Reset

by scotchplaid

Summary

Set several years after the end of Season 5, this fic sees the return of H.G. Wells to Warehouse 13. The Warehouse and, by extension, the world is under threat, and H.G. is the only one who can save it. However, in order to set the world right, she has to fix all that has gone wrong in her life, starting with Myka . . . .

Notes

This is the last of the fics I posted on FanFiction and didn't post here simultaneously. Other than getting rid of typos and editing for clarity and awkwardness, this is pretty much the same story.
Chapter 1

She was both appalled and amused that this was the invitation she was accepting. Artie would simply be appalled; the invitation hadn't come from him. The invitations came from Claudia as everything else did - the announcements, the photos, the gossipy little items. Helena had never responded to any of them before; almost ten years' worth of news of the Warehouse and its agents and she had never sent so much as a thank you in response. Someone else might have taken her silence as disinterest, but not Claudia. The last time Helena had spoken with an agent was a brief phone call she had with Myka, after Nate and Giselle but before Patrick and Catherine and all the rest. Myka was in an airport waiting for a flight, so she had said. She had laughed nervously and apologized for calling so late - it was midnight in London - but she had wanted Helena to hear it from her first. Helena had said the right things, the things a friend should say, ending the call by wishing her and Pete all the best. That was the one invitation she hadn't received; Myka hadn't sent her one, and Claudia would have known better than to try to correct what was, only on the surface, an oversight. But Helena had received the announcement less than two years later of Andrew Bering Lattimer's arrival in the world, and Claudia hadn't stinted on sending pictures. A doting godmother, she found every act of young Drew Lattimer worthy of saving for posterity, although just possibly, because it was Claudia, she took impish glee in imagining Helena's sigh every time she received an e-mail with a new photo. Her text message about the divorce, when it occurred, had been so terse that Helena couldn't help but imagine Claudia transmitting it via Western Union, seeing a freeze frame of the rumpled yellow telegram - Pyka over. Stop.

She hadn't responded to it either.

But this, this, Artie's retirement was enough to have her lean forward in her chair and send back her electronic RSVP. Then, in another first, she sent a message of her own: I look forward to seeing all of you.

………………

It was called the "campus" now, the entirely artificial greenspace on which the B&B had been built, dry prairie on the edge of the Badlands that had been sodded, irrigated, and manicured to resemble nothing remotely approaching its original form. Acres similarly cosmeticized had been added to encompass the growth in housing. The two-story Victorian B&B still stood, albeit significantly enlarged by additions on both the main and second floors, but single family homes also shared the property, shaded walks and a few lanes just big enough for a golf cart or a hybrid-energy compact connecting them. It was all so self-consciously designed to balance privacy and a sense of community, middle-class comfort and the desire to reduce one's carbon footprint that Helena smiled and shook her head. Surely there had to be a fitness center and a community garden to complete the picture.

In the middle of the campus, there was a large white tent, the kind usually reserved for graduation parties and family reunions, and although the invitation had said only that the reception was to be held from 2:00 to 4:00, and not where, the number of people milling around the outside of the tent suggested that the reception was being held there. The dress code appeared to be khakis and polo shirts for the men and sundresses of varying colors and lengths for the women. Feeling a little overdressed in her tailored slacks and silk blouse, she walked across the grass toward the tent. She didn't recognize any of the men and women standing outside the tent drinking from paper cups and eating appetizers from paper plates (it was hard to miss the containers at the corners with the recycling symbol). But the man emerging from under the canopy, avidly attacking a kebab and crinkling his eyes against the sun as he looked at her was all too familiar. His mouth stretching
wide in a welcoming grin, he flung down his plate and jogged to intercept her, waving his arm in a come-along gesture at a small boy engaged in a slouching, scuffling patrol of the tent, boredom plain on his face.

"H.G.!" Pete yelled in her ear as he wrapped her in a bear hug and lifted her off the ground. He gave her another squeeze before releasing her and stepping back to take her in. "Claud said you were coming, but we didn't believe it. God, you look great. Love the white streak, by the way." He raised a hand as if to touch her hair but thought better of it. "Very Lily Munster."

Ten years ago she wouldn't have caught the reference, but she had spent too many nights in too many hotel rooms flipping channels to counteract her insomnia not to have at least a passing acquaintance with American sitcoms. "As I believe you and Herman are brothers under the skin."

"Ouch, I don't think that's a compliment," he said to the boy who had come to stand beside him, ill at ease and clearly dreading the incipient introduction. With a gentle shove, Pete propelled the boy forward. "This is Drew." The boy started to sketch a wave, but Helena reached out and pulled his hand into a handshake. One second, two, then Drew dropped the contact and let his eyes fly away. "Drew, this is the lady who wrote all those stories your mom read you."

She had recognized him, even before Pete had motioned to the boy to join him. She had opened every one of the pictures Claudia had sent her, the baby in the bathtube shots, in which he mimicked in miniature his father's squinting grimace; the birthday pictures, in which he raised a face full of frosting toward the camera; and the ones Helena had sourly called to herself the "God, doesn't he look like Myka?" pictures, which Claudia must have especially enjoyed sending. But none of them - and she fervently believed that Claudia had not let a moment of his eight years escape without being digitally recorded - had prepared her for meeting Myka's son. Pete and Myka's son, she reminded herself. Because he did look like Pete more than he did his mother. His coloring was different, the hair a lighter brown and the eyes hazel instead of dark brown, but the shape of his face, his nose, his mouth - they were Pete's. Drew's smile, not in evidence today, but in the pictures, at times goofy, at times cocky, sometimes both at once, but always engaging, that was Pete's too.

Myka was more in his expressions, not the sulky shyness besetting him now, but in the lip-biting concentration Claudia had captured as he constructed a Lego racer and the pensiveness with which he viewed a department store Santa besieged by other children. She was in his gait as he had joined his father; even with hunched shoulders and a foot-dragging reluctance to meet yet another adult, he walked with an easy grace that was hers, and which, with the characteristic seriousness that frequently mistook a compliment for an observation needing explanation, she had attributed to her years of fencing. And then, as the shyness that had gripped Drew seemed to give way to curiosity, she was in the directness with which he met Helena's eyes, an open, inquiring look that, when his mother turned it on her, had always left Helena feeling not so much exposed as called upon to respond, as if Myka were asking a question only she could answer.

"Hmmm?" She was dimly aware that Pete was saying... something.

"The rest of the crew's in the tent, well, most of them, anyway, and they're anxious to see you."

"Ah, yes. I'm sure Arthur's celebration won't be complete without my congratulations," she said dryly.

Drew led the way, happier, at least, to be moving, the reddish tint to the waves of his hair more pronounced in the sunlight, and Helena blinked, remembering how Myka's hair could shine with a profusion of colors - red, orange, gold - so different from the unrelieved blackness of her own. Not so unrelieved any longer. She cast a sideways glance at Pete; he was graying as well, but he looked
fit, he could easily button the blazer he was wearing over his stomach. If Myka was, what, forty-three, Pete would be approaching fifty.

Pete must have been conducting a similar evaluation of her, because he said with a teasing but appreciative smile, "You don't look a day over 140. Still doing the, um, kempo?"

"It's all rounding after you reach 100," Helena said. "More tai chi than kempo these days."

"Myka's dying to see you. She's around somewhere. I think one of the newbies dragged her off for a consultation."

Helena very much doubted that Myka was 'dying' to see her, but there was nothing in Pete's voice or expression that suggested he was being anything less than sincere. Yet Myka had typically kept her feelings close, and Helena didn't think seven years of marriage and whatever type of relationship she and Pete now had would have changed that. Especially where she was concerned. "It'll be good to see her," Helena said, feeling that the words had come out awkwardly, stiffly.

But Pete didn't seem to notice, coming to a stop just inside the tent and saying, "Guess who I've got with me."

Helena had taken no more than a step forward when she was enveloped by a blur of arms and legs in a rib-cracking hug. "Ten years," Claudia said quietly but fiercely. "Ten years it took me, but you're finally here." She stood back, crying unashamedly, and though Helena had promised herself that she wouldn't cry no matter who she saw or what someone said, and, truthfully, had not once felt close to crying since she had arrived, she felt the burn of tears now. Claudia shimmered in front of her, wearing a rumpled linen pantsuit that seemed more Mrs. Frederic or a corporate executive attending Artie's retirement party than Claudia. "I know," she said, pointing to herself. "You'd think I was COO of Facebook or Yahoo or something." She pulled Helena into another hug. "You felt it, didn't you? The Warehouse." She whispered, intending to be heard only by Helena. "It's glad you're back, too."

When Helena had first been an agent, when the 20th century, little more than a decade away, seemed to herald all the promise that had eluded the century she had been born in, and the 21st was nearly mystical with portent, she thought that everyone associated with the Warehouse felt what she did, its... hum, a deep, constant reverberation that sounded as much like a cat's purr as it did the ceaseless revolving of an engine. However, she learned that the sounds - and the smells - of the Warehouse were present only to a few, and had things turned out differently, she could have been then what Claudia was now, its caretaker. Given how poorly she had managed to look after her daughter, in the end, it was just as well that the Warehouse's welfare hadn't been left in her hands. But the connection had never really been broken, not when she had been immured in bronze or marshalling artefacts to end the world or, much more prosaically, burying herself in Boone or London or on Capri, and she had felt it today, even before she had arrived at the campus. She had felt it in Univille as soon as her foot touched the hotel's parking lot, that thrum, which had become only the more insistent the closer she came to the Warehouse.

But she couldn't acknowledge it to Claudia, how her heart seemed to beat in rhythm with the vibrations, saying only, "You need to get out more, darling."

Claudia seemed to recognize the remark for the deflection it was, shrugging, willing to let it go for the moment. "Have you seen Myka yet?"

Pete answered for her from the buffet, piling a plate high with kebabs and puffs. "I think she's with one of the newbies."
Claudia frowned. "She was supposed to be squiring around Congressman Jaffee. Giving him the rundown on artefact retrieval and storage."

Helena quirked an eyebrow. "Since when are members of Congress introduced to the Warehouse?"

"Since Congress decided that, like any government agency, we're subject to their oversight." Claudia raised her own eyebrows. "A lot's changed since you've been gone." Leading Helena toward the center of the tent, she said over her shoulder, "By the way, your white streak, very -"

"Lily Munster, yes, I've been told."

"I was going to say Susan Sontag. I'm not Pete, you know." Claudia grinned.

Standing next to the support pole for the top of the tent were Artie and Vanessa. They were shaking hands with and talking to a group of well-wishers. Helena couldn't remember whether they had married in the intervening years. She supposed it didn't matter; although Vanessa had only ever managed to blunt the edges of his temper and even out his fits of moroseness, she was also the only one who had been able to do that much. The wiry hair had turned white, but his voice was still caustic. Seeing Helena, he announced, "The prodigal has returned. Kill the fatted calf! Sorry, Pete's already eaten it." Pete, hearing Artie's shout, shrugged and held up a kebab.

For a moment, Helena thought he was wearing a muumuu, but as Artie completed his turn toward her, she realized that it was an oversized Hawaiian shirt that someone must have given him as a gag gift. He poked his glasses up the bridge of his nose and held out his arms, a mocking smile playing at his mouth. Moving into the hug, she noticed that he had cocked his head, trying to view her out of the corners of his eyes. Macular degeneration. One of the reasons for his retirement, Claudia had explained in the e-mail with the invitation. Another one, of course, was standing next to him. Long since retired from the CDC but still on call for the Warehouse staff, Vanessa, Claudia confided, had finally issued an ultimatum. She was moving to her home on Maui, with or without him. Apparently with him, if his shirt was any indication.

He held her more tightly to him than she was anticipating; she was off-balance, practically leaning over him - she wasn't a tall woman by any means but she had forgotten how short Artie was - and only belatedly realized that he was trying to whisper something in her ear. Inclining her head toward his lips, she heard him say, "You came back. Don't tell me this means that I'm finally forgiven."

He had said it with a wryness that was belied by the intensity of his hug. "Forgiven you for what, Arthur?" She murmured, temporizing, though she already knew.

"Forgiven me for resetting the time line, bringing you back from the dead." He drew back and shook his head, his hair wagging to its own beat. "That's all right. Somedays I wish I hadn't either." He took his glasses off and passed his hand over his eyes, but whether it was from emotion or the fatigue of the day, Helena couldn't tell. "She should have been here."

Claudia ducked in between them, slinging her arms around their waists. "Hey, what's with the serious faces?"

"Nothing," Helena said quickly. With a meaningful look at Artie, she added, "Admittedly, we have a checkered history, Arthur, but I have wished, and will always continue to wish, the very best for you."

"That was gnomic and Spock-like and potentially very scary," Claudia said, removing an arm and flashing the Vulcan split-fingered benediction at no one in particular. "Have you just sacrificed
"I'm officially through with trying to save the Warehouse or you," Artie said, pointing a stubby finger at Claudia, "from disaster. But, unofficially, you know, if Myka needs some more mentoring in the job..." He shrugged, turning his head to see if Vanessa had overheard him.

"Myka's our new Artie. Didn't I tell you that?" Claudia frowned, clearly going through in her mind the past several e-mails she had sent to Helena. "But she's cuter and sweeter, and she's got that whole eidetic memory thing going for her." She gave Artie a fond glance. "You'll hardly be missed."

Artie sent Claudia a bilious look in exchange, but ten years hadn't made Helena more patient with their lovingly fractious - but constant - teasing of one another. Vanessa, having disposed of a well-wisher with a "You'll have to come see us on Maui," was already reaching for Helena. She and Vanessa lightly hugged, exchanging air kisses. After saying something bland but congratulatory, Helena was almost beyond the circle of people crowding around them, when Vanessa asked, "Have you seen Myka yet?"

Was everyone going to ask her this? "Not yet. I hope to meet up with her later." That was more or less true. Vanessa seemed satisfied with her response, but Artie was watching her, his head still tilted, although Helena wasn't sure whether it owed anything to his impaired vision or was simply an indication that he didn't believe her. She searched for Claudia, wanting some excuse to ease herself away, but Claudia had been pulled aside by a self-important stripling in his twenties wearing a suit and tie. She had a look of suffering on her face, which he was ignorant of or indifferent to, but she was listening politely to him. A member of Congressman Jaffee's staff? Helena slid behind a pair of men close to Artie's age, exchanging Warehouse stories. Former agents. There couldn't be that many here, she must be one of the few. Strange to think of herself in any context to which "former" might apply though it was one of the most fundamentally true things about her. She had outlived so many people, so many eras, and "former" was ghostly, pointing toward someone or some time that once existed but was no longer, yet she was no ghost. She was here, unmistakably, undeniably, solidly here. But she was also only a former, former agent (twice), former author, former inventor (well, occasionally she still tinkered), former - no, always and forever a mother. Even if she were to outlive her only child by more than a thousand years. Former lover, countless times over, practically a "former" before the relationship even started, one foot out of the bed, on the floor, seeking the easy exit.

She was nearing the edge of the tent. She would walk around the campus, make some half-hearted attempt to find Myka, and then revisit the tent one more time, repeat her congratulations to Vanessa and Artie, say good-bye to Pete and Claudia. Maybe try to catch one last glimpse of Drew. It would be easier to see Myka that way, blurred and refracted in her son.

"Hello, Helena." It came from beside her. The shadows were thicker on this side, or just possibly Mrs. Frederic had summoned the shadows to her. Helena wouldn't put it past her. She was sitting on a wooden folding chair, hands clasped in her lap. She was dressed in a suit, as she always had been the times Helena had seen her, its boxy cut, Helena had learned only later, long after there was little likelihood that she could expect to see Mrs. Frederic suddenly appear in the same room with her, in the style of women's suits from the 1950s, as if Mrs. Frederic were routinely dressed by Edith Head. Which Helena also wouldn't put past her. The hairstyle hadn't changed either, still an intricate woven structure that resembled, when it reached certain heights, the Tower of Babel. But even in the shadows, Helena could discern how much white was intermixed now with the brown and how the suit was, just perhaps, a little too square, Mrs. Frederic's always generous proportions having shrunk over the years. "Walk with me."
The habit of issuing invitations as commands hadn't changed. Or maybe there had never been invitations, only commands. She pushed herself up from the chair with difficulty, Helena trying to hold it steady for her. After a grave wobble, the chair righted itself, and Mrs. Frederic stood, one hand balanced on Helena's arm, the other adjusting the hem of her skirt. She leaned on Helena's arm as Helena led her across the grass to a sidewalk. Once on the concrete Helena half-expected Mrs. Frederic to release her arm, but though her grip lightened, becoming no more than a touch, the hand remained. As they walked, Mrs. Frederic proceeding at a slow pace with no visible stiffness or difficulty, Helena was reminded of Sunday afternoons in London, when she was a young woman escorting her grandmother on a stroll. There was a similar imperiousness to the two women, Helena mused, but whereas Mrs. Frederic carried the burden of the Warehouse and its artefacts, her grandmother had treated of great moment the quality of the day's dinner, complaining to Helena with an outrage suggesting that sacrilege had been committed if the lamb was overcooked.

Mrs. Frederic was silent for so long that Helena began to believe she had only been seeking someone to walk with her and Helena had happened to be the first person passing by. Having rarely if ever engaged in casual conversations with Mrs. Frederic, Helena was unsure how to start one, but she inclined her head toward the housing. "Claudia said the Warehouse was under congressional oversight now. Is this whole compound, for lack of a better term, related to it?"

"Nominally we're under the aegis of the Department of Homeland Security," Mrs. Frederic said with an irritable wave of her hand. "And, yes, now we have bureaucrats conducting audits and teams of scientists wanting to subject the Warehouse and its artefacts to various experiments, but who we are and what our mission is remain unchanged. This, this," the sweep of her hand was more expansive but no less irritable, "is simply the clutter we have to work around."

"Is having to dance attendance on Congressman Jaffee and his staff also mere clutter?" Helena asked, her eyebrow skeptically arched.

The look Mrs. Frederic gave her would have struck terror into most agents and even quieted Artie, but Helena didn't answer to this woman anymore. So she reminded herself. "Unfortunately, much of Claudia's, and the regents', time is spent advocating for the Warehouse's independence from any government's interference, including that of its host. Of course, the more we advocate, the more the government resists, and visits by Congressman Jaffee and his colleagues are not infrequent. But I didn't ask you to walk with me to discuss what has happened to the Warehouse since you've been gone. I asked you to walk with me because I need to know much you've changed."

"Need to know?" Helena repeated with doubting emphasis. There was nothing the Warehouse or those connected with it "needed" to know about her. They were nearing a wrought-iron bench placed thoughtfully under some shade trees, which in fifteen years would actually provide some welcome shade. But the trees were too small to do more against the sun than cast fragmentary shadows. Mrs. Frederic, however, seemed not to mind, settling herself on the bench. "My father was a preacher, did I ever tell you that?" Helena shook her head, keeping her wonder at the non sequitur to herself. "The older I get the less uncomfortable I am using his language. I asked you to walk with me because I want to assess the state of your soul, Helena."

"What does the state of my soul, supposing I have one, have to do with anything?" Helena sat down beside her.

"It has to do with your fitness," Mrs. Frederic said enigmatically. For the first time since she had spoken to Helena under the tent, Mrs. Frederic smiled at her, although Helena didn't feel more comforted by its appearance.

"My father was a kind and generous man, willing to give the shirt off his back to anyone in need,
although my mother joked that someone should explain to him that it was only a metaphor. But his sermons were full of hellfire and brimstone. The devil was as real to him as his children were, and he was often called upon to cast Satan out of some poor soul. I loved my father very much, but I lived in constant fear that the devil might take up residence in me.” She paused for a beat, glancing out of the side of her eyes at Helena. "I'm not boring you, am I? Because I do have a point." Helena noticed that she had been gently swinging one of her legs. She stopped.

"One day my brother Howard aggravated me beyond the limits of my patience, I threw an iron at him, and it hit him on the head. He clutched his head and screamed as the blood poured down his face. I ran and hid under the porch of our house convinced that I had killed him." Mrs. Frederic sighed, eyes cloudy with memories. "Howard was a horrible, mean-spirited little boy who became a horrible, mean-spirited little man, but that isn't the point of my story." She shifted, turning toward Helena, their knees almost touching. "I stayed under the porch for hours, praying for forgiveness, and when my father finally found me, I wouldn't come out since I was certain I was one of the damned, and a member of the damned couldn't live in Pastor Vaughn's house. But he crawled under the porch to join me - and he wasn't a small man so I can't imagine how miserable that must have been for him - and reassured me that God would forgive me if I was truly repentant. There was only one sin that God couldn't forgive, and it was not murdering your brother. Why if that were true, he said, half the people in the Bible couldn't have been forgiven."

She was looking expectantly at Helena, and Helena, pleased with herself that she wasn't rolling her eyes, asked obediently, if somewhat sarcastically, "What's the sin God can't forgive? You'll have to excuse me, my family was observant in the well-bred Anglican way that assumed hell was something only the lower classes had to fear."

Her voice soft, Mrs. Frederic said, "My father closed his hand in a fist and said that when your heart became too small and hard to ask for forgiveness that was the sin God wouldn't forgive."

"Do you think my soul has shriveled to the size of a walnut?" Helena was undecided whether she should be amused or insulted. She would never have believed Mrs. Frederic a candidate for dementia, but this wandering tale about irons and souls and forgiveness was so unlike what Helena remembered as Mrs. Frederic's usual mode of speech, decisive, brief, and, at times, maddeningly cryptic, that she had to entertain the possibility.

"I was less worried about your soul when you were planning to end the world," Mrs. Frederic said, and Helena was surprised to feel herself flushing. "At least then you still felt the world was worth taking on."

"Is this all because I left the Warehouse for good?"

"It's because of what you left the Warehouse for," Mrs. Frederic said. "You've become, what, an appraiser of Victorian-era antiques and memorabilia? I assume you must be able to do that in your sleep. A woman of your talents ought to ask more of herself."

Helena felt the flush intensify, but she kept her voice even. "Considering how I used to employ my talents, you ought to be grateful that I live so quietly. And as for asking for forgiveness, I would ask for it every day for what I've done, but there is no one out there to hear my pleas."

"Is it that you think there's no one to hear your pleas, or that he - or she - won't listen to them? Forgiveness is just that, a gift. It's not assured and can't be expected. That's the one thing my father wasn't willing to tell his seven-year-old daughter. It's enough to make anyone stop asking, especially if her sins are, let us say, significant."

Helena repressed the desire to rub her temples. She wasn't surprised that Mrs. Frederic knew what
she had been doing to make a living for the past several years, but she was surprised that Mrs. Frederic cared. After Boone, when she had turned over every last thing that had tied her to the Warehouse, practically given the regents the lint from her pockets to ensure there would no longer be an association, no one had asked her where she was going to go or what she was going to do. And had the regents asked, she wouldn't have been able to tell them. Yet here, today, Mrs. Frederic had the gall to disapprove. Helena didn't owe her anything. She didn't owe Artie forgiveness, and she didn't owe Claudia an apology for her silence. Possibly, maybe, she had owed Myka the truth. But that had been a long time ago, and the truth had a way of looking different each time you held it up to the light.

She had done enough today. She had come to South Dakota, to Univille, to this campus, and she had seen Pete and Claudia and Vanessa and Artie and spoken with them and pretended that her coming back was of no great import, as if she had been just an agent who had briefly lived and worked with them. She had met Drew, and if that was all of Myka she would take away with her that was enough. She stood up, holding out her hand to Mrs. Frederic. "If you're ready, I thought we could return to the reception. I have an early morning flight out, and, while I hate to admit it, it's been a long day for me."

Helena bit back a smile at the annoyance that flashed across Mrs. Frederic's face. The old woman didn't like surrendering control. "Despite what you may think, this hasn't been the wool-gathering of a woman approaching senility, Helena. Every agent, every caretaker has done things that do not rest easy on her conscience; the measure of her is in how willing she is to carry that burden. Ten years ago, you cut yourself off from us and you disappeared. To end up charging exorbitant fees for verifying the authenticity of a sideboard that could very well have been in your family home."

Helena felt ridiculous holding out a hand that Mrs. Frederic was in no hurry to take, but she wouldn't give her the satisfaction of sitting down. Childish, yes, Helena acknowledged, but she wasn't above it. "The things that burden my conscience aren't things I did for the sake of the Warehouse or 'our mission,' as you put it. I was in service only to my own needs and obsessions, as you well know."

Mrs. Frederic nestled her chin deeper into the scarf that lined the neck of her suit. The tucking of her chin could possibly be taken for a nod of agreement or even concession, but her next words undercut such an assumption. "You may have severed your connection to the Warehouse, but it hasn't severed its connection to you. And that it hasn't chosen to do so, I have to take on trust. God may not play dice with the universe, but that doesn't mean that He – or She – won't let it have its crotchets."

"Meaning?" Helena said impatiently. The mini-bar in her hotel room would not be enough to put this day to rest. She would have to order some horrendous bottle of wine from the room service menu, a vintage from Nebraska, no doubt, that she would shudder her way through.

"Meaning that while I don't understand why, the Warehouse still believes we can use you, Helena. I'm not sure I like the idea very much, but I don't know that we have any alternative."

"Mrs. F., Irene, we don't want to be scaring off H.G. just as she's arrived." Claudia was miraculously at Helena's elbow, staring hard at her mentor. Apparently the ability to be "magicked" from one place to another was a transferable power as well. But Claudia's appearance carried with it the air of a harried commuter rather than the unruffledness, which her predecessor had never failed to convey, of someone who, just moments before, had been helped from a chauffeured limousine. Claudia's linen suit was even more rumpled and her hair was mussed, as though she had been constantly running her fingers through it. "I thought we were going to give her a little time to get reacclimated. You know, get all of the 'Hey, how have you been?' 'We've missed you,' 'What
was all that going on between you and Myka back then?" out of the way before we sprang it on her."

"If by 'it' you mean my helping the Warehouse, there would be no easing of me into that," Helena said. She stepped around Claudia, leaving Mrs. Frederic to her. "I think I'll continue my self-guided tour of the campus, but I'll try to drop by the tent again before I leave."

Claudia touched her arm. "Seriously, H.G., if you have plans to leave tomorrow, cancel them. We need to talk to you." It landed somewhere between a request and an order, and though Claudia was trying to wear an ingratiating smile, she was too tired to wear it well. While she might be at the beck and call of congressmen and their staff, she was also accustomed to having people do what she said. She was comfortable with her authority, something the Claudia of old wouldn't have hesitated to mock. And envy.

Helena responded with her best noncommittal smile. She hadn't put more than a few feet of grass the color of the plastic grass in Easter baskets between them, when she heard Mrs. Frederic say warningly behind her, "Time's running out on you, Helena." She didn't stop walking, although she was fairly certain that Mrs. Frederic and Claudia had seen her back stiffen. As she passed the tent, she nodded to a few people who raised their hands in acknowledging waves. She didn't know them. They probably would realize as they exchanged glances and a "Was that?" with each other that they didn't know her either. She wasn't sure where she was headed, other than away. But her path was unerringly taking her closer to the B&B.

The garden at the back of B&B had been enlarged, with gravel paths and benches for sitting added. The old unkempt shrubbery, with its spiky, bristly growth, like a vegetative five o'clock shadow, had been removed, and smaller, more visitor-friendly bushes had been planted in its place. There were metal plates stuck in the soil next to all the flowers and plants, identifying whether they were native to the region or introduced. The gravel was a virginal white and showed signs of having been recently raked, and the benches were so freshly stained that Helena was leery of sitting down on one. But she wasn't yet ready to enter the B&B. The sun room, which had doubled as a breakfast room, was still where it used to be, with its French doors opening out onto the garden, but she couldn't locate the kitchen, and when she shaded her eyes with her hand to look up at the second floor, nothing about it looked familiar. She hadn't thought she was sentimental about the B&B; it had always uncomfortably reminded her that they were contemporaries. The creak of its floorboards, the groaning of its walls during a South Dakota winter, every affliction of its old age had underscored to her what a fraud she was. She didn't belong there, or if she did, it should have been in some sepia-tinted photograph of the home's original owners. But it was disorienting to look at something so familiar and yet, on some level, not be able to recognize it. She had no idea where to look for her old bedroom; she couldn't tell whether she was on the wrong or right side of the building.

She heard voices coming from around the corner, a man's and a woman's. He was thanking her for her time, but he sounded less appreciative than vaguely peevish, as if he were asking himself why he should be thanking her. Helena caught a glimpse of a blue suit, carefully groomed salt and pepper hair. The congressman. Then her voice, Myka's voice, and it wasn't so much its timbre that caught at Helena as its edge, so blunted by politeness and patience and studied good humor that someone who didn't know her, like the congressman, might mistake it for a bit of overearnestness. Helena had heard it too many times when someone was attempting to dodge their questions about an artefact; while she had gone in for sarcasm, Myka had simply continued probing, never letting her temper get the best of her, but at the same time signaling to her partner in her very deliberateness that she recognized what a pain in the ass they were dealing with. The congressman, responding to what he thought was sincere gratitude for having monopolized her time, reassured Myka that there was no aspect of the Warehouse's operations that he wouldn't want to thoroughly
investigate. Another voice, another man's, cut in, reminding the congressman that he had a meeting in Rapid City to attend, and then the congressman was moving, feet crunching on gravel, Myka already forgotten. A flash of black, and Helena wanted to turn her head away, a reflex as stupid as it was self-protective since it would only draw attention to her not wanting to draw attention.

"Helena?" Myka was there, in front of her.

She was wearing a cocktail dress and her hair up, a double rarity as far as Helena could recall. In combination with the lines around her mouth and at her eyes that Helena didn't remember, couldn't remember, because they hadn't been there ten years ago, the formality of her appearance made Myka seem not older so much as at a remove, as if Helena were seeing her through glass. Or, Helena ruefully acknowledged, given how lovely Myka still was, as if she were relegated, like the star-struck at a premiere, to staring at her from the cordoned-off margins of the red carpet. But without realizing that she was moving, Helena was standing, the distance receding, as the both of them leaned into an awkward embrace. Their hands fluttered briefly at each other's waist and then they were leaning away, their smiles hesitant, peeping, as though newly hatched, at the corners of their lips.

Helena struggled to say something, anything, that would attempt to disguise how nakedly she was cataloging every part of Myka, comparing her to the image she had carried in her mind. The hair, the deep, rich brown she remembered, smoothed but not tamed into a twist, curls in active rebellion against the restraint, suggesting that the twist was only a firm tug from being undone. The eyes, more green than hazel, always seeming to be on the verge of widening with surprise or delight. The skeptical angle of her mouth at war with the open curiosity of her eyes. "I met Drew," Helena finally said. A necessary clearing of her throat, then stronger, "He looks like you."

"No, he doesn't," Myka said chidingly, the way she used to when she caught Helena in a lie or one of her more theatrical exaggerations.

"He reminds me of you, then," Helena said, slipping without thought into the mock exasperated tone she would adopt to parry Myka's chiding.

Myka's smile became a grin. "That I'll accept." Her grin didn't fade, but she uneasily lifted a shoulder. "I don't know what to say to you that wouldn't be trite or clichéd."

Helena became aware that she had fixed on Myka's shoulders, their breadth, the sweep of muscle from neck to bone. Myka was taller than average, but not tall, her shoulders broad, but not exceptionally so, yet Helena's memory of Myka pinning her to the wall with casual force was one of her strongest. All the subsequent memories she had formed of her, no matter that they were memories of Myka's more impressive or endearing qualities, had never lessened the power of that early one. When it struck her as funny and not pitiable, Helena would ask herself how the great H.G. Wells could have enshrined a memory that might as well have been a scene from a bodice-ripper, in which the hapless heroine (not really hapless just momentarily at a disadvantage) is manhandled by her antagonist-and-future-lover. The antagonist part had been true to life, if temporary, the future lover had remained imaginary.

"I'd offer you a tour of the B&B, but there's little you would remember of it and what's new is pretty forgettable. It's a conference center, except for the second floor and Claudia's wing."

Grateful for something to look at that wasn't Myka, Helena twisted her head to take in as much of the B&B as she could. "Claudia has a wing?"

Myka pointed to the extension on the B&B's far side. "She lives here, more or less. And that's where the old B&B is, if you want to see it. She swears there was no 'artefacting' involved in the
recreation, but you half-expect Leena to pop out from the kitchen."

Helena was reminded of Artie's quiet "She should have been here" and his admission about not forgiving himself. Shaking her head to banish the thought, she said, "And the second floor?"

"Apartments for some of the agents. One of the few changes most of us approved of, no more trying to squeeze an adult-sized life into a teenager's bedroom." With an off-handedness that wasn't quite successful, Myka said, "Pete lives in one of them."

There was no deft avoidance of the subject of their divorce, although Helena assumed that Myka didn't want to talk about it any more than she did. Which left silence and staring. Because Helena was still staring. It wasn't just Myka's shoulders, it was all of her in that tight black sheath. Myka had always referred to herself as a nerd and a bookworm, and though she had laughingly declined Helena's offers to teach her kempo, she had had her own ways of keeping in shape. Running primarily. Helena would see her leave the B&B at an absurdly early hour, the two of them up long before anyone else. Myka was getting her daily mile and a half in, while she, she was up because she never slept well or for long. Dressed in shorts and tanks in the summer, pants and hoodies when it was cooler, Myka would have her hair pulled back in a rubber band and her face would be stern with concentration.

"Do you still run?" Helena asked softly.

Myka nodded, surprised. "Every morning." She took a deep breath. "Did Claudia speak to you?"

Helena didn't have to ask Myka what she meant. "Mrs. Frederic did." She bent to her side and pretended to read the name plate of a plant growing next to the bench. "The wonders may be endless, but my capacity to experience them is not. Whatever it is they want to ask of me I can't do."

"I guess that's an end to solving puzzles and saving the day."

Helena straightened. Myka's eyes had narrowed to a squint, although the sun wasn't directly shining on them. "Not for another team," Helena attempted lightly. She had never found Myka's expressions difficult to read, but she couldn't tell what Myka was thinking now. She was out of practice. Or Myka's reserve had hardened into armor over the years.

"If you change your mind, there's a meeting tomorrow morning. Here, in Claudia's wing." Myka's face relaxed into a smile, albeit a half-hearted one. "I don't know if you're still a night owl, but the meeting won't be until ten. I can't come in until I drop Drew off at math camp."

Silly of Helena to think that a child of Myka Bering could be left to enjoy his summer vacation. "Math camp?"

"He likes it," Myka said defensively. "All right," she conceded with a sigh, "I had to bribe him to do it with the promise of soccer camp."

"Ah, he takes after his father." Another silence, but this time Helena was staring at the gravel under her feet. Raising her eyes to Myka's, she said, "I won't be able to make it, I'm leaving early tomorrow."

"Of course."

Myka had said it quickly, but Helena thought she could hear an unspoken yet sarcastic "you are." Of course you are. Fleeing, running, abandoning. But perhaps it was only her inner voice sneering at her. It did that with annoying frequency. Myka's eyes told her nothing, the green irises with their
hazel flecks, or maybe, after all, they were hazel irises with green flecks, were empty of derision, empty of any emotion. They were the eyes of a woman she had last spoken to ten years ago. There were no hidden emotions to parse.

Myka began to teeter away from her, anxious to leave. "I haven't been down to Artie's reception yet. I hope to see you before you go."

Helena watched her exit the garden, not with the swinging graceful strides she remembered but with more measured, more careful steps. She wasn't used to the heels. Helena's path was to the parking lot, which was past the B&B in the opposite direction. But instead she found herself heading in the direction of the tent. She wouldn't go in, she promised herself, she would just take one last look.

The distance seemed shorter this time, the commons was smaller or the tent was closer to the B&B than she had thought. She stood outside the tent. She spied Claudia's rumpled pantsuit in passing, and she was sure Mrs. Frederic was under the canopy, sitting in the shadows and brooding over the parlous condition of Helena's soul. About to turn away, she was again arrested by Myka's voice. Myka and Drew and Pete were standing in the middle of one of the tent’s entrances. Pete was ruffling his son's hair and Myka was fondly looking at the both of them. It seemed right, somehow, the three of them until Myka, sensing someone was staring at her, spun to face Helena, and then everything suddenly seemed out of balance, as if what could have been, what had been, and what was were commingling. It wasn't new to her, this dizzying feeling of occupying multiple worlds, but it had been a very long time since Myka had been in all of the worlds with her.

Myka looked at her questioningly, and Drew, noticing that his mother's attention had been drawn away, turned to look at Helena, too, and he looked at her with the same directness, the same inquiry written on his face.

She had had no answer then, and she had no answer now. She didn't run exactly, but she pushed herself back toward the B&B, toward the parking lot with great speed. Finally locating her unremarkable rental car in the midst of all the other sensible, four door sedans in the lot, she slid in behind the steering wheel and sank against the back of the seat. She would drive back to her hotel, lock herself in her room, drain the mini bar dry and, after a sleepless night, catch her flight out to Boston, no, Philadelphia. No, back to New York, home, now, of all places.

Yes, that's exactly what she would do, she told herself as she retrieved her phone and checked her flight. She was still telling herself it was exactly what she would do when she cancelled her reservation.
Chapter 2

Helena stood outside the B&B, a box of pastries in one hand, a recyclable 20 ounce cup of Earl Grey in the other. She supposed she could just enter and hope there was someone, a security guard, an agent, a lurking congressional staffer, to whom she could announce herself and ask for Claudia. It felt odd to feel so uncertain about entering the B&B; it also felt odd to be carrying pastries. But this was a morning meeting, and there had always been food at the morning meetings, even if it was no more than all of them carrying their bowls of cereals or cups of tea and coffee to the sun room. There was a bakery down the street from her hotel, and after her usual restless night, made all the more restless by the fact that she had cancelled her flight out without even really understanding why, she had been at its doors before it opened.

There hadn't been a bakery in Univille when she had lived at the B&B. Or a coffee shop. There had been a diner, which offered a fish fry on Fridays and meatloaf on Mondays. The only tea on its menu had been Lipton. There hadn't been hotels, plural. There had been a motel on the edge of town, the Badlands Inn, which offered two parallel rows of rooms whose windows either looked onto the parking lot in front or the stretch of weedy grass in back. Univille had been no different from any other town in the rural Midwest, in her admittedly limited experience. A gas station, a diner, a bar, a grocery mart, and a scattering of homes. If you had wanted something more, you drove the hour it took to get to Rapid City. But now its sleepiness had a slightly self-conscious air, as if Univille had realized that its isolation and lack of attractions were valuable to someone. Namely the government someones whom Helena had encountered in the hotel's fitness room at 5 am and in the bakery two hours later, their constant, ill-disguised scrutiny of their surroundings more so than their workout habits or their business casual attire marking them as new to town. It was one thing to be bordering a top-secret facility so remote and so esoteric in its work that the government itself probably believed it was an IRS warehouse, quite another to be bordering that facility when the government chose to remember what it was.

The government someones had wanted lodgings with treadmills and elliptical machines, and they had wanted their coffee freshly ground and brewed by baristas. They also wanted something less heart-attack-inducing than the double bacon breakfast special at the diner. Helena, a little hung over and still dehydrated, no matter that she had downed two bottles of water before taking a run on the treadmill, had benefited from the government someones' predilections by having the option of dragging herself down to the fitness room, by being able to buy a 20 ounce Earl Grey, by allowing herself to be indecisive about whether she wanted a chocolate croissant or a blueberry scone and then choosing both. Like the blind boring of termites, the government somethings, in their ceaseless investigation of the Warehouse's operations and personnel might be undermining all that made the Warehouse what it was, but Helena couldn't regret the changes to Univille.

A moment before Claudia hadn't been on the B&B's verandah, but in the time it had taken for Helena to glance down at her box of pastries and then glance back up, which was no time at all, Claudia had appeared. The jeans were black but not aesthetically torn, the belt was also black but not studded, and the top was simply a casual top in a very unClaudia-like royal blue. "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in," she said in a horrible Pacino imitation. "Is that how you're feeling today?"

"Did you guess that I would show up for the meeting, or did you sense a disturbance in the Force?" Helena asked as she approached the verandah's steps.

"Look at you, H.G., playing name that movie," Claudia said, reaching for the box of pastries. She
led Helena into the B&B's foyer, which still retained the old hardwood flooring, restored to a gleaming finish, but that was about all. The foyer had been enlarged to include a casual seating area, just off to the side of a large reception desk/security station, fashioned from a slightly lighter wood than the flooring and similarly gleaming. No one was yet manning it, and Claudia paid it no attention, heading down a corridor that seemed to separate the business part of the B&B from a more private area. There was only one door, at the corridor's end, and Claudia casually pushed it open. "Welcome to my digs," she said. "By the way, should I still be calling you H.G.?

It was the old B&B, down to the rag rugs on the no-longer-gleaming hardwood floor. The staircase to the second floor was next to her, the sun room was across the foyer and through the French doors. If she turned and went past the staircase, down the hall, she would be in the kitchen. She tentatively touched the bannister, not sure but what her fingers wouldn't go through it, and looked up. "I wouldn't have it any other way, darling." Which was true. Although no one had called her H.G. in years, 'Helena' wouldn't sound right coming from Claudia, or Pete, for that matter. She was still looking up, trying to remember which room she had occupied. Had she been down from Myka or across from her?

"Go up if you want. I knocked out some of the walls to make a bigger bedroom, but otherwise it looks the same."

Not that she had any fear of being overwhelmed by memories, since the second floor didn't hold many for her, her bedroom only being the place where she had slept, or, as was more often the case, unsuccessfully waited for sleep, but Helena preferred not to take Claudia up on her invitation. Instead she nodded her head toward the sun room. "Are we meeting in there?

"Pete and Jane are already here. We're just waiting on Myka and Mrs. F."

"Jane Lattimer?"

"Our eminence grise among the regents," Claudia said. Realizing that Helena looked no less puzzled by Janeâ€™s presence, she explained, "Kosan found he couldn't stomach all the wrangling with deputy directors, assistant deputy directors, managing associate directors, and deputy assistant managers. Okay, I might have made the last one up, but it takes a certain talent to handle all the underlings and their underlings."

"The patience of a former schoolteacher, perhaps," Helena said dryly.

"It also doesn't hurt that, somehow, she has clout in Washington," Claudia said out of the corner of her mouth as she opened the sun room's doors.

Pete sat across from his mother, and seeing their faces, together, in profile, Helena was struck by their resemblance. The same pronounced chins, straight blunt noses, and high foreheads. She had always found Jane one of the more reasonable - and shrewder - of the regents, and especially when Helena's appreciation of Pete was at a low ebb, she had found it hard to believe they were related. Myka had always urged her to look past his antics, to consider them protective coloring, and she wondered now if Myka, as usual, hadn't been right.

"Helena, it's good to see you," Jane said, rising, and shook her hand. "Claudia, you better put that box down before Pete starts drooling." She gave her son a wryly affectionate glance before turning her attention back to Helena. Her eyes were blue, not brown, and they had never been lit with her son's manic gaiety, at least not to Helena's knowledge. Jane was regarding her with a look that Helena suspected had greeted the children in her classroom year after year, knowing, amused, and carrying a hint of steel. It said there was no trick you could play on her that she wouldn't be wise to. She looked like a schoolteacher today, too; her white hair was drawn back in a bun, and she was
wearing an unfashionably long skirt and flats. "As soon as the others get here, we'll tell you what all this is about."

Pete was hovering over the pastries. "Do I go for the bear claw or the apple fritter?" He sighed before taking them both from the box.

"Whatever looks deep fried in that box is for you," Helena said.

Pete clapped one hand over his heart, while the other crammed the better portion of the fritter into his mouth. "You don't have to keep that unrequited passion for me hidden any longer," he said, working the pastry to the side of his mouth as he spoke. "I'm yours for the taking, H.G."

"I'm afraid I'll have to decline the offer," she said absently, opening the folder Jane had placed in front of her. Inside were pictures of artefacts, with summaries of their properties. The material wasn't unlike the information inside the assignment folders that Artie would pass out during meetings, except the summaries for these artefacts included the dates they had been retrieved and stored in the Warehouse. These weren't new or missing artefacts; they had already been found. She frowned and shot a glance at Jane.

"I know," Jane said. "That's one of the things we'll explain."

Pete's voice cut across his mother's. "That's going to be a doozy. But first things first, were you just telling me that you're taken? Has some lucky man - or woman - tamed your wild heart?"

The French doors behind them closed, and Myka, folders in the crook of one arm and keys dangling from her hand, the other hand pushing sunglasses over her forehead, circled the table and took a chair an equal distance from her former husband and her former mother-in-law. She dumped the folders and the keys on the table. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Pete. The official interrogation has been scheduled for later." There was no surprise in the friendly smile she gave Helena, but there was also no particular warmth to it, the smile suggesting that Helena was no more than the office mate two rows of cubicles over.

Helena sent a glare in Claudia's direction. "Did you tell everyone I was coming?"

Claudia had opened a laptop once she sat down and had never lifted her eyes from it, other than to select a pineapple danish from the box. She didn't lift them now. "I would have known if you left the area, H.G. There are precious few perks to being a caretaker, but that's one of them. If you were still here, that meant you were coming to the meeting." Tilting her head ever so slightly in Jane's direction, she said, "I'm almost done with the scans. Everything looks clean, so far."

"So," Pete said, bending his fingers in a beckoning motion. "Enough with the misdirection, H.G. Inquiring minds want to know. Did you turn down my proposal because you've given your heart to another?"

"Give it up, Pete," Myka muttered, sliding the topmost folder from her stack.

Perhaps she was irritated that they had known she was coming to the meeting before she did. Or possibly she was nettled by Myka's indifference to her romantic status, although after ten years of silence there was no reason for Myka to care. More importantly, why would she care whether Myka cared? Maybe she was also just a little bit disgruntled because even in faded jeans and a summer-weight v-neck sweater, Myka was undeniably... fetching. Helena was reluctant to admit to the inner whispering of a stronger adjective. Responding to Pete's teasing, she said archly, "Monogamy's never been my strong suit, darling." Myka remained absorbed by the contents of her folder, not so much as an involuntary twitch disrupting her calm concentration.
"Ooooh, still playing the field, are we? Maybe you and I, we can hit the night spots in Univille."
Pete grinned and pulled apart his bear claw.

"Which one? Taco Bell or Applebee's?"
Pete laughed, stuffing half of the bear claw into his mouth. "Sad but true."

Claudia closed her laptop. "Scans are done. We can talk freely as soon as Mrs. F. arrives."

There had been no opening or closing of the doors, but Mrs. Frederic was already taking a seat next to Myka. "Then let's proceed," she said, her gaze, as it settled briefly on Helena, cool and measuring.

"Scans, talking freely? Are we supposed to be hermetically sealed?" Helena asked. She had held off for as long as she could, but the print of the artefact summaries was beginning to swim in front of her. She opened the small satchel she had brought with her and fished for her reading glasses. Why she was embarrassed by having to use reading glasses in front of them, she didn't know, since her age had always been an easy target for Pete and Claudia, and sometimes for Myka as well; she was only slightly mollified to see that Pete was moving his folder up to and then away from his eyes and squinting at the print.

"Go get your glasses, dear," his mother said.

"Eh, I'm fine without them." He took in Helena's glasses. "On her, they're hot. Hey, H.G., when you're out looking for love, do you find that those work for you?"

That comment Helena ignored, and Mrs. Frederic impatiently cleared her throat. Claudia mumbled, "Dude, really, am I gonna have to have Myka send you through sensitivity training again?" After a sharp look from Mrs. Frederic, Claudia said, "Yeah, about the scans and the talking freely. There's kind of a trust issue between us and the DHS, meaning they don't trust us and we don't trust them. They've tried to bug my rooms more than once, and we've gone old school with the folders and the paper, like Artie did back in the day, because they track who accesses the Warehouse systems and what they're looking at. We'd prefer the DHS know as little as possible about this meeting."

"Meaning that your superiors don't know about this problem you've discovered." Helena sighed, rubbing her forehead.

"I wouldn't call them our superiors," Pete grumbled.

"I don't understand why you're under their authority in the first place. Warehouses have existed for centuries with little to no interference. Why the change?" Helena put her hand out to forestall the easy answer. "And don't tell me it's because of the Internet. The Internet existed when I was an agent here, and there was no hue and cry for government oversight."

"True," Jane said. "But the Internet has changed since you were an agent, and smart phones didn't exist, or they were only in their infancy back then. Everything's a potential photo for posting or a tweet."

"Do you know how many times I've been on YouTube?" Pete demanded. "Actually," he said, expression turning thoughtful, "that's kind of cool." The he assumed a comically stern look and a lower voice, saying, "But it's bad, very bad for Warehouse business."

"It got harder and harder to explain the Teslas and the purple gloves and the bagging," Claudia said, pulling the box of pastries closer to her. "The political climate's changed, too. There was the fallout from WikiLeaks and, of course, the stuff that went down with Snowden. And saying we
were with the IRS wasn't helping to make people any less suspicious. No one still knows quite what we do, but there are sure a hell of a lot more people involved in the not-knowing." She pursed her lips in consideration of the remaining pastries. "Some of these have an H.G.-look to them, you know, the scones, the croissants. I don't want to take something you want."

"Darling, take whichever one you want. It doesn't matter to me," Helena said.

At that, Myka rose from her chair and leaned over the table to look into the box. "She doesn't mean that." She paused, biting her lip. "Don't take the chocolate croissant."

Claudia frowned. "Yeah, but she said. . . ."

"Oh, God," Pete said, drawing down his cheeks with his hands. "How could I have forgotten the road trips with the two of you." Adopting a falsetto, he said, "'Helena, do you prefer a classical station or jazz? 'Myka, it really doesn't matter to me, just pick one.' 'I think I'll go with jazz.' 'Fine.' 'Are you sure you don't have a preference?' 'None at all, darling.' 'You know what? I think I'll go with pop.' 'You'll have to remove my cold, dead hands from the radio before you do that.' And then Myka's all smug as she turns it to the classical station, because she knew that's the one H.G. really wanted all along. She just wanted to see if she could provoke H.G. into giving herself away. They could spend hours trying to fake each other out. Claud, take the chocolate chip and strawberry swirl scone. I'm pretty sure H.G. believes that's a travesty of sconedom."

Both Myka and Helena looked at him admiringly. "I'm a higher primate," Pete said. "I'm capable of learning if the behavior's repeated often enough."

"Can we return to the matter at hand?" Mrs. Frederic said testily.

"Which is?" Helena asked. "I've been looking at the artefacts in the folder, and they're all here, in the Warehouse. I can't understand why that would be a problem."

Myka said slowly, "It isn't. We believe these are artefacts that have been copied."

"There have been replicas of artefacts before," Helena said. "Timothy Leary's reading glasses, for one." She didn't have Myka's eidetic memory, but hers was very good, all the same. She had just never cared much for details, believing that the endless hunt for such artefact-pollen was for the worker bees. When she had said as much, years ago, Myka had laughingly accused her of thinking she was the queen bee. Helena hadn't denied the charge, claiming with a dramatic haughtiness that it was self-evident she was the queen. She and Myka had been smiling at each other until the amusement in Myka's face had given way to something reckless and challenging, and she had leaned over the front seat of the SUV saying quietly, so that Pete, sitting behind the wheel couldn't hear, "Try to lord it over me." Funny how for a woman impatient with details, she still remembered that one. But Myka seemed not to be remembering the same moment, and Helena, forcing her mind back to replicated artefacts, said, "But their powers are generally weaker. Is that not the situation here?"

Given the sober expression on Myka's face, memories of flirtations with old partners weren't distractions. "The objects haven't been replicated, only their properties. Which, of course, makes the new artefacts that much harder to find. Take Jonas Salk's lab coat, for instance." She took a page from her folder and waved it at Helena. "It makes the wearer immune to physical injury, but it also makes her susceptible to hallucinations, fugue states -"

"Makes her looney-tunes, as our Mr. Sensitive would say," Claudia said, looking narrowly at Pete. "Salk, earlier in his career, tested vaccines on patients in state asylums. You know, back in the good old days, when mental illness, like being black or gay or a woman, made you slightly less
than human, in other words, great unwitting test fodder." Claudia eyed her chocolate chip and strawberry scone suspiciously before taking a tiny bite.

"We retrieved the lab coat in San Francisco nine months ago," Myka said, "from a race car driver who had a talent for walking away from fatal crashes. Since then, we've retrieved six more artefacts from San Francisco having the same property. A stethoscope, a scalpel, and a test tube," she paused. "Then a compact mirror, a visor, and a wristwatch."

Helena shrugged. "It's not uncommon to run across artefacts that have very similar properties. The vast majority of us, despite our tendency to believe otherwise, really aren't all that unique. How can you be sure that isn't the case?"

"Because the first side effect is the same and because the new artefacts tend to have occurred in clusters, in the same locations, over a relatively short period of time," Myka said.

"First side effect?" Helena hadn't missed the emphasis.

Myka hesitated, but only for a moment. "There are other, more permanent ones, like irreversible coma and death," she said ruefully. "We don't know how soon they happen, but we think the time period is short. A couple of months, maybe less than that. Six replicated artefacts, six people, six deaths."

"Are you sure the properties of the original artefacts haven't simply been transferred?" Helena asked.

"We retested the original artefacts," Pete said. "They still have their mojo."

Helena stared at Mrs. Frederic, an ironic smile teasing her mouth. "Perhaps God does play dice with the universe." Mrs. Frederic didn't smile in return, her face impassive. Turning to Jane, Helena said with a lightness that verged on mockery. "Absolutely fascinating. But I'm not sure why you think you need me." To be honest, she was fascinated. This was replication on a level that had never been previously achieved. Dreamed of, yes. Even she had been tantalized by the possibility, when she had hungered to invent whatever was beyond someone else's grasp, if only to prove that it wasn't beyond hers, but she hadn't been that hungry in a very long time.

"Because you're you," Claudia said. "We need someone to figure out how this is happening. The way the artefacts are multiplying we're not going to be able to keep up with them."

"We're chasing our asses right now," Pete said. "Everything's on the verge of spinning out of control."

"All the more reason to bring Homeland Security up to speed. You need resources, and they would be able to give you that." At the look of distaste that crossed Claudia's face, Helena felt a twinge of guilt for bedeviling her, them, with the suggestion, but only a twinge. The problem with secrets was that they tended to make you secretive, and working for an organization that itself was supposed to be secret seemed to foster mistrust and divisiveness more than it did any kind of solidarity. During her time at both Warehouses, she had often lobbed a rational suggestion into discussions grown increasingly rabid as frustrations about artefact-hunting, large and small, led to dark mutterings about bumbling fools from other agencies, imperious caretakers, and interfering regents. Sometimes they would rail against the Warehouse itself, accusing it of making the retrieval harder than it needed to be or actively hampering their searches. Of course, because she was perversive, more often because she was bored, Helena had also frequently been the one to plant the initial suspicion of a conspiracy, watching as others nurtured and developed the idea. She had sometimes wondered whether in the mix of all of her psychological frailties there wasn't a bit
of pyromania as well, this desire to light fires and then intensify them. But there was actual sincerity in her suggestion this time. She had little to offer that a department of the government couldn't.

Claudia said dismissively, "The last time we reported a 'situation' to the DHS, they put the Warehouse under lockdown. No one could go in or out, and the agents were grounded. It set us back weeks, and that was when we thought one artefact from the Warehouse, one artefact," she said, aggrieved, "was missing. I don't want to imagine how they would overreact to this." Myka had been studying another folder, but she lifted her head just enough to send a slanted look at Claudia. "She wasn't serious, you know, about bringing in the DHS."

"But I was," Helena said. She waited until Myka cocked her head toward her. "I wasn't just stirring the pot. Maybe this is something that's bigger than all of you." Myka steadily regarded her, while Pete vehemently squirmed his disagreement from his chair. "Were you able to get any information from the race car driver about how he acquired the lab coat or how its properties might have been replicated?"

"He was already on the crazy train when we caught up with him," Pete said. He cocked a finger at Claudia, "You'll have to add that phrase to the 'Peteisms that must not be repeated list.'" Turning back to Helena, he said, "He was still under psychiatric care. We went over his place with a fine-toothed comb, took apart his computer and his phone, and all we found was an online auction site that had been abandoned."

"They're good, whoever they are. I couldn't get anything useful from the site." Claudia broke off a piece of the scone and observed it with interest. "This isn't half-bad, H.G., you should try it."

Jane had pushed her folder away and was abstractedly running a finger over her upper lip. She glanced at Helena, then looked away. "Obviously they're targeting people who have the money to pay for artefacts, and the fact that they've been able to do so discreetly suggests that they already have an existing network they can tap for clients."

"Perhaps one of them is a former Warehouse agent who now makes a living appraising expensive antiques and collectibles," Helena suggested quietly. "She probably has a client base that matches your profile." She found she was clenching her hand, and she slowly uncurled her fingers. She had forgotten - it was all fun and games fueling people's paranoia until she found it directed at her. And with good reason, she had to concede, although it didn't lessen the anger that she had been duped, it was clear, into coming to this meeting. They weren't asking for her help as much as they were trying to determine whether she was the culprit. She could sacrifice herself a hundred times over and what they would all remember first was that she was the only agent in Warehouse history, to anyone's knowledge, who had asked to be bronzed; the second thing they remembered was that she had been one trident-strike away from ending the world as they knew it. She recalled with a clarity that surprised her the last meeting she had had with the regents, their regret at her decision to sever all ties with the Warehouse not quite overriding a sense of relief. And from Mrs. Frederic, who had also been present, there had been only watchfulness, as if she would wait forever, if need be, for the other shoe to drop. Had Mrs. Frederic thought she heard something fall to the floor just now? Helena was tempted to lift one leg and then the other and show her that a sandal remained on each foot. Instead she fixed her with another stare and said, "Yesterday I didn't give a shit about the world and today I'm supposed to be plotting its destruction again?"

"We're all under a cloud, Helena," Myka said gently. "Someone with a knowledge of artefacts is orchestrating this."

That had always been Myka's role. Whenever they had felt that the tortured H.G. Wells, the
unstable refugee from the nineteenth century and her own tragic history, was about to make an appearance, Myka would step in to stroke her fevered brow (only metaphorically, of course) and to coax her to rejoin the family. Screw that. "Don't insult me, darling. No one else at this table could do what's apparently being done, not even Claudia."

Seemingly from out of the depths, though she was still sitting next to Myka, came Mrs. Frederic's dry rattle of a laugh. "Then you're in agreement that you're a natural suspect, Helena?"

"Except that I have no motive." Helena paused, knowing that she would regret what she would say next, but it felt so satisfying to indulge her anger, she couldn't resist. It had been so long since anyone or anything had gotten under her skin like this; it was pleasurable, this momentary self-restraint before she let the words fly. She almost wanted to wait another beat or two just to savor the build-up, but as had also been true when she was angry, the need to lash out was overpowering. "I haven't cared enough in ten years to have anything to do with the Warehouse or anyone associated with it, and Claudia can attest to that, not a single acknowledgement of a single email. I have no reason to invite you back into my life, which is exactly what replicating an artefact's power would do. I'm sure you have some dossier on me, a folder probably just like this one." Helena picked hers up and slapped it down on the table. "Money wouldn't be a motivator, nor revenge, nor anything else. You probably know what I had for breakfast last week and whom I've last slept with. You know there's nothing in my life as I live it now that suggests I would do this."

Myka's face hadn't changed at all. Her eyes hadn't flickered or grown large or shut tight, and Myka had never looked away from her either. She had listened to Helena's rant as if she had heard it a thousand times before, and Helena realized with a growing horror that Myka had. Helena would feel attacked, Myka would try to soothe her, she would, in turn, brush off the attempted sympathy with something cutting or contemptuous, and then snarl, for good measure, that she didn't care, about their opinions of her, about what the world at large thought of her. How could she have forgotten so easily? But Myka had expected her, they had all expected her to respond like this. In fact, she could see the smile begin to creep across Myka's face.

Pete, in a gesture reminiscent of his mother, was rubbing his chin. "The shredded wheat, yeah, that was sad, a little bit. I had to skip over that part. But the woman in D.C. you're seeing, she's, like, incredible. Is she the one who's got your number now, H.G.? Cause I could completely understand."

Claudia had never stopped eating her scone during Helena's display of temper and was only now patting away a few lingering crumbs from her face. "You have to admit it was pretty odd timing, your RSVPing Artie's retirement party. Right when all of this crap's going on, and out of everything I'd sent you, that's the thing you responded to? We had to check it out, and, frankly, you're right. We would've checked you out even if you hadn't come to the party. I could count on the fingers of one hand the people who could pull off replicating an artefact's properties, and four of those fingers have your name on them."

"So, did I pass the test?" Helena demanded, angry anew at hearing the tiny tremor in her voice.

"No more than any one of us has," Jane said. "None of us has your capabilities, true, but it doesn't mean that we couldn't be helping out someone who does." The blue eyes weren't unkindly, but Helena half-expected Jane at any moment to tell her to buck up and follow the other children's example. "We would have been more worried if you had laughed off the suspicion or volunteered to submit to a polygraph. Myka said that the more you clawed the dirt and flapped your wings, the less likely you were to be involved."

"Yes, 'mad as a wet hen.' Lovely image, thank you," Helena muttered.
Myka shrugged, still smiling, but there was a wistfulness to it that kept its curve shallow. "Ten years is a long time. Maybe we don't cross your mind, maybe your choosing to come back now is only a coincidence, and you'll leave here happy if you never see any of us again. But I have to believe that whatever's changed, Helena, you wouldn't hurt the Warehouse."

Helena looked at Claudia. "Is it? Is the replication harming the Warehouse?"

"Not directly, but I think it's fair to say that the Warehouse is a little confused. An artefact whose properties can be replicated in a completely unrelated object. It's a violation of everything we know about artefacts and why Warehouses have existed." She sighed and leaned against the back of her chair, tipping it onto its back legs and catching onto the edge of the table for balance. "Yeah, it's a paradox, but not in a fun, there's-a-drinking-game-in-this-somewhere kind of way. The Warehouse doesn't like puzzles. Who knew?"

"Are you all right?"

Claudia grinned. "Great show of indifference there, H.G. Sorry to tell you, but you don't have the not-caring thing down. But to answer your question, yes, I'm fine for now, and so is Mrs. F. But if we can't put a stop to the replication, I can't say what's going to happen."

Helena wasn't sure how she felt, still a little angry, a little ashamed at her outburst, and more than a little alarmed at how quickly she was slipping into old patterns. She also knew that a part of her mind was already working through what would be needed to replicate an artefact's properties. But first things first. "Give Myka the chocolate croissant and then pass me the box," she told Claudia. She held up a warning finger to Myka. "Don't remind me about your no sugar rule, which none of us ever believed anyway, and don't tell me you've already eaten because I know you haven't." Flicking her eyes to Pete and then back to Myka, Helena said, "I remember our road trips, too. You always forgot to eat if you were in a hurry."

For the first time, Myka's smile was the way Helena remembered it, full and warm and teasing, and she hadn't forgotten how the power of it could move through her, banishing whatever dark thoughts had been besetting her - multiple and varied but nonetheless uniform in the weight of their guilt or remorse - but she blinked at how powerful it remained, realizing that her own lips were stretching to accommodate a smile she rarely wore, one that said she was utterly gobsmacked. Clearing her throat and needlessly readjusting her reading glasses, Helena took refuge in her folder. "I'm standing by my suggestion to bring in Homeland Security, but if you're dead set against it, why did you let Artie retire when he did and where, by the way, is Steve? If the situation is as serious as you say, why isn't everyone here who needs to be here?"

Claudia, Myka, and Mrs. Frederic looked at one another, before Claudia answered. "Because it would raise more questions. Hiring goes through the DHS now, and they track how we use staff very, very closely. We have more agents now than the Warehouse has had in decades; it's what allowed us to take Myka out of the field and have her become our new Artie long before we needed a new Artie. It enabled Vanessa to talk Artie into retiring about three years after he should have and five years before he wanted to, and, after an incredibly painful amount of paperwork, it gave us the ability to allow Steve to take a six-month sabbatical in Nepal. But we don't know who has our new agents' loyalties, the Warehouse or DHS, and there's no way I'm going to have new agents tattling to DHS about our replication problem. If we had postponed Artie's retirement or called Steve back from Nepal, there would have been even more questions." Letting all four legs of her chair touch the floor again, Claudia said, "If we need to, I think we can trust a couple of the newer agents, Travis and Jacqui. Pete's been on a few assignments with Travis and thinks he's solid." Pete dipped his head in agreement. "And Jacqui's our new Myka in training, which is good, because if you decide you're with us in this, H.G., Myka's going to be your partner in the field."
"What?" Helena heard Pete chiming in only a second or two behind her.

Pete had half-risen from his chair, and Jane stared at him until he sat down. Glaring first at his mother and then at Myka, Pete said tightly, "This part we didn't discuss. I thought I would be partnering H.G. Aside from the fact that our son needs one of his parents to be home," he said to Myka, "you haven't been in the field on a regular basis since Drew was born. H.G. hasn't been in the field on a regular basis since she tangoed with Yogi Bear at Yellowstone. Given that we don't even know what we're looking for anymore, it's a recipe for disaster."

"You're our senior training agent. If you're not out there training the newbies, Myka will get calls from the DHS. So, no, you're not going to be H.G.'s partner. Myka goes into the field on quality checks," Claudia said. "You remember, the ones the DHS makes us do now to ensure that people aren't posting shots of us dunking an artefact in goo or blogging about that neat trinket Mr. Jones next door was using to entice all the neighbor ladies into taking their clothes off for him?" At Pete's disgusted expression, she said, "All the DHS requires is that we do them, they don't ask which ones or how often we send her out. Amazingly enough, they don't quality check our quality checks." "Why do I suspect that avoiding the so-called storm troopers of Homeland Security will be like escaping the Death Star via the trash compactor?" Helena mumbled to herself as she broke off a chunk of the blueberry scone.

Pete gaped at her before turning to Myka. "That was awesome and proof that our little girl's all grown up. But the stuff about you going out into the field with her is not awesome and not what we agreed to when it comes to Drew, and you know it."

"We can talk about that later, Pete, in private," Myka said. "But as for my not being an active field agent for years or Helena not being a field agent, and our not being able to handle ourselves in the field, that's bullshit, and you know it." She pulled a folder out from the middle of her stack. "Claudia and I have already decided on the next replicated artefact we need to track down." She was about to slide the folder in Helena's direction when she stopped. "Helena, we need to know, are you in or not?"

In for what and for how long. What commitment were they asking from her? A week? A month? Longer? She didn't operate like that anymore. Her commitments, such as they were, were well defined and limited. A three-day trip to Los Angeles to appraise Edwardian-era furniture that a director wanted to buy for a study he would never use and a carriage that an agent wanted to restore, the third day of the trip being her own to spend at a beach watching the waves roll in. There was no commitment she had to make other than to give her clients her opinion, and if she picked up some young thing on the beach or in a nightclub later in the evening, no commitment was required then either. On the fourth day, three days ahead of when God had rested from his labors, she would be finished and on a plane to the next appraisal or someone's vacation home in the Caribbean or her loft in New York. It really didn't matter where only that it was different from the last place she had been.

But what they were asking of her now, there really was no end to it. There would always be another artefact, replicated or not. There would be the drudgery of tracking down clues and the grinding irritation of having to cajole, or browbeat, people into revealing what they knew. Thankfully the moments of terror, when the artefacts or the people involved with them turned out to be more dangerous than anyone realized, tended to be short-lived. Helena no longer understood her younger self's enthusiasm for the hunt, especially since the end of it was so rarely happy, but then she didn't much like her younger self anyway, brash and overweening in her pride. She had learned that the Warehouse was no bastion of morality; eerily sentient, it also seemed incapable of, or perhaps uninterested in, passing judgment, allowing villains and monsters into its depths as easily as it did
its caretakers and agents. Her second go-around with the Warehouse had been tolerable only because of Myka. Myka hadn't redeemed the Warehouse for her, but she had made Helena believe that, just possibly, it was a little less venal than the world outside it.

Despite the hint of impatience in her voice and the harassed expression that the folders in front of her had brought to her face, as if they were multiplying before her eyes, there was an earnestness to how Myka was looking at her that Helena devoutly wished at that moment she didn't remember. It was the look Myka always gave her before they were about to do something particularly dangerous or ill-advised or both, searching and serious and, worst of all, trusting that Helena, regardless of their games or arguments or her whole sad history that screamed she couldn't be trusted, would be beside her. She had always been powerless before that look, just as she was now.

"I'm in," she said.

Claudia whooped, Jane looked relieved, and Pete, although his expression was uncharacteristically sour, gave her a thumb's up. Myka simply pushed the folder across the table to her, apparently having expected no other response. Mrs. Frederic shifted in her chair, clapping her hands together on the table, as though only now was the real discussion to begin. "It's all well and good that Helena's agreed to assist us, but I have my own concerns about her fitness as an agent, no matter how temporary her tenure with us is."

"Irene," Jane said, "I thought we had settled this." She said it pleasantly enough, but the schoolmarm's steeliness was evident in her voice.

Mrs. Frederic was unperturbed. "In your mind, perhaps." As Claudia and Myka exchanged worried glances, Mrs. Frederic looked unblinkingly at Helena. "You do remember what you said to the regents when you wished to end all association with the Warehouse?"

"I said many things."

"Not that many," Mrs. Frederic countered. "When one of the regents asked what it was about the incident in Boone that made it the deciding factor, do you remember what you told her?"

Helena crumbled what was left of the scone between her fingers. The meeting with the regents had been in a room in Boone's community center, the one next to the room, ironically enough, where she had taken the same cooking class as Nate. It had been toward the end of winter, March, but in Wisconsin that could still mean below-freezing temperatures and snow storms, and she recalled how stuffy and warm the room had been as they sat, grouped around a small table, snow melt puddling at their feet and coats and scarves draped over empty chairs. All except Mrs. Frederic, who had worn nothing over her mustard-colored suit and whose pumps showed no trace of having crossed icy sidewalks or stepped through slush. Helena had thrown up earlier that morning and was still feeling queasy. She wasn't sure whether it was nerves or if the regrettable night in Nate's bed a few weeks ago - before then they hadn't slept together for months, although Helena had yet to move out - was coming back in the worst possible way to haunt them.

"I told her that I had been having nightmares ever since Myka and Pete had retrieved the jawbone artefact, that I dreamed Adelaide had died," Helena said tonelessly, but her eyes were bright with resentment as she glared at Mrs. Frederic. "I said that the experience had ruined my relationship with Adelaide's father and confirmed my worst fear, that I might lose another child, especially if I retained any connection to the Warehouse. Although I had helped out the Warehouse on a few occasions since that initial visit, hoping that I might be able to reconcile the two halves of my life, I realized that I had to choose between them." She finished grimly, "You know what I chose."

It had all been true, what she had said to the regents. Myka and Pete's coming to Boone had marked
the end of her relationship with Nate, but for reasons other than, or at least in addition to, the reason she had given the regents. She had had nightmares of Adelaide dying, but they had little to do with Adelaide herself and even less to do with her having been held hostage in the camping goods store. But the only outright lie she had told the regents was that she had wrestled with cutting all ties to the Warehouse for months; she had known before Pete pulled the SUV out of Nate's driveway their last evening in town that nothing of what she had built, or thought she had built, in Boone would last and that she when left Boone, as she inevitably would, she would need to leave the Warehouse behind her as well.

"Helena," Myka said, her voice soft and apologetic, "I'm so sorry for whatever role we had in how things ended for you in Boone. When we talked afterward, you never said -." She cut herself off. "For what it's worth now, I'm really sorry," she repeated, raising her eyes to Helena's. The look was full of an old misery, and Helena wondered how long Myka had brooded about what happened in Boone, what had been said and not said.

"It was a long time ago," she said more curtly than she had intended. Trying to soften her brusqueness, she said, "Nate married a couple of years after we broke up. By all accounts, Adelaide's mainly, his wife is a wonderful woman and she's been a great mother."

"You still keep in touch with Adelaide then?" Myka asked, a strange smile playing on her lips.

Pete darted a glance at Myka, and the sour expression that had never quite left his face was replaced by something tender and protective, and Helena bridled upon seeing it. She restlessly swept the scone crumbs into a tiny pile with her napkin. "Occasionally. She'll be a sophomore in college this year."

"I'm not finished with that meeting in Boone," Mrs. Frederic said, reclaiming Helena's attention. "There was something more you told the regents. When they asked you if you were sure that there could be no further relationship with the Warehouse."

Helena closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of her chair. Of course, this was what Mrs. Frederic had been honing in on, tolerating all the mawkishness about Helena's failed relationships with Nate and Adelaide because there was something more telling from that meeting yet to be disclosed. Telling in Mrs. Frederic's mind, yet simply another calculated half-truth in Helena's. She had said what she needed to say to convince the regents that she was serious. Opening her eyes and looking at everyone around the table in turn, she said, "I told them that I wasn't sure, if emotionally, I could cope with the strain and the stress of being involved with the Warehouse anymore, that, at some point, it would demand something from me that I no longer had to give, and I couldn't be responsible for putting an agent at risk because of it."

"Why should I believe that's changed now?" Mrs. Frederic said, her voice, like a needle, pricking at Helena. "How can I be sure, how can anyone of us here be sure that you won't suffer some collapse when you're needed most?"

Helena chewed the inside of her cheek and then forced herself to smile. She was certain it was more grimace than smile. "Admittedly I don't have a very good track record with agents. I've done horrible things to some of them, some in this very room. And when I haven't betrayed them, I've lied to them and manipulated them. But the one thing I've never done to an agent is to abandon him, or her, out of fear. It's a small point of distinction, very small, but -"

"Enough." The word sliced through Helena's confession, startling her. Myka was looking at Mrs. Frederic. "Enough," she repeated quietly. "You're not making the decision about whether Helena's fit enough be in the field with me. None of you are. I'm making it. She's going, and I'll take responsibility for it."
"Very well," Mrs. Frederic said mildly. "You will take responsibility for it, Myka." Rising from her chair, she regarded Helena with what might have been the barest glimmer of an amused smile. "You're carrying a larger burden than most, Agent Wells, you need to shoulder it well." After a twitch at her skirt to straighten it, she was gone, the French doors not having a chance to close in the softest of whispers behind her.

Claudia sucked in a breath and then let it out in a slow exhale. "Well, that last was awkward, but it's over." She kept the serious expression on her face for a second or two before bouncing out of her chair to rush over to Helena and hug her. Helena felt her shoulders being painfully folded together as Claudia squeezed her, shouting over the top of Helena's head, "Welcome back, temporarily unofficially reinstated Agent Wells." She broke the hug, grinning widely. "It's off-book, of course, and we'll have to publicly deny all knowledge of you if anything bad or embarrassing happens, but otherwise you're an agent. Tesla-less and Farnsworth-less but still an agent."

"I'm overwhelmed," Helena said sardonically. "And why will I not have a Tesla or Farnsworth?"

"No one has them anymore. The DHS deemed them to be unsafe technology. We're not absolutely forbidden to use them, but they're all logged and stored away, and I practically have to sign Pete's firstborn over to get one out." Claudia's grin had shrunk, and she ran her fingers through her hair in what Helena suspected was a frequent gesture of frustration when dealing with Homeland Security and, remembering the importunate young assistant who had collared Claudia at the party yesterday, congressional staffers. "Apparently shooting people is preferable to Tesla-ing them, and talking on an encrypted phone I could hack in my sleep is superior to using a Farnsworth. But, hey, who's complaining. You're back, even if it's only for a little while." She wrinkled her forehead in thought. "How long do we have you?"

"It may be overpraised, but one of the pleasures of being self-employed is being your own boss," Helena said, opening the folder that Myka had given her. "I cleared my schedule before I came here. There's nothing I have to return to." She felt the truth of her words echo mockingly within her, as if she were no more than an empty room, her collection of memories like a box of old LPs and some dust mice on the floor.

She heard Pete and Myka talking in low, not entirely friendly, voices near the doors that opened onto the garden. Myka's face had settled into a familiar stubbornness, the arch of her brows flattening into an uncompromising line just above her eyes and her chin lifting, as if it were a finger she could jab in emphasis. "Myka, will you be joining us tonight?" Jane interjected in a voice she must have used countless times to head off fights on the playground, carrying and authoritative, and Pete and Myka both instinctively turned around.

"I already have plans, Jane, but thanks for asking," Myka said, and though Helena assumed that Jane had asked Myka to join them in an attempt to defuse the situation, she noticed the disapproval that flared at Myka's response.

"Boyfriend," Claudia hissed in explanation.

"I'm sorry?" Helena said, not sure she had heard Claudia correctly.

"Myka," Claudia hissed again. "She has a boyfriend. Pete's okay with it, but Jane still struggles."

"Oh," Helena said, feeling that she had gusted the word, as though the heel of someone's palm had been driven into her gut, pushing her breath up and out. She shouldn't have been surprised to hear that Myka was seeing someone but she was. A little shocked, actually. She didn't know what else she had expected, certainly not that Myka, in taking over Artie's job, had also assumed his nearly
monastic devotion to the Warehouse. She was a single woman. No, she was a gorgeous single woman who would have her pick of Univille's eligible bachelors, few in number and unprepossessing though they might be. "I'm amazed that she found someone in Univille, but -"

"She doesn't live in Univille," Claudia said. "She and Drew live in Rapid City; she works from home most of the time. To give the DHS their due, they were pretty accommodating, you know, the whole work-life balance thing. She can be soccer mom and Artie all rolled into one. Of course, her house is wired to the rafters, and I think you're automatically electrocuted if you ring the doorbell, but if you want to visit, I'm sure she'll give you the secret password."

Myka had returned to the table and was gathering her folders. The irritation that had been visible as she had argued with Pete was gone, and she seemed completely absorbed as she flipped through each folder before adding it to the stack, frowning in concentration, mouth slightly parted as if she were just seconds away from taking a Twizzler from her secret stash and chewing on it. Helena could imagine the same look on Myka's face as she watched her son play soccer. Yes, the work-life balance, the equal meting out of responsibilities, and Myka being Myka, she would attend to each with the same care. She wouldn't have been one of those children who try to dislodge a playmate from a teeter-totter by ramming her end into the ground; she would have always sought that perfect balance of up and down, never too high and never too low. Adelaide had been like that, too. Why hadn't she seen it earlier. . . . Helena sensed where her thoughts were drifting and was more grateful than startled when Myka suddenly said, "My house," and looked at her. "Tomorrow night. Working dinner at 7. I want to go over the artefact we'll be retrieving. Claudia can give you directions." She slung the folders into the crook of her arm and tucked her keys into her jeans' pocket. "Claud, I'm off to meet with Jacqui. I'll be at the Warehouse if you need me."

Claudia pursed her lips and issued a soft whistle. "Working dinner, and here I thought all the surreptitious meetings we're gonna have to have would take place over tuna fish sandwiches in a parked car in the grocery mart lot. You must still rate."

Helena was recalling one of Myka's previous attempts at cooking, when they had all lived in the B&B. She asked, deadpan. "Will this be what finally kills me?"

"Drew's still alive, so she must not screw up kid's fare too bad. You're probably safe if she sticks with chicken tenders." Claudia gave her a comforting pat. "I've got to go torture somebody at DHS, but you're free to hang around for as long as you want."

The sun room was empty when Claudia left - through the French doors - and Helena slumped against her chair, exhausted. She wanted another shower or a change of clothes; the rush of emotion and memories had left her feeling like she had just rolled out of bed after a weekend bacchanal. Or, far worse, a long snag and bag. She told herself she hadn't come back to help the Warehouse; she hadn't known the Warehouse was in trouble, couldn't have possibly known, because she had made damn sure she stayed far enough away not to sense anything like trouble from it. She had come back because. . . she was running out of other places to go. Her soul, should she have one, wasn't in jeopardy, but she would admit to having lost her bearings. She smiled at the unintended pun. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, yes, and so does entering a labyrinth. She still didn't know which she was traveling, only that Myka was at its heart.
Chapter 3

She stayed in the car, leaving the engine running, and looked at Myka's house. It was older and less tract-like than she had expected. On the edge of the city, it was off a lane that wound up and down hills before leveling at the top of a ridge that afforded spectacular views of the Black Hills to the west and north. Myka had neighbors but none too near, and the house, a prairie-style ranch, had space to sprawl. Helena eyed first the bottle of wine on the passenger's seat, which was nice enough to present as a gift but not nice enough to upstage the meal, even if it consisted of chicken tenders and oven fries, and then her outfit, assembled from the offerings at the Rapid City Macy's, which, she concluded, were not only marketed to the well-to-do suburban mom - though Rapid City wasn't yet large enough to have spawned any suburbs - but also hellbent on making every woman look like one. Wearing navy blue capris and an off-the-shoulder French-striped sweater, Helena feared she looked like the middle-aged lead from a Nancy Meyers movie. Taking a breath to settle her stomach, which wobbled as if it were thinking of breaking away from her other organs, she shut off the engine and tried to walk to Myka's front door with a confidence that said she did this every day, only to be greeted by chaos as soon as the door opened. A large dog ran across the foyer with something hanging from its mouth, and Drew was in pursuit, shouting "Shep, c'mere!" Myka ushered her in with a lopsided smile. "Wait here while I go kill my dog." Something brown and smelling pungently of soy sauce streaked her shirt and jeans; she looked down at it and grimaced before jogging after her son and their dog.

Soon Helena heard growls erupting from deeper within the house, many of them sounding like they came from Myka. She returned, a raw, well-chewed chicken breast in her hand, Shep trotting complacently behind her, nails clicking on the hardwood floor. He approached Helena curiously, head cocked. She cautiously patted his head as Myka gave him a withering look. "Three obedience schools," she said, "and nothing took. I guess I should be happy he's no longer peeing in the house."

She led Helena through the foyer, which was bordered by a formal dining room on one side and an equally formal living room on the other, both having the funereal stillness of rooms used only on special occasions, and into a large, open area that seemed to extend the width of the house and combined the kitchen, a much more casual eating area, and a family room where Drew was sitting on a rug in front of the TV playing a video game. French doors opened onto the patio, and Helena could see that a table, at the center of a grouping of sturdy, rain-impermeable chairs, had already been set, had probably been set for hours. To her left, and she would barely need to stretch her arm out to touch it, was an island, crowded with bowls and cutting boards; at its base, the floor was littered with strips of red and green peppers and more chicken. Myka threw away the chicken breast she was carrying, sighed, and with her hands on her hips surveyed the damage. "I'll change, and then I'll try to figure out something for dinner." She pointed to Helena's bottle of wine. "Why don't you open that? There's a corkscrew in the drawer and wine glasses in the cupboard." She gestured vaguely to the cabinets that lined the walls behind them.

The corkscrew was easy enough to find, and Helena eventually located the wine glasses, after a few futile sorties into the cupboards; they were hidden behind a row of children's glasses ringed with various action figures. The popping of the cork caught Drew's attention, and he watched as she poured wine into the glasses. Individually they were familiar, Myka's serious expression and Pete's features, but combined as they were on Drew's face, Helena was struck by their unusual juxtaposition, as if Myka might want to put straws up her nose or Pete might want to watch a documentary on PBS.

"How's math camp?" Helena asked, intensely aware that it had been a long time since she had been
Drew shrugged. "It's okay."

"What do you do in class?" Helena heard herself laugh nervously and cringed. "In my day, we probably would have been chained to our desks and forced to do long division." Wonderful. Could she sound any more ancient and out of touch?

He stared at her blankly. "We play games. They take us on a lot of field trips and stuff, to show us how we use math every day. And we get to build things." He sounded more animated about the last.

A promising trail into eight-year-old boyland. "What are you building?" Helena looked at the mess on and around the island. Surely she could find the broom on her own.

"Nothing yet." He pushed himself off the rug and she was aware of his silent surveillance as she searched what she thought were likely areas where Myka might keep a broom. "It's over here," he said, walking toward a slender cabinet farther along the wall, next to a door that Helena assumed opened to the basement stairs. Shep was a black shadow, albeit a snuffling one, beside him. Drew handed her the broom but held onto the dustpan, and he knelt on the kitchen tile, positioning the dustpan at the end of the projected trajectory of peppers and chicken. He squinted up at her. "We all have to build something by the end of camp. My friend Jacob's going to build a go-cart. Well, him and his dad. My dad said we could do something like that, but Mom said we should think of something more useful."

Of course Myka would take the practical view. Helena swept chicken and peppers into the dustpan, noting how Drew minutely moved the pan to keep to the track of the broom. Helpful, uncomplaining. It was dismaying behavior to see in a child his age. Somewhere in him there had to be a bedrock of resistance to chores and making "useful" things for school projects. "I think a go-cart would be fun." She paused, giving herself a moment to reconsider what she planned to say next, but how else were children to learn unless you put ideas into their heads? "I built a rocket once."

Drew's eyes grew big. "One that went into space?"

Helena nodded, taking the dustpan from him and emptying it into a wastebasket. Myka, returning to the kitchen, said, "And how did that go for you, Helena?"

"Not as well as I had hoped," she grudgingly admitted. Although she was still smelling peppers, she caught the scent of something lighter and sweeter, perfume. Myka was wearing perfume, and she had changed into dress slacks and a long-sleeved blouse. The blouse was pale blue, with a long, open neckline, which closed just above the swell of her breasts. Helena knew she was staring yet her smile couldn't have been less apologetic, and Myka suddenly, clumsily turned away from the smile, almost knocking over her wine glass.

"They're going to build a birdhouse," she said, her words sounding rushed. "I'm fairly confident that Pete can help him build it without injuring himself or Drew, and we can put it up in the yard when it's finished."

Helena's response was to sip her wine. Drew exhaled noisily in what might have been a sigh and slouched back toward the TV.

Transferring bowls and cutting boards from the island to the sink, Myka said, "It's something that can last, something that the birds will use, I hope, and something that's appropriate for a boy his
"I'm not objecting, Myka," Helena said, smiling over the rim of her wine glass at her.

"Yes, you are," Myka said. "You're all but screaming it." She bit her lip. "Just say it."

"It's boring, it's safe, and it's probably what every other child will bring to class, either that or a magazine rack. There, I've objected." Helena hesitated, a memory of Adelaide coming to her, asking for her help with an assignment that her art teacher had given the class. "Adelaide had to model something in clay for her art class. The teacher was looking for a pencil holder. Adelaide took a skyscraper to class, and Nate and I were both called in for a heart-to-heart. This is the kind of object lesson I provide when it comes to school projects."

"You didn't rail at the teacher at any point about stunting a child's imagination, did you?" Myka brought a dishrag with her to the island and began wiping down the countertop. As she neared Helena, Helena didn't step out of her way, and Myka halted, exasperation and amusement on her face.

"You always think the worst of me, darling," Helena said silkily. "It is true that, afterward, Nate said he would be the one to handle any further communication with Adelaide's teachers."

More seriously than Helena had anticipated, Myka said, "I never think the worst of you." Her wiping of the countertop became more aimless, and she looked away from Helena toward the patio. "Is it hard to talk about them, Nate and Adelaide?"

She would have to talk to Myka about Boone and especially about Adelaide, but not tonight. "No. Leaving was the right thing to do, but I have fond memories of them both." More about Adelaide than Nate, but Helena couldn't deny that he was a good man, just never the man for her. Noticing that the level of wine in her glass was low, she moved out of Myka's path, with an exaggerated step to the side and a sweep of her hand indicating that cleaning could proceed, which occasioned an eye roll from Myka. She poured more wine into her glass. "What shall we have for dinner now?"

"I'm low on options," Myka said. "It's either mac and cheese or frozen pizza. Your choice." As Drew's head shot up, Myka gave him the kind of stern look that Helena remembered her giving his father many times. "You've already eaten, buddy, remember?" Shep had also raised his head upon seeing Drew's sudden movement, and Myka shook a dishrag-covered finger at him. "As for you, you're just lucky I haven't banished you to the garage."

Shep's woof was equivalent to a shrug, and Helena said into her glass, "I see the exceedingly tight ship you run at home."

"Are you sure you really want to be challenging me?" Myka laughed, reaching for the wine bottle. "You couldn't force me into the garage," Helena said. "I may finally be showing my age a little, but I can still take you down."

She had meant it as a joke. She had said it as a joke, hadn't she? It hadn't sounded suggestive to her as she said it, but Myka had reddened. "I was talking more about my cooking skills, trying to make something from scratch," Myka said. "You know, being the victim of some impromptu dish gone horribly, horribly wrong... although I can make a decent stir-fry, you can't really screw those up. You take a protein, some vegetables, and..." She worried her lip again, seemingly less in frustration than in an attempt to stop rambling. "Let's go with frozen pizza."

They went with frozen pizza, and, as Helena had suspected she would, Myka relented and let her...
son have a slice. As Drew returned to his video game, slice in hand, Myka also relenting on what was apparently only an irregularly enforced rule about not eating in the family room, they carried their wine glasses, the pizza, and, tucked under Myka's arm, another bottle of wine out onto the patio. The umbrella over the table shaded them from the better part of the evening sun, although it failed to block the rays that seemed to skim the table, in lines more horizontal than diagonal, and which lit the back of Myka's hair.

How many times in the summer, when they stopped for gas or reconnoitered a building or just stood outside the Warehouse, had Helena seen the same transformation of brown into red, the curls seeming to snap in the sun like filaments? She looked away. "What I said earlier today, about not caring about any of you, it wasn't true. I was angry, and I lashed out." She hazarded a glance at Myka, who was regarding her steadily. "One of my many failings. Thankfully I limit that impulse to words these days." The breeze was slight, but it lifted one or two of Myka's curls, and Helena remembered, with more clarity than she wished for at the moment, how often when she had seen the wind play with Myka's hair, she had wanted to twine the curls around her fingers. "There's really nothing I can offer about why I didn't at least send you a line now and then that would make any sense."

Myka dropped her eyes and played with the stem of her wine glass. "You don't have to explain, Helena. It was...is a complicated situation. I thought about inviting you to the wedding, you know, but we had already fallen out of touch, and that's what it would have been, the wedding, a Warehouse reunion of sorts. Then Drew and the divorce, it seemed too much to put into a letter or email. Or too little." She smiled faintly before raising her eyes to meet Helena's. "Now I'm overexplaining. I guess I'm saying no one's reading anything into this, your helping us out."

Helena flushed, hoping Myka would attribute the sudden color in her face to the quality of the light or the wine. Apparently she was so faithless a friend that none of them presumed she might be willing to reestablish a connection. Which she wasn't, she reminded herself. She could wince at their easy dismissal of her as anything more than a resource, but she couldn't blame them. She busied herself with her pizza; there was no response she was comfortable giving.

But she had underestimated, or forgotten, Myka's tolerance of the awkward social moment. She had never been consistent in choosing when she would pursue a conversation that seemed destined to plunge into a bog, but once she had made up her mind, she seemed oblivious to whether the waters would close over her head. "Have you been happy?"

Helena tried to take a small bite, but the cheese swept off the side of her slice. Neither alternative, cramming it into or pulling it away from her mouth, like an errantly popped piece of bubble gum, was attractive. Shrugging, she pulled the cheese away from her mouth and set it on her plate, surveying the denuded slice. A metaphor for her own life but no reason for Myka to know that. "Would you settle for content?"

Myka started to shake her head but stopped midway, taking a slice of pizza and pulling the topping away from the crust. She tilted her head back, opened her mouth wide, and pushed all of the cheese and pepperoni in. "No standing on ceremony," she said, her eyes level with Helena's once more, her mouth full.

Helena gave her a look of mock disgust. "You don't have to trample it to death, like your ex-husband." But she began plucking the pepperoni from the cheese on her plate and nibbling on them. "I like what I do, and I have companionship when I want it. I am rather a simple person," she said innocently, "when you get past all the mad genius, diabolical former agent rubbish."

"I've seen pictures of your companionship," Myka said with a wry look. "Is it serious?"
"Only to the extent that we both abhor the thought." Helena grinned as Myka rolled her eyes. "A little bird told me that you've found, ah, companionship as well."

"Thank you, Claudia," Myka muttered. She tore the crust away from her pizza and chewed one end contemplatively. "His name is Jeff, and we've been seeing each other for a few months." Holding the bottle of wine up, she tipped it in Helena's direction; at Helena's nod, Myka pulled the cork and poured a large amount into her glass.

As Myka poured even more wine into her own glass, Helena tried to remember the last time they had talked about men or relationships in general, with or without the assistance of alcohol. She couldn't; they had never girl-talked about relationships. Myka had told her about Sam, but that had been part of a more far-reaching conversation about coping (or, in Helena's case, failing to cope) with loss. As for Helena, she had never had a relationship of sufficient longevity, including her liaison with Christina's father, to merit discussion. Her one sustained attempt, with Nate, had come too late to share with Myka, had she even been so inclined, and turned into such a royal cock-up that she sometimes liked to believe it had been artefact-induced. How else could a single flirtatious battle conducted with wooden spoons during cooking class become an invitation to move in less than three months later? He had been attractive and personable enough and she had been lonely, but she had raised a higher bar for one-night stands.

"You're 'seeing him.' That sounds awfully casual for you," Helena observed, wondering why she was pumping Myka for more information. It couldn't possibly matter to her, other than in that vague way one always wished, or always pretended to wish, that a friend's new relationship would be a good one for her. By the time Myka reasoned her way to deepening things with Jeff or ending them, Helena would be long gone.

"It's still pretty new," Myka said. "And it's different now, dating, with Drew. Whatever happens, I have to protect him."

Helena knew that Myka hadn't meant to draw any parallel, but it was there. She had known Adelaide for less than two months when she had moved into Nate's house. The relationship with Nate had progressed quickly, not in a starry-eyed, head-over-heels way but in a manner that, on the surface, seemed more sane, a comfortable and comforting meshing of likes and dislikes, a mutual unspoken acknowledgement that loneliness should be counted among the seven deadly sins, and which had felt so easy, so unthreatening that Helena hadn't been put off by the fact that Nate had only casually suggested it, as he might a weekend getaway to wine country or Las Vegas. She recalled him shouting it to her while she was in the bathroom brushing her teeth. And she had just as casually accepted it, throwing her few possessions in a couple of moving boxes the following weekend.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to suggest that you, that you and Nate were..." Myka studied her wine as she stumbled over her words.

"Careless?" Helena supplied. "We were. We hurt Adelaide. It was the last thing I ever wanted to do, to hurt her, but I did." She paused, not wanting to dwell any longer on what happened in Boone. "Besides, darling," she said, deliberately injecting a theatrical archness into her voice, "there's nothing wrong in being with someone just for the sex. I trust that Jeff is more than competent in that regard."

The old Myka would have blushed furiously and sputtered that it was none of Helena's business. This Myka, not in the least flustered, said smoothly, "I don't kiss and tell."

"More's the pity." Helena quirked her lips teasingly. "Brief though my tenure was with Warehouse 13, I always thought you were undersexed."
That did hit its mark. Myka shifted in her chair and gave Helena a narrow-eyed look. "Darling, it was true," Helena exclaimed. "Pete had any number of encounters, shall we say, and that doesn't include Univille's veterinarian at the time. Even Claudia had some mopey teenaged boy trailing after her. But you, you could have been cloistered for all that you were away from the B&B of an evening."

"If I were you, I wouldn't throw stones," Myka said.

"I had other preoccupations," Helena said lightly but feeling her teasing smile grow stiff. "Doing my nails, planning the end of the world, that sort of thing." Boone was a minor embarrassment compared to the consequences of her pre-Yellowstone schemes and machinations. After all, she had only, simply, merely deserted a child in Boone, she hadn't been the agent of her death, not like those poor boys whom she had hired and sent to Egypt. Back then her insomnia had been fueled by the feverishness with which she was carrying out her plans, just tinged with, not steeped in, guilt. She became disquieted only when she would look out the window in the early morning and see Myka beginning her stretches. There was something about the crispness of her movements, her long, lean lines that would make Helena believe she could live in a world like this one, if it had no more than Myka running across the grass, bare legs working like scissors in the sun. She had never known until later, after Yellowstone, after Boone, that insomnia could bear down on one like a stone or that it could be more peopled by chain-dragging ghosts than Dickens had thought to plague his Scrooge with. Hoping her face wasn't betraying the direction her thoughts had taken, she worked her smile into a smirk. "And then once the Janus coin was employed, well, it's so hard to meet people when you're a hologram. Perhaps poor Emily Lake had better luck, although I would think her wardrobe and cat," Helena shuddered, "argue against it."

"How did you meet her?" Myka asked abruptly. "Suzanne, right?" Her narrow-eyed look had continued to narrow, to a particularly skeptical squint, as if she were preparing herself for a story so salacious that it could hardly be believed.

Never let it be said that Helena Wells ever left a woman disappointed. "A couple of years ago at a party a client hosted. I had been in Georgetown to appraise a number of items he and his much younger second wife were hoping to acquire to finish off a Victorian-themed nursery. They invited me to stay for the party, and Suzanne was one of the guests." Helena viewed the remains of the pizza. There were a couple of slices left, but the cheese had cooled and congealed, developing a skin that had the shiny hardness of a scab. "As the folder you have on me would have told you, she's a curator for a privately-funded art museum, the Farraday. My client was a donor. At any rate, we exchanged pleasantries, and thirty minutes later, her hand was up my skirt or mine was up hers, I forget which. We had been looking at my client's collection of early 20th century art. Now that I think about it, it must have been my hand up her skirt because she was the one who came next to the Klimt. Very apropos, but the painting was knocking against the wall so violently I was afraid it was going to drop to the floor." Helena spread her hands wide. "That was how we met."


"You asked, darling." Myka opened one eye at a time, giving her a caustic glance with each. Helena shrugged in response. "I'm sure some of you thought Suzanne and I were in collusion." She tried to keep the tone mocking, but she could hear the anger left over from yesterday's meeting. "Yes, she and I were out to bring the world to its knees through a mass distribution of magicked pocket combs. Though I do have to admit that she would be a perfect co-conspirator. A woman with a large network of wealthy patrons and donors, many of whom would be willing to pay great sums of money for a new, exclusive entertainment."

"I can't answer for the others," Myka said, "but I've never thought you were involved." She
frowned in puzzled contemplation. "It's not a right fit for you, it's too... small, somehow. The artefacts that are being copied, what they're being copied to, how many copies there are, it's more mercantile than I would expect of you."

"Thank you, I think," Helena said dryly. "But I'm not above wanting to make lots of money, Myka. It's a large part of why I do what I do now."

Myka began gathering their plates and the leftover pizza. "The last time we spoke, you were working as a quant for a hedge fund in London."

"I was managing quants for a hedge fund in London," Helena corrected her. "The fund prospered, I prospered. I had already moved on by the time the recession really took hold, but our fund did quite well, weathered it far better than most."

"No doubt the result of your superior foresight," Myka said, deadpan.

"Of course," Helena said matter-of-factly, smiling only after a deliberate pause. Myka smiled in response, shaking her head. "The greed and outright chicanery, it wasn't all that different from what you would have seen in the markets at the end of the nineteenth century. But some months before I had been spending time with a client, doing a lot of hand-holding, and he invited me to lunch at his home. He gave me the grand tour, showing off what he thought were some original Charles Voysey pieces." Feeling absurdly antiquated, as she did most times she referred to famous figures, long since dead, whom she had personally known, she said, tipping her wine glass to her mouth, "I knew Voysey and was acquainted with his work, they weren't his. I told the client that, he confirmed it with a more reputable dealer than the one he had bought the furniture from, and, thus, yet another 'new' career for H.G. Wells was born."

"A paramour?" Myka asked, laughing.

Helena choked on her wine. "There were some men whose virtue I refrained from testing, you know. He was one of them. Actually, he built a house in Kent for Charles, not long after I was bronzed." She said the last quietly as she set her glass on the table.

The something laughing and lovely in Myka's eyes quieted as well. "I'm going to take the dishes inside, and then we can get to work on our snag-and-bag. It's still light out, maybe we can work out here?"

"Has Homeland Security bugged your home too?" Helena asked derisively, remembering Claudia's excessive care to ensure their privacy during the meeting.

"I was thinking it was too nice to go in," Myka said, balancing the empty wine bottle on top of her stack. "On the other hand, I don't put anything past the DHS either, not when it comes to the Warehouse."

One in the bank of French doors opened, and Drew stepped out, blinking against the sunlight. "Mom, your friend's here." He stood aside as a tall man walked past him, giving Drew an appreciative pat on his shoulder. "Myka, sorry to barge in, but I was in the area and I've got something of yours I thought you might like back." He said it easily, as though, while he might not be accustomed to being in her home, he was accustomed to being around her. He was rangier than Pete, but there was a quality to how he carried himself that reminded Helena of Pete, or perhaps it was just the fact that he had dark hair. Helena smothered a sigh. Really, couldn't Myka have found a Jeff who didn't at all resemble Pete? Maybe one with dark blond hair or red hair. As he neared them, his eyes flickered over Helena,
taking her in with little interest, before focusing on Myka. Well, that was unlike Pete. Helena stretched out her legs, crossing them at the ankle. The silent interplay between the two was interesting, Jeff, a grin spreading across his face, obviously glad to see Myka no matter the excuse, while Myka was uneasily shifting the dishes in her hands, a blush beating up into her cheeks.

"Hi, Jeff, thanks. Um, maybe you can leave it in the kitchen?" Myka still wasn't able to meet his eyes as hers wandered and settled, with relief it seemed, on Helena. "My friend Helena and I were just finishing dinner." She jerked her head with unusual gracelessness toward Jeff. "Helena, this is Jeff, a friend."

Helena smiled a hello, noting as he turned briefly toward her that he was younger than Myka. By several years. Her smile grew wider as she looked at Myka. Myka's blush intensified. Her discomfort wasn't lessened when Jeff said, "I'm pretty sure this is something you don't want Drew to see."

Helena couldn't stop the little laugh that escaped her. "Oh, dear, Myka. He must have one of your unmentionables."

At pains not to scowl, probably ferociously, at her, Myka said with a thinly veiled impatience, "I'm going into the house with Jeff for just a moment. You'll be fine out here?"

"Peachy keen, as they say," Helena said, resting her head against the back of her chair. "You take all the time you need."

She heard them talking in lowered voices, Myka's sounding no less impatient once she was away from Helena. The closing of the door left only the sounds of the breeze ruffling the top of the umbrella and birds crying their even-song to each other. Seeing Jeff hadn't bothered Helena but marking his resemblance to Pete, no matter how superficial, did, and she couldn't blame the sour surging in her stomach, something that happened more frequently now than it did when she was younger, especially when she felt off-balance, on either the wine or the pizza. How divorced could you truly be if you were dating men who looked like your ex-husband? While her fling with Giselle, a French flight attendant whom she had initially flirted with during a layover in LaGuardia, was clearly some sort of rebound from the mess with Nate and Adelaide, Patrick, the married barrister in London whom she had taken up with after she had relocated there, had been completely unlike Nate, as brooding and biting as the latter had been pleasant and even-tempered. But then she and Nate had been together for less than a year while Myka and Pete had been married for over seven. There was a difference.

Restless, Helena pushed back her chair and walked past the end of the patio. Although the yard sloped down the edge of the ridge, the mown part of it stopped there. Perhaps Myka owned the land beyond the ridge as well, which would make this a fair piece of property she owned, enough land to do things with. Helena blinked, trying to chase the thought away. It didn't matter what Myka did or didn't own, what could or couldn't be done with the land. It wasn't as if she was going to be visiting again, once this mission or assignment, whatever you wanted to call it, was done. Trees formed a rough boundary line at the edge of the ridge, some scraggly and bent by the wind, but a few were tall, with generous branches that grew relatively close to the ground. Two of the trees were close together and without giving thought to what she was doing, Helena slipped her sandals off and, placing her arms into the fork of the trunk, hauled herself up, feet trying to grip the bark. If she stood in the center of where the trunk forked, there was a branch she could pull herself up to that should easily bear her weight. There was more inelegant scrabbling than she had anticipated, but soon she was perched on it and peering through the leaves at the view beyond. It, too, was more than she had expected, more compelling, additional ridges undulating toward the larger hills, which looked much closer from here than they had from the road.
She felt movement beneath her and spotted Drew pulling himself up the trunk of the tree. She eyed the branch she was on and moved farther down, slapping the space next to her. "Why don't you sit next to me?"

With an assurance she envied, he walked along the branch, only occasionally touching others near him for balance. He sat down beside her. "What are you doing up here?"

"Taking in the view. What are you doing up here?"

"I don't see many grown-ups climbing trees. I thought you might need help getting down." Pete's smile, no, this one was shyer and the earnestness in the eyes was much too unalloyed by humor to be Pete's. Myka. He was all Myka right now.

She drew in a long and dismayingly unsteady breath. "I was thinking this would be a marvelous tree for a tree house." Surely she hadn't said what she thought she had just said.

"Me too," he said. It was simply an affirmation of her opinion. There was no sudden eagerness in his face, no incipient expectation that she was promising him something. He had said it as if he had climbed this tree a million times and had the thought each time.

She should get down now before she said something they would both end up regretting. What she intended, what she was opening her mouth to say was going to be something cautionary and sensible. She was going to say, "Let's get down before your mother starts to worry" or something similar. But her arm, which really should be working with her other arm to keep her on the branch, was beginning to make a sweeping motion, as if preparing to draw a design in the air, and the words she was saying this very minute were not at all about climbing down from the tree. "You could integrate the flooring with the branches and work it all around the tree, I believe. You could put supports there and there," she said pointing. Then she looked up at the branches above them, smaller but still capable of supporting the weight of an eight-year-old boy.

Drew looked up at them too and before she could say anything to stop him, he was climbing farther up the trunk. She heard branches shake and felt a few leaves fly past her before she saw him, several branches above the one she was sitting on, his arm wrapped around a neighboring branch to hold himself steady. "We could have a pirate lookout here," he said excitedly. "Maybe Dad and me could build this for my math camp project."

"I thought the project had to be something you could bring to class," Helena reminded him and felt annoyed at having to be an adult.

Drew looked crestfallen but brightened with a thought. "Maybe it's something Dad would help me build once math camp is over."

Helena tried to imagine Pete armed with basic woodworking tools. It was a frightening picture. "Perhaps it's something I can help out your dad with. I've built a few tree houses in my time," she said casually.

Drew appeared to be considering the offer. "You'd help us, really?" He was leaning over far too much for no more support than his little boy arm and the branch around which he had anchored it could provide.

Helena wasn't at all sure she could stop his fall should he slip, let alone catch him. She began to lift herself up, keeping her eyes on his. In the shade of the tree, his eyes were darker and she was looking through them and seeing another pair of eyes, as dark as her own, and she thought she
might strangle on the breath in her throat. She hadn't seen Christina this clearly in years. She was looking at Helena the way she did when she had grown old enough to understand that Mama went away on "assignments," excitement and uncertainty battling for dominance, with excitement almost always winning out. She disliked it when Helena had to leave her, but Mama always brought her back wonderful gifts and even better stories and the promise that someday she too would go away on assignments. And Helena had meant the promise, they would make their own adventures, safaris in Africa and journeys to the temples in India. When Christina was older.

"I promise," she said, her voice thick and foreign to her.

Then there was another voice, Myka's, but it was queer-sounding and unlike her normal voice too. "Why don't the both of you come down?"

Helena waited until Drew had half-slid, half-hopped his way back to the branch she was on, then she slowly climbed down the trunk, feet and hands seeking purchase. There was no graceful dismount; she more or less dropped down from the fork in the trunk, lurching some steps to the side simply to prevent herself from falling. As Helena pulled on her sandals, Drew jumped from the fork, easily sticking his landing and nonchalantly walking toward his mother. She hugged him to her with one arm; he squirmed away, saying "She's going to help me and Dad build a tree house. Did you hear her?"

"Yes, I heard her." Myka hadn't turned to look at her yet, her attention remaining with her son. "What have I told you about getting up in that tree?"

"That I shouldn't do it unless you or Dad are with me," he said unrepentantly. "But she was already in it, doesn't that count?"

"I should think it would," Helena began until, still without looking at her, Myka opened and closed her hand over the back of her shoulder. Helena quieted.

"For tonight, it'll count. But only for tonight." Then laughter began to bubble in Myka's voice. "I know that Helena looks like a grown-up, but she's not." With more firmness, she said, "Why don't you go on in? It's almost time for your bath."

Having achieved victory with the tree-climbing, Drew knew better than to protest the maternal reminder and with only the slump to his shoulders expressing his displeasure at the mention of "bath," he scuffed ahead of them toward the house. Helena started to follow him, but Myka placed her hand on Helena's shoulder, holding her back. Waiting a few seconds until Drew was safely out of earshot, she said, "I don't know which one you thought you were making that promise to, whether it was Christina or Adelaide, but you need to make it right with him and tell him that you're not going to help out with any tree house." She didn't say it unkindly, but there was a hardness to her voice that Helena could feel herself flinching from.

"I have every intention of keeping my promise to Drew," Helena said, glaring at Myka. Irritation and more than a little shame at having been caught overpromising made her stand up straighter, although that still made her three inches shorter than Myka, which meant that she was glaring mainly at Myka's nose. "It's only the big things I can't deliver on, Myka, you should know that." Tipping her head back, she searched Myka's eyes. They were hazel in the waning light, and Helena thought she saw something almost wistful in them before they returned her own glare. "It's not as though we're going to solve the puzzle tomorrow, I'll have time to hire the materials and the workmen and -"

Myka's laugh was so short and bruised-sounding that Helena heard it as a jeer. "He doesn't want you to have it built for him, Helena. He wants you to help build it, with him and Pete." Myka's face
relaxed into a smile, and Helena knew she was seeing Pete trying to act as a master carpenter. Then the smile faded as she focused on Helena again. "I can’t stop you from charming my son, Helena, but I won't have you hurt him, not even over something small."

"Like I hurt you," Helena said under her breath, hoping she had said it so softly that Myka hadn't heard her, but the sudden stillness in Myka's face told her otherwise.

"Like you hurt all of us, me, Claudia, Steve, Pete, Artie," Myka said, answering the remark and deflecting its more personal thrust at the same time.

Helena let it pass. She wasn't entirely sober, the evening was wearing on, and they still had their plans for retrieving the artefact, whatever it was, to go over. But there was one thing they had to, she had to settle now. "I will stay here long enough to help build him a tree house. I built tree houses for myself and Charles when I was a child, and I built much more elaborate ones for Christina. It won't take that long, even with Pete's well-meant bumbling." She turned away from Myka and started toward the house. "You can count on me for that much."

"Damn it, Helena," Myka said softly, lengthening her stride to catch up with her. "Don't go into a sulk on me." Helena tried to pin her with a look, but Myka was laughing again; it was still bruised-sounding but more rueful this time. "Better you want to claw my eyes out than giving me the wounded puppy look."

"Wounded puppy, really?" Helena said. "I think you're mistaking me for Pete, which is even more of an insult."

"Sometimes I think the two of you are more alike than either of you would be willing to admit," Myka said, an odd note creeping into her voice.

"Having rebuked me for promising a tree house to your son, which I fully intended to carry out, and then having compared me to your ex-husband, you owe me a drink. Please tell me we haven't exhausted the supply of alcohol in your home." Helena kept up the tone of mock outrage. They were back to the patio now, the trees were behind them and that wound her promise to Drew had reopened behind them, for the moment, as well.

Myka led her to the pantry, where, from behind a stack of canned peas, she unearthed a bottle of scotch. "Childproofing," she said. "Drew hates peas." As Helena poured a couple of very large, make that giant, fingers into a juice glass and added a few ice cubes, Myka noted wryly that after the scotch was finished, there was only rubbing alcohol, and working for the Warehouse again couldn't be as bad as that. Helena only raised an eyebrow doubtfully in response.

Leaving her to retrieve the information on the artefact, Myka returned with a phone to her ear. Jacqui needed her help with a problem two of the newer agents had called in. Helena waved her away, taking a seat on the sofa in the family room. She sipped her scotch as Drew, done with one of the quickest baths on record and wearing Superman pajamas, plopped in front of the TV and started playing another video game. Shep, also a little damp, his fur occasionally sparkling in the light, stretched out on the rug next to him. Kicking off her sandals and curling her feet under her, Helena watched him play. The game was a car race, and Drew drove his car with a methodical precision that ensured he would place well but never win. Helena sighed, a little too loudly, because Drew paused the action to turn around and look at her.

"Would you like to play?" He asked, and Helena, who had intended to shake her head no because so far her interactions with Drew were seeming only to upset his mother, found herself sliding off the couch and taking a seat on his Shep-free side. He passed her another controller and, as she briefly studied the device, he relaunched the game.
She chose a silver Ferrari, which appeared to meet with his approval, and as a surprisingly realistic-sounding starter pistol fired, she put her car into gear. For a few laps around the track, she let him set the pace and then tried to pass him on the next lap. He blocked her adroitly enough and she let the Ferrari hang back. She tried another pass on the following lap, at the same speed and from roughly the same position, and he succeeded in blocking her again. A few laps later, she increased her speed until she was right behind him and she feinted passing several times and each time he responded. From the relaxed set of his shoulders, she could tell that he felt he knew enough about her strategy, such as it was, that he didn't need to worry about her. Other cars in the game began to bunch around them in a pack, and as Drew let his car drift toward the wall, Helena spied a narrow gap between his car and a blue Lamborghini. She punched the controller, increasing her car's speed and plunged through the gap, clipping the back end of Drew's car and sending him careening toward the wall and spinning the Lamborghini into the center grass.

"Hey!" Drew shouted, as Helena took the lead and his own car scraped the wall. "That wasn't fair!"

"Of course it was fair, darling. It just wasn't nice." She looked at him curiously. "Don't you play this way with your friends?"

"Well, yeah," he grumbled, scowling at her. "But when I play with Mom or Dad, they don't -"

"They let you win," she cut in. She suppressed another sigh, looking at him. With a mother who only colored within the lines and, let's face it, a father who barely knew how to hold a crayon at times, Drew was severely disadvantaged. "You know life isn't like that, fair. And it's not just a matter of learning the rules of the game, Andrew. You have to learn how to bend them, to make them work for you."

He paid attention only to the fact that she hadn't called him Drew. "Only my mom calls me Andrew," he said, looking mutinously at her.

"That's the thing about grown-ups. They can call you whatever they want, and they can do whatever they want. Your parents are doing you no favors by letting you beat them all the time," she finished sternly. She had never been so indulgent with Christina. When Christina had insisted upon playing chess with her, Helena had shown her no mercy, only showing her the errors in her play once the game was over. But Christina had never thrown tantrums or upended the chessboard in frustration, she had simply lined up her pieces and, with a determination that had simultaneously tugged at Helena's heart and increased her admiration of her daughter's resolve, nodded her readiness for another game.

She waited to see how Drew would react. He set his mouth grimly and started the game over. "I'm not going to take it easy on you either."

Biting back her smile, Helena waited for the sound of the starter pistol. The races became less like races and more like stock car derbies as she and Drew banged each other's car around the track. Frequently Helena won, but not all the time, as the blue Lamborghini more than once sent her Ferrari into the wall or left her spinning in the middle of the track, taking out several other cars. She began to suspect that the Lamborghini was the game-maker's version of the house rules, the guarantee that the player was always at a disadvantage and the enticement for him to return to the game again and again. Eventually Drew became more interested in watching Helena battle it out with the Lamborghini, setting aside his controller and offering suggestions as she chased the Lamborghini around and around the track. After taking a long drink of her scotch, Helena set her controller down and motioned imperiously in the air. "Where's the programming for this game?"

Drew shrugged and gestured toward the console. "Maybe there, maybe in the disc. I don't know."
Helena crawled toward the TV and looked at the cable assembly connecting the console to it. Mumbling to herself she began to unscrew some of the cables. "If you ever find yourself at an impasse, young Andrew, as I seem to have found myself with that nefarious Lamborghini, don't give up." She hadn't noticed before how much like a cheap stage actor she could sound in her cups. Or like her grandfather. He had been known to bellow any number of Shakespearean soliloquies following a few after-dinner brandies. "Everyone can get out of her own Kobayashi Maru if she's willing to rethink the rules. And by the way, my mentor Caturanga had discovered that principle long before Star Trek." She began to crawl backward from the TV, the console still attached by a cable or two, before Drew, who had been on his stomach next to her, suddenly shot to his feet. "Oh, dear," Helena murmured.

"Drew, you were supposed to go to bed after your bath. Go, now." There was no indulgence in Myka's tone, and as Helena took in her eye-level view of Myka's feet, which, for feet, were really quite nice, somewhat on the long side but neither too narrow nor too wide, she heard two other sets of feet scampering from the family room and a woof issuing from the opposite side of the kitchen.

Helena sat up and placed the console next to her. Her gaze lifted as far as Myka's knees, which were clad in yoga pants. One of the legs in the yoga pants nudged the console closer to the TV. Then, as Myka bent to deposit a stack of folders on the sofa, Helena saw that she was wearing a simple scoop-necked top. "Is this a sleepover? Because I didn't bring the right clothes."

"It's turned into one because you're not sober enough to drive back to Univille, and I'm probably not going to be sober enough to take you. When we're done, you can crash in the guest room." Myka ran her hand through her hair, tugging at it. In the same brusque tone she had been using since she entered the family room, she said, "I need to go say goodnight to Drew. You can get started on the folders."

"Well, since I'm staying over, I'll just refresh my drink," Helena said, pleased she was pushing herself from the floor without stumbling.

"I should just turn myself into social services now," Myka muttered.

"I thought it was the Department of Homeland Security," Helena said. At Myka's glare, she said hastily, "Just joking." Pulling at her wrinkled sweater, she added, "Myka, what eight-year-old boy pays attention to bedtime? Had I known you feared I would be the instigator of his descent into juvenile delinquency, I would have stayed out on the patio."

"Believe it or not, he's always gone to bed after his bath, without my nagging him. I know it's weird, but it's Drew. But you come here and Shep steals a chicken breast, which he's not done before, I drink more wine than I've had in months, Jeff drops by with my bra sticking out of his back pocket no less, I find you and my son at the top of a tree -"

"It wasn't really the top," Helena interjected.

Another glare. "I'm the one speaking here," Myka said. "And then, then when I finally think things are settling down, I come out and I find you using a video game to give an Art of War lesson to a child. My child. My eight-year-old child, who thinks that the Fortress of Solitude is a place he can visit."

"If it makes you feel better, I'll let you -"

"What?" Myka interrupted, taking Helena's glass with her as she stomped to the kitchen. She rinsed it out and poured more scotch into it. "You'll let me kick your ass to Univille? We have to work together for the next several days, God, maybe weeks."
"I was thinking of something that might really hurt me, darling, like you making me dinner from
scratch," Helena said mildly. She had followed Myka into the kitchen and opened the door to the
freezer compartment. She dug out a couple of ice cubes and put them into the glass.

Myka watched her. "It always becomes a circus when you're around," she said helplessly.

"Stop pretending you hate it," Helena said, as Myka handed her the glass. "I bring the chaos and
you find the order in it. It's how we work." She made the mistake of looking at Myka's eyes, more
green now than hazel in the light. "I've missed it."

"So have I," Myka said, and, then, as if to stop herself from saying anything more, she spun on her
heel and marched off toward her son's bedroom.

Sprawled out on the sofa, a pillow behind her neck, Helena was leafing through the folders when
Myka lowered herself to the floor next to her, a glass of iced tea in one hand. Iced tea smelling
strongly of scotch. "It'll hardly act as a counteragent laced with booze, darling," Helena observed.

"Shut up and hand me a folder," Myka said. Taking the folder Helena offered her, Myka added,
"Drew wants you to stay for breakfast. He said he would share his Cap'n Crunch with you."

"Cap'n Crunch?" Helena said slyly. "Isn't that corn syrup held together by a few grams of . . . corn?
Oh, how the mighty have fallen."

"One box. And once he's eaten it, no more for several months. He's doing you quite the honor."
Myka grumbled. "I suppose you made Christina clean her plate once she had received her daily
dose of 'nature red in tooth and claw.' Children's boot camp provided by H.G. Wells."

"Hardly, darling. It was nineteenth century Britain. Mutton and porridge. Porridge and mutton. I
couldn't even stomach it." Helena opened another folder. "And before you ask, Tennyson was a
little too much before my time. I couldn't even stomach it." Helena opened another folder. "And before you ask, Tennyson was a
little too much before my time. I couldn't even stomach it." She scanned the first page of the
folder, then closed it. "Pete and another agent retrieved the 'lucky' dice of Nick Davalos, also
known as 'Nick the Greek,' a couple of months ago from the home of an investment banker who
had committed suicide."

"Stewart Afton," Myka supplied. "He was using the dice to make unsound investments with a
number of pension funds he was managing. Initially the investments paid off, that's why the dice
are lucky. But as happened to Nick, Stewart's luck changed, and the funds lost money. He ended
up bankrupting one fund. We think that's why he killed himself, the firm was under SEC
investigation, and he was about to be exposed."

"And you've seen things since then that would indicate the properties of the dice were replicated."

