

Overdue

“He’s called Wentworth. They told me he was a Maine Coon ... but I’m not so sure. I don’t think they get this big.”

“He is *really* big.” The girl’s eyes widened as Wentworth heaved his furry bulk up from the top of the bookshelf, perhaps fearing the cat would decide she was lunch. Instead he flomped back down a few feet from his original position, following the patch of sun that had slid off him during his snooze. “I mean really really!” She had the refined strain of the local accent, Edinburgh brogue lifted straight from The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.

“Every bookshop needs a cat. At least that’s what I think.” Marie managed to stop herself adding ‘and customers’. Despite Wentworth being the sole feline in Blackponds, the shop often had more cats than customers, and in fact Marie couldn’t remember a single occasion when the number of customers perusing the shelves had threatened double digits. Recently she’d not even had double digits through the doors for whole days at a time.

The young woman nodded. “I agree. Bookshops need cats.” She looked as if she wanted to stroke Wentworth but lacked the courage. The cat might even outweigh her, a slight thing in her twenties, the same sort of age Marie had been when she helped open the shop ten years earlier.

The girl offered Marie a tentative smile and advanced on the shelves, almost swallowed by the raincoat that hid her painful thinness.

“Don’t get lost,” Marie called after her good humouredly. “It gets a bit complicated back there.”

The girl waved as she vanished behind the Mysteries, offering a last glimpse of overlarge eyes, high cheekbones, and a fall of flame-red hair.

“He’s Wobwellington, Third Duke of Catborough,” Cole said. “I call him ‘his grace’. The man said he was a Cornealian Mountain Cat, but I’ve not been able to find anything about them, not even in the cat aisle.”

“You have a cat aisle?” The little boy stared at Cole, round-eyed.

“Well, his grace would say they’re all cat aisles.” Cole smiled. “But yes, we do have some books on cats in the non-fiction section, under Natural History.”

The boy’s face fell a little. He retreated from the doorway into the sunlight and bustle of the street. He wiped his nose on his wrist and sniffed. “Thanks Mister! I got to go.”

“Any time.” Cole watched him go, silently berating himself for not saying ‘we have children’s books too – tell your friends – tell your parents – tell anyone’. He wasn’t that desperate. Not yet. Riverocks’ most recent incarnation had only opened its doors the month before. Word of mouth took time to spread. Even in a smaller city like Tirrifon. Though if he’d sold a book for everyone who had come into ask about his grace after seeing the cat stretched out in the display window then he’d be thinking of opening a second branch by this point.

The door closed gently, muting the clatter of the street to something that slipped beneath the quiet patience of books waiting to be read. His grace came over to the counter and coiled himself to make a fur puddle around Cole’s ankles. A third sound introduced itself, adding to the softened clamour of wheels on cobbles and the expectant hum of five thousand covers, each promising enlightenment or adventure. The call of the blank page was, Cole

thought, not unlike the cries of the gulls down by the docks where the tall ships rested at anchor, their sails billowing with potential. A gull's cry lent itself to all manner of interpretation, a warning, an invitation, despair, longing. One thing to the departing ship, another to the crew returning to safe harbour after weeks on the desert of the ocean. A gull's cry could break your heart or strip away forty years in a single stroke of white wings.

With a sigh Cole lifted his manuscript from beneath the counter. One upside from Riverrocks' slow start in the business of selling books was that he'd had time to write a considerable chunk of his own.

Page 100. The whiteness of the sheet like freshly fallen snow, and his quill, poised above the pristine expanse. He dipped it, rising from the ink pot black-bellied, pregnant with possibility, the glistening drop swelling from its point, fat like the sails of those ships held beneath the gulls' cries. Cole cleared the nib and began to write. He always felt himself the despoiler, scratching away at the empty page with his crabbed script, trying to anchor more to the paper than mere words, something greater than the whole. Later he would copy it out in his precise copperplate but for now it was a battleground, prone to sudden crossings out, to long lines snaking from here to there, seeking to pull thoughts and emotions together from the alphabet's wreckage.

For day after day Cole had tried to pour himself into the story, as if the ink were his blood and he might by force of will press the ineffable – the complexity that even in the shadows of his thoughts would not allow words to frame it – into the book. And every night, pushing the growing stack of papers into its drawer, part of him would cringe to think what any reader might make of his efforts. A toddler may paint with passion and heart ... and still what lies on the board in thick, primary colours remains a stick person of uncertain gender and purpose.

“Ouch!” Cole looked down from blotting his last line. “Did you just bite my leg?”

Unapologetic eyes looked up from a furry face. His grace licked one long canine, studied the calf in question as if considering a second bite ... then lay back down to sleep.

“What’s he called, Mr Worth?”

“Wobble. Or at least that’s what I call him. I think I’m not the only one who feeds him.” Nicholas considered the sleeping beast stretched out among the dusty books that still needed sorting onto shelves. Miss Pency seemed content to join him in his contemplation of the cat. The bell on the door had announced her arrival, and she introduced herself as an old newcomer. She promised to call into the Bee & Den at least once a week, which was probably as often as her old legs could manage the hill from the cottage she’d rented down by Hilbert’s farm on the outskirts of the little town.

“He *looks* like he’s being fed by several people. Or perhaps has eaten several people...” Miss Pency tutted. “Such a beautiful boy though. Is he part lynx?”

“A mountain cat. I’ve been adopted by several over the years. All the same sort of tabby beast. I seem to attract them...” Nicholas didn’t discount the old woman’s opinion. The cat might seek his meals elsewhere too, but Wobble very rarely left the shop. Most of the time he just vanished into the back, deep among the shelves, sometimes evading detection for days at a time. “And what brought you out to Lounton, Miss Pency? Not to town today, I mean. To this part of the world?”

The old lady shrugged. It made her look younger than her years and Worth scolded himself for thinking of her as old. She was probably only 15 years his senior, if that. Or

perhaps he should call them both old. He felt old these days, brittle driftwood abandoned on Lounton's distant shores, washed clean of dreams, hopes, and ambition.

"I guess I..." She paused as if considering how honest she wanted to be. "Blown here by the wind, Mr Worth. I was the baby of the family and they've all gone and died on me. I needed a change of scene. What's your story? There can't be enough people in this town to buy more than three books a week." She smiled, a mischievous gleam amid the wrinkles, but not unkind.

"Call me Nicholas. I always felt too young to be 'Mr Worth', and then suddenly I felt too old to bother with formality. There wasn't even a day in between when I was happy with it." Nicholas realised he was stalling, trying to decide whether to be polite or to be truthful. He opted for the middle ground. "I came here to lick my wounds and ended up falling in love with the place. And selling three books would be a good week. I'm afraid if I'm honest this is just something to occupy my time – a sort of retirement. I've always loved books. I've been a librarian, run several failed bookshops..."

"Did you ever try writing one?" Miss Pency took an old tome from a nearby shelf, its cover blank with age, the leather binding rough with hard use. One of a set from the Ravensbridge Estate.

"I ..." Nicholas shook his head. He came to lick his wounds, not to open old ones. "I never did."

"Make sure you talk to her when she comes back."

"She probably won't come back," Marie looked out through the shop window. By craning her neck she could glimpse Bridge Road where Edinburgh shoppers flowed both

ways in a never-ending tide of colour. The girl with her crystal cut accent and sheath of flame-red hair had vanished out of the shop into their number. Although all it took to reach Blackponds Emporium of Fine Books was a left or right turn, very few ever took that corner and entered Marie's little backwater. It was like that extra click on the internet that proves just too much effort for so many. The girl was gone. History. Not even that.

