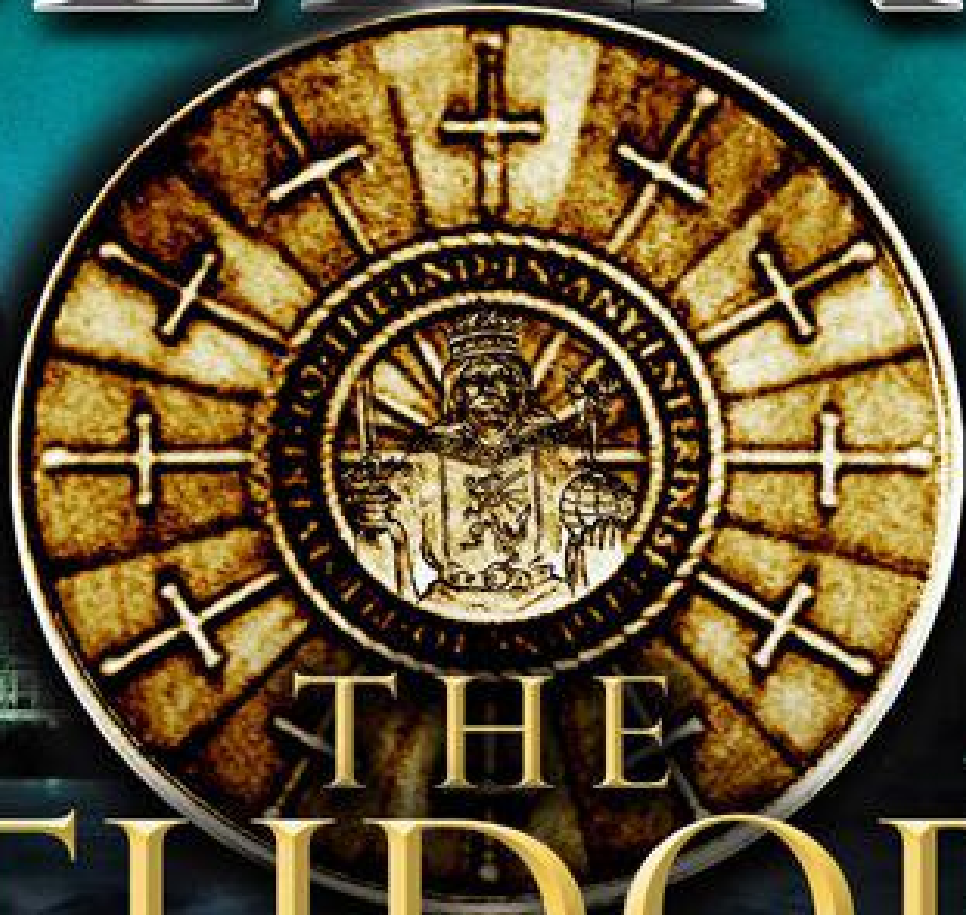


STEVE BERRY



THE TUDOR PLOT

BY STEVE BERRY

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The Tudor Plot

Steve Berry



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This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *The King's Deception* by Steve Berry. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

eISBN: 978-0-345-54450-6

Cover design: Scott Biel www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.1

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Excerpt from The King's Deception

CHAPTER ONE

SEVEN YEARS AGO

Cotton Malone hated surprises.

And this one was no exception.

He'd arrived at Buckingham Palace ten minutes ago, bypassing a throng of tourists crowded around the front fence by motoring through a guarded side gate. Now he sat in a green silk upholstered chair and watched as the two men who'd brought him left the room. No one had spoken during the trip across town and he was beginning to wonder. He'd been in England less than two days and now, for some unknown reason, he was about to see the queen.

His waiting room appeared to be an office—the flocked wallpaper a mixture of pinks and blues, the ceiling adorned with cream-colored ornamental molding. A white marble fireplace consumed one wall, the deep-blue-and-gold carpet outlined by a parquet floor. A desk sat catty-corner to the windows, stacked with paper, neat and orderly. He thought perhaps the room belonged to someone on staff, the space elegant but not regal.

The door opened and a man in a three-piece wool suit strolled in, followed by a wheelchair that contained Victoria II. Malone had many times seen the queen on television and in photographs. Never, though, had she been pictured handicapped, and the sight was disconcerting.

Victoria had reigned his entire adult life. She was the only English monarch most Americans knew. Her face was wizened, her color drained, her body frail. Though her hair remained a familiar shade of silver, fashioned in her trademark layered bob, he noticed an oily sheen on her forehead and skin flaking at the sides of her nose. This, the stooped posture, and an expression that seemed frozen in place evidenced how Parkinson's now controlled her muscles. The one

glimmer of hope was the radiant glow that seeped from her green eyes.

He came to his feet.

Victoria was being pushed by her husband, Prince James, the Duke of Edinburgh.

“Please, Mr. Malone, do sit,” Victoria said. “I apologize for the wheelchair, but within the palace I find it much more convenient. Unfortunately, walking has become a chore—and, besides, I don’t think pretense is called for.” She threw him a smile. “I have brought you here under the most suspicious of circumstances. I could well understand if you were even angry with me.”

“It would be difficult to be angry with so gracious a lady.”

“And a flatterer. The reports on you were correct.”

He wondered what reports she was referring to, but kept his mouth shut.

James stepped forward and faced him, a tall man with a beefy countenance. “It’s good of you to be here, Mr. Malone.” The prince offered his hand, and he felt the power in the older man’s grip. “We have a problem that we hope you might assist us in solving.”

The third man, younger, wearing the three-piece suit, stood behind the desk. Apparently, this was his office. James motioned toward him. “My private secretary, William. He’s the one who found you.”

Malone acknowledged the man with a slight nod of his head, which was returned.

Victoria glanced at her husband. “Do tell him, James.”

The prince cleared his throat before saying, “Two days ago an individual contacted the palace and asked for a meeting. He said there was something of the utmost importance to the nation, and our family, that he needed to discuss. It concerned our son, Richard, and, our grandson, Albert. Beyond that he offered nothing but riddles. We were scheduled to talk in this office. Today. But that man died yesterday.”

“Died? Or was killed?”

“Unfortunately,” Victoria said, “that is hard to say. A car accident. But at a most inopportune moment, would you not say?”

“Depends on which side of that opportunity you’re on.”

James nodded. “Our thoughts exactly.”

“You said he spoke in riddles. What kind?”

“He talked of Arthur. Sent us information from ancient journals.”

“As in Pendragon? Camelot? The Round Table?”

The prince nodded. “Exactly.”

“Tell me, Mr. Malone,” Victoria said. “Do you fancy yourself a believer in Arthur?”

He shrugged. “I’ve read quite a bit about him. The Dark Ages are one of my favorite periods. But who knows? One thing I’ve learned is that all legend is based on some fact.”

“It’s a story,” James said. “Concocted by Thomas Malory. Who, by the way, has a lot in common with our dead messenger. Both were thieves, Malory the worst kind for his era since he robbed churches.”

Malone knew Malory’s bio. The scribe had spent a lot of time in and out of prison before being granted a royal pardon. But he was curious. “Your messenger was some sort of felon?”

“He was a newspaper publisher,” the queen said. “Of some infamous repute. He steals people’s privacy, their secrets, true or not, and publishes them for the world to know.”

He caught the bitterness. “So why exactly was I brought here?”

He’d come to England on assignment for the Magellan Billet. Three years ago the American embassies in Greece and Egypt were targeted by a terrorist named Peter Lyon, a South African who blamed the United States for the destruction of apartheid, a rise of black rule, and an overall dilution of the white race worldwide. He was also a nefarious arms dealer, particularly dangerous because of his personal wealth and close association with many fanatical elements. The two embassy attacks had taken the lives of a dozen marines and six State Department representatives, including the deputy ambassador to Greece. Civilian casualties had topped 100. The Justice Department quickly linked Lyon with the killings, and four of those involved, all on Lyon’s payroll, were captured last year by a team of Navy SEALs.

Lyon remained a fugitive.

The International Court of Justice had assumed jurisdiction and Great Britain was chosen as the venue for the trial, with the United States prosecuting. A Justice Department team had been sent over to handle the matter, which included Malone. He'd been at his hotel, readying himself for trial, when men with badges appeared and politely asked him to come with them. They'd allowed a call to Atlanta and he spoke with his boss, Stephanie Nelle, who said that she wanted him to go with them, too.

But she'd offered no explanations.

Victoria settled back in her wheelchair, her right hand trembling. "My body is failing me, Mr. Malone. I am eighty-two years old and the one thing that keeps me alive is the realization that, after I'm gone, my son will succeed me. Richard is our most poignant disappointment. Like parents throughout the world with a troubled child, I wonder where we went wrong."

Malone was surprised by her frank admission.

"I have tried," Victoria said, "to convey to my son the importance of his position, but he remains resolute in defiance. Being a monarch in this century is difficult enough—without erecting artificial barriers. My son fails to understand this."

A quotation came to mind, so he said, "*His will is not his own. For he himself is subject to his birth: He may not, as unvalu'd persons do, carve for himself, for on his choice depends the sanity and health of this whole state.*"

Victoria gave a slight nod. "Shakespeare wrote Laertes' speech with great eloquence. Ophelia should have taken heed. So should my son. Thankfully, our grandson is more mature than his father. Albert will be our saving grace."

Now he understood. "So when an infamous newspaper publisher mentioned that whatever he wanted to discuss concerned Albert, your attention was piqued?"

She nodded again, a slight bob of the head, her neck muscles surely restricted by the disease. "He is our joy."

"And our hope," James said.

Malone turned toward the Duke of Edinburgh. "What's the problem?"

James motioned across the room. "William will explain."

He turned toward the desk.

"The Prince of Wales, as I'm sure you know, stays in the press. Over the past nine years I have charted the reports from every London newspaper. That survey shows the *Globe* printed well over 70 percent of the initial stories about Richard. Now, that could simply be from hard work, luck—"

"Or a little inside help."

"Precisely," James said.

"And the dead man? He published the *Globe*?"

"He was its founder and owner."

"Have you spoken to Richard about this?"

James shook his head. "It would do no good. He could not care less about any perceptions, problems, or embarrassments."

Malone sensed something in the prince's tone. "What are you not saying?"

"It is our daughter," Victoria said. "Eleanor is an ambitious woman. We fear that she might have something to do with all of this."

That shocked him. "What would be gained by disgracing her brother? She's far removed from the succession."

"As long as Albert is safe," James said.

"You think he might be in danger?"

"We don't know what to think," James made clear. "We hope this is all simply the paranoia of two old people with difficult children. But William is not so sure. Neither am I anymore. After the tapes incident, my mind was changed."

He recalled the furor that had erupted a few months back when audiotapes of Richard's private telephone conversations surfaced in the media. Calls made to various women, some married, others with less-than-stellar reputations. The conversations were juvenile and sexually explicit, displaying an amazing immaturity—which the press had exploited.

"Did you ever discover who recorded them?" he asked.

James shook his head. "They tried to blame palace security, but no one here made them. The conversations were all on open, mobile

phones, so they could have been recorded by anyone. Bloody embarrassing for our family. But, as with everything else, Richard seemed unaffected."

"The disturbing thing about those conversations," William said, "was that they occurred over an extended period, on different mobile lines, in different parts of the country. How did someone happen to be tuned to the precise frequency at the precise moment?"

"What did your security people say?"

"They offered no explanation, and to this day we have no idea who made those tapes, nor who forwarded them to the press."

"Let me guess," Malone said. "The *Globe* had an exclusive."

William nodded. "The source was, as always, 'unidentified palace insiders.' Just like in today's *Globe*. A front-page story about Richard and the daughter of one of the more vocal lords in Parliament. Pictures and all. A grand romp he had last weekend. Richard may be reckless and foolish, but he does not invite the press to follow him. Yet they were somehow alerted to that liaison."

"But why is his sister suspect?" Malone asked.

"My daughter," Victoria said, "tries hard to convince me that she is a good child. But she married into an ambitious family. Nigel Yourstone says he is a friend of the realm, yet his son is hardly the man I would have thought Eleanor would marry. Her decision to do so has always puzzled me. But the boy was fair born, of the right lineage, and pronounced fertile. That is all *I* can require of her choice in a husband."

"Our daughter," James said, "is far more devious and capable than her brother."

"You think she's the leak?"

Neither parent answered him.

Finally, James said, "We simply don't know."

Silence passed between them.

"There is no one in the palace we can trust with this," James said. "William has kept his concerns and his suspicions to himself. Victoria and I speak only between ourselves. We need someone

independent to analyze the situation and tell us if there is any reason to be concerned.”

“Your intelligence people can’t do the job?”

The prince shook his head. “Far too sensitive. William is close with your supervisor. She told us where to find you and said you might be able to help us out for a few days.”

“You know Stephanie Nelle?” he asked William.

“Goodness, yes. She and I have been acquainted for years. Quite a delightful woman, wouldn’t you say? She said you were her best agent. We need the best here, Mr. Malone.”

“And we need to move with speed and authority,” James said.

But there was still the matter of the terrorists’ trial, scheduled to start in less than a week. He was merely assisting, but he hated to leave his colleagues in the lurch.

One of three phones on the desk rang and William answered. After listening for a moment he hung up. “The BBC has a broadcast running that the front office says we should see.”

William stepped over to an ornate cabinet and swung open its double doors, revealing a television. He switched on the set and adjusted the volume. An older man was standing before a bevy of microphones.

“That’s Lord Bryce,” James said. “A stubborn blowhard. No friend of the Crown. Though I rarely agree with Richard, his choice of sexual companion this time is fitting punishment for that bloke.”

Malone was puzzled and William explained about today’s *Globe* story, which detailed Richard’s tryst from last weekend with Bryce’s daughter. Bryce was no monarchist, and the on-screen announcer was explaining how he intended to move aggressively toward the abolition of the monarchy. No one gave his effort much of a chance, but the attempt would definitely generate more negative discussion about an institution that, the announcer noted, “had begun to outlive its usefulness.” The voice went on to say, “Tourist dollars generated from the millions who travel to Britain each year to experience royal culture should not be justification for perpetuating a national embarrassment. Is it too much to ask for the privileged to behave themselves?”

The image suddenly shifted to another man. Mid-fifties, handsome, with thick salt-and-pepper hair. He approached the microphones and spoke in a deep, authoritative voice, expressing his loyalty to the Crown, but also his disagreement with the heir's immoral actions.

"That is Nigel Yourstone," James said.

He made the connection.

Yourstone's son was married to Eleanor.

"I have to agree with my colleague," Yourstone said. *"Enough is enough. The time has come for some accountability from Buckingham Palace."*

The Duke of Edinburgh's face hardened, and Malone spotted anger at the comments from the father-in-law of the third person in line for the throne.

But a tear tracked down Victoria's cheek.

Her gaze caught his own.

And he suddenly felt the pain of a mother who'd quite possibly been betrayed.

CHAPTER TWO

Nigel Yourstone smiled at the cameras while reporters asked their questions. Lord Bryce's tirade in the House of Lords had been a classic. The crusty old gentleman had spent nearly an hour berating the monarchy, particularly Richard, for what he considered a *vicious assault on the pride and dignity of his family*. The press seemed to salivate at Bryce's promise that a bill would be introduced in the Commons calling for the monarchy's abolition. Such measures were nothing new, but the number of ministers supporting the idea was growing. Bryce himself had made no secret of the fact that the head of state should not be chosen by genetics, echoing what every schoolchild was taught from an early age. *At the very least, royals should be a mirror to our better selves*. Unfortunately, as Bryce had made clear, Richard Saxe-Coburg was a married man who cavorted like a schoolboy at the public's expense. And, as Bryce had so aptly said, *the clear incompetence of this feeble-minded individual, who owes his station to an accident of birth, borders on the amazing*.

Interestingly, Bryce's daughter had yet to publicly comment, but Yourstone knew the young lady would do exactly as her father instructed. The senior Bryce controlled the family finances, and her two brothers could easily be given her one-third share. She was certainly an enticing woman, and he was betting she wasn't stupid. A romp in the sack with royalty was not worth the millions of pounds sterling she might lose from her father's continued disapproval. So Yourstone was sure that when the good Lady Bryce finally spoke her words would be dignified and distressing, compelling the palace to respond.

He readjusted his posture before the microphones, delivering his standard line that the monarchy was good for England, but that did not mean he agreed with everything the royals did. Though he respected and admired Victoria, and was delighted Eleanor was a member of his family, his fondest wish was for the Prince of Wales to mature. He was next in line for the throne, father of Albert, the

second heir, both of which demanded that he conduct himself as a proper gentleman. He finished his remarks with a sincere hope that God would continue to bless the people of England with good health for Her Majesty, Victoria II.

He thanked the reporters and surrendered the microphones to another colleague. Ordinarily, he would not have taken the time to even comment, but it was important that his views be clear.

With what was about to happen, he needed no misunderstandings.

He quickly departed the Parliament building, crossing the street to St. Margaret's Church. The white stone edifice, a patchwork of architectural styles, sat in the shadow of Westminster Abbey. It contained a collage of Tudor monuments that had survived two world wars, though the building had not been as fortunate, now replete with 20th-century repairs.

A middle-aged man sat in one of the long pews.

The daily parade of tourists had already begun, and the aisles were crowded. He walked over and calmly sat beside the man, keeping his eyes ahead, toward the altar.

"What was so urgent?" he quietly asked.

"I believe you have a problem."

He listened as his spy told him about a man named Cotton Malone, a barrister who worked for the American Justice Department, in a specialized intelligence unit known as the Magellan Billet.

"Never heard of it."

The man explained that it handled highly sensitive investigations worldwide, working outside the established American intelligence community. Malone, a former navy commander, possessed a reputation for competence and was in England to help prosecute the terrorists' trial, set to begin next week.

"At the moment, though, Mr. Malone is meeting with the queen." The spy paused. "About you."

He told himself to stay calm. All was in place. Too late now to turn back. "I don't suppose you could discover the content of that meeting?"

“It would be difficult and might risk exposure.”

“Give it a try. Results would be most appreciated.”

“I was hoping you would say that.”

The other man stood and left, following the crowd toward the main doors. Money motivated most weak souls. This one particularly.

Or at least he hoped.

He sat for a few moments and considered this new development, unsure of its implications.

American Justice Department?

He'd not factored that into the equation.

He stood and ambled toward the far side and the east window. It was a magnificent stained-glass depiction, crafted in Flanders at the command of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1501 to celebrate the marriage of their daughter, Catherine of Aragon, to Arthur, the eldest son of Henry VII. Henry had been fascinated with the Arthurian legend and intentionally named his heir for the mythical monarch. After ending the Wars of the Roses and killing Richard III, the first Tudor king had been intent on resurrecting the English throne, beginning with his son, Arthur. Unfortunately, the boy died shortly after the marriage, even before the window rising before him had arrived on English soil. Poor Catherine eventually married Arthur's brother, Henry VIII, and went on to suffer the disgrace of a forced divorce and an early death.

But he admired Henry VII's audacity. That first Tudor king had thought of the right idea.

He told himself to stay calm.

Be patient.

And finish what he'd started.

CHAPTER THREE

Malone followed William out of Buckingham Palace toward a guarded gate that led to the street. The afternoon had turned cool, but a brilliant sun warmed the clear September sky.

"We do appreciate your service to the Crown," William said. "Stephanie said you would be quite helpful. And we definitely need assistance."

He was curious as to why his boss had so readily volunteered him. He needed to speak with her.

"The car just over there will return you to the hotel," William continued. "Let me give you my private mobile number. I am available around the clock. Call if anything is needed. I understand you possess an eidetic memory, so I assume there's no need for me to write anything down."

He listened and memorized the number.

"You can see how all this affects Her Majesty. I'm extremely worried. The strain is taking a toll. The doctors have repeatedly warned her about undue stress."

"So let's do what we can to ease her mind."

Malone entered Osborne House.

The hotel prided itself on English tradition, but was sophisticated enough to offer all of the amenities modern business travelers demanded. Back in his room, he connected his Magellan Billet-issued laptop to the Internet and contacted Stephanie by email.

So wonderful of you to volunteer my services. I didn't know you were royally connected. Now tell me what's really going on.

I received a report yesterday from Langley. A small-time smuggler named Jonathan Kent was apprehended in Liverpool with some unusual lavender-colored

material. Turns out it was C-83 explosive. Unfortunately, Kent died before any more could be learned. The car transporting him to London was found wrecked, all of the occupants, including two local policemen, dead. You won't see a press story on it. The Brits squelched it. They want to see if more C-83 turns up. That's a powerful explosive. And, by the way, one of the arms dealers who routinely handles it is Peter Lyon.

You think this has something to do with the trial?

That thought crossed my mind. Lyon is not going to sit back and allow us to try his people. I'm guessing he killed Kent and those policemen.

What has this got to do with the queen?

While Kent was in custody, the Liverpool police managed to extract a few tidbits from him. He muttered something about Richard and Albert and changing the course of history. After talking with William and hearing the same thing, I thought a closer inspection was warranted.

What do you want me to do?

Just look around for a couple of days. See if there's anything to this. They could be separate, unrelated incidents. But my gut tells me they're connected. If you find nothing, get on with the trial and convict those SOBs. I'm sending you an updated profile on Peter Lyon, along with another file William forwarded to me, which, he says, you need to see.

He watched as the download indicator bar flooded with color. He opened the file on Lyon and absorbed the information. Not much

there that he didn't already know. Lyon was a violent, amoral prick who made his living off other people dying.

He opened the second file.

Color photographs of a spherical cauldron, fashioned of silver or pewter, appeared. Remnants of gilding lined the edges. Eight tattered plates made up the walls, another the base. A scale indicator revealed the object was about eighteen inches long and at least that high. The crafted plates were all crowded with engravings, and he noticed the images—foot soldiers, animals, boar-headed trumpets, knotwork designs.

One plate was missing.

He maneuvered the mouse to a row of smaller images that towered on the right side of the screen and double-clicked. The screen filled with a close-up of one of the plates. The etchings depicted three soldiers toting long shields with bosses, one sounding a boar-headed trumpet.

He clicked on three more of the smaller images.

The enlargements revealed more warriors, boats, battle scenes.

One panel depicted death.

At the end was a narrative.

