



ONE

DEEP AND CRISP AND EVEN

The little girl with the mechanical arm reached for the brightly wrapped package that was almost as big as she was. Then she paused and looked up at me.

‘It’s all right, Hope,’ I said gently. ‘It’s for you. Merry Christmas.’

A radiant smile appeared on the girl’s pinched and delicate features – she still looked under-nourished despite devouring every last scrap of food placed in front of her over the past three months – and then she dragged the package out from beneath the tree. She had eyed the tree warily at first, watching from the top of the stairs as Hawkins and I had manoeuvred it through the front door, its piney aroma causing her nose to wrinkle with suspicion. When Clover and I had dressed it on the night before Christmas Eve, bedecking its green-needled branches with trinkets and strips of coloured paper and small cloth bags containing fruit and nuts and sweets, she had sidled into the drawing room and stood silently beside the log fire for a while, eyeing us in bewilderment.

‘What are you doing?’ she had asked finally.

It was Clover who answered. In her long coral-coloured skirt and matching fitted jacket over a high-collared blouse and black, buttoned-up boots, she looked like a kindly schoolteacher or governess. Her formerly maroon hair was now a deep chestnut-brown, and held in place with various pins and grips and a tortoiseshell comb.

‘We’re decorating the tree,’ she said. ‘Haven’t you seen a Christmas tree before?’

Hope thought about it for a moment, then shook her head.

‘Would you like to help?’ Clover asked.

Hope considered the question carefully. We waited. We had learned to give her time, and that to rush her was often to panic her.

‘What is its purpose?’ she asked eventually.

‘Its purpose?’ At a loss, Clover glanced at me.

‘Well, it’s... traditional to bring a tree into the house at this time of year. Especially an evergreen like this one.’ My fingers brushed the tip of one spiny-needled branch.

‘Why?’

I glanced towards the row of windows on the far side of the room, but the heavy damask drapes had already been drawn, shutting out the night. ‘You know how cold and dark it is outside, how all the flowers are dead at this time of year, and how all the trees have shed their leaves?’

Hope nodded.

‘Well, the evergreens keep their leaves all year round. And so we bring them into our homes as a reminder of renewal and rebirth.’ To be honest, I had no idea if I was making this up or if I’d read it somewhere. ‘Also it reminds us of the birth of baby Jesus in Bethlehem.’

Hope looked at me blankly. ‘Who is baby Jesus?’

‘Blimey, you really *do* have a lot to learn, don’t you?’

Smirking, Clover said, ‘Baby Jesus was born a long, long time ago. His mother and father followed a star to a place called Bethlehem, and baby Jesus was born in a stable on Christmas Day, and that’s why we celebrate Christmas.’ Under her breath she murmured, ‘Or so the story goes.’

Hope frowned. As she involuntarily flexed the muscles in the stump of her skinny right arm the metal pistons and pulleys in the artificial limb began to creak and move, causing the pincer-like claw that served as her hand to open and close.

‘Why do you decorate the tree?’ she asked.

‘To make it look pretty. Don’t you think it’s pretty?’ said Clover.

Another moment’s thought, then Hope nodded. ‘Yes, but not as pretty as you.’

Clover laughed. ‘What a little charmer you’ve become.’ She shook a tiny bell, which she’d been about to hang on the tree, making it tinkle. ‘So – *do* you want to help?’

This time Hope nodded eagerly.

As Clover lifted Hope up so she could hang decorations on the higher branches, I reflected, not for the first time, what an open book this little girl was, and how much her naivety and lack of knowledge shocked me.

It wasn’t her fault, of course. For as long as Hope could remember – or was prepared to remember – she had lived in a tiny cage in a basement laboratory beneath a hospital, her existence as a living subject for the vile experiments of a surgeon called Dr Tallarian dominated by misery, pain and fear.

