaos of shallow depressions and compressed grass from the

forensics team's work, and whatever story it had told in the night was thoroughly overwritten now. There was nothing here in the bright morning except the disturbed ground and the particular quality of attention one pays to a place where something irreversible has happened.

The Warrens was a low stone house of the kind that Dartmoor produces with some regularity—built to last against weather rather than to impress, with deep-set windows and a porch that had been added sometime in the Victorian period and clashed amiably with everything around it. Sir Jeffrey had converted one of the outbuildings into the museum that had, according to East and various published references I had found online the previous evening, made him a figure of some consequence in the field of East Asian decorative arts. The garden was well-kept. There were cars in the drive that I did not recognise.

The housekeeper who answered the door told me that Miss Falkner had left for London that morning—a communication from the solicitors had required her immediate attention, and Mrs. Grierson, Sir Jeffrey's sister, had accompanied her. She had asked whether Mr. Mavrides was available and the housekeeper had gone to ask, and a few minutes later I was shown into a long library with book-lined walls and a central table that held, among stacked catalogues and folders, the composed evidence of a lifetime's serious collecting.

Mavrides rose when I came in. He was, as I had previously noted, a remarkably good-looking man—perhaps thirty-five, dark, with a quality of contained precision in the way he held himself

and moved. He was wearing black. He looked as though he had not slept, and the evidence of genuine grief in his face was the kind that is either real or a very accomplished performance, and I have enough experience of both to be reluctant to distinguish between them under adverse conditions.

"Dr. Carmody," he said. He had met me twice before, briefly, and retained the name. "You were with—you found him, last night."

"My friend East and I were the first on the scene, yes." I sat in the chair he indicated. "I came to ask after Miss Falkner, and also—" I paused, measuring this. "I wanted to ask you a few questions, if you're willing. About Sir Jeffrey's purchase yesterday."

Something moved in his expression, very briefly. "The monkey."

"Yes. I realise it may seem an odd focus—"

"No," he said. He sat back down and looked at his own hands on the table surface for a moment. "It doesn't seem odd. Your friend East asked about it last night before he left." He looked up. "I liked Sir Jeffrey very much. If there is anything I can tell you that helps find whoever—yes. Ask."

"The dimensions," I said. "Can you describe the figure? Its size, weight, how it was modelled?"

Mavrides considered. "About the size of a Barbary macaque—if you know them. A full-grown one. Forty centimetres, perhaps a little more. Hollow—it was quite light for its apparent size, though Sir Jeffrey thought it probably had some fill material because it was denser than it should have been for the wall

thickness. The modelling was complete—every surface, right down to the soles of the feet and the individual nails on the hands and feet.” He looked at me. “It was a very accomplished piece. I said to Sir Jeffrey at the time that the execution was better than the period—it was catalogued as nineteenth century but the workmanship suggested older material, possibly a copy of something much earlier.”

“And the feet,” I said carefully. “The proportions of the hands and feet.”

“They were accurate. I commented on that specifically—most decorative pieces of this type stylise the extremities. This one was anatomically correct. I told Sir Jeffrey it was unusual.” He paused. “Why do you ask about the feet?”

“Professional curiosity,” I said, which was not entirely untrue and was the best I could offer. I thanked him and stood, and he walked me to the door with a composure that had, or I thought it had, a slight effortful quality beneath its surface—the composure of a man who is managing something, not the composure of a man who is not.

I filed this away and said nothing and walked back across the moor.

I had lost track of the time at The Warrens, and it was further into the afternoon than I had realised. The light was going gold and horizontal by the time I reached the lower section of the path, and the shadows from the granite tors to the west were already long across the heather. Black Gap was ahead. I had been brisk and purposeful about it in the morning and found

myself less so now. There was no rational basis for this—it was a tarn in a Dartmoor hollow in broad late-afternoon light—and I walked at the same pace regardless, because I am not entirely ruled by the irrational, only partly.

The coppice beside Black Gap in the late afternoon had the deep shadow of deciduous trees at the end of summer, when the leaves are at their fullest and thickest and the light comes only from above. I was abreast of it, eyes forward, when something moved in the edge of my vision and I stopped.

A figure was crouching at the coppice margin. Low to the ground, partially screened by the undergrowth. Still.

The thought I had was not rational and I did not entertain it past its first half-second. Because:

"All right," said East's voice. "With you in a moment."

He rose from the undergrowth and came out to the path, carrying something on a length of cord—two lengths, looped at intervals around a bulky, angular, blue-glazed shape of roughly forty centimetres in height. He held it away from his body and looked at it with the expression of a man who has confirmed something that has been annoying him.

"The blue monkey," he said. "It was in the tarn. Tied to an ebony walking stick and weighted with clay. The weeds along the south bank were holding it just below the surface." He looked at me. "Did you speak to Mavrides?"

"Feet and hands completely and accurately modelled," I said. "Hollow. Approximately the weight and size of a live Barbary macaque."

East looked at me for a moment with something that, in a less contained person, might have been satisfaction. "Good. Come. I am going to The Warrens."

He set off along the path at his characteristic pace—a notch too fast for comfortable company—and I followed, looking at the blue figure of the ape swinging from the cord in his hand, and thinking about tracks that went into a coppice and did not come back, and about a hollow china figure weighted with clay and dropped into a moorland tarn, and beginning to see, with a not entirely comfortable clarity, the shape of what East was going to say.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE STEPPING STONE

The library at The Warrens had the quality that a room acquires when its owner has died in it unexpectedly—not the settled, deliberate hush of a house in mourning, but something less composed, the hush of a space that has not yet adjusted to

the fact of absence. Sir Jeffrey's catalogues still lay where he had left them. His reading glasses were on the corner of the desk. The lamp over the central table had been left on.

East placed the blue monkey on the table and took his seat at the far end. I sat to one side. Mavrides, who had received East's request for a meeting with apparent willingness and only a slight pause, took the chair to East's right. Between us all, on the polished surface, the monkey squatted with its characteristic air of impassive self-possession. The loops of cord were still knotted around it at its waist and shoulders. East had left them in place.

Mavrides looked at the figure, then at East. "You found it."

"In the tarn," said East. "This afternoon."

"I'm glad." Mavrides's tone was genuine and composed. "He wanted it at home. It seemed important to him."

"It was important," said East. He settled his hands flat on the table surface, fingers spread, and looked at Mavrides with the focused attention that I had seen directed at many things, and always meant the same thing. "Let me tell you what I know about it."

Mavrides nodded and waited.

"When I learnt that Sir Jeffrey had been carrying this object at the time of his death, and that it had disappeared from the scene, I assumed initially that it was the motive. Sir Jeffrey had valuables on him—cash, a good watch, his phone. The monkey was missing; therefore someone wanted the monkey, and took it after killing him." East paused. "But that didn't hold. So

yesterday morning, before I went to London, I ran a quick check on the piece. It has next to no market value. It's of comparatively modern Chinese manufacture—nineteenth century at the latest, possibly later. Sir Jeffrey apparently bought it because it caught his attention, not because it was significant. The theory of the curio as motive collapsed immediately."

"Then what was the motive?" asked Mavrides.

East looked at him. "I'll come to that. First—the tracks."

He produced his phone and set it on the table, displaying a photograph: the ground beside Sir Jeffrey's body as it had been the previous night before the SOCO team processed it.

"You weren't at the scene," East said to Mavrides, "so you haven't seen these. Carmody will confirm. There were tracks leading away from the body in the direction of the coppice. They had the character—at first glance—of small bare feet and hands, the pattern of a creature on all fours." He tapped the photograph. "They were not that. I recognised, as soon as I studied them carefully, that they were too regular. A living animal moving at any natural pace produces slight variations in pressure and placement with every stride. These were machine-regular. They were made by something that was not alive and was being manipulated—pressed into the ground at controlled, even intervals."

"By the monkey," I said. I had been following the logic since the path, and I might as well say it.

"By the monkey." East looked at the figure on the table. "Placed feet-downward, pressed firmly into the soft ground,

lifted, moved forward, pressed again." He reached out and turned the figure slightly, displaying the underside of one foot. The detail of the sole and toes was, as Mavrides had told me, precisely and accurately rendered. "The impressions were consistent with these feet. And note"—he indicated the cord loops—"that something has been tied around this figure at two points. The string was used to manipulate it."

Mavrides studied the monkey with what appeared to be frank curiosity. "But surely," he said, "even if the figure was used to make those marks—someone still had to be present to use it that way. And you said there were no other footprints approaching the body."

"There were none," said East. "Which brought me to the second part of the problem." He set the phone down. "No footprints approaching. But the killer was there—he struck Sir Jeffrey, struggled with him, and strangled him. So how did he arrive without leaving marks?"

He paused. When East paused like this it was not for effect. It was because he was checking the sequence in his own mind before committing it to words.

"Sir Jeffrey walked from Marlton station to The Warrens," East said. "It rained yesterday morning, and the path from the station to the house was soft for most of its length. Any footprints made on that path yesterday evening would have been clearly preserved." He looked at Mavrides. "The killer followed Sir Jeffrey from the station. He was careful. He placed his feet almost exactly in the impressions Sir Jeffrey had already made—

using the baronet's own track as a guide, stepping in each print or close enough to it that no separate set of marks appeared. Sir Jeffrey would not have heard him. A man walking on already-compressed ground makes almost no sound."

The room was very quiet. The lamp hummed faintly above us.

"He came up behind Sir Jeffrey at Black Gap," East continued. "Struck him—something heavy, blunt, found locally, discarded afterward. Sir Jeffrey's hat absorbed some of the blow. He fought back, and the ground around them became a complete confusion of marks that tells us nothing useful. The killer prevailed. He strangled him." A pause. "Then he had a problem. He was standing on soft ground, surrounded by the evidence of the struggle. Every step away from the body would leave a new set of footprints, trackable, identifiable. He needed to leave without a trace."

"The monkey," said Mavrides, who had been very still for the past several minutes.

"He used the monkey as a stepping stone." East laid both hands on the table and looked at Mavrides with a directness that I had seen stop people mid-sentence. "He placed the figure on the ground in front of him at a suitable distance. He stepped onto it—it's hollow but dense enough to bear a man's weight for a moment. Then, using two walking sticks for support—"

"Two sticks?" I said.

"Sir Jeffrey's ash stick and his own." East nodded towards the monkey. "He looped the cord around the figure. With his weight transferred to the sticks, he used the loops to lift the

monkey forward—and stepped onto it again. And so on. A slow, effortful, methodical business. But every step he took was on the monkey's surface, not the ground. When he reached the firmer earth of the coppice, he had left no identifiable footprints between the body and the trees." East leaned back. "I noticed, in the photographs of the track, a series of small wedge-shaped holes, paired, running parallel to the monkey impressions. They puzzled me until I understood what I was looking at. They were the tips of the two sticks, each slightly different in diameter. One narrower than the other."

He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a short length of wood—dark, dense, broken cleanly across its narrow diameter with a small metal ferrule still attached to the lower end.

"The narrower stick," he said, placing it on the table, "snapped. Ebony, which is brittle in proportion to its strength. The lower section, with the ferrule, was left in the ground. The killer would have retrieved it if he could, but it was embedded, and he was running out of options. He left it." East looked at the fragment, then at the monkey, then at Mavrides. "He reached the coppice. He tied the monkey to what remained of his stick. He filled the monkey's hollow interior with clay from the bank to give it additional weight. He walked along the coppice to the Gap and dropped both into the tarn."

He let this rest on the table between us for a moment.

"Ebony is rather brittle, isn't it," he said pleasantly, "Mr. Mavrides?"

Mavrides had taken a cigarette from the case on the table and was in the process of lighting it. The lighter clicked. His face above the flame showed nothing, or almost nothing—the faintest shift around the eyes, something behind the composure that moved and then was controlled again, and if I had not been watching very carefully I would have missed it entirely.

"It is," Mavrides said. He exhaled slowly. "A very fine piece, this." He nodded towards the wooden fragment. "One doesn't often see ebony of that quality in a walking stick."

"No," said East. "Particularly not with a monogram."

He turned the fragment to show the silver band just above the ferrule—an engraved oval, two letters. He set it back on the table and looked at Mavrides with the same directness as before.

And Mavrides looked back at him, and I watched both of them, and the library was very quiet, and the blue monkey sat between us on the table and stared at the middle distance with the expression of a creature that has seen everything and finds it entirely unsurprising.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BLUE MONKEY

The silence after East's last line lasted perhaps four seconds.

Then East said, clearly and without raising his voice:
"Selby."

The library door opened. The man who entered was solidly built and somewhere in his forties, wearing a dark jacket that he had clearly put on recently and not for social purposes. He

carried, wrapped in an evidence bag, the remaining portion of an ebony walking stick—the upper section, handle intact, broken at its lower end. He crossed to East and placed it on the table beside the fragment that East had already produced.

The two pieces lay alongside each other. The break was clean and corresponding. The monogram engraved on the upper section's silver band was identical to the one on the ferrule end.

"Detective Sergeant Marsh," said East, in the tone of a man performing an introduction at a function rather than identifying an arresting officer. "Devon and Cornwall. He and I spent an instructive afternoon at the Gap." He looked at Mavrides. "The monkey and the cane were tied together, filled with clay, and dropped into the tarn from the north bank. Not difficult to locate once one knew where to look."

Mavrides was still holding his cigarette. He had not moved since Selby entered. He looked at the two pieces of the cane, and at the monkey, and then at East with an expression that was no longer a performance of anything because there was nothing left for it to perform.

"I don't know," said East conversationally, "what you used to strike him initially. Something from the coppice, I would imagine—a branch, picked up and discarded. Nor do I know what you did with his ash stick." He spread his hands. "I expect we'll find both in time. But those are details."

Mavrides set his cigarette in the ashtray on the table. He did it with care. He stood, and his chair made a sound against the floor, and Marsh moved one quiet step closer.

"A broken elm branch," said Mavrides, in a voice that had lost all its careful modulation and had become something rougher and more direct. "His hat absorbed it. I had to—I completed it with my hands." He looked at the table rather than at East or at me. "You needn't tell me that Olive has told you about the marriage. I'm sure she has. It was registered in May. Sir Jeffrey didn't know. He would never have agreed—I had nothing, in his eyes, nothing of substance, nothing he valued. He would have cut her off entirely." He looked up then, and what was in his face was not the composed, cultured man I had spent an hour with that morning. It was something stripped and unguarded. "She inherits everything. She is my wife. I was desperate."

"Yes," said East.

"I followed him from the station. I had been planning it for—I had been thinking about it for some time. I had decided it in London, on the train, watching him carry that ridiculous parcel, pleased with himself." His voice had a quality I could not quite name—not remorse, not justification, but something that was trying to be neither. "He was going to destroy everything we had built. Everything. Because I wasn't good enough. Because I hadn't been born in the right place to the right people." He stopped. "I don't ask you to understand it."

"No," said East. "You shouldn't."

Marsh had been moving with a patience and a quiet that I had only then registered—edging closer with each exchange, angling himself between Mavrides and the door, closing the distance by increments. He was perhaps two metres away.

Then Mavrides reached inside his jacket.

Everything happened in a space of time too compressed for sequential account. East was on his feet and back from the table. Marsh lunged. The sound in the library was contained and enormous simultaneously. Mavrides went forward across the table with the full weight of a man who has lost all muscular control, and the table tilted under the impact, and the blue monkey—which had been sitting at its centre throughout all of this, the object around which the whole evening had organised itself, the thing that had made tracks that went one way and not the other—slid across the polished surface and fell.

It struck the oak floor and was gone.

Not dramatically. Not in one clean break. In several, the sound of each arriving slightly after the last, a brief diminishing sequence of impacts, and then fragments—blue glaze, pale body material, a foot, the curve of a shoulder—scattered between the table legs and across the floor in the specific pattern of things that were made to hold together and have abruptly stopped.

I was on my feet without knowing I had stood. East had a hand on my arm. Marsh was already on his radio. The room, which had been extremely quiet for the past ten minutes, was now full of voices and movement and the particular quality of shock that is not horror—this had not been entirely unexpected, by East at any rate—but the body's own registration of the fact that something irreversible has just occurred.

Sir Jeffrey's library. The books he had spent a lifetime acquiring. His reading glasses still on the desk. His catalogues open at the page he had been marking when he left for the auction that morning.

I thought of the monkey found at the bottom of the tarn, of the cord loops East had left in place, of the tracks in the soft ground that were not a child's and not an animal's and were, in the end, the most mundane thing in the case: a tool, used and discarded. And I thought of Sir Jeffrey walking home in the evening across the moor, carrying something he was pleased with, ahead of a man who had already decided what he was going to do.

East picked up the ebony cane fragment from the table and handed it to Marsh without speaking. Then he looked down at the fragments of the blue monkey on the floor for a long moment.

"Leave it," I said.

He looked at me.

"Leave it where it is," I said. "It's done its work."

East looked at the scattered pieces once more—the blue glaze, the pale body, the carefully modelled foot that had made such precise impressions in the soft ground by Black Gap—and then looked away, and did not touch them.

We left the library to Marsh and his colleagues and walked back across the moor in the dark, and neither of us said anything for a long time, and the moor had the quality it has late at night in summer when the worst of the heat has finally broken and the air is cool and the stars are out and the heather smells of itself.

"Well," East said eventually. He did not finish the sentence.

"Yes," I said.

That was the end of our rest cure. We were back in London within three days, and East was almost immediately engaged on something else he declined to describe, and I returned to the work I had been trying to put down—which was the account of what had happened in the Shan Hills, which I did not know how to write, and which required several more months before I knew how.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WRAYCOTE

"Well, Marcus," said Strickland, "and what is the latest word from your readers?"