"She'll be back," Sarah said. "She was looking for something and she found it."

"She didn't buy anything." Marie shook her head. Her sister was an idiot sometimes ... though what did that make Marie? She shook her head again. She was the sensible twin. Sarah the idiot.

"She was very pretty," Sarah said innocently.

"She's a child." Marie snorted.

Sarah folded her arms. "Twenty-three if she's a day."

"All the boys will be after her then." Marie went to start straightening books as she always did when flustered.

"I'm sure she's had all she wants of them. This isn't a Jane Austen novel. We're not in the 1810s." Sarah came to watch the book straightening. "And I know she'll be back. So next time ask her name at least. And then—"

"As if I would take your advice on dating." Marie sniffed. "You're not even here."

"Am so."

"You're dead." Marie wanted to add, 'You idiot.' She wanted to get angry. She wanted to shout. But she'd done all that and Sarah was still dead.

“If I’m dead then how come Wentworth can see me?” Sarah pointed at the cat who had left his spot and come to sit nearby, watching them.

“He’s not very clever. He’s staring at dust motes.”

Sarah sighed and looked at Marie as if waiting for more.

“You’re not to mention that girl again,” Marie said. “I don’t need a friend. I certainly don’t need a girlfriend—”

“How would you even know? It’s not like you ever—”

“Don’t speak about her again.” Marie was aware that this was not how twins were supposed to end each other’s sentences. Another straw for the haystack of her guilt. “Not another word.”

With an excess of theatricality Sarah mimed zipping her lips shut, locking them then tossing away the imaginary key. Wentworth chased the figment of the dead girl’s imagination into the aisles.

The street door opened, not the girl returning, but customers even so. Two Americans still wrapped in a conversation about the castle. And behind them, hunched against the cold swirl of wind that followed them in, a thin man in a black raincoat. Marie found herself staring then shook herself, leaving the books to return to the till. The man was an albino ... could you call them that anymore? Marie wasn’t sure. The man suffered from albinism. That sounded safer... Suffered, or just had? The man was a person with albinism. She looked up and startled, knocking her pens onto the floor. He’d come right up to the till without her noticing his advance and was now looking her in the face as if the whole of her embarrassing internalised conversation about his condition was written there in red ink.

Marie, remembering herself, opened her mouth to ask how she could help but without warning, and causing a cry of alarm from one of the American ladies, Wentworth sprang from the nearest bookshelf to land on the counter with a distinct thud. Marie's surprise sent her coffee mug tumbling to join the pens. It was the most athletic thing she'd seen the cat do since she'd inherited him with the premises, on behalf of Blackponds Ltd, a decade earlier. Mostly he moved as if he were underwater, exploring the deep places of the world in a heavy pressure suit.

"Oh, I wouldn't—" She tried to stop the man as he reached absently to fondle the cat's head. "He ... bites..."

But, as the white hand vanished into the thickness of his fluff, Wentworth only pushed himself against it. At first Marie thought that the vibration, so deep it made the air throb, was caused by some sort of engine that had started up in the street, machinery for roadworks perhaps. "Oh. He purrs?"

"You didn't know?" Sarah leaned in beside her grinning. "He purrs for me all the time. You just have to know where to scratch him."

Marie bit her tongue and avoided rebuking her sister in front of a stranger for the obvious lie.

"Hello, Wentworth." The man fussed the cat. He nodded, seemingly in Sarah's direction – which was of course ridiculous. "Behind the ear. That's where he likes it most."

"Exactly," Sarah said. "This one knows his cats."

"I know *this* cat," the man said. He had no accent whatsoever, which seemed an impossible thing but also true.

“I scratch him behind the ear all the time!” Marie protested, stepping in front of Sarah to try to reclaim the conversation. “He’s never purred once, not in all these years.”

The man turned his pink eyes on Marie. “Stroking a cat is a two-way process. He’s not going to purr unless you’re both happy. That would be rude.”

Marie felt herself go still, her cheekbones prickling with pins and needles, and her concentration suddenly consumed by an unexpected battle not to release the sob that wanted to move her ribs and escape.

Sarah’s hand came to rest on her shoulder, allowing the pressure to leak away. Marie sucked in a breath. “How... How can I help you, sir?” She tried to guess his age and found she had no idea. He hadn’t any wrinkles and his white hair lay as thick as a young man’s, but on the other hand he reminded her strongly of her late grandfather ... both of them in fact. Not in appearance so much as in his deliberate and cautious movement and just a general ... grandfatherliness...

A kind smile took possession of the man’s colourless lips. “My apologies. My name is Yute. I’m on a quest.”

“A quest, Mr Yute?” Why did the nice ones always have to be strange with it. She hoped this one wasn’t going to be like the young man last month who refused to leave and kept talking about sabbers waiting for him in the street. Marie fixed her own smile in place and looked past the man, hoping to catch the eye of one of the Americans and to somehow convince them not to leave her alone with him. “W-what’s the quest for?”

“Well, if I knew that it wouldn’t be much of a quest, now would it?” He turned away, scanning the shelves. “A friend asked me to meet him here.” He gave Wentworth’s ear one final scratch. “But I’m not sure why. May I look around?”

Marie opened her mouth, not knowing how to answer. Sarah nudged her. “Of course...” She almost added her ‘don’t get lost, it gets complicated back there’ joke, but somehow this Yute didn’t look like a man who would ever lose his way in such a place.

“Thank you.” He paused. Hesitant. And when he spoke he was cautious, kind, certain in himself and yet a thousand miles from preaching. “What you do here matters. Never think it doesn’t.” And with that he was off, a swirl of raincoat, the black of his collar shocking against the whiteness of his neck. He walked briskly into the aisles with Wentworth trailing after him as if there were a cat treat in each of his footprints.

“Well...” Even Sarah sounded taken aback. “He was...”

“Unusual,” Marie finished for her.

Cole’s father had ignored his wife and his many children in order to make a great deal of money by floating on financial seas and following the winds of opportunity. When a heart attack had sunk his father along with his career, Cole had spent his portion of those funds buying the bookshop he had for so long imagined and populated it according to his own tastes. The architecture had been inspired by a childhood dream of a library so vast that you could walk for days between towering shelves and never see the same book twice in all those miles.

Of course, even a banker’s wealth has limitations and dreams pass into the waking world through the keyhole of compromise. Even so, customers did occasionally report getting lost within the labyrinthian aisles at the rear of Riverocks.

Cole's father had, Cole thought, seen money as a way of keeping score, and life as a competition that needed to be won in some demonstrable manner. Cole had no interest in competition, and if he were to keep score it would not be with the number of zeros after a digit in some bank ledger's bottom line.

Unfortunately, a degree of interest in competition and in the business of bookkeeping proved to be a necessity when it came to not just keeping books but selling them in quantity too. The dream shop had to be sold, and the remaining funds were used to purchase an existing store on one of the lesser highstreets of Tirrifon. The dream, however, was not sold. Rather, as dreams so often do, it became something else.

Cole still loved to sell books, although in simply numerical terms he wasn't much better at it than he had been at the start. Now though, his dream was to write books as well. One in particular. The first of what would likely be a flood.

"Good afternoon!" Cole nodded to the man who'd come in from the blaze of sunshine outside and now stood, perhaps letting his eyes adjust or simply soaking up the comparative coolness. Cole laid down his quill, feeling it was rude to write whilst a customer might have need of him.

