

# Chapter One

## Mount Everest Base Camp, 1924

Five miles above sea level, Mount Everest rose above the Tibetan plain like a monstrous stalagmite. Surrounding her were the cloud-piercing Himalayan peaks Lhotse, Nuptse, and Pumori, and at her base lay the frozen tongue of Rongbuk glacier. Directly below the glacier, seeming like it had been birthed by the mountain itself, stood Rongbuk Monastery, stepping up the mountain in a series of stone buildings. The monastery served as a spiritual sentinel for Buddhist monks who lived, meditated, and searched for enlightenment.

The British expedition camped in the great mountain's shadow. Their canvas tents sprouted over the moraine like a field of wild mushrooms. For weeks, the men had waited for a break in the weather, waited for the opportunity to be first to climb Mount Everest. Time was running out. The monsoon was coming.

Andrew (Sandy) Irvine, at age twenty-two, was the youngest expedition member. With the high peaks looming behind him, he sat perched on an outcrop repairing the bent strut of Bentley Beetham's camera. The new Vestpocket Model B Kodak had just been introduced. Its light weight made it perfect for mountain climbing. He brushed back a lock of straw-colored hair and blew on his reddened, wind-chaffed hands for warmth. Sandy understood that he was the expedition's go-to-man when mechanical things needed fixing, and he didn't mind it a bit. As

he oiled the bellow mechanism, Sandy manipulated it, and then wound in a spool of film in the distance came the welcome clank of yak bells. Bloody wonderful, he thought, supplies were here and along with them letters from Emma and his family. Emma. His beautiful, free-spirited fiancée. He'd reread each of her letters so often that they were practically in tatters. Just to see her words on the page brought contentment to his soul.

At the sound of boots crunching on ice, Sandy glanced up. George Mallory approached with his usual cat-like grace. His thick, dark hair, disheveled by the wind, stood straight up above a pair of robin's egg blue eyes. After all their months together, Sandy still felt a sense of awe in his presence. No one in England had a more dynamic style or a more intuitive sense of rock climbing than George.

Sitting down next to Sandy, he brushed dirt off his puttee leggings. "The supplies and mail are arriving. I'm expecting a letter from my sister, Mary, she's going to let me know the moment the monsoon hits Ceylon."

"Ceylon's thousands of miles away." Sandy exclaimed.

"True, but after leaving Ceylon, the monsoon barrels straight for us, so it'll give us some idea when to expect it here."

"If we don't summit by the end of May..." Sandy's voice trailed off with concern.

"Doesn't give us much time, does it? Probably two more weeks, maybe three if we're lucky." Then George twisted around and studied Mount Everest, as if he'd never seen it before.

"Not a beautiful mountain, is she? Jagged, asymmetrical, and one deadly brute."

Sandy nodded his agreement. Deadly was right. During the 1922 Mount Everest expedition, seven porters were swept away by an avalanche and buried alive.

"I've come to tell you that Bruce and I will make the first summit push."

“Jolly good. When do you go?” Sandy asked.

“Very soon, probably in a couple of days.”

“You can count on me for any support.” Sandy held up the camera he’d been fixing.

“These new cameras are fragile, you should bring two along, just in case one malfunctions.”

“Excellent idea, I’ll borrow Sommerville’s.”

The bell’s clanking grew louder and finally the caravan, a long ribbon of men and animals, came into sight, wending its way up the slope. Bataar, the leader, was out in front, followed by men and yaks. In the intense cold, vapor streaming from the animals’ noses appeared like dragon smoke, and with the exception of eyes and nose, every inch of the yaks was covered by an extraordinary amount of shaggy hair.

Picking up the camera, Sandy started snapping pictures. “Emma’s a professional photographer, and is always asking me for more photos.”

George looked interested. “You seem keen on her.”

Sandy smiled. “Very. We’re to marry.”

“Ahh, so it’s serious. Then I look forward to meeting her one day.”

“Dance at our wedding, but after I return, my expedition days are over. The danger frightens Emma too much.”

“Ruth feels the same way.” George took out his pipe, carefully cleaned out bits of charred tobacco, then packed in fresh. When he lit a match, the sharp smell of sulfur wafted up.

By now Bataar and his men had passed by and were proceeding to set up a makeshift corral near the camp. Due to the steep terrain, the animals couldn’t climb higher and now it was up to the men to ferry goods to the upper camps.

“There’s something mysterious about that man.”

“Bataar? Why?” Sandy asked, puzzled.

“Look at him. See how different he is from the others; much taller and with green eyes. He speaks Chinese, Tibetan, English, a smattering of Latin and who knows what else.”

George gave a sigh and tamped the glowing embers of tobacco with a pipe tool. “He’s leaving tomorrow best get all our letters ready for the yak express.”

After the mail was doled out, Sandy rushed back to his tent, his face flush with excitement. He opened Emma’s letter first and looked down at the one page in surprise. Usually her letters consisted of at least four sheets of paper.

