

## GHOST STORY

"The story goes, sir," explained Vincent, "that you can, on certain nights when there is no moon, see Sir Jarred and his mount wandering through Battle Wood. But the story also says that he can free himself and return to Beale Hall.

"He grants a favor, you see, to those who ask at the right time, which, perhaps not surprisingly, no one seems to be able to predict. But when the grant is given, the result adds one more soul to feed and strengthen his own army of souls. And when enough souls are gathered, Sir Jarred will have his escape."

Proctor felt the road rise, felt the Bentley slow as it reached the top of a low hill. He leaned forward and saw a scattering of lights in a broad valley below.

"For those who believe in this story," Proctor asked, "how do they know when a grant has been given? I mean, how can they tell when Sir Jarred has taken another recruit for his army?"

"Oh, that's easy," the driver answered. "It's the same every time. Someone has good fortune ... and someone else dies."

**Praise for *Black Oak: Genesis***

"Charles Grant is a grand storyteller who  
never lets his audience know if they are on the  
mortal or supernatural plane ...  
a truly great gothic tale."

—Harriet Klausner, [paintedrock.com](http://paintedrock.com)

## Previously, in *Black Oak*

# E

than Proctor, to a young woman who walks with him in a lonely town in Kansas: "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"It's very simple," says Taylor Blaine. "I want you, and Black Oak, to find my daughter. She's been missing thir-teen years, but I know she's still alive. I don't care what you have to do, who you have to see, how much money you have to spend, how many enemies you make ... I have contacts, Proctor, I have all the money you'll ever need.

"Find her. That's all I ask. Just find her."

In Atlantic City, a man named Shake Waldman is gunned down in the street. He's a small-time gambler, Waldman is, and a source of occasional information for Black Oak and Proctor. As he lies dying on the sidewalk, rain falling into his eyes, he sees the man who killed him, standing over him and smiling.

It's difficult to breathe, worse to think, but there's some-thing wrong with his assassin, and in the time between the smile and the dying, he understands what it is—the man has one glass eye, and it looks just like a marble Waldman had as a kid.

Tiger's eye; it looks just like a tiger's eye.

\* \* \*

Ellen Proctor sits by a window in a nursing home she's lived in for almost seven years. Her hair is brushed, her clothes are clean, her hands lie calmly in her lap. Her face is turned slightly toward the winter sun, but there is no smile at her mouth, no smile in her eyes.

When it's time for meals, a nurse feeds her; when it's time for bed, a nurse helps her; when it's time to wash, a nurse bathes her.

Physically she is as healthy as she can be in such a situation.

Proctor visits her every Wednesday night, and every Wednesday night he tries to bring her back. No one knows where she is or why she's there, but Proctor tries to bring her back.

She hasn't said a word in almost seven years.

*do you believe in ghosts ?*

Episode 3

**WinKnight**



# N

ight in early January, the first Sunday, and a silence that belongs only to winter, a darkness without the moon.

The shops were closed along Battle Row, the display windows dark, no need for night-lights or spotlights or alarms. A few of the buildings were mock Tudor, first floors extending partway over the large-block pavement on either side of the street, with heavy casement windows and mullion panes, and window boxes now empty, not to be seeded until spring; the rest were ordinary brick and weathered stone, tonight made extraordinary by the sharp brittle air that sparkled around the streetlamps, and by the snow that fell slowly out of the dark.

At the top of the Row was the Raven's Loft, another Tu-dor but not a copy; two years before it had celebrated its three hundredth birthday. It too went dark once the land-lord, Darve Westrum, ushered Conrad Cheswick politely out the door and politely, but firmly, closed it behind him.

Conrad stood in the cold then, shivering as he buttoned his topcoat and adjusted his scarf more snugly around his neck. A rotund man with a close-cropped white beard and thick white hair, round cheeks and bright eyes, he resembled to his constant discomfort a cartoon rendering of Fa-ther Christmas in tailored cashmere. It especially bothered him this time of year, although Christmas and Boxing Day were a long fortnight gone.

Briskly he rubbed his gloved palms together and blew out a puff of breath, watched it expand and fade, and reckoned it was time he made his way home. Not at all drunk, but not completely sober either. A good thing, he thought, that he hadn't driven. He had a feeling as he took his first step away from the pub that he'd probably end up in a ditch somewhere and never hear the end of it.

He also wished he had worn his cap. The snow had already begun to catch and melt in his thick wavy hair, and by the time he reached his hearth he'd no doubt be halfway home to a miserable cold. Still, there was no sense lamenting what he didn't have, and making dire predictions of what might be—he was here, so was the snow, and home wasn't getting any closer.

At least it would be a pleasant walk.

The storm had begun not long before old Darve had ushered him away, and the flakes were still small, scarcely larger than raindrops, glittering and flashing past the street-lamps, and they hadn't yet managed to cover the ground. Little danger of slipping, less of being blinded, because there was no wind.

Just the snow, and his footsteps, echoing off the night.

Once clear of the waist-high stone wall that separated the pub's forecourt from pavement and tarmac, he glanced south, down the length of the Row, and sighed in delight. A postcard picture it was, disguising the village's true age, giving it all a badly needed fresh coat. A handful of blocks long, with no traffic or traffic lights, and one of the few red phone boxes remaining in Britain, it was nineteenth cen-tury pure and simple.

Soon enough there would be car horns and kids with bizarre haircuts and the stench of exhaust and the blare of those whatever-they-called-them-these-days portable tape players disturbing everyone's peace of mind.

For now, however, there was only the snow, and Battle Row, and the silence only snow could bring, deep and soft and comfortably cold.

And safe.

It would be nice to stay here for a while and enjoy the view, but a chill turned him left, and with hands in pockets and chin tucked into his scarf, he walked on.

Beyond the corner of the wall were a few yards of empty lot, dotted with saplings trying to stake a claim before someone came along to build something on it. Another was across the street, a mirror image of the first, except there a few of the ladies had planted a fenced-in garden, a village beautification project that Cheswick had to admit was fairly successful.

On this side the lot ended at a corner whose street formed a T-intersection with the Row; on the other it ended where Battle Wood began.

Cheswick didn't much care for the Wood.

In daylight its trees seemed too widely spaced to be completely natural, its lowest boughs twice as high as the village's tallest man, and so thickly intertwined that sun-light had a rough go of reaching the ground. Only a hand-ful of bushes. Not much grass to speak of. The rest of the Wood's floor was either bare or covered with dead pine needles and oak leaves. The ladies said that made good mulch, which they accordingly used in their garden; he only wished it would make some noise when you walked on it.

In its own way, the Wood produced a snowlike silence, but all year round. Day or night.

This was the part of walking home he disliked.

It was foolish, of course. It wasn't as if there were gangs of hooligans and thugs lurking among the trees, waiting to pounce on him or his wallet. This time of year it certainly wasn't a place for lovers, whose antics would embarrass him if he was to stumble upon them. And the village had no homeless, just a handful of bums who panhandled during the day and mysteriously vanished each night, so there was no one to accost you as you walked by... that way, at least.

It was foolish.

He knew it.

Still, he kept to the street's west side, grateful for the houses that began to crop up on his left, even if most of them were dark. A block-long stretch of cottages with patches of front gardens, they made him feel that he had someplace to run if he needed to run.

"You're daft, you know," his best friend, Willa, told him at least once a week.

"Maybe," he would agree. "Don't like it anyhow."

She would crinkle her eyes and laugh; he'd fetch them another round; and they'd spend the rest of the evening arguing the merits of one thing or another, seldom agreeing but never arguing so heatedly that they'd have a falling out. She knew too not to push when it came to his unease about the Wood. Willa Danby knew where the lines were, and she never crossed over.

A remarkable woman, all in all.

If he wasn't careful, he might actually end up in love. If he wasn't there already.

He shuddered as a trail of melted flakes slipped under his collar. He hunched his shoulders in an effort to close the gap, and hurried on, his gaze resolutely straight ahead. No cheating looks across the street; no sidelong glances, just in case.

A grunt, a sigh, and as the snow fell more heavily and another chill trickled down his spine, he yanked at his collar with one hand, hoping to snug it more closely against his neck. He only had another block to go, a left turn, count up four doors, and there he would be. Safe and sound, with perhaps a small brandy to warm him before he finally went to bed.

Actually, he should have been in bed already. He had an early day tomorrow, starting with a drive over to Beale Hall, to show Alan Morgan his latest acquisition—a marvelous old photograph album he had picked up for a song. Although some of the pictures were only a few years old, most showed the Hall and its surrounds at the turn of the century, before the present owners had taken possession. He suspected Morgan would pay a pretty penny for such a treasure, a prospect Conrad and his bank account anticipated with great pleasure.

A smile and a quickened pace, then, and a look across the street; he couldn't help it.

The Wood ran close to a hundred yards along the Row, and was four, perhaps five times that deep. Long ago, long before Cheswick's time, a narrow crescent had been scooped out in the middle of the run, a kind of artificial clearing, and several wood-and-iron benches had been placed there for the convenience and pleasure of those who wanted to sit in the shade on a warm summer's day.

Spring and summer were fine; the benches were well used.

It was winter when no one sat on them, and it had little to do with the cold or the snow.

Another grunt, another sigh, and he hadn't taken a dozen steps when he stopped, frowning slightly, and re-luctantly faced the trees.

A single high streetlamp stood at either end of the cres-cent clearing, casting just enough light to make the benches stand out and fill in some of the darkness behind them, making the area seem like a shallow bare stage. At the back, black boles winked where light touched the flakes.

He had heard something; he *thought* he had heard something.

The faint jangle of thin metal, the stir of something large.

Damn, he thought wearily; I've no time for this.

Shading his eyes against the snowfall, he squinted as hard as he could, just in case it was the drink that made his nerves jump, that made him hear things that were not there.

It didn't work.

Drink or no drink, nerves or no nerves, something was back there. Every so often he caught a glint of silver, as if whoever it was would shift closer to the light, then back away.

What now, he wondered; what now?

He heard the sound again, quicker this time, sharper, and the figure moved a small step forward.

Resignation made him check up and down the street, then a glance over both shoulders, before he crossed over, slipping once on a patch of ice hidden beneath the snow. Swallowing hard, sniffing, touching at his scarf and coat as if appearances were important.

The figure backed away.

The soft sounds of metal clinking, old leather creaking.

At the edge of the crescent he checked again to be sure no one watched him, and rolled his eyes when he realized he wouldn't be able to tell anyway. Behind a curtain, stand-ing at the corner of a building ... with the dark and the snow he'd never know, so why bother.

Setting his shoulders, straightening his spine, he moved slowly into the clearing, rounded a bench whose back he brushed with a finger.

The figure retreated again, moving deeper into the dark.

The light, pale and weak, slipped over Conrad's shoul-ders, but it didn't reach the figure ... or the second shape that stood patiently behind it.

"Good evening," Cheswick said. Cleared his throat. Took a deep breath.

Silver winking, polished metal flaring.

The muffled shift of heavy hooves.

"Have you done it?" the figure asked. A man, his voice rumbling like the last echo of thunder.

"Tomorrow, sir," Cheswick said.

"You were to have done it last week."

"I was poorly, sir."

"You were drunk and with that woman."

Conrad bridled. "I do not get drunk. And that woman, if she'll have me, will be my wife before the year's out." He blinked his abrupt astonishment, grinned at his boldness and the decision abruptly made, then wiped the grin away

with the hasty pass of a glove. "I was slightly ill, he had business, and so we canceled. The soonest was tomorrow."

He wasn't sure he could see the man's eyes, wasn't sure he wanted to. Something glittered back there, however; something too much like fire.

Swift movement, then—metal, leather, the clear sound of a bridle jangling—and the man looked down at him from his saddle, shape and shadow shifting beneath the trees.

"Don't fail me, Cheswick."

A simple statement gently given, and it made Conrad tremble.

"I haven't yet," he answered, more strongly than he felt. "You know that."

"No. You haven't, that's true enough." Horse and rider moved deeper into the Wood, but the voice sounded as if it were whispering in Conrad's ear: "See me when you're finished. I'll have something for you."

Cheswick didn't answer. He nodded, turned, and walked quickly away, blinking hard against the snow, not daring to think, not daring to turn around, scarcely daring to breathe until he reached his home, unlocked the door, and nearly fell over the threshold in his haste to escape the storm, and the night.

He didn't bother to turn on any lights; he made straight for the kitchen, opened the cupboard over the sink, and pulled out a small bottle of cheap brandy. Uncorked it. Drank, but not deeply. Sagged against the counter and drank again.

All this time, he thought, watching his hand shake, feeling his legs tremble; all this time, you'd think I'd get used to talking to him.

As if, he added silently, anyone could ever get used to talking to a man who never stirred from the depths of Battle Wood.



# A

fter a long day's gloom, the storm had finally opened up midway between midnight and dawn, lightly at first, small flakes ticking against windowpanes, hissing through dead grass. Not much of a wind, just enough here and there to trace white patterns in black air. The heavy flakes, the wet flakes, and a stronger wind arrived when Monday morning turned grey, and for the next three hours there were white-out conditions on highways and bridges; schools closed, businesses scaled back, and snowplows with whirling amber eyes rumbled slowly through neighborhoods where children waited to play.

By noon there was a lull, no wind, just the cold, with three inches on the ground and the forecast of three more before the day was done.

Ethan Proctor was home, and he was in trouble.

He stood in the driveway near the front fender of a Jeep whose patches of rust made it resemble a sickly leopard. He was outnumbered, outgunned, and through no fault of his own, outflanked. This wasn't going to be pretty. He had walked right into the trap.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," he warned.

Immediately, he winced. Wrong; definitely the wrong thing to say. It was a dare, and he should have known better, considering the nature of the small army that faced him.

In line behind the Jeep was a sedan, another behind that. At the foot of the drive stood a tall young man in black leather, his long, wavy hair solid black against the white backdrop. Grinning evilly, one hand behind his back.

In front of the Jeep, nose almost touching the pitched-roof ranch house where Proctor lived and worked, was a third car, as expensive as all the others combined. It sat at the foot of a short brick walk that led to a small porch outside the kitchen door. There a woman waited, her hair as black as the young man's, but perfectly straight. She too grinned, and shifted side to side eagerly. Directly in front of him, in the center of the large backyard, two more women, bundled against the cold, watched him carefully.

He could always back up, move quickly across a smaller yard and follow the drive's extension to the garage at the south end of the extra long house, but he knew he'd be nailed before he took a single step.

The ambush was perfect.

No safe way to get inside, no way for him to get ammunition of his own in time, and the huge thick evergreens that ran along three sides of the three-acre plot effectively cut him off from the rest of the world.

What he needed was something drastic.

"Give it up," the young man said with a movie-villain snarl. "You can't win."

Proctor stared at him over the Jeep's roof; then, desperately inspired, he reached into the brown paper bag cradled in his left arm and pulled out a short cylinder wrapped in thin colorful paper. He held it over his head, arm cocked to throw it into the street.

"One more step," he warned, "and the tuna gets it."

"Sorry," said Paul Tazaretti, "I hate tuna," and threw the snowball he'd been hiding in his right hand.

It was the signal for the onslaught, and Proctor didn't have a chance.

By the time it was over, amid shouts and delighted shrieks and not a few curses, he was square on his rump on the driveway, covered with snow that melted down his cheeks and collar. His secretary, RJ, had retrieved the lunch he'd gone for an hour earlier and was already inside, unable to stop giggling. On the porch, Lana Kelaleha laughed so hard she had to lean against the railing to keep from falling over. The third woman stood over him, hands in the pockets of her long leather coat.



"Pathetic," she said, lips twitching against a smile. "You look like Frosty on a really, really bad day."

He shook his head in dismay. "You know, the CEO of General Motors doesn't have to worry about stuff like this." He held out a hand, and she grabbed it, hauled him effortlessly to his feet, then stood back while he slapped as much snow from his coat and hair as he could. "This was your idea, wasn't it?"

Vivian Chambers shrugged. "You'll never know, Proc-tor. You'll never know." A wink, and she headed for the porch, paused at the foot of the stairs, and looked over her shoulder. "Watch your back, Proctor. Watch your back, it's only January." She did laugh then, a high witchlike cackle, and didn't stop until the kitchen door closed behind her.

When Taz finally came up to him, it was all he could do not to laugh at the distress on the young man's face. All this time, and Taz still wasn't sure Proctor wouldn't bite.

"They made me do it, boss," Taz said nervously as they walked to the porch. "I mean, it was a pretty cool idea, I think, but they made me do it."

"Is that so?"

"Lana. It was Lana's idea."

"You, of course, fought it."

Taz grinned, blinked, and wiped the grin away. "Well..."

"It's okay." He pushed the younger man up the steps ahead of him. "Don't worry about it."

Relieved, Taz nodded, opened the door, and waited for Proctor to join him.

Proctor, however, shook his head, gestured him on. "Go ahead. I'll be in in a minute." But before the door closed, he added, "Taz?"

Taz stuck his head out.

"Don't call me boss."

"Oh. Sure. Sorry. I forgot."

"And one more thing."

Taz waited, uncertain.

"I don't get mad. I get even."

At which point he turned away quickly and covered his mouth with a hand, wishing he had a camera for the horri-fied expression on Tazaretti's face. Too easy, he thought; sometimes it's just too damn easy with that kid.

A gloved hand absently swept snow from the railing as he looked out over the yard. Beyond the near solid wall of towering blue spruce he could hear neighborhood kids laughing and shouting as they took full advantage of this Tuesday off from school. The welcome rough scrape of sleds drawn across snow; a car passing tires wrapped in chains, the chains sounding like tin bells; on another block, the grumbling of a plow; an errant flake drifting out of the low cloud cover.

The snow in the yard was trampled where RJ and Vivian had scrambled to make their ammunition, a few tufts of grass poking through, almost green. If the forecast held true, it wouldn't be long before the snow was smooth once again, erasing all signs of the brief rebellion.

Lana. Of course it would be her. Working hard every day since the beginning of December, taking a few days off at Christmas and New Year's, then back to work again— tempers had been short, and she had known the best way to defuse them. Without, he suspected, a single word of apology for the notion that beating up on the boss was good for morale.

Another flake, larger, soon joined by a dozen more.

A small smile despite the chill of melted snow that tight-ened his shoulders and tracked down his spine.

When asked that morning after everyone had arrived, he had claimed somewhat grouchy, and loudly, that snow only meant tempting a heart attack while shoveling the driveway, then watching helplessly when a town plow threw most of it back. It meant listening to the damn stuff rumbling off the roof in the middle of the night; it meant possible frozen pipes and stalled cars and black-flecked grey slush packed in all the streets' gutters.

No one questioned him.

And he suspected that only Doc knew what the snow really meant.

Inside, he told himself; inside before someone steals your lunch.

Yet he couldn't help one last look at the yard as the after-noon darkened and the wind abruptly rose and, before he reached the door, the world turned whirling white.

He changed into a dry shirt and jeans, bullied his dark sandy hair into something resembling order, and hurried back into the north side of the house, the area where Black Oak Investigations did most of its business. The others were already in the dining room, seated at the square table that easily held eight. He took his place at the table's head, his back to the long window that looked out over the yard, and snarled as he scooped his sandwich and accepted a cup of hot chocolate from Taz.

To his left was Doc Falcon, a slender man never seen without an elegant tailored suit, a deep wine handkerchief in the breast pocket, and a perfectly knotted club tie. He was bald, his nose eagle-hooked, and his eyes set deeply enough to make his face appear more thin than it was. Before him, in careful array, were his plate, his cup of coffee, silverware, a cloth napkin, and a folder thick with paper.

"You weren't out there," Proctor complained sourly. "How come?"

"I assumed," Doc answered blandly, "you could take care of yourself."

Taz, on Proctor's right, snorted, spilled his hot chocolate, and excused himself sheepishly while RJ, on his right, rolled her eyes and used her napkin to mop up the spill. At the same time, Lana had arranged salt and pepper shakers, a fork, and a glass of water in an attempt to illustrate for Vivian the area of Hawaii where she and her husband used to live.

Chatter and quiet laughter, office rules forbidding shop-talk during lunch under the hanging brass lamp that was the room's only light.

Until at last Proctor nodded at the table and said, "Taz, if you will," and Taz immediately began to scoop up paper and plates, glasses and utensils, to carry into the kitchen. RJ took out a steno pad for notes. Lana leaned back, one hand fussing absently with the bangs that covered her brow. Vivian, at the foot of the table, made to stand and leave, but Proctor nodded her back into her seat.

"All right," he said when he had their attention. "A couple of things before you get on with the regular stuff. Vivian, are you guys ready?"

She nodded. "We leave tomorrow afternoon, we'll be in Cleveland before dinner."

One of the problems he had with searching for Taylor Blaine's daughter was the uncomfortable fact that the old man, despite protests to the contrary, had given short shrift to the two young women who had vanished with her. Taz, on his first case of this sort, had been assigned to visit the one family who had agreed to be interviewed. Vivian would accompany him for moral and information support. Among other reasons.

"You okay, Taz?"

Taz nodded. "Sure." Clearly nervous, however; fully aware of the responsibility he'd been given. "It'll be okay, boss." He winced. "I mean, Proctor."

"Good." He rubbed a finger alongside his nose; this next thing would be hard. "Lana, we have to find... Doc has to be in Boston for a week, maybe more, to close out his current case. That leaves you and me to handle everything else." He shook his head, refused to look at the others. "We, uh... we have to find someone new."

No one spoke.

What he meant was, and what he couldn't say aloud was, it was time to find a replacement for Sloan Delany, one of Black Oak's original investigators, murdered late last summer. The move was long overdue, but Proctor hadn't been

able to bring himself to do it. Delany had been too good a friend.

He cleared his throat, the matter was closed, unspoken instructions given.

"And," he said, flashing one of his one-sided smiles, "we'll need to do something about the times when RJ isn't here."

"Forget it, that's impossible," Taz protested gallantly. "We'll just have to close down, that's all there is to it."

"Oh, shut up," RJ said, slapping his arm. Her face was momentarily veiled by a ripple of long dark blond hair parted in the center and draped over her shoulders, but not quickly enough for them to miss her blushing.

Last week RitaJane had announced that she was going to start night classes down at Rutgers, half the state away. She was, she had told Proctor, determined to finish her college degree, maybe go on to get her Master's. Flushed, rightfully proud of herself, she had evidently believed he would put up a fight, because it meant leaving the office early a couple of times a week. Sometimes maybe not being able to show up at all.

All he had said was, "Why?"

She hadn't hesitated: "Because you people make me feel stupid sometimes, all the things you know, and I don't like to feel stupid."

That had thrown him, and he'd muttered, "Come on, RJ, you're not stupid, and no one here thinks you are."

A little ditzy sometimes, he thought, and exasperating in her constant boyfriend crises, but never stupid.

"It doesn't matter. It's what I think that counts. Isn't that what you always say? There might not be any real ghosts, but if you think there are, then there are?"

"Not the same."

"Yeah." She smiled. "Yeah, it is."

And maybe it was; maybe it was.

Not that it mattered. He was proud of her decision and was equally determined to make sure nothing would stand in her way. To that end, he had insisted, on condition of her retaining the job she clearly loved, that Black Oak pay for her education, a gift he wouldn't have been able to make a short seven months ago. B.B., as Lana sometimes said—Before Blaine. There had been the usual protestations, polite dances, feigned negotiation, and finally acceptance.

"RJ," he said now, "If you've any ideas, bring them to Lana. Otherwise, we'll try temps."

"No." Lana shook her head emphatically. "A temp is out."

And for good reason, he realized with a nod to her protest. Black Oak's primary cases dealt with frauds and scams, most of them financially oriented, and a temp would, of necessity, have too much access to too much sensitive information.

And for his own private cases—investigations of scams and schemes of an entirely different kind—no temp would understand.

"Whatever," he told her. "Just do it soon."

Again, no one spoke, just a simple nod from Lana.

He pushed back his chair then, and stood, faced the window, watched the dancing snow. Felt the winter's chill drift off the pane.

"One more thing," he said. "Doc, what about the glass?"

Falcon drew the folder to him and opened it. Inside were a dozen crisp color and black-and-white photographs of what looked to be varying sizes of glass shards laid out on dark green felt. Artifacts brought back from a recent, harrowing time spent in Kansas with Vivian.

One of the private cases.

Doc cleared his throat, touched the side of his nose. "My friends down in Princeton are finally back from their trip, and they're checking on the pieces I left them." He shook his head, leaned back, folded his hands in his lap. "I have no idea what they'll find, but I suspect..." He smiled rue-fully. "Nothing. I do not know."

Proctor wasn't pleased. They had wasted a lot of time since he'd returned last November, and he wasn't pleased at all that no one had yet been able to give him a straight answer. Especially since he was sure, without concrete proof, that the case had been much more than what it seemed.

"Then all we can do is wait," he said, not bothering to hide his exasperation.

Falcon nodded. "I'm afraid so."

Great, he thought sourly; son of a bitch, that's just great.

A pale fall of light from the kitchen and dining-room windows illuminated the yard halfway out to the blue spruce. Snow winked on the boughs, the site of the snow-ball fight was already obliterated, and he looked through his own reflection to a spot out there where, years ago, in a snowstorm much like this, he had spoken to his father.

Who had been dead for seven years.

Which was why, when he considered adding someone new to the firm, sooner or later he posed the question:

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

And which was why RJ had been wrong in one respect, and why he hadn't yet corrected her: If you think there are ghosts, it's possible, maybe even probable, that you'll see them sooner or later, whether they're there or not.

But if you *know* there are ghosts...

... what else might be out there?

Proctor knew.

He had seen it.

# TRE

## B

eale Hall was not quite as grand as the guidebooks would have it. An architectural nightmare for those who understood such things, with tall windows, a steep roof studded with gables, dark stone walls, ornamental medieval towers at either end, and a hideously ornate Victorian portico at the entrance at the top of the circular drive. Beautiful in an ugly sort of way, but Conrad, with a photograph album wrapped in brown paper under his arm, was nonetheless impressed each time he entered through the huge oak doors and was, like today, led down a wide paneled corridor into a study easily as large as the first floor of his own house. Walls covered with book-shelves and paintings; multipaned French doors in back that opened onto a patio that overlooked several acres of grass, trees, and gardens; a walnut desk he reckoned would take five men to lift; oriental carpeting; a huge old-fashioned safe in the corner; and the distinct aura of immense, and old, wealth. Morgan wasn't here.

The butler, a cadaverous ageless man who never smiled or blinked, whose inordinately thin lips scarcely moved when he spoke, suggested a drink while he waited. Conrad declined. It was only noon, and even at his worst he never imbibed so early. Instead he went straight to the desk, placed the album on the perfectly centered leather-edged blotter, and stood at the window, hands clasped behind his back.

Blue sky stung his eyes; bright unmarked snow made him squint.

Dead gardens ringed with low stone walls, a glimpse of stables off to the left, a thick stand of trees at the back, black against all that unrelenting white.

He did not want to be here.

He had no idea what the plan was, what his purpose in it was, but after a long night of tossing, turning, and nipping at the brandy he kept at his bedside, parts of his mind that had been long suppressed these past few years had begun to stir and ask questions, questions he did not know the answers to, questions he did not want to know the answers to.

From the beginning, from that first winter meeting in the Wood six years ago, he had told himself it was for him and Willa, a chance in their later years to live comfortably, safe from the foul economic winds that had so often bested too many of his contemporaries. More basically, he did not want to die alone; he did not want to die in a so-called retirement home, barren of life despite the life that was there.

In that regard he had succeeded beyond dreaming.

It was the price that he had paid, and would continue to pay, that had, at long last, begun to niggle at his conscience.

Why now, though, and not before, he had no idea.

A quiet sound behind him, and he turned, saw the butler in the doorway.

"I've just had word," the manservant said, enunciation almost comically precise. "Mr. Morgan will be at least an hour. Traffic, I believe, in retrieving his guest. Will you wait, sir? Shall I bring you a light lunch?"

Cheswick started to nod, saw the album on the desk, and suddenly shook his head. "No," he said, crossing the room hurriedly as he buttoned his topcoat. "No. Thank you. I will ... if you would be so kind as to ring Mr. O'Leary for me. Thank you. I, uh... thank you."

For no reason he could think of, he had begun to perspire, and all he wanted was to get out of this place before he embarrassed himself. Away from the history of it, the weight of it, before it crushed him. By the time he stood under the portico, he was panting, breath puffed and streaming like a hard-riden steed; by the time Patrick O'Leary drove up in his battered old taxi, he was ready to run home, the hell with the ride and his heart.

"Raven's Loft, Patrick," he said as he practically fell into the patched backseat. "Stop for no man or woman, as fast as you can."

O'Leary merely grunted and, as usual, drove not much faster than a young man's brisk walk. Complaining about the way the roads were still not cleared, complaining about the government's new round of taxes, complain-ing about the weather because it wasn't yet spring.

Cheswick heard very little of it.

He wanted a drink; he wanted Willa; he wanted a first-class ticket to anywhere but here because he had a terrible nasty feeling he had just figured out what was going on.

"You all right, Conrad?" O'Leary asked, glancing in the rearview mirror.

Cheswick stared bleakly at him. "I don't know, Patrick. I swear to God, I don't know."

"Well, it's easy, isn't it," said Ginny Harden patiently. "You just tell him what you want, and you gets it, ain't that the way it's done?"

"Yeah, but—"

"But nothing." She rapped her best friend's arm sharply with a knuckle. They sat at the window table of Coranders, the only restaurant in the village, for their usual Monday luncheon. "Listen, Mave, you got to do it. You don't, he walks away without a scratch just like always and you're left holding the bag."

Mavis Jones shook her head, miserable in her grief. "I don't know, Gin, I don't know."

"Listen," Ginny said urgently, reaching across the table to take hold of the other woman's shoulder, shaking her lightly, "you let that son of a bitch walk over you like that, he'll be laughing at you the rest of your life. He ain't pay-ing his alimony; he ain't fixing the house like he's sup-posed to. Now this. You won't never be able to walk down the street, other people'll be laughing at you too. Hell, they already are." She shook the woman again. "Listen to me, Mave, you've got to do it."

"But there's not one to pay the—"

Ginny released Mavis's shoulder and leaned back, arms folded under her breasts. "There is, you know."

Mavis blinked stupidly.

"Cary himself."

"No." Mavis shook her head vehemently. "No, I won't do that. I won't."

Ginny shrugged. "Then him that fired you, right?"

"What?"

"Well, you said there was no good reason. He made a pass, you turned him down, next thing you know you're on the street, no money coming in, right? Right?"

Mavis stared, then frowned, then nodded slowly. "Well, maybe."

"No maybe about it. He's a bastard too, right? That's what they call sexual harassment, right? Only it's your word against his, and around here that ain't good enough, you know that. So what's the problem?"

"He's local, for one thing."

"Never stopped the bargain before." Ginny closed her eyes for a moment, finally made a decision. "You think, do you, that my old man just happened to be on the tracks that night? You think he was really too drunk to notice that bloody great train you could see coming a mile away?"

Mavis's mouth opened in a silent gasp.

Ginny nodded grimly. "He raped me when I was a kid, Mave. Just fourteen, my own dad raped me. He's local. No loss. And now I've got me own house, free and clear."

"But I... I wasn't raped."

Ginny wanted to strangle the woman. 'God, Mave, are you thick? You want everybody thinking you're tricking? Shagging anything on two legs what isn't a female? That's what Cary's saying, you know. And I know you know it. And when he says it, he laughs. I've heard him, Mave. The son of a bitch laughs.'

Mavis propped her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands. A long minute later she put her hands in her lap. "What do I do" she said. "How do I do it?"

Just past noon, Mickey Danby stood behind the register in her empty, brightly lit shop and wished her mother would make up her mind about that old bugger, Conrad. Far as she could reckon, they'd been hanging around to-gether for just on five years, and it was clear as a bell, at least to her, that sooner or later they would get themselves married.

She prayed, not entirely unselfishly, that it would be damn sooner.

She didn't mind sharing the flat above the bookshop with Willa, not really, Her mother made no unreasonable demands, kept to herself, and always chipped in when funds were low and bills needed to be settled. The shop, Dickens Closet, pretty much paid its own way most of the time, but it was, all in all, a chancy operation. When the tourist flow was good, so were the profits; when the buses and cars stopped coming, as they did when travel fares got too high or the weather was dreadful, that's when Mickey wished she'd gotten into another line of work.

She also didn't mind the romance she was sure the two shared. She thought it was kind of sweet, really. Her brother now, he was such a prig, such a prat, that he couldn't even stand the sight of Conrad holding the old lady's hand. An affront to Father, he would declare in such high dudgeon it was a wonder he didn't get a nosebleed. It was up to her then to remind him that Father had been dead for twenty years, more than half their lives, and it was a miracle Willa hadn't remarried before this, being so good-looking and all.

What she minded, however, was the sex.

Not her mother's; hers.

There wasn't any.

Right now, for example, despite the glare of the snow still on the pavement and rooftops, she could look through the shop window directly across the Row into the news-agents, where Henry Treadle worked. She could see him fussing with the magazine racks, straightening and replac-ing before the lunch crowd descended, his long brown hair fallen over his face, those arms... that chest...

"Whoa," she said, fanning herself with one hand and laughing, glad, for a change, that the shop was empty.

She and Henry had been seeing each other for nearly six months now, and each time she had worked up the cour-age to get down to it, Willa would come in. Blush. Fluster. And hurry back out. Which was fine and all, but nothing was able to put the mood back together.

Willa marries Conrad, however, and moves in with him on Carrow Lane, and suddenly the flat is...

Mickey shook her head. A dream it was, that's all; just a dream.