"Indeed." The man lowered his hood, an oddity that Cole had not noticed until he came forward and resolved from mere silhouette to full formed human. The quite marvellous whiteness of the man caused Cole to blink but he pressed his lips together against any personal remark and instead waited with what he hoped was polite attention for the customer to state his business.

"I'm on a quest, Mr ... Riverocks?"

"Ah, no, call me Cole. The shop was named ... well it came to me in a dream. Perhaps I should have just used my surname."

“Not at all.” Pink eyes located the quill first and then the manuscript. “If a writer can’t have flights of fancy, then who can?”

“You mentioned a quest?”

“I did. I’m not entirely sure what it is yet, but a friend asked me to meet him here.” The man looked around expectantly, and seeing nobody, gave a small shrug. “He does tend to get a bit scattered. Far from the most reliable of friends, but he’s always been there when I really needed him.”

Cole nodded his most polite yet non-committal nod. He had no idea where all this was going excepting that it would most certainly in some way, shape, or form end up on the pages before him. Already his fingers were twitching the quill of their own accord, eager to capture the strangeness of the man before him. Cole wondered if he were from the frozen latitudes where even the empire icebreakers couldn’t penetrate. A man with skin so dark that it was almost black had once come into his old shop. A very learned man who purchased some of Cole’s rarest and most expensive tomes. That gentleman had hailed from the deep south, beyond the Thaar where the sands are so hot they scald even the most hardy foot. Perhaps in the north folk paled past the fair skin and blonde hair of Scandumen and shaded into a whiteness to rival that of the snowbears.

Cole broke the silence which had grown, if not uncomfortable, then perhaps overlong. “Was there a particular book you were looking for, sir?”

“Not today.” The man looked around, hunting for something. “And call me Yute.”

Hidden in his puddle of fluff around Cole’s ankles his grace shifted sleepily and briefly kneaded Cole’s calf muscle, pin-pricking claws through his trouser leg.

“Would you like to look around Mister ... Yute?”

“I’m in the Library business myself,” Yute said, as if Cole hadn’t spoken. “Business? Game? I’m employed by the Library – let’s leave it at that. Tell me, Cole, you sell books here do you not?”

“I do ... it’s ... a bookshop.”

“Interesting.” Yute nodded as if contemplating some complex and novel idea. “Why?”

Cole opened his mouth with a line about it being how he made his living already queuing on his tongue. He swallowed it. If he had wanted to make money he would have taken up one of his father’s many invitations to follow him into speculating with other people’s wealth. Instead he sold dreams, and kept his speculation for the page.

“When you sell someone a book you give them ownership of something without it being taken away from anyone else. You give them a ticket for a voyage. A door to other worlds. People walk out of here not truly knowing what they’re carrying with them. They used to put locks on books. Did you know that? Individual locks. I don’t approve of that, but I like the symbolism. You still need a key to open a book. I’m not talking about turning the cover here – to open the story, you need a key, and you *are* the key. Perhaps you won’t fit. Perhaps you will and the story will open for you.” Cole caught himself. “I’m sorry – I’m going on rather too much, aren’t I? It’s a bit of a favourite topic. I didn’t mean to get so...”

Yute raised a hand. “I understand.” He went to the shelf and laid white fingers on the nearest volume. “Each of them is a piece of magic. At least for someone.”

“We don’t have bookshops where I come from. Just the Library.”

“I don’t see how that would work...”

“And I don’t see how this works.” Yute smiled. “Perhaps that’s why my friend brought me here. It’s an interesting solution.”

“Solution? To what?” Cole wasn’t sure whether he had a madman in his shop or merely someone who had travelled so far that everything was strange to him and everything he brought with him was strange here. But then the man’s Etruscan was so perfect that it could only have been learned by living here for—

“If you make people pay for these books then they value them. They take them home and cherish both the form and the contents. I imagine that someone who has parted with perhaps more money than they intended will surely read the story or the opinions or the instructions within. And pay them heed.”

“Well certainly...”

“But there will be those who cannot afford such luxuries. The poor for whom the feeding of the stomach must take precedence over the feeding of the mind. And so should we not make all this,” – the wave of a black-clad arm encompassing the shop – “freely available, stories for the starving, education for the poorhouse?”

“We should!” Cole’s animation roused his grace who disentangled himself from the shifting feet that might inadvertently step on a paw. “We definitely should! But...” The host of practical objections crowded in, the grey hecklers that seemed to bring down every grand idea.

“But people don’t value what has no price,” Yute said. “People receiving stories for nothing do nothing with them. Where books are so cheap that the price isn’t noticeable they drift in unloved heaps. The freely given is stepped over in the rush to spend on something we’re told we can’t have unless we pay.”

“But—” Cole struggled to imagine books so cheap they were treated as little more than autumn leaves.

“It’s a dilemma. It’s certainly that. Why, I—” His grace chose that moment to spring from his place at Cole’s feet to the counter, inserting his purring body between the two men. “Hello, old boy.” Yute reached out to ruffle the cat’s head. “I was wondering where you’d got to.”

“Do ... do you two know each other?” Cole was sure he would remember if Yute had visited the shop before.

“I’ll have a look around if you don’t mind.” Yute disentangled himself from the cat’s uncharacteristic affections. “Don’t let me interrupt your writing. It might take me a while to find ... whatever it is I’m looking for.” And so saying he went to examine the nearest shelves, followed closely by his grace.

When Cole next glanced up, the man was far back, a white flash revealed briefly as he crossed a line of sight before becoming once more hidden by the bookcases.

Later when the sun slanted in low and crimson along the length of Ermine Street, Cole realised that he must have missed Yute’s departure, so deep in his writing that even the tinkling of the bell on the door couldn’t reach him.

“Helloooo?” The tinkling of the bell above the door would alone have drawn Nicholas from his shuffling of stock among the aisles, but Miss Pency’s voice quickened his pace.

“Miss Pency, how nice to see you again.”

“Diane, I keep telling you.”

“It’s shop rules, I’m afraid. We can’t be on first name terms until I’ve sold you at least one book.” Nicholas grinned and took his station at the counter.

“Pffft, I’m certain I’ve bought at least seven!”

“Nine, actually. But,” – Nicholas spread his hands on the counter top – “I don’t feel that I sold any of them to you. To sell a book I need to match a text to a type and arrange a happy marriage, or torrid affair, or merely a debauched weekend, but whichever it is it needs to be a discovery, something that would not have happened without my intervention. That, my dear Miss Pency, is how books are sold rather than merely purchased.”

“And what, Mr Worth–”

“Nicholas, I implore you.”

“You can be Nicholas again when you’ve sold me a book. And what is your first suggestion?”

Nicholas paused. The conversation had taken an unexpected direction as they so often did with Miss Diana Pency – a woman that he had learned was once a captain of industry, not to mention a scientific powerhouse, owner of patents on some of the most valuable alchemical processes of the last few decades. Why she was lurking on the outskirts of Lounton rather than in some granite mansion in the heart of the capitol within sight of the king’s palace he had yet to discover. Common sense said scandal, but his heart wanted a better reason – perhaps something akin to his own withdrawal from the race, though he wouldn’t wish his shadow life on anyone, let alone this fiercely intelligent little woman.

“Follow me!” He aimed for a mysterious tone and hoped he hadn’t landed in creepy territory as he led the way out among the aisles of his reduced kingdom.

