

A PHILIP RAYKE MYSTERY

# Gwendolen

HOLLY BELL

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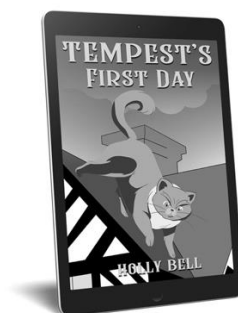
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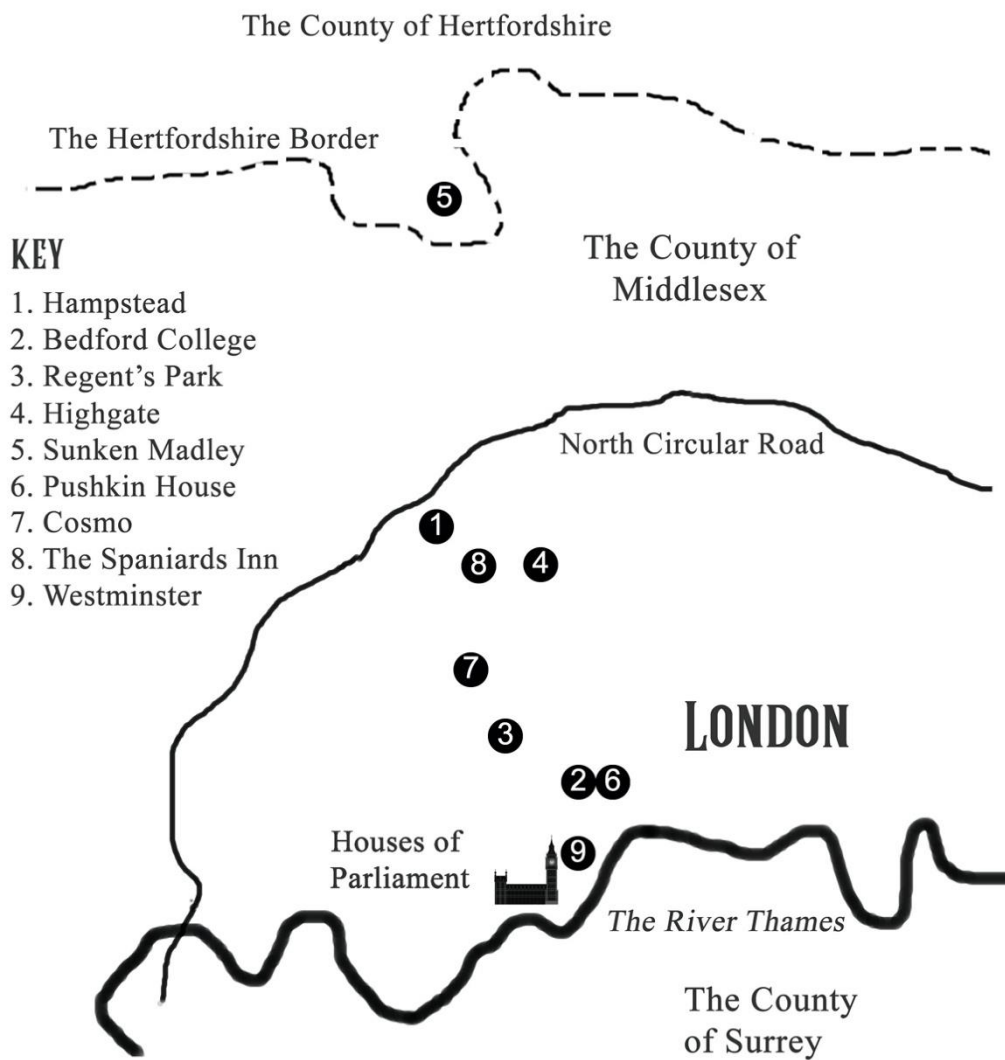
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*For Ann*

*With Love*

*It is only with the heart  
that one can see rightly;  
what is essential  
is invisible to the eye.  
– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

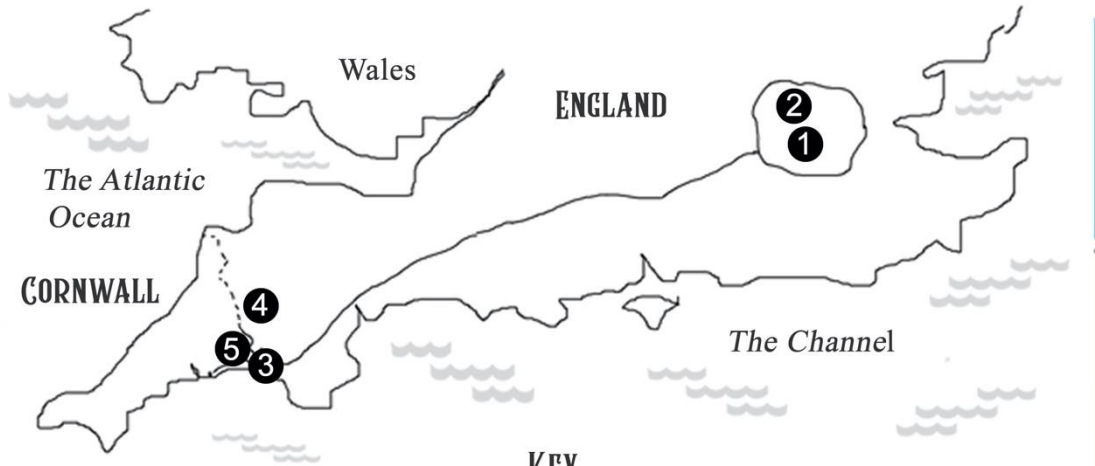


## MAP OF LONDON, SOUTH HERTFORDSHIRE AND NORTH SURREY

\*Hertfordshire border approximate



## MAP OF CORNWALL AND THE SOUTH OF ENGLAND



### KEY

- |                  |                                 |
|------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. London        | 4. The River Tamar & the border |
| 2. Sunken Madley |                                 |
| 3. Plymouth      | 5. Crafhole                     |



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## *Introduction*

**Please note** that to enhance the reader's experience of the world of Amanda Cadabra, the series from which this story is derived, this British-set story, by a British author, uses British English spelling, vocabulary, grammar and usage, and includes local and foreign accents, and dialects that vary from different versions of English as it is written and spoken in other parts of our wonderful, diverse world.

For your reading pleasure, there is a glossary of British English usage and vocabulary at the end of the book, followed by a note about accents

## *Chapter 1*

### **The Interview**

‘What was it that gave me away?’ Gwendolen looked at Philip Rayke with a mixture of curiosity and nervousness.

Grey-wool suited, with white shirt and tie, he was formally dressed yet casually leaning back in the wing chair opposite hers on the other side of the fire in the gracious high-ceilinged room of the Hampstead house. His expression had yet to develop the mild inscrutability that would come with the years. Now, it showed a measured calm as he said,

‘May I leave that until after you have told your story?’

‘Of course, sir,’ Gwendolen answered hastily with an embarrassed flush, gripping her white gloves more tightly in her lap as she sat up straight on the edge of her seat.

Philip noted the attempt at severity in the navy of her own wool suit and sensible low-heeled court shoes, which only served to accentuate the air of helpless femininity. It somehow drew attention to the large, anxious pale blue eyes, brown curls under the picture hat and peeping broderie Anglaise on the hem of the petticoat beneath her flowing skirt. That very air, he considered, had the potential to be a formidable asset ... if she said ‘yes’ to his proposal.

Observing her tension, Philip leaned forward with warmth and earnestness.

‘This is not a formal interview, Mrs Attvane. I would like to think that your family and I have developed an understanding, even trust. No court in the land would convict you or indeed accept the evidence such as it is. I request this only as a courtesy, if you will, to further my comprehension of such matters, in which I have a very particular interest.’

There was a tap on the door and a ‘come in’ from Philip, followed by the entrance of an older lady in a neat shirt and skirt carrying a tea tray. ‘Ah, Milly. Here it is. This should help. Milly is our splendid housekeeper, Mrs Attvane. Will you not take off your hat?’

‘Well, I ...’ Gwendolen was reluctant to relinquish a part of her armour. She put up a hand hesitantly, as Milly put down the tray, arranged a small table between the wing chairs, and placed the tea things upon it.

‘Let me take that, ma’am.’ Milly kindly offered a hand for Gwendolen’s headwear. ‘That’s right.’ Her trained eyes saw how Gwendolen’s gaze followed her. ‘See? It’s right here on the sideboard by the door, for when you want it.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Mrs Attvane.

‘Will there be anything else, sir?’

‘Not for now, thank you, Milly. But perhaps –’ he looked questioning at Gwendolen – ‘muffins?’

The slight brightening of Gwendolen’s face showed her youth in spite of her twenty-something years and marital status. He’d made a hit, as Milly observed.

‘Certainly, sir, I’ll tell cook.’

With a smile and a nod, Milly withdrew.

‘What a kind thought, Mr Rayke,’ Gwendolen managed.  
‘Are you hungry now, Mrs Attvane?’  
‘No, no, I couldn’t eat a thing until ....’  
‘Then ... when you’re ready,’ he encouraged her gently.  
Gwendolen smoothed her skirt over her knees, tugged at the bottom of her fitted jacket, drew a breath and began.

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‘College was quite a culture shock. So very different from home. Our house was always full of different people of all ages – Mama and Papa’s Russian friends – music, even dancing, food, poetry.’

‘Your parents are Russian?’ Philip asked, even though he knew the answer.

‘No, they just fell in love with the culture – before I was born. They met some Russian émigrés when they were young, and it started from there. They were practically bilingual by the time I was born and, I suppose, that’s how I grew up too.’

‘I see. And when you got to university ...?’

‘Suddenly, there at Bedford College, I was with people all my own age. And mostly English. But I enjoyed it. I mean, I was good at college - studying and so forth. I had some friends. Had some jolly times together.’ Gwendolen’s expression lightened. ‘Not the popular crowd, of course, but in our own way. There was always Cynthia, of course, a year or two above me but we always spent time together. She always showed me the ropes, especially that first term ... when I first saw Duncan.’

## *Chapter 2*

### **The First Meeting**

‘Who’s that, Cynthia?’

Gwendolen’s friend turned her gaze away from an idle inspection of the waters below the Regents Park bridge where they were currently sunning themselves, leaning on the sun-warmed rail.

‘Who? The six-footer with dark-brown hair or the short blond boy with the bicycle? No. Let me guess.’

Gwendolen laughed. But she paid attention to her posture as they passed, apparently preoccupied by their conversation.

‘Yes,’ she answered, once the boys had gone by.

‘Duncan Attvane, my dear,’ replied Cynthia, somewhat astringently.

‘A student?’

‘Indeed. Captain of his college rugger team. Predictably.’

‘Do you ... do you think he noticed ...?’

‘We’re wearing skirts, my angel; of course, he noticed. But he’s presently in the possession of Gloria Yardley. In your year, I think.’

‘Oh ... yes. She’s very ... I can understand why ... I know her only by sight really. Oh ... I see ....’

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‘But by the end of year, the word was that they’d broken up.’ Gwendolen drifted away into reverie.

‘When was the first time you and Mr Attvane spoke, Mrs Attvane?’

‘Hm? Oh ... oh, that was much later, during the second year. Quite by accident. It wasn’t unusual for students to study in the park – Regents Park. You know, in pleasant weather, away from it all and so on ....’

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The pages caught the wind and fluttered by Gwendolen, drawing her eye. She quickly weighted her own notes with a book and got to her feet. In an instant, she was jumping, stooping, turning, and clutching in a dance of rescue. Soon, she had handfuls of paper, joined by a young man who raced for the last of them. He ran to her, laughing but protesting.

‘Thank you! But you really shouldn’t have troubled. I’m sure I haven’t written a thing of any use. Certainly not enough to impress my mathematics master.’

'Oh yes, I noticed the figures. Here!' Gwendolen handed him her collections and pattered over to a stray page behind him.

'You're too kind.'

'Oh, it's awful to lose one's work.'

'Are you maths too then?' he asked.

'No, no. History.'

'Ah. Oh manners!' He held out his hand. 'Duncan Attvane.'

She shook it. 'Gwendolen Armstrong-Witworth.'

'Pleasure, Miss Armstrong-Witworth. Well, thanks again. You've been a real chum. Good luck with your course.'

'Yes, not at all ... thank you ... you too.'

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'And that was that. I felt at the time it was all rather romantic. I thought that next time we met or passed he'd surely remember me. But he didn't. I wasn't really surprised, I suppose. I mean, I wasn't his type. I heard soon after he was going out with Mary Groves. Another bright, vivacious, confident ... well ... she'd been captain of the lacrosse team at her school, Cynthia told me. I could see why he ....' Again, Gwendolen drifted away.

'Won't you have some more tea, Mrs Attvane?' His voice recalled her to the reality of the unpleasant present.

'Oh, I haven't ....' She finished the tepid liquid in her cup as he leaned forward and picked up the teapot. 'Thank you. Please.'

'You're doing tremendously well. Giving me a wonderful picture of Mr Attvane and your college life.'

'I am?' Gwendolen asked doubtfully.

'Indeed.'

'Oh, I was worried I'm being rather rambling.'

'Not at all,' Philip reassured her.

'Well then ....' Gwendolen took a reviving sip, and transferred her gloves from her lap to the arm of the sofa next to her. 'Shall I go on?' Her voice had become more confident.

'When you're ready.'

'The third year, then. That was when it happened. He and Virginia Todd had just broken up. You know, Cynthia had always said it was the girls who finished things with Duncan. But my friend Frances said that her brother, who was rather in Duncan's crowd, insisted that it was Duncan who always put an end to things. But that last term ... I found out the truth. ... If only I'd listened to them. If *only* I'd listened ....'

## Chapter 3

### The Warning

Gwendolen watched the swans as she leaned on the bridge rail, in deep thought.

‘This might help.’ She was startled to find someone beside her, offering his cigarette case. ‘Your cogitations. Clearly something of great import.’

‘Well ... yes, I must say I was ...’

‘French. My father just brought them back from a Paris trip,’ he explained.

‘Thank you.’

‘Duncan Attvane,’ he added, as he lit her Gitanes with an ornately engraved silver lighter.

‘Yes. I mean, Gwendolen Armstrong-Witworth. We met ... last year ....’ His expression was puzzled. ‘You’d lost your notes here in the pa....’

‘That was you? How unpardonable of me!’ exclaimed Duncan apologetically. ‘Of course. I was sure I knew you from somewhere. How have your studies been progressing? Finals coming up?’

‘Yes.’

‘And then?’

‘That’s what I was thinking about to be honest. Home, I suppose ....’

‘Which is, no doubt, in some charming county of our beloved isle.’

‘Oh, it’s a little place. You wouldn’t have heard of it. Sunken Madley.’

‘Unusual name,’ remarked Duncan.

‘I suppose so.’

‘Won’t you tell me about it? Look there’s a little coffee place I know. If you don’t have to be anywhere else.’

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‘Actually, I did have somewhere to be, but it just seemed so miraculous that here was Duncan Attvane, talking to *me*, asking me out.’ Gwendolen shook her head as if at her own naïveté.

‘And that’s how it started. While we were there, having coffee, Duncan told me that he’d noticed me first term. It was a lie, of course. I said foolishly that I’d noticed him too, and why hadn’t he spoken to me back then? He said he’d thought I wouldn’t be interested. He’d especially wanted to ask me out that time with the pages but didn’t have the courage. It was all a very convincing act. I was reeled in. Then he took me out for dinner. Oh, I was besotted, Mr Rayke. And before I knew it ... I was engaged.’ Gwendolen sighed, shook her head again, looking into the fire, and fell silent.

Philip gave her a moment, then prompted quietly,

‘You said you wish you’d listened.’ Gwendolen looked back at him.



‘Well, Cynthia kept asking me if I was quite sure. Sure he was the one. And then there was that thing that Virginia Todd said. We were at a refreshments table, queuing. She was in front of me – it was a dance, I think. I felt rather awkward for stealing her beau, and showed it, I suppose. But suddenly, Frances turned to me and spoke.

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‘It’s all right, I’m not going to poison your punch.’

‘Erm?’

‘Duncan,’ Virginia elucidated. ‘You’re welcome to him. You’re just what he’s looking for. A meek little church mouse who’ll do his bidding and feed his Colossus-sized ego.’ She handed Gwendolen her filled cup. ‘Here. You have this. You’re going to need it. And a lot more like it.’

Gwendolen’s eyes were wide with surprise. All at once, Virginia’s attitude changed.

‘Look ... Wanda, isn’t it?’

‘Gwendolen.’