"I asked Jacqui and Claudia to keep an eye on the firm. The SEC closed their investigation after
Stewart Afton's suicide, thinking the problem was limited to him. But a couple of other fund
managers have been enjoying a string of successes lately, and these have been high-risk
investments."

Helena opened the folder again, squinting at the print. She should have thought to bring her
reading glasses. "It doesn't have to be a replicated artefact. Just because an investment is high-risk
doesn't necessarily mean that it's a bad investment, if the investor is sufficiently knowledgeable
about the risks and takes the proper precautions. Maybe there's nothing more here than a couple of
fund managers enjoying the fruits of their due diligence, or a run of luck. It happens."

"Thank you, Suze Orman," Myka said, turning her head to look up at Helena and flashing her a
sardonic smile. "If you had actually read beyond the first few pages, you would have learned that Pete and Travis interviewed those two fund managers when they were retrieving the dice. They were friends of Stewart Afton."

"Reading beyond the first page is what I let others do," Helena said dismissively. Seeing that Myka remained thoroughly unimpressed, she said, "You want to go in now before the additional side effects of the replicated artefacts begin to appear. If these two friends acquired copies of the dice from him or whomever Afton himself obtained the dice from, they could be at risk." At Myka's nod, Helena said, "So what's our plan? What's our cover story?"

Myka squirmed a little and took a drink of iced tea. "That's where working for the DHS has made things difficult. They don't like cover stories. When Pete and I were still in the field together, they never liked our flashing our Secret Service IDs whenever we thought throwing some weight around was necessary. We're supposed to say that we're investigating a potential terroristic threat and leave it at that."

"And people just open up then?" Helena demanded sarcastically. Myka lifted her shoulders and let them drop, expressing her opinion. "Obviously something like that will never work, if only because no one would take us seriously for saying something like 'terroristic.'" As Myka began to protest, Helena said, "Yes, darling, I know it's a real word, but that doesn't make it any less of a crime. We'll have to have a cover story." She moved her lips from one side to another as she thought. "Nothing's coming to me right now. Where's the folder on Mr. Afton's friends?" Myka pulled it out from under a pile of folders that Helena had discarded next to her on the sofa and gave it to her. "I promise I shall read this with care." Helena waggled the folder for emphasis. Myka again looked unimpressed.

Helena put the folder down as Myka quickly and with little effort raised herself to her feet. Were she to try to move from her position on the sofa with the same speed, Helena knew she would land face first on the floor. "Let me show you the guest room," Myka said.

"If you don't mind," Helena said, "I'd prefer to stay out here and let the television put me to sleep." Unlikely though the possibility was. Myka's expression softened, but she didn't say anything as she handed the remote to Helena. "However, if you could give me a toothbrush, I'd be most grateful."

Their goodnights were quiet and summarily dispensed with. As Helena should have guessed, Myka not only had spare toothbrushes but travel-sized tubes of toothpaste as well. She settled back onto the couch and found a movie channel playing old Laurel & Hardy shorts. If Myka was lean Stan Laurel with his diffident common sense, that made her . . . . Her mother's side of the family had tended to gain weight later in life and not a few of the women developed tiny bottle-brush mustaches. God knows she already had the bluster down pat.

She must have fallen asleep at some point because a noise or maybe just the sense that someone was looking at her jerked her awake. She pushed herself up to a sitting position, blearily seeing Myka standing where the kitchen and family room met. A few lights in the kitchen had been left on at their lowest setting to serve as an ad-hoc night light, and they limned Myka's figure. Helena became very aware that Myka was wearing a thin sleepshirt, nothing more. Her face was in shadow, but Helena knew those hazel-green, green-hazel eyes were watching her, had been watching her, as she slept.

"Mrs. Robinson, are you trying to seduce me?" Helena croaked.

"That's a misquote, Helena. It's 'Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me,'" Myka said, amused. "I knew that, darling. I just didn't want to assume." Then, cheekily, "So are you?"
"If I ever want to seduce you, Helena, there won't be any question about it," Myka said, stepping backward into the kitchen. "See you in the morning."

The next time Helena awoke, she again felt eyes watching her, but as she stretched and reluctantly raised her head from her pillow, she saw two sets of eyes, both brown, but one obviously canine. "You snore, like Shep," Drew said gravely.

"Do I now?" Helena asked, sweeping a hand through her hair, touching the corners of her mouth. Drew nodded, out of his Superman pajamas and in cargo shorts and a polo shirt. She hadn't been looking for confirmation, but she should have expected that Drew, like his mother, would be slow to recognize a rhetorical question. She bent to search for her sandals, which only made the pounding in her head worse. "When you get to be my age, Drew, you make a lot of strange sounds in your sleep." Sleep. She had slept, which was unusual. She had obviously slept after it. The conversation had happened, hadn't it? She wouldn't have dreamed that she quoted dialog from *The Graduate*. She only remembered the film because she thought Dustin Hoffman was a ninny for preferring Katharine Ross to Anne Bancroft. But why would Myka have gotten up in the middle of the night to watch her sleep? Perhaps Myka believed as Helena sometimes did herself that she existed simply as a figment of someone's imagination or nightmare. Mrs. Frederic's for instance, which would be only fitting.

Aware that Drew was still somberly regarding her, Helena turned to him, sandals dangling from her hand. "Was it a loud, rattling snore like this?" She sharply inhaled before letting her breath out in a snore that sounded like a coffee-maker gasping its last.

Drew laughed and shook his head. "No, not like that."

"It had a whistle to it," Myka said from the kitchen. She came around the island, wearing her summer jogging outfit, tank, shorts, baseball cap. "Long, trailing, with a whistle at the end." She grinned.

"Yeah," Drew said. "It was funny." He ran with Shep toward the table in the eating area and slide onto a chair, a bowl and a box of Cap'n Crunch in front of him.

"No running," Myka said reflexively. She came into the family room with a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin. "You'll be needing this."

Helena took both with an appreciative sigh. "I'll just pop a couple of these, and then I'll be on my way."

Myka cocked her head, her eyes, under the brim of the baseball cap, alight with a challenging glint. "You're having breakfast with Drew, remember? He's been in and out of the family room for the past half-hour waiting for you to wake up."

Helena groaned and shook out some aspirin from the bottle. Ordinarly she would appreciate the view of Myka's long legs, which she had always thought were among her most attractive features, but not this morning. The thought of having to eat a bowl of Cap'n Crunch made both her stomach and the roof of her mouth ache in apprehension. "I'll need a big pot of tea," she said in a low voice. "I suggest you start that now."

Myka flashed her another grin, which, Helena observed, hadn't a glimmer of sympathy to it. After five minutes in the bathroom, which mainly consisted of groaning, splashing her face with water, and more groaning, Helena joined Drew at the table and covered the bottom of her bowl with a single layer of Cap'n Crunch. "You need more than that," Drew said and vigorously shook the box.
until the mound of cereal was equal with the blue stripe bordering the rim of the bowl.

"Thank you," Helena said faintly.

Drew laid a piece of paper between them on the table, which had a rectangle, clearly drawn with a ruler, that stood in for the tree house. It included two windows in the front and a door. Above it and to the right was a wastebasket-looking thing that Helena could only guess was supposed to be a crow's nest. "A cabin on a pirate ship and a lookout," he announced. "Could we build something like that?"

Helena studied the drawing, noting the differences between the crow's nest and the cabin, but she said nothing. Instead she smiled at him and said, "Yes, I believe we can."

Myka drifted over to inspect the drawing. "Hmmm, didn't see the crow's nest before." She stared at Drew, who guilelessly shrugged. "Where is it going to go?"

"Way up at the top," he enthused.

"I don't think so, buddy. The branches are too small. They couldn't support your weight."

Helena moved the piece of paper closer to her. "Do you have a pen or pencil?" Drew skyrocketed from his chair in search of one, Shep galloping behind him.

"Helena," Myka warned.

"Not at the top but not right next door to the tree house either." With a mock loftiness that Helena figured would still get under Myka's skin, she said, "A child should always have the opportunity to extend his horizons."

"We're talking about a metaphor, Helena. Drew doesn't need to see over the next hill."

"Says you," Helena muttered as Drew returned with a well-chewed pencil. Gingerly taking it from him, she began to add to the drawing, sketching in the tree as she remembered it. "Flexible support," she continued muttering, drawing lines radiating out from the crow's nest, like spokes from the center of a wheel. "Can't put additional stress on the tree. . . don't want the top snapping off in a high wind." She crooked her neck back, certain she could hear the blood drain from Myka's face. She met Myka's wary gaze and said soothingly, "I'll work it out, darling. Don't worry."

"I'm sure you will." Myka put her lips close to Helena's ear. "Because I'm going to be the one who puts you in it during a high wind just to see how you fare."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Drew had returned to his chair but was leaning so far over the table to see what Helena was doing with the drawing that his shirt was brushing the top of his cereal bowl and soaking in the milk. As Myka exclaimed, "Drew," Helena asked him, "Might I borrow this for a little while?" At his sober nod, which made her feel that she had just signed a contract bristling with failure to perform penalties, Helena folder the paper into a square and pushed it into a pocket of her capris.

Later, after two changes of Drew's shirt, three cups of tea, more aspirin, and a chase after a romping Shep, who had one of her sandals in his mouth, Helena finally arrived at the door to her car. Myka stood in front of the hood, her arms folded over her chest, a castellan ready to pull up the drawbridge once Helena backed out of the drive.

"Our flight to New York tomorrow morning is at seven," Myka said.
Helena saluted in acknowledgement, but Myka didn't appear to be reassured. "Are you going to warn me one more time about making promises to your son?"

"Do I need to?" Myka asked quietly.

Helena shook her head. She touched the piece of paper in her pocket. When she had looked at the drawing earlier, she had realized that the awkwardly drawn crow's nest was Drew's, but the cabin's straight lines and its windows were Myka's. The helpful mother, she had drawn what he had envisioned. No eight-year-old boy, not even Drew, would use a ruler and though he might have had the idea of treasure-chest-shaped windows, he wouldn't have had the patience to work over the lines until they were a fair approximation. She wasn't promising only Drew, she was promising Myka, but she had always known that, hadn't she? There was no reason for her heart to be beating so fast, so anxiously. It was just a tree house, after all.
Chapter 4

She had four hours before she needed to get up for the flight to New York. There was the time she needed to shower, to drive to Rapid City, and then to wait, bored, sleepy, and probably hungover once again, in the gate area until she was allowed to board. But *North by Northwest* was on, and though she had seen it many times before, she always liked to watch through to the end. She reached for the plastic cup on the nightstand next to her. She had gone to a proper liquor store this time rather than ordering off the room service menu, but she couldn't say that the quality was much better. Most likely because the liquor store was the hotel's supplier, this was Univille, after all. Some part of her was arguing that if she turned off the TV, she might eventually sleep for an hour or two. Another part of her countered that if she turned the TV off, she would be staring into the darkness for the two or three hours it took her to fall asleep. If she had to stare at something, whether or not she ever slept, she would rather stare at beautiful people. So *North by Northwest* to the bitter end, then.

He was quite beautiful, Cary Grant. She wondered if it had been an effort for him, in his mid-50s, to project such youthfulness, such lightness, to seem years younger than his contemporary, James Mason, and to carry off the illusion that he was the contemporary of Eva Marie Saint, although he was 20 years older. Had it been a matter of discipline, taking the same care he had so obviously applied to his appearance and applying it to his frame of mind? Had he evaluated his emotional equilibrium with the same professional concern he must have brought to watching his weight? They weren't all that dissimilar, the two of them, though she would grant him an edge, albeit a small one, when it came to attractiveness. Both expatriates, both of an ambiguous sexuality (whatever that meant), both caught between two worlds. He would have had to strive for humble beginnings, yet through some combination of persistence, good looks, and luck (the contribution of each to his success unknowable and impossible to replicate), he had thrust himself into a world vastly different from the one he had been born into. He had adopted a new name, a new accent, and an almost constant expression of wry amusement, as if he wasn't sure that the world he now claimed as his own had been worth the abandonment of the other. With the grace and agility of the acrobat he had been, he tried to balance himself between the two, suggesting that the abyss separating them could be bridged. But of the many things she had been, an acrobat wasn't one of them. She didn't know how to walk a high wire, couldn't juggle knives in the air. There had never been comical drops to the floor for her, designed to make the world laugh, only dreadful collapses that had threatened to bring the world tumbling after her.

She wasn't Cary Grant. She was Leo G. Carroll, the elderly Professor, scrambling to keep up with him.

In the glow of the nightstand's light (why was hotel lighting always both too dim and too bright?), she saw the folder she had brought with her from Myka's perched precariously on the corner of the bed. She had actually read it through, which would doubtless stun Myka and had left her feeling only slightly less surprised. The information on Afton's friends had turned out to be more interesting than she had anticipated, resulting in numerous calls to Claudia and extensive log-in time on her own laptop. After much grumbling about "some people's expectations that she would be at their beck and call," which would have made Artie proud had he been there to hear her, Claudia was able to provide the information Helena sought. When Helena had then asked her to print some financial statements for her, adding, as she thought, helpfully, that they should be packaged in a professional style that would be suitable for a presentation, Claudia had let loose a howl of indignation about how "some people needed to realize they weren't ordering around a junior agent but the frakking caretaker." Nevertheless, a portfolio had been produced, which was perched precariously on the opposite corner of the bed.
As she watched Cary Grant sidle up to the windows of Vandamm's Mount Rushmore hideout, which had her simultaneously wishing such a property behind the presidents' heads existed and recalling that, with a generous allowance for exaggeration, Myka could be considered to have a Mount Rushmore-area hideaway, Helena heard a faint noise at the door. She heard it again and realized that it was a very tentative knock. With an exasperated sigh, she rolled off the bed and looked through the peephole.

"You decided to knock this time?" She demanded of Claudia as she opened the door.

Claudia shrugged and stretched out on the other side of the bed, pulling a Tesla from the waistband of her jeans and setting it down on the matching nightstand. "For you."

"I thought I couldn't have one," Helena said, as she joined Claudia on the bed, sending both folders to the floor. At least she would know where they were in the morning.

"You couldn't have one that the DHS knows about. This is my own personal illicit Tesla, and you have to promise not to use it unless you absolutely have to." Her dark eyes narrowed in what Helena supposed she was to assume was a look of great significance. Claudia elaborated. "You and Myka have to be on the verge of dying. That means blood on the floor, H.G."

"All right," Helena sighed.

"Spit and pinky promise," Claudia warned, licking her pinky finger and crooking it toward Helena.

Helena looked with disdain at Claudia's finger. "I'm not Pete. You'll have to be satisfied with my word. I will use the Tesla only as a last resort."

Claudia wiped her finger on her jeans. She pulled the pillows Helena wasn't using from underneath the bedspread and crammed them behind her head. "North by Northwest. High-waisted pants, Brylcreemed hair, and some really cheesy Freudian metaphors, like the train going through a tunnel when Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint are getting it on. Not my groove." She sat up and reached for the remote. "Mind if I change channels?"

Helena drank her wine. "Feel free."

Claudia clicked through a few channels. "You weren't in your room this morning. Your bed wasn't slept in."

"There are so many things I could say to that," Helena arched one eyebrow disapprovingly. "But I'll settle for asking why you were here."

"To let you know that when you and Myka come back from New York, and assuming you haven't solved our problem, you're moving into the B&B. If you're on the Warehouse's dime, excuse me, the DHS's dime, you'll have to leave these palatial digs," Claudia lazily waved an arm at the room, "and rub elbows with us commoners."

"I thought I was on my own dime, which, without going into detail, buys me much more than your dime." Helena held out her almost empty wine bottle toward Claudia. "Drink? There are more plastic cups in the bathroom."

Claudia adjusted her pillows, rolling closer to Helena. "It's too late in the evening or, conversely, too early in the morning for me. But, H.G., really, drinking alone? In this crappy hotel room? It brings you down in my estimation."

"Heartbroken," Helena said offhandedly. "You haven't yet explained to me why I'm being
"Cause the longer you're here looking like you're sightseeing, and God knows Univille has precious little worth seeing, the more suspicious people are going to become. And then I'm going to get a call from a bureaucrat asking me why you're hanging around a government facility."

Claudia wriggled even closer, the side of her head touching Helena's shoulder. "So Jane and I have sold the DHS on the story that you're an efficiency expert we've hired. And how efficient is it if our efficiency expert stays in Univille?" Working her head onto Helena's shoulder, Claudia mused, "They count the number of pencils we buy, but when we say we're hiring a consultant, the sky's the limit. Gotta love the government." She stopped the remote on a channel featuring some sort of reality show, which, being indistinguishable from a hundred other reality shows, confirmed Helena's belief that insanity was not doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result but watching one reality show after another and remaining convinced that everyone was intrinsically interesting. "Soooo," Claudia said, "did you bag Myka your first evening together? Because if you did, then I have to decide whether I'm going to hit you or hug you."

Helena awkwardly drew her head to the side trying to see Claudia's face. It was hard to tell from her voice whether she was joking. "Tell me which one you're leaning toward, and I'll tell you whether I did."

Claudia nudged her in the ribs with an elbow. "Eh, you were probably sacked out on her couch. No way Myka is going to give it up to you on the first night." She shifted, pressing herself tighter into Helena's side. "But she will, if you stick around long enough. She's been waiting for you, H.G. She'd die before she'd admit it, even to herself, but it's true."

Helena wrapped her arm around Claudia. She would lay with Christina like this, reading to her or watching her sleep. Literally a hundred years ago, and she hadn't let a head rest on her shoulder since. Not in this familial way, at any rate. She had forgotten how tactile Claudia was, draping herself over Pete and, at times, Myka, clinging to their backs like a baby monkey, and Claudia was small enough that Pete had sometimes left her on his back when he went into the B&B's kitchen foraging for snacks. Helena had always imagined him feeding her as he searched the cupboards, passing chips and cookies to her over his shoulder.

"You greatly exaggerate the nature of our relationship," Helena said softly into Claudia's hair. "And she has a boyfriend, who rather resembles Pete."

"Just proof that it's going nowhere," Claudia grunted. "Funny, Steve figured it out first, even before they did, but then you couldn't miss it." She scrunched her shoulders together in a tiny shudder, and Helena fought the impulse to stroke her hair and kiss her head, just as she used to do when Christina shivered from the cold or a stray, scary thought. "Boone tore her up, H.G., and then the cancer scare. I told you about that, right?" She took Helena's silence as confirmation. "She was at a really weak point, and Pete was there. That was as far as I ever cared to examine it." She picked at the bedspread. "It was like Greg and Marcia hooking up, not that they had their tongues down each other's throat in front of us or were doing it in the B&B all the time. They were just . . . gone when they had always been around before. They'd come back late at night or at breakfast. Artie didn't care, and Abigail thought it was cute. Even Mrs. F. approved. Steve is so zen, he just thought the world would expand to encompass it. I was the only one who saw how axis-tilting wrong it was."

Claudia was as aggrieved as if she had walked in on Pete and Myka yesterday, and Helena didn't resist the impulse, this time, to kiss the side of her head. Claudia's losses had been as great as her own and even more undeserved. She clung to her Warehouse family still, stubbornly living in the old B&B even in the midst of the "new" one, and it wasn't surprising that she would have seen Pete and Myka's desire to create their own family within the larger one as a betrayal. "They had been
friends, close friends, for many years, and partners, of course," Helena attempted gently. "Why Greg and Marcia? Why not Scully and Mulder, or Chandler and Monica?"

"Have you spent the entire ten years watching Netflix?" Claudia cried. "You're sounding less H.G.-like and more like, I dunno, some middle-aged cat lady who spends her nights in front of the TV."

Take away the cat, and Claudia wasn't that far off. Helena was jostled as Claudia suddenly leaned up, propping herself on her elbows. "I used to think there were two things you didn't know shit about, H.G. But maybe there're three. You." She poked Helena in the ribs. "Myka, and now I'm adding family dynamics." Her face taking on a determined cast, she pushed herself to a sitting position, crossing her legs. "I was just a kid when you came to the Warehouse, and I didn't know Myka all that well back then, but even I knew she was practically begging you to make a move on her."

"I'd hardly call some late night conversations about literature a come-on."

"They are in the Mykaverse. And you would have seen it, if you hadn't been so dead set on skewering the world with your trident, like it was a cocktail weenie or something. Pete was her big brother, her safety net, but you, you were trouble, you came in all Wuthering Heights-like with your tragic history and that black mane of yours and your brooding. She was gone. All that self-control, all that 'follow the rules' and 'read the manual,' it went out the window." Claudia was smiling, although her voice still sounded plaintive. "How can you not see that you still have that effect on her, even after all this time? No one tells Mrs. F. to essentially shut up, but Myka did, because she thought that Mrs. F. was attacking you."

Helena was remembering Myka saying to her last night that she was a circus, and she shook her head. She wanted to put her hand over Claudia's mouth and push the words back in, not because she believed them but because she was afraid she would want to. "Myka always defends the underdog, and, darling, when it comes to the Warehouse, there is no bigger underdog than I. Or perhaps I mean to say that there is no one more in the doghouse than I. Plus she has that great slavering brute at home, which, now that I think about it, also resembles Pete." At Claudia's look of confusion, Helena spread her hands. "Myka and dogs of any kind, she seems to have a soft spot for them, that's all I'm trying to say. I wouldn't read anything into what she said at the meeting."

"Whatever." Claudia uncrossed her legs and swung them off the side of the bed. She stood, shaking the legs of her jeans until they once more covered the tops of her high-tops. "I love Drew to death, but that marriage never should've happened." Sweeping her hair away from her face, she said, "Myka wanted the divorce, you know."

"Was Pete cheating on her?" Now it was Helena's turn to pluck at the bedspread.

"Not that I know of. They seemed to be getting along fine, and the next thing you know, Pete's back in the B&B, and Myka and Drew are in Rapid City." Claudia hesitated and when Helena stopped her pulling at the bedspread to look up at her, she saw that the eyes - and the expression - were serious, focused, adult. For the first time, Helena began to wonder if the cuddling, the talk about Myka's feelings had been orchestrated, as if Claudia had known what chords to touch in her and had played them, all with the goal of binding her ever more firmly to the job at hand. Her suspicion wasn't lessened by Claudia's next words. "Whatever happens between the two of you, it can't screw up what we're doing here. Stopping the replication, that has to come first."

"Thus the caretaker spoke," and though Helena tried to say it lightly, she couldn't quite keep a note of wounded vanity from her voice.

"I wasn't playing you, H.G.,” Claudia said, and Helena wanted to laugh at how their roles had
reversed, Claudia was the one explaining something Helena didn't want to hear. "Not completely, anyway. The Warehouse always has to come first for me. But I have missed you like hell. And what I was saying about Myka, all true. She's waiting for you, but you fucked with her, and you can't just charm or win her back. You're going to have to earn her back."

"What happened to 'frak,' darling?" Those were old eyes staring at her, older than Claudia, older than Mrs. Frederic.

"I'm a big girl now, H.G. I can whip out the obscenities when I feel they're needed, and I need you to know that you deeply, deeply messed with her."

"I thought you said I came back for the sake of the Warehouse. Now you're saying I came back for Myka. What if I just came back? And when this little mission is over, I very well may go away again." Helena wasn't angry, but she wanted to push back. The space she had created between herself and the Warehouse ten years ago might be arid and desolate, but it was her space nonetheless, and she would determine when she was tired of living in it, not Claudia, not Mrs. Frederic, and not the Warehouse.

"See? That's a perfect example of you not knowing yourself. Myka and the Warehouse, they're one and the same to you." Claudia sucked in her cheeks. "I wish I could love someone that much, but I can't. The Warehouse is my ol' ball and chain." Yet she didn't seem truly regretful. "You don't even realize it, do you? How much you love her." She glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand and then gave Helena a mock sympathetic grin. "Aw, you're gonna have to get up in a couple of hours. I should let you get some sleep."

"Before you disappear into the ether or whatever it is you do, since you seem to think you know me better than I know myself, tell me why you kept communicating with me, even when I wouldn't respond."

"For one thing, it's called a Mini-Cooper, and it's parked in the lot," Claudia said. "As for the other, I kept at it precisely because you didn't respond. If you had ever once written me back, saying 'Gosh, it's great to hear from you, keep sending the pics,' I would have said, 'Fuck you,' and you wouldn't have heard from me again. Because you would have worked through whatever it is you're working through and come out on the other side and not needed us anymore. We'd be like those people you meet up with at class reunions and are all 'Call me' with and then forget the next day. And if you had ever said, 'Don't send me anything anymore. Don't e-mail me. Don't try to call,' I wouldn't have. Because you would still be so deep in your shit that you weren't ever coming out. But the silence? It meant I had a chance, that you had a chance. Don't go ruining it again, H.G."

Myka was waiting for her at the gate, a small roller at her feet and a frown on her face. "You're late. They're practically ready to shut the door."

A little dismayed by how out of breath she was simply by hurrying through the small, very small, Rapid City airport, Helena made a mental note to increase her exercise regimen before turning a sunny smile on Myka. "But they haven't, so turn that frown upside down and let's go take our seats."

Myka shoved her in the shoulder then, just as she would have Pete in the old days, and took Helena's sunglasses off her face. "Your eyes are bloodshot. You were drinking last night and overslept." She handed back the sunglasses. "Do I need to worry that you're developing a substance abuse problem?"

"The only abuse of concern here is the abuse of my sensibilities by Univille. Darling, it's a wonder that I don't drink more," Helena said, flashing an equally sunny smile at the gate attendant, who
was unmoved as she twisted her phone to be read by the scanner. "But if it's of any comfort to you, I intend to remain drink-free on the flight. And just so you know, I misjudged the time it would take to get to the airport, I did not oversleep."

She had been awake when the alarm had rung at 4:00. She hadn't slept once Claudia had left, and getting out of bed, taking a shower, and repacking her few items in her carry-on had seemed efforts she was trying to accomplish underwater, leagues underwater. It had exhausted her lifting her arms to shave, and when she had finally forced herself from the shower, where she had perhaps fallen asleep for a few minutes, and lurched back into the room, she had stood transfixed in front of the mirror that hung slightly aslant on the wall. Her white streak looked wider or maybe just whiter. Her mother had grayed the same way, first a single streak past her left temple, then more until, for a while, she had resembled a lhasa apso. Eventually the color had resolved itself into a white that looked rinsed with steel, rather an imposing color Helena had found and suited to the domestic tyrant her mother had become. She had never thought she resembled her mother other than in her coloring; her features had been her father's. But the older she grew, the more she saw the likeness. She wondered briefly, very briefly, whom Christina would have grown to resemble. Her daughter had shared her dark eyes and hair, but there had been a squareness about her jaw that wasn't from the Wells's side. Perhaps it had come from Christina's father, a quick-witted, ambitious M.P. from Yorkshire, who had had a tangential relationship to an artefact Helena was pursuing. Their affair, if it could be called such, had lasted a few weeks until his engagement to the daughter of a prominent family was announced, and then with no real regret on either side, it had ended. It was futile to imagine whom Christina would have taken after, whose traits she would have exemplified; she had died an eight-year-old girl whose greatest desire had been to live in a large house with her mama and scores of bunny rabbits and kittens. Helena had thrown her towel over the mirror.

Myka led her to their seats. Helena had been used to flying first class for the past several years, but she knew better than to complain as Myka shuffled sideways to the window seat and almost immediately inserted ear buds into her ears. No conversation to pass the time on this flight. Awkwardly extracting the portfolio of financial statements from her satchel, Helena passed it to Myka, who quirked an eyebrow at her and lifted an ear bud away from her ear. "I need you to have a nodding acquaintance with this information by the time of the meeting," Helena said. "It's our cover story."

"It better be good since our meeting's at 3:00. We won't have a lot of time once we land to decide on a plan of action." Myka placed the folder on her lap.

"I moved it to 4:30," Helena said. "I need to go to my loft, and there, in relative comfort and privacy, we can discuss how we're going to approach Mr. Sheffield and Mr. Bergstrom."

"Thanks for letting me know you're taking over," Myka said dryly, reinserting the ear bud but also opening the folder.

"I promised that I would come up with the cover story, and I never fail on the small things," Helena said.

Myka smiled in acknowledgment at the allusion. "Not so small. They're our best chance for finding out more about the new artefacts. We need something to get them to open up." Her smile dipping sardonically, she added, "Something that won't get us arrested."

"Darling, the commissioner of the SEC is one of my clients. Were we to have impersonated investigative staff from his office, I'm confident I could have traded on our relationship to keep you from serving substantial jail time."

"You're such a bullshitter," Myka said, but the smile was in her voice too.
Although it felt like her tray table was wedged against her diaphragm, thanks to the person sitting in the row ahead of her who decided to move his seat back, Helena managed to sleep on the flight to Chicago. She put a pillow behind her neck and stretched her feet around her satchel, but when she woke, her head was on Myka's shoulder. At least there wasn't a wet patch where her cheek was resting, and, other than having her neck craned at a somewhat uncomfortable angle, Myka seemed oblivious to her presence. When Helena lifted her head, muttering an embarrassed "Sorry," Myka opened the portfolio between them and stabbed at a statement. "You need to explain this," she said in utter seriousness.

"I will," Helena said. "Later."

The flight to New York was no less crowded or uncomfortable, but Helena read a book on her laptop to fight off sleep. As she limped up the jetway to the gate, her knees feeling so stiff she feared they might lock, she watched Myka stride springily ahead of her and promised herself that she would fly first class back, happily paying the difference in price herself.

During the cab ride to her home, Helena observed Myka's constant twisting of her head as she tried to take in all the views the cab windows offered. Finally noticing how Helena was watching her with amusement, Myka shrugged and said with an embarrassed grin, "Hey, I'm just a tourist whenever I come here." She practically pressed her nose against the window. "Where are we going?"

"Brooklyn." At Myka's surprised look, Helena said, with mock horror, "Imagine my distress when my agent said he had a loft for me here. The last time I had been in Brooklyn was 1889. If only I had thought to snap up real estate then."

Her loft was in a rather nondescript former warehouse and occupied the entire top floor. Helena felt more than a little trepidation as Myka followed her in. It wasn't that milk was souring in the refrigerator or that weeks-old magazines and newspapers were littering the furniture, Helena was never in the loft frequently enough for either to be a problem. Plus she had a cleaning service that came once a week whether she was there or not. It was that the loft looked so obviously unlived in, so clearly decorated by professionals - so hotel-room like.

"So... cavernous," Myka said finally. She flushed. "I'm sorry -"

"Don't apologize," Helena interrupted her. "It's an address, that's its purpose."

Myka had wandered over to the windows that faced the city skyline. She had taken her shoes off at the door, and she was curling her toes into the deep pile of the area rug. Behind her were loveseats and a few chairs, all in the off-white tones that were the dominant color schemes; Helena wasn't terribly fond of white, or any variation thereof. It reminded her of coroners' offices and burial shrouds, and she had seen enough of both. But she had given the designers a free hand, and she didn't care enough about the loft to hire another team to redecorate. That would be tantamount to suggesting that she might make the loft a home.

"Spectacular view," Myka was saying. "You must show it off to all your guests."

"You're my first guest." Myka looked at her disbelievingly. "I don't bring people here," Helena said.

"Not even your girlfriend?"

"She's not my girlfriend." Perhaps because being in the loft always made her irritable, its space, its furnishings, its very whiteness a reproach to her for not living in it, for not putting dimples in the
cushions and the occasional mark on the walls, or perhaps because it was Myka who was privy to all that the loft told about her, none of it good, Helena said brusquely, "We fuck, and that's the extent of our relationship. We don't call, we don't text. The only understanding we have is that there is no understanding."

Myka's eyes widened, but she didn't immediately respond. She cocked her head, her gaze measuring Helena and then she smiled in understanding. "You hunt, but you don't bring your prey to your lair. I guess that's one way to conduct your social life."

"It's less messy that way."

Helena headed toward a small winding staircase at the side of the room that led to her bedroom on the upper level. "I'm going to take a shower and wash away the stain of air travel. There's water of various kinds in the refrigerator, none past its expiration date, I believe. Help yourself." She saw that Myka had turned back toward the view. "You're welcome to stay here, if you'd like. I have a guest room."

"Thanks, but I'm fine with the place the DHS puts us in midtown. I may take you up on the water, though."

Myka was still in front of the windows when Helena finished her second shower of the day. She held a bottle of water, which she nearly dropped when Helena, leaning over the railing, called to her to come upstairs. Looking down at herself, Helena realized that she was only in a bra and panties. She hadn't given it a thought when she had decided that she wanted Myka's opinion on what to wear to the meeting with Dwight Sheffield and Russ Bergstrom. They had shared hotel rooms and more than once changed together in the car; the B&B, with its shared second floor bathroom, had hardly promoted modesty. "I need your opinion on the least professional outfit I can get away with wearing."

"Least professional?" Myka's voice managed to rise above the muted ringing of the metal staircase under her feet.

"Claudia did give you a copy of the additional information I requested on Sheffield and Bergstrom, did she not?" Helena said from in front of her custom-made wall-length wardrobe.

"Yes, but. . . ." The glance Myka flashed at her skipped over her quickly and landed on the excessively large bed. That also seemed to make her uncomfortable, and she went to stand at the railing, three-quarters turned away from Helena. She tapped it a few times in an uneven rhythm before she let her breath out in a dismayed sigh. "You think the artefact's properties have changed."

"Transmuted, yes, into another form of luck." Helena took a skirt suit from the wardrobe. "I wasn't struck by the type of investments they were having success with, I was struck by the type of clubs they were visiting and how frequently." She held the skirt, which was very short, against her waist. "What do you think of this one, with this blouse?" She reached back into the wardrobe and pulled out a long-sleeved crimson silk blouse with a plunging neckline, holding it against her chest. Myka's eyes first roamed over her face, lighting on her lips and the fall of her hair against her cheek. Then she appraised the clothing. "That should get their attention," she said quietly.

Helena flung them over the top of one of the wardrobe's open doors. "Three months ago, Dwight Sheffield lived with his wife and three children in Greenwich, Connecticut. Four weeks ago, his wife filed separation papers, and he's living in a Manhattan condo. Three months ago he hadn't visited a single one of the clubs he haunts now. Some I've been to, and others I know of by their reputation. They're meat markets, some a bit more meaty than others, if you get my drift."

"Afton, who had the original artefact, the dice, got lucky, for a while, with investments. Sheffield
has a replicated artefact, and you think he's getting lucky the old-fashioned way. And Bergstrom looks to be doing the same."

"Stands to reason. He's a bachelor, if I remember correctly." Helena was holding up the other skirt against her waist; it was gray, rather than black, and, although longer, it had a side slit that would expose most of her thigh. She also held up another blouse. "What about this, darling?" The blouse didn't button; it had three decorative chains that would loosely close it over her chest. "Too much?"

"It depends on the reaction you're looking for," Myka temporized. "You can't wear a bra with that blouse."

"That's why they invented breast tape," Helena said slyly. "At my age, you can't let the girls run free."

Her glance again sliding away from Helena, Myka sat gingerly on the bed. "What age are you trying to pass for these days?"

"Fortyish." Helena paused. "Do I look older? I've been debating about coloring my hair, but I don't want to look like I upended a coal scuttle over my head." She shivered. "I want to appear as naturally fortyish as a woman who's 148 can be."

"Don't worry," Myka said. "Most people would take you for younger than 'fortyish,' even with the white streak." She leaned back, balancing on her hands. "I'd suggest going with the black suit and red blouse. You don't want Sheffield and Bergstrom too distracted."

"Am I distracting, darling?" Helena grinned as she slipped on the skirt and partially zipped it.

"You don't have to try to vamp them," Myka said, not answering her. "We can come up with another angle."

"You've seen their pictures. Not the most prepossessing of specimens," Helena said dismissively. "They're not likely to give up their artefacts willingly, so I figured one of us needed to set up a honey trap of sorts."

"Helena, you have no idea of the power of the artefacts they have, especially if some of the properties are new." Myka raised one hand to tug at her hair, her forehead crinkling.

"We'll meet with them, show them the financial statements of the 'investors' we represent, and, with any luck, I'll be able to inveigle one of them into taking me out to dinner. While I'm at dinner fending off Mr. Sheffield's or Mr. Bergstrom's advances, you'll be searching his home, his office, wherever we think he might have information on the people behind this." Helena opened one of the drawers in the bureau next to the bed and took out another bra. "You may want to avert your eyes, darling. I'm about to give your modesty another jolt." She began to unhook the bra she was wearing. "Or you can finally give way to the prurience you've been denying all these years and take a peek. I won't tell."

Myka rolled her eyes before turning her head to the side. "This isn't wise, Helena. I wouldn't be in a position to help you if something went wrong."

"The worst thing I can think of happening is that I would fall under the influence of the artefact and sleep with him." Helena adjusted her bra. "There," she said with satisfaction, "all tucked in."

Myka looked up. "Jesus, I think pasties show less." She quickly turned her head to the side again, her cheeks pinking.
"They're called plunge bras for a reason. And it wouldn't be the first time that I sacrificed my virtue, what there is of it, on the altar of the Warehouse or country." At Myka's appalled expression, Helena said impatiently, "Not while I was with 13, darling, 12. You know, Rule Britannia, God save the queen, and all that rubbish." She walked back to the wardrobe and put on the blouse. "I'm back to being barely respectable."

As Myka slowly and warily pivoted on the bed to face her, Helena was twirling her fingers at her. "Now we have to take care of you."

"Me?"

"I can't have you outshine me," Helena protested, shrugging on the jacket. She heard Myka's snort of derision as she searched the bottom of her wardrobe for the appropriate pair of heels. "Don't tell me that after all these years, you still don't know how stunning you are. You took my breath away the first time I saw you." Shouting it from the bowels of a closet didn't leave her feeling nearly as vulnerable as saying it face to face would have.

Myka, not surprisingly, took it as another joke, another exaggeration. "That explains why you left Pete and me stuck to the ceiling in London," she said wryly.

"I needed time to recover." Helena felt a twinge of disappointment that Myka hadn't taken her seriously. More matter of factly, she said, "You'll need to wash your make-up off, and please tell me that you brought your glasses with you."

"They're in my bag downstairs."

"Good. You'll need to wear them." Moving closer, she stretched out her hand to touch Myka's hair. Myka tilted her head up and looked warily into her eyes. Her heart unaccountably beginning to pound, Helena fingered the strands, lightly pulling on a curl. The very few fantasies of Myka she had ever allowed herself, they had begun like this, her hands in Myka's hair. But the Myka of her fantasies had been swaying toward her, eyes closed, much like the overcome ingénues in old-fashioned romances, Helena realized with a flash of embarrassment, which was not at all what the real Myka was doing. The real Myka was already preparing a skeptical reception for whatever Helena had to suggest next, leaning back more on her hands, eyes narrowing. Myka, at least, recognized that she was on an assignment. This was business. Her hand arrowing straight to her own head once it disentangled from Myka's hair, as if that had been its target all along, Helena said, "You'll need to pull it back, as messily as possible. I have clips, if you need them."

Myka laughed. "If you wanted me to return to my high school days, you should have just told me. Am I playing Betty to your Veronica?"

"Far frumpier than that, darling. You need to be Velma to my Daphne." At Myka's look of surprise, she said, "Those Saturday morning cartoons Pete insisted on watching, a few of them filtered through." Unable to resist the mock dig, she added, "The government-sanctioned slacks and blazer you're wearing aren't quite Velma's turtleneck sweater, but they'll do."

Another roll of the eyes, but Myka rose and washed her face, clipped back her hair, leaving a hank of curls to spill over the clip, and replaced her contacts with her glasses, which were no longer the plastic-frame monstrosities she used to wear. They were smaller, slimmer, squarer, and, in combination with the business suit, gave her the look of an ambitious college intern. Not sexy but impossibly cute. Suppressing a groan, Helena wondered if it would just be easier to put a bag over her head, her own, not Myka's.

Myka completed a sardonic, half-pirouette. "Do I meet with your satisfaction?"
"Always," Helena said as casually as she could.

"You are going to bring Claudia's Tesla with you." Myka used the same tone she might use to remind Drew not to forget his homework.

"Darling, it'll ruin my line." Helena grandly swept her hands down her sides. "Besides, how do you know about it? Claudia acted as though she were being forced to ask me to babysit the Warehouse. 'Call me if it runs a temperature.' 'Don't let it roll off the changing table.'"

"Everyone knows about her secret Tesla." Myka smiled sheepishly. "Plus she told me she was giving it to you. She didn't want you out in the field without any protection."

"I thought you were my protection. I seem to remember a threat about kicking my ass back to Univille. Don't tell me that ass-kicking Myka isn't up to the job."

"If this plan of yours works as you hope, you'll be completely exposed to the artefact. I've already told you I don't like it." With an aggravated sigh that signaled she was conceding the argument before it started, Myka headed toward the staircase with her quick, purposeful strides. "We need to get going. We have to make a stop in midtown first." Slowing at the top of the steps, she said, "About the financial statements of those fake investors we're representing. They look real, Helena."

Helena, trying to insert an earring, focused on the image of Myka in her bureau mirror. "They should. They're mine."

"Jesus, that's what I was afraid of." Myka seemed to fold onto the top step, her shoulders slumping, all her purposefulness fled. "You didn't just manage quants for a hedge fund, did you?"

Helena fumbled the other earring off the top of the bureau. Muttering curses, she bent to pick it up. "At the very start I did. But then I formed a company that manages hedge funds. I still own it, but I'm not actively involved in it."

"None of that's in our dossier on you."

Helena lost the earring again. There was no reason for Myka's reaction to be affecting her, but Myka was making no attempt to hide the pained expression on her face. "Because I didn't want Claudia or anyone, for that matter, to find it. I appraise antiques. That's true, but it's not how I make the majority of my money. If it makes you feel any better, I give most of the money away. You wouldn't know it by looking at this place, but I do. And I took a bath yesterday transferring money into Treasuries and money-market funds."

"Helena, I don't care that you're rich." Under her breath but still audibly, Myka said, "Really rich." She rubbed her chin distractedly. "It bothers me that you're bankrupting yourself to create a workable cover story just like it bothers me that you're willing to let one of these men use an artefact on you."

Helena frowned at herself. The little hook went through the little hole in her earlobe. Why was it proving so difficult? "We need to have a substantial net worth to show for the Sheffields and the Bergstroms of the financial world to give us the time of day. I'm not exhausting my 'fortune,' if you want to call it that. I'm not anticipating that I'll be in Sheffield's or Bergstrom's bed by the end of the night. But we don't have much time, and, strangely, I feel less ridiculous prostituting myself in front of a money manager than I do saying 'terroristic.'"

"A few days ago, you had no interest in helping us. Now you're designating yourself the sacrificial lamb. Why?" Myka pushed herself up from the floor and slowly came to stand behind Helena, who
continued jabbing with annoyance at her ear until she felt the earring's hook poke through.

"Darling, before I became completely irredeemable, I didn't ask someone to do something I wasn't willing to do myself. I want you to be able to look your son and your... Jeff in the eyes when we return. Think again about those pictures in the folder." She grinned mischievously at Myka in the mirror. "Think about fates worse than death. That's what I'm sparing you." Myka looked at her steadily until Helena turned away from the mirror. "Braggadocio aside, I have complete confidence that you'll figure the replication out, with or without me. I'm the expendable one here."

She thought she saw something flare then in Myka's eyes, not anger exactly, but something as resistant. "You thought that before, Helena, and you were wrong." With an effort, Myka summoned a crooked smile. "Come along, Gypsy Rose Lee, you have a show to put on."
Maybe it was Myka's reference to Gypsy Rose Lee, but Helena couldn't get the unironic blare of *Night Train* out of her mind as they were led down a corridor, paneled in cherry wood, to Dwight Sheffield's office. She was tempted to swing her hips as she walked, but her outfit didn't need the help, and there was the slight risk she could throw a hip out of joint. Nevertheless the thought must have been parent to an extra suggestiveness to her movements because she thought she heard Myka snicker behind her. Sheffield's assistant, a woman as glossily finished as the suite of rooms the investment firm occupied, stopped them outside his office door with a cool look that turned even frostier when her glance slid over Helena. The assistant disappeared into his office, emerging moments later with a beaming Dwight Sheffield behind her.

Despite her claims about his unattractiveness, Helena acknowledged that he looked much like every other middle-aged male executive, well-groomed and manicured, and while his suit might have been off-the-rack, it was an expensive rack, and the suit had been tailored to give more width to perilously sloped shoulders. The only discordant note was his hair, obviously dyed, the 'chestnut brown' tint showing as a lurid red in the artificial light, a red Helena usually associated with clown wigs and postcards of tropical sunsets. Trying to keep her eyes from continually straying to his hair, she had to remind herself to let her hand remain in his a second or two too long as she introduced herself and Myka. His gaze traveled the length of her neckline, settling between her breasts. Finally raising his eyes to hers, he gave her hand a lingering squeeze before offering Myka a perfunctory greeting.

He showed them to a table, pulling out chairs for the both of them, although he managed to touch the small of Helena's back as she slipped into hers. He took a chair not quite opposite them; he would have an unobscured view of Helena in her very short skirt. Myka's left eyebrow was questioningly arched as she handed Helena the portfolio; she was asking Helena if she were still intending to go through with her plan to entice Sheffield. Helena patted the portfolio.

"I was hoping Mr. Bergstrom would be joining us as well. My associate and I represent several investors, and they so value an attention to detail and the personal touch. They believe in fostering very close working relationships." Helena patted the portfolio.

"Unfortunately Russ had an obligation he couldn't get out of this afternoon, but I can assure you that I'm very committed to my clients and always maintain open lines of communication with them. Unless you're representing an army, Ms. Wells, I believe I can perform to their satisfaction." His smile wasn't quite a leer. "But if you would rather reschedule when Russ is available. . . ."

Helena leaned forward in her chair, and Sheffield's eyes obligingly traveled the valley between her breasts. "I don't think that's necessary, Mr. Sheffield. I have hopes that we'll be very satisfied with you." She paused, smiling seductively in turn. "Assuming I recommend to my clients that they move their investments to your firm."

He reached out a hand, the fingernails buffed to a shine, and let it briefly touch hers as he tapped the portfolio. "Well, then, let's see what I can do to convince you to take me on."

Helena let him slide the portfolio out from under her hand. As he began paging through the statements, she looked at Myka, whose eyebrow seemed to be fixed in its questioning arch. Her mouth was too grimly set, and Helena nudged her with the toe of her shoe. Myka gave her a rueful quirk of her lips before she tilted her head to survey the office. Helena had seen nothing of interest
during her initial scan when Sheffield had been seating them at the table. Some of the walls were covered with display shelves, which held the usual assortment of diplomas, certificates, and personal items, while others were mounted with the generic photographs of landscapes that seemed to grace (or deface, depending on your point of view) every business office. She hadn't sensed anything unusual from Sheffield either. But it would be unlikely, if his artefact worked as she suspected that it did, for him to bring it here. It wouldn't do to have all the women in the firm lining up outside his door.

"Is that a compass on one of the shelves?" Myka asked, moving her chair back. "It looks like one my brother used to have."

Sheffield glanced at the display shelves. "Feel free to take a look." He smiled apologetically at Helena. "I've been remiss. Would you like a bottled water, soft drinks? I can ask Gina to bring an assortment in."

Myka was at the shelves, reaching for the compass. Helena tensed; she had overlooked it when she had glanced at Sheffield's photos of his family and his few keepsakes. It did look out of place, she had to admit. The metal was tarnished and scratched. It was the kind of cheap metal compass you could still buy for a few dollars at any sporting goods store. Myka had picked up the compass and was turning it over. With a shrug of her shoulders, which Helena interpreted to mean that it was nothing special after all, she put it down. Coolly she said, "Helena and I are fine, thanks. Is that a compass from when you were a Boy Scout, Mr. Sheffield?"

He flipped a statement over, not raising his eyes from the page. "Yeah, how did you know?"

"My brother's always went with him on his troop's camping trips. His is a bit beat-up too." Myka walked back to her chair.

"I keep it around as a reminder never to wander off course." He was responding to Myka's comment, but he had raised his head and was looking at Helena. "Set your sights on what you want and go after it."

He was looking at her in a way, Helena knew, that she was supposed to find magnetic and masterful. Instead she thought he had the overdetermined focus of someone desperately trying not to belch in public. But she couldn't afford not to play along, so she murmured appreciatively, "I share that philosophy," and teased him with another seductive smile.

Moving his chair closer to hers, Sheffield placed the portfolio between them. "These are very conservative investments." The smile had never left his face, but his eyes had a shrewder, more skeptical glint than they had had before, and Helena wondered, not for the first time on an assignment, if she had managed to tip her hand.

"The recession, understandably, made my clients very cautious. They're only now entertaining the idea of investing their funds in more speculative, but potentially more profitable, ventures. It's something I've been encouraging them to do for years, but they're very conservative in other ways as well. They want the right... man to handle their money, and they've asked me to find him." Helena shifted in her chair to press her leg against his. "But before he can prove himself to my clients, he needs to prove himself to me." It was bald, but she couldn't let him start, as he himself had put it, wandering off course and wondering who these women were showing up in his office with an investment portfolio that, with minor adjustments, could have come straight from the 1970s.

Maybe it had been too bald, because he was silent for a moment, staring down at the statements. With the artefact, he could target women who otherwise wouldn't look at him; she didn't want to
seem desperate by comparison. On the other hand, she had rarely been wrong when judging a
man’s interest in her – and he hadn't moved his leg away from hers. "Perhaps we could talk about
this over dinner," he suggested. "I think the type of relationship your clients are looking for should
be discussed in a more informal setting. That is, if you and Ms. Bering are agreeable."

On cue, Myka said, "I'm sorry, but I won't be able to join you. I have a prior engagement." It could
have been said less stiffly, but Sheffield seemed not to notice. His leg was aggressively pressing
against Helena's.

"Then it looks like it's just the two of us, Mr. Sheffield." Mainly because she felt the perverse
impulse to tweak Myka, Helena casually rested her hand on Sheffield's forearm, her fingers not
quite still, imperceptibly stroking the sleeve of his suit. "What do you recommend?" If her voice
had been any more laden with suggestiveness, she wasn't sure she would have been able to drag it
from her throat, as rich and heavy as the words sounded to her own ears. For her efforts, she felt a
sharp kick in her ankles, but she kept her gaze firmly on Sheffield's face, who, for his part, seemed
to have gone into a trance at the question. Blinking rapidly, he named a restaurant that Helena
recognized, exclusive but not at all the type of restaurant where an investment banker should be
hosting a business dinner.

After asking his assistant to make a reservation for him "and one lovely guest," he showed them to
the door, his hand actually moving on Helena's back, rubbing in a rough circle against her spine.
She wanted to move away from the caress, but she resisted the impulse and forced herself to give
him a slow flutter of her eyelashes as he closed the door behind them. Passing his assistant at her
desk, Helena couldn't help but linger until the woman reluctantly swiveled her chair in Helena's
direction and then Helena gave her a triumphant smile. Myka chose not to share in the victory,
striding down the corridor to the suite's entrance.

"You did lay it on pretty thick at the end," Myka wasted no time in saying once the elevator doors
had closed.

"So your kick told me." Helena looked at her with faux innocence. "I was acting my part. I don't
know why it disturbed you so."

"What about less is more escapes you, Helena?" Myka demanded. "Sheffield needed to think he
couldn't have you without the artefact, and you practically had your skirt hiked up for him on the
conference table."

"Interesting that you would describe it so graphically, darling. But sometimes less is, simply, less. I
was well aware I was competing against women barely more than a tenth of my age; he needed to
know, unmistakably I might add, that I was interested in him. Also, the fact that I appeared to be
attracted to him without the assistance of an artefact would be no small sop to his vanity." Myka
grudgingly lifted a shoulder in acknowledgment of Helena's counterargument, but her eyebrows
were stubbornly drawn in toward the bridge of her nose.

Helena wanted to place her finger on the small creases between Myka's eyebrows and smooth them
away. She wasn't sure how convinced she was by her own argument, but it was better than
confessing that she had been blatantly flirtatious in part to see what Myka's reaction would be. It
was so childish. . . something that Pete might have done. Buttoning the jacket of her suit to close
the Grand Canyon view of her chest that her blouse offered and not-so-surreptitiously tugging her
skirt down - amazing what a fleeting thought about Myka's claim that she and Pete were more alike
than either would be willing to admit did for her desire to appear mature and responsible - Helena
asked, "Do we need to find a way into Bergstrom's office?"

Myka shook her head as the elevator doors opened onto the lobby. It was past 5:00, and they had to
wind around office workers and their managers rushing to start their commutes home, hierarchies forgotten as administrative assistants cut off their bosses in their hurry to get through the exits first. Leaning close to Helena to ensure that she could be heard above the din of thundering feet and conversations punctuated by shouts of "Have a good night" and "See you tomorrow," Myka said, "I don't think we'll find anything there, if Sheffield's office was any indication. There was nothing in Afton's office when Pete and Travis searched it. Maybe Sheffield will reveal something at dinner tonight." At Helena's laugh, Myka scowled. "That's not what I'm hoping he'll reveal."

"You and me both, darling." The scowl, in combination with the increasingly wild disarray of her hair, which was working out of its clip, and the sadly wrinkled state of her suit, left Helena thinking that Myka no longer looked like a college intern or even the tired Warehouse agent she was as much as she did a disgruntled accountant, as if the most dangerous weapon she could brandish would be the threat of an audit. But Helena wisely kept that thought to herself. Myka didn't like the dinner date as it was, no sense in further annoying her, although Helena instinctively remembered Tamalpais and being pressed against the wall by a very annoyed Agent Bering. There could be a purpose in further annoying Myka, but not here and not now.

"What's your plan for getting into Sheffield's condo?" Helena asked, quashing thoughts of Tamalpais and any other stray thoughts involving Myka and vertical surfaces. Horizontal ones too, for that matter.

"I've asked Jacqui to create a minor security disturbance. She's not Claudia-good, but she's good, and that should allow me to get up to his place. I can handle things from there."

"And you were the one who worried that I would get us arrested. What kind of 'minor security disturbance' is this?"

"The less said about it, the better. Besides, I at least have reliable backup if I get into trouble."

Myka swerved to avoid two co-workers who had stopped in the middle of the lobby to check their phones.

Hurrying to catch up with her, Helena said, "So do I." As Myka sent her a withering look over her shoulder, Helena insisted, "I do. Myka, I trust that you'll be there for me if I need you." Of course, she wouldn't be, couldn't be there in time - Sheffield's condo was too far away from the restaurant were something to happen there. But the reality of it didn't matter, what mattered was convincing worried Myka, not logical, cool-headed Myka, who, strangely, seemed to be in a subordinate role right now, that things were going to be all right.

Myka grabbed Helena's arm and guided her out of the path of a determined woman in a pant suit and running shoes, phone to her ear, barreling toward them and the glass doors they were about to push open. "You'll come sweeping in, just like you did now," Helena said as they stepped onto an apron of concrete fronting the sidewalk.

But Myka seemed not to hear her, the muscles at her jaw bulging a little with tension. As another anxious commuter bumped against Helena on her way to the subway station, Helena touched Myka's elbow. "I'm so rarely out among the little people these days. What is a 'rush hour'?" She hoped her imitation of Violet Crawley was adequate; her accent alone should have sold it.

A flicker of a smile appeared on Myka's lips. "I think I prefer the Helena who said television was a greater threat to the world than the nuclear bomb."

"If her invective was no better than that, she isn't worth missing." In a darker tone, Helena said, "Besides, wasn't she the one up in her room polishing her trident?"
Myka cocked her head and looked at her for a long moment. "I don't think about tridents or Yellowstone much anymore. You should give it a try." She began drifting toward the curb, looking for a taxi to flag down. Suddenly she spun around, glaring at Helena, her expression fierce. "You call me if anything, and I mean anything, seems off tonight. If he looks at you cross-eyed, call me. Promise me, Helena."

"Scout's honor," she said breezily.

Trying to see Helena though the parade of passers-by on the sidewalk, Myka shouted in protest, "You weren't any kind of scout. I don't consider that officially binding, you know." A cab squealed to a stop at the curb, and with a last warning glare at her, Myka flung herself into the back seat.

Sheffield's assistant had made the reservation for 7:30, and Helena nursed a couple of club sodas in the restaurant's bar as she waited, passing the time looking at her accounts on her phone (she had gladly left the DHS-issued dinosaur in the loft) and tallying just how much money she had lost on creating the cover story she and Myka had used with Sheffield. Not that she cared about the money, but the tallying had absorbed her attention and quieted her nerves. She hadn't wanted to encounter an artefact or its possessor without any sort of defense, but fitting her phone into the tiny clutch purse had been difficult enough; there was no disguising the Tesla.

She sensed the pull of the artefact long before she saw him. It was strong but not overwhelming, which hadn't been her experience with artefacts whose effects were felt by others rather than the artefact holders themselves. As she glimpsed the crown of his head, garishly red even in the dimness of the bar, she found him no more attractive than she had a few hours earlier in his office, what she felt instead was the compulsion to say yes to anything he said. So that was how it worked, and he chose to use the artefact to have sex with women who would look at every man in the room before they looked at him. That wasn't quite true - they would look three or four times at that hair in utter shock before running in the opposite direction. In spite of herself, because she knew what he did with the artefact was horrible, she was disappointed in his lack of imagination. She was fairly certain if he were to ask her to step in front of a bus, it would be all she could do not to run to the street looking for one. In other hands, an artefact with this power could be used to cause a disaster that would affect thousands, even millions. That was one of the things they never told you when you came to work for the Warehouse. All you heard about was the endless wonder, they never told you about the endless stupidity of many of the people who ended up with an artefact. Back in the time of 12, there had been the idiot who had Napoleon's tricorne, and what did he use it for, an artefact that would allow him to devise military strategies that would crush opposing armies? He used it to build the unbeatable cricket team. Granted, the smallness of his ambition made it all the easier to take the artefact from him, they hadn't had to wage a war to retrieve it, but it had been galling all the same to walk onto the cricket field and see that fool jauntily wearing the tricorne and exhorting his teammates to carry the battle to their opponents.

That was the exactly the kind of thinking that had led her down some very dark paths. Suppressing the thought of Napoleon's tricorne as well as a shudder of revulsion at seeing Sheffield cockily approach her, she unbuttoned her suit jacket and slowly crossed one leg over the other. He took in the view appreciatively, a hand brushing lightly against his trouser pocket before coming to rest on his hip. It was an odd little gesture that Helena hadn't seen from him while she and Myka had been in his office.

"Sorry I'm late. Last minute conference call." The hand moved from his hip to help her up from her chair. Helena accepted his assistance, just as slowly uncrossing her legs and rising. "The night's still young, Mr. Sheffield, but you have a lot of persuading to do."

"Dwight," he said. He had begun to guide her in front of him but stopped to reach for the napkin
under her glass and wipe his forehead with it. "Damn hot in here." He crumpled it and dropped it on the table. He had made the comment seriously - it had been no heavy-handed compliment - and Helena could see the sheen of sweat on his forehead. She had been comfortably cool in the bar, and she noticed that the compulsion to comply with anything he asked of her had weakened.

"Are you feeling all right? We can do this some other time." She would prefer not to, she would prefer to get this over with tonight, whatever this dinner with him turned into, but he was looking pale. She hadn't been expecting the side effects of the artefact to start making their appearance this soon, but she needn't jump to conclusions either. It had been a warm day, more like July or August than June, and perhaps a stressful one for poor Dwight as well.

"I'm just fine." His hand glided briefly down to his trouser pocket again, and Helena felt such a violent surge of... eagerness, not desire, but eagerness to please him that she clenched her hands into fists to keep herself from sinking to the floor and begging him to do whatever he wished with her. Still, she knew the smile she was shining on him was one not normally in her repertoire, giddy and unguarded, and she felt, underneath the pressure to comply with his every wish, a flash of resentment that she was wasting this smile, one she hadn't even remembered she had, on him.

"Shall we?" He asked, and the resentment was gone in the breathless "yes" she couldn't hold back.

Thankfully she had been agreeing only to leave the bar for the main dining room, where they were seated in an intimate alcove set off from the other diners. Occasionally Sheffield would dab at his face with his napkin, but he otherwise made no complaint about the heat. Sometimes he would let his hand drop below the table, and Helena knew he was touching whatever it was in his trouser pocket that was serving as the artefact. She hadn't felt another surge in response to it, for which she was thankful, but she still felt the need to be in perfect unison with him. Which was why she had automatically agreed to a glass of wine, although she was aware that alcohol would only weaken her resistance to the constant impulse to say... "Yes?" At the last minute she had inflected the word, making it into a question rather than a surrender.

Sheffield looked pleased and gave a brief nod to the waiter. What had she said yes to? Some sort of appetizer. "I had been planning to make a pitch to you over dinner about the investments I think your clients should be making, but I find you much too attractive, Helena, to spend our evening discussing start-ups and venture capital. I'm hoping that the attraction isn't one-sided." His smile was too confident, too insincere. He knew what she would say because he had compelled other women to tell him what he wanted to hear. His elbow crooked slightly, and she knew the hand was at his pocket.

"You're not hoping in vain." She would have said something similar, even without the artefact, because she had a script to follow, but with the artefact, she had to say it. She would have said more, along the lines of being willing to leave the restaurant with him now if he wanted to, but she was biting down very hard on the inside of her mouth to prevent those words from tumbling out. Feeling an everpresent push, as if a hand were between her shoulders giving her a shove every few seconds, she thought of other dinners, other men and other women, when the attraction was truly mutual; they had been different than this, surely. She had never felt the wanting was forced, never had to acknowledge that she didn't find the other person terribly attractive, never ended up having sex because there was no other way, it seemed, to end the evening. She had never been that lonely or desperate, had she? And all the smugness and smirking and winking suggestiveness, that couldn't have felt as clumsy and unappealing as it did now. This, with him, it was part of a mission; it was a task, a means to an end. The other... maybe there had been an element of marking time, she reluctantly allowed. There had always been in the rote compliments and sly glances a sense that they were going through their paces, she and the man, or woman, across from her, as though
there were a certain number of moves that had to be made, certain things said or implied, before they could advance to that next stage, where there didn't have to be any talking at all. And hadn't that had, even at its best, a whiff of something slightly stale? As if they were having sex in a room that hadn't been aired out in a while or on top of a bed made of old clothes.

"You're a thousand miles away, and here I thought you couldn't take your eyes off me," he chided her. His hand hadn't moved, but she felt another sickening surge of the artefact's power. She had displeased him, and she needed to make it right. Her hand shot out to his, and she was saying, what was she saying? That she was so intensely attracted it took her breath away, that she had felt drawn to him from the moment she saw him. Reassured of her interest, he relaxed, and Helena felt the compulsion recede. She sank back against the leather of the booth, fighting against the desire to take a deep breath. Or two.

He looked at her over the rim of his wine glass, and she couldn't force herself to look away. Their waiter quietly appeared at their table and just as discreetly placed the appetizers between them. Helena wondered dismally if Sheffield was going to ask her to feed them to him. As he took his fork and speared a tiny pastry (Helena didn't think she could have borne the absolute cliché the evening would have become had the appetizers been oysters on the half shell), they both noticed the fork wavering in front of his mouth. He managed to steady his hand and he joked, "This is the effect you have on me," but he wasn't smiling. He put down his fork, but the tremor in his hand was still visible.

Helena saw the perspiration at his hairline, and the prickle of foreboding she had felt earlier in the bar grew into a shiver. She wasn't sure how much time he had before the side effect or effects worsened, and she wasn't sure to what extent the artefact would let her resist his displeasure - his momentary pout had had her all but leaping onto his lap - but she needed to say something now. "Dwight, you've been touching an object in your pocket all evening." At his grin, she said as crisply as she could, "It's not that object I'm interested in, I'm interested in the other one, the one Stewart Afton gave you. Maybe it's a key chain or a special coin, but it brings you luck with the ladies, or so you think."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He picked up his napkin and wiped underneath his chin. He looked at the napkin with dismay and flung it on the table. "I thought we were getting along, having a nice dinner. I like you, you seem to like me. That's all there is." The hand was trembling more violently, and he flexed his fingers. "Perhaps we ought to call it a night. I'm not feeling too well, after all."

Pleas for him to forgive her, to ignore what she had just said were bubbling up her throat. Gritting her teeth, she said, "You're not feeling well because whatever it is Mr. Afton gave you has some powerful side effects. They're deadly side effects, Dwight. You need to relinquish that object."

His smile was sarcastic. "Give it to you, maybe? This has all been a set-up, hasn't it? The meeting this afternoon, the investments. And then your associate, with her interest in my compass. You were looking for it then, weren't you?" He began to pull at the collar of his shirt, his breathing becoming more labored. "Stew said we had to be careful... not attract attention... he said they wouldn't be happy." His muttering became unintelligible, and he unsteadily pushed himself out of the booth. "I need to go home." He swayed, and Helena slid out of the booth to grab his arm. He shook her hand off, taking a step before he fell to his knees.

Helena caught him as he crumpled to the floor. "Someone call 911!" She shouted as the diners closest to them sent her alarmed looks and shoved their chairs away from their tables. As a waiter rushed up to her, she said, "Find out if there's a doctor here." Sheffield was still conscious, but his eyes were unfocused and his breathing was shallow. "You're going to be all right," she said to him.
as she searched his trouser pocket. As one diner gave her what Helena thought was a suspicious look, she said, "I'm looking for his epi pen." Car keys, spare change, and something else, something oblong and metallic with a rough, knobby inlay. She drew it out, a money clip with an oval of rhinestones down its middle. It was cheap and garish and empty of bills. Slipping it into a pocket of her jacket, she looked at Sheffield; the breathing was raspier and his eyes were closed. "Dwight," she said, leaning over his face, "stay with us here." He gave her no response. Bent over him, she ran her hand along the inside of his suit coat, searching for his phone.

Then a hand was on her shoulder pulling her away from him. He was an older man, with a fringe of hair around his head that did nothing to undermine the look of authority he gave her. "I'm a doctor. Can you tell me what happened?"

Helena, clutching Sheffield's phone to her, rapidly identified the symptoms she had noticed. She had been hoping that once she removed the artefact that Sheffield's condition would improve. But if anything, it had gotten worse. As the doctor examined Sheffield, she reached for her purse in the booth. She needed to call Myka, but the doctor started talking to her, asking her questions about how Sheffield had acted before he collapsed. She tried to be as detailed as possible, glancing all the while at her phone, and then he was standing up, motioning to two paramedics who were loping toward them.

They strapped Sheffield to the stretcher and began wheeling him out of the restaurant. At the ambulance doors, she didn't hesitate to follow the stretcher into the back, saying with firmness, "I'm his wife." One of the paramedics stayed with them, while the other jogged to the front of the rig. As lights flashed and the siren began its loud pulse, Helena watched the paramedic recheck Sheffield's vitals. Sheffield's eyelids fluttered open, and he turned his head toward her. "Dwight, you need to tell me about the money clip."

The paramedic frowned, shooting her a puzzled look. Not sure at all what properties the artefact still possessed or how they might work with her, Helena took a gamble and smiling as sweetly as she could at the paramedic, she said, "Would you humor me by not paying any attention to what we're saying?"

His eyes suddenly glassy, the paramedic only nodded, busying himself with various monitors. Sheffield was moistening his lips and looking around the interior of the ambulance. "Where are we going?" His voice was thready, and drops of sweat were running down his face.

"To a hospital. You're going to be fine, Dwight." Helena had no idea whether he was going to be fine, but she certainly wasn't going to tell him that the recovery rate so far for holders of replicated artefacts was zero. "Dwight, how did you, or Afton, get the money clip?"

"Stew got it for me. Said it would make me lots of money." He swallowed with effort. "Am I going to be okay?" Helena smiled reassuringly. He didn't appear to take comfort in it. "Need to call my wife."

"I will." Helena lightly touched his shoulder as his eyes began to roll back in his head. "Dwight, who sold Afton the clip?"

He didn't answer, and one of the monitors he was attached to began beeping. The paramedic checked the screen and ripped open Sheffield's shirt. He began applying CPR, and Helena looked helplessly. The technology had changed, but that was all. When she had been younger and before death had touched her irrevocably, the adrenaline of retrieving the artefact had frequently been enough to carry her through this part of the process, when they hadn't been able to arrive in time to save the victims, which had all too frequently included the artefact holders themselves. The gore, the agonized expressions of the dead, she had picked her way through broken bodies and
pools of blood and narrowed her field of vision to eliminate all but the artefact itself. She had
treated the scenes like dioramas at a museum, exhibits she could linger over, if she wished, but just
as easily turn her back on in her search for objects of greater interest. The excitement, the detached
curiosity, they had served her well until every dead body was Christina's and every mouth frozen
open in shock or fear was silently echoing her screams.

Eventually the paramedic stopped the compressions and looked at the monitor, sharing a look of
relief with Helena. "We've got normal rhythm," he said.

At the hospital, Sheffield was rushed into examination, while Helena paced the waiting room,
calling Myka. Myka answered before the first ring had ended, but before Helena could tell her what
had happened, Myka was asking, anxiously, "Are you all right?" Then her voice grew harder, more
demanding. "Tell me you're all right."

"I'm fine, but I'm at the hospital." Hearing Myka's sharp intake of breath, she said rapidly, "It's
Sheffield. He started succumbing to the side effects at the restaurant, but I was able to get the
artefact." Helena winced at the word, but no one else in the waiting room seemed to be listening;
people were on their own phones or listlessly flipping through magazines.

"It's on you? Of course it is, God, you should've had . . . ." Myka trailed off. "Where are you?"

Helena looked around the waiting room, why she was expecting something like a street sign with
the hospital's name on it, she didn't know. Tapping the shoulder of the person nearest to her, she
asked the woman for the name of the hospital and then relayed it to Myka. After a completely
unnecessary caution that she shouldn't go anywhere, Myka hung up, and Helena put her phone into
her other jacket pocket, the one not holding the money clip but Sheffield's phone. His wife, he had
wanted her to call his wife. She made the call, introducing herself as a business associate, and
Sheffield's wife immediately grew suspicious, asking Helena what a 'business associate' of her
'husband' - pronouncing both as if they were dead mice she was being asked to carry - was doing
calling her on her husband's phone. Mrs. Sheffield's tone softened as Helena patiently explained the
seriousness of the situation to her, and as she began asking Helena if Dwight had asked for her or
the children, if he was conscious, Helena felt a resurgence of the helplessness she had felt in the
back of the ambulance, and she recognized that she hadn't missed this part of being a Warehouse
agent either. On top of the sheer awfulness of having to tell family or friends that their husband or
sister or child wasn't coming back, would never be coming back, there was the awkwardness of not
being able to tell them why. Even if they were too stunned to actually ask the question, it was on
their faces. And Mrs. Sheffield was asking her that question now. "What happened to him?"

And Helena had nothing more to offer than the same mix of facts and half-truths she had offered
over a hundred years before. "We were at dinner, and he said he felt ill. Perhaps it was a reaction to
something he ate or drank, I don't know. He collapsed and was brought here."

Her regret, at least, was honest, and Mrs. Sheffield seemed to recognize it, thanking Helena for
staying with her husband. Helena smiled bitterly at the gratitude. All the better to rifle his pockets,
darling. But she wouldn't say that either, of course. The call ended, she dropped the phone in her
pocket and dropped herself into an empty seat, waiting for Myka.

It may have been minutes or a half-hour, Helena didn't know. She was alternating between looking
at the doors to the emergency room and the doors to the ER's reception area. The doors to the latter
opened first, and Myka charged in, head twisting as she searched for Helena. She was in another
one of her summer-weight sweaters and jeans, the corner of something purple peeping from one of
her back pockets. Helena called to her as she crossed the waiting room, and Myka's wry smile
couldn't disguise the relief flooding her face.
"I wasn't sure what to expect. When you said you were all right, I thought, at the very least, there would be bandages and a cast." Myka ran her hand down Helena's forearm, but her eyes were still anxious as they searched Helena's. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Physically yes, emotionally I may be a little worse for wear. I had forgotten what it was like to witness the adverse effect of an artefact." Helena had her head turned over her shoulder, watching the doors to the emergency room as Myka led her toward the women's room.

"Helena, we need to take care of the artefact," Myka said in a low voice.

The restroom was empty, and as Myka tugged a pair of gloves and the bag from the pockets of her jeans, Helena said, with the flippancy that she felt was expected of her, "Darling, we should make sure I've grabbed the right item. I think there's a stall over there we could occupy while we determine whether I can get lucky just by holding a money clip. Don't you feel the least bit inclined to rock my world?"

Myka pulled on the gloves and opened the bag. "You can stop, Helena. I can tell your heart's not in it." She held out her palm, and Helena, with a sigh that sounded more ragged than truly theatrical, placed the money clip in it. They both shielded their faces as Myka dropped the clip in the bag.

The sparks were brighter than Helena had anticipated, and she continued to squint as Myka stripped off her gloves and threw them in the bag as well. Wrapping the bag around the clip, she crammed the small bundle into her jeans pocket. They exited the restroom, and Helena scanned the reception area and the waiting room to see if Sheffield's wife had arrived, but the number of people hadn't changed.

"Have you eaten?" When Helena shook her head, Myka suggested, "Why don't we go to the cafeteria and get something quick?" Helena shook her head again, and Myka, trailing her to a couple of empty chairs against the wall, asked, "If I get you something from the vending machines, will you eat it?"

Helena shrugged in a way that could be interpreted as a yes and shifted her shoulders against the hard plastic, leaning her head against the wall. Ostensibly she and Myka were still here on the off-chance that Sheffield might not slip into a coma and might be willing to tell them more about the clip, but she was here because she wanted to talk to Sheffield's wife. She wanted to tell her that she had been Sheffield's last thought before he lost consciousness. She wanted to tell her that his leaving her had been the product of an artefact, and the artefact itself, his possession of it, anyway, the passing vagary of a middle-aged man. She wanted to tell her to prepare herself because no one had survived the side effects of a replicated artefact. She wanted to tell her... because there had been no one to prepare her, no one to tell her what Christina's last thoughts had been, no one there with her at all. The hotel clerk had given her the telegram, unable to meet her eyes, and she had thought his shifting feet and his inability to look at her just another sign of the infatuation that had been on display all week in his blushes and mumblings whenever she had spoken to him. So she had carelessly unfolded the telegram at the desk, expecting it to be a communication from the Warehouse, and when she had grabbed at her throat, unable to breathe after she had read it, there had been no one in the hotel's lobby to ask if she had received upsetting news, no one to urge her to sit down or to clumsily pat her hand. She had simply torn the telegram into tiny pieces and climbed the stairs to her room, her breath coming in and out in such harsh gulps that she thought her lungs might tear themselves from her chest -

"I hope there's something here you'll like." Myka placed a handful of candy bars and packages of nuts and crackers in her lap. She handed her a bottled water as well.

"Thank you," Helena said faintly, trying to open the bottle.
Myka took the bottle from her and opened it. "Where were you just now? Were you thinking of Christina? I didn't think about hospitals being . . . I know back then they weren't like what we have now. . . ."

"I'm all right, truly." Helena absently took a drink and set the bottle down. "I confess that I still think of them as pits of vermin and incompetence, but I suppose you can't take all the Victorianism out of the old girl."

"I'll stay," Myka said. "Helena, go back to your loft. It's been a long night for you already." The green eyes were so earnest that Helena began to smile. Myka had always had that effect on her. She could be sunk in the darkest of her thoughts, which, during her sojourn at 13, she frequently had been, and while Myka never really jollied her out of them, in part because Myka wasn't someone who jollied others by nature (that had always been Pete's talent, if you could call it such), the intensity of her sympathy, even when Myka couldn't have known what was prompting it, had nearly always managed to make their weight seem less oppressive.

"I'm staying." She opened a package of crackers and offered them to Myka. "Until I was debronzed, the only part of a hospital I ever saw was the morgue." She hesitated. "You must not have the most pleasant of associations either."

"They're not all unpleasant," Myka said with a smile. "I had Drew in one. And Pete and I have been in and out of them enough times that I don't fear them." She looked more intently at Helena. "You're thinking about what Claudia always calls my 'cancer scare.'" She shook out a few crackers and passed the bag back to Helena. "It didn't amount to much, in the end."

"Of all the times that I never responded to Claudia's emails, that's the lapse I regret the most. Even though she told me long after it happened, I should have said something. No need to have caused any of you to add 'heartless' to whatever string of adjectives followed my name." Helena bit off a tiny corner of a cracker and look toward the reception area. No frightened woman with a gray-blonde bob was standing at the desk asking about a Dwight Sheffield. She bit off another corner of the cracker.

"I didn't want anyone to know about it. Which was a mistake." Myka blew out a stream of air. "It wasn't fair to burden Pete with all of it. If I had been more open about what was going on, he wouldn't have felt he was on his own, and all that followed with Paracelsus . . . ." She shrugged her shoulders almost moodily.

Helena couldn't help herself; she brushed back a strand of Myka's hair, tucking it in among the other curls. Myka didn't shy away, and she took the bag of crackers from Helena's lap. "I'm sorry you felt that you couldn't tell me. We were still having our virtual coffees back then."

Myka shook out more crackers. "You were still trying to work things out with Nate. I thought Pete and I, no, I had already done enough to screw things up for you on that score."

After giving her a long look, Helena opened one of the candy bars, a Snickers. She broke it in half and handed one end to Myka. "Eat it," she said firmly. "You haven't had anything either." She chewed her half meditatively. This wasn't really the time or place - funny, how many times when she had thoughts about Myka, her immediate reaction was that it wasn't the time or the place - but they were at least talking around Boone, if not about it, and God alone knew how long they were going to be here in this waiting room. "You were right about Nate and Adelaide, about my being with them for the wrong reasons," she said finally. "Perhaps if I had been more honest with you about why I had moved in with Nate, you would have been more honest with me about the cancer."

Myka looked doubtfully at her half of the Snickers bar and placed it, still in its wrapper, on the
empty chair beside her. "It's water under the bridge, Helena," she said wearily. "Boone, the cancer. It wasn't my place to tell you whom you could love. You don't owe me any explanations."

Oh, but I do. But Helena had no intention of telling her everything about Boone, only what would confirm the suspicions that Myka might have had. "He was a very kind, very decent man, but I wasn't in love with him, and I don't think he was in love with me. What we had in common was that we both loved Adelaide." She looked at Myka from the corners of her eyes, but Myka's face was expressionless, and she was folding the empty bag of crackers into a small square. "I was used to seeing successful marriages built on less. My parents had been pushed into an engagement by their families, and while they never fell madly in love with each other, not to my knowledge, anyway, they ended up caring for one another quite deeply. I made a mistake in thinking Nate and I could do the same. But when the truth came out about my past, well, part of it, we had nothing to fall back on. Our relationship became an endless volleying of recriminations on his part and apologies on mine." Myka was creasing the square of foil with her thumbnail. "But even if we had been able to get past my lies and his fears for Adelaide's safety, we wouldn't have stayed together."

"Because he would have wanted more?" Myka asked, not looking at her.

"Because I would have." That was as close as Helena could come to the truth. For tonight, anyway.

"Then why -" But the swinging open of the doors to the emergency room brought them both to their feet. After a quick visual sweep of the waiting room, the doctor went to the desk in the reception area and spoke briefly to the woman standing behind it, who was wearing the cheerfully patterned smock that was standard issue for medical assistants everywhere; hers was covered with flowers sporting smiley faces. Myka was already halfway to the desk, pulling a small leather wallet from another pocket. Helena hurried after her.

"Are either of you Mrs. Sheffield?" The doctor asked brusquely, glancing from Myka to Helena. Her scrubs, like her voice and her demeanor, were no nonsense, an institutional green.

Myka flipped open the wallet. "We're the ones who brought Mr. Sheffield in. We're with the Department of Homeland Security."

The doctor barely glanced at it. "Has his wife been notified?"

"She's en route," Helena said.

As the doctor pivoted back toward the doors to the emergency room, Myka said quietly but firmly. "We'd like to talk to him if at all possible." The doctor hesitated, and Myka added just as politely but just as firmly, "He's a person of interest in a case we're investigating, we need to talk to him."

"All I can tell you is that he's in no shape to be talking to anyone." The doctor's eyes narrowed. "If there's anything you know about why he needed to be brought in, I suggest you tell me."

"We can't tell you anything you would find helpful," Myka said. "My associate was interviewing him when he suddenly fell ill."

"The paramedics said they were called to a restaurant," the doctor said, crossing her arms. "Since when does an investigative agency interview persons of interest over dinner?" And how does what your associate's wearing meet the definition of 'business casual' her contemptuous once-over of Helena practically shouted.

"When they don't want to tip him off," Helena interjected, pulling her jacket tighter around her. "If there's anything more specific you could tell us about his condition, we would appreciate it." Not a
little irritated at her reaction to the doctor's disapproval, Helena added, "While I'm sure your Tea Party neighbors would be supportive of your interrogation of our methods and budget, I believe Mr. Sheffield is the one in greater need of your services."

The doctor gave Helena a disdainful look before growling, "He's still unconscious. Is that sufficiently specific?" She turned away from them and disappeared through the doors.

"Thanks for alienating her," Myka said as they made their way back to their chairs. "We need her to be cooperative."

"I didn't like her attitude," Helena sniffed. "Didn't you see how suspicious she was getting?" She picked up the snacks she had left on her chair and sulkily settled against its back.

"She really wasn't giving us that much static. You're bristling because she was looking at you as if you had come off the set of a porn flick." Myka grinned at her, taking a swig from her bottle of water.

"Please, my blouse alone costs more than the budget of a porn movie." She opened another candy bar wrapper, while Myka lifted a bag of nuts from her lap.

They ate in silence for a while. Myka finished the nuts and placed the empty bag over the half of the Snickers bar Helena had given her. "When Drew was about four, he contracted a virus. It seemed like a typical cold, but then his temperature began to climb. It was the middle of the night, and we drove him to the hospital in Rapid City. The doctors couldn't figure out what virus it was, and his temperature was soaring. Pete was nearly frantic, and I wasn't much better, but I knew I had to be the calm one, and so I was. We sat in chairs like this, and Pete pretty much emptied every vending machine, although neither of us could eat." Myka glanced at Helena and then looked away. "I kept telling him everything would be all right, and eventually it was. The doctors came up with something that knocked the virus out, and Drew's fever dropped. But you asked me about unpleasant associations with hospitals, and I wouldn't be completely honest - if we're being completely honest - if I didn't tell you that I always associate hospitals with that day. Not because Drew was so sick, because I knew, knew that he was going to be okay. But because that was also the day I realized I couldn't stay married to Pete." She was bent over in her chair, hands loosely clasped on her legs, and looking down at the floor. "Drew was better, and we were on the hospital bed with him, eating all the junk from the vending machines we hadn't been able to force ourselves to eat before. Pete had the biggest smile on his face because everything was right with his world and everyone he loved most was on that bed with him, and all I could think was 'I can't do this anymore.'"

She was silent after that, and though Helena's mind was filled with questions, she didn't ask them. "I'm sorry" was what she said.

"I think you actually mean it." Myka laughed softly, but there was no humor in it.

"Of course I do," Helena said just as softly. "You don't commit yourself lightly, Myka."

"Claudia always thought it was a mistake, the marriage. Even on our wedding day, she was telling me it wasn't too late to change my mind, and she was my maid of honor. She tried to pass it off as a joke, but I knew better, Pete knew better." Myka shook her head in fond exasperation at Claudia's stubbornness. After a moment filled only with the sounds of medical staff being paged, she turned to Helena, regarding her steadily. "It wasn't a mistake, I need you to understand that, Helena. Had Pete and I stayed married it would have been a mistake. But for a while, it was real, what we had."

"I knew, I knew when you called me from the airport that night. Do you remember?" At Myka's
nod, she continued, "And I meant what I said then, too. I think one of the few virtues I've managed to hang onto is that I've always wanted you to be happy."

"Why do you have to be thousands of miles away from me when you say things like that?" Myka asked, and the look in her eyes was the one that always left Helena feeling seared, the look that was so open and questioning that she burned whenever she realized she was the object of it. Open and questioning and, fundamentally, innocent, as if Myka believed there was no darkness in Helena that she couldn't face and, by facing it, conquer it.

Because of looks like that. Because I'm usually the cause of your unhappiness. Instead, almost teasingly, Helena said, "I'm here now."

The doors to the reception area opened, and a middle-aged woman with a grayish-blond bob came in from the outside and uncertainly approached the desk. Helena nudged Myka, and they left their wrappers littering the chairs and walked toward Dwight Sheffield's wife.

"I'm Diane Sheffield. I understand that my husband was brought here." She was nearly buttonholing the woman in the smock, who edged away, saying, "Let me page Dr. Saunders for you."

"Mrs. Sheffield?" Helena devoutly wished she was wearing something other than a short, tight suit and a blouse with a plunging neckline.

Her wish was reflected in the appalled expression on Diane Sheffield's face. "You're . . . the associate who called me about Dwight?"

Myka casually stepped between them. "Mrs. Sheffield, I'm Myka Bering. We're with the Department of Homeland Security. We were talking with your husband in relation to a case we're investigating."

The confusion deepened on Mrs. Sheffield's face. "Department of Homeland Security? My husband works for an investment firm. Why would he be mixed up with anything involving Homeland Security?"

"It's a long story," Myka admitted.

The doors to the emergency room blew open, and the doctor approached the three of them with the same impatient attitude with which she had approached Myka and Helena before. "Mrs. Sheffield?" Her eyes fixed on Sheffield's wife, and she pushed Myka and Helena aside. "Will you please follow me? We need to talk about your husband's condition."

Mrs. Sheffield's face paled. "Is it that serious then?"

With a quick, hard look at Myka and Helena, the doctor said unhappily, "I'm afraid it is." She guided Sheffield's wife toward the emergency room doors. "I'm sorry, agents, but you're not going to have an opportunity to speak with Mr. Sheffield."

As they passed through the doors, Helena glanced worriedly at Myka. "I'm not misunderstanding her meaning, am I?"

Myka slowly moved her head from side to side. "She just told us he's not going to make it." She pushed her hand into the front pocket of her jeans, distractedly touching the bagged money clip. "We need to find Russ Bergstrom, and we need to find him now."
Chapter 6

They didn't find him that night. They called and texted him, using Sheffield's phone, but he didn't respond. They went to Soho, where he had an apartment, and not finding him there, they went out to Long Island, where he had rented a summer home, which showed no recent signs of occupancy. On their return to the city in the early morning hours, they went to the investment firm, on the off chance that he might be burning the midnight oil in his office. Giving up on their hunt, Myka directed the driver to take them to her hotel, suggesting to Helena that they get some sleep before going back to the investment firm and relaunching the investigation Pete and Travis had closed months before. "We have no choice," she sighed, calling Claudia yet again. "Because we obviously don't know what we're dealing with anymore. If a replicated artefact's properties can, well, drift, there could be more people at the firm than we know who have an artefact. Jacqui and I were screening only for blips in the investment patterns. Who knows what we should be looking for now?" The car stopped in front of the hotel. "You can sleep on the sofa," she offered abruptly, offhandedly. Then, into the phone, "No, not you, Claudia."

Helena shook her head, wondering if Myka was extending the invitation only because they were both exhausted and she thought to spare her the trip back out to Brooklyn, or if she was acting on an old Warehouse memory, the times when she had come down to the kitchen in the middle of the night, and there Helena would be at the table with a mug of tea between her hands. "I'll be fine," she said, choosing an all-purpose response that would be equally appropriate regardless of the motivation behind Myka's offer. "Besides, I'd like to change before we grill Sheffield's colleagues. It'll be hard enough to talk about 'terroristic threats' without having them all staring down my blouse." Helena gave her lapel a tug and sent Myka a wry glance.

Myka jerked her head to the side in acknowledgment as she got out of the car. "Seven-thirty in the firm's lobby," she said, quickly ducking her head back in. At Helena's nod, she swung the door shut with her hip. "No, not you, Claud," she redirected into the phone. "Hey, we can use another agent or two out here. . . ." Helena watched her flash an appreciative smile at the doorman as he held the door open for her, and though the smile was only one courtesy exchanged for another, it lit her face, erasing the fatigue of the past hours and making Helena wish she had said yes, but the car was already merging into traffic.

Helena slumped against the seat, letting her own exhaustion take hold. The effect of Sheffield's artefact, his collapse, and the wait at the hospital for news on his condition had been draining enough, but the quiet conversation she and Myka had had - it had filled in some of the gaps of the past ten years but left others unexplained. Her own confession, such as it was, came years too late, long after Myka, by rights, should have stopped caring whether her suspicions were correct. And whatever new light it might have shed on her behavior was hardly a flattering one, a woman pitifully attempting to fix a relationship, hollow at its core, within a Victorian frame of reference that was equally as spurious. She hadn't believed in companionate marriages when "Victorian" didn't yet exist as an adjective. She had viewed them with the same scorn she reserved for chastity, the existence of God, and the natural superiority of men. Yet there she had been solemnly trying to explain to Myka that she had hoped things with Nate would work out because they had both loved Adelaide. What had she expected Myka to make of that, of her?

Then there was Myka's half-explanation of the end of her marriage, which provided everything except the reason why. It wasn't a telling that welcomed questions, despite raising them, and Helena hadn't asked any, but now, watching darkened buildings pass by on either side of the hired car she had spent an outrageous sum of money on to take them on their fruitless search for Bergstrom, she felt that Myka's narrative itself had been a question, that the recital of facts - the
spiking of Drew's temperature, Pete's raiding of the vending machines - was only the prologue to a question that Myka had looked to her to answer, as if she, Helena, could explain why the sum of a child's recovery and his return to his parents had been a minus instead.

There had been no further talk of Nate and Adelaide or Pete on the ride to Soho and Long Island. What conversation there was had been about where to look for Bergstrom and the frustrating lack of useful information at Sheffield's condo. The long stretches of silence hadn't had the easiness that Helena remembered from their past assignments together, but they hadn't been uncomfortable either. What was forming between the two of them now, part working partnership, part friendship, part something nebulous and unspoken was familiar, and the silences were what bridged the awkwardness as they worked their way toward each other. Or maybe the silences were marking the dead spots in a relationship that, whether it existed ten years ago or was coming into being now, suggested it could be many things but would end up being none of them. Or possibly, Helena reminded herself, the silences between them had been just that, silence.

The car double parked outside her loft, which, to Helena, was barely more familiar than the scores of buildings that had seemed to overhang the car like trees as it glided beneath them. She handed the driver a credit card - the extravagance wouldn't be going on an expense account. She had a car, a BMW or a Benz, she had difficulty remembering which, she drove it so rarely, but it had been more efficient, if infinitely more expensive, to be driven on their search, rather than trying to navigate the streets on their own. On a few unavoidable occasions she had been the driver on assignments during her stint with 13, and Pete and Myka had both groaned at being her passengers, Pete because she drove too slowly and Myka because she was too distracted, always spotting something in the distance that she wanted to investigate and instinctively steering the car in that direction regardless of the obstacles in its path. Perhaps that was why Myka hadn't raised a fuss about using a livery service when she had suggested it. A livery service, not a taxi. Helena had hopes that her kidneys might still function after an evening spent jolting along the city's streets.

In the dark, the loft seemed more warehouse space than living space, but Helena didn't bother to turn on any lights on the main floor, there was enough light coming through the windows to see her way up the stairs. The lamp on one of the nightstands provided enough light to undress by, and as she casually dropped her jacket and blouse on the floor, she saw the glint of her locket on the top of the bureau. She picked it up, feeling the metal beginning to warm against her fingers. Not all that long ago, she would have been unable to imagine not wearing it, but it had attracted too much interest from her clients. They could generally recognize an antique when they saw one, and when they weren't trying to buy the locket from her, they were asking her where she had gotten it and if it still held the original memento. The easiest way to avoid the questions had been not to wear it, although she usually carried it on her. She hadn't been with Christina when her daughter had needed her most; keeping the locket with her, it was the smallest of gestures but the only one she could make. Tonight was one of the rare exceptions when she hadn't had the locket with her. It wasn't the right jewelry to accessorize her outfit, and she chose not to tuck it away in a pocket of her suit. In the event that she did end up under Sheffield's power, she hadn't wanted Christina to be a witness. A pointless indulgence of a propriety she had only begrudgingly upheld when Christina was alive, and silly as well since Christina could no longer be a witness to anything, but she had left the locket on the bureau. She put it on now, running the delicate links through her fingers. It wouldn't make sleep come any faster, but it would make her feel less alone as she waited out the night.

The color of Myka's suit was an institutional gray, which complemented the business-like display of her credentials to the two senior partners of the firm and her flat, colorless delivery of the news to them that the Department of Homeland Security was reopening its investigation of their firm.
The two men were somewhat gray-looking themselves, still trying to digest the call they had received from Sheffield's wife earlier in the morning.

"First Stewart died, and now Dwight's in intensive care," the older of them said, his hand shaking as he brought a cup of coffee to his lips. "And you're saying you think they've been in contact with a person or persons conspiring against the interests of the United States?" The china of the cup was so thin that Helena saw the shadow of the coffee as it lapped against the side.

"That's what we're trying to determine," Myka said. "We're hoping to speak to Mr. Bergstrom today."

The two partners looked at each other. The one whose hands weren't shaking but whose face was grayer than his colleague's said, with an uncomfortable glance at Myka, "He called his assistant a little while ago. He said he's not feeling well and won't be coming in."

"We tried his home and his summer rental last night. He wasn't at either one. Do you know where he might be staying?" Myka added quietly, "If one of you were to give him a call, would he return it?"

The two men exchanged another quick look. "We have a joke around the office that Russ's phone has been surgically attached to him. We tried to reach out once we heard about Dwight, but he didn't call us back. That's unlike him. But maybe he's just that under the weather, or Diane's already told him about Dwight, and he's in shock." The older partner shrugged. "His assistant may know something we don't."

Unlike Sheffield's assistant, Bergstrom's looked less like an ex-model and more like the Staten Island mother of three she claimed she was. She obligingly searched her files but could offer no additional contact information. "I think his mother and father are in Florida, and he has a sister, in Albuquerque or El Paso, someplace like that." When Myka asked if they could look in his office, Bergstrom's assistant reluctantly opened the door. "I doubt you'll find anything in here that'll tell you where he is. He doesn't like clutter."

Furnished similarly to Sheffield's office, the room was starker, devoid of the keepsakes and photos that Sheffield had displayed. What dominated it was the large reproduction of a post-Impressionist painting, mounted on the wall behind his desk. A scene of brightly dressed young women perched on the knees of several carousers, the painting looked familiar to Helena, and she tried to place where she had seen the original. The assistant, noticing Helena's interest, volunteered, "That came from Mr. Afton's office. They were close, and Russ took his death so hard."

Myka had been flipping through a planner on Bergstrom's desk. "He kept his own schedule?"

The assistant's smile suggested that it was a quirk she tolerated but didn't completely understand. "He said he remembered his appointments better if he wrote them down."

"Funny, when we were to meet with Mr. Bergstrom yesterday, Mr. Sheffield said he had an obligation that prevented him from joining us, but there's nothing here." Myka held the planner out to Bergstrom's assistant.

She frowned, turning over a page then turning it back. "That's strange. Russ was set to meet with you and then he ran out of the office, telling me to let Mr. Sheffield know that he couldn't make it. I thought he had accidentally double-booked himself." She set the planner on the desk. "He didn't return to the office, and, of course, today he's already called to say that he won't be in. He's usually so reliable. I can't remember the last time he didn't come into the office, sick or no. He lives this job."
"It is does sound a little out character," Myka softly agreed. "Rushed out of the office, you say, right before we arrived?"

"I'm surprised you didn't cross paths. It was that close." The phone rang at the assistant's desk, and she hurried to answer it.

Myka leaned against Bergstrom's desk and crossed her arms, studying Helena who was still studying the painting. "Don't tell me," she said dryly, "you were the model for the woman wearing the red dress."

Helena focused on the dark-haired figure who had caught Myka's attention. Wearing a red dress as Myka had noted, though it was little more than a daub of red paint that left rounded limbs and rounded breasts exposed, the woman had been captured drawing a flower teasingly under a man's chin as she sat on his lap. "You do know these women are prostitutes, Myka," Helena replied just as dryly, arching a brow. "Once, once I sat for an artist as a favor for a friend, and everyone has me spending all my time disrobed in ateliers."

"Once, once you posed nude," Myka mockingly repeated, "and the painting's hanging in the Tate."

"What can I say?" Helena shrugged. "I was an inspiration."

Myka laughed. "What is it about this painting?"

"I've been trying to remember where I've seen the original." Helena peered at the artist's name scrawled in the corner. "He's a minor figure. It's curious to see a reproduction of it here, where you would expect to see a print by someone vastly better known, a Van Gogh or Gauguin instead. I didn't gather from their files that Afton and Bergstrom were art lovers."

"Maybe Afton got it as a gift," Myka suggested. She opened the laptop on Bergstrom's desk, then shut it. "Yesterday I still had hopes that this would be something we could keep small. But since we're now looking for anything that can do anything..." Checking to see that Bergstrom's assistant was still on the phone, she said, "Sheffield wouldn't have had time to warn Bergstrom last night, but he's acting as if he knows why we're here." She closed her eyes. "What if his artefact - never mind." Blinking at Helena, she tried to marshal her thoughts. "First things first. I'll start on the other employees and see if the senior partners will voluntarily release Bergstrom's and Sheffield's computers to us, though I doubt we'll find anything on them." Helena smiled at Myka's irritation at her own need to be thorough. "Why don't you go back to Bergstrom's apartment? Maybe he's been there all along, hiding from us."

Helena glanced once more at the reproduction. She didn't know why it was tugging at her that she couldn't place where she had seen the painting. If she were Myka, she would have remembered not only where she had seen it but when, down to the hour, probably. If she were Myka - that would be quite an exercise, to imagine just how different her life would have been. One thing she knew, had she been Myka she would have cut a wide swath around one H.G. Wells. How had Claudia described her, something about a mane of hair and a Byronic appeal? Only in romances was someone that troubled reclaimed; in real life, she usually had an arrest record or a restraining order. Or she was a killer.

Helena left Myka heading back toward the senior partners' offices to commandeer a conference room for the interviews. On her cab ride to Bergstrom's apartment, she wistfully recalled how much easier it had been to break into someone's home when she was with 12. A few essential tools, a cover story at the ready, that was usually all it took. Not so now, Bergstrom's apartment was in a building monitored by a security staff and security cameras. She would have to try charm her way in, and charm was such a fickle instrument. What might win over one person would put off another,
and while she more often than not charmed others into doing what she wanted, there were always a few exceptions. Like Artie. That would be all she needed, a dour little man who saw right through her.

Thankfully the man whom she had to charm her way through into Bergstrom's apartment was no Artie, although his eyebrows were almost as wildly overgrown. He found her tale believable enough - she had posed as Bergstrom's girlfriend worried that a bout of flu might have left him unable to leave his bed - to allow her to enter Bergstrom's apartment unaccompanied. It was as expensively decorated as her loft and practically as devoid of personal touches. Blue dominated the color palette rather than white and the focal point of the living room was not a bank of windows providing a spectacular view of the city - although the room had that as well as a wrap-around balcony that encouraged extended skyline viewing - but a theater-style TV. In his bedroom, which was painfully neat, she saw that one drawer hadn't been shut flush with the others and a rolled-up ball of socks had been left under the bed. Given how orderly Bergstrom appeared to be, they were the only signs that suggested he had left the apartment in a hurry.

"He's decamped," she told Myka over the phone.

"That's what I was afraid of," Myka said glumly. "The fact that he ducked the meeting we were having with him and Sheffield, that he hasn't been calling in like he usually does, that's he nowhere to be found. What if his artefact, like Sheffield's, gives him a different kind of luck? Maybe it warns him of 'bad' things before they happen."

"And we're his misfortune?" Helena asked. "I suppose, for an artefact, it would be bad luck to be neutralized, so perhaps our Mr. Bergstrom has an additional incentive for avoiding us that he's not aware of." She could visualize Myka chewing her bottom lip. "We'll find a way to work around it, we'll find him," she said as reassuringly as she could.

Myka's silence expressed her skepticism. Ending the call, Helena glanced into a spare bedroom that served as Bergstrom's office. She opened his file cabinet and desk drawers and flicked open the neatly labeled hanging files. Tax records, account statements, all date-ordered. Finding nothing of interest, Helena took the iPad from his desk and crammed it into her handbag. Just before she closed the door to his apartment, she took one last look around. The only sign that anyone lived here was the stack of mail on a kitchen counter, which mainly consisted of mail order catalogs. The apartment still smelled new, of paint and polish and fabrics just off a furniture truck, though Bergstrom had been at the address for a couple of years. The bright gleam of the appliances seemed a rebuke; surely they should have betrayed some use by now, either sporting magnets advertising pizza places or carrying a few nicks and dents. This wasn't a home, it was a way station, much as her own loft was simply another hotel room. She scattered the stack of mail along the counter. If they got to Bergstrom in time, he could always restack the catalogs, and if they didn't, whoever came to pack up his personal effects might be fooled, for a second or two, into thinking that Bergstrom actually lived here and wasn't just passing through.

Since Myka was toiling through interviews on her return, Helena occupied herself by accessing the computers in Bergstrom's and Sheffield's offices. The cab ride back to the investment firm had been long enough for her to determine there was nothing relevant on Bergstrom's personal computer. She had expected to find a cache of pornography at the very least, but there was nothing of the sort. Games and some family photos, that was it. Even the sites he had visited were tame, a few online dating and NFL sites. How could someone just... exist like this? But of course she knew how one could inhabit a life without ever living it. She put the iPad in one of his desk drawers, shutting it with more force than necessary.

She waited for the firm's IT staff to log onto Bergstrom's and Sheffield's work computers and open
programs and retrieve folders. They were earnest young men, the firm's IT support, and she suppressed the desire to elbow them out of the way and finish their work in half the time. She had learned the hard way that showing people up often made them less cooperative. When it came to Bergstrom's assistant, who fluttered in and out of his office, clearly ill at ease that Helena was sitting at his desk and looking through his files, Helena asked her to print Bergstrom's client list, although Myka already had it. And when the assistant returned with the list, asking if there was anything else, Helena put on her most ingratiating smile and sent her out for sandwiches. She wasn't terribly hungry, but that was the thing about assistants, they wanted to assist. It was why Helena no longer had any herself. When she ran out of tasks to invent for her ("Would you please bring me Mr. Bergstrom's expense statements for the past three years?" "Would you please provide me a list of his professional memberships and subscriptions?") Helena sent her out for iced teas, using those very same statements and lists she had asked the assistant to provide as impromptu coasters for the drinks. She did her best to ignore the assistant's rolling of her eyes when she saw how the lists she had produced were being used. By the time Helena finished her first iced tea, she had completed her review of the contents of Bergstrom's work computer. Other than a horribly unfunny dirty joke that the three men shared via e-mail, there was no communication between Bergstrom, Afton, and Sheffield of a personal nature. By the time she finished her second iced tea, she was almost through with Sheffield's computer, which was also yielding nothing about the artefact. Standing up and stretching, she saw Pete cross the assistants' work areas, towing a small roller bag behind him. He stopped in the doorway to the conference room where Myka was conducting interviews.

Myka joined him, and Pete leaned in and kissed her on her cheek, saying, "Drew said to give his mom a big kiss and tell her she's supposed to get him something cool from New York." There was nothing especially intimate about how they stood together or the kiss, but their affection, though casually expressed, was unmistakable and Helena felt as she had the day of Artie's retirement party when she saw them outside the tent, that there was an ease, a rightness between them that made their divorce seem the joke, not their marriage. But as happened then, Myka saw her and stepped away from him, this time gracelessly, having to clutch at the wall to keep her balance. Pete turned his head and spotted Helena, an emotion crossing his face that seemed more like resignation than annoyance. "Drew's got something for you, too," he said, his cheerfulness having slipped for only a moment.

As Helena approached, he puckered his lips. She stopped, and he laughed at the horror of her expression. Myka gave him a shove before disappearing back into the conference room, and Pete, his laughter only slowly ebbing away, pulled a couple of pieces of folded notebook paper from his back pocket. "Seriously, he told me to give you this."

Helena pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. Myka was at one end of the table, going over the notes she had taken during the interviews. Pete left his roller bag in a corner and took a chair next to her. He craned his head to read her notes. As they talked quietly, Helena unfolded the notebook paper. Drew's handwriting, like so much of him, was a blend of his parents' styles, the letters cramped closely together, like Pete's, but written in perfect horizontal lines, like Myka's. He was setting specifications for the treehouse and asking questions. In addition to the 'lookout' as he called it, he wanted to know if she could build a captain's cabin, where he could sleep on hot summer nights. The main room would be reserved for pirate conferences about which ships to attack next and whether certain prisoners would be made to walk the plank. Which brought up the question, a line or two below, whether she would build a plank that would stick out over the branches. Could she make it so that he and his friends could play video games in the treehouse? Would it have a roof so his dad could put up hammocks? Her grin grew wider as she went down the rest of his list.

"He's over the moon about the treehouse idea," Pete said, looking up from Myka's notepad.
"It's not just an idea. You and I, we're going to build it for him," Helena said, studiously avoiding looking at Myka. "I don't know that we can implement everything on his wish list, but we'll do what we can."

"My ten thumbs and I will be at the ready to help you," he said, waggling his fingers at her. "Maybe I can find a kid-sized hard hat for him." He tilted his chair back and looked musingly at the ceiling, before turning to Myka. "He'd be so freakin' cute in it. Remember when we dressed him up like John Travolta from *Saturday Night Fever* for Halloween that one year? The suit, the platform shoes, the tiny pompadour?"

"We have it on video, and someday I'm going to embarrass him with it and tell him that it was your idea," Myka said, frowning at one of her notes and drawing a line through it.

"It won't matter," Pete said confidently. "I'm still his favorite." He smiled as Myka scowled. She tore a piece of paper from the pad, scrunched it into a ball, and threw it at him.

Pete fondly recalled, "Claudia was throwing a '70s-themed Halloween party, and Drew was about three. He and I both did the *Saturday Night Fever* thing, and Myka, she went as Farrah Fawcett. I tried to get her to wear the swimsuit, but she only went as far as the wig."

As Helena imagined what Myka would look like in an ash-blond wig with feathered hair, Myka muttered, "I wanted to go as Sabrina from *Charlie's Angels*."

"That was the host's pick," Pete said. Narrowing his eyes, he appraised Helena thoughtfully. "Now what '70s icon would you have gone as?"

"Darling, I'm already an icon," Helena said dismissively. Looking at Drew's list one more time before she refolded it, she said, "Who's watching him?"

"Claudia, his second favorite person after Pete," Myka said, giving him a begrudging smile. He preened playfully. Myka's phone buzzed, and she picked it up from the table. "Hey, Claud." She listened silently for a few minutes. "No, that's good to know." She fell silent again before saying, "Don't let him talk you into pizza, and no, I don't let him play Call of Duty. That's what his dad does, thinking I don't know about it." She shot Pete a glare, which he met with a look that managed to be both guilty and unapologetic. Putting the phone down, she said, "Claudia got a hit on one of Bergstrom's credit cards at an ATM."

"He knows we're tracing his credit cards, so he's trying to use cash where he can," Helena said as Myka twisted her hair back into a knot and then released it. "I've found absolutely nothing on their computers." She glanced at Pete. "You found nothing on Afton's computers or phone." As he nodded, she turned her attention back to Myka. "And, I imagine, no one you talked to recently acquired a 'mysterious' object or heard Afton or Sheffield or Bergstrom talking about an 'interesting acquisition.' Afton would have been the sole point of contact, and he would have been coached on what not to do. Not to leave any electronic traces, not to talk about the artefact where others might hear him. Sheffield told me in the restaurant, right before he collapsed, that he had been told not to attract attention."

"Helena, we know that whoever is providing the replicated artefacts understands how we work. We've been looking into the background of every agent, current and former, to see if it's one of us." Myka said.

"Aside from its employees, who's been the most interested in the Warehouse?"

"The DHS, and we've been reviewing the staff who've had the closest association with us."
Congress, of course." Staring hard at Helena, she asked, "Where are you going with this?"

"Who among the members of Congress?" Helena pursued.

"Are you developing vibes in your old age?" Pete had left the table to root in the exterior compartments of his suitcase. Opening a bag of pretzels, he popped a few into his mouth.

Not vibes. Memories. The feeling on assignments that she was up against a network, not of criminals, though there were those too, but of men who were allied by money and position and, in her time, breeding. There had been a . . . clubbiness that was virtually impenetrable. Always the same slightly superior smile, no matter their age or appearance, the same claims of ignorance issued with the same air of boredom. It was beginning to feel the same with this case, and, again, the reproduction in Bergstrom's office flashed through her mind. If only she could remember where she had first seen the painting. It was important, she didn't know how she knew it, but she knew it. So maybe this was partly a vibe, after all.

"Jaffee and Perkins," Myka was saying, "but mainly Jaffee."

"Have you looked into him?"

Myka gave her an incredulous look. "Investigate a congressman? We're trying to save the Warehouse not surrender it."

"But if Claudia or this Jacqui you speak so highly of were to -"

"We would have to have evidence that Jaffee was involved before Claudia or Jane or Mrs. Frederic would ever agree to it. We can't go to them simply because we think he might be involved." Myka was shaking her head.

"Operating off a vibe from H.G. Wells?" Pete chimed in. "First, they'd have to get over the shock."

"Let's stick to something concrete," Myka said, flashing a warning look at Pete. "Bergstrom's our only real lead. We just have to find a way to sneak up on him."

"Well, there's no better place to hide than in New York." Pete spread his hands, as if to encompass the city. "And if I were him, I'd want to go someplace that had lots of people where I could lose myself and forget my troubles."

Helena's and Myka's eyes met. "Nightclubs," they said simultaneously.

"I was thinking a Yankees game," Pete said, "but nightclubs will work."

####

Bergstrom had frequented several nightclubs, but Myka had narrowed it down to three based on how many times his credit cards had been charged at them. The first they visited was the glitziest and loudest of the three, and Helena viewed what they were wearing with dismay. They hadn't changed after leaving the investment firm, spending the early evening at a restaurant planning their next steps, so she and Myka were still wearing the suits that they had put on in the morning. Though her own suit was too conservative, Helena gave it credit for being stylish whereas Myka's battleship-gray suit . . . looked like it had been woven from steel as well. As for Pete, he was in a long-sleeved shirt and khakis. Age was no sin but dowdiness was, and more importantly, it made them stand out in all the wrong ways. It looked like they were looking for someone; three grim middle-aged parents searching for an errant child. They were lucky that half the club wasn't heading for the doors.
Pete gently nudged people out of his path toward the bar and showed one of the bartenders a picture of Bergstrom. The bartender shrugged and gestured at the dance floor, where Myka was already sidling between groups, splitting the space between couples, searching for Bergstrom. Helena walked the perimeter, glancing into occupied booths, skimming her eyes over crowded tables. Myka fell into step with her as she came off the dance floor.

"He's not here," she said, holding the sides of her jacket away from her chest, her face flushed from the heat.

"Not yet, anyway," Helena said.

"The question is, do we stay here and wait or do we try another one?" Myka twisted her head, taking in as much of the club as she could from where she was standing.

"It's not lively enough right now, if he's out," Helena responded. "He'll be looking for a place where he'll be hard to find." She took out her phone and tapped in a name. "Of the other two, my best bet is that he's here. It draws on a, ah, more louche crowd, shall we say...."

Pete poked his head over Myka's shoulder and glanced at Helena quizzically. "Loose crowd?"

"Louche," Myka repeated, smiling slyly at Helena. "A fast crowd, Pete, think of it that way."

"I get it," he said as Helena, to her consternation, began to blush. "It's where H.G. gets lucky. I'm all for checking out where she scores."

The other club was packed. They could barely edge through the door without stumbling into people milling between tables, laughing, yelling over the music. The air was close and hot, heavy with perfume. Eyes slid over the three of them without interest, although Helena knew that would change as the night wore on. This wasn't a club she visited often, although if all she wanted was someone forgettable to spend the night with, she could usually find that someone here. Her history with the club, brief though it was, rested uneasily with her tonight, and as Myka looked at her, she thought she could still see a sly smile. Helena never liked to think she was the object of someone else's amusement, but here, in this place, which seemed more anteroom than club, as if people were waiting only to be led somewhere more interesting, more private, she felt that she was being laughed at, a woman too old for everyone, who trolled for sex among the young and eager like a vampire from an Anne Rice novel.

More roughly than she intended, she grabbed Myka's elbow and propelled her toward the bar. "We need to start showing Bergstrom's photo," she said, her voice tight. Myka looked uncertainly at her but didn't move out of Helena's grasp.

Most of the bartenders looked at the photo and shrugged, as they had at the first club, but one nodded and said, "Yeah, he comes in sometimes, but usually it's later than this. If you're willing to wait around, you might see him."

Myka lifted a shoulder in acquiescence, and she and Helena were able to claim a table in the shadows that gave them a view of the entrance. Pete briefly sat down with them before jumping to his feet and patrolling the dance floor. It would be difficult to isolate Bergstrom among the flow of people entering and leaving the nightclub; there were too many, and the lights were too dim. They didn't try to talk, and Helena felt no real desire to attempt a conversation; for all the shadows and pounding music, she felt exposed, as if Myka could look at her and see every time she had left the club with someone. Occasionally she could hear snatches of others' conversations as they passed by their table. They consisted of comments on the music or other people for the most part, but sometimes she heard a pick-up line, generally awful, and she could tell from the laughter whether...
the recipient of the offer was rejecting it or asking for something better. Watching one such hook-up successfully negotiated, the woman's laugh light and accommodating even though the man's second line had been no better than his first, she wondered, as she had when she was encouraging Sheffield's heavy-handed flirtations, if she had always looked that falsely interested, if her eyes, like the woman's, hadn't stopped searching for someone more promising even as she was accepting the overtures of the one beside her.

"You're a thousand miles away," Myka said in her ear.

"No," Helena said wryly, "I'm right here."

Sometimes Myka would spell Pete or she would, and empty glasses and bottles soon littered their table. Sparkling water and soda. She wished for something stronger to while away the boredom. The later the evening grew, the more crowded the club became until Helena became convinced she was breathing in elbows. Every time she turned, she was bumping into a knee or a shoulder, and the view of the entrance from their table became hopelessly obscured. As she passed along the dance floor, someone from a table put out a hand to stop her. The woman was laughing at something one of her friends was saying, and her smile only grew wider as she looked up at Helena. "I remember you," she said. "The woman with the white streak in her hair and the amazing mouth." Her eyes had the sheen and slightly liquid roll of someone who was a few mixed drinks' distance from being sober, but they focused on her with little difficulty. She was pretty, with brown hair and light eyes, maybe green, maybe blue. "I gave you my number, but you didn't call."

"I don't call," Helena said, edging away.

The woman sighed. "And I actually gave you my real number." But she didn't seem offended. "Are you going to be around for a while?"

"I'm here with friends," Helena said.

"That's what you said then, too. But you didn't seem to care that you were leaving them behind. In fact, I think you were feeling me up before we made it out the door. Not that I minded." She peered wonderingly up at Helena. "You honestly don't remember, do you?" She laughed good-naturedly as Helena gently pushed her hand away. "If you change your mind, I'll probably still be here. Because you're better than the ones who've hit on me so far." Behind her she heard the woman saying, "We ended up at some hotel. She's a little old, but really, she does have the best mouth. . . ."

A little old. The best mouth. Better than the others. . . so far. God knows the woman could have said worse things about her, but to be summed up in such few words, and for those to be the words. Was that what she had dwindled to in her 148th year, a footnote to a sexual encounter with a woman young enough to be her great-great-great granddaughter? H.G. Wells, writer, inventor - a good (enough) lay.

"Hey, hey!" The bartender who recognized Bergstrom from the photo was waving his arms at her. Shouldering her way through people flashing fingers and money at the bartenders, Helena followed the one who had called out to her. He slid two mixed drinks to a customer, then motioned for Helena to come closer. "He was here," he shouted. "The guy you were looking for."

"He's here? Where?"

"Was here," the bartender cupped his hands around his mouth as he bent toward her ear. "He came in, and it was like he was sniffing the air or something. He got this strange look on his face and then he was fighting people to get out."
"How long ago?" Helena said, trying not to let her frustration show.

"Ten minutes or so." The bartender caught the eye of another customer. "Sorry. I gotta -" And with a shrug, he left her, grabbing a couple of pilsner glasses from underneath the bar as he sped to the next order.

When she told Myka and Pete that Bergstrom had been at the club without their knowing it, Pete groaned and pulled at his cheeks. "How the hell did he see us? I can barely see you, and you're standing right in front of me."

"I don't think he did see us. The bartender said it looked like he was sniffing the air."

"He sensed us," Myka said, pushing herself up from the table. "We were in a crowded club, and he could still sense us."

"Crafty little artefact," Helena said admiringly.

Emerging from the club, they stood on the sidewalk, breathing deeply. The air wasn't all that fresh, but it was better than what they had been breathing in the club. "I know we should come up with a new plan of attack, but I'm beat," Pete said yawning. He waved limply at a cab parked in front of the club. "Coming Mykes?" The cab inched toward him.

Myka was looking at Helena. "Are you going back to your loft?"

Not until I absolutely have to. But she didn't say that. Instead Helena said, "Not quite tired enough yet. I thought I might go somewhere I could get a decent cup of tea and review your son's extensively detailed wish list for the treehouse. I need to clear my mind for a while of all things Bergstrom."

"Me too. Mind if I join you?"

Helena tried to hide her surprise. "Not at all," she said as offhandedly as she could.

Myka waved Pete toward the cab. He glanced from her to Helena but said only, "Don't forget, the hotel's all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet begins at six."

Helena flagged another cab and gave the driver an address in Brooklyn. It was home to a 24-hour cafe that was putatively Greek but served just about anything, including a half-decent cup of Earl Grey. Once they were seated in a booth, Myka asked for the same, and when Helena raised an eyebrow at her, she only shrugged. Opening her handbag, Helena took out Drew's list. "It'll be bigger than your house by the time I include all his add-ons."

"And worth more." Myka absently poured several teaspoons-worth of sugar from the shaker into her tea. "What kind of treehouses did you build for Christina?"

Helena had been sketching designs for Drew's treehouse on the back of one of the pieces of paper. Her pen slowed, and she remembered the cottage she had rented for them outside London. The treehouse hadn't been large, and it had been hastily built, but Christina had played in it nearly every day, pretending that it was a castle in which she was the princess. She had been six that summer, and Helena had often been gone on assignments, and her daughter's most frequent playmates had been her dolls, which she faithfully carried with her up to the treehouse. It was after that summer, when Christina's nanny had commented meaningfully on how isolated the cottage was, that Helena had decided to send her daughter to Paris in the summers. She had cousins who had children Christina's age, and they had been encouraging her for years to bring Christina for a visit.
"It was something of a miracle I was pregnant only the once," Helena said. "I didn't want a baby, and had I been pregnant with her now rather than then I would have considered aborting her." She paused, but the expression on Myka's face hadn't changed, intent, serious, and completely without judgment. "Charles thought a baby would steady me. He had always believed I was too flighty, incapable of committing myself to any one thing. I did try with her. I committed myself to her as best I could." She smiled wintrily at Myka and resumed her sketching.

"What about her father?" Myka asked softly, her eyes looking especially green in the cafe's light.

"Didn't we talk about him, long ago?"

"You told me only that he was engaged to someone else. You never told me how you felt about him, if he knew about Christina." Myka sipped her tea, and perhaps it was only the association of the color of the tea with the color of her eyes, but now Helena was convinced they were completely hazel.

"His name was Robert Croydon, and I met him on an assignment. He was," Helena considered her choice of adjectives, "interesting." She divided the treehouse she was sketching into two rooms, the smaller of them the captain's cabin Drew had requested. "That's damning with faint praise, isn't it? But it's true. I found him interesting. He was glib, like many politicians, but there was an intelligence behind the glibness and a true desire, I think, to make things better. It was no grand passion, but I liked him. Even had there been no engagement, we were far too absorbed by other things to have made a go of it. Christina was conceived in the back of a carriage, and at the climactic moment, darling, my thoughts weren't of Robert or how marvelous he made me feel - which would have been an exaggeration even in a conveyance more comfortable than the carriage - but of the artefact I was hunting." She added two sets of hooks to the cabin's ceiling, for the hammocks. "I'm sure there were fireworks above the bed and the 1812 Overture thundering at Drew's conception." She held up a hand, palm out, not looking up from her drawing. "I know, you don't kiss and tell, which in this case, I deeply appreciate. I'd rather not have any images of Pete that would strike me blind."

She felt rather than saw Myka's smile. "You never told him about Christina."

