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The Death Chamber

Sarah Rayne

Chapter One

Georgina read the letter a second time -- and then a third -- because it was so extraordinary there was a strong possibility she had misunderstood it. The heading was impressive. In ornate lettering, it announced itself as being, 'The Caradoc Society for the pursuit of knowledge of psychic phenomena and the paranormal. Founded 1917.'

15 October 20--

Dear Miss Grey

I am asked by the trustees of the Caradoc Society to enquire if you might be able to help us with the disposal of the Society's assets.

This was the first astonishing statement, although to someone who had spent the last ten days trying to count up the damage wrought by a cheating business partner, the word 'assets' struck an optimistic note. The fact that the business partner had not only absconded with most of the money but had taken David with her was not making Georgina's task any easier.

The writer of the letter went on to explain, with careful politeness, that it had recently been decided to bring the Society and its activities to an end. Georgina thought the wording suggested this was a decision taken voluntarily, which was cheering to someone who had just been made abruptly and comprehensively broke.

As you will know, the generous bequest in 1940 from your great-grandfather, Dr Walter Kane, enabled the Society to buy its present headquarters -- Caradoc House. Unfortunately the house must now be sold and the greater part of the proceeds used to pay off our debts. However, we are told there should be a little money left over, and the Society's solicitor believes that any credit balance can legally be passed to Dr Kane's descendants. The Society's bankers also feel this to be reasonable.

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However, just to strengthen this decision, it would be helpful if you, and any other direct descendants of Dr Kane could provide family papers -- perhaps letters written by Dr Kane around the time he created the Trust. We have a few documents which came to us on his death, which we shall, of course, pass on to you.

I look forward to hearing from you, and if you felt you could travel to Thornbeck to bring any appropriate papers to us, we would be very pleased to see you. The King's Head has quite pleasant accommodation, or we have a tiny flatlet in Caradoc House itself which in the past we have used for visiting speakers. You would be most welcome to make use of that as our guest.

Yours sincerely
Vincent N. Meade
Secretary to Caradoc Society

Clearly Vincent N. Meade assumed Georgina knew all about great-grandfather Walter Kane's bequest, but this was the first she had heard of it. She did not really know much about Walter at all, except that he had been a prison doctor in Cumbria in the 1930s and had apparently abandoned his wife and small daughter to live abroad. A bequest to a society dedicated to psychic research was intriguingly at odds with the image of a prison doctor.

Georgina had no clear idea what kind of evidence would substantiate her claim to any leftover moneys from the Thornbeck set up: ordinary proof of identity would surely be enough on its own. But the possession of letters from or to Walter might be a useful addition, in the way that correspondence about paintings or porcelain were useful in creating a provenance. It was just possible there might be something in the bundle of family photographs which had been stored in the attic since Georgina's parents died nearly ten years ago. She pulled on an old tracksuit and skewered her hair on top of her head with a clip before climbing up there. It was cramped and awkward in the attic and stiflingly hot. It was unexpectedly good to realize there was no likelihood of David coming in and making disparaging remarks: 'Goodness, George, you have made a fright of yourself, haven't you?' or frowning at dispossessed spiders that had scuttled angrily down into the flat.

There weren't any photos of Walter in the suitcase, which was annoying because Georgina was getting interested in him and would have liked to know what he had looked like. Had he had the family grey eyes and lightish brown hair?

There were several tattered medical articles -- none of which had been written by Walter -- and some faded postcards sent from unidentifiable people and places, but these would not be the kind of thing Vincent N. or the Caradoc Society solicitor wanted. Was there anything else? She picked out a handwritten letter dated September 1940, and felt a wholly illogical thump of pleasurable anticipation at seeing the words in graceful handwriting, 'My dear Walter' at the head.

The letter had a Thornbeck address, and was signed by Lewis Caradoc.

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I am glad to know you are still safe. Up here, we are managing to dodge the bombing, in fact we are very free of raids, although I cannot dissuade my wife from making her regular visits to London. Even after so many years she is still searching for people to replace that infamous pair of tricksters in Finchley, but I never question her activities, just as she never questions mine. Are you smiling that narrow-eyed smile as you read that, my dear Walter?

My very warmest regards to you, my dear boy. Try to remain safe if you can -- after all we went through together I should be devastated to lose you. I was very interested to hear you have invited a young nurse to dinner on your forthcoming leave -- are you going to succumb to romance at last? I hope so, and I look forward to hearing more. The Berkeley Grill was as good as ever the last time I was there, but if you do decide on the Hungaria, mention my name to Luigi, and I'm sure he will find you a decent table.

Georgina rather liked the sound of Lewis Caradoc who had been known at the Berkeley Grill and the Hungaria and had made that dry remark about his activities not being questioned by his wife. Who had the Finchley tricksters been? And had it been her own great-grandmother Walter had been taking to dinner? The dates would be about right.

