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WINTER'S GROUND

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

About 70,000 words

CHAPTER ONE

THE WATER NYMPHS

Does an evil deed cast a shadow in advance? Does premeditated crime spread a baleful aura which affects certain highly-strung temperaments, just as a sudden cold wave rising from the spine to the skull may be a forerunner of epilepsy or panic? John Trenholme had cause to think so one bright June morning, and he has never ceased to believe it, though the events which made him an unlikely figure in what the press came to call the Winter's Ground case—the murder of a prominent financier known throughout the City of London—have long since been eclipsed by the next crisis and the one after that, as events always are in our accelerated age. Even the sun became a prime agent of the occult that morning. It found a chink in a blind and threw a bar of vivid light across the face of a young man lying asleep in the front bedroom of the White Horse Inn at Roxton. It crept onward from a firm, well-molded chin to lips now tight-set, though not lacking signs that they would open readily in a smile and reveal two rows of strong, white, even teeth. Indeed, when that strip of sunshine touched and warmed them, the smile came; so the sleeper was dreaming, and pleasantly.

But the earth stopsops not for men, no matter what their dreams. In a few minutes the radiant line reached the sleeper's eyes, and he awoke. Naturally, he stared straight at the

disturber of his slumbers; and being a mere man, who emulated not the ways of eagles, was routed at the first glance.

More than that, he was thoroughly aroused, and sprang out of bed with a celerity that would have given many another young man a headache during the remainder of the day.

But John Trenholme, painter by profession, was something of a light-hearted wanderer by instinct; if the artist was ready to be annoyed because of an imaginary loss of precious daylight, the wanderer laughed cheerily when he blinked at the glowing screen of his phone and learned that the hour still lacked some minutes of half past five in the morning.

"Bloody hell," he grinned, pulling up the blind. "I thought I'd slept through the best part of the finest day Hertfordshire has seen this year."

Evidently he was still young enough to deal in superlatives, for there had been other fine days that summer; moreover, in maligning himself, he was ridiculously unfair to six feet of athletic symmetry in which it would be difficult to detect any marked resemblance to inertia.

On the way to the bathroom he stopped to listen for sounds of an aroused household, but the inmates of the White Horse Inn were still taking life easily.

"Eliza vows she can hear my alarm through the ceiling," he communed. "Well, suppose we assist nature, always a laudable thing in itself, and peculiarly excellent when breakfast is thereby advanced a quarter of an hour."

Eliza was the inn's stout and voluble cook-housekeeper, and her room lay directly above Trenholme's. He went back for his phone, crept upstairs, opened a door a few inches, and placed it inside with the alarm due in three minutes. He was splashing in the bath when a harsh and penetrating din jarred through the house—he had chosen the most aggressive ringtone available—and a muffled shout confirmed that Eliza had been duly alarmed.

A few minutes later came a heavy thump on the bathroom door.

"All right, Mr. Trenholme!" cried an irate female voice. "You've been up to your tricks, have you? It'll be my turn when I make your coffee. I'll put salt in it instead of sugar, don't think I won't."

"Why, what's the matter, Eliza?" he shouted.

"Matter! Frightening a body like that at five in the morning. I nearly put my back out getting off the bed."

Eliza was still thunderous when Trenholme ventured to peep into the kitchen.

"I don't know how you dare show your face," she cried wrathfully. "The cheek of it. Just fancy you sneaking in and leaving your phone in my room."

"But, *cherie*, what have I done?" he inquired, his brown eyes wide with innocence.

"I'm not your cherry, nor your anything else. Who set that alarm in my room?"

"What alarm, *ma belle*?"

Eliza picked up a spatula and bent so ferocious a glance on the intruder that he dodged out of sight for a second.

"Listen, *carissima*," he pleaded, peering round the jamb of the door. "If the phone found its way upstairs I must have been sleepwalking. While you were dreaming of something thoroughly sensible, I may have been dreaming of you."

"Stand there a bit longer chattering and calling me names, and your bacon will be frizzled to a cinder," she retorted.

"But I really hoped to save you some trouble by carrying in the breakfast tray myself. I hate to see a jolly, capable woman of your considerable energy working herself to a shadow."

Eliza squared her elbows as a preliminary to another outburst, when the stairs creaked. Jade, the morning helper, arrived in a dressing gown, phone in hand.

"Oh, you've condescended to get up, have you?" was the greeting Jade received.

"Why, it's only ten minutes to six!" cried the astonished young woman, staring at her phone as if it had lied to her.

"You've never had such a shock since you were born," went on the sarcastic Eliza. "But don't thank *me*, my girl. Thank Mr. Trenholme, the gentleman standing there grinning like a Cheshire cat. Talk to him nicely, and perhaps he'll do a portrait of you, and then that young man of yours will see how beautiful you really are."

"Davy doesn't need telling anything about that," said the girl, smiling, for Eliza's bark was notoriously worse than her bite.

"Davy!" came the snorting comment. "The first man who ever asked me to marry him was called Davy, and when, like a wise

woman, I said no, he went off to some investment bank in Canary Wharf and made a fortune—that's what Davy did."

"What a piece of luck you didn't accept him!" put in Trenholme.

"And why, I'd like to know?"

"Because he began by losing his head over you. If he'd lost his heart as well, there wouldn't have been much of Davy left for the trading floor, would there?"

Jade giggled, and Eliza raised the spatula again; so Trenholme retreated to the dining room. Within half an hour he was passing through the High Street, nodding a cheerful good morning to such early risers as he met, and evidently well content with himself and the world in general. His worn canvas rucksack and portable easel betrayed his profession to anyone who cared to notice, but no student of men could have failed to guess his calling were he dressed in anything else. The painter and the poet are the last true bohemians, and John Trenholme was bohemian to the tips of his fingers.

He moved with the easy confidence of a man who expected the landscape to arrange itself pleasingly around him. He had studied at the Slade, and that school had taught him to trust his instincts above every passing trend. He looked on nature as an inexhaustible gallery, and regarded people in the mass as creatures that occasionally improved the composition. He was heart-whole and unattached. At twenty-five he had already been shortlisted for the Bloomberg New Contemporaries twice over and had a quietly devoted following in certain gallery circles, which

is the contemporary method of waiting to see whether a genuinely promising artist will do something extraordinary.

He had luminous brown eyes set wide apart in a face which won the prompt confidence of women, children, and dogs. He was splendidly built for outdoor life, and moved with a long, supple stride that people mistook for lounging until they walked alongside him and found that the pace was something over four miles an hour. Add to these traits the fact that he had been in Roxton exactly two and a half days and was already on speaking terms with most of its inhabitants, and you have a fair notion of John Trenholme's appearance and ways.

He was commissioned by *Aperture & Field*, a glossy arts and landscape publication, to spend a week in this old-world Hertfordshire village and produce a set of illustrations for a feature on endangered English landscapes. He had sketched the straggling High Street, the green, the inn itself with its timbers reputedly dating from the sixteenth century, the undulating common, the church with its lych gate, and the ivy-clad ruin known as The Castle, with its square Norman keep still frowning at the countryside. There remained only an Elizabethan manor, curiously misnamed The Towers, to be transferred to his portfolio. Here, oddly enough, he had been rebuffed. An email to the owner, Mortimer Harlow—hedge fund manager, prominent collector, and a name that carried quiet weight in the City of London—asking permission to enter the park for an afternoon had received a curt, one-line refusal.

Trenholme was unsurprised by the type if not the bluntness. He had expressed in the inn his frank opinion concerning a certain kind of financier and the Harlow species in particular, whereupon the forthright Eliza, who classified the Harlow family as "all show and no warmth," informed him that there was a public footpath through the park, and that from a certain point near a lake he could paint the grand old manor house to his heart's content, let the Harlows and their security arrangements scowl as they chose.

The landlord bore out Eliza's account.

"There was a proper row about it, twenty-odd years back, when Harlow bought the estate and tried to block the path," he said, wiping the bar in the way landlords have when a good story is coming. "He had signs up, he had padlocks, he had a letter from some solicitor. But we had three hundred years of precedent and the Ramblers Association, and in the end he gave it up. Not many people bother these days—he put in a new car park by the station to keep folk away—but some of us walk that way on a Sunday afternoon just on principle. It's a funny old business up at The Towers these days, mind you. Mrs. Harlow—the second wife, that is—you'll hear her playing piano some evenings if the window's open. Lovely player. Sad sort of sound to it, though." He replaced a glass and picked up another, as if that ended the matter. "Any road, the right of way is yours if you want it."

Trenholme stored the detail away without knowing why. Something in the landlord's tone—that brief tenderness followed

by studied indifference—suggested a story he hadn't been invited to hear.

He little imagined, that glorious June morning, that he was setting foot on a road of strange adventure. He had chosen an early hour deliberately. Not only were the lights and shadows perfect for watercolor work, but at such an hour he was unlikely to draw attention. He would not have come at all had the magazine not specifically requested a full-page illustration of the house.

Now, all would have gone smoothly had the landlord's directions proved as spare in spirit as they were in language.

"After passing the old pub at the edge of the common," he had said, "you'll come to a pair of iron gates on the right. There's a pedestrian gate on the near side. Go through, and head straight for the clump of cedars on top of the little hill. There's barely a path, but that's the line of it. It comes out at the far gate on the London road."

Yet who could guess what a snare for an artist's feet lay in those few words? How could Trenholme have known that "a pair of iron gates" would prove to be an almost perfect example of seventeenth-century decorative ironwork, wrought with acanthus leaves and roses of extraordinary freedom and beauty? He crouched by the pedestrian gate with his sketchbook propped on one knee and spent forty minutes on them, and thought himself well rewarded for every minute. Another result, uncounted by him but of singular importance in its outcome, was the delay thus entailed.

He crossed the undulating park and found the almost-invisible path without difficulty—grass-grown but traceable in the long furrows of an old drove. At the top of the cedar-crowned hill he obtained his first view of the mansion and immediately saw that the sun was directly behind him. The house faced southeast; to paint it properly he would need to move farther along the slope. A brier-tangled hillside fell away on the far side of the trees to a lake fed by a small cascade on the eastern edge. An ideal spot, he thought.

This, then, was the stage setting: Trenholme, screened by the black cedars and dense scrub, seated about fifty feet above the level of the lake and some forty yards from the near edge of the water. The lake, largely artificial and dating from the eighteenth century, lay at the foot of the cascade, which slid and splashed down a face of moss-covered boulders. Copper beeches, silver larches, and a scatter of flowering shrubs cast strong irregular shadows on the dark, pellucid surface below. On a promontory of dressed brown stone stood a white marble statue of Venus Aphrodite, and the ripples spreading from the cascade set her reflection trembling on the water as if the goddess were alive.

Beyond the lake a smooth lawn dotted with fine old oaks and chestnuts rose gently for a quarter of a mile to the formal gardens in front of the house. To the left the park gave way to mixed woodland; to the right, another belt of trees partly concealed a series of old quarries and overgrown ravines. Altogether a quietly extraordinary setting—pastoral, perfectly

English, and seeming on that still June morning so remote from the glass towers of the City that it was hard to credit the nearest road sign, which placed London at thirty miles.

By now the hour was closer to half past seven than to seven, nearly an hour later than he had planned. But Art, which is long-lived, reckes little of Time, an evanescent thing. He was absorbed in his subject. He unpacked his portable easel, set out his palette, and was soon deep in work.

He worked with the speed and assured confidence of someone who has learned to trust their eye absolutely. The house came together quickly—a harmonious arrangement of warm brick and shadow, impressionistic but accurate. Then he turned to the lake. Here the tonal values were deeper and more complex. He half-closed his eyes in the painter's habitual gesture of simplification. He was so absorbed that he was entirely unconscious of the figure approaching from the direction of the house until she had crossed nearly the whole width of lawn between the garden and the far edge of the lake.

It was not altogether surprising that he had not seen her sooner. She wore a pale green waterproof jacket and dark leggings—good camouflage against the early-morning parkland—and she moved at a quick, purposeful pace that covered the ground faster than it appeared to. Moreover, every line of her attention was directed elsewhere. She no more suspected that a painter was sitting motionless in the shadow of the cedars above her than she suspected the marble Venus of watching.

She came on with rapid, graceful strides, stood for a moment beside the statue, and then, while Trenholme literally gasped for breath, shed the jacket, kicked off her shoes, tucked her hair under a swimming cap, and dived cleanly into the lake.

Trenholme had never felt more surprised. The transformation had been so swift, and the girl's complete unconsciousness of any observer so obvious, that he felt immediately the prickle of the uninvited witness. He was invisible from below—the deep shadows and dense undergrowth saw to that—but the question remained of what to do. If he stood and blundered back through the scrub, the noise would startle her. If he stayed motionless, he was in some sense complicit in her not knowing she was being observed.

At this crisis, the artistic instinct triumphed. He became aware, almost with a start, that the lake and its setting had been missing precisely this: the living element. The marble goddess was beautiful but cold. The swimmer, moving through the dark water with unhurried, rhythmic strokes, gave the composition the quality it had lacked—life, and more than life, a dialogue between the permanent and the present. His hand had moved for the small canvas before he had fully decided to use it. Oil was the right medium for this. He positioned himself a little further back under the brier and began a third picture, the dominant note of which was the contrast between the living woman and the marble goddess.

For fifteen minutes the girl swam with the ease and variety of someone long practiced in the water, at complete liberty and equally at ease. At last she pulled herself up onto the stone

platform beside the statue, dripping, and stood for a moment in the early sunlight.

Trenholme had anticipated this and had already laid the groundwork for it. The comparison between the two figures—the marble and the living—was too strong to pass over. He worked with rapid concentration, capturing the quality of wet skin in sunlight, the gleam of the bathing cap, the posture of someone entirely unaware of being observed and, for that reason, more interesting than any deliberate pose could have been.

Then she dressed herself in a few efficient seconds and was walking back towards the house before Trenholme had quite remembered to breathe normally.

"Well," he said quietly, watching the pale green jacket recede across the park. "That's something. I have my picture."

He had got a great deal more, if only he were gifted to peer into the future; but that is precisely what the future withholds. When he was calmer, and the new canvas had received its necessary color notes, he found himself thinking about her with a persistence that surprised him.

"If she's half as interesting to talk to as she is to paint, I would cheerfully miss a deadline for the first time in my career," he mused. "But that's frankly impossible, I suppose. Even if I could contrive a meeting, I could never explain this honestly. She wouldn't—and quite rightly wouldn't—forgive me for it."

And yet he watched. His eyes followed her until she disappeared through a gateway in a dense yew hedge and ran

lightly up the steps of a stone terrace. She swung herself through an open set of French windows at the south end of the house. He followed her in imagination—across the room, up the stairs, the quiet routine of a morning after a swim—then caught himself doing it, and returned firmly to the canvas.

He sighed.

"If I had the luck of a decent French poodle, this hedge fund plutocrat Harlow would have invited me to lunch," he grumbled.

Then his eyes found the sketch and he forgot the girl in her likeness. By heaven, this would be a picture. "The Water Nymphs." He must alter the setting enough that no one could identify the location, but the essential quality must be preserved at all costs.

"Luck," he said, with a sudden lift of spirits. "I am the luckiest painter in England this morning. Happy chance has given me something the studio never could."

His satisfaction was shattered by a gunshot.

Sharp, insistent, a sound of absolute finality in that still morning air. A host of rooks erupted from the tall elms near the house. Two cock pheasants came rocketing out of the wood to the right with the indignant clucking of birds interrupted at breakfast. Rabbits vanished in every direction. But Trenholme was sportsman enough to know the weapon at once: a rifle, high-velocity, nothing like the muffled thump of a shotgun. Not the sort of thing that had any business being discharged in an

enclosed private estate thirty miles from London on a weekday morning in June.

He fixed the direction—the wood to the right, beyond the belt of scrub and the old quarry—and his glance went automatically towards the house.

The French windows through which the girl had entered remained open, but now a window on the first floor, the most easterly of three, had been raised a few inches. The light was strong and the air clear enough that even at this distance he thought he could make out movement behind the glass—someone gesturing, or so it seemed. This continued for a minute or more. Then the window was closed.

At the same moment he noticed a gleam of light from behind the clipped yew hedge beyond the east wing: morning sun on a car windscreen. The car had been there all along, he realized. He had simply not remarked on it. It had not moved.

That was all. The rooks settled gradually. A pair of rabbits ventured back from the scrub to resume their interrupted breakfast on the short turf. A robin trilled from somewhere in the cedars above him. Trenholme checked his phone. Half past nine. He had apparently been absorbed here for rather longer than he realized.

He packed his materials and, having noticed that the car had not moved, decided to take the direct exit nearest the road rather than the longer route through the park.

He had barely emerged from the trees when a voice addressed him.

"Excuse me. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

A man in a waxed jacket, carrying a shotgun broken over his arm and accompanied by a Labrador, came up the slope with determined purpose.

Trenholme explained civilly, since the keeper was clearly within his rights. Moreover, his appearance so obviously announced his profession—easel, paint-stained bag, the persistent smell of turpentine—that the question had a ready answer.

"Did you hear a shot fired somewhere?" the keeper asked.

"Yes. In that direction." Trenholme indicated the belt of trees to the right. "A rifle, I'd say. Not a shotgun."

"That's what I thought." The keeper's expression had moved from challenge to something more focused. "High velocity."

"Rather dangerous in an enclosed estate, isn't it?"

"I intend to find out who was stupid enough to fire one. Excuse me, sir." And man and dog went quickly towards the wood, the Labrador already pulling ahead.

And Trenholme, not knowing that death had answered the shot, took the path towards the road, his mind pleasantly divided between the morning's three canvases and the memory of a girl emerging from dark water into the morning sun.

CHAPTER TWO

"WHO HATH DONE THIS THING?"

Trenholme's baritone was strong and tuneful—for the Muses, if kind, are often lavish of their gifts—and the final refrain of an impassioned aria traveled far on that still June morning. Thus, when he reached the iron gates, he found the Roxton community officer standing there with the particular air of a man who has nowhere urgent to be and is entirely comfortable with that arrangement.

"Hello," said the artist cheerily. Of course he knew the constable. In a week he would have known every man and dog in the village by name.

"Morning, sir," said PC Farrow, turning with unhurried ease. He was a solid, sandy-haired man of thirty-five or so with the weathered complexion of someone who preferred the outdoors to a desk and had arranged his career accordingly. "Fine bit of singing. What was that?"

"Caro mio ben. Giordani. Eighteenth century." Trenholme passed his easel through the pedestrian gate. "The sentiment is broadly transferable to any age."

"Is it now." Farrow considered this with apparent sincerity. "You were in the park this morning, sir?"

"I was. Painting the house and the lake. There's a public footpath."

"I know it well." No challenge in the tone—purely professional interest. "By the way, did you hear a shot fired while you were inside?"

"Yes. About forty minutes ago, I'd say. From the direction of those trees." Trenholme indicated the Quarry Wood to the right. "A rifle. Not a shotgun."

Farrow's thumbs found his belt in what appeared to be a habitual resting position. "You'd know the difference, sir?"

"I grew up on a Scottish estate. Yes."

"See anyone in the vicinity?"

"A keeper. Stocky man, forty-odd, a yellow Labrador, shotgun broken over his arm. He was heading towards the wood as I came out."

"That'll be Bates." Something in Farrow's expression suggested that this was exactly the kind of reliable, confirmable fact he most appreciated. "And yourself—you were in the park from roughly what hour?"

Trenholme told him: the gates at just past six, the cedar hill before seven, the painting without interruption until the shot at half past nine. Farrow listened with an expression of courteous attentiveness that Trenholme would later recognize as the man's working face—the face of someone absorbing everything while appearing to absorb nothing in particular.

"Thank you, sir. I'll wander that way and have a word with Bates. Where are you staying?"

"The White Horse. I'm there through the end of the week."

"Very good." Farrow already had one hand on the gate. "Enjoy the rest of your morning."

Trenholme walked on, and within a few minutes was singing again, his thoughts entirely on life—and more especially on life as expressed by a girl diving into dark water.

Police Constable Farrow did not hurry. Why should he? A rifle shot in a private estate at half past nine on a fine June morning was, as he had said, unusual—unusual was a word he used often and meant with precision—but it was obviously a matter capable of the simplest explanation. Such a sound heard at midnight would be sinister, replete with the elements of dread. Under the conditions, he would almost certainly find Bates, or Bates would find him, and the story would turn out to involve Jenkins, the under-keeper, some long-running grievance against a particular crow, and a judgment call about the wildlife bylaws that Farrow would be invited to overlook.

He paused at the tree line long enough to radio his location and the report of the shot to the duty sergeant at Easton. Procedure, nothing more. Then he went in.

He took fifteen minutes to cover the ground Trenholme's longer stride had traversed in ten. He found no one in the wood. No pheasants were disturbed by his passing. The estate was quiet in the particular way of an early summer morning before the working day has properly started.

He emerged into the long avenue that ran from the Easton lodge gate to the front of The Towers, and stopped.

The dark blue Range Rover was parked on the gravel in front of the house, engine off, driver's door ajar. There was no sign of the driver. The front door of The Towers stood open. A yellow Labrador sat at the foot of the broad stone steps, watching Farrow's approach with calm territorial certainty.

Farrow checked his watch. He noted the absence of Bates, of Jenkins, of anyone at the door. He noted that Mortimer Harlow, who kept famously reliable hours, had apparently not yet left for London on a morning when his train departed at nine forty-five. He noted all of this without alarm and with the studious absence of conclusions that he considered the foundation of competent policing.

Then the driver reappeared from the direction of the stable block—Brodie, the Harlow family's driver, a compact and practical man whom Farrow knew from the village shop on Saturday mornings. Brodie moved differently than usual. He moved with the compressed urgency of someone carrying information he didn't know how to put down.

Farrow had seen that walk before, and straightened slightly.

"Brodie."

The man stopped. His face did the calculation that faces do in such moments—how much to say, in what order. Then it resolved into a flat kind of directness. "You'd better go inside," he said.

"What's happened?"

Brodie's jaw worked briefly. "Mr. Harlow has been shot." He kept his voice level, as if volume might make it more true than

it already was. "He's dead, Mr. Farrow. Right there on the front steps, same as every morning. Harris and I carried him in. I didn't know if we should have done."

"It's all right," said Farrow, which was not quite accurate but was the right thing to say. He pressed his radio.

The next ten minutes had a quality of controlled acceleration that he would remember for the remainder of his career. The duty sergeant at Easton was succinct and capable. A second officer was being dispatched. He was to preserve the scene and await. Dr. Stern, who covered the district, was already on his way—someone at The Towers had called him directly, it seemed, before anyone had thought to call the police.

Farrow walked to the foot of the steps. He looked at the broad mosaic landing where Mortimer Harlow had stood. He turned and looked at the line of the Quarry Wood, four hundred yards away across the park.

The shot had come from there. The angle was right. The range was considerable but not impossible for a high-velocity rifle. And somewhere in that wood—from the rock above the old quarry, he suspected, which he knew from years of walking the path—there would be a point from which this landing was clearly visible, and from which a man with the right rifle and the right preparation could put a bullet exactly where the bullet had gone.

He was still working through this quietly when three men came through the doorway behind him: Bates; Tomlinson, the house manager; and Hilton Harlow.

Hilton Harlow was the elder son, and most people who had dealings with him found him formidably composed. He was thirty-five, lean, dark-complexioned, with the deliberate manner of someone accustomed to controlling a room by the simple method of being the calmest person in it. That composure was fractured now. He was pale in a way that had nothing to do with shock alone—it was the particular pallor of a strong nervous system sustaining a very large impact, and making a visible effort to continue functioning.

Dr. Stern's car came up the avenue at speed and stopped with a jerk. The doctor got out looking hurried and worried.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was halfway through a surgery. I came as fast as I could."

"I'm afraid nothing can be done," said Hilton quietly. He steadied himself with one hand against the doorpost, just briefly. "My father is dead. I'm quite certain. If you'd go in—Tomlinson will take you to him." Then, as an afterthought, in a tone of slightly forced precision: "My stepmother is upstairs. She knows nothing of this yet. I'd be grateful if we could keep it that way until you've had a chance to assess things. She is—she has difficulty, at the best of times."

There was something in the way he said it—the deliberate pause before "difficulty," the particular care of the phrasing—that Farrow stored away without examining.

Doctor and house manager went inside. As they did, Farrow noticed a movement at one of the first-floor windows—the easternmost window above the entrance. A figure, briefly. A woman

in a pale dressing gown, close to the glass, looking down at the steps. Then Hilton turned towards the doorway and the figure stepped back, quickly, as if into shadow.

Farrow looked back at Hilton Harlow and found that the young man had not seen it. Or at any rate he gave no sign of having seen it.

Hilton became aware of Farrow properly then—not as a uniform at a distance, but as a person who had been observing him. Something shifted in his expression; the decision was made to engage.

"Constable. I'm glad you're here. Bates tells me there was an artist in the park this morning. I want him found and spoken to."

"I've already spoken to him, sir. His name is Trenholme. He's a guest at the White Horse Inn, been there since Monday. He was in the park legitimately—he has the right of way—and he had no firearm. He heard the shot and reported it clearly."

Hilton Harlow pressed two fingers briefly to the bridge of his nose. "He may have seen something. Something he doesn't know the significance of."

"That's very possible, sir. I'll be speaking to him again. Can you tell me, in your own time, exactly what happened this morning?"

Hilton told him. He was more composed now that there was a procedure to follow. During breakfast with his father, his stepmother, and Nell Voss—his father's ward, who lived at The Towers—there had been nothing unusual. His father had excused

himself shortly after nine, collected his things from Harris in the hall, and gone out to the landing to light his cigar, as he did every fine morning. Hilton had returned to his study on the first floor.

"I heard the shot," he said. "I was reading. At first I didn't—" He stopped. Tried again. "I heard Miss Voss call out a moment later. I went downstairs and found him at the foot of the steps. Brodie had come round from the car. Harris came back out. I believe my father was already dead before any of us reached him."

"Did your father have reason to expect trouble of any kind? Threats, anything out of the ordinary recently?"

The pause was very short. "No. None that I'm aware of."

"And your brother—Mr. Robert Harlow?"

"Robert left on Saturday morning. I haven't been able to reach him. He—we had a difficult week, and he needed some space from the situation here."

Farrow waited.

"There was a disagreement between my brother and my father. On Saturday morning, before Robert left." Hilton's voice was careful, precise, like a man carrying something fragile. "I don't know the full details. Family matters."

"I understand, sir." Farrow's tone conveyed no pressure. "One more thing. You've called the local police—we're here. Have you made any other calls?"

Hilton held his gaze steadily. "I telephoned the Metropolitan Police as well. Scotland Yard—specifically, the the

Met's homicide specialists. My father was involved in an ongoing investigation with the SFO. A financial matter. I thought under the circumstances they needed to know immediately."

"When did you make that call?"

"Shortly after I found him. Nine forty-five, perhaps. Possibly before I called the local station. I wasn't entirely thinking in order."

"Of course not, sir."

But you thought about Scotland Yard, thought Farrow. In the first ten minutes, with your father lying on the steps, you thought about Scotland Yard.

He turned to Bates with a look that said: later. Bates gave the smallest possible nod.

The next quarter-hour was the kind of organized busyness that Farrow was good at. A second constable arrived on his bicycle from Easton and was stationed at the Easton gate. Brodie drove to the station to give a full account to the Inspector. Three of the gardening staff were assembled in the courtyard, briefed carefully, and dispatched in a line to beat the Quarry Wood. Farrow gave them exact instructions: mark anything unusual with a twig pushed upright, touch nothing, make as little impression as possible.

"They'll tramp over everything," said Hilton Harlow, watching from the steps.

"Not if they do as I ask, sir. And if the murderer is still in those trees, he can't stay there forever."

A flicker of something crossed Hilton Harlow's face—not at the word *murderer* exactly, but at some private association the word carried. It was gone at once. He put a hand over his eyes and walked slowly into the Italian garden.

Farrow and Bates fell in at the back of the search party.

"All right, Alfred," said Farrow quietly, once they were screened from the house by the yew hedges. "What is it?"

Bates looked straight ahead. He was a man who normally wore his silences comfortably; this one had edges. "I've got a good position here," he said, which was his way of explaining the price of what he was about to say.

"Understood. Go on."

"Last Saturday morning. Mr. Robert and his father, in the hall. My niece works inside—she was on the stairs, hadn't been seen. She heard the old man say: 'That's my last word on the subject. I mean to be obeyed this time.' And Mr. Robert—he lost his temper. Said his father was enough to drive a man crazy. Said some fellows would be tempted to—" Bates paused, choosing words. "He used an unfortunate expression. He said some fellows would be tempted to shoot the pair of them. Himself and his father. Then Tomlinson appeared and the old man went off in the car, and Mr. Robert left on his motorbike and hasn't been back since."

Farrow walked four paces in silence.

"There's more," said Bates.

"I thought there might be."

"That shot this morning." Bates dropped his voice another level, though the nearest member of the search party was thirty

feet ahead. "I've been on this estate sixteen years. I know every firearm in the gun room and out of it. I know what every one of them sounds like—pheasant drives, rough shooting days, all of it." A brief pause. "There's one rifle on this estate that fires that caliber. A .450 Express. Mr. Robert bought it three years ago for a safari trip that never happened. Keeps it in his sitting room."

Farrow said nothing, and waited.

"I went to look," said Bates. "Before I came outside. It's not there. The rack is empty, and there are no cartridges in the drawer that I could find. I haven't said this to a soul but you, and I'd be grateful if—"

"You haven't said it to me," said Farrow. "I haven't heard it. We'll see what the wood tells us."

Bates breathed out quietly.

They were at the tree line now. Farrow raised a hand; the search party stopped and spread out. He and Bates took the most direct line towards the rock above the quarry—the one point in the wood, as Farrow had already calculated, from which the front steps of The Towers would be fully visible.

Twenty yards short of it, Bates stopped and pointed.

Three clear impressions in a strip of moist earth beside the quarry path. A man's boot print, to judge by the size and shape.

"Not fresh," said Bates, crouching low. "Three days, possibly four. The grass is beginning to right itself at the edges. And look here—insects have stirred the surface."

"Mark them," said Farrow, and moved on.

The rock rose twelve feet from the surrounding ground—old limestone, bare and broad at the crown, with the estate laid out clearly to the south. Farrow climbed it with care, keeping to the edge where his boots would leave the least impression. From the top the entire east face of The Towers opened before him without obstruction. He could see the broad mosaic landing at the head of the front steps. He could see the gravel where Brodie's car was parked. He could see, with absolute clarity, exactly where Mortimer Harlow had stood every fine morning of his life to light his cigar.

He could also see, on the mossy south-facing surface of the rock, two distinct sets of marks: one set three or four days old, careful and measured, as if made by someone studying the ground; and a second set, overlaying the first, very recent—less than a day—purposeful, controlled, and made by feet smaller than the ones that had left the earlier prints.

Farrow looked at this for a long moment. Then he took out his phone and photographed it carefully from three angles.

He descended the rock and found the others waiting.

"Seal off the quarry path back to the boundary," he said to the constable who had arrived from Easton and was now at his shoulder. "Nothing comes in or out of this section. No one from the house either, until further notice. Take my authority for that and explain to the Inspector when he arrives."

He pressed his radio again. He gave the duty sergeant at Easton a terse summary: confirmed rifle shot, identified probable firing position, footprints of two different dates found at the

location, rifle belonging to Robert Harlow reported missing from the house. He recommended that the Metropolitan Police be made aware, on arrival, that the essential groundwork had been completed.

He said all of this precisely and without any perceptible satisfaction in his voice. But as he stood at the edge of the Quarry Wood with the morning sun full on his face and the estate quiet around him, Police Constable Farrow permitted himself one small, private thought.

He had been told that Scotland Yard were coming. That the the Met's homicide specialists were already in motion, and that someone of seniority would be on the road within the hour.

They would arrive to find the scene secured, the firing position identified, the key witness already interviewed, a missing firearm on record, and a set of footprints that a forensic examiner would need to look at very carefully—because whoever had made the older set had taken some trouble to ensure they were the right size.

When the big detectives came down from London, Farrow reflected, they were going to find that the quiet constable from Easton had not wasted the morning.

He walked back towards the house in the sunlight, hands clasped behind his back, thinking about footprints.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HOUNDS

Detective Chief Superintendent Jonathan Winter had just finished reading a surveillance report he did not much like—the kind that confirmed a suspicion without providing anything that would survive cross-examination—when his office phone rang. He glanced at the display, set down the report with the air of a man releasing a small and unpromising fish, and answered.

The caller was the Commander, Specialist Crime.

"Leave whatever you're doing," said the Commander. "Mortimer Harlow, the fund manager, has been shot dead at his estate in Hertfordshire. Rifle shot, approximately nine-thirty this morning, apparently from a wood on his own property. His son has just telephoned here. Local police are on site. The SFO had an active inquiry with Harlow's firm—which is why we're involved rather than the county. Take personal charge. I want you on the road in five minutes."

The voice ceased. Winter had been consulting his watch.

"Nine-thirty this morning, sir?" he said. "That's barely an hour ago."

"The son didn't waste time. Harlow is of some significance in the City and the SFO connection and Harlow's City profile mean we're being brought in at senior level. I'll let them know you're going." A brief pause. "Who will you take?"

"Fournier."

"Good. Keep me informed."

Winter put the phone down and stood. He was six feet two and built on the lines of a man who had once played rugby to a decent standard and now contented himself with walking large distances at weekends. He had a close-cropped grey head that people variously described as bullet-shaped or distinguished, depending on their relationship with him, and a broad, weathered face which conveyed in roughly equal measure intelligence, patience, and the faint suggestion that he had heard most things before and found few of them surprising.

He crossed the corridor in three strides and opened the door of the adjacent office without knocking, which was their arrangement.

Detective Inspector Charles Fournier was standing at the window with a small espresso cup in one hand and his phone in the other, apparently reading something that amused him. He was forty-four years old, slight, clean-shaven, and so consistently in motion that the rare moments when he held still tended to attract attention. His black eyes were quick in the particular way of eyes that are always doing more than one thing at once.

"Harlow," said Winter.

Fournier looked up from his phone. Something shifted in his face—not surprise exactly, but the rapid reordering of pieces that have suddenly been given a new configuration.

"Mortimer Harlow?" he said.

"Shot dead at his Hertfordshire estate an hour ago. The Commander wants us on the road."

Fournier put the espresso cup down with great precision.

"Of course he does," he said, and reached for his jacket. "*Sacre nom*. I was wondering what would happen when the SFO inquiry stalled. I didn't expect this."

"You knew him?"

"Better than I knew you when we first worked together." Fournier was already at the door. "And he puzzled me more. Get the car, Jonathan. I'll explain on the road. Also—" he paused at the threshold, and for the first time something that was not amusement visited his face—"I should tell you now: I don't think this is going to be easy."

"You said that about the Baxter case."

"And the Baxter case took eleven months." Fournier was already in the corridor. "Get the car."

Winter got the car.

The road north out of central London took them through the parks and up through Islington before the speed restrictions lifted and the morning traffic thinned. Winter drove, which was their arrangement; Fournier claimed that driving required the use of brain capacity better deployed elsewhere, and Winter suspected this was true.

"Tell me about the SFO matter," said Winter, when they had cleared the North Circular.

"Harlow Capital Management. Small fund, about a hundred and eighty million under management. Institutional clients mostly, a

few wealthy individuals. Mortimer Harlow founded it twenty years ago after some years in Asian commodity markets—a period he was always very fluent about in general terms and remarkably thin on specifics. Two months ago, a tranche of US Treasury bonds held in custody on behalf of clients—worth four point two million pounds—vanished from the fund's record-keeping system. The movement was traced: transferred via SWIFT to a Luxembourg nominee account registered to a shelf company, Meridian Trustees SA, dissolved within a week of the transfer. The money went into the wind somewhere between Luxembourg and Liechtenstein."

"And the SFO called us in."

"They called my unit in, yes. You were in The Hague for a fortnight, if you recall, attending a conference on cross-border financial crime, which you described to me afterward as—"

"Never mind what I described it as. Go on."

"I interviewed Harlow twice." Fournier turned the espresso cup in his hands—he had brought a fresh one from his desk in a small thermos. "He was impenetrably helpful. Gave us every number, every access log, every record we asked for. Cooperated completely. Was visibly distressed. Said the fund was his life's work, he couldn't imagine who had done this, he wanted the money found as much as we did." A small pause. "He was one of the best interviewees I have ever encountered. Which, as you know, is never a reassuring thing to say about a suspect."

"You suspected him."

"I suspected his son. Hilton Harlow—Operations Director, has run the fund's back office for eight years, administrator-level

access to all custody records. Before joining his father's firm he spent four years at a Luxembourg trading house. He knows that infrastructure intimately. He also took two trips to Luxembourg in the year before the securities disappeared, which he characterized as relationship management with a third-party prime broker, which may well be true and is impossible to disprove without the kind of access the Luxembourg regulator was disinclined to provide."

"Was Mortimer Harlow aware of your suspicions?"

"I put it to him directly. Quietly, at the end of the second interview. The money, I said, appears to be within the family. He received this information with the expression of a man being told something he already knows but is hearing articulated for the first time. He said he would give it serious consideration. He called the SFO the following morning through a solicitor and withdrew cooperation pending legal advice. The inquiry stalled and has been stalled since."

Winter drove in silence for a moment.

"He protected Hilton," he said.

"That is the most straightforward reading, yes."

"Or Hilton didn't do it."

"Also possible. The only other person with the necessary access was the fund's compliance officer, a woman named Patterson who has worked for Harlow for twelve years. I spent some time on her. She is, without question, the most meticulous person I have encountered in twenty years of financial investigation. She keeps every record, files every return, retains every communication.

She is the kind of person who would rather die than falsify a document. She did not move the securities."

Winter acknowledged this.

"What about the younger son?" he asked. "Robert."

"Robert Harlow." Fournier's tone shifted slightly—affectionate, almost, in the way that one can feel affection for a phenomenon one finds entertainingly predictable. "Thirty-two years old, half-brother to Hilton—different mothers. Has the build and temperament of a man who should be doing something physical and demanding for a living, and instead has spent the last decade doing nothing useful at all. He was briefly a fund manager at his father's firm, then at two other houses in succession. He left each of them under what the City calls 'compliance issues' and the rest of us call getting caught. He has expensive tastes, an impressive capacity for trouble, and enough charm to convince each successive employer that this time will be different. He did not move those securities. He hasn't the patience or the technical understanding."

