The TOWER, the ZOO, and the TORTOISE

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For Joan
We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals.

—IMMANUEL KANT
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

_Balthazar Jones:_ Beefeater, overseer of the Tower’s royal menagerie, father to Milo, and collector of rain

_Hebe Jones:_ Balthazar’s wife, who works at London Underground’s Lost Property Office

_Mrs. Cook:_ Balthazar and Hebe’s one-hundred-eighty-one-year-old tortoise—the oldest tortoise in the world

_Arthur Catnip:_ London Underground ticket inspector of limited height

_Rev. Septimus Drew:_ Tower chaplain, who writes forbidden prose and pines for one of the residents

_Ruby Dore:_ Barmaid at the Tower’s Rack & Ruin pub, who has a secret

_Valerie Jennings:_ Hebe’s eccentric colleague, who falls for someone of limited height

_The Ravenmaster:_ Philandering Beefeater, who looks after the Tower’s ravens

_Sir Walter Raleigh:_ Former Tower prisoner and its most troublesome ghost

_Chief Yeoman Warder:_ Suspicious head Beefeater

_Oswin Fielding:_ Equerry to The Queen

_Samuel Crapper:_ Lost Property Office’s most frequent customer

_Yeoman Gaoler:_ Deputy to the Chief Yeoman Warder, who is terrorized by ghostly poetry at night
Beefeater \ˈbē-fē-tər\: the popular name for the official guardians of the Tower of London. They are descended from the warders who, from early in the fortress’s history, guarded the gates and royal prisoners. From the reign of Henry VIII (1509–47), these duties were carried out by the King’s Yeomen at the Tower, who were entitled to wear the royal livery, a version of which is still worn. The warders were also responsible for carrying out torture under the command of the Lieutenant of the Tower during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The full and proper title of a Beefeater is Yeoman Warder of Her Majesty’s Royal Palace and Fortress the Tower of London, and Member of the Sovereign’s Body Guard of the Yeoman Guard Extraordinary. The most likely explanation for the warders’ less glamorous nickname, which dates from at least 1700, is that they were given a daily ration of meat for their duties. They much prefer being called Yeoman Warders.

They have been showing people around the Tower for centuries. Early visitors came by royal or government invitation, but from the middle of the seventeenth century records show that people were simply turning up ready to pay to be taken around. In 1838 the Tower reformed its entry fees and produced guidebooks and tickets. In three years annual visitor numbers rose from 10,500 to 80,000. It was during this time that the Yeoman Warders became official guides.

Today, as well as guarding the fortress and leading tours, Yeoman Warders attend the Coronation of the Sovereign, the lying in state, the Lord Mayor’s Show, other state functions, and charity events. They are all former warrant officers from Her Majesty’s Forces with an honourable service record of at least twenty-two years.
Standing on the battlements in his pajamas, Balthazar Jones looked out across the Thames where Henry III’s polar bear had once fished for salmon while tied to a rope. The Beefeater failed to notice the cold that pierced his dressing gown with deadly precision, or the wretched damp that crept round his ankles. Placing his frozen hands on the ancient parapet, he tilted back his head and inhaled the night. There it was again.

The undeniable aroma had fluttered past his capacious nostrils several hours earlier as he lay sleeping in the Tower of London, his home for the last eight years. Assuming such wonderment was an oasis in his usual gruesome dreams, he scratched at the hairs that covered his chest like freshly fallen ash and descended back into ragged slumber. It wasn’t until he rolled onto his side, away from his wife and her souk of competing odours, that he smelt it again. Recognising instantly the exquisite scent of the world’s rarest rainfall, the Beefeater sat bolt upright in the darkness, his eyes open wide like those of a baby bird.

The sudden movement of the mattress caused his wife to undulate for several seconds like a body drifting at sea, and she muttered something incomprehensible. As she turned away from the disturbance, her pillow fell into the gap between the head of the bed and the wall, one of the many irritations of living within circular walls. Balthazar Jones reached down into the dusty no-man’s-land and groped around. After carefully retrieving the pillow, he placed it gently next to his wife so as not to disturb her. As he did so, he wondered, as he often had throughout their marriage, how a woman of such beauty, the embers of which still glowed fiercely in her fifty-fifth year, could look just like her father as she slept. For once, he didn’t feel the urge to poke her awake in order to rid himself of the harrowing illusion of sharing his bed with his Greek father-in-law, a man whose ferocious looks had led his relatives to refer to him as a good cheese in a dog’s skin. Instead, he quickly got out of bed, his heart tight with anticipation. Forgetting his usual gazelle’s step at such times, he crossed the room, his bare heels thudding on the emaciated carpet. He peered out, nose and white beard against the pane, which bore the smudges of numerous previous occasions. The ground was still dry. With mounting desperation, he scanned the night sky for the approaching rain clouds responsible for the undeniable aroma. In his panic not to miss the moment for which he had been waiting for more than two years, he hurried past the vast stone fireplace to the other side of the bedroom. His stomach, still bilious from the previous evening’s hogget, arrived first.

Grabbing his dressing gown, its pockets bearing the guilty crumbs of clandestine biscuits, the Beefeater pulled it across his pajamas and, forgetting his tartan slippers, opened the bedroom door. He failed to notice the noise the latch made and the subsequent incomprehensible babble it produced from his wife, a slither of hair skimming her cheek. Fingers sliding down the filthy rope handrail, he descended the corpse-cold spiral stairs clutching in his free hand an Egyptian perfume bottle in which he hoped to capture some of the downfall. Once at the bottom of the steps, he passed his son’s bedroom, which he had never brought himself to enter since that terrible, terrible day. Slowly, he shut behind him the door of the Salt Tower, the couple’s quarters within the fortress, and congratulated himself on a successful exit. It was at that precise moment that his wife woke up. Hebe Jones ran a hand along the bed sheet that had been a wedding present all those years ago. But it failed to find her husband.

Balthazar Jones had been collecting rain for almost three years, a compulsion that had started shortly after the death of his only child. At first he thought that rain was simply an infuriating part of the job, which, along with the damp from their abominable lodgings, produced in all the Beefeaters a ruthless specimen of fungus that flourished on the backs of their knees. But as the months grated by following the tragedy, he found himself staring at the clouds, frozen in a state of insurmountable grief when he should have been on the lookout for professional pickpockets. As he looked up at the sky, barely able to breathe for the weight of guilt that pressed against his chest, he started to notice a variety in the showers that would invariably soak him during the day. Before long he had identified sixty-four types of rain, all of which he jotted down in a Moleskine notebook he bought specially for the purpose. It wasn’t long before he purchased a bulk order of coloured Egyptian perfume bottles, chosen not so much for their beauty but for their ability to conserve their contents. In them he started to collect samples, recording the time, date, and precise variety of rain that had fallen. Much to the annoyance of his wife, he had a cabinet made for them, which
he mounted with considerable difficulty on the living room’s curved wall. Before long it was full and he ordered two more, which she made him put in the room at the top of the Salt Tower, which she never entered because the chalk graffiti left on the walls by the German U-boat men imprisoned during the Second World War gave her the creeps.

When his collection had swollen to the satisfying figure of one hundred, the Beefeater promised his wife, who now detested wet weather even more than was natural for a Greek who couldn’t swim, he would stop. And for a while it seemed that Balthazar Jones was cured of his habit. But the truth was that England was going through an extraordinary dry patch, and as soon as the rain started to fall again, the Beefeater, who had already been reprimanded by the Chief Yeoman Warder for gazing up at the sky while he should have been answering the tourists’ tiresome questions, returned to his compulsion.

Hebe Jones satisfied herself with the thought that eventually her husband would complete his collection and be done with it. But her hopes evaporated when he was sitting on the edge of the bed one night and, after pulling off his damp left sock, revealed with the demented conviction of a man about to prove the existence of dragons that he had only touched the tip of the iceberg. It was then that he had some official writing paper printed with matching envelopes, and set up the St. Heribert of Cologne Club, named after the patron saint of rain, hoping to compare notes with fellow wet weather enthusiasts. He placed adverts in various newspapers around the world, but the only correspondence he ever received was a heavily watermarked letter from an anonymous resident of Mawsynram, in northeastern India, which suffered from one of the world’s heaviest rainfalls. “Mr. Balthazar, You must desist from this utter madness at the most soonest. The only thing worse than a lunatic is a wet one” was all that it said.

But the lack of interest only fuelled his obsession. The Beefeater spent all his spare time writing to meteorologists around the world about his discoveries. He received replies from them all, his fingers, as lithe as a watchmaker’s, quivering as he opened them. However, the experts’ politeness was matched by their disinterest. He changed tack and buried himself in dusty parchments and books at the British Library that were as fragile as his sanity. And with eyes magnified by the strength of his reading glasses, he scourged everything ever written about rain.

Eventually, Balthazar Jones discovered a variant that, from what he could make out, hadn’t fallen since 1892 in Colombo, making it the world’s rarest. He read and reread the descriptions of the sudden shower, which, through a catalogue of misfortunes, had resulted in the untimely death of a cow. He became adamant that he would recognise it from its scent even before seeing it. Every day he waited, hoping for it to fall. Obsession eventually loosened his tongue, and one afternoon he heard himself telling his wife of his desperate desire to include it in his collection. With a mixture of incredulity and pity, she gazed up at the man who had never shed a tear over the death of their son, Milo. And when she looked back down at the daffodil bulbs she was planting in a tub on the Salt Tower roof, she wondered yet again what had happened to her husband.

As usual, Balthazar Jones listened carefully. The only sound emerging through the darkness was a sentry marking his territory, his footfall as precise as a Swiss clock. He sniffed the night again and for a moment he doubted himself. He hesitated, cursing himself for being so foolish as to believe that the moment had finally come. He imagined his wife emitting an aviary of sounds as she dreamt, and decided to return to the warm familiarity of the bed. But just as he was about to retrace his steps, he smelt it again.

Heading for the battlements, he noticed to his relief that the lights were off at the Rack & Ruin, the Tower’s tavern that had been serving the tiny community for two hundred and twenty-seven uninterrupted years, despite a direct hit during the Second World War. He did well to check, for there were occasions when the more vociferous arguments between the Beefeaters took until the early hours to be buried. Not, of course, that they remained that way. For they would often be gleefully dug up again in front of the warring parties by those seeking further entertainment.

He started down Water Lane, the cobbles slimy underneath his bare feet from the fallen leaves. As he approached Wakefield Tower, his thoughts turned to the odious ravens, which had been put to bed in their pens in the tower’s shadow. Their luxurious accommodation, with its running water, under-floor heating, and supply of fresh squirrel meat at the taxpayers’ expense, had been a constant source of irritation ever since he had discovered the true depth
of their villainy.

His wife had taken an instant dislike to the famous birds when the family first arrived at the Tower. “They taste of shrouds,” announced Hebe Jones, who, with the exception of peacock, which she deemed inauspicious, claimed to have eaten most species of animals.

However, the ravens had been an instant source of curiosity to Balthazar Jones. During his first week, he wandered over to one perched on the wooden staircase leading to the entrance of the White Tower, begun by William the Conqueror to keep out the vile and furious English. As the bird eyed him, he stood admiring the thousands of colours that swam in the oily blackness of its feathers in the sunlight. He was equally impressed when the Ravenmaster, the Beefeater responsible for looking after the birds, called the creature’s name, and it arrived at the man’s feet following a shambolic flight due to its wings having been clipped to prevent it absconding. And when Balthazar Jones discovered that they had a weakness for blood-soaked biscuits, he went out of his way to provide them with a splendid breakfast comprised of the delicacy.

Several days later, Milo, who was six at the time, shrieked “Daddy!” and pointed to a raven standing on top of Mrs. Cook, the family’s historic tortoise. All affection instantly vanished. It wasn’t just that it was extraordinarily bad manners to hitch a ride—albeit at the most sedate of paces—aloft another creature that infuriated Balthazar Jones. Neither was it the fact that the bird had just left a copious runny deposit on top of his pet. What drove the Beefeater into a state of fury was the raven pecking at Mrs. Cook’s fleshy bits with its satanic beak. And given the tortoise’s age of one hundred and eighty-one, there was a noticeable delay before she was able to draw her head and limbs into her worn shell, away from the vicious assault.

It was by no means an isolated incident. Several days later, Balthazar Jones noticed that the ravens had assembled into what was indisputably an attack formation outside the Salt Tower, once used to store saltpeter. One of the birds squatted on top of the red phone box, three stood on a cannon, another perched on the remains of a Roman wall, and a pair sat on the roof of the New Armouries. The situation continued for several days, as it took considerable time for Mrs. Cook to explore her new lodgings. Eventually, she was ready for a change of scenery. As soon as she set a wizened leg out of the front door, there was a uniform advance of one hop from the massed ravens. The birds displayed remarkable patience, for it took several hours for Mrs. Cook to make sufficient ground out of the door to warrant a second hop. The Ravenmaster blamed the fact that it was well past their lunchtimes for what happened next. Balthazar Jones, however, vehemently insisted that their scandalous behaviour was not only a result of their allegiance to Beelzebub but how they had been raised, an insult that pierced so deeply it was never forgotten. Whatever the reason, one thing was for certain: by late afternoon Mrs. Cook, the oldest tortoise in the world, no longer had a tail, and one of the Tower ravens was too full for supper.

A S BALTHAZAR JONES PASSED WAKEFIELD TOWER, the sound of the Thames lapping through Traitors’ Gate seemed louder than usual in the darkness. He looked to his left and saw the vast wooden watergates that had once opened to let in the boats carrying trembling prisoners accused of treason. But he spared not a thought for such matters, the details of which he had to relate countless times during his working day to the tourists, who were interested only in methods of torture, executions, and the whereabouts of the lavatories. Instead, he pressed on, past the Bloody Tower with its red rambling rose, said to have produced snow-white blossoms before the murder of the two little princes. Neither did he notice the dancing candlelight at one of its windows, where the ghost of Sir Walter Raleigh nibbled the end of his quill as he sat at his desk in what had been his prison for thirteen years.

Climbing up the stone steps, the Beefeater quickly reached the battlements. In front of him stretched the Thames, where Henry III’s white bear had once swum for its dinner. But Balthazar Jones kept his pale blue eyes raised as he tried to work out from which direction the precious rain would come. Touching his white beard with his fingertips as he made his calculations, he scoured the sky, through which the dawn was starting to leak.

UNABLE TO SLEEP SINCE HER HUSBAND woke her as he left, Hebe Jones sneezed twice, irritated by the dust on her pillow. Rolling onto her back, she dragged a clump of damp hair from the corner of her mouth. Instead of coursing down her back as it had done during the lusty days of youth, it meandered slowly to her shoulders. Despite her age, apart from the odd strand that flashed like a silver fish in certain lights, it was the same luminous black it had been when Balthazar Jones first met her, a defiance of nature that he put down to his wife’s obstinacy.

As she lay in the darkness, she imagined her husband walking through the Tower’s grounds in his pajamas,
clutching an Egyptian perfume bottle in a hand that no longer caressed her. She had tried her best to rid him of his compulsion. During his first few attempts, she had caught him before he reached the bedroom door. But he soon improved his technique, and before long he was able to make it halfway down the stairs before he heard the seven words which he had grown to dread, uttered with the same red breath as his mother’s: *And where do you think you’re going?* However, dedication to the high art of vanishing resulted in a number of spectacular successes.

Hebe Jones began to monitor the escape manuals he borrowed from the public library, and locked the bedroom door before they turned out their reading lights, hiding the key while her husband was in the bathroom battling the loneliness of constipation. But the trick backfired one morning when she could not remember where she had put it. Through a mouthful of humiliation which threatened to choke her, she asked him to help her in her search. He removed the loose stone next to one of the lattice windows, but all he found were the more aromatic love letters he had sent her during their courtship. He then strode to the fireplace, put his hand up the vast stone hood, and retrieved an old sweet tin from a ledge. Upon opening it he discovered a pair of silver cufflinks bearing his initials in the most alluring of scripts. His wife revealed that it was a gift she had bought for him four Christmases ago, which she had never been able to put her hands on. Her joy at seeing them again, and Balthazar Jones’s delight at suddenly receiving an unexpected present, distracted them both from their predicament. But before long, the hunt resumed until Balthazar Jones found what was indisputably a sex aid in the drawer of his wife’s bedside table. “What on earth is this for?” he asked, pushing a button. Their dilemma was forgotten again for the next thirty-four minutes, during which many questions were asked. The answers that were forthcoming led to further questions, which in turn produced a series of accusations from both sides.

It was over an hour before they returned to their search. By then the cufflinks were back in the tin up the chimney with the announcement that he would have to wait until Christmas for them. Eventually, the pair admitted defeat, and Balthazar Jones reached for the phone and called the Chief Yeoman Warder to release them. The man made four attempts before the spare key sailed through one of the open windows. It was then that Hebe Jones spotted the original still in the keyhole, and she secretly removed it.

From then on the bedroom door would remain unlocked, and no amount of protest would keep the Beefeater from his nocturnal wandering. It was with relief that Hebe Jones took the news one morning that her husband had been caught by the Chief Yeoman Warder. However, her relief turned to indignation when the rumours quickly followed that Balthazar Jones was carrying out a secret liaison with Evangeline Moore, the Tower’s young resident doctor, who quickened the heart rate of many of her patients. The claim was not without credibility as most affairs conducted by the Tower’s inhabitants took place within its walls, as they were locked in from midnight. While Hebe Jones knew instantly that there was no truth in the rumour—since Milo’s death her husband hadn’t allowed himself the pleasure of love-making—she nevertheless banished him from the matrimonial bed for a fortnight. Feet either side of the taps, Balthazar Jones slept in the bath. He endured the cramped, damp conditions, dreaming amongst the spiders of being lost at sea in a sinking boat. Each morning Hebe Jones would get up early to run a bath, being careful not to remove her husband beforehand, and always ensuring that she ran the cold water first.

**NOW, AS SHE LOOKED AT**

the bedside clock, fury coursed through her veins at yet another night of disturbed sleep. Her usual revenge, performed each time her husband returned to bed reeking of the night, was an anatomical master stroke. Once she heard the muddy breath of a man descended deep into his dreams, she would suddenly leap from the bed and make the short journey to the bathroom with the gait of a demented sentry. Once installed on the lavatory, she would proceed to empty her bladder with the door wide open. The clamour of the catastrophic downpour was such that her husband would immediately wake in terror, convinced that he was lying in a nest of snakes. When the infernal hissing eventually came to an end, the Beefeater would instantly sink back to his dreams. But several seconds later, in a feat of immaculate timing, his wife would release a second much shorter but equally deafening cascade, which would finish in a pitch-perfect rising scale and wake her husband as brutally as the first.

Pulling the shabby blanket up to her chin, Hebe Jones thought of the cabinets of Egyptian perfume bottles filled with rain in the top room of the Salt Tower, and then of the cruelty of grief. Compassion suddenly chilled her rage. Ignoring the glass of water on her bedside table that she usually drank in its entirety on such occasions, she turned back onto her side. And when her husband eventually returned home with his empty vessel after the clouds had fled, Hebe Jones pretended to be asleep as he clambered in beside her.
CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS THE SIGHT OF HER HUSBAND’S dressing gown hanging on the back of the bedroom door, an Egyptian perfume bottle still in its pocket, that reignited Hebe Jones’s anger the following morning. She pressed down on the latch with irritation, having lost all compassion for her husband because of a headache brought on by her broken night’s sleep. She descended the stairs in her pink leather slippers and nightclothes, recalling the previous occasions that her dreams had been disturbed by her husband’s obsession. When he joined her for breakfast at the kitchen table, she placed in front of him a plate of eggs that had been scrambled more vigorously than usual, then released the full fury inside her.

Several minutes later, the Beefeater’s stomach shrank again as she suddenly veered away from his compulsion and launched into the many injustices of living within the fortress. She started with the Salt Tower roof that was such a poor exchange for her beloved garden at their house in Catford, which the wretched lodgers had let go to seed. Then there was the gossip that spread through the monument like fire. And finally there were the mournful sounds that permeated their home, once the prison of numerous Catholic priests during the reign of Elizabeth I, which both had pretended to Milo that they couldn’t hear.

For a moment Balthazar Jones closed his ears, having heard the complaints on countless previous occasions, and picked up his knife and fork. But suddenly his wife came up with a wholly new deprivation that caught his attention. Despite her unrepentant aversion to Italian food, which her husband put down to her nation’s historic distrust of Italy, she suddenly declared: “All I want in life is to be able to get a takeaway pizza!” He remained silent as there was no escaping the fact that they lived at an address that cab drivers, washing machine repairmen, newspaper boys, and every official who had ever given them a form to fill in assumed to be fictitious.

He put down his cutlery and looked up at her again with eyes the colour of pale opals, something people who met him never forgot. “Where else could you live surrounded by nine hundred years of history?” he asked.

She folded her arms across her chest. “Virtually anywhere in Greece,” she replied. “And it would be a lot older.”

“I don’t think you realise how lucky I was to get this job.”

“A lucky person is someone who plants pebbles and harvests potatoes,” she said, evoking the Greek mysticism of her grandparents. She then hunted around, searching amongst the rubble of their relationship for past hurts that she held up again in front of him. Balthazar Jones responded in kind, taking her examiner’s torch and shining it on ancient grievances. No shadow was left unlit and by the time they left the table, every fissure of their teetering love had been exposed to the damp morning air.

With furious, quick steps, Hebe Jones scuffed back up the stone spiral staircase to the bedroom. Dressing for work, she thought with regret of the part she had played in helping her husband secure a job at the Tower after his second career failed. As he had been a master stitch in the Army, responsible for altering the magnificent Foot Guard uniforms, tailoring had seemed an obvious choice when he finally hung up his bearskin hat. When he suggested renting some premises, his wife thought of the mortgage they were still paying off, and warned: “Don’t extend your feet beyond your blanket.” So he commandeered the front room of their terrace house in Catford and built a counter behind which he presided, his measuring tape hanging around his neck with the sanctity of a priest’s stole.

A year later, Milo arrived after two fruitless decades of conjugal contortion. Balthazar Jones took care of him while his wife was at the office. In between customers, he would set the infant’s basket on the counter, pull up a chair, and proceed to tell his son all he knew about life. There were warnings to work hard at school “otherwise you’ll end up an ignoramus, like your father.” The child was informed that he happened to have been born into a family whose members included the oldest tortoise in the world. “You’ll have to look after Mrs. Cook when old age turns your mother and I cuckoo, for which your maternal grandparents have always shown a natural disposition,” he said as he tucked in Milo’s blanket. And it was pointed out that of all the blessings that would come to him in life, none would be greater than having Hebe Jones as a mother. “I’ve pitied every man I’ve ever met for not being married to her,” Balthazar Jones admitted. And Milo would listen, his dark eyes not leaving his father for a moment as he chewed his own toes.
For a while it appeared that he had made the right decision in opening a tailor’s. But gradually fewer and fewer customers knocked at the house with the tiny Greek flag flying from the roof of the birdhouse in the front garden. Some stayed away because they were unsettled by having to wait while a nappy was being changed. Later, others blamed the brevity of their trouser legs on the attention the bewitched tailor gave to the boy, who ran round the shop, as his father refused to send him to nursery. And when Milo was finally at school, some of the new trade that Balthazar Jones managed to pick up never returned after being measured, unsettled by the brutal honesty of a former soldier.

When he realised how precarious the family’s finances were, Balthazar Jones thought about the ways in which other soldiers earned a living after leaving the Army. He remembered the time he had spent on sentry duty at the Tower of London, and the Beefeaters in their splendid uniforms, who went by the exalted title of Yeoman Warders of Her Majesty’s Royal Palace and Fortress the Tower of London, and Members of the Sovereign’s Body Guard of the Yeoman Guard Extraordinary. Not only were they all former warrant officers from Her Majesty’s Forces, but each had an honourable service record of at least twenty-two years. Fulfilling both requirements, he posted off an application form. Four months later, a letter arrived informing him of a vacancy for the historic position, which had once entailed guarding (and torturing) prisoners, but since Victorian times involved acting as an official tour guide.

Hebe Jones, whose own earnings were modest, knew that their savings would never stretch to the university education they both wanted for their son. Ignoring the dread that set like cement in her guts, she dismissed her husband’s warning that they would have to live at the Tower if he were successful. “It’s every woman’s dream to live in a castle,” she lied, not turning round from the stove.

When Balthazar Jones discovered that she had never visited the famous monument, he asked how it was possible, since she had spent most of her childhood in London. She explained that her parents had only ever taken their four daughters to the British Museum to see the Elgin Marbles. The sound of Mr. and Mrs. Grammatikos weeping as they stood in front of the Greek exhibits piffered by the English was so catastrophic that the family was eventually banned from the museum for life. The couple consequently refused to visit any British landmarks, a protest Hebe Jones had kept up in adulthood out of familial solidarity.

In case his wife wasn’t aware, Balthazar Jones pointed out that not only was the Tower of London a royal palace and fortress, but it had once been England’s state prison, had witnessed numerous executions, and was also widely believed to be haunted. But Hebe Jones simply disappeared into the garden shed and emerged with a blue-and-white-striped deck chair. She sat down and pulled out of a shopping bag a guide to the Tower that she had purchased to prepare her husband for his interview. With the ruthlessness of a gunner, she started to fire questions at the man who had failed his history O-Level to such a spectacular degree that the astonished marker kept a copy of his paper to cheer herself up during her most debilitating bouts of depression. Hebe Jones maintained the battery as her husband paced up and down the lawn, scratching the back of his neck as he searched for the answers in the empty birdcage of his head.

His wife’s determination was absolute. Balthazar Jones would receive a call at lunchtime asking not what he fancied for supper, but the name of the woman who was sent to the Tower in the thirteenth century for rejecting the advances of King John, who subsequently poisoned her with an egg. She would return home from work and enquire, not how her husband’s day had been, but in which tower the Duke of Clarence had been drowned in a butt of his favourite Malmsey wine. Bathed in sweat after love-making, she would lift her head from his chest and demand that he reveal not the depth of his devotion for her, but the name of the seventeenth-century thief who made it as far as the Tower wharf with the Crown Jewels. By the time the job offer arrived in the post, Balthazar Jones’s brain had been unsettled by so much English history, that it provoked in him a mania for the subject that afflicted him for the rest of his life.

REV. SEPTIMUS DREW WOKE in his three-storey home overlooking Tower Green, and glanced at his alarm clock. There was still some time before the gates of the Middle Tower would open to let in the loathsome tourists, the worst of whom still thought that the Queen Mother was alive. At times the chaplain rose even earlier to capture more of this exquisite period. The place was never the same when the infernal hordes eventually left, and the gates shut swiftly behind them, as the air in the chapel remained as putrid as a stable’s until nightfall.

His mind immediately turned to the new mousetrap he had painstakingly laid the previous evening. With the mounting excitement of a child about to inspect the contents of his Christmas stocking, the clergyman wondered what he would find. Unable to wait any longer, he swung his legs out of bed and opened the windows to clear the room of the mists of unrequited love that had clouded them overnight. The movement sent tears of condensation
and a high-pitched squeak from the crypt. The woman jumped to her feet and fled, no doubt in fear of one of the
soul in anguish, he decided to offer her comfort, despite his wretchedness. But at that very moment came a thud
brushed. Cursing himself for having left the house with hangman’s breath, he looked down at his skinny, bare ankles
hair had always been perfectly combed into the style first inflicted at the age of eight, and his teeth had been
wistful fantasies he had concocted as he stood at his window overlooking Tower Green hoping for a glimpse of her,
approach, he considered it the best out of all those he had thought of since his heart had taken flight. But in all the
been imagining for months: a chance to speak to her alone, take her hand in his, and ask whether there was any hope
Sir Thomas More, where he had set up his latest apparatus (which had taken two months of planning and execution,
garden twine, were laid out on a table. The arsenal of weapons included a tiny sling and marble, a razor blade which
had once formed part of a doomed guillotine, a tiny trebuchet, and a pair of minuscule gates complete with murder
holes in the top, through which deadly substances could be poured.
His beetle-black hair still in turmoil, he walked the short distance across the cobbles to the Chapel Royal of St.
Peter ad Vincula. He had never got used to it being included in the Beefeaters’ tours. Many of the sightseers ignored
the instruction to take off their hats before entering, only to receive a retired soldier’s reprimand once inside. Some
even attended the Sunday service, and the chaplain would watch them from the altar, his fury mounting as they sat
amongst the Beefeaters and their families, gazing at the walls around them. And he knew that their wonderment had
nothing to do with being in the House of God, but everything to do with the thrill of sitting in a chapel which housed
the broken remains of three Queens of England who had been beheaded just outside.
He naturally blamed the tourists for the rat infestation, assuming they showered the place with tantalising crumbs
as they snacked while listening to the Beefeaters’ talks. However, the sightseers were entirely blameless, for any
food they made the grave mistake of purchasing from the Tower Café went straight into the bin after the first
mouthful. The truth was that the current rat population were descendants of the rodents that moved in not long after
St. Peter’s was first built as an ordinary city parish church outside the Tower walls, before being incorporated into
the castle following Henry III’s extensions. The rats had decamped briefly on the two occasions when the chapel
was rebuilt, and for a third time during the nineteenth-century renovations when more than a thousand human
corpses were discovered under the floor. But the vermin soon returned, lured by the succulence of the new tapestry
kneelers. They had harassed a succession of chaplains to such a degree that each was obliged to wear his cassock
several inches above the dusty chapel floor to prevent the ends from being ravished whenever he stood in
contemplation. But it did nothing to stop the nibbling while they knelt in prayer. Rev. Septimus Drew found such
radical tailoring one humiliation too far, and had devoted his eleven years in the post to the extermination of the
creature not worthy of a mention in the Bible.
His time had been spent studiously converting the humble mousetrap into a contraption of suitable robustness to
annihilate a rat. First he turned one of the empty bedrooms, which he had hoped would be used by the family he had
longed for, into a workshop. It was there that he laboured on his inventions late into the night, the shelves lined with
books on basic scientific laws and theories. Numerous plans with perfectly to-scale drawings lay unfurled on a desk,
weighed down by anemic spider plants. A series of models, made out of pieces of cardboard, off-cuts of wood and
garden twine, were laid out on a table. The arsenal of weapons included a tiny sling and marble, a razor blade which
had once formed part of a doomed guillotine, a tiny trebuchet, and a pair of minuscule gates complete with murder
holes in the top, through which deadly substances could be poured.
Arriving at the chapel door, he pressed down on the cold door handle. His hopes mounting for a formidable body
count, he pushed open the door and made his way across the worn tiles to the crypt. As he approached the tomb of
Sir Thomas More, where he had set up his latest apparatus (which had taken two months of planning and execution,
as well as a call to a weapons expert at the Imperial War Museum), he heard a sound in the main body of the church.
Irritated at being disturbed at such a delicious moment, he retraced his steps to determine the source of the noise.
His resentment at being interrupted immediately evaporated the moment he recognised the figure sitting in the
front row of chairs next to the altar. Caught off guard by the sight of the woman who had chased away his dreams,
he quickly hid behind a pillar and stood with his palms flat against the cold, smooth stone. It was the moment he had
been imagining for months: a chance to speak to her alone, take her hand in his, and ask whether there was any hope
that she might feel for him the way he did about her. While still uncertain of the merits of such an antiquated
approach, he considered it the best out of all those he had thought of since his heart had taken flight. But in all the
wistful fantasies he had concocted as he stood at his window overlooking Tower Green hoping for a glimpse of her,
his hair had always been perfectly combed into the style first inflicted at the age of eight, and his teeth had been
brushed. Cursing himself for having left the house with hangman’s breath, he looked down at his skinny, bare ankles
and deeply regretted not having taken the time to put on his socks.
As he berated himself for his unsavoury state, a burst of sobbing echoed round the ancient walls. Unable to ignore
a soul in anguish, he decided to offer her comfort, despite his wretchedness. But at that very moment came a thud
and a high-pitched squeak from the crypt. The woman jumped to her feet and fled, no doubt in fear of one of the
many spectral apparitions said to haunt the Tower. Rev. Septimus Drew remained where he was, playing the scene over in his mind with a spectacularly different ending as the incense, which he burnt in copious amounts to mask the stench of rat droppings, curled around his skinny, bare ankles. When, eventually, he returned to the crypt, not even the sight of a slaughtered rat improved his mood.

When Balthazar Jones had recovered the will to report for duty after his disastrous breakfast, he clambered into his dark blue trousers and pulled on the matching tunic with the initials ER emblazoned in red across the front, surmounted by a red crown. He reached up to the top of the wardrobe for his hat, and pulled it on with both hands. Like all the Beefeaters before him, he had initially worn the Victorian uniform with pride. But it hadn’t been long before it became a source of utmost irritation. The outfits were unbearably hot in the summer and insufferably cold in the winter. Not only that, but they itched from the clouds of moth repellent sprayed on them twice a year while the Beefeaters were still wearing them lest they shrink.

Descending the Salt Tower’s stairs, he locked the door behind him, and turned right past the Tower Café. Assigned the post outside Waterloo Barracks, which housed the Crown Jewels, he chose a spot at sufficient distance from the sentry who had won a fistfight with a Beefeater the week before. His pale blue eyes instinctively searched the sky, and his thoughts drifted with the clouds on their way to drench the washing of the residents of Croydon. When his concentration briefly returned, he braced himself for the battery of ludicrous questions from the tourists who had started to seep in.

An hour later, Balthazar Jones had failed to realise that it had started to rain. Such was his expertise, his subconscious had instantly dismissed the downpour as a particularly common variety for January. He remained in exactly the same position, staring intently but seeing nothing, while the visitors had long since run for cover. When the man from the Palace eventually found him, he was still standing in the same spot, completely sodden and smelling fiercely of moth repellent. On hearing his name, Balthazar Jones turned his head, causing a raindrop to fall from the end of his nose onto the red crown embroidered on the front of his tunic. The man in the dry coat immediately covered the Beefeater with his silver-handled umbrella. Introducing himself as Oswin Fielding, an equerry to Her Majesty, he enquired as to whether he might have a word. Balthazar Jones hurriedly wiped his beard to rid it of water, but then found that his hand was too wet to offer. The man from the Palace suggested that they have a cup of tea at the Tower Café. But as they approached, he sniffed twice, flinched at the affront to his nostrils, and headed straight for the Rack & Ruin.

The tavern, from which members of the public had always been barred, was empty apart from the landlady, who was cleaning out her canary’s cage. Oswin Fielding walked past the empty tables and chose one against the back wall. He hung up his coat and approached the bar. Balthazar Jones, who had forgotten to remove his hat, sat down and tried to distract himself from his anxiety about what the man wanted by studying the framed signature of Rudolf Hess hanging on the wall. It had been given to a Beefeater during the Deputy Führer’s four-day imprisonment at the Tower. But Balthazar Jones had studied it so many times before, it failed to hold his attention.

The Beefeater’s hope that Oswin Fielding would be seduced by the real ales evaporated when he returned with two teas and the last Kit Kat. He watched in silence as the man from the Palace removed the red wrapper and offered him half, which he refused on account of his fluttering insides. The equerry proceeded to dunk each finger before eating it, a process that doubled the length of consumption, while at the same time enquiring about the pub’s history. Balthazar Jones answered as briefly as possible, and failed to mention the fact that the man had chocolate on his chin lest it deter him further from getting to the point. When the courtier spotted the framed signature of Rudolf Hess, the Beefeater instantly dismissed it as a fake, as he could no longer bear waiting for the executioner’s axe to fall.

But much to his annoyance, Oswin Fielding started to talk about a golden monkey called Guoliang, which had belonged to the Queen. “It was a gift from the President of China following his state visit in 2005,” he explained.

Balthazar Jones was not the least bit interested in golden monkeys, royal or not. He glanced out of the window and wondered whether the equerry had come about his lamentable record for catching pickpockets, which was the worst amongst the Beefeaters. By the time he opened his ears again, he realised that Oswin Fielding was still discussing the late Guoliang.

“The creature’s death has caused Her Majesty immense personal sorrow,” the equerry was saying, shaking his head, which barely possessed sufficient hair to warrant such a meticulous parting. “Someone at the Palace looked up its name and discovered it means ‘May the country be kind,’ which makes its demise even more unfortunate. It caused the most stupendous diplomatic row. Golden monkeys are indigenous to China and there aren’t many of them left. We explained that we even got in a feng shui expert to redesign the enclosure as soon as the animal
appeared off-colour, but the Chinese didn’t seem that impressed. For some reason they had got it into their heads that it would be kept at Buckingham Palace. But with the exception of horses, the Queen keeps all animals given to her by heads of state at London Zoo. Which is just as well as the Palace is enough of a monkey house as it is.” The courtier paused. “Don’t repeat that,” he added hastily.

Just as Balthazar Jones could take no more, Oswin Fielding adjusted his rimless spectacles and announced that he had something of the utmost importance to tell him. The Beefeater stopped breathing.

“As you will know, relations between Britain and China are in a rather delicate state, and as China is an emerging superpower we need to keep them on our side,” the courtier said firmly. “No one has forgotten those unfortunate comments made by the Duke of Edinburgh, either. As a gesture of goodwill, China has sent Her Majesty a second golden snub-nosed monkey. Shame, really, as they haven’t got the most attractive combination of features—a snub nose, obviously, blue cheeks, and hair the same colour as Sarah Ferguson’s. Anyway, the Queen is stuck with it. To make matters worse, the Chinese also noticed the similarity in hair colour, and have named it the Duchess of York. The Queen is understandably rather unsettled by that.”

The Beefeater was about to ask why exactly Oswin Fielding had wanted to see him, but the equerry continued.

“While the Queen has the utmost respect for London Zoo, she has decided to move the new monkey, as well as all her other gifts of animals that are kept there, to a more intimate location. The problem is that foreign rulers always take it as a personal slight if their creature dies.”

The courtier then leant forward conspiratorially. “I’m sure you’ve guessed where the animals are to be newly lodged,” he said.

“I can’t imagine,” replied Balthazar Jones, who was contemplating fetching himself a pint.

Oswin Fielding then lowered his voice and announced: “They are going to be transferred to the Tower to form a new royal menagerie.”

The Beefeater wondered whether the rain had rusted his eardrums.

“It’s not as daft an idea as it sounds,” the man from the Palace insisted. “Exotic beasts were kept at the Tower from the thirteenth century. Foreign powers continued to send the monarchy animals over the years, and the menagerie became an immensely popular tourist attraction. It didn’t close until the 1830s.”

Like all the Beefeaters, Balthazar Jones was well aware that the Tower had housed a menagerie, and often pointed out the remains of the Lion Tower to the tourists. He could even have told the equerry that the elephants were given red wine by their keepers to banish the cold, and that the lions were rumoured to have been able to determine whether or not a woman was a virgin, tales he used to stun the more irritating visitors into silence. But he didn’t utter a word.