When I’d rescued her and brought her home (though in truth it had been Hawkins who’d done that; I’d been overcome by smoke inhalation, having attacked Tallarian’s henchman with an oil lamp and inadvertently set the laboratory on fire), she’d been all but feral, tearing up sheets and clothing to build nests in cupboards and under the bed we’d provided for her, and using the corner of her room, instead of the chamber pot, as a toilet. She couldn’t dress herself, had barely been able to speak, and had gone crazy at the feel of soap and water on her skin. She’d been terrified and mistrustful, spitting and snarling and lashing out at anyone who came near.

But in the three months since then her progress had been remarkable. Hope was like a sponge, absorbing knowledge, responding to the kindness and patience shown to her not only by Clover and me, but by the rest of the household staff (particularly Mrs Peake, the housekeeper, and Polly, one of the maidservants), and latching on quickly to whatever was required of her. She’d learned to speak, or at least had found her voice, since when she had barely stopped asking questions. She had begun to dress herself, to wash regularly, to sleep in her bed instead of under it, and to use a fork or a spoon to eat with – which, of course, she held in her left hand, as her right, the pincer-like claw, was little more than an encumbrance.

But it wasn’t the claw’s inefficiency that bothered me. The real concern was the artificial arm to which the claw was attached, and not only because it was heavy and impractical. Where the metal was grafted into Hope’s flesh, halfway between her shoulder and elbow, the skin was red and inflamed, prone to infection. Mrs Peake and her staff fought a constant battle to keep the wound clean, though there

was a danger in that too, because we were all aware that if the metal became too wet too often it would start to corrode, which could, if the rust seeped into Hope's bloodstream, cause septicaemia.

In my view, Hope's metal arm was therefore not all that different to having a bomb attached to her body – one that was currently dormant, but that might start ticking at any time. The obvious solution would be to have it amputated, but in this day and age such an operation was too risky. Anaesthesia, in the form of ether, chloroform, even cocaine, was hit and miss, and the body trauma to patients was often considerable. It was still common for patients to die of shock or blood loss or of later infections contracted during surgery. Of course, if we'd had twenty-first century techniques at our disposal it would have been a doddle. But we didn't.

I watched Hope opening the largest of the Christmas presents we'd bought for her – to be honest, we'd spoiled her, but if there was ever a child who deserved to be spoiled, it was her – and tried to put my anxieties out of my head, at least for today. Admittedly it wasn't easy. It wasn't just Hope I was worried about, but my youngest daughter, Kate. Kate had been abducted by an individual or group who were after an artefact in the form of a small obsidian heart, which until recently had been in my possession. If I didn't recover the heart, which I'd last seen in the hands of DI Jensen, the detective leading the enquiry into my daughter's disappearance – or, more likely, a shape-shifter in the form of Jensen – I would never be able to get back to my own time. And if I didn't get back, then the likelihood was that I would never see Kate again.

But even if I *did* recover the heart, I knew it would still be only the first step on the long road towards a reunion with my daughter. Of course, the fact that the heart was no longer in my hands could mean that, in the twenty-first century, Kate had been released by her captors. On the other hand it could be an entirely different group that had snatched the heart – but I had no way of even beginning the process of finding that out until the thing was back in my possession. But who was to say the heart was still even in this time period? Whoever possessed it now had the potential to use it to travel in time, in which case it could already be permanently beyond my reach. There'd been periods in the past few months when my problems had seemed so

insurmountable that I'd sunk into despair. It was at these times when Clover's calm, reassuring presence had been invaluable.

'Forget about the bigger picture,' she'd said to me more than once. 'Take it one step at a time.'

The first time she'd said that I'd lost my rag with her, had accused her of being insensitive. 'It's not your daughter who's missing,' I'd snapped. 'Every day that passes feels like a day where she's getting further away from me.'

'Except she isn't, is she?' Clover said calmly. 'Think about it, Alex. Just because time's passing here doesn't mean it's passing at the same rate for Kate. If you get the heart back, even if it takes six months, you could theoretically use it to travel back to the moment after you left.'

It was true, and her words were a comfort. The knowledge that the heart could make the passage of time irrelevant, that somewhere, in the future, Kate's existence was not necessarily continuing without me, but was, to all intents and purposes, suspended, was, I think, the only thing that kept me from going mad.