This vessel was found by a man cutting peat in Yorkshire sometime around 1857. The soil had preserved the silver remarkably well, along with the artistic depictions. Its purpose was surely ritual, hardly suitable for holding liquid, and the elaborate internal decoration on the plates would discount drinking as one of its preferred uses. It would seem illogical to craft something with such care only to expose it to caustic liquids. Investigation reveals the bowl to be Celtic. The serpent with ram's horns, the torcs worn by deities, and the stags and boar were all regular components of Celtic art. The depiction of the sea creatures and other oddities confirms that this was an accounting of a great event, memorialized in the only permanent way for the 5th to 6th century CE, which is an accurate dating for the vessel's creation.

This bowl remained with a private collector until recently, when Nigel Yourstone purchased it. We believe this occurred because of a discovery,

happened on by chance, at the National Museum in Reykjavik, where Yourstone found the missing panel from the cauldron. It was displayed with an assortment of objects that had been unearthed in Iceland over the past 300 to 400 years. The curator of the museum attached no special significance to the etched silver panel other than to note that it helped establish a 6th-century connection among Ireland, England, and Iceland. The curator thought nothing of that connection since historians have long known Irish monks routinely ventured across the northern Atlantic to Iceland on religious retreat during the 5th, 6th, and 7th centuries. Yourstone visited the museum and photographed the panel extensively. With all of the panels in hand, our experts note that he now may be able to complete the message the cauldron was designed to convey.

Malone recalled what had been said at Buckingham Palace about the dead publisher who'd requested an audience with the queen.

He spoke of Arthur.

But how did that fit with this cauldron?

His next move was clear.

Time to pay a visit to Lord Nigel Yourstone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Yourstone dialed the phone resting on the corner of his desk. The line on the other end was answered after the third ring and he said, “We have a problem.”

The gravelly voice seemed unsurprised.

Over the course of the last decade they’d routinely communicated, the voice supplying otherwise unobtainable information—Yourstone ensuring that the resulting scathing stories about the Prince of Wales appeared in the media. The story about Richard’s presence at Lauder Place with the daughter of Lord Bryce had come to light thanks to the man on the other end of the phone.

“My and Lord Bryce’s comments on the monarchy will make an excellent story for tomorrow,” Yourstone said. “Buckingham Palace will have to make some sort of statement, and there’s the next day’s story. The media can then rerun the tryst photos with a comment from the darling-daughter-Bryce the following day.”

“I do believe you’ve come to both understand and appreciate this sordid business.”

“All I want is for that bloody peckerhead to be as welcome as yesterday’s coffee.”

“Such resentment for our future king Richard.”

“I hope such a title is never attached to that man’s name.”

“Based on the latest polls, you’re not alone in that sentiment.”

He’d read the same statistics. “I’ve always possessed a great deal of faith in the English people.”

There had been four Saxe-Coburg monarchs. The line was created in 1840 when Victoria I married a German prince of the Saxe-Coburg line. Edward VII, Victoria I’s eldest son, became the first Saxe-Coburg ruler. His son, George V, toyed with the idea during World War I of changing the family name to Windsor—a way to distance the royals from marauding Germans—but never did. The next son was Victoria’s father. But his sympathy to Germany in World War II, while Hitler’s bombs exploded over London, made

him extremely unpopular. Victoria II was actually the first of the Saxe-Coburg line to rule with both popular support and no cloud of scandal.

Richard, though, had clearly inherited his grandfather's weakness for women and a political ineptness.

His public gaffes were legendary.

Once he characterized the greenhouse effect as *poppycock*. He then recommended that all of the old terrace houses and Georgian buildings of London be razed and replaced with *more modern structures*. He openly criticized the gentry for driving *gas guzzlers* while being chauffeured about in a Bentley that offered less than ten miles per gallon. He regularly consulted a psychiatrist and gulped down antidepressants, neither fact he thought private enough to ever refuse comment upon.

But his most offensive and alarming statements concerned Catholicism.

Since the 1701 Act of Settlement, no Catholic, nor anyone married to a Catholic, could succeed to the throne. Richard had made no secret of his fondness for the faith. He'd made several trips to Rome for audiences with the Pope. He'd been photographed attending mass and courted the disfavor of the Archbishop of Canterbury by recommending a full reconciliation between England and Rome, forever ending the schism Henry VIII created in the 16th century. Britain was a Protestant nation, and the sovereign was the symbolic head of the Church of England. The coronation oath called for absolute loyalty to the Anglican faith. For a monarch-to-be to doubt the validity of the national religion bordered on treason, and editorials in major newspapers had many times hinted at that conclusion.

Richard was surely a disappointment to Victoria, but in her customary manner never had she publicly commented. Yourstone recalled what George V was known to have said regarding his son—*after I am dead the boy will ruin himself in twelve months*. More than likely Victoria had privately repeated that same prediction about her eldest. Which was why Richard could not be in a position to

inherit the throne once the queen died. So, for nearly a decade, he'd made sure Richard Saxe-Coburg stayed in the news.

London's tabloid press had blossomed thanks to the heir apparent's exploits. Photographs of him in various parts of the world with a variety of women kept the British people talking. He was a weak soul who could not appreciate the good fortune life had bestowed upon him. Nor did he seem to mind that he was a nearly constant source of ridicule.

Which made him excellent prey.

"There's a new problem," Yourstone said.

And he told his accomplice what he knew about Cotton Malone and the Magellan Billet.

"I'll investigate," the voice said. "And report back."

A knock on the study door interrupted his call. "I have to go," he said. "Let me hear from you soon."

He ended the call.

The door opened and Eleanor entered the room.

He stood from the desk and approached his daughter-in-law. She was wearing a full-length silk charmeuse gown that tightly gripped her shapely frame. The bodice was trimmed in cream-colored lace, and her bare legs slipped in and out of a seductive slit cut high on her thigh. A kimono-style robe covered her shoulders, open in front. Its gold coloring matched her hair.

"Strange attire for the middle of the day," he said.

She approached his desk.

He stepped toward a red lacquer cabinet that housed a bar, dropped a couple of ice cubes into a crystal tumbler, and splashed vodka over them.

"Anything for you?"

She came close and nodded.

He took in her perfume as he poured her a vodka with no ice. Aragon was truly one of the world's great scents.

He handed her the glass.

She always drank her liquor straight and behind closed doors, and he caught the swell of her breasts as she savored a sip.

"You haven't answered my question about the gown," he said.

"I was lonely."

"Where is your husband?"

"Your son is out. At the races today, I believe. He so enjoys his life of leisure."

He knew better. "You accept your husband's infidelities with great patience."

She sipped her drink and appeared unaffected by his crude declaration. She was like that. Able to misdirect her emotions with the skill of a parlor magician.

"My only concern is that he be discreet," she said. "I assure you, his sexual prowess is not worth fighting for."

He chuckled. "You do your family proud."

"I do what is necessary. As do you, my loving father-in-law." She finished off her vodka. "How is your plan progressing?"

The Act of Settlement proclaimed that a male heir always inherited the throne first, which meant Richard and Albert stood in Eleanor's way. Shortly before her marriage to his son, he'd explained what he had in mind and was gratified to learn that she, too, wanted to be queen of England.

And she'd proven herself invaluable.

She was the link to Richard.

The hapless fool cherished his sister and regularly sought her counsel. Through her, Yourstone possessed a direct line into the prince's innermost thoughts and fears, and it had been easy to manipulate both.

"We are less than twelve hours from completion," he said in a hushed tone, though there was no one who could possibly overhear them. His town house was empty, save for them. He employed a house staff, but only during certain hours, and none lived on the premises.

"My precious mother could die at any time. The bloody doctors can't say anything for sure. If that happens and we are still where we are now, this whole thing is over."

"I'm aware of the risks."

"So has the deal been made?"

He nodded. "Our South African friend has assured me it will be done."

She moved closer to the hearth. The fire he'd started earlier had burned down. The charmeuse of her gown shimmered with every step. He wondered what possessed his son to leave a woman of such beauty alone.

She noticed his gaze on her.

"Can the father succeed where the son is lacking?"

Wisps of light hair draped her forehead like fringes from a shawl. This woman knew how to arouse him. It had been that way since the beginning of their association. His son was sterile, a fact only he knew since he'd paid the doctor who'd administered the test to lie about the results. Then he'd had the doctor killed. The same fate had found the publisher of the *Globe*, who'd somehow pieced together what was happening and made contact with the palace. Thankfully, another spy had alerted him and that problem had been quickly solved. For his plan to work, not only must Eleanor assume the throne as queen, but there had to be an heir to follow.

Normandy. Blois. Plantagenet. Lancaster. York. Tudor. Stuart. Hanover. Saxe-Coburg.

Each family had ruled.

The next royal house would be named Yourstone.

"I assure you, I can accomplish the required task." He did not use her title with any measure of respect, but that did not seem to faze her.

"I wonder how the son wholly failed to acquire what the father clearly possesses. Nature can be so cruel."

He tabled his empty glass.

"I assume the country will soon be reading more about Richard and the perky Lady Bryce," she said.

"For the next several days."

"I watched Lord Bryce and you earlier on the television and I have to ask. Your comments to the press. Were they needed? Surely Mum and Father are now questioning your loyalty."

Which might explain the presence of a certain American agent named Cotton Malone. "Let them."

“Maybe the stress will finally claim Mum’s heart.”

“Not yet, my dear. We need another day.”

“That’s the problem, Nigel. We have no idea how much time she has left.”

“This can only move so fast. Timing is everything.”

She returned her empty glass to the cabinet and headed for the door. “Thankfully, this is *your* problem. I have enough to handle with Mum and Dickie. Are you coming up?”

Her lack of clothing had, of course, been an invitation. Eleanor and his son usually resided at the royal Clarence House while in London. But they also, on occasion, made use of Yourstone’s London flat. Yourstone’s wife had been dead five years, so the opportunities this woman presented were irresistible. But he wasn’t going to let her know it was that easy.

“Leave the latch open. If I decide to come up.”

She stopped at the door and turned, a cunning grin on her lips.

“Don’t take too long.”

Yourstone rose from the bed, stepped into his trousers, then donned his shirt. He slipped his arms through the braces and adjusted their silken lengths. Eleanor lay naked atop pearl-colored sheets. It pleased him that he was able to satisfy such a beautiful woman.

“It’s my time,” she said. “I’ve become quite apt at predicting ovulation.”

“Hopefully, what just happened will be sufficient to produce a Yourstone heir.”

He zipped his pants and cuffed his shirtsleeves.

Supposedly, she’d been a virgin when married, but he wondered. A woman of such passion could hardly have learned all she knew from someone so inept as his son. Yourstone had taken many mistresses. They’d come from all stations of life and varied in race and color. Eleanor was every bit their equal, more so in some respects.

She rolled over on her side.

Except for her short blond mane and eyebrows, there was not a hair on her body. Her skin had the look and feel of polished alabaster. No blemish disturbed its sheen. It was said that her mother, Victoria, had once been blessed with the same creamy patina. A Saxe-Coburg trait he actually admired.

"Doesn't bother you at all, does it?" she said. "Sleeping with your son's wife."

He shrugged.

"You want this that bad?"

"As badly as you." His eyes were drawn to her body, and he fought another rising urge within him with thoughts of business. "Tell me, do you know the Arthurian story?"

"I never cared for fiction."

He grinned at her ignorance. "It's actually quite colorful, and who knows if it's true." He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Then by all means, tell me a bedtime story."

He let her teasing pass. "It seems that during an Easter feast King Uther became enamored with the wife of the Duke of Cornwall. Uther simply could not control himself and made known his feelings, which sent the duke into a jealous rage."

"How I envy his wife."

"Like any good husband, the duke took his wife and left the feast. Like any enraged lover, Uther gathered an army and followed. The duke hid her in Tintagel Castle, then barricaded himself in a nearby fortress to divert Uther away."

"Such passion for the love of a woman."

He agreed. "Uther learned where the wife was hidden and consulted Merlin, who used magic to make the king appear like the duke, which allowed Uther to easily enter the castle and climb into the wife's bed. She, of course, thought she was sleeping with her own husband. When the duke was killed the wife agreed to marry Uther, especially after learning she was pregnant, thus assuring that her child, Arthur, would later become king. So you see, my dear, illicit unions are nothing new in the name of the Crown."

She chuckled. "That's what I like about you, Nigel. No conscience at all."

“Lucky for us, and lucky for England, we are so similar.”

“My mother would go to her grave if she could see me now.”

He pocketed his wallet from the nightstand. “I think the entire nation would fall over dead if they saw you right now.”

“Especially dear Papa.”

Her father, Prince James, the Duke of Edinburgh, was a Scotsman, part of a family that traced its roots back to the time of Henry VIII, when jocks fought England for independence. He was a rough, harsh man the public seemed to worship. Eleanor was in many ways like her father, though she clearly had inherited her mother’s commanding physical presence. He wondered, though, where she acquired such ambition. None of the Saxe-Coburgs had ever shown that trait. But this vixen seemed a new breed. One more to his liking.

“As much as you seem to be enjoying all this, I do have to go,” he said.

“Business to do before evening?”

He rose from the bed. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

He stepped to the door and left, gently closing it behind him.

Yourstone made his way back toward the front of the house. Along the way oil portraits of his ancestors kept him company. Most had been financiers to kings and queens, trusted members of Parliament the Crown had counted on to ensure the status quo was religiously maintained.

Either a Hanover or a Saxe-Coburg, all far more German than English, had sat on the throne since 1714. But the house of Yourstone would soon become the ruling family of England. Where once adversaries on battlefields with pickaxes and short swords fought for the right to rule, the 21st century provided weapons no previous usurper had ever possessed. The printing press, cameras, public opinion polls, and the Internet were proving far more effective than armies.

And the goal was now in sight.

He descended the staircase and reentered his study.

The book that had started it all sat on the table beside his favorite club chair, a 19th-century analysis of a 16th-century manuscript. The editor, a sociologist at the British Museum, had been entranced by the legend of Arthur. The researcher had spent a lifetime searching for proof that Arthur was not a poet's romantic notion. He'd been fortunate enough to uncover an obscure journal scavenged from a French monastery, which told of something that happened during the summer of 1189 and into 1191.

With Henry II.

A Plantagenet from the 12th century.

The last to rule a united France and England.

He opened the book to a marked section.

During the Octave of the Apostles Peter and Paul, in the nineteenth lutation, on the third day of the week, the fourth day of July in the year of our Lord 1189, a scribe strode across the courtyard of Chinon Castle, toward a chapel. He'd traveled through France to this, the heart of the Angevin empire, and carried a leather bag over one shoulder, taking great care to shield its contents from a summer rain. At the chapel door he lightly knocked and was ordered inside. The dingy stone walls were lit from the glow of candles that struggled in damp air to maintain life. On a threadbare divan lay His Majesty, Henry II. Where once this monarch stood tall, broad-shouldered, with the freckled face of a lion, he presently loomed sick and wretched, a mere shell of the giant he once was. Beside him stood the Archbishop of York, Geoffrey, Henry's illegitimate son, and it was Geoffrey who directed the scribe to a table where he obediently removed from the satchel several sheets of vellum, a goose quill, and a small jar of black ink.

"Record whatever the king says," the archbishop ordered in a quiet voice.

The scribe's hand shook with a quake he found hard to control. Here before him was the ruler of a territory that stretched from Ireland, through England, across the channel to Normandy, then south to the Pyrénées. He was the first of the House of Angevin to claim the throne and for thirty-five years his armies had dominated France and England.

Yet his accomplishments seemed hollow.

Henry's legitimate sons, Richard and John, had long schemed with their mother to subvert his throne. Over the past few weeks their treachery had climaxed with Henry's armies suffering a series of humiliating defeats. Eighty knights and 100 men-at-arms had been taken prisoner at Tours only three days ago. Afterward, towns had been sacked and castles besieged. Henry's commanders were surrendering at an alarming rate, and only yesterday Henry had been forced to make peace. The terms of surrender required him to place himself in the French king's hands. He'd also been forced to acknowledge Richard as his sole heir, entitled to inherit all his dominions including England.

"Baseborn indeed have my other children shown themselves," Henry slurred through labored breaths. He then motioned up to Geoffrey. "This alone is my true son."

The scribe wrote furiously to memorialize what his sovereign had said. He was aided by Henry's incessant coughing that seemed to tax whatever strength he still possessed. Droplets of blood spattered from Henry's parched lips. The scribe wondered what malady had struck this seemingly invincible man.

"Now let things go as they may. I care no more for myself or for the world. Shame, shame on a conquered king."

The scribe dutifully recorded the lamentations, which sounded like the onset of delirium. Never had he heard Henry speak with such pity. He glanced over at Geoffrey with a look that asked if it was wise to write any of this down.

"Do as he wants," the archbishop mouthed.

"I have a message which I desire for you to deliver to my loyal servant Ralph FitzStephen, presently across the sea at Glastonbury Abbey," Henry said.

The scribe brought a fresh sheet of vellum before him and gave his full attention.

"Tell him that I have long known the location for Arthur, King of the Britons. The information was bestowed to me by a Welsh bard who provided enough proof that I believed him. The king and his queen lie at Glastonbury. There was once a church of clay and wattles, where is unclear since it was long ago. Beside that church was a graveyard.

There, many feet down into earth, they will find a stone slab. Beneath that slab lies the leaden cross for the King of the Britons. Farther down will be the mortal remains of Arthur and his Guinevere. They were placed there with great reverence with the intent they forever remain. Tell FitzStephen that I want the monks to know this and do with the information as they see fit. For, unlike Richard's, my love for the church and God is absolute."

The scribe wrote so quickly that it was difficult to keep ink in the quill.

"Let them know that I go to meet my God with a satisfaction that my traitorous son may perhaps meet his match. Bring the bones of the great king back into sunshine. Let them cleanse this world of lies. Use their power wisely."

Henry stopped to catch his breath. Sweat poured from his brow, which Geoffrey dabbed with a damp cloth.

"Only yesterday, my beloved John, the son I thought above all others would never betray me, turned against me. I can only hope that somewhere within my realm another Arthur might rise and silence the voices of greed and deceit."

Henry indicated with a flick of his hand that the message was complete. The scribe wrote the final few words, and the vellum was rolled and sealed with a wax signet.

"Go to England. Take my message to Glastonbury with all haste," Henry said. Then another coughing spell racked his chest.

Chills came to his spine each time he read the passage. He'd shared the account with his contact at the *Globe*, who'd been forced to share it with the paper's publisher. That fool had somehow thought it his duty to inform the palace as to what he'd learned. Why, he didn't know.

But that betrayal had required definitive action.

Which the voice on the phone earlier had provided.

He could almost see Ralph FitzStephen's face when, at Glastonbury Abbey, he'd read Henry II's final words. By then the king was dead, having passed two days after the messenger left Chinon Castle. Henry's son Richard had immediately claimed the

British throne and was busy consolidating power. Glastonbury itself, which represented the heart of English Christendom, awaited its new prior, and a few months later Henry de Sully was appointed to the post by Richard. It was FitzStephen and de Sully who met soon after and realized the full extent of the revelation Henry had provided.

He read the words again.

*Beneath that slab lies the leaden cross of the King of the Britons.
Farther down will be the mortal remains of Arthur and his Guinevere.*

“Thank God you were at least half right,” he whispered.

CHAPTER FIVE

Malone listened as Big Ben chimed, signaling 1:30 P.M. He'd hoped Nigel Yourstone was still in his office at Parliament, but was disappointed to learn he'd left an hour earlier. A call to William secured the address of Yourstone's London residence, a limestone-and-marble edifice just in Belgravia, not far from Buckingham Palace. He'd always been fond of the direct approach, which was why he believed that a face-to-face encounter with the potential enemy might rattle some cages.

He rang the front doorbell.

To the steward who answered, a middle-aged man with silver-streaked hair and a hooked nose, he introduced himself and said that he would like to speak with Lord Yourstone.

"That would be impossible. His lordship speaks only by appointment."

"Do you have a pad?" he asked.

The question seemed to catch the attendant off guard, but he recovered and lifted one from a nearby table.

"And a pen?"

Annoyance now registered, but apparently British breeding refused to allow rudeness. The steward slowly reached for a pen and handed it to him. He accepted both offers and wrote: COTTON MALONE, UNITED STATES JUSTICE DEPARTMENT, TO SEE HIS LORDSHIP ON A PERSONAL MATTER. WE CAN TALK HERE OR YOU CAN OFFER YOUR REBUTTAL TO REPORTERS LATER WHEN THEY CALL. PERSONALLY, I LIKE THE LATTER COURSE BETTER.

He tore the top sheet off, folded the paper in half, and handed it over.

Two minutes later the door reopened and he was ushered inside to a spacious study, whose mosaic floor, stuccoed ceiling of elaborate octagonal panels, and gilded furniture screamed Old World extravagance. Yourstone was apparently obsessed with

portraiture, as many dotted what appeared to be Carrara marble walls. Classical statuary was abundant, as were busts of Shakespeare, Bacon, and Newton. A portrait dominated the wall behind the desk and was, if Malone was right, a Van Dyck. Pretentiousness was most likely an occupational hazard for someone whose family had come to expect everything from life, but there was something challenging in the look of the man who rose to greet him. Nigel Yourstone was even more imposing up close than on television, and if he was disturbed by the introductory note he showed not a hint of concern, his face as stoic as those on the statutes that encircled the room.

Yourstone thanked the steward, who left, closing the door.

“What may I do for you, Mr. Cotton Malone, United States Justice Department?” The voice was the same baritone from earlier on television. “Your note indicated a personal matter. That, along with the veiled threat about the press, piqued my curiosity. As was its intention. So what is this about?”

“The game’s over.”

His target never flinched. “I was unaware that there was any game ongoing, much less one that I was a participant in. But, if there were, what interest is there for the American Justice Department?”

“Enough that I’m here.”

“To threaten me?”

He shrugged. “I look at it more as instructing you.”

Yourstone threw him a tight stare.

He asked, “Do you know what C-83 is?”

Yourstone didn’t waver as he answered, “I have no idea. Care to enlighten me?”

Malone shrugged off the inquiry. “Doesn’t matter.”

He drifted toward a row of windows that admitted the bright midday sun, lingering before a glass table where a pair of sphinxes, cast in what appeared to be bronze, rested. He assumed there was a story to them, as they were placed in a position of prominence. An oil painting of a manor house hung above them.

“That’s my country home,” Yourstone said. “That painting was commissioned in 1786 for one of my ancestors.”

“A beautiful place,” he said. “Your family has been around a long time.”

“We have served the Crown four centuries.”

“Now your son is married to Victoria’s daughter.”

“For an American, you certainly know a lot about me.”