‘Gwendolen. I shouldn’t have been rude. I’m trying to warn you. Get out while you still can. Enjoy the dance.’

Gwendolen looked around in consternation as her friend, Phyllis, sailed up.

‘What’s wrong?’ Gwendolen relayed the conversation.

‘Oh Virginia,’ said Phyllis, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. ‘She’s just jealous, I expect. You’ve got class, Gwennie, and you’re incredibly intelligent. We all think so. He obviously wants something less ... well, superficial than Frances and her lot.’

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‘It was exactly what I wanted to think and hear, and I was too dazzled by what I saw as my success to listen to Frances.’

‘What about your parents?’

‘Well, that was the thing, you see.’ Gwendolen leaned forward a little. ‘Oh, they had the most beautiful and harmonious of marriages, blissfully happy and in accord. But it seemed to me so ... so *unexciting*. I wanted some ridiculous schoolgirl’s fantasy, film-style grand passion ... drama, even ... and I was to *get* it, all right.’

## Chapter 4

### Escalation

‘Duncan announced the engagement at graduation. He didn’t want me working. I was to be a housewife, I supposed, but assumed I’d still have time for reading, carrying on my studies in an informal sort of way.’

‘Yes, I see. And the change in Mr Attvane ... his behaviour ... when did that begin?’

‘The second week of our honeymoon.’ Gwendolen suddenly looked at Philip intently. ‘You see, I’d spot it at once now. I’d tell someone. I’d walk away. But no one tells you about these things, do they? Unless you know someone who’s been through it. It’s all about ... getting a man and then ... making it look good. Perfectly absurd when you think about it.’

‘I agree entirely, Mrs Attvane. You sound very like my wife, actually. You’d get along.’

Gwendolen smiled, then said purposefully.

‘Back to my story then. He made some remark about me in front of a couple we met on the Riviera. It wasn’t kind but seemed just in passing, and I tried to put it down as affectionate banter. But it started happening more and more. If I protested, he told me I was imagining things or I was being too sensitive. If I became insistent that he was being rude and had to apologise and stop ... he became angry ... and actually said the most *awful* things.’ Gwendolen paused and took a breath.

‘I’m so sorry, Mrs Attvane. It must have been quite dreadful for you,’ said Philip, sincerely.

She looked at him for a moment with large, empty eyes. ‘But at least at that point, it was still only verbal. Later that year, though, it ... it waxed to physical. He always claimed he was sorry afterwards, and would buy me an expensive present. He’d blame his ... violence on the strain of some current circumstance or other. Promise it would never happen again. When such and such was over, it would be better .... It never was, of course. Of course, now ... at the first sign ... I would never tolerate any of it. But back then ....’

‘You never mentioned it to anyone?’

‘I was too ashamed. I’d been *completely* taken in by him. Oh, my parents and Cynthia had had concerns all along. It was all so fast, what did we really know about him and so on. That made my embarrassment all the worse; I’d ignored them, I’d ignored the warning from Frances, inflated my own attractiveness in my mind. ... The truth is, I felt such a fool, Mr Rayke.’

‘I’m sure you weren’t the first to be taken in by men of his stamp, Mrs Attvane. You were the object of a strategic campaign by a cold-blooded individual.’

‘Really?’ Gwendolen’s face was at once filled with hope. ‘Do you really think so, Mr Rayke?’

‘Indeed. So, how did you handle it ... when his treatment of you worsened?’

‘I claimed I was clumsy, I’d fallen, or walked into things – to explain the injuries. Duncan became more and more controlling, watchful, ridiculously jealous. He made sure I was occupied while he was at the office.’

‘Vice chairman of his father’s business?’

‘That’s right. We lived well. I will say that. And there were times when ... Duncan could be so ... so charming, loving, generous and such fun .... But it became clear that I had seen too late what Frances and the other two girls had had the wit to see. A side of him ... an almost pathological self-absorption, an entitlement to the service and devotion of those around him. He always had to be correct, to be the one to ....’

Gwendolen took a breath and continued. ‘Anyway ... his fuse just got shorter, his paranoia mounted. I hardly saw my friends, saw my parents less and less, I was afraid all the time of his temper. I knew I had to do something. Duncan must have sensed that I was on the verge of leaving. That’s when he ....’

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Attwood hung up his hat as his wife came into the hallway to greet him with a dutiful kiss and take his case through to his study.

‘Hello, Duncan. Did you have a good day at the office?’

‘No, it was dismal. But someone has to put bread on the table. You look dreadful. Why don’t you do something with your hair?’

‘Look, Duncan, we need to talk.’

‘Don’t bother.’ Attvane turned to her. ‘Just know this. I know *everywhere* your father goes, on *which* days, *everything* he drinks and *everything* he eats. If you talk ... then he’ll be speaking his last. Got it?’

‘I ... I ....’

‘*Got it?*’

‘Yes, Duncan. Please. I won’t say anything. I promise.’

‘Good.’

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‘It isn’t broken, Mrs Attvane,’ said the nurse. ‘But it’s a nasty sprain. You’ll have to look after it. Lucky it’s your left arm. Tennis, you say?’

‘Oh, I was holding the racket all wrong! And it was such a fast serve. I didn’t get myself positioned at all correctly.’

‘Well ... I’ve never seen an injury from tennis like this before. Are you quite sure it wasn’t anything else?’ The nurse looked at Gwendolen keenly, observing the bruise under her makeup. It was all too familiar a scenario.

‘Oh, well,’ murmured Gwendolen, ‘you know how these things are.’

‘Maybe you should speak to someone ... about your ... tennis. Sports can be very dangerous. Even fatal.’

Gwendolen nodded. ‘Yes, I expect I should.’

## Chapter 5

### The Path

‘That’s when I knew it was serious, Mr Rayke. Really serious. He’d threatened Papa and, as the nurse said, my own life was in danger. I had to do something. From the hospital, I went to the park to think. That’s when I saw it. I was sitting on a seat by the path. It was perfectly ordinary, but it shone.’

Gwendolen’s expression, which had been so troubled by her painful recollections, now strangely brightened. Her eyes cleared; there was even the hint of a smile on her lips. Her soft voice was even and confident. ‘It was all quite clear to me. I felt a sudden ... relief. It would all be so ... easy. Everything was in my favour. It was as though *my* path had been laid out before me. You see, it had become more and more difficult to keep the servants, so the house was emptying. Duncan was becoming increasingly secretive. He had a drawer – well, I expect you’ve seen it.’

‘Yes, with a lock and cabinet underneath it with a lock too,’ Philip replied. ‘And there’s a safe in its own cupboard.’

‘That’s right, and a key to each one, as you found them. I never saw the contents and the keys never left his person. They went from pocket to pocket: pyjamas to dressing-gown to trousers and back to pyjamas. Three keys on a simple key ring.’

Suddenly, Gwendolen stopped and gazed at him intently. ‘It was the *books*, wasn’t it? When you visited us at home, I mean, my parents’ home. The books that gave me away.’

Philip smiled. ‘No, Mrs Attvane. It was not the books. Please do cont–’

The door behind them, at the opposite end of the room from the one Milly had come in by, opened, and a young man hurried out.

‘Sir. Please excuse me, ma’am. Sir ....’ He leaned down and said something quietly in Rayke’s ear.

‘Mrs Attvane,’ said Philip. ‘Please forgive me. There’s a call I rather feel I must take.’

‘Of course, Mr Rayke.’

The men left, and a few minutes afterwards, the door reopened to admit a breezy, smiling young woman in a tweed skirt and short-sleeved jumper. She had a plate in one hand but held out her other hand welcomingly.

‘Dear Mrs Attvane – oh dear me, no, please don’t get up.’ The lady shook Gwendolen’s hand warmly and sat down in the wing chair formerly occupied by Rayke. ‘Philip’s been telling me. You’ve been through the most awful time, my dear. I’m so dreadfully sorry.’

‘Erm ....’ In spite of the kindness of the lady’s words and air, Gwendolen looked at her with anxious eyes.

‘Oh, my dear, you really mustn’t worry. Nothing dreadful is going to happen to you – although I suppose some people might think it ... But I have a feeling that it’ll be just the thing for ... Oh, here he is now ...’ The lady handed Gwendolen the plate and picked up the teapot. ‘Now you’ve been having the most awful shock

having to go over it all again. You'd best have some more tea and see if you can manage an arrowroot biscuit. Two would be better.'

'Erm ... thank you, Miss, er .. are you Mr Rayke's, er ... assistant?'

'Oh, my dear, I haven't introduced myself. How rude of me. No, I'm Marion, his wife. Although "assistant" does seem to have worked its way into the small print!'

'Darling ...'

'Yes, dear. Now, Mrs Attvane, if Philip upsets you, I'll be right next door!'

With that, she breezed out again, leaving Gwendolen somewhat breathless and uncertain as to whether or not to be reassured.

Rayke sat down, smiling. 'Marion: one of the authorities to which I answer. But my wife is quite right. Please do take a moment to drink your tea and have a biscuit.' He leaned forward and helped himself. 'Cook's own recipe. Rather good.'

Encouraged, Gwendolen took one and nibbled at a corner.

'That's right,' Philip encouraged her. 'We're terribly spoiled. Cook's a marvel and Marion will be first to tell you that she doesn't know one end of a range or cooker or whatever it is from the other. But what she *won't* tell you is that she has no end of compensatory talents. I'm singularly fortunate in my life's companion and I have no doubt, Mrs Attvane, that when this is all over and you've had time to reflect and recover, you will be equally so.'

'Do you really believe that? Knowing ....'

'Without a trace of doubt, Mrs Attvane.'

'Thank you, Mr Rayke. You're very kind.' She put down her cup with resolve.

'Now, I expect you'd like me ....'

'If you're ready.'

## Chapter 6

### Rather Odd

‘Thanks for coming, Phil,’ said Henry Parkhurst, freshening his glass and getting down to it after the pleasantries.

‘Not at all, old boy. You always have the best brandy,’ Rayke answered his old school friend with a grin and took an appreciative sip. ‘Now. Fire away.’

‘Well, it’s this case I’ve been working on. Have to admit I’m stumped.’

‘The Attvane case?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hm, thought so. Scotland Yard calling in one of its big guns,’ remarked Rayke.

‘Hardly that. I’m just a humble detective inspector.’

‘With a reputation for getting the job done. So ... not natural causes after all?’

‘Oh, the doctor has confirmed heart attack, all right, but ... .’ Henry put his glass aside. ‘Well, there’s the question of the mysterious illness that led up to it, d’you see?’

‘Old Attvane kicking up a fuss?’

‘Yes and no. Said if the sawbones had been competent, they’d have saved his son, and if he’d had a proper nurse instead of that namby-pamby milksop of a wife of his with a headful of old books and who are her family anyway and so on.’

‘I can imagine. So, if not the family and not the death certificate, then ...? It’s not the first time someone has died from an illness that has only been identified much later. Take diabetes. People were perishing from it for must have been thousands of years before anyone worked it all out.’

‘I know, I know,’ sighed Henry, passing a hand over the back of his ginger hair, ‘but ... I just have a feeling .... The wife’s parents ... they struck me as rather odd sort of folk. Perfectly genial. Rather sweet actually. But ... odd. Clearly devoted to the daughter. But ... sorry, Phil ... can’t put my finger on it. All I’m saying is ... well, look, you know what it’s like when a couple alibi each other. And there’s no one else to confirm, and ....’

‘You suspect one or both parents?’

‘I don’t know, old chap ... but look ... the game has rather changed for me since ... look, Dorothy’s only two, I know, but if she was grown up and some cad laid so much as a finger on her ... I ... if I felt I had no recourse to the law I ... well, I don’t know *what* I’d do.’ Henry leaned back and waved a hand at his friend. ‘Oh, you wait till you have one of your own. You’ll *soon* see what I mean.’

‘Well, even now I can at least imagine what that would be like. But is there any evidence that either of the parents had any connections with the deceased – that they met or visited his house or place of business?’

‘No. No, there isn’t,’ Henry admitted, getting up to pick up the poker and encourage the fire. ‘It should be “case closed”, and I’m being urged to do just that.’ He paused, squatting by the hearth and looking over his shoulder at his friend. ‘I just have this *feeling*. And it won’t go away. The feeling’ – he wriggled the poker into the

coals – ‘that there’s more to this than meets the eye. And you, old chap, have always had a nose for the unusual. I mean isn’t that what your department or whatever is about? So rumour has it.’

‘I certainly do have an interest in the “unusual” as you put it,’ Philip replied evasively.

‘And a flair for getting to the bottom of such things.’ The flames picking up, Henry returned to his chair.

‘Modesty forbids! Hm, I think I can see where this is leading.’

‘Yes, would you have a look at the evidence, Phil? Perhaps talk to the parents and Mrs Attvane and anyone else.’

‘Spoken to Matron, have you?’

‘Well ... through certain channels, called in a favour from Broomsbury. I’ve had the word she’s agreed to let you have a nose, if you’re keen. Apparently, said as if there was any point trying to stop you.’

Philip grinned.

## *Chapter 7*

### **The Room**

‘So, this is the room where he died?’ asked Rayke, looking around the bedroom of the Attvane’s spacious Highgate establishment.

‘Yes, in the bed there,’ Henry Parkhurst answered, gesturing towards it. ‘He was drooping to one side. Head and arms over the left side of the bed, by the cabinet.’

‘Windows?’

‘Closed. Apparently, he hated any sort of draft or cold.’

‘That door over there?’ Rayke walked over to it.

‘To the bathroom.’

‘Ah, I see,’ said Rayke, peering in.

‘Windows closed in there too,’ supplied Henry, standing back against the wardrobes to allow his friend to explore the room.

‘Drinks by the bed?’

‘Water in a jug and glass, but clean of any toxic substances said the lab.’

‘No help there then,’ remarked Philip. ‘All right, how about clothes?’

‘Pyjamas and dressing-gown. In the bags on the table over there. Ready for you.’

‘All right to put them on the bed?’

‘Absolutely.’

As Philip brought the nightgear round the side of the bed where the deceased had lain, he frowned at the nightstand. The surface was catching the light from the window unevenly. ‘What are these marks?’

‘Telephone. Lived there. Apparently, Attvane had a thing about answering all calls. If he was in the house, he wouldn’t let anyone else do it.’

‘Why isn’t it here?’

‘The wife said he couldn’t bear being woken up by it,’ replied Henry. ‘She put it on the hall table up here while she went out on an errand for him.’

‘Which was at what time?’ enquired Philip, going out the hallway outside the bedroom door.

‘Just after 9, Mrs Attvane said.’

‘Corroboration?’

‘One of the shopkeepers remembered her.’

‘And you and your chaps arrived ...?’

‘At around 10.30. Mrs Attvane telephoned from a neighbour’s house, when she returned and couldn’t get in. We were here within minutes.’

‘Did you see her latchkey was definitely inside the house?’

Henry came out of the bedroom to join and pointed down over the bannister.

‘See the table in the hall there? That grey and black pottery bowl thing? The key was in there.’

‘There was no chance for Mrs Attvane to deposit it on her way in?’

‘No. She rushed straight in and up the stairs. Nowhere near the dish.’



‘All right. Hm.’ Rayke returned to the bedroom. ‘So Mrs Attvane reached her husband before anyone else?’

‘Yes, but only seconds ahead of my sergeant. Preston is sure of that.’

Philip stood by the bed, looking down as if at the deceased for a moment, then turned his attention to the clothes.

‘So he was wearing his dressing-gown in bed? Because of feeling the cold?’

‘Yes. Staff and medics attest to that.’

‘Right, let’s see.... Nothing in the pyjama’s pocket .... It’s a trifle worn.’

‘The wife said he always kept his keys on him,’ explained Parkhurst. ‘Must have rubbed away at the fabric.’

Philip raised his eyebrows. ‘Housekeys?’

‘No, just to the nightstand drawer, the cabinet below and the safe. Never let them out of his sight.’

‘Really? What on earth was in the cabinet and safe?’

‘Papers relating to finance. Nothing shady there,’ Henry assured him. ‘But in the safe, £25,000. And in the drawer ... a service revolver ... and several rounds.’

‘Dear me. Surely too young to have fought in the war.’

‘Father’s,’ replied Henry.

‘Did he know his son had his weapon?’

‘He claims not. The other item of interest was a bush knife – probably a souvenir, judging by the handle and scabbard.’

‘Hm. In the night stand?’ Henry nodded. ‘Charming man. ... Right, dressing-gown pockets ... handkerchief ... pills ... for?’

‘Aspirin – he was having headaches. Confirmed by the doctor.’

‘And here are the infamous keys. ... Hm ... odd.’

‘What?’ asked Henry hopefully.