Using both her real hand and her metal claw, Hope was now tearing the paper from the parcel. Beneath was a doll's house, a real beauty, lovingly hand-carved and painted, breathtaking in its attention to detail.

'Do you like it?' Clover asked. The doll's house had been her idea.

'Yes,' said Hope automatically. Her nose wrinkled. 'What is it?'

'What does it look like?' I said.

'A house. Like this one. But little. Too little to live in.'

Clover knelt on the carpet beside her and leaned forward, dragging another couple of smaller parcels out from beneath the tree. 'Open these.'

Obediently Hope tore the paper from one parcel, and then the other. The first contained miniature items of furniture – tables and chairs, beds and wardrobes, a bath on four tiny clawed feet, a dressing table, a foot stool, a writing desk, a pair of washstands – and a bunch of even smaller items, all carved out of wood: bottles, hairbrushes, a joint of meat, ornaments, paintings, chamber pots, houseplants. The second parcel contained the house's occupants: a mother, a father and three children (one boy, one girl, one indeterminately gendered baby), plus a number of servants, including a chauffeur and a gardener.

'It's your very own house,' Clover said. 'And all these things are for you to put in it. You've even got your own family, look.' She held up

the little girl and jiggled her from side to side. 'Hello, Hope,' she said in a squeaky voice.

Hope was fascinated. She reached for the wooden figure Clover was holding, but then paused, her hand hovering in the air. Uncertainly she said, 'Aren't *you* my family?'

'Well... yes, of course,' said Clover. 'We're your *real* family. But this is a pretend family for you to play with.'

'But what do I do with them?'

'Whatever you like. You're in control, so you can give them names and decide who they are. You can use your voice to make them speak to each other, and your imagination to make up stories about them and send them off on wild adventures.'

'Remember what we said about imagination?' I prompted.

'It's when you make up things that aren't real. Not lies,' Hope added hastily. 'Lies are different. They're bad.'

'That's right,' said Clover. 'But imagination is good. Because making up stories is fun. And it forces you to think.'

'It exercises the little grey cells,' said Hope solemnly, repeating something I'd told her, making both of us laugh.

'Exactly,' said Clover. 'And the more you think the quicker your mind works and the cleverer you become. Because you need to think to make decisions, to decide what's right and wrong. You see?'

Hope nodded slowly, looking at the doll's house. 'So do *I* decide where all these things go in the house?'

Clover nodded. 'You can put things where you like. And if you decide afterwards you don't like them where they are, you can move them around.'

'Same with the people,' I said. 'You can decide what sort of people they are. You can decide whether they're happy or sad, or nice or nasty, or...' I floundered.

'Brave or cowardly,' Clover offered.

Thoughtfully Hope picked up the father and brought him up close to her face, staring at him as if trying to read his personality in his painted eyes.

'Can he be an explorer?' she asked.

I smiled. 'If that's what you want.'

'What are you going to call him?' asked Clover.

Hope looked at me. 'I shall call him... Alex.'

My smile widened. 'And what about the mother?'

'Clover,' Hope said without hesitation.

Clover glanced my way, raising her eyebrows in amusement. Since finding ourselves here, we had decided, for the sake of decorum, that it would be best if we posed as husband and wife. To live together under any other circumstances would have been regarded as dubious at best, scandalous at worst. It would have led to adverse attention, unneeded hostility, maybe even a downturn in my business interests and investments – all of which had been set up before I got here, and which thankfully managed to tick over quite nicely with the minimum of involvement from me.

But even having established a veneer of respectability, Clover and I still occasionally caused eyebrows to be raised. I'd known vaguely before finding myself here that the Victorian era was an age when gender equality was still in its infancy, when women didn't yet have the right to vote, and when Emmeline Pankhurst and her suffragettes, their movement still very much in its earliest days, spent most of their time battling against an overwhelmingly hostile tide of public opinion. But it wasn't until I was actually living *among* the Victorians that I realised just *how* chauvinistic a society it was, and how entrenched was the notion that women were second-class citizens in all departments. It was honestly believed among the majority of men – or at least the ones I'd encountered – that women who refused to conform to the expected role of being a demure housewife were thought to be suffering from an 'affliction of the brain'.

