

Chapter 1

1999, Gloucestershire, England

The dream was in full color. The hands, sticky with blood, sent chills up Simon's spine. A butcher-priest sliced another throat as if cutting bread. Red spattered his tunic, the blood pooling around his bare feet. Simon grabbed his stomach and heaved. He wanted to run but his feet refused.

Across a broad hilltop, a hundred other priests were killing—fast, efficient. Young boys hauled calves and lambs on short ropes toward the slaughter. With eyes bulging, the animals struggled and moaned. Vultures wheeled in the clear sky, waiting.

A golden-skinned youth wearing a purple robe watched the carnage, unmoved. To his right stood an older man in blue, and beyond them, a tattered tent. A high cloth wall surrounded the hilltop, and voices filtered in from the outside.

A fire blazed above a large altar in front of the tent. The priests threw butchered flesh into the flames. Acrid smoke swept towards Simon. He blinked and

gagged at the stench.

The youth lifted his hands to the sky. No fire fell. No lightning flashed. Just black smoke, burning Simon's throat. The golden-skinned youth glanced at the older priest and shrugged. The old man's voice sounded strong, assured.

Simon didn't understand the language. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He had to escape. A rope tightened around his neck. He dug in his hooves, but a boy dragged him to the waiting slaughter.

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"No!" Simon screamed, heart pounding as he tried to unfurl himself from his tangled bed sheets. Lingering visions of blood made his stomach clench. "No!" he screamed again.

Simon calmed himself with heavy breaths. As the dream faded to black, the familiar bedroom replaced the killing hill. But the stench of death lingered deep down in his throat.

Simon checked his watch. Had he overslept? No, it was Saturday. His wife would be playing tennis. With his heart still pounding, he stared out the window. He needed something normal right now, something real.

The maple tree was still bare, but the first daffodils were unfolding their golden trumpets, preparing for spring. He took several more deep breaths.

The dream had haunted Simon for the last three nights, each time more vivid, more gruesome. *Why? Who were these people?* He didn't recognize anyone. The sense of foreboding was so strong, he thought about canceling his upcoming expedition.

Simon threw the sheets aside and stepped into the hallway. Nothing was burning. Nothing but the nightmare of the young man and the blood. *All that blood.* He shook his head. *Forget it! I don't need this. Not now.*

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Simon Archer was lanky, with receding light-brown hair. Despite his natural fitness, he felt fifty today—not thirty-four. Back in his room, he flung a large suitcase onto the bed, opened the wardrobe cupboards and picked up his supply list.

"Ah, yes. Mosquito nets, jungle formula, spare hiking boots, gaiters, anti-leech . . ."

A bang on the front door interrupted him. He put the list aside and thumped down the stairs. When he opened the door, his colleague smiled and stroked her

hands on her jersey.

"Come in, Helen. It is good of you to do this."

Helen Shipton was slim and well-groomed, as always.

"It's a pleasure," she said. "I'm only twenty minutes away."

"Shall we go down?"

Simon led her through the kitchen and out the back door. Frost glazed the lawn. The garden was dominated by three gleaming greenhouses, each larger than a double garage. Stepping into the first, the heat engulfed him. Simon inhaled and grinned. "Welcome to Malaysia." He loved its wet-blanket feel.

Tropical plants clambered untamed through his miniature jungle, fighting for space. Pots of all shapes and sizes perched on the wooden staging. Some contained small trees, their upper branches squeezing against the roof. Vines coiled up the trunks. Flowers overhung the passageways. Beneath the staging ran rows of water pipes and heaters. The pungency of warm earth and mushrooms soaked the air.

Simon pointed to a control box with lights and dials. "I keep the temperature constant. The alarm will sound if there's a drop. Keep an eye on the watering system,

especially the misters."

Helen nodded, gazing at the array of color and form.

Simon glanced around. "Can you smell burning?"

"No. Why?"

"Bad dream. I can still smell it. Very odd."

The scene of the sacrifices still felt real. Could it have been Stonehenge? Simon wondered. No, there are no hills at Stonehenge.

Pushing away his thoughts, Simon fussed over a cluster of small pots.

"The *Calophyllum* haven't settled well." Simon prodded their soil with his thumb. "Don't over water. The sprinklers should do okay. We're quite excited about these." He fondled a leaf and whispered to them, "Now you grow strong and healthy." After a few moments, he led Helen through a dividing door, and the temperature dropped ten degrees.

"This is the high-altitude house. The oxygen's lower, so we keep the doors closed." Simon turned to her. "This is so kind of you. I couldn't trust many with my plants. Are you sure you can do the whole month?"

"Of course. I've always admired your research. Anyway, I wanted to know what you were growing in

here." Helen grinned.