Harry Strickland stretched his long legs across the hearthrug and looked at me with the expression he reserved for questions he did not expect answering. We were sitting in the great hall at Wraycote—a room that had once been the principal room of a Tudor house and was now the principal room of a house

considerably larger, though no less old in its bones. The panelling was the original; the ceiling beams were the original; the inglenook at the far end was the original, with a fire built in it that was not strictly necessary on an August evening but that the Colonel had lit anyway on the principle that a fire in the hall at Wraycote was as much an architectural feature as the panelling.

"They write in asking whether Low Wenfold is for sale," I said.

Strickland looked amused. "Has anyone told them what is under the floor?"

"The podcast audience is not discouraged by underground Bronze Age barrows," I said. "I think it may actually be an attraction."

"The twenty-first century," said Strickland comfortably, "is a peculiar time."

He blew a ring of smoke towards the ceiling with the contemplative air of someone who has no pressing demands on his attention, and from whom no one is expecting anything in particular. He was good at this. Harry Strickland had inherited from his father, Sir Alistair, a distinguished architectural historian and author, both the profession and a quality of apparently effortless attention that I had come to recognise, over the years of our friendship, as entirely deceptive. He was watching something across the hall—a door, in fact, the one that led from the east corridor into the hall proper—with the sleepy,

unfocused gaze that meant he was not looking at it at all but was thinking very hard about something adjacent to it.

Colonel Calthorpe, our host, was in his chair on the other side of the hearth, doing something with a pipe that required both hands and his full attention. He was a compact, white-haired man in his mid-sixties with a direct manner and the kind of contentment in his own house that comes from having lived in it long enough to stop seeing it.

"I gather," said the Colonel, not looking up from his pipe, "that the podcast about this place would be quite something."

"Wraycote doesn't need a podcast," I said. "It has an entirely adequate reputation of its own."

"Ha!" said the Colonel, with the short, gruff laugh that was his characteristic response to anything that pleased him. "Fair point. The Riddle alone should keep you busy."

He nodded towards the north wall of the hall, where the panelling ran unbroken except for the carved inscription that had given the house its particular footnote in architectural history. I had examined it briefly on arrival and would examine it more carefully later. The inscription was in a recessed panel, set between two carved device-panels bearing the repeated motif of a man with a ragged staff—the Calthorpe family crest, from which the house took its name.

I was at Wraycote, ostensibly, to write. The Valley of the Just account had been sitting in a folder on my laptop for three months and refusing to take its final shape, and Harry had suggested, with some reason, that a week in a house whose

atmosphere was conducive to the consideration of inexplicable things might help. Colonel Calthorpe had read the podcast transcript and knew my work; the invitation had been offered with the kind of genuine pleasure that makes an invitation easy to accept. There were four other guests that week, none of whom I knew particularly well.

Felix Saxby I knew by reputation. He was in his late thirties, dark-featured, widely considered an authority on the material culture of the English country house, and had written two books on the subject that were well regarded by people who read such things. He was polished and agreeable and had a quality of focused attention behind his eyes that reminded me, mildly, of East—though less disinterested than East, and directed inward rather than outward. He had been at Wraycote twice before, apparently.

The others were a young couple, the Farlands, recently married, who had come for the sea air; and a Dr. Crale, a retired GP who farmed the neighbouring land and whose familiarity with the Colonel suggested the easy intimacy of thirty years.

It was on the first evening, while we were assembled in the hall before dinner, that Strickland said:

"I had a message from the governor this morning. He's at Lake Como apparently, doing windows and doorways and stair-rails and all the other details that constitute the architectural soul." He said this with the mock-exasperation of someone who adores the subject of his complaint. "He was here quite recently, wasn't he, Colonel?"

"October of last year," said the Colonel. "Spent three days. Your father, Marcus," he added to me, "was working on his book on decorative woodcarving—Wraycote's panelling is apparently rather significant."

"Rather significant!" said Strickland. "The Colonel is being modest. The Riddle alone is worth three chapters." He glanced at the north wall and then looked back at me. "He made a very thorough documentation of it. Photographs, measured drawings, rubbings. He stayed until he was satisfied he'd captured every detail."

"He was welcome to stay as long as he liked," said the Colonel, warmly.

"Yes," said Strickland. He paused in the way that signalled he was about to say something rather different in tone. "The thing is—someone broke into his study at home, three nights ago."

The Colonel put down his pipe. "Good heavens. Was anything taken?"

"That's the curious part," said Strickland. "Nothing was taken—or nothing that we can identify. The study was thoroughly searched. His laptop wasn't touched. His external hard drive—containing several years of documentation—wasn't touched. But the files had been accessed. The search history showed several specific folders opened: the Wraycote work was one of them."

He delivered this last sentence without emphasis, turning his empty glass in one hand, and if I had not been watching him I might have missed the fraction of a second in which his gaze moved to Felix Saxby and away again.

I had been watching him.

"Most strange," said Saxby. "Though if nothing was taken, presumably the intruder didn't find what they were looking for."

"Presumably not," said Strickland pleasantly. "The Wraycote photographs, as it happens, are on a separate drive at my studio. He sent them to me when he finished them, as he always does—my studio has better archiving."

The conversation moved on. But Strickland's eyes moved once more towards that door.

He did not have to wait much longer. Within five minutes of this exchange, Sybil Calthorpe came in from the east corridor, having apparently been in the garden, still in walking clothes, with colour in her face from the evening air. She was a striking young woman of about twenty-seven—dark-haired, tall, with the kind of self-possession that comes from having lived in and loved a house that has its own considerable presence. She wore, as she apparently always did, a ring on her right hand that was unusual enough to catch the eye: wide, heavy-banded, with a flat square-cut bezel of dull gold that was clearly old and was, despite or because of its age, not pretty.

I noticed two things simultaneously.

Strickland straightened very slightly in his chair.

And Saxby looked at the ring.

Not at Sybil, not at Strickland's straightening—at the ring. With an attention that he controlled almost immediately, but not quite quickly enough.

I said nothing. The fire shifted in the inglenook, and the panelled hall held its light, and the carved device of the ragged staff repeated itself along the walls in the evening shadow, and something that I could not yet name had begun.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE RIDDLE

After dinner the party drifted back into the hall, which the Colonel used in the evenings as a sitting room in the way that only works in houses large enough for the hall to be both the most impressive room and the most habitable one. The fire was lower now, the standard lamps lit, and the panelling in the lower

half of the hall had come into its proper quality—the dark oak taking on a depth and warmth that the afternoon light had not given it.

I had brought my whisky and found a chair near the north wall, where I could look at the carved inscription more closely than the earlier glance had allowed. The Riddle was set in a recessed panel about half a metre wide, flanked on either side by the device of the ragged staff—a stripped branch with its bark removed and the knobbed joints exposed, carved in the particular Calthorpe style that ran throughout the hall's decoration. The inscription was in the medieval hand that the original carver had used for the other heraldic texts in the room, but these letters were cut more deeply and with a different quality of intention.

Saxby settled into a chair not far from mine. He had been good company at dinner—knowledgeable, precise, with the easy manner of someone accustomed to being the most expert person in a room about matters that most people find obscure. I had enjoyed him. The quality I had noticed in his look at the ring still sat slightly apart from the rest of the impression he made, the way a single wrong note sits in an otherwise competent piece of music.

"Extraordinary business," he said presently, to no one in particular, "that break-in at Sir Alistair's place."

"Yes," said Strickland, from across the room. "How did you come to hear of it?"

The question was asked lightly, in Strickland's habitual drawl. Nothing in his tone said that the answer mattered.

"Robert Holt mentioned it," said Saxby. "He has the next study along at the Architectural History Institute—they share a corridor."

"I see," said Strickland. He picked up his glass and looked into it for a moment. "When did you speak to Holt?"

"Yesterday morning, in London. Before I drove down."

"Ah," said Strickland pleasantly. "That's odd. Holt's been in Edinburgh since Monday—the vernacular architecture conference. He texted me from the train."

A silence of perhaps two seconds followed. Saxby's expression did not change, or not quite—the same slight displacement I had noted when the ring appeared, controlled with the same speed.

"You may be right," he said. "I may have misremembered where I heard it. One picks up these things in passing."

"Quite," said Strickland, and let it rest there.

I did not look at either of them. I looked at the Riddle and turned my whisky glass slowly and thought about the files accessed on Sir Alistair's hard drive and the Wraycote photographs that were not, in fact, at Sir Alistair's study at all.

The Colonel, who had missed this exchange through benign inattention, leaned forward to knock his pipe against the grate. "I'll tell you something, Marcus," he said to me. "The Riddle is one of the oldest things in this house, and possibly the strangest. We've had it dated to somewhere in the 1580s—Tudor,

possibly Elizabethan. The device and the inscription were carved at the same time, by the same hand, on evidence of the cut."

"What is the tradition associated with it?" I asked. I had read about it, briefly, before coming—it had been mentioned in two architectural histories of the house—but the Colonel's version would be more textured than the published accounts.

"That it belongs to the Calthorpes," he said simply. "That it has always brought the family luck of a general kind—nothing specific, nothing you could point to, but the sense of the place having been well-looked-after through some difficult centuries. And that if anyone outside the family possesses it—a copy, a reproduction, a record of it—misfortune tends to follow." He said this without particular emphasis, as a fact. "I don't say I believe it. But I will say that Sir Alistair's study being broken into within days of his completing his documentation of the Riddle is—interesting."

"Rather," said Strickland.

"I let him copy it," the Colonel continued, "because Alistair is an old friend and the book is a serious one and the Riddle deserves proper scholarly attention. His drawings are at Strickland's studio now, as I understand it." He gave Saxby a mild, incurious look that I suspected was neither mild nor incurious. "I daresay the tradition doesn't extend to photographs and digital files. But it's something to think about."

Sybil, who had been listening quietly from her chair, said: "Shall we all go and look at it? Since we're discussing it?"

There was a general movement towards the north wall. The fire had settled to a steady red glow and the standard lamps cast a warm light that fell well on the panelling. We gathered in a loose group before the carved inscription.

Up close, the Riddle had a quality that photographs did not convey. It was not merely decorative—the letters were cut with a precision and a deliberateness that suggested someone who had thought carefully about what they were preserving. The surrounding frame of oak leaves and stripped branches was not background; it was part of the composition, integral. Looking at it for any length of time produced a slight sense that the inscription and the decorative carving were in a relationship with each other that was not merely aesthetic.

The text, in the spelling of its time, read:

Wherso eer thee doome bee
 Looke untoe ye strypped tree
 Offe ragged staffe. Upon itte ley
 Golde toe greene ande kay toe kay.

"The ragged staff is the device," said Dr. Crale, who had come to stand at my shoulder. He pointed to the carved motifs flanking the inscription. "Those are the ragged staffs—stripped branches with the knobs of the cut limbs. The family crest."

"'Golde toe greene,'" said Sybil, tracing the carved letters with one finger but not quite touching them. "I was taught that as a child. I never understood it."

"Look at the leaves in the decorative border," said Saxby. He had come to stand on the other side of me, and his tone was the tone of an expert sharing an observation—easy, generous, apparently free of any ulterior interest. "The colour differentiation in the original carving, before it darkened with age, would have been significant. The green leaves are carved with a shallower cut than the others—they catch the light differently." He pointed. "There. And there."

Several people looked where he was pointing. I looked at him.

The knowledge was genuine. He knew this panel in a way that suggested more than one careful examination—the casual fluency of someone who has studied a thing until its details are part of his mental furniture. He had been here twice before, the Colonel had said. I thought of the files accessed on a hard drive, and the photographs that were not where the searcher had expected to find them.

"What does 'kay toe kay' mean?" asked Mrs. Farland, who had come to look over Sybil's shoulder.

"Key to key," said the Colonel. "Or so the tradition has always had it. What key, and what the key unlocks—that's the riddle of the Riddle, if you'll forgive the expression." He sounded, to my ear, as though he found this opacity personally agreeable—a man who is comfortable with his own family mysteries and not particularly anxious to solve them.

Strickland had been standing slightly back from the group, looking at the panel with the particular gaze he used when not

looking at what he appeared to be looking at. As the group began to drift back towards the fire, he stayed where he was for a moment, tilting his head slightly, and I stayed with him.

"Saxby knows this panel well," I said quietly.

"Very well," Strickland agreed. He looked at the oak leaves with the differential cut. Then he looked at the ring on Sybil's hand, which was catching the light from the nearest standard lamp. Then he looked at me with an expression I had seen before on his face: the expression of someone who has picked up the edge of something and does not yet want to pull on it. "Very well indeed," he said.

He rejoined the party. I stood for another moment before the Riddle, looking at the stripped branch, the knobbed joints, the green-cut leaves, and the four lines that had apparently meant something very specific to someone who had been dead for four hundred years and had taken some trouble to ensure it was not forgotten.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE LIGHT IN THE HALL

The party separated at around eleven. I went to my room with the reasonable expectation of sleeping promptly, and did not sleep at all.

The coast had its own opinion about this. Since dinner, a wind had come up from the Atlantic with the abruptness of coastal weather in late summer—not gradually but all at once, as though it had been waiting offshore and had finally decided to arrive. The windows of my room looked west, and the booming of the waves against the cliff face below the house was not the sound of distant water but the sound of something with mass and intent. The cornice rattled. The firs on the west side of the house moved continuously. The wind, going around the older parts of the building, found gaps in its four-hundred-year-old confidence.

I worked for an hour and gave it up. The Valley of the Just material was not going to resolve itself tonight. I lay down and closed my eyes and the wind continued and the house settled and shifted around me, and my brain, with the specific perversity of an overtired brain, settled on the one piece of material I had not been consciously thinking about and began to run it.

"The riddle of the ragged staff," it said to itself. "The riddle of the ragged staff."

I lay still and experienced this. It went to a kind of rhythm after a while, the phrases fitting themselves to the boom and withdrawal of the waves below, and then to something more monotonous and internal than that, and I was either nearly asleep or considerably more awake than I had been, and the hall clock somewhere below struck the half-hour, and I checked my phone: half past one.

Then I put the phone down and lay listening to the wind and the waves and the house, and the difference between the first two

and the third was exactly the difference that the old writers were always trying to describe in those stories I had been re-reading since accepting the Wraycote invitation: the difference between the sounds a place makes at night because it is in the world and the weather, and the sounds it makes because something in it is doing something.

Something had fallen. Inside the house. Heavily, in the hall below, or somewhere close to it.

I lay still for a moment, applying the reasonable interpretation: a window insecurely latched, a framed picture disturbed by the movement of the old walls, something left on a surface by someone who hadn't left it carefully enough. These things happen in old houses in wind. I applied the reasonable interpretation and found that my body had already sat up and was already reaching for the bedside lamp, which I then did not turn on.

A scratching, faint and sustained, from the direction of the landing above the hall.

My room was at the corridor end nearest the hall landing—the room closest to whatever was happening. The corridor between my door and the balustrade above the hall was perhaps ten metres. I got up, put on what was available—a heavy jacket over my pyjamas, shoes without socks—and crossed to the door without turning on any light.

I was reaching for the handle when I saw it.

The gap under the door was not wide—perhaps a centimetre, the ordinary gap between an old door and an uneven floor. Through

this gap, for a period I estimated at less than two seconds, a light came. It was not the kind of light made by a lamp or a phone. It was white and extremely intense—the quality of a professional studio strobe, something that lit the whole gap simultaneously and with an evenness that left no shadow. Then it was gone, and the gap was dark again, and the darkness under the door had the quality of something that had just contained something rather than the ordinary darkness of a corridor at night.

I opened the door.

The corridor was empty and dark, the landing rail visible ahead in the oblique moonlight from the landing window. I crossed to the balustrade and looked down into the hall.

The hall was in partial moonlight from the high windows—the same moon that was being periodically covered by the cloud-banks driving in off the Atlantic. In the cross-light, the polished boards threw back irregular patches of silver, and the panelling was in deep shadow, and the carved device of the ragged staff repeated along the walls with the particular quality that old carvings have at night of looking slightly different from how they look by day.

A cloud moved across the moon. In the half-second before it did—in the last clear light before the shadow took the hall—I saw something catch the light. It was at the north wall, near the Riddle panel, close to the floor. A metallic gleam, brief and precise, like a thin rod of some kind. Then the cloud was across and the hall was dark and I could not determine what I had seen,

or whether the shape I thought I had made out standing near it—the suggestion of someone standing very still in the shadow—was the shadow itself.

I stood at the balustrade for a moment. From somewhere in the lower part of the house, muffled but distinct above the wind, a sound: a grating, like something moving against resistance, or like a very old lock being operated.

I went downstairs.

The hall was empty. I checked every corner and alcove—and Wraycote had more than most—and found nothing. The north wall with its Riddle panel showed no disturbance. The bolts on the main door were shot. Every window I could reach was latched. I stood in the middle of the hall under the beam of my phone's torch, looking at the panel and thinking about the quality of that light, which could not have been a lamp because it had no direction, and could not have been a phone because it had been too white and too total, and might have been lightning except that there had been no thunder and no further flash, and so I reached the obvious conclusion, which was that there was no explanation available to me at the present moment, and went back to bed.

I slept badly and said nothing at breakfast, which the Colonel presided over with the cheerful authority of a man on good terms with his mornings. The wind had dropped entirely with the night, as coastal winds sometimes do, and the day was warm and clear with the specific clarity that comes after an Atlantic blow, when the air has been cleaned and the distances are sharper

than usual. From the terrace you could see the cliff edge and the glittering line of the sea and, further out, the suggestion of shipping on the horizon.

The Colonel and Dr. Crale went out after breakfast with two others of the party, intent on the lower fields. Strickland and I took a different route, heading on foot for the cliff path that ran north along the coast above the honeycombed moorland ground, and the subject of the previous night's visitation sat between us for the better part of an hour while I considered how much of it sounded rational when spoken aloud.