Her mother would never take the first step, Conrad was... well, Conrad, and Henry had more than once told her quite sternly that he would never sully their relation-ship by resorting to some sordid night in a cheap motel.

"God," she said with a slap at the counter. Sometimes he sounded like one of the books she sold. *Sordid. Sully.* The kind of words people just didn't use anymore.

Still and all, he was a generous, sweet man. A wonderful man. He surprised her with small presents for no reason at all; he treated her better than Dad had ever treated Mum; he worked his butt off to make sure every villager's quirks and interests *were met* with his stock; and he was all for Mum taking Connie as her own.

Not to mention that, if he was to be believed, he loved her.

"Then let's get married," she had said the last time he told her.

"No, Michelle, I can't marry you until I know we'll be secure."

The only person in the world who called her Michelle.

"Henry, you have your shop, I have mine, so unless the whole place burns down, we'll have it made."

For her, a potent, telling argument; for him and his un-commonly fragile ego, an insinuation that without her he wouldn't be able to support them both. Not in the way he wanted to.

Sweet. But damn exasperating.

But tonight that was going to change.

Tonight she had promised herself she would give him the ultimatum: love me, marry me. Now. No more waiting. The *or else* would be implied—if he didn't stop dithering and planning, she'd look for someone new.

Thirty-three wasn't old, but she damn sure wasn't going to end up like her mother.

Of course she could always go to the Wood and make a bargain. She could, if she believed in such things. Which she didn't, never had, never will, and anyway, if it were as easy as that, half the village would be sleeping in a church-yard, or obscenely rich, or... whatever.

No, it was time for poor Henry to put up or pack his duffel.

She felt her face launch into a scowl, passed a finger over it to smooth out the lines, and suddenly realized Henry was waving to her, and probably had been for a while. The scowl became a schoolgirl grin. She waved back; he mimed *hang on minute, I'm going to call you*, and hurried out of sight.

Oh, dear, she thought; what happened now?

When the telephone rang, she jumped, even though she'd been expecting it. As soon as she put the receiver to her ear, he said, "Darling, don't say anything, but I've got to go down to London straight after work. I'll be back first thing tomorrow." A smile in his voice. "Keep your evening free, love. There's something important I want to tell you."

"Oh, Lord, is there something wrong?"

He laughed. "No. I'm fine. Just... do what you do to close up, bundle up nice and warm, and I'll be over after I return about half six, is that all right?"

"It's fine, Henry, but what's this all about?"

He didn't laugh, but she could feel him smiling. "A sur-prise, love. A surprise."

Receiver in hand, she stared blindly at the empty street. Not daring to hope. It wasn't bad news; she always knew when it was bad news. Could this be it, then? Could he have finally stepped up to the mark? Was he going to London to buy a ring? Something else? She grinned, and decided as she absently patted her short, deep brown hair that there was no sense speculating; it would only drive her crazy. Patience was the watchword. She didn't even mind that her ultimatum would be postponed. Something in his voice told her she wouldn't need it. Assuming, of course, it wasn't wishful thinking.

She didn't care.

It put her in such a good mood that she didn't even mind when Mrs. Yarrow waddled in, complaining about the weather, about the poor selection of romances on the shelves, about the price of a paperback these days, and just about everything else in and out of the shop.

Mickey didn't care, because Henry would soon be hers.

Mavis stood at the edge of the clearing, anger at her ex-husband not quite stilling the nerves that made her hands slip in and out of her coat pockets, that kept her shifting her weight from foot to foot, that made her wonder if maybe she wasn't making a huge mistake.

Ginny was right, though.

She *had* heard what Cary had been saying about her, hateful rumors soon blossoming into established fact when, one night last week at the Loft, a man had approached her. A stranger. Obliquely offering her money for a date. She hadn't understood right away, and when she had, she had screamed at him to go away.

A few of the others in the pub had laughed, and she had fled, red-faced and weeping.



She stepped into the Wood.

Early afternoon became early evening under the thick branches and snow-laden crowns. No birds, no traffic noise, just the sound of her boots crunching over the thin cover of snow.

When she finally looked back, she could see nothing but trees.

When she faced straight ahead, she saw a shadow, and it terrified her, but instead of running, she said, "Help me."



T

he house had grown quiet. No wind in the eaves. No plows, no scratch of snow or sleet against the panes.

It was just past five, and Proctor was at last alone.

He sat on the three-cushion couch, in the high-ceiling living room. There were end tables with small lamps that provided the light, a pair of armchairs, a walnut coffee table, a lion's-paw wingback where he sat at meetings not held in the dining room—Doc called it his throne, but Lana called it an abomination it was so damn ugly. The north wall was taken by an etched glass-fronted bookcase, the south wall was shelved, holding his music, his television, and things that just sort of found their way there.

A large and comfortable room where nothing matched and everything fit.

Behind the wingback was a long picture window, its drapes open to the night. Several times after the others had left, he stood there, hands behind his back, watching the lights on the other side of the Hudson River wink and flare as the storm finally ended; several times he turned away, not from the cold but from the distance of it all.

He yawned and rubbed his eyes, scratched vigorously through his hair. Snowy afternoons were not meant for work. They were meant for reading, dozing, generally wasting time without feeling too much guilt. A second yawn popped his jaw, made him smile before he reached for the telephone. Time for a little business of his own.

A call to Ohio:

As soon as the connection was made and a greeting given on the other end, he said, "It's Proctor. If you're free, I have a favor to ask."

There was no question but that the man on the other end would be free. It was often the preferred method of payment for Proctor's services—when the puzzle is solved, an obligation is incurred. He put no time limit on it. Some-times it was only a matter of days or weeks; sometimes a matter of years; and much of the time, even when the obligation was discharged, successfully or not, the contact remained available, and he was never hesitant to use it.

Blaine had his connections, Proctor had his own. He had a feeling that his people and the old man's didn't exactly move in the same circles.

"I have two people coming your way tomorrow. One of my investigators, Paul Tazaretti, I think you've met him, and a woman, Vivian Chambers. She's his bodyguard. Don't kid yourself when you see her. She is an expert, and she's damn good. They're visiting a woman names Miram Tackett, just outside Akron. I want to be sure that no one gets in their way."

He listened, neither smiling nor frowning.

"Nothing specific, just a precaution. I'm feeling a little paranoid tonight."

A grunt, a fleeting smile.

"Whatever it takes. Just be invisible."

\* \* \*

The furnace murmured to itself, a slow wind began to whisper around the corners of the house, and it was easy to believe that the house on the edge of the New Jersey Palisades was the only house left on the planet tonight.

A second call, to the Saddle Hills Recovery Center thirty minutes' drive from where he sat:

"Paul, this is Proctor. Just want to make sure it's all right to see Mom tomorrow, as usual. Nothing... nothing new, I suppose... no, I didn't think so... I'll bring those vacation pictures again, you never know, maybe that'll do the trick... yeah, well, it's all I have, Doc. If Dad were alive... yeah, yeah, I know, I know, wishes and horses, right? ... okay, see you tomorrow."

When the phone rang he started, stared at it dumbly, then grabbed the receiver.

"Proctor, that you?"

It took a second for the voice to register. "Yes, Av, it's me."

"You sit by the phone waiting for my calls?"

"I just happened to be here."

"I wanted to talk to the sexy lady, not you."

"Which one, Avram?" he said, leaning back and smiling. "I have nothing but sexy women in here all the time."

"Very funny. I meant the one with the long hair and the big you-knows."

"Av, for crying out loud, she's barely twenty-two."

"So I'm dead? I'm in my grave? I've been struck blind? What's the problem? Okay, the one with the enchanting figure and enough hair to stuff a sofa. You happy?"

"Idella hears you talking like that, you will be in your grave."

"Ha! What my wife don't know won't hurt me."

"Right. Sure. You just keep telling yourself that. So what's up?"

"You're the Richard Diamond, private detective, you tell me."

Proctor puffed his cheeks wearily, rubbed a finger over one eye. "Avram, I am not a private detective. We've been through this a million times."

"You're private, right? You detect, right? Don't be so fussy, Proctor, you'll go bald. So anyway, I got your books here, they came in this morning."

"Great, thanks. I'll pick them up sometime tomorrow."

"Make it early. I got them on the front counter, and they're making my customers nervous. You shouldn't be reading such junk anyway, you know that? You're too old for this crap."

Proctor made sure Avram Munshin heard his sigh. "Maybe I'm too old, Av, but I like to be prepared. It's research"

"For what? You expecting we're going to be overrun by an army of vampires, with werewolf generals and some bug-eyed alien things driving the tanks? Young man, let me tell you something you obviously don't know, Okay? Trust me on this, Proctor, there are no such things as vampires."

Proctor laughed, agreed, and hung up. Looked at the window that dimly reflected the dining room's hanging lamp. The wingback was in his way, and all he could see was the other end of the couch, the archway, the tops of a couple of chairs.

Nothing else.

It was as if he weren't there, and although he knew it was dumb, he shifted quickly to his left, until he could see himself again.

Vampires, he thought, cast no reflections.

Two more calls, to people whose cases he'd taken up, and solved. The first, to an elderly woman in Maryland, assured him that she no longer relied on tea leaves and bone-casting to guide her investments. He had been fairly certain the fake Gypsy who had targeted her wouldn't try it again—this had been one of those times when turning the crook over to the police probably wouldn't have done any good. He had taken steps himself to drive the man out of business. These steps hadn't been strictly legal, but they had obviously been effective.

The second call was to a family up in Cambridge, driven near to madness by poltergeist activity and hauntings that turned out to be a clumsy method used by their owner/ landlord to clear marginally profitable buildings so he could turn them into upscale, overpriced condominiums. That one had been easy, one the police could have handled without breaking a sweat. The problem, as always was the victims—embarrassment and fear of ridicule went a long way sometimes toward keeping victims from contacting the authorities. This particular family never wanted to see him again, a reminder of what they perceived was their gullible shame, but he called anyway. Just to be sure.

Sometimes, RJ, he thought, ghosts aren't ghosts at all.

With nothing else on his mental list but a decision whether to go out to east or fix something here at home, he thought about the day's mail. Immediately after lunch, he, Lana, and RJ had gone through it all, regular matters first. There was, as there had been over the past few months, more than usual to sift through; Blaine had apparently spread the word of Black Oak's modest successes. This was another reason why he needed a replacement for Delany—to help with more work than the firm had had in several years.

What bothered him, however, was the inescapable fact that he hadn't been able to establish these new contacts on his own. He had always done good work, rarely came up failing, yet the business had been in serious financial trouble until Blaine and his money had come galloping over the horizon. The new cases, the ones he accepted, weren't charity; he knew that; but couldn't help feeling that they were.

Pride.

It all came down to his damn stubborn pride.

The one thing the old man couldn't influence, however, was the other half of Black Oak:

After RJ had returned to her office to type the responses, he and Lana turned to the special items. *His* mail. Requests and pleas for help or assistance forwarded from contacts who knew his reputation. None tempted him. Except, per-haps, for the man in Flagstaff who believed his barn and cattle had been taken over by alien creatures that resembled walking Joshua trees and pipe organ cacti.

"You're kidding," Lana had said when she saw his expression.

It took him a moment before he finally said, almost rue-fully, "Yes."

Nevertheless it had been a close call, if only because it had been so long since he had felt that tug, that spark that indicated something out there needed his attention. Needed looking into before someone else was fleeced and dreams were shattered like so much glass.

Still, walking cacti did have a certain bizarre allure.

Maybe, he thought, wandering into the small kitchen, staring blindly at the contents of the cupboards over the counter, maybe it's just paranoia, like he'd told his Ohio connection. The last case he had taken on had been a death trap. If Vivian hadn't been with him ... he scowled. That must be it. Once burnt, twice shy. Not that he hadn't had close calls before, but in this instance *setup* was the word that came instantly to mind.

"Right," he muttered, wandering back to the couch. "Of course. You've ticked off the Secret Masters of the Uni-verse. Next thing you know, the milkman's really an agent for the Dark side and Avram's really an assassin troll in dis-guise." He chuckled, shook his head, and nearly jumped back to his feet when the telephone rang. He closed his eyes in disgust, and grabbed the receiver. "Mr. Proctor?"

"Oh, hello, Franklin," he said politely. Franklin Blaine laughed softly, in self-deprecation. "Yes, I'm sorry, it's me again. My monthly call."

Franklin, and his twin sister, Alicia, disapproved strongly of their father's continuing search for their lost sister. Nevertheless, since it was something they had not been able to dissuade the old man of, Franklin had taken it upon himself to make sure the money spent had been spent wisely. Under the circumstances.

"Lousy weather down there?" Blaine asked.

"Snow," Proctor answered sourly. "Slush. Ice."

"You're not a winter man, I take it."

"I don't mind the cold, it's the damn snow."

"Ah. Well, up here, it's just beautiful. A wonderland."

Of course it is, Proctor thought; you're on a zillion acres of private land, no traffic to turn it all into slush. "Mr. Proctor, I'm wondering how things are going."

"The same, Franklin. As always, the same. It's a slow business, especially after all these years."

"I'm sure it is. It must be rather frustrating." Proctor shifted his position so he could see his reflection. "I am a patient man, Franklin, if there's something to be found, I hope to find it."

"Confidence. I do like that. You would go far in the larger world of commerce, Mr. Proctor. Confidence. Ambition. A clear sense of purpose. Who knows where you'd end up, yes?"

"My world is large enough, thanks."

And a damn sight larger, he thought, than the likes of you will ever know.

Although Vivian and Lana regularly provided detailed accountings of all expenses incurred in the search, Franklin insisted, as he did every month, in reassuring himself that no corners had been cut, no unnecessary expenditures made. It had become so routine, Proctor was able to go through it automatically, making all the right sounds at the right times, patiently explaining his methods without really explaining a thing.

Actually, he didn't mind, not really. Since Franklin oversaw the daily running of Hogan and Blaine, his interest was understandable.

It was the attitude that grated.

The younger Blaine firmly believed in the separation of classes, and had gone so far as to affect a Boston Brahmin accent echoed by his sister, a ludicrous contrast to the workingman New England his father spoke. Although their conversations had never been anything but polite, they never quite reached the friendly stage, never ended without Proctor being reminded, one way or another, in which class he resided. Permanently.

Which was why Proctor always called him Franklin, never Mr. Blaine. He knew it pissed him off.

Spiteful, perhaps; childish, definitely.

He wagged his eyebrows at his reflection: so *sue me*.

When Blaine finished, there was a pause long enough to make Proctor sit up. His voice flattened. "What is it, Franklin?" "Mr. Proctor, Alicia and I are of one mind on this, make no mistake about it."

"I'm aware of that."

"After much discussion over the holidays, we have concluded that despite your best efforts as one of the best in your field, or so our father says, this entire enterprise is going nowhere."

"It's been not quite six months, Franklin. Hardly enough time to put a dent in thirteen years."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Proctor, nevertheless. It is our desire that you continue as best you can until, say, the end of next month. At that time we believe it would be wise, and prudent, to end it. With, of course, our heartfelt thanks."

Proctor shook his head. "Franklin, I don't want to seem ungrateful, or mercenary, but I don't think this is your decision, do you?"

Another pause, and he could hear a faint rustling in the background, a whispering. Alicia?

"Mr. Proctor, you have no idea how cruel this is. You have not the slightest inkling what this is doing to Alicia and

I."

Proctor thought of his mother, virtually catatonic in her private room at the Center. "You'd be surprised, Franklin."

"Yes. I would." The younger Blaine's voice became harsh. "Celeste is gone, Mr. Proctor. No matter what my father says, my sister... is dead. You cannot bring her back. My father cannot bring her back. She is *dead*, Mr. Proctor, and I am telling you now, you will not dig her up."

He sat for a long time, listening to the furnace, listening to the dying wind. A draft gently rocked the hanging lamp in the room behind him, swinging shadows across the walls and ceiling. When at last he rose, he slipped his hands into his pockets and walked over to the window. From this angle he could not see the river, but across a field of black there were lights suspended in the darkness, smeared by blowing snow.

Five minutes or an hour; it didn't matter when he finally turned and crossed the room to the large oak door in the south wall. He unlocked it, swung it open, and stepped over the threshold into the hallway that led to the rooms no one saw but him.

Here be dragons, Lana had once said, only half joking.

He turned and stared at the telephone.

Try to get me fired, he said silently; try to talk the old man into letting me go, try to discourage him, whatever. But whatever you do, do not threaten me.

Trust me on this, Franklin—you're way out of your league.

When the door finally closed, all the lights went out.

When the door finally closed, it did so with an echo.



# M

Mavis Jones was disappointed. She stood naked in the bathroom before the full-length mirror Cary had fixed to the back of the door shortly after they'd married, and saw the same thing she saw every time she stepped out of the shower—nothing special. Everything as ordinary as it always had been, just like her name. Blond hair wet and dull, breasts and hips nothing to brag about, legs that were and always had been slightly plump at the thighs, with no saving taper at the ankles. Ordinary brown eyes, ordinary lips. Not even a dimple to break the ordinary lines of her face.

"Damn," she muttered and grabbed for a towel to dry herself off.

After waking this beautiful Tuesday morning, after con-vincing herself that last night had not been a dream, she half expected things to be markedly different. Aglow about her, maybe, or some physical change.

Nothing; absolutely nothing.

She didn't count the telephone call at breakfast, the one that told her she could take the morning off. It had been a surprise, but then, Mrs. Whidden did that occasionally when she was too bored to open the shop. Or, Mavis thought with a giggle, too hungover.

A pleasant start, but again, nothing special.

What was different, and what scared her a little, was the realization that she felt no guilt at all for what she had done. The bargain had been struck, something would hap-pen to her ex-boss, and... she frowned. Then what?

She didn't know.

She just wished it would happen soon. If only to prove that she hadn't lost her mind.

More than once, she and Ginny, and once in a while Mickey Danby, spent tempestuous but friendly lunch hours arguing the truth of the bargain. In light of day it seemed so very silly. A legend of the kind villages like this often fostered. Generally it was the old folks who spoke in whis-pers of such things, while the young mocked and scorned and eventually left for greener pastures.

In Pludbury, however, age made no difference when it came to belief. The truth of it was, Mickey belonged to a very small minority, and Mavis had often wondered if her dismissal of the bargain was only a sign of her jealousy. She had nothing she wanted, so the bargain was a waste of time. Why believe in something you'll never need?

Why believe in a ghost who'll only help you once a year?

Part of the bargain, a very important part, was never di-vulging your participation in it. Ginny had taken a great risk in telling her about her father, the sign of a true friend, and Mavis hoped nothing would happen to her because of it. She had done it out of love, and out of fear for Mavis's life.

She shuddered then, dressed quickly, and hurried out to her car. At least, she thought, deciding to be charitable, she could thank Cary for the fact that the old heap ran at all. He was good at that, making cars and things run. He picked up what he called loose change by fixing other people's en-gines, and even, lately, spent a lot of time at the Hall, work-ing on that huge beast they had up there.

Too bad the little bastard couldn't fix his own life.

A thought: Dear God, did he spread lies about her up there as well? Did Mr. Morgan think she was a slut, too?

A scowl, then, as she reminded herself that all would be well soon; then it wouldn't matter what anyone thought of her.

Especially that shit, Cary Jones.

The cottage she had retained in the divorce was the last on the lane, the last before the village gave way to fallow fields and the low hills that surrounded the village. She turned on the engine, backed out of the graveled drive, and sped toward town. Mornings off did not mean a grant to be late for the afternoon. Mrs. Whidden was the only one who would give her a job after Cary had left her, and left her reputation in ruins. Losing the job would mean losing everything, and she didn't think she could bear it.

"Help me," she had said.

And Jarred Battle had answered, "Yes."

"This," said Alan Morgan, "is astonishing." He glanced up from the photograph album and grinned at his guest seated in the club chair opposite the desk. "Do you have any idea how old some of these pictures are?" He turned a page carefully, shaking his head in pleasure and astonishment, his free hand unconsciously stroking his short, well-trimmed beard. "I cannot believe it. How that old bugger found this is a miracle, that's all I can tell you. A damn miracle. I shall have to double his finder's fee, no question about it."

"Important?" his guest asked.

Morgan sat back in his leather chair, though his long-fingered hands did not leave the album. "In a national, historical sense? Absolutely not. No one cares about Pludbury except the people who live in it. But for this house? As far as I can tell, this is the only photographic record extant of the people who lived here at the turn of the century. The last few pages are relatively recent, but the rest?" He spread his arms. "Except for those godawful oils in the front hall and library, no one knows, or is old enough to remember, what these people really looked like." He tapped the album firmly with a forefinger. "The last of their line, my dear friend. What we have here, what Conrad in his muddling genius has unearthed, are actual photographs of the last descendants, direct or otherwise, of the scum that built this place."

"Harsh words, Alan."

"Well, then come and have a look while I tell you a story before lunch. It's proof positive that English history isn't as dull as the BBC makes it out to be."

When Conrad Cheswick woke up at midmorning, he was positive he had been shanghaied in the middle of the night and was now aboard some sort of unholy merchant ship plying its lumbering way across a storm-tossed sea. The bedroom swayed, the bed swayed, and his stomach and head competed with each other as to which would be the first to make him scream. Closing his eyes only made it worse; sitting up only made him lie back again, moan, and pray for a swift death.

What, he wondered bitterly, had he been thinking?

The last thing he remembered with any clarity was stepping up to the bar, dropping a pair of ten-pound notes in front of him, and telling Darve Westrum to keep his glass filled with the best scotch in the house.

He had no idea how he had gotten home until, with a gasp, he heard a familiar noise in the kitchen.

No; please, Lord, don't let it be.

"Well, well, well," a voice said from the doorway. "It lives."

"My God, Willa," he begged, "please don't shout. I'll go deaf before my time."

Willa Danby stepped into the room, lips parted in a grim smile. "Your time is about up, Connie, if you don't tell me what got into you last night."

"Don't know," he lied.

She moved to the foot of the bed, hands on her hips, and glared. "Speak now, you old reprobate, or I'm fetching the pots and pans for a little impromptu music of my own creation."

He swallowed and, without lifting his head, did his best to look soulful. "I don't deserve you, Willa."

"Indeed," she agreed.

She was a head taller than he, slender to his round, with a figure most women half her age would kill for. That she tried to hide it under loose sweaters and baggy trousers only made her, to him, that much more alluring. No makeup,



her hair still mostly that soft dark sable and cut sensibly short ... she could wear one of those hideous green herbal facial things, he thought, and still look damn attractive.

"Well?" she said, fingers drumming her hips.

He moaned, shifted, and his eyes widened in horror when he realized he hadn't a stitch on, that the only thing between him and Willa was a plain thin sheet that even now had ridden down to his pale stomach. Suddenly pan-icked he flapped a hand around, trying to pull it up, but she leaned over and snared his wrist, held it immobile.

"You did it, didn't you?" she accused. "After all we talked about, you took the package to the Hall, didn't you?"

His eyes closed.

"Oh, you old fool," she said, part in sorrow, part in anger. "Do you have any idea what you've done?" She shook her head. "Yes, I suppose you do. But why, Connie? What would make you do such a thing?"

"For us," he said weakly. "I told him I was going to marry you before the year's out."

The grip on his wrist loosened, the fingers stroked the back of his hand, the voice softened. "You didn't."

"I did."

"You're a damn idiot, but I accept."

"Thank you, love."

"Thank me later, Conrad. Now we must figure out how we're going to live long enough to keep your promise."

Mavis, red-faced from the cold and hurrying from the car park, pushed into Whidden's with an apology on her lips, and stopped. Stared. Spread a hand over her chest to keep her heart from breaking out.

Mrs. Whidden, who preferred to call herself a clothier rather than a woman who sold dresses and the occasional suit, stood behind the main counter on the left-hand wall, an enormous smile on a face that had been nipped and tucked enough to give her complexion an almost waxy sheen.

Gertrude Whidden seldom smiled; and when she did, it was barely more than a twitch. She also never drank at work, but there she was, with a glass of champagne in one hand, the other holding a glass out to Mavis.

"You've won the pools," Mavis guessed.

"Good as," Mrs. Whidden said. "Come in, girl, close the door before we freeze to death, and have a sip. I've just done the books, and you have no idea how much we've made over the holidays." She nodded at a ledger set next to the register. "And how many orders have come in in the last week."

Mavis, still not sure how to react, moved forward cautiously.

"Oh, do hurry, girl," Mrs. Whidden said, laughing. "If you don't I shall have to rescind the raise I just gave you. And," she added with a broad wink, "the promotion as well."

The train to Windsor, the bus to Pludbury—a hell of a dismal trip, uncomfortable and dull, and far longer than it would have taken by car. Henry Treadle, however, hadn't trusted the roads to be fully cleared, just as he hadn't trusted Michelle not to spy on him when he'd told her of his London trip. If he had taken the car, she would have asked questions because he made it a point to complain about the drive whenever he could. The bus and train, however, would keep her silent.

It would also give her ideas, because of the expense. The stupid cow probably figured he was buying a ring, or some other special engagement-type present.

He laughed to himself as the bus nipped sickeningly over a low rise, congratulated himself on having the strength of purpose and willpower to have held off as long as he had. Not that he'd turned into a monk. Far from it. Of course it would have been easier to have a bit in the village itself, but that was neither wise nor possible. He had learned that with Mavis Jones, who, if she'd had any courage at all, could have brought his whole scheme down on his head.

But tonight...

Ah, tonight was the pop-the-question occasion.

Michelle would agree, they'd set the date, he would have her without question anyplace he wanted, and before he knew it he would be able to push harder on Plan B, which would be to get the old witch married off to Father Christmas as fast as he could. Once that was done, the old fart's bank account would be fair game.

Simple and ingenious—he laughed. Christ, he was a bastard, wasn't he?



# A

vast obsidian plain under a huge faceless moon. Obsidian trees whose stiff sharp leaves clacked and clattered in the wake of a swift dark wind. The ground's surface smooth and even, reflected moonlight giving the surface a depth that made crossing it seem like crossing clear ice over still black water. Winged creatures in the sky, silent, gliding, leaving faint trails of grey smoke that twisted and tore and soon vanished.

Proctor knew it was a dream.

He had been here before.

In the dream there was the scent of fresh roses and fresh mint, the stench of rotting flesh and charred wood; in the dream there was no climate, though once he had nearly frozen and once he had nearly withered as though he'd been locked in an oven; in the dream the only sound was the clack and clatter of the leaves, and the echo of his foot-steps as he skirted the trees and headed for a knoll that broke the flat horizon.

He had been there too.

Beyond it, if he slept that long, would be a castle, as black as the landscape around it, rising from the ground rather than resting upon it. Black pennants on the corner towers. Black-clad guards on the walls. A narrow band of tall black blades where a moat once had been. A black dragon at the front gate, sitting on its haunches, black wings unfurled, black claws unsheathed, and on its breast, scales in the shape of a young woman's face—in gold.

Sometimes an earthquake toppled him into a chasm; sometimes a violent storm drowned him or battered him or made him scream when he was struck by slow-moving bolts of black lightning; sometimes the dragon rose above the castle, and caused black fire to engulf him while the woman in gold smiled; and sometimes he walked without seeing anyone, or anything, and the moon cast him a shadow outlined in silver.

This time was different.

The wind stopped, the winged creatures landed in the trees and watched him, and he could hear, over the knoll, the steady breathing of the dragon.

He knew it was a dream, but it wasn't a nightmare, not even when he died.

It wasn't a nightmare tonight; it was a place, nothing more, that he hadn't figured out yet. Not a symbol of any-place else, or a representation of his quest.

It was what it was.

And tonight, for the first time, it made him uneasy.

Something had changed here, more than the lack of wind, more than the creatures who watched him with black eyes, more than the feeling that the dragon had sensed him and didn't give a damn.

Something had changed; it was no longer familiar.

And a voice whispered: *You're not alone.*

When the telephone rang, Proctor rolled over and tried to slam the alarm clock silent. Once he realized what had driven him out of his dream, what had prevented him from learning who had been on the plain with him, he cursed, rubbed his eyes, and stared at the dark bedroom window while he fumbled the receiver up to his ear.

"What?" he snapped, thinking this had damn well bet-ter be good.

"Good news, Proctor," a voice said, practically yelling. "Great news!"

He was halfway to slamming the receiver back onto its cradle when, through the shifting fog of waking up, he recognized his caller. "Hang on," he said, and grunted into a sitting position, stared at the window again, and looked

to the ceiling for guidance, and patience. "No offense, Mr. Blaine, but it had better be pretty damn spectacular."

Taylor Blaine laughed, his voice not quite rough, a strong voice honed by years of smoke and outdoor work. "Well, I happen to think it is."

Proctor yawned, rubbed his face hard with his free hand, but stopped himself from turning on the light. If he put on the light, he'd have to get up because he'd never get back to sleep.

"Mr. Blaine, do you know what time it is?"

"Who cares?"

Proctor's eyes widened slightly. This must be some-thing incredibly special. The clock radio on his nightstand told him it was just before dawn. "All right, I'm listening."

A hesitation, as if the man were struggling not to give in to doubt. "Proctor, you're not going to believe this, but there's a man here, and... Jesus, I can barely believe it my-self, but he has a picture of my daughter. He has, Proctor, a picture of Celeste."

"You've seen it?"

"Not twenty minutes ago."

Strength, he thought; please give me strength.

He yawned instead, and pulled sharply at an earlobe to keep him alert.

"All right, okay, that's ... why is it so special? I mean, we already have—"

"Three years," Blaine said. "Proctor, the picture is only three years' old."

Proctor had no idea what to say. There were too many implications, and he still wasn't awake.

"You've got to come, Proctor. Come right away. I need you to..." The doubt finally surfaced. "I need you to help me make sure."

Proctor felt a low surge of resentment. His master's voice, summoning.

Oh, for Christ's sake, Proctor, knock it off.

There was already a swarm of questions, but now wasn't the time, not until he saw for himself what Blaine had seen. "Okay, sure," he said, scratching hard at his chest. "As soon as I can get ready."

"Wonderful." Another pause. "Are you sure? You have nothing... you know. Special?"

Well, actually, I've got a pipe organ cactus that wants to live in a barn, and a Joshua tree stomping around a man's Arizona ranch.

He stopped himself from saying it aloud. He had a defi-nite feeling Blaine wouldn't understand.

"No," he said carefully. "I can take some time, if you really need to see me."

"Wonderful! Wonderful! So how do you feel about the Concorde?"

"About the what?"

"Damn it, Proctor, aren't you listening to me? Do we have a bad connection?"

"Mr. Blaine, the connection is fine. It's not even dawn, and you woke me from a pretty sound sleep. Listening isn't that easy."

"Oh." Blaine laughed. "Well, sorry, son, I forgot, I was so excited. So how do you feel about the Concorde? Can you get to Kennedy this afternoon? Can you clear the decks by then? Never mind I'll have a car come pick you up. Just make sure you can get away."

Proctor held up a hand. "Hold it, hold it, slow down a little, okay? You're not making sense." He closed his eyes for a moment, took a breath. "Where are you, Mr. Blaine? Where am I going?"

"England, Proctor," Blaine said. "With any kind of luck I'll see you this evening in Pludbury, England."

"You're ... where?" Lana said, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"England." He hefted a small suitcase onto the dining-room table and snapped open the latches, flipped back the lid. Despite the luxury of traveling the Concorde, he wore his usual—no tie, jeans, and loafers comfortable enough that he often used them as slippers. "Someplace called Pludbury."

"You're kidding."

"That's what the man said."

Lana stared, blew up so hard she ruffled her bangs, then clapped her hands in an *okay, let's get ready* signal that had him in a chair while she repacked the suitcase to keep him out of permanent wrinkles, made him promise to have Blaine pay for a new suit and tie just in case he needed it, double-checked his passport, hovered while he ate a de-cent breakfast, and made him swear he would pick up at least one postcard that had a picture of Highland cattle on it.

"Why?"

"Because they're the only things that are uglier than my mother-in-law."

She waited; he didn't laugh; she rolled her eyes. "That's a joke, Proctor," she said sternly.

"Oh."

When the telephone rang, she waved him back into his chair and answered it herself. Said a few words he couldn't hear, and returned to sit opposite him. "The driver. He'll be here in an hour. The Concorde leaves at quarter to two. My God, do you have any idea how much a seat on one of those things costs these days? Ten grand al-most," she said before he could guess. "Thank God it's his money, not ours."

He looked into the living room, at the white glare of sun-light that prevented him from seeing outside. It made the large room seem even larger, and he shook his head.

"What?" she asked.

"I don't know about leaving you here. Everyone else's already gone, and I have no idea how long I'll be away." He shook his head again. "I don't like it, Lana. Maybe you ought to just stay home until somebody comes back."

"Bull," she said, smiling. "I'm a big girl, Proctor, in case you haven't noticed."

He frowned, suddenly uneasy. "No, Lana, I can't let you stay here alone. I... all right, but only if you can get Chico to stay with you."

Her husband, called Chico because she claimed no one would be able to pronounce his Hawaiian name without spraining a tongue, was a rock with eyes and a brain. No, he corrected, a boulder. A huge boulder.

She studied him, didn't smile. "Vivian told me, you know. What you think. You know, about being set up?" A small hand in the air. "Maybe, maybe not. But if it'll make your paranoia happy, I'll call him."

"Thank you," he said.

"No trouble. I'll put him to work."

He nodded, and spent most of the next hour getting up, pacing, sitting down, getting up, pacing, and generally driving Lana crazy even though she had finally retreated to her office. He was not a big fan of flying, and the idea that he would be in an aircraft that cruised at Mach 2 at God only knew how many thousand feet was not his idea of a great way to visit Great Britain for the first time.