"I chose medicinal plants for my PhD. We've only tested about 10 percent of the world's flora for biological activity, and every day we lose another species. Such a tragedy." He paused, pointing to a row of tall green canes. "These are *Piper betle*, or betel vine. They have anti-mutagenic properties. Especially, the hydroxychavicol fraction. It's being tested on prostate cancer. I'm excited about the *Calophyllum*. Possibly anti-HIV."

"Simon, that's excellent. Is that why you're going?"

Simon paused, then ducked through another dividing door. "There a plant new to science used by traditional medicine against tumors in Malaysia." He frowned and dropped his voice. "Might help Ruby."

"How is your daughter? I heard she was ill."

He nodded. The familiar pain tugged at his insides. "Chemo." He took a deep breath and forced a smile. "She turned ten yesterday. We decorated her ward with pink balloons."

Not waiting for a response, Simon stepped outside and sighed. The sun was greening the frost from the grass, leaving white patches in the shade.

"You're not going alone are you?"

"No. With a colleague. Austrian. Clever chap, more on the chemistry side, like you." He shook his head. "I'm sure something's burning." The image of blood returned and he blinked. *Cursed dream.* "Perhaps it's the greenhouse heaters. I'd better check."

"Sure," Helen said. "Your plants will be safe with me, I promise. I can find my way out."

Simon gave her the keys and re-entered his jungle. When he returned to the house a few minutes later, his wife was standing in the hallway wearing a tracksuit. Tears pooled in her eyes.

"Kathy, what's wrong?"

Kathy handed Simon a letter and turned away. He scanned the contents but already knew what it was about from the letterhead and her reaction. The *in vitro* fertilization had failed. Their third attempt. And just as before, Simon felt punched in his stomach. He swore. "I knew it!"

Kathy spun around, her eyes ablaze. "I can't do this anymore, Simon. Why? Why did you?"

"Why did I what?"

"Why did you suggest we try again if you knew it would fail?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're making no sense. We

both—”

“It’s been six years, Simon. You ignore me, you ignore Ruby. All our money goes on your blasted greenhouses. You haven’t been through what I have. It’s totally humiliating what the doctors did. Don’t you have any feelings for me anymore?”

Simon crumpled the letter and threw it on the floor. “Oh, give me a break. It hurts me just as much as it does you.”

“Does it?” she yelled. “Then why are you abandoning us? I have no baby. And our only child is dying.” Kathy stood frozen, her fists clenching and unclenching.

“She’s not dying. She’ll get better. Like last—”

“So you’re a prophet now, are you? Don’t you care about your own daughter?”

“Of course I care. That’s the reason I’m going. How could I know Ruby would have a relapse?”

“If you cared, you’d cancel your pathetic expedition!”

“You know very well I can’t. It’s been planned for months. There are plants that can help—”

“Oh, sure. Doctor Archer’s Miracle Cure.”

“I’m going in order to help Ruby. We’ve been over

this a hundred times. You agreed a long time ago—”

“So you’re blaming me now? Is that what you call love? Well, we just might not be here when you get back.” Kathy ran up the stairs.

Simon picked up the letter and shoved it into his pocket. Stepping outside, the aroma of charred flesh again filled his senses. He slammed the front door and strode to the car.

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Kathy buried her face in her pillow and wept. She’d never felt more alone, more unloved. Simon didn’t have a clue what she’d been through. It was like being married to a block of wood. Cold and rigid. In the early days, she was everything to him. Now it was all about lecturing and expeditions and those stupid plants. Kathy was no longer a priority.

The fear of losing Ruby filled her with a despair that gnawed at her soul—a cancer in Kathy’s own heart. Her only daughter could be dead within weeks. Her only remaining joy, gone. They’d just lost their last chance of another child. All that pain and humiliation wasted; the happy family dream was nothing but shards. She could hear her father’s rebuke. “*You’re an*

abject failure."

Simon's car crunched across the gravel and sped away. Kathy blew her nose and picked up the phone. "Morrie? Can I come round? It's failed." She choked on the words.

"Of course, my dear. But is it wise to come now? I mean, when does he leave?"

"I can't wait," she said. "Please, Morrie."

Dursley Park was just a short drive. Surrounded by wooded hills, the great house loomed over a broad valley. Kathy loved the imposing Jacobean frontage, the forest of chimneys, the beeches lining the long, gravel driveway. But today everything seemed pretentious. Irrelevant.

Using the servants' entrance, Kathy entered the great hall and stood alone in the empty space. When he finally appeared, she burst into tears.

Morrison Henley wrapped her in his long arms. "What terrible luck." He cooed over her until she settled.