*My Dear One,*

*I think of you always, and miss you in ways that you can’t believe. Mother was beside herself in anger when I broke off my engagement with Freddie and told her I would marry you instead. But you mustn’t worry. The situation at home became so intolerable that I am moving in with Christina Broom, my lovely, kind teacher, who sends you her regards. She offered me a room in her house and a position as her photography assistant. We are constantly busy photographing, so I am making a decent wage, and besides, I have a cottage in the Lake District which was bequeathed to me some years ago. Please be safe and careful for my sake. I can’t wait for the expedition to be over and once again you are in my arms. My new address in London is written on the back. I’ll write more when things are calmer. All my love.*

*Your,*

*Emma*

Sandy became crazed with worry. Emma’s mother was beside herself in anger... living with Christina Broom. This hellish situation of Emma’s was all due to him. From the very start

her mother had hated him. She insisted he wasn't suitable, for Sandy was neither rich nor was he titled, and Emma had offers from both. It was made clear to Sandy that he was in the way. Her family's fortunes suffered from bad investments, and their future rested on Emma marrying well.

Bubbling with agitation and helplessness, Sandy thrust the letter into his pocket and wandered over to the corral where Bataar was tending to a yak. He liked Bataar, liked his gentle dignity.

"Namaste."

"Hello, English."

Sandy lifted the lid of a can of Dunhill My Mixture 965 tobacco with his penknife and offered him some. Bataar reached into his pocket and pulled out a narrow, foot-long pipe partially covered in silver filigree and embedded with turquoise and coral. Sandy filled his Meerschaum pipe. Smoking their pipes, they fell into easy conversation.

"Nice taste, English. Like the smell of old leather."

"How was your trip?" Sandy asked.

"Travelling a big danger now, many bandits and warlords. New government very weak. I afraid Russia or Japan attack us."

"Why do you believe that?"

"I see this before. It is the way of nature. We are weak like an injured animal." He made a gesture with his hand slitting his throat. "Other animals will see weakness and hunt us."

A man's shadow crossed Sandy's field of vision, and a porter with a scar traveling down his left cheek, like a puckered seam on a jacket sidled up. He opened his grimy hand and there, sparkling in the sun, were two blueberry-sized uncut red stones resting on his palm. Holding up one of the stones to give a better view, he began speaking in a wheedling tone.

Sandy couldn't understand a word of Tibetan, but clearly the porter wanted to sell the stones. When Bataar shook his head, the porter turned to leave.

"Wait!" Sandy insisted. "Are you sure you don't want them?" he asked Bataar,

"No, English."

The porter was savvy enough to know when a man was interested. Smiling at Sandy like a brush salesman, he exposed a rotting front tooth. Sandy pushed down his revulsion for the man as the stench of decay wafted up, "How much does he want?"

"This man is evil, English. He picks the bones of the weak. Best not to have these stones. There is a bad story here. I feel it."

But Sandy visualized Emma wearing the stones and thought how beautiful they'd look against her red hair.

"What are they?"

The porter's answer was a shrug of the shoulders and a cold stare.

"Where are they from?"

"Ama Dablam." But there was a reluctance to the porter's reply.

Sandy could tell the man wasn't going to add anything more.

He counted out the agreed-upon money, more than he had intended to pay. Now to take them to Noel Odell, the expedition geologist, for his opinion. Probably just garnets, but still, they were beautiful. "Thanks, Bataar."

Bataar's expression turned grave. "Don't keep them, English." With that as a goodbye, he stooped to pick up a wooden pack saddle, and a wool saddle blanket decorated in an orange peony design set against an indigo blue background, and went to join his men.

Not surprisingly, Sandy found Noel Odell in his tent, studying a rock with a magnifying hand lens. Next to him was a small table stacked with dozens of rock specimens.

“They all look the same gray brown to me, how can you tell the difference?”

“And I could ask how you were able to improve our oxygen bottles so that they function so much better?”

With a laugh, Sandy handed him the small red stones. “Say, Noel, be a good egg, I just bought these. Can you tell me what they are? I hope I’m not a bloody fool for having done it.”

Noel shifted the focus of his hand lens, smoothed his light brown beard and mustache, and examined each one carefully, then picked up the pocket knife that lay next to his notes. “Do you know the Mohs scale?”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s a standardized scale of hardness to help identify minerals, developed a hundred years ago by the German geologist, Fredrick Mohs. All minerals have a characteristic hardness. For example, talc, which is very soft, is rated a one, while a diamond, on the other end of the scale, is a ten.” Noel tried to scratch his knife blade with one of the stones.

“Wait Noel! What are you doing?”

“This little test just told us plenty, because forged steel is a 7.5 on the scale. This stone left a scratch mark on my knife, so we know the stone is harder than the knife blade.”

A note of excitement crept into his voice. “Sandy you may have something here. It certainly could be a topaz or ruby, but until we do further testing in England, we won’t know. How exactly did you get them?”

Sandy proceeded to describe the porter, Bataar’s help, and the sinister feeling Bataar had about the stones.

Back in his tent, Sandy wrote a letter to Emma. He included in the envelope a roll of film; photos of the expedition members, an itinerant monk, camp scenes, yaks, and Bataar with his men. He was about to seal the envelope when he paused. Why not put in one of the red stones as a surprise? He'd present Emma with the other on his return home. All of his letters had reached Emma, so he wouldn't worry about the stone going astray. He wouldn't tell her about the lama from Rongbuk Monastery who warned them not to climb Mount Everest because of the demons who lived there. It was just superstitious nonsense.



