

The Apothecary's Apprentice

(First Fifty Pages)

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“... The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines ... At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found ... with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast!”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

– Part introduction to his
poem *Kubla Khan*

Published 1816

One

On a cold September evening in Australia's Hunter Valley, a car closed quickly on another. Shortly afterwards, both were racing south in tandem along the New England Highway. Anyone of a philosophical or dreamer bent who saw them passing may have wondered if there was a drama at play here, some involvement between the occupants other than a testosterone-fueled butting of adolescent heads. There was. Much more. For this was the beginning of the end game of a drama that extended from one side of the planet to the other and from late in the eighteenth century to early in the twenty first.

In the first car, a young woman crouched over the steering wheel and squinted into a freezing blast of air that assailed her through a shattered windscreen. Lines of white tracer speared at her from where the headlights painted some colour into the road ahead while pale ghosts of solitary eucalypts, occasional farmhouses and low hills glided silently past both vehicles in the moonlight.

In the second car, a younger woman released her grip on the sides of her seat and flexed her fingers. "I'm not sure how much more I can stand of this." She reached out and rubbed the back of her hand against the inside of the windscreen to remove a patch of condensation. "I suppose it *is* her?"

"It is," confirmed the man driving the car. "The back window has a hole in it the size of a bucket." Suddenly he began to chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Everything. All of this is so bloody surreal! We're caught up in a Hollywood action movie complete with the obligatory car chase!"

"I don't know how you can laugh. I'm getting pins and needles in my knuckles."

Their eyes met momentarily, his expression reassuring, hers troubled. Their joint involvement in these events had been ignited four months earlier.

On the morning of 16th June, the sun climbed unimpeded out of the Pacific Ocean and drove a shimmering lance into Sydney harbour. The city was immediately illuminated, as

if from within, by a ruby glow. Not a cloud was in sight. What there was of the breeze was a nor'-wester, but light and chancy, and only rarely did it ruffle the waters of the harbour.

Among the early morning diners in one of the cafés that lined the promenade behind the opera house, a man whose casual attire and lack of a traveller's accessories suggested he was neither businessman nor tourist, appeared to be so engrossed in his morning newspaper that he had forgotten his breakfast. Beneath a thin, chaotic layer of steam caught briefly in reflected light from the rising sun, his plate of bacon and eggs remained untouched, prompting the young woman who had placed the meal before him to ask if he wanted another cup of coffee in an unsuccessful attempt to break his concentration.

The item that commanded Rory McLaughlin's attention had first been published the previous weekend in the literary supplement of a leading British newspaper and was republished here in a local daily broadsheet on the actual anniversary of the day of its inspiration: Bloomsday. With deference to the day that Leopold Bloom wandered the streets and pubs of Dublin, the author of the article made much of what he claimed was James Joyce's contribution to the modern English novel. But it was neither his lyrical waxing of Joyce nor his brief description of Bloom's adventures that attracted Rory's attention. Amongst the expected eulogizing of Joyce's *Ulysses*, was relieving diversion into other imaginative works of a controversial nature including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*. And it was a brief description of the role of Coleridge's mysterious *person on business from Porlock* that caught McLaughlin's eye.

Ten thousand miles away in London it was a little after ten o'clock in the evening and still warm after a sweltering day. While many Londoners, particularly those who were still out and about, relished the breath of true summer, others were hoping that rain in the north-west of the British Isles might move in and provide some relief to what, for them, was fast becoming tiring weather.

Penny Longford, in the living room of the flat she shared in Knightsbridge with a former college friend, was curled up on a sofa idly flipping through the aforementioned literary supplement where the Bloomsday article had first appeared. Her attention was about equally divided between the television set in the corner of the room and scanning each page for points of interest when her gaze alighted on the reference to the person from Porlock. Immediately, in what might well have been perfect synchronism with Rory McLaughlin on the foreshores of faraway Sydney harbour, her entire attention was captured to the exclusion of all extraneous sights and sounds including the antics of golf-

course-domiciled hares on BBC 2 and the steady hum of traffic from nearby Brompton Road.

Whether or not the article celebrating Bloomsday was the trigger that set two people from opposite ends of the earth off and running on what was to become a mutual quest, is conjecture. As some people believe, subconscious metaphysical influences or even more mysterious forces, cause coincidental pursuit or simultaneous discovery to occur at opposite hemispheres of the planet. But in this instance, the Bloomsday article would seem to be the more likely candidate. The link was obviously tenuous at best, but the timing was spot-on.

What is not conjecture is that the repercussions of their pursuit could well shake the literary world as it has never before been shaken and catapult the value of a few scraps of paper into the same arena as the world's most treasured works of art.

Both Rory McLaughlin and Penny Longford were previously aware of Coleridge's *person on business from Porlock*. Their degree of interest in the reference to him in the Bloomsday article resulted from separate but related reasons to discover for themselves as much as was known about him. On this day they were to be disappointed; for other than reinforcing the possibility he was an apothecary and possibly Coleridge's local source of opium – speculation that they both had come across previously – there was nothing new in the article. So, the reference to him was a reminder rather than a revelation; a push in the back to get them moving on a course of action they each had experienced some unease over not pursuing earlier.

For Rory, the journey began some six months before, and for Penny, twelve.

When Penny Longford finished reading the section of the Bloomsday article and scanned the remainder to ensure that there was nothing further about Coleridge or the person from Porlock, she sat staring at the television.

This was how her flat-mate, Christine Addison, found her when she emerged from her bedroom some minutes later dressed in a crumpled nightgown. Christine stood yawning

and scratching the top of her head before looking across at the television. “Bunnies. I love bunnies.”

“Bunnies?” Penny emerged from wherever the article about Kubla Khan had taken her when she realised Christine was referring to what BBC 2 was screening. “Oh yes, rabbits.” And then in response to her rural origins, “Hares actually.”

Christine turned away. “Too hot. Couldn’t sleep.” She moved towards the small kitchen that occupied the rear of the room. “Want a cup of tea?” When Penny did not reply, she turned to look at her, “Are you all right, Pen?”

“What? Yes, I’m fine.” She turned and watched in silence as Christine filled an electric jug with water. Outside, ear-jarring sirens accelerated and decelerated twice in both volume and frequency, implanting in the minds of both women an image of two police cars hurtling along Brompton Road amidst an accompaniment of flashing lights erupting from the cars themselves and rebounding from nearby reflective surfaces.

“Chris, if I were to ask you where Nubia was, where would you say?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Nubia. Where Nubians come from.”

“Oh! That Nubia. Africa somewhere. Lothar was a Nubian.”

“Who?”

“Mandrake’s African sidekick. Mandrake the Magician. Dad was a great collector of comic books.”

“Where in Africa would you say?”

Christine screwed up her face and, with her free hand, described in the air in front of her what might have been a partly deflated football, but was probably Africa. She stood for a time surveying the invisible image with her mind’s eye, “The northeast. Somewhere in the Nile valley. But is there a Nubia? Isn’t it just a race of people?”

“There was once, apparently. What about Abyssinia?”

“Abyssinia? Other than a cheery farewell, you mean. Abyssinia!”

“Seriously, where would you say it was?”

“It’s Ethiopia, isn’t it? Why are we talking about Africa?”

“I have a feeling that Nubia and Abyssinia were possibly thought of as one and the same place back when Africa was still the dark continent. The ancient Greeks thought so as well. They grouped Abyssinia, Cush and Nubia together.”

“So?”

“So, someone like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was an ardent Greek scholar, might, if it suited the metre of a poem he was writing, substitute a word such as Nubian for Abyssinian and vice versa.”

“I suppose so. But what are we talking about?”

“Remember Jane Leigh Perrot?”

“Who?”

“Jane Leigh Perrot. Jane Austen's Aunt.”

“Ah yes! Your dissertation. Panic time.”

Twelve months before this evening, Penny and Christine were at Cambridge. Both were struggling with the production of final dissertations, Penny for her degree in English, and Christine for hers in Law. Among the detail Penny had compiled, was a short discourse on the influence of friends and family on the works of Jane Austen. And it was here she was distracted for a time by the misadventures of Jane's aunt, one Jane Leigh Perrot, formerly Jane Cholmeley, a wealthy heiress whose family owned vast estates in Barbados.

Penny was to discover that when this woman was charged with the theft of a piece of lace worth twenty shillings from a haberdashery in Bath, she put her own life in jeopardy by electing to go to trial rather than have the charges quashed by settling the matter with her accusers. If the chroniclers of the event can be believed, her trial at the Taunton assizes in 1800 attracted a crowd of some two thousand onlookers. Although she was acquitted after the jury retired for less than fifteen minutes, the trial and the events leading to it became the subject of numerous published articles and – expectedly for such matters involving the gentry – the affair was parodied for some time in the music halls of the country.

Was this the reason Penny had speculated in her dissertation, that niece Jane Austen's letters made no direct reference to the circumstances of her aunt's troubles? Was she ashamed of her relative's notoriety? Or did she perhaps suspect that her aunt may not have been as innocent as the Jury's verdict would indicate. During the trial it was revealed that those who brought the charges against her were of dubious reputation and almost certainly looking for a way to alleviate pressing financial difficulties. But would it have been wise of them to target a woman of completely unblemished character? Penny had wondered. Would it not have been prudent to target someone who was known to be wealthy but also had a propensity from time to time to pocket the odd item that took her fancy?

It was the remark that Jane Leigh Perrot herself made in a letter to her cousin, Mountague Cholmeley after the trial that she “was disappointed in Jekyll”, that caused Penny to see if she could discover why she was disappointed in Joseph Jekyll, who was one of her lawyers, and what did Jekyll think of the person he was helping to represent. This was not as difficult as she first imagined, because he was a man of some notoriety himself, a member of Parliament and a friend of the Prince of Wales. Representing Calne, a *rotten borough* with a mere twenty odd electors, he had regaled the House of Commons for thirty years with a waspish wit and a predilection for puns. Consequently, some of his correspondence survived, including a letter he wrote at the time of the trial to a friend and fellow lawyer, Augustus d’Arcy Durant.

Recollections of this and related matters hovered at the forefront of Penny’s concentration as Christine carried two steaming mugs of tea across to the sofa and passed one to her.

Penny made room for her to sit. “I didn’t tell you about something I came across at the time because I didn’t want to think too much about it myself and get distracted. God knows we both were up to our ears trying to finish in time.”

“Didn’t tell me about *what* that you came across?”

“A letter written by Joseph Jekyll, one of the lawyers who represented Jane Leigh Perrot at the Taunton assizes. One in which he mentioned a poem or part of a poem she had in her possession that spoke of a demon lover and a wailing Nubian woman.”

“What, one by Coleridge?”

“Not supposedly. One she’d taken from someone she’d been imprisoned with while awaiting trial.”

“So, where does Coleridge come into it?”