She thought she would telephone Vincent N. Meade to explain about this letter, and ask if it would be of use. It was a pity it did not provide any clues about why Walter had left money to psychic research, though. Might there be answers in Thornbeck itself? If Georgina went there, would she find them? More to the point, could she afford to go there?

'Just about,' said Georgina's accountant, who was trying to tow her out of this financial crisis, 'but you're running dangerously low.'

'I know.'

'What about this place?' She cast a sharp professional eye over the small Chelsea shop, the lease of which had cost Georgina everything she owned and a bit more besides because freeholders in London demanded your life blood like Dracula, if not your soul, as a down payment like Faust. 'From the look of it you won't be able to afford to keep it on by yourself.'

'I know.'

'How long has the lease actually got to run?...How long? Oh dear. You'd better try to sub-let. And there's the stock.' This was said with a glance at the fabric swatches, books of wallpaper patterns, and the narrow shop window with the careful display of chairs covered in William Morris patterned material and silky waterfalls of fabric. Georgina and the perfidious partner had tried to be thrifty over the buying in of fabrics and papers, but it had been necessary to have bales of material for curtains

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and sofa coverings on hand, and to have a few choice pieces of furniture to set colours and materials against as well.

'You'll probably have to sell what you can,' said the accountant, having taken in the nearly Chippendale chairs, the little Regency table and a few other things. Some pieces had been bought quite cheaply in street markets, but the sort of clients Georgina and her partner had been targeting knew the difference between Christie's and the Portobello Road, so the showroom furniture had had to be good. 'You'll only get a fraction of what you originally paid, anyway.'

'I know.'

'George, I wish you'd stop saying you know and think what you're going to do next.'

'I know exactly what I'm going to do next,' said Georgina. 'I'm going to drive up to Thornbeck to find out about my great-grandfather's peculiar bequest to this Caradoc Society.'

'Is there likely to be any money in it?'

'Well, that's not why I'm going, but if I'm lucky I might get next month's rent out of it.'

'Where will you stay in Thornbeck?'

'At Caradoc House. The local pub's a bit booked up. Vincent Meade says a television company's in Thornbeck -- they're assessing whether to use an old prison in some programme that focuses on unusual buildings. C.R. Ingram's researching the possibility.'

'That sounds rather fun,' said the accountant. 'Is it the C.R. Ingram who writes those books about ancient cultures and the human psyche and the power of the imagination and whatnot?'

'I think so. I don't expect there's more than one C.R. Ingram.'

'He's quite eminent,' said the accountant. 'I saw that TV documentary he did last year about the empty reassurances of religion. He followed it up with a book.'

'Talismans of the Mind,' said Georgina. 'I didn't read it, but I saw the programme.'

'Didn't the Archbishop of Canterbury condemn it, or the Pope issue a proclamation or something?'

'I don't think it got as far as that,' said Georgina. 'One or two vicars might have objected.'

'Still, he's probably worth meeting if you can engineer it, although personally I wouldn't trust a man who goes by his initials.'

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'I wouldn't trust any man at all,' said Georgina, and went to phone estate agents about sub-letting the shop and after that to look out road maps for the journey to Cumbria.

The drive to Thornbeck took longer than Georgina expected, but she did not mind because it almost felt as if she was leaving the tangled mess of faithless lovers and failed business ventures behind, and entering a different world altogether. By the time she got onto the northbound M6, she was thinking how good it was not to have David with her unfavourably comparing her car with newer, faster ones on the road and looking out for hotels and restaurants with Egon Ronay stars where they could have lunch. Remembering this Georgina took a perverse pleasure in pulling into a service station near Coventry, and buying ham rolls and fruit which she ate in the car.

By the time she left the motorway it was growing dark. The roads were becoming steeper and mountains reared up on the horizon; they were bleakly monochrome in the failing light and slightly menacing, but Georgina thought them beautiful. You could plan an entire room in those colours; rather minimalist it would have to be. Soft grey walls, with inset oblongs of cream...velvety sofas in that really deep charcoal that was not quite black but much darker than grey...modern, matt black pottery...She remembered with a fresh stab of bitterness that the days of planning beautiful rooms were temporarily on hold.

The further north she went, the more the place names began to have the cadences of Old England, and even of Middle Earth. Ambleside and Ravenglass; Thirlspot and Drigg; Grizedale Forest. This was all unexpectedly restful.

She skirted Wast Water, which was the loneliest, most broodingly sullen stretch of water she had ever seen, and thought that if the car broke down out here she would be marooned. Probably she would become one of the many ghosts that lurked here, and people of the future would refer sombrely to an early twenty-first-century traveller who had vanished one late-autumn day. 'No one knew where she came from,' they might say, 'and no one ever knew what happened to her, but on moonless nights her shade can occasionally be seen, wringing its hands...'