"He and his fiancée wouldn't have welcomed the news, and I felt no need to tell him. Christina was almost perfectly fatherless, which suited me and didn't seem a gross failing to her. Christina Croydon." Helena pulled in her shoulders and grimaced in distaste. "Christina Wells was much better." A plank, Drew wanted a plank. Perhaps a platform that he could stand on and pretend he was looking out at the ocean, a platform with a railing, which would prevent him from falling from the tree (which would please his parents), plus it would make the treehouse look a little bit more like a ship. "I suppose she would have asked about her father eventually, but she wasn't terribly curious about the mechanics of how she came into the world. God knows, even in the better families you could hear mothers crying out during childbirth, but the babies made their appearance discreetly, swaddled within an inch of their lives and looking like they had just been pulled from a shipping crate. Sometimes Christina would peer into my valise when I returned from an assignment, asking if I had brought her back a baby brother or sister."

She was talking too much. She had always found it too easy to talk to Myka. Putting her pen down, she eyed Myka curiously over her cup of tea. "Why are you here with me? Not that I don't enjoy it, because I do. But we were out late last night as well, and you must be exhausted."

"No more than you," she countered. "And this thing with Bergstrom would've had me pacing the floor. Maybe I should have done what Claudia suggested and had her work her magic to cut off his line of credit, shut off his access to his bank"
"Cutting off his credit might have flushed him out, yes, but it could have driven him deeper underground. This way we still have a method of tracking him."

"For how long?" Myka said gloomily. "How long before he ends up like Afton and Sheffield?" She rolled the empty cup between her hands. Abruptly she asked, "Do you have dreams about the Warehouse exploding, when we were chasing Sykes?"

"Occasionally." Myka's head was turned away from her, toward the windows that looked onto the street, and she was appearing to take a great interest in the people passing by. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I still dream about it. I see you standing outside the shield you created for us and smiling."

"I was at peace," Helena said, surprised not at the realization, which she had had long ago, but at the fact that she was admitting it.

"I wasn't," Myka said bluntly. "It was the second time I saw someone I cared about die in front of me, and I was powerless to stop it. I guess I should be thankful that I can't fully remember it because the fragments I relive in my dreams, they're agonizing enough."

"The virtues of amnesia are vastly underrated," Helena said lightly. "Quite possibly I should have concentrated on inventing something that would alter memories rather than time itself."

Myka turned her head away from the window long enough to thank the waitress for bringing her another cup of Earl Grey. Her eyes searched Helena's face before dropping to the cup. "It was worse the second time," she said quietly. She hesitated, slowly raising her eyes to Helena's, and this time Helena saw the question in them, and the only response she could think to give was "Always." But she didn't say it, it would have sounded so somber, so ridiculous in its gravity, said over the pressed wood table and the chipped china. What would she be pledging, anyway? And why would Myka ever believe her? She saw the question die in Myka's eyes, and Myka said, as if this was what she had intended to say along, "Worse because there had been a second time."

Myka drank her tea, and Helena sketched, although it was more doodling than sketching, pirate flags and cutlasses adorning the treehouse like Christmas ornaments. No boy would want something so fussily decorated. She pushed the paper away, conceding that the Berings, mother and son, flummoxed her, with their trust that she would have the answer. What if it wasn't the right answer, did they never think of that? Rubbing her neck and stretching, Helena noticed that Myka had curled up in the corner of the booth, her head resting against the wall, her eyes closed. She said under her breath, "There won't be a second time for me. I will not go through that again." A second time to fail someone she loved? She would give her life over and over again to prevent that from happening.

Second time. Of course. The alternate reality Artie had created to save the Warehouse. Old timelines surviving in dreams, fragmented, broken, but still surviving. Myka's grief, her own sense of peace, separated from their source but capable of being reexperienced. Every incursion into time, even her own failed attempts to change it, weakened the causal chain. Every artefact had its shadow double, its properties already copied, imperfectly. Gesturing wildly at their waitress, Helena asked her for paper towels, napkins, children's paper placemats, anything she could write on. And some baklava. Suddenly she was hungry.
Chapter 7

Go to Yankee Stadium, get Derek Jeter to have his picture taken while he's holding Bergstrom's photo, run it on the Jumbotron during the game with him saying, "Where's my man Russ?" Maybe get to have your picture taken with Derek, plus get to sit in the dugout with the rest of the team.

Put teams of bloodhounds, no, K-9s, no, rescue dogs, like St. Bernards, on the streets and get them to track Bergstrom's scent. Maybe get to have your picture taken with the rescue dogs.

Send up a flotilla of hot air balloons and drop flyers all over the city showing Derek Jeter holding up Bergstrom's photo with, like, a little word bubble over his head, "Where's my man Russ?" Maybe get to ride in one of the hot air balloons, with Derek Jeter.

Pete flung his legs over an arm of the loveseat in Myka's hotel room and dug into a bag of Munchies. "The last one gets my vote, but I'm happy with any of 'em."

"Because they're your goofy ideas," Myka said from a chair upholstered in the same fabric. Folders were open on a circular table in front of her.

"Maybe we should have gotten Drew a rescue dog instead of Shep." Pete brushed crumbs from his shirt.

"Shep is a rescue dog," Myka said. "We rescued him from a shelter."

"No, he's a rescued dog. There's a difference." Pete put the Munchies down and opened a bag of barbecue potato chips.

Helena took one jaundiced look at them before she bent over the desk again. She had hardly stopped writing since she and Myka had been at the café. They had been left undisturbed in their booth, Myka dozing and Helena ordering multiple cups of Earl Grey. The waitress had brought her stacks of old menu inserts announcing daily specials, and Helena had filled the backs of them with equations and cryptic notes in a scrawl that, unlike the rest of her, seemed firmly situated in the nineteenth century, spiked with emphatic dots and slashes and tails, the cursive equivalent of the decorative wrought iron fences that used to mark an owner's property - and nearly as impenetrable to the eye, even her own. She would probably still be in the booth but for the fact that Myka woke, disoriented and a little cranky, anxious to get back on Bergstrom's trail. She had consented to stay long enough to eat a hasty breakfast (Helena felt they owed the café that much for asserting squatters’ rights over the booth), but then it was to separate cabs, with the agreement that they would reconvene with Pete, in Myka's room, in an hour.

They had been in the room for the better part of the day, Pete and Myka tossing out ideas for finding Bergstrom without setting off the artefact, Helena typing her theories, wild speculations really, on her laptop. Claudia or Jacqui would call in, asking for updates, sometimes providing them, although Claudia emphasized that her ability to help in the search for Bergstrom was limited by the needs and short attention span of... Shep. Myka had the speaker on her phone turned on, and Claudia's exasperation with the dog threatened to grow hands and reach out from the phone to strangle someone. "Play with me, feed me, let me out. The only reason I know that I'm babysitting him and not you, Pete, is because he has more hair."

"Have Drew play with him," Myka suggested, frowning at a sheet she picked up from one of the folders.
"Drew's too busy being Frank Lloyd Wright. He's building a fort or something with toothpicks and glue in the kitchen. Or maybe he's just gluing toothpicks to the table, because that's something a kid of yours, Pete, would do."

"He's probably building a model of the treehouse that Helena and Pete are going to build for him," Myka said absently, still staring at the sheet.

"An architectural model? Because that's something a kid of yours, Myka, would do." Claudia's voice sharpened. "Since when do any of you have time to build a treehouse? You're supposed to be finding out who's replicating artefacts. Especially you, H.G."

"Claud, don't get your eyebrows in a tangle," Pete shouted from the loveseat. "H.G.'s inventing a new time machine. Or maybe she's filling out one of those DHS expense statements. It's worse than filling out a 1040."

"Dude, we all know that Myka does your expense statements as well as your taxes. So what are you up to, H.G?"

"Theories, that's all I can say at the moment." Helena rubbed her forehead.

"Theories, great," Claudia said sarcastically. "Let me turn to the only adult in the room. Myka, any ideas on how to flush Bergstrom out from wherever he's hiding? Because we're seeing absolutely nothing here. Granted, sometimes it takes awhile for a charge to work its way through the networks, but other than his stop at the ATM, he has no electronic trail."

"Would you be able to get into a hotel's registry?" Myka was working a Twizzler from a half-empty package.

"Possibly. It depends on the hotel and it depends on their systems."

"A few weeks ago Bergstrom rented a suite at a hotel here in Manhattan called The Regency. Maybe he had friends or family visiting, or maybe it was a spa weekend. Could be he decided to hole up there."

"I'll let you know. Dammit, Shep... " Claudia's voice grew faint, and there was the sound of something shattering as the call ended.

"Spa weekend?" Pete said through a mouth full of potato chips. "Is that what you and Jeff do?"

Myka ignored him, biting off a piece of her Twizzler. "I'll admit it," she announced to the room at large. "I'm grasping at straws."

"I'd say you're grasping at Twizzlers," Pete said, mimicking a rim shot. "Ba-da-bum."

"Funny." Myka reached for one of the loveseat's pillows that were littering the floor around her chair - earlier missiles from Pete - and sent it flying back at him.

He ducked, holding a finger to his lips and nodding toward Helena. "We're disturbing the genius."

"Not very geniusy, as you might say, at the moment," Helena said, arching her stiff back away from the chair. When she had first started at 13, Pete's antics, always at double speed when he was bored or restless, had been such an irritant that she considered requesting not to be partnered with him on assignments. She had also considered using some sort of immobility artefact on him, or one that would render him mute. She didn't think she had ever seriously considered killing him, but she couldn't say that, during moments of extreme stress, the thought hadn't crossed her mind. And she
had been more than a little disappointed when she saw Myka not only tolerating his jokes and pranks but joining in them as well. It wasn't that at 12 there hadn't been the same seeking of diversion during slow periods, but the diversions had been different. Pubs and whorehouses for the men, except for Caturanga, who found his solace in chess, with or without a partner. As for her, before Christina, she had tinkered, either on the premises or in rented spaces in nearby warehouses. Once she had Christina, she still tinkered to fill the time between assignments, but she was far more receptive to being distracted by the whims of her daughter. Games of hide-and-seek in the parks, afternoons spent flying kites, she had even attended teas for Christina's dolls, gravely asking after the health of each one. After Christina died, there had been no need to fill time; instead, she ached for more of it, trying to devise and then perfect the machine that would allow her to resurrect her daughter.

So the childish jokes, Pete's jumping and running about, as if he were Trailer in need of being let out to pee, had not merely annoyed her, they had offended her. If he couldn't find a useful outlet, he could at least find an adult one, although pubs were clearly not an option. It was after one such day, when she had stormed out of the Warehouse unable to be near him, that Myka had followed her, urging her to be more patient with him. It was when she had first called Pete's behavior 'protective coloration,' and Helena had stared at her disbelievingly. But because Myka was Myka and because even then Helena had known there was almost nothing she wouldn't do to make her happy, she had sighed and reluctantly rejoined them.

She began to note that when Pete became most frenetic, it was usually following one of his vibes. Particularly if the vibe presaged something bad and he had little idea what the something bad was or to whom it was going to happen. She also became aware that his teasing of Myka was more pronounced - and persistent - when she was anxious about an assignment or blaming herself for a mistake, almost always unimportant, that she had made during a retrieval. Helena grew to understand, albeit imperfectly since she couldn't always shake the reflexive burst of irritation she felt when she saw him clowning around, that it was his way of reestablishing his - and, if necessary, his partner's - equilibrium.

This afternoon the pillow fights and wisecracks were more a sign of his frustration at the dead end they had come to with Bergstrom. Helena could sympathize with him; for all the hours she had spent trying to work out how much energy it would take to divorce a property from its artefact long enough to duplicate it and then how much additional energy it would take to weld the replicated property to another object, she had just the haziest idea that it would exceed the energy required to split an atom. Which meant that it was impossible in any ordinary sense. One replicated artefact, yes, perhaps. But several, as if they were flying down a conveyor belt at a warehouse for Walmart or Amazon? "All I've come up with so far is that we should have a mushroom cloud on the horizon every time an artefact's power has been replicated, but that obviously hasn't been happening."

Myka's phone rang. "Hi, Claudia." It was a brief conversation. "Okay, thanks," she said, clearly disappointed. She looked at Pete and then at Helena. "'First, she wanted me to tell you how kickass she is because it took her all of a couple of minutes to hack into The Regency's systems. Second, she wanted us to know that Bergstrom's not there."

Pete rolled off the couch, made a show of stretching, and shot the empty Munchies bag at a wastebasket. "I'm going to walk around and do some touristy things, like buy cheesy souvenirs. Maybe I'll even run into Bergstrom. You know he's out there, hiding in plain sight."

He was almost out of the room before Helena stopped him. "Hiding in plain sight, you said." Myka turned in her chair and looked at her, curiosity blunted by exhaustion. "What if he never left? Maybe that's the reason there isn't much of an electronic trail. He's still in his apartment building. There may be vacant units, or maybe he agreed to feed another tenant's cat or water her plants."
Myka's gaze grew sharper, and Helena asked, "Where was that ATM he used?"

Pete let the door shut and perched on an arm of the loveseat as Myka flipped through a notepad. "It's on Houston Street. It's in the neighborhood."

"If we go over there we're going to scare him away again," Pete said. "He barely had to step into that nightclub, and he knew we were there."

"But it was only after he entered the nightclub that he knew," Myka said. "The artefact may give him a general sense of when trouble or danger is near, but its ability to pinpoint it appears to be limited. And even though Helena was in his apartment yesterday, that wouldn't have necessarily sent him running because he would have expected us to show up there."

"And he might not have known," Helena added, "if the unit he's occupying is far enough away. But all this is speculation. We don't know that he's there."

"It's better than anything else we have," Myka countered. "You were able to work your magic and get into his apartment." She pointed to Helena's phone. "Maybe you can coax some information out of that security guard."

"It's highly unlikely it would be the same one, and then what? We'd go over there and the two of you would flash your badges? If we put the security staff on alert, then we likely will spook Bergstrom."

"It's about time a little luck comes our way," Myka said smiling, "and I trust your ability to wheedle something useful out of whoever answers the phone."

"I believe she could wheedle someone out of their underpants," Pete said, unruffled by Helena's glare at him, "but we basically have one shot at this. Because she's right, otherwise we're going to get the security staff all edgy, and once they get hinky, Bergstrom's going to fly. Maybe someone less rusty at all the secret agent stuff should be making the call."

Myka shook her head. "Helena can get us what we need."

"You're the decider," Pete said, sliding off the loveseat's arm onto its cushions and fumbling for the potato chips.

Rolling her eyes at Pete, Helena called the apartment building's information number and asked to be connected to the security staff. Her heart sank as an unfamiliar gruff voice - not the one belonging to the guard with Artie-like eyebrows - answered. Starting to stumble through an explanation, feeling simultaneously that Myka's faith in her had been misplaced (yet again) and that Pete had been right, which was a truly unpleasant combination, she stopped as the man's voice began to warm.

"Hey, this is Carl, we spoke yesterday. You're Mr. Bergstrom's girlfriend."

Smiling broadly at Pete, Helena said sweetly into the phone, "Forgive me, Carl. I should have recognized you. You were so helpful to me yesterday."

He sneezed noisily. "Damn allergies. Make me sound like a foghorn, or so my wife tells me." His voice continued to warm exponentially. "But you, can't mistake your voice. It sounds so classy. I think I could pick your voice out of a hundred women's."

"Yes, well, thank you for the compliment." At this, Pete rolled his eyes and Myka stifled a laugh. "I was wondering, Carl, poor Russ is in such a tizzy about something he promised one of the other
residents, he was going to walk her dog or collect her mail, something like that. He's practically prostrate with the flu, and here he is concerned about someone else." Helena sighed dramatically. "It's why I love him so." She paused. "You wouldn't happen to know who in the building's on vacation, would you?"

Carl made a sound that might have been concurrence with Helena's assessment or a reservation about Bergstrom's altruism that he felt he couldn't express more strongly. Helena heard a squeak, Carl was leaning back in his chair, and she wondered if it was prologue to a refusal to provide the information, filled with regret but a refusal nonetheless, and she thought that perhaps she ought to say something else in her 'classy' voice to push him a little, if he was undecided. Another squeak and then Carl was saying confidingly, "Sometimes Mrs. Levinson on the floor above asks one of her neighbors to look in on her cat when she's out of town. Maybe she asked him this time. But don't tell anyone I told you that."

"Not a word, Carl," Helena promised solemnly. Thinking a little effusion was in order, she added, "You have been my knight in shining armor these past two days. I fear you'd steal my heart if it wasn't already someone else's."

Pete put his hands to his throat and stuck out his tongue, rolling off the loveseat to the carpet and drumming his feet on the floor. Myka shushed him and nudged him none too gently with her shoe. In turn, Helena endured a few gallant offerings from Carl, some of which she thought his wife would definitely disapprove of, before he announced with great reluctance that he needed to return to work.

"Bergstrom's staying in the apartment above," Helena said. "Now we flush him out."

"Was the guard still wearing his underwear when you finished?" Pete asked as he crawled back onto the loveseat. Myka flung another pillow at him.

Deciding their plan had a better chance of working if they waited until later in the evening - "After the scare he must have had at the nightclub, he's probably staying close to home," Myka had said. "But just in case, let's wait until he's settled in for the night" - they plotted their approach. Pete would cover the back entrance while Myka would take the stairs to Mrs. Levinson's apartment to ensure that the artefact sensed their presence. Helena would finagle her way into the parking garage. "Sensors and card readers aren't that difficult to confuse," she had said airily. They would have to depend on the security staff to watch for Bergstrom if he tried to leave through the main entrance.

Helena ended up being grateful that all she had to do was follow a car into the garage since the sensor/reader array was more complex than she had anticipated; she hadn't the time, patience, or tools for her ingenuity to be taxed. She waited next to the elevators for what seemed an inordinate amount of time for someone as athletic as Myka to run up the stairs; surely the artefact would have sensed her presence by now. The doors opened, and she jumped forward, nearly Tesla'ing a teenager spinning the keys to his parents' car on his finger. She backed away, holding the Tesla behind her back, shrugging sheepishly. "Thought I'd surprise my boyfriend," she said lamely. "More like you were going to mug him," he grumbled and shambled toward a late-model Lexus.

The next time the doors opened, she hesitated, but the gleaming bald head and, more so, the quick, furtive moving of that head from side to side gave Bergstrom away. She pushed the Tesla into his back. It didn't feel quite as absurd to her as she expected after all these years, holding a fund manager at gunpoint with a weapon that looked like a sleeker version of a ray gun. "We'll take that lucky charm from you now." But that line had come out of a B-movie replete with gun molls and trench coats.
His response wasn't at all what she expected. "Thank God," he said, raising his arms with alacrity. "I've been hoping someone would come and take it."

At first, he hadn't been interested in acquiring said 'lucky charm' or any lucky charm. Although Afton had sworn that the dice were making all the difference in the performance of his investments, Bergstrom had been cautious. When Afton had told him and Sheffield that he could get duplicates of the dice, or some other object that would be just as lucky - for a 'nominal' price, he said - Bergstrom had turned him down. There was something about the arrangement he hadn't liked. He and Sheffield couldn't communicate with the sellers themselves, they had to go through Afton, and they were supposed to exercise the utmost discretion when talking about the objects. There should be no emails, texts, or IMs, and they shouldn't discuss the objects where anyone might overhear. In fact, Afton refused to discuss the dice or their substitutes at work, preferring to have the conversations in a crowded sports bar where it was almost impossible to hear anyone. But Sheffield had bought in and when he reported to Bergstrom - in the men's restroom over the sound of a running faucet - that his money clip was making him lucky with the ladies, Bergstrom couldn't deny that he was intrigued.

They were in his living room. Pete was on one of the couches, looking longingly at the TV, Myka was next to him taking notes, and Bergstrom sat across from them, in a chair that his 6'4" frame dwarfed. Standing away from the three of them, her back to the windows, Helena reflected that at least she had tried out her furniture before giving the decorators her final approval. Bergstrom squirmed in the chair as if he had never sat in it, pushing at the armrests as though that might make the chair roomier. He stopped, glancing around the apartment. "I've pretty much been married to my work, which makes it hard to meet women. The last date I was on, my assistant had arranged it, which is really pathetic since it was with her sister-in-law. So when Dwight said women were falling all over him, I thought why not? I told Stew I wanted one of those luck thingys." He cast a mournful eye at the bag in which his rabbit foot's key chain had been neutralized. "But that isn't how it seems to work for me. What it does do, and which was cool at first, is that it prevents bad things from happening to me. Hell, I can't even nick myself shaving. But then it got so that practically everything was a threat, going out for a walk or buying the paper, and when you guys showed up, I couldn't stop running, from the firm, from my apartment. I wanted to go to the hospital to see Dwight, but I couldn't. It felt like I was going to have a heart attack if I didn't stay low."

"Scared like a rabbit," Pete muttered.

"Yeah, that's about it," Bergstrom sighed heavily.

Myka and Pete were taking turns questioning him. It had already gone on for awhile and could continue for hours, Helena knew, but Bergstrom patiently, willingly answered every question - every time it was asked. And the questions were exhaustively repeated, a slightly different twist added to each iteration. At some point he ordered out for pizza and soft drinks, as if this were a gathering of friends and he was the host. Helena might have pitied him except for the niggling suspicion that her refusal to invite anyone into her loft, to have her isolation exposed, was only the inverse of Bergstrom's obliviousness to his.

Bergstrom's answers never changed, and they were few in number compared to the questions. He never knew who supplied Afton with the artefacts. Afton referred to them as friends, but he never explained how he knew them. Bergstrom didn't think they were clients, if for no other reason than most of their clients were institutional, pension funds and other retirement plans. He didn't know how Afton communicated with his 'friends.' Neither he nor Dwight, to his knowledge, had ever received any communications from them. The never's and other negatives - no's, I don't know's, not once's - piled up so quickly during the questioning that finally Helena interrupted with a question.
of her own, just to hear him say something different.

"Did Afton give you the print behind your desk?"

"Stew wanted me to have it," Bergstrom said, relieved at being able to answer something affirmatively. "He gave it to me a few days before he died. I should have known then that something was up because that painting meant something to him, because of who gave it to him, I think. I got the impression that she was the one who got away. He never told me much about her, I couldn't even tell you her name." He played with his empty soft drink can. "We knew that his investments had gone sour, and he was upset. But we never thought . . . we were all so busy. He told me I needed something to put on my wall, and I just laughed. I meant to give it back to him, when he felt better about things. Then it was too late." He carefully put the can down on a diminutive end table. "I felt like I had to put it up."

Myka looked at him sympathetically, but Helena recognized the steel behind the sympathy and knew Bergstrom was about to face another battery of questions. And so followed the no's and never's. Helena opened the door to the balcony and stepped out. It was pleasantly cool, and off to the east, the sky was beginning to show striations of pink and yellow and lavender. Dawn wasn't far off. They had been here that long. She groaned softly and leaned against the balcony's metal railing, looking down at the streets below, which were beginning to fill with delivery trucks. She had never been afraid of heights, as a child, perched in the highest branches, challenging Charles to climb a tree faster, and as a Warehouse agent racing to the tops of belfries and to the vertiginous ends of parapets in pursuit of an artefact. In her arrogance, she had thought her lack of fear was confirmation that she belonged to a higher realm, even if it was only imperfectly realized in the modest skyline of turn-of-the-century London. Now she was all too aware of the slimness of the margin between reaching the pinnacle and falling from it. A single misstep, a bobble, a bout of dizziness. But the possibility that she could plunge to her death didn't alarm her - should the railing give way, should she be foolish enough to tap dance on it. She had seen people die in worse ways. She had caused people to die in worse ways.

The door opened, but Helena didn't turn around. Pete would have already been talking, exclaiming over the view or wondering how high a superball would bounce if he threw it down to the street. As for Bergstrom, she doubted that he ever thought to come out here. There was no furniture, and the drapes were perfectly three-quarters closed over the windows, as if one of the decorators had told him it was the optimal look, and he hadn't dared to change it since. Myka joined her, not choosing to rest her arms on the railing like she was, hands clasped over space, but not cringing three feet behind it either.

"We're taking a break," she said. "In fact, I don't think we're going to press him anymore. We've asked every question twenty different ways, and we're still getting the same response."

"Nothing." "Nothing."

Helena straightened. "They're adapting, the ones doing the replicating. According to the files, there was no apparent connection between the race car driver and the people who received the replicated artefacts. They were contacted individually, or so it appears. Now they're using one point of contact and relying on him or her to reach out to others. Fewer points of vulnerability for them. It's as if they're watching us trying to find them."

The breeze wasn't strong, but it was enough to trail strands of hair across Myka's face, and she pushed them back, tucking them behind her ear. "Do you really think someone in Congress is involved?"
"You said that you thought there was something mercantile about all this, which there may be, although I think the money is more an attempt to ensure that the players have skin in the game. But using an artefact in the end is about power, the power to cause change or to stop it. Who would as naturally be attracted to it as a politician?"

"We can go back to the files and see if there's any connection between the race car driver, Afton, and the congressmen interested in the Warehouse, but a contribution here or there isn't going to persuade the regents," Myka said warningly.

The sky was growing lighter to the east, the yellow and pinks intensifying, and a trembling rim of orange was just beginning to peep above the horizon. It was hard not to believe that the sun wasn't lifting itself, shimmering with effort, as though each day was guaranteed only to the extent that the sun had the strength to ascend. It didn't lend an air of contingency to the whole business of getting up in the morning and conducting your life but confirmed, rather, that it was a bit of a chore. Not the most uplifting of thoughts. "What is Pete doing with Bergstrom?" Helena asked.

"They're playing video games on that big TV Pete is lusting after." Helena could hear the smile in Myka's voice. "Pete's excusing it by saying that we all need a brain cleanser."

"Is that why you're out here?"

"I wanted to take in the view. Not what you get in Rapid City." She turned slightly toward Helena. "Why are you out here?"

"Sometimes I like to see the sunrise. It reassures me that I'm not one of the undead," Helena said wryly.

"What else do you do to convince yourself that you're still alive?"

It was teasing but not playful, and Myka's smile wasn't the indulgent one that had laced her comment about Pete with an almost maternal affection. It was half-challenge, half-invitation, and her eyes, neither green nor hazel but gray in the early morning grayness, had dropped to Helena's mouth. Helena couldn't remember if Myka had ever looked at her like that before or smiled at her like that before, but she knew what that look and that smile meant. Myka had even drawn closer and tilted her head to make it easier. Helena reminded herself that she had done this a million times before. Perhaps a million was a slight exaggeration, but all she needed to do was bend her head and graze Myka's lips with her own, deepening the kiss as Myka's mouth parted.

But she was breathing a little too fast and her heart was beginning to pound, which were interfering with the smoothness of her movements. Her head was moving too forcefully, and her lips weren't grazing Myka's but grinding into them, as if she were a runner sliding into home. She felt her upper lip mash against Myka's, and their teeth click, and then Myka was pulling away, rubbing her nose. Bollocks, it wasn't that hard, she had been more inept than a teenager on her first date. In fact, her own first kisses, not that she could remember them all that well, were marvels of adroitness by comparison.

"I am so sorry," she said, unsure whether she should be apologizing only for her bumbling or for the kiss itself.

"Helena, it was just a kiss."

The seeming dismissiveness of the remark made her think that perhaps she had invented a desire where there hadn't been any, seen an invitation in a look and a smile that hadn't existed. "You know, I did miss the DHS training on sexual harassment. In a sole proprietorship, which is
essentially what my appraisal business is -"

"Helena, it was just a kiss," Myka repeated, but it sounded different this second time, knowing and amused and not at all admonishing. Myka took Helena's face between her hands, and for one almost unbearably deflating second, Helena thought Myka was going to kiss her, no, not kiss her, plant a kiss on her, the type of kiss one person gave another to signal that all kissing was over with, forever. They would go back to being friends, friends-who-had-tried-but-couldn't-be-something-more friends. But the kiss wasn't like that. It was sweet and almost chaste - Myka wasn't trying to tease her mouth open - but there was a promise in it too, particularly in the way Myka had moved into her, pressing her against the railing and slipping one leg between hers, that they would try this again.

And then it ended. Myka was halfway to the door by the time Helena had pushed herself away from the railing, knees a little wobbly (because they had been locked, Helena told herself), and pulled needlessly at her shirt to straighten it.

They left Bergström with a video game on at a loud volume on the TV and a living room strewn with pizza boxes and soft drink cans, and he was smiling a strange, regretful smile, as if he were sorry to see them go. They had only a couple of hours before they needed to be at JFK for their flight, and Helena spent most of her time at her loft packing a couple of suitcases (she had no idea how long she would be staying at the B&B) and trying not to think about the kisses on the balcony. As Myka had said, they were just kisses, and with some minor awkwardness, she was sure that the two of them could pretend that they had never happened. Because that was the wisest course of action. Despite what Claudia had said, she hadn't come back to repair her relationship with Myka and certainly not to start up a different kind of relationship with her. To hammer the cliché home, she didn't do relationships. Not anymore.

With Myka you couldn't have anything else.

So absolutely not anymore.

She was going to march out to the airport - metaphorically, of course, because taking cabs was the furthest thing from marching - after one side trip, and she was going to greet Myka and treat her like the colleague she was, the professional she was. As Claudia had groused over the phone, they didn't have time for treehouses for eight-year-old boys or, as Helena added to herself, romancing the eight-year-old's mother.

Not that she would be doing any romancing. Because she didn't do that. Because she didn't call, she didn't remember, she didn't care.

She had left 13, left Boone because of Myka. It was madness, Claudia's this time, to think she would have returned because of Myka. Maybe it had been bordering on madness to have kissed Myka on the balcony, but it certainly was madness still to be having this conversation in her head. She didn't do madness either, not anymore.

Helena arrived at the gate before Pete and Myka and upgraded her seat to first class. She wasn't going to be scrunched into coach, not today, especially if she had to be scrunched next to Myka. She saw them at the far end of the corridor, Pete carrying a plastic bag branded with a name of one of the airport shops, laughing, mugging. Because Myka looked dejected, it was in the slump of her shoulders, the downturn of her mouth. As they came up to Helena, Pete opened his bag and took out a Yankees jersey and cap.

"Not bad for five minutes' shopping, eh?" He stuffed them back into the bag. "Miss Perfection here didn't find anything 'sufficiently cool' for our son." He gave her an exasperated glance. "He's eight,
Myka. It's not like he was expecting you to bring the Empire State Building home with you."

This was exactly the wrong moment to open her own bag, the result of her side trip. It would look . . . ingratiating? Worse, intrusive, after the kiss, as if she were trying to muscle her way into Myka's life. It had been an impulse trip, an impulse purchase, and her plan had been simply to give it to Drew the next time she saw him. But here she was, opening her bag and taking out a model of the Empire State Building. "After Claudia said he was trying to build a fort, or a treehouse, out of toothpicks, I thought he should perhaps start with something easier." She handed it to Myka.

Who promptly handed it back. "Helena, no, it's your gift -"

"From someone who's barely more than a stranger to him. It's an easy solve, Myka." Helena put the box in the bag and gave the bag to her.

She offered to pay for upgrades for them to first class, but she had known from the outset that they wouldn't agree to it. When the first class travelers were asked to board, she left Pete and Myka companionably bickering about who would get the window seat when they boarded. Aside from the awkwardness over the gift for Drew, Myka hadn't shown the least sign of discomfort or self-consciousness. She hadn't avoided looking at her, she hadn't ignored her, she hadn't buried her face in a magazine. It was as if the only thing they had exchanged on Bergstrom's balcony was conversation, and Helena was grateful. To be honest, she was just the slightest bit annoyed, but she realized she should be grateful. She breathed out a satisfied "Ahhhh" as she relaxed in her (relatively) roomy seat, asking for a tonic water from the flight attendant. He was quite nice looking, and as he brought her back her drink, she smiled warmly at him. Catching the smile, he leaned against the seat in front of her and let his eyes appreciatively trace her features. Someone bumping down the aisle toward coach with her roller bag aggressively jostled him into the seat, and as he started to fall over, maintaining his balance only by slapping his hand against an overhead bin, Helena saw the crooked grin on Myka's face. "So sorry," she murmured. Pete waved merrily behind her.

It was hard to put any energy behind her flirting after that, and though the flight attendant gallantly made an effort, bringing her refills before she had a chance to ask for them, asking her about her travels, she eventually picked up the airline magazine as a snub and flipped through it. After she heard the last of the beverage carts trundling noisily down the aisle, she rose, telling herself she needed to stretch her legs, and wandered through coach. She spotted them toward the back of the cabin. Pete had the window seat, Myka the seat next to him. Her head was on his shoulder, her eyes closed. It was hard not to imagine their spending countless flights this way, Myka asleep, Pete stolidly supporting her. They were a unit, married or divorced, and Helena knew she had nothing comparable to offer. She never had, which was why, in one sense, it hadn't been difficult to take the astrolabe Mrs. Frederic had entrusted to her and disappear, starting over with a new (old) name, in a new place, with a new set of lies about who she was and where she came from. That she would never quite measure up to Nate's wife, never love him as she had, those failures on her part didn't loom so large; Nate wasn't asking for all of her, didn't want all of her. She was an able companion, and she cared for Adelaide as if Adelaide were a daughter to her. That had been enough for a still-grieving Nate. But Myka would have never settled for crumbs. What had Pete called her? Miss Perfection. Miss Perfection would have demanded all of her, every last reprehensible inch of her, and Helena wouldn't burden anyone with that.

She went back to her first class seat and, though it was only two in the afternoon, ordered a whiskey sour from the once-beaming now-impassive flight attendant. She didn't visit coach again. The flight from Chicago to Rapid City was delayed. They didn't board until almost eight in the evening, and it was after ten, mountain time, when the plane landed. The airport was nearly
deserted, and the three of them were quiet as they headed toward the parking lot.

"Drew have math camp tomorrow? 'Cause I'll drop him off." Pete began to veer away from them, toward a Mustang parked at the other end of the lot.

"No math camp, no soccer camp," Myka said.

"Can I keep him for the day, then? Because I've hardly had a chance to see him. You'll give me a personal day, won't you, boss?" He smiled cheekily at Myka.

"Drop him off tomorrow evening, not too late. He does have math and soccer on Tuesday. And if you need me, I'll be working from home."

"Gotcha." Pete snapped off a salute and started jogging toward his car.

Helena was trying to pick out her own nondescript sedan from the small huddle of them in the center of the parking lot. Myka had stopped where she was; she wasn't searching for her car but there was something indecisive about the way she was standing, as though she might spin around and head back toward the terminal.

"Did you forget something?" Remembering that she could use her remote to identify her car, Helena took it from her handbag and pressed the alarm button.

"No." Myka clapped her hands over ears as the alarm went off. "Look. . . . Hey, hey," she said more strongly as Helena hadn't stopped walking toward her car, dragging her bags behind her. Her gaze darting around the parking lot before coming to rest on Helena, Myka said, "Come home with me."

Not sure but what the car alarm wasn't still ringing in her ears and warping what had been "See you tomorrow" into "Come home with me," Helena said, "I'm sorry, you said -"

"Come home with me." Myka took a few hesitant steps toward Helena. "I want you to come home with me."

"Really, it's an inexpensive toy that I picked up on a whim. A simple thank you, darling, would suffice." The words and the tone, arch, mocking, were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

She thought she could see Myka close her eyes and hear her count to ten. "God, you can make it so difficult sometimes." Myka had defensively wrapped her arms around her chest. "So let me make it simple for you. I want to take you home with me. If you want that too, roll your bags this way. If you don't, well, then I guess I'll see you Tuesday, and I'll be the one taking the sexual harassment training."

Helena picked up her bags and walked to where Myka was standing. Her heart was beating so hard she thought that her 148-year-old arterial system wouldn't be able to take the pressure, but her voice was steady. "When you told me that I would know when you were trying to seduce me, I didn't think you meant this."

Myka laughed and she uncrossed her arms, but her laugh nervously trailed off and her eyes skittishly slid away from Helena's. "I'm running a little short on romance right now."

Helena dropped her bags. She was in a parking lot, accepting perhaps the worst come-on she had ever been offered in her life, matched only by the awfulness of their first kiss. For all of her work with the Warehouse and artefacts, she had never been much of a believer in portents, but perhaps
these were signs worthy of her attention. "Myka, if this is out of curiosity -"

"Helena, I've been with a woman before," Myka interrupted impatiently. "This is not some bi-curious ad on Craigslist."

"I think we need to revisit your don't-kiss-and-tell policy, but for now, what I meant was if it's out of curiosity to see what things might have been like between us, with me -"

"Really? Are you that full of yourself to think I've been dying to bed H.G. Wells, the sexual adventurer?"

"No," Helena said quietly. "What I'm trying to say I'm apparently saying very badly, so let me make it simple. If you're just interested in fucking me for a night, Myka, I can't do it." With everyone else in the universe, people seem to think, but not with you. Never you.

Myka bunched a clump of her hair in her hand and released it. "I don't know what I want, but it's not that. I'm trying to take you home, Helena. I've not done that with anyone, not even Jeff. I've had no one in my bed with me, except for Shep." She held up her hand. "I know how that sounds, don't even go there." She paused. "I'm choosing you, and if we haven't managed between the two of us to suck all the possibility out of this evening, I want to spend the rest of it with you."

"Are the sheets going to have dog hair on them?" But Helena was already standing beside the passenger door of what she hoped was Myka's car.

Thankfully the car's trunk opened, so she had guessed right. Myka put in her bag, then Helena's, and carefully placed the Empire State Building on top of them. Shutting the trunk, she said slowly, "No, but I have to admit I didn't change the sheets before I left." She started to laugh, ruefully, disbelievingly. "I don't know how you could turn this down."

"I'm not. Get in the car, Myka."

She wasn't supposed to be doing this. She had decided there was going to be nothing more, and yet here she was on her way to Myka's house to do... something. In the end, maybe there would be nothing more than another night spent on Myka's sofa. Nothing they had said to each other seemed very likely to lead to "more" and, in fact, it all seemed to point to the opposite. It was conceivable that tomorrow morning, once she had risen from the sofa and Myka from her virginal bed, there would be even less between them than there had been when she had arrived a week ago. That was all it had been, a week. This was madness. Yet she had taken Myka's hand between her own, and she was letting her fingers trail lightly across Myka's palm, around and over her knuckles, between her fingers, down the back of her hand.

Until Myka withdrew her hand, not ungently, and said, her voice strained, "If you keep doing that, I'm going to have to pull off the highway, and I really don't want it to happen here, in the car."

"We're going to have to broaden your horizons, darling."

They left their bags and box in the trunk. Myka didn't turn on the lights in the kitchen, taking Helena by the hand and leading her around the island, down the hallway, past Drew's room and the guest room, to her bedroom. Helena wasn't sure she had breathed once Myka had turned the car into the driveway, and based on the fact that Myka hadn't said a word since they had gotten out of the car, she suspected Myka wasn't breathing either. The evening was still at a tipping point, and it seemed even the slightest thing, the sound of a trunk slamming or the flash of a light being turned on was enough to push it over. To the "nothing more" side, where they would clumsily back away from the caress and the invitation and the kisses and let the swell of those ten years wash
everything smooth. Not "as if" nothing had ever happened because nothing, in fact, had happened, would ever happen.

In her room, Myka did turn on the light, and they blinked uncertainly at each other as their eyes adjusted. Myka looked tired, the faint lines at the corners of her eyes and around her mouth more noticeable. Helena knew she looked no less tired, and she feared that the whiskey sour she had consumed hours ago was still coating the roof of her mouth. She should at least brush her teeth, swig some mouthwash. Could she do that discreetly? But she hadn't brought in her bag.

Myka said, reading her mind, "There's stuff in the bathroom, if you want to wash up."

In the bathroom, Helena bowed over the counter, putting her head in her hands. So this was how it was going to end, not with a bang, but with the flush of a toilet. With the others, none of the details to be gotten out of the way - the bad breath, the needing to pee - had mattered because being with them hadn't mattered. It was just sex. But it had taken the two of them so long to come to this and, even then, they were being so bloody clumsy and tentative about it - just wanting to get the stale taste of alcohol out of her mouth seemed likely to derail it. She found dozens of spare toothbrushes, and she gamely brushed her teeth with one of them. Perhaps Myka was digging out a pillow and blanket for her now, and she would pad to the living room and lay on the sofa, turning on the TV. She couldn't do this with Myka, not now; the cosmos had opened up, like a book having its back cracked, and she couldn't help but read, "This is a disaster." It had stopped giving out signs because she was too stubborn or too stupid to pay attention to them and was literally spelling out the message.

Later she would think it had all swung on the Altoids tin. When she had opened the bathroom door, Myka was sitting on the edge of her bed, still in her suit pants and the pale pink blouse she had worn with them. Next to her was a tin of Altoids. Peppermint. Thank God, the cinnamon would have been too much. Too sweet, too cloying. And why she was making judgements about the breath mints belonging to a woman she was likely never to kiss again, she didn't know. It struck her as funny, so she started to laugh. In fact, the whole day, starting from their time together on Bergstrom's balcony, had been funny from a certain perspective, so she started to laugh harder. Not hysterically, but richly, because, well, it had been funny, sad-funny, but still funny.

Myka laughed with her at first, but she sobered, and those eyes, whose true color always seemed to be beyond Helena's ability to determine, grew serious, and she stood up from the bed with a swiftness that had the breath catching in Helena's throat, it was like Tamalpais but better than Tamalpais because, although Myka was backing her against the wall, it wasn't a gun or an arm against her throat, but Myka's mouth, hot and insistent and . . . pepperminty. Helena started to laugh again, but then Myka's mouth was swallowing her laugh, and she was groaning into that mouth, and her hands were working Myka's shirt out of her pants, and if there was going to be 'nothing more' between them, things needed to stop very soon. Then Myka's hand was on her breast, and Helena realized that things weren't going to stop. Myka wasn't going to stop them, and as Helena unzipped Myka's pants and slipped her fingers between Myka's panties and her skin, she knew she wasn't going to stop them.

It wasn't the kind of coordination they had developed as partners that was needed here. They had never worked with each other naked was the ridiculous thought that went through Helena's mind as they fell back gracelessly onto Myka's bed, Myka's pants pooling onto the floor, and Helena trying to work out of her half-buttoned blouse. Helena wasn't sure she had ever seen Myka naked, maybe a flash of hip in a hotel room, but that was it. Coordinating the movements of arms and legs and heads, it was awkward and occasionally painful. When Myka's head accidentally cracked her under her jaw, Helena said softly, "You're making me see stars."
"And not in a good way, sorry." Myka winced for her and gently touched her jaw. Helena kissed the worried creasing between Myka's brows and then the corners of her mouth, trying to tug them upward in a smile. They hadn't so much flung the covers off as pushed them down, and Myka still had on her shirt and bra, somehow, while Helena was wearing only her locket. As Helena worked to remedy the balance of clothing between them, in favor of there being none at all, Myka said almost shyly, "I used to look up at your window in the B&B in the mornings, just before my run. I was always hoping you were looking for me."

"I was, but I was standing back. I didn't want you to think I was stalking you."

"I wouldn't have thought that. Helena, if I would have seen you looking at me one of those mornings, I would have been flying back up those stairs, you know." Myka was smiling, but it wasn't quite in her eyes, and Helena recognized, with a jolt, that perhaps Claudia had been right, that she hadn't seen what was right in front of her. She was, truly, an idiot.

"I wouldn't have known to open the door." And again, she had just proven herself to be an idiot. That was not the thing to say. How many times could she cold cock this before Myka threw her out of the bedroom?

"I know that now." The smile had made its way to her eyes. "It's time to open the door, Helena."

The awkwardness didn't entirely go away, there were still inadvertent bumps and pokes and pinches, and then there was the fact that the woman sometimes on top of her, sometimes under her, sometimes simply next to her was Myka. It made her more hesitant and unsure, something that she had rarely felt in a sexual encounter. But because it was Myka, every caress felt different, more intense, as if she wasn't only naked but, on some deeper level, stripped bare, and when Myka went inside her, it felt as if she were being touched everywhere and when she cried out, it sounded - and felt - as if it had been ripped from her, loud and pained and exultant all at the same time, and so foreign to how she usually came that it was hard to accept the cry as her own.

Myka worked an arm beneath Helena's shoulders and drew her close. "Are you all right?" she asked, nipping Helena's ear.

"Very much so," Helena said, with a chuckle. "But you've made a screamer out of me, and I'm not quite sure it fits my self-image. I do so like to maintain an air of mystery."

"I like the screamer just fine," Myka whispered, rolling onto her back and taking Helena's hand between her legs.

"On second thought," Helena said, moving carefully so her hand wouldn't lose contact with a heat that had her nearly biting through her tongue - which would have seriously impaired her future plans - and balancing herself on her knees and the hand she placed next to Myka's shoulder, "an air of mystery can be overdone."

Myka had been an internalizer for as long as Helena had known her, so she didn't find it surprising that Myka kept most of her orgasm in, only letting out a long, hissing breath at the end. "Hard to let loose with a child in the house."

"Don't kid a kidder," Helena said, lightly rubbing Myka's stomach, feeling the hard muscle underneath. "You don't let loose."

"There's something we can work on," Myka grunted. "But in the meantime, just to prove to you that I have the potential." She sat up and turned over on her stomach. "See it?" On the small of her back, there was a tattoo of a dagger. "It was supposed to be a foil. Pete and I had just gotten
together, and we had finished a horrible, horrible retrieval. We were waiting for our flight out of LAX, when he said, 'Let's drive down to San Diego for the weekend,' and we did. He dared me to get a tattoo, and I dared him to swim naked in the hotel pool."

"I think he got the better end of the deal," Helena said, appraising the dagger.

"I think so, too," Myka sighed. "I come up with the worst dares. I keep thinking I'll get this removed, but it's too easy to forget it's there. I don't want to be some seventy-year-old woman flashing my wrinkled, tattooed back at every other seventy-year-old woman in the locker room."

"And why would you be flashing your back at other old women in a locker room?"

"Senior swim at the Y," Myka said in all seriousness. "My knees aren't going to be able to take the running forever."

"Darling, don't worry, I won't let you go to the Y, I won't let you go out, period, if you still have that tattoo when you're seventy."

For a moment, they were both quiet, realizing what she had said, what it implied.

First, Myka said, "I'll take a picture and send it to you, wherever you are, to prove that I've had it removed."

Then Helena said, "If you don't, I'll fly in, from wherever I am, to wherever you are and conspire with whomever you're with to have it removed." She smiled as Myka inched over and began to nuzzle her neck. "Did I leave things open-ended enough?"

They moved with each other and against each other with more assurance as the night wore on; there were fewer apologies, fewer words altogether. They began to intuit each other's rhythm, and though they slept, it seemed to Helena that she would no sooner close her eyes than she would instinctively begin reaching out for Myka or Myka's hands would be roaming over her. In the early morning, they rolled away from each other, but Myka hooked a foot over hers, and they slept apart but still touching.

The night had brought them from "nothing more" to "more," Helena hazily, drowsily realized before she drifted into a deeper sleep, although she didn't know what the "more" was or how long it would last.
Chapter 8

There were voices outside the bedroom, and Helena muzzily wondered why Shep hadn't started barking or, better yet, attacked the intruders. Part shepherd, part retriever, part three or four other breeds Myka had said, and, in Helena's opinion, entirely worthless. But Shep wasn't here, he was with Claudia, or maybe Pete by now. She supposed if the intruders weren't after the family silver - families didn't keep silver anymore, that was right, too time-consuming to maintain - they would be after other things. She hadn't been practicing her kenpo for awhile, but she would be good for a few moves. Unless they had guns. She pulled the sheet higher over her head; she'd just have to rely on her wits then. The voices became more distinct, separate, one higher-pitched, the other lower, and now there was barking.

Myka tried to leap from the bed, but her foot was still hooked around Helena's and she more or less hopped out, grabbing at the wall for balance. "What are they doing here?" She sounded more anxious than angry, and, balanced restored, she was picking up her clothes from the floor.

"Hey, Mykes," Pete shouted. "Are you here? The Drewster and I thought we'd take you out for breakfast. Claudia's decided we could all take a day." Lowering his voice, he said, "Maybe she's out for a run, think we should wait around?"

Drew's response was muffled. Helena pushed her pillows up against the headboard and nestled into them, watching Myka as she worked her way into the pants and blouse she had worn the day before. She swept a hand through her hair, trying to shake it into some semblance of order. Muttering "I smell like sex," she hurried toward the bathroom; she stopped, on the verge of asking Helena something, Helena could tell, but decided against that too, moving to the door and saying loudly, "I overslept. I'll be right out."

"Your mom never oversleeps," Helena could hear Pete saying. Myka threw a glare over her shoulder at the door. Her blouse gapped where she had a missed a button, and her curls had matted on one side of her head. A Myka thrown out of her routine was adorably befuddled, for the first few minutes, anyway, and Helena hid her smile in a yawn. "Am I to hide in the bedroom? Is that the plan?"

"I need to... prepare them, that's all," Myka said, darting into the bathroom. She emerged a few minutes later, smelling of toothpaste and hand soap, and she had drawn her hair back with a clip. The blouse had been rebuttoned and tucked into her pants. Opening the door just wide enough that she could slip through it, although Helena doubted either Pete or Drew would be able to see into the bedroom, she was already saying, "Hey, buddy, I missed you."

The voices alternated, as if in canon, first Pete's, then Drew's, and Myka's trailing behind. Drew's remained at the same speed and level of enthusiasm, and Helena caught "treehouse" and "New York" and "Claudia's cool," while Pete's slowed, becoming less jovial and more embarrassed, as he took in the import of Myka's excuse of oversleeping. Because she didn't oversleep. Helena sighed and slid out from under the sheet. Myka would have been better off saying that she didn't feel good, or that she had just returned from her run, something that wouldn't have automatically flagged itself as a lie. Deception still came too hard for her. This time, because Myka wasn't there to see it, Helena let the smile spread across her face, unguarded and tender and... gobsmacked. Just a little bit and justifiable after last night. She waited outside the bathroom for a beat, then shrugged. It was going to be hard to deny there was someone else in the house with the plumbing going full force.

Pete and Myka were standing farther apart than Helena normally saw them when she left Myka's bedroom. He turned his head, but he wasn't surprised to see her. "Process of elimination. There was
no car in the driveway."

Myka didn't have her arms wrapped around her chest, but there was a defensiveness in her expression. Her chin had that stubborn tilt, and her "You could have called" had an unmistakably accusatory note.

"Won't be making that mistake again," he sighed. "You're welcome to come along, H.G., though it may be just Drew and me."

Drew was sitting on one of the stools drawn up to the island. Although he seemed absorbed in whatever he was drawing on a pad of paper, Helena was sure he was listening to everything that was being said, and not said. She touched his shoulder as she came to stand in front of the cupboards. "Why don't we have breakfast here? You must have some pancake or waffle mix around."

Both Pete and Myka stared at her. "I can cook," she said, "but I generally prefer not to." As they continued to stare, she added, "It was a part of every nineteenth century..." She trailed off as she looked at Drew, who had stopped drawing long enough to point to the pantry. "It was what every girl learned to do when I was growing up. Ah, yes, thank you, Drew."

As she opened the pantry door, Pete said, "Do we have everything you need - a wood stove? Cast iron skillet? Butter churn?" Behind her she heard shuffling, then Pete's "Ow."

By the time she found the mix, which was buried behind several boxes of cereal, Pete and Myka had gone out onto the patio. They were talking more animatedly than they had allowed themselves to do in the house. Drew was observing them, his drawing, for the moment, forgotten. "They're mad at each other," he said matter-of-factly.

Helena was viewing the contents of the refrigerator, looking for the milk. She leaned back and peered over at the box of mix - her glasses were in the trunk, too - those two ovals, they must be eggs. "They're not angry, they're embarrassed."

"Why?"

The old habit of being almost unsparingly honest with Christina hadn't deserted her. Unfortunately. Helena closed the refrigerator, resting her head against the door. Taking a deep breath, she crossed over to the island, placing the milk and carton of eggs close to Drew. "I'm sure you must have done something that, although it wasn't wrong, you thought your parents might not like? And your mom or your dad found out about it?"

With the show of concentration that made him so uncannily resemble his mother, Drew gave the question some thought before nodding his head. "My friend Colton and I were racing dirt bikes over the ridge. Mom never said I couldn't do that, but she never said I could either. Colton's mom told her."

"And how did you feel?" Helena was guessing that rather than being defiant, Drew, like the otherwise compliant child he appeared to be, would have swiftly succumbed to guilt. She turned the box so that its instructions faced Drew. "Would you read those out to me, please?"

"I felt bad. Mom wasn't angry, but she said we could have hurt ourselves jumping off the ridge like that." He looked around the box to see how Helena was mixing the ingredients. "Says you're supposed to gently mix."

"Forgive me," Helena said dryly, slowing her rotation of the whisk. "This morning your mom feels
bad, and your dad does, too." She glanced at Pete and Myka on the patio. "They're just trying to sort things out between them."

"Is it because you stayed over in my mom's bedroom?"

Helena dropped the whisk into the mix. Gingerly fishing it out, she went over to the sink and washed her hands. She hadn't become a nun by any means after Christina was born, but the number of her liaisons declined and the ones she did conduct, she conducted away from their home. Her unsparingly honest conversations with Christina hadn't had to include explanations of why a strange man or woman had come out of Mama's bedroom in the morning. "Do you have an electric skillet somewhere?" At Drew's blank look, she began opening cupboards. Perhaps a little banging might help drown out that question of his still hanging in the air. She vigorously shut and opened the cupboards, even drawers, rattling the silverware thoroughly. Finding two skillets, neither electric, she set the largest on the stovetop. Hot but not too hot, she reminded herself.

"Colton says when your mom starts letting someone stay over in her bedroom, it means that they're going to be her boyfriend. Colton's mom has a boyfriend, and he sleeps in her room." Drew's features were scrunching into a speculative squint at her. "You can't be my mom's boyfriend, but does it mean you're going to be at our house a lot now? Cause Colton said his mom's boyfriend is always over there."

Hmmmm, Colton did not appear to be a fan of his mother's boyfriend. But she thought Drew seemed more neutral than opposed to the possibility that she might become a permanent houseguest. An unlikely possibility given the rocky unfolding of events over the past 24 hours, but that she would keep to herself. She could simply change the subject, although she thought it was the coward's way out. Or she could tell him that it was a conversation he needed to have with his mother, which was equally weasely in a different sense, since, really, it was a conversation she and Myka should have first, what they were to one another now. Carefully pouring a small amount of the mix into the skillet, she said, "Staying in your mom's room overnight doesn't make me her . . ." For once, Helena couldn't find the word she wanted. "It doesn't mean I'm going to move in," she said bluntly. Too blunt for an eight-year-old? But Drew's steady, thoughtful regarding of her hadn't changed. "It doesn't have to mean anything at all." Applying a cheery smile that she hoped looked more sincere than it felt, she said, "And it certainly doesn't mean anything is going to happen this morning, other than having pancakes, that is." Perhaps it was a good time to get him more involved in the breakfast-making process. "Do you want to start setting the table for me?"

She had to get the plates down for him, but he collected the silverware, counting out the required number, and methodically set plates and knives and forks on the small dining table. She turned the pancake over, noting with some degree of satisfaction that it didn't look too brown. "Are you going to stay in her room again?" There was no whisk to drop in the mix this time, but she did nearly burn her finger on the rim of the skillet.

She looked at him. So far being honest with him hadn't backfired on her. "I don't know." She had a question of her own. "You seem to have been giving a lot of thought to your mother having a relationship with someone. Why is that?"

"Colton says she's going to get a boyfriend, and then everything will change," he said with adult resignation. "I want to be ready for when it happens." His determination to be prepared made him sound so much like Myka that Helena wanted to fly across the kitchen and hug him to her, but she cleared her throat instead and lifted the pancake up to see if it had browned on the bottom. He put a napkin under each knife and then, without prompting, opened the refrigerator and took out a tub . . . of some mixture of hydrogenated oils. If it was possible to be a dairy snob, Helena counted herself as one. She joined him at the refrigerator, scanning its shelves. No butter. What about syrup? Myka
couldn't be so uncompromising as to have pancake mix without syrup. A small bottle. They both looked at the bottle and sighed simultaneously. "Maybe it'll be that guy who came over the other night. She goes out on dates with him." He shrugged, putting the margarine on the table as Helena heated the syrup. Squinting up at her, as if he were trying to take her measure, he said, "Would you like it if he was her boyfriend?"

Perhaps Drew would become a Warehouse agent when he grew older, he already had the dogged quality down, Helena grimly reflected. She smelled something burning and turned back toward the skillet. Bollocks. Flipping the burned pancake onto a plate, she turned the heat down and poured more mix into the skillet. "No," she said, "I wouldn't."

A crooked smile appeared on his face. "Me neither. At least you're building me a treehouse." The smile widened into a cocky grin reminiscent of his father's, and Helena laughed. Shaking her spatula at him, she said, "I'll have to keep my eyes on you. You're a sly customer."

Then he was back in Myka mode, frowning as he worked the term over. "What's a sly customer?"

###

Burned and unburned pancakes were about evenly split. Pete gallantly took all the burned ones, noting as he slathered margarine over them, "You may have learned to cook as a girl, but I'm thinking you haven't cooked since you were one." He took a bite then pointed at her with his knife. "Didn't you meet Nate in a cooking class?"

Helena sipped at her tea. "I was new in town. It was a way to meet people." Her pancake, half-uneaten, lay cooling in its syrup. It wasn't burned, but it was tough. She was blaming the age of the mix for that.

Drew had a lake of syrup on his plate in which he was dredging tiny triangles of pancake. Myka seemed to be meditating over her cup of coffee, her eyes closed, the cup even with but not touching her mouth. When Pete and Myka had come in from the patio, they were smiling, but Helena could see that the tilt of Myka's chin hadn't noticeably lessened. Pete, however, seemed more at ease, teasing his son and commenting approvingly on Drew's drawing, which was a reasonable facsimile of a pirate ship.

"Drew, why don't you finish up your pancake and brush your teeth." He looked from Myka to Helena. "We're going out to the baseball diamonds. Drew's going to wear his lucky Yankees cap and jersey and shag some balls." As Drew took a few more bites of his pancake and then carried his plate over to the sink, Pete asked innocently, "What do you girls have planned for today?"

Myka opened her eyes and glared at Pete. "I've got work to do," she said. Lowering her voice, she said to him, "You really shouldn't push this." Drew was shuffling slowly toward the bathroom, looking from one parent to the other, and Helena, catching his glance, smiled reassuringly at him. Pete held his hands up in surrender. "Did you get up on the wrong side of bed or something?" He laughed as Myka threw her napkin at him. "Sorry, but it's just too easy, you know." Turning toward Helena, he said, "I hear that we're going to be roomies." At Helena's look of alarm, he amended, "Not roomie roomies, but, you know, floormates or whatever they call it." His eyes were bright and mischievous. "The things we have in common now. Who would've thought?"

"Pete, seriously, it's time for you to go." Footsteps thundered down the hall toward them, and Myka looked over her shoulder. "You ready, Drew?" Helena thought he had had just enough time to put a curl of toothpaste on his brush and then rinse it off. He nodded enthusiastically and kissed his mother's cheek before scurrying toward the door, Shep running to join him. "Pete. Go. Now,"
Myka enunciated testily.

Pete got up from the table, flashing a grin at Helena. "Enjoy your new place. I'll be over later with the 'welcome to the neighborhood' casserole." After he put his dishes on the counter, he started whistling an off-key but recognizable version of the theme music to *The Odd Couple*.

After they heard the front door slam, Myka groaned and buried her head in her arms. "I'm so sorry about how things turned out this morning." Allowing herself one more groan, she pushed herself away from the table and went to the kitchen to pour herself another cup of coffee. "Do you want any more tea? Coffee?"

"No, thank you." Helena took her knife and idly sliced through her pancake. "They were pretty awful, the pancakes, weren't they?" The refrigerator door opened with a small pop, as if it had been vacuum sealed, and she heard Myka moving containers. "How long have you been putting milk in your coffee? You used to shudder when you saw any of us drinking our coffee diluted."

"My stomach can't deal with it straight any longer. And, yeah, the pancakes were awful." Myka slumped back down in her seat.

"It's not as though they walked in on us, darling," Helena said.

"All but." An eyebrow and a corner of her mouth quirked up at the same time, and Helena wondered how Myka would react were she to reach over and take the hand that wasn't gripping the cup like a life preserver. She wanted simply to touch some part of her that was ordinarily in the public view and touch it in a way that wouldn't suggest she was asking for a commitment of Myka's feelings or her future.

Helena wryly reflected that a morning after was no less awkward now than it was when it had been the custom to believe that they didn't exist. Hard to have a morning after when, in polite company, the night before didn't exist either. She couldn't remember so wanting to touch someone she had just been lying next to only hours before. Usually she had had a surfeit of touching, a surfeit of her partner before there was a morning after to endure. That was why she was out the door, hailing a cab (or calling for one), before the morning could make its appearance. Last night she had made no escape plan, hadn't surreptitiously looked up cabs on her phone, hadn't set her internal alarm (although normally there wasn't much need for that, she was awake long before she crept out of the bed), hadn't fixed in her mind where she had left her clothes so she could find them in the dark. As a result, here she was, paralyzed by indecision about whether she should run her thumb across the back of Myka's hand and feeling wistful that the morning, in all its awkwardness, with the child and the ex-husband, the burned pancakes, and, now, the painfully halting conversation might not be repeated. Taking Myka's hand didn't have to be a question, it could be a statement, hers, that this morning was fine as it was, that last night had been even better, and that she was completely open to doing it all over again.

Instead Myka was taking her hand, lacing their fingers, or trying to. Their hands weren't in the right positions or, maybe, they weren't in the right positions for it to be easily done. Helena felt her fingers bending backward as Myka tried to fit her own between them. It wasn't painful, just a little uncomfortable. But it was good to feel the discomfort, to get the confirmation that Myka wanted a connection too.

"He never shows up like that, to take me out to breakfast. I mean, we're still close. But he doesn't ordinarily just walk into the house." Helena's thumb was free, and she was gliding it along the base of Myka's thumb. "We do try to observe some boundaries." Myka laughed, but her eyes were focused on the movement of Helena's thumb. "It's all been a comedy of errors, hasn't it?" As Helena's thumb slowed and came to a stop, Myka's eyes widened with the disappointment of a
child witnessing the dying motion of a wind-up toy. "Not last night," she said hurriedly. "We were kind of stumbling around, but that was to be expected. . . . Us, you know, together, it was good," she finished inarticulately.

Taken aback by the intensity of her relief, Helena said lightly, "We could always repair to your bedroom and -" 

"'Repair?'" Myka repeated. "And, what, engage in quaint nineteenth century sex?"

"Did it feel quaint? Superannuated? I think this old woman more than kept up with you." Helena recognized their teasing for what it was, flight from a vulnerability that neither wanted to expose, but at least they weren't mutually acknowledging that the night had been a mistake.

Myka gave her a long look. "Don't challenge me. I doubt that you're up to a rematch yet." At Helena's scoff, she said warmly, gently, "I have agents to check in with, and you have to get to the B&B. Remember when Artie gave us days off?"

"We vacationed doing inventory. Yes, I remember."

"Claudia doesn't give days off either, not really. Technically, she can't." Myka released Helena's hand. "Only I can, and, thanks to you, I have more research to do to find the connections, if there are any, between Afton and the victims in San Francisco."

Helena watched her as Myka rinsed the dishes in the sink and then frowned at the state of the skillet. There had been the "more" that started in Myka's bedroom and there was the "more" that started, or continued, really, outside it, when they were sitting, dressed, and talking to each other coherently, about things other than how they wanted to go faster or slower, have it sweatier or sweeter. The intimacies weren't separate but linked, one leading into and out of the other. She had experienced something like that with Nate, but the sense she had had that they were never quite in sync, the nagging recognition that the distance between them never diminished made it harder to feel her way with him. At some point she was always brought up short, not sure how she would get from, say, talking with him about Adelaide's reluctance to take swimming lessons to joining him in the shower. Nothing ever flowed with Nate. She wanted things to flow with Myka. She wanted to find the right word, the right gesture that would allow her to lead Myka, who seemed to be completely absorbed in her scrubbing of the skillet, from the sink to her bed. Possibly not today, because she thought Myka might be able to laser the burned dough from the skillet with the strength of her glare, but tomorrow or the next day or whenever it was that they might be together, here, again.

Indeed, there was no flow from the kitchen table back to Myka's bedroom, at least not for Helena, since once the dishes were rinsed and put away in the dishwasher, except for the skillet which was left to soak, Myka took her phone from the counter and was calling Jacqui as she went down the hall. Helena had gone out to the tree she had chosen for Drew's treehouse, making sure it would support what she was envisioning, glancing occasionally at the windows of Myka's bedroom and trying not to imagine Myka showering. Myka remained all business as they got into the car and started the drive to the airport parking lot. But if the silence between them wasn't as charged as it had been on the way to Myka's house, it retained an intimacy that surprised Helena, considering how easily Myka had shifted from lover? friend? to the agents' manager.

In slacks and a short-sleeved blouse, which, Helena noted approvingly (if only to herself), looked much better on her than the DHS-mandated pantsuits she had been wearing in New York, Myka would let her hand drop from the steering wheel and rest it on Helena's knee. Sometimes Helena would try to move it higher, which earned her a reproving shake of Myka's head and, sometimes, making a gesture toward decorum, she would simply cover it with her own. But Helena was aware
that the only moment more awkward than waking up next to someone was the moment, usually at
the door or, in this case, the car, when a signal about whether this was to be the first or the last of
their moments together had to be given. During the few times she hadn't been able to slip out
unseen in the morning, thereby making the decision for the both of them, Helena had been the one
doing the signaling, and almost always, she had signaled that it wasn't going to be the first of many
more moments together. She knew what she ought to signal, if Myka didn't beat her to the
signaling first, but she knew what she would signal, if given the chance. Helena looked over the
top of her sunglasses to see if she could read anything about which way Myka was leaning in her
face. She had hopes from Myka's blushing, cavewoman-like "Us, it was good" admission earlier,
but that was what lent this moment, this moment with her, its awkwardness, all she had were hopes,
she couldn't know.

Myka pulled off onto the shoulder of the road, just in front of the gate to the lot. "I can drive in,
you know. I can handle the ticket."

"Darling, we don't want to overburden the DHS expense account. I'll wheel my bags down that
little passageway there," Helena said, pointing to a narrow concrete path that led past the gate into
the lot.

Myka pressed the lever to open the trunk as Helena tried to think of some way to casually ask when
she might see her again, outside the Warehouse that is. Myka began to lift her bags from the car.
Would tomorrow be too soon, suggest that she was too needy? Dinner? No, Myka was with Drew
in the evenings. Lunch? Helena remained inside the car, biting the temple piece of her sunglasses.
It had been so long since she had asked someone out on a date. How did people survive doing it
more than once?

Myka knocked on her window, and Helena jabbed at the button to open it. "Helena?" Myka looked
at her curiously.

"Lunch, would you go out to lunch with me tomorrow?" My God, she had actually gulped before
she said it.

Myka looked away and then down at the ground. "I made plans to have lunch with Jeff tomorrow."

"Of course." Too clipped, too automatic. When had she had time to make plans with Jeff? Not last
night, that was certain. Helena refrained from closing her eyes. Jeff wasn't important. She almost
said 'Some other time,' but that would have sounded wounded, as if she were brushing Myka off
because she felt she had been brushed off. Casual. She needed to be casual.

"I'm free for lunch on Wednesday, though. I don't have to pick Drew up until 3:00." Myka squinted
at her, smiling a smile that seemed uncertain whether it ought to stay.

Three sounded rather late for lunch. Why was Myka giving her such a large window? "Are we
speaking euphemistically, darling? Should I be using air quotes when I say 'lunch?" Helena slipped
on her sunglasses.

"You're the one asking." Myka opened the car door for her and slammed it, perhaps a little too
decisively, once Helena was out.

"Lunch it is. You wouldn't mind though, would you, if I came back to your house afterward?" She
paused, waiting to see what Myka would make of her request. As Myka blushed, her mouth
cramping in frustration at the blush, Helena said, "I need to take some measurements for the
treehouse." Jeff might make Myka blush from embarrassment, as he did the night he returned her
bra, but he couldn't make her blush by snookering her into revealing what was on her mind. That
required someone who didn't play fair and who knew that, down deep, Myka liked it that way. Sometimes, anyway. Helena walked toward the parking lot, suitcases bumping behind her, smiling smugly.

The suitcases were bumping behind her as she walked up to the B&B. Like the last time, Claudia was waiting for her on the verandah. "Did I ring the Warehouse's bell again?" Helena asked sardonically as Claudia hopped down the steps to pick up one of the suitcases.

"Well, that, and Myka called to let me know that you were on your way." Claudia grunted as she hefted the suitcase. "What do you have in this one?"

"Shoes."

Set in the wall parallel to the reception/security counter (Helena still was unsure what face the DHS wanted to present to visitors), which was unstaffed today as well, was an elevator, and Claudia pressed the button. "Two floors, but the last time we housed some mid-level executive from the DHS, he complained about having to carry his bags and groceries up the stairs. Big baby." The door opened, and Helena and her suitcase were barely able to squeeze in next to Claudia and the other suitcase. "And they were cheapskates about it too." As the elevator banged and rattled through its short ascent, Helena couldn't help but agree. "Don't you think it's powered by a team of oxen?" Claudia said querulously, as she yanked the suitcase over threshold and rolled it toward the opposite end of the corridor. "Your place is down here."

It was beige. Beige carpeting. Beige walls. Beige furniture. Claudia plumped down on the sofa, pressing the cushion on either side of her. "Comfy," she said, her sarcasm thick. Helena deposited her suitcases in the single bedroom with its putatively double bed, and returned to the living/dining area, taking a slow tour around the room and the no-frills kitchen that opened off it.

"It will do." She sat in the lone arm chair, which was positioned at an angle to the sofa. Both were set close to a small tv on a stand. Helena had boiled down rental decors to three, luxuriant, executive, and utilitarian. This was definitely utilitarian.

"You can always stay with me in the old B&B, if all the, uh, neutrality gets to you," Claudia offered, her eyes roaming the room. "But we don't know how long that's going to be, unless you've had a brainstorm about the replicated artefacts."

"No brainstorm. A few ideas." Claudia looked at her alertly. "You said that the DHS keeps track of everything, including visitors to the Warehouse. I'm assuming it also tracks what sections people have visited, what artefacts they've asked to look at."

"We have thousands upon thousands of audit reports. You can't sneeze in the Warehouse without a system recording it."

"I want to know how many people have been interested in the time-related artefacts, and I want to know who they are." Helena hesitated, seeing in her mind the print behind Bergstrom's desk. "I also want to know who's visited my time-machine, who's asked about me and my time with the Warehouse." Claudia's gaze continued to sharpen. "The last, Claudia, is between the two of us. You share it only with me."

"Myka's your partner on this, H.G."

"She's not to know. Am I being clear, darling?"

Claudia rose from the sofa. She was dressed more like the Claudia of old today, the denim
distressed and ripped, the shirt a t-shirt with a faded Star Wars graphic. Opening the refrigerator, she whistled a long, low note. "We need to order some supplies for you." She moved on to the cupboards, surveying random shelves. "At least you have some glasses and bowls." Coming to a stop behind the breakfast bar, she leaned on it, propping her chin on her fist. "I'm not lying to her, H.G. I don't know where you were last night, and I'm not asking because I have to take it on faith that you're both big girls, but I'm not going to be part of hiding things from her. That's not how Myka and I operate."

"It's not lying, it's deferring disclosure, if that makes you feel better. At least until I have a better idea of what we're dealing with," Helena said, feeling suddenly tired. She swept a lock of hair away from her face, all black, no white. That, at least, was reassuring.

"You silver-tongued devil, you. I'm defenseless before the government-speak." Claudia rounded the breakfast bar. "If she asks me what I'm doing, I'm telling her. All of it." As was beginning to be the case, it seemed, in her interactions with this older, more authoritative Claudia, Claudia could be all smiles while those dark eyes remained fiercely intent. "Am I being clear?"

"Perfectly."

"I'll put my minions on the audit logs. If the DHS asks why, I'll tell them my efficiency expert wants to know. As for the other part of it, the one dealing with you, I'll handle it personally." In what appeared to be no more than two strides, and Claudia didn't have long legs, she had crossed the room.

"How much does the DHS know about your efficiency expert?" Helena trusted that Claudia, in inventing her cover, would have done everything possible to eliminate any connection to H.G. Wells, but if there was a... mole... in the DHS, the Warehouse's sudden hiring of a consultant would spark some interest.

"They know her name is Emily Lake, and that she comes recommended by several Fortune 500 companies." Claudia's expression softened. "She comes with her own Social Security number, which always helps. With a little creative stitching here and there, Jane and I were able to establish a plausible-enough backstory for her. It's solid enough that it should stymie anyone snooping around her." Digging the toe of her shoe into the carpet, which was one layer more plush than that used in dentist offices, Claudia said to her feet, "Of course, it won't last forever. If we can't get to the bottom of these replicated artefacts anytime soon, or if, you know, you would have some other reason to stay, we'd have to come up with something else for why you'd be hanging around the Warehouse. Is that a possibility, H.G.?" She looked up at Helena through her eyelashes. "I shouldn't put you on the spot like that, but tell me this much, is it a mistake to have put you this close to Pete?"

"Far from it. He's bringing me a casserole," Helena said blandly.

It didn't take her long to unpack her suitcases once Claudia left, especially since one was, as she had said, filled with shoes. In the tiny utility room next to the bathroom, there was an even tinier washer-dryer combo. Helena looked blankly at it; she didn't wash her clothes, hadn't since she left Boone, she hired others to do it for her. Perhaps Univille had attracted a dry cleaner in the years since she had been gone. Then there was the matter of meals. She would have to tackle the grocery mart, in particular its frozen food section. These weren't the things she wanted to concentrate on. So she wouldn't. Taking her laptop, she sat at what was little more than a student desk - with all the sturdiness of one, she noted as one of its legs wobbled - and began working over her theories about the artefacts.

It wasn't just a knock, it was a performance, raps and thumps and, to end it, a bellowed "Welcome
"Wagon!" Pete wasn't carrying a casserole dish, he was carrying a box, whose contents he theatrically displayed to Helena. At the breakfast bar, Helena, pushing the frames of her reading glasses up as she rubbed her cheeks, stared disbelievingly at the items Pete was setting on the counter, cans of Campbell's Chunky soup, Dinty Moore's beef stew and Hormel's chili, packages of donut gems, a six pack of Gatorade (fruit punch flavor), and a small bottle of Tide.

"Just a few extras I had," he said magnanimously.

"You won't be offended if I tell you that the laundry detergent is the most appetizing," Helena said, picking up a can of soup and reading its ingredients. "Why am I not surprised that sodium is listed first?"

"It is not," he protested, looking over her shoulder. "It's, like, the fourth one listed." He tapped the can. "This will look awfully good about ten o'clock tonight."

"Unfortunately, you're probably right. I haven't had a chance to go shopping yet." She gestured toward the beigeness that stretched beyond the breakfast bar. "Please don't tell me this is how your apartment looks."

"God, no. This is one reserved for visitors. The ones for staff are larger, and we can decorate them any way we want. Well, mostly. They nixed the jacuzzi and the sunken living room I wanted to put in." At Helena's puzzled expression, he said, "Joke," and wandered through the living room, down the hallway, poking his head in the bathroom, the utility room, the linen closet, and the bedroom. Helena tensed as he stood in the doorway to the bedroom. He slapped the frame and hooked a thumb over his shoulder as he walked back into the living room. "I'm surprised there's room for you and your shoes in there."

Helena relaxed, slightly. "I have water... and Gatorade, if you'd like anything."

"You thought I was going to make some crack about you and Myka trying to fit into that bed, didn't you?" Pete pulled a chair out from the dining table and straddled it.

"The lovely gifts notwithstanding, aren't you here to give me the speech about how the universe won't be big enough for me to hide in if I hurt her?" Although she was tempted to busy herself by putting the cans of soup and stew away, Helena didn't turn away from Pete, holding his gaze steadily.

"Do I really have to give it?" Pete asked quietly. Helena shook her head, and he continued, just as softly, "It's not my place, anyway. Myka's more than capable of taking care of herself, and if she doesn't have your number by now, H.G., she never will."

"My number?" She had meant to repeat it so haughtily that her mere intonation would serve as a denial, but, instead, it came out almost beseechingly, as if she were asking Pete to explain to her all the frailties that made her such a poor prospect.

"You're the poster child for 'hot mess,' and if Myka has a weakness, she loves a mess." Pete rubbed the back of his head, smiling to himself. "First there was Sam. Yeah, he was separated, but he and his wife weren't moving at lightning speed to get a divorce. Then there's me, a drunk, a divorced drunk at that, and, I admit it, not the most mature guy around. And then there's you." He shared his smile with her, one that was not a little wistful. "To be honest, H.G., although you gave me a helluva kiss when we first met, I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. But Myka? She can't resist. She couldn't then, and she can't now. Whatever the two of you have, it's just... different."

Helena didn't bother with trying to muster a defense, she looked at him openly, nakedly. "How can
you want me around your son? How can she?"

Pete's squinting grimace was more squinting than usual, as if he were trying to understand what she had said. "I'm not going to pretend to know what you went through when Christina died, though I have a much better idea now, with Drew. I'm not worried about you being around him. You'd die before you'd let anything or anyone harm him, and as for your... influence, he's got his mom and he's got me. I'm not worried, H.G. When I say I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole, I mean that I have too much on my plate to ever want to take on your stuff. But if you're what Myka grooves to, I have to respect that."

Helena displayed her own version of the Lattimer squinting grimace. "I always knew you were a better person than I, but this kind of forbearance... If I were you, I'd find it difficult even to be civil to me, especially after this morning."

Pete sighed. "When you've had years to prepare for it, you're relieved when it finally happens."

"Years?" Helena echoed. Gingerly picking up the Gatorade, as if uncertain that it actually was something to drink - Helena thought it might be better used as antifreeze or washer fluid - she put it in the refrigerator. "Pete, Myka and I weren't in contact after you married, and up until a couple of weeks ago, I wasn't sure I'd ever come back here. There was no other shoe to drop."

He appeared to consider what she had said, eyes abstracted, but he eventually shook his head. "I had vibes, and they were about you, H.G." Anticipating her question, he said, "Yeah, you're special that way, you've got your own vibe. It twanged like hell right before we got the call from you in Boone, but after that, it quieted down. I didn't feel it for a long time, and then it started again. Off-and-on, not all the time, but I knew you were coming." He was looking at her the way Claudia had looked at her in the hotel room when she had pitied, yes, pitied her in her ignorance. "H.G.," he said gently, "you'd only ever come back because of her."

"She loved you," Helena said stubbornly, insistently. "She told me so when we were in New York. She wasn't waiting for me."

Pete got up from the chair and pushed it back into place. "I know she did, but she's always loved you more." In response to Helena's stunned expression, he said, "One of the first things they tell you in recovery is to accept the things you can't change. It's even part of the prayer, you know? If I was going to be with Myka, that was something I was going to have to accept, and I did." He approached the breakfast bar, eyes never leaving Helena's face. "And being with her and having Drew, it was better than I ever expected. When I first started getting the vibes, again, I kicked at it, sure, and tried to pretend it wasn't going to happen. But I had a choice to make, I either accepted that you were going to waltz back into our lives, or I did something stupid that would cost me Drew. And I wasn't going to lose him, H.G., not over you."

Helena inhaled shakily. "You do understand how I felt about Christina. Nothing was more precious." She searched his face, seeing traces of an old resentment (how could there not be?) but, what was more, seeing an acceptance that encompassed not only her imperfections and his but Myka's as well. Because in a perfect world, perhaps not perfect but better than the one they were in, Myka wouldn't have given her a second look, wouldn't have found her sad history a magnetic draw, would have found her, in fact, just a mess with not an iota of hotness.

Slapping the counter decisively, Pete said, "Enough with the gooey stuff. You and I, we're not gooey, and I guarantee you, I have no desire to see you and Myka all gooey with each other."

Helena cleared her throat. "We'll keep the excessive PDAs to a minimum." Which wouldn't be hard at this point, their Wednesday lunch not auguring much in the way of volcanic passion, passion
period. She looked at a can of Hormel's chili, it really didn't sound bad at all. "Pete, would you humor me and tell me when you started to get the vibes about me?"

He was almost out of the apartment, but he made a quarter-turn and leaned against the jamb. "I can't pinpoint it for you, but I'd say they started four or five years ago. Just a few, but they got stronger a couple of years ago, I was getting them, like, every month. It didn't come to me as a surprise when, at about the same time, Myka said she wanted a divorce. Can't fight fate, H.G."

Five years ago she had still been living on Capri, which had been a rather whimsical choice of residence on her part, made mainly out of the knowledge that, for years, it had served as a temporary home for other footloose ex-patriates. But tiring of Italian politics and of her involvement with an Italian model, she had decided to relocate once again. The fact that relocating to New York would put her some several thousand miles closer to Myka hadn't even entered her mind. Two years ago, she wasn't thinking of Myka either. She was busy doing her appraisals and what little down time she had, Suzanne or some other willing body filled it adequately enough.

Pete's vibes about her hadn't been heralding her return. They had been about something else. As Helena searched the kitchen drawers for a can opener and a saucepan to heat the chili in, she knew she didn't want to know what Pete had actually been sensing.
Chapter 9

Wednesday morning Myka called to ask if Helena minded having lunch in; she was expecting a call from Homeland Security. Since Helena would have been just as happy had they planned to have lunch on two upended pails in a construction site - in the middle of a rainstorm - she raised no objection. When she asked Myka what she could bring if they were having lunch in, and Myka casually said, "Whatever looks good to you," Helena almost replied that what looked good to her was already at Myka's house. But she didn't say it, it would have sounded, not crass or smarmy but dopey, and she thought it was too soon to let her guard down and give way to the kind of lovestruck rejoinders that, when said by others, had always made her eyes cross. So instead she teased, "Usually something decadent, darling," which, in the end, she wasn't sure was much of an improvement.

She ended up buying nearly everything on display in the miniscule deli section of Univille's grocery mart, crackers and cheese and something shrink-wrapped with a faded label that said it was a specialty sausage. She also bought grapes and plums and apples. Surveying the items, she had to admit they didn't look decadent, a little sad actually, the box of crackers showing some dust on the top and the fruit sporting blemishes. And, of course, there was the mystery sausage. Next time, if there was a next time, they would go out for lunch. Her last purchases were a tape measure and notebook. While Myka was on her call with Homeland Security, she would take the tape measure and the notebook with her out to the tree. She wanted to do some basic measurements and re-sketch the design, identifying the number and height of the supports for the treehouse's platform and calculating the size of the platform itself. This wouldn't be a slapdash job; she had a boy's mother to impress. If this was wooing - and she wasn't sure because it had been a very long time since she had wooed anyone in earnest - it seemed so paltry, the lunch from the grocery, the treehouse. Shouldn't she be whisking Myka off for a weekend in Paris or showering her with . . . something?

At other times, with other people, the gifts and the impulsive trips to resorts or other so-called romantic places, they had all been part of the game, the chase, but she could picture the knot forming between Myka's eyebrows were she to suggest a weekend jaunt to Paris, the checklist Myka would start going through - Drew, dog, mail hold - visible in her eyes. Not jewelry either, Myka had never been terribly interested in that. Books were something she loved, but you couldn't discreetly take a book from a pocket and place it on the table during a romantic dinner or clasp it around her neck. Flowers. She could at least bring flowers. But would that be too much? Helena spun back toward the grocery mart and then just as indecisively spun back toward her car. Maybe the only wooing Myka wanted from her, if Myka wanted to be wooed by her at all, was her showing up, her being where she was expected to be. Such as arriving at Myka's for lunch, and she was running late as it was.

Helena didn't speed all the way, but she didn't start slowing down until she made the turn onto the lane to Myka's house. She went through the garage, Shep greeting her noisily in the hallway, and Myka stopped writing on a pad long enough to smile a greeting from the table as she entered the kitchen. The everpresent phone was present but not attached to Myka's ear, and there was a bonelessness in how Myka was sitting, head nearly resting on her opposite arm as she wrote, that Helena hoped was a sign that the call had been canceled. As Helena took her purchases from the bag and placed them on the counter, Myka said, "My call was early," her eyes half-closed as she lazily tracked Helena's progress in the kitchen.

"We could go out, if you wanted," Helena suggested. "The Univille grocery store offers no decadence, only disappointment." With a mocking smile, she drew her fingers along the sausage, modeling it like a prize on a game show.
Myka just as lazily shook her head, and as Helena searched for kitchen shears to open the sausage's shrink-wrap, she felt that heavy-lidded gaze burn down her back. "I think I can count on one hand the times I've seen you in a pair of jeans," Myka said.

"I wear them quite frequently on an appraisal. Often I'm in the back of an antique shop or at an estate sale trying to evaluate a piece that hasn't seen the light of day since the Great War. Very dusty." She was prattling. When she was nervous, she prattled. Helena jabbed ineffectively at the shrink-wrap with the scissors. There was no need to be this nervous, it was just lunch. Lunch without air quotes. She set the sausage and scissors down before she could accidentally stab herself.

"They look tight on you."

Myka was so near that Helena thought her breath was stirring the hair at the back of her neck. Looking down at her jeans, an older pair that she had chosen with climbing trees in mind, Helena conceded, "I may have put on a few pounds since I've come back. Haven't reestablished my exercise routine, darling."

"And I'm supposed to be the literal-minded one." Myka laughed softly, close enough that Helena could feel Myka's lips in her hair. Myka's arms were circling her waist, and her fingers were unbuttoning Helena's jeans and pulling down the zipper.

"I offered to understand this lunch euphemistically, but you refused," Helena said more breathily than she liked. What was it about this woman that such a standard step in the dance - she could almost hear Pete jibing "Who hasn't unzipped your pants, H.G.?" - had her trembling and clutching the counter for support?

"I didn't refuse, I wasn't ready to make a decision then," Myka countered, moving her hands from Helena's jeans to the collar of Helena's shirt and pushing it away from her neck. "I'm not accustomed to seeing you in tank tops either." She slipped a strap off Helena's shoulder and gently sucked at the skin.

"I forgot what the summers were like here, the forges of hell, you know." Helena leaned back against Myka and reached for her hand, pushing it down deep into her jeans. "I'm going to be baking in that bloody tree this afternoon."

"But not right away," Myka murmured, her fingers tenting the panel of Helena's panties as they sought access.

"Yes," Helena groaned in agreement, "not right away."

At the last minute they retreated to Myka's room, really, the last minute because she had been on the verge of coming in the kitchen, half-on the counter, half-off because standing had been too awkward and she had needed Myka deeper. She had been crying out, her head pressing back against a cupboard, when Myka had stopped, her breathing and her voice ragged, saying something about the windows or perhaps it had been a hygienic consideration because she had also muttered, "We eat here," and Helena had been able to muster the thought or, rather, plea, 'Yes, yes, we do.' Then Myka was pulling her off the counter, and Helena clumsily yanked up her jeans so she could stagger back to Myka's bedroom without tripping over them. Though she felt a flicker of irritation that Myka couldn't just lose herself, forget where they were - how likely was it that someone, a meter reader, would be crossing the patio as Myka was burying herself between Helena's thighs - the irritation died when Myka did that very thing in the privacy of her bedroom. As her orgasm crested and broke over her, Helena was forced to admit, nearly deafened by the loudness of her own cries, that Myka had more than made up for the wait.
They lunched in bed, and while Helena had been the one to suggest it, Myka hadn't raised an objection, going out to the kitchen to bring back the crackers and cheese. It seemed such an unlikely departure for her, Helena mused, especially since Myka had been too embarrassed to dart out of the bedroom naked, flushing and mumbling, again, about the windows before throwing on a top and shorts. It led her to wonder how Myka had learned to unbend enough to allow food in bed, and Helena thought of Pete, a master snacker if there ever was one, which caused her to cut her wondering short. She had no desire to imagine Pete, Myka, and a plate of cookies or bag of Doritos in any kind of sexual combination.

If Helena were honest with herself, she didn't want to imagine Myka in sexual combinations with anyone, unless she was the only other participant. It had been fine before to tease Myka about her refusal to kiss and tell. But that was before, before . . . more. There was more now, whatever it was, and thinking about Myka with someone else made less of it. It was ridiculous to think she had any claim on Myka's fidelity and even more ridiculous to admit that she wanted to lay claim to it. She hadn't expected it of anyone before now, except perhaps Nate, but that was more because she wanted to present a unified front for Adelaide than because she needed a sign of his commitment to her. Not that she had had much cause to worry about Nate, he was hardly a player. Nor was Myka, but she was still seeing Jeff. She'd had lunch with him yesterday. Lunch like they had just had "lunch"?

Helena discontentedly readjusted her pillows. Myka was free to sleep with whomever she wanted and to call it whatever she wanted, lunch, dessert, tea. "Tea" was what one of her own amours had called it to excuse her absence for several hours in the afternoon, back when teas weren't something that primarily existed on period dramas and jealous husbands never gave a second thought to a young woman who spoke of rockets and time travel to their wives, except to pity her her eccentricity and the man who would be mad enough to marry her. She couldn't remember most of their names now, the bored wives she had met at readings and lectures (always on subjects suitable for the more delicate sensibilities) and the meetings of missionary societies; she had attended them in association with artefact retrievals, and it got so that pursuing one became inextricable from pursuing the other. The excitement was the same as was the inevitable letdown once the capture was assured.

She might not remember their names, but they must have lingered, collectively, as a memory in the back of her mind, their frustration with the tedium of their days, their yearning for someone to expect more of them than an ability to manage a household, to produce accomplished needlework, and in their unruffled presiding over servants and children, to reflect - but never to own for themselves - the rightful authority of their husbands, so that when she encountered Myka, first in London and then in Tamalpais, she recognized how different she was from them. But that wouldn't have been enough. Even then, when the world had been so new to her that, although the language was the same, the frames of reference were foreign, Helena would have given the attraction only enough consideration to figure out how to ease this woman, bewitchingly confident in her pants and shoulder-holsters and yet strangely unsure outside her role as an agent, into her bed. And had Myka not been a necessary part of her plan, Helena would have done exactly that, seduced her and moved on. But earning Myka's trust, earning the trust of all of them, required that she stay and develop some semblance of a relationship. So she had discovered, to her initial disappointment, that Myka really wasn't all that different from other women she met, some of whom were just as bright and driven and high-achieving. What made her different was, oddly enough, a quality that made her more, not less, like the women Helena had known over a hundred years ago.

She characterized it, wrongly, as innocence, but she had never known what else to call it, the quality that, while it had nothing in common with the naïveté, and certainly not the ignorance, of those Victorian wives and daughters as they listened raptly to a lecture on the evils of drink or the fate of their "darker brethren not yet brought to Christ," shared in the wonder that there was so
much of the world yet to learn and in the hunger to learn it. But Myka's peculiar innocence was that she believed, despite all that her experience had taught her to the contrary, that even the worst humanity could offer was ameliorated by the knowing of it. Myka would look at her as if she could see, not around or over, but through Yellowstone and Warehouse 2 and, beyond, to when Helena had entered the bronzer, when she had frantically, ruthlessly attempted to change time, when she had hunted down and then tortured Christina's killers and, still farther back, to the day when she had first become a Warehouse agent, buoyed by a confidence that had never been tested and convinced that humility in the presence of an artefact would be a weakness.

The question in Myka's eyes had never been the horrified "What are you?" that Helena had seen, at times, in the eyes of others but an almost-chiding "Is this all you think you are?"

Myka reentered the bedroom with a plate full of crackers and cubes of cheese (of course she would have taken the time to cut and slice and arrange whereas Helena would have decided that they could break off chunks of cheese with their fingers and eat crackers straight from the box). As she climbed awkwardly onto the bed, holding the plate high and walking on her knees toward Helena, Helena, still remembering the vainglorious young Warehouse agent she had been, blurted, "I think even then I would have loved you, when I was an insufferable fool and everything that was to happen hadn't yet."

Myka's eyes widened, but she didn't drop the plate, saying only, "Now that's a conversation starter."

"Or ender," Helena said, taking the plate from her and setting it between them. It wasn't how she would have chosen to say it, or where, or when, but she had said it, it was out, now, between them, and although Myka looked neither overwhelmed nor overjoyed, Helena was too relieved to have finally said it to carp to herself that Myka could at least look less wary. "I know it's absurd, we've been together only little more than a week after ten years' of silence, but the feelings, they've been there a long time."

"And still you left," Myka said quietly, turning a cube of cheese over and over. "I can't get all misty-eyed, Helena, when I know you could leave tomorrow. I know you, you could do that."

Helena nodded, meditatively biting off the end of a cracker. "It wasn't easy, but I did, and I understand why you think I would do that now, and I wish I could promise you that I won't . . . ." She shrugged. She could tell her about Boone, about Adelaide, about why she had left after making such a point to Myka all those years ago about her intention to stay, but she had probably said too much already. She was never going to get the hang of this. Both too little too late and too much too soon.

She was surprised then when Myka wriggled closer to her, putting the plate on her stomach, and resting her head on Helena's breast. Popping a piece of cheese into her mouth, she said, "I'm not going to hold you to it, but don't go retracting it either. Let's let it rest for awhile."

When she woke, Myka was gone, and a glance at the clock on the nightstand showed that it was
five to 3:00. Drew would be done with soccer camp. Feeling her forehead, half-expecting that Myka might have left a Post-it note attached saying "Please vacuum," Helena rose from the bed and gathered her clothes, taking them into the bathroom. On the one hand it seemed silly to take a shower when she would only be going outside to sweat in a tree, on the other hand, she didn't feel that she should leave any evidence suggesting to Drew that she had stayed, even briefly, in his mother's bedroom. She made the bed and located the vacuum to sweep up the crumbs, just in case Drew would wander in. She was in the tree, straddling a branch that was too small for her weight and visualizing the placement of the platform by the time they came home, the grinding of the garage door as it lifted alerting her first and then the barking of a manically happy Shep. It had only been once she was up in the tree that she realized she really should be working with someone, just in case she needed some help measuring or a caution about venturing out on a branch too small for her. Studying her position and noticing how perilously the limb was bending, she was reminded of the look on Myka's face when she had said she loved her, and she realized that this was yet another time that she had left herself without an exit plan.

In the end, she didn't fall. She had crouch-stepped her way back to the trunk and then, moving very carefully and very slowly because she was still shaking, she climbed down to the ground. Perhaps she should sketch from this vantage point. She had brought a ladder out from the garage with her; she could make sure her estimates about the height of the support posts were correct. As she picked up the ladder and opened it, she saw Drew crossing the yard toward her, Shep bounding and barking and, sometimes, running around him in circles. He was wearing the kind of moisture-wicking shirt and shorts she was used to seeing professional soccer players wear, and he had on the long socks as well. He watched her settle the ladder and test its steadiness; silently he gripped it with his thin, little-boy arms, his expression determined, and his child's smell of warm skin and sun and grass could have been Christina's in those summers before Paris when the two of them would chase each other in the parks, and Helena would grab her daughter and hold her close at the end of their games. Without thinking, she tousled his hair as she climbed the ladder, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Mom said she needed to do some work, but she's asleep," he volunteered, looking up at her.

Unable to keep from smiling, Helena said, "She must have had a tiring afternoon." She held the lip of the tape measure on the branch and pushed at the housing until it dangled just above Drew's head. "Can you grab that and pull down on it? I'm fine on the ladder."

He did as she asked, shouting out the measurement. They moved to another spot under the tree and repeated the same process, with Drew asking at the end, "Have you built lots of treehouses?"

"I built one for my daughter," Helena said, thinking that like, any other child, once he had received an answer to his question, he would be thinking of another one, completely unrelated.

"Is she here with you? I mean, does she live with you?" He frowned thoughtfully. "She could help us with this one, and I would let her play in it."

Which wasn't at all what she had expected him to say. At a loss for how to answer him, she looked up through the branches, thinking hazily that Christina, who always loved to "help" her mother, would have been eager to assist with building a treehouse, even if it wasn't for her. "She died a long time ago," she said as gently as she could. He screwed his face up in his father's grimace, and Helena wanted to pound her head against the tree trunk. Why hadn't she simply lied? Had she been so afraid of an eight-year-old's grueling interrogation that she hadn't been able to take refuge in something convenient, like telling Drew her daughter lived with her father or attended boarding school in Europe? But she knew why she hadn't deflected his questions with a response other adults would have considered kinder, if not honest. She had started her relationship with Myka with lies,
and whatever happened with that, she didn't want to do the same with Myka's son.

The muscles in Drew's face relaxed, and he tentatively touched Helena's hand. "You must be sad," he said.

She had felt many things about Christina's death over the years, but sadness had only infrequently been among them. Rage had been the predominant emotion. It had carried her through the funeral and the packet across the Channel to Dover, and it had compelled her to return to the Warehouse far earlier than Caturanga had expected or felt was advised, as he had bluntly told her. But the Warehouse was always in need of experienced agents, and after several long, doubting looks at her and a brief conversation during which she remained dry-eyed and adamant that the work would help her far more than an enforced leave, he had relented. And the work did temper her rage, removing its heat and instability without lessening its intensity. She could feel the transformation, its darkness and heaviness, which, during those first few days after Christina's death when she thought it might shatter her because bone and muscle couldn't be expected to stand up to its pressure, being hammered through the unrelenting pace of retrievals and her own obsessive investigations into something lighter and colder, but no less deadly. It wasn't a bomb she held inside her any longer, with all the uncertainty of when and if it might explode, but a rapier, whose thrusts she could control with the flick of a wrist. Sadness could never have made her into a weapon, so, no, she had very rarely been sad.

But all she said in response to the question in Drew's face was "Sometimes." Then, feeling that she should offer him more, having left him to draw what conclusions he would about a mother who said she only sometimes felt sad about the death of her child, she added, "Christina would have loved a pirate ship." Which wasn't untrue, she realized. Although Christina had fretted over her dolls and enjoyed pretending that she was a princess in a castle, she had also dreamed of piloting one of her mother's rocket ships into space, and she would have giddily served as second in command on a pirate ship (Drew, of course, being the pirate captain since it was his treehouse).

He smiled and, then, with the complete lack of transition she had expected from him earlier, he shouted, "I bet you can't do this!" and climbed the tree to a branch directly overhead, clamping his legs around it and hanging upside down. He giggled as she climbed to a branch parallel to his and, less quickly and gracefully, swung herself upside down. It was harder than she remembered it being, and she was sure her face was beginning to resemble an overripe tomato. Drew suddenly rocked himself up with a speed that made her heart pound, but he grabbed the branch with both hands and casually dropped to the ground. "Are you staying for dinner?" He was observing her face with concern. "You're all red."

Grunting with the effort to pull herself up even with the branch so she could grasp it, Helena said, "Your mother hasn't invited me."

"I'll go ask her." He ran a few steps before stopping to look back at her. She was still struggling to grab the branch. "We'll probably have chicken. Mom makes chicken a lot. Is that okay?"

"Yes," Helena gasped.

"Do I need to get my mom out here to help you?" He watched as she flailed, once more, at the branch.

"No." Less sharply, Helena said, "I'll be fine." She really should have added more stomach crunches to her workouts.

Drew had no sooner left the shade of the tree than he came running back. "What do I call you?"
"Helena." She could see him silently mouthing it to himself. "H.G. if it's easier."

With a jerk of his head, as if he had made a decision, he sped from under the tree, calling to Shep to follow him. Helena eyed the distance to the ground. It was just a few feet, the worst she could do if she let herself fall was collect a few bruises. But it was the principle of the thing, she had never gotten stuck before, and she wouldn't now. With another groan, she yanked herself up, clawing at the air as she tried to wrap at least one hand around the branch. As her nails bit into bark, she scrabbled for more purchase on the branch. Her fingers inched far enough around it that she could bring her other hand up, and from there it was a simple push off and drop from the branch.

Myka was on the patio, shading her eyes against the sun as Helena, carrying the ladder, angled across the yard toward the garage. "I was just about to come out there. Drew said you might be in trouble."

"Not a bit," Helena said nonchalantly.

"So that's why you're wearing half the tree," Myka said, amused.

Helena looked down at her tank top, the front of it was covered with shreds and pieces of bark. She shrugged. "I wasn't the one in need of a recuperative nap."

Myka followed her through a back door into the garage. "I had a long day yesterday."

"An extended lunch with Jeff?" Helena had said it teasingly, but her pulse was racing like it had when she was struggling on the branch.

"Helena," Myka said warningly as Helena set the ladder against a wall.

Helena raised her hands slightly in surrender. "You're quite right. We're free agents, and it's none of my business whom you have lunch with or how long it takes you to finish." She hung one of her wickedest smiles on her lips and hoped it stayed.

Myka's eyes narrowed. "I thought you said you -"

"And you said to let it rest, and while it's resting, I'm assuming -"

Myka tugged her hand through her hair. "So if Suzanne called, you'd actually fly out to DC, from here, for a . . . ."

"Booty call?" Helena supplied. "Darling, I've traveled farther."

Myka was the first to drop her gaze. A blush had climbed into her cheeks, and Helena's eyes trailed from her cheeks, down that lovely neck, to rest on the notch in her collarbone. Although her description of South Dakota summers as the "forges of hell" had been poetic license, Helena acknowledged that it wasn't all exaggeration. The heat in the garage was stifling, and she was certain if she licked that notch she would taste salt.

"Are you staying for dinner?"

"Are you inviting me?"

Laughing softly, Myka opened the door that let into the house. "We're not playing the game with the radio stations."

After a half-skip or two to catch up, Helena snaked an arm around Myka's waist, drawing her in. "I
feel that I have made my position clear. You have to give me something." She couldn't reach the notch in Myka's collarbone, but she swept Myka's hair away from her neck, bending to kiss it, but Myka slid out of her grasp, pushing Helena's arm down.

She turned her head over her shoulder, an eyebrow arched but the look surprisingly sober. "Yes, I would like you to stay for dinner."

Dinner included chicken, as Drew had predicted. Apparently he hadn't predicted the green beans that would accompany it, as he scowled when Myka took a bag of green beans from the refrigerator. "Gotta get our green veggies, buddy."

He looked at Helena, who was at the island cutting tomatoes for the salad. "Did you make Christina eat vegetables?"

Myka's eyes widened, but Helena gave her a minute shake of her head not to interject. "Yes, I did," she said, dropping the chunks of tomato into the bowl. "Like you, she detested peas, but she was rather fond of beets." At that, both Myka and Drew shuddered, but Helena only clucked at them as she reached for a cucumber. "There's nothing wrong with a good fresh beet," she said reprovingly.

"Only everything," Myka said with another shudder. "All that magenta, in a vegetable, it's disturbing." Drew nodded vigorously. "Green beans not so bad now?" Myka grinned at her son. Pointing to Helena, she said in a stage whisper, "If she was in charge of the menu, we'd be having beets."

Resigned to the green beans, Drew shuffled into the family room and collapsed onto the sofa. Opening a package of marinated chicken breasts, Myka said, "The more the decision making is taken out of cooking for me, the better off we all are." Moving closer to Helena, she said quietly, "You two must have bonded for you to have told him about Christina."

"He asked if I had built treehouses for anyone else." Helena added the sliced cucumber to the bowl. "So I told him a little bit about her. The last time I lied to a child about my past, it didn't turn out well."

"Just remember that he's a kid. They have questions."

Helena said, "He's quite sensitive, you know, for being Pete's progeny."

Myka slanted her a look before peering at the instructions on the back of the package. She shrugged and emptied the chicken into a skillet. "I am not going to switch to a different temperature setting midway through cooking. It's medium-high until I'm sure they're cooked through or they become chicken briquettes, whichever happens first."

"At least you're saving us from food-borne illnesses," Helena said, mixing the salad. Seeing Myka at the stove, pushing the chicken around the skillet with a spatula, and hearing the steady pulse of chatter from the TV in the family room, Helena thought she could lay the scene like a sheet of tracing paper over one from Boone and not err on a single stroke. That wouldn't be quite true. Nate would have marinated the chicken himself and Adelaide would have been deep into a book. And as for her, she wasn't staring at the pictures of Nate's wife hanging on the wall in the hallway and wondering what Jennifer would make of her presence. Not that there weren't pictures of Pete in Myka's house, captured in various poses and settings with Drew, but so far she hadn't felt compelled to look at them and confirm her suspicion that she didn't belong. Did she belong here?

Her eyes roved around the kitchen, which was nice enough, although were it her own she'd make a few improvements. But that really wasn't the point, she reminded herself, the fact that she would
want to replace the tile and countertops. Did she belong here with them? As if sensing she was
being looked at, Myka turned from the stove. Touching Helena's wrist, she said, "You look like
you're ready to bolt. Stay awhile, even if everything's overcooked, which it probably will be, there's
ice cream later."

"Because Drew's the one with the sweet tooth," Helena said dryly, even though she didn't feel as
relaxed or as casual as she sounded. Myka was right, she did want to bolt. Didn't she? If she stayed,
she might let Myka convince her, someday, that she wouldn't soil everything she touched, that,
having crossed the line that made a human being into a monster, she could still cross back, that
what had happened over a hundred years ago, had almost happened over ten years ago, wouldn't
ever happen again. Maybe Myka was willing to risk being wrong, but she wasn't. Or at least she
hadn't been. Because, she decided, she really didn't want to bolt. Ultimately she might not belong
with this woman and her son, but she didn't feel she was standing in someone else's place. She
could do as Myka suggested and stay awhile, see what happened.

"Darling, I wouldn't pass up the opportunity to try one of your briquettes." Helena inclined her
head toward the skillet where the chicken was smoking.

After dinner, Drew took the controllers from a shelf of the TV stand and announced that he was
ready for a rematch. Helena sat cross-legged next to him on the floor and selected a black Porsche,
while keeping her eye on the blue Lamborghini. This time she was in full command of her
faculties, not bobbing along on a sea of scotch and wine, and she was more than equipped to do
battle with the programming of a 25-year-old computer nerd who did his coding in the Red Bull-
stocked confines of his cubicle. Cracking her knuckles self-importantly, which earned her a snort
from Myka curled up in a corner of the couch and studying a thick sheaf of paper, Helena gave
Drew a curt nod to start the game.

Drew had practiced. He drove his Corvette with an aggressiveness that, more than once, had
Helena scrambling to avoid having her Porsche spin out or collide with another car. However, she
never lost sight of the bright blue flashes that announced the Lamborghini's stealthy advance, from
back of the pack to just behind the leaders. She took too long to decide whether the Lamborghini's
latest maneuver was a feint or a push for the lead, and suddenly she found herself boxed between a
Jaguar and a Ferrari while the Lamborghini smoothly eased ahead of her.

Drew's hoots of laughter must have caught Myka's attention because, as she frantically worked her
controller, Helena heard Myka mock-hiss, "From hell's heart I stab at thee."

Helena didn't turn her eyes away from the TV. "That car's hardly Moby Dick, and I'm not Captain
Ahab, monomaniacal tendencies notwithstanding."

"No, you wouldn't possibly be trying to prove that you're smarter than a computer game."

At that, Helena twisted her head over her shoulder to look at Myka. "You think I'm that petty."

"I think you're that competitive."

"So says the woman who always wanted to be the smartest girl in the class," Helena rejoined.

"I did," Myka agreed, "and then I found out that there were other things I wanted more." She rose
from the sofa.

No longer caring that both the Lamborghini and Drew's Corvette had crossed the finish line ahead
of her, Helena said, "I devoutly hope there's a hidden meaning in that."
Myka gave her a Mona Lisa smile. Shifting her gaze to Drew, she said, "Drew, ice cream."

He ran to the kitchen, Shep snuffling excitedly beside him. Helena put her controller down and watched Myka and Drew coordinating their movements in the kitchen, setting out bowls and containers of ice cream. It struck her that this was often what she had done during her time with 13, watch everyone else congregate in the kitchen or living room until Myka would see her and call her to join them. Myka had never failed to include her, had never made it easy for her to bolt. Even now she was waving an ice cream scoop in the air, saying, "Get over here before it starts melting."

Stumbling a little as she pushed herself to her feet, Helena stopped, amused, as Drew danced around her, a bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other, crowing, "I beat you, I beat you."

"Drew," Myka said admonishingly, "that's enough."

"We'll see if you can do it a second time," Helena growled teasingly at him. She examined the vaguely pink ice cream in his bowl; it smelled of bubble gum. As if to confirm her guess, he blew a bubble and popped it. "Yummy," she said, her lip curling. He continued to prance around her as she surveyed the offerings on the island. The disgusting bubble-gum flavored ice cream, the chocolate-upon-chocolate-upon-chocolate Myka was eating, and... butter-brickle. "You remembered," Helena said, taking the scoop from her. "You could have said something earlier, we might have had some at lunch," she added innocently.

Myka choked, and Drew ran around the island to pound her on the back. "I'm fine, I'm okay," she said, escaping to the sink and pouring herself a glass of water. Her eyes still tearing, she drank it down. "You and Artie," she wheezed. Her voice growing stronger, she said, "You were the only ones who ate it, which confirms my suspicion that most butter-brickle lovers came of age when the light bulb was invented."

"Ha." Helena licked the scoop. "Jeff would be more of a bubble-gum ice cream fan."

"Ha." Myka made a face at her. Picking up her bowl, she said, "I bought it yesterday when I was out, having lunch at a restaurant with Jeff." Picking up her bowl, she came around the island to put her lips close to Helena's ear. "Just so you know."

There was another race, more butter-brickle ice cream (for Helena), a bath (for Drew, although Helena, catching a whiff of her tank-top as she shrugged back into her long-sleeved shirt, thought she could probably do with one herself), and bed. In his Superman pajamas, Drew ran from the bathroom into the family room, kneeling beside Helena as she put the controllers away.

"Are you coming over tomorrow? I have a game where we go looking for treasure. In the ocean, shipwrecks and stuff." He added, obviously unsure whether it was a selling point for her, "I'm pretty good at it."

"Probably not tomorrow." Helena felt absurdly touched as his face fell. "But the next time I'm here, we'll play it." She lightly poked him in his stomach. "I'm pretty good at finding treasures, too."

He hesitated, then flung an arm around her for a millisecond in what could generously be described as a hug. "G'night, Helena." Leaving the room noticeably more slowly than he had entered it, he said, "I'm going to bed now, Mom."

Myka looked up from the account statements she had been studying most of the evening. "Be right there, bud." She handed the clipped pages to Helena. "These are Afton's. Take a look at the items I've circled."
Helena sat on the sofa, flipping through the pages. She heard a door open and Myka say, "You're going to have to show Helena your Empire State Building. She'll be impressed." A beat later she heard Myka say, "No, not tonight." Smiling, Helena saw that Myka had circled what appeared to be payments Afton had made, on a more or less regular basis, to something called PAWL, obviously an acronym. The amounts were small given Afton's income level, a couple hundred dollars each, and Helena suspected that they were donations or membership fees to support PAWL in whatever its mission was. There were similar payments to well-known charities and a few political organizations and think tanks. The latter were mainly on the conservative end of the spectrum, but not all.

As Myka sat next to her, Helena murmured, "So when do I get to see the Empire State Building?"

"After tonight you're angling for another dinner invitation?" Myka said disbelievingly.

"More like breakfast." Helena dropped the statements to the floor and leaned in, giving Myka feathery kisses along the line of her jaw. She kept leaning in, her weight beginning to press Myka down onto the cushions, but Myka placed a hand on Helena's chest and pushed back.

"Sorry, nice try." Pointing to the papers on the floor, she said, "That's what Afton and Michaelis, the race car driver, had in common. Payments to PAWL. It took this long to find the connection because there are just two entries for Michaelis, over the same two-year period. Do you have any idea what PAWL is?"

Helena shook her head. "I bet that it'll still exist tomorrow, whatever it is." She kissed Myka again, letting her tongue limn the shape of Myka's lips.

"I'm sure it will too. But you need to go back to the B&B." Myka's voice was firm, but the look in her eyes said she was undecided, and she let her hands trail the length of Helena's arms. Helena took Myka's hands and pulled her in, sinking back against the sofa arm. Working her fingers past the waist of Myka's shorts, Helena stroked the curve of Myka's butt through her panties and, when Myka groaned, she slipped her hand down and then under the hem of a leg opening, stroking bare skin. Another, louder, groan, and Myka rolled off the sofa, readjusting her shorts and trying to regain her balance at a safer distance. Hopping a little on one foot, she said, "Seriously, you need to go."

"Because of Drew?" Helena asked, tucking a pillow between her head and the sofa arm.

"Because of me." Myka stopped hopping, her expression equally determined, anxious, and wistful. "It would be all too easy just to let go with you, and I'm trying hard not to. I need to be sure of you this time. It's what I was trying to tell you earlier. For all I know, tomorrow you'll have found a new Boone, and I can't go through that again."

Helena sat up, unconsciously crushing the pillow to her. "Let me tell you about Boone, why -"

"But it's not just Boone," Myka said, interrupting her. "It's everything. In some ways, it's like you never left, and you're just as I remember you, and at the same time, you're so different." Her voice took on a wondering note. "You used to be so... consumed, Helena. At first, well, I thought I knew what was driving you, and even though I was wrong about what it was, you were driven, that was clear. And then after Yellowstone, you were falling all over yourself trying to atone for your mistakes. I thought that's why you left, you were still looking for forgiveness. But we get to Boone, and it's not that, it's some other obsession. Trying to reconnect to Christina through Adelaide. And now? You seem so... . . ."

"Adrift?" Helena said sharply. "Without purpose?" Myka was biting her lower lip, the
determination and anxiety in her face giving way before the sadness. Claudia and Pete were right; the more broken she was, the more Myka itched to fix her. But there wasn't that much drama in her life anymore, she had seen to that. Long stretches of time spent traveling from place to place interrupted by sporadic bursts of sex when the loneliness became too much. She was no threat to anyone any longer, not even herself. "I had never thought you and Irene were much alike, but I'll have to revise my opinion," she said with a brittle derision. "Shorn of my superpowers, awful though they were, I'm not nearly as fascinating, am I? In fact, I'm pretty pathetic, just some troubled middle-aged woman you're fucking, hoping all the while she'll become someone else."

Myka's eyes grew large. "Hey, hey, hey, hey," she said softly, crossing the distance between them with those leggy strides Helena had never tired of watching. Dropping to her knees, Myka tipped up Helena's chin with a finger. "Look at me," she said quietly. Helena, clutching her pillow tighter to her, raised her eyes with reluctance. They were green, some calm, dispassionate part of her decided, Myka's eyes were green. Not hazel or some color in between, but green. "You and Irene, the two of you have always had a strange kind of relationship that I'm not going to pretend to understand. I know I spouted a lot of crap years ago about how you couldn't live a normal life and that you were part of the Warehouse, but I was just lashing out. Helena, I don't care whether you come back to the Warehouse or appraise antiques the rest of your life. I don't think being a Warehouse agent defines you, just as I don't think the things you've done, good and bad, define you either. You're more than both, but you have to want to believe it."

Helena lifted a hand, as though she might touch Myka's face, but she couldn't complete the gesture. Myka did it for her, taking her hand and nestling her own face against it. "What I was trying to say before . . . I was just trying to say that, for the first time in all the years I've known you, I thought you had room for something, someone, besides your . . . . " She turned her head and kissed Helena's palm. "Preoccupations, for lack of a better word."

"You're saying that my narcissism has finally been dented," Helena said with a shaky laugh. As Myka laughed with her, she traced the shape of Myka's eyebrow and the arc of her cheekbone with the thumb of her free hand. "They don't tell you before you're bronzed, because, of course, they don't know and because, truly, no matter what you might say about being released in the future, you know they don't ever plan to release you, but you'll discover that the world you find yourself in isn't yours, will never be yours," Helena said hollowly. "Not that I would've listened had anyone told me, I was still arrogant enough to think, after everything that had happened, that I was stronger than any punishment. I could make myself the master of any situation I found myself in." Her voice faltering, she said, "But I was wrong. Everyone I had known, everyone I had loved was dead, and the homes I had lived in or visited were gone or altered almost beyond recognition. Or put on some register of historic places. She attempted a wry smile. "It turned out that I wasn't bigger than the forces that had shaped me, I was a product of my time, and my time had already passed."

Taking a deep breath, she said, "You've been what's made living in this world that's not mine, this century that's not mine possible. You're also what makes it impossible. You've seen me for who I am, and yet you still think I'm worthy of being loved. I've never been able to reconcile it."

"Because it can't be reconciled," Myka said. "You just have to accept it." She tilted her head back, squeezing her eyes shut. Blinking them open, her eyelashes wet with tears, she said ruefully, "Or not."

Unfolding herself from where she knelt at Helena's feet, Myka sat next to her on the sofa. Helena threaded her fingers through Myka's hair, and Myka sighed, swinging her legs over the other sofa arm and laying her head in Helena's lap. "When Pete and I came to Boone, and I saw you in Nate's house and how you hung on everything Adelaide said or did, as if she was all that kept you from being swept away, I literally thought, 'This is Helena's new obsession. She's found a way to reconnect with Christina.' And though I wasn't sure what my feelings were entirely, I knew they
needed to end." Myka looked up into Helena's face, her mouth crooked in a half-smile. "But Pete was there. He was always there, and maybe it started then, with him, because I knew I couldn't take his there-ness for granted anymore. Because whether you intended it or not, even when you were there, in the Warehouse, on the road, in the B&B, you weren't there. Not where I could reach."

Helena wrapped a strand of Myka's hair around her finger. "Adelaide was precocious and curious like Christina, and while Nate didn't really need a wife, Adelaide needed a mother. Then you came to Boone, and I realized she wasn't very much like Christina at all, but she was very much like you. So serious and eager to please, constantly feeling like she had to make up for something. As I often imagined you felt as a child, responsible for what were your father's failures." She looked away from Myka for a moment. "I don't know what was the worst realization. That I had run from her, a potential lover, only to become her mother, or that I had forgotten who my daughter was." Turning her gaze back to Myka, Helena let those green eyes, earnest and grave, draw her in, deeper and deeper. "I was trying to make up to her for how badly I had hurt you, and all I did in the end was hurt her the more. Is it so hard to understand why I leave?"

"If that's how you feel, why did you come back?"

Helena lifted her shoulders helplessly. "The farther I've run from you, the less I've cared about where I ended up. There's nowhere else for me to go, Myka."

"That's deflating, but it's honest, I guess." This time it was Myka winding a strand of Helena's hair around her finger. "If you run, I'm not going to chase you. You've got to want to be here, Helena, for this to work between us. And by here," she said, her gaze growing intent, "I mean here, present, unobsessed. You have to make room for two of us, and if you can't do that . . . ."

Helena caught Myka's hand. "'I try all things, I achieve what I can.'"

"I never should have introduced you to *Moby Dick*. Only you would think quoting it would win a girl over." She was smiling, a little. "But, sadly, I'm the type of girl it works on." She paused. "I know, neither one of us is promising anything." She reached for one of the sofa pillows and put it on Helena's lap. Snuggling her head into it, she said, "Just for a minute, and then you really do have to go back to the B&B."

Helena heard crunching sounds and an irregular tinking. She opened her eyes, her hand automatically hooking back to rub her stiff neck. There was an uncomfortable weight pressing on her bladder and, looking down, she saw Myka sleeping on her lap. Helena dazedly realized they had spent the night on the sofa in the family room, and the crunching and the tinking were coming from Drew, who stood in front of them, eating a bowl of what looked like Cap'n Crunch.

"You stayed over again," he announced unnecessarily. "And you were snoring again." He looked over his shoulder at the TV. "Do you want to play the treasure-hunting game?" At Helena's shaking of her head, he said, "I finished putting together the Empire State Building Mom got me. Do you want to see it?"

Myka stirred, sleepily pushing her head into Helena's abdomen. Helena winced at the added pressure, but she only smoothed the tangle of Myka's curls from her face. "I think I have time for that."

Helena was yawning as she unlocked the door to the apartment. She had a container of Earl Grey and a croissant in a bakery bag pinched between the fingers of her other hand. She stopped just inside the threshold; Mrs. Frederic was sitting regally, not a bend in her back, on the sofa. The pale pink suit was crisp and the pumps shiny and unscuffed.
"Did someone leave you as a housewarming gift?" Helena asked sardonically, crossing to the breakfast bar and putting the tea and bakery bag down.

Mrs. Frederic smiled blandly. "I thought I would check in and see how you're doing."

Helena opened a cupboard and took out a package of donut gems. "Mini-donut? Would you like some Gatorade instead?" The bland smile didn't change. "Do you eat? I've often wondered."

Helena removed the lid from the container and took a sip of her tea, eyeing Mrs. Frederic over its rim.

"You've made inroads, it appears. With Myka and with our replication problem."

"I heard you were a cheerleader for Myka and Pete, I can understand if you don't find her being with someone whose soul has shriveled like a raisin a step up." Helena broke off a piece of the croissant and popped it into her mouth.