## Chapter Two

Lake District, England, present day

The odds are, when you receive an inheritance, you know the person you inherit from, but that wasn't true for Cynthia Graham. Try as she might, she couldn't come up with any memories of Lydia Dunton. Cynthia had wrongly assumed that her grandmother was long dead. But now, this recently buried stranger filled her thoughts, and left her with the unanswerable question, how could she have not known about Lydia Dunton?

A mournful whistle startled Cynthia into focusing on the winter scenery. A train engine, black as the coal that fed it, materialized from a ghostly sweep of trees and powered its way up slope. The engine's billowing steam, fog and thick snow flurries merged to form an unexpected vision from a bygone era. Then, as if to say goodbye, the train gave another long whistle that clung in the air like the last notes of an aria before fog and snow swallowed it up.

Cynthia leaned toward the cab driver, "Steam engines still operate?"

"They do, miss. For the tourists, luv. Takes them to Lake Windermere. Last tourist train were a couple weeks back. Must be checking out the equipment today."

With the vintage train, the croft cottages dotting the landscape, and the dry stacked stone walls, which for all Cynthia knew went back to Roman times, she felt transported back to a simpler time. No wonder writers flocked to the Lake District.

"Isn't Beatrix Potter's cottage around here?"

“Aye. Miss Potter left Top Hill Farm to the National Trust when she died. Nothing’s changed there since ‘43. Most know her stories, but few how she saved our local Herdwick sheep from dying out. We’ll not see the likes of her again. On holiday, luv? Miss Potter’s home is closed ‘til spring, but the garden’ll be open.”

“No, death in the family.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that, luv. How long’s your stay?”

“Leaving tomorrow.”

“Where are you from?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Not normal weather for this time of year, not normal at all. Aye, best come back in the summer to see the fells and meres and Miss Potter’s house. ”

The taxi driver then hummed to himself and increased the speed of his wipers. Squeaking, they struggled to clear heavy snow from the windshield.

Wondering what a mere was, she blew on her hands to warm them, then slipped into a meditative silence once more trying to process the enormity of the past several week’s events. Snuggling deeper into her thin coat she suppressed a shiver; when she’d left Los Angeles it’d been seventy degrees.

A short while later they drove down a narrow street in the village of Bowness on Windermere and pulled in front of a two-story Victorian building resplendent with gables. The house itself looked the product of a wealthy captain of industry. Cynthia glanced again at the business card. Yep, it was the right address. The driver set down her suitcase and counted out change. For a few moments she stood motionless until a fierce blast of wind spurred her to action. Time to put a face to the voice and meet the solicitor, Mr. Jones.

Inside the old Victorian she was greeted by a motherly woman with a short, gray bob. “Terrible weather we’re having. You must be freezing, you poor lamb. I’ll make tea.” She then pointed to a corner, “Go ahead, miss, leave your suitcase over there by the printer. I’ll tell Mr. Jones you’re here.”

Cynthia smiled ruefully to herself at the term “poor lamb”. At 5’8”, she towered over the motherly woman.

Cynthia then was shown into the solicitor’s office.

After shaking hands, he got down to business. “May I see your documents?” His manner was dry, but not unkind.

Cynthia handed over her passport, birth certificate, her mother’s immigration papers and death certificate.

As he read her passport, he glanced up to examine her.

Assumedly he was going over passport details with a lawyer’s thoroughness: hair color red, check; eyes blue, check; twenty-seven years old, check.

The gray-haired woman entered bearing a tray holding a teapot, two cups and a plate of cookies. Carefully she set the teapot and porcelain cup ringed with a festive holly pattern in front of Cynthia. “This’ll warm you up.”

Cynthia smiled her thanks.

“Marion,” Mr. Jones said, “please make a copy of these for our files.”

Having found her documents satisfactory, Mr. Jones’ manner warmed. “What do you know about Lydia Dunton?”

“Unfortunately, absolutely nothing. You see, my mother died in a fire when I was eight.” Just uttering those words out loud brought back the horror.

There's that defining moment of your life, that blink moment when your whole world shifts. For seven-year-old Cynthia Graham that day began like every other. The morning sun baked the southern California landscape, the summer sky sparkled bright and blue, and down the street, a leaf blower roared.

Already dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, Cynthia was about to go over to her best friend Rita's house when whispers of anger filtered into her room. Not again! It scared her. Made her stomach hurt. She didn't feel safe. Hugging her *My Little Pony*, she collapsed on her bed in a cascade of tears. Her parents whispered fights were far worse than the loud ones. What were they saying? Was it about her? Pressing her ear to the door, she tried to hear more.

"Gambler! Not enough money for rent this month. You promised! My part time job can't pay the bills." Her mother's English accent thickened with each accusation.

She was also aware of how much the anger had intensified over the past several months to become daily fare.

"I'm taking our daughter and leaving you."

Her father's hiss rose to a roar. He pounded his fist on the kitchen table. "No you're not! If you ever try, you'll be sorry."

Cynthia didn't want to see them like this, not with their faces squished up in rage, but she badly had to pee. Tiptoeing down the hall she scooted into the bathroom. When she'd finished her parents spotted her coming out. Her mother brushed tears away and her father forced a smile.

"Hi Pumpkin," her father said. "I need to go to work now, but to celebrate tomorrow's first day of school, I'm bringing you back something special tonight."

“Thanks, Dad.” Cynthia tried to act enthusiastic, but so often her dad didn’t remember his promises, and she was left feeling hurt and rejected. She turned to her mother, “Can I go to Rita’s?”