When the car arrived to take him to the airport, Lana practically mugged him into his jacket and laughingly shoved him and his suitcase out the kitchen door. Then, on the back porch, she tugged at his arm until he leaned down so she could kiss his cheek.

"You be careful," she ordered. "Have a good time. Call when you can so we know you're all right."

Squinting against the snow glare he touched her arm, started down the stairs. "I'm only going to look at a picture, Lana," he said over his shoulder. "All expenses paid. Assuming I get there in one piece, what the hell could happen?"

She didn't answer right away.

She just looked at the sparkling snow, at the house, and finally said it again: "Be careful, Proctor. Just... be careful."

Less than an hour after takeoff, Proctor shifted in his grey leather seat—"sculpted" claimed the brochure he had picked up at the terminal—and, after a cursory glance at his much better dressed fellow passengers, looked through the window. The craft was noisier than ordinary airliners, two seats on either side of a narrow aisle, and so high it felt as if he were riding the space shuttle instead.

In less than four hours he would be at Heathrow.

A shrug, another look, and he turned his head abruptly away. His hands gripped the armrests tightly; something uncoiled in his stomach.

"Are you all right, sir?" the flight attendant asked.

He gave her a pale nod.

"It's all right," she told him, smiling. "Some people get nervous the first time, being so high. Have yourself a nap." She touched his shoulder. "We'll be there in no time."

No, he thought as she moved on to take care of another passenger up the aisle; no, the one thing I am not going to do is take a nap.

There had been clouds massed far below him, smooth and dark and spread to the horizon.

And they looked for all the world like a vast obsidian plain.

# SEVEN

## T

he young man who met him after he had cleared cus-toms was taller than he was by a head, in a dark suit and tie, and a topcoat that brushed the tops of his shoes. His face was mildly pocked, his mustache thin and care-fully trimmed. After an initial "Good evening and wel-come, Mr. Proctor, Im Vincent, your driver," he handed Proctor a sealed envelope. Opened, it revealed a single sheet of paper on which a single word had been written in Taylor Blaine's hand.

A password.

"Are you feeling all right?" Blaine had demanded when Proctor insisted on the precaution. "All I want you to do is look at a damn picture, for crying out loud."

"Humor me," was all Proctor had answered, and obvi-ously the man had.

"Thanks," he said to the driver, who merely shrugged and led the way to baggage claim, then toward the exit, his long easy strides forcing Proctor to hurry to keep pace.

Outside, he hunched his shoulders against the damp evening's cold, looked around for whatever car the man had driven, and did his best not to gape when he saw it.

Once again he felt as if he had not dressed for the occasion.

At the curb was a sleek and long, deep brown auto-mobile, its tinted glass and gleaming chrome trim an understatement, not a proclamation. A handful of people hovered respectfully nearby, admiring it, reaching out to touch it without actually moving their arms as their breath puffed into the night air. When Vincent opened the back door, they switched their attention to Proctor, staring openly, trying to place him in their knowledge of celebri-ties and stars.

By the time he was settled in the soft leather backseat, jacket off and folded on the seat next to him, Vincent was behind the wheel, and the Bentley moving so smoothly he had to check out the window to be sure they were actually under way.

He waited until they had negotiated the curves and fits and starts of the airport exit and were on a highway before he said, "Pludbury."

"Yes, sir, that's right, sir," Vincent answered, a glance at the rearview mirror. "We should be there shortly after midnight, traffic willing."

Which meant nothing to him at all as far as actual dis-tance was concerned, although he had the distinct feeling this vehicle paid no heed to mere mortal constraints like speed limits. He had never been in such luxury, and while it was wondrous as he'd always imagined, it also made him uncomfortable. Unlike Franklin Blaine he did not be-lieve in class distinctions, yet he understood that this auto-mobile, combined with the Concorde, was way out of his league.

Still... a faint one-sided smile when he imagined Lana's and Taz's expressions when he told them.

Infrequent streetlamps swept light through the interior; headlights of oncoming traffic turned the driver into a flickering silhouette. On one occasion an illusion made him appear transparent; on another he was a reminder of something that grew on the black plain.

"Your first trip over?" Vincent asked politely.

It was the tone rather than the question that made Proc-tor relax. The man may be a chauffeur, but he didn't seem to be a servant.

"Yes."

"I hope you'll enjoy it."

Proctor nodded. Shifted. Noticed a small bar set into the rear of the front seat, and was tempted. Resisted, however,

because it was late. Nearly eleven now, local time, and he'd not had much to eat on the plane; a drink would knock him out. He grunted then in mild amusement. Call-ing the Concorde a plane was like calling this Bentley a car—it simply did not do either the aircraft or the vehicle justice.

Silence for nearly a mile, no road noise to disturb it until the comfortable warmth made him realize he'd either have to talk or fall asleep.

"You work for Mr. Blaine?" he asked.

"No, sir. Mr. Alan Morgan."

He shrugged. "Sorry, don't know him."

"Mr. Blaine," Vincent said, swerving neatly around a slow-moving, hulking lorry, "is staying with Mr. Morgan at Beale Hall. Mr. Morgan's residence."

"Sounds impressive."

Vincent tilted his head. "It's quite old, sir."

Proctor grinned to himself. A definite politically neutral response. Fill in the blanks. "Have you worked for him long? Mr. Morgan, I mean."

"Several years, yes, sir. It runs in the family, you might say. My brother, Gerald, is the butler. My sister Hattie runs the kitchen. Our parents before us, and their family before them."

"All this time at... Beale Hall?"

"No, sir."

The Bentley took a dimly lighted exit onto a more nar-row road, with so few lights and markings that Proctor felt as if he were flying over dark water. So quietly did it move over the low rolling landscape that he couldn't even hear the hiss of the tires.

Silence and the warmth again, and he felt the long day gain weight on his eyelids; he rubbed his cheeks hard to bring feeling back. The one thing he did not want to do now was doze off; he didn't want to be groggy or out of sorts when they arrived. To help, he pushed closer to the edge of the seat, forcing himself to sit upright.

They passed around the fringe of a small town, its lights a brittle glow that almost reached the sky. As far as he could tell, there was no snow on the ground.

"Ghosts," he said then.

Vincent's head jerked. "Sir?"

"Beale Hall. England." He laughed quickly. "Ameri-cans, you probably already know this, tend to associate old English homes with ghosts and things. Clanking chains, groans and moans, the whole nine yards. The curse of old movies and books. So are there? Ghosts?"

"Does that sort of thing interest you, sir?"

He met the driver's gaze in the mirror. Without a smile. "You might say so, yes."

Vincent's eyes were illuminated from below by the dash-board, and Proctor watched them studying him. Carefully. It was a curious reaction to a simple tourist question, and he had the distinct impression the man was debating choices. How gullible is this American was the obvious one. How much should I tell him was another.

Proctor gave him no help.

When the eyes changed, he knew the young man had smiled; he also suspected Blaine had mentioned some-thing about his private cases.

"There are ... stories, sir." The smile had spread to his voice.

"I wouldn't mind one. If you don't, that is."



They passed onto a narrower road, scarcely one lane wide, the only light the headlamps' glow. Grey boles and grey branches rose above the verge.

Suddenly Vincent laughed, an oddly high-pitched sound that he coughed away, a loose fist at his mouth. "Sorry, sir," he said. "I was just thinking about the movies."

Proctor frowned. "Movies?"

"Yes, sir. In the movies ... do you like movies, sir? I'm going to be in one, one day, I'm not going to be driving all my life. I'm really an actor, you see. But anyway, if you've seen enough of them, especially the black-and-whites, you'll know there's always somebody who knows the story behind the haunting, or the murder house, or the important bits about the curses." He laughed again. "It's usually a doctor, you see, or a professor. Hardly ever a chauffeur."

Proctor ducked his head in acknowledgment. "Oh, yeah, I know what you mean." His back began to ache, and he sat back, the hell with it, he'd stay awake anyway. "But in the movies, people have already died, right? And the good guys need the information to keep someone else from getting killed."

"Exactly, sir."

Proctor crossed his legs. "So I suppose, by being my ex-pert, you could say you were actually trying to save my life."

Vincent chuckled. "Yes, sir, in a way, I suppose you could say that."

Why not? Proctor thought with a glance at his watch; it's a long way to go.

"So talk to me, Vincent. Is Beale Hall haunted?"

"No, sir. Not as such."

"Meaning... what?"

"Meaning, sir, that the Hall isn't, but Pludbury is."

Do you know much English history, sir? Do you know the War of the Roses? Well, to make a long bloody story short, the Houses of Lancaster and York, some five hundred years ago, they got into a small war, so to speak, to establish what each insisted was a legitimate claim to the English throne. All over the country you had nobles and gentry lining up on one side or the other, switching sides, sitting back and letting everyone else bash in heads and do the dirty work.

Now, Pludbury, even then it wasn't much of a place. Farming mostly, at the time, and a coach stop between one place and another. Not a lot to recommend it.

Most of the land round about was owned by Sir Jarred Battle—apt name, don't you think?—and he had ambitions, apparently. Nothing so grand as being the next king, but he did want a say in how things were run. Problem was, coming from this small village, no one beyond the valley much cared what he thought. He was a fighter, not a true thinker; his political sense was, you might say, not suited to the outside world, and by all accounts, he didn't realize at the time that this was what you might call a major character flaw.

Still, there was something about him, they say. He could get people to do his bidding—fighting, local intrigue, things like that—without becoming directly involved. Any trouble, and he's not to blame, you see? It was a gift, and one he apparently exploited very well.

It was he, sir, who built Beale Hall. Of course, it's different now. Bigger, for one thing. Still parts of the original in the center of the house, but not much as Sir Jarred had imagined when he built it. He just wanted a house bigger than everyone else's.

Anyway, Sir Jarred, who had spent most of his fortune on his ancestral home, spent what was left on raising a small army—too kind a word really for the motley group he had—in order to offer his services to the winning side.

He picked, for reasons still unknown, the Yorks.

Bad luck.

Even before Battle's men saw their first skirmish, it was evident that the Lancasters would take the final flag, and the

throne. The House was also rather vindictive in vic-tory. In the winter of 1485 Lord Sedgin, who was rather displeased with Sir Jarred's lack of loyalty, sent a contin-gent of men to teach him a lesson.

Needless to say, the men of Pludbury hadn't a chance in hell of winning. And they didn't.

An offer was made—return to your farms and be spared. Not being fools, many of Sir Jarred's men took it instantly, and they were, indeed, spared. The rest... well, sir, there was a fierce battle on the village streets and in the wood you'll no doubt see during your stay. A complete slaugh-ter. No prisoners, no mercy, and unable to talk himself out of it this time, Sir Jarred was hanged from a tree in the wood's center, his body left there for the birds and animals to clean.

So the historical story ends.

Vincent looked in the mirror, and Proctor nodded a *go on, I'm listening*.

"There's a ghost, of course." Proctor grinned. "Of course."

\* \* \*

The story goes, sir, that you can, on certain nights when there is no moon, and particularly when there is rain or some other inclement weather, see Sir Jarred and his mount wandering through Battle Wood.

Usually it's in winter.

Evidently he's trapped there, forever caught by taking a wrong turn in his ambition. But the story also says that he can, with Pludbury's help, free himself and return to Beale Hall. Some say that's when he'll finally be able to rest in eternal peace; others, however, say that's when he'll be able to raise his army again and take his revenge on those remaining Yorkists who deserted him in his time of need.

He grants a favor, you see, to those who ask at the right time, which, perhaps not surprisingly, no one seems to be able to predict. But when the grant is given, the result adds one more soul to feed and strengthen his own army of souls. And when enough souls are gathered, Sir Jarred will have his escape.

Not everyone believes this, of course. Mr. Morgan cer-tainly doesn't. And before you ask, neither do I.

It's a story, sir. Nothing more than a story.

But it's a good one to tell on a dark road toward mid-night, to a stranger who says he might be interested in ghosts.

Proctor felt the road rise, felt the Bentley slow as it reached the top of a low hill. He leaned forward and saw a scattering of lights in a broad valley below.

"Pludbury," he said quietly.

"Yes, sir."

Patches on snow on the verge and low embankments; stiff weeds and dead flowers poking through the white.

"You tell a good story, Vincent."

"Thank you, sir. I try."

"You'll make a fine actor."

"Your lips to God's ears, sir."

Proctor laughed softly. "A question."

"Certainly, sir."

"For those who believe in this story ... how do they know when, a grant has been given? I mean, how can they tell when Sir Jarred has taken another recruit for his army?"

"Oh, that's easy," the driver answered. "It's the same every time. Someone has good fortune ... and someone else

dies."

# BH

## T

he Bentley coasted between two fluted granite pillars and up a tree-lined drive that curved gently to the left, breaking into the open at the foot of a tarmac oval. Proctor strained to see as much of the Hall as he could, but it was too dark, and Morgan evidently did not believe in spot-lights for illuminating either building or shrubs. When the automobile stopped beneath a portico under whose cover the tarmac had been replaced by worn inlaid bricks, he barely had time to grab his jacket and slide over to the door before Vincent was there.

After the warm comfort of the drive, the shock of the night's cold made him shudder.

"I'll have your luggage inside, sir," the driver said, and turned as one of the front doors opened and light spilled across the bricks. He lowered his voice to say, "Brother Gerald," as a dark-suited thin man appeared at the thresh-old, white gloves on hands folded at his waist. "You'll find he takes his position much more seriously than I. You have to call him Bridges. He thinks it's unseemly otherwise."

Proctor nodded as he held back a grin, waited until his bag was out of the trunk, then took it from Vincent's hand. "It's all right," he said at the questioning frown he re-ceived. "I'd prefer carrying it myself."

Vincent hesitated, then brushed the air in front of his forehead as if touching the bill of a cap. A wave to his brother, and he was gone, the Bentley fading into the dark, only the red eyes of the taillights marking its departure.

"Good evening, sir," the butler said formally. "Welcome to Beale Hall."

He stepped aside as Proctor moved over the threshold into an entrance hall that, for the size of the house, seemed too small. Dark pine wainscotting below, white walls above; a single large carpet fringed and easily fifteen feet on a side; landscape oils in heavy frames; closed double doors left and right; a staircase on the right, leading to a landing on which he could see a full suit of armor standing on a pedestal, a short sword in one hand. From the landing the staircase split left and right, leading to a gallery that stopped at the front wall; a single corridor on either side led, he assumed, to the rest of the house. Light was pro-vided by a teardrop chandelier whose arms were brass and ornament was crystal.

"Mr. Morgan sends his regrets," the butler said stiffly. "An early business engagement in the morning required him to retire early."

"No problem," Proctor said. He glanced at the closed doors. "I expected Mr. Blaine anyway."

"Ah."

Nothing more.

"So... is he still up?"

For an answer Bridges stepped to his left and slid open the doors. Beyond was a room cluttered with overstuffed, wood-trimmed Victorian furniture, and dominated by a walk-in stone fireplace on the right-hand wall. Two match-ing leather armchairs set parallel to the raised stone hearth faced each other over a long and low cherry-wood cocktail table. Over the dark wood mantel was a medieval shield flanked on the left by a pair of crossed lances, and on the right by crossed claymores. On the mantel itself were dull gold candelabra and, beneath the shield, a short pewter chalice.

The faint smell of lemon polish and ashes, old wood and dust.

The only illumination was provided by a quartet of standing lamps whose shades appeared to be Tiffany-inspired, if not the originals. Since most of their light was aimed downward, most of the room remained deep in shadow.

Proctor hoped the room fared better in daylight, be-cause now it looked as if it had been furnished by scroung-ing through someone's old aunt's attic.

"The parlor, sir. Mr. Blaine is just there, in the sitting room."

He followed the butler across the thickly carpeted floor to a doorway in the far wall. Beyond was another room, not as large as the first but nearly identically furnished, the area over its marginally smaller fireplace taken by a stag's head, a crossbow, and a longbow. On the mantel were what appeared to be an array of family pictures in simple wood frames.

In the armchair facing him sat a man with thick, wavy white hair, his features lightly shadowed by the standing lamp behind him. "Do you know," he said, "the man doesn't even have a television set, for God's sake? I damn near fell asleep waiting for you."

Proctor smiled, set his jacket and bag down, and leaned over the cocktail table to shake Taylor Blaine's hand. The old man was shorter than he, stocky without having gone to seed, his face lined and slightly fleshy. He didn't rise, and Proctor didn't expect him to.

"You're looking good," he said.

"I look like hell," the old man grumbled. On a small end table to his left was a decanter, with a matching glass half empty. With a tilt of his head he offered Proctor a drink.

Proctor declined with a gesture and dropped into the other armchair. "One drink and I'll be out for the duration."

"You're too young to be that tired." He shifted his attention to the butler. "You don't have to wait around, Bridges," he said gruffly. "We're going to be a while. Somebody might as well get some damn sleep around here. I'll show Proctor his room when we go up."

"Very good, sir," the butler said with a modest bow, backed out of the room, and was gone.

"That guy gives me the creeps," Blaine said, lifting his glass, staring at it, then putting it down again. "Every time you open a damn door, there he is. It's like he can read your damn mind. Or he's really triplets."

Proctor shrugged. "His brother's not that bad."

"Ha. That kid has seen too damn many movies for his age. Wants to be a star or something. I don't think he's read a book in his life."

"Well, I kind of like him."

Blaine looked at him, squinting with one eye. "That figures." He flipped open an engraved silver box on the table between them and picked out a cigarette, stared at it as if trying to decide if it was what he really wanted, and suddenly gestured with it toward the fireplace. "Son of a bitch locked it up, you know that? He locked it up."

Proctor waited patiently.

"The picture," Blaine explained.

"Oh?"

"The album the picture's in."

Proctor couldn't help a brief smile. "Mr. Blaine, you're not making much sense."

Blaine sagged back in his chair, glass still in one hand, unlit cigarette in the other. "The picture that I saw. Of Celeste. It's in an album some local guy, I gather he's like the local historian or something, it's in some album he brought to Morgan. I didn't get a chance to see the whole thing but..." His voice lowered, deepened. "I saw her, Proctor. Clear as a bell, I saw her."

"You're sure of that."

"I'd know my own daughter, damnit."

Proctor took his time. Because of the Concorde's speed there might not be jet lag, but he was feeling the effects of the day's travel just the same. He wanted to be sure he said the right thing.

"Mr. Blaine, it's been thirteen years. People change. A lot." He held up a hand before the old man exploded. "I'm not saying it isn't her, don't misunderstand me. I don't know, I haven't seen it myself. What I am saying is, until we get a chance to look at it more closely, really examine it, you have to be ... you can't assume it was her, and not someone who just might resemble her."

"Jesus Christ, Proctor, don't you ever stop working?"

"My curse," he said wryly.

"No, mine." Blaine closed his eyes and sighed. Then, as if talking to himself: "I think it was taken in front of this house, and I nearly had a heart attack when I saw her, you know. He was flipping through it, the album, and I saw her and my damn heart nearly stopped. I kept thinking, it's her, and I kept thinking, what's she doing in England?" His eyes opened slowly. "I think Morgan thought I was nuts. I think... I think I didn't behave very well."

"Understandable, Mr. Blaine."

"I might have, uh, yelled a little."

A little.

Proctor looked away while he struggled with his expression. Blaine was a plain-spoken man. Like Alan Morgan, he had a household staff, but it consisted of employees, not servants. And when he was excited, or irritable, yelling was a way of getting their attention. Bellowing was more like it.

For whatever reason, however, he hadn't yet yelled at Proctor.

The cigarette dangled unnoticed from Blaine's hand, and he sighed loudly, wearily.

"He, uh... he insisted it was a mistake, and after giving me a second look, he hustled me out of the room, it was his study or library or whatever they call it over here, and walked with me for a while outside." His lips twisted into a sneer. "To calm me down, he said."

"A smart move."

"Maybe. But I haven't seen the album since. If, he said, it's that important, if it's that valuable, it shouldn't be left lying around the house." He snorted as he glanced around the room. "Lying around this house? Hell, it's so damn big, you could have a corpse lying around in a chair and no one'd notice for a hundred years, for Christ's sake. He locked it up, Proctor. He locked it up and said we'll see it in the morning."

Proctor saw the impatience, the frustration, in the way the old man could not sit still. He emptied his glass and re-filled it; he lit the cigarette with a wood match and forgot it; he made to rise and changed his mind.

"How do you know Morgan?" Proctor asked.

Blaine stared at him as if they weren't speaking the same language. "What?"

"Easy. How do you know Morgan? Are you old friends, old business partners, old war buddies, what?"

"What does that—"

"Humor me, Mr. Blaine."

Blaine stared angrily at the cigarette, and flicked it into the fireplace. "We've done some business over the past few years, thanks mainly to Franklin's efforts. He's come over to the States a couple of times, always invited me to visit him if I was ever in the neighborhood." He seemed smaller now; older. "I needed to get away, Proctor. I was expecting miracles from you and your people, and when I didn't get them, I needed to get away for a while."

It was not a casting of guilt; Proctor understood that, and nodded.

"So you've been relaxing."

"Yeah. Until today."

"Pludbury a nice place?"

"Proctor, are you drunk? You have too much damn champagne on that plane?"

"Vincent told me about the ghost."

Blaine gaped, then laughed, loudly and so hard his face flushed an alarming crimson. "Jesus." He pressed a calm-ing

palm against his chest. "Jesus, leave it to you, Proctor, leave it to you." He coughed, straightened, passed the back of a hand over his eyes. "Five thousand miles because I think I've got a clue about Celeste, and the first thing *you* come up with is a goddamn ghost."

"Apparently you said something. He thought I'd be interested."

Blaine shrugged; an admission—*so what, big deal*.

"Mr. Blaine," said Proctor evenly, "there's nothing we can do until morning, so I think maybe it's time we both got some sleep."

"Ghosts," Blaine muttered as he pushed himself to his feet, emptied his glass, and took a staggering step away from his chair. "Jesus H, man, ghosts."

Proctor grabbed his things and followed the old man to the staircase, watching him carefully, paying no attention to his mumbling. Once on the landing they turned left and made their way down a long wide corridor.

Blaine waved vaguely at a paneled door on the left. "Yours." Directly opposite: "Mine." He opened his door, looked over his shoulder, shook his head, and said, "Ghosts," with a smile before he closed the door behind him.

Ghosts, Proctor thought. He turned the knob and stepped into his room.

A switch on the wall turned on a single nightstand lamp, showing him a closet on the left, an open door to a private bathroom on the right, a small fireplace with two arm-chairs next to the closet, and a four-poster on a low raised platform, with a tall arched casement window on either side of the bed.

What made him stop, however, was the woman who sat on the edge of the mattress at the foot of the bed. Her feet were bare, she wore a sheer white nightgown, and in her left hand she held a gun.

# NNE

"For crying out loud," Ginny complained, rubbing her eyes, trying to pick out the time on her bedside clock. "Do you know what... God, Mave, it's after mid-night." Her eyes widened. "Oh, Lord, is something wrong? Has that—"

"No, no, no," Mavis said quickly. "God, no, there's noth-ing bad at all."

"Then what the hell are you doing, calling me this time of night?"

Mavis stood in the middle of her living room, grinning so widely her cheeks ached. "I couldn't wait."

"For what?"

"To tell you the news."

Ginny sagged back onto her pillows and yawned. "What news, Mave, and it'd better be good."

"Well..." Mavis giggled, and once started, found she couldn't stop. "It's supposed to be a secret for a while."

"You're drunk," her friend accused. "Ring me in the morning, Mave. You're drunk."

"No," Mavis yelled. "I got to tell you now."

"About what?"

"The raise."

Ginny sat up. "Raise? The old bat gave you a raise?"

"Double."

"Double?" Ginny slapped her cheeks hard to wake herself up, to be sure she wasn't dreaming. "Are you ... double?"

"Yes. It goes with the promotion."

"Promotion?"

Mavis giggled, hiccuped, and lowered herself to the floor, crossing her legs. "Oh, Ginny, it's so wonderful, I've been walking on clouds all day. Mrs. Whidden's opening another shop over in Windsor. So... so..." She couldn't help shrieking, "So she's made me her Pludbury manager!"

"You're drunk," Ginny declared firmly. Then: "You're not drunk."

"No, Ginny, I'm ... okay, I'm a little pissed, but I'm not drunk."

"Be damned."

"Who cares? I got a raise! Can you believe it? I don't need that damn bastard anymore!"

Ginny looked to her bedroom window, wishing now she had drawn the curtains, pulled the shade as far down as it would go. But she didn't want to get out of bed. She drew the coverlet up over her breasts instead and hugged it close to her throat. "You did it, didn't you?" she whispered.

Mavis rocked back and forth. "I did."

"I mean—"

"I know what you mean, and yes, I did it."

"Oh, my God, Mave. Oh, my God."

Proctor held out his left hand—*let's not be hasty here, let's not do anything stupid*—and slowly placed his bag on a small wood chair beside the door. His jacket followed.



Not once did he move his gaze from the weapon aimed squarely at his heart.

\* \* \*

Henry Treadle stood in front of the mirror over the bath-room sink. He flexed his biceps. He tried to make his pecs jump the way that wrestler did on Sky TV. He fisted his hands and crossed his arms over his chest, did his best to produce a menacing glower.

Not perfect, he judged, but he was pleased with his progress. The weights had definitely been the right choice. By summer there won't be a skirt in the kingdom that won't kill to see the rest of him. And if the muscle didn't do it, there was always the magic. They loved the silly damn tricks he could do, especially the one where he pulled, oh so slowly, a blossoming rose from between the buttons of a blouse. A real silk one, too, none of that tacky paper crap.

"Darling?"

His eyes closed. Opened. He turned and said, "Yes, my love?"

"Are you going to be all night?"

"That depends," he answered, moving into the dark-ened bedroom.

Mickey laughed. "You're a right cock of the walk, aren't you?"

Henry smiled wickedly. "Something like that, yes."

Amazing what a simple marriage proposal could do. And just as he had predicted, the poor cow had just about jumped him right in the Wood's clearing, crying, laughing, not a shred of doubt. It hadn't taken much more than a vague suggestion—"Darling, now that we've made it official, I think we needn't wait any longer, do you?"—and she'd practically dragged him down the street to the house his mother had left him. Her clothes were off before he'd gotten through the door; his were off, mostly by her hand, before he had a chance to show her the flowers and the champagne and the fancy tin of sweets he'd picked up as an afterthought.

He needn't have bothered.

He also wondered, about the time they should have paused for supper, why he had been so stupid as to wait so long.

Who would have thought a woman who sold books in a dump like this would know so much about things like that?

Now she sat up and let the sheet fall to her lap. A wink, her tongue slipped over her lips, and she said, "See any-thing you like?"

He laughed and shook a finger at her. "Not fair, Mi-chelle. We saw that movie only last week."

She shook her shoulders and pouted. "If you're so bloody smart, what was it?"

"*Carrie*," he answered with a grin.

"Wrong. *Halloween*. But am I not like her? Carrie, I mean?"

"Sorry, luv, but if you remember, she could move things with her mind."

A quick swipe to knock the hair from her eyes, and she stared at his groin. A moment later she said, "And what, exactly, was your point?"

The woman on the bed had long dark blond hair iron-straight and pulled over her shoulders. Dark blue eyes and eyebrows so pale they were almost invisible. If her face had been any more heart-shaped it would have been a caricature.

As it was, she was stunning. And would have been, even if she were not dressed as she was.

And even without the gun, Proctor would have been hard-pressed to look away.

He straightened slowly. "I think," he said carefully, evenly, "there's been a mistake."

"Really?" she said languidly. She cocked the hammer. "I don't think so."

In the fourth cottage along on Carrow Lane, Conrad Cheswick stood in his front window, hands clasped loosely behind his back. He wore a robe whose hem was frayed and whose elbows had been patched with worn suede more than once. After spending the day sobering up, then trying to figure out, with Willa, how to get out from under the bargain he had made with Sir Jarred all those years ago, he had come down to only two choices:

They could pack up and flee. The obvious choice and probably the most prudent. Money, thank God, was no longer a problem, and neither had strong ties to the village except for Willa's Mickey. Who, Willa insisted, could bloody well take care of herself for a change.

Or, they could recognize the strength of their position. Battle was still tied to the Wood. Despite his ability to cause certain... *things*... to happen, he still needed Con-rad for tasks he could not as yet do himself. Which, Willa insisted, gave them an awfully good platform from which to make a few demands of their own.

"He won't like it."

"He's dead, what can he do about it?"

"Seamus Harden is what he can do about it," he answered grimly, reminding her of what had happened to Virginia Harden's father.

"But your bargain is different," she said reasonably. "No life for a life. Connie, use your head. He still needs you more than you need him."

Perhaps that was true.

Perhaps that had always been true and he'd just not re-alized it until she'd pointed it out.

Nevertheless, he thought as he watched the empty lane; nevertheless. Maybe, just maybe, he ought to make sure. Leaving nothing to chance might leave them with their future.

"A mistake," Proctor repeated.

A brief frown before the woman gestured brusquely with the gun as she slid off the footboard, and he nodded and sat hastily on his coat and bag. He wasn't sure she real-ized that, with the lamp's light behind her, her nightgown had been rendered virtually translucent, and what was under that left nothing much to his imagination.

He tried not to stare.

When she half turned to grab something off the mat-tress, he closed his eyes. Not out of embarrassment or modesty, but because, if he hadn't, he really would have made a complete fool of himself, and by the way she han-dled that gun, he suspected she knew how to use it.

"Oh, it's all right," she said, a soft laugh in her voice. "You can look now." In her free hand was a length of velvet ribbon. "You're not Vinnie."

"No," he said. "I'm not."

"Damn."

She reached for the bed again, this time to find a pair of black-framed glasses she put on clumsily. She blinked, and sighed. "Oh. Right. Damn." Completely unabashed and unfazed, she shook her head at her mistake and lowered the gun. "Sorry."

He didn't move. "It's okay. I guess."

She gestured with the gun as Blaine had gestured with his cigarette—absentmindedly. Carelessly. "I thought this was his room."

"Nope. It's mine."

She nodded. "Which makes you ... who?" Again the gun waved. "Never mind. You must be Ethan Proctor, right?"

The other American. The ghost hunter or some-thing. You expose wonky swamis and things."

Ghost hunter, he thought; swamis. Jesus Christ, Blaine, gimme a break.

He nodded anyway. "Yep. And that makes you... who? Vinnie's girlfriend?"

When she laughed he stiffened, unable to forget that damn gun. "God, no." She stepped back and leaned her rump against the footboard, crossing her hands in front of her and wiggling her bare toes. "Vinnie's a good boy, but he has ideas, you see. He thinks he's in love with me, has been an awful pest, mooning about, following me, so..." She held up the gun and the velvet ribbon. "I decided to teach him a lesson."

"In what?" he asked without thinking.

She laughed again. "In what a bitch a woman can be when she wants to be left alone and isn't."

For the first time, he felt able to relax a little. Still, as he rose to dig his bag and coat out from under him, he kept his hand extended to show he meant no harm or unnecessary moves beyond sitting again.

"So you were going to... tempt him, tie him, then scare him with the gun?"

"That's about it."

"Ah. Well, did it ever occur to you that he might become violent when he caught on? He's a big boy, you know. He might have been too ashamed to do anything. Then again, caught like that ... I seriously doubt that ribbon would have held him for very long."

Her next laugh was cut off by a frown. "Oh, dear."

"Right. Is the gun loaded?"

She stared at it. "Heavens, no."

"So you couldn't shoot him. What would you have done, beaten him with it?"

"Good Lord, no. I couldn't do anything—" She blinked several times. "Oh, dear." A rueful smile. "A rather awful plan, wasn't it?"

"Pretty bad, yeah."

"Oh, dear." She draped the ribbon around her neck, catching her hair, pulling it close, away from her chest.

He couldn't take it anymore. "Miss," he said, "would you mind standing over there?" And pointed to a spot to his left, away from the lamp.

She frowned her puzzlement, looked down, looked behind her, and said, "Oh. I see. Sorry." Which, clearly, she wasn't.

When she moved, everything moved, and Proctor wished he hadn't said anything. He studied the carpet instead, and didn't look up until she reached the door and opened it. She was directly at his shoulder, and he could smell fresh soap and talc and a hint of something spring-like in her shampoo. He stood quickly and backed off as she peered around the jamb to be sure the hall was empty. A satisfied nod, and she slipped over the threshold, turned and reached for the knob to pull the door closed.

"Do me a favor," he said.

She smiled, uncertain.

"Next time you want to meet the strange American, come up with a better story, okay? Better yet, just knock on the door."

"Really, Mr. Proctor."

"Really." He spread his arms. "This is a guest room. Vincent is staff. No way in hell he'd be staying in here."

She studied him for a few seconds, then deepened her voice, affected a faint Germanic accent. "Very clever, Mr.

Bond. Very clever indeed."

He grinned. "If I do say so myself, Miss Money Penny."

"Terrible Sean Connery," she said, slowly pulling the door closed. "Godawful, in fact." The door shut, then quickly opened. "And it's Rosalind, Mr. Proctor. Rosalind Morgan."

Ginny Harden lay in bed, hands clasped and tucked under her chin. After Mavis had rung off, giggling like a silly schoolgirl, Ginny had tried to sleep but couldn't. After nearly an hour, she opened the bedroom door and turned on the hall light, returned to her bed and stared at the ceiling.

Wasn't right, she thought; less than a day after the bargain had been struck? It wasn't right. She herself had waited nearly five agonizing months before the house had been hers. She knew others who had waited much longer.

Less than a day.

It wasn't right.

Snow began to fall not long before dawn.

Deep in Battle Wood, beneath a tree that had no leaves, and hadn't for centuries, a shadow reached out a hand and watched a snowflake land in its palm.