Mrs. Frederic looked at the skirt of her suit, and the downward sweep of her eyes revealed a weariness that made Helena regret the sarcasm of her remark. "You had made it clear that you had no intention of returning to the Warehouse, and Myka needed to move on. Why wouldn't I be supportive of it?" Mrs. Frederic didn't sigh, it would be a sign of weakness, Helena thought uncharitably, but she heard the exhalation in the quiet of the apartment. "In so many ways, you remain such a child. If Myka is happy with you and you with her, why would I object? She's always had a positive influence on you, and, in your own way, I think, you can be good for her. The fact that you're at least trying to strengthen your relationship with her . . . perhaps I needn't fear for the state of your soul. Time will take us where it will, and the fact that Pete was what Myka needed when you left the Warehouse doesn't mean he's what she needs now." Shifting on the sofa to turn toward Helena, she said, "My concerns are with what's happening to artefacts and the Warehouse, and your ability to stop it."

"And there's the confidence booster I was looking for from you," Helena said dryly, taking a seat on one of the chairs at the breakfast bar.

"You want to know who's been interested in the time artefacts."

"It's a theory I'm working on -"

"You think the number of times that someone's gone back to change time has enabled the replication. You, Artie, Pete and Myka, perhaps many others. Yes, I'm aware. What I don't understand is why you want to know who's been interested in your artefacts. You were never able to successfully change time."

"Thank you for the reminder," Helena said with a tight smile. "I didn't realize Claudia had become such a little gossip."

"She doesn't have to tell me," Mrs. Frederic said equably. "We have a connection. As do you and I, believe it or not."

"Oh, I know our connection," Helena said, frowning down at her tea. It had cooled. She hated cold Earl Grey. "We're two old women who have lived far longer than we should have."

"But not past our usefulness, I hope."

"It doesn't matter that I failed to change time, it matters that I disturbed it, more than once." Helena hesitated. "I don't belong here," she said quietly. "You're still a caretaker, you have a reason for being here. I don't. My being unbronzed was never intended by anyone at the Warehouse, and I
would have died or, rather, remained dead had Arthur not changed the time line. I'm a walking anomaly, you know that, as would anyone who had access to the Warehouse's records. An anomaly, moreover, who for some strange reason continues to share an affinity, I guess you could call it, with the Warehouse. Sometimes I think I must be like that character from *Fringe*, the one from the alternative universe who glows in this one. Do I give off a glow? Do I make lights blink and toasters short out?"

"Actually, it's a little black cloud right over your head."

Helena barked a surprised, not entirely pleased, laugh and stared at Mrs. Frederic. "You do have a sense of humor. I hadn't been sure about that either."

"And I think you're getting carried away with your sense of self-importance. There's no reason for you to think that whoever is behind the replication has a special interest in you." Mrs. Frederic slowly pushed herself up from the sofa. "I agree that someone may have an interest in the time artefacts, and I fully support any energies Claudia wants to devote to finding out if those artefacts have been handled without our knowing it. But I do not support her wasting time trying to determine if your artefacts have been disturbed, nor do I appreciate your insistence that she keep her investigation secret."

There was something in her eyes that Helena couldn't quite read, something more than worry but less than fear. "Did Pete ever tell you that he's had vibes about me, stretching back five years ago?" A muscle in Mrs. Frederic's face twitched, the only giveaway that she hadn't known. "He didn't tell you. Pete gets a lot of things wrong, but not his vibes. He said they were about me, and I believe him."

Mrs. Frederic said, deadpan, "Of course you would. Mr. Lattimer's vibes are very useful, it's one of the reasons that I wanted him as a Warehouse agent, but I wouldn't base a course of action solely on his vibes."

"Who said anything about taking action? I have no plan in mind, Irene. I'm trying only to see all the possibilities." Helena took her tea to the sink, dumped it, and then dropped the container in the small recycling bin next to the garbage can. So conscientious this new Warehouse regime.

Mrs. Frederic regarded her impassively. "You have always had a fondness for the grandiose. We are a team here, Helena. Should you discover anything tangible, I expect you to tell us and not to act on your own."

"Little more than a week ago, you doubted that I could act to save an agent, if necessary. Now you're presuming that I would throw myself into the fire to save the Warehouse. You can't have it both ways. Either I'm still capable of such grand gestures or I'm not." Helena came around the breakfast bar to stand in front of Mrs. Frederic. She was petty enough to take satisfaction in the fact that she was the taller. "Let me reassure you, I'm not seeking redemption. I would very much like to solve this problem with my skin intact. If I discover who is behind the replication or how it's being done, I will be more than happy to share it with the rest of you and let you decide what action to take."

"You've also had a fondness for lying when the truth would better serve you. I can only hope you're being honest with me now."

Helena shook her head, rolling her eyes. "Wouldn't this connection between us that you've so blithely mentioned tell you when I'm lying -" She cut herself short when her gaze landed on the empty space in front of her. Bollocks. There was no having the last word with that woman.
She went back to the kitchen and dampened a sponge to wipe the crumbs off the breakfast bar. She had no plan in her back pocket, no course of action mapped out. She didn't know if she bore some special connection to the replication. But what she did know was that if, somehow, the efforts to replicate the artefacts depended on her or something of hers, she wouldn't let any of it touch Myka. That didn't require any chest-thumping declaration or dramatic avowal. She just wouldn't, that's all.
An artefact retrieval in Atlanta had gone wrong, and Myka was charged with cleaning up the mess. A Civil War era relic that gave the possessor limitless courage but an appetite for foolhardy stunts, and which had been passed around by the college student who found it, had people trying to fly off the roofs of buildings and walk through fires. One of the Warehouse agents sent to retrieve the artefact succumbed to its effects and, though the artefact was neutralized before the agent could walk a tightrope stretched between two high-rises, it wasn't neutralized before national news teams were sent to cover the "bizarre" events and videos were uploaded to YouTube.

Stopping by Helena's apartment after dropping off Drew and the dog with Pete, Myka, after wheeling her roller bag into the living room, had buried her head in her arms at the breakfast bar, muttering imprecations, but Helena couldn't tell whether she was grumbling at having to placate various state and city officials, without really explaining what had caused the bursts of irrationality, or spending several days in Georgia at the end of June. Helena had attempted some placating of her own, which inevitably led them, or so it seemed these days, to the apartment's small bedroom. Myka had balked at the threshold, hissing "Pete," but Helena had arched an eyebrow and pointed out that Pete's apartment didn't border the bedroom and, unless Myka planned, in what would be a departure for her, to scream at the top of her lungs, it was unlikely that he would be able to hear anything. Myka had sulkily responded that it wasn't the noise she made that concerned her as Helena innocently blinked at her. She remained reluctant to venture into the bedroom until Helena slipped arms around her from behind and deftly unbuttoned and pushed down Myka's blouse; breathing, very lightly, against the column of Myka's spine, Helena brushed her lips and the tip of her tongue against the bump of each vertebra, and then Myka had turned around, pulling Helena onto the bed with her. An hour later, Myka rushed from Helena's apartment, the roller bag swerving from side to side behind her, and her blouse only half-tucked into her pants.

Not having to fly to Atlanta and soothe government officials or scrub social media sites of evidence of the artefact-induced madness or, for that matter, plant stories with the networks that had covered the events attributing the behavior to unanticipated side-effects from a drug trial, Helena enjoyed the luxury of having only to worry about replicated artefacts. Or so Claudia tried to tell her until Helena reminded her that the replicated artefacts could present a PR nightmare that would dwarf all previous ones. They were in the war room of the Warehouse, which looked remarkably unchanged since the last time Helena had seen it. The computers were newer, and there were more of them, but otherwise the room had the same cramped, tinny feel of a compartment in a WWII submarine. The occasional thump or clank from somewhere in the vast interior of the Warehouse didn't dispel the illusion that they were underwater rather than buried in the Badlands, this fusty operations center with its cranky, eccentric systems and the cranky eccentrics who maintained them (less cranky, perhaps, now that Artie was gone) being all that kept the Warehouse from plunging to the depths.

"So, how does it feel being here?" Claudia asked, Converse-sneakered feet pressed against the edge of a table, her office chair tipped back at a precipitous angle.

"Are you expecting me to say it feels like home?" Helena asked dryly, from a loveseat that could have been new or bought at a thrift store. The fabric had a not-quite-industrial nub that would show a certain degree of wear and no more for millennia.

"I'm not expecting you to say anything, it's whatever you want to volunteer."

Helena frowned. She wasn't sure she wanted to volunteer, wasn't sure she could. She had been
nervous on the drive over from the B&B. It was one thing to feel the Warehouse's thrum from a Univille hotel parking lot, it was another to be walking on its territory, going through its umbilicus. It was the difference between being invited by an acquaintance you hadn't seen in a long while to drop by her house sometime and actually dropping by. Regardless of the motive behind the invitation, once you were at her home, she would have to decide how welcoming she wanted to be. Or maybe she would hide in the bathroom as you fruitlessly rang the doorbell because she hadn't known, until she saw your car in her driveway, watched you walk up to her front door, that she didn't want you there at all. But as Helena had entered the Warehouse proper, she smelled apples, and the thrum that reverberated in her core seemed more organic than not, as if the Warehouse might be chuckling to itself. The rage that burned through her then had caught her off guard, caused her to take a step or two to the side to hide her swaying, and when Claudia, from the doorway of the war room, had asked her if she was all right, Helena had said only that the heat must have gotten to her. She hadn't felt the full intensity of that rage since her early days with 13 when the prospect of being in the Warehouse day after day, when she wasn't on assignment, had her throwing up in the B&B's communal second floor bathroom.

She hadn't expected the Warehouse to register the changes that Christina's death had caused in her. At least not initially. One didn't weep in the Warehouse and expect it to offer a handkerchief or a comforting pat. Its recognition of kindred spirits, or however its identification of potential caretakers was characterized, wasn't the harbinger of a relationship in which the Warehouse acted as a benevolent guardian, looking out for its chosen ones and protecting them from danger. Smelling apples wasn't some talisman against injury or death, and the Warehouse wouldn't have been shaken to its foundation (assuming it had something so prosaic as a foundation) if she had died on a retrieval.

But when she began her own hunt for Christina's killers, conducting it with the same obsessive care that she used in plotting and refining her attempts to undo Christina's death, she expected some shift in their relationship. Because she knew what she was going to do to the men when she found them, despite her assertions to herself - and to Caturanga when she asked for the leave to travel to France - that she was only going to assist the police inspector, Michaud, in his ongoing search. It wasn't that the Warehouse didn't tolerate killers; it tolerated many of them. Most were imprisoned in bronze but a few strolled its cavernous space as agents. Helena knew of, and had been partnered with, agents who preferred to complete an assignment as quickly and easily as possible, and if it was less work to kill the poor sod who was refusing to give up an artefact than to disable him or to talk him into surrendering it, they would. That hadn't been her way before Christina's death, and it wasn't the approach she adopted afterward - she had helped Tesla invent his blasted Tesla, after all - but she was less inclined to prevent an agent from using his revolver instead of his Tesla. The smell of apples never lessened, and perhaps in the Warehouse's view, should it have one, killing some malnourished factory worker to get at an artefact she had hidden underneath her skirts was no better or worse than convincing her to give it up. The artefact had been retrieved, that was the essential thing.

What she did to the men, however, to Poule and Lebecque, especially Lebecque, wasn't in service to anything other than her desire for revenge. There had been no artefact to take from the blood and gore she had spilled, no disaster averted by leaving Poule and Lebecque broken and still, eyes forever fixed wide and staring. Yet when she returned after she had murdered Lebecque, his screams echoing in her mind, she sensed no change in the Warehouse's reception of her. Artefacts didn't fall off their shelves, the electrical discharges that caromed off the roof weren't more violent than normal, and, if anything, the smell of apples was more pungent, of apples being pressed for cider, sharp and sweet simultaneously. How could something so sensitive to imbalance, of emotion, of energy, not react to the derangement within her? She had had principles - morals, the more sentimentally inclined called them - lines that she wouldn't cross, acts that she wouldn't stoop
to commit. Yet she had crossed and stooped. If she had changed after Christina's death, she had changed again after Lebecque's. There was nothing, she knew now, that she wouldn't do because there wasn't anything that was inconceivable any longer.

When her last despairing attempt to negate Christina's death caused the death of an agent, the only thing she found worse than her own blank acknowledgment of her culpability was the greater blankness of the Warehouse's response. She had grimly welcomed the suspension from duty that followed the incident as the regents investigated and determined whether they should take action against her. But their investigation concluded and no action taken, she had returned to the Warehouse to find she couldn't rid her nostrils of its stench, of something sickly sweet and decaying. The rage she had harbored since Christina's death and turned on Christina's killers, she now focused on the Warehouse. The purpose of the Warehouse was to store artefacts and objects like them, she had been told upon starting out as an agent, not to pass judgment on them. But that was just an excuse for what it actually did, which was to shelter them. It sheltered criminals like her, artefacts that by themselves or in combination with others could level cities and wipe whole populations from the earth. That refusal to pass judgment didn't elevate it but made it complicit. The Warehouse had been as much a part of her impulsive, clumsy cruelty to Poule and her much more meticulous and thorough torture of Lebecque as if it had stood beside her as an accomplice. And when she made the decision to be bronzed, it wasn't lost on her that, in some sense, she was forcing the Warehouse to swallow her, to carry her and the evil in her in its metaphorical belly for eternity. But even then the Warehouse had had the last laugh because the last thing she took with her into the bronzer was the smell of apples.

Meeting Claudia's curious gaze, Helena said lightly, "It was like meeting an old friend." Or enemy.

Closing her eyes and tilting her head, breathing in as if Helena's response had a certain bouquet of sincerity or, conversely, disingenuousness that she wanted to examine, she asked, "Should I leave the two of you to catch up on old times?" Her head rolling back into position, Claudia rubbed her neck. "Can't say that the Warehouse and I have the same relationship, but then it didn't choose me so much as I was pushed into the line of succession. There's something of the favored one about you, the Warehouse version of Star Wars, with the Warehouse being the Force and you being, I don't know -"

"Anakin Skywalker?" Helena supplied.

Claudia's eyes grew big. "Dude, don't tell me you actually watched the prequel, all three of them." At Helena's abashed nod, she groaned, "You are truly making me lose all respect for you, H.G. But yeah, Anakin's right on. Talented and beautiful and . . . twisty." She paused. "I shouldn't have said that, about you being twisty. I mean, with you and Myka, you know." She bumped the ends of her fists together a couple of times. "Myka wouldn't . . . if you were still twisty."

"But I am still twisty, as you call it. Just because I'm not planning the end of the world doesn't mean the twistiness has gone away. It's still there, it will always be there." She had said it with a wry little smile, but Claudia was looking too serious, so Helena bumped her fists together. "And this means?" she said leadingly.

Claudia looked at her in disbelief. "You're just pulling my leg because we were getting too sad. I know you know what this means." She clenched her hands into fists and bumped them in slow motion. "You and Myka, this afternoon before her flight. I had to turn the stereo on in my B&B to drown out the noise."

Helena felt her mouth dropping and a blush rising in cheeks. "Weren't you already here. . . how could you have heard. . . I am not the type who swings screeching from chandeliers, but with her. .

"H.G. I was just having you on, I mean, I didn't know, I was throwing darts in the dark." She ran a hand through her hair. "Wow, Myka . . . like before her flight?" She shook her head wonderingly. "Ms. If We're Not There Three Hours Early We're Late? You are rocking the Mykaverse, H.G., I'll give you that."

With a primness that surprised her, Helena found herself saying, "If we could change the subject, please."

"With pleasure," Claudia muttered. "I love her and I think I may be falling back in love with you, H.G., but I think you just ruined the B&B for me." She rolled her chair over to the loveseat and tugged at Helena's hand. "I asked you down here so I could show you something, so pull up a chair."

Helena took a chair from another table and set it next to Claudia's. Claudia hit a few keys on her keyboard and a security camera view of the interior of the Warehouse flashed on the monitor. "There are security cameras all over this place. There isn't an artefact anywhere, not even in the Dark Vault, that isn't on view somewhere. The DHS insisted on it. It also insisted that we never destroy or record over footage. This is footage from five years ago." She hit another key, and the only way that Helena could tell the video was playing was from the scrolling of the seconds in a corner of the screen.

"Yes, I can tell it's recording activity, or the lack thereof, in some artefact sector. I'm also assuming this is one of the places where the time artefacts are stored." Helena tried to keep the impatience out of her voice.

"A little more appreciation for the hours I spent scouring security cam recordings would be nice," Claudia complained.

"But you didn't spend hours, Claudia. You created a program that did the scouring for you, looking for anomalies," Helena said chidingly. "But I fail to see what anomaly it is that I'm supposed to be seeing."

"I try to have a life outside this, you know," Claudia said mildly, raising her hand in a looping motion that was, Helena supposed, to encompass the Warehouse. "Do you know how many . . . never mind," she sighed. "It's like being a redwood among bonsai. Unlike you, however, I can let my genius go unremarked."

Helena rolled her eyes. "Yes, as you're doing now. Tell me what I'm supposed to be admiring."

"How cleverly someone's who's not me erased the fact that there were visitors in this part of the Warehouse five years ago. My program knows they were here, it also knows that approximately 15 minutes of surveillance are 'poof' gone." Claudia closed her fingers then spread them wide in imitation of something magically vanishing. "Over the past five years, this has happened a half-dozen times."

"Any other way of finding out who these visitors were?" Helena asked.

"I've checked the audit reports of the visitors to the Warehouse on those days to see if they were altered." Claudia leaned back in her chair. "Lots of visitors, busy, busy, busy." She sidled a glance at Helena. "Scientists, DHS, politicians. Congressmen Jaffee and Perkins and their staff. Senator Lester's people. My guess is our visitors didn't sneak in, they're part of one or more of those groups, because, as far as I can tell, the audit reports weren't changed." Claudia noisily exhaled.
"You're right about who's interested in the time artefacts."

"What makes you say that?" Helena said, frowning. "It could have been a few lowly Homeland Security functionaries taking in the sights."

"Don't rub it in that you're not rubbing it in. Some DHS supervisor tooling around the Warehouse on his lunch break wouldn't have thought to have his gawping at the artefacts erased. More importantly, he wouldn't have had the clout to get someone this good with this kind of access to mess with our systems." Claudia tapped the monitor. "Whoever did this is very, very good. And to get the clearance to the Warehouse to let their fingers do the walking - we're looking at a Jaffee or a Perkins or a Lester." She reached over and drew a manila folder that was on the corner of the table closer to her. "And speaking of politicians and things political, Jacqui's been doing some research into that PAWL connection."

As she opened the folder, an African-American woman bounced into the war room, waving a greeting at Claudia and looking with interest at Helena. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she was wearing shorts and a scooped-neck top. She was dressed too casually and Claudia was too relaxed in her presence for Helena to mistake her for someone from the DHS. Spinning away from the table, Claudia held out the folder to the woman. "Since you're here, Jacqs, why don't you do the honors?"

Jacqui took the folder and perched on the edge of nearby table. She thumbed through the folder's contents and then set it aside. "Not sure why I need the refresher," she said, wrinkling her forehead. "There's not a whole lot to be found - or said - about PAWL. It's a nonprofit, it's actually called the Foundation for the Preservation of the American Way of Life, and it's main activity seems to be holding power breakfasts for the rich and well-connected in Washington."

"Basically it's a fundraising tool for right-of-center politicians," Claudia interrupted with a derisive laugh.

Jacqui shrugged, spreading her arms, palms out, in a 'What else can you expect?' gesture. "Its membership list isn't publically available, and its officers are the type of corporate shills you typically see fronting organizations like that, but I did find some names that repeatedly crop up in association with it." She took a sheet of paper from the folder and handed it to Helena.

Helena scanned the names. "Several congressmen, I see, including Representatives Jaffee and Perkins." She hesitated, then turned a wry smile on Claudia. "Wade Farraday, and a few of my clients as well. Is this your way of telling me that I'm still under suspicion?" Still smiling, although she felt it becoming increasingly wintry, she looked down at the list. "I have no relationship with Wade Farraday, unless you want to make something of the fact that I've slept with the curator of his family's art museum. As for my clients, I put their money in my pocket, not their political beliefs, and were I plotting something nefarious, such as replicating artefacts, they're hardly the ones I'd contact first."

"Easy there, old timer," Claudia said, taking the sheet of paper from her. "I wanted you to see it because I'm beginning to think you're right about the political connection. I'm not ready to go all Three Days of the Condor or The Manchurian Candidate on you, but Jaffee and Perkins, in particular, have been sounding the alarm about us - saying we're still too independent, too secretive. What better way to crack open the Warehouse goodie box than by using the cover that it's some sort of anti-American enterprise?"

"What do we do now?" Helena asked, uncertain whether she was still offended.

"We continue digging until we hit something solid." Claudia folded the page into a paper airplane
and threw it toward Jacqui. "Don't the proceduralis always have the cops following the money trail? So let's follow the money. Who are Jaffee's and Perkins's backers? How much money is associated with PAWL? It ain't cheap to replicate artefacts." She leapt up from her chair and restlessly paced the office, stopping to look out at the Warehouse's expanse. "It makes me wonder what else our visitors did while they were here. What other records have been altered?"

"They wanted to know how certain artefacts work. They wanted to know which ones agents were still hunting. I don't think they tried to remove any," Helena said slowly, thoughtfully. "It would have been arduous enough to have someone manipulate the recordings to erase where they went, what they looked at. I don't think they would have wanted to take on the extra risk of actually stealing artefacts. They just needed to find the ones still known and still out there before we did."

"Did you hear yourself, H.G.? You said 'we.'" Claudia grinned.

"Senior moment," Helena said.

"Uh-huh." Claudia wagged her finger at Helena admonishingly. She tugged her phone from her pocket. "We'll pick this up later, but right now I have a conference call with the regents."

"What, they're not holding their covens at the diner anymore?"

"Meow." Claudia looked at Jacqui but pointed at Helena. "It hurts her to be nice. Don't let her touch anything. If you need me, I'll be in the Bat Cave." She inclined her head toward Artie's bedroom.

Had been Artie's bedroom. Surely was something else now. As if she had heard Helena's unspoken question, Jacqui volunteered, "It's Claudia's office." She slid off the table, and held out her hand as she approached Helena. "No one bothers with introductions around here, but I think they're only good manners. I'm Jacqui, Warehouse agent, tech help, and researcher extraordinaire."

Helena shook her hand. "Helena, or H.G., if you prefer, nineteenth century transplant, black sheep." Jacqui's eyes were the brown of pennies and held a similar glint, despite the engaging smile with the dimple at either end. She might describe herself as a researcher, but Helena was pretty sure she could handle herself in the field.

"I've been with the Warehouse three years, and every time Myka asked me to find something out for her, she had the answer before I did. But not since you've been here. I've actually heard the words 'I didn't know that' from her, and for that, I'm eternally grateful." Jacqui, with the bounce that seemed to speak more to a coiled energy than it did to a bubbling disposition - though she could have that as well, Helena conceded, never mind her own jaundiced view that the Warehouse crushed the optimism of anyone who served it long enough - crossed the room to an alcove furnished like a kitchenette. "Can I get you something? Bottled water, soft drink?"

"Nothing, thanks." Helena left her chair to stand in the war room's doorway. Extending for as far she could see and beyond were the shelves and vaults and rooms that contained centuries' worth of found items, essentially. But with one notable difference, the curious-looking piece of metal you picked up from the sidewalk was, in here, the curious-looking piece of metal that could enable you to see the memories locked in others' minds or, conversely, that could cost you your own.

"So, did they use the 'endless wonder' recruitment speech back then, too?" Jacqui was beside her, holding a bottle of iced tea. "I was an anonymous analyst in Homeland Security when my manager called me into her office, and there were Myka and Mrs. Frederic."

"Please don't tell me Myka used the term 'endless wonder.' I might have to break up with her."
"Myka was pragmatic. 'There's a lot of traveling,' 'You'll have to move to South Dakota,' 'It's not a 9 to 5 job.' The last was familiar. I used to work for a DA's office." As Helena smiled affectionately at the image of Myka underscoring all the realities of being a Warehouse agent, Jacqui added, "She told me that it would be the best job I would ever have and the worst. She said that the things I would see, the people I would meet, they'd break my heart more than once."

"And have they?" Helena asked quietly.

"I've been on a few rough retrievals, but I'm still here." Jacqui took a long swallow of iced tea. "So far the good's outweighed the bad, and the good, when it's really good, it's been, I have to say, wonderful." The look she gave Helena was tinged with old sorrows, but as her eyes turned to the Warehouse that yawned before them, her expression lost its sadness and became suffused with something that Helena could describe only as contentment.

Seeing it, Helena felt something else she hadn't felt in years, envy.

......

It wasn't the knocking at the door that made her look up from her apartment's ridiculously small and flimsy desk (Were these quarters for working staff or not?), it was the panting and anxious woofs. Shep. Which meant Drew. Grinning, she opened the door as Drew was poised for another knock.

"Didn't your father warn you to stay away from the cranky old lady in 3C?"

Drew squinted up at her in puzzlement. "You're not in 3C."

Helena sighed. "You are your mother's son." Shep poked his large, inquisitive head into the living room as Helena tried to body block him. "What can I do for you, Master Lattimer?"

"Dad said I could ask you to come play Call of Duty with us."

Helena put a finger to her lips, pretending to be deep in thought. "The game your mother doesn't let you play at home? If I spoke to her, I would hate to have to lie about what we did tonight. Are you prepared to buy my silence?"

Drew frowned, then his face cleared, and he gave her a cunning smile. "I bet my mom wouldn't like it if she knew you let me play Call of Duty. I'd hate to have to tell her that."

Helena laughed. Nudging Shep back into the hallway, she slung her arm around Drew's shoulders. "I believe there's hope for you yet."

......

What was the old joke she had heard about hockey? "I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out." A night spent playing Call of Duty with the Lattimer men was more about what went on between the desultory firing at enemy combatants than the game itself. There were food fights, wrestling sessions (which were mainly Pete tickling his son until Drew erupted into shrieks of laughter), farting contests, and chases around the apartment that had Shep barking and galloping after them. Helena was willing to fling popcorn and pretzels and bat away the incoming missiles from Pete and Drew, but she begged off the competitive farting and there wasn't the slightest chance in hell that she would let Pete tickle her ribs. When father and son ran their circuit around the apartment, she crawled as high as she could up the back of the sofa to avoid a lunging, jumping Shep.
Collapsing on the sofa beside her after sending Drew off to get ready for bed, Pete said a little breathlessly, "Can't say I don't know how to show a girl good time."

"A ten-year-old girl possibly," Helena said as she dug out popcorn between the sofa cushions.

"Could be that's why I'm having a hard time getting dates." Pete swept his hand over his hair, brushing away pretzel fragments. A phone began vibrating and beeping on the coffee table in front of them. "Hey, Mykes." He walked toward the bedroom Drew had disappeared into. "How's Atlanta?" A pause. "That fun your first night there, huh. By the way, your girlfriend's here. Drew and I thought we'd treat her to a night of Lattimer charm. Have to say she doesn't seem all that impressed. . . ." The door closed, cutting off the rest of the conversation, although Helena could hear an excited chirp of "Mom!" from Drew which suggested that Pete had just handed over the phone.

Restless, she rose, trying to avoid crushing potato chips into the carpet. Pete's apartment was a larger version of the Pete Cave, unsurprisingly, decorated with framed posters of superheroes and dominated by a large TV (although not as large as the one in Bergstrom's apartment). A relationship with Myka would always be four-sided, Pete almost as inextricably a part of her life as her son. Complications had always been for artefact retrievals, equations, trial runs of her inventions; her sexual relationships Helena had tried to keep as uncompromisingly simple as a straight line - from Warehouse or home to borrowed (sometimes rented) room and back. Some of the agents of 12, the more forward-thinking ones, had teased her about her "string of lovers," joking that she needed a version of a dance card to keep them in order, but she hadn't found having multiple lovers a complication. It was only another kind of geometry, the shapes her going from one lover to another made. And the spouses to whom many of them were attached existed in her mind only as impediments to be overcome. They weren't people to her, not in the end, nor, sadly, were many of her lovers. Whims, needs, the occasional preoccupation. She had found the habit dispiritingly easy to resume when she left Boone. She should have found it dispiriting, anyway.

"You can't bring that long face into my son's bedroom," Pete teased, rejoining her in the living room, but the dark eyes were more concerned than merry. "Seeing something that sad might give him nightmares. He wants to say goodnight."

Helena summoned a bright smile. "Better?"

Pete waggled his hand. "It'll do." He hesitated. "If there's something bothering you, I can sit still enough to listen. But if it's about you and Myka . . ." He screwed up his face and stuck out his tongue. "Ewww, no."

"Old memories. They'll pass."

Drew's bedroom was smaller than his one at home, and considerably more messy, but the bed was exactly the same, except that the sheets were Batman instead of Superman, as were his pajamas. As Helena sat on the edge of the bed next to him, he asked, "When are we going to start on the treehouse?"

"Soon," Helena said, "when your mother comes home."

"Like this weekend, maybe? Because Dad could help if he's here." He wriggled under the sheet. "It's going to be great. I've been telling my friends at soccer about it. They want to see it when it's done." He looked up at her. "Do you think all of them will be able to fit into it?"

"At the same time?" At Drew's nod, Helena pretended to give his question serious thought. "Perhaps. But if the tree starts to fall over, that means there are too many of you, and some of you
may not be able to get out in time."

His eyes grew round for a moment, but then he saw the quirk of her mouth, and he began to laugh.
"The tree's not going to fall over."

"No, it's not, but your friends may have to wait their turn to climb up to the treehouse. It's not going
to be as big as a real pirate ship, you know."

"That's okay." His expression turned hopeful. "Maybe it'll still be nice enough out that we can hold
my birthday party in it."

His birthday was in October, Helena remembered. There could be three feet of snow on the ground
by then. It was South Dakota, after all. "We'll have to see."

"You can come," he said, "to my birthday party." The look he gave her then was pure Myka. "Will
you?"

"Of course." It didn't feel like a lie, it felt like the truth.

Drew took it as a promise, rolling onto his side, dismissing her. "Goodnight, Helena."

She thought he might have fallen asleep by the time she reached the door, his breathing soft and
even. Her hand moved up the wall, too high. She had been seeking the gas light, as if she had just
finished saying goodnight to Christina. But this was Drew's room, and she needed to move her
hand down to the switch plate. The centuries righted themselves, and her trembling fingers found
the switch, turning the light off.

.......

It was after midnight, and next to her arm there was a cup of cold Earl Grey that she was never
going to finish. The source of power for the replication had to be an artefact or artefacts, but what
were they and where had they gotten them? Helena rubbed her eyes. Despite her words to the
contrary, perhaps artefacts had been stolen from the Warehouse. When was the last time there had
been a full audit of the Warehouse's artefacts?

Her phone rang. Most likely it was Claudia calling about another discrepancy her programs had
found. The phone was... somewhere. In her bag? Couldn't be, the ringing didn't sound muffled.
Kitchen? Breakfast bar. Helena didn't like the stiffness she felt in her knees as she went to the
counter and picked up her phone. Bloody student desk. Bloody cheap government agency.

"Myka? I'm the insomniac, not you." Stiffness forgotten, annoyance dissipated, Helena dropped
onto the sofa, and then immediately regretted it as her head banged against the sofa's unforgiving
arm.

Myka sounded uncertain and embarrassed. "I know, it's been, what, only 12 hours since I saw you,
but I couldn't sleep." She sighed, "God, this is adolescent."

"I think I remember you telling me you didn't have any boyfriends in high school," Helena said
with an impish smile that she could at least pretend Myka could see.

"All right, yes, I didn't have any boyfriends or girlfriends to call at inappropriate times in the
evening when I was in high school, but Tracy did and some of my friends did, and, yes, even then I
thought it was silly," Myka said, exasperated.

"Yet silly as it is, you're calling me."
"Yes, we've established that. I feel silly and stupid, and I can't not call you, although, truthfully, you're being kind of a putz right now."

Helena's smile grew wider. "I want you to say it, to say that you're gobsmacked. Just a little."

"Pete said you won the farting contest." Myka could be endearingly stubborn. Sometimes she could just be stubborn. Helena wasn't sure which she thought Myka was being now.

"Turn up the volume and put the phone down," she said crisply.

"We are not going to do this. I am not going to tell you where I am or what I'm not wearing. The times Pete and I tried this, we always started laughing." Her voice dropping, Myka said, "Besides, you never know when you're being recorded."

"All the better," Helena countered. "I've never minded an appreciative audience."

"I don't even know what to do with that."

"And that's precisely why you called me. Myka, put the phone on the nightstand, and do exactly what I tell you, no more no less."

"This will never work," Myka grumbled.

But it did.
Chapter 11

Myka was home from Atlanta for only a couple of days, and then she would be off to Albany, New York, for another clean-up followed by a meeting with Homeland Security in Washington. Helena had assumed that she wouldn't see her; she hardly outranked Myka's son, who also hadn't seen her for almost a week, but on an otherwise unremarkable weekday morning, Myka called her to the Warehouse for a meeting.

Helena had no great desire to visit the Warehouse again, but she did have a great desire to see Myka, even if it was only in the context of a staff meeting. Since Myka's first night in Atlanta, they had been speaking to each daily, actually nightly, ending each call the way they had the first one, with Myka's grumbled protests about "this not working" serving as foreplay to an extended session of phone sex that strained Helena's voice as well as a few muscles. The night before, after Drew had gone to bed, Myka had been the one to tell Helena to turn the volume up and put the phone down, and a few moments later, after Helena suspected Myka's phone had been on mute, she could hear Sade playing in the background. Although she had been wise enough not to comment on the music, Helena asked if she should first whine, "This isn't going to work," to get them warmed up, to which Myka had responded with a frosty "Would you be just as happy listening to the sound of your own voice?" And then immediately answered her own question, "Of course you would."

It was Smooth Operator that Helena was humming on her drive over to the Warehouse. The humming, not on key to begin with, slid into a few sour notes as the Warehouse's dark bulk appeared on the horizon. She was tense as she emerged from the umbilicus, half-expecting a resurgence of the rage she had felt before, but the only emotion that threatened to swamp her was a growing impatience to see Myka. No smell of apples greeted her either, only a musty odor that she was used to encountering in antique stores, two parts things-left-unaired to two parts dust. Perhaps they had achieved a temporary truce, she and the Warehouse, in their battle of wills. She could pretend that it was the world's largest flea market, and it could pretend that she was only another visitor.

Helena stood outside the war room, seeing Myka talking to Jacqui. Myka had returned to her jeans and summer-weight V-neck sweaters, and while Helena thought she had made no sound expressing her pleasure at the end of a six-day absence, she must have sighed or maybe her smile had crashed the sound barrier in pinning itself on her face because Myka turned, giving her a smile just as ridiculously happy and blushing so intensely that she crimsoned all the way to the vee of her sweater.

"Hey, you," she said softly. Turning back to Jacqui, she said, "We can pick this up later."

Jacqui grinned. "If by later, you mean tomorrow later, that's fine by me. I don't have anything to do here that I can't do at home." As Myka fumbled for a response, Jacqui said, "Home being miles away from the Warehouse and where I won't be expecting a call from you." Passing Helena on her way out, she said in a low voice, "I'm trusting you to keep her too busy to think about work."

"Darling, I'm not going to let her have time to think, period." Helena said loud enough for Myka to
hearth and curved her lips in a theatrically lascivious smile. She leaned against the doorframe. "Is our meeting a performance review? Because I have some ideas about areas of improvement that I'd like to show you." The lascivious smile wobbled and then dissolved as Helena started laughing. "I can do that all day you know, horrible double entendres, cringeworthy innuendoes."

"You forget," Myka said, taking Helena's arm and leading her out of the war room, "I was married to the master of bad jokes for seven years. And don't say what you're thinking, Helena. He's also the father of my child."

Allowing herself to be tugged down to the main floor of the Warehouse, Helena let her glances skim over the artefacts on the shelves. Myka's head remained ruler-straight as she passed them, but, Helena, no slouch when it came to fixing her mind on a single thought, had always admired Myka's ability to concentrate. Myka's pace was quick, she was focused on wherever she was taking them. She slowed only when they entered the area that held, but not just held, preserved, Helena silently amended, the pressed suits, nail clippers, and the like, even the very lodgings, of former agents who hadn't been fortunate enough to voluntarily terminate their employment and thus, carry out, in an extra suitcase or a box under their arms, those suits and clippers. Myka knew what she was looking for, and as her selection unfolded before them, Helena recognized her old room at the B&B.

"This reaction was a little drastic, don't you think, to my leaving the Warehouse?" Helena wandered the room, the floorboards creaking just like they always had. There couldn't have been much she had left behind because she hadn't accumulated much to begin with, not when she was with 13; she had been at the B&B for less than a year before Yellowstone, for only a few weeks, if that, after Sykes had been defeated.

"Claudia thought you weren't in your right mind or possibly under alien control when you told the regents that you weren't coming back. She thought it qualified." Myka had shut the door and was leaning against it, arms folded across her chest. Helena touched the nightstand, the bed. She wasn't sure what she had expected to feel but something other than this mild acknowledgment that here was a place in which she had given her hair a hundred strokes before going to bed to not-sleep and sorted her laundry. And plotted. She hadn't gone over to the desk, she wouldn't; that might be the one thing in the room that would stir some emotion. There every night she had carefully thought through the next steps of her plan, occasionally scribbling a few cryptic words in a notebook. She hadn't put it past Artie to search her room on a regular basis. She glanced at the windows and smiled. The desk wasn't the only object that could make her feel something. She went to stand in front of the one that had looked onto the garden, where Myka had stretched before her morning runs.

"Too bad the reproduction stops at the interior," she said, fingers hovering over the glass that showed only the two of them and the somewhat sad contents of the room in a blurred reflection.

"So put yourself there. Let's say a June morning about 12 years ago." Myka moved away from the door, arms still hugging her chest.

"You're out there doing your pre-run stretching, in short-shorts and a form-fitting tank top?" Helena
suggested, meeting her in the middle of the room. "It's a humid morning, isn't it, and you're already perspiring, here." Helena threaded her hand through Myka's hair, drawing closer to caress the back of her neck. "And here." She ran a finger along the neckline of Myka's sweater, tugging it down at its vee, fingertip brushing, featherlight, over and between Myka's breasts.

"Sounds about right," Myka said casually, but her eyes had grown heavy-lidded and her smile welcomed more.

"As I recall, I left here in a bit of a hurry. There might still be a vibrator and some ancient lube in the nighstand," Helena teased.

"I won't need help, of any kind," Myka murmured, stepping back and pulling her sweater over her head, dropping it on the floor. "I'm running up the stairs to your room, Helena. Are you going to open the door?"

"Wide open, darling."

Twelve years ago Helena wouldn't have allowed herself to fantasize about what they were doing on her bed now, at least not in such detail, and Myka would have been too diffident about her own feelings to think of proposing it. Twelve years ago, it would have taken an accidental encounter with an artefact or the touch of a fairy godmother's wand to have caused them to tumble into bed together. An alternate timeline in which that encounter would have been so magical, so life-changing that she would have called back the students from Egypt, flushed the pages from her notebook down the toilet, and scoffed at her belief that the world should be brought to an end as so much self-pitying nonsense. An alternate timeline because such an encounter then wouldn't have changed anything.

Their timeline, the one in which she nearly ended the world, was the timeline they had; they could come to this room every day and they could come in this room as often as they had the energy to bring each other to the point, but it would change nothing. As Myka raised her head and smiled at her - and Helena could reassure her, if Myka needed reassuring, that she didn't need to feel diffident about anything - the green eyes intent and a little dreamy at the same time, Helena sat up to cup that face. "Myka, this is lovely, but it can't undo, and even then it wouldn't have --"

"Shush, no talking. It's a fantasy, remember?" A sadness more bleak than gentle swept away the dreaminess in her eyes, and Helena cursed her unerring tendency to complicate something simple, but after a moment, Myka shook her head, saying wryly, "Okay, it may just be my fantasy, but let's face it, Helena, you owe me a few."

Myka placed her finger on Helena's lips. "Let's see if I can work off my obligation, shall we?" Her tone was appropriately roguish, and given the age and condition of the bed, not to mention her age and condition, she thought she moved gracefully enough from underneath Myka to a position over her with a minor number of protests and most of those from the bedsprings. In fantasies, you could be whatever you wanted, she could be whatever Myka wanted, and if Myka wanted her untainted by the deaths she had carelessly caused and the billions of deaths she had been planning to cause then that was the
Helena she would pretend to be. But as she bent her head to gently take Myka's bottom lip between her teeth, she felt that other Helena, the one she was, with all the misfortune and misery she had unleashed, settling between her shoulder blades, and she nearly sagged under the weight. "Darling, no going easy on me, although," she said, as breezily as she could, caressing Myka's breast, "in this instance, I do believe in grading on a curve."

This time Myka cupped her face. "Helena, if this bothers you, we can stop." Her eyes growing more searching, she added, "When I feel like we're in a summer stock production of Private Lives, I know your shields are up."

"You do know that was more than a mixing of metaphors," Helena said gravely. "You managed to combine Noel Coward and Gene Roddenberry in the same sentence, and my ears are bleeding."

"Helena," Myka said patiently. She tapped Helena on the shoulder to let her know that she wanted to sit up. "I didn't stop to think that it might be difficult for you, being here in this room, pretending that it was when we first knew each other." Drawing the sheet to her, she hugged her knees to her chest. "This B&B, the old one, was more of a home to me than the home I grew up in. But you have an entirely different relationship to it."

Helena rolled onto her back and smashed a pillow over her face. She heard Myka chuckle, and then she felt Myka trying to tug the pillow away from her face. "Helena, it's all right."

"Really, I don't have anything against the room," Helena said from under the pillow. "It's a little drab, but I've lived in worse, I've had sex in -." As Myka noisily cleared her throat, Helena said hastily, "It's the desk. I sat at that desk, you know, scheming, hating, contemplating a mass murder the likes of which had never been seen. It's not a mood enhancer." After a pause, she removed the pillow. "I didn't think it would affect me. But I've never been very good at turning back time."

"How does an early lunch sound?" Myka suggested, bending down to kiss Helena's nose and then scooting off the side of the bed.

"I thought compromise was the basis of a good relationship. This isn't a compromise. You had a fantasy that I have managed, not surprisingly, to turn into some tedious personal drama. Besides," Helena said plaintively, "you're going to Albany tomorrow, and I would like to have sex that involves physical contact."

Myka was stepping into her jeans. "What do you suggest?"

"A compromise fantasy. There is a room in the B&B where I think I would have no issues." Helena looked around the floor for her underwear. "There's a replica of the B&B in the Warehouse, am I right?"

Myka nodded, giving her a wary look. "I wouldn't recommend entering it."
"But you with your prodigious memory," Helena said slyly, "I'm sure you remember how to get out of it. Are you willing to take a chance?"

"It's a maze, Helena, and I'm not ready to spend eternity trapped in it with you."

"So you have considered spending eternity with me?" Helena was on her hands and knees and peering under the bed for her bra. Then she saw a strap peeping out from beneath a sheet.

"Are you proposing?" Myka arched an eyebrow.

"Are you accepting?" Helena arched her opposite eyebrow.

"Let's go find the B&B."

Although Myka didn't lead her as quickly to the Warehouse's B&B as she had to the room archive, she didn't appear to have second thoughts about taking them into a maze, or perhaps, Helena thought, walking slightly behind that rangy frame with its impeccable posture (attributed by Myka to fencing, of course), Myka's plan was to leave her in it. Other, better people wouldn't have let their misgivings about reimagining the past ruin their girlfriends' fantasies. Sexual fantasies. Other, equally selfish people wouldn't have let their misgivings ruin their one opportunity at having sex before their girlfriends left on another trip. Why did she believe she would act differently in another room? The B&B itself was a reminder of who she was, what, given the right circumstances, she could always become again. Yet as she took the lead once Myka opened the door, guiding them through the foyer and down the hallway to that certain room on the left, the room where she hadn't had fantasies so much as a series of idle thoughts, she knew it would be different.

Myka laughed softly as she followed Helena into the library. "I should have guessed," she said, going to the shelves and trailing her fingers along the spines of well-used paperbacks and the occasional hardcover.

"I think," Helena began slowly. "I think I needed a room we were in together, happy together. I didn't plot here, I didn't obsess over the evil state of the world. I just enjoyed spending time with you." She backed an unresisting Myka toward the sofa. "You were happy, too, weren't you, with me, in this room?"

"Yes," Myka said simply.

"Claudia said she thought that our late night conversations in here were merely another form of seduction."

"I'm not sure how I feel about you and Claudia discussing you and me." Despite her words, Myka was completely absorbed in unbuttoning Helena's blouse.
"Only in the context that I was an utter fool for not realizing what was happening." Helena unbuckled Myka's belt.

"If you didn't realize what was going on, what exactly were you fantasizing about?"

"Always the logical one," Helena sighed as Myka unhooked her bra and then sighed again as she felt Myka's hands rest lightly on her breasts, thumbs grazing her nipples. "I will admit that my thoughts sometimes wandered, particularly when we talked about Melville." Leaning into Myka's touch, she began working Myka's jeans over her hips. "You forget, I come from a nation of sailors, and I know what the ships were like back then." She grinned as her fingers slipped between Myka's thighs and then slipped in so readily that Myka hissed and bit her lip. "Perhaps Melville and you find all those descriptions of rosy-cheeked sailors appealing, but sharing close quarters with a crew of scurvy-ridden, unwashed men holds no appeal for me. Can you blame me if I wondered, every once in awhile, what we might get up to in a hammock?"

"Did your mind wander when we talked about other books?" Myka's eyes had assumed the intently dreamy look they had held in Helena's bedroom, and she stilled the movement of Helena's hand long enough to move in for a kiss.

Helena's hand lost contact with Myka's body only for as long as it took Myka to kick off her jeans and panties and then pull Helena down with her onto the sofa. "All the time when we talked about the Transcendentalists." Helena let out a small groan as her fingers found their place again. "Ah, Myka darling, you must like Ralph Waldo Emerson very, very much."

"I do," Myka said, her hips moving up and down. "In high school, I won a prize for an essay on 'The Over-Soul.' I was. . . . ."

Smiling and biting her lip at the same time, the curve of her lashes as they fluttered over her eyes matching the curve of her smile, she said, "Over the moon for Ralph Waldo." Her voice broke off in a pleased gasp as Helena's tongue sketched a circle around one of her nipples. "Tell me how bored you were when we talked about Henry James."

Helena trailed kisses down Myka's abdomen. "So bored that I imagined putting my tongue here. . . and here," she said, demonstrating, as Myka squirmed and muttered a few half-words. "I don't believe those particular words were ever part of our discussions," she said in mock reproof. Straightening and sitting on her heels as Myka reached for her, Helena smiled mischievously. "I always wanted to see the purple passages James excised from the book, the ones in which Madame Merle showed Isabel how truly bad she could be."

"This bad?" Myka breathed as Helena moved between her legs, hand starting a familiar rhythm.

"Something like," Helena said, stroking more urgently. "Goodwood, indeed." She sniffed disdainfully.
"Helena." Myka's eyes were closing again. "I've had enough of books for now."

It took Myka only two tries to get them out of the B&B, but she was practically running down the aisles toward the war room, clearly worried that she was going to be late to pick up Drew from soccer camp. When a sudden, unpleasant thought crossed Helena's mind, she came to a halt, between shelves that appeared to hold artefacts from politicians, while Myka charged on. Eventually turning around, Myka said, "We don't want to stay in this aisle any longer than we have to, Helena."

"Because," Helena squinted to read an electronic description, "we'll develop instant amnesia if we touch Reagan's candy dish?" Pointing to another artefact, she laughed. "Or we'll have 'lust in our hearts' if we wear Jimmy Carter's cardigan sweater? I don't think we need an artefact for that." Sobering, she glanced at Myka, an uneasy expression on her face. "Did you and Pete ever. . . ."

"It was the library, Helena, what do you think?" She grabbed Helena's hand and pulled at her to come along. "Just to hurry things up here, Pete and I never had sex at the B&B. That was what you were going to ask next, wasn't it? What rooms did we have sex in?"

"Actually, I think I'm more interested now in hearing about what happens if we stay too long in this aisle." Helena reluctantly shuffled after Myka, but she kept her head twisted over her shoulder to keep the artefacts in view.

"There's a filibuster artefact that periodically activates itself, and when that happens, you can be stuck where you're standing for days. We lost Steve for a weekend once because of it." Myka tugged more firmly on Helena's arm. "We need to move faster, babe."

"You did just call me 'babe,' you realize that." Helena's eyebrows arrowed in concentration as she silently mouthed the endearment. "I don't know that I'm a 'babe' or 'baby.' Certainly not a 'hon,' so don't even try it. 'Darling,' of course, I own."

"Helena," Myka groaned, exasperated. She slowed more and pivoted on her heel, seeing that Helena was still gazing down the aisle. "What's so fascinating about these particular artefacts?"

"Besides the fact that I'm planning how we might use the filibuster artefact to trap ourselves in your bedroom, I was thinking that, perhaps, Congressmen Jaffee and Perkins might have had an interest in them."

"They're all present and accounted for - going back the last several inventories. It's possible they've been replicated, but I doubt it." Myka dropped Helena's hand and came to stand beside her. "Jacqui could check and see if either Jaffee or Perkins asked for any of them to be 'investigated.' They've done that with a number of artefacts that they say they're concerned about."

Helena nodded abstractedly. Then she asked, in obvious disbelief, "You and Pete, never, in the B&B?"
"Claudia," Myka answered, heading back up the aisle toward the war room. "Instead he and I just went on a lot of assignments." She sighed, remembering. "A lot of assignments." At Helena's moue, she glared at her and said, "That's not what I meant. It's ridiculous when you stop to think about it. To spare Claudia's feelings, we traveled to Kansas City or Billings, Montana, to have sex."

"It's sweet," Helena countered, turning and wrapping an arm around Myka's waist, drawing her close. "And it sounds very much like something that you and Pete would do. But I am not that nice," she said, nuzzling the skin below Myka's earlobe.

"And I am not that patient. We wouldn't make it to the airport, darling."

"If I didn't need to get to my car in the next five minutes so I can have a ghost of chance of picking my son up on time," Myka whispered, "I'd challenge you to do what you could in those five minutes because I'm still not sure how good you . . . ." As an object rattled on a shelf above them, she stepped out of Helena's arms and sent a rueful glance toward the artefact. "But not here, not today."

"Another fantasy I'll owe you then?" Helena said, as Myka ran toward the stairs. She stood on tiptoe to read the description of the artefact, a piece of costume jewelry from the set of Cleopatra, still moving on the shelf. "Supposedly it brings about a torrid romance, one for the ages," she shouted. "Apropos, don't you think?"

Myka's voice floated back to her. "Followed by volcanic arguments, ill health, near bankruptcy, and divorce."

"Well, if you're going to fixate on that. . . ." Helena grumbled, the end of the aisle still a dismayingly long way ahead.

The next day she was in the sunroom of the old B&B, Claudia's version of it, looking over a series of print outs Jacqui had put on the table in front of her, when Claudia, who had been on the phone with Myka, Jane, Pete, and then Myka again, flopped into the chair next to her. "We have a situation. I'm sending Pete out on an emergency retrieval, and Myka and Jane and I have to be in Washington bright and early tomorrow morning, so we need someone to watch Drew -- and the dog. We could fly Pete's sister in, and Jacqui's volunteered." At this, Jacqui nodded, tearing a pastry in half. "But Drew wants you -- I can't speak for Shep -- and now Myka wants to talk to you."

Putting aside a financial statement of one of Congressman Jaffee's backers, doubtlessly purloined from some Claudia- or Jacqui-hacked system, Helena picked up the phone. "Myka, I hear that Drew wants to go to Victorian summer camp for a few days, where he will be drilled in the classics, though I suspect his Latin and Greek are woefully inadequate, and thoroughly hazed by the older boys." Helena was tempted to wander away from the table in search of some privacy but thought better of it when she caught sight of the studied innocence of Claudia's expression. After the embarrassing exchange they had had in the Warehouse about Myka, Helena didn't think
Claudia would try to listen in, but it would be wiser not to test her.

Myka laughed, relief not quite crowding out the nervousness. "You're okay with it, then? I know it's an imposition, but he likes you --. You're okay with Shep, too?"

"Love you, love your son and your dog? It's fine, really, but my apartment here is rather small."

Able to concentrate on the practical aspects of the arrangement, Myka's voice grew in confidence. "Get my house key and access codes from Claudia, if you don't mind staying in my house."

"Not at all," Helena said, suppressing the impulse to make a lewd remark about talking later when she was in Myka's bedroom. She managed to end their conversation with appropriate circumspection, smothering a suggestive response to Myka's "I'll call you tonight," though she did murmur dryly, "I suppose this isn't some elaborately devised excuse to give me your key, that you'll want it back when you return," but Myka only laughed under her breath, saying softly "Helena."

Taking the phone back, Claudia said, "This is so The Courtship of Eddie's Father." Receiving a puzzled look from Helena, she started crowing, "Ah, how I missed that blank stare when any cultural reference cropped up, my H.G. is back." Giving her a gentle shove, Claudia said, "Mid-1960s show where a son tries to fix his father up with various women. Now you never have to watch it." Sighing, she added, "But Drew, what a devious little monkey he's becoming. It's not in his genes. He must be getting it from his exposure to you, H.G., which makes me think he probably shouldn't be staying with you at all."

"There's nothing underhanded about what he's doing, darling. I've promised him a tree house, and he's going to keep an eye on me until I get it built. Exactly something his mother would do." Helena shuffled the paper into a neat stack. "Can we get back to the matter at hand, namely these financial statements whose provenance I'm not going to bother inquiring about?"

For the next few hours, they followed the connections, such as they were, between Congressmen Jaffee's and Perkins' financial supporters and what little financial data Jacqui had been able to unearth about PAWL. Claudia rolled in or simply magicked into being a large white board, on which she began listing names, their links to other names, and their association with the nonprofit. Soon the board was covered with lines from several names to PAWL, and all of the names were contributors, past or present, to Jaffee and Perkins. Among them, unsurprisingly given the information Jacqui had found earlier, was Wade Farraday's name, which made Helena shift uncomfortably in her chair, but she heard herself repeating what Suzanne had once told her about him, "He's something of a crank, contributing to both parties depending on his mood and how much he believes one party more than the other is full of scoundrels."

Claudia shrugged. "We're not here to pick on you or your ex-girlfriend, and she is your ex-girlfriend, right?" Her eyes narrowed, and she looked challengingly at Helena. "Cause I don't really want to bust your ass right before I have to go hang out with your new girlfriend, but I will."
"How many times do I have to tell you," Helena said in exasperation, "that Suzanne and I don't have that kind of relationship, any relationship. And I would like to see you try to 'bust my ass.' You failed miserably all the times I tried to teach you kenpo."

"Girls, girls," Jacqui said admonishingly. "The only interesting thing I was able to find out about Wade Farraday is that he's a collector, of all sorts of things. Civil War memorabilia, old timey carousels, 1950s Ford Thunderbirds, just to name a few."

"Nothing that would require my expertise to verify," Helena said, "and I've never met the man."

Claudia held her hands up in surrender. "Honestly, we're not out to get you. Well, not anymore, so relax. Jacqs, what about this guy, Nolan Mercer?"

And so it went, until Helena needed to leave to pick up Drew. She had just enough time to run up to her apartment, throw a few clothes and her laptop into a bag, and pace the elevator as it ever so slowly rattled its way to the first floor. Claudia gave her the house key, the access codes, and a happy, barking Shep, who shivered with excitement and then lunged at the door to the verandah. Her shoulder nearly dislocated from her efforts to keep Shep from dragging her through the front lawn, Helena thanked Claudia, somewhat less than sincerely, after calming Shep with a deadly glare. She followed the directions Claudia gave her to the park where Drew's soccer camp was held and, though she trusted Claudia, in the main, she also plugged the address into her phone as a double check. It wouldn't be unlike Claudia to give her the directions for getting to Mount Rushmore instead.

She parked the car in the lot and, feeling a little self-conscious, joined the mothers strolling through the grass and chatting with one another as they collected their children. Drew was in a group of boys, laughing at something one of them said. He was taller than most of them, and his hair glinted red in the sunlight. He glimpsed Helena heading toward him, and he heard him say, "That's my mom's friend." At least he said it with a smile. The boys began to disperse, all but Drew and a boy, shorter and stockier, who looked at her with a suspiciousness that would have seemed more understandable coming from Drew.

"This is my friend Colton. We're supposed to give him a ride home, but he wants to hang out at my house with me for a while." Drew squinted up at her, seeking her approval.

What had she done when Christina had wanted to play with her friends? Granted, social relationships, even among children, had been more formal then, but children had still played together. Surely her daughter had wanted to invite a playmate to her home, but why couldn't she remember? My God, had her daughter been so friendless as to have no one to play with other than her dolls or had she been so remiss a mother as to leave it up to Christina's succession of nannies to oversee such arrangements? Hoping it was the latter, although it was small comfort, Helena almost dropped her phone, trying to bring up the keypad. "Colton, what's your number so I can call your mother?"

Going through the awkwardness of introducing herself as Drew's sitter to Colton's mother, advising her of the boys' hopes of spending the rest of the afternoon together, and then allowing her to talk to Colton (probably to reassure herself that Helena wasn't intending to abduct her son), Helena
finally obtained her assent to having Colton stay for the afternoon - and for dinner, which Helena wasn't looking for, not in the least. But the boys were jumping up and down and shouting "Pizza!" She wasn't sure who made the most noise in the back seat, Drew and Colton or Shep, and then, when she pulled into Myka's garage, and the boys burst through the back door into the yard, Shep galloping after them, the three of them became a tangle of legs and fur, shouts and barks. Unpacking her bag in Myka's bedroom, she occasionally looked out a window at the boys as she hung her clothes in the closet - ordered she noticed by type of clothing (business, casual) and then further ordered by color - and arranged her toiletries on the vanity in the bathroom. It didn't look so crowded. She and Myka could share the space, but perhaps not the closet. Her shoes alone demanded their own closet, and such rigid ordering as Myka apparently needed made her itch to upset it, putting blazers between the sun dresses and grays among the reds.

She wasn't ready to concede to the boys' demand for pizza, so she surveyed the contents of the pantry and the freezer for something suitable for dinner. Ever present packages of boneless, skinless chicken breasts and bags of frozen vegetables, she could make something edible out of those. The slamming of doors announced the boys' imminent arrival in the kitchen, and then they were at the island, perched on the stools, wanting popsicles. Helena was surprised that Myka would allow such things, but her eyebrows lowered themselves to their normal levels when she sorted through the box in the freezer and saw that they were made from organic fruit juice.

His mouth purple-rimmed and smiling brightly, grapely, Drew said, "I told Colton that he and all my friends could come see my tree house. Though you said we might not fit up there all at the same time."

Colton shrugged, licking the side of his cherry popsicle. "My mom's boyfriend's always telling me we're gonna do something, or he's gonna build me something." He looked at Helena levelly. "He talks a lot."

Drew's smile dimmed, and he turned his head to look out at the yard and the tree that was to host the tree house, which showed not a sign of the pirate ship that was to float on its branches. When Myka came home, Helena thought she might take it upon herself to suggest that Drew should spend less time with Colton, which was a better alternative than locking him in Myka's closet as she wanted to do now. "Tell you what, I was going to do this tomorrow when you were at math camp, Drew, but if you two don't mind spending a few minutes in a lumberyard, let's go and order the wood for the tree house. I have all the measurements." She smiled and stared at Colton, who remained unimpressed. Drew, however, had hopped off the stool and was running toward the garage.

She had been intending to do no such thing, not tomorrow at any rate. But she would be damned before she let an eight-year-old boy with the cynicism of a man five times his age sully Drew's enthusiasm. With the two boys - and the dog - in the back seat once more, she drove toward where she hazily remembered the mall to be. She had no idea where the nearest lumberyard was, but there had to be one of those big-box do-it-yourself stores, a Home Depot, a Lowe's, at or close to the mall. They could manage to order some wood for her, couldn't they?

They were passing through an unevenly developed stretch of small businesses when she spotted a lumberyard on her left. She wrenched the steering wheel and, tires squealing, the car jolted into the parking lot, which had both boys, even the saturnine Colton, giggling. As the boys chased each other around a stack of lumber, despite her calls to them to stop, and as she tried to keep Shep from marking everything in sight, a tall, powerfully built man emerged from the shed and eyed all of them skeptically.
"Can I help you?" He asked doubtfully. He had graying, sandy hair and a ruddy complexion, and he reminded her of one of the agents at 12 who had thought a woman agent was an abomination.

Wrapping Shep's leash tightly around her hand, she cast a disdainful glance around the yard before looking at him with equal skepticism. "That remains to be seen," she said haughtily, "but it's a relatively straightforward project."

He gave her another look, this time a harder but more measuring one. "Let's hear it."

As she swiftly outlined her plan for the tree house, Jared, as he told her to call him, grew interested, making a few suggestions that she incorporated into the design. He knew his carpentry, she grudgingly admitted to herself, and when she asked how soon the wood, cut and treated to her specifications, could be delivered, he seemed genuinely regretful when he said it would be closer to weeks, not days. Looking at Drew, who, tiring of running around the yard, was sitting with Colton on a bench and gazing with boredom at the lumber, she leaned closer to Jared and said quietly, "I'm willing to pay whatever it takes to get the wood by Saturday." Friday was when Myka was supposed to come home. Saturday was soon enough to appear like a woman who was relationship-worthy, who knew what a commitment was and could honor it.

He nodded and scribbled an astronomical sum on a scrap of paper. "I can't get you exactly what you want by Saturday, but I can get you this and you'll hardly know the difference."

She nodded in turn. "If you can recommend a few men to help me out on Saturday, and Sunday, if necessary, I'll give you half of what the wood will cost as a referral fee. And I'll pay whomever you can line up twice that amount."

He whistled softly. "I'll bring out a couple of guys and some equipment and help you myself. We can start at dawn for this kind of money."

"Nine will do and make sure you include some tasks suitable for a boy to help with. . . and a hardhat he can wear."

He followed her gaze and smiled when he saw she was looking at Drew. "I think I may even have an extra tool belt for him."

She pursed her lips, remembering that Pete was going to "help" build the tree house. "Make that two hardhats and two tool belts."

Dinner that night was McDonald's, which, while not eliciting the excitement that pizza had, was greeted with shouts all the same as Helena made another careening turn into the drive-through lane, having nearly overshot it on their way back to Myka's house. Colton's cool regard of her hadn't changed after the trip to the lumberyard, and she acknowledged that she was petty enough to want to demolish him in one of Drew's video games, but she restrained herself, watching them play the treasure-hunting game as she sat on the sofa, reviewing additional information that Jacqui had e-mailed her on Jaffee's and Perkins' backers. As soon as the boys finished the second game, she was ushering them, perhaps a little too happily, into the car to take Colton home.

Helena sent Drew off for his bath once they returned, and, as usual, he seemed to hop in the tub only to hop immediately out of it. He still had streaks of toothpaste around his mouth when Helena came to wish him goodnight. He had spoken to Myka while the bath was running, jumbling soccer, lumber, and Happy Meals in a torrent of words, and taking the phone from him, Helena had received from Myka a sardonically amused "We'll talk about this later." Sitting on the edge of the bed and dabbing at his mouth with a washcloth to remove the excess toothpaste, she asked sternly,
"Did you wash behind your ears? Scrub your elbows and knees?"

"I'm clean," he protested, crooking his elbows for display and swinging them around so quickly for Helena's inspection that she barely avoided being hit in the face by one of them.

"That'll do," she said brusquely, but her smile belied the growl in her voice, and Drew flopped his arms on the sheet, exhaling loudly and with satisfaction.

"Can we build something else once the tree house is done?" He asked.

"We haven't even started on the tree house. How do you know you'll like building it?"

He lifted a shoulder, his expression commingling uncertainty and an impatience that Helena had had to ask the question, and she recognized only then that it wasn't so much building something else as being wrapped up in the excitement of a project and, possibly, planning something with her that he wanted to repeat. More gently, she said, "There are only so many trees in your yard, but maybe I can come up with something that won't alarm your parents."

He smiled sunnily at her. "Colton thinks you're okay."

Recalling that disapproving, freckled face, Helena doubted it, saying dryly, "I shall go to sleep immeasurably relieved that I've received his stamp of approval."

Drew looked up at her, sensing that Helena's response wasn't to be taken seriously but not sure which part of it he should focus on. Seeing his confusion, Helena relented. "I'm glad he enjoyed himself. Sweet dreams, Drew."

When Myka called her the next evening, Helena could report that she had shuttled Drew from math camp to soccer camp and then home without incident (and without a scowling Colton in the back seat), served him a meal that was not supplemented by soda or action figures, and ensured that he remained in the bathtub for more than 30 seconds by announcing that not only would there be a behind-the-ears and elbows-and-knees check but a between-the-toes check as well. Myka was silent, and Helena wasn't sure whether she was trying to digest the amount of parental responsibility Helena had shown or finding an omission in the care of her son. "I met her today," she said finally.

"Her?" Helena repeated.

"Suzanne Emory. I went to the Farraday after our meetings were over for the day." Helena was waiting for more, but Myka had fallen silent. After a long pause, Myka said quietly, "She's stunning. The pictures in the file don't do her justice. The file also didn't prepare me for how elegant and charming and smart she is."

Myka couldn't see the knowing smile on Helena's face, which, all things considered, was just as well. "She gave you a tour, did she?" Helena asked silkily.

"A little bit." Helena could picture Myka defensively scrunching her shoulders under her sweater and, if there were Twizzlers nearby, nibbling on one. "I was looking at some of the post-Impressionist paintings, and she was coming down the stairs. She was surprised to see me; it was virtually closing time."

Suzanne wasn't surprised to see you. She had probably scouted you from the moment you paid your admission fee. She just wanted to pick her spot for an "accidental" encounter. Helena said instead, as neutrally as she could manage, "Most visitors aren't so fortunate as to have the curator
"Give them a guided tour."

"You're saying it was no accident," Myka said, laughing a little.

"You're beautiful, Myka, and while Suzanne generally doesn't poach on museum territory - potentially very bad for business, you know - sometimes she just can't help herself."

"Not today," Myka sighed. "It's hot and humid, and my hair was all over the place, and my suit was plastered on me. . . ." Her words slowed, and she said suspiciously, "How do you know what she was doing?"

"Darling, I know how she operates."

"You've seen --." Then Myka understood, and she said hastily, "I don't think I want to know."

Helena thought she could hear the blood beat to Myka's face. But the blushing, and Myka's embarrassment, began to last too long, and Helena didn't find their silence a comfortable one, saying with a tentativeness that she didn't try to disguise, "You do know that's all in the past, right? Suzanne, the others." Sometimes Suzanne and another, but Helena didn't say it aloud.

"Claudia has made it very clear that I'm to be seeing only you."

But Myka didn't respond to the teasing note. "We're so different, you and I. Sometimes I forget, and then something brings it home. You haven't asked lately, but I'm not seeing Jeff any longer. That day we went to lunch, I broke it off. I can't . . . ." She stopped. "I've only slept with a stranger once, Helena, and that was because she looked so much like you, she could have been your twin."

"Myka. . . ." Helena gripped the phone so tightly her knuckles hurt.

"But it's not about how many sexual partners you've had and how few I've had. That's just a detail."

Myka snorted a little at her own words. "A big detail, but still a detail. Seeing your loft, that financial statement of yours we used with Sheffield, and then Suzanne. We've lived such different lives, the two of us, the past ten years. Sure, every so often I'm called out to neutralize an artefact that turns the harmless guy next door into the Incredible Hulk, but otherwise I'm like most people. I take my child to school, I try to keep in shape, and my guilty pleasure is watching a Shonda Rhimes show. That's my life, the Teslas and the neutralizing goo, they're window dressing."

"I can assure you that the last ten years of my life have hardly been glamorous. I think you know that, Myka," Helena said with emphasis. "I've raised children and done housework. I've lived that so-called ordinary life. We're not that different. Not in that respect."

Myka would be running her hand through her hair, yanking gently, or not so gently, at the roots as she did so. It was a stress-relieving gesture. "I used to imagine what it would've been like for you, if Christina hadn't died. I always come up with some quasi-Bloomsbury lifestyle -- I picture drafty old homes crowded with artists and eccentrics, every one of them your lover at some time or other. You're always inventing something, stories, devices -- "

"Letting my brood of illegitimate children run wild," Helena interjected, laughing, the tightness in her chest, and in the grip on her phone, easing. "Christina was inevitably going to be joined by a half-brother or sister or two. I was more careful after I had her, but I was far from a nun."

Myka was laughing as well, but there was still something too rueful about it for Helena's liking. "That's what I mean, about our being different. Honestly, can you see me in that life? Trying to order the chaos? I'm a one . . . person . . . woman, Helena, and I don't share, not in that way. I would've been a gorgon standing at the foot of your bed."
"Ready to turn to stone anyone so foolish as to enter my bedroom?" Helena said lightly. "That life you imagine, that's only one possibility, and since I was never all that convivial, I'm already feeling claustrophobic at having so many people in the house." The lightness faded. "You said that this would work only if I was willing to make room for you and Drew, if I was willing to stay. You have to trust that I am willing, that I want to stay." Her voice becoming uncertain, she said, "I thought you were going to suggest that we should slow down, take a step back. Maybe you are going to suggest it, but just know, darling, that it will be hard for me to do, because I've jumped in with both feet."

"I wasn't going to suggest anything like that, I just . . . ." More hair-tugging if the level of Myka's frustration was any indication. "Did you have to date a supermodel?"

It was so plaintively asked, as if Myka were once more a gawky, insecure teenager wondering when someone was going to notice her rather than the cheerleader, that Helena burst out with a relieved laugh. "Suzanne never strong-armed me against a wall in Tamalpais, she never trumped me with her perfect recall, she never trusted that I would save her life in a chess game," she said with loving indulgence. "She isn't you, she could never be you." Adopting an arch tone, Helena asked, "So, after the private tour, did Suzanne suggest getting a drink? Dinner?"

"Nothing like that. She hoped I had enjoyed the museum, and she said she had enjoyed the opportunity to talk about some of her favorite paintings." The frown was clear in Myka's voice. "I really don't think she was interested in me, not sexually, that is." At Helena's derisive huff, Myka added, "It's hard to put the Suzanne I saw with the Suzanne you know. The woman I saw - she's warm, committed. She wouldn't settle for the occasional weekend, she'd be wondering when she would next hear from you or see you."

"I think you're attributing characteristics you have to her," Helena said.

"Maybe." She hesitated. "It's almost as if . . . never mind," she said abruptly.

"She becomes whatever the person she's with expects or wants?" Helena finished Myka's sentence for her. "Her job title may be curator, but she does her share of glad-handing. The museum bears the Farraday name, but I don't know how much the family continues to fund it. She can't overlook a potential benefactor, and you have to be a bit of a chameleon to successfully raise money."

"Yes," Myka said slowly, still building on the thought.

"Since you're safely out of her clutches - I know, I know, you think she was merely befriending some poor, bedraggled government employee -- "

"I wouldn't say that I was bedraggled," Myka cut in. "And since then, I've changed and showered and I'm here all by myself on this king-sized bed."

"Not for long, darling, because I'm just about to join you," Helena said, stretching out on Myka's bed and pillowing her head on a bent arm.

"Wait, before we, you know . . . ." Suddenly, hurriedly, Myka said, "About my one-night stand with your identical twin. In the interests of full disclosure, I guess I should tell you about her. It was after Boone, and we were staying at the same hotel, and we --"

"It doesn't matter, she's not important. Suzanne's not important. Our differences are not important, not to me. Any life I led or might lead without you is not important." Helena waited one moment, two, then said very firmly, "Have I made myself clear?"
One moment, two, then a laugh, high and delighted and breathless, more like a giggle than a laugh, as if a gawky, insecure teenager finally realized that she, and not the cheerleader, was the center of attention. "I'm not sure," Myka said, "I'm afraid you're going to have to repeat that."

Myka didn't come back on Friday. Instead she flew to Charlotte to manage an eruption on Facebook and Twitter about people who were suddenly able to take flight, rocketing a few or several feet into the air. No deaths but several instances of broken bones as the victims' ability to launch themselves deserted them as quickly as it had appeared. "This is the home of Kitty Hawk, after all," Myka had sighed on the phone to Helena as she headed toward baggage claim. So she wasn't home to worry her bottom lip when, shortly after Jared and his crew arrived, the backyard filled with stacks of wood, power tools, and a pick-up truck or two. Drew ran excitedly among the men, a hardhat two sizes too big slipping from one side of his head to the other, as he led them to the tree. Helena took pictures of him with her phone, trying to keep the pick-up trucks parked in the yard out of the frame, and sent them to Myka. Pete came later in the morning, exhausted from a red-eye flight from Los Angeles, but he grinned when he saw his son, and Helena took a picture of him and Drew together, swaggering with their hardhats and tool belts. She took another picture, a few hours later, of Pete's swollen thumb, which had gotten caught between the hammer and the nail it was supposed to have hit. When she wasn't taking pictures or ordering lunch, or trying to keep Drew hydrated and out of the sun - the temperature had climbed into the 90s by the afternoon - she was with Jared and his men, constructing the tree house's platform and putting the walls in place. By the time the men left early in the evening, the tree house was mostly built, and though she was pleased with it, she had to admit that it looked more like a tugboat than a pirate ship. The bow and stern were short, and the cabin dominated the middle of the ship.

Drew didn't care, exclaiming that it was the best tree house he had ever seen. He didn't even mind that the crow's nest had become something less ambitious, a small observation deck built above the prow of the ship. At the last, Helena had given in to the caution that had used to visit her when Christina was small, keeping glass containers out of reach, not letting her play among horses. When she had an image of Drew clinging to a slender, bending branch after toppling out of the crow's nest, she had thrown her designs for it away. It was the same kind of caution that had her holding him back by his shoulders when he wanted to run up the staircase and through the tree house. She urged him to wait until tomorrow, when the tree house would be completely finished.

Sunday afternoon brought Jared and his men back. Pete, unable to pry Drew away from the house and, by extension, the backyard and tree house, even for a night, had shown up in the morning, boxes of doughnuts in hand. Claiming that his injured thumb prevented him from taking an active role, he sprawled in a lounge chair on the patio "overseeing" the finishing touches. When Claudia stopped by, Drew dragged her to the tree, and she good-naturedly oohed and ahhed, but her eyes, as they met Helena's over Drew's head, were serious, and Helena suggested that he go into the house and get Jared another soda.

"How do you feel about pairing up with Pete for a snag-and-bag in Kenosha, Wisconsin?" As Helena rolled her eyes, mainly in feigned reluctance, Claudia said, "Glad you're for it. I don't know that we're dealing with a replicated artefact, but a couple of our junior agents were out there on another retrieval about three months ago. It's not like Kenosha's the Vegas of the Midwest, so why two artefacts would pop up there has me worried. I want people I can trust on the job, and since Myka's away --"

"Pete and I get the dubious pleasure of each other's company, yes, I understand. So when do the good times roll?"
"Tonight." Claudia raised her hand in a gesture that was as much about forestalling Helena's objections as trying to placate her. Part boss, part sympathetic fellow agent. "Myka's going to try to catch a flight out yet this evening, and until she comes through the door, I'll stay with Drew."

Tucking her hands into her jeans' pockets, she started to walked back to the house, and Helena fell into step with her. She was certainly in no hurry to repack her bag and head to the airport. In the few days she had spent at Myka's house, she had enjoyed sitting on the patio of a morning with a cup of tea, gazing at the Black Hills in the distance. It was quiet here, except for the thumping and running of Drew and the dog, and even that was comforting in its predictability. What she wanted to do now was sit at the table on the patio, under the shade of its umbrella, and watch as Drew tried to assist the men as they sanded down the last few rough edges or tapped in one more nail.

"Nice job there," Claudia said, stopping and turning to look at the tree house. "Think he'll let me play in it?" As Drew rushed past them, holding out a can of Coke as if Jared were some god of tree houses to whom he was making an offering, Claudia shouted, "Drew, you going to let me come over and play in your tree house?"

"Maybe," he shouted in return.

"If you've stolen my place in his affections," Claudia said, waving her finger threateningly in Helena's face, "there are places in the Warehouse I can put you where no one will ever find you."

"Darling, I was bronzed for over a hundred years. You can't scare me with the Warehouse." At least not that way, Helena added to herself as she pushed the waving finger aside.

As they approached the patio, Pete was talking animatedly, gesturing as if the person on the other end of the conversation was sitting across from him at the table. Slipping into a chair and scooting it farther away from him, Helena saw that it was her phone he was yelling into, and it was Myka's voice, sounding weary and irritable, that was coming from the speaker. "You said she's what?"

"I said that guy she's got from the lumberyard, the way he's looking at her I'm thinking the tree house isn't the only thing he wants to nail."

"You just wanted to make a play on 'nail,' didn't you?" Myka accused him. "Someone punch him in the shoulder for me, please."

Claudia obliged, as Helena sent Pete a withering look. "Jared's been a perfect gentleman, and if he's been admiring, it's solely because, unlike most women of his acquaintance, I understand the basic principles of construction," she said reassuringly into the phone.

"It's the usual, Myka." Claudia impatiently flicked away a lock of hair that had fallen across her forehead. "Jared's been a perfect gentleman, and if he's been admiring, it's solely because, unlike most women of his acquaintance, I understand the basic principles of construction," she said reassuringly into the phone.

"It's the usual, Myka." Claudia impatiently flicked away a lock of hair that had fallen across her forehead. "Pete's being juvenile, and H.G.'s acting as if a show of humility would kill her."

Her voice growing warmer, Myka said, "Like I said last night, the tree house looks great in the pictures you sent, Helena. Thank you."

"It reminds me a little of the Skipper's boat on Gilligan's Island," Pete said "but Drew'll never know the difference." As Helena kicked him in the ankles, he said, aggrieved, "It doesn't look like a pirate ship, that's all I'm saying."

"It doesn't," Helena conceded, although she wasn't about to apologize for kicking him in the ankles. He deserved it for the comment about Jared wanting to nail her, if nothing else.

"It's just fine, regardless of what it looks like," Myka said soothingly.
"That's what she kept saying about you on your wedding day," Claudia said to Pete.

Helena smiled. Put Claudia, Pete, and Myka together for any length of time, and the ribbing and needling, along with a few half-hearted attempts at peacekeeping, wouldn't be far behind. It was familiar, and seemed as natural happening on the patio behind Myka's house with her son running up and down the stairs to the tree house as it did in the B&B's kitchen 12 years ago. As Pete and Claudia continued to amiably trade gibes, Myka stepping in to referee, Helena recognized that the difference between then and now was that she didn't see herself outside it, unconnected. The affectionate digs the three were exchanging, the intermittent shouts and bursts of laughter from the men working on the tree house, Drew's theatrical orders to "Stop!" and "Halt!" from the observation deck to an imaginary merchant ship (she would have to school him in pirate jargon, it would seem), even Shep's barks and whines as he responded to the command in Drew's voice, they made for no celestial harmony - Helena wasn't sentimental enough to think that - but they wove the afternoon together and her within it. For once, she didn't feel herself to be a discordant note. It wouldn't last for long, she knew, but she could appreciate it for as long as it lasted.

It had been on late summer afternoons like this, albeit cooler and greener ones, that she had lain on the grass with Christina, observing insects lumber over twigs and leaves or wildly beat their wings as they settled on a flower. Pointing out an ant scaling a blade of grass, she would attempt to explain what made ants such marvelous creatures, while Christina, more of a born storyteller than her mother, although displaying a fondness for treacly tales that Helena could only hope she would outgrow, invented a story behind the ant's labor; the little lost ant was climbing mountainous blades of grass in search of its parents, or it was a mother ant in search for food for her babies. Sometimes when she was here as well as there, the present would be the hazier, more indistinct of the two, sometimes the past. But today, this afternoon, this minute, Helena felt she was equally in both. The gap in Christina's teeth where she had lost a front tooth, the squareness of her fingers, as clear to Helena sitting a continent away and more than 100 years in the future from her daughter as Claudia's chewed thumbnail or the water rings left by Pete's bottle of root beer. If not at peace, never at peace, she at least felt that she was standing on steady ground, neither of her two worlds shearing away from her.

"What do you think?" Pete was asking her. "It's the age-old question, about why the Warehouse smells like apples. Why not cookies or Doritos, something that I, for instance, would want to smell?"

Helena looked down at her phone, still in front of Pete. The screen was black; Myka must have ended the call. She would call her back later when she could be assured of some privacy. "Haven't the foggiest notion. Perhaps the last thing it wants is an intimate relationship with you. If only a disappointingly large number of women had felt the same."

"Ow, ow, ow." Pete crossed his arms over his stomach. "Jeez, you're mean sometimes."

Helena ignored him and waved at Jared as he crossed the yard toward her. His face even ruddier in the heat, he rubbed his arm across his cheeks and nose to wipe the sweat away. She invited him to sit down, but he shook his head. "It's all done. Eric put up the Jolly Roger." He pointed at the tree house, and she followed the line of his arm and saw the flag hanging limply outside the cabin. "Wife's going to be wondering where I am. She was hoping I'd restain our deck today." He shook hands with all three of them, encouraging Helena to give him a call the next time she had a project in mind. Pete worked his eyebrows suggestively at Helena once Jared had turned away, and Claudia slapped him in the shoulder again. "Just because he's married doesn't mean he wouldn't have fantasies about you working his wood, so to speak," he stage whispered. "I can't help it, 'wood,' 'nail,' 'hammer,' you're just lucky I've kept the worst of it in because of Drew," he said in his normal voice.
"Oh, I'm very lucky," Helena said dryly.

Claudia tapped her watch and looked pointedly at Pete. "You need to be hightailing it home and packing. Your flight to Milwaukee leaves in a few hours."

"Okay, okay, boss. Can I say good-bye to my son first?" Pete shoved his chair back and headed in the direction of the treehouse.

"The thing about apples, they're a hardy fruit. If you need a fruit to have your back, it's an apple. It's tough," Claudia said conversationally. "They can keep forever, and you can cut out a bruised spot or a worm," she said, shuddering at the last, "and still have apple left to eat. That is, if you aren't grossed out by having a worm in your food." She rolled her eyes up at the umbrella, as if she were debating whether she'd still eat an apple in that case. "Can't say that about other fruits. They get a brown spot, and they're toast. They're done. It's pretty frakkin' hard to totally ruin an apple, when you think about it."

"I refer to the collective wisdom of the Jackson 5 and note that one bad apple can come perilously close to spoiling the bunch," Helena said wryly. "But I will think on what you said once the dizziness stops from my head-on collision with the moral of your story."

"I think it's the Osmonds, but you get an A for effort." Claudia smiled. "Myka and Mrs. F. are in agreement concerning one thing about you. You don't see what's right in front of you." Leaning across the table, she pressed the tip of her finger between Helena's brows. "So I'm here to remind you, don't close your eyes."

As Claudia sat back in her chair, Helena's glance lingered on her phone. Failing to see Myka hadn't been her problem. Her problem had been that she could never not see her. She knew that Claudia hadn't been talking about Myka, not this time. But Helena had lived for a hundred years without seeing her reflection, she didn't have a need to start seeing it now. She knew what would stare back at her.
Chapter 12

Helena waited outside baggage claim. Myka had texted her that she would be picking her up in their rental car, so Helena had taken her bag, which contained the clothes she had worn in Kenosha and hadn't had time to launder, and picked a spot just outside the sliding doors. It was broiling, and the shadows thrown by the building weren't much cooler than the sunlight. But they were cooler, and they hid the t-shirt she had bought at a gift store, which was lavender and had 'Denver' written across the chest in purple metallic script. It was the most muted of the women's t-shirts on sale, and Helena desperately wanted to shed the top she had been wearing for the past 15 hours. So she had bought it and changed into it in the ladies room; all she needed were two tired, fretful children next to her, and she'd look like a mom desperately hoping that the family's summer vacation was over. She hadn't intended to look like a frumpy middle-aged mother when she saw Myka again after an almost two week absence, and she hadn't intended to see Myka at the Denver airport. The call had come in late the night before; she and Pete were booked on a 9:00 a.m. flight from Milwaukee the next day for home, but she learned she would be driving to Chicago and taking a flight to Denver instead. Claudia had said there was another instance of a replicated artefact, this time in western Oklahoma. Myka would be meeting her, and they would be driving down to Boise City. Wasn't the Boise City in Idaho enough, she had grumbled over the phone, couldn't the town's founders have come up with something more suggestive of the desolation of that part of the Great Plains and closer to what she actually felt, such as The Next Best Place to Hell? But she had reset her alarm for 4:00 a.m. Just in case she slept.

Once she had gotten to Chicago, her flight was cancelled because of mechanical problems, and she had been rebooked to Denver through Atlanta. Another delay, this time weather-related, and finally, several hours and two, maybe three, screwdrivers in coach later, she was walking up the jetway in Denver, wanting to crawl out of her clothes as quickly as possible. But the gift store sold only t-shirts and hats, not panties and pants. She could have walked down to the western wear store, where she could have picked up some boot-cut jeans. Yes, and she'd slip into them just before she went line dancing. Helena rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses.

Her head was already pounding, a combination of sleeplessness, the cramped confines of the airplane, and the three mixed drinks. She had bought a bottle of water in the gift store in addition to the t-shirt, and she drank from it as she looked for the economy car that Myka would be driving. It was a nearly five hour drive from Denver to Cimarron County, the westernmost county in the Panhandle, which would put them in Boise City around midnight. It would have been much shorter had they driven north from Amarillo, but it was cheaper to fly into Denver. Thanks to that spasm of DHS-inspired cost-consciousness, she was wearing a hideous lavender t-shirt and battling, unsuccessfully it seemed, a metaphoric screwdriver boring through her head.

A black SUV pulled in next to the curb, and Helena listlessly eyed it until she recognized the driver who had jumped out and was opening the back of the car. Yanking at her bag until it more or less wobbled obediently behind her, Helena hurried to the curb, aware that Myka was reading the design on her t-shirt and grinning. Helena expected a smart remark, a business-like "we're both agents here" hug, and the tossing of her suitcase into the SUV. And some of those elements did happen as expected, only in a different order, because first Myka grabbed her and held Helena tightly to her, leaving the suitcase to fall on its side and the bottle of water to drop to the concrete unnoticed. She stepped back but simply to reposition them so she could step in to Helena again and give her a decidedly "we're not just agents here" kiss. Myka broke the kiss long enough to whisper roughly next to her ear, "I've missed you so much." Then she resumed the kiss for a few seconds more before the shrill sound of an airport security whistle broke them apart, and Helena was left to dazedly touch her bottom lip as Myka pushed the suitcase between two others, still feeling the
pressure of Myka's mouth as she had sucked that lip between her teeth. Taking the keys from a pocket of her shorts and walking backwards toward the driver's side of the SUV, Myka cocked her head and glanced at Helena's t-shirt, gaze zeroing in on the girlishly cursive 'Denver.' "Come to the big city for a good time, have you?"

"Are you going to give me one, or are you just going to tease me to death?" Helena challenged, but she knew that her ludicrously happy smile said she would take the teasing-to-death so long as Myka was her tormentor.

"Only teasing for now," Myka said, putting the SUV into gear as Helena buckled in and took off her sunglasses. Threading through the airport traffic, Myka shot her another grin, less broad but just as pleased. "How do you like the tank? With the kind of drive we have ahead of us, I wanted some leg room. And arm room. And, well, just room." Helena could have sworn Myka's cheeks were pinking, but she was sure it was only an accident of the sun, shining on... something. Jerking her head toward the back seat, Myka said, "I hope you don't mind that I want to push on. I picked you up a sandwich."

"Thank you." Helena unbuckled her seatbelt long enough to grab the bag from the seat. "I don't mean to sound like a whiny bitch, darling, but if you could have picked up some clean clothes for me, that would have been heavenly. Claudia gave me just enough advance notice to get to Chicago."

"That's what the extra suitcase has," Myka said smugly. The rare cocky smile she flashed at Helena grew more knowing. "Interesting collection of panties you have."

"Darling, don't act like you've never seen them."

"I've been too busy getting them off you to notice," Myka said. She changed lanes and increased the car's speed. "More lace than I'd expect for a former Warehouse agent and inventor."

Between bites of her sandwich, a smoked turkey and chutney concoction spicy enough to make her eyes water, Helena said, "If you'd had to wear knee-length cotton drawers for a good portion of your life, you'd appreciate something... utilitarian... as well. But if it makes you feel better, I'm wearing a pair of pink grannies today."

"You are not," Myka said in disbelief.

"Pull over onto the shoulder, and I'll show you."

For a moment, Helena thought that Myka might take her up on her offer. There was a steadiness in how Myka held her gaze, a lift to her chin that suggested she might cross the several lanes of the interstate, and not only screech to a stop on the shoulder but also pull down Helena's pants herself. Helena found it difficult to swallow the mass of smoked turkey and chutney she had in her mouth for suddenly wanting Myka to do just that. The frustration of the waiting that had taken up most of her day, the headache, the awful t-shirt, all were gone in the visual Helena summoned of Myka pinning her between the seat and the door and easing down the zipper of her pants.

But Myka's eyes were back on the road. "As much as I'd like to, I can't see that causing a multi-car collision justifies it. For now, I'll take your word for it." Changing the subject, she said, "We haven't talked since the first night you were in Kenosha. How did the retrieval go? Is Pete returning intact?"

Unbuckling her seatbelt again, Helena was examining the other treasures on the back seat: a 12-pack of water, from which she wrested a bottle; a stack of folders, which almost certainly detailed
their newest retrieval and which Myka would foolishly expect her to read; and a scattering of maps and atlases. "In answer to your questions, we successfully acquired the artefact, which was not a replicated artefact, by the way, and Pete is, yes, intact, which is more a testament to my forbearance, I'll have you know, than to his behavior." The laughter bubbling in her voice undercut the severity of her tone.

Helena picked up a couple of the maps and resettled in her seat. The sun was beginning to set, but she could see the detail on the maps without needing to turn on the overhead light. They would take the exit for Highway 287, which held more interest for Myka than it did for her, as she let Myka's mini-lecture about the length of the highway, about where it began and where it ended, wash over her, following only the enthusiasm in Myka's voice. Helena looked at her, eyes almost stroking the long line of her legs, Myka's shorts having invitingly bunched up on her thighs. In her short-sleeved plaid blouse, the tangle of curls sweeping over the collar, Myka looked summery in the practical, no-nonsense, my shorts-are-stain-resistant-chinos way that she always wanted to present. Nothing could ruffle her, nothing could disturb her. But all Helena needed to do - well, she was pretty sure that it would be all she needed to do - was to stretch over and run her hand up a thigh, wriggle it under the shorts, and keep her fingers moving, and Myka's eyes would take on that slightly panicked look when someone, no, not someone, she called her bluff. Because Myka was never that in control, not on the inside, not when she was around. Helena had always sensed it but hadn't wanted to believe it, hadn't wanted to know she was responsible for making Myka feel as aching and hollowed-out as she felt. But things were different now --

"Don't do it," Myka said. "I know what you're thinking of doing. I'm driving, Helena. I need to focus." The note of warning was losing ground to a plaintiveness that surprised Helena. She was used to seeing Myka struggle harder against that loss of control, to give into it only if she could, paradoxically, limit it, restrict it. As she had the first time they had slept together, after their retrieval in New York, when Myka had invited Helena to come home with her with all the fire and passion of an offer to stay the night in her guest room, as if Helena were a friend passing through town. But the kiss at the airport earlier in the evening and now Myka, not admonishing or rebuking or refusing, but pleading with her, really, not to make her lose her concentration, drive them off into a ditch - although in a landscape this flat, where was the nearest ditch? - this was something new in their relationship. Helena wasn't sure whether she was more confused or aroused.

In the hopes of relaxing them both, she took a long breath and suggested, "Why don't I tell you about Kenosha and why it wasn't a retrieval of a replicated artefact? Then you can tell me about Boise City and why you and Claudia think this one is."

When she had lived in Boone, Helena had been only a couple of hours away, at most, from Kenosha but never had the occasion to go there. Having spent almost a week in the city, she saw no reason to return. It wasn't horrible, just unremarkable, a larger developed spot in an almost unbroken line of development trailing up the western shore of Lake Michigan from Chicago to Milwaukee. The only thing that was making Kenosha of interest to anyone besides a Kenoshan was the decidedly strange goings-on. At first it had been only a matter of a few people walking away from their jobs or homes in the middle of the day to sob hysterically or to sink into a depression so deep that they could barely be roused from it. Then had come the pile-ups on the interstate and drivers and passengers walking, sometimes crawling, away from the collisions laughing just as hysterically as others had cried, broken limbs and bloody cuts not even an afterthought. After a train derailment, when the engineer had been discovered wailing in the men's restroom, and a number of incidents involving small planes veering off runways, when the pilots were found breathless with laughter in their seats, the Warehouse became involved. There was no upside in letting the NTSB, which was investigating the accidents, stumble upon an artefact. Months before, Warehouse agents had been sent to Kenosha to retrieve an artefact, a red rubber nose that had belonged to Emmett Kelly, which caused the possessors to attempt the ham-handed magic tricks
and clumsy acrobatics performed by circus clowns, actions which in and of themselves weren't harmful, except when the person was trying to 'disappear' a baby in a top hat or was on the verge of taking a swan dive off a tenth-floor apartment balcony. The fear, Claudia's and Jane Lattimer's, was that the nose had been replicated, with the same drifting of its properties that had afflicted the replicated artefacts in New York.

Helena and Pete had spent the better part of two days reinvestigating the previous retrieval, re-interviewing the people who had come into contact with the clown nose artefact, but there was no apparent connection between them and the people who were being affected by the new artefact, whatever it was. More significantly, none of the victims were suffering the fatal side effect of a replicated artefact, lapsing into unconsciousness and then slipping into an irreversible coma. The injuries suffered were the result of the falls, collisions, and traffic accidents that the hysterical crying and laughing caused. The third day of the retrieval had been spent talking to victims who could no longer remember what had led them to walk into the middle of busy intersections, crying so hard that they literally couldn't see the stoplight, or, conversely, had doubled them over with laughter as they drove their children not to but into school. At 10:00 that night Helena and Pete were staring grumpily at each other over their meals at a local bar and grill. Furthering souring her mood, because she was already unhappy that they were returning to their hotel rooms too late at night for her to do anything more than send limp texts to Myka on the order of 'Another long day. Miss you,' was her realization that she wanted Pete's burger, not her own 'lite' entree. There was a burst of laughter from the bar as a man, unsteadily waving his glass, was shouting predictions about the upcoming football season, insisting that the Packers were going to win the Super Bowl.

Pete had twisted his head to take in the scene at the bar. "Don't miss that. All the clowning around that no one thinks is funny, and you're too drunk to notice."

"I can assure you that your nonalcohol-induced clowning around isn't funny, and yet you remain blithely ignorant to -." Helena cut herself off and raised her eyebrows at Pete. In a completely different tone, she said, "The crying jags, the inappropriate laughter. . . ."

"The not-remembering afterward," Pete finished for her. "Like blackouts. It's as though they're on the worst bender of their lives." He groaned and rubbed his face. "We've been on the wrong track all this time. But we're in the heart of beer country - it could be almost anything."

But it wasn't. Going back for another series of interviews, they isolated the commonality among the victims - they all had commemorative beer mugs from the same brewery in Milwaukee, and each of the victims had used the mug the night before he or she descended helplessly into tears or, laughing all the while, plowed into the back wall of the garage. The beverages had run the gamut, from alcohol to chicken soup, which meant that it was the mug, and not what was in it, that was the issue. Spending their fourth and fifth days of the retrieval going through kitchen cupboards, man caves, and more than a few attics and dropping the mugs into their neutralizing bags, Helena reflected that this was yet another thing new Warehouse agents were never told - how much of their time would be spent sifting through all the things that ordinary families ordinarily accumulate in order to find that one extraordinary object that was the artefact: school photos, Mom's souvenir spoon collection, Dad's fishing lures. Most of the time the items held no significance to anyone but family members, and sometimes not even them. At other times, what the agents would find was grim. During an artefact retrieval during her first few months at 13, Helena had opened a shoebox stuffed in a dark corner of a teenager's closet to find Ziploc bags of prescription medicines he had been stealing from his parents. On occasion what turned up in their searches was heartbreaking. When she had been at 12, she and her partners had frequently found themselves picking through mementoes of children lost in infancy or to illnesses for which the nineteenth century had no cures. Helena had always closed her eyes when she discovered a rattle or a baby's hairbrush bound to bunches of dried flowers and yellowed expressions of sympathy, thanking chance, if nothing else,
for sparing her a similar loss. Until she lost Christina, and then she would toss the mementoes aside in her search, as if they were so much garbage to be removed from the house.

On the sixth day of the retrieval, she and Pete had driven to Milwaukee to speak with the president of the brewery. It wasn't always clear why an object had become an artefact, and if the agent couldn't explain why, Caturanga had drummed it into her, he couldn't be certain that the threat had been completely neutralized. "Why only Kenosha?" Pete had wondered on the drive up. "Shouldn't we be seeing it in Milwaukee too?" "Multiple artefacts," Helena had muttered, barely listening to him, which was typical of a great many of their interactions, "but they don't feel like replicated artefacts." At which Pete had yelled, "Feel like? Did you hear yourself? You can deny it all you want, H.G., but partnering with me has taught you a few things. Like the importance of intuition -"

"And the centrality of fart jokes and so-called funny pictures of monkeys to bonding with you. Which is why, Peter, and you and I are never meant to be -"

"Lovers. I know, Mykes is kind of old-fashioned about things like fidelity. But we can long for each other from afar." The goofily lovelorn look he gave her, a crimped mouth, cross-eyed affair, had Helena laughing in spite of herself.

They hadn't found much to laugh at in the brewery's executive suite where they had found the president unhappily surveying the half-boxed contents of his office. The brewery, a family-owned enterprise, had been sold on the eve of the 145th anniversary of its founding, to a conglomerate whose best known products were cleaning products and TV dinners. The president had been attending a charity golf event in Kenosha when he had received a call from the chairman of the brewery's board informing him that the brewery had been sold and that his services would no longer be needed. The president had been carting around a sample case of the mugs in the trunk of his car; trying to decide whether mugs or pilsner glasses were the way to go for commemorative gifts to the employees. Well, screw that. After a few (or more) consoling drinks at the club house, he had taken the box from the trunk and handed out mugs to every golfer he saw until the box was empty.

"That was our grand mission in Kenosha, to neutralize an artefact created by a self-pitying executive, who no doubt will be in receipt of a handsome severance package," Helena grumped. Becoming more indignant, she said, "Claudia actually thought someone would want to replicate the properties of an Emmett Kelly artefact. What does recreating the ability to bobble a simple magic trick or take a pratfall get one?"

"I bet Pete said he would pay money to have a replicated clown artefact," Myka said with a smile in her voice.

"That just proves my point," Helena exclaimed. "Who with a shred of common sense would bother?"

"The artefact or artefacts we've been sent to Ellis to retrieve are a different matter entirely," Myka said soothingly. "I think if you open the glove compartment, you'll find a Heath bar."

"Are you trying to placate me? And did you just say Ellis? I thought we were going to Boise City."

"We're staying in Boise City, the artefact's in Ellis." Myka nodded toward the glove compartment. "C'mon, open it."

"Then why aren't we staying in Ellis? Is the Super 8 in Boise City more palatial?" Helena crossed her arms, peering at Myka in the deepening gloom of the car.
"Babe, eat your Heath bar. I'll explain it in a minute."

Helena tried to look miffed, but she was already opening the glove compartment. She did love toffee, she had suffered through an excruciating day, and she was wearing a horrid shirt. Moreover, she had just relived the six days - six full days - she spent in the company of Pete Lattimer. She deserved that toffee. She deserved to have Myka feed it to her, but she would settle for nibbling the candy bar in the dark. Tearing open the wrapper, she half-heartedly offered a part of the bar to Myka, who waved it away.

"You know how I feel about sugar." Myka had assumed a straight face, but her voice began to crack with laughter at her own absurdity. "Besides, I think it's the candy bar equivalent of butter brickle ice cream. It makes me feel like I'm dating my great-grandmother."

"Incest aside, I can imagine what a staid affair that would be," Helena said as she bit off a corner of the Heath bar. "Cautious, conscientious, observant of all the proprieties." Wriggling against the seatbelt so that she could turn toward Myka, Helena asked, "Is there anyone in your family tree who remotely approached being a free spirit?" She bit off another piece, letting the chocolate melt on her tongue.

"I believe most Berings thought a carriage was a conveyance, not a bedroom on wheels," Myka said dryly.

"If only they had been bedrooms on wheels," Helena said a little sadly. "They were cramped and smelled horribly for the most part, and a woman would spend most of the time she allotted for an assignation getting her skirts above her waist."

"Jesus, Helena," Myka said, the exhalation more sigh than laugh.

Taking a bigger bite of the bar and pushing the toffee momentarily to the side of her mouth in what she only belatedly realized was a Pete-like display of manners (or lack thereof), Helena said, "I told you that Christina was conceived in a carriage." After swallowing the toffee, she continued, "Considering the difficulties involved, how rare it was to consummate... at least to the woman's satisfaction, it was a minor miracle that her conception happened. Maybe Croydon sperm were exceptionally hardy, but I always thought that that tiny egg must have known who it was going to be." She paused. "It's about the only time in my life when I believed in a 'soul.' Because how else could such an indifferent coupling produce Christina unless she were only waiting to be born?" She felt Myka's fingers lightly touch her face and then, clearing her throat, Myka said, "About the artefact that might have been replicated... . . ."

Two Warehouse agents had been dispatched to Oklahoma City to investigate the source of the literally spellbinding oratory of a state representative. Never known as a magnetic public speaker, the representative would no sooner begin advocating a measure before the House than all the representatives would roar their unanimous approval. The senate had been able to block most of the bills, which were more radically conservative than they had the courage to pass, even in a conservative state. Bills to abolish the state income tax, to make morning prayer mandatory in the workplace, to roll back every environmental protection and regulation. The agents discovered that the representative would place a battered Bible on the table whenever he rose to speak. When they managed to substitute another Bible, equally battered, the representative would stammer and mumble and eventually trail off into incoherence.

"It was Aimee Semple McPherson's Bible," Myka said.

"Ah, yes, a televangelist before the term was coined," Helena mused. "Bit of a fraud though, wasn't she?" She felt rather than saw Myka's shrug.
"She has her detractors. But what no one can deny is that, for a while, she was enormously popular. She's also thought to be one of the first people to understand the power of the media to attract a following."

"At last, an artefact worth replicating." Helena looked out the window. With the exception of the twin cones of the SUV's headlights and those of a few other vehicles, there was no light. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen such unrelieved blackness, other than when she had been encased in bronze. That was an unsettling thought. Blocking it from her mind, she pulled her t-shirt away from her chest, convinced that she had dropped chocolate on it. The chocolate had probably already melted, and the next time Myka saw her in the light, she'd look like a superannuated five-year-old. How romantic. The chocolate stains would give her an excuse to throw the t-shirt away, although she felt the spangly 'Denver' would be written on her chest for days.

In the light from the dashboard, she could see that Myka was running her hand through her hair. "We can't enter Ellis because this new artefact, potentially replicated from McPherson's Bible, seems to have affected the whole town. The state police has blocked all access to it." A hard tug at the hair. The more Myka fiddled with her hair, the more difficult Helena could count on the retrieval being. She had been introduced to the Bering scale of retrieval difficulty soon after joining 13. A few passes of Myka's hand through her hair meant the retrieval presented only a moderate level of difficulty. Repeated tugging at her hair presaged a retrieval of significant danger. Then there was the retrieval when Myka had reputedly pulled at her hair so frequently that the curls stood out from her head at right angles. That was the retrieval when both she and Pete had ended up in the hospital. The New York retrieval had occasioned only a modest level of hair tugging, if Helena remembered correctly. Ellis, if Myka's early hair-tugging was any indication, was going to be a bad one.

"The few people who managed to escape the town describe everyone falling under a spell, gathering around a TV, a radio, a computer monitor, anything capable of broadcasting or displaying a signal. It didn't matter whether they were on, people were just as transfixed by a blank screen." Myka rubbed her shoulders against the back of the seat, trying to unknot muscles. "The ones who escaped were the ones already on their way out of town, a trucker, a rancher, the mailman starting his rural routes, and even they said it was almost impossible not to stay and join the rest."

"So, as far as anyone knows, everyone in Ellis is still grouped around a TV," Helena said musingly. "How long has it been?" A sign on the side of the highway flashed past them. Boise City was another 75 miles away.

"Long enough for the governor to shut down all media coverage - in the interest of the public good - and to discreetly contact various government agencies." Myka pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to smother a yawn. "Did I just see a sign saying Boise City was about an hour away?"

Helena risked drawing her fingers slowly up Myka's thigh, letting them linger at the hem of Myka's shorts. "If you think I'm going to let you sleep after not seeing you for an eternity, you're sadly mistaken. As soon as we check in to the Boise City Days Inn or whatever passes for five-star accommodations there, I'm going to..." She strained against her seatbelt to put her lips against Myka's neck.

"Take pity on me," Myka groaned, more seriously than not. "Ever since I've been home, I've been sleeping in that damn tree house. Drew hardly leaves it. My first day back, we had to go out for air mattresses because he wanted to stay in the captain's cabin all night. He keeps spouting things like 'A captain has to stay with his ship.' I'm pretty sure he means a captain should go down with his
ship, but I don't have the heart to tell him that a pirate captain probably wouldn't be so self-sacrificing." She didn't seem to notice that Helena's hand was inching upward. "It's a beautiful tree house, Helena, and I love you for building it for him, but you're going to stay out there with him next time."

Myka had said she loved her. Granted, it was the jokey kind of declaration someone makes when somebody buys her a frappuccino after a hard day, but Helena wasn't proud, not when it came to Myka anyway, she would take it. When Myka parted her legs to ease Helena's access, and her breathing became faster, more audible, Helena's jaws clamped so hard in surprise that she thought she might have cracked a tooth. With her other hand, she fumbled to release the seatbelt. Myka didn't object to that either. "It's all about the angle here, darling," Helena said softly. "And it helps to be unencumbered. I'll take my chances that you're not going to cross lanes." Sliding closer to Myka, she looked at the virtually empty stretch of highway in front of them. "And take out a jackrabbit or tumbleweed."

"If I don't want to fall asleep behind the wheel, it's either keep talking about Ellis . . . or this."

"Really, really missed? Is that a euphemism, darling, as opposed to having only missed me? Really, really suggesting this, of course." Helena's hand edged underneath the leg of Myka's panties. "A vast improvement over calling out states from license plates." She traced whorls of wiry hair and then, parting skin so soft that it seemed to sluice between her fingers, like water, she teased, "Why didn't we think of it years ago?"

Myka gasped out a laugh. "Come to think of it, we did do a lot of snacking on those road trips. Were we sublimating?"

Her forehead brushing against Myka's headrest, feeling the muscles in her jaw, her throat, swell in sympathy as her fingers stroked, Helena said, "I was fond of those chocolate snack cakes with the cream centers." She moved her head down to kiss the rim of Myka's ear peeping palely through her hair. "I'd break the cake in half to get at the center first, then scoop out the cream and lick it off my fingers."

"You did not," Myka objected breathily, but she freed a hand from the steering wheel to press Helena's hand harder against her.

"True, I didn't," Helena said just as breathily. "But it seemed an appropriate embellishment." With her other hand, she unbuttoned Myka's shorts and pulled down the zipper, trying not to jostle the steering wheel. "You pretended that you were satisfied with your Twizzlers, but I always found a snack cake missing." She lightly rubbed Myka's abdomen. She loved the sensation of soft skin undergirded by the smooth, hard plane of muscle, the tactile version of a sweet-salty combination. Or maybe she loved that it was Myka's skin and Myka's muscle.

Myka failed to bite back a groan. "It could have been Pete, you know."

"It could have been, but he didn't leave a chocolate cake crumb or two in the corners of his mouth." Aware of the precariousness of her balance, hands doing other things than supporting her, Helena leaned in and kissed the corner of Myka's mouth. "And if he had, I certainly wouldn't have wanted to lick it away, as I wanted to do with you."

"I couldn't have left crumbs because I didn't eat the cakes," Myka murmured, weakly, in protest. As Helena accelerated her stroking, her own breath catching, Myka moaned and shifted to allow her more access, then just as suddenly stopped. "I am not going to come like this. I'm a 43-year-old
woman who is driving a tank down a US highway."

The words sounded more resolute than her voice, and Helena said, "I'm almost there myself, darling. I don't see the harm in allowing ourselves just a little bit more time."

"Helena." Said sternly, as the old, familiar but no less loveable Myka would.

"Should I zip up your shorts and rebutton them on my way out?" Helena asked sweetly.

"No." Myka sighed, albeit raggedly. "About Ellis."

"I believe you left off with the governor discreetly contacting various government agencies," Helena echoed Myka's sigh. "Unlike most, I can multi-function, you know."

"Yes, because you're a genius," Myka said as she awkwardly tried to zip up her shorts.

Even in the limited glow of the car's interior, it was painful to watch, and with a maternal cluck, Helena reached over and yanked up the zipper and pushed the button through the buttonhole. "All better now?" At Myka's exasperated hiss, Helena said, "I'm assuming one of those government agencies was the Department of Homeland Security."

"Ultimately, but he called the CDC before he called us. A team went in; they've yet to come out."

"And now the governor thinks it could be an act of domestic terrorism?" Helena said sarcastically.

"At least it won't sound quite as ridiculous when we say it this time," Myka said, lifting the hair at the back of her neck, leaving Helena to wonder what this signaled on the Bering hair scale.

"Again, I have to ask, as I did with Jonas Salk's lab coat and Nick the Greek's lucky dice, what makes you think Aimee Semple McPherson's Bible was replicated? I could name you any number of artefacts that put people under spells."

"I know," Myka conceded. "It may not be her Bible, but the state representative who had it? He's from Boise City. And before you ask, Jacqui's already researching any connections between him, our guys in New York, and Congressmen Jaffee and Perkins."

Taking the momentary silence as an occasion to sigh especially loudly, because she wanted Myka to know just how disgruntled she was that she was using her hands to stuff sandwich and candy bar wrappers in the sandwich bag, along with a pile of used napkins (and thank God Myka had thought to bring extra), rather than using them to their mutual benefit between Myka's thighs, Helena waited for Myka's reaction. Nothing. Myka had her eyes on the road, the picture – now – of an attentive, responsible driver. Helena preferred the other one, the one who had been on the verge of making US 287 a much more interesting highway. Helena leaned her head against the passenger window. There had to be some Boise City citizen watching a late night TV talk show or eating a midnight bowl of ice cream, there had to be a flicker of an electric light somewhere out there. Granted, people here were probably outnumbered by cows, but there had to be some evidence of human habitation. Where was the omnipresent sight of a McDonald's golden arches? Leave all hope behind, ye who enter here. She might not have gotten the quote right, but she thought Dante would have agreed with the spirit of her assessment.

She felt Myka's hand on her leg, on her knee, to be exact. She felt like a benchwarmer being subtly encouraged by her coach to do the team proud. When Myka said "We have a meeting with the Cimarron County sheriff tomorrow morning," she could almost hear Myka reminding Drew that he had school tomorrow.
She wasn't a child, more especially she wasn't Myka's child, and though she knew she should be thinking about the problem in Ellis, what remained of the night was theirs. It didn't belong to the Warehouse. "Not too early, I hope." She wanted Myka to feel the heat of her look, to feel as if they were in their hotel room now and Helena was undressing her with her teeth. Yes, it was an exaggeration because buttons would be hell on teeth, but she thought working Myka's panties down with her teeth was a possibility.

"Nine. You need to make sure you're sufficiently recovered by then." Myka had turned her head in Helena's direction, but her look, which Myka was undoubtedly hoping was burning its own hole through the darkness, was, Helena was sure, that of a senior Warehouse agent. At least Myka didn't have Artie's eyebrows. Yet.

"Darling, I can function quite well on precious little sleep. If, however, you set the meeting for nine because of the rigors of travel, although I'm fairly certain you weren't on your way to the airport at 4:30 in the morning -"

"Did you forget what you were boasting about just a few hours ago? I have my own plans for us, and they don't have us rolling out of bed until 8:30. So, Granny in your granny panties, you might want to rest up while you still can."

Just hearing Myka talk to her like that made her want to squirm - in an entirely pleasurable way. Helena smiled to herself. "You did steal snack cakes from me all those years ago, didn't you?"

Myka laughed. "Of course I did. I would scarf one down while you were in a gas station bathroom and then wonder why it didn't taste as good as it looked when you were eating it."

"How was there space in the car for you and me and Pete and what seems, now, the unfairly discredited whole of Freudian psychology?" Helena shook her head in mock disgust.

"Hmmm, and we're in a big car with plenty of room and a package of those snack cakes in my suitcase." Myka was suddenly very focused on her driving.

Helena sent her another look, one that was frankly admiring. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"No, but you will, many times."

Helena couldn't swear to it, because it was too dim to tell what kind of smile Myka had on her face, but she was pretty sure it had a cocky angle to it.

Myka had wisely set the alarm of the room's 1980s-era digital clock. Wisely, because when Helena opened her eyes for the first time since falling asleep, exhausted, shortly before dawn, it was only after the alarm had been beeping for several minutes. 8:35. Swallowing a groan, Helena parted Myka's hair to kiss her behind her ear and to rub her nose against the slight bulge of bone behind it. Was she so besotted that she thought even Myka's skull was adorable? She caressed Myka's hip and then the curve of her butt, which was glued to Helena's abdomen. "Darling, we have 25 minutes to get showered, dressed, and to the sheriff's office."

"Shouldn't I be the one saying that?" Helena chuckled. "You're the early riser." Feeling her skin pull as she began to move away from Myka, she laughed softly again and said, "But then 'usual"
"wasn't operative for us last night, was it?"

"Next time remind me we're too old for that." Only Myka's hair was moving, a couple of stands stirring in the faint puff of air as she spoke.

"Never," Helena said, with another kiss and a slap of Myka's butt. "But I think we need to clean up in our respective bathrooms."

Myka raised her head and gave Helena a sleepy yet knowing look. "You don't trust me after last night?"

"I don't trust me, and, besides, aren't there people we have to de-Svengali?" Helena swung her legs over the bed and froze, seeing the motel room carpet. How had she allowed her bare feet to touch it last night? Silly question, of course she knew why she hadn't cared about the state of the carpet last night.

At first she had been too tired to care. There had been no lights of Boise City ahead of them, only a larger, darker mass that gradually began to separate into a cluster of homes, a post office, a bank, and, on the other side of town, their motel, The Cimarron. It, too, had been dark, the keys to their rooms in a manila envelope taped to the office door with the names Berrings and Well written on the front.

"Love the security. . . and the spelling," Helena muttered as she got back into the SUV and tucked the envelope between her seat and the console. The motel had a typical L shape, and their rooms were toward the end of the longer arm of the L. The night obscured the imperfections of the exterior, but when Helena entered her room and flicked on the light, she looked with dismay at the bed frame and dresser with their scarred walnut veneers, the casual chair with its nubby orange upholstery, straight from the set of _Mad Men_, and the queen-sized bed with its worn bedspread. She had spent many nights in motels like these, she reminded herself; The Cimarron was better than some, worse than others. Until she saw the bathroom, which was clean but consisted of a toilet, sink, and shower stall with an aging plastic shower curtain. Spartan would have applied to a higher level of creature comforts.

Muttering to herself, she returned to the bedroom and looked at the carpet. It was a muddy brown that was certain to be hiding a multitude of sins among its fibers, and which she could only hope had been recently vacuumed. She tried the handle of the door that connected to Myka's room. Given the room's underachieving, she half-expected it to be unlocked. It wasn't. What willful ignorance had made her think that Boise City, as the county seat, might offer a Days Inn or Quality Inn or any other of those economy hotels, which were hardly romantic getaways, but whose blandly decorated rooms didn't smother a romantic impulse on sight. She could no more imagine wildly flinging the bedspread and sheets from the bed and pushing Myka down onto the mattress than she could -. At a minimum, she did have to sleep in the bed. Gingerly she tugged back the sheets, white, thin, and a little musty smelling, but there were no obvious stains or sunken places. She would pay for her boasts in the SUV about keeping Myka up the rest of the night, but. . . she took one more look around the room. Above the bed was a painting, of mushrooms, it seemed, at a river crossing. The mushrooms resolved themselves into a herd of cows when Helena put on her glasses to take a closer look. Cows with very stumpy legs. The painting was better when she had thought they were mushrooms. Seriously, how could she could focus on making love to Myka when that was above them?

She hoisted the suitcase Myka had brought her onto the table, there had to be something, a top and shorts, a nightgown, she could wear. She would shower, put on something that would pass for sleepwear, and hope that Myka's libido had also suffered a knock-out blow from The Cimarron.
Perhaps they could just spoon the rest of the night. The wheezing of the room's wall unit air conditioner suggested that it was doing all it could to keep the room at the temperature of warm milk. Helena wasn't going to challenge it further.

Stripping quickly, she tiptoed into the bathroom, noting the one towel over the towel rack. Both bath towel and hand towel? Incredible. She took the washcloth draped over it into the shower with her. The water pressure was indecisive, and there was no light near the stall; she had the distinct impression that their stay at The Cimarron would be one very narrow step above camping. As she rinsed her hair, she thought she heard a voice say, brightly, "Towel service," but that couldn't be right, and then she saw a shadow against the shower curtain. Without thinking, she swept the curtain to the side, pulling the intruder into the stall and slamming her up against the tiled wall, her forearm pressing into the woman's throat. Kenpo was fine in its way, but sometimes the crude power of street fighting was all you needed.

Myka stared at her wide-eyed, but before Helena could drop her arm or apologize, the surprise died in Myka's eyes to be replaced by a look that did nothing to lessen the rapid beating of Helena's heart. "Don't stop," she said, her voice strained by the pressure of Helena's arm. Helena frowned at her, confused, but Myka was smiling, the invitation clear. "Don't say anything, and don't stop."

She hadn't. Helena still didn't know how to characterize how they had been with each other, what they had done to one another, hours later. In the shower stall once again, she soaped herself, noticing the red marks where Myka had clutched her, dug into her. The "Don't stop" and smile from someone else would have been the invitation to a game that Helena had played before. But Myka wasn't following a script in a role play; the vulnerability and the trust were as real as the surprise at being so roughly grabbed and the flare of desire that had followed it. She wasn't surrendering but offering herself, and while Helena, in the past, would have treated the words and smile as a move she needed to parry, she relaxed the pressure of her arm and dropped her head to make amends, kissing, licking, nibbling at Myka's throat until Myka's fingers were hooking into her waist and the "Don't stop" became incoherent stammering.

Every time she looked into Myka's eyes, marveling at how far she could see into them, past Myka's marriage and Boone and Yellowstone, even past Tamalpais, to the first moment they had seen each other, she felt those eyes opening her up in turn. Helena, seeing herself in Myka's eyes, felt the good and bad of her balance. The weight of what she had done a century and more ago, what she had tried to do in this century, she would always carry with her. Lebecque and Poule, the disaster of her time-traveling, the students in Egypt, Yellowstone, they were a burden, but there was ballast on the other side, not the least of which was Myka herself. Not relieved of her sins but not defined by them either. If this was grace she was experiencing with this woman, in this bed, she felt no uplift, but she did feel steady, righted. Which was still more than she deserved.

When she came, it didn't sound like she had had a revelatory experience in the midst of it; maybe she was a little louder, the cries a little more ragged, but nothing that this room hadn't been witness to many times over. Yet it wasn't her imagination that Myka held her closer than usual, and she knew she wasn't hearing things when she heard Myka say, "I'm always there to catch you, Helena."

Helena shook herself awake and turned off the shower. Dressing hurriedly, she slammed, or attempted to slam the door behind her, but it was too warped to fit easily within the frame, and she had to tug it shut. Dismissing room 11 with a glare, Helena turned to find Myka waiting for her next to the SUV. She was wearing one of her DHS-approved suits, black blazer, black pants, white, spread-collared blouse, and she looked entirely capable of hauling Helena back from whatever precipice, physical or moral, she might teeter on next. But Myka seemed unaware of the admiration in which Helena held her, glancing with concern at her watch. "We have two minutes to make our meeting with Sheriff Paulson."
"Factoring in rush hour traffic that gives us a minute to spare. Perhaps we can swing by a Starbucks." As Myka's brows drew together in annoyance over her sunglasses, Helena said, "What? If we're five minutes late, he's going to shop the mess in Ellis to another bidder? We're their last best hope."

However, another potential bidder was precisely what greeted them when they entered the sheriff's office five minutes later. (Four minutes had been taken up by Myka signing over her gun to a deputy's care and Helena's answering the deputy's questions about why someone from England would come all the way to Boise City.) Unlike Sheriff Paulson, who greeted them with the genially relaxed courtesy that reminded Helena of how long it could take small town law enforcement to get to the point of a meeting, the other visitor suffered the introductions and the offers of coffee and banana bread (freshly baked by the sheriff's wife) with ill-grace. He was Major Lowry of the Oklahoma Air National Guard on "special assignment," he said, to help "resolve the threat in Ellis."