‘Links coming off the ring but not attached to anything.’

‘Oh,’ Henry replied, a little deflated, ‘Mrs Attvane said the chain was used to hold the fob to his first Bentley. Pulled it off and threw it at her head in a fit of rage one day. Wouldn’t have it back on,’ explained Henry.

Philip looked up into space, the keys lying in his hand. ‘Fob ... wouldn’t that have been on its own ring and that threaded onto the ring for the keys or the key threaded onto the ring of the fob itself?’

Parkhurst had been thorough. ‘I did ask. Mrs Attvane said he complained that it got in the way of the keys and wanted it on links.’

‘I see. That would explain why the end one is open. Fair enough,’ Philip sighed, and reached a hand into the other dressing-gown pocket. ‘Rather nice lighter ... cigarette case ... still some in it .... Why not have them on the nightstand?’

‘The doctor told him to stop smoking.’

‘I see. So inevitably he kept some hidden. What else? ... A couple of barley sugars and a butterscotch – wrapped. Got to give the man credit for his taste in sweets.’

‘Barley sugars?’ asked Henry. ‘Can’t bear the things. I’m a mint humbug man, myself. Well, that’s it.’

‘Hm,’ mused Philip. ‘Well, seems like nothing to go on so far ... although .... Hm ....’ He paused and sniffed the air. He’d noticed it – just a faint trace – as he’d entered the room. ‘What’s that smell?’

‘Smell? What smell?’

‘You haven’t noticed it?’

‘No,’ answered Henry. ‘Perhaps a bit stuffy, musty. Room needs airing, I dare say but ... what? What can you smell?’

‘Hm ... can’t really smell it anymore. It was just a ... hint of .... Can’t put my finger on it .... Never mind. Right then. Staff?’

## Chapter 8

### The Witnesses

'Oh, 'e had a wicked temper, that man,' said Mrs Hay of her erstwhile employer. She folded her hands over her apron as she sat in her domain, the kitchen of Mr and Mrs Stewart's house in Islington. 'The amount o' meals 'e sent back you wouldn't believe. And the tongue on 'im to the maid 'as took up 'is food to 'im! Sally used to come back in tears, poor girl. But I says to 'er, I says, it's not pers'nal. 'E does it to everyone, includin' 'is poor missus.'

'May I ask, did you ever serve him personally, Mrs Hay?' asked Philip respectfully.

'Just the once, Mr Rayke, just the once. Both maids 'ad quit or bin fired, and poor Mrs Attvane 'ad 'er 'ands full talkin' with the doctor in the study an'is scones all wrong. It was all I could do to keep civil, Mr Rayke.'

'I'm sure Mrs Attvane appreciated your forbearance.'

'But well, when Bridget, the new maid come back down to me with a nasty scald from 'is soup what 'e thrown at 'er, I said enough is enough. I only stayed as long as I did for that poor Mrs Attvane, barely more than a girl. And my Ryan sayin' as I come 'ome every day in such a state. I 'ad to think of meself in the end.'

'Of course,' agreed Philip understandingly.

'And she such a sweet lady as was only ever soft spoken to 'im.' Mrs Hay shook her head and pursed her lips, her cheeks flushing. 'I tell you what. If I 'ad a 'usband like 'im, I'da taken my rollin' pin to 'im. If she'd 'a' done for 'im I wouldn't 'ave blamed 'er.' Mrs Hay frowned at Rayke suddenly. 'But there's no way she did. And if you come 'ere lookin' for dirt on Mrs Attvane, then I'll thank you to go about your business.'

'I assure you, Mrs Hay, I am just seeking to tie up any possible loose ends so this sad matter can be put to bed.'

'Hm,' replied the lady, somewhat mollified.

'Well, thank you for the tea, Mrs Hay, and for your help.'

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Mrs Kelly put the tea tray down on the table in the parlour. 'There we are, sir.'

'This is most kind of you, Mrs Kelly.'

'Not at all. Now, to answer your question, I was sort of general help for Mrs Attvane. We did the meals and housework between us. She kept trying to get more staff, but you know how it is, word gets round and well – Mr Rayke, did you say it is?'

'That's right, Mrs Kelly.'

‘Well, Mr Rayke, I felt sorry for her. The long and short of it is he wasn’t a good man, Mr Rayke. No, Mr Attvane was *not* a good man. And I’ve no doubt he’s met his Maker and about *where* he’s gone to now!’

‘Your help to Mrs Attvane, though, I have no doubt will be remembered,’ replied Philip encouragingly

‘I did my best. I had to keep out o’ sight, mind. Oh, he was that distrustin’. Suspicious. Believed people were tryin’ to kill him, so he did. Didn’t want a soul in the house but his wife, poor mite. But she couldn’t have managed that great big place all on her own and with him being so picky with his food. I’d have been there more if I could.’

‘I’m sure, Mrs Kelly. So, when were you able to be at the Attvanes?’

‘Just in the mornin’s for about an hour just before lunch when he had his sleep, and again late afternoon when he had his second nap. And I had to a creep about with the housework. And keep the kitchen door shut tight.’

‘I see. It must have been very difficult for you,’

‘And no mistake,’ agreed Mrs Kelly, pouring the tea.

‘So, on the morning when Mr Attvane died, you hadn’t yet arrived. Have I got that right?’

‘Yes, sir, or I would have let Mrs Attvane in. All she had to do was tap on the kitchen window.’

‘Yes, of course. Thank you,’ Philip added, accepting his cup and saucer. ‘Had Mrs Attvane forgotten her latchkey before?’

‘That she had, Mr Rayke, and the poor lady, with all she had to think about and put up with, there’s no surprise there. Sure it’s a wonder she didn’t forget more.’

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‘Sister, Mr Rayke is here to see you.’

‘Thank you, Nurse Reid. Show him in.’ The young Jamaican lady smiled and gestured Philip into the small room at the end of the hospital corridor. He nodded his thanks and entered.

Philip offered his hand. ‘Thank you for seeing me, Sister.’

‘That’s all right, Mr Rayke. But I don’t have long.’

‘Of course, I’ll be brief. You saw Mrs Attvane here on occasion?’

‘Oh yes, she was in here all right, sir,’ replied Sister Browning, nodding emphatically. ‘And don’t tell me those injuries were from accidents or sports. We see it all the time. And not always just the women, either, if you can believe it. The husband even had the gall to bring her in himself a couple of times, but mostly, it was her household staff. And if you want us to testify in court, we will. Won’t we, Edie?’

‘Mrs Attvane? Oh yes.’

‘In your medical opinion, Sister, Nurse, these were injuries inflicted by another person?’ asked Philip.

‘Yes, especially from the finger marks. Clear as day,’ replied Sister Browning. ‘And Dr Branch will tell you the same thing. He should be ....’ The doctor was striding down the corridor, white coat flapping behind him.

‘Sorry, Mr Rayke, I’m mid-rounds but I can give you a couple of minutes. Mrs Attvane?’

‘Hello, Doctor, thank you. Yes, Mrs Attvane.’

‘I expect you want to know how she got her injuries. Could they have been caused by someone else, to wit, the husband? I’m afraid it did look very like but these things are almost impossible to prove when the victim denies it, you see. It’s up to them to bring charges and to be honest ... when it’s a woman ... and a powerful family like the Attvanes ... even then, I regret to say ....’

‘Indeed. Although the Armstrong-Witworths are scarcely nobodies.’

‘An old and respected Hertfordshire family, yes, Mr Rayke. But the Attvanes ... the Attvanes are money with a capital ‘M’. And that sort of money can buy you ... a lot of advantages, shall we say.’

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‘That’s quite all right, Mr Rayke. My next patient isn’t for another twenty minutes. How can help?’ asked Duncan Attvane’s family doctor, laying aside his spectacles on the desk between them.

‘I’d just like to confirm the cause of death of Mr Duncan Attvane.’

‘It was unquestionably a heart attack. The patient was extremely weak and any overexertion could have brought it on. And he was of a somewhat choleric disposition, refused to take any advice, needless to say.’

‘And the illness ... the weakness?’ Philip asked curiously.

The doctor leaned back in his chair and shook his head. ‘I wish I could say. But you know there are still so many things we don’t understand. A lot of men who came back from the war from countries abroad – it could have been some strain of something.’

‘Had Attvane been abroad?’

‘Let me see.’ The doctor reached for the patient file before him, put his spectacles back on and looked through his notes. ‘To the French Riviera on his honeymoon .... but that was some time ago ... Paris and Zurich on business ... but he may have contracted something from someone he’d met or knew. As I told your colleague, Inspector Parkhurst, there was no evidence of any kind of poison introduced into his system. As far as we know, he simply ... got ill and ... died.’

The interview with Attvane senior was as fruitless as Philip had expected. It was mostly a repetition of what he’d told Inspector Parkhurst. However, he threw into the general mix of ire and complaint, ‘I blame the parents. Couple of damned Bohemians, no sense of *noblesse oblige*, with a houseful of Johnny foreigners. Yes! Mixing with a lot of damned Ruskiens. Probably a houseful of spies.’

The wife had nothing to add except, ‘Mr Rayke. The whole unpleasant business should be closed. The funeral has been conducted, and it is high time that everyone got on with their lives, and their *own* ... business!’

That was the final London stop, which left only one interview: the parents of Mrs Gwendolen Attvane, Walter and Evaline Armstrong-Witworth.

## *Chapter 9*

### **The Bohemians**

A lady of mature years and energetic demeanour opened the door.

‘Mr Rayke?’

‘That’s right.’

She smiled and nodded. ‘Yes, good, please come in. I am Yelena. I take you to Mr and Mrs Armstrong-Witworth.’ He followed her over the threshold of The Elms.

It was a gracious house, a mansion on a small scale or large house, depending on one’s point of view. Either way, it was one of the landmarks of Sunken Madley, a quaint English village with rural roots stretching back at least a thousand years. It lay 13 miles north of the Houses of Parliament and three miles south of the Hertfordshire border. Few people had heard of it, and its visitors tended to be restricted to those eager students of art or history who came to admire the glowing stained-glass window in the medieval church of St Ursula-without-Barnet.

Philip relinquished his hat to Yelena and followed her into a long, nicely proportioned, bay-windowed drawing room. Muted sun shone through the French windows at the end. They gave onto a small patio and long garden beyond, distinguished by an avenue of fine elm trees that gave the house its name, with the exception of an oak tree on the right near the house.

Yelena closed the door behind her as she left. Philip was at once struck by the pleasant aspect of the room and the warmth of the smiles of the couple who had risen at his entrance to greet him and shake his hand. The lady, dressed in a burnt orange dirndl skirt with colourful embroidered horizontal rows of stitching and a white peasant top, reached Philip first.

‘Mr Rayke, do come in and sit down. How kind of you to visit us.’

‘Mrs Armstrong-Witworth, thank you.’

‘Please. Evaline.’

‘Delighted to have you with us,’ said the man, attired in shirt, cravat and linen jacket, holding his round lens spectacles in one hand. ‘Inspector Parkhurst said you are working to tie up any loose ends so our sweet Gwendolen can put this whole dreadful time behind her.’

‘Indeed, sir, I hope that that can be done as soon as possible. Thank you for being willing to speak with me about it.’

‘Of course, of course. And it’s Walter. We have an informal house here.’ They all sat down as the door opened, and a muscular, middle-aged man of impressive height and beard entered. By contrast, he bore a silver tea tray with delicate cups and saucers of fine white porcelain, decorated with blue swirls and gold leaf.

‘Oh Piotr, how you are spoiling us!’ beamed Mrs Armstrong-Witworth. ‘The very best cups and saucers, you know.’

‘In our family for years,’ Piotr explained to Philip. ‘Nothing but the best for one who is helping our Gvenka.’ He then left and returned carrying an impressive samovar, which he took over to a table by the wall and plugged into the electrical socket there. Piotr stood up and announced. ‘Modern design!’

‘Indeed. Mr Rayke this is Piotr. He was an athlete in Russia. Yelena was a singer.’

‘In our younger days,’ said Piotr, as the men shook hands, Philip feeling awkward for having assumed the couple were servants. Clearly, they were very much more, in the household of his unusual hosts.

Next, Yelena came back into the room with a tray of plates, dessert forks and a Victoria sandwich on a silver cake stand. She placed it on the table, saying quietly as she nodded towards the garden,

‘Alexei bake for you, Mr Rayke. It helps him.’ Philip noticed the figure of a young man, sitting on a bench reading quietly under one of the trees.

‘I’m afraid our Alexei had a rather bad time of it,’ Evaline explained. ‘He was a young university lecturer with ideas that were not appreciated by the authorities. He was captured the first time he tried to escape to the West, you know. You understand.’ She looked at Philip intently. ‘The treatment he underwent.’

‘I am so sorry. Mrs ... Evaline, you are caring for him?’

‘Yes. We take in as many as we have room for, help them find their feet. Perhaps you will meet Anya. She is working at The Grange while she gains confidence with her English. Anya was an engineer in Russia and will, I am sure, have no difficulty in gaining a position when she is ready. Her daughter Havilah has started school in the village this week.’

‘And has already made a little friend,’ smiled Walter. ‘Dennis. He walks her to and from school every day and he is teaching Hava all about British motor cars, you know!’

Philip marvelled. ‘You are doing an excellent thing here, both of you.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Piotr and Yelena. ‘Excuse us now.’

‘This house,’ said Walter, after the couple had left, ‘since my parents’ time has always been a refuge for those fleeing oppression, for as long as they have need of it.’ He shook his head. ‘As it should have been for our daughter. At least now, her home can give her the comfort she needs to recover.’

‘Mrs Attvane is here with you?’ asked Philip, hearing this confirmed for the first time.

‘Yes, Mr Rayke, of course,’ replied Evaline. ‘We brought her home the day Mr Attvane breathed his last. We left for the house as soon as that dear lady, Mrs Kelly, telephoned to let us know.’

‘Do you wish to speak to Gwendolen?’ Walter was a little concerned. ‘She is in her room sleeping. We didn’t want to disturb her.’

‘No, no, please, don’t trouble your daughter. Another time. This is excellent tea, by the way.’

‘It is all in the leaves and the pot. You see, the samovar has its own heat source and keeps the tea hot but not boiling. But yes, Gwendolen has been through some very hard times, Mr Rayke. It is only now that we are learning about them. Her sacrifice for my safety is one I can never repay.’

‘Walter, were you aware that Attvane knew of your movements?’

‘It would not have been difficult,’ replied Walter, stirring sugar into his black tea. ‘I keep quite a regular schedule. I have the privilege of a private income and so have no office hours, but I go to Pushkin House for lectures twice a week and to the Cosmo – a restaurant in the Finchley Road – at least once a week to meet with new and old Russian friends there. I also take walks in Madley Wood here.’

‘With you, Evaline?’

‘I prefer to stay here and care for our guests, Mr Rayke. Although, I do on occasion accompany Walter.’

‘Of course. And Walter, you knew then that you were being followed?’ Philip enquired.

He shook his head. ‘I must give the credit to Sophia, another friend of ours, for that. I was impressed by her detective skills but, as she said, you do not walk the streets of Moscow under the watchful gaze of the KGB without developing a sixth sense for when someone has an eye on you.’

‘So I should imagine. Did you consider who it might be?’

‘It never occurred to me that it was Duncan, Mr Rayke.’ Walter shrugged expressively. ‘There are those who do not sympathise with the plight of our Russian friends here in London nor those who assist them. I assumed it was such an individual.’

‘You didn’t go to the police?’

‘It was just surveillance. I considered it to be some fearful person, afraid of Russians, afraid of what they did not understand. Such are our times. Of course ... no one is following me anymore. I have Sophia’s assurance.’

Yelena came in and spoke quietly to Evaline while Walter cut a generous slice of cake.

‘Will you excuse me, Mr Rayke?’ asked Evaline. ‘Gwendolen has woken up. I must go to her.’

‘Of course. There is no need for her to come down unless she wishes it,’ Philip insisted.

‘Thank you.’ Evangeline and Yelena departed as Walter rose with a plateful of Victoria sandwich.

‘And if I may leave you alone for a few minutes while I take our Alexei some of his own excellent cake?’

‘Certainly. Take your time.’ Walter left the French windows open, and the autumn breeze blew softly into the room for a moment, freshening the air. Philip stood up and wandered across to the bookshelves. There were old friends there, naturally, but some unfamiliar works too. Towards one end, more and more were in what he supposed to be Russian. Suddenly, there it was again. There and gone. What was it? Some hint of spice perhaps. It left a taste in his mouth just for a second. Gone before he could identify it.



## *Chapter 10*

### **The Books**

Presently, Walter returned to the drawing room.