Miss Pency followed with a swish of her sensible skirts. “Did you know there was a great big raven perched on your shop sign?”

“No?” Nicholas hoped the bird would behave itself or he’d be having to clean his ‘Bee and Hen’ board.

“Enormous thing. I was watching it as I came in in case it decided to steal my hat. I half expected it to say ‘nevermore’! But it just squawked at me. So loud my hat fell off! I’m surprised you didn’t hear it.”

“Squawked? I thought ravens cawed.”

“Me too – this one seems to be a bit of an eccentric...”

Nicholas walked slowly along the aisles, hoping that inspiration would strike. A left turn, a right, past the In Memoriams where black ledgers recorded vanished lives in single sentences, paragraphs, or pages, each according to the depth of the relatives’ pockets. These sold primarily for display, there being a vogue for the death’s head motifs and other heavy funerary adorning both spines and covers.

“Goodness, I forget each time how big this tiny shop is, Nicholas.”

“It does go back a way. Wobble’s been known to vanish back here for days on end. Lord knows what he eats. We don’t have rats.”

“Maybe you don’t after he’s finished.”

“Speaking of the devil.” Wobble sat atop the shelving unit opposite them as Nicholas made another right turn. His tail hung down across the books like an inverted question mark. Nicholas stepped closer and set two fingers to the battered volume at the very tip of the cat’s tail. “Most of the shop’s stock was printed on presses in Bellan or Mesmoor. Even the oldest stuff, I don’t have any texts on vellum illuminated by monks from the dark days.” He tapped

the book he'd touched. "But these few here." He pulled the volume out and opened it to reveal page after page of handwritten text, the black ink oxidised in places to a pale brown. "Some of them are younger than I am, and for most of them the only example in existence is right here, on my shelves. These are the stillborn books, the rockets that fizzled out before launch, seeds ungerminated. Many of them were perhaps too flawed to meet the expectations of some grand publishing house. A few, perhaps, fell short of every mark, but even so I guarantee you that some brave soul bled as the quill was dragged a hundred miles to set the story down. And this one, this right here, by A.M Earhart, is in my humble estimation, a gem. And although the state of the cover hints at a life hard lived, it is possible that after me and the author, you might be the only other person ever to have actually read it. Do be careful with it, it's quite old and I've had it a long time. It was a great inspiration to me as a young man." He offered the book to Miss Pency, a slight tremble in his hands as if this were the proposal that had never been made and he should fall to one knee.

"Sold." Miss Pency folded her hands around the covers. "I think perhaps that I have never been sold a book before... And whatever my opinion of the story inside, the story you have just woven around the outside of it is a string from a writer's heart, Nicholas."

"I just saw a great big black dog."

"Uh huh." Marie paid Sarah little heed. Her sister liked to narrate her non-existence, often remarking on things as trivial as the passing of a cloud with a very marshmallowy shape.

“A very very black dog.”

“Uh huh.” Marie was struggling over an order. The dilemma between keeping the stock current but not getting stuck with duds.

“It walked through a wall.”

“Oh, you liar.”

“I don’t lie!” Sarah set both hands against her breastbone, the picture of injured innocence.

“You told me Elvis Presley’s real name was Pelvis Wesley.”

“Only an idiot would believe that.”

“I told the students in my hall of residence – people I was trying to make friends with.”

“Well, you did make friends with them. You should call Ria, or Heather, or that Tom, we liked him.”

“They didn’t tell me I was wrong because I’d said you told me and they didn’t want to make you out as a liar, not when they all knew you were in hospital.”

“Only an idiot–”

“I kept telling people that for a year. A whole year!”

“Pelvis Wesley? Really?”

Marie frowned furiously at her sister, giving her what she hoped was a very hard stare. “I heard it on the radio. They did call him Pelvis. So I believed you.”

“They called him ‘the pelvis’ – there’s a difference! What mother would call her son Pelvis for god’s sake?”

“Americans have all sorts of strange names,” Marie said defensively. She wrote a decisive ‘5’ next to *All My Yesterdays* on her stock order, then scribbled it out and put ‘6’, she could sell six of a book like that.

“I apologise,” Sarah said unapologetically. “I was bored. I had cancer, and you were swanning off to university. I didn’t expect you to believe me. And you really should call up some of those friends of yours. You’ve practically been a lock in since I...” She looked out of the window. “I really did see a dog walk through a wall just now. He came out of Gregs, into the alley.”

“Probably stocking up on chicken bakes.” Marie wasn’t being fooled again.

“He looked more like a dog-shaped hole than a whole dog,” Sarah mused.

The street door opened and the red-haired girl walked in, wrapped in a puffer coat, her cheeks pale, each with a bright red patch as if the winter had pinched her.

“Ask. Her. Name.” Sarah pushed Marie forward.

Stumbling and pretending to have tripped on the flooring Marie approached the door. “Hello again.” She smiled. “I’m Marie. Let me know if I can help you with ... anything.”

“Any.” The girl smiled back, a quick nervous smile.

“Amy?”

“Any.” The girl shook her head. “It’s stupid really. I should just change my name to Amy. It was a joke between my parents. A dad joke, I guess. My mother said, ‘what shall we call her?’ and he said ‘Anything’. So, being idiots, they did. Any for short. There are

countries where you have to pick a child's name off the approved list – did you know that? To stop parents giving people like me stupid names. I expect Zowie Bowie wished he'd been born in one of them..." She trailed off, suddenly aware she'd been going on.

Marie blinked, feeling she'd been temporarily hypnotised. "Any it is then."

"Do you have books on writing? I'm trying to write a book and it's not going so well."

"A book? Well, those can be tricky. Rather like juggling – harder than it looks. It's all in the wrist, I'm told."

Another nervous smile, quick like the fin of a fish breaking the surface. Whether it was a pity smile or whether Marie's 'all in the wrist' quip had landed, she couldn't tell. *Please god, don't let her think I do dad jokes.* "We do have books on writing," Marie carried on doggedly. "We've even got one called 'On Writing'. That one's by Stephen King. It's very good, though a lot of it is more entertaining than informative..."

"Could you show me?" Any asked.

Another shove from Sarah but Marie didn't stumble, she was already on the move.

Marie's twin left them alone as they discussed writing books, writing, and Any's writing, with Marie picking out one advice book after another. Any was like a conversational brook, once started she could flow seemingly indefinitely. Though she knew how to listen too, and Marie found it easy to talk to her despite the age gap.

Sarah was right of course, and it was easier to admit it in her absence. After Sarah's death Marie had turned in on herself, stopped making the effort to seek out her friends, and gently deflecting them when they made overtures of their own. Yes, she was doing fine. Yes, she was happy. No, sorry, she couldn't make that weekend. Maybe next month.

The shop had become her world, her island retreat, stranded just off the high street and a million miles from her old life. Like the song said – *and then one day she'd found, ten years had got behind her, no one told her when to run ... she'd missed the starting gun*. She'd sat here, stranded, Tom Hanks on his desert island – with Sarah as her Wilson – waiting for something, anything. And here she was: Anything.

“What are these?” Any had crouched down to examine a row of shabby volumes at the bottom of a shelf near the back of the shop.

“Ah ... those.” Marie came to join her. “They’re an indulgence of mine. I go to book fairs, second hand shops, charity shops and I ... rescue old books. The ones that are in such a state no collector would ever have any interest in them. The books that are destined for the council dump. When I find one that I really like I repair it and put on that shelf to sell.”