As Helena bit into a slice of banana bread, Myka said carefully, "We need to find out what the problem is before we try to resolve it."

The sheriff had had extra chairs brought in, but Major Lowry preferred to stand, stiffly. His gray hair was cut close to his head, giving it the sandpapery look of a match head, and Helena had the idle, but not pleasant, thought, feeling the tension emanating from him, that if she were to scrape her thumb nail against his head that, like a match, he would explode into flame.

"I think the problem is clear," he said dismissively. "Something has taken over that town, nothing seems to be effective against it, and it poses a grave threat to more than this county."

"All the more reason," Myka said with strained patience, "to try to identify what this threat is."

"Sheriff Paulson," Helena cut in, "are there reports of any other communities in the county being similarly affected?" She reached for another slice of banana bread, prettily fanned out on a paper plate on the sheriff's desk. She was hungry, but it was good, even for banana bread. For Myka and Major Lowry to have banana bread, they would have to break eye contact to locate the plate, and neither seemed willing to be the first to look away. Leaving them locked in their stony stares, Helena smiled winningly at the sheriff. "This is very good, you know. Very moist."

"The wife throws in some shredded zucchini and a little bit of applesauce. That's always been her complaint about banana bread, gets too dry." Rocking back in his chair and lacing his fingers behind his head, the sheriff squinted at Myka and Major Lowry before squinting up at the ceiling. "We blocked off the highway and a county road that run through Ellis, about five miles on either side. Boundary seems to be holding, five miles or more away and you're fine, any closer and you're a zombie." Disturbed by his own comparison, the sheriff hastened to say, "Not like from *The Walking Dead*, more like. . . ." He searched for another cultural reference. "Like *The Stepford Wives.*"

Wiping her fingers on a napkin she took from a stack next to the banana bread, Helena slowly lifted her eyes to the major. "It would seem that the threat isn't growing, Major Lowry. Let us conduct our investigation. I hardly think bombing Ellis is the solution."

The other three looked at her with varying degrees of alarm. "That is what we're talking about, aren't we? Why else would an officer from the Air National Guard be here?" She had never been much of a conciliator, complimenting the sheriff on the banana bread was about as far as she could take it.

Uncomfortable, Major Lowry shifted his feet. "I'm not at liberty to discuss any military options."
"I believe the only time the United States bombed its citizens, it did so accidentally. I wouldn't think anyone, no matter how worrisome the situation is, would be anxious to give that order." Helena crumpled her napkin and casually tossed it into the wastebasket. "There's no need to succumb to hysteria." She thought she heard Myka sharply inhale, but her attention was focused on Major Lowry.

The major shifted his feet again, but the discomfort stopped at his feet. He was gripping his hands, tightly, in front of his waist, and his stare was, if anything, harder. "As I said," he repeated evenly, "I'm not at liberty to discuss military options. But what I can say is that it would be unwise to consider the threat in Ellis contained. We need to be prepared for when, not if, it begins to expand. And that's not hysteria speaking, Agent Wells." He turned his head back toward Myka, and Helena almost expected to hear the sound of rocks grinding together as his neck moved from right to left. "I think if you speak with your management at Homeland Security, you'll find that they're in agreement that we need to resolve things quickly. The governor wants to minimize the risk as soon as possible. You have three days and then, if the threat hasn't been neutralized, we'll need to reconsider the situation."

The sheriff had remained quiet, but the red mottling his face expressed his opinion. Closing his eyes, as if he were counting to ten, he let out a sigh. "I don't know what resources the two of you have here, but my deputies and I will provide you anything you need. One of my men can drive you out to the boundary, if you'd like. Don't know whether seeing the surroundings will help, doesn't look much different than here, but," he paused, sending a not entirely respectful look in the major's direction, "we'd like this settled without a lot of fuss. We're a pretty self-reliant bunch. Have to be, out in the middle of nowhere." The sheriff laughed, although his geniality had been all but replaced by wearied concern. "There's hardly anyone in Ellis I don't know. If you can fix whatever's gone wrong and leave the place still standing, we'd all be in your debt."

Myka smiled at him, the stubborn tilt to her jaw that had been proxy for a stabbing finger when she argued with the major all but gone. "That's what we're hoping for, too. Any information you or your staff can provide us on Ellis would be helpful, any unusual activity that's been going on, anything that sets it apart." She glanced at Major Lowry, who, in apparent disinterest, had walked to a window overlooking a tiny patch of grass with a few straggling petunias. "Anything you can share from any aerial reconnaissance you've been doing, Major Lowry, would also be helpful." Her jaw was lifting again, and her voice held little of the friendliness that had characterized it when she was speaking to the sheriff.

One rigid shoulder lifted infinitesimally. "We're operating out of an office down the hall. You're welcome to come with me, and I'll show you a few images."

The sheriff pushed back his chair, not reluctant to begin ushering them out of his office, anxious, Helena supposed, to have the federal nose, as represented by the unlikely trio that she and Myka and the major made, out of his business, which, until now, probably provided no more excitement than the occasional shutting down of a meth lab. Chiding herself for the uncharitable thought, Helena pressed his hand warmly and praised his wife's banana bread once more.

"You know, the county assessor's office is on the second floor. Might want to stop by there. Don't know how finding out the tax value of Ellis' hardware store is going to help you, but. . . ." The sheriff shrugged. As diffidently he added, "We got a little county museum on the third floor. Way back when, Ellis was the big town in the county. Maybe something in its past has come back to haunt it." He laughed uneasily.

That had happened more than once, Helena recalled. There had been a hamlet in Cornwall visited every year by accidents large and small on the anniversary of a mine collapse. The artefact had
been a miner's pick that the town fathers trotted out --. No sense in adding to the sheriff's concerns. He could do little more than worry and offer visitors banana bread - with Major Lowry intent upon controlling the "situation."

She joined Myka and Major Lowry in the hallway. His boots striking the linoleum with the same hard insistence he had displayed in the sheriff's office, the major led them toward his temporary office. Helena lagged behind, looking up the stairwell. The museum was at the top, the sheriff had said. It couldn't take long to go through, and even if it was time wasted, it wouldn't be a significant amount of time. Maybe the artefact wasn't replicated from Aimee Semple McPherson's Bible, and there was no one better suited to find out whether Ellis' present problems were rooted in its past. She knew all too well what it was like to live with ghosts.
Conestoga wagons. Cattle. Barbed wire. Land rush. Dust Bowl. Helena rubbed her back against the spindles of her chair before she put down the *History of Cimarron County* by Joseph and Ruth Ridley, a brother-sister pair if she had read the acknowledgments correctly. The book was published in 1948, so, if the artefact at work in Ellis came from a more recent period of its history, then she had wasted an hour immersed in a history of the American West. If she had to be schooled in some telling of it, she would choose the 1950s Technicolor versions, dreadfully biased though so many of them were, over books like the Ridleys’. Histories, whether personal or larger-scale, were the saddest stories of all, and if she could lose the plot and the truth it generally obscured in an appreciation of the aerodynamic perfection of the brassieres and the inexplicable availability of Max Factor cosmetics worn by the actresses, she would - quite happily.

The one note of interest in the Ridleys’ *History* was the radio club formed by a group of Ellis high school students in the 1920s; for a few years, the club produced a one-hour program, broadcast in the late afternoon, that provided news of the school's sports teams, theatrical and choral offerings, and, especially for the girls, recipes and household hints, courtesy of Lorraine Owens, home economics teacher. Given the equipment and the budget likely available to the club, the signal would have had a range of only a few miles. Helena studied the picture of the club’s members, all boys, grouped around a desk with a microphone; the broadcasts had happened almost a hundred years ago. It was foolish to think that any of the equipment was left, although the school building was still standing, if the pictures of Ellis on one of the museum's walls were to be relied upon. By 1948, Ellis's population and importance had significantly declined; the school was closed and the students bused to a consolidated school several miles away. The building had had varied uses made of it since then, housing an antique store, apartments, and county extension offices at different points in time. At three stories, it remained the tallest building in Ellis, having served as elementary, junior high, and senior high school all in one.

When an artefact is in play, Helena reminded herself, you can't expect science to apply. Stop thinking of sound waves and amplifiers and antennas. The artefact could just as easily be a rubber duck someone is squeezing periodically in a tornado shelter below ground. Meaning the artefact could be anything anywhere. What was it Doyle had put in the mouth of his most famous creation? When you have eliminated the possible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Clever phrasemaking, but it assumed that 'whatever remained' was still within the realm of the possible, the logical, the explainable - the connection waiting only to be discovered. No why's or how's were ever sufficient for an artefact, not really. In the end, an artefact beggared explanation, it just was.

Myka pulled out the chair across from Helena and sat down with a loud, discouraged sigh that expressed Helena's own sense of futility. "Please tell me that you've found something more helpful than I've been able to dig up." She glanced at her watch. "We're now at 68 hours before Lowry shuts us down."

Helena shook her head, pushing the *History of Cimarron County* over to Myka. "I've looked at countless maps, read ancient editions of the Ellis Bugle on microfilm almost as ancient, and perused the *History*. I can tell you how Ellis got its name, why the county seat was moved to Boise City, and what the secret is behind Doris Petrie's prize-winning strawberry-rhubarb pie, which apparently swept the 1918 county fair by storm, but I haven't the foggiest idea of why an artefact was used in Ellis or what that artefact might look like."

"Lowry let me look at some surveillance video and photographs. Streets are empty, and there's no
activity outside the homes and businesses. Ellis is virtually a ghost town. Then I went back to the sheriff's office. He gave me access to their records. I read arrests and citations for the last 12 months. Other than I learned that you don't want to tangle with the Carter twins on Saturday night, I didn't find anything. No skulkers, no peeping Toms, no one wandering around Ellis without a reason to be there." Myka ran her fingers through her hair, which looked like it had had several encounters with her hand. She began to leaf through the History. "Our thanks to our parents, who taught us that you can never lose your way when you remember where you came from." She glanced at Helena. "Wonder if they collaborated on anything else."

"Not unless Ruth got her brother to admit that it was her labor that made the book possible." Helena sniffed. "You'll see at the very end of the acknowledgements that he thanks her for the 'hours spent poring over county records and collections of letters.'"

"Did Charles not sufficiently acknowledge you?" Myka teased.

"He convinced me that no one would read fiction with a scientific, albeit imaginative, bent written by a woman. Her realm was the domestic and her mission that of self-improvement, thus H.G. Wells rather than Helena Wells. How convenient that Charles's middle name was Herbert." While Helena's voice betrayed exasperation, her smile was fond. She remembered him bent over the manuscripts, writing over passages she had originally written that he considered too daring. Perhaps the works were better for their removal. "We argued for days over the middle initial. He wanted 'F' for a family name he was besotted with, I wanted a firmer, more decisive sound. This H. Wells was imagining things that hadn't yet been invented." She smiled smugly. "Not to the knowledge of anyone outside the Warehouse, at any rate. 'He' needed a middle initial that didn't sound like someone on the verge of wheezing. H. F-f-f-f." Helena derisively sputtered the 'F.' "See what I mean? Charles eventually conceded, and it was H.G., not H.F., Wells. He said the 'G' stood for my grandiosity."

Myka was laughing, but a surprised note bubbled through it. "I thought 'G' was your middle initial, we all did."

Helena responded to her surprise with an admonishing look. "That's what you chose to assume. I never said it was my middle initial."

A man emerged from a room in the back with an "Employees Only" decal on the door. He was thumbing through the pages of a pocket notebook as he approached their table. His eyes touched lightly on Myka before focusing on Helena. "I looked up the students in the radio club," he said. "It won't surprise you that none of 'em are alive anymore, but a few still have family in the area. One's got a daughter in a nursing home in Guymon; she might be able to tell you something. Another's son is still living, just outside of town here, but he's not doing too good. Not sure how much help he'd be." He tore the page from the notebook and handed it to Helena.

"Thank you, Pete," she said appreciatively.

"I'll be behind the desk, if you want anything else." With the heavy, padding steps that had followed Helena around the small space of the museum, he went to sit behind the well-lacquered desk at the museum's entrance. The museum hadn't been open when Helena had first climbed to the third floor, and when she had returned to the sheriff's office to find out if it could be opened for her, Sheriff Paulsen had taken her to the records office and called out to a man bent over a drawer in a file cabinet. Pete would open the museum for her and provide her with anything she needed. This Pete was as slow-moving and laconic as Pete Lattimer was hyperactive and full of chatter. He led her up to the third floor and unlocked the museum door, turning on the lights. With an abashed smile he asked her to sign the guestbook - she saw that she was the first visitor in four months - and
then, moving his arm in a slow arc, he pointed to the pictures on the walls, the few exhibit cases, and a harvest-gold microfilm reader before pointing to the closed "Employees Only" door. "Take a look around, and if what you want isn't out, we may have it in storage." Thankfully the History had given her the radio club, which provided her a reason for shooing him away from the semi-permanent position he had taken by her elbow. She didn't believe talking to the descendants of the original radio club members would result in any useful information, but right now she and Myka didn't have any information, let alone enough to judge what was useful and what wasn't.

"So eager to be of service, so tractable. I want to trade our Pete for this Pete," she whispered to Myka. "I honestly think Drew would come to love him in time."

Myka narrowed her eyes. "What's this about the radio club?" she asked finally.

"There used to be a radio station of sorts in Ellis, in the school building. It's possible that if the artefact isn't a replica of Aimee Semple McPherson's Bible, it might be associated with the club. I know I'm grasping at straws, darling, but straws are all we have at the moment."

Myka twitched her shoulders, as though she were trying to get her blazer to lay more comfortably on them. "I'm starving. Let's find lunch somewhere and then drive out toward Ellis. I don't know that what we'll see will give us any ideas, but, like you said, all we have are straws."

With a last look at the History, Helena followed her. She could ask Pete on the way out if he knew what had become of the Ridleys, whether there were other collaborations, as Myka had wondered, or if they had worked on separate projects, or if there had been anything that followed the History. Her immersion in bronze certainly hadn't been an impediment for Charles, although she had stopped providing him ideas and roughed-out scenes long before then. It was also true that, in the years when dreaming of time machines and other marvels had been among her favorite distractions, she had given him enough material for countless works. She had recognized elements in his later writings, the ones he had published after she had been bronzed, from conversations they had had sitting on the lawn behind one of her many rented summer cottages or in front of the fireplace in their parents' parlor or while they watched Christina toddle about in the kitchen, she sketching the design of her latest device in the air and throwing out bits of dialogue, he, slouched across from her or next to her, ankles indolently crossed, listening and following her flying hands.

She touched the desk, Myka was already in the hallway, at the top of the stairs. Fingers rubbing an ancient groove, Helena asked Pete as casually as she could, "Do you know what happened to the Ridleys, the ones who wrote the book you gave me?" Casually because it didn't matter what had happened to the Ridleys, brother and sister, no more than which one had been the smarter or the more talented or whether their relationship had been close and loving or filled with jealous bickering. They were both likely long gone from this earth, as was Charles, and who was there left to care, except their families and her, and she should be concentrating on more urgent matters.

Pete studied the ceiling. "Joe, he was a professor of history or something like that at Oklahoma State. Became sort of a bigwig, they named some building on campus for him, or so I've heard. "Ruth," he shrugged. "I think she was married to a professor at the university. Don't know much about her. Probably did what was normal for a woman back then, stayed at home to raise the kids."

"Yes," Helena said noncommitally, "I suppose she might have."

She hadn't gotten far from the desk when he said, louder, so they both could hear him, "Speaking of the Ridleys, they had a cousin, younger, although she's pretty old now. She's, uh, she's kind of different. Hears voices and all that. But she's been telling people she's gone into Ellis. I mean, that's what the two of you are here for, right? To figure out what's going on - the whole town's been buzzing about it."
Helena turned and Myka began walking back to the museum entrance. "Gone in - after people were affected?"

He nodded. "Esther's okay, she's just, I mean, she's been in and out of mental hospitals most of her life. She'll tell you she had a conversation with the pope or her husband, who's been dead 20 years, and yet she always knows what's going on. Sharp as a tack, really." He played with the guestbook, fretting one of its corners. "When it comes to everyday things, you know, like, 'Pete, I went to Guymon,' which she wouldn't say because she can't drive, but, you know, something like that, it happened, she went there. It's only when she's talking about telling the president what to do or the governor asking her for advice that you have to . . . you know, take it with a grain of salt. It happened only in her head."

Helena gave him back the page he had torn from his notebook. "Write down her name and contact information."

He fumbled for a pen. "You'll have to go out to her farm. She doesn't have a phone. Or a television. Or a computer." He scribbled the address. "The farm's north of Ellis, not too far from the barricades they got up."

As they took the stairs down to the first floor, Myka murmured, "Are we really looking at a woman who suffers from auditory hallucinations as a source?"

"Straws, darling," Helena counseled, "straws."

After a hurried lunch in a cafe in which they drew the unhurried looks of the other diners, they took the highway south out of Boise City, the SUV a crucible from hours parked in the sun. The jet roar of the air conditioning promised relief, but Helena was convinced that she would turn into one of those desiccated corpses, all flying limbs and skeletal grins, that seemed to spring out like jack-in-the-boxes in horror movies. Perhaps it was having wandered, and sat, and wandered, and sat again in the county museum reading about people long since dead, seeing photos of people long since dead that made her so aware of her own age, all 148 years of it. By rights she should be a desiccated corpse instead of looking like - she flipped down the visor and critically assessed herself in the mirror - a woman barely . . . 50. She couldn't say 40, not the way her eyes were drooping and her skin was hanging slack under her jaw. She could blame it on exhaustion - although she would gladly repeat last night, anywhere, anytime - but as she pushed the visor up and moodily plucked at her slacks, she knew she would have only to roll up a pant leg to see the reddish, broken lines beneath her skin, as if her arterial system were fraying, unraveling, shedding bits of itself like so much thread.

'What was normal for a woman back then.' Helena didn't know which part of it bothered her more, the lack of imagination it revealed, as if he literally couldn't think of anything else Ruth Ridley might have done, or the lack of curiosity, as if what had become of her after writing the History wasn't worth speculating about. She knew it was unfair to label Pete, if only in her mind, as some close-minded traditionalist who secretly thought that she and Myka had no business wearing slacks and pretending they were the ones to solve the problem in Ellis when the obvious man for the job was Major Lowry. But it gnawed at her, it really did, that Ruth appeared to have no existence outside the History, which would have a slim claim on almost anyone's attention. She had provided the material from which her brother had fashioned the book and then she had seemingly disappeared. There would be no buildings anywhere named after Ruth Ridley.

"What are you brooding about, Helena? Is it the Ridleys? I heard you ask him about them." Even though Myka's eyes were hidden by her sunglasses, Helena could feel the unrelenting patience of that gaze. Like the heat, it would bear down on her until she succumbed. It was what made Myka..."
an effective interrogator, but, at this very moment, when Helena suspected that she would sound only self-pitying, a rather unsatisfactory lover. An unMyka-like lover wouldn't have noticed how she had frowned as she looked at herself in the mirror or picked at her slacks; she would have attributed Helena's quietness to her concentrating her considerable mental powers on Ellis. Or better yet, an unMyka-like lover would be driving the SUV off the highway, seeking the privacy of some trees and asking her to find the snack cakes. But Myka, her Myka, wasn't as gullible or, sadly, as sex-driven.

"Then you must have heard him say that he didn't know what had become of Ruth Ridley and, what was worse, acted as if it didn't matter what had happened to her."

"I wouldn't say that," Myka said mildly, "he simply didn't know much about them, especially her. You were expecting a lot from someone whose job is clearly not running that museum." She didn't try very hard to hide a smile. "So, you're no longer as eager to replace our Pete with County Museum Pete?"

"That's what you're taking from this?" Helena exclaimed. "That I have a renewed appreciation of Pete Lattimer?"

"No, although I am relieved for Drew's sake." Myka pulled her sunglasses down, looking steadily at Helena. "Something about the Ridleys resonates with you, and don't tell me that it's because Charles got all the credit."

"Why does it have to be anything more than indignation at how women. . . ." Helena faltered as Myka, eyes once more hidden behind the carapace of her sunglasses, flashed her a look that Helena knew was stern just by the dipping line of her eyebrows. "Thinking about the ignominious end to my own contributions to H. G. Wells led me. . . ." She exhaled and tried again. "When I was going to be bronzed, there was considerable debate among the regents about how it should be explained to my family. They were worried that, if not properly explained, my disappearance would lead my family to raise questions no one would be eager to answer." Helena leaned her head against the side window, seeing not the highway in front of them but the smoke-filled room in which she had met with the regents - all men back then - for the last time. "So although it galled them to do it, they decided that my family would be given the standard Warehouse 12 explanation for an agent's death or. . . . permanent alteration. . . . resulting from an artefact. My family would be told that I had died in the service of my country. A train might derail or a boat might sink, whatever it would be, I would have been on an important assignment, and Her Majesty's government would deeply feel the loss. Maybe even that last bit was partly true." Her voice, already quiet, dropped further. "I was given a day to 'settle my affairs' and to tell my family that I would be away for some time on work-related travel. I told the lies easily to my parents. We had barely spoken since Christina's death, but I couldn't lie to Charles, not that baldly."

"You told him the truth?" Myka's voice was as quiet as her own.

"An approximation." Helena's laugh was wry. "Despite everything that had happened, I couldn't bring myself to commit that betrayal. I told him that no matter what he might be told later, I wasn't dead. I had done nothing noble either. I had done awful, horrible things, and the government had no choice but to punish me. I thought about telling him that I was being sent to prison, but then I imagined him asking which prison and whether anyone would be allowed to visit me. So I told him I was being banished, where I didn't know, but that I could return to England only at the forfeiture of my life. Moreover, I was expected to sever ties with family, friends, and associates as part of my punishment. Ridiculous story, but there was truth in it, and he must have heard it since he didn't once question me."
Closing her eyes, she pictured him as he had been that evening, rumpled, irritable, and displeased at the interruption. He had been working on one of her, their stores when her sister-in-law had shown her into the parlor and called him to come downstairs. As he entered the room, he was rubbing his forehead in the fretful manner of a child unsure whether he wanted to fuss more visibly, reminding her so sharply of Christina that she was aware only of the furious pounding of her heart. "I thought for the longest time that I had told him what I did because I couldn't bear the lies. Someone needed to know the truth of what I had become because the Warehouse would never willingly reveal it, and the others who knew were dead. But even that explanation gives me too much credit. I told him because I wanted someone to know I was alive. I wanted to think that he might occasionally wonder where I was, what I was doing, if I had found some relief from my sins. Murderers still hope their mothers love them, and I was no different. I needed someone to care."

"That's not horrible, Helena, it's human -"

"To have burdened him like that? He wouldn't have shared it with anyone, I impressed upon him the need to keep it secret. So all those years when I was staring into the blackness of my own mind, he left flowers on my grave and wiped away my mother's tears - assuming she wept - and reassured my father that I had died a patriot's death. He would have been curious about where I was sent - he was a writer, it would have intrigued him - and he would have thought, 'Did they exile her to Australia? How is the old thing faring in the outback? Maybe he imagined me among the untouchables in India. At least my parents had peace. I didn't give him that.' Helena whipped her head away from the window, but Myka was concentrating, or pretending to concentrate, on the road ahead. "Come to think of it, maybe banishment would have been the better solution. Perhaps I could have found salvation toiling with the missionaries in some remote jungle, or just as easily, if not more likely, I could have contracted malaria in that very same jungle and died. At any rate, what happened, almost did happen after MacPherson released me wouldn't have."

"You do know that everything you did, good and bad, brought you here, where you're complaining that you should have died 95 years earlier." Myka said it, flatly, to the windshield.

Helena remembered last night with Myka, looking into her eyes, and feeling incredibly, wondrously, balanced. It had been marvelous that moment and it had given her the hope that such moments might multiply for her, but it was hard to keep that moment from being erased by all the other ones, the ones that reminded her that her world, the one in which her American counterparts had fenced in and plowed under the plains, buried victims of cholera and typhoid, and died at 60, was now nothing more than a narrative comprised of greater or lesser anecdotes and lists of names that books like the History called history. Moments that reminded her that people far more deserving than she of the jury-rigged immortality the Warehouse had given her had lived their lives and died, only to be spoken of with uncertainty or dismissiveness, 'Don't know much about her... probably did what was normal for women back then.' It was very difficult to keep her balance, to feel balanced in a world, in a time in which she was an imbalance. Everything she had done, good and bad, might have brought her here, but she didn't belong here.

Myka's voice was still flat, still angry as it cut into her thoughts. "Yes, Helena, if you're speaking in some larger sense then, yes, banishment would have been better. MacPherson wouldn't have died, the boys in Egypt wouldn't have died, Pete and I wouldn't have nearly died, and I wouldn't have held your gun to my forehead in the wild hope that some part of you, deep down, didn't want to instigate another ice age. Is that what you want to hear? Do you want me to go a step further? If I thought in a larger sense, I would have killed you in Yellowstone. Fundamentally, that's what I'm trained to do, Helena, I'm a Secret Service agent, I eliminate threats." The sunglasses swung toward her once again, although Helena had no idea what type of look Myka was giving her now. "You were a threat, and nothing had been able to stop you, not the bronze, not MacPherson, not how much we all loved you."
"Did you think of killing me then?" Helena remembered how white Myka's face had been, the color leached from it by fear, but while her eyes had been wet with tears, they had fixed unblinkingly on hers.

Myka let the question hang between them. Sounding more tired than angry, she said, "I can't believe in some cosmic scale that weighs our strengths and weaknesses. How we act, how it affects others, it's a daily thing. And though the mistake I make on Monday may not cancel out the kindness I do on Tuesday, how long do I let it follow me, Helena? Do I let it outweigh everything else? Do I let it destroy every relationship I try to form? If I believed I should let people's failings solely determine how I felt about them, I never would have spoken to my father once I left for college." She sighed, finally reaching over to grip Helena's hand. "Kill you? I was so absolutely fucking devastated, I barely had the strength to call for help after it was over. I wasn't an agent then, I was . . . me, nerdy, straight-arrow Myka crushed out on this dashing, dangerous woman who had just ripped her little world apart, although the real world was just fine." She released Helena's hand and pointed to the patrol cars parked across the highway a short distance ahead. "Look, we need to. . . ." Hesitating, she finally applied the brakes, slowing the SUV well before the barricade. "I get it," she said rapidly. "I get that there are going to be black days for you, Helena. But when you say the world would be better off without you, I can't accept that, because my world isn't better off without you."

The SUV crawled up to the barricades. Myka turned off the engine and opened her door, saying over her shoulder. "What happened in Yellowstone was one of the worst moments of my life. Of the top five worst moments of my life, you're in four of them. If that isn't a sign from the universe about you, I don't know what is. Yet when I look at you. . . ." She shrugged helplessly. "Let's go talk to the troopers."

The troopers were bored and glad for the distraction. Surveying the fields around them, some green with the benefit of irrigation, others brown and lying fallow, Helena couldn't imagine spending eight hours standing (or sitting in a car) behind concrete barriers. Birds skimming the grass for prey provided the only relief from the utter stillness. She was already sweating under her linen shirt, and they had been outside the SUV for only a few minutes. In response to Myka's questions, the troopers would look at each other and then one would gravely accept the mantle of responsibility and state -

No, no one had tried to get past the barricades, not here and not at the other end of town.

No, no one had come out from the town.

No, in the time they had been patrolling this part of the highway, nothing had changed.

No, nothing smelled different, nothing looked different, nothing sounded different.

Myka rocked back on her heels a little, working her hands into the pockets of her slacks. There was nothing more to ask them. Nothing a logical, reasonable person would ask. So Helena asked it. "We've heard there's a woman claiming she's been in and out of Ellis since the roads were blocked. You haven't seen her around here?"

The troopers looked at each other, Myka looked at her. "You must be talking about Esther Price," the older of them said. "She's not all right in the head, they should have told you that." He glanced from her to Myka, letting his eyes linger on Myka as if to ask her why she had let this other woman, obviously not all right in her own way, take over.

The younger trooper, after a sideways look at his partner, obviously judging whether it was worth it to seem to be disagreeing with him, planted his feet wider and carefully directed his eyes to a spot
just above Helena's head. "She could have walked or ridden her bicycle through the fields to get to the town. There aren't enough of us to block all access, but Nolan's right, she's... um... touched." He cleared his throat. "That said, a couple of years ago when a tornado went through here and carried off the Anderson boy, she was the one who found him. We had been looking for hours, but she said she 'heard' him, and she took us to a culvert, and that's where he was. Naked as a jaybird and dazed but fine."

His partner said scoffingly, "It's not as though we weren't going to search that culvert, Aaron."

"She'd been saying that all day, Nolan, and nobody believed her." The younger trooper swallowed, refusing to glance at his partner. "But that boy's parents were desperate, and they pleaded to have the search teams sent to that area. That's why we were there when we were there."

The older trooper took off his hat and rubbed the back of his arm against his forehead. "You're free to think what you like, but Esther Price's just a crazy old woman." He put his hat back on and nodded toward the SUV. "You're looking a little wilted, ladies. The heat's nothing to trifle with. You're welcome to look around here, if you want, but we've kept a pretty good eye on things."

Myka had stiffened at "ladies," but her expression and her tone remained pleasant. "Agent Wells and I appreciate your time, officers." The emphasis was slight but unmistakable.

As they began walking to their SUV, Helena throwing her shoulders back to show the troopers that the sun wouldn't beat her down, at least not in their view, Aaron shouted after them, "If you want to talk to Esther, her farm's up the highway toward Boise City. That gravel road you passed about a mile and a half from here, take a right on it and down about another mile, you'll see her farmhouse."

Myka was silent as she turned the car around and headed north on the highway. As the air conditioner roared to life, Helena groaned and slumped against the seat. "The younger one tried to be helpful, don't you think? Maybe we should drop in on Ms. Price." Myka didn't respond, leaning toward Helena only to adjust the controls of the air conditioner. "I don't think we properly ended our conversation," Helena ventured. "It's not that I don't want to be here, Myka. I do, never more deeply than I have these past weeks, but even you can't say that I haven't been given more second chances than I deserve."

"It's not a matter of deserving or not deserving to be here, Helena. We just are... here, and we make the best of it." Helena could see the white of the gravel road ahead, a lighter scar against the land than the highway. Myka could see it, too, and she lifted the hair at the back of her neck, tugging gently at the strands. "I'm thinking of that line in the acknowledgment of the Ridleys' book, about not losing your way if you remember where you came from. That's true. But another saying comes to mind, about missing what's in front of you if you insists on looking back."

"Point taken," Helena murmured as Myka made a right turn onto the gravel road. "You do know where you're taking us, don't you?"

"Maybe I get a little contrary when men get paternal and tell me I can't do something or that I'm looking 'wilted.' Or maybe when I stop to consider that I'm sitting next to a 148-year-old woman chasing a magical knock-off of a magical Bible... and I'm trying to convince that 148-year-old woman that she has a life with me and my son, I think I have no right to judge who's sane and who's not." Myka flashed her something that was too uncertain to be a grin, but it was, nonetheless, a smile.

The farmhouse was narrow but with two full stories. With its coat of white paint and unadorned windows, the house presented a long, solemn face as did so many of the farmhouses Helena
remembered seeing farther north, as if they could stand in for the long, solemn faces of the farmers in Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. The yard was covered by a patchy layer of brown grass, and the lane that wound from the road past the house to the barn and sheds beyond was empty. The only indications that the house was occupied were the bicycle propped against the side of the house and the woman standing in the yard impassively watching them as they turned off the road. When the SUV came to a stop beside her and Myka lowered the window, the woman looked at them incuriously. Tanned skin, pulled as tight over high, sharp cheekbones as a freshly made bed, gave no clue to her age; she might have been 65 or 85.

"I'm Esther, and you must be the folks from Washington." Neither welcoming nor suspicious, the tone was as matter-of-fact as her words.

The eyes, dark, unreadable, swept through the SUV's interior once more, slowing as they studied Helena. Myka had pushed her sunglasses into her hair and was preparing to explain the reason for their presence, when Helena leaned in front of her, saying ironically, "You heard us coming, did you?"

Esther looked no less impassive, but something Helena was positive was amusement had crept into that dark gaze. "You're the smarty pants of the two of you, aren't you? Somebody send you to talk to the crazy lady who claims she's been in Ellis?"

"Have you?" Helena asked.

"Why don't we talk about Ellis where it's cooler."

Like a phrase that was untranslatable, the meaning of "cooler" could only be poorly approximated, Helena decided. In the heat of the living room, fans placed on the floor and an ancient window air conditioner managing to stir the air but not cool it, Helena and Myka sat on a loveseat, holding perspiring glasses of sweet tea, which, in Myka's case, wasn't sweet at all. Esther Price occupied an armchair, her head cocked to one side, the long white braid of her hair dangling like a bell pull over her shoulder, apparently listening to an inner dialogue because every time Helena or Myka tried to speak, she waved a hand to quiet them.

Finally she raised her head and pointed her finger at Helena. "You're too noisy." She turned to Myka. "You don't bother me as much as her." She lifted a shoulder in Helena's direction, and Helena rolled her eyes. "You're much quieter than that one. Not that I can't hear you. There's someone who's telling you that he's disappointed in you, that you can do better, and there's someone you spend most of your time shushing. Your boy..." Esther shook her head. "No, not your boy. You don't tell him to shush - he might need you." She smiled. "How old is he, your boy?"

"Eight," Myka said, returning her smile, but it was tight and tense.

Esther tilted her head and closed her eyes. "That's the voice you're always listening for, isn't it? Hers. Agent Smarty Pants."

From the corner of her eye, Helena saw a blush rise in Myka's cheeks. Myka put her glass down on a side table as the buzzing vibration of her phone became audible. She tucked her hand in her blazer's inner pocket and pulled out the phone. She barely glanced at the screen before she was pushing herself off the loveseat, saying curtly, "I need to take this."

"So you're 'hearing' only us?" There was the sound of the door being shut, and Helena glimpsed Myka beginning to pace the yard, the phone held to her ear.

"You, her, others. They're quieter because they're farther away. But I'm sure as hell not hearing the
Queen of England," Esther snapped, her brows drawing together. More softly, she said, "When I was younger, much younger, and making the mistake of trying to explain what I hear, people said I went around thinking I had a radio in my head. They joked about me tuning in on the 'wrong frequency,' asked me when the aliens were coming. Eventually it was easier to let people think what they wanted. But I'm not carrying on conversations with the president, and I don't see little green men."

Helena drank her tea, wanting to roll the glass across her forehead. "I believe you. You can hear people's . . . thoughts. . . if they're within a certain range."

"I can't read minds, if that's what you're asking." Esther's voice had regained its irritability. "I hear voices, that's the only way I can describe it."

"We were told you were able to rescue a little boy because you 'heard' him. How did you hear him, like you heard Myka? How far away were you?" Helena leaned forward.

"I was here in the house when the tornado touched down, but it went the other way. The culvert where they found him is maybe ten, 12 miles away. He was crying out for his mama. That's what I heard." Esther's eyes roamed the living room, which offered only the loveseat and armchair. There were no rugs on the scarred floorboards, no pictures on the walls, a paperback was splayed on the same table as Myka's abandoned glass of tea, but it had the undisturbed look of a book that was picked up and read only on rainy afternoons. "You're even noisier now that she's not here. Too many voices for me to sort through." She nodded to herself as if she had figured something out. "You're a lot older than you look. Only way to explain all those voices." She cocked her head. "Also explains why so many of them are dead, the ones you listen to. I hear my husband. He's always asking the same thing. 'Got dinner on the stove?' Dead 23 years this past May and still asking where his dinner is. Shouldn't be surprised. That was all he was interested in when he was alive. I married him because he rarely had a thought in his head. He was restful for me that way." She gestured toward a spot next to the loveseat. "That's where his recliner was and where I'm sitting, the TV. Now that he's dead, it kind of gets on my nerves that 'Got dinner on the stove?' That's the problem with the dead, they say the same things over and over."

"So do some of the living," Helena reminded her.

"Eh," Esther lifted her shoulders in dismissal. "Comforting in some ways, I guess, to be listening to the dead like you do. They're always where you're looking for them." The dark gaze became shrewd, appraising, uncomfortably like Irene Frederic's, Helena thought. "Some of the voices don't really say anything, they're just screaming. Why do you listen to it, the screaming?"

"Because I caused it."

The door rattled open, and Helena heard Myka's quick, decisive stride. The familiarity of it made her smile in relief, although her smile faded when she saw Myka's glower. Myka gave her a jerk of her head to signal that they would talk about whatever it was that had infuriated her later. Much as she smoothed out the line of her blazer before she sat down next to Helena, Myka curved her lips slightly to ease her frown as she faced Esther. "What have you learned about Ellis?" She nudge Helena.

"Nothing yet, but we're getting to it," Helena said, directing her own dark gaze at Esther. It was bad enough that Esther had access to the horror show of her mind, she didn't want Myka to know about the screams of the men she had tortured; the recriminations that an eight-year-old Christina had never grown old enough to utter; the groaning collapse of her time machine; the sharp crack of the ground as it fissured under the trident.
"What do you hear when you go into Ellis, Esther?" Myka had picked up her glass, more Helena suspected because Myka wanted to give her hands something to do besides playing with her hair than because she wanted to drink the rest of her tea.

"A voice, not loud but persistent. How some sales people are, always at you. That's what it's like. It starts worming its way into your brain, and it's hard to think about anything else, though I can't really tell you what the voice says."

"Where does it come from?" Myka asked, her expression intent but abstracted, and Helena knew that she was recalling, in detail, the images of the town she had seen in Major Lowry's office, ready to target the location if Esther could name it.

"Everywhere, nowhere. There's no one in the street with a megaphone, just people in their houses or the bank or the grocery store sitting around screens. Not that they can't get up for the necessities, you know, but then they wander back. I've tried to talk to the ones I know best, but they don't recognize me." Esther looked at the glasses Helena and Myka were holding. "More tea? Got some cookies, if you're peckish. I always have a couple this time of day."

Helena shook her head for both her and Myka. "Could you tell if people have tended to gather more in one place than another? Have you seen anything that would suggest some might be less affected, or more affected, than the rest?"

Calling out on her way to the kitchen, Esther said, "Ain't like it's church in Ellis. They're scattered all over the place. Like I said, they're at home or in the bank or stores. That voice - I bet it works quick if you're normal, kind of catches you where you are." There was a flurry of banging as she opened and closed cupboards. "If I didn't see that their eyes were open," she shouted, "I might think they were asleep. I don't hear anything from them. If it weren't so damn spooky, I'd go into Ellis more often. I rarely hear the quiet like that - it's nice, except for that voice." She came back into the living room, holding a napkin piled with cookies. Settling back in her armchair, she extended the cookies toward Myka and Helena. "Sure you don't want any? They're just Archway, but the molasses ones are pretty good."

"Thanks, no." Myka's glass was on the side table again, and her hand was lifting hair away from her neck. "Everyone seems fine, as if they're asleep but fine?"

"No one's died yet, if that's what you're asking," Esther said bluntly. "I suppose, though, if this goes on long enough, they'll get sick. They look like they're asleep, but they're not sleeping. Not eating much either, as far as I can tell." She had spread the napkin across her lap and pushed the cookies to one side. "You'll end up like them, if you're thinking of going into town." She broke a cookie into halves and used one of the pieces to point at Helena. "You'd last longer than her because you got more noise in your head, easier for you to shut the voice out. But even I'd end up like those poor souls if I stayed."

"How long would it take before that happened, do you think?" Myka asked. At Helena's alarmed look, she said, "I'm not going to ask Esther to do our jobs for us, I'm just trying to figure out how long we would have before we'd end up sitting in front of a screen."

Esther broke the half into quarters and popped one into her mouth. "I don't know, maybe a day, probably not much more than that."

Myka muttered, "And we might have, at most, a fraction of that."

"But I would have more time than you," Helena said, "because I'm 'noisier.'" She smiled in an effort to coax a smile from Myka.
But the thin line of Myka's mouth didn't relax. "We can discuss that later. We're not making any decisions right now." The worried crease between her eyebrows was only deepening, but she tried to say as reassuringly as she could to Esther, "We've been throwing a lot of questions at you, but the information you've given us has been invaluable. Helena, unless you have anything else?" Myka was rising from the loveseat.

Helena wasn't sure where to put down her glass. The side table was on the other side of the loveseat. She could be flummoxed by a momentary indecision about where to put an empty glass but unruffled by the thought that they had to retrieve an artefact whose effect everyone was defenseless against. Unless you happened to be an old woman who heard other people's 'voices.' "Has it grown any stronger, the voice, since you first heard it?"

Esther worked her mouth, the question something to chew, like the cookies. "Not that I can tell. But it's not gotten weaker either. Those other folks from the government, the CDC, I see 'em milling around in their special little suits in the gas station. The station's the first thing you see when you're coming into Ellis from the north. Looks like they stopped there and that was it for them."

"And here I was hoping the voice might have become a croak, didn't drink its honey tea or whatever singers do," Helena sighed. "Not that I believe Major Lowry can be persuaded to see reason, he's the Mount Rushmore of obdurateness, but if we -"

"You're not going to persuade anyone about anything if you tell them you got your information from a crazy old woman," Esther interrupted. Her napkin of cookies placed carefully on the seat of her chair, she was impatiently motioning to Helena to surrender her glass, her braid seeming to twitch in sympathetic irritation. "Give me that before you drop it."

"I wasn't going to drop it, I'm quite capable of taking it to the kitchen," Helena protested, but she gave the glass to Esther, who snorted in derision as she led them from the living room.

"I bet you're one of those types who'd let the house burn down while you solve a crossword puzzle," she growled.

"She's known for ruining skillets," Myka volunteered. "It's why Leena insisted we keep the fire extinguisher next to the stove, not under the sink." Her voice fell, and she paused just inside the kitchen. "She saw what she called auras. I think you hear something similar, Esther."

"And how did your friend deal with it?" Esther nudged a chair closer in to the kitchen table and smiled wearily at them. "Sometimes I didn't mind when they hospitalized me. The doctors kept everyone so drugged up that I found some peace. Sometimes."

"She baked when it . . . when we . . . got to be too much for her," Myka said softly. "She'd banish us from the kitchen for an afternoon, and she would bake cookies and brownies and all sorts of things. She would sing along to the radio and make a mess and not worry about any of us. It wasn't much, but it eased some of the stress."

"Not too good at baking. Can't bear any extra noise - that's why I got rid of the TV after my husband died. Phone, too. If people want to talk to me, they have to come see me, and that tends to discourage them." Esther slapped the back of the chair, as if it was as close as she could get to an affirmative gesture, and then opened the door for them.

"We may come out again, if we have more questions about Ellis." Myka briefly touched Esther's hand. "I'm sorry if we're a burden, but this really is -"
"I know," Esther interrupted. "Something's gotta be done about the town. Anyway, you're not the problem, it's this one whose mind is yammering." Esther presented Helena with a scowl that seemed entirely sincere. Helena gave her an apologetic look before she followed Myka out into the yard. The heat beat up through the soles of her sandals and the SUV, an overlarge charcoal briquet under the sun, promised an auto-da-fe on the return to Boise City.

A hand fumbled at her arm, and Esther was insisting somewhere between Helena's shoulder and ear, "Remember, it needs to be you that goes into Ellis. Your partner, she's one who likes order and for things to make sense, isn't she? The voice'll shut her down just like that." She snapped her fingers for emphasis. "You just gotta let it say whatever it's saying and keep your mind on your other voices. All of them. You'll need 'em." Esther merrily waved at Myka, who was staring at them over the hood of the SUV, acting as though she had wanted to do nothing more than say good-bye one more time or urge them to take some cookies for the road.

Myka waited until Esther had gone back into the house before she asked, "What was that about?"

"Just some travel advice from Glinda about staying on the yellow brick road," Helena said lightly.

The first few minutes in the SUV were excruciating, and Helena thought that, if the passenger door were to open right now, she would simply pour onto the highway, like that cantankerous character in the Star Trek show who turned into what looked like melted gold lame when he couldn't keep his form. Was that how Esther experienced all those voices? Hers, Myka's, neighbors', the troopers' at the barricades, a cacophony that would shatter her, make her a part of endless noise. Shunting the thought aside, she said, "Obviously we're not going to tell Major Lowry how we obtained the information, but if we can convince him that Ellis poses no immediate threat to a larger area -"

Myka cut in, the tension that had marked her earlier evident in the clipped voice, as if each word was a bullet she had to load into a gun. "It was Claudia who called earlier. We've inspired no confidence in Major Lowry. We don't have three days anymore, the DHS has cut it to two. Then the Guard can do whatever it thinks necessary."

Later that night when they were in the bed in Helena's room - her room being marginally cooler than Myka's - Myka curled into herself and radiating a heat that shouted "Don't touch me" while it more quietly spoke of an anger at an increasingly impossible artefact retrieval, Helena said, "Yes."

"Yes to what?"

"Your proposal."

"What proposal?" Helena couldn't see the furrow in Myka's forehead, but she could hear it in Myka's voice. The bed complained as Myka uncurled herself enough to turn over.

"The proposal implicit in your saying that you were trying to convince me that I had a life with you and your son. And my answer is yes."

"Esther was telling you not to let me go into Ellis, wasn't she?"

"Changing the subject doesn't make the proposal go away," Helena said admonishingly, falling silent when Myka turned over again and pulled Helena's arm around her waist, pressing herself against Helena's chest, hips, thighs. She was hot and sticky and Helena felt their skin adhere, but she squeezed Myka closer and kissed the curve of her shoulder. "I'm not trying to be a martyr."

"She said it herself, she's a crazy old woman. Maybe she made it all up, about going into Ellis." Myka's stubbornness was plaintive, the kind of stubbornness a child engages in when she fears
most she'll be convinced she's wrong.

"She didn't. And you know she's right about which one of us has to go into Ellis to find the artefact."

"Because you're the more complicated of the two of us," Myka said jeeringly, but it wasn't much of a jeer, trailing off as she pressed her face into Helena's arm, giving it feverish little kisses.

"Because I'm older." Because I'm the more scarred. Because I know what madness feels like. Making her tone more playful, although it was hard work given Myka's mood and the sweaty suction of their bodies, Helena said, "You haven't said you didn't propose."

"There's no same-sex marriage in South Dakota, Helena."

"That's still not a denial. You proposed and you know it, Myka."

"You come out of Ellis with that artefact, and we'll talk about it."
Chapter 14

Gadgets. People felt either reassured or alarmed when they saw her tinkering with the parts of a disemboweled machine (or a half put-together one, depending on your point of view, especially of her). Would it be something useful that she created or something destructive? That, oftentimes, it was both was a Warehouse paradox few seemed comfortable accepting. Her inventions were good or bad. She was good or bad. Myka had never seemed to view her tinkering with approval or anxiety; it was what Helena did, just as she wrote stories about time machines and invasions from Mars and practiced kenpo. . . and grieved her daughter's death. Which had her reminding herself, as she sat at the table in Myka's room with the parts of a pair of walkie-talkies scattered in front of her, why she was tinkering with them since it wasn't going to reassure Myka of anything. Myka didn't think she had any workable plan for retrieving the artefact, Myka believed she would succumb to it first. Unfortunately, Myka was right, but this was the pretense the two of them had tacitly agreed on, that Helena would pretend she could figure out, in less than 36 hours now, how to retrieve the artefact - attended by a busy, busy display of tinkering - and Myka would pretend that she was concerned but not afraid.

To carry off a pretense, one needed to be pretending to do something. So Helena pretended that she was modifying the transmitter to jam the "signal" of the artefact. Not that what she was doing would interfere with any signal, let alone whatever energy was animating the artefact. But she frowned and muttered "diode" and "sine wave" and "amplitude" whenever Myka pretended that she was checking on Helena's progress. What was allowing them to continue the charade was that they had also agreed, in actual words that they had tried to invest with sincerity, not to stay in the same room with each other for any length of time.

"Since your room has the table why don't I work in there?" Helena had suggested, tossing onto her bed the bag from the discount store - which was Wal Mart-like but not Wal Mart, substituting cashiers stolidly waving from behind their cash registers for greeters and cartoon avalanches for the "falling prices" smiley faces. She thought she had struck the right tone, sounding serious yet relaxed, as though the assortment of tools and the walkie-talkies they had purchased, in combination with the genius touch only H.G. Wells could provide, would result in a homely little neutralizer in just a matter of minutes.

"Sounds good," Myka had said with brittle cheerfulness. "I'll stay in here and research the archives for any artefacts that might counteract the replicated Bible, if that's what it is. Jacqui and Claudia are looking through the records, too."

"We're already invincible," Helena had said, suspecting she sounded like an instructor at a positive thinking seminar. But Myka had only smiled, pointing at the desk in the corner of Helena's room and the connecting door as a sign that they should get busy.

Rolling a screwdriver between her thumbs and index fingers, Helena wondered, not for the first time, what her genius touch amounted to. Maybe Edison thought it came hard at 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration, but Helena believed that the ratio, for her, was even less impressive, 75% bravado and 24% desperation. The remaining 1% she attributed to luck. It was the bravado part of the equation that she had presented early in the morning on their way to the discount store, when she had breezily recounted the retrieval, when she was at 12, of Mesmer's magnets. They had had the psychological effect of binding the victim's will to that of the artefact's holder; what he wanted, she was compelled to do.

"The downside," Helena had said, sipping at her coffee from the diner (tea wouldn't do on a day..."
like this one was going to be), "was that the holder would eventually become as much of a shell as his victim. The magnets so inextricably fused them that they would end up consuming one another, metaphorically speaking. Although we might have jumped on it sooner had cannibalism been involved. A shallow lot most of us were, always on the lookout for a good spectacle." She had broadened her accent, tried out an engagingly devilish grin, but Myka maintained her death grip on the steering wheel, the large, black lenses of her sunglasses lending her face a similar blankness. "At any rate, we managed to retrieve the magnets without losing any one of us to their influence."

The sunglasses swung toward her as did a disbelieving scowl. "Is this where I'm supposed to ask 'Golly, Superman, how did you do it?'"

"Darling, it's not a fair comparison. Superman never displayed any particular inventiveness, no ingenuity, no cleverness. Just brute power wrapped in overdeveloped pecs."

"All right, Lex Luthor, impress me," Myka had said, turning the SUV into the discount store's parking lot; she left the engine running, so the air conditioner could continue to blast, and had shifted in her seat to face Helena.

"They were magnets, so we demagnetized them, in a sense. We made some agents more suggestible, shall we say, and Caturanga sent them out as decoys. Except they were suggestible only to the desires we had implanted, not the desire of our target, who was using the magnets to compel people to steal for him. The agents were focused on sex or food or poetry, of all things, not money. The new variables we introduced disrupted the magnets' attraction, and we were able to capture our villain. It had sounded easy, even to her own ears. Identify the artefact, isolate its power, and devise a plan for neutralizing it.

"When you say 'we,' don't you really mean 'you'?" Myka had taken off her sunglasses and was nibbling on one of the temple pieces. Her eyes looked especially green, they always did, Helena knew, when she was tired. Her eyelids were red-rimmed, and the whites of her eyes weren't white but the color of old lace. She looked like she hadn't slept, and though Helena didn't remember Myka rolling out of her arms, when they, no, she had woken -- she had slept - she had noticed that Myka was closer to the edge of the bed. Helena had touched her and her skin still felt hot, as if she had done nothing all night but let her worries burn like a bonfire.

"I'm not easily suggestible. I can't be hypnotized by watching a pocket watch being swung back and forth. I have to calculate the speed of its swing or mentally take it apart and improve its timing mechanism. An active mind doesn't take direction, Myka, but gives it." Myka was never proof against Helena's indulgence in a bout of childish boasting, and a crooked smile was Helena's victory.

She hadn't really used a watch to hypnotize the other agents; that was a silly bit of stage business. She had used another artefact, a blindfold worn by a popular magician of the time when he had pretended to read the minds of his audience. It hadn't actually allowed him to read minds, but it had allowed him to control thoughts and command the responses he wanted to hear. As artefacts went, it was relatively harmless. The mind control lasted for only a few hours, and the wearer's subsequent blindness was only temporary. Helena had spent the two days she had suffered the side effect - the magnets having been retrieved and a five-year-old Christina left in the care of her doting Uncle Charles and his wife - in the rooms of an actress, enjoying the full play of her other senses. She wouldn't have been any less vulnerable to the property of the blindfold than the other agents, but it had been her idea to disrupt the magnets' power by hypnotizing agents to have competing compulsions, and Caturanga had decided that she should be the one to oversee the retrieval. All Myka needed to know, however, was that she hadn't been in danger of having her mind controlled by anyone or anything, not the less than confidence-inspiring reasons why.
Myka continued to chew on her sunglasses. "But you knew what the artefact was, exactly what it did, and you had time to plan. We have none of that."

"True. But there's one factor that's the same," Helena said leadingly and shrugged. "I hate to be immodest, but . . . ."

Myka had punched her shoulder then, as if she were Pete. "Sure, right. Let's see your genius tackle what the store has to offer."

That had been several hours ago. Helena checked the time on her phone; it was after 4:00. She was peckish, and in order to drive that from her thoughts, she was tempted to stretch out on the bed and nap. She wasn't unconcerned about tomorrow's retrieval, far from it, but she hadn't progressed to the terror and desperation stage of the process, when she would pace the room and rail against artefacts and throw whatever was at hand, which sometimes, unfortunately, was the device she was working on. Maybe she wouldn't get to that stage, Myka wasn't going in after the artefact. And, in the end, regardless of what happened to her in Ellis, Myka's safety was all that mattered. When you had lived to be almost 150 years old, the thought of dying or becoming, in any way, permanently transformed, which was generally the same thing in the Warehouse universe, lost its power to horrify. The few years when Christina was alive and these recent weeks with Myka and Drew, they weren't enough, but if they were all she had, who was she to say she deserved more given what she had taken from others?

She had kicked off her shoes and flopped on the bed, bunching the two thin pillows behind her head, when Myka opened the door, striding into the room with more nervous energy than the time of day and the overtaxed air conditioning seemed to warrant. Myka had last checked in on her a half-hour ago, dejected that the Houdini séance-busting and cult deprogramming artefacts weren't viable options for combatting the effects of the artefact in Ellis. The Houdini artefact, a table used at actual séances, was too unwieldy for Claudia to whisk down to Boise City and, furthermore, had the far more objectionable side effect of dematerializing the people sitting at it. The deprogramming artefact, a '70s era lava lamp, which had been among the furnishings of a room in which several deprogrammings had taken place, was at least portable, and the side effect, an inability to give credence to anything, although problematic, wasn't permanent - and, as Myka had said, probably couldn't be distinguished from Helena's native cynicism. But the lamp's glass had been cracked in an inventory-related accident, and no one was sure if the lamp's property hadn't been impaired as well. Myka was holding out hope for an artefact recently retrieved from the set of *Mad Men*, an ashtray from the desk of a reputedly Don Draper-like ad executive, which made the possessor impervious to any influence, but the side effects weren't completely known. Some people had become alcoholics, others sex addicts -

"If it were the latter, darling," Helena had said, trying to pull Myka onto her lap, "I think the two of us could live with it." At Myka's wide-eyed, disbelieving look, Helena had quickly added, "You would be the only object of my insatiable desire, I promise you."

Myka hadn't been amused then, and she looked even unhappier now. "Claudia just heard from the DHS. Our deadline's been pushed up again. We have until noon tomorrow." She slapped her phone against her leg. "If Lowry were here, I'd kill him." She looked at Helena, who hadn't so much as flinched at the news. Her legs were still casually crossed, her head still pillowed against the headboard. "This doesn't bother you because you have everything in hand, right?" She gestured toward the dismembered walkie-talkies. "Because you're going to jump up any minute and put those together in a way that will counteract whatever's going on in Ellis. Don't tell me I'm wrong, Helena." Dropping her phone on the bed, she swept both hands through her hair.

"Or what?" Helena demanded. "Do you promise to punish me? I often have my best ideas when
I'm thoroughly distracted." She pushed herself up and tugged at a belt loop on Myka's pants. "Lie here with me. Let's put Major Lowry and Ellis and artefacts out of our minds for a few minutes."

Myka moved away from her. "I can't do that, Helena," she said irritably.

"Then can I talk you into an early dinner? The diner's special tonight is smothered meatloaf. Isn't meatloaf already smothered in ketchup or tomato sauce? What else is it being smothered in, I want to know." She grinned up at Myka, who had dropped one hand from her hair but continued to pull at it with the other. "Gravy? Velveeta? I suppose its mountains of sodium and cholesterol and calories don't really matter at this point. I could be eating air, staring at a blank computer monitor with the other poor Ellisians this time tomorrow." She paused. "It hadn't occurred to me before, the homonym, but it is rather apt, don't you think?"

"No, Helena, it's not," Myka snapped. "You will not be entering the afterlife tomorrow, do you hear me? Ellis is not the Elysian Fields. Ellis is Univille, only without the nice hotel and Applebee's. You don't like Univille, remember? You make fun of it, you can't wait to leave it. You will think about Ellis the same way you think about Univille, as a place to get the hell out of."

She had stopped worrying her hair and pacing; she was standing at the foot of the bed, her hands settling on her hips, a gunslinger about to... No, Helena decided, a sheriff, a sheriff demanding that she get out of Dodge. Her grin returned full force. They were going to replay this moment someday soon, in a much nicer bedroom, except that Myka was going to be naked, practically naked, with just an old-fashioned gun belt riding her hips and a leather vest with a sheriff's star pinned to it hanging open over her breasts. "I'll be on the next stagecoach out, I swear."

Myka had reluctantly driven them to the diner, where she had picked at a club sandwich while Helena had tried the smothered meatloaf, which wasn't smothered so much as immersed in brown gravy and onions. The diner had had few other customers, and they had studiously kept their attention to themselves. Perhaps they were less curious than the ones who had been in the diner during lunch, or perhaps Major Lowry's clawing back of the time allotted to them for saving Ellis had, like the typical goings-on in small towns, made itself known without the source of the news ever being acknowledged. Even their waitress had seemed unable to meet their eyes, taking their orders with her gaze fixed on her pad.

When Helena had managed to capture the attention of their waitress - since she rarely looked their way, it had to be done through a series of throat-clearings and finally, the waving of her napkin - and ordered a slice of pie, not blueberry or cherry but a mixture of berries called "Berry Heavenly" - Myka had hissed, "Since when do you eat meatloaf and mashed potatoes and pie? This is not a 'last meal,' Helena whatever-your-middle-name-is Wells."

"Like any traveler, I'm sampling the native cuisine," Helena said loftily. "Although I need to work up to the okra. And, since it's time you know," she dropped her voice, "because we are engaged, despite your caviling about a successful retrieval, it's Joy."

"Helena Joy Wells," Myka said slowly, incredulously.

Helena smiled up at the waitress, who managed to slide the plate onto the table while looking in the opposite direction. "Mine was a difficult birth. My parents had already decided my first name would be my maternal grandmother's, but there had been a dispute over my middle name. My father wanted it to be Elizabeth, after his mother, but my mother wouldn't hear of it. And then my birth had been so protracted that my mother said it ought to be 'Joy' because she had never been so joyful in her life as to have finally had an end to what had been, throughout, a miserable experience. My father was too exhausted himself to object. Or so the family story went."
"You're just spinning tales, aren't you?" But Myka couldn't hide a smile. "Your middle name's no more Joy than it is Amber or Tiffany."

"You can't say it's not." Using the side of her fork, Helena sliced off the tip of her pie. Berries, small and large, purplish and red, spilled onto her plate. They didn't have the shrunken look of frozen berries; they looked freshly picked. The crust was... pie crust, but it wasn't chewy and carried a hint of cinnamon. Pie wouldn't be her choice for a last dessert, but if this was the last sweet she would have, she could have chosen worse.

After dinner, Helena laboriously put the walkie-talkies back together. Laboriously because she needed to make it look like she had actually done something to them, something that she didn't want to jar by putting them back together too quickly. Though Myka was in her room talking to Drew, the connecting door was open (Helena had impatiently broken its lock the first day) and Helena could hear the pad of Myka's feet as she approached the doorway and then their pad as she walked away, apparently having thought better of checking up on Helena's genius-ing. She heard the outside door to the room open and close, and then she could no longer hear Myka's voice.

When she had finished putting the walkie-talkies together, she pushed them across the table. She would take them with her, but she wouldn't use them. The only things that would help her, according to Esther Price, were her own voices, but Helena wasn't sure that her ghosts, numerous though they were, would be able to mount a defense. She had been listening to them for a hundred years by the time MacPherson had released her from the bronze, and still she had managed to make a glorious cock-up of her reentry into the world.

More door-opening and closing and then Myka was handing the phone to her. "It's your turn."

Drew had wanted to speak with her last night too, and they talked now, as they had then, about the projects they might work on together, tree houses for his friends, go-karts, and bird condominiums (he was no longer satisfied with the simple, single family bird house he and his father needed to build for his math class's final project). "You know how we talked about my friend Tanner and how he wanted you to build him a tree house? Well, Tanner's dad saw the pictures of my tree house, and he wants you to build him a new deck."

"I'll consider Tanner's request, but Tanner's dad will have to find someone else to build a new deck for him."

"That's good, 'cause I have a new project for us. I want us to make my room bigger."

"That's quite a project," Helena temporized. "Have you talked to your mother about it?"

"She said we could start planning it once you finish your job tomorrow."

Artful little devil Myka was. And shameless, too, using her son as leverage.

"Hey, I know something you don't," Drew gloated.

"Best enjoy the moment."

"Huh?" He sounded so like Pete that Helena couldn't help but smile into the phone. "I promised Mom I wouldn't say anything to you . . . ." Helena had a vision of him biting his bottom lip, just as his mother might.

"It's important to keep your promises," Helena said gently. "If your mother thinks it's important for me to know, she'll tell me."

She hesitated for a moment. "I'll talk to you tomorrow night."
"Okay," he said. Thankfully he didn't make her promise.

Drew and his mother talked for a little while longer, and then the call ended. There was silence from the other room, and Helena thought Myka was working on her laptop, drawing upon the Warehouse's archives for yet more artefacts that might be of use. If it kept her occupied and calm... But there was something too silent about the silence, and there was the faint sound of scraping nearby, as if someone were pacing the parking lot, turning rocks over with her feet. Helena pushed back her chair and ran out of the room, her heart pounding.

"Don't do it," she said.

Myka was standing by the hood of the SUV, playing with the keychain. In the waning sunlight, it was easier to hear the keys being tossed and jingled than to see the glints of silver. She stopped, pocketing the keys. "You have no idea what I was going to do," she said.

"You were going out to see Esther Price and talk her into accompanying me into Ellis. Close enough?"

Myka shrugged dismissively. "She's our best bet for retrieving the artefact. We have no choice but to consider using her."

"We do have a choice," Helena countered, running her hand along the hood until it reached Myka's arm. "I know how to get in, find the artefact, and get out. We don't need Esther."

In the twilight, Helena could tell only that Myka was looking at her, she couldn't tell how Myka was looking at her. But she could feel the weight of her gaze, doubting and anxious. "You've been bullshitting me all day, Helena. You have no idea how you're going to manage this." Myka raked her hair with her fingers, giving it vicious tugs. "We're supposed to meet Lowry at nine tomorrow morning, at the barricade north of Ellis. He'll give us until noon, but not a minute more."

"You know it doesn't matter how much or how little time he gives us. Most likely I won't have even a half-hour. I'll have to work very, very quickly." Injecting a silkiness into her voice that wasn't coming naturally tonight, especially now, she moved closer to Myka, stilling the frenetic fingers. "Which annoys me because I prefer to take my time, as you well know, darling." She kissed the corner of Myka's jaw.

"Don't try to work me," Myka said, ignoring the kiss but not pushing Helena away. "I need you to come out of Ellis, preferably under your own power."

"I will." Quietly, half-whispering, she said, her lips gliding just above Myka's skin, "I couldn't bear it if something happened to Esther. My conscience is overburdened as it is. Don't put me in the position of having to worry about her safety."

Myka stepped back far enough to cup Helena's face between her hands. "You don't understand. I need you to be all right, Helena." She started to laugh, but her laughter broke off jaggedly. "I have no qualms about risking her, me, whatever, whoever, to get you out of there."

"But I do." Helena paused. "Please, Myka, don't."

Again, Helena felt the look, disbelieving in an entirely different sense. "How can you not know? What do I have to do? Open your eyes, Helena."

Instead Helena kissed her before Myka could continue giving vent to an incredulity that would have been insulting in another context, one that wouldn't involve turning into an automaton in front of a screen and then either starving to death or falling victim to a "military option." Against Myka's
lips, she said, "Tell me what you want me to do."

"I need you to love me, Helena."

She could respond seriously or mischievously or seductively, or she could simply do what Myka
asked. For once, she could be the one to offer support, to provide comfort. It was strangely
humbling to feel needed and needed not because she could invent wondrous, if not always fully
functioning, devices or write novels that Myka could happily lose herself in but because she was
Helena, with all her imperfections. Displaying less grace than she had hoped, she lowered herself to
her knees, unbuttoning Myka's pants and working the zipper down. With the tip of her tongue, she
drew a line across Myka's skin parallel to the waistband of her panties, and Myka shivered. The sun
was no more than a faint lemon yellow streak across the sky, but the air remained dense, close, as
if she were having to touch Myka through a blanket, not under one. It was time to retreat to the
lesser discomfort of their rooms, and Helena was surprised that Myka hadn't already insisted on it.
But when she leaned back, Myka made a complaining noise and restlessly, roughly stroked
Helena's hair. "No, here," she muttered.

"You do know that we're in a public space, on the verge of breaking laws," Helena murmured,
hands moving around to Myka's back, slipping under her panties and gliding slowly over the curves
of Myka's butt.

"Now" was Myka's only response.

Helena rose and, still touching, still kissing, they slid and bumped along the side of the SUV until
they were against a rear door, which Myka fumbled open. Lifting her hips onto the seat, she helped
Helena push down her pants and didn't protest when they, along with her shoes, were flung to the
ground. Helena felt the warm press of Myka's legs as they locked around her, pulling her in. For a
passing second, Helena was in a carriage, trying to divest her paramour of the hour of her (or his)
multiple layers, more clothing than one human being should ever be expected to wear, and then the
memory, along with its fragmentary collection of lovers long dead, was gone, as momentary as a
cool breeze or a summer rain shower in this blast furnace of a town. Myka was no fuzzily
remembered ghost, Helena knew this body under her hands, its long legs and arms, the arch of its
rib cage, the shallow valley between its breasts. She thought she had known its voice too, low and
half-broken when Myka was close to coming, but the sound Myka was making now was higher-
pitched, an actual cry, and growing louder. Helena stopped, confused, until she felt the lock of
Myka's legs around her tighten and Myka's hands tangling in her hair, pulling it hard, pulling her
closer.

No carriage, a boat this time, not just rocking amidst the waves, but careening down them and
rocketing, leaping up them. When she was young, before the bronze, she had never made love on a
boat; never enough space or privacy on the packets across the Channel, and on the steamer ships
when she had followed an artefact across an ocean, she had been too enamored of the engine's
workings to be distracted by an attractive passenger. There had been a few hook-ups on boats,
yachts really, in the years since she had left the Warehouse, but she could barely remember the
experience let alone her partner. This wasn't a boat she was in, it was still just the SUV, and she
had had plenty of sex in conveyances with wheels, but the speed and the pumping of Myka's hips
and these new loud cries of hers made it feel so different that Helena thought she was losing her
soundings, that she could be moving with Myka through water or air, not giving them both carpet
burns as they rubbed against the upholstery. It was a pell-mell rhythm, and Helena was trying to
keep pace with the timing of Myka's cries, but some were short, more gasps than cries, while others
were longer, more drawn out.

She slowed, withdrawing her fingers, and Myka was shouting in protest, "Damn you, damn you,
damn you," and Helena knew it wasn't only about her stopping, and she kneeled above Myka, her head bent against the roof of the SUV, feeling that odd and unfamiliar sense of humility, that anyone could care so much. About her. She crawled out of the SUV and then leaned back in, wrapping her arms around Myka's waist and dragging her to the edge of the seat. Crouching, not entirely sure how long she could maintain this position, she hooked Myka's legs over her shoulders and lowered her mouth. She knew this part of Myka's body too, how wet and soft it was, as if it might dissolve in her mouth if she lingered long enough, and tonight it was more liquid than flesh, and she couldn't resist nipping, just a little, to see if she had skin between her teeth. Myka cried out again, drumming her heels against Helena's back, and Helena set up a new rhythm, one whose speed she dictated because while she was Helena, she was also H.G. Wells, and there wasn't a problem - given time enough - that she couldn't solve, no artefact she couldn't neutralize. Because she was the best, always had been the best, there had never been anyone like her before, and there never would be again --

And then Myka cried out loud enough for all of Boise City to hear, and Ellis too, if they hadn't already been listening to something else, and it was a sound that, for once, drowned out all the voices in Helena's mind, and she thought if she could carry that with her into Ellis, she really would be invincible.

.............

The concrete barricades had been moved back, far enough not only for the SUV to pass through with ease but a much larger vehicle as well, one of those military trucks with the camouflage-patterned tarps stretched over their backs, which hid whatever was being transported, maybe boxes of canned goods or . . . troops or . . . weapons. There were no military vehicles visible, other than the sedan that the major and his staff had driven to the barricades and it looked like a regular car. There wasn't anything vaguely military hovering in the sky above, but just like the trucks, Helena knew it was out there, up there, somewhere, waiting for the major's order. Myka and Major Lowry were talking, and Myka's hand was on her hip. It wasn't a particularly good sign that her other hand was in her hair, but it was better than being on the other hip. Myka was in jeans this morning and, despite the already punishing heat, wearing one of her v-neck sweaters. The shoulder holster seemed especially obvious, maybe only because it was black and contrasted sharply with the sea green of the sweater. But the gun looked larger than usual, as if it had swelled in proportion to the danger. The holster and gun were such a part of Myka's uniform on a retrieval that normally Helena didn't notice them, but this morning, they were very . . . weapon-like. As was Myka, she decided, whose every facial muscle seemed bunched with tension.

Helena had watched Myka clean her gun earlier that morning, glasses halfway down the bridge of her nose; she was still squinting, which may have been because she needed a new prescription, but Helena was pretty sure that it was because she was tired. Because she herself was exhausted, holding the back of her hand to her mouth as she yawned. They had returned from the SUV to Helena's room, Myka gloriously and unself-consciously bottomless, although Helena caught only a glimpse of Myka's butt as they darted in and out of the wide arc of a street light. Behind the warped motel room door, Helena was humbled once more, wonderfully humbled, as Myka had pushed her onto the bed and straddled her, itemizing breathily against her ear all the intimacies they would no longer share if Helena didn't make it back from Ellis. And then Myka had demonstrated them. "In case you had forgotten," she said.

Myka was calling to her, and Helena joined them. Her features seemed to squeeze together in one large, tense knot the closer Helena approached, and Helena wasn't sure if it was because of her imminent departure or whatever it was Major Lowry was telling her. It didn't matter at this point, anyway. Nor did Major Lowry's underscoring of their noon deadline or his repeated directive that she was to contact Myka immediately if she noticed any change in Ellis or its residents. She nodded
as if she were listening but she was remembering how she and Myka had lain on the lumpy mattress in the motel room, watching the darkness fade as the sky outside grew lighter. She was drifting toward sleep when she felt Myka clutch her hand, interlacing their fingers. The sex, the words they had whispered against each other's skin, it all came down to a simple gesture, one asking for a reassurance she couldn't believe in and the other offering a reassurance she didn't have the power to give.

"Any change, I mean, any change, you call her immediately. Immediately, got that, Agent Wells?"

If Myka was looking weapon-like, Major Lowry was looking more rock-like. His head, his chest, even his haircut were squarer, the lines not rounded but forming corners. Helena gave him another nod, but she was trying to take in all she could of the moment.

Like the meatloaf and pie she had eaten last evening, this patch of asphalt and the surrounding fields and pasture weren't what she wanted, but it was what she had. She had to make do with the troopers she and Myka had talked to the day before, who were chatting with Major Lowry's two underlings; the birds, hawks by their size and larger wingspan, which were idly circling above them; the sunlight, as white-yellow as cornsilk, which was mercilessly illuminating everything, but always her eyes went back to Myka. Her hair shone red and was floating in all directions on the breeze. Helena wanted to twine a strand around her finger, but she let the impulse pass. Even something so modestly affectionate was too much now.

Then it was time, and she was walking to the SUV, Myka's curt, controlled "Be safe" and her own careless "Why should I start now" following her into the car. She ignored the walkie-talkies on the passenger seat and drove between the barricades. She figured she would have time to search only one location before she was impaired by the artefact. Selecting the school had no solid logic behind it - the artefact could be anywhere in Ellis or, worse yet, miles away. But people never failed to try to make sense of the nonsensical. If the holder of the artefact thought that he was transmitting a message, gravitating toward the high point of the town would be a rational thing to do, especially if he knew about the old radio club. It was a straw, but, as had become her and Myka's mantra, straws were all they had.

For longer than she thought she would, she heard only the steady hum of the SUV's engine and the whine of its tires on the road, but as the buildings on the northern end of Ellis began to appear, the gas station that Esther had mentioned, a church, she identified a sound that didn't belong to the car. Esther had described the sound as the insistent voice of a used car salesman, but she wasn't hearing one voice, she was hearing many. Softer than whispers, the voices seemed more echoes of sound than sound itself; they were old voices, very old voices. When she had returned to 12, after what she had done to Lebecque and Poule, she fancied that she heard the Warehouse talking to itself in its several voices, those of its long-dead agents and regents, the Eldunari (their constant dance a constant speaking), the artefacts themselves, ruminating about what was to be done with her. She had hoped Caturanga would assign her to a retrieval, but instead, with a chilliness distinct from his customary reserve, he assigned her to several housekeeping tasks in the Warehouse. She had entered its rooms and walked its aisles, its murmurings following her, burrowing into her, like an insect wriggling into her ear. As she checked the numbers assigned to the artefacts against the numbers on her list, she would poke her pencil into her ears, trying to rid herself of the noise -

Helena stamped on the brake, nearly launching herself over the steering wheel. Esther had said she would need all her voices; it was time to find another before the Warehouse's overwhelmed her. She was in Ellis proper, driving down its empty main street; unfortunately, the high school was on the opposite end of town. But she had seen its roofline before she had seen the rest of Ellis. Just a little farther, she had just a little farther to go .

- Mama, Mama, I'm going to hide in your bag so you'll take me with you.
Christina was avidly watching her as she packed a valise for a retrieval in Germany. The voice was excited, tumbling over the words. Listening to it was like seeing her daughter endlessly somersault.

- You'll open it, and there I'll be, saying Surprise, Mama.
- Promise me we'll go on adventures like you have.
- Where's India? Will you bring me back a tiger?
- I haven't seen you in forever and ever. Someday I'll build a rocket, too, and take you and Uncle Charles and Cinders to the moon.

Cinders, their ash-colored mouser, was staring at Helena yellowly from the sanctuary of Christina's arms, looking unmoved at the prospect of flying to the moon.

The voice changed, becoming older, louder, more petulant.

- But I don't want to go to France. I want to stay here with Nanny and Uncle Charles and Aunt Jane. France is boring. My cousins are boring. Nothing ever happens there. It's always the same. Don't make me go, Mama. Not this summer.
- Not this summer, Mama.
- France is boring. Nothing ever happens there.
- Don't go.
- Can't I go to Greece with you?
- I hate France. It's boring.
- Nothing ever happens there.
- Nothing ever happens there.
- Nothing ever happens there.

Another stomp of the brakes, but she had already passed the high school, was on the highway headed south out of Ellis. She wrenched the steering wheel, turning the SUV around with a squeal of tires. She was sweating and shaking, unable to silence Christina's voice, which wasn't spilling over itself with enthusiasm but continuing to mount in fury, shrieking over and over, Nothing ever happens there, Nothing ever happens there. . . .

The voice was masculine, dry, striving to sound urbane, but that had always marked Charles, the striving. The Wellses weren't much above shopkeepers, but Charles strove to suggest there was more. He might have had the ink-stained hands of a scribbler, adopted views unpopular among true gentlemen, but the voice, the voice could be allowed to intimate that if one climbed up high enough in the Wells family tree, one might find among its branches the illegitimate child of a lord, perhaps a duke, a mark of gentility and breeding that couldn't be erased no matter how doggedly the Wellses continued to (re)populate themselves among the lower classes.

- So you've decided to carry it?
- Oh, ho, her, is it? And you know it's a 'her' because of some medical diagnostic you've recently invented? Or perhaps the secret government office that employs you has devised, among its varied, mysterious, and, dare I say, mystical operations, a method you've used to determine its sex?
- You simply know? You don't do anything simply, Helena.

A pause, the voice again, both more mocking and more affectionate.

- Perhaps the child will steady you. You could do with some steadying, someone to keep your feet planted on the ground and to demand you love something besides your inventions and your 'government' work.

- I don't think you're selfish, not unreasonably so, at any rate. But you can't deny that you aren't single-minded, obsessive, even ruthless in your investigation of the latest theory or object that's captured your attention. In fact, now that I think about it, perhaps you should plan to produce a brood, although the shame of it would be enough to send our parents to an early grave.

- Satisfied with just one, hmmm. Yes, one that you can become monomaniacal about. I can see it now. You'll so dote upon her, you'll raise a little monster. I fear you'll be a mother to an insufferable brat. So that's your plan, Jane and I will be the - what did you call it? - 'leveling' influence? The necessary common touch? Don't hide your esteem for me, Helena.

Another pause and then the voice resumed, sharp enough that Helena felt it cut through her.

- You may give birth to her, but you'll never be a mother. You'll never learn to put her above yourself. You'll lose her. But you, you'll go on living because you're the sun in your universe. Nothing can be allowed to eclipse the great H.G. Wells, not even her own daughter.

The high school was on her right. She would. . . what was it she was going to do at the high school? It was difficult to think, to do anything but listen. The Warehouse, Christina, Charles, and the others. Christ, there were so many others. Helena took her foot off the gas pedal and dropped her arms from the steering wheel to wrap them around her chest. The SUV slowed, drifting toward the curb.

- How much? For how long? And if we run into trouble? You're paying us like this to avoid trouble, right.

- Dude, maybe we should think about this some more.

- It's a lot of money.

- I don't know. . . .

- Hey, how 'bout this? Lady, if this thing goes sideways on us, it's all coming back on you.

They were graduate students in anthropology. But she hadn't sought out the best or the hardest-working in the program, she had searched for the ones who still harbored the illusion that field work was one long Indiana Jones movie, that they would discover Camelot or Atlantis, not as a result of research or painstaking study but through a combination of luck and instinct. Sufficiently motivated - or greedy - to do as she directed but not shrewd - or cautious - enough to question why she was hiring them.

Their voices were replaced by the sound of a strong breeze. She had to clutch her skirts to her as she ran after a woman who was running even more frantically toward the end of the roof. The woman climbed the narrow ledge and held out her hands in a stopping motion.

Helena slowed and waited for her new partner, a phlegmatic man and portly, to catch up to her. Dunbar had been with Scotland Yard for many years before coming to the Warehouse, and she was curious to find out how he wanted to proceed. The woman teetering on the ledge possessed a ring,
once reputedly owned by Lucrezia Borgia, that she had been using to poison a succession of husbands and lovers. Once he began breathing more normally, Dunbar genially called out to the woman, declaring that they wanted only to talk to her. She regarded him suspiciously as he approached her. Dunbar stopped, not quite close enough to touch her, but he was reaching out his hand, in supplication, Helena thought. Until, with surprising speed, he lunged forward, his hand pushing the woman off the roof. She scrabbled for purchase but she grabbed only air, and her screams as she fell to the street below held more surprise than terror. Dunbar turned around, shrugging.

- I didn't want to waste the afternoon trying to persuade her to hand it over.

When they had descended to the street, he had squatted next to the woman's broken body, calmly twisting the ring off her finger.

- Tell Caturanga if you must. I can always go back to the Yard.

Her voice, equally as indifferent.

- She suffered less than her husbands. You should have dangled her over the edge, given her some hope, then let go of her.

He had laughed in true appreciation.

- I think you and I, Wells, will get along just fine.

The grinding of the SUV as it bumped over the curb startled Helena, and she watched, as if it were unfolding before her onscreen, a corner of a building, a hardware store it seemed, loom ever larger until the SUV struck it, hard enough that she was jerked forward against her seat belt but not so hard that the airbag inflated. She fumbled with the latch of the belt. She needed to get out of the car and go somewhere. . . . Something about a high school. . . . Staggering onto the street, she went to her knees, her hands scraping along the pavement as she tried to break her fall.

She thought about resting on the street for a while. It wasn't as if she was going to be run over, and it would take so much effort to stand up. She wasn't sure which was the greater weight holding her down, the heat or the voices. She lifted herself to a kneeling position, and then, with one of her burning, stinging palms pressed against the pavement, she pushed herself up, awkwardly, unsteadily. Her feet crossed over each other as she attempted to take a few steps, but she didn't fall down again. She wanted to go back to the SUV to retrieve her phone; she needed to look at it, but one of the voices, a woman's, maybe even her own, told her not to do it, and she obeyed it.

The high school was only a few yards away, and she walked drunkenly toward it. She swatted at the air around her head. They were so loud now, those voices, squawking at her like birds, and she craned her face toward the sky, expecting an angry flock of them to be hovering above her head, ready to dive-bomb her at any minute. Maybe she should be shielding herself. . . . like that actress. . . . in that movie that Cl. . . . someone, she could no longer remember who, had made her watch. Cl. . . . she couldn't hang onto the name, but it didn't matter. What mattered was trying to find out if the movie was playing on TV. She needed to find a TV so she could watch it again. She slowly turned in a circle, swaying, as she tried to read the signs on the buildings. Was one a café? Haltingly, she began to lurch in the direction of a small, one story building with a large plate glass window. But the voice that had told her not to go back for her phone told her to quit looking for a TV. So she reversed direction, toward the high school; at least the voice - and it was rather bossy that voice, but it made her smile - wasn't objecting to that.

- An unusual request, Agent Wells. To be bronzed is a punishment we reserve for only the most
dangerous, the most deranged. The worst of the worst. The process is not without risk. Sometimes it fails to complete, and the individual dies an agonizing death. Despite your grave errors of judgment, you remain of value to this organization. There are other punishments, almost as severe, and if it's suffering for your sins that you think you deserve, certainly more painful, but your . . . talents. . . would still be available to us.

- She's said she's no longer fit to be an agent. She's threatened to destroy the world if she has to live in it any longer, Jefferson. Given all that she's done, I'm inclined to grant her request. She's a monster, and we ought to treat her as one. We thought we had that infernal time machine of hers well guarded, but she managed, despite our best efforts, to gain access to it yet again, and it cost another agent his life. She's made a mockery of our mission. Let her be bronzed, and if she doesn't survive the process, so much the better.

- What do you think, Caturanga? You know her better than anyone here.

- You've concluded that her crimes must be punished. She hasn't asked for your sympathy or your mercy, only your assent to the punishment she's chosen for herself.

- I'm asking you what you think, not to play her advocate.

- Helena doesn't ask for favors, she hasn't ever been in need of them. She has not asked, she has begged us for the bronze.

- Good God, man, speak plainly. You put me in mind of one of those swamis who hold such influence over your kind. What do you recommend?

- He's spoken plainly enough. We bronze her.

All the voices rose in a huge roar of assent, so loud that Helena vainly covered her ears with her hands, her mouth opening as if to scream, but her screams wouldn't drown out the voices. She stumbled and fell, her shins barking against . . . steps, old, crumbling, concrete steps, and they led to the front doors of the school. She didn't realize, until she had dragged herself up to the last one, using a rusted iron railing as old as the steps to pull herself along, that the doors were locked with a padlock chain.

This time her butt hit the concrete first, her back scraping against the support post of the railing. She could think the words clearly enough, bloody bolt cutter. Fucking bloody bolt cutter. They hadn't thought to buy one. And as the voices took another collective breath, preparing for a final assault, she looked at the empty streets, the seemingly abandoned buildings, and thought that what she had done with the past ten years of her life - longer than that really, if she counted back to when she had left the B&B, carrying no more than a travel bag, saying good-bye to no one - was to have constructed a mausoleum, whose confines she endlessly wandered, communing with her dead when she chose, summoning them every time she was called on an appraisal. Irene hadn't been far wrong about her. What more fitting place to become the ghost she believed herself to be than a ghost town?

She had tried to use her voices, but they had used her. She belonged to them as much or more than they belonged to her. It was time to stop resisting. Her eyelids fluttered, and she could feel them coming, descending upon her, tearing at her. But there was one that remained apart, refusing to join with the others.

Open your eyes.

Ah, the bossy one, the one that made her smile.
Open your eyes, Helena.

Open. Your. Eyes.

In front of her was Esther Price.
"Come on, get up. We don't have much time." Esther's head was hanging like a wilted flower and her hands were on her hips, as though she had just finished a race to get to her. Helena shifted to make room for her on the step. She didn't understand the hurry. Esther's voice was ragged, and there had been a small gasp at the end of her words, as though she barely had the strength to say them. Her head tilted up, and her eyes fixed on Helena's. As her thoughts scudded and broke apart, like clouds captured in time-lapse, Helena felt she knew that gaze intimately, but she couldn't remember who had pinned her with it before. Not the one with the green eyes... that one could look intently, even fiercely at her, but there was always warmth in those eyes...

"Did she... Myka." There, the name had come to her. "Did Myka send you?"

"Didn't have to." Esther was trying to pull her up. "Doesn't look like there's much to you, but you're a solid one," she grunted. "Get up, Smarty Pants."

"I don't think I can." With Esther tugging on her arms, Helena couldn't cover her head with them, protect herself from the birds that continued to swoop toward her, birds that sounded like people she had known long ago, their cries more human than not, but angry, so angry with her. She wouldn't be afraid if there was only one, but there were so many...

"You have to, because you're the one who knows what to do." With another grunt, Esther pulled Helena to her feet.

She tottered and then, freeing herself from Esther's grasp, she began to descend the steps. She needed to find some place where she could get away from the birds. They were distracting her so that she couldn't think, but there was a message... something she needed to hear or read. She needed a building with computers and phones, not this vacant hulk. Why was she here, anyway? She felt a hand grabbing at her arms again, and she brushed it aside. Helena heard the slap of tennis shoes beside her on the steps and saw from the corner of her eye a figure in blue jeans with a long white braid pass her only to stop two steps lower down and fold her arms across her chest, like a crossing guard forbidding her access to the street.

"She's counting on you, and I know you don't want to disappoint her."

Who was counting on her? This woman, this... Esther. Yes, Esther. Not Myka. Myka was younger and very pretty. Had she told Myka that? She had a phone, yes! She would find her phone and call Myka and tell her about the birds and tell her that she was very pretty. Helena patted her pockets but couldn't feel the oblong shape of her phone. "I can't find my phone," she said pleadingly to Esther.

"You don't need your phone. You can talk to Myka later, when you're done here." Helena felt Esther's hands on her arms again, one hand slipping down to circle her wrist and tug her down the remaining steps. At the bottom, Esther began to drag her toward the side of the building. Helena dug her feet into the ground, and Esther turned and peered into her face. "Do you remember why you wanted in this building? I need you to remember." Esther was panting although they hadn't been running. But it was hot, very hot - and noisy. The sky was filled with birds. Helena didn't have to look up to know that. "He's very loud, that used car salesman. Do you remember me telling you that's what I hear when I'm in Ellis? He hasn't ever been this loud, and I'm having a hard time shutting him out. You have to start working with me, Helena, now."

She was disappointing Esther, Helena realized, and she didn't want to disappoint her. She didn't
want to disappoint Myka either. But it was so hard to hear anything but the birds, she fretted resentfully, they didn't understand. . . . There was a new voice but a familiar one. She had heard it many times before; she didn't know how she knew that, but she knew it was true. She had heard it when she was sitting on a bench beside an African-American woman, an African-American woman in an oddly formal suit for such a warm day. The woman was speaking to her, quietly, calmly, but the eyes above those moving lips were immovable in their disdain. Helena flushed and wanted to turn away, but it was as if the woman held her head fast in order to speak directly into her ear -

I was less worried about your soul when you were planning to end the world. At least then you still felt the world was worth taking on.

You've become, what, an appraiser of Victorian-era antiques and memorabilia? I assume you must be able to do that in your sleep. A woman of your talents ought to ask more of herself.

Every agent, every caretaker has done things that do not rest easy on her conscience. The measure of her is in how willing she is to carry that burden.

A pause.

You're not measuring up, Helena.

The old crone. It was what came to Helena first. Then, Irene.

In a great flapping of wings, the birds retreated, squawking discontentedly as Helena clutched Esther's shoulders. "I have to get into the school. . . . and you have to talk to me."

"What do you think I'm doing?" Esther demanded.

"Give me something to focus on." The birds were hovering, she could hear their cries, which were becoming more distinct, individualized. She shouldn't be listening to them, but one sounded like a little girl sobbing. Christina, she needed to find Christina and comfort her. No, no, no, Christina was dead, she had been dead for . . . . Helena noticed the wrinkles crosshatching and scoring Esther's face. Christina had been dead for longer than Esther had been alive. She released Esther's shoulders only to press her temples between her hands. "Tell me. . . . tell me about Ruth Ridley. She's a relative of yours, isn't she?" She tried to smile at Esther, but she felt it freeze into a grimace as Christina's sobbing became louder and more insistent. "And help me find a way in."

Esther yanked at Helena's wrist. "The idiots padlocked the front door but didn't do anything to the side door. The lock's been broken for years." They went around the corner of the school in an awkward half-jog, Esther tugging at her every time Helena slowed. The lawn hadn't been maintained, and Helena tripped over uneven patches of crabgrass and thistles; it was hard to keep her footing as the birds were becoming louder, Christina's sobs mingling with Lebecque's screams, both rising and falling in rhythm with the pulsing in her head. "She was always Ruth Eustis to me. She was married by the time I was old enough to remember who she was." Esther sharply pulled at Helena's arm to force her to stumble up the step to the side door. "You wanted to know about Ruth Ridley," she shouted, wrenching at the door with her free hand. It ground against the cement, opening only a few inches. "Damnit, Smarty Pants, stop woolgathering and help me with the door."

Helena heard the exasperation, and the fear, but Esther's voice was becoming lost among the birds'. She was shaking her head, trying to shake Esther's voice free, when Esther took her hand and crimped her fingers around the door. Helena stopped shaking her head and obediently began to pull at the door, the scraping of the metal partially drowning out the sounds of the birds. "She helped her brother write a book about the county. They've got a copy of it in the museum in Boise City. Is that why you know about her, because of the book?" Esther was bumping against her as they
struggled with the door, her hands becoming tangled with Helena's, her nails scratching and digging into Helena's skin as she fought to widen the opening. "Don't you go off to la-la land on me. Tell me, do you know her because of the book? We always used to think of it as Joe's book, 'cause it's mainly his."

- I don't understand why you're offended. I wanted to ensure that your contributions to our mutual creation were known, so, yes, I named you in the acknowledgments.

- You are my dearest sister, and I don't think it's patronizing. I also thought the sentence 'Without you, H.G. Wells wouldn't be half the man he is' rather clever.

- Would you prefer 'Without you, H.G. Wells wouldn't be half the writer he is'? I can see you don't like that either.

- I hardly think 'Without you, H.G. Wells wouldn't exist' is fair. He's as much mine as he is yours. More so, in fact. I'm the one who takes your far-fetched ideas and makes something comprehensible of them. I'm the one who convinces the publishers that people will want to read about a time traveler and your other fanciful creations. Like it or not, it's my face, my life that will be recognized as H.G. Wells's. You will be his 'dearest sister.'

"Like hell," Helena yelled and slammed her shoulder into the door, Esther backpedaling away from the assault. The door groaned and shook but moved only another inch or two, but the additional inch or two was enough for Helena to squeeze through, finding herself in a corridor, at the far end of which was a door. Behind that door was a stairway, she hoped.

Once Esther had negotiated the narrow gap between the door and its frame, Helena took the lead down the corridor. The voices in her head had quieted, no longer a great flock of birds tearing at her mind, but the ghosts whose murmurs she was used to filling the silence. When she had been encased in bronze, there had been no need for the voices to shout; there had been no competing distractions. As she approached the door, she sensed rather than heard a hum. Like the Warehouse's, only more... industrial. The corridor was dim, the windows having been boarded over or filled in with brick. No power was coming in, though it was possible that whoever had the artefact had brought in a generator. But Helena had never known an artefact to rely on an external source of energy.

"Do you still need me to talk about Ruth?"

Helena almost jumped at the sound of Esther's voice. "I want you to explain why your family had the misbegotten notion that she wasn't as essential to the book's composition as her brother."

"She always said it was Joe's book, that's why."

"Probably because everyone automatically assumed that he would have been the one to write it. I suppose next you're going to tell me that she was perfectly content to cook her husband's meals and, given the era, to raise their children virtually on her own." She sounded peeved, Helena knew, which didn't lift her to the lofty heights from which she could deliver a lecture on assumptions about 'a woman's place,' but she was unnerved that, so close to the artefact, its effect, its overwhelming effect, had seemingly disappeared. She had never known that to be true of an artefact either.

"You're all full of vinegar," Esther observed, laughing weakly. "You don't hear what you were hearing before, do you?"

Helena stopped and turned around, trying to discern Esther's expression in the shadows. "Hasn't it
"gotten better for you?"

"Can't say that it has. That used car salesman, he's getting pretty persuasive."

"Then perhaps you should listen to my voice." Helena touched Esther's elbow and leaned in, trying to look into her eyes.

"Eh, you just like to hear yourself talk. I'll be better once you find what you're looking for. So get to it."

Helena saw Esther's hands move in what looked like a shooing motion. Letting her hand trail down Esther's arm, in what she hoped would be received as a comforting gesture, Helena turned back to the door and tentatively twisted the knob. It opened onto an equally dim stairwell that appeared to climb to the third floor. She placed her foot on the first step, and the hum that was more sensation than sound felt heavier, as if someone had suddenly thrown a blanket around her shoulders. An iron blanket. Five steps, and she felt her that her lungs had been collapsed like the bellows of an accordion. They weren't even to the landing between the first and second floors. Three more steps, and once on the landing, Helena sagged against the wall, mouth open, wheezing.

"What's going on with you?" Esther crouched beside her. Helena couldn't be sure, because Esther's dark eyes were virtually indistinguishable from the shadows, but her gaze seemed unfocused, her eyes traveling in all directions, and Helena, raising her hand with difficulty and pushing it through the wet cement of the air, pinched Esther's chin between her thumb and forefinger.

"Stay with me. We're almost there." Helena wasn't sure it was true, but this seemed the appropriately perilous moment that, in the movies, would see one of the doughty adventurers encouraging his companions to soldier on. Not infrequently the one who did the encouraging was dead by the end of the film, but she wasn't going to concentrate on that. As Esther's eyes wandered away from hers again, Helena drew Esther's face closer to her own. "You haven't finished telling me about Ruth." She let go of Esther and grabbed the handrail, pulling herself up. It was no easier to breathe; she felt as if she were trying to suck air through a straw, one punctured with holes. But she also wasn't going to concentrate on that. Where was that famed British pluck, that cheerful perseverance in the face of disaster? Everything came down to putting one foot in front of the other, then doing it again. Righty-ho.

The sense of being compressed was intolerable. She set her foot on the step above only to feel that the school would be collapsed, any moment, like her old room in the B&B, she and Esther flattened inside of it. Eons from now, in Warehouse 21, another Myka would open this building like a pop-up book, she and Esther and the stairwell flipping up in the center. She looked down and realized that her other leg was still on the step below. The leg looked like hers, but it felt as heavy as an elephant's. She couldn't lift it high enough to clear the top of the step, and her foot banged into the edge before she could draw it even with her other foot. She forgot how many times she repeated the process, Esther's voice, thin and wavering, managing to rise above the rasp of Helena's breathing and the scratching of her shoes on the grit covering the stairwell in a fine layer as she continued to haul herself up, step by step.

"Ruth married a professor. He was older, but they were happy, as far as I know. She had a couple of kids, a boy and a girl."

Helena would have rolled her eyes, but they were weighted down by sandbags. They were on the twentieth step, she thought, but she couldn't be sure since she had lost count. She couldn't move her legs from one step to the next and count them as well. They were past the second floor, but not by much. She wanted to encourage Esther to keep talking, but her mouth was too busy breathing. The hum was everywhere - around her, on top of her, in her. Invisible, it threatened to pulverize her, yet
it filled her lungs like water. She was being crushed to death, but all that enveloped her was air; she was drowning, but there wasn’t a drop of water. She hadn’t experienced such remorseless annihilation since she had been bronzed.

Esther had fallen silent. Helena wasn’t sure if she could straighten and turn around or, having done that, whether she could turn back. It was all she could do to cling to the handrail. But if she let something happen to Esther, she wouldn’t want to make it to the top of the stairwell, she wouldn’t care about retrieving the artefact. She incrementally shifted her feet, feeling like a second hand on a watch that was dying for want of a fresh battery. Tick... tick... tick... tick... tick... tick... Her waist and legs were facing downstairs, while her arms were still slung along the handrail, but she could see Esther, who was slowly going down the steps.

"You can't go." She hadn't said it very loudly, and she had said it mainly into her arm, but Esther stopped, with one foot dangling in the air. Esther had heard her, but whether she was still able to listen was something else.

"I've got to," Esther said wearily. "I've got to go... look at something, I think. You'll be all right." Helena's plea wasn't stopping her.

"You can't go," Helena repeated. Esther hesitated. "You can't leave me alone." She released the handrail and swayed on the step, the unbearable weight pressing down on her, almost tipping her over, but if she couldn't persuade Esther to stay, if she couldn't work her own magic against the artefact, then she might as well tumble down the steps. "I won't survive it again." Her cheeks drew in as she struggled to breathe. "You think you can stand the... isolation. You have your... ghosts... to keep you company." She forced her lips into a wry smile, hoping that her joke, however feeble, might evoke a response from Esther. "But they have weight, your memories, your thoughts. Your..." She fought for a word, something plainer but more encompassing than 'consciousness.' It was too hard to keep smiling, to keep breathing. "Your... youness... has weight." Helena tried to point to her chest, but she didn't have the strength to lift her arm. "At first, it's just a rock in your chest, but as time passes, it grows larger, heavier." Whispering to herself, she added, "That's how you know that time has passed, the weight gets larger and heavier."

Esther tugged on her braid, looking down the stairs and then up at Helena. "Why did they do it to you?"

"Because I asked them to. Because I was still so proud. Only the worst for the worst." Helena closed her eyes, but it was a child's trick, this summoning of a darkness that, in the end, bore no relation to the darkness of the bronze. "You can't get away from it... from that sense of being crushed, because it's you. It's only you." She opened her eyes to see that Esther had turned toward her and was, with deliberation and effort, climbing the step in front of her. "I couldn't... I couldn't... I let it..." How to tell her that one day, one year, after fifty years - she didn't know - she had let the weight carry her over the edge? That her pride was no match for her madness? The remorse she had felt at her actions gone, the recriminations in the voices lost within the screaming. She had expected to spend an eternity contemplating the horror of her crimes; stripping her of such conceit, the bronze had taken her mind and riddled it, leaving her only horror.

Esther continued climbing, her breaths sounding as loud and ragged as Helena's. She spared another glance at where Helena stood or, more accurately, wobbled, and gasped at her, "Hang on, I'm almost there." Periodically she would brush her arm against an ear, as if she were trying to drive away an insect buzzing around her head. Two steps below Helena, Esther reached for her hand. "I'm here. Can you turn around and get to the next step?"

Helena scuffled, slowly, toward the end of the step and grabbed the handrail. "I can get myself up
the steps. You need to spend your strength on shutting out your used car salesman."

They climbed the remaining steps together, Esther able to mount each one faster than Helena, who was so bowed as she pulled herself along the handrail that she was practically on her knees. The encouragement Esther offered her was her sparse summary of Ruth Ridley's life, her "I'm not sure about that" and "So I've heard" outnumbers actual facts. Which did nothing to encourage Helena until Esther approached the end of her story. "Became a birder in her old age. Took to lobbying the government to preserve the prairies and wetlands. Must've got some powerful people to listen to her because she got big chunks of land in the eastern part of the state protected as bird habitats. The largest of them is known as the Eustis Preserve."

The third floor landing was just above her. Esther was already on it, swaying slightly but grinning down at her. "And there you were thinking all she did was pick up after her husband and kids."

Helena had reached the end of the handrail. She had nothing to propel her up and over the edge. She could sink to the cement and crawl the rest of the way up, or she could ask the teetering Esther to help her. Or, the intolerable pressure notwithstanding, she could lunge. It was dramatic, it was ridiculous, so, of course, she lunged the few inches of space separating her from the landing, relying on her elephant legs to give her the necessary lift, and not surprisingly, her feet didn't clear the edge. Her arms began to windmill, slowly, as she tried to maintain her balance, but Esther shot her hand out and grabbed a fistful of linen shirt and yanked Helena to her. They stumbled against a wall, and as Helena staggered back, one step, two, she protested, "I wouldn't have fallen down the stairs, you know."

Trying to gulp down air, Esther hiccupped, "Could've fooled me."

Helena's head was below her waist, her hands splayed on her thighs. The sense that she was on the verge of being crushed to death hadn't lessened, and she felt that if she completed the retrieval, she would be a couple of inches shorter than she was when she had entered the school, but she forced herself to straighten and give Esther a grateful smile. "Thank you for telling me about Ruth."

Esther lifted a dismissive shoulder, but the casualness of the gesture was belied by the anxiety in her eyes. "I'm out of stories, Smarty Pants, and I'm hanging by a thread, so you better fix things quick."

Helena looked at the exit door. If it was locked . . . Staring at it, she saw herself in her room at the B&B, standing at the window, hoping she hadn't missed Myka go through her pre-run stretching. She had spent the night reviewing her plans for her trip to Yellowstone, her final trip anywhere, and as she felt an excited flutter in chest at spotting Myka in the garden, the utter absurdity of the situation wasn't lost on her. Behind her, on the desk, was the itinerary of her one-way flight to Bozeman, Montana, and yet she was eagerly watching Myka stretch her hamstrings, as though her day couldn't start properly without a glimpse of long legs and a cascade of hair temporarily restrained by a ponytail holder. In a few days, none of this would exist, yet she couldn't turn away. Then Myka raised her head, looking up at Helena's window, no, not at it but through it, through that Helena, and at her.

- I can't come up if you don't open the door. Open the door, Helena.

Helena did. It noisily objected, but the door swung away from its frame. She was confronted with another corridor, but there was an open doorway halfway down it. Fumbling behind her for Esther's hand, she led them out of the stairwell. The iron blanket remained on her shoulders, her lungs were still working to draw air through the eye of a needle, but she was upright, more or less, and walking, more or less (more, if you didn't notice that she was weaving from side to side); that artefact was hers.
Over a hundred years ago, she had walked, far more steadily, toward the cylinder in which she would soon be encased in bronze. Caturanga was next to it, impassively observing her as she neared it. He would be the one to lock her in and, once the Bronzer was securely sealed, to initiate the process. Perhaps he saw his presence as her repudiation of his selection of her, of the years he had spent training and mentoring her, but she had chosen him because she had trusted no one else. She hesitated before stepping into the cylinder, not because she was afraid but because she thought she should say something to him, though nothing seemed adequate.

- You placed too much faith in me.

She heard something too soft to be a sigh but too strong to be simply an exhalation, the only sign that he was disturbed by what was about to happen.

- You understand yourself so slenderly, Helena. You're a survivor.

- I understand myself well enough. I'm a monster.

- No, sometimes in trying to survive, we do monstrous things. There is a difference.

Survivor and monster, another conundrum. But right now, as she pulled Esther with her into the room, her eyes darting everywhere, seeking what didn't fit, she was focused on being a survivor. The card table in the center didn't fit, the folding chair behind it didn't fit, and the middle-aged man slumped against the back of the chair didn't fit either. Helena put her fingers to his neck; he was warm, and he had a pulse. He needed to be attended to, but he could wait. Helena glanced at the watch on his left wrist; whoever he was, he had made the past 40 minutes among the most miserable of her life.

"Gene Butler," Esther said wonderingly, "what's he doing here?"

"That does seem to be the question." Helena took a neutralizing bag from a pocket of her pants. She had forgotten to bring gloves, but there was little that the artefact could do to her that it hadn't already done, she figured. Pens and notepads bearing the slogan "Better with Butler" littered the table. There were flyers with Butler's picture, in which he was smiling and tipping a cowboy hat, and underneath the photo, he promised to bring back "law and order the way it used to be." She swept them all into the bag, but nothing sparked; she didn't feel a lifting of the omnipresent pressure, and Esther's eyes still showed a tendency to drift. "Who is he?" she asked, trying to say it sharply enough to capture Esther's attention, but it sounded tired and muffled, as if this time she was trying to push her words through mattress ticking rather than wet cement.

Esther had begun wandering the room, which, with the exception of the card table and the man behind it, was bare. The linoleum flooring, cracked and scuffed, once suggested the room had been an office; it bore the imprints of desks and faded brown splotches that resembled coffee stains. "Every election he runs against Don Paulsen for sheriff, and every election he loses," she responded, approaching too close to the doorway for Helena's comfort.

Having cleared the table of objects, Helena scanned Paulsen, seeing nothing in his hands or lap. A tip of gray plastic peeped from a pocket of his sport shirt, and she gingerly removed a toy sheriff's star. When she dropped it into the bag, it sparked violently. She turned her head to make sure that Esther was still in the room. "Feeling better?" It was easier to speak, to breathe, and the iron blanket had dropped from her shoulders.

Esther cautiously nodded. "I don't hear the used car salesman anymore." The look she directed at Helena wasn't quite as piercing as the one Helena remembered from their first encounter at the farm, but it was gaining strength. "How about you?"
"Improving."

The pressure was lessening, but the hum, Helena could still feel it reverberating within her. Taking a deep breath and appreciating every musty-smelling molecule she was inhaling, she set about searching Butler, finding a small black case, similar in size to a ring box, in another pocket. Inside, nestled in a protective material that looked like foam but felt gel-like was an irregularly shaped piece of black glass. Helena took it over to a window and held it up to the sunlight. She thought she could see movement within the glass, as if the fragment were the tiniest of fishbowls and inside fish were swimming up and down, back and forth. She carefully placed it back in the case and snapped it shut. Looking down at the side street, Helena imagined that soon it and every street in Ellis would fill with people, those released from the artefact's hold over them and those arriving to gawk, not to mention state troopers, sheriff's deputies, and Guardsmen. Major Lowry. Helena wearily ran a hand through her hair. He would want to know what she had found in Ellis, and, like the mills of the gods, that rock-like figure would grind her slowly and small. She needed to get Esther and the artefact away from Ellis now. Tucking the case and the worrying object it contained into a side pocket of her tropic-weight pants, which, smeared with dirt and torn at the knees, looked as if they had been worn in a rain forest, she returned to the table, where she had left the neutralizing bag. Esther had kneeled at Butler's side, touching his face with gentle fingers.

"I can't hear him," she said. "He needs a doctor."

"I'll see that he gets medical care." Helena placed a hand on Esther's shoulder. "There's nothing we can do for him."

"He's full of hot air, but he's harmless."

Not so much, Helena silently disagreed, as Esther's head tilted toward her, puzzlement written on her face. "He did all this, what happened to the town?"

"Not without assistance." Helena helped Esther to her feet. She picked up the neutralizing bag, questioning the wisdom of what she was about to do. Although it held pens, notepads, flyers, and a plastic star, it was as flat as when she had taken it out. Esther warily regarded it.

"What did he have, a secret weapon or something? Some crazy sci-fi, Area 51 type of thing?" She laughed nervously.

Helena smiled reassuringly. "It can't hurt you or anyone else now. But if people see it, they'll have questions, and there aren't any easy answers." Actually the answer was easy, only nothing anyone would believe. "I need to get it out of this town quickly and discreetly."

"You want me to take it." Esther derisively blew a gust of air between her lips. "Save your bacon, tell you stories, babysit your gizmos. Don't ask much of a person, do you, Smarty Pants?"

"I'll be back to get it. Just don't take anything out of the bag." Helena handed it to Esther and nudged her toward the doorway. "Now go." She had thought about giving Esther the fragment of black glass as well, but decided to keep it herself. She wasn't sure that she knew what the glass was, but she knew she didn't want it anywhere near the artefact.

Esther hadn't advanced much beyond the table when she stopped, as if she had heard something. For a moment, Helena feared that, somehow, the artefact was still working, still sending its message through the goo, either that or there was an artefact she had missed, and she suddenly felt cold in the stifling room. But when Esther turned, there was nothing unfocused about the eyes that met Helena's. "Your friend's in trouble," she said grimly.
Myka. Helena grew even colder. "What kind of trouble?"

"Not sure, but whatever it is, it's big, and she's in the middle of it."

Flying past Esther, tearing down the stairs, Helena tried to remember where she had left her phone. In the SUV, which she had left, still running, on the sidewalk in front of the hardware store. She wasn't laboring any longer under a weight that threatened to crush her; the erratic beating of her heart and the strangled sound of her breathing were the result of her fear. She hadn't let her ghosts grow beaks and talons to tear at her or relived the eternity she had spent in bronze only to lose Myka now. Trouble, she reminded herself, that's what Esther had called it, not danger. Trouble. But the distinction wasn't enough to make her breathe any easier or to cause her to slow down.

She slammed herself against the stuck side door, pushing it open a few more inches, and then she was across the yard and into the street. People were emerging from the bank, a bar, the café, squinting into the sun and calling to one another. A better person than she would go over to them, ask if they were all right, help them to reorient themselves after the time lost to the artefact, but someone who attempted to end the world wouldn't be expected to look after others. Someone who attempted to end the world was a monster, and monsters only looked after themselves. And Myka. So perhaps she wasn't being entirely monstrous, but she wasn't being helpful, certainly not selfless, and damn well not spending another minute in Ellis. The SUV was where she had left it, unmolested if not undamaged. She was one long step away from reaching the opposite side of the street -

"Hey." Again. "Hey." And this time a hand clamped onto her arm. She spun around, almost colliding with a man, unshaven and pale. He gestured limply at the surrounding buildings. "Do you know what happened here?"

"Not a clue," she said quickly. "Sorry." She edged away only to feel the hand locking around her arm again.

"I stopped in the bank to make a deposit last Wednesday," he said plaintively. "Ten minutes ago, I realized I was in front of a computer monitor, cans of Coke and cheese puffs around me, and no memory of what happened." He leaned closer to her, eyes bloodshot and wild. "Today's Wednesday, but it's not the same Wednesday, and I want to know what happened."

"Your guess is as good as mine." Helena smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, but you need to let go of my arm."

His grip tightened. "You look a little banged up, sure, but you smell like you've showered. I know everyone around Ellis, but I don't know you." He gave her arm a shake. "I bet you know what happened. Why won't you tell me?"

Helena could forcibly free herself, but that would attract only more attention, and since others were beginning to take an interest in them, she didn't want to draw a crowd. She also didn't want to put the man flat on his back, which a firm shove might be enough to do. Though his grip was pinching her arm, he wasn't steady. It was hardly sporting to take out a man who looked every bit like he had lived on Coke, cheese puffs, and little-to-no sleep for a week. Behind him she could see the black and white cruisers of the state patrol. She needed to get to the SUV before the troopers saw her; although she and Myka had met only the two guarding the northern boundary outside the town, she had no doubt all of them were very aware of the two government agents sent in to "fix" Ellis. Having to answer questions now just added to the delay of getting to Myka.

"You forced it out of me," she said in a low voice. "I have it on good authority that the federal government was behind this, experimenting with an anti-terroristic measure that went terribly
wrong, I'm afraid." He nodded thoughtfully, as if he had expected such an explanation all along. Or perhaps he was still chewing through "anti-terroristic," she knew she wouldn't be able to get the taste of it out of her mouth for awhile. "If you don't let me go, I won't be able to inform the others."

He didn't ask her who the others were, which was just as well because she hadn't gotten that far in her story. Instead, he relaxed his hold, and she offered him a vaguely conspiratorial jerk of her head, a curt signal that no more should be said about what had gone on in Ellis. He seemed to understand, putting a finger to the side of his nose and winking. She sprinted the short distance to the SUV and heard the soft rumbling of its engine. Throwing herself behind the wheel, she shifted into reverse and prepared to back the car off the sidewalk, only to see one of the cruisers stop behind her bumper. Its lights weren't flashing, but then they didn't have to. She was boxed in. Feeling for the case in her pocket, she took it out and removed the black glass. Protected by the unusual foam and then by the case itself, the object would elicit more interest than she wanted it to have. Loose, in her pocket, it was a trinket, a charm, nothing to merit a second look. As Officer Aaron, the young, helpful one of the two she and Myka had talked with at the barricades, approached the side of the SUV, she waved and stretched her mouth into a wide, friendly smile as she turned the engine off. There was nothing to be gained by being uncooperative.

He motioned for her to get out of the SUV. Blinking, as if she wasn't sure she understood him, she slipped from the seat but didn't move away from the half-open car door. "Beautiful morning, isn't, officer? The sun is shining, and people, well, they're people again, aren't they? A little the worse for wear, especially the poor gentleman I found in the school building over there, but I'm sure medical teams are already on the way. You'll make sure to send one over to the school, won't you?"

"You need to come with us, agent."

Maybe Officer Aaron wasn't a morning person. The round face with the soft, pleasant features was trying to look hard but managed to look only grumpy. He paid no attention to the growing congregation of people on the sidewalks and in the street, looking at themselves and each other in disbelief, more than a few crying and reaching out to hug those closest to them. He was focused on her, as if she had brought the craziness into Ellis rather than ended it. But she kept her smile wide. "I was on my way back to Agent Bering to make a report. I suppose I couldn't just follow you?" She took a tiny step backward, gesturing at the SUV, and one of Officer Aaron's hands began to inch closer to his duty belt. Bollocks, this was bad.

"If you would get in the car, agent." When she inclined her head in assent, he escorted her to the cruiser and opened the door, ensuring that she was settled on the seat before he shut it.

She gave Officer Nolan the same wide, friendly smile she had given Officer Aaron. Behind large reflective sunglasses, he was observing her in the rear view mirror. "Would you be able to tell me what the police escort is for?" He continued to look at her in the mirror until Officer Aaron joined him in the front seat. Helena tried one more time. "Do you know where Agent Bering is?"

Officer Aaron said, in a tone designed to quash additional questions, "She's on her way to Boise City. You'll see her at the sheriff's office."

The cruiser crept toward the northern end of town, not once stopping, although more than one person came up to slap the car's hood or top to get the officers' attention, shouting, "What the hell went on here?" Other cruisers were parked and the troopers were patiently answering questions. Helena wondered what the official response would be. The troopers' confused expressions suggested that an official response hadn't yet been developed. An ambulance was in front of the bank, and another was working its way down the opposite side of the street; behind it were familiar
olive drab trucks, camouflage tarps pulled tight like skin over the cargo areas. Helena expected any minute to see Guardsmen clambering down from the backs of them, carrying out searches at Major Lowry's, or his counterpart's, orders. Where had they been that they could arrive so quickly? Had they been brought in earlier in anticipation of a clean-up after the "military option" had been exercised? She narrowed her eyes, turning to watch them as the cruiser drove through the town's outskirts. She almost missed the CDC team outside the gas station - the cruiser was picking up speed - standing, lost, among the gas pumps, resembling down-at-the-heel astronauts in their dirty, torn hazmat suits. And then they were gone as the cruiser sped down the highway, fence posts and telephone poles whipping past, the greens and browns of the bordering fields and pastures resembling checkerboard squares as they alternated in rapid succession. Helena hoped she might spot Esther on her bicycle, pedaling the artefact to safety, but the cruiser flashed by the turn-off to the farm without Helena seeing anything on the move other than birds circling high overhead. She had had enough of birds for the day.

The officers didn't speak to her again until they arrived at the county building in Boise City, asking her to follow them. They entered the lobby, the officers standing off to one side as Helena was searched, hand searched on this visit, which only emphasized the suspicion she was now under. She had emptied her pockets, but the piece of black glass excited no one's curiosity, although she could have sworn it vibrated in the plastic bowl. The search concluded, her dignity only slightly less rumpled than her clothing - she didn't care about that, not really, because she would willingly subject herself to far worse to find out where Myka was - the officers took her back to an office, not the sheriff's, which was furnished with one table and two chairs set on either side of it.

Major Lowry was sitting on one of the chairs, but 'sitting' couldn't capture the rigidity of his back, straight and held a half-inch away from the back of the chair, or the tension of the arms placed in perfect parallel on the table. Boulders couldn't spring from the earth, not of their own volition, but Helena could imagine Lowry springing from his chair to throttle her, because there was no mistaking the rage in his tight-lipped expression and no way of pretending to miss the swelling along one cheekbone.

"Sit down, Agent Wells," he said, his voice appropriately flint-like.

"I need to make my report to Agent Bering," Helena said, her voice calm but unyielding.

"You can make it to me. Sit down."

Helena suppressed a sigh. Major Lowry would always choose to go through rather than around, which would make him a horrible Warehouse agent. "Agent Bering is the senior agent." Only in a sense but now was not the time to quibble with herself about her choice of words. "I report to her. Where is she?"

"Agent Bering's whereabouts aren't your concern at the moment. Sit down before I sit you down myself." Major Lowry's voice was trembling with fury.

Helena swiftly reviewed her options. She suspected the major was acting without authority, but there was no one in this building who would be willing to confront him. She could disable him, only temporarily, unfortunately, but she didn't know where Myka was - she wasn't completely convinced that Myka was in the building despite what Officer Aaron had said. She was also afraid that the black glass she carried in her pocket might start interacting with an artefact harbored in the museum on the floor above. Who knew what memorable event at the 1925 Cimarron County fair, a tornado or a violent dispute over the awarding of a blue ribbon, might have spawned an artefact? She needed to get out of this room, and the best way to do that was to have Major Lowry, under his own power, release her. She sat down.
"What happened in Ellis?" He tried to keep his voice even, and he steepled his fingers together in an effort to appear composed.

Helena bit back her first response and said quietly, "The anomaly was removed."

"What was this 'anomaly' that was removed?"

"I'm not at liberty to say." As the major's face flushed an alarming red, the swelling turning scarlet, Helena added smoothly, "You'll need to ask the Department of Homeland Security for clearance for that information. Then I will gladly give it to you."

"Let me give you the score, Agent Wells, since you seem to be laboring under a misunderstanding about just how happy your bosses are with you." He pointed to his cheek. "I had the authority if I believed you and Agent Bering weren't going to be effective, to . . . do what I thought necessary to protect this county and the surrounding area. I was going to do just that when Agent Bering slammed my face against the hood of the car and put a gun to my head, threatening to shoot me if my officers carried out my orders." He smiled. "She not only prevented an officer of this country's armed forces from carrying out his duties, she threatened to kill him. Do you have any idea how much trouble she's in?"

Esther hadn't been exaggerating. Helena wanted to close her eyes or put her head in her hands, but she couldn't, wouldn't do that in front of him. "I'm sure you feel you're not at liberty to tell me what you were planning to do, but whatever it was, it would have only made the situation worse, not better, and Agent Bering did what she had to do to prevent that from happening. Homeland Security will take that into account as well."

"Just tell me what it was you found, and I'll let you see her." His smile grew lopsided, sneering. "And let's not pretend, you and I, that you're so anxious to see her because she's the senior agent."

She desperately wanted to see Myka but she wouldn't trade the artefact for it and, confronted with that sneer on his face, she wouldn't give in to this bastard for anything. She hoped not, anyway. "As I told you before, I'm not at liberty to discuss it."

"I guess we're just going to stare at each other across this table, then." He relaxed enough to let his back rest against the chair's back. "Next time you hear a car engine it's going to be the sound of Agent Bering being transported to Oklahoma City."

Helena couldn't stop her mouth from thinning. That was exactly the kind of thing that was going to make her rethink whether she should be protecting a bloody sheriff's star. A toy sheriff's star. She didn't drop her eyes from his, not even when someone knocked at the door. The major, without turning his head, barked at the interruption, grinning at Helena when he heard that the governor was on the line for him.

"Tell Paulsen I'll take it in his office," he said to the soldier, who had features, Helena thought, as young and soft-looking as Officer Aaron's and as equally ill-equipped to assume the stern, unrelenting face of the law. Or, in this case, the United States military. He was scowling at Helena and projecting as much knee-buckling danger as if he had been Drew or one of his friends; she tried to recall if the soldier had been one of the underlings with Major Lowry at the barricades this morning. "Quit growling at Agent Wells," the major amiably chided him. "She's not going anywhere."