“In his poem *Kubla Khan*, he speaks of an Abyssinian woman and someone wailing for her demon lover. Jekyll wouldn’t have known about that because, although Coleridge wrote it in 1797, it wasn’t published until 1816. Jane Leigh Perrot’s trial was in 1800.

“So, you think it was a copy from Coleridge’s original manuscript?”

“I don’t know. If it is, it’s different from the published version. Nubian isn’t mentioned.”

“So, what’s the big deal?”

Penny turned to face her. “The prisoner she took it from came from Porlock.”

Two

Christine sat staring at the book she had open on her lap. “I love that last bit. Love it!”

“I thought you don’t like poetry.”

“I don’t, but this is sexy. I’m going to read that bit again.”

*“And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing Eyes, his floating Hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your Eyes with holy Dread,
For He on Honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the Milk of Paradise.”*

When she finished, she sat biting her bottom lip with her face creased by a silly grin. “I don’t know what that means, but it’s definitely sexy and suggestive. *Honey-due, Milk of Paradise, flashing Eyes, floating Hair*. He sounds like an interesting man.” Her smile dissolved into a soft giggle. “My kind of man.”

“Sounds like someone you should avoid. *Beware! Beware!* couldn’t be more specific.”

“Avoid afterwards, maybe.”

Penny chuckled. “You’re shameless, Chris.”

“This is true, but don’t tell anyone.”

“What would Bunky think?”

“He already knows.” They sat smiling at each other in silence for a moment. “So, what are you saying – that the person on business from Porlock stole the missing lines?”

“Not missing. According to Coleridge, lost, forgotten, no recall except for a few fragments.”

“He was stoned on opium. He wouldn’t know what happened to them.” Her brow furrowed. “What would they be worth, these lines, if they did exist and did turn up somewhere?”

“Oh, not much,” Penny responded nonchalantly. “If you didn’t think a king’s ransom was much. Or the discovery of the Mona Lisa’s sister in pristine condition. *Priceless*, is the word that springs to mind.”

Christine looked closely at her friend. “Get real, Pen! It is only a poem.”

“Yes, and Notre Dame *is* only a church. Look how you reacted to the bit you just read. Twice! And you hate poetry!”

“I do not!” Christine protested, her face pained. “Well ... I do. But this poem is different.”

“Exactly!” Penny stood up. “Put the jug on again. There’s something I’d like you to see.” She disappeared into her bedroom.

Once they were each armed with a fresh mug of tea, Penny handed Christine a bundle of loose sheets of paper she had retrieved from her room. “I printed these from the web at the time. They list some of what supposed literary experts have to say about *Kubla Khan*. Don’t read them in detail. Just skim through them to get the gist.”

Christine complied. “Blimey, Pen! Do they rave on about other poems like this?”

“Not often! It’s arguably the world’s most famous piece of verse. Few others, if any, have attracted anywhere near as much comment or speculation. It’s probably the most written about and discussed poem ever created.”

“But none of them seems to know for sure what it’s about. Or at least they can’t seem to agree.”

“Mainly because it’s incomplete.”

Christine cocked her head to one side and gazed quizzically at her friend. “What I don’t understand is why you didn’t say anything at the time about this letter from whatshisname that mentions what might have been a missing verse?”

“Joseph Jekyll. Why would I? It was distracting enough as it was just knowing about it. And it had nothing to do with my dissertation. Like you said, *panic time!* I was up to two in the morning every night. And so were you. Did you want to be distracted?”

“But afterwards?”

“Afterwards, I had more things to worry about. Getting a job for one. It slipped my mind for a while. And it’s probably nothing anyway. Nothing to do with Coleridge.”

“Where did you find the letter?”

“On microfilm at the library.”

“I don’t suppose you took a copy?”

“I did as a matter of fact. Want to see it?”

“You have a copy! I could strangle you, Pen. Of course I want to see it.”

A few minutes later both were looking down at a sheet of paper on which was a faintly reproduced, slightly askew image of Joseph Jekyll's letter.

“Read it aloud, Pen, It's your turn and your eyes are better than mine.”

“Some words are too faint for mine, but here goes:

“My Dear Gus, Just a short epistle to let you know ... something, something ... from the terrors of Taunton and will be there on the 31st. Something ... our dear old red-robed friend, Lawrence the Magnificent was probably itching to give his black cap another airing but, in this instance, our good Sir Soulden ...”

“Sir who?”

“Sir Soulden. Sir Soulden Lawrence was the judge. Where was I?”

“... our good Sir Soulden will have to remain slumped wounded on that point.

“Jekyll was a keen punster, apparently.

“As I am writing, she and her entourage are on their way back to Bath as free as the sons of the waves. As I previously relayed, I am still of the opinion that our lady of good fortune is one ... something ...to frequent the stalls and bazaars of the common man and occasionally mistake his property for hers. I had recourse to remove from her possession a piece of poetry – of all things worthless – she had appropriated from a young lad who faced our red-robed friend the day before, in which instance his black cap did get an airing.”

“Blimey. The kid must have been condemned to death. What did he do?”

“The letter doesn't say.” Penny returned her attention to it.

“The lad, an apprentice apothecary from Porlock – alliterally – was imprisoned with her for a time at Ilchester. The last thing we needed was for a youngster with some claim to intelligence to be crying theft on the day of her trial. I assured him I'd get it back for him which kept him quiet, but he and the others who were sentenced were ... something, maybe packed or pushed ... off back to Ilchester to await their fate in such a hurry after... something ...they were sentenced, I didn't get a chance to return it.

“To await their fate. Maybe he didn't hang.”

“Maybe.” Penny looked up for a moment before dropping her gaze back to the letter and continuing to read.

I don't know what he was so excited about. She would hardly publish it herself and he could always write another. It's not a bad piece of doggerel, although it

stretches the mind to figure out why a pimply youth from Porlock would feel inclined to write of demon lovers and wailing Nubian women. As poetry ... something ... much more in your area of interest, I've included it here for your perusal. Until the 31st, Joseph J."

Christine grimaced. "An apprentice apothecary from Porlock,"

"Alliterally!"

"A play on alliteration, I suppose. But there's no such word, is there?"

"No. but he obviously thinks there should be."

"Methinks he's a smartarse, this Jekyll! Sounds more like a Hyde! Ilchester gaol raises a flag. Tony St James could probably point you to where any records might be found on the place, being an Ilchester native."

Penny's face clouded. "Tony St James is the last person I'll be approaching about this."

"Just a thought. Did you ever get around to visiting the gaol, or was sightseeing low on the agenda when you were his number one house guest?"

"I don't think the gaol is still there."

"I wonder if he's still nurturing Cambrigian under-grads."

"I don't want to think about Tony bloody St James at the moment." Penny began to fold the photocopy of the letter. "And of course he's still nurturing under-grads. That's his expertise, nurturing."

"Sorry! Sorry!" Christine fluttered a hand in disengagement. "I take it the poem wasn't on microfilm."

"No."

"And you haven't tried to locate it? Find out if it still exists?"

"Not until now."

"And now?"

"Seeing I have the couple of days off, I might pay a visit to Mrs Vera d'Arcy McClelland."

"Who's that?"

"The lady who donated this letter and several others to the University library not all that long ago."

"Do you have her address?"

"Somewhere. I was in two minds about writing it down, because, as I said, the last thing I wanted at the time was unnecessary distraction. As I recall, she lived in Dorking."

“That’s not very far away. But you haven’t told me why you have this sudden interest now.”

Penny nodded to the folded paper on the coffee table in front of them. “An article I was reading mentioned Coleridge and the person from Porlock. It pricked my conscience.

“So, it should have. I’m coming too, to Dorking.”

Three

After Rory McLaughlin had finished reading the Bloomsday article, he sat for some time looking out at Circular Quay, seemingly engrossed in the activities of meandering tourists and shuttling ferries; or perhaps in the human millipedes of sight-seeing Harbour Bridge climbers ascending the great arch that soared above the former bond stores that flanked the western shore of the quay. Then, perhaps on impulse, and certainly in a conscious move to act before he changed his mind, he took out his phone to confirm it contained the new number of the person whose name had sprung to mind as he drove back from the Minimbarul theological college some six months before.

From Sydney Rory had embarked on a trip into his past, making a broad, clockwise sweep of the New South Wales countryside, briefly visiting the towns where he had spent periods of his childhood. Although he may not have acknowledged it, he was not in the best of spirits at the beginning of the journey and, until shortly before the end, his sense of well-being had all but deserted him and he was suffering from an unprecedented level of despondency. Not that this would have been noticed by other than the more discerning of the few people he brushed against on his travels. Any comment he made or pleasantries he exchanged gave little indication that he was being besieged by a sense of uncertainty and loss of direction.

The drought that gripped the country did not help. Parched grey fields, denuded of pasture and livestock, stretched to all horizons. Where there were any sheep or cattle, they were clustered tightly together on bare ground waiting to be hand-fed. Crows either sat watching from nearby trees or flapped lazily over the adjacent fields.

The towns he visited gave him some lift in mood. They were cleaner and tidier than he remembered, denying the ominous presence of the bleak countryside that pressed in on them from all sides. Outdoor cafés, unknown in his younger days, and now thanks to the widespread introduction of dung beetles, sparkled in the sun. But fond memories evoked by the levee banks on which he stood or the streets he walked were soured by a sense of wasted time and the escalating speed at which it was consumed.

The final day of his journey, the day when his mood received an inspirational jolt, had him travelling down the Hunter Valley. On the north-western outskirts of the town of Singleton, coal was now king. For as far as he could see, new hills were being created by drought-resistant monsters that crawled backwards across the landscape leaving newly formed valleys in their wake, some of these already recarpeted in grasses and low vegetation. Although he was swept with a curious mix of admiration and concern at the industrial scale of these activities, it was not this that affected a change in him. It was on the town's southern outskirts that the road took on some of the characteristics of the one to Damascus.

Honouring a promise to his sister to follow-up a lead on their family history, a few miles south of Singleton he called into the Anglican theological college of Minimbarul. The main building was a huge two-story Victorian structure surrounded by wide verandas and wrought-iron balustrades.

As he stepped out of the air-conditioning of his car at the visitor's carpark opposite the main entrance, he was struck by a furnace-blast of air, a collision of hot dry wind that had traversed much of the continent and a wet blanket of humid air that clung to the coast. The sudden change in temperature and humidity was too much for his sunglasses. They immediately frosted over rendering him blind and forcing him to remove them in order to survey his surrounds. He was then momentarily caught in a swirl of dust that forced him to turn away to protect his eyes. The dust, as well as consisting of innocuous mineral matter, was an uneven mix of organic substances, including pollen, pulverized bark, and grass and insect debris – the bane of anyone with asthma or sinus problems. And the man who approached Rory, with one hand clamped over his nose and the other waving him towards a short flight of steps and a door to one side of the main entrance, often claimed that he could represent his country in sinus problems.

“Reverend Dagleish?” Rory received in reply a brief nod, momentary grip of his extended hand and a repeat of the wave towards the steps.