Instead of melting, it exploded into a brief blue flame that cast no light.

Near the clearing on Battle Row, a bird woke, and stretched its wings, and screamed.

# TEN

## W

hen Proctor awoke, he had no dreams to climb out of, no cobwebs of deep sleep to disperse—his eyes snapped open and his arms and legs stiffened in the few seconds' confusion before he remembered where he was. Then he turned his head slowly, to make sure he was alone.

"Oh, boy," he whispered, and swung out of bed, scratched chest and scalp vigorously as he stood before the left-hand window and looked out from what he soon understood was the front of the Hall.

No sun; only a deep grey field of lowering clouds. Trees stark and black against patches of old snow and a dusting of new. The black streak of the drive. Grey and white curls of chimney smoke in the distance; Pludbury, he assumed, surrounded by woodland and pastures. Beyond that, all the grey, all the white and black, blurred into a haze that kept the horizon hidden.

It was as if he had awakened at early twilight, not morning.

A chill from the windowpanes, his breath on one con-densing into thin ice that spread like growing crystal.

A monumental yawn that made his jaw pop; an auto-matic check of his watch, and a groan.

It was well past ten, and as he hurried to clean and dress, he wondered why no one had come to get him up. Blaine, for one, should have been so excited and nervous about the picture, he wouldn't have waited so long without breaking the door down and hauling him away by the scruff.

Once ready—dark jeans, dark shirt under a light pull-over, coat in one hand, his hair as neat as it would ever be considering the unruly shock that refused to stay off his brow—he listened at Blaine's door for a moment, knocked tentatively, and tried the knob, turned it, and looked in. The room was empty.

A soft surprised grunt, and he moved on. There were electric candles in silver sconces on the dark-paneled walls, but the only light came from a ceiling-high window at the corridor's end behind him, reinforcing that twilight feeling. Although his room had been comfortable, the cor-ridor was chilly and he puffed a breath to see if he could see it.

As he approached the gallery he heard quiet voices, one impatient, one amused. A futile push at his hair, and he hooked his jacket over his shoulder with a forefinger when he reached the head of the stairs.

Blaine, in a topcoat open to reveal a sweater and slacks, looked up and scowled. "It's about time, Proctor." He waved a disgusted hand. "You must sleep like the dead. You're late, we've already had breakfast. Get down here, man, we've things to do."

Proctor took his time, right hand gliding over the wide banister.

The other voice belonged to Rosalind Morgan. Her glasses were on, her hair deftly twisted into a chignon, and she wore a baggy sweater, baggy jeans, sharp-toed pol-ished boots. She smiled up at him as she zipped her down jacket closed. "Good morning."

He nodded.

"Oh." Blaine waved a hand. "Proctor, this is Alan Mor-gan's daughter, Rosalind."

"Yes," said Proctor dryly. "I know."

Blaine didn't ask. All he said was, "Of course."

Rosalind pulled on a pair of leather gloves. "I've volun-teered to chauffeur you two around today. My car," she added. "The Bentley can be a little pretentious for a simple neighborhood tour."

"What about Vinnie?"

Loose strands of pale hair refused to stay under a bright red beret. She fussed with it for a moment before giving up.

"He's with my father. *He* doesn't think the Bentley's pretentious at all."

It wasn't clear whether she meant her father or Vinnie, and he decided the remark was probably aimed at both.

Blaine, unsure what was going on, shifted his feet to underscore his impatience. "Miss Morgan here has agreed to introduce us to the guy who brought the album. Ber-wick, Banswick, something like that."

"Cheswick," she corrected politely. "Conrad Cheswick." An overly sweet smile as Proctor reached the floor. "Did you sleep well, Mr. Proctor?"

"How the hell could he?" Blaine grumbled, yanking at his own gloves. "I damn near froze my—I damn near froze to death. Don't you people pay your bills?"

The sweet smile turned on him. "The Hall, as you've al-ready seen, Taylor, is far too large and too old for central heating throughout. That's why we have all those fire-places. One gets used to it if one stays for a while."

"Oh, sure," Blaine said, mood melting at the smile. "But I'll bet your rooms don't have to worry about fireplaces."

"Of course not," she answered airily. "I live here."

The old man barked a laugh and reached for the door-knob. Suddenly Bridges was there, in black suit and white gloves. He stepped neatly between Blaine and the door, had it opened before any of them could move.

"Will you be having dinner home tonight, miss?"

"Yes," she said, waving Proctor and Blaine outside. "Mr. Morgan will be back by then, I hope?"

"He says he will, miss."

Proctor noticed the brief frown as he passed her; then the door was shut, and before he knew it, he was in the backseat of a small bright green car that Rosalind shot out of the portico's shelter as if she couldn't wait to get away.

It took a while to get used to the steering wheel on the right-hand side and to driving on the left, but once done, and once Rosalind had slowed down, he paid closer atten-tion to his surroundings: first the car-high, tree-topped embankments that bordered the road beyond the pillars; then the fields, distant buildings he assumed belonged to farmers, and the occasional lone tree whose branches tried to scratch at the clouds.

"Actually, we're quite lucky," Rosalind told them. "As you'll see, there isn't much out there except"—she hesi-tated, and laughed—"what you see. Civilization hasn't reached us yet, thank God."

"Where's this Cheswick?" Blaine wanted to know.

"In good time, Taylor," she answered good-naturedly. "All in good time."

"I haven't got time," he snapped.

"Mr. Blaine," Proctor said quietly.

"Well, damnit, man, I don't."

"Yes," Proctor answered, still quiet, still calm. "Yes, you do."

Blaine growled deep in his throat, folded his arms over his chest petulantly, and glared through the windshield.

Proctor understood his impatience, and did not want to feed it. There were questions to be asked first, a photo-graph to be studied, and most of it could not be done until Morgan returned from his business meeting. A rather con-venient business meeting, he thought as the car rounded a sharp curve and the first cottages appeared.

"Pludbury," Rosalind announced. "First stop, last stop, mind the gap and don't forget your luggage." She looked over her shoulder. "Sorry, Mr. Proctor, no thatched roofs this trip."

"Proctor," Blaine muttered sourly. "Don't call him mis-ter, he gets all moody and pissed off."

"Does he really?" she said. "Fancy that."

Proctor ignored them.

The cottages were at first *widely spaced*, with fencing in back to mark gardens and yards and open land beyond; most of them had hedging in front to border much smaller spaces that were also, he reckoned, used for gardens and grass. Each cottage had a gate and, it seemed, a post in the yard from which hung a sign to give each home a name.

There were no sidewalks until the cottages grew closer, but everything else remained the same.

Rosalind slowed even more as they approached a T-intersection, and she pointed across Blaine's chest as she braked for a stop sign. "Connie lives just there, the fourth one along."

Proctor counted quickly and saw a brick and white trimmed house that appeared freshly painted and cleaned; a dark red door that, he imagined, was supposed to match the brick; burlap sacks over sticks of rosebushes; no Smoke from the chimney that rose unevenly from the pitched roof.

Blaine twisted around. "Then stop, for God's sake."

She didn't. She swung left and accelerated.

"He won't be there," she told him. "We'll catch up with him later. Besides, there's something I want to show you first." She glanced at the rearview mirror. "Are you familiar with the history, Proctor?"

He nodded as he faced front. "Vinnie told me the story."

"Nonsense," Blaine said, still agitated.

"Not many think so," she said.

"Living out here, I'm not surprised."

Almost immediately the rank of cottages thinned once more into open fields. Rosalind took the next right so quickly the car nearly fishtailed, and she laughed an apology, then jerked a thumb at her window, at widely spaced trees that crowded the verge. "The infamous Battle Wood. We've just left the north end of the equally infamous Battle Row, Pludbury's High Street."

Deep in the wood Proctor could see pockets of mist, slashes of white where snow clung to the bark, stunted brush in clear areas the snow hadn't reached. A single tree near the perimeter, deformed by a lightning blast. A peculiar trick of light—as the car's easy speed made the near boles blur into an opaque brown wall, a few farther in with lighter bark seemed to jump from place to place, as if they were trying to follow.

The road forked into a larger one, and Rosalind turned to keep the wood on their right, the fields on the left, low bare hills crowding them.

"Straight through," she said, "it's nearly half a mile to the Row. As the crow flies. An odd thing, actually. With all that space in there, the trees being as they are, still it's quite easy to get lost." She rapped her window with a gloved knuckle. "You wouldn't think so, would you? At least two or three times a year one of the children wanders in, and then the torches come out to find them."

"Torches?" Blaine said. "What?" "Flashlights, Taylor. You call them flashlights." "Ah. And what about adults. Do they ever get lost?" "No," she answered. "Because they don't go in."

A brief heavy snow squall slowed her to a crawl.

"I want to see Cheswick," Blaine complained stiffly. "I appreciate the tour, Rosalind, but I want to see that man."

"Lunch," she said. "I spoke to him this morning, and we're meeting for lunch."

He shook his head. "No, that won't do. I want to see him now."

"Mr. Blaine," Proctor said.

"Damn it, Proctor, I think you sometimes forget who's paying the damn bills around here."

Proctor felt his face stiffen, his breathing slow; he stared at his hands and willed his fingers out of the fists they had curled into. His spine was rigid, and he could not relax it; there was heat in his cheeks, and he could not cool them.

"Taylor," Rosalind said, clearly uncomfortable, clearly annoyed herself, "we have to go round," and she gestured south with her left hand. "By the time we reach the bottom of the Row, it'll be time for lunch. Time to meet our Con-nie." The hand settled awkwardly on his shoulder and withdrew. "I'm sorry if I've displeased you."

"Rosalind—"

"These people," she continued, "are a curious lot. We're not in mountains here, but we're cut off just the same. The children grow up and leave, and only a handful ever come back. We live on the sufferance of others, Taylor. Tourists, sometimes historians, but except for the sheep and the crops, there's nothing here but ourselves."

"Rosalind, 1—"

"What I'm trying to say is, if I had taken you to Connie straightaway, he wouldn't have said a word. He would be polite, he's never rude, but he wouldn't tell you anything. This"—and she gestured at the road ahead—"is the best way, you'll have to trust me."

Blaine nodded sharply. Grudging acceptance; not an apology.

The Wood gave way to brush, and to houses that, despite obvious efforts to keep them up, looked in need of constant repair. Without sunlight, they were colorless; and the snow here wasn't nearly as picturesque.

The car rattled and thumped over a train crossing, and she took another right-hand fork, this road barely a lane wide, and on the left was a stream that ran black between its weedy banks. She didn't slow again until she reached another intersection, its main feature a low brick building with a British Rail logo on a sign over the entrance. She backed into a half-full small car park next to the depot, rolled down her window, and pointed.

"This, gentlemen, is where our ghost story begins."

Proctor said nothing; he still didn't trust himself to speak. But he welcomed the cold air that swept through the car.

Rosalind poked her arm out the window and pointed. "So old Lord Whatshisname's soldiers came out of the trees on the other side of the water—there were trees there back then—and the fighting started right about where we are now. It was literally swords against pitchforks. Sir Jarred spent most of his fortune on that damn house and couldn't arm his own people properly." She pointed north. "They fought right up the road and into the Wood. You know the rest."

"Yes, yes," Blaine said, stabbing his finger at the steering wheel, urging her to drive on. "The ghost and the bargain, we know, we know."

Proctor noted the hesitation before she put the car into gear and pulled back onto Battle Row. They hadn't gone fifty yards before she said, "Next time you hear the story, Taylor, listen more closely. These people aren't talking about bargains with some cranky old ghost. They're talk-ing about making deals with the Devil."



# BLAINE

## R

osalind parked across from the Raven's Loft, bump-ing up over the low curb to rest the right-side wheels on the sidewalk. As Proctor opened his door, he heard Blaine grunt approval. She had made the right choice with the pub; she had known the old man wouldn't have been happy in that restaurant down the street, the one with the flowery curtains in the window.

"Come along, boys," she said brightly, standing in the middle of the road, making a comical show of checking for oncoming traffic. Blaine didn't hesitate, muttering some-thing about needing a stiff drink as he headed for the break in the pub's low stone wall.

Proctor, however, raised his collar, put his hands in his jacket pockets. "I'm going to walk a little," he said. "Fresh air."

She leaned as though to take a step toward him, then flapped an arm. "I'll see to him, then," she said, backing away. "Don't be too long."

He nodded and walked off, knowing she stared after him, uncertain about his mood, maybe feeling that she had somehow failed in her volunteer duties. He wanted to re-assure her that his temper had nothing to do with her, but he kept moving. Breathing deeply. Slowly. On the one hand telling himself he didn't need to put up with Taylor Blaine's high-handed crap and could, at a word, be on the next plane back to the States; on the other hand reminding himself that Blaine, through a fluke, had gotten closer to his missing daughter than he'd been in over a decade, and his impatience, and fear, were so obviously understand-able that Proctor really shouldn't be having this stupid conversation with himself.

Nevertheless, better he stay away for a while and calm down than say something he couldn't take back.

He passed an appliance and fix-it store and stood for a moment checking the prices in the window. They didn't mean a thing, however; he had forgotten to check the ex-change rate before he left. Two doors down was a narrow storefront whose window was painted a solid green; above the door a sign that said mecca. He wondered if it was an Islamic bookshop, or some kind of religious center. He opened the door just to see, and stepped back quickly; it was a betting shop.

A small grocery across the way, flanked by a building so-ciety, and a clothing store that evidently also sold luggage, shoes, and a variety of toiletries.

A chemist on his left that, after peering at the window displays and the room beyond, looked remarkably like drugstores he'd seen in small Midwestern towns.

Across the street he saw a bookshop, Dickens Closet, paused and almost went over, changed his mind. A place like that, he figured would take some serious browsing time, which, right now, he didn't have. Instead he turned into a newsagents and wandered down the side aisle, skimming the magazine racks, an awful lot of which had *Royal* in their titles.

"Afternoon."

In the back, standing behind a narrow horseshoe counter, was a tall man whose torso strained the cardigan and pin-striped shirt he wore. His face was angular, his hair thick and brushed straight back from his forehead.

"May I help you?"

"Nope, just looking," Proctor said. "But thanks anyway."

"Ah. Canadian? No, American. U.S. American that is. A Yank." The man grinned. "Sometimes the Canadians get a little put off when we don't call them Americans too."

Proctor smiled politely and continued his wandering, thinking it was about time he headed back for the pub.

"You're staying at Beale Hall then?"

Proctor stopped and turned. "Well... yes."

The man laughed silently. "No need to worry, sir. I'm not a spy." He jerked a thumb at a wall calendar behind him. "Not tourist season, you see. And Daisy Yarrow's bed-and-breakfast hasn't had anyone in since the holidays." He spread his hands. "No place else to stay. Unless you're a relative. Which you're not."

"Oh."

"Besides, I saw you drive by with Miss Morgan and the other Yank." He laughed again as he fingered a cigarette from a pack lying on the counter. "This is a very small town, sir, as you've noticed. One word here is like a brush-fire. Especially this time of year."

Proctor smiled a polite *I can imagine*.

The man lit his cigarette and said, "Houdini."

Proctor frowned. "I'm sorry?"

A stiff finger rapped the counter's glass top, directing his attention to a small display of cheap magic tricks, several how-to books, and a dozen different decks of playing cards. "I'm an amateur myself, you see," he said with an unapologetic one-shoulder shrug. "Spare time sort of thing. Keeps the nieces and nephews happy, and me out of trouble, or so my fiancée claims."

Proctor didn't know what to say.

"Henry Treadle," the man said then, extending his hand. Proctor walked over quickly and shook it, the man's grip unnecessarily, and unsurprisingly, strong. A test. A show of strength.

He did not give his own name.

"Do you do magic, Mr...?"

"No," Proctor said.

"Ah. But you are like Houdini."

"I am?"

Treadle smiled, showing perfect teeth. "From what I've heard, I would guess so, yes. You expose the charlatans, save the widows and orphans."

Good Lord, Proctor thought, what did Blaine do, write a goddamn book?

"Whatever you've heard," he said, a cheerful wave as he headed for the exit, "is probably an exaggeration."

"Of course," Treadle replied. "Of course, no question. The thing is..."

Proctor paused, hand on the latch.

The shopowner shrugged, casually flicked an ash from his cigarette onto the floor behind him. "We don't have much here, as you've seen, so... I guess you might say we kind of like our ghost."

"Good for you," Proctor said, and left.

A glance at the clouds and the feel of impending snow-fall, and the unmistakable feeling that he'd just been warned off.

Don't touch, Yank; Sir Jarred is ours.

As if, he thought sourly, he really gave a damn.

Mickey watched the stranger pause on the sidewalk and glance in her shop's direction.

Come on, she thought, narrowing her eyes, willing him to cross the street; come on over, you've money, I know it, come on and fill the till.

When he turned and went into Henry's place instead, she groaned, then shrugged. Ah well. Not to worry. By the expression on his face she knew he'd be in sooner or later; he had that look about him. He would stay away from the bestsellers, though, if she had him right. He'd go to the back where the older books were. Maybe ask her a question or two. Maybe, and she giggled, ask her about the ghost.

Oh, he'd be in. Sooner or later. No question about it. He was already hooked.

Meanwhile she had a million things to do. Let Henry charm the poor man with quaint stories of village life, and bore him with some of those silly magic tricks of his. She had plans. There was a dress to buy for the wedding, invitations to consider, and, in what she thought was a brilliant stroke, get hold of Rosalind Morgan, see if it wouldn't be possible to use the Hall for the ceremony. Do it up right. Besides, without a proper church or meeting hall in Plud-bury, it was either that or go somewhere else.

She didn't want to go anywhere else.

Here she was born, here she was raised, and here, by God, she would be married.

And to think, she thought, she didn't even have to make a bargain.

Mavis, sliding her arms awkwardly into her coat, stepped out of Whidden's Fashions just as the American left Henry's place, checked the sky, and hurried on. She ducked back into the recessed doorway and watched him head up the Row. Not a very tall man, but the glimpse she'd had of his face told her he wasn't anything she'd kick out of bed, either.

"Mavis Jones!" she whispered, scolding. "What's gotten into you?"

She grinned, felt the blush at her cheeks, and moved off in the same direction, arms folded under her breasts, back slightly hunched. Maybe he'd be taking lunch at the Loft. She'd get a better look then, maybe give him a shy smile, maybe give him her number.

"Mavis!"

She laughed aloud and shook her head at her sudden boldness, oblivious to the damp cold that slipped past her coat collar. What she really ought to do is give Ginny a quick call, have her come down to meet her for a bite. What did Mrs. Whidden call it? A power lunch? Yes, a power lunch. Two unmarried and not totally unattractive young women having a power lunch while they decided what they'd do to the unsuspecting American once they had him in their grip.

A cheerful wave to Mickey Danby as she passed the bookshop, a halfhearted attempt to walk tall and straight as a real power woman ought to, and a sudden stiffening of her spine when she heard a man calling her name. She slowed, but she didn't stop; her heart raced, but it did not betray her.

"Hey, Mave, hold on!"

It was Cary-the-bastard, hustling across the street from the betting shop.

Indecision gave way to resolve, and she turned to walk backward, expression as neutral as she could make it. Wondering with a shake of her head what she had ever seen in the man. Boy, really. Built like a couple of lumpy barrels stacked atop each other, not even thirty yet and his muddy brown hair already thinning too much to hide by clever combing, his face puffed by too much drink.

"Mave," he said with a malicious grin. "You doing all right then?"

"Yes," she answered, still moving backward.

"That's good, Mave, that's super." He winked. "Have any fun lately?"

"You might say that." She faced forward, kept walking, listening to his labored breathing, bracing herself in case he should touch her. Then, a faint smile parted her lips and she looked over her shoulder.

"Cary?"

"Yeah?"

"You ever been to the Wood in winter?"

He stumbled, not certain she was serious.

"You made out your will yet?"

This time he stopped, mouth open, blinking as if a harsh wind had blown in his face. He tried to speak her name, but nothing came out of his mouth but a strangled, mewling sound.

She wagged her eyebrows and walked on, a few steps later waving a good-bye over her shoulder, and laughing when she heard him running away.

Proctor stood for a moment inside the pub door to let his vision adjust. It was as gloomy in here as it was outside, the windows dark glass on the bottom, smoke- and grit-stained on top. Small round tables clean but chipped, the plank floor worn smooth, padded bench seats beneath all the windows, what looked like a one-armed bandit glowing in a far corner. Exposed heavy beams below the ceiling and in the walls; a small fireplace on the right, a table there taken by three old men wearing fingerless gloves, their conversation heated but muted.

It was, he thought as he unzipped his jacket, one of the most comfortable places he had ever been in in his life. No rush, no pressure, no accounting for time; just a drink, just a meal, with company or alone.

That, as much as anything, was what stopped him from leaving when he looked to his left and saw Blaine's face.

The old man and Rosalind, their coats on wood pegs on the wall near the lavatory door, were on a bench seat facing two tables pushed together for the occasion. A woman was with them, her back to him, gesturing weakly around a half-filled pint glass of lager.

Blaine looked as if he wanted to reach over the table and strangle her.

Jesus, Proctor thought; what the hell now?

"Ah, Proctor," Rosalind said gratefully when she spotted him. She struggled to get out from behind her table, hurried over, and took his arm, leading him to the end of the bar where curved clear plastic hoods protected the day's lunch. "My God," she said, barely moving her lips. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Walking. Like I said."

"Well, it's been—ah, Mr. Westrum, I'd like you to meet a guest, Mr. Proctor. Our landlord and host, Proctor, he'll not steer you wrong."

Proctor nodded to the man behind the bar. A classic lantern jaw, black hair in tight curls, a square chest and arms that looked as if they could lift kegs without straining. Westrum nodded back, unsmiling.

"I think" Rosalind said, "the shepherd's pie, Darve. And a half pint, Webster's should do, until he gets used to it. I don't think," she said to Proctor, "you're quite ready for steak and kidney pie." As Westrum put the meal together, she lowered her voice and added, "That's Willa Danby, Conrad's lady friend."

Proctor didn't get it.

"It's Connie," she explained anxiously. "Conrad Cheswick? Willa says he's gone missing."

# TWINE

## F

oolish man, Cheswick thought; you foolish, foolish man. Broad daylight, the middle of the day, and you couldn't find your own arse without a road map.

What the bloody hell were you thinking?

"Oh, you go ahead, love," you said to her when she re-minded you about having lunch with Rosalind and that American. "Go on, there's a love, I've a couple of things to do first, this tie isn't right for one thing, and I'll join you in a few minutes, no need to wait, we don't want to keep Miss Rosalind waiting, do we?"

What the bloody hell were you thinking?

Beneath the trees it was greylight and shifting shadows, a slow wind, and a cold that went much deeper than his bones. It had been so easy getting Willa out of the house that he'd almost wondered if that was a sign. A sign he was about to make a horrendous mistake.

Nevertheless, he did it because it was their future he was thinking of, their future he needed to secure. And for a change it would be he that did the planning and the fix-ing. She'd be mad, of course, but in time she would be proud. In time she wouldn't think of him as a silly old Father Christmas who just happened to be the man she loved.

He looked around, recognizing nothing. Every bole was the same as its neighbor; every leafless bush a twin of the one he had seen before.

"Christ," he muttered angrily, holding his topcoat closed at the neck. "How the hell can you be lost?"

Proctor accepted his lunch from the bartender and headed for the others, changed his mind and moved over to the front corner, placing plate and glass onto a smaller, round table stained with glass-bottom rings and scarred with cigarette burns. He took off his coat, folded it onto the bench seat, and returned to Blaine, leaned down, and whispered, "Stay put. You may pay the damn bills, but I do the damn work."

Blaine lifted his head, said nothing; a sharp nod, noth-ing more.

Proctor reached out a hand and gestured toward his ta-ble. "Mrs. Danby, would you join me, please?"

Willa, flustered, confused, looked to Rosalind, who gave her a nod and a sympathetic smile. After taking up a small purse she held close to her stomach, she rose and followed him, took a chair that kept her back to the others, and called over her shoulder, "Same again, Darve, please?" in a tremulous voice.

After her new drink was served, Proctor apologized for eating in front of her. "My first of the day," he explained with a crooked smile. "If I don't do something soon, my stomach will growl like a lion."

"No worse than him, your friend there," she said, but she did return the smile.

He figured her to be in her early to mid-fifties, but only because of the white he saw creeping into that short, as-tonishingly sable-dark hair. She could, he decided, easily pass for someone ten years younger, if not more. A smart but not expensive coat; a smart but not expensive blouse.

"Do you know why he's here?" he asked, using his fork to point quickly at Blaine.

She tilted her head.

"That album your friend—"

"Fiance."

"Okay. That album your fiance brought to Alan Mor-gan has, he thinks, a picture of his daughter in it. The catch is, his daughter has been missing for a few years, and ..." A shrug—*you can guess the rest.*

"Oh, dear." She lifted her glass and stared at the dark liquid, blew lightly on the foam. "Oh, dear, I didn't know. Neither did Connie, I'm sure. Oh, dear." She sipped, used a thumb to take the foam from her upper lip before cupping her hands around the glass. "And you are...?"

"An investigator, Mrs. Danby. I'm looking for her too."

"Oh!" She smiled. "Like a private eye?"

"Well... not really, no. But close enough."

She sat back, leaned forward, turned her glass around. "Like I was trying to tell your Mr. Blaine, I haven't seen Connie all day. When I woke up this morning, he was gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

This was not a soft woman, he decided; not a simple villager isolated from the world. Upset, yes, but something more.

Then he thought, you're lying, Mrs. Danby. I don't know why, but you are.

But he didn't call her on it; it was too soon, he needed more.

\* \* \*

The overcast thickened.

The slow wind was still strong enough to move the smaller branches, to cause a lazy spill of snow from an evergreen bough.

Cheswick adjusted his scarf, squared his shoulders, and decided just to walk. There was nothing else to do. Sooner or later, simply by keeping in a straight line, he would either reach the Row or the motorway, or end up in someone's backyard. Either way, now, was fine with him, as long as he was shut of this dreadful place.

He didn't like the sound the wind made in the trees.

A shiver walked his spine then, and he couldn't help thinking that someone, somewhere, had just walked over his grave.

Cary Jones burst into the train station and ran straight for the ticket window, cursing loudly when he couldn't find anyone to help him. In fact, now that he checked, he saw he was the only one in the building. The four pewlike benches were empty, and when he looked through the side exit there was no one on the platform either.

All right, he thought, pushing a hand through his hair; all right, it's not a problem. All you have to do is wait, that's all. Fennick will be back in a minute, probably just taking a piss, that's all. He'll be back, you'll get your ticket, you'll be out of here by...

He scowled, raked his hair again, and hurried to the posted schedule beside the ticket window.

"Aw, shit." The next train out, in either direction, wasn't until three-twenty. Two hours. Still, that was all right too. If the old cow actually did it, it wouldn't happen right away anyway, right? Plenty of time to get out. Not that he really believed she'd gotten the nerve. Mave hadn't the guts to kill a fly; she sure as hell wouldn't have had the... "Shit." He kicked at a bench. "Shit!"

Several new customers came into the pub, laughing, greeting the landlord loudly as they hung their coats on pegs and rubbed their hands briskly. A young woman followed them in, cheeks bright with cold, and went immediately to a wall telephone beside the bar. A wave to the old men still sitting by the hearth, and she turned her back to the room.

Proctor saw it all without taking his gaze from the strain on Willa's face. The familiar sounds, though, seemed to settle her a bit. She stopped fussing with her glass; she met his eyes now and then; she glanced less frequently at Rosalind, as if seeking reassurance that this man was a friend. She didn't quite trust him; he was, after all, a stranger, a foreigner. Still, she told him about her daughter's bookshop, about the man her daughter was to marry if only he'd get

off the mark and get on with it, and how she had met Cheswick—years ago, when they were teenagers. Just friends then, until time made them much more.

"You see," she said, absently biting at her lower lip, "Connie is an amateur historian. Taught it most of his life, and when he stepped down, he found he was rather good at finding things. Old things. People come to him, they want this and that, things that used to belong to the family. More often than not, he's successful."

He ate as she spoke, listening as much to the pride in her voice as the words. He suspected she was more practical than romantic, and he'd bet Cheswick did the dreaming while she did the planning.

"This album," he said when she seemed to have run down. "I haven't seen it yet, only Blaine has, but how did your fiance come to get it?"

Willa tucked a strand behind her ear, flicked a finger at something invisible on the table.

"He was down in London, at the market in Covent Garden—have you been to London yet, Mr. Proctor? No? Well, this market sells just about anything you can think of. He prowls, pokes around, sometimes finds the most extraordinary things. That's where he discovered the al-bum. A photographic history, you might say, of Beale Hall in the early days of this century." She frowned. "There were a few pages of more recent pictures, but I can't imagine why Mr. Blaine's child would be in them."

"So he didn't go there specifically to hunt for the al-bum," Proctor said. "It was... luck."

"Oh, yes. Connie is very lucky sometimes. And some-times, not so lucky." She smiled. "It's the luck of the game, you see. Not often, understand, but it happens."

She finally took another drink, another group of cus-tomers took to the last empty tables, and Proctor sat back, thumbing his plate to one side. As the noise level rose and a heavysset woman appeared from a back room to help Westrum behind the bar, he began to feel as if he were in an old British movie; all that was missing was the dense London fog and a nightstick-swinging bobby making his rounds.

He picked up his glass and tasted what Rosalind had or-dered for him, widening his eyes slightly when he found it not half bad. Not quite beer, not quite ale, with a faint and pleasant bitter aftertaste.

Willa watched him carefully. He knew Blaine watched as well, but he looked at neither, content with letting his silence do some work for him while he scanned the room slowly. By the frank looks several patrons gave him, he knew they had figured out who he was, but a cautious nod was all he got when an eye was caught, and a polite nod in return was all he gave.

Willa emptied her glass, wiped her lips, checked her wristwatch, and frowned. "I don't understand. He's not like this, Mr. Proctor. Really, he's not like this."

Her concern was genuine, but he knew she wouldn't give him the reason why.

The real reason.

Then Rosalind was at the table, Blaine behind her, glow-ering. "Proctor," she said with an apologetic look to Willa, "Taylor here wants to wait for Father back at the Hall. Un-less you're up to a long hike, I'm afraid I'm going to have to steal you away."

"It's all right," Willa assured him, reaching out as if to pat his hand. "I'll stay a little longer, then go home and probably find him napping on the couch." She laughed lightly. "When he comes, I'll give you a call, shall I? If you still want a word, that is."

"Thank you," Proctor said. He stood and shook her hand. "And thank you for the company."

She lowered her gaze, and as he passed her he squeezed her shoulder tightly, just once, before trailing the others outside. The afternoon had darkened, grown colder. The few cars that passed the pub seemed too small, and drab. A streetlamp had come on down near the bookshop, its light brittle and frail.

Proctor slid into the backseat and had no objections when Rosalind asked if it would be all right if she cruised the streets for a while. "Just in case we run into Connie," she explained, and then laughed. "Obviously, it won't take very long."

"Sure," Blaine said.

She made a sharp U-turn and headed back down Battle Row.

Proctor stared at the Raven's Loft until he couldn't see it anymore. He was pretty sure Mrs. Danby had lied to him at least twice—about knowing where Cheswick was, and about his run of luck. Likely, since she didn't know him except on Rosalind's introduction, she considered some things none of his business. Still, it was curious.

It was as if, he realized suddenly, she considered him a possible threat.

Curious.

He could be wrong; his anger at Blaine could very well have colored his perceptions, affected his judgment.

Still, if he was right, it was... very curious.

Billy Fennick, self-important as always in his damn stationmaster uniform, trundled in, saw Cary Jones pacing the waiting-room floor, and said, "Bugger, what the hell do you want?"

Cary whirled on him, scowling. "Jesus, you prick, don't you ever work?" He stomped to the barred ticket window. "Come on, then, I need some service around here."

Fennick took his time unlocking the door to his office, and Cary tapped his foot impatiently, swearing by all the gods in Creation that he'd have the bastard's bleedin' heart if he didn't hurry it up.

When Fennick finally appeared in his place, Cary threw some notes into the depression scooped out of the counter, and Fennick swept them into his hand. "Where to, then?"

"Where'll they get me?"

Surprised, Fennick looked up. "What'd you do, Cary, rob the bank or something?"

Cary sneered at him. "Just give me a damn ticket, okay? I don't need none of your lip."

Fennick coughed a laugh. "Yeah, right, whatever you say." He counted the money and looked up in astonishment, lips pursed in a silent whistle. "Christ, Cary, this'll get you halfway to Paris, for God's sake."

"Then do it."

"All right, all right. Jesus, you'd think you'd been—"

Cary saw the look, and looked away. "Just do it, Billy, okay? Don't ask no questions. Just do it."

Cheswick leaned heavily against the trunk of a young larch, one arm wrapped around it to keep him from falling. His watch didn't work, the one Willa had given him on his last birthday, but he could tell by the rapidly dimming light that it was well on toward the dinner hour.

His plan hadn't worked.

So anxious had he been to find his way out that he'd ended up walking in circles, making him so frustrated that it had taken him a long time to calm down again, to force himself to take notice of his surroundings so it wouldn't happen again.

Stinging sweat dripped into his eyes, froze a path down his spine.

He used his scarf to dry his face, took a step away from the tree, and wiped his face again. Held his breath and squinted.

There, between those trees up ahead—was that a car he'd seen? So quickly gone it was hard to tell, but he was positive it was a car. Battle Row or the motorway didn't matter. A few more minutes and he'd gladly put up with Willa scolding him, yelling at him, calling him twenty kinds of a fool.

"Foolish man," he said, grinning.