Helena allowed herself to groan, but softly, once Major Lowry had left the room. She remembered how tautly Myka had been holding herself, how big the shoulder holster and gun had looked. Normally Myka wouldn't be one to react violently, but it wasn't every retrieval that the military was
threatening to blow up, quite literally, in fact. It also hadn't helped matters that Myka and Major Lowry had instantly found the other an irritant, but Myka didn't let irritants and annoyances and pet peeves make her decisions for her, unlike some agents. Helena squirmed in her chair, recalling a retrieval when she had been at 12 that had almost failed as a result of her locking her partner in a cellar. She had been unable to stand his ceaseless chatter. But he was a skilled fighter, which would have stood her in good stead when she encountered the holder of the artefact and his henchman in a very dark, very lonely alley.

The door opened, and she was about to snap at Major Lowry that she wouldn't move until she knew where Myka was, when she realized that it wasn't a boulder in the doorway, but something softer, more like the Michelin man. "Come with me," Sheriff Paulsen said, crooking a finger at her. "I can take you to Agent Bering."

Helena didn't hesitate, running out of the room and following him down the hallway. "I can't let you stay too long. Lowry'll be looking for you, but I can give you a few minutes." He turned into another hallway, which took them to the back of the building. They stopped in front of a secured door with a card reader. He gave Helena an apologetic glance. "Had to put her here. Didn't have any choice." He held his badge to the reader, and the door unlocked. "Go on in, Reed'll take care of you in there."

"Thank you." Helena's brows creased in a question she didn't ask.

Sheriff Paulsen held the door open for her. "You folks stopped what was going on in Ellis without leveling the town, and for that I owe you."

She was in an office with another secured door across from her. At a desk, a deputy was already rising to punch in a code on the keypad. After a loud click, the door automatically swept open. "She's in the first cell on the left. We don't have anyone else in here right now." The door closed behind her.

Myka was pacing the cell, stopping mid-turn when she heard the door and then running to the cell door when she saw Helena. Relief washed over her face, and she squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, they were wet. "Hey," she said in a small, unsteady voice.

Helena was reaching for her through the bars, but Myka didn't come any closer, grinding her palms against her eyes. "So, tell me," she said, fighting to keep her voice controlled. "Tell me about the retrieval."

Helena let the hands that Myka hadn't clutched and pulled to her loosely wrap themselves around the bars. If Myka needed to maintain this distance, act the Warehouse agent, she would let her, for a little while. "It was difficult," she admitted. "I won't go into the details about how difficult, but, thankfully, Esther was there."

Myka was tearing off sheets of toilet paper by the toilet in the corner of the cell and blowing her nose industriously. When she was finished, she said, her voice more strongly matter-of-fact, "What did you find?"

"A man on the top floor of the school, unconscious. The artefact was a plastic sheriff's star in his
shirt pocket." At Myka's frown, Helena continued, "The kind you see packaged with a toy Colt .45 and gun belt, all a child needs for an Old West fantasy. The star wasn't scratched or dirty or worn. It was new, and Esther said he had been unsuccessfully running for sheriff for years."


Helena hadn't realized until that moment that she wasn't going to tell Myka about the black glass. Not until she knew exactly what it was. The rationalization seemed logical but felt empty, like a lie. "What makes you think that there was something else?" She wanted to wince at her clumsy temporizing. Being around this woman always made her want to listen to her better angels, but she was so out of practice. . . .

But Myka seemed not to notice or, as was probably more to the point, she wasn't ready to let on yet that she knew Helena was being evasive. "Because whatever signal that toy star was emitting or spell it was casting, we could sense it five miles away." She threw the used tissue in the toilet and put her hands on her hips. The no-nonsense posture was slightly undercut by the fact that her eyes were still welling with tears. She impatiently thumbed a tear away and cleared her throat, trying to assume her cool, dispassionate agent face.

"When did you start sensing it?" Helena asked quietly.

"About ten or fifteen minutes after you left. Some of the men started slapping at their ears and necks, complaining about bugs. I didn't hear buzzing, but I heard the sound of water, as if we were near a rapids or a waterfall. Lowry said he was hearing gunfire." Myka begun to tug at her hair, and her expression grew clouded with an anxiety that hadn't completely left her, even with Helena standing in front of her. "One of Lowry's men started running toward where we were standing by the car, shouting that he needed to go into Ellis and stop the noise. That's when Lowry said that we," Myka paused, drawing a connecting line in the air between her and Helena, "you and I were done, and that he was going to finish what we couldn't." She shrugged, as if to suggest that what came next wasn't important. "He's a big man, but I had the element of surprise. I managed to pin him against the hood of the car and put my gun to the back of his neck. I said we were going to wait until you had stopped it. Even the soldier who wanted to drive to Ellis settled down."

"Myka." It was more breath than sound. Helena rested her head against the bars. Myka was regarding her defiantly, using her fingers to squeegee her tears to the sides of her face.

Myka started to laugh, albeit shakily. "I know that half the time you don't know what you're doing, but you always come through in the clutch. That's why I knew you wouldn't kill me in Yellowstone and that you'd figure out the right chess move to save me in Hong Kong. That's why I should have known when we saw Sykes's bomb. . . ." She faltered. "I should have known that you would. . . ." She covered her face with her hands for a few seconds. She rocked back and forth before dropping her hands and giving Helena a wry smile through her tears. "You're thinking I pulled a gun on him because I was trying to save the retrieval, because I was afraid he was going to bomb the town and endanger people far beyond Ellis."

"I'm assuming that it was a consideration, at the very least," Helena said slowly, uncertain where Myka was going. "We're agents, and we've been trained to think about the artefact first." Her smile mirrored Myka's in its wryness. "I'd also like to assume that my well being was a consideration. And that of the good people of Ellis, of course."

"You remember when I told you about knowing that my marriage to Pete was over when Drew was in the hospital?" Myka was returning to the toilet for more toilet paper. "I didn't tell you how I knew or why I knew then." She wiped her eyes, her nose.
"I thought you would tell me when you were ready."

"I thought you would have figured it out by now," Myka said with exasperated indulgence. "You're so blind, Helena." Helena began to protest, but Myka cut her off. "It's true. I remember years ago when we were all watching Titanic and sobbing our eyes out, even Pete, and you were still going on about how the ship should have been better engineered."

Helena wasn't sure why Myka was bringing up one of those ancient movie nights that they had had at the B&B, before Boone, before Yellowstone, except that she needed to work up to telling her whatever realization Drew's illness had caused her to have. Helena was more than willing to help her delay the moment; she felt that her soul – if she had one, if it wasn't as small and hard and wrinkled as a walnut – had been blistered, riven, during her time in Ellis. A weak thing, it couldn't stand up to much more. "It should have been," she objected, eagerly entering into the argument. "Did you never read about the jaw-dropping errors and poor decision-making that went into its construction? And if you're going to lecture me about how I should have been paying attention to the love story instead, it was utterly ridiculous. I'm supposed to believe that had the ship not sunk, those two would have lived happily ever after? What about the differences in class, education -"

"When you come down to it, all love stories are 'utterly ridiculous,'" Myka cried impatiently. "What's the logic, really, in saying this person is better or more suited than that one? It's as crazy as listening to Pete tell me that he never knew it was possible to love someone as much as he loved Drew and realizing that I had, I did love someone as much as I loved Drew, and that it wasn't him." She repeated softly, "It wasn't Pete."

Helena groaned, rubbing her forehead against the bars. It wasn't how she had imagined hearing Myka tell her that she loved her, in part because she hadn't let herself imagine it. It had been enough to sense it, assume it, believe it these past weeks because it was all one with their not ever saying how they felt, which went all the way back, on her part, to a morning she couldn't even place, except to recall that it was a sunny, clear morning after an awful, sleepless night, and Myka had been in the garden going through her quad and hamstring stretches, and Helena had watched those legs flex and that hair glint red and gold, wanting for the first time, not since the bronze but before it, for there to be another morning and another one after it, so she could see her, like this, again and again and again.

"You don't have to tell me, Myka."

"But I do, because you need to know that someone in this world loves you that much, because you're convinced that no one can love you as you are." Another laugh, higher-pitched and a little wild at the end as if the absurdity, the utter ridiculousness of it all, was too much, even for her. "I can't remember it, when you stood outside that shield you had created for us and smiled at me, thanking me. I can't remember it, that moment, that second - and that's all you gave me, Helena - when I knew I had never experienced anything so gut-wrenching, so agonizing, not even when Sam died." She stopped, and when she looked up at Helena, her eyes were free of tears. "I can't remember it, but I've dreamed it over and over. I knew you were coming back from Ellis because I wouldn't let there be any other outcome."

Myka was still standing outside her reach, but Helena didn't try to coax her into coming closer. It was too much. It was impossible to reconcile, the enormity of the emotion and the fragility of its object. And she was a very, very fragile vessel for Myka's love. But people gave themselves over to such absurdity all the time, because not to surrender, not to believe . . . she was living proof of what happened when you stopped.

'I love you' was faint-hearted.
'I would die for you' was repetitive because she already had.

But silence was unacceptable.

"I think if we were to watch Titanic again," Helena said carefully, "you would find me more appreciative of poor Rose and Jack."

Myka stared at her, astonished. "That was completely inadequate, you know. I've just poured out my heart to you, and that's what you come up with." But she was laughing.

They were still smiling at each other foolishly, crazily, lovingly when the door opened, and the deputy stuck his head around it. "I have to take you back," he said to Helena. She nodded mechanically, not hearing him, but Myka sobered.

"One of us needs to stay out of jail," she said. "It's time for you to go save the day again."
Chapter 16

She was sitting in Sheriff Paulsen's office, nibbling on a homemade caramel roll, when the door swung open, and Claudia rushed in, wearing the same linen pantsuit she had worn at Artie's retirement party. It looked about as rumpled as it had then, and she looked as harried, hair sticking out in back as though she had been pulling at it or nervously rubbing her head.

"You're eating? All hell has broken loose and you're eating." She looked on with disbelief as Helena pulled away a mailing-tape-sized strip of roll and carefully ate it down to her fingers, licking caramel frosting off her fingertips.

"Because I didn't eat anything before I saved the town that time forgot." Helena gestured toward the pan of rolls on the sheriff's desk. "You should have one, darling, you look in need of a sugar fix."

Muttering "I thought Myka was the adult," Claudia began pacing the floor. Her voice grew louder. "Assuming I can fix the mess you've made down here, the two of you are never going to work together again, not on a retrieval." She spun around, going to the doorway and looking down the hall. "I'm supposed to be meeting with Major Lowry now, but I was told that 'he would get to me when he has time' and sent away like a kid selling Girl Scout cookies." Frustrated, she exhaled a stream of air that was a cross between a comic book "pffft" and a raspberry.

"He's an utter arse, and my only regret about this assignment other than the heat, the dismal accommodations, and the fact that I nearly lost my mind, again," Helena said, grinding through the 'again,' "is that Myka didn't shoot him." As Claudia stared at her once more, Helena finished the roll and wiped her fingers on a napkin. "What's that line from Flannery O'Connor? He would've been a good man, if somebody had been there to shoot him every minute of his life." She paused. "That may not be an exact quote, but I think my meaning is clear."

Claudia slammed the door shut and faced her with a thunderous expression. "What is wrong with you? Myka's on the verge of being court-martialed or found guilty of treason or whatever they do to you if you pull a gun on a major in the Air Force, and you're in here, the sheriff's office, for Christ's sake, saying she should have shot him." She grabbed at her head with both hands. "Just . . . just shut up."

Helena made a moue but kept silent. Claudia dug out a caramel roll from the pan, managing to sigh in appreciation after the first bite while trying to mortally wound Helena with the visual equivalent of ninja throwing stars. Feeling the heat and intent of Claudia's looks, if not actual pain, Helena was reminded of her infatuation with telekinesis and the experiments she had conducted with various artefacts purloined from the Warehouse. A narrowly avoided collision between Caturanga and a bank safe whizzing across her workshop had brought a swift end to her efforts. It had also resulted in the termination of her access to all "wish fulfillment" artefacts, the Warehouse agents having coined the term long before Freud was given credit for it.

"Is the artefact secure?" Claudia asked, perching on a corner of the desk, taking another bite and hungrily looking at the pan.

"Yes." Helena thought she was safest with a one word reply.

"Did you find who was using it? Do we know anything about them?" Claudia sounded no less angry with her, but Helena heard in her contented munching the possibility that someday, far off in the future, she might be forgiven. However, Helena knew that her response was only going to
extend the time before Claudia would consider forgiveness an option.

"Yes, but . . ."

"But why the hell aren't you out there going through everything they own? You're not so old, H.G., that you've forgotten the drill. Bag the artefact and ensure there's nothing else that's hinky." Roll forgotten, Claudia slid off the desk and resumed her pacing. And her ninja throwing star glares.

"I could say that it was because I was apprehended before I had a chance to, but I was . . . concerned about Myka." Helena found herself reluctant to tell Claudia about Esther, feeling oddly protective of her. "I needed to know that she was all right." Claudia finished a circuit and tried to impale her with another glare. "And I'm staying here, as close as I can get to her, until I'm sure there's going to be no Air National Guard version of a rendition," Helena finished, casually picking at her grimy pants with the holes at the knees as if they were tailored slacks she was ridding of fluff. For no more weight than she gave to her words, she might have been expressing a preference to stay that Claudia, by dint of persuasion - or authority, as the de facto agent in charge - would be able to change. But Claudia wasn't fooled, she stopped pacing and her expression became more wary than angry.

"H.G., we need to know everything we can about this guy." Almost gently she reminded her, "The job comes first."

"No, it doesn't," Helena said, "she does." She smiled sweetly but implacably at Claudia.

Claudia's wariness deepened, and she said with extreme care, as though the wrong word would have Helena lunging at her, fangs bared, "I don't want to have to pull rank on you, but I need you tossing his place to see if we can find anything linking him to the people behind the replicated artefacts. I need you to act like Myka's partner, not her girlfriend. You know that she would be telling you the same thing."

"But she's being interrogated yet again by Major Lowry, so she's not here to tell me the same thing. I don't trust him not to spirit her away somewhere off limits to us." Helena leaned over to pick out an especially gooey roll. "Sheriff Paulsen is keeping an eye on her for me, much to the major's chagrin." She bit into the roll, chuckling as she wiped a dab of frosting from her nose, but her eyes, when she raised them to Claudia's, were so blackly obdurate that Claudia looked away. "I'm not leaving until I can take Myka with me."

"It's not going to be that easy. I've been on the phone with the DHS all morning, with the secretary himself. Even if we're able to calm the governor down as well as the four-star general who runs the National Guard, the DHS is already pissed at us. Let me tell you just how bad it is." Claudia crossed her arms over her chest, adopting a defensive stance as if she were a teenager expecting to be grounded by her parents, one of whom just happened to be the Secretary of Homeland Security. "Remember how I said this replicated artefact investigation was on the q.t.? You were Emily Lake, the efficiency expert, and you were going to accompany Myka on a few quality assurance checks? That's how we were papering it over with the DHS until this morning, and they just blew through our paper, H.G. They know there was no previous retrieval in Boise City to do a quality assurance check on, so it's all why did you send Myka and the efficiency expert instead of 'real' field agents? That was the first question. Then the secretary's minions whisper in his ear again, and he asks me why Emily Lake's resumé doesn't check out. Either the companies she worked for don't exist or they've never heard of her. But the best part happens after more whispering in the secretary's ear, and he asks me who the hell Emily Lake is because she didn't exist until eleven years ago. The DHS is operating on all cylinders for once. That's how bad it is."

As Claudia had worried out loud, she had drifted over to Helena's chair, standing so near that her
pant leg brushed against Helena's scraped knee. At first, Helena thought the burning sensation was her skin's response to the irritant of the linen, but it wasn't centered in her knee; it was all through her thigh. "Claudia, you don't happen to have an artefact in your possession, do you?" She tried to keep from touching the fragment of black glass, although she half-expected to see wisps of smoke floating up from her pocket.

"It's not like my broomstick has a back seat," Claudia said. "I thought we could use an extra pair of hands, maybe more, what with Myka getting arrested." The glare wasn't a ninja throwing star, but it was meant to be withering. "So I decided to expedite the travel of a couple of agents."

"Expedite how?" Helena felt the burning extend into her calves, her feet.

"It's a drawing pencil of one of the artists for *The Flash*. I think you can take it from there." Claudia restlessly returned to the door, opening it to look down the hallway.

The burning sensation hadn't subsided once Claudia walked away, and Helena started feeling it in her hips. "What's the side effect?" She stared at her roll, thinking the extra glaze of caramel frosting seemed to have a reddish sheen. It was nothing more than her imagination, but the gooey goodness of the frosting suddenly wasn't so appetizing. She threw the roll into the wastebasket. What she wanted was a tall glass of ice water.

"The most common is that you want to eat everything in sight - and I mean everything - for a few days, but, supposedly, there were some incidents of spontaneous combustion." Claudia flapped her jacket. "Speaking of spontaneous combustion, is it me or is it starting to feel warm in here?" She only grinned at Helena's alarm. "Didn't they ever tell you at 12 that caretakers are natural neutralizers. Don't sweat it." Her grin grew wider. "Really, H.G., don't sweat it."

But Helena was sweating, and not just from the heat flooding her abdomen. Quite possibly there would be no Myka to protect if she and Claudia remained in the same room, the same building. She needed to tell someone about the other object she had found, but not Myka, and after a swift encompassing glance at Claudia, which didn't miss the nervous pacing she had resumed, Helena concluded that it wouldn't be Claudia either. She knew whom she needed to tell, and she wouldn't be able to tell her if she kept sitting in this chair and letting the heat build.

"Do you promise that you'll stay here with Myka, that you won't surrender her to Major Lowry or anyone else?" Helena had risen, trying to loom over Claudia to the extent that her slight advantage in height permitted her.

"You're standing on tip-toe," Claudia said. "It's undercutting the whole 'I'm scary H.G., world destroyer' thing you're trying to work."

Helena sighed and rocked back onto her heels. "You haven't promised me," she said softly.

"No one's taking our girl anywhere," Claudia responded, no less softly and no less seriously. "Now go and do what you're best at."

Helena didn't think she meant rain mayhem and destruction, so that left being an agent, which, when she managed to set aside all the other interests that claimed her attention and put her mind to it, she sometimes thought more than justified Caturanga's faith in her. There was no one in the hallway to stop her and ask her where she was going, and the deputy and administrative assistant in the outer office lifted their heads and watched her pass by them with placid disinterest. Didn't they recognize that she was the other half of a team that, in the eyes of some, was most likely the perpetrator of the 'suspicious activities' in Ellis? Never mind the fact that she and Myka had been the ones to put an end to the scheme, the plot, the coup - whatever people wanted to call it - it was
only further proof of their guilt.

And then the deputy was calling her back. Of course she wasn't going to be free to walk out of this place. They would lead her back to the sheriff's office, where she would sit with Claudia, and her fragment and Claudia's artefact would continue to interact until she, or Claudia, or the both of them combusted. At least it would satisfy those who expected their terrorism and anti-American malefactions to be straightforward, not strange, inexplicable influences that left people mute and transfixed in front of computer screens and TVs. It was all going to come to an end, she, finally, was going to come an end. Fine, fine. She had never wanted to live to be 148 . . . .

"You'll probably want these," the deputy said laconically, giving her a bag that contained her keys, phone, and wallet. "You'll find your SUV in the parking lot." He turned his back on her, unafraid that she could end his life with no more than a key hanging from its fob, which she could, she wanted to shout at him, except that bragging about that particular skill wasn't only in bad taste it would probably result in her occupying the cell next to Myka's. He just took it for granted that she would walk out the doors and drive away. Which she did, because, despite Major Lowry's suspicions, her only interest in subversion was in ensuring that he and fools like him couldn't interfere with what she needed to do, and what she needed to do was to find out what it was she had in her pocket. She could be first things first. She would start with Gene Butler, as Claudia wanted her to do, and work backward from there.

As she pulled into the motel's lot, getting an address for Butler from Jacqui and trying to field an incoming call from Pete, she didn't notice until the SUV's tires bounced against the concrete block at the end of the parking space that two very young, very overdressed agents were standing outside her and Myka's rooms.

"Who are you?" Forgetting for the moment the phone clamped between her ear and shoulder, she bumped one of them aside, memorable only for the towering wave of black hair being held back, with copious amounts of sculpting gel, from breaking over his forehead.

"The same person I was a minute ago," Pete said. "What's going on with Myka? Before she blinked her eyes and disappeared, Claudia was shouting that Myka was in jail and that the Warehouse was going to end as we knew it and all sorts of end of the world stuff. And if you're going to be the voice of reason, then I know we're in trouble." The gentle poke at her was further blunted by his worried tone. "I've been calling the both of you for hours."

"Cabrera. Ernesto Cabrera. Ernie," the one she had bumped said nervously, still managing to block her path to the door.

"We'll get along better, Mr. Cabrera, if you don't stand in my way." She unlocked the door, hearing the wheeze of the air conditioning unit over Pete's reassurance in her ear that she could rely on junior Agent Cabrera. "Ernie's okay. He's young, but he's solid." Then the worry crept back into his voice. "What's going on down there that Claudia had to send other agents? Is my son going to have to get used to seeing his mother in an orange jumpsuit?"

"I'll take the Janus Coin again before I see her in a jumpsuit. They should have been put to rest with Elvis. And orange is definitely not her color." Helena peered into the dimness, trying to survey the contents of the room. Nothing looked out of place, and her laptop was cabled to the bed frame. She had expected to see evidence that her room had been searched, if not men and women in fatigues carrying out her few belongings in evidence bags, then an open dresser drawer or the portrait of the mushrooms, no, cattle at the river crossing hanging askew or, better yet, flung to the floor. She motioned to Ernie to go a far corner, distractedly recording Pete's bellow, "Drew, your mom's going to be a felon," and turning around to narrowly miss colliding with the other agent, a woman
who had the irrepressibly cheerful expression of the indulged youngest child of a sitcom family and the freckles and upturned nose to go with it.

"Megan Reeves," she said, holding out her hand.

Helena reluctantly shook it as she erupted into the phone, "Don't you dare tell him that. She's temporarily being held for questioning. I want to hear you tell him that, Pete." There was silence on the other end. "Now," she ground out, "or so help me God, I'll -"

Pete was laughing. "That's the only funny I've had all day. Thank you." Still laughing, he let himself wind down before he said, "Drew's not here, H.G. He's with one of his friends from soccer. In fact, I need to go get him in a few minutes." Finally sobering, he said, "Drew's going to be expecting Myka's call around 8:00, 8:30 tonight. Will she be making that call?"

"Yes," Helena said curtly, pressing the receiver icon and feeling a spurt of satisfaction at seeing it change from green to red and from up to down. She would have enjoyed cutting him off more had she been able to slam the receiver in its cradle as she had seen happen in old movies and TV shows. She didn't miss much about the nineteenth century, but life back then had been tactile in a way that life in this new one wasn't, sometimes repulsively, sometimes delightfully so . . . .

Agents Cabrera and Reeves stood uncertainly in the corner where they had been relegated, and she impatiently waved them out. "You're going to die of heat stroke before the day is done, and then what bloody use will you be to me?" She tried to soften her bark with a smile. "We'll be searching a house. You've at least done that before, haven't you?" At their nods, she said, "Who told you Warehouse agents wear suits on the job? Claudia?" Another series of nods. "Change out of them and meet me back here in ten."

In fifteen they were all in the SUV and on the highway to Ennis, Ernie at the wheel. After her shower, she had looked for her keys only to have Ernie, more sensibly dressed in cargo shorts and a polo, dangle them in front of her, saying with a wiseass grin, "Claudia gave us five rules for dealing with you. One is never to let you drive."

"What are the other four?" She shifted against her seat belt, so she could see both Ernie and Megan, who was in the back seat.

"Another is to keep you guessing for as long as we can." Megan tried out her own version of a wiseass grin, but on her, it managed just to look sweet - and endearing.

Gene Butler lived in an unprepossessing ranch house on a county lane off the highway less than a mile from Boise City. Wincingly stepping down from the SUV, the occasional brushing against her knees of the other tropic-weight pants she had packed surprisingly painful, Helena smiled to herself as she saw Ernie and Megan carefully approach the front door, guns drawn. Ernie pounded on the door, and a dog howled from within.

"I'm fairly certain the dog is unarmed," Helena said as she joined them. She tried the knob; the door was unlocked. For a law enforcement fan, Butler was strangely trusting of his neighbors. She had no sooner pushed it open than Ernie and Megan rushed in ahead of her, guns up and extended as they fanned the room. The dog, a beagle happy to see them, whined and snuffled at Megan's legs. "Put the guns down," Helena said, "no one's here. If you don't believe me, take the dog's word for it." As Ernie and Megan holstered their weapons, Helena walked farther into the living room. The furniture was old but in good repair, though the floral pattern of the upholstery didn't seem to match the preferences of a middle-aged man. Helena suspected that Butler had inherited the furniture, if not the home itself, from his mother. He was a middle-aged bachelor who had lived with his mother, and she flashed back to the election posters she had seen in the Ellis school, Butler
with a cowboy hat, promising to bring back law and order "the way it used to be." A mama’s boy with a need to assert his masculinity. Between him and Major Lowry, it was almost enough to make her write off men. Almost, there was still hope for Drew. She thumbed her phone's screen and called Jacqui, who was researching whether there were any connections between Butler and the legislator who had owned Aimee Semple McPherson's bible.

"I'm still running his name against those of the other legislators, nothing's kicked out so far on the bible owner," Jacqui tiredly sing-songed. "Give me some time, H.G."

Helena was about to respond when she felt Megan's hand on her arm. "You should come back to his bedroom," Megan said, looking down and smiling, cheerfully, at the beagle, still whining, still sniffing at her feet. "He looks pretty well fed for a puppy left on his own for a week."

"Better check the kitchen for what's left of Mother Butler," Helena said dryly, tucking the phone into her shoulder bag.

Megan grimaced, casting an anxious look, which didn't rest well on her features, toward the back of the house. Helena left her to find Ernie in one of the bedrooms, which were off a narrow hallway from the living room. He was powering on a computer, which shared space on a drop-leaf table with a printer. The table was set against the one area of the wall that wasn't covered with movie posters and old black and white stills of Westerns. The other walls of the room were similarly papered with posters and shelves held lunchboxes and games featuring the names and characters of television Westerns. Stagecoach, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, My Darling Clementine, Gunsmoke, Bonanza. Helena walked around the room, noticing that many of the posters and stills featured John Wayne. On the nightstand next to the twin bed were stacks of paperback Westerns. A cowboy hat hung from a bedpost.

"It's slow," Ernie said, frowning at the monitor.

"Turn it off. We'll take the CPU and work on it at the Warehouse." Helena opened the drawers of the nightstand and then the dresser. Nothing of interest. She hadn't found a phone on Butler, and she didn't see one here. Perhaps he had left it in his car, which was parked somewhere in Ellis more than likely. She wasn't venturing there again unless she knew she wouldn't be given another unasked-for courtesy ride to the sheriff's office. A cursory check of the closet revealed nothing of interest either.

With Ernie clutching the CPU to his chest, she quickly searched the other bedroom. It looked like it had been undisturbed for years, if the dust on the bureau was any indication. The bed was old-fashioned, the mattress and box springs set in a heavy, dark frame. The bedspread was patterned with roses as were the curtains at the windows. There would be nothing of Gene's in this room. When they returned to the living room, Megan was sitting on the couch, the beagle sitting next to her.

"Dillon had chewed opened a bag of dog food," Megan said, petting him. "There's a little doggie door cut into the back door so he can -"

"Yes, I think we understand," Helena said dismissively. "I know that you and, Dillon is it, have become fast friends, but we can alert the county's animal control -"

"Where they'll put him down in a couple of weeks when no one claims him. Mr. Butler's not going to be able to claim him, is he?" Helena only looked at her impassively. "There's no one here to take care of him. There's a dog carrier on the back porch, it's how I learned his name."

"How is a beagle an asset in this investigation?" Helena shouted at Megan's back as she hurried to
the kitchen.

Ernie gave her another wiseass grin. "You're a soft touch. That was rule number five."

When they came to a stop at the intersection with the highway, Dillon barking from the cargo area and Megan trying ineffectually to shush him, Ernie began to turn left to go back to Boise City, until Helena clamped her hand on his arm. "We have somewhere else to go first." She directed him to the turnoff to Esther's farm, and while he frowned at her uncertainly, he obediently drove the SUV down the narrow road. The house looked no less unoccupied than Gene Butler's, and Helena heard Ernie mutter under his breath, "No one's home," but he had no sooner said it than Esther came out onto the front porch, shading her eyes as the SUV entered her driveway. She held the neutralizing bag at her side.

"Wait a minute," Ernie said, eyebrows arching, "she's an agent, too?" He let the SUV roll to a gentle stop, and he stared at Helena in disbelief.

"Honorary." Helena looked at Ernie and Megan in turn. "I won't be long." Feeling that she was addressing them as she might the beagle, whose barking had decrescendoed into anxious whines, she said, "Be good and . . . keep your mind clear."

Esther's hair, in its customary long braid, was dark in places, as though she had recently showered. The black eyes were intent and faintly amused, showing no traces of the cloudiness that Helena had seen when they were trying to retrieve the artefact. She looked past Helena toward the SUV.

"New friends?"

"No, new agents."

Esther craned her head a little, as if she were trying to peer into the SUV's cargo area. "Got a dog back there, don't you? Gene Butler has a dog. I imagine there's no one to look after it." Her gaze held no judgment, only a mild curiosity.

"I didn't know your talent included hearing the voices in a dog's head," Helena said dryly.

"They don't, but I can hear the ones in the agent who wanted to take it. She's still half-afraid you're going to make her give it up." Esther glanced at the neutralizer bag. "He's in the hospital, in a coma." She looked back up at Helena, smiling slightly. "Mrs. Warner down the road told me that. I didn't 'see' it." The smile disappeared. "He's not going to come out of it, is he? But I expect you knew that already. That's why you weren't in any rush to get him help." She handed Helena the bag. "What happened in Ellis, it's happened elsewhere." Helena didn't answer her. "It's been interesting meeting you but can't say I'll be sorry when you go. You're upsetting my quiet."

Helena shifted the bag to her other hand, the one that wouldn't brush against the pants pocket that held the fragment of black glass. A useless precaution, more likely than not. The shadows starting to creep across the yard signaled that it was late afternoon, about the time of day for Esther to eat her cookies, if she hadn't already. Helena wondered which it would be, oatmeal raisin, chocolate chip, peanut butter. After she had moved out of Nate's, she had developed routines. When Christina had been alive, she had reluctantly followed a schedule, and those few short months with Adelaide, she had done so as well, but she had never liked repeating the same thing over and over. Not without a change in the variables, not without the hope that this time it would be different. But after the misadventure of 13 and the disaster with Nate and Adelaide, she hadn't wanted to change variables and she hadn't expected anything to be different. No matter where she lived, no matter how else she spent her time, no matter with whom she spent some of that time, the routines never varied. They were small and private, she shared them with no one. Every day she would picture
Adelaide and apologize to her, every day she would tell herself that 13, and by that she had always meant Myka, was better off without her. At least once a week, she would sit in a coffee shop or café - the city was unimportant - and savor a cup of Earl Grey. It didn't matter how strong or weak it was; the tea she was drinking was not the one she was remembering, which was the tea she had every morning when Christina would chatter through her breakfast rather than eat it. Once a year she would pick up an H.G. Wells novel and read a few pages in it, less to remember the writing than to hear Charles' voice in the words. In the end, she couldn't say what purpose Esther's routines held for her, but her own, they hadn't been about security, they had been the boundary markers of her isolation, her self-imposed quarantine; they had been what gave her loneliness shape and helped convince her that it was a life. Adelaide still came to mind frequently but the impulse to apologize to her had lessened, and Helena hadn't thought Myka was better off without her since she had seen her in her black dress the day of Artie's retirement party. She remembered Christina more powerfully when she was with Drew than she ever had drinking Earl Grey and conjuring up a breakfast from 120 years ago. And as for reading one of her own books, the next time she did that, she would do it with Drew and Myka.

"If the quiet ever gets lonely, you might try where I live," she said casually to Esther. "We're an odd bunch, misfits the lot of us, but then we know how to appreciate the unusual, what doesn't fit in."

"It sounds like you're offering me a job." Esther chuckled and shook her head. "Never thought I was the employable sort."

"Not that we couldn't find a use for you, but I was thinking more along the lines of a haven." The word was out before Helena could stop it, before she knew it was a word she should stop herself from saying, but it had never occurred to her that she might use "haven" to describe the Warehouse since a haven was the last thing she had found in it. She had meant the people associated with the Warehouse, Myka, Pete, Claudia, Steve. A simple mistake, an elision in her thinking, that was all.

Esther was regarding her with that shrewdly knowing look that reminded her of Irene. Perhaps the one anomaly the Warehouse couldn't absorb was the presence of two Mrs. Frederics. "I've finally got things where I like 'em here. Took me awhile, but I'm content where I am. Appreciate the offer though."

She was silent long enough that Helena thought Esther might simply be waiting for her to leave, but as she was wondering how best to acknowledge the debt she owed Esther, made all the more impossible to repay since the woman had risked her own life to save hers, Esther said musingly, "Hard to believe Gene stumbled onto something that could shut down a whole town." The tone was casual, but the eyes bore into Helena's. "Always kind of a sad sack, you know? Worked as a sheriff's deputy a month or two, but they had to let him go. Lost his gun trying to break up a bar fight, shot himself in the foot, literally I'm telling you, another time. He kinda went from job to job, nice enough but if there was a banana peel somewhere, he'd be the one slipping on it. That's why his running for sheriff year after year became such a joke. Even outside the county people made jokes about it. One year a station in Oklahoma City sent a reporter up here to cover the election. They interviewed him at his 'headquarters,' which was the diner in Boise City, and tried to hunt up a few supporters. They were making fun of him, but he didn't seem to notice."

"Sounds like he's someone people could take advantage of," Helena said, making an equal show of idle speculation. How did someone who couldn't hold down a job and lived in his parents' home afford a replicated artefact? How would he have found out about them? Or, to rephrase the question, how did he come to the attention of those behind the replicated artefacts? She turned her head, from left to right, as if leisurely taking in a panoramic view of Esther's driveway, the SUV, the road, and, beyond, the unending sweep of pasture and tilled fields. There was nothing to
suggest that the four of them - and the beagle - weren't the only inhabitants for as far as she could see. As desolate as the moon but lacking the moon's star quality. People wanted to go to the moon, no one wanted to go to the panhandle. Hard to find a better place to test an artefact, especially one that was paired with something special, an accelerator or amplifier. If the experiment went poorly, the collateral damage would be minimal, relatively speaking. All you needed was just the right trigger, one that could be absorbed by the reaction without anyone noticing or, more accurately, caring.

"You need to go now," Esther said, giving her a gentle push. "Your mind's getting busy, and it's been a tiring day for me." She opened the screen door but didn't immediately go in. "If you and the other agent make it down this way again, look me up. I like her, and she settles your mind some. Makes you tolerable."

Esther's grin was wide and teasing, but Helena answered her more seriously than the jab merited. "Yes, she does."

"Then hang onto her." The door banged shut, and Helena caught a glimpse of Esther's white braid swinging behind her before she lost sight of that, too.

Jacqui didn't pick up until Helena called her the third time. "Hey, sorry, but Travis called in with an emergency request, and I had to deal with that first. So -"

"The connection isn't between Butler and one of the legislators," Helena said rapidly. "It's between the legislator who first took the bible and Congressman Jaffee, or possibly Perkins."

"Hold on," Jacqui said. "I'm not following you."

Of course she wasn't. No one was ever able to ride her runaway trains except Myka, Helena thought moodily. Sometimes Claudia, if the train was hauling equations and theories designed to upend the laws of physics. "The Warehouse team that retrieved the bible, they swapped it for another one. But what if that had been done before, to replicate it? And then put back without the legislator who owned it any the wiser. Maybe it was done during a holiday recess. First, you'll need to find out - "

"I can take it from here," Jacqui interrupted her. "But, Helena," she added sternly, "you know this is going to take longer, right? Don't start bouncing off the walls if you don't hear from me when you think you should. Even though Jaffee and Perkins don't represent Oklahoma, they're still national politicians. More than one legislator may have a connection to them or possibly multiple connections. It will take time to get you the information you want."

"It always takes time," Helena muttered irritably and then regretted her pettishness. "I know I'm asking a lot of you."

"We both want Myka home," Jacqui sighed.

The call over, Helena stared at the farmhouse for a few moments before asking Ernie to unlock the cargo area. She put the neutralizing bag by the beagle's carrier, which occasioned a cacophony of barks and yips. Perhaps by some alchemy the bag could be made to swallow Dillon. As she buckled herself into the passenger seat, Helena said, "I suppose another one of the rules is 'Remind her to be patient. Not everyone is Myka or Claudia.'"

Megan was half-over the backseat, trying to soothe Dillon's fretting. She twisted her head over her shoulder and, with the beaming smile teachers adopted when awarding gold stars (a silly practice but one, Helena had learned living with Adelaide, a gold star Olympian, that remained a staple of
elementary education), she assured Helena, "You're 100% right."

Helena convinced Ernie and Megan to try the diner, although they were ready to drive the hour to Guymon to have dinner "somewhere recognizable." Suspecting she was overselling, Helena nevertheless made much of the daily specials, which today, if she was correctly deciphering the scrawl on the diner's chalkboard, was fried catfish and hush puppies. The interior was rather redolent of cornbread and fish, she had to admit. So far she had avoided eating fish sporting whiskers, but today . . . today seemed the perfect day for fish with whiskers. Though Ernie and Megan were wrinkling their noses, Helena decided to attribute it . . . to nothing. She was tired, and she didn't want to go to Guymon to sit in a Pizza Hut. If they wanted "lite" fare, there was the house salad, which came accompanied with a package of saltines.

Helena's appearance with two new agents raised little more excitement than the usual spectrum of wary-to-suspicious glances. Occasionally she caught the words "Ellis" and "government" and "screw-up" in the conversations around them, and she thought there could be no Mad Libs version of them that wouldn't make sense. At one point, she caught Ernie viewing her with a certain kind of calculating gaze that she hadn't lived to be 148 without knowing what it meant. When Megan excused herself to go to the restroom, Helena leaned over her partially eaten special (the hush puppies were shaped like mini cannon balls and weighed about the same) and murmured, "You're never going to get a chance to find out."

Ernie flushed, but he tried to brazen it out. "I was just wondering what it would be like to tap 150 years' worth of history, you know. I'm sitting across from someone who may have met Queen Victoria."

"She never knew the Warehouse existed, but I had the dubious honor of fending off Prince Edward's advances. He never got to 'tap my knowledge' either."

"At least I'm in good company," he said, unrepentant.

After Megan secured a doggie bag for the dog, they walked back to the motel. Helena lingered in front of the county building, tempted to go in and browbeat, or sweet talk, her way to whatever room Myka was in, although the building had the somnolent air of businesses closed for the night. If the law didn't sleep in other places, it couldn't sleep in Boise City, but Helena suspected it often pretended it was reading, surveilling would be more accurate, its eyes closed. The anxious thought crossed her mind that Myka might have been removed, transferred to Oklahoma City or elsewhere despite Claudia's efforts to keep her under the Warehouse's protection, oxymoron that it was. If Claudia didn't have the support of Homeland Security then all she would have would be her own futile, and profane, protests, the kind that Artie would raise whenever the regents acted without consulting him.

Helena had hoped that Myka might be in their rooms, waiting for her, but the only thing that greeted her was the odor of old bedcovers and carpet that hadn't (ever) been shampooed. Ernie and Megan went to their rooms, in the short arm of the motel's L, and Helena restless flopped onto the bed. There were certain records she needed to review, cross references she needed to make, suspicions she needed to confirm, but she wanted to use her own computer, with its Claudia-proof encryption, not the government-issued laptop she had had to bring with her from Kenosha. She dug out the fragment of black glass and put it on the nightstand. She needed to deal with it as well. But not tonight.

Her worries about Myka and the trips to Butler's home and Esther's farmhouse had kept the voices that the artefact had stirred at bay. But in the silence of the room, she could hear them, Christina's, Charles', Caturanga's, and those of all the other victims of her obsessions or, as equally, her
indifference. What had Charles accused her of being? A sun that couldn't allow another star to shine? She could do him one better. A sun so mesmerized by its own radiance it was unaware that other stars could shine.

Something scraped outside the door, and she raced to fling it open, crying loudly, gratefully, "Myka." But they weren't Myka. Ernie held out a six pack of Miller and Megan a deck of cards. Megan's cheerfulness wasn't so much dimmed as modulated by a note in her voice that suggested she was far wiser than the sitcom kid sister she resembled. "The other thing Claudia told us? 'She'll never admit it, but she doesn't like to be alone at night.'"

Helena was on her third beer, perhaps her fourth, and their umpteenth game of hearts. Megan didn't like beer, and Ernie tended to nurse his as though he had only a couple of dollars to stretch over the course of the night. He didn't have to be so careful; they weren't actually babysitting her. But planting her hand on the mattress to steady herself as she viewed her cards, she had to admit that that's exactly what it looked like. If Ernie had any hopes of putting her to bed, however, he would find out that, unsteady or no, she still had a wicked left hook.

When the door opened, she didn't notice it, busy ordering the suits in her hand. She looked up only when she felt an inrush of heat, and she saw Myka leaning against the doorjamb, a tired smile on her face. "She's got you on the bed, but everyone's still wearing clothes. This can't be an H.G. Wells' card party."

Helena knew her answering smile was more woozy than seductive. "That's because I was waiting on you, darling."

"And that's our cue," Megan said hastily, leaning over to find her shoes, while Ernie gracelessly slid to the end of the bed, dragging the bedspread and cards with him.

Once they had gone, Helena reached over to deposit her bottle of beer with the others on the nightstand and then patted a spot on the mattress next to her. "Come tell me every horrible Major Lowryish detail."

"That's going to have to wait," Myka said, crossing the room to the connecting door, leaning down to kiss the top of Helena's head on the way. "There's a patrol car outside that's going to take Claudia and me to Oklahoma City. An escort, they call it. That's one way of putting it, I guess." Thumps and the rattle of hangers started coming from the other room. "Bright and early tomorrow, I'm to apologize to the governor and a representative of the Air National Guard. An explanation of the situation, they call it. And then onto Washington for a meeting with the DHS. I've been told that my responsibilities are going to be 'reevaluated.'"

Helena, with more flailing than she felt three, perhaps four, beers should be causing, pushed herself off the bed and entered the other room, standing uncertainly in front of the doorway. Myka was throwing clothes and toiletries with unMyka-like carelessness into her suitcase. "They won't fire you. They don't dare."

"The regents can't unilaterally call the shots anymore, and that's assuming they aren't as angry as the DHS. It's been a huge embarrassment, and one thing you learn working for bureaucracies, they hate being embarrassed." She tossed her make-up bag and a sleep shirt she had never worn into the suitcase and zipped it, yanking it off the bed. Walking over to Helena, her expression softened, and she lightly touched the side of Helena's face. "Don't look so troubled. It's not the end of the world if they fire me."

"You remember who I am, don't you?" Helena demanded. "I know all about what it takes to end the world, and though I haven't reached that level of outrage, I'm thoroughly displeased." Hoping
her look was fierce but not so fierce as to make Myka fear that she would begin searching for the Minoan trident before long, Helena repeated, "Thoroughly displeased with the American tendency to draw conclusions before you have all the answers."

Myka bent her head, kissing Helena at the corner of her jaw. "Because you, of course, never do anything like that."

"When I do," Helena said, arching her neck and pressing Myka's head closer in, "it's called genius." She felt Myka's laugh as a hum against her skin and enjoyed the shiver of it. They could almost be laughing together, at the idiocy of cabinet secretaries and four-star generals and regents (why not throw them in for good measure?). But she said with utter seriousness, "You don't need any of it. I have enough money to support us for several lifetimes, and we certainly don't have to remain in South Dakota. We can go anywhere, the three of us." As Myka leaned away from her, frowning in disbelief, Helena said falteringly, "We'll fly Pete in for his paternal visits. As many times as he wants." Myka's frown deepened. "All right, we'll take Pete with us, although he's living in a home of his own -"

Myka leaned in again, silencing the rush of her speech with a kiss. It was a shushing kiss and a consoling one, sweet and unyielding at the same time. "We're not going anywhere, Helena, no matter what happens with the DHS. That's our home. I mean, I want it to be our home. You told me you came back because you had nowhere else to go. So stop running. We'll deal with whatever the DHS throws at us."

"Of course we will," Helena said with a hint of exasperation. "I wasn't suggesting that we run away, I was suggesting that we might bear our disappointments in a more attractive locale."

"South Dakota has its flaws," Myka wryly conceded, "but it's grown on me."

"Ow," Helena said indignantly. "The metaphor was heavy, by the way, and I think it raised a few lumps on my head."

Myka laughed under her breath, giving Helena another kiss, one that was completely sweet and promised much yielding at a future date. She broke the kiss to fumble in a pocket of her jeans for a key ring, which she pressed into Helena's hand. "If you could do a couple loads of laundry, that would be great. And if you have the time, we need the staples - bread, milk, ice cream, cereal, coffee. Take Drew with you, he loves going to the grocery store."

Helena stared down at the house keys. "Is Pete going on a retrieval? Are you expecting enhanced interrogation methods at the hands of Homeland Security?"

Myka grabbed the suitcase, towing it behind her as she headed for the door. "Yes and possibly." Her smile was casual, but Helena felt Myka's searching gaze asking her the question for which she could never find the answer. "But there are two things you need to do first when you get back tomorrow. You need to call Drew, because while he was wildly excited that I was calling him from the back of a police cruiser, he was disappointed that he had to go to bed before he could talk to you." She hesitated and then said quietly, "And you need to move out of the apartment."

"Because Homeland Security is going to fire me as well?" Helena asked sardonically.

Myka shook her head, but her eyes never left Helena's. "Because you're moving in with me and Drew. You said I asked, so there's your ring. For now." She shrugged, embarrassed. "Not very romantic, I know. But you made me wait for over 12 years, and I'm tired of waiting. Plus. . . . " Now she did look away. "I'm afraid of what will happen if we keep dragging this out. I don't have that many more Warehouse explosions or Ellises in me. Will you stay, Helena?"
So that had been the question all along, and Helena finally knew the answer.

............

Helena insisted on driving the SUV to Denver. Ernie and Megan looked at each other and Dillon woofed uncertainly in his carrier, but no one tried to take the keys from her. A large container of something that one of the diner's waitresses had said was coffee was in a cup holder in the console. With several injections of caffeine and a foot unrelentingly holding the accelerator to the floor, she might make it back to Rapid City before midnight. She wasn't flying out of Denver with Ernie and Megan, she had other plans.

She didn't bother to keep an eye on the speedometer, and Ernie, after the SUV almost took flight when it hit a dip in the road, kept his attention fixed firmly on his phone. Megan passed the time by talking to Dillon, telling him stories of her unsurprisingly idyllic childhood and assuring him that, assuming they made it to Denver in one piece, he would love the B&B and its campus.

"How do you know that Claudia will let you keep the dog?" Helena asked after observing Megan cooing to the dog, who, this morning, had his carrier next to her on the back seat.

"She's said more than once that she misses Trailer."

"I think that's her way of saying she misses Artie."

Megan shrugged. "We always had dogs when I was growing up, and it's nice having someone to come back to. They're more dependable than men, and, really, they're not that much messier." Ernie twitched in a manner that might have been a prelude to an objection but he kept silent, perhaps believing that the Nike swoop of his hair, groomed and styled to perfection, was objection enough about men being messy.

With the help of the SUV's GPS and much hollering from both Ernie and Megan, Helena made it to the passenger drop-off at the Denver airport, roaring away from the curb after Dillon's carrier cleared the car door. Airport security whistled and one guard jogged toward a car as though he might give her chase, but Helena bumped and squealed her way onto the expressway, determined to stop at the first dealership she saw. It happened to be a luxury car dealership, but money wasn't a concern, the salesman's ability to provide what she wanted on immediate notice was. The only SUV available was a custom-ordered claret-colored Land Rover that the owner had returned after having it for only a few days. Helena walked around it once and listened with boredom as the salesman described its many features, but she took a great deal of interest in the back seat, wriggling and stretching out her legs, finally pronouncing it roomy enough. She bought it without any further investigation or a test drive and left the SUV for pick-up by the rental agency. On her way out of Denver, she stopped at a discount supercenter that sold everything from groceries to tires and bought more coffee, a couple of boxes of snack cakes, and a shovel. She would take the SUV for the only test drive she cared about later, once Myka returned from Washington, and there would be snack cakes in the glove box.

In Wyoming, she turned onto a county highway and drove for several miles until all she could see was empty prairie. She parked on the side of the road and, carrying the shovel with her, she dug a hole in the earth and placed the fragment of black glass, secured once more in its special box, deep within it. She felt a pulse, a tug toward it as she buried it, and she was confident that she could find it should she need to.
Chapter 17

She snapped out the pair of cargo shorts she pulled from the dryer, giving them a once-over before folding and placing them on top of the stack of Drew's shorts. They looked clean despite the assortment of stains they had collected in the short time he had worn them: grass stains from wrestling with Shep in the backyard, dirt and splinters of wood from climbing over and around and down the tree house, pink splotches from failing to eat all around a strawberry ice cream cone, and a few whose origin she hadn't wanted to determine. Viewing the baskets of freshly laundered sheets, Drew's clothes, and Myka's underwear (which she had given a keenly appreciative appraisal), she noted that the baskets holding Drew's clothes outnumbered the others by two to one. She was less struck by how laundry was now a minor investment of time and effort than by the housefly-like lifespan of children's clothing. There was no magic in the transition from the witches' cauldrons of her childhood and adulthood, with their boiling water and ill-smelling cleaning compounds, to automatic washers and dryers, just the usual human desire to turn a profit from making a process more efficient. There was magic in how an item of clothing that fit a child one day was too short or too tight for him the next. Drew wouldn't be able to wear most of these shorts next summer, and some of the t-shirts and polo shirts that he continued to wear were already too small. In a few years' time, he would look at a pair of shorts this size and wonder how he had managed to pull them up his legs.

She ran her hand over the material, thinking that as Drew grew bigger and the boy clothes became smaller, she was beginning to approach the age—was the age—when she would become smaller and her clothes larger. As her bones and muscle lost mass, she would shrink and, even without a dowager's hump (were she to be so lucky), she would still resemble a turtle, the sagging necklines of blouses and sweaters a carapace from which her thin neck and rounded shoulders would emerge. That was a depressing image and not one to dwell on when Myka's panties, bikinis to be specific, were nearby.

The door above her banged and then Drew was thundering down the steps. The cargo shorts he had put on this morning had been clean until he stuffed himself with the powdered donuts he had persuaded her to buy at the grocery store yesterday. "Colton's mom wants to take us to the pool. Can I go?"

Silently she held out her hand for the phone he was clutching to his chest and confirmed with Colton's mother that such an outing was indeed planned and that she would be watching over the boys. When she gave the phone back to Drew, he complained, "It was just like I said."

"Of that I was reasonably sure, but I've no intention of entrusting your care solely to a 16-year-old lifeguard daydreaming about the YouTube video of him rescuing a child."

"Huh?"

"That means I want an adult with you at all times."

He wagged his head in disgust. "You're worse than my mom sometimes."

"I take that as a compliment." As he climbed the stairs, she called after him, "Make sure you have sunscreen on before you get into the pool."

He bent over the handrail to look at her. "When does my mom get home?"

"Not for another couple of days." She put the pile of folded shorts into one of the baskets filled
with his clothes. "You know, I'm not leaving when she returns. That's the new deal, and you agreed to it." She locked eyes with him until their mouths began to twitch, threatening grins. "Go get ready," she said softly.

"Tonight you're going to sleep in the treehouse with me, you promised," he shouted, slamming the door behind him.

A few days before, when Helena had stopped at Pete's apartment to pick Drew up, two bulging suitcases behind her, she had questioned Myka's wisdom in suggesting that she move in, although, since Myka hadn't suggested so much as told her that she was moving in, she was really only obeying orders. She couldn't be blamed for being swept up in Myka's uncharacteristic rashness. She and her suitcases, the one that was especially bulging attesting to her fondness for shoes, which was only a natural overreaction for one accustomed to nineteenth century footwear and its limitations - after all, there was only so much even the most talented shoemaker could do with the basic boot - they were there at Myka's behest. If she were to be no more highly regarded than the live-in boyfriend of Colton's mother, whose usefulness outside certain not-to-be-explored, grown-up contexts was decried by a universe of eight-year-old boys, it wasn't her fault.

But when Drew opened the door and his eyes fell on the suitcases, he said only, "Dad bet you'd have a lot more stuff." Then the suitcases and the changes to his life they heralded dispatched, he raced to his room, Shep lunging after him.

Pete was leaning on the breakfast bar, his elbows propping him up, a coffee cup between his hands. "I do have a lot more 'stuff,'" she said, "in New York. But we'll have to sort that out later." Helena gave him an embarrassed smile, feeling defensive and guilty at the same time. Yes, the fact that she was shagging his ex-wife was now being made official - and permanent - but he didn't have to look so . . . normal . . . about it.

"Hey," he said, spreading his arms like wings and slopping coffee over the rim of his cup in the process, "why are you the one who's looking like you're not okay about this?"

"It's sudden. For him." She tilted her head toward Drew's room.

"Yeah, but he's a Warehouse kid." Pete sucked at his coffee, and Helena almost winced at the sound of it. There weren't many things she would ever readily volunteer about Pete Lattimer, but one of them was that he wasn't passive-aggressive. The slurping was a sign only of his atrocious table manners. "He's used to his mom and dad leaving him at a moment's notice, never really telling him what they're up to. He may not know what we do, but he knows what it means. Expect the unexpected." He flashed Helena an evil grin. "Plus, he thinks he's getting a new bedroom out of it."

With a series of thumps, Drew emerged from his bedroom, leaning into an invisible harness and dragging a large sports bag behind him. Pete put his coffee cup down and jogged over to his son to take the bag from him. Below the gray t-shirt bearing the Nike swoop was a pair of Spiderman pajama bottoms. Half of him literally was a man, and half a child. Hefting the bag over his shoulder, he led them out of the apartment, Helena bringing up the rear with her wayward rolling, oft-colliding suitcases. When she pointed to the Land Rover in the parking lot, he whistled.

"Nice, but what are you doing buying a housewarming gift for yourself?"

"It's for all of us," she said primly, banishing thoughts of snack cakes and licking the cream off Myka's mouth. "There's plenty of room for Drew and his friends -"

"And the dog." Pete flashed her another evil grin. Shep was on his back paws and clawing at a side
door. Helena shuddered at what he would do to the leather seats. Pete stowed the bag and the suitcases in the Rover's cargo area, and once he had finished, he turned a face toward her in which amusement couldn't quite hide the wistfulness. "Are you sure you're ready for this? Myka and the Drewster act all nice and polite, but they're kind of trying to live with, you know? She's always referencing some internal manual, and he's eight; half the time he'll forget to flip the toilet seat up, and the other half, he's bringing all sorts of crap into the house, treasures that he's discovered in the yard, Shep's old toys, baby birds that have fallen out of their nests. There's not a whole lot of 'endless wonder' to it."

"They'll have to accept my vagaries as well - calisthenics in the nude, house music blasting in the background . . . . I'm not going to cut and run, Pete." She wanted to thumb away the worry lines in his forehead.

He laughed, the humor genuine. "Like she would let you now that she's got you. You're hers if you don't know that already." The laugh trailing off, he said, "You don't have to make her happy, H.G. You just need to be you - that's all she's ever wanted."

Yes, one of Myka's few lapses in judgment, Helena thought wryly. Unworthy, she would always be that, but the realization didn't crush her, and she felt no need as she had years ago to save Myka from the consequences of loving her. If Myka's internal manual didn't already have a big chapter titled "Helena" with generous margins for notes, it would.

She wouldn't say that she had developed a routine in the days that had passed since she drove out of the B&B's parking lot with a boy and a tongue-lolling Shep trying to hang out of the windows, but she had made a few gestures toward claiming a place for herself in the house. She had found space in the dresser in Myka's bedroom - her and Myka's bedroom now, she reminded herself - and in the closet in the office for both her clothes and shoes, and she had made a minor investment in a tea kettle, strainer, and tin of loose-leaf Earl Grey. She hadn't made herself tea on a regular basis since the turn of the last century, and she couldn't honestly say it tasted any better than what would come out of a Keurig, but she enjoyed the process of making it while Drew poured cereal into a bowl and then proceeded to eat it with a slurping satisfaction reminiscent of his father. Christina, when she had grown old enough, had clamored to measure out the tea leaves; Drew wouldn't, if the past mornings were any indication, but the differences between then and now made Christina seem closer to her than if Drew had perfectly mimicked her daughter's every gesture.

When she wasn't make merely passable tea for herself, ferrying Drew between math camp and soccer, occasionally remembering to pick up after the both of them, which meant collecting Drew's toys and found "treasures" and her own scattered notes and dirty mugs and dumping them in their respective bedrooms, Helena was trying to find an answer for the replicated artefacts. Answers, rather. She didn't know the mechanics of the replication, but she had theories. On the other hand, while she knew, at least strongly believed she knew, who was behind the artefacts, all she had were hazy ideas of how to prove it. After discovering the doctored surveillance footage and the relationship of some of the victims to PAWL, the organization that had strong links to politicians far to the right of those on the right, the rest of the team had come around to her view, which was that the replication wasn't a mercenary venture; the retrieval in Ellis only confirmed her suspicions that these so-called masterminds had another goal in mind.

The replicated lab coat and dice - and who knew what other artefacts had been copied that the Warehouse agents didn't know about - had been experiments, limited efforts to determine how successfully the properties of the original artefact had been reproduced. Although the results had been decidedly mixed, they hadn't deterred the ones behind this mess, who had then launched a larger-scale trial in Ellis. Having proven, if only to themselves, that replicated artefacts were as powerful as the originals, they had increased the stakes by using a single replicated artefact on a
larger number of people. The fatal side effect of possessing a replicated artefact, the worrisome tendency of the replicated property to "drift," these were, to all appearances, acceptable costs. What goal, what end would possibly justify the damage the replicated artefacts caused? Not money, vengeance perhaps, and that she could understand better than most people, although even vengeance would have glutted itself on the bodies the replicated artefacts left behind. Maybe love, though what beloved would stomach the lengths to which her lover had gone? Power. She had thought it before, and it seemed all the more likely now, after Ellis. The malefactors weren't scientists and hardly ethicists; they were politicians.

Jacqui had yet to find any connection between the Oklahoma legislators and Congressman Jaffee or Perkins, but Helena knew it was there, just as she knew the slight throbbing that had begun after her journey to Ellis and had yet to stop, although the fragment was buried in a Wyoming field hundreds of miles away, argued that she was the trigger for the explosion of the artefact's power that morning. Well, she and the . . . amplifier . . . working in tandem. And the fragment was only that, a fragment, chipped from or broken off something bigger. Possibly much bigger.

"They" had known, or guessed, that she would be sent to Ellis, which meant "they" knew who she was. And what she was to the Warehouse. Expanding the search into her own records, she retrieved itineraries and e-mails and account statements from travels she had made over the past five years, which was when Pete had begun to feel his vibes about her, and tried to cross-reference them, to the extent she could, with the retrieval "schedule" that Artie and Myka would have used to flag artefacts that they particularly wanted to neutralize. The agents still relied on a database that compared reported anomalies with the properties of unretrieved artefacts and "pinged" when it found a match. Artie had always been silent about how the database, despite being housed in hardware that wouldn't have looked out of place on a WWII-era submarine, all knobs and switches and porthole-sized screens, processed information faster and more accurately than any modern-day computer. Helena strongly suspected that the technology was artefact-enhanced, but when she had suggested as much Artie had only shrugged.

She itched to get her hands on it one day, but that day wasn't going to happen anytime soon. While asking Jacqui or Claudia to query the database for the dates when the original artefacts had first pinged would remove some of the guesswork from her cross-referencing, it would also raise questions she didn't want to answer. To enter through the database's back doors without setting off the trip wires Claudia would have set would be onerous even if she had all the time in the world to spare, and she didn't have that kind of time. She might be overestimating the warmth with which she had been welcomed back, but she suspected that no one would like the conclusions she was drawing, and Myka . . . Myka was the primary reason she wasn't asking for anyone's help or trying to hack into the database. It wasn't that what Myka didn't know wouldn't hurt her, it was that what Myka didn't know wouldn't hurt her. Myka would be more than capable of shackling her to the basement furnace or the Land Rover, and though she would welcome being restrained for other purposes, she needed to be able to prevent "them" from taking what had happened in Ellis and trying to make it both bigger and better.

Consequently, her dataset was less precise than she desired, and it had less data than she would have liked, but the graph she was able to create from it told her enough. The lines she plotted that represented her trips and the lines that represented the necessarily rougher time frames of when she thought the lab coat, the dice, and the bible had been replicated intersected where she had suspected they would, Washington D.C. Connections to Washington D.C. and people Helena knew had already been made, the fact that some of her clients were on PAWL's list, that Wade Farraday had donated money. Those clients as well as others for whom she had done a fair amount of work lived in Washington, as did Suzanne, and Suzanne's boss, so to speak, was Wade Farraday. Both Jaffee and Perkins, as well as a senator who shared their views, had visited the Warehouse, and they had all supported greater DHS oversight of the Warehouse. Somebody with influence and
access had had Warehouse security video edited, and somebody with money had created - somewhere - a workspace, a laboratory in which to experiment with replication. What those somebodies needed was someone with knowledge of Warehouse artefacts, of her. Had the replication been happening 12 years or more ago, Helena would have said finding the disaffected scientist or former agent would have been easy. Although the Warehouse didn't officially exist and, therefore, couldn't have a budget to be slashed, something very much like a budget had been slashed, repeatedly, and the scientists who had once had their own labs in the Warehouse had retired or been let go decades earlier. The population of people with the necessary knowledge would have been very, very small. Since the DHS had taken over, however, the number of people flowing in and out of the Warehouse had increased, more than a few scientists interested in discovering how the artefacts worked and how their properties could potentially be put to other uses.

Shep, whom she had left snoring in the family room, started barking, and a few seconds later, after more sounds of barking and a child running through the house when he knew he wasn't supposed to, she heard Drew calling out to her from the kitchen, "'lena, when's dinner? Can I have a peanut butter sandwich?"

Helena looked at the clock in the bottom corner of her laptop screen, 5:00 p.m. How had it gotten so late? Colton's mother had picked up Drew at 1:00. Four hours and she had accomplished nothing. She had spent most of it researching connections, again, between Farraday, Jaffee, Perkins, and those of her clients who had made donations to PAWL and/or the two congressmen but had found little more than a couple of charity golfing events. She had become so desperate that she had contacted one of the researchers at her hedge fund; she had little active involvement with the firm anymore, but his name had cropped up more than once in the monthly information packets she received. When he had gotten over his initial amazement at her call, he was more than happy to do some extracurricular work for her, especially when she said that she would recommend that he receive a large bonus for his efforts. That apparently had tugged at his conscience enough that he felt obliged to remind her that his researching skills were investment-related. Anything he could find on the Farraday companies or on the businesses of certain of her clients would be greatly appreciated, she had reassured him. Or anything of interest, for that matter. She had ended the call feeling old and outdated and . . . inept. There had been times when she had been able to retrieve an artefact and divine the solution to a particularly vexing experiment all in four hours. More than once she had rendezvoused with a lover at a hotel only to have a messenger find her and deliver a curt command from Caturanga to come address a problem at the Warehouse and she had managed to satisfy all parties concerned, all within four hours.

What had happened to her? And here she was looking down into those eyes, which reminded her so much of Myka's, and saying, "How about an apple instead? And while you're eating it, I'll get dinner started." The old Helena would have already had dinner made . . . no, she wouldn't have, not with nineteenth century stoves and refrigeration. The old Helena had a cook in addition to a nanny, and Cook would have already had the meal prepared. In fact, Christina would have already eaten it and readied herself for bed by the time Helena returned home. She may not have accomplished anything with regard to artefact replication, but at least she would be home to eat dinner with Drew. That was something.

Generally she wasn't a recipe-follower, mainly because, despite having no solid evidence to support her, she believed that her own thrown-together concoctions were better than most recipes. Finding a package of sausage in the refrigerator - the real goods, no turkey- or chicken-sausage for her when Myka wasn't around - and a can of baked beans, she put them together in a pot. Frowning, she added some frozen carrots. That would take care of the vegetable requirement. Finally she diced a jalapeno or two and scraped it off the cutting board into the pot. That would take care of the Helena requirement, although the spiciness might be overmuch for Drew. Adelaide had never liked spicy
foods. Not every meal can be macaroni and cheese or chicken tenders, she silently remonstrated with eight-year-olds and their insistence upon blandness. Motioning Drew over to the stove, she held out to him a wooden spoon with a dab of the sausage mixture. He chewed it and then immediately took a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. "Not too bad," he said after he had drunk half of it.

"What do you suggest we do to make it better?"

Ten minutes later, she was looking down at the mound of cheese that nearly obliterated the sausage, carrots, and baked beans on her plate. Of course. Drew, meanwhile, was shoveling it in, stopping periodically to blow his nose into his napkin or drink more water.

"You don't have to eat it, you know, if it's too hot for you," Helena said. "I probably should've done without the jalapeno." She poked at the cheese . . . poncho protecting her meal from both inclement weather and her appetite.

"No, it's good, especially with the cheese" he said. "Really. And Dad and I are always putting extra hot sauce on stuff. He says it'll put hair on my chest." Drew pulled out the neck of his t-shirt and looked down. "Not yet," he said and grinned.

"Well, I won't be at all surprised if I need to be 'manscaped','" Helena said wryly."That, in combination with . . . " What was she doing bringing up perimenopause and hormonal changes with an eight-year-old boy? Clearing her throat and wishing she could indulge in a third glass of wine, she searched for a more appropriate topic. "Did you enjoy yourself at the swimming pool today?"

He shrugged. "Mostly. It got crowded, and some of the bigger kids hogged the diving boards. Colton said he was going to take one of them on, push him into the pool, I guess. But that kind of thing can get you thrown out, so I asked his mom for some money for ice cream."

"And did the ice cream help?"

"Ice cream always helps," he said seriously.

He bent his head over his plate, chasing a piece of sausage. His hair was matted from the pool – later she would make him comb it out – but all she wanted to do in that moment was hug him to her, which no doubt would scare the hell out of him. "That was very wise of you," she said. "To distract him like that."

He was chewing the piece of sausage. Unlike Pete, he swallowed before responding. "He likes ice cream, and I didn't want us to get thrown out of the pool. You would've probably made me do chores or something if I had come home early." He shrugged. "Colton's pretty easy to figure out sometimes."

He started to push his chair back, then stopped. "May I be excused?" He said it with the weary patience of someone who doesn't see the necessity of the request.

"Certainly." She watched him as he dropped himself in front of the TV and dug out the controller. Her phone buzzed. Jacqui, not Myka, but the disappointment was short-lived. If Jacqui was calling her, she had something. Eyeing Shep suspiciously, Helena took the plates to the kitchen sink and gave them a quick rinse. She had fed him his evil-smelling dog food while dinner was cooking. If she were him, she'd be willing to take on jalapenos to get at something tastier, and Drew said the meal had been good. If you couldn't trust a child about food, even a compliant one like Myka's son, whom could you trust?
"Finally found a link between Jaffee and one of the Oklahoma legislators," Jacqui said, equal parts triumphant and exhausted.

"Hang on a minute, let me take this in the office." Helena rechecked the family room. Drew had put on his treasure-hunting game, and Shep was just now stretching out beside him. Satisfaction giving her a boost, she quickly made her way to the office and closed the door behind her. "What did you find?"

"One of the legislators is Jaffee's cousin."

"That's what you found?" Helena demanded incredulously. "You didn't have to call me about that, you could have sent it to me in the mail, third class."

"Ah, this is the Wells charm that Claudia was warning me about. Just sit down and open your ears," Jacqui said. "A cousin who had worked on one of Jaffee's campaigns a few years back, before he decided to run for office himself." She paused, and Helena set her jaw, unappreciative of the dramatic effect. "He also sat behind the legislator who had the bible."

"Well, that's different," Helena grumbled. "Why didn't you lead with that piece of information?"

Jacqui ignored her. "We're not going to be able to prove that he ever took the bible, but we know he had access, and we know he's sympathetic toward Jaffee's platform, which suggests that he and Jaffee probably have a good personal relationship. It's what you were looking for, H.G."

"Yes, you're quite right, thank you. A very big thank you, Jacqui." She drew in a deep breath. "Now, we need to find the other connections - "

Jacqui cut in. "I've been assigned to other projects, H.G. I'm not going to be able to ransack the Internet for you any longer on this."

Helena took the phone away from her ear and stared at it. "Why would Claudia or Myka have done that?"

"Hey, don't go breathing fire after them," Jacqui warned. "It was Mrs. Frederic's decision. I just found out today."

"Irene?" Helena hardened her stare at the phone, but, much like Mrs. Frederic, the phone seemed unaffected by the heat of her look.

"I've got to get going, H.G. Somewhere there's a lounge chair and a margarita for me. You'll have to take this up with Mrs. F. Sorry."

Helena distractedly swiveled the desk chair back and forth. It was unlike Irene to interfere so directly and in a manner that was distinctly at cross-purposes with an investigation. Myka would be calling her and Drew later this evening; perhaps she would know why Irene had reassigned Jacqui. Opening her laptop, she woke it from sleep mode and stared at the graph on the screen. Obeying an impulse that was more felt than thought, she started to revise her dataset, inputting dates for trips she had taken to Washington D.C. that had been solely to see Suzanne. There hadn't been many; she had usually worked in a night or two with Suzanne when she was there on business, appraising a client's purchase or assisting him in buying an antique. Other times Suzanne had flown to New York, and they had occasionally hooked up in other cities as well. Yet when the lines appeared on the graph, she was surprised at how close some of them were to the lines representing the replication dates, even closer than the business trip lines were. She searched her memory for why she had flown to Washington D.C. to see Suzanne. Had she done it on a whim? No, Suzanne didn't
welcome whims any more warmly than she did, even warning her early on, "The only kind of spontaneity I like to see is in the bedroom." Because she had missed her? Their relationship had been predicated on the certainty that neither of them would long for the other; a series of one-stands, that had been their relationship. She had flown to Washington D.C. when Suzanne had let her know that she had had to cancel a trip to New York, when Suzanne had suggested that Helena come to her rather than forfeit the time together. Neither might spend much time or thought on missing the other, but neither was also going to give up a planned weekend in bed with a desirable and accommodating sexual partner. At least Helena believed that Suzanne had reached a similar conclusion.

Maybe Suzanne had reached no such conclusion because she didn't find Helena an equally desirable and accommodating sexual partner, had never found Helena a desirable sexual partner, had needed to establish a relationship with her and used sex as her means for doing so. Helena knew she bore some part in the replication; as flat-footed as it sounded, maybe Jaffee and his cohorts needed her physically to be in Washington. And if so, they wouldn't want to depend solely on the needs - and purchasing power - of her clients. Enter Suzanne, a Farraday employee who looked like a supermodel, as Myka had put it, and, as their first meeting had proved, was eminently fuckable. Crudely stated, but true. Helena put her head in her hands. A honey trap. She had set up more than a few of her own when she had been with 12. Why hadn't she recognized it?

She had. When Myka had talked about encountering Suzanne at the Farraday Gallery and questioned why someone so seemingly warm and engaging could be satisfied with Helena's arctic version of a relationship, she, not Myka, had been the one to suggest a chameleon-like quality to Suzanne, only to belittle it as a fundraiser's ploy to charm money from potential contributors. But what was the most important factor in setting up a honey trap? Convincing the victim that the seduction was his idea. Suzanne had offered her everything she had wanted: no demands, no conditions, no interest in anything more than what Helena could do in a bed. After the failures with Nate and a string of others, Helena had stopped searching for more than the occasional sexual encounter. Oddly, or not so oddly, enough, she had found them far safer. No need to worry that the secrets she couldn't share and the people she couldn't talk about would build a wall between her and her lover, because in an hour, two hours, the next morning at most, he or she wouldn't be her lover any longer. What wondrous, wondrous luck then that she had found a woman who didn't care about her secrets, her life before they met, or her strangled love for someone else. Because she had given Suzanne no importance, she hadn't given any serious consideration to the possibility that Suzanne could be involved in the replication, even when others had suggested it. She was H.G. Wells, after all, and who was a curator of a tiny art museum to get one over on her? She exited Excel and accessed a search engine. It was a humble start, to Google the names of Wade Farraday and Suzanne Emory, but she had been thoroughly humbled. She wouldn't overlook the seemingly insignificant again.

There was a knock on the door, and before she could answer it, Drew had swung the door open. He stood in the doorway, knuckling his eyes. "I'm ready for ice cream," he announced. "Then we can go out to the treehouse." He shuffled farther in, peering at her laptop. "Are you working on my new room?"

"Yes," Helena said, not quite slamming the laptop shut. "Now you'd best scoot and get out to the kitchen before you ruin the surprise." She rose and gently turned his shoulders toward the door. "Put the bowls and spoons on the island, and I'll be right with you."

He ran down the hallway, shouting to Shep, and Helena, as she turned out the light, predicted that she would be spending a good chunk of the night after Drew fell asleep working on plans for renovating his bedroom. A rough penance for ignoring him for most of the evening. Of course, "ignoring" suggested that she had been aware of his presence and chosen not to spend with him the
hours she had spent instead searching for information on Farraday and Suzanne. Oblivious to his existence would be closer to the truth, but she usually had more to show for her bouts of child neglect. When Christina had been alive, she had been a frequent guest of her Uncle Charles and Aunt Jane, frequent enough to have been given her own room. It wasn't only the retrievals that had resulted in her visits; Helena's scientific pursuits were causes as well. Unlike the retrievals, which could go on for days, a night spent in one of her makeshift laboratories was all the longer she would let an experiment run before she went, red-eyed and yawning, to claim Christina in the morning. Her dress would be unchanged from the day before and streaked with chemicals and, sometimes, scorch marks. But even if she hadn't yet perfected the process or device, she had generally made enough progress that she could enthuse about it over a half-eaten bowl of oatmeal to a marveling Christina and a far more skeptical Charles. Charles would invariably roll his eyes the more enthusiastic she became, until Helena, somewhat sharply, would remind him that a number of her inventions had already found uses in fields as diverse as medicine and engineering. "Not to mention your personal favorite," he said dryly, "the field of study that has Helena Wells, genius, as its object of study."

She flushed now, remembering. She would have nothing to enthuse to Drew about over a half-eaten bowl of ice cream. All she had been able to discover about Wade Farraday was that there was little to discover. The absence of information corresponded to Suzanne's description of him as a virtual recluse. What she did find concerned his apparent mania for collecting; it was of a mind-numbing volume and evidenced no discretion. She could as easily imagine him dumpster diving for Star Wars-themed Big Gulps as submitting a multi-million dollar bid for a Van Gogh for the gallery. If possible, there was less information about Suzanne. A few articles profiling her work at the gallery, an old resumé on LinkedIn. She might have emerged whole from the skull of Wade Farraday for no more than Helena had been able to find.

Myka called while they were still eating ice cream or, rather, Drew was. Noisily scraping his bowl as he told her of his day, he asked plaintively at the end, "When are you coming home, Mom?"

"Soon, buddy, I promise." She sounded tired and dispirited but, obviously gathering herself, she said, with a laugh that sounded only a little forced, "Has Helena been driving you crazy? Have you been driving her crazy?" The laugh became genuine as Drew slyly responded, "Not so crazy that she didn't let me have ice cream tonight."

After Helena sent him to take a bath, "No, a shower, you need to wash that hair," following that command with the usual admonitions about washing ears and elbows, she queried Myka about the doubtful "soon." "You didn't sound very confident," she said quietly.

"I'm supposed to undergo a psych eval before the DHS makes up its mind whether to suspend me or fire me." Myka sighed. "Send me some of that ice cream, will you? A pint or two would really be great."

"Fire you?" For the second time that night, Helena stared at her phone. Yes, their last night in Ellis, Myka had said that she might be fired, but Helena didn't think either of them had seriously believed it would come to that.

"Jane and Claudia tried to argue that if I hadn't stopped Lowry, the situation in Ellis would've turned out much worse, and I think some at the DHS, the ones most familiar with the Warehouse, understood that. It's probably why I haven't already been fired, but everything's just mushroomed. I guess Secretary Johnson was dressed down by the president. Someone has to pay for an embarrassment like that, and I was the one who caused it." Another gusty sigh. "Not the moment of recognition I was hoping for."
"They won't fire you, Myka," Helena said it more uncertainly than she had intended. Myka sounded tired and bruised, but not crushed. The Myka she had known 12 years ago would have taken, if not to her bed, then one of the worn armchairs in the B&B's library and disappeared for several days between the covers of a book, her unblinking scanning of one line of text after another like the automatic return of a typewriter carriage. Anyone who knew her would recognize her absorption for what it was, the equivalent of a rollover on a highway, tires spinning in the air.

"I'm not so sure." Helena imagined Myka rubbing the tensed muscles of her neck or working a Twizzler out from its package. "It would be tough, and I'd be horrible to live with for a while, but the Warehouse, it's not everything." With more forcefulness, she said, "I knew that holding a gun to Lowry's head could be the end of my career as an agent, especially under the current regime, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat, Helena. There was never a choice."

"I know." They were silent until the sounds of banging coming from Drew's bedroom had Helena announcing, "Your son's packing, I believe, for our stay in the treehouse."

"Just make sure the air mattresses haven't leaked. There should be a pump somewhere in the captain's quarters. Oh, and be prepared to feel a muzzle in your armpit by morning. Crickets, frogs, bug zappers, all of those nighttime noises tend to frighten Shep."

Ah, there was the return of the confidence and authority of her list-lover. The manual of "How to Survive an Overnight in the Treehouse" was being written as they spoke, but Helena already had edits, particularly as they concerned the care and comfort of Shep. "I issue daily threats against his continued existence," she complained. "Why would the beast look to me for protection?"

"Because you are trustworthy, even the dog knows it."

"I would much rather it be your muzzle in my armpit. When can we arrange it?" As Myka laughed, Helena thought it might be a propitious moment to ask about Jacqui's reassignment. "Did you know that Irene took Jacqui off researching the artefacts' connections to our favorite congressmen and their supporters?"

Reluctantly Myka answered, "She and Claudia and I had conversations about it."

"You won't mind my saying that I find it completely at odds with resolving the problem," Helena said mildly, more baffled than outraged.

"It may be at odds with incarcerating the people responsible, but it's not at odds with concluding that the threat has, um, diminished." More gusty sighing came over the phone. "There's been more going on here than the DHS raking us over the coals. I'll fill you in once I get home. That is, if I'm still officially associated with the Warehouse."

No phone sex, no verbal cuddling, and no satisfactory explanation for why the crisis of replicated artefacts was no longer a crisis. Helena tried to school her expression into something cheerier when Drew, backpack slung over his shoulder, dropped a sleeping bag at her feet. "Get your stuff ready. It's time."

After a dozen trips between the house and the treehouse, Drew declared they had sufficient stores for the night. Looking around at what had once been a roomy space, now stuffed with pillows, blankets, cartons of juice, water bottles, bags of pretzels and cookies, comic books, and several flashlights, including a few floor lanterns that were providing illumination, Helena marveled at how he had managed to combine his mother's methodicalness and his father's bottomless appetite for snacks and distractions. Tucking a grubby sheet of notepaper having his list of essentials into a back pocket, Drew crawled into his sleeping bag and positioned his head against a tower of
pillows. With one hand, he clicked on a flashlight, with the other he opened a comic book.

Helena unzipped her own sleeping bag and gingerly tried to find a comfortable position on her air mattress, which felt suspiciously low to the floor. When both the flashlight and the comic book slipped from Drew's hands, she moved them out of the way and shut off all but one of the lanterns. Shep snuffled uneasily at his side. Taking her laptop with her, she went out on the observation deck and sat cross-legged on the planking. The battery was fresh, so she could probably get a couple of hours in on the redesign of his bedroom. She became engrossed by the challenges in recreating the Fortress of Solitude's crystal array so that when Drew removed a crystal a corresponding dresser drawer would open. The object would be for the drawer to glide open, not be ejected with such force that it would knock Drew into the opposite wall. Inventive not injurious would be her mantra.

She didn't know how much time had passed, but she knew that something shouldn't be gleaming at roughly eye-level at this time of night, unless it was the fangs of a predator about to devour her, and, really, what sort of predator would be on the observation deck? She looked harder at the gleam, which was the moonlight or a flicker of the lantern in the captain's quarters glinting off the silver buckle of a fashion belt, which, in turn, was wrapped around the waist of a conservative skirt. She hadn't guessed wrong; a predator was standing in front of her, complete in blazer, blouse, and color-coordinated pumps.

"I don't suppose you own a pair of pajamas," Helena said. "If you did, you could join our sleepover. Juicy Juice and Chips-Ahoy are in the far corner, just in case you want an early breakfast."

Mrs. Frederic leaned her back against the railing and crossed her ankles in what was meant to suggest a relaxed posture, although Helena was put in mind of a jaguar or panther, something sleek and deadly, trying to curl up like a house cat on her lap. "My father built us a treehouse when I was a child," Mrs. Frederic said. "Then the man whose land my father sharecropped had him tear it down because it would only encourage our 'natural laziness.'" The lenses of her glasses flashed as she tilted her head to look up at the stars. "Lovely view. You should enjoy it. You should enjoy the life you're making for yourself here."

"I would enjoy it more," Helena said, setting the laptop down and pushing herself to her feet, "if I knew that Jaffee or Perkins or both of them weren't out there trying to magnify an artefact's power." She leaned against the railing next to Irene. She wasn't about to let the woman stand over her, literally or metaphorically.

"I was something of a fly on the wall during the meetings in Washington." Mrs. Frederic ignored Helena's sardonic "Wearing three pairs of pumps, I presume" and adjusted her blazer, as if she were chilled. "Not everything that came out of them was bad. The replicated artefacts have taught Homeland Security that they can't open the Warehouse to anyone who says he has a reason for seeing it, including powerful congressmen. In that sense, we're returning to the way things were before, when we were unknown, unlocatable, and, I fear, underfunded."

"But not out from under its aegis," Helena said grimly.

Mrs. Frederic smiled, and Helena could almost feel the edge of it. "The regents have been demoted to what amounts to an advisory board, and the senior agent-in-charge will report directly to a Homeland Security officer. All decisions concerning retrievals go through their office first. And, by the way, your employment as an efficiency consultant has been terminated, Helena."

Helena shrugged. "I wasn't looking forward to writing the report. The recommendations for streamlining operations here would have been overwhelming." She jammed her hands into the tiny side pockets of her lounge pants. "What happens to Myka?"
"It's unclear. They're questioning her fitness, given her actions in Ellis, to oversee the other agents and to represent the Warehouse."

She had said it so neutrally that Helena turned to peer at her. "You know she had no choice. Lowry was about to order someone, the Guard, the Air Force, a joystick jockey in a Nevada bunker, to -"

Mrs. Frederic interrupted no less harshly. "And I doubt that Myka was thinking of anyone or anything but you when she took Major Lowry hostage. For all agents, but especially for the senior agent, the Warehouse has to come first."

"Thank God, I gave up on that a long time ago."

"Did you?" Mrs. Frederic said, her voice becoming silky, and Helena had a vision of the jaguar or panther beginning to stalk her. "You remind me of a child who, in a fit of temper, threatens to run away but goes no farther than her room. Have you ever really asked yourself why you let the regents sentence you after your time machine collapsed? Or why you let Myka stop you at Yellowstone? Or why you've never forgiven yourself for Christina's death?"

"Don't say it, Irene. Don't you dare." Helena's hands were pressing so hard against the pocket seams that she felt her pants begin to slide down her hips. "You were the one who said my soul had shrunk to the size of a walnut, you were the one who questioned my fitness to work with you on the replicated artefacts, you -"

"Said what I needed to say to get you to help us. You don't respond to pleas, Helena, or compliments, but if someone seems to slight you, you're at the ready to prove her wrong. Basic psychology."

Unbidden, the memory came to her of Suzanne, next to the Klimt, readjusting the skirt of her dress and giving her a cool kiss on the cheek. She had said, "Maybe we'll meet up again, although it's bound to be a letdown after this." She had shown no interest in seeing Helena again, and Helena felt she had been reduced to no more than a wet mouth and a couple of adept hands. She had been the one to call Suzanne back, to suggest they leave the party and return to her hotel room. She had simply been an older Colton, seduced by her version of an ice cream cone.

"It's not over for them, Jaffee and Perkins. They don't need the Warehouse anymore, so banishing them from it won't end the replication. You know that, just like you know I've been what they needed to make the replication work."

Mrs. Frederic shook her head. "I don't know anything of the kind, Helena."

"You, Claudia, I, and who knows how many innocent people happily going about their lives have been marked by the Warehouse. Most will never know it. But a catastrophe has killed all the agents and regents, or maybe you, Irene, have finally taken a vacation and Claudia is unavailable, and the Warehouse has to find someone to watch over it. So we carry its signature." Helena paused, remember how she had shivered, on the inside, when she had stepped onto the hotel's parking lot in Univille. "The artefact in Ellis wasn't strong enough to affect anyone outside the town limits until I went there, and then the gates of hell opened." It was impossible to tell whether Irene was listening, she had tipped her head back to gaze at the stars again. "I found something in addition to the artefact - "

Mrs. Frederic dismissively waved her hand. "Yes, I know. You think it boosted the artefact's power."

"Only after I arrived in Ellis, Irene. He had it on him all along, but it needed me, my connection to
the Warehouse to amplify the mind control. I still feel it, even though I buried it far from here, so I know that you must feel it, too. It's dozens, hundreds of artefacts fused together, and it's only a chip, a fragment. Guess what a larger version of it would do if it were put with another artefact, with one of us." Helena spun away from the railing to face her. "We can't just walk away from this and pretend that they won't use it again."

"We will have no support from Homeland Security if we pursue the investigation. They've determined that cutting off access should neutralize the threat. Any replicated artefacts still in circulation will be retrieved in the normal course." Mrs. Frederic lowered her head to look at Helena. "If we're caught acting without their authority, they will not hesitate to replace every one of us. Like every government agency, Homeland Security needs a place to unload its undesirables, the ones they can't fire and who won't leave. The Warehouse will be that repository for them. Who better to guard a collection of oddities than oddballs and malcontents? The Warehouse needs unusual people but unusual because of their talents, their gifts, not because they're incompetent cranks. We would end up with agents and caretakers without skills, knowledge, or understanding. I cannot and will not risk that happening. I know you believe that men like Jaffee and Perkins can act with impunity, but they live in the sun of public opinion. If that threatens to become a searchlight . . . ."

"I can't be so sanguine."

"I'm not sanguine, cautiously hopeful is closer to the truth." Mrs. Frederic brushed past her to stand just outside the captain's quarters. "He'll be a marvelous Warehouse agent someday. He'll have his mother's analytical mindset and his father's intuition. But he'll also have flashes of inspiration that will have come straight from you."

"You can't see into the future," Helena said flatly.

"What I see are endless possibilities. That's just a possibility I happen to like." She patted Helena on the arm as she walked away from the room. She casually leaned her hip against the railing, although the tone of her voice wasn't remotely casual. "You have no proof, Helena, tying anyone to the replication. All you have are theories and some wounded vanity, I believe. Let it go . . . for now."

"It's precisely his future I'm trying to protect," Helena said in frustration. "One which will not have him sacrificing himself on the altar of the Warehouse." She practically shouted the last, but Irene was already gone.

She reclaimed her laptop and settled on her air mattress, noticing with relief that Drew was still asleep. But she aimlessly scrolled through shots from Superman movies, unable to refocus on the design for his bedroom. She could only gaze at him as he curled into a ball and then uncurled, digging his head deeper into his pillows. She had never forgiven herself for Christina's death because she hadn't put her daughter above her own needs and desires. It had everything to do with her self-centeredness and nothing to do with the Warehouse. Just as choosing to be bronzed and surrendering to Myka at Yellowstone had had nothing to do with protecting the Warehouse from her sins; she had been trying, not well or soon enough, to protect other humans. The Irenes of this world and, by the looks of her 24/7 traveling between dimensions, the next several worlds could look after the Warehouse.

She put the laptop aside and got up and moved her air mattress closer to Drew's. She wouldn't sleep, but she would feel better, more relaxed, the nearer she was to him; she could wrestle Irene to the ground if the old bat thought to return with some kind of child's miniature Tesla or Farnsworth. She crossed her arms behind her head and considered where she might screw in hooks for
hammocks next summer.

. . . something was trickling onto her face, as if someone were releasing a tiny stream of sand above her. She groped to brush the sand away from her mouth and out of her eyes, but something warm and wet and carrying more than a whiff of dog food was beating her to it. "Get off me," she yelled, sitting up and pushing Shep's head away. Frantically scrubbing at her cheeks with the sleeve of her top, she glared at Drew, who was kneeling at her side, eating a cookie.

"You're up," he said brightly. "We're hungry and we've been waiting forever."

A shower and quick change of clothes later, she closed the door into the garage on an unhappy, howling Shep and shooed Drew into the Rover. She desperately wanted a good cup of tea, which meant not of her own making. Had Drew had math camp or soccer today, she would have kept him out because it was just that kind of day. Not a beautiful day that put her in the sunny, slightly roguish frame of mind to play hooky, but a gloomy, humid day that felt as oppressive as her mood. Last night's conversation with Irene continued to leave a bad taste in her mouth, or maybe it was just Shep. She would try to find comfort in a cup of Earl Grey and a pastry. Perhaps two.

A past trip through Rapid City's downtown had introduced her to a bookstore that shared space with a coffee shop. She recalled that the coffee was pretty good, which gave her hope for the tea. Drew contented himself with a book of mystery stories and a bottle of strawberry-flavored milk - and the better portion of a chocolate chip muffin that Helena thought she had bought for herself. They whiled away the morning in the bookstore, Helena buying additional cups of tea and, to ensure Drew's compliance, several comic books. When his squirming grew so pronounced that she couldn't ignore it, she rapidly flipped through the last few pages of the fashion magazine she had been skimming, rating the appeal of both the clothing and the models wearing them. An especially shallow diversion, but she wasn't above ogling; in fact, she had been quite shameless about it when she was younger, most of the objects of her admiration more titillated than outraged by such a breach of decorum by a woman . . . .

"Can we go now? I'm bored," Drew said.

Helena blinked, her memory of what had followed an impudent look at a parson's daughter unfairly cut short. Apparently she had been transformed overnight from an attractive woman in her forties (early forties on a good day) to a memory-befogged old thing hunkered over a cup of tea. She had been fired from a job she had forgotten she had as well as from an investigation that she had been coerced, yes, coerced into assisting in the first place, and now her only occupation was taking care of an eight-year-old boy, a temporary position from which, it seemed, she was on the verge of being dismissed, based on the sour looks of her charge. Already she was adrift, purposeless . . . withering as she sat, used up, unwanted, unloved, soon to be forgotten -

"Can we go home now?" Drew whined, jerking her back from the entertaining spectacle of her self-pity.

She could clean the house, make it look presentable for Myka when she came home. There were towels and sheets yet to be washed, and the yard needed mowing. She could become the housewife she had so assiduously avoided becoming for so long. Even when she had lived with Nate, he had done the majority of the housework, brushing off her admittedly infrequent offers to clean the bathrooms or sweep out the garage. Looking back on it now, she thought that it had been a signal, none too subtle, but if she had been reading signals correctly, or at all, she wouldn't have moved in with him. He didn't trust that she would stay or didn't trust that he would want her to stay. So she had cooked in her fashion, taken out the trash, driven Adelaide to and from karate lessons, violin lessons, gymnastics, nothing that marked Nate's house as her own, nothing that ever threatened to
displace Jennifer.

Suddenly she pushed herself back from the table, causing Drew's elbow to skid off the edge and his head, which he had propped on his hand in a demonstration of how bored he was, to almost hit the surface. "Not yet. We've got a makeover to start."

When they returned home, Drew had fallen asleep in the backseat, surrounded by bags of feather pillows, sheets having the highest thread count she could find, and, somewhere in those bags, a receipt for a custom-made bed for the master bedroom. In the cargo area were towels and throw-pillows and boxes of glassware. Pulling into the driveway, Helena didn't notice that the garage door was up, nor that Myka's car was in the garage, absorbed in plans for the redesign of their bedroom. But when she had to brake to avoid hitting a bounding Shep, who was throwing himself at the Rover's doors in his eagerness to greet them, she looked up and saw a grinning Myka mouthing "Nice ride."

"You have no idea yet," Helena murmured wickedly to herself.

Flinging pillows over the backseat and the front seat in his haste to get out, Drew yelled in delighted surprise, "Mom, you're back," only to immediately abandon her when, after a squeeze and a kiss, Myka said, "There may be a Nationals jersey for you in the house."

Helena more sedately exited, in part because she thought if she didn't she would end up in an ungainly sprawl on the concrete, although she felt that her reciprocal grin was splitting her face. Myka was running her hand across the hood and shaking her head. "I don't think we can get both of them in the garage."

"We'll build a bigger garage."

Myka laughed at that, but her eyebrows were arching as she took in all of the items filling the back of the Rover. She didn't comment, however, linking her hands with Helena's as she leaned in to kiss her. She started laughing again as Helena's lips remained firmly closed. "He's in the house. Besides, he's going to have to get used to this."

"Perhaps we can lead up to it gently. Week one, firm handshakes. Week two, pecks on the cheek. Week three -"

"He kisses the dog all the time. He has no room to complain." Myka was more authoritative in her second kiss, and since Helena never wanted to be a match for Tamalpais Myka, she parted her mouth only to find that Myka had moved on to nuzzle her jawline and then her ear. "Too late," Myka said under her breath.

"Speaking of time," Helena said softly, rubbing the tip of her nose against Myka's skin. "While I'm ecstatic to see you, I thought you had a psych eval today."

Stepping back from her and recapturing Helena's hands, Myka said, "What were they going to do with me once I told them I was in love with a 148-year-old woman? We were never going to get past it." Her smile faded, and her eyes took on the searching look to which Helena now knew "Yes" was the only answer. "I woke up last night stressing out about the evaluation and my future with the Warehouse, and I remembered what I had told you, that there were things I loved more. So what the hell was I doing there when I could be here? I got the first flight out that I could."

"You and Drew will always come first, and if that means leaving the Warehouse, so be it."

This Myka wouldn't be shutting herself away in her bedroom or losing herself in a book for days.
This Myka had already let go of her hands to open the Rover and examine the plunder. "What did you do, empty Bed, Bath & Beyond?"

"Hardly." Helena sniffed. "I do not bargain hunt, something you'll have to learn to live with." Was it strange to feel so much love for someone in the midst of bath towels and fitted sheets? It didn't matter. The towels and pillows and linens could be returned if Myka didn't like them; the bed might be more difficult to return, but it would go as well if Myka couldn't come to love its plushy softness and wonderful back support. The things weren't important, the statement they represented was. This was her home now too, and she was staking her claim. She hadn't made a home with someone in over a hundred years, and she was making it with potentially Warehouseless Myka, another inconceivability. She would concede one thing to Irene, given those two jaw-dropping events, the possibilities were indeed endless.
Of course Myka's separation from the Warehouse didn't last long. Homeland Security, although displeased that she had skipped the psychological evaluation, decided to use it as support for demoting rather than firing her. While still a senior agent in terms of title and pay, she was stripped of responsibilities for supervising agents in the field. Helena knew that she struggled with the embarrassment of having her job performance criticized because she was Myka, after all, and Myka Bering never performed poorly, and it mattered, the criticism, on one level, even if it didn't matter on the more important ones. She had made her choice and it had been the right one, but the realization that her record, for as long as the Warehouse remained under Homeland Security's oversight, was flagged and included reports describing her as "impulsive and insubordinate," "uncooperative and incapable of providing effective guidance to the agents who report to her," and those among the kinder assessments, was a hard one to put behind her. That she wasn't fired was something of a mystery to her, but Helena suspected, with no evidence for her suspicions other than the late night conversation in the tree house and a begrudging respect for what a formidable figure she was, that Irene had had a hand in Myka's remaining with the Warehouse.

For a few days, before it became clear to her that she still had a future with the Warehouse, Myka had contemplated what alternative careers she might pursue. Trying to be a good girlfriend, a good partner, whatever the appropriate term was - and she was big enough to admit that she was small enough to let her anxiety that she didn't know how to be that person feed an anger at Homeland Security that, at its mildest, found expression in "Idiots!" every time someone referred to the agency - Helena had offered to support them while Myka went back to school, "if that's what you want, darling." Law school, medical school, graduate school, it didn't matter. If Myka wanted to make a career of being a student, that was fine, too. They, she could afford it, and, considering that Drew's academic future was always somewhat endangered by the other half of his genetic inheritance, to which college would invariably suggest "girls" and "video game contests" and "more girls," he might need the example of a perpetual student, and wouldn't Myka, as his mother, want to give him the best foundation possible?

Myka had laughed at that, the worry, which had been causing not lines but grooves to develop above her eyebrows, put aside for the moment, and she had slipped her hand underneath the band of Helena's panties to stroke the curve of her butt, saying, "There's something else students have a lot of time for." It was late at night and Drew was asleep, but Helena couldn't resist what she knew might be a mood-destroying response and hooted at the image of a college-age Myka vanquishing half the student body at the University of Colorado. The hand slipped out of Helena's panties as easily as it had slipped in as Myka used it to push herself up from the mattress a few inches in mock outrage. "I wasn't -"

"What, a virgin at graduation? You most certainly were," Helena said dryly.

"Sam wasn't my first, I'll have you know," Myka said, looking adorably uncertain about whether defending the breadth of her sexual experience was actually a good thing.

Helena narrowed her eyes and looked at her appraisingly in the glow of the nightstand lamp. "Not your first but your second. Your first was after graduation. You hadn't found that special someone in college - little did you know that she was encased in bronze - but, as you were debating that summer whether to go to law school, as you had planned to do, or take on something more adventurous, such as join the Secret Service, you thought that being a virgin hardly suited the image of a federal agent prepared to sacrifice her life for that of the president." She sighed theatrically. "Were you unfamiliar with the term 'virgin sacrifice'?" The classics reek with it, and of
course it would have suited the kind of Secret Service agent you were to become, principled, dedicated . . . unstoppable." With her finger, Helena followed the curve of Myka's breast through her sleep shirt, smiling smugly as the nipple hardened at her touch. "And oh so quick to respond."

"Your point?" Myka's air of boredom was undercut by the grin at her own pun (of sorts) and by her arching her chest so that Helena could cup her breast.

"I've already forgotten it," Helena murmured, rolling closer and pressing Myka down onto her pillow, her hand deserting Myka's breast momentarily to dip beneath her sleep shirt.

"I haven't," Myka breathed. "Go on."

"I'm trying to," Helena complained as Myka's hand pushed her hand down. "Oh, all right," she groused. "He was someone you met while you worked at your father's bookstore. You being you, you would've had to have felt some emotional connection with him, but he was married or otherwise involved with someone since you wouldn't have wanted to become too attached. Close enough?"

Myka stopped batting Helena's hand away. "His name was Bart and he had a one-year contract teaching composition at UC Colorado Springs. He wasn't married but he was in a long-distance relationship that was going sour. No fireworks, but he was nice." She awkwardly drew in her arms as Helena worked the sleep shirt over her head.

"Stop wearing this to bed," Helena growled, flinging it to the floor. "I want unimpeded access to you." She trailed her lips down Myka's neck to her breast, but Myka was moving against her impatiently.

"No need for appetizers. I'm ready for the main course," Myka said, pulling up her legs and spreading her knees.

"Main course?" Helena repeated witheringly, but she found Myka so wet and so open that her sarcasm dwindled to a sigh that was more appreciative than dismissive. "He must have been more than nice for you to be this . . . enthusiastic . . . already."

Myka groaned. "God, you're shameless. Bart never made me this wet." Grunting a little at the effort, she launched herself into a sitting position and leaned down to take Helena's face between her hands. "No one has ever undone me like you, Helena. I'll see you flip your hair back, and I'll want to take you right there and then."

"The next time that happens, just do it, darling."

"Not in a supermarket, Helena, no." They smiled at each other, and then Myka flopped down onto her pillow. "I believe I said something about being ready to move on to the main course?"

Several minutes later as Myka keened at the ceiling, crying out, among other things, "Christ," Helena lifted her head and said, with no small amount of self-satisfaction, "That's not my name, but I'll answer to it."

Although that conversation about Myka's future plans had evolved into something else, Helena wasn't willing to let the subject drop, wanting to ensure that Myka knew, whatever she chose to do, that she would have her unwavering support. She mentioned it often enough that even Drew became aware of the anxiety besetting her, at one point, patting her hand with one grimy from building mud forts with his friends and telling her, "Mom's okay, she knows she has us," and then fleeing from the family room into the yard before Myka could find him and order him to change
his clothes.

Myka remained good-humored about it, seeming to understand - and tolerate - the flux of Helena's emotions better than Helena herself, which wasn't at all surprising. Sometimes when Helena issued one of her solemn assurances "That no matter what -" Myka would look thoughtful and say, "I have wanted to become a better cook. They have a culinary school in Denver that I might look into. How would you feel about my turning the kitchen into a cooking laboratory in the meantime?" Helena would smile and gamely reply, "Whatever you want, darling." At other times Myka would accept the earnestness of the assurances and respond in kind, hugging Helena and whispering into her ear, "I know that you're here for the long haul, babe. I love you, too."

Then the day came when Myka was called in to the Warehouse and, with a casual-seeming shrug of her shoulders that didn't fool Helena, she said, "I guess my fate has been decided." As had become customary, Helena said scornfully, "Idiots." For good measure, she added, "Fools." Just before Myka pushed the button of the garage door opener, Helena shouted after her, "Don't give them the power. March in there and tell them you're through. You know that -"

"No matter what you'll back me 100%," Myka finished for her. When Helena flushed in embarrassment, Myka's expression grew serious and she came back into the kitchen and kissed Helena on the cheek. "I love that you're trying so hard, but you don't have to. You're not going to cut and run . . . and even if you did, if I can't run down a 148-year-old woman, I don't deserve to be an agent."

When she returned home, Helena was at the table in the dining area, pretending to be absorbed in her design for Drew's upgraded bedroom, while Drew was just as studiously examining the birdhouse he and Pete had finished building for the end of math camp. Even Shep, slack and snoring on the family room rug, seemed to be putting more effort into his sleeping than was absolutely required. All three merely lifted their heads as Myka came into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water from the refrigerator's water dispenser. She had, just possibly, made more noise than necessary since her appearance had elicited only casual "Hi's" from Drew and Helena. Passing behind Helena, she swept the hair away from the back of her neck and rolled her glass across the exposed skin. Helena startled at the coldness of the glass, and she turned to glance up at Myka. "I didn't want to smother you with questions. I wanted to give you to, ah, process if you needed it."

"Now you're choosing not to 'smother' me?" Myka said it wryly, but she softened it with a kiss to the tip of Helena's nose.

"Were you fired, Mom?" Drew put the birdhouse on the sofa cushion next to him. As Myka laughed and demanded, "Are you and Helena double-teaming me? One of you taking the gentle approach while the other goes straight for my gut?," Helena completed another appraisal of the birdhouse, which Drew was to present as his final project at a special afternoon pizza party session of math camp. Twenty eight-year-old students and their parents in an elementary school cafeteria signaled only the tedium of polite conversation with adults and tepid praise for the offerings of their children, but this was what parents did nowadays, apparently, accepted without encouraging their offspring to aspire to better, even if "better" were out of their reach. Conceivably a bird desperate for refuge might occupy Drew's birdhouse, but if the gaps between the roof and walls didn't suggest that it would collapse in a strong breeze, its decided canting to the side did. She could try to fix it before she and Myka took him to math camp, but Drew was proud of the birdhouse, apparently having forgotten that, at one point, he wanted a more ambitious bird condo. Helena suspected that Drew was proud of the birdhouse because it attested to the teamwork that had produced it, the hours he and Pete had spent working together, and not to any woodworking prowess. Of which there was absolutely none. But she had to let that go, she had learned her lesson.
with Adelaide and her art class project. If accepting the output of the average student was the goal of K-12 education rather than holding all to a higher standard, so be it. She would not protest, although she felt it was incumbent upon her, should she ever talk with Drew's teachers, to point out the complacency of such -

"Did you hear what I just said? I'm not fired. I've been suspended for the next four weeks without pay, and when the suspension ends, I'll basically have Jacqui's job. Which works out pretty well since she's wanted to go back into the field." Myka was standing next to her but leaning down, close to her ear. "Maybe we should look into hearing aids for you, there's no shame in admitting hearing loss at your age, you know."

"There is nothing wrong with my hearing," Helena said crisply, "I was -"

"Looking at Drew's birdhouse and thinking Pete should never be allowed within 20 feet of a hammer and nails," Myka said quietly so that her son couldn't overhear her, "or, what I suspect is the case, that no educator should accept such below-par work as a final project." As Helena shot her another surprised look, Myka gave her a cocky smile. "You're not so hard to read yourself."

And so Myka was gathered back into the Warehouse's bosom, which, Helena thought, were the Warehouse to have anything resembling a bosom, would be generous in its proportions and covered by a blouse and suit jacket in complementary colors. During her suspension, Myka mentioned more than once, but not so often that it undercut her sincerity, that she had never enjoyed the supervisory part of Artie's job. What she had loved doing was researching artefacts and doing that full time, or as close to full time as the occasional QA assignment to clean up a retrieval permitted (Unfortunately the DHS hadn't thought to relieve her of that responsibility, Myka complained), would be . . . terrific, actually.

If Helena believed that Myka's potential termination from the Warehouse had been a cruel tease, she could view Homeland Security's interest in her only as further punishment. It had started with a phone call from a Homeland Security idiot . . . lackey a few days into Myka's suspension. Helena had thought the call was for Myka, and she had curtly informed Dave, as the lackey had insisted she call him, that Myka wasn't home - which was true since Myka had taken Drew to the dentist - when Dave told her that he was calling her. The conversation, which, in Helena's opinion, hadn't proceeded well from the moment that Dave had said he was with Homeland Security, only plunged off a cliff from there. At first she had thought she could decline the job offer, which would involve her working on various mid- and long-term projects for the department, and she had tried to be polite in her refusal, but Dave grew insistent, and as he became more insistent, Helena became more strident in her declining of the offer, ultimately shouting into the phone that she would never consent to work for a government agency whose collective intelligence was so far down the scale that it registered as an intelligence deficit because an intelligence quotient implied a positive value. Frustrated that she had been unable to deliver a more stinging insult, Helena was caught off-guard by Dave's unoffended chuckle. Then he just as genially explained that he hadn't been offering her a job, he had been outlining, in necessarily general terms, the job that she would be taking with Homeland Security. The department couldn't pass up the opportunity of employing someone with the talents of an H. G. Wells, and, his genialness not quite disguising the threat, it also couldn't allow someone who had once almost ended the world - "Bit of an overachiever, aren't you?" he had said almost indulgently - live among the innocent citizens of Rapid City, South Dakota, or anywhere else for that matter, unsurveilled.

After complaining to Claudia and Jane, who had done little more than hunch their shoulders helplessly and explain that she had been what they sacrificed to retain the Warehouse's nominal independence, Helena had "summoned" Irene (which had seemed to require no more than a muttered "She's behind this somehow. Come out from behind your curtain, you old fraud. This is
one pissed-off Dorothy" before she practically ran into the woman as she stormed out of the B&B).

"The position's quite attractive," Mrs. Frederic had said mildly, putting a hand to her hair as if Helena's furious descent of the verandah's steps had generated a gust of air strong enough to disturb its intricate weave. "You can telecommute for the most part, which will allow you to work from home and at hours convenient to Drew's schedule. The projects will employ skills you've not had to use in years, I suspect, and, unlike your appraisals, will provide worthy contributions to the continued stability and strength, if only indirectly, of the Warehouse. Moreover," she leaned in conspiratorially, touching Helena's arm, "the health plan and retirement benefits are more than market-competitive."

"I'll try to keep that in mind when I make my weekly reports to Dave," Helena said sarcastically, "who, no doubt, has a metal nameplate outside his office attesting to the fact that he's a manager over the areas of pencil-sharpening and label-making."

"He's the deputy secretary," Mrs. Frederic replied with a sly smile and, in the millisecond it took Helena to blink in surprise, disappeared.

Helena's announcement that she was working for Homeland Security, "for real," seemed to amuse Myka rather than outrage her. "You'll be a giant among Lilliputians," she said consolingly, and when that didn't rouse Helena from her sulk, she said, "All right, think of it this way. With you there the proportion of idiots will be slightly smaller."

Helena made a face at her over her glass of wine. "That didn't sound nearly as complimentary as you think it did." They were sitting at the patio table, watching the sunset and drinking wine. Rather Myka was watching the sunset and drinking wine, while Helena was glowering at nothing in particular and inhaling hers. "Dave," she said with disgusted emphasis, "blackmailed me into this job."

"I know," Myka said, "but how much worse is it than the file we worked up on you as a potential suspect for the replicated artefacts? It's the nature of the work we do. Forget the 'endless wonder,' we see the threat first and respond accordingly." She covered Helena's hand with her own. "I wasn't entirely joking. Maybe you can change the culture. Aren't you H.G. Wells genius extraordinaire? You can do anything." Helena scoffed, albeit lightly. Giving Helena's hand a jiggle as she pretended to be struck by the deepening rose and orange of the horizon, Myka said casually, "Would Dave be open to your pushing off your start date by, say, a month? I've been considering a few things we could do during my suspension."

Considering a few things. This was Myka. Math camp and soccer were over, and Drew had more than three weeks of unstructured, unblocked-off time, and she was determined to fill them with an edifying round of sightseeing - wonders natural (the Grand Canyon), zoological (the San Diego Zoo), and cultural (the Getty). The feverishness with which Myka consulted maps, guidebooks, and online sites only confirmed Helena's suspicion that the road trip was the justification for the planning. A suspension was still a suspension, notwithstanding Myka's real pleasure at returning to what she loved most about the Warehouse, and when feeling unsettled and at a loss, she planned and scheduled with a vengeance. Helena half-expected to be given an itinerary for the trip, which thankfully did not happen, but Myka presented her with many, many checklists.

Pet-friendly hotels having been booked on their circuitous route through the Southwest, suitcases having been packed with clothes for every kind of weather and outing (aided by vacuum-seal storage bags, a vacation must, Myka said firmly), and healthy snacks having been purchased and ordered by type (and then stealthily replaced by other snacks, courtesy of a few extra grocery runs taken solely by Helena and Drew), they all piled into the Range Rover. Helena forgave the dawn
start because she had a large travel mug of Earl Grey at hand - and she wasn't driving. She was also fortified by the knowledge that new snack cake packages had been placed in the glove compartment and the hope that, at some point during the trip, they might be employed during a late night, Drew-less drive into the desert.

Helena hadn't been sure how she would manage two and a half weeks spent in close confines with an eight-year-old, a dog, and a woman who had multiple planner apps on her phone - and used all of them - but she realized as they settled into their suite in San Diego that she was enjoying herself hugely. Yes, Myka had frequently consulted her planners, calculating the drive to and from, time spent on, and money needed for each day's activities, but when Helena grabbed the phone from her and buried it in the shoulder bag that had become their all-purpose mini-cooler and pharmacy, she meekly acquiesced. Shep's panting presence was not a required variable in any experience, especially once she discovered that he liked to flop between her and Myka in the middle of the night, but, really, that was a small thing. The mule ride in the Grand Canyon was also an experience she wouldn't care to repeat, but being saddle sore for two days was also a small thing. They were small things because there were so many more things that she came to love: the sight of Myka and Drew sharing the bathroom sink as they brushed their teeth, the assiduous movements of their toothbrushes nearly synchronized; Myka and Drew curled up together on a sofa asleep; their version of the showdown at the OK Corral as each flipped through a guidebook eager to be the first to reel off a series of facts about the Grand Canyon; Myka's wry aside at the real OK Corral about how differently it might have gone if Teslas had been used instead of guns and then her soft, "That's what you do. You make the possible real. So make the DHS what it can be."

She loved most of all Myka's whispers and touches and, in Drew's occasional absences, her sultry sidelong looks. Looks and discreet caresses were all that they exchanged for the first week, but after they had crammed the San Diego Zoo and SeaWorld into two days, Drew finished an evening call with Pete by bouncing on his bed and shouting, "Dad's going to come get me and take me to Disneyland." Then quieting, he ran into the living room of the suite, Shep galloping after him, and asked his mother uncertainly, "He can, can't he?"

Darting a sly glance over the top of her glasses at Helena, Myka said, "It's all been arranged, bud. Your dad's flying in tomorrow and driving you and Shep up to Los Angeles. Three days of Mickey Mouse and beaches and baseball games."

"Awesome, awesome, awesome." Drew pumped his fist and ran back to the bedroom.

Sprawled on the loveseat opposite Myka's, Helena scrolled down the screen of her iPad, which was filled with design ideas for master bedroom makeovers. Directing her words at the screen, Helena said, "I've developed a strange desire to see Disneyland. Being greeted by a human-sized mouse and seeing where it all began, the promotion of childhood as a state of mind, not to mention a profit-making venture -"

"I'm sure you'll find room in the car between Drew and the dog," Myka interrupted smoothly. "But I'm staying here." She grinned at Helena and stretched, slowly, arching her back more than was probably necessary. "The hotel's said to have a world-class spa . . . ."

Helena's glance over the top of her glasses wasn't sly but frankly appreciative of the view. "One might think," she observed carefully, "that Pete's coming here had been planned well in advance, if one were inclined to believe that her fiancée was something of a planner."

"One might think that," Myka responded just as carefully before turning her attention back to her book.

Helena grew used to seeing Myka wrapped in a towel over the next three days, sometimes in the
spa or at the swimming pool but mainly in their bedroom, and the only thing that disturbed their occupation of the fantasy land they created out of their hotel suite - which had no human-sized mice, although Helena said she had no objection to a little Cinderella/Prince Charming role playing - was the call she received from the researcher at her hedge fund who was researching Wade Farraday. She hadn't forgotten, but Wade Farraday and the replicated artefacts seemed, not far away, but pushed down the list, as if she had opened one of Myka's planner apps and entered all the things she needed or wanted to do and "find out more about Wade Farraday" had ended up 92nd on the list. Myka was in the shower, so she had a few minutes to listen to what the researcher had found. 'The reclusive collector' wasn't new, and Helena only half-listened to the researcher's exhaustive rundown of everything Farraday found worthy of collecting until he mentioned one interest that she hadn't found and Jacqui either hadn't discovered or thought significant enough to mention.

"Items from famous Victorian-era crimes?" Helena repeated.

"You know, Lizzie Borden's axe, Jack the Ripper stuff, that sort of thing. It's all violent crime, really, no matter the period, but since Farraday almost got arrested for trying to steal some purported Ripper evidence from another collector, that's what made me think maybe that's the period he's most interested in." The researcher cleared his throat and moved on to Farraday's penchant for antique snuff boxes, rare albums, old cigarette and candy vending machines . . . . "He's not a collector, he's a hoarder," the researcher concluded with a chuckle.

The interest in crime memorabilia, if it could be called such, unsettled her. Artefacts created from those objects could be especially powerful. She remembered from her time at 12 the retrieval of the dagger that had been used to kill Christopher Marlowe, which drew its power not only from the emotions of the killer but the victim's as well. It was a nasty little artefact in that the possessor, in addition to having a compulsive desire to attack writers, with no distinction made between the type of writing or level of skill, felt equally compelled to publish accounts of his murders. The dagger had fallen into the hands of a failed poet, and he had both terrorized and titillated all of London one summer by publishing his deeds in verse. Ultimately so frustrated in his attempt to capture the artefact, Caturanga had used her as a decoy, which became a story in and of itself, something she would have to share with Myka on a rainy night . . . . But the possibility that artefacts originated from violent crimes could be associated, in some manner, with the replicated artefacts wasn't the only cause of Helena's unease. It was a reach, but the murder of her daughter and the maid who had stayed with her that day, while never quite claiming headlines, had been reported in both the Paris and London papers. Christina had been the "niece" of H.G. Wells, after all. As far as Helena knew, the clothes that Christina and the maid had been wearing that day, the bedsheets, all of the items kept by Michaud and his men as evidence, had moldered in the depths of a Paris police station until they were destroyed or discarded.

Helena shook herself - the researcher was still talking. "Another thing you might find interesting," he was saying, "the Farradays, back when there wasn't only Wade the hoarder representing the family and they were an economic and political force to be reckoned with, they had plants all over Maryland, Delaware, the Virginias, making lots of products. One of the products was turbines. Over time the plants were sold or closed down, but I was talking to a friend recently in the DC area, and I mentioned the Farradays to him. He said there had been some strange goings-on at an abandoned Farraday plant just outside DC. For the past couple of years, people living near the plant have reported that they've seen the buildings light up, felt the ground shake, like someone's not only been building turbines but having jet planes take off from inside the plant. The most popular rumor is that a terrorist cell is operating out of it." When Helena didn't respond, he said apologetically, "I know it's not the info you're looking for, but financially speaking, Wade Farraday isn't all that interesting. Don't get me wrong, he's as rich as all get out, but a lot of the money is tied up in trusts. The family must've been thinking, 'Better lock it up before crazy Wade gets his hands
"This is all very good," Helena hastened to assure him, but her voice faltered as she pictured a cavernous room in which turbines had once been assembled, now home to Farraday's collections and all the artefacts, unknown to the Warehouse, hidden in them. The only thing lacking was someone with the expertise, and the obsessiveness, to begin working over Farraday's treasures and putting the artefacts in combination. A Warehouse without any of the Warehouse's protective measures for neutralizing all the power it contained.

The researcher waited patiently for her to gather her thoughts and, with a shake of her head, Helena forced herself to say with a casualness she didn't feel that she appreciated the information and his diligence in obtaining it. With more assurances that he would be well compensated for the time he had spent as well as promises that she would consider him the next time she needed research - "on the rich and eccentric," the researcher interjected with a laugh - Helena wound the conversation down, telling herself at the same time she was praising him once again for his efforts that Irene had said their off-the-books investigation of the replicated artefacts was over. No sense in making Dave mad before she even began her indentured servitude.

She weighed her options. She could brood about the implications of what the researcher had told her or she could lose herself in something just as absorbing and much more pleasant. The old Helena (older, in some ways, than she was now, more than one hundred years later) would have chosen the former, unconvinced that she had emotions or needs as deserving of fulfillment as that so-called fine mind of hers. But she was capable of learning and, to give her old self its due, that Helena hadn't had a Myka. The silence in the suite once she ended the call had alerted her to the fact that the shower had stopped running, which meant there was a possibility that Myka was still in a towel - but only if she hurried. Tossing her phone in the shoulder bag, she returned to their bedroom where, in fact, Myka was still in her towel. Tugging it open and wrapping herself in it until she was pressing against Myka's damp body, she said, "I believe we need to rectify the mistake we made by getting out of bed."

Myka looped her arms around Helena's neck, the towel loosening and dropping to the floor. "It's a rare event when H.G. Wells confesses to a mistake," she teased, kissing the little pucker of skin that had developed between Helena's eyebrows.

The pucker had developed because, in spite of her best intentions, Helena was recalling the image she had had of another Warehouse, in which someone like her was experimenting with artefacts, courtesy of Wade Farraday's insatiable desire to collect, well, everything. "I've wanted to be wrong more often than people might think."

But soon Farraday and the other Warehouse started to slip down the list again. There were so many other things that blunted the importance of what the researcher had found and distracted her from her uneasiness. There was the start of school and indoor soccer and, instead of math camp, band, because what child's life could be considered well rounded without musical appreciation? Given the choice of oboe or trumpet - the band also needed baritone horn and percussion players but Myka nixed those options - Drew picked trumpet, much to his father's relief. "Not that I'm all into 'manly' stuff for boys," Pete said, hunched over his controller as he and Helena squared off in a game of Grand Theft Auto. She was tempted to give him a disbelieving look, especially as last month's issue of Maxim was peeping out from under the sofa, but that would have assumed she believed him capable of moments of quiet reflection. "But, c'mon, an oboe? Give the kid a chance to leave the playground before every other boy in the school jumps him." Pete also didn't have to listen to his son practice the trumpet, an experience that had Helena adding "thoroughly soundproofed music room" to her renovation plans. Which hadn't progressed beyond plans since Myka had declared that she wasn't going to live in the midst of plastic sheeting and gaping wall-
It was unfair of her to lay it all at Myka's feet, however, since her own "job" with Homeland Security had also begun, and she had her reports to Dave to make. Her first project was to review TSA security protocols and to determine how the agency might more reliably identify potential threats. "And if you have an idea for a new tool or device that would make our job easier, don't hesitate to mention it," Dave had said jovially during their first face-to-face meeting in Washington. "I hear you have a knack for that kind of thing." He grinned at her. She did love to dismantle and rebuild, she couldn't deny that. Even her mad scheme to end the world had had that impulse, although it was hard to see how rebuilding would have been successful after throwing the world into another Ice Age. To create something that would be misused or mangled by these idiots... her colleagues... was precious little enticement, however, and her smile in response was pained.