He shrugged. “I just love the English.” He lightly stroked one of the sphinxes. “It’s not going to work.”

Yourstone’s face remained rigid.

Then he realized. This man already knew he was involved. Perhaps he’d even expected a visit? “You have good spies.”

“One good spy is better than 500 well-armed troops.”

“Sun Tzu also said all war is deception.”

“That it is.”

And something else the great Chinese strategist had written about winning came to mind. *Pretend inferiority and encourage arrogance.*

Time to leave.

He stepped toward the door. “You have a good day, Lord Yourstone. We’ll be seeing each other again real soon.”

And he left.

Malone exited the town house. He’d accomplished what he came to do. Nothing slowed an enemy down faster than the knowledge that someone may be in close pursuit. Especially an enemy who cared about his public image. If nothing else the visit would buy him time to figure out just what was happening here. Yourstone would, at a minimum, be concerned. But coming here also had drawn attention, which nearly always meant trouble.

That was okay.

He was accustomed to trouble.

And the ball needed to stay rolling.

So he found his cell phone and dialed William’s private number, explaining what he’d like for Victoria to do next.

“Excellent suggestion,” William told him. “I shall organize it immediately. As you learned earlier, refusing the queen’s invitation can be difficult.”

He found the sidewalk and started walking back toward the Underground station. He’d take a train to Osborne House and have William arrange a meeting later with the Prince of Wales. He needed to see for himself exactly what he was dealing with.

He thought again of the cauldron from earlier.

That was another subject he’d need to learn more about.

A car braked at the sidewalk, and its rear door popped open. “Mr. Malone.”

He whirled.

An older man sat inside. He was in his early sixties, with a weathered face as round as a full moon. His silver hair was immaculately coiffed. Thick, steel-rimmed glasses hid his eyes. He wore a stylish dark suit with a vest, a silver watch chain snaking from one pocket. The right hand held a walking stick, the handle an ivory globe.

Which he recognized as the trademark of Sir Thomas Mathews.

Head of Great Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service.

Or as more commonly called, MI6.

“We need to speak,” Mathews said.

CHAPTER SIX

Yourstone stared through the car's tinted windows and admired St. James. The quarter was once the haunt of London's bachelors, and there still remained an air of quality to its regal surroundings. The plush private clubs that currently filled the brick buildings, descendants of 18th-century coffeehouses, were famous. Boodles. Brooks'. White's. The Carlton. The Oxford and Cambridge Club. Membership commanded high price tags and deep lineages.

Eleanor sat beside him.

The call had come to his town house just after Cotton Malone left. The Prince of Wales wanted to speak with both his sister and Yourstone. Richard had sounded his usual distraught self. Eleanor told her brother that they would come immediately.

Yourstone knew what the buffoon wanted.

A sympathetic ear.

But he also knew what he wanted. And time was running out.

So this opportunity had to be maximized.

The car stopped at a gated entrance. The red-brick edifice of St. James' Palace had been a wedding present from Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn. In the centuries since it had served as the perennial home of the heir to the throne.

They were allowed inside, and the limousine parked in a courtyard beneath a brick porte cochere. They stepped out into a balmy afternoon and entered the palace, making their way to a closed door on the third floor.

Richard was waiting alone.

Where Eleanor was blond and fair-skinned, her brother was dark-haired and olive-hued. They looked little alike, which had sparked speculation that he was the product of some illicit affair early in Victoria's marriage. But anyone who even remotely knew Victoria Saxe-Coburg realized that would have been impossible. The queen was absolutely devoted to her husband. Richard had simply been bestowed with far more of his father's Scottish blood than his

mother's German lineage. Photographs of a paternal grandfather bore a striking resemblance. His handsome face was blessed with features that had become easy to caricature. The Roman nose was the cartoonist's favorite victim, though his wavy hair and deep-set brown eyes were inevitably overplayed in what seemed a nearly daily ritual of ridicule.

Richard wore one of the snug-fitting, double-breasted suits he'd long popularized. His shirt was a soft shade of pink, the tie red-and-black-striped. A colorful handkerchief puffed from his jacket pocket. He stood in a bay window staring into the room. Eleanor closed the door behind them and stepped toward her brother.

"What is the rush about?" she asked.

"Have you seen the afternoon *Globe*?"

"I don't read that titillator."

"There, on the table. Have a glance."

Eleanor grabbed the newspaper.

The front page blared a bold headline: IS SHE THE NEXT LADY OF THE PALACE? The color photograph was of Lady Bryce open-mouth kissing the Prince of Wales, while a car waited with its door open. The lens was apparently long-range as the photo was blurry. Lady Bryce was wearing an obscenely short skirt, and Richard's hand was firmly planted on her shapely ass.

Yourstone had already read the story. Yesterday. After it had been written. He was always provided a preview.

"I'm about at the end of my tether," Richard said.

"You're just now coming to that conclusion?" Eleanor said. "Dickie, you stay in the papers. One woman after another. One mistake after another."

"I want my own life."

"To do what?"

"What I please."

There was the defiance Yourstone knew so well. So he twisted the knife. "So you can convert to Catholicism?"

Richard faced him. "Actually, I have a great fondness for that religion. There is no reason for our alienation from Rome." The

prince sighed, his usual signal of resignation. "Why must I be tormented? What purpose is served from that?"

Yourstone seized the moment. "You are a married man and heir to the throne. What you do contrary to both is relevant to the nation."

"My wife is batty. She sits under pyramids all day and studies the stars. The people cannot expect me to be happy with her."

From the monotone he wondered if Richard had taken more antidepressants. The royal doctors had told him to stop.

"She is still your wife," Yourstone said. "The Princess of Wales. The one *you* chose to marry, to be the mother of your son."

"Good God, man. You of all people know that Mother and Father had more to do with that choice than I."

"I don't recall you publicly voicing any reservations. Your wife is an extremely beautiful woman. You were quite taken with her."

"I had no idea she was a nutter."

Eleanor tossed the newspaper on the table. "Richard, why do you continue to think you can do as you please? At a minimum, why can't you at least be discreet?"

"I do not invite the press to know my business. But I also don't intend to lurk about."

The declaration carried a firm resolution.

"Then you'll continue to sail close to the wind, and you mustn't grumble when the boom slaps you into the water."

Richard stepped away from Eleanor, toward the windows, walking with the same perfect posture all royals were taught. His jacket was buttoned, his hands intertwined behind his back. He thrust his chest forward and shook his head as he paced. It was moments like these that reminded Yourstone of their hapless grandfather, who'd similarly stalked about.

"Why not you, Ellie? It should have been you, not me."

"Unfortunately, dear brother, the law says a male inherits the throne, as long as there is one. We have two, so I'll not be meeting the archbishop for a crown anytime soon."

"It should have been you, not me. I have no desire to be king. I do it simply because it is expected of me."

“No one is forcing you to the throne,” Yourstone said. “Your grandfather almost chose abdication.”

Richard smiled. “But duty came first, as they say.”

This was the moment. So he pressed. “Your grandfather was inept. The people hated him. He did not want to be king, and ultimately proved how unqualified he truly was. History has not been kind to him. Do you want the same legacy?”

“I want simply to lead my life as I see fit.”

“Then abdicate, in favor of Albert, and live your life as you see fit.”

But he knew what that decision would mean. Gone were the days when obscure royals were funded off the civil list with outrageous yearly stipends. Once Richard gave up his claim to the throne, Victoria would have no choice but to slash the prince’s yearly payment, if not wholly eliminate it. And there was simply no way Richard Saxe-Coburg could earn a living on his own. He was so disliked that no one would step forward to help.

Except one.

“I have told you before,” Yourstone said. “I will personally ensure that you are financially cared for. Do not allow money to govern your decision.”

Richard stared at them with eyes that conveyed confusion in the clearest of terms. He wondered what it was like to be so dependent on others for emotional support. Eleanor was the opposite. Her strength seemed to come from within.

“I shall not allow money ever to govern me,” Richard said, his voice nearly a whisper. “But, Lord Yourstone, I appreciate your assurances.”

The prince looked away, and he caught Eleanor glancing down at her tight belly. Was there now a child there? The male Yourstone heir who would galvanize the nation and restore the credibility of the monarchy? After, of course, her own reign was completed.

Eleanor motioned to the newspaper. “Richard, don’t you see the harm that is being done to the monarchy? Do you enjoy being ridiculed?”

Richard shrugged. "I will always be the Prince of Wales, no matter what I say or do."

Sadly, the fool actually believed what he'd just said. *Spineless, selfish, stubborn,* and *stupid* were just a few of the adjectives routinely applied, along with the label *Prince of Wails* because of his constant whining.

"What if Albert had never been born?" Yourstone asked. "What if your wife had been barren? Would you still want to be king?"

Richard seemed to consider the inquiry with earnest. "I would not. But that is not the case. And I cannot allow the press to drive me from my birthright. That much I do owe our family."

"Your son is nearing twenty-two. He's capable of inheriting the throne. Why not allow him?"

"You make it sound like that prospect would please you."

Yourstone shook his head. "You're the one talking about being so unhappy. I'm merely offering you a logical, legal way to resolve your conflict."

"I know. I didn't mean to offend. It's just that I really do not care to be known as a king who abdicated his throne."

Eleanor stepped close to her brother. "Richard, you are a desperate soul. Lost and unhappy. I worry about you. Let your son take the throne and concern yourself no more with this nonsense. Deny the press the opportunity to hurt you any more. Go live your life, as you see fit."

Richard considered her again through weary eyes. She was the only person on earth he might listen to. He'd made no secret of the fact that he despised their mother and was afraid of their father.

The prince hung his head low and spoke to the carpet. "It should have been you, Ellie."

"I don't want to be queen. But I would do my duty, if that was thrust upon me."

Richard looked up at her. "That is the remarkable thing about you. You always do your duty. Regarding Mother, Father, and country. In that way you are a far better person than I."

"I only want my brother to be happy."

She said it with such conviction Yourstone nearly believed the declaration himself.

“My son is a robust young man who will one day be Albert I. But God forbid, if anything ever happened to him, I would, without a doubt, leave this position forever. Then, dear Ellie, this prison would indeed be yours.”

Yourstone nearly smiled.

That was precisely what he'd come to hear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Malone was familiar with the chopper, a Royal Navy Westland Lynx, and listened as the Rolls-Royce turboshafts drove the swept-tip blades through the afternoon air. The navy had taught him how to fly fighter jets and he'd logged a respectable amount of time in a Tomcat, but he'd never sat behind the controls of a helicopter.

Sir Thomas Mathews, head of the Secret Intelligence Service, had transported them to an airfield where the chopper had waited. They'd made the eighty-mile journey from London to Salisbury in a little under an hour, skirting the sloping hills and tree-fringed meadows of the Wiltshire region, eventually overflying the magnificent Salisbury Cathedral.

The town itself was ancient, lined with thickly built streets and aging architecture that conveyed, even from the air, an overpowering ancient spirit. North of town center sat the university, a collage of limestone buildings intermingled among stately oak and walnut trees. The pilot expertly landed in the middle of a deserted athletic field. A waiting car drove them across campus to a three-story building with a crumbling façade veined with ivy. Pale gray carvings spanning the top cast an appearance of tattered lace. Workers were busy raking the surrounding yard clean of autumn leaves.

Britain's top spymaster had said little on the trip.

And Malone had kept his mouth shut, too.

Inside, Mathews led them to a second-floor office where a gangly, bearded man with oversized ears sat behind a green metal desk littered with books. He introduced himself as Professor Goulding. Malone noted diplomas on the wall that indicated doctorates in history from both Cambridge and Oxford.

"I understand that William provided you photos of a cauldron," Mathews said. "After you met with the queen about her ... family situation."

"You have spies within the palace?"

“How else would we ever know what happens there?”

“I thought you were responsible for foreign matters. MI5 handles the domestic stuff.”

“That depends on the nature of that *stuff*.”

Mathews motioned to Goulding, who brought up another photo of the cauldron on a computer screen.

But he wanted to know, “Have you spoken with Stephanie?”

Mathews shook his head. “And neither did she show me the courtesy of contacting me before dispatching you.”

“More spies? With more information?”

“A necessity that has allowed me to survive in this business for a long time.”

Mathews was legendary. Only sixteen men had led Great Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service, responsible for all foreign intelligence matters since the start of the 20th century. Mathews was the latest and the longest. A Cold War veteran. Feared by the Soviets. Respected by Washington. And though Malone had worked with MI6 several times before, never had the head man himself been involved.

Which spoke volumes.

“Tell him,” Mathews said to their host, motioning with his cane.

“This cauldron once occupied a prominent position at a pagan altar,” Goulding said. “There are many similar ones in museums, but this is a particularly well-preserved specimen. These bowls served a dual purpose.”

The professor’s finger touched the screen.

“These plates are our first history books. I’ve seen others that record a battle or some catastrophic occurrence. This one details the end of a ruler’s reign.”

Goulding traced the color image on the screen with his index finger. “Look here. The king dies in battle. Then his warriors pay tribute to him with trumpets and ceremony. Even the animals are saddened by his death.”

The academician clicked on a smaller image at the right side of the screen, and an enlarged picture of one of the etched panels appeared.

“This plate is the key,” Mathews said. “It’s the one missing off the bowl. The one currently located in the Icelandic National Museum in Reykjavik. By itself it’s meaningless. But together, with the rest of the images, the story becomes complete.”

Malone remembered what William had written. “And since Yourstone photographed that Iceland image, and has the actual cauldron, that means he has all of the pieces to the puzzle.”

“Which is why you and I are talking,” Mathews said.

Then he realized. “I assume my visit to Yourstone created a problem?”

“An understatement, but accurate. It jeopardized over a year’s worth of covert surveillance.”

Which explained why the head man was here.

Goulding stood from the computer and stepped across the office to a row of floor-to-ceiling bookcases, whose shelves sagged from their load. He bent and retrieved a leather-bound volume on the bottom row, gently parting its pages. After a moment of careful leafing he said, “Let me read you something. I think it will explain things clearly.”

In the winter of 1191 at Glastonbury Abbey, in the churchyard of St. Dunstan, near the south door, a white-curtained pavilion was erected between two stone markers shaped like pyramids. The abbot of Glastonbury, Henry de Sully, was in charge of the construction. Two years earlier a message had arrived from Henry II, bestowing information deemed so sacred that the king’s offspring were not to be informed. The king had learned the location of Arthur’s grave and his personal friend, Ralph FitzStephen, then in charge of Glastonbury Abbey, had passed the information to Abbot de Sully after Henry died in July 1189.

Why de Sully paused two seasons before acting is unknown. Perhaps his cautious personality and desire to please Richard, Henry’s son, the monarch who appointed him to such an exalted position, played a role in his decision. Nevertheless, sometime in 1191, de Sully finally ordered that digging should begin. It took several days before, eight feet down in

thick soil, a heavy stone slab was encountered. A full week was needed to raise the monolith from the hole. On the underside of the stone a cavity was discovered in which had been placed a leaden cross. It was an unusual design, the top curved, sides flared at rounded angles. Upon the cross was etched: HERE IN THE ISLE OF AVALON LIES BURIED THE RENOWNED ARTHUR WITH GUINEVERE HIS SECOND WIFE. The script was ancient, in a text not used for many generations, and had been purposefully placed inward, facing the stone.

The discovery motivated more digging and it was another eight feet down before a rough coffin, formed like a dugout canoe from a hollowed oak bole, was discovered. Two-thirds of its inside contained the bones of a man. The skull was large and impressive, many wounds were clear, all mended save for one and the diggers concluded the immense gash had been the cause of death. One of the monks removed a shinbone from the grave and held it up to the tallest man there. It stretched a full three inches above the knee, meaning that whoever filled the grave was a man due respect. In the remaining one-third of the bole were the remains of a woman. A tress of hair, plaited and coiled, still possessed of blond color, lay among the bones. One of the monks, a silly, rash, and imprudent fellow, grabbed for it and the bundle disintegrated into dust. Female hair had always been a snare for the feeble-minded, although it is said that those with strength of purpose can resist its allure.

The monks interpreted the event as an omen.

Malone said, "A mystery to the world, a grave for Arthur."

Goulding smiled. "From an old Welsh poem. And quite apt."

"Are you saying Arthur was buried at Glastonbury Abbey and his grave discovered in 1191?"

Goulding gently laid the open book on the corner of the desk. "A grave was excavated in 1191 and the bones of a man and woman were found. That much history accepts, since there are at least five separate accounts of what happened during the exhumation. They differ in detail, but the general thrust is similar. The bodies were sunk deep in the ground, which was unusual for graves at the time. As you might expect, tools then were not the finest, and digging

deep would have been difficult. But Arthur was the sworn enemy of the Saxons. He almost succeeded in stopping their steady intrusion over Britain. The Saxons would have relished in ravaging his grave, so burying him deep made sense.”

“You believe Arthur to be an actual historical figure?” he asked.

“Without a doubt. He was a Celt who fought invading Saxons. The best that can be determined is that he lived in the later part of the 6th century, dying around 537 to 542 CE.”

“He was a king?” he asked.

“There was no such concept then. It would be another 300 years before some semblance of kingship, as we know it, formed. Arthur was *Dux Bellorum*. Battle Leader. A warrior. He fought twelve battles we know of. Supposedly, after the Battle of Camlann he was carried off by his cousin, Morgan, to the Isle of Avalon, where his wounds were mended. But, in fact, he died and was buried there.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Malone asked.

Goulding motioned to the screen. “The answer is here. The plates on the bowl depict exactly what happened. There is a wattle-and-daub church in the background, which I recognize as the Old Church at Glastonbury. This cauldron is a record of those events.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Yourstone followed a contingent from the House of Lords into the queen's audience chamber. Eight of the leadership had been summoned for a hastily arranged meeting, the subject of which was not revealed, only that Victoria needed to speak with a few of the lords.

Throughout history it had been the lords who rose to the Crown's defense, especially when the Commons tried to cut the monarch's power. From the 16th to the latter part of the 20th century the English monarchy had enjoyed an almost unprecedented popularity. The downfall started with Victoria's father, who'd made no secret that he never wanted to be king. Three decades had passed since he died, and the nation had been blessed with his daughter, a woman possessed of a spirited attitude that had won back the public.

But the explosive recklessness of her eldest son had resurrected all that had once been bad, and a decade of concentrated effort on his part had merely aggravated the wound. If all went according to plan, by the end of next week Eleanor would be queen of England, Yourstone's son her prince, their child to become the first Yourstone monarch. He could only hope it was a boy—which would be a sure sign that what he'd labored so hard to achieve possessed a divine stamp.

That male would rule as Arthur II.

But even if a girl were produced, no matter. She would bear the regal label of Guinevere. There would be no more Elizabeths, Annes, Marys, or Victorias. No Saxe-Coburg names. And the German connection with the British throne would forever be severed. Yourstone children would take Celtic and Brit names. They would also emphasize their Norman heritage.

Arthur or Guinevere.

Either one a Yourstone.

The lords completed their entrance and sat where directed by uniformed footmen. Victoria was already perched at the head of an

elongated table that shone under the brilliance of a Bohemian chandelier. The queen was dressed in a light blue suit, a triple string of pearls encircling her neck. Her face cast a tired expression, but she sat straight in the chair, which appeared to take effort. Apparently, the medical reports on the extent of the Parkinson's were to be believed.

"Please, my lords, be comfortable and let us talk for a few moments," the queen said.

Prince James stood behind his wife, a stump of a man whose Scottish ancestry showed in his every word and action. Some likened him to John Brown, the Scotsman who consoled the first Victoria in the latter part of the 19th century after her husband, the first Albert, died. Both were stubborn, determined men, but unlike Brown, James was extremely popular and the press treated him with deference. As far as anyone knew—and Yourstone had delved deeply—he'd always been monogamous. His only fault was a passion for horse racing, something he and Victoria shared.

"I appreciate your appearance on short notice," the queen said. "Ordinarily, I would not concern myself with what someone may say about myself or my family. I have lived a long life and learned that one cannot be queen and have a sensitive nature. But I require counsel and hope you might oblige me by offering some."

Yourstone watched Victoria closely. Though ill, she was still the woman of three decades ago who'd charmed the nation with her civility and poise.

"My lord Yourstone."

The sound of his name caught him by surprise.

His gaze found the queen.

"I listened earlier in gratitude at your defense of the Crown. But I also caught your warnings. I am sorry my son places us all in such difficult positions."

"I, too, am a father and understand the anguish children can sometimes cause."

"Yet neither of our sons is a child. They are grown men who should know how to conduct themselves."

“And, by the grace of God, my son has matured into a fine man. He makes your daughter quite happy.”

“For which my husband and I are grateful.”

Yourstone caught James’ stare as the Scotsman stood behind his wife. Though the queen had ignored his coy slight, the prince had not. No appreciation cast from his stern expression.

“Tell me, Lord Yourstone,” Victoria said, “does Lord Bryce’s attempt to abolish the monarchy stand any chance of passage?”

“There are many in the Commons who feel abolition would be a sign of progress. Similar to when the House of Lords was modified a few years ago. Many felt that change would be viewed favorably.”

His reminder, he knew, would fuel resentment in the men who sat around the table. A change to a Labour government had brought a call for reform to the House of Lords. Its 1,000-plus membership, heavily dependent on family for position, had evolved into an anachronism. So most of the hereditary seats were abolished and the Lords’ membership reduced to a workable number. Victoria had wholeheartedly supported the change, one of those rare occasions when she interjected herself into the political process, and many of the gentry harbored ill will for her interference.

“That does not answer my question,” Victoria said, her voice suddenly sharp. Apparently, she had sensed both jabs. “Does Lord Bryce’s move *possess* political strength?”

“I believe it does.”

“Explain yourself,” James said.

The prince’s deep baritone seemed to shake the walls.

Yourstone cautioned himself to remain calm. Appearances were everything. Especially now. “Richard has inflicted enormous damage. You certainly realize that. The ministers are tired of him. The people are tired of him. I’m sorry, but his becoming king would be viewed as a national disgrace. The people speak of him and your father as one.”

He realized that he was openly insulting Victoria’s father, but James had asked for an explanation.

“My father had no desire to be king,” Victoria said. “But he did his duty to the day he died.”

“That is not enough anymore. Your father ruled at a time when the press was restrained and respect was shown the monarchy. He was allowed many liberties. We live in an age of instant communication. Newspapers, television shows, mobile phones, countless websites. They all require constant content. Millions of people are more than willing to supply that content. Most of which is offered free. To survive such an informational glut, a monarch must be extraordinary. Beyond reproach. Like yourself. No one would dare attack Your Majesty, but you have given no one cause or reason.”