Rory experienced some alarm for the other man's health as Dagleish, after ushering him into a large office and motioning for him to sit at a chair opposite a broad desk, turned away to be consumed by a violent sneezing fit that lifted and dropped his upper body with an action reminiscent of a pile driver. When Rory, rather than responding to the direction to sit, remained on his feet and enquired if there was anything he could do – get him a drink of water perhaps, or call someone – Dagleish shook his head and twirled a finger back in the direction of the chair. So, Rory sat where instructed. As his sneezing gradually

subsided, Dalglish snatched a small plastic applicator from his pocket and, after several unsuccessful attempts because of some untimely after-shocks of the attack, managed to spray a dose deep into each nostril.

“Be all right in a moment.” A half-whisper, half-croak. He then extracted a handkerchief and, turning away again, proceeded to clear his nose with a battery of impressive trumpeting snorts.

“So, you’re the literary Rory McLaughlin,” he managed finally.

“Not at the moment. At the moment I’m simply the family-history-researching Rory McLaughlin.”

Dalglish sank into a high-backed chair behind his desk. “You’re not writing?”

“Afraid not.” The lightly slumbering guilt-demon within him rolled over and blinked a leaden eye to affirm its presence.

“What! My wife will be devastated. She wanted to know when your next book will hit the shelves. She’s pretty cut up as it is that she couldn’t be here to meet you. Had to take my daughter to town. Which is my cue to get this over and done with before we get down to other business.” He pushed a hard-cover copy of Rory’s latest novel – the thriller that had financed his present lifestyle despite his protracted literary inactivity – across the table. “Would you please sign this for her. Otherwise, my life won’t be worth living.”

“What’s your wife’s name?”

“Diane. Do you need a pen?”

“No, I have one.” Rory took out a small notebook and extracted a pen from the spine. He opened the cover of the book Dalglish had placed before him and began to write on the fly. “I’m saying that when the next one is published, I’ll send her a copy.” He liked Dalglish, he decided – what he could see of him, his way – despite an awareness he himself was in breach of a recent resolution to break his life-long habit of forming hasty – usually, but not always, favourable – judgment of people. He also liked the sound of his wife. Possibly because she liked his books. More likely because she was married to someone he had already given his blessing. So, he made a silent pledge to honour what he was writing. When he had finished, he passed the book back.

Dalglish glanced at the fly. “She’ll be delighted. Thank you. My name’s Walter by the way. Couldn’t get that out before.”

“Call me Rory.”

Dalglish, leaned back and clasped both hands together over his chest. “So, you have an ancestor who worked here last century? I mean, century before last.”

“Yes, from the early eighteen twenties for about fifteen years.”

“Well, if he did, you should have some sympathy for the poor man. He would have worked under the tyrant who took up the property not long before the twenties, Captain Isambard Billington Featheringham; from all accounts as formidable a colonial swaggerer as ever lauded it over those unfortunate enough to come within his command, convict and freeman alike. What was he, your ancestor, if you don't mind me asking – convict or freeman?”

“Convict. Actually, ticket-of-leave man when he was here.”

“What was his name?”

“Charles MacGregor McLaughlin.”

Dalgleish shook his head. “Doesn't ring any bells, I'm afraid. What did he do? To become a convict, I mean. Needn't tell me if it had anything to do with animals.”

Rory smiled. “It did actually. He supposedly stole some cattle.”

“Where?”

“Not sure. But he was tried at the Sterling assizes.”

“Ha! No one with the MacGregor tag would stand a chance of walking away from a cattle-stealing charge in that neck of the woods. Before and after Rob Roy's day. It's a wonder he didn't hang.”

“So I believe. What I'd hoped to find is how he came to get an education during the time he was here. His papers indicate that, before he came, he could neither read nor write. Afterwards, he was capable of both and had enough mathematics to get employment as a bookkeeper.”

“Well, that wouldn't have been down to old Isambard. That would be down to his wife, Mary Elizabeth. She was cut from a different cloth. You'll see her portrait in the hallway. A grand lady! She built a school here for the workers and their children and initiated similar deeds throughout the district. A grand lady, indeed!”

“Was she the teacher?”

“She may have done some teaching herself, but the person most likely to have taught him was the man she put in charge of the school. One of the ex-convicts.” He paused and looked up at the high ceiling for a few moments before returning his attention to Rory.

“Can't remember his name. Small matter. He was reasonably well educated as I do remember and something of a poet as well from all accounts. Read something about that somewhere.” His brow furrowed. “Might have had something published. Or tried to. We

have a stack of records from that time that would have the details and may even mention your Charles *MacGregor* McLaughlin.

“Would it be possible for me to look through those records?”

Dalgleish did not reply immediately. With his lips pursed in what appeared to be painful concentration, he tapped the tips of his fingers together several times before eventually saying, “Bit of a problem there. You’d need someone to assist you, I’m afraid and, unfortunately, the best person for that isn’t expected back for a few days. Our bursar, or the Reverend Albert Spencer to be more precise, our most senior master. He has a room here, but mainly stays at a small farm he owns down by the river. Prickly old bugger. He’s been compiling the records of this place and the district for more than twenty years.” He fluttered a hand in the general direction of the skylight above the door. “They’re kept in a part of this building we don’t use, and there’s no way I could even contemplate taking you there when my sinuses are giving me a taste of the nether regions of the hereafter. Far too much dust. You’d have to bring me back down again on a stretcher.”

“Could someone else show me?”

Dalgleish began to tap his fingers together again before suddenly flinging his hands apart as if the thought that struck him had caught him squarely between the shoulder blades. “Of course someone can. And I know just the person. Old Albie would almost certainly hit the roof if he ever found out, but you’ve come too far to be turned away empty handed.”

He reached for a telephone handset and punched in a number. “One of our students who *is* here today has helped him from time to time. I’ll have him take you up and provide any assistance you’ll need.”

“I’m sorry to be a nuisance.”

“You’re not a nuisance. We’re between semesters and this young chap is probably bored stiff and will jump at the opportunity.”

Four

Douglas Ridgestow led Rory along a broad, dimly lit passageway in the south wing of the building. Ridgestow was tall and painfully thin, perhaps too thin to be the basketballer Rory's first sighting of him brought to mind. Whatever his physical condition, it did not prevent him from striding out at a pace that had Rory wondering if he was demonstrating the keenness to assist him that Dagleish had suggested, particularly when he took the stairs two at a time and was a good four paces ahead at the top.

The hallway was uncarpeted. A column of daylight, spilling through a window at the far end, revealed a film of dust on the floorboards. All the doors were closed as were the tall skylights above them, and the air was stale.

Rory caught up with him. "How come you don't need to use this area?"

Ridgestow released a breath that Rory hoped was not the insolent sigh it resembled, and replied dryly, "The dormitories and most of the classrooms are out the back in a more modern building. If you can call the 1950s modern. The place was a private boys' high school until about six years ago when it was considered too small. Some of the masters stayed on when it became the theological college."

"So, what's the function of this building?"

Again, Ridgestow replied in a tone that suggested he would rather be elsewhere. "The front contains the admin section and some of the senior staff's studies, the north wing is Dagleish's residence – as big as it is, the entire wing – and beneath us here in the south wing are the kitchen and dining room. Where we are on the top floor of the south wing is mainly empty except for a few rooms that are used for storage of old furniture and odd junk owned by previous occupants and, of course, the room we're heading for, which houses the archived records you want to see."

Ridgestow finally stopped before a door near the end of the corridor and, after inserting a long key in the lock, struggled to open it. Hoping they would not need to retrace their steps and, with his low mood already further deflated by the gloom of their surrounds and Ridgestow's manner, Rory was swept with an all too familiar sense these days of, *what the hell am I doing here?* But finally, after some trial-and-error reinsertion of the key, Ridgestow managed to turn it full circle and, a moment later, the heavy door swung wide.

The portentous creak and simultaneous rattle of two windows that stood either side of another sky-light-topped door that apparently led to the verandah, coincided with Rory's audible exhalation.

The room's solitary light was switched by a chord that hung from the ceiling. The light consisted of three dusty globes beneath a circular metal reflector that hung by a chain at the centre of the room. Directly beneath it stood a large wooden table and, on either side of the table, two heavy, high-backed chairs. Except for the doorways and windows, all wall-space was taken up by deep shelves upon which were stacked cardboard boxes.

Thankfully, Rory noted, the boxes had had been clearly labelled, presumably by the absent bursar using a thick felt pen. The labels seemed to consist of a range of dates or the names of families or individuals.

Although none of them appeared to bear the name of his paternal forebear, within ten minutes, thanks to some unexpected guidance from Ridgestow, Rory was able to locate and transcribe to his notebook several references to Charles MacGregor McLaughlin. These were mainly in the form of bookkeeping accounts of wages and purchases from the property store. An entry for the purchase of writing paper, pens and ink during his forebear's second year of employment diverted Rory to seeking information on the school Dalgleish had mentioned. Curiously, Ridgestow seemed less willing to assist with this line of enquiry.

"It wasn't a real school. Just a place where those who didn't have any education were able to get some guidance in reading, writing and arithmetic. An indulgence by the old rogue who owned the place to keep on the right side of his wife."

Rory stood up and moved to where the boxes were labelled with the names of individuals or families. "Do you know the name of the man who ran the school?"

"I doubt you'll find anything about him there."

"Hello! What's going on?" someone demanded from the doorway in a distinctive pubescent croak.

Rory turned to see a slim youth he guessed was about thirteen or fourteen years old standing at the door.

"Hello, Jamie! Fancy running into you in this neck of the woods when the Reverend Albie is away!"

Rory detected a mix of both annoyance and forbearance in Ridgestow's response.

Jamie walked across the room proffering his hand. "You're Rory someone, the writer. I'm James Dalgleish. Please call me Jamie."

Rory shook his hand. "Rory McLaughlin. Pleased to meet you, Jamie."

"Likewise." Jamie, pumped Rory's hand three times before releasing it. "Can I be of assistance?"

"Mr McLaughlin's in good hands, Jamie. Haven't you some homework you should be doing?"

Jamie ignored him and pointed to the row of boxes that Rory had been investigating when he entered. "Is one of these people your convict ancestor?"

Rory smothered a smile. "You've been well briefed. No, I don't think he was important enough to have his own box. I was wondering if the man who ran the school back in those days has one of his own, but Doug doesn't think so."

Jamie pointed across at one of the boxes. "He certainly has." Arthur Warrington."

Ridgestow grimaced. "Ah, of course! For some reason I was thinking his records were mainly with Mrs Featheringham's."

"I don't think so. Except maybe something on that poem he hoped she could interest someone in publishing. I doubt there'd be much else. Perhaps a mention here and there in letters, but that would be all." He turned to Rory. "She sent a verse from a poem of his to the publisher of the Sydney Gazette, with promise of more to come if he agreed to publish. Forget his name ... No, I don't. It was Howe, Robert Howe, son of the first government printer. As well as the gazette, he printed poetry and other stuff from time to time. And to WC Wentworth at the Australian – the one who first crossed the mountains and had his nose in most things those days." He gave Rory what he probably assumed was a knowing look. "A bit risqué for those times. No wonder they wouldn't have a bar of it."