Oswin Fielding continued. “Her Majesty very much hopes that the new menagerie will increase the number of visitors to the Tower, which has been declining.” He paused before adding, “Hirsute gentlemen in antiquated uniforms are not much of an attraction these days. No disrespect to you, your trousers, or your beard.”

He paused yet again, but the only movement that came from the Beefeater was a raindrop plunging from the brim of his hat. Slowly, the courtier raised his eyes from the spot where it had landed.

“It’s a little-known fact that Her Majesty is rather partial to tortoises,” he said. “She is aware that you are in possession of the world’s oldest specimen, which, of course, is a source of great national pride. Such an animal undoubtedly requires the most tender care.” And with a triumphant smile the man from the Palace added: “The Queen can think of no one better than you to oversee the project.”

Oswin Fielding patted Balthazar Jones on the shoulder and then reached underneath the table to dry his hand on his trouser leg. As he stood up, he warned the Beefeater not to tell anyone of the plan, particularly the Chief Yeoman Warder, as details had yet to be ironed out. “We’re hoping to transfer the Queen’s animals in about three weeks’ time, and give them a few days to settle in before opening the menagerie to the public,” he said.

Announcing that he would be in touch shortly, he put on his coat and walked out with his splendid umbrella. Balthazar Jones remained on the red leather stool unable to move. He didn’t manage the monumental task of getting to his feet until he was asked to leave by the infuriated landlady, who complained that the stench of mothballs had caused her canary to faint, and it had landed in the slops tray.

IT HAD STOPPED RAINING by the time Hebe Jones returned to the Tower, having left work early on account of her
headache. The sky remained an obstinate shade of used bathwater, ready to disgorge a second filthy load at any moment. She nodded at the Yeoman Gaoler, the Chief Yeoman Warder’s deputy, who was sitting in a black hut at the entrance to the Tower, a three-bar electric fire preventing the damp from decomposing his toes. When he enquired about the visit from the man from the Palace, Hebe Jones replied that there had been no such thing, or her husband would have called to inform her. But the Beefeater backed up the sighting with a further nine eyewitnesses, each of whom he named while unfurling a plump finger.

“Don’t sprout where you haven’t been planted,” Hebe Jones snapped, and continued through the gates. Her passage was soon thwarted by a suffocation of tourists staring at the Beefeaters’ terrace houses along Mint Street. Feeling more than ever the weight of her supermarket shopping in each hand, she squeezed her way sideways up Water Lane, wishing that the visitors would indulge their lunatic weakness for British history elsewhere. As she passed Cradle Tower, she was struck sharply in the chest by a rucksack whose owner had turned to see the window from which two prisoners had escaped on a rope stretched across the moat in the sixteenth century. Once she had caught her breath, she continued on her journey, seeing nothing but the Greek cottage of her fantasies.

Arriving at the Salt Tower, she searched for the key that failed to fit into a pocket, and discovered that it had already torn the lining of her new handbag. After turning it in the lock, a feat that required both of her doll-sized hands, she made her way up the steps with half her bags, the narrowness of the spiral stairs preventing her from carrying them all up in one go. As she started her descent for the second load, gripping the filthy rope handrail that still bore the sweat of the condemned, she wondered, as she often did, how many of them had kept their heads.

She put away the shopping and started to wash the breakfast dishes, remembering the argument that morning with her husband. After losing Milo, instead of clinging to each other cheek to cheek as they had throughout their marriage, the couple had found themselves swimming in opposite directions as they battled to survive. When one needed to talk about the tragedy, the other wanted to experience a few fleeting seconds of tranquillity. They eventually ended up collapsed on distant shores, marooned by their grief and aiming their anger over losing him at each other.

As she scrubbed, she looked up at the picture on the wall in front of her depicting the Salt Tower in wobbly pencil strokes, coloured in with felt tip. Great care had been taken, but not always achieved, to keep within the lines. Next to the Tower stood three smiling figures, two tall, one short. Only the artist’s parents had recognised the small object next to them, which was also smiling, as that of the oldest tortoise in the world. And she peered, with mounting distress, at the colours that had started to fade.

Suddenly she heard the thud of the Salt Tower door. Not long afterwards, her husband appeared in the kitchen and silently presented her with a warm, flat cardboard box. Hebe Jones, unable to admit that she still detested pizza, set the table and forced down the white flag in small mouthfuls that threatened to choke her. And for the rest of the evening the air in the Salt Tower was so fragile that they spoke to each other as if the place were filled with a million fluttering butterflies that neither dared disturb.
CHAPTER THREE

HEBE JONES UNBUTTONEO HER COAT next to the drawer containing one hundred and fifty-seven pairs of false teeth. It was a ritual she performed every morning upon arrival at London Underground’s Lost Property Office, even during the summer, a season she vehemently distrusted in England. She hung it on the stand next to the life-size inflatable doll, a deep red hole for a mouth, which no one had yet dared to claim. Turning the corner, she stood at the original Victorian counter, its shutter still closed, and studied one of the ledgers to remind herself what had been brought in the previous day. As well as the usual several dozen umbrellas and bestselling novels, some with a bookmark tragically near the end, the yield included one lawnmower, a Russian typewriter, and sixteen jars of preserved ginger. The last item brought in was yet another abandoned wheelchair, increasing the office’s hoard to the spectacular figure of thirty-nine. It was proof, if only to the staff, that London Underground could perform miracles.

She switched on the kettle on top of the safe that no one had been able to open since its discovery on the Circle Line five years ago. Opening the fridge, currently the subject of a standoff about whose turn it was to clean, she took out a carton of milk and raised it to her nose. Satisfied that the boisterous odour came from something no longer recognisable on the lower shelf, she poured some into a teacup. As she waited for the water to boil, Hebe Jones, who felt the weight of loss more acutely than most, gazed with regret at the graveyard of forgotten belongings on metal shelves stretching far into the distance, covered in a shroud of dust.

Passing the long, black magician’s box used to imprison glamorous assistants while sawing them in half, she took her tea to her desk. It was scattered with a number of recent items whose owners she was still trying to trace: a stuffed hummingbird in a little glass dome; a false eye; a pair of tiny pointed Chinese slippers with lotus leaf embroidery; a gigolo’s diary which she hoped wouldn’t be claimed before she had finished reading it; and a small box found in the Albert Hall purporting to contain a testicle belonging to an A. Hitler. Standing on a shelf above the desk was a line of faded thank-you cards kept as proof of the more considerate side of human nature, one that was easily forgotten when dealing with the general public.

Opening a drawer, she pulled out her notebook, hoping that the deeply satisfying task of reuniting a possession with its absent-minded owner would take her mind off her troubles. She read the notes she had made during her search for the manufacturer of the false eye. But her thoughts kept finding their way back to her husband.

She smelt the arrival of her colleague before seeing her. The still-warm bacon sandwich in greaseproof paper tossed onto the neighbouring desk knocked over an Oscar statuette, which had been waiting for collection for two years, eight months, and twenty-seven days. Despite the fact that Hebe Jones had repeatedly told her that it was a fake, borne out by all the letters sent to the actor’s agent remaining unanswered, Valerie Jennings was of the utter conviction that one day Dustin Hoffman would arrive in person to reclaim it.

Years of frustration, made bearable by the odd spectacular triumph, had bonded the two women like prisoners sharing the same cell. While they rejoiced in one another’s successes as keenly as their own, they were equally susceptible to feeling the dead weight of each other’s failures. It was a job of highs and lows. As a result, neither woman could bear the shafts of boredom that would eventually shine their way into the working day, often with the handing in of the morning’s thirty-ninth set of door keys. It was then that they would long for the arrival of something either exotic, edible, or, if luck would have it, both. And while during particularly intense periods of stress Hebe Jones was able to escape to the sanctuary of the magician’s box, where she would remain entombed with her eyes closed, Valerie Jennings, whose marvellous girth thwarted such pleasure, resorted to trying on the contents of an abandoned box-set of theatrical beards and mustaches, and admiring the many splendid permutations in the mirror.

The two women, who irritated each other as much as siblings, but who loved each other just as fiercely, ruled London Underground’s Lost Property Office with a queenly air that only slipped to that of the filthiest of brothels during moments of intense frustration. Their honesty was absolute. Everything that was handed in by Underground staff, or kindly members of the public, was written down with the penmanship of a monk in perfectly ordered ledgers. The only items the women claimed as their own were perishables, which they were forbidden from storing for more than twenty-four hours, though they made a secret extension for inscribed birthday cakes, which unsettled their hearts more than their taste buds.
Hebe Jones and Valerie Jennings had enjoyed in toasted cheese sandwiches the previous day.

Hebe Jones approached as he realised he couldn’t remember what he had lost. He stared at the floor, running his fingers through his ochre-coloured hair, which had never regained its ability to lie flat since the brutal years of being constantly flushed. A smile suddenly appeared as he recalled the object, but it swiftly slid away again when he remembered that it was no longer in his possession.

“Has a tomato plant been handed in, by any chance?” he enquired, adjusting his gold-rimmed glasses. It was no ordinary specimen, he went on to explain, as it was descended from one of the first such plants ever to have been grown in England, courtesy of the barber-surgeon John Gerard in the 1590s. After several years of infiltration, he had managed to procure the seed from a contact in the tomato world. Such was the magnificence of its fruit, he had decided to enter it into a show. “Unfortunately, I left it on the Piccadilly Line yesterday on my way there,” he confessed. “I’d forgotten that the show actually takes place this afternoon.”

“Just a minute,” replied Hebe Jones, disappearing from view. She returned within minutes, carrying the plant in front of her, and slid it silently onto the counter with the words “Don’t worry about the retrieval fee.” Skipping her usual chat, she said goodbye and disappeared again with unusual determination. Samuel Crapper walked joyfully away, clutching the plant to his corduroy jacket, having completely failed to notice the four missing tomatoes that Hebe Jones and Valerie Jennings had enjoyed in toasted cheese sandwiches the previous day.

When Hebe Jones returned to her desk, her colleague was looking inside the fridge in readiness for elevenses, despite the fact that there was some time to go before the sacred hour. During those magical fifteen minutes, the shutter was closed, phones remained unanswered, and the two women would serve themselves Lady Grey tea in bone china cups, yet to be claimed, along with whatever cake or tarts Valerie Jennings had brought in.

Her considerable appetite developed after she returned home from the office one day intending to suggest to her husband that it was time that they start a family. But instead of the night of reckless passion she had been hoping for, her husband turned from his newspaper and told her with the frigidity of a lawyer that he was leaving her. He explained that the marriage had been a mistake, and insisted that no one else was involved. Valerie Jennings was so distraught at the revelation of his lack of affection, she let him handle the divorce. Several months after the decree absolute came through, she heard he had got married barefoot on a Caribbean island, and she threw out the travel brochure she discovered in the drawer of his bedside table. Only then did she take down their wedding photograph.

The Swiss cowbell rang before Hebe Jones had a chance to reply. She got up from her seat to allow Valerie Jennings the dignity of an uninterrupted breakfast. On her way to the counter she tried to open the safe, as was the office custom. But despite yet another combination of numbers, the grey steel door remained tightly shut.

Samuel Crapper, the Lost Property Office’s most frequent customer, was standing at the counter dressed in a brown corduroy suit and blue-striped shirt, concern threaded across his forehead. A distant descendant of the famous plumber with a glut of Royal Warrants, he had received from his family the best private education money could buy. But they paid an even higher price than they had thought. The cruel words in the playground made his cheeks flare, which led to the loud declaration by his tormentors that he was “flushed with pride.” Despite his protestations that it was an urban myth that Thomas Crapper invented the flush lavatory, and it was in fact Queen Elizabeth I’s godson, Sir John Harington, they would lie in wait, striking at any opportunity to force his head down the pan. The trauma of the bullying affected his memory, and he tried to compensate for it by purchasing two of everything. However, he failed to realise that if something went missing it didn’t prevent its double from going the same way.

Tall and thin as smoke, Samuel Crapper felt his agitation mount on seeing Hebe Jones approach as he realised he couldn’t remember what he had lost. He stared at the floor, running his fingers through his ochre-coloured hair, which had never regained its ability to lie flat since the brutal years of being constantly flushed. A smile suddenly appeared as he recalled the object, but it swiftly slid away again when he remembered that it was no longer in his possession.

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When, several minutes later, the Swiss cowbell rang again, Hebe Jones got to her feet. Standing at the counter was Arthur Catnip, a London Underground ticket inspector of limited height whose waistline had been softened by a weakness for fried breakfasts. Over the years he had learnt to detect a fare dodger at a hundred paces. He put his talent down to the same intuition that had warned him he was going to have a massive heart attack fifteen days before the colossal misadventure took place. After taking annual leave, he attempted to check himself into the psychiatric wing. His prophetic warnings were noted down by a squeakily bald doctor thrilled at the thought that he
had discovered a whole new subset of insanity. When the medical emergency eventually took place, the only reason Arthur Catnip survived the massive onslaught was because during the height of his suffering a flood of boiling vindication coursed up his body from his toes, pushing through his blocked artery with the thrust of a stallion. As the scent of self-righteousness filled the wing, two patients more sane than their keepers decided that this was their moment, and escaped with their suitcases after a combined stay of forty-nine years.

Over the years, Arthur Catnip had received numerous cups of tea from the ladies for his willingness to hand in everything he found. A number of his colleagues, exhausted by the number of forgotten belongings choking the network, left the least suspicious items where they were in the hope that they would be stolen. Arthur Catnip, however, took everything that he found immediately to the Lost Property Office. Not only were the two ladies the only people in the entire workforce who ever thanked him for his efforts to make London Underground a bastion of British glory, but the thought of visiting the antiquated department in Baker Street made the former seaman’s innards roll as if he were back on one of his ships. Several months ago, he had caught Valerie Jennings in one of her theatrical beards, a sight which had thrilled him beyond measure. The vision instantly reminded him of the wondrous bearded ladies he had seen on his voyages around the Pacific, who had once been guarded by spear-waving elders against circus owners with voluminous nets. The women’s undoubted charms had earned them the highest regard in their village, where they were worshipped as deities and presented with the biggest turtle eggs. They used the golden yolks to gloss their beards, and the whites to oil the succulent flesh that covered their bodies in tantalising handfuls.

Arthur Catnip had vowed not to trust women again when his eleven-year marriage collapsed on the chance discovery that his wife was having an affair with his Rear Admiral. He left the Navy before he could be discharged for breaking the man’s jaw, and, not wanting to see the light of day, applied for a job with London Underground. But the spectacular vision of Valerie Jennings produced in him such yearning that from then on he always arrived at work doused in eau de toilette. Having never seen her crowned with such lustrous facial hair again, he eventually convinced himself that the wondrousness had been an illusion. He was left with a ghost of the vision that haunted him during his working day as he rattled through the Victorian tunnels seeking out fare evaders.

The ticket inspector, whose hands had never recovered their smoothness after years of rope-pulling, placed on the counter a camellia, a pair of handcuffs, sixteen umbrellas, thirteen mobile phones, and five odd socks. He waited in silence, one elbow on the counter, as Hebe Jones noted down the items in a number of ledgers with inscrutable coded cross-references. Just as she closed the final volume and returned it to its place, Arthur Catnip picked up a modest blue holdall from the floor next to his feet and placed it on the counter with the words: “Almost forgot this.”

Hebe Jones, her curiosity as potent as the first day she started the job, unzipped the bag and stood on her toes to peer inside. Still uncertain of its contents, she reached in a hand and retrieved a plastic lunch box containing the crusts of a fish paste sandwich. Feeling something else inside, she drew out a wooden box with a brass plaque inscribed with the words “Clementine Perkins, 1939 to 2008, RIP.” And neither of them spoke as they stared in horror at the urn of ashes before them.

After Arthur Catnip had left, wondering out loud how someone could mislay human remains, Hebe Jones noted it down in the ledgers. But her hand shook to such an extent that her penmanship no longer resembled that of a monk. She carried the item back to her desk and put it on top of the gigolo’s diary without a word. But her mind was no longer on the wooden box in front of her with the brass nameplate. Instead, with the twist of a knife, it had turned to the small urn that stood in the back of the Salt Tower’s wardrobe.
suffocating silence, the third cup abandoned on the tray, neither of them able to look at the thing on the table that
induced in them both a secret wish to die. Several days later, Hebe Jones noticed that her husband had placed it on
the ancient mantelpiece. The following week, unable to bear seeing it any longer, she put it in the wardrobe until
they had decided upon Milo’s final resting place. But each time one of them brought up the subject, the other,
suddenly caught off guard, had felt too bruised to reply. So it remained at the back of the shelf behind Hebe Jones’s
sweaters. And every night, before turning off her bedside light, the mother would find an excuse to open the
wardrobe doors and silently wish her child goodnight, unable to abandon the ritual she had performed for eleven
years.
CHAPTER FOUR

For what he considered to be very good reasons, Balthazar Jones decided not to tell his wife about the visit from the equerry with the splendid umbrella. When, several days later, at the demonic hour of 3:13 a.m., Hebe Jones sat bolt upright in bed and asked, “So what did the man from the Palace want?” the Beefeater muttered with the colourful breath of a man still embedded in his dreams that it was something to do with the drains. He instantly regretted his reply. Hebe Jones remained in the same erect position for the following eleven minutes as she pointed out that while their lavatory may very well be connected to an historic garderobe, the monstrous smell of petrified effluent left by centuries of prisoners that hung like a fog in their home whenever the drains blocked was not protected by any royal decree.

The Beefeater had considered Oswin Fielding’s proposal to be utter lunacy. Once the tourists had been locked out of the fortress for the day, he spent the rest of his afternoons collapsed on his blue-and-white-striped deckchair on the battlements engulfed in the creeping darkness, hoping that royal enthusiasm for the menagerie would wane. While he didn’t suffer from his wife’s natural horror of them, animals offered little in the way of interest for him. The one exception was Mrs. Cook, whom generations of Joneses had completely forgotten was a tortoise. She was regarded more as a loose-bowelled geriatric relative with a propensity for absconding, such a protracted habit that nobody ever realised she had vanished until weeks later, as her sedate trajectory across the room was still burnt on their memories.

It was only after being summoned to the office in the Byward Tower that the Beefeater realised that being in charge of the Queen’s beasts might in fact be to his benefit. He pushed open the office’s studded door to see the Chief Yeoman Warder sitting behind his desk within the cold, circular walls, his fingers, as soft and pale as an embalmer’s, laced over his stomach. He looked at his watch with irritation and then gestured to a seat. Balthazar Jones sat down, placed his dark blue hat on his lap, and held on to its brim with both hands.

“I’ll get straight to the point, Yeoman Warder Jones,” the man said, his grey beard clipped with the precision of topiary. “Guarding the Tower and capturing professional pickpockets are very much part of the job for which thousands of retired British servicemen would give their back teeth, if they still had any, to be selected.”

He leant forward and rested his elbows on the desk. “You were one of our best when you first arrived,” he continued. “I remember the time you rugby-tackled that chap on Tower Green. He had five wallets on him at the time, if I recall correctly. I know things haven’t been easy, what with that dreadful business with the little chap. But time has moved on. We can’t afford to have a weak link. Let’s not forget the Peasants’ Revolt, when all those hoodlums stormed the place.”

“That was back in 1381, sir.”

“I’m well aware of that, Yeoman Warder Jones. But the point is that the Tower is not infallible. We must be alert at all times, not gazing around the place enjoying the view.”

The Beefeater looked through the arrow slit behind the Chief Yeoman Warder’s head as he remembered the last time he had been called into the office. On that occasion the man had bothered to get to his feet when he came in, and immediately offered him his condolences. “I know exactly how you feel,” he had insisted. “When we lost Sally we were just devastated. She had such an extraordinary character. One of the most intelligent dogs we’ve ever had. She’d been with us for nine years. How old was the little chap again?”

“Eleven,” Balthazar Jones had replied. He then looked at his hands, while the Chief Yeoman Warder’s gaze fell to his desk. The silence was eventually broken with an offer of more time off work, which Balthazar Jones refused, insisting that the three days had been sufficient. He left to walk the battlements, hoping to find a reason to live.

“Are you listening, Yeoman Warder Jones?” the Chief Yeoman Warder asked from behind the desk.

The Beefeater, his cloud-white hair flattened from his hat, turned his gaze to him and asked: “How’s the new dog?”
“She’s fine, thank you for asking. Top of the obedience class.”

Balthazar Jones’s gaze returned to the view through the arrow slit.

The Chief Yeoman Warder studied him with a frown. “I don’t think you realise that your future here hangs in the balance. I suggest you sit there for a while and think things over,” he said, getting up. “This can’t go on.”

The Beefeater jumped as the door slammed. He looked down at his hat and slowly wiped away the raindrops that shone like diamonds on its crown. Too defeated to get to his feet, he stared ahead of him. His mind turned once more to the night Milo died and his terrible, terrible secret. When his stomach eventually settled, his eyes dropped again to his hat, and he wiped it with the tips of his fingers, though nothing was there. Standing up, he put it back on, tugged open the door, and returned to duty.

By the time the letter arrived from Oswin Fielding asking him to come to the Palace to discuss the new menagerie, Balthazar Jones had convinced himself that his new duty would protect him from losing his job, which had given him a reason to get up in the morning when the weight of remorse pinned him to the sheets. He slipped the letter into his tunic pocket, where it remained hidden from his wife, along with the crumbs from the biscuits she forbade him to eat to safeguard his heart.

ON THE MORNING HE WAS DUE TO meet the Queen, the Beefeater sat on the bed in his dressing gown waiting for the final echo of his wife’s footsteps as she descended the spiral staircase. He scurried to one of the lattice windows to check that she was on her way to work. Through the ancient glass he recognised instantly the gait of a woman determined to reunite a lost possession with its absent-minded owner. He fetched from the wardrobe his red and gold state dress uniform, which Oswin Fielding had insisted he wear for the occasion. And, with the thrill of a woman about to put on her most alluring underwear, he retrieved his white linen ruff from the trouser press.

He started to dress in front of the mirror, which for the last eight years had stood on the floor as he had been unable to mount it on the circular walls. It was a miserable room, as miserable as the living room downstairs, despite the efforts he and Hebe Jones had made to disguise the Salt Tower’s repugnant past as a prison. The cheerful curtains he had made for the windows not only failed to keep out the draughts, but threw into sharp relief the wretchedness of the place.

The couple had pushed the wardrobe in front of the worst of the pitiful carvings by prisoners who had scratched onto the walls their hopes of keeping their heads. But the others could still be seen. At night, when the couple were unable to sleep, fearing the catastrophic dreams inspired by their lodgings, they were convinced they could hear the mournful sound of chiselling.

When the family first arrived at the fortress, Hebe Jones had insisted that all the Salt Tower’s decrepit furniture be taken away and replaced with their own. But it was a decision both of them regretted. While a bed, a chest of drawers, and a desk had been easily carried into Milo’s bedroom on the ground floor, there was little they could maneuver up the spiral staircase to the floors above. As a result, the furniture had to be dismantled outside and brought up piece by piece. Not only did it refuse to fit back together correctly, but it failed to stand flush against the curved walls, a problem neither of them had foreseen. Despite the folds of cardboard that Balthazar Jones had wedged underneath, the furniture stood at precarious angles, made worse by the pitch of the floor, until the next thunderous collapse that invariably happened in the middle of the night.

Savouring the opportunity to put on the famous uniform reserved for royal visits to the Tower and special ceremonies, Balthazar Jones clambered into his crimson tights. Pulling in his stomach, he managed to do up the matching breeches, which he concluded must have shrunk while they were hanging in the wardrobe. After putting on the tunic with the initials ER embroidered in gold thread across the chest, he tucked in the ruff’s hem, and saw in the mirror the remains of a man who had dedicated his life to serving his country. Gone were the waves of hair that his wife, an amateur artist driven by hope rather than talent, had once declared was the precise shade of mummy brown, a paint whose pigment came from the dusty remains of ancient Egyptians. Over the years, the rich, earthy crests had been replaced by a low, grey undulation that had suddenly turned white. And his once clean-shaven cheeks were hidden by a beard of identical colour, grown as insulation against the wretched damp.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he attached red, white, and blue rosettes to the sides of his knees, and then to the front of his black patent shoes. Stepping over Mrs. Cook, he headed for the bathroom, where the cold penetrated with such intensity a woollen hat was required during the solitude of bathing. And, as he brushed his teeth with the vigour required for a royal appointment, he prayed that the button on his breeches wouldn’t burst when he bowed.

As he walked down Water Lane towards Middle Tower, a sight that sent the tourists into raptures, he refused to
asked: “So how many people died in the Tower?”

But despite the encouraging start, the evening always followed the same fault line whenever someone inevitably finished their cocktails. By the time the guests took their seats at the table, the woman would be flushed with desire. Riveting tales about escapes from the fortress, which had everyone either wide-eyed or roaring before they had

Not only did the man admit to a passion for cooking, music to a modern woman’s ears, but he recounted the most

would seem that his hosts had been right. The woman would be instantly captivated by the engaging clergyman

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His married friends had done their best to lift him out of the quagmire of bachelorhood. To each of their dinner parties they had invited a good Christian woman whom they insisted would be a perfect match. Forever hopeful, the chaplain would arrive freshly shaven and armed with one of his more treasured bottles of Château Musar. At first, it would seem that his hosts had been right. The woman would be instantly captivated by the engaging clergyman whose job obliged him to live at the Tower of London. Despite his hairstyle, he was perfectly agreeable to the eye.

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REV. SEPTIMUS DREW RETURNED from his morning walk around the grassy moat, which had been drained of its pestilent waters in the nineteenth century. He had spent the time contemplating his next Sunday school lesson for the Tower children, during which he would explain how animals such as unicorns appeared in the Bible, whereas rats, for example, didn’t. Just as he was about to enter the fortress, he spotted Balthazar Jones getting into a cab wearing state dress, and he was once again filled with regret over the collapse of their friendship.

There was a time when the Beefeater had been a regular guest at his dinner table, and they would enjoy together the delights of a plump game bird and a bottle of Château Musar. Other evenings had been spent in the Rack & Ruin inventing stories about the mystery bullet hole in the bar as they sampled the real ales. When weather permitted they used to be found on the Tower’s bowling green, where they upheld their unspoken gentlemen’s agreement to overlook one another’s cheating. The chaplain was able to ignore the fact that, as a former soldier, the Beefeater had been prepared to kill for his country, just as Balthazar Jones had been able to ignore his friend’s unfathomable attachment to religion.

Such had been the two men’s mutual appreciation that even Milo had got over his initial terror of the chaplain, who was said to have been driven mad by the eleven-fingered drumming from Anne Boleyn’s tomb. The boy would seek him out in the chapel, and the pair would sit on a bench outside as the clergyman told him tales of the Tower that had never appeared in the guidebooks. And when, one afternoon, Milo was eventually discovered hiding in Little Ease, the tiny prison cell in which no grown man could stand, he never admitted who had told him its secret location.

But since the boy’s death, the Beefeater had only once accepted an invitation to supper with the chaplain, and his bowling shoes had remained in the bottom of the wardrobe. Despite the clergyman’s best efforts to lure him into having a drink in the Rack & Ruin, Balthazar Jones had always gone alone, preferring the company of solitude.

Arriving back at his home that overlooked Tower Green, the chaplain ran himself a bath in which he was unable to linger on account of the desperate temperature of the room. He searched for a pair of underpants that would afford him the appropriate dignity for what he was about to do. After putting on his favourite mustard corduroys, which revealed a breathtaking expanse of skinny ankle on account of his excessively long legs, he scrabbled inside his sock drawer and selected a pair that hadn’t been worn since its arrival in the Christmas post. Shrouded in his red cassock, he padded off to the bathroom lost in the silent ecstasy of wearing new socks. Looking into the mirror dappled with age spots, he carefully combed his dark hair into the style first inflicted at the age of eight, and took particular care in brushing his teeth. But despite his efforts, when he looked at his reflection, all he saw was a man who had reached his thirty-ninth year without having experienced one of God’s greatest gifts: the love of a wife.

He made the short journey to the chapel, glad that there was still time before the tourists would be let into the Tower. Pressing down the cold handle, he descended the three steps and made his way to the crypt, where he sat out of sight, hoping that the woman who had stirred the very sediment of his soul would return. After the first hour had passed, he reached into his briefcase for his copy of Private Eye and searched for the unholy adventures of his fellow clergymen. For a while it managed to keep his mind off his predicament as he contemplated a particularly tantalising revelation, the details of which included a female lighthouse keeper, a sou’wester, a bottle of absinthe, and a cauliflower. But once he had finished the magazine and the joy of its scandal had faded, his mind turned yet again to the woman he was waiting for. As another hour creaked past, he wondered again why he was still single.

His married friends had done their best to lift him out of the quagmire of bachelorhood. To each of their dinner parties they had invited a good Christian woman whom they insisted would be a perfect match. Forever hopeful, the chaplain would arrive freshly shaven and armed with one of his more treasured bottles of Château Musar. At first, it would seem that his hosts had been right. The woman would be instantly captivated by the engaging clergyman whose job obliged him to live at the Tower of London. Despite his hairstyle, he was perfectly agreeable to the eye. Not only did the man admit to a passion for cooking, music to a modern woman’s ears, but he recounted the most riveting tales about escapes from the fortress, which had everyone either wide-eyed or roaring before they had finished their cocktails. By the time the guests took their seats at the table, the woman would be flushed with desire. But despite the encouraging start, the evening always followed the same fault line whenever someone inevitably asked: “So how many people died in the Tower?”

The chaplain, who had grown wary of the question, knew from experience to keep his reply brief. Crossing his
excessively long legs underneath the table he would state: “Despite popular belief, only seven people were beheaded at the Tower.” But either the exceptional Lebanese vintage or the interjection of a fellow guest with surprising historical insight would get the better of him, and Rev. Septimus Drew would find himself disgorging the whole wretched truth:

“But there weren’t only the beheadings, of course. Henry VI was said to have been stabbed to death in Wakefield Tower. Many people believe that the two little princes were murdered in the Bloody Tower by Richard III. In the reign of Edward I a senior official called Henry de Bray tried to drown himself on the boat ride to the Tower by throwing himself bound into the Thames. Once he was inside, he committed suicide in his cell. In 1585 the Eighth Earl of Northumberland shot himself in the Bloody Tower. Incidentally, Sir Walter Raleigh also tried to commit suicide while imprisoned in the Tower. Who else? Oh, yes, nine Royalists were executed during the Civil War. Then there were the three men from the Scottish Black Watch who were shot for mutiny in full view of their regiment next to the chapel. They had been ordered to wear their shrouds underneath their uniforms. Who have I forgotten? Oh, yes. Poor old Sir Thomas Overbury. While he was imprisoned in the Bloody Tower he was given poisoned tarts and jellies. He suffered a slow and agonising death over several months and was finally finished off with a mercury enema. Most painful.”

On the assumption he had finished, there would be a momentary pause of condolence. But as soon as the guests reached again for their cutlery, the chaplain would continue:

“Then there was the Duke of Clarence, who was drowned in a butt of his favourite Malmsey wine in the Bowyer Tower. Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was dragged from the Tower during the Peasants’ Revolt and, after several attempts, beheaded outside. You can see his mummified head in the church of St. Gregory at Sudbury in Suffolk …

“Where was I? Oh yes. Arbella Stuart, James I’s cousin, was imprisoned and possibly murdered in the Queen’s House. Her ghost is in the habit of strangling people as they sleep. There were eleven men of various nationalities shot by firing squads for espionage during the First World War. A German spy was shot during the Second World War in 1941. He was the last person to be executed at the Tower, by the way. We’ve still got the chair he was sitting on at the time somewhere. And I suppose I should mention the one-hundred-and-twenty-five-odd Tower prisoners who died, mostly by beheading, on Tower Hill, just outside the fortress, watched by thousands of unruly spectators. Well, that’s some of them, anyway.”

By the time Rev. Septimus Drew had finished answering the query, the dinner was inevitably cold, and the woman’s cheeks had drained to the colour of the white linen napkins. When she would leave at the end of the evening, guarding her telephone number closely, the apologetic hosts would insist that his address was to blame. “What sort of woman would want to live in the Tower of London anyway?” they would ask. And each time the chaplain would agree with the explanation. But whenever he returned to his empty home on Tower Green and sat in the dark in his carpetless study, he always came to the bitter conclusion that the fault was solely his.

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ONCE HE HAD FINALLY ACCEPTED that the woman who invaded his dreams wasn’t coming, Rev. Septimus Drew got up, and headed through the chapel to the door. As he stepped out, the wind instantly rearranged his hair, and he headed home, the snowmen on his socks visible in the gap between the bottom of his cassock and the cobbles. He searched in his pocket for the key to his blue front door, which he had kept locked ever since the day he returned home to find two Spanish tourists in his sitting room, eating their sandwiches on the sofa. After locking the door behind him, he went into the kitchen that still smelt of the treacle cake he had baked using his mother’s faded recipe, and took down his solitary teapot for one.

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BALTHAZAR JONES ARRIVED at the gates of Buckingham Palace having spent the journey trying not to crush his ruff against the back of the seat each time the taxi driver hit the brakes. A police officer escorted him into the palace via a side door, then handed him into the care of a mute footman, whose polished buckled shoes were equally silent as the two men passed along a corridor of dense blue carpet. It was flanked with marble-topped gilt tables bearing billowing pink arrangements made that morning by a weeping Royal Household florist, whose husband had just asked her for a divorce. However, her tears were not those of sadness, but of relief, for she had never got used to the idea that her husband left for work each morning wearing what was irreputably a skirt, tartan knee socks, and no underpants. Married to the Queen’s Piper for three disappointing years, she had found his talent for the bagpipes as insufferable as the Monarch did. His historic duty, dreamed up by Queen Victoria at the height of her Scottish
mania, was to play every weekday under the Sovereign’s window. The commotion started at the absurd hour of nine o’clock in the morning and lasted for a full fifteen minutes, much to Elizabeth II’s annoyance. There was no escaping the man, as he would follow her to her other residences at Windsor, Holyrood, and Balmoral, where he continued the loathsome ritual with undiminished devotion.

The mute footman opened the door to Oswin Fielding’s office and indicated a green seat upon which Balthazar Jones was to wait. Once the door was shut silently behind him, the Beefeater sat down and removed from his crimson left knee a piece of fluff that upon inspection he failed to recognise. Looking up, he surveyed the room. On the pale blue walls were hung several engravings of Buckingham Palace mounted in thin gold frames, which were part of the courtier’s private collection. As he leant forward to inspect the photographs on the formidable desk, a drop of sweat started its descent inside his thick crimson tunic, tickling the valley of his chest as it fell. He picked up the nearest silver frame and staring back at him was Oswin Fielding, almost unrecognisable with a profusion of hair, in hiking gear with his arm around a blond woman in a baseball cap. He surveyed the man’s legs, which he immediately concluded were not as good as his own, despite his advanced years.

Suddenly the door opened and in strode the equerry accompanied by a waft of gentleman’s scent. “I must say you’re looking splendid,” announced the courtier, undoing the button on his discreet suit jacket. “Her Majesty has been delayed unfortunately, so I’m afraid it’s just the two of us after all. Still, always fun to put on the old crimson breeches, I’m sure!”

The Beefeater slowly took off his black Tudor bonnet and rested it on his lap in silence.

“What we both need is a cup of tea,” the courtier announced as he sat down behind his desk. After making the call, he sat back. “It must be fun living in the Tower,” he said. “When my children were younger they were always asking whether we could move there. Have you got any children? All I seem to know about your personal circumstances is your tortoise.”

There was a pause.

“The Beefeater’s gaze fell to the desk. “A son,” he replied.

“Is he still with you or has he gone off to join the Army like his father?”

“He’s no longer with us, no,” replied Balthazar Jones, looking at the carpet.

The silence was broken by the arrival of a footman with a silver tray. After setting it down on the courtier’s desk, he poured two cups through a silver strainer and left again without a sound. Oswin Fielding offered the Beefeater a plate of shortbread. Balthazar Jones declined, unsettled by the unruly shape.

“Pity, they’re one of Her Majesty’s specialities. Almost as good as her scones. Admittedly, they do appear a little strange. Apparently she couldn’t find her glasses,” said the courtier, helping himself.

The Beefeater looked with regret at the shortbread made by royal fingers, and then at the equerry who had just taken a bite and seemed to float in a momentary state of ecstasy. Once Oswin Fielding came to, he took a file from a locked drawer and opened it. He then went through the planned building works for the menagerie, pointing out that not only would enclosures be constructed in the moat, but a number of the disused towers within the monument would be converted for the keeping of the beasts.

“I’ve no idea where any of them should go. I know nothing about exotic animals—I’m more of a labrador man, to tell you the truth—that’s why I’m leaving all that up to you,” said the courtier with a smile.

Balthazar Jones pulled at the band of his ruff to ease the constriction around his neck.

“Now I expect you’re wanting to know which animals are to be transferred along with the Duchess of York,” the equerry continued, turning to another page. “Some toucans. If I remember correctly, they came from the President of Peru. There’s a zorilla, which isn’t, as one might imagine, a cross between a zebra and a gorilla, but a highly revered yet uniquely odorous black-and-white skunk-like animal from Africa. In the Sudan they call it the ‘father of stinks.’ We were hoping to send that back before the Queen saw it, but she spotted it and said it was rude to return a gift, no matter how foul smelling. There are a number of Geoffroy’s marmosets from the President of Brazil, and a sugar glider from the Governor of Tasmania. Sugar gliders, by the way, are small flying possums that get depressed if you don’t give them enough attention. There’s also a glutton, sent by the Russians, which looks like a small bear and has an enormous appetite. It costs the Queen a fortune in food. What else? A Komodo dragon from the President of Indonesia. Komodo dragons are the world’s largest lizards, and can bring down a horse. They’re carnivorous and have a ferocious bite, injecting venom into their victims. So I’d watch that one, if I were you.”

The Beefeater gripped his armrests as the equerry turned a page.
“What else?” Oswin Fielding asked. “Ah yes, some crested water dragons, otherwise known as Jesus Christ lizards. The President of Costa Rica sent that lot, God knows why. And there’s also an Etruscan shrew from the President of Portugal. It’s the smallest land mammal in the world, and can sit in a teaspoon when fully grown. It’s also very highly strung—some die from anxiety just being handled. They say moving is one of life’s greatest stressors, so best of luck. Let me remind you that the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance, signed in 1373, is the oldest alliance in the world still in force. We wouldn’t want anyone to come along and mess that up. Well, here’s the list. You can read about the others at your leisure. There will, of course, be a vet at your disposal, should you need one, but it should all be pretty straightforward. Just make sure they’re fed and watered. And jolly them along, I expect.”