“But they were already for sale...” Any ran her fingers gently over the spines.

“Yes, but I really sell them, because I know what’s in each one, and I try to match them to someone who they’ll matter to.”

“Sell me one.” Any’s green eyes met Marie’s gaze with a hint of both challenge and of mischief.

“Really?” The girl had called her bluff. The shelf truly was an indulgence. None of the books there had ever sold. Management would have a fit if they were displayed at the front, and back here Marie seldom got to see if anyone showed an interest. “But I–” She was going to say ‘hardly know you’. The truth was she knew Any better on the basis of the last half hour’s conversation than she knew anyone else these days.

“Maybe this one.” Marie pulled the volume out, suddenly nervous. The book had actually been the only one in the shop when the owners bought the place and sent Marie in to

organise the restocking of its empty shelves. Between them, the book and Wentworth had been the sole legacy that the previous owner left.

Any accepted the thick book into slim hands. The covers were polished by time, erasing any title, but the first page bore in large copperplate, so perfectly formed that it might have been printed but was in fact the work of a sure hand, the legend: *The Book That Burned, by Cole Worth*.

“Good, is it?” Any asked.

“I think Cole Worth put everything he had onto those pages,” Marie answered, after a pause. “Whether that’s good or bad, subpar or sublime, depends on the reader. I think maybe you’ll like it.” She thought more than ‘maybe’ but she didn’t want to overegg the thing – nothing kills off a book like too much hype – though ironically hype’s exactly what’s needed for them to flourish. Similar deal with oxygen: too little, you die; too much, you die.

At last, Any made her way to the exit from the counter, laughing at Marie’s weak parting joke, three books in her Blackponds’ carrier bag, two about the art of writing and one handwritten in faded ink and concerning the effort that is sometimes required simply to exist.

“Ask her out!” Sarah poked her in the ribs. “Quick! Ask her for a drink! She’s getting away!” Practically hopping from foot to foot.

“Let me know how you get on,” Marie called after Any.

“I’m on insta,” Any called back. “Anything Earhart. Hit me up. I’ll definitely need help.”

“I will.” Marie waved.

“Well, that’s something.” Sarah folded her arms. “I suppose. But you should have just said, let’s go for a drink, how’s Friday for you?”

“Shush, you.” Marie couldn’t suppress her smile. She returned to the counter, whistling, and changed the 6 to an 8. She could sell 8 copies for sure.

“I know you!” Nicholas had been surprised to see a man walking towards him from the back of his shop and not only because he was entirely sure that he hadn’t yet had his first customer through the front door. He was more surprised by the fact that he recognised the person now approaching the counter. “You’re... you’re...” He clicked his fingers trying to scare the name out of his subconscious and onto his tongue.

“Yute.”

“Yute! That’s it!” He wanted to say ‘Yute the snowman’ but was now convinced that rather than hailing from the extremities of the north, Yute was in fact afflicted by a rare disease or condition that had sucked almost every trace of colour from him. “How...” He had last seen the man disappearing off into the back of a different shop, and now here he was nearly forty years later emerging from the back of this one. “You haven’t aged a day, sir!”

“Cole, how are you?” Yute stopped before the counter, his garb an outlandish robe of dark grey velvet, touched by dust around the hem.

“Nicholas,” Nicholas said automatically. He’d given up his abbreviated name as a childish pretension. Set it aside with many other things. Perhaps too many things, though his life did now have a certain anaesthetic tranquillity to it as he waited, waiting for nothing in particular and resigned to the waiting. He hadn’t thought he was waiting for anything, but

since Miss Pency's arrival unsettling waves of possibility had started to lap at the shores of his isolation. And now, past expectation or even imagination, here was Mr Yute.

"Nicholas it is." Yute inclined his head. He really hadn't aged a day. His face was the kind that offered age no purchase, but even so ... forty years!

Nicholas rallied himself, taking shelter in formality. "Welcome to Bee and Hen, how can I be of service today?"

"I'm on a quest," Yute said as Wobble emerged from the aisles to rub around his legs.

"Still?" There had been a quest before, Nicholas was sure of it.

"Still." Yute inclined his white head.

Nicholas pointed to the door and the street beyond the wide windows. "Did you...?"

"I came from the Library," Yute said as if that answered the question. "There's another circle starting."

"A circle?" Nicholas had no idea what the man meant but politeness encouraged him to follow on. "And that's bad?"

"It could be calamitous. I hadn't known they could happen out here in the peripheries, but it seems that these bookshops are more numerous and more widespread than I had believed. I'm sure I knew more about this once upon a time, but my memory..." He tapped his temple. "Not what it once was."

"No..." Nicholas wondered if the man's memory might not be the only faulty part of his thinking apparatus. But then again whether Yute had been this crazy on his previous visit was an answer that his own memory was proving unable to supply.

“The Exchange connects them, you see? Bookshops. Libraries great and small. Who knows where it ends? Perhaps individual bookcases in private homes also touch the Exchange. Nothing would surprise me these days. Books leak. They wander. Transported and translated by the Exchange. A gentle shuffling and reshuffling of reality. A fault in the design if you ask me ... or sabotage. Jaspeth’s work, no doubt – I can’t see Irad being so careless...”

“Irad? No...” Nicholas nodded, then shook his head for good measure. “And you’re here because?”

“Wentworth said it was urgent.” Yute went to one knee and started to scratch Wobble behind the ear.

“I see.” If there had been a place to retreat to then Nicholas would have retreated. “Can I ... make you a cup of tea?”

“That,” – Yute looked up from fussing the cat – “would be delightful.”

Nicholas locked the shop, turned the door sign to ‘closed’ and took Yute to the stockroom where he presumed the man must have broken in. The stacked books occupied only three-quarters of the available space and Nicholas lit the new-fangled gas-lamp to reveal a small table with two comfortable if battered armchairs. Wobble slipped in behind them before Nicholas could close the door. Rather than vanish off into the stacks in search of mice the cat simply coiled himself beneath the table.

Nicholas got cups from the cupboard and poured them both tea out of the flask he always brought with him from home. Yute raised the blue and white porcelain to his lips and inhaled. “It smells as good as it sounds. You call this T?”

“Uh ... yes.”

“I wonder what delights U has for us?”

While Nicholas puzzled over the grammar of Yute's pronouncement Yute sipped his tea, sighed, and contemplated the shadowed stacks. "You were writing a book."

"I was," Nicholas said stiffly, feeling much as if his guest had just reached over and stuck him with a bayonet.

"A dangerous book," Yute said.

"Dangerous? Well, I imagine it might have been dangerous to the finances of any publisher who invested in it," Nicholas said, failing to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Luckily for them they all avoided that fate."

"But still, you wrote a book? That fact is not dependent on the clanking of printing presses."

Nicholas sighed and nodded heavily. "I wrote a book." He left unvoiced that he had opened himself to the world, bled upon the page, and gone unnoticed, his words whispered into an uncaring wind. It had been his greatest act of courage and of faith. The ruination of his hope amid a flurry of standard rejections had left him hollowed. He cursed himself daily for his cowardliness, for the fact that he had defined his life not by some work of literary greatness but by how remarkably long he had been able to sulk about his failure. But even so, despite knowing both the cause and the cure, he had been unable to free himself. The black dog had trailed him down the years, a malady of the mind they called it, a malaise. That up-and-coming Dr Fraud had given a medical name to it: depression. Not a bad name all things considered. Depression – a depression, a dent, a hole from which he couldn't find the strength to climb. The quill had become too heavy to hold and he had set it aside, taking on a quiet life of limitations instead, his only joy remaining in the works of others, and in the placing of them in the right hands.