And behind him a voice said, "Indeed."

Rumbling like thunder.



# TREN

## D

aylight continued to fade while the temperature continued to drop. The wind had stopped. Nothing moved; there was no sound.

Proctor stood outside Morgan's study, watching the clouds slowly blend into evening. He didn't know if the English called this stone balustrade-rimmed flagstone area a patio or a veranda or something else entirely, but it was the fourth time he had been here since returning from the village.

Needing time to think, explaining himself to no one, he had followed all the brick and stone walks that wandered around the gardens, all the way to the far treeline and back. He had been to the stables, most of which had been converted into a garage for three cars, but in the two stalls left he could smell the pleasantly sharp odor that meant at least one horse still lived there.

He had drifted through the house until its size and silence had driven him back outdoors.

He had seen no one except Blaine, sitting morosely in the study. Even an accidental visit to the modernized kitchen didn't unearth Hattie Bridges. So much, he had thought, for Bridges, the ubiquitous butler.

On one of his rounds he had even figured out how to work the study telephone and tried to call Lana, but all he got was the damn answering machine. He'd left a brief message—arrived safely, Blaine is as always—and asked that he be informed right away if anything came up.

One of the French doors opened, and Blaine, his topcoat open, came out to join him.

They stood side by side in the silence, until the old man cleared his throat, brushed at his sweater, and squinted as if the light were too bright.

"Sorry. About before."

Proctor nodded. "I warned you we'd butt heads."

"You did."

"I have a headache."

Blaine bowed his head and laughed, looked up from under his thick eyebrows. "Do you know, Proctor, that you never use both sides of your mouth when you smile? Do you have any idea how annoying that is, not knowing if you're mocking me or laughing?"

"Yep."

Blaine shook his head, and stared out toward the stables. "It's driving me crazy, Proctor. It was supposed to be so simple."

"Do you know Franklin called me yesterday?"

Blaine sighed. "No, but I can guess."

"He and Alicia have given me to the end of February to find her. Then, he says, they're pulling the plug."

Blaine sat on the balustrade, hands jammed into his pockets. Staring at the Hall, still squinting.

"Don't get me wrong, Proctor. I love my children. They work hard, not like some others who take their parents' money and do nothing but spend it. They work hard." He shifted his gaze to Proctor's face. "But I'm still in charge, and don't you forget it."

Proctor nodded. He'd thought as much, but wanted the reassurance. And having received it, his heart hardened, just a little, against Celeste's twin siblings.

"Goddamnit!" the old man exploded, angrily punching his thigh. "I don't get it. Where the hell is everybody? Why the hell can't I see that album again?" He shook his head in despair. "I don't get it. I don't understand it."

"Well, maybe we should do something about it."

Without waiting for a response, he returned inside and stood behind Morgan's gunboat of a desk. Blaine followed, the stress all too visible on his face and in his posture. He nodded at the old safe, black and solid, ornate gold designs, vines and flowers, framing its face.

"I don't suppose safecracking is one of your more dubious skills."

Proctor shook his head regretfully as he examined the telephone that, judging from the row of buttons below the number pad, probably connected to just about every area of the house. One of the buttons was green.

"You're the man's guest," he said. "Do what you have to, to keep it that way. I think I'm going to play Ugly American."

Then he pressed the green button and waited.

Less than half a minute later Bridges entered the room and stopped, doing his best not to react when he saw Proctor at the desk.

"May I help you, sir?"

Proctor pointed at the safe. "Do you know the combination to that thing?"

"No, sir."

"Mr. Morgan is the only one who knows it?"

Bridges nodded.

"And he'll be home... when?"

"I'm not sure, sir. Soon, I expect."

Proctor nodded, rubbed the side of his neck as he walked around the desk while he unzipped his jacket, deliberately slowly, stopping only when he was a double handsbreadth away from the butler's chest.

Quietly: "Does he have a car phone? A cell phone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Call him."

Bridges blinked. "Pardon me, sir?"

"Call him."

"Sir—"

"Mr. Bridges, a woman's life may be at stake here." Proctor narrowed his eyes, not feeling a thing when the man took a step backward. "Call him. Now. Find out when, exactly, he'll be home."

Bridges drew himself up as if to protest, froze, and nodded. Proctor continued to face the study doorway as the butler moved stiffly to the desk and picked up the receiver, punched in a number, and waited for a connection. There was no attempt to eavesdrop on the conversation; he turned only when he heard the receiver click back onto its cradle.

"Ten minutes, sir."

Proctor nodded, not daring to smile at the animosity in the man's expression. "And Miss Rosalind?"

"What about Miss Rosalind?" she asked from the doorway. A smile, a nod of dismissal to Bridges, and she waited until he left the room before moving purposefully across the carpet to switch on a standing lamp not far from where

Blaine stood. Instantly the room shrank, the lamp's bright glow diffused through its cloth shade, giving birth to shadows that hadn't been there before. She switched on the desk's green-shaded brass lamp as well and sat in its chair, hands clasped loosely in her lap.

"You realize," she said, speaking primarily to Blaine, "that 'Ugly American' is actually a misnomer. Twisted by so-called pundits to suit their own agenda. The hero of that book wasn't nasty or mean, he was... ugly."

"I'm sorry, Rosalind," Blaine said, stripping off his coat and dropping heavily into the nearest chair. "But for me, this day has been..." He waved a helpless hand.

"Intolerable," Proctor suggested flatly. "Rude. Inconsiderate. Damn thoughtless."

"Yes," she agreed readily. "And I'm sorry as well. Father should have known—" She closed her eyes, took a breath. "I don't know why he left without taking the pictures out for you. I'm sorry. It's..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry."

Blaine looked at Proctor, who gave him no help, then folded and refolded the coat in his lap. "It's okay. I—did you hear from that woman?"

"Willa?" Rosalind shook her head. "I tried calling a while ago, but there was no answer at Connie's, and Mickey, that's her daughter, hasn't seen her all day." She scooted the chair forward and rested her elbows on the desk. Pushed her glasses higher on her nose and grinned at Proctor. "So. Do you think there's a mystery here, Investigator? Have we got to hunt for clues and such?"

"Mystery?" a voice boomed from the hallway. "What's all this garbage about a mystery?"

Alan Morgan was not nearly as tall as his voice. He swept into the study, topcoat caped dramatically around his shoulders, and made straight for the safe.

"My God, man," he said to Blaine. "My God, I'm so terribly sorry. Absolutely thoughtless of me. Completely thoughtless. What you must think of me I have no idea." He tossed his coat onto the desk as he passed. "Rosalind, be a dear and do something with that, will you? Bridges seems out of sorts for some reason. It must be the damn weather, so damn gloomy and cold all the time."

A thick head of deep brown hair, a close-cropped matching beard that left his cheeks bare, and a mustache only as wide as his upper lip; Harris tweed jacket with fawn leather patches; dark green tie, matching waistcoat; slacks that barely moved when he walked.

He gripped Blaine's shoulder as if comforting a mourner, then hitched up his pants legs and hunkered down in front of the safe. "Traffic," he said, blowing lightly on the fingertips of his right hand. "You know, Taylor, it's getting so I'm actually thinking about picking up one of those helicopter things. God knows there's enough room for a what-do-you-call-it. A landing pad. What do you think? Too ostentatious? Too *nouveau*?" With his left hand he slipped a key from his waistcoat pocket and placed it into a tiny keyhole to the left of the dial, turned it, then fussed with the dial itself for a moment. "Going to change the damn combination too, one of these days. Something simple, like a birthday. Rosalind's would do. Except"—and he laughed—"she'd then know all my secrets."

"Father," Rosalind protested, though not very hard.

Slowly Blaine draped his topcoat over the back of his chair, leaning forward and rubbing his hands together as if they were cold.

Rosalind took off her glasses, put them on again. "Father."

"Not now, dear. Can't you see I'm trying to concentrate?"

Sternly: "Father."

"Darling, I've almost got it. And you know that Taylor—"

"Father," she snapped, "you haven't met Taylor's associate yet. You walked right past him and you didn't even see him."

Morgan lifted his head. For a second he didn't move, then braced a hand on the safe's top and rose, turning as he did. "Oh, yes," he said. "Oh, yes. Of course."

Proctor stayed where he was, and Morgan made no move to cross the room to shake his hand.

Morgan nodded a greeting. "Ah, yes. The ... ghost hunter."

The smile was there, the tone just right, but Proctor couldn't help wondering if the others had noticed the complete disdain in the man's eyes—they looked at him, but they didn't see him; he was, as far as Alan Morgan was concerned, little more than another servant.

"Alan," Blaine said into the silence Proctor refused to break. "Alan, the album, please."

Morgan didn't react immediately; but when he did, it was with a flurry of hands and arms, semaphoring an apology and getting back to the job at hand. He knelt again and gave the dial a vicious twist. "Have to start over. Sorry. Lost track of where I was. Just give me a second here—" He placed two fingers to his forehead. "Yes. Got it. Taylor, I must apologize again for my tardiness. But the roads, you know ... all that ice, and Vincent is so careful about—ah! Success!"

He backed away and pressed down the brass handle. The door swung open. He rubbed his palms together, chuckling, and reached in, fumbled a bit before pulling out a green leather-bound album. With a smile to Blaine he took it over to the desk, frowned until Rosalind vacated his chair, then sat.

"Come," he said, waving to his friend. "Come on, Tay-lor, it won't bite you, you know. Let's have a look at what all this fuss is about."

Blaine looked to Proctor, who nodded but didn't move. He wanted to watch this man at work; he wanted to watch the way this man's daughter was treated no better than he; and he wondered what had happened to Rosalind's mother.

"Taylor," Morgan said gently, "I would be remiss if I didn't tell you that I still think you've made a mistake."

"I know," Blaine said, and opened the cover. "I know and I appreciate it."

As he searched, Proctor could see that the photographs had been attached to their pages by scalloped, triangular corner guards of different colors, the kind he remembered seeing in his grandmother's family albums, the ones he poured through with wicked delight, searching for embar-rassments in his parents' childhoods. The pages them-selves were stiff, and the old man was very careful not to flip them too fast.

"There," Morgan said, pointing. "These are the newer ones, I believe. Relatively speaking, that is." He frowned. "They're not very good, are they? Do you want a magnify-ing glass? I might have one—"

"No," Blaine said, bending over the album. "No, I'll know when I see her. I won't need help."

Morgan nodded acquiescence, and moved the chair again, giving Blaine more room.

Proctor took a quiet step forward, not realizing Rosalind was beside him until he brushed her arm. They said nothing, but Morgan glared briefly at them anyway.

Blaine turned another page. "I remember this one. I think maybe—" And he turned another. "Maybe ..." A hand brushed over his face, back through his hair. "May-be..." He turned another.

"Taylor, really," Morgan said. "I think this is about where you—"

"Hush, Alan." He turned another. "Please be quiet. I need to..."

Proctor looked up at the ceiling, at the ornate plaster rosettes, at the pairs of cherubs in each corner that, in the dim light, seemed to leer at him. Not cherubs at all; fallen angels. He was tempted to wander over to the open safe, to see what else Morgan might have in there, but he didn't want to disturb Blaine, who turned pages more rapidly now. Muttering to himself. Scowling. Bending so far over his nose nearly touched each picture.

"Proctor?"

He sounded lost.

"Still here."

Morgan glared.

"Proctor? I don't..." Blaine looked up, desperation in his eyes. "I can't..."

Proctor stepped toward the desk, ignoring Rosalind's attempt to warn him with a touch, ignoring Morgan's silent command to remain where he was. He turned the album around, and Blaine hurried around the desk, bumping into the corners, cursing, then cursing loudly.

"It was here," he insisted, rapping a page with a stiff finger. "Damnit, Proctor, it was here."

"Taylor," Morgan said, sighing, "Taylor, I told you. Believe me, as a friend, I want to help, but I told you."

"One more time," Proctor said evenly. He opened the album to the halfway mark and, as slowly as he could, turned each page. Watching Blaine, not the photographs; watching Morgan. "She was standing..." he prompted.

Blaine nodded. "Under that porch thing in front. There were two men with her." He tried to laugh; it sounded awful. "One of them kind of looked like Morgan here, without that awful beard."

Morgan laughed too; it sounded strained.

"Now granted there was some shadow, but her face was clear enough, Proctor. Her face was clear enough. It was Celeste, I know it was." He slammed the album shut, turned away, spun back and punched the album without touching it. "It's gone, Proctor. Goddamnit, her picture's gone."

# IRIS

W

While Blaine vented his frustration at no one in particular, stopping just shy of accusing Morgan of removing Celeste's picture, Proctor took off his jacket to carry over one arm, then fetched the old man's. By the time he returned to the desk, Blaine was fuming but silent, and Proctor shoved the topcoat into his hands.

"Come on, let's take a walk. Cool down a little, okay? Get some perspective."

Blaine sputtered but didn't object, the fight abruptly drained and leaving him pale. When he headed for the patio, however, Proctor turned him around and pushed him gently toward the doorway without explanation.

A look to Morgan, then, impassive in his leather chair; a look to Rosalind, who wasn't sure which way to turn; an invitation to neither to follow as he led Blaine from behind, nudging him to the right once they were in the hall, then left, into a narrower corridor. The paneled walls here weren't quite true, the ceiling lower, the two doors they passed slightly canted in their uneven frames. The carpeting was only a runner, exposing planks uneven in length and width.

The original house; the core; Sir Jarred's ancestral home smothered by additions and Time.

"Where are we going?" Blaine demanded.

"I'm hungry," Proctor told him, and pushed open a swinging door at corridor's end, bringing them into the kitchen, which was lit by a pair of circular fluorescent lights attached to one of the ceiling's exposed beams.

The room was empty.

"How in hell can you eat at a time like this?" Blaine demanded. He looked around, then made for a small square table set near a door whose upper half was all glass, looking out onto the estate grounds. "It was there, Proctor," he insisted as he sat in a simple wood chair, slamming his coat angrily onto the floor. "I swear on Iris's grave, it was there."

"No need to swear," Proctor said dryly. He dropped his own jacket onto a butcher block island and began to rummage through the cupboards. "Answer me a question."

Blaine made a disgusted noise—*go ahead, but it's a waste of time.*

"Your Connecticut place, it's not this big, right?"

"Lord, no."

He found some bread, some well-used flatware, opened one of two refrigerators and pulled out a packet of sliced cheese and a head of lettuce, a jar of mustard, and, as an afterthought, a plastic bag of oranges. The menu wasn't hard; there was nothing else to choose from.

"So... you don't have a butler, right?"

"Jesus, why should I? I'm not so old I can't answer the door myself. Alicia's the one with the butler. You should meet him. A supercilious twit." He shuddered. "Comes from California, has one of those movie-British accents."

"A cook?"

"What? Sure. Iris used to do it all, but I can barely boil water, and what in hell are you talking about?"

Proctor dropped everything onto the table and signaled that Blaine should make his own sandwich. He began to drift around the room, opening cupboard and cabinet doors at random. "Maid?"

"Sure. Not full-time. More like a housekeeper, I suppose. She brings in help when she needs it. Vivian takes care of that."

"Not Franklin? Or Alicia?"

Blaine snorted a laugh. "Are you kidding? Alicia, sweet darling that she is, wouldn't know a dustcloth from a vacuum cleaner." He shook his head. "Spoiled her rotten, I guess. No, Vivian says it's easier to protect me when she's positive of those around me." He looked at his sandwich and grimaced. "Like I need saving from a damn maid."

Proctor finally sat opposite him, grinned as he swiped the finished sandwich and took a bite. "Damn," he muttered, and returned to the first refrigerator, looked for something to drink; the best he could come up with was an unopened bottle of orange juice; he took it because the second fridge was completely empty. Back at the table he took a swig and handed the bottle over.

"Roughing it," he said.

Blaine rolled his eyes. "Do you mind telling—"

"How long have you been here?"

Blaine blinked. "In the Hall, you mean? I don't know. Three, four days." He frowned, counting silently. "Four, counting today. I spent a day sightseeing in Windsor. Otherwise, I've been right here. Waiting on Alan, who doesn't seem to be around a whole lot. Business. Jesus, Proctor, I hope I wasn't like that when I was his age."

"You've had meals here?"

"Well, sure. The first night, anyway. The rest of the time, except for one dinner, well, Alan likes to eat out. He knows all the best..." He stopped; he looked around the kitchen. "Jesus, Proctor."

"Rosalind asked Bridges if we were having dinner tonight. He said we were, but he didn't look too thrilled about it. I think she was surprised he actually said yes." He picked up a knife, tapped the dull point on the table. "I'll bet you a dollar that's because there is no Hattie, that actor Vinnie does the cooking, and Vinnie, tonight, was out with your friend." He smiled. "Has to be the kid. I can't see Bridges doing it; it would dirty his precious gloves." A sweeping gesture with one hand. "No Hattie, no dinner."

"Proctor, what the hell are you saying?"

Proctor ignored him. He stared preoccupied at the back door, its diamond-shaped panes black, reflecting the kitchen in glass jigsaw pieces.

"I'm guessing maybe thirty or forty rooms in this mausoleum. I walked all over today after we got back, and I didn't see a single maid, a housekeeper, Bridges, no one. Most of the doors I tried were locked." He pointed over his shoulder. "That door leads to a pantry. There's only canned goods in there, no cleaning supplies. Just a broom."

Blaine shrugged. "The locked doors aren't surprising. This place would cost a small fortune to keep up if you didn't close some rooms off. Rosalind as much as said that herself." Absently he grabbed the orange juice and drank, stared at the swinging door. "Alan has money, though. He could buy a small country for what that Bentley costs. I don't even want to think about the insurance. Hell, the furnishings in that study alone..." He shook his head. "Proctor, I don't get it. What are you driving at? And will you put down that damn knife?"

Proctor did, studied it for a second, then flicked it with a finger to spin it in a complete circle. When it stopped, he spun it again and watched the blade, blurring, then flickering, then sighing to a halt.

One of the lights buzzed and went out, came on again a few seconds later.

Dimmer.

"If what you say is true," Blaine said, making himself another sandwich, "why wasn't Vinnie in here making dinner like he was supposed to?"

"I don't know," Proctor admitted. He pushed away from the table and crossed his legs. "I don't know."

Blaine ate, but not much; he looked at the back door as if expecting the chauffeur to charge in at any moment; then he looked at Proctor and said, "I know what you're doing."

Proctor stretched, and cupped his hands behind his head.

"You're trying to take my mind off Celeste." He reached for the knife, drew his hand back. "You're asking me all these senseless questions to give me time to consider what I really saw. That it was probably just a woman who happened to look like her. That I jumped to conclusions any half-baked, two-bit psychobabble columnist could see coming a mile

away."

Proctor glanced up at the lights, and the weak one went dark.

It didn't come back on.

Blaine said, "You're wrong." He tore a leaf off the head of lettuce and began to shred it, examining each piece before dropping it to the table. His voice softened. "She never wanted to learn to cook, you know, no matter how much Iris pushed her. Except for burgers on the grill. She liked that. I don't know why, but she liked that." He put the last piece into his mouth and chewed it slowly. "She even got Franklin to do it once, and it was a complete disaster. Most of the meat fell through onto the coals, and she never let him forget it." He scooped the other pieces into a palm, rose and carried them to the sink, dropped them in and wiped his hands on his trousers.

He didn't turn around.

"It was her, Proctor. It *wasn't someone who* looked like her. It wasn't someone who resembled her in some way. It wasn't wishful thinking. It was her."

Proctor stood and crossed the room quietly, half turning to signal Blaine to keep talking.

"All I want to know is where that picture went," the old man said loudly, faced creased in bemusement. "Alan wasn't here to open the safe, so who took it?"

Proctor put a finger to his lips when he reached the swinging door, and waved Blaine back to the table. Once done, he said, loudly, "If I kick this door now, it'll probably break that gorgeous nose of yours, you know. Your glasses too."

He counted to seven, and backed *away* slowly as the door opened inward.

"Very clever, Mr. Bond," Rosalind said sourly.

Cary sat alone in the darkened waiting room, his ticket held tightly in his hand.

His rotten luck Brit Rail had had another problem; his lousy luck the train he wanted wasn't just delayed, it was effing canceled. Billy Fennick, all official and smug, assured him the fare would be good on the commuter train once it came.

It hadn't come.

The telephone in the station office had rung several times, but Fennick, gone to supper, wasn't there to answer, and Cary couldn't do it for him because the office door was locked. In fact, Billy should have been back by now, it was already past seven, but there was obviously no hurry because the train still hadn't arrived.

Did he know? Cary wondered; did he already know about the train?

There was, just the once, an urge to call Mave. Admit he was a heartless pig, a stupid prat, and ask her to call it off. Swear he'd make it right with everyone, cop to the lies, then leave Pludbury and never return. Go so far away she'd need a visa to find him.

But he could not move.

There were noises outside he could not identify.

Soft noises. Scraping noises. Noises that sounded like footsteps, like hoofbeats, like wires keening in a high wing, except there was no wind, just the night.

He could not move because he dared not move, so he sat in the darkened waiting room, ticket tight in his hand, and listened for the train and prayed for Fennick's return and closed his eyes when the telephone rang because it sounded too much like something shrieking.

And when it stopped he looked up, because then there was no noise at all.

Proctor hitched himself up to sit on the butcher block, so he could watch the others, and the back door. A faint buzzing overhead, and he hoped the light would hold.

Rosalind went straight to the table and took Proctor's seat. Her chignon had begun to loosen, and she fussed with



the loose strands that made their way over her shoulder and her face. She avoided Proctor's gaze, making a show of examining the remains of their impromptu meal, tsking as she replaced the mustard jar lid. She picked up the knife, and put it down. Shook her head sadly.

"I'm so sorry, Taylor."

"I assume you already heard, so I won't say it again."

She ducked her head in a single nod.

"Where's Alan?"

A shrug. "Gone to bed, I suppose. He was... is very up-set." She took off her glasses and placed them carefully on the table. "He thinks you're accusing him of taking that picture. He thinks... he thinks you may think it was some kind of horrid joke."

"What about you?" he asked.

"I didn't see it," she answered plaintively. "How can I say anything when I didn't even see it? You've put me in an awful bind, you know. You really have. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to hurt him. I..." For the first time, she looked right at Proctor. "I don't know what to say."

Genuine anguish there, he judged, and not a little fear. Not unlike Willa Danby's expression when they talked about Conrad Cheswick. The anguish he could understand, given each of the circumstances, but he couldn't find a reason to slip around the fear and hold it long enough for him to study.

Abruptly her mood lightened. "No questions?" she asked, exaggerating her nearsighted squint. "You had dozens for Taylor. I'm hurt, Proctor. Truly hurt."

"Well," Blaine said, "you could tell me if he was right about the cook. About Vinnie, I mean. Being the cook."

Proctor watched her face as she sifted through several possible answers, yet he didn't react when all she did was nod.

"But why?" Blaine asked, not bothering to mask his confusion. "I mean..." He spread his arms wide to encompass the Hall, the estate grounds. "I know you're not broke, we do business your father and I, remember? So why?"

She fumbled for her glasses, nearly dropped them, and held them against her chest. A draft stirred her loose hair, and she shook her head irritably. Finally she said, her voice so quiet Proctor almost didn't hear her, "I can't. Don't ask me, Taylor, I can't."

"Won't," Proctor said, just as softly.

"No." She looked up. "Can't."

He tilted his head—*okay, if you say so*—and slid off the butcher block. "Mr. Blaine, no offense, but your cooking sucks. Is there anyplace in town I can get something more solid to eat?"

"Coranders is open till nine, we'll just make it," Rosalind said, plainly grateful for the change of topic. "Fair Italian, lousy French. We're not gourmets here, but we can scrape together a decent meal." She slipped her glasses on. "I'll drive, if you like. Taylor?"

Proctor didn't like the way the old man slumped in his chair, arms on the table, palms down, fingers limp. In the fluorescent glow, his hair slightly mussed, he looked fifteen years too old. The fight was still there, it would always be there, but the strength to raise it had deserted him.

"I think ... no. No, you two go ahead. I'll grab a book from the study, get a drink, read a little." A weak smile for Rosalind. "I won't get lost. Promise. Fill me in when you get back."

Proctor said nothing as he took his coat from the chair and watched as Rosalind stood, reached out, and squeezed one of Blaine's hands.

"Careful, girl," Blaine said with a mock growl. "I may be getting older, but I'm not decrepit yet."

She laughed, leaned over, and gently kissed the top of his head. The gesture surprised Proctor, and when she saw

his expression she tried to smile, failed, and said, "I'll fetch my coat and meet you in the study. You can be the gentle-man and walk me down to the garage."

"Sure."

With a cautious farewell wave to Blaine, who looked but didn't really see him, he followed her from the kitchen. Once they reached the main hall, she gave him a playful push toward the study and ran off. Five minutes later she was back, in a dark green overcoat with a matching scarf around her head, loosely tied beneath her chin.

The cold first startled, then revived him. Unlike the afternoon, it was dry now, and there were stars and a slow-rising moon, the hiss of a light wind across the frozen sur-face of the snow.

She took his arm, and he said, "Do me a small favor?"

"If I can," she answered warily.

The single bulb over the entrance to the garage and stable swung and bobbed as they walked. Beyond the reach of the study's light there was only the moon and glowing snow.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Tonight," he said. "I want to meet Jarred Battle."



# C

randers was nearly as small as it appeared from the outside. Pompeii and Rome-site murals on the walls, Chianti bottles in straw jackets that held candles on each table, red-and-white check tablecloths, a small Italian flag on the wall behind the narrow register counter. Even at this late hour, enough customers to provide pleasant am-bient noise without filling every chair.

Proctor accepted Rosalind's menu suggestions without comment; he wasn't all that hungry. What he had wanted was a good excuse to get out of the Hall and away from Blaine without seeming rude, and a chance to ask those questions Rosalind had teased him about.

He needed to think.

She had laughed off his request to meet the local ghost, and for the time being he didn't pursue it. He had wanted her out of the Hall as well, away from Blaine, away from Alan Morgan, in the hope that she might feel more relaxed, less compelled to play the role of the hostess of the estate.

Unfortunately, either she was far more clever than he'd thought, or it worked all too well—throughout the meal she teased him about his instant reputation, filled him in on the local village gossip, flirted outrageously, and deftly parried all questions about her family. At the same time she managed to keep up a sporadic but meal-long conversation with two young women at the next table. One, he gathered, was celebrating a recent promotion, while the other drank far too much and seemed disturbed and dis-tracted despite making all the right noises.

Eventually the competition for her complete attention was too great and he gave up.

An odd thought: Jealous, Proctor? Lost your touch?

That he had the idea at all startled him, and made him uneasy. He finished before she did, and when she hinted rather broadly she'd like to invite her friends to their table, he gave her a sickly polite smile.

"You all right, Proctor?"

"This place is a little close, I think. Would you mind if I got a little fresh air?" He was on his feet before she could object. "Tell you what, I'll meet you all at the pub, okay? I need to think about *what* to do for Mr. Blaine," An expres-sion of concern for his employer, which wasn't entirely faked.

"That's fine," she said seriously. She reached out a hand, and he took it; she squeezed his fingers and gave him a wink, a promise she'd see him up at the Loft.

Boy, lady, he thought as he picked up his coat and left, with a cheerful wave to the women, who were already switching tables; boy, you are really, really good.

With infinite care Mickey Danby put the receiver down; with a slow inhalation to steady her anger she walked across Henry's living room, fetched her overcoat from the closet, and put it on. From one pocket she pulled her gloves and slipped them over her hands. From the other pocket she pulled a wool scarf and settled it around her throat.

It took a very long time before she got it right.

It took a long time more before her hands stopped trembling.

She scanned the room carefully to be sure she hadn't left anything behind, anything at all that would remind any-one, however remote, that she had spent time here. When she was satisfied, and when she finally subdued the urge to smash everything in sight, she stepped out into the cold, and slammed the door behind her as hard as she could.

*Hello, Henry darling, the caller had said, speaking rap-idly, breathlessly, leaving no time for a greeting. I know I'm not supposed to do this, forgive me, but I had such a wonderful time the other night, I couldn't help it, God you're inexhaustible. You really must come down to London more often, I can't stand it when you 're not here, you know*

*that, don't you? I... Henry ? Henry? Are you there, Henry?*

She walked quickly up the street until she reached the corner. It took a great effort not to think, not to change her mind and go back, preferably to burn the shoddy little place down and dance among the flames, but she man-aged. Just. Not the least because she was her mother's daughter and knew how to behave while being stabbed in the back.

A glance into Coranders' side window tempted her to go in, sit with Ginny and Mavis and tell them, in vicious detail, a bottle of wine in her hand, the hell with using a glass, about Henry's betrayal.

The son of a bitch.

She felt the onset of tears, and willed them away, teeth clenched, jaw tight enough to make her neck muscles bulge. She would not, she absolutely would not cry. He wasn't worth it. He didn't deserve it. She vacillated— home, the pub, a long walk, find the sorry son of a bitch and cut off his puny balls, the restaurant... but home was too dark and empty with Mum staying with Connie, the pub would have too many people who'd notice her dis-tress and add her to the gossip list; and finding Henry was a wonderful choice but she had no inkling where he'd be. She only knew he wasn't down in London with that gush-ing whore.

She marched up Battle Row, heels snapping on the pave-ment, anger fueling her stride and a certain, almost thrillingly frightening determination.

Maybe she was being a complete fool; maybe she truly ought to know better. But as the saying goes, there are no atheists in foxholes, and goddamnit but Henry Treadle had brought this war on himself.

If it was true what she had heard, she was positive she could handle the aftermath of certain guilt; if it wasn't, well, it wouldn't be the first time tonight she had been made to look the fool.

Goddamn you, Henry, she thought, and let the tears fall.

By the time she reached Battle Wood, she was running.

Coranders sat on the corner of a dead-end street and Battle Row. Proctor hesitated for a moment, rubbing one shoulder unconsciously, taking in easy lungfuls of sharp cold air to replace the restaurant's smells. Then, a mental flip of a coin, and he strolled south toward the railroad tracks. Across the street and down he could see a bus idling noisily in front of the station, exhaust swirling around it like locomotive steam. Passengers were either heading toward him or hurrying to cars in the parking lot. There was no sign of a train.

He could hear their voices, some complaining, some laughing in resignation, and he gathered the train had had some trouble and buses had taken care of the commuters. He smiled. Pludbury didn't seem much like a commuter haven. Yet there they were, and soon they were gone, leaving behind a stocky man waving something at the bus driver, gesticulating wildly. Whatever the occasion was, it was over by the time Proctor reached the tracks, the bus gone, the man left alone, standing forlornly under the sin-gle light over the station entrance.

Proctor stood between the rails and looked in both di-rections, then south into the darkness, trying to imagine how it must have looked that winter, Lord Sedgin's sol-diers charging out of the woods.

For Sir Jarred's men it must have been hell.

Blood would have pooled on the frozen winter ground; bodies would have fallen with a dull hollow sound.

They had no chance.

No chance at all.

So why, he wondered as he began to walk slowly back up the street, did Jarred bother? Rosalind said he was a fighter; surely he would have known he hadn't a prayer against seasoned troops. What the hell did he think he was doing?

What the hell was he protecting?

He stopped.

He looked over to the station without really seeing it, or the man still standing in the doorway; he looked down at the tarmac; he gave himself a hard mental pinch, a re-minder that he wasn't here to speculate about something that had happened half a millennium ago.

He was here to help Taylor Blaine find his daughter; everything else was secondary.

He looked up sharply.

No; no, it wasn't.

He had a feeling, nothing more, that he had somehow disturbed the strands of an invisible spiderweb.

His legs took him up the street; he was barely aware he was moving.

Webs are patterns, each strand connected to the next, simply, sometimes intricately, always inexorably. Too close, and all you see is what you've bumped into. For an insect, a fatal move. What he had to do was step away, see the pattern, see what, if any, sense it made.

Patterns always made sense.

Silently, and unconsciously, he began to snap the fingers of his left hand.

Silently, and unconsciously, he began to whistle at the dark.

Cary Jones watched the American closely. For a second he thought the man would cross over and speak to him, but the man moved on instead, not walking in a straight line, head up, then down, and Cary wondered if he was drunk.

Not that it mattered, did it?

The situation would be reserved if he ran up to the Yank and begged for help.

For what? the man would say.

I don't want to die, Cary would answer.

Who's going to kill you?

The ghost.

"Aw, Jesus," he muttered, and slid down the door until he was resting on haunches and heels. The ticket still tight in his hand, a talisman for which he had yet to find a use. Goddamn coach driver wouldn't accept it, told him to file a complaint, but he was on his way home. An accident up the line had separated the rails, all trains rerouted, coaches called into service to service the poor stalled passengers.

"Nothing until morning, earliest," the man had told him without much sympathy. "Go home, go to bed, you can leave in the morning."

No, Cary thought; no, I can't.

Fennick had returned just as the coach had arrived. Officious little wanker, sucking up to the passengers, grinning like a jerk, then telling him there was no sense opening up again, not until there was word about the line, and so 'Have a good night, Cary,' and a wave and he was gone.

It was the look on his face, though, that Cary remembered best.

Poor sod, it said; if it's what I think, even Paris won't save you.

Cary wished he could get mad, stay mad, but he couldn't. Reaping and sowing, as his late mum would say; you're reaping and sowing, you sorry little twit.

Then he wished the wind would start again. At least that would explain why he shivered so badly.

In a dark place with no wind there were shadows that moved.

"Soon, I think. Tomorrow night latest. Tonight, if we must."

"Are you sure?"

"All I need is two. That should do it nicely."

"This isn't like it used to be, sir. Remember that. People notice things. When people die, other people ask questions."