‘Ah you have an interest in Russian literature, Mr Rayke?’

‘I am afraid I am not so erudite. I was curious as to what they might be about, though,’ explained Philip. ‘This one, for example.’ He pointed to a thick spine, a little taller than its neighbours.

‘Hm, if that has drawn your eye, then you must visit my library. Bring your tea and cake,’ Walter invited him. Philip picked up his refreshments and followed his host to a room on the opposite side of the hall towards the back of the house. It was lined, almost floor-to-ceiling, with books of all sizes, the majority apparently in the Russian language. But the particular section to where Walter beckoned him gave him pause. There it was. Just a residue, as though, weeks, maybe months ago, someone had lit incense there, and the room had never been aired. That same ... tang.

‘Quite a collection,’ remarked Philip.

Walter smiled. ‘Not all ours. Most of our Russian friends are learned men and women, whom it was important to their native land to retain within its borders. Naturally their books were among the prized possessions for which they made space in what little luggage they could bring with them. Some have been left with us for safekeeping while their owners make their way in the world; some have been given to us as precious gifts and keepsakes. And many have been acquired over the years by my parents and ourselves.’

‘I see.’ Philip was drawn to a particular section of a shelf at waist level.

‘Now those few ... let me see ... now one or two are from friends and the others I bought myself, oh, many years ago. Some might call them religious works, though Evaline and I are not church-goers.’

‘Bibles? Theological commentary.’

‘No, not that but the subject has religious connections. Zagovory. You have heard of this?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Ah. Surprising,’ remarked Walter, impressed.

‘All sorts of things come my way in my work,’ Philip explained vaguely.

‘Then perhaps you also know it as “Slavic magic”. The power of the word, Mr Rayke. I believe we both would subscribe to that idea.’

‘Oh yes. Its power to persuade, to move, incite, elevate, encourage or discourage.’

‘Those things, certainly, but zagovory went beyond that; the power to call up unseen forces. Or, for example, personifying an unwanted condition, then using the power of a certain form of words to banish it.’

‘Unwanted condition? Illness?’

‘That’s right. Of the body or mind.’

‘So, these are books of ... what? .... Healing spells?’

‘That’s the idea, Mr Rayke.’

There were three together that seemed to stand out for some reason. They were in shades of brown like the other leather-bound books, one a little shorter, between a slimmer and a thicker volume. Philip instinctively put out a hand towards them but did not touch the spines.

Walter smiled. 'Now that's interesting.' Philip looked at him curiously. 'These are the oldest of the zagovory works here. Perhaps you feel the same appeal as I do.'

'May I ...?'

'Why, certainly. They are not enchanted, I promise you,' Walter chuckled, pulling out one of the books. 'Though I'm not sure how much they will convey,' he added, putting a pale brown work into Philip's hands.

Rayke opened it. Sure enough, it was all in Russian, much of it set out like poetry.

'I dare say,' Walter went on, 'books of prayers for the sick might have the same effect, to those with conventional faith. Though personally I find I am more comfortable with the more pagan-rooted ways.'

Philip looked up at that. 'Have you ever ...?'

'Made use of these ... spells? Yes, to encourage the recovery of a friend. Perhaps more for my own comfort than anything, to help both myself and the patient to hope for the best, you might say.'

'Did they always get better?'

'Why yes, as a matter of fact, they did. But my wife is more sceptical and will tell you that, in every case, it was down to the doctor's skill and her own restorative cooking! But herbs are part of every nation's folk magic, are they not? We have a very knowledgeable herbologist in our village here.'

Philip smiled. Then he let out a sigh that was a mixture of relief and disappointment. He'd felt he was on to something .... Something .... He made one last try.

'So, these are healing spells then? Just that?'

'Well, I have not read every page, Mr Rayke, or every one of the books in this section. The language of some of them is somewhat dense, often obscure or archaic. But a positive effect is all that *I* have ever sought from them,' Walter added gravely.

'Of course,' Philip responded warmly, feeling he might have sounded accusatory.

'I wish I could be more helpful. I am by no means an expert. It was something of an interest of mine, many years ago. When the children were young, and curious about magic and such things, as children are. Fairy stories and so on. You have some of your own?'

'Children? No, er, my wife and I have been rather preoccupied with our work. But we do plan, at some point, to have a family.'

'Well, then, when that happy time comes, and should they be curious about Russian tales, do not hesitate to call upon us, dear chap,' Walter invited Philip, with a gentle pat on his shoulder. 'Though I hope you will visit us again before that.'

## Chapter 11

### Gwendolen

They returned to the drawing-room and Philip's eye was caught by a figure outside.

She was coming from the garden, between the rows of Elm trees towards the French windows, carrying an empty cake plate, brown curls blowing awry in an autumn gust, straw hat in her hand, fluttering dress in a blue that matched the cornflower shade of her eyes. The image rose unbidden in his mind of birds and butterflies around her, rabbits and squirrels at her feet and a deer in train.

And that was Philip Rayke's first sight of Gwendolen Armstrong-Witworth. 'Ah, here comes my daughter.'

Recalled to reality by Walter's voice, Philip reminded himself that she was not his type. In fact, the ethereal contrast to his dear, confident, breezy wife couldn't be more marked. He also saw how, side by side with other even averagely pretty young women, Gwendolen would be as a daisy amongst roses. Unremarked, even unremarkable. Yet, here in her home setting, she was quite ... taking. Even ... enchanting.

'We made her put off her black while at home. Her plight has been dire enough without adding sombre attire to it. I hope you are not shocked, Mr Rayke.'

'By no means,' Philip assured him.

Gwendolen's warm smile on seeing her father melted into anxious enquiry at the sight of Philip. He found himself wanting to reassure her.

'My dear,' said Walter, drawing her into the room and relieving her of the empty plate with one hand and putting his other arm around her, 'let me introduce our guest, Mr Rayke.'

'How do you do?' Gwendolen's soft voice greeted him politely from the shelter of her father's arm as she put out her hand.

Philip returned her greeting in as friendly a manner as possible, and said, as they all sat down, 'Has your mother explained to you why I am here?'

'Yes, I believe you are in the process of tying up any loose ends relating to Duncan's death. Is that right, Mr Rayke?'

*Tying up loose ends.* What a useful phrase that was being in this case. It covered a multitude of sins. Meeting Gwendolen Attvane, he felt almost guilty for pursuing any vestige of suspicion of either her or her loving parents. And yet .... And yet.

'Mrs Attvane, please do say if you don't feel up to it today. But at some point, would you be willing to indulge me with a recap of the events of that unfortunate day?'

'Oh well ...' Gwendolen looked doubtfully at her father.

'It's up to you, my pet,' he assured her. She looked back at Philip.

'Well ... I would rather get it over with, if that's all right. May my father stay?'

'Of course, Mrs Attvane.'

'I'm afraid there's not much to tell, Mr Rayke. My husband was running out of his favourite sweets. The doctor had advised him to give up his cigarettes and limit his whisky, and so sweets were his only pleasure.'

'I understand.'

'I promised I would go out first thing to the sweet shop and get some for him. I needed one or two things for lunch and dinner too. So just after 9 o'clock that morning, promising to be back within the hour, I went out and foolishly left my key behind. I went to the shops and when I got back found myself locked out. I knew Mrs Kelly wouldn't have arrived and my husband was far too weak to be able to come down and open the door for me. I knew he would be growing anxious for my return and I was concerned for his safety, being so unwell and alone in the house. The locksmith was unlikely to be able to come at once. So, I crossed the street to my neighbour, Miss Pardington, who let me use her telephone to call the police. Within a short time, Sergeant Preston arrived and got the door open. I hurried in, went up to the bedroom and ... well ... it was clear .... The sergeant called for the inspector – Inspector Parkhurst – and he soon arrived.'

'I see. Thank you, Mrs Attvane. And you're quite sure there was no one else in the house when you arrived?'

'Oh, quite sure, Mr Rayke. Duncan wouldn't allow anyone else in the house. Actually, he didn't even know about Mrs Kelly. But I couldn't have coped with everything by myself, you see. Duncan really needed a full-time nurse. But he ... he was ... resistant to the idea,' finished Gwendolen lamely.

'And Mr Attvane was alive when you left?'

'Oh absolutely, Mr Rayke.'

'And no one could have got into the house in your absence?'

'No. All of the doors and windows were closed and locked. The doors, I mean. The windows can only be opened from the inside and they were all closed. Duncan was very insistent about security.'

'Right. ... I ... think that covers everything. Thank you for going over those events, Mrs Attvane. I hope that it has not caused you undue distress.'

'Oh ... well, thank you, Mr Rayke. Whatever I can do to help .... the loose ends.'

Walter got up, and Gwendolen and Philip followed suit as Evaline came into the room.

'Leaving us?' she asked.

'I really have taken up too much of your family's time, Mrs Armstrong-Witworth. You have all been immensely kind and tolerant.'

'Well, if there's anything more we can do to help close the case, you know where to find us,' she replied heartily. Walter showed Philip to the front door, leaving the ladies to clear up the tea things.

They shook hands. Something was still snagging in Philip's mind. It was the tiniest of threads, but ....

'Walter, you mentioned a herbologist.'

'Well, no, that's not his profession, but he does seem to know quite a bit about plants and the ways of nature. Comes from a rural background, you see. Farming people, I do believe. But no, he's our furniture restorer. Pop in and see him if you have an interest in herbs and folk remedies and so forth. A quiet man but friendly.'

'If you're sure he wouldn't mind a visit out of the blue.'

‘Not at all. He’s Perran Cadabra. Cottage at the edge of the village.’ Walter waved a hand in the general direction. ‘It’s 26 Orchard Row. Did you come from Barnet?’

‘Yes.’

‘So drive back towards it along Muttring Lane here which becomes the High Street, then turn right into Hog Lane. Orchard Row is the first on the left. It’s the end house. The workshop is right at the back of the house so give him plenty of time to come to the door. I dare say he might have a lead for you to someone who really *is* a herbologist. Don’t get on the wrong side of his wife, though! Bit of a fiery soul. Aristocratic. Head of long chestnut hair and violet eyes. Tall. Can’t miss her.’

‘Noted! Goodbye, Walter, and thank you, again.’

‘Cheerio!’

## *Chapter 12*

### **Perran**

Philip found it easily enough. A Princess Margaret rosebush fronted a small driveway flanking the path to the door, which was picturesquely bordered on one side and above by wisteria, twining wilfully in front of the bell.

Twisting a finger into position to access it, he gave it a couple of presses and waited patiently. After a few minutes, an amiable, youthful face above a tall frame and under a thatch of dark hair appeared, as the door opened.

'Hello, how can I help you?' asked the man, in a gentle Cornish-flavoured voice.

'Hello, my name's Philip Rayke. Please excuse my turning up without an appointment, but I've been visiting the Armstrong-Witworths, and Mr Armstrong-Witworth said that a Mr Perran Cadabra at this address may be able to help me with an enquiry. Is he at home?'

'Very much so,' replied Perran genially, and put out a hand. 'Well now, any friend of Walter and Evaline's is a friend of ours. Come in. I hope you won't mind the workshop, but I'm in the middle of clamping a chair I'm glueing, and don't want it to go off before I've got it all firmly in place.'

'Of course. It's most kind of you to see me in the middle of your work.'

'It's nice to have company. Leave your hat on the table there. I promise it'll still be there when you leave,' Perran jested.

'Thank you.'

The young Cornishman led the way along the hallway, through the kitchen and out into the garden. A path wound through a short stretch of lawn, then fruit trees, with some vegetable patches up to the workshop. Perran unlocked it and ushered in his guest. 'That Queen Anne armchair there is quite safe. I haven't started on it yet.'

Philip tucked himself out of the way while Perran worked on a stylish wooden chair on a table in the centre of the front of the workshop. Some of the clamps were larger than any Philip had seen. The craftsman applied them carefully to the curved surfaces, protecting them at the point of contact.

'That's rather lovely,' remarked Philip. 'Is it ... Scandinavian?'

Perran smiled. 'Not a million miles off. Dutch. Neils Eilersen. It fell foul of removals. Accidents do happen even to the most professional of movers. Fortunately for me, the insurance company is happy for them to recompense me for my services.'

'And I see why. It's a very professional looking set-up you have here,' commented Philip, gazing at his surroundings.

'Well, mostly hand tools. I prefer that. But I'm building up my array of electrically powered ones bit by bit.' Perran walked around the chair, stooping and checking, wiping off a little excess glue here and there, then stepped back.

'Well, now, how can I be of service, Mr Rayke. If you've been visiting Walter and Evaline, my guess is it's about our Gwendolen.'

'That's right. The inspector in charge of the case of her husband's death has asked me to just tidy up a few loose ends so that it can be put to bed.'

Perran nodded. 'I see. Not sure I can help with anything to do with that, except to attest to Gwendolen's good character.'

'That's always helpful but ... no ... I have a question prompted by a couple of books in the Armstrong-Witworths' library.'

'You read Russian?'

Philip shook his head regretfully. 'No. No, I can't lay claim to such a skill. But, er, the books were about ... folk healing. The use of herbs, I gather, and so on. Walter said you knew more about plants and the ways of nature than anyone else in the village and might be able to shed more light on the subject for me.'

'There are those who know far more than I. But I can tell you of a few.'

Cadabra stared up into the air as he recalled. 'Let's see, there's foxglove for heart troubles, rosemary for dizziness and headaches, honeysuckle for the skin ....' He stopped and looked back at Philip. 'But I don't think that's what you're really asking about, is it, Mr Rayke?'

'Well ... could any helpful plants have undesirable side-effects?'

'Of course, misapplied in ignorance. Why? Was there some harmful substance found in the post mortem?' asked the Cornishman with concern.

'No. No, not at all. But perhaps some other folk-rooted measures .... Could something of that nature misfire?'

This brought forth a teasing smile. 'Now, Mr Rayke, it sounds to me like you're talking about *magic*.'

'Well, I'm not sure I'd put it exactly like that but ....'

Perran chuckled. 'Are you thinking one of the Armstrong-Witworths has been poking pins into a doll of Gwendolen's husband? "Eye of newt, tongue of bat".'

Philip laughed. 'Put like that, it does sound rather absurd, I grant you. It's not ... it's just that I want to make sure all possibilities regarding the undiagnosed illness of Mr Attvane leading to his death are completely ruled out, so that at no time in the future can the ruling of death by natural causes ever be questioned.'

Perran favoured Rayke with a shrewd gaze that was at once mild and intent.

'I'm afraid I'm not your man for that. My knowledge is what I picked up from my mother as a lad, of growing things. But ... there's one that might have the knowledge of such things in broader terms. She would be a far better judge than I.'

'Thank you. Any lead at all. I would appreciate it.'

The Cornishman was doubtful. 'It's a fair journey, now.'

'That's all right.'

'And no guarantee that the lady will converse with you.'

'I'm willing to try,' Philip assured him.

There was a beat of pause, then,

'Very well. I'll write you a note to take. Let's return to the house,' said Perran, leading the way to the door.

'Thank you,' replied Philip, getting up and following him. 'Where must I go?'

Perran looked over his shoulder at Philip with a somewhat impish smile.

'*Dhe Gernow, Mester Rayke. To Cornwall.*'

## *Chapter 13*

### **Across The Tamar**

It certainly was a long journey and Philip arrived too late to pay a call unheralded. He had expected that and brought an overnight bag. He checked himself into a Plymouth hotel, had dinner and slept until morning, the strange tang of spice wisping through his dreams.

At 9 o'clock he paid his bill and took the road, following Perran Cadabra's directions, to the Torpoint Ferry. Moving across the water and the ancient border between Cornwall and the rest of Britain, Philip had a strange sense of momentousness; that this journey was far more important than just a trip to follow a lead. He breathed in the scent of the sea, south along the estuary, and heard the sound of the water even above the laughter of the holidaymakers enjoying the last of the season.

Exiting the ferry, Philip took the road south-west to Tregantle Fort then followed the coast road along and up to Craffhole, a village once famed for its smugglers, but now for its welcoming fifteenth-century Finnygook Inn, formerly a coaching stop. There, on the outskirts of the village, he found the cottage, with lavender growing in pots either side of the green painted door.

Unaccountably with butterflies in his stomach, Philip drew the envelope Perran had given him out of his pocket, ready to present to the lady he now hoped to meet.

The door was opened presently by a small woman somewhat broad of frame yet shapely. Her deep-set dark eyes and pleasant set to her mouth were framed by dark abundant curled hair with burgundy lights. He would have judged her to be in her forties. She carried gloves and secateurs in one hand and, with the other, was dusting off the apron over her gathered floral skirt and matching shirt as she greeted him.