The Beefeater reached out a white-gloved hand and silently took the file. Just as he was about to stand up, the man from the Palace leant forward. “A word of warning,” he said, lowering his voice. “Remember to keep the lovebirds separated. They hate each other …”
Hebe Jones ignored the urn sitting on her desk as she had done every day since its arrival, and picked up the false eye. As she held it up to her own, the two pupils looked at one another for several seconds. Eventually stared out, she admired the artistry of the tiny brushstrokes on the hazel iris. Her curiosity sated, she picked up the phone, hoping to finally reunite the item with its Danish owner.

It hadn’t taken her as long as she had feared to find a number for him. The breakthrough had come when she spotted the manufacturer’s name and a serial number on the back of the prosthesis. Due to the mouse-like dimensions of the print, she had needed to borrow Valerie Jennings’s glasses in order to decipher it, a habit that had become a particular source of irritation. The request evoked a sigh of despair that stirred the worms in the earth below, but which Hebe Jones never heard. Valerie Jennings disappeared into a labyrinth of petrifying smears as she waited for their return and suggested once again that Hebe Jones have her eyes tested. “Everyone’s sight gets worse as they get older,” she said.

“The old hen is worth forty chickens,” Hebe Jones replied, when she finally handed over the spectacles.

After dialling the owner’s number in Århus, given to her by the receptionist at the eye manufacturer’s, Hebe Jones doodled on her pad as she waited.

“Hallo,” came the eventual reply.

“Hallo,” Hebe Jones repeated cautiously. “Frederik Kjeldsen?”

“Ja!”

“This is Mrs. Jones from London Underground Lost Property Office. I believe we may have something that belongs to you.”

There was a moment of pure silence, after which Frederik Kjeldsen began to weep with his good eye. When the damp sound eventually came to an end, the man apologised and began to explain what had happened.

“Two years ago I lost my eye in a road accident and spent seven weeks in hospital,” he said. “I was too scared to drive again and had to give up my job as a teacher. I was so depressed, I didn’t bother getting a … what do you call them?”

“A prosthesis?”

“Ja, a prosthesis. It wasn’t until my sister announced her wedding that I decided to get one to save her the humiliation of my solitary eye in the wedding photographs. I made the decision that, once the celebrations were over, I would take my own life.”

There was a pause during which the two strangers held on to each other through the silence.

“I had to take two buses to reach the manufacturer’s,” he continued. “But the moment the eye-maker lifted her head from her instruments and spoke to me with the voice of an angel, I fell for her. After eight months, and what I have to admit were many unnecessary appointments, I proposed to her under the same fir tree where my father had proposed to my mother. Our wedding emptied the florists for miles. I was so happy I cannot tell you.”

After swallowing loudly, Frederik Kjeldsen continued: “Ten days ago, I was travelling back to the airport after a weekend in London to see my niece when the Tube suddenly stopped. I banged my head against the glass and my eye flew out. There were so many feet and suitcases in the carriage I wasn’t able to find it before arriving at Heathrow. If I had stayed looking for it any longer, the train would have taken me back to London and I would have missed my flight. I needed to get back in time for work the next day, and I had such a headache you wouldn’t believe, so I put on my sunglasses and got off. Of course my wife has made me another eye, but I so wanted the one that had brought us together. And now it seems that you have found it. It is truly a miracle.”

After Frederik Kjeldsen apologised again for his salty state, Hebe Jones assured him that she would get it into the post immediately. As she put down the phone, Valerie Jennings approached and peered at the eye over her colleague’s shoulder, scratching her nest of dark curls, clipped to the back of her head. She then walked to one of the shelves and returned with a box containing a hand-blown glass eye purported to have belonged to Nelson, and
another made of porcelain, which, according to its accompanying label, was used by a fourteenth-century Chinese
emperor whenever he slept with his favourite mistress. After showing them to her colleague, Valerie Jennings, who
had started to smell the rank breath of boredom, asked: “Fancy a game of marbles?”

Hebe Jones was certain of winning, particularly as she was prepared to suffer the indignity of lying flat on the
office floor to execute a shot. She had honed her skills as a young child on the cool, tiled floors of the house in
Athens, and her talent flourished when the Grammatikos family moved to London when she was five, despite the
challenge of carpeting. Her ability to win even blindfolded led to the widespread belief that her expertise was due to
exceptional hearing, rather than the more obvious explanation that she was peeking. She subsequently claimed to be
able to hear the talk of infants still in the womb, and mothers from the Greek community, who were more ready to
believe such ability existed in one of their own, presented their swollen abdomens to the girl to learn the first
utterances of their child. After demanding absolute silence, she would sit, one ear pressed against the protruding
umbilicus, translating the squeaks, whistles, and centenarian groans with the fluency of a polyglot.

“No, thanks,” Hebe Jones nevertheless replied, turning over the prosthesis in her hand. “Look. It’s concave. And
anyway, that poor man’s eye has rolled around enough of London as it is.”

After sealing up the box with brown tape, kept on the inflatable doll’s wrist by mutual agreement following one
too many disappearances, Hebe Jones added Mr. Kjeldsen’s address and dropped the package into the mailbag with
the warm glow of victory. As she looked around her desk for the next task, her eyes stopped at the urn. Feeling a
stab of guilt for having ignored it since its arrival, she turned the wooden box round in her hands and ran a finger
over the brass nameplate bearing the words “Clementine Perkins, 1939 to 2008, RIP” in an elegant script. She tried
to imagine the woman whose remains had been travelling around the Underground, but felt even greater pity for
the person who had mislaid them. Hoping to find something to help her trace Clementine Perkins’s relatives, she
decided to look up her entry in the national register of deaths.

“I’m just popping out to the library,” she announced, standing up. And within minutes, Hebe Jones and her
turquoise coat were gone.

Valerie Jennings watched her turn the corner and immediately regretted not having asked her to bring back a
Chelsea bun from the high street bakery. Despite her patronage, she had long lamented their offerings, and had once
even boycotted the establishment when she noticed two French tourists looking into its windows and discussing
whether its wares were for the purpose of plugging holes. But eventually she relented, defeated by patriotism and
necessity.

After labelling a yellow canoe, she took hold of one end and dragged it through the office, shuffling backwards in
her flat black shoes, uttering a string of profanities. Eventually, she managed to slide it onto the bottom shelf of the
nautical section. Standing up, she arched her back, then made her way to the original Victorian counter and noted
down the shelf number in an inscrutable code in one of the ledgers.

It was the only office in the whole of London without a computer, the introduction of which the two women had
refused with a steadfast obstinacy. When, five years earlier, they were informed that the unfathomable machines
were to be installed, both immediately offered their resignation with the freaky concurrency of twins. Then, like two
circus curiosities, they demonstrated their encyclopedic knowledge of every item stored on the meticulously
numbered shelves, including on which Tube line they had been abandoned.

Their invincible memories were not, however, enough to dissuade the authorities from accepting their
resignations until an attempt was made to follow the logic of the cross-referencing in the ledgers. The antique code,
invented by clerks to make themselves indispensable, had been handed down from Victorian times, when the office
was established to handle the onslaught of muffs and canes left behind on the breathtaking new transport.

As soon as management realised what they were up against, one of them filled his pockets with barley sugar and
visited the only other staff still alive who had worked in the antiquated office. He found the pair propping each other
up in the sitting room of an old people’s home, covered in a coat of dust. But despite the joy of an unexpected
visitor, and one with such treasures in his pockets, nothing could persuade them, when the mist of senility
temporarily parted, to give up the key to the code that had ensured them a job for life. All attempts at modernisation
were therefore abandoned until the next change of management, which, despite renewed tactics, always failed as
emphatically as its predecessor.

Arriving back at her desk, Valerie Jennings reached into her black handbag and returned a novel to its place on
one of the bookshelves. Each volume she borrowed was brought back to the office the next day lest its owner arrive
to claim it. There it would remain until she slipped it back into her bag again on leaving. And, once at home and
installed in her armchair with the pop-up leg rest, she would rampage through the pages, intoxicated by the heady
On hearing the Swiss cowbell, she brushed away a kink of hair that had escaped from its mooring, pushed her glasses up her nose, and headed back to the counter. On the way she tried to open the safe, as was the office custom. But it remained as closed as the day it had been discovered on the Circle Line five years ago.

Turning the corner, she found Arthur Catnip partially obscured by a bunch of yellow roses. It was the second bouquet he had bought her. When he found the shutter closed the first time, his courage instantly abandoned him and he fled to the street. He offered the flowers to the first woman he encountered, but she, along with the eleven after her, rejected the gift in the common belief that all fellow Londoners had the potential to be psychotic lunatics.

Flowers were not the only gift the ticket inspector of limited height had bought for Valerie Jennings. Recognising her weakness for literature on account of her habit of reading the back of each novel he handed in, he scoured the capital’s second-hand bookshops for something to give her pleasure. Ignoring the bestselling paperbacks, he eventually came across the work of the obscure nineteenth-century novelist Miss E. Clutterbuck. Skimming the pages, he found that the female protagonist who featured in all of her work was graced with stoutness, a fearsome intellect, and a long line of suitors of varying heights. Never once did a tale end without the heroine having discovered a new country, invented a scientific theory, or solved the most fiendish of crimes. It was only then that she would retire to her parlour with a bowl of rhubarb and custard to consider her numerous marriage proposals, surrounded by love tokens of yellow roses. Arthur Catnip bought all the novelist’s work that he could find, and would arrive at the original Victorian counter with his latest musty, cloth-backed purchase, claiming he had found it in a carriage. Valerie Jennings’s face would immediately light up at the prospect of another installment. And she would gaze with unfettered anticipation at the colour plates of the fleshy heroine throttling a serpent in a newly discovered land, introducing her latest invention to awed gentlemen in Parliament, or stepping out with one of her elegantly mustached admirers, a number of whom were of inferior height.

Suddenly finding himself in the presence of Valerie Jennings while holding the flowers of choice of Miss E. Clutterbuck’s suitors, Arthur Catnip was unable to speak.

“How lovely!” she said, peering at the bouquet. “They must have been for someone special. Where were they left?”

Panic rattled him, and Arthur Catnip found himself uttering the three wretched words that he spent the following week regretting.

“The Victoria Line.”

REV. SEPTIMUS DREW CROSSED THE COBBLES on his way back from the chapel, where he had waited yet again in vain for the woman who had unsettled his heart. As he approached his front door, he looked around hoping to spot her, but all he saw were the first of the loathsome tourists who had started to seep into the Tower. As he reached into his cassock pocket for the key, he noticed that these visitors were not in fact the first, as there was someone already sitting on the bench next to the White Tower staring straight at him, her knees clamped together, and short gunmetal hair lifting in the breeze. Instantly he recognised the chairwoman of the Richard III Appreciation Society. For months she had been trying to persuade him to become a member, her passion for the maligned monarch inflamed by the gasoline of unrequited love for the clergyman. Fearing that she was going to try and convince him yet again of the injustice of the King’s reputation as a hunchbacked child slayer, Rev. Septimus Drew quickly unlocked his door and closed it behind him.

He made his way down the hall to his bachelor’s sitting room, where he spent more time than he cared to. Avoiding the unruly spring, he sat down on the sofa, a relic from the former chaplain, along with the rest of the mismatched furniture. Picking up a biography of Jack Black, rat-catcher and mole destroyer by appointment to Queen Victoria, he started to read. But he soon found his mind wandering after the woman who had failed to return to the chapel. His gaze settled on the family portrait on the mantelpiece taken on Christmas Day, when his six sisters had come to his home for lunch with their husbands and numerous children. As his eyes ran along the familiar faces, he tasted the bitterness of failure for being the only one who still wasn’t married.

His nose still invaded by the smell of rat droppings from the chapel, he picked up a bottle of Rescue Remedy from the side table and released two drops onto his tongue. His belief in the mystical powers of the blend of five flowers, and the other more lunatic offerings distilled by the druids of alternative medicine, was as strong as his belief in the Holy Spirit. As the chaplain advanced towards middle age, he had begun to grab all the defences against ill health he could find, filling his bathroom cabinet with the latest tinctures and potions brewed for the worried well. For he was
firmly of the conviction that the body was more susceptible to disease without the presence of love to warm the organs.

The belief was not without its foundations, however unstable. He had watched his elderly mother, the colour of porridge, lying in a hospital bed for months, while the entire family was convinced that she would meet her maker at any moment. It was such a foregone conclusion that the music for the funeral had been chosen, and the florist put on standby for the approaching calamity. With her sheet pulled up to her whiskered chin, Florence Drew spoke of nothing other than joining her husband in heaven. Her only fear was that he would fail to recognise her on account of the disease that had infiltrated her body.

One night the man in the opposite cubicle, who had never received a visitor, got out of bed and came to sit on the grey plastic chair next to her. Switching on the night-light, George Proudfoot reached into the pocket of the new dressing gown that would be his last, pulled out a paperback, and started reading to her simply to hear his own voice before he died. He returned each night, but never once did the widow acknowledge his presence.

When, one evening, he failed to arrive, she called out to him, unable to bear the thought of dying without knowing the ending. George Proudfoot, by now so close to death he was barely able to speak, eventually made his way to the grey plastic chair. With the hermit’s voice that was all that was left to him, he proceeded to make up the dénouement, no longer able to read. The twist was so ingenious that Florence Drew immediately asked for another tale, and every night he arrived with his dose of storytelling. The widow would lie hypnotised, her head turned towards him, unable to take her eyes off his lips for a minute. Depending on the nature of the tale, her fingers, twisted like hazel by age, would grip the top of the sheet with dread, or reach for it to dry the tears that cascaded onto her pillow.

Suddenly, she no longer looked forward to death, as George Proudfoot always left the ending to the following night, too weak to complete a whole story in one sitting. He also stopped praying that he would be taken as swiftly as possible, as he wanted time to think up the endings, which he was as eager to know as she was.

One night, after several weeks, he straightened the top of Florence Drew’s clutched sheet and planted a kiss on her forehead before returning to bed. The footnote to their ritual continued after every visit. The widow’s colour returned with such force that the florist was stood down, and blood tests were repeated three times to check their accuracy. It wasn’t long before her heartbeat started to stampede out of range again, this time in the opposite direction, sending her monitors shrieking. Eager medical students formed a queue at the end of her bed to witness the patient who was seized by the mania of love.

Eventually, the staff decided it was such a hopeless case nothing could be done, and the chaplain’s mother was discharged, along with George Proudfoot, who was just as badly afflicted. The pair moved into opposite rooms in a nursing home, their doors left open so they could continue their nocturnal courtship, and never once did the man’s imagination fail him. They lived in such a state of bliss they became the envy of the young nurses, whose romances were always in tatters.

When, eventually, Florence Drew died, George Proudfoot followed within minutes. Both had left instructions to be buried in the same coffin, as neither could bear to be parted from the other even in death. Her six daughters opposed the request, but Rev. Septimus Drew insisted that the couple’s instructions be carried out, as the holy state of love wasn’t to be meddled with. And the couple were lowered into the ground together, the first time they had lain in each other’s arms.

BALTHAZAR JONES SAT in the small black hut next to the Bloody Tower, no longer able to feel his toes. He had been unable to use the three-bar electric fire that usually acted as defence against the cold from the open hatch door. For, several moments after turning it on, he had been engulfed by the putrefying smell of bacon fat, a result of the Yeoman Gaoler’s second breakfast the week before.

It had been a busy morning for the Beefeaters as an unfathomable dry spell had encouraged the tourists to wander round the monument instead of sheltering in the towers, and few could resist the urge to pose them a question of infinite idiocy. Balthazar Jones had already been asked in which tower Princess Diana had been kept following her divorce, whether he was an actor, and if the Crown Jewels, which had been on public display at the Tower since the seventeenth century, were real. These had come on top of the usual enquiries that came every few minutes regarding executions, methods of torture, and the location of the lavatories.

Over the centuries the Beefeaters had kept a written record of the worst of the visitors’ queries, as well as their more questionable behaviour. The leather-bound volumes included the tale of the nobleman who, in 1587, read Sir
Everard Digby’s *De Arte Natandi*, the first book published in England on swimming. Having rigorously studied the woodcut illustrations, the nobleman ignored the author’s advocacy of the breast-stroke and decided to attempt his first-ever aquatic maneuver on his back. He chose for his initiation not the overcrowded Thames, but the more tranquil waters of the Tower moat. The moment the Beefeater accompanying him turned his back, the gentleman whipped off his breeches and shirt, passed his wig to his wife, and scurried round to the steps next to the Byward Tower leading down to the moat. It was never clear whether it was the man’s lamentable rendition of the backstroke or the pestilent waters that were to blame. Either way, his bloated body floated around the fortress until the following spring and became the latest landmark people jostled to see, fuelled by dire warnings in the newspapers by doctors who insisted that his unsavoury ending was proof of the hazards of getting wet.

Through the hatch door Balthazar Jones explained with utmost patience to a couple from the Midlands that Mint Street, which they had spotted upon entering the Tower, had nothing to do with the manufacture of sweets, as they suspected. Rather, it had everything to do with the fact that the Royal Mint, which produced most of the country’s coinage, had been located at the Tower from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Overcome by generosity, he decided to toss them another historical nugget, adding that the great physicist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton had been Master of the Royal Mint for twenty-eight years. But the couple looked at him blankly and then asked the location of the lavatories.

As he smiled for the inevitable photograph, an evil wind sent the brittle leaves rattling noisily along the cobbles beside them. Dark spots appeared on the stones like the weeping sores of the Black Plague, and the stench of dust nine centuries old filled the air. When the tourists ran for shelter from the downpour, Balthazar Jones unbolted the lower half of the door, stepped outside, and squinted at the sky with the scrutiny of a veteran horse-trader. Cheered by the sudden arrival of a new variety, he reached into his pocket for a slender pink Egyptian perfume bottle. After proping it up against the remains of a wall erected on the orders of Henry III, he returned to the black hut, shut the top and bottom doors, and sat down. The rain hitting the roof with the frenzy of a cannibal’s drumbeat, he put on his reading glasses and unfolded the list of animals given to him by Oswin Fielding.

He was scratching his beard trying to remember what a zorilla was, when there was a sharp knock on the window. The Beefeater looked up, took off his spectacles, and saw the Chief Yeoman Warder standing hunched against the rain. Balthazar Jones hurriedly opened the top half of the door.

“There are two men sitting in a lorry outside the gates insisting they’ve come to erect a penguin enclosure in the moat,” shouted the Chief Yeoman Warder over the downpour. “Apparently you know all about it.”

Balthazar Jones frowned. “Hasn’t the Palace told you?” he asked.

“That lot never have the decency to tell me anything.”

It took him several attempts to persuade the Chief Yeoman Warder that there was to be a second royal menagerie at the Tower. And it took even more to make him believe that Balthazar Jones had been put in charge of it. The Beefeater had never seen such fire raging in a man caught in the devastation of a rainstorm.

“What the hell do you know about looking after exotic animals, apart from that knackered tortoise? Good God, they couldn’t have picked anyone worse,” said the Chief Yeoman Warder, wiping rain out of his eyes with his embalmer’s fingers.

Suddenly the monument flashed silver.

“This is a fortress, not some ruddy theme park,” bellowed the Chief Yeoman Warder before running for cover as the thunder rolled.

Balthazar Jones closed the door. Despite his dislike of the man, there was no denying that the Chief Yeoman Warder was right about his lack of experience. Putting his glasses back on, he looked down at his now sodden list with magnified eyes, and struggled to remember what all the creatures were. He had expected to be entrusted with the sorts of animals that had inhabited the Tower over the centuries, which had in some cases been the first of their kind in England, and which by modern standards would be deemed decidedly pedestrian.

The original menagerie was a subject the Beefeater was intimately familiar with, having studied its history when he first arrived at the fortress in an effort to dispel Milo’s dread of his new home. The boy’s horror was a result of the tour on which some of the other Tower children had taken him while his parents were still unpacking, the tourists long since locked out for the day. When they called at the Salt Tower to meet the newest and youngest resident, the six-year-old was attempting to lure Mrs. Cook out of her travelling case with a fuchsia filched from one of the tubs his mother had insisted on bringing with her. But with the obstinacy of the ancient, the creature refused to move. After each child had lain on the floor and been formally introduced to the record-holder, whose antique
features resembled a tribal shrunken head, they offered to show Milo around the fortress. Hebe Jones, who had no idea what lay in store for her son, immediately agreed, assuming they were going to show him where he could ride his bike.

As the children ran to nearby Broad Arrow Tower, one of them asked Milo whether he knew what Bonfire Night was. 

“It’s when Daddy lets off fireworks from milk bottles in the garden, while Mummy watches from the kitchen with Mrs. Cook as the noise makes their ears go funny,” he replied. The son of the Chief Yeoman Warder then informed Milo that it was, in fact, the anniversary of the day when Guy Fawkes and his gang tried to blow up Parliament. He then pointed out where Sir Everard Digby, one of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, had chiselled his name on the wall while imprisoned, before being hanged, drawn, and quartered. Milo, who had no idea what that meant, ran his tiny white finger along the carving, wondering where his father would nail the Catherine wheel now that they no longer had a garden shed. When there was no response, one of the older children elaborated: “All the plotters were hanged, then taken down before they died. After their private parts were cut off, and their hearts ripped out, they were beheaded and cut into quarters. Finally their severed heads were then displayed on London Bridge as a warning to others.”

Feeling light-headed, Milo followed the children as they ran out of the tower. As they passed Waterloo Barracks one of them called out: “That’s where they keep the Crown Jewels, but we can’t show them to you as the alarms will go off and all the Beefeaters will shout at us, and then we’ll be sent to prison.”

Another child then shouted: “It’s also where the East End gangsters the Kray twins were imprisoned in 1952 after going AWOL during National Service.”

When they reached the scaffold site on Tower Green, they all sat cross-legged on the grass. One of boys lowered his voice and said: “This is the spot where seven prisoners had their heads chopped off, six with an axe and one with a sword.” Milo, his stomach in turmoil, immediately wanted to return to the sanctuary of the Salt Tower but was too scared to find his way back on his own.

He followed them as closely as he could as they ran across the lawn, still pierced by the tobacco grown by Sir Walter Raleigh during his thirteen-year imprisonment. As they pushed down the cold door handle of the Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula, three rats feasting on a tapestry kneeler darted underneath the organ. Once the children had gathered at the altar, Charlotte Broughton, the Ravenmaster’s daughter, pointed to the spot at her feet and whispered: “Underneath here is the arrow chest containing the remains of Anne Boleyn. Her husband, Henry VIII, got the most fashionable executioner from France to come and behead her with a sword. She had an extra finger and the sound of them drumming on the box’s lid has sent the chaplain mad.”

When they left, sending footsteps echoing round the walls, Milo ran as fast as he could to ensure that he wouldn’t be the last to leave.

As evening slipped over the battlements, bringing with it the stench of the Thames, the children decided to take the boy on a ghost tour of the fortress. First they visited Wakefield Tower, which they pointed out was haunted by Henry VI, who was stabbed to death within its walls. Then they stood outside the Bloody Tower, and one whispered that two small ghosts in white nightgowns had frequently been spotted standing in the doorway. Next they ran along the stretch of the ramparts where the spirit of Sir Walter Raleigh strode in the most elegant of Elizabethan fashions. And, after they had visited the other dozen sites, they finally crept into Martin Tower, where the apparition of a bear had startled a soldier who later dropped dead in shock.

Despite his new stegosaurus duvet cover, and the tyrannosaurus poster that Balthazar Jones had eventually managed to fix to the cold wall, that night Milo refused to sleep in his circular room, which had initially filled him with wonder. When it was time to go to bed, he clambered up the spiral staircase in his tiny slippers and crept between his parents’ sheets. He lay on his back, arms against his sides, and refused to close his eyes “in case they come and get me.” When he finally descended into his dreams, he kicked his father in the shins as he tried to escape his tormentors. Balthazar Jones woke up shrieking, followed within seconds by his wife and son, who instantly joined in the uproar.

The Beefeater tried all manner of reassurance to lighten the shadow that the Tower’s abhorrent past had cast over his son. But although he pointed out that the death penalty had been abolished, the scientific world denied the existence of ghosts, and Rev. Septimus Drew was as sane as could be expected from a member of the clergy, it did nothing to calm the boy.

Holding Milo’s hand, Balthazar Jones took him on a walk along the battlements. As they looked over the ramparts at Tower Bridge, the Beefeater explained that some of the prisoners had had a much more comfortable existence
than the poor living in freedom outside the fortress.

“Remember John Balliol, the Scottish king I was telling you about who was imprisoned in the Salt Tower? He had a splendid time,” the father insisted, leaning against the parapet. “He brought loads of staff with him. He had two squires, a huntsman, a barber, a chaplain, a chapel clerk, two groomers, two chamberlains, a tailor, a laundress, and three pages. And he was allowed to leave the Tower to go hunting. He had it better than we do. Your mother’s already sent me out twice to the laundrette because the washing machine isn’t working. Mind you, he was banished to France after serving his sentence, which was particularly cruel in my opinion.”

But Milo, who was standing on his toes to see over the parapet, wasn’t convinced.

“What about Sir Walter Raleigh, then?” Balthazar Jones continued. “Remember that man I was telling you about who discovered potatoes and was imprisoned in the Tower three times?”

“Was he put into prison for discovering potatoes?” asked Milo, looking up at his father.

“Not exactly. First it was for marrying one of Elizabeth I’s ladies-in-waiting without asking the Queen’s permission, then for treason, and finally for inciting war between Spain and England while searching for gold. But you’re absolutely right, potatoes are a very questionable vegetable. Personally, I would have locked up the person who discovered brussels sprouts. What was I saying? Oh yes, during his thirteen-year imprisonment in the Bloody Tower, Walter Raleigh was allowed three servants. Imagine that! You’d like someone to pick up your socks, wouldn’t you?”

But Milo didn’t reply.

The Beefeater then told him that the explorer’s wife and son sometimes stayed with him in the Bloody Tower, and that his second son had been born there and was baptised in the chapel.

“Raleigh was even allowed to grow the exotic plants he brought back from the countries he discovered in the Tower garden,” he continued. “They let him set up a still in an old henhouse there, where he experimented with medicinal cordials that he sold to the public. And he built a small furnace for smelting metals. We could get you a chemistry set, if you liked, and you could try out some experiments of your own. We could make a few explosions, and see if we can get your mother to jump higher than she does on Bonfire Night.”

But that evening Milo returned to his parents’ sheets, where he juddered in his sleep as if possessed by demons. Balthazar Jones finally managed to reclaim the marital bed after a flash of inspiration during lunch in the Salt Tower’s shabby kitchen.

“When can we go home to Catford?” Milo had asked, his mouth covered in bolognese sauce.

“Every time the ewe goes ‘baa,’ she loses the same number of mouthfuls,” Hebe Jones said.

The Beefeater looked at his wife, and then at his son. “I think what your mother is trying to tell you is not to talk with your mouth full,” he said. He continued to wind spaghetti around his fork, then added, without raising his eyes: “Milo, you really do live in a very special place, you know. For six hundred years the Tower had its own little zoo as there was a tradition of giving the monarchy live animals as presents.”

Milo’s eyes shot to his father. “What sort of animals did they have?” he asked.

The Beefeater kept his head lowered. “I’ll tell you before you go to sleep tonight, but only if you’re in your own bed,” he replied. “They may or may not have been descended from dinosaurs.”

Balthazar Jones spent the rest of the day studying documents and records he prised from the covetous fingers of the Keeper of Tower History. When night fell, he closed each set of curtains he had made for his son’s bedroom. He then drew the duvet up to the boy’s chin and sat down on the side of his bed.

The menagerie was started in the reign of King John, he explained, possibly with three crates of wild beasts he ordered to be brought from Normandy in 1204 when he finally lost the province. Then, in 1235, his son, King Henry III, was prodded awake while sleeping off a disappointing lunch in the Tower. The bony finger belonged to an anxious courtier who informed him that a surprise gift making the most villainous of noises had just arrived by boat courtesy of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II. The King, thrilled at the thought of an unexpected present, quickly pulled on his boots and scurried down to the banks of the Thames. The crates were prised open to reveal three malodorous leopards. But no amount of persuasion could convince the monarch that their spots were an integral part of their beauty rather than an indication of disease. And some of the rarest beasts in England were left alone to pace their cages in the Tower.

Milo, who had listened transfixed, asked: “But if spots are beautiful, why does Mummy always get cross when she gets one?”
“Because spots are beautiful on leopards, but not on ladies,” Balthazar Jones explained.

The following night, Milo returned to his own bed, lured by the promise of the next installment. The Beefeater sat down, saw in his son his wife’s dark good looks, and continued his tale.

In 1251 another present arrived at the Tower, this time from Norway. The polar bear and its keeper turned up unannounced outside the fortress in a small, salty boat. By then the pair, who had been travelling for months after being blown off course, could no longer abide one another’s company. Their journey up the Thames only increased their foul mood. Both had a rabid dislike of being stared at, and the hysteria caused by the sight of the white bear, the first to be seen in England, to say nothing of the comments made about the keeper’s dress sense, brought about a monumental double sulk that grew worse as soon as they saw their ruinous lodgings within the fortress. Assuming the creature to be aged well over three hundred on account of its white fur, Henry was content to simply look at it, as if it were a rare antique.

“What’s an antique?” Milo asked.
“Something that’s very old.”

There was a pause.

“Like Granddad?”
“Exactly.”

Harald, the bear’s keeper, who would take the creature to fish for salmon in the Thames while it was attached to a rope, soon realised that no one understood him, the Beefeater continued. Nor he them. He gave up trying to communicate and spent all his time in the company of his white charge, sleeping in the animal’s pen, their quarrels long forgotten. Eventually each knew what the other was thinking, though neither of them ever spoke. At night the pen would fill with dreams of their homeland, with glinting snowy expanses and air purer than tears. When scurvy eventually claimed Harald’s life, the white bear was dead within the hour, felled by a broken heart.

When Balthazar Jones had finished, he noticed a line of tears running down each of Milo’s cheeks. But the boy insisted that his father carry on. In 1255 Henry was sent yet another animal, courtesy of Louis IX, which was also the first of its kind in England, the Beefeater continued. A number of ladies who had stopped on the banks of the Thames to witness its arrival fainted when they saw that it drank not with its mouth, but with an excessively long nose.

The King ordered that a wooden house be constructed for it within the Tower. But despite the creature’s docile disposition and wrinkly knees, the monarch was too terrified to enter, and he would gaze at the beast through the bars, much to the hilarity of the Tower’s prisoners. It came as some relief to the King when, two years later, the animal took one final breath with its mysterious trunk and keeled over, trapping its keeper for several days before help eventually arrived.

“But why did the elephant have to die as well?” Milo asked, clutching the top of his stegosaurus duvet.

“Animals die too, son,” Balthazar Jones replied. “Otherwise there would be no animals in heaven for Grandma, would there?”

Milo looked at his father. “Will Mrs. Cook go to heaven?” he asked.

“Eventually,” said the Beefeater.

There was a pause.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Milo.”

“Will I go to heaven?”

“Yes, son, but not for a long time.”

“Will you and Mummy be there?”

“Yes,” he replied, stroking the boy’s head. “We’ll be there waiting for you.”

“I won’t be alone, will I?” the boy asked.

“No, son. You won’t.”
CHAPTER SIX

AFTER MAKING HIMSELF SOME GINGER TEA in his sorrowful teapot for one, Rev. Septimus Drew carried it up the two flights of battered wooden stairs to his study, lifting the ends of his nibbled skirts so as not to trip. The only trace of comfort in the room was a forlorn leather armchair bearing a patchwork cushion made by one of his sisters. Next to it stood a mail-order reading lamp that had taken months to arrive as the address was assumed to be a joke. Above the mantelpiece hung a portrait of the Virgin Mary, resolutely Catholic in origin, the brushwork of which had seduced his father into buying it for his bride on their honeymoon. Feeling the draught from the sash windows, the clergyman looked with regret at the fireplace that he had been forbidden from using since a coal escaped and set ablaze the ancient rag rug in front of it. It was assumed that the chaplain must have been deep in prayer for him not to have noticed the foul-smelling smoke that reeked of thousands of pairs of unwashed feet. However, the truth was that he had been in his workshop trying to fashion a miniature replica of the Spanish Armada on wheels, fitted with fully functioning cannons.

He took off his cassock and dog collar, which he deemed inappropriate attire on such occasions, and hung them on the hook on the back of the door. His heart afloat with relish for the task ahead of him, he sat on the dining chair at the simple desk and took out his writing pad from the drawer. As he unscrewed the lid of the fountain pen that had remained at his side like a trusty sword ever since school, he read the last sentence he had written, and continued with his description of the rosebud nipple.

While the clergyman’s imagination was one of his many assets, he had never envisaged becoming one of Britain’s most successful writers of erotic fiction. When he started to pursue creative writing, inspired by the effect George Proudfoot’s storytelling had had on his mother, he had assumed that if his work were to encounter success, it would be in the mainstream market. When he finished his first novel, he sent it off to the country’s leading publishers with a silent prayer of hope. It was only after waiting eleven months for a reply which never came that he assumed that there was no interest. By then he had already penned another work. Convinced that his address at the Tower was preventing him from being taken seriously, he rented a post office box and sent out his new manuscript, his heart aflutter with the thrill of expectation. The unequivocal rejection slips that eventually arrived only served to encourage him, and when each new novel was finished it was swiftly sent off with the same benediction, uttered with closed eyes.

Just as he was about to put copies of his eighteenth work into the post, he received a number of envelopes that his fingers detected did not contain the standard printed card of rejection. Such was his excitement, he was unable to open them for a week, and the envelopes remained on the mantelpiece, glowing more brightly than the halo of the Virgin Mary above. But when he finally worked his ivory letter-opener into their spines, instead of the offers he was expecting, he discovered letters requesting him to refrain from ever submitting a manuscript again.

For a week Rev. Septimus Drew laid down his pen. But he soon found his holy fingers reaching once more for its slender barrel, and, having exhausted every other genre, he submerged himself in the musky vapours of erotica. His chastity was his advantage as there were no experiences to limit his imagination: everything was possible. Assuming the pseudonym Vivienne Ventress in an attempt to slip under the barbed wire erected in front of him, he sent his first effort, The Grocer’s Forbidden Fruit, to the prohibited addresses, minus a benediction. By the time he checked his post office box, several of the publishers had sent their third letter imploring Miss Ventress to sign a six-book deal. All of them had seen a uniqueness in her work: the glinting chinks left open for the reader’s imagination; the strong moralistic tone that gave her work a distinctive voice never previously heard in the genre; and her absolute belief in the existence of true love, a theme none of her contemporaries had explored. Rev. Septimus Drew assumed a position of infinite coyness, drizzling his replies with the lustiest of fragrances as he wrote to each one turning them down. The tactic worked, as the offers were immediately raised. The chaplain accepted the highest, insisting on a clause in the contract allowing good to triumph over evil in every plot. He kept the huge advance cheque hidden underneath the brass crucifix on his study mantelpiece. And when the royalties started arriving, there were sufficient funds for him to set up a shelter for retired ladies of the night who had been ruined by love in its many guises.

The chaplain continued writing until lunchtime, when he rose to the surface again, distracted from his forbidden romances by a sudden gust of loneliness. As he thought of the woman who had reduced him to a cursed victim of
he insisted that his opponent turn out his pockets. The Beefeater obliged, and then offered the doctor the iron with a
and hunted between the chair legs for the sacred object. When he returned to his seat, red-faced and empty-handed,
stopped for thirty-nine minutes while the corpulent doctor stuffed his stash of pink £500 notes into his breast pocket
vanished. He immediately blamed the Beefeater, who vehemently denied the accusation of theft. The game was
manner of bribes to swap it for the hat with its alluring brim, the motorcar with its tiny wheels, or even the Scottie
colossal hotel empire, put his supremacy down to the fact that he always played with the boot. He was offered all
rampage across the board, buying up property in a monstrous display of avarice. Once he had acquired all the title
together.

THE RAIN HAD BEEN DRIVING against the door of the Rack & Ruin with such ferocity that it started to seep underneath it,
spreading like a pool of blood across the worn flagstones. Not that Ruby Dore noticed. The landlady, who had been
alone since the lunchtime drinkers finally left, was looking into the cage at the end of the bar trying to coax her
canary to sing. The bird was suffering from chronic agoraphobia brought on by its dramatic fainting fit into the slopes
tray. Despite her previous attempts, which had started with cajoling, progressed to bribes, and ended in threats,
nothing could induce from it even the most humble of melodies. Much to Ruby Dore’s consternation, the bird was
also suffering from what gut professors euphemistically called “the trots.” They had been brought on by the feast of
dainties fed to it by a succession of Beefeaters to encourage it to sing, in the hope of securing a free pint. Paper
napkins had been unwrapped on the bar containing crust from a steak and ale pie, leftover Christmas pudding
discovered at the back of the fridge, and the remains of a Cornish pasty. But the only sound that came from its cage
was an intermittent quiver of yellow tail feathers followed by an unladylike splat.

Plump lips close to the bars and her cinnamon-coloured ponytail running down her back, Ruby Dore whistled a
final salvo of random notes assembled in an order that no one of musical persuasion would ever choose. But the bird
remained mute. In an effort to distract herself from her failure, she set about dusting the cabinets of Beefeater
souvenirs mounted on the tavern’s walls. The collection had been started by her father, the previous landlord, who
had retired with his second wife to Spain, suffering from a surfeit of bearded conversation. The cabinets contained
hundreds of Beefeater figurines, ashtrays, glasses, mugs, thimbles, and bells—anything on which could be stamped
the famous image of a hirsute gentleman in crimson state dress, complete with rosettes on his shoes and the sides of
his knees.

The Rack & Ruin had been her only home since the day she emerged from her mother, slipped through her
father’s tremulous fingers, and slithered headfirst onto the kitchen linoleum in the family’s quarters upstairs. The
night Ruby Dore was due to make her entrance into the world, the Tower doctor was in the bar below, having long
given in to the addiction that was to be his life’s torment. When he was politely informed that the landlord’s wife’s
contractions had started, he waved away the messenger. “She’s got plenty of time,” he insisted. He then turned back
to the game of Monopoly he was playing with a Beefeater that had already lasted more than two hours. The man was
the only Tower resident whom the doctor hadn’t beaten, simply because the pair had never previously played
together.

The doctor’s reign was absolute. While Beefeater after Beefeater languished in jail, the general practitioner would
rampage across the board, buying up property in a monstrous display of avarice. Once he had acquired all the title
deeds of a colour group, he would double the rent and, without so much as a blush, hold out his palm for payment
when his opponent landed on his holdings. It was a strategy that many claimed to be illegal. The rules were searched
for but declared lost, and a number accused the doctor of having hidden them. Tempers flared in the fortress to such
an extent that arbitration had to be sought from the board game’s manufacturer. It sent back a closely typed letter
stating that the doctor’s methods did not contravene the holy regulations.