While she had been in Washington, she thought about renting a car and driving out to the plant in which the "strange goings-on" the researcher had mentioned were supposed to have occurred, but between meetings at Homeland Security and searches for an architecturally-inspired gift for Drew (rather grumpily, she settled on a Legos White House), she hadn't had time. She had also thought about calling Suzanne. While weeks could go by without an e-mail or phone call, it was rare that months would elapse. Of course that had been the whole point of their relationship, such as it was, that neither would feel compelled to remain in touch with the other. But she wondered what Suzanne made of her silence, if she suspected that Helena had begun to piece together the fragmentary clues, the connections between those who had possessed the artefacts that had been replicated (Michaelis, Afton) and PAWL, between PAWL and Congressmen Jaffee and Perkins, between PAWL and Farraday. Or if she believed that Helena had lost interest or found someone else, which was the simpler explanation. None of what they had learned about the replicated artefacts or PAWL or the victims had anything to do with Suzanne; her only connection to any of it was that she was the curator of the Farraday family's art museum. Maybe she was innocent, and Helena's suspicions of her were reflective more of a desire to distance herself from the life she had led before she had returned to the Warehouse, to Myka, than of anything substantive that pointed to Suzanne's involvement. What was it she had told Claudia shortly after she had returned? Her "twistiness" would never disappear, not completely. How like her, then, to magnify a conspiracy and to suck someone innocent into it because that someone reminded her of an emotional carelessness, an amorality, she wanted to deny about herself. Nonetheless, the night before she was to take a flight back to Rapid City, she contacted the oh-so-helpful researcher from her hedge fund (she supposed Dave would make her get rid of her ownership interest in it because it posed some conflict of interest or other) and charged him with finding out everything he could about Suzanne Emory. Discreetly, of course.

And then that slid down the list as well. Not forgotten, just toward the bottom of the list, because when she returned there was the party for her 48th/148th birthday, which she pretended she hated but secretly enjoyed, and, in October, Drew's birthday, which occasioned much readying of the tree house for an influx of eight- and nine-year-old boys. He dutifully endured a joint birthday dinner the night before with his mother, father, and Helena, but he couldn't wait to leave the restaurant so he could bury himself in his room collecting all the items necessary for the overnight. The tree and the tree house still standing after the birthday party, Helena took a steadying breath only to be flung into a series of fundraisers for the indoor soccer team, the band, and several other school-related activities, most of which Drew wasn't involved in, but which Myka believed required their support as well.

One of the fundraisers took the form of a bowling contest, proceeds to go toward – it didn't matter what, Helena crossly decreed in repeated mutterings about the house, since her participation would require her either to put her feet into shoes worn by countless others or buy her own, never to be
worn again. Myka ignored the glares and mutterings, saying only, "At last, a game of your youth" with an impish smile. While Helena fretted about the shoes, Myka worried about her role in a matchmaking attempt suggested by Colton's mother, who thought she had found the perfect woman for Pete. Myka's role was limited to ensuring that Pete would be able to attend the fundraiser, Colton's mother would see to the rest, but . . . "Things between you and me and Pete are going better than I thought they would, and I don't want a disastrous blind date to change that," Myka moaned in their bedroom, five minutes before they were supposed to leave for the bowling alley.

"It's not a blind date," Helena disagreed. "It's an introduction, and I'm sure Pete will be absolutely clueless that he and this woman are being set up."

"God, his vibes. How could I have forgotten about them?" Myka sank onto the bed again and flopped backward. "He knows, Helena, and he's already planning his revenge."

Showing no pity, Helena yanked at her hand and pulled her up. "If I have to endure hours wearing shoes that have hosted scaling skin and toenail fungus, you can suffer the minor discomfort of watching Pete trying to charm a woman with his collection of fart jokes and superhero lore."

But after a couple of hours spent surreptitiously glancing at Pete as he chatted and joked with Cindy, an emergency room nurse at a Rapid City hospital, Myka and Helena exchanged one long, similarly stunned look. Their team having been knocked out of the competition early on – Myka's fencing-ingrained sense of balance deserting her on a bowling lane as she stumbled on every approach and Helena's tentative, skipping dance just before she released the ball a testament to the reluctance of her feet to inhabit rental shoes – they claimed a booth in the snack area, from which they could occasionally pop up and cheer on Drew's team or spy on Pete. Cindy, a pretty, petite blonde with two teenaged children of her own, wasn't just smiling politely at Pete's tried-and-true jokes (Helena especially appreciated the one about the bank robber and his pig accomplice, which had the immortal punchline – coming from the indignant pig – "What makes you think I'll squeal?"), she was throwing back her head and laughing.

"All she has to do is snort, and I think the deal is sealed," Helena said, more relaxed now that the hated rental shoes had been returned to the service counter.

"Wow," Myka said softly, twirling the straw in her glass of unsweetened iced tea. She shook her head in disbelief.

Helena regarded her curiously. There seemed to be more than simple surprise at work in Myka's expression, but the emotion that seemed to darken her eyes and pull down the corners of her mouth was one that Helena couldn't identify. If forced to guess, she would call it jealousy, but that was ridiculous. Half-rising from the booth, she surveyed the bowling alley, seeing groups of adults, some still bowling, some sitting in booths and tables in the snack area, some talking with other parents. Other couples. She and Myka were the only same sex couple at the fundraiser, she realized. What her relationship with Myka signified to the world at large, particularly those conservative parts of it, rarely weighed on her mind. She had had no issues with who she was sexually, the fact that her desire encompassed both sexes had seemed entirely natural to her; intellectually she had rebelled at limits, so why would she accept the conventional thinking that because she was a woman, she should desire only a man? But while she and Myka frequently arrived at the same conclusions, they arrived at them by taking different paths. Myka might have, probably did have a vastly different understanding of her own sexuality. Whereas she heard the awkward references or recognized the hard stares only when someone else drew her attention to them, Myka might be all too aware of them. After all, Myka hadn't dated a woman before becoming involved with her, not to her knowledge, at any rate. They had talked about a million things since she had moved in to Myka's house, but how a relationship with a woman was
something completely new to her wasn't one of them. Myka could easily be jealous of Pete and Cindy, not because she still harbored feelings for Pete but because their connection would never raise the questions or invite the criticism that her relationship with Helena did.

"Does it bother you . . ." Helena began, unsure how to ask what she suddenly felt she needed to ask. Unsure because she had never asked it before, of Suzanne or Giulietta or Catherine or Giselle, hadn't thought of asking it, hadn't cared, frankly, what the other woman's answer would be, because whatever it was, it wouldn't change how she felt, couldn't make her feel more committed or less because she was incapable of committing to anyone.

"Bother me?" Myka repeated, the frown her lips had only hinted at earlier now fully expressed. "Do you think I'm jealous?"

"Not that I actually believe you're reconsidering . . . us . . . but, you have to admit, no one will raise their eyebrows at them or struggle about what to call them." As Myka's mouth formed an even grimmer line, Helena said helplessly, "I haven't been very good about considering things like that, have I? Perhaps Drew has been beating up other boys daily for making jokes about his 'two mothers' and neither of you has told me. I've never even asked you how you broke the news to your parents." She hesitated. "It will never be as easy with me . . . that way . . . so how could I resent your occasionally wishing that it were?"

"It's not jealousy. It's . . . " Myka seemed to be at an equal loss. "We need to have a conversation," she muttered as Colton's mother and her boyfriend approached their booth, Colton and Drew in tow and asked to sit with them.

As Helena changed sides to allow, Colton's mo—Heather, yes, Heather and Casey to sit across from them, and as Heather crowed in triumph to Myka, "Didn't I tell you she would be a good fit for him?," Helena was grateful that the question she had so awkwardly raised could be buried beneath more self-congratulations from Heather and, eventually, gossip about other parents, minor complaints about teachers and the school, and, ultimately, a bowling alley-wide tallying of funds raised. By the time families were returning bowling balls and shoes and leaving to go home, she and Myka and Heather and Casey had moved to a bigger table where they were joined by two other couples and they talked well into the night, the children falling asleep in their parents' laps, and Helena would have been hard put to find a moment when she and Myka weren't viewed as being the same as anyone else around the table, as a couple of overtired parents appreciative of a chance to sit and commiserate, or doze, with other overtired parents.

Had "We need to have a conversation" been on Helena's list, it, too, would have slipped toward the end because Helena was a firm believer that "necessary conversations" were an oxymoron. "Necessary conversations" weren't about imparting new or significant information, because if they were, they would have already taken place before becoming a necessity. What they were was an opportunity for one party to repeat something to another party that the other party had already heard, usually something negative about the other party's conduct. But "We need to have a conversation" was on Myka's list, and while it soon became clear to Helena that it was not at the top of Myka's list either, since they didn't have the conversation the day after the bowling alley fundraiser, or the day after that, or even during the following week, she knew better than to think that Myka had forgotten it.

Since Drew didn't come home from school with a bloody nose or a black eye and since people in the grocery store didn't give her and Myka stares any more incredulous than the ones they normally gave them, usually when she had stopped the cart in the middle of an aisle to exclaim at the latest abomination created to assuage a consumer's anxiety about her intake of carbohydrates, such as honey wheat-flavored pancake mix that was actually free of anything resembling wheat or
honey, which had caused her to flourish a box of it in front of Myka and demand, "Why not just stick a price on a rack of test tubes and be done with it?," Helena began to return to her former indifference about how their pairing was regarded outside their home. It was made easier when Myka chided Drew for his reluctance to acknowledge that his father had as much right to have a girlfriend as she did, and Drew didn't use the opportunity to complain that, although Helena was cooler than Cindy, she would never be as cool for his mother as a cool boyfriend would be. "What makes Cindy less cool than Helena?" Myka asked, and though Helena could think of any number of things, she reminded herself that Myka wasn't asking her. Drew mentioned the tree house, of course, and Helena's plans for renovating his bedroom and, somewhat surprisingly, her ability to "kick butt at video games." But when, after a long pause, Drew said, "'Cause she can think like a grown-up and a kid," Myka had stopped smiling and her expression became more sober, just as it had at the bowling alley.

While Helena didn't think Myka's sudden seriousness had anything to do with misgivings of the sort that might be numbered under the heading "Why I Should Have Picked Jeff Over Helena" and saved in one of her planner apps to be updated as needed, she nonetheless brought up their bowling alley conversation as they watched Scandal later that evening, Drew having been dispatched to bed. "Take Fitz and Olivia, for example," she began, as though they had been arguing about the relationship since the episode started. "Do you think it never crosses her mind that part of their difficulties likely stems from the fact that she's black and he's white in a society that still discriminates?" She had to be careful as she gestured at the TV since her hand was flying close to Myka's glasses and sending them across the room would hardly make the conversation any easier.

Myka, who frequently watched her favorite shows using Helena as a backrest, twisted her head up and around, her expression puzzled. "I think their biggest problems are that he's married and he's kind of an ass, not to mention a murderer." She paused. "Are you looking at them as a stand-in for us?"

"Darling, you have to admit, I am a murderer and also a bit of an ass at times." She gave Myka her best devilish smile, but the smile did little to ease the irritation that was creeping into Myka's face. "We've just never talked about the fact that I'm your first foray into same-sex relationships," she added plaintively. "I'm not suggesting that you've agonized over it, but you can't tell me that over 12 years ago, you saw yourself living with a woman."

With more elbowing and pushing against her than Helena felt was needed, Myka turned around so that she was facing her. Balancing herself on her knees with both arms braced on either side of Helena, one hand on the back of the sofa, the other on its arm, Myka leaned in until their noses were barely an inch apart. "Twelve years ago I didn't see myself settling down with anybody, man or woman. I never had, not even when I was with Sam. I was completely focused on my job. Then you blew into my life and you rearranged it, and I didn't realize how much you changed what I hoped for until you told me in Boone that you had found what you wanted." She cocked her head, her eyes searching Helena's. "Are you asking me what I think I am and whether I'd ever get involved with a woman again? I don't care what loving you makes me, Helena. If others want to label me, they can go right ahead. And as for getting involved with another woman were you to do something really despicable like die on me . . . it doesn't hold any meaning for me because whoever it was, she – or he – wouldn't be you."

Glasses askew, ancient yoga pants drooping down her hips slightly, Myka had never looked sexier, and Helena thought she might come simply from the feel of Myka's breath on her face. Frantically pushing down her own pants as she nipped at Myka's lips, she pulled one of Myka's hands off the sofa and tried to guide the fingers into her but her movements were too impatient. Eyes intense and alight behind the lenses of her glasses, Myka wriggled off the sofa and then pulled Helena down until she was only partially resting on the cushion. "Only you," she murmured as she cradled
Helena's lower back and hips and began to move her fingers in and out, setting a rhythm that Helena wanted to rush but, as Myka's steady gaze held hers, chose to follow. "Only you," she echoed, the two words becoming one as their pace increased and ending in a pillow-muffled wail as Myka lifted Helena's hips higher and tongued the words, or something very much like them, that her fingers had been speaking minutes before.

Sometime later, *Scandal* and the local news both long over, she and Myka spooned on the sofa, an afghan covering them, their clothes in a heap on the floor. Sleepy yet still aroused, Helena began moving her hand inquisitively between Myka's thighs, and as Myka groaned in exasperation and began rocking her hips at the same time, she mumbled against Helena's forearm, "It was before Ellis when I called my mom and told her that I was involved with someone, someone I had known a long time ago. I thought I would have to work up to telling her that it was you, but she already knew. She asked me if it was 'the friend who convinced you to come back to the Secret Service in spite of what she had done,' and when I said yes, she said she had known then that it must have been a pretty powerful love-gone-wrong to make me quit my job."

"Can't imagine that she's too happy about it," Helena grunted as Myka hooked a leg, backward, over Helena's leg and shifted to allow Helena's hand greater room. Helena nuzzled Myka's neck, feeling the increase in her pulse, the skin jumping under her lips.

"She believes in second chances," Myka said, a little breathlessly, as she started to grind her butt against Helena's abdomen. "Lucky for you that I believe in third and fourth chances, which is why you're still here."

While she might have a second chance with Jeannie Bering, Helena suspected she would have no margin for error with Myka's father. Other than exchanging polite greetings on the rare occasions when Warren Bering called his daughter, Helena had had no conversations with the man who had been the most significant factor in how Myka had become Myka. Their upcoming Thanksgiving visit to Colorado Springs, where, thankfully, they would be staying with Myka's sister Tracy and her family and not trying to cram themselves into the small living space allotted to the elder Berings in their senior living complex, was sufficient cause for Helena to volunteer to pick up Drew from the B&B one evening. In the time it would take for Drew to gather his clothes, his toys, and his dog, she would pick Pete's brain – and what an undertaking that would be – about how best to deal with Myka's father. "That was the upside to the divorce," Pete said, turning off the TV remote and sweeping off leftover popcorn from the sofa cushions. "Not having Warren as my father-in-law. He's mellowed with age, but he's . . . he's still a piece of work." He glanced down the hall at the door to Drew's bedroom. It remained shut, but he lowered his voice. "Jeannie's a sweetie, you'll love her. But Warren . . . kind of funny that Myka could never do anything right in his eyes, but, man, there isn't anyone good enough for her. I could go on about him, but I think this'll tell you all you need to know. Every time we visited? He'd throw his beer out and make Jeannie dump her wine too. I'd open the recycling bin, and there the empty bottles would be. I told him he didn't have to do that, but he just looked at me, like I was something on the bottom of his shoe."

Helena had only nodded. She knew what disapproving parents were like. What child growing up in the nineteenth century didn't have disapproving parents? Children were disapproved of for being children in the first place, and the sins went on from there. Her parents had certainly been representative of the time. Like others whose station in life was subject to shifts in fortune, they clung all the more to respectability, insisting upon dressing well, if not expensively, attending church services faithfully, and exhibiting the decorum that marked men and women as gentlemen and ladies. Her parents had stretched her father's meager means for Charles' education; she had been taught only what was considered necessary for a woman to know – how to cook, properly clean, set a table, sew, quiet a child, manage a servant (when they could afford one). But her
parents' disappointment in her refusal to "behave like a woman of good character should" (as her father put it) had had no power to sting her. She had known early on that she was different, able to learn more and learn it faster and better than others, and the older she grew, the more she came to view her parents, and even Charles to an extent, as weights dragging at her heels, preventing her from flying high and far away from an existence, which, if it wasn't exactly false, wasn't true to her capabilities, her potential. That her superiority was worth far less than the value she had put on it she would learn only later and at great cost.

Myka, however, hadn't grown up with a fatuous belief in her own superiority. She had grown up believing that she was a disappointment instead. She had failed first, in her father's eyes, by not being a boy, and every B instead of an A, every 80 instead of 100, was a failure that naturally followed upon the first. That it had taken her so long to look with a critical eye at the bookstore that her father owned and that they had lived above throughout her childhood, a bookstore that rarely made more money than the minimal level that could support a family of four, was one of Myka's biggest regrets. Helena remembered one long, slightly drunken late night conversation when she had been at 13 that had turned from books to their childhoods. Content for once to listen, she had watched as Myka unsteadily navigated a cup of tea that was more brandy than tea to her lips only to lower it as she exploded at her father's unrelenting demand that she outperform her peers at school. "Jesus Christ, he could spout all that crap to me when here he was, with a fucking MFA, and he couldn't do any better than manage a bookstore. I wish I had kicked him in the balls. Better yet, my mother should have left him." Looking down into her tea, she had mumbled, "You would have kicked him in the balls."

And she would, if he said one unkind word to Myka or Drew during their visit. But Warren was on his best behavior, gliding past those moments when he might have said something cutting, such as when Myka awkwardly explained that her duties with the Secret Service had undergone a change in response to his question, "Still running the show and ordering people around?" Or when Drew had shown him pictures of the birdhouse on Myka's phone. After staring at them, eyebrows hiked high, he had said only, "Looks like you put a lot of work into it." He had even treated her cordially, if not especially warmly, asking her where in England she was from, if she was able to see her family as often as she would like. Helena responded with polite fictions, noticing, not for the first time, how much Myka and her father resembled each other. They had the same rangy build, the same eyes, and though his hair was little more than a fringe around the back of his head and mainly white, she could see how the longer hairs started to curl at their ends. Though Myka would say later, after they had returned to Rapid City, that her father had been on his best behavior because "he knew he was on his fourth and last chance with me," it was clear to Helena how happy she was that he was behaving more like the father he would have been in some kinder timeline, one in which Sam wouldn't have died and Myka herself wouldn't have so irrevocably fallen for a woman destined to hurt her so many times. At the dinner at Tracy's house on Thursday night, Myka squeezed her hand so hard when Warren joked and kidded with his three grandsons that Helena thought one of her knuckles might have been permanently displaced.

Because Myka had looked so happy, been so happy, during the dinner and afterward, playing an old board version of Clue with Drew and her nephews, ten-year-old Connor and six-year-old Liam (British voices for certain suspects provided by Helena), ribbing Tracy about her high school career as a cheerleader, and dutifully asking for tax advice from her accountant brother-in-law Kevin, Helena was unprepared for Myka's straddling of her in their bed and her quietly announcing, "I want another child."

At first when Myka had straddled her, Helena had had the hope that her "no sex while we're sleeping in Tracy and Kevin's guest bedroom" might have been lifted. Drew was bunking with his cousins during their stay, and surely if they went about it silently enough . . . . Then Helena recognized the seriousness with which Myka was looking at her, and she was reminded of how
Myka had looked at her in the bowling alley and the night that Drew had enumerated the reasons why she was cool. She had known that the seriousness had signified something, thus her fears that Myka had found their relationship lacking, and, apparently, there had been some truth to her suspicions. She wouldn't have guessed that what it lacked was a baby. Too startled to know exactly what she felt about the idea, Helena said carefully, "We're a little old, don't you think?"

Myka shrugged, defensively, and started tracing a pattern on Helena's chest through the sheet – and a nightgown that Myka had insisted she wear while they were at Tracy and Kevin's. "I turn 44 in March, and if we were to do . . . this, I'd like to start before then. I've been thinking that, if you were in agreement, we could start after the New Year. We'd work with Vanessa to see if I might need any fertility treatments –"

Although it was possibly one of the least arousing conversations she had ever had with Myka and Myka's finger was having to work through two layers, Helena couldn't deny that the figures Myka was drawing on her chest, especially when Myka's finger would bump against one of her breasts, were making her twitch. Forcing herself to concentrate, she said, "I'm 148, I'd be closing in on 200 when the child graduated from college."

"What does it matter whether you're 148 or 170? Let's face it, you could die on me at any time." Myka's finger wasn't stopping and it was working its way down Helena's chest.

"What about Drew? He's barely gotten used to having me in the house, plus he's having to accept the fact that his father has a girlfriend, too. It's a lot of change for a nine-year-old boy," Helena peered up at Myka's face. She looked so grave, so focused. The finger couldn't be a ploy. She just needed to physically work through her thoughts. Helena ordinarily wouldn't have called Myka a kinesthetic style of thinker, unless one counted how she would worry through several Twizzlers or work her fingers through her hair –

"Helena, are you with me?" Myka leaned forward, planting her hands on the bed even with Helena's shoulders. The distraction of the pattern-tracing finger was now replaced by the distraction of seeing down the neck of Myka's sleep shirt and imagining her mouth or her hand on one of Myka's breasts. "I just said that Drew's been asking me lately if we were going to have a baby. His only concern is that if you're the one to carry it, you won't want to renovate his bedroom next spring." She smiled, a tender and strangely giddy smile that Helena hadn't seen before. "He wants to be a big brother."

Mesmerized by the slight sway of Myka's breasts, Helena wondered if her distraction had less to do with her usual responsiveness to Myka and was more a method of not focusing on whether she wanted a child. Because that was what Myka was asking her, though she had yet to express it as a question. Did she want a child, a baby? It wouldn't be like it had been with Adelaide or as it was now with Drew, a parent of sorts but most definitely not a mother. It would be closer to what it had been like with Christina, when she had looked into dark eyes that matched her own and realized that she encompassed her baby's known universe. She was Christina's sun, moon, and stars, and while Christina would someday recognize that a universe much larger and much, much more promising existed outside her mother, some fragment of that earliest misapprehension would remain. It was in her shrieks of laughter when Helena returned from a retrieval or the trusting acceptance with which she received Helena's casual lessons about pollination or the life cycle of insects when they played in a park. As long as her mama was with her, all was well. "You don't have to do this for me," Helena finally said, looking away from Myka. "I've been a mother."

"I don't want to do it for you, I want to do it for me." Myka quit straddling her to sit, cross-legged, beside her. "I've been wanting to talk to you for a while about this, but I couldn't figure out a way that wouldn't sound like I was trying to redo some part of your life, make up for losing Christina.
Maybe because I didn't know why I suddenly wanted another child." She shrugged, this time as if she were helpless to explain what she felt. "I was happy with Pete, and Drew, he seemed a natural consequence of that, you know? But I wasn't dying to have more children, although Pete would nudge me about it sometimes. I was happy, Helena, I was satisfied. And then Drew was sick and I wasn't happy or satisfied any longer because I had realized during that whole mess that being satisfied with Pete wasn't enough. I wanted more, I wanted you. At the same time, I knew you weren't coming back. Whatever you had found was enough for you because you weren't knocking on my door. So for the two years before Pete and I got divorced?" She quirked an eyebrow at Helena and her mouth slanted upward in a crooked twist that Helena hoped wasn't as painful as it looked. "I became a baby-making machine, tried to, anyway. Because maybe another kid would make it all better. And nothing happened. We hadn't even tried with Drew. I got pregnant on a retrieval when Pete and I were both so tired we hardly knew what we were doing. But this time around? Nothing." She shrugged again. "And the longer we kept trying and failing, the more everything just seemed... wrong."

Helena had rolled onto her side as Myka talked, propping her head on her hand. With her free arm, she reached out and grabbed one of Myka's big toes, lightly rubbing the ball of it. Not the most romantic of gestures, but it was the part of Myka closest to her. "I dated after the divorce, obviously, since you met Jeff, but I wasn't looking for anything serious. I told myself that it was because I didn't have the heart for it, but maybe I was waiting for you and I didn't want to admit it."

"You have me now, and you would have had me sooner if I hadn't been such a bloody idiot about everything." Helena gave Myka's big toe a loving squeeze.

"I know." Myka's twisted smile smoothed into something happier, goofier, and she stretched out her hand to sweep Helena's hair back from her face. "And I thought once I had you I would be happy, I would be satisfied." At Helena's incipient frown, Myka unfolded herself and slide down the mattress until she could lock her legs around one of Helena's. "I'm happier than I ever thought I could be, but I'm not satisfied. You make me want more, more of you, more of us. I want to see you putting 'nappies' on our baby and thinking of all the ways you can improve the process. I want to see you blowing out the candle on her – or his – first birthday cake. I want to fill that living room we never use with pictures of you and me and Drew and his little brother or sister. I want all that, and even more. Do you understand, Helena?"

Helena thought she did. Perhaps it was all the easier to understand here in Myka's childhood home, loosely speaking, since Tracy and Kevin's suburban two-story bore no resemblance to the cramped two-bedroom apartment in which Myka had grown up. A child who had never been enough for her father became the woman who always demanded more of herself without expecting "more" in return. Being grateful for what she was given, certain that she didn't deserve what she desired most, she had been happy enough. Until H.G. Wells had come along, Helena wryly reflected – with, what had Claudia called it? – her "black mane" and "Byronic history" – and taught her that having enough wasn't nearly enough. Myka should have recognized in her the lesson of what happens when a person's reach exceeds her grasp, but whatever alchemy it was that never stopped drawing the two of them together, it had led her to find in Helena the "more" that had always seemed to elude her.

In her own case, maybe it wouldn't be wrong, this one time, to want more. Having spent ten years trying to want nothing and discovering that it was as lethal in its own way as wanting too much, perhaps she could engage in a small thought experiment and determine if picturing how she and Myka would raise a child together, from scratch so to speak, could evoke in her more than terror. The child would have one thing in its favor, it wouldn't have her genes. That was a positive she could build on. She pushed at Myka's hip until Myka got the signal and turned over, allowing Helena to put an arm around her waist and draw her in. "I will observe the 'no sex' rule here, but
once we get home and send Drew off with his father, we are locking ourselves in our bedroom, and I am going to do my best to impregnate you."

"You think you're joking, but you're H.G. Wells, and anything is possible," Myka chuckled. She took a deeper breath and said, "You didn't say no, and I can live with that for now."

No pregnancy resulted from the time they spent locked in their bedroom, but one result was that Helena could imagine a child, a girl, with Myka's eyes and hair and uncertain smile, looking up at her with the same unawareness of anything else in her world except her mother that Christina had had, and she wasn't filled with dread. Because the illusion that she was the only object in her child's universe would exist only to the extent that Myka didn't enter the room and kiss her daughter's and Helena's foreheads and Drew didn't make faces at his sister designed to have her crowing in delight. She could be a good mother to this child. As Myka had said, she was H.G. Wells and anything was possible.

One morning in December, a couple of weeks before Christmas, Helena was washing her face in the master bathroom, thinking, if she was thinking about anything, about when they should contact Vanessa, assuming, of course, she decided that she wanted a child. As she lifted her head and reached blindly for the hand towel, she suddenly remembered where else she had seen the post-Impressionist painting that had once been Stewart Afton's office. She and Suzanne, in one of their few date-like outings, had taken in an exhibit at the National Gallery. There had been no big names among the painters, in fact that had been the point of the exhibit; it featured the works of artists overshadowed by the likes of Gaugin, Cezanne, and Van Gogh. They had stopped for several minutes in front of a painting of demimondaines and their lovers, and Suzanne had pointed at the dark-haired prostitute with the rose sitting provocatively on the lap of her client as she gazed with flirtatious intent at the viewer. "That's you, already eyeing your next conquest," she had teased. Helena had laughed, although the comment had rankled her without her being able to define exactly why. Instead of coming back with a retort, she had leaned toward the impeccable shell of Suzanne's ear and said softly, "The paintings are lovely, but I'd much rather be fucking you in my hotel room."

Suzanne rarely betrayed embarrassment, but she had then, flushing and moving slightly away. "Always the romantic, and just when I think it's safe to take you out in public . . . ." Her voice was quiet and edged with irritation.

"I am what I am," Helena had said with an unapologetic smile, which wasn't reflected in the cool challenge of her eyes.

Suzanne had dipped her head in acquiescence. "Want a souvenir before we go?" She motioned toward the painting. "It's difficult to get prints of it but not impossible. I've done it before."

Helena had shaken her head, incurious about the others to whom Suzanne had offered the gift. The only souvenir she wanted was Suzanne coming above her, under her, and all that would happen soon enough.

As quickly as it had flashed into her mind, the memory disappeared. Perhaps because the next several hours after they had left the exhibit, the next day, had been exhausting without having been meaningful. Helena couldn't even place it among her other memories of Suzanne, unsure which sex marathon it belonged to. Recalling the moment now, she was struck not only by what an utter ass she had been but the rightness of Myka's perception of Suzanne as well. That had been one of the few times that Suzanne had let her mask slip, betraying her boredom with, maybe even her distaste for, yet another protracted session with Helena in a hotel room. Drying her face, Helena knew she could live with the delayed sense of chagrin at her self-centeredness. What she wasn't sure she
could live with was not acting on what she knew now, that Suzanne had been involved with the replicated artefacts all along.
She thought later, much later, and it was only much later that she allowed herself to think about all that had happened, that the worst moment, out of the many bad moments that had preceded it, had been turning away from Drew. He had wrapped his arms around her tightly, as if the force of his embrace would imprint upon her how crucial it was that she succeed, and Claudia had had to pull his arms away from Helena's waist, saying quietly, "She can't save the day if you don't let her go, Drew." Helena hadn't looked at him, couldn't look at him, because she knew what she would see, not just a strained, pale face, its freckles all the more visible without the big grin squeezing his cheeks, but that direct, questioning gaze which wanted only one answer. And she couldn't tell him yes because she didn't know if she would be telling him the truth. Instead she walked away from him, toward the elevators where Pete was waiting for her, his face as strained as his son's, walking a little unsteadily because her knees had been locked as Drew had hugged her, because she hadn't eaten or slept since one of the D.C. hospitals had confirmed what she had dreaded most, because . . . the hell with the stiff upper lip and the "Righty ho," because she was too frightened to pretend that she wasn't. Not for herself, but for Drew and Pete and Claudia - and for the others as well, some just arrived, some who were still on their way, Steve, Artie and Vanessa, Abigail. And, yes, dammit, for herself, because if she had made Myka want more than she had had before, Myka had made her feel, again, how sweetly sharp it was to want, to crave. To be as old as she was, to have done so much and suffered so much, and yet to want there to be another day and another day after that one, she hadn't felt so pierced through by what she could only call happiness since Christina had been alive.

She wasn't just frightened, she was terrified that what she had regained with Myka she could lose all over again. But as she entered the elevator with Pete and he said in the clipped, compressed voice that had been his since they had found out about Myka, "Everything a go?," she pressed the elevator button for the lobby and said, without a tremor, "Dave assured me they would have her ready for us."

There had been no niggling concern that grew slowly into an all-consuming fear. There had been a time when Helena didn't worry - because she hadn't needed to, because Myka had said she was flying to West Virginia for a QA check of a recent retrieval, because it was likely, Myka had said, she would be working too late that first day to call - and there had been the moment when Helena knew something was horribly wrong. When Myka didn't call the second day, didn't call that morning before Drew went to school, Helena didn't bother to counsel herself to wait; she called Claudia. If Myka had to break a routine, she always tried to make up for the interruption, especially when it came to Drew. When she was away, she called him before he went to bed, and the few times she had missed an evening call, she would call him the next morning. It was that simple with her. It wasn't Myka being rigid, it was Myka showing her son that while work might occasionally take precedence, it never really came first.

It was 7:00 in the morning when she made the call, and Claudia had been asleep. Querulous, she hadn't finished her rant about how not everyone kept a Victorian's hours, when Helena said, "She's not in West Virginia evaluating a retrieval, so where did you send her and what is she doing?"

Claudia immediately stopped her grousing. There had been no QA check in West Virginia. Myka had told her that the regents had asked her to verify whether an object that had come into their possession was an artefact. She had said she was going to Philadelphia. Sitting at the kitchen island, Helena put the phone down, ignoring Claudia's increasingly loud and apprehensive exclamations. It was a week ago that she had remembered where she had seen the painting in Bergstrom's office, and she had said nothing about it to Myka. She had said nothing, not because
she had had some grand plan in mind that she and only she could execute but because she hadn't known what she was going to do. Yet Myka must have sensed something . . . . She cut Claudia off in mid-"I'm the frakking caretaker-in-waiting, you'd think people would –" and made another call.

She hadn't remembered his direct line, maybe she had never known it in the first place, but she managed, through the intercession of a number of assistants, to get put through to him, and when Russ Bergstrom answered, he sounded only mildly surprised. "I spoke to Agent Bering not too long ago. Didn't she tell you?"

That wasn't what she had wanted to hear. "And she asked you about the print, the one that used to hang in Stewart Afton's office," Helena interrupted, fearing that every one of her burgeoning suspicions was going to be confirmed.

"Yeah," Bergstrom said, drawing the affirmation out, as though she should have already known why Myka contacted him. "She said she remembered that I told all of you that one of Stew's old girlfriends had given him the painting. I don't know if that's exactly what I said, because I'd always gotten the impression from Stew that he wanted more from her than she was willing to give, you know what I mean?" Helena recalled the unlived-in look of Bergstrom's apartment, how he had turned their interrogation of him into a pizza party, and hoped she could suffer his increasing chattiness, which suggested he had gotten over his initial surprise and was treating her call as the reaching out of an old friend, without screaming at him to tell her what she needed to know. "She was the one who got away, that's how he always described her. I told Agent Bering that I didn't know who the woman was, but she said that was okay. She wanted me to take down the painting and look at the back of it. And there it was, 'To my favorite flâneur, Love, Suzanne.' I had to look that up you know, flâneur, and it doesn't really seem like Stew. Of course I didn't know him then like . . ."

"Thank you, Russ, you've been most helpful," Helena interrupted again, impatience giving ground to an equally unbearable sense of foreboding. She was too far behind, she wouldn't catch up to Myka in time.

"You heard about Dwight." Russ framed it as a statement rather than a question.

Her thumb hovering over her phone's screen, ready to end the call, Helena hesitated, compassion and a perverse compulsion to intensify her fear intermingling. "No, Russ, I didn't."

"He passed away a couple of days after you guys left. Never regained consciousness." He said it matter-of-factly but Helena could hear both the sorrow and the somewhat awed note that Dwight Sheffield's fate could have been his.

Five days? Five days after they had met with Sheffield in his office. Granted, they didn't know how long he had possessed the replicated artefact before he succumbed to its lethal side effect, but it had taken him only five days to die from when he had collapsed in the restaurant. If Myka had come into contact with a replicated artefact, particularly one that had been "amplified," it was possible she was already suffering from the side effect. Which would mean there were four days, four days to find Myka and save her. Unless Suzanne and her co-conspirators had taken more direct action, and that possibility Helena couldn't dwell on either.

"Agent Wells?" Helena almost dropped the phone. "Agent Wells, is there anything else you or Agent Bering need from me?"

"I don't believe so, Russ." Although Sheffield's behavior with his artefact had been reprehensible, Bergstrom had counted him as a friend, and Bergstrom himself seemed a decent man, so Helena swallowed her revulsion at the memory of Sheffield touching his artefact to control her and added...
softly, "I know Sheffield was your friend."

"If there's anything about that painting that can help you, hell, I'll FedEx it to you." His tone grew uncertain. "That woman, Suzanne, the one who gave it to Stew. She's not mixed up in this mess, is she?"

"We're still investigating." It was an inadequate response and hardly one to give him comfort, but telling him that Suzanne likely played on Afton's feelings for her in order to use him as a conduit for distributing replicated artefacts would leave Bergstrom feeling no better.

Down the hallway, a door slammed. Drew. Helena put down the phone and made sure she was casually leaning back against the island, an indulgent smile on her face by the time he slouched into the kitchen, the backpack hanging off his shoulder half his size. Since he was tall for his age, maybe it was an exaggeration, but the backpack was wider. There was being honest with a child, and there was alarming him. Helena didn't see how she could do the former without causing the latter, and if his mother was in danger, the less time he had to focus on his helplessness the better. Yet, as he slung his backpack over a chair and went to root in the refrigerator, intent only on finding a snack and unaware that he couldn't rescue his mother if she was in need of it, Helena wondered if obsessing about her own helplessness was what she was trying to avoid by not telling him.

"My mom call yet?" He took out an apple and stuffed it into a pocket of his backpack.

Couldn't he have been sneaking a pudding pack? Of course that would have required the presence of pudding packs in the refrigerator to begin with - Myka claimed they were plastic cups of cornstarch and sugar. Today was a day when she needed him to remind her of Pete, not his mother. "Not yet. That means we can raise bloody hell with her later." He only shrugged as he went to grab his coat, Myka's missing her morning call prompting no demands from him that she call the police, the FBI, or his Grandma Jane. He waited patiently for her by the door to the garage. Slapping her legs, she said with false briskness, "Let's get you to school then."

If he noticed that she drove faster than usual or that she turned on the radio rather than quiz him about fractions or state capitols, he didn't let on. After seeing him lope toward the school's entrance, backpack swinging like a pendulum, she found a quiet street nearby and, letting the Land Rover idle, she called Claudia again. When the call went to voicemail, she next tried the analyst from her hedge fund who had become her part-time researcher. She needed him to ferret out from the information he had collected on Wade Farraday the locations of all the old Farraday factories with driving distance of Washington D.C.

Which he was able to do with admirable speed had she been in an admiring frame of mind. Promising her that he would send the information in an e-mail he had just begun drafting, he swore with the fervor that had apparently produced the list of factories that he was within one or two more queries of having the information she had wanted on Suzanne Emory. "Interesting thing about her," he volunteered over the snicking of his keyboard, "she's -" 

"A Farraday or believes she's one," Helena grimly supplied for him.

His disappointment in being preempted was plain. "You could've saved me about three weeks' worth of work digging that up if you'd told me."

"It was a hunch," she said. She hadn't known for certain. But ever since she had remembered where she had first seen the original of the print in Bergstrom's office, she had been trying to understand the reasons behind Suzanne's involvement. That is, she thought about why Suzanne was involved when she wasn't trying to figure out what she was going to do with the knowledge, whether, in an
uncharacteristic concession that she had superiors, she would present an argument for reopening the investigation into replicated artefacts to the regents and Homeland Security or act as she had done before, on her own and without consulting anyone. Only Myka seemed to have sensed her dilemma and resolved it for her . . . .

" - her biological father was a Farraday, some sort of cousin of Wade's and a real loser by all accounts. Couldn't hold down a job, had scrapes with the law. Her mother eventually dumped him and remarried, and Suzanne went by her stepfather's name, Wilcox. Then she changed it again, to Emory, after college. That's why I kept running into roadblocks. It took me a while to figure out that Suzanne Emory, Susan Wilcox, and Susie Farraday were the same person."

His voice became a buzz once more as Helena wondered, not for the first time, if the chameleon-like quality that Myka had recognized in Suzanne during their brief meeting at the Farraday Gallery was forged by a childhood of having a storied name but not the access to the privileged world that other, luckier, Farradays inhabited. Her envy would have hardened over the years, driving her to do whatever was necessary to become one of "us" as opposed to remaining one of "them." Helena shook her head in irritation; she was fast developing the plot for a potboiler that, in its lurid psychology, was more Jackie Collins than H.G. Wells. All she lacked was cover art that would have an extraordinarily busty Suzanne planting a stiletto heel on the backs of Stewart Afton . . . and one Helena Wells . . . as she sashayed her way to the top. "What's her connection to Congressman Jaffee, or is Perkins the one?"

"It's pretty sketchy, but back when Jaffee was a state senator he enlisted a lot of college students to do the grunt work of his campaigns, making fundraising calls, going door-to-door, that sort of thing. Her name pops up on lists of volunteers over a couple of years." He chuckled. "You don't know what it took me to unearth them. Dinners with, ah, a friend from my MBA program who used to be a Jaffee supporter until, as she phrased it, 'he went from being a sensible, fiscally conservative Republican to a complete wacko with a desire for world domination.' She was good enough to contact some old friends of hers who used to work for Jaffee in the Dark Ages. Apparently he's the paranoid type who doesn't want any paper or electronic trail, other than what he's legally obligated to maintain, so a lot of old stuff is gone. I guess if you're planning some right-wing coup, you don't want it out there for everyone to see." He laughed at the absurdity of it, while Helena, recalling the sleepwalkers in Ellis, thought he would find it less funny if he had seen what she had.

Without warning, her phone started vibrating so violently that she thought it might shake into its environmentally unfriendly component parts. A series of repetitive text messages from Claudia began to populate the screen, Call me NOW. Urging her researcher to e-mail her with any other information he found, she ended the call and tried Claudia's number again.

"Dude," Claudia shouted as soon as she heard Helena's voice, "she put it all together. Most of it, anyway. I found where she had squirreled it away, in the last place anyone would look, a bunch of subfolders buried in our procedures. Open the folder named Neutralizer, subfolder Bags and Gloves, subfolder Pre-retrieval Checks, subfolder Completed Pre-Retrieval Checks - and there it is. Your ex Suzanne, Jaffee, Wade Farraday, you. Not that we're still suspecting you or anything, it's just that -"

"I was an oblivious, self-centered fool, easily led and easily used," Helena said in wry summary. "I think we'll discover the same about Wade Farraday." She sighed, thinking of the countless times she had used her laptop, which held the results of her searches and, more importantly, the graphs she had created to compare the timeline for the replicated artefacts with her trips to Washington D.C., when Myka was in the room. Myka and her amazing recall. She must have memorized the key strokes of her password. A fleeting smile crossed Helena's face. They would have a conversation about boundaries and privacy once Myka was safely back home with her and Drew.
"She must have been working on this since . . . I don't know, a long time. She didn't compile all this information overnight," Claudia said quietly.

Myka's visit to the Farraday Gallery. Natural curiosity about an old . . . girlfriend . . . or had she suspected even then? Myka insisted that she was logical, analytical, not intuitive; Pete was the one who had vibes. But no one with an ounce of logic would have taken a chance on her, would have loved someone who was so ill-equipped to love in return. Myka acted on her gut far more often than she was willing to admit, just as she had in Ellis when, again, with no reason for doing so she had believed in the ability of an erratic, boastful "genius" to neutralize an artefact that had overtaken an entire town. Helena sentimentalized the retrieval because it was then when Myka had told her that she loved her. Yet it was also when Myka had threatened to kill a major in the Air National Guard, when she had refused to allow for any other outcome than the one she wanted most. Myka was crazy. In fact, Myka was crazier than she was.

"At least since we came back from Ellis," Helena said, "maybe before then. She's done all this to protect me. She's figured it out so I didn't need to, she's gone to Washington to confront Suzanne so I wouldn't have to."

"We're going to get her back," Claudia said reassuringly. "I forwarded all her work to the DHS. They're agents, sort of, right? They're at least competent enough to bring Suzanne in for questioning, Wade Farraday, too. If they're not scared of their own shadows, they'll go after Jaffee."

"She should have called by now, Claudia. She's in trouble. We can't wait on Homeland Security."

Her grip on the phone was becoming slick. Helena switched it to her other hand and wiped her sweaty hand on her jeans. She had heard how thin her voice was becoming, as if it were a piece of wire being twisted until it snapped.

"What do you suggest we do?"

"We start calling hospitals. I saw what happened to Dwight Sheffield, to Gene Butler. The replicated artefacts, they're becoming more dangerous. The properties seem to be degrading faster. If Myka came into contact with a replicated artefact or several . . . ." Helena couldn't make herself say it, but she could picture it. Suzanne and Jaffee's other willing helpers dumping Myka, unconscious and without any identification, in an alley. They wouldn't have to kill her, only wait for the side effect of the replicated artefacts to do its work. While Myka lay comatose in a hospital, they would have time to flee – or to construct an unbreakable alibi. "If we don't hear from Myka or Homeland Security by the end of the day, I'm flying out there, and I'll find her myself."

"I need to loop in the regents and Mrs. F., and then I'm going to grab a seat on that flight you're taking. She's my family, too, H.G."

Helena looked at the homes on either side of the street, snowmen in various stages of disintegration, listing like crumbling wedding cakes in the yards, Christmas lights framing windows and lining roofs; lacking the magic of night, they were only green electrical cords in the daylight. It was a scene gay and tatty simultaneously, and she thought that she should have driven the Land Rover farther away and parked it in front of a junkyard or an empty commercial building with its windows boarded and a For Sale sign crowding the sidewalk, somewhere more fitting for her halting, nervous inquiries about whether an unconscious woman in her 40s, possibly a Jane Doe, had been recently admitted. She felt desperate and ridiculous in equal measure describing Myka, and the businesslike manner of the hospital staff who answered her calls only solidified her belief that the ordinary, the logical wasn't separate from madness but part of it, the front that madness put on when you met her at a party in a client's home or when you heard her say, from her
jail cell, that she wouldn't lose you again or saw her reflection when you looked in a mirror.

She was told, time and again, in the same professionally neutral voice, no matter which hospital, that she should pursue her request through appropriate channels, that they couldn't provide that information over the phone. Appropriate channels, yes, and what was Homeland Security doing? Had the minions to whom Claudia had sent Myka's findings filed the information under Replicated Artefacts - Closed or Warehouse 13 - Paranoia and Hysteria? She could try filing a missing person's report with the Washington D.C. police: "My girlfriend didn't make her nightly call to her son, and I fear that a U.S. Representative and his co-conspirators have subjected her to the deadly spell of a replicated artefact." That would be a hastily ended call – by the police. But there was someone who would believe such a story, parts of it, anyway, and had the clout to override "appropriate channels."

He answered on the second ring. He couldn't possibly have that much time on his hands; he would be in back-to-back meetings with his boss or other high-level functionaries or answering questions before Congress. He wouldn't be in his office, scrolling through his e-mail, and hoping for a call to interrupt the quiet.

"I have favors to ask of you," she said without preamble.

*Dave* answered almost lazily, "What can you give me that I can't already demand?"

He had a point, but she hadn't made this call unprepared. "You have in me a reluctant, resentful employee, compliant but just barely. What if I were to give you an H.G. Wells who wanted to work for you? Or made a better pretense of it, at the very least."

He laughed at that, but his laughter quickly died when she explained what was happening and what she needed him to do. Two hours later, she received a call from one of *Dave's* lackeys, who informed her that a Jane Doe admitted to George Washington University Hospital earlier in the day had been identified as Myka Bering. In less than three hours after she had gotten the call, she, Claudia, Pete, and Drew were boarding a chartered jet that would fly them to Washington D.C. There had been an agent waiting for them at the Rapid City airport and another in the cabin of the jet; they were wearing the same dark business suits, and their badges said Homeland Security but she wouldn't have been surprised if they were on loan from another agency. She didn't care. Drew clung to her hand, as if she were the only one he trusted to someday explain what all of this meant, other than that something was very wrong with his mother. He didn't need that explained to him. He could see it in his father's face and Claudia's . . . and hers. Yet he whispered to her, "She's going to be all right. I feel it, like Dad would."

The fact that Pete didn't seem to be having any positive vibes far outweighed Drew's fledgling ones, if he was having them at all and not mistaking the intensity of his hopes for them. But Helena kissed his head. "Good, that's good to hear, Drew."

It was a spartanly furnished jet, just a few rows of seats as uncomfortably small and squeezed together as on a commercial airplane, but Pete leaned across the aisle and reached for her other hand. "She's tough, you know." He didn't sound like himself, his voice tight and under pressure, the last defense against the emotions threatening to pour out. He wasn't Myka's husband or her partner any longer, but he had an enduring relationship with her and their history eclipsed the time that she and Myka had shared. "She faced you down at Jellystone," he gave her a ghost of a smile at his weak joke, "and then she had the guts to ask you to move in with her." Partner, husband, Drew's father, but even more than that Myka's friend, and that was all he was claiming now.

She stared at the hand covering her own, warm and broad and supportive. He meant it to be supportive, and she had thought she would find such a gesture comforting, and in some numb,
distant way she did appreciate it, but it didn't lessen her fear. When Christina died, and she, sitting alone in the hotel, had torn the telegram into shreds, she had yearned for someone beside her, someone to brush the pieces of paper from her lap and to hold her. It would have made the news different, no less awful but more familiar, because death stole from everybody, and if the grief couldn't be shared with another, even a stranger, then nothing could. But here, now, the presence of others was too much, and their fear only added to her own. Reminding herself that this wasn't Christina, this was Myka, and that she wasn't too late, not yet, she gave Pete an equally small smile. She slipped her hand from under his and patted it apologetically. Drew's hand she still held; she was a mother, even if she wasn't Drew's mother, and you always gave comfort, whether or not you could accept it yourself.

She had also thought that having the time to tell Christina that she loved her, to stroke her hair, to sit or lay next to her would have made losing her more bearable, but sitting next to Myka, telling her that she loved her, stroking her hair made it all the harder she discovered. During one afternoon when she was with 13, a precious day with no retrievals and no inventory, she and Pete and Claudia had spent it watching soap operas; Claudia and Pete had called it a necessary step in her acculturation to the 21st century, Myka had only sniffed and retreated upstairs to resume her favorite long-term project of updating their procedures manual. There had been more than a few deathbed scenes, and they had snickered at the perfectly styled hair and make-up of the actors playing the characters clinging to life. "Where are the catheters and the ventilators and all that shit?" Claudia had cracked. "Yeah," Pete had echoed, "and there were no hot nurses when I was laid up in Seattle with that weird artefacty-like virus-thingy. All kinds of crap was leaking out of my body, and this one older, hairy male nurse kept growling at me, 'You're keeping us busy, Mr. Lattimer, with the mess you're making of this bed,' as though I was doing it on purpose."

All the equipment that had been so conspicuously absent in the hospital rooms on the soap operas' sets was in Myka's room, including a prominently placed ventilator. She was still breathing on her own, but, occasionally, Helena thought she heard a slight gasp, as if Myka was having difficulty drawing in enough air. There were lines in her arms, and other lines whose placement on Myka's body Helena couldn't see but which were extending from under the bedcovers. Myka wore no make-up, and there were patches on her head where her hair had been shaved and electrodes attached. There was nothing glamorous about her; she looked every one of her 43 years and more. Helena thought how unlikely it was that someone born toward the end of the nineteenth century hadn't previously kept watch at the bedside of someone gravely ill; generally people took their first and last breaths in a home, in the bed they had slept in. But both her parents and her grandparents had still been alive at the time she had been bronzed, and as for the agents she had worked with at 12, serious injuries stemming from an encounter with an artefact or its holder were usually fatal, if not on the site of the encounter then usually not far from it. She wasn't unaccustomed to death; she was unfamiliar only with its more "genteel" prolongation. Some might say she had been present at Lebecque's deathbed, but it was different when you had pushed all the divinities out of the way and assumed the role yourself, and she had made sure that when he finally did die, he died as brutally and as quickly as her daughter had.

Helena fingered her locket. She hadn't worn it often these past few months; she hadn't had to since Christina had been nearer to her than she could ever remember. The memories didn't flood her, but they flashed across her mind frequently, triggered by events hardly memorable in themselves: seeing Drew play with Shep, eating one of Myka's less-than-successful dinners, sitting on the sofa between them watching the original Star Wars yet again. Especially since Myka had expressed her desire for another child, Helena had been visited by the sound of Christina's laughter and her cries - happy, angry, surprised, disappointed - the echoes so strong that at times she had whirled around, convinced that, somehow, her daughter was in the house with her. But when she had received the call from Homeland Security about Myka, and she had frantically pulled out bags for herself and
Drew, heedlessly throwing items in them, she had actually stopped and taken the time to search for the locket, and once she had found it, among the few pieces of Myka's jewelry, strangely enough, she had put it around her neck.

She was alone in the room with Myka, which was unusual. Drew had been a constant presence, sometimes sitting with Helena in the lone visitor's chair, sometimes squeezing himself onto a narrow strip of the bed to curl himself around his mother. But Pete had taken him out for "some fresh air," which meant a trip down to the vending machines or the cafeteria. If the cafeteria was open. Helena wasn't sure what time it was. They had arrived in D.C. Tuesday evening, and a car had been waiting for them at the airport to take them to the hospital. Escorted by another pair of dark-suited, expressionless agents, they had been taken to a high security floor of the hospital - or some area that Dave had ordered be designated as one - on which Myka was the sole patient. The doctors and nurses had regarded them curiously but hadn't imposed any restrictions on the number of visitors allowed in Myka's room at any one time, and when Drew had dislodged one of the lines leading to or from Myka's body as he had attempted to lay next to her, the nurse in the room had adjusted it without comment. It was as if, completely ignorant of what had caused her condition, the staff had tacitly decided that the usual restrictions weren't applicable. In fact, the only time a nurse had intervened was when a fight had broken out in the visitors' waiting area outside Myka's room, a fight mainly conducted in angry hisses but a fight all the same.

Helena had started it, drawing Claudia out of the room a few hours after they had been there, pleading with her to "transport" herself back to the Warehouse and bring back whatever artefacts might possibly have a positive effect. Damn any hellacious side effects, they couldn't be worse than the coma. Claudia had only shaken her head. "Which ones, H.G.? Do you know which ones would save her instead of making her worse?"

"How, how could it be any worse? She's going to die if we don't do anything."

"I know." Claudia had been literally wringing her hands, and the hopelessness in her eyes as she raised them to meet Helena's would have stopped Helena from saying anything more if she hadn't been about to choke on her own sense of futility. "But she's got this thing, she actually had it written up after Drew was born, kind of a DNR except that it's about artefacts. Like, if I'm dying don't use any artefacts to save me."

"And you're going to follow it?" Helena's tone had been coldly incredulous. "You used a fucking metronome to save Steve's life, and now you can't purloin an artefact because it's the wrong thing to do?"

"I wouldn't do it again." The emotion in Claudia's gaze had turned from hopelessness to agony. "As a caretaker, you're responsible for something larger than yourself. You know what happened when Artie used an artefact to change the time line. I was just lucky nothing serious happened to Steve, or anyone else. What if I bring an artefact back here, and not only does it not save Myka but in combination with whatever is affecting her, it harms us or the doctors and nurses, maybe the entire hospital?" As Helena's expression refused to soften, Claudia had said in a low, furious voice, "You would've never become a caretaker, H.G., because, in the end, you always put yourself first. Whether it's savior or villain, you're always the one out in front. If you're so goddamn superior, such a fucking genius, then why haven't you already saved her?"

A nurse had approached them then, suggesting - forcefully - that they calm down or take their "conversation" elsewhere. Claudia had, not quite, stomped away, and Helena had scanned the chairs and tiny counter with its coffee maker and paper cups, afraid and ashamed that Drew had witnessed their argument. There wasn't much in terms of mores or social niceties from her upbringing that she had thought worth preserving some 150 years later, but her fight with Claudia
had been unseemly. Her grandmother would have called it that, and it felt even more presumptuous than it did inappropriate, as if she and Claudia had taken Myka's death for granted and were conducting their own private, accusation-laden post-mortem.

Since then, Claudia had kept her distance, keeping to the corners of the room when she checked in on Myka, and Helena, though she regretted the argument, couldn't expend the emotion to tell Claudia how sorry she was. Because Claudia was right. If she was so brilliant, where was her startling insight, her out-of-the-box idea to save Myka? She had nothing. At least Drew had had the idea of counting to three and snapping his fingers, as though Myka were only under hypnosis. As she stretched against the back of her chair, she thought she heard someone come into the room. Maybe it was Vanessa. She and Artie had arrived last night? This morning? Vanessa had already run a set of diagnostics, but the results had left her looking no less grim.

"What time is it? Hell, what day is it?" Helena asked groggily.

"It's Thursday morning, 9:00 a.m., if you want me to be precise," Irene said, seeming to glide to the other side of Myka's bed.

"Where are your sickle and hourglass? Are you here to cart her off to whatever afterlife exists for Warehouse agents?" Helena tilted her head, her face stiff with the effort of smiling. She wouldn't let the old bat see how vulnerable she felt. When she hadn't been thinking of ideas to reverse what had happened to Myka and discarding them, she had been imagining in detail how she would kill Irene, right after she killed Suzanne and Jaffee. If it hadn't been for Irene, she wouldn't be here now, feeling now. Technically, Claudia had been the one who sent her the invitation for Artie's retirement party, but Irene had been behind it, as she was behind everything Warehouse-related.

"She more than Mr. Lattimer was the wild card for me, you know." Irene looked steadily at Myka, but she was gripping the rail on the bed, as if she might totter against the wall without a handhold, and Helena spied the exhaustion that had carved lines - or revealed existing ones - in Irene's face. "Methodical, logical, hardly given to the flights of fancy of her partner or his vibes. Yet to be a Warehouse agent, you have to have something different, something special, and outwardly Myka didn't seem any different from the hundreds of other agents whose personnel files I had reviewed." She smiled gently, maternally. "I just . . . sensed . . . it was there. And when she met you, I recognized what it was." Irene's gaze was no less gentle, no less maternal when she focused it on Helena. "She would stop at nothing for someone or something she cared about. Many people say they would do anything, but few can, or would."

"That quality seemed to annoy you when we last spoke. Was her preventing Major Lowry from leveling the town of Ellis, and me along with it, ill advised?" Helena had tried to say it mockingly, but it came out raw and angry. She wasn't angry only at Irene, however. She had prided herself on knowing Myka so well, and yet she hadn't sufficiently appreciated Myka's insight into her. Nor the depth of her devotion. Bloody blind fool, too self-involved to recognize how she affected others or how others reacted to her. Just as Charles had said once upon a time, she was the only sun that she would allow in her universe . . . .

"I don't believe I ever said that," Irene countered. "It's an admirable quality, heroic even. She just needs to temper it with one of her other admirable qualities, her ability to reason her way through a problem."

Sententious witch. As though Myka was ever going to have the time to learn to "temper" anything. "When she dies, I'm coming for you, you know." It didn't sound the least bit threatening coming out of her mouth, and Helena, as she automatically wiped the skin under her eyes, realized that she was crying.
Irene didn't seem afraid, pulling a tissue from the box on the cart next to the bed and handing it to Helena. "I can't hide very well, too hobbled up with arthritis, so I should be easy to find." As Helena blew her nose, Irene said quietly, "What's your plan? You don't have much time at all." Helena looked at her in disbelief. "I didn't bring you back so you could fail and let one of my agents die. What's your plan, Helena?"

"Maybe I'll just stand here and count to three and snap my fingers. That's been the sole idea we've had, and that was from a nine-year-old boy." She dropped the tissue in a wastebasket and started running the locket's necklace through her fingers again, grimacing at the memory of how she and Caturanga had worked together on an elaborate hypnosis to counteract the artefact that induced a hypnotic state. De-magnetizing Mesmer's magnets, that was what she had called it. But Myka wasn't under the influence of a single artefact with a single property, she had been bombarded with the unstable, shifting properties of multiple artefacts or one that had been "enhanced" by the object she had found on Gene Butler's body. It would be like sticking a knife in a toaster and feeling the voltage surge through you. Not volts, of course, but emotions, overwhelming in their intensity, and the only escape, the only defense would be . . . .

She lifted the necklace over her head. She opened the catch to the locket and lifted its lid. She hadn't looked at its contents in a very long time. There were still a few broken strands of hair, but most of it was gone. She had been carrying a virtually empty locket for - it didn't matter. What mattered were the emotions she had imbued it with, what power those emotions could generate. Holding it in her hand for a moment, she asked, "Why was this never taken from me? It has to be an artefact."

Other than a quiet beeping that had started issuing from one of the monitors, the only sound was that of Myka's breathing, which had become disquietingly uneven. As Helena looked anxiously from Myka to the doorway, in which a nurse would damn well appear in the next three seconds or else she would snatch one from emptying catheter bags or whatever it was that was keeping them all occupied, Irene said, "An object only becomes an artefact once it's separated or removed from its owner. The locket was never out of your possession."

She had shown no distress at the change in Myka's breathing, and she seemed unworried as a team of nurses hurried in, a doctor trailing them. Irene observed them without emotion as they inserted a breathing tube into Myka's mouth and set the ventilator. Helena, after being asked to step away, tightened her hand around the locket, hardly able to concentrate on what the doctor was telling her. "Her oxygen levels were dropping. This will help her breathe easier." For a second or two, they all were silent, watching the ventilator operate, everything the doctor hadn't said louder than the ventilator's hum.

When the doctor and nurses were gone, Irene said, as if she had merely paused in her explanation, "That's the official answer. The real answer or, perhaps, just the one I choose to believe is that we're not that heartless." Yet when she turned her face to Helena, the despair in it was undisguised. "The minutes are ticking, Helena, and she doesn't have many left."

"It may not have been an artefact before, but it's going to become one now. A special one. An artefact to end all artefacts." Helena placed the locket on Myka's chest. She glared at the cluster of machines blinking and whirring around the bed. How many hundreds of thousands of dollars did they represent and how many more hours of labor? Scientists and doctors always seeking to extend life even when they didn't know what was causing it to slip away. Medicine, still more hope than fact a hundred years later. At least the Warehouse, for all of its indifference to the suffering it both witnessed and caused, was a truer testament to how short humanity's reach actually was. The forces that drove them, her, Myka, Irene, everyone, were ultimately unknowable and magical only in the sense that they so easily eluded control. So she would start with something simple.
"When I was a girl, you were a girl, there were no antibiotics to cure an infection. What you could only hope to do was to draw it out - by heat or poultices . . . or leeches and incantations. I think there were doctors in my time who still believed in those." She looked hard at Irene, not just willing her to understand but to assist her, because she couldn't do this alone. "How do you neutralize an artefact when you have no goo? You draw the emotion out of it." Leaning over the bed, she pressed her lips against Myka's temple. Straightening, she put her hand over the locket, barely feeling the movement of Myka's chest. "You and I and Claudia, we have a special connection to the Warehouse, right? Well, there are possessions of mine in one of the old Farraday factories that they've been using, along with others', to create the replications. I'm going to reclaim them, and to do that, I need your help, the Warehouse's help, to draw all of that energy from them. And not just my artefacts, Irene, every artefact that's there. We'll be conduits for the Warehouse. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

"You want to use the Warehouse as a giant neutralizer," she said evenly.

"That's what it is, isn't it? I'm simply asking it to do its job," Helena said the last sardonically.

"I'm only its caretaker, not its boss," Irene replied, her tone cool but a smile beginning to hover on her lips.

"I'd like to think that maybe it feels it owes me," Helena said, "but solely on the basis of self-preservation, it should want to see an end to the replication." She hesitated. "Will you help me? I doubt that my connection to the Warehouse is strong enough by itself." As Irene bent her head, appearing to ponder a response, Helena, irritated and unsettled by Irene's needing to think over the decision, added, "If you're not up for the task, I can always ask Claudia -"

"No." It was unequivocal. "I wasn't deciding whether to help you but how. Claudia can't be a part of this. Someone has to protect the Warehouse from us if . . . things . . . don't turn out as we intend." Irene took the locket from Myka's chest and carefully fastened it around her neck. She then took one of Myka hands and loosely interlaced their fingers. "I think it would be prudent if I wore the locket. I may be a caretaker in emeritus status, but I understand how the Warehouse works better than you."

There were practicalities that needed to be addressed before Helena could put her plan into action, although if she had been asked what form that action would take, she would have growled, "Let me get into that ersatz Warehouse first, then I'll tell you." Which was what she was on the verge of saying to a skeptical and only stiffly cooperative Claudia, who had asked a version of that question. Assuming a calm authority she was far from feeling, Helena said, "Irene and I have it in hand, Claudia, and if you don't trust that I know what I'm doing, I know that you trust her. We wouldn't be doing this if she didn't think it would work. Just keep an eye on her." She hoped it would occur to Claudia only much later that Irene never consulted, never took direction, never merely acquiesced. As if Irene would work with someone instead of boss her around. In fact, Helena suspected that Irene didn't believe her idea had any chance of success; if she hadn't been desperate, Irene wouldn't have considered anything that might present the slightest risk to her precious Warehouse. Because who could predict what would happen when an irresistible force met an immovable object?

"You haven't told me anything, you know that," Claudia said with a ferocious scowl. "And if I find out that you're BSing me and you don't know what the hell you're doing, I'll kill you if the replicated artefacts don't do it for me first."

"Am I to take it that I'm forgiven for earlier?" Helena said it flippantly, but she realized that she didn't want to leave with the image of a still-fuming Claudia in her mind. She would be carrying
enough fear and regret as it was when she went to find – and neutralize – Jaffee's private cache of artefacts. If she could rid herself of that particular self-rerimination, it would be one less negative emotion that she would be adding to a combustible mix.

"Maybe," Claudia said grudgingly, "but I have the feeling that all I am in this deal is a glorified babysitter."

"There's no glory to it." Helena mustered a wry smile. "Irene is more trying than a child."

Enlisting Pete's assistance required no persuasion. Unable to bear the sight of Myka connected to so many monitors – "She looks like a freaking human power strip, juicing all those things," he had muttered to Helena – he had spent most of his time in the visitors' area playing games on his phone. Luckily, other required elements had been in place before she came up with her scheme. Dave (she had stopped saying it in her mind with her usual underscoring of distaste – he had helped her find Myka, she could at least do that) had called her at several points or, more than likely, Claudia because she was fairly certain she had stopped answering her phone once they had arrived at the hospital. First he had called to inform her that Suzanne Emory had been found and brought in for questioning. Then, when a search of the gallery had turned up Myka's ID, he had called to tell her that Suzanne had been arrested on charges of . . . . Helena hadn't cared what the charges were; she had needed to know only that Suzanne was in custody. Since this was before a nine-year-old had led her to an idea of how to save his mother, she had still been plotting what she would do to Suzanne. Helena had cared only to the extent that the information made Suzanne easier to find when she was free to exact her retribution; the fact that Suzanne might be squirreled away in a highly secured location that had no official connection to a federal law enforcement agency would not be an obstacle. There had been one more call about Congressmen Jaffee and Perkins, who had also been brought in for questioning but neither of whom had yet been arrested. Helena had vaguely fretted then that Jaffee might not be so easy to locate when she was ready for him, but now it didn't matter, not in the same way, anyway. Suzanne should be able to give her what she and Pete needed, which wasn't the satisfaction of revenge but details: which factory, how many artefacts, the number and type of security measures restricting access. As for exacting retribution, should her plan fail, which, in all probability it would, she didn't count on surviving the failure to kidnap Suzanne and Jaffee. If, in the context of the Warehouse and mucking around with artefacts, Myka had stuck a knife in a toaster, she would be carpet bombing a power plant. And if she did manage to survive, given how she had wept through her promise to kill Irene, she probably didn't have it in her anymore to torture and kill someone. Which was a good thing, all in all.

The last task that remained was ensuring Dave's continued support of her and her actions. Talking to him for the first time since Tuesday morning, when he had seemed more struck by the thought of H.G. Wells reviewing the specifications for yet another TSA scanner-of-the-future with a smile on her face than by the threat posed by replicated artefacts, she was surprised by how rapidly and seriously he assented to her newest request. "I'll admit," he said with what might have been characterized as an embarrassed sigh, "that we might have underestimated how 'involved' certain persons were in the activity."

"You mean Congressman Jaffee," Helena said pointedly.

"Primarily but there were others interested in his experiments with, um, enhancing his base, you might call it."

"I call it mind control."

"Let's just the say the search of his home has proven fruitful."

"Have you arrested him?" Helena asked impatiently. "He was the so-called mastermind, but he
couldn't have done this without more help than could have been provided by a curator with delusions of grandeur and a compulsive collector. Where are the ones actually responsible for the replication?"

"We're rounding them up, don't worry," he said with a dismissiveness reminiscent of Irene.

"Of course I worry," she barked at him. "You can't afford to leave him or her out there, someone with the ability to divorce a property from its artefact and then multiply it. That's the 'terroristic threat' you should be concerned about."

"H.G. Wells advising me about another world-destroying H.G. Wells . . . will wonders never cease? Oh, I guess with your group they don't." He chuckled at his own joke.

"I did not destroy the world, by the way. Just in case it might have slipped your mind, the woman whom your agency fired and who's breathing only with the assistance of a ventilator stopped that from happening. Furthermore, we're not talking about destroying the world, we're talking about enslaving it, although it's hardly better." She paused. Her voice grew quieter. "I have your word there will be no interference when it comes to Suzanne Emory?"

"Absolutely."

She sucked in a long breath and turned off her phone, setting it on a table between two chairs. She wouldn't have much need for it from now on. She had to leave the hospital, leave Myka to bring this mad plan to completion, which had found its start in a boy's childish hope that he could wake his mother simply by snapping his fingers and images, disparate and lacking any connection except the one in her fevered mind, of overloaded circuits and poultices applied to infections. She hadn't gotten beyond the visitors' area before Drew ran from Myka's room, Claudia in pursuit, to fling himself at her. Bollocks. As she bent over him, her hand in his hair, murmuring words that had no meaning, she flashed back to standing in the overfurnished parlor of her cousin's home on the outskirts of Paris, her legs imprisoned by a distraught Christina, who refused to let her go. Patrice and Georges, wearing pained smiles, were clearly bewildered by Christina's shouted demands to return to London. Who would prefer sooty, teeming London to sooty, teeming Paris? It had been an especially oppressive August afternoon, and Helena was in danger of missing her train to Vienna. Hot, irritable, and determined not to give into Christina's tantrum, she had pried her daughter's arms from her, saying sharply, "Stop acting like a baby and be good for your cousins. I shall be back before you have time to miss me." A businesslike kiss on Christina's wet cheek and then she was striding out of the room, Christina's gulping, strangled "Mama! Ma-a-ma-a!" lost in the rush of her thoughts about how to retrieve a Beethoven score reputedly able to deafen all those who touched it.

From Vienna, she would travel to St. Petersburg to retrieve a jeweled egg and on to Constantinople to retrieve what had been identified as a Crusader's coat of mail. With luck she would be back in Paris within a month. She had been back in five days, the score unretrieved and other agents dispatched to Russia and Turkey.

But the hospital wasn't Paris, Drew wasn't Christina, and she was no longer the woman she had been then. This time she wouldn't be putting the Warehouse's needs above all else; this time, it would be in service to hers.
A large black SUV was waiting for them, effectively double-parked because it hulked across two lanes, the driver unaware of or indifferent to the cacophony of horns that sounded behind, beside, and in front of it. Helena would have been reminded of Myka's picking her up at the Denver airport except for the fact that Myka would have never parked so aggressively and the burly agent who came around the hood to open a passenger-side door for them - after casually leaping down from the SUV into traffic, prompting another blare of horns - didn't sweep her up in a kiss. He didn't offer them a greeting either, silently returning to the driver's side and rapidly accelerating away from the hospital, forcing at least two cars to abruptly stop to avoid a collision.

She wasn't being chauffeured through a city by someone who signaled before she merged into a lane and who frequently checked her side mirrors; she was being chauffeured by a drug lord's bodyguard who, whether he was driving his boss or shadowing him in public, was accustomed to muscling aside the people in his way. That or he was a federal agent swollen with the importance of his mission, probably imagining bombs or vials of anthrax, not Walkmans and lunchboxes and fountain pens imbued with something "extra." Helena was sure that had he known he was helping to save the world from magical Walkmans, the SUV would have slowed to a crawl and he would be craning his head around the headrest to stare at them in disbelief.

But she left his intact his belief that he was ferrying two chemical weapons experts, not a man who spoke of his vibes as casually as a medium might of the spirit world and a 148-year-old woman who had spent the better part of her life essentially mummified in metal. Never knowing that his world had been on the verge of being spun off its axis, their chauffeur deposited them at the entrance of a building, nondescript and bearing no signage, one of several with the same generic architecture and similarly lacking in memorable features. After a curt thank-you, Helena said, "When we're done here, we'll need a car. No driver." She jerked her head at Pete. "He'll drive."

The agent made no response to her request, but she supposed the flicker of his eyelids was assent enough. Helena glanced at the glass of the entrance; there would be agents behind those doors who would take them to Suzanne, and there would be yet more agents behind more doors watching them, not a moment of their visit going unrecorded. It was a woman this time, in a navy skirt suit, who took them to a room furnished with a conference table, its pressed wood surface showing not a few thin brown rings attesting to the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of coffee cups that had rested on it, and three or four chairs. Suzanne was already sitting at the table, her hair messily gathered back in a twist. She was wearing clothes that had obviously been slept in, likely the same clothes she had been wearing when they brought her in for questioning. Their lines were more flowing than crisp and the colors were striking but not overbold; Helena didn't recognize them, but they were the kind of clothing Suzanne would wear to the gallery, not quite formal and not quite casual but always expensive, highlighting the long legs, the slender neck, and the fall of dark hair that in one light could appear a rich coffee brown and in another as black as her own hair . . . used to be.

She had lain next to that body countless times, had known it intimately, but it was hard to recall anything distinctive about it. She had only to close her eyes and she could see the dagger-meant-to-be-a-foil tattoo on Myka's back, the mole precisely in the middle of her left hipbone, the faint white trail of a scar down her calf; Myka had gotten it when she was ten and ice skating with her sister, Tracy tripping and her skates swinging as she fell, one slicing into Myka's leg. Suzanne's body had been responsive, pleasing, willing, much like Suzanne herself, and that was all Helena had ever required or wanted.

Looking up as they entered the room, Suzanne's eyes locked onto hers, the relief that flashed in
them immediately chased away by fear. "I didn't do anything to her, Helena. She was unconscious when we . . . I found her."

Helena took the chair opposite her, Pete pushed a chair away and perched on the table, close enough to touch Suzanne if he reached out a hand. Instinctively she leaned away from him; he only smiled, thinly. "She was at the gallery." Helena said it flatly, as a statement; she didn't expect to be contradicted.

"In the room where we held the items, the artefacts, after Scott and his team had 'cooked' them."

"You kept artefacts like, like that in a storeroom?" Pete erupted. "Jesus, do you know what they could have done -"

"Not without - what do you call it - a neutralizer. They always came packed in some . . . substance . . . that Scott swore worked as good or better than what was used at the Warehouse." Suzanne's eyes had never left Helena's. "We frequently received deliveries of artworks. Only some of the vans were transporting other kinds of fragile objects. We kept them in a special room at the gallery until they were ready to be shipped out. How your girlfriend got into the room, let alone the gallery after hours, without setting off alarms, I don't know. Unless you taught her all that?" Her eyes were still filled with fear, but there was humor lurking in her voice.

"Who's this Scott guy --"

"How many of these 'cooked' artefacts were in the room when you found Myka?" Helena demanded, her voice riding roughly over Pete's question.

"I don't know . . . not many," Suzanne said, casting her eyes down at the table and scratching at a groove in its surface. The once-impeccable fingernails, products of weekly trips to a manicurist, were almost even with her fingertips and ragged where she had been chewing them. "Ever since what happened in Oklahoma . . . there's been no work on the artefacts." She hesitated. "Not very much, anyway," she amended.

"Were there any artefacts near her, out of their neutralizer?" Helena pressed.

"That's just the thing. Everything was where it should have been, except her." Suzanne began to scratch more vigorously at the groove. "We knew what happened with the artefacts if you were around them long enough, the ones Scott and his team made. Scott said he was going to fix it, but there was never enough time, there was always another . . . ."

"Experiment?" Helena finished for her. "So you found Myka unconscious in the room in which you kept the artefacts, and you assumed that she had succumbed to one or more of them, although none appeared to have been disturbed?" Suzanne nodded. "And then, since the artefacts were sparing you the job of killing her yourselves, you dumped her in a vacant lot or abandoned building?"

"We didn't know what was going on, except that we couldn't stay in the gallery any longer. It wasn't safe - Scott was going to have to come and take care of the artefacts - but we couldn't leave her there either." She ran her thumb over the groove. "The gallery is closed on Mondays, you should remember that. You always made sure you stayed over on a Monday . . . ." Suzanne's voice dropped, but her eyelashes fluttered as if she were thinking of looking up at her, and Helena recalled, with no pleasure, how she would keep Suzanne imprisoned in her hotel suite for the day, sometimes, with Suzanne's willing acquiescence, literally tied to the bed. "Mondays were the days when I . . . we would finalize the arrangements and ship the artefacts out. Wade was with me that day . . . and Jerry, he's another . . . um . . . helper, I guess. They took her some place, I didn't ask where."
Pete twisted around, glancing worriedly at Helena. "Weren't DHS agents or somebody's agents searching that place?" He looked at Suzanne, worry changing to contempt. "You had to know what the agents would be doing when they brought you in for questioning, and you didn't warn them that they'd walking into Chernobyl?" Suzanne only continued to scratch at the groove. Pete cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted toward the surveillance camera mounted in a corner of the room. "You get all that? You need to be following up with those agents you sent out there."

"There's nothing you can do for her, Helena." Suzanne had paused her scratching and rubbing long enough to regard her with a gaze in which a cool sympathy had come to overlay the fear.

"You may be right," Helena conceded and then her voice hardened. "But I have to try, so you're going to tell me where this motherlode of cooked artefacts is and how I get to it."

"And then what? You're going to seal me inside with them?" The cool sympathy in her eyes started losing ground to the fear. "I knew about you long before I met you. I know what you've done, I know what you're capable of. There was a time I found it . . . titillating." She nervously inhaled. "But not right now."

"I always like my prey to be unaware when I take them," Helena said. "You can consider yourself safe for the moment." The malice wasn't difficult to summon - she could as easily lunge across the table and strangle Suzanne as listen to her - but the silkiness in which she had enveloped it, that had taken years to perfect. Years of learning, over and over again, that the men she worked with and the men she pursued in order to capture an artefact never respected her abilities. The inventions that made the retrievals easier, the kenpo and the street fighting that turned her into a worthy opponent physically, the learning, the languages she had so assiduously practiced, none of it won her their admiration. But when she had to bed down someone to gain his secrets or to secure an artefact, her fellow agents had been all agog to hear the details. So she had learned to lower the natural register of her voice, to infuse it with a suggestiveness so smoky that combustion seemed imminent, and when she married it to a threat that no one of them would have otherwise taken seriously, it achieved what her holding a gun or a Tesla never had. "Where are they, Suzanne?"

"In an old Farraday factory in Maryland, just outside the capitol. It's not hard to get to, but it'll be virtually impossible for you to access the place where Scott and his team worked on the artefacts."

"There's not much that's impossible for me." It was more boast than truth, but she had learned to deliver such statements with a carelessness that seemed to enhance rather than undermine belief.

"The security's biometric. To get in you have to pass a retinal and fingerprint scan."

She was about to say more when Pete bluntly interrupted. "We don't have to have anyone's cooperation, including yours, to get past those."

"Then it gives you a randomly generated series of numbers that you have to repeat. The voice scan is sophisticated enough that it can tell the difference between a recorded voice and a live voice. It also can register stress, for example, if someone's being told at gunpoint to repeat the numbers. So, Mr. Lattimer, you do need my cooperation." She clasped her hands, and she looked from Pete to Helena, the look still fearful but strangely sly as well. "I've been very cooperative with you, as I've been with the other agents." She blinked, her expression becoming one of wounded innocence. "I've come to believe that I've been under the influence of an artefact as well. My years of supporting Clint Jaffee's dreams, my assistance with the artefacts, I understand how reprehensible it looks, but I wasn't in command of myself. I wouldn't have willingly given my allegiance to a cause so destructive unless I had been subject to an influence beyond my control. I want to help you, Helena, I do, but I can't go back . . . to that place. I'm finally free, I hope, of Clint and his artefacts.
I can't go back."

She was good. Part of Helena couldn't help but admire her. The nervousness, the fear, and now the almost-but-not-quite penitence, not quite because none of it had been her fault, not really. When had she decided to pitch the "I've been under the control of an artefact" defense? When Jaffee had turned on her - if he hadn't already, he soon would - or had she had it in mind from the beginning? The problem with superior beings was the itch to be the most superior, the "superiorist," as Pete would say. She herself hadn't been immune to it; her last act, her choice of the bronze, had had in it the certainty that she couldn't be humbled, not even by the face of eternity. At the end, there could only be one, and Suzanne had determined that she would be the survivor, not Jaffee. Or perhaps it was simpler and sadder than that. There was no artefact involved in Suzanne's participation, of that Helena was sure, but she must have tired of being at his beck and call, carrying out his orders, no matter how sincere her belief in him was.

It didn't matter. She didn't care what motivated Suzanne, she cared only about what Suzanne wanted from them. "How can we ensure your further cooperation?"

"I believe my cooperation should be worth more than a reduced sentence, especially since my participation in Clint's schemes was guaranteed by an artefact." Her tone grew knowing. "His grandfather used to work at the Warehouse as a scientist, back in the '50s. That's how he learned about artefacts." She shook her head regretfully, sorrowfully. "I was no match for that, Helena. If you want me to risk my life by being 20 feet away from a roomful of cooked artefacts that apparently can't be neutralized any longer, you'll have to give me something commensurate in value." There was no fear in those eyes now.

"Such as?" Helena asked dryly.

"Full immunity, your guarantee that I leave that factory alive and intact once I get you into it, and a permanent restraining order against you," she said as readily as if she had been rehearsing it.

No one here had the power to grant to Suzanne what she wanted. Helena, after a long steady look at her, which Suzanne met unblinkingly, or so it seemed, left the room and called Dave on her phone. He grumbled over the first for a few minutes, claiming that Scott, a disgraced scientist from a military weapons laboratory at which a fatal accident meriting a Congressional investigation had occurred, and his cohorts were requesting the same for their cooperation. The fact that Jaffee had helped to shield him from more severe consequences than the loss of his position had instilled no loyalty, as Scott was willing to confess all he knew, which would implicate other politicians besides Jaffee or so he hinted, but only if his conditions were met. "Who would you rather have walking free on the streets?" Helena wearily asked. "A woman who colluded in the distribution of highly dangerous objects or the man who created the highly dangerous objects she helped to distribute?"

Ten minutes later, Suzanne was sitting in the backseat of a black SUV - Helena was left to surmise that the federal government's supply of them was endless - between two powerfully built male agents. She had insisted that she would not get into any car with Pete and Helena unless she was under the protection, and she underscored "protection," of agents not directly associated with the Warehouse. Directing Pete to take Interstate 495 to 95, she settled against the back of the seat and said nothing more. Helena looked out the window. The light was dimming, the gray clouds overhead steadily darkening, although it was only early afternoon. They, she had wasted so much time already, time that Myka didn't have. She pulled her jacket tighter around her, feeling a chill she hadn't felt when standing outside the building, waiting for Suzanne and her escort of agents to appear. She should be at home, buying Christmas presents for Drew and Myka online, including a few for Myka that she wouldn't allow her to unwrap until they were alone, naked, in their bed.
Myka would pretend to be shocked, but Helena knew the look on Myka's face when she was
curious to understand how something worked. Resting her forehead against the window, Helena
closed her eyes. If she concentrated hard enough, she could pretend that no one was with her in the
SUV except Myka, and they were on their way to Boise City -

"The next exit," Suzanne said suddenly, breaking the silence. "You'll follow the highway east a
few miles. You can't miss it."

Shortly after Pete turned onto the highway, chain link fencing with barbed wire at the top marked
property whose privacy appeared to be zealously guarded, although nothing disturbed the
emptiness behind the fence until, a mile or two farther along, buildings appeared, some low-slung
and close to the ground and others crowned with smokestacks. No clouds of steam and smoke
overhung the buildings today, nor was it likely any had obscured the buildings in recent memory.
Both the rust and the worn exteriors attested to the plant's age. Helena felt her stomach roll at the
prospect of entering whichever building it was that housed Wade Farraday's hoard of collectibles.
The main entrance was off to their left, and the SUV followed the road through an unmanned
security gate, the barrier arms locked upright. They drove past employee parking lots long empty
until the road broadened into a wide, cracked expanse of pavement fronting a building that, as
attested to by its flagpole (lacking a flag), stone bench, and once-trimmed shrubbery, must have
functioned as the administrative office. A number of smaller access roads led to the buildings
farther in, radiating from the center area like spokes from a hub, and Suzanne directed Pete to take
one of them. It wound between buildings that looked like hangars, although no planes were inside
them, and others that looked like vintage Quonset huts, which suggested - and it would take no
leap of faith to believe it - that the plant, decades ago, had been part of the military build-up during
World War II.

Suzanne leaned over the front seat and pointed at a building set off from the others. "That's it."

Hair that had escaped from her clip brushed across the shoulder of Helena's jacket, and Helena
remembered how it would fan across a pillow; she would cup the strands like water and let them
spill over her hand. A more idle than tender moment, and idle moments had been almost as rare as
tender moments between them, but something far different from this, Suzanne pointing out the
building in which Farraday's collections had provided a steady supply of artefacts, some used as the
objects of replication and others used . . . somehow . . . to power the replication. "My trips to see
you, because you said getting away from the gallery was always difficult, they powered what went
on in there?" Helena gestured toward the building that Pete was having the SUV cautiously
approach, as if it might leap from its foundation to crush them. Which it might, Helena thought as
she eyed the virtually windowless walls; she didn't find it difficult to believe that it might have
developed a sentience like the Warehouse's. How could it harbor so many artefacts without
borrowing something of their energy and, albeit at a greater remove, that of the artefacts'
originators, the people whose emotions had given birth to the magic? So, yes, the building might
be aware of their arrival and already sense the threat to its existence that they presented. Crush
them or lock them forever behind its impressively new-looking door, which appeared to be the
kind of door that would remain firm in its frame after everything else had been obliterated . . . in an
explosion like the one she felt her bumbling efforts to save Myka's life would inevitably bring
about.

As Pete slowed the SUV to a stop, Suzanne was still leaning over the seat, her lips close to
Helena's ear. "Clint said that you had a special connection to the Warehouse. At first, he thought
you might be willing to replicate artefacts for us -"

"Because I'm one of the natural elect?" Helena said derisively.
Suzanne laughed softly. "Because your file said you were an inventor and because you dealt with memorabilia. Like Wade, only smarter." She sat back on her seat and began to nudge one of the agents to let her out. "But you came to the gallery one day when Scott was there, and he has some sort of meter that can detect energy peculiar to artefacts. He thought one of the sculptures we had recently acquired might be an artefact, but you were the only thing that lit his meter up. He was so excited . . . he thought if he could capture whatever was emanating from you, enhance it . . . ." Her voice trailed off as if Scott and his ideas about artefacts and their energy was a subject of conversation that she had had to suffer long enough.

They gathered around her as she entered a series of numbers on keypad beside the door. It swung open, and, with an ironic quirk of her mouth, as if she realized her ushering them into the building wasn't unlike her ushering visitors into one of the Farraday Gallery's special exhibits, Suzanne followed them inside. The door's closing virtually eliminated the only light in the room, and Suzanne ran her hand along the wall for a switch. The fluorescents illuminated only empty space. Across from them, and taking up most of the opposite wall was an overhead door, wide enough to let a car or truck in, which was shut and padlocked. Built into the adjacent wall, which extended into the room, was a large elevator shaft, and she led them toward it. Like the door through which they had entered, it had a keypad beside it, and Suzanne typed in another series of numbers. After a few seconds, there was a loud rattle, and the elevator doors opened. There was no panel with floor numbers, no Stop or Alarm buttons, and as Pete stood against the side of the car, he muttered, "I'd love to get stuck in this with See and Hear No Evil," he jerked his thumb at the two agents who remained impassive, "and Harley Quinn over there." Once the doors closed, the elevator immediately began to descend.

When the elevator stopped with a jolt, Helena estimated they were several hundred feet below ground. They stepped into a dim, dingy hallway, its only light an incandescent bulb screwed into a socket overhead. At the end of the hall was a set of double doors, each having a square inset of wire-hatched glass. The hallway, doors, and light bulb were far older than the blinking array of scanners that took up a significant portion of the wall to the left of the doors. Their shoes sounded loud on the cement floor, and, sweeping her eyes over the crudely plastered walls, Helena guessed that this had been, at one time, an underground laboratory for experiments, which, because they were too incendiary for any number of reasons, had been shielded from public curiosity or outrage by being literally shielded from view. Yet the caution that Jaffee and his scientists had taken apparently hadn't been enough, given the reports of activity occurring at a closed Farraday plant just outside Washington D.C. Or, perhaps, once the replicated artefacts had been sufficiently "cooked," they had been moved to another building for testing before being distributed.

"This place was basically a bunker in the 1940s. Scott kept asking Wade what his family had going on here, but Wade would only shake his head." Suzanne grimaced, although Helena thought there was something, perhaps some passing fondness for the man, which prevented the contemptuous slant of her mouth from digging deeper into her cheek than it might have. "Wade acted like it was a big secret, but he didn't know what it was. He knows what he has a passion for collecting, and that's about it." She crooked a finger at Helena. "Stay close. The doors don't stay open long once I say 'Open Sesame.'"

Pete grabbed at Helena's arm before she could follow her. His face had an unwonted sternness. "I'm coming back for you once I can ditch Peter, Paul, and Mary here. This is not going to be like it was between Spock and Kirk at the end." He released her arm to rapidly move his finger between them. "You know, when Spock goes all noble and saves the Enterprise by going into that chamber with the mushroom cloud and Kirk runs to him but it's too late 'cause Spock's been irradiated and he's gray-looking and he has lumps on his face." The finger suddenly jabbed at her stomach. "It's not going to be like that, H.G."
"Of course not," she said, pushing his finger away, "because, darling, you're Chekov."

Suzanne was waiting for her in front of the scanners. "Any last words before I start the process?" Narrowing her eyes, as if she wanted to underscore that she wasn't joking, Suzanne added, "Scott lost more than one member of his team to those things in there. Until he developed a protectant, they walked around in hazmat suits, not that it did them much good."

"And yet that wasn't cautionary enough for Congressman Jaffee. Or you."

"You should understand the commitment to achieving a goal better than most," Suzanne said frowning, Helena's response seeming to have disappointed her. Then the frown was consumed by an innocent smile. "I was helpless under an artefact's power. But you weren't. You knew what you were doing when you killed all those people, the men who murdered your daughter, the Warehouse agent, the boys you sent to Egypt. You were committed to a mission, Helena."

Not a goal or a mission, because they implied a purpose, and there had been no purpose in trying to raise Christina from the dead. Bringing her back wouldn't have stopped wars or fed the starving multitudes. She had been a grieving mother, who, unused to loss or remorse or the recognition that there were forces larger than she, had decided not just that she couldn't accept her daughter's death but that she wouldn't, she didn't have to. After all, she was H.G. Wells, the brightest sun in her universe or any other. Not a goal, not a mission, only the blind, heedless submission to a toxic combination of pride and rage, because to truly grieve would have been to accept that Christina was beyond any power she could summon to reach her. She didn't know if she could save Myka, she wasn't entirely sure she understood what it was that she needed to do, but there would be nothing beyond this. She would succeed or fail, but it would end here, with her. There would be no one else swept along with her in this particular madness. Irene . . . Claudia would protect Irene.

No last words, really, but she did have a last question. "When did you stop needing me?"

"One day Scott's team wasn't careful enough with some of Wade's collections. That was always Scott's excuse, but an accident was bound to happen, wasn't it? Playing with things more powerful than you?" The mocking glint in Suzanne's eyes was unmistakable. "I don't know whether some items touched each other or what it was, but there was an explosion. It took out part of the lab, and three team members died. The only thing that was left was this black rock-like thing. It kind of looks like lava - you'll see it in there. But Scott said it was powerful enough to move the Earth from its orbit. He was able to stabilize it, and it made the replicating so much easier." Another frown, but it had a sarcastic slant. "Or were you asking about us? It wasn't always about the artefacts with you . . . you are gifted, I can't deny that. But I never saw anybody run so hard and yet stand in one place. Then she came to the gallery that one afternoon, and I knew what it was you had been running from."

Helena only stared at her. After a moment, Suzanne shrugged and turned around to face the scanners. Once the retinal and fingerprint scans were completed, a string of numbers appeared on a monitor and Suzanne leaned in closer to say them, clearly and calmly. The doors, with a shudder, began to open.

"Good luck," she whispered.

Suzanne might have been sincere. She might not have been. It didn't matter. She didn't matter now that she had served her purpose, but Helena couldn't resist brushing Suzanne's ear with her lips and saying just as softly, "I'll see you soon." Suzanne flinched, but Helena was already past her, slipping between the doors.

She had expected to see heaps of board games, snuff boxes, nineteenth century firearms, and
everything else Wade Farraday had ever purchased with his fortune, but there were only a dozen items or so lining a few tables, which were dwarfed by the size of the room. It had the shape of a cavern, more round than square, with a definite arch to its ceiling. She was vaguely reminded of the churches she had visited in Rome when she had been a very young Warehouse agent sent to the city to retrieve a surplice said to have healing powers. Many, especially the grander ones, had been shadowy and cool and vaulted like this. She should have been humbled by the vastness those arches had contained and the greater vastness at which they had pointed as metaphor, grateful that she wasn't crushed by such divine omnipotence, but she had been excited instead, pirouetting and marveling at how high she might climb if the ideas bouncing around in her brain could be realized.

Off to her left was an enclosed room, walled entirely in glass, in which she suspected Scott had more or less safely observed the work of his team while they had exposed themselves day after day to the random combination of multiple properties. Had he even been here the day of the explosion? She couldn't see any evidence of one; there were no marks on the walls, no gouges in the floor. Approaching the closest table, she surveyed the items on it. None of them looked familiar to her, a metal lunchbox, a pair of workboots, a wire rack holding old LPs, a fishing rod, a half-deflated basketball. Feeling a surge of frustration, she glanced at the objects on the other tables. She could inspect them, turn them over in her hands, and be no closer to figuring out how to "de-artefact" them than she was now. She didn't have the luxury of being stymied. From her researcher's description of Wade Farraday's various enthusiasms, she had been hoping to see something of his collection of nineteenth century true crime memorabilia. She needed to start from something of hers. She didn't think it, she felt it, as unerringly as Pete must feel a vibe. And where was that black rock, as Suzanne had called it, that seemed both to generate the replication and increase the replicated artefacts' power? She would need that too.

Then to the right of her, hidden in the dark reaches of the lab was another enclosed room. Its walls weren't made of glass but of something thicker, like cement, and she had noticed it only because the area had seemed too square, too block-like to be natural. She ran to its door and shook its handle, fearing that it would be locked, but the door opened, and lights automatically flickered on as she entered the room. It was much larger than it had appeared from the outside, and in the center of the room, on a large workspace, encased in the substance that had protected the piece of black glass she had found on Gene Butler, was the . . . rock . . . that Suzanne had described. Next to it was a plastic tub, nothing more dramatic or unusual than the kind of storage container she could purchase at a department store, the kind she might use to store Christmas decorations should she be so sentimental as to want to decorate a tree with Myka and Drew. And she desperately wanted the opportunity to be that sentimental.

It was hard to move, as hard as it had been to mount the stairs to the top floor of the school in Ellis. But now she knew what force she was pressing against, the remnant of the artefacts - and the people - caught in the explosion, all the fear and anguish and whatever else had been trapped in those objects, and in the scientists, and her need to move was even greater. So she forced herself to take a step and then another until she was in front of the tub, and her lungs were laboring so hard that it wasn't difficult to believe that the next breath she would expel would be filled with blood. Part of it was caused by that artefact-like thing, but part of it was caused by what she realized was in the container, the evidence from the crime scene at her cousin's home. Much of it was brittle and crumbling, but she recognized the sheets from the bed and Christina's shift. Something rusted lay underneath the fabric, and Helena realized that the objects weren't only from her cousin's home but also from the warehouse in which she had tortured and killed Lebecque. She knew without taking out the rusted bit of metal that it was a knife, or what remained of it. Michaud must have kept all of this, long after Poule and Lebecque were dead and she had disappeared into the ether, still obsessed with the killers of her daughter and then, later, the killer of the killers.

She didn't know if she would be able to touch more than one of the items, the pressure that had
initially bore down on her like a collapsing wall was narrowing and concentrating its force; she could almost feel it drilling through her seeking what was in the container. So she would hold the most precious of the items, if she could hold only one. If she would have time for only one. Gently, she gathered the decaying folds of her daughter's gown and began to lift it up and out, and as she did so, she no longer saw it but a woman hurrying toward a hospital. It was the unevenness of her gait, her feet seeming to skim over the pavement then stagger forward, that told Helena who the woman was. Not the woman's old-fashioned dress, whose long skirt she carelessly ground into the street as she hurried, nor her hat, an elaborate structure of fabric and frame that the woman had heedlessly crushed to keep it on her head as she ran. The gait was the peculiar hobbled gait of a woman who was running or, more accurately, attempting to run in a multi-layered dress that was designed to coerce a woman's body into a prescribed shape not conform itself to her. The horse-drawn carriages that the woman flung herself between and the brick or amalgam of crushed rock that the woman's feet scraped across only told her the woman's time period, not her identity. Helena hadn't needed to see her face, only her gait, because its unevenness wasn't solely the product of the dress or the pavement. It was the manifestation of a halting, incomplete understanding that her daughter was in that hospital, in an operating theater turned temporary morgue, a disbelief so profound that she stumbled every time she recalled reading the telegram that had told her Christina was dead.

Helena remembered the dizziness, the inability to coax her body into coordinated movement, when she had climbed down from the cab she had taken from the train station to run clumsily, lurchingly across the busy street, as if she were literally drunk on the shock of it. Then the woman stopped and turned around, which Helena couldn't remember having done because there had been nothing in her awareness except the hospital, and the dark eyes, her own, stared at her, and Helena no longer only remembered the disbelief and strange sense of panic that had enveloped her, she felt it as she had first felt it 115 years ago. Something began to loosen within her, and although she had to grit her teeth before she could suck in a breath, the power in that makeshift lab bending her, breaking her, she cried out, not because of the pain caused by the force filling the room but because she realized that she would experience what was to come all over again and be just as helpless to stop it . . .

Charles had refused to let her go alone into the operating theater. He and Georges had been waiting for her outside the room, Georges turning his eyes away from her, his hands working the brim of his hat so violently that he seemed about to tear it off. She stilled his hands, but he continued to look away from her, saying to the wall in a rapid French, the words brokenly tumbling out, "It was so hot and she had been so trying. Patrice and the boys and I took a stroll along the river and left her with Marie, thinking we would all be in a better humor later." She didn't say anything but left her hands lightly resting on his until Charles cupped her elbow and led her to the doors opening into the theater. He hesitated, his hand on the door. His eyes were red-rimmed and his moustache, usually tidily groomed, was wet and the hairs askew. As he regarded her, his eyes brimmed with tears and he worked a handkerchief from his pocket, rubbing it under his nose. "You don't have to do this, Helena. Georges and I can take care of all the . . . necessities. I've seen her, and no mother should see her child like that."

Giving no sign that she had heard him, she entered the room, her glance instinctively avoiding the table in the center of the room and the small figure on it. Instead she focused her attention on the two men standing next to it. The taller one, with the oiled beard and the air of command, she quickly dismissed, concentrating on the other, more diffident-appearing man who was leaving his companion to greet her. His suit was workaday, although freshly cleaned and pressed, and his hair, notwithstanding being thin and unremarkable in color, had been parted with precision and brushed flat to his head. "Miss Wells," he said in carefully enunciated English, "I am Inspector Michaud." Helena appreciated the fact that he didn't resort to the false delicacy of calling her Mrs. Wells. She
had never been ashamed that she was an unmarried woman with a child, and she sensed no disapproval from Inspector Michaud. What she did sense from him was a preference for accuracy, regardless of how uncomfortable it made others, such as the man, the doctor it must be, behind him, who had grimaced at the "Miss." Inspector Michaud didn't attempt to take her hand, offering her instead a slight bow and then turning and inclining his head in Charles's direction. "What happened to your daughter is insupportable, but rest assured, Miss Wells, I will not rest until I have brought her killers to justice."

Had it come from anyone other than this man who had the mien of a head bookkeeper she would have made some withering comment about letting competence take the place of grand pronouncements, but he had said it with such earnestness and quiet certainty that she believed he would literally go without sleep until Christina's murderers were found. Deceptively mild blue eyes were fixed on her, and she nodded under the inspector's unwavering gaze. The doctor was intoning his condolences, in French, and while Helena had no difficulty understanding the rhetoric of his sympathy, his solemnity irritated her. Charles was reduced to blinking, recognizing only "H.G. Wells" among the doctor's words, and Michaud hastily explained, "Dr. Tailleur wishes to express his deepest sympathy and he regrets meeting the famous H.G. Wells," Michaud again dipped his head toward Charles, "and his sister under such tragic circumstances." With a delicate cough, he added, "We are fortunate that Dr. Tailleur could assist us. He is a physician of much renown, and the investigation will benefit from his expertise." He half-turned toward the doctor and, in much more fluid French, repeated the flattery. There had been a perfunctory quality to it, in both English and French, offered as if the inspector well knew that the doctor's self-importance did not easily suffer the presence of another who could expect even greater deference.

That was why Christina was here, in her own private morgue, rather than sharing space with the nameless whores and pickpockets in the city's great public morgue or being consigned to the care of whatever mortuary Patrice and Georges would have chosen, the Inspector Michauds of the Sureté having already shuttled the investigation to a dusty file room in favor of pursuing the newest one to which they had been assigned. Without the name of H.G. Wells attached to it, the murders of a little girl and maid during a failed burglary would have received no more than a mention in the newspapers and prompted no more than some rapidly sketched signs of the cross from the men and women who read it. The surge of bitterness was automatic, but Helena had only to look over at Charles, once more wiping his eyes and nose with his handkerchief, to feel an equal rush of shame. He had been more father than uncle to Christina, the only father she likely would have ever known, and he had provided her with a constancy that Helena hadn't. Christina had never trailed woebegonely after her beloved Uncle Charles asking him when he was coming back from Spain or 'Rocco. Helena had never fallen short in letting her daughter know she was loved, but that was the only thing she had given Christina in abundance.

There was one other thing she could give her daughter. Her voice sounding hoarse and uncertain, she asked, "May I see her?" It didn't seem an odd question to ask because that body on the table wasn't only Christina, wasn't only her daughter, she was also evidence of a crime, property, in a sense, of the Sureté. Now she also belonged to Inspector Michaud.

"Of course," he said gently. He escorted her to the table, which wasn't large, but Christina was short and slight for her age, and she made it seem bigger than it was. The inspector motioned to Dr. Tailleur to step aside. A sheet had been drawn up to Christina's chin and her head was turned to the side, as if she were still angry with her mother, even now. Helena knew why Christina's head had been placed in that position, what it was attempting to hide; the flurry of telegrams she and Charles had exchanged while she was in Vienna had provided her a few details about Christina's death, but she needed to see it, just as she needed to know everything that had happened that afternoon.

She waited until she was sure that her hand wouldn't tremble, and then she touched Christina's chin
and moved it carefully toward her. She heard the doctor sharply inhale and twist away from the table muttering an imprecation, against her she was fairly certain. Perhaps she was unnatural. Charles uttered a choked "Dear God, Helena, she's not one of your damnable experiments," but she paid him no attention. Christina's skin was cool but not too cool to the touch. In the morgues, bodies were often frozen, stored with ice to slow decomposition. She would have started screaming if she had had to imagine Christina shut away in a drawer or compartment, slowly stiffening, freezing. She bit down on the inside of her lip, hard enough that she could taste the blood, when the other side of Christina's face came into view. Her daughter's face had become a macabre drama mask, one half the little girl with black lashes so long and thick that they seemed to sweep her skin like fringe and a nose more like an adult's than a child's, the bridge prominent and well-defined. Helena had always believed it foretold of a woman of strong convictions, which would have made for an . . . interesting . . . adolescence. But the other half . . . The bones and eye socket were crushed and her temple had been so battered that the side of her head was bowed in.

"Christina favored sleeping on her side. She had been asleep."

"That is my thought," Michaud said as softly. "She never knew they were there."

"She slept through bells, train whistles. Her room was upstairs, away from the kitchen. If that's where they entered, she wouldn't have heard them or the maid." Helena had withdrawn her hand, but her eyes hadn't moved from Christina's face. It was Michaud who pulled the sheet completely over her; Helena seemed unaware of the gesture, her eyes continuing to burn through the sheet. "They were angry," she said. "She hadn't woken. She wasn't any threat, and even if they had wanted to ensure that there was no one who could have heard or seen them in the house, one blow would have been enough for such a small child."

He nodded. "They robbed the wrong house. Down the street from your cousin's home, there is a family, the mother, who came into an inheritance. The rumor was that she had inherited some fine jewels. The house numbers are similar and the family has two young boys, like your cousin and her husband." He hesitated. "They were animals, doing what they did to your daughter and to the maid. But they didn't . . . ."

"They didn't violate her," Helena said calmly, which evoked another "Dear God" from Charles. "Then I will spare them that." She didn't realize she had said it aloud until, with the inching progression of a minute hand on a clock, she turned her head to look at him and saw, not surprise, but a strangely pleading expression.

"You must give me time, Miss Wells."

She didn't reply. Instead she leaned over her daughter and folded the sheet back just enough to reveal the unmarred portion of her forehead. She kissed it and then walked away from the table, her steps gaining speed and authority. Nearing Charles, she said crisply, "We must make arrangements to take her back with us." Pivoting toward Dr. Tailleur, who was staring at her as if she were more monstrous than Christina's killers, she said in a voice that would brook no objection, "You should be through or almost through with your examination, doctor."

"Helena, Helena," Charles was saying. She impatiently spun around. There was much to do, so much to do, and yet he wasn't walking with her to the doors. They had to arrange for a coffin and for the delivery of Christina to the ship and, yes, book passage for themselves as well on that ship to London, whichever ship it was. Not tomorrow, there wasn't enough time, but the day after - "Helena," he said urgently. The pity in his face was worse than the revulsion in Dr. Tailleur's. "Helena, it's too late . . . ."

"What do you mean it's too late?"
"It's been three days." When she continued to look at him in puzzlement, he repeated patiently, "It's been three days... it's too late. Too late to take her with us to London, to arrange for her to be buried there." He drew back his shoulders, ready for her outburst. "Georges and I have already made arrangements for her to be buried here." Almost coaxingly he said, "She'll be in the same cemetery as our great-grandparents. She won't be alone."

She remembered Christina's resentment at having to come to Paris, her refusal to look up from her book as their cab rolled through the streets, her glowering at Patrice and Georges's house, her rudeness to their children, the boys who, in Helena's mind at least, would have become her daughter's boon companions by the time she returned. Of all the things she had imagined about Christina's month in Paris, the landmarks she would visit, the streets she would wander - always within sight of Patrice - her efforts to speak French like a true Parisian by the time she next saw her mother, Helena had never imagined this room or Christina in it. "She hated Paris," she whispered. "I can't lay her to rest in a place she hated, Charles."

"She hated it as children hate," he said, a fond half-smile briefly appearing, "with a great temporary vehemence. You would have come back to find her refusing to leave." He began to rub her arms as if he were trying to warm her against a chill. "The cemetery is very nice, you'll see. It will remind you of the parks in London that the two of you played in... and that little grove close to the cottage you rented last summer. She'll feel at home there. I promise you." Suddenly, she didn't know how, he was the one taking command, hooking his arm around hers, looking over his shoulder and nodding twice, signaling their leave-taking to Michaud and the doctor. A part of her scolded her for the breach in manners she was displaying by not thanking them, but it wasn't gratitude she felt for being permitted to see her daughter's ravaged body and to hear how she died, why she died. Helena knew that when she allowed herself to feel she would feel many things about being in this room, but gratitude wouldn't be among them.

Georges clapped his hat back onto his head as she and Charles came out of the operating theater, the brim so torqued from his worrying of it that the hat didn't rest evenly on his head but slanted to the side, as though he had put it on after an afternoon spent at a brewery. Which seemed much the more appealing place to her than the hotel room that Charles had reserved for her. She could easily crawl into a bottle and never crawl out. Georges took her other arm, and they shuffled, the three of them, down the hallway. Half-an-hour ago, no, a hundred years ago, she had walked unsupported down this hallway, staggering under the weight of what she couldn't comprehend but leaning on no one, because she had never had cause to rely on anyone but herself. She didn't need Charles and Georges's assistance now, but she didn't refuse the courtesy, didn't resist the condescension always at the heart of such gestures. She was no weak, helpless thing in need of a man's greater strength, but her knees felt strangely unhinged and the hallway seemed to stretch into infinity.

They buried Christina the day that she and Charles were scheduled to depart for London. The cemetery was as he had described it, park-like and quiet, and Christina's grave was close to her great-great grandparents'; it was shaded by the boughs of a tree whose trunk was so wide and gnarled that it might have been a sapling when Charlemagne ruled Europe. There had been just the four of them at the gravesite, and afterward she and Charles had returned to the hotel, declining Patrice and Georges's invitation to join them at his sister's home for the noon meal. Patrice and Georges and their sons were staying with his sister and her family, temporarily they said, but they showed little inclination to return to their own home. When they had asked her if they should send Christina's things to her in London, Helena had curtly told them they could feel free to burn every item or to give it all away. She wanted none of it.

When she and Charles arrived at the hotel, she went to her room to pack while he went on a stroll, determined to experience a few minutes of peace or, better yet, forgetfulness. Having never completely unpacked, Helena listlessly stuffed back into her trunk what little she had taken from it.
A knock sounded at her door, and the youth who stood outside it handed her a slip of paper and then remained standing in the doorway until she remembered to give him a coin. The note was from Inspector Michaud asking her to meet him in the hotel's lobby.

He was sitting with military stiffness on one of the benches that lined the lobby's walls. When he saw her, he sprang to his feet to intercept her. As he bowed slightly in greeting, she noticed that the part in his hair was no less straight, and that the hair itself had been subdued by the dint of much brushing to lay close, very close, to his head. Asking her to walk with him in the hotel's garden, he set a businesslike pace toward a side door that let onto an abbreviated but well-tended garden. It offered a gravel path that wound between flower beds in which late summer blooms drooped like sleepy children under the August sun.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait for my brother to return?" Helena believed she could identify every occasion when a man had chosen to discuss a matter of import with her first rather than Charles, her "husband," or the male Warehouse agent with whom she was partnered, and they hadn't been numerous.

Michaud decisively shook his head. "I wish to speak to you." Clasping his hands behind his back as they followed the path, he said, "It didn't take me long after you entered the operating theater to recognize what you were. I had thought until then that it was your brother or your cousin who had asked me to meet with you at the hospital. Of course, one of them had arranged it - I suspect Mr. LeCompte since Mr. Wells's French may not have been up to the task - but you wanted to meet me there." He had offered her no more than a slight upturn of his lips when he commented on the adequacy of Charles's French, and she didn't realize until it was gone that it had been a smile. "For a moment I believed I was there to offer you the platitudes and assurances that every grieving parent wants to hear. But you didn't want those." He stopped to look at her intently. His eyes were bloodshot, and she suspected that he hadn't slept much, if at all, since she had seen him. As he had promised, he was taking no rest. "You're a hunter, Miss Wells, as am I, and you were there to pick up the trail of your quarry."

She didn't attempt to deny it. It was strange to think so, though she had known only strangeness the past few days, but this man with his clerk's demeanor and, apparently, a clerk's devotion to precision knew her better than her brother or even Caturanga. He said quietly, "That's why I asked you then, it's why I'm asking you now to give me time. Give me time to bring them to justice."

"Because justice is what separates us from the beasts in the field?" Her sarcasm beat angrily against the inspector's pale, perspiring face.

He shook out a neatly folded handkerchief and blotted his forehead and cheeks. "Many things separate us from the beasts in the field, including vengeance." The look he continued to give her wasn't diminishing in intensity. "Justice is what separates man from God."

"You need to read your Bible more closely." Her sarcasm was no less harsh. "God, if He exists, may be different from man, but He is not just."

"Being just does not require being merciful or loving," he countered softly. "Justice views us all with a dispassionate eye. I am no more important than you, and you are no more important, before the law, than your daughter's killers." He refolded his handkerchief before putting it in his pocket. "Vengeance takes more than it gives. I hope you don't have to discover that, Miss Wells."

"Then you and justice had best hurry, inspector."
He attended to his duties, Inspector Michaud did, but sending her a brief note every month or two about his progress, or lack thereof, in apprehending her daughter's killers likely wasn't one of them. Helena doubted that other inspectors were so considerate of victims' families. Their duty was to solve the crime, not to inform mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, of developments in the investigation. This was something Michaud did of his own volition, of that she was sure. She couldn't imagine other inspectors confessing, in an English so stiff she thought she could hear it creak, the failure of their efforts unless they were required by their superiors to do so, and no police force would willingly disclose such an abysmal record of an investigation as that of the murders of a maid and an eight-year-old girl during an attempted robbery.

For the first few months, the notes, sent to her in care of her brother (which showed commendable foresight on the inspector's part, at least in that small respect, since Helena maintained no fixed address once she returned to England - without Christina, there was no need), acknowledged that mistakes had been made but reassured her that an arrest or arrests were imminent. The suspects had been spotted in various establishments they were known to frequent, but they had managed to elude capture. A former member of the gang had come forward with information about where his confederates might be hiding, but before he could be questioned more closely by the inspector, he was stabbed to death in a quarrel over a prostitute. Other robberies with similarly violent attacks upon those who were alone in their homes had since occurred, but the surviving victims' accounts were often confused and the reports of suspicious characters loitering in the area turned out to be unfounded.

A few months became six, then 12, then 15. Although Charles delivered the notes to her whenever they met, which was infrequently, by the time the first anniversary of Christina's death had come and gone, Helena was no longer reading them. Charles was, however, and he related to her the most recent mishaps of the investigation despite her increasingly indifferent reaction to them. She had learned all she needed to know when she was still reading Michaud's notes, their names. Lebecque. Poule. Raymond. Lebecque was the organizer, the one who planned the thefts, who brought in the men needed for the job. Poule was his second-in-command, clearly subordinate but no less ruthless. Raymond was Lebecque's nephew, little more than a youth, usually the one who observed a household's comings and goings, identifying the times when the house was empty, or nearly so. Michaud had speculated in one of his notes that it was Raymond who had mistakenly identified the LeComptes as the family recently come into an inheritance, but Helena hadn't cared who made the error, just as it made no difference to her whether Lebecque had killed Christina or had shrugged in resigned acceptance as one of his men emerged, covered in blood, from her bedroom. They were all guilty.

It was ever present, the feeling that she was being honed, worked ceaselessly against a grindstone, the unrelenting force of her rage pressing her against the constant futility of Michaud's efforts to arrest the killers. She sensed that at any moment she might hurl herself, like a spear, into the rundown cafés and saloons, the rented lodgings and crowded apartments of families in which Lebecque and his men were said to congregate, sleeping or drinking or planning their next robbery. She couldn't be any less successful than the Sureté, yet she remained in London despite her increasing frustration, completing her fair share and more of retrievals and working in her off-hours on her time machine. She had always dreamed of the possibility of traveling through time, correcting the errors of the past and ensuring that the future was a continuous improvement upon the present. Developed to its fullest potential, it could make the Warehouse obsolete. One could destroy a pair of pruning shears before they became impregnated with a head gardener's virtually homicidal fit of temper at a subordinate. There would be no need to sequester artefacts like so
many incendiary devices because there would no longer be artefacts, at least none of the harmful variety.

While the perception of time might be befogged by romanticism and religiosity, it was, at its simplest, a measurement, and measurements were a creation of science, not God. If time was, in one sense, the measurement of the motion of objects through space, what would happen to time if such a basic equation were manipulated and motion reversed, time collapsed? Charles, of course, being of both a more moralistic and crowd-pleasing bent had interest in a time machine only to the extent that it served as an instrument for his criticisms of economic and social injustice. She had so tired of the Eloi and the Morlocks, begging him to devote more of the novel to the workings of the time machine itself, but he had refused, claiming that it wasn't a technical manual he was writing. So she had left him to his Time Traveller and his Weena and built prototype after prototype. The temptation to avail herself of artefacts had been difficult to resist; it would take an enormous amount of energy to achieve what she envisioned, more than her jury-rigged generators could produce. But there was no harnessing the power of an artefact, one could only suffer it or extinguish it. The fact that her machines weren't up to the task she had set for them didn't mean that she lacked the proper materials; it meant that she lacked the proper theories. In order to do better, she would have to think better, and that was what she held to through years of failed experiments . . . until Christina died. Then it wasn't that her theories were wrong, the universe itself was horribly, horribly wrong.

She argued her case with Caturanga, pointing out that the regents had permitted her on previous occasions to use artefacts in her experiments. "Those experiments, if successful, would have benefited the mission of the Warehouse," he dispassionately replied. "If memory serves, a number of your inventions have been of use in our work." He paused, giving her a consoling smile. "A great number."

Helena wasn't to be consoled. Why wouldn't a time machine benefit the Warehouse, she demanded. To prevent an artefact of dubious value from being created or to retrieve one before it could fall into the hands of a miscreant, how was that not beneficial, she stormed, pacing back and forth across Caturanga's office. With the exception of the chessboard on a table only slightly bigger than it and which was shoved against a wall to allow him passage from desk to door, there was no hint of the man apart from the senior agent. Perhaps there was no man separate from the agent; she was beginning to think it given how obdurate he was about not approaching the regents.

"Because you're not trying to travel through time, you're trying to raise your daughter from the dead, and there is no benefit to the Warehouse in that." He had the same look on his face as Charles had when she insisted that they take Christina's body back to London for burial, which expressed no impatience but rather an indulgence worse than pity, suggesting as it did that she was ignoring an indisputable truth. "You would put the Warehouse itself at risk trying to resurrect her, and I can't let you do it." He paused again, and this time there was no consoling smile, only a reflection of her misery in his eyes and in the lines of fatigue around his nose and mouth. "I know you've endured much --"

She cut him off, her voice not sounding honed and hard like a spear but broken, as if she might sink onto the chair across from his desk and weep until her tears, like a river, carried the both of them away. "You have no idea of what I've endured."

They never talked of it again. She didn't put aside the possibility of using artefacts to power her time machine, only that she would ask for permission.

Stymied (if only temporarily) in her efforts to produce a functional time machine, she sullenly continued to accept the assignments Caturanga gave her, but the retrievals, in their unrelenting
trafficking in the worst of human behavior -- the cupidity, the utter idiocy -- provided her no relief. Neither liquor nor opium tempted her, and the physical intimacies she had once enjoyed were repellent to her. The fleeting pleasure she would find in another - if she could find it - promised to corrupt the pleasure she could still take in her memories. There was precious little she could remember about Christina that wouldn't ultimately leave her standing next to her daughter's corpse and lifting the sheet from her face. She would not compromise the fragments she had left by forging a spurious connection, no matter how brief, with someone else.

There was no sharp divide between waking and sleeping for her. It seemed to her that she never rested, that she returned from a retrieval to lie in her bed only to rise immediately to go out on another assignment. It seemed equally true to her that she had fallen into some purgatorial slumber that wouldn't end until the world itself ended, that she would never open her eyes until Christina, whole and laughing, was in front of them. So she was as surprised as Caturanga when she entered his office some weeks after their argument to request a leave of absence. She would be staying in Paris for a period of time, she told him. As soon as she said it, however, she realized she wanted nothing more than to go there, wanted it with all the hunger she couldn't summon for food or the company of others or a quiet moment empty of the screams that sounded only in her mind.

"To assist in the investigation," he said finally.

She could have said yes, reminded him that she was one of the best agents he had, that he had ever had, clever and inventive -- because brilliance didn't always suffice in this work -- persistent and tireless. Or she could have shouted in fury that it had been over a year since Christina's death and her killers remained free and then cursed the inspector's incompetence, letting Caturanga assume that she intended to take charge of the investigation herself. Instead she stared at him until he looked down at his desk, hands beginning to knead each other. When he spoke again, he spoke factually, as if she were planning to do no more than tend to her garden, had she one. "You have a week's paid leave. If you're gone for longer than four weeks, we'll find another to fill your position. If you return to the Warehouse after that time, you'll have to apply for reinstatement, and it will go before the regents."

"It won't take me four weeks," she said quietly.