“And what did you hope for it, Nicholas?” Yute spread his fingers on the table as if he might be about to play it like a harpsicord. “Wealth?” He looked around. “I imagine in a place where books are sold rather than given it could be lucrative to write a book that many people wanted to read?”

“I had money.” Nicholas shook his head, fracturing a vision of his father’s gilded coffin. “More than I knew what to do with.”

“Fame perhaps?” Yute pursed his mouth.

“Fame? I hide from the world in here. I might like it if more people came through the door seeking books, but not to see me. I was never what you might call ... sociable.”

“What then?”

“To matter.” Nicholas stared at the table, at the grain of the wood, at the knots and whorls. He thought of the book he had sold to Miss Pency. A.M Earhart’s novel had inspired him to write his own. It had opened doors in his mind, filled his thinking, set fire to his imagination. It had *mattered* to him. “I wanted to have said something that was heard. To have been seen and to have had that make a difference to someone.”

“Someone? Not ten someones? Would ten thousand be a thousand times better?”

“Zeros after the digit.” Nicholas pressed his lips together.

“I’m sorry?”

“That’s just counting. Keeping score. No, I didn’t care if it were ten or ten thousand. Someone, anyone would do.”

“Anything...” Yute murmured the irrelevance before gathering his thoughts and saying, “What happened to the copies?”

“There were no copies, just the original. I had the manuscript bound when it came back from its last journey with its final rejection. I tried it on friends and family.” Nicholas shuddered. “That was a mistake. My eldest sister ‘loved it’ but hadn’t a single word to say that made me believe she had actually opened the front cover.”

“And the original?”

“Lost.” Nicholas – Cole as he’d called himself back then – had been going to burn it, honouring the promise of the title, but in the end he decided to avoid the drama, not to mention the hazard of fire and drunkenness in a bookshop. He’d been going to toss it out with the rubbish for the waste-carts to take to the dump. The actual moment when they parted still hid behind one of the holes his shameful affair with red wine had punched through his memory of those years, but he’d had the book one evening, intending to throw it away, and in the morning he’d lifted his head from the table, groaned at the horror of his headache, and had seen that the book was gone, no longer there to accuse him each time his eyes found it. No longer the flag of his failure, waving itself endlessly in recrimination. Whether he had returned it to the shelves or thrown it into the street, he couldn’t say.

“Come with me.” Yute stood and made to leave.

“I ... I can’t. I’ve got a shop to run. Customers...” Miss Pency would be by later in the afternoon.

“That’s alright, Nicholas. We won’t leave the bookshop.”

Nicholas shrugged and stood, finishing off his tea. “After this I really do have work to do.”

“Quite so.” Yute led the way out into the shop where Wobble was waiting by the shelves.

Nicholas did a double take, glancing back into the stockroom, expecting to see the cat still coiled beneath the table. As Yute approached, Wobble turned and led the way among the aisles.

“We’re following Wobble?” Nicholas hurried to catch up. “I mean, I hate to say it, he’s a lovely boy, but there’s nothing between his ears except more fluff...”

Yute tilted his head. “He has a remarkable talent for getting from here to there. Even from now to then.”

Nicholas decided to keep his own counsel on Wobble’s talents and save his ‘I told you so’ for the back wall of the shop. They walked on into the little book-warren Nicholas had constructed.

“It goes back quite far,” Yute observed.

“You should have seen my first shop. It was a palace compared to this ... compared to palaces too, if I say so myself. You needed ladders to reach most of the books. And the back was like a labyrinth, no, scratch that – it *was* a labyrinth. People got lost!” Nicholas followed Yute, so wrapped in his memories that he hardly saw the reality of his present life. A thought suddenly struck him. “Wait! You’ve found my book?” Was it possible? Had he changed his mind while deep in his cups? Hidden the book among the shelves? And it had somehow persisted among his stock all these years, lurking in the aisles? Avoiding one cataloguing after another. “That’s not possible!”

Wobble took a left into another canyon of books, holding his tail high.

Nicholas craned his neck. “This ... this is my first shop!”

“Best not to linger then, my boy. You wouldn’t want to bump into Cole and give him this particular vision of his future.”

“Wait ... this ... this is madness!”

But Yute had already followed Wobble down another turn and for reasons Nicholas couldn't explain, the fear of being left behind overwhelmed both shock and his growing anger at being so toyed with.

Wobble set a brisk pace, and Yute followed, seeming not to hear questions. The sense of familiarity lessened as the ceiling and the shelves vaulted steadily higher. This wasn't Nicholas's bookshop, new or old, or anyone else's that he could imagine.

Something in the periphery brought Nicholas to a halt even as he caught up with Yute. “Are ... are those ... trees?”

“Best not to look,” Yute took another right, quickening his pace to catch up with the cat. “We're not going that way.”

Nicholas tore himself away. At the end of a very long aisle, far longer than the entirety of his shop, there had been trees, he was sure of it. Even the glint of water between them.

By degrees, through lefts and rights, ducking through doorways that led from one side of a shelf-wall to the other, the aisles became more human-sized, more familiar, the ceiling lowered, and lowered again and the light, which had seemed to come from every direction at once, reclaimed sources, though these were mysterious globes set on the ceiling and broadcasting a light far whiter, brighter, and more steady than even the most advanced of gas lamps. Somehow Wobble had escaped them, but Yute seemed unconcerned.

“Quiet now.” Yute slowed, gesturing downwards with his palm. “It would be better if we were not observed.”

Feeling like a fool, a thief, and an intruder, Nicholas joined Yute leaning around the end of a seven-foot bookcase. They were in a bookshop. A very wide window gave onto a street containing several very strange carriages, parked at the curb and with no sign of horses. A young woman with short brown hair stood behind the counter, leafing through a book. Nicholas felt like a peeping tom, a man approaching sixty staring at a stranger without her knowledge.

“We should–”

“Ssssh.” Yute shook his head.

The woman muttered something and smiled.

“Why is she talking to herself?” Nicholas hissed.

“She’s talking to her sister.”

Nicholas squinted. The girl was alone ... unless the sister was a child – a small child – and hidden by the counter. He glanced up at the wonderful lights. “Do they have some marvel of science that lets them speak over great distances?”

“They do,” Yute whispered.

Satisfied Nicholas continued to watch the muttered conversation continue, deciding to put his faith in Yute.

Without warning a shape darted past the window and someone burst in through the door, leaving the bell jangling in her wake. Another young woman, long red hair in disarray, eyes smeared with what looked to be greasepaint that had been rubbed in circles making her look rather like a spectacle bear.

The shopkeeper came out to meet the sobbing girl, seeming unsure whether to hug her or keep her distance. Nicholas caught words of reassurance and concern over the other girl's distress.

Marie hardly knew what to do with Any. Her first thought was that someone had died. But why that would send her racing back to Blackponds in floods of tears Marie had no idea.

"It's ok. It's ok." She settled for holding Any's hands though her arms wanted to offer what comfort they could. "What happened? Should I call someone for you?"

The ugly sobbing lasted another minute before Any finally managed some words between the heavings of her narrow chest.