“Except you, Lord Yourstone. You attacked me. This morning.”

“I said nothing derogatory about Your Majesty.”

“You insulted my family, which is the same thing.”

“I merely spoke the truth. As, I assume, you want us all to do. We did not create this problem.”

Another poke at Richard’s parentage.

Victoria shifted slightly in the chair, which seemed to calm the tremors in her hands. He realized she would never publicly disparage a member of her family, no matter what he or she may have done. Royals always defended royals. But he also knew, from Eleanor, that privately the queen and prince were furious with Richard. So he said, “The Prince of Wales simply has yet to realize that he will one day be king. That, to me, is his greatest fault.”

“And will he be king?” Victoria asked.

“That is wholly dependent on your son.”

“What if he were to abdicate in favor of Albert? Would that satisfy the ministers who want the monarchy abolished?”

“Your grandson is a gentleman. The people love him. He would make an excellent king.” He was perplexed why Victoria was directing her comments only to him. Perhaps it was because he was family and she believed he would be honest. “Of course, though, Albert will not be king for many years. We all wish Your Majesty a long life, and Richard is relatively young. Albert will surely be older if, and when, he ever inherits the throne. He will have a lifetime to prepare. It is our nation’s blessing that the Saxe-Coburgs enjoy long lives.”

“And our curse,” Victoria quickly added.

“Might I inquire, Your Majesty, as to the purpose of this gathering? Rarely does the palace involve itself directly with the affairs of Parliament, particularly on matters such as this. Many have attempted to change the Crown, and few have ever succeeded. Why does this seem different?”

“It is always prudent to be cautious of another Cromwell,” James said.

“Quite correct,” Yourstone said. “But Charles I was a tyrant who plunged the nation into civil war. Cromwell had an easy matter to seize that opportunity. I would hope many lessons were learned from what happened all those centuries ago.”

“But another Guy Fawkes could be lurking,” Victoria said.

The reference to a potential royal assassin bothered him. Fawkes was hanged in 1605 for plotting to blow up James I. The nation continued to remember that betrayal every November 5 when bonfires, topped by Fawkes’ effigy, were ceremonially lit all over the country.

“Are you suggesting a possible regicide?” he asked.

“World leaders are often murdered. There is nothing that makes this monarchy immune.”

“But the royal family enjoys the finest protection. This is not the 17th century, when conspirators can could stockpile gunpowder beneath Parliament.”

“And even then,” James said, “it was only thanks to one of Fawkes’ men turning coat and revealing the plan that the effort failed.”

Yourstone caught a gleam in the prince’s eye. Was he being tested? Surveyed? Analyzed? Perhaps he’d underestimated these aging icons. And there was still the matter of Cotton Malone, whom he knew had spoken with them. He’d yet to learn the substance of that conversation. How much did these people know? Not enough. Obviously. Otherwise they’d be arresting instead of baiting him.

So he seized the moment and said to James, “What you say is true, as to what happened all those centuries ago. But as I have

learned, from both life and politics, today there are so few secrets in this world.”

He paused for effect.

“So precious few.”

CHAPTER NINE

Malone was perplexed. "I've never considered Arthur a historical figure. I took him more as a creation of poets and novelists."

Goulding explained that, until the 12th century, Arthur was known only in bardic tales and Welsh poems. But Geoffrey of Monmouth changed everything in 1136 when he translated the *History of the Kings of Britons*, a fanciful account, more fiction than reality, that elevated Arthur to a king. The story was immensely popular, and the Welsh seized on Geoffrey's imagination. They'd never submitted to Saxons or Normans and saw in Arthur a way to keep a rebellious spirit simmering. Three hundred years later, when Sir Thomas Malory finally wrote his epic, Arthur was forever ingrained into the realm of myth.

"He was real," Goulding said. "But not the chivalric character Malory envisioned. More likely a brutal, barbarous man who fought Saxons, not unlike a thousand other warrior leaders who arose during our Dark Ages. He was fortunate, though, that later poets saw something more in him. So they manufactured a legend."

Malone knew about the *History of the Kings of Briton*, a famous and valuable rare edition. Books were his private passion. He collected them by the hundreds, his house back in Atlanta lined with shelves. His dream was to one day own a bookshop, but he doubted that would ever happen.

"It's absolutely impossible, though, to know where truth stops and fiction begins," Goulding said. "We can only hypothesize."

Malone faced Mathews. "I'm assuming all of this is important in some way to what's currently happening?"

"Vitality. But to comprehend what we are facing, you must know the historical background."

Malone motioned to the book on the desk and the passage Goulding had read to them. "The cross found by the monks noted, *Here in the Isle of Avalon lies buried the renowned Arthur*. What's the connection to Glastonbury?"

“That’s the easy part. Arthur lived in the middle to latter part of the 6th century. Glastonbury was then to English Christendom what Westminster and Canterbury are now. The abbey was situated on an island surrounded by the River Brue. The Welsh called it *Ynys Avallon*, the Island of Apples. So it’s easy to see how the cross’ inscription came into being. Remember, it was Malory, 300 years later, who bestowed magical qualities on Avalon. Before that, it was simply a place.” Goulding motioned again to the computer screen. “The cauldron tells us a great many things. Are you aware of the Irish settlement in Iceland?”

He shook his head. “I’m aware of Viking colonization, but know nothing about the Irish.”

“There’s a journal. *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*. Voyage of St. Brendan. It’s in the British Museum and details how a party headed by St. Brendan left County Kerry, Ireland, in 539 CE. They sailed across the Atlantic to the Hebrides, then on to the Faeroes.” Goulding paused. “It was only a short hop from there to Iceland, and St. Brendan made the journey. He discovered, though, that Irish monks had already been traveling there, using the isolated land as a religious retreat. Which was no small feat for the time, sailing the cold waters of the open Atlantic in tiny boats made only of skins.”

When Malone thought of Iceland what came to mind were volcanoes, whales, and snow. Not religion.

“The *Landnámabók*,” Goulding said, “is a famous Icelandic text that tells of a mariner, Ari Marson, who was driven off course by a storm to a place he called *Hvitramannaland*. There, he found Irish Christians. Translated, *Hvitramannaland* means ‘Greater Ireland.’ We know that place today as Iceland.”

“I had no idea Europeans ventured west *before* the Vikings,” Malone said.

“Traditionalists would argue pre-Norse Irish colonization of remote western regions was isolated or accidental. It’s a two-day sail from Scotland to Iceland, and they contend anyone who made that journey did so involuntarily. A victim of a shipwreck or blown off course. But there is a respectable amount of evidence to suggest

an intentional Irish presence in Iceland, Greenland, and perhaps even North America long before the Vikings arrived.”

Goulding reached toward the table and grabbed several color photographs.

“These are close-ups from the plates on the cauldron. Notice the images of volcanoes, icebergs, and whales. None of those would have existed in England or Ireland. Clearly, the engraver was aware of Iceland. The ceremonial bowl is definitely 5th- or 6th-century Celtic and, most important, depicts a great warrior’s death.”

Malone studied the images. A man dies from a blow to the head. He’s placed on a boat and taken to an island where there are volcanoes, whales, and icebergs. Then the body is carried ashore and encased within a mountain.

He faced Mathews. “What the hell is going on here?”

“It would seem obvious. Lord Yourstone is searching for the grave of Arthur.” Mathews motioned with his cane toward Goulding. “Tell him what the cauldron says of Arthur’s final resting place.”

“According to the plates on the ceremonial vessel, Arthur’s body was taken to Iceland. There he was buried, safe from Saxons. The bodies at Glastonbury were decoys, and the monks knew that, which might explain why they kept the discovery secret for so long.”

“What makes Arthur so important now?”

“It’s a matter of history,” Mathews said. “So many kings have tried to make the connection. Edward I called himself *Arthurus Redivivus*—Arthur Returned. Centuries later, Henry VIII’s aim was to eliminate everything Catholic, so he destroyed all of the monasteries, including Glastonbury. Yet even Henry possessed an emotional attachment. His older brother, who should have inherited the throne, was named Arthur, but he died before being crowned. Henry VII, the first Tudor king, was intent on using the Arthurian legend to solidify his family’s claim to the throne.”

“In the 13th century, King John did the same thing,” Goulding said. “He killed his nephew, Arthur, who should have succeeded to the throne. John’s father, Henry II, was obsessed with Arthur and wanted his successor to bear the name. Henry II was the first monarch to unite France and England under one crown—save, of

course, Arthur himself, if legend is to be believed. The French took pride from their connection to Charlemagne, but Arthur's heritage was even older. John's murder of the heir apparent stopped any unification, and France was forever lost."

Malone sat forward in his chair. "Yourstone is trying the same thing?"

"Precisely," Mathews said. "He wants to use English tradition to his favor—and what better way than through Arthur?"

"To what end?"

"To make Eleanor, his daughter-in-law, queen."

Yourstone left the palace through a rear entrance and marched directly to his waiting Bentley. Victoria had kept the contingent from the House of Lords busy, discussing in detail the prospect of any legislative changes to the monarchy. The men around the table had assured her nothing would receive the necessary majority from their side of Parliament, and she'd been pleased with their confidence. His misgivings about the queen and her husband had faded over the course of the two hours, yet the entire purpose of the gathering continued to bother him.

He climbed into the Bentley and cautioned himself against paranoia. Within the palace only Eleanor was aware of what was happening. Yet there was still Cotton Malone.

Meeting with the queen.

He'd sat patiently listening to the lords and Her Majesty discuss what he knew to be a moot issue. There was no way he would ever allow changes to the monarchy, besides ones he'd already contemplated that would strengthen rather than weaken the institution.

The House of Yourstone would not begin business with a deficit.

"Back home," he told his driver.

The car motored from the palace.

Malone considered what Thomas Mathews had just said and noted, "Eleanor is third in line to the throne."

"I am aware of that. Her brother and nephew come before her. But Richard has been the subject of brutal attacks by the press. He has virtually no public image. We now know that Nigel Yourstone has been orchestrating those attacks."

"And you haven't bothered to tell the queen?"

"That would be problematic. There is no way to maintain a secret within Buckingham Palace. In order to stop this, we must have total secrecy."

"So you think Yourstone is trying to prevent Richard from becoming king?"

"There is no doubt. And that will not be difficult. Richard could easily be primed to abdicate. Which is precisely what Yourstone is planning."

"And my visit to Yourstone compromised all of that?"

Mathews nodded. "He now knows that someone is watching."

But none of that was Malone's fault. He hadn't asked to be involved and had been thrust into this fight with little to no information. He was only doing what the queen of England and Stephanie Nelle had asked him to do.

"Cotton, I don't want to overdramatize the situation, but Yourstone and Eleanor are plotting the death of Albert. With Albert dead and Richard abdicating, Eleanor is queen."

He decided to tell Mathews the rest of the bad news. "There's been a meeting of several lords at Buckingham Palace, which is surely over by now. Yourstone was there."

And he explained more.

"I have to check with my people," Mathews said, when he finished. "Assess the damage."

Malone looked at Goulding. "While he does that, I need to use your phone."

"Mr. Malone, you are saying my daughter is plotting regicide."

The queen's voice cracked with emotion.

He'd called William at the palace and told him he needed to speak with Victoria immediately. Mathews had okayed the call, provided no mention was made of him or his agency's involvement.

"Malone's right," James said through the speakerphone. "You heard Yourstone earlier. He told us there are precious few secrets in this world. But I believe we have just confirmed one."

Malone listened as they explained what happened at the meeting.

"What do we do now?" Victoria asked.

"At least Yourstone knows we're watching. It might slow him down."

"Why not just arrest him?" James asked him.

"We have no proof. Talk about a PR disaster. You'd have a giant one. It's too early for that. But security on Albert should be tightened. Perhaps a retreat to an estate for a few days. That'll make him easier to protect."

"He has some previously scheduled duties for today," William said.

"Finish them. Then change his schedule."

"And what of our daughter?" Victoria asked.

"Keep her isolated. Do nothing to alert her suspicion."

"And Richard?"

"He's not a player, until Albert is dead. Since that isn't going to happen, just let him be."

"You sound confident," the queen said.

"I am."

"And what of Yourstone?" James asked.

"Leave him to me. No more contact with him, either."

"I'd prefer to strangle the bloody bastard," James said.

"You might get your chance, just not at the moment. I'll be back in touch."

He ended the call and glanced at Professor Goulding. Mathews was still outside on the phone. "You really believe Arthur is buried in Iceland."

"With what we already know, combined with what Yourstone uncovered, I think he is."

"Can the grave be found?"

Goulding nodded.

CHAPTER TEN

Yourstone reentered his London flat. Eleanor had stayed with Richard on the pretense of making sure he was all right. The real purpose was to cement the Prince of Wales' resolve to abdicate.

Inside, he headed straight for his study and was surprised to find his son waiting for him. Andrew was perched in one of the club chairs that faced the fireplace, nursing a snifter of brandy, appearing quite comfortable.

"I thought you'd be out for the day," Yourstone said, closing the door and stepping toward his desk. "At the races."

"Not all that exciting. I decided, instead, that you and I should have a chat."

He could not imagine what they would have to discuss. They were little more than strangers. About as far apart as a father and son could be. "I'm in a bit of a hurry. Can't this wait?"

"Afraid not."

He sat behind the desk and decided to see what the imbecile wanted.

"Do you think, dear Father, that you could stop screwing my wife?"

Not exactly what he expected. But he appreciated his son being direct. "And how would you know that was happening?"

"The staff talks. But don't blame them. I overheard a private conversation. They have no idea I know. But I've had suspicions for some time. Contrary to what you and my lovely wife believe, I'm not stupid. So I've been thinking about why you would do such a despicable thing, wondering what precisely you are up to. You're always up to something, aren't you?"

"A man without ambition is lost."

"Is that meant to insult me?"

"It was meant to motivate you." He decided to see how far his son was willing to go. "Does becoming king of England appeal to you?"

Andrew coolly savored a sip of brandy.

"You don't seem surprised by the question."

"Nothing you do surprises me."

"I intend for our family to rule this nation."

"Which finally explains why you wanted me to marry the third in line. I wondered the reason you were so keen on the union. Seemed useless to me. But for Eleanor to be queen Richard and Albert both would have to be out of the way."

No need to voice the obvious. His silence at his son's speculation was answer enough.

"Impressive," Andrew said. "I never realized the depth of your passion. You are a grand schemer, and a dangerous one at that."

"I am only looking after the future of this family. The future of our nation. Yourstones have served the Crown faithfully. It is time that others serve us."

"And when will this ... *change* ... happen?"

"Soon."

"How your gut must churn."

He did not like the young man's surly tone, but he said nothing.

"I know what a disappointment I am to you. You find me wholly unsuitable to be the next Lord Yourstone. Yet now I will be the crown prince. A position, I'm sure, you personally would like."

"You are the one married to Eleanor."

Andrew stood from the chair, downed the rest of the brandy, and tabled the snifter. "You never answered my first question. Can you stop screwing my wife?"

"You're sterile."

The news did not surprise his son, either.

Andrew chuckled. "I've always wondered why none of the tarts I've bedded fell pregnant. I thought it just good fortune."

"I paid the doctor who ran the palace's fertility test, prior to the marriage, to lie."

"And then he died. I noticed that."

"Would you rather have him alive to contradict the results?"

His son shrugged. "I suppose not."

"It matters not that you are sterile?" he asked.

“I despise children. The last thing I would want is another one of me.”

“To be king and queen means your wife must produce an heir.”

He watched as Andrew considered that reality, the dots connecting.

“All right. If we need a Yourstone heir, then impregnate Eleanor. Once that’s done, if you touch her I’ll make you sorry.”

He was unaccustomed to any semblance of a backbone from this weak soul. “And how will you do that?”

“I’ll kill you.”

He laughed.

“Not literally, Father. Though the thought is inviting. I’ll simply kill everything you hold dear. Which, in turn, will kill you. All I would have to do is reveal the truth. DNA testing can confirm the actual father of any heir. Then the whole thing unravels.”

“Including your position as crown prince.”

Andrew shrugged. “I was not a king before. I won’t be after. Who cares? As you like to remind me, I have no ambition. Perhaps that’s a good thing? Oh, I just remembered.” His son pointed a finger at him. “You’re the one who cares. So do your duty, Father. For God and country. Then leave my wife alone.”

Andrew left the room.

Yourstone did not move from his chair.

For his son he’d financed the best education, provided the finest tutors, and attempted to mold him into a man. Still, they’d always been distant, and he’d always thought the boy an idiot.

Yet the past few minutes had caused a reassessment.

For the first time he was proud.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Malone settled back in the seat as the helicopter angled up into the afternoon sky. The visit with Professor Goulding had been both enlightening and troubling. The chopper's passenger compartment was roomy and insulated from both the cool air and the churning rotors.

The helicopter bucked upward, then headed east to London.

A rap from the cockpit window caught his attention. The pilot was pointing to his headset and motioning to another set that hung on the wall. Mathews donned the earphones, motioning for Malone to do the same with a third pair.

"There's a scrambled communication coming in for Sir Thomas," the pilot's voice said in his ears.

Mathews twisted the microphone close to his mouth. "Let's hear it."

A few clicks and a voice said, "Guinevere is at the castle with Lancelot."

"Any luck with the Black Knight?"

"We have no idea of his location but have the sword in sight."

"We're on the way. Keep me posted on any changes."

Mathews removed the headset and signaled for the pilot to end the communication. The older man moved close to him.

"I wanted you to hear that. Albert is about to be murdered."

The words grabbed his full attention.

"We've been monitoring this situation for some time. Peter Lyon plans to act this evening."

"Then stop him."

"It's not that simple. We know where he intends to act, and how, even the point of origin. But your appearance in this offers us a new opportunity—considering the locale and the players involved. I've been wondering how we would proceed. Now I know exactly what to do."

He didn't like the sound of that. "You have thousands of security people at your disposal. And you need me?"

"I haven't told you everything. Once I do, I believe you'll understand why only you can do this."

Yourstone enjoyed a walnut muffin and the rich Turkish coffee he imported by the case. The jam on the table was concocted from grapes grown on his country estate and was served at Victoria II's table at Buckingham Palace, something he considered an omen, a signal that all things Yourstone were surely right for England.

He was reading the afternoon newspapers, evaluating the coverage on what had happened with Lord Bryce in the House of Lords. A lengthy editorial in one urged the Commons to seriously consider changes to the monarchy. *The time has come*, the writer urged. At a minimum royals should be forced to live off their personal revenues. *No longer should the people fund their reckless extravagance. The future Richard IV is nothing short of a national embarrassment*, the writer lamented. And not solely for his sexual promiscuity, but also for what the editorialist called *a loose grip on the reality of the modern world and substandard sensitivities to history and tradition*.

That part pleased him.

Many British possessed an almost fanatical obsession with their lineage, and the monarchy was just one of several links with that 2,000-year-old past. Living in a land littered with castles, manors, estates, and battlements only reaffirmed a connection with ancient Brits, Celts, Saxons, and Normans. He'd learned long ago that the proper manipulation of that collective affection could sway public sentiment, and he knew precisely what should be used as a cornerstone for that effort.

Arthur.

No other English character carried such a mystique.

Arthur's resurrection would come directly after the Saxe-Coburgs' bloody downfall, at a time when the people would be searching for something to latch on to. Though the idea of dispensing with the

monarchy altogether had a certain appeal, he doubted that most would embrace the notion. Oliver Cromwell had made that mistake when he beheaded Charles I in 1649. His Protectorate lasted a mere eleven years before the Stuarts were invited to rule again. And in 1660, after Charles II was crowned, the king ordered Cromwell's body dug up, hung on a gallows, then decapitated. The head remained displayed on a pole outside Westminster for twenty years until a gale finally blew it away.

Regicide was indeed a dangerous business.

Footsteps caused him to look up from the newspapers.

His personal secretary was stepping across the room toward the table, dressed in his customary gray suit. He stopped a few feet away and remained standing.

"What of Iceland?" Yourstone asked.

"Everything is progressing. But no success, as yet."

He did not like that report. "What's the problem? I've paid those buggers a fortune and they assured me it wouldn't take this long."

"I have reminded them of that. But weather is not cooperating. It's cold there this time of year."

"They're underground."

"The expedition requires supplies, and arctic conditions make that difficult."

He poured himself more coffee. He did not offer his employee any—nor, he realized, would any have been accepted. A clear line existed between the upstairs and the downstairs, and this man respected that division. "I'm going to need the Iceland project completed within the next week. It's critical."

"What would you suggest I do to spur their efforts?"

"Don't offer them any more money. Try one of your ... unique methods of persuasion. I'll leave the particulars to your vivid imagination."

His secretary gave him a nod, signaling a complete understanding. He liked that about the man. No questions, just results.

"I also need imagination used on this Cotton Malone. He knew about the C-83 explosives. That could be a problem." He paused. "For us all."

Once Eleanor was crowned this man would become *her* personal secretary. So he had a stake in what was happening.

“And what of our South African ally?”

He said, “Our business with him will soon be complete. I doubt he’ll care about us after that.”

“Does not the fact that someone may be investigating concern you?”

He shrugged. “Not particularly. Lyon will gladly assume the blame for all that is about to happen. I believe he’s actually looking forward to doing so. The terrorist mentality, I assume. He seems to take this trial of his associates quite personally. But I agree. Men like the South African possess agendas unmindful of others. Fanatics come with an assortment of advantages and liabilities.”

And never had he dealt with such a dangerous personality. He’d located Lyon through intermediaries, and initially the terrorist had not been interested. That was, of course, before his associates were captured and Great Britain agreed to try them in an international court. It had been Lyon who’d reinstated contact, the only condition to his involvement being that everything Yourstone planned must coincide with the trial. That criterion had been acceptable since it would further divert blame.

He glanced at his watch: 4:05 P.M.

“We’re only a few hours away. What’s happening now is out of our hands.”

Malone waited for an explanation.

“You’ve entered this fight at the last minute,” Mathews said. “I know the challenge that presents. But you’re a pro, and it may be fortuitous for us all that you are here. This entire matter is most delicate.”

“You’re aware that Princess Eleanor is involved?”

“Of course. She is in league with Nigel Yourstone. In fact, it is much worse than the palace realizes. Yourstone and the princess are lovers.”

That shocked him.