As it turned out, I did not have to decide. On our way back to the house, approaching from the east along the lower path through the rock garden, we found ourselves in a position from which we could see the steps between the main lawn and the rose garden—and the two figures standing on them—without, I thought, being visible ourselves.

Felix Saxby was speaking to Sybil. The manner was unmistakable regardless of distance: the particular angle of approach, the slight lean forward, the quality of attention that is directed not at what a person is doing but at what a person is deciding. Sybil listened. Then she turned slightly and shook her head. Saxby reached for her hand. She stepped back, more decisively.

We pressed on without announcing ourselves. Strickland did not look at me, and I did not look at him. But his jaw was set in a way I had not seen before on his generally easy face, and his pace along the path had increased by the unconscious increment of

a man who has just been given information he finds unacceptable and is calculating what to do with it.

"Tell me what you saw last night," he said, when we were well past the rock garden.

I told him. He listened without interruption, and when I had finished he was quiet for a full minute, looking at the path ahead with the expression of a man assembling things in a particular order.

"I had a glimmer of an idea last night," he said at last. "I have a larger one now."

"Name it," I said.

"Not yet," he said. "It's too fantastic a hybrid to expose before I've tested it." He looked up. "Will you drive over to Dr. Crale's with me after dinner?"

"What for?"

"To borrow a camera," he said. "A good one, with a macro setting. His daughter is a photographer—she'll have something suitable."

He said this with the calm of someone filing a request. I said I would, and we walked back to the house, and neither of us mentioned Saxby or the rose garden steps.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE FLASH

At lunch the following day a man named Alderton, who had driven over with one of the Colonel's neighbours, drew everyone's attention to Sybil's ring. He was one of those people who notice

things on other people's hands, which is a kind of attention that tends to belong either to doctors, jewellers, or people with an unusual interest in objects. He was none of the first two.

"That's a remarkable piece," he said to Sybil. "May I ask—is it old?"

"We believe so," she said, removing it and handing it across. "The family calls it Phoenician, though I'm not certain how well-founded that is."

Alderton examined it with the competent attention of someone who knows what he's looking at. The ring had a wide flat band of dull gold and a bezel that was, as I had noted the previous evening, not conventionally attractive—the square-cut top was thicker than modern taste would produce, and the gold had the particular surface quality of things that have been handled by many hands across many years.

"There's a case for Phoenician origin," Alderton said, tilting it towards the window. "The alloy looks right, and the construction method is consistent with eastern Mediterranean work of the early Iron Age, if that's what it is. It might equally be a very good copy made in the sixteenth century—English goldsmiths were producing some very convincing archaisms then. Either way it's interesting." He returned it. "You wear it always?"

"It's worn by whoever is heir to the house," the Colonel said. "In former times that was always the eldest son; in our generation we've had to adapt the tradition slightly." He looked at Sybil with a warmth that made the adaptation sound like the least complicated thing in the world.

"May I look for a moment?" said Strickland.

Sybil handed it to him directly. He bent over it, tilting it as Alderton had done, but with a different quality of attention—not examining the metalwork but the shape of the bezel, specifically. The flat square top with its blunt edges. He held it for perhaps twenty seconds, turned it once, and returned it.

"Thank you," he said, and resumed his lunch.

I had been watching Saxby.

His expression, from the moment Strickland had asked to see the ring, had been something I found difficult to characterise precisely. It was not the expression of a rejected suitor watching a rival handle something associated with the woman he wanted to marry. It was more focused and more purposeful than that, and it was directed, with an intensity he was controlling but not entirely concealing, at the ring in Strickland's hand. At the bezel, specifically. As Strickland returned the ring and Sybil replaced it on her finger, Saxby's expression resolved itself back into his customary pleasantness. But the displacement had been there, and I had seen it clearly.

After lunch, Strickland took me out onto the cliff path. It was a brilliant afternoon, the blown clarity of the previous night's storm having given the distances an unusual sharpness, and we sat on the turf above the cliff edge with the whole Atlantic below us and apparently no one within earshot.

"Tell me exactly," said Strickland, producing his pipe, "what the ring looks like."

I described it as accurately as I could—the wide flat band, the thick square bezel, the blunt edges of the gold top.

"And the panel," he said. "Think about the leaves in the Riddle panel—the ones with the shallower cut."

I thought about them. Then I thought about what Saxby had said at the panel: there's a square hole, half hidden among the oak leaves. The green-cut leaves with their lighter incision.

"Strickland," I said. "There's a hole in the panel."

"I think so," he said, with the satisfaction of a man whose hypothesis has just been confirmed by someone else's observation. "A square hole, hidden in the decorative carving."

"And the ring's bezel fits it," I said.

"'Golde toe greene and kay toe kay,'" said Strickland quietly. "Gold to green—the gold bezel to the green-cut leaves, where the hole is. Key to key—the ring's bezel is the key, and whatever the key unlocks is the second key."

We looked at the sea for a moment.

"Now tell me," he said, "what you heard and saw last night. Everything."

I told him. The scratching. The extraordinary white light under the door. The gleaming metallic streak in the hall. The grating sound.

He smoked and listened. When I had finished he was quiet for a while in the way that meant he was testing something against what I had said, and the test was not disproving it.

"I have a theory," he said. "I have had a theory since this morning, and what you've just told me makes it considerably more

definite. But it's such an extraordinary proposition that I won't state it until I have evidence."

"You could tell me and I would keep it to myself," I said.

"I know. But if I'm wrong I'd rather not have been quite so confident." He knocked his pipe against the turf. "I'll tell you tonight, if things go as I expect."

We saw no one on the walk and came back to the house later than everyone else.

At dinner Strickland said, during a pause in the general conversation: "Colonel, I'd like to photograph the Riddle panel. Would you mind terribly?"

The Colonel looked mildly surprised. "Your father made rather thorough documentation of it already."

"He did. But I want to study it closely at my own pace, and it's difficult to do that while standing in the hall—one feels rather conspicuous staring fixedly at a section of wall. A good high-resolution photograph on a laptop is much more workable."

"I don't see any objection," said the Colonel. "Have you got a camera with you?"

"I haven't, actually. Can anyone here lend me one? Something with a decent macro capability—close-focus work."

There was a general consulting of memories. Nobody volunteered. I glanced at Saxby. His expression was entirely composed.

"Dr. Crale's daughter is a professional photographer," the Colonel said. "Sarah. She's home at the moment, I believe. If you drove over you could probably borrow something suitable."

"I'll go after dinner," said Strickland. "Marcus—you'll come?"

I said I would. We set off at half past nine in Strickland's car, the lane dark between the hedges, the sky above the fields clear and starred after the previous night's blow. Sarah Crale proved to be a direct and practical young woman who, on hearing that the requirement was close-focus detail work in a panelled hall, produced a camera body and a macro lens with the professional's lack of sentiment about equipment and also a small external strobe unit.

"For even illumination in low light," she said. "If you're photographing carved wood detail, ambient light will give you shadows in all the wrong places."

She showed Strickland the settings. He asked several questions that suggested he had been thinking about this in more detail than the camera's immediate purpose would seem to require.

We were still at the Crales' when the rain began. It came in fast and heavy, the genuine Atlantic variety that arrives without much preamble and means business, and Sarah Crale's hospitality was equal to it. It was well past midnight before the rain let up enough to justify leaving.

We drove back through the sweet-smelling lanes, the headlights picking out wet hedgerows and puddles on the tarmac. At twenty past one we turned in at Wraycote's gate and came up the gravel avenue, the house a dark mass ahead against the sky.

Then, from three windows of the upper floor simultaneously, a white light blazed.

Not a light in the ordinary sense—not a lamp switched on, not a lantern. A single, instantaneous flash of the same quality I had seen under my door the previous night: total and directionless, illuminating the drive and the steps below and the wet gravel in one instant of cold white brilliance. It lasted less than two seconds. Then it was gone and the house was dark again, as dark as before and no differently dark, and the only change was that Strickland had pressed the brake and we had stopped halfway up the drive.

He sat without speaking for a moment, looking at the dark windows.

"That light was in the hall," he said. "The hall windows are directly below those three." He turned to me, and in the darkness his face had the quality it had on the cliff: something confirmed, something settling into place. "That's what shone under your door last night."

"A flash unit," I said. "Like the one Sarah Crale just gave us."

"Yes," said Strickland. "Except his is evidently on a second attempt." He said this with a slight, particular satisfaction. "He failed last night. Tonight he has succeeded, or tried to."

He put the car in gear and drove the rest of the way up to the house in silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE CHEST

We came in through the side door, leaving the car on the drive. The hall, when we passed through it with our shoes in our hands, showed nothing disturbed. The Riddle panel was as it had been. The floor was unmarked. Whatever had happened here an hour earlier had been accomplished and concluded.

"Don't say anything to anyone about what we saw," said Strickland, at the foot of the stairs. He said it quietly, without drama, as a practical instruction.

"What exactly are our suspicions?" I asked.

"Not entirely definable yet," he said. "Tomorrow."

He went to his room. I went to mine and did not sleep for some time, which I used in thinking about the flash from the windows and the gleaming tripod leg and the grating sound of something old being operated.

Strickland was up before the household. When I passed the gallery above the hall on my way to the bathroom, he was below with the borrowed camera, already packing up the tripod. The morning light was coming cleanly through the east windows, and he had evidently been at work for some time.

"Splendid negatives," he called up. "Macros of the whole panel. And something specific near the lower section."

"What specifically?"

"Come and see after breakfast."

After breakfast we sat in his room with his laptop open and the RAW files loaded. He had processed them while I ate—enhanced the contrast, brought up the shadow detail in the carved leaves—and the panel on the screen had a clarity that the original did not offer in the hall's ambient light. You could see, now, the differential in the cut between the ordinary leaves of the design and those carved with the shallower incision. And there, half-concealed in the foliage at the lower right of the design, was a square recess, approximately two centimetres across, set so

precisely into the carved surface that it would have been invisible without either very close examination or exactly the angle and lighting that the macro photograph provided.

"There is your keyhole," said Strickland, pointing.

We looked at it for a moment. Then we looked at the ring on Sybil's hand as she passed along the terrace below the window, speaking to her father about something domestic and unhurried, the morning light catching the flat square bezel.

"The bezel dimensions," I said.

"Match precisely, by my calculation. I measured the ring at lunch yesterday with a piece of thread while I was 'examining' it. The square hole in the panel is two centimetres. The bezel is two centimetres." He looked up. "Key to key."

He spent the rest of the day in his room, the photograph on the laptop, making notes, and I went about the house and the grounds with the comfortable uselessness of a houseguest who has nothing particular to do. It was a good day for it—the cleared air was warm and the cliffs offered their long Atlantic prospect and the Colonel was in excellent form at lunch about a project to restore the walled garden.

I was the first back to tea, as it happened.

Strickland came out of the house at a pace I had not previously seen from him and met me on the terrace steps.

"Not a word," he said, "but if the Colonel is agreeable there's something I'd like to tell everyone at dinner." His voice had the quality of someone who has been containing something for several hours and has decided the time has come.

Then I saw Sybil standing in the doorway behind him, in the shadow of the porch, and even at that distance I could see that her composure was in a particular kind of difficulty that had nothing distressing about it.

"Oh," I said. "Congratulations. Both of you."

"Thank you," said Strickland, who had gone slightly pink, which I had not thought possible. "But come and see the photograph."

We went in and he showed me his notes on the Riddle—the last two lines now mapping cleanly onto the physical panel, the first two still partially opaque—but the announcement somewhat overtook the photography for the next hour. The Colonel was extravagantly pleased and made no effort whatever to contain it, so that within five minutes of being told, the whole house knew.

I watched Saxby receive the news at tea. He was at the far end of the terrace when the Colonel made his announcement, and he heard it with a composure that was, I thought, the most controlled thing I had seen from him—more controlled than his handling of Strickland's question about Holt, more controlled than his look at the ring. His dark eyes held their expression for a moment, and then he smiled, which was technically convincing, and raised his glass, which was technically gracious, and said something appropriate to Strickland, who thanked him with perfect courtesy, and the whole exchange lasted perhaps thirty seconds.

Dinner was lively with the Colonel's happiness and Sybil's barely-suppressed brightness and the general warmth that an

engagement produces in any gathering of people, and whatever else was happening at Wraycote was, for those hours, elsewhere.

It was late before Strickland and I were alone in his room with the photograph, and the household had been quiet for some time.

"The first two lines," he said, spreading his notes on the table. "'Wherso eer thee doome bee, looke untoe ye strypped tree.' I've been through several online glossaries of Early Modern English. 'Doom' can mean fate, judgment, or—interestingly—law, ordinance, a fixed ruling. 'Strypped tree' is the device: the ragged staff with its bark stripped and the knobs of the cut branches. And it begins 'wherso eer'—wherever. So: wherever your fate or law takes you, look to the device of the ragged staff."

"Which is saying: the answer is always in the panel," I said. "Regardless of circumstances."

"Yes. It's a reassurance rather than an instruction. The instruction is in the last two lines." He pointed at the photograph on the screen. "Gold to the green-cut leaves, key to key. Which is perfectly explicit once you have the ring in your hand and the close photograph in front of you." He sat back. "I think the message is complete. I've been trying to find a cipher in the first two lines for most of the day and I don't think there is one. It means exactly what it says."

"Then the remaining question," I said, "is what opens when the ring's bezel is inserted into the panel."

"A panel section," said Strickland. "A priest's hole, almost certainly, given the period. Or access to the passage system—which I believe exists and which Saxby also believes exists, on the basis of some document he's found."

"How do you know about a document?"

"I don't know. I infer." He yawned. "I've been inferring heavily today. Let's try to sleep."

We did not try long. At some point in the early hours—I had fallen into the light, unsatisfying sleep of someone whose brain has not finished with the day—a knock at my door brought me upright.

Strickland stood in the corridor. The Colonel was immediately behind him, in a dressing gown, looking startled.

"Sybil," said Strickland. "She's all right—but something's happened. Come."

Sybil was in the Colonel's sitting room, wrapped in a cardigan, with the alert eyes of someone who has had a shock but has processed it. The ring was not on her hand.

"She woke up," Strickland said to me, "and found the ring missing. She'd taken it off during the evening—there was a lot of hand-shaking—and couldn't remember replacing it. She went downstairs to look in the library."

"The library is off the hall," Sybil said. She was composedly matter-of-fact about what she was about to say, in the way of someone who has decided the best approach to something extraordinary is to describe it as accurately as possible. "I didn't find the ring. But when I came out into the hall I almost

walked into something. A box. An iron-bound chest, about half a metre long, very dark, standing near the bottom of the stairs. I hadn't seen it going in—it wasn't there. It appeared while I was in the library."

"What kind of markings?" Strickland asked.

"On the lid—a skull and crossbones, painted or branded, partly worn but clear enough." She looked at Strickland steadily. "I screamed, I'm afraid. Then I ran upstairs."

"Quite right," said Strickland.

"By the time I got down," said the Colonel, "perhaps two minutes later—nothing. No chest. The hall was exactly as it always is." He looked between us. "Has the Wraycote ghost decided to walk again? You'd know about that, Saxby—"

Saxby stood in the corridor doorway in pyjamas and a flannel shirt. He had apparently been woken by the noise. "I heard the bell," he said. "I'm a very light sleeper. But I'm afraid I saw nothing unusual."

"Of course not," said Strickland pleasantly. "Saxby, the Turret Room is directly above the hall, isn't it? I have an idea about the acoustics. Could I come up and have a look? Just for a moment—I hate to drag you back but it would set my mind at rest."

The Turret Room was reached by a short staircase that branched from the main landing. You entered it by descending three steps—an architectural quirk that Strickland examined briefly, to my eye with more than a casual interest. It was an octagonal room, entirely panelled, with the characteristic dense

darkness of rooms whose windows are small and whose walls are close.

Strickland moved around it methodically, pressing the panels at intervals, testing the floorboards at each corner. His manner was exactly that of a man satisfying a professional curiosity about a building's structure. Saxby watched him with the patience of a man who has nothing to conceal.

"Thought so," said Strickland, apparently to himself, at the far panel. He stood up. "The acoustic transmission in old structures is remarkable. I think what Miss Calthorpe heard was carried up from outside—the wind does extraordinary things with this coastline. Saxby, terribly sorry to disturb you." He held the door. "Goodnight."

Walking back to my room along the dark corridor, Strickland caught my arm briefly.

"The chest was real," he said, very quietly. "And I know exactly where it is."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CAPTAIN SATAN

Wraycote was quiet. Strickland sat on the edge of my bed with the photograph on his phone, the Riddle print in his other hand, and the look of a man who has been carrying something all day and has now put it down in the right place.

"Let me go through it in order," he said. "First: someone breaks into my father's study and searches it specifically for the Wraycote documentation. They find the computer, the external drive, the archived files—but the files they want most, the close photographs of the Riddle, are at my studio, not there. They take nothing, because they found nothing useful." He looked up. "Saxby cited Holt as his source for knowing about the break-in. Holt has been in Edinburgh since Monday."

"His slip," I said.

"A significant one. Now: you hear a crash in the hall, and see through your door gap an intense white light, and briefly in the moonlight a gleaming metallic streak near the north wall—which I believe was a leg of a collapsible tripod. The crash was the tripod falling. The light was a strobe flash—one powerful exposure—which produced an unusable photograph because the tripod had already gone over."

"And the grating sound."

"The passage. He retreated through it, back up to the Turret Room, when the tripod fell and he knew the noise might bring someone down." Strickland folded the print. "The morning after your night disturbance, I saw, through a half-open door, the kind of memory card reader that sits on a bedside table when someone has been transferring photographs from a camera. Saxby hadn't closed his door entirely. He didn't know I'd noticed, because I was walking past at pace and I didn't stop."

"He has his own camera," I said.