Rory was unable to hide his smile. "You seem to know quite a lot about these matters, Jamie."

"I'll have a PhD in history one day." He swept a hand around the room. "If my thesis was involved with colonial pastoral history, I wouldn't have to look much further than what we have here." He glanced across at Ridgestow with what might have been a smile twitching the corner of his mouth. "Provided I could get as much access to this room as I'd need."

Ridgestow's face broke into a similar half-smile, half-grimace. "Shouldn't be a problem. Much!"

Jamie released an abrupt clipped laugh and Ridgestow, although obviously attempting to maintain his sober demeanour, was unable to prevent his face breaking into several broad smiles.

Rory glanced from one to the other. “The man who compiled these is a bit protective of them, I take it?”

“Just a bit,” Ridgestow responded, prompting a replay of Jamie’s laughter and his own failed smothering of a battery of smiles.

Ridgestow was obviously succumbing to Jamie’s infectious good humour and Rory found himself reverting to a more favourable impression of him. “You still seem to know a lot about what’s in here, Jamie.”

“He isn’t always around. And what the eye doesn’t see, the heart doesn’t grieve. And even when he is here, he knows he’s obliged to let me have some access if I have a school assignment relating to colonial times.”

“How old are you, Jamie?”

“Fourteen.”

Ridgestow echoed Rory’s thoughts. “Fourteen, going on twenty-four.”

Jamie walked across to one of the shelves and extracted a heavy box. “These are Mrs Featheringham’s letters, I can probably find that poem, if you’d like to see it.”

“Rory’s here to look up his own family history, Jamie. I’m sure you’re distracting him.”

“No, I’m not being distracted. There’s probably not much more here on my ancestor anyway. I’d like to see this poem. I wouldn’t think that poets in those days of the colony would have been thick on the ground.”

A few minutes later all three stood peering down at a small yellowing sheet of paper.

“Read it aloud, Jamie. It’s a bit faint for my eyes.”

Jamie blushed and shook his head. “You read it. I have a cold.”

“I’m sure you’d still do a better job, but here goes.” Rory cleared his throat and read with passable control of the metre,

*“Naked as Jewels from Samarkand,
Lithe Maidens danced in Revelry,
In Glades where blind Musicians played
On silver Pipes with Gold inlaid;
Long Tresses floating free.
Above the Maids a fall of Vines
Cascaded down thro’ mighty Pines,*

*Where garlanded Boy-Men, shyly hidden,
Cast flowering Showers of petaled Snow,
Fermenting Freedoms for long Forbidden,
Amidst the startled Laughter loosed below.”*

Jesus Christ! he exclaimed silently somewhere within him as he finished, the strength of this reaction revealed in his own simultaneous acknowledgment that he could not remember when his breath had last caught in mid-exhalation over something he had read.

Five

Rory straightened and glanced at the others. “Do either of you know what crime this Arthur Warrington committed?”

Jamie looked across at the shelves. “I think it was theft. It will be in his file. Why do you ask?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it was plagiarism, if there was such a crime in those days.”

“You think this is from someone else’s poem?” Jamie walked back to the shelves and, extracting another box, brought it to the table.

“Well, I wouldn’t put money on it, but it looks a lot like one that Coleridge might have written, or, if not Coleridge, Wordsworth or Shelley. Definitely one of the Romantic poets. You said that there were more verses?”

“Mrs Featheringham’s letter said there were more to come, but I’m pretty sure that single verse was all that was ever found.” Jamie opened the new box, which was marked, *Arthur Warrington*. “If he did have more already written, they haven’t come to light. And he never left, because he died here. His grave’s in the cemetery we have out the back.” He opened Warrington’s box and, removing a stack of papers, began to flip through them.

Ridgestow moved closer. “Look, if you’re not careful you’re going to get things mixed.” He reached for the sheet containing the verse. “I’ll put this away.”

Rory flipped his notebook open. “Let me copy that first.”

“I’m not sure that’s appropriate. This has nothing to do with your family history.”

Rory turned and looked at him. “I’m sure Jamie’s father wouldn’t mind. I’ll clear it with him first, if you like.”

Ridgestow met his gaze defiantly.

Jamie glanced from one to the other. “Of course he won’t mind. What’s the matter with you, Ridge? Old Albie’s not here. When he’s been gone before you haven’t been so concerned about what he’d think.”

Ridgestow’s eyes narrowed. “Careful, Jamie! You’re not so big I can’t still clip you over the ears for being cheeky.” He turned back to Rory. “Sorry. I am feeling a bit peaky today. This wind gets to me, I’m afraid.” On cue, the windows and outside door were jolted by a violent gust. “Go ahead and copy it if you must.”

While Rory then copied the words, Jamie continued to flick through the papers from Warrington's box, finally holding up a single sheet. "There might be other stuff here with more detail, but this says that Arthur Warrington, aged 14, was charged with stealing five pounds from his employer, Caliph Stainbridge, apothecary of Porlock, County of Somerset, convicted at the Taunton assizes, Friday 28th day of March, 1800, found guilty, sentenced to death, commuted to transportation to New South Wales for seven years by Royal Decree."

"So," Ridgestow offered. "he was a thief, but of money not of poems."

Rory remained motionless for a moment. "I'll copy that down as well, if you don't mind."

He had just completed doing this when the door swung open behind him. "What in damnation is going on here?" barked a distinctive Geordie voice.

Ridgestow snapped to attention. "Al... Reverend Spencer!" "We weren't expecting you until the weekend."

"Obviously!" snarled the nuggety individual who strode into the room. He stopped in front of Rory and stood with his feet set well apart and his hands clamped to his hips.

"Who are you, and what are you doing in this room?"

Rory put away his notebook. "I'm Rory McLaughlin and I assume you're the man who compiled all this material."

"Assume what you like. You haven't answered my question."

"He's checking on a family ancestor who worked here, Uncle Albie. Dad gave him permission."

"Did he? What's your ancestor's name?"

"Charles MacGregor McLaughlin."

"There is nothing here of substance on him."

"Well, I've already found some references to him in the property accounts."

"I repeat, there is nothing here of substance on him. If you wish to have copies of what little there is, put your request in writing and send it to me. Mr Ridgestow will give you the address. Mr Ridgestow, will you see this gentleman to his car, now! I bid you good day, Mr McLaughlin."

Rory could no longer contain his smile. "And I you, Reverend Spencer." The smile broke into a low chuckle as he moved towards the door. As Spencer's gaze shifted to the table, Jamie transmitted a grimace of apology from behind his shoulder.

“One moment!” Spencer snapped. “What are these records doing here? These are not records of accounts. What are Mrs Featheringham’s and Arthur Warrington’s records doing here?”

Rory turned from the doorway. “I was interested in both. My forebear received an education here that would have been on account of their good graces.”

“Did you copy anything from these records?” He turned to Ridgestow. “Did he copy anything from these records?”

“Yes, I did.”

Spencer held out his hand. “You had no right. So, kindly hand me what you wrote.”

“I told him, it was not appropriate.”

“Kindly hand me what you wrote,”

“No, I won’t. Kindly or any other way. Whatever goes into my notebook stays there, unless I decide differently.”

Spencer moved closer. “I order you, mister, give me your notebook so I can remove what you wrote. And I warn you, I served with the 3rd Commando in Malaya.”

“Did you, Reverend Spencer? I’m suitably impressed. But your manner suggests that since your time in Malaya, your time as a schoolmaster has affected your manners when dealing with adults. There is no way I’m going to give you my notebook and, despite what you may think, I don’t believe you’re capable of taking it from me.” He leant forward and lowered his voice, more as a display of imparting a confidence, than actually preventing the others from hearing. “And, in case you’re tempted to try, there’s every chance you never were, even during those interesting times when you were playing silly buggers in rubber plantations.” He straightened and briefly touched his forehead with the tips of his fingers in what might have been a salute. “So, I. now bid you good-day, sir!” With this he raised a hand in farewell to Jamie and left the room with Ridgestow trailing closely.

Several times as they made their way along the passageway and down the stairs Rory chuckled softly to himself.

“It’s not funny,” Ridgestow mumbled. “You should not have treated him like that. You should have shown more respect.”

“If he had shown me any, I would have. Your Reverend Albert Spencer is a bully, Doug. And the best way to treat bullies is to grab them by the balls.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Rory headed for Dalglish’s office.

“That’s not the way to the car park,” Ridgestow protested.

“I’m going to say goodbye to my host.”

“But Reverend Spencer ...”

“Is an old goat, and if you can't see that, you're not as smart as I think you are.”

Dalgleish's office door was partly open revealing him still sitting at his desk, so Rory knocked and raised a hand as the other man looked up.

“Come in, come in.” Dalgleish rose from his chair.

“Just popping in to say, goodbye, and to thank you for your assistance.”

“Did you find what you were after?”

“Some of it, but we were interrupted by the return of your Reverend Spencer.”

“He's back! Oh my God!” Dalgleish cracked an open palm against his forehead. “He must have noticed the key was missing.” Through a sympathetic grimace he added, “I suppose he wasn't happy?”

“He was decidedly unhappy, particularly when he knew I'd been taking notes. He even demanded I hand them over.”

Dalgleish released a mirthless chuckle. “That's because he caught you interfering with his children. Did you oblige?”

“No.”

“Good for you.” He glanced at the door. “He'll make my life a misery for a while, but I suppose I'll survive it. What surprises me is that he gave up so easily and he's not here now trying to throw a hammerlock on you.”

“He did warn me he'd been with the 3rd Commando in Malaya.”

“He wasn't lying. But the fact he mentioned it probably means he's been drinking. So, the sooner we have you on your way the better.” He looked across at Ridgestow who was standing at the doorway. “And you best stay out of his sight for a while as well.”

Jamie appeared at the door. “I suppose you heard what happened, dad.”

“You were there too!”

“Your son was a great help.”

“I'm sure he was, but the fact he was there will have compounded Albie's anger.”

“He's working himself into a real lather. If he wasn't so anxious to stow his records away and kick me out of there, I think he'd have taken off after Rory.”

“So, I suppose this will prevent me from coming back, if I wanted to check your records for anything else?”

“Not at all, not at all. But we might have to wait until the old bugger kicks the bucket. Ha!” Dalgleish laughed abruptly and patted Rory on the shoulder as he ushered him towards the door that led to the verandah. “I wish I could say that was a joke, but we'll

see, we'll see. You'd have to give me plenty of warning." He turned to his son. "Jamie, I'm going to see if I can find Albie and try to placate him. You walk Mr McLaughlin to his car and, if Albie puts in an appearance or attempts to waylay him, tell him I'm looking for him and see if you can head him off until this good man is on his way."