The general practitioner, who would secure the Strand, Fleet Street, and Trafalgar Square as the epicenter of his
colossal hotel empire, put his supremacy down to the fact that he always played with the boot. He was offered all
manner of bribes to swap it for the hat with its alluring brim, the motorcar with its tiny wheels, or even the Scottie
dog with its cute shaggy coat. But nothing could persuade him to surrender the boot.

When a much more urgent whisper sounded in his ear about the alarming frequency of the contractions, the doctor
turned to the messenger and snapped: “I’ll be up in a minute.” But when he looked back at the board, the boot had
vanished. He immediately blamed the Beefeater, who vehemently denied the accusation of theft. The game was
stopped for thirty-nine minutes while the corpulent doctor stuffed his stash of pink £500 notes into his breast pocket
and hunted between the chair legs for the sacred object. When he returned to his seat, red-faced and empty-handed,
he insisted that his opponent turn out his pockets. The Beefeater obliged, and then offered the doctor the iron with a


limp smile. Just as the medic was about to declare a suspension of play, the Beefeater started to choke. Instantly suspecting what he had done, the doctor stood him up, turned him around, and proceeded to perform the Heimlich maneuver. And, as Ruby Dore skidded onto the kitchen floor, the disputed boot soared from the Beefeater’s mouth and landed on the board, scattering a row of tiny red hotels.

Once she had finished the dusting, the landlady returned to her stool behind the beer taps. She rested her feet on an empty bottle crate and reached for her knitting, a diversion started to relieve the desire for a cigarette but which had since become an even more compulsive habit. Before long, her mind drifted to the test she had done in the bathroom that morning, and she thought again how the result didn’t make sense. Unable to stand the uncertainty any longer, she stood up. Sidestepping the creeping pool of water on the worn flagstones, she grabbed her coat, opened the door, and pulled it shut behind her.

Lowering her chin to her chest to keep the rain out of her eyes, she ran past the Tower Café, where some of the tourists had taken shelter, much to their regret after sampling its fare. Turning the corner at the White Tower, she continued past Waterloo Barracks, and when she reached the row of houses with blue doors overlooking Tower Green, a now sodden ponytail swung heavily behind her.

After a vigorous knock, Dr. Evangeline Moore eventually appeared and stepped back to let the landlady in out of the rain. Apologising for her wet feet, Ruby Dore walked down the hall to the surgery. She sat in front of the desk, in a chair with a cracked leather seat, and waited until the Tower doctor had taken her place opposite her. It was only then that she announced: “Sorry to barge in, but I think I might be pregnant.”

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, when darkness had crept over the parapet, Balthazar Jones hesitated outside the Rack & Ruin waiting for the courage to enter. He hadn’t bothered changing out of his uniform since coming off duty, as he had been too preoccupied about the meeting he had called to inform the Tower residents of the new menagerie. Numerous rumours had swept round the fortress, the most alarming of which involved tigers being able to roam freely once the visitors had been locked out for the day. Suddenly the sign above the door depicting a Beefeater operating the rack let out a screech in the wind. He went in and saw that his colleagues, who hadn’t changed either, were already sitting at the tables, each armed with a pint and a wife.

Knowing there would be considerable opposition to the project, as nothing unsettled Beefeaters more than a change to their routine, Balthazar Jones headed straight for the bar. Ruby Dore, who still hadn’t forgiven him for provoking her canary’s fainting fit, eventually served him a pint of Scavenger’s Daughter, ordered not out of admiration but as a gesture of atonement. The only ale brewed on the premises, it was, according to some of the Tower residents, even more gruesome than the method of torture after which it had been named. Balthazar Jones had managed only three reluctant sips when the Chief Yeoman Warder stood up, called for silence, and invited him to explain to everyone the catastrophe that he was about to inflict on the Tower.

Placing his pint on the bar, he turned towards his colleagues, whose hair, still bearing the imprint of their hats, spanned a dozen hues of grey. He felt for the security of his beard as he suddenly forgot the words he had carefully rehearsed. He then caught sight of the chaplain, sitting at the back next to Dr. Evangeline Moore. The clergyman smiled and raised both his thumbs in a gesture of encouragement.

“As most people here already know, there was a royal menagerie at the Tower of London from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries,” he began. “At first the animals were just for the amusement of the monarch, but they became a public attraction during the reign of Elizabeth I. A lion was actually named after her. The health of the monarch and the menagerie’s lion was said to be interlinked, and the creature did in fact die several days before her.”

“Get on with it, man,” called the Chief Yeoman Warder.

“The tradition of giving the monarchy live animals continues to this day, and they are kept at London Zoo,” Balthazar Jones continued. He paused before adding: “The Queen has decided to transfer them to the Tower and reinstate the menagerie. She very much hopes that their presence will attract more visitors. The animals are due to arrive next week, and the menagerie will open to the public once they have settled in.”

There was an instant chorus of protests.

“But we don’t need any more tourists. We’re overrun by the buggers as it is,” called the Ravenmaster.

“One knocked on my door the other day and had the cheek to ask whether he could have a look around,” said one of the Beefeaters’ wives. “I told him to get lost, but he didn’t seem to understand. Then he asked whether I would take some photographs of the inside for him. So I took a picture of the loo, gave him his camera back, and shut the
“Where, precisely, are these animals going to be kept?” demanded one of the Beefeaters. “There’s no room at my place.”

Balthazar Jones cleared his throat. “The construction of a penguin enclosure has already started in the moat, and it will be joined by a number of other pens. There will also be one on the grass outside the White Tower. Some of the disused towers will be used as well. The birds, for example, will be located in the Brick Tower.”

“What type of penguins are they?” asked the Yeoman Gaoler, whose sprawling beard covered his mountainous chins like grey heather. “They’re not the type that live on the Falkland Islands, are they? They’re more vicious than the Argies. Nip your arse as soon as look at you.”

Balthazar Jones took a sip of his pint. “All I remember is that they’re short-sighted when out of the water and are partial to squid,” he replied.

“Ex-servicemen looking after animals … I’ve never felt so humiliated in all my life,” raged the Chief Yeoman Warder, his embalmer’s fingers even paler than usual as he gripped the handle of his glass. “I hope you prove better at looking after animals than you are at catching pickpockets, Yeoman Warder Jones. Otherwise we’re all doomed.”

A number of Beefeaters got up to go to the bar, while the others continued to protest about the four-legged invasion. Balthazar Jones picked up his glass and walked over to inspect the canary, hoping that he would be forgotten. Bending down, he looked at the thinning bird. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Fig Roll filched from a packet in the office bearing the words “Yeoman Gaoler” in black marker. He broke some off and offered the biscuit crumbs to the mute creature through the bars. Refusing to look him in the eye, it slowly sidestepped along its perch, then took a morsel in its beak with the speed of a pickpocket. The assembled Beefeaters turned in amazement to look at the crazed creature suddenly disgorging a surfeit of notes that had built up in its chest during its protracted period of silence. But while everyone gazed at the noisy bird, Rev. Septimus Drew turned his dark eyes once more to the heavenly Ruby Dore.

As the Beefeaters struggled to hear themselves above the yellow racket, the Ravenmaster finished his tomato juice. Despite the lure of the well-stocked bar, he avoided the soothing temptation of alcohol, as he needed his wits about him when handling his charges to avoid losing an eye.

“I’m just going to check on the birds,” he said to his wife, patting her on the knee. After blowing her a kiss from the door, which confused the Yeoman Gaoler who happened to be in his eye-line, he put on his hat and stepped outside. One of the few Beefeaters who had resisted growing a beard, he was immediately hit by the bitterness of the evening. Just as he was about to cross Water Lane, he saw Hebe Jones approaching on her way home from work, clouds of breath visible in the darkness as she hurried to escape the sadistic cold.

He paused in the doorway, taking his time to put on his black leather gloves. The pair had barely spoken since one of the odious ravens had relieved Mrs. Cook of her tail. In keeping with the duties of a mother, Hebe Jones had helped Milo in his fruitless search for the severed appendage. The boy was adamant that it could be sewn back on like the finger Thanos Grammatikos, his mother’s cousin, had lost during a misguided return to the dark art of carpentry. The six-year-old spent several hours scouring the Tower grounds, Hebe Jones on all fours next to him. Every now and again he would joyfully hold aloft a bit of twig, only to cast it aside upon closer inspection. Eventually, he came to the reluctant conclusion that it had been swallowed, one that his parents had reached much earlier, and the hunt was finally called off.

During the ensuing years, Balthazar and Hebe Jones had been obliged to remain civil with the Ravenmaster on account of the friendship that had developed between their two children. It started when Charlotte Broughton, who was eight months older than Milo, appeared at the Salt Tower one morning with what she insisted was a new tail for Mrs. Cook. Hebe Jones immediately invited her inside and followed her up the spiral staircase. The family sat on the sofa and held their breath as the girl slowly unfurled her tiny clenched fist. While his parents instantly recognised what was undeniably the end of a parsnip, Milo was thrilled with the new appendage. The two children immediately went in search of Mrs. Cook, whom they eventually found in the bathroom, and lay down on the floor next to her trying to fathom how to attach it. And, with the help of a piece of green wool, for a whole morning the oldest tortoise in the world dragged behind her the browning tip of a root vegetable, until Balthazar Jones spotted the creature and put a stop to the indignity.

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THE RAVENMASTER TOUCHED THE BRIM of his hat as Hebe Jones walked past, and she nodded stiffly at him in return, her nose reddened by the cold. Once she was out of sight, he waited a few more minutes until he was certain that she
had reached the Salt Tower. He then headed towards the wooden bird pens next to Wakefield Tower, barely visible for the clouds masking the moon. But when he reached them, he simply glanced at the closed doors and carried on walking, smoothing down his pigeon-grey mustache in anticipation. Arriving at the Brick Tower, he checked behind him, then felt for the enormous key he had slipped into his pocket while in the office.

He cursed under his breath at the noise the lock made when it eventually turned, and looked behind him once more. He then pushed open the door, and shut it behind him. Flicking on his lighter for a moment to get his bearings, he made his way up the steps of the tower that had once imprisoned William Wallace. Reaching the first floor, he groped in the darkness for the door latch and entered the empty room. He looked at his watch, a present from his wife, which glowed in the gloom. Still a few minutes early, he sat down on the wooden floorboards, took off his gloves, and waited, his heart clenched with anticipation.

Eventually, the Ravenmaster heard the bottom door open and gently close again. He rubbed his moist palms on his trouser legs as the sound of heels climbing the steps echoed up the stone staircase. It hadn’t taken him long to discover the delights of the Tower Café when it re-opened. However, his appreciation had nothing to do with the menu, which horrified the Beefeaters as much as the tourists, but everything to do with the delicious new chef. He immediately forgot Ambrosine Clarke’s lack of talent, which some believed bordered on cruelty, the moment he saw the glow of her formidable cleavage as she leant over to stir what was allegedly turnip soup. Her mind enfeebled by poor nutrition, she agreed to meet him at the Pig in a Poke pub, a short walk from the fortress. Sitting on the bar stool, she forgave him his lack of imagination regarding the choice of venue when he whispered into her ear his insurmountable appreciation of her eel pie. She forgave his repeated assertions that ravens were more intelligent than dogs when he placed a hand on her sturdy thigh and muttered exaltations about her tripe and mash. And she even forgave the fact that he had a wife when he ran the back of his fingers over her cheek, still flushed from the heat of the kitchen, and assured her that her suet pudding was better than his mother’s.

The Ravenmaster watched as the glow from a match crept its way up the wall towards him. Suddenly it was blown out, and the tower was plunged back into darkness. He listened as the footsteps approached the door, and passed slowly through the threshold. Recognising the smell of cooking fat, he got to his feet and reached for her.

Once she had let herself into the Salt Tower, Hebe Jones climbed to the roof to take down the sodden washing. It was stubbornness, rather than optimism, that had made her peg it out that morning before going to work. Lit up by a bone-coloured moon that had momentarily broken free of the clouds, she worked her way along the line, dropping into the plastic basket the heavy clothes that reeked of damp from the Thames. As she struggled to take down the bed sheets without trailing them in the puddles, she glanced over to Tower Bridge, and she remembered having to convince Milo, when he was still terrified of the place, that it had been old London Bridge, down the river, that had been mounted with severed heads.

When she walked into the kitchen with the basket, she found her husband sitting at the table with his head in his hands, his mustache still damp from a final swig of Scavenger’s Daughter to complete his reparation.

“Feeling all right?” she asked, squeezing behind his chair to get to the tumble dryer.

“Fine,” he replied, moving in his chair. “How was work? Anything interesting brought in?”

Hebe Jones’s mind immediately turned to the urn still sitting on top of the gigolo’s diary. “Not really,” she replied, feeding the sheets into the machine.

Once she had finished cooking supper, she reached for the two trays propped up against the bread bin. The couple no longer ate at the kitchen table in the evening, as neither could stand the silence that sat like an unwanted guest between them. After serving out the mousaka, a recipe passed down generations of Grammatikoses which she had hoped to teach Milo, she carried the trays to the living room and placed them on the coffee table in front of the settee. It was there that she found her husband again, dressed in a pair of ancient trousers with a hole at each pocket from the weight of his hands. They ate with their eyes on the television, rather than on each other. As soon as they had finished, Balthazar Jones got up to wash the dishes, which he no longer left until the end of the evening as it gave him an excuse to leave the room. Once he had finished, he stepped over Mrs. Cook and headed for the door to the staircase.

“What do you think Milo would have looked like now?” Hebe Jones suddenly asked as he raised his hand to the latch.

He froze. “I don’t know,” he replied, not turning round. After closing the door behind him, Balthazar Jones made
his way up the spiral staircase, the scuff of his tartan slippers amplified by the ancient stone that surrounded him. Arriving at the top floor, he felt in the darkness for the handle and pushed open the door to the room that his wife never entered, as the chalk graffiti left on the walls by the German U-boat men imprisoned during the war gave her the creeps. He switched on the light, revealing the night at the lattice windows surrounding him on all sides, and sat down on the hardback chair at the table. Picking up his pen, he started to compose his next batch of letters that he hoped would secure him a fellow member of the St. Heribert of Cologne Club. And two floors below him Hebe Jones sat alone on the sofa trying to answer her own question as the cracks of her heart opened.
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DAY EXOTIC BEASTS RETURNED to the Tower of London, Mrs. Cook’s ancient bowels defeated her. Balthazar Jones discovered the disgrace as he made his way to the bathroom in the early hours of the morning. Still seeking the courage to tell his wife about the animals’ imminent arrival, he hadn’t slept. He had hoped that the news would have reached her, sparing him the onerous task. But she remained completely oblivious. This was due, he concluded, to her having given up all social activities within the fortress, which included folding herself up into mysterious positions after one of the Beefeaters’ wives indoctrinated her into the cult of yoga.

He sat in the darkness on the side of the bath, his pajama leg pulled up to his knee as he washed Mrs. Cook’s indiscretion off his foot. He gazed out of the lattice window towards the Thames, glowing with the sparks of a new day. And, as he looked at the Tower wharf, his thoughts turned to the tale he had told Milo of when the ship bearing England’s first ostriches arrived, courtesy of the Dey of Tunis, the North African ruler, in the eighteenth century. He and his son had been collapsed on deck chairs on the lawn by the White Tower, the loathsome tourists long since locked out for the day. After handing him a glass of lemonade, the Beefeater told the boy how the curious crowd that had gathered when the vessel docked at the fortress recoiled with dread as two giant birds stalked down the gangplank, shook their dusty behinds, and released a volley of evil-smelling droppings.

The Londoners quivered at the sight of their hideous two-toed feet, he continued, and gasped when a beaming crew member held above his orange turban a white egg almost the size of his head. The onlookers’ horror was complete when the birds fluttered their long, lustrous eyelashes at the crowd and lunged their pitifully small heads at the nearest bystanders to snatch a pearl button and a clay pipe, which were immediately swallowed. The pair were swiftly housed in a roofed pen to prevent them flying away. But it wasn’t long before one of them was dead, having swallowed too many nails fed to it by an eager public convinced of the rumour that the creatures could digest iron.

Milo listened in silence, gripping the sides of his seat as the story unfolded. Afterwards he kissed his father on the cheek and ran off to ride his bike around the moat with the other Tower children. Balthazar Jones didn’t give the ostrich tale another thought until two days later, when they rushed Milo to hospital white with pain, and the doctor tapped his pen on the X-ray of the boy’s twisted gut, indicating the edges of what was unmistakably a fifty-pence piece.

BALTHAZAR JONES ROLLED DOWN his pajama leg and returned to bed. Convinced his wife was safely settled on the seabed of slumber, he turned his head towards her and muttered that not only was the Tower about to have a new menagerie, but that he had been put in charge of it. Satisfied that he had finally done his duty, he turned away and closed his eyes. But Hebe Jones immediately rose to the surface of her sleep with the thrust of a sea serpent.

“But you know how much I hate animals,” she protested. “Putting up with that geriatric tortoise has been bad enough, and I only did that because you insisted that she was part of the family.”

The argument only came to an end when Balthazar Jones got up to go to the lavatory again, where he remained for so long battling against the obstinacy of constipation that Hebe Jones fell asleep.

When the shriek of the alarm woke them several hours later, they got dressed on either side of the bedroom in silence. Neither had breakfast so as to avoid having to sit at the kitchen table together. And when they eventually bumped into each other the only thing they exchanged was the word “goodbye.”

After his wife had left for work, Balthazar Jones ran a clothes brush over the shoulders of his tunic and grabbed his hat from the top of the wardrobe. He drove out of the Tower headed for London Zoo, his hands clamped tightly on the wheel as he tried to concentrate after so little sleep. Sliding around next to him was his partisan, an eight-foot pike-like weapon that could gut a man in an instant. Though it was usually reserved for ceremonial occasions, Oswin Fielding had insisted that he bring it along as the equerry wanted him to look as “Beefeatery” as possible for the press.

When he eventually found a parking space between the television satellite vans, he remained behind the wheel for a few moments trying to summon enough courage for the task ahead of him. But it never came, so he got out
The Beefeater then started his journey back to the Tower, attracting all manner of honks and two-fingered
searching amongst his CDs, he selected Phil Collins’s Love Songs in the hope of calming his highly strung
passenger. The Beefeater then started his journey back to the Tower, attracting all manner of honks and two-fingered
Anyway, forgetting his partisan. He walked through the wrought-iron gates and stood watching as a single file of
penguins waddled up a gangplank into a van following a trail of glistening fish. Once they were inside, a solitary
bird stood at the door looking back towards the enclosure. The driver, the sleeves of his checked shirt rolled up to
his elbows, shooed it inside, swiftly removed the gangplank, and closed the door. Suddenly the Beefeater heard the
sound of slapping. He turned to see a solitary penguin following the wet footprints, rocking from side to side as it
attempted to run.

“You’ve forgotten one!” he yelled.

“For Christ’s sake!” said the driver, who had already reached for the cigarettes he had vowed to give up that
morning. “I knew this job would be a nightmare. It’ll have to come in the front with me. I’m not opening that door
again. It’s taken me over two hours and a trip to the fishmongers to get the ruddy lot in. They’re worse than bloody
kids. And I should know, I’ve got four of ’em. What’s that you’re wearing, anyway? Fancy dress or something?”

Things began to deviate wildly from what Oswin Fielding had referred to as “The Plan” when he approached
Balthazar Jones and informed him that the press wanted to take a picture of him with some of the Queen’s animals.
After berating the Beefeater for leaving his partisan in the car, the equerry then herded the journalists towards the
monkey house. He stopped outside the Geoffroy’s marmosets’ enclosure, seduced by the innocence of their white
faces and their fluffy black ears. What he didn’t know, however, was that the creatures’ keeper had been trying all
morning to entice them out of their cages in readiness for their journey to the Tower. But the longer she tried to lure
them with pieces of chopped fruit, the more desperately they clung on to the bars, until she gave up and went to
weep in the lavatory. When the man from the Palace introduced Balthazar Jones to the press as Keeper of the Royal
Menagerie, and stood him in front of them, the marmosets displayed their most defensive behaviour yet. And the
monkeys continued to flash their privates long after the most sexually depraved of the journalists had blushed to the
roots of their hair.

The Beefeater escaped the cameras and went to the aviaries to make sure that the two lovebirds were being loaded
into separate vans. On his way, he stopped to admire the herd of bearded pigs, in a state of ecstasy as they rubbed
their behinds against their itching post, and he regretted that they belonged to the zoo rather than the Queen. Much
later, when the full ramifications of his actions dawned on him, he put his gross lack of judgement down to having
been seduced by their stupendously hirsute cheeks, which were even more lustrous than his colleagues’. In his
defence, it seemed that the animal had been entirely complicit. For when Balthazar Jones succumbed to the
temptation of an open van door, and pointed in its direction, the pig quite happily trotted inside. And it only took the
Beefeater seconds to shut the door behind it, in the wholly deluded belief that no one would notice its absence.

Just as he was about to fetch the Etruscan shrew, he saw the Komodo dragon lumbering away from its terrified
keeper, who was attempting to shoo it into a lorry with flaps of his handkerchief. The giant lizard came to a stop
next to the gift shop and stood perfectly still, flicking its forked tongue. Balthazar Jones followed its gaze and saw
Oswin Fielding tapping a box of animal feed with his umbrella, the wind lifting the remains of his hair like a palm
branch. As the animal headed towards the equerry with surprising speed, the Beefeater recalled the creature’s ability
to swallow a small deer whole, after which it would lie in the sun for a week to digest. It was then that he started to
run.

Within seconds, the ugly reptile had thundered past the equerry towards its target of a discarded hamburger. But
by then Balthazar Jones, who hadn’t run so fast since rugby-tackling a pickpocket on Tower Green with five wallets
down his trousers, had built up such a speed he was unable to stop. He collided with Oswin Fielding with a force
that brought both men to the ground in an instant, and resulted in the equerry’s silver umbrella no longer being
splendid. It was only when both men confirmed that they were still conscious and struggled back to their feet, that
the man from the Palace conceded it was a good job Balthazar Jones hadn’t been carrying his partisan after all.

The Beefeater was still mournfully inspecting the hole in the knee of his uniform when the cavalcade of vehicles
began to leave for the Tower. He watched as the first van passed, a solitary penguin standing on the passenger seat
looking at him through the window. He winced at the smell emanating from the second, carrying the zorilla, and
then shouted as he saw the open-topped lorry bearing the giraffes approach the exit, the top of which threatened to
decapitate all four of the beasts. Six members of the zoo’s staff then stood around the vehicle holding out tantalising
branches to encourage the creatures to lower their heads long enough to pass underneath the wrought-iron arch. As
soon as they were safely through, the animals raised their necks again and closed their eyes in the breeze as the lorry
picked up speed. Balthazar Jones waited until the final truck pulled out, then headed to his car carrying a cage
bearing the Etruscan shrew. He placed it on the back seat, and lashed his partisan to the headrest to prevent disaster.
Searching amongst his CDs, he selected Phil Collins’s Love Songs in the hope of calming his highly strung
passenger. The Beefeater then started his journey back to the Tower, attracting all manner of honks and two-fingered
gestures on account of his pitiful speed.

Ruby Dore knocked at the blue door facing Tower Green and stamped her feet to banish the cold as she waited for it to open. It had taken a week for the doctor to call, informing her that the test result was ready. She had spent the time feeling more and more distressed, knowing that as each bloodless day passed, the future she had dreamed of—a husband first and children later—was increasingly unlikely.

When Dr. Evangeline Moore finally appeared, the landlady searched her face, but was greeted by the inscrutability of a poker player. Ruby Dore walked swiftly along the hall to the surgery and sat down. Taking her place opposite her patient, the doctor picked up a pen from her desk and held it with both hands in front of her. “I’m sorry it’s taken so long,” she said. “It’s just as you thought, you are pregnant.”

Ruby Dore remained silent.

“Is it good or bad news?” the doctor asked.

“Not the greatest, considering the circumstances,” the landlady replied, fiddling with the end of her scarf.

Once the consultation was over, she ran back to the Rack & Ruin and bolted the door behind her. She climbed the narrow wooden staircase that led to her cramped home with its low ceilings, worn furniture she couldn’t afford to replace, and smell of beer, which she never noticed.

Moving aside several books, she sat down on the only sofa she had known and closed her eyes. Immediately she saw the man she had met in the village bar while visiting her father in Spain, the white Rioja they had enjoyed, and the tumultuous hour they had spent together on the beach before she crept back to the villa, accompanied by the dawn. She thought of the woman and child whose hands he had been holding when she bumped into him the following day, and his refusal to acknowledge her. And she wondered whether he lied as much to his family as he had to her in the brief time that she had known him.

Her thoughts turned to the humiliation of having to tell her parents she was pregnant. Her mother would naturally blame her father, as she continued to do for most things despite having divorced him more than two decades ago. Her father would blame himself for not having raised his daughter well enough after her mother left, unable to bear life in the Tower any longer. It had taken him weeks to admit to his daughter that she was gone for good. When the nine-year-old asked yet again where her mother was, Harry Dore finally gave her the answer: “Your mother is in India trying to find herself. God help her when she does.”

Opening her eyes, the landlady looked around the living room at the display cabinets containing the family collection of Tower artefacts, amassed by generations of Dores while running the tavern. She remembered telling the man about it in the bar when he asked where she lived, and he had even feigned interest. There was the Tower report written in 1598 complaining that the Beefeaters were “given to drunkenness, disorders and quarrels.” On the shelf below was the mallet used in 1671 by Colonel Blood to flatten the state crown before hiding it in his cloak during the only attempt to steal the Crown Jewels. Next to it was a piece of the cloak worn by Lord Nithsdale during his escape from the Tower in 1716 disguised as a woman.

Every piece had been researched and labelled, a project she and her father had shared. Harry Dore would recount the objects’ history with the mesmerising delivery of an oral bard, after which his daughter would print the labels in her best schoolgirl’s handwriting. But their time together had not been enough to heal the damage wrought by the years Ruby Dore had spent watching her parents serve each other their curdled devotion. Her mother had advised her to remain single. “There’s nothing lonelier than marriage,” she warned. However, Ruby Dore refused to believe her. But during her search for affection, she had found herself seeking it from the shadiest of hearts. And no matter how often she opened her bedroom window, never once had she been touched by the moonlight of love.

Hebe Jones had had no luck with the register of deaths. She had searched it thoroughly, but all those listed under the name “Clementine Perkins” had died several decades ago. She had since put it out of her mind and got on with easier items that guaranteed the warm glow of victory, such as handbags containing their owners’ phone numbers. But the sight of the urn still sitting on her desk unsettled her.

“Valerie,” she said, looking at the brass plaque.

“Yes,” came the muffled reply. Hebe Jones turned to see that her colleague had squeezed herself into the front end of a pantomime horse, found on a bench at Piccadilly Circus station.
“It smells in here,” said Valerie Jennings, positioning herself so that she could see through the small mesh window in the neck.

“What of?”

“Carrots.”

“I need to ask your opinion about something.” Hebe Jones continued, ignoring the reply.

Valerie Jennings sat down at her desk, and crossed her matted fur legs.

“If someone died, but their death wasn’t officially recorded, what would that mean?” Hebe Jones asked.

Valerie Jennings scratched the back of her leg with a brown leather hoof. “Well, it could mean a number of things. Maybe the person hasn’t died after all, and someone is pretending that they have,” she said, tugging on a cord, which sent the horse’s eyes shooting left. “Or maybe the person really did die, but someone wants to keep it a secret and they bribed the crematorium staff not to inform the authorities,” she continued, tugging another cord, which sent the horse’s eyes shooting to the right.

“I think you read too many books,” suggested Hebe Jones.

“Then, of course, there’s human error,” she added, pressing a switch that sent both sets of lustrous eyelashes fluttering. Standing up, she then headed towards the fridge. But just as she secured the horse’s long, yellow teeth around the door handle, the Swiss cowbell sounded. After a brief bout of wriggling and blaspheming, she found that she was firmly wedged inside. Hebe Jones got up and tried tugging on the creature’s enormous felt ears. But eventually she gave up as they started to work loose.

The bell started up again, and continued with such urgency that Hebe Jones quickly went to answer it, not even stopping to try and open the safe that had been left on the Circle Line five years ago.

When she turned the corner she found a man at the original Victorian counter wearing a navy uniform. Middle age had run its fingers through his neat, dark hair.

“Is this London Underground Lost Property Office?” he asked.

Hebe Jones raised her eyes to the sign above the counter.

He followed her gaze. “Has anyone handed in a small green case in the last fifteen minutes? It’s an emergency,” he asked.

“What does it look like?” she asked.

“A bit bigger than a child’s lunch box.”

“Was there anything identifiable inside?” she asked.

“A kidney,” he replied.

“As in steak and kidney pie?”

“As in organ donation.”

Hebe Jones turned the corner and called: “Valerie! Has anyone brought in a green case in the last fifteen minutes?”

“No!” came the muffled reply.

Hebe Jones came swiftly back to the counter. “Where did you leave it?” she asked.

“Nowhere,” the man said. “It was by my feet as I was standing by the carriage doors. The next moment I looked down it was gone.”

Suddenly the phone started ringing in the office. When it failed to stop Hebe Jones called: “Valerie, can you get that?”

But there was no reply. When she looked round the corner, she was confronted by the sight of Valerie Jennings bending over her desk, trying to knock the receiver off its cradle with threadbare nostrils. Hebe Jones picked up the phone. After a while she replied: “I’ve got the owner with me now. We’ll come for it immediately.”

Grabbing her turquoise coat from the stand, she called: “Valerie, I’ve got to go out. There’s a man at the counter who’s lost a kidney and it’s just been handed in at Edgware Road. I’m going with him to make sure he finds it.”

There was an equine nod.

Once Hebe Jones had left, Valerie Jennings sat down and looked around the office through the gauze. She peered up at the cuckoo clock and wondered how long it would be before her colleague returned to release her. Just as she
was about to attempt opening the fridge door again, the cowbell sounded. She ignored it at first, but it continued clanking. Unable to bear it any longer, she got to her hoofed feet and headed to the counter with the reluctance of a beast on its way to the knacker’s yard.

When she turned the corner, Arthur Catnip returned the bell to the counter without a word, and looked into the horse’s eyes. “Is that Valerie Jennings?” he asked.

“It is indeed,” came the buried reply.

“I was just wondering whether you’d like to go out for lunch sometime,” he said.

“That would be fine.”


“I’m a bit tied up.”

“What about Thursday?”

“That would be lovely.”

“One o’clock?”

“I’ll see you then.”

Arthur Catnip watched as the horse seemed to momentarily lose sense of direction, went cross-eyed, and then disappeared from view.

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Hebe Jones moved aside a discarded newspaper and sat down in the carriage, relieved that the organ courier had finally been reunited with his case. As the train began to rattle its way out of the station, she looked up and inspected the passengers opposite. It was the boy who immediately drew her attention. “He must be around eleven or twelve,” she calculated. Though he looked nothing like Milo, the sight of him wounded her just the same. She studied his mother sitting next to him absorbed in a magazine, and doubted she would ignore him if she knew how easy it was to lose a child. She closed her eyes, regretting yet again all the occasions she could have spent with Milo: the times when she had told him to go and play with the other children when she was trying to find a talent for painting on the Salt Tower roof; the times when she and her husband had left him with Rev. Septimus Drew so that they could go out to dinner; and the times when she had sent him out of the kitchen after finding plastic soldiers bobbing in the casserole.

The boy got up and offered his seat to an elderly lady who had been looking at him hopefully since the journey began. “Milo would have done that,” Hebe Jones thought. She looked at the boy’s hand holding the rail next to her. Suddenly she remembered the last time she had seen her son’s hand, cold, white, and perfect as he lay on the hospital bed. And she thought what a neglectful mother she had been for not knowing there had been something so terribly wrong with him.

It had taken far longer than Hebe Jones had wished to become a mother. A year into the marriage, when there was still no grandchild, her mother had presented her with a small wooden statue of Demeter with the solemnity usually reserved for a holy relic. Hebe Jones put it into her handbag and carried it with her wherever she went. But it seemed that not even the Greek goddess of fertility could make anything grow inside her. Medical tests failed to find a reason for the couple’s inability to conceive. By then her three sisters had produced so many offspring, the oldest was obliged to lock her husband out of the bedroom at night for fear of yet another nine months of craving ice.

The blood eventually stopped after twenty years of monthly disappointment. During that time, Hebe and Balthazar Jones had refused to let the thorns of infertility shred their marriage, and the roots of their love had wound round each other even more tightly. Convinced she had entered the black hole of menopause, Hebe Jones wept with joy when she discovered she was pregnant. And that night in bed Balthazar Jones laid his head on his wife’s soft stomach, and started a conversation with Milo that continued for nearly twelve years.

While Hebe Jones escaped the horror of morning sickness, she found herself gripped by an even more pernicious compulsion than her sister’s. Balthazar Jones would return home to find his wife sitting on the floor by the fire, her swollen belly resting on her thighs, helping herself to the coals. “I’m not doing anything,” she would reply, her teeth blackened with soot. Her husband, convinced that she was lacking a vital mineral, searched through the dusty shelves of the local grocer’s for something to satisfy the yearning. He brought back one hundred and fourteen tins of squid in black ink, and presented them to his wife with the pride of a hunter. And, for a while, the Spanish delicacy seemed to work. But one evening he caught her walking out of the living room with a telltale smut on her cheek. It was then that he took irrevocable action. And Hebe Jones greeted the man who came to trade the coal fire for gas
with silent tears in her eyes.

She spent her pregnancy in a state of bliss interspersed with bouts of terror that she would not be able to love anyone else as much as her husband. But her fears were unfounded. When the baby was born, she soaked him with an outpouring of affection that rained just as heavily on his father.

Balthazar Jones, who was equally lost in the madness of newborn love, thought his son so beautiful he suggested calling him Adonis. Still flushed with the effort of expelling the child, Hebe Jones, who had always wanted a Greek name, welcomed her husband’s capitulation. But while her baby’s allure was beyond doubt, she feared taunts in the playground and reminded her husband of the misery he had suffered being named after one of the Three Wise Men, particularly one who had turned up with such a lousy gift as frankincense.

When Hebe Jones’s mother arrived at the ward to meet her eleventh grandchild, Idola Grammatikos looked at the baby and announced: “The old chicken makes good broth.” Unable to take her eyes off her grandson for a moment, she declared him so delicious she could eat him. Milo, the Greek word for apple, was then suggested, and the boy left the hospital named after a fruit. But when Balthazar Jones eventually came round from his delirium, he denied any botanical influence and insisted that his son had been named in honour of Milo of Croton, the ancient Greek six-time Olympic wrestling champion.
CHAPTER EIGHT

OPENING THE SALT TOWER DOOR, Balthazar Jones peered out at the silent fortress, glistening with a stubble of frost. He stood for several minutes listening for the Ravenmaster, who always rose early to feed his odious birds. But nothing could be heard. He closed the door swiftly behind him and headed to the Develin Tower clutching a grapefruit.

The Beefeater slipped a hand into his trouser pocket and withdrew the key. After a quick glance behind him to make sure that he wouldn’t be seen, he put it into the lock and turned it. Once he had closed the front door behind him, he pressed down on the latch to his right. The bearded pig immediately turned its head at the noise. The moment Balthazar Jones saw its marvellous hirsute cheeks, his guilt at having made off with the animal instantly vanished. Bending down, he held out the grapefruit, the only thing he had been able to find in the kitchen in his haste to check on the animals after their first night at the Tower. The pig, which had been in the middle of an orgy of scratching, instantly gave up pleasuring itself against the fireplace and scampered across the straw to inspect the yellow gift with its hairy snout. Instead of sinking its teeth into the fruit, the creature promptly knocked it to the floor, flicked it across the room with its nose, and charged after it. After another butt, the pig continued the pursuit with undiminished enthusiasm, its tasselled tail flying like a flag over its fulsome buttocks. The Beefeater was entranced, and after more than ten minutes, neither man nor beast had shown any sign of tiring from either performing or watching the grapefruit spectacle.

Vowing to return with an alternative breakfast, Balthazar Jones locked the door behind him and headed down Water Lane to see whether the delivery of fish for the rockhopper penguins had arrived. Suddenly it dawned on him that he hadn’t seen the creatures since the van passed him on its way out of the zoo, a solitary bird standing on the passenger seat looking at him.

Balthazar Jones stopped running when he reached the bridge overlooking the moat. As he stood with both hands on the wall, firing hot clouds of desperate breath into the cold morning air, he saw that the penguin enclosure was empty. He opened the gate and clattered along the boardwalk erected to prevent the tourists’ feet from turning the grass into mud. Standing at the window of the next enclosure, he looked for a huddle of short-sighted birds with magnificent yellow eyebrows. But all he saw was the reclined glutton, feeding itself another fresh egg with the self-indulgence of a Roman emperor. Moving to the next pen, he hunted between the knobbly knees of the giraffes, but there wasn’t a hint of a beak.

He ran back inside the fortress, climbed the steps of the Devereux Tower, and opened the door to the monkey house. But his sudden appearance set off the howler monkeys, and he was forced to retreat after a quick glance through the bars of the cage. Standing in front of the zorilla, he encouraged it to get to its feet, but his frantic arm movements produced from the animal a particularly pungent aroma, and he backed out as soon as he saw that the creature was alone. As he stood staring at the Komodo dragon, which refused to move, he realised that the birds would have stood no chance in its company anyway, and he rushed off to the enclosure next to the White Tower, hoping they had been herded inside. He then hunted between the reclusive ringtail possums sleeping on a tree branch, their tails coiled neatly below them. But never once did he glimpse a pair of beady black eyes.