"But he would make an excellent suspect."

"Extraordinarily good," said Fournier pleasantly. "Precisely the sort of person you'd want the police to be looking at. Flamboyant, financially reckless, publicly at odds with his father. Even made some sort of threat last Saturday, according to my sources. Ideally cast."

Winter glanced across at him.

"You have sources at The Towers?"

"I have sources everywhere, Jonathan. It's not glamorous but it is effective." Fournier poured a careful measure of espresso into the cup's lid. "There was a significant row between Robert and his father last Saturday morning. Robert left immediately afterward on a motorbike and hasn't returned. He is, at this moment, unaccounted for."

"Which is convenient for someone."

"Remarkably so."

They drove. The city gave way to the outer suburbs, and the outer suburbs thinned into the flat green of Hertfordshire, punctuated by retail parks and logistics warehouses and, increasingly, old farmland that had not yet been redeveloped and still had the patient look of land that knew it was waiting.

"There's another element," said Fournier, after a silence.

"There always is with you."

"Nell Voss. She is twenty years old, an orphan—her father was Harlow's business partner in his early years in Asia, died when she was twelve, her mother two years before that. Harlow was guardian during her minority and trustee of her settlement thereafter. He has managed her inheritance ever since. The trust holds approximately three and a half million pounds in various assets."

"She turns twenty-one."

Fournier looked at him with what appeared to be genuine admiration.

"In ten weeks, yes. At which point the trust dissolves and the assets transfer to her directly. She has the right—and she

has exercised it; I've spoken to her solicitors—to appoint an independent auditor to review the trust accounts before transfer."

"And if Harlow had been using the trust assets informally—"

"As a revolving credit facility for the fund, yes, which I believe is precisely what happened—then the SFO inquiry was a catastrophe for him because it brought scrutiny to all the fund's custody records. He killed the SFO inquiry. But Nell's auditor arriving in ten weeks was a different kind of threat altogether. One he couldn't kill simply by withdrawing cooperation."

Winter said nothing for a moment. The road sign said Roxton, six miles.

"Unless," he said finally, "the trustee died. And the trust administration passed to someone else. Someone who could arrange a delay."

"The trustee has died," said Fournier quietly. "And I find that I am not, on reflection, very surprised." He recapped his thermos. "I told you it wouldn't be easy, Jonathan. Dead men tell no tales. Mortimer Harlow himself could probably provide several chapters of a very interesting story. Those chapters are missing now."

"Still," said Winter, with the air of a man declining to be discouraged. "I have a feeling we shall get further in London than in Hertfordshire."

Fournier looked at him sidelong.

"Sometimes," he said, "you frighten me when you produce a remark like that. I seem to see intelligence gathering itself, like a weather system."

"Don't push your luck," said Winter. "We're nearly there."

The estate appeared on the county map, and its entrance—the iron gates Trenholme had spent forty minutes drawing that morning, though neither detective knew that yet—came into view at the end of a narrow road bordered by old hedgerow. A woman emerged from the lodge to vet their credentials. As Winter produced his warrant card, Fournier leaned past him and looked at the lodge keeper with an expression of courteous interest.

"Is Mr. Robert at home?" he said pleasantly.

"No, sir."

"When did he leave?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

She could say, and Fournier knew it, and she knew that Fournier knew it. The gate opened.

"The domestic as adversary," murmured Fournier, as the car moved into the avenue. "She'll be a sufficient proposition if we push her, but the real competition will be Tomlinson."

"The house manager?" said Winter.

"How did you—" Winter indicated the estate entrance behind them. On the lodge gatepost, half-obsured by a climbing rose, was a small printed label: *Bates & Tomlinson, Estate Management*. "You're very annoying, Jonathan," said Fournier.

"I know. It's one of my better qualities."

They were received at the front of the house by Hilton Harlow, who had, by now, assembled a version of his composure. He was pale and controlled in the way of a man who has decided that the most useful thing he can do is function. He recognized Fournier at once, and the recognition produced in his expression something that was rapidly suppressed—not quite alarm, but its quieter cousin.

"Mr. Fournier," he said.

"Mr. Harlow. I'm very sorry." Fournier's tone was entirely genuine. "This is Detective Chief Superintendent Winter, who is leading the inquiry."

"Thank you for coming so quickly." Hilton Harlow shook Winter's hand, and the steadiness of his grip was impressive. "I've asked the household to cooperate fully with you. Whatever you need."

He led them through the front door and into the entrance hall. On an oak settee against the far wall, a white sheet covered the outline of an object that had been a man two hours ago. Winter looked at it for a moment. Fournier did not look at it at all, which was, in Winter's experience, the more attentive response.

They were shown into the dining room. Two people were waiting there: a trim elderly man with the watchful face of a doctor long accustomed to delivering difficult news, and a young woman in dark clothing who stood by the window with her arms at her sides and her eyes on the middle distance.

"Dr. Stern," said Hilton. "And Miss Nell Voss."

Introductions were made. Winter, who had been going to ask the doctor directly about the wound, found that Fournier had somehow moved to Miss Voss's end of the room in the time it took to shake hands, and was asking her which chair she had sat in during breakfast with the unhurried manner of someone making conversation.

Winter let him get on with it, and turned to Hilton Harlow.

"In your own time, Mr. Harlow. Tell me exactly what happened."

Hilton told it well. This was the third time he had told it—to Brodie, to Farrow, and now to Winter—and the repetition had smoothed and shaped it into something almost too clean, too sequential; but Winter knew that shock sometimes produced exactly that effect in precise, controlled minds, and did not yet assign it another meaning.

The breakfast had been normal. He and his father and Miss Voss had all been present. His stepmother, he mentioned, almost in passing, had been upstairs; she rarely came down for breakfast and had not done so this morning. His father had left the table just after nine, collected his things from Harris in the hall, and gone to the landing to light his first cigar of the day.

"He did this every fine morning," said Hilton. "Without exception. He said it was the one moment of the day when he allowed himself to simply look at things."

Something in that sentence settled in Winter's mind and stayed there.

Hilton had been in his study on the first floor—the east-facing room above the entrance—working through documents brought from the City overnight. He heard the shot. He did not immediately react, because the shot seemed to come from the grounds and his first thought was that Bates had found a reason to use a firearm, which was unusual at this time of year but not unprecedented.

Then he heard Miss Voss call out.

"I'll take up the account from there, if I may," said Nell Voss from the window. Her voice was level. She had the composure of someone who has decided, very recently and very deliberately, not to be undone.

"Please," said Winter.

"I had come out to the terrace after breakfast. I wanted some air. I heard the shot—it came from the wood to the right, I was sure of that. Then I looked towards the steps and I saw my guardian at the foot of them. He had fallen. I went to him immediately."

"You were not frightened by the shot itself?"

"I was startled. But a shot in the grounds isn't unheard of here." A brief pause. "I recognized the caliber."

Winter waited.

"I grew up in this house," she said. "I know every gun on this estate. That sound—the report, and the way it travels—that was Robert's .450 Express. Bob uses it for serious game. He was planning to take it to Zambia this winter." Her chin lifted slightly. "I want to be entirely clear that in saying this I am

not—I am not suggesting that Robert fired it. I am saying I recognized the rifle.”

“Noted,” said Winter. “Thank you, Miss Voss.”

He glanced across the room. Fournier, who had arranged himself in a chair beside Miss Voss and was sitting with his ankles crossed and his eyes half-closed, like a man taking a mild interest in the proceedings, gave no sign of having heard any of this. Winter knew that he had heard every word and had found, in that account, at least three things that Hilton Harlow’s more polished version had left out.

“One more question for the moment, Mr. Harlow,” said Winter. “Do you have any reason whatsoever to believe that your father had made an enemy capable of this?”

“None.” The answer was immediate. “My father could be—he was a demanding man in business. He had opponents. But people in the City do not settle disputes with rifles.”

“And no private matter? No personal grievance, so far as you know?”

“None that I am aware of.”

Winter studied him. The phrase *so far as you know* had produced no reaction at all, which was either entirely natural or the product of considerable practice.

“It is a very extraordinary crime, Mr. Harlow,” he said.

Hilton sank into a chair and pressed both hands over his face. It was, Winter thought, the first uncontrolled gesture he had made since they arrived.

Fournier unfolded himself from his seat and spoke to Hilton in an undertone. "There's a local constable in the wood with your estate staff. I'd like to bring them out and seal that area. Can you help us do that?"

"Of course." Hilton rose again, grateful for the task.

While Hilton went to the door to call Tomlinson, Fournier crossed swiftly to Miss Voss.

"Just two things," he said quietly. "During breakfast—your view was towards the park?"

She showed him where they had sat. The dining room had two windows looking down the avenue and three looking towards the garden and the park beyond it. Mortimer Harlow's chair had commanded both views. Hilton had sat with his back to the park. Miss Voss had faced it.

"You saw no one in or near the trees?"

"Not a soul. I swim in the lake below the cedars every morning, and there's a standing arrangement that the estate staff don't go that way between eight and nine. It would be most unusual for anyone to be in that part of the wood at half past nine."

"You swam this morning?"

"Yes. Shortly after eight."

"I see." Fournier's tone remained unhurried and pleasant. "And you saw no one near the lake? No one at all?"

She considered this for a moment longer than the question might have seemed to warrant. "No," she said. "No one."

"Thank you." He smiled and turned away, and Miss Voss's eyes followed him for a moment with an expression that was not quite the one she had been wearing before.

Winter, who had been conducting a low-voiced conversation with Dr. Stern, looked up.

"Expanding bullet?" he confirmed.

"Quite certain," said the doctor. "I worked for three years with an NGO in the eastern DRC. I know what that kind of wound looks like."

"High-caliber rifle, fired from distance."

"From the Quarry Wood, by the angle. Your people will want to examine the wound formally, of course. But the direction and the nature of it—yes, I'd say four hundred yards at least, and a round designed to fragment on impact."

Hilton returned with Tomlinson, who was the kind of house manager who had clearly considered, and discarded, several alternative careers. He was sixty-odd, dignified, slightly purple of face from the morning's exertions, and in possession of a manner that suggested he had encountered crisis before and expected to encounter it again, and proposed to do so without losing his composure.

Hilton spoke briefly to him, and Tomlinson directed a constable to signal the search party in the wood. Shortly afterward PC Farrow appeared at the head of the estate staff, who had fanned out behind him in a line. Farrow had the look of a man who had done something useful and was aware of it without being disposed to say so.

Winter received his account standing on the front steps—the mosaic landing where Mortimer Harlow had stood every fine morning of his life in this house. He listened in silence to Farrow's description of the footprints beside the quarry path, and of the two overlapping sets of marks on the rock above it, and of his own photographs of both. He asked two questions of clarification. He thanked Farrow, and meant it.

Then he turned back to Hilton Harlow.

"With reference to the rifle Miss Voss mentioned," he said, in the tone of a man asking about something he already half-knows the answer to. "Where is it kept?"

"In Robert's sitting room. There's a gun rack by the bookcase."

"May I see it?"

Hilton turned to Tomlinson. "You know Robert's .450 Express. Would you fetch it, please?"

Tomlinson, shaken but steady, went inside. The group on the steps stood in the kind of silence that collects around a question everyone is afraid has only one answer.

He came back. He was a shade paler than when he had left.

"I'm very sorry, sir," he said. "The rifle is not in the rack. It's not in the room at all, so far as I can find."

"Not there!" It was Nell Voss who said it, and the sharpness of it—involuntary, unguarded—was the most natural sound she had made all morning.

"Are you quite certain?" said Hilton. His voice was perfectly controlled. "It may have been moved—to the gun room,

perhaps. Or Robert may have taken it to be serviced. I recall him mentioning the sight."

Tomlinson's expression contained its own answer.

"It is not in the gun room, sir. I've looked."

A silence settled over the step, longer than the last. Bates, who had been standing at the back of the group, stared at the ground. Farrow stared at nothing in particular, with the composure of a man who had known for two hours what this moment would reveal.

Fournier, alone among them, looked at Hilton Harlow. He looked at him with the patient, unhurried attention of a man reading something carefully and without haste, and Hilton Harlow did not look back.

"That's all right," said Hilton at last, into the silence. "There will be an explanation. We'll find it." He turned towards the door. "I need to telephone the bank. They'll be in chaos. Would you excuse me for a few minutes?"

He went inside. Winter waited until the footsteps on the parquet had receded, and then until a door on the first floor opened and closed.

"Well," he said.

"Indeed," said Fournier.

They looked at each other with the expression of men who have been given, all at once, too many pieces and no obvious place to start. It was their most productive state.

"The wood," said Winter. "We need to go in ourselves."

"Yes. And before that—do you notice that Mr. Harlow, in a twenty-minute account of a morning in which his father was shot dead, mentioned his stepmother precisely once, in passing, and with the air of a man clearing an obstacle from the path?"

Winter had noticed.

"We'll need to speak to her."

"We will," said Fournier. "But carefully. Tomlinson mentioned to me, just now, while you were with the doctor—I asked him, naturally—that Mrs. Harlow has been, in his words, 'more present today than usual.' He seemed uncertain whether this was welcome news or not. When I pressed him, he said that she had been playing the piano since seven this morning, which she does only when she is either very troubled or very clear-headed. And that at approximately nine-fifteen she had come downstairs, gone to the east window of the morning room, and stood there for some minutes looking towards the Quarry Wood. Then she had gone back upstairs, and the piano had stopped."

Winter absorbed this.

"Nine-fifteen," he said. "Fifteen minutes before the shot."

"Yes." Fournier's expression was unreadable. "Fifteen minutes before. And the morning room window," he added, almost as an afterthought, "has a direct line of sight to the Quarry Wood."

He buttoned his jacket and moved towards the steps.

"The wood first," he said. "Then Tomlinson. Then, I think, we shall go to London—there's more in that fund's records than we've been shown. And then, when all of that has been done—" he paused—"then Mrs. Harlow."

Winter produced, from the inside pocket of his jacket, a packet of nicotine gum. He looked at it for a moment.

"Three years," he said.

"And three months," said Fournier. "Don't."

Winter put it back. He followed Fournier down the steps towards the wood, and behind them the great house settled into its afternoon quiet, and on the first floor of the east wing, in a room overlooking the park, something moved behind the glass—the pale figure of a woman, watching them go.

CHAPTER FOUR

BREAKING COVER

Winter drew Inspector Caldwell aside while Fournier stood at the foot of the front steps in what appeared to be a state of mild abstraction, his eyes on the Quarry Wood.

Inspector Caldwell was forty-seven, built for county cricket rather than police work, and had been running the Easton station for eleven years with the solid efficiency of a man who knows his territory. He also knew, with the particular self-awareness of a capable provincial officer, that he was standing in the presence of two detectives whose reputation had reached Hertfordshire ahead of them. He handled this with the same good sense he brought to most things: he paid careful attention and tried not to speak when he had nothing useful to add.

"This inquiry is formally yours in the first instance," said Winter. "Mr. Fournier and I are here at the invitation of the family, but primarily because the SFO brought us in on a related financial matter two months ago. I'll let the Commander explain the jurisdictional arrangement to your Chief Constable—it'll come better from him. But in practical terms we'll work with you and through you, and anything we turn up gets shared."

Caldwell nodded. He had been on the phone to the Chief Constable for twenty minutes before the Scotland Yard car arrived

and had received, in essence, the same instructions delivered in a more hierarchical register.

"You'll give formal evidence at the inquest," Winter continued. "I'd recommend opening it tomorrow—identification and the doctor's statement only, then adjourn for a fortnight. Coroners cooperate when you explain the position."

"Of course, sir." Caldwell glanced towards the Quarry Wood. "I've had PC Farrow's report. He was thorough."

"Very." Winter said it simply, the way he said things he meant entirely. "Don't move him from his post in the wood. I want him there until we've had a proper look."

"Understood." Caldwell hesitated, then: "One thing, sir. The press. There were two vehicles at the Roxton gate when I came through. Local outlets, but it won't stay local."

"I'll deal with the press," said Winter. "Your job is the gates. A constable at each one, nobody in without identification and a reason."

Caldwell went, with the relieved efficiency of a man who has been given clear instructions and intends to carry them out precisely. Winter turned back.

Fournier had not moved. He was still at the foot of the front steps, looking at the Quarry Wood, and he had the look he sometimes had when he was doing the thing Winter thought of as his most valuable and most private capability—the thing that had no proper name but that was something like reading a landscape the way a good naturalist reads a hedgerow, as a continuous text rather than a series of individual objects.

"Charles."

Fournier turned. He ran lightly down the remaining steps, looking somehow younger in motion, and joined the group. Despite the warmth of the morning he wore his jacket buttoned, as if he kept some internal weather of his own.

"Boots," he said, as if completing a sentence he had begun privately. "Before we go into that wood, I want a worn pair from everyone on the estate and in the house. Men, women, everyone. Tomlinson can organize it. And I'd like Brodie in his car first."

Winter nodded. When they were working, rank between them dissolved almost entirely. If either produced a useful idea, the other took it up without ceremony unless he had a specific argument against it.

Hilton Harlow, who had returned to the steps, received Winter's request without hesitation. He turned to the assembled staff with the particular authority of someone who has run a complex operation for years and knows how to make a large machine move quickly.

"These officers have full authority here," he said. "Answer every question directly and completely. I place matters unreservedly in their hands."

"And without reservation," Winter added quietly.

A brief silence. "Yes. Exactly."

Fournier was already at Brodie's elbow.

"Mr. Brodie. When the shot was fired this morning you were at the wheel, waiting for Mr. Harlow?"

"That's right, sir."

"Looking at the wood?"

"In a general way, sir. Not watching it, exactly."

"I'd like you to do something for me. Put the car where it stood this morning and take your seat. Start the engine. I want you to put yourself back in the frame of mind you were in at nine-twenty-five—waiting for your employer, nothing unusual expected. You're not to watch the Quarry Wood especially. Just be what you were. If you happen to see me appear somewhere, give a wave. Can you do that?"

Brodie, who was the kind of man who understood a clear instruction and carried it out without adding to it, said he could. The car moved to its morning position. Brodie took the wheel and the engine turned over with a quiet, expensive sound.

Tomlinson, meanwhile, had sent for the boots. He was a man of method, and within fifteen minutes a constable had brought two large canvas bags from the house and several pairs collected from the estate cottages. Tomlinson labeled each pair with a sticky note bearing the owner's name, which Fournier regarded with visible appreciation.

"There it is," said Fournier quietly to Winter, as they walked with Bates towards the wood. "Your man. The one you need on your side and hope to God never retires."

"Tomlinson?"

"PC Farrow." He tilted his head back towards the constable walking behind them. "Farrow photographed those marks at ten-fifteen this morning without being asked to. He noticed two overlapping sets rather than one. He kept them in his own head

and the keeper's until he could give the information directly to us. He didn't brief the Inspector, who would have trampled everything with enthusiasm." A pause. "In my experience that kind of instinct is either innate or it isn't. It isn't taught."

Winter said nothing, which was his way of agreeing entirely.

The Quarry Wood was cooler than the open park, and denser. It had the particular quality of old mixed woodland in June—crowded with green, the light filtering down in shafts between the canopy, the undergrowth thick with fern and bramble and the occasional sudden brightness of wild garlic. It smelled of leaf mold and dampness and a faint trace of something harder to identify that Bates, who had worked this ground for sixteen years, would have called old stone and standing water from the flooded section of the quarry below.

Fournier moved through it differently from everyone else—not with the keeper's practiced ease, not with the detective's systematic caution, but with the specific unhurried attentiveness of someone who is doing two things simultaneously: moving through the physical landscape and reading it as a record of events. He paused at irregular intervals and crouched and looked at things, and occasionally moved a piece of bracken aside with one finger, and once stopped and stood completely still for nearly a minute in a small clearing while the rest of the party waited with the patient bafflement of people observing a private consultation they do not have the vocabulary to follow.

"What do you see?" said Caldwell, during one of these pauses, in the tone of someone who has decided that direct inquiry is preferable to further bewilderment.

"Disturbance," said Fournier, without looking up. "This area here—the bracken is crushed in a line consistent with someone moving at a specific pace, not browsing or exploring. Moving with a destination in mind." He stood. "Bates—does the estate staff have reason to come through this section regularly?"

"No, sir. There's nothing to bring them this far north. The regular patrol goes along the lower path, not through here."

"Then this disturbance is from our man. Or from the preparation for him." Fournier looked at the line of crushed bracken and something in his expression settled, the way a face settles when a hypothesis has just received confirmation. "Three days ago, I would estimate. The same timing as the footprints."

Winter and Caldwell exchanged the briefest of glances. The Inspector had been reaching, incrementally, towards a conclusion since their arrival, and the incrementalism was becoming uncomfortable. He had been warned against it by the Superintendent's very specific instructions about jumping to conclusions, but nature and fourteen years of county policing were pushing him towards the obvious.

"So he came here," said Caldwell carefully, "to—to survey the position."

"Yes," said Fournier, still looking at the bracken. "And he did it very carefully, and he did it twice, and the second time

he was wearing something different on his feet than the first time." He moved on. "Let's see what the rock has to say."

They came to the strip of moist earth beside the quarry path where the three boot prints lay, undisturbed and clearly defined in the shadow of the surrounding oaks. Fournier crouched beside them and took a small steel rule from his inside pocket. He measured, straightened, and looked at Bates.

"Saturday morning," he said. "You'd know if Mr. Robert was in this wood on Saturday?"

"He left on his bike at about half ten," said Bates. "If he was in the wood before that, I couldn't say for certain. The Roxton gate was unlocked till midday."

Fournier nodded and turned to the canvas bags. He worked through the house boots first, rapidly and with the focused economy of someone who knows exactly what they are looking for. He set one pair aside almost immediately. Tested the estate boots. Nothing. He picked up the pair he had set aside and pressed one sole carefully into the earth alongside the original print.

Tomlinson's label read: *R. Harlow*.

"Well," said the Inspector, and paused, and tried again. "Well. There it is, then."

Fournier was still crouched, regarding the two prints side by side. He said nothing for a moment.

"I want to ask something," said Fournier, and his tone was conversational, unhurried. "Why would anyone feel alarmed by the

discovery that a pair of boots resembling these prints happen to belong to Robert Harlow?"

The Inspector opened his mouth and closed it.

"These marks are three, perhaps four days old. Robert Harlow left on Saturday morning. Today is Wednesday. He may well have been walking in his own employer's wood on a Saturday morning." Fournier looked up. "What would be alarming about that?"

"But the rifle—" began the Inspector.

"The rifle is missing. These footprints are not recent. The man who shot Mortimer Harlow this morning was on that rock two hours ago. He could not have made these marks." He stood and brushed his trousers. "I mention this only to guard against the most natural error in detective work, which is fitting the evidence to the most available suspect rather than reading what the evidence actually says."

Caldwell, to his credit, took this without visible offense. He had been cautioned against precisely this tendency for fifteen minutes and had almost committed it anyway, which told him something useful about himself. He filed it away.

Bates, who had been kneeling beside the prints with the absorbed attention of a man reading a text in his own language, looked up.

"May I say something, sir?"

"Please," said Winter.

"I've been on this land sixteen years. In this kind of ground—wet, shaded, this time of year—you can read an impression almost like a date. These here—" he indicated the older prints—

"the grass shoots are beginning to right themselves at the edges. A bit of insect movement in the soil. The crushed leaves are drying out." He pointed to a second set of marks, shallower, closer together, partially overlapping the first. "These are from this morning. Grass still bent flat. Soil still closed up where it was pressed. Clean break at every edge." He sat back on his heels. "Two different people, two different times. Clear as anything to me."

"Thank you, Bates," said Winter. He said it simply and meant it entirely.

"There is one further thing," said Bates, in the tone of a man releasing something he had been deciding whether to say. He looked at the second set of marks, the shallower ones. "The distribution of these—the weight is spread wider than it should be for a man of that build. No distinct heel or toe. Almost as if the foot was wrapped in something."

Fournier was already on one knee looking at the same marks. "Yes," he said quietly. "Exactly that."

The two men looked at each other with the brief, complete understanding of people who have arrived at the same place by different paths. Caldwell watched this exchange and understood that something significant had just passed between them, and that he would have to wait to understand what it was.

Fournier was already moving towards the rock. He went up it with the quick, sure-footed ease of someone who grew up on difficult ground, and appeared at the top almost before the

others had begun to climb. He stood there for a moment, very still. Then he raised one hand.

At the front of the house, fifty yards distant from Brodie's car, Brodie raised his own hand in immediate response. He had seen Fournier the instant he appeared.

Winter reached the summit. The east face of The Towers opened before them without obstruction: the broad mosaic landing, the gravel, the Italian garden to one side, the lawn running to the wood on the other. It was a view of perfect, unimpeded clarity. A marksman on this rock with a zeroed rifle and adequate preparation could have placed a shot with complete reliability.

Neither man spoke. They looked at the rock surface, at the overlapping marks Farrow had photographed, at the surrounding trees—oak, ash, elm, mature and tall, their canopy doing nothing to impede the sightline because the sightline ran between them across the open park.

"The trees," said Fournier suddenly.

"What about them?"

"Someone cut down an oak and two spruces at some point in the past decade. Bates mentioned it on the way up—the stumps are just visible there to the left. Without those trees, this sightline becomes unobstructed. With them, it would have been marginal." Fournier looked at the stumps, then at the house.

"Harlow had this wood managed."

"He wanted a clear view of the park."

"He wanted a promontory, essentially. A place to stand and see his estate from. It never occurred to him that the view was

reciprocal." Fournier crouched over the marks on the moss. "Or perhaps it did occur to him, and seemed an acceptable risk. No one was going to come up here with a rifle."

"No one did," said Winter. "Someone came up here with a plan and a rifle that they'd had time to prepare."

They came down from the rock. The Inspector was energetically briefing Farrow on his new assignment: custodian of the rock and its immediate surrounds, authority to turn back anyone without exception, including residents of the house.

"You can show yourself," Winter told Farrow, when the Inspector had finished. "It'll warn off press. And there's no reason you can't take the occasional look at the landscape from the top."

Farrow's expression suggested that this was about the best professional news he had received in some time.

"No one from the house either, sir?"

"No one. Mr. Harlow and Miss Voss can be told why, and I trust they'll cooperate."

Farrow turned back towards the wood. As he went, Winter saw him straighten his shoulders with the particular self-possession of a man who has been given real work to do.

They emerged from the trees to find the front of the house changed. Three cars and two motorcycles had arrived in the avenue during their absence in the wood. The owners were identifiable at a glance—young, phones raised, one with a camera that had the heavy, professional look of something that cost serious money. Three had found their way around the constable at the gate by the

simple method of approaching from the Roxton footpath, which was, as Bates would have observed, a right of way.

Hilton Harlow stood in the doorway, and the quiet control of the morning was gone. He was haranguing the nearest of them in a voice that had stripped away its careful modulation. The intrusion was illegal, unconscionable; he would have them removed; he was calling his solicitors. Two of the journalists were filming him on their phones, which was not improving matters.

Winter moved quickly. He stepped between Harlow and the press, produced his warrant card, and spoke to the journalists in a tone that was entirely pleasant and contained no flexibility whatsoever. He gave them a factual account of the morning's events—bare, accurate, and precisely calibrated to satisfy immediate deadlines without revealing anything useful. He confirmed that a full statement would be issued from the Yard by mid-afternoon, that further inquiries at the scene would result in obstruction charges, and that the officer at the gate had instructions to facilitate their departure.

One journalist—a young woman from a London outlet who had arrived on a motorbike and had the look of someone who ran towards things rather than away from them—didn't move immediately. She looked at Winter with the specific assessment of a person deciding whether a wall is climbable.

"Is this a murder inquiry?" she said.

"A man has died on his own property," said Winter pleasantly. "The police are investigating the circumstances. Mid-afternoon, as I said."

"And the Scotland Yard involvement—"

"Mid-afternoon," said Winter, with the particular finality of a word spoken for the second time.

She went. They all went, not entirely happily, but they went. Winter had given them enough.

He rejoined Hilton Harlow in the doorway, aware that Fournier had quietly vanished, which generally meant he had found someone more useful to talk to.

"I'd have thought you'd be glad of a press statement," said Winter mildly. "It keeps them off the estate and buys you some quiet."

"I object to the prurience of it." Harlow's jaw was tight. "My father is dead twelve hours and they're already—" He stopped. Composed himself, visibly. "Forgive me. It's been a long morning."

"Of course. May we use your dining room again? I have a few more questions."

They settled in the dining room, Harlow across the table from Winter, a glass of water untouched at his elbow. The afternoon light came in through the park-facing windows, catching the dust motes that the morning's extraordinary traffic had stirred into the still air. The room felt subtly different from the morning—heavier, more aware of itself, in the way of rooms

where significant things have happened and whose furniture has absorbed the weight of them.

"One thing I've been meaning to ask," said Winter. "You mentioned that your father had an ongoing matter with the SFO. Did he discuss it with you?"

"Naturally. I run the fund's operations. I was present at both interviews."

"Were you satisfied with how those interviews went?"

A measured pause. "I was satisfied that my father cooperated fully. The SFO reached no conclusion, as far as I know."

"Were you aware that Mr. Fournier had a specific line of inquiry regarding the fund's custody records?"

"He asked a number of questions about the back-office systems. I answered them."

"And your father's decision to withdraw cooperation—were you involved in that?"

"My father made his own decisions. He always had." Something tightened briefly around Harlow's eyes. "He consulted his solicitors and acted on their advice."

"Of course." Winter's tone remained entirely neutral. He looked at his notebook for a moment, though he had not written anything in it during the interview. "Now—your brother. You said you haven't been able to reach Robert since Saturday."

"That's correct."

"Can you tell me a little more about the disagreement they had?"

Harlow shifted almost imperceptibly in his chair. "I'd rather not go into family matters. I'm not sure it has any bearing."

"In my experience, Mr. Harlow, the more we know the less it tends to affect the people you're protecting."

A silence. Outside, a wood pigeon established itself somewhere in the cedar and began its soft, repetitive complaint.

"My father intended to change his will," said Hilton at last. "Robert had been aware for some time that his position in the fund was under review. His father meant to formalize this. There was a confrontation on Saturday morning." He picked up the glass of water and set it down again without drinking. "Robert said things he didn't mean. He was angry. He left. That's all there is to it."

"What things did he say?"

"Intemperate things. The kind of things people say when they're furious and frightened."

"Specifically?"

Harlow held his gaze for a moment, then looked away. "He said, among other things, that he'd be tempted to shoot them both. Himself and our father. It was a figure of speech. Robert is not—he is not a violent person. He is a reckless person. There is a difference."

"Quite," said Winter. He made a note, and the scratch of the pen was the only sound in the room. "One more thing for now. You telephoned the Yard at about nine-forty-five this morning?"

"Yes."

"And you received a call shortly before we arrived. From the bank, you said."

"Yes. They'd seen the news."

"Right. I'll need a record of all calls made from and received by the house today—mobile and landline. Purely routine. Tomlinson will be able to help with that."

Something passed through Hilton Harlow's expression. It was very quick and almost entirely suppressed, but it was there: the particular flicker of a man who has just understood that a question he thought was incidental is not incidental at all.

"Of course," he said.

The door opened. Fournier appeared in the frame, loose-limbed and apparently at leisure.

"Sorry to interrupt. Hilton, there's a call for you. Tomlinson says it's the bank—the compliance director. He seems to have been trying for some time."

"Damn." Harlow rose, nodded briefly at Winter, and went out.

Fournier watched him go, then crossed the room and sat where Harlow had been sitting, in the chair that was still faintly warm.

"Well?" said Winter.

"I've had half an hour with Tomlinson." Fournier set his elbows on the table. "He is, as I predicted, a rich mine. He is also deeply conflicted—a man of absolute loyalty to the family as an institution, and rather less loyalty to any individual member of it. He told me three things of importance."

"Go on."

"First: Robert's rifle was definitely in its rack as recently as last Friday. Tomlinson saw it himself when he was in the room collecting laundry. Second: Hilton made a phone call at nine thirty-seven this morning. Before he telephoned the Yard. Before he telephoned the local police. The call lasted four minutes, and it was to a mobile number Tomlinson does not recognize, but which he saw on the screen because the phone was on the hall table. He gave me the number." Fournier produced his own phone and set it face-up on the table between them. "I've sent it to the Yard for identification."

Winter studied the number. "And third?"

"Third." Fournier sat back. He had the look of a man releasing the thing he has been carrying longest. "Mrs. Harlow has asked to see us. Not Hilton-us. She sent a message through her housekeeper, a Mrs. Pritchard, while Hilton was outside with the press. She was specific: she wants to see us privately, before this evening, and she does not want Hilton to know."

Winter regarded him steadily.

"Tomlinson mentioned she was at the morning room window at nine-fifteen," he said. "Fifteen minutes before the shot."

"Yes."

"Watching the wood."

"I think she knows something, Jonathan. I think she has known something for some time. Whether she knows what she knows—that's a different question. People in confined situations sometimes accumulate understanding without quite daring to arrange it into a conclusion."

Winter looked at the ceiling for a moment, as was his habit when reassembling his thoughts.

"The phone call first," he said. "Once we have an identity on that number, things may move quickly. And I want to go to London tonight—there's more in that fund's records than we've been shown."

"Agreed. And then Mrs. Harlow."

"And then Mrs. Harlow."

From upstairs, faintly but distinctly, came the sound that Tomlinson had described that morning. Piano. A slow, suspended melody in a minor key—careful, deliberate, and unmistakably the music of someone thinking very hard about something they have not yet decided to do.

Both men listened without speaking.

"She plays beautifully," said Fournier, quietly.

"She does," said Winter. He stood, and picked up his notebook. "We'll go up before we leave for London. But carefully, Charles. She may be the most important person in this house."

"Or the most frightened," said Fournier.

"Those are not," said Winter, "mutually exclusive."

He buttoned his jacket and moved towards the door, and behind them the piano continued its patient, unresolved melody, the sound of it traveling through the quiet house like something looking for a place to rest.

CHAPTER FIVE

A FAMILY GATHERING

Hilton Harlow returned from the telephone looking like a man who has been required to perform a complex task in a foreign language while suffering from a headache. The composure was intact but costing more than it had cost an hour ago.

"The fund's compliance director," he said, sitting down. "She's holding everything together, which is more than I can say for the rest of the staff. I'll need to go to the City this afternoon. I hope that doesn't present a difficulty."

"None at all," said Winter. "In fact, it may suit us well. We have things to do in London ourselves." He paused. "Mr. Harlow, I want to return to something you said earlier—about your brother and the disagreement with your father. You mentioned a woman. A married woman."

Hilton set both hands flat on the table in front of him, a gesture that Winter associated with people preparing to carry a weight.

"I said Robert was involved with a married woman. That's correct. He's been trying to end it for some months, but the situation has become—complicated. I believe there may have been some financial pressure involved. Blackmail, is the honest word, though I have no proof of it."

"Your father was aware of this?"

"He found out. That was the substance of Saturday's row. He told Robert he would not assist him financially, and that he intended to revise his will to reflect—to reflect his view of Robert's judgment." He picked up the glass of water and set it down again without drinking. "I am telling you this because a policy of concealment in these circumstances is worse than useless. I'd rather you had it from me than pieced together from gossip."

Winter nodded slowly. He was thinking, as he had been thinking since the morning, that Hilton Harlow volunteered information with the precision of a man who has decided exactly what to reveal and in what order. Everything he disclosed made his brother look worse. Nothing he said touched himself.

"I'm grateful," said Winter. "One or two other things, if you don't mind. I'd like to understand the family structure a little better. You and Robert are half-brothers?"

A pause, the kind that precedes a rehearsed answer.

"Yes. My mother was my father's first wife. Celine Ashford, as she was. They divorced when I was three. My father was given custody—my mother's family had money, and their solicitors were thorough in every respect except in the matter of arranging for her to keep her own child." Something shifted in his voice: the first inflection in the entire morning that had not been completely controlled. "She remarried when I was six. It wasn't a success. She has lived in the south of France for the past twelve years. She is not well."

"And she and your father maintained no contact?"

"None. My father preferred that arrangement, and he was—" the briefest halt—"he was a man who got the arrangements he preferred."

"Have you maintained contact with her yourself?"

The pause this time was longer.

"We have corresponded," said Hilton carefully. "Over the years."

"I see." Winter's tone gave nothing away. He made a brief note and moved on. "And Robert's mother is the current Mrs. Harlow?"

"Yes. My father met her six years after my mother left. She was not from his world—he always said so himself, though not unkindly. She has found life at The Towers increasingly difficult. She is, in her way, a prisoner here, and I think she knows it."

He said it matter-of-factly, as one states an architectural feature of a house. Winter looked at him for a moment.

"Is Miss Voss engaged to be married?" said Fournier.

He had been so quiet for so long, seated just inside the doorway with his ankles crossed, that Hilton had visibly half-forgotten him. The question produced something unexpected: a flash of feeling, quickly extinguished, in Hilton's dark eyes. Not quite anger. Something more personal than anger, and more carefully guarded.

"No," said Hilton. "She is not."

"Any prospect of it?"

"I don't see that Miss Voss's private life is relevant."

"One never knows," said Fournier pleasantly. "Shall I explain? Suppose someone was very attached to Miss Voss, or to her money, or to both. And suppose her guardian was not in favor of the attachment. That would be a motive—not the likeliest motive in the world, but one we'd be professionally negligent to ignore."

Hilton looked at Fournier for a moment with the expression of a man recalibrating the weight of a problem he thought he had measured.

"I take the point," he said, more quietly. "Miss Voss is not engaged, and is not, to my knowledge, attached. My father had views about what would be suitable for her. He was her guardian. He took that seriously."

"Of course," said Fournier, and returned to his contemplative silence with the air of a man entirely satisfied.

"One last question," said Winter. "Do you suspect anyone of committing this murder?"

"No." The answer was immediate, and the emphasis was precise. "On my life, no."

"Thank you, Mr. Harlow. We'll speak to Tomlinson now, if that's convenient."

Hilton rose, nodded, and went out, and when the door had closed the two detectives looked at each other with the focused attention of men comparing notes they cannot yet afford to speak aloud.

"The mother in France," said Fournier softly.