Clover had adapted to Victorian society quickly and was well aware of the need to rein in her usual garrulousness, but even so, she could not exactly be described as demure, at least not by the standards of the day. Several of my business colleagues who had visited the house had been shocked when she had answered questions directed at me. One of them, the managing director of a shipping company in which I had shares, had even taken me aside and suggested I encourage my wife to make house calls on other ladies in the neighbourhood, or perhaps become involved in charitable work, in order to curb what he described as her 'tendency towards vulgarity'.

Clover had laughed when I'd told her this, but it had annoyed her

too. 'If he thinks it's vulgar just for a woman to express an opinion,' she said, 'maybe we ought to take him back with us when we find the heart. It would blow his tiny mind.'

Clover had been here when I'd arrived, installed apparently by an older version of me, who had been in possession of the heart I was currently searching for. He had explained just enough of the situation to prepare her for my arrival, and this had helped to cement my trust in her. Before her appearance, despite all we'd been through together, I'd harboured a lingering thread of doubt – in fact, if I was honest with myself, I still did, but it was now gossamer thin, and appeared only when I was overly stressed or tired, which in turn tended to bring out the paranoia in me. I reasoned that if a *future* version of me had brought her here to help, then she *must* be trustworthy – at least according to my older self. It followed, therefore, that if Clover *did* have a hidden agenda, she must be playing a long game – a *very* long game, in fact.

This, of course, was assuming that Clover's claim to have been transported here by an older me was true. However, as Hawkins had confirmed her story, I was inclined to believe it. Now and again it did occur to me to wonder whether *both* of them might be in league with my enemies, and were protecting me only to preserve me for an even bigger fall somewhere down the line. But that was a ridiculous and destructive way to think, wasn't it? I mean, what, for them, would be the point?

And believing Clover's story gave me a reason to be optimistic about my own personal future, and that was something I was loath to relinquish. The idea that an older me had brought her here, together with evidence that future versions of me had used the heart to perform other deeds – not least buy this house and set up an entire portfolio of business interests – enabled me to cling to the hope that, whatever happened, eventually everything would turn out okay.

Was it really that simple, though? Was my fate already mapped out? I'd seen dozens of movies where the hero or villain went back in time and changed history, thus altering the future they'd come from. But in truth I had no idea how time really worked, how flexible it was. Whenever I tried to think it through, it tied my head in knots. It always came back to variations on that age-old conundrum: what if you travelled back in time and killed your grandfather – would you

cease to exist? The impossibility of that suggested that time travel was a nonsense, that it couldn't be feasible. Yet it *was* feasible; I was proof of it. But maybe time had its own rules that couldn't be broken? Maybe the person who *tried* to kill their grandfather would find themselves constantly thwarted for one reason or another?

The fact that I didn't know, *couldn't* know, meant that I couldn't afford to be blasé about my future. I couldn't assume that just because I had 'evidence' that my future self was in possession of the heart it automatically meant I was destined to find it.

Once Hope had opened her other presents – a doll; a stuffed horse; a drawing set comprising paper, pencils and an India rubber; a toy theatre with cardboard figures on sticks; a music box; a magic lantern with slides of animals and famous buildings – she sat in a kind of stupor, her eyes dazzled and dreamy. For a girl who'd had nothing her whole life, who had no concept of the notion of 'Christmas', and didn't even know how old she was, this was probably too much. Yet Clover and I had wanted to treat her, had wanted to try to roll all the Christmases she'd missed into one glorious celebration. Of course, material things didn't bring happiness, they didn't heal a scarred soul, but we were doing our best to deal with that too. We were providing Hope with love and kindness and security, and hoping it would be enough.

Clover, still kneeling beside Hope, said brightly, 'Right, what shall we play with first?' She reached for the magic lantern, her eyes shining, as though showing Hope how to play the role of Eager Child on Christmas Morning. 'How about this?'