Having searched the rest of the fortress, the Beefeater finally arrived at the Brick Tower. Telling himself that the removal man must have shoed the penguins in with the other birds, he climbed the stone steps two at a time. Once he had reached the first floor, he flung open the oak door and rushed to the aviary. As he peered through the wire fencing, his eyes didn’t linger over the charming King of Saxony bird of paradise, its two prized brow feathers stretching twice the length of its body, a sight so extraordinary that early ornithologists dismissed the first stuffed specimen as taxidermic trickery. Nor did he gaze at the green and peach female lovebird that had been separated from its mate lest it be savaged. He didn’t even admire the toucans given to the Queen by the President of Peru, with their alluring beaks believed by the Aztecs to be made from rainbows. Instead he kept his eyes on a pair of ugly feet sticking out of a small bush. Suddenly there was a rustle of leaves, and the Beefeater held his breath. But from out of the undergrowth stalked the wandering albatross, a species with such voluminous feet sailors once used them as tobacco pouches. The Beefeater sank to the floor, wondering how he was going to explain the penguins’ disappearance to the man from the Palace. As he leant back against the circular wall, he let out a sigh of such momentous despair it woke the emerald hanging parrot from its upside-down slumber.
REV. SEPTIMUS DREW HITCHED UP his cassock and knelt down by the organ. It took a moment for him to summon the courage to pick up the creature by its tail. Once he had overcome his aversion, he held it aloft and inspected it with an eye that had seen into the dusty depths of countless tormented souls. Despite a disappointing week of mechanical failures, and more pestilent droppings than usual, the sight of its tiny front paws suddenly filled the chaplain with unexpected regret. He lowered his eyes to the rat’s gruesome yellow teeth that had been sunk with unfettered ecstasy into the succulent tapestry kneelers, and all pity vanished. He noted that the creature had been cleanly slain with a single blow to the back of the neck by his latest innovation, a masterpiece of engineering that had been hidden inside a miniature Trojan horse. The whiskered enemy had been lured to its minutely plotted death by the most unholy of temptations: peanut butter.

While part of him opposed a Christian burial for the vermin, rats were, nevertheless, God’s creatures despite their nonappearance in the Bible. He dropped the stiffened body inside one of the old turquoise Fortnum & Mason paper bags that he kept for such occasions, and picked up his trowel. Pulling open the chapel’s ancient door, he made his way to the Byward Tower, where he descended the steps to the moat, which had been used to grow vegetables during the Second World War. After a quick prayer for the creature’s villainous soul, he buried it in the flowerbed that ran alongside the bowling green. While in life the rodents had little meaningful purpose, in death they played the exalted role of fertiliser to the chaplain’s favourite rosebushes. He then turned his back on the carefully tended patch of lawn, which had witnessed so many accusations of cheating the previous season that all bowling matches had been suspended.

As he headed home, the Yeoman Gaoler, who was looking even more exhausted than usual, caught up with him and placed a plump hand on his arm. “No offence, but you haven’t been pinching my Fig Rolls, have you?” he asked.

Rev. Septimus Drew considered the question. “While I’d hold my hand up to the odd bit of gluttony, theft isn’t my thing, I’m afraid,” he replied.

The Yeoman Gaoler nodded in the direction of the chapel. “Nobody’s happened to confess to it, have they?” he asked.

“Unfortunately we don’t do confessions. Try the Catholics down the road. The priest gets to hear all manner of scandal, though from my experience he’s a bit reluctant to pass it on.”

As he crossed Tower Green, the clergyman spotted Balthazar Jones in the distance weighed down by what appeared to be a bag of fruit and vegetables. He watched his journey, troubled as usual by his old friend’s perpetual air of despair. The chaplain had tried his utmost to encourage him to take up his interests again. He had even offered him the custodianship of the bowling green, a duty that had fallen to him that year, knowing that there was little that gave an Englishman more pleasure than the torment of tending a lawn. But the Beefeater had declined the offer with a shake of his white head.

Rev. Septimus Drew then tried to smoke him out of his grief by stoking his mania for English history. After service one Sunday, he cornered the Keeper of Tower History and asked him whether there was any new research that had been kept out of the latest edition of the Tower guide. Caught disarmed in the House of God, the man confessed to a revelation of such tantalising intrigue that the chaplain immediately went in search of Balthazar Jones to tell him.

He found him collapsed in his blue-and-white-striped deckchair on the battlements, gazing at the sky. The chaplain strode up to him, an undignified breeze lifting the ends of his nibbled crimson skirts, convinced that he had the key to set his friend free from the prison of his depression.

Sitting down on the ground next to him, the clergyman then recounted the astonishing tale of the ravens’ dubious historical pedigree. It was widely believed that the birds had been at the Tower for centuries. According to the legend peddled to the tourists, Charles II’s astronomer complained that they were getting in the way of his telescope. The King was said to have called for them to be destroyed, only to be warned that the White Tower would fall and a great disaster would befall England if the birds ever left the Tower. He then decreed that there must always be at least six birds present.

“But it’s all rubbish,” exclaimed the triumphant clergyman. “A researcher just scoured the records going back a thousand years and found out that the earliest reference to the ravens being at the Tower was in fact 1895, and so the legend must have been a Victorian invention.”

But instead of the delight he expected the Beefeater to display at the news, Balthazar Jones turned to him and
asked: “Do you think it’s going to rain?”

However the chaplain refused to give up. Sweeping into the British Library, he asked to see the most obscure titles he could find in the hallowed catalogue, much to the irritation of the staff, who were obliged to push aside curtains of cobwebs in the basement in order to reach them. After several months, he finally fell upon a tale of historical fascination that had at its helm a number of doctors. Not only did it show the medical profession to be staffed by baboons, as the Beefeater insisted it was, but it was of such hilarity that the chaplain’s library membership was terminated on account of his explosion of mirth when he read it.

With no hint as to the delight that lay in store for the Beefeater, Rev. Septimus Drew invited him round for supper, having selected his best bottle of Château Musar from his cellar. Once he had served the watercress soup, the clergyman proceeded to tell the story of Mary Toft, the eighteenth-century maidservant who one day began to give birth to rabbits. The local surgeon was called and he helped deliver nine of them, all stillborn and in pieces. The doctor wrote to numerous learned gentlemen about the phenomenon. George I sent his surgeon-anatomist and the secretary to the Prince of Wales to investigate, and both of them saw her deliver yet more of the dead creatures. The woman was subsequently brought to London, and the medical profession was so convinced of her affliction, rabbit stew and jugged hare disappeared off dinner tables across the kingdom. But she was eventually unmasked as a hoaxer when a porter was caught trying to sneak a rabbit into her room, and she confessed to having inserted the pieces inside her.

The tale, which the chaplain related over three courses, included a number of ambitious theatrical demonstrations. After they had finished the roast capon, the chaplain pulled back his chair and rubbed his back with both hands as if easing the pains of a rabbit gestation. After he refilled their glasses for a fourth time, he raised a finger to either side of his head, bared his front teeth, and twitched his nose. And just before bringing in the summer pudding, the six-foot-three clergyman proceeded to execute what were undeniably bunny hops around the dining room. The Beefeater’s eyes didn’t leave the chaplain for a minute as he related his uproarious tale. But when Rev. Septimus Drew finally wiped his tears of merriment on his white cotton handkerchief and asked his guest what he thought of the story of Mary Toft, Balthazar Jones blinked and asked: “Who?”

ARRIVING BACK AT HIS HOUSE, the chaplain put the trowel in the cupboard under the kitchen sink, washed his hands carefully, and took down his sorrowful teapot for one. As he sat alone at the table sipping his cranberry infusion, his mind turned once more to the heavenly Ruby Dore. Unable to bear the stab of solitude any longer, he stood up, fetched his pile of recipes from the drawer next to the sink, and set about selecting his weapon of seduction. Once his choice was made, the clergyman picked up the mail he had collected from his post office box earlier that morning and made his way up to his study to compose his next sermon. Sitting at his desk, he worked his ivory letter-opener across the first spine and reached inside. When he had finished reading, he read the letter again to make sure that he had understood it correctly. He then folded it, returned it to its envelope, and slid it into the desk drawer. And, as he sat back in his chair in astonishment, he wondered whether there was any real hope that he would win the Erotic Fiction Awards, for which he had just been shortlisted.

BALTHAZAR JONES STOOD at number seven Tower Green and knocked on the door. When, after several long minutes, there was still no reply, he put down the cage, cupped his hands against the windowpane, and attempted to see through a gap in the curtain. Eventually, the Yeoman Gaoler appeared at the door, his dressing gown tied across the crest of his stomach, one hand raised against the glare of the marble clouds.

“Are you all right?” Balthazar Jones asked.

The Yeoman Gaoler scratched at his chest. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“May I come in for a minute?”

The Yeoman Gaoler stepped back to allow the man to pass. “It might be warmer in the kitchen,” he said.

Balthazar Jones walked down the hall and placed the cage on the table. The Yeoman Gaoler sat down and ran a hand through his hair.

“What’s that?” he asked, nodding at the cage.

“The Queen’s Etruscan shrew. I was hoping you’d look after it. It’s of a particularly nervous disposition.”

The Yeoman Gaoler looked at him. “How will the public be able to see it if it’s in my house?” he asked.
“They can make an appointment, but to be honest I’m not too bothered if they don’t. I just want to make sure that it stays alive.”

“Let’s see it then.”

Balthazar Jones stretched his arm into the cage and took the lid off the tiny plastic house.

The Yeoman Gaoler stood up and peered inside. “I can’t see anything,” he said.

“It’s there in the corner.”

The man reached for his glasses and took another look. “That thing there? Are you sure it’s alive?” he asked.

“Of course I’m sure. I saw it move this morning.”

The Yeoman Gaoler continued to gaze at the creature, then scratched the back of his head and declared: “To be honest, I don’t think shrews are my thing.”

The Beefeater studied him for a moment. “The other thing I had you pencilled in for was helping to look after the penguins,” he said. “They were a gift from the President of Argentina. Apparently they’re from the Falkland Islands after all.”

After showing Balthazar Jones out, the Yeoman Gaoler returned to the kitchen, sat down, and looked at the cage with the unfocused gaze of the exhausted. He had gone to bed at a respectable hour the previous night, dressed in a celebratory new pair of pajamas, convinced that the horror was finally over. Before taking his evening bath, he had opened all the windows in the house and, according to the ancient remedy for driving out ghosts, stood in the corners of each room brandishing a smouldering bunch of dried sage. The vapours had curled up against the walls towards the ceiling and drifted off into the night. But shortly before dawn, he was woken by the sound of boots striding across the wooden dining-room floor below him, and the most heinous profanities deriding the Spanish uttered in a Devonshire accent. After mustering the courage to descend the stairs, which were flooded with the stench of tobacco, he found that the potatoes he had left out to fry for his breakfast were missing. Returning swiftly to bed, he locked the door, drew up his covers, and listened in a state of terror to the unearthly sounds that continued until well after dawn.

HEBE JONES ARRIVED at London Underground Lost Property Office earlier than usual, having been woken by the uproar of the red howler monkeys. Her irritation had been complete when she discovered that not only was her husband missing, but so too was the grapefruit she had bought herself for breakfast. As she waited for the water to boil for her cup of tea, she looked through the fridge for something to eat and discovered a solitary Bakewell tartlet belonging to Valerie Jennings behind a carton of carrot soup. Seduced by the lurid red cherry on top, she convinced herself that her colleague would not miss it, carried it back to her desk, and took a bite. But it was to be her only memory of the succulent almond filling. For her fingers immediately reached for the gigolo’s diary, and she became so engrossed by an entry that involved the ruination of a boardroom table by one of his lovers’ heels that she ate the rest without realising.

Just as she was wiping the evidence off her mouth, the phone rang.

“We do indeed,” she replied, turning her eyes towards the inflatable doll with the red hole for a mouth. “She’s blonde … I see … They’re white … Her shoes are definitely white, I can see them from here … She doesn’t appear to be yours then … We’ll be in touch if she shows up … We always take great care of anything that’s handed in … I quite understand … Not at all … Each to their own … Will do … Goodbye.”

Sitting back in her chair, her eyes fell to the urn, and she dusted the wooden lid with her tiny fingers. She reached for one of the London telephone directories on the shelf above her desk and leafed her way to residents called Perkins. Hebe Jones was not beyond looking for a needle in a haystack, a method both she and Valerie Jennings had been forced to adopt on numerous occasions. Its rare successes had meant that they both returned to it when desperate, with the dogged hope of a gambler. She looked at the first entry and dialled the number.

“Hello, is that Mr. Perkins?” she asked.

“Yes,” a voice replied.

“This is Mrs. Jones from London Underground Lost Property Office. I’m calling to enquire whether you might have left something on the Tube network recently.”

“I wish I had, dearie, but I haven’t left my house in over twenty years.”

“I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”
“That’s quite all right. Goodbye.”
She peered at the phone book and dialled again.
“Hello, is that Dr. Perkins?”
“Who’s speaking?”
“Mrs. Jones from London Underground Lost Property Office.”
“She’s at work. I’m the cleaner. Can I take a message?”
“Do you know whether she happened to have left a wooden box on the Tube recently? It has a brass plaque bearing the name Clementine Perkins.”
“I doubt it,” the woman replied. “There are no Clementines in Dr. Perkins’s family.”
As Hebe Jones put down the phone, Valerie Jennings arrived in her usual flat black shoes. But as she hung her navy coat on the stand next to the inflatable doll, there were none of her usual complaints about delays on the Northern Line during which she had to suffer the indignity of being tightly pressed against her fellow passengers. Nor was there a word about the bitterness of the morning and a prediction of snow on account of the twitching of her bunions. And when she opened the fridge, there wasn’t even a look of reproach when she searched in vain for the Bakewell tartlet that she had hidden behind a carton of carrot soup.
“You’re not still worried about those ears, are you?” enquired Hebe Jones, thinking of Valerie Jennings’s eventual release from the front end of the pantomime horse, which had resulted in the detachment of both appendages as she lurched backwards. “I took the horse home last night and Balthazar said he’d sew them back on and you’d never notice.”
“It’s much worse than that,” said her colleague.
“What?” asked Hebe Jones.
“Arthur Catnip asked me out to lunch while you were gone yesterday afternoon.”
“What did you say?”
“Yes … He caught me off guard.”
There was a pause.
“It gets worse,” Valerie Jennings continued.
“Why?”
“I don’t want to go.”

FOLLOWING A DAY OF defeat at the office, Hebe Jones made her way up Water Lane, hunching her shoulders in the darkness. While she welcomed the fact that the tourists had been shut out of the Tower by the time she returned each evening, she dreaded the solitary walk in winter when the only light came from the fleeting appearance of the moon. As she passed Traitors’ Gate, she remembered the time when Milo dived for coins dropped by tourists into the stretch of the Thames that seeped through its wooden bars. With no regard for the visitors still touring the monument, he and Charlotte Broughton had shed their clothes and descended the forbidden steps to the water’s edge in their underpants and vests. They had retrieved several handfuls of coins by the time the alarm was raised. Running back up the steps, their underwear heavy with water, they dodged the Beefeater who had spotted them and took off down the cobbles. As they headed up Mint Lane, several off-duty Beefeaters who saw the pair from their living rooms joined the chase. They were eventually cornered against the Flint Tower, where they stood with their heads bowed, dripping with water. Not only did they endure the wrath of their parents and every Beefeater in the Tower, but they were summoned to explain themselves to the Chief Yeoman Warder. The coins were duly thrown back into the murky water, apart from a single gold sovereign that Milo slipped into the leg of his underpants and kept with his other treasures in a Harrogate Toffee tin until he presented it to Charlotte Broughton two years later in exchange for a kiss.

The Salt Tower was in darkness as Hebe Jones approached, save for a light on the top floor. Passing Milo’s door at the foot of the spiral staircase, she wondered whether her husband would remember that their son would have been fourteen the following day. As she changed into something warmer in the bedroom, she thought of the time when she used to be greeted on her return home. She went down to the kitchen, and while searching in a cupboard for a pan, she recalled the evenings when there had been so much noise, she had had to shut the door. If it wasn’t her
husband playing Phil Collins hits on Milo’s kazoo, a uniquely irritating habit that had led her to hide the instrument, it was his attempts to help the boy with his homework. Unless the subject was English history, Balthazar Jones would walk around the living room suggesting answers that were wholly arbitrary. When asked a question he was unable to even guess at, he would go to extraordinary lengths to conceal the fact that he was as mystified as his young son. Leaving the room under the pretext of needing the lavatory, he would rifflle through the sacred text he kept hidden by his bed that held the key to the world’s most troubling enigma: how to do fractions. He would emerge victorious through the living-room door, trying to hold the formula in his head, and the pair would wrestle with mathematics until the monster was eventually slain.

When supper was ready, she walked through the empty living room and called up the spiral staircase to the room at the top of the tower that she never entered. When they had finished their chops in front of the television, Balthazar Jones immediately got up to do the dishes, then disappeared once more to his celestial shed. And when they met each other again, several hours later in bed, Hebe Jones looked at the outline of her husband in the darkness and thought: “Please don’t forget what day it is tomorrow.”
Balthazar Jones woke early and turned onto his back, away from his wife muttering in her dreams next to him. As he waited for sleep to reclaim him, the question Hebe Jones asked him the previous week about what Milo would have looked like had he lived floated back to him. He tried to imagine how tall his son would have grown, and the shape of his face that had always appeared to him to be that of an angel. He had never had the pleasure of teaching him how to shave, and the razor that had belonged to the boy’s grandfather, which had travelled around India in its battered silver tin, remained in the Beefeater’s sock drawer with no one to pass it on to.

Unable to bear his thoughts any longer, he got up and dressed in the bathroom so as not to disturb his wife. He left the Salt Tower without stopping for breakfast, barely noticing the snow pirouetting down from the sky like feathers. He drifted from enclosure to enclosure, as he wondered how his son’s voice would have sounded today, on his fourteenth birthday. When he led the eleven o’clock tour of the fortress, he didn’t have the stomach to show the tourists the scaffold site, and only mentioned its location while standing at the chapel door as they were about to file out at the end. It caused such annoyance that even the Americans, whose mystification over English history the Beefeaters always forgave on account of their famous generosity, failed to press a tip into his hand. He crossed Tower Green and started to patrol Water Lane, but kept seeing his son amongst the visitors. He left to check that the Komodo dragon’s enclosure was completely secure in readiness for the opening of the menagerie to the public, scheduled in a couple of days’ time. But all he could think about as he tested the locks was how much Milo would have liked to see the mighty lizard that was strong enough to bring down a horse.

He remembered his meeting with the man from the Palace only when he spotted him striding across the fortress wrapped up against the cold. He hurried to the Rack & Ruin, cursing himself for not having come up with a credible explanation for the missing birds with yellow eyebrows, and pushed open the door.

“What do you mean that the penguins are missing?” Oswin Fielding asked, leaning across the table next to the framed signature of Rudolf Hess.

“They just never turned up,” Balthazar Jones replied, lowering his voice lest someone hear.

“So where are they?”

The Beefeater scratched at his white beard. “I’m not quite certain at the moment,” he replied. “The removal man says he stopped for petrol and when he came back from paying, both the back and the passenger doors were open and they’d vanished.”

“Who was in the passenger seat?”

The Beefeater looked away. “One of the penguins,” he muttered.

“Damn,” said the equerry, running a hand through the remains of his hair. “The Argentineans are going to think we lost them on purpose. We don’t want to get on the wrong side of that lot again. Listen, if anyone asks where they are, tell them that they got travel sickness or something and they’re at the vet’s. I’ll make a few discreet enquiries.”

Oswin Fielding took a sip of his orange juice while studying the Beefeater carefully. “Is there anything else I should know?” he asked. “I don’t want any cock-ups when the menagerie opens.”

“Everything else has gone according to plan,” the Beefeater insisted. “Apart from the wandering albatross, all the animals have settled in well. The giraffes are loving the moat.”

The courtier frowned. “What giraffes?” he asked.

“The ones with the long necks.”

“Her Majesty doesn’t possess any giraffes.”

Balthazar Jones looked confused. “But there are four in the moat,” he said.

“But I gave you a list,” Oswin Fielding hissed. “There were no giraffes on it.”

“Well, someone thought they belonged to the Queen. They’d been loaded into a lorry by the time I arrived. I just
assumed you’d forgotten to write them down.”

There was a pause as both men glared at each other.

“So, to sum things up then, Yeoman Warder Jones,” the equerry said, “the Queen’s penguins are missing and the Tower of London has kidnapped four giraffes that belong to London Zoo.”

The Beefeater shifted in his seat. “We can just send the giraffes back, and say there was a misunderstanding,” he suggested.

Oswin Fielding leant forward. “I very much doubt that we will be able to sneak four giraffes back across London without being spotted. It’ll be all over the papers and we’ll both look like complete idiots. I’ll call the zoo and explain that we’ve borrowed them. Hopefully they won’t kick up too much of a fuss, and we’ll send them back in a couple of months when things have quietened down. If they start being difficult, I’ll remind them what they did to Jumbo the elephant.”

“What did they do to Jumbo the elephant?” the Beefeater asked.

“They sold him to Barnum, the American circus man, for two thousand pounds. It caused an absolute stink: there were letters to The Times, the nation’s children were in tears, and Queen Victoria was furious.”

Oswin Fielding sat back in his chair with a sigh that would have woken the dead. “Is that shrew still alive?” he asked.

“I saw it move this morning.”

“That’s something at least.”

ONCE THE EQUERRY AND BEEFEATER HAD LEFT, Ruby Dore collected their glasses and looked to see if it was still snowing.

But as she peered through the window, on which was scratched an eighteenth-century insult concerning the landlord’s personal hygiene, she saw that there were no traces of it left. Filled with disappointment, she remembered the winters of her childhood: her father pulling her around the moat on her sledge, and the Beefeaters’ snowball fights, which were more furious than their historic battle to defend the Tower against the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381.

As the canary hopped from perch to perch in its cage, she returned to her stool behind the bar and finished writing an announcement that the thirty-five-year ban on Monopoly had been lifted. It had been introduced by her father, incensed that the Tower doctor had continued playing while his wife gave birth on the kitchen floor above. The board game’s prohibition had forced it underground, and a number of Beefeaters descended to their basements to brew their own ales with which to drown the torment of defeat as they played the Tower doctor in their sitting rooms. The practice, which had continued over the years, had resulted in a drop in the tavern’s profits, and now that her life was about to change forever, Ruby Dore was determined to claw back some turnover.

After pinning the notice on the board next to the door, she reread the rules she had listed underneath the announcement. In order to avoid resurrecting historic grievances, playing with the boot would be prohibited. Anyone caught cheating would be obliged to pay a fixed levy on their pints for the next six months. And the Tower doctor was only permitted to play in the absence of a medical emergency.

Not long afterwards, when Rev. Septimus Drew pushed open the heavy door carrying his weapon of seduction, he was relieved to find that he was the only customer. But Ruby Dore was nowhere to be seen. He stood for several minutes on the worn flagstones wondering where she was, then placed the treacle cake on the bar, sat down on one of the stools, and took off his scarf. Picking up the nearest beer mat, he read the joke on the back of it. He then gazed around the bar, wondering whether it was unseemly for a man of the cloth to be looking for love armed with the fruits of his oven.

Fearing that one of the Beefeaters would come in at any moment and catch him in flagrante with his Tupperware box, he quickly got to his feet and strode out. As he stood in the cold tying his scarf, he heard a sound coming from the disused Well Tower. Unable to resist the lure of an open door, he stepped in. There, with her back to him, was Ruby Dore, instantly recognisable in the gloom by her ponytail. Just as he was about to reveal that he had left her a little something on the bar made according to his mother’s recipe, the landlady turned and greeted the chaplain with the words: “Come and have a look at the Queen’s fancy rats.”

The chaplain saw behind her a flash of villainous yellow teeth.

“The Keeper of the Royal Menagerie said I could look after them,” she continued, turning back towards them. “Aren’t they sweet? I used to have one when I was little, but it escaped. One of the Beefeaters said he spotted him
by the organ in the chapel once, but we never found him. It was such a shame. We’d taught him all kinds of tricks. My dad made him a tiny barrel, and he used to push it across the bar. The Beefeaters would give him a penny each time he got to the end. He was loaded by the time he escaped. Did you know that Queen Victoria used to have one?”

But when Ruby Dore turned round, all that was left of Rev. Septimus Drew was a hint of frankincense.

BY THE TIME VALERIE JENNINGS ARRIVED at work, Hebe Jones was already entombed in the magician’s box used to saw glamorous assistants in two. Recognising instantly the horizontal position of defeat, Valerie Jennings unbuttoned her navy coat, hung it next to the inflatable doll, and sat at her desk waiting for the restoration of her colleague’s faculties. After a few moments, she glanced at her again, but her eyes were still closed and both her shoes had dropped to the floor. Eventually, she heard the telltale creak of the lid, and Hebe Jones emerged and muttered a greeting to her colleague, who watched as she returned to her desk, peered at the phone book, and picked up the receiver with renewed determination.

Valerie Jennings looked at her notebook but found herself unable to concentrate on reuniting the yellow canoe with its owner. She glanced at the cuckoo clock, dreading lunchtime. Despite the fact that Arthur Catnip was their favourite ticket inspector, she bitterly regretted having agreed to go out with him. She had never intended to enter the maze of romance again, with its hopeless dead ends. The last time she ventured inside, she had been encouraged by a neighbour unable to bear the sight of her mowing her lawn, a job she believed was decreed at birth to be that of a husband. She waited until Valerie Jennings was trimming the edge next to the fence, and seized the opportunity to rear her head. First she congratulated her on her crosscutting technique, which her own husband also swore by. She then added in a breathless non sequitur that she had a single colleague who also liked books. But despite Valerie Jennings’s insistence that single men were almost as dangerous as married ones, the woman persisted until she reluctantly agreed to meet him.

For a week she convinced herself that the man would be entirely unsuitable. But as she got ready for their evening together, a spark of hope suddenly flickered inside her, and when she closed the front door behind her a gust of loneliness fanned it into an inferno of longing. She sat in the corner of the pub with her double vodka and orange, inspecting the pattern on her new dress, looking up each time someone came in. Eventually, a man opened the door and glanced around. They held each other’s gaze long enough for her to realise that it was him. She offered a timorous smile, but he turned on his heels and left with as much determination as he had shown on entering. It was a considerable time before Valerie Jennings was able to stand. She then pulled down her dress over her splendid thighs and walked out, leaving the embers of her dreams scattered behind her.

When the door of the cuckoo clock burst open and the tiny wooden bird shot out to deliver a single demented cry, Hebe Jones wished her good luck. “I’ve got some lipstick you can borrow, if you like,” she added.

“It’s okay, thanks. I wouldn’t want to encourage him,” she replied. She put on her navy coat over the skirt she had worn the previous day, and reluctantly turned the corner. Arthur Catnip was already waiting at the original Victorian counter, fingering a savage new haircut. The assault had taken place that morning during his tea break. As soon as the barber heard that his customer was taking a woman out for lunch, he insisted that something more dramatic was required. But instead of the transformation he had been hoping for, when Arthur Catnip raised his eyes to the mirror after the man had finally laid down his scissors, he found that a massacre had taken place. Not even the peace dove of a waived bill could appease him. He wandered back to the staff room in defeat, hoping that Valerie Jennings would see past the carnage.

They headed out together into the cold, discussing the early morning snow that had failed to settle. As they passed the Hotel Splendid, Valerie Jennings glanced with regret at the marvellous columns and the uniformed doorman waiting on the top step, wondering where the ticket inspector was taking her.

It wasn’t long before the couple arrived at the entrance to Regent’s Park, and Valerie Jennings wished she was back in the warm, familiar office. As they passed the fountain, Arthur Catnip pointed to something in the distance and announced that they were almost there. Valerie Jennings peered through her smeared spectacles and saw what was undeniably a tea hut. “I think it’s going to rain,” she said.

As they passed several men prodding the undergrowth with sticks, Arthur Catnip wondered what they were searching for. But Valerie Jennings didn’t even look up, as she was thinking about what she would find in the comforting foxed pages of Miss E. Clutterbuck that evening, while in the sanctuary of her armchair with the pop-up leg rest.

When they approached the tea hut, she pointed with relief to a notice on the door saying “Closed.” But Arthur
Catnip pushed it open, and invited her to step inside. Instead of the rows of battered tables and chairs filled with dog walkers and bird-watchers, she looked around to see a table set for two in the center, covered in a white linen cloth. A single yellow rose stood in a silver vase in the middle. Behind the counter was a man wearing a white chef’s hat, and a young waitress dressed in black. “Don’t worry, I asked for a French chef,” said Arthur Catnip as the waitress approached to take her coat.

When the onion soup arrived, Valerie Jennings recalled the French onion seller of her childhood standing on the corner with his laden bicycle. Lowering his voice, Arthur Catnip revealed that his uncle had run away with one, after which the vegetable was banished from the house.

Once the poulet à la moutarde was served, the ticket inspector topped up her glass and recounted the spectacle of the mysterious voodoo chickens he had seen while in Haiti with the Navy. Valerie Jennings took another sip of wine and found herself telling him about the cockerel owned by her godmother that had fallen in love with the kitchen mop and tried to mount it each time the woman cleaned the kitchen floor.

As they were eating the tarte tatin, she muttered that she had been thinking about making cider from the apples in her garden in the summer, as they had never been good enough for baking. The tattooed ticket inspector said he thought it was a great idea, and confessed to having once drunk so much of the stuff, he fell overboard and spent almost a week on a desert island before being spotted by his ship and rescued.

While they were drinking their coffee, one of the men they had seen earlier prodding the undergrowth with a stick put his head around the door and asked: “You haven’t seen a bearded pig by any chance, have you?”

They replied that they hadn’t, and offered to keep a lookout on their way back, both thrilled at the thought of seeing a pig with a beard. But as they returned to the Lost Property Office, Valerie Jennings forgot all about it as she only had eyes for Arthur Catnip.

THAT NIGHT, THE TICKING OF THE CLOCK on the bedside table seemed much louder in the darkness. As she looked at the time, Hebe Jones wondered whether she would ever fall asleep. She moved onto her side, away from her husband’s fitful slumber, and her mind turned to the evening they had just spent. Balthazar Jones had gone up to the room at the top of the Salt Tower as usual, without a word about what day it was, and she had remained on the sofa, pierced with shards of grief, wondering how he could have forgotten.

She remembered Milo’s last birthday, when he had again requested a chemistry set. He had asked for one ever since his father first told him about Sir Walter Raleigh brewing his Balsam of Guiana in the Tower henhouse. Much to her annoyance, he had filled the boy’s head with wondrous tales of the Great Cordial, made with ingredients that included gold and unicorn, which had cured Queen Anne of a dangerous fever.

“Daddy said the Queen was so impressed with it that she asked for some to save the life of her son Prince Henry,” the boy had said as his birthday approached. “He said that they’d tried to cure him by putting dead pigeons on his head and pressing two halves of a cock against the soles of his feet. But once he’d swallowed the Cordial, he opened his eyes and sat up and spoke!”

Hebe Jones had continued peeling the potatoes. “What your father failed to tell you was that he died not long afterwards,” she replied.

But despite Milo’s pleading, Hebe Jones refused to buy her son a chemistry set, fearing disaster despite her husband’s insistence that he would supervise each experiment. When the boy tore the wrapping off his present, he discovered a telescope that offered not the slightest possibility of eruption. His parents took him up to the Salt Tower roof, where Balthazar Jones showed him all the stars that the first Astronomer Royal who had lived in the Tower would have seen. “If the ravens ever get in the way of your telescope, let me know and I’ll fetch Grandpa’s shotgun,” the Beefeater promised. While Milo appeared delighted by the prospect of his father reducing the odious birds to a pile of black feathers, Hebe Jones knew that planet-gazing was no match for the experiments he had hoped to perform. Recognising her son’s disappointment, she assured him she would buy him the present he had always wanted for his twelfth birthday. But it had never come. As she turned over to escape the memory of the promise she hadn’t been able to keep, a hot tear slipped down her cheek.

When she woke several hours later, the room was still dark. Immediately sensing the absence of her husband, she ran a hand along the bottom of the sheet, and found that his side was still warm. Pulling back the shabby blanket, she got out of bed and drew back a curtain. She gazed at the Tower, streaked with faint brushstrokes of light. Through the rain, which slid in greasy drops down the pane, she made out her husband slowly climbing the battlement steps, his wet nightclothes clinging to him. When he eventually returned, a new variety hidden in his dressing-gown
pocket, he found that Hebe Jones and her suitcase were gone.
UNABLE TO REPORT for duty because of the weight in his chest, Balthazar Jones sat on the edge of the bed in a dry pair of pajamas and picked up the telephone. As he called the office in the Byward Tower, his eyes followed each revolution of the dial and its laborious spin backwards.

“Yes?” replied the Yeoman Gaoler.

The Beefeater rubbed the shabby blanket between his fingers. “It’s Yeoman Warder Jones here,” he said.

“Good morning, Yeoman Warder Jones. The shrew’s fine. It ate a cricket while I was in the shower this morning.”

“That’s good.”

“Is it a he or a she, by the way?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll find out.” Balthazar Jones cleared his throat, then added: “I won’t be reporting for duty today.”

“And why is that, may I ask?” the Yeoman Gaoler enquired, standing up and surveying the room for his packet of Fig Rolls.

“I’m not feeling very well.”

“Oh?” came the muffled reply as the Yeoman Gaoler peered inside a bin, looking for an empty wrapper.

There was a pause.

“I’ve had a surfeit of lampreys,” continued Balthazar Jones, his mind drifting in the current of his despair.

“A what?”

The Beefeater tried to recall what he had just said, and suddenly realised that he had told the Yeoman Gaoler he was suffering from over-consumption of an eel-like fish that had caused the death of Henry I. But there was no going back.

“A surfeit of lampreys,” Balthazar Jones repeated as quietly as possible.

“Speak up, man!”

“Lampreys,” he muttered. “A surfeit of them.”

There was a pause.

“Just a minute,” replied the Yeoman Gaoler, putting down the phone. He strode over to the bookcase next to the arrow slit and pulled out a binder in which absences were recorded. Returning to his desk, he sat down, picked up the receiver, and selected a pen from an old Golden Syrup tin.

“And how are we spelling lampreys?” he enquired, finding his page. He twiddled his pen as he waited for a reply.

“I’m not sure,” replied Balthazar Jones, gazing at his wet dressing gown on the back of the door.

“Laammmpreeez,” enunciated the Yeoman Gaoler as he noted down the affliction and filled in the date. He paused before adding: “They must have been good.”

After putting down the phone, Balthazar Jones reached for the letter he had found on his pillow when he returned to bed earlier that morning, soaked with rain and reeking of the Thames. Despite the numerous times he had read it, he still failed to find in it any hope that his wife would ever return. There was no mistaking her need to be away from him, her bitterness over his refusal to talk about Milo’s death, and her despair over the erosion of their love.

As he stared at her name on the bottom of the page, he thought of the gust of serendipity that had blown him and Hebe Grammatikos together all those years ago. It was such a chance encounter, too random to be the reassuring hand of destiny, that he had lived in terror of luck’s capricious nature ever since.

For too long he had been afraid that he was never going to marry. An only child, he had been woken at night by the sound of laughter coming from his parents’ bedroom above. He had assumed that all relationships were of equal delight, but the girls he met were disappointing. His parents assured him that his bride would eventually come, but
as the years passed and their conviction failed to prove true, he decided to join the Army in order to distract himself from his loneliness, opting to become a guardsman in the belief that it would present fewer opportunities to shoot someone. The day before he was due to leave, his hair shorn and packed bag waiting outside his bedroom door, he met the extraordinary creature in the corner shop.

About to buy some stamps for the letters he planned to write to his parents, he spotted the girl standing in an aisle holding a Battenberg cake, dark hair meandering down the front of her turquoise dress. She had the eyes of a fawn, which fixed on him as soon as he approached, and from that moment all sanity was lost. He walked up to her and informed her that the lurid yellow-and-pink-checked cake had been invented by a distant relative of his in honour of the woman who had captured the man’s heart. Unable to send her flowers because of her catastrophic allergies, he had made her a cake of the most alluring colours he could find in his garden. The four coloured squares each represented an aspect of her that had so beguiled him: the paleness of her skin, her modesty, her wit, and her piano playing. Each week, a carriage arrived at her home with a basket on the back seat bearing a cake. But the woman, whose doctor had forbidden her to eat sugar, never tasted them. Instead, she packed up some of her china and kept the love tokens in her dining-room cupboards. When the man learnt of the secret stash, he started covering the cakes in marzipan to ensure their preservation. He continued baking them, and she continued keeping them, a habit they maintained up until their wedding, and the creation was named after the German town they visited during their honeymoon.

When Balthazar Jones finished his story there was a moment of pure silence. The Pakistani shopkeeper, as transfixed as Hebe Grammatikos, then declared from behind the till: “It is true, madam,” simply because he wanted it to be.

The young couple sat on the wall outside the shop talking for so long that Balthazar Jones invited her for supper, to the initial devastation of his mother, who wanted her son to herself on his last night. But it wasn’t long before she was equally taken with Hebe Grammatikos, and she gave an extra serving of bogget to the tiny guest with the enormous appetite. When the girl’s last train home had long departed, Mrs. Jones made up the spare bed down the hall and retired upstairs with her husband. When all was quiet, Balthazar Jones eventually persuaded the extraordinary creature into his room, with the assurance of the most gentlemanly of behaviour. She sat on the end of his bed and asked why he was called Balthazar. He told her that he had been named after one of the Three Wise Men as he had been conceived on Christmas Day. In turn, she revealed that she had been named after the Greek goddess of youth. The pair talked until midnight, when they were suddenly reduced to silence by the realisation that they would be parted within hours. So they stayed awake, knowing that sleep would hasten the unthinkable moment. As the ruthless dawn heaved away the night, Hebe Grammatikos kissed the tip of each of his slender fingers, which would have to get used to holding a gun. And when it was finally time to say goodbye, she stood on the doorstep next to his parents and joined them in waving him off, each with a stone in their heart.

He used the stamps he had bought for letters to the tiny creature he had met in the corner shop. But his writing on the envelopes was always so confused by love that they took several weeks to arrive at the correct address. Kept awake by terrible snores coming from the bunk above him, he was in such distress over the time it took to receive a reply that he wrote more and more frequently, presuming that his letters were going astray. Two years later, when he proposed, it was to the great relief of the postman, whose back had long ago given way.

Balthazar Jones ignored the knocking on the Salt Tower door. He remained in the same position on the bed, clutching the letter as the wind blew through the tiny gaps in the lattice windows. But the banging continued, and mounted with such urgency that the Beefeater, fearing the commotion would attract further attention, got up to answer it. He staggered down the stairs in his bare feet, heaved open the door, and shielded his eyes against the glare of the marble sky. Standing in front of him was Dr. Evangeline Moore carrying a black bag. “I understand you’re not feeling well,” she said.

Too troubled to think of a credible reason not to let her in, he stepped aside and followed her back up the stairs, feeling their chill on his soles, blackened from his nocturnal foray on the battlements. Once they had reached the living room, the Beefeater suddenly felt embarrassed at being caught in his nightclothes by the young woman. Taking refuge on the sofa, he warned: “Mind where you’re treading.” The doctor, whose copper ringlets glowed whenever caught by a freak ray of sunshine, promptly sidestepped Mrs. Cook. She unbuttoned the jacket of her neat brown trouser suit and sat down on the armchair that failed to match the settee.