"Has had one all along, yes. When I asked at dinner whether anyone could lend me one, I was testing him. He didn't volunteer. A man with a camera in his bag, offered the opportunity to help someone photograph a Tudor panel, doesn't stay silent unless he has a reason to stay silent." Strickland looked at the photograph on his phone. "His second attempt—which we saw from the drive—was successful. He has his copy of the Riddle. What he does not yet have is what the Riddle leads to."

"The chest."

"Because to open the panel he needs the ring, and the ring was on Sybil's finger." He paused. "Until tonight, when Sybil took it off during the celebrations and couldn't remember where she'd put it. She left it on the library windowsill, as it turns out—I think she'll find it there in the morning. But Saxby found it first." He looked at me steadily. "He had his opportunity while she was still in the library searching for it. He went to the panel, used the ring, opened the hidden section, and got the chest out into the hall. What he didn't anticipate was Sybil coming out of the library so soon—she must have given up quickly. He heard her coming, left the chest, and retreated into the passage. He was in there while she was in the hall, looking at what he'd left behind."

"And when she ran upstairs—"

"He came back for it. But he hadn't had time to open it. He was still working on it—or perhaps he'd realised the night was now disturbed enough that he needed to move quickly—when the Colonel came down two minutes after Sybil." Strickland stood up.

"He got back to the Turret Room through the passage. The chest is there now."

I looked at him. "And the ring—you said she'll find it on the windowsill?"

"He must have left it in the panel aperture, or on the hall floor beside it, when he retreated. Sybil, coming out of the library in a panic, wouldn't have noticed. I'll find it in the morning." He went to the door and then turned back. "I want to speak to him tonight. Before he has time to think."

"Now?"

"Now," he said. "Come."

We went upstairs to the Turret Room corridor. Under the door, a thin line of light.

Strickland stood before it for a moment. Then he knocked.

"Who's there?"—sharp, immediately, the voice of someone who has not been asleep.

"Strickland. I'd like to talk with you about the secret passage and the old treasure chest—before either of us involves the Colonel."

A silence that was not empty. I could hear, just barely, the sound of someone moving. Then: "Just a moment. Don't come in until I say."

We waited. A minute passed. Then another. Then: "All right. Come in."

Strickland opened the door.

As it swung wide, from somewhere inside the room—not from the door but from a panel on the far wall—a faint, dry click sounded. The particular click of a latch released and re-engaged.

The Turret Room was empty.

On the table, the candle burned. On the bed, the iron-bound chest stood, a sheet of paper folded on its lid. On the table beside the candle: the ring, and a phone displaying a clear photograph of an old parchment or document.

Strickland crossed to the note and read it. He handed it to me without speaking.

It said: *Mr. Strickland—I understand that you have worked it out. I have not had time to open the chest; as matters stand, I only ask that you do not pursue me. I have taken nothing that was not mine to find. The ring and a photograph of the document through which I first learnt of all this are on the table. Offer what explanation of my departure you choose. I place myself in your hands.*

Strickland picked up the phone and studied the photograph on its screen. I came to look over his shoulder. It showed what appeared to be a page of a much older document—the handwriting was cramped and faded, the paper foxed and creased—but the content was legible enough once you adjusted to the hand. It was a diagram: the outline of a house, octagonal room visible at the upper left, and radiating from it and from several other points, a system of passages marked in a different ink and labelled in brief notes. An annotation near the top read *R.R.* and in brackets *Capt. S.*

"Roderick Calthorpe," said Strickland quietly. "'Capt. S.'—Captain Satan."

"Who was Captain Satan?" I said.

Strickland set the phone down and went to the chest. He had not touched it yet. He stood looking at the roughly painted device on its lid—the skull and crossbones, worn but clear—and at the lettering below it, in faded red characters that were still legible: *CAPTAIN SATAN*.

"Roderick Calthorpe was an ancestor of the Colonel's," he said. "He goes back to the early eighteenth century in the family records, and he has an entry in maritime history as one of the most effective pirates ever to operate on the Spanish Main. He accumulated a considerable fortune before disappearing from the historical record somewhere around 1720—the standard theory is that he was killed, but there's no confirmed evidence either way." He looked at the chest. "He evidently came home. And evidently he found the Riddle before we did, because the passage plan—in his handwriting, by the look of it—is more complete than anything the Colonel knows about. He stored his hoard here."

"And Saxby found the archive document," I said, "and spent years working out what it meant."

"Years, I think. The two visits to Wraycote, each time making a study of the panelling. The broken attempt at the studio, then the two night attempts here. This was not a casual enterprise." Strickland looked at the chest for a long moment. "The Colonel will not want to open this."

"You sound certain of that."

"I am certain of that. He said as much on the day we arrived: 'Let all pertaining to that part of our records remain buried.' He has a sense of his family history that includes its dark pages, and he carries them with a kind of equanimity that belongs to people who have had a long time to reconcile themselves to complicated ancestors." He picked up the ring. "Saxby has left us with a situation that has only one reasonable resolution."

"Return the chest."

"Return the chest. Which requires using the ring on the panel, which Saxby has now thoughtfully demonstrated how to do." He paused. "We tell the Colonel we found the ring on the library windowsill in the morning. We tell everyone else—if asked—that Saxby received a sudden urgent message and had to leave early. The chest goes back to wherever Captain Satan put it, and stays there."

"And the document on his phone?"

"He left the phone. He has a copy of the photograph on his own devices, no doubt—that's what he's working from—but the gesture of leaving it here is genuine. He's giving us what he found, and asking us to let him go." Strickland looked at the phone. "He didn't get what he came for. He took nothing. In the circumstances, that's the most we can ask."

We carried the chest between us down to the hall. The ring's square gold bezel, pressed into the recess among the carved leaves, produced a smooth resistance and then a release, and the lower section of the north panel swung outward on hidden pintles

to reveal a space perhaps a metre deep and two wide—dry, dark, stone-lined, entirely empty except for the chest we were about to put back into it.

"A priest's hole," said Strickland, holding up his phone's torch. "Four hundred years old, give or take. In good condition." He looked around it with the quiet appreciation of a man who has spent his professional life thinking about what buildings contain. "Captain Satan had good taste in hiding places."

We set the chest inside and closed the panel. It came to with the same faint click we had heard from the Turret Room. The hall was exactly as it had always been.

"One more thing," I said.

"The ring," said Strickland. He had it in his hand. "I'll leave it on the library windowsill tonight, and discover it there in the morning." He looked at it for a moment—the wide flat band, the square gold bezel that had just unlocked four centuries of accumulated secret—and then laid it on the sill with the quiet precision of someone replacing a thing where it belongs.

We went to bed. In the morning the Colonel was gratified beyond measure by the discovery of the ring, which he attributed to Sybil's habit of leaving things in the library. Saxby's early departure was explained as a family matter requiring his immediate attention. No one asked many questions. The day was fine, and there was a great deal to talk about that was pleasanter than the mystery of an absent guest.

"My boy," the Colonel said to Strickland that evening, on the terrace, looking out at the Atlantic with the satisfaction of

a man in his right place at the right time. "I cannot tell you what this week has meant to me. I don't mean the ring—though I'm glad to have it back—and I don't mean whatever you and Marcus were getting up to in the small hours." He said this last without elaboration and without expectation of elaboration. "I mean my daughter, and the future she's chosen, and the fact that Wraycote will remain in good hands." He was quiet for a moment. "Some things belong to the past. Let them stay there."

"That," said Strickland later, walking back from the terrace with me, "is the most diplomatically omniscient statement I have ever heard a man make while technically knowing nothing."

"The Colonel," I said, "has been living in this house for sixty years. He knows a great deal more than he says."

"So does the house," said Strickland. He looked back at Wraycote behind us, its upper windows lit against the evening sky, the carved device of the ragged staff invisible in the dark but present, as it had always been, in the panelled hall below. "That's rather the point of it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HOLLOW LOCKE

The file on the Hollow Locke fire ran to sixty-three pages—mostly insurance assessments, structural surveys of the ruins, and the county coroner's report on the absence of identifiable

remains in the debris. Dr. Edvard Lestrangle was officially listed as a missing person for seven years before his death was presumed in law. The fire was attributed to an electrical fault in the wing he used as a laboratory, a conclusion that the structural surveyor described as consistent with the evidence and that the surveyor's careful language suggested he had not been entirely satisfied with.

I found Tregarth through his wife's name. Phryné Auber-Tregarth—she had kept her own name alongside his—was the daughter of a French graphic novelist whose small posthumous reputation had been rehabilitated by a documentary some years back, and her own website listed her as an illustrator living in Perthshire. I wrote to her. She passed my letter to her husband. Tregarth telephoned me, sounding like a man who had expected the call for some years and had decided, without great enthusiasm, to take it.

We met three times. He told me everything, with one condition: the specific nature of what he found in Lestrangle's laboratory, and the nature of what Lestrangle had been doing there, would not be reproduced in any published form. I agreed. It is a condition I continue to honour. What I can say, and what Tregarth himself says without reservation, is that the discovery transformed his understanding of what a human mind is capable of conceiving and pursuing; that no amount of subsequent time has diminished that understanding; and that the one comfort of the whole episode is that Lestrangle did not live to complete it.

What follows is Tregarth's account, as he gave it to me across those three conversations, reconstructed with his approval.

Jack Tregarth came to Hollow Locke on a thunderous evening in October—the second week of a convalescence that his father had arranged, and whose purpose Tregarth had accepted without particular enthusiasm. He had been seriously ill. The illness was not of the dramatic kind but of the slow, depleting kind that takes a young person's reserves and then takes their confidence in those reserves, so that six months after the worst of it they are still not certain whether they are better or are merely not worse. His consultant had recommended three months of quiet, and his father had recommended Hollow Locke, and Dr. Lestrangle, and the restorative properties of the Yorkshire countryside.

"Lestrangle was an old friend of my father's," Tregarth told me. "They'd been at medical school together, briefly. My father left medicine—went into business instead. Lestrangle stayed, and gradually receded from the kind of medicine people practise in public, into private research. By the time I went to the Locke, he hadn't published anything in eleven years."

The taxi that brought Tregarth from the station behaved in the way that things in this story will be seen to behave: with an unease it did not know how to express but could not conceal. The driver had asked three times whether Tregarth was certain of the address. Driving up the narrow lane, he had been silent with the specific silence of a man who would prefer not to be going where he was going.

The lane wound upward through dense firs whose branches met above the road and reduced the last of the evening light to a green dimness that had already, at five in the afternoon in October, the quality of a place where night came earlier than elsewhere. The lane was clean—recently swept, its surface well-maintained—but the grounds on either side of it showed the deliberate abandonment of someone who had decided that the approach to their property should not invite approach. The verges were not merely unmown but grew with the specific density of vegetation given decades to consolidate without interference: bramble and nettle and the dead standing stalks of previous seasons compressed under the current year's growth.

The lodge at the foot of the drive was closed. Tregarth got out and rang the bell set into the wall—a single iron ring, hanging from a rusted bracket. The sound it produced was extraordinary: a cracked, discordant clangour that seemed to travel upward through the firs rather than down towards the house, a sound with something monkish in it, something that spoke from a long way away in time as well as space. The taxi driver, standing beside his car, had the expression of a man doing something he has resolved not to do again.

The lodge gate was not locked. Tregarth went through and began the walk up the drive alone, his overnight bag in one hand, the light fading fast above the firs.

He told me the approach to the house was one of the strangest experiences he had encountered, and he is not someone who uses that word loosely. The lane bent repeatedly, each bend

presenting a new section of the same dark tunnel through the trees, and at each bend the expectation of the house ahead was disappointed by another length of fir-walled approach. The grounds sloped steeply above and below the lane. No light was visible from any direction. And the cold that rose from the tarmac and the ferns and the matted vegetation on either side was the cold of a place that had been cold for a very long time without interruption.

Then, around a final bend and at the end of a short straight section: a light. Yellow, warm, distant, coming from somewhere below the level of the drive—from a window set into a lower section of the building, which stood in a fold of the hillside in the way that Hollow Locke had always stood, the hill rising directly behind it and the valley descending directly before. The house was long and irregular in the dark, its central portion Victorian and functional, the east wing older and lower with the better proportions of an earlier age. No other lights were visible. The house looked, in the gathering dark, like a place that had been closed for years and had just had one room opened for some specific purpose.

Tregarth had gone off the drive at some point and was approaching across a terrace that ran along the east wing's lower level. Beneath his feet the stone was outlined in moss. The smell of the evening—fir needles, damp earth, something slightly mineral from the hillside above—was very clean, and was at variance with the quality of the house itself, which even at a

distance and in the dark seemed to have withdrawn from the ordinary world into a different kind of quiet.

He crossed the terrace and the thin strip of lawn and came to the east wing's lower level where the lit window was. It was a French window, slightly open, the curtain drawn back. Inside, the room was dark except for a reading lamp on a small table in the corner, its shade directing the light downward onto a pile of cushions on the floor.

Face-down in the cushions, her chin resting on her folded hands and her dark curly hair untidy in the lamplight, lay a girl. She was reading—or had been, before sleep found her—a book that was now face-down on the floor beside her. She was wearing a dark green dress with sleeves that had been pushed up to the elbow. She was, Tregarth told me, the most beautiful person he had ever seen, and he said this with the straightforward matter-of-factness of a married man whose wife is in the next room, and with the additional quality of someone who has never found the observation to require qualification.

He had been standing at the window for perhaps ten seconds when a piece of gravel shifted under his foot.

She woke immediately—head up, fully alert in under two seconds, the specific reflex of someone who is accustomed to being alone in a large house and whose sleep is accordingly light. She saw him, and her expression moved through alarm and into something else before he had time to speak.

"You frightened me," she said. Her English had a faint French intonation at the edges of it that was not quite an

accent. "You must be Jack Tregarth. I'm Phryné." She said her name with the quiet confidence of a person who has long since decided not to be embarrassed by it. "My guardian mentioned you were expected."

"Phryné," repeated Tregarth. He had enough classical education to be startled and enough presence of mind not to show it beyond a pause. "How do you do."

She looked at him. The roguish quality in her eyes was not frivolous—it was the quality of someone who takes quick, accurate stock of the people they meet and finds most of them, on balance, familiar. "You know the original, then," she said.

"Thespian beauty," said Tregarth. "Yes. Though I would call the comparison an injustice in the present direction."

She smiled, and reached for her book, and straightened, and regarded him with an expression he could not immediately classify. Then: "I'm afraid my guardian is in his laboratory. I was meant to watch for your car. You came on foot?"

"From the gate."

"He didn't send anyone to meet you. I'm sorry. He sometimes forgets." She said this without apology but not without the slight, personal shadow of someone who has learnt to offer the same explanation more than once. "He'll be in directly. Come through—the hall is warmer."

The hollow was illuminated by a blinding flash of lightning, and the thunder that followed came from directly overhead, a single prolonged detonation that shook the French windows in their frame and sent the curtain billowing inward. Phryné, who

had not flinched, looked at the darkened valley below and said: "The storm has been building since noon." She said it with the equanimity of someone reporting a weather condition, not commenting on it. "Dr. Lestrangle dislikes storms. He'll be inside very soon."

As she spoke, the door to the hall opened and Dr. Lestrangle entered the room.

Tregarth had met him once before, twelve years earlier, and retained essentially no memory of the meeting. He was therefore constructing his impression entirely in the present moment. What he saw was a tall, gaunt man in his late sixties, wearing a dark corduroy jacket and no tie, with a face that was long and triangular and dominated by eyes that were very wide-set and very still—eyes that had no warmth in them at that moment and, as Tregarth would come to understand, at no subsequent moment either, regardless of what the rest of his expression was doing.

"Jack," said Lestrangle. His voice was warm. His eyes did not change. "Forgive me—I was in the middle of something. Welcome to Hollow Locke."

He extended his hand, and Tregarth shook it, and looked into those wide, still eyes, and felt—not fear, not yet, but the quality that precedes fear: the realisation that you are in the presence of something you do not yet understand, and that understanding it will take longer than the evening.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THOTH

Tregarth lay awake that first night at Hollow Locke for longer than his body had any right to, given the journey and the accumulated fatigue of the illness. The storm had passed, but what replaced it was not quite ordinary quiet—it was the particular stillness of a place that has withheld itself from ordinary life for long enough that its silence has a different quality than the silence of inhabited places. Through his window the valley below was dark except for a dull red glow on the ridge above the distant town, which he took for a struck building or a fire in the fields.

He was trying, methodically, to account for his unease, which he recognised as the unease of a body that has been seriously ill and is not yet certain the worst is over—the kind that produces urgency without cause and reads significance into ordinary things. He applied this diagnostic to the cracked bell at the gate, to the over-attentive quality of Lestrangle's welcome, to the bare-bulb clarity of the corridors, to the woman Harman, the housekeeper, who had shown him to his room with the demeanour of a person performing a task she had performed before and expected to perform again, and in whose face no curiosity about the new guest had been visible at all.

All of these could be accounted for. An eccentric man of science. An isolated house. A staff suited to isolation. A housekeeper for whom discretion was the professional standard.

He had more difficulty accounting for Lestrangle's eyes.

Tregarth was well-read in things that most men in his position were not—his illness had been a long one and he had used the time, without particularly intending to, to read more carefully in mythology and ancient history than his education had required. He had read about Thoth: the Egyptian god of knowledge and judgment, the ibis-headed figure who stood at the scales in the hall of the dead, who weighed souls and recorded the results in his meticulous hand. The eyes in the temple paintings—wide-set, very still, attentive not to the person in front of them but to something the person's presence was revealing—were the eyes he had looked into across the dinner table tonight.

The voice was warm. The eyes did not change.

Lestrangle had taken his medical history, or rather had read attentively the notes his own physician had sent ahead, and had asked several questions that were clinically appropriate and expressed with the ease of someone for whom this was entirely familiar. He would begin a course of treatment the following morning. There was a prescribed draught for the evenings, to assist with sleep. Everything was courteous and considered.