"I was – in the park – just down the way–"

"Someone attacked you? I should call–"

"No!" Any pulled a hand free and took something from her raincoat's voluminous pocket. "This! I was reading this!" She held up the book that Marie had sold her just the day before, the handwritten one. "I finished it–"

"In one day?" It wasn't a thin novel. Marie had spent a week savouring it.

"I–" More sobs pushed conversation back onto the impossible list.

Marie couldn't not hug her. "Silly. I know. It's ... moving ... at the end." Marie had dabbed her eyes, maybe wiped away a tear. The book had monopolised her thinking for a week or more, but nothing like this. Something on those pages had undone Any.

“It was just ... so beautiful. So perfect. And when she—” More tears.

“I know. I know. I’m sorry.”

Any pulled away, blinking tears. “Sorry? Don’t be sorry. It’s the most wonderful—” She trailed off, staring at something behind Marie.

Marie turned and stepped back in shock. “Mr Yute? I didn’t see you come— or your friend?”

“My apologies for intruding. Sincerely. Humbly.” He bowed his head. The older man behind him, tall, skinny, with grey hair and glasses, looked deeply embarrassed, shading to crimson as if he would rather be anywhere else in the world.

He had a distinctly Sleepy Hollow vibe to him, though Marie couldn’t say exactly why. She rallied herself. “You’re not intruding, Mr Yute. This is a bookshop after all!” She tried a laugh, a brave but failed attempt.

Yute looked past Marie, turning his gaze to Any. “I’m afraid that I have to reclaim the book you have there, miss.” He offered a perfectly white handkerchief in exchange.

“What? No!” Any wrapped her arms around the book, protective as any mother.

“I sold this book to Any.” Marie tried to regroup. “It’s hers.”

“My apologies,” – Yute seemed to grow taller, whiter if anything, his skin almost gleaming, “but the book belongs to the Library, and it is overdue.”

Sarah appeared at Marie’s shoulder. She rarely did that sort of thing, preferring to avoid anything ghostly. “I think you should give it to him, Mar.”

Marie shook her head, ignoring her sister. “The library?” She felt an unaccountable tingle of fear, which made her angry. She stepped between Yute and Any, shielding the girl. “It doesn’t have any stamps or markings. Which library?”

The narrow, almost haunted, man behind Yute had been looking at the book as if it were the holy grail, glowing with divine light, but now he shook himself and leaned further into view. “Ladies, Yute intends only the best for you both. He hails from very distant climes and doesn’t know our ways. I could purchase the book from you perhaps, miss? Would a thousand pounds suffice? It’s all I have in the world.”

“I ... I don’t understand.” Any kept her embrace tight around her prize. “I don’t want money...” It sounded rather as if she did very much need money, but that the book meant still more to her.

“I understand.” The man bowed his head. “But if you had seen what I have seen in reaching this place you would know that Yute here has knowledge far beyond our ken and...” At this point Wentworth ambled out from behind the counter to butt his furry head against Yute’s legs. “Wobble!” the man exclaimed. And to Marie’s astonishment the cat moved on from Yute to offer this newcomer the same uncharacteristic affection.

“He’s right,” Sarah said. “There’s magic here. Lots of it.” The awe in her voice didn’t sound like Sarah – Marie’s sister never let go of her flippancy. She’d fought her disease with sarcasm right to the end. Even on the last day. “Give him the book, Mar.”

Something in Sarah’s tone and in her closeness made Marie’s eyes prickle. She swallowed. Her sister seldom used the pet name they’d coined when they were kids. Mar and Sar. Even so, she couldn’t just let them take it. Despite being wrongfooted both by her visitors’ kindness and by their demands Marie wasn’t going to let them take Any’s book.

Especially not when it appeared to contain the most important story she had ever read. “I’m sorry, Mr Yute, and to you, Mr...”

“Worth.”

“I’m sorry but you can’t just come in here and take other people’s property. That book was sold to Blackponds with the tenancy of the building, along with any other contents not removed by the former tenant. I’ve legitimately sold it to Any, and we’re not being bullied out of it with mystical talk and veiled threats. I don’t know what else to say ... but you sound like conmen.”

Mr Worth shook his head, horrified by the accusation. “My dear lady, we’re really not—”

Yute hushed him with a raised hand. “Allow me to allay your understandable fears that we are here to dupe you.” He kept his hand aloft at shoulder height as he rotated slowly, scanning the shelves. “Ah! This will serve.” Two quick paces and he took from a low shelf a copy of *Where The Wild Things Are*, leafing through the picture book with long alabaster fingers.

“That very night a forest grew, and grew until the ceiling was a sky and the walls became the world.”

As swiftly as he spoke trees did grow, and the ceiling melted into blue skies, and in the space of a dozen heart beats Marie stood surrounded by tall magnolias, all in full bloom like the ones she remembered from a visit to a stately home when she was a child and where she and Sarah had run barefoot among the petals. Not far off among the repeating rows of trees a peacock strutted by, its tail fanned into iridescent glory.

“How is—”

“This can’t—”

“Marvellous!” Mr Worth gazed around in wonder.

Any, Marie, and Sarah were separated from Mr Yute and Mr Worth by a circular pool perhaps two metres across, its unrippled surface reflecting a sky strewn with puffy white clouds.

“I say!” Mr Worth looked at Marie and did a double take. “I’m sure there was only one of you before...”

Any took a step away from Marie’s protection, clutching her book as if it were a life preserver in a choppy sea. “I don’t understand...”

“You can all see me?” Sarah twirled, delighted, her summer dress swirling out.

“You can *see* her?” Marie started to fall to her knees, finding it hard to breathe. Sarah caught her, arresting her fall. Marie tried to huff out the pain from her chest, her heart ached too much to beat. “Does this mean...?”

“Cool your jets, little sis.” Sarah stepped back, hands to either side of Marie as if checking she were balanced.

“I’m not little, we’re twins!”

“And I’m still dead. This is magic.” She turned to face Yute over the pool. “I should go. I should have gone a long time ago. But she wouldn’t let me and I wouldn’t leave her. We were both too weak and now it’s killing her.”

“It is not killing me! What rubbish are you telling him?” Marie found her strength.

“Who is he anyway? Coming into the shop, ordering us around, taking things?”

Wentworth pushed himself into the space between the sisters, mrrrowing gently.

“Et tu, Wentworth?” Sarah grinned much as she had grinned into the face of death on her last day at the hospice. “Et tu?”

Solemn-faced, Yute waved a hand at the pool and in an instant it was a window looking down upon a city, a desert, a burning forest, the scene changed and changed again until suddenly it was black and nothing else.

“I’m going to go,” Sarah stepped towards the pool.

“No!” Marie had her by the arm, tugging. “Are you mad? You want to step into a black hole now?”

Sarah shook her head. “It’s full of light ... so bright...” She stretched an arm out. “I see only good things.”

“Don’t, Sar!”

“Baby. I’ve got to go. You know that. You’ve always known that.” Sarah looked towards Any. “Look after her for me?”

And Any, with fresh tears running down her cheeks could only nod, coming forward to take gentle command of Marie’s other arm. She reached forward and gave her book to Sarah.

Marie could have fought as Sarah softly disentangled herself from her grasp, but something deeper than her sorrow told her that to do so would only hurt her sister. Sarah walked the pool’s perimeter and gave the book not to Yute but to Mr Worth who received it with trembling hands.

“Thank you, Cole.” Sarah smiled, and Mr Worth turned away covering his eyes with a hand, chest heaving.