Her mother nodded and gave her a kiss. “Be back by lunch, honey.”

After she closed the front door their hot words resumed. “Divorce. I’m fed up,” her mother said.

With a sigh of relief that she didn’t have to hear any more, Cynthia shut the chain-link gate and started walking the four blocks toward Rita’s. As she passed Mrs. Munger’s, her German Shepherd snarled a warning, then lunged. Cynthia jumped back in fright, for only a thin clothesline tied to the dog’s collar kept those fangs away. As she hurried on, she anxiously wondered what would happen if that clothesline ever broke. Soon the modest houses on her block transitioned into larger and nicer homes, and by the time she reached Rita’s the houses had doubled in size.

She rang the doorbell of a two-story Spanish colonial and Mrs. Apfelbaum opened the door with a welcoming smile. “Cynthia, I’ve just finished baking chocolate éclairs which you must try and tell me how you like them. Rita’s in the kitchen waiting for you.”

Rita was a miniature version of her dark, glossy-haired mother. Both had sparkling hazel eyes and warm personalities. Mrs. Apfelbaum passed out festive plates decorated with sunflowers and set two éclairs on each. Cynthia took a bite. The thick custard rich with vanilla flavoring had her taste buds dancing in wild abandon. Wiping her mouth with a napkin, she realized that it was the best desert she’d ever eaten. Greedily she looked over at the remaining éclairs on the counter.

“Only two, Cynthia,” Mrs. Apfelbaum laughingly cautioned, “I don’t want your mother to be angry with me.”

If good food is love, Cynthia thought, there was a lot of love in this house. Rita then took her to her room to play with her doll collection.

“This Dutch one is new, Uncle Saul gave it to me,” she said, handing it over to Cynthia to inspect. The blond-haired blue-eyed doll was exotically dressed in a red costume with a white apron and a cap which sat on top of blond braids.

The hours ticked away quickly as they always did when she was with Rita, but finally it was time to go.

“For you and your parents,” Mrs. Apfelbaum said, wrapping up three éclairs to take back with her.

Cynthia had walked and skipped about 20 yards when the wail of fire engines shattered the quiet. The sirens decibel’s climbed, and the neighborhood dogs howled in protest. She pressed her hands over her ears as three red engines screamed by. But where was the fire? Black smoke billowed in the distance, but even though she jumped up, she was far too short to make out where it was coming from. By the time she’d covered two blocks, fear swamped her like a wave and she started running as fast as her seven- year- old legs allowed. Her street! The fire was on her street. Soon she smelled the acrid odor of smoke. She dropped the éclairs and raced on. When she reached her home she was panting for breath, and found it swarming with firemen and a milling group of neighbors. Hoses spurted water at the flames, but the house was burning like a torch. In the background, a radio crackled out instructions.

“No,” Cynthia screamed, racing past the firemen and onto the porch. Suddenly, strong arms swept her away and back to safety.

She kicked, squirmed, and struggled. “Mommy! Mommy!”

The fireman’s sooty face turned grim. “Your mom’s in there?”

“Yes!”

Mrs. Munger stepped up, her frizzled gray hair looking like so many tight paper clips.

“Her car’s still here, she didn’t leave.”

“Holy shit, Doug, someone’s trapped inside.”

Doug wielded his axe and smashed it against the front door. It splintered and flung open, but he leapt back as impenetrable wall of fire roared out. The hoses continued gushing water, but within five minutes her home had crumbled into a smoldering, blackened hulk.

Cynthia sobbed uncontrollably.

“Why didn’t she come out?” The fireman named Doug asked. “It’s daytime, so it’s not like she was asleep. Why didn’t she come out?”

A car screeched up and out ran her father. For a long moment he stared at the house.

Then, spotting Cynthia he hurried over, took her and cradled her in his arms.

The fire captain removed his helmet, and gave her father an intense look. “Sorry sir, there was nothing more we could do...’fraid I have more bad news. Police and an arson inspector will be arriving soon, and you’ll have to stay to talk to them. Can someone take care of your little girl for now?”

Her father nodded. “The Apfelbaums will.”

The arson investigation proved inconclusive’ Her mother’s body had been found in the bedroom, but what had proved all too conclusive was that nightmare day had ripped a hole in Cynthia’s heart that no amount of scar tissue could cover. She wanted to stop feeling that painful sense of loss, but try as she might, those feelings filtered through like a biting wind.

“Ms Graham, are you alright? You look pale.” Mr. Jones asked, with a look of concern.

“Sorry. Just some stray thoughts. To the best of my knowledge mom never mentioned my grandmother. I assumed she was dead. Dad knew nothing about her either.”

Mr. Jones pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his long nose and ran his fingers through thinning hair. “As I explained on the phone, your grandmother, Lydia Dunton, died two months ago. She left her entire estate to her daughter, your mother. When we discovered your mother was deceased, we did further digging and discovered you. Mrs. Dunton’s cottage, its contents, the surrounding land, and about 10,000 pounds are all yours.

“I’m overwhelmed. Of course I have questions. Did you know my grandmother well? What was she like?”

“I met her twice. I can only give you an overall impression. Down to earth, a bit guarded. Came back to live here about fifteen years ago. My predecessor, Mr. Hollander, assisted your great-grandmother with her will, and, according to our records, she died some thirty years back.”