The dull red glow on the ridge, Tregarth noted from his window as he finally lay down, was not diminishing. He realised it was not a burning building. It was in the wrong direction for the town, and its quality was not the yellow of burning wood but the specific, steady redness of enclosed heat—furnace heat, or the heat of equipment running continuously through the night. The laboratory, Phryné had mentioned, was in the wing adjoined to the old chapel at the house's east end.

He had been at Hollow Locke for three weeks when he went to the village.

He could not afterwards have explained precisely why he went alone. He had been in the habit, since arriving, of spending every available hour in Phryn 's company, and the days had taken on a quality of compression—each morning arriving more quickly than the last, each evening concluding before he was ready—that was entirely her doing and entirely outside his previous experience. That particular day he had simply walked out through the gate and down the lane and on to the road, and had been walking for an hour before he acknowledged to himself that he was trying to think about Phryn  with her removed from the equation, which was proving considerably harder than thinking about anything else he had ever attempted.

The village had a pub, a post office that was also a corner shop, and the kind of organic settled presence of somewhere that has been exactly what it is for several centuries without particular disruption. He had a coffee in the shop, because the pub was not yet open, and fell into conversation with a man in his eighties who was sitting in one of the chairs near the window with the authority of someone who has been sitting in that specific chair for forty years.

He was called Brewster. He had been born in the village, he informed Tregarth, and had lived there with the exception of two years of national service and one year working in Sheffield, which he had not enjoyed. He used his eyes with the specific,

unembarrassed attention of the elderly, in whose company social niceties have generally been discarded.

"You're staying up at the Locke," he said. It was not a question.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"You came from that direction. And you've got the look." Brewster looked at him. "The look of someone who's been ill and is getting better but isn't quite sure they are. That's who he has to stay."

"Dr. Lestrangle," said Tregarth. "You know him?"

Brewster's expression was precise: not hostile, not frightened, but containing something that had settled after some consideration into a flat, practised distance. "We know of him," he said. "Nobody knows him, exactly. He doesn't come into the village much. Hasn't for years."

"He seems quite solitary."

"Quite solitary," agreed Brewster, in the tone of a man accepting a very incomplete description. "How are you finding it up there?"

"Strange," said Tregarth honestly. "But not unpleasant. His ward is good company."

Something moved in the old man's face. "Phryné," he said. "Yes. She is good company." He looked at his coffee cup. "Three or four years ago a young man from the vicarage in Netherton used to come up to the Locke. He'd met her somewhere in the village, I think. He used to walk up. Nice enough lad, working at the vicarage while he figured out what to do with himself. Harry

Tolliver, his name was." He paused. "He stopped coming after a few months."

"What happened to him?"

"He went away. Suddenly, and without much explanation." Brewster turned his cup. "There was another one before him, about two years earlier. A young Frenchman. He was here for a conference at the agricultural college. He went up to the Locke several times as well. Then he left, also suddenly, and sent the girl a letter." He glanced up. "I know about the letter because his landlady here in the village posted it for him. She told me something of what it said. She was a bit shaken by it."

"What did it say?"

"Something like—he would give his life for her gladly, but his soul belonged to God."

The village shop was quiet. From outside came the sound of a car passing on the main road.

"He was also someone who'd been ill," Brewster added. "On the mend, convalescing. Same as you. Same as Harry Tolliver."

Tregarth looked at him. "You think there's a pattern."

"I'm an old man," said Brewster, "and I've lived here long enough to see a few things and keep my mouth shut about them. I'm not young enough anymore to bother keeping my mouth shut." He met Tregarth's eyes with the flatness of someone delivering something he has prepared. "The vicar here, a few years back, asked Dr. Lestrangle to a meeting about safeguarding. Lestrangle didn't come. The matter was referred to the county, and nothing came of it because there was nothing concrete. There never is anything

concrete with Lestrangle. He's done nothing illegal, as far as anyone can show. He takes in young people who are unwell, provides them with rest and medical care, and they go away. Some go away suddenly. He doesn't talk about his research. His housekeeper doesn't talk about anything." He picked up his cup. "I wouldn't say there's a pattern, exactly, because I couldn't prove one. I'd say there's a question."

"What question?"

Brewster looked at him steadily. "What does he want from them?" he said simply.

Walking back to the Locke along the lane, four miles through the October afternoon, Tregarth thought about this. He thought about it carefully and with the methodical attention he usually brought to difficult problems. He thought about the Frenchman's letter—*my soul belongs to God*—and about Harry Tolliver who had simply disappeared from the village's account of itself. He thought about his own prescribed medicine and about Lestrangle's Thoth-eyes and about the red glow visible from his window each night.

And then, somewhere in the middle of the second field-path, he stopped thinking about any of that.

He stopped because he had been trying, for the entire walk, to think about Phryné, and specifically to think about her as a problem to be assessed—to arrange, with clinical detachment, his feelings about a beautiful young woman he had known for three weeks, to weigh them and find them manageable.

He stood in the field-path in the October afternoon and understood that he was not going to find them manageable.

His future, from this moment, lay in the hollow of her hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE BARGAIN

He told Phryn  about the conversation in the village the following morning, on the terrace, in the thin October sun. She listened without interrupting, which was characteristic—she had the habit of genuine attention, of letting a thing finish before she responded to it, that Tregarth had noticed from the first day and had come to rely upon as one of the more steadying qualities of her company.

When he had finished:

“Brewster,” she said. “He’s been here forever, Brewster. He knows everything about everyone.” She was quiet for a moment, her chin on her hand. “The Frenchman was Jean-Louis. He was here for about two months—this was four years ago, maybe a little more. He was nice. A bit intense, very earnest, very much in love with the fact of me rather than the actual me, if you understand the distinction.”

“I do,” said Tregarth.

“He left suddenly. He sent me the letter—Brewster told you about the letter?”

“That his soul belonged to God.”

“Yes. I thought he was unwell. I thought it was a romantic crisis of some kind.” She looked at the valley. “I didn’t know what Lestrane had said to him.”

“Do you know now?”

"Not exactly." She paused. "Harry Tolliver was the second one. He was here about a year after Jean-Louis. He was—less contained than Jean-Louis. He became very devoted, very quickly, in a way that I found difficult. But before I had to deal with the difficulty myself, something changed. He started avoiding me. Then one day, in the village, he said: 'I can't do it, Phryn . Tell him I can't do it. He can rely on my word.'" She looked at Tregarth directly. "And then he was gone."

"He said 'tell him,'" Tregarth said. "Tell Lestrangle."

"Yes."

"So Lestrangle had asked him to do something."

"Something Harry couldn't do," Phryn  said. "Something that—looking back, I think both of them were asked. And both refused." She looked at her hands. "I don't know what they were asked. Lestrangle has never told me."

They sat with this for a while. The October light was clean and cold and the valley below the terrace was very still.

"But you've felt something different," Tregarth said. "About Lestrangle. Lately."

She looked at him. "How did you know that?"

"You said, that first evening, 'I shall be glad when—' and then stopped."

She was quiet for a moment. "Slowly," she said, "over the past year, perhaps eighteen months—his manner towards me has changed. He has always been kind. He has always been attentive. He has always been, in the ways that matter, a good guardian to me. I had a strange childhood and I owe him a great deal." She

said this carefully, the way someone says something that has been tested against its own truth many times. "But increasingly I have the feeling that he watches me in a way that is about something other than my welfare. That I am part of an equation he is solving. That the kindness is—instrumental."

She said this last word with a slight, precise finality, as if she had arrived at it after a long time and was not pleased with it but could not improve on it.

"Since the convalescents started coming," Tregarth said.

"Before that, I think. But that accelerated it." She looked at him steadily. "I have been waiting, for some time, for someone to appear here who was not—susceptible. To the way this place feels. To the feeling of isolation and the way isolation makes one available to things one would otherwise question."

Tregarth looked at her.

"I have been waiting," she said, "for someone like you."

He had been in possession of this information for approximately four seconds when he forgot how to respond to it with any of the composure he normally relied on, and she saw this clearly, and the expression that came onto her face was not triumphant but was very warm.

The morning had advanced by several degrees before either of them said anything further that required words.

That evening at dinner, Lestrangle was at his most cordial—attentive, interested, drawing out Phryné on the subject of the book she had been illustrating and asking Tregarth about his plans for when his convalescence was complete. The wide-set eyes

moved between the two of them with the specific quality that Tregarth had been cataloguing, and which he now found he could name more precisely: it was the attention of someone who has arranged something and is watching to confirm that it is proceeding as arranged.

After dinner, as Lestrangle was rising, Tregarth said: "Sir, I'd like to ask you something."

Lestrangle sat back down. He looked at Tregarth with those still eyes and waited.

"I'd like your blessing on an engagement," Tregarth said. "Between Phryné and myself, if she's willing."

He had not discussed this with Phryné beforehand. She was sitting very still across the table, and when he glanced at her the expression on her face told him that this was all right—not the surprise of an arranged moment but the recognition of a right one.

What happened next was the thing Tregarth found most difficult to account for when he described it to me. Lestrangle's response was, on its surface, entirely appropriate: warmth, expressed pleasure, gracious and genuine-sounding good wishes for their future. He placed no obstacle. He expressed confidence in both of them. His voice had the quality of authentic happiness.

But the eyes, watching Phryné's face throughout, were doing something entirely different.

"His joy was real," Tregarth told me. "That's what I couldn't dismiss. But it wasn't coming from where joy should come from. It wasn't—fatherly. It was the joy of someone for whom an

outcome has been achieved. A calculation completed. A variable settling into its expected value." He paused. "I had almost liked him for a moment. Then the wave came back."

They left Lestrange in the dining room and went out together onto the terrace. The October night was very cold and clear. Phryné wrapped her coat around herself and looked at the dark valley and did not speak for a time.

"What has he wanted from the others?" Tregarth asked. "What was the bargain he offered them?"

"I don't know," she said. "But Harry said 'he can rely on my word.' Like a promise. Like an oath." She turned to him. "Something he swore not to do."

"Or something he swore not to allow."

They thought about this.

"He's never going to offer it to you," she said. She did not say it as a question. She said it with the flat certainty of someone who has worked through a logic to its conclusion. "Not as a choice. Not a bargain. Whatever he did with the others—offering them something, asking something of them—he's not going to offer you that. He's going to take it."

Tregarth looked at the red glow visible from around the east end of the house—the laboratory light, steady and unchanging, as it had been every night since he arrived.

"Why are you certain?" he asked.

"Because you're already here," she said. "You're already taking his medicine. He's already treated you for three weeks." She paused. "Jean-Louis and Harry were offered something. They

refused and left. You weren't offered anything. You were brought here."

The owl in the firs answered some question Tregarth could not hear, and the red glow from the laboratory persisted, and far below in the valley a single light moved slowly along the road.

That night, for the first time since arriving, Tregarth did not take the evening draught that Lestrangle had prescribed. He told himself it was an oversight—fatigue, distraction, the evening—and was only partially convinced.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE NOTEBOOK

He told me it was thirst that saved him. Not any particular intelligence, not the accumulated unease of the preceding days, not even Phryn  's analysis on the terrace—though all of these had worked, quietly and without his conscious cooperation, towards the moment that followed. It was simply that he woke at two in the morning with a dry throat and no water within reach, and got up to find some.

The house was completely dark. He had his phone but did not use its light immediately—he knew, from a month of the Locke's specific geography, the exact number of steps from his bedroom door to the top of the stairs and had navigated it several times in darkness without difficulty. He felt his way to the stairs and started down.

At the bottom, in the hallway, his foot struck something.

He caught it before it fell, by reflex—a thing slightly smaller than a paperback, firm-covered, heavier than its size suggested. He held it for a moment in the dark. Then he pocketed it and found the kitchen and drank water from the tap, standing at the sink in the dark with the smell of the house around him: the old stone smell of the place, and under it something chemical and organic that he had learnt to associate with the east end of the building and that was, tonight, perceptibly stronger than usual.

On his way back up the stairs he passed Lestrangle's study door and noticed that it was ajar by perhaps two inches—not open, not quite closed. Through the gap, the faintest trace of that same smell. Tregarth did not pause. He went back to his room.

On the dressing table, the phial of Lestrangle's prescribed evening draught stood unopened. He had not taken it tonight. He had not taken it the previous night either, he now realised—or the night before. He looked at the three unopened phials in a row and felt the quality of narrowly avoided consequence, which is not relief but its sober cousin.

He mixed himself a glass of water from the bathroom tap, sat on the edge of his bed, and took out what he had found in the hallway.

It was a research notebook—A5, hard-covered, black, the kind sold in academic bookshops. Lestrangle's name was not in it, but the handwriting was Lestrangle's: the small, cramped, entirely legible hand that Tregarth had seen in the marginal notes of the library books. Most of the notebook was written in English. Some sections were in what appeared to be technical notation—formulae, sequences, abbreviations that required the context of specialised knowledge he did not have. Some passages were underlined in red ink.

He read for perhaps twenty minutes.

Here I am obliged to hold to the condition Tregarth placed on these accounts. I will not reproduce, or summarise, or characterise in any specific way the contents of what he read. I will say only this: it was a research programme that had been

ongoing for decades. It had a theoretical basis in the alchemical tradition—specifically in the work of Paracelsus, whom Lestrangle had apparently studied exhaustively—and an experimental application that Lestrangle had been developing, refining, and attempting for the entirety of his time at Hollow Locke. The previous convalescents—Jean-Louis, Harry Tolliver, and the others whom neither Tregarth nor I was able to trace—had been approached as potential participants in this programme. They had each been shown, or told, something of its nature. They had each refused.

Tregarth had not been told. He had not been approached. He had been provided with a nightly draught of which the notebook's earlier pages, read with retroactive understanding, made the purpose entirely clear.

He told me that the cold sweat came on gradually, which was worse than if it had come at once. His mind ran through the logic of what he was reading, arrived at its conclusion, rejected the conclusion, reread the relevant sections, and arrived at the conclusion again. He was forced to sit very still on the bed for some time, waiting for the trembling in his hands to stop.

When the trembling had stopped:

Phryné.

Phryné, who had been at Hollow Locke since childhood. Phryné, whom Lestrangle had adopted and raised and watched with those still, calculating eyes while the years made her into what she was. Phryné, who was also in the notebook—not by name, but her presence was there, the other element of the programme, the complementary component. The nature of that role was what

Tregarth told me he found most difficult to hold in his mind without something in him that was not precisely revulsion but was its more organised brother.

He sat still and breathed and thought.

Two things were clear. The first was that his three unopened phials of medication had almost certainly preserved his capacity to think at all in this moment. The second was that he had to act before morning, and he had to do it without alerting Lestrangle to the fact that he had read the notebook.

He replaced the notebook in the pocket of his dressing gown. He put on his slippers and went quietly back downstairs.

The hallway floor was exactly as he had found it: bare boards, the fringe of a rug in the corridor leading to the dining room. He placed the notebook at the precise spot where his foot had struck it—on the floor near the skirting board, partially beneath the hall table. He straightened and stood still, listening to the house.

Hollow Locke at three in the morning made different sounds from Hollow Locke at any other hour. The old structure had its own vocabulary of settling and cooling and responding to the temperature differential between the stone exterior and the maintained warmth of the interior, and Tregarth had, over the weeks, learnt to read this vocabulary as an ambient background. What detached itself from it now was not in that background.

A footstep. Single, from the direction of the east wing.

He moved in one quiet step behind the long curtain that covered the alcove beside the hall table—the alcove where

umbrellas and walking sticks were kept, and where the curtain's fabric was heavy enough to hang straight. He pulled it fully closed and stood without breathing.

Dr. Lestrangle came through the east corridor into the hall.

He was wearing a long laboratory coat with its hood raised—the pale blue disposable kind that research facilities use, not a theatrical garment, but the hood gave him in the dimness exactly the quality Tregarth had been circling for weeks: the monkish, ibis-headed quality of something that had come from somewhere very old and had dressed itself in the present day's clothing without quite achieving the disguise. He carried a small torch whose beam he directed at the floor, moving it in careful arcs across the boards.

He found the notebook immediately.

The change that came over him when he located it was something Tregarth described to me with great precision and considerable effort, because it was the thing that settled, permanently and without subsequent revision, his understanding of what Lestrangle was. The frenzied eagerness—not the eagerness of relief (something lost, found again) but the eagerness of something deferred that is now available once more—the quality of a man for whom this small object is not merely a misplaced notebook but the instrument of a purpose that has occupied him for decades and is, tonight, within reach of proceeding. He thrust it into the pocket of the laboratory coat with the quick, furtive movement of someone taking rather than recovering.

Tregarth held absolutely still behind the curtain. The beam of the torch swept across the hall once more—he could see it through the slight gap between curtain and wall—and then Lestrane turned and went back the way he had come. The quiet of the east corridor swallowed him.

Tregarth remained behind the curtain for another two minutes by the count of his own pulse. Then he stepped out, went directly to the foot of the stairs, and looked up at the landing.

Phryn 's room was the second on the left.

He had perhaps four hours before the house would begin to wake.

THE LABORATORY

Phryné's room was empty.

Not disturbed—not the empty of a room that has been entered forcibly or in haste. Simply empty: the bed turned back, her phone on the bedside table, her book open face-down at her page. Whatever had been asked of her—whatever had been given to her, or done to her, while Tregarth was watching from behind the curtain in the hall—had been accomplished without difficulty. She had trusted him. She had trusted her guardian of twenty years.

Tregarth stood in the doorway of her room for a moment. Then he went towards the east wing.