'Good day to you.'

'Good day, ma'am. My name is Philip Rayke. I am looking for a lady called Maam James.'

'Well, you've done well so far. Maam James am I.'

'Excellent. I bring a letter of introduction from Mr Perran Cadabra.'

At that, the lady leaned back a little in amazement.

'Have you, now? Well, there's a name I haven't heard for a while. Well, now. That being the case, you'd best come in, hadn't you?'

Maam James led him to the kitchen, where she bade him sit down, and said,

'Let's get the kettle going and I shall sort myself out.' There were small sheaves of herbs and bundles of carrots and potatoes on the table, which explained the earthy dust on her apron. The vegetables she put in the sink and scrubbed; the herbs were tied with twine and hoisted up over the door.

Philip sat patiently while the lady finished her tasks. Finally, she set out the tea things, brought an unfamiliar looking cake out of the larder, and cut some generous slices. It was loaf-shaped, deep yellow and studded with sultanas. It rang a faint bell in Philip's mind from a Cornish holiday in his childhood.



‘Is this ... saffron cake?’

‘Very good,’ she approved. ‘A Cornish delicacy.’

‘Indeed, ma’am, thank you.’

‘You’re welcome. It’s not ‘ma’am’; it’s Maam. Maam James. *Maam* is Cornish for “mother”, do you see?’

‘If I may say so,’ Philip ventured, ‘you seem a little too youthful for such a title.’

She chuckled and asked frankly, ‘How old do you think I am?’

‘Well. One should be very careful when speaking of a lady’s age but I would have said perhaps forty.’

Maam James laughed outright at this. ‘Well, that’s a gentleman’s answer if nothing else! I won’t see sixty again, Mr Rayke.’

‘Indeed? Well, Maam James, that’s remarkable. And forgive me if my pronunciation is only approximate.’

‘Don’t worry. Perhaps you need to spend more time in Cornwall, Mr Rayke,’ she said with a twinkle.

‘I have no doubt you’re right. That would be a pleasure indeed from what I have seen so far and what little I recall.’

‘Now.’ Maam James reached out her hand. ‘Let’s see about this letter of yours.’ He passed it to her; she opened it with a knife and read it through carefully. Philip had been curious for several hours as to its contents and hoped the lady might share them. ‘I expect you’re wondering what Perran Cadabra has written,’ she commented accurately.

‘Well ....’

## Chapter 14

### Truth

‘Perran Cadabra says that you are attempting to tie up loose ends in the case of the death of the husband of one in his care,’ summarised Maam James, putting the letter down on the table, where he could see it. A single glance was sufficient to tell Philip that it was not in English.

‘In his care? No, Maam, Miss Armstrong-Witworth lives with her parents now.’

She smiled an almost secret smile. ‘I see you do not understand the way of villages from the old times, Mr Rayke. The village you have come to, to find me ... all within its boundaries have long been within the care of those who have resided within this house. And so it is with Perran Cadabra, his village, and the house where he and his wife now live.’

‘Like ... a village ... Shaman ... or mayor ... or ... minister or doctor perhaps?’

‘Something of that nature,’ conceded Maam James. ‘So ... understanding that, you will see that I have a particular interest in the case of yours. You wish to know if this girl or her parents could have used magical means to bring about the death of the husband.’

Philip was somewhat taken aback by her frankness.

‘Well ... yes, I suppose ... that’s what it comes down to.’

‘Why?’

The abruptness of the question, so early on in their discussion, took the wind out of his sails.

‘I ...’

Suddenly he thought he knew the answer. ‘To get to the truth, Maam.’

Her dark eyes looked at him kindly but keenly, seeming to pierce his soul.

‘And what would you do with this truth of yours, Mr Philip Rayke?’

What *would* he do? On the one hand, if there could be material evidence admissible in court to prove any of the Armstrong-Witworths guilty of murder, that would surely close the case for his friend.

On the other hand, there was no question that an innocent young woman had suffered cruelly at the hands of a brute without mercy or conscience, who was capable of putting an end to her life. Yet, would a court accept a plea of self-defence if she had premeditatedly brought about his illness and subsequent death? The words of the doctor came back to him: ‘when it’s a woman ... a powerful family like the Attvanes ... Money with a capital M’. If it came to court, the Attvanes would surely be baying for her blood, and they undoubtedly possessed the influence to get it.

Of course, no court would consider a report of the use of magic. But if it led to something that *could* be used against her, ... would he not be sending Gwendolen Attvane to the gallows?

Philip, for all his experience, knew he was way out of his depths. This was a quandary such as he had never had to face. Himmler’s obsession with the occult was

no secret at the Ministry. Just how effective it might have been in the Nazi war effort was a question few were willing to pursue. And yet it was at times material to locating or understanding certain documents, and to the pursuit of Hitler's fellow war criminals, and Philip had somehow found himself something of a specialist in this area.

But ceremonial magic was one thing, and the evidence against those who had been responsible for atrocities was clear. This village folk magic, and the fate of the gentle girl coming in from the garden, or that of her kindly, generous parents, was quite another.

Maam James did not force a reply from him but turned the subject to what he had seen of Cornwall so far and his childhood experiences of her land. Finally, the tea was drunk and cake eaten. Philip had to acknowledge that he had learned nothing from her, only the uncomfortable dilemma in his own heart.

Yet he had come all this way. Maam James rose to end the interview and he followed suit. He made a last-ditch attempt to further his mission.

'Are you sure there isn't anything you can tell me? The books, the magic ... the spell books in Russian in the Armstrong-Witworths' library. Walter said they were only for good ... healing and so on. Please. Is there any possibility...?'

Maam James leaned both hands on the table and looked him in the eye.

'Mr Rayke. You are welcome in my house at any time. But I will not help you to put a noose of your English rope about the neck of a helpless, trapped, blackmailed young girl.'

She showed him slowly to the door, gave him a note for Perran and wished Philip well. He bade her goodbye and then ... as he set foot upon her path, all at once, his own opened up before him. It was clear. He turned decisively.

*'Nor would I.'*

He waited.

'Is that your truth, Mr Philip Rayke?'

'That is my truth, Maam.'

'Then go in peace.'

Philip bowed his head respectfully and turned away. He had at least learned something of himself. He accepted defeat. As he reached the gate, though, he heard her speak.

*'Yma dhe bub lorgh dew benn.'* He spun round.

But she was gone.

Philip hurried to the car and hastily wrote down the syllables as he remembered them. Cornish. What he needed was a Cornishman. And he knew just where to find one.

## Chapter 15

### Cynthia

Cynthia de Havillande, in cigarette pants and white shirt, hurried down the gravel driveway to greet her friend, pulling her sensible hat off her short straight crop, the inevitable dog in her wake.

‘Darling! You should have called!’ came the forthright tones. Reaching Gwendolen, she embraced her warmly.

‘I needed the walk, Cynthia. The fresh air and the ... well, the peace. You know what the house is like. Always full of people. *Dear* people ....’

‘But yes, lots of them. Grounds or house and tea?’

‘I’d rather be outdoors for a bit, if it’s all right.’

‘Of course.’

They threaded their way through to the terrace and beyond. Cynthia found a stick and hurled it with the might of an amateur javelin thrower. The black Labrador bolted after it enthusiastically.

‘So ...? I hear The Elms has been having an extra visitor.’

‘A Mr Philip Rayke,’ replied Gwendolen, running her hand over the lavender growing near the house. ‘He says he’s some sort of colleague of the inspector, who has asked him to tie up loose ends.’

‘Hm, there’s a phrase that covers a multitude of sins,’ Cynthia remarked wryly. Gwendolen blushed. ‘What’s wrong? He been harassing you?’

‘No. Not at all. But he was closeted with Mama and Papa while I was sleeping earlier. For quite some time, and then with Papa in the library.’

‘What did he want?’ asked Cynthia, as the dog ran back with its prize. ‘Good boy! *Good* boy!’

‘That’s just it,’ Gwendolen replied, plucking a head of the fragrant seeds and pushing her skirt down against the playful breeze. ‘I know they mean to be kind, but they just tell me not to worry and it’s all going to be all right and Mr Rayke is here to help.’

‘Isn’t that good?’

‘If it’s true. If he’s really here to help me ... why all the secrecy?’

‘Can’t you find out?’ suggested Cynthia, bending to ruffle the Labrador’s ears. She threw the stick again.

‘Oh Cynthia, you know what our house is like. If you stopped to listen at a door for a moment it’s ten to one someone would wander by and ask you what you were doing. And probably not discreetly either.’

‘Fair enough. Did you ...?’

‘Yes, of course. I came down to have a good look round the library in the early hours after everyone was in bed. Typically, before I found anything, Yelena turned up and asked me if I was all right and needed anything. I just said I couldn’t sleep and was looking for a book. She started making some hot milk in the kitchen. In the end I had to go back to my room. But as far as I could see, there was nothing helpful. No papers or anything.’

‘But why are you worried? Duncan kicked the bucket through having a heart attack, didn’t he?’

‘Yes ... yes, he did.’

They walked on in silence for a while until Cynthia halted, and said frankly,

‘You can always talk to *me*, you know, Gwennie. Tell me *anything*. I’ll keep your confidence to the grave and beyond.’

Gwendolen smiled warmly at her friend. ‘Oh, I know Cynthia ... It’s just ....’

Cynthia forbore to press her friend, but said bracingly,

‘Well, no doubt it will be over soon enough. Have you thought about what you’re going to do, after?’

‘A little. I suppose, back when I was a student, I’d always assumed that I’d get married ... happily ... or go back to college after the long vacation and do my masters. Maybe teach there one day.’

‘Still an option. Or you could stay with your parents. Get involved in their work.’

‘No ... I can’t go back.’ Gwendolen shook her head. ‘I can’t pick up the threads of my old life. Those old ... plans, such as they were.’

‘Well ... you could always come and live *here*, you know. No end of things to do around this old pile.’

‘Dear Cynthia. You’re so very kind. I don’t want to sound like I’m pooh-poohing all your suggestions, but –’

‘I know. The parents and siblings. They’re not here that often. But I know. We can barely stand each other. Fortunately, this barn of a place allows us to avoid one another as much as possible.’

Gwendolen chuckled. ‘And you know I’m not much of a dog person.’

‘We could get you a cat.’ The Labrador barked and Cynthia patted him. ‘How would you feel about that, eh, boy?’ She sent him on his pursuit again. ‘No,’ said Cynthia decidedly. ‘It’s all too soon, isn’t it? Everything is just too close to home. Too much reminding you. College, home, the Highgate house.’

‘Yes .... I don’t know ... perhaps,’ Gwendolen’s face brightened a little. ‘Perhaps I’ll go abroad. Maybe study in Paris or somewhere. It’s just that it’s hard to look beyond this ... to some dream or other.’ She shivered and drew her yellow cardigan more closely around her. ‘Right now, it all seems too much like a nightmare.’

‘Look. Want me to find out who this Rayke chap is? I could telegraph the parents.’

‘Thank you, but they’re bound to know the Attvanes, and if it got back to them that I’d made enquiries ... I mean, how would it look?’

‘I suppose. They are the sort of unbearable people my parents *would* know. Well, perhaps this Rayke got whatever he wanted and won’t be back.’

Gwendolen looked into the distance over the fields to the belt of trees beyond.

‘Oh, something tells me he’ll be back. In fact, ... I’m quite certain of it.’

## Chapter 16

### The Meaning

Philip purchased five pasties and a tankful of petrol. He struck out for Sunken Madley.

The sun was setting by the time he arrived. He hoped Perran would not mind the evening visit.

There were no lights on at the front of the cottage, as he drew up. Philip negotiated the wisteria and rang the bell, hopefully. It was possible, of course, that the Cadabras were out for dinner, at a village function, or in town even.

The hall light showed through the small glass panel at the top of the front door, and soon, it opened.

Perran smiled a welcome.

‘Well now, good evening, Mr Rayke. Won’t you come in? We have just finished dinner. Would you like to share a little apple pie and custard with us? Our own apples.’

‘Thank you, Mr Cadabra,’ replied Philip, entering the cosy hallway. ‘Please excuse the late visit. Actually, I’ve eaten five fine Cornish pasties over the course of my journey.’

‘Then you are more than ready for dessert. Or “pudding”, as my wife calls it,’ he twinkled, leading his guest into the dining room, then leaving to find Mrs Cadabra in the kitchen. ‘Senara, my love, another for pie, if you will,’ Philip heard him say. As his host returned bearing the custard jug and three rimmed bowls, Philip apologised,

‘Forgive me, I had no intention of interrupting your meal. I have just come from Maam James.’

‘Ah, and your mission was fruitful? Sit down, sit down, Mr Rayke.’

‘Thank you. Yes, I think so. I’m not sure. Maam James gave me this letter for you,’ said Philip, offering him the envelope. ‘And she spoke some words as I was leaving. But in Cornish. I was hoping you could tell me their meaning.’

‘If I can,’ replied Perran, reading the note. He looked up, apparently content with what he had read. ‘Tell me the words.’

‘I’m afraid my pronunciation won’t do them justice,’ Philip apologised, pulling the piece of paper from his pocket. “‘Imma the bub lorch dew pen.’”

He looked up expectantly at Perran. A clear, strong yet quiet voice behind him uttered:

‘Every stick has two ends. *Yma dhe bub lorch dew benn.*’ He turned and rose. Chestnut-haired, tall, violet-eyed and imperious. There could be no doubt.

‘Mrs Cadabra?’

‘Indeed.’ She shook his offered hand elegantly.

‘Philip Rayke. Thank you. That is the translation of Maam James’ words?’

‘Yes. Do you comprehend their import, Mr Rayke?’

He paused. ‘I think I do. And ... forgive me ... perhaps I may take up your kind offer of hospitality another time but ... I think I know where I must go next.’

‘By all means,’ replied Senara Cadabra graciously. ‘We shall expect your return when your business with this affair is complete.’

It was a royal edict he would not dare have refused. ‘Yes, ma’am,’ Philip responded. He found himself bowing over her regally outstretched fingers. ‘Ma’am, sir. Please. I will let myself out.’

‘One moment, Mr Rayke,’ said Perran. ‘Maam has a message for you.’

‘Oh?’

“‘If and when the time comes, send him to me.’ She says you won’t understand it now ... but one day you will.’

‘Well, I must say, I have no idea what it could be referring to but, thank you, Mr Cadabra. Good evening to you both.’

Within seconds Philip was back in his car, headed for The Elms.

## Chapter 17

### Cards on the Table

Evaline opened the door with a smile.

‘Ah, you have returned to us. Come in, Mr Rayke. My husband is in the drawing room with Gwendolen, Yelena, Piotr and Alexei.’

‘Thank you, Evaline, but may I speak to you both in private?’

‘Of course.’ She gestured down the hall. ‘Go into the library, and I will bring him in a moment.’

Philip entered and walked to the shelves where he had stood the day before, feeling both excited and nervous. He was about to ask for a leap of faith on which all might depend.

Soon, Walter came into the room with hand extended.

‘Do you have news for us?’

‘Possibly. You may not like what I’m about to say, but I ask you to bear with me. I have a theory. No more. And I know that it’s in the grand tradition of investigators to keep these things to themselves until they have proof. But I cannot solve this without your help.’

‘Of course, Mr Rayke. Let’s all sit down, and you can tell us what this is all about.’ The three of them took their seats at the library table. Evaline lightly clasped her hands before her, and Walter sat back and waited calmly.

‘First, I should explain a little about the nature of my area of work and why Inspector Parkhurst asked for my help with the Attvane case.’

They nodded and heard him out. Philip described his job in such broad terms as he was permitted.

‘Well!’ remarked Evaline. ‘I am surprised that the Ministry of Defence would pay anyone to consult on *magic*.’

‘I wouldn’t put it quite like that,’ protested Philip.

‘But if they do, then I’m *not* surprised that your department has been kept in obscurity. Still, if the MoD believes there’s something in it ....’

‘I think it’s more that they believe *other* people believe there’s something in it, Evaline.’

She smiled. ‘Now *that* I find more credible.’

From there, Philip related his friend Henry Parkhurst’s hunch that there was something unusual underlying the case.

Evaline smiled. ‘I think I see where this is going, Mr Rayke. This is much more Walter’s area than mine. And no, I will mention nothing of this to Gwendolen. May I leave you two together and return to the family? We have been planning a game of Monopoly and I’m afraid it can become rather heated without a little leavening presence! As long as you are here to help our daughter, Mr Rayke, whatever involvement my husband chooses to have, in whatever it is you are here for, has my support.’

With a promise to send in tea and refreshments, Evaline departed.



‘As you see, my beloved wife and I are as one on many things, but not all,’ Walter commented with wry humour.