"You'll need to surrender all Warehouse-issued devices," he continued, appearing not to have heard her. "Once you're on leave, you're a private citizen, and we'll take no steps in an official capacity to assist you, should you encounter . . . any difficulties."

"And in an unofficial capacity?" She laughed disbelievingly, sarcastically.

He looked up at her, beneath brows so furiously drawing together in displeasure or, possibly, concern that they seemed to draw his skin taut at the temples. "You'll get no help from us, Agent Wells."

She didn't need his help or the Warehouse's, and she had seen enough of Michaud to know that he would interfere should he learn of her presence in the city. She needed no one's help navigating Paris, more familiar with the haunts of its criminals than the equally charmless area, albeit charmless in a different fashion, in which her cousins lived. More than one retrieval had led her to Paris. As an artefact's power became known, it wasn't uncommon for the artefact to be stolen from a hapless holder and spirited across the Channel to become the latest prized possession of a dissipated royal or a wealthy businessman. A Warehouse agent had to be quick to intercept it as it passed through the hands of various middlemen, and she had tramped the streets prostitutes strolled at night and haunted the crumbling warehouses on the quays of the Seine.

Once she arrived in the city, she rented a room in a "hotel" popular with certain prostitutes and their
clients. The rates charged were laughable for the condition and furnishings of the rooms, few of which contained little more than a bed and nightstand, but Helena knew she wasn't paying for luxuriousness or comfort. She was paying for the silence of the clerk who took her money but not her name and of the cleaning women who would remove the chamber pots, the soiled sheets, and any other evidence of what had occurred in the rooms. She asked for a room close to the back entrance of the building, which added to the price, and she asked for a table and chair in addition to the bed, which also added to the price, but money was of no concern to her. It had meant little to her before Christina's death, other than to ensure that her daughter had the best that she could provide her; it meant even less to her now.

She unpacked the trunk she had brought with her, of a modest size but peculiarly heavy. The clothes within it were not new, unremarkable in style and material, and in dark colors. Having laid them neatly on the bed, she then lifted the bottom panel from the trunk, which revealed only another panel. She felt for a latch and pressed it; removing the extra panel, she viewed the contents of the hidden compartment dispassionately. She had thought of them as tools when she had placed them in the trunk, and she had used many as tools on retrievals, although none of them were among the devices that the Warehouse formally issued to its agents. Her compliance with Caturanga's prohibition on making use of Warehouse-issued devices, despite the fact that several were her inventions or refinements of existing devices, had been meticulous. There was nothing, not the names on her travel documents or the items in her trunk, that connected her to the Warehouse. 

Looking at the tools now, running her fingers along their blades, their sharpened points, their mallet-like heads and claw-like ends, she recognized that they might be considered weapons as well, were, in fact, weapons. She could think of no other way to describe the pistols in the compartment, the knives and daggers, the tubular parts that, once assembled, fashioned a rifle of her own design, which had an accuracy over exceptionally long distances that could be measured in fractions of an inch.

She had justified their inclusion because this was a retrieval she was on, a more complicated and dangerous one, possibly, but a retrieval all the same. She was charged with or, rather, she had charged herself with the responsibility of securing unpredictably malign elements whose presence threatened the safety and well-being of countless citizens. Taking out a very small-barreled pistol, like a derringer but a far more reliable performer, and tucking it into the pocket of her skirt, she had to ask herself, however, how far she would go to "secure" Lebecque and his men.

On the packet across the Channel and on the train to Paris, she had mulled over the best method for flushing her daughter's killers from their hiding places, and the implicit metaphor suggested the most powerful motivation, fear. As for what a lone, seemingly defenseless woman could say to induce that fear, that posed another problem. If the threat of being apprehended by the Sureté wasn't enough to have sent them scattering like mice through the streets of Paris, there was nothing more ominous that she could frighten them with. If only H.G. Wells had written the kind of story so popular among Americans, the Western with its sheriff-hero promising to hang the outlaws or die trying. The specter of a Morlock or Martian wouldn't be enough to frighten Lebecque or Poule. As she had grimaced at herself in the train window, her and Charles's pseudonym suggested an answer that wasn't dependent on fantastical creatures from the future or another planet. It was possible that H.G. Wells could accomplish what Helena Wells couldn't.

The sun hadn't completely set and, for some, especially those who lived and worked on these streets, Paris didn't come alive until nightfall. Opening a metal box that had a lock of her own design, she sorted through her small stockpile of banknotes and francs. She had exchanged money before getting on the packet, but most of it had gone toward renting the room. She would need to exchange a greater amount tomorrow. If necessary, she could wire her bank in London for a letter of credit. Spinning a franc on the table, she thought that invisibility, despite what she and Charles had imagined, did not come cheaply or accidentally. She hoped she would have enough.
Her pistol in one pocket, money in another, she left the hotel to find a certain café, which was better known for the information that was bought and sold over its tables than its meals. The café had gone through a succession of cooks, each as inept as his or her predecessor, which had only convinced her that the proprietors didn't want customers lingering over a dinner or dessert. Nonetheless, she took a seat at a table with uneven legs and ordered a pastry, asking to speak with Pierre. Pierre was one of the putative owners, although she suspected he was merely the face, the unshaven, chinless face of a shadowy group of businessmen, criminals, and politicians who were rumored to have invested in the café, each having his own purpose for trafficking in information. It was possible that Pierre would recognize her from a retrieval that had occurred several years ago, when she and her partner were in pursuit of an artefact that was purported to transform any metal the possessor touched into gold, but she had been heavy with Christina at the time -- "waddling like a duck" her partner had described her in disgust, unhappy at being partnered with a woman, an unmarried one with child at that -- and she had looked very different then. Happy was the word that flitted across her mind, and she bit into the inedible pastry so hard in reflex that she felt her teeth grind against her tongue. It was safer, in all respects, not to let her mind wander while she was in the café.

Pierre emerged from the back, rubbing the skin that sagged and folded in upon itself, falling away from his nubbin of a chin. His eyes narrowed upon seeing her, and he gruffly asked her what her business was with him. He showed no signs that he recognized her.

- I have something of interest to certain people, she said in a fluent French, which wasn't so fluent that she would be mistaken for a native speaker. Pierre wouldn't care; he paid attention to nationality only when it involved currency. - A little girl and a maid were killed in a bungled robbery over a year ago. Their killers have never been caught, and the little girl's family still grieves.

- People are killed all the time and their killers are never caught. How is this of interest to anyone?

- Because the little girl is a niece of a famous English writer, and he is tired of waiting for the Sureté to act. He's hired his own men to find the killers.

Pierre turned his head and spat on the floor. - Tell 'anyone' that he should be worried. The men are here, one was just with me bragging how the writer told them that he didn't care what they did to the killers as long as his niece's death was avenged.

Helena rose, dropping a few coins on the table for the inedible pastry. At the sound of the coins, Pierre rapidly swung his head around and watched her as she placed more coins and banknotes on the table. - Tell 'anyone' that he should be worried. The men are here, one was just with me bragging how the writer told them that he didn't care what they did to the killers as long as his niece's death was avenged.

Pierre looked up and considered the ceiling before looking down to stare at the money on the table. - Who is the writer?

- H.G. Wells.

He shrugged, the name meaning nothing to him. - What do you get from this? He sneered. - What do you care which man is on top of you?

- I always prefer the man with more money. She smiled, but it held no warmth. - If 'anyone' wants me to tell these men where he's certain not to be found, he needs to come see me at --'s hotel. And tell him he's to bring with him three times what you see here.

Helena repeated her story in even less reputable establishments than the café, in saloons and
gaming rooms, dark places along the Seine where customers for various illicit commodities met with their purveyors. At some places she left money, at others her hand never left the pocket in which she carried her pistol. She returned to her rented room in the early morning hours only to drag herself from the bed as soon as the sun rose. She needed to find the brokers with whom she could discuss renting space in one of the warehouses by the river.

She didn't ask herself why needed to rent a space, just as she hadn't asked herself why she had brought a small armory with her in her trunk. Each retrieval demanded its own strategy, although she also never asked herself what her strategy for this peculiar retrieval was. She found an agent who promised her that he could secure her just the space her husband was looking for (it was always easier to negotiate if she said she was acting on behalf of a man). The space was small, but the warehouse was on the bank of the river, just as her husband desired -- he could open the back door, the agent said jovially, and fall into the Seine -- and it was tucked away from the streets. If it was privacy her husband wanted, the agent assured her, it was privacy that he would have. The agent was momentarily at a loss when she asked whether sound traveled easily from the space. Assuming an expression of wide-eyed incomprehension, Helena explained that her husband's work was "noisy." With much nodding of his head, as if he completely understood the nature of the work that she had only seconds before invented for her nonexistent husband, he held a finger to his lips before saying that the space would be like a tomb, that not even the cries of the dead could be heard from it.

A price was settled upon, and she spent virtually the rest of her money, including the money she had taken from her trunk earlier in the day and converted into francs. If she wanted to eat or, less necessary to her survival but a prudent course of action all the same, return to London, she would need to wire for more money. She wasn't sure she was interested in eating or returning to London, but eating was essential to completing the retrieval. So she bought day-old bread from a patisserie and trudged back to her room, in which she ate and thought about the warehouse space she had rented, not admitting to herself that those thoughts, violent and awash in blood as they were, were also more methodical in how the bloodletting would occur than a passing fantasy of revenge would seem to require.

She didn't undress before she went to bed, and she took from her trunk's hidden compartment a medium-sized black metal cylinder with a lens at one end. She pressed a switch in the cylinder's center and a light shone through the lens, albeit weakly; frowning, she started to unscrew a cap from the other end of the cylinder just as the light began to grow stronger. The muscles in her face stopped tensing, but her frown didn't entirely disappear. The illumination should have been better with the design improvements she had incorporated into the batteries. They were smaller, no longer than her pinky finger, but capable of generating and sustaining a stronger current. She had been working on a continuously recharging version but as there were still flaws in its performance, she hadn't packed the prototype, a decision she was beginning to regret as she continued to study the device, which she variously called an electric lamp, an electric candle, or, more prosaically, a light emitter. Charles preferred the term "electric torch"; she thought it overromantic and more than a little gothic, bringing to mind crazed villagers intent on hunting down the witches and changelings in their midst. But regardless of what it was called, the device should cast a better light, the batteries had been fresh. She pressed the switch to turn the emitter . . . electric torch off. The sea air must have degraded the batteries; she should have accounted for it. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Helena reminded herself that solving these sorts of puzzles were no longer her first priority. Why it wasn't working as well as she had anticipated wasn't important, that it worked was.

She turned down the lamp and crossed to the bed, drawing an evil-smelling blanket up to her neck as she lay down on the equally evil-smelling mattress. They would be coming for her, if not tonight then the next night or the night after. They wouldn't entirely believe her story about men hired by a famous writer, but they couldn't afford to dismiss it. They weren't negotiators; they would be
prepared to beat the truth out of her if they couldn't sufficiently frighten her to volunteer it. The gun in her pocket, the electric torch at her side, she waited. Eventually the hotel grew quiet; the prostitutes had shown their last clients to the door and the other lodgers were out on business of their own, gone for the night. There was a heavy step in the hallway and another, a pause, as if the visitor were trying to judge whether he was too loud, and then more steps, lighter ones, but the wood was too old and it continued to creak. The gas jets in the hallway were always on, and although their light was feeble, as she carefully raised herself on an elbow, she saw the faint glow underneath the door disappear as someone stepped in front of it. She lay down again, trying to steady her breathing -- he would expect her to be asleep -- and listened to the sounds of him picking the flimsy lock, a few snicks and then a longer, cautious grating of metal being pushed back against itself.

She heard him enter her room, and she suspected he was letting his eyes readjust to the dark before he advanced. She could make out that he was tall and broad; she would need to be quick and certain of her movements since he could easily overpower her. He crept closer and she could smell him; he reeked of days-old sweat and this evening's rank tobacco. He was shifting something in his hand, a blade most likely. He would want to press her into the bed, ensure that he had covered her mouth, and then dig the blade into her throat, more to scare her than hurt her. The hurting would come afterward. She counted one, two, three, and swept the blanket to the side, pressing the switch on the electric torch and angling it up. The light flickered before it intensified, and she felt a surge of panic, but he was too shocked and then too blinded to do more than curse. Scrambling off the bed, but never relaxing her hold on the torch, Helena took her gun from her skirt pocket and aimed it at him.

- An elephant would have been quieter, she jeered.

Blinking, he took a step or two forward until she leveled at the gun at his chest, cocking the hammer back with her thumb. Since the light from the electric torch was already beginning to fade, he was more easily able to focus on what else she was aiming at him. - You think to hurt me with that toy. He sounded equal parts amused and offended.

- I wouldn't 'think' to hurt you. I would hurt you. The gun is more dangerous than it looks.

He might be slow-witted, but even he couldn't overlook the obvious comparison. He laughed, although there was a note of uncertainty to it. - Just as you're more dangerous than you look. He didn't try to advance toward her.

- Tell the man who hired you that next time he needs to come himself.

He hesitated, as if unsure whether he oughtn't to risk the danger of rushing her. She didn't wait for him to make up his mind; she pointed the gun down and shot one of his feet. The shot was quiet, hardly louder than the click of the hammer being drawn back, and he looked at the floor for a moment as though he were expecting a bullet hole. Then he yelled, more angry than injured it seemed, and she pointed the gun at his chest again.

- The second one goes into your heart or your gut. Either way you die.

The light from the electric torch died completely, and in the dark, she could feel the pent-up violence of his stare before he pivoted on the heel of the foot that she hadn't shot and limped to the door, cursing her without having to take a breath in between. The door slammed shut behind him, and only then did she bend to pick up the blade he had dropped. She could always use another weapon.

She didn't sleep the rest of the night. She wasn't afraid that he would return with reinforcements;
whichever one had sent him, Poule or Lebecque, would be more cautious . . . and respectful. She didn't sleep because she might have let the man who had killed her daughter leave with no more deadly an injury than a minor flesh wound, a graze along his foot. She was on a retrieval, she reminded herself; there was no cause to regret being merciful. And how merciful was it, really, to shoot someone in the foot? She hadn't wanted to incapacitate him - she needed him capable of delivering a message - but she had also wanted to show him, them that she wasn't to be trifled with. Her mission was to capture Christina's killers, not execute them. She was here, as she had told Caturanga, to assist Michaud in his efforts. Yet if that were so, she would have informed Michaud of her arrival, inserted herself into the investigation. In fact, she should be scribbling a note to Michaud now explaining how she was certain, almost certain, that she had Lebecque or Poule, perhaps both, virtually within her grasp. But she didn't write the note, and she fell into a restless sleep just as the sun was rising. She dreamed of shooting her intruder in the other foot, his knees, his shoulders . . . .

It was late afternoon when someone knocked at her door. Shadows were beginning to form in the corners of the room. She was sitting at the table, cutting the pages of a book she had bought earlier in the day. Her pistol, filled with bullets, was in her pocket, but she didn't think she would need to use it. Not this time. She called out to her visitor to enter, and he entered confidently, as if they had been friends for many years and his dropping by to see her was something he did frequently. He smelled better than her visitor of the night before, and though his clothes were a workingman's coarse shirt and trousers, the ring on his right hand was nothing a mere workingman could afford. The band was gold, the stone semi-precious, an amethyst, if she had to guess. He took the chair across from her without introducing himself, without waiting for an invitation.

- How much do you want? He could have been a bricklayer or a street sweeper. His hands, resting on the table, were scarred and calloused. His features were ordinary; he would be hard to distinguish from a hundred other laborers. Nothing about him suggested that he would be the type to command other men. They would follow him only because he spoke for another. He would be Poule, not Lebecque.

- It's not money I want. She sliced and separated pages 85 and 86 of her book. It was a copy of Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. She hadn't bought it to read it.

- Of course you want money. Everyone wants money. Just tell me your price.

- You won't want to pay it. She smiled at him indulgently, as if he were teasing her and, for the moment, she was playing along with the joke.

- Probably not. But we can negotiate. He smiled in return, showing two rows of broken teeth.

- I want you and Monsieur Lebecque to surrender to the Sureté for the murders of Christina Wells and Marie LaPlante. I will deliver you to Inspector Michaud myself.

He uttered a short, disbelieving laugh. - Are you mad? What is this? I thought you had information to sell about the men some Englishman hired to kill us. His sallow complexion grew red, and he knocked back his chair, standing and leaning over the table, hands planted on its surface as though he were ready to leap across it and strangle her.

For a second or two, she stared at her knife. It wasn't really the sort of knife that one would use to cut the pages of a book. It was too long and the blade was too wide. Cutting the pages of a book required little more than a letter opener, and she was using a dagger. With a rapid, downward thrust of her arm, which carried all the force she could muster, she plunged the blade into the back of Poule's right hand, pinning it to the table. It was a very sharp blade made from a very hard steel, and the table's wood was cheap and soft. She had been pricking at it with the blade all afternoon.
Poule screamed. He instinctively tugged at the hand only to scream again. She observed him impassively. - *Bitch. Whore.* His teeth, broken and fragmented as they were, were grinding together.

- *You murdered my daughter.* She watched as tears beaded on his eyelashes. He was in pain. - *Tell me where I can find Lebecque, and I'll remove the knife.*

He was sweating. His cheeks were wet where his tears hadn't yet tracked. - *I'll take the knife out myself, and then I'll make you scream. You'll beg me to kill you before I'm through with you.* He set his jaw, the yellow nubbins of his teeth sliding into the gaps and crevices in the neighboring dentin, and placed his left hand on the hilt of the knife. He was strong enough to pull it out, but his right hand would be useless. Virtually one-armed, he would find it difficult to kill her. She could shoot him to defend herself, but she would rather not.

- *Tell me where I can find Lebecque.* From the space between the bound pages and the column that joined the front and back covers of the book, she withdrew a letter opener. It was dull and nicked, but the point of it was sharp. She paid no attention to Poule's groans as he tried to remove the knife, taking more interest in balancing the letter opener on the palm of her hand.

With a scream that was also a shout of triumph, Poule jerked the knife free. His hand bleeding, arm dangling at his side, he rushed her with the knife raised clumsily in his left hand.

- *Bitch. Whore. I'll gut you now. I'll -*

She stepped into his lunge as if it had been an embrace and jammed the letter opener into his neck. It did have a very nice point . . . .

Screams were nothing that alarmed the hotel's management or its patrons, but a dead body would be considered a violation of the rules. Dead bodies were difficult to dispose of without alerting the police, not to mention the dead person's vengeful family members or friends. No amount of money, had she it to offer, would be enough for her to be allowed to stay. She packed her trunk, which, though heavy, wasn't large, and carried it quietly down the back stairs several hours later. Poule she left in the room, lying where he had fallen, undisturbed except for one small thing, and that small thing, with the ring still on it, had been put in a metal box that she had taken from her trunk. It was a perfect fit. One might think she had packed such a box for precisely such a purpose. Wrapped around the finger was a note with an address.

She had taken the box to the man behind the counter - it might have been the same man from whom she had rented the room or a different one, they all wore the same bored, indifferent expression - and gave it to him with a few francs she had found in yet another of the trunk's hiding places. - *Please see that this reaches Monsieur Lebecque. He'll want to attend to it immediately.*

- *I know of no Monsieur Lebecque.* He looked at her impassively.

She had no more money to give him; she had uses for what little she had left. She had wired to London earlier in the day, but the soonest that a Parisian bank would release funds to her would be tomorrow. She looked down at her shoes, turning alternatives over in her mind. The shoes, not new or well cared for before she had come to Paris, were stained; most of the splotches and streaks were from her walking amidst the refuse that clogged the streets or covered the floors of the hovels she had visited like carpet, but some were fresh and reddish in color. Removing the ring had been a less precise business than she had hoped for. She tilted her head and smiled at the man, hardly a clerk, probably only somewhat less murderous than Lebecque and his men. She didn't intend it to be received as a pleasant smile.

- *There's a package in my room for him. He's expecting it, and he'll want to see that it has remained*
untouched. Before he shows up here tomorrow with his . . . associates . . . I suggest you search your memory because I believe you'll discover that you do know of him. If you send him what I've given you, he'll richly reward you. If I have to find someone else to deliver it, and it arrives late, he'll be very, very unhappy with the helpfulness of this establishment's . . . staff.

His expression was just as impassive as before. There had been no twitch of an eyelid, not even the flutter of a muscle in his cheek, but the francs that she had placed on the counter next to the box were gone as was the box itself.

She spent what remained of the night in the space she rented in the warehouse, using the electric torch to inspect the room. It was small, but its walls were as thick as the agent had promised. Windows had been set into the outside wall that didn't face the river, high up, close to the ceiling. The glass was veiled with cobwebs, but it would let in light. Good, she would need light. There was a door in the back wall, and when she opened it, she saw the uneven planks of a crude dock that jutted into the Seine. The electric torch was beginning to dim, and she shook it in frustration. Light bounced off a lantern set on a chair in a darkened corner. She took a box of matches from the trunk and lit it. It didn't contain much kerosene, but she could purchase or otherwise obtain more tomorrow, and the chair would be useful too. If she looked around the warehouse tomorrow, she would likely find other things she could borrow. A table would be nice, as would a tarp and rope.

She would need to prepare quickly, however. Once Lebecque discovered Poule's body, he would be on a mission to find her. She wanted him to find her but only when she was ready.

What she needed to be ready for she no longer had to ask . . . .

The heat and the pressure were building. Helena thought that if she looked down at her body, she would see it riddled with holes, and if she looked around the laboratory, she would see walls buckling under the force. She felt that she was drenched in sweat, but the arms holding up Christina's gown looked dry. Her arms ached from holding up the gown, but she couldn't release it. Standing in this room, knowing that she was going to be sundered by the energy that the artefacts and that she, as the conduit for the Warehouse, was releasing, she couldn't help but feel that whatever agony she would experience as every cell of her was shattered was better than what she was being forced to relive, experiencing it as she had over a hundred years ago, the freshness of the emotions intensifying the pain of what she couldn't undo.

The gown suddenly dropped from her fingers, and she would have cried out with relief if she had been able to unlock her jaw. But the relief was short-lived because her hands, fingers worming through the items Michaud had hoarded for a lifetime, were unearthing a new object. When Helena saw what it was, she tried to resist pulling it from the tub, but one hand clenched around the hilt and yanked it free, other objects, equally as rusted and pitted, tumbling away. Her jaw unhinged, and she screamed and screamed, the sounds lost in the noise as the laboratory walls began to crack.

Whereas she had lived each minute, each second previously, now the images came at her with the speed of a film shuttled through a projector. A clichéd comparison in the century she was currently living in but a prescient one at the end of the nineteenth century. She had heard of the pioneering efforts in "moving pictures," but neither the concept nor the process interested her; she considered it an adaptation of an existing technology, more or less, and she had seen no useful application of it for the Warehouse. The regents wanted no record of how retrievals were accomplished, and, in this matter at least, she and the regents would have been in accord. The last stage of this special "retrieval" would be completed without witnesses.

The address she had wrapped around Poule's finger was the address of another warehouse some distance from the one in which she was renting space. The note had also provided a date and a time; even if Lebecque and his men couldn't read, they would likely have a working knowledge of
numbers. It wouldn't take them long to figure out the contents of the note. She had also given the same information to Michaud by means of another messenger, a boy who possessed a malnourished child's spindly body but the cynical eyes of an adult. It was possible that Michaud would pay no attention to his note, especially as he would have no knowledge of who had written it (Helena had paid the boy extra to remain silent if Michaud pressed him for details on the note's author). The solemnness with which he had promised that he would arrest her daughter's killers, however, suggested that he would dismiss no information out of hand, regardless of how mysterious the source.

It was also possible that Michaud would capture Lebecque at the other location, but Helena was gambling that Lebecque would not come to the rendezvous alone. He would want to eliminate the threat swiftly and completely; he would come in force. She was also gambling that he would risk the lives of the men he brought with him rather than hazard his own, much like a general would choose to survey the battlefield well behind his forces. He would ensure the safety of his own retreat under the guise that, like a general, it was his strategic genius that made the difference between winning and losing, between leaving a house with bags full of jewels and cash and leaving it empty-handed. To find out if her own planning had been sound, Helena visited the café that was a far more reliable venue for news than for food. Sitting at yet another of its rickety tables, she ordered another pastry and asked for Pierre.

The scene was brief, a glimpse of Pierre's face, as unshaven and as unwashed, but registering a caution when he saw her that it hadn't had before, his wary admission that a "mutual acquaintance" had been rudely surprised by the Sureté, his reluctance to accept another message from her, which consisted of an address, a date, a time, and one word, "seul." When she placed money on the table for him (it wasn't for the pastry), he left it untouched. Perhaps he could sense that it was money she had scrounged from a dead man's pockets.

Another scene, Lebecque, not alone, but accompanied by a youth who was little more than a boy, entering the room at the warehouse -- Helena had left the door open - holding a lantern high with one hand and a gun in the other. The room was filled with the flickering, oily light of several lanterns, and she stood in its center. She carried no electric torch with which to surprise him; she was only what she appeared to be, a slender woman of middling height, past the first blush of youth. A mere woman . . . clutching a wire in the folds of her skirt. The wire passed through a hinge of the door and its other end was tied around the trigger of a rifle, the rifle of her own design, with its long-range accuracy and very sensitive trigger. The rifle itself she had fixed to the top of a chair, a chair cloaked in the shadow cast by the door. The door was heavy, and she had spent more time than she had anticipated oiling its hinges, sanding and scraping its bottom until it would slam shut with the force of a prison cell door. She had experimented several times, letting loose of the wire and then counting the seconds until the door shut, the chair jerked, and the trigger clicked back - she had left the rifle unloaded during the testing, of course. Not perfect, but she was expecting, hoping, she wouldn't actually have to drop her end of the wire.

- Where are these men this writer was to have sent? She noted that Lebecque kept the youth behind him.

- There are no men. She shook her head, smiling. - There is a writer who mourns the loss of his niece but he hired no men to kill you.

- He can mourn your loss as well. Lebecque pointed his gun at her.

- You kill me, I kill your . . . nephew . . . is it? Helena held the wire out from her skirt.

Puzzled, Lebecque instinctively followed its line, letting both arms drop slightly. Raymond,
curious too, edged around his uncle to take a closer look. That was when she fired the tiny pistol she had hidden in her skirt pocket, the bullet expending much of its energy passing through the material of her dress before it grazed Raymond's arm. It would look more serious than it was. Blood was already staining the sleeve of his shirt, and he was crying. Lebecque had let go of his gun and was clamping his hand over the boy's arm. Helena bent to pick up the gun, tensing her hold on the wire. All she had needed was a moment's inattention; it wouldn't do to lose her grip now and shoot them both dead. Not yet.

The next image was as full of color as the previous one had been dark, white flesh streaked with red. Lebeque was tied to a chair, his chest bare. Blood was seeping from several small incisions. Raymond, his wounded arm effectively if amateurishly bandaged, was tied to a chair nearby. He was moaning softly against the gag in his mouth. He wasn't one who would suffer his pain silently, which made him very unlike his uncle. Lebecque hadn't said a word since the . . . interrogation . . . began. Helena was at the table, considering the tools she had laid out on it. There were others that would cause far more pain and far greater injury than the small instrument, very much like a scalpel, she had been using, but she wasn't ready to move to them yet. She suspected she would need them when Lebecque came to the more difficult parts of his confession. With a grimace, she picked the blade up. Identify your enemy's weakness and persist in attacking it. When she drew the blade down the side of Raymond's face, his screams were loud enough to make Lebecque jump in his chair.

- Now tell me, why were you in the LeComptes' house?

And then she was sped, mercifully, forward, but mercifully only because she wasn't being forced to relive every minute, there was nothing merciful in being forced to witness what she had already done and what she had yet to do. She had succeeded in making Lebecque confess, confess in whimpers and sobs and curses and wails that would climb so high Helena could hear them still ringing in her ears. He sat slackly against the chair, his chest so covered in red, bright and dark, that she might have painted it. He was missing an eye and several of his teeth, one ear had been half-severed from his head. Her dress was wet in several places, marking places where his blood had splashed, and her dress was stiff in other places, marking where it had dried. The room was acrid with the odors of blood and urine and sweat.

Her hair had come unbound. It fell into her eyes, which was an irritant, although every time she swept it from her face, she left a little bit of blood on her cheeks and her forehead. She had wiped her hands many times - it was difficult to hold her instruments steady when her hands were slick - but she knew her nail beds were rimmed with dried blood. She would have to take a brush to them later. Her voice was hoarse; she had been taking him through the LeCompte robbery over and over. But as he had begun to scream whenever she saw her take some new instrument from the table, so she screamed when she dug it into his flesh. She hadn't had to use many of her instruments on Raymond after slicing his face. Lebecque had spoken willingly after that, lies at first, but after she had broken one of Raymond's fingers and then threatened to remove one of his eyes, Lebecque had admitted everything about the robbery and the murders, even things she knew hadn't happened. He told her that his men had not harmed Patrice and Georges's two little boys, who had also been in the house, perhaps hoping to placate her. It hadn't placated her, and she had been especially savage in her response.

He had yet to tell her what she most wanted to know, and the interrogation had wound down to this, her question and his reply, repeated over and over.

- Why did you kill my child?

- I don't know.
He had shouted it in defiance, said it with a jeering humor that had him smiling and showing her the gaps where his teeth had been, wept it, but it had never changed. He said it again now, his remaining eye slowly surveying her, from the tangled mess of her hair to the stained hem of her dress. - *I don't know. We hadn't entered that house intending to kill her. We didn't even know she was there. Can you say the same?* His eye looked down at his chest, scored with gouges and cuts. *You keep calling me a beast. Look at me and tell me who's the beast.*

- Why did you kill my child?

- I don't know. Do you want me to say that I'm sorry? I'm sorry a hundred times over. A million times.

- Why did you kill my child?

- Nothing you can do to me will bring her back. You can't bring her back. He hadn't said it derisively or triumphantly from that ruined mouth in that ruined face. He had said it as if he pitied her, as if he, some illiterate peasant from the countryside, knew more than she. He had said it, his one eye dark and staring into her own as Christina's eye had stared at her when she had lifted the sheet.

She didn't know what she held in her hand but she brought it down on him, again and again and again, until his head hung limply on his chest and there was no need to ask him questions anymore. Turning toward Raymond, she saw that he was crying and working his mouth violently against his gag. She hooked her fingers over the cloth and brought the knife through it in a single stroke. He had fainted when he saw the knife darting toward him, and she waited, seeing his eyelids beginning to flutter after a few moments.

He looked up at her, fear fading and a dull, resigned certainty settling over his face. - *I was so angry that day. I was so sure that this was the house with the jewels. Uncle asked me to search the bedrooms, and I saw her. She was sleeping, like a little angel. She was sleeping while I would have to go back downstairs and tell him that I had failed. It didn't seem fair.*

He would have said more, but she gently placed her finger against his lips. She looked at Lebecque's bloodied form, at the boy, at the knife in her hands. Kneeling, she cut the rope that bound his legs to the chair and then she cut the rope that had bound his arms. She stepped back. He stood, wobbling, staggering a little. He spared one agonized glance for his uncle before he began to run. She heard his grunts as he labored to open the door, and then he was gone.

Helena felt her eyes being forced open; she hadn't realized that she had closed them. The cracks in the laboratory walls were growing wider, and there was a rumbling, outside the laboratory, that was growing louder. She had dropped the knife back into the tub, but she couldn't move her feet. It was just as well, she wouldn't willingly move them if she could. Lebecque had been right. She hadn't succeeded in bringing Christina back from the dead, although she had made use of every artefact that she had thought might help her. She had demonstrated no especial cunning in her "borrowing" of the artefacts; she was too obsessed, too frantic, almost, to divert the attention and care that would be required to mask her thefts from her relentless improving of her time machine. Yet neither Caturanga nor any of the other agents had seemed aware that artefacts were missing. It was as if the Warehouse itself were conspiring with her.

Several weeks after she had returned to London, she was called to the office in which the Warehouse's "public" business was conducted. It was a long, narrow room filled with desks that ostensibly were occupied by agents completing reports on goods they had recovered from ships and trains and carts, the latter most often used in the more remote parts of the island, that had been used to transport the merchandise past customs officials. If requested, such reports could be
produced, as could the agents. A secretary was seated on a stool behind a counter at which requests for reports and their agents could be made. The secretary had been an employee of the Warehouse for over 20 years without knowing that it existed. He knew only that he worked for the government, and that days could go by without him seeing or speaking to anyone. He filled his time smoking and reading newspapers. Today, however, he would remember, Helena knew, because today a visitor had arrived, and not just any visitor but one who spoke English with great seriousness, as though an incorrectly conjugated verb would be considered a breach of diplomacy.

His suit had been meticulously brushed, and the part in his hair was ruler-straight. She felt unkempt in his presence and recognized that it was no exaggeration on her part to think such. When she slept, she slept on the floor next to her time machine, and she hadn't changed her dress in days. "Inspector Michaud," she said gravely.

"Miss Wells," he inclined his head slightly, in deference to being in the presence of a woman, although Helena waved her hand irritably at the courtliness of the gesture. Agent, woman, human, she was none of those things any longer. "I thought to bring you the news in person. Your daughter's killers... they have been brought to justice. Guillaume Poule's body was found abandoned in an alley. Jacques Lebecque's body we found in the Seine." She said nothing. A small smile did nothing to lighten his expression. "I didn't think you would be surprised. Monsieur Poule was stabbed in the throat, but Monsieur Lebecque, he had been savaged before he died."

The secretary was staring at them, mouth hanging open. A single look from Helena sent him scurrying to a corner of the office in which he pretended to be busy straightening the papers on a desk. "He must have enraged his killer. Have you captured him yet?" Helena pushed a tendril of hair behind her ear. It felt greasy to the touch, and it smelled of burnt wire.

"No." Inspector Michaud revolved his hat in his hands. "We have heard reports of a woman, not unlike you in her appearance, asking after his whereabouts several days before he was fished from the river. Have you recently been in Paris, Miss Wells?"

"I have had no occasion to go there, Inspector. It is the place where my daughter was murdered. I have no desire to visit it."

He nodded. "I received a message informing me that I might find Lebecque and his men at a certain warehouse. It was written in a feminine hand, and I have kept it. I was thinking of asking the secretary for a copy of a report you would have written. Should I ask him?"

"You can ask him." Helena shrugged. "But I doubt that my reports will help you."

"Probably not," Michaud conceded. "The note I have, it has just a few words. But, no matter how repugnant Messieurs Poule and Lebecque were alive, their deaths are equally repugnant, and their killer or killers must be apprehended. I have to try, Miss Wells."

"I understand." She did understand and, if by some chance, he would amass enough evidence to arrest her, she wouldn't resist.

He inclined his head again, and she knew that he was done with her, for now. He gingerly set his hat on his head, he didn't want to disturb the part. "I believe I may have told you that I have a daughter. She is still young enough that when she suffers bad dreams, she cries out. She doesn't want her mother to comfort her, she wants me, and I sit with her until she goes back to sleep." He hesitated. "Tell me, do you still hear your daughter crying? Or have you been able to comfort her?"

"I fear she will always cry, Inspector. There is nothing I have done that has made her stop."
His gaze softened. "Then I am truly sorry for you, Miss Wells."

She hadn't seen him again. Perhaps he had, over time, accumulated sufficient proof to arrest her, perhaps Raymond had sought him out, once his terror had diminished, to identify her as his torturer and his uncle's killer. Perhaps Michaud had returned to the Warehouse and demanded that she be released to his custody. She would never know. As the surface under her feet began to fissure, her hands seemingly glued to the rim of the tub, she thought that Michaud had at last succeeded. It was a rough justice to which she had been brought, but she was here to serve the end of her sentence.
Chapter 22

Only now was she hearing the report, the flat crack of the firing, long after Sam had crumpled to the ground, as if the bullet had been shot from the gun faster than the speed of sound. She was running, she had been running since he stepped backward, hands held out in an almost supplicating gesture, as though he had intruded upon something he wasn't supposed to see. First one leg had given way, then the other. He had been early. They were to have pincered the counterfeiters between their two teams, and his team had jumped too soon. Another agent was already bending over him, pressing his hands against Sam's chest. Run faster, run faster, she urged herself. Her breath was coming in ragged bursts. Run faster, goddammit. She fell to her knees beside him, watching the blood spread from a small, dark hole just to the left of his sternum. Earlier in the morning, her head had been resting on that chest, her breath, not ragged then, gently stirring the hair that grew in the slight vee.

They had been talking about what they were going to do that evening. Sam had wanted to go out to dinner, special occasion, he had said, winking at her. She wasn't sure what merited one. Their first year anniversary was still a couple of weeks away. Maybe the divorce had been finalized, but that required papers to have been filed, and she was pretty sure that neither Sam nor his wife had yet taken that step. She hadn't wanted to go somewhere nice, she remembered whining, but Sam had only winked at her again, saying, Trust me, bunny, you'll be glad we did. She had sighed, parting a few chest hairs and kissing the warm skin beneath. She didn't like the endearment, she never had, but it seemed such a petty thing to complain about, just like complaining about dinner. She loved Sam, she really did, except that sometimes she wished for, wanted -

With the part of her mind that was still doing the job, analyzing the factors, noting that the agents who were pursuing the counterfeiters were already too far behind them, she examined the wound that she and the other agent were vainly trying to plug with their hands; it looked like a flower, the expanding blood stain on his shirt, almost like something Georgia O'Keefe would have painted, large petals and a dark, dark center. Blood was continuing to well between their fingers, but more slowly. Sam's eyes were growing glassier. He hadn't recognized her, he hadn't spoken, but that was all right, she could do the talking, Hold on, Sam, help is almost here. Hold on. But he couldn't hold on, and the other agent was removing her hands from Sam's chest and squeezing them gently, Stop, Myka, you can stop now.

. . . They were frantically looking for something to stop the bomb, she, Pete, Artie, and Helena. Except that Helena wasn't with them, she was standing a few feet away, head down, fingers flying over some object. Christ, that was so like her, to be distracted by something that momentarily caught her interest. She was about to scream at Helena to stop being so goddamn curious and help when she heard something snick into place above them, like an umbrella being opened, but she couldn't see anything that was going to protect them from what was about to rain down. Then she saw Pete hold his hand out and press against the air, except that it wasn't air, his hand wasn't going through it. Bewildered, he looked at her, and she looked, in turn, at Helena. Helena was smiling at them, a sad smile but a relieved one, too, and she thought she had never seen Helena so peaceful, so happy . . . so beautiful. She pounded on the inside of the shield, but it was surprisingly resistant. Thank you, was that what Helena was saying? Thank you? She and Sam had had so much time, and they had said nothing, nothing important. She and Helena had so much to say, and they had no time. Thank you. Was that all Helena had to say to her? Give me more time, Helena, give me more time. Give me more -

........
She had crawled under the porch as far as she could. They wouldn't think to look for her, not for a while. They would think she had run to Auntie Cora. Daddy didn't like her spending so much time with Auntie Cora, who wasn't her aunt, wasn't anyone's aunt, but who had been called Auntie for as long as anyone could remember, including her daddy. Auntie Cora claimed she had second sight, which Daddy thought was the mark of the devil. The devil had lots of marks, and now she had been marked by him, too. She carried the mark of Cain because she had killed her brother. Her forehead would have the same red streak that had appeared on Howard's after she had thrown the iron at him. Auntie Cora might have second sight, but she couldn't raise people from the dead. Auntie Cora couldn't help her now; there would be no more talk of how special she was, how she would see wonders that God would show no one else, how she would live to a great age. She had thrown the iron at Howard and seen it strike him. She had seen the blood. He was dead, and the white men were going to come and send her far, far away. It didn't matter that no one would miss Howard except Mama, she had committed a horrible sin, and God would punish her.

She heard scrabbling in the dirt; a huge, dark form was trying to wiggle underneath the porch. A bear. God wouldn't have a chance to punish her because a bear would eat her first. "Reenie?" That was her daddy's voice. He didn't sound angry. He sounded worried. She hugged her knees to her chest. Maybe if she made herself very small and was very quiet, he wouldn't see her. "Reenie, it's all right. Howard's going to be fine. He's going to have a sore head for a bit," Daddy chuckled, "but he'll be fine." Then he sounded very stern. "Irene Esther Vaughn, I can see you."

He was determined to squirm his way to her, digging his elbows into the dirt and pulling himself forward, occasionally bumping his head against the planks of the porch above. Just because Howard was alive didn't mean God was going to forget about punishing her. She asked warily, "Are you going to let the white men take me and send me to jail?"

His head jerked up and collided with wood. "Goddamn. Why would I let the sheriff take you?"

"Because I wanted to kill Howard. He made me so mad, Daddy, calling me a bookworm and saying he was going to stomp on me and squish me like a nightcrawler."

Her daddy laughed. "If God went around striking everybody dead who wanted to murder his brother at one time or another, there wouldn't be anyone left." He sobered. "You have to learn to rein in that temper of yours, Irene. That's how the devil finds his way into our hearts, and once he's there, it's hard to get him out."

He was close enough now that he could stretch out next to her; he was too big to sit up. Mama said he was naturally big, tall and broad, that his family would have been warriors way back in Africa. Her grandmama, her mama's mama, always sniffed when she heard Mama talk admiringly of how big and strong Daddy was, saying, "I don't know about that, but his appetite is sure unnatural." Daddy smelled of sweat and the fields. He had been called to be a pastor, but he could preach only on Saturday nights and Sundays; the rest of the week, he worked Mr. Abernathy's cotton fields just like everyone else. She liked being close to him, feeling the rough material of his shirt and smelling the faint tang of mint on his breath. Her daddy didn't smoke or chew tobacco like other men did. He chewed mint leaves because he said no one should be spreading the word of the Lord with breath that smelled like the devil.

"What if the devil is already in me, Daddy? What if I can't get him out?" She burrowed into him fearfully.

"God forgives anything, Reenie, except refusing his love and forgiveness. Let him in and he'll cast the devil out." Daddy was resting his chin on the top of her head. It was big and solid, like the rest of him, and pushing her head into her neck, but she would never ask him to stop holding her.
Daddy might think he was puny against the devil, but she knew better.

"But what if, Daddy? What if God doesn't forgive me?" To Daddy, God was something real, something he could almost reach out and touch, but to her, God was like the clouds that piled on the horizon in the summertime, dark and towering and promising all sorts of trouble. Sometimes, although she would never tell her daddy this, she had a hard time telling the difference between God and the devil.

Then he was whispering into her hair, "Even if God doesn't forgive you, baby, I always will."

He was drawing her into him even tighter, and Helena couldn't breathe. She felt she was twisting her head around, although she knew she wasn't moving. The eyes, dark and knowing, were Irene's and then they were not; they were immeasurably colder, remote. The voice, too, had changed, still a whisper but carrying a note of command. Hold on. It was Myka's voice, Hold on, and then it wasn't. It wasn't a single voice but thousands, millions of them coursing through her, laughing, crying, raging, and above them the sounds of rock tumbling, crashing. The ground beneath her tilted up, and the table tilted down, the tub and all that remained of who she had been in another time, in another place, disappearing into a yawning hole. She would disappear into that hole soon enough, and while a part of her welcomed the fall, there was another part of her that was begging, Give me more time. So foolish to think that she had been given too much of it when there would never be enough. She thought she could hear Myka's voice crying above all the millions of voices, Hold on, and whether Myka was crying it to Sam or to her didn't matter. Helena held on.

. . . The sky was gray. She was cold. Oh, and she hurt, she hurt as if some malevolent force, pretending to save her, had dropped her from a very great height. Very carefully, she lifted each finger for a second before moving onto the next. She flexed her toes with the same care. Gingerly she pushed herself up to a sitting position, balancing herself on her hands, and surveyed her chest, her arms, her legs. No gaping wounds, no broken bones poking through her skin. Her clothes were more or less intact, a few tears here and there. She was sitting in a field, but there was nothing but weeds as far as she could see, no buildings, not even a plaintively mooing cow. That wasn't completely true. Far off to her left, she could see plumes of smoke. Not entirely certain that all of her bones were attached - they had absorbed a lot of punishment over 148 years - she rolled onto her knees and used the ground to lever herself up. She could stand, that was progress, and she could walk, which was even better, although she felt that each step was enough to jar her head off her shoulders. At her current pace, Helena figured she might make the smoke, what was left of the old Farraday plant, she surmised, by nightfall.

She hadn't stumbled far - and stumbling was all her disarticulated joints were allowing her to do - when she spotted an SUV, not black and not government-issued, bouncing across the field toward her. She was hopeful that the passengers were friendly, or, at the worst, gawkers come to stare, open-mouthed, at the site of an explosion, but it was possible that they were scientists who had worked for Jaffee, those not rounded up or on the run, who were anxious to find out what had happened to their laboratory. Helena knew she had no cause to grumble, again having survived something that should have killed her, but if the Warehouse had decided to spare her, it could have made for a softer landing; as it was, her fight or flight response was closer to vociferously argue or creep away. If the people in that car were intent on harming her, she could do little to prevent it.

The SUV juddered to a stop half a football field away. The passenger side door opened and a dark head popped above it before quickly disappearing. Helena might not have been able to hear what was being said, but as the door was flung open and the man jumped out, she would recognize Pete's flailing arms anywhere; they punctuated his victories at Call of Duty, his dismay upon finding an empty Doritos bag, and, apparently, his consternation that his Good Samaritan wouldn't come any nearer to a potential terrorist or, conceivably, the radiation-poisoned survivor of a
thermonuclear blast. The car door slammed, and Pete started running to her. Helena could only increase her pace from stumbling to shambling, but she was able to curl the fingers of one hand and hold the thumb and pinky to her ear. "Myka! Is she all right?"

Pete hiked his shoulders and held out his arms in the universal sign for utter incomprehension. God, he was an idiot. How Myka could have married him, let alone stay married to him for seven years - but she was laughing maniacally and hobbling as fast as she could all the same. He swept her up and then immediately dropped her to the ground, backing away in horror. "I'm so sorry for hugging you like that. Are you okay?" Bloody idiot, he had just compressed what few intact vertebrae she had left. "We were out there on the interstate, and there was this 'cra-a-ack' and then a 'whoosh.'" In demonstration, Pete puffed out his cheeks and exhaled a long breath, then flung his hands up. "I told the agents to take Mata Hari back. I'd flash my badge and commandeer a car to come back here."

Helena squinted at the sky. It wasn't much darker than when they had entered the grounds of the plant, and night fell early this time of year. If Pete's recounting was accurate, she hadn't been in the underground laboratory for very long at all, but it had felt like - it didn't matter now. "Have you called the hospital to find out about Myka?"

"No, I mean, we were just out there when all this happened." He searched his pockets for his phone. "You look like crap by the way, like you might have gotten blown up or something." His smile was uncertain. He stared at her for a long moment before he suddenly pulled his shirt over his head and awkwardly tied it around her shoulders. "This isn't much, but it should keep you a little warmer." Shivering in his t-shirt, he continued patting his pockets, finally digging his phone from one of them. He looked at the screen before looking at her. His eyes might have been watering from the cold, but Helena didn't think that was the cause. "I'm afraid, you know, afraid that all this," he waved his hand above his head, "that it didn't work. You somehow survived that fireball, H.G., and it was just . . . massive. You should see the crater. There's nothing left of any of those buildings, they're all gone. I'm terrified that your going all Spock wasn't enough to save the Enterprise. I'm not sure I'm ready to call Claudia yet."

Bloody idiot, Helena thought fondly. She lightly ran her hand along Pete's arm, feeling the goosebumps. "When you're ready."

He blew out another long breath and squared his shoulders. He pressed the screen. Helena heard a click and then an ear-splitting squeal as Pete held the phone away from his ear, "Omigod, it wasn't Linda Blair from The Exorcist good, no levitation, no spinning head, but she's back, our Myka's back, Pete."

Helena didn't hesitate, grabbing the phone from Pete's hand. "Let me talk to her, Claudia," she demanded. "Put Myka on, I need to hear her voice." It had worked, her desperate, frankly harebrained, scheme to uncouple an artefact, to separate it into its component parts, the object and the emotion melded to it. Her goal hadn't been to replicate the power but to release it. She had conducted her own reverse engineering in the hopes that further destabilizing the 'artefacting' process (now there was a mate for 'terroristic') would finally prompt the Warehouse itself to act, to reabsorb the energy that Jaffee and his friends had hoped to control for themselves. She had had the desire more than the expectation that the Warehouse's neutralizing of the shadow Warehouse would free Myka's mind from the overwhelming power of hundreds of artefacts, thousands of them - but now that her gambit had worked, she didn't trust it. She wanted to hear Myka speak, say her name, say anything. She didn't sink to the ground, but she wobbled, first to her left and then to her right, before Pete shot out a hand to steady her. "Myka," she insisted.

Claudia emitted another squeal. "Frak, H.G., how did you do it?"
"I jammed a knife into a toaster," Helena said impatiently. "Now let me talk to Myka."

"As soon as she opened her eyes and said your name, they were shooing everybody out of her room, me, Drew, everybody. They let Vanessa stay, I guess, but -"

"Myka asked for me?" After assuring himself that she could stand on her own, Pete had started walking back to the SUV, so Helena had no one to stop her swaying from side to side.

"Who else?" Claudia said.

But that was before. Before today, before she and Myka and, yes, Irene, had swapped memories in the Warehouse's version of a Vulcan mind meld. If she had been privy to Myka's greatest sorrows, there was no reason to think that Myka hadn't been a witness to hers, watching her hunt down Poule and Lebecque with murderous fervor . . . . "How did she sound?"

"Sound? Like she had been in a coma. Just get back here, and you'll have all the time in the world to make sure she's okay." Helena could hear background noises, more voices talking, inquiring anxiously, including Claudia's, asking "Can we see her now?" Then Claudia's voice, loud in her ear, excited, "They're letting us back in. Hurry up, your girlfriend's waiting."

Helena crossed her arms over her chest, phone held loosely in her hand. She felt colder now than when she had woken to find herself in the middle of weeds and brownish clumps that she could only hope were dirt. Hugging herself, she hissed as a torn shirt sleeve slid over her skin. That was an ugly gash she had on her elbow, but she couldn't recall how she had gotten it. Maybe she had cut her arm in the laboratory, maybe she had scraped it against the ground in her crash landing. Pete was loping toward her, gesturing at her to join him at the SUV. "I've convinced Wayne back there that you're not out to blow up Washington D.C. Let's get out of here before the feds show up."

She looked at the plumes of smoke, flat and wide at their tops and tapering to points, like nails. Nails in the coffin of Jaffee's grand plan. A cliché, but then she hadn't put her hand to any serious writing in over a century. Barely visible above the grass at this distance was a line of black ants marching toward the smoke. But they weren't ants, they were black SUVs, most certainly government issued. "We're too late."

One of the ants broke formation, having sighted their Good Samaritan's SUV, and roared across the field to intercept them. Helena hoped that, Wayne was it?, had the good sense not to try to escape. She raised her arms and waved them, crossing her wrists above her head, as if to suggest that she and Pete were a pair of rubberneckers who had encountered car trouble. They were all hustled into the government-issued SUV, including Wayne, an amateur photographer wearing a cap with an embroidered FBI decal glued front and center. Oh, that would help them immeasurably, Helena thought sardonically as they jolted their way to the ad hoc command center, three SUVs parked in a rough semi-circle with their cargo doors open and agents at laptops squatting inside. The crater was some distance away and already partially ringed with law enforcement, but Helena understood what Pete had meant when he said everything was gone. There was no building left standing, not even a stray piece of concrete left to mark where one had been. All had been sucked into the explosion as though the Warehouse had perceived its rival as nothing more than crumbs to be swept off a table.

Although the agent in charge was no less granite-jawed than Major Lowry, she had one of the agents scrounge the SUVs for a blanket that Helena gratefully draped around her shoulders and an extra jacket for Pete. That courtesy, however, was the only one she extended, and she seemed no more inclined than Major Lowry to settle for Helena's explanation that they, Wayne excepted, were Homeland Security agents on a classified assignment. While Pete adopted a different approach than Myka's curt professionalism, his summoning of the always dubious Lattimer charm
failed to soften Agent Anderson. "Seriously," he was saying, "can't we get out of the cold, stop at the nearest Mickey D's, and hash this out over coffee? Maybe a Big Mac or two?" He smiled disarmingly. "Okay, so maybe you're a grilled chicken sandwich kind of woman, I can work with that, but we're all basically playing on the same team."

Anderson stared at him impassively before being called over by a couple of her agents. Pete quirked an eyebrow at Helena. "Maybe I read her wrong, maybe she's on your team."

Helena tugged her blanket closer. "I have no team, but your problem is that you have no game."

He leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. "How was I going to live without your constant insults?"

Anderson ended her discussion with the other agents and pointed to Helena and Pete. "That was Homeland Security. We're to bring you in." She pointed to Wayne. "You're free to go as soon as you give us the memory card to your camera." Wayne looked as if he might protest, but, after glancing from the shivering, blanketed Helena to Pete, almost as miserable in a windbreaker too small for him, he appeared to decide that capitulation was the wiser course of action.

Helena's hopes that the order to bring them in was just some interagency posturing before the deputy secretary stepped in to release them died as soon as she saw Dave waiting for them. He was outside the same room in which they had interrogated Suzanne. "Sorry," he murmured to her as he followed them into the room, "but my boss has a boss who wants answers about what caused an explosion strong enough to have rattled the windows of the Oval Office."

She and Pete were questioned, both separately and together, far longer than she had been in the cavern. If she had re-experienced months, years of her life in less than an hour, the Warehouse worked no similar temporal magic here. Although she was repeatedly asked if she had detonated the buildings, a question to which she as invariably rolled her eyes and sarcastically remarked, "Yes, with the convoy of explosives that I had brought with me," the more serious response she provided also never changed. She acknowledged that she had been charged with ensuring that Jaffee's secret "artefact factory" was shut down, but that she had done nothing more than walk through the rooms. "Because every inch of space not filled with objects considered artefacts was filled with World War II-era munitions. What they thought to do with them, I couldn't say, but I realized that they were extremely unstable. I was lucky to escape before the 'fatal spark' was provided." At this, her 17th iteration by her count, Dave's gaze was no less opaque than it had been at the beginning, but he suddenly clapped his hands and concluded the interrogation.

"I think we've gotten enough for now. The site may yield additional clues, and Agent Wells may have more to tell us when she's had a chance to rest."

Homeland Security didn't need to know how the laboratory was destroyed, only that it was gone. No one needed to know what had happened. The facts of her life were a Warehouse record, but the grief and horror she had suffered, and had caused, were hers alone. Why the Warehouse had decided to save her she might never know, but she figured it wasn't her place to explain why the Warehouse did anything. If the Warehouse wanted to explain why it had flung her far from the explosion, then it could manifest itself as a burning bush or the four horsemen of the Apocalypse or Dumbledore and explain away. But she would remain silent. Helena wouldn't have been surprised if her willful refusal to provide details had guaranteed that she and Pete would be taken to a holding cell, but instead, Dave walked them out to a black SUV, instructing the driver, an agent identical to all the others in his conservative haircut and conservative clothes, to take them to George Washington University Hospital. Once more Dave was murmuring in her ear, but his voice held no apology this time. "You'll be providing me with a report later, Helena, that includes everything you left out today."
She made no acknowledgment other than to nod, her mind already taking her to Myka's room where she would find out exactly how much Myka had seen of the deaths of Poule and Lebecque. She took no consolation in the fact that it was late at night and that Myka might be asleep. No one slept in a hospital unless drugged unconscious; if it wasn't the blinking lights and the officious noises of the monitors, it was the nurses entering with medication or performing status checks. Myka would be awake, if not alert, but rarely was Myka awake and not alert. During the interrogation, an agent had provided her with pants and a shirt, and she had been allowed to clean herself up as best she could in a restroom. She wouldn't be walking into the hospital looking like she had been pulled from a collapsed building, but the clothes clearly weren't her own and, though soap and water had removed the grit, the hasty wash had only made her scratches and cuts all the more visible. The ill-fitting clothes and scratches she could breezily dismiss, what she had no story for - none that Myka would believe - was the haunted look in her eyes, which she had been unable to scrub away and which told her that, despite the Warehouse's decision to spare her, it hadn't saved her, not really. Wherever her daughter still lay in a makeshift morgue, wherever Lebecque, tied to a chair, shouted his defiance, she was there too.

She had assumed that the only artefacts whose emotions she could release would be her own, but she had been focused on the energy generated by the emotions, not on the emotions themselves. Regardless of how energy was created, it was still energy, subject to certain laws. If she were going to be torn apart trying to destroy the replication that Jaffee's scientists had invented, she would be torn apart the way matter was typically torn apart when it encountered a massive surge of energy. She should have realized that her spirit, her soul, whatever it was called, had always been frailer than her body, more subject to breaking. The rage and despair of the years following Christina's death had been too strong for her; released the moment she had held the fraying and rusty remains of her history, they had overwhelmed her once more.

Pete was holding the elevator for her. "C'mon, Helena, get in. You're finally going to see for yourself that she's all right."

But she isn't, she can't be after everything that has happened, and neither am I.

There were a lot of people in Myka's room this late, but they parted, clearing a path for her to the bed as soon as Helena crossed the threshold, Claudia, Abigail, Vanessa, Artie, Steve. Drew was curled up at the foot of the bed asleep, and Helena threw him an envious glance. Myka was sitting up bolstered by several pillows behind her back, her expression revealing all the anxiety that Helena was feeling. Helena stopped, confused. Revulsion, disbelief, anger, horror, any of those, all of those she would have expected, had been expecting, but not this anxious regard, as though Myka were preparing herself for a proper Victorian chastisement, complete with fusty references to what befell the ancient Greeks when they dared the wrath of the gods.

Myka tilted her chin. "I had to solve the puzzle," she said, her voice cracking.

"Leaving me to save the day?" From somewhere Helena mustered a theatrical note of outrage.

"Because you were the only one who could." Myka tried to smile, but she was biting her lower lip too hard for the smile to gain purchase. She impatiently brushed the back of her hand across her cheek.

Still bewildered, Helena sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Myka to her as everyone filed from the room. Myka wasn't only crying, she was weeping without restraint against Helena's shoulder, saying "I'm sorry" over and over as Helena stroked her back and kissed her hair. Helena knew that she should be the one crying, prostrate on the floor in her case, and pleading for forgiveness. Perhaps that would come later when Myka was more herself, when she realized or remembered
what she had witnessed. Perhaps this was the Warehouse sniggering at the trick it had played, rescuing her only to have Myka renounce her, in which case Helena would have preferred to have been left in the cavern.

Lifting her head, she searched the room, hoping that Irene might be making one of her unannounced visits because she could use some gnomic wisdom right about now, but she saw only Drew wrinkling his face in his sleep, sensing that something important might be going on but not so important that it required him to wake up. "I knew that if you got to her first," Myka was muttering, her breath hiccupping between the words, "I couldn't save you, but if I got to her first . . . you could save me. I'm so sorry, Helena, to have scared you like that." Suddenly her arms were around Helena squeezing her so hard that Helena thought her bruised ribs might surrender to the pressure and break. "But there was no way I was going to lose you."

Irene had told her that she had almost passed Myka over for the Warehouse because, as intelligent and competent an agent as she was, she wasn't special. Then something changed her mind, and though Irene hadn't been specific about what it was, she said she had realized that what set Myka apart was her fearlessness in doing whatever it took to save the ones she loved. Irene may not have seen Myka's frantic race to save Sam until today, but Helena had no doubt that it had been the genesis of Myka's resolve to be the first to the rescue. Having been too late once before, Myka would never be late again. Run faster. Helena squirmed farther onto the mattress, balancing herself on her side and Myka, knocking pillows to the floor, curved into her. Their feet nudged Drew but he only sighed and inched closer to the bottom of the bed.

"Myka, you were dying, and I had a single half-assed idea." Her voice was the one that was cracking, breaking.

"You needed only one."

"The right one," Helena grumbled . . . softly.

"When it counts, you always come up with it."

"Myka, when I was trying to undo what Jaffee's scientists had done, I saw Sam. I saw him being shot, and I saw you running to him. I saw my own life, too." Helena hesitated. "We were connected for a time when I was in the laboratory where the replication had taken place. I need to know - what did you see?"

"We've always been connected, Helena, even when we thought we weren't," Myka said. Her words had dragged, caught in an opposing current, and her eyes were almost closed. "It's not the Warehouse's doing, it's us. We'll talk, but for now, I just want to be with you. Is that all right?"

All right for now. Maybe not all right after they really talked, but Helena would take their momentary all rightness and enjoy it. She relaxed against the warmth of Myka's body. She wasn't ready to shut her eyes, she didn't trust what she would see, but she could look at Myka and Drew, and that was almost as peaceful as sleeping.

In the morning, there was no time to talk. With the unerring accuracy children have for divining the first hint of sunrise, Drew had awakened and crawled in between them, displaying a similarly uncanny ability to squeeze himself into a millimeter gap, mainly by aggressive wriggling that had Helena grabbing at a storage cart to keep herself from falling out of the bed. Drew settled next to her and, after a collision with her cheekbone that might have been meant as a kiss, announced that he was hungry.

"No, 'Welcome back, Helena,' no 'I'm glad you're okay'?” She recognized that her giving him a hug
that was more a clamping of his head to her chest - any true use of her arm would have sent Myka off the other side of the bed - undercut her complaint, but she didn't care. He was giving her Pete's silly grin with a certain wide-eyed look that was all Myka.

"Of course, I'm glad you're okay, but you were going to save my mom. You had to be okay. That's the way things work, 'lena." He frowned at her as if she were the child. His confidence was completely misplaced, but she wasn't going to argue him out of it. She would simply accept it, just as she had accepted Myka's sleepy reassurance the night before that everything was all right. The goodness of this moment with Drew and a restlessly mumbling Myka might disappear in the next, but it was hers to hold for now.

Even though Pete came to claim Drew for a "manly breakfast" in the cafeteria, his claiming of his son was a protracted process, involving multiple hugs of Myka, a long recounting of how he had found Helena wandering in a field that was "like practically in another state," and, from Helena's point of view, exceedingly tedious reminiscing about several close calls he and Myka had experienced on retrievals. After enveloping Helena in a bear hug or two, "just because I'm so freaking happy," which had Myka urging him on with a wicked enthusiasm, Pete finally backed out of the room only to usher in a team of specialists who decreed that they needed to run more tests on Myka.

"Never saw anything like it," one volunteered to Helena. "I've seen people recover from seemingly irreversible comas before but not like she did. She was a little wobbly but she would have tried to leap from her bed if we had let her."

Myka hitched a shoulder in modest acknowledgment, but there was nothing hesitant or unsure in the gaze she directed at Helena. Not so much "Hold on" this morning as "Wait until I get you home." Helena waved as they trundled Myka, firmly told to stay in her bed, out of the room; she picked up an ancient fitness magazine and collapsed into a chair prepared to wait out the rest of the morning. Which was when Vanessa entered with a wheelchair and a stern expression, pointing at the wheelchair. "Don't think you're escaping without an examination."

"Don't you have to have hospital privileges to be threatening me with tongue depressors and blood pressure cuffs?"

"You're not actually asking me for my bona fides, are you? Get in the chair."

Vanessa might have worked at the hospital for years based on how readily the nurses hopped to do her bidding. Helena was divested of her clothing as well as a good share of her dignity, bleeding, peeing, and spitting into various containers and opening every orifice, or so it seemed, for a sample. Nevertheless, she preferred that to Vanessa's insistence that she tell her, once the door was closed and the nurses sent on their rounds, what happened at the Farraday plant "because," Vanessa scrutinized her curiously, "you shouldn't have survived an explosion like that." Vanessa assumed that Helena had made use of some artefact to save herself and she cautioned her that "it would be a hell of a thing for you to die as the result of a side effect when being in the blast area of a bomb couldn't do it."

"I didn't use an artefact, but I don't remember how I got out of there." It was a true statement as far as it went, but Vanessa clearly expected more, uttering a suspicious "hmmpf" from the corner of her mouth. Vanessa probably expected much frenetic picking up and putting down of artefacts, a razor-sharp mind imagining properties that would erect a force field or bend time and space so that the explosion would be forever deferred. She wouldn't be expecting an answer on the order of "The Warehouse hugged me to safety." It was homely and saccharine, a rescue designed by a Hallmark card or the Lifetime channel, a father protecting his daughter. There was no wonder . . . just love,
improbably enough. If the Warehouse had wanted to get all warm and fuzzy, it could have found a better object for its affection. She had just emerged from the virtual reality of her own past, in which, with a cruelty greater than his own, she had scored and mutilated Lebecque with her rage. She wasn't the type of child whom the Warehouse should have clutched to its breast. "Honestly, I have no idea how I made it out."

With the saturnine observation that she had the body of a healthy middle-aged woman and the disposition of a crotchety 96-year-old, Vanessa dismissed her. Superficial abrasions (with the exception of the gash on her arm) and a mild concussion. Surely the anguish of removing the sheet from her daughter's corpse had caused a small stroke and the horror of inserting a blade into Lebecque's eye socket had caused her heart to stop. She couldn't be leaving the examination room with only the wry recommendation to rest and take a few ibuprofen. "It's what I tell all my patients who survive utter destruction," Vanessa had said. Of course, because it was the Warehouse, Vanessa had also advised her to watch for any delayed side effects - "You know, the usual. You turn into a fictional character or everything you touch becomes a chicken." Helena would have welcomed the former, having always wanted a turn as Victor Frankenstein, and, so long as she kept from changing Myka and Drew into Rhode Island Reds, she wouldn't have cared about the latter.

It wasn't the supernatural consequences that she was worried about but the natural, human-sized ones. In the space of half an hour, she had had to endure the loss of her daughter again; in the space of an additional half an hour, or slightly less, she had killed two men and tortured a third. It was true that torturing and killing others weren't natural for most, but they were, unfortunately, human-sized. Until yesterday, Myka had almost convinced her that she could become part of a family, that she could be one with the suburban, middle-class masses, ferrying their children to their activities (she had been on the verge of giving into Myka's crazy idea of having a baby) and, after sending them off to bed, spending that free hour watching television with glazed eyes. The mourning she had refused to do for Christina she had begun to experience in a muted fashion (necessarily so after more than a hundred years) as she cared for Drew, the continual recognition that "she's not here" and "I'll never get to do this with her" strangely, wonderfully softened by being able to tease and chide and watch over and love a child not her own. And just as strangely and wonderfully, by acknowledging that Christina wasn't here, couldn't ever be here, Helena found her everywhere.

But there was no incorporating what she had done to Poule or Lebecque, not even the minor cruelties she had inflicted upon Raymond, into that life. Though she hadn't been forced to relive her killing of MacPherson or the deaths of the students she had hired to find Warehouse 2, they were of the same cloth as her other sins. "Twisty" was how Claudia had described her, and Helena couldn't deny that there was something ungovernable within her, something that indeed twisted away from the need to follow the same rules as everyone else. Myka with her insistence upon seeing her as two halves miraculously balanced, her twistiness flattened and straightened by the weight of all her so-called good qualities, she would have to let go of that now because she had witnessed for herself just how bad - and it was very, very bad - one H.G. Wells could be.

Helena brooded over all of this as she sat with Artie and Steve and Claudia and Abigail in the visitors' lounge outside Myka's room, all the while laughing at Artie's "curmudgeon in paradise" views on Maui and listening attentively to Steve's tale of his spiritual reawakening in Nepal. Hearing him describe his newfound centeredness, she thought but didn't say that being centered, being balanced, was possible only if the burdens you carried were light. Occasionally her eyes found the clock on the wall, almost noon. Maybe she would have a chance to talk with Myka while the others went to lunch. Yet when noon came and along with it Myka in her bed, the specialists hovering over her, no one left and all the gang crowded into her room, including Pete and Drew carrying pizza boxes. More laughter, a burping contest, Pete waxing reminiscent yet again, and this time joined by Claudia and Artie. It was the cozy kind of B&B gathering Helena had always tried to avoid and into which Myka had frequently propelled her, sometimes literally with a push to her
back. Myka didn't rise from her bed and physically steer her closer, but she frequently looked in her
direction, finally shouting to be heard above Pete and Claudia and announcing that it was time for
everyone but Helena to leave. After a few snickering comments about behaving themselves from
Claudia, the last to leave, Myka and Helena were alone.

"You wanted to talk," Myka said, her voice suddenly quiet, "so let's talk." She folded her legs to her
chest and wrapped her arms around them, an anxious, defensive posture that immediately made
Helena regret insisting upon a conversation that Myka clearly didn't want to have, but they had to
get it out now, the ugliness of what Myka had seen - "You want to know what I saw," she
continued wearily. She was still wearing the pair of flannel pants and the long-sleeved top she had
worn last night, but her hair had been drawn back and clipped into a particularly bushy ponytail,
the curls, profuse and thick, refusing to be restrained. The fullness of the ponytail made for an odd
contrast with the shaved patches on the sides and top of her head where the electrodes had been
attached. Her face was drawn, and Helena wasn't certain whether it was from the series of tests
Myka had undergone or . . . her.

"I saw so many things, heard so many things. There were so many people clamoring in my head.
You read about people being crushed to death at a concert or in a fire, and that must be what it
feels like, screams and heat and bodies. I was breathing in hands and elbows and feet and faces. I
was connected, Helena, to every person who had ever created an artefact, and I was drowning in
their memories." She paused, wanting to take care with what she said next. "I saw you. You were
in a room with two men tied to chairs. One was dead, and the man who was still alive was crying,
saying that he had killed your daughter." She paused again. "You had done horrible things to the
men in that room. I know that." Myka tried to run a hand through her hair, but the clip was an
obstacle. "Is this when you tell me you're a monster and that you don't deserve to be happy? Is this
when you run away?"

"It's one thing to read accounts in the Warehouse archives and to hear me give my version of
events, it's quite another to see me in action, so to speak." Helena heard the brittleness of her tone,
and her hands were nervously worming around and over each other.

"What I saw, Helena," Myka said with deliberateness, "what I saw was that you let him go." She
looked up, her eyes all the more green for the tears shimmering in them. "He said he killed
Christina, and you let him go. Maybe he was lying, maybe he was hoping to be done with it all by
goading you into killing him, but you believed him, and you let him go."

"I was so exhausted," Helena said, looking at Myka but not seeing her, seeing herself instead,
tottering, blood-spattered, dazed by the enormity of what she had done. "I don't think I could have
raised my arm to stab him if I wanted to."

"You call it exhaustion, I call it mercy."

"I was no better after that," Helena felt compelled to remind her, "and in some ways worse."

"True, and then you punished yourself far more severely than the regents were prepared to do."

"Only to emerge from the bronze a century later and almost destroy the world."

"Almost." Myka's smile was faint. "We've had this argument before, and every time I think I've
won it, you start it up again." She rolled onto her side, her face turned away, but Helena had no
difficulty understanding her. "I'm going to take a nap because the tests tired me and because you're
tiring me. I'm leaving this hospital tomorrow morning, I'm not waiting for them to discharge me.
You can leave with me or you can run away, your choice."
Of course she wasn't going to run away. Of course she was going to be here in the morning, prepared to convince Myka not to be so precipitous about discharging herself. But as Helena silently blustered and protested, she knew that wasn't what Myka had really meant. Not so much "here" as "present," fully committed to this world and no longer straddling two. If Christina was not here, would never be here, then she herself couldn't be there, could never be there again. Over the past few months she had congratulated herself on living rather successfully in the 21st century only to be immersed once more in that ancient grief and hunger for vengeance, which hadn't felt very ancient as she had stood, paralyzed, in front of her artefacts.

Maybe she would have to learn to make that commitment to being here, to being present every day. Pete had once said that the first thing he did upon waking up in the morning was to promise himself that today was a day when he wouldn't have a drink. She had faltered in her commitment, but all she could do was try to be better, which might be, in the end, what forgiveness was, another chance - a second, sixth, fortieth - to be better. Thankfully she had found someone who loved her enough to give her those chances.

It could have been the barest whisper of fabric sliding against itself, but Helena believed she sensed more than heard Irene's arrival. Without knowing how she had ended up in a chair in the visitors' lounge, she was nonetheless sitting across from Irene, who was wearing her usual pumps and skirt suit, perfectly coordinated in shades of coral. She might have wandered out to the lounge or Irene might have spirited her to another dimension in which this exact same grouping of chairs and loveseats existed. She didn't know, and Irene certainly wouldn't tell her, but it did seem odd that they were the only two in the lounge. Just as Helena was about to give the nod to being teleported, Irene held out her palm, the locket and its necklace in the center.

"I don't think we need this anymore."

"I'm surprised you didn't pack it in goo and ship it off to the Warehouse for storage." Her sarcasm was blunted by her fastening the locket around her neck. It felt comfortingly warm.

"It's only an artefact when it's separated, permanently, from its creator. You merely loaned it to me." Irene settled back in her chair and crossed one leg over the other.

Helena tipped her head, considering her. "Your father was a good man but a bit of blasphemer, don't you think?"

Irene smiled. "Because he said he would forgive me even if God didn't? I suppose some might think so, but he was a father who loved his child. How would God not understand that . . . and forgive it?" She smoothed an invisible wrinkle in her skirt. "Mr. Lattimer may not be the most eloquent of men, but something he said a long time ago has stuck with me. Everyone in this world needs someone in his corner, someone who will have his back. I had my father. I think you know who's in your corner. She's forgiven you even when you might have thought God had forsaken you. Yet you're out here instead of in there." Irene dipped her head in the direction of Myka's room.

"Why did the Warehouse save me?"

Irene had the temerity to chuckle at the question that Helena had asked in all seriousness. Seeing her amusement, Helena half-expected Irene to wag a finger and indulgently cluck, "That Warehouse, such a practical joker." There was no finger-wagging, no clucking, just a shrug and an "I don't know." Reading the suspicious disbelief that Helena knew was in her face, Irene added, "Maybe the Warehouse felt a burst of gratitude . . . or affection. Maybe it thought it might need you in the future." Fixing her with a darkly intent look over the top of her glasses, she asked, "Does it matter why?"
Helena surprised herself with her answer. "No, actually it doesn't."

"Good. Perhaps after all these years, you're finally learning how to be a true Warehouse agent." Irene's glasses winked at her or, possibly, it was just a quality of the light. "Something else Mr. Lattimer has said, 'The why's are less important than we think, it's the is's that matter.'"

"It's like hearing the Psalms read to me," Helena said dryly. "Words to live by."

"They are," Irene said, "especially for those of us connected to the Warehouse."

This time Helena shrugged. She had asked for gnomic wisdom; it was too late to complain now.

"There's rarely a satisfactory answer to 'why.' You can waste a lifetime, several lifetimes, asking it. A much better question is 'how,' and the answer is in that room." There was no gentle dipping of her head toward Myka's room; instead, Irene jerked her head with impatience and pointed.

And Helena was there, not knowing how or when she had entered Myka's room. Perhaps she hadn't left it all, perhaps she had merely dreamed Irene. Myka was still curled on her side, but Helena knew she wasn't asleep. She could tell Myka that she loved her, that she would always love her; she could tell her that she was sorry and that, if Myka were to forgive her again, she would try to be better. Or she could say the one thing guaranteed to get Myka's attention.

"Quit pretending to nap. We have things to do, Myka, a Christmas tree and presents to buy, Drew's bedroom to remodel, baby names to argue about. We have plans to make."

Sheets and a blanket were flung aside, and Myka was up, finding her phone and scrolling through the apps. Her fingers darted over the screen several times. How many planners did she have? Helena audibly sighed. Myka stuck out her tongue, then she grinned. "Oh, the plans we'll make."
Chapter 23

September 2016

It started this way now, in the middle of the night, Myka turning to her, half-asleep, and caressing her breasts, parting her legs, and Helena almost always responding by guiding Myka's mouth to her nipples and, with a still half-asleep Myka balancing herself over her on a bent arm, opening her legs wider and encouraging Myka's fingers to advance until they slipped in, slipping in because she was always wet, or so it seemed, even at three in the morning, and hearing Myka suck in her breath as she lifted her head from Helena's breast, awake now, and moan, just a little, in response to her moan because that's how it happened, now, with them. And then Myka was moving, working her fingers, her hand, and Helena was moving with her, and Myka was kissing her as they moved, nipping, gently worrying the skin of her throat, darting her tongue past Helena's lips, groaning, softly, into her mouth, until Helena lifted herself from the mattress and, with an arm around Myka's waist, turned her onto her back, her hand now seeking access and finding it, because Myka was also always wet at three in the morning. They were moving, faster, more urgently this time, and although Helena wanted to do more, and do it more actively, she simply didn't have the energy and neither did Myka. She contented herself with tiny kisses around the areolae of Myka's breasts, the tip of her tongue grazing, ever so lightly, the tips of Myka's nipples. Myka's moans were beginning to turn into cries, and she was arching her hips, and then it ended this way now, though less often than it had before, with their nine-month-old son's cries over the intercom eclipsing his mothers'.

"That's his 'my diaper is full' or 'it's cold and wet.' Your turn." Myka pushed herself up against the headboard as Helena crawled out of bed.

"I thought he was supposed to be sleeping through the night by now. When did he become so exacting about the state of his nappy? He's an infant out of Henry James," Helena complained.

"There aren't infants in Henry James." Myka yawned. "Maybe you should look closer to home. Who else might possibly be dissatisfied with product quality?"

Helena only grumbled in response as she staggered into the bathroom, taking a robe from the hook on the door and belting it around her. She then staggered back out, walking only slightly more steadily down the hall, past Myka's office (her office too, she supposed), the other bathroom, Drew's bedroom where, with a dead-to-the-world devotion to sleep reminiscent of his father's, he would be sprawled diagonally across the bed, to the guest room that had become Ellis's nursery. She turned on the light and crossed to the crib, where Ellis was waving his arms and legs in distress. He blinked up at her and stopped mid-cry, surprised by Helena's presence. Were she more awake she would take the time to marvel at the mystery, no, more like the puckish humor of a universe in which a child who bore no genetic relationship to her could look so much like her, but tonight she merely picked Ellis up, kissing the dark hair curling up from the crown of his head, and pulled the diaper away from his bottom. No smears, only the acrid tang of urine. She quickly removed the diaper, cleaned Ellis, and put a fresh diaper on him; her son was talking earnestly to her now, the "bub-bub-bub" sounding like they were on the verge of becoming recognizable words, and wriggling as though he wanted to be put down on the floor. Helena placed him back in his crib, noting the muddy blue of Ellis's eyes; they would turn darker, brown probably, like her own. They were long and narrow, like hers, not round like Myka's, but how Ellis would look at her, with a directness that shouldn't be possible for a mere baby, that was all Myka. She leaned down and kissed Ellis on his forehead. "See you in a few hours, little one." He began to whine, but it wouldn't turn into the full-fledged cries that erupted when Myka was the one who attended to him. Myka was the object of his adoration, only one of the many things he shared with Helena. She
turned the light off and closed the door. Already his whines were becoming briefer, quieter, more like whimpers.

When she returned, Myka asked drowsily, "How's our boy doing?" A note of amusement crept into her voice. "I heard you walk into the wall. He didn't squirt you in the eyes again, did he?"

"No," Helena said, offended. "It was just the once, you know." She held her hands out in front of her, stepping cautiously in what she thought was the direction of their bathroom. When her hand slipped around the lintel, she knew where she was and she shuffled into the bathroom, fumbling her way to the sink.

"But you walked around for hours claiming that he'd blinded you."

"It stung," Helena protested as she dried her hands. "I've had only an intermittent appreciation of that part of the male anatomy. I can't help but think it would benefit from better engineering."

Myka's voice was decidedly more awake, laughter threatening to bubble through it. "I know some anatomy that needs," a laugh finally escaping her, "your expert touch, so get back over here."

"You are quite possibly the worst seductress I've ever encountered." Walking more confidently toward the location of Myka's voice, Helena slipped in beside her and pulled Myka to her, her hand seeking and finding.

"I don't care as long as I'm the last one."

The next morning Helena lay in their bed, allowing Myka the privacy she needed to finalize arrangements for a birthday party that was a surprise to Helena only because she hadn't yet let on that she knew about it. She had fussed the year before on her 49th that she wanted no party, no special celebration on her 50th, understanding that Myka would take it as provocation.

"Dude, it's your sesquicentennial. How can we not celebrate?" Claudia had said, guarding her slice of birthday cake from Pete.

"Because we," Helena had pointed to a pregnant Myka asleep in her chair, "will be exhausted."

"What's a sesquicentennial?" Drew had asked, which ended the conversation.

She could hear the heavy clumping of his sneakers as he got ready for school. He was likely packing his lunch under his mother's direction, walking back and forth between the island and the refrigerator. Carrots, apple, bottled water . . . . Helena shuddered and drew the comforter up over her head. Only to fling it off when Ellis let out a wail that echoed through the house. Myka would have let him crawl in the family room until he did something - tried to pull himself up by grabbing onto the TV, wormed underneath the sofa - that would have had her pick him up and place him somewhere far less interesting. Helena could sympathize, up to a point. She, too, had always resisted having her explorations curtailed, but she didn't think her objections had ever been so piercing. Or so prolonged. He was still crying, and his cries were getting closer.

"Will you watch him? I'm going to take Drew to school this morning. I have some errands to run."

Myka abstractedly kissed Ellis on his cheek and set him on the bed. His misery twofold upon seeing his beloved leave the room, Ellis turned a tear-streaked face to Helena. His bub-bub-bub's were the engine sounds of the saddest little motorboat in the world.

Ellis wasn't supposed to be "Ellis." He wasn't supposed to be a he, although Myka, who had been the more certain of the two of them that she was carrying a girl, would vociferously deny it now. The woman who remembered everything had conveniently forgotten her assurances throughout the
pregnancy that they didn't need to choose a boy's name because this child would be a girl. In fact, she had explicitly told their ob-gyn and Vanessa, who served as their special Warehouse ob-gyn, not to inform them of the baby's sex. She didn't need confirmation, she had said. So when Vanessa had nestled their newborn child in Myka's arms (the entire hospital staff had been under the strictest instructions to let Vanessa examine the child first - Helena never regretted insisting on it, just as she had never regretted any of her "ludicrous" precautions that had had Myka and more than one nurse grumbling under their breath) and announced, "You have a perfectly healthy little boy," Myka simply stared at her. It was a look she must have perfected during her years with Pete, of such utter disbelief that one could rightly presume Myka had witnessed an event that violated not only the laws of men but of science as well.

"We can't name him Elizabeth," she said slowly.

Helena hadn't known until then that Elizabeth had won the vote. The last time they had discussed names, Charlotte, the name she preferred, seemed poised to carry the day. It had the twin virtues of honoring Charles, which, to her horror, she had become only the more sentimental about the closer Myka's due date approached, and meeting Myka's requirement that the name at least sound old-fashioned, even if it wasn't. "I don't see you calling Amber to dinner or asking Madison how school was," Myka had said early on, and Helena had to admit that her lips began to crimp and pull themselves in every time she tried to say 'Brittany.' Not that there was anything fundamentally wrong with those names, only that had she named Christina Brittany, her mother would have shuddered and asked, "Did you give birth to an atlas or a child, Helena?" She had sufficiently challenged convention by having a child without the (dubious) benefit of a husband, further embarrassing her family by giving her daughter the name of what, in her time, had been a French province or a breed of dog would have seemed cruel. A part of her had been hoping illogically that her long-dead family would accept, if not approve of, her relationship with Myka. Myka was everything that they had wanted in a husband for her, hard-working, reliable, virtuous, temperate in her habits (not in all of them, thankfully) . . . except not her husband. Her wife. Wasn't the fact that she had married enough? She saw her mother shake her head vigorously, as if it were just another disappointment to be expected from her wayward daughter. A name that had currency in late 19th century England was really the most insignificant of gestures, especially directed toward people who were no longer present, who could no longer be offended, but it couldn't be said that Helena Wells completely dispensed with tradition. A conventional name it would be for their unconventionally conceived daughter.

Except that they had a son, eyes squinched shut and and mouth parted, mewling, more kitten than infant, who was already seeking Myka's breast. "We could call him Eli, Elias. How about Eleazar? It's so Biblical you can almost smell the brimstone." Helena, awkwardly balancing herself on the bed next to them, kissed Myka's cheek and then bent farther down to kiss the dark hair springing up in rebellious tufts from their son's head.

"Ellis," Myka said. "He was conceived there, in the way that conceiving a child matters."

Helena couldn't disagree. Ellis it was. Ellis Charles Wells.

They were on the patio, she and Ellis. Or, rather, she was on the patio, ostensibly working but actually sunning herself on a lounge chair while Ellis crawled with great energy in the grass. It was warm for mid-September in South Dakota, and Ellis's baby-sized version of a zippered sweat jacket was folded over the arm of a chair. He crowed in pleasure as he discovered another one of the objects she had hidden for him to find, brightly colored blocks of wood and rubbery, spongy balls that were easy to grip. As he had fussed and waved his arms in his activity chair, wanting more activity than it could offer, she had ranged a small square of yard beyond the patio, seeding the grass with toys. She had worried more than Myka about her capacity to lose track of everything
outside her obsession of the moment, which, for the past several weeks and likely into the future as well, was a project to develop technology to replace the TSA's manual pat-downs, fulfilling the twin goals of being more effective and less intrusive. She had had visions of Ellis crawling to the end of the yard and tumbling down the hill. Myka, in turn, had been more alarmed about Helena's proposed solutions. "I don't care what you call it. There will be no electric fence, no electric anything near our son. He's not an inmate or a tiger in a zoo." Thus, she uttered a resounding "No" to, among other ideas, sensor panels in place of grass, which would beep or shrill when Ellis tried to venture beyond them or a tiny drone that would hover above him tracking his every move. In the end, Helena hit upon a solution that was technology-free, Shep. Of the numerous breeds that were part of his genetic make-up, several must have been herding dogs because he intently shadowed Ellis whenever and wherever Ellis was put down to crawl, nudging him back with his snout when Ellis crawled too far away or barking to draw Myka's and Helena's attention. Looking up from her laptop, Helena noticed that Shep was lying only a few feet away from Ellis, head on his paws as he watched Ellis gum on a bright blue ball. Shep loved Drew, but Ellis was his calling, his job.

Letting the ball dribble down his chest, Ellis spied yellow blocks stacked on top of each other like a pyramid, and he gurgled loudly, glancing back at Helena to see if she was watching him. She smiled and nodded, and he emitted a shriek of happiness as he scooted toward the blocks. Every time they brought him out onto the patio, he would scan the yard, expecting a treasure hunt. Helena believed that his surveying of the yard was deliberate and not an unfocused response to a multitude of stimuli. Myka seemed less sure, but she couldn't deny the intention behind his repeated pushing of the purple key on his piano, a toy that had originally produced notes in association with its keys but which Helena had taken apart and rebuilt so that each key played a person's name and a greeting. When Ellis pressed the purple key, he heard Myka saying, "Hi, Ellis, this is your mom. I love you, and just remember, I'm the grown-up." His other mother's key, the red one, had Helena saying, "Mum, Ellis, Mum, not Mom. Because your mom is the grown-up, we're going to have the adventures, you and I." Although she tried to maintain an air of indifference about how often Ellis banged on the red key, she was more than a little smug that it came in a close second to the purple one. Of course Ellis frequently pressed more than one key simultaneously, and Steve's "When you get older, I'll teach you how to meditate. You'll need it as a coping method," Claudia's "Holy frak, I don't know if we can handle two Wellses," and Pete's, "Ellis, I figure I'm gonna be your Obi-Wan 'cause there's stuff those two can't teach you" intermixed like the jokes and cries of disgust when, years ago, they had all gathered in the B&B's kitchen. Myka would always smile wistfully when she heard the cacophony issuing from the piano, and Ellis would pat his hands at the performance.

Observing him butt his head into the pyramid of blocks and giggle as they tumbled to the ground, Helena idly wondered if Ellis's paternal contribution, instead of being shipped overnight from a FedEx location most likely in Atlanta, wouldn't someday be traced to a sperm donation made in, say, 1987 by one Pete Lattimer, the sample frozen and forgotten for decades until it was mistakenly injected into Myka's uterus. It was just a stray thought, the seed of a bad dream, that was all; she would have preferred to chase the thought away with some wine, but she allowed herself only the occasional glass or two now, and at - she peered at the laptop screen - 1:30 in the afternoon, there wasn't a mother in any time zone watching an infant who would say, "Drink up, it's happy hour here." No mother she should be listening to, at any rate. She sipped her tea instead and turned her face up to the sun, Ellis's contented "bub-bub-bub" reassuringly nearby.

Myka had barely waited for the holidays to pass before she was dragging Helena to appointments she had made with various gynecologists and fertility specialists. Helena had urged her to see Vanessa first - Vanessa and Artie had indefinitely extended their stay, buying a townhome in Atlanta, which had Vanessa wisecracking that even paradise could get on Artie's nerves - and when Myka put her off with shushings and vague half-responses of "Soon, I promise," Helena decided to fly Vanessa to Rapid City. Cornered at the B&B by the two of them, Myka had surrendered to an
examination, which discovered no lasting ill-effects from the artefact-induced coma.

"Look, I became pregnant with Drew less than a month after I was whammied by an artefact that had me convulsing with seizures." Rolling her eyes in exasperation as Helena failed to hide her curiosity, Myka said, "It was a rare edition of Notes from Underground, all right? My point is that Drew's fine, I'm fine."

"Since Pete's his father that remains to be seen," Helena muttered. At Myka's glare, she protested, "That was a single artefact. You were inundated with the power of hundreds of artefacts plus the power of the Warehouse itself." Catching at Myka's hands and pulling them to her chest, Helena said in a low voice, "None of this is worth risking your health, Myka. We're together, we're happy, that's all I need. Don't think that you have to make up for what I've lost. I have so much now, more than I ever thought I would."

"I'm fine. We'll be fine. I know it. Trust me," Myka said, giving their locked hands a shake, "I know this."

It was with the same certainty, "Trust me, I know," that Myka dismissed all the uncertainties attendant upon, first, the conception of their child and, second, her pregnancy. She had begrudgingly submitted to the genetic screening Helena had insisted upon, brushed aside the recommendations of the fertility specialists she had initially thought necessary ("Honestly, I think all you'll have to do is put the sperm in the same room with me"), and was unfazed by the dizzying number of options available to them when it came to selecting a donor. As Helena minutely studied profiles, in part to submerge her anxieties about the entire process, Myka showed little interest, or so it seemed, in whether their child's father would be a professor of mathematics who played classical guitar or a 22-year-old college senior who described his donation as a humanitarian gesture comparable to ending hunger or eliminating the nuclear stockpile.

In the midst of Helena's deliberations, Vanessa called one evening to inform them of a potential private donation, if they were interested. "I had one of my former colleagues at the CDC contact me," she said with an embarrassed little laugh. "I don't recall having told anyone about your interest in a sperm donor. It would've been a horrible ethical lapse on my part, but all the same, he was aware that I was working with a couple looking for a donor." Her voice took on a wondering, curious note. "He said he had no desire to raise a child, until now he hadn't had any interest in fathering a child, but he wanted to be considered. He's provided me all the typical information required of a donor plus more besides. I can forward it to you."

Vanessa was no spring chicken, although still young enough, Helena wryly conceded, to be her granddaughter, make that great-granddaughter. A "former colleague" could mean an infectious disease specialist or microbiologist on emeritus status. Not bloody likely that she would let the spermatozoa of a 65-year-old man try to fertilize the egg of a 43-year-old woman, no matter how highly Vanessa recommended him. But for the first time since she had been reviewing donor profiles, Helena could see a glimmer of interest in Myka's eyes, which failed to reassure her. "Darling, we have plenty of candidates as it is," she whispered.

It had been a loud whisper, which was the only reason Helena decided much, much later that could explain why Vanessa knew it was time to volunteer her opinion. "You'll make the decision, obviously, but I know this man very well, and he would be a wonderful choice. He's also not 100 years old, Helena, if that's what you're afraid of. As you'll see in the packet of information, he's in his mid-30s, and I won't go into detail, but in every category you can think of, he's truly at the top." She hesitated before adding, "I don't know how heavily you'll weigh this, but his father's English, his mother French. Very close to your own heritage, Helena."
"Next thing you'll tell me," Helena sniffed, "is that his last name is Wells."

Vanessa had simply laughed and promised to send an e-mail with all the information in the morning. But Helena, having planted the seed in her own mind, could only watch it grow, waking up early the next morning, earlier even than Myka, and, hunched in her bathrobe (the temperature outside was a frosty -10, inside it didn't feel that much warmer), mused over a cup of tea how exceedingly strange it was that one of Vanessa's associates, wanting to father their child and no other, apparently, should have emerged from the welter of procreative anxieties, competitive impulses, financial need, and, yes, altruism that had seemingly motivated the other candidates (after all, what leads a man to leave behind him possibly dozens of children?). It smacked of the Warehouse, and Helena called Vanessa at her and Artie's home even though it was just past 7:00 in Atlanta. Yet not only was Vanessa awake, she wasn't surprised to discover who her caller was.

"I'm just thankful you didn't call me at 4:00 in the morning," she said, sounding unshakably good-humored.

"Did Irene have anything to do with this paragon of masculinity offering his services? You don't have lapses, Vanessa, ethical or otherwise, and while I am ready to believe that he recently found himself convinced that it was his duty to help bring our child into the world, someone had to put him in the vicinity of an artefact or magically appear in his bedroom and whisper it in his ear."

Muted clanking, a coffee carafe being put under a faucet, and muted growls, Artie padding around in the kitchen, accompanied Vanessa's next words. "I doubt Irene had anything to do with it, and while I don't know how he divined that you and Myka were looking for a donor or why he decided to throw his hat in the ring, so to speak, I'm going to look at it as a marvelous coincidence, something truly serendipitous. You should do the same, Helena. Read his information before you rush to judgment."

"Nothing serendipitous can come from the Warehouse," Helena said darkly, "calamitous, yes, serendipitous, no."

Vanessa giggled, actually giggled. "Helena, what the Warehouse gained in you, the theater lost." A murmured aside to Artie, then she was speaking into the phone. "The Warehouse brought you and Myka together, and, when you failed to get it right the first time, it brought you together again ten years later. How is that not serendipitous?"

Some half-an-hour later as she was scrolling through their potential donor's information, Myka nipping her ears and lightly sucking at the pulse points in her neck, Helena conceded that Vanessa might, might have a point. It wasn't that she was finally with the woman whom she had pushed away for so long and who, right at the moment, was doing her best to distract her, it was that the information she was trying to focus on was impressive, he was impressive. "Did you note the Ph.D. at 23? The second at 27?" Myka punctuated her emphasis of the achievements by pushing Helena's bathrobe off her shoulder and kissing the line of her collarbone.

"It doesn't prove that he's smart, it proves that he knows what answers to give." Helena tried to ignore the kisses by leaning forward and peering more intently at the screen.

"Okay, so he's cunning and clever. I'll take it." Undeterred, Myka lifted the hair from the back of Helena's neck and let her breath dance across Helena's skin. "He has patents, Helena. He tinkers."

"I'm sure he writes classics of science fiction in his spare time. Maybe if we dig hard enough, we can scrounge up a murder -"

Myka spun the office chair around, forcing Helena to face her. "Stop it," she said firmly. "I want a
child with you, Helena, because I can't get enough of you." She brusquely, almost roughly kissed her. "I want to see your joy and your curiosity and even your impatience multiplied. If we could, I would have your child, but we can't, and of the profiles I've viewed so far, he comes the closest to you. He's our donor." She looked stern, her jaw at its 'don't mess with me' angle, but a goofy broad smile was breaking over her face, as if the prospect of raising a child with a multiple murderer was exactly what she had dreamed of as a girl. Helena knew better than to say anything more on the subject and adopted the faux querulous tone she used when she wanted to direct Myka's vexation toward something new. "Doesn't the timing, his knowing strike you as odd? I've told you that Irene already has designs on Drew. Perhaps this is all at her instigation because she's hoping to breed some super agent, and you're her test tube."

"Can't deny that you're a force to be reckoned with in that ratty bathrobe and wearing those reading glasses." The goofiness of her smile was diminishing and a certain welcome lasciviousness was taking its place. Helena removed her glasses as, with more determination than grace, Myka straddled her in the chair. "All this talk about baby making has me wanting to make a baby."

"Except that's not what we'll be making," Helena chided, but not before her hand started exploring underneath Myka's bunched sleep shirt.

"Our daughter won't figure that out for years," Myka said, beginning to rock herself gently against Helena's hips. "Drew's with his father, I don't have an artefact call until noon, and you set your own hours. We have all morning to show each other a world of wonder," she said, hiccupping a little at her own silliness.

"And yet no one had managed to snap you up when I came back to town. How could that be?" Helena drawled, her hand moving up, swift but gentle, as Myka's hips lifted. A sharply drawn in breath told Helena that her hand had found its destination.

That was then, before, as Myka predicted, their donor's sperm, having barely penetrated the examination room ably penetrated her egg; before the morning sickness and the fatigue and the revulsion that took the place of cravings ("Get that thing out of here," Myka had panted, practically dry-heaving at the sight of Helena eating a slice of cheese); before their mad rushing around Thanksgiving week, the parental Berings and Drew in tow, to obtain a marriage license and then find a judge, miraculously, on Black Friday to marry them because Myka had wailed that she couldn't bring herself to have a child out of wedlock; before the midnight feedings and Ellis's nocturnal alertness ("Does he have to be so much like you?" Myka had demanded, accidentally knocking the baby monitor from her nightstand as she went to attend to him); before their middle of the night fumblings with each other because sex at 3:00 in the morning was better than no sex at all.

This was now, Ellis gurgling over another ball he had found, Myka coming out onto the patio, and, after a kiss that found Helena's ear rather than her cheek, scooping up their son and tickling his belly until he erupted into shrieks that weren't unlike the ones she tried to muffle when Myka did the same to her, Helena had to admit. After placing the squirming Ellis back on the grass, where he promptly clutched the ball to him once more, Myka pulled a lounge chair closer to Helena and sank into it with an appreciative sigh.

"Those must have been quite the 'errands.' You're home just in time to pick up Drew from school." If Myka heard the ironic inflection, she didn't let on, and Helena resolved to be good. She wouldn't niggle at Myka about preparations for a party the existence of which she was supposed to be blissfully unaware.

Myka reached for Helena's iced tea and took a long swallow. "I thought I might let you do that.
Wouldn't want you to start feeling housebound," she said mildly, but the eyebrow she raised was in an impish mood.

"I'm working," Helena offered innocently.

"I can see that." Myka tilted her head toward Ellis, who had dropped the ball in favor of chewing a piece of grass. "He's not building anything with the blocks yet, is he? Just keeps on knocking them down?"

Helena refused to rise to the bait. Myka still burst into laughter whenever she brought the chess blanket that she had made, at the cost of several days' labor and two sewing machines, and sat Ellis on it with a variety of toys. She would sit on it with him and move toys to the squares corresponding to the appropriate attack or countermeasure, watching to see whether the eyes tracking her movements would begin to see a pattern. So far Ellis recognized his mother's crawling around on the blanket as nothing more than an invitation to roam across the squares and fling the toys out of his way. That was all right, as was his other mother's laughter. She was, aptly enough, playing the long game, and the repetition would tell eventually. He was a Wells, after all.

This was also now, waiting in a line of cars idling at the curb for her other child to shamble to hers, shrug off his backpack on the back seat, and then collapse on the front seat next to her. "Better get a second wind," Helena advised Drew. "You can't be a laggard at soccer practice."

He frowned at the unfamiliar word, then brightened. "You mean 'slacker.'"

"Good. You did that without a dictionary."

"I'm learning." He grinned.

She took in the length of his hair with a critical eye. He needed to get it cut; they would be visiting a barber tomorrow morning among other things. On the weekends he wasn't with Pete, the two of them usually spent Saturday mornings together, more by unspoken, common consent than by arrangement consecrated by a colored block in one of Myka's many planners. Lately they had been spending their mornings together on the land she had bought after Myka had acknowledged, hemmed in by piles of baby clothes and accessories in the office-turned-nursery that possibly they did need to think bigger than remodeling a few rooms. Helena had long since sold her loft in Brooklyn and the expensive off-white furniture in it for an absurd amount of money, and she had used a portion of it to buy several acres farther to the north and west than where they currently lived. They could build on it a house with a far more ambitious floorplan than Myka's, bedrooms that were used for bedrooms and offices that were used for offices, yet all of it remaining on one level ("Because how much longer are your 149-year-old knees going to be able to handle stairs, Helena?"). There would be more than enough land for her workshop, located at a distance far enough away that any explosion turning it to rubble would leave the house intact. They wouldn't start building the house until next spring, but the workshop, which had to satisfy only her and not her budding architect stepson or her simultaneously indecisive and finicky wife, was almost done. In size and appearance closer to a hangar, it nestled between two of the rises that gave their property a pitch and roll that reminded Helena of the sea and had Myka muttering about the cost of having the grass mown. The workshop would be nearly invisible from the county highway that bordered the property as well as from the house, which had been one of Myka's conditions: "If I can't see it, I won't be worrying about what you're doing in it." It wouldn't be true, of course, Helena knew, but she had decided to let Myka cling to that fiction as long as she could.

While he had been initially disappointed at the delay in having the custom-designed bedroom that Helena had promised him, Drew's enthusiasm for the new house and an even bigger and better bedroom had limited his complaints. He was less interested now in having a bedroom that looked...
like the Fortress of Solitude and more interested in one having "cool architectural features," which he designed and discarded on an almost daily basis. He loved visiting the property with her, surveying the site on which the house would be built and imagining how it would look. They would walk over to the workshop and spend some time wandering around its cavernous interior, Drew excitedly asking her what she was going to create in it and Helena no less excitedly planning experiments in her mind but trying outwardly, at least, to appear the adult, indulging Drew's visions of boy-sized hovercraft and "rocket shoes" and robots that would clean his room while reining in his wilder dreams of manning a special ship that she would build for him to fly to Mars and beyond.

"I'm fairly certain your mother wouldn't approve of you joyriding through the solar system, especially on a rocket of my design. My last effort didn't fare too well."

"Bet Dad would let me." He was running down the long concrete slab, vanquishing imaginary aliens . . . from Mars, he told her, and she smiled, not entirely ironically, at the conceit.

"If you're going to play your parents off one another, you need to think more strategically, Drew. Come talk to me about it when you're sixteen and you want your own car. That is, if your generation still wants to drive by the time it turns sixteen."

He ran back to her and smiled at her slyly. "Mom says that when it comes time for me to learn how to drive, I'm not supposed to let you teach me."

"And yet she lets you ride in a car with me. Such a conundrum, your mother." Well, not so much, since the Range Rover did have all the extra safety features that she had had installed at Myka's insistence. "You're also not supposed to go into this workshop once it's finished. She's already given me a stern lecture about it. Has she done the same with you?"

He nodded. "That's just one more thing we won't tell her."

He had been looking forward to a little sister. His father had assured him that sisters were the best; a brother, after all, was just another boy. A sister had the best qualities of a brother - loyalty, a spirit of adventure - but she could make cookies, too. Not that a brother couldn't make cookies, of course, but really, look at his own hands, those grimy paws, and imagine them wrist-deep in cookie dough. Would he want to eat cookies made by a brother instead of a sister? But Helena suspected that the culinary talents of their daughter - and the odds that she would be any more skillful than her mothers weren't high, surely he realized that - weren't the source of his preference. He hadn't only talked to Pete, or Steve, or his friends about what it would be like to have a sister. He had asked her countless questions about Christina, what she had liked to do, what her favorite subjects in school had been. She hadn't hesitated to tell him everything she remembered about her. Reliving her death and all that had followed after hadn't set Helena free, far from it, but in reclaiming her grief, she had also reclaimed an unalloyed joy in her daughter. The good memories, and there were so, so many of them, she could share them now without feeling she was about to remember one too many, that one unwary recollection would return her to the summer she had left Christina in Paris. Sometimes the memories did lead her back to the morgue and the small, sparsely attended funeral under the hot August sun, but she knew that the sorrow and the guilt would pass. She was strong enough to bear the burden.

He had expected to see Christina's face when Myka had pushed back the edges of the blanket, and his excitement immediately faded when his mother said, "Say hello to your little brother, Drew." His disappointment eventually moderated to tolerance but little more than that, and although he dutifully helped the both of them with Ellis when asked, he accepted every sleepover invitation he received and asked to spend extra days with Pete. Myka thought he was feeling neglected, and she
ensured that she and Drew spent time together, just the two of them. It seemed to help for a while, but then the pattern of avoiding Ellis resumed, and Myka frowned and brooded until she came into the family room one Saturday morning in March, and Helena, sitting with Ellis in front of the TV, which was showing a video of a concert pianist demonstrating his technique as he played a Chopin polonaise, looked up to see a smile of triumph on Myka's face.

"Why don't I watch Ellis while you take Drew and Shep out to the park? Shep could do with a good run." Technically, it was an interrogative, but Helena heard the command. Myka had her head bent at an odd angle, and Helena traced its line to the spot on the floor where Drew sprawled glumly with his dog.

Later, as she and Drew stood shivering in a city park as Shep gamboled and chased squirrels, Helena observed to him, "I haven't thoroughly demolished you in a video game lately. We need to rectify that."

"I don't want to cut into Ellis's TV time." He looked up at the lowering clouds, which finally were living up to their promise of snow. Flakes were dusting his hair, which had become even more wavy of late. His resemblance to Myka was growing stronger in other ways as well; his jaw, for instance, had just now taken on a stubborn jut that was unmistakably hers.

"I have to get my influence in early, before your mother enrolls him in baby soccer or Social Skills for Infants 101." It was a poor joke, but he gave her Myka's crooked smile, the one that Helena had always understood to mean, 'You've missed the mark, but at least you're trying.' They watched in silence as Shep harried a squirrel up a tree.

"This afternoon, if it's still snowing out and there's nothing else to do, I could maybe put on the racing video game." Drew offered it with a very casual shrug.

"I would like that, if, of course, you don't have other things to do," Helena said, making clear her concession to the universe of activities that would take precedence over his playing a game with her.

However, none of those activities materialized, and though the snow hadn't lasted long enough to prevent Drew from making plans with his friends, instead of calling them he retrieved the game consoles from a shelf under the TV. He beat her three games out of five, and, after he had gone to bed and Helena and Myka lay quietly talking, the middle of the night no longer measured by hours but by the intervals between Ellis's fussing, Myka said, "Did you see him play with Ellis tonight? Drew just needed some reassurance that your relationship hasn't changed."

Helena chuckled, albeit wryly. "I was trying to see to it that he had extra time with you. I didn't think he would notice."

"You always underestimate how much others care about you, Helena."

It was easy to think that way if you had had a habit of vanishing from the lives of the people who held you dear, Helena reflected.

There would be no more vanishing. She and Drew tacitly carved out time that was their time, when he could be the sole focus of her attention and she, in turn, could indulge in decidedly childlike fantasizing about spaceships and cities built under the sea. More like Jules Verne, in many respects, than H.G. Wells, but she didn't dwell on the resemblance. Today, this afternoon, picking him up from school and then taking him to soccer practice, was not their time together, and while Helena considered herself so rooted in their lives, Myka's, Drew's, and Ellis's, that they would need to blast her out if they wanted to be shut of her, based on the look Drew gave her as she drove him to a
practice he didn't want to attend, he would be happy to light the fuse.

"I'll be there at 5:30 to bring you home," she reminded him.

"You're always there," he groused.

She only smiled.

The party began at 3:00 the following afternoon, and Helena had to concede that together Drew and Myka had devised a successful plan to keep her away from the house until after 3:00. Despite her best attempts to dawdle over her tea and enjoy a leisurely shower, Myka had her, Drew, and the dog in the Range Rover by 9:00 a.m. In addition to getting Drew's hair cut and visiting, as usual on a Saturday morning, their new property and fantasizing about their new home, Myka had, unsurprisingly, drawn up a list of things she wanted Helena to purchase or address or address by purchasing. To cross them all off the list, Helena calculated that she had been forced to cover every square foot of Rapid City. Ellis, for example, just happened to be out of organic puréed bananas, and not just any organic puréed bananas but a brand that was found only in the downtown food co-op. Drew, on the other hand, needed to practice his footwork, and the best place for that was the soccer fields where he could move the ball up and down between the goals, but they, naturally, were across town. Helena could have tried to reorder the list, but Myka was diabolical enough to have predicted such a strategy and had designed a to-do list that would involve backtracking no matter how Helena reordered it. Helena gazed at the list in mingled frustration and admiration. Bloody woman, she couldn't love her more if she tried.

They returned a little after 3:00, Drew fidgeting on the seat, excited not only at the prospect of a birthday party, even if it wasn't his own but also at the grander scheme, of which Myka had undoubtedly assured him he was an integral part, to keep it a surprise. Shep, infected by Drew's restlessness, was whining and jumping off and on the backseat by the time Helena turned into the driveway. The empty driveway, had Myka bussed everyone in? As Drew uncharacteristically hung back, grabbing at Shep's collar to prevent him from bounding ahead, Helena fixed a smile on her face and opened the door into the house, singing out, "We're back. Do you want to help me unload the Rover? We have Ellis's puréed bananas and the paper towels on sale at Target. I also went to Macy's and bought Drew jeans that fit him -"

There really were people springing up in the family room and coming out from behind the kitchen island shouting "Happy Birthday" at her, and it was just as hokey as any surprise party she had seen on TV, with balloons bumping against the ceiling and a glittered Happy Birthday cut-out taped to the edge of the island and, in the middle of the island, a large sheet cake quilled with birthday candles. Everyone was singing "Happy Birthday," loudly and off-key: Pete and Cindy, Claudia, Steve, Artie and Vanessa, the younger agents Jacqui, Travis, Ernie, and Megan, and, from Drew's school, Heather and Casey and Colton, and the other parents who had become friends. Not a crowd but enough to fill the kitchen and spill out onto the patio, where, on tables with spotlessly white tablecloths that could have come only from the caterers and not their overworked washer and dryer in the basement, were chafing dishes with all the party foods that Myka had wisely decided not to make. Not a bad showing for a woman who had already outlived one set of family and friends.

Although Myka protested that the invitations had explicitly said no gifts, there was the usual assortment of gag gifts for a 50th birthday, jars of baby food (alas, no puréed bananas among them) and boxes of diapers, walkers and bottles of multivitamins. There were the usual jokes as well, although the ones from the Warehouse agents were more barbed; Ernie suggested that, like the Gettysburg Address, the closest thing she had to a contemporary, she should be preserved under glass. He scurried away after receiving her death stare. Turning a friendlier face to their other guests, Helena made sure she thanked everyone for coming, noticing with an amused smile that
Ellis was attracting the most attention, cooed over by virtually all of the women and not a few of the men. He enjoyed it so long as Myka was in view, but whenever she disappeared from sight, he squeezed his face closed like a fist and began to whimper, causing, first, Vanessa to give him to Helena and, later, Pete. Letting her son gnaw the shoulder of her blouse for solace, she picked from the plate Pete had filled for her. He picked at it, too, earning him a Myka-like slap on his arm from Cindy before she left him to talk to Heather and Casey.

"You're happy," he announced, biting into a lightly fried chicken tender. There were several varieties of chicken tenders, the only protein other than tofu that Myka had allowed at the party, fried, grilled, marinated, barbecued, roasted, and Pete had piled the plate high with them. "It looks good on you. It would look better if you weren't a sleep-deprived parent of an infant and a ten-year old, but," he popped the remaining half of the tender into his mouth, "still not bad, considering you really should be looking like a White Walker from *Game of Thrones*. You know, all leathery with your skin peeling off and stuff." He shuddered, almost dropping the plate.

Snagging a chocolate-covered strawberry from the plate before it dropped to the patio, she replied, "You've always worn your idiocy well. Today's no exception."

He snickered and nodded in agreement, gingerly picking up a barbecued chicken tender. "I know, yet Cindy still loves me." His face struggled but eventually won the battle to assume a thoughtful expression. "Maybe I ought to do something about that."

The afternoon darkened into evening, and Myka, prepared for any event, walked the perimeter of the patio lighting patio lanterns. A number of their guests having already left and Ellis put in his crib for a nap, she gracelessly fell into a chair next to Helena, who, without turning away from Claudia and her enthusiasm about the "prosthetic glasses" they were planning to create for Artie, found her wife's hand and interlaced their fingers. "We can rebuild his visual field from the part of his retinas that are still functioning, but what worries me is the time lag . . . ."

Helena murmured under Claudia's thinking out loud, "Ellis is down, and Drew?"

"Heather and Casey are letting Colton stay over. They want to sleep in the treehouse," Myka said softly.

". . . I mean, you know how frustrating it is when your phone keeps searching for a Wi-Fi connection? The processor has to be so frakking fast, H.G., or what's the use of doing this . . . ."

"It will get chilly later. They'll need something heavier than those sleeping bags," Helena fretted.

"It's been taken care of. You just have to be prepared to go out for doughnuts tomorrow morning."

"Doughnuts?" Helena exclaimed.

"H.G.," Claudia demanded, annoyed, "are you listening to me or are you in mom mode?"

"Both." Leaving her hand linked with Myka's, Helena leaned toward Claudia. "The human body is a power station, Claudia. We'll be tapping into his neural pathways. I'm more concerned about the complexity of the field we'll be recreating -"

"That's what I'm saying. The complexity will slow down the process -"

"Claudia," Helena said sternly, "what have I said is a scientist's greatest attribute?"

"Persistence," she answered sourly.
"And what is her constant companion?"

"Failure," she said even more sourly. "Persistence through failure," she singsonged. "I'm not Ellis."

"Sadly, no," Helena mock-sighed, "he has all the persistence in the world and he whimpers less. Buck up, Claudia, we have a gloriously long string of failures ahead of us." Twisting around so she could lean toward Myka, she said, "You recall, do you not, that I bought doughnuts a mere two weeks ago when Drew also had friends staying over? What's happened to the woman who, if only for public consumption, maintains that sugar is to the human body as global warming is to the planet?"

"She had a baby in her 40s, that's what happened to her." Myka yawned and rested her head on Helena's shoulder. "I'm so tired, babe. Take Drew and Colton with you, but make sure they don't fill the box with sticky buns and cinnamon rolls. Leave room for a couple of plain cake doughnuts."

"Because the plain cake ones are healthier than sticky buns or cinnamon rolls," Helena said dryly.

"Uh huh," Myka mumbled, working her head into the crook of Helena's neck.

It wasn't even 9:00 when the last of their guests left, although Helena felt that she was swaying on her feet. Pete, Cindy, Steve, and Claudia had washed the dishes, including the chafing dishes, and put away the leftover appetizers and cake. The clean chafing dishes and the no-longer-so-spotless tablecloths were waiting for the caterers to pick them up; the gag gifts were also stacked on the table pending their final disposition. Myka was with Ellis in the nursery, and Helena, as her part of their nightly ritual, let Shep out into the yard. He deftly avoided Ellis's "learning center" on his way to a far corner where he briefly squatted before galloping to the tree that housed Drew's pirate ship. Helena had followed him at a much slower pace, and she heard his happy bark as he ran up the stairs to join the boys. Stopping at the bottom of the stairs, she called up to the treehouse, "How are you doing up there? Do you need anything?"

"We're okay," Drew shouted back.

"Your mom is sending us out for doughnuts tomorrow morning, so don't load up on that Crunchberry cereal or whatever it's called."

"You know what it's called. You just don't like saying 'Cap'n,'" Drew accused her, knowing her too well. "Is Mom okay? She's letting us have a lot of doughnuts lately."

"We'll keep an eye on her. If she says you can have pizza for breakfast, we'll take her to an urgent care."

He giggled, his voice still light and clear, a child's voice, and she felt a premature pang at the realization that the days he would remain a child were steadily becoming fewer. He would turn eleven in October. She stood for a while longer next to the stairs, listening to Drew and Colton cheerfully insult each other as they played a video game (the treehouse lacking no electronic device, power source, or Internet connection that she and Claudia could, working together, provide). She started her walk back to the house only to see one of the shadows crisscrossing the yard detach itself from the others and move to intercept her path. For a moment she thought it was Myka out to discover what was taking her so long, but Myka wouldn't be wearing a skirt suit at home; in fact, Myka never wore a skirt suit.

"Come to wish me Happy Birthday, have you? You have through Wednesday of next week. We were celebrating it early."
"I needed to find where I had put your present," Irene said. "I'm old and forgetful."

"The former, yes, the latter, no," Helena scoffed.

"Not so true anymore," Irene countered with no noticeable regret. "Claudia's continuing to grow into her role as caretaker and as she does, my powers diminish. There will be a day, not far off, when the transition will end."

Helena had put on a sweater before she left the house, but Irene's words seemed to have stirred up an even cooler breeze, and she hugged her chest tightly. Before she had returned to the Warehouse, to Myka, she thought she would welcome her passage from a world that was never quite familiar enough, but she no longer felt ready to leave. This world would always be foreign to her on some level, but it held her wife and her children and they, in turn, held her. It was by far the sweetest of the various imprisonments she had endured. "Promises, promises, Irene," she said flippantly.

Irene chuckled. "I didn't bother to wrap it. I know you're the kind who simply rips the paper off." She handed Helena the gift.

It was a book, slim and leather bound by the feel of it, and though it was too dark to read the title, Helena could trace the outline of the letters on the cover. "H.G. Wells," she said quietly. "What's this?"

"A chapbook. That's how your brother described it when he gave it to me." Irene paused, waiting for Helena to erupt, but Helena said nothing, her fingers going over and over the letters. "I met him during the war. He was old and in ill-health and not convinced that darkness wouldn't prevail. How he knew that I was in London, how he knew to find me, how he knew that I would recognize your name, I never learned. He said that he hoped you might still be alive, that you had achieved some measure of happiness, but that if you were no longer among the living, you might have left behind a child or children who would appreciate it." Helena felt Irene's hand, surprisingly warm, on top of her own. "I always believed you would find it too much, so I didn't tell you about the book or his visit. I don't think you'll find it the burden you would have in the past."

"What's in it?" Helena asked hoarsely.

"I don't know," Irene said. "It wasn't my story to read. It's yours." Helena didn't see Irene's smile very clearly, but she felt its sadness. "Sometimes I think the greatest gift we can receive is to know that we'll be remembered. He remembered, Helena."

She had been going to ask Irene where she had met Charles, what he had been wearing, whether he had stayed long enough to have a cup of tea (he had always enjoyed a good conversation over tea). She wanted to be able to see the tobacco flakes on his vest, the watch chain he invariably failed to polish; she wanted to see the drape of the blackout curtains over the windows (if there had been windows) and hear the whine of the planes defending London overhead. She wanted to imprint all of it on her mind as though it had been her memory to recall and not Irene's. She opened her mouth to ask one of those questions or maybe just to plead "Tell me" when she realized that Irene was gone.

Helena saw him then, Charles, as she sometimes saw Christina and, with lesser frequency, Lebecque, as if her past were a room she had left to attend to something else and which would remain undisturbed until she chose to enter it again, the decades she had been away no more than minutes. He was finishing one of their books, an early one, and he was waving the last page at her, the ink not even dry. "This is our immortality, Helena, not these silly inventions of yours. When the grappler has been surpassed by something equally as clever and of greater utility, people will still be reading our stories."
Myka was in their bedroom, waiting for her. Ellis was with her on the bed, on his back, burbling as he tried to fit a onesie-covered foot into his mouth. "He wouldn't settle down," she said apologetically. "I thought he might relax and go to sleep faster if he was with us." She looked readier for sleep than he was, yawning as she pointed at the book. "I don't remember seeing that gift."

Helena stifled a laugh that she was certain would have had more hysteria than humor in it. She kicked off her shoes and stretched out beside them. "Irene gave it to me a few minutes ago." Myka merely nodded because, of course, it was what Irene did, suddenly appear. "It's from my brother." Then Helena did laugh, and it didn't have the wild, wavering note in it she had feared. It sounded warm and fond and faintly incredulous, as if Charles, embarrassed at being so late to her party, had set it outside their door and crept away before he could be discovered. "She's been keeping it for the past, oh, 75 years or so."

"Maybe you ought to read from it. You know how I can't resist H.G. Wells." Myka had adopted a teasing tone, but her eyes were serious and she was stroking Helena's hair. Ellis had stopped working his foot into his mouth and was blinking owlishly at her, expecting a story too.

Clearing her throat and wishing she knew where she had left her reading glasses, Helena flipped to the first page, marveling at how new the book looked and felt, the leather soft and the pages still white and crisp. "An author, especially one of some renown, will often refer to the name by which he is known to the world as the mask behind which he hides, small and ordinary by comparison. In my case, H.G. Wells isn't a mask, he's a figure, a character for the stage, created whole from the imagination of two people, one being the very unremarkable man writing these words and the other being one of the most beautiful, brilliant, and ultimately tragic souls I have ever known. Without her, there would have been no H.G. Wells, only a scribbler of adventure stories, easily consumed and as easily forgotten."

"She was born Helena Augusta Wells on September 21, 1866 . . . ."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!