"You should have seen Rory stand up to him, dad. It was brilliant! Brilliant!"

Rory shook hands with Dalgleish, raised a hand to Ridgestow, and followed Jamie out of the room. They reached his car without any further drama. Jamie shook his hand, the three firm pumps of his lower arm more indicative of his age than his contribution to the day's events.

Before Rory climbed into his car, Jamie glanced back at the building and lowered his voice. "I must warn you, Rory that before Dad's time here, when this was still a high school, Albie nearly killed a student teacher who crossed him over some matter or other. Beat the daylights out of him. The police wanted him charged but the church covered it up somehow and the student teacher refused to give evidence. So, don't underestimate him. I think he's a bit crazy."

"Thanks Jamie, I'll give him a wide berth if ever I do come across him again. And you had better steer clear of him as well. Because I've come across his type before. And I think he could be more than just a bit crazy."

He waited until he was clear of the college and back on the New England Highway heading south before he permitted himself to mouth the single word that, despite the untimely appearance of the Reverend Albert Spencer, had hovered at the periphery of his attention from the moment Jamie first uttered it in relation to Arthur Warrington:

"Porlock!"

Six

The reason Penny gave Mrs Vera d’Arcy McClelland for wanting to visit her, was that she and Christine were seeking as much information as they could find on the Leigh Perrot trial. Fortuitously, neither when arranging the visit, nor immediately after they arrived, did she mention Joseph Jekyll’s letter. Had she done so their host may not have been so willing to entertain them. Detecting, early in their visit, that Mrs McClelland was no fan of Jekyll, they bided their time while she served them afternoon tea and went through her forebear’s papers. She seemed genuinely pleased to discover that there were several references that Penny was able to jot in her notebook.

“Not only was Augustus d’Arcy Durant a judge, you know,” Mrs McClelland proclaimed at one stage, “he was a knight of the realm and contributed much to this country’s judicial history.” Her gaze settled on Penny. “Would you like another piece of cake, dear? You could do with some fattening up.” When Mrs McClelland then called upon Christine for support of this observation, the implication that she, Christine, did not need the same treatment caused their previously intent expressions to collapse into broad smiles, Christine’s reflecting what might have been the hint of a grimace.

The knighted gentleman’s great-great-great-grand-niece, whom the others assumed correctly was in her late-eighties, was dressed in a frock that matched the floral style of many of the softer fittings in the cottage where she lived with two cats and an attention-seeking pink-cheeked cockatiel. The cats were not used to visitors and were hiding, while the cockatiel was either hanging by its bill from a wire strand of its cage at the end of the enclosed verandah where they were sitting or was leaping about on its perch and releasing potentially ear-damaging whistles.

Mrs McClelland eventually gave them the opportunity to raise the subject of Jekyll’s letter. “He was a greater man than Joseph Jekyll and I told them so. But no, all they were interested in was Jekyll’s letters. *Who was Jekyll?* says I. *Someone whose main claim to fame was that he had not one iota of credential for his position of Master of Chancery.* The Prince of Wales bullied Lord Eldon into appointing him while the poor man was on his sick bed, you know. Joseph Jekyll, Master of Chancery! He was a master all right. Master of poppycock!”

“One of those letters from Mr Jekyll that you sent to Cambridge mentioned there was a poem attached. Penny’s interested in any poems from that period. I don’t suppose you still have it so she could copy it down?”

“Poem! That wasn’t a poem, dear. That was a piece of drivel. And pornographic to boot! I never really paid it any attention until I was putting the other papers together that they wanted. I couldn’t send something like that to Cambridge. What would they have thought of me! So, I burnt it.” Her brow furrowed thoughtfully, and she glanced across at the cockatiel which was now attempting to whistle while hanging by its beak from its perch, not with much success. The younger women exchanged pained expressions that were wiped away a moment later by, “Or did I? I know I intended to.”

“I don’t suppose it’s still with Sir Augustus’s other papers?” Penny nodded to the metal box Mrs McClelland had placed beside her chair after satisfying herself that it did not contain any more letters with references to the trial.

The old lady bent down with some difficulty and, after picking up the box, placed it back on her lap and opened the lid. “It would be here if I didn’t burn it. But I’m sure I must have, because that’s what I intended to do. It *was* some time ago and my mind was in better order then. It was a small piece of paper as I remember.” She began to rifle through the papers, pausing occasionally to extract any small sheet, which she would examine more closely before shaking her head and replacing it. “The only reason I have some doubt is that I don’t remember actually putting it in the fire.” The eyes of both onlookers remained locked on her every movement.

“What’s this?” She leaned away from a small sheet of paper she held at arm’s length. “This could be it. My goodness, I think it is! The writing is much smaller and fainter than I remember, but it is the poem all right. I couldn’t have burnt it after all, but I certainly should have.” She held it to one side and turned her face away in obvious disgust.

Penny leaned forward. “May I see?”

“See if you must, dear. But I don’t know why you’d want to. This time I will burn it.” She passed it to Penny.

Christine, stood up and moved to where she could look over Penny’s shoulder. “Penny needs as many samples as she can lay her hands on. I’m sure you’d like to include this one, wouldn’t you, Pen, even if it isn’t of a very high standard?”

“It’s of a very low standard, young lady. You wouldn’t want it, would you, dear?”

“I would, actually, if that’s all right by you?” Rather than have you burn it.”

“You can do what you like with it, girl. I don’t want it in the house.”

“Well thank you. But I must tell you that if I were to discover that it has any value, I promise you that I’ll see to it that you’re properly rewarded.”

“Don’t be silly, dear. I’m too old for rewards and I certainly wouldn’t want to be associated with that. Not everything that was written back then has value, girl.” She closed the metal box and tapped the lid with her finger. “Sir Augustus’s letters are proof of that. I couldn’t give them away.”

“Well thank you very much, Mrs McClelland.” Penny opened her notebook and carefully placed the sheet of paper between two unused pages. “You’ve been very hospitable and very kind.”

The old lady stood up still cradling the metal box. “It was a pleasure, dear. Now, both of you can help me take these things back to the kitchen and then you had better be on your way. It’s becoming very dark outside, and this could be the start of the bad weather they’ve been forecasting.”

Because it was Dorking and they wanted a place where they could examine their prize more carefully, they chose the White Horse Hotel. The front door was only a short distance from where Penny had earlier parked her car but, before they reached it, stinging sheets of rain assailed them as they sprinted across the high street. They bundled themselves inside and chose a table close to a window. Once they were settled, Penny took out her notebook and carefully opened it to reveal the yellowing sheet and the faint scrawl upon it. Raindrops tracking down panes of glass beside them drew a moving mosaic in many shades on the notebook and poem and across the hands and spread fingers of the two women peering down at it.

“Read it aloud, Pen. I couldn’t take it in back there and now I’m shaking so much I can’t think straight.”

Penny looked to the left and right to make sure no one was within hearing distance and read in a hushed voice:

*“Framed by the mounting midnight Moon,
Strode the Daemon with Eyes agleam;
Wide-eyed Animals, great and small,
Cringed and trembled at each Foot Fall;
His Wake, a silent Scream.*

*When she sensed his relentless Tread,
Her Heart was gripped by thrill-shot Dread;
And then when entangled within his Grasp,
She writhed for Release to wasted Avail;
So scalded his Neck with a rasping Gasp,
And rent the Air with her Nubian Wail."*

"Bloody hell, Pen! I've gone all goose bumps."

Seven

When Rory left the Hunter Valley to return to Sydney, he was fired with the desire to spare no level of endeavour in attempting to identify the origin of the poem he had been shown. If he had been pressed about why he failed to follow this course he would have probably confided a reluctance to pursue a matter he feared could prove to be extremely time-consuming, probably lead nowhere and be similarly frustrating as his endeavours to trace his family history. But the real cause was the return of the despondency and sense of loss of direction that had been dogging him of late, triggered by the situation that confronted him upon his return.

Such was his enthusiasm when he drove from the Minimbarul Anglican theological college, he decided to forgo a night he had planned to spend at the nearby Hunter wineries and instead, return home immediately.

Joanne Bonython, barrister of law, highly acclaimed practitioner of same and the first and only person with whom Rory believed he could contentedly spend the rest of his life, was not quite in full voice when he entered his apartment. But she was certainly in full, repeated and vocal gasp. For a moment Rory stood as if transfixed. What he could hear emanating from their bedroom was so unexpected, so far beyond the comfort of his perceived personal sanctuary, for several seconds his mind was swamped with a sense of utter disbelief. He struggled to accept that what he had walked in upon was real and actually happening to him, not to someone else. He was momentarily nudged by recall of a similar reaction when, in his youth, he suddenly found himself rolling down an embankment inside a crashing car.

He eventually placed his travel bag on the floor and moved to the bedroom where the door was slightly ajar. Although the scene that confronted him was stark visual confirmation that his ears had not deceived him, he still found difficulty in accepting its reality.

Despite the two occupants of the bed having their backs to him, he recognised both immediately – Joanne by her gasping, *Oh Gods*, and Derek Fielding, her legal chambers' associate, by the paucity of hair on the crown of his head and the length of his ponytail. Both were naked. Joanne was on all fours and Derek was on his knees behind her.

Although the exact nature of their intimacy was hidden from view, there could be no doubt about the activity in which they were engaged, nor the term that would best describe it.

Rory later was unsure of how long he stood and watched. But when the combination of Joanne's gasping cries of, "Oh God!", Derek's guttural grunts, and the sympathetic slap of flesh suddenly began to rise in both volume and tempo to signal the onset of what was probably the final crescendo, he left and walked back into the living room.

When, shortly afterwards, Derek emerged from the bedroom gleaming with perspiration and crossed to the kitchen at the rear of the living room to pour himself a glass of water, Rory sat watching him from a couch on the opposite side of the room.

Luckily, Derek was no longer holding the glass when he turned to retrace his steps. For when Rory calmly enquired, "Are you planning to stay the night, or should I call you a cab?" Derek jumped as if shot.

"Christ, almighty!" His jaw sagged and he placed a hand against his chest. "You could have given me a heart attack, you stupid bastard!"

"I'm not sure you're in a position to be calling *me* names," Rory responded coldly. "Not while you're standing there naked and probably dripping your body fluids onto *my* kitchen floor."

Joanne appeared at the bedroom doorway. "Oh God!" she whispered.

"Still praying, Joanne? You seem to be in a particularly devout mood this evening."

She moved to the centre of the room and stood between them, her face a mask of anguish. "You told me you wouldn't be here until tomorrow."

Rory opened his hands priest-like. "So, this is my fault?"

"Should always call if you're going to arrive home unexpectedly, matey. Saves embarrassing situations such as this one."

"Shut up, Derek!" Joanne snapped.

"You don't seem to be very embarrassed, Derek, *matey*. You seem quite unabashed. Been here and done this before, have you?"

"No, he hasn't!" Joanne turned towards Derek and, taking his arm, directed him towards the bedroom. "Derek, get dressed and go. Please! Now!"