‘As is the case with my wife and me. It keeps things interesting.’

‘So ... from the zagovory books here you went to Perran, yes?’

Philip related the course of his own investigation up to the translation given him by Senara Cadabra.

‘So let us be clear, Mr Rayke. You believe that someone with a knowledge of Slavic folk magic used for healing, in some inverted manner applied it to kill Duncan Attvane?’

‘In a word, yes.’

‘And if you could prove that a certain person had employed magical means to end Duncan’s life, would such evidence be admissible in court?’

‘I strongly doubt it.’

Walter gave a sigh of relief but said, ‘I would have thought not.’

‘However, if such methods had been supplemented by ordinary ones there could be evidence of that. And if it were enough to stand alone then it could lead to a conviction.’

‘A lot of “ifs”, Mr Rayke. Nevertheless, I must ask you to tell me candidly what you would intend to do if you found such evidence?’

At that moment, Yelena entered with tea and a cake. ‘Medovik. Honey cake, many layers,’ she explained. ‘Very good. You will like. Plis help yourself. Now I must trade for Park Place, and I have best set on the board. I already have stations. I will win. It is done.’ With that, she exited.

Walter grinned. ‘She will too. Yelena is the most rampant Russian capitalist I have ever played against.’

Philip smiled. The lady had unwittingly relieved the tension that had built up in the room.

‘I will tell you, Walter. First, let me assure you most sincerely that I intend no harm to your daughter. And so ....’

Between sips and luscious mouthfuls, Philip answered his host’s question.

At the end Walter let out a low whistle.

‘That is a bold plan indeed, Mr Rayke, and dependent on many factors.’

‘I realise that, Walter. But if there is hard evidence out there, isn’t it better that I find it rather than someone else?’

‘You are asking me to make a leap of faith. Then tell me why you would help *us* rather than your friend the inspector.’

‘I’m not a policeman, Walter. I don’t represent the law. Until a few hours ago, I thought I knew *what* I represented. Now I’m not so sure. In such an instance, a person can only go with what they feel deep down is right. I don’t feel it’s right to take another life. Of course not. But I don’t think anyone should be punished for defending themselves, for taking the only course of action that seems open to them when in their extremity.’

Walter nodded gravely

‘But,’ Philip continued, ‘I also believe that their taking that very course of action may show special qualities that could be turned to good.’

‘You believe it was Gwendolen then?’ Walter asked bluntly.

‘I do.’

‘And you need my help to further your investigation.’

‘Yes,’ Philip answered shortly.

Walter looked him in the eye. 'If you are deceiving me, Mr Rayke, then I could be helping to send my child to the gallows.'

'How can I prove to you that I am telling you the truth?' Philip asked earnestly.

There was a long pause. Then Walter spoke decisively:

'You cannot.'

## *Chapter 18*

### **The Other End**

Such a choice as lay before Walter required something stronger than tea. They took their drinks out into the cool of the night. Philip leaned on the kitchen door out of sight of the drawing room and lit a cigarette, looking up at the pale grey of the moonlit clouds above, and giving Walter his space.

Walter took his own drink and cigarette and went out into the garden, strolling among the trees in the light coming from the drawing room through the French windows. The soft orange glow caught the smoke from his cigarette as it rose. He turned and observed the scene of his family gathered around the battered old Monopoly board, with its familiar names of distant streets of Atlantic City, New Jersey, that they had never walked.

There was Gwendolen, throwing the dice, then clapping her hands. She must have landed on one of her favourite 'orange properties', as she called them. Her face was lit up, her cornflower blue eyes sparkling. He walked and mused and watched his family until Philip had stubbed out his cigarette and returned to the library.

Walter came in. It was clear that he had come to a decision.

'Hm ... I watched Gwenka. She looked no different from the little girl I taught to add up, using those very dice. All her life I have had to make decisions that would affect her. Never before one so life-and-death. Yet decide I must. What is it that you said, Mr Rayke? All a person can do is what they feel deep down is right.'

Walter paused, then drew a breath.

'Very well, Mr Rayke. It would seem that we are in this together.'

Philip rose with relief and held out his hand.

'Thank you, sir. And, please, it's Philip. You have my word that it will not result in harm to your daughter.' Yet he knew in his heart that it was perhaps a rash promise. Nevertheless, he looked around the room. 'I will swear on any book here.'

Walter smiled and shook Philip's hand. 'Your word is enough. Come then. Let us find your "other end of the stick". I will read; you will make notes, yes?'

He ran his finger along several spines. 'I know there is nothing to help us in these books. But ... perhaps this one.' The first book yielded very little. It dealt with more recent times: healing, love spells, good fortune. The second, however, made reference to a curse.

'Here is something. Calling up entities to aid the speaker of the spell, to bring harm to ... But no, Philip, I am certain Gwendolen would never become involved with such ... it is too fantastical.'

Philip accepted Walter's word. 'You know your daughter. Then, please, see if you can find something else.'

It grew late. Evaline brought in the samovar and bade them good night, wishing them success in their endeavours.

To help him with the archaic language, as he read, Walter was tracing the path of each line in the third book. The clock in the hall struck midnight, and his finger stopped.

‘I have found something, Philip.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Here is mention of the use in curse magic of ... what is the English word? Like ... talisman ... an object carrying the intention for the curse. Then one would pronounce a certain form of words .... It gives an example.’ A silence fell as Walter read on.

‘Is there more?’ asked Philip, his pulse rate rising but trying to sound casual.

‘That’s all. It is just in passing. No. But ... wait... wait, ... this stirs something in my memory ....’

‘In another book?’ Philip suggested, looking towards the shelves. But Walter shook his head and took off his spectacles.

‘Not in another book. It was ... it must have been twenty years ago. The children were young .... What was her name? Yes. Irina. I don’t recall her story, why she had to leave her homeland but she had endured an arduous journey in her youth that had left its mark. Irina was advanced in years and we cared for her at the end. She talked often in her sleep and rambled in her waking hours. I set no store by what she said at the time. You understand?’

‘Of course.’

‘Irina said that long ago, back home, she had a troublesome neighbour, who was at times malicious. The woman made advances to Irina’s husband and spread lies about her. There were other things ... but I forget what it was that was the last straw. So, Irina claimed she had put an end to the woman’s behaviour with a zagovory curse, using a piece of ... let me think ... a Russian mineral.’

It seemed important to Walter to remember its exact name and so Philip waited. Walter went on,

‘It didn’t make sense at the time because it is a gem believed to connect this world and the next, but to angels, good spirits ... Ser....’

‘Serpentine?’

‘Yes, it’s a kind of ser... seraphinite! Yes, from Siberia. You see, it made no sense until you told me what your Cornish lady said.’

## *Chapter 19*

### **Irina's Story**

'How did Irina use this stone?' asked Philip curiously.

'She offered it to the neighbour as a gift, pretending it was a peace offering. Irina knew the woman would take it as tribute, and wear it as a sign of her dominance. The woman grew ill over many months and finally died. Irina seemed to want to tell someone before her own death. Only I could not tell if it was for praise or absolution.'

Philip leaned forward. 'What became of the stone after the neighbour's death? Did it cause harm to anyone else?'

'Ah, that's just it,' replied Walter, folding his glasses and tapping the book in front of him. 'Irina retrieved it, claiming she wanted it as a keepsake of her neighbour over whose death she pretended to mourn. And that's just it. She gave it to me. She said it would give me and my household protection. Which seemed a little upside down given the way Irina said she'd used it. But then ... if "every stick has two ends", an object used to curse could also be used to protect. At least, that's what Irina believed. But at the time, I didn't want it, you know, but she was insistent. It was her last request to me.'

'Did you keep it?'

'Yes, but I locked it in a box and put it away. Somewhere.' Walter opened drawers and cupboards at random, then, 'Let me see if Evaline is still awake.' He hurried from the room.

Presently, he returned with his wife attired in an ankle-length, full-skirted satin dressing-gown of the palest blue faintly studded with rosebuds.

'Forgive my attire,' she apologised.

'Not at all, Evaline. Very elegant. I'm sure if my wife were here, she'd be asking where you got it.'

'I'll write it down, but I understand there are far more serious matters afoot. And as usual my dear husband –'

'Has no idea where anything is,' Walter finished her sentence with a sheepish smile. 'Just that I put it –'

'"In a safe place." Yes, dear,' she said good-humouredly, tucking her dressing gown around her legs and squatting down in front of one of the cupboards underneath the bookshelves to begin her search. 'It's just a stone, you know. There is no doubt in my mind that the poor lady's neighbour became ill from entirely natural causes. It was decades ago, and many people died from diseases that were not yet understood.'

Evaline moved crabwise to the next cupboard and continued, 'Irina probably felt guilty because of her own feelings towards the woman and, being of a superstitious nature, believed she was somehow responsible ... as though she had wished or prayed for the woman to die. It is not uncommon.'

'Perhaps,' replied Philip diplomatically. 'Can you recall who was in the room when –'

'And please – sorry to interrupt – but please do not bring this up in front of Gwendolen. She was only little but had become quite attached to the old lady. Irina's

mind would wander into the past, trying to make sense of it, but Gwenka's presence seemed to soothe her. She used to sing to Irina, you know.'

'Really?' asked Philip. It wasn't something he'd imagined Mrs Attvane doing. Another talent?

'Oh yes!' exclaimed Walter at once, remembering. 'Russian children's songs. Of course, we will not mention any of this to our daughter.'

'But besides Gwendolen,' Evaline went on, with a clink of glass as she explored another cupboard, 'there were others who heard Irina's tale. She told it more than once. Various friends came to sit with her. But I know that you are thinking that Gwendolen and ourselves are the only ones with a connection to Duncan. There!'

Evaline stood up in triumph, holding a wooden box.

'All you had to do was move two bottles, dear.' She put it on the table with a knowing smile.

Walter caught her hand. 'My dear, what would I do without you?'

'I dread to think!'

Philip gave them their moment, then asked, 'Could Gwendolen have known where this was and been able to open it?'

Evaline held the box level with her head so the men could see it clearly. The key was taped to the bottom.

'Now that's what I call security,' said Evaline wryly. 'And I expect the children found it in one of their games of hide-and-seek.'

'It would be nothing special,' explained Walter. 'You see, nothing among our possessions was forbidden to our children, Philip. Although we taught them it is polite to ask before they used anything ... in here ... anywhere. Not that of our friends and guests, of course, but anything belonging to us. And of course, to handle all things with care.'

'It is always the same with children,' put in Evaline. 'As soon as you forbid something it becomes desirable, glamorous. And now, if you both have everything you need for your flights of fancy,' she added teasingly, 'I will go back to bed. Goodnight, Philip.'

'Goodnight, Evaline.'

She dropped a kiss on her husband's forehead. 'My dear.'

'Thank you, *meelaya*.'

## Chapter 20

### Under the Microscope

The door having closed behind Evaline, Walter asked, 'You think Gwenka could have used this stone in some way to cause her husband's illness?'

'It is possible, isn't it? Can you see if it's still in its box?'

In answer, Walter untaped the key, sticky from the old adhesive of the tape. He took out his handkerchief and wiped it, saying, 'As perhaps you can see, there is nothing special about the box itself. Mass produced by the old Vishnyakov factory. But a keepsake from friends long gone, valued for sentimental reasons, and a gift that, for us, far exceeded its material worth .... Ah.'

The key fitted the lock, albeit somewhat snugly. It turned, and Walter lifted the lid.

And there it was. The smell. That tang of spice. Still faint but the strongest Philip had ever experienced it.

'It's here, all right,' announced Walter. 'See for yourself.' He slid the box toward Philip, who looked in.

It lay on the red felt lining: a silver oval setting housing a grey-green marbled stone.

'It's a pendant,' observed Philip with surprise.

'Yes.'

'What did you say it was?'

'Seraphinite. It is dangerous, as are all serpentines, I believe, in certain forms, but not this one. As far as we know.'

'May I ... may I see if it has prints?' Philip asked gently.

'Do you have some kit with you?'

'No, but I can improvise.'

'Wait.' Walter hurried out of the room. Within a few minutes, he returned with Piotr.

'Here,' said the Russian, putting talcum powder and a soft brush on the table and holding out a jeweller's loupe. 'It was my grandfather's.'

'Thank you, Piotr. Erm ....'

'Ok. I know what you do. It is for Gwenka.'

'You know?'

'Of course.' He smiled, shrugged and left.

'I haven't said a thing,' protested Walter, raising his hands in answer to Philip's tacit question.

Somewhat bemused, Philip pulled the table lamp closer and, with a handkerchief, carefully lifted the pendant out of the box. At first glance, he could see no trace of handling, not even of the box.

'Nothing. Both jewellery and box seem to have been wiped entirely clean. Do you recall cleaning either before you put the pendant in here?'

‘No ... I think I just wanted it to be safe and out of sight. Though I’ve no doubt the children played with them over the years. Perhaps one of them could have wiped them clean as part of one of their games.’

Philip frowned. ‘Didn’t that worry you? Your children touching the stone? And having it so close to bottles of drinks.’

‘That’s not how these things work according to my dear Evaline, who would say it is all purely psychological, and that if someone were, say, to cast a spell on you and you knew and believed in it, then it could harm you. But if you had no thought of their ill intent and even thought well of them ... it could have no effect.’

‘So, to the children, it was just a pretty stone with a sort of fairy tale attached to it. Is that what you’re saying?’ enquired Philip.

‘Yes, as far as I recall, they set no more store by these things than their mother does.’

‘And you?’

Walter sighed. ‘I have to say that the story made me uncomfortable. Which is why I wanted the pendant out of sight. But the woman wanted me to have it with a good purpose in mind, as a protection for my household. It would never have occurred to me that it would poison the cognac!’

That drew a smile from Philip. He positioned the magnifier over the pendant again.

‘Hmm.’

‘You see something?’ asked Walter

‘Nothing on the stone itself, but there’s a significant scratch on the ring at the top of the setting. The chain is too fine to have caused that .... I wonder.’

It was far too late to call Henry. Philip went home. Marion had waited up. She greeted him in the hall with a kiss.

‘How’s it going?’ she asked at once.

‘It’s moving.’

‘Well, it had better move fast, darling. There are rumblings in the upper echelons. I had a visit from Matron in my office.’

‘Oh?’ ‘Matron’ didn’t make house calls.

‘She probed; I was vague. “Matron,” I said, “you’ve always trusted Philip in the past –”’

‘You called her that?’

‘Well, no,’ admitted Marion.

‘I expect she does know everyone’s nickname for her.’

‘We work in Intelligence, darling. What do you think?’

‘Good point. Anyway ...,’ Philip prompted, getting back to business.

‘Anyway, I supplied sufficient reassurance to buy you some time. Not much though.’

‘How much?’

‘She wants you back at your desk the day after tomorrow.’

Philip blinked and blew out a breath. ‘Good grief. All right. Thank you, darling.’

They were awakened the following morning by the telephone. It was Philip’s turn to answer.

‘Hello?’

‘Henry here. Sorry to call so early, Phil, but wanted to catch you before you were off out again. Look, your visit to Attvane has kicked up a dust. The old man has been on the phone to my boss, insisting we put the case to bed *pronto*.’



‘How *pronto*?’

‘*Prontissimo*. The boss wants my report on his desk by close of play today. Either I present hard evidence or declare the case closed.’

‘You can’t be serious. I need to ... complete this, then talk to Matron and Varndish. Listen, I was going to call you anyway. Are the evidence bags still at the house?’

‘Yes. Do you need to see the house again? I’ll make sure there’s a constable with the key.’

‘Excellent. I’ll be there as early as possible.’

‘You’re onto something?’ Henry asked hopefully.

‘Wish I could say,’ answered Philip vaguely. ‘Could be nothing.’

‘Right. Well, you have today. Oh lord, the baby’s awake. Must go. Don’t let me down, old chap!’

## Chapter 21

### Admission

Philip stood in Attvanes' bedroom, holding Duncan's keys to the light, scrutinising them through Piotr's kindly loaned loupe. It was clear to see. The edges of the open links hanging from the keyring matched the scratches on the ring attached to the seraphinite setting exactly. Philip was sure that an analysis would show traces of the links' metal embedded in it.

He sat on the edge of the bed and stared out of the window.  
She'd done it.

That quiet, obscure girl, with all her fragility, had endured being terrorised, abused, trapped. And yet, drawing on her every resource, however slender, she had found a way ... in effect, to commit the ... perfect ... murder.

But how had she got this past her paranoid, eternally vigilant husband? Surely, he would have been suspicious of anything she gave him. Surely, as he grew increasingly unwell, he would have made *some* sort of connection. It was the one weak link. The one thing that made no sense.