“Do you know anything else? I’m truly curious. I know absolutely nothing about my mother’s family. When mom emigrated from England, it was as if she was reborn without a past on American soil. I always wondered about her early life.”

Mr. Jones coughed then looked intently at her. “As you’re wanting more information about your family...” The solicitor paused as if collecting his thoughts. “Mr. Hollander told me there was a scandal way back when, but that was during more conservative times.”

“What was the scandal?”

“Your great-grandmother, was, well, in the family way and unmarried. Of course these days it means nothing, but back then...”



“Yes, I can imagine how awful it must have been. I’m surprised she didn’t move away. Anything else you can tell me?”

“According to Mr. Hollander’s file, the cottage has been in your family since before the Great War. At one time the estate included a home in London and various investments but, I assume with high taxes, and unfortunate investments, I’m afraid the cottage is all that’s left. Next year’s taxes have already been paid. You needn’t worry about that. But first we have paperwork that requires your signature. I’ll take care of transferring the property into your name.”

Cynthia signed multiple pages then did the math in her head: 10,000 pounds amounted to about \$16,000. Not a fortune, but certainly welcome.

“Where’s the cottage located?”

He answered with a smile, “It’s on my way home. As you’re my last client today, I’d be happy to drop you off.”

“Are we neighbors?”

“Not really. I live about thirty minutes from you. There are numbers of small landholdings and crofts around here, so it’s hard to know everybody. Do you intend on staying long?”

“Just for the night.”

“Pity you can’t stay longer.”

“I’m the marketing manager for my company so... well...it’s difficult to take time off now. But I’ll be back. Thanks for your offer to drive me.”

He stood up to go. “Not at all. We’ll pick up supplies for you.”

As they strolled up the street toward the shops, a low-flying flock of Canada geese with their black necks straining forward flew in V formation over the water. She watched the one in front drop back to allow a new leader to wing ahead.

“What a beautiful lake.”

“Windermere is the largest lake in England. The town itself was built around the railway station and the lake.” he said, with a touch of pride. For a moment they stared out at the long, narrow ribbon of water covered in white caps before the wind compelled them to move forward.

The village itself oozed a Victorian and Edwardian charm; well maintained buildings surrounded by clusters of thick evergreens were interspersed with deciduous trees which now looked denuded and skeletal without their dressing of leaves. Halfway down the next block, Mr. Jones entered into a Tudoresque shop with a bow window and was greeted by a burly shopkeeper. While she decided on her provisions, the two men bantered back and forth over a football match. She choose cheese, a slice of kidney pie, bread, milk, salad, granola and a bottle of wine. When they drove away from the village she noted Mr. Jones’ older model Mercedes Benz, unlike her Jeep back home, was spotless.

As the snow flurries diminished she was better able to see the low rolling, hills of the countryside through the rising mists. The occasional stand of trees softened the hills giving the landscape a melancholy effect.

After pointing out a landmark, the solicitor asked. “What sort of marketing do you do?”

“For a software company. Plan events, make sure all sales information is up-to-date, approve advertising, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“In this economy, it’s a challenge. Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful for my job, but I used to have a staff of three, now there’s just me.”

“What do you do in your off-time?”

“Meet up with friends, write and do some mountain climbing. Mostly peaks on the West Coast. Funny, I just remembered mom saying that during her summer breaks she loved running around exploring the hills and valleys. And she talked about a pet lamb, I suppose she meant here.” Tears pricked at Cynthia’s eyes as she thought of her mother’s lilting voice singing her favorite song, “*Mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey A kiddley divey too, Wooden shoe!*” Her mother danced her around the room, twirling and spinning, and when they had no more breath left, they’d collapse on the rug in a fit of giggles finishing with, *Wooden shoe!*”

“You’re in the right spot for mountain climbing. The Lake District attracts climbers and ramblers from all over the world,” Mr. Jones said. “We’ve had a lot of famous climbers including Sir Christopher Bonington, and much further back in time, in the 1920s, George Mallory and Andrew Irving.”

Then, changing the subject, he delicately asked, “I don’t mean to pry, but if you’re married or planning on it, I suggest consulting with a California lawyer about protecting your property rights. Naturally I know the laws here, but haven’t a clue what they are in the states, so can’t advise you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not married.”

After thirty minutes or so of polite conversation, the bulk being anecdotes about his three children, the solicitor turned off the main road and slowly drove down a muddy country lane. After a few moments, he pointed, “Over there.”

Cynthia wiped condensation off the window for a better look. A creeper-clad cottage composed of gray stone, with a slate roof, a curtained window near the front door and a bay window on the side stood waiting for her.

“Excuse me,” The solicitor reached over to open his glove compartment, pulled out a flashlight and handed it to her. “You’ll need this torch. I’m sure you’ll find candles inside; everyone keeps a good stock out here in the countryside.”

“There’s no electricity?”

“After Mrs. Dunton’s death it was turned off.”

She looked around and saw only one cottage in the distance. “Is it safe out here?”

“Very. Can’t remember the last time a crime’s been committed. You’re fortunate. Most of the land surrounding your property is owned by the National Trust, so it’s left as is.”

He set her suitcase by the door, handed her the groceries, then the house key. Cynthia thanked him for the lift, and for the assurance that he’d return the following morning to take her to her grandmother’s grave and then to the train station.