"Yes."

"He's been sending her money."

"I think so. Quite a lot of it, for quite a long time, from quite the wrong accounts."

"And Mortimer was about to find out—not through the SFO inquiry, but directly."

"The SFO inquiry was the alarm bell. It brought scrutiny to the fund records. Hilton understood what a forensic accountant looking at those records would eventually find." Winter stood and looked out the window at the park, quiet now in the early afternoon. "Everything he's told us today has been true. That's the remarkable thing. Every fact he's given us is accurate. He's just been arranging them."

"He's putting Robert in the frame," said Fournier. "Carefully, methodically, one true fact at a time. The angry threat on Saturday. The missing rifle. The married woman and the blackmail. He's constructing a case."

"And doing it well," said Winter. He turned from the window as a knock came at the door. "Come."

Tomlinson entered and took the chair Hilton had vacated, drawing it back from the table slightly in the manner of someone who knows their place precisely and is comfortable in it. He had recovered his breath and something of his composure since the morning's upheaval. His suit was still immaculate. His manner was the manner of a man who has held a complicated position with dignity for a long time and proposes to continue holding it.

"Thank you for your time earlier, Tomlinson," said Winter. "I have a few more questions."

"Of course, sir."

"Mr. Mortimer Harlow—you've known him twenty years, you said. Was he a good employer?"

"One of the best, sir. Exacting, but fair. I never received a cross word from him that wasn't deserved." He paused. "He was, in his way, a man of principle. Not always a comfortable man to work for—he liked things done to a high standard and had little patience for falling short. But his standard applied to himself as much as to anyone in the house, and a man who holds himself to the same measure he holds others is, in my experience, the kind of employer worth serving."

"And Mrs. Harlow?"

Tomlinson settled himself in the chair with the careful adjustment of a man preparing to carry something fragile.

"Mrs. Harlow leaves the household entirely under my supervision, sir. She has done so from the beginning."

"Why?"

A brief assembly of words. "Mrs. Harlow has always found social demands difficult, sir. She has a great deal of feeling, and sometimes finds it hard to manage. She has—she has been prescribed a number of things, over the years, to help her." He paused. "I am not comfortable speaking of this."

"I understand that, and I respect it," said Winter. "But the man you served well for twenty years has been murdered, and concealment of anything—however tangential it seems to you—is not loyalty to him now."

Tomlinson absorbed this, and something in the set of his shoulders acknowledged it.

"Mrs. Harlow has struggled with prescribed medication, sir. For a long time. She was prescribed strong anxiolytics after Robert's birth, and the dependency developed. Mr. Harlow managed it—managed her—with the help of Dr. Stern and her own housekeeper, Mrs. Pritchard. She is not—" he chose the words carefully—"she is not always fully present. There are good periods and difficult ones."

"Has she been having a good period recently?"

Tomlinson hesitated in a way that contained more information than an answer.

"This last week she has been—clearer than usual," he said. "Mrs. Pritchard remarked on it. She has been up earlier, taking more notice of things. The piano." He paused. "We thought it was encouraging."

"Has she ever spoken to you of concerns about the household? About anything that worried her?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Harlow and I have a respectful relationship, but not a familiar one." He considered. "I will say this: she is not as unaware as people suppose. She has a quality of observation. She notices things. She simply has no power to act on what she notices, and I think she has understood that for a long time."

"Thank you. Now—the brothers. Tell me about them."

"As different as could be, sir. Mr. Robert is what he appears to be: impulsive, generous, not always wise with money,

but genuine through and through. I have known that young man since he was eight years old, and there is not a dishonest bone in him."

"Yet he threatened to shoot his father and himself last Saturday."

Tomlinson met Winter's eye directly. "With respect, sir, Mr. Robert once threatened to drink a gallon of weedkiller if I reported what time he came in after a party. He once told me he would stab me to the heart if the kitchen ran out of his particular brand of coffee. He does not have the words for strong feeling—he reaches for the most dramatic thing he can think of and says it. It means nothing beyond the feeling itself." A pause. "Nothing on this earth would make me believe that young man shot his father."

"And Mr. Hilton?"

A different quality of silence this time. Not reluctance exactly—more the silence of someone checking their footing before stepping onto uncertain ground.

"Mr. Hilton is a more complex person, sir. Very able. Very controlled. He has always been the capable one, the one who keeps things running."

"But?"

"I didn't say 'but,' sir."

"You were going to."

Tomlinson looked at the table for a moment. "Mr. Hilton has a very strong need to have things his own way, sir. When that is frustrated he can be—not outwardly angry, not like Mr. Robert.

Quieter than that." He glanced up briefly. "There was a dog. A spaniel, belonged to the household. About four years ago. It got into Mr. Hilton's study and chewed some papers. Nothing important as it turned out. But the dog was gone within a week. Rehomed, Mr. Hilton said. Mrs. Pritchard said she heard the dog crying in the yard at two in the morning, the night before it disappeared. Mrs. Pritchard has a room at the back."

Neither detective spoke.

"He is a very good shot," Tomlinson continued, with the air of a man who has decided to say what he came to say.

"Exceptional, really. I have seen him put three shots through a penny at twelve paces with a handgun. He used to knock over running rabbits with a .22 as if they were stationary. He said he found the calculation involved in difficult shots—he used the word 'satisfying.' And yet he never joined the October shooting parties. Said it made him ill to see birds brought down clumsily by indifferent marksmen."

Winter absorbed this. Fournier had not moved from his position by the door.

"One more thing," said Winter. "You mentioned that Mr. Hilton breakfasted early on Monday and Tuesday this week. Can you say how early?"

Tomlinson looked up, and for the first time something behind his eyes suggested that he had understood, only in this moment, the shape of what he had been carefully not looking at.

"He asked for breakfast at six-thirty, sir. Both days. Harris laid it. Mr. Harlow senior remarked on it—he said it was rather unlike Hilton to be up before him."

"Did Mr. Hilton say why?"

"He said he had preparation work. Documents to review before the City day began." A pause. "He did not eat the breakfast either morning, which Harris mentioned to me. Just coffee. He was out of the house early—I do not know precisely when, as he did not come through the kitchen, but Harris found the side door unlatched at half past six on Tuesday. He assumed Mr. Hilton had stepped out for air."

Winter made a careful note.

"One last thing, Tomlinson. We're told Mrs. Harlow has asked to see us. Has that request changed?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Pritchard told me to say that Mrs. Harlow is—she is having a clear day, sir. She very much wants to speak with you, and she asks that you come without Mr. Hilton's knowledge if possible."

"We'll come before we leave for London."

Tomlinson rose. He stood for a moment with his hand on the back of the chair, and Winter saw in the quality of that pause something he had seen before in people of Tomlinson's type—the pause of a man who has given everything he came to give and is deciding whether there is one thing more.

There was.

"Sir," said Tomlinson. "I have been in this house for twenty years. In twenty years I have seen a great many things that I

have dealt with in my own way, without troubling anyone, because that is the nature of the role. I want you to understand that anything I have told you today I have told you because Mr. Mortimer Harlow deserves to have it told, and not for any other reason."

"I understand that perfectly," said Winter.

"Thank you, sir." And Tomlinson went out.

When the door had closed, Fournier spoke.

"The side door unlatched," he said. "Six-thirty Tuesday morning."

"Yes."

"He was out of the house both mornings for approximately forty minutes by my estimate. Coming and going through the staff entrance, not the main door, not the courtyard side." Fournier's voice was very quiet. "He has a route. He has timed it. He has been testing it under actual conditions."

"Tuesday night he lit a fire," said Winter. "A fire in warm weather. He burned something."

Their eyes met. The dining room was very still.

"We need to look at his rooms," said Fournier.

"Yes. Carefully. While Hilton is—" Winter checked his watch—"on his way to the City. Tomlinson will let us in. We'll go now, before Robert arrives."

From the kitchen wing came the muffled sounds of the house's afternoon machinery—voices, movement, the domestic engine running on without its principal. Downstairs, Harris was in the hall, and the housemaid was somewhere on the upper floor with a cart, and

in the courtyard Bates had come back with one of the garden staff to collect boots left for the inventory. The house was continuing to function because that was what it knew how to do, and because Tomlinson had not permitted it to stop.

Outside, on the front drive, Brodie brought Hilton's car around. They heard the door, the engine, the gravel. Then the sound receding down the avenue.

Then Robert Harlow came downstairs.

He had been with his mother for an hour, and the high color of the road had given way to the particular pallor of a man who has been crying without admitting it to himself. He moved through the hall with the preoccupied air of someone whose attention is partly on the room they are walking through and partly on something entirely different.

He stopped when he saw Winter and Fournier in the doorway of the dining room.

"You're the Yard," he said. Not hostilely—more in the tone of a man confirming a fact he has been told and is now reviewing.

"Yes," said Winter. "Detective Chief Superintendent Winter. I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Harlow. We'd like to speak with you when you're ready."

Robert looked at him for a moment with a directness that was the opposite of his brother's precision. Whatever Robert Harlow was, he was uncalculated.

"I've got to go back to London," he said. "There's something I need to sort out. I should have done it before I came here, and I didn't, and I can't leave it any longer."

"We'd prefer you stayed, Mr. Harlow. There are questions--"

"I know." He ran a hand through his hair. "I know there are questions. I'll come back tonight. I give you my word on that. But if I don't deal with this thing today--" He stopped. "I can't explain it right now. I'm asking you to trust me for four hours."

Winter looked at him steadily for a moment. Then he stepped aside.

"Tonight, Mr. Harlow. Without fail."

"Without fail," said Robert, and went out.

They heard the garage door, and then the bike, and then the sound of it receding down the avenue in the hot afternoon.

"He wasn't at the station on Saturday morning," said Fournier, when the sound had gone entirely. "He arrived here today from London."

"Which means he's been in London since Saturday. Four days."

"Dealing with the married woman. Or the blackmail. Or both." Fournier looked towards the drive. "He didn't take his rifle when he left on Saturday. And he's genuinely distressed. He's been crying."

"You noticed."

"It's my job to notice." He turned back. "He's not our man, Jonathan. He's transparent. Everything that's in him shows immediately on his face. You cannot plan and execute what was done in this park if you are that kind of person. It is physiologically incompatible."

Winter nodded. He had reached the same conclusion by a less articulate route.

Then the door at the far end of the upper gallery opened.

Mrs. Harlow stood in it.

She was a tall woman—unexpectedly tall; the figure Farrow and Winter had glimpsed at the window had not conveyed that. She wore a dark dress and her hair was drawn back with a care that suggested she had been preparing for this moment. She was perhaps fifty, and had been beautiful in a way that life at The Towers had compressed rather than extinguished—the bone structure was still there, the quality of the eyes, which were very light in color and entirely steady in their gaze. She was holding the gallery railing with one hand, not for support but in the way of someone who has decided to hold their ground.

“Bob,” she said. Her voice was low and clear. Not the voice of a woman unraveled by medication and years of managed isolation. Not today.

Robert stopped on the stairs. Something in her voice and her bearing produced in him an uncertainty he had not shown towards anyone else in the hall.

“Mum.” He went the rest of the way up quickly and she took both his hands, and for a moment they stood like that on the gallery while the household watched from below.

Then she looked down. Her eyes moved deliberately past the point where Hilton had stood—a specific and conscious look, the kind that knows an absence as well as a presence—and came to rest on Winter and Fournier.

“You are the detectives,” she said. It was not a question.

"Yes, Mrs. Harlow," said Winter. "Detective Chief Superintendent Winter. My colleague, Detective Inspector Fournier."

"I know who you are." Her gaze was still and direct. "I would like to speak with you. Privately."

"Of course."

"This evening, if you can arrange it." She said *arrange it* with a slight emphasis that said clearly she understood there were obstacles and trusted them to manage those obstacles without being told how. Her eyes went to the place where Hilton's car had stood—briefly, specifically—and then she drew Robert gently through the gallery door and it closed.

In the hall, no one spoke for a moment.

Winter looked at Fournier. Fournier looked back with the expression of a man who has been given, in a thirty-second gallery appearance, several pieces of important information.

"She wasn't looking at where Hilton stood," said Fournier. "She was looking at where his car was parked. She was making sure he'd gone."

"Yes."

"She's been waiting for him to leave. For longer than today, I think."

They went upstairs. The house settled around them in its altered afternoon quiet, and the piano did not play, and in the kitchen Harris was making tea that no one had asked for because it was four o'clock and the house understood that four o'clock required tea regardless of what the day had contained.

CHAPTER SIX

THE EVIDENCE OF FIRE

Robert had gone -- they had heard the bike fade down the avenue some while since -- and Mrs. Harlow had withdrawn again behind the gallery door, and the house had settled into the long middle of the afternoon. Winter and Fournier stood in the hall with the particular stillness of two men who have been handed a great deal in a single morning and have not yet decided the order in which to use it.

"The phone number?" he said.

Fournier checked his phone. "Not yet. I'll push them when we're on the road."

"I'm going now. I want those fund records, and I want to know who Hilton called at nine thirty-seven." Winter buttoned his jacket. "You'll stay?"

"Tonight. I want to look at the rooms first. Then I'll go to the village--there's the artist to speak to, and Farrow needs a visit." He glanced towards the stairs. "And Mrs. Harlow this evening."

"Be careful with her, Charles."

"I am always careful with frightened people." A brief pause. "It's the unfrightened ones who require caution."

Winter left. Fournier stood in the hall for a moment after the car had gone, in the particular stillness he inhabited when

he was thinking most intensively. The sheet on the oak settee had been removed—Mortimer Harlow's body had gone to the mortuary in a plain transit van two hours ago, with a discretion that Fournier suspected was Tomlinson's work. The settee stood against the wall looking like what it was: a piece of furniture from which something permanent had departed.

He crooked a finger at Tomlinson, who had materialized in the corridor with the quiet efficiency of a man who has been waiting to be needed.

"The brothers' rooms," said Fournier. "I won't detain you long."

Tomlinson led him up the stairs and along the east gallery. Robert's suite came first—a bedroom, a sitting room, a bathroom. Fournier moved through them quickly, with the air of someone conducting a survey rather than a search. Robert's world was legible: sport, some books, a guitar, an expensive confusion of outdoor clothing and technical gear. Honest disorder. Nothing hidden because there was nothing to hide.

"And Mr. Hilton's," said Fournier.

They traversed the full length of the gallery to the south corner. Hilton's sitting room faced southeast over the Italian terraces and the rolling park. It was a different kind of space: ordered, spare, the books arranged by subject, the desk clear, the surfaces uncluttered in the manner of a mind that does not tolerate ambient noise.

Fournier's eyes went immediately to the fireplace.

A fire had been laid and used. Recently—the ash was pale gray rather than the deeper color of a fire left for several days. In the grate, among the ash, three or four compressed lumps of blackened material had not burned completely. They had burned enough to be unidentifiable but not enough to be entirely gone. Fournier crouched beside them, produced a small evidence bag from his inside pocket, and collected each fragment with the care of a man handling something that might not survive rough treatment.

He stood and looked at Tomlinson.

"Who laid this fire?"

"The housemaid, sir. As a matter of routine in the summer months, a fire is laid in Mr. Hilton's room but not lit—he lights it himself on the evenings when he wants it."

"When was it last lit before today?"

"The housemaid will know better than I."

"Send her up, would you? Don't ring—just ask her to come."

Tomlinson's broad back retreated. Fournier moved to the bedroom in the seconds he had alone. His hands and eyes worked with the rapid economy of someone who has learned to read a room as a whole before touching any individual element. He picked up a glass tumbler from the bedside table and examined the rim briefly, then slipped it into his jacket pocket. He checked the bathroom—towels, the basin, the shower tray. He picked up a hand towel and folded it into another evidence bag. Then he returned to the carpet near the fireplace and crouched again.

Near the hearth, worked into the weave of the carpet, were several traces of fine grit. Not the grit of general household

movement—something more specific, grainier, the color of limestone and compacted earth. The color, Fournier thought, of the rock above the Quarry Wood.

He was collecting the last of it in a folded envelope when the housemaid arrived. She was nineteen or twenty, red-eyed from the morning's events, and looked at Fournier with the wary expression of someone who has spent the last six hours being asked questions they don't know how to answer.

"Don't worry," said Fournier pleasantly. "I have just one question and it's a simple one. When did Mr. Hilton last light this fire?"

She looked at the grate. Something in her expression suggested relief at being asked something she actually knew.

"Last night, sir. I came in to turn down the bed at nine o'clock and it was already lit. Which surprised me, because it was quite warm—I had my own window open all night."

"Did Mr. Hilton often light a fire in warm weather?"

"No, sir. Only when it was chilly." She hesitated. "I thought it was strange at the time. I would have said so, but—" she gestured slightly at the room, the house, the morning—"everything else drove it out of my head."

"Of course it did. Thank you." He smiled, and the tight expression around her eyes relaxed a fraction. "Tell Mr. Tomlinson I'll be down shortly. And—there's no need to mention to anyone that I've been up here. It's not a secret, but there's no need to bring it up."

She nodded and went.

Fournier stood alone in Hilton Harlow's sitting room and looked at the fireplace for a moment.

The night before the murder. A fire in warm weather, burning something that did not want to burn cleanly—the compressed lumps in the ash suggested material of some density, something woven or layered. Limestone grit in the carpet, consistent with the rock in the Quarry Wood. A glass tumbler at the bedside—a man who had been preparing himself for something, perhaps, or who had needed something to help him sleep.

He would not yet commit himself, even privately, to a conclusion. But the shape of the thing was becoming visible in the way that a landscape becomes visible when the morning mist is beginning to lift—not fully revealed, but no longer entirely hidden.

He went downstairs and accepted Tomlinson's invitation to eat something.

They sat in the butler's room, which was comfortable in the particular way of rooms whose occupant has spent thirty years making them so. Tomlinson produced cold chicken, bread, a green salad, and—after a consultation that had the character of a ritual—a bottle of white Burgundy.

"I am grateful," said Fournier, considering the label seriously. "A Meursault at luncheon is one of the few remaining proofs that civilization is still making the effort."

Tomlinson poured with the gravity appropriate to the occasion. "You are kind to say so, sir."

"I mean it literally. Tomlinson—the fire last night. Is there anything else you noticed about Mr. Hilton's movements yesterday?"

The butler set down the bottle with great precision.

"I don't know what I should say," he said carefully. "I have known Mr. Hilton for twenty years. His father trusted him completely. The fund, the estate management, everything financial—it was all Hilton."

"Yes."

"Last night—" he stopped. "I had occasion to pass the east wing at half past eleven. I was checking the house, as I do. Mr. Hilton's light was still on. I could hear movement in the room. Drawers, I think. A wardrobe. I didn't think anything of it. People move about at night when they're troubled."

"Of course."

"This morning he was up at six. As I said." Tomlinson looked at the table. "He didn't eat the breakfast Harris laid for him. Not a thing. He drank coffee and went out."

Fournier ate his chicken and said nothing for a moment.

"Tomlinson," he said at last, "you are a man of considerable loyalty. You've demonstrated that this morning at some cost to yourself. I want to ask you something directly, and I want you to take your time before you answer."

The butler nodded.

"Is there anything—anything at all—that you have not told us today, which you believe we should know?"

A long silence. Outside, a wood pigeon. The distant sound of a lawnmower starting somewhere in the grounds, then stopping, as if whoever had started it had remembered where they were.

"Mr. Hilton," said Tomlinson carefully, "told me last Thursday evening that he had spoken to his father about certain financial matters. He seemed—he seemed tightly strung. More than usual. He said that 'things would be resolved one way or another by the end of the week.' I assumed he meant a business matter."

"Thursday," said Fournier.

"Yes. The day before he was up early on Friday, and then early again on Monday and Tuesday."

Fournier looked at him.

"Thank you," he said. He finished the Meursault and rose. "The bicycle you mentioned this morning—is the offer still open?"

An under-gardener's bicycle was produced. Fournier stopped in the Quarry Wood long enough to sit with Farrow on the rock for twenty minutes, during which time they ate the sandwiches Tomlinson had packed and drank the beer, and Fournier established that nothing had moved in the wood since the morning and that the quarry path remained undisturbed. Farrow showed him where the overlapping marks on the rock were and Fournier looked at them for some time.

"You were right to photograph them immediately," Fournier said.

"I thought so," said Farrow. He didn't inflate it or diminish it.

"Keep the path clear until Forensics come tomorrow. I'm requesting a full scene-of-crime examination of the rock and the surrounding fifteen meters. They'll want to cast the boot prints as well."

"Will they find what they need?"

"If they're thorough. The soil has been kind to us."

Fournier finished his beer. "You're spending the night here?"

"Inspector's orders. My wife brought sandwiches."

"Good man." Fournier paused on the way back down the rock. "One thing. When Bates first brought you here this morning—did you notice anything on the quarry path itself? Not the marks on the rock. The path."

Farrow thought for a moment. "A couple of loose threads caught on the brambles. Low down, maybe eight or ten inches from the ground. I almost photographed them and then I thought—" he paused—"I thought they might be from the previous week, when we'd had walkers through. The path is a known route."

Fournier looked at the bramble patch for a moment. "Point them out to Forensics. Tell them the height." He started down. "It may be nothing."

"And if it's something?"

Fournier glanced back at him. "Then you'll have noticed two things this morning instead of one, and I'll owe you a considerably better beer than that."

He rode to Roxton through the afternoon, which had reached the still, warm period of a fine English June day when the light flattens slightly and the shadows begin to lengthen without yet

losing the quality of afternoon. He left the bicycle against the wall of the White Horse, noted with satisfaction that Trenholme's name was still on the register board by the entrance, and went in.

Eliza, the cook-housekeeper, appeared from the kitchen with the specific velocity of a woman who has been waiting for someone to arrive so that she can tell them something before anyone else does.

"Mr. Trenholme is upstairs, sir," she said, slightly breathless. "He's been working all morning. He doesn't know a thing—he hasn't had his phone on; I've heard him in there singing. If you're from the police I expect he'll be a witness, won't he?"

"He may well be," said Fournier. "Has he come down for lunch?"

"Not yet. I was about to call him." She paused. "Should I tell him about Mr. Harlow first? It'll be a shock. He was in that park this morning, wasn't he? You'd know that already."

"Tell him," said Fournier. "I'll wait."

He heard Eliza's feet on the stairs and then her voice, emphatic and urgent in the way of someone delivering news they have been saving. He heard the particular silence that followed it. Then Trenholme's voice, sharpened, asking something. Then footsteps coming back down more quickly than they had gone up.

Trenholme appeared in the doorway of the dining room looking like a man who has just been required to revise his understanding

of the morning. He had paint on one hand and had clearly forgotten about it.

"Good Lord," he said. "That shot—"

"Yes," said Fournier. "Come and sit down. My name is Fournier. Detective Inspector, Metropolitan Police." He waited while Trenholme absorbed this and sat. "You didn't see the news this morning?"

"I never have it on when I'm working. I was—I had rather a lot to think about." He looked at his paint-stained hand as if noticing it for the first time. "I spoke to the constable this morning. Farrow. He knows I was in the park."

"He told us. You were there from approximately six o'clock?"

"Six-fifteen, roughly. I was held up at the gates—there's a pair of iron gates at the park entrance that would stop a painter cold on a good morning. I spent forty minutes on them. Then I went up through the park to the cedar hill, then down to the lake. I was there until the shot."

"And you heard nothing before the shot? No movement in the wood, no vehicle on the estate road?"

"Nothing. The place was entirely quiet. I was—" he hesitated briefly—"I was absorbed in my work."

"Of course." Fournier's tone was entirely neutral. "You produced several sketches during the morning, I understand."

"Three. The gates, the house, and—" he stopped.

"Yes?"

Trenholme looked at him with the expression of a man selecting his words from a shelf where most of them are inconvenient.

"There's a lake below the cedar hill. A marble statue beside it. I did a third study—oils—of the lake and the statue. It's purely compositional."

"Might I see it?"

A brief but complete silence. Trenholme looked at Fournier with a directness that was also, unmistakably, an appeal to a better instinct.

"It's—there's a figure in it. A swimmer. The compositional contrast between the living figure and the marble goddess. She was entirely unaware of me—I was screened by the undergrowth, fifty feet above the lake. It was an accident of circumstance. An artist's decision."

Fournier looked back at him with an expression that was neither judgment nor absolution. "I'd like to see it, Mr. Trenholme."

They went upstairs to the room Trenholme had converted to a studio. The painting stood on the portable easel with the unselfconsciousness of a thing not yet finished—the lake dark and reflective beneath it, the marble Venus to the right, and on the stone landing beside the statue a figure in a swimming costume, caught in the moment of emerging from the water. The face was three-quarter, detailed, unguarded, genuinely beautiful and completely recognizable in the way that only an unstaged portrait can be.

Fournier looked at it for a long moment. He was completely still in a way that had nothing to do with professional composure.

"It is very fine," he said at last, and meant it.

Then Eliza appeared in the doorway with the expression of a woman who has come to deliver cheese and found herself at the opening of a larger drama than she had bargained for. She looked at the painting, then at Fournier, then back at the painting.

"That's Miss Voss," she said. "That's Mr. Harlow's ward, that is. Plain as anything."

Trenholme said nothing. He looked at Fournier.

Fournier, for his part, had shifted his gaze from the canvas to Trenholme, and was regarding the painter with the particular attentiveness he reserved for moments when something new had just entered the case.

"You didn't know who she was," he said.

"I had no idea. I knew only that she was someone at The Towers who swam in the lake before the house was properly awake. I didn't know her name until this moment."

"Eliza," said Fournier, pleasantly, "would you mind very much bringing that cheese up here? I think Mr. Trenholme and I will eat in the studio, if that's all right."

Eliza went, visibly recalibrating her opinion of Fournier from *inconvenient police presence* to *a very sensible man indeed*.

"Sit down," said Fournier, to Trenholme. And then, when Trenholme had sat and the immediate defensiveness of his posture had settled somewhat: "Mr. Trenholme. The painting is not a

problem. You were concealed, she was unaware, you produced a work of art. No reasonable person could object to the circumstance, and Miss Voss is not, in my experience, an unreasonable person."

Trenholme let out a breath.

"What is a problem," Fournier continued, "is that you were at that lake between approximately seven o'clock and nine-thirty this morning, fifty feet above it in the cedars, with an excellent view of the lake, the surrounding ground, and—from a slightly different position—the Quarry Wood and the approach to the house." He leaned forward slightly. "I need you to think very carefully about everything you observed during those two and a half hours. Not what seemed significant at the time—everything. What you heard, what you saw, any movement in or around the wood, anything that appeared and then disappeared. The smallest detail."

Trenholme was quiet for a moment. Outside the window, the village went about its afternoon.

"There was a car," he said slowly. "I noticed it when I climbed the cedar hill the first time. Behind the yew hedge on the east side of the house. Just the reflection of the sun on the windscreen. It was there when I arrived and still there when I heard the shot and checked—it hadn't moved."

"Make? Color?"

"Dark. That's all I could say from that distance. Could have been navy or black."

"What else?"

"A window on the first floor of the east wing. After the shot. It was raised a few inches and someone was moving behind it—gesturing, I thought. It was open for perhaps a minute and then it was closed."

Fournier said nothing, but something shifted almost imperceptibly in his expression.

"That's the east wing first floor," said Trenholme. "The room above the front entrance. If I had to say—I would say the person was looking towards the wood."

"Or towards the front steps."

"Yes. Or both, from that angle." He looked at Fournier. "Is that—is any of that useful?"

"Very much so." Fournier sat back. "Tell me one more thing. When you came down from the cedar hill to paint the lake—what time was the girl already in the water?"

"She wasn't. She arrived about twenty minutes after I did. I was set up and working on the house when she came across the lawn. She swam for perhaps fifteen minutes, came out, dried off, and went back to the house."

"Did she look towards the wood at any point? While she was in the water, or afterward?"

Trenholme thought. "Not towards the Quarry Wood. She looked towards the house—several times, as if checking something. But not the wood."

Fournier nodded slowly. Eliza arrived with the cheese and bread, set them down with the satisfaction of a woman who has correctly read a situation, and retired without a word.

"Mr. Trenholme," said Fournier, cutting himself a piece of bread with the unhurried focus of a man who knows how to think and eat at the same time, "you are going to be required to give a formal statement. Nothing you've told me is damaging to you—quite the contrary. You were in the park on a public right of way for entirely legitimate purposes. You witnessed things of considerable value, and you have been honest about them."

"There's one more thing," said Trenholme. He said it with the air of a man releasing something he has been holding.

Fournier waited.

"The painting. I'll need to—I mean, if Miss Voss is going to be questioned about having been at the lake that morning—and presumably she will be—she's going to find out eventually that someone was there. That she was observed." He looked at the canvas. "I'd rather she heard it from me than from a statement. I know that's an unusual thing to ask."

Fournier looked at him for a moment with an expression that was almost, but not quite, a smile.

"I'll arrange it," he said.

"You will?"

"On one condition. The painting doesn't leave Roxton until I say so. It may be evidence. I suspect it won't be—but it may be."

"Of course."

"Good." Fournier finished the bread and stood. "One more question, and this one is purely personal."

Trenholme looked up.

"Is it as good as it looks from here? The painting?"

Trenholme looked at the canvas for a moment. "Yes," he said honestly. "I think it might be the best thing I've done."

"Then we are both," said Fournier, "going to have an interesting week."

He went down the stairs and out into the afternoon, retrieved the borrowed bicycle, and rode back towards The Towers. The village receded behind him in the long, still light. The Quarry Wood was visible against the sky ahead, dark and defined, its profile unchanging since the morning in the way that places where things have happened retain an absolute indifference to what they have witnessed.

On the rock above the quarry, just visible through the trees, the solid, unhurried form of PC Farrow moved briefly against the sky and was still again.

Fournier rode on, and thought about fires.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOME SIDE ISSUES

Harlow Capital Management occupied the top two floors of a building in Bishopsgate, a short walk from Liverpool Street station—close enough to the City's financial arteries to matter, far enough from the truly grand addresses to suggest a firm that had built its reputation quietly and preferred to keep it that way. The building's lobby was the kind that says *professional services* without specifying what kind or for whom, which is a particular species of City discretion. The lift was slow and the carpet was the color of reserved judgment.

Winter arrived at half past two. He was met in the lobby by DS Sheldon, who had got there an hour earlier and used the time well.

Sheldon was thirty-eight and looked thirty, which he had learned to use as an asset. He had a face that invited confidence—the kind of mild, attentive face that people talked to without quite knowing why—and he had been the best detective constable Winter had ever worked with before being promoted to sergeant and into Winter's own unit. His left eye was fractionally smaller than his right, a feature so minor that most people never noticed it, and yet it created, in certain lights, an impression of a man looking at two things simultaneously. This was, Winter had long thought, precisely accurate.

"Patterson's upstairs," said Sheldon, keeping his voice down. "She's been here since eight this morning. She knows you're coming. I've told her the nature of the inquiry and she's—" a brief pause for the right word—"she's ready."

"Ready how?"

"Ready in the sense that she's been preparing for something like this for some time and is relieved that it's here." He held the lift door. "She brought three months of back-office records in from home storage this morning before anyone else arrived."

Winter looked at him.

"She keeps records at home?"

"Copies. Her own copies of everything that passes through her systems, going back four years. She said she started doing it after the SFO inquiry began and she realized that digital records on the fund's own servers were—" Sheldon chose the word with care—"potentially subject to amendment."

The lift arrived at the top floor. Winter thought about a woman who had spent four years making her own copies of records against the possibility that the official ones would be altered. He thought about what it meant to sit at a desk every day knowing something was wrong and having no mechanism to act on it that wouldn't destroy the working life you'd spent fifteen years building.

"She's been frightened," he said.

"Very," said Sheldon.

The offices on the upper floor had the specific quality of rooms under pressure. Not dramatic pressure—no raised voices, no

visible signs of disorder—but the contained, careful tension of a place where people have been managing bad information for a long time and are running low on the energy that management requires. Three desks in the open-plan area were occupied by staff who looked up when Winter came in and then looked down again with the deliberate focus of people who have been told to get on with their work and intend to do exactly that. A fourth desk was empty. Its occupant's screen had been switched off. A cardigan hung over the chair back, and a coffee mug with a film of dried coffee at the bottom sat precisely centered on a coaster. Someone had left this morning and had not expected to return today.

Sheldon saw Winter notice it. "The fund manager," he said quietly. "Hilton's deputy. Resigned this morning by email. Cleared his desk yesterday evening, apparently."

"Fast," said Winter.

"People in the City tend to move quickly when they sense the weather changing."

Carol Patterson was in the glass-walled meeting room at the far end of the floor. She was fifty-one, precise in manner and dress, with the careful composure of someone who has been holding themselves together under significant pressure and is not entirely sure what will happen when the pressure is finally released. She had a quality that Winter associated with people who have been right about something for a long time and have not been believed, and who have consequently developed a specific combination of confidence and exhaustion. She shook Winter's hand

with a grip that was deliberately firm, as if demonstrating something.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "I want to be clear from the start: I have done nothing improper. I have been aware for two years that certain transactions were improper. I did not report them to the FCA or the SFO directly because I was—" she stopped, and the stop was precise, not faltering—"because I believed that doing so would result in my dismissal before anything could be established, and that without me inside the firm the records would be amended. I made a judgment call. I want you to know the reasons for it."

"Noted," said Winter. "Tell me about the transactions."

She had a laptop open and three printed files on the desk. She had clearly spent time arranging the order in which she would present this, and Winter let her do it in that order, because the arrangement itself was information.

She had been with Harlow Capital Management for twelve years. She had come from a larger fund where she had run a team of six; Mortimer Harlow had hired her at slightly below market rate in exchange for a level of operational autonomy she hadn't had in her previous role, and the trade had suited her. She described him as a fair employer, demanding but not unreasonable, and in her experience of the fund until approximately three years ago, entirely legitimate.

"The change," she said, "was not dramatic. It's never dramatic in these cases. It's always incremental. The first irregular transfer I identified was so small—fourteen thousand

pounds—that I initially assumed it was a processing error. I raised it with Hilton as a routine query.”

“What was his response?”

“He corrected it. Within forty-eight hours the money was back in the right account. He thanked me for catching it and explained it as a system error.” She paused. “Three months later there was another one. Slightly larger. The same correction, the same explanation, the same thanks.” Another pause, longer. “I am not a naive person, Mr. Winter. I understood after the second occasion that these were not errors. I began keeping my own copies.”

The story she told from there was the one Fournier had sketched on the drive north, but with the texture that only someone inside the machine can provide.

The client securities—US Treasuries, four point two million—had not simply been transferred to Luxembourg. That transfer, she explained, was the final step of a process that had been running for three years. Harlow Capital Management had, since 2022, been carrying a set of internal accounts that did not appear in any regulatory filing. The accounts held funds transferred incrementally from several client portfolios—never enough in any single quarter to trigger a threshold alert, always within the range of normal portfolio management activity. The destination of each transfer, traced through intermediary accounts in three jurisdictions, was a French bank account held in the name of a private individual.

“Do you have the name on the French account?” said Winter.

Patterson opened the third file. "Celine Renaud. Formerly Celine Ashford. The account is at a private bank in Nice." She turned the file to face him. "I believe she is Hilton Harlow's mother."

Winter looked at the account details for a long moment. The transfers went back thirty-eight months. The total, accumulated over that period, was just under one point eight million pounds.

"He's been paying for her care," said Winter.

"A nursing facility near Antibes, yes. I found it through the bank's IBAN prefix. I didn't pursue it further because—" Patterson folded her hands on the desk in a gesture that was the physical equivalent of a full stop—"because I was afraid of what pursuing it further would mean. For everyone."

A silence. Through the glass wall of the meeting room, the open-plan floor was visible. The three remaining staff were working with the focused application of people who are very aware of what is happening in the room they are not in.

"You could have gone to the FCA at any point in those two years," said Winter. "What stopped you?"

Patterson looked at him directly. "Mortimer Harlow stopped me. Not by threatening me—he was never threatening. But he was aware of what I knew. I had made it clear to him, indirectly, that I was maintaining my own record of the fund's transactions. And he—" she paused—"he trusted me not to act on it. I don't quite know how to describe that. It wasn't coercion. It was more like an understanding between two people who both knew something and had both decided, for their own reasons, not to move."

"Your reason being that you needed more time to build the documentation."

"And because I believed, until four months ago, that Mortimer would eventually deal with it himself." She looked at her hands. "He called me into his office the week the SFO inquiry began. He told me the inquiry was unwelcome but manageable and that he was taking advice. He seemed—not frightened exactly. Resigned. As if the arrival of the inquiry was something he had been expecting and was now deciding how to handle."

"Did he say anything about Hilton?"

"No. Directly, no. But I have known Mortimer Harlow for twelve years, and there is a specific quality to the way a man talks about something he is protecting. He had that quality." She looked at Winter. "I think he knew it was Hilton from the beginning. I think he decided to give him time to correct it himself. And then the time ran out."

"The April transfer," said Winter.

"That was someone who had run out of options and moved a large amount very quickly, without the care they'd previously taken. The SFO inquiry had been widening. I think someone realized that the incremental transfers were about to be found. The April movement was an attempt to consolidate and clean. And instead it triggered the alarm."

"You flagged it to Mortimer directly."

"I walked into his office. I put the document in front of him and I said: this is not an error, and I don't believe it can be explained as one. He called me three days later through a

solicitor and said the firm was withdrawing cooperation from the SFO pending legal advice." She paused. "I knew then that the choice had been made. I called my own solicitor that afternoon."

"Thank you, Ms. Patterson," said Winter. "I need copies of everything—your files and the originals on the server. DS Sheldon will stay and work through that with you this afternoon. Do not discuss this conversation with anyone connected to the firm until you hear from me."

"I understand." She looked at him with an expression that was the complicated mixture of relief and residual fear that Winter associated with people who have just set down something very heavy. "Is it too late?"

"For what?"

"For any of it."

He couldn't give her the answer she wanted. He gave her the accurate one instead. "It's not too late for justice. What comes after that—" he stood—"depends on what we find."

He left Sheldon with the files and went back to the street.