Taking out a folder from her black bag, she opened it on her knees and ran a finger down a page. She frowned, looked up, and said: “According to the Yeoman Gaoler, you’ve had a surfeit of lampreys.”
Balthazar Jones gazed at the floor and started digging at a threadbare patch of the emaciated carpet with a grimy toe. The only sound was a tiny creak as Mrs. Cook stood up and started her day’s journey across the floor. The Tower doctor looked at the tortoise while the Beefeater continued to look at the floor. She turned her eyes back to her patient, who had bored such a big hole that half his toe had disappeared.

“It’s not that uncommon,” she suddenly declared. “You’d be surprised. How many are we talking about? Half a dozen maybe? Well, however many it was, I’m sure it’s nothing serious. Just take it easy for the rest of the day,” she concluded with a smile that he took to signify an end to the matter.

But just as Balthazar Jones thought that the doctor was about to leave, she suggested a quick examination. Too defeated to refuse, he stood up, and the doctor proceeded to poke and hammer at him with a variety of implements that wouldn’t have looked out of place at the Wakefield Tower’s instruments of torture exhibition. When it was finally over, he retreated to the sofa and immediately felt for the comfort of his beard as he watched the weapons being returned to the black bag.

“Everything seems to be fine. I’ll let myself out,” announced the general practitioner, stepping over Mrs. Cook and heading for the door. As she reached for the latch, she suddenly turned round and said: “I’m sorry to hear about your wife.”

The silence that followed was eventually broken by the sound of heels descending the stone stairs. The Beefeater, not in the least surprised that word had already gotten out, remained slumped on the sofa. Unable to bear the thoughts that threatened to engulf him, he stood up and made his way to the bedroom. Preferring to report for duty rather than endure his own rumination, he slowly put on his uniform, wobbling as he clambered into his Victorian trousers.

HIDDEN FROM VIEW, the Ravenmaster knelt down next to the bridge over the moat and took out his nail scissors. Carefully he snipped at the grass that grew around the tiny crosses marking the graves of long-departed ravens, a number of which had literally dropped off their perches. Despite the stories peddled to the tourists, the legend that the kingdom would fall should the ravens leave the Tower was utter poppycock. The kingdom had not so much as trembled when the birds were put into cages just before the start of the Second World War and driven away at nightfall. Their unexpected holiday had been organised at the highest level to prevent them from receiving a direct hit, which would threaten the nation’s morale. The same day, the Crown Jewels had also been secretly removed, transported in coffins by armed guards dressed as undertakers, and hidden in Westwood Quarry, in Wiltshire. The caged ravens were taken by ambulance to the terrace house of a Beefeater’s aunt who lived in Wales and smuggled inside. The pebbledash home in Swansea remained in permanent blackout, and the aunt was forbidden from opening her door to visitors lest word get out that the ravens had left the Tower. Not only was the woman paid to look after the birds, but she was also granted a stipend for the rest of her life to keep silent about their temporary removal.

When the war was finally over, it was not certain who had driven the other more mad. The wild-eyed aunt, desperate for human conversation, told anyone who would listen (as well as those who wouldn’t) about her top-secret mission during the war. But even the local paper refused to believe her. And the generation of wartime ravens, a species noted for its talent at mimicry, never lost their Welsh accents during the remainder of their days at the fortress.

Satisfied that dignity had been restored, the Ravenmaster put his scissors back in his pocket and stood up. He then made his way to the entrance of the Tower and stood on the bridge waiting to take the tourists on the last tour of the day. His black-gloved hands clasped in front of him, he watched the visitors who were on their way out, eyeing their rucksacks closely lest one try to leave with a bird buried deep within as the ultimate souvenir. As one of the giraffes in the moat raised its head in search of a leaf, the tourists immediately pointed to it. A man with a video camera attached to his hat approached the Ravenmaster and asked when the menagerie was opening.

“The day after tomorrow, if the Keeper of the Royal Menagerie gets his act together,” came the mustached reply.

“I heard there used to be a menagerie here years ago,” the Australian tourist continued.

“There was until the 1830s when they finally realised it was a bad idea to have wild animals around the place. Still is, as far as I’m concerned,” said the Ravenmaster, turning his gaze back towards the giraffes.

“Was anyone killed?” asked the man, hopefully.

The Ravenmaster then told him the unfortunate tale of Mary Jenkinson, who lived with the lion keeper. “One day in 1686, she was inside the den stroking one of the animal’s paws when it grabbed her arm in its teeth and wouldn’t let go. Her arm was amputated in an attempt to save her life, but she died several hours later.”
The tourist immediately related the tale to his wife, who beamed with equal satisfaction, and immediately asked her husband whether they could come back when the menagerie opened.

The Ravenmaster looked at his watch and called to the visitors waiting for the tour to step closer. He then threw open his arms and announced in his best theatrical tones, employed to elicit tips from the Americans: “Welcome to Her Majesty’s Royal Palace and Fortress, the Tower of London! It is my pleasure to be your guide over the next hour as we look back over nine hundred years of history …”

An hour later, he stood at the door of the chapel as the tourists filed out, each pressing a coin into his hand. Once the last had left, he made his way to the ravens’ pens and stood calling the birds’ names one by one. They landed sham-bolicically, then swaggered across the grass to their respective wooden homes and flew up inside. Locking the doors to keep them out of the jaws of urban foxes, he looked at his watch and smoothed down his pigeon grey mustache with a leather-gloved hand. High with anticipation, he crossed the fortress to the Brick Tower and, with the furtiveness of a horse thief, glanced behind him. Satisfied that he wasn’t being watched, he unlocked the door. Closing it behind him, he reached in the gloom for the rope handrail, then suddenly remembered that he was still wearing a vest. Recognising instantly that it was not the correct attire for an illicit encounter, he unbuttoned his dark blue tunic, pulled off the undergarment, and left it in a warm bundle on the bottom step to collect on his way out. Once he was dressed again, he continued up the stone steps. Finding the door of the first floor closed, he felt for the handle and pressed down on the latch. The sudden sound startled the birds, which created such an uproar that the Ravenmaster, who had completely forgotten about the new aviary, joined them with a squawk of terror. The birds continued their demented circular flight long after Ambrosine Clarke arrived, dressed in jeans and a sweater, the neckline of which revealed the tormenting depth of her cleavage. The Ravenmaster reached for her in the darkness, recognising instantly the smell of cooking fat. Once their clothes were shed, they sank to the floorboards, where they were covered in a drizzle of seed husks whipped up by the frantic flapping. The cook’s eventual shriek of ecstasy was drowned out by the profanities of the emerald hanging parrot, which had been rudely woken from its upside-down slumber.

Balthazar Jones had remained on the sofa in the same position since returning from an afternoon of patrolling the fortress. He hadn’t bothered to close the curtains, and sat gazing at the night bulging up against the lattice windows that surrounded him. On the coffee table in front of him was the vest he had discovered on the bottom step of the Brick Tower when he checked on the birds on his way home. He could find nothing to account for the gentleman’s underwear, and when he pushed open the door to the aviary, he saw that its inhabitants, terrorised into a state of exhaustion, were huddled together on their perches to keep warm as they slept, while the parrot hung below them, occasionally swaying while it dreamed. The only bird still awake was the wandering albatross, searching the cage for its companion, which was still at London Zoo as it didn’t belong to the Queen.

It wasn’t until the cold finally drove him to his feet that Balthazar Jones found the courage to go upstairs to the bedroom. He closed the curtains, the rings dragging sorrowfully across the poles, then undressed slowly to further delay the moment. Once in his pajamas, he spent longer than usual in the bathroom, having decided that now was the moment to fix the tap that had dripped since the family arrived eight years ago. When, eventually, he could find nothing else to occupy him, he came back out and finally looked at the empty bed. Unable to get into it, he pulled on a sweater, turned off the light, and sat in the armchair next to the window. When, several hours later, sleep continued to evade him, he stood up, drew back one of the curtains, and opened the window. Leaning against the sill, he looked out over the fortress, gruesome in the moonlight, and breathed in the dank night. And out of the deathly silence came the mournful wail of the solitary wandering albatross that mated for life.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Hebe Jones tried to leave the fortress in the early hours with her suitcase, the Beefeater on duty refused to unlock the small door inside the Middle Tower’s vast oak gate. “It’s against regulations,” he replied when she protested. She sat on top of her case, coated in three years of dust, glancing at her watch with the impatience of a prisoner about to be set free. When six o’clock eventually came and the ancient lock was finally turned, she got up and walked stiffly out with the intention of going to work. But as she stood in the crowded Tube carriage, subjected to more intimacy with strangers than she experienced with her husband, she soon realised that a day of attempting to reunite abandoned property with its absentminded owners was beyond her. She climbed the steps to the exit and left a message on the office answering machine informing Valerie Jennings that she was unwell, and started walking the streets. After a while, she found herself by the entrance to Green Park and slipped in to escape the relentless commuters marching to work, knocking her case against her shins as they passed. She spent much of the day on a bench, being pummelled by the wind as she wondered whether she was still a mother even though her son was dead.

When darkness started to descend around her, fear forced her to her feet. She returned to the warmth of the Underground and rode the network wondering where women usually went when they left their husbands. Eventually, she made her way to Baker Street and arrived at the Hotel Splendid, the only hotel she knew, as she took Valerie Jennings there for lunch each year on her birthday. When the receptionist asked whether she required a single or double room, her eyes fell to the desk. “I’m alone,” she replied, wondering whether the woman could tell that her marriage had just ended.

After being shown to her room by a Polish bellboy who insisted on carrying her case, she sat on the bed and her stomach reminded her that she hadn’t eaten all day. She ordered a ham and mustard sandwich and ate it at the dressing table, still wearing her coat. Opening her case, she discovered that she had forgotten her nightdress, and she thought of it lying on the bed in the Salt Tower. Her mind turned once more to her husband, and she wondered whether there was anything in the fridge for his supper. Reluctant to sleep naked in such unfamiliar surroundings, she hung up her coat and skirt in the empty wardrobe and got into bed in her blouse and tights. She looked around at the cream swag curtains, the luxurious white bathrobes, and the vase of pink roses on the desk, and imagined the young honeymoon couples who had sealed their marriage in the room. And she wondered how many of them were still together.

Between scraps of sleep, she spent the night listening to doors banging as guests returned, and the intermittent shrieks of laughter coming from the room above. The following morning, despite the grandeur of the dining room with its white linen napkins, polished silverware, and uniformed waiters, Hebe Jones skipped breakfast, preferring the familiarity of people’s lost possessions. After sliding her suitcase underneath her desk, she went to the original Victorian counter and opened one of the ledgers to the previous day. As her eyes fell down the entries, she saw that Samuel Crapper had been in to collect the same tomato plant that he had lost earlier in the month, a hand-written musical score had been discovered on the Hammersmith & City line, and a new wedding dress had been found on a bench at Tottenham Court Road station.

She sat at her desk, and was still looking at the phone directory in defeat when Valerie Jennings arrived and stood next to the inflatable doll, unbuttoning her navy coat. “Feeling better?” she asked Hebe Jones.

“Yes, thanks,” she replied, immediately noticing something different about her colleague. Mascara had brought out her eyes from behind her glasses, an embellishment normally reserved for her birthday lunch at the Hotel Splendid. Instead of her usual flat, black shoes, her wide feet were wedged inside a pair of high heels. And instead of holding a white cardboard box from the high street bakery containing a little something for elevenses, Valerie Jennings was carrying a brown paper bag containing what looked suspiciously like fresh fruit.

“When are you seeing Arthur Catnip again?” Hebe Jones asked.

Valerie Jennings immediately looked away. “I don’t know,” she replied, hanging up her coat. “I haven’t heard from him.” She then unfolded her newspaper and handed it to Hebe Jones. “Remember that man I told you about who came into the tea hut and asked whether we’d seen a bearded pig?” she asked. “Apparently it escaped from London Zoo and it’s still on the loose.”
Hebe Jones looked at the front-page photograph taken of the creature while still in its enclosure, its resplendent snout whiskers stretching across several columns. She handed it back to her colleague with a shudder, and returned to the directory. She peered at where she had left off, picked up the phone, and dialled the number.

“Is that Mrs. Perkins?” she asked when it was finally answered.

“Yes.”

“This is Mrs. Jones from London Underground Lost Property Office. Something has been handed in to us that relates to a Clementine Perkins who died last year. I was wondering whether you happen to have known her.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“You’ve found it?” came the eventual reply. “We haven’t been able to rest since it went missing. My husband will be so pleased. I’m not sure how to get to you though. I’m not too good on my legs and my husband doesn’t go uptown anymore. He says there are so many people he just ends up walking on the spot, and then it’s time to come home again.”

“Would you like me to bring it round? It’s not something I want to put in the post.”

“That would be very kind of you.”

It didn’t take Hebe Jones long to find the house, which stood out from the others in the street due to its overgrown lawn. She pushed open the rotten gate, which felt rough under her fingers on account of the peeling paint. Warmed at the thought of having finally found the urn’s owner, she walked along the concrete path, looked at the “No Hawkers” sign, and rang the bell. When there was no reply, she checked to see that she had the right house number. She rang again, and eventually an elderly woman wearing a pink dressing gown opened the door.

“Mrs. Perkins?”

“Yes,” the woman replied, squinting in the light.

“I’m Mrs. Jones from London Underground Lost Property Office. We spoke on the phone.”

“Oh, yes, I remember,” she said, stepping back. “Come in, love. Cup of tea?”

While the woman was in the kitchen, Hebe Jones found somewhere to sit in the chaos of the living room and gazed around at the slumped piles of free newspapers on the floor, the cabinets over-filled with cheap ornaments, and the unwashed dishes balanced on the mantelpiece.

Eventually Mrs. Perkins returned with a tray bearing two cups and saucers and placed it on the coffee table. “Biscuit?” she asked, holding out a plate. When Hebe Jones declined, she helped herself, moved a pile of unopened letters from the armchair, and sat down. “What did you say your name was again?” she asked.

“Hebe.”

“That’s a nice name. I’ve got some in the back garden,” she said, nodding towards the French windows.

Hebe Jones picked up her cup and saucer and rested them on her knees. “I was actually named after the goddess of youth, rather than the plant.”

There was a pause.

“I thought my parents had named me Flora after the goddess of flowers. Turns out I was named after the margarine,” Mrs. Perkins replied, staring in front of her.

Hebe Jones looked down at her tea.

“What did you come about, again?” the old woman asked.

“Clementine.”

“Oh, yes. We loved her so much,” she said, reaching for a tissue in her dressing gown pocket. “She was getting on a bit, and we knew she was going to pass away sooner or later, but it’s always a shock when it happens. Even now I can’t believe she’s gone. I still keep imagining her walking in here through those doors, and sitting where you are now. We buried her in the back garden. It had meant so much to her. She was always out there, pottering amongst the rosebushes.”

“I see,” replied Hebe Jones, still holding her cup.

“My husband reckons it was one of those urban foxes that dug her up again. Attracted to the smell.”

“The smell?”

“Things start to rot, don’t they? I told my husband not to use that cardboard box, but he insisted. I said
Clementine deserved better, but he said I was being too sentimental. So I wrote her name on it to make it a bit more special,” said Mrs. Perkins, fiddling with a thread on the end of the armrest.

“When we discovered that she’d been dug up, we were heartbroken. Some people just couldn’t understand. We expected her to turn up in one of the neighbour’s gardens, but you said she was found on the Tube. That doesn’t seem right to me. I reckon that lot next door had something to do with it. They never did like her. She kept piddling against their new greenhouse. But cats won’t be told,” she added, finally taking a bite of her Custard Cream.

AFTER CHECKING THAT THE WORKMEN had erected all the signs in readiness for the opening of the royal menagerie that afternoon, Balthazar Jones let himself into the Develin Tower. He caught the bearded pig in a state of unfettered ecstasy, its eyes shut and hairy nose pointed heavenwards as it rubbed its considerable flank against the corner of the stone fireplace. The Beefeater sat down on the straw, resting his back against the circular stone wall, and stretched his legs out in front of him. On seeing its keeper, the animal sent the battered grapefruit flying to the other side of the room and charged after it. Once it had caught up, the pig turned its head towards the man with inferior whiskers. There was no response. Lobbing the fruit again with its snout, it galloped after it, its tasselled tail flying like a flag over its fulsome buttocks. It looked again at the Beefeater staring blindly ahead, but received not the least encouragement. The pig slowly made its way across the straw, and lay down next to him, pressing its back against his thigh.

Oblivious to the damp seeping through his tunic, Balthazar Jones wondered again where his wife had spent the night, and hoped she hadn’t been cold without her nightdress. Suddenly he felt a chill as he imagined her having all the warmth she needed in someone else’s arms. He picked up a piece of straw and started to fiddle with it, remembering the day, all those years ago, when she had promised to be his forever.

Balthazar Jones invited Hebe Grammatikos to Hampstead Ponds two years after they met with the sole motivation of wanting to see her in her red bikini. When they arrived, she immediately took up a horizontal position on the bank in her new swimwear, her hair forming a black halo on the grass. When he tried to lure her into the water, she insisted that it was too cold. But the country was experiencing a record-breaking heat wave that had led to the dismissal of a weatherman for a prediction of continual clouds. Refusing to accept her argument, Balthazar Jones eventually talked her into the freshwater pond. It was only when the young soldier went to fetch his camera, and turned to look at her from the bank, that it occurred to him she might not be able to swim. He watched as she disappeared without a sound into the dusty water shaded by the overhanging oak trees. Several seconds later, she rose again, her hair floating on the water like an oil slick.

When she immediately sunk again he thrashed towards her and groped with desperate hands for her body. Unable to find her, he breathed in and dived underwater, but failed to see anything in the murky depths. It was only when desperation sharpened his vision that he saw a tendril of black hair floating on the top of the water in the distance. After grabbing her body, as slippery as an eel, he hauled her back to the bank. As he held her, her eyes rolling, he asked her to marry him, as he would rather be betrothed to the dying Hebe Grammatikos than to any other woman alive.

When she eventually came round in the hospital, a piece of pondweed still in her mouth, she was congratulated by the nursing staff for not only having survived, but also for being engaged to be married. During the sultry days of their engagement, while lost in the contentment of each other’s arms, they often spoke of the proposal that had been so much more romantic than anything Balthazar Jones could have planned. Hebe Jones’s only regret was that she had no memory of his asking her to marry him, as she recalled nothing after walking into the water in the hope that the ability to swim would suddenly come to her like a holy miracle. Each time she asked Balthazar Jones what her reply had been, he would quote back her words that evoked the Greek mysticism of her grandparents: “It is better to tie your donkey than to look for it.”

THE BEEFEATER WAS BROUGHT ROUND from his memories by a sudden snort from the dreaming bearded pig. Getting up gently so as not to disturb it, he looked at his watch, brushed himself down, and hurried off to meet the man from the Palace before the menagerie opened.

When he pushed open the door of the Rack & Ruin, he saw Oswin Fielding already sitting at the table next to the framed signature of Rudolph Hess. He approached the landlady and ordered an orange juice, despite his urge for a pint. He carried it past the tables occupied by numerous Beefeaters on their lunch break, and sat down opposite the courtier.
“I’m sorry to hear about your wife,” said Oswin Fielding.
Balthazar Jones stared at him. “How did you hear about that?” he asked.
“It was mentioned. You have my sympathies. My wife left me several years ago. You never get over it.”

Both men stared at their glasses.

“Anyway,” said the courtier eventually. “Back to the matters at hand. All set for the opening?”

“Yes,” replied the Beefeater. “Any news about the penguins?”

“Unfortunately not. Thankfully the Argentine Embassy hasn’t been in touch, so it seems they’re none the wiser.
Let’s hope they remain that way. We have, however, heard from someone in the Brazilian President’s office. It was
he who gave the Queen the Geoffroy’s marmosets, if you remember. The chap wanted to know why they were
flushing their private parts in those photographs taken with you, which, as he pointed out, were used all around
the world.”

The Beefeater glanced away. “Apparently it’s something they do when they sense danger,” he muttered.
The equerry frowned. “Really?” he asked. “I wasn’t entirely sure, so I told them it must have been your uniform.”

“My uniform? What did he say to that?”

“He said that he found it hard to imagine why monkeys would find the sight of a Beefeater in any way sexually
alluring. I tried to explain that the Tower of London attracts more than two million visitors a year from all around
the world, and they weren’t just coming to see the Crown Jewels. ‘History’s a big turn-on,’ I said.”

“What did he say to that?”

The equerry reached for his glass. “I’m not entirely sure,” he said. “It was in Portuguese. Then he hung up.”

WHEN THE TIME CAME to open the royal menagerie to the public, Balthazar Jones unlocked the gate that led to the moat.
A line of visitors who had been queuing for several hours immediately surged through. The Beefeater followed them
in case there were any questions, despite his fear that he would be unable to answer them. They stopped at the empty
penguin enclosure and read the information panel that he had had erected, stating that the birds were not only
amongst the smallest breeds of penguin in the world, but also the most opportunistic. The tourists happily accepted
the Beefeater’s explanation that they were at the vet’s, and then clattered their way along the boardwalk to inspect
the President of Russia’s gift. Stopping at a sign that said: “Please Feed Me,” they stood and stared at the small bear-
like creature with yellow stripes running down its brown fur. After the recumbent glutton emitted an undignified
belch, a young girl asked Balthazar Jones how much the creature ate. “Even more than the Yeoman Gaoler,” he
replied.

As the group headed towards the giraffes, the Beefeater immediately suggested that they go to see the Duchess of
York before there was a queue. There was an instant murmur of agreement, and he led them into the fortress to the
Devereux Tower. Once the tourists had gotten over their disappointment that they were not actually in the presence
of Princess Diana’s former sister-in-law, but rather a blue-faced, snub-nosed monkey with titian hair, they got out
their cameras declaring that the resemblance was nevertheless remarkable. The Beefeater offered to take them to see
the birds next, but they were unable to move because of the crowds flocking up the stairs to see the Geoffroy’s
marmosets in all their glory.

IRRITATED BY THE SUDDEN INCREASE in tourists, the Yeoman Gaoler crossed Tower Green, stopping to point one of them in
the direction of the Tower Café. After wishing her good luck, he continued on to the Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad
Vincula, wondering whether he would ever sleep through the night again. He had been woken in the early hours by
the sound of leather boots striding back and forth across the dining room below. Instead of profanities about the
Spanish, the house had been filled with poetic entreaties to a woman by the name of Cynthia. It hadn’t been long
before the stench of tobacco started to seep underneath his bedroom door, increasing his yearning for a cigarette. He
remained in bed, his sheets drawn up to his chin, fearing not only for his potatoes, but for the life of Her Majesty’s
highly strung shrew.

When he and his wife first arrived at the Tower, it had struck them as odd that such a large house was vacant. On
learning that its previous tenants had moved to one of the smaller terrace cottages along Mint Lane, they assumed
the family had been put off by the windows that were nailed shut, the blocked-up fireplaces, and the numerous locks
on the doors. They prised out the nails, opened up the fireplaces, and only drew one bolt at night. Hand in hand they
chose some new wallpaper, and started to scrape at the nicotine-stained walls, listening to records on the gramophone that had been a wedding present all those years ago. It wasn’t long before they discovered the ominous warnings the children of the previous inhabitants had scrawled on the walls. Dismissing them as youthful fantasy, they continued redecorating as they swayed their middle-aged hips to the music they had danced to during their courtship.

Their happiness started to drift when the Yeoman Gaoler’s wife accused her husband of having taken up smoking again, which he categorically denied. Each refusal to admit to having succumbed once more to the cursed habit only increased her fury. She named each relative whose life had been dramatically shortened by the vice, but still the smell of tobacco flooded the house each night. Convinced that her husband was going to meet a gruesome early death, she left the Tower in search of a new one, a task that didn’t take long on account of her considerable charms.

Unable to bear his empty home, where the sight of the gramophone reduced him to tears, the Yeoman Gaoler spent his evenings in the Rack & Ruin. In between recounting their heroics while serving in the armed forces, the other Beefeaters would boast of their ghostly encounters in the Tower with even greater bravado. A number claimed to have heard the screeches of Margaret Pole, the Countess of Salisbury, who had been chased by a hacking axeman after his first blow failed to remove her head. Several insisted they had seen the white form of Sir Thomas More sitting on one of the chapel’s chairs. And all of them were adamant that they had seen the terrifying vision of the Protestant martyr Anne Askew, the only woman ever to have been racked. The Yeoman Gaoler would listen intently, but never once did he reveal that the ghost of Sir Walter Raleigh had taken up residence in his home, something that terrified him more than anything he had witnessed on the battlefield.

The spirit had returned to the Tower to write the second installment of his *History of the World*. The first, written while serving his thirteen-year sentence, had been an instant hit, outselling William Shakespeare’s collected works. He had assumed that the sequel would come to him with the ease of the first. But when he sat down at his old desk in the Bloody Tower, surrounded by globes and rolled-up maps, he was seized by the torment of second-volume syndrome. As he nibbled the end of his quill with tar-stained teeth, desperately seeking the words that evaded him, he became convinced that the success of the first was simply the result of nostalgia for the man who had introduced to England the mighty potato. And not even the ale brought to him by the equally ghostly form of Owen the waterman could help him.

Pushing down the cold handle, the Yeoman Gaoler opened the chapel door and stepped inside. He found Rev. Septimus Drew bent double, trying to remove chewing gum from the bottom of a chair with furious pinches of his pink rubber gloves.

“I need your help,” the Yeoman Gaoler announced as he walked up the aisle.

The clergyman straightened, and rested his pink wrists on his hips.

“Birth, marriage, or death?” he asked.

“Exorcism.”

WHEN HEBE JONES RETURNED from her wasted visit to Mrs. Perkins, she stood in silence, unbuttoning her turquoise coat next to the drawer containing one hundred and fifty-seven pairs of false teeth.

“Any joy?” Valerie Jennings asked.

“It was the wrong person,” she replied, taking the urn out of her handbag and returning it to her desk.

There was a moment of silence.

“Going anywhere nice?” Valerie Jennings asked.

“No. Why?”

“The suitcase under your desk.”

It didn’t take long for the tears to come. Hebe Jones cried for her husband, whom, up until the tragedy, she had still looked forward to seeing each day after three decades of marriage. She cried for Milo all alone in heaven, whom she couldn’t wait to join. And just when she thought she had finished, she cried for the stranger who had lost the remains of Clementine Perkins, whom she wasn’t able to find. It wasn’t until over an hour later, when Valerie Jennings had installed her in the armchair with the pop-up leg rest and carried her suitcase to the spare room, that her tears finally stopped.
Rev. Septimus Drew strode across Tower Green, leaving large, dark footprints on the stiff, frosted grass. Much of the night had been spent agonising over Ruby Dore’s affection for the creature not worthy of a mention in the Bible, and lamenting his failure to seduce her with his mother’s treacle cake. By the time he woke, there had not even been time for the delights of Fortnum & Mason’s thick-cut marmalade. He left the fortress as fast as his excessively long legs could carry him, ignoring the Yeoman Gaoler, who was calling his name from a bedroom window. As he sat on the Tube carriage, heading for the shelter for retired prostitutes, his fingers worked their way into the cake tin on his lap, and he broke off a small piece of biscuit from the batch he had baked for them. Each had been shaped into the form of a disciple, their distinguishing features meticulously piped with white icing. As he nibbled, he hoped that none of the ladies would notice that Judas Iscariot’s legs were missing.

By the time he arrived, the matron had already shown the new resident to her room with its single bed surmounted by a wooden cross. Sitting opposite her in the communal living room, the chaplain explained that she would be given free board and lodging for six months, during which time she would be helped to find alternative employment. In the meantime, she could, if she wished, assist the other women in the vegetable garden, which had become a labour of love. For, he explained, apart from prayer, there was nothing more restorative for the soul than growing something in God’s good earth. He offered the woman the tin of biscuits, and she helped herself with painted fingernails. After brushing the crumbs from her red lips, she congratulated the clergyman on his talent for baking, and then politely enquired whether Judas Iscariot had really been disabled.

When the chaplain had returned to the Tower, and stood at his blue front door searching in his pocket for the key, a tourist approached and asked whether he knew where the zorilla was kept. “Down there, on the right,” the clergyman replied pointing. “Follow your nose.” Once inside, he locked the door behind him and headed up the battered wooden stairs to his study. Arming himself with his fountain pen, he started to compose a sermon of sufficient intrigue to keep the Beefeaters from sleeping, slumped against the radiators.

The clergyman was so engrossed in his work that he failed to hear the first knock at the front door. He ignored the second one, fearing it was the chairwoman of the Richard III Appreciation Society. He had spotted her sitting on a bench by the White Tower on his return, and instantly recognised a woman burning with desire to impart the society’s latest evidence that the maligned monarch had the most waterproof of alibis.

On the third knock, Rev. Septimus put down his pen with irritation, and stood with his forehead against the cold window as he peered down to see who was beating at his door. His heart tightened the moment he saw Ruby Dore blowing onto her hands and stamping her feet in the cold. He descended with such a commotion that when he opened the door the landlady enquired whether he had fallen down the stairs.

Panicked and delighted in equal measures at the surprise visit, the clergyman stood back to let her in. He indicated the way to the kitchen, not wanting her to see his melancholic bachelor’s sitting room, particularly with its biography of Queen Victoria’s rat-catcher on the armchair. But as he offered her a seat at the scrubbed-top table, he wondered whether he had made the right decision after all. There, on the counter, was the mournful teapot for one, with its matching single cup; sitting in the vegetable rack was a solitary carrot sprouting roots; and propped up on the windowsill was an excessively thumbed edition of Solo Suppers. He busied himself filling the kettle to hide his unease, and eventually turned to face her again holding two mugs out in front of him.

“Tea or coffee?” he asked.

“Coffee, please,” she replied, taking off the lavender scarf she had knitted and resting it on the table.

Once they were sitting opposite each other Ruby Dore covered her face with both hands and muttered through her fingers: “I’ve got something to confess.”

The chaplain was about to explain that he didn’t do confessions, and she’d be better off with the Catholics down the road, but the landlady continued. She had intended to return the cake that he had left behind in the pub, she insisted. But when she opened the lid and smelt it, she couldn’t resist having a slice. She then had a second just to confirm that it was as good as she had thought. Deciding that she couldn’t return a partially eaten cake, she promptly finished it. “I had thought about blaming the canary, but I didn’t think you’d buy that,” she admitted.
Rev. Septimus Drew dismissed the apology with a bat of a hand, insisting that her lack of resistance was a compliment to his mother, whose recipe it was. The landlady immediately asked for a copy, and he wrote it down with the flamboyant penmanship of a victim of love. As they drank their coffee, Ruby Dore told him of the latest object she had acquired for her collection of Tower artefacts: a pot of rouge said to have been used by Lord Nithsdale for his escape from the Tower in 1716 dressed as a woman. The clergyman replied that out of all the escapes, this was his favourite, and that he hoped one day to visit Traquair House in the Scottish Borders, where the woman’s cloak worn by the bearded Jacobite was on display.

As the landlady got up to leave, Rev. Septimus Drew suddenly felt the bruise of loneliness. “Do you fancy going to see the museum in Westminster Abbey this morning?” he suddenly found himself asking. “The exhibits include what is probably the oldest stuffed parrot in the world.”

Once Ruby Dore had left to find someone to take her place behind the bar, the chaplain fled upstairs. He took off his cassock, combed his hair hard, and returned to his place at the kitchen table hoping that she would be in luck. It wasn’t long before she reappeared, having bribed a Beefeater’s wife with a bottle of wine to stand in for her.

They squeezed their way out of the Tower through the tourists, and were equally taken aback by the length of the queue waiting to get in. Sitting opposite each other on the Tube, they discussed the extraordinary popularity of the royal menagerie, which had taken everyone by surprise. It wasn’t until the chaplain had finished telling her of his affection for the Jesus Christ lizards that he noticed that he had forgotten to put on his socks before leaving.

When they arrived at the Abbey, Ruby Dore asked whether he minded if they had a quick look at the monument to Sir Isaac Newton, who had been Master of the Royal Mint, based at the Tower, for twenty-eight years. They stood side by side looking at the relief panel on the sarcophagus showing naked boys holding up a gold ingot and containers of coins, and firing up a kiln. Much to her delight, the chaplain then took her to Poets’ Corner to show her the grey Purbeck marble monument to Geoffrey Chaucer, who had been Clerk of Works at the fortress from 1389 to 1391.

Stopping briefly to point out Britain’s oldest door, thought to have been built in the 1050s, Rev. Septimus Drew led the way to the museum in the eleventh-century vaulted undercroft of St. Peter. Ruby Dore gazed in wonderment at the collection of life-size effigies of kings, queens, and society figures, most of them dressed in their own clothes, and all, except Lord Nelson, buried in the Abbey.

The clergyman explained that at one time the bodies of dead monarchs were embalmed and put on display for the funeral procession and service. Later, effigies were used instead due to the length of time it took to prepare for the ceremony. After 1660, effigies no longer formed part of the funeral procession, replaced by a gold crown on a purple cushion, but were used to mark the place of burial.

He showed her the cabinet bearing the oldest: Edward III made from a hollowed-out piece of walnut wood. The fourteenth-century curiosity had been analysed by an expert from the Metropolitan Police Laboratory. “Its few surviving eyebrow hairs were found to be those of a small dog,” he added.

As they moved on to Henry VII, the clergyman pointed out that his face, with its lop-sided mouth, hollow cheeks, and tightly set jaw, was based on his death mask.

Ruby Dore wandered over to Nelson, bought in 1806 to attract people visiting his tomb in St. Paul’s Cathedral back into the fee-charging Abbey. Joining her, Rev. Septimus Drew pointed out: “His left eye appears to be blind, instead of his right.”

Finally, the couple approached the Duchess of Richmond and Lennox, dressed in the robes she wore for the Coronation of Queen Anne in 1702. Ruby Dore immediately bent down to take a closer look at the historic stuffed parrot perched on a stand next to the effigy, which for centuries had attracted a pilgrimage of myopic taxidermists from around the world, who knelt in reverence in front of the holy specimen.

As she contemplated the bird, Rev. Septimus Drew, whose fascinating insights into the collection had earned him a number of eavesdroppers, recounted the tale of the parrot and the Duchess. When Frances Stuart was appointed maid of honour to Charles II’s wife, such was the teenager’s beauty, the King immediately fell for her. But he was not the only one to have noticed the considerable virtues of the girl, later used as a model for Britannia on medals. In an attempt to seduce her, an infatuated courtier gave her a young parrot as a love token, acquired from a Portuguese sailor who had been blown off course. The bird spoke nothing but Portuguese profanities, and Frances Stuart devoted so much time trying to coax out of it the simplest of English niceties that the King, jealous of the attention she gave the creature, attempted all manner of subterfuge to kill it. But the wily bird picked out the poisoned nuts from its bowl, instantly spotted the toes of the servants hiding behind the tapestries with nets, and immediately sensed when a hand approached not to tickle its throat, but to throttle it.
Frances Stuart eventually eloped and married the Duke of Richmond and Lennox. But when she returned to court, the King was as bewitched as ever, and his jealousy of the foulmouthed bird was as fierce as his adoration for its mistress. In his darkest moments, he swore that the parrot had been his life’s most confounding love rival. When, in 1702, the Duchess eventually passed away, the parrot mourned in the most eloquent of English, and then died six days later. The parrot was stuffed and displayed with her memorial effigy out of respect for its forty-year friendship. And the King, long since buried in the Abbey, was unable to overrule her instructions.

Ruby Dore was so delighted by the account that on the way out she bought a postcard of the Duchess, which sadly lacked her much more famous pet. And, as she walked back to Westminster station with Rev. Septimus Drew, she wondered why so many men spun stories of their own brilliance, when women would much rather hear an intriguing tale about a stuffed parrot.

“A-FOUR,” SAID VALERIE JENNINGS, casting a furtive look at her colleague underneath her lustrous eyelashes.

Hebe Jones looked down at the grid she had drawn. “Miss,” she replied. A moment later she announced: “F-three.”

“Hebe Jones admitted, reaching to answer the phone.

Valerie Jennings had suggested a game of Battleship after she noticed Hebe Jones gazing into the distance again, lost in a world that no longer existed. She handed her a piece of paper and challenged her to a game, hoping that it would distract her from her troubles. She had fully intended to let her houseguest win, but once they had drawn their grids and positioned their ships, Valerie Jennings completely forgot about raising the other woman’s spirits. Instead, she set about annihilating the enemy vessels with the ruthlessness of a pirate, brandishing her cutlass the moment she suspected that Hebe Jones had placed one of her submarines diagonally, which was in strict contravention of the rules of the high seas.

Recognising she had now sunk Hebe Jones’s entire fleet, Valerie Jennings decided to clean the fridge as a means of atonement. Squeezing her feet back into her high-heeled shoes, which forced her toes into two red triangles, she stood up and armed herself with a pair of yellow rubber gloves and a damp cloth. As she bent over to see inside, several of her curls sprung from their mooring on the back of her head, and no matter how many times she pushed them away, they returned to obscure her vision with the persistence of flies. Infuriated, she looked around for a solution, and spotted a plastic Viking helmet on one of the shelves. She pulled it on, tossed its yellow plaits over her shoulders, and returned to her penitence. As she threw out an empty cake box, a relic of the glory days of elevenses, she bitterly regretted not having worn make-up for her lunch with Arthur Catnip.

When the Swiss cowbell rang, Hebe Jones instantly recognised an attempt at the Greek national anthem. She got up to answer it, stopping on the way to twirl the dial on the safe, as was the office custom.

As soon as she arrived, Thanos Grammatikos returned the bell to the counter and kissed his cousin on the cheek. Following her wasted trip to Mrs. Perkins, Hebe Jones had given up the needle-in-a-haystack method, and asked him to stop by and look at the urn. While he had only a rudimentary knowledge of the dark art of carpentry, proven by his needing to have a finger stitched back on, Hebe Jones hoped he would be able to shed some light on the unusual wood.

“So how’s everything?” he asked. “I saw Balthazar’s picture in the paper the other week. Why were all those monkeys flashing their bits behind him?”

“I didn’t like to ask,” Hebe Jones replied.

He looked at the urn she was holding, “Is this it?” he asked, taking it in his hands and running his fingers over the cream-coloured surface. “To be honest, I’ve never seen this wood before. Do you mind if I show it to someone?”

“You won’t lose it, will you?” Hebe Jones asked.

“Name me one thing I’ve ever lost.”

“You finger.”

“That was never lost. It was on the floor all the time.”

“Well, take care of those ashes,” she said. “They’ve already been lost once.”

As Hebe Jones returned to her desk, her stomach emitted a low thunderous rumble. As if two whales were calling to each other, it was shortly answered by a similar sound coming from the figure stooped over the fridge. Hebe
Jones instantly recognised the cause. The once sacred ritual of elevenses, a practice governed strictly by Valerie Jennings, had, since her lunch with Arthur Catnip, been reduced to a sliced apple and a cup of jasmine tea. As the pitiful sound started up again underneath her own blouse, Hebe Jones stood up and announced that she was just popping out for a minute.