"Yourstone's son is sterile. So the father is making sure there will be a proper blood heir."

"How does Yourstone plan to murder Albert?"

"He doesn't. But Peter Lyon does. And in a grand style. A missile, fired at the Tower of London. With Albert there."

All of which fit Lyon's grandiose personality. His people were being tried on British soil, and he would make sure the entire nation understood that error.

"Lyon wants to strike a public blow. Yourstone and Princess Eleanor want the second in line for the throne dead. Of course, they want no blame for that. So they made a most diabolical arrangement."

Lyon was one of the world's premier arms dealers. Procuring a surface-to-surface guided missile would not be a problem.

"And you kept all of this to yourself?"

"I head the Secret Intelligence Service. As you noted back at the college, my jurisdiction lies outside this country. MI5 handles internal matters."

"Has MI5 been alerted?"

Mathews shook his head. "I couldn't risk it. They are not the most reliable of people. Besides, Peter Lyon is an international matter and I want him. Now I have him. My people have worked hard to keep this contained. We just need to finish it."

"We?"

"A tracking device has been smuggled into the Tower, one the missile will use for guidance. I need you to locate that device."

"Why not just stop the missile before it fires?"

"I will do that. We have the launch point under surveillance. There is no danger of any missile leaving that locale and striking Albert. But we need to implicate the right culprits in this vengeful plot."

"You don't have agents who can handle that?"

"None of my people was recruited by the queen. You were. The palace apparently trusts you, so you are the logical choice to reveal the conspirators."

“The queen already suspects Yourstone and her daughter.”

“And she is correct. But proof must be uncovered.”

He understood. “And my doing it also insulates you.”

“Exactly. By law, I should not be involved. Luckily, here I am.”

He wasn't exactly sure of that conclusion, but didn't argue.

“Where is the proof?”

“Now, that's the most interesting part.”

And as the chopper continued flying toward London, he listened while Mathews explained.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Yourstone followed the cortege into the ground floor of the Wellington Barracks. In a few days the building would be packed with tourists, all eager to view the royal regalia of crowns, scepters, orbs, and swords proudly displayed behind bulletproof glass. Today the crowds were absent, replaced by a small contingent of royal family members taking advantage of the first opportunity to view the newly constructed Jewel House before it was formally opened to the public.

Eleanor walked beside him, her dress a pale blue bouclé, the jacket similar with a gray velvet collar. Hats were her trademark, and she'd chosen a wide-brimmed lattice straw design. Her no-frills wardrobe brought both compliments and complaints. The press praised her frugality, the fashion columnists harangued her lack of style. But no one could accuse her of extravagance.

"This is quite a spectacle," she whispered. "It will be fine pomp and circumstance for the masses."

During World War II her grandfather had ordered the crown jewels moved from the nearby Wakefield Tower to an underground chamber beneath the Waterloo Barracks. There a magnificent star-shaped case was constructed and elaborately lit to showcase one of the last sets of crown jewels left in the world. But the swarm of visitors that flocked each year to view the display had proven too much for the cramped chamber, and Victoria had commissioned a larger location back at ground level. It had taken two years to remodel an old barracks into a state-of-the-art vault that not only ensured security but also provided a dazzling spectacle.

Evening sunshine from outside was replaced by a cool semi-darkness. A wide corridor led forward, equipped with a conveyor-belt walkway designed to keep viewers from lingering. The cases themselves were illuminated with a combination of halogen floods and miniature lasers. He'd never seen the collection in such vivid color, and the effect was remarkable. Today the conveyor belt was

still and the twenty or so guests strolled about, taking their time. Eleanor had come to represent her mother, her appearance limited to this tour, as other duties would shortly take her to North London and Greenwich. Her causes varied from animal rights to organizations for the disabled to environmental concerns. Richard tended to draw the industrial plant openings, state visits, and trade association gatherings.

“The ceremony will begin promptly at 7:00 P.M.,” an attendant reminded everyone. “We need you outside around 6:30. Until then, please enjoy the display.”

Eleanor led the way as they drifted to where her nephew, Albert, stood alone admiring the crowns.

“One of those will someday be on your head,” she said as they approached.

The others were studying more of the regalia in other cases.

“The thought is frightening,” the young man said.

Albert Saxe-Coburg was tall, with squared shoulders, his legs and arms in nearly perfect proportion to a sturdy frame. A thick patch of hair drew attention to eyes that seemed to flash a dreamy light. He'd acquired most of his physical features from his mother, who was, though batty, incredibly beautiful. Virtually no Saxe-Coburg feature could be found in his nose, mouth, or eyes, and only the pronounced oval skull and tiny ears could be credited to his father. He was well educated, an Eton scholar, versed in the classics and possessed of an Oxford degree. His interests were simple, among them chess and Scrabble. A procession of nannies, tutors, and sporting instructors contributed to his upbringing and helped instill a sense of conscience. He was soft-spoken and chose his words with great care. Yourstone could recall no press report ever speaking ill about him. Born to privilege, educated with purpose, and existing in a life devoid of privacy, this young man had managed to remain both sane and immensely popular.

Yourstone stared through the polished glass a few feet away at the 400-year-old St. Edward's Crown. He envisioned the Archbishop of Canterbury, who stood on the other side of the room admiring the

royal scepters, reverently placing that crown onto Eleanor's head. Cheers would ring as echoes of *God save the queen* bounced from the walls of Westminster Abbey.

"You will do us proud," Eleanor told her nephew.

The young man smiled at her. "You are a treasure, Aunt Ellie." Protocol would never allow him to speak such intimacies outside the immediate family. "I see why Father loves you so."

"Your father is a troubled man. He does not want to be king."

"I'm afraid you are right."

"But he's lucky to have such a worthy son."

Yourstone's gaze fixed on the smaller Imperial Crown. Once Eleanor's coronation ended, with her having taken Holy Communion and withdrawing to an adjacent chapel, he could envision her changing into velvet robes, the heavier St. Edward's Crown replaced with this lighter version. Her great-great-great-grandmother Victoria I had been a finicky sort, much like herself, and ordered its creation, an accommodation for comfort demanded by her petite size and spare frame.

Albert exhaled a short breath and continued to stare at the display. "Father must deal with his own demons. It's not my place to interfere."

"Nor mine, but I have told him to let these crowns pass him by, directly to you."

The young man's face tightened, but he did not look at her. "Bad advice, Aunt Ellie."

"You're more ready than he will ever be." She paused a moment. "And I can say that because I am his sister."

People began edging toward the exit. The ceremony dedicating the new Jewel House would begin shortly outside on the Tower Green. The Archbishop of Canterbury ambled toward them. He was a short, stern-faced man with a receding hairline.

"This is truly a wonder," the prelate said.

Albert nodded. "Quite right. The designers have done the nation proud."

"Such a shame these are merely recent creations. What a sight the originals and jewels must have been."

What the archbishop observed was true. Nearly everything surrounding them had been crafted in the 19th century or later, at a time when the Crown was forced to rely on wealth and ceremony to generate respect.

“Perhaps the monarchy did itself a great disservice when it chose luxury over power,” Yourstone said.

The archbishop shook his head. “If I recall, Parliament did not give much choice. The time of absolute rule had ended.”

“Nothing ever ends,” he made clear.

The archbishop smiled. “This nation has endured much. These jewels are just one testament to its greatness.”

He wasn’t in the mood for abstractness. “The true test of a monarch is the ability to garner subjects’ respect—without the need for props. It should not be necessary to don a robe, or wear a crown, for the people to offer loyalty. They should do that because a monarch proves worthy of their affection. The sole interest and desire of any king or queen is making sure the nation is well.”

He watched as Albert considered what had been said. This Saxe-Coburg was clearly a product of the modern age. He’d bypassed the customary tour in the military that most royal offspring endured, choosing graduate studies in politics and literature. The time of a king leading troops into battle had long passed. The 21st century demanded far more skills than filling out a uniform, and Albert was intuitive enough to realize that fact. He was the *choicest of the litter*, as *The Times* once described him. *If not born to royalty he would have been a natural politician*, another observer had written.

And he agreed.

Which made this young man most dangerous.

He casually glanced at his watch. “I believe you are needed on the Tower Green.”

Albert nodded, donning the grin photographers had come to love. “Quite right. Shall we exit.”

They said their goodbyes to the archbishop, then left the Jewel House.

Yourstone was not staying for the ceremony, either. He’d come only to make sure that all was in place. So he watched as the royal

contingent headed away, then he followed the pavement around the magnificent White Tower toward one of the gates leading out. A small reviewing stand had been constructed on the Tower Green, near the spot where privileged executions once took place. Two of Henry VIII's wives lost their heads there, as had Lady Jane Grey, the seventeen-year-old who ruled for nine days as queen until Mary, Henry VIII's daughter, had her head removed, too.

English history had turned on this spot.

As it would today.

Eleanor accompanied Albert. But she would depart in a few minutes, too.

Before 7:00 P.M.

His gaze focused on the White Tower. Its 100-foot walls of Kentish and Caen stone formed an uneven quadrilateral, defended on the corners by three square towers and a round one. Once the stone had been whitewashed, giving the building its name, but now it glistened a golden brown with an elegance that perpetual care assured. High above, the Union Jack fluttered in a light breeze. This ancient citadel was the symbol of the nation.

A place of pride and honor.

He walked through the exit gate and headed toward his waiting car.

Acolytes continued to prepare the reviewing stand. A small contingent of press was ready and waiting, including television cameras.

The royals had begun to take their seats.

His gaze shifted from the White Tower toward the northeast.

Another glance at his watch.

6:45 P.M.

The evening sky was calm and clear.

But not for long.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Malone arrived at the Tower of London.

The Royal Navy Westland Lynx chopper had landed in a parking lot a few blocks away and he'd run the distance, arriving just as Lord Yourstone was climbing into a car and speeding away. He'd called William during the flight from Salisbury and the royal secretary was waiting past the ticket stalls, on the concrete path that led into the Tower.

"I've alerted security," William said. "They are standing by for you."

He was winded. "And Eleanor?"

"Still inside. I delayed her departure."

He grabbed his breath. "Then let's go meet the princess."

They hustled toward the entrance gate, where two security men kept watch. Past that barrier and into the Tower Green he spotted a reviewing stand and the podium where Albert would speak. People milled about, some taking their seats, others talking in small groups. No one seemed concerned about a thing. He'd told William to keep a low profile. The press was set up behind a rope barrier with a clear view of everything. Several cameras on tripods were being readied. Mathews had told him where to find the homing device, so he hustled straight for the podium and a silver box with a bow that rested beneath.

"You haven't explained a thing," William said.

Malone laid the box on a nearby chair.

"That is the royal gift," William said. "It is customary to present one at affairs such as this. Albert would have done such during his dedication speech."

He removed the lid and exposed a porcelain crown, Victoria's official regalia painted on one side. He carried it away from the crowd, past where the press had gathered, near one of the building entrances, where he and William stood unseen.

No time for niceties.

He dropped it to the pavement.

The crown shattered, exposing a small black rectangle among the shards. He bent down and retrieved the object.

"What is it?" William asked.

"A homer. Once fired, a missile would have locked on to this and flown straight for it. You never miss with one of these at the other end."

"How did you know where it was?"

He honored his deal with Mathews and said, "I received some good intelligence."

"Does this mean everything is okay?"

He nodded. "Here, at least. But you still have a problem. Who brought the gift here?"

"I would imagine someone on Albert or Eleanor's staff, since it is being offered directly from the queen. I will have to check."

"Do that. Where is the princess?"

He glanced at his watch: 6:50 P.M.

"She and Albert are inside the chapel."

"Take me to her."

They entered the Chapel of St. John the Evangelist. Limestone walls and a tunnel-vaulted nave cast a Norman feel. Eleanor and Albert stood near the altar, among a few rows of empty wooden chairs. No one else was inside. William introduced Malone.

"What is an American agent doing here?" Eleanor asked.

The princess was an extraordinarily beautiful woman. But he reminded himself that she was also devious and dangerous.

"I'm here to stop you and your father-in-law."

"From what?"

He caught the suggested incredulousness as she played her part.

"It's over," he told her.

And he displayed the homer, which he dropped to the floor and crushed with the heel of his shoe.

"Of course, it doesn't matter. The missile was stopped at its launch point. There'll be no attempt on Albert's life."

“My life?”

“It’s a complicated tale,” William said. “Your grandmother would like to explain it all to you. And she will, as soon as you are done here.”

A uniformed officer rushed inside. “Sir, we just received word that a missile has been spotted in the sky. Less than three minutes away and coming in this direction.”

William faced him. “How can that be?”

Malone’s mind raced.

Mathews had sent him here to expose Eleanor. Supposedly, MI6 could not be directly involved. *Since the palace involved you, they trust you.* That had been Mathews’ justification. *The missile has been disarmed. No danger exists to Albert.*

And the homer lay in pieces on the floor.

So—

Then it hit him.

Son of a bitch.

He lunged toward Eleanor and grabbed her by the throat. “Where is it?”

Her eyes went wide as she struggled against him.

Albert moved to help her, but William stopped him.

He tightened his grip. “We could stay here and wait for the thing to arrive. Weren’t you supposed to be gone by now?”

He saw the observation registered.

“My ... purse.”

She carried no purse, and none was inside the chapel.

“Where?”

“Outside ... my secretary has it.”

He released his hold and rushed from the chapel.

Malone scanned the Tower Green, William standing beside him. Two security men kept Eleanor and Albert inside the chapel, behind heavy stone walls. Albert had demanded an explanation, but there was no time. The man who’d provided the first warning stood with them, an ear fob linking him with security command.

“Missile is still inbound,” the young man said. “Two minutes to arrival. Give or take.”

“What is happening?” William asked.

“Eleanor brought a second homer. The real one.”

“There she is,” William said pointing. “Eleanor’s secretary. Her name is Audrey.”

He spotted the older woman, dressed in a dark business ensemble, standing off to the side, holding two purses. They sprinted for her and William ordered her to hand over Eleanor’s purse. She didn’t argue. Malone released its clasp and found another homer inside. Smashing it would certainly prevent the missile from landing at the Tower. But where would the warhead, with no guidance, finally strike the ground? It would fly until its fuel was depleted, then drop onto whatever lay below. Which could still be inside London. He had to make sure that nobody was hurt. His gaze locked on the gate that led from the Tower to the Thames, maybe 200 yards away.

“One minute,” the younger man said. “Still on course. Headed here.”

Malone grabbed the purse and bolted for the gate. His feet pounded the pavement as he kept on a straight line for the river. Inside his head he ticked off the time.

45 seconds.

40 seconds.

He crossed a broad walk and stopped at the bank.

30 seconds.

Or at least he hoped.

Nobody occupied any of the benches. The walkways were likewise deserted, as was the river in either direction for more than a mile. Surely all of those areas had been secured for the royal visit.

20 seconds.

He kept running and dropped the homer into the purse, then, using his momentum, hurled the bundle as far as he could out into the water. It splashed fifty-plus feet out, lingered a moment, then disappeared beneath the surface.

He heard the whine of the missile as it overflowed the Tower and sought its target. He fled the bank and dove behind one of the concrete benches.

The missile arrived, dropping from the sky, splashing into the Thames.

Then exploded.

Yourstone sat in his study, his ears ready to register a low rumble as, across town, the missile slammed into the Tower Green. The resulting fireball should kill not only Albert and the Archbishop of Canterbury, but an assortment of lesser members of the royal family, too. A terrorist, bent on revenge against a Western nation that dared to try his associates, had struck a blow by murdering the second in line to the British throne. Killing Albert instead of Richard would further divert any thought of a royal coup. After all, Richard was still alive. The act would be attributed to senseless violence. Days or weeks later, when Richard abdicated in favor of Eleanor, that would be chalked up to the heir apparent's ineptness—and the second phase of Yourstone's revolution would be complete.

But at 7:00 P.M. nothing was heard.

He checked the television.

No reports of anything unusual.

At 7:30 the house phone rang.

"Lord Yourstone, my task is complete."

Peter Lyon.

Calling here? Not good.

"What happened?"

"The missile was fired but missed the target. I was across the Thames, watching. A man tossed a purse into the river just moments before the missile arrived. It overflowed the Tower and slammed into the water. The explosion occurred beneath the surface. Quite spectacular, actually. A towering plume of water that fell harmlessly back to the surface, doing no harm."

How could that be? Everything had been set up according to plan.

"Please deposit the remainder of the money you owe me."

"You didn't deliver the results promised."

"But I did. The missile was fired, and it arrived. You were the one responsible for securing the homing device."

"I'm not paying you any more money."

"Then I will kill you."

A shiver swept through him.

He reconsidered. "All right. I'll make the transfer."

"Excellent. And by the way, you're fortunate that I don't kill you anyway. You disrupted my plans. I wanted that spectacle. But at the moment, I have a greater need for your money."

He heard a click.

The call ended.

What *had* happened?

He dialed another number, hoping to find out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Malone strapped himself into the helicopter's rear compartment. Professor Goulding sat beside him. An RAF pilot settled in behind the controls and fired up the turbine. A couple of minutes later they lifted off into a frigid, murky Icelandic morning.

A military transport had flown them both from London to a NATO base at Keflavik. En route Malone had spoken on a secure line with Stephanie Nelle, briefing her on what had happened yesterday at the Tower with the missile. He'd even managed a few hours' sleep last night and adjusted his clothing for arctic conditions, donning thermal underwear, thick wool shirt and pants, gloves, and a fur-lined insulated coat with a hood. Goulding had done the same. He'd brought the professor knowing he might need some immediate expertise. The queen had personally requested the journey and Goulding had been anxious to go. On Stephanie's orders he'd revealed to the queen all of what he'd learned about Arthur's grave, but kept MI6's involvement secret.

The official story from yesterday was that a military exercise had gone awry, the armed missile falling into the Thames and exploding underwater.

But Malone knew who was behind it.

Peter Lyon.

Who remained at large.

He had questions for Sir Thomas Mathews, but the head of MI6 was also nowhere to be found. No surprise, really. Considering the implications. He'd reported everything to Stephanie, including all of his suspicions. On the transatlantic flight, Goulding had briefed him on three important details left out of yesterday's talk. The first was a journal, compiled during the Catholic occupation of Iceland, contained within the British Museum.

Irish settlements on Iceland were abandoned when the Vikings arrived in 900 CE, but a few new monasteries appeared in the centuries after, all closed during the Reformation when Danes

banned Catholicism. Before evacuating one of the monasteries near Skriðuklauster, on the eastern coast, an industrious monk had recorded what he'd found among the ancient records. The monk spoke of a cave haunted by a ghost where someone of great importance lay buried. The location was supposedly to the south of a pyramid-shaped peak, beyond a brown-and-red-striped gorge, in the face of a sheer cliff *known only to birds*. The journal was sketchy, reflecting a time when myth and magic predominated, and ordinarily the tale would be summarily dismissed. Yet Goulding had noticed drawings contained within the journal, etchings supposedly seen by locals who'd ventured into the cave, that matched the plates on the ceremonial vessel.

Further confirmation was found in the second revelation.

During World War II the Allies had operated a base on Iceland's rocky east coast. A British colonel assigned there became fascinated with the legend of the haunted cave. His treks into the surrounding mountains were documented in a diary that Mathews had managed to obtain from the soldier's grandnephew. The entries talked of a cave found in the shadow of a pyramid-shaped peak, beyond a brown-and-red-striped gorge. There were drawings and the beginnings of a tunnel map. Unfortunately, the colonel was lost in the mountains, presumably a victim of an avalanche, and never fully documented the extent of his find. Still, his fleeting references were enough to conclude that the legend may perhaps be fact.

The final piece of evidence came to light entirely by chance. A farmer in West Sussex was opening an old well when he discovered that several stones used to shore up its sides were engraved. Mathews learned that Yourstone purchased the stones and realized the inscriptions were 6th century in origin. They talked of a land where the ground erupted with fire, and ice soothed the flames. A faraway place where warriors dwelled, one in particular of great lineage and importance. There was no name mentioned, but the reference to a land of fire and ice seemed further confirmation that the trail for Arthur's grave ended in Iceland.

"Yourstone was searching out there," Goulding said as they glanced through the windows at a sky stained salmon from a

morning sun. "Sir Thomas confirmed that to me."

"But he never learned the location?"

"I don't know. Mathews never told me."

Deep fjords scarred the jagged southeast coastline, which gave way to tussocks of soaking-wet tundra. Sheep tracks were evident through boulder fields. Patches of birch and aspen dotted an otherwise barren landscape. A river flowed north, more a long narrow lake for much of its length, the calm water glittering blue from a glacial tinge.

The pilot kept the chopper trim in the cold air.

Malone said, "I've read some of the Icelandic legends. They talk about gnomes, elves, and dwarves that live in the mountains. Easy to see how a legend about a haunted cave would have survived." He stared down at craters that dotted the barren surface. "This place is like the moon with water."

"There's a saying. If you're lost in the Icelandic forest, just stand up."

A column of vapor rose in the distance.

"Geysers," Goulding said. "Lots of volcanic activity here. Land of Fire and Ice, remember? What a lovely contradiction."

Off to the west glaciers dominated, one having withdrawn its icy paw and left a black gravel plain veined with verdant moss. And somewhere out there was a pyramid-shaped peak near a brown-and-red-striped gorge. Unfortunately, from the looks of things there were a lot of pyramid-shaped peaks. All of the slopes were tall and jagged.

The chopper banked right and lost altitude to escape an approaching patch of dense clouds. They cleared a short peak and Malone saw a village ahead, its buildings of wood, dry stone, turf walls, and corrugated iron roofs. Sheep roamed its perimeter. A group of reindeer clambered up a nearby slope. The pilot angled his approach away from both flocks. Goulding had learned of this locale from the World War II journal.

"This is the closest settlement to the area you mentioned," the pilot said through their headsets. "I'm going to land."

He settled the chopper onto a grassy field and they climbed out into the frigid air, quickly zipping their coats. It was a five-minute walk to the village. A paved road bisected the town neatly in half. There was a variety of stores, one a rock shop that displayed semiprecious stones in its front window, another a general store full of merchandise. A wooden church stood at the end of the long street. A woman wrapped in a wool coat was strolling down the street away from the church. She approached the general store and inserted a key into the lock.

He led Goulding over and did the introductions, learning that the store was hers.

"I heard the helicopter a few minutes ago," the woman said in clear English, brushing brown, gray-streaked hair away from her eyes. She was middle-aged with a face round and red as a beet.