The phone number was waiting for him in a message from the Yard's financial intelligence unit. It had taken them longer than usual—the number was registered to a consulting firm, not an individual: Carver Advisory Services Ltd, a company incorporated eighteen months ago at a registered address in Chelsea, with a single director, a man named Nicholas Carver, who had a professional background in cross-border regulatory compliance and a history that Winter's financial crimes colleagues found interesting. Carver Advisory had three known clients, all

connected to the Luxembourg investment sector. Its registered address was a serviced office building on the King's Road.

Winter walked. The afternoon was warm and the City was conducting its afternoon business with the self-absorbed efficiency of a machine that has been calibrated too finely to notice what runs alongside it. He walked up through the insurance district towards the Bank, where the traffic was thick and the buildings were the kind that require architectural confidence to justify. He had always liked this particular stretch of the City for the same reason he disliked several of its inhabitants: it was direct about what it was. Money moved through here. The buildings made no apology for it. This was, in Winter's experience, more honest than the softer-spoken end of the market.

He stopped at a coffee bar near Moorgate and drank a flat white he didn't particularly need while reviewing his notes. The fund records, the French account, Patterson's twelve years of careful watching. The picture was clear and it was damning, and it was also, he noted, the picture of a man who had begun with a genuine act of love—supporting a parent his father had discarded—and had let that act metastasize into something that could only end in one of two ways: discovery or concealment sustained indefinitely. Hilton had chosen a third option, which was to remove the specific source of the threat to the concealment. The logic was cold and complete.

He thought about Mortimer Harlow standing on his front steps every fine morning to light his cigar and look at things. A man

who had made his mistakes and been trying, in his particular way, to make them right. Too slowly, too late, but trying.

He paid for the coffee and walked on.

Winter took the Tube to Sloane Square. The building on the King's Road was the kind that provides a respectable postal address and a certain kind of professional anonymity. The receptionist was pleasant and regretful: Mr. Carver had not been in today, and his last confirmed visit had been yesterday morning. No, she couldn't provide a personal address. She was, Winter noted, looking at her screen with the particular careful neutrality of someone who has been told something by a recently departed client and is uncertain whether it applies to a Detective Chief Superintendent.

He thanked her and went back to the lobby. He was considering his next step when the lift opened and a woman stepped out.

She was perhaps sixty, well-dressed, with the bearing of a person who knows their own mind and has had years of practice exercising it. She was carrying a document bag and moving with purpose towards the exit. She looked at Winter with the direct, assessing gaze of someone for whom men in suits in the lobbies of professional offices were, broadly, the landscape.

Winter looked back. And then he placed her.

"Mrs. Drummond," he said.

She stopped. The assessment in her expression became something more specific.

"Superintendent Winter," she said. Her voice was composed and slightly flat in the way of a voice that has spent decades concealing what it actually thought. "It's been some years."

"Four," said Winter. "The Blackwood Capital matter."

Adele Drummond. She had been a compliance consultant at Blackwood Capital during a regulatory investigation Winter had led four years previously. She had been a witness, not a suspect—scrupulously cooperative, impeccably careful, and, Winter had always thought, considerably more informed about the activities of her employer than she had ever been required to testify to. The inquiry had ended without charges, partly because certain key records had proved difficult to locate. Winter had never been satisfied with that outcome.

She was a tall woman, and she carried herself with the specific authority of someone who has operated at senior level in a world that historically assumed they should not be there, and who has dealt with that assumption by being better at the work than anyone who held it. Her expression now was not entirely composed. Something behind the composure was calculating, rapidly, whether the meeting in this lobby was coincidence or consequence.

It was consequence. They both knew it.

"Are you visiting Mr. Carver?" said Winter pleasantly.

"I have a number of clients in this building," said Adele Drummond. "Is there something I can help you with, Superintendent?"

"Possibly. I understand you have a professional relationship with Carver Advisory."

Her pause was very brief and very controlled. "I have provided consultancy services to a number of firms in the Luxembourg sector."

"Including, I imagine, Meridian Trustees SA."

A pause so small it was almost not a pause. "I'm not at liberty to discuss individual client relationships."

"Of course not." Winter smiled. "Mrs. Drummond-Mortimer Harlow was shot dead at his estate in Hertfordshire this morning. I'm investigating his murder. If there are things you'd like to tell me in a more formal setting, I'd recommend you contact my office before I contact you." He produced a card and held it out. "Soon, I think, would be best."

She took the card. She looked at it for a moment with the expression of a woman recalculating something she thought she had already calculated. Then she looked at Winter, and the calculation concluded.

"I was sorry to hear about Mr. Harlow," she said carefully. "I knew him slightly."

"I know you did. Good afternoon, Mrs. Drummond."

He went out into the King's Road and called Fournier.

Fournier answered on the second ring, which meant he was waiting for the call.

"Patterson has the money trail," said Winter. "It goes to a nursing facility near Antibes. Celine Renaud, formerly Ashford."

Hilton's mother. One point eight million over three years, small enough in each movement to avoid automatic flagging."

"I see." Fournier's voice was entirely level, which with him meant he was moved. "And the April transfer—the SFO one?"

"Panic. Someone had been too careful for three years and then moved too fast when the incremental transfers came close to discovery. The SFO inquiry was closing in."

"And Mortimer?"

"Patterson told him directly. He withdrew the SFO cooperation within days. He knew it was Hilton. He decided to protect him." A pause. "And then decided, eventually, to stop protecting him. Which is what Tomlinson's 'resolved one way or another by the end of the week' means. Mortimer told Hilton on Thursday that the protection was ending."

A silence on the line.

"The phone call," said Fournier.

"Nicholas Carver. A fixer—cross-border regulatory work, Luxembourg connections, three known clients all in the investment sector. He's disappeared. Gone since yesterday morning, which means Hilton warned him before the murder, not after. Last night, possibly, or early this morning."

"He was tying off threads," said Fournier quietly. "The call at nine thirty-seven wasn't warning Carver after the fact. He called before going out to his study. Before the shot."

The implication landed between them on the line and sat there.

"The alibi," said Winter.

"Yes."

"He was in the house, Charles. He was in his first-floor study. Tomlinson heard him moving across the parquet before the shot. Harris heard him come down after."

"Winter." Fournier used his surname only when he was being deliberately precise. "The shot was fired at nine-thirty. Hilton called Carver at nine thirty-seven. Seven minutes between the rifle shot and the phone call. The study is on the first floor, east wing. It is forty feet above and fifty feet back from the front steps."

Winter worked through it in silence for three paces on the King's Road.

"He couldn't have got from the Quarry Wood to the study in seven minutes. The wood is four hundred yards across open park. In full view of Brodie in the car."

"No," Fournier agreed. "He could not have got from the Quarry Wood to the study in seven minutes. That is precisely true."

The tone was patient, in the way of a man waiting for something to complete itself.

"Charles."

"Consider the east wing," said Fournier. "The Quarry Wood approaches the east boundary wall. The estate map Farrow showed me this morning marks a gate in the east boundary wall—the old orchard gate, locked, overgrown, not visible from the house. I asked Bates about it this afternoon. He said the gate hasn't been used in years and the key hangs in the estate office."

A silence.

"Or hung in the estate office," said Winter.

"Or hung." A pause. "The east wing has a secondary staircase. Staff use it. It runs from the courtyard level up to the first-floor gallery, emerging six feet from Hilton's study door. It takes—I walked it—approximately forty seconds from the courtyard to the gallery. And Tomlinson mentioned, just now, that the side door onto the courtyard was found unlatched at half past six on Tuesday morning. Harris noticed it. He assumed Hilton had stepped out for air."

Winter stood still on the King's Road while the traffic moved past him with complete indifference to what he had just understood.

"He didn't come from the Quarry Wood," he said.

"No. He went out through the orchard gate in the east boundary wall before the household was up. He wrapped his feet in something—I believe the burned material from the grate—to obscure his tracks on the rock. He fired from the rock at nine-thirty. He returned through the orchard gate, across the courtyard, up the staff staircase, and was at his study desk before the household reached the front steps." Fournier paused. "Brodie was watching the park and the main gate. No one was watching the courtyard. It was approximately a four-minute journey from the rock to the study, if he moved quickly. He had three minutes to spare."

Winter pinched the bridge of his nose. He was not, primarily, annoyed with himself for missing it. He was doing the

more useful thing, which was fitting it against everything else they had.

"The Monday and Tuesday early breakfasts," he said. "He wasn't just studying the sightline. He was timing the route."

"Yes. He needed to know exactly how long it took. Every element of this was prepared. The older footprints—Robert's boot size—placed in advance to suggest Robert had been in the wood recently. The orchard gate key taken from the estate office at some point before Tuesday. The fire on Tuesday night to burn the wrapping from his feet. The phone call to Carver either the night before or early that morning to warn him." A brief pause. "And the performance afterward—the controlled distress, the immediate call to the Yard, the strategic disclosure about Robert—all of it prepared in advance and delivered under pressure with almost perfect execution."

"Almost," said Winter.

"Tomlinson noticed the fire. Farrow photographed the footprints before they could degrade. Brodie remembered where the pheasants rose from—below the rock, not at the rock level, which means the shooter was below the rock's highest point and not where we initially supposed." Fournier's voice was very quiet. "And Mrs. Harlow was at the morning room window at nine-fifteen, looking towards the east boundary wall. Not the Quarry Wood. The east boundary wall."

Winter closed his eyes for a moment.

"She saw him go out," he said.

"I think so. I think she knew, or feared, what she was watching. And I think she has been carrying it since nine-fifteen this morning."

"We need to speak to her tonight."

"I'm seeing her at eight," said Fournier. "Robert is back. He's been here since five. Whatever he needed to do in London—some arrangement connected to the woman, the blackmail, I imagine—he's done it. He's subdued but cooperative. He'll give a formal statement tomorrow." A pause. "He has no idea about his brother."

"Keep it that way until we have more."

"Yes." A brief silence. "Jonathan—come back tonight. I think by this time tomorrow we shall know most of what there is to know."

"And the rest?"

"The rest," said Fournier, "Mrs. Harlow will tell us."

Winter put his phone away and looked up at the King's Road—the long, indifferent, crowded afternoon of a city that has been carrying its own secrets since long before any of its current inhabitants were born. He thought about Hilton Harlow in his east-facing study, waiting, in the silence after the shot, to hear what sound the house would make.

He thought about a woman playing piano at seven in the morning because clarity, when it came, needed somewhere to go.

He hailed a cab and gave the driver the address of Scotland Yard.

CHAPTER EIGHT

COINCIDENCES

The six fifty-two from Liverpool Street to Hertford was not a train that rewarded close attention to one's fellow passengers, being the kind of service that achieves maximum occupation with minimum comfort and caters primarily to people who have run out of alternatives. Winter boarded it at Liverpool Street with his bag, found a seat in coach C, and was considering what he knew and what he still needed when he looked through the connecting door into coach B and saw Hilton Harlow.

He was in a window seat, facing backward, with a leather document case open on the tray table. He was reading something from it with the focused attention of a man trying to concentrate over a significant amount of internal noise. He had changed his suit since the morning—a dark one now, appropriate to the occasion—but he had not shaved, which was the first departure Winter had noticed from his otherwise flawless presentation of himself.

Winter considered for a moment. Then he moved through the connecting door and sat down across the aisle from Hilton Harlow.

Harlow looked up. The recognition was immediate and produced, for just a fraction of a second, something that was not quite surprise and not quite alarm—something between the two, and

more controlled than either. Then the familiar composure reassembled itself.

"Superintendent," he said.

"A long day, Mr. Harlow."

"Yes." He looked at Winter with the level, unreadable attention he had maintained throughout the morning. Then, with a quality of deliberateness that Winter noted: "I had a rather unexpected phone call this afternoon. From a woman named Drummond. Adele Drummond. She said she believed she'd been seen speaking to you, and she wanted to know whether she needed a solicitor."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her to get one." A brief pause. "I thought you should know that I knew."

Winter absorbed this. It was, he thought, a characteristic move: the preemptive disclosure, the studied transparency, the implication that a man who voluntarily admitted things could not be concealing others. He had been doing it all day.

"I appreciate that," said Winter.

"I imagine you're going to ask about Carver Advisory as well."

"Eventually."

Harlow closed the document case. Outside the window the eastern suburbs moved past in the particular way of suburbs glimpsed from a train—everything familiar and slightly wrong, too close to examine and gone before you could decide what bothered you about it.

"I should have told you this morning," said Harlow. "About the fund. About the transfers. I didn't, because—I thought there might still be a way to manage it. To keep it contained." He looked at his hands on the document case. "I was wrong. I've spent the afternoon recognizing that I was wrong."

"Yes," said Winter.

The train moved out of the last of London and into the darkening green of Hertfordshire. Neither man spoke for several minutes. Harlow looked out of the window with the expression of a man watching something recede that he will not see again in its current form.

"Your father knew," said Winter. Not a question.

"He knew on Thursday," said Harlow. "He called me in and told me that matters could no longer be allowed to continue as they were. He didn't shout. He never shouted. He said he intended to make everything right. The clients, the trust, Miss Voss's accounts, all of it. He said he would give me until the end of the month to arrange a full disclosure to the regulators." A long pause. "He also said he would destroy the will and make a new one."

Winter watched him. He was saying things that were true. He was still, even now, giving accurate information. It was, Winter had decided some hours ago, his most fundamental quality: a precision so complete that it extended even to confession.

"Who else knew about the transfers?" said Winter.

"No one. Not entirely. Carver understood the mechanics—he helped arrange the Luxembourg structure. But he didn't know the

destination or the reason." He looked at Winter. "My mother is in a facility near Antibes. She has been there for twelve years. The costs are significant."

"I know," said Winter. "Ms. Patterson was thorough."

Something moved across Harlow's face at Patterson's name—not anger, something older and more complicated. "She did her job," he said. "She was right to."

They rode in silence through the last green miles. At Hertford the train emptied and they were briefly alone in the carriage.

"Mr. Harlow," said Winter. "Is there anything you want to tell me about today?"

He held Harlow's gaze. Harlow held it back. The train began to slow.

"No," said Harlow. His voice was entirely steady and entirely empty of the particular quality that Winter most needed to find in it. "There isn't."

The platform appeared. They collected their things in silence and parted at the ticket barrier without further words, Harlow towards a waiting car, Winter towards the taxi rank.

Winter arrived at The Towers at half past eight to find Fournier in the Italian garden, which in the long June evening was still holding the light in a way that made the yew hedges look like stage scenery. He was sitting on a stone bench with his jacket folded on his knee, doing nothing that was visible, which generally meant he was doing several things at once.

"You shared a carriage with him," said Fournier, as Winter sat down.

"You heard the car."

"I heard the car, and you arrived from the direction of the station rather than the road, which means you came on the same train. Which means you had forty minutes." He looked at Winter. "How was he?"

Winter summarized. The voluntary disclosure about Drummond. The admission about the fund and the transfers. The mother in France. The Thursday conversation with Mortimer. The new will.

Fournier listened without expression.

"He's preparing a position," he said, when Winter had finished. "Everything he told you tonight is true and provable and none of it touches what matters. He's surrounding himself with accurate information that doesn't address the question."

"Yes."

"He said there was nothing he wanted to tell you about today."

"Exactly that."

They sat with it for a moment. The garden was very quiet. The last swifts were cutting the sky above the east wing.

"Mrs. Harlow," said Winter.

"Mrs. Pritchard will bring us up."

Mrs. Pritchard was a compact, purposeful woman of sixty who had been looking after Mrs. Harlow for seven years and carried the specific competence of someone who has learned to manage a complex situation without drawing attention to the fact that the

situation is complex. She led them up the staff staircase—the same staircase Fournier had described on the phone, Winter noted, moving quietly enough to count the seconds—and along the back corridor of the east wing to a sitting room overlooking the orchard.

"She's been clear all day," said Mrs. Pritchard, in a voice pitched for their ears only. "Clearer than she's been in a long time. I want to say that so you understand—what she tells you is reliable. She knows what she saw."

"How long has she been like this?" said Fournier.

"Since last Thursday. Since whatever was said between Mr. Mortimer and Mr. Hilton. Something shifted in her. She came to me Thursday evening and asked me to reduce the evening medication. She said she needed to be able to think." Mrs. Pritchard paused. "She said she'd been not-thinking for too long."

She knocked and opened the door.

The room was lit by a single lamp and the long evening light from the orchard window. It was a different order of space from the formal rooms downstairs—smaller, personal, with books that had been read rather than displayed and a piano against the far wall with sheet music open on the stand. Mrs. Harlow sat in a chair by the window with her hands in her lap and her back straight, and the quality of stillness about her was the kind that comes from decision rather than passivity.

She looked at them both, and then at Fournier particularly, with the expression of someone meeting a face they have been expecting.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "Sit down, please."

They sat. Mrs. Pritchard stationed herself near the door without being asked, which told Winter that this was an arrangement they had discussed. Mrs. Harlow folded her hands more deliberately in her lap.

"I want to begin by saying something," she said. "I have been—I have not been fully present in this house for a long time. I know that. I know what people think about me and what they say, and mostly they're right. But I need you to understand that the things I'm going to tell you—I have not invented them, or misremembered them, or confused them with something else. I know what I saw."

"We understand that," said Fournier. His voice was very quiet.

She looked at him. Something in her expression adjusted slightly, as if she had been testing for something and found the result satisfactory.

"Monday morning," she said. "I was up early. I've been sleeping badly for two weeks—since before Mortimer told Hilton about the fund, though I didn't know then that that was what was happening. I was up at five-fifteen. I went to the kitchen for tea—I didn't want to disturb Mrs. Pritchard. I came back along the back corridor here, past the top of the staff staircase. The door at the bottom was open. I could see the courtyard."

She paused.

"I saw Hilton cross the courtyard towards the east wall. He was dressed in dark clothing. He was carrying something—I

couldn't tell what, at that distance and light. He went through the orchard gate. I watched from the window at the end of the corridor. He was gone approximately thirty-five minutes. He came back through the gate, recrossed the courtyard, and came up the staff stairs. I was back in my room by then, but I heard him on the stairs."

"Did he see you?" said Winter.

"No. I'm—I've learned to be unobtrusive in this house." She said it without bitterness, simply as a fact. "Tuesday morning was the same. A few minutes earlier—perhaps five o'clock. The same clothing. The same route. He was gone about forty minutes that time. He came back more quickly at the end—almost running."

"Did you understand what you were watching?" said Fournier.

A silence. Outside, a wood pigeon settled into the orchard.

"I understood that he was going somewhere he didn't want anyone to know about. I understood that it had something to do with what Mortimer had said to him on Thursday, because—" she paused, selecting this carefully—"because I heard Thursday's conversation. Not all of it. Enough. I knew that Mortimer had decided to end something. To stop protecting Hilton from the consequences of something Hilton had done."

"What did you hear?" said Winter.

"Mortimer said: I have been making it worse by covering it over. He said: the girl deserves better than to have her future managed by people who can't be trusted with it. And he said—" she stopped. Her hands tightened in her lap. "He said: I should have seen, years ago, what kind of man you are."

The room was very still.

"After that, I tried to speak to him. Mortimer. On Friday evening. I told him—I told him I was afraid. I didn't say of what, exactly. I don't know if I fully knew yet. He was kind. He said there was nothing to be afraid of and that things were going to be put right." She looked at the window. "I thought he meant financially. I thought it was about the fund. I didn't—I didn't let myself think about the other thing."

"The other thing," said Fournier gently.

"Hilton's expression, after Mortimer sent him out of the room. I saw it. He didn't know I was there—I was at the end of the gallery, in the shadow. He stood in the corridor for a moment after the door closed." She paused for a long time. "I have never in my life seen a person look like that. Not angry. Not frightened. Something that had made a decision. Something that had closed."

Fournier did not speak. Winter did not move.

"I told myself it was the medication," she said. "I told myself I was imagining things. I played the piano on Tuesday evening for four hours. I played on Wednesday morning from seven o'clock because I could not—" she stopped and steadied herself. "Because I could not sit in silence with what I half-knew."

"This morning," said Fournier. "Tell us about this morning."

She took one breath, deliberate as a diver's.

"I heard him on the staff staircase at five-fifteen. The same sound. I knew he was going out again. I got up and went to the morning room—the window there looks over the orchard wall

towards the Quarry Wood, and also towards the east boundary gate. I could see the gate from there."

She looked at Fournier.

"The gate was unlatched. He'd left it open behind him. He'd never done that before. Monday and Tuesday he'd fastened it from the outside each time. This morning he left it open." A pause. "I don't know what that means, exactly. But it felt different. It felt like someone who has decided that the return journey doesn't need to be hidden."

"You stood at the window," said Fournier.

"I stood at the window for perhaps twenty minutes. I didn't know what to do. I thought—I thought, if I go downstairs and stand in the hall, if I am simply *there* when he comes back—" She stopped. "But I didn't. I was afraid of him. I have been afraid of him for a long time and I have never said that aloud to anyone before."

Neither detective spoke. Mrs. Pritchard, by the door, was entirely motionless.

"I went back upstairs at nine twenty-five," said Mrs. Harlow. "I heard the shot from my room at nine-thirty. I knew immediately. I want to be clear that I knew immediately. There was no moment of confusion, no wondering what it might be. I knew. And I sat on the edge of my bed and I could not move for some time."

She looked at Winter. Her pale eyes were quite dry, which was in its own way more affecting than tears would have been.

"I love my son," she said. "Robert. I want you to understand that nothing I have told you tonight was easy to tell, because I know what it means for this family. But Robert is going to be suspected of this. He is already being suspected of this. And I cannot—I will not allow that to happen."

"No," said Winter. "He won't be."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

Something that had been held very tightly in her face released itself. She looked suddenly, briefly, much younger.

"There is one more thing," she said. "Mortimer's will. He told me on Friday evening that he was going to make a new one. He said he'd spoken to a solicitor on Thursday, after Hilton left his office. He said he wanted to ensure that Nell's trust was properly protected and that Robert was provided for regardless of—regardless of how other things were resolved." She looked at her hands. "He didn't tell me the details. But he said it was already in the solicitor's hands and would be signed on Thursday of next week."

"Do you know the solicitor's name?"

"He mentioned it. A Mr. Farrington, in Gray's Inn. I think Mortimer had used him for personal matters before."

Winter wrote it down. He looked up and found Mrs. Harlow watching him with the expression of a woman who has put something down that she has been carrying for a very long time and is not yet certain how to exist without the weight of it.

"Mrs. Harlow," said Fournier, "I want to ask one last thing. It is the most important question and I need you to take your time."

She waited.

"Do you believe that what you saw on Monday and Tuesday morning, and again this morning, was Hilton going to the Quarry Wood to prepare and then to carry out the shooting of your husband?"

The word *husband* settled in the room with a particular weight. She received it.

"Yes," she said. "I believe that. I have believed it since nine thirty-one this morning, when I heard the shot and understood what it was. I have been believing it for the past eleven hours and it is the most terrible thing I have ever believed about another person."

A silence.

"Thank you," said Fournier.

They said good night to Mrs. Pritchard, who closed the door behind them with the quietness of someone sealing something carefully. They went back down the staff staircase in silence—Winter counting the seconds again: thirty-eight from the first-floor corridor to the courtyard door—and out into the warm evening.

The Italian garden was in shadow now, the last of the light gone from the sky above the east wing. Somewhere in the house Robert Harlow was awake, and probably drinking, and thinking about his father. In his first-floor sitting room Hilton Harlow

was presumably doing what he did in the evenings—working, reading, maintaining the performance of himself with whatever private cost that performance now carried.

Winter and Fournier walked to the far end of the garden before either spoke.

"The will," said Winter. "Mortimer was going to sign on Thursday of next week. Hilton knew this. He had six days before the new will was signed. After which the trust protection and Robert's share would be legally established, and any further financial irregularity would go to the regulators rather than being handled within the family."

"Yes. The Thursday conversation was not a warning. It was a deadline." Fournier looked up at the east wing. One light on the first floor. "He had one week to prevent it or to ensure that the old will—which presumably benefits him considerably—remained in force."

"He moved in three days."

"He was already prepared. The early mornings, the gate key, the timing—he had probably been considering it since the SFO inquiry began two months ago. Thursday's conversation made it certain and immediate." Fournier was quiet for a moment. "He is not a man who hesitates, once he has decided."

"No." Winter looked at the lighted window. "We need the old will and the new one. Farrington in Gray's Inn."

"First thing tomorrow."

"And Forensics on the rock and the path at first light. I'll call the scene-of-crime team tonight."

"The threads on the brambles."

"Yes." Winter put his hands in his pockets. The evening had turned cool in the sudden way of English summer evenings when the light goes. "Charles—he's going to know, tomorrow morning, that something has shifted. When we come back from Gray's Inn. When Forensics arrive."

"He may already know," said Fournier. "The train."

"I didn't tell him anything."

"You didn't need to. He's read your face for thirty years without your noticing. He's very good." Fournier turned. "We should be ready to move quickly when the time comes. I'd rather not give him another night of preparation."

They went inside. The house received them in its altered quiet—the quiet of a place that has been carrying a lie for some time and can sense, though not yet confirm, that the lie has been found.

In the room above the orchard, the piano started again. Slower this time, and in a different key—major rather than minor. Not resolved, but moving towards something. The sound of a woman who has, at last, done what she could.

CHAPTER NINE

THE PREPARED GROUND

The conversation with his father lasted eleven minutes. Hilton timed it afterward, from memory, because the precision of the interval seemed important—seemed, in some way, to characterize everything that had been said. Eleven minutes to dismantle the architecture of three years. The man who had constructed that architecture quietly, carefully, at no small personal cost, and who had maintained it through two SFO interviews and four months of regulatory scrutiny, was informed in eleven minutes that it was over.

His father had been kind about it, which was almost the worst part.

Mortimer Harlow sat behind his desk at The Towers with the expression he wore when he was about to do something he considered necessary and unpleasant—the expression, Hilton had always thought, of a surgeon. Composed, focused, with the practiced sympathy of someone who had decided that the kindest approach was the direct one.

"I know what you've been doing," he said. "I've known for some time. Patterson confirmed the structure this morning, but I'd identified the pattern myself in February. I gave you time—I won't say why I gave you time, because I think you know."

Hilton said nothing. He was sitting very still in the chair across the desk, and he was thinking several things simultaneously, which had always been one of his more reliable capabilities.

"The money going to Nice," said his father. "I understand why. I even—I want you to know that I understand why. What she has been through is something I am responsible for, whatever else I am. I have not always behaved well towards you or towards her."

This was the nearest Mortimer Harlow had ever come, in thirty-five years, to an apology. Hilton received it without expression.

"But the clients," said his father. "Patterson's clients. Nell's trust. Those I cannot protect you from. The scale of what you've moved—if the FCA examines the records from the past three years there will be no ambiguity. And the April transfer—" he paused—"the April transfer was a serious error of judgment. You moved too much, too fast. Patterson told me because she had no choice."

"What are you proposing?" said Hilton. His voice was level.

"Full disclosure. Self-reporting to the FCA and the SFO by the end of the month. I will engage Farrington to revise the will this week—the trust must be properly insulated from any proceedings against the fund, and Robert must be protected. You will make full restitution from your own share of the estate where possible. The criminal consequences—" his father paused again, and the pause had in it something that was not quite grief but was close to it—"the criminal consequences I cannot protect

you from. But I will not abandon you to them, and I will ensure that your mother's facility is funded from a separate and unimpeachable source."

Eleven minutes. The offer was genuine. The conditions were non-negotiable. And Hilton, sitting in the chair across from his father and listening to the map of his future being redrawn in careful and irreversible strokes, understood with complete clarity what it meant.

It meant prison. Almost certainly. The scale of the transfers, the offshore structure, the April transaction—a competent prosecutor would make two years of it at minimum, and Hilton had spent enough time in the legal environment of financial crime to know that minimum sentences in this area were not fashionable with the current judiciary. It meant the end of the fund, the end of the professional reputation he had spent his adult life building. It meant the dissolution of the careful world he had constructed around himself, piece by piece, since the age of twenty-two.

All of that he could calculate with precision, and he calculated it now, sitting still and composing his face into the expression of a man receiving difficult news that he is prepared to accept.

What he could not calculate with the same precision was the other thing.

His mother was fifty-eight years old and living in a room overlooking a garden near Antibes. She had a condition that required specialist care, daily medication management, and the

kind of attentive monitoring that only a properly staffed private facility could provide. The NHS would not cover it. A state facility would not keep her. She had no savings, no assets, no family other than Hilton and the fiction of the French surname she had taken after the second marriage failed.

His father's offer—a separate and unimpeachable source of funding—was genuine. Mortimer Harlow was not a cruel man. He had been careless and dismissive and ambitious, and he had disposed of Hilton's mother when she became inconvenient and then spent thirty years not thinking about what that meant for the person disposed of. But he was not cruel. The offer was real.

The offer would survive, of course, only as long as the man making it was alive.

Hilton sat in the chair and looked at his father's face and understood, with the same clarity and in the same moment, several things that were adjacent to each other and would not remain adjacent for very long.

He thanked his father for his honesty. He said he understood the position entirely. He asked for the weekend to arrange his own affairs before the process began. His father agreed without hesitation, because the man's essential decency had never been in question, only his attention.

Hilton walked out of the office and across the hall and up the stairs and into his own sitting room, and he stood at the window for a long time looking at the park.

He was not, he told himself, deciding anything. He was simply thinking. The decision did not exist yet. He was a

methodical person and it was his habit to think problems through before acting, and this was a problem, and he was thinking it through.

The problem had a shape. The shape was this: there was a man whose continued existence was incompatible with the continued existence of the arrangements that kept Hilton's mother alive and comfortable and attended to. This was not a metaphorical incompatibility. It was a specific and temporal one. The man had given him until the end of the month. After which the self-reporting would proceed, the FCA would examine the records, the accounts would be frozen, the transfers would stop, and his mother would receive, within a quarter, a letter from the facility explaining that her accommodation could no longer be maintained.

He stood at the window for a long time.

The park was very quiet in the late afternoon. The cedars on the hill threw long shadows across the grass. The front steps were visible from here—the broad mosaic landing, the three shallow steps, the graveled area where Brodie parked the car each morning to wait.

His father stood there every fine morning to light his first cigar.

The Quarry Wood was four hundred yards away, and the rock above it commanded an unobstructed view of the landing. Hilton had known this since childhood. He had shot rabbits from that rock with a .22 at the age of fourteen, and had understood even then, with the particular geometry of a mind that naturally

resolved visual problems into angles and distances, that someone on that rock could put a bullet precisely where they intended to put it at ranges considerably in excess of four hundred yards.

He was not, he told himself, deciding anything.

He went to bed at his normal hour and slept adequately, which surprised him slightly.

On Friday morning he rose before the house and went out through the orchard gate, which he had not used since the summer of the previous year when he had walked that way for no particular reason and noticed that the key was the same as all the other estate keys, and filed that away as the kind of detail that occasionally becomes useful.

He had obtained the copy key from the estate office three weeks earlier, on the pretext of needing access to the orchard for a survey of the fruit trees that was never conducted. He kept it in the small drawer of his desk, under a binder of compliance documents, where it had occupied a space in his peripheral awareness for three weeks as a thing he had acquired in case it became necessary and that might not become necessary.

He walked through the orchard in the early morning light, around the edge of the kitchen garden, and into the first of the fields. He walked to the Quarry Wood along the boundary path, where he would not be visible from the house, and entered the wood from the north. He followed the quarry path to the rock. He climbed it and stood at the top and looked at the house.

The front of The Towers was perfectly clear. The landing was clearly visible. The distance was familiar to him from childhood but he measured it again now, with the eye of an adult who had spent his professional life calculating values: approximately four hundred yards. The elevation of the rock above the park level was twelve feet, not enough to complicate the trajectory significantly at this range. There were no obstructions. The line of sight was clean.

He stood on the rock for perhaps ten minutes, doing nothing that would have looked, from a distance, like anything other than a man enjoying the early morning and the view. He was not enjoying the early morning. He was confirming the geometry. The geometry was exactly as he had known it would be.

He descended the rock and walked back the way he had come, checking his watch as he crossed the courtyard: twenty-two minutes from the rock to the staff staircase door. He had expected less. He would need to move quickly.

He went upstairs and prepared for the day. Over breakfast he was quiet, which no one remarked on because he was often quiet at breakfast.

He had still not decided anything. He was simply preparing, as he had always prepared for significant problems, by understanding the terrain before he committed to a course of action.

The weekend was occupied with the fund's quarterly reports, which required his attention and received it with the same focus

they always received, because the work did not become less important because other things had also become important. He spoke to his father twice—once about the estate accounts, once briefly at dinner—and each time his father looked at him with the particular quality of attention that a man gives someone he has injured and not yet repaired, and each time Hilton met this with the steady, appropriate response of a son who has accepted a situation and is dealing with it.

He drove to the estate office on Saturday afternoon and took a potato sack from the stack in the storage room. He told Harris he was doing some clearing in the old stables. Harris noted it and forgot it within the hour, as he noted and forgot the majority of Hilton's movements, because Hilton's movements had never previously given anyone reason to remember them.

He cut the sacking into two roughly foot-sized pads with a craft knife from his desk drawer. He bound each pad with garden twine salvaged from a ball he found in the potting shed. He wore them over his shoes in his sitting room for twenty minutes, walking back and forth, testing the grip and the silence and the degree of impression they left on the carpet. The impression on carpet was negligible. The impression on soft earth would be different but irregular—distributed over a wider surface, the individual fibers pressing independently—and would not read to the trained eye as a definable boot pattern. He was confident of this.

He put the pads in the bottom of his wardrobe under two pairs of old shooting boots that had not been worn since the previous October.

Robert had a quarrel with their father on Saturday morning and left the estate by midday. The quarrel was not entirely convenient—it created noise and disorder and the kind of domestic drama that Hilton found depleting—but the specific content of it was useful, and Robert's departure more so. Robert would be in London, unaccounted for, for an uncertain period of time. That was useful.

Monday and Tuesday he rose at five and went out through the orchard gate and to the rock. On Monday he wore Robert's boots—he had taken the key to Robert's room from the board in the estate office on Sunday evening, telling himself he needed to check on the gun room inventory, which adjoined Robert's suite—and walked deliberately through the strip of moist earth beside the quarry path, choosing his footing to leave the clearest possible impression. He climbed the rock in his own shoes. He timed the return journey from the rock to the staff staircase: four minutes and eight seconds at a controlled pace that would not attract attention if observed. Four minutes and eight seconds. He timed it three times to confirm the average.

On Tuesday he wore the pads and made the same journey. He kneeled at the rock's northern face rather than its summit, confirming what he had calculated: the sightline from that position, with the body lower and the angle adjusted, was

adequate. He had spent the previous evening dry-firing Robert's rifle in his sitting room with the curtains drawn, working the bolt, establishing the feel of it with the .450's particular weight and balance. He was not a man who needed familiarity with a weapon to use it accurately, but he was a man who did not leave variables unexamined.

He thought about his father on Tuesday morning, standing on the rock and looking at the landing. His father had not changed the pattern of his mornings in twenty years. Every fine morning, without exception, he stood on the broad mosaic landing at the head of the front steps and lit his first cigar of the day. He did this because he said it was the one moment of the day when he allowed himself to simply look at things. He had said this to Hilton once, in an expansive moment at dinner. Hilton had not forgotten it.

He stood on the rock and looked at the landing and thought about his father looking at things, and he held two facts in his mind simultaneously: that his father was not a cruel man, and that his father's continued existence was incompatible with his mother's care. Both facts were true. They were not reconcilable. He had understood for several days that he was going to have to choose between them.

He had chosen.

Tuesday night he sat at his desk until half past ten, finishing a set of fund documents that required his signature by morning. This was not procrastination. The fund documents needed

doing and he did them, because the work did not become less important because other things had also become important.

At half past ten he went to the wardrobe and took out the sacking pads. He laid them in the grate and lit them with a box of matches from the mantelpiece. The material was slow to catch—hessian is dense and resistant—and he had to add a sheet of newspaper and then a second before the fire established itself. He watched it burn. The material did not burn cleanly; three or four compressed fragments survived, blackened but not entirely consumed. He did not disturb them. He trusted the fire to do its work more thoroughly than any intervention on his part would achieve.

He opened the window to clear the smell of burning. The night air came in, warm and still, carrying the cedar and grass scents of the June park. He stood at the window for a while.

He thought about his mother. She was at this hour, he calculated, three hours ahead—half past one in the morning in Antibes. She would be asleep, in the room overlooking the garden, with the medications that allowed her to sleep without anxiety taken at ten o'clock as they were every night. The facility was quiet and well-staffed and had never, in two years, given him cause for complaint. He had visited twice, and each time she had known him, and each time they had sat in the garden in the afternoon and talked about things that were not the present. She had been happy, in a careful and managed way, for longer than she had been happy at any point that Hilton could remember.

He had made that possible. He had made it possible through decisions that had required considerable precision and sustained nerve, and through the application of skills that his father had hired him for and never, he thought, fully appreciated. He had made it possible, and he was going to go on making it possible, regardless of what that required.

He closed the window. He went to bed. He slept.

Wednesday morning he was awake at four-fifteen without an alarm, which was what he had expected. He dressed in dark clothing. He took the rifle from the wardrobe where he had placed it on Saturday, wrapped in the outer cover of an old shooting bag. He took Robert's boots, which he would leave in the orchard—he could retrieve them later, or not; boots left in an orchard were not particularly incriminating—and in his other hand he carried the sacking pads, which he intended to burn in a different location after the morning was done.

He went down the staff staircase. The house was silent. He crossed the courtyard. He unlocked the orchard gate and went through.

It was a fine morning. The sky was just beginning to lighten in the east, the first pale color at the horizon above the Quarry Wood. The air had the particular quality of early mornings in June—cool and still and carrying a clarity of scent that the day would gradually replace with its own weight. He stood in the orchard for a moment and breathed it.

He was not afraid. He had wondered, in the abstract, whether he would be afraid, and the answer, now that the answer was available, was no. He was not afraid. He was focused. The fear would have been appropriate to a man who had not prepared, and he had prepared with a thoroughness that had left nothing to fear. All that remained was the execution of a plan that had been thought through to its conclusion.

He walked to the rock.

He did not think about his father. That was important. He did not allow himself to think about his father as a person—as the specific, particular man who had stood in the Italian garden on a Sunday afternoon telling him, with evident pride, that the lavender had come in better than any year he could remember. The man on the landing in three hours' time was not that man. The man on the landing was a problem that had been resolved. Thinking of him as a person rather than a problem was a form of sentimentality that would impair the precision of what needed to be done. Hilton was not, and had never been, sentimental.