He did not use his phone's torch. He knew the house now in the way that convalescents come to know their surroundings: intimately, by repetition, in the particular way that people who have nothing else to do except be somewhere come to know it. He moved through the dining room and into the small sitting room beyond and through to the library passage and to the narrow door that led to the old chapel, and he did all of this in the dark and without sound, and the smell that he had been registering for weeks as a background condition—organic and chemical and slightly sweet, the smell of processes running in enclosed spaces—became stronger at each step.

The chapel was lit by the open door in the altar's left cupboard.

Through that door came a reddish, unsteady light—not the clean white of LEDs but the quality of light produced by heating

elements running at high temperature, the functional red of sustained process. The smell was very strong here. Tregarth stayed at the chapel entrance and watched.

Lestrangle was in the doorway of the laboratory, his back to Tregarth. He stood for a moment, then stepped back into the chapel. He was carrying two things: a small glass-stoppered bottle and what Tregarth recognised, with a cold that went through him completely, as an anaesthetic mask—the modern clinical kind, fitted, with a flexible strap. He placed both on the altar step with the deliberateness of a man laying out instruments in a order for a purpose.

Then he straightened, looked at his watch, and went towards the library passage—towards Tregarth's room.

Tregarth pressed back into the shadow of the chapel wall as Lestrangle passed within two metres of him. The laboratory coat. The hood. Those eyes, looking ahead at something that was not Tregarth but was, precisely, where Tregarth should have been—sedated and passive in his bed, the accumulated three weeks of medication having done what it was designed to do.

He waited until Lestrangle's footsteps were fully in the library and then crossed the chapel in three steps and went through the open door into the laboratory.

I cannot tell you what was in that room.

I can tell you that Tregarth told me about it, once, in the third of our three meetings, with the door closed and his voice at a level that made me lean forward to hear it, and that he did not look at me while he spoke. I can tell you that what he

described reached something in me that does not answer to reason or training, and that I have not published and will not publish what he said. I can tell you that the insurance assessor's report on the structure of the laboratory wing, which is a public document, contains a note—two sentences, set in parentheses, as though the assessor was uncertain whether to include them—describing the presence of certain fitments and apparatus that were, in the assessor's words, "inconsistent with any medical or scientific purpose with which I am familiar." Those two sentences are the only public record of what that room contained.

What Tregarth focussed on, in the moment of entering, was not the room but the couch.

It stood in the centre of the space, low to the floor, metal-framed, and Phryné lay on it on her back in her night-clothes, entirely still, her face turned slightly to the right, her dark hair loose around her head. She looked, in the red laboratory light, like something from a painting—perfect and pale and terrifyingly present. The smell of the anaesthetic was clear in the air: she had been sedated. Her breathing was shallow but present.

He was kneeling beside the couch before he knew he had moved. He said her name. She did not respond. He put one hand on her face—warm, alive—and then got his arms under her and lifted.

She was lighter than he expected, or his body had decided to make her so. He turned towards the door to the chapel.

Lestrangle was in the doorway.

He had come back. He had gone to Tregarth's room and found it empty and had come back. He stood framed in the laboratory entrance in his pale coat with the hood still raised, and his face in the red light of the equipment was the face that Tregarth had been trying to name since the first evening, and now he could name it: it was the face of something that has been patient for a very long time and finds that its patience has just been inconvenienced.

"What is the meaning of this?" His voice was cold and entirely steady. "Phryné has been unwell. I've been monitoring her condition. Put her down."

"Get out of my way," said Tregarth.

"I'm warning you. There are processes running in this room that—"

"Get out of my way."

He advanced. Lestrangle was between him and the door and Phryné was in his arms and the distance between them was perhaps three metres. There was a pedestal on Tregarth's right, waist-high, supporting a large glass vessel filled with something dark and thick that caught the red light from the equipment with a quality that he chose not to examine.

"Be careful!" Lestrangle's composure broke—the voice went high, suddenly, with a fear that was not for Tregarth or for Phryné. "You fool, be careful of that—"

Tregarth's hip caught the pedestal.

The glass vessel went over. The sound it made was enormous in the enclosed space, and what followed immediately was the

smell—the full, uncontained version of the smell that had been underlying the whole of Hollow Locke for weeks, released now all at once and concentrated. Lestrangle, who had lunged forward as the pedestal tilted, stepped into the spreading pool from the broken vessel and his foot went from under him. He went down heavily, catching the edge of a bench with one arm, and the sound he made as he fell was an animal sound—something from very deep, something that was not pain but was its more essential component.

Tregarth did not wait.

He went through the door into the chapel with Phryné in his arms, and he turned and found the handle of the laboratory door and pulled it shut behind him. Through the door, as it closed, he heard Lestrangle making sounds. He chose not to analyse them.

He carried Phryné out of the chapel, through the library, through the dining room, and had reached the foot of the main staircase when the first smell came—not the laboratory smell but a different one, the clean, high smell of burning wood. The fire had begun very quickly.

He got her outside. He put her down on the terrace wall where the air was clean and cold and held her upright, and she breathed, and her colour was better in the fresh October air almost immediately. He looked back at the house. A glow was visible in the east wing windows, the same reddish quality as the laboratory light but spreading, brightening, becoming unmistakably something else.

He called 999 and then held Phryn , who had not woken, and watched the east wing burn, and said nothing to the fire crew when they arrived about what he had seen inside.

There was no body in the ruins. There was no identifiable trace of Dr. Edvard Lestrane in anything that survived the fire. The structural survey conducted some months later noted the laboratory's unusual fittings. The inquest returned an open verdict. Lestrane was listed as a missing person for seven years.

Phryn  recovered fully, in the physical sense, within forty-eight hours. She had no memory of anything after going to bed the previous evening. She believed, and believes to this day—Tregarth has never told her otherwise—that she was overcome by fumes from a fire that may have been started by a fault in the laboratory equipment, and that Tregarth carried her out.

This is true, as far as it goes.

When I asked Tregarth whether he had made the right decision in keeping her ignorance intact, he was quiet for a long time.

"What would she have gained from knowing?" he said at last.

"Understanding," I said. "What was done to her, and why."

"She knows what was done to her," he said. "She felt it changing, for two years before I arrived. She felt it and she named it and she waited." He looked past me. "She knows everything that matters about it. She just doesn't know the specific content of the notebook." He paused. "Neither do you. Neither does anyone. And that's—that seems right to me. Some things should be left in the ruins."

I closed my notebook and thanked him. On the way out of his house, I passed a shelf in the hall with a framed photograph on it: a man and a woman standing on a hill somewhere in Scotland, squinting slightly into the light, both of them looking directly at the camera. The woman had dark curly hair and the particular expression of someone who knows precisely who she is. The man had his arm around her shoulders and was looking at her, not the camera, with an expression I recognised from the telling of this account but had not expected to see so plainly on a face.

I did not ask about the photograph. I already knew what I needed to know.

THE MANUSCRIPT

Those who followed the long-form journalism of the previous decade will remember Saville Vellacott, at least in outline. He wrote for the same publications I did—a different beat, a different register, but there were overlapping years when we shared editors and occasionally shared the same conferences on opposite sides of the room. He was one of the best foreign correspondents of his generation: a man with a gift for being in the right city at the right moment and the cold, exact eye to see clearly whatever was happening in it. He was also, by general agreement of everyone who knew him well, the most thoroughly self-contained person in any room he entered.

“Self-contained” is the diplomatic version. The more direct version is that Saville Vellacott was someone who had arranged his life with great deliberateness to keep other people at a distance—not hostile distance, not defensive distance, but the considered, maintained distance of someone who found proximity to other people’s emotions genuinely uncomfortable and had decided to do something about it. He had no close relationships. He had no relationships of any kind, as far as anyone could determine, beyond the professional. He was handsome, dark-featured, precise, and alone in the way of someone who has chosen aloneness with full information.

He disappeared in Cairo in the spring of 2021, while recovering from a severe respiratory illness at the Mena House Hotel. He went out one evening for a walk towards the Great

Pyramid and did not come back. No body was found. No trace was found. The story received the coverage it deserved for about a week and then was overtaken by other events, as stories always are.

Two years later I was in Cairo on assignment, and on a Wednesday evening I came out of the lobby of the Nile Ritz-Carlton and was handed a package by a man I did not recognise—tall, in white, his face largely concealed by the combination of a keffiyeh and the angle at which he held himself. He placed the package in my hands, made a formal gesture—fingertips to forehead, to lips, to chest—and left. By the time I had looked down at the package and looked up again, he was gone.

The package contained a rolled document, printed on ordinary A4 paper. The file name printed in the footer was VELLACOTT_MANUSCRIPT.docx. The date in the header was three days before his disappearance.

I have satisfied myself, to the extent that graphological comparison and digital forensics allow, that the document is authentic. The writing is Vellacott's. The voice is unmistakably his. Whether that is sufficient to conclude that the events it describes are as he describes them—that is a question I leave to the reader, as Vellacott himself left it.

What follows is the manuscript, with minimal editorial intervention.

—M.A.

* * *

Two years have elapsed since I left the world I knew, and the news that a former colleague is in Cairo—someone whose sceptical intelligence I respect, and who I think would publish this account if given it—prompts me to write it down. I have been trying to write it down for some time. The difficulty is not memory but form: the account has no form that the journalism I practised for fifteen years would recognise. So let it be what it is. Let it be a story. No one will believe it. I am past caring whether they do.

I will begin where it begins, which is in the Khan el-Khalili, in Cairo, on a Tuesday afternoon in March.

I had been convalescing at Mena House for ten days. I had been seriously ill—a respiratory infection that had developed into something worse, and then, slowly, into something recoverable. Mena House has the pyramid view and the gardens and the particular quality of comfort that suits a person in the specific recovery stage of not wanting to think. I had arrived there from London, where I had been ill, on the instruction of my doctor and with the complete absence of enthusiasm of someone who is going somewhere only because they lack the energy to resist.

The hotel suited the project of recovery but not, I discovered within a week, the project of existing. It was pleasant and staffed with great care and attended by the kind of international travel that moves between luxury hotels with its own internal consistency, carrying its enthusiasms and its opinions and its photographic activity with it from city to city. I respected this world. I wanted to be elsewhere.

The streets of old Cairo suited me better. I should say, to be precise: they suited the person I discovered myself to be when I left the hotel and walked into the Khan el-Khalili for the first time, which was a person I had not previously met. I am, by formation and habit, someone who maintains a clear interior distance from other people, from their lives and their impulses and their emotional circumstances. I had not been unhappy in this. I had not thought of it as a lack. The streets of the Khan surprised me.

The people I passed there—the traders, the craftsmen, the shoppers moving through the narrow lanes with the fluent ease of a crowd that has been moving through these specific streets in this specific pattern for several centuries—felt, for a reason I cannot satisfactorily explain, familiar. Not in the sense of having met them before, but in the sense of recognising a quality. A kind of unhurried, purposeful existence that did not require justification and did not perform itself for an audience. Something in me, which had been in the habit of maintaining its distance from precisely this quality in the people I usually spent time with, found it without defences.

I am saying that the Khan el-Khalili caused me to feel, unexpectedly and somewhat inconveniently, at home.

I went back most days. I kept to the back streets and the quieter sections. I watched the silversmiths at work, and the spice merchants, and the carpet traders, and I sat in a corner of a café with tea and felt the distance I usually carried reducing, degree by degree, in the heat and noise and smell of the place.

On the afternoon in question—the Tuesday—I was in the Street of the Silversmiths when the street changed.

The change was sudden and odd. People who had been moving through the lane with unhurried purpose were suddenly moving quickly, and not towards me but away from whatever lay behind me. A man on a small motorbike came past fast, with his head turned back over his shoulder. A group of traders emerged from a doorway, looked at something down the street, and retreated. The lane emptied, in the specific way that lanes do when something irregular is approaching, but without the urgency of genuine fear—more like the ambient caution of people who have seen something before and know what response it requires.

I turned to look, and at that moment someone coming from the opposite direction collided with me.

She was very old.

The word “old” does not carry enough of what I mean. She was old in the way that certain objects are old—with an ancientness that is qualitative as well as chronological. Her face, when the falling of her veil uncovered it, was a face from which so much had been removed by time that what remained was closer to a documentation of the passage of time than to a human expression. She had fallen. She lay on the ground of the lane and moaned, and reached with hands that were all joint and tendon, and her eyes, when she opened them, looked for a moment as though she did not know where she was.

I have said that I maintain a clear interior distance from other people’s emotions and circumstances. The woman on the

ground of the lane in the Khan el-Khalili appeared to have no awareness that this was the case. Or rather: the specific light that came into her eyes when she looked up and saw me, and saw that I was hesitating rather than helping—the specific recognition of being found repugnant—did something to the distance I was carrying that I have not been able to account for since.

A wave of remorse, that is the only description I have for it. A feeling entirely out of proportion to anything I had done, and entirely without precedent in my experience of myself.

"I'm so sorry," I said, and stooped and raised her head from the ground, resting it against my knee, and found that I had bent down further and pressed my lips, for one second, against her forehead.

I did this. I, Saville Vellacott, who had maintained an exactly calibrated distance from human intimacy for forty-one years, kissed a stranger in the street.

The old woman sighed. It was an exhalation that seemed to come from a very deep place and to have been held there for a very long time. The expression that moved across her features in that moment was not happiness exactly, but its elder sibling: the expression of someone for whom something that has taken very long is now, at last, done. She rose, blessed me with her hands, and walked away down the lane, which had begun, by now, to resume its ordinary activity as though nothing particular had happened in it.

I stood in the Street of the Silversmiths in Cairo and felt the impression of the kiss on my lips for a long time after she had gone, and could not understand it, and could not wipe it away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ALF

That same evening—still feeling what I can only describe as a residual warmth from the afternoon, a quality in the air around me that was unlike anything in my ordinary experience—I came out of the hotel after dinner to look for Hamid.

Hamid Abd-el-Khaliq was the guide I had contracted for a trip to Saqqara the following morning. He was a man of considerable learning—a doctorate in Islamic art history from Cairo University, and a published specialist in Fatimid-period manuscripts—who guided tourists and journalists not because he had no better options but because he valued the movement between worlds that the work allowed. He knew I was a journalist in the way that all of Cairo's professional guides know the backgrounds of their clients: precisely and without making a show of it. He had been good company on two previous excursions and had the quality I value in any companion: he said what he thought and he expected the same in return.

He was not among the people gathered outside the hotel. I walked slowly down the road in the direction of the road terminus, killing time.

I had taken perhaps ten paces when a man appeared out of the darkness at my side.

He was tall, dressed in white, his face concealed by a keffiyeh drawn high. He did not speak. He placed a small object in my hand with the precision of someone who knows exactly which

hand he is looking for, made a formal gesture—the same gesture as the figure who had delivered my own manuscript two years later, fingers to forehead, lips, chest—and was gone. I looked after him and he was not there.

In my palm was a piece of silk, folded and tied. It was scented, faintly—something floral and old, like dried roses. I returned to the hotel and stood under a light and opened it.

The object it contained was a pendant: a piece of lapis lazuli, deep blue, carved in the form of a heart and mounted in gold. On its surface, three Arabic letters were inlaid in the same gold. The workmanship was extraordinary—not modern, not new, the kind of work that belongs to a tradition rather than a moment. I turned it in the light. The letters caught and threw it back.

I had no idea what it meant. I was still turning it when Hamid arrived.

His expression when he saw the pendant in my hand is something I have thought about many times since. It was not fear—I want to be precise about this, because fear would have been comprehensible. It was a compound of things: recognition, and the particular quality that attends the recognition of something you have been told is possible but have not expected to see. He stared at the pendant for a long moment without speaking.

"Hamid," I said. "What is it?"

He held out his hand without replying, and I placed the pendant in it. He studied the Arabic letters for a long time.

"These three letters," he said, "form the word alf."

"What does alf mean?"

"One thousand," he said. He returned the pendant carefully and looked at me with an expression I was not yet equipped to read. "Mr. Vellacott. Will you allow me to tell you something? It's a story, and I want to be clear that I'm calling it a story because that's the honest word for it. It exists in the oral tradition of this city. Versions of it appear in texts from the Abbasid period. Whether it is history or legend or both—I genuinely don't know. But the pendant in your hand appears in the story, and I think you should hear it."

"Tell me," I said.

We sat at a table outside and Hamid told me what he knew.

In the caliphate of Al-Mamun, he said—ninth century, the son of Harun al-Rashid, the caliph of the Arabian Nights, one of the greatest rulers of the Abbasid golden age, the patron of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad—there was a woman in Cairo called Scheherazade. She was the daughter of the governor of Egypt, and by the account of every text that mentions her, she was of exceptional beauty. She loved a merchant of the city named Ahmad er-Madi—a wealthy man, a good man, by all accounts a genuinely excellent person who had the specific bad fortune to love someone whose father had other plans. The father refused the match. The lovers eloped. Ahmad's wealth was confiscated; a death sentence was issued should he return.

"Exiled," said Hamid. "They went to a distant oasis where a friend of Ahmad's was sheikh. For a while they were content, or tried to be. But exile is a hard teacher, and Ahmad was not a man

who could bear to see the woman he loved living less well than she deserved. He heard of a man in the deep desert—a scholar of the old traditions, someone who was said to know things that the formal learning of the time had forgotten or refused to know. Ahmad went to find him."

While Ahmad was gone, Hamid continued, the son of the caliph—who had been one of Scheherazade's rejected suitors—chanced upon the oasis on a hunting trip. What happened between them during Ahmad's absence, the texts are not clear on. They mention a meeting. They mention that when Ahmad consulted the desert scholar and asked to see Scheherazade from a distance—the scholar had this capacity, or claimed it—what Ahmad saw in the scholar's mirror was Scheherazade and this man, together.

"What he saw may have been true or may have been false," Hamid said carefully. "The texts don't resolve it. What matters is what Ahmad believed."