With something to focus on, Hope blinked and nodded, a smile creeping across her face. Watching her I was hit with a sudden, unexpected wave of sadness. Although I wasn't missing out on Christmas morning with Kate – that was a different time, a different world, away – it felt as though I was. I couldn't shake the notion that Christmas was a time for family, and that Kate should be here with me, with us, opening presents and joining in the celebrations. For a moment I saw her, sitting on the carpet with Hope, squinting adorably behind her pink-framed spectacles. I remembered last Christmas morning – or at least, *my* last Christmas morning: Kate's excitement; her squeals of delight as she opened her presents. I'd made us both

pancakes for breakfast, and then we'd sat on the settee in our pyjamas, my daughter burrowing into the gap between my arm and my hip like a warm puppy as we watched – for about the hundredth time – *Toy Story* on the telly.

My eyes blurred with tears; my head went stuffy and hot. I sniffed and Clover glanced at me. Her eyes flashed a question: *Are you all right?*

I stood up as unobtrusively as possible. Hope was still preoccupied with the magic lantern, gazing with awe as the first image – a springing tiger, mouth open in a snarl – appeared in faint, broken patches on furniture and the wall beyond.

'I... er... just have to deal with something,' I muttered. 'I'll be back soon.'

Clover nodded her understanding as I crossed the room and slipped out of the door.

In the corridor, I leaned against the wall, pressed my cool fingers to my closed eyelids and took a shuddering breath. I exhaled hard, opening my eyes in time to glimpse my breath as a faint curl of mist in the air. This house on the edge of Kensington Gardens, which I had suddenly found myself rich enough to own, was big and high-ceilinged, its walls adorned with paintings, mirrors and stuffed animal heads, its many rooms crammed with furniture, fabrics and artefacts from China and the Far East. Sumptuous as it was, though, like the majority of homes at this time it didn't have central heating. Hot running water, yes – that was heated from the kitchen range. But for now we lived, as Clover had put it, 'like cavemen', Mrs Peake and her staff having to stoke up the fires in every room each morning to stave off the biting winter cold.

Twitching my nose at the smell of slowly roasting turkey drifting up from the basement kitchen, I crossed the icy hall, bypassing the foot of the wide staircase, which faced the front door across an expanse of patterned floor tiles. The first door I came to on the opposite side of the hallway opened into the morning room, but I ignored that and continued along the corridor leading to the rear of the house. Wall-mounted gas lamps, whose paraffin-like fumes overwhelmed the delectable aroma of our Christmas dinner, dispelled the deepening gloom here. Gaslight might look pretty in films and TV dramas, but as well as being whiffy it gobbled up huge amounts of oxygen,

which meant that unless the room you were in was well ventilated (and who wants a well ventilated room in the dead of winter?) you invariably ended up with a stinker of a headache. I'd told Hawkins and the household staff that as soon as electricity became domestically available I'd be signing up for it. Mrs Peake was dubious; she thought electricity was dangerous and unreliable, that it would never catch on. When I tried to assure her that it was the way forward she gave me pitying looks.

Pushing open the solid oak door into the library, I was met with a billow of warmth. It enfolded me like an arm around the shoulders, drawing me towards the log fire, which danced and crackled behind the dark mesh of the fireguard. Although real fires were cosy, they left a thin layer of sooty grime on every surface – not good for the hundreds of leather-bound books lining the floor-to-ceiling shelves. This had been one of the things that had most surprised me about Victorian London – how horribly *dirty* it was. I'd known about the Industrial Revolution, the dark, satanic mills, the growth of mechanisation, all that. I'd even known about the rookeries, the workhouses, the terrible poverty – and yet there had still been a part of my brain that associated the Victorian era with elegance and innocence and romanticism.