There was another thing. How had she got the stone off the keyring before Henry had arrived? Attvane had seen to it that there was only one key to the house, and Henry had seen for himself that it was in the bowl by the door when he'd entered with Gwendolen and his sergeant. So, she could not have got in to remove the seraphinite *before* calling the police.

No matter. He was sure he had enough for his next move.

'Hello.' Marion looked up in surprise as Philip entered her office in the Westminster building. 'I wasn't expecting to see you *here* until tomorrow morning.'

'I'm on schedule for that.' Philip told her why he was there, asked about a certain situation and got his answer. 'Good. Where's Matron?'

'In with Varndish.'

'My lucky break. See you at dinner. I hope!'

The meeting was moderately successful. No promises of what Philip was angling for, but at least one that meant he could keep a promise of his own.

Philip made a telephone call from his own desk and left Westminster for Hampstead.

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Walter walked his daughter to the car that had drawn up outside the Elms.

'You're sure, Papa?' Gwendolen asked anxiously.

'Positive. There is nothing for you to fear. But you must trust him, yes? Tell him *exactly* how it happened.'

The uniformed driver got out of the car, but it was Walter who opened the back passenger door for Gwendolen. She got in. He closed it and waved with every appearance of cheerfulness he could muster as his daughter was driven away.

An hour later found Gwendolen in the Raykes' comfortable sitting room, feeling very different from on the journey there. The fear that had hung over her since the early days of her marriage had, at least somewhat, lifted. The gravity of what she had been driven to remained, but she felt to some extent at peace and ready to tell the man in the wing chair opposite her on the other side of the fireplace what he needed to know.

'I've always turned to books ever since I can remember. Papa and Mama encouraged us all to read, but I was the one who needed the least encouragement. I turned to books for fun when I was bored, for entertainment, for knowledge, for escapism when I felt uncomfortable with life, for comfort when I was sad or troubled. I knew after that hospital visit for my arm that I had to do *something*. And there in the park, outside the hospital seeing that shining pebble on the ground, the memory of a story came back to me. The lady who gave that pendant to my father ....'

'Irina?'

'Yes. You know her story?' asked Gwendolen, surprised.

'Yes, your father told me,' Philip explained.

'I was in so dark a place ... maybe that's why it came back to me. It is a dark story, after all. But I believed it. I don't even know why I thought it would work for *me*. But somehow – I don't know why – I had no doubt that it *would*.'

Philip was curious. She didn't seem the type, but you could never tell. 'Had you ever used ...?'

'No, no,' replied Gwendolen emphatically. 'I had never used ... magic of any sort. I wasn't that sort of teenager. I steered clear of Ouija boards, fortune tellers at the fair, oh, anything of that nature. But ... I had been curious about Slavic folk magic. I'd always loved words, you see, and zagovory is all about words. So I'd read every book about it in my parents' library cover to cover. It took me simply ages. The language of some of them is old and dialectic. I came across very few references to the use of it for the sort of thing Irina used it for. Eventually, my curiosity was satisfied and I moved on to something else. My thirst was slaked and eventually I forgot all about it.'

'It never came up in conversation with your Russian friends?'

'Well, you see, all of the family's Russian friends tend to be very modern, educated, forward-thinking people. So no, it was never mentioned. And back then, I never felt tempted to use any of it or to dabble in any other kind of magical practice. But then ... when there seemed *no way out* of the situation with Duncan ... this ... was somehow different. Perhaps because it felt like – I've grown up with Russian culture – in a way it felt like mine. So you see this was different, familiar, in some strange way ... it almost felt *natural* to turn to it. And even if it failed, what did I have to lose?'

## Chapter 22

### Howdunnit

Gwendolen picked up her cup and saucer and took a couple of sips of tea. Philip reached for his own brew, saying, 'Take your time. There's no hurry.'

'Thank you ... So you see, I knew the "what" I had to do in the most general terms but not the "how". Then, Duncan tore his fob off his key ring and threw it at me. He didn't want the fob back on. As though he'd wanted it to look like he'd intended to take it off all along and didn't want to admit he'd done it in one of his tantrums. That gave me the opening I needed. His parents or some other of his people would come to visit. Whenever they were there, Duncan didn't want me around, so I was able to go out for an hour or two. I'd go home and on the pretext of finding some books to borrow, I'd go to the library. I took the pendant, and searched for the ... I suppose you'd call it ... spell.'

'Did it take you long to find it?'

'Three or four visits, especially with people coming in and out like it was Piccadilly Circus. It's only in that one book and it hadn't stood out back when I'd read them all. But then I *did* find it. And I waited. I knew my chance would come.' Gwendolen reached down into her bag and took out a small, slim case. Philip at once got out his lighter and leaned forward to ignite her cigarette. She took a draw, exhaled the smoke slowly towards the fire, then continued,

'It came all right. The fit of rage, the striking out ... and then the remorse. I made my move. I'd rehearsed it in my mind over and over until was ... performance-perfect. I insisted on my love for him, my absolute undying passion and loyalty. He liked that. And then I pleaded with him to accept a token of my devotion. I said it was a family heirloom, precious to me, and that as long as he kept it safe close to him, I would never, ever leave him.'

Gwendolen drew on her cigarette again, then tapped it over the ashtray on the table.

'It was exactly what he wanted to hear. He lapped it up. He sent for Harold, our gardener and odd job man – we still had him at that time – to bring his tools and attach the stone to the empty fob links at once. There and then.'

'Wasn't Mr Attvane suspicious when he began to feel unwell?'

'That was what made it successful, you see, Mr Rayke. The fact that I knew it would work and I knew how my husband would react. The next day, I went to the kitchen and put Famel Syrup in the sweet sauce for pudding that cook had prepared in the morning for our dinner. It was the only cough mixture he liked. And he *really* liked it.' Of course, in quantity, it gave us both an upset stomach. That covered me and would give him something to pin his failing health to.'

'I see.'

'But I wanted to be doubly sure. So a day later, I did the flowers,' she went on matter-of-factly.

'The flowers?'

‘Yes.’ Gwendolen put her cigarette down on the ashtray. She seemed to Philip now in flow and quite self-possessed in her quiet way.

‘Duncan liked flowers on the tables in the hall, the drawing room, dining room and the bedroom. Particular flowers. Gardenias and orchids. Nothing “common”, as he called it, like carnations or lilies. He was allergic to amaranth. It was that time of year. On a visit to my parents – Sunken Madley is practically a country village – it wasn’t difficult to find some. I sprinkled the pollen on all of the flowers.’

Gwendolen said it all in her soft, sweet voice. All with composure.

*My word. Once she makes her mind up ... what a cool customer she is,* thought Philip.

‘And then?’ he prompted.

‘I waited. The spell began to take effect. One day he complained of weakness and a headache. He looked paler than usual. It had been about four days since the flowers and five since the Famel Syrup. I was worried that he might not make the connection so I put some ground up walnuts in the stuffing for Sunday lunch. He was allergic to nuts,’ she added helpfully.

‘Ah,’ replied Philip. ‘And then?’

‘He grew weaker, was away from the office more and more. His temper grew worse, of course, as the doctors could find neither cause nor cure. But when his ire was directed at me, he could no longer catch me. He had trouble sleeping and so I moved into the adjoining room, still within call, you understand. Which he frequently did. He had to spend increasing amounts of time resting until he was practically bed-bound.’

‘And at no time did your husband suspect your gift, Mrs Attvane?’

‘Never. In fact, he believed that it gave him a hold over me even more potent than his threat to Papa. I’d told him that it was like a piece of my soul. When he thought I was showing any reluctance to serve him, he would hold it up and jingle it with the keys to remind me of ... my contract with the Devil.’

Philip shook his head in amazement. He had, in the course of his work, encountered, even if mostly only on paper, men capable of appalling deeds, but he had never come across any so vicious on a personal level. Gwendolen continued,

‘One by one he fired the servants, or they quit. I became both household staff and nurse. But at least he was now too weak to harm me.’

‘That must have been a relief,’ said Philip

‘It was. However.’ Gwendolen reached for her cigarette again. It had gone out. Philip relit it for her. ‘Thank you. However, he was not too weak to use his tongue. Nor were the others: his father, his mother, his sister. Duncan could still call on whoever to hurt my father and he reminded me of this whenever he suspected I was wavering in my slavish devotion, or I failed to do exactly as he wanted. He was weak but hanging on ... and on ... *and on*. I couldn’t bear it any longer.’

## Chapter 23

### Execution

Mrs Attvane took a final draft and stubbed out her cigarette.

‘I heard the doctor warning him against exertion. His system was weak. He had to take care of his heart. With Duncan’s vile temper, it wasn’t all that difficult to ... I hadn’t *intended* to escalate the process, but now I just had to lay the groundwork. I planned how I would do it. He was fanatical about the telephone. He had to be the one to answer it. But he was also fanatical about not being disturbed if he was sleeping. He often made up for the missing hours in the night by sleeping late the next morning. Then he’d be awake for about an hour then want to sleep again.’

‘It was during that late morning nap that Mrs Kelly would arrive and help out?’ asked Philip.

‘That’s right. And she was important as a witness to my leaving my key in the house sometimes. The first time, I timed it so that she would arrive as the local locksmith was getting me back into the house. Then I would make sure we were talking – quietly – in the hall as I’d be going out. I’d pretend to be about to leave without my key, and Mrs Kelly would spot it still in the dish and remind me.’

‘And the day of Mr Attvane’s death?’

‘He was running out of his favourite sweets. I’d promised the night before I’d get some more for him the following morning. Sure enough, as I’d hoped, he was still in the Land of Nod at 9 o’clock. It was a simple matter for me to go into his room, and remove the telephone to the table just outside the door, instead of in the next room with the door shut. He couldn’t hear it from there, you see. Thick walls. But everyone knew not to call the house until lunchtime, in case he was napping.

‘I left my key in the dish and drove – Duncan liked me to drive everywhere except to the most local shops so that I was away for the shortest amount of time, and because he liked certain things from certain shops and they weren’t all local. So, I went to his favourite sweet shop, the grocer’s, and the greengrocer’s. I thought that would be enough for someone to remember that I was there at that time. Then I went to a telephone box, the one in Hampstead by The Spaniards Inn. It’s not much used by anyone we know, and anyway, no one looks in telephone boxes unless they want to use them. Have you noticed? I have. I’d tried practice runs, just calling my parents.’

Philip marvelled at the attention to detail in Gwendolen’s preparations.

‘Anyway, I rang the house. I let it ring. And ring. And ring. And ring. I knew that, first, it would wake Duncan. Next, it would drive him wild. Then, he would try to get up to answer it. I hoped ...’ She gazed into the fire for a moment and then back at him, clear-eyed. ‘And then, all at once, I .... knew. It was over. Duncan was dead. Finally. Dead.

‘I went back to the house, and made a show of looking for the key in my bag and pockets, in case I was observed from one of the houses across the street or a passer-by. Then I went to my neighbour and made a show of such anxiety that she called the police on my behalf, rather than wait for the locksmith.’

‘Enter Sergeant Preston and then Inspector Parkhurst. How did you get the seraphinite off the keys before either saw your husband?’

‘As soon as the lock gave, I pushed past the sergeant and threw myself up the stairs as though I was frantic with worry. I had to make sure I was between the sergeant and my husband. I had only a few seconds to get my hands into his dressing-gown pocket and break off the stone from its chain. I don’t know where I got the strength from. But what the sergeant would have seen is me with one hand on Duncan’s chest as though feeling for a heartbeat and the other over my mouth.’

‘You put the stone in your *mouth*?’ asked Philip in astonishment.

‘I didn’t have time to put it in my pocket and still have my hands in a credible position at the sergeant’s first sight of the tableau,’ Gwendolen explained simply, as it were the obvious solution.’

‘I see.’

‘Once the attention of the policeman was on the bed, I was able to appear to stagger to a chair behind him, and transfer the stone to my pocket and pretend to be distraught. It wasn’t all entirely feigned, you know.’

‘You must have felt some vestige of affection –’

‘Oh no. Not that. Not at all. Duncan had killed that long ago. No, it was that I was rather shocked by what I’d done. The enormity of it. And wondering if the police would find anything at all that could implicate me. Whether the Attvanes would be looking for someone to blame. What Mama and Papa would think of me if ever they knew what I had done.’

‘I see. Yes.’

‘The inspector arrived, and an ambulance was called. A doctor confirmed he was dead. They took away the body, and my parents came to collect me and take me home. Then, all I had to do was wait for the opportunity to replace the stone in its box. The investigation began at the insistence of the Attvanes. For me, it all hung on whether the inspector would check the incoming phone records, see the call from The Spaniards Inn telephone box and make a connection. You see, there might have been someone who Duncan had told about the effect the bedroom telephone ringing had on him. But the inspector didn’t pursue that and the post-mortem report came back as a heart attack resulting from muscle weakness caused by an undiagnosable illness. The doctor signed off the death certificate as natural causes and it all seemed like it would go away. And then ....’

‘And then, Mrs Attvane?’

‘And then, Mr Rayke ... you turned up.’

## Chapter 24

### The Future

Philip took out a cigarette from its case and lit it, sitting back somewhat dazed. It seemed barely credible. Not only the meticulous planning of the death of Duncan Attvane, but the almost emotionless way in which she had related its execution to him, as if it were all so plain, obvious. It seemed a mismatch to the face, the voice, the clothes, even the figure of this unremarkable, rather sweet, meek girl sitting before him.

He smoked in silence until he noticed Gwendolen looking at him doubtfully, her head tilted a little to one side.

‘Am I ...? What is going to happen to me, Mr Rayke?’

Her words recalled him from his musings.

‘Why, Mrs Attvane, what would you *like* to happen?’

‘That’s strange, my friend Cynthia asked me the same question only hours ago. I didn’t know the answer then and I must confess that I still don’t.’

‘Well, how would you like,’ Philip said slowly, ‘to put your undoubted talents to use somewhere they could be extremely useful?’

‘I don’t understand ... Mr Rayke, I could never use magic again,’ insisted Gwendolen passionately, ‘so don’t ask me.’

‘No, indeed. I am speaking of a career, Mrs Attvane, to which I and certain others would consider you suited, perhaps ideally. Given your knowledge of the Russian tongue and culture, your unquestioned intellect and ability to maintain a clear head in the most difficult of circumstances, and other assets.’

‘I don’t quite ....’

‘A job in intelligence, Mrs Attvane.’

Her eyes grew round. ‘Intelligence? ... You want me to be ... a *spy*?’

Philip’s lips twitched. ‘That’s not the only job there, you know. But certain people agree, at least to some degree, that you have potential to be a valuable asset to the security of your country.’

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘Of course. What you have told me does not count as a confession. In any event, your circumstances were desperate. On the existing evidence, the case would never come to court.’

Gwendolen leaned forward a little and asked anxiously,

‘Are you going to tell your colleague, the inspector?’

Philip shook his head kindly. ‘No. Mrs Attvane, you have been through enough. If you wish to put this behind you, move away, begin a new life entirely here or anywhere else, I will do all in my power to facilitate that. However, if you are willing to consider a more ... interesting path ... there may be one before you.’

‘I don’t know .... I *do* know that I can’t go back to the life ... the *me* that was before I married Duncan. And I have done ....’

‘What you had to do to survive,’ Philip supplied earnestly.

For the first time, Gwendolen seemed to accept this judgement.



‘Yes ... yes.’

‘Perhaps you could use the resourcefulness you have shown, in the service of your country,’ he suggested gently.

Gwendolen bent her head a little, looking at the rug beneath their chairs.

‘Perhaps it would in some measure atone ....’

‘There is no atonement needed – not in my eyes, if that counts for anything. But you do have singular gifts. Whether or how you choose to use them, is entirely up to you.’

She was silent, thoughtful.

‘Would you be willing to talk to a couple of people?’ Philip suggested. ‘Might help you to decide. Or you could think about it?’

Gwendolen was amazed. She hadn’t entirely trusted Philip. What if he had been recording their conversation, or someone else had been listening in? She had half-expected that she would now be travelling to a police cell or even prison. Instead, she was being offered ... a new life ... a new chance ....

‘A couple of people?’

Philip looked at his watch.

‘Yes, and they might be able to see you in .... Will you excuse me while I make a telephone call?’

‘Of course.’

He vanished through the door behind him, and almost at once, his wife came out, sat in his chair, leaned forward and took Gwendolen’s hand warmly.

‘My dear, I do hope Philip has been reassuring you that it’s *all* all right, and not putting the *slightest* pressure on you to take up this career. But here it is. Based on the little I’ve heard and seen of you, I think it could be just the thing for you. Even *fun*, you know. And a distraction from all the *dreadful* things you’ve been through. They’d help you, you know. But please, *please*, dear Mrs Attvane, don’t feel you must.’