Ahmad believed the worst. His love became, in the space of the mirror's image, a hatred equally passionate. He demanded that the scholar curse her. The scholar refused. Ahmad held a blade to the scholar's throat and gave him a choice.

"The curse," said Hamid, "was specific. It used the language of the tradition very precisely. Scheherazade would be transformed—would become, in her appearance, the sum of all the years that would otherwise have been lived out naturally, and more years beyond those. She would live for an incalculable time in a condition that would cause all who saw her to turn away. And it would remain until—and this is the exact formulation from the

oldest version of the text—until one thousand compassionate men, unasked and of their own free will, had each bestowed a kiss upon her. Then she would regain her beauty, her love, and death.”

Ahmad walked out of the scholar’s cave. He died that night on the desert road—the texts say of the scholar’s malignant will, which is the tradition’s way of saying: what you set in motion has a cost, and the cost arrives.

“And Scheherazade?” I said.

“Went out into the world. The oldest texts say she begged her way through the centuries, accumulating slowly, painfully, the thousand acts of spontaneous compassion that would end the curse. To each man who gave her what the curse required, she caused a lapis lazuli heart to be delivered—with the number of his kiss inscribed in gold.” Hamid looked at the pendant in my hand. “I saw such an object once, when I was a child. My grandfather had it. He was very old, and he would not tell me where he got it. But the number on it was nine hundred and ninety-nine.”

I looked at the pendant. The gold letters caught the lamplight. One thousand.

Hamid was watching me. His expression had settled into the particular compound I would come to know over the following days: something between compassion and a profound reluctance to say what he was thinking.

“Hamid,” I said. “I need to tell you something that happened this afternoon.”

I told him about the Street of the Silversmiths. The clearing of the lane, the collision, the old woman's face, the involuntary act. His expression as I spoke did not change—it had already settled, I thought, into the position it would hold.

When I had finished:

"It was her," he said quietly. "Scheherazade."

"You don't know that," I said. "It's a coincidence of a kind, but—"

"Mr. Vellacott." He looked at the pendant. "The number on your pendant is alf. One thousand. The last." He was quiet for a moment. "I don't know what it means. I told you that at the beginning and I'm telling you again: I don't know. The texts don't say what comes after the thousandth kiss. They say she regains her beauty, her love, and death. What 'her love' means across eleven or twelve centuries—what form that takes—I genuinely cannot tell you."

"So what happens to me?" I asked.

Hamid looked at me for a long time. "I don't know," he said again, with the honest directness of someone who has decided that the one thing he is absolutely not going to do is lie to this man tonight.

I went back to my room and sat for a long time looking at the lapis pendant in my palm. The blue of it was very deep in the lamplight. I thought about the old woman's sigh—the quality of enormous, accumulated relief—and I thought about what Hamid had told me, and I thought about the word that Scheherazade was

restored to: her love. And then I thought about the word death, which came at the same time.

I put the pendant on the bedside table and went to bed, and slept, and dreamed about a desert I had not yet seen.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE THOUSAND AND FIRST KISS

At Saqqara the following day I was aware, throughout, of Hamid watching me.

He watched in the way that a person watches someone they care about and cannot help. Not obtrusively, not with the performance of concern, but with the steady peripheral attention of someone who has accepted a responsibility he did not ask for. We walked the stepped pyramid and the surrounding complex and he told me what he knew, which was a great deal and was given with the authority of someone who has spent years with this material, and I listened, and the knowledge was interesting. But what I found myself attending to was something else.

Something was happening to my relationship with the ordinary world. I can only describe it as a loosening—the way a knot loosens when the thing it was holding is removed and the tension that gave it purpose is gone. I found myself looking at things with the slight detachment of someone who is looking at them for the last time, and finding the detachment not distressing but appropriate. I noticed this about myself and found I did not particularly want to correct it.

I caught myself, on two occasions during the day, lifting the lapis pendant to my lips. I did not kiss it. But the impulse was there, and its presence alarmed me less than it should have.

When Hamid left me at the hotel that evening, the parting had a quality that neither of us named. We shook hands. He looked at me for a moment with an expression I recognised from the previous night—the specific compound of compassion and reluctant acceptance—and then he said: “If you need me, you know how to reach me.” He said it in the tone of someone who does not believe the statement will be acted upon but makes it anyway, because offering it is the right thing to do.

I did not eat much at dinner. I sat in the restaurant and looked out at the pyramid—the hotel sits close enough to make the scale of it real; from certain windows, at night, it occupies the entire field of view—and I thought about what Hamid had told me, and what he had not been able to tell me, and about the word that the curse ended with.

Death, and her love, and the regaining of her beauty. In that order, or not in an order—simultaneously, perhaps. Death after twelve centuries. And something that had been waiting for twelve centuries before the death could come.

I avoided the company of several people who approached me with the social intentions of hotel guests, which was not difficult, as I have had practice in this. Then I came out of the hotel into the night air and walked in the direction of the plateau.

I had taken perhaps thirty steps when I put my hand in my pocket and took out the lapis pendant, and lifted it to my lips, and kissed it with a fervour that bore no relationship to

anything I had ever felt for any object or any person in the whole of my previous life.

I cannot explain this. I have tried, and I cannot. Something in me that had been held at a careful distance from all feeling, for longer than I can trace, was not at a distance. Something that the kiss in the street had opened—or recognised—was fully open. And I did not understand it and I did not resist it and I walked on towards the plateau with the pendant in my hand and the night air on my face.

Then a figure appeared at my shoulder out of the darkness.

It was the same man who had delivered the pendant, or his double: tall, white-robed, face concealed. He said one word: "Follow." He pointed ahead into the darkness below the plateau.

I followed.

Then I stopped.

The part of me that had been a journalist for fifteen years and had maintained its distance from the full range of human experience precisely because that distance was what made the work possible—that part came back with a violence I had not expected. I stopped dead in the path and I said, loudly: "Who are you? Where are you taking me? I'm not going any further until—"

Something was drawn over my head from behind. A scarf, fine silk, enough to prevent me shouting but not to prevent breathing. I fought. I fought, Vellacott tells me, like a man who knows what's at stake—hands and feet and everything available—and the knowledge that was in the fighting was not of being robbed or mugged or any ordinary bad outcome but of something much more

specific and much more final, the knowledge that if he let this happen it would not be reversible.

It was not reversible. Arms caught him that were, by his account, unlike ordinary arms in their quality of restraint, and he was lifted and bound and in a matter of moments placed into a covered litter on the back of a camel, which was already rising to its height before he had finished fighting.

The camel moved off at speed into the dark.

And then the revolt ended.

He does not explain this—he says only that it ended as suddenly as it had come, and what replaced it was not resignation in any passive sense but something he does not have a word for: a kind of directed calm, purposeful stillness, as though he were being taken somewhere he had, without knowing it, been going for a long time. The bonds were unnecessary. The dark was not threatening. The rhythm of the camel and the distance being covered and the absolute silence of the desert around the motion were, for the first time in his life, not isolating but generous.

For hours the camel moved. Then, at some point in the deep night, sounds came from ahead—voices, the distant sense of gathered life. The camel slowed and stopped and knelt and he was helped out.

He was led forward. Marble beneath his feet. The sound of water. The smell of burning ambergris, warm and resinous in the night air.

He was placed with his back against a pillar and the binding there was formal, not punitive—the gesture of a ceremony rather than a restraint. And then the scarf was removed from his head.

The hall he looked into was open on its far side to the desert, the stars above the sand brighter than any sky he had seen in the cities he had spent his life in. The interior was lit by oil lamps in their dozens, and the light they gave was warm and shifting, and the fountains played in the corners, and the air was the air of a place that has been prepared for something.

She was on a couch at the far end of the hall.

I will not attempt to describe her. Vellacott wrote several sentences in the manuscript at this point and then deleted them, and what remains is a blank space and the sentence: *I found in her eyes all that I had missed in life, and lost all that I had found, and the distance I had carried for forty-one years was gone.* I think this is the right description. I think the deleted sentences were closer to journalism than to truth, and Vellacott knew it.

She rose. She took from a small table beside the couch a dagger—jewelled, its blade catching the lamplight in a way that made it clearly real and clearly ancient. She walked towards him. He felt, he writes, what he had never expected to feel, what he had structured his entire life to avoid feeling: complete, unguarded presence in the company of another person. No distance. No management of proximity.

She reached him. She looked at him for a moment. Then she cut the binding with the dagger, a single clean motion, and held

the dagger out to him, hilt first. She placed one hand on her own heart.

"My life is thine," she said. "Take it."

The dagger fell from his hand. He says he did not drop it deliberately; it simply fell, as things fall when the hands that were holding them no longer have any use for them.

He looked at her for the last moment in which he was still the man who had left London in a state of illness and incapacity and had found himself, improbably, in the Street of the Silversmiths with the last of a thousand debts of compassion to discharge.

Then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

The manuscript of Saville Vellacott ends here.

* * *

I have done what I can with what was given to me. I checked the police records of Vellacott's disappearance again after I received the manuscript and found nothing new. I made inquiries at Mena House and was told, with the careful discretion of hotel staff who are asked about missing guests with some regularity, that Mr. Vellacott had paid his bill fully, left his luggage for collection, and had not been seen after leaving the hotel on the evening in question.

I spoke to Hamid. He was willing to speak, once; he answered my questions and then said he would prefer not to speak about it further. I respected this.

The one thing I will say, as someone who has spent several years investigating the intersection of the inexplicable and the

possible, is this: the story Vellacott tells is not a story about a man who was taken against his will. He fought, and he was overpowered, and he was carried into the desert. But the revolt that produced the fighting lasted perhaps three minutes. What followed it—by his own account, and Vellacott was not a man who softened facts—was something he had no word for but which he did not resist. He wrote the manuscript three days later. He describes no distress.

I have thought, sometimes, about the word the curse ended with: *death.* And then her love, and her beauty. And then death. What the thousand and first kiss completed, whether it ended something or began something—I genuinely don't know. I am not sure the distinction matters to whatever Scheherazade became when twelve centuries of waiting were over. I am not sure it matters to Vellacott.

The lapis pendant was not delivered with the manuscript. I have looked for it. I have not found it.

Perhaps it is where it belongs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BEN TAHAR

I had been at Mena House for three days—having moved there from the Continental after receiving Vellacott's manuscript, partly because I wanted to be near the place where he had last been seen and partly because the hotel's particular quality of sitting at the edge of the desert had begun to feel, in the days after reading his account, like the right kind of adjacency to the questions I was carrying—when I met John and Elspeth Maitland.

They were at the same hotel, in adjoining rooms on the upper floor, and they had the relaxed and mutually attentive quality of a couple who have been married long enough to be genuinely comfortable in each other's company. He was English, quiet, worked in finance; she was Irish, dark-haired, with the quality of alertness that some people carry—the quality of someone who is fully present in what is immediately around them and doesn't require the reassurance of her own previous opinion before responding to it. They had been married seven years. This was their second time in Cairo; they had come on honeymoon and come back because they had loved it.

Mohammed Khalil was their guide. He had guided them on their first visit as well—a professional with considerable knowledge of

the city's history and a gift for the precise calibration of what his clients wanted from an experience. He was not a man who filled silence with noise; he spoke when he had something worth saying, and the result was that when he did speak, people listened.

On the evening of my second day at Mena House, I joined the Maitlands and Mohammed at a table on the terrace. The pyramid was lit, as it is at night, in amber light, and the desert beyond the lights was a particular kind of dark—the dark of space that has had the moon taken out of it temporarily by passing cloud. Mohammed was telling them about Ben Tahar.

"He is the lord of the desert," Mohammed said. "From the valley of the Wadi Araba to Damascus he is known, and loved, and feared. They say"—his voice dropped, as voices do when speaking of things that require a different register—"that he is a great welee, a man of God favoured beyond other men. In Cairo he is sometimes seen in the streets of the old city, having the appearance of a very simple, very old man. In the desert he is something else. He is said to ride a snow-white camel faster than any animal in Egypt."

"What is a welee, exactly?" asked Elspeth.

"A man of God," Mohammed said. "In the sense of someone who has been given something—a kind of grace, perhaps, or of power—that ordinary men have not been given. Someone operating from a different kind of authority."

"And this Ben Tahar has this quality?"

"So it is said. He goes about helping the poor and the sick, quietly, without announcement. When he comes to Cairo, he is not seen by most people. He is seen by the supremely good—"

Elspeth looked interested.

"—and the supremely wicked," Mohammed added.

Maitland laughed. "A binary distinction."

"Most significant distinctions are," said Elspeth without looking at him, and Mohammed inclined his head slightly in the direction of a man acknowledging that a point has been well made.

I asked Mohammed how reliable he considered the reports.

"I have spoken to people who have seen him," he said. "I believe them. There are things in the desert that are more reliable than the newspapers, Mr. Carmody. The desert keeps its own records." He said this without mysticism—as a simple, considered observation from someone who had spent thirty years navigating between the old city and the new one.

Maitland was looking out at the pyramid. He had the manner of someone who has decided to be indulgent about a conversation that is not quite his register. Elspeth was watching Mohammed with the direct, genuine attention she gave to everything.

"Where does he live?" she asked.

"No one knows exactly," said Mohammed. "His people—the Ibn-Rawallah—have territories in the eastern desert that very few outsiders enter. When he comes to the city, he comes and goes. No advance notice. No recorded movements." He looked at the pyramid. "The authorities in two countries would give a great deal to understand his network. They cannot."

"Why would the authorities want to understand his network?" Maitland asked.

"Because he disappears people who have done things that warrant disappearing," Mohammed said, with a tranquillity that was not dark humour but something more considered. "Specifically: people who have been preying on others in the desert territories that his people know and the authorities do not reach. It has been happening for as long as anyone in the old city can remember. Nobody has ever been charged with anything. Nobody has ever provided evidence of anything. And certain problems have simply ceased to exist."

The cloud passed from the moon and the desert acquired its silver, and the pyramid threw a shadow across the sand towards the hotel.

"I hope I may meet him," said Elspeth, entirely sincerely.

"Unless you journey far into the sands for many days, it is unlikely," Mohammed said. He paused. "But then—he does appear to certain people."

"The supremely good and the supremely wicked."

"Yes."

"Well," said Maitland, with the slightly deflating good humour of a rational man, "since neither of us is likely to qualify under either heading, I think we're probably safe."

He squeezed his wife's hand. She smiled at him, and then looked back out at the desert, and I thought I saw in her expression the specific quality that people have when something

has already found its way past their reasonable adult defences and installed itself as true.

None of us knew, at that moment, that across the desert something was already in motion. There is a man I have not yet named in this account—a man who had been watching the terrace from a position outside the light for the better part of an hour, and who had seen Elspeth Maitland on the hotel terrace the previous evening, and who had been making arrangements since then. His name was Faris el-Rashad. He operated a small and highly profitable criminal network in the desert region between Cairo and the Red Sea coast—antiquities, primarily, and other things—and he had, over the past two years, made a habit of using the remote terrain and his considerable knowledge of it to conduct operations that the Egyptian authorities could demonstrate existed but could not locate.

He was a handsome man in his late forties with a reputation for elegant violence and a kind of ambition that extends beyond money. He had been to London twice. He had met Elspeth Maitland's eyes once, across the terrace, and she had not known he existed, and this had produced in him an emotion he was not accustomed to managing.

He was accustomed to getting what he wanted.

I did not know any of this that evening. I learned it afterward, in the way that one learns most of what matters: too late to prevent what it explains.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
THE TURQUOISE NECKLACE

We went to the Khan el-Khalili the following morning—all of us, including Mohammed, who had a standing arrangement with a metalwork shop there that I suspected was financially advantageous to both parties. The Khan is one of the oldest active markets in the world, the bones of it laid down in the fourteenth century under the Burji Mamluks, and there is a quality to walking in it—the specific density of accumulated commerce and human activity, layer upon layer—that makes the present tense feel slightly provisional. It does not feel haunted, or at least not in the simple sense. It feels historical in a way that very few places manage: not preserved but continuous, still doing what it has always done.

I was in the copper merchants' section, looking at a coffee set I could not afford and had no room for, when the commotion began.

Khan el-Khalili's narrow lanes are not designed for motorised vehicles, but this has not prevented their entry, and the specific hazard of a delivery moped ridden too fast through a lane too narrow is a known quantity in this section of the city.

I heard the sound before I identified it—the particular whine of a moped at speed—and then the shouting, and by the time I had made my way around the corner the worst was over.

Elspeth Maitland was standing in the recess of an ancient doorway, catching her breath. Beside her, also in the doorway, was a very old man. He was bent with the specific stoop of someone who has been carrying things for a very long time, and he carried a bundle wrapped in blue cloth which had evidently been dropped in the confusion and now lay at the edge of the lane. The moped had stopped some distance further down the street, its rider having regained control by the straightforward method of running into a market stall.

Maitland arrived from the direction of the copper merchants' lane at approximately the same time I did, with Mohammed behind him. Maitland's face when he saw his wife standing unhurt had the particular quality of relief that had just converted from something considerably worse.

"My God," he said. "Elspeth—"

"I'm perfectly all right," she said. She sounded slightly breathless. "The old gentleman needs seeing to, not me."

I had not been there for what happened, but I gathered it from the people around us without difficulty. The old man had not heard or registered the moped coming up fast behind him. Elspeth had. Rather than stepping back to safety—which would have been the natural and rational response—she had stepped forward, gotten her hands to the old man's shoulders, and redirected both of them

into the doorway as the moped passed. She had done this in the time available, which was not generous.

The old man now set down his bundle, straightened as much as his back allowed, and looked at Elspeth with an attention that was, in that crowded lane, rather extraordinary—the attention of someone for whom the crowd around them has ceased to exist and the thing directly before them is the only thing present. He had a white beard, a green turban, and eyes that were, even in the shadow of the doorway, very clear for his apparent age.