"I've wet your lapels," she said, brushing off his chest. "And your cravat."

"Least of my worries. Let's have coffee in the morning room."

Soft yellow sofas, Turkish rugs, and Georgian furniture greeted them. The sun streamed through the eastern windows, gilding the lofty room. Morrison, a large man, plunged onto a sofa and pushed a lock of brown hair from his face. He seemed tired with a hint more gray at his temples, but his gaze was filled with concern.

“Is there another chance?”

Kathy shook her head and searched her bag for a tissue. A housekeeper entered and placed a tray on the table.

“Thank you, Catriona,” Henley said, “Please see that we’re not disturbed.” He turned to Kathy. “My poor Katherine.”

Only Henley called her that, which made her feel special and loved. After a few moments, Morrison frowned and put on his Member of Parliament voice. “Katherine, this is seriously bad timing. I have urgent calls to make and a lunch meeting I cannot miss.”

Kathy had met Henley three years ago at the tennis club. She’d had other brief flings but her relationship with Henley ran deeper; he had a way of understanding her. She was safe with him. Now she fought for control, her voice strained.

"After the first two . . . I was so angry. I was sure they'd stuffed up. I mean, how could they fail? The chances are high. After two IVFs." She shook her head. "How I hate it! It's so . . . invasive. So un-private. They used to be called privates. Huh. Now they should call them publics. I'm just another specimen. Like one of Simon's precious plants."

He took her hand. His eyes glazed with desire. The lock of hair fell back across his face. He pushed it away and smiled.

"I know what you need. We can fly to Nice tomorrow. The yacht is at Cannes. We'll sail to Lavagna and enjoy some decent Italian fare without people or paparazzi."

"Morrie, I can't leave Ruby in the middle of chemo."

"Then come and stay here with me." He kissed her fingers. "And in the meantime?"

"I'm a wreck. And I'm still in my tennis things."

"I don't care."

* * *

After the half-hour drive to Gloucester, Simon was still fuming. He hated how Kathy always reacted to bad news. She could be so spiteful. He also hated how

she managed to rile him. They'd been on the emotional rollercoaster of cancer for too long. Simon felt helpless—defeated. *Well, I will do what I can do.* And that meant researching plants.

If it wasn't for Ruby, he'd scrap the whole expedition. He dreaded leaving her. But if it worked, it would help others too. He'd go, despite the sacrifice of leaving his family. *Is that what the dream meant?* He glanced down. *Human feet, no hooves.* But he couldn't shake the heavy sense of premonition. *Was that my death? Or Ruby's?*

"Morning, Mr. Archer. Bad day?" The receptionist had a kind face.

"Is it that obvious? Sorry." He tried to smile. "How is she?"

"Her hemoglobin is back to normal and her white blood count is stabilizing. She can go home this afternoon."

"That's wonderful." He felt warmth radiating through his whole being.

The nurse smiled. "She's a real little trooper, is Ruby."

"She is amazing."

Ruby was sitting in bed with a book. Bouquets and

pink balloons brightened the room. His daughter had Kathy's high cheekbones and turned-up nose with his wide eyes and broad forehead. Her glorious red hair had surprised them, for Kathy's was dark. Today, however, Ruby's was cropped and the color of dead flowers.

"Daddy!" She threw her arms around him. Simon kissed her forehead. Her face was as pasty as boiled rice, but her eyes sparkled.

He pulled a chair closer. "What are you reading?"

"*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. It's funny. Jess gave it to me." Ruby waved at the girl in the next bed and grinned. "There's a place called 'platform nine and three-quarters.' You have to go through the magic wall to get there. I was nine and three-quarters until yesterday."

Simon gazed at her. *She must still be feeling dreadful*. Suddenly, he was inside his dream, again. The blood and the rope around his neck. *Is that the magic wall I walked through? . . . Silly nonsense*.

He took her hand. "I've come to say goodbye, my darling." Again, fear churned his stomach. He fought it. *She'll be fine*, Simon convinced himself. *It will take more than a dose of leukemia to kill my daughter*.

"Where are you going?" Ruby asked.

"Malaysia. Remember? The people use special plants there. Maybe they'll work against your illness. I'm going to find them."

"Thank you, Daddy. I know you will. Anyway, I'm getting better. I'm going home today." She frowned. "Is where you're going dangerous?"

The Foreign Office advised against unnecessary travel to the Thai border, exactly where he was planning to go. But the trip was necessary—very necessary.

"No, darling. Not really. Well, perhaps a little. But I'm going with a friend. We'll be fine."

Ruby smiled. "I love you, Daddy. You're my hero."

He kissed her. As he stood, he wiped away a tear.

"And you are mine."