"This is going to sound a little strange," he said, "but in the mountains, are there any peaks nearby shaped like a pyramid?"

"Many."

"Here's another stupid question. How about brown-and-red-striped gorges?"

She smiled. "Too many to even count."

He told her about the legend of the haunted cave.

"Are you treasure hunters?" the woman asked.

"Not at all," Malone said.

"The others said the same thing, and I thought they were lying, too." Her declaration carried contempt.

He wanted to know, "What others?"

"The men up in the mountains." She pointed to the west toward snowcapped peaks. "They said they were rock hounds. Looking for jasper and obsidian."

"How long have they been there?" he asked.

"About a month. They come down every few days for supplies."

He was now interested. "What made you think they were lying?"

"Too anxious. The hikers and scholars take their time. These men were in a hurry." She paused. "They stay in a hurry."

He was beginning to appreciate the woman's perception. "You know where they are up there?"

“One of the herders told me they were beyond the midge lake, above the Álar basin. The hills there are hollow. Lots of caves and tunnels. But there’s nothing there. People have roamed them for centuries.”

“Did you tell them that?” Malone asked.

She studied him with a rapt expression. “As I’m telling you.” She hesitated a moment. “Another reason they’re treasure hunters.”

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“They didn’t believe me, either.”

Half an hour of discussion was needed before she warmed to them. It helped that Goulding seemed familiar with the region and understood some of the local peculiarities. A hundred dollars U.S. secured the rental of her Range Rover for the day.

They headed off on the only highway from town.

The roadway cleaved a canyon through red rock walls that displayed a geological layer cake of history. The peaks and hills beyond were molded in rust and yellow hues, dusted with snow. Steep remnants of ancient volcanoes drew their attention.

The absence of ice caught Malone’s interest. “For somewhere so cold, there’s little moisture.”

“I’ve always thought the name strange, too,” Goulding said. “Iceland. Yet there’s almost none here. The air’s too dry.”

The shopkeeper from the village told them about abandoned sulfur mines, formed when steam bubbles lifted lava through rock and hardened before shattering, resulting in a maze of passages and chambers. And though all of the mines were now gone, their remnants remained.

They followed the directions she provided, the road progressively worsening until it was more gravel path than highway. He estimated they were a good thirty miles from the village, isolated, no sign of anyone or anything.

“According to what she told us,” Goulding said, “it’s a hike up through those hills just ahead.”

Malone stopped the vehicle, and they climbed out onto a lava flow colonized by lichens. Dwarf willows hugged the black earth in scattered patches. Tundra spread off toward the north, a snowfield to the west.

He led the way up a slope.

Hiking this ground was like walking on ball bearings and he was grateful for the boots the military had recommended earlier. They were looking for a *nemeton*, the Celtic word for a sacred place in a remote locale. The ancient manuscripts referred to *door mountain*, noting its location in reference to a pyramid-shaped peak. Mountain ranges pierced the sky in a variety of shapes, basalt, tuff, and rhyolite clearly mangled over time. He realized that what was pyramid-shaped in the 6th century might no longer exist—the forces of vulcanism, ice, and plate motion surely altering everything around him.

He glanced at his watch. 9:45 AM.

It felt and looked like 5:00 P.M., especially since he was working on only a few hours' sleep.

Then he saw it.

On a ridge half a mile away, before a black opening in the sheer rock face, he saw a campsite of three oversized tents. He studied the peak above and noted that it was indeed triangular—a crooked pyramid, but nonetheless a pyramid. He spotted no one near or around the tents.

“Let’s approach from the far side,” he said, gesturing toward a sparse clump of ash trees.

“You concerned about something?”

He detected apprehension in the question. “Are you okay with this?”

“I’m not an agent, but I did serve four years in the infantry.”

He laid a hand on the professor’s shoulder. “Not to worry. Just follow my lead.”

The camp was deserted.

A low methodic hum from one of the tents and two black cables snaking a path into the mountain signaled a generator. An assortment of footsteps were framed by scattered snow, all leading into the mountain. The entrance tunnel was surprisingly wide, which helped with his distaste for enclosed spaces. Lightbulbs tacked to the rock dissolved the darkness, revealing rough walls, sharp in places, the floor a mixture of sand and gravel.

"This chute is natural," Goulding whispered. "From lava eons ago."

They exited into a room about forty feet square with a high, vaulted ceiling. At the far end, illuminated by a stand of halogen lights, was what appeared to be an altar, a rectangular slab of blackened stone supported by two stone pillars, the structure elevated by a platform hewn from the rock. Goulding was drawn to the altar and began to focus on knotwork designs behind and above on the chamber walls.

"Celtic. The symbol of man's eternal spiritual growth. But there. See it? Overlays of Christianity."

Spaced behind the altar were carvings of a man, lion, calf, and eagle.

"Man symbolizes Matthew. The lion, Mark. The calf, Luke. And an eagle, John. The four evangelists. Pagan caves like this eventually became churches."

A cross caught Malone's attention, in a shadowy niche off to the right. A circle filled its center, the lower arm longer and wider than its two sides. The circle was quartered and ornamented, giving depth and definition to an otherwise flat face.

"It's Celtic," Goulding said.

His nerves were alert. Where were the men who'd staked out the camp? Then he noticed something. Across the chamber, on the rock floor. He stepped over and bent down. Dark splotches. Dried. Hard to tell.

"Is it blood?" Goulding asked.

"Could be."

Two gauges marred the sandy floor, about a foot apart, leading in a straight line into another tunnel, as if something had been

dragged, heels down.

He found his Magellan Billet-issued Beretta.

“Stay behind me,” he said to Goulding.

“Should I be worried now?”

“Good question.”

They entered the far tunnel. More bulbs lit the way. The passage wound a path with no offshoots until ending at another chamber, this one smaller than the first but nonetheless Celtic—the same knotwork designs dotted the stone face. On the far wall, a bulb illuminated writing.

EFFIGIEM CHRISTI QUI TRANSIS PRONUS HONORA—ANNO MCCCVI “You who are hurrying past, honor the image of Christ—AD 1306,” Goulding said, reading the words.

The tracks in the sand moved through the chamber and out another of the three exit tunnels. The same one where the cables fed. They followed, the new passage narrower than the first two, its walls sharper and lighter in tone. Bulbs were sparse, about thirty feet apart. The air was colder, truly like a tomb, their condensed breath leading the way. They passed openings that led into the pitch dark. Man-made niches appeared periodically in the rock face. Latin inscriptions were chiseled into the stone of a few.

The dual tracks continued ahead.

Was he being led?

The tunnel snaked a path deeper into the mountain. Their level changed twice, and the route rose steadily. The passage ended in another cathedral-like chamber, this one with a towering ceiling of jagged rock cast in a bluish tint by steaming halogen floods. A stone plinth dominated the center, about twenty feet square. Celtic symbols decorated the edges, along with more Latin letters.

But it was the bodies that drew their attention. Three men. Dressed in heavy coats and boots. Bullet holes to the head.

“Now you can be worried,” he said.

But he wasn't surprised. The mess had to be cleaned. Nothing could be left.

“That’s horrible,” Goulding said.

Thanks to the cold, it was hard to tell how long they’d been dead.

He turned his attention to the chamber, concerned that they may not be alone. But they were too far involved now to turn back.

Had that been the idea?

“Is this Arthur’s grave?” he asked.

Goulding knelt before the plinth. “The writing talks of Christ, the Virgin, and the sanctity of a sovereign. But Celts never would have buried a chieftain in this manner. Their graves are more personal. Intimate.”

His internal clock told him they’d left Keflavik three hours ago.

“Look over there,” the professor said.

He saw it, too.

Another power cable, disappearing into a wall cleave. They moved closer and examined the exit, then he led the way inside. Twenty feet and they came to a man-made doorway, created from block façades carved into the rock. Celtic designs decorated its base.

The chamber beyond was lit.

They entered.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Yourstone made his way into the castle. He'd been summoned earlier, surprised that the queen was now west of London, at Windsor. Once the massive fortress had been her favorite retreat, but as Parkinson's slowly consumed her muscles it had become increasingly difficult for her to travel in comfort. Nonetheless, for some reason the court had fled the city and was now in residence at a place royalty had continuously occupied since the time of William the Conqueror.

He was still dismayed over the events of yesterday. News reports continued to speak of an errant military drone plunging into the Thames. The military had accepted full responsibility. Some members of Parliament were calling for an investigation.

But he doubted that would occur.

Whoever was controlling the spin of this story would squelch any official inquiries. Something bad was happening. He needed details. But Eleanor had not returned to the town house, and his attempts to telephone the voice he'd many times spoken with had been futile. Andrew had proven the most annoying. Unaware of the connection between the missile and Albert, his son had pressed for the details of how he would become king.

But there was none to tell.

"Lord Yourstone."

He stopped at the mention of his name and turned to see Richard strolling down a carpet runner that bisected the wide loggia. The prince was dressed casually, as there was no danger of a prying press here.

"I need to speak with you."

Concern filled the heir's face.

He was led into a nearby parlor, the room paneled with beveled glass windows. Richard closed the door behind them.

Yourstone wanted to know, "What is this about? I was summoned here with no notice of why."

“You are to tell me the truth. I will not tolerate any lies. Did you conspire to murder Albert?”

The question confirmed his fears of what had failed at the Tower. “Are you mad?”

“Do not anger me. Answer the question.”

He grabbed his riddled composure and calmed himself. “Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Mother believes you are conspiring with my sister to usurp the Crown. I cannot believe that you would ever do such a thing. Tell me, please, that it is not so.”

Richard was being his usual naïve self. But he had to learn what he could. So he asked, “You must tell me what is going on. It sounds as if the queen has begun to lose her senses.”

“She’s intent on the fact you were involved yesterday with an attempt on Albert’s life. Something about that missile in the Thames. Albert himself believes it, as well.”

“Albert is here?”

Richard shook his head. “He left a short while ago. To a place of safety.”

“You cannot possibly believe I would do anything to harm your son. I myself was at the Tower yesterday.”

“That’s why I wanted to speak with you prior to your seeing the queen. I wanted to hear your explanation myself.”

“What of your father? Does he believe the same?”

“Absolutely.”

His mind raced with possibilities. He needed to speak with Eleanor. But his thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the door. Victoria was wheeled into the room by a uniformed attendant. Eleanor entered behind them. The attendant withdrew and shut the door.

The queen faced her son. “I told you to escort Lord Yourstone to me.”

Richard straightened like a scolded schoolboy. “I wanted to speak with him first.”

“Will you ever learn to follow instructions?”

The prince stared at Yourstone. "She wanted me to deceive you. To lead you astray. To help elicit a confession. But I will not be a party to such folly. I do not believe that you are capable of this treachery."

"You are a blithering fool," Victoria said. "And your sister is a usurper."

"I resent that," Eleanor said.

"You are an ambitious, dangerous woman. Both of you should be grateful that your father is not here. His anger was too intense. I asked him to allow me to handle this alone."

"What does it matter?" Eleanor asked. "Soon you will be in St. Albert's Chapel, entombed with the rest of the Saxe-Coburgs."

"I may disappoint you."

"I don't think so."

"You are as evil as your brother is stupid."

"I admit to nothing." Eleanor stepped across the room toward the rays of midday sun pouring through the windows.

"You don't have to admit to a thing," the queen said. "The proof was found in your purse."

"I doubt you will implicate your own daughter in a plot to overthrow the Crown."

"What are you saying, Ellie?" Richard asked.

"Mother is right. You are stupid. You have nearly cost us all."

"Did you attempt to kill Albert?"

Eleanor said nothing.

"You would shed Saxe-Coburg blood? My son's blood?"

"You would destroy our reputation?" she fired back. "Our family's honor?"

"My son is more important."

"Since when, Richard? You consistently avoid him. Your public comments are nothing like a doting father. You actually seem to resent Albert, as the press has repeatedly observed. Since when has your son meant anything to you? Were you thinking of him while bedding Lady Bryce?"

Her brother's eyes flared with rage. For an instant Yourstone saw a flash of the Scottish heritage their father had bestowed upon them.

Then confusion reappeared.

"You may think me ignorant," Victoria said to her daughter. "Feeble and not of sound mind. But you are wrong. I will have you, and Yourstone, prosecuted and jailed for treason."

"You will do nothing," Eleanor declared.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because of Albert. You want him to be king. For the people to learn that a royal sibling plotted the overthrow of the monarchy would forever end the Saxe-Coburgs. Thanks to Dickie, here, our tolerance level among the public is virtually nonexistent. No. You will do nothing that jeopardizes the succession to Albert."

The queen shifted in the wheelchair. "Your father wishes never again to lay eyes upon you."

"If that is my only punishment, I can endure the loss."

"And you will be removed from the civil list. No more money."

She shrugged. "My husband is wealthy."

"Your in-laws are traitors."

"But that, too, will remain our secret," Yourstone said. "Now, won't it?"

The queen said nothing, but the look of contempt on her face was piercing. Richard retreated to the far side of the room.

Something else Sun Tzu had taught 2,500 years ago occurred to him. *Know the enemy and know yourself and in a hundred battles you will never be defeated.*

So true.

He was home free.

"Richard, push me from this room before I vomit," the queen said. "You can perhaps be forgiven for your idiocy. Your soul is totally without malice. But this devil, your sister, and her traitor of a father-in-law cannot."

The prince grasped the wheelchair.

"You will both remove yourself from the palace immediately and neither of you will ever set foot here again."

"Until you're dead," Eleanor said.

"No, Ellie," Richard said.

The prince's eyes focused tight.

“That order will remain in my reign, and in my son’s and his children’s thereafter. That much I swear will be done.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Malone stared into the lit room, his gaze focusing on what looked like an enormous high-backed couch. He stepped close and caressed the top edge. "Bronze?"

"Celts were good with metal," Goulding said.

Its blackened face was embossed with dancing figures and horses pulling carts. The workmanship was intricate and had survived intact.

Lying across the couch were the remains of a skeleton.

From end to end the figure appeared about six feet tall. Only bones remained. Bits of cloth lay scattered among the bones—perhaps, he thought, burial robes long gone to dust. A gold ornament rested where the neck had once existed. Malone suspended his hand above the band. The diameter spread the width of his extended fingers. "He was a big man."

Malone knelt before the bier and noticed that it rested on eight metal statues, each a woman, bare-breasted, atop a unicycle, the wheel of each cycle forming a caster. The design was ingenious and sophisticated. He traced the outline of lettering with his gloved hands.

"Latin," Goulding said. "It's a hope the deceased finds the other world and is happy. Only leaders were given this honor."

He studied the rest of the room. Dark shadows signaled more objects. On the far side, to the right of the entrance, sat a wagon made of what appeared to be wood. He stepped toward it and saw iron wheels festooned with bronze chains and figurines. Like the couch, the workmanship was astonishing.

"Probably ash, elm, or maple," Goulding said. "I've read about these. Seen drawings. Bits and pieces have been found. But nothing has survived whole. This is quite an archaeological discovery."

The cart bed was piled with bowls, plates, platters, and knives.

"What's the point of the tableware?" he asked.

“Necessities of the afterlife. Celts believed in an afterworld. Death was but a brief pause in an endless cycle of rebirth. So their dead were equipped for the long voyage. The grander the deceased, the richer the grave.” The professor pointed. “Bowls and plates were for eating, knives for hunting.” Two rows of ornamented drinking horns hung from iron chains. One horn was larger than the other six. “A mighty cup for Arthur, the rest for his companions.”

“Cup of what?”

“Over there.”

In the remaining corner sat a bronze cauldron. Its handles were crafted as lions, but the images were distorted, more caricatures than faithful animal representations. He followed Goulding over to it. Sediment filled the inside, black and hard as stone.

“Fermented honey mead. A common drink for Celts in the 6th century. The drinking horns would have been used to empty this cauldron. Can’t go to the afterworld thirsty.”

He knelt down and studied the odd-shaped lions.

“Celtic representations,” Goulding said. “There were no lions in Britain. They would have learned about them from Romans. These are the artist’s imagination at work.”

“You know this stuff.”

“It’s my world. Finding a tomb, like this, is the coup of a lifetime.”

He noticed etchings in the side of the cauldron.

Goulding bent down close. “Incredible. It’s a battle history. Mount Baden, Cat Coit Celidon, City of Legion. Those are all places where Arthur supposedly fought Saxons. The last line speaks of *gueith Camlann*, the Strife of Camlann, where history notes Arthur supposedly died. Incredible. This is his obituary, 6th-century style.”

Malone noticed the intricate carving of a horse, a warrior perched on top, his chest protected by a cuirass, the head helmeted. The right hand wielded a sword, the left a lance. The man sat tall atop the animal, ready for a fight.

“Arthur would have fought on horseback,” Goulding said.

On a slab beside the cauldron lay more items. Buckles of bronze. A sword hilt and scabbard embellished with blackened silver.

Armlets decorated with elaborate filigree. Thumb rings of enameled copper and tin. A boar's tusk carved with more scenes from battle.

"His things?" he asked.

"It was tradition to bury a warrior with his possessions. They would be needed in the afterworld."

Porticos notched the wall, and a few contained the remnants of skulls.

"Defeated enemies," Goulding noted. "It was a sign of respect to bury their skulls with the dead warrior."

A cross filled one niche, fashioned from stone, its face divided into clear panels, each a maze of animals and knotwork designs. A burst of light caught Malone's gaze, and he stepped close to see the center filled with a crystal the size of his fist.

"Diamond?" he asked.

Goulding shook his head. "Celts would not have known diamonds. Quartz of some sort, more than likely. Oh ... my."

He caught the surprise in the voice and saw Goulding heading for a container lying on the rock floor. It was shaped like a house with a gabled roof and ridgepoles attached to the crown. A band adorned with a beast head wrapped the eaves and sides. Its exterior appeared a combination of bronze and silver inlaid with gems.

"It's a *cumdach*. Portable shrine. They were used to store books and manuscripts. I've only seen drawings of them. Yet here's one in absolute pristine condition."

Malone studied the construction. "It appears it'll take us both to open it."

"Is that wise?"

"We're not on an archaeological dig. We need to see what's inside."

He gripped one set of the ridgepoles and Goulding clasped the other. They lifted in unison and the lid came free, sending a cascade of sand showering off as they laid the gabled top on the ground. The interior was lined with more bronze, the space empty save for a single volume, which measured about six by eight inches and two inches thick.

He carefully swiped the air above the book and shooed away centuries of dust. Faded writing could be seen.

DE EXCIDIO ET CONQUESTO BRITANNIE

“On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain. This is a Gildas manuscript.”

He listened as Goulding told him about Gildas Sapiens, who lived in Britain and died somewhere around 572 CE—but not before penning a scathing attack on his contemporary churchmen and political rulers.

“His words were a history of post-Roman, pre-St. Augustine Britain, a clear denunciation of secular and ecclesiastical authority. Most historians, though, regard his observations as more fiction than fact. But they remain the only firsthand account of 6th-century Britain.”

He caught Goulding’s excitement.

“There are about seventy editions of his work still around. I’ve seen the one in the British Museum. It’s a 10th-century handwritten copy of an 8th-century text.”

“Double hearsay?”

“Exactly. Who knows if it’s accurate. It’s also badly burned in places, and less than half the pages are legible.”

“You think this is an original?”

“If this tomb was fashioned in the 6th century, it’s entirely possible. Gildas lived during Arthur’s time. He was an ardent observer, a political critic at a time when criticism was not tolerated. He was learned in Latin and could read and write.” Goulding caressed the top sheet, as if carefully probing a sore. “Vellum. Much better than parchment or papyrus, and this giant refrigerator has preserved it. So, yes, Mr. Malone, this could be an original.”

“Go ahead.”

“Disturb it?”

“Why not? You know you want to. Frankly, I’m curious, too.”

Goulding reverently lifted the book from its container, balancing it on one palm, studying the pages, which rested on top of one

another with no binding. A quick count revealed about sixty, and the vellum was waffled from time. The professor laid the bundle across one corner of the chest and carefully lifted off the top page, using both hands from underneath, cradling the sheet before setting it aside. Each one possessed a creamy white patina, an almost unused look, the writing faded to a light gray, the penmanship small and tight, words running the entire length with no paragraphs or punctuation.

Malone knew about Dark Age manuscripts. Writing materials were scarce, so every bit of surface was used with no margins.

“Can you translate?”

Goulding read in silence. “It’s Latin. But readable.” A pause. “It’s a bloody record of Arthur’s life. I’ve read some of the other Gildas translations. Nothing like this was ever part of those interpolations.”

“Maybe because you’re reading the true edition.”

“There’s actually another explanation. Gildas was the son of Caw, king of Scocie, one of twenty-three siblings. His brothers were, to a man, warriors. One in particular, Huail, plagued Arthur by pillaging and burning villages. Finally, Arthur pursued and killed Huail. When Gildas was informed of the murder he reportedly threw into the sea all of his writings that mentioned Arthur.”

“Which explains why there are, to this day, no contemporary accounts of Arthur’s life. The only reporter of the time purged the record.”

“But this manuscript survived,” he said. “And if it’s authentic, this represents the proof historians have long sought regarding Arthur.”

Goulding returned his attention to the words, lifting off more sheets as he scanned the pages. “It’s decipherable. The punctuation is nonexistent. So are paragraphs. But I can adjust the prose. Listen to this.”

A summer’s night brought a gathering of nobles in Wessex forest, near the river. They sat upon a litter of straw and the fleece of wolves and dogs. Cauldrons and spits overflowed with meat and children served

elders. The bravest of warriors, as was tradition, received the finest portion of flesh. Arthur led the talk, though he was not a man given to stories. His mustache hung long and thick and milk soaked the mane, at times making it difficult for him to eat. There was laughter from his attempts to keep the hairs clean, which he did not seem to mind. He neither rejoiced in victory nor was downcast in defeat. Both states be but temporary, he was given to say. His was of only one purpose. To rid the land of Saxons. On this night he spoke of the battles at the River Glein, three at the River Dubglas, and another at the River Bassas. At another nearly a thousand Saxons fell in one day from one charge, he alone standing at the end. There is no doubt that Saxons fear him. His voice echoes of a man who long ago abandoned family for the sake of nation. When one of the nobles challenged his account of a battle he was quick to confront the objector. Their disagreement led to combat and he drove the breath from his challenger with a thrust of his sword. All agreed the fight was fair, the insult satisfied. After, he sat alone and no attempt was made to include him in conversation. His solitude stands him apart, but also makes others follow. He is the will of Briton.