Before Gwendolen could answer, Philip put his head around the door, saying, ‘They can see you in half an hour. What shall I say? Yes or no?’

‘Er, ...’

She swallowed, looked at Marion Rayke for a moment, then replied breathlessly,

‘Yes!’

## Chapter 25

### Identity

Philip drove and Marion sat in the back with Gwendolen, reassuring her and talking about landmarks along the way to Westminster, one or two of which evoked happy memories.

Once in the building, Gwendolen was somewhat dismayed when they stopped outside a door, Philip explaining,

‘This is us. Well, these two here. We’ve been away from our desks quite long enough. You just need to go to the end here and take the lift two floors up, go straight ahead, the first right and the door’s on the left. You can’t miss it.’

‘Oh. All right,’ murmured Gwendolen.

‘We’ll see you after. Promise,’ said Marion. She and Philip disappeared in Philip’s office. Marion leaned on the door.

‘Phew ... what do you think?’

‘I think *they’re sure* she’ll say yes, or they wouldn’t have told us to bring her here.’

‘Ah well, at least, *your* part is all done and dusted.’

‘Indeed. Too early for a celebratory nip?’

‘I’d say not,’ replied Marion merrily, going to the place where the bottle and glasses were hidden.

The pair sat on Philip’s desk, drinks and inevitable cigarettes in hand, regarding the somewhat uninspiring view through the window.

‘Cheers!’

‘Cheers.’

Philip took a sip.

‘There’s just one thing I don’t understand.’

‘Only one?’ teased his wife. ‘Go on.’

‘There was this strange smell ... this tang ... I kept smelling it. At least I thought I did. It was faint ....’

‘When?’

‘Well .... I think ... around those zagovory books and that seraphinite ...and in the Attvane’s bedroom. Just a whiff, momentarily.’

‘Hm. Given off by some sort of esoteric element or something?’ hazarded Marion.

‘Perhaps. Funny. I’ve never noticed anything beyond a certain mustiness in any of the documents that have come across our desks to do with the occult .... Mind you ... they’re old. It would have been a long time since they were written or used.’

‘Maybe it wears off?’ Marion suggested.

‘I don’t know .... Oh, I probably just imagined it,’ concluded Philip, doing his best to dismiss it.

‘No.’ His wife was thoughtful. ‘I don’t think you did. ... Well, maybe we’ll learn more one day.’

‘Maybe. Hold on.’

‘Yes?’

‘You’re right, darling, there is more than one thing I don’t understand. Maam James in her message to Perran Cadabra –’

‘The furniture restorer in that peculiar village?’

‘Yes.’

‘The message he was to give me from her. It said, “If and when the time comes ... send him to me.”’

Marion turned down the corners of her mouth in puzzlement.

‘Hmm. Enigmatic. Whatever could it mean? Who’s “him”?’

Philip shook his head.

‘I really have no idea.’

\*\*\*

Gwendolen set off, trying to remember the directions.

In the corridor, a young man, his view obscured by a stack of files he was carrying, bumped into her, scattering a mass of papers over the floor.

‘Oh no!’ he exclaimed in Russian, adding that he was dreadfully late. Would she be so kind as to help?

As they gathered and sorted the pages of each file into order, they chatted away in his language. Finally, all was set to rights, and he took Gwendolen the rest of the way to her destination, still conversing companionably.

He knocked, then in response to the invitation to enter, led Gwendolen in, shook her hand, nodded at the lady and man by the desk and said in a flawless English accent:

‘She’ll do!’

He smiled at Gwendolen and left.

‘Mrs Attvane, do please sit down,’ said the lady. ‘I’m sure this has all been rather a roller-coaster ride and you could do with some tea and an arrowroot biscuit.’

‘Well, thank you ... yes, please,’ Gwendolen accepted shyly. ‘They’re my favourite.’

‘Yes, we know.’

While Gwendolen sipped and nibbled, the man explained their proposal. She listened in silence, trying to take it all in.

‘Pose as the sister of your agent over there?’

‘Yes, you see, the right look is essential and I’m afraid our current available stock is ... too pretty, too tall, too red-headed or too ... something. You’ll be trained of course, well prepared. But your mastery of Russian is, of course, key. Also, your – forgive me – rather everyday appearance, although I’m sure that dressed for a ball you are simply stunning, Mrs Attvane, but as ....’

‘I know,’ Gwendolen acknowledged placidly. ‘Girl next door.’

‘Yes, to be frank, perfectly unremarkable, which for this sort of job is simply ... *perfect*. You have shown courage under fire, Mrs Attvane. A cool head and ingenuity in the most trying of circumstances. In fact, you yourself *are* remarkable. This is a quick in-and-out job, but there could be more of that nature. And if not, we can always use another translator. In short, Mrs Attvane, if you can use *us* to make a new life for yourself ... we can use *you*.’

‘Well,’ she replied slowly, looking at her tea, ‘... put like that ....’

‘You can have more time to think it over,’ he offered.

‘No ... I don’t need any more time.’ She had come to a decision and looked up at him. ‘I accept, Mr Varndish. Hmm.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well,’ mused Gwendolen thoughtfully, ‘I did say to my friend just yesterday ... I thought I might go abroad. And so it seems I shall. ... It’s yes.’

He seemed pleased but unsurprised.

‘We rather hoped so. And consequently, Mrs Attvane, in preparation we have obtained this for you.’

Varndish handed her an open passport across the desk.

She expected it to be in Russian and didn’t check the cover. What alias would they have given her, like the spies in the novels she’d read? Anastasia Ivanov?

Tatiana Petrova?

‘It’s a just start,’ added Varndish.

She looked down, and a smile spread over her face.

It said:

Gwendolen Armstrong-Witworth.

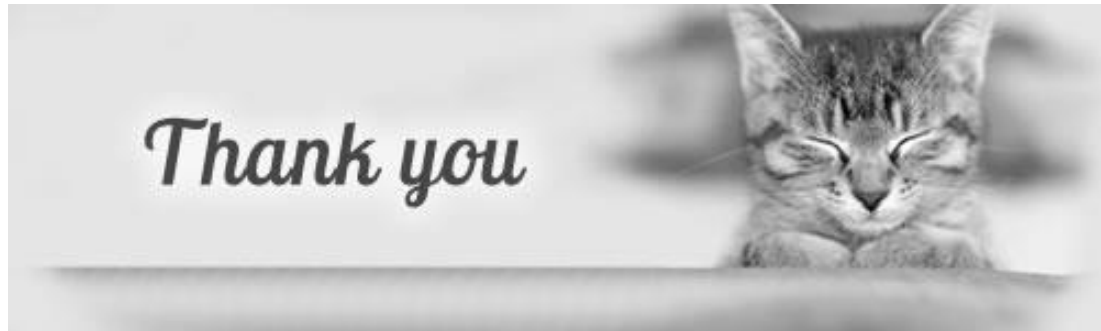
The End

Find out more about Gwendolen in *Amanda Cadabra and The Rise of Sunken Madley*. Revisit Philip and Marion to discover the meaning of the Maam James’ enigmatic message in *Amanda Cadabra and The Strange Case of Lucy Penlowr*. Get to know the strange village of Sunken Madley and Gwendolen and Cynthia’s young neighbour, covert witch and granddaughter to Perran and Senara in *Amanda in Cadabra and The Hidey-Hole Truth*. Look out for the sequels to Gwendolen in *The Grange Trilogy*.

## Author's Note

Thank you for reading *Gwendolen – A Philip Rayke Mystery*. I hope you enjoyed your visit to Sunken Madley, Cornwall and the realms of North London.

Whether this was your first time in the village or your second or even third trip, I would love you to tell me your thoughts about your journey through the book. And if you could write a review, that would be of tremendous help. You can post it on the e-store where you bought the book or on Facebook, Instagram, X or your other social platform of choice. It would mean a great deal to me.



Best of all would be if you dropped me a line at [HollyBell@amandacadabra.com](mailto:HollyBell@amandacadabra.com) so we can connect in person. If there is a character you especially liked or anything you would like more of, please let me know. Amanda Cadabra Book 9 is in the pipeline, and I want to make sure that all of the things that you liked about the first eight books make an appearance for you.

For titbits on the world of Sunken Madley and to keep up with news of the continuing adventures of our heroes Amanda, Tempest, Granny and Grandpa, Trelawney and Hogarth, visit [www.amandacadabra.com](http://www.amandacadabra.com), where you can also request to enter the VIP Readers Group or sign up for the newsletter to stay in touch and find out about the next sequel. The VIP Readers is a limited numbers group. Members are invited to receive and review an advance copy of the next book. If you are one of that treasured number, thank you for reading, evaluating and giving your precious feedback.

As well as my personal email, you can also find me on:

Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Holly-Bell-923956481108549/> (Please come and say hello. It makes my day when a reader does that.)

X at [https://twitter.com/holly\\_b\\_author](https://twitter.com/holly_b_author)

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and Bookbub at <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/holly-bell>

See you soon.

## About the Author

Holly Bell is a Bard of the Gorsedh of Cornwall. The journey there began back in 2017. British author, cat adorer and chocolate lover, Holly life changed in a day. A

best-selling author friend convinced Holly that she could write cozy mysteries, after many years' experience with non-fiction, photography and video making.

Holly devoured all of the Agatha Christie books long before she knew that Miss Marple was the godmother of the Cozy Mystery. Her love of JRR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings meant that her first literary creation in this area would have to be a cosy paranormal, with the seeds of urban fantasy that would soon characterise the series.

Holly lives in the UK and is a mixture of English, Cornish, Welsh and other ingredients. Her favourite feline is called Bobby. He is black Like her favourite hat. Purely coincidental. Of course.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to my dear friend Ann Solomon, to whom I owe the spark for this story.

In addition, I would like to express my warm appreciation for my VIP Readers who so carefully beta-read the book and sent their feedback, especially Marsha Francis ('Auntie Marsha'), Colin Ridley, my kind correspondent here in the UK, for noticing issues and offering ideal solutions, Judes Gerstein, my Canadian pearl of a reader, to my dear friends Katherine DeMoure-Aldrich in Florida and David Darryl Bibb in Montana, to Dianna yadanza, ChariKate and Jane Litherland for their fine-tooth-combed proof-reading of the manuscript, and to Mary for her supportive comments. Thanks also to my friend and mentor Tim Brown for his applying his illustration experience to the design of the cover and always cheering me on all the way from Wales.

Thanks too to the former rector of St Mary the Virgin, Monken Hadley whose fund of information helped me to shape the village of 'Sunken Madley', and to [Stephen Tatlow](#), the former Director of Music there and the churchwardens for their kind welcome and delight at being fictionalised.

This is likewise an opportunity to extend my appreciation to all of the loyal readers who follow, like, comment and share my posts on Facebook and all of the generous reviewers on Amazon, Goodreads, Bookbub and elsewhere.

Thank you, in fact, to all those without whose support this book would not have been possible.

Finally, in whatever dimension they are currently inhabiting, thanks go out to my grandfather for inspiring Perran, and to my cat who will always be a part of Tempest. Your magic endures.

## **About the Language Used in the Story**

**Please note** that to enhance the reader's experience of Amanda's world, this British-set story, by a British author, uses British English spelling, vocabulary, grammar and usage, and includes local and foreign accents, dialects and a magical language that vary from different versions of English as it is written and spoken in other parts of our wonderful, diverse world.

## **Questions for Reading Clubs**

1. What did you like best about the book?
2. Which character did you like best? Is there one with whom you especially identified?
3. Whom would you like to know more about and why?
4. If you made a movie of the book, who would you cast and in what parts?
5. Did the book remind you of any others you have read, apart from the *Amanda Cadabra* books, either in the same or another genre?
6. Did you think the cover fitted the story? If not, how would you redesign it?
7. How unique is this story?
8. Which characters grew and changed over the course of this book, and which remained the same?
9. What feelings did the book evoke?
10. What place in the book would you most like to visit, and why?
11. Was the setting one that felt familiar or relatable to you? Why or why not? If you have read any of the *Amanda Cadabra* books, how at home did you feel revisiting the locations?
12. What did you think of the continuity between the *Amanda Cadabra* books and this related novella?
13. Was the book the right length for a novella? If too long, what would you leave out? If too short, what would you add?
14. How well do you think the title conveyed what the book is about?
15. If you could ask Holly Bell just one question, what would it be?
16. How well do you think the author created the world of the story?
17. Which quotes or scenes did you like the best, and why?
18. Was the author just telling an entertaining story or trying as well to communicate any other ideas? If so, what do think they were?
19. Did the book change how you think or feel about any thing, person or place? Did it help you to understand someone or yourself better?
20. What do you think the characters will do after the end of the book? Would you want to read the sequel?

## **Glossary**

As the story is set in London, an English village, and Cornwall, and written by a British author, some spellings or words may be unfamiliar to some readers living in

other parts of the English-speaking world. Please find here a list of terms used in the book. If you notice any that are missing, please let me know on [hollybell@amandacadabra.com](mailto:hollybell@amandacadabra.com) so they can be included in a future edition.

British English	American English
Spelling conventions	
—ise for words like surprise, realise	—ize for words like surprize, realize
—our for words like colour, honour	—or for words like color, honor
—tre for words like centre, theatre	—ter for words like center, theater
Mr Mrs Dr	Mr. Mrs. Dr.
Double for words like traveller, counsellor	
Biscuit	Cookie
Defence	Defense
Different from	Different than
Garden	Yard
Grey	Gray
Jewellery	Jewelry
Jumper	Sweater
Long Vacation	Summer break
Momentarily	For a moment
Sceptically	Skeptically
Scone	Smaller, lighter and fluffier than the US scone, served with cream and jam
Victoria Sandwich	Sponge cake with jam and cream filling
<b>Cornish</b>	
bub	Mutated form of pub meaning every
lorgh	Stick or staff
diw	Two
benn	Mutated form of penn meaning head or end
dhe	to
Gernow	Mutated form of Kernow meaning Cornwall

## The Cornish Language

If reading this book has sparked your interest in Kernowek – Cornish – here are some useful places to find out more:

[gocornish.org](http://gocornish.org)

[kesva.org](http://kesva.org)

[The Cornish Language Office](#) (offering a translation service or everything from house names up. Free up to 40 words.)

I have had tremendous fun over the past five years learning the language, meeting other enthusiastic students and wonderful teachers, and support teaching, all through Zoom, I might add. You can now learn anywhere in the world and join the Cadabras



and Maam James in experiencing this extraordinary Celtic tongue with ancient roots, now blossoming in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

If you'd like to join me in exploring Cornish, you can go to the links above and, or, write to me at [hollybell@amandacadabra.com](mailto:hollybell@amandacadabra.com).

### **A Note About Accents**

One of the characters has a Cockney accent indicated by the missing 'h' at the beginning of words such as 'hello' becoming 'ello'. There are also characters with Russian accents. These accents have been rendered as closely as possible using English spelling conventions.

### **The Last Word ... For Now**

Thank you once again, dear reader, for allowing me to share Gwendolen's story with you.

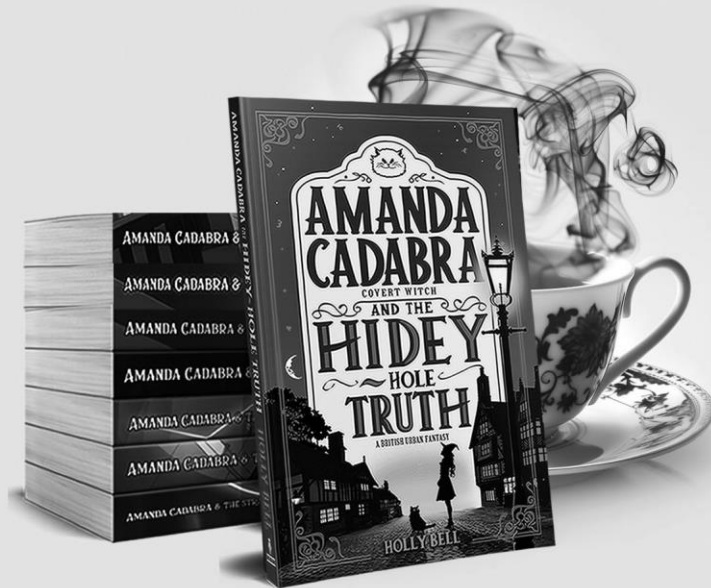
Best wishes,

*Holly Bell*

<https://amandacadabra.com/contact>  
<https://amandacadabra.com/come-on-in>

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