He sauntered beside her with a supercilious gaze locked on Rory. As soon as she had ushered him out of sight, she strode back to confront Rory. "Don't you dare touch him. Please don't make this any worse than it is."

"I believe I'm being wonderfully restrained."

"This isn't what it seems, you know."

Rory chuckled dryly. "I've just scored the daily double."

Her brow furrowed. "What?"

"I walk in unexpectedly and catch you fucking your brains out, and you tell me it isn't what it seems. Two urban bloody clichés in rapid succession right between the eyes." He watched her with a steady gaze. "If it isn't what it seems, what is it?"

"I'll explain when he's gone."

Soon afterwards, Derek reappeared at the door dressed in a shirt and trousers and carrying his coat and tie. "Feel free to talk about me, girls."

"Please just go, Derek. Don't speak."

He sauntered to the front door, opened it, twirled a hand in front of his forehead in a mocking flourish and walked out closing the door quietly behind him.

Joanne shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. "I have to shower. Please don't go anywhere."

"Why should I go anywhere. I live here." He sat down.

"So do I." She matched his gaze. "Remember. At least for the moment." She turned and hurried across to the bedroom.

When she returned, dressed in a robe, he was sitting where she had left him. She sat beside him, closing the robe quickly when it fell open to reveal her thigh. "Don't read anything more into what you saw than what it truly was. Simply a celebratory fuck. Nothing more, nothing less. A partly-pissed, spur of the moment indiscretion." She raised a finger to remove a tear that threatened to spill from the corner of one eye. "If you hadn't been out there someone in the back blocks searching for your lost bloody soul or whatever it is you're looking for, it would have been with you. God knows that after what I've been through during this bloody hearing, it had to be with someone. You know the effort I put in. When the verdict came down, I could have shouted to the heavens. You wouldn't believe how good it felt. I was floating on air." Her voice was high-pitched, her words tumbling rapidly from trembling lips. When he did not reply she pointed to an empty champagne bottle and two glasses that were sitting on a nearby coffee table. "We emptied that after sharing several bottles at dinner with the clients. I was drunk. I'm still drunk."

"Derek bloody Fielding! Jesus, Joanne!"

"Yes, Derek bloody Fielding! He was here, you weren't. A measure of my madness. I know he's a pompous idiot. No ..." She shook her head. "No, that's unfair. We may not have won without him. He certainly knows his law and he gave me great assistance." She dropped her gaze.

“I suppose, for an aging junior counsel, it beat the living daylights out of his senior simply shouting him the traditional good lunch.”

She sprang to her feet and swung to face him. “I’ll tell you something – what he gave his senior beat the hell out of anything of a similar nature you’ve given me in a long time. Twice!”

“Twice? Jesus, Joanne, if what I saw was the encore, I’m glad I missed the main event.”

She suddenly burst out crying and clamped both hands over her face to hide the collapse of her expression.

Rory made no move to console her as she sank back down beside him. When she recovered some composure, she removed her hands and was silent for a time, then sighed deeply and turned away. “I’ll leave in the morning. Not because of this. Not entirely. I had planned to do so eventually if you showed no sign of getting over whatever it is you need to get over. I mentioned it to Judy. She said I could move back in with her until I find a place of my own. I can’t go tonight. I’m too exhausted. Not from what you think. From the day I’ve had. From the last three weeks. You’d better sleep in the other bedroom. I doubt you’d want to come anywhere near your own bed until I change the sheets. I’ll change them before I leave. I couldn’t manage tonight.”

She began to sob and quickly ducked inside the room, closing the door behind her.

Only much later, after he had caught his head falling forward several times, did he finally stand up and make his way to the second bedroom.

Eight

Some six months later and shortly after encountering the Bloomsday article, Rory arranged to meet Associate Professor George Yashinov at a café in Newtown close to where George was employed at Sydney University. Although Rory had been waiting for him for some forty minutes when he eventually saw him approaching, he knew that George would not accept that he was running late. As George would readily explain, acquaintances would know that unless an appointment with him coincided with the departure of a plane, train or ferry, or perhaps the raising of the curtain before a performance of *La Bohème*, he was more than likely to arrive up to an hour after the appointed time. So, knowing this and indeed expecting it, they would be well aware that, as far as he was concerned, the appointed time was merely the leading edge of an envelope that could extend to about an hour, but would rarely move beyond that. If it ever did, then they could accuse him of being late. Otherwise, in his mind, he was on time. So, if those same acquaintances were asked what they thought of George, taking into account this and similar quirks, most, including Rory, would readily concede that he was something of a pain in the arse. And his propensity to address everyone he knew by their surname did not help.

After successfully avoiding the apparent homicidal intent of several truck and bus drivers as he crossed King Street, George swept into the café and announced to the customers and a few pedestrians passing by outside that, “While this fucking government continues to do nothing about having speeding vehicles coming into close proximity to pedestrians in this town, not only is it risking killing the odd jay-walker like my silly-self, it’s risking having a big vehicle mount the footpath one day after a minor collision and wiping out a couple of dozen of their long-suffering taxpayers, or maybe even a flock of their pitifully-educated school children.” As was his custom after such an outburst, he stood for a moment scanning faces for any signs of dissent from those within hearing. His formidable size and the real possibility that he was not of sound mind, usually ensured that overt disagreement was rare. Apparently satisfied, he sat down opposite Rory and embraced him with a warm smile.

After they shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, George spent the first few minutes bringing Rory up to date on what his life was like now that he had moved into the higher levels of academia. Perhaps as a result of his recent traffic-dodging exploits giving him an adrenalin boost, he was in even finer voice than normal and, whereas the roar of passing trucks would have obliterated parts of a conversation carried out at a normal auditory level, George's volume simply rose in sympathy with any increase in outside noise to ensure that not a word was lost.

“You know me, Mr bamboo man himself, ever ready to sway to the left or right depending on the prevailing breeze. At the moment I'm definitely caught in a howling nor'easter straight from the steppes, circa 1930s. And I can exchange, *Greetings, comrade* with the best of them without so much as a twitch of the eyebrow. Though I must admit it does stick in the craw knowing that most of those of my close relatives from both sides of the family gene-pool who didn't make it into China with my grandparents tucked under an arm or squatting on a shoulder, died miserably in one Gulag or another. I doubt my grain-fed, armchair revolutionary colleagues would be so free with their salutation if they knew that, for a good proportion of those who got out of eastern Europe by the skin of their teeth, *Greetings comrade*, because of its implied association, is as offensive as *Heil Hitler* would be to an Auschwitz survivor.”

George's loud voice and barking laugh were well matched by his height and ample proportions; as were his big eyes, ruddy face, wild unkempt mop of long jet-black hair, deafening bowtie, cartoon-character festooned shirt and baggy checked suit well placed here in Newtown's King Street.

When Rory first had the opportunity to change tack without knocking him too far off his stride, he placed a copy of Arthur Warrington's poem on the table between them.

“What do you make of that?”

“A poem, McLaughlin!” George lifted his hands in an expression of mock amazement. “Do your literary skills have no bounds? Another line item on the list of your published credits about to be ticked off, have we? I can hear the fanfare rising as your pen descends to tick it off.”

“Read it and tell me what you think, you silly bugger.”

George picked up the sheet of paper and, holding it at arm's length, read in silence. When he had finished, he placed it back on the table and sat back observing Rory silently with his arms folded.

Rory waited for what he believed was long enough. “Well?”

“Well, if you intend to publish it as your own, complete loss of literary credibility for a start.”

“So, who do you think wrote it?”

“If it wasn't Coleridge himself, it was someone doing a reasonable job reproducing his Stowey style.”

“Stowey?”

“Nether Stowey in Somerset. Where he lived for about three years up to about 1800. Where he was living when he wrote *Kubla Khan*, the *Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* and a few others.”

“Tell me about *Kubla Khan*. All you know.”

“This isn't from *Kubla Khan*, McLaughlin. I can recite *Kubla Khan* from word first to word last. Crewe manuscript version and 1816 version.”

“As I recall, there's not much difference between them.”

“There isn't. Five original copies were found, all somewhat similar. The Crewe manuscript didn't come to light until 1934. Instead of the lengthy introduction that mentioned he fell asleep after taking an anodyne for a slight indisposition, in that version he admits that the anodyne was two grains of opium.” He ran a hand through his thick hair and screwed his face up in concentration and, for a moment, closed his eyes. “Read somewhere that he'd taken two to three grains of opium, not just two. Don't know where I got that. Shows there must be other stuff around probably written by his contemporaries who knew more about what happened than was attached to the poem. Anyway, in the Crewe manuscript he also doesn't mention being interrupted by a person from Porlock.”

“What do you think about this person from Porlock?”

“Ha! If he existed at all, you mean. Some say he could have been his opium supplier. More say he was a convenient excuse. *God, please send me a person from Porlock to interrupt me from this soul-destroying drudgery!* is one way he's entered the vernacular. I can sympathise with those sentiments.” He sat back and observed Rory with a smile. “So, what do you think you've got there, McLaughlin? A missing verse?”

Rory matched his smile. “I don't know what I've got, but I haven't been able to find it on the web, so it does appear to be an original or at least from an unpublished work.” He waited a few moments before delivering the punchline. “And the bloke who supposedly wrote it lived in Porlock when Coleridge passed through.” He watched with smug satisfaction as George's smile gradually faded and was replaced by a stare that revealed

genuine astonishment. “Felt a cold finger stroke you between the shoulder-blades, did you Georgie?”

George signaled over Rory's shoulder for more coffee and then sat looking at him in silence for a time. “It certainly looks like a piece of Coleridge's stuff. But that means nothing. All that crowd wrote similar verse from time to time. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey and others freely borrowed or stole lines and verses from each other, and from older texts they came across or translated.”

“Why would Coleridge jeopardise his reputation in that way?”

“His reputation! Let me tell you about Coleridge. He was a flawed genius. Some say, a spoilt, boozing, whoring, drug-addicted hypochondriac. Others, a foppy, bug-eyed, floppy-haired, loud-mouthed, self-opinionated bore who would loudly expound his views, political or otherwise, for hours on end without coming up for air, heedless of those within hearing he might offend. If you can believe his detractors, when he was drunk, they say he was so free and easy with telling all and sundry what he thought of anyone who annoyed him, including the government, he could regularly have been called out on a duel, or thrown in the pokey. Perhaps even transported out here for sedition. And he was always in debt and sponging off his family and friends, and once he went completely off the rails and joined an army regiment as a lowly trooper.”

He leant back and smiled. “That last bit reminds me of someone I know. But unlike the person sitting opposite me, he wasted only about four months in uniform, not six years.”

“I don't know about the last bit, Georgie.” Rory ran a hand across his mouth to wipe a smile. “But the first bit certainly reminds *me* of someone *I* know. And waste is your word.”