He arrived at the rock. He checked his watch: five twenty-two. Brodie would bring the car around at nine-fifteen. His father would appear on the landing between nine-twenty-five and nine-thirty-five, as he appeared every fine morning, to light his cigar and look at things. The window was ten minutes. Hilton would need to be in position from nine-fifteen.

He had three hours and fifty minutes.

the farm buildings, the ordinary sounds of an ordinary Wednesday morning at a country house.

He had visited her twice.

He thought about this on the crate by the orchard wall, in the long bright hours between the reconnaissance and the act, because it was the one line of thought he permitted himself that morning that was not about timing or sightlines or the disposal of materials. He had decided, in advance, that he would allow himself this. A man could not hold a single cold idea in his head for three hours and fifty minutes without it curdling; he had read somewhere that interrogators understood this, that the mind under sustained pressure will manufacture its own relief whether you sanction it or not, and that it was better to choose the relief deliberately than to have it ambush you at the wrong moment. So he chose. He thought about his mother, because his mother was the reason, and a man is entitled, on the morning of a thing like this, to spend an hour with his reason.

The facility was above Antibes, on a hillside that fell away towards the sea in terraces of pine and dry pale stone, and the first time he had gone he had driven up from the airport in a hired car with the windows down and been surprised, against all his preparation, by the beauty of the approach. He had expected an institution. He had been braced for the smell of institutions, the particular compound of disinfectant and overcooked food and the air that has been breathed too many times by people who are not going to leave. What he had found instead was a low white building with a tiled roof and shutters the colour of faded lavender, and a garden that someone competent and well-funded was clearly paying attention to, and a terrace where the residents

who were able sat in the afternoons under a pergola hung with something that flowered. It had cost, he had thought, even in that first moment of relief—it had cost, and would go on costing, and the cost was the whole point and he had already arranged to meet it. The beauty was not free. Nothing that held the tide back was free.

She had been in the garden. A nurse had walked him out to her, talking pleasantly in the careful bilingual way of people who deal all day with families who are paying for reassurance as much as for care, and he had seen his mother from forty feet away before she saw him: a thin woman in a pale cardigan in a cane chair, her face turned up to the light with her eyes closed, and for a moment—the length of the forty feet—he had not known whether she would know him.

This was the thing no one who used the phrase *daily medication management* understood about what the money bought. It did not buy a cure. There was no cure; he had stopped, after the second consultant, expecting anyone to use a word that implied one. What it bought was a holding action. It bought a place where the bad days were managed so that the good days could occur, where someone noticed when she stopped eating and someone else noticed when the noticing was needed, where the slow subtraction that was happening to her was slowed, fractionally, at enormous expense, by the constant attention of people who were good at their work because they were paid enough to be. The money did not buy his mother back. It bought her *time*, in small expensive increments, and it bought the quality of the time, and on a good

afternoon in a garden above the sea the quality of the time was very nearly indistinguishable from the thing itself.

That first afternoon had been a good one.

She had opened her eyes and seen him and her whole face had done the thing he remembered from childhood, the thing he had not seen on any face since—a lighting, sudden and total and without calculation, the expression of a person for whom the arrival of one specific other person was simply and uncomplicatedly the best thing that could happen. “There you are,” she had said, as if he had stepped out of the room for a moment rather than out of her life for the better part of a decade, and he had sat down in the cane chair beside her and taken her hand, which was light and dry and very cool, and they had talked for two hours.

They had not talked about the present. He had learned, by the second visit, that the present was the dangerous ground—that the present was where the gaps were, the names that would not come, the alarming blanks she would step into and out of like a person crossing a stream on stones some of which were no longer there. The past was firmer. So they walked on the past. She had been sharp on the past, that afternoon, sharp and funny and warm in the way that he had spent thirty-five years believing he had invented out of a child’s need, until he sat beside her in the Mediterranean light and discovered that he had invented nothing, that the sharp funny warm woman was real and was still in there, surfacing in the good hours like a swimmer who can hold her breath for only so long before she has to come up.

She had told him a story about a holiday they had taken when he was five, before the divorce, to a cold grey beach somewhere in the north of England, and how it had rained for six days, and how his father had been furious in the particular contained way that was worse than shouting, and how she and Hilton had escaped to a shelter on the front and eaten an entire box of fudge between them and watched the rain come in sideways off a brown sea and laughed until they could not breathe. He did not remember the holiday. He remembered, when she described it, the specific feeling of the fudge—too sweet, slightly gritty, the wax paper—and he had not known he remembered it until she gave it back to him, and he had understood, sitting in the garden, that this was what she was: the keeper of a version of him that existed nowhere else, a small boy who had laughed in a rain shelter, the only evidence that such a boy had ever been.

He had been three at the divorce. He had no memory of the marriage, only of its aftermath: the largeness and certainty of his father, the largeness and certainty of the houses, and the slow dawning understanding, arrived at over the careful years of a watchful childhood, that his mother had been *removed*—that there had been a person, central and warm, and then there had not been, and that the removal had been accomplished by adults using money and solicitors and the quiet machinery of a man who got the arrangements he preferred, and that no one had asked the small boy what he wanted because the small boy was a clause in someone else's settlement. She remarried when he was six. It failed. He saw her at intervals that grew longer. And somewhere in the

lengthening intervals he had learned the lesson that he had organised the rest of his life around without ever once stating it to himself: that affection was not a thing you were owed and not a thing that protected you, that it could be subtracted from you by people stronger than you while you stood there with your hand out, and that the only people who survived the subtraction were the ones who had arranged, in advance, never to be caught needing.

He had arranged it. He had arranged it so thoroughly, for so long, that there was very little left in him that could be reached—Nell had seen that, he knew, and his stepmother had seen it, and his father had seen it last of all and only at the very end, *I should have seen, years ago, what kind of man you are.* And his father had been right, and also wrong, because the one thing the arrangement had never quite managed to wall off, the single account that had never balanced, was the thin woman in the cane chair who carried the only surviving copy of the boy in the rain shelter.

The second visit had been worse. She had known him, but it had taken her longer—a few seconds of searching, of looking at his face the way you look at a word on the tip of your tongue—and the few seconds had cost him more than he had been prepared for. He had understood, driving back down to the airport that time, that the good afternoons were a diminishing resource, that there would be a visit, not yet but coming, when the searching would not resolve, when she would look at his face with polite uncertainty and offer him the courteous, terrible smile of a

woman being kind to a stranger. And he had understood, with the part of his mind that did the arithmetic, that every one of the remaining good afternoons depended absolutely on the continuation of the arrangement that paid for the low white building and the lavender shutters and the competent garden and the nurse who walked families out to the terrace, and that the arrangement depended absolutely on his being free to continue it, and that his being free depended now, as of a conversation eleven minutes long in his father's study, on one thing only.

If the money stopped, she would not stay. He had asked, on the second visit, in a hypothetical voice, what the procedure was for a resident whose funding lapsed, and the administrator had answered in the gentle, practised way of a woman who has given the answer before: there was a notice period; there was a transfer to a state facility, where one was available; the family was always given time to make arrangements. He had thanked her. He had understood what a *state facility, where one was available* meant for a woman in his mother's condition, in a country that was not her own, with a French surname she had taken from a marriage that had failed and no family but a son in England. It meant the end of the good afternoons. It meant that the keeper of the boy in the rain shelter would be moved, with appropriate notice and full procedural propriety, to a place where the slow subtraction would no longer be slowed, and would proceed at its own pace, unattended, until it was complete.

He sat on the crate in the orchard and he held two things in his mind at once, as he had held them for several days, and he

had stopped trying to reconcile them because he had established that they would not reconcile. The first was that his father had been, on balance and within his limits, not a cruel man, and had been trying, too slowly and far too late, to do something decent. The second was that his father's continued existence and his mother's remaining good afternoons were the same quantity of time, measured from opposite ends, and that one of them was going to have to be spent to buy the other.

He had done the arithmetic many times. It always came out the same. It came out the same because the love was real—that was the part his father had not understood and the prosecutor would not understand and no one would ever understand, that the thing driving the cold machine was not cold at all, that he was the most calculating man any of them would ever meet and the calculation served the one warm thing he had left. He loved his mother. Whatever else he was—and he was, he knew, by nine o'clock that morning going to be something there was no coming back from—he loved his mother, and he was going to go on holding the tide back from her for as long as he had the means, regardless of what holding it back required.

At nine-twelve he put on the sacking pads, bound them over his shoes, picked up the rifle, and went to the rock.

At nine-fifteen he was in position on the north face, kneeling, left elbow supported. The front of The Towers was clear before him in the morning sun. The landing was empty. Brodie's car was on the gravel. The house was quiet.

He waited.

His father appeared on the landing at nine twenty-eight. He came through the front door with his coat and his phone and his cigar case, and he paused at the top of the steps in the way he always paused, settling himself, preparing for the day. He took the cigar from the case and cut it with the small cutter he kept on his watch chain.

Hilton watched through the scope and breathed with the controlled evenness that any competent marksman develops, and he did not think about his father as a person, and he put the crosshairs where they needed to be, and he fired.

The shot was clean. His father fell at once, without the hesitation that a less certain shot produces. Hilton noted this with the part of his mind that was still doing its job. Then he was on his feet and moving, down from the rock and through the bracken to the quarry edge, where he threw the rifle into the flooded section and heard it hit the water, and then along the north path to the orchard gate.

He moved quickly but not urgently. Urgency in a visible location was the enemy of composure, and composure was what the next hour required above everything else. He crossed the orchard at a steady pace, left Robert's boots against the wall, removed the sacking pads and tucked them under his arm—he would deal with them later—and went through the orchard gate and across the courtyard and up the staff staircase.

Thirty-eight seconds from the gate to the gallery. His practice runs had estimated forty seconds at a careful pace. He was, apparently, moving somewhat faster than he thought.

He went into his sitting room and sat down at his desk. He checked his watch: nine thirty-two.

Then he heard Nell's voice below. Then Harris's. Then the quality of the sounds changed in the way that the quality of sounds changes when something has happened.

He took out his phone and called Carver.

He had prepared this call. He told Carver, in three sentences, that the regulatory situation had changed significantly and that the Luxembourg structure would need to be wound down immediately and the records archived in accordance with the arrangement they had discussed. He kept his voice completely level, because his voice was almost always completely level and any departure from that would have been noticed. Carver asked one question. Hilton answered it. The call lasted four minutes and eleven seconds.

He put the phone down.

He waited thirty seconds more, enough time for a man in a first-floor study to have heard a sound and processed it as significant, and then he opened his sitting room door and went to the head of the gallery stairs.

Below, in the hall, Harris was running. Tomlinson had appeared from the back corridor. Nell was at the front door.

Hilton ran downstairs.

Later, he would think about this as the most dangerous part of the morning. Not the shooting—the shooting was preparation, and preparation is something he could control. The dangerous part

was the hall, and the front steps, and his father's body, and the faces of the people who were already gathered around it.

He had imagined it. He had imagined it many times, with the deliberate care that preparation requires. He had rehearsed, in his mind, the appropriate response: shock, distress, the controlled grief of a composed man whose composure has been breached. He knew what it should look like because he had seen it before, in the faces of other people at other deaths, and he had the actor's basic skill of being able to produce from the inside what he had observed from the outside.

What he had not fully imagined was the reality of the body.

This was, he realized later, the single failure of his preparation. Not the footprints or the gate or the timing. The body. He had imagined a problem resolved. He had not imagined the specific and irreversible particularity of a man lying at the foot of his own front steps with the morning sun on him, smaller than a living man is, which the dead always are, and more still than any living stillness, and already, in some quality of the air around him, gone.

His father.

He stood at the foot of the steps and the prepared response worked, more or less, because the grief beneath it was genuine—which is something he had not expected and which surprised him with a sharpness that he did not entirely manage to conceal. Some of what Farrow saw, and what Farrow would record in his notebook, was not performance. Some of it was the real thing.

But the word he said to Farrow—the word about the bullet—that was not grief. That was the part of his mind that had been doing its job since five o'clock in the morning and had not yet been told to stop.

He would think about this afterward, in the quiet of his sitting room, when the evening came and the house settled around its altered facts. He would think about what it meant that the most practiced, most calculated part of himself could not prevent a moment of pure, specific knowledge from emerging in the presence of the constable and the body and the ruined morning.

He did not have a name for this. He was not a person who had ever spent much time on the interior life. But he sat at his desk that evening and he thought about it, and what he arrived at was not regret—he was too honest with himself for the comfortable softness of regret—but something colder and more specific. The understanding that a thing can be prepared for with perfect thoroughness, and can proceed with perfect execution, and can still contain, somewhere in its structure, one element that resists the preparation. One element that belongs, not to the calculating intelligence that made the plan, but to the person who had to carry it out.

He was, whatever else he was, still a person.

He sat at his desk and thought about his mother in her room above the garden near Antibes, and he thought about the morning's work, and he thought about the detective who had arrived in the afternoon with the careful eyes and the quality of patience, and he thought about Farrow's notebook.

He thought: *I knew what it would do.*

He had always known what it would do.

CHAPTER TEN

HER OWN REALM

Her father had died in this county, in this county's particular green. Not at The Towers—he had been in a hospital in Hertford when the cardiac event finally ended what his own recklessness had been working towards for years—but in Hertfordshire, within twenty miles of the house where Nell had lived since she was twelve years old. She thought about this sometimes: that she had grown up in the landscape that killed him, and that the landscape had no idea and did not care, and continued to be beautiful in its unhurried, unassuming English way regardless.

She had not, to be clear, been unhappy. That needed to be said, even to herself, because in the past year she had noticed a tendency in her own thinking to rewrite the history of The Towers into something more uniformly grim than it actually was, and she distrusted that tendency. The truth was more complicated and, in its complications, more honest.

She had been eight when her mother died. She had been twelve when her father followed, having spent four years in the management of his own grief through the reliable method of drinking heavily and eating badly and working with an intensity that had a quality of punishment about it. She had understood, at twelve, that she was alone in the world in the specific and

irreparable way that the death of both parents produces, and that her guardian—Mortimer Harlow, her father's old business partner, whom she had known since childhood as a large, slightly remote man who gave excellent presents at Christmas and appeared at intervals with the quality of someone performing a conscientious duty—was now the principal feature of her life.

She had been frightened of him, at first. Not because he was unkind—he was not unkind, and in his way he had been genuinely fond of her, in the manner of a man who is fond of things that require management. But he was large and certain and she was small and uncertain, and the house was large and certain too, and she had felt, in the first year, like someone who had been placed in an exhibit and had not yet learned its rules.

The rules became clear. You were polite. You were diligent in your lessons. You did not make demands. You appeared at mealtimes with an expression appropriate to the conversation. You did not discuss money or ask questions about the trust. You expressed gratitude for the opportunities provided and you did not compare them to the opportunities that might have been provided elsewhere, because there was nowhere else.

She had followed the rules. And in the spaces between the rules—in the park, in her room, in the long, unwitnessed hours between lunch and dinner when the household moved at its own pace and no one particularly wanted anything from her—she had built a life that was genuinely, authentically hers. That was the thing she needed to be honest about.

She had books. Hundreds of them, because Mortimer Harlow, whatever his other failings as a guardian, had understood that books were not luxuries and had given her free use of the library and a generous annual allowance for the online retailers she had quickly learned to use with precision. She had paint and paper and canvas and the long afternoons in which to use them. She had the park—the lake, the cedar hill, the footpaths she had walked until she knew every gate and stile by the quality of its hinges—and the particular freedom that an English country estate, however private, cannot entirely deny to the person who lives within it.

She had her imaginary journeys.

These had started at fourteen, when she first understood that she had money coming to her—a substantial amount, when she turned twenty-one—and that the money meant something specific and practical: the ability to go anywhere and do anything she chose, without consulting anyone. She had acquired an atlas and three volumes of travel writing and begun to plan. Over seven years the plans had proliferated into a system of notebooks, each dedicated to a different journey, illustrated in the margins with sketches copied from photographs and maps, annotated with routes and distances and the names of painters who had worked in those specific lights.

The Alentejo in October: the cork oaks, the ochre earth, the quality of the light at noon that she had seen in Vieira da Silva's paintings and could not reproduce in Hertfordshire regardless of effort. The Lofoten Islands in February: ice-blue

water and the raw, angular Norwegian light that she had tried to understand from reproductions and suspected required the thing itself. The Jordaan in Amsterdam in spring. The Extremadura at the end of summer. The Cairngorms in November when the color was stripped back to purple and gray and the bone of the land showed through.

She had planned all of these journeys in extensive, devoted detail. She had planned them in the hours when the house did not need anything from her, which were the hours that were most purely her own, and they had sustained her through seven years of breakfasts and dinners and the kind of social occasions that a man of Mortimer Harlow's ambitions occasionally organized and that required her presence in a good dress with an appropriate expression.

Ten weeks. In ten weeks she would be twenty-one. The trust would be hers, the solicitor would manage the transfer, and she would be free to make the life she had been planning in the margins of notebooks since she was fourteen years old.

She had not told anyone this. Not because she was ashamed of it, but because the desire for freedom, she had found, was best kept private until the conditions for freedom actually existed. People had views about what she should do with her money and her time and her degree of freedom, and those views were not, on the whole, particularly interesting to her.

The household was not a happy one. She had understood this for some time, though the understanding had grown gradually, the

way all important understandings grow—not as a single revelation but as the accumulation of small, individually unimportant details that eventually formed a pattern too large to ignore.

Mortimer she was genuinely fond of. This was the most complicated of the household relationships and the one that most resisted simplification. He had not been a particularly good guardian in the textbook sense. He had been remote, occasionally dismissive, constitutionally incapable of asking her what she actually wanted, and increasingly insistent, in the past two years, about Robert. But he had also been honest with her, in his blunt way, about the world; had introduced her to people worth knowing; had funded the books and the paints and the courses of study she had requested without understanding exactly why she wanted them; and had never, in nine years, been deliberately unkind.

She was going to miss him. She had accepted this in the past year, as the accumulation of his human qualities had become clear to her in a way they hadn't been when she was younger and wanted him to be different than he was: she was going to miss this specific, difficult, largely well-intentioned man, even as she walked out of his house at twenty-one with her plans and her notebooks and her freedom. She had been looking forward to it. She had not properly reckoned with the missing.

Robert she managed. The affection was genuine but it was the affection of long familiarity rather than deep compatibility—the warmth one develops for someone who has been present throughout your childhood and who has always, in his clumsiest and most

self-absorbed moments, meant well. He was not her kind of person. She had understood this at sixteen and had been both grateful for the understanding and slightly saddened by it, because it would have been easier if Robert had been her kind of person.

Mortimer's wishes were clear and Robert's wishes were simpler still—he wanted to be told what to do and then be praised for doing it, and the wanting was so naked that she felt, at times, a pity for him that she did not quite know what to do with.

Hilton was different.

She had no quick or comfortable way to describe her relationship with Hilton Harlow, which was itself a significant thing. Most relationships have a description. They are warm or cool, close or distant, uncomplicated or fraught. Her relationship with Hilton Harlow had none of these qualities. It was something else, something she had been trying to find language for since she was old enough to understand that the language mattered.

She was not frightened of him. That was important to establish, because she knew that other people assumed she was frightened of him and she found the assumption both understandable and slightly irritating. She was not frightened. She was something more specific than frightened, which was wary in the way one is wary of a thing whose properties you have studied and whose behavior you can therefore predict to a reasonable degree.

Hilton's behavior could be predicted, and what it predicted was this: that he was, at any given moment, managing his

relationship with you with a specific outcome in mind. The managing was impeccable. The warmth was appropriate when warmth served and cool when cool served, and the transitions between the two were so smooth as to be nearly undetectable. Nearly. She had been watching him for seven years and had learned to detect the transitions by their absence—by the specific quality of evenness in his manner that only appeared when he was deploying it rather than simply having it.

She did not know, precisely, what he wanted from her. She suspected it was related to the trust and to the estate and to the way that Mortimer Harlow had structured his financial arrangements, but she had not been told the details of any of this and had learned, early on, that asking for them produced polite deflection. What she knew was that Hilton wanted something, and that the wanting had a quality of patience to it that was considerably more unsettling than Robert's simple, undisguised wanting. Robert wanted her to say yes. Hilton was waiting for a moment that he had calculated in advance, and his patience was the patience of someone who has decided the moment will come and has arranged his affairs accordingly.

When she had first understood that the trust's transfer was only weeks away, she had felt, alongside the relief and the anticipation, a slight tightening of the air around her. As if something in the household had registered the calendar and was recalibrating.

Wednesday morning she woke early and lay in bed listening to the house. This was something she did often—the house had its own grammar of sounds, and she had learned to read them. The staff staircase creaked in a specific way when Tomlinson used it. Harris's footstep on the hall parquet had a particular decisive quality. The kitchen door's spring tension had been doing something slightly off for three weeks and produced a sound just distinguishable from its normal sound.

She heard something at five-fifteen. A sound from the east wing corridor, and then the staff staircase door, and then nothing more. She lay still for a moment. Not alarmed. Something that was a notch below alarm, which was the register she had been occupying since Monday morning when she had seen Hilton cross the courtyard towards the orchard wall before anyone else in the house was awake.

She had seen it from her window, which faced south. She had been at the window because she had not slept well and had been awake since four watching the sky lighten. She had seen him cross the courtyard with something under his arm and go through the gate in the east wall, and she had stood there watching the gate for a long time afterward.

She had told herself several things.

She had told herself it was early morning exercise. She had told herself the gate led to the orchard and the orchard led to the footpath and there were people who walked the footpath at five in the morning. She had told herself she was misreading the quality of the darkness and the strangeness of the hour and the

object under his arm, which she had not seen clearly enough to identify. She had told herself she was generating a narrative from insufficient data, which was a thing she knew she was capable of and which she had learned, over the years, to guard against.

She had told herself these things on Monday, and on Tuesday morning when it happened again, and on Wednesday morning when she heard the sounds from the corridor and knew, without seeing, that it had happened a third time.

She got up.

She dressed quickly and went downstairs by the back staircase and let herself out through the morning room, and she stood on the lower terrace in the early morning looking at the east boundary wall. The gate was just visible from this angle, at the corner of the orchard. She stood and looked at it for several minutes.

Nothing moved.

She went back inside. She made tea. She sat in the kitchen with the tea and the particular quality of a fine June morning coming through the window, and she thought about what she knew.

What she knew was: she had seen Hilton use the orchard gate before dawn on three consecutive mornings, and on each morning he had returned within forty minutes, and on the third morning she had heard him on the staff staircase, which meant he had entered the house through the courtyard rather than the front door. She knew that the orchard gate led to the north path and the north path led to the Quarry Wood, and that the rock above the quarry

had a clear view of the front of the house. She knew that Robert's rifle had not been in its rack when she had passed the open door of his suite on Saturday morning.

These were things she knew. They did not add up to what they added up to. She refused to let them add up to what they added up to, because what they added up to was impossible and she was a rational person and she dealt in what was demonstrable.

She finished her tea and went to the lake.

She swam every morning between eight and nine, as she had for the three years since Mortimer Harlow had granted her sole use of the lake at that hour. She swam as she always swam—efficiently, with purpose, covering the width of the lake twice before settling into a longer contemplative circuit of the perimeter that she found clarifying in the way that repetitive physical activity clarifies. She thought while she swam, which was something she had always done and which she found preferable to thinking while stationary. Thinking while stationary tended to circle. Thinking while swimming tended to move forward.

She looked towards the east boundary wall while she swam. She did it several times without deciding to. The gate was just visible from the water on a clear morning, and she checked it without quite knowing that she was checking it.

She thought about Mortimer Harlow. She thought about the conversation she had overheard three weeks ago through the half-open door of his study—not the words, exactly, but the tone, which had been the tone of a man who has reached the end of a rope he has been holding a long time and is deciding what to do

now that his hands are empty. She thought about his demeanor since Thursday, which had been thoughtful in a specific way—the thoughtfulness of someone who has made a decision and is preparing to act on it.

She thought about ten weeks.

She climbed out of the lake and stood on the warm stone beside the Venus and looked at the house in the morning sun. The front of The Towers faced southeast and caught the light at this hour in the particular way of a building whose architect understood that morning sun is generous to warm brick. She had painted it from this angle several times and had never quite captured the quality of the light, which was the reason she kept trying.

She dried off, dressed, and began to walk back to the house. She took the direct route across the lawn, passing the formal garden, and came up onto the first terrace through the gap in the yew hedge.

She heard the shot.

It came from the right—from the direction of the Quarry Wood—and it had the flat, specific quality of a rifle shot that she knew from the estate's October shooting days. Not a shotgun. She had always been able to tell the difference and had always known it marked her, in Robert's eyes, as better at this than he was.

She looked towards the wood. Nothing moved. The rooks went up from the elms. Two pheasants came out of the tree line in the particular indignant way of birds interrupted.

Then she looked towards the house and saw her guardian at the foot of the front steps.

She ran.

Later, when she had given her formal statement and had answered the detectives' questions and had sat in the dining room with tea that Tomlinson had made without being asked, she would think about the running. It was the only part of the morning that she had not, in some cold and separated part of herself, partly anticipated. She had not anticipated running. She had been prepared, in the way that people who have been thinking about difficult things for several days prepare themselves, for something difficult. But the body does not prepare. The body simply runs, and kneels, and lifts, and does what needs doing without consulting the mind that has been managing itself for days.

His head was heavy and his eyes were closed and he had the particular stillness she had described to herself earlier: more still than any living stillness. She had her hand on his face. She said his name, which seemed, in the moment, the most important thing, to say his name so that if there were anything left it would know it had been addressed. She said: Uncle Mortimer. She had not called him that since she was thirteen but she said it now.

He did not hear her. He had been dead for some time.

She sat beside him on the broad mosaic landing in the morning sun and she held his hand and she waited for the household to come.

The afternoon was long and occupied by the police and the forms they required and the questions that were asked several times in slightly different ways. She answered them all. She answered them with the same steady, directed attention she brought to everything that required it, and she did not say the thing that was moving around the edges of her mind, circling and circling, because it was the thing that did not add up.

Robert came back and was clumsy with grief in the way that he was clumsy with everything, which she found, today, easier to forgive than usual. He said something in the garden in the late afternoon that she had not found particularly wise, and she told him so in clear terms, and he went away looking hurt, and she did not pursue him.

The small, quick detective appeared in the corridor when she was on her way back to her room, and she had the impression that he had been waiting there on purpose.

"Miss Voss," he said. "How are you getting on?"

She looked at him. He was not, she thought, asking how she was getting on in the way that people asked that question. He was asking something more specific.

"I am managing," she said.

"Good." He paused. "There's an artist at the White Horse Inn who would like very much to explain himself to you before tomorrow. He's planning to come to the lodge gate later this evening, if you're willing. He has some information that may be useful to the inquiry." He said this with an evenness that she

found transparent in the most agreeable way. "I believe you'll find the conversation worthwhile."

She looked at him for a moment. He had the expression of a man who has arranged something and is waiting to see if it lands.

"What was he painting this morning?" she asked.

"The house, the gates, the lake." A pause. "And you, in the lake. He is—" Fournier appeared to select this word with some care—"a very good painter."

She looked at the corridor wall for a moment. Then she said: "All right."

Fournier nodded with the satisfaction of a man who has done something small and useful and is not going to make more of it than that. Then he went away along the corridor without further comment, which she appreciated.

She stood at the boundary wall in the long evening light and watched John Trenholme walk away through the farmyard and felt, underneath the weight of the day, the particular sensation of someone who has been in a confined space for a very long time and has suddenly perceived that the walls have moved.

She had lived in this house for nine years. She had known its rhythms and its hierarchies and its unspoken arrangements. She had known the quality of the light in every season on the front of the building, and the particular sadness of the lake in November, and the way the cedar hill looked in early morning from the bedroom window. She had known all of this with the intimacy of someone whose world has been limited to it.

In the space of an afternoon she had discovered that her world had contained things she had not known about. That a man had been watching her swim and had captured what he saw with a precision and honesty that she would not have expected from anyone she already knew. That honesty, in a face she had not seen until today, was instantly distinguishable from the management of honesty that she had grown up surrounded by. That the difference between being seen and being looked at was a large and important difference, and that she had, for nine years, been primarily looked at.

Hilton had a plan. She knew this now, in the way that you know something you have been avoiding knowing, when the avoiding becomes too effortful to continue. She did not know the precise shape of the plan—she had refused to assemble it fully from the pieces she had—but she knew it was there and that it was specific and that it had been running in parallel with the apparent life of the household for longer than she had been willing to believe.

She knew, also, that in ten weeks she would have the means to step outside whatever the plan had arranged for her. That the money and the freedom it represented were almost within reach, and that the only question was whether the plan could be concluded before she reached them.

She looked at the orchard gate in the east boundary wall. The evening light caught it at an angle that made the ironwork look delicate, which it was not.

She turned and walked back towards the house across the long, gold-lit park, and the house received her, as it always

did, with the absolute impartiality of a building that has contained many lives and has never attached itself to any of them.

Tomorrow she would tell the detective everything she knew.

Tonight she would go upstairs to the room above the orchard and sit with a woman she had spent nine years managing rather than knowing, and discover that the managing had been neither necessary nor particularly useful, and that what the woman had most needed was the same thing Nell had most needed, which was someone who would simply sit with her and not require anything.

And she would fall asleep, finally, thinking about a painting she had not yet seen, in which she and the marble goddess stood beside a dark lake in the morning sun, and a man she had not yet met had seen exactly what was there.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE CLEARING

For a long time she had thought of it as weather.

That was the word that came nearest. Not illness, which was what the doctors called it, and not unhappiness, which was what the first years had been before the first years became this. Weather. A condition of the air she lived in, low and gray and without edges, through which the household moved at a great distance and their voices reached her softened, the way voices reach a person standing at the bottom of a deep and well-appointed well. She had lived inside the weather for so long that she had stopped, at some point she could not identify, believing there was anything outside it. The weather was simply the climate of being Mrs. Harlow. She had assumed it came with the name.

Her name, the other one, the one from before, was Margaret. People had called her Maggie until she was twenty-six. She thought about this sometimes, in the fog, with the mild detached interest of someone considering a photograph of a stranger who happens to resemble them: that there had been a person called Maggie, who laughed in a particular way and walked quickly and was always slightly late, and that this person had married a man named Mortimer Harlow and had become, by a process she had never been able to locate the precise mechanism of, Mrs. Harlow, who

did not laugh much and rarely went anywhere and was never late because she was never expected.

She had not been from his world. He had said so himself, more than once, and not unkindly—that was the thing about Mortimer that had taken her years to understand, that the unkindness was almost never in the words. The words were often generous. It was in the arrangement underneath the words, the quiet assumption that the world sorted itself into people who managed and people who were managed, and that she had been sorted, with her own provisional consent, into the second category on a morning she could no longer remember agreeing to.

She had been a music teacher when he met her. That detail surprised people, on the rare occasions it surfaced, because by the time anyone met her she gave no impression of having had a profession or indeed a life that required one. But she had taught piano to children in a town he had no reason ever to have visited, and she had been good at it, and she had been happy in the particular unspectacular way of a person who is doing work that suits them. She had learned the Mozart at nine and taught it at twenty-three to a boy named Daniel who could not be made to keep time, and she had played it at her own wedding because it was the only thing she could think of that belonged entirely to her, and she had not played it again for years afterward because somewhere in the early arrangement of being Mrs. Harlow it had been gently established that her playing was a charming accomplishment rather than a thing she did because she could not help doing it.

Robert had come two years into the marriage. She had wanted him with an intensity that frightened her and had loved him from the first hour with a completeness that left, she discovered, very little of her over for anything else, which was perhaps the beginning of the weather, though she had not understood it as such at the time. What she remembered of those months was not unhappiness. It was a kind of overflowing—too much feeling for the size of the life she was permitted, the feeling pressing at the walls of the days like water against a dam built slightly too small. She had not slept. She had wept at things that did not warrant it and failed to weep at things that did. And Mortimer, who did not tolerate disorder and who loved her in the way he loved his garden, as a thing that responded to good management, had arranged for her to see a doctor.

The doctor had been kind and the medication had worked. That was the part no one understood when they looked at her now and saw what they saw. It had worked. The pressing at the walls had eased; the water had gone still; she had been able to sleep, and to come down to dinner, and to be the wife the house required without the constant interior labor of holding herself together. She had been grateful. She had not understood, because there was no reason for a grateful and frightened young mother to understand, that there is a difference between a wall that holds back floodwater and a wall that has been built around a person while they were too tired to notice, and that the gratitude one feels in the first case is precisely the instrument by which one is delivered into the second.

The dependency, when it established itself, had been managed. Everything at The Towers was managed. Mortimer managed it, and Dr. Stern managed it, and in the latter years Mrs. Pritchard managed it, and the managing was competent and continuous and entirely without malice, and it had kept her, for the better part of two decades, in the weather, where she was no trouble to anyone and no use to anyone either, least of all herself.

She had not been a prisoner in any sense that would have stood up in a court. The doors were not locked. She could have walked out of any of them at any hour. This was the fact people would have offered, reasonably enough, if she had ever complained, which she had not, because the medication had taken from her, along with the floodwater, the specific energy that complaint requires. You cannot push against a wall you can no longer feel. You cannot leave through a door you can no longer be bothered to see. The genius of the arrangement, which no one had designed and everyone maintained, was that it required no force. It required only that she be kept slightly below the level at which a person decides things, and she had been kept there, gently, for years, by people who would have been genuinely distressed to be told they were doing her harm.

She had watched the house from inside the weather and she had seen a great deal. That was the thing they none of them knew—that not-thinking is not the same as not-seeing. She had seen the way Mortimer looked at the girl, Nell, with the proprietary fondness of a man who has confused guardianship with ownership,

and the way the girl had learned, very young, to give back exactly the surface he wanted while keeping everything that mattered somewhere he could not reach. She had seen Robert grow into a man who was kinder than he was clever and who had never once been required to find out what he was capable of, and she had grieved for that, privately, in the only register grief was available to her, which was a faint and chronic ache without object. And she had seen Hilton.

Of all the things she had seen from inside the weather, Hilton was the one she had looked at longest and understood least, and feared most.

She had no claim on him. He was Celine's, and Celine was the wound at the center of the house that no one named, the first wife disposed of and pensioned into silence and a flat in the south of France, and Hilton had arrived at The Towers as a grave and self-contained boy of twelve who had already learned, from watching his mother be subtracted from his father's life, that affection was a currency and that the people who survived were the ones who never let on how much of it they needed. She had tried, in the early years, before the weather closed over her, to be something to him. He had been unfailingly courteous and had given her nothing. By the time she understood that the courtesy was the wall and not the door, she no longer had the strength to go on knocking.

What she feared in him she could not, for most of her life at The Towers, have put into words, because words required a clarity she did not have. It was a quality. A patience. The way

he received a refusal—not with anger, never with anger, but with a small, almost imperceptible adjustment of his attention, a noting and a filing, as if he were a man who kept ledgers in a part of himself that did not appear on his face, and who understood that accounts could always, eventually, be settled. She had seen a dog disappear once. She had seen the particular evenness come over him when his father overruled him on some matter of the estate. And she had thought, in the dim way the weather permitted: *there is something in that one that does not forgive*. And then she had thought nothing further about it for a long time, because thinking further was not a thing the weather allowed.

The clearing began on a Thursday.

She would remember afterward that it had begun before she had any reason for it to begin—that some animal part of her, the part the medication had not entirely reached, had started to surface a day or two ahead of her conscious mind, the way the sea draws back from the shore before the thing that draws it back has shown itself. She had slept badly that week. She had found herself, on the Wednesday, standing at the window of her sitting room watching the cedars throw their long evening shadows across the park and feeling, for the first time in a great while, that she wanted to know what time it was—not in the vague way of the weather, where time was something that happened to other people, but precisely, urgently, the way a person wants to know a thing they intend to act on.

And then on the Thursday she had been on the gallery, in the shadow at the end of it, when the door of Mortimer's study opened and Hilton came out.

She had not meant to overhear. She had been on the gallery for no reason, drifting, as she drifted; and the voices had come through the door before it opened, low and even on both sides, and she had caught only fragments, but the fragments had been enough. *I have been making it worse by covering it over.* That had been Mortimer. *The girl deserves better than to have her future managed by people who can't be trusted with it.* And then, after a silence: *I should have seen, years ago, what kind of man you are.*

She had stood very still in the shadow. And Hilton had come out of the study and closed the door behind him with great care, and he had not seen her, and he had stood for a moment in the corridor with his hand still on the handle.

She had seen his face.

She had spent her life learning to read the weather in other people, because it was the only weather she had any power to predict, and she knew the difference between a man who has been wounded and a man who has been decided. What she saw in Hilton's face in the unguarded second before he recomposed it was not pain, though there was pain in it somewhere, far down. It was a closing. A door swinging shut on something, quietly, all the way, until it latched. She had seen, in that face, a decision being filed in the part of him that kept the ledgers, and she had understood—not in words, the words came later, but in the older

and surer language of the body—that something irreversible had just been entered into the account.

That evening she had asked Mrs. Pritchard to reduce the medication.

She remembered the conversation with the particular vividness of moments that mark a border. Mrs. Pritchard had been turning down the bed. Margaret had sat in the chair by the window with her hands in her lap and had said, in a voice that surprised her by being steady, that she would like to take less in the evenings. Mrs. Pritchard had stopped what she was doing and looked at her for a long moment—Mrs. Pritchard, who managed her with a competence that had always had genuine kindness underneath it—and had asked, carefully, whether she was sure. And Margaret had said: *I need to be able to think*. And she had heard, in her own voice, something she had not heard in years, which was the sound of a person stating a requirement rather than apologizing for a preference. *I have been not-thinking for too long*, she had said. *Something is wrong in this house, and I need to be able to think*.

Mrs. Pritchard had reduced the medication. She had also, Margaret understood later, made a private decision of her own that evening—to watch, and to be ready, and to keep her own counsel—and Margaret would be grateful to her for the rest of her life for the fact that she had not argued, had not soothed, had not gone to Dr. Stern. She had simply, for the first time in seven years, done what Margaret asked instead of what was good for her.