"They haven't yet, have they?"

"But two, sir?"

"Three, actually." A laugh. Low, and rumbling. "I need to be sure."

"Three? No offense meant, sir, but you must be joking."

"None taken, and I'm not. Once it's done, we'll have no more worries. It won't matter what questions are raised. It won't matter, because it'll be too late and we'll be long gone."

A long silence, until something creaked; it sounded like old leather.

"The third one."

"Yes?"

"Who's it to be then? No one else has made a bargain."

"Doesn't need to be, does there? Not now. And we need to be safe. We don't need interference, not at the last minute, not when we're so close."

"Then... ah."

"Yes. Very good. But you must promise me one thing."

"Anything, sir."

"I want it to be bad. I want blood, you understand? No cars, this time, no trains. When the ghost hunter dies, I want all his blood."

# STEEN

## T

he fourth one along is what Rosalind had said, and Proctor hesitated at the open gate before he walked up to Conrad Cheswick's front door. It was a waste of time, but he knocked anyway. Aside from the fact that there were no lights in the windows that he could see, the house had an empty feel to it. When knocking didn't work, he pounded a few times, then backed away and checked the upper story. The glow of the nearest streetlamp didn't give him enough light to see if anyone had touched a curtain up there, but he didn't think so.

No one home.

Backing away farther, he checked the cottages on either side, but there were no lights there either. A few across the street, but he didn't think the people there would take kindly to a stranger asking questions about one of their neighbors.

"Nuts," he said, jammed his hands into his jacket pock-ets, and headed for Battle Row. He didn't feel defeated, just slightly disappointed. Still, it would have been too easy anyway, finding the man home, asking about the album and getting the right answers. Too easy. Not that he'd know what to do with the answers once he'd gotten them.

He was still too caught up in the image of the web, certain it was important, relying almost entirely on an instinct that had seldom steered him too far wrong. Hunting, he thought, and laughed quickly, silently.

Once, he had inadvertently overheard Taz talking to Doc, telling the older man that Proctor sometimes re-minded him of a panther he'd seen in a TV documentary. "Like, this big old black cat was walking through the jungle, minding his own business, suddenly it stops, tail go-ing every which way, and then he's off again. So what I'm saying is, the boss, he gets this look too, you know what I mean? He's talking or thinking, and suddenly he gets this look. Scary as shit. The next thing you know, we're going somewhere, and when I tried to find out why, he didn't say. But damn, Doc, you should have seen that look."

"I have," Doc had said calmly.

"So what is it?"

"You ought to know that by now, Paul. He's hunting."

At the time, Proctor had laughed at an absurd image of himself, prowling through the jungle, roaring, snarling, then pouncing on his prey and tearing it apart. He had laughed, but he had never forgotten it because he knew that's not what Doc was talking about.

There was something in the air, and once he sensed it he started... well, he supposed hunting was as good a word as any.

A fair analogy, but not perfect.

There was something else as well, something he had never been able to explain to anyone, something that some-times frightened him when it happened.

A sudden certain knowledge that not all was as it seemed. A subtle difference, but a difference nonetheless. A difference far more than simple instinct. Yet this instinct-plus rarely failed him, and he didn't think it had failed him tonight. He'd just had the wrong prey, that's all.

"Wrong prey?" He groaned, muttered, "Jesus," in disgust, and laughed shortly, loudly, and when he reached the T-intersection, decided he'd better get down to the pub. Rosalind had been gracious enough to let him go without protest; the least he could do is show up for the after-dinner drink. Besides, she had the car, and he wasn't about to walk all the way back to the Hall.

He quickened his pace, encouraging the night's cold bracing air to clear his brain of stupid panther images so it could get back to work. A glance across the street showed him the clearing, the benches, the way the trees behind formed a solid black-ice wall.

Brother, he thought; no wonder they believe in ghosts around here.

If he had some time, he might go into it more, the leg-endar-y ghost of the Pludbury knight, the question of Battle's men actually fighting those soldiers. Right now, however, he had to hope that Blaine was all right, that he wouldn't try anything stupid like try to beat an answer out of Morgan, or tear the place apart himself looking for that picture.

Damn, but he wished he had seen it. It wasn't that he didn't trust the old man's identification, but he'd feel a whole lot better if he could have seen Celeste for himself. He had seen other photographs, of course, scores of them chronicling her life from infancy to high school graduation. If there was a new one, he would recognize it, and her; then he would make damn sure it was genuine.

The only thing he was sure of now was that there had been a photograph, and now there wasn't.

The why of it was another one of those strands he sensed.

Halfway to the Loft his left heel skidded on a small patch of ice. His leg went one way, he went the other, and before he had a chance to begin fighting for his balance, he was on his rump as a fist of pain slammed up his spine. He gasped and thought he screamed. Realized his mistake when he heard it again.

It wasn't him, it was a woman.

When he looked over his shoulder he saw her, racing out of Battle Wood.

Proctor tried to stand, but the shock to his tailbone had rendered one of his legs practically numb, and he stumbled, fell onto his hands and knees, and scrambled for a few feet on all fours before he was able to get up. His leg still didn't work properly, and by then the woman was already past him, keeping to the middle of the street, her voice high, keening; he couldn't hope to catch up.

Lights began to snap on in the houses along the Row; someone called out from the Loft's forecourt.

He watched her veer toward the pub, then he headed for the clearing. Someone might be hurt; he was the closest one to them. A few unsteady steps as the shock-pain cleared, a few more as other voices were raised, and finally he was able to run himself. The curb was low enough to take in stride, and he swerved around the first bench, slowing to a trot while his eyes worked to adjust to the darkness beyond the first row of trees.

It didn't occur to him until he had moved out of the clearing that he might need a weapon.

A hesitation, a check back to see how close anyone else was, and he moved, wincing each time his shoes crunched through the thin cover of snow. The light from the street was uneven here, turning black to grey in some spots, turning black darker in others. The woman's footsteps were clear; she had evidently run out the same way she'd gone in.

Gone in for what? he wondered; to meet someone? To make one of those bargains with a ghost? It certainly wasn't just to take a stroll—too cold, too dark; even in a small place like Pludbury, he sure didn't see a woman on her own taking a walk through reputedly haunted woods in the middle of the night.

Thirty feet in, at the end of the light's reach, he saw the figure on the ground, just off to the right. Huddled against a bole as if trying to gain warmth. The woman's tracks stopped a couple of paces farther on. She had seen it too, had gone over to check, turned, and run away.

When he reached the same spot, he could understand why.

Loud voices behind him, and the strobic effect of flash-lights trying to slice the darkness.

Proctor stayed where he was, crouching now, catching his breath when a stray white beam swept over the man's face. Eyes wide open, mouth agape, white hair and white beard caked with dried blood.

The wind took its time, but it finally began to move.

The moon was high enough, not strong enough, uneven patches of silver light that almost reached the ground. Casting shadows that shifted and vanished, shifted and stayed.

A beam slid past Proctor's right arm, touched the dead man's face, moved away and darted back.

"Aw, Jesus," someone said. "Aw, Jesus, it's Connie." A scramble of exclamations then, orders hissed and snapped;



more lights skidded over and around the body, and eventually a tentative finger poked Proctor's shoulder. When he turned he saw a man in uniform, thought at first it was the local police until he realized it wasn't a policeman at all. A group of maybe fifteen others stood back, flashlights now aimed at the ground at their feet.

They had seen enough.

They had seen too much.

"You're the Yank, yeah?" the man said, deliberately keeping his gaze on Proctor's face. "The investigator?"

Proctor nodded.

"Billy Fennick," the man said. "I'm the stationmaster. The train station? We don't have a local copper. We don't even rate a substation." Fennick swallowed hard to slow the babbling. "Look, this isn't in the rules, I know, but I'd like... shit, man, can you give me a hand?"

It would have been ludicrous had there not been all that blood.

He warned himself this was an opening for trouble, but he could also see the panicked look on the man's face, a man surely not yet out of his twenties.

He nodded. "You watch TV, right? Cop shows? You should know most of it." He pointed. "You keep everyone away from this area so they don't mess up the crime scene. You send someone running like hell for a real cop, and you take the woman who found him and you put her some-place where no one will talk to her. Keep a friend with her. She didn't look in too great a shape when I saw her."

Fennick smiled, almost. "Yeah. Got it. Aw, Jesus."

He turned and hurried back to the others, Proctor admiring the way he managed to keep his voice firm. It wasn't deep, but at least it didn't crack. Several men instantly took off for the street; two others moved to the left, two to the right, forming a clumsy half circle a good twenty yards from Cheswick's body. When it was done, Fennick beckoned with his light, and Proctor joined him and the others.

He recognized the amateur magician from the news-agents, and two of the old men who were in the pub last night.

"We should get up a search party," one of the old men said.

"Too late," Proctor told him. "His blood's frozen. The killer's long gone."

"Around the roads then," Henry Treadle suggested. "Maybe see where the guy came out."

Fennick looked to Proctor, then nodded. "Okay, Henry, do it. But," he added loudly as Treadle turned to leave, "you see something, man, don't go messing around with it. You stay put, send someone back." He watched for a moment. Then, "Thanks," to Proctor.

"No problem. I watch cop shows too."

Fennick smiled weakly, uncertain now what to do next. He explained that it would be a while before the police arrived, they had a way to come yet, and he couldn't understand why anyone would want to kill poor old Cheswick, he never did anyone any harm and—

"Your flashlight," Proctor said gently.

Fennick blinked. "What?"

Proctor took the flashlight from the young man's hand. "I'll need this for a minute. Meanwhile I want you to watch me carefully so there'll be no question of what I did when the cops do show up. I'm going over there, where I was when you arrived. I'm not going anywhere else, okay?"

"I don't know, sir. This is—"

"Just watch."

With a hand up to keep Fennick in place, he returned to the spot and again lowered himself into a crouch. The light skated slowly over the unbroken surface of the snow. No footprints for as far as he could see. He checked overhead,

but the light slipped too many shadows between the branches; still, there was nothing, no one, up there.

He flew in, he thought; flew in, slashed the poor guy's face, cut his throat, and flew out.

Right, Proctor; sure.

He examined the ground around the body. Less snow there, but it was clear the old man had died where he'd been attacked. He hadn't had a chance.

But if the killer didn't fly, where the hell are the god-damn footprints?

*someone has good fortune, and someone else dies*

"Mr. Proctor? Sir? I really think you shouldn't—"

Proctor stood, stretched his back, and returned to Fen-nick's side. "Thanks," he said, handing back the flashlight. "It's all yours."

A flash of panic. "Where are you going?"

"Just to the street, okay?"

"I... I don't know. Maybe you should—"

Proctor touched his shoulder lightly. "It's all right, I'm not running off." He took a step, and added, "You don't have to stay, you know."

Fennick's smile was grateful. "Actually, sir, I'd better. Watch the scene and all, right?"

Proctor shrugged, patted his arm, and made his way back to the clearing. When he stepped out of the trees, he saw several groups standing in the street, all of them watching him as they had in the pub—some directly, others at a discreet angle. He felt as if here were a performer taking the stage for an audience that wasn't terribly enthusiastic about the play. He was relieved when he spotted Rosalind off to the left, near the clearing's first bench. Her head rose expectantly when she spotted him, one hand lifted in a tentative wave. When he reached her, he sat, turning his back to the wind.

She sat beside him. "I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault. Is the woman okay?"

She nodded, too quickly. "Yes. Or as well as. That was Mickey Danby. Connie was..." She looked away. "Connie was going to marry her mother. You met her. Willa?"

"Yeah." He looked around. "I don't see her."

"No one has."

Great, he thought.

She tipped her head toward the others. "They're saying, you know, it was a struck bargain."

"The ghost."

"Yes."

Proctor adjusted his collar closer to his neck. "What do you think?"

A hand went to her hair, her glasses, adjusted her scarf. He could see that despite the wind-color in her cheeks, she was pale, taut lines of tension at the corners of her eyes.

She looked older.

Instead of pressing, he looked back at the Wood, at the distant segments of white light moving side to side as the men shuffled in place to keep warm. Those in the street and on the sidewalks huddled closer, but they didn't leave. A car drifted by, stopped, and the driver asked someone a question. A second car came up the Row, its headlights bright

and blinding; it too stopped, at the other end of the clearing, and several men gathered near the driver's window.

Only a few heads turned when, in the distance, the wind carried the high-and-low, high-and-low cry of an approach-ing siren.

At the sound, Rosalind shifted closer and took his left arm in both her hands. Holding it tightly.

"Well," he said, "I guess I'm in for a long night." He smiled at her. "You sure know how to show a tourist a good time."

"Mave," she said.

"What?"

"Mavis Jones. From the restaurant?"

He shook his head to tell her that he didn't understand.

"It was Mave," she said. "It was Mave who struck the bargain."

# SEVENTEEN

## I

It was over much quicker than Proctor expected. The detective in charge was nothing if not efficient, and Proctor suspected the cold wind had more than a little to do with hurrying the process along. The man quickly sorted through those who had had contact with the body and those who were only bystanders. The latter he ordered back to their homes, and the rest were herded down to the train station, while crime scene experts trudded into the Wood. Along the way Fennick was complimented on his handling of the situation and the allocation of the men he had on hand. He tried to pass on some of the credit, but Proctor shook his head—*leave me out of it, this is your show*.

Interviews were held in the station office, tape recorder running, a constable at the door. Proctor's didn't take long. He explained how he had seen the woman run out of the woods, how he had gone in in case someone had been hurt, and instead found Cheswick's body. Didn't touch a thing, did his best to help young Fennick get organized, and sat on the bench with his hostess because he knew he'd have to make a statement.

He could sense no suspicion, accepted a "doing your civic duty" compliment with a modest shrug, and went into the waiting room, where he saw Rosalind standing nervously by the exit.

Mavis Jones and Ginny Harden sat on a bench, Mickey Danby between them, eyes red and used tissues crumpled on the floor. He wanted badly to speak to the woman who had "made the bargain," but he knew this was neither the time nor the place.

Besides, there was something else that wanted clear-ing up.

They walked up the street, Rosalind holding his arm. The wind slapped their cheeks hard; it was difficult enough to breathe, much less have a conversation, so he waited until they were in the car and on their way back to the Hall before he said:

"Interesting, don't you think?"

"What?" she asked, staring hard at the road ahead. "What do you mean?"

"Well..." He shifted so he could watch her and the road at the same time, felt the car shimmy and threaten to drift at each gust. "Cheswick brings an old album to your fa-ther. There's a picture inside that suddenly seems to be missing. And now the man who brought the album is dead. Worse, he was murdered."

"Oh, a coincidence, surely." She cleared her throat. "It has to be, doesn't it?"

"Why?"

"Because it has to be."

"Why?"

She refused to look at him. "Because it doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"No," he admitted. "Not yet. But that's only because we don't know the connection."

"There is no connection. I mean, how could there be? I don't even know if Taylor's picture even existed."

"It does."

"And how do you know that? You didn't see it either."

"No, but *he* says it does."

"He's not perfect. He can make mistakes. And this is his child you're talking about, Proctor. A man could see a missing child in a thousand different faces."

Proctor nodded the possibility. "Where is your mother?"

"What? My mother?" This time she did look at him, startled, eyes large behind her glasses. "What does she have to do with it?"

He pointed at the road until she turned her attention back to her driving. Which, at this point, was about as fast as the road would allow. She didn't bother to slow at the turn-off; she took it so hard the car nearly sideswiped the trees on the verge, and the pillars went by so fast he almost didn't see them. When she braked under the portico, he had to brace himself against the dashboard to keep from slamming his chest against it.

She didn't apologize, or turn off the engine.

He didn't move to leave.

"As it happens," she finally said, "she died when I was a child."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. You didn't know her."

"You're right. But I do know you look an awful lot like her."

"Good heavens, how do you know that?"

"Because," he said flatly, "you don't look a damn bit like your father."

She clenched the steering wheel so hard it began to tremble. After several calming breaths, she said, "Get out, Mr. Proctor."

He opened the door, winced at the cold that instantly filled the car, and turned to slide out. Paused, and said very quietly, "You don't know me either, Rosalind, so I'll give you a hint, you can take it or leave it, it's up to you."

"Mr. Proctor, please leave. I'm tired. I want to put the car away and go to bed."

"I'll give you a hint," he repeated. Very quietly. And waited until she couldn't help but turn her head. "I'm not your enemy, Miss Morgan. Don't lie to me again."

She looked away, her chin up and rigid.

He took his time getting out, closed the door gently, and jumped back a step when she sped away, tires squealing, the engine barely keeping up with the change of gears. When he could no longer see the taillights, he shook his head and went inside where the wind couldn't reach him. But he could still hear it out there, prowling, testing the doors, testing the windows, sending drafts in to curl ice around his ankles.

A single light in its pewter sconce, like those he'd seen in the halls upstairs, burned down where the entrance hall ended, nothing in the hallway beyond; in what Bridges had called the parlor the two lamps nearest the doorway had been switched on. The combined effect of the three was just strong enough to reach the staircase banister, while the stairs themselves seemed to climb into a fog that darkened in stages to dead black long before they reached the landing.

As he took off his coat and held it in one hand, he figured the first thing he better do was find Blaine and give him the bad news about Cheswick. After that... he shrugged and walked over to the parlor, saw that the next room in line, where he had spoken to Blaine the first night, was completely lit. He wasn't sure, but he thought he could see the old man sitting in the same chair.

When he heard the faint noise behind him, like a slow soft sigh, he turned, and saw something make its way down the stairs.

It was as if a piece of the gallery darkness had detached itself from the landing and as it descended, gained substance, step by step. Black solidifying; white appearing out of blots of grey, and catching the light. Midway down, he could see that it was a man; three more steps, and he could see white gloves and a pale profile. He also thought he could see through it to the wall.

Two steps more, and he said, "Good evening, Bridges."

"Good evening, sir," the butler answered, unfazed. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to let you in."

"No problem. It's late." A short laugh; a shrug. "I can't expect you to be up all night, right?"

"All the same, sir." He stopped before he reached the last step, turned with one hand atop the newel post. "Is there something I can do for you, sir?"

"I was looking for Mr. Blaine," Proctor answered, then jerked a thumb over his right shoulder. "I think I found him, though."

"Will you want drinks, sir? Or perhaps something light to eat?"

"I don't think so, no. But thanks."

"As you say, sir."

Proctor gave him a good-night salute and started for the sitting room, stopped, and turned. "Bridges, there was a murder in the village tonight."

Bridges hadn't moved. "Yes, sir, I've heard."

Proctor frowned. "You have?"

"As you've already discovered, sir, this is a rather small community. News travels fast."

"You can say that again." He switched his coat to the other hand. "You knew him, right?"

"He was a visitor, sir. Mr. Morgan and Mr. Cheswick had business on occasion."

"Does Mr. Morgan know?"

"He does, sir. He's very upset. In fact, I was just on my way to bring him something to help him sleep."

"Oh. Good idea. Well, look, give him my sympathies, will you, please?"

"I shall indeed, sir, thank you."

Proctor lifted a hand—*don't mention it*—and headed for the sitting room, changed his mind and hurried back, slowed, and peered carefully around the doorway frame. Bridges was already in the hall, heading for the kitchen. He faded slowly into the dark, first the black, then nothing, briefly, but the white gloves until they too vanished.

The breath of a draft brushed his cheek.

He shivered, shook his head quickly and hard. So what did you see, Proctor? he asked himself as he made his way toward the sleeping Blaine; you're tired and it was just a trick of the light? Bridges's natural ability to seem to appear out of nowhere? What exactly did you see?

It's the first thing they say when you come into their home, or their office, or someplace outside: it must have been a trick of the light. It must have been some kind of illusion. My mind isn't sharp and I'm seeing what I want to see.

Or what I'm afraid to see.

It's the first thing they say, and most of the time they're right.

Blaine was slumped in the chair, head down, one hand on an armrest, the other dangling between his legs. On the side table was a decanter, not much left inside. On the floor at his feet, a book lay where it had fallen.

Proctor picked it up and dropped it onto the cocktail table. When that didn't work, he shook the old man's shoulder gently, whispering his name until Blaine's eyelids fluttered, opened, closed, opened again. He opened his mouth, and Proctor smelled the liquor.

"You're... back."

Proctor nodded. "And you need to get to bed."

"Talk."

"No. Not now."

Blaine batted the hand away, inhaled deeply several times, and smacked his lips. "Need a talk."

"No, sir," Proctor said. "I don't think so. Not tonight."

"Still early."

"Mr. Blaine, it's after midnight."

Blaine rubbed his face, his eyes, but it was clear he wouldn't be able to focus for very long. "Damn." He blew out a long unsteady breath and held up a hand, shook it until Proctor took hold and pulled him to his feet. Blaine pushed his hair back from his forehead and stared wide-eyed at the decanter. "Jesus, I drank all that?"

"Looks like it, yeah."

"Damn." He took a step, looked at the ceiling, and said, "I think I need a hand here, Proctor."

Proctor draped his coat over his shoulder and took the old man's arm. Lightly, ready to tighten his grip but not now. Another illusion—Blaine could still make it on his own.

"Been thinking," the old man said as they headed for the stairs, Proctor shortening his stride to match Blaine's shuf-fling gait.

"Okay."

"I think this place is haunted."

"No kidding." Proctor chuckled. "What makes you think so?"

"Noises."

"Ah."

Blaine didn't speak again until they reached the stairs. He looked up and shook his head, groaned at the distance, and grabbed the banister. "Christ, the least the bastard could do is leave a light on, huh? Jesus, you'd think he was a damn mole or something."

One slow step at a time, Proctor behind, just in case.

At the landing, Blaine patted the suit of armor on its breast plate. "Battle's, did you know that?"

"Nope."

They looked at the duckbill-front helmet, at the back-curved crown.

"Ugly son of a bitch, isn't it?" Blaine laughed hoarsely, and coughed, and Proctor nudged him to the second flight. "Christ, that thing is ugly. Who'd want to wear a thing like that, huh?"

"If it keeps you from getting killed."

Blaine laughed loudly. "Well, damn, Proctor, it didn't work, did it? Stupid son of a bitch got himself hanged. And son of a bitch, where the hell are the lights? A man could get killed up here."

At the top of the stairs they turned into the gallery, and Proctor ran his fingers along the wall, side to side, up and down, until he found a light switch just around the corner. Three bulbs lit when he tripped it, one at either end and in the middle.

"Cheap son of a bitch," Blaine muttered, gesturing at the barely useful wattage. He laughed, coughed, pounded a fist against his chest. "He's so cheap he doesn't even use doors, you know that? Doesn't put them in, just walks through the damn walls." He shook his head, rubbed the back of his neck. "Which room is mine? Hell, he ought to put numbers on them, for Christ's sake."

"This one," Proctor said when they arrived. He reached around Blaine and opened it, then reached around the frame and pressed the switch, turning on the nightstand lamp. "I'll see you in the morning."

Blaine nodded heavily, already fumbling with his shirt buttons as he swiveled unsteadily to close the door. "I was in the library, or the study, or whatever the son of a bitch calls it."

Proctor waited patiently.

Blaine's eyes closed, and for a second Proctor thought the man had fallen asleep on his feet. Then the eyes snapped open. "I was looking for a book. To read. I... you know I couldn't find a single mystery? I thought the English loved mysteries. He doesn't have one. Nothing. I turned around and there the son of a bitch was." He grinned, and grabbed the door to keep from falling. "Scared the shit outta me, Proctor. He must've walked through a damn wall."

Right, Proctor thought; after finding all three doors to the study locked, he walked through a wall.

"Go to bed, Proctor," Blaine said. "You look like hell."

"Thank you, sir," Proctor answered. Smiled. And after the door closed, waited in the hall until he was sure the old man hadn't fallen before he fell into bed.

A sigh, a surrender to a great yawn, and he opened his door, went in, turned on the light, and said "Aw, Jesus, Rosalind, not again."

All Rosalind said was, "Damn you, Proctor, how did you know he's not my real father?"



# ICHEN

A

s in a dark dream, dark voices beneath the wind: "I think he knows."

*"He suspects."*

"Right now, that's all the same."

"Nevertheless, I can't move about the way you can now. Cheswick was, I think, the last one for me."

"Was he surprised?"

"Sadly, I don't think so. Still, it wasn't a total loss. There *was* a lot of blood."

"What about the ghost hunter?"

"As much as I'd like to, just to be sure, we can't wait. We will finish it tonight."

"All of it?"

"Oh, yes. All of it. Beginning to end."

"Then I'd better hurry, sir. 'Twould be better if it were all done in the dark."

"When we're finished, old friend, there won't be any dark. Ashes, my loyal friend. All they'll see is ashes"

# NEBEN

## T

here were no houses on the road south of Pludbury, no shops, no lights. No trees along the verge to slow the wind that coasted from the hills and across the pastures. The embankment was topped with thick hedgerows, it was like trudging through a tunnel with a glass top. Wan-ing moonlight was the only thing that kept Cary Jones from stumbling off the tarmac into the ditch that bordered the road.

Not that it would stop him—a few scrapes, a few cuts, even a broken bone—if his current run of luck stayed its course.

He had heard the screaming and had seen someone, it had looked like a woman, racing hell-bent down the Row. Next thing he knew half the village was in the street, head-ing for Battle Wood, and he held his breath, crossed his fin-gers, prayed long and loudly until he heard about poor old Connie.

For a second he rejoiced.

The bargain was complete.

But when he was hustled out of the station doorway by an officious copper prick, he began to wonder. All the other times, if the stories were to be believed, it was an ac-cident what done a man in, or a woman, not some sodding slasher with a blade. Or maybe a quiet stopping of the heart while an old codger slept.

Never was a murder.

Never; it wasn't done.

If the stories were to be believed.

So he hung around for over an hour, listening in on the gossip, then peering through the window at Mave and her bitchy friends, all of them wringing the hell out of hand-kerchiefs and tissues, Mave shaking like a leaf, and he de-cided that she believed it, and maybe it was her bargain what done poor old Connie in.

Maybe, though, it wasn't.

Maybe it was really some nutter hanging out there in the Wood. So it would have to be Cheswick who got it, right? Stands to reason. Because the old fart was always in there anyway, wandering around all hours of the day. No one else hardly went in, but he did. All the time.

So if it was a slasher, then...

He walked straight to his flat down the dead end from Coranders, fetched his passport, all the money he could find, an extra sweater and his heaviest coat, and started walking south. No sense running, he'd be done for in twenty minutes, too much smoke and drink, and he wasn't all that stupid.

A nice steady pace wins the race.

He reckoned he'd be out of the valley before dawn, un-less his damn luck changed and he was able to get a ride. Once over the hills, he'd stick out his thumb and take his chances. Or find a coach at a stop. Or a station that had a train.

What he hadn't counted on was the wind.

It blew right in his face, made his nose and eyes run, and made walking bloody hard. Sweat soaked him and chilled him. It wasn't long before his teeth began to chatter, and his joints felt as if they had filled the gaps with grind-ing ice.

He had to stop every hundred yards or so and turn his back so he could breathe and have a rest, and curse himself for not thinking and heading north instead so the wind would push him, not take his strength.

Too late now, though; if he changed direction, he'd probably drop before he reached the tracks.

Damn you, Mave, he thought as he ducked his head and pushed on; damn you, Mave, I'm going to kill you, I swear to God you're gonna die.

He liked the sound of that and said it aloud. Used it to give him cadence. A marching song to lift his spirits and keep his legs moving when all they wanted to do was stop and fold.

"Kill you, Mave," he chanted. "I swear to God you're gonna die."

Then the hedgerows fell away to open the land on either side. The wind no longer tunneled; it slammed and shoved at him instead.

"Kill you, Mave!" he shouted, and looked out across an empty snowfield, saw a glimmering light, a moonlight silhouette of a barn, and wondered if maybe the farmer back there would take him in. Just for the night. Maybe just an hour.

He slowed and wiped the wind-tears from his eyes, and damn if there wasn't some idiot standing out there in the snow.

He wiped his eyes again, gave them a good rubbing, and looked again, and said, "Oh, sweet Jesus, save me," spun around and began to run.

Proctor dropped his coat onto the chair by the door, crossed the room, stepped up to the bed-platform, sat on the edge of the mattress, and began to pull off his shoes and socks.

She had pulled the drapes over the windows, and they fluttered at the bottom whenever the wind, humming to itself in the eaves, slipped a draft through.

"Proctor, didn't you hear me?"

"I heard."

She twisted around until she was kneeling on the bed, still in her sweater and jeans, hair still wind-tangled. "So how did you know?"

He pulled off his sweater and tossed it on the floor, wig-gled his toes, and stretched. "I was guessing," he said. "I didn't know for sure until just now."

She gaped, then scowled. "Proctor, you—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I know." He stepped back off the platform and reached for the buttons on his shirt. "I know, okay? I don't guess, right? I have some damn mystical power that renders it impossible for me to guess."

"Well... no," she said. "I was going to call you a son of a bitch, actually."

He stared at her, let his eyes close for a second while he ran through a list of names for himself, from idiot to pompous jackass, then returned to the bed and sat cross-legged, facing her. Held up a forefinger, to caution her not to interrupt.

"There are different kinds of *we*," he said. "The editorial *we*, the royal *we*, the... the *we* you use when you're speak-ing for a group. Okay so far? Then there's the *we* you use when you're talking about family. About home. About the people who mean something to you, something important. I didn't think about it at first, not until tonight. Back at the bench. Every time you talk about the village, Rosalind, you say *we*. Morgan doesn't. He says *they*. It's the rich on one hand, and the not-rich on the other. *We*, and *they*. The gentry, the nobility... and the *they*." He smiled. "Us."

"And... and the resemblance?"

"Shaky ground," he admitted. "But experience ... I don't know if I can put this the right way, but as far as I can see, no child ever stands completely alone from either of her parents."

"That's very wise," she said, a half smile on her lips.

He smiled back. "Thanks. I stole it from my mother."

"Ah." The smile faded and her right hand began to pluck at nothing on the quilt. "You do that in America, do you? The *we* and the *they*, I mean?"

"There are exceptions. Blaine, for one. But yes. We don't call them nobility—dukes and earls and barons—"

"—and knights."

He nodded. "The titles aren't there, but the attitude's the same. We just don't make a ceremony out of it."

"There are exceptions here too, you know."

"I'm sure there are. I'm also sure Morgan isn't one of them." He reached out then to cover her hand and keep it still. "So who are you, Rosalind? Who are you, really?"

Slowly she pulled her hand away, and turned her back to him, hanging her legs over the footboard, heels butting the wood softly. "I think," she said, her hand down, "the better question is, who is Alan Morgan?"

Willa Danby was enraged in her grief—at Conrad for do-ing what he did, at herself for not thinking ahead and pre-dicting he would do it, and at the winter knight himself for taking all she had from her simply because Connie's job was over.

She should have known it when she woke up and he was already gone; she should have known when she didn't see him, when she snuck back home to fetch some things, giggling like a schoolgirl all the way because here she was, nearly sixty, and sneaking in the back door just like Mickey used to when she was a teen; she should have known it, damnit, when the sun went down and he still hadn't come home.

Calls to the pub, to Beale Hall, to a couple of his cronies, and when he wasn't there, wasn't anywhere, goddamnit she should have *known*.

Worse; when she heard the screams and saw the men gathering in the street, she'd gone out and stayed in the shadows, listening until she knew. And then, just like a woman in those old books the old dear loved to read, in-stead of making herself known and playing the grieving not-quite widow, she had panicked and run away. Hid in the house until she realized the police would search it. Then she'd grabbed her coat and scarf, and left as quickly and quietly as she could, thinking Battle would be after her next and she wasn't going to give him that chance.

But the cold and the wind confused her, and once in a while grief swamped her and she'd stopped and sobbed and cursed. Until, desperate and unable to keep the fear away, she decided she had only one chance, one choice.

She headed for Beale Hall.

It was like running into a tunnel once the hedgerows re-turned, no light anywhere but far ahead and that was only a faint glow. Cary knew he wasn't going to make it that far. He knew it, but he ran anyway, because there wasn't any-thing else to do.

For a while the wind helped him, giving him that extra step, that extra nudge, but it wasn't long before his already stiff and weary legs couldn't work right anymore. He be-gan to veer from one side of the road to the other, and his left knee began to ache, hobbling him, slowing him down.

It was hard to breathe.

It was hard to see.

Damn you, Mave, he thought; damn you, damn you.

A fearful look over his shoulder, and he couldn't see a thing. A hope that made him gasp, until he saw the figure waiting for him straight ahead.

He sighed; he slowed and stumbled, slowed and stopped.

It wasn't a giant, not like in some of the stories he had heard. Tall, maybe, taller than him for sure. But it wasn't a giant, and it didn't breathe fire, and when it was close enough for him to see its face, he wiped his eyes and grinned and said, "Holy shit, man, it's you?"

Beale Hall, Rosalind said, staring at the door, feeling Proctor at her back. Sir Jarred, they call him the Winter Knight because of when he died, he wasn't very popular once the fighting was over. He had two sons, their mother long dead, and they stayed for a while. The younger one left first, the older a few years later. The Hall was empty for the longest time, and apparently no one cared, they were too busy trying to put the village back together.

Then one day a young man shows up, claims the Hall for himself. Calls himself Beale, and again, no one cares because he's not too bad, by all accounts. Kept to himself for a while, then started a family and opened his purse now and then to be sure the farmers wouldn't starve in bad times.

Generations came and went, and it wasn't so bad here. We never grew, never really wanted to, and as long as Beale Hall looked after us... well, it wasn't so terribly bad.

Inevitably it was found that Beale was just a forced corruption of Battle, and that the first Beale was really one of Sir Jarred's grandsons. By then, of course, no one minded. The Battles were long gone, the Beales were here to stay, and the fiction suited everyone, so no one ended it. We simply didn't care.