As she stood at the head of the queue in the coffee shop round the corner, pointing the assistant’s tongs to the largest flapjack in the counter, she suddenly felt a tap on the shoulder. She turned round and instantly recognised the soft, dark eyes and neat hair marbled with silver.

“I thought it was you,” said Tom Cotton, smiling. “I was the one who lost a kidney, remember?” He invited her to sit with him, and pointed to his table. Reasoning that a quick chat would give her sufficient time to eat her snack before returning to the office, Hebe Jones paid the assistant and followed him.

“Have you seen the papers today?” he asked as she sat down. “Someone’s spotted the bearded pig that escaped from London Zoo.” He held out his newspaper and showed her the blurred photograph taken by a reader in Tewkesbury of a creature rampaging across the bottom of his garden.

“It doesn’t look much like a pig to me,” she said, peering at it. “It looks more like the Loch Ness monster.”

Tom Cotton opened a sachet of sugar and poured it into his coffee. “That kidney you helped me get back saved a boy’s life, you know,” he said.

Hebe Jones put down the paper. “How old was he?” she asked.

“About eight, I think.”

Hebe Jones remained silent for so long, he asked her whether she was feeling all right.

“They couldn’t save my son’s life,” she said eventually, raising her eyes. “The doctors insisted there was nothing they could do, but you never stop wondering.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Do you have any children?” she asked.

Tom Cotton picked up a spoon. “Twins,” he replied, stirring his drink. “They lived with their mother after we got divorced. It was really difficult just seeing them at weekends. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through,” he said.

Hebe Jones glanced away. “Some people think they can,” she said. “You’d be surprised how many bring up the death of their pet.”

They sat in silence.

“What was he like?” he asked.

“Milo?” she asked with a smile. “I called him the apple of my eye, and he was.” She told him how she had fallen in love with her son the moment she saw him, and while younger mothers would complain about lack of sleep, she always looked forward to his cries in the night so that she could take him in her arms, rest her cheek against his velvet head, and sing him the Greek lullabies that had sent generations of her family to sleep. She told him that when she took Milo for his first day at school, dressed in the trousers that his father had insisted on making for him, she had cried more than all the children put together. She told him how terrified he had been when they first moved to the Tower, but how he had soon grown to love it, which had made the place so much more bearable for her. She told him how Milo had wanted to become a vet ever since the family tortoise lost her tail, and despite his mystification when it came to science, she was certain he would have succeeded. She told him how Milo’s best friend had been a girl called Charlotte, who also lived at the Tower, and how she had hoped that one day the pair would marry, as only his father had been able to make him laugh more than the girl did. And she told him how nobody had made her laugh more than her husband, but that those days were now gone because after they had lost Milo, they had lost each other.

WHEN HEBE JONES FINALLY RETURNED to the Lost Property Office, Valerie Jennings had finished cleaning the fridge and was on the phone.

“We might have,” she replied evenly, casting a look at the magician’s box. “No, it doesn’t sound like the one we’ve got … It was found about two years ago … I see, but if you lost it that long ago why has it taken you all this time to ask for it back? … What were you in prison for, if it’s not impertinent of me to ask? … I see … No, no I quite understand, I’m useless with a saw myself … You have my sympathies. Glamorous assistants aren’t what they used to be … as I say, it doesn’t sound like yours, but you’re most welcome to come and have a look at it … Baker
Street … For our more costly items we do like to see some proof of ownership—a receipt or a photograph, for example … Not at all. See you tomorrow then … Valerie. Valerie Jennings.”

Just as she put down the phone, the Swiss cowbell sounded. Offering to answer it, she stood up and pulled her skirt down over her splendid thighs. On the way, she stopped at the safe, bent down, and turned the dial left and right, entering her vital statistics, as all else had failed. Just as she straightened up, the heavy grey steel door swung open. Hebe Jones turned immediately on hearing the shriek.

The two women stood side by side looking down at the safe’s open door.

“Go on then,” encouraged Hebe Jones. “Have a look what’s in it.”

Valerie Jennings crouched down and reached inside. Out came bundle after bundle of fifty-pound notes, which she stacked on top of the safe around the kettle. She then put her hand in again and withdrew a pile of documents. The two women stared at the money.

“How much do you think is there?” Hebe Jones whispered.

“Thousands,” Valerie Jennings whispered back. She looked down at the documents she was holding.

“What’s in that folder?” Hebe Jones asked.

“It looks like some sort of parchment,” she replied, holding it up.

Just as that moment the Swiss cowbell sounded again. Both women ignored the noise as they gazed at the fortune and then at the ancient manuscript. But the clanking continued. Valerie Jennings tutted, passed the papers to Hebe Jones, and went to answer it.

As she turned the corner, intoxicated with victory at having finally opened the safe, she saw Arthur Catnip standing at the original Victorian counter. The ticket inspector appeared equally surprised to see her.

“I was just wondering whether I could take you out for lunch again,” he asked.

“That would be lovely,” she replied.

“How about tomorrow at twelve o’clock?”

“Splendid,” she said, and disappeared back round the corner to recover from her second shock. It was only when she was standing in front of the safe again and tried to relieve an itch on her scalp that she realised she was still wearing the Viking helmet, from which hung two blond woollen plaits.

BALTHAZAR JONES SAT ALONE at a table in the far corner of the Rack & Ruin, a hand round an empty pint glass. It had been a while since he had been in, as he had been trying to avoid the commiserations of the other Beefeaters over his wife’s departure. Eventually, the ale lured him back, and he was relieved to find that the afternoon drinkers failed even to acknowledge his presence as they stood captivated by the spectacle of Dr. Evangeline Moore’s first game of Monopoly. She had chosen as her weapon the landlady’s alternative to the historic boot: a threepenny bit her mother had used to hide in the Christmas pudding, not so much to bestow good fortune on its finder as in the hope of choking her husband. The Beefeater sat shredding a beer mat, completely oblivious to the outrageous bets being laid around him. During the brief moments of respite from mourning his marriage, his mind filled with worries about the collection of royal beasts. While the animals appeared well enough—apart from the wandering albatross, which had failed to settle—Balthazar Jones regarded the menagerie as a delicately balanced house of cards, susceptible to the faintest stirring of an ill wind. What he hadn’t foreseen, however, was that it would be one of the Tower residents who would attempt to blow it down. Realising he could put off the moment no longer, he got to his feet, and on his way out pinned a notice on the board stating that if anyone had lost a gentleman’s vest they could collect it from the Salt Tower.

Resigned to yet another dressing down, he dawdled down Water Lane to his appointment with the Chief Yeoman Warder, hoping that a tourist would stop him to ask a question. But for once, it seemed that everyone knew the way to the lavatories. He knocked lightly on the office door so that he wouldn’t be heard, but immediately a voice called to him to enter. Balthazar Jones stepped in and found the Chief Yeoman Warder sitting behind his desk, having just returned from a home-cooked lunch.

“Yeoman Warder Jones, have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the chair in front of him. The Beefeater took off his hat, placed it on his lap, and held on to its brim.

The Chief Yeoman Warder leant forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “How is everything?” he asked.

“Fine,” the Beefeater replied evenly.
“Splendid. I thought you would like to know that the Palace has been in touch, and they’re very pleased with the way the menagerie is shaping up. Visitor figures are up considerably compared to this time last year, and press coverage, both national and international, has been largely positive.”

The Beefeater remained silent.

The Chief Yeoman Warder then picked up a pen and started rolling it between his fingertips. “There were, of course, those unfortunate pictures of you and the marmosets at the beginning. Hopefully the papers won’t use them again now that we’ve allowed them to take photographs of the animals at the Tower. What was all that about, by the way?”

The Beefeater swallowed. “They expose themselves when they feel threatened,” he said.

“I see.”

There was a pause.

The Chief Yeoman Warder glanced down at his file. “Now,” he continued, “there have been one or two complaints. And while I’m well aware that people are never happier than when they’re moaning, they need to be addressed. The first one is the penguins. When will they be back from the vet’s?”

Balthazar Jones scratched at his beard. “Any day now,” he replied.

“Good. The sooner the better,” he said, tapping the desk with his pen. “I don’t like the look of that empty enclosure. It gives the impression that they’ve escaped, like that bearded pig from London Zoo. Bunch of amateurs. Now, the second matter is a complaint from the Tower residents with regards to the wandering albatross. Apparently some of the Yeoman Warders can’t sleep because it keeps wailing, which sets off all the other birds, and then the howler monkeys start up.” He sat back in his chair, his elbows on the armrests. “Personally, I can sleep through mortar fire, but not everyone has my constitution.”

“I’ll sort out the albatross,” said Balthazar Jones.

“Glad to hear it. Now keep up the good work. I don’t want that lot at the Palace on my back if anything goes wrong.”

* * *

When Balthazar Jones returned to the Salt Tower, he stood emptying pockets of apples and sunflower seeds onto the coffee table. He didn’t bother to turn on the light or draw the curtains, and sat on the sofa in the darkness. As he looked at the pale crease of the moon, he wondered again where his wife was. Eventually, he got up to make some toast, brought it back to the living room, and turned on the lamp. As he sat eating, his attention was caught by the front end of the pantomime horse, whose ears he still hadn’t brought himself to sew back on. Looking away, he noticed the photograph taken of Milo holding the precious ammonite he had found while fossil hunting in Dorset. He lowered his eyes, but they fell to his wife’s shoes.

Abandoning his supper, he scuffed his way up the cold spiral staircase, no longer caring that he was retracing the steps of a thirteenth-century Scottish king. He ran himself a bath, but as he lay back in the water he thought of his terrible secret, and what Hebe Jones would say if she ever found out. Too distressed to linger, he got out of the water.

After putting on his pajamas, he looked at the armchair by the window where he had slept since finding his wife’s letter the previous week. Unable to bear another night of crooked slumber, he climbed into his side of the bed and turned off the light. As sleep continued to evade him, he reached out a hand and felt around in the darkness. Eventually, his fingers found what they were searching for. Pulling the white nightdress towards him, he held it to his face and inhaled. He was still clutching it several hours later when he woke from a dream that Hebe Jones was lying next to him, and the arrows of abandonment rained down on him once more.

He escaped to the bathroom and sat on the side of the tub, putting off his return to bed. As he stared at the floor, he noticed a piece of brown lettuce on the carpet. Suddenly he realised that he hadn’t seen Mrs. Cook for a week, and a hand gripped his heart as he thought of the creature’s exalted heritage.

Mrs. Cook was no ordinary tortoise, but the daughter of a pet once owned by Captain Cook. The explorer had taken one look at her mother’s alluring markings and carried her on board the HMS Resolution, where she was given the run of the deck. In 1779, when the ship arrived in Hawaii during a festival of worship for a Polynesian god, a number of the locals mistook the Yorkshireman for a deity. In an effort to distract them from their conviction, he gave them his most treasured possession: the ship’s mascot.
Almost a year later, the reptile, which had a natural propensity for absconding, was noticed on the beach by a seaman from a visiting ship. Convinced that tortoises were good omens at sea, he picked her up, and presented her to the crew with the fanfare of a showman once they had set sail. She became the pride of the vessel, and at night he would recount tales of spectacular fortunes enjoyed by mariners with a tortoise on board.

But the ship was blown off course, and soon the sailors had finished the rations. The starving men began to gaze at the creature with gastronomic longing. One of them stood up and announced that he was sure it was black cats that were good omens for sailors. Another joined him, and eventually the entire crew agreed that the seaman had been mistaken.

The following day, pirates attacked the ship. When the seaman was taken on board the enemy vessel at gunpoint, he grabbed the bucket in which he had hidden the maligned mascot. Instructed to prepare the meals, he made sure that each was as near a culinary masterpiece as possible, given the limitations of ships’ biscuits. When the vessel eventually docked at Plymouth, he was rewarded with his freedom and returned home to South Wales with his bucket. He presented the tortoise to his wife, who made a small fortune showing her to the good people of Gower, who refused to believe in the existence of a creature that carried its home on its back.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BALTHAZAR JONES STIRRED, his bearded cheek pressed against his wife’s cotton nightgown. As usual upon waking he felt the ache of her absence, but as he lay with his eyes still closed, he sensed that something else was wrong. As soon as he remembered the piece of withered lettuce on the bathroom floor his eyes opened.

Casting back the shabby blanket, he fed his feet into his tartan slippers. Tying his dressing gown across the gentle hillock of his stomach, he started to search for the creature that had been considered the matriarch of the family for generations of Joneses. First he looked in the bathroom airing cupboard, the door of which was kept ajar so that she could enter, lest the Salt Tower’s bitter temperature condemn her to a permanent state of hibernation. He tried her lairs in the bedroom, peering down the side of the dressing table and behind the wastepaper basket. But all he found were the cobwebs the spiders had spun since Hebe Jones had left.

He descended the spiral staircase to the living room and gazed down the gap between the back of the sofa and the circular wall. Something was there. But when he shone his torch into the dusty expanse, it turned out to be a ball. Moving aside his wife’s easel next to the bookcase, he saw nothing more than an odd black sock. He then lifted up the front end of the pantomime horse, which offered the perfect place for concealment. But all he discovered were the ears that he hadn’t brought himself to sew back on.

Head in his hands, he sat in the armchair trying to think when he had last seen her. He recalled the visit of the Tower doctor the previous week, and the arthritic sound of the animal’s knees as she got to her feet, but couldn’t remember seeing her since. He stood up and retraced his steps, hunting for evidence of loose bowels. After searching underneath the bed for the seventh time, he sat on the floor with his back against the dresser feeling utterly alone in the world.

REV. SEPTIMUS DREW WORKED A FINGER between each of his pale toes as he sat in bathwater infused with tea tree oil. It wasn’t a belief that cleanliness was next to godliness that led to such meticulousness, but the conviction that prevention was better than cure. While he didn’t get caught in the rain as often as the Beefeaters, he nevertheless feared succumbing to the fungus that flourished on the backs of their knees. As he lay back in the fragrant water, his mind turned to the invitation he had just opened, and he wondered again whether he stood any real chance of winning the Erotic Fiction Award. Having never come first at anything in his life, he put the possibility of victory out of his mind, and closed his eyes.

As he relived his trip to the Abbey’s museum with Ruby Dore there was a knock on the front door. He rose with the thrust of a whale, slopping water over the side of the bath, hoping it was the landlady. Wrapping himself in a dressing gown, he made his way to one of the spare bedrooms at the front of the house, leant his forehead against the cold windowpane, and looked down. There, standing on his doorstep, was the Yeoman Gaoler. The chaplain had been avoiding the man ever since agreeing to perform the exorcism. He was just about to hide behind the curtain when the Beefeater looked up and their eyes met. Unable to pretend to be out, as he had done on the three previous occasions, the chaplain heaved up the sash window and called: “I’ll be down in a minute!”

Dripping his way back to the bathroom, he took off his damp robe and, as he dried his excessively long legs, wondered why he had always been so hopeless at exorcisms. It was a skill that would evidently be of great use to his congregation. While many of the Beefeaters boasted about the ghosts they claimed to have seen around the Tower, never once did they speak to anyone other than the chaplain about the spectral apparitions in their own homes, as they were a terror too far. Despite the number of times that he had been asked to perform one, he had never quite got the hang of the procedure, much to the Beefeaters’ infuriation.

Once dressed, he idled his way down the stairs, stopping along the way to inspect a mark on the banister.

“Yes?” he said, opening the door.

“I was wondering if you’d come and sort out that little problem we were talking about,” the Yeoman Gaoler said, the shadows under his eyes even more noticeable in a freak ray of sunshine.

“What little problem?” the chaplain enquired.
The Yeoman Gaoler nodded towards his home. “You know.”
“I do?”
“Odes to Cynthia? Smell of tobacco? Missing potatoes?”
“Oh, yes,” said the chaplain, starting to close the door. “Just let me know when you’re free and we’ll arrange a
time.”

The Yeoman Gaoler put a foot against the door frame. “I’m free now,” he said.

There was a pause.

“Are you sure it’s convenient?” queried the chaplain.

“It’s been convenient ever since you agreed to do it last week.”

The chaplain followed him to number seven Tower Green, hoping to be waylaid by the chairwoman of the
Richard III Appreciation Society. But the bench outside the White Tower was empty. The Yeoman Gaoler opened
the door and stepped back to allow him in. The chaplain immediately headed down the hall, calling out behind him:
“Shall we have a nice cup of tea before we get started? I haven’t had my breakfast yet.”

The Yeoman Gaoler caught up with him and blocked the way to the kettle. “I’d rather get on with it, if you don’t
mind,” he replied.

Rev. Septimus Drew peered at the cage on the table. “What’s that?” he asked.

“It’s the Queen’s Etruscan shrew.”

“Let’s have a look.”

The Yeoman Gaoler picked up the cage and put it on the counter behind him. “I’m sorry, it’s of a nervous
disposition. The dining room is through here,” he said, leading the way.

The clergyman followed and immediately went to inspect the Yeoman Gaoler’s long-handled Tudor axe propped
up in the corner, which he carried during special ceremonies. “Your predecessors used this when escorting prisoners
to and from their trials at Westminster, didn’t they?” asked the chaplain, studying it. “Am I right in thinking that if
the blade was turned towards the prisoner, it meant that they had just been sentenced to death?”

“Aren’t you meant to sprinkle some holy water around, or something?” asked the Yeoman Gaoler, ignoring the
question.

“Quite right, quite right,” the clergyman replied, patting his cassock pockets for his vial. He then bowed his head,
recited a quick prayer, and walked around the room scattering its contents.

“There we are,” he announced with a smile. “All done!”

The Yeoman Gaoler looked at him dumbfounded. “Is that it? Don’t you have to ask it to leave or something?”

The chaplain covered his mouth with his hand. “Do I?” he asked.

The two men looked at each other.

“No, no, that’s so last century,” the clergyman announced, dismissing the suggestion with a bat of his hand.

“Right then, I’d better be off,” he added, heading for the front door.

As the Yeoman Gaoler watched the clergyman stride back across Tower Green, his red cassock flapping, he felt
the unease of the duped. He walked back to the kitchen, opened the cage, and offered the Etruscan shrew another
cricket, which it sniffed with its pointed velvet nose.

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**HEBE JONES FOUND A NOTE** on the kitchen table from Valerie Jennings saying that she had gone to work early to sort a
few things out. As she sat at the table eating a bowl of Special K, having found nothing more substantial in her
colleague’s cupboards, she looked around at the still unfamiliar surroundings and wondered how long she should
stay. While Valerie Jennings had told her that the spare room was hers for as long as she needed it, and had done
everything possible to make her feel at home, she didn’t want to outstay her welcome. As she stood at the sink and
washed her dish, she decided it was time to dip into the money she had saved for Milo’s university education and
rent a flat until the tenants’ lease was up on their home in Catford.

When she arrived at the Lost Property Office, she thought she could smell wet paint. Assuming the odour was
coming in through the open window, she put the thought out of her mind and went to make them both some tea. As
she waited for the water to boil, she looked down at the safe, firmly closed lest the cleaners make off with its
contents, and hoped that her colleague would remember the combination of numbers.

“Did you find everything you needed for breakfast?” Valerie Jennings asked, emerging from the bookshelves.

“Yes, thanks,” she replied, looking up. She was instantly reminded that her colleague was meeting Arthur Catnip for lunch again. Valerie Jennings had clearly searched deep within her wardrobe for something suitably flattering, only to retrieve a frock of utter indifference to fashion. There had been an attempt to tame her hair, which seemed to have been abandoned, and the fuzzy results were clipped to the back of her head.

“You look nice,” said Hebe Jones.

Both women sat down at their desks and got on with the business of reuniting lost possessions with their absentminded owners. It was only when Hebe Jones got up to make another cup of tea that she noticed the flagrant transformation. “The magician’s box is pink,” she said, a hand over her mouth.

Valerie Jennings turned round, one eye enlarged by the magnifying glass she was using to scrutinise the ancient manuscript they had found in the safe. “I thought I’d give it a bit of spruce up,” she said.

Returning to her seat, Hebe Jones studied the lotus leaf embroidery on one of the Chinese slippers whose owner she was still trying to trace, and kept her thoughts about her colleague’s behaviour to herself. Valerie Jennings had been more than good to her by offering her the spare room when she was too ashamed to ask one of her sisters to put her up. Each evening, instead of asking her questions she couldn’t bear to answer, she had simply installed her in the armchair with the pop-up leg rest with a glass of wine. And while she didn’t cook their supper with the talent of her sisters, it was certainly with the love of one.

Shortly after her quartered apple for elevenses, Hebe Jones’s stomach emitted a roll of thunder, and she fetched her turquoise coat from the stand next to the inflatable doll and announced that she was just popping out for something.

As soon as she was gone, Valerie Jennings slipped her hand into her black handbag, withdrew a paperback, and returned it to its place on the bookshelf. As she scanned the shelves for her next fix, the Swiss cowbell sounded. Irritated at being interrupted during her favourite part of the day, she turned the corner. Standing at the counter was a tall man wearing a black top hat and a matching cape that flowed down to the floor. Tucked under his arm was a wand.

“I’ve come to see Valerie Jennings,” he announced, throwing one side of his cape over his shoulder, revealing the red silk lining.

“Oh, yes, I’ve been expecting you,” she said, opening the hatch. “Come this way.”

She led him through the office and stopped in front of the magician’s box that she had repainted that morning, so that Hebe Jones wouldn’t be deprived of her sanctuary. The man ran a white-gloved hand along the surface. “How strange,” he said. “It’s exactly the same as mine apart from the colour. It’s even got the same marks on the wood where I didn’t cut straight.”

Valerie Jennings folded her arms across her plump chest and looked at the prop. “I’m sure it doesn’t help when the glamorous assistant starts screeching,” she said. “It must be difficult telling whether she’s just putting it on for the audience, or whether you’re actually sawing her in half. Anyway, if it’s not the right one, I’ll show you out. If you’d like to follow me …”

When the Swiss cowbell sounded just before noon, Valerie Jennings’s heart leapt. She covered her lips with another coat of Lilac Haze and walked to the coat stand in the shoes that forced her toes into two red triangles. But when she turned the corner, instead of the tattooed ticket inspector, she found a woman in a duffel coat and beret in tears. “Has anyone handed in a boot?” she enquired, gripping the edge of the counter.

It was no ordinary boot, she went on to explain, as it had once belonged to Edgar Evans, the Welsh petty officer who had died while returning from the South Pole under the command of Captain Scott. The curator recounted how she had suddenly fled the carriage when she realised that she was travelling south on the Northern Line instead of north as the name suggested. Only when the doors had shut did it occur to her that she had left behind the historic footwear, which was to be triumphantly united with its mate, for decades the crowning glory of Swansea Museum, labelled simply as “Evans’s Boot.”

Hunting amongst the shelves, Valerie Jennings eventually found it next to a pair of angling waders in the footwear section. When she returned to the counter with it, considerably hotter and crosser, the woman promptly burst into tears again and subjected her to an oral biography of Edgar Evans, warning her never to confuse him with Teddy Evans, Scott’s second-in-command on the expedition.
“Good gracious me, I wouldn’t dream of confusing him with Teddy Evans,” Valerie Jennings assured her, snapping the ledger shut to signal an end to the Antarctic ramble. Just as she was sliding it onto the shelf below the counter Arthur Catnip arrived. The battleground of his hair had been razed with the pomade that his barber had given him as recompense for the previous assault, and it now bore the shine of an ice rink.

Instantly regretting not having taken off her coat as she had started to sweat, Valerie Jennings accompanied him to the street, wondering where they were going. Eventually she found that they were in Regent’s Park again, and the ticket inspector pointed to a bench by the fountain, suggesting that they sit down.

“I’ve brought a picnic,” he announced, as he opened his rucksack and spread a rug on her knees. “Let me know if you get cold.”

As Valerie Jennings helped herself to a roast pork sandwich, she told him that, according to the papers, there had been two further sightings of the bearded pig in Essex and East Anglia. Arthur Catnip replied that if he spotted it in his garden, he would never tell the press as the last thing he’d want would be a herd of journalists trampling all over his vegetable patch.

He offered her a pastry parcel, which Valerie Jennings eyed suspiciously. After her first mouthful, she congratulated him on his salmon en croute and told him that she’d once gone salmon fishing with her ex-husband, and had been so bored that she threw herself into the river so that they would have to go home. Arthur Catnip helped himself to a tomato and replied that he had once thrown a sailor overboard after he made a comment about his then wife, but immediately dived in to rescue him as he realised that the man had a point.

As the ticket inspector looked at the fountain, he recalled the time he poured car anti-freeze into the garden pond one winter, as his biology teacher had told him that the fish in Antarctica had anti-freeze in their blood so they wouldn’t freeze solid. But when he went back to check on them, all his father’s koi carp had died. Wiping a corner of her mouth on her napkin, Valerie Jennings told him how she had just handled a boot that had belonged to Teddy Evans, the petty officer who died on his way back from Scott’s ill-fated trek to the South Pole. He was not, she pointed out, to be confused with Edgar Evans, Scott’s second-in-command on the same expedition.

ONCE THE TOWER HAD CLOSED, Balthazar Jones, who had led the last tour of the day, headed to the aviary, his nose numb with cold. It had been a particularly busy afternoon, during which he had found time to take some of the tourists around the enclosures. His motivation was not so much to act as a guide—maps had been produced indicating where each animal was housed—as to keep an eye on his charges. He had already noticed that a number of the sightseers were offloading their sandwiches and pastries bought in error from the Tower Café onto the glutton. But even the creature with the enormous appetite had refused them, and the waste was piling up in its pen.

As he climbed the Brick Tower’s stairs clutching a Hamleys shopping bag, he thought again of the gentleman’s vest he had found and wondered why no one had come to claim it. As he pushed open the door, the King of Saxony bird of paradise jumped to a lower branch, its two blue brow feathers that stretched twice the length of its body looping gracefully through the air. The tiny hanging parrot opened one eye from its upside-down slumber and watched as the Keeper of the Royal Menagerie unlocked the wire door and entered the aviary. As he looked around, the female lovebird glided down from its perch and landed on his shoulder. Searching for a telltale pair of ugly feet, the Beefeater eventually found the wandering albatross sitting alone behind a potted tree, its black and white wings tightly drawn in. He sat down beside it and pulled from his pocket his special purchase. Unwrapping it under the continuing one-eyed gaze of the emerald parrot, he laid the organic squid flat on his palm and offered it to the melancholic bird. But the thinning creature refused to look at it. The Beefeater and albatross remained where they were, both staring into the distance, seeing nothing but their troubles. It was almost an hour later that the bird finally lifted its neck and nibbled at the gastronomic gift with its huge hooked beak, by which time the parrot had noded off again. When it had finished eating, Balthazar Jones got to his feet, followed by the bird, which immediately shook its feathers and released a watery deposit. The Beefeater opened the shopping bag, drew out a white toy duck, the nearest thing he could find to an albatross, and placed it next to the creature before leaving.

He made his way through the gloom to the Salt Tower and closed the door behind him, feeling too defeated to climb the dank stairs to the empty living room. Sitting down on the dusty bottom step in the darkness, he rested his hairy white cheeks on his fists. His thoughts immediately found their way back to his wife, and he cursed himself for losing her. He wondered again about calling, but his conviction that he didn’t deserve her chased away the thought. Eventually he stood up, and as he groped around for the light switch, his fingers brushed the door handle of Milo’s bedroom, which he hadn’t entered since that terrible, terrible day. Overcome by an urge to enter, he pressed down on the latch, the sharp noise echoing in the blackness. Pushing open the door, he ran a hand along the rough wall for the
It took a while to take everything in. There on the wall above the neatly made-up bed was the world map which had eventually replaced the dinosaur poster he had bought his son from the Natural History Museum to help him settle into his new home. He looked at the little black cross Milo had drawn marking the mouth of the Orinoco River where his favourite prisoner, Sir Walter Raleigh, had started his search for El Dorado. On top of the chest of drawers stood the swing mirror that the Beefeater had spotted in the window of an antique shop and instantly bought, despite the imaginative price, so he wouldn’t have to try mounting one on the circular walls. Next to it was a bottle of fragrant aftershave, despite the fact that the boy had been too young to need a razor, which Hebe Jones had insisted was proof that Milo was in love with Charlotte Broughton.

He approached the chest of drawers, picked up the brush, and touched the dark hairs caught in it. He remembered telling Milo that he hoped the boy had inherited his mother’s genes and wouldn’t turn grey as early as his father had. He stood in front of the bookshelf and bent down to read the spines. Picking up a matchbox in front of the Harry Potter novels, he pushed it open and immediately recognised the fifty-pence piece that had travelled through the boy’s intestines to near lethal effect. He reached for the ammonite next to it, rubbing it between his fingers as he remembered Milo’s delight at finding it. As he returned it to the shelf, he spotted a photograph between two books. He tugged it out and when he looked at the smiling picture of Charlotte Broughton standing on the battlements, he realised that his wife had been right all along.

Pulling back the chair, he sat down at the desk and ran his palms over the wood, which Hebe Jones had kept dusted. He peered at the row of folders and took one out that he recognised. Glued to the front was a piece of paper, not quite square, on which was written: “Escapes from the Tower of London.”

The Beefeater opened the file, remembering the time they had spent working on it together. They had gone to see Rev. Septimus Drew, an authority on the subject, and had sat in his kitchen eating jam tarts as he launched into his dramatic renditions of nearly forty escapes. Balthazar Jones glanced at the first page, devoted to Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, the first high-profile prisoner at the Tower, who happened to also have been the first escapee. He read his son’s account of how the Bishop had got his guards drunk and lowered himself down the outer wall on a rope smuggled to him in a gallon of wine.

Turning the page, he came across an essay on John Gerard, who asked his warder for oranges and wrote messages in their juice, legible when held against a candle, on seemingly innocent letters to his supporters. A plan was hatched and the Jesuit priest escaped with fellow prisoner John Arden by climbing along a rope from the Cradle Tower to the wharf. When the Beefeater had finished reading it, he recalled all the secret messages he and Milo had sent each other, much to the irritation of Hebe Jones, who could never find her oranges.

At the end of the folder, he came across several blank pages bearing just the name of a prisoner, and he imagined the high grade Milo would have received had he lived long enough to finish the project. He picked up a pencil from a pot at the back of the desk and held it where his son’s fingers had once been.

Walking across to the wardrobe, he pulled open the doors. Milo’s scent instantly hit him, and for a moment he couldn’t move. Eventually, he raised both hands and pulled the hangers apart, remembering his son in each item of clothing. He then looked down at the shoes at the bottom of the wardrobe and thought how small they seemed. Unable to bear the familiar smell any longer, he closed the doors, switched off the light, and, groping through the darkness, started the slow journey up to his empty home.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After one final catastrophic shudder that travelled down to his arthritic knees, the Ravenmaster collapsed on top of Ambrosine Clarke. He lay breathing in the smell of suet from her hair as the birds continued to fly in hysterical circles in the aviary next to them. They had been startled by the chef’s cries of exhalation as she slid back and forth on the wooden floorboards with each thrust of his hips. Eventually the sound of frantically beating wings subsided, and only the toucans continued carving their multi-coloured loops.

As he pulled on his black ankle socks, he glanced at the cook, rounding up her large, white breasts into her bra, the top of her hair still flattened where he had gripped her head for better purchase. Taken aback, as always, by how quickly the inferno of desire could be extinguished, he reached for his uniform, covered in seed husks. As he pulled on his trousers, his stomach turned at the thought of the torment that followed their clandestine meetings. Sure enough, as soon as they were both dressed, Ambrosine Clarke reached for her basket. Ignoring the Ravenmaster’s protests that his appetite had deserted him, the chef unpacked its contents. As he cast an eye over the dishes, he saw that his penitence that morning was the full Victorian breakfast that she had been threatening for several weeks, which included kidneys, haddock in puff pastry, and jelly in the shape of a hare. And as the Ravenmaster forced it down, he was convinced that it was an even greater torture than that inflicted on William Wallace, whose pitiful moans from being racked were sometimes heard echoing through the Brick Tower.

The cook left first, taking care to look through the window before opening the heavy oak door. After pulling on his black leather gloves, the Ravenmaster followed her a few minutes later, the stench of the zorilla causing his stomach to turn again. As he crossed the fortress, which hadn’t yet opened to the tourists, his anger at the Queen’s animals being housed in the Tower smouldered more fiercely than his heartburn. The visitors had shown little interest in the ravens since the menagerie opened, despite the birds’ reputed historic pedigree and their intelligence, which scientists had proved rivalled that of great apes and dolphins. He had frequently complained about the royal beasts in the Rack & Ruin, the sweetness of his orange juice no match for the bitterness spilling from his mouth. However, he rarely found the consensus that he sought. Despite their initial reservations, most of the Beefeaters had developed an affection for the animals, seduced by the glutton’s breathtaking appetite; the softness of the reclusive ringtail possums that fell asleep in their arms; the showmanship of the fancy rats, which Ruby Dore had taught to roll tiny barrels along the bar; and the charm of the blue-faced Duchess of York, which clambered into their laps and searched their scalps with the ruthlessness of a nit nurse.

A downpour forced the Ravenmaster into an ungainly run, and he hunched his shoulders to prevent the rain going down his collar. Suddenly the sight of a body stopped him dead in his tracks. He stared in disbelief, then rushed over, emitting a low moan of dread. As the rain pummelled his back, he knelt down on the grass and picked up the raven from a pile of bloodied feathers, searching for signs of life. But its neck lolled backwards, and its glassy eyes failed to flinch despite the rain. He hurried back home with the creature, placed it on the dining-room table, and with frantic gasps began to administer the kiss of life.

As Balthazar Jones trudged through the rain, a common variety that fell in fat droplets from the brim of his hat, he noticed the Ravenmaster running in the distance and wondered what he was up to. The previous night, when he had eventually got round to doing his laundry, he picked up the vest he had found and noticed the label of a certain gentlemen’s outfitters which the Ravenmaster swore by. He stood next to the washing machine for a considerable time trying to work out how the man’s undergarment had come to be on the Brick Tower steps, until the sight of a piece of shrivelled carrot on the floor distracted him, and he started another fruitless search for Mrs. Cook.

Clutching a swede for the bearded pig, the Beefeater arrived at the Bowyer Tower to feed the crested water dragons. He was greeted in the doorway by one of the sullen press officers, who had been forced to abandon their comfortable office on the ground floor in order to accommodate the bright green reptiles. Their resulting loathing of the President of Costa Rica on account of his cursed gift had stretched to a ban on coffee drinking in their cramped new premises on the first floor. Not only had the three women suffered the indignity of shifting their desks, but they were now faced with almost constantly ringing phones on account of the number of enquiries from around the world
about the new royal menagerie.

“Ah, Yeoman Warder Jones, I was hoping to catch you,” the woman said, a pink cashmere scarf wrapped around her neck. “We’ve had a call from one of the papers in Argentina. They’re wondering where the rockhopper penguins are.”

The Beefeater scratched at his wet beard. “They’re at the vet’s,” he replied.

“Still?” she enquired.

Balthazar Jones nodded.

“I told her that, but she didn’t seem to believe me,” the press officer said.

The Beefeater looked into the distance. “Penguins won’t be rushed,” he replied.

“I see. We’ve also had an enquiry from the Catholic Times wondering why the crested water dragons are also known as Jesus Christ lizards.”

“Because they can walk on water in emergencies,” he said.

There was a pause.

“The other thing is we’ve had a couple of calls about the giraffes,” she continued. “Who were they from again?”

The Beefeater’s eyes fell to the vegetable he was holding. “The Swedes,” he replied.

ONCE HE HAD FED the crested water dragons, Balthazar Jones headed through the rain for the Develin Tower, hoping the bearded pig would like its new ball. Just as he was passing the White Tower, he heard footsteps running up behind him. The next thing he knew he was pinned up against the wall by a hand round his throat.

“Which one of the animals did it?” demanded the Ravenmaster.

“Did what?” the Beefeater managed to reply.

“Savaged one of my birds.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The Ravenmaster pressed his face up to Balthazar Jones. “I’ve just found Edmund on the lawn. His leg and neck were broken. Which one was it?” he repeated.

“They’re all locked up. Always have been.”

The Ravenmaster increased his grip on his colleague’s neck. “Well, one of them must have escaped,” he hissed.

“Maybe it was a fox, or even the Chief Yeoman Warder’s dog,” croaked Balthazar Jones.

“I know it was something to do with you,” the Ravenmaster said, then pointed a black leather finger at him and strode off.

Once he had caught his breath, Balthazar Jones readjusted his hat and picked up the swede that had tumbled to the ground. While it went against the creature’s nature, he wondered whether the bearded pig was responsible, as it was the only animal he hadn’t checked on that morning. But when he reached the tower, he found that the door was still locked. Glancing over his shoulder to make sure that he wasn’t being watched, he turned the key. As he entered the room, the animal bounded up to him, its tasselled tail flying like a flag over its fulsome buttocks. After scratching the pig behind its ears, the Beefeater presented it with the root vegetable, which it immediately knocked across the floor and chased. He sat down on the straw, rested his back against the cold wall, and closed his eyes. Raising a hand, he felt his neck with the tips of his fingers.

After a while, he reached into his tunic pocket and drew out some of the love letters he had written to Hebe Jones all those years ago. He had taken them from her hidey-hole during the night while unable to sleep, but hadn’t brought himself to read any of them. He looked at the first envelope, with its address confused by love, and took out the letter. As he began to read, he remembered the girl with dark hair meandering down the front of her turquoise dress, and her eyes of a fawn that had fixed on him in the corner shop. He remembered that first night together and their horror as they realised they would be parted in the morning. He remembered the first time they had made love during a weekend in Orford, when a power cut in the bar of the Jolly Sailor Inn, built from the timbers of wrecked ships, had driven them to their room earlier than expected. The light from the candle given to them by the landlady lit up the ancient murals of ships, their sails engorged with wind. And, after they had sealed their love, they promised to be with each other until they were so old they had grown a third set of teeth, just like the Indian
centenarian they had read about in the paper.

As the bearded pig came to sit by him, resting a whiskered cheek on his thigh, the Beefeater unfolded another letter, feeling the creature’s hot breath through his trousers. After reading the outpouring of devotion, he remembered the butterfly that had danced above the pews during their wedding, sending each member of the Grammatikos family into raptures over such a good omen. He remembered how they had vowed to stay together forever, despite what life threw at them, and how at the time it had seemed inconceivable to do otherwise. Looking down at his old man’s hands holding the letter he had composed all those years ago, he saw the scratched gold band that had never left his finger since his bride slipped it on at the altar. And he decided to write her another letter.