The clearing, when it came, was not gentle. The weather had been an anesthetic, and coming up out of it was like coming up out of cold water into air that was somehow colder—every edge of the world too sharp, every sound too near, the days arriving with a brightness that hurt. She had not understood, until the fog began to lift, how much it had been holding down. The grief came first, years of it, undischarged, for Robert and for the boy Hilton had been and for the music teacher named Maggie who had walked quickly and been always slightly late. And then, under the grief, sharpening as the days passed, came the thing she had been afraid to let herself know.

Because she had seen Hilton go out.

Monday morning she had been awake—awake in the new, raw, undrugged way—at a little after five, and she had gone along the back corridor for no reason except that she could not lie still, and the door at the top of the staff staircase had been open, and she had seen him cross the courtyard below in dark clothing, carrying something, and go out through the orchard gate in the east wall. She had stood at the corridor window and watched the gate for thirty-five minutes until he came back. Tuesday it had happened again, a little earlier. And she had stood at the window both times and felt the clear, cold air of her returning mind assembling the pieces into a shape she would not let herself look at directly, the way one will not look directly at the sun.

She told herself things. She was good at telling herself things; she had been doing it for twenty years. She told herself it was exercise, that he could not sleep, that a man had a right

to walk in his own grounds before dawn. She told herself she was newly clear and that newly clear people see significance everywhere because they are not used to seeing at all. She told herself that the gate led to the orchard and the orchard to the footpath and that there were people who walked the footpath at five in the morning, though she had lived at The Towers for twenty-three years and had never known one.

And underneath the telling, in the clear cold place, she knew.

She knew the orchard gate gave on to the north path and the north path led to the Quarry Wood. She knew the rock above the quarry commanded the front of the house—she had stood up there herself, years ago, in a different life, with a younger Robert who had wanted to show her how far you could see. She knew her husband stood on the front landing every fine morning to light his cigar, because she had watched him do it from her window for twenty-three years, the one fixed point in the architecture of his days. She knew that Mortimer had decided to stop protecting Hilton from something, and she knew the face Hilton had made in the corridor, and she knew—in the body, in the cold clear place the medication no longer reached—what was being prepared in the dark mornings.

She did not go downstairs and stand in the hall. She thought about it. She thought, on the Tuesday night, that if she were simply present, simply visible, an obstacle of flesh between the decision and its object, perhaps the decision could not complete itself. But she did not go down. She was afraid of him—she could

admit that now, in the clarity, where before there had been only the dull weather of a fear too diffuse to name—and she had been afraid of him for a long time, and twenty years of being kept below the level at which a person acts does not reverse itself in three nights, however clear the air becomes.

So she played the piano.

She had begun playing again that week, for the first time in years—the medication reduced, the hours of darkness unbearable to sit through in silence—and she played because the clarity had to go somewhere and there was nowhere else for it to go. She played slow things, suspended things, in minor keys, late at night and early in the morning, the music feeling its way around the shape of what she knew and could not say. The household heard it and thought she was unwell. She was not unwell. She was, for the first time in two decades, entirely and unbearably present, and the piano was the only language she had left that did not require her to accuse her stepson of a thing she could not prove and could not stop and could not, even now, fully let herself believe.

Wednesday morning she heard him on the staircase at a little after five and she got up and went to the morning room, because the window there looked towards the east boundary wall and she could see the gate.

He had left it open behind him. He had fastened it both other mornings; this morning he left it standing. She had not known what that meant, exactly, only that it was different, and that the difference frightened her more than the sameness had—as

if some final fastidiousness had been abandoned, some last pretense that the morning would have a return journey worth concealing.

She stood at the window for twenty minutes. She did not go down. She would carry that—the not going down—for the rest of her life, and she had decided, by the time she gave her account to the small dark detective with the careful eyes, that she would not pretend otherwise, to him or to herself; that whatever else she did with the wreckage of that morning, she would not soften the one fact that mattered most to her, which was that she had known, and had stood at a window, and had let it happen.

At nine twenty-five she went back upstairs. At nine-thirty she heard the shot, and she did not for one instant wonder what it was. She sat down on the edge of her bed and found that she could not move, and she stayed there, upright, her hands in her lap, while below her the house broke into the sounds of its catastrophe, and she understood that the decision she had seen filed in Hilton's face on the Thursday had now been settled in full, and that her husband, who had loved her in the way a man loves a well-kept garden and had managed her into a weather she had only just begun to climb out of, was dead at the foot of his own front steps in the morning sun.

She had loved him. That was the thing she would not be able to explain to anyone, and did not try. He had reduced her to almost nothing and she had loved him anyway, in the helpless, undignified, lifelong way one loves the person one has given one's life to, and his death tore something out of her that the

weather had been keeping numb, and she sat on the edge of the bed and let it tear, and when it had finished tearing she found, in the cold clear place, that she had become, finally and entirely, Margaret again.

And Margaret had a son.

That was the whole of it, in the end. Not justice, which was a word for other people, and not even the truth, which she had spent twenty years being protected from and protecting others with. It was simpler and more absolute than either. They were going to suspect Robert—she had understood that within the hour, had seen the shape of it forming, the angry words on the Saturday, the missing rifle, the convenient absence—and Robert had not done it, and she knew who had, and there was no power on earth that would make her keep silent and let one son hang for what the other had done.

She had spent twenty years unable to decide anything. She discovered, sitting on the edge of the bed in the ruined morning, that she had one decision left in her after all, and that it was the only one that had ever really mattered, and that it had been waiting all this time, quite patiently, under the weather, for the day she would be clear enough to make it.

She rang for Mrs. Pritchard. When Mrs. Pritchard came, Margaret asked her to send word, privately and without Hilton's knowledge, to the detectives.

Then she sat down at the piano, and she played the Mozart—the sonatina she had learned at nine and taught at twenty-three and played at her own wedding because it was the only thing that

had ever belonged entirely to her—all the way through, for the first time in more years than she could count, in a clear, deliberate, major key, the certainty in it like something walking out of a fog into the light.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEREIN AN ARTIST BECOMES A MAN OF ACTION

Fournier's visit left Trenholme in a state that was not, strictly speaking, unhappy, but was certainly not the uncomplicated contentment of the morning. He had risen before five o'clock and painted three pictures. One of those pictures was the best thing he had ever done. A man had been shot dead four hundred yards from where he sat. He was, apparently, a witness. He was, somewhat less apparently, about to be introduced to the subject of his best picture against her will by a detective who had the charm and diplomatic instincts of a benevolent fox.

He went back upstairs and looked at the painting for some time. In the studio's afternoon light it was still good—perhaps better than he had allowed himself to believe, which was not a thought he was accustomed to having about his own work. The quality of the unguarded subject, the contrast of wet skin and marble, the dark water below carrying both reflections—it was the sort of thing that happened once, if it happened at all.

Eliza appeared in the doorway with a pot of tea and the expression of someone who has decided that practical kindness is the best response to metaphysical difficulty.

"I thought you might want something," she said. "You've not eaten since luncheon."

"Eliza, you are, in all the ways that actually matter, a saint."

"Don't go saying that to Mr. Fournier or he'll think I can't keep my head," she said, pouring. "He's a funny one, that man. Small and sharp as a little ferret. But he spoke very handsome about the painting."

"So he said."

"He also said you'd be a witness at the inquest." She set the cup beside him with the decisiveness of someone delivering a diagnosis. "Are you in trouble?"

"No," said Trenholme. "I was in the wrong place at the right time, which is different." He picked up the tea. "Eliza—the girl in this painting. You said her name was Miss Voss."

"Mr. Harlow's ward. She's lived up at the house since she was a child. Very well thought of in the village." A pause. "She's had a hard day of it. Losing her guardian and then—" Eliza's expression suggested she had stopped herself saying something.

"Then what?"

"Well. Mr. Robert came back about four o'clock, and apparently he had some conversation with her in the garden that she didn't take to at all kindly. According to Jade's cousin, who does evenings up there, Miss Voss came in looking like she'd been asked something quite astonishing and was not particularly charmed by the question."

Trenholme looked at the painting and said nothing.

"Not that it's anyone's business," added Eliza, in the tone of someone who considers it entirely their business. She collected herself and went out.

Trenholme drank the tea and made a decision.

The decision had been forming since Fournier left, but he had been refusing to examine it directly in the way that one refuses to look directly at the sun. The formal arrangement—the lake, nine-fifteen tomorrow morning, the detective present, the painting produced as evidence, Miss Voss confronted with the fact of being observed—was perfectly manageable from a legal and professional standpoint. It was, from every other standpoint, intolerable. He was not going to meet Nell Voss for the first time as a man being paraded before a witness. He was going to do it now, this afternoon, on his own terms, and give her the chance to be as angry with him as she liked before the official version of events required her to be composed about it.

He put the tea down, changed his jacket, and went out.

The village was still buzzing with the day's events in the way of places where remarkable things rarely happen and are therefore discussed with extraordinary thoroughness when they do. He heard Harlow's name several times as he passed the pub, and Nell Voss's once, spoken with the particular warmth that attaches to someone who is universally liked in a place and is known to be having a difficult time of it.

He walked the half-mile to the Easton lodge gate and presented himself.

Mrs. Bates, the keeper's wife, looked at him through the iron gate with the caution of a woman who has been told to admit no one and is considering whether this particular person qualifies as no one.

The constable beside her was more directly categorical. "The estate is closed to visitors, sir."

"I understand," said Trenholme. "My name is John Trenholme. I was in the park this morning—Mr. Farrow can confirm that, and Mr. Fournier of Scotland Yard. I'm not here to visit the house. I'd be very grateful if you could telephone up to Miss Voss and tell her I'm here. She'll know the name."

"You're acquainted with Miss Voss, sir?" said Mrs. Bates, who had the look of someone updating a hypothesis.

"Not yet. But I've reason to think she'd want to know I'm here." He met her gaze with the frank, uncalculated directness that had been making people trust him since he was eight years old. "I won't take ten minutes of her time."

Mrs. Bates looked at the constable. The constable looked at his phone. A brief consultation followed, conducted in an undertone that suggested each was leaving the decision to the other. Then Mrs. Bates went inside and Trenholme heard, distantly, the murmur of a call.

She came back with the expression of a woman mildly surprised by the answer she'd received.

"Miss Voss says she'll come out to meet you, sir. If you walk up the avenue you'll find her."

He went in and walked up the avenue in the long June evening light, with the particular awareness of a man walking towards something he has decided to do and has not yet decided how to do. The park around him was quiet—the rooks had long since settled, the day's unusual population of vehicles and officials had gone, and the place had returned to its normal pastoral self with the impassive speed of landscapes that have been briefly dramatic and returned to what they were.

He saw her before she saw him. She came down the avenue from the direction of the house with the quick, purposeful stride he recognized from the morning—different clothes, dark ones now, appropriate to the day—and the same quality of complete self-possession that had struck him when she crossed the lawn towards the lake. She was looking directly ahead, which meant she was preparing herself for this meeting, which meant she was more uncertain about it than she would show.

He stopped walking and waited, which he thought was the right thing to do.

She stopped three feet in front of him and looked at him with eyes that were blue and direct and not, as yet, warm.

"Mr. Trenholme," she said.

"Miss Voss." He took a breath. "I came today rather than waiting until tomorrow because I couldn't face the alternative. The alternative being—meeting you for the first time in front of a detective, with the painting produced as evidence of something that—" He stopped. "I owe you an apology, and I wanted to give it to you without an audience."

She looked at him steadily for a moment. "I've been told, by Mr. Fournier, that you were in the park legitimately, that you were concealed by the undergrowth and not by any deliberate intent, and that the painting exists."

"All of that is true."

"He also told me it was very good."

"That is also true, though it's not something I'm especially proud of saying."

The faintest alteration of expression—not quite a smile, but something that acknowledged the absurdity of the situation without dismissing it.

"Walk with me," she said. "I'd rather not stand in the avenue."

They turned off the main drive onto a grass path that led towards the ornamental garden. In the distance, just visible through the yew hedges, the lake was catching the low evening light. They walked for a moment without speaking, in the manner of two people deciding simultaneously that the silence needed to be broken and each waiting for the other to do it.

Nell spoke first.

"I already knew someone was there," she said. "Or suspected it. Not you specifically—just a presence, somewhere in the cedars above the lake. I felt it, the way one sometimes does when one is being watched. But I'd felt it before on other mornings and it was usually just Bates checking the path, so I didn't—" She paused. "I chose not to act on it. Which is perhaps not the same as not knowing."

Trenholme said nothing, and waited.

"I want to ask you something," she said. She was looking at the path ahead. "While you were there—above the lake, painting—what else did you see? Not the obvious things, not the shot and the birds and so on. What did you see that didn't seem significant at the time?"

He considered her carefully. She was not asking out of curiosity. She was asking with the specific, directed attention of someone who has a question of their own and is triangulating.

"Several things," he said. "I've told the police most of them. There was a car behind the yew hedge by the east wing that was there when I arrived and hadn't moved when I left. A first-floor window opened after the shot—someone behind the glass, gesturing or looking. And while you were swimming—" he hesitated—"you looked towards the house several times. Checking something."

She was quiet for a long moment.

"The east boundary wall," she said finally. "That's what I was checking. Not the house, exactly—the gate in the east wall, at the corner of the orchard. You can just see it from the lake if you're in the right position."

"You were watching for someone coming through it."

"Or coming back through it. I don't know which." She stopped walking and turned to face him, and her expression was the specific expression of a person who has been carrying something that has become unbearable and is deciding whether to set it down. "I've seen Hilton use that gate. Twice in the last week. Early in the morning, before anyone else was up. I don't know

where he went. I didn't follow. I told myself it was none of my business."

Trenholme looked at her. "Have you told the police this?"

"Not yet. I was going to. Mr. Fournier asked me to come to the lake tomorrow morning, and I intended to tell him then." She looked at her hands briefly. "I've been rather afraid of getting it wrong—of saying something that seems damning and turns out to be nothing, or saying something damning that turns out to be exactly what it seems. Do you understand that?"

"Completely."

"My guardian was killed this morning. Robert is going to be suspected—he's already being suspected, I know it, everyone in this house knows it. And Hilton is the one organizing everything, managing everything, telling everyone what the facts are." Her voice was very even. "He's very good at that. He's always been very good at that."

"Tell Fournier tomorrow," said Trenholme. "Tell him exactly what you've told me. He'll know what to do with it."

"You know him well enough to say that?"

"I met him this afternoon for the first time. But yes." He was surprised to find how certain he was of it. "Yes, he'll know what to do."

They resumed walking, in a different kind of silence—the quieter kind that comes after something has been said that needed saying.

The garden path curved around the end of the yew hedge and opened onto a view of the lake below, still and dark in the

evening light, the marble Venus carrying her reflection in the water with complete indifference to the day's events. Trenholme looked at it and thought about the morning, which seemed to belong to a different order of time.

"May I see it?" said Nell. "The painting."

"I didn't bring it."

"I know. I'm asking whether I may see it—tomorrow, perhaps. Before the official presentation."

"Of course." He looked at her. "You're not angry."

"I decided not to be. It would take more energy than today has left me." Something that was genuinely a smile this time, brief and private. "Also, Mr. Fournier said it was very fine, and he struck me as someone not given to unnecessary encouragement."

"He's not. He's a rigorously honest critic."

"Then I'd rather see it than wonder about it." She turned back towards the avenue. "Come back to the lodge and I'll ask Mr. Jackson at the farm to let you through his yard—it cuts ten minutes off the walk to the village."

They went back up through the garden and the avenue in the long evening light, talking in the easy, sidelong way of two people discovering that they agree about more things than they expected to, and that the agreement extends in directions they had not anticipated. He learned that she painted watercolors, and that she found the technique less honest than oils and suspected this was why she preferred it. She learned that he had studied at the Slade and considered the teaching there better than anything he'd found in Paris, which she disputed with more knowledge than

he'd expected. He learned that she had been planning foreign journeys for years on paper and had not yet made most of them. She learned that he found the English countryside consistently underrated as a subject, which made her laugh in a way that suggested she had been saying the same thing to people who didn't listen.

They were at the lodge gate when Brodie's car came up the drive.

It slowed as it reached them and Trenholme felt, before he fully saw it, the quality of attention directed at them through the rear passenger window. Then the window came down and Hilton Harlow looked out.

He looked at Nell with an expression that was several things at once and contained all of them perfectly: concern, possessiveness, and beneath both of those something older and less manageable that was gone the instant he registered the presence of a witness.

"Nell," he said. "You should be inside. It's been a difficult day."

"I needed some air," she said. Her voice was entirely level.

"Of course." His eyes moved to Trenholme with the particular quality of attention that is not quite a challenge and not quite an inquiry but carries elements of both. "Mr. Trenholme."

"Mr. Harlow. I'm sorry for your loss."

The window went up. The car moved on.

Nell watched it go with an expression that she did not trouble to arrange. Then she looked at Trenholme.

"Nine-fifteen tomorrow," she said. "By the lake." She went in through the gate and the constable latched it behind her.

Trenholme stood for a moment in the lane. The car had disappeared around the curve of the drive. The sound of its engine had faded. The evening was very still.

He walked back to the village by way of Mr. Jackson's farmyard, thinking about the expression on Hilton Harlow's face—the thing beneath the concern and the possession, the thing that was gone before it could be named. He had been painting faces seriously for six years, which had given him a certain fluency in reading what faces did not intend to show. What he had seen in Hilton Harlow's face in the moment before its owner collected himself was not grief, and not anxiety, and not any of the emotions appropriate to a man whose father had been murdered that morning.

It was the expression of a man who has found something where he thought he had left nothing.

He let himself into the White Horse. From the kitchen came the sound of Eliza in full strategic deployment, the clatter of pans, the confident aroma of something roasting that had not been there an hour ago. He went upstairs and looked at the painting again in the last of the daylight.

He was still looking at it when his phone buzzed with a message from a number he didn't recognize. It read: *Mr Trenholme. Tomorrow morning, please also tell Mr Fournier what Miss Voss says to you about the east boundary gate. She may find it easier to tell you first.—F.*

He looked at the message for a moment. Then he went to the window and looked out at the village in the evening, and the fields beyond it, and the dark line of the Quarry Wood against the fading sky.

"Well," he said, to no one in particular.

He went down to dinner.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE QUARRY

The forensic team came up through the Quarry Wood at first light, which in the second week of June meant a little before five, and they came the way such teams always come—quietly, in white, carrying more equipment than seemed possible for the recovery of a few square metres of ground, and with the unhurried collective competence of people for whom another person's worst morning is simply Tuesday's work, done well.

Winter and Fournier met them at the edge of the wood. Winter had slept four hours and looked it; Fournier appeared, as he generally did at unreasonable hours, to have been awake for some time on purpose and to be enjoying it. Farrow was already there, having spent the night in the wood as instructed, and had the particular alertness of a man who has guarded something through the dark and is glad to be handing it to people qualified to take it.

The crime-scene manager was a spare, deliberate woman named Sandra Keele, who had run scenes across three counties for nineteen years and had long since worn away whatever part of herself might once have found any of it dramatic. She shook hands without warmth or coldness, listened to Fournier's account of the ground with her head slightly tilted, and then declined, courteously, to be interested in any of his conclusions.

"You'll forgive me," she said. "I find it's better if I don't know what you think I'm going to find. I'd rather find what's there." She looked up the slope towards the rock, invisible behind the trees. "Tell me only where I'm not to walk and why, and let me give you the rest in my own time."

"That," said Fournier, with evident pleasure, "is exactly how I'd want it done. The path is a single approach line—the brambles to the left of it have threads I'd like recovered before anyone passes. The rock at the top. The flooded section of the quarry below the rock, on the far side. And I'd ask you to look, when you reach the rock, at whether one person could have done all of this, or whether you'd want two."

"I won't tell you how many people," said Keele. "I'll tell you what the marks say. You can do the arithmetic." And she went to brief her team.

Winter watched her go. "I like her," he said.

"Everyone does," said Fournier. "She is what I would be if I had no imagination and considerably better discipline."

They worked the path first, because the path had to be crossed to reach everything else and Keele would not have it contaminated. Two examiners moved up it on stepping plates, photographing as they went, a third following with the evidence log, and the wood that had been a place of birdsong and leaf-mould became, for an hour, a slow procession of small deliberate acts: a numbered marker set beside a mark; a scale laid; a photograph; the marker moved on.

The threads were where Farrow had said they would be. Keele crouched at the bramble eight inches off the ground and looked at them for a long time before she touched them, and then lifted them with the care of a woman handling something that would not survive being handled twice—short, coarse, pale fibres, caught low where a person moving up the path would have brushed the bramble with the side of a leg or an ankle.

"Natural fibre," she said. "Coarse weave. I'll not say sacking until the lab says sacking. But I'll say it isn't clothing." She bagged it, sealed it, signed the seal. "Whoever left this was carrying something low, or wearing something low, at ankle height, on the way up this path. Not on the way down—the fibres are angled with the direction of travel towards the rock." She glanced at Fournier, the first thing she had volunteered. "You'll have a use for that."

"I will," said Fournier, and did not say what it was.

The prints came next, the strip of moist earth beside the path where the two sets lay, and here Keele spent the better part of an hour and would not be hurried. She photographed them in raking light, a low lamp set almost flat to the ground so that every ridge and depression threw a long shadow and the soil gave up detail the eye alone would have missed. Then she mixed the casting compound in a flexible bowl, working it with the unhurried attention of a woman icing a difficult cake, and poured it, and waited, and while it set she sat back on her heels and looked at the two sets of marks side by side and said the only interpretive thing she would say all morning.

"These two were made differently," she said. "Not by different feet, necessarily. Differently. This set—" the older, the clearer—"someone walked through this on purpose. Look at the spacing and the depth. Even pressure, full sole, no hurry. A person placing their feet where they meant to place them, in soft ground, leaving a good clean print." She moved her hand to the second set, the shallower, the wider. "This set, the weight's wrong. It's spread. No defined heel, no toe-off. Either a very strange gait or a foot that wasn't a foot—wrapped, padded, the impression distributed across something soft." She looked up. "The first set wants to be seen. The second set wants not to exist. That's all I'll say. The casts will say the rest."

Winter and Fournier exchanged a glance and said nothing, because there was nothing to add to it, and because Keele had just described, in the language of pure observation and without ever leaving it, the entire shape of what Hilton Harlow had done in this wood: one set of prints laid down deliberately in his brother's boots to be discovered, and one set obscured because it was his own.

The rock at the top was bare and pale in the strengthening light, and the view from it was the same view it had offered every morning of the week and for two hundred years before—the four hundred yards of open park, the cedars on the hill, the broad mosaic landing at the front of the house where a man had stood to light his cigar.

Keele worked the rock surface for traces and found little, which she had expected. "Rock doesn't hold much," she said. "Rain'll have had most of it, and there's been no rain since, which is the only luck we've had." She found, at the north edge, where the surface dropped away towards the quarry, a scuff in the lichen and a small disturbance in the moss, fresh enough to be recent and consistent with someone having gone down that side rather than the way they came up. She photographed it. She did not interpret it.

Fournier stood at the north edge and looked down. The quarry fell away below in a face of weathered stone, and at its foot lay the flooded section—a still, dark, roughly oval pool, the colour of strong tea, fed by groundwater and ringed by the pale debris of a working that had been abandoned long before any of them were born. The far side of it, the north side, lay almost directly beneath the boundary wall and the orchard gate.

"There," said Fournier quietly.

The underwater search team arrived at seven. They were two men and a woman from the county's specialist unit, and they approached the dark pool with the same lack of drama Keele's people had brought to the path, wading the shallows in dry-suits, working a search pattern out from the bank with their hands and a graduated pole because the water was too peaty for sight to be any use. It took them forty minutes. Winter and Fournier and Farrow stood on the bank and watched, and the wood made its ordinary morning sounds around them, indifferent as ever, and then the woman in the water stopped, and stood very still for a

moment with her arm submerged to the shoulder, and said, in the flat carrying voice of a person reporting rather than exclaiming:

"I have something. Long object. Wrapped."

They brought it up slowly, supported along its length, water sheeting off it, and laid it on a plastic sheet on the bank—a long shape in sodden, blackened sacking, bound at intervals with twine, the sacking grown heavy and dark in the water but unmistakable for what it wrapped. Keele unwrapped it on the bank with the unhurried care she brought to everything, peeling the wet hessian back fold by fold, and there it was: a bolt-action rifle, a heavy thing, the metal already filming with the first surface rust of a day's immersion, the stock dark with water.

"A .450," said Bates, who had come up quietly and was looking at it from the edge of the group with the particular grief of a man recognising an object. "That's Mr. Robert's. I'd know it anywhere. He's had it since he was eighteen."

"Don't touch it," said Keele, not unkindly, and Bates put his hands behind his back like a schoolboy and kept looking at it.

"It's been in the water a day," said Keele. "I'll be honest with you, the bolt may give us something and the surfaces almost certainly won't. Water is the enemy of nearly everything I do." She looked at the wrapping rather than the weapon, which Fournier noticed and understood. "But the sacking I can work with. And the twine. And the angle it went in."

"The angle," said Winter.

Keele looked at the pool, and at the rock above it, and at the bank where the object had lain. "It entered from this side. The north side. You don't throw a thing like this any distance—it's heavy and it's awkward and wrapped it's more awkward still. It went in from close to, from above, from the north bank, which is—" she did not finish the sentence, because finishing it was interpretation and interpretation was Fournier's department, but she tilted her head a degree towards the slope above the north bank, where the ground rose to the boundary wall and the orchard gate and, beyond it, the courtyard and the staff staircase and the first-floor study of a man who had been at his desk by the time his father was found.

Fournier looked at the gate, just visible through the trees, and then at the rifle on its sheet of plastic, and then at the long dark pool that had held it for a day with the same indifference the wood brought to everything.

"Thank you, Ms. Keele," he said. "You've given me a great deal and told me nothing, which is precisely what I needed."

"That's the job," said Keele, and went back to her sacking.

Winter and Fournier walked down through the wood a little after eight, leaving the team to its slow completion, and stood for a moment at the edge of the trees where the park opened out.

"He carried it up the path in the sacking," said Winter, not as a question. "Fired from the north face. Threw it into the pool on his way out, from the bank below the rock, because the pool was on his line back to the gate and he wasn't going to walk a

hundred yards out of his way carrying it. Then through the gate, across the courtyard, up the stairs."

"Yes."

"It's clean, Charles. Keele's findings, the angle, the threads, the prints. It's all consistent and none of it requires us to have imagined anything."

"It's clean," Fournier agreed. He was looking back up the slope, where the white figures moved among the trees with their slow deliberate care. "And it is the part that will matter least, in the end. A good defence will tell the jury that consistent is not the same as conclusive, and they will be right. The boots, the gate, the sacking, the rifle—every piece of it can be explained away on its own. It is all opportunity, and opportunity is a circle of suspects, not a man."

"You don't think it's enough."

"I think it is the arch without the keystone." Fournier turned and began to walk down towards the house, where the morning was arriving and the household was beginning, against everything, to make its tea. "Everything we have found this morning makes the thing possible. Somewhere I have not yet looked is the one fact that makes it *his*. I had thought it would be a fingerprint, or a witness, or a confession." He glanced at Winter. "It may yet be none of those. It may be something already written down by a man who didn't know what he was writing."

Winter looked at him.

"Farrow's notebook," said Fournier, almost to himself, and did not explain, because he had not yet looked at it again, and would not say a thing aloud until he had.

They walked down to the house in the early light, and behind them the wood gave up its evidence into bags and casts and logged photographs, patiently, all morning, in the care of a woman who dealt only in what was there.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FOURNIER STATES SOME FACTS AND CERTAIN FANCIES

The lake was still in the early morning in the way of water that has not yet been disturbed by the day, its surface carrying the pale sky and the dark cedars with equal patience. The cascade fell into it from the east, setting the reflection of the Venus trembling as it had trembled the morning before, and the morning before that, and for however many years of mornings had passed since the marble goddess was placed on her promontory and the lake filled up around her.

Trenholme arrived first, which was deliberate. He set up his easel at the cedar line and was in the act of uncovering the painting when he heard footsteps on the path below—light, quick, purposeful—and Nell Voss came around the end of the yew hedge with the swimming cap in her hand and the particular expression of someone who has decided that the best way to handle an unusual situation is to treat it as ordinary.

She stopped when she saw the canvas.

He had turned it to face her, and she looked at it for some time without speaking. The morning light was different from the afternoon's—cooler, more direct—and it hit the oils at an angle that brought out the contrast he had been most intent on: the living figure and the cold marble, the dark water holding both.

"Well," she said finally.

"Yes," he said.

"It is very good." She said it without any apparent wish to soften the admission. "And I understand now what you meant yesterday about the artistic sense as a separate state of consciousness. You weren't watching me. You were watching something that happened to include me."

"That is—yes. That is exactly right."

She looked at it for another moment. "It will have to be kept covered, won't it. Until all this is over."

"Fournier was clear about that."

"And after?"

"After," said Trenholme, "is a question I haven't answered yet."

She considered this for a moment and seemed to find it acceptable. She sat down on the stone landing beside the statue—where she had stood in the painting, though she was unaware of the echo—and looked out over the water. Trenholme covered the canvas and sat down a few feet away. They waited for Fournier in the comfortable silence of people who have already established that they can talk and have chosen, for the moment, not to.

Fournier appeared from the direction of the house at nine-twenty, which was five minutes late for someone who had said nine-fifteen, and was therefore almost certainly deliberate. He came down the slope with the easy, bouncing stride of a man in good spirits and excellent health, and he carried, Trenholme noticed, a thermos of coffee, three cups, and the faint but

perceptible air of someone who has already done several important things before breakfast.

"Good morning," he said, producing cups from his jacket pockets with an air of domestic satisfaction. "The Forensics team has been in the Quarry Wood since six o'clock. They've cast the footprints and photographed the rock. They've also found what I believe are threads from a potato sack caught on the brambles at ankle height, eight inches from the ground, on the quarry path." He poured. "They found the gate in the east boundary wall propped open with a stone, which is consistent with someone in a hurry on the way back. And they found the rifle."

A silence.

"Where?" said Trenholme.

"At the bottom of the old quarry, wrapped in sacking, under three feet of water in the flooded section. Someone had thrown it in from the path above." Fournier handed Nell a cup. "It's been sent to the lab. The water won't have helped, but the bolt mechanism may still yield something."

He sat down on a fallen log with the ease of someone who has sat on worse, and looked at Nell.

"Miss Voss. Trenholme tells me you have something to tell me about the east boundary gate."

She told him. The same account she had given Trenholme the previous evening—the two early mornings the previous week, Hilton crossing the courtyard before five o'clock in dark clothing, the gate, the thirty-five and forty-minute absences, the return. She spoke clearly and without hesitation, in the manner of someone

who has been rehearsing not the words but the decision to say them, and has made the decision.

Fournier listened without interrupting. When she had finished he looked at her for a moment.

"You said you were watching the gate while you were swimming."

"Yes. I'd seen him go out on Tuesday morning, from my window. That was the second time. I was—I was trying to decide what it meant. Whether it was my business. While I was swimming I was thinking about it, and the gate is just visible from the water if you're in the right position. I was checking whether it was latched."

"Was it?"

"On Tuesday it was. On Wednesday—" she paused—"on Wednesday I was inside before nine-thirty. I didn't check it on Wednesday morning."

"You didn't need to," said Fournier gently. "We know it was unlatched." He looked at her with the particular attention he gave to things he considered important. "Miss Voss, I want to ask you something directly, and I want you to take your time."

"Yes."

"In the time you've lived in this house—the past two years, let's say—have you been afraid of Hilton Harlow?"

The question sat in the morning air for a moment.

"Not afraid exactly," she said carefully. "Uncomfortable. There is a quality about him when he doesn't get what he expects—a quality of patience. As if he is noting something and filing it

away for later. I've always found that quality more unsettling than anger."

"Did he make his expectations regarding you clear?"

She looked at the water. "He never said anything directly. He's not a person who says things directly. But yes. I understood what he considered the most suitable outcome for my guardianship. For some time I assumed my guardian shared that view, and I was prepared to deal with it when I turned twenty-one and had the means to deal with it. More recently—" she paused—"I had the impression that my guardian's views had changed. He seemed to be putting distance between himself and that expectation. Hilton noticed. And the quality I described became more present."

Fournier nodded. He stood, finished his coffee, and looked at the lake for a moment with the expression of someone mentally completing a document.

"Thank you," he said. "Both of you." He looked at Trenholme. "I'll need your formal statement this afternoon, if you can come to the house. And the painting will need to stay where it is for the moment."

"I understand."

"Good." He glanced at Nell again, briefly. "The next few days will be difficult. There are things that need to happen that will be unpleasant to witness. I can't spare you from that, but I can tell you that it will be quick."

She received this with the steadiness she had shown throughout. "Thank you for that."

He went back up the slope towards the house. Below him, by the lake, Trenholme and Nell Voss sat in the morning quiet, and the Venus stood in her reflection on the dark water, and neither of them said anything for some time.

Fournier found Robert Harlow in the kitchen, eating toast with the subdued concentration of a man making up for yesterday's missed meals. He looked up when Fournier came in, and something shifted in his expression—the recognition of someone who knows a reckoning is due and has decided to meet it without flinching.

"Mr. Harlow. Walk with me, would you?"

They went out through the courtyard and around the east wing, and Fournier led the way without explanation towards the Quarry Wood. Robert followed in silence, glancing once at the east boundary gate as they passed it—the stone still propping it open, the blue-and-white tape of the forensics team visible on the gate post—and then looking away.

They entered the wood by the main path. Fournier slowed as they approached the strip of moist earth where the footprints lay.

"Do you see these marks?" he said.

Robert looked at them. He looked at them for long enough that Fournier could see the calculation happening—trying to read what they meant, what he was being shown, what the right response was.

"Those are mine," he said slowly. "Those older ones. Size and pattern. I've had these boots six years."

"Someone wearing your boots made those marks," said Fournier, "three or four days before the murder. Monday or Tuesday of this week. Do you know who might have had access to your boots?"

Robert stared at him.

"They're in my room," he said. "In the cupboard. Anyone in the house could—" He stopped. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that someone went to considerable trouble to ensure that the most recent prints in this wood would match your boot size. And that the person who actually came here this morning to fire the shot wore something over their footwear to avoid leaving any identifying impression." Fournier met his gaze levelly. "The rifle has been found, Mr. Harlow. At the bottom of the quarry."

Robert sat down on a log with the abruptness of someone whose legs have made a unilateral decision.

"My rifle," he said.

"Your rifle."

"And the prints—" He looked at the ground. "Someone used my boots. To come here." He was working through it in the methodical, slightly slow way of a man who is not stupid but needs to follow the sequence. "Before the murder."

"Yes."

"To make it look as if—"

"Yes."

Robert was quiet for a long time. In the branches above them a pair of wood pigeons conducted a murmuring conversation. The

Forensics team had gone from this section; the wood was very still.

"Who?" he said. Not with heat—with a flatness that was worse than heat.

"That is what I am establishing. And I need your help to do it. Everything that happened last Saturday morning—the argument with your father, where you went, what you did in London, the woman, all of it. In full, this afternoon. Nothing held back. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"And one more thing." Fournier's voice was quiet but very direct. "You left this estate yesterday without permission and against the express request of a senior police officer. That will need to be addressed. The most useful thing you can do today is demonstrate, by your conduct, that your instinct is to cooperate rather than to run. We're not your enemies, Mr. Harlow. The person who made those boot prints is your enemy. Don't make our work harder."

Robert looked at him for a moment with the direct, unguarded expression that Trenholme would have recognized from the previous evening. Then he nodded once, stood, and walked back towards the house with the particular set of a man who has just understood something and is adjusting his posture accordingly.

Fournier watched him go. He spent another moment looking at the footprints, then walked the remaining distance to the rock.

Farrow was there. He had been there since before dawn, and he was eating a sandwich with the undemonstrative serenity of a

man who has been in exactly the right place at exactly the right time and has the notebook entries to prove it. He stood when Fournier approached.

"The threads on the brambles," said Fournier. "Forensics took them?"

"Tagged and bagged, sir, at six forty this morning. The examiner said the material was consistent with hessian-potato sacking."

"Good." Fournier climbed the rock and stood at the top, looking across the four hundred yards of open park to the front of The Towers, where the broad mosaic landing was clearly visible in the morning sun. He stayed there for a full minute, doing nothing that was observable. Then he came down.

"Farrow. I want to go over your notes from yesterday morning. Specifically what Mr. Hilton Harlow said to you when you first arrived."

Farrow opened his notebook without expression and found the page.

"I arrived at the front of the house at ten-twelve," he said. "Mr. Hilton Harlow was on the steps. He told me his father had been shot and asked me to go with Mr. Bates to investigate the wood. I asked him to describe what he knew of the wound and he said—" Farrow read directly from the notes—"I don't know what's been done to him. A bullet that does that to a man—it must have nearly torn him to pieces."

Fournier looked at him.

"That's verbatim?"

"Yes, sir. I wrote it within ten minutes. I always get the words exact when I can."

"At ten-twelve."

"Yes."

"Dr. Stern arrived at ten-seventeen and examined the body at ten-twenty-five." Fournier stood very still for a moment. "The first medical examination of the wound took place thirteen minutes after Hilton Harlow described its effect to you."

Farrow looked at his notebook. Then he looked at Fournier. The understanding moved through his expression with the quiet certainty of a fact finding its level.

"He knew," said Farrow. "He knew what kind of bullet it was. Before the doctor came."

"He chose an expanding round specifically," said Fournier. "He knew what it would do. He had imagined it, in detail, in advance. What he couldn't imagine—what no one who commits a premeditated murder can ever fully imagine in advance—is the reality of the body afterward."

Farrow was very still.

"He broke down when he saw him," he said. "On the steps. I thought it was grief. I thought—" He stopped.

"It was grief," said Fournier. "Of a kind. And guilt, and horror, and the gap between the calculation and the reality. But the words came earlier, before he could collect himself. Before he could arrange what he knew and what he should appear to know." He paused. "Those words are your evidence, Farrow. Yours. You

wrote them within ten minutes and the notebook has the timestamp. That is what makes them what they are."

They stood on the rock above the Quarry Wood in the morning sun, and the house was clear before them, and the Hertfordshire countryside lay around them in its unhurried green, and Farrow looked at his notebook with the expression of a man who has been handed something he does not yet know what to do with but understands is valuable.