“Amazing,” Goulding said. “Absolutely amazing. Some of this can be found in scattered references we have to Arthur in other writings. But here is a complete, contemporary, historical text. Finally, Arthur is no more the exclusive province of poets.”

Goulding scanned more pages and read aloud.

Warriors gathered in the Gorsedd woods, crowded around a slab of oak shaved flat by swords. Mead was drunk to continued victory. Arthur was there but did not participate. He stood alone and watched with silent satisfaction. One of the nobles approached him with a full tankard and he accepted the offer. When asked what troubled him, he said their fight was in vain. He foresaw a day when Saxons ruled their land. When Britons will speak in the rough Saxon language. He said a people without language is only half a nation. To be forced to learn another's tongue was the worst badge of conquest. He suddenly stopped speaking. Cuckoos sang from their perches. A group of calves with their mothers grazed in a

distant field. The harvest would soon be ready, he finally said. Winter was coming not only to the land, but to the people. His fondest desire was to be in the afterworld when that happened.

“He sounds like a patriot,” Malone said.

“He sounds human. A man fighting for a cause, like a million other revolutionaries that came before and after him. He fought Saxons, but eventually the Saxons, in 1066, battled invading Normans. Those Normans and Saxons became Englishmen and eventually repelled the Spanish and the Germans, surely echoing the same sentiment.”

Malone glanced back toward the doorway. They needed to leave. The bodies still bothered him. Those men were killed for a reason, and he was beginning to understand why. “Any more interesting parts.”

Goulding was already lifting more pages, scanning the prose.

“Here’s a reference to Huail, Gildas’ brother.”

Caw of Prydein possessed two sons of many. I being one, another was Huail ap Caw. Huail sought the love and affection of one of Arthur’s mistresses. A day occurred when Arthur was waiting for Huail at his mistress’ house. There was much discussion between the two before swords were drawn. Huail landed a blow to Arthur’s knee. To save himself the humiliation of being bested, Arthur agreed to a reconciliation provided Huail did not taunt the blow to others. Arthur returned to Caerhass and was nursed back to health, though he walked with a slight lameness whilst he lived. Much later Arthur fell in love with a woman in Rhuthun. He visited her dressed in the clothes of a girl. Huail was there and discovered him playing dance amongst the girls and recognized him from the lameness. “The dancing was good were it not for the knee,” Huail stated. Arthur heard the insult and knew the words were directed to him. Huail was later fetched to Arthur and questioned on the breaking of his pledge. He was then taken to the town market and his head cut off on a stone lying on the ground. Because of this deed the rock is called the Stone of Huail.

Malone glanced again out the crypt's open doorway.

"The text goes on and notes that Gildas never particularly cared for his brother. He does not seem to fault Arthur for what happened, but he does note that people did not approve of the execution. This is not the vengeful historian I've read about in other accounts. And Arthur seems more tyrannical, fanatical. Given to impulse. Not to mention cross-dressing."

Which was fascinating. "You think that's true?"

"Hard to say. But, why not?"

Why not, indeed.

Goulding's attention returned to the pages.

"This passage talks of how Arthur fell at the Battle of Camlann. He gave orders that he be taken to Venodocia so that he might sojourn on the Isle of Avalon for the sake of peace and for the easing of his wounds."

"Where is Venodocia?" Malone asked.

"It was later called Gwynedd. A kingdom that spread across North Wales. This confirms Avalon was in that locale."

On arriving in Avalon, Arthur became aware that his wounds were fatal. Three bishops were summoned to administer last rites. In time Arthur died, his body embalmed in balsam and myrrh. He was taken to a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Its doorway would not accept the funeral pyre so the bishops performed the rites inside while the body waited out. A storm arrived driven by a thick mist. When the rain stopped and the mist cleared, Arthur's body was gone. It was learned later that the nobles had met. There was much discussion concerning Arthur's passage to the afterworld. Priests made the final decision. They knew a place where he may rest without risk of Saxon desecration. A faraway land with fire, ice, and huge creatures that dwelled in the sea. A place where it was possible to become close to God, where he would dwell until needed again.

"Here," Goulding said. "They put him here 1,500 years ago."

A few moments of silence passed, as they both realized where they were standing.

"You think Yourstone found this place?" Goulding asked.

"Yep. Then somebody else found it after him."

And he knew who.

"The manuscript is priceless," Goulding said. "More valuable than anything in this tomb."

"Words always are."

In the light he noticed an image on the front of the *cumdach*. He knelt and saw the outline of a man etched into the metal. He was thick-featured and cast a look of unbending determination. A scar ran from the hairline to the corner of the mouth. The eyes, captured so well by the artist, seemed pools of anger. Something uncompromising could be seen in the expression, a message from the pinched lips and tight jaw that made clear there would never be subservience. Not from this man. The dress was the uniform of a Roman emperor—knee-length tunic and breeches, leather jerkin with metal-studded fringe across the abdomen, a cloak pinned at the shoulders with a brooch.

"Celtic warriors aped Roman parade dress," Goulding said.

"Is it him?" he asked.

"That we'll never know. But this is good enough for me." The professor pointed to the base of the reliquary where a simple label was inscribed.

ARTVRIVS. SUPERBUS TYRANNUS.

"Arthur. Outstanding Ruler."

"We have to leave," he said. "Bring the book."

He stepped over to the wagon and retrieved two of the bronze bowls. He had Goulding lay the pages into one, then he clamped the other on top, binding them together with his belt. They then hustled through the doorway and carefully made their way back through the mountain, outside, following the power cables and lightbulbs.

But the campsite was no more.

All three tents were charred and burned.

The equipment remained, the generator still working, but nothing now shielded anything from the weather, which had turned wet, bitter cold, and windy. The sun was gone, dreary and stained behind a mask of freezing mist.

“What’s happening?” Goulding asked.

“Let’s take a look for the Range Rover.”

They hustled past the camp, toward where the vehicle was parked.

An explosion rocked the silence.

They whirled and saw the entrance to the cave being sealed by an avalanche of rock and debris.

“Mr. Malone, what is this?”

He knew. “No need to go look for the Rover. It’s gone.” And the shopkeeper back in the village wasn’t going to like that. Whoever killed the three men had used the time they’d spent exploring the tomb to ready this surprise.

Apparently, they needed to die. Out here. Naturally. Which would not take long. Sure, they both wore coats and gloves, but prolonged exposure to these elements would mean certain death.

His internal clock, which had never failed him, told him they’d been gone right at four hours.

He yanked up the hood of his parka.

Goulding did the same.

“Keep those pages dry,” he said.

“What are we going to do?”

He led the way back to the clump of ash trees they’d used for cover earlier. As Goulding had first moved toward the camp, Malone had hesitated and laid his watch at the base of one of the trees.

He bent down and retrieved it.

“Standard issue for the Magellan Billet. Contains a GEOSAT transceiver. I told our pilot to wait four hours then start a search pattern.”

He could see that Goulding was relieved.

So was he, actually.

“Who wants us dead?” the professor asked.

“You’d be surprised.”

In the distance he caught a glint of light in the dim sky. Slowly, the outline of the Sea King Commando chopper became clear.

Right on time.

“You knew there’d be trouble?” Goulding asked.

“It was a good bet. But we had to come for a look.”

He saw the professor agreed. “That we did. Thanks for bringing me along.”

The helicopter settled nearby, atop more rhyolite formations. They ran through the wash of the blades, and he allowed Goulding to enter the passenger compartment first.

He followed.

But as he did, he hoped no one was watching.

His newfound status as a corpse would come in handy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Yourstone slammed the door to his study. The past few hours had been the worst of his life. He'd left Windsor and ridden back to London in silence, heading first to his office at Parliament. He'd felt safe there, though he realized that his time as an influential member of that body was drawing to a close.

Nothing had gone right.

And he couldn't count on Peter Lyon.

No. This problem was all his.

He stepped to the bar and poured himself a whiskey, downing the drink in one swallow, then made himself another. This seemed like a good night to be roaring plastered.

He reclined on the sofa.

The door to the study opened and his son stormed into the room.

"My God, Father. What have you done?"

He was definitely not in the mood for prattling. "Leave me alone."

Andrew rounded the couch and faced him.

He did not rise or even look up.

"You cannot dismiss me."

He gulped another swallow of whisky. He was going to need fortification. "If I could only be so lucky."

"You have destroyed us. I spoke to Eleanor. She told me what happened with the queen."

"I no longer give a bloody damn what you think or care."

"Our title could be ended. My inheritance. Gone."

He downed the rest of the whiskey and rose for more.

His inheritance.

The moron.

Yourstone had enjoyed the sweet nectar from a poisonous tree. He'd bedded a princess and plotted to overthrow two legitimate heirs to the Crown. He'd even come close to making his son king. What did any inheritance matter?

He splashed more whiskey into the tumbler.

"You seem unconcerned," Andrew said. "Don't you even realize what has happened?"

He pushed past his son and settled back on the couch. He actually wished he had another mistress. Her flat would be an excellent place to spend the next few days. But he'd concentrated all his attention on Eleanor of late, trying desperately to impregnate her.

"Leave me alone," he said. "Go and bed one of your tarts. Pretend to be a man. I hope whoever she may be likes her men on the weak side."

He downed more whiskey.

"You are an abomination. A disgusting monster."

He saluted his glass as the young man stood before him. "To me. The abomination."

He bottomed out the tumbler and enjoyed the feeling that burned a path to his stomach.

His son rushed from the room.

Good riddance.

Malone stuffed a pistol between his belt and shirt. He wore a dark jacket, cords, and a brown shirt, his feet wrapped in black Nikes. He climbed from the car into a night made soft by a half-moon and a plenitude of stars. He was parked down the street from Nigel Yourstone's Belgravia house. He'd waited until darkness before moving, having learned all about Victoria's confrontation at Windsor with Eleanor and Yourstone. But if he'd guessed right, and he was certain he had, Yourstone was facing something far worse than a royal wrath.

He shut the car door and walked down the sidewalk.

Lights burned inside the residence.

Yourstone enjoyed another whiskey and then decided on his course of action. It would be easy to simply take a revolver from his desk and blow his brains out. That was precisely what two great-uncles

had done when faced with financial ruin 200 years ago. Every family had its share of weaklings, men and women remembered more for their shortcomings than their accomplishments. But he was not about to resign his fate to such dismal depths, always having his name preceded by *poor*, and succeeded by *remember him, such a shame what happened, killing himself like that*. He would not give anyone the satisfaction of feeling sorry for him. Instead, several million pounds waited on deposit in Swiss and Cayman Island accounts. Money he'd long ago siphoned from his tax obligations and businesses. Thanks to the Falklands War, the Argentines still hated anything and everything British. No extradition treaty existed between the two countries, no matter the crime.

He could actually live a comfortable life there.

He stepped to the desk, unlocked the lower left drawer, and found the passbooks for the two foreign accounts. Upstairs in the bedroom safe was 50,000 pounds. Money he always kept on hand. He located the telephone directory and reached for the phone. A moment later a reservationist for British Airways came on the line and told him there was a flight to Caracas, Venezuela, leaving in five hours. From there he could grab a connection to Buenos Aires.

Perfect.

He booked a first-class ticket, then headed for the hallway and upstairs.

Before reaching the study doors, the panels swung inward.

Had his son returned?

He hadn't the time to dawdle over more of his nonsense. But the figure in the doorway was that of a silver-haired man, clean-shaven, dressed in a three-piece suit, his right hand gripping a peculiar walking stick, the left holding a revolver.

Sir Thomas Mathews.

"I heard your conversation with the reservationist. Argentina is lovely this time of year."

The spymaster blocked the doorway.

"Why haven't you answered my calls?" Yourstone asked. "I've tried reaching you since yesterday."

Mathews motioned with the gun. A sound suppressor extended the snout a few extra inches. "I thought we'd speak in person. Have a seat."

He decided not to argue and retreated back across the room, sitting behind his desk.

Mathews casually examined the bookcases. "Your choice of reading is admirable. The classics, mythology, St. Augustine. Quite a variety."

"My ancestors were well versed."

The older man chuckled. "You aristocrats aggravate me so. I would rather deal with terrorists and fanatical avengers, like Peter Lyon, than the blue blood of old money."

"You didn't seem to mind using me for your purposes."

"Quite right. I never minded a moment."

It had been Mathews who'd provided nearly all of the surveillance information on Richard. The Secret Intelligence Service possessed resources no one could match. Monitoring mobile phone calls had been easy for them. Keeping tabs on Richard simple. Secrecy a matter of course.

"What are you holding there?" Mathews asked.

He displayed the bankbooks.

"I'm familiar with your offshore accounts. Money supposedly safely hidden behind aliases."

He shrugged. "It's the way of the world."

Mathews studied more of the leather volumes on the black wood shelves, and Yourstone used the moment to ease open one of the desk drawers.

Oiled ball bearings made not a sound.

The gun's grip came into view.

Malone bypassed the town house's front entrance. William had explained the building's geography, so he knew Yourstone's study was located on the ground floor, facing west.

He rounded the corner and headed for the rear.

A swish of leaves from the treetops, thanks to a stiff breeze, produced the only sound disturbing the chilly night. Not much car traffic here. He climbed a wrought-iron fence and threaded a path through a back garden, weaving among ranks of roses and clipped yews.

Movement caught his eye from an alcove.

A glass pane in a door window had been shattered, and lace curtains danced through the opening. He removed the gun from his belt and trotted to the porch. Approaching slowly, he could see through the curtains that the door led into a kitchen. The floor was a checkerboard of black and white tile. Bright lights highlighted an array of stainless-steel appliances. Splotches on the floor caught his gaze.

Blood.

He tried the knob.

Open.

He swung the door inward and stepped inside. Nobody was in sight. Not a sound, save for a soft whir from two refrigerators. Blood droplets formed a trail to a paneled door. He followed their lead and found a young man, in his late twenties, lying in a pantry that reeked of clove and garlic, his shirt stained red from a fatal chest wound.

William had also provided photographs of Yourstone's son.

Andrew.

Here he was.

Dead.

Yourstone turned his attention away from the gun and kept his face a study in restraint, not wanting to telegraph any of what he was thinking. Mathews remained across the room, near a rack of antique hunting rifles. An 18th-century grandfather clock in the opposite corner ticked with a steady beat that began to unnerve him. Thank heaven for the whiskey, which was lessening his fear of this maniac.

"This effort failed because of your ego," Mathews said.

“It seems it failed because of Cotton Malone. He was a step ahead of you throughout. Was he the one who tossed the homing device into the Thames? If you had bothered to get back to me with information about him earlier, we might have avoided all of this.”

“And what would you have done?”

“We’ll never know, now, will we?”

A smile formed on Mathews’ lips. “No. We won’t. And, yes, it was Malone who thwarted the missile.” The older man gestured with the gun. “How long has your family owned this town house?”

He wondered about the sudden change in topics, and the thought of a cat toying with a mouse flashed through his mind. But he simply answered, “Two hundred years. Yourstones have served this nation with distinction.”

“But alas, there will be no Yourstone on the throne.”

“It seems we are both to be denied.”

“It’s ironic,” Mathews said. “Three Richards have sat on the throne. All were failures. The first betrayed his father, then spent his life crusading and left the country to ruin. The second was overthrown and murdered. The last was a despot who killed his brother’s children and stole the throne, only to lose it on the battlefield. I shudder to think what havoc Richard IV will reek upon us.”

“So this was all about love of country?”

“Unlike you, my lord, I have no personal agenda. No profit or fame or fortune. No glory. My only interest is what is best for the United Kingdom.”

“And you were willing to kill Albert Saxe-Coburg?”

Mathews chuckled. “For someone who thinks himself so smart you are quite stupid. I had no intention of Albert dying. On the contrary, he should clearly be king. And you offered the perfect way to make that happen now. As did Cotton Malone. He stopped the missile and exposed Eleanor, which in turn exposes you. All of the conspiratorial rats taken down in one sweep. Richard will be his own downfall. He will never be king.”

“Nothing exists to stop that now.”

“Don’t be so sure. There are matters of which you have no knowledge. Be assured, he will not be crowned.”

Silence passed between them, and he was comforted by the sight of the gun, in the drawer, only inches away. Mathews moved away from the desk and momentarily turned his back on him.

He eased the drawer fully open.

Mathews turned and said, “Your son. I heard him earlier. Apparently there is no relationship there?”

“He is an inept fool.”

Mathews shrugged, as if agreeing. “My thoughts, too.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Malone left the kitchen.

As best he could determine he was in the south wing of the irregular-shaped mansion. Yourstone's study was west, at the other end, so he began to navigate the wide corridors. The rooms he passed were filled with fine furniture, paintings, tapestries, and ceramics. He passed through a dining room, lit only from lights in the hall, and stopped at the beginning of another long corridor.

Voices could be heard.

He crept down a carpet runner, gun drawn, and turned a corner. A small foyer opened before him and contained a settee and two tables. A magnificent crystal lamp burned brightly. A set of double doors were cocked open.

He heard the voices again.

One was Yourstone's.

The other Thomas Mathews'.

Yourstone sat still in the chair.

"What of your son and Eleanor?" Mathews asked. "I take it they will make their own arrangements with the queen?"

"Royals always look after royals."

"That they do. A shame you're not a royal. Nor married to one."

"I can handle myself."

"Then go ahead," Mathews said.

He started to rise from the chair and leave.

"That's not what I meant."

He settled back down.

"Go for the gun."

He said nothing.

"It's lying there. In the drawer. Reach for it. I want you to have a sporting chance."

A cold clammy feeling surged through his body. His face must have betrayed the question that formed in his mind. *How did he know?*

“I’ve been a spy a long time.”

Mathews’ pistol hung at his side, barrel pointed to the floor. Yourstone’s right arm shook. He needed to grip the gun and roll to the floor, using the desk for protection. It was his only chance. His gaze again darted to the drawer, but his hand remained glued to the armrest.

Sweat beaded on his brow.

Mathews stood five meters away.

He realized what he’d become.

Not longer an ally. Now a problem.

Yourstone lunged for the weapon and slid from the chair. But his hand never made it to the drawer, nor his body to the floor.

A bullet slammed into his chest.

The sensation was at once surprising, then horribly painful. Blood poured from the wound. He tried to ease the hemorrhage with a hand but blood oozed through his clenched fingers.

He stared at Thomas Mathews.

“So sorry. But this matter must end here.”

Mathews stepped to the desk and retrieved the passbooks. “Your money will be put to good use, though. Rest easy on that matter.”

And the last thing Yourstone saw was Mathews raise his weapon and fire once more.

Malone heard the distinctive pop of a sound-suppressed gun discharging twice. Thomas Mathews had surely just saved the British government the trouble of prosecuting Nigel Yourstone.

The double doors swung open.

Mathews stepped into the hall, holding a Glock 9mm with sound suppressor in one hand, two booklets in the other.

Malone stepped from the shadows and raised his weapon.

The spymaster halted, then slowly turned around. “I didn’t think you were dead.”

He and Professor Goulding had been flown directly to Reykjavik, the NATO pilot ordered to say they'd been lost in the wilderness. Goulding had been ensconced in a hotel and told to contact no one. Malone had been flown by U.S. military transport to a base in England, then made his way into London by car.

He kept his gun trained on Mathews' head, assuming under the tweed suit there might be a Kevlar vest. "It was you, making everything happen. You were Yourstone's information source."

Mathews stood rigid. "You are an interesting man, Cotton. A bit lucky, too. Never underestimate the value of luck."

"We were supposed to die out there in Iceland?"

"That was the idea. I had the camp burned and the tunnel sealed. It seemed a good way to end the problem. You and Goulding both succumbing to natural causes. Few questions would have been asked."

"Let the gun fall from your hand. Don't raise your arm."

Mathews' fingers released their grip, and the Glock thudded on the carpet.

He said, "I should kill you."

"But you are a naval officer. That means you are a man of honor. Taught to respect life. Play fair. Would your father have shot an unarmed man?"

"What do you know about my father?"

"Quite a lot, actually. He was a naval officer, too. Lost at sea. Doing his duty. Another man of honor. Would you disgrace him by shooting a defenseless man?"

"I wouldn't characterize you as defenseless."

"Lord Yourstone was a traitor. Now he is dead. Prince Albert is safe. This matter is at an end."

"The palace must have suspected you, or someone else in intelligence, because they refused to involve you or MI5."

"I assumed the same thing. Which explains why they turned to you."

"And you set me up at the Tower."

"Really? I thought you performed brilliantly. Saving the day, and all that."

“What if I hadn’t found that second homer?”

“I had every confidence you would.”

“And along the way you allowed Peter Lyon to escape.”

“We actually never had him. But luckily, we discovered the details of his plan and the launch point.”

“What if Albert had been killed?”

Mathews shrugged. “Now, that would have been MI5’s problem.”

“This was about a turf war?”

“It’s about the security of this nation. Which I take seriously. But others do not. MI5 was not even aware Lyon was in the country. And that was after the incident of the dead policemen and the C-83, which even Stephanie Nelle uncovered. MI5 does not do its job. A point I’ve tried to make clear to the Home Secretary. Yet she fails to listen.”

He could not believe what he was hearing. He’d heard of Mathews’ determination, how his enemies feared him.

But this was arrogance and stupidity.

“Every operation,” Mathews said, “should have at least two objectives, each running parallel to the other. If the primary goal fails, then the secondary becomes paramount. Here, the primary was achieved. You stopped the missile and exposed the conspiracy. I will now finish what Yourstone started, and Richard will abdicate in favor of Albert. All will be right.”

“And if I had not lived up to your expectations?”

“Then the secondary objective, of exposing how poor our domestic security measures truly are, would have been realized by a missile striking the Tower of London. I’m sure there was little threat to Albert. You had him away from the impact point, never in any real danger.”

“But a lot of other people could have died to prove your point.”

“Every cause has its martyrs.”

“Like Yourstone’s son, who’s lying dead in the kitchen?”

“I’m afraid the young Yourstone knew a bit too much. He was one of those loose ends that have a terrible habit of reasserting themselves.”

“The three men in Iceland fall into that category, too?”

Mathews nodded. "A pity there. They were actually quite good at what they did."

He was tired of the banter, ready to end this.

"I was troubled to learn that your marriage is ending," Mathews said. "That's too bad. There's a son there, correct?"

Gary was nine years old and dealing with his parents' separation as best he could. They lived on one side of Atlanta and he on the other.

"Leave my son out of this."

"A measure of a man is the character of his child. I'm told your son is a fine young man."