Not so. Victorian London was *filthy*. And it wasn't just the poor areas of London that were bad, it was *everywhere*. Coal was used not only in industry, but to heat virtually every household in the city. This meant that every day thousands of fires belched out soot and fumes, as a result of which the stonework of most of the buildings was black, the pavements muddy underfoot, the air itself not only gritty and hazy, but often so smoky it was sometimes hard to breathe. On days when the air was particularly damp, the smog was so brown and dense you couldn't see more than a couple of feet in any direction. Also there was shit everywhere – dog shit on the pavements, horse shit in the road. And the people smelled. Because there was no deodorant, few showers, or bathrooms even, and clothes were hand-washed and often hung out to dry in smoky environments, even those who were lucky enough (or scrupulous enough) to wash regularly had a slightly musty, sweaty, smoky odour about them. It wasn't nice, but it was something you had to accept and get used to.

And I *had* got used to it in many ways. It's amazing how quickly you

can adapt to a new environment. Which didn't mean I wasn't still often struck by how amazing and terrifying and disorientating this situation was. I had *travelled in time*. I was *living in history*. Queen Victoria was on the throne (and next year would become the longest-reigning monarch in British history); the Jack the Ripper murders had happened only seven years ago, which meant that the killer, whoever he was, could still be alive. Arthur Conan Doyle was on hiatus from writing his Sherlock Holmes stories, but was yet to write his most famous, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Elsewhere in the world, the likes of Monet, Lenin, H.G. Wells, Oscar Wilde, Sigmund Freud and Joseph Lister were going about their business. The Eiffel Tower was a mere six years old; last year the Lumière brothers had invented the cinematograph; somewhere in Germany X-rays had just been discovered.

Sometimes I would literally get the shakes thinking about it all. I thought about it now as I walked slowly across to the windows that overlooked the stretch of lawn at the side of the house. I was a man who could see into the future. If I wanted I could use my foreknowledge in all sorts of ways to earn myself a fortune – or rather, a greater fortune than the one I had *already* earned.

The snow outside was a foot deep, even deeper where it had banked up against the trees and bushes at the perimeter of my property. Though I couldn't see anyone, I knew there were people watching the house; people patrolling the area *around* the house, on the lookout for anything suspicious. They constituted a small fraction of the vast army I employed, or at least paid, not only to guard my interests but to keep their eyes and ears open for any news of the heart. It was an army that had been recruited from all walks of life.

Those who guarded the house did so on a rotational basis, and had instructions to be as circumspect as possible. They'd been handpicked by Hawkins – tough men who would otherwise be working on the docks or the railways, or even keeping themselves afloat by nefarious means. In view of the weather, I'd instructed Mrs Peake to keep them supplied with bread and cheese and beef tea. I'd even told Hawkins to make sure they took turns to come inside now and again to warm themselves by the kitchen range.

How effective the guard would be if the Wolves of London decided to launch an attack I had no idea, but their presence gave me some

peace of mind. I watched the snow drift lazily down from a sky so colourless it was as if God had forgotten to fill it in. The snow formed spirals, helixes; it was mesmerising. After a while I wondered if the patterns were trying to tell me something.

I felt calmer now, less friable. *White Christmas*, I thought, and smiled at the idea of becoming an internationally renowned songwriter. I wondered what would happen if I were to 'write' songs I knew from the future – songs by Burt Bacharach, Irving Berlin, say – and claim them as my own. Would time warp and crack and shatter? Would reality unravel?

Something popped in the fire – a rusty nail, a knot of wood. I turned away from the window and went back to spend Christmas with my 'family'.

Later, after turkey and plum pudding had been eaten, after charades had been played, after Hope had collapsed into bed, exhausted but happy, after Mrs Peake and the girls – Polly, Florence and Hattie – had retired to their rooms at the top of the house, and Clover and Hawkins were in the drawing room, sharing a bottle of port and chatting in front of the fire, I went outside.

I did this most nights. It had become a habit. I was like a crusty old colonel in some far-flung outpost, patrolling the perimeter of his domain to check on the morale of his men and ensure that all was well before sealing the lid on another day.