"Sir," he said.

"I'll need a formal witness statement from you this afternoon. Every word verbatim, timestamped, your signature." Fournier started down from the rock. "I'd also recommend you eat the other sandwich. Today is going to be long."

He found Winter in the dining room at eleven o'clock, with Sheldon beside him and the fund records spread across the table in the particular organized disorder of a proper financial investigation in progress. Winter looked up when Fournier came in, and the expression he wore was the one he reserved for things that were going better than expected.

"Farringdon," said Winter. "The solicitor in Gray's Inn. I spoke to him at nine o'clock. The new will was drawn up on Thursday afternoon, the day Mortimer confronted Hilton. It was not yet signed—the appointment to sign was Thursday of next week, as Mrs. Harlow said. Under the new will, the trust funds protecting Nell Voss's inheritance pass directly to her on her twenty-first birthday regardless of any subsequent events. Robert receives an equal share to Hilton. Hilton's share is reduced by

the amount already identified as having been diverted from client accounts."

"Which means the new will is worthless to Hilton," said Fournier. "Whereas the old one—"

"Under the old will, Hilton takes a majority share of the estate. Robert gets a third. The trust continues to be administered by the estate—meaning by Hilton, as sole surviving partner—until Nell's twenty-fifth birthday."

"Four more years of managing her money," said Fournier. "And by then the existing irregularities would either be unrecoverable or untraceable."

"The SFO inquiry," said Winter, "has been formally reactivated this morning, on my request. Patterson will cooperate fully. Adele Drummond's solicitor called at eight-thirty; she is prepared to provide a full account of her involvement with Meridian Trustees SA and Carver Advisory. Carver himself is in Brussels. Interpol have been notified." Winter leaned back. "The financial case is solid, Charles. The question is whether the criminal case will meet the standard for charge."

Fournier sat down and looked at the ceiling for a moment, which was how he organized his thoughts when they needed organizing.

"Let me tell you what we have," he said. "Not what we believe, not what we can demonstrate was likely. What we have, evidentially."

Winter looked at Sheldon, who produced a notebook.

"Opportunity," said Fournier. "The orchard gate, the staff staircase, the timing—four minutes from the rock to the study, confirmed by my own test. This is confirmed by the Forensics team's finding that the gate was used—there are tool marks consistent with a recently cut copy of the estate office key on the gate lock, which I expect will match the key blank found in Hilton's desk drawer this morning during the search of his rooms."

Winter looked up. "You searched his rooms?"

"At seven-thirty this morning. In his presence. With his formal consent, which he gave with impeccable grace." A pause. "He knew we were coming. He'd had the night to remove anything critical, and I think he did remove several things. But he couldn't move the key blank, because he didn't know we knew about the gate. It was too specific."

"Go on," said Winter.

"Physical evidence at the firing position. Two sets of marks on the rock—the older set consistent with Robert's boot size, the newer set consistent with a wrapped foot, both now forensically documented. The threads on the brambles: hessian, consistent with potato sacking, at ankle height, on the path from the gate to the rock. The burned material from the grate: partially combusted textile fibers, forensic analysis pending but consistent with coarse-weave natural fiber—hessian again." He paused. "The limestone grit from the Quarry Wood in the carpet of Hilton's sitting room, deposited during his reconnaissance visits. The rifle, retrieved from the quarry pool, last handled by someone

other than the owner on the night before or the morning of the murder."

"The fingerprints on the rifle," said Winter.

"Submerged for over twenty-four hours. I'm not relying on them. I never was." He shifted in his chair. "The phone call. Hilton called Nicholas Carver at nine thirty-seven on Wednesday morning. Before the local police. Before the Yard. Before an ambulance. His first call after the shot was not to emergency services but to a financial fixer in Chelsea who has since fled to Brussels. That call establishes guilty knowledge and consciousness of guilt."

"The money trail," said Winter. "Patterson's records."

"That establishes motive. The old will, the new will, Mortimer's Thursday ultimatum—all establish motive and timeline." Fournier paused. "And then there is Farrow."

Sheldon had been writing steadily. He looked up.

"PC Farrow's notebook," said Fournier, "records, verbatim and timestamped at ten twenty-two on Wednesday morning, Hilton Harlow's exact words on the front steps of this house: 'A bullet that does that to a man—it must have nearly torn him to pieces.' Dr. Stern's examination of the wound took place thirteen minutes later. No medical assessment of the wound had been communicated to Hilton Harlow at the time he spoke those words. The wound had been covered by a sheet. The only person who could know that an expanding bullet had been used, and what it would do to the human body at that range, was the person who had chosen and loaded that bullet."

The room was quiet. Outside, the park was beginning to warm up in the late morning sun, and somewhere in the Italian garden a gardener was at work—the first sound of normal estate activity since Wednesday morning, tentative and somehow moving.

"The voussoir," said Winter.

Fournier looked at him.

"The keystone," said Winter. "The thing that holds the arch together. That's it."

"Yes," said Fournier. "That is it. Everything else makes the arch possible. That is what makes it an arch."

Winter stood up and looked out the window at the park in the late morning. Four hundred yards of open grass, a belt of trees, a rock above an old quarry. A man who had walked that distance before dawn on a Wednesday morning, done what he had planned to do, and walked back. Who had stood on the front steps of his father's house and described the wound to a constable before any doctor had examined it.

"Are we ready?" said Winter.

"Almost," said Fournier. "I want the lab results on the burned material and the rifle. I want Robert's formal statement, which fills the last gap in the timeline. I want Farrow's witness statement formally sworn. And I want one more conversation with Hilton Harlow himself."

"Why?"

Fournier considered. "Because he is the most controlled person I have encountered in twenty years of this work, and there is one thing I do not yet fully understand about him. He has been

meticulous in every detail. The timing, the route, the footprints, the fire, the phone call. And yet he described the wound to Farrow before the body had been examined. A man capable of this level of preparation would not make a careless error."

Winter frowned.

"You think he did it deliberately?"

"I think," said Fournier carefully, "that there is a part of Hilton Harlow that wanted to be known. That the performance of grief and control was something he could sustain. But that somewhere in the machinery of what he had done, something required acknowledgment—from himself, from someone—and those words to Farrow were the only form it could take."

Winter thought about this.

"That won't help him in court," he said.

"No. It won't." Fournier looked at the table. "But it helps me understand him. And I find I need to understand people, even when what I understand about them is terrible."

Sheldon closed his notebook. The clock on the dining room mantelpiece said twenty past eleven. Somewhere upstairs, in the east wing, a door opened and closed.

The three men sat in the morning light and considered what they had, and what remained to be done, and the particular quality of the day that lay ahead of them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SOME PRELIMINARY SKIRMISHING

Three dinners took place at The Towers that Thursday evening, at one and the same hour. The first was in the formal dining room where the two brothers sat at opposite ends of the long table with the particular quality of silence between them that is worse than argument. The second was upstairs, in the east wing, where two women found each other's company rather better than either had expected. The third was in Tomlinson's room, where two detectives ate with appetite and something approaching contentment while considering, with equal appetite, the problem of a man who had committed a nearly perfect crime and was beginning to understand that it was not perfect enough.

At the formal dining table, Hilton had arrived first and was already pouring water when Robert came in. They acknowledged each other with the brief nod of men who have known each other all their lives and never been easy with each other for a single afternoon. Harris served in silence and withdrew.

Robert was quieter than usual. Fournier's conversation in the Quarry Wood that morning had produced an effect the detective had intended: Robert had spent the afternoon turning over the fact that someone had used his boots, taken his rifle, and manufactured evidence pointing towards him with the deliberation of someone who had thought about it very carefully. He had

arrived at the edge of a conclusion and was sitting beside it, reluctant to look in.

Hilton ate with the methodical efficiency of a man maintaining energy for whatever the evening required. He was a little thinner-looking than the morning before. Not dramatically—it would require a careful observer to see it, and Robert was not, tonight, a careful observer—but the slight economy had appeared around the eyes, the particular compression of someone burning more fuel than they were replacing.

"Where's Nell?" said Robert, when the silence had established itself long enough to become uncomfortable.

"Upstairs with Mother." A pause. "It seemed appropriate."

Robert looked at his plate. "How is she?"

"Nell?" Something in Hilton's voice was very careful.

"Mother."

"Mrs. Pritchard says she's having a clear day." He drank some water. "It will pass."

Robert looked up at that. It was a small thing to say, and Hilton said it as a small thing, and Robert—who was not always the blunt instrument people assumed—felt the smallness of it and did not like it. He turned his attention back to the food.

"I've been thinking," he said, after a minute, "about the rifle."

Hilton's hands continued their work on his plate without interruption. "Oh?"

"Someone knew the gun was there. Someone who had access to this house. Someone who knew I'd been—who knew about Saturday."

He turned his glass by its stem. "Someone who wanted it to look like me."

"The police will work through all of that," said Hilton.

"I expect they already have." Robert looked at his brother.

"Don't you want to know who did it?"

"Of course I do."

"You don't seem—" Robert stopped. Tried again. "You seem very calm."

"One of us has to be."

This was unanswerable in the way that certain things said by certain people are unanswerable—not because they're true but because they come with the full weight of a lifetime's established dynamic. Robert returned to his plate.

"I'm going to marry Nell," he said.

A silence of a different quality.

"She said so?" said Hilton.

"She will. It was the pater's wish. I'm going to make it right." He said it with the dogged earnestness of someone who has decided something and is determined not to hear the counterarguments. "I should have done it before. That's on me. But I mean to do it now, and I don't see any reason why—"

"She told you this afternoon that she wouldn't discuss it."

Robert looked at him sharply. "How do you—"

"This house is not as private as you imagine," said Hilton. His voice was precisely level. "You asked her in the garden and she declined."

"That was today. Things change. She needed time, that's all."

Hilton looked at his glass of water for a moment. He looked at it with the expression of a man exerting considerable control over something that is exerting equal force in the opposite direction.

"Robert," he said. "I would advise you, very sincerely, not to press this matter at the current time. For your own sake as much as anything."

"My own sake." Robert's tone sharpened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that the police are examining every aspect of this family's affairs, and a clumsy marriage proposal in the forty-eight hours after our father's death will create an impression that will not be to your advantage." He looked up. "Nell is her own person with her own counsel. She will make her own decisions. I am telling you not to push."

The temperature between them had become specific, the way temperature becomes specific between two people who know each other's exact pressure points and have been, for years, choosing not to use them.

"I'll push when I like," said Robert flatly. "You've always managed this family. I've let you. But Nell's not a family matter and she's not your business."

"She is rather my business," said Hilton, in a tone so quiet it was almost inaudible, "given that I have been managing her trust."

"That trust transfers to her in ten weeks."

"Yes."

"So she won't be your business for much longer." Robert put his napkin down. "I'm going to marry her. That's it."

He pushed back his chair and left the room. Hilton remained at the table. He sat very still, and his face wore the expression of a man completing a long calculation and arriving at a number he finds unacceptable.

Harris, returning for the plates, found him there alone and withdrew as quietly as he could.

Upstairs, in the comfortable room above the orchard, Nell Voss and Mrs. Harlow were finishing the quiet meal Mrs. Pritchard had arranged for them on a small table by the window. The evening was still long and pale. Below, the orchard was gilded at the far end, and the kitchen garden beyond it was blue in shadow.

Mrs. Harlow was different from any version of herself that Nell had known. The versions she had known were either muffled by medication into a kind of permanent soft fog, or briefly, disquietingly present before retreating again—a woman glimpsed through glass. This woman was present in the full sense: attentive, direct, capable of irony.

"You've been very kind," said Mrs. Harlow, "to want to have dinner up here. You didn't have to."

"I didn't want to be downstairs," said Nell, honestly.

"No. I don't imagine you did." A small pause. "I've spent a good many years not wanting to be downstairs and not having the option." She said it without self-pity, as a geographical fact.

"You have options. That's an important thing to know about yourself."

Nell looked at her. She was not, she realized, speaking in the abstract.

"Mr. Winter said Robert wouldn't be a suspect," said Nell carefully.

"I know. Mrs. Pritchard told me." She looked out at the orchard. "I spoke to the detectives last night."

"I know."

A silence, comfortable enough. The quality of the evening light changed as the last of the sun moved behind the cedar hill.

"What will you do," said Mrs. Harlow, "when all this is over? When you're twenty-one and the trust is yours."

Nell had been asked this question before, in various forms, by various people, and had usually given a careful, noncommittal answer. She found she didn't want to do that now.

"Leave," she said. "Travel. I have three imaginary journeys I've been planning for years. I'd like to see if the real versions are better." She paused. "I want to paint. Properly. I've been doing watercolors of things I can see from the park for two years and pretending that's enough."

"Is it not?"

"No." She smiled briefly. "I met a painter this week who made me understand that."

Mrs. Harlow looked at her with the particular attention she had been demonstrating since the previous night—the attention of

someone who has been watching people carefully for years without being able to act on what she saw.

"Don't let people decide things for you," she said. "That sounds obvious. But it takes more active prevention than you'd think."

They sat in the evening quiet, and the orchard went from gold to gray, and below them in the house the day concluded its business.

In Tomlinson's room, the detectives were dining extremely well.

Tomlinson had understood, without being told, that this was the last dinner of the investigation's indoor phase and had prepared accordingly. The food was impeccable. The wine was Tomlinson's own selection and bore the marks of someone who had been given a good budget and excellent taste with which to deploy it.

"I hate eating the food of a man I intend to put in the dock," said Fournier, tasting the soup with an expression of genuine internal conflict.

"This is Miss Voss's table we're dining at, in every sense that matters," said Winter. "Have no scruples."

"You think the trust has been funding the household?"

"Patterson's records will tell us definitively. But yes—I think so. The fund was Harlow's income. The trust was the contingency reserve. When the fund started going wrong, the trust absorbed the difference." He tasted the wine with appreciation.

"By the time Nell Voss turns twenty-one and her auditor arrives, there would have been very little left to audit."

Fournier absorbed this with the expression of someone who already suspected it and is confirmed.

"Tell me something," said Winter, when the sole had come and gone and they were at the lamb. "The prosecution case. How long to a conviction?"

"From charge to verdict? Eight months, possibly less. The financial case is straightforward—Patterson has everything and it's documented to an unusual degree. The physical case—" Fournier turned his glass—"the physical case is circumstantial, but strongly so. The footprints, the gate, the staircase, the timing, the burned material, the key blank. No single element is conclusive. Together they are very nearly so."

"And Farrow's notebook."

"And Farrow's notebook. Which is—yes. The keystone. The thing that makes it an arch and not a collection of stones."

"Is it enough?"

Fournier was quiet for a moment in the way of someone doing an honest audit.

"With Farrow's testimony, Mrs. Harlow's testimony, and Nell Voss's testimony about the gate—yes. I believe so." He looked at Winter. "Hilton Harlow is the most controlled defendant I have ever considered bringing to trial. He will perform composure in the dock as well as he has performed it here. It will be a long fight and a hard one. But the evidence is there."

"And the phone call to Carver."

"Consciousness of guilt. Established before any police were called. A jury will understand what that means."

Tomlinson appeared to inquire about coffee and to mention that Harris would bring a decanter of port from Mr. Hilton's compliments, since Mr. Hilton knew the butler favored it and would not himself be requiring anything further this evening.

"How very considerate," said Fournier.

When Tomlinson had gone with his customary quiet efficiency, the two detectives sat with the decanter between them and did not immediately pour from it. They looked at it with the particular attention they reserved for things that had appeared at an unexpected moment.

"He knows," said Winter.

"He has known since the train," said Fournier. "He read your face, Jonathan, exactly as I told you he would." He lifted the decanter and held it to the lamp. The wine was a good color and entirely opaque in the way good port is opaque, which was, Fournier reflected, also useful.

He poured a small amount into each glass. They smelled it. Tasted it. The port was excellent.

It was also, beneath the excellent port, something else.

"Zolpidem," said Fournier thoughtfully. "Or similar. He carries it himself—I noticed the prescription in his bathroom cabinet during the room search this morning. A strong dose would produce several hours of deep sleep." He set his glass down. "He wants tonight to work in. Retrieve something from the wood, perhaps, or access the fund's records from the office terminal."

Possibly simply to drive to the airport without anyone knowing he had left."

"He's going to run," said Winter.

"He's considering it. He hasn't decided yet, or he wouldn't have bothered with this." Fournier indicated the decanter. "If he'd decided to run he would simply go. This is still the action of a man who hopes to manage the situation. Who hasn't quite given up on the idea that it can be controlled."

Winter took out an evidence bag, which he carried as a matter of habit, and decanted approximately a third of the port into it with the practiced ease of a man who has done similar things many times. He resealed it and put it in his breast pocket. They looked at the decanter, now noticeably less full than it had arrived.

Fournier went to the butler's sideboard and found, after a brief search, a bottle of the same year and producer. He poured from it until the decanter was restored to approximately its original level.

"Tomlinson will be asked to produce this later," he said, returning the bottle precisely to its position. "It's better if the evidence is untampered."

"Agreed." Winter looked at the decanter with an expression that was not quite a smile but was close to it. "He's getting scared."

"He is getting very scared," said Fournier. "Which is the most dangerous phase. A man who has been entirely rational and entirely patient for a very long time—when he becomes afraid, he

moves faster than his planning allows for. That is when mistakes happen."

"Should we watch him tonight?"

"I've already arranged it. Sheldon is in the stable block. The constable from Easton is at the Roxton gate. I asked Bates to chain the orchard gate from the outside." He paused. "He won't know about the orchard gate chain until he tries it. That will tell us where he is and what he intended."

They drank their coffee, which was uncomplicated by anything except excellent coffee beans.

Robert, who had been tracked by Sheldon to the village pub and back again and was now in his own room, received the detectives at nine-thirty with the subdued cooperation of someone who has decided to be helpful and is finding it slightly awkward in practice. He confirmed, with some reluctance but ultimately in full, the details of his London visit: the address in Battersea, the woman, the settlement of the blackmail arrangement that he had been paying for eighteen months. He confirmed his alibi for the morning of the murder through three witnesses and a restaurant receipt. He confirmed the last time he had seen his rifle—a week ago Saturday, in its rack.

Then he said something that Winter had not expected.

"Look," he said. He was sitting on the edge of his bed with his forearms on his knees, looking at the floor. "I keep coming back to something. Who benefits? Hilton and me, obviously. And the will—I don't actually know what the will says. Maybe I should. Maybe I've been an idiot for not asking." He looked up.

"But Hilton was in his study. He was there. I heard him on the gallery when I ran downstairs. I heard his door before that. How could he—" He stopped. "He couldn't, could he."

"What makes you ask?" said Winter.

Robert was quiet for a moment. "The way he talked about Nell at dinner. The way he always talks about her. Like she's—like she's a position on a balance sheet." He turned his glass in his hands. "My father talked about her the same way. I never liked it. I didn't think what it meant. Now—" He shook his head. "It probably doesn't mean anything. He was in the house. He couldn't have."

"No," said Winter, in the most neutral tone he possessed. "Go to bed, Mr. Harlow."

They left him and went back along the gallery. Below, the hall was empty, the settee against the wall bare, the tile floor quiet. The east wing was dark except for the light under Hilton's door.

"He almost had it," said Fournier, quietly.

"He had it," said Winter. "He backed away from it."

"He'll come back to it in the morning."

"Yes."

They went to their room. At half past ten, according to Sheldon's subsequent report, the light under Hilton's door went out. At eleven-fifteen there were footsteps in the east wing corridor. At eleven-twenty the staff staircase door opened. At eleven twenty-two Sheldon, who had been waiting in the courtyard

since ten o'clock, heard the sound of the orchard gate being tried and found chained, and then silence.

At eleven twenty-five the staff staircase door opened again and the footsteps returned.

At eleven twenty-six the light under Hilton Harlow's door came back on.

It stayed on until three in the morning.

In the stable block, Sheldon noted the times and sat in the warm dark and waited, as he had been trained to wait, without impatience or conclusion, for whatever the morning would bring.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PUBLIC RECORD

The Coroner's Court for the district sat in a converted council chamber on the high street in Easton, a room that had been designed in the 1930s for purposes of municipal business and had never quite adjusted to its more recent function. The ceiling was too high and the acoustics were wrong and the chairs had the uncompromising quality of furniture selected by someone who believed that discomfort concentrated the mind. On a fine Thursday morning in June, with the high windows admitting more sunlight than the room's pale carpet knew what to do with, it had about it the slightly reproachful air of a place that expected better and had learned not to say so.

It filled up by nine o'clock. The Harlow case had been the principal occupation of the district since Wednesday morning, when the first news item had appeared on local feeds and been shared three hundred times before lunch. There were people here who had known Mortimer Harlow personally, which was to say they had been on nodding terms with him at the Roxton farmers' market or had encountered him at the occasional civic function he attended when it could not be avoided. There were people who had never seen the man but felt, as people do in small districts, that his death was something that had happened to them and therefore required their presence at its public accounting.

There were journalists. Six of them, from four outlets, occupying the left side of the public gallery with the contained alertness of people who have been doing this a long time and know that the interesting material rarely comes from the proceedings themselves but from the faces observing the proceedings.

Eliza arrived with Jade at five past nine and secured two seats in the center of the gallery from which she had a clear view of everything. She had the expression of a woman attending a significant civic event and proposing to give it her full attention. Jade, who was twenty-two and had never been to an inquest before, sat with her hands in her lap and looked at everything twice.

"Is that him?" Jade whispered, indicating a man in a dark suit at the front.

"That's the coroner's officer," said Eliza firmly. "The coroner isn't in yet. And don't point."

"Who's that then, the tall one who just came in?"

Eliza looked. The tall one was Winter, who had come in through the side door with Fournier and was taking a seat in the row reserved for police officers. He sat with the efficient economy of a large man in a small chair.

"That," said Eliza, with the satisfaction of someone who has done her research, "is the man from Scotland Yard. Detective Chief Superintendent. And the small one beside him is the French one." She paused. "He's not actually French. He just seems it."

"What does that mean?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like," said Eliza, and opened her order of service.

Bates was two rows behind them, in the company of the other estate staff, his keeper's face wearing its standard expression of watchful neutrality. Harris sat very straight and looked at the coroner's desk. Tomlinson was not in the public gallery—he would be called as a witness and was waiting in the anteroom with the composure of a man who has been giving evidence in formal proceedings for thirty years and regards them as simply another occasion requiring the correct manner.

The Harlow family entered through the main door at nine-ten. Hilton first, then Robert, then Nell. Behind them, unobtrusive, walked the local Inspector and a constable.

Hilton Harlow wore a dark suit and moved with the particular quality of a man whose composure has been deployed so continuously that it has become indistinguishable from his natural state. He acknowledged the room's attention with neither engagement nor avoidance. He found his seat in the front row, spoke briefly to the solicitor who rose to meet him, and sat.

Robert was behind him, red-faced and uncomfortable in a dark jacket that did not quite fit, and that he had clearly not worn for some time. He sat next to Hilton without looking at him and put both hands on his knees with the air of someone who has been told to sit still and is complying with conscious effort.

Nell came last. She wore dark clothing and her hair was back and she walked with the deliberate, careful steadiness of someone managing grief rather than suppressing it, which is a different

and more effortful thing. She did not look at the public gallery. She sat next to Robert and looked at the front of the room.

In the row behind the family, Trenholme sat. He had been summoned as a witness—present at the scene, able to confirm the source and direction of the shot—and had come with his sketchbook in his jacket pocket out of a habit so ingrained that he had not noticed it until he was already in the room and it seemed too late to put it back. He was looking at the floor with the expression of a man running through what he intended to say.

Eliza noticed him with the particular satisfaction of a woman who has predicted something and is watching it unfold.

"That's the painter," she told Jade.

"The one who was in the park?"

"The very same."

"He's rather nice-looking," said Jade.

"He's entirely too charming for his own good," said Eliza, in the tone of someone who means the opposite. "Now be quiet."

The coroner was a compact woman of fifty-five named Dr. Hartley, who had held the role for eleven years and conducted herself with the quiet authority of someone who has presided over the community's most difficult moments and understands that dignity in those moments is not a courtesy but a necessity. She entered, took her seat, and looked at the room with a brief, comprehensive survey that registered everything and lingered on nothing.

"This inquest is opened into the death of Mortimer Harlow, aged sixty-one, of The Towers, Roxton, Hertfordshire. The date of

death is recorded as the fourth of June 2025. I will hear evidence of identification and cause of death, after which I expect to adjourn this inquest pending the outcome of a police investigation into the circumstances of Mr. Harlow's death."

She said this in the manner of someone reading a well-worn script that has been worn well by use, not by repetition without care. The formality of it settled over the room like the particular quality of a frame around a painting—defining what was inside and acknowledging that the inside was significant.

Tomlinson was called first. He identified Mortimer Harlow, described the finding of the body, confirmed the time and location. His voice was level throughout and his manner was precisely what it always was—the house manager at a formal occasion, performing the function of a house manager at a formal occasion with impeccable skill. He looked at no one in the public gallery. When the coroner thanked him and said he might sit, he went back to his seat with the same quiet authority with which he did everything.

Hilton was called next. He rose, came to the witness position, and gave his evidence in the tone of a man performing a civic duty under difficult personal circumstances, which was also the tone of a man who had been performing this particular role since Wednesday morning and had refined it considerably.

He gave his name, his address, his relationship to the deceased. He described, briefly and accurately, the morning of Wednesday the fourth of June: breakfast at eight-thirty, his father leaving the table at nine, his own position in the first-

floor study. He had heard the shot at approximately nine-thirty. He had gone immediately to the hall when he heard Miss Voss's voice. He had found his father at the foot of the front steps.

He said this last sentence with a particular quality of stillness in his voice—not a suppression of feeling but something that sounded like the aftermath of having processed a feeling and chosen not to display its residue. It was, from a technical standpoint, perfect. The coroner acknowledged it with a brief, human pause before her next question.

In the police row, Fournier sat with his ankles crossed and his hands in his lap and watched Hilton Harlow give his evidence. He watched with complete stillness and the specific quality of attention he brought to things that would be important later. The room watched Hilton. Fournier watched the room watching Hilton, which was a different and in some ways more revealing observation.

When Hilton returned to his seat, Fournier turned his head very slightly towards Winter and said, barely audibly: "He is magnificent."

Winter said nothing.

"Analytically," said Fournier. "I mean analytically."

"I know what you mean," said Winter.

Dr. Stern was called. He gave his evidence in the direct, competent manner of a physician accustomed to giving expert testimony, covering the cause of death with sufficient precision for the formal record and sufficient restraint for the public room. He confirmed the use of a high-velocity expanding round,

the direction of fire, the approximate distance. He did not elaborate on the nature of the wound beyond what the formal record required, which was the judgment of an experienced man in an inquest room.

The coroner asked two brief questions, noted the answers, and called PC Farrow.

Farrow came to the witness position with his notebook in his hand and his uniform arranged with the particular care of someone who has been in uniform for fourteen years and still regards it as something that should be worn correctly. He looked at the coroner, not at the public gallery, though the public gallery was looking at him with the awareness that this was the constable who had been first on the scene.

He confirmed his arrival at The Towers at ten-twelve. He confirmed the state of the scene. He confirmed that he had taken preliminary statements from three witnesses and had initiated the search of the Quarry Wood. He said all of this with the specific, careful language of someone who has thought about what each word means and has chosen not to use more of them than the situation requires.

The coroner thanked him. He returned to his seat.

Trenholme was called last, which was correctly ordered given that his evidence was supplementary—confirming the direction of the shot from a different position, establishing the early presence of a witness in the park. He gave his name, his profession, his commission from *Aperture & Field*, his legitimate presence in the park via the public right of way. He described

hearing the shot, estimating its origin, speaking to Bates and then to Farrow. He was clear and organized and only slightly less comfortable than he would have been with a canvas in front of him, which is to say he was substantially more comfortable than most people giving evidence in a coroner's court.

He did not look at Nell Voss during his evidence. She did not look at him. The village gallery noted both of these things with the comprehensive attention of a community that has already formed several theories.

When Trenholme returned to his seat, Eliza nudged Jade.

"Told you," she said, though she had not in fact predicted anything specific.

"Told me what?" said Jade.

"That something would come of it," said Eliza.

Jade opened her mouth.

"Hush," said Eliza.

The coroner summarized the evidence briefly and announced the adjournment of the inquest pending the police investigation. She gave a date six weeks hence for the resumed inquest, noting that this date might change depending on the progress of proceedings. She thanked the witnesses and the court. She rose. The room stood.

The formal part of the morning was over.

In the dispersal that followed—the specific, slow movement of a room full of people who have been sitting still and now have license to move and talk—the various threads of the morning

separated and recombined in the way of communities processing significant events.

Bates spoke briefly with the Inspector and then with Farrow, the three of them in a knot near the door with the quality of men exchanging information that has professional weight. The estate staff drifted towards the door in pairs, speaking quietly. A journalist with a recorder moved in the direction of Hilton Harlow and was intercepted by the solicitor, who performed this function with evident practice.

Robert found Nell near the door and said something to her that made her look at him with the patient expression of someone who has heard a thing before. She replied briefly. He nodded and went out ahead of her.

Hilton spoke to no one. He collected his jacket and his phone and moved towards the exit with the contained efficiency of a man who has completed the task the morning required and has other tasks to proceed to. At the door he paused for a fraction of a second—not a hesitation, not uncertainty, simply the pause of a precise person establishing the route—and then he went out into the high street.

Fournier watched him go.

"Tomorrow morning," said Winter.

"Yes." Fournier buttoned his jacket. "Before the fund opens in the City. Before Carver has time to make further arrangements from Brussels. Before—" He stopped. "Before he decides that running is worth the cost of what it looks like."

"Do you think he'll run?"

Fournier was quiet for a moment. "No. I think he's made his calculation and understood that running confirms everything without offering anything in return. He'll stay." He looked at the door through which Hilton had left. "He's been right about everything else. He might be right about this too. Staying is the composed decision. Running is the frightened one. And whatever else he is, he is not frightened."

They went out into the high street in the June morning, where the village was processing the event in its own way—small clusters of people, voices raised slightly above their normal register, the particular animation of a community that has been given something large to think about and is thinking about it actively.

Farrow was outside, standing at the edge of the pavement with the waiting quality he had displayed all week. He looked at Fournier and raised an eyebrow with a precision that communicated the question without requiring the words.

"Tomorrow morning," Fournier told him. "You'll be needed. Make sure your notebook is with you."

Farrow nodded once and looked at the middle distance with the expression of a man filing a very important date.

Trenholme emerged from the court building and stood for a moment on the pavement, adjusting to the light. He had the slightly dazed look of someone who has been formally processed by an institution and is now recalibrating to ordinary life. He looked up the high street and down, apparently uncertain of his next move.

Then Nell Voss came out behind him and he turned, and they stood on the pavement of the Easton high street in the June morning with the village moving around them, and neither of them said anything immediately, which in the circumstances was exactly right.

"Well," said Trenholme, eventually.

"Yes," she said.

A pause. The sunlight on the high street pavement was the particular strong, clear sunlight of a fine English morning when the air is still and the light has not yet acquired the weight of afternoon.

"I could buy you a coffee," he said. "If there's anywhere reasonable in Easton."

"There isn't," she said. "But there's somewhere reasonable in Roxton."

They walked. Winter, watching from the far side of the street with the discreet attention of a man who has arranged nothing and is simply observing the consequences of other people's arrangements, watched them go.

Fournier materialized beside him.

"Well," said Winter.

"Indeed," said Fournier. He appeared to find the morning satisfactory. "Come. We have work to do."

They walked back towards the station in the opposite direction from Trenholme and Nell, and behind them the village of Roxton processed the morning's events in its own time, and the high street settled back into its ordinary self, and the

Coroner's Court for the district sat in its high-ceilinged room and waited, as it always waited, for the next occasion that required it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SOMEWHERE REASONABLE

They walked out of Easton by the back lane rather than the high street, which was Nell's suggestion and which Trenholme understood, correctly, to be less about the route than about the number of people on it. Easton on a market Thursday was not a place where the ward of a murdered financier could expect to pass unremarked, and she had spent the morning being looked at by a roomful of people who believed they were entitled to, and she had had, her bearing suggested, enough of it for one day.

The lane ran between hedgerows still wet at the roots from a dawn shower that had burned off by nine, and the air had the washed clarity of early June after rain. For the first quarter mile they did not say much. Trenholme had learned, in his short and crowded acquaintance with her, that Nell Voss did not consider silence a problem requiring a solution, and he found that he didn't either, which was itself a small discovery, since he was a man who had filled most of the silences of his life out of a vague conviction that they reflected poorly on him.

"You don't talk to fill the gaps," she said, when they had gone some way. It was not quite a question.

"I'm out of practice. I've spent the week being interrogated, formally and informally, by everyone from Scotland Yard to Eliza at the inn. It turns out one runs dry."

"Eliza." Something that was almost a smile. "She came to the inquest. She had a hat."

"She'd have been mortally offended to have attended without one." He glanced at her. "She has theories about you, I should warn you. About us. She considers herself the author of the whole situation."

"She isn't wrong, entirely." Nell looked at the hedgerow. "She told you about the footpath. The one that put you above the lake at the right hour."

"She did." He had not thought of it in those terms—that the entire chain of the week, the painting and the witness and this lane, ran back to a cook's offhand remark about a right of way—and the thought sobered him for a moment, because the same chain ran through the thing at the foot of the front steps, and there was no walking the one without the other. "I'm aware that I owe a great deal to a public footpath. I'm also aware that's a strange thing to be glad of, given the morning it belonged to."

"You can be glad of one thing and not the other," she said. "I've been doing it all week. It's the only way to get through the days without coming apart. You take the hour you can stand and you stand in it, and you leave the rest for later." She said it without self-pity, as a method she had tested. "I learned that a long time ago. I had a good deal of practice before this week."

He let that sit, because it was the first time she had said anything that opened onto the nine years before he met her, and he had the painter's instinct not to reach for a thing that was offering itself.

The lane came up over a low rise and Roxton appeared below them—the green, the church with its lych gate, the timbered front of the White Horse, the whole modest arrangement of it lying in the midday light like something a more sentimental painter than Trenholme would have called unspoiled. He had drawn most of it that week. He found he was looking at it now not as composition but as a place where this particular person had grown up, which was a different way of looking and, he suspected, the more dangerous one.

"There's a tea room by the green," Nell said. "Run by a woman named Pidgeon, which is her actual name. The coffee is bad but the windows are good. We can watch the village pretend not to watch us."

"That," said Trenholme, "is the most appealing description of a cup of coffee I've heard in some time."

Mrs. Pidgeon's establishment had four tables and a view of the green, and Mrs. Pidgeon herself had the good grace, when Nell came in, to perform an elaborate non-recognition that fooled no one and was, in its way, a kindness. They took the table in the window. The coffee, when it came, was as advertised.

"Tell me about the painting," Nell said. "The real version. Not the version you gave Mr. Fournier."

"What did I give Fournier?"

"The professional account. Composition, the living figure against the marble, the accident of the light. All true, I imagine, and all designed to keep the conversation on ground you

could defend." She turned her cup without drinking from it. "I'd like the other version. Why that, that morning. Why you couldn't leave it."

Trenholme considered her. He had been asked about his work many times, by people who wanted to be told it was good and by people who wanted to be seen to be the sort of person who asked painters about their work, and he had developed answers for both. He understood that neither would do here.

"There was a marble goddess and a lake and a perfect arrangement of light," he said slowly, "and it was beautiful and it was dead. Beautiful in the way a thing is beautiful when nothing has happened to it for two hundred years. And then a living person walked into it without knowing she was being looked at, and the whole composition—I don't know how to say this without it sounding worse than I mean—the whole thing came alive, because the difference between the marble and the woman was suddenly the entire subject. The permanent thing and the passing thing, in the same frame, neither one apologizing for the other." He looked at his coffee. "I couldn't leave it because I'd been trying to paint that lake for three days and it had refused to become a picture, and in about four seconds it became the best one I've ever made. A painter doesn't walk away from that. Whatever the cost to his manners."

She was quiet for a moment.

"You said *without knowing she was being looked at*," she said. "That's the part. That's why I'm not angry, and I've been trying to work out why I'm not angry, because by every reasonable

standard I ought to be." She looked out at the green. "I've been looked at my whole life. Do you understand the distinction? Not seen. Looked at. By my guardian, who looked at me the way you'd look at an asset that was maturing. By the people he invited to dinner, who looked at me to work out what I was worth and to whom. By—" she stopped, and he understood she had nearly said a name and chosen not to. "By a number of people who had decided in advance what I was for. Nine years of being looked at. And then a stranger sits in a hedge and doesn't look at me at all—looks at the light, looks at a problem of paint—and somehow that's the first time in nine years I've been seen as something other than a sum."

"That's a generous reading of a man hiding in your shrubbery."

"It's an accurate one. I'm not in the habit of the other kind." She finally drank some of the bad coffee, made a face, and drank more. "What will you do with it? After. When all this is—concluded."

The word sat between them. *Concluded*. They both knew what was being concluded, and roughly when, and that the conclusion would arrive at the house she would go back to that evening and take the form of a man she had grown up alongside. Trenholme did not pretend otherwise.

"I don't know," he said. "It can't be shown while any of this is live. It may be evidence. After that—" He shrugged. "It's the best thing I've done and I'm not sure I want it in a gallery with a price on it and your face on the wall for strangers to

look at. Which is an odd position for an ambitious painter to find himself in. I've spent six years wanting exactly that kind of attention for exactly that kind of work."

"And now you've made the work and you don't want the attention."

"Now I've made the work and I find I'm protective of the subject," he said, "which is not a feeling I have any professional use for and cannot seem to put down."

She looked at him then, directly, with the blue and undeceived attention he was coming to recognize as the truest thing about her, and something passed between them that neither of them named, because naming it would have been a kind of looking, and they had just spent twenty minutes establishing what they thought of that.

She told him about the journeys, after a while. She had not meant to—she could see that she had not meant to, that it came out of her the way the painting had come out of him, against the grain of her habitual reticence—but once it had started she let it run.