When the car sped away a range of feelings bubbled up and overwhelmed her: confusion, sadness, and resentment at the loss of a relationship. Why hadn’t she known about this woman? She remembered her mother as being strong willed. If Lydia were equally so, likely their personalities clashed. But what, she wondered, was the event that caused the estrangement between her mother and grandmother, an estrangement so bitter that all contact stopped?

Instead of just standing here, let’s see what’s inside, she told herself. Opening the door she found a cozy sitting room with a comfortable looking green corduroy couch, two over-stuffed floral and bird patterned arm chairs, oak beams with plastered white walls and some exposed stone. A fireplace stood half-way down the south wall.

She flung open the windows to let out the musty air. Fire, that’s what she needed. The rolled up paper and kindling caught right away, and soon licked the coals into a roaring fire. For the first time that day she felt warm. Everything in the cottage was orderly. Newspapers and

magazines in neat stacks, no unwashed dishes in the sink. One thing she already knew about her grandmother, she was a tidy housekeeper. The cottage had only one bedroom so it didn't take long to rummage through cabinets and drawers in the living room and dining room. There was some family silver, good dishes and needlepoint projects mostly of flowers and leaves. She found more books of matches and put them on the kitchen counter. "Who were you, grandmother?" she said, aloud. "Why didn't I know about you?"

When the wind picked up and whirled leaves into the house, she latched the windows shut. She found candles in the kitchen, lit them and placed them around the cottage. In part, she felt like an interloper; here she was going through a complete stranger's things. Wandering into the bedroom, she picked up a silver brush on the night stand and pulled out a gray hair. Her unknown grandmother's DNA. She opened the night stand's top drawer. Next to several pill bottles lay a yellowed, creased letter, some photos, several hand embroidered handkerchiefs and various odds and ends. Curious, she picked up the photos first. One was of three generations of women, all looking so similar they had to be related. The youngest of the group was her mother looking about eighteen. Cynthia was struck by her carefree smile. She rifled through the other photos but they were strangers to her. Next she picked up the letter. By its condition it looked decades old. It must have been important to her grandmother if she kept it next to the bed. A love letter, or something equally as sentimental?

Cynthia began skimming it.

*Lydia, my dear girl,*

*We've rarely seen each other since you've moved to London so many years ago. In case something happens to me, I've left special letters, photos, and a*

*locket, under the bird's wings. Before your father disappeared in Tibet, he sent me a gem with a strange history. It came from a mountain called Ama Dablam. He'd bought two off a Tibetan porter. Some years later, I took mine to a geologist, Cates-Smith, who spent one summer in the old Waterfield place. Gemology wasn't his expertise, but he suspected the red stone could possibly be a ruby, and worth a tidy sum. He considered it rare and he suggested that I have it tested and appraised in London, but I never got around to it.*

*I wore it in the locket with your father's photo, so, my daughter, this is your heirloom. It was Sandy's last gift and that meant much more to me than money.*

*Your loving mother,*

*Emma*

Cynthia plopped down on the bed still clenching the page. It was all so disorienting. Her grandmother was Lydia, so Emma must be her great-grandmother. Her great-grandfather, the man who disappeared. What was he doing in Tibet? A military campaigner, or an explorer? She wondered if Lydia read this last letter from her mother every night before she went to bed. Cynthia's pale blue eyes were devouring the letter a second time when the flashlight's bulb weakened into a watery pool of light. A ruby! She strained to capture the last sentences in the candlelight, as shadows flickered on the stone walls' irregular surface. Her incredulity turned to shock. Could the locket still be here? "...under the bird's wings." It had to mean somewhere inside the house.

She spun around. The chairs! They were covered in that flower and bird pattern. She picked up the cushions, checking carefully at the seams, but when she probed the lining she saw

that the stitching hadn't been tampered with. Back in the kitchen, she searched for more candles, then placed them in strategic spots. A warm glow like sunlight filtering through dense clouds filled the rooms.

Where else could the locket be? Her eyes rested on a watercolor of a raven hanging on the far wall. She immediately took it off its hook. Nothing on the back except an old, yellowed map of Tibet. She tapped the wall behind it. Solid stone. A chair sat beneath, and above was the beamed ceiling. She paced the cottage. No bird photos, no bird figurines, no duck decoys, no bird dishes. How hard could this be? This was a small cottage. The desk! Of course. But the ornate drawers only held bills and letters. Piece by piece she examined everything: kitchen cupboards, under the bed, above the mantle, and then the furniture. From a heavily fluted armoire she tossed thick sweaters, woolen shirts and a rain slicker, then lugged several cardboard boxes onto the floor. Scrutinizing the empty armoire, she found... nothing.

Where was it? Could her grandmother have lost or sold it? Was that it? Or could someone else have found the letter and got to the locket before her? She shook her head. Who'd ever take the time to read an old woman's letters? Besides, she couldn't imagine the kind Mr. Jones doing anything unethical.

Cynthia sighed and for a moment sat quietly as if waiting for a clue to present itself, but as she looked around, there was no clue, just the contents of that remarkable letter spinning around in her mind. Had she missed anyplace? Well, there was the hutch. Taking the dishes out she stacked them on the kitchen counter. But the hutch's boards were plain and utilitarian, no secrets there. She'd covered everything, there was no other place else to look.