“If it wasn't waste, how come you won't tell me, or anyone else I know who also knows you, about it? I don't suppose it was because they had you mucking out stables like poor old Coleridge, but I suspect it was just as menial. I know you'd like me to think you were gallivanting around the world like one of your storybook heroes, but I'll wager the truth was much less glamorous. How did you spend your time, McLaughlin? Propped behind a desk calculating the regimental payroll or something similarly soul-destroying. Hence your silence on the matter. You can tell me. I promise I'll keep your little secret.”

Rory smiled. "You've been down this dead-end before, Georgie. Get back to Coleridge. If he wasn't above stealing someone else's work, could he have stolen the verses he did publish of *Kubla Khan* from this Arthur Warrington, the true author perhaps?"

"Not a chance. When I say Coleridge was a flawed genius, the key word is *genius*. Your Arthur whoever, may have been able to pump out this one verse if he studied Coleridge's style but he could never have produced anything like one of Coleridge's major works and remained unknown. If there is a poetry thief in this little saga, it's your person from Porlock."

"But is he *the* person from Porlock?"

Whether or not he's *the* person from Porlock, McLaughlin, what is more important is, did he steal this verse from Coleridge. And if the answer is, *Yes*, did he steal more than one verse?"

"How big a deal would it be if he did ..." Rory tapped the sheet of paper. "... and this was indeed by Coleridge?"

"Big?" George laughed abruptly and then shook his head and took a moment to recover. "Take it as read, if it could be proved, you wouldn't believe how big. The problem would be in the proving. Without other verses and quite a few of them, it would be practically impossible to say who wrote it."

"And if other verses were uncovered, perhaps all of the verses that Coleridge believed he'd lost or could not recall?"

George leant forward and propped his chin on one palm. He looked steadily at Rory for a time in silence; then offered quietly, "We're really wandering into fantasy land now, but I'll give you an art-world analogy. Imagine if it was discovered that Leonardo Da Vinci based the Mona Lisa on a much larger painting of his that included the lovely lady and all of her family, and each of the faces carried the stamp of his genius and was as remarkable and striking as the Lisa. Then imagine that this work turned up today in mint condition in some attic in Venice or Florence or wherever."

"OK, I get the message."

George stared at him again. "I wonder if you do." He sat back and again watched him silently for a time. "So, what's next on your agenda."

"I'm going to get hold of everything I can on both Coleridge and on Arthur Warrington."

"From the web?"

"From wherever."

George again tried without success to attract the attention of a waiter. “There’s the web and there’s the web. Give me your pen and a piece of paper.”

Rory took a pen from his jacket and handed it to him and turned over the sheet on which the poem was written. “Write on this. It’s just a copy.”

“If you ever come across what’s not just a copy of it, treat it as you would a gift from the gods.” He began to write. “These are two usernames and their passwords. They’ll get you into academic websites you can’t access normally.” When he had finished writing, he turned the paper around so Rory could read what he had written.

“Are these yours? Your usernames and passwords?”

“No, but they are the ones I use when I want to use the sites they give access to.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why don’t you use your own name?”

“Maybe I don’t want anyone to know what I’m researching. What does it matter?”

“Whose usernames are these?”

They belong to two old academic dodderers who have just come to terms with the ball-point pen. Giving either of them access to a website would be like giving a pig a flute.”

“What are their names. Who’s this *tomtom*?”

“Thommo Thomas. Lectures in Latin. Or did. Rarely takes a class these days. Not a bad old stick but a state-of-the-art dodderer with a woeful stutter. Julius Caesar would be still standing on the other side of the Rubicon if old Thommo was giving him the pros and cons of whether or not to cross.”

“And *duckling*, password *dafford*?”

“Jimmy Donald. Same as for old Thommo if you substitute Greek for Latin and remove the stutter.”

“I’m not going to use their names and access. I’m not a thief.”

“They’re given gratis to these old buggers, for Christ’s sake! If there’s a crime being committed, it’s that they don’t use them. You wouldn’t be stealing anything. Take them and use them. They’ll give you access to a wealth of information you won’t find on the normal web.”

“I’ll think about it.” Rory folded the paper and placed it inside his jacket.

“You know you could be chasing moonbeams, McLaughlin. For a start, you have no definite proof that Coleridge did finish his poem.”

“No, but ever since I read somewhere that people recovering from an opium-induced sleep don't remember their dreams, I've had a niggling doubt about what Coleridge says happened that day. Maybe it wasn't a dream he was remembering, but the poem he'd actually written down while in a euphoric state induced by the drug before or after he did fall asleep.”

“Or maybe his whole story was a fabrication.”

“Maybe. It's one of the reasons I'm planning to go to the UK.”

“You're what!”

“I'm going to look through some old Home Office records among other things.”

“For information on your poetry thief!” George scoffed. “Possible poetry thief at best. I doubt the Home Office would have any interest in him?”

“For information on Coleridge during that time.”

“I doubt Home Office was interested in him either. Coleridge's one-time associate John Thelwell maybe. Because of his revolutionary rants. But not Coleridge himself.”

“They were interested all right. They were spying on him.”

“Ha!” George sat back beaming and signalled for two more coffees. “That's not definite, I'm sorry to tell you, McLaughlin. Yes, yes, now you mention it, I remember something about Coleridge claiming he and William Wordsworth were tailed by a spy whenever they went trekking in the Quantocks with Wordsworth's sister in tow. Someone he called *Mr Nosey* he said was forever creeping up on them and attempting to eavesdrop. But I'm sorry to inform you, that most of those who knew him reckon that was simply a piece of Coleridge whimsy. Wordsworth says he knew nothing of it and even Coleridge's family say on that point he was definitely confusing fact with fiction.”

“Recently there's been suggestion that Wordsworth himself may have been a government man.”

“Wash your mouth out!”

Rory smiled. “Some of what Coleridge claimed about the matter – his supposed chat with the spy, for instance – may have been fiction, but Home Office records show that they were indeed spying on him.” Rory parodied George's smug expression. “The truth of the matter is that the Duke of Portland, who was then the Home Secretary, ordered that Coleridge's activities and those of his friends be closely watched. And John King, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, employed a man named James Walsh to do just that.”

“Where did you get this?”

“From a few sources.”

“Why on earth would the Home Office bother? Coleridge and his mates were hardly dangerous subversives.”

“They were trekking about the countryside scribbling notes not far from where the French attempted a half-hearted raid in February of the same year. And they were known to have Jacobian sympathies. If I was the Home Office, I’d be bloody interested.”

George shook his head. “I reckon you’d be better off going back to this college where you picked up the piece of verse?”

“I’ll put that off as long as I can. There’s a real live dragon in charge of that treasure chest.”

“I don’t know what you can do about that. But I’ll tell you something I do know. I’m sick of trying to get one of these blind bastards to bring us more coffee.” He stood up.

“Let’s lunch at the Nelson.” Rory also stood and, as they moved towards the counter, George patted his coat and added more quietly, “Seems I’ve come without my wallet. It’s a good thing you’re my friend, my friend. Today is on you, I’m afraid.”

“Why is it that I suspect I’m your only friend, Georgie?”

Nine

Sheets of horizontal rain were again assailing Penny and Christine as they set out on their next journey. This time they were back in the heart of London making their way in a generally northern direction from Fleet Street in the vicinity of Holborn's Lincoln Inn Fields. What brought them here was a call that Penny had made – reluctantly and mainly at Christine's insistence – to her former mentor, former lover at Cambridge, Dr Anthony St James. The information Penny sought was the present whereabouts of Dr Claudia Petersham, whom she had once met at a party thrown by St James at his family home on the outskirts of Ilchester, and whom she knew had something to do with handwriting forensics.

To Penny's relief, St James was unavailable when she rang, so she was able to record her request on his voicemail. He replied a day later by email, informing her that because Claudia had some on-going business at the Temple, she was presently staying with her father at Holborn and could be contacted at the enclosed number. Although she dismissed St James' final remark that he would give her a call next time he was in town as nothing more than a customary close, she was gripped by an involuntary shudder and silently upbraided Christine for her insistence that she contact him.

The plaque beside the doorway where they eventually huddled beneath a narrow gable that offered some protection from the elements proclaimed that they had arrived at the residence of Wilfred Batteringham MA, Phd.

"It's definitely number 32, but is this the right lane?" Christine ventured a lean back into the weather in the hope of spotting signed corroboration at a nearby intersection. Moments before, they had scurried across it with their attention more directed at survival than navigation.

Before Penny could reply, the door opened to reveal a tall grey-haired man in the process of bidding farewell to a small Indian woman. After grimacing at the weather, the woman cast a shy-eyed, perhaps sympathetic, glance at the others and hurried past them, launching an umbrella as she stepped onto the street.

The man moved aside to give them room. “Come in, come in. You’re at the right place. Claudia is expecting you.” He ushered them into a front room and had them sit down on a comfortable couch facing a large desk upon which he propped himself, crossing one long leg over the other. “I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with me for the moment. Claudia’s on the phone taking a call that could consume some time. So, ...” He spread his arms and opened both palms. “... Wilfred Batteringham, student of languages, long-suffering tutor of the English component, at your service. Claudia is my unmarried daughter, despite the differences in our names. She’s taken that of her dear departed mother. Although she denies it was because she was sick of having to weather aspersions that linked her forthright manner with the name *Batteringham*, I suspect that was the main reason. May I get you coffee? Tea? I’m going to have a well-deserved cup myself.”

They introduced themselves, and both ordered coffee. “Good choice.” He stood up. “A strong jolt of caffeine, compliments of the *coffea* bean, is highly recommended before plunging into the murky depths of handwriting forensics. I, on the other hand, after an hour of attempting to impart some understanding of the vagaries of our wonderful language to an enthusiastic newcomer, need the more comforting succour of steaming *camellia sinensis*. Green tea!” He stood for a moment with his gaze beyond them. “The expression ‘used to’ is always a worry. Poor Mrs Sharma. English as she is spoke and Everest as she is climbed isn’t a bad match for a latecomer to the language. Particularly when encountering terms such as *used to*. My heart goes out to those whose circumstance did not equip them with English when they were at an age where learning a language coincided with learning to smile at their mothers.” He dropped his gaze back to the women. “Back in a moment.” He flashed a smile that, by the way it shed his years had probably been well practiced, and departed, leaving the women exchanging raised eye-browed expressions of perplexed amusement.

After he returned and handed them their cups, he again sat on the edge of the desk. “If Mrs Sharma doesn’t have enough worries trying to bring up five daughters without a husband in a foreign country, now she is determined to confront and conquer the perplexities of expressions such as *used to*. Imagine trying to come to terms with, ‘I’m not *used to* your language. I *used to* work in Calcutta. In Calcutta trucks are often *used to* transport people.’ You’ll have to excuse my prattling on, but I *do* love a captive audience. And now I have you, I must ask, is the handwriting you will be discussing with my daughter, a signature or a piece of text?”

“It’s actually two pieces of text,” Penny replied. “Or rather one piece of text and a poem.”