This image cheered Georgina up so much that she drove all the way round Wast Water singing the famous feminist anthem, 'I Will Survive' with discordant defiance, after which, in deference to the surroundings, she went on to 'River Deep, Mountain High'. At least David was not there to wince, make sarcastic comments and pointedly switch on the radio.

She reached a set of crossroads, and pulled onto the side of the road to check the map. Straight across, sharp right, and then it was about six miles to Thornbeck, which was the merest fleck on the map. Good. She had just taken the right turn, when she saw the weather-beaten signpost with its worn lettering pointing down a narrow lane leading away from the main road. It was the kind of lane that was so

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narrow you might easily miss it altogether, but Georgina did not miss it. She slowed down to study it.

TO CALVARY it said, and underneath, in smaller, faded letters, were the words, TWO MILES, and a tiny arrow pointing the way.

Calvary. It was not precisely a place name you would expect to see on a signpost in the heart of this quintessentially English countryside in the twenty-first century, but it was a deeply evocative word. You had only to see it written or hear it spoken aloud, and you instantly saw the image of the hill in Jerusalem, and the stark rearing silhouette of the crucifixion. It did not matter if you had not travelled any further east than the Norfolk Broads, or if you had spent your life in a remote Tibetan valley and never been within hailing distance of a Christian church; it was an image that everyone, regardless of beliefs or disbeliefs, recognized.

Georgina recognized these images as well as anyone, but for her the word also conjured fragments of memories handed down within her family. 'Your great-grandfather was a doctor...' 'He worked in a prison -- Calvary Gaol in Cumbria, where they took condemned men to be executed...'

So down that lonely looking lane was Calvary. Had Walter lived there -- had he been entitled to prison quarters -- or had he had a house somewhere nearby? Georgina wished all over again that she knew more about him. It was somehow unfair of him not to have left any memories behind, although it made him rather a good ancestor because it made him mysterious.

Georgina thought the landscape would have looked much the same in Walter's time. He must have known this road; he must have travelled along it dozens of times and turned down the narrow lane. Am I going to do that now? thought Georgina, still staring up at the sign.

She put the car into gear and drove on to Thornbeck, leaving Calvary and its disturbing echoes firmly behind her.

October 1938

Walter Kane almost missed the signpost to Calvary Gaol, but he saw it at the last minute and swung the car sharply across the road and into the narrow lane.

It had been quite a long drive to Thornbeck, but it had been fun because he was still enjoying the novelty of owning a car. It had been an extravagant purchase -- if his mother had been alive, she would have been deeply shocked. A very imprudent thing to have done, she would have said. The action of a spendthrift. Oh Walter, how could you be so feckless? It had always been tacitly understood that when Walter reached twenty-one and inherited his father's money outright, it would be sensibly invested. To provide a little income, his mother said; that's what you want, Walter, because you won't make a lot of money from doctoring: don't expect that you will.

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Walter had not said he did not want to make money from being a doctor, and he had not said he did not want his father's money, either. On his twenty-first birthday he had deposited it in a bank, vowing he would have to be in very dire financial straits indeed before he touched it, but he had relented sufficiently to draw out enough to buy the car -- a dogged little Austin Seven. It was not really so very spendthrift of him: if he was offered this Calvary appointment a car would be very useful in such a remote place.

No. Let's be honest about one thing if about nothing else, he thought. The car is because I don't want any comparisons between this journey and the one my father took along this road over twenty years ago. I want to arrive at Calvary as my own master, in command of my own life, and I don't want any ghosts travelling with me.

But the ghosts were with him anyway and, as he drove along the narrow road towards the prison, he found himself thinking that the landscape could not have changed very much since 1917. There might have been fewer houses then, although the farmhouse across the fields would have existed -- to an untrained eye it looked Elizabethan. I don't suppose you'd have seen it, though, said Walter to the memory of his father. You wouldn't have seen the lanes or the hedgerows either. Oh damn, in another minute I'll be conjuring up a reproachful spectre from the past, like something out of Hamlet, doomed to walk the night, forbidden to tell the secrets of the prison-house. That would be just like my father, as well, because from all accounts he was fond of dramatic gestures.

But there were no such things as ghosts and if this particular prison-house did have secrets it could keep them locked inside its walls, because he did not want to know what they were. He would not think about them. He would think instead that his appointment with the board of prison governors was for three o'clock, and if he did not drive a bit faster he would be late. He had no intention of being late, or of doing anything that might jeopardize his chances of getting this job. He wondered if there would be a house to go with it. It had not been mentioned in the correspondence, but perhaps they would discuss it during the interview.

He rounded a curve in the lane, and there, looking down from a gentle slope of the English countryside, was Calvary. The place of execution set on the hill.

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