About a hundred fifty years ago the Beales saw the wisdom of the Industrial Revolution and they began investing. I guess they did all right at first, but then it all went bad. By World War I all the money was gone, and it wasn't long before the Beales were gone too.

About ten years ago ... no, forgive me, I lie. It was exactly four years, one month, and a fortnight ago, give or take, when Morgan showed up, and the Hall had light again. Most of the time.

And it was about that time, Mr. Proctor, that Sir Jarred came back as well.

Cary stopped smiling.

Panting, exhausted, the wind trying to thrust him forward, he took a shaky step to one side and shook his head in disbelief.

"Aw, don't be stupid, mate," he said, hating the whine in his voice when he wanted to sound firm. "I'm leaving, you can see that, yeah? And all I done for you. Don't that count for something?"

The face, what he could see of it, was more pale than the moon. Black lips and black eyes, and black hair the wind shunned. There was something in its right hand, but he couldn't make it out.

Cary flapped his arms helplessly. He raised his voice to be heard over the wind: "Oh, for Christ's sake, don't go playing the game with me, huh? I'm looking right at you, I ain't blind. Don't go playing that game with me."

The right hand stirred, and something flared and faded.

Cary held out a pleading hand. "Look, I told you I was leaving, right? Far away as I can get, and I ain't telling no one, no one'd believe me anyway. Right? Who'd believe someone like me?"

The wind pushed him again, sounding like an old woman shrieking in his ears.

He was tired, he could barely stand, and he had to start now if he was going to go at all.

The hedgerows hissed as the wind passed through them, branches husking and rattling.

When the right arm moved again and he saw what the right hand held, his eyes widened, and there was nothing colder than the cold that settled around his heart.

"No," he said, not giving a damn now how he sounded. "The old man's dead, right? The bargain's done and done. You don't have to do me, you know. You don't have to do me, there's no need."

"There's always a need," the dark figure answered.

The wind shrieked in his ears, and he couldn't stop it, and he couldn't run, and he couldn't help looking when the dark figure raised its hand and he saw how the moon-light turned the blade it held to silver.

"Please," he begged.

The wind shrieked in his ears.

"Time," the figure said, and the blade shrieked as well.

# THEY

## P

roctor pushed off the bed and walked slowly around the room. Flexing his knees. One hand massaging the small of his back. He had stopped Rosalind because he thought he knew where she was going, and he needed a few moments to put things together. To gather the web's strands.

He wandered to the window and yanked open the drapes. The lamps were still on in the sitting room and parlor, their glow slipping weakly across the drive to the snow patches on the other side. In one pane he saw Rosalind swing herself around, bedsprings creaking, until she faced him, legs up, hands wrapped around her shins, chin resting on one knee. While behind her and through her he could see the wall and the bathroom door, slightly distorted because the glass was old and settling.

"Why," he said to her reflection, "are you telling me this? To try to convince me that Alan Morgan is actually a ghost, or something like a ghost? That he's really Jarred Battle, back to reclaim what was once his?" He sounded sarcastic; he couldn't help it. "That because I'm supposed to be a ghost hunter, or whatever, that I can do something about it?"

She lowered her gaze, and he lowered his head, braced his hands on the sill, and let his forehead rest lightly against the glass. The cold felt good. For a while. When he straightened, her head was up, but he couldn't read her expression. It didn't matter. He wasn't mad, but he was on his way. Knowing that it was irrational, that she couldn't know what he did.

Or what he had seen.

They expected him to believe, without question or condition; and through that belief they expected some kind of rescue, some kind of miracle, some kind of magical protection that only he could provide.

What she, what they all could not know is that for every one he came to know was real, there are one hundred that were not.

He never believed until he saw.

Yet he never disbelieved out of hand, either.

What made him angry ... what made him sad, what brought him down in his quiet times with a melancholy weight was the unavoidable reality that sometimes he didn't recognize what was real until it was too late.

Until someone was... hurt.

"Are you all right?" she asked, sliding to the edge of the bed, hands braced on the mattress.

A moment passed before he nodded, not very enthusiastically; another moment before he turned around and said, "Follow me, here, because I think..." He frowned. "I don't know. Just follow me for a minute because I'm thinking out loud and I don't always make sense."

"Like now?"

He grinned. "Yeah. Like now." He took a slow breath, followed the track of the ceiling's exposed beams. "Most important—you should know I'm very sorry about your friend's death. You should also know there was nothing I could have done to prevent it, even if I'd known what was going on."

"And now you do?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Not really. Only sort of."

She shook her head—I *don't understand*—and jumped when the gust slammed against the window, rattling the frame, making the panes shimmer. She hugged herself again, and hunched her shoulders.

"I think," he said, "your story is wrong. The legend, I mean." He turned his head and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, drew his hands to his temples and rubbed them. He was tired, and he didn't want to be, not now. "It says, the story, that Battle takes one soul to revive each of his soldiers, right? When his army's intact again, he... I don't know. He shows up?"

Rosalind edged toward the footboard as if escaping the window. "Yes. I guess... yes."

"No."

She took off her glasses, blew on the inside of the lenses, and put them on again. "No?"

"No." He leaned against the door, folded his arms across his chest. "Forgive me if I'm speaking out of turn here, but from all I've heard, Jarred Battle was one thorough son of a bitch. He didn't much care for the people he was supposed to protect; he certainly didn't spend any of his fortune on them; and most of what he called his army deserted him at the first opportunity, which tells me those people weren't entirely stupid. Or loyal."

Rosalind frowned, thinking, then gave him a brief smile. "You know, I've never thought of it that way, but I suppose you're right. A bastard he was, no question about it."

"Okay, so why would he go to all the bother of resurrect-ing, as it were, people he didn't like? That he probably had contempt for? The deserters. The cowards."

"He wouldn't. But why..." She frowned again, moved her lips but said nothing for a while. "Then why all the souls? Over time, Proctor, the past four years, a number of people have died here. Granting truth to the story, as you have done, some of those deaths had to be ... let's call them natural, but others were the result of a struck bar-gain. That's still quite a lot of people."

"Not, " he said, "if you're not content with remaining a ghost."

"Now that's absurd."

"Why?"

"Ghosts are ... ghosts, for heaven's sake. They can't be anything else."

He laughed, then raised an apologetic hand. "Sorry, but look—I flew over here at twice the speed of sound, was chauffeured to Pludbury in a Bentley large enough to house a small town, and here I am now, talking to an at-tractive woman about ghosts as if they were real, and you think only ghosts with ambition is absurd?"

She blinked. She took off her glasses, put them on, rubbed a finger under her nose, and said, "This is crazy."

The strands came together. Not all, but most.

He remembered her reflection in the pane.

"A man eats to gain strength, Rosalind. A man eats to gain strength. Read all the books you want, listen to all the stories, watch all the movies but keep this one thing in mind—there are no hard-and-fast rules for a ghost's exis-tence or the reason for its return. Each one is different. Some wail, some clank, some warn, some threaten, some yearn, some guide.

"And some want to come back... and they can."

A brusque gesture of denial before she slid off the bed, went to the window, and stared out at the night.

"Do you know what that means?" she said.

He nodded. "Yes. The bargain is a fraud. And it has been since the beginning."

\* \* \*

Suddenly she seemed very small, standing in front of the tall window; very small, but not fragile. He knew she had

one of the last strands, but for now he didn't know how to identify it, to figure out how it fit into the pattern.

"It's a trick then, isn't it?" she said, putting her back to the sill, smiling as if hoping he would smile with her. "Someone is out there, killing our people, and we've been blaming it on a ghost."

He had already considered that possibility, and had already rejected it. He had been so wrapped up in trying to fit Blaine and that damn album in to everything else that had happened that he'd gotten lost. Created a false maze. A false web. Put the album aside, however—aside, but not forgotten—and it was amazing what he could see without—

"Son of a bitch," he whispered.

Her reflection in the window.

Rosalind turned quickly. "What? What's the matter?"

He came at her so fast, her eyes widened in fear; when he grabbed her shoulders, he could feel her trembling.

"Tell me now and tell me quickly," he said. "No time for stories. Is there a treasure? Gold or jewels or something hidden here or in the Wood?"

She shook her head. "No, I—"

"How about money, lots of it, somewhere else? The Beales weren't really broke when the last one left, were they? Some kind of an estate attached to this house?"

"No, Proctor, there's isn't anything like that, I don't think."

He stepped back, hands sliding down her arms. "Then why do you suppose he's gone to all this trouble? What's in it for him when he finally takes the last step?"

Without waiting for an answer, he snatched up his shoes and socks, hurried to the bed, and put them on. "My sweater," he said, and she picked it up, tossed it to him.

"What's the matter? What's going on? What do you mean, what's in it for him?"

"Think about it," he told her grimly. "You already know the answer."

The garage door rose without making a sound.

An icicle snapped free of the stable roof and shattered on the frozen ground. Without making a sound.

Moonlight failed to reach inside the garage bay, but in there, in the dark, was the sound of quiet rumbling.

Proctor pulled the sweater over his head and hastily slapped his hair back into place. Put his hands on his thighs and told himself to slow down or he would end up slamming into blank walls. His eyes closed; his breathing slowed; he listened to the wind outside, to Rosalind's foot-steps as she made her way nervously, aimlessly across the carpet.

Trick of the light.

No, they weren't.

He *had* seen right through them; it hadn't been a trick of the light.

He listened to something in the hall.

He wasn't sure what it was at first, or even if he really heard it. When Rosalind stopped and said, "Damn, a window must have broken," he knew what it was:

The wind.

"It happens every once in a while," she explained, head-ing for the door. "This place is so old, a pane pops out when someone sneezes and the next thing you know we're fighting a hurricane inside. It's a bother, but you get used to it."

"Rosalind."



"I won't be a minute. Bridges—"

"Rosalind, no!"

She turned with her hand on the knob, then stared at the door as the corridor wind rose by degrees to a long howling moan, then pitched higher to a scream. The heavy door began to shake, strong drafts blasting through under-neath. She jumped back, gasping, one hand darting as if seeking something to grab.

Proctor hurried to the edge of the bed-platform and grabbed her hand, pulled her to him and up.

"What is it?" she whispered, her grip so tight his knuckles ground together.

The doorknob rattled; the hinges squealed like iron drawn against rusted iron; the drafts, like miniature winds themselves, rippled his pants legs and froze his shins, slipped behind the drapes and lifted them away from the window, snapping like dull gunshots.

The nightstand lamp shade rotated slowly around the bulb.

On the floor, Proctor's sweater rose as if something had crawled beneath it to hide.

Abruptly the pitch lowered, the scream became a deep-throated rumbling, the voice of a vast stampede without any vibration.

It passed swiftly, and faded; the drafts died and the drapes settled.

Proctor blew out a relieved breath, didn't know what to say, so looked down and said, "My hand."

With an *I'm sorry* grimace she released him and sat heavily on the bed. Reached out and grabbed his elbow and pulled him down beside her. Her breathing was quick and shallow, as if she'd just run a race, and her left hand rose to take off her glasses, changed its mind, and pushed at her hair instead. Finally she exhaled sharply, slumped, and said, "If you have any idea what the hell that was, Yank, I don't think I want to know it."

In the garage, headlamps snapped on.

Blaine, Proctor thought; Jesus, Blaine.

Moving so suddenly it made Rosalind start, he ran for the door, flung it open, and crossed the hall. He didn't bother to knock; he opened Blaine's door and stepped over the threshold, at the same time flicking the switch on a brass standing lamp by the window.

"Taylor, you okay?"

Blaine's clothes were scattered around the floor, his shoes placed neatly on the armchair's leather cushion. Blaine himself was burrowed under his quilt, only crooked spikes of his hair showing. He muttered and shifted and released a wet sputtering snore that made Proctor grin as he turned off the light, backed into the corridor, and closed the door.

Small favors, he thought, and closed his eyes in thanks.

"Is he all right?" Rosalind whispered from the opposite doorway.

"Yes." He followed her gaze as she poked her head out and looked down the hall to the high window at the far end. It was a far distance, the light down there dim, but when she looked back at him he didn't have to be a mind reader to know what she was thinking: It isn't broken.

To her credit she didn't come after him with questions; instead, when he asked her in mime to get their coats, she did, and said only, "Where are we going?" Then she jabbed his side lightly with an elbow. "Keeping in mind, you understand, that the last time I said that you wanted to meet Sir Jarred."

"Maybe I still do."

They headed for the staircase.

"Don't joke, Proctor."

"I'm not." He pointed across the gallery to the unlit hall on the other side. "Private quarters? Family?"

"Yes." She grabbed his arm and stopped him. "No."

Frightened again, she shook her head, unable to put voice to all the objections she tried to assemble. But when he looked at her, unsmiling, she dropped her hand and placed it against her stomach.

He left her staring after him, didn't look when she ran to catch up. Down the stairs to the landing, a glance at the armor, a glance down into the front hall, and he started up the other side. He wasn't sure exactly what he was going to do, what he would say when he faced Alan Morgan, but he wasn't going to let another night pass without doing something.

"Proctor, please," Rosalind said.

He looked over his shoulder and said, "Show me the way," just as someone began to pound frantically on the front door.

# TWENTYONE

## R

Rosalind didn't hesitate. She swung off the landing and took the stairs down two at a time, one hand on the banister to keep her balance. "Yes!" she called as the pound-ing continued. "Yes, we're coming!"

Frustrated, Proctor took one more step up before groan-ing, cursing, and following her down. By the time he reached the bottom the door was open, and he heard Rosa-lind say, "Oh, my God, Willa, where have you been?"

He didn't hear the answer.

The night behind her suddenly turned a glaring white, and he saw Willa Danby half turn and hold a hand up to shade her eyes.

The glare brightened.

He tossed his coat aside and ran across the hall, grabbed Rosalind's arm, yanked her back inside, and grabbed Willa by the waist, swung her around and over the thresh-old just as the Bentley, dark and silent, swept so close to the door he could feel the wind of its passing. It didn't stop; it swept on down the drive without a single touch to the brakes.

The next few minutes were hectic, as Rosalind insisted on bringing Mrs. Danby into the parlor while Proctor re-trieved their coats. Once the shaken woman was in a chair, Rosalind went to the sideboard, studied the several de-can-ters on their silver serving trays, and said, "The hell with it." She opened one of the doors below and took out a bottle of brandy, grabbed three glasses, and asked Proctor if he wouldn't mind pouring, because her hands were shaking so much she didn't think she could make it. She put bottle and glasses on the cocktail table and knelt be-side Willa's chair, grabbing her hands and rubbing them.

"You poor thing, you're freezing." A mild scold: "Willa, tell me you didn't walk all the way out here."

Willa, her face blotched with angry red, pulled one hand free and searched through her coat pockets until she found a tissue to take care of her nose. "I had to, dear," she said, although she looked at Proctor. "I can't talk to the police now, you know that."

"No," Rosalind said sternly, "I don't."

"They'll want to know where ... where Connie ..." A hand covered her eyes. "They'll want to know why."

"You wait." Rosalind stood, thought for a moment, and repeated, "You wait. I'll be right back. More tissues," she said to Proctor as she trotted into the hall and turned toward the kitchen.

He stood behind the empty chair, his jacket on the cush-ion where he'd dropped it. He glanced around the room, thinking something wasn't quite right, but for now he only waited until Mrs. Danby shuddered a deep breath and reached for a glass. Realized he hadn't poured yet and pulled the hand back, twisting restlessly with the other in her lap.

"Where did he go?" he asked her quietly.

She stared at the dark fireplace, head still shaking from the cold. "The Wood," she said at last.

"Why?"

"To ..." When she'd sat with him before, back at the pub, she could have been a decade younger; now, he noted sadly, she could easily be a decade older. "To end it, Mr. Proctor. He went to end it."

"You had a deal," he said, just as Rosalind returned.

"Damn it, Proctor, can't you leave her alone for a while?" She dropped a box of tissues onto the table and grabbed the brandy, filled each glass, and parceled them out.

"A deal," he repeated, ignoring Rosalind's glare, turn-ing his glass slowly in his hands.

Willa nodded and accepted her glass with a quivering smile, but didn't drink. "You know how it's to be done?"

"Yes."

"We... his was different."

"Willa," said Rosalind, concerned and angry. "Please wait until you're—"

"Hush," Willa said. "I can't wait." A nod to Proctor. "He knows I can't."

"Money?" he asked.

"Yes." A tear like melted ice slipped down her cheek. "A favor here, a favor there. He's ... he was very good, you know, at finding things. So very good at finding things."

"Like Rosalind?"

Rosalind opened her mouth to protest, then sagged and turned away.

Willa nodded.

"And the album?"

She nodded again.

"Tell me."

She held her glass in both hands and sipped, swallowed, then suddenly exploded in a choking that brought Rosalind to her, taking the drink away, rubbing her back while she glared at Proctor, a demand that he stop this at once.

Willa wiped her eyes, blew her nose, lifted her head, and clasped her hands. "We thought, you see, he needed us more than we needed him. To do those things. We had more than enough money, we don't need that much, after all. Connie wanted to end it, promised we'd talk about it, and ..." She swallowed. "And the foolish old man went there alone." Her smile was ghastly. "Now I have the money, and that bastard has my Connie's life. It turned out to be the bargain after all."

"No, Mrs. Danby," he said.

"But he's dead," she cried, and Rosalind again rushed to her side, put an arm around her shoulders.

"Enough, Proctor. That's enough."

"Exactly, Mr. Proctor," said Alan Morgan from the door-way. "That's quite enough indeed."

Proctor neither flinched nor turned; he watched the women instead as he lowered his hands, keeping his un-touched brandy below the top of the chair.

A brief wild look at Proctor, and Rosalind said, loudly, "Alan, my God, what do you think you're doing with that gun?"

Morgan laughed, the laugh as deep and smooth as his voice. "What does one usually do with a gun, my dear? In this case, I think you'd call it lending a friend a hand." His voice moved closer. "Well, bless me, but is that Mrs. Danby I see there? Drinking, I might add, my very best brandy?"

Rosalind tightened her grip on Willa's shoulders. "Mor-gan, this is ridiculous. There's no need for that."

"Oh, I'm afraid there is, my dear."

Closer still.

"Mr. Proctor, would you mind stepping aside, there's a good fellow. I've done a lot of things in my time, but I have never shot a man in the back."

Rosalind rose and stamped one foot. "Alan, stop this nonsense right now!" She moved slowly behind Willa's chair.

"He's not going to like this, you know. He's not going to like this one bit."

"Who? Proctor? Of course he won't, dear, he'll be dead."

"You know damn well who I mean." She sidestepped toward the middle of the room, shaking her head in disgust, raising her hands to the ceiling in exasperation. "He'll do us all, you stupid man, if you take Proctor from him."

The voice, closer and sliding to Proctor's left: "Rosalind, please, don't make this any harder than it must be. It's very tiring, you know. And very boring."

Rosalind laughed bitterly and looked straight and hard at Proctor. "Do you hear him? Boring? The most boring actor in the entire world, and *he* calls *me* boring?"

"Enough," Morgan snapped. "Stand still, you little bitch, or I'll do you first. Ghost hunter, I told you to move."

Proctor did.

He turned slowly to his left, just enough to see how close the man was, then whipped his right hand around and flung the brandy into his eyes. Morgan bellowed at the pain, but Proctor already had the wrist of his gun hand, and in a single upward and backward twist, forced him partway to his knees, then wrenched the weapon away.

"Damn you," Morgan yelled, and tried to stand.

"Damn yourself," Proctor said calmly, and swung the gun against the side of his head.

Morgan went down instantly, sprawled on the carpet. Proctor checked to be sure the man was still breathing, then told Rosalind to find something to bind him before he came around. She started for the kitchen, changed her mind and ran to the drapes where she pulled off the rope tiebacks, and said, "Let me." She pulled Morgan's hands behind him none too gently and bound his wrists together, bound his ankles together, then ran the last tieback between them, pulling the man's legs up.

Proctor was impressed and said so.

"It's nothing," she said, and grinned nervously, "Bond does it all the time." She dusted her hands off on her jeans as if she did this sort of thing all the time. "Now what?"

Proctor said, "Your keys."

"What? What keys?"

"I need your car, Rosalind. I can't waste time explaining."

"You don't have to," she said, the grin gone. "I've already figured it out. Just like you told me."

"Then you know you can't go."

"Go where?" Willa asked.

Proctor winced; he'd forgotten all about her.

"Sir Jarred," he told her. "I have to try to stop him before he does what he came back to do. Come on, Rosalind, the keys."

"Like hell. I'm going with you. It's my car, you've never driven in England, you'll probably stay on the right and kill yourself. And the car."

"What," Willa said, "is he going to do?"

Proctor snatched up his coat and punched into it. "Re-venge, Mrs. Danby. Revenge. Nothing romantic about his return, nothing at all like the legend. He, and at least one who had died with him, are back to get revenge."

Willa settled back in her chair and sighed. "Yes. You know, I rather thought that would be it. He was such a bastard in his first life, why should he change now? Connie, now, he ..." A shudder stiffened her, then left her. "The descendants of those who deserted his cause, I would imagine."

"Oh, no," Proctor said. "Not that simple. Come on, Rosa-lind, give me the keys, we're wasting time."

"I've already told you, I'm going along."

Proctor stared pointedly at Alan Morgan. "And what about him? We can't leave Mrs. Danby alone with him."

"Of course you can," Willa said. She gestured toward the floor. "He's well tied, and he's going to have a lovely headache when he wakes up." She leaned forward and poured herself another brandy. "So if you two will stop squabbling and hand me that gun thing of his, I'll see what I can do to amuse myself while you're gone."

Proctor stared at her, then smiled. It wasn't as if he had a choice. The longer they argued, the greater Battle's chances were of succeeding. He retrieved the gun, made sure it was loaded and doubly sure the safety was on, and handed it over.

"You know how to work it?"

Willa only smiled.

"All right, then." As Rosalind grabbed her coat and went into the hall, he looked again at Morgan and shook his head. "Damned fool."

"We all were, Mr. Proctor," Willa said sadly. "When it comes down to it, we all were."

Another smile, and a nod. "Be careful," he said.

"Oh, I will. Just hurry back safely." Her voice hardened abruptly. "This man hastened the death of my Connie. I do not excuse our part in this, but I warn you I will not be re-sponsible if I'm left here too long."

Rosalind called him.

The wind groaned over the mouth of the chimney, and dust stirred under the logs.

He nodded a farewell and joined Rosalind in the hall. She already had her gloves on, and her scarf tied around her hair. They looked up, startled and wary, when the gallery lights and the chandelier brightened for a moment, then went dark.

Rosalind immediately checked the parlor, but the lamps there hadn't been affected. "We should tell Bridges," she said as she hesitated before reaching for the door. "Don't you think we should tell him?"

"We don't have to," he answered. "He already knows." "Indeed, sir," said Bridges from the landing. "I already know."

# TWENTY-TWO

## B

ridges stood at the head of the staircase, arrogant, sneering without moving a muscle. And not quite completely visible in the light that slipped out of the par-lor. White gloves and black suit. His face a shade of pale death.

"You were going to leave Willa here with him?" Rosa-lind whispered angrily.

Proctor shook his head.

Pull the strands, and the spider comes out.

"You understand," the butler said, coming down a step, "that you're too late."

"No," Proctor answered. "I don't think so."

Another step.

Something in his left hand, tucked behind his trousers.

Proctor tried to ease Rosalind aside with one arm, but she wouldn't budge. "For crying out loud, Proctor," she said quietly, "there's two of us and one of him. And I'm not helpless, you know."

Bridges smiled, a death's-head smile.

Another step.

"Chivalry is not as dead as you two soon will be."

The chandelier swayed, crystal teardrops sounding like tiny wind chimes.

"I may assume you have taken care of Mr. Morgan?"

Proctor grunted. "He's not dead, if that's what you mean."

"Too bad, but no matter. He will be, soon enough."

"No. Not if I can help it."

Bridges paused, considering the challenge, then continued his descent, right hand gliding over the banister's surface, the darkness behind him like a vast cloak untouched by the wind. Halfway down he stopped, examined the palm of his glove, and held it up to them.

"Not a speck," he said, not raising his voice but heard over the wind just the same.

The chandelier continued to sway, its arc wider now, the wind chime sound louder.

Proctor moved slowly, almost casually, to his right, to get out from under it, nodding at Rosalind to go the other way. She did, and he noticed that her bravado was just about gone. She wouldn't bolt, but the butler's unhurried descent and velvet voice had begun to wear on her courage.

"Is Bridges your real name?" Proctor asked, flexing his fingers at his sides.

"Oh, yes, sir. Has been for centuries."

Bridges didn't smile.

"Jesus," Rosalind blurted. "Then you're not...?"

"No, miss. I regret to say that I am not."

Another step.

"Sir Jarred, of course, sends his regrets that he will not be here to see how you manage. I can assure you, however, that your funeral will be fitting your rather miserable station."

Rosalind glared. "And the horse you rode in on, you miserable little sod."

Bridges shook his head in regretful condemnation, and focused his attention back to Proctor. "The younger generation, Mr. Proctor, yes? But then"—the death's-head smile returned—"you're all the younger generation to me these days."

Proctor beckoned with one hand. "This is all very nice, Bridges, the lights, the chandelier, but I'm in a hurry. If you're going to do something besides posture and talk, get on with it. I'm not impressed."

Five steps from the bottom Bridges brought his left hand away from his side. In it was the long blade Proctor recognized as belonging to the suit of armor on the land-ing. When the man pointed it at him, a warning and a vow, he could see fresh blood on the gleaming steel, bloodstains on the white glove.

Damn, he thought angrily; someone else. God... *damn*.

Bridges noticed the look and held the blade up, turned it to catch the light. Then he lifted his other hand and turned it as well before thumping it lightly against his chest. "There's no formula, you know, but it seems as if the bug I squashed this evening was the last. At least for my purpose."

"That's too bad," Proctor said, taking off his jacket, wrapping it around his left hand and forearm. A settling then, a cold comfortable calm that seemed to darken his eyes, give edges to angles the shadows lay over his face.

A familiar cold.

A familiar calm.

"Too bad," he whispered, just loudly enough for the man to hear.

For a moment Bridges seemed unsettled. "And why is that? Do you plan to kill me, Mr. Proctor? A good trick, since I'm already dead."

A humorless smile and narrowed eyes, the blade point-ing again at Proctor's heart.

Another step down, four steps from the hall floor.

"Holy water? A cross? Some arcane incantation?" His voice deepened. "Come on, ghost hunter, how do you kill the dead in that country of yours?"

Proctor returned the mirthless smile. "I don't care. I don't have to."

Three steps from the floor, Bridges turned his wrist so the blade inscribed small circles in the air.

"Riddles, Mr. Proctor? I thought you were in a hurry."

"Not a riddle, Bridges. I don't care how you kill the dead, in my country or yours, because, if I follow how this all works, you're not a ghost anymore. A spirit. A poor wandering soul. Whatever word you choose." He walked toward him, hearing Rosalind whisper, "No," watching Bridges frown. "I don't care. Because now you're alive."

He held up his left arm padded by his jacket and moved it back and forth in front of him. Slowly. Letting the man get used to it, letting him figure out how to neutralize it as he fed on his own arrogance and smiled again, in contempt.

A gust battered at the front door.

The chandelier swayed wider, and its mooring plate be-gan to creak.

Suddenly Bridges feigned a lunge, Rosalind gasped, and Proctor didn't move. Another lunge that took the but-ler to the bottom step, and still Proctor didn't move.

"Lots of blood," Bridges said when he reached the floor. "He wants lots of blood."



Proctor said nothing. He watched the man's feet, watched the man's eyes, and sidestepped nimbly when Bridges lunged again with a shout that was supposed to unnerve him. This time Proctor feinted, spinning to his left and reaching out with his right hand, as if to grab Bridges's free arm.

In and out, and the blade, just too late, sliced past his cheek.

Proctor misjudged the arc of his turn and hit the newel post with his shoulder, pushed away and snapped the padded arm up just as the blade slashed at him again.

Not a fencer, Proctor thought, but not surprising; the man had been a common soldier. And a soldier had no time for the niceties, for finesse—he hacked and stabbed, and when he drew blood stabbed again. It was only a matter of time before the weaker enemy was worn down, his defenses haphazard and desperate, and eventually useless.

Only a matter of time, and it was on to the next kill.

Bridges lunged and slashed effortlessly, not hurrying, willing to let Proctor do the work of ducking and backing away, once in a while trying for an opening that closed all too soon.

Neither man spoke.

The taunting and probing were over.

Flakes of plaster broke loose from the shieldlike base of the chandelier and spun around them, caught by the drafts that filled the hall; the parlor lights flickered, held, and flickered again; the building itself turned into a vast resonant chamber for the voice of the wind.

The muffled scuff of soles across the carpet, the floor; the gentle rasp of Proctor's controlled breathing; the cut of the blade through the air.

Every few seconds Rosalind's image flashed into a corner of his vision and flashed out again. Without a weapon of her own, she knew enough not to try to interfere, and he could sense her frustration, saw her once almost yield to the temptation to reach for Bridges's arm. Bridges ignored her. He concentrated solely on his opponent, mocking him with his expression, making certain he saw the blood on the blade.

Proctor almost stopped.

Taking his time; the son of a bitch was taking his time. He didn't want a last flurry to decide the victor. God-damnit, the bastard's stalling; the oldest trick in the book.

The hesitation cost him.

Bridges grunted, swung left and charged right, and the blade ripped through Proctor's shirt, left behind a burning red slash an inch below Proctor's left shoulder, on his up-per arm. The left hand convulsed beneath the jacket and his left foot almost slid out from under him.

Bridges sighed when he saw the blood.

A wild lunge and swing, and Proctor backed away hastily, grimacing, trying to keep the padded arm up but the burning had reached across his shoulder and into his neck, and it was all he could do just to stay away from the blade.

This time Bridges didn't wait; he followed, carving great X's in the air, not caring where the blade landed, forcing Proctor to back away toward the front door. Grinning, always grinning. Then lunging as if the blade was a rapier, making Proctor backpedal furiously.

Until his shoes touched the carpet's long fringe and slipped, toppling him back into the door. His head struck the thick wood, his vision blurred, and as he fell sideways he heard a great explosion he was sure was the sound of his skull splitting open. Dazed and desperate, he tried skidding away on his rump, pushing with his legs and one good hand.

"Proctor," Rosalind said anxiously.

He waved her off, blinking wildly, cursing his eyes because he could see nothing but the chandelier, the walls, where the hell was Bridges?

Rosalind dropped behind him and looped an arm around his upper chest, holding him tightly. "Stop," she said.

"Stop, you're all right."

"Get away," he said. "Jesus, get *away*."

But she only held him more tightly, nearly strangling him, and he couldn't fight her so he let her hold him. Thinking this was a hell of a way to end it. Thinking what the hell was Bridges waiting for? Thinking Rosalind had better give him some air and damn soon or he was going to be choked to death, for crying out loud.

Abruptly his vision cleared.

He saw Bridges sprawled across the bottom stairs, the blade lying near the baseboard. In the middle of his perfect white shirt was a perfectly round red stain.

Confused, his arm urgently reminding him it needed care, he sat up and shook his head slowly.

"Didn't you hear me?" Rosalind said, fingers tenderly combing through his hair to see if his scalp had been split.

He winced and jerked his head away. "Hear what?"

"She was trying to tell you," Willa said from the parlor doorway, "to stand away." And she held up the gun so he could see it.

A grateful nod was all he could manage before his wound flared and he grunted. Pushed away from Rosalind and with her help, stood. "Something," he said, and pointed to the blood. She nodded and ran off toward the kitchen.

"You need to sit," Willa told him.

"No time, Mrs. Danby." He smiled. "It's not finished yet."

From the parlor they heard Morgan's groan as consciousness returned.

"You'll want this," she said, holding the gun out to him.

"No. You'll need it. Just in case."

"But you can't fight him," she argued, jutting her chin to indicate his shoulder. "Even with Rosalind's help, you can't fight him with that. He'll be so much stronger."

Morgan groaned again, and began to curse his pain.

Proctor covered his eyes with his good hand, ordering himself to think, to ignore the fire stabbing at his shoulder. A nod, and he walked over to Bridges's body, shook his head at it, and picked up the blade. The hilt and guard were small, scant protection for his inexperienced hand, but if he could get close enough, it would do the job.

Rosalind returned with a large first-aid kit, ordered him to strip to the waist, and proceeded to make the wound hurt much worse than it already did.

"You were so fast," she muttered as she worked.

He didn't think so. It had felt like hours, and he had felt as if he'd been moving in slow motion, but she insisted the whole thing lasted less than a couple of minutes. When she was finished, bandages tied off, the arm admittedly feeling relatively better, he refused a makeshift sling and asked for aspirin, and dry-swallowed several tablets, much to her disgust.

"Car," he said then.

She wanted to protest, but she didn't, with a soundless sigh. She understood.

"You'll be all right?" he asked Willa as they headed for the door.

"Yes. Of course." Morgan groaned and cursed again. "It'll be fun. But how are you going to find all the descendants?"

"I won't have to. I told you it wouldn't be that simple."

"But Sir Jarred," Rosalind said, opening the door, letting in the wind.

The cold air pleased him, took some of the ache away.

"He's not going to individuals," he said, hefting the blade. "He wants them all, Mrs. Danby. He wants the whole village."

# TWENTY-THREE

## M

ore from instinct than necessity, Proctor gripped his left hand tightly below the bandages as Rosalind ripped away from Beale Hall as recklessly as the Bentley had before her. The blade, uncleaned, lay across his lap.