I went armed. Both Hawkins and Clover insisted on it. I carried a howdah pistol, a large-calibre handgun, which had been designed for use against the lions, tigers and other dangerous animals in colonial Africa and India. Hawkins had acquired it for me – I didn't ask from where. Again I had no idea how useful it would be against the Wolves of London – Tallarian and his mechanical army, the shape-shifter – but at least it *felt* reassuring, and it allowed Clover and Hawkins to convince themselves I was as well-protected as I could be.

As it was Christmas night I went out armed not only with my trusty pistol, but with a hamper of goodies – turkey sandwiches, a quarter wheel of cheese, mince pies, Christmas cake, a bottle of good brandy – with which to feed the troops. Although it had stopped

snowing it was still bitterly cold and my breath hung on the air like a Yuletide apparition. My feet made soft crumping sounds as I plodded through the snow, the shadows in the depressions I left behind shimmering blue in the moonlight. From the front door I turned left, trudging parallel to the front of the house, before turning left again into deeper shadow when I reached the first corner. As I plodded along the side of the house, taking exaggerated, clown-like steps, I scanned the black, jagged screen of trees and bushes at the edge of the property, but all was still.

Then something shifted, black on black. I peered harder, my right hand slipping inside my fur-collared topcoat – all my coats and jackets had been fitted with a special pocket in which I could carry my pistol. Like a globule of oil breaking free from a slick, a shape detached itself from the larger clump of blackness behind it. As it moved towards me the snow creaked like polystyrene.

‘Name yourself,’ I challenged.

‘Frith, sir.’ The voice was gruff and phlegmy, with a pronounced Scottish accent. ‘Donald Frith.’

I relaxed, though not entirely. The shape-shifter could adopt the guise of anyone so perfectly it was impossible to tell the fake from the real thing. Already I had seen it in the forms of Clover, Barnaby McCallum and DI Jensen. Who was to say it couldn’t catch me off-guard by taking on the form of one of my protectors?

‘Tell me today’s word, Mr Frith.’

I heard the man clear his throat in the darkness, as if about to make an important proclamation. ‘Crackerjack.’

I smiled. My hand slipped from beneath my coat. ‘Do you have a lantern?’

‘I do, sir.’

‘Then light it, by all means.’

It hadn’t taken me long to adopt the Victorian speech patterns I heard around me every day, though I sometimes wondered whether the idioms and rhythms I found myself slipping into had more to do with Sherlock Holmes movies and TV period dramas than actual reality. If the natives ever thought I spoke a bit oddly they didn’t mention it. Perhaps they were too polite. Or perhaps they thought I was a foreigner and that English was my second language. I was purposely vague about my origins.

After a few seconds of fumbling, a Lucifer flared in the darkness and next moment a brass lantern in Frith’s other hand was glowing brightly. Frith held it up, as if to emphasise that he’d complied with my suggestion, his black form acquiring a flickering orange definition, which gave the snow around him the appearance of softly glowing lava. When he grinned, his craggy, bewhiskered face crumpled up like an old leather shoe, full of pits and grooves.

‘There you are, sir,’ he said. ‘A very Merry Christmas to you.’

‘And to you, Mr Frith. Though I’m afraid that yours can’t have been as merry as all that. I’m sorry that you drew the short straw today.’

‘The short straw, sir?’

‘What I mean is, I’m sorry that you’re out here alone on Christmas night.’

Frith shook his grizzled, leonine head. Like the rest of the men that Hawkins had selected, he was tall and bulky, though some of his bulk could be attributed to the fact that in order to keep warm he wore numerous layers of clothing. Much of it, in common with the majority of London’s population, was baggy, colourless, patched, threadbare, ragged at the edges. The cap on his head, from which his badly cut hair jabbed like dark straw, resembled a cowpat with a brim; the scarf around his neck was not much more than a length of grey rag. The pockets of his brownish jacket sagged and gaped, as though full of stones, and his boots were wrapped with cloth and twine to prevent them from falling apart.

‘Not at all, sir, not at all,’ he said amiably. ‘I’ve little else to do. And gainful employment keeps me from indulging in certain devilish temptations, if you get my drift.’ He tilted a hand towards his mouth in a drinking gesture.