Accepting defeat, Cynthia turned her attention to her journal, unclasped it, and flipped to an empty page. The blank white page begged for words, for new ideas, for impressions, and

observations, and today's events was jam packed with all of the above. Lately, journaling was all the writing that she's been doing. She winced, just thinking about the three unfinished manuscripts that mocked her. What had it been, two or three months since she accessed them? She blamed it on work hours, but in reality, she was stuck. Somehow the characters didn't seem alive or real to her.

She fought the need to sleep for as long as she could, then with a yawn gave up and stepped back into the bedroom. Stripping the sheets off on her grandmother's bed, she replaced them with clean ones and slipped under the covers. Within minutes she'd drifted off.

The scratching woke her. She blinked her eyes open and stared around uncomprehendingly. Her eyes rested on the shadowy apple tree near the window, which was backlit by a full moon. A handful of withered apples, dangling like so many miniature jack-o-lanterns from twisted, skeletal branches gave the tree a faintly sinister look. In the distance she almost expected to see the Headless Horseman riding off on a black stallion.

Then, the scratching again. For another minute she listened, trying to get her bearings. It seemed to be coming from the front of the house. With a touch of fear she grabbed the flashlight and made her way to the front door, pulled back the curtain at the window next to it, and looked out. A dog! Opening the door she found a border collie looking up at her. Was it injured or lost? When she went out to check on him, he turned and melted away into the darkness.

For a moment all she could do was stare. Why had he come?

All warmth had left the cottage hours ago. Cynthia shivered as her bare feet on the wooden plank floor got colder and colder. With the curtain pulled aside, the moon washed the living/dining room filling the area with strong light and dark contrasts, like those old black and white photos from the 1920's. With just the moon light filtering in, everything looked so



different, so shadowy. Her eyes darted over the room then lazily half focused on the desk in front of her, and when she did, she saw it. The bird's wings.

Her heart thudded as she lightly touched a frieze of stylized bird's wings sculpted along the top portion of the desk. Funny she hadn't noticed it earlier when she'd checked the desk drawers. Could there be a secret compartment? Hurriedly, with her hand shaking, she lit a candle. At the third attempt she had a flame.

She ran her fingers lightly over the frieze until she felt a slight depression. She pressed firmly. With a slight click, a panel popped open exposing a dark hole.

In the light of the wavering candlelight, her eyes centered on a cobwebby, black velvet jewelry box. By the amount of dust inside, she guessed the hole hadn't been disturbed for years. First checking for creepy crawlies, she gingerly pulled out the box then softly blew the cobwebs away. White strands of silk and a layer of fine dust floated in the air before settling onto the floor. Looking in again, she spotted something else. Letters tied in a faded blue ribbon; she pulled them out as well. She couldn't open the box quickly enough. Inside, set against the dark velvet, glittering up at her was a large, gold filigree locket, faintly Asian in design, suspended from a gold chain. Her throat constricted as she used her thumbnail to pry open the locket. Frustratingly, her nail was too short and the locket stayed stubbornly closed. She rummaged through the desk drawers until she found what she needed; a paperclip. Bending it straight, she finessed the locket, and with a snap it opened. Out spilled a red, uncut gem. The ruby! Holding up a slightly bigger than blueberry-sized stone, she gazed at the fire deep at its heart and thought, how utterly beautiful.

Then she examined the locket photo of her great-grandfather, looking circa 1920s. A young man, with blond, slick-backed hair, full sensuous lips and air of self-confidence seemed to

smile at someone behind her. She caught herself about to look over her shoulder to see who it was and laughed. But a sense of recognition settled over her. "I've seen him before," Cynthia whispered to herself. "Why can't I remember where?"

By now Cynthia was blue with cold. Back to the warm bed, she told herself, you can see everything again in the morning.

For the rest of the night, she tossed and turned, and when she finally woke up, an unsettled feeling hung over her, and she half wondered if the dog and locket were a jet-lagged dream. Only way to find out. Practically leaping out of bed, she raced into the living/dining room. There sat the cobwebby black velvet box. No, definitely not a dream.

Taking the gem over to the window she watched as sunlight sparkled and caught the gem's inner glow, and was enchanted. As she put it around her neck, she thought that it'd be easier to get it through Customs if she wore the locket.

There were several cardboard boxes of papers and photos she wanted to quickly sift through. Not enough time to do much more, she realized, as Mr. Jones would be over in a couple of hours. She'd bring the boxes back with her, she decided.

Cynthia was in the middle of putting away crockery when a series of violent knocks pummeled the front door. She dropped her breakfast bowl and it shattered at her feet into five pieces. As she stooped to pick them up, the pounding became more aggressive. What the...? It couldn't be Mr. Jones. He'd agreed to pick her up at noon and it was only 10:00 a.m.

"Who's there?" she asked.

A man's voice indistinct, but angry, replied.

For a moment she just stood there. Was this guy some kind of nut case? A robber, rapist, murderer? Stop it, she told herself, cowgirl up, don't let fear control you. Besides, Mr. Jones

said it was safe out here. With that, she forced herself to march to the window to look out. She almost made it when the door flew wide open and she realized she'd forgotten to lock it last night. Her mind began processing the man's entrance as if in slow motion. This wasn't looking good.