Sarah walked into the pool, causing Marie to cry out, but her sister walked on the surface as if the darkness were obsidian rather than oil.

Sarah turned to Yute and nodded. "Thank you too, Yute, opener of doors."

Slowly she began to sink. Feet, calves, knees.

"This is very dramatic!" She looked around, finding Marie's eyes. "Shush now, cry-baby." She pursed her lips. "You know that Elvis Presley's real name was Elvish Priestly? His parents were Lord of the Rings fans."

"You liar." Marie coughed a broken laugh through her tears despite not wanting to. "The book wasn't even published—"

"Lord of the Rings fans," Sarah repeated. She reached out to pat the dark surface as it swallowed her thighs. "Let's do this Terminator style!" The blackness became molten metal, seething as it burned without heat. "Be good. Carpe every diem and all that crap." Flames lit her face and she was gone save for a raised hand showing a final thumbs up before that too was swallowed.

"I can't—" Marie clutched Any who supported her with surprising strength. They were in the shop, no trees, no sky, or pool, no Sarah.

"Miss Smith, Miss Earhart." Yute bowed a small bow and rose to meet their gaze, his pink eyes bright. "I must leave with Mr Worth. To say more would be to increase the damage."

"B-but," Marie stammered, finding herself beyond exhaustion. "But what should we do?"

"Follow your sister's advice. Live your lives. Be good."

Yute turned and walked off towards the back of the shop. Mr Worth shot an unreadable glance towards Marie and Any, pressed the book to his heart, and hurried after Yute. Wentworth ambled after them.

It came as little surprise when none of the three ever returned from the aisles.

“Nicholas! This is the most extraordinary book I’ve ever read!” Diane Pency burst through the door of Bee and Hen like a woman in her prime chasing down a thief. “I just don’t know where to— I’m quite overwhelmed, and you’re the only person I know who has read it!”

“Diane. I’m so pleased you liked it.” Nicholas had expected her to enjoy the book. But he hadn’t imagined that lighting would strike twice and that it would undo her as it had undone him. It was a book both of raw emotion and of remarkable insight, the kind of story that reaches out beyond its covers. It was, he had always felt, a kind of crime against humanity, that such a book had been confined to a single unloved copy, washed into the corner of a small bookshop in a small town. It had been the push he needed to start writing himself. And the book’s discovery had prompted him to question what other literary wonders lurked among the detritus, wholly unknown. Even so, the strength of Diane’s reaction was a surprise. She looked stunned, as if the foundation had been cut from her world and replaced with something entirely unexpected.

“Liked it?” She seemed a heartbeat from taking hold of his lapels and shaking him as she hauled him across the counter. “It was written for me. This ... this A.M Earhart is a genius. He should be given the Enster Prize this instant. He should—”

“She,” Nicholas said, amazed that until this moment he had failed to connect the red-haired waif from the marvellous bookstore with this volume. “She.”

“She’s a genius!” Diane carried on undeterred. “I want to meet her! Though...” She looked at the battered novel in her hand. “I suppose she must be terribly ancient now ... or dead.”

“She was...” Nicholas faltered. He wondered if Any had ever realised that the gawky old Mr Worth who stole her book was the man who penned it in his youth. “She was very much alive in her time. I think ... I think that everyone who ever lived is still alive in every moment of their lives, strung out through the prism of time like beads on a thread.”

“Nicholas.” Diane took his arm over the counter and drew it to her. “You sound like quite the writer yourself. Are you sure you never tried your hand?”

“Well, I...”

The door tinkled and Yute walked in, still in the grey robe he had worn on their travels three days earlier. But Nicholas supposed that the man would draw stares wherever he went, regardless of his attire.

“This is Yute.” Nicholas pointed Diane towards the servant of the Library. “I’m afraid I have to ask an enormous favour of you, Diane, and can only ask that you trust me and accept my apologies.” He swallowed hard, steeling himself against her reaction. “I should not have sold you that book. It belongs to the Library and Yute tells me it is overdue.”

Cries of outrage, or cold accusations would have been less painful than the pang of hurt that creased Diane’s face and stole the animation from beneath her skin. “Of course, Nicholas.” She slid the book across the counter with a slow but sure hand. “Though if it’s a matter of money...”

Yute stepped forward smoothly. “I’m afraid that this is not a matter of money, Miss Pency. But it is one in which your cooperation is deeply appreciated.” He put the book into a capacious pocket, nodded solemnly to both of them, and left the way he came in. Wobble slipped out after him just before the door closed.

“I’m so sorry, Diane.” Nicholas hung his head.

Between them Nicholas and Any had made a kind of loop through time and worlds, drawing Marie and Diane into the spiral. That’s how Yute told it. A loose kind of ring that with luck would unravel itself and do no harm. But while the books remained in the places to which they had wandered, they risked forming a tight and dangerous ring of the sort Yute had seen just once over the course of a great many years. A ring that could threaten ... everything.

Returning the originals to the time and place from which they originated had helped reduce the danger, but the fact was that both books were physical instances of paradox, they were each the parent of the other. And impossibilities have a habit of causing trouble for reality.

In order to avoid disaster, Yute had taken Nicholas’s and Any’s books to his Library, where they would have to stay.

“I’m so sorry,” Nicholas repeated. He had stolen her newfound joy – wounded someone he cared for. With sudden inspiration he patted his jacket. “And yes, I confess I did once write a book.” He took the key from his inner pocket and unlocked the strong box below the counter. “This one.” Nicholas lifted the unbound stack of crisp pages. They bore the same words that had meant so much to A.M Earhart. His words.

Yute’s resolve had weakened as he’d taken Nicholas’s book from trembling fingers. The book itself, the object, had to go to the Library and be sealed in a place of safety. The

words though, Yute had allowed that they could remain. There would be some small risk, the story was also a paradox, but stories are strange creatures, more flexible than paper and ink. And risk, Yute acknowledged, was part of life, along with sorrow and joy, cats and dogs, dusty books and glorious sunsets.

“It’s a poor substitute, Diane, I do understand. My book never took flight, but even so it did find a home in at least one person’s imagination. Perhaps it even inspired them to greater work. And it would be an honour if you were to read it.” It had taken three sleepless nights and left him with aching hands, but he had copied his story onto fresh pages.

Diane accepted the volume, arching a brow at Nicholas. “I’m not promising to like it.”

“Every door needs a different key.” Nicholas smiled. “Thank you for allowing me a turn.” Outside in the street Yute returned, walking past the shop as if he had mistakenly turned left on exiting when he should have turned right. Remarkably, Wobble was still tracking the man, and even more remarkably, hard on his heels was the blackest dog Nicholas had ever seen, like a soot mark on the retina. Nicholas didn’t think for a moment that the black dog following the librarian was literally the black dog of his depression that had trailed him down the years – but perhaps it was a sign, and as the trio passed from view a burden lifted from his heart, a burden he had carried so long that it had become an almost structural part of him, the narrow window through which he viewed the world and could not pass.

“Nicholas?” Diane asked, seeing his distraction.

“Forgive me.” The smile that found his lips required no manufacturing. “Don’t worry. If you don’t like this book, then you can make it up to me by buying me dinner.”

“Oh, I will. You’d better believe that. And if I do like it, I’ll be buying you dinner as a thank you.”

She put the book in her bag then looked up with a slight frown. “Have you sold me this book?”

“Given,” Nicholas said. “And that’s even better.”