“Splendid! And you want to know if these were written by the same person?”

“More or less.”

“More or less?” He raised an eyebrow.

Penny blushed. “It may not be definitely apparent. We may have to be content with comment on the possibility of it being by the same person.”

“Intriguing! And what a pity you didn’t bring your problem to me instead of Claudia! By the time she gets off the phone I probably could have had you on your way either rejoicing or lamenting. Surely not, you say. Surely so, I say. Why? Because I – brushing aside for the moment a natural inclination to modesty – am a highly skilled observer of *what* a writer has written, as opposed to *how* it is written. An observer of the *whole* as opposed to the *pieces*. My darling daughter – God bless her little heart – although she is now domiciled at Cambridge, is a product of the Home Office’s science laboratory at Birmingham, so is naturally more concerned with the pieces. Where she will blow up your samples and run a rule over them examining the relative proportion of letter heights, widths and spacing, and line thickness, evenness and disturbances, and – God help us – pen pressures and lifts, and a host of other boring detail before she gives you an answer, I would simply run my eye over what is written. And, as with the truism in cards of, *a quick peek at your opponent’s hand is better than a finesse*, I can assure you, a quick glance at the whole will often reveal more in a matter of seconds about the identity of the author than what might take hours of painstaking examination of the pieces.” He flashed his smile again as he looked from one to the other. And then he furrowed his brow. “But I’m intrigued that you have a poem. I’m sure that’s unusual. Are you seeking the identity of the author, or do you already know who wrote it?”

The women exchanged glances.

“Ah, ha! A moment of hesitancy. The plot thickens. I must admit I admire your evasiveness. I’m very impressed!”

“We’re not sure who wrote it.”

“Something from the past, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“And you do know who wrote the text?”

Christine turned her face to one side and narrowed her eyes projecting what might have been either mock or genuine suspicion. “Are you sure you’re only an enthusiastic amateur when it comes to forensics Mr ... Doctor ... ”

“Batteringham, and please call me *Will*. Definitely amateur.” Again, the smile. “I wouldn’t charge Penny a penny.”

Christine turned to Penny. “Methinks he’s too practiced in his way of questioning, this amateur.”

He laughed abruptly. “Blame that on having been forced to sit on far too many academic review boards, young lady.” He lowered his head to observe her steadily. “If I were a betting man, and I am, and there was somewhere I could lay the wager, and unfortunately there isn’t, it would be on *Cambridge, Jesus College, Law* and, ...” with the reappearance of the smile, “*methinks* a tutor with an interesting affection for archaic phrase, one *Charlie Macalister*. What price that accumulator?”

Penny glanced from Christine to Batteringham. “I know nothing of your observation skills with regard to the written word, Dr Batteringham, but your skills of deduction are readily apparent.”

“Well phrased, Penny. Slipping into the Holmes mode again I’d venture *Cambridge, Jesus College*, maybe *Law* again, but more likely *English* and ... going out on a limb now ... *Little Jimmy Passmore* for a tutor.”

Both women smiled broadly before Christine was the first to respond. “You’ve been checking up on us. Even the illustrious Holmes couldn’t have been that accurate. Either you’ve been talking to Tony St James, or your daughter gave you that information.”

“On the contrary, dear lady, I do not speak to Tony St James.” The smile had momentarily disappeared from his voice but returned as he continued. “And whether or not Claudia mentioned Cambridge, I would have assumed the connection because of her close association with the place. Something I share with her. Hence being familiar with Charlie Macalister’s fondness for archaic expression and thence my venturing *Jesus* and *Law*.” He returned his attention to Penny. “I assumed you both attended *Jesus* and, as you were the one that made the appointment with Claudia and are in possession of some text and a poem from our past, *English* and Jimmy Passmore were a natural progression, albeit a bit more of a long shot.”

“Very impressive,” Penny acknowledged.

Batteringham spread his hands. “So, now that I have so shamelessly displayed that I have some deductive ability and at least a modicum of intelligence, will you allow me a

quick glance at these intriguing items before my darling daughter returns and spoils my fun?"

The women looked at each other.

"I can assure you that, although I am an amateur in this particular field, I guarantee you my professional discretion."

"Why not!" Penny took an envelope from her bag and extracting two sheets of paper, passed them to him.

Batteringham read what was written on both sheets of paper in silence and, after glancing from one to the other several times, he passed them back to Penny. "Put them away again before my daughter arrives. She needs precious little reason to upbraid me rather unkindly these days, and I'd prefer that she did not do this in front of two lovely young ladies whom I believe I've managed to impress to some degree."

Penny replaced the envelope in her bag. "Well, you now have the opportunity of impressing us to a greater degree."

"*Greater* fills me with a level of contentment. The piece of text, I notice, has been copied from the Internet. I assume it's a sample of the handwriting of the person you believe may have written the poem."

The women exchanged glances before Penny responded. "Yes, it is."

"I'm continually amazed that we can sit in our living rooms and study records that once would have required us to travel to the far corners of the earth. In this case, an institution in Canada, I believe."

"You know who he is, don't you? The author of the text at least."

"I do claim a level of expertise in this field, remember. And, if my memory serves me right, your sample is an annotation he wrote on a work by his spiritual hero, Robert Leighton, the esteemed bishop of Glasgow. May I ask why you selected this sample? You must have come across others."

"It contains some of the words that appear in the poem and many of the capital letters."

"That *will* please Claudia. Having plenty of handwriting pieces to compare. And the dark area around the photocopy of the poem, I take it, indicates that the original is written on a much smaller piece of discoloured paper?"

"Yes," Penny answered. "I photocopied the original because it was pretty fragile. I didn't want to risk damaging it by carting it about unnecessarily."

“Very wise. Although I’m sure Claudia won’t agree. Forensics people love to poke around original work, testing paper composition and ink or pencil ingredients if required, usually heedless of the damage they’re inflicting.”

“So, what do you think?”

“You must have some idea yourself. There isn’t a lot of similarity between the samples.”

“That’s why we’re seeking the opinion of an expert in this field. Could the differences be caused by the author perhaps being affected by illness or drink?”

“Or opium? One or two grains perhaps?” He smiled and shook his head. “Not these differences, I’m afraid. Whoever penned the poem – penned, not necessarily composed – wasn’t our addicted friend in any state of euphoria. And although my daughter may not be aware of the author’s identity, I expect she will tell you much the same. But there is something I can tell you that Claudia probably won’t.”

“Father, what are you saying? What won’t I tell them?” Dr Claudia Petersham walked into the room and stood facing her father with her arms folded.

He stood up and gestured priest-like towards the others with both hands open and spread. “You won’t tell them that they’re the most attractive couple I’ve had visit me since I moved here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! For a start, they didn’t come to visit you, they came to visit me.” She turned from him and strode across the room heading for the rear of the desk. “Seems I’ve arrived just in time to prevent you making a complete fool of yourself.” She shook her head resignedly. “You and young women! I don’t know!” She sat down and waved the back of her hand at him in regal dismissal. “So, if you’d be kind enough to leave us, these ladies and I have some matters to discuss.”

“I wouldn’t dream of missing out on observing you in full flight, Claudia darling! Rarely having the honour of your company from one month to the next. So, I’ll just park myself in the corner here and promise to be quiet as a mouse while you conduct your business. Please treat my office as if it were your own.” He sat down and met her cold stare with an exaggerated version of his smile.

Claudia Petersham had inherited her father’s height and athletic frame, together with large eyes and a strong jawline that supported an evenly balanced face around a slim, cleanly-crafted nose. But whereas his features contained a softening around the eyes and at the corners of his mouth that projected an impression of contentment and good humour that enhanced his appearance, tighter flesh in these areas of her face suggested less

contentment. Nevertheless, she had a striking beauty that undoubtedly turned heads. Unfortunately, she also had a manner that suggested she was well aware of this.

When Penny produced the samples, she had brought, Claudia confirmed her father's prediction about the photocopy of the poem, by displaying obvious exasperation at not being able to examine the original. She also confirmed his claim that her interest would focus on examining the structure of the writing rather than its content. "I'm going to have to enlarge these so I can measure relative letter sizes and more closely examine several other features." She placed the sheets of paper one on top of the other and holding them in one hand. "Which means, you'll have to leave them with me. I'm far too pressed for time to do anything with them until I get back to Cambridge next week." Perhaps sensing some reservation on their part, she added, "I'll send these back to you with my report. And I can assure you I regularly handle much more sensitive material than this." She waved the sheets of paper dismissively before placing them back on the desk.

As they prepared to depart shortly afterwards, Batteringham insisted on seeing them to the door, encountering no resistance from his daughter who seemed anxious to return to other matters.

As they stepped on to the narrow porch, Christine glanced at him. "What can you tell us that she won't?"

Batteringham lowered his head and quietly replied, "Almost certainly, whoever penned the poem wasn't its author."

Penny leaned closer. "How can you tell?"

"The writing is far too immature for that content. Too laboured. It has the stamp of someone, probably young, painstakingly copying it."

"Could the real author be our opium addicted friend?"

"Possibly, but I would need to peruse it again more carefully before I would quote the odds on it." He glanced back through the partly open door. "If you want to discuss any of what you're doing, call me. I'm in the book." With this he stepped back inside, lifted a hand in farewell and closed the door.

They descended a short flight of steps to the footpath. "What do you think, Pen?"

Penny raised her umbrella as the few drops of rain they encountered on emerging from the building were suddenly reinforced by a steady drizzle. "We have to find out more about this kid, the one Jekyll says wrote the poem,"

"There should be something about him somewhere. Seeing he was condemned to death."

“Assuming he was.”

“Jekyll said something about the judge being able to give his black cap an airing when it came to sentencing him. So, he was definitely sentenced to hang.”

“But he also said that the prisoners who were sentenced the day before Jane Leigh Perrot’s trial were packed off to Ilchester to await their fate. Perhaps that fate was to be transported to Botany Bay.”

“Back to the web?”

“Back to the web.”

Christine, linked an arm with Penny and moved closer beneath her umbrella as they crossed the street. “I have an uneasy feeling about this.”

“So have I, and it has little to do with whether this kid was hanged or sent to Botany Bay, and much to do with leaving those copies with that woman.”

“Exactly.”

As they reached the other side and waited for a group of people with raised umbrellas to pass them on the narrow footpath, Christine suddenly squeezed her companion’s arm. “Look, Pen! She’s watching us.”

In the building from where they had just emerged, pulsing light from somewhere above them was brushing occasionally over the form of a woman standing at the edge of one of the upstairs windows. “You don’t suppose she could check on what we’re doing. Use her connections with the police or the government to monitor us in some way?”

“I don’t know. What I do know is that if I were game enough, I’d go back and tell her I’ve changed my mind and ask her to give me back those copies.”

“I’m game enough. But only if you come with me.”

Penny remained silent for a time before responding. “Best not. It might increase her interest and maybe make matters worse. Come on! Let’s get out of here.”