I thought of the brandy in my hamper, and wondered whether it might be best to keep it there. ‘I hope I’m not depriving your family of your company, though, Mr Frith?’

‘All gone, sir,’ he said bluntly. ‘My wife was a good woman – too good for me. Took to her heels some years back and my bairns with her...’ He wafted a hand, as though scattering seed to the wind.

‘I’m sorry.’

Frith raised his bushy eyebrows in surprise. ‘Nothing for you to be sorry about, sir. Nothing at all.’

‘Even so,’ I said. Then in order to avoid awkwardness I patted the hamper. ‘I’ve brought you some sustenance. Thought you might be hungry.’

‘That’s powerful kind of you, sir. And I won’t deny that some wittles would be most welcome.’

I opened the hamper and told Frith to help himself. Before I could think about what I was saying, I added, ‘There’s plenty more where that came from.’

As soon as the words were out of my mouth I winced at the insinuation that my resources were bountiful when so many were starving, but Frith made no comment. After I’d watched him eat his fill, cramming the food into his mouth and swallowing almost without chewing, as if afraid I might suddenly withdraw the offer, I hesitantly offered him a nip of the brandy ‘to keep out the cold’.

‘I’d best not, sir, if you don’t mind,’ Frith said. ‘Not if I desire to keep my wits.’

Once we’d wished each other goodnight, Frith blew out his lantern and melted back into the shadows. There were six men guarding the house, and I encountered them all as I performed my nightly circuit. They were all more or less like Frith – shabby and gruff, but polite, deferential. They were inordinately grateful for the food I’d brought, and they never ceased to be surprised by my concern for their welfare, though they tried not to show it. Their diffidence made me uncomfortable; this was one of the things I’d found hardest to come to terms with since arriving here. I wanted to tell them I was a fraud, that I was no more a gentleman than they were. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. The borders between the haves and the have-nots were too rigid. I knew if I’d tried to get closer to any of them, they would have regarded me with confusion and suspicion. The Victorian attitude, so alien to me, was that the rich and the poor held on to their pride by knowing their place in the scheme of things and sticking to it. There was little ambition among the working classes; the prevailing mood of aspiration, of attainment, hadn’t yet filtered down to the lower stratas of society. There were exceptions, but based on my experience over the past three months the general consensus seemed to be that the poor and downtrodden were where they were simply because God had decided that was to be their lot in life.

None of the men had anything to report. All was quiet. I reached the last corner, having done almost a full circuit of the house, when something caught my eye. Across the white blanket of snow leading from the dark mass of the hedge at the front of the house to the now-dormant flowerbed beneath the drawing room’s bay window, was a set of animal tracks. This wasn’t unusual in itself, but it was the nature of the tracks that bothered me.

Placing the now almost empty hamper on the snowy ground, I approached the line of tracks cautiously, wary that whatever had made them might be lurking nearby. My hand crept again to the pistol in my jacket as I followed the tracks to their source, the hedge at the edge of my property.

The tracks by the hedge were those of a small bird, like a sparrow, with three toes at the front and a clawed spur at the back. These tracks made just enough of an impression to be picked out by the moonlight, a series of regular, icy-blue scratches on the otherwise pristine blanket of snow.

What was unusual was that as the tracks got closer to the house, they *changed*. The twig-like toes became thicker and less defined, and the tracks themselves deeper. Within the space of half a dozen steps, the markings altered shape completely, the toes becoming broader, more rounded, the rear spur expanding and flattening out.

It was as though a bird had landed on the lawn, and then, as it approached the house, had changed into a cat or a dog. The creature had walked up to the house, hung around by the bay window for a while (there was a mess of footprints here to indicate it had moved around a bit) and then had padded back towards the hedge, where its tracks had transformed once again into a bird’s. The returning tracks then ended abruptly a few metres from the hedge, as if the bird had flown away.

Instinctively I peered into the moonlit winter sky, but saw nothing moving up there.

Nothing, that is, except a few random snowflakes spiralling lazily from the heavens to settle upon the earth.