Before her stood a tall, dark-haired man perhaps in his late thirties. He wore jeans, a pair of wellies, a thick blue parka and a blue and green tartan scarf. He strolled into the living room as if he owned it and stopped by the fireplace. A border collie padded shadow-like behind him. She stood speechless when the border collie lay down next to the hearth, and then put his head on his paws. The dog from last night?

The stranger's eyes snapped as he examined her. At least he was keeping his distance. In any other circumstance she would have found him attractive, but not now.

"I don't know who you are or why you're here, but I want you to leave," Cynthia said.

"Who the hell are you," the stranger demanded, "and what are you doing here?"

Terrified, Cynthia scanned the room for a weapon. The poker? Too far away. The kitchen knives? Couldn't get to them in time. Keys? Yes, the keys! She grabbed them off the table and positioned them between fingers in a self defense stance. "I'm warning you. Don't come near me. Get out before I call the police."

He went back to the door, shut, and leaned against it, then crossed his arms.

Oh great, her only escape route was blocked. Now what?

A heavy silence filled the room while they assessed each other. She felt her heart thump out its rhythm, one beat, two beats, three beats, four beats.

On the fifth beat the stranger finally said, “I have absolutely no intention of coming near you. Feel free to call the village bobby if you want, but you may have difficulty, the phone’s been disconnected.”

“I have an iPhone.”

His voice deepened, and as if speaking to someone not too bright, his words came out slow and clipped. “Good for you. Then use it. I happen to be friends with the local bobby. I want to know who you are and why you’re here.”

She mimicked his slow, clipped tone, “Answer my question first. Who are you?”

He gave a sigh. “What a stubborn woman you are. Consider me a concerned neighbor.”

Her fear turned into confusion. “Concerned? About what? Why are you trespassing on my property? Why come barging in?”

“Trespassing? Then you must be Lydia’s granddaughter. As I said, I’m a neighbor, and when I saw smoke coming from the chimney, well...squatters have been staying in and trashing summer properties recently. So I assumed you were one.”

Now that the worst of her fear was gone, Cynthia examined the man with new eyes. His tight jeans conformed to a great butt and his shoulders seemed to go on forever. She’d always associated an olive complexion with brown eyes, but his eyes were a dark green that matched the tartan of his scarf. A sexy combination, she thought, and felt herself turn red.

“Are you a farmer?” she asked.

“Among other things.”

His tone then dripped sarcasm, “You’ve certainly been quick to arrive and take over the cottage, but what I want to know is where you were when Lydia lay dying?”

That broke the spell. She banged the keys on the table. “How dare you, whoever you are! I didn’t even know I had a grandmother until the solicitor contacted me. My mother died when I was young and she never mentioned her. Anyway, how is it you know about me? Even my grandmother didn’t.”

He looked rueful. “The local greengrocer. There’s not a bit of gossip he isn’t privy to.”

In her wildest imaginings Cynthia couldn’t picture the dry and careful Mr. Jones gossiping about her, but his motherly assistant with the gray bob, well she looked like she’d enjoy a cozy chat with a greengrocer. The collie trotted over and nuzzled Cynthia. Absentmindedly she pet him, keeping the stranger in view all the while. The dog then proceeded into the kitchen and pawed a cupboard open, brought back a box of dog biscuits and dropped them at her feet. While still watching the man out of the corner of her eye, she fed the collie, then stared at the man with heightened suspicion. “Why does your dog know about these biscuits? Maybe you’re a squatter.”

“Hardly.” He opened the door to go. “Shep knows about the biscuits because he was your grandmother’s dog. She gave him to me before she died.” He rested his hand on the doorknob. “Are you here permanently?”

“No. I’m leaving in a couple of hours.”

“Just checking on your new assets then?” He turned to go, “Heel, Shep.”

When he left, Cynthia grimaced at how much his words stung. Forget about him, she told herself, odds are you’ll never see him again.

She brewed a cup of Earl Grey, then wandered over to sit down on one of the overstuffed chairs. As she stared out the window, the sun broke through the clouds sending a shaft of sunlight onto the raven watercolor. Sitting on a large boulder the raven’s head was cocked and he

seemed to look curiously at her, almost as if asking, will you keep the cottage? Or will it be, nevermore? She grinned at herself. Surely ravens can say something other than nevermore.

An hour later Cynthia had readied two boxes of papers to send home. She was sure the solicitor would mail them for her. As an afterthought she tossed in the letters tied with the blue ribbon. The thought of reading someone else's love letters gave her the creeps, and with that blue bow what else could they be? She pictured almost indecipherable handwriting with lots of purple prose, but she'd go through them anyway to see what more she could learn. The crunch of gravel broke into her thoughts. Not surprisingly Mr. Jones had arrived just when he said he would.

"Thanks for giving up some of your Saturday to take me to the station."

"Not at all. How do you like the cottage?"

"I like it so much that it's hard to leave it."

Then she related the morning's drama and described the stranger.

After tusk tussing, Mr. Jones said. "I'll contact the authorities for you."

"Don't bother. He meant no harm. He was only protecting the property from what he thought were squatters. Do you know him?"

"Afraid not. But I don't know many in this part of the valley. This is sheep country, so lots of tall men with border collies here."

Gray clouds, heavy with snow, drifted overhead as Cynthia shut and locked the door.