He knelt. Not the stumbling, effortful kneeling of a very old man but a deliberate, unhurried descent, and his forehead went to the stones of the lane.

“Oh, please—” Elspeth said, distressed.

Mohammed was at her shoulder. “He is making du’a for you,” he said, in an undertone. “A prayer of intercession. He is a haj—do you see the green turban?” His voice had changed from its customary professional calm. There was something in it I had not heard before.

Maitland had reached for his wallet, the straightforward human instinct of the embarrassed Englishman confronted with extreme gratitude. Mohammed put a hand on his arm without looking at him. “No,” he said quietly.

“But—”

“No.”

The old man rose. He was talking to Mohammed now in Arabic, quickly, and Mohammed was listening with the expression of a man receiving information that he is processing on multiple levels

simultaneously. Then the old man turned back to Elspeth and said something.

"He wants to give you something," Mohammed said. "From his bundle. He wants you to take it."

The old man had opened the blue wrapping and was lifting from it—carefully, with both hands—a gold chain on which hung a pendant. It was a piece of turquoise, raw-edged, not the polished tourist variety but the kind that retains its geological character. The gold mount was very old. He held it out across his open palms.

Elspeth looked at Mohammed.

"Take it," Mohammed said. There was urgency in his voice, very controlled, the urgency of someone who knows something he cannot explain in the available time. "Please. Take it."

Elspeth took it. The old man spoke again.

"He asks you to hang it around your neck," Mohammed said.

She fastened it. The turquoise lay at the base of her throat, catching the light of the lane.

The old man looked at it for a moment. Then he made a low, formal bow—not the bow of someone performing a social courtesy but the bow of someone completing an act—picked up his bundle, spoke one or two words to Mohammed, and walked away down the lane. The people standing around them made space for him to pass. This happened, I noticed, without anyone appearing to decide to do it. He simply walked and the space was there.

He was gone around the corner of the lane before anyone spoke.

"Who is he?" Maitland asked.

Mohammed had the expression of a man who has just seen something he has spent years knowing was possible but did not expect to see. He said nothing for a moment.

"Mohammed," Maitland said.

"I will find out," Mohammed said. "I will make inquiries." He said this with the tone of someone who already knows the answer and needs time to decide how much of it to give.

We found a carriage and left the Khan. Mohammed rode on the outside and the Maitlands and I had the car to ourselves. Maitland was examining the necklace—or rather examining Elspeth, who was wearing it and had the slight distance in her expression that I had learned to associate with someone turning something over in their mind.

"It's a good stone," Maitland said. "Old mount. We must find some way of—"

"John," she said.

"—of recompensing him without—"

"John." She was looking out of the window at the street. "When we were in the doorway. Before you arrived." She paused. "He spoke to me."

"The old man?"

"In English. Quite clearly. He said: 'I am in your debt.' That was all. And then he went back to Arabic, and Mohammed arrived." She looked at her husband. "His English was not the English of someone who learned it from tourists."

Maitland looked at me. I had nothing to offer him.

She did not say anything more for the rest of the short drive. She looked out of the window, and her hand was at the turquoise pendant, turning it slightly, and at the entrance to the bazaar she had passed—in the last moment before the moped's sound had reached her and she had done what she did—I recalled that Mohammed had specifically mentioned the turquoise in his account of the necklace. That it was not the sight of the old man she had glimpsed in the lane; it was something else. I did not ask her about it.

At the back of the crowd at the bazaar entrance, as we had left, there had been a face I had registered without attaching significance to at the time. I recalled it now and attached significance to it.

It was the face of Faris el-Rashad.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE ABDUCTION

The afternoon at Mena House after the bazaar had a quality of accumulated tension that none of us named directly. Elspeth wore the turquoise pendant at dinner. She was quieter than usual—not subdued, but inward, the way of someone whose attention is divided between the present conversation and something they are working out at a level below it. Maitland watched her. Mohammed had not returned to the hotel after leaving us at the entrance; I had not seen him since.

I had been thinking, during the afternoon, about el-Rashad's face at the bazaar entrance. I had not been close enough to read his expression, and in any case I did not know enough about him to read it if I had been. But I had seen where he was looking. And what he was looking at was Elspeth, from perhaps thirty metres away, with the fixed attention of someone who has decided something.

I said nothing about this. I was not certain enough to justify the alarm it would cause, and the bazaar incident seemed to have resolved without incident. By evening I had half-convinced myself I was being paranoid.

At half past eight, a note was delivered to Maitland at the dinner table—a hotel envelope, handwritten, purportedly from the reception desk, saying that there was a query about his account that required his immediate attention, and that the duty manager was waiting for him at the business centre on the ground floor. Maitland read it, looked mildly irritated, excused himself to Elspeth and me, and went.

It was a false note. There was no query at the business centre. By the time Maitland discovered this and returned to the terrace, twelve minutes had elapsed.

Elspeth was not at the table.

A waiter, when Maitland asked, said she had received a message on her phone about five minutes after he left, had read it, stood up, and walked towards the hotel garden. The waiter assumed she was going to meet her husband and thought nothing of it. The garden path at the hotel's east end runs between two substantial ornamental hedges for a stretch of about forty metres before opening to the wider grounds. This section is not directly visible from the hotel's main terrace.

Maitland did not find her in the garden. He found me at the bar and I could see from his face that what I had persuaded myself was paranoia was not paranoia.

We went to reception and they called Mohammed, and it was Mohammed who found Maitland forty minutes later—bound with plastic cable ties, gagged with a cloth, sitting against a low wall in the hotel car park, approximately four hundred metres from the main entrance. He had been taken from behind on the

garden path and walked to the car park quickly, with something pressed against his ribs, and was not harmed beyond the indignity of it. The whole operation had been quick, professional, and coordinated.

Elspeth had been taken in the same window of time, through the same section of garden path, in the same direction. Nobody saw. The hotel had cameras on the main entrance and the lobby but not on that section of the garden path, which was something el-Rashad's people had established in advance.

Maitland was on his feet and speaking almost before Mohammed had the cable ties off him.

"How long?"

"At least an hour," Mohammed said. His voice was steady.

"Probably a little more."

Maitland went white. I saw him process this and find his way to a quality of controlled fury that was, I thought, worse than visible panic—the specific emotional register of a man who has decided not to lose control because losing control will not help.

"El-Rashad," he said.

"Yes," Mohammed said.

"You know where he's going."

"I have an idea. He has a location, south of here, near the river. There are old structures there that the authorities know about but can't easily access." He paused. "They have vehicles now. They're not going to stay in the desert for long—he knows the desert is where his advantage is but not at this time of

night with the roads as they are. He'll reach his location and wait."

The police were called. The manager was on his phone. From the direction of the main entrance came the first sounds of arriving vehicles. All of this machinery was activated and all of it was, as Maitland intuited with a certainty that was entirely correct, useless for the next twelve hours at minimum. El-Rashad had been operating in this region for years while the authorities demonstrated their awareness of his activities and their inability to act on it.

Mohammed said, very quietly: "Effendi. I need to go to Cairo."

"Cairo." Maitland stared at him. "Mohammed, she's—"

"I know where she is," Mohammed said. "Or near enough. Going to Cairo is not going away from her. Going to Cairo is the only thing I can do that will help. I need to go now."

He ran back towards the car park. Maitland watched him go with an expression I cannot describe except as the expression of a man watching the last resource he has move away from him, and having nothing to do but let it go.

He turned to me.

"There's a broken chain on the path," he said. "Someone picked it up. The necklace." His voice was flat. "She knew. She broke the chain and left it."

I understood. The turquoise pendant with its broken gold chain, left on the garden path in the dark: not accident and not simply evidence, but a message sent in the only direction

available to Elspeth Maitland in that moment. A message to whatever the pendant connected her to.

The police arrived and took statements. A military unit was deployed at significant speed and to no discernible effect. I stood with Maitland on the terrace and watched the desert in the direction the investigators told us was most likely, and the desert offered nothing, and the pyramid sat in its amber light at the edge of the nothing, and the moon rose.

"She'll be all right," I said. I believed it. I could not have told you why I believed it at that point, beyond the fact of the necklace.

Maitland did not say anything. He was looking at the desert with the expression of a man who is doing the only thing left available to him: staying exactly where he is so that he is there when something happens.

I stayed with him.

Mohammed was in Cairo, moving through the old streets at a pace that I reconstruct only from what he told me afterwards—a pace that I found consistent with the man I had watched operate all week, which was to say: purposeful, efficient, without drama. He knew a address in the old city. He had known it for years and had hoped, in a general and private way, never to need it. He went to it, beat on the door of what appeared to be a very old and partially ruined building, was admitted, was inside for perhaps twelve minutes, and came back out.

He told me, when I eventually asked him directly what he had done inside, that he had passed on a message and the terms of what was owed.

I asked what was owed.

He looked at me with the composed, decided expression of someone who has decided exactly what he will and will not say.

"The debt of a life saved," he said. "It is a very old obligation. It has very specific terms. They are always honoured."

He said nothing further on the subject. I noted this and did not press him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE WHITE CAMEL

Several witnesses saw the white camel that night.

A contractor driving back to Gizeh from a site visit saw something cross the road ahead of him at speed—an animal, he told the police, moving faster than he had ever seen a camel move, the rider upright and apparently not urging it. By the time he had processed what he was seeing, it was gone across the sand to the east. A patrol unit that had been deployed in what turned out to be entirely the wrong direction saw the same animal pass them at a distance of perhaps two hundred metres, moonlit, silent, heading south. Their senior officer, who filed the report, wrote that it was moving at a pace consistent with a racing dromedary of the pure desert breed, and that the rider made no response to their challenge.

Maitland was somewhere in the desert on the hired horse he had obtained over the strenuous objections of the hotel security team, riding in the direction the military had said was most likely and which, as Mohammed had correctly predicted, was wrong.

He was not looking for the white camel. He was looking for anything. He saw the camel and the rider as a shape against the moonlit sand, passing without sound, not in the direction he was riding but at right angles to it, and he pulled up and watched it go and found that he was praying, not in words but in the sustained, wordless way of someone who has run out of everything else.

By the time Maitland returned to Mena House—empty-handed, grey-faced, having reached the conclusion that movement was no better than stillness—dawn was an hour away and the search operations had the quality of exhaustion that means they will be wound down before they produce anything.

Mohammed was not at the hotel. He was standing on a low mound of sand some three hundred metres to the east of the main building, looking along the desert road. He had been there for an hour.

He saw the white camel when it was still half a kilometre away. He did not move towards it. He stood and watched, and as it approached he could see the double burden it carried—the rider, and a figure in the rider's arms. When it was close enough for him to see Elspeth's face, pale and still, he made the du'a—the prayer of intercession—with his hands open and his eyes closed, moving his lips in the Arabic that he had learnt as a child and had come back to some years ago, for reasons he had not fully explained to anyone. He kept his eyes closed until he heard the camel kneel.

When he opened them, he saw Ben Tahar descend and lift Elspeth Maitland carefully from the camel's back. He saw him lower her to the sand and support her with one arm. He saw him force something between her lips from a small glass container. He saw Elspeth's throat move as she swallowed.

Ben Tahar turned east and made a long, deep obeisance towards Mecca.

When Mohammed looked again, the camel and its rider were gone.

He ran across the sand as Elspeth Maitland opened her eyes.

What had been given to her in the temple ruins, when the old man had appeared behind the pillar from the desert darkness and spoken her name in perfect English, had not been poison. This I understand now but did not at the time. It was a compound, known to the desert physicians of a tradition far older than pharmacology as officially practised, that produces in the body something indistinguishable from death for a period of several hours—the heart rate reduced to a barely detectable thread, the temperature dropping, all surface signs of life suspended. The Bishareen had found her apparently dead and had left her. What Ben Tahar gave her at dawn, on the sand outside Mena House, was the antidote.

She did not require hospitalisation. She required warmth, and water, and her husband, and several hours of sleep, and she received all of these. She was shaken but unharmed and remembered what had happened to her clearly and without trauma, which is

itself an indication that whatever she had been given was considerably more specific in its action than shock or sedation.

El-Rashad was found dead in his tent by his own people. I will not describe the manner of his death, which was unusual. I will say that the camp was abandoned before dawn and that the Egyptian authorities announced, some weeks later, that the network el-Rashad had operated in the eastern desert region had been dismantled, and that they attributed this to their own investigative efforts, which was their privilege and perhaps partly true. Mohammed, who heard this announcement on his phone and showed me the news item without comment, gave a very slight smile.

"Before the next moon," I said.

"Just," he said, and put his phone away.

I was on the terrace with the Maitlands two days later—Elspeth recovered, Maitland with the quality of a man who has been through something that has permanently reorganised his understanding of what is possible, and who has not yet decided how to file it—when Maitland said: "I don't understand it at all."

He said this not to Mohammed, who was present, but to the general air around him, as the honest acknowledgement of a man filing a statement for the record.

Elspeth looked up from the glass of tea she was holding. She had the expression of someone who has known something for a while and has been waiting for the right moment to say it.

"Perhaps," she said, "you will not laugh, quite so readily, in future, at my Irish stories about the good people."

Maitland looked at her.

"The good people," he said.

"The ones who appear to those who need them and those who deserve what comes to them. The ones who operate by rules that are not the rules of ordinary life." She looked at the desert. "It has different names in different places. The same thing."

Maitland turned to Mohammed. "The turquoise," he said. "She was wearing it when she came back. How was it managed? You had it."

"I took it to him," Mohammed said. "It was the token by which he knew her need. And the token by which she was-protected, while she was with them. They would not harm what bore his mark."

"You knew where to find him."

"I knew an address," Mohammed said. "I had kept it for a long time. I was not certain whether it would still be useful." He paused. "It was useful."

"Why didn't you tell us before?"

Mohammed considered this with his habitual care. "Because," he said, "I was not certain you would take the information seriously. And I needed you to do exactly what you did—stay at the hotel, be present, be reachable. If I had told you I was going to find Ben Tahar, you would have—"

"Come with you," Maitland said.

"Yes."

Maitland absorbed this. "And that would have been wrong."

"It would have been the wrong journey," Mohammed said. "For you. Some journeys are not yours to make."

We sat in the desert light and the pyramid maintained its patient presence at the edge of the morning, as it had maintained it through three millennia of all the things that had been asked of it and all the things that had been done in its shadow, and it had nothing to say about any of them but was still there.

I left Cairo four days later. I had filed my piece about Vellacott's disappearance—a careful account that left more questions open than it answered, which is the honest version—and I had an overdue conversation with the magazine's features editor about what came next. I was tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep.

* * *

I have tried, in writing this account, to be precise about what I know and what I cannot know. That is the obligation of the work I do—the same obligation that applies to the podcast and the magazine column and every other form in which I have attempted to describe what I have seen and heard and been unable to fully explain. The obligation is simple: say what happened. Say what you observed. Say what you concluded and on what grounds. Acknowledge the limits of the framework.

The framework I have used for twelve years—atmospheric anomalies, geological emanations, the documented effects of certain compounds on human perception, the occasionally reliable testimony of credible witnesses—has served the work tolerably well. It has allowed me to describe what happened at Low Wenfold

with reasonable accuracy. It has given me a partial vocabulary for the Valley of the Just and for the laboratory at Hollow Locke. It fails, more or less gracefully, with the Curse of a Thousand Kisses and the Turquoise Necklace, and it fails quietly and without elegance when I try to apply it to certain details of the Riddle of Wraycote and the Blue Monkey that have no anomaly about them at all but which I nonetheless find, on reflection, that I have been carrying.

What I notice, reviewing these accounts, is that the framework's failures follow a pattern. It fails, specifically, in the presence of people who are already living outside it. Shwe Bo, who has been in the Valley of the Just before and knows that its mechanism is probably geological and possibly something else. Mohammed, who kept an address in Old Cairo for years against the day it would be needed. Sybil Calthorpe, who wore the Wraycote ring without knowing what it opened and lived with the house's weight without needing to explain it. They are not credulous people. They are not people who have abandoned reason. They are people who have extended their working understanding of what the world contains to include things the framework does not handle, and have found that this extension is accurate.

I find I trust their accuracy more than my framework's completeness.

This is not a conclusion I would have reached at the beginning of the work. I offer it as the conclusion I have reached at the end of it, with the appropriate caveats that it is one person's observation across one person's experience, and that

other investigators with different cases would reach different conclusions, and that I cannot prove any of it, and that I am not trying to.

Low Wenfold has been demolished. The site was purchased by a heritage developer who applied for planning permission to build three houses on the footprint; the application was declined on grounds unrelated to what lies under the mound. The mound is still there, still registered on the National Heritage List as a Bronze Age tumulus, still sealed. The barrow's last recorded surface temperature reading was taken in September of last year by a student researcher who was mapping geothermal anomalies in the area for her doctoral thesis. The reading was normal.

The Valley of the Just remains in northern Myanmar, unnamed on maps, unregistered with any authority. The temple is in the valley and the bronze figures are in the temple. Shwe Bo continues to work for the Archaeological Trust. I have not asked him about the valley since Mandalay.

The ruins of Hollow Locke were acquired by a Perthshire company and cleared for farmland. Nothing identifiable was found.

Vellacott's manuscript is in a safety deposit box in London. I still do not know what the thousand and first kiss completed, and whether the distinction between an ending and a beginning matters to anyone it concerns.

John and Elspeth Maitland returned to Cairo for a third time the following year. Mohammed guided them. They brought the turquoise pendant. I was not there for this visit but Elspeth sent me a photograph of the three of them on the hotel terrace

with the pyramid behind them. Maitland is smiling at the camera. Elspeth is looking at something off to the left that is not in the frame. Mohammed is looking in the same direction as Elspeth.

I have looked at that photograph a great many times.

I cannot see what they are looking at. But something in the quality of their attention tells me it is there.