The notebooks. Seven years of them, one for each journey, illustrated in the margins, annotated with routes and distances and the names of painters who had worked in particular lights. The Alentejo in October for the cork oaks and the ochre earth. The Lofoten in February for the ice-blue water and the angular Norwegian light she had tried to understand from reproductions and suspected she would have to stand inside. Amsterdam in

spring. The Extremadura at the end of summer. The Cairngorms in November, when the colour was stripped back to purple and grey and the bone of the land showed through.

"I planned them in the hours when the house didn't need anything from me," she said. "Which were the only hours that were properly mine. I told myself I was waiting until I had the means. That was true. But I think now I was also doing the other thing—the thing you do with a watercolour when you don't quite commit, when you keep it provisional so it can't fail. I've been painting the park in watercolours for two years. Things I could see from my own windows. Pretending it was enough." She looked at him. "It isn't, is it."

"No," he said. He said it gently, but he said it, because she had not asked him to be kind and he sensed that kindness, here, would be a smaller gift than honesty. "Watercolour's an honest medium if you're honest in it. But you can also use it to keep everything reversible. To make a record of a thing without ever standing in front of it and committing. Oil makes you decide. You put it down and it's down." He turned his own cup. "You don't paint the park because the park is enough. You paint the park because the park is what's permitted. There's a difference, and I think you've known it for longer than two years."

She did not answer for a moment. Out on the green a dog was being walked in circles by a child who had not yet grasped the principle of the lead.

"In a few weeks," she said, "I'll have the means and the permission both. Nothing keeping me here at all." She said it as a fact she was testing the weight of rather than a plan she was announcing. "I'd thought I'd feel—released. I expected to be counting the days. Instead I find I'm rather frightened, which I hadn't budgeted for. It's one thing to plan a journey for seven years. It's another to discover the planning was the safe part."

"That," said Trenholme, "is the most reasonable fear I've heard you express. The planning is always the safe part. The going is the thing." He looked at her. "For what it's worth, from a man who has done a certain amount of going—it's worth it. Not because the places are better than the plans. Some of them aren't. But because a plan is a thing that happens inside you, and you can carry the inside of yourself anywhere, and a place is a thing that happens to you, and you can't predict it, and the not predicting is the entire point. You'll paint differently. You won't be able to help it."

"You sound certain."

"I'm certain about almost nothing," he said. "I'm certain about that."

They did not stay much longer. There was a limit to how long Mrs. Pidgeon could sustain her performance, and a limit, too, to how long either of them could sit in the bright ordinary window of a tea room with the afternoon ahead of them carrying what it carried. Nell would go back to the house. Trenholme would go back to the inn and to a painting he could not show and a feeling he

could not file. The week was concluding around both of them whether they sat in the window or not.

At the door she stopped.

"The lake," she said. "When this is over. Before I go— wherever I go. I'd like to swim there one more morning while it's still mine, and I'd not object to a witness, provided the witness brought paint and not a camera." She said it lightly, the way a person says a thing they mean entirely. "Call it an arrangement."

"An arrangement," he agreed.

"It may be some months. There's a great deal to settle. And then I expect I'll go, and be away a good while, and you'll have forgotten all about it and be painting someone else's lake."

"I shouldn't think so," said Trenholme.

She looked at him for a moment longer, with the directness that undid him a little each time, and then she went out into the green and the midday light, walking quickly, the way she always walked, like someone slightly late for somewhere she had every intention of getting to.

Trenholme watched her go from the doorway of Mrs. Pidgeon's tea room. Across the green, half in the shade of the lych gate, the large unhurried figure of Detective Chief Superintendent Jonathan Winter was apparently studying the church, in the manner of a man who studies churches, and who had arranged nothing, and was simply observing the consequences of other people's arrangements.

He caught Trenholme's eye across the green, and inclined his head a fraction, and went back to studying the church.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE RECKONING

Sheldon's report was on the table at half past six. Winter read it standing, in the particular way he had of reading field reports that he found satisfactory.

Hilton Harlow's light had gone off at three-twelve. No movement after that until five forty-five, when the light came on again. Curtains opened at six. No attempt to leave the house at any point. The orchard gate had remained chained throughout.

At five forty-two, forty-seven minutes before the light reappeared, the forensics report from the night shift had come through to Sheldon's phone: the burned material from Hilton Harlow's grate was confirmed as hessian fiber, consistent with potato sacking of the type used in the estate's kitchen garden. The key blank from the desk drawer was consistent with the orchard gate lock. The wax impression Forensics had taken of the gate lock confirmed it had been used with a copy key within the past seven days.

"He's been awake since three," said Fournier. He was at the window with tea, watching the park in the early morning light.

"Yes."

"He'll have been doing what you do when you've run out of options and you know it. Reviewing everything. Looking for the gap that doesn't exist."

"Is there a gap?"

Fournier turned from the window. "No."

"Then we go now. Before he decides to manufacture one."

They went upstairs together at seven o'clock. Sheldon came in from the stable block and stationed himself at the foot of the staff staircase, which was the correct thing to do and which no one had asked him to do.

The east wing corridor was quiet. The light under Hilton Harlow's sitting room door was on. Fournier knocked.

"Come in."

The room was tidier than it had been during the room search two days ago. Papers had been organized, the desk cleared, the chair positioned with its back to the desk and facing the window—the position of a man who has been sitting looking out at the park for some time. Hilton Harlow sat in it, dressed and composed, with the particular quality of stillness that Winter had been reading since Wednesday morning. He was paler than he had been, and there were marks under his eyes that a night without sleep produces and another night rarely removes. Otherwise he was the same.

He looked at them both with the even, assessing attention that was his characteristic expression. Then he looked back at the window.

"Sit down, please," he said.

They sat. Winter had a folder. He placed it on the table between them and left it closed for the moment.

"Mr. Harlow," said Fournier. "I want to set out what we have, plainly and in order, and I'd like you to hear it to the end before you say anything. Can you do that?"

"Yes," said Harlow.

"Thank you." Fournier leaned back slightly. He spoke in the even, unhurried tone of a man who has done this before and understands that the most important quality in a moment like this is patience. "You entered your father's employment at Harlow Capital Management eight years ago. You had access to all back-office systems, all custody records. At some point in the following two years you began making incremental transfers from client portfolios to an account in Nice held by your mother, Celine Renaud, formerly Ashford. Over three years those transfers totalled one point eight million pounds. The amounts were calibrated to remain below automatic flagging thresholds."

Harlow said nothing. He was looking at the window.

"Two months ago the SFO's inquiry into the fund began focusing on custody records. You moved quickly—too quickly. A single transfer of four point two million pounds to a Luxembourg nominee account that was dissolved within a week. That transfer triggered the alarm your smaller ones had avoided. Patterson flagged it directly to your father." Fournier paused. "Your father spoke to you on Thursday of last week. He told you the protection was ending. He had been to a solicitor the same day to revise his will. He gave you until the end of the month to make full disclosure to regulators. After that he intended to notify the FCA himself."

Harlow's hands rested in his lap. He was very still.

"Monday and Tuesday of this week," said Fournier, "you left the house before five o'clock through the orchard gate in the east boundary wall, which you had previously obtained a copy key for from the estate office. You went to the rock above the Quarry Wood and studied the sightline to the front steps of this house. You timed the return journey—through the gate, across the courtyard, up the staff staircase—and found that you could make it in under five minutes. You wore your brother's boots on both mornings to leave footprints consistent with his size in the patch of moist earth beside the quarry path."

A very small sound from Harlow—not denial, not confirmation. The sound of someone receiving information they have been holding alone and now hear spoken aloud for the first time.

"On Tuesday evening you lit a fire in your sitting room. You burned the material you had wrapped around your feet for the shooting—hessian, cut from an estate potato sack. The fire burned incompletely. Three fragments of hessian fiber were recovered from your grate. Hessian threads consistent with the same material were found on the brambles beside the quarry path at ankle height. Limestone grit consistent with the rock surface was embedded in your sitting room carpet."

Fournier opened Winter's folder and placed a single sheet in front of Harlow. He didn't ask him to look at it. He simply placed it there.

"Wednesday morning. You left through the orchard gate at approximately five-fifteen. You crossed to the rock via the north

path, approached from below the summit, and fired one shot from a kneeling position at nine-thirty. The rifle—your brother's .450 Express, which you had taken from his room—was thrown into the flooded section of the quarry on your way back. You returned through the orchard gate and up the staff staircase. You were at your desk, in your sitting room, when your father was found."

The morning light on the park outside was the particular clear gold of early June. A blackbird was doing something complicated in the cedar. Somewhere below, the house was beginning to stir—Harris moving through the hall, Tomlinson's voice, distant and calm.

"At nine thirty-seven," said Fournier, "you called Nicholas Carver of Carver Advisory Services in Chelsea. That call was made before you telephoned the local police, before you telephoned Scotland Yard, before you called an ambulance. It lasted four minutes and eleven seconds. Carver was in Brussels by the following morning."

He paused.

"At ten-twelve, Police Constable Farrow arrived at this house. You met him on the front steps. In his words, spoken to him by you at ten-twelve and recorded in his notebook within ten minutes: 'A bullet that does that to a man—it must have nearly torn him to pieces.' Dr. Stern, who examined the wound, arrived at ten-seventeen. His examination took place at ten-twenty-five. No medical assessment of the wound had been communicated to you before you spoke those words."

Hilton Harlow was looking at the park. His hands had not moved. After a long moment he said, quietly:

"I knew what it would do."

The words came out with the same care and precision as everything else he had said, and with the same composure, and with something beneath the composure that was not quite either of those things. Something older and more irreversible.

"Yes," said Fournier. "You did."

A silence of some duration. Not uncomfortable, exactly. The silence of a room in which something has been completed.

"There is one thing," said Harlow. He looked at Fournier directly for the first time since they had entered. "My mother is at a facility near Antibes. The arrangement I made for her will—when the fund accounts are frozen, the transfers will stop. She has no other means." A pause. "She knew nothing of any of this. She believed I was acting on behalf of the estate. She's not well enough to know otherwise."

Fournier looked at him.

"I will make sure that the question of her continuing care is brought to the attention of the court before any freezing order is applied to her account. That is not a promise I can enforce. But I will ensure it is raised and that someone who can enforce it is aware of it."

Winter said nothing. He looked at Fournier for a moment and then looked away.

Hilton Harlow received this with a single, slight movement of the head. Then he looked back at the window.

"I'm ready," he said.

Winter stood. "Hilton Harlow, I am arresting you for the murder of Mortimer Harlow on the fourth of June 2025." He continued with the caution in the even, practiced way of a man who has said it many times and has never found it a trivial thing to say.

Harlow listened to it standing. He did not look away from the window.

When Winter had finished, Harlow said: "I understand." Then, with a quality of absolute steadiness that Winter had not seen in any arrested person in thirty years of the work: "Give me a moment, please."

They stepped back. He stood at the window for perhaps thirty seconds, looking at the park in the morning light—the long sweep of grass, the Quarry Wood dark against the pale sky, the lake just visible at the cedar line, the marble goddess catching the first of the sun.

Then he turned and went to the door.

In the corridor, Sheldon was waiting. He fell in without instruction, which was the correct thing to do, and they went down the stairs together in the particular quiet of people who have each decided what this moment requires and are giving it that.

At the foot of the stairs, Tomlinson was in the hall.

He had heard, or understood, or simply known in the way of someone who has been in a house long enough to feel its shifts

before they surface. He stood very straight and he did not look away as Hilton passed.

Hilton stopped.

"Tomlinson," he said. "See to my mother."

"Yes, sir," said Tomlinson.

Then Hilton Harlow went out through the front door of The Towers for the last time, and across the broad mosaic landing where his father had stood every fine morning to light his first cigar of the day, and down the steps into the June morning.

Sheldon's car was at the foot of the steps. Sheldon held the door.

Winter and Fournier stood at the top of the steps and watched it go. The car moved down the avenue at a moderate pace, through the dappled morning light, and turned at the gates and was gone.

The park was very quiet. The blackbird in the cedar had started again. From somewhere in the house came the sound of a piano—a few hesitant notes, feeling for something, then finding it. A simple melody, clear and deliberate, played by someone who has decided to begin.

"Well," said Winter.

"Yes," said Fournier.

They went inside.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE ALTERED HOUSE

Robert came downstairs at eight o'clock and found the hall empty. This was unusual. The hall at The Towers at eight o'clock on a weekday morning was never empty: Harris would be crossing it, Tomlinson would be emerging from the back corridor with the day's post, the smell of breakfast would be traveling from the kitchen with the particular purposefulness of a house that understood its routines.

This morning the hall was empty. The post was on the hall table. Harris was nowhere. The smell of breakfast was absent, and in its place was the particular quality of a room that has recently contained something significant and has not yet settled back into itself.

Robert stood at the foot of the stairs and looked at the hall and understood, slowly, that something had happened.

Winter was in the dining room. He was alone, with tea he had made himself when it became clear that Harris was occupied elsewhere. He rose when Robert came in, and the quality of his rising—the deliberateness of it, the intention—told Robert, before a word was said, what kind of morning this was.

"Sit down, Mr. Harlow."

Robert sat. His face had the alert, slightly raw look of a man who has not slept well and whose body has been carrying the

anticipation of something without the mind being willing to name it.

"Your brother was arrested at seven o'clock this morning," said Winter. He said it simply, because the simple version was the one that Robert needed to hear first, before the rest of it. "He is being held at Easton police station pending a formal charge. The charge will be murder."

A silence of some length.

Robert looked at the table. His hands were flat on the surface. He looked at his hands and then at the table and then at Winter, and Winter saw in his face the specific expression of someone who almost knew something and is now being asked to finish the knowing.

"He was in the house," said Robert. Not a challenge. A fact he had been holding like a weight, hoping it would be sufficient.

"He used the orchard gate in the east boundary wall," said Winter. "And the staff staircase. He could get from the firing position in the Quarry Wood back to his study in under five minutes. He had rehearsed it twice earlier in the week."

Robert was quiet.

"He planned it from the moment your father spoke to him on Thursday," said Winter. "Everything that followed was preparation. The footprints, the rifle, the fire in his room Tuesday night. All of it was prepared."

Robert said nothing for a long time. The clock on the mantelpiece moved through several of its small, steady intervals.

"I almost—" He stopped. Started again. "Last night, I almost—" He shook his head. "I kept thinking about it and then I kept thinking it was impossible and I kept going back to the beginning."

"Yes," said Winter. "Most people do."

"My father. He's been—" Another stop. The difficulty was not grief, exactly, though grief was there. The difficulty was the specific layering of grief: grief for a father already grieved, now overlaid with the understanding that the person who had organized that grief, who had stood on the front steps looking appropriately bereaved while Winter and Fournier arrived, who had told them in his careful voice that there was nothing further to disclose—had been responsible for all of it. "It's been three days," said Robert. "He's been in this house for three days."

"Yes," said Winter.

"He sent me after Nell last night." Something moved through Robert's expression—not anger yet, something colder. "He came to my room and told me she was in the park. He was—he was helpful about it. He said to drop him, run it on my own."

"He wanted you in the park in the middle of the night, near the Quarry Wood," said Winter. "In the vicinity of where the rifle was hidden. He hadn't been able to retrieve it—we'd sealed the area and the orchard gate was chained. He needed someone else to inadvertently find it and draw attention back to you." A pause. "We had Sheldon in the stable block. We knew what he was doing."

Robert looked at him.

"We had enough," said Winter. "We were always going to have enough. We just wanted to make sure he didn't have the opportunity to remove anything further before the morning."

Robert put both hands over his face for a moment. Then he took them away and straightened and looked at Winter with the direct, uncomplicated gaze of someone who has received a fact and intends to live with it.

"What do I need to do?" he said.

"Finish your statement. The formal one, everything you told us about London, the woman, the alibi. Sheldon will take it this morning. Then you'll need a solicitor of your own—not the family firm, your own. I'd recommend it sooner rather than later given the complexity of the estate situation." Winter paused. "And I'd suggest telling Miss Voss yourself, before she hears it from someone else. She knows some of this, but not all."

"She knew," said Robert slowly. "Didn't she. She's been—she saw something."

"She told us what she knew. It was significant."

Robert nodded once, with the air of a man revising his understanding of several things simultaneously. Then he rose, and went to the window, and looked at the park in the morning. The park looked entirely like itself.

"He hated me," he said. Not with self-pity. As a fact. "He always hated me. I knew it. I never said it because—because what do you do with that? He's your brother. You don't say your brother hates you." He paused. "He didn't hate the pater, though."

I don't think he did. I think he loved him and hated him at the same time, which is—I don't know. Maybe that's worse."

Winter said nothing. It seemed to him that Robert, for all his bluntness and his limitations, had understood something about his brother that the investigation had taken three days to document. That it had not helped him, until now, was the irreducible tragedy of the thing.

Tomlinson received the news from Winter in the corridor outside the kitchen at quarter past eight. He stood very straight and listened with the full attention of someone who had suspected, for at least twenty-four hours, what he was being told, and who had been hoping he was wrong.

He was not wrong.

He looked at the middle distance for a moment when Winter had finished. Then he said: "Thank you for telling me directly, sir." Nothing more. He went into the kitchen.

Winter heard him, through the closed door, speaking to Harris in a low voice. A silence. Then the sound of someone putting the kettle on, which was the house resuming its functions.

Nell was at the lake when Robert came to find her. She had gone there at six in the morning, before the arrest, because she had understood from the quality of the silence in the house that something was about to happen and she had needed to be somewhere that was hers before it did.

She was sitting on the stone landing beside the Venus with her knees drawn up, looking at the water. She had not brought her painting things. She had simply come to be here, in the place that was most unambiguously her own, in the hour before the day made its demands.

She heard Robert's footsteps on the grass long before he reached her. He walked differently when he was troubled—heavier, less sure of the ground—and she knew from the sound of him that this was not a morning's ordinary errand.

He sat beside her on the stone, which he had never done before in all the years they had known each other, and for a moment they both looked at the dark water and the marble goddess in her reflection and said nothing.

Then he told her.

She listened without interrupting. She had known most of it, in the way she had spent five days refusing to know it while knowing it completely, and hearing it confirmed was not the shock it might have been for someone who had been successfully not-knowing. It was instead the specific sensation of a weight you have been carrying being acknowledged to exist by someone else—not removed, but shared.

She looked at the Venus.

"He managed everything," she said. "For years. The house, the fund, everything. I thought—I think I thought that if you manage everything for long enough it becomes who you are. That the management is the person." She paused. "But it isn't, is it.

There was always something underneath it that the management was protecting."

"His mother," said Robert.

"Yes." She thought about this. "That part I understand. I don't understand the rest, but I understand that part."

Robert nodded. He was looking at the cascade and the way it troubled the Venus's reflection. He seemed, Nell thought, somewhat younger than he had three days ago. Not in the way that weakness produces, but in the way that honesty does—as if several years of maintained positions had simply put themselves down and he was left with the actual face underneath.

"I'm sorry," he said. "For the thing I said on Wednesday. In the garden."

"I know," she said.

"I meant well."

"I know that too."

He looked at her. "You're going to be all right."

She smiled at this—a brief, honest smile. "Yes," she said. "I am."

They sat for a while longer in the morning quiet, the half-brothers and the ward and the old estate around them, and the sun came fully over the cedar hill and hit the water and made the Venus's reflection tremble, and the cascade ran on exactly as it always had.

Mrs. Pritchard brought Mrs. Harlow the news at eight-thirty. She sat beside her and spoke to her in the direct, plain way that

Mrs. Harlow had asked her to speak to her, without softening or managing, because she had been softened and managed for long enough.

Mrs. Harlow listened. She was dressed, her hair arranged, her hands in her lap. She had been awake since before five and she had known, from the quality of the morning silence, that what she had set in motion six days ago when she sat down in front of her housekeeper and asked for the evening medication to be reduced had reached its conclusion.

"Is he—" she began.

"He's at the police station in Easton," said Mrs. Pritchard. "They'll charge him formally today."

Mrs. Harlow nodded.

She sat for a while without speaking. Then she said:

"Robert."

"He's downstairs. He knows."

"Is he all right?"

"He will be," said Mrs. Pritchard.

She nodded again. She looked at the piano for a moment. Then she got up and went to it and sat down and began to play—not the slow, suspended minor-key meditation she had been playing for six days, but something else. Something in a clear, major key, with a particular quality of motion to it, like a piece of music that is walking somewhere purposefully rather than sitting and wondering whether to move. It was a Mozart sonatina she had played for the first time at the age of nine, which she had always loved because

of the specific quality of certainty in it, the way it knew, from the first bar, exactly where it was going.

Mrs. Pritchard sat and listened.

Fournier found Farrow on the rock at nine o'clock, which is where Farrow had spent most of the past three days. He was sitting at the summit looking at the house and eating an apple and had the quality of a man entirely at ease with where he was and what he had done.

"It's done," said Fournier.

"Yes, sir." Farrow looked at the front of The Towers, four hundred yards of open park away, the mosaic landing bright in the morning sun. "Good."

Fournier sat beside him on the rock. For a few minutes neither of them spoke. The estate was quiet around them. Somewhere below, in the wood, a pair of jays were having an argument of sustained intensity.

"I'm submitting a formal commendation for your work on this case," said Fournier. "Your documentation of the scene within the first hour was decisive. The witness statement about Harlow's words regarding the bullet is, specifically, the piece of evidence most likely to determine the outcome at trial. You wrote it within ten minutes. You had the instinct to do that without being told to."

Farrow looked at the house. His expression was the expression of a man receiving something he has been doing his job

well enough to have earned, and who finds the receiving of it slightly uncomfortable in proportion to how much it means.

"I just noted things," he said.

"Yes," said Fournier. "Noting things is what this entire case depended on."

A pause. The jays settled.

"There will be a promotion board in November," said Fournier. "I would recommend you apply for it."

Farrow did not say anything for a moment. Then: "I'll think about it, sir."

"Good," said Fournier. He stood. He looked at the house one last time, in the way of a man completing a circuit of thought that has occupied him for several days. "Go home today. Get some rest. Your formal statement is already on record. There's nothing more to do here for the moment."

Farrow stood too, and looked at the house with the expression that Winter had always associated with him: the expression of a man who is good at exactly what he does and knows it without being altered by the knowledge. "Right, sir," he said.

He climbed down from the rock and walked back through the Quarry Wood in the June morning, and behind him the wood was quiet, and the rock sat above the old quarry in the long grass, and on its northern face the moss was beginning, slowly and without urgency, to grow back.

Winter and Fournier left The Towers at eleven o'clock. Tomlinson saw them to the door with the impeccable courtesy of a

man whose world has been reorganized around new facts and who is managing the reorganization with characteristic precision. The house behind him was quieter than it had been at any point in the past three days, with the specific quality of a place that has exhaled.

"Mr. Tomlinson," said Winter. "What will you do?"

The question was not one that Tomlinson had been asked often, and the slight shift in his expression acknowledged this.

"The estate's affairs will need managing," he said. "Until the legal situation is resolved, someone will need to keep things running. I am well placed to do that." A pause. "Mr. Robert is, I think, rather better equipped than he has been given credit for. He simply hasn't been required to demonstrate it. I intend to give him the opportunity."

"He'll be lucky to have you," said Winter.

"We shall see," said Tomlinson. He shook Winter's hand, then Fournier's, with the firm, brief gravity appropriate to the conclusion of a significant professional engagement. "Safe journey, gentlemen."

They drove down the avenue in the morning. The iron gates were open, and as the car went through them Fournier looked back at their decorative ironwork—the acanthus leaves and roses wrought in that extraordinary freedom and beauty—and thought about a young man who had spent forty minutes drawing them six days ago and had been late to the lake as a consequence.

"Do you know," he said, "I'd like to see those gates properly. I only looked at them briefly."

"They'll be there," said Winter.

"Things often are," said Fournier, and turned back to face the road.

They drove towards London in the summer morning, and the case that would occupy the next eighteen months of their professional lives in the preparation and prosecution settled into its long, procedural shape, and the Hertfordshire countryside unfolded around them in its unassuming way, patient and green and entirely unconcerned with what had recently happened within it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DEAD RECKONING

The case went to the Crown Prosecution Service in October, by which time Winter and Fournier had produced a brief of documentation that ran to six hundred and forty pages and was, in the opinion of the Senior Crown Prosecutor who received it, the most thoroughly prepared homicide file she had seen in twenty years of criminal practice. She said so to Winter over the phone, which was not a thing she said often, and Winter thanked her with a modesty that Fournier, who was listening from across the desk, found entirely unconvincing.

"You're pleased," said Fournier, when Winter had replaced the receiver.

"I'm satisfied," said Winter.

"That is," said Fournier, "exactly the same thing, dressed differently."

They were already two weeks into the next case, which involved a Mayfair art dealer, a collection of possibly forged old masters, and a level of financial complexity that Fournier described as baroque and Winter described as a headache. They continued to work on it. The Harlow case moved through its procedural phases on the parallel track that the justice system maintains—unhurried, methodical, inevitable—and occasionally intersected with their other work in the form of phone calls from

the Crown Prosecutor and requests for supplementary statements, and twice required Fournier to return to Hertfordshire for consultations with local counsel.

On one of these returns he stopped at the White Horse Inn in Roxton and had coffee with Eliza, who provided him with a comprehensive account of the village's current opinion of events, organized chronologically and with editorial commentary. He found it both accurate and instructive.

"And the young man?" said Fournier, finishing his coffee.

"Gone back to London," said Eliza. "Though he comes back." She gave this a significant weight.

"Does he," said Fournier.

"Regularly," said Eliza, and left it at that.

The trial opened at the Old Bailey in the second week of February, eight months after the murder. It lasted eleven days.

Fournier had described, to Tomlinson in the dining room at The Towers the previous June, what a man of Hilton Harlow's composition would look like in the dock. He had described it as something theatrical, something that might command the respect of a careful observer even while commanding the revulsion of every moral instinct. He had not been wrong.

Hilton Harlow sat in the dock with the composure of a man who has accepted where he is and proposes to conduct himself there with the same precision and self-possession he has brought to every other environment. He listened to the evidence with level attention. He received the counsel's examination and cross-

examination with the considered responses of someone who has thought carefully about every question he might be asked and has prepared truthful answers to the ones that matter. He did not look away from witnesses he had reason to find uncomfortable. He did not look at the jury when the jury was looking at him, which was one of the several small, careful calculations that the jury noticed and noted.

The financial case occupied four days. Patterson gave her evidence with the organized clarity of someone who has been waiting to give it for two years and has spent that time ensuring it is impeccable. Adele Drummond gave her evidence with the slightly reduced confidence of someone who has negotiated, at some personal cost, the terms of her cooperation. The Luxembourg regulator's records, obtained after considerable diplomatic effort by Fournier's financial intelligence colleagues, supplied the international dimension. The picture that emerged was complete, documented, and entirely damning.

The physical case occupied three days. Forensics gave their evidence, precisely and technically. The gate key. The orchard gate and the staff staircase. The burned hessian fibers and the limestone grit in the carpet. The two sets of marks on the rock. The rifle in the quarry pool. Each piece placed within the framework that Fournier had described in the dining room at The Towers—wedge-shaped stones building an arch.

PC Farrow was called on the morning of the fifth day.

He came to the witness box with his notebook and gave his evidence in the direct, precise manner of someone who knows

exactly what he observed and has kept an accurate record of it and intends to say so clearly. He confirmed the time of his arrival. He described the scene. He described his conversation with Hilton Harlow on the front steps of The Towers at ten-twelve in the morning of the fourth of June 2025.

He opened his notebook.

"In Mr. Harlow's own words," he said, "which I recorded within ten minutes of the conversation: 'A bullet that does that to a man—it must have nearly torn him to pieces.'"

The Crown Prosecutor paused before her next question. It was a deliberate pause, professionally calibrated, designed to give the jury time to understand what they had just heard. She was good at her job and she understood that some evidence is most powerful when it is not immediately followed by commentary.

She asked Farrow when the medical examination of the wound had taken place.

He told her: ten-twenty-five.

She asked whether any medical assessment of the wound had been communicated to Hilton Harlow between the discovery of his father's body and the time of his statement to Farrow.

Farrow said: no.

She thanked him and sat down.

The defence cross-examined for eleven minutes, without finding anything in Farrow's account that could be shifted. The notebook was admitted in evidence. The jury looked at Hilton Harlow in the dock and Hilton Harlow looked back at them with the level, steady gaze that had been, throughout his adult life, one

of his most reliable instruments and that served him now not at all.

The jury deliberated for four hours and returned a verdict of guilty.

Hilton Harlow received it standing, with the same composure he had maintained throughout. The judge addressed him at some length, noting the premeditation, the extent of the preparation, and the systematic nature of the financial crimes that had preceded the murder. He sentenced him to a minimum term of twenty-two years.

He was taken down.

Before the sentencing, Hilton's counsel had made representations regarding Celine Renaud, the prisoner's mother, who was resident at a facility near Antibes and dependent on the arrangements her son had made for her care. The judge noted the representations and made an order that a portion of the estate—specifically, the legitimate proceeds of Hilton Harlow's own professional earnings rather than any funds held in trust or obtained through fraud—be made available for the continuation of that care. It was a narrow order and required Farrington, the family solicitor, some weeks of work to implement. But it was made.

When Winter told Fournier about the order afterward, Fournier said nothing for a moment. Then he said: "Good."

"You thought it would happen," said Winter.

"I hoped it would happen," said Fournier. "There is a difference. Though I admit the difference was small, in this case."

Nell Voss turned twenty-one on the fourteenth of August.

The birthday itself was quiet, which was her preference. Robert had proposed, some weeks earlier, a dinner—a proper one, with the staff and the village people who had known her since she arrived at The Towers and the few friends she had managed to maintain through her years of restricted social life. She had thanked him and said perhaps a smaller version of that idea, and had ended up with Tomlinson, Robert, Mrs. Pritchard, Mrs. Harlow, Bates and his wife, and the solicitor Farrington, who arrived from London with a document folder and the quiet satisfaction of a man who has good news to deliver.

The trust accounts had been audited. The audit had confirmed what Patterson's records showed: significant irregularities over three years, amounting in total to just under two million pounds removed from the trust's assets and redirected via the fund's internal accounts. Farrington laid this out carefully at the dining room table, in the way that solicitors have of delivering bad news in the same tone as good news, so that neither seems disproportionate.

The remaining assets, after legal costs and the compensation framework that the civil proceedings would eventually establish, amounted to just over one point four million pounds. Not the sum the trust had originally held. Not what her father's partnership

with Mortimer Harlow had been worth at its best. But real, and hers, and free of any further claim.

Nell listened to all of this with the attentiveness she brought to documents that mattered. She asked three precise questions. Farrington answered them. She signed what needed to be signed.

Then Tomlinson opened a bottle of champagne that he had been keeping for this occasion for a year and a half, which was the duration of his understanding that this occasion would arrive, and they drank it in the dining room of The Towers in the August afternoon, and Mrs. Harlow, who had not drunk champagne in eleven years, held her glass and looked at the park through the window and said: "It's a very good day."

It was.

She left The Towers in September, a few weeks after her birthday. Not in haste and not in anger. She walked through the rooms one last time on the morning she left—the library, the dining room, the morning room with its view of the orchard, the east wing gallery where she had looked down at the detectives on the morning after the murder—and she said goodbye to each room not dramatically but practically, in the way that one says goodbye to places that have been home for a long time and that one is grateful to and ready to leave.

Mrs. Harlow was in the orchard when Nell came to find her. She was sitting on the old crate beside the wall in the September morning, which had the particular quality of early autumn light—

clear and slightly distant, the shadows longer—and she looked better than Nell had seen her look in nine years. The medication was being managed at a fraction of its former level. She slept adequately. She played piano every morning. She had, three weeks earlier, written her first letter to Hilton in prison—not forgiving him, she had made clear to Mrs. Pritchard, but telling him that his mother was being looked after and that his arrangements for her care, the legitimate ones, were continuing. It had taken her four drafts and the better part of a morning. She had sent it.

They sat together in the orchard in the September morning and talked for an hour, and said what needed to be said about nine years of living in the same house at a great distance from each other and what that had cost each of them and what it had, despite everything, occasionally given. This was not a conversation either of them had expected to be able to have. It turned out to be one of the best conversations either of them had had in a long time.

When Nell's car came for her, Mrs. Harlow stood at the gate and watched it go down the avenue and through the iron gates, and she stood there for a moment after the sound of the engine faded, in the particular quiet of a place that has let something go and is settling into what remains.

Then she went inside and sat down at the piano.

Robert took on the estate with the combination of modest competence and genuine effort that had always been available in

him and rarely demanded. Tomlinson guided him through the first year with the patient certainty of someone who had always understood that Robert's capacities had been underestimated because no one had ever required them. By the following spring the estate was running, the fund's remaining clients had been transferred to a reputable management firm, and Robert had discovered that he was better at agricultural administration than he had ever suspected, which surprised him considerably and pleased Tomlinson not at all.

He sold his motorbike. He bought a sensible car. He attended the Board of Guardians on Saturdays, which was not as dull as he had feared. He was, cautiously, beginning to understand that the life available to him was not the one he had been trying to live, and that the available one was not, on examination, particularly bad.

In November, at the promotion board he had applied for on Fournier's recommendation, Police Constable Farrow of Easton was promoted to Detective Constable. The board's notes described him as demonstrating exceptional evidential instinct, particular skill in early scene documentation, and reliable judgment under complex investigative pressure. These were accurate descriptions of a man who had been doing his job well for fourteen years in conditions that had rarely required him to demonstrate it at the level the Harlow case had required, and who had demonstrated it anyway, because that was how he had always done his job.

He moved to the CID office in Hertford and found, to his mild surprise, that he liked detective work considerably more than community policing. He was good at it for the same reasons he had been good at community policing: he noticed things, he remembered them exactly, and he understood that the most important skill in any investigation was the patience to let the evidence say what it actually said rather than what you hoped it would say.

He kept the notebook. He kept it in his desk and consulted it occasionally, not sentimentally but professionally, as a record of what good documentation looked like and what it could do.

Trenholme exhibited at the Bloomberg New Contemporaries in December, which was not the first time he had been shortlisted and was the first time he had won the principal prize. The painting that won it was not *The Water Nymphs*—that remained in private hands, which is to say it was in a flat in Islington that Nell Voss had taken on a twelve-month lease on her way to somewhere else. The winning painting was a large oil of the iron gates at the entrance to a Hertfordshire estate—acanthus leaves and roses in decorative ironwork, the early morning light hitting them at an angle that made them look both ancient and immediate, as if they had always been here and were paying no particular attention to the present moment.

The *Aperture & Field* commission had, in the end, produced its illustrations. They ran in the February issue under the title

'The Vanishing Landscape,' and were, by general editorial agreement, the finest work the magazine had published in a decade. The accompanying article made no mention of the murder that had taken place the morning the artist was commissioned to draw The Towers. That seemed, to the editor, to be someone else's story.

Winter and Fournier closed the Mayfair forgery case in January, three days before the Harlow trial opened. The old masters turned out to be genuine, which resolved one question while opening several others of equal complexity. The dealer was charged with something other than forgery that was, in Fournier's view, considerably more interesting. They gave the file to the Crown Prosecution Service and moved on.

The next case arrived, as cases always arrived, before the previous one was entirely concluded. A financial adviser in Canary Wharf. A widow in Wiltshire. A discrepancy in a will that had been thirty years in the making and had, apparently, been waiting patiently for someone to look at it from exactly the right angle.

"Dead ground," said Fournier, reading the file in the car on the way to the first interview.

"What?" said Winter.

"It's what they used to call terrain you couldn't see from your position. The ground that lay in the blind spot of every available sightline. It was there all along. No one looked."

"I know what dead ground is," said Winter.

"Then you'll appreciate," said Fournier, "that this—" he indicated the file—"has rather a lot of it."

Winter drove. The winter morning opened before them, gray and particular, full of things that had not yet been looked at from the right angle.

The following June, Nell Voss came back to Roxton.

She had been away eight months, to the Alentejo and then to Amsterdam and then to a residency in Norway that had been harder and colder and more necessary than she had expected. She had three notebooks full of work and several canvases that would need to be properly stretched and a quality in her painting that had not been there before—not better exactly, but more specific, more committed, more willing to be difficult. She had learned things she could not have learned inside the walls of The Towers.

She had also, somewhere in the Norwegian winter, understood that the imaginary journeys she had planned for seven years were not, on their own, sufficient. That the planning had been an act of survival and the journeys themselves were something else, and that both required the other to be complete.

She came to Roxton on a fine June morning when the park was exactly as she remembered it—the cedars dark against the pale sky, the grass long in the meadow sections, the iron gates standing at the entrance with their acanthus leaves and roses in the morning light. Robert had given her use of the park whenever she wanted it, which was the most useful thing he could have

done. She went through the gate and up the path and over the cedar hill and down to the lake.

Trenholme was already there. He had the portable easel set up and was working on something she couldn't quite see from this angle, and he was so absorbed in it that he didn't hear her coming until she was on the grass below the cedars.

She had been watching him for forty seconds before he looked up.

"You're late," he said.

"By eight months," she agreed.

"I was beginning to think the arrangement was off."

"The arrangement," she said, sitting down on the stone beside the Venus, "was always on."

He looked at her for a moment, in the specific way that he had always looked at things he intended to paint—not possessively, not strategically, but with the honest, open attention of someone recording what is actually there. Then he returned to the canvas.

Nell looked at the lake. The water was dark and still, the cascade running as it always ran, the reflection of the goddess trembling as it always trembled. Above them the cedars were motionless in the warm morning air.

She had been here a thousand mornings and she knew every quality of this place—the specific temperature of the water in June, the way the light moved across the park between eight and nine, the angle from which the house looked most like itself. She knew all of this, and she knew also that she was seeing it

differently now, from a slight distance, with the adjustment of perspective that eight months and three countries and the specific discipline of paying serious attention to light had produced in her. It was the same place and she was a different observer, and the difference between those two things was considerable and worthwhile.

She pulled off her shoes and her jacket.

"I'm going in," she said.

"I know," said Trenholme.

She dived.

The water was cold and dark and received her in exactly the way it always had, and the goddess stood on her promontory in the morning sun with the patience of marble that has been watching June mornings for two hundred years, and above the lake in the shadow of the cedars a painter worked in oils on a canvas that was entirely its own thing—not the same painting as last year, not an echo or a repetition, but something new, made from the same light and the same dark water and the same living figure emerging from it, in a summer that had come around again as summers do, bringing everything it brought, which is to say everything.