He didn't care about the blood.

"Thank you," he said when her car reached the trees and shot toward the pillars, and the village road beyond.

"For what?"

"The arm. Your help. Distracting Morgan back there."

"I owed you."

He nodded. "Yes, you did."

Half a minute passed with only the engine and the wind.

"I was born right here in Pludbury," she said, her voice tight as she concentrated on keeping the tires on the road. "My mother died when I was seven, I never knew my fa-ther. I was shipped off to an aunt, a maternal aunt, in Suf-folk. Not so oddly, perhaps, they lived in a village not unlike this one. She and my uncle raised me as if I were their own. I wanted nothing, Proctor. Understand that—I wanted nothing."

Snow reflected the waning moon so faintly it wasn't white; it was grey.

She was happy, she claimed. Scholarships gave her a decent education, and ambition gave her a position as a re-searcher for the BBC. She wanted, eventually, to be a direc-tor. That was how she met Alan Morgan. He was a failed actor who, surprisingly, was canny enough to make wise investments while he was still making money on the stage. He eventually turned himself into a business that special-ized in investments, using his paltry acting skills to con-vince others to join him. He came to the studios every so often, to brag about his successes and, she suspected, to re-live old times that were better in memory than the truth.

Beale Hall was slated to be torn down. It was falling apart, it had little or no historical value, and nobody in Pludbury gave a toss what happened to it.

Proctor interrupted, pointing at the first cottage coming up on the left. "An old American saying," he said. "Long story short."

Her smile was pained. "Someone contacts Alan. Offers to underwrite bills if he'll play gentry at the Hall. Alan contacts me, do I want to earn some extra money, see the old homestead in the bargain." She grimaced. "As it were."

"You hadn't been back?"

"No need. No family. Few friends. I was only seven, re-member? Nothing here for me, really."

"Didn't you ask why the charade?"

"A few times. He told me nothing. He just handed me my check, said it wouldn't be for very long. That was six months ago."

"You've been here for the whole time?"

"More or less, I don't know how, but Alan arranged for a leave. I still go down to London, show the flag, keep my job. But mostly, I've been here."

"Why did he need a daughter?"

"I wish I knew. Respectability, perhaps, family and all that. I honestly don't know."

A twinge made him grip his arm tighter. The aspirin wasn't working.

"Hurry," he said.

Ginny sat up gulping for air, sweat drenching the long T-shirt she used for a nightgown. She kicked the covers aside and stared at the ceiling until she knew she wouldn't return to sleep anytime soon. A sigh, and she stumbled into the bathroom, rinsed her face with cold water, and checked the thermostat in the hall. It felt like midsummer; the thermometer told her it was midwinter.

Soon as dawn came, she promised as she stumbled back to her bed, she was packing. Hell with it. Packing all she could load into her car and she was leaving. Hell with it. She hadn't seen Cheswick's body, but it didn't matter. She could imagine it, and she was haunted by it.

Good luck to Mave, may she make a million pounds, but Ginny Harden wasn't going to spend one more day here.

Not one more day.

Proctor took his hand from his injured arm, tensed until he was sure the wound wasn't bleeding, then lay the hand on the hilt of the blade. The car slowed, and they passed Cheswick's cottage. There were no houselights on the Lane, just the streetlamps and the moon.

"The one who contacted Morgan," he said, automatically bracing himself as she slowed the car in a hurry, engine whining.

"I don't know. I swear I don't know."

"Why did you accept?"

She laughed without humor. "A researcher never gets rich from her salary. And, like Alan had said, it was a chance to come home. Old friends, Proctor, childhood friends. A bit romantic, I suppose, in hindsight."

"Did they know you?"

"A few after a while, but not really. Mave, Ginny, a couple of others. No real memories. Strangers, really, but not really, if you know what I mean."

"And the Winter Knight?"

"A story, that's all. I thought it was just a story."

Mickey Danby woke and mumbled, "Mum, are you okay?" before she remembered that her mother was missing. The police didn't say so, but she knew they thought she was dead. Just like Connie. Because of her—they were dead because of her, even though she hadn't even had a chance to make the bargain.

"Oh, God," she moaned. "Oh, God, please help me."

She wandered into the kitchen and drew herself a glass of cold water, drank half, and walked into the front room, feeling like a zombie. She parted the curtains and looked down on the Row.

"Mum?" she said, a small child's voice. "Mother, where are you?"

Rosalind stopped at the intersection, then let the car roll silently around the corner where she stopped again, starting straight ahead.

The Row was empty.

"I don't know what to think," she said. "Whatever he's got in mind, they don't deserve it."

Proctor rolled down his window to let in the fresh air. "Those who believed," he said coldly, "or believed and acted, were willing to trade some good luck for someone's life."

"But not all of them, surely." Proctor didn't answer.

Henry sat on the edge of his bed, tumbling a silver coin over and under his knuckles, so good at it he didn't have to think about it.

Dozing in and out of nightmares had finally driven him from under the blanket, but he was too tired, his mind too fuzzy, to do anything but sit there, a vague plan to recapture Michelle's affections competing with a stronger urge to get even. After all, she'd been in the Wood, and he knew damn well what that meant.

What triggered that he didn't know, but when she refused his attempts to comfort her at the station, when those bitch friends of hers ran him off, he had accepted praise from the detective in charge of the investigation, gone straight home, and emptied what remained of a bottle of cheap scotch.

Sod the engagement, he decided when the silver coin slipped to the floor; it'll be much more fun making her pay.

Proctor gestured, and she let the car coast forward.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know," he said. "Unless he's in those trees."

"Can't do any harm in there."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"So what can he do? What will he do? If he's not going after people one at a time like you said, what's he going to do?"

"When you lead an army," he answered, leaning forward, peering at the darkened houses, "and you don't want your enemy to recover, what do you do?"

"Burn their houses, take away their shelter."

When he looked at her in mild surprise, she blew on her nails and buffed them against her chest. "Research, remember? BBC is known for historical shows and such. We ship them over to you Yanks all the time."

They drifted past the village garden and the Raven's Loft.

"But if you want to hurt them worse, make them miserable, make them hurt," he said, "you burn their fields and take their food, destroy their support, take away what feeds them. Shelter can be made in hours; a field takes a year to produce again. And if it's winter, it'll be months before you can even start."

"But—"

"A ghost," he said, "is not necessarily stuck in Time. He learns about the Time he's in."

Darve Westrum sat straight up in bed, wide awake, listening. He didn't know what took his sleep; he could hear nothing in the pub below, or in the rest of the flat. Suddenly he inhaled sharply, as if struck in the back by something sharp. He shook his wife's shoulder hard and said, "Wake up, Fanny, wake up, something's wrong. I'll get some light."

"Stop," Proctor said.

"What? What is it?"

He got out and stood beside the car, right hand resting on the roof, left hand holding the blade. He looked behind him, looked ahead, streetlamps doing little but creating lonely pockets of light. Here and there a glow of silver in a shop window if the light reached that far; here and there a glow of mica in the sidewalks. His collar was up, but it didn't stop the wind, which blew steadily in his face; he was grateful it wasn't as strong as it had been.

Rosalind got out, keeping her door open. "What?" she whispered.

Battle was out there, not very far.

He knew she wondered if he was testing the wind; maybe he was; maybe he had.

But Battle was out there, his plan already under way, and Proctor turned his head and listened, sifting through the sounds born of the wind, trying to get behind them, around them, shaking his head in frustration until a stab of pain made him grunt, and he could feel the cold again.

Rosalind said, "You'll freeze, let's get in and go on."

*destroy their support, take away what feeds them*

His head snapped around. "How do you heat your homes?"

She shrugged. "Depends. Wood stoves, coal, gas, electric fires. Lots of ways. Why?"

The streetlamps went out.

Mickey didn't move when the street went black. She cursed under her breath, but she didn't move. Any second now the lights will come back, she thought; any second now.

When they didn't, she tired of watching nothing. Too upset to go back to bed, she might as well get something from the kitchen and read until she felt sleepy again. When she tried a lamp near her couch, that didn't work either, and she muttered, "Bugger it," and fumbled in the end-table drawer, found a candle, then searched again for a box of matches.

"Get in," Proctor said urgently. "Jesus, hurry, get in." Rosalind did as she was told, slammed the door, and faced him, fear and puzzlement at war across her face. "Now what?"

"Ah," Mickey said when she found what she was looking for. She tucked the candle under her arm and struck the match.

Rosalind screamed when the front of Dickens Closet blew out into the street ahead of a rolling fireball, would have jumped from the car if Proctor hadn't lunged for her shoulder and held her back. Within seconds, flames belled out of the upstairs windows to twist in the wind, while shards of glass and pieces of burning wood splattered on the tarmac, and on the nearby shops.

"My God, Proctor, what's—"

"Gas," he said over the voice of the fire. "He's learned about the gas."

Behind them the roof of the Raven's Loft exploded, releasing a column of fire and smoke that curled toward the moon. A burning plank bounced off the trunk, Rosalind screamed again, and Proctor yelled at her to drive, and drive now, keep your head down, for Christ's sake, and drive!

He was thrown back against the seat when she jammed the accelerator to the floor, threw his good arm over his face when the appliance store blew up just as they passed it, cracking his door window, shoving the car across the street; it rebounded off the curb and headed straight for the newsagents before she was able to regain control.

Another explosion behind them shoved the car forward.

Below them, Coranders disintegrated, walls bowing outward, then collapsing inward into a roiling cauldron of fire and black smoke.

"The station," he yelled over the bedlam, and she nodded grimly, so close to the wheel her chin almost touched it. The buildings that hadn't exploded had begun to smoke, sparks drifting in through shattered display windows, flaming planks slamming through glass doors. Smoke and debris rolled across the tarmac, and she quickly gave up trying to avoid it.

The car bounced over steaming lengths of twisted pipe, jolted over charred pieces of furniture and store fixtures, nearly went up on two wheels when a concussion blasted them from the left, fishtailed when another struck them from behind.

Proctor held the dashboard lip tightly, listening to the fire, listening to Rosalind shouting incoherently, listening to the way the engine screamed with her. He leaned forward, pressed back, jerked side to side as if movement would help propel the vehicle in the right direction.

And when they were through, all the destruction behind them, he held his breath, waiting for the next explosion, the one that would finally catch and finish them.

It didn't happen.

"Help," Rosalind said, shaking so hard she could barely steer. "We have to get help."

"The station," he told her, and didn't have to tell her again. She yanked the wheel around and thudded over the curb, stamped on the brake pedal and let the car skid slowly into the station's brick wall.

Proctor was out before the engine died. He hurried into the street and looked up at what remained of the village.

"Oh, my God," Rosalind said when she joined him. Tears on her cheeks, head and hands palsied. "Oh, my God." She leaned into him. "We're too late, Proctor. We were too late to help."

"We were always too late," he said flatly. "Some things you can't stop. But there are some things you can."

He turned around to face the tracks.

The Bentley was there, just on the other side, and beside it, Jarred Battle.



# TWENTYFOUR

## T

he wind remained steady, and the fire danced with it, coaxing shadows out of nothing to streak and splash across the Row. A muffled explosion. A prolonged deep groan as a wall struggled not to fall, and failed. A roof collapsed and sparks were carried away, and at the edge of Battle Wood a mottled trunk began to smolder when the sparks settled on its bark.

Screams of the trapped; screams of the dying; screams of those who left their untouched homes and tried to save the others and their village.

Proctor shifted the blade to his right hand, felt the weight of it, the promise of it, and wished he knew how to use it, or at least use it more effectively than Bridges had done. Heat simmered on the back of his neck. The wind in his face threatened to freeze his brow and cheeks.

Rosalind stood beside him, tears still in her eyes, her chest rising and falling in hitches as she fought to catch a breath.

"Do me a favor," he said without looking at her.

"I don't know. I don't know if I can."

"Sure you can," he said, did look, and gave her a smile. Then he spoke to her softly, and she looked at him strangely, and then he said, "Please."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

She kissed him on the cheek, shook her head with a rueful grin, and kissed him quickly on the lips. "You owe me," she told him and ran to the car.

He waited, feeling the heat, feeling the cold, until she'd sped past him, swinging sharply left at the bottom of the Row and vanishing into the dark. He didn't know if she had looked at Battle; he kind of doubted it. If she had, she would have changed direction and tried to run him down, and he suspected she understood it wouldn't have done any good.

Shouts behind him, but he didn't look. They would be running from one place to another, waiting for the fire brigade, doing what they could to save their livelihood from the ashes. Every so often, an explosion; every so often, a scream.

A hell of a bargain, he thought.

He tapped the blade against his leg and began to walk toward the tracks. Taking his time. Judging distance. Watching the edge of his shadow ripple as though it were floating on the stream. When a spark landed on his shoulder and he smelled it burning through his jacket, he brushed it off with his left hand; when a shard of curling, smoking plastic landed in front of him, he kicked it away with the side of his foot.

He had a thought—*I'm going to die*—and chased the thought away. He wasn't, not this time. Maybe he was wrong about what he had asked Rosalind to do, maybe he was wrong about what he had to do himself, and he definitely could lose, the enemy definitely could win.

It wouldn't be his first defeat.

But he wasn't going to die.

Not this time.

When he was close enough to the tracks to be sure he could be heard over the fire, the shattering glass, the gun-shot crackling of wood, he lifted the blade in a mock salute, and said, "Hello, Vinnie, how you doing?"

Jarred Battle leaned against the Bentley's fender and shook his head and laughed. A deep, rumbling laugh that

produced echoes around the station. He slapped the hood, he slapped his leg, and as he calmed he pressed his hands against his chest in an attitude of congratulations, well done.

"How'd you know, Proctor?" the winter knight said.

"I saw right through you," Proctor answered.

Battle laughed again, but this time it was mocking. "I wondered if you had noticed. I had to consider seeing to it you never made it here but," he added ruefully, "I hadn't the full strength yet."

"Or," Proctor said, "it was just a matter of subtraction." A hard smile. "Morgan wasn't it. No one in this village has the spine. And Bridges ... when he died the second time, you were the only one left."

Battle straightened. "He's dead?"

"What did you tell him, Vinnie?" Proctor began to walk. "Did you tell him that if he caused enough deaths, he'd live forever?" He swung the blade loosely. "Or did you tell him you'd be able to bring him back yet another time?" He glanced over his shoulder, saw the fire, saw the smoke, and looked back to watch Battle unbuttoning his chauffeur's coat. "What you didn't tell him was, once back you could die again. Another death here and there didn't make any difference as far as that was concerned."

Battle shrugged; he didn't care. He folded the coat neatly and laid it on the hood. Then he backed up, rubbed his hands on his jacket, reached into the Bentley, and pulled out a tarnished claymore.

Wonderful, Proctor thought; that's what was different about the parlor—one of the claymores was gone.

He had no idea how long the two-edged weapon was, just that it was too damn long for his liking. And obviously heavy enough that Battle would have to use both hands to wield it. With luck, and a little speed, the long time the man had had between combats would be to his advantage.

Unfortunately, unlike with the blade, there would be no such thing as a nick or simple scratch from that weapon.

Battle lifted the claymore over his head and turned it in a tight circle, then brought it down slowly until its point brushed the ground. A modest bow, a hungry smile, and he held out one hand, crooked a finger, and beckoned.

Proctor obliged.

He could run, he supposed, but he knew that wouldn't solve anything. And Battle certainly wouldn't leave until the ghost hunter was dead. Neither man could live knowing the other still survived.

Still, he wasn't encouraged by that recent show of strength. Nor did it help that the knight easily lifted the broadsword with one hand and pointed it at him without a single muscle trembling with the effort. He was right, then; the extra deaths didn't do anything to make the ghostmen immortal, but they went a long way toward giving them what amounted to suprahuman strength.

Battle flipped the weapon from hand to hand, and laughed. He nodded at his display. "A surprise, Mr. Proctor? Something you ghost hunters didn't expect?"

"There's only one," he answered.

"What a shame."

The street rose to meet the tracks, and the fire glinted off the rails.

A distant scream, and Battle sighed. "Each one, Mr. Proctor. Each one makes me stronger."

There was a moment then, just a moment, when Proctor wondered how Battle had come to this knowledge, and once having it, if that was why he had engaged in the hopeless fight with Lord Sedgin's troops, already knowing that one way or the other, he would be the victor in the end.

Arrogance, he thought, is far too mild a word.

Battle approached the tracks, broadsword cocked against his shoulder. "A long time," he said, eyes reflecting the burning village. "Such a very long time."

When he swung, Proctor was ready, backing away and to his right as the weapon swept viciously from right to left. Its momentum took the man around with it, and in that time Proctor sprinted to the rails, lashed out with his blade, and skipped away as the knight howled at the minor cut he received in his side.

Lucky blow, Proctor thought, moving left now, watching the sword, knowing Battle wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

If, he thought when he saw the man's smile, it was a mistake at all.

"Well struck, ghost hunter," the man said. "Well struck indeed. You sorry little bastard."

He strode onto the tracks and whipped the claymore around his head, eyes wide, lips pulled tightly away from his teeth. He laughed deep in his throat and spun the claymore even faster, the blade humming so loudly it almost drowned out the fire.

Not a drop of sweat, not a sign of strain, and when a building collapsed up the Row, Battle spun the claymore even faster.

"The trouble with arrogance," Proctor said, keeping his distance. Backing away. Feeling the heat grow stronger on his back.

"What's that?" Battle asked, skipping easily to his right when Proctor made to run in that direction.

"I said, the trouble with arrogance."

"What about it?"

"It makes you stupid."

Battle laughed again and lunged, and Proctor ducked too hastily to his right, nearly tripped over a length of charred wood and had to throw himself backward to avoid being gutted. Battle followed him hard, swinging his weapon with one hand, then the other. Showing off. Sending a message. Herding Proctor away from the village.

Proctor knew they were heading for the dark beyond the tracks, but the other man was too quick, too close, for him to turn and run. One step, and his spine would be severed, or his head separated from his shoulders; one step, and it would be over.

He kicked a piece of metal, picked it up, and flung it at Battle's face. The man batted it away with the sword and shook a finger at him.

He shifted to the right, and Battle followed, pressing close; he shifted to the left, and Battle stalked him, pressing close. A rock from the station parking lot grazed the man's shoulder, and he didn't even wince; a length of smoking wood sidearmed from the curb struck him in the ankle, and his face contorted in mocking pain.

"Fight me, you little bastard," Battle said tightly. "Fight me."

The wind shifted, swirling between the buildings that hadn't yet burned, pushing a fog of dark smoke over the station and rails. It didn't take long for Proctor's eyes to begin to sting, his throat to burn, while it didn't seem to bother the knight at all.

"Fight me."

The tip of the claymore, fast as a serpent's strike, carved a line across his cheekbone, under his left eye. He yelled and jumped back, nearly falling, wondered where the man had come from, how he'd gotten so close. He could feel the sweat; he could feel the blood.

"Fight me."

He brandished his blade in a feeble attempt to keep the knight at bay, saw it matched against the claymore, and laughed aloud at the difference. He was crazy. He had been as arrogant as Battle was, and now the piper wanted payment.

Slowly, as slowly as he dared, he made his way up the rise and across the tracks, the heat on his face now, the cold at his back. Battle grinned and lowered his weapon, cocked his head, and strolled onto the rails. Proctor could hardly see his face, the flamelight was so bright, the shadow so deeply black as he stood framed by fire and fire-streaked

smoke that had long since taken the moon.

"Fight me," Battle whispered.

Renewed shouts and cries, and Proctor couldn't help but take a step to his right and look up the Row. He could see the meager arc of garden hoses playing on the flames, and a number of dark figures running north, dodging whatever burned in the street, urging others to follow.

It took a few seconds for him to understand, but when he did, he smiled.

"Fight me," Battle said.

"Okay, Vinnie, sure."

Battle frowned, and was barely able to swing out of the way when Proctor charged him, snapping his blade into his left hand and slashing at the knight's waist, cutting through the shirt, cutting through the skin. It wasn't deep, but it was enough to make the man scream—with rage and indignation. He picked the claymore up and brandished it over his head, growling, bubbles of spittle flying from his lips.

Proctor faked another charge, then stumbled to one side when a spasm of coughing made him light-headed. The wind had shifted again, and the smoke dipped out of the sky in thick clouds, momentarily obscuring his vision, burning his throat and lungs, forcing him to hold his weapon out blindly and pray for a lucky blow.

When the smoke and his vision cleared, he saw Battle waiting on the tracks, the claymore's tip on the ground.

Battle smiled.

Proctor nodded.

Once again the knight lifted the broadsword over his head, rocking now as if building momentum for a charge of his own. When the weapon came down, hard and fast, and struck the rail, there were sparks, and the sound of steel on iron sounded like a flawed hollow bell.

Battle shook his head and gasped; that wasn't supposed to happen.

Proctor approached him warily.

As he did, he couldn't help noticing the sweat that shone on Battle's face, the way his chest worked, the way he stared in horror at his hands. The way he turned his head and stared at him, madness now in his eyes, while he tried to lift the claymore one-handed, and could barely drag it along the ground.

"The Wood, Vinnie," Proctor said.

Battle rested the hilt against his chest, dried his hands on his trousers, and tried to lift the claymore again.

"The Wood is burning," Proctor said, moving closer, brushing a hand in front of his eyes as if to shove the wind and smoke away. "You were hanged there, Vinnie, and that's where you returned."

Battle coughed, staggered, gripped the claymore des-perately, but he couldn't lift it off the ground.

"What did they call it in your day, Vin? Seat of power? Locus of energy? Some Latin phrase? Something impres-sive in Norman French?" Moving closer. "What did they call it, this place where you harbor all your strength, all your lives?"

Battle let the claymore fall, and drew a forearm across his mouth. "My hands," he said, holding them up, watch-ing them tremble. "My bare hands, ghost hunter."

He took a long deep breath, ducked his head, and smiled, then charged off the tracks with a long snarling cry. Suddenly indecisive, Proctor gripped his blade uneasily and waited, bracing himself, then twisted down and away from a clublike blow from the man's arm, intending to spin and catch the man as he passed. Yet even weakened as he was, Battle was too quick; a second wild blow struck the middle of Proctor's back and his knees buckled and he went down, hands out to keep himself from falling all the way.

By the time he reached his feet again, his injured arm flaring so hotly it made him dizzy, Battle had checked his headlong rush. He turned, and Proctor saw the sweat steaming off his shoulders and tangled hair, off his face, off his neck.

With the smoke and fire behind him, he was a mad-man's demon, a nightmare born in blood.

Proctor looked at him and said, "Fight me."

Battle charged again, his legs barely holding him up, his arms almost useless at his sides until he closed the gap and his hands went to Proctor's neck.

And froze when he felt the point of Proctor's blade pressed against his belly.

Panting, trying to read Proctor's expression, he dropped his hands to Proctor's shoulders and said, "You have me, sir, I think. I'm yours, it seems." Barely hanging on now, his weight pressing Proctor down, he smiled. "The rules of battle. As it were."

"You slaughtered Conrad Cheswick."

Battle shrugged with a raised eyebrow. "You have me, ghost hunter. Does it matter now?"

Proctor watched him, watched his eyes, watched the vil-lage burn down around them.

Battle sensed the change and shook his head. "I am un-armed, ghost hunter, remember? And I'm dying anyway. Rules of battle. You mustn't harm me." And he laughed without a sound.

Proctor nodded slowly, took a breath, and said, "Sorry, the rules have changed."

He grabbed him with his left arm and yanked him closer, and used his right hand to shove the blade deep into his stomach. And yank it upward as hard as he could.

There was no reaction from the knight, save a widening of his eyes and a disappointed sigh before he fell, and died, knees pulled up, hands covering his head.

No earthquake, no ghastly ghostly wails, no puff of sparkling smoke or heavenly choir.

Jarred Battle lay on the filthy street, sparks blown around his hair and clothes, while his blood mixed with the soot and ash that fell like snow from the winter sky.

Proctor watched, then walked away, crossed the tracks and without looking tossed the blade into the black-water stream. Then he sat on the rails and watched the village die while he waited for Rosalind to return and take him home.

# TWENTY-FIVE

## P

roctor stood under the portico roof, leaning against a pillar. The sun was bright, the sky a blinding blue, and the day for the month, was pleasantly warm, and his jacket was unzipped. His left shoulder ached, and the cut beneath his eye would, Rosalind had told him, probably leave a scar; muscles protested every movement, and every so often he had to cough to clear his lungs. All in all, however, he was doing a hell of a lot better than Plud-bury. At least, after a long time, he'd been able to get some sleep.

A smoke-cloud pall drifted over the village. There were still occasional sirens as fire brigades from neighboring towns left and arrived, arrived and left. It would probably be that way for the rest of the week.

The front door opened and Rosalind came out, no coat, just a sweater. She had spent most of the morning in Plud-bury, had returned shaken and wanting to be alone. This was the first time he'd seen her since, and she stood with him to watch the smoke as the sun began to wester.

"How's Mrs. Danby?" he asked.

"As well as," she said, lifting one shoulder. "There's still Connie's place, so she won't be homeless. Don't know that she'll stay, though, what with Mickey gone, and all the rest."

"And your—" He caught himself. "And Morgan?"

She laughed a little. "Now there's an interesting thing, isn't it? I expect, actually, he's going to stay. He rather likes the life of a gentry. Says there are some cleanup projects he wants to get started." She shook her head, surprised. "He's still a right bastard, but who would have thought he had that in him?"

Morgan had still been trussed when they returned before dawn, propped against a chair, blustering and begging by turns, while Willa listened to the story of the death of her village. When they were finished, she walked over to him, slapped him hard twice, and walked back, sat down, and said with sad disdain, "What a silly little man."

Today Proctor had brought him to the study, closed the doors, and gave him his choices; face arrest for threatening murder against innocent people with an illegal gun, with lots of witnesses who'd lie through their teeth to put him away; or stick around and use his contacts and his fortune to help put Pludbury back together.

"What if I tell you to stick it?" the man asked, one final act of defiance.

Proctor had leaned over the desk, his voice low as he said, "Think hard, Mr. Morgan. Think very hard. Do you really want to fight me?"

Evidently not, he thought, and couldn't help it—he grinned.

"You look like the Cheshire cat," Rosalind said.

"Thinking about Mr. Blaine," he lied.

"Oh, yes. The poor man."

Blaine had slept through everything, demanded complete explanations when he'd finally awakened, then demanded a doctor because his head felt like exploding. Proctor had considered telling him the truth in the hope the man would believe it.

Evidence, unfortunately, was slim to none.

When he and Rosalind returned to the Hall, Bridges's body was gone. All that remained was a single white glove draped over one stair. Rosalind had been too stunned by events to ask many questions; Proctor hadn't been surprised—as he waited for her by the tracks last night, he had watched Battle's corpse fade and the wind blow ashes through the place where he had lain.

Blaine would have to be content with the gas explosion story. Which, after all, wasn't entirely a lie.

"They've done a house-to-house," she said a few minutes later. "Mickey's fiancée is dead. The amateur magician? Burned to death in the middle of the street, they don't know how." She shuddered. "I saw them take Mave away. They found her in her bedroom. She'd cut off all her hair and was using a paring knife to cut her arms and legs. Atonement, she kept saying. She's gone mad, Proctor. She thinks it's all her fault." She shook her head. "I don't know about anyone else. I couldn't find anyone I knew."

"Deal with the Devil," he reminded her.

"Maybe," she said, and turned away.

She drove them to Windsor for dinner that night, Morgan electing to stay behind and begin the arrangements for the clean-up.

"Atonement," Proctor told her.

"Yeah," she said. "Believe it when I see it."

When they returned, Morgan met them in the front hall. "There's a call for you, Proctor," he said, so deferentially that Rosalind couldn't help but stare. Morgan ignored her. "It's from the States."

"Good Lord, don't those people ever leave you alone?" Blaine thundered as Proctor hurried to the study. "Jesus, man, you're in *England*, for God's sake."

Proctor laughed, waggled fingers over his shoulder, and tried to guess who it was. Probably Lana, he decided as he took the chair behind the desk; she's pissed because he hadn't called her to tell her he was all right.

"Proctor," he said when he picked up the receiver.

"Proctor? It's Paul Browning."

He couldn't speak, could barely breathe. Browning was his mother's doctor.

"Proctor, you there?"

"Tell me quick," he said, tried to swallow, and couldn't.

A pause before Browning laughed. "No, Proctor, it's all right. Honest to God, it's all right. Your mom's okay."

He didn't know whether to be angry or relieved. "Then what's—"

"She spoke, Proctor. Last night, she spoke. I heard her, man, I actually heard her."

Suddenly Proctor couldn't hear, and he couldn't see because sudden tears filled his eyes. He wiped them away with the heel of his hand and asked Browning to repeat what he'd just said.

"I was on my way home, thought I'd stop in for a quick visit. All of a sudden, I swear to God she scared me half to death, she sat up and looked right at me. It's the first time she's exhibited any real recognition of any kind in what? Four years? Five? I don't know what I said, I was so star-tled I don't remember, and she said ... Jesus, Proctor, she said, 'Tiger's eye.' Before I could ask her what that meant, she lay back down and nothing I could do brought her back.

"She's the same as always now, but, Proctor last night I heard her speak."

There were a dozen questions, scores of them, but he couldn't sort them out well enough to risk the asking. Instead, he told Browning he'd be home as fast as he could, jumped to his feet, and ran from the room.

Rosalind didn't understand the significance of the news— that his mother hadn't communicated with any human being for nearly seven years—but Blaine did, and he grabbed Proctor's hand and shook it as if he'd just won a million dollars.

"Concorde," the old man said, snapping his fingers, "We'll take the Concorde. It's faster, I'll make the arrangements, we'll get home ..." He started for the study. "Do you know we'll get there before we leave? I don't get it. Je-sus, Proctor, what a hell of a trip!"

The arrangements were made, Proctor thanked him profusely, and frowned when Blaine abruptly sagged in the chair, hands folded in his lap.

"What?" Proctor asked.

"Celeste." Blaine glanced at the safe. "I wasn't thinking. I booked seats for the both of us. But... Celeste. Dear God, Proctor, I almost forgot."

"You don't have to go, sir."

Blaine's answering smile was incalculably sad. "Yes, I think I do." A short hollow laugh. "I know what I saw, but there's no proof that I saw it. Maybe you're right. An old man's wishful thinking."

"I never said—"

"Not out loud, no."

Proctor touched the bandage on his cheek, could feel the lump of stitches beneath it. A ghost did that; who's to say then that Celeste's picture wasn't real.

"But," Blaine said, taking a deep, strengthening breath, "if she was here, she's not here now. That idiot Morgan knows nothing." A wry smile. "And without you, I think, if I stuck around, I'd do something stupid."

Proctor didn't answer, just gave him an exaggerated lopsided grin.

Blaine laughed, and sighed, and pushed to his feet. "I'm tired, Proctor, I'm very, very tired. I think ... yes. I think I want to go home."

"We'll find her, sir."

"Will we?"

Proctor nodded, once. "Yes."

He couldn't sleep.

He tried, but he couldn't sleep.

His injuries, the destruction, the news of his mother's... could he call it temporary recovery?

He sat on his bed and couldn't sleep.

The knock on his door was almost inaudible, but he called, "Come on in," just in case he hadn't imagined it.

It was Rosalind. "You all right?"

He smiled. "Yeah, I think so. I don't know. I think so, yeah."

"Good," she said closing the door behind her. "Because you owe me, Proctor, remember?"

"Okay. What do you want?"

She took off her glasses and said, "Oh, don't be coy, Yank, just take off your damn clothes."

The Concorde soared, but Proctor barely felt it. Despite the speed, he was impatient; despite Blaine's company, he felt alone.

Tiger's eye; since getting up that morning, he couldn't help thinking he'd heard that phrase before, and it hadn't been all that long ago. But he couldn't pin it down, couldn't recall the source.

Blaine sat by the window. In his lap was a package—the photograph album. Morgan hadn't objected when the old man demanded it; Proctor hadn't cautioned the old man he might be making a mistake. Because somewhere between Rosalind and dawn, just before he finally slept, he realized that Celeste's picture hadn't been a fluke, it was a lure. Whoever had placed it there knew Blaine would call him and demand his presence; whoever put it in the album wanted Proctor out of the country.

Or wanted him specifically in England so he could be killed or put out of action by what was clearly not a ghost.



Something else, but not a ghost.

Or maybe, to test his skills.

Too many possibilities, and he closed his eyes tightly, listened to the Concorde's engines, and forced himself to table that subject until he had his people with him. They would know if he was right; they would know if he was crazy.

"What about the girl?" Blaine asked.

"I don't know," he said, remembering and smiling. "She wants to be a director. She won't be staying at the Hall, I think she's going back to London."

"She'll keep an eye on Morgan for us?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely."

"Good."

A minute later: "You know, Proctor, that place was spooky."

Proctor grinned. "No kidding."

"Place like that, it should have been haunted by that damn ghost of theirs."

"Yes, sir, I think you're right."

Blaine looked at him sideways. "You know, Proctor, sometimes I wonder how stupid you think I am."

Proctor returned the look, added a shrug. "I don't know what you mean, sir."

The old man sighed and checked the window, rapped the thick glass with a knuckle. "Boy, would you look at that, huh? Amazing. Come on, son, take a look."

Proctor leaned across the old man's lap and looked out and down, and sat back quickly. Unaccountably afraid.

"Damn, Proctor, are you scared of heights? It's only clouds, you know. It's not a sign or anything. It's only clouds."

Black clouds that spread as far as he could see; black clouds that resembled a vast obsidian plain.

And midway to the horizon, a darker mass that looked, just for a moment, like a large black dragon, wings unfurled, ready to fly.