Mathews was sending a message. *I can hurt you. Where it counts.*

"I'm leaving," the spymaster said. "We're going to assume that this conversation never happened."

"I'm one of those loose ends."

"That you are. And if you had died in Iceland, as planned, there would have been no problem. Killing you and Dr. Goulding now, though, presents issues that I'm not prepared to deal with. Surely Stephanie Nelle is aware you're here. I haven't heard from her officially, as yet, since you were supposedly dead. In any event, I don't want a war with the Americans. Killing you will mean one of my own will be targeted. So we'll call it a day."

Mathews turned and started to walk away.

Malone fired into the floor just ahead of the Brit. "The next bullet will be to your head."

"No, it won't. You have the same dilemma as I. Neither one of us can kill the other." Mathews had stopped but was still facing away. "No matter how much we each would like to."

The bastard was right.

Stalemate.

Mathews started walking again. Ten feet remained until the hallway right-angled. His adversary kept moving, the cane leading the way.

Finally, Mathews stopped, turned, and faced the gun.

"Only you and I know the truth. And that is the way it will stay."

He lowered the gun. "One day, Sir Thomas, you're going to push someone too far."

The older man smiled.

"I doubt that."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Malone finished packing his bag. His flight left Heathrow in a little over three hours. The trial was finished and the terrorists convicted, each sentenced to life in prison. His two months in England were over. A light rap on his hotel room door disturbed the silence, and Stephanie Nelle entered. His boss had flown over a few days ago for the verdict.

“Ready to leave?” she asked.

“Been ready.”

“This was a tough one, wasn’t it?”

“You could say that. My faith in the good guys is beginning to wane.”

Everything he’d learned from and about Thomas Mathews still bothered him.

He folded the last of his shirts into the bag and zipped the lid shut.

In the weeks after the missile attack the press had been told precious little. The two Yourstones’ deaths were blamed on a robbery gone bad. Eleanor was saying nothing, playing the part of the grieving widow. And none of the royals would ever talk. The queen privately extracted a written declaration from her daughter renouncing all claims to the throne. There would be no repeats of regicide, or at least the effort would do her no good. Eleanor was allowed to keep her title, but no more royal duties. The official line was her desire to withdraw from public life and mourn her husband.

He laid his travel bag on the floor.

And not a word from the Secret Intelligence Service.

But he hadn’t expected any.

“William called,” Stephanie said. “The queen has asked us to come for a quick visit. She wants to say goodbye.”

He glanced at his watch.

“Let’s do it fast.”

He followed Stephanie through Buckingham Palace and into the audience hall. Victoria sat at the far side of the long chamber in her wheelchair, Albert standing beside her. William and Prince James stood off to the side. An array of ancient armor and weapons adorned the chamber, the finely carved, cream-colored walls resembling lace.

“Come in, Mr. Malone,” Victoria said.

Her pale voice resonated through the vast space, and she sounded upbeat.

He stepped toward her. “You’re looking well, Your Majesty.”

“I feel much better. My strength is returning. It is like a new day here.”

He was glad for her.

“I was wondering,” Victoria said, “if you might kneel.”

An odd request, but he could not refuse her.

“For service to this Crown, which included placing your life in jeopardy, I want to bestow upon you the title, knight of the realm.”

Albert stepped forward, holding a glistening silver sword, the scabbard afire with rubies and diamonds. He raised the blade and gently touched the tops of Malone’s shoulders.

“From this day forward,” the queen said, “you shall be known as Sir Harold Earl Malone, Protector of the Realm. This honor is granted by the Crown only to its loyal servants. And you sir, are my most loyal. You saved my grandson’s life. For that I, and this nation, owe you more than a mere knighthood.”

He was a bit overwhelmed. He hadn’t expected this. He stood. “I’m honored. Thank you.”

The queen smiled. “Ms. Nelle told me of your displeasure with commendations. She says you’ve refused quite a few. I decided to bestow one upon you that you could not refuse.”

“As I said yesterday, it would be hard to refuse so gracious a lady.”

Victoria chuckled. “Still the charmer.”

“I see you also learned my full given name. I’m not often called Harold Earl.”

“Ms. Nelle was kind enough to tell us. But I do wonder, where did the name Cotton come from?”

He smiled. “It’s a really long story.”

“Let’s agree then that, one day, you will return and tell me.”

“Absolutely. Might I ask, Your Majesty, what about Richard? What will happen to the succession?”

“My son has already signed his abdication. He will forfeit his right to the throne in favor of his son. That announcement will be made next week.”

Which further explained Mathews’ silence. The spymaster surely knew. And this was precisely what he wanted to happen.

“My advisers say the move will be greeted with much favor,” the queen said. “It will also diffuse the rumors of attempted regicide that the press, for some reason, cannot seem to abandon.” She reached up and grabbed her grandson’s hand. “Albert will marry within the year. His chosen one is a fine lady. She will make an excellent queen. The nation is in good hands.”

Malone studied the new heir apparent. The English monarchy did seem in good hands. He glanced over at Stephanie. He’d wanted to tell the queen about Mathews, revealing everything, but his boss had vetoed the idea.

Not our fight, she’d said.

“The grave site in Iceland has been fully mapped and the artifacts removed,” the queen said. “The manuscript you found is indeed a Gildas original, a lost volume that proves Arthur was real. We plan an announcement of the find next week to coincide with Richard’s abdication to Albert.”

He smiled at the irony. Victoria now planned to do what Yourstone and all of the other monarchs before her had tried and failed. Use Arthur to revitalize the throne. But she just might succeed. The timing was right. The people would greet the news of Arthur’s return, and Albert’s succession, with great joy.

Once a myth, now proven real.

Arthur.

The Celtic warrior.

Not a king. Just a leader of men, fighting for what he believed. A few lines from Tennyson came to mind. Applicable to a king lamenting about his death or a queen worried about the future of her realm.

If thou shouldst never see my face again, pray for my soul.

Which made him again think of Thomas Mathews. Whose soul he would not pray for. Stephanie had officially let MI6 know that what had happened would not be forgotten. But Mathews' continued silence signaled no remorse. And Malone understood. This was the spy business. Not for the faint of heart.

But still—

One day, Sir Thomas, you're going to push someone too far.

And maybe, just maybe, he'd be there to see it.

WRITER'S NOTE

This story postulates an alternate history. The current British royal family is called Windsor, but their true name is Saxe-Coburg, a name born in 1840 at the marriage between Victoria I and Albert Saxe-Coburg. The family label was changed (as detailed in [chapter 4](#)) during World War I to eliminate its German character. For the purposes of this story I omitted that modification. I did the same with the 1936 abdication of Edward VIII ([chapter 6](#)), instead implying a long reign and making him the father of my invented Victoria II. I chose to use a fictional royal family just as I've used a fictional American president in many of my thrillers.

The locales of St. Margaret's Church ([chapter 2](#)), Buckingham Palace ([chapters 2, 19](#)), St. James Palace ([chapter 6](#)), the Tower of London ([chapters 12, 13](#)), and the Wellington Barracks ([chapter 12](#)) are accurately described. The silver vessel in [chapters 3](#) and [7](#) is real, though slightly modified. This story takes place seven years in Cotton Malone's past, so the Act of Succession quoted in [chapter 4](#) is the one that existed prior to the recent change that now allows both male and female firstborns to inherit the throne.

The exploits of Arthur described in [chapter 4](#) are from the legend, but the information about him being a Saxon warrior leader ([chapters 7](#) and [9](#)) is probably more accurate. The account of a dying Henry II ([chapter 4](#)) is based on a historical incident. Henry was the first English king to attempt to use Arthur as a way to revitalize the throne. Eliminating the monarchy is something constantly discussed throughout British history ([chapters 2](#) and [8](#)). It was actually accomplished in the 17th century when Cromwell briefly ruled. As detailed in [chapters 2, 9, and 11](#), various kings have wanted to name their potential heirs Arthur, but death seemed always to interfere. The connection between Arthur's grave and Glastonbury abbey exists ([chapters 7](#) and [9](#)), and currently a marker stands at Glastonbury noting its supposed location.

History of the Kings of Britain by Geoffrey of Monmouth ([chapter 9](#)), *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* by St. Brendan ([chapter 9](#)), the *Landanámabók* ([chapter 9](#)), and *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain* by Gildas ([chapter 16](#)) are actual manuscripts. The addition of specific references to Arthur in the Gildas work was my invention, though those accounts were based on historical references.

The Celtic settlement of Iceland in the 6th century happened, so it seemed a natural choice to hide Arthur's true resting place there. The tomb, as described in [chapters 14](#) and [16](#) is based on an actual grave site exhumed in the 1990s.

Of all the kings and queens who ruled England, only Arthur became a legend. But, most likely, he was not a king. Just a leader of men, fighting for what he believed in. When thinking of him, a line from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* always comes to mind—a tribute to Arthur, but it is also the theme of this story—*"The old order changeth, yielding place to new."*

About the Author

Steve Berry is the #1 internationally and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Jefferson Key*, *The Emperor's Tomb*, *The Paris Vendetta*, *The Charlemagne Pursuit*, *The Venetian Betrayal*, *The Alexandria Link*, *The Templar Legacy*, *The Third Secret*, *The Romanov Prophecy*, *The Amber Room*, and the short stories "The Admiral's Mark," "The Balkan Escape," and "The Devil's Gold." His books have been translated into forty languages and sold in fifty-one countries. He lives in the historic city of St. Augustine, Florida. He and his wife, Elizabeth, have founded History Matters, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving our heritage. To learn more about Steve Berry and the foundation, visit www.steveberry.org.

Please read on for an excerpt from Steve Berry's

THE KING'S DECEPTION

Published by Ballantine Books

LONDON

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 21

6:25 PM

COTTON MALONE STEPPED UP TO THE CUSTOMS WINDOW AT Heathrow Airport and presented two passports—his own and his son Gary’s. Positioned between himself and the glass-enclosed counter, however, stood a problem.

Fifteen-year-old Ian Dunne.

“This one doesn’t have a passport,” he told the attendant, then explained who he was and what he was doing. A brief call to somebody led to verbal approval for Ian to reenter the country.

Which didn’t surprise Malone.

He assumed that since the Central Intelligence Agency wanted the boy in England they’d make the necessary arrangements.

He was tired from the long flight, though he’d caught a few hours of sleep. His knee still hurt from the kick Ian had delivered in Atlanta, before trying to flee from that airport. Luckily, his own fifteen-year-old, Gary, had been quick to tackle the pesky Scot before he’d escaped the concourse.

Favors for friends.

Always a problem.

This one for his former boss, Stephanie Nelle, at the Magellan Billet.

It’s the CIA, she’d told him. Langley had called directly. Somehow they were aware Malone was in Georgia and wanted him to escort the boy back to London, handing him over to the Metropolitan Police. After that he and Gary could head on to Copenhagen. In

return, they'd received first-class tickets all the way home to Denmark.

Not bad. His own were coach.

Four days ago he'd flown to Georgia for two reasons. The State Bar of Georgia required twelve hours of continuing legal education from all of its licensed lawyers. Though he'd retired from the navy and the Magellan Billet, he still kept his law license active, which meant he had to satisfy the annual education mandate. Last year he'd attended a sanctioned event in Brussels, a three-day meeting on multinational property rights. This year he'd chosen a seminar in Atlanta on international law. Not the most exciting way to spend two days, but he'd worked too hard for that degree to simply allow his ticket to lapse.

The second reason was personal.

Gary had asked to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with him. School was out and his ex-wife, Pam, thought an overseas trip a good idea. He'd wondered why she was so reticent, and found out last week when Pam called his bookshop in Copenhagen.

"Gary's angry," she said. "He's asking a lot of questions."

"Ones you don't want to answer?"

"Ones I'm going to have a tough time answering."

Which was an understatement. Six months ago she'd revealed a harsh truth to him during another call from Atlanta to Denmark. Gary was not his natural son. Instead, the boy was the product of an affair some sixteen years past.

Now she'd told Gary that truth, and his son was not happy. For Malone, the news had been crushing. He could only imagine what it had been for Gary.

"Neither one of us was a saint back then, Cotton."

She liked to remind him of that reality—as if somehow he'd forgotten that their marriage supposedly ended because of his lapses.

"Gary wants to know about his birth father."

"So do I."

She'd told him nothing about the man, and refused his requests for information.

"He has no involvement here," she said. "He's a total stranger to all of us. Just like the women you were with have nothing to do with this. I don't want to open that door. Ever."

"Why did you tell Gary about this? We agreed to do that together, when the time was right."

"I know. I know. My mistake. But it had to be done."

"Why?"

She did not answer him. But he could imagine the reason. She liked to be in control. Of everything. Only she wasn't in control here. Nobody was, actually.

"He hates me," she said. "I see it in his eyes."

"You turned the boy's life upside down."

"He told me today that he might want to live with you."

He had to say, "You know I would never take advantage of this."

"I know that. This is my fault. Not yours. He's so angry. Maybe a week with you would help ease some of that."

He'd come to realize that he didn't love Gary one drop less because he carried no Malone genes. But he'd be lying to himself if he said he wasn't bothered by the fact. Six months had passed and the truth still hurt. Why? He wasn't sure. He hadn't been faithful to Pam while in the navy. He was young and stupid and got caught. But now he knew that she'd had an affair of her own. Never mentioned at the time. Would she have strayed if he hadn't?

He doubted it. Not her nature.

So he wasn't blameless for the current mess.

He and Pam had been divorced for over a year, but only back in October had they made their peace. Everything that happened with the Library of Alexandria changed things between them.

For the better.

But now this.

One boy in his charge was angry and confused.

The other seemed to be a delinquent.

Stephanie had told him some. Ian Dunne had been born in Scotland. Father unknown. Mother abandoned him early. He was sent to London to live with an aunt and drifted in and out of her home, finally running away. He had an arrest record—petty theft,

trespassing, loitering. The CIA wanted him because a month ago one of their people was shoved, or jumped, into the path of an oncoming Underground train. Dunne was there, in Oxford Circus. Witnesses say he might even have stolen something from the dead man. So they needed to talk to him.

Not good, but also not his concern.

In a few minutes his favor for Stephanie Nelle would be over, then he and Gary would catch their connecting flight to Copenhagen and enjoy the week, depending of course on how many uncomfortable questions his son might want answered. The hitch was that the Denmark flight departed not from Heathrow, but Gatwick, London's other major airport, an hour's ride east. Their departure time was several hours away, so it wasn't a problem. He would just need to convert some dollars to pounds and hire a taxi.

They left Customs and claimed their luggage.

Both he and Gary had packed light.

"The police going to take me?" Ian asked.

"That's what I'm told."

"What will happen to him?" Gary asked.

He shrugged. "Hard to say."

And it was. Especially with the CIA involved.

He shouldered his bag and led both boys out of the baggage area.

"Can I have my things?" Ian asked.

When Ian had been turned over to him in Atlanta, he'd been given a plastic bag that contained a Swiss Army knife with all the assorted attachments, a pewter necklace with a religious medal attached, a pocket Mace container, some silver shears, and two paperback books with their covers missing.

Ivanhoe and *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

Their brown edges were water-stained, the bindings veined with thick white creases. Both were thirty-plus-year-old printings. Stamped on the title page was ANY OLD BOOKS, with an address in Piccadilly Circus, London. He employed a similar branding of inventory, his simply announcing COTTON MALONE, BOOKSELLER, HØJBRO PLADS, COPENHAGEN. The items in the plastic bag all belonged to Ian,

seized by Customs when they took him into custody at Miami International, after he'd tried to enter the country illegally.

"That's up to the police," he said. "My orders are to hand you and the bag over to them."

He'd stuffed the bundle inside his travel case, where it would stay until the police assumed custody. He half expected Ian to bolt, so he remained on guard. Ahead he spied two men, both in dark suits walking their way. The one on the right, short and stocky with auburn hair, introduced himself as Inspector Norse.

He extended a hand, which Malone shook.

"This is Inspector Devene. We're with the Met. We were told you'd be accompanying the boy. We're here to give you a lift to Gatwick and take charge of Master Dunne."

"I appreciate the ride. Wasn't looking forward to an expensive taxi."

"Least we can do. Our car is just outside. One of the privileges of being the police is we can park where we want."

The man threw Malone a grin.

They started for the exit.

Malone noticed Inspector Devene take up a position behind Ian. Smart move, he thought.

"You responsible for getting him into the country with no passport?"

Norse nodded. "We are, along with some others working with us. I think you know about them."

That he did.

They stepped out of the terminal into brisk morning air. A bank of dense clouds tinted the sky a depressing shade of pewter. A blue Mercedes sedan sat by the curb. Norse opened the rear door and motioned for Gary to climb in first, then Ian and Malone. The inspector stood outside until they were all in, then closed the door. Norse rode in the front passenger seat, while Devene drove. They sped out of Heathrow and found the M4 motorway. Malone knew the route, London a familiar locale. Years ago he'd spent time in England on assignments. He'd also been detached here for a year by

the navy. Traffic progressively thickened as they made their way east toward the city.

“Would it be all right if we made one stop before we head for Gatwick?” Norse asked him.

“No problem. We have time before the plane leaves. The least we can do for a free ride.”

Malone watched Ian as the boy gazed out the window. He couldn't help but wonder what would happen to him. Stephanie's assessment had not been a good one. A street kid, no family, completely on his own. Unlike Gary, who was dark-haired with a swarthy complexion, Ian was blond and fair-skinned. He seemed like a good kid, though. Just dealt a bad hand. But at least he was young, and youth offered chances, and chances led to possibilities. Such a contrast with Gary, who lived a more conventional, secure life. The thought of Gary on the streets, loose, with no one, tore at his heart.

Warm air blasted the car's interior and the engine droned as they chugged through traffic.

Malone's eyes surrendered to jet lag.

When he woke, he glanced at his watch and realized he'd been out about fifteen minutes. He willed himself to alertness. Gary and Ian were still sitting quietly. The sky had darkened further. A storm was approaching the city. He studied the car's interior, noticing for the first time no radio or communications equipment. Also, the carpets were immaculate, the upholstery in pristine condition. Certainly not like any police car he'd ever ridden in.

He then examined Norse.

The man's brown hair was cut below the ears. Not shaggy, but thick. He was clean-shaven and a bit overweight. He was dressed appropriately, suit and tie, but it was the left earlobe that drew his attention. Pierced. No earring was present, but the puncture was clear.

“I was wondering, Inspector. Might I see your identification? I should have asked at the airport.”

Norse did not answer him. The question aroused Ian's attention, and he studied Malone with a curious look.

“Did you hear me, Norse? I’d like to see your identification.”

“Just enjoy the ride, Malone.”

He didn’t like the curt tone so he reached for the front seat and pulled himself forward, intending to make his point clearer.

The barrel of a gun came around the headrest and greeted him.

“This enough identification?” Norse asked.

“Actually, I was hoping for a picture ID.” He motioned to the weapon. “When did the Metropolitan Police start issuing Glocks?”

No reply.

“Who are you?”

The gun waved at Ian. “His keeper.”

Ian reached across Gary and wrenched the chrome handle up and down, but the door would not open.

“Great things, child locks,” said Norse. “Keeps the wee ones from slipping away.”

Malone said, “Son, you want to tell me what’s going on?”

Ian said nothing.

“These men have apparently gone to a lot of trouble to make your acquaintance.”

“Sit back, Malone,” Norse said. “This is none of your concern.”

He reclined in the seat. “On that we agree.”

Except his son was in the car, too.

Norse kept his head turned back toward them, his gaze and the gun glued on Malone.

The car continued through morning congestion.

He absorbed what was whirling past outside, recalling what he could about the geography of North London. He realized the bridge they’d just crossed was for Regent’s Canal, a corridor-like waterway that wound a snaking path through the city, eventually spilling into the Thames. Stately trees lined the four-laned promenade. Traffic was heavy. He spotted the famous Lord’s Cricket Ground. He knew that the fictional Baker Street of Sherlock Holmes lay a few blocks over. Little Venice wasn’t far away.

They crossed the canal again and he glanced down at brightly painted houseboats dotting the waterway. Longboats dotted the canal, no more than ten feet high, designed to fit under the tight

bridges. Rows and rows of Georgian houses and flats lined the boulevard, fronted with tall trees less their leaves.

Devene turned the Mercedes onto a side lane. More houses rolled past on either side. The scene was not unlike Atlanta, where his own house had once stood. Three more turns and they entered a courtyard enclosed on three sides by high hedges. The Mercedes stopped outside a mews constructed of pastel-colored stones.

Norse exited. Devene also climbed out.

Both rear doors were released from the outside.

“Get out,” Norse said.

Malone stood on cobblestones outlined by emerald lichens. Gary and Ian emerged on the other side.

Ian tried to bolt.

Norse slammed the boy hard into the car.

“Don’t,” Malone called out. “Do as he says. You too, Gary.”

Norse shoved the gun into Ian’s neck. “Stay still.” The man’s body pinned Ian to the car. “Where’s the flash drive?”

“What drive?” Malone asked.

“Shut him up,” Norse called out.

Devene jammed a fist into Malone’s gut.

“Dad,” Gary called out.

He doubled over and tried to regain his breath, motioning to Gary that he was okay.

“The flash drive,” Norse said again. “Where is it?”

Malone rose, arms hugging his stomach. Devene drew back to swing again, but Malone jammed his knee into the man’s groin, then smacked Devene’s jaw with his right fist.

He may have been retired and jet-lagged, but he wasn’t helpless.

He whirled in time to see Norse aim the gun his way. The retort from a single shot came the instant after Malone lunged for the pavement, the bullet finding the hedges behind him. He stared up into the Mercedes’ passenger compartment and saw Norse through the half-open doors. He sprang to his feet, pivoted off the hood, and propelled his legs through the car’s interior into the far-side door.

The panel flew out and smashed into Norse, sending the phony inspector reeling backward into the mews.

He shoved himself through the open door.

Ian was running from the courtyard, toward the street.

Malone's gaze met Gary's. "Go with him. Get out of here."

He was tackled from behind.

His forehead slapped wet stone. Pain shuddered through him. He'd thought Devene out of commission.

A mistake.

An arm wrapped around his throat and he tried to release the stranglehold grip. His prone position gave him little room to maneuver and Devene was hinging his spine at an unnatural angle.

The buildings around him winked in and out.

Blood trickled down his forehead and into his eye.

The last thing he saw before blackness enveloped him was Ian and Gary, disappearing around a corner.