Carefully locking the door of the Develin Tower behind him, he headed home, a wind of hope behind him. He climbed to the top of the staircase, pressed down on the latch, and entered the room where German U-boat men had been imprisoned during the war. Ignoring the chalk swastikas and portrait of Field Marshal Göring drawn on the wall, he pulled back the wooden chair, which scraped mournfully against the pitching floorboards, and sat down at the table he had found in a junk shop. He selected a piece of writing paper from one of the piles and, with the same penmanship that hadn’t altered in three decades, wrote the words “Dear Hebe.”

The outpouring of affection that followed was as fulsome as it was frantic. He told his wife how the seed of their love had been planted during their first night together when she kissed the tip of each of his fingers that would have to get used to holding a gun. He told her how he had bitterly regretted having to leave her for the Army in the morning, but that the shoots of their love had grown despite the distance between them. He told her how the butterfly had flown into the church and danced over their heads, attracted by their blossoming love. And he told her how Milo, the fruit of their love, had been his life’s greatest joy, along with being her husband.

Pausing for a moment, he raised his eyes to the mantelpiece on the other side of the room, seeing nothing but their son a few hours old in his mother’s arms, a moment for which they had waited so many years. But his thoughts suddenly turned to that terrible, terrible day, and the blade lodged in his heart plunged even deeper. Knowing his wife would never forgive him if she ever found out what he had done, he tore up the letter. And he sat at the table for the rest of the morning, head in his hands, bleeding with guilt as the rain pounded the windows.

WHEN THE DOOR of the cuckoo clock sprung open and the tiny wooden bird shot out to deliver eleven demented cries, Hebe Jones put out the “Back in 15 Minutes” sign and pulled down the shutter. She waited at her desk, hoping that her colleague’s resolve had finally cracked. But when Valerie Jennings stood up from rummaging in the fridge, instead of the butter-rich dainty Hebe Jones was hoping for, she drew out the same green apples that her colleague had had to endure longer than she cared to remember.

Despite the fact that Valerie Jennings had already told her every detail of the picnic lunch the previous week, Hebe Jones listened to her reminiscences, sipping her jasmine tea. She heard again about the rug Arthur Catnip had handed her to keep out the cold. She heard again about the glasses he had brought for the wine, which were real crystal rather than plastic. And she heard again about the hours he must have spent the previous night preparing all the food, and how it was only polite of her to have tried his rhubarb and custard, despite her regime.

When elevenses were over, Hebe Jones stood rinsing the cups, remembering how her husband had always offered her a rug to defend her against the cold in the Salt Tower, and while he had never subjected himself to the torment of making pastry, he had been an expert at making tomato chutney, until the Chief Yeoman Warder spotted the plants he and Milo were growing up the side of their home and ordered their destruction.

As she hauled up the shutter, one of the ticket inspectors was already waiting at the counter. Standing next to him was a wooden sarcophagus with a chipped nose.

“Anything in it?” asked Hebe Jones, looking it up and down.

“Just a bit of old bandage,” he replied. “The mummy must have got out at an earlier stop.”

After noting it down in the ledgers, Hebe Jones helped him carry it down the aisle to the Egyptology section, a troublesome journey due to their vastly differing heights.

Back at her desk, she picked up the phone and called the Society of Woodworkers, having been assured by Thanos Grammatikos when he returned with the urn that morning that it was made from pomegranate wood. She spoke to the chairman, hoping he could put her in touch with someone who specialised in it. But he didn’t know of anyone, and promised to send her a list of members who took on commissions to help her in her search. After hanging up, she glanced at her colleague to make sure she wasn’t looking, and opened the gigolo’s diary.
“The treachery of the Swedes,” Valerie Jennings suddenly announced.

“Pardon?” asked Hebe Jones, who had been engrossed in an encounter with an ice cube.

“The treachery of the Swedes,” her colleague repeated, closing the Latin dictionary she had borrowed from one of the bookshelves. “That’s what *perfidia Suecorum* means. It’s one of the few things I can make out on this manuscript. Terrible handwriting.”

Hebe Jones stopped to peer at it over her colleague’s shoulder on her way to answer the Swiss cowbell. As she rounded the corner, she saw Tom Cotton in his blue uniform standing at the counter. She raised a hand to her mouth and asked: “You haven’t lost something else, have you?”

“I was just wondering whether you fancied a coffee,” he said.

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**WHILE TOM COTTON STOOD** in the queue, Hebe Jones chose the same table at the back of the café where they had sat the previous time. As she waited she looked at him, trim in his uniform, talking to the girl behind the counter, and wondered why his wife had let him slip through her fingers. She lowered her eyes as he approached with a tray.

“So,” he said, sitting down and putting a cup and plate in front of her. “Anything interesting been handed in recently?”

Hebe Jones thought for a moment. “A tuba, which my colleague plays during moments of despair, and a sarcophagus,” she said.

She took a bite of her flapjack. “Saved any lives recently?” she asked.

“It’s the donors and doctors who save lives. I just fetch and carry,” he insisted, raising his cup to his lips.

Hebe Jones looked at the table. “We didn’t donate any of Milo’s organs,” she said, eventually raising her eyes. “They took his heart to be examined by a specialist. It was weeks before we got it back. I couldn’t stand the thought of him being without it.”

There was silence. Eventually Tom Cotton spoke: “You haven’t lost Milo completely, you know. I lost my sister when we were both very young. We always carry a part of those we loved tucked inside us.”

After she had dried her cheeks on the soft, white handkerchief that was offered to her, she looked at him through a shimmering kaleidoscope of tears. “Thank you,” she whispered, placing her tiny hand on his.

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**BALTHAZAR JONES HADN’T INTENDED** to go out once he had finished work for the day. But the top floor of the Salt Tower no longer felt like the sanctuary it once was, and after sitting slumped on the sofa in the darkness for an hour, he left to walk the battlements. As he strode, his hands sheltering in his pockets from the cold, he found that his problems had followed him. He stopped for a moment and gazed at Tower Bridge, lit up like a fairground attraction in the darkness, but his troubles rose around him like a fog, and he was forced to move on. No matter how fast he walked, he was unable to shake them off.

Eventually, he sought refuge in the Rack & Ruin. Pushing open the great oak door, he stood for a moment on the worn flagstones wondering whether he could bear the company of so many people. Spotting an empty table next to a cabinet of Beefeater souvenirs, he ordered a drink, hoping that no one would notice him. But as he waited to be served, one of the Beefeaters standing at the bar turned to him and said: “Sorry to hear about your wife.”

He took his pint to the table, where he sat, head slumped in his hand, drawing lines in the condensation on his glass. The sound of the chair opposite him scraping against the flagstones suddenly interrupted his rumination. He looked up to see Rev. Septimus Drew sitting down, and placing his glass of red wine on the table. With the wild enthusiasm of a man who had just unearthed the Holy Grail, the clergyman started telling him about his amazing discovery. It had taken him many months of endeavour, he explained, but finally he had managed to prise the archives from the covetous fingers of the Keeper of Tower History. He had spent night after night bent over the age-stained pages looking for a hint of an explanation, and had been about to give up, when suddenly he found what he was looking for: the scandalous story behind the bullet hole in the bar.

Balthazar Jones’s eyes dropped to the table in disinterest, but the clergyman continued. One night in 1869, two Beefeaters got so drunk in the Rack & Ruin that the landlord was unable to rouse them after calling time. Leaving them to sleep with their heads collapsed on the tables, he retired upstairs. During the night, one shook the other awake, convinced that he had seen the ghost of a Jesuit priest. The Beefeater told his terrified colleague that he must have been dreaming, returned his head to the table, and went back to sleep. But the man went to the bar to retrieve
the landlord’s pistol and sat with his back against the wall, waiting for the apparition to return. The Tower chaplain, who was always armed at night in case one of the Beefeaters attempted to steal his bells, crept into the tavern to help himself to the gin. At the same time, the landlord appeared on the bottom step brandishing his wife’s pistol, roused by the noise downstairs.

“Suddenly a shot was fired!” Rev. Septimus Drew cried, gripping the Beefeater’s arm as he worked himself up to his explosive denouement. But before the clergyman could reveal who shot whom, the door to the Rack & Ruin burst open, and the Yeoman Gaoler stormed in.

“Where’s Yeoman Warder Jones?” he demanded.

The Beefeater stood up.

“I’ve just seen the Komodo dragon running past the White Tower!” the Yeoman Gaoler shouted.

The Keeper of the Royal Menagerie was followed out of the door by the rest of the drinkers, who immediately abandoned their pints in order to see the spectacle. As soon as they reached the White Tower, they discovered that the giant lizard wasn’t the only creature to have escaped. Two howler monkeys were running across Tower Green, and judging by the stench that flooded the air, the zorilla was also on the loose. As he started after the monkeys, Balthazar Jones noticed that the door to the Brick Tower was wide open. Charging up the spiral steps, he reached the aviary and found that it was also open. All the birds had vanished, apart from the wide-eyed albatross sitting alone in the middle of the enclosure, its white head sunk into its body. The Beefeater ran down the stairs and searched the night sky. But all he saw was the sugar glider’s pale stomach as it sailed over his head like a tiny furry kite. Spotting the Duchess of York in the distance, he immediately headed after her. But sprinting towards him on their hind legs as he turned into Water Lane were the Jesus Christ lizards. He stopped for a moment, resting his hands on his knees as he caught his breath, watching the golden snub-nosed monkey turn into Mint Lane. As he shot clouds of panic-fumed breath into the night, the Komodo dragon lumbered past him, flicking its forked tongue. Turning to see where it had come from, he spotted the reclusive ringtail possums lying motionless on the cobbles. He ran over and knelt down beside them, taking each one in his arms. But no matter how often he ran a trembling hand across their silken heads, not one of them could be roused.
IT WASN’T UNTIL THE WATERY GLOW of a new morning appeared that Balthazar Jones finally scuffed his way up the Salt Tower’s spiral steps. Despite not having eaten since the previous lunchtime, he fetched just a glass of water from the kitchen before making his way upstairs. Too defeated for a bath, he lay on his side of the bed still in his uniform and closed his eyes. But he was kept from his dreams by images of the last frightful few hours he had spent trying to get the animals safely back into their enclosures.

He had gone after the howler monkeys first, unable to stand their demonic shrieks that pinned the Beefeaters’ wives to their beds in terror. He cornered the first one with the help of a sentry, whom the beast was attempting to scale, lured by his bearskin hat. The other three ran to Rev. Septimus Drew’s house, which he had forgotten to lock when he rushed back to fetch a torch. The Beefeater was relieved that the chaplain hadn’t been there to witness the destruction. The teapot for one was smashed, four dining-room chairs upended, and neat piles of documents in his study took to the air in a paper blizzard that momentarily suspended pursuit until vision was finally restored. After a diversion involving a freshly laundered cassock, the monkeys finally sprinted out of the front door, only to be corralled outside the Rack & Ruin by a number of Beefeaters who had joined the chase. The creatures were eventually coaxed back to the Devereux Tower with the help of cheese-and-pickle rolls scavenged from the pub.

Balthazar Jones then went to the aid of one of his colleagues who was in a standoff with the Jesus Christ lizards on Tower Green. Sensing a crisis as he approached, the creatures suddenly stood up on their hind legs and ran past the two men, their hands stretched out either side of them as they sought to maintain their balance during their ungainly green sprint. The pair chased them past Waterloo Barracks. They were eventually caught by two Beefeaters coming in the opposite direction in pursuit of the female lovebird, which had just hunted down its mate and savaged it, sending clouds of peach and green feathers drifting into the night. As ladders were erected to bring the sugar glider down from one of the White Tower’s window ledges, Balthazar Jones went in search of the zorilla, which, judging from the smell, was somewhere nearby. He found it asleep outside the Tower Café, its rank odour mingling with the stench of the discarded food in the bin outside. He then watched the Geoffroy’s marmosets, which had gathered on top of a cannon, declare a state of emergency as a group of Beefeaters smelling fiercely of beer slowly approached them with outstretched arms. The monkeys continued exposing themselves long after the men had fled, crimson beneath their beards.

As far as the birds had been concerned, it was a game of patience. After considerable effort, Balthazar Jones persuaded the Yeoman Gaoler to surrender his drippings. The man returned from his house with pieces of bread covered with mean scrapings, which Balthazar Jones scattered on the ground underneath the trees. The first to give in was one of the toucans, which he swiftly captured with a fishing net. And after one final lap of victory around the White Tower, even the female lovebird succumbed to the fatty temptation.

But the hanging parrot, lit up by the moon, refused to abandon its position on one of the plane trees, where it swung upside down with the nonchalance of a trapeze artist. As the rest of the Tower residents headed to their beds in defeat, Balthazar Jones tried a succession of succulent titbits in an attempt to coax it to the ground. When they failed to work, he finally reached into his pocket and sacrificed the Fig Roll he had taken from a packet in the Yeoman Gaoler’s kitchen when visiting the Etruscan shrew. But not even a biscuit made from sun-ripened Turkish figs could make the small bird surrender its illicit perch.

Eventually, he gave up on gastronomic entrapment and rested a ladder against the trunk of the tree. The bird watched him with one eye as he made his way up the rungs with the surefootedness of a rum-soaked sailor climbing a mast. Just as he came within arm’s reach of the bird, the creature performed a spectacular double somersault and dropped to the branch below. The Beefeater descended several rungs and stretched out his slender fingers. But the bird shut both eyes and plunged to the floor with the weight of a corpse. Just before hitting the ground, it snatched the Fig Roll and flew up to the White Tower roof, where it sat on a gold weathervane, swinging in the breeze as it showered Balthazar Jones with crumbs.
first thing he was aware of was the phone ringing on the bedside table next to him. He ignored it at first, pulling the covers over his head. Eventually it stopped, but started up again seconds later. He stuck out a hand from underneath the shabby blanket and picked up the receiver.

“Hello?” he croaked.

“Good morning, it’s Oswin Fielding. I’m at the Rack & Ruin. It’s already twenty past. You were meant to be here at nine.”

Assuring the equerry he was on his way, the Beefeater flung back the bedclothes and found his way to the bathroom. As he battled against the might of constipation, he remembered the forlorn bodies of the reclusive ringtail possums, and he wondered how he was going to explain their deaths to the equerry.

He had no doubt who was responsible for letting the animals loose: the same person whose white vest was hanging in his airing cupboard. His anger rose as he remembered the Ravenmaster pinning him up against the White Tower. He hadn’t trusted the man since their confrontation over the loss of Mrs. Cook’s tail when the family first arrived at the Tower eight years ago. Neither did he like the way the man treated his wife, a woman as thin as parchment who was so rarely seen in the Rack & Ruin that Hebe Jones once declared: “He shuts her up in a walnut.”

On his way out, Balthazar Jones looked at his creased uniform in the bedroom mirror, and regretted not having taken it off before going to sleep. He pulled on his hat over his tumultuous hair and headed down the stairs, apprehension turning his empty insides.

Shielding his eyes from the glare of the alabaster clouds on his way to the Rack & Ruin, he opened the tavern door and found relief in the beer-scented gloom. He ordered a cup of tea from the landlady, who refused to serve alcohol before ten o’clock, a custom started by one of her ancestors to ensure that all Tower residents were in charge of their faculties when emptying their piss-pots. Muttering his thanks to her for rounding up the fancy rats, he carried his tea past the empty tables to Oswin Fielding, who was peering at a file.

“There you are,” said the equerry, looking up. “I hear there was an incident last night.”

The Beefeater sat down opposite him in silence.

“When I came in this morning I spotted the possums sitting in one of the trees. The Chief Yeoman Warder told me all about last night’s mayhem. The only saving grace seems to be that none of the animals in the moat escaped, so the public should be none the wiser.”

Balthazar Jones thought of the pile of bodies on the cobbles of Water Lane. “I thought the Komodo dragon had killed the possums,” he found himself saying.

“They must have been playing dead. They’re fit as a fiddle now,” Oswin Fielding replied. He took off his spectacles and started cleaning them on a blue handkerchief.

“The Chief Yeoman Warder wondered whether you’d forgotten to lock the enclosures, but I told him that a man who hadn’t lost his tortoise in all these years wouldn’t be that careless.”

Balthazar Jones looked at the table.

“Any idea who let the animals loose?” the equerry continued, returning his glasses to his nose. “I don’t for a minute think that they managed to escape by themselves.”

The Beefeater sat back. “I’ve got my suspicions,” he said.

“Care to tell me who?” he asked.

“I haven’t got any proof.”

“Well, we’ll conduct a thorough enquiry to flush out the culprit,” said the equerry, turning a page in his file. “At least all the animals have been recaptured.”

The Beefeater’s thoughts immediately turned to the occupant of the White Tower weathervane, and he raised his cup to his lips.

“Now,” continued Oswin Fielding, “The reason why I called this meeting is to let you know that the Prime Minister of Guyana has just dispatched some giant otters to the Queen, which is rather annoying, I must say.”

Balthazar Jones stared at the courtier. “But we haven’t got any room for giant otters,” he protested.

“No one is happy about it, I can tell you. We’ll just have to put them in the penguin enclosure for the time being. Make sure you look after them. They’re an endangered species, like that Komodo dragon. How is it, by the way?”

“It’s fine. Just a little plump, that’s all.”
The equerry looked down at his file. “As long as it hasn’t eaten a small child, I wouldn’t worry about it.”
The Beefeater gazed out of the window wondering when he had last seen the Chief Yeoman Warder’s dog.
“Now, there’s one other thing I wanted to mention,” Oswin Fielding said.
Balthazar Jones started fiddling with a beer mat.
“There’s a story in the Swedish papers this morning about the giraffes being a gift from the King of Sweden,” the equerry continued. “What I can’t understand is that the Press Office said they got that information from you.”
The Beefeater looked away. “I happened to be carrying a swede at the time,” the Beefeater muttered.
“A Swede? Anyone in particular?” asked the equerry.
“The vegetable, not a Scandinavian.”
The man from the Palace squinted at Balthazar Jones. “Couldn’t you have just picked a country in Africa?” he asked. “We’ve already had a call from the King of Sweden’s office. I told them that the Press Office had got their wires crossed, so I’d avoid those ladies for a while if I were you. They’re not very happy.”
The courtier closed his file and sat back with a sigh. “How’s Mrs. Jones?” he asked.
There was no reply.
“Still hasn’t come back?”
Balthazar Jones looked out of the window. “No,” he replied eventually.
“Shame. My wife never did either.”

Once the two men had left, Ruby Dore cleared the table of their empty cups and gathered up the pieces of shredded beer mat. She vowed to go to bed early that night, having been up long past midnight finding the last of the fancy rats. She had almost given up hope when Rev. Septimus Drew ran up to her as she was looking in the bin outside the Tower Café, saying he had just seen two running past the Fusiliers’ Museum. More than an hour later, they had chased them through the doors of the Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula, left open by one of the Beefeaters during the mayhem. The rodents immediately darted underneath the organ, and the pair sat down on the front row of seats in despair. When the vermin reappeared in front of them and proceeded to shamelessly sink their teeth into the white linen altar cloth, the chaplain went to fetch that most unholy of lures: peanut butter.

Once the creatures were safely back in their cages in the Well Tower, Ruby Dore invited the clergyman into the Rack & Ruin, locking the door behind her lest the Beefeaters expected to be served. She reappeared from the cellar with a bottle of vintage champagne, which she had been saving for a special occasion that had never arrived. As she poured them both a glass, Rev. Septimus Drew looked at the canary asleep on its perch and said that he had always thought it such a shame that Canary Wharf had not been named after an infestation of tiny yellow birds as one might assume, but after the Spanish islands whose fruit had arrived there by the boatload. As she handed him his drink, the landlady knew that the special occasion had finally come.

Once she had finished her first glass, she revealed that she was studying for an Open University degree in history. She hadn’t told anyone, she said, watching his reaction closely, as she didn’t want people to think that she had ideas above her station. She had taken over the pub from her father without having given much thought to another career. But she had come to the conclusion after almost two decades behind the taps that there must be more to life than pouring Beefeaters pints.

Rev. Septimus Drew replied that he thought it a splendid idea, and had considered reading history at university himself, but theology had been a stronger calling. The landlady refilled his glass and as they sipped their champagne, they discussed the lives of several European monarchs including Ethelred the Unready, Pippin the Short, and George the Turnip Hoer.

When the bottle was empty, Ruby Dore finally found the courage to ask him the question that had recently perplexed her: why he had never married. Rev. Septimus Drew replied that he had only once met a woman whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, and who would find living in the Tower a privilege rather than a curse.
“What happened?” she asked.
“She doesn’t know,” he admitted. And he held Ruby Dore’s gaze for so long, she lowered her eyes to the bar with a blush.

• • •
RUBY DORE YAWNED as she stood at the sink washing Balthazar Jones’s and Oswin Fielding’s cups. As she looked down, she wondered when people would start to notice that she was pregnant. She had already decided to rebuff any enquiries about the father with the simple explanation that they were no longer together. It was a line she used when she broke the news to her parents. Her mother had remained silent for so long that Ruby Dore wondered whether she was still on the line. Barbara Dore then told her the truth: “I’m not ready to be a grandmother, but then again I wasn’t ready to be a mother.”

It was her father’s reaction that she had been more concerned about. Once again there was a moment’s silence on the line, this time as Harry Dore worked out that his daughter must have fallen pregnant while in Spain, having honed his mathematical skills during decades of Beefeaters attempting to defraud him. Swallowing the questions he wanted to ask, he offered her his congratulations and shouted to his second wife the exalted news that he was going to be a grandfather. When, several minutes after hanging up, the full ramifications of the situation dawned on him, he immediately called his daughter back. “For God’s sake, don’t let the Tower doctor handle the birth,” he urged. “I don’t think the kitchen lino is up to it.”

The landlady fetched the broom from the cupboard under the stairs and started working it in between the bar stools. When she opened the pub door to sweep out the dust, she noticed the mess left by the howler monkeys when they had been cornered the previous night. They had grabbed what they could as they fled from the home of Rev. Septimus Drew. She picked up a large sock bearing a snowman and a clerical collar, and then reached for the crumpled pieces of paper. As she walked back inside, she was struck by the familiarity of the handwriting. She smoothed down one of the pages on the bar, and it wasn’t long before she recognised the hand that had written out a recipe for treacle cake. But what she couldn’t understand was why the chaplain would be writing about the glory of rosebud nipples.

HEBE JONES SET DOWN HER SUITCASE in the hall. Slipping the keys she had just collected from the lettings agency back into her coat pocket, she set about exploring her new home. As she wandered from room to room she discovered to her dismay several things she had failed to notice when she agreed to rent the flat. As she stood in the living room that overlooked a main road, she realised how loud the traffic was. While the kitchen was much bigger than the one she was used to in the Salt Tower, the cooker was electric rather than gas, and the insides of the cupboards were covered in grime. She went into the bathroom and saw that the carpet curled up in discoloured corners under the sink. As she sat down on the lumpy bed used by countless strangers for the most intimate act of all, she wondered whether she would ever get used to sleeping alone.

She looked at the shabby 1970s dressing table in front of her, which she would never have chosen. Already missing the comfort of Valerie Jennings’s over-heated flat with the frilly tissue-box covers, she reminded herself that this would only be temporary. When the tenants’ lease ran out, she would be able to move back into their home in Catford, where the carpeted stairs rose in a straight line, the rooms were square rather than circular, and the neighbours didn’t even know her name, let alone her business.

However, the thought of returning home was not enough to defend her against the tide of misery that rose up around her, and she picked over the flotsam of her marriage. For years she and her husband had remained in a state of blissful delusion, seeing many more virtues in each other than really existed. While some spent the silences of their marriage imagining being in another’s arms, Hebe and Balthazar Jones had maintained a lifetime of conversation, both entirely convinced that they had picked the right one. But after the tragedy, a corrosive despair had worked its way into the bolts of their affection until the mechanism of their colossal love was unable to turn. And all she had left was its echo.

Eventually, the unfamiliarity of her surroundings drove her to her feet, and she walked back to the hall. She opened the front door and pulled it behind her. As she headed down the steps for the Lost Property Office, the harsh sound of it slamming followed her.

WHEN HEBE JONES ARRIVED, Valerie Jennings emerged from behind the shelves and asked how the flat was.

“It’s lovely,” Hebe Jones replied. “Thanks again for letting me stay with you for so long.”

She sat down at her desk and, working a silver letter-opener across each of the envelopes’ spines, opened the post to distract herself. The only things of interest were yet another thank-you letter from Samuel Crapper—this time for having reunited him with his corduroy jacket—and a list of members of the Society of Woodworkers who took on commissions. Hebe Jones glanced through the numerous pages, her heart sinking. When she thought of the stranger
who had lost the urn, it sank even further, and she dialled the first number. After the initial disappointment, she
dialed again, then continued down the list, enquiring whether they had ever worked with pomegranate wood. Just as
she had reached the bottom of the first page, she heard the clanking of the Swiss cowbell. Irritated at being
disturbed, she looked over to see whether Valerie Jennings was going to answer it. But she caught a glimpse of her
disappearing down one of the aisles carrying a set of golf clubs, listing like a ship with uneven ballast.

Standing at the original Victorian counter was a man in a long black leather coat. His hair had been grown to
counteract its unequivocal retreat from the top of his head, and was fashioned into a mean, frail ponytail that hung
limply down his back. Blooms of acne highlighted his vampire-white skin.

“Is this London Underground Lost Property Office?” he asked.

“Can I help you?” Hebe Jones asked.

The man placed his hands on the counter. “I left a diary on the Tube about a month ago. I’ve only just found out
that this place exists and was wondering whether you’ve got it. It’s got a black, hardback cover and is written in
green ink.”

“Just a minute.”

Hebe Jones rounded the corner and swiftly returned with the gigolo’s diary, which she slid across the counter with
afingertip.

“You didn’t read it, did you?” the man asked, putting it into his pocket.

“Heavens no,” she replied.

After washing her hands thoroughly, she returned to her desk, picked up the phone, and called the next number on
the list. “Is that Sandra Bell?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“My name’s Mrs. Jones. I was wondering whether you’ve ever worked with pomegranate wood?”

“I have done, as a matter of fact, but unfortunately I don’t have any left.”

Hebe Jones explained where she was calling from and that she was trying to trace the owner of an urn made from
the curious wood.

“I did make someone a box out of pomegranate, but I’ve no idea what it was for,” the woman replied. “The
gentleman just gave me the measurements and I got on with it as soon as I’d tracked down some wood. It’s not easy
to come by. But I can try and get in touch with him, if you like.”

“God delays, but does not forget,” thought Hebe Jones as she put down the phone. She looked over at Valerie
Jennings, who was standing next to the inflatable doll putting on her coat.

“I’m just going to the Danish Church,” she said, doing up her buttons.

Hebe Jones had suggested the place as a possible lead after Valerie Jennings came to a dead end in her attempts to
trace the owner of the safe. All the documents she found inside had been signed by a Niels Reinking. When she
called the shipping firm whose address was printed at the top of each one, she was told that he had left and it was
against company policy to give out personal details. After she tried the phone book in vain, Hebe Jones pointed out
to her that Reinking was a Danish name.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone Danish,” Valerie Jennings had said.

“Nor me,” Hebe Jones replied, adding that her mother had never allowed Danish bacon into the house, as
Denmark had surrendered to the Nazis after just two hours of occupation. Then she suggested trying the Danish
Church up the road in Regent’s Park. “You never know, someone might have heard of him.”

Before leaving the office, Valerie Jennings gave her lips another coat of Lilac Haze in the hope that she would
bump into Arthur Catnip on her way out. But it was disappointment rather than a tattooed ticket inspector that
accompanied her to the street. Wondering again why she hadn’t heard from him since their second lunch, she
thought what a fool she had been to mix up Edgar and Teddy Evans during her tale of the lost Antarctic boot. As she
approached the church, she cursed herself, explorers, and finally their forsaken footwear.

Reasoning that if God understood Danish, he would also understand the anguish of constricted bunions, she took
off her shoes and left them next to the umbrella stand. She padded up the cold aisle, grateful that neither big toe had
bored through her tights. Standing at the altar, she looked around, but failed to find any sign of life, so she sat down
on one of the pews to rest her feet. Opening the pamphlet she had picked up from the table at the entrance, she
started to read about the services the church offered to Danish sailors. But her thoughts immediately turned to Arthur
Catnip, and she wondered whether he had ever visited English chapels overseas, if such things existed, during his years in the Navy. Just as she was trying to find the resolve to stand up again, a side door opened and the pastor came out wearing a pair of jeans and a red sweater.

“You’re in luck, we’re not usually open at this time of the day. I’ve just popped in to catch up on some paperwork,” he said, coming to sit beside her. He looked down at her feet. Valerie Jennings followed his gaze, then quickly explained that she worked at London Underground Lost Property Office and had found something belonging to a Niels Reinking. “I was wondering whether you might know him,” she said.

The pastor gazed at the ceiling as he thought. “The name doesn’t ring a bell,” he said. “But I’ll ask around. I’m better at faces than names.”

He walked her to the door and watched as she forced her feet back into her shoes.

“Maybe I should try Jesus sandals,” Valerie Jennings muttered, and reached for the door handle.

Back in the Lost Property Office, she put on the kettle and updated Hebe Jones on her progress with the safe while waiting for the water to boil. As she reached for the teacups, the Swiss cowbell sounded. Valerie Jennings reached in and drew out its contents. First came a black cloak, followed by a breastplate, a plastic lightsaber, and finally a black helmet with a pronounced mouthpiece.

After thanking the woman, and wishing that everyone was as honest as she was, Valerie Jennings noted down the items in the ledgers. Once she was certain that she was alone, she picked up the helmet and pulled it on. As she was holding the lightsaber in front of her with both hands, she looked up and saw through the eye slits someone standing in front of her. She turned her head slightly and instantly recognised the confused features of Arthur Catnip.

“Is that Valerie Jennings?” he asked.

“It is,” came the muffled voice.

“I was wondering whether you would like to go to dinner tonight,” he said, keeping his distance from the weapon. The black helmet nodded.

“Would eight o’clock at the Hotel Splendid be okay?”

There was another nod.

The ticket inspector hesitated for a moment, then turned to leave. “May the Force be with you,” he called over his shoulder.

THE BATHROOM CURTAINS DRAWN tightly against the night, the Yeoman Gaoler hauled himself out of the tub. He stood on the mat rubbing his back with his towel, his japonicas swaying underneath the full moon of his belly. Once in his pajamas, he brushed his teeth, and such was his contentment he even gave them a floss to please his dentist.

Climbing into bed, he turned off the lamp and released the contented sigh of a silver-muzzled dog as he waited for the blissful uninterrupted sleep he had enjoyed ever since the chaplain had worked his magic. He had had little hope in the abilities of Rev. Septimus Drew, and had only asked for his help in an act of desperation. But the exorcism had been such an emphatic success that the Yeoman Gaoler, who had previously deemed religion to be a form of witchcraft, had even considered turning up for the chaplain’s service on Sunday.

The explosion sounded sometime after midnight,terrifying the odious ravens to such an extent that they simultaneously discharged a hail of droppings. The Yeoman Gaoler woke from his dreams, convinced he was in the grip of the heart attack the Tower doctor had warned him about. When the painful beating finally slowed, he swung his legs out of bed and staggered to the window. Rubbing a hole in the condensation with his fingers, he cupped his hands against the pane and peered through. Unable to make out anything in the darkness through the streaks, he hauled up the sash window and saw the shimmering form of a converted henhouse, minus its front door. Lying flat on his back amongst the splintered wood was a man in a plumed hat and velvet breeches, his face covered in soot. It took a while for the ghost of the doomed explorer to come round following the botched experiment. He slowly sat up, lamenting the state of his pearl-encrusted jacket. He then got to his feet, dusted himself down, and set about mending the door.

“That bastard Raleigh,” raged the Yeoman Gaoler and slammed down the window. He unhooked his dressing
gown from the back of the bedroom door and pulled it on. As he tied it around his waist, he cursed the useless chaplain, with his skinny white ankles, who had simply transplanted the problem outside his house. Gripping the wooden handrail, he made his way down the narrow stairs in his bare feet and headed along the hall to the kitchen to check on the Etruscan shrew after the commotion. He found his glasses, opened the cage, and carefully took the lid off the plastic house. But no amount of nudging the creature’s tiny ribs with his plump finger could make it reveal its pointed velvet nose.
Balthazar Jones carefully placed the Egyptian perfume bottle inside the cabinet and stepped back to admire it. It was a particularly fine sample taken from a light shower that had fallen the previous night. Giving the display a careful wipe with a duster, he ran his eyes over the other varieties, reading their labels with a collector’s fixation.

Closing the door on the wartime graffiti, he was halfway down the stairs thinking about breakfast when the phone rang. He picked up speed, his hand burning on the filthy rope handrail. But when he answered it, instead of his wife, he found a salesman on the line trying to sell him the genius of double-glazing.

He hung up, and sat down heavily on his side of the bed. While he knew that Hebe Jones wasn’t coming back, he still had the tormenting hope that she would get in touch. At one stage he had become obsessed with the thought that she would write, insisting that she had made a mistake in leaving. Several times a day he called in at the Byward Tower to check his pigeonhole, certain that if the letter hadn’t arrived with the postman, it would be hand-delivered. But as the weeks continued without a word, he became convinced that the only letter that would come would be from her solicitor. From that moment on, he refused to collect his mail, and so much built up that the Chief Yeoman Warden threatened to dispose of it if he didn’t take it away.

Sheltering his hands between his thighs from the draught, he looked around the room wondering what to do with his wife’s belongings. There, on the dressing table, was the colourful pot he had bought her on their honeymoon in which she kept her earrings. Hanging from one of the knobs on the chest of drawers were her necklaces that once swayed across her neat chest as she walked. And on top of the wardrobe was the box containing her wedding dress that she had refused to leave in the loft in their house in Catford, insisting it was the first thing she would grab in the event of a fire. Deciding that everything belonged exactly where it was, the Beefeater put on his uniform, and left the Salt Tower without breakfast, not having the stomach for it alone.

Entering the enclosure on the grass next to the White Tower, he looked for the reclusive ringtail possums, which had gone into shock the night they were released. As he hunted for them amongst the leaves, his mind turned to the man responsible for the treachery, whose vest was still hanging in his airing cupboard. Without any proof of his culpability, he doubted whether the Ravenmaster would ever have to account for his actions.

Eventually he found the secretive animals hiding at the back of their enclosure, only their magnificent coiled tails visible amongst the foliage. Satisfied that they had fully recovered from the trauma, he opened the wire door that led to the tiny sugar glider, a gift from the Governor of Tasmania. The pearl grey creature, which suffered from depression when left alone, immediately opened its huge brown eyes. After teaching it to climb the little ladder he had made for it, he tickled its fur with a feather shed by one of the toucans. And after they had engaged in a mutually enjoyable game of hide-and-seek, he fed it pieces of fresh fruit to satisfy its addiction until it fell asleep in his hands.

Leaving the nocturnal creatures to their dreams, he headed for number seven Tower Green and looked up at the White Tower weathervane. He stared at the emerald dot still swinging upside down in the breeze and turned away in frustration. At the same moment, he felt what he recognised as a parrot indiscretion land on his shoulder. Furiously wiping his uniform with a tissue, he pressed on through the crowds of tourists that had started to seep in. After knocking on the pale blue door, he stood surveying the clouds as he waited. Several moments later, he rapped again. Suspecting that the Yeoman Gaoler was in, he took off his hat, bent down, and looked through the mail slot. The man was sitting on the bottom of the stairs in his pajamas, his head in his hands. Slowly his fingers opened, and two eyes looked at Balthazar Jones.

“Open the door. I’ve got some more crickets for the Etruscan shrew,” the Beefeater called.

The Yeoman Gaoler approached the letterbox and bent down.

“Just pass them through,” he replied.

As the Beefeater began to feed the plastic bag through the door, he was suddenly gripped by suspicion. Snatching it back out again, he declared: “I think it might be easier if I give it to you. It doesn’t seem to fit.”

The Yeoman Gaoler opened the door just wide enough to get his hand through. Ignoring the plump outstretched
fingers, Balthazar Jones leant a shoulder against the wood and pushed. “If it’s all right with you, I think I’ll just check on the shrew while I’m here.”

Once Balthazar Jones had got past the Yeoman Gaoler, a feat that required an ungentlemanly tussle, he walked straight down the hall to the kitchen. Placing his hat on the table, he opened the cage, reached inside, and lifted the lid off the tiny plastic house. He gave the creature a gentle prod. It failed to stir. He poked it again, but it was useless.

Turning to the Yeoman Gaoler he asked: “Any idea why it’s not moving?”

The Yeoman Gaoler’s eyes slid to the other side of the room, then returned to his visitor with a look of infinite innocence. “It’s having a nap?” he suggested.

Balthazar Jones reached inside, drew out the creature by its tail, and held it up in front of him, where it swung as lifeless as a hypnotist’s watch. “So when did it die?” he demanded.

Sitting down, the Yeoman Gaoler ran a hand through his hair and confessed that it hadn’t stirred for almost a week. The two men looked at the stiffened corpse in silence.

“We’ll just have to tell everyone it’s gone into hibernation,” Balthazar Jones decided. “And in the meantime you’ll have to find another.”

The Yeoman Gaoler looked at him in defeat. “I don’t think they have Etruscan shrews in England,” he pointed out. But Balthazar Jones ignored him, and let himself out.

As he walked towards the moat to feed the rest of the animals, the Beefeater remembered collecting the Queen’s gift from the President of Portugal, and their pitifully slow journey across the city together listening to Phil Collins’s Love Songs. He thought of the night it had spent on the old dining table on the top floor of the Salt Tower, unknown to Hebe Jones, while he tried to think of the best person to look after it. And he remembered its pointed velvet nose that no longer quivered as it swung by its tail before the Yeoman Gaoler. He passed through Byward Tower and stood on the bridge over the moat. But not even the sight of the enormous queue outside the fortress waiting to see Her Majesty’s collection of exotic beasts lifted his mood.

REV. SEPTIMUS DREW FILLED UP the orange watering can in the bathroom, then carried it to his workshop dedicated to the extermination of rattus rattus. It had been several weeks since he sat at the table with the Anglepoise light, toiling until the early hours on his latest apparatus aimed at bringing a swift and irrevocable end to a life nourished by his tapestry kneelers. The change had not come about because of a decrease in the whiskered population—which continued to discharge its droppings throughout the chapel without the slightest blush—but out of respect for Ruby Dore’s unfathomable affection for the vermin.

As he watered the anemic spider plants, in a state of collapse from lack of attention, his thoughts turned again to the landlady’s sudden froideur. After the hours they had spent together in the Rack & Ruin following the recapture of the fancy rats, he had returned home high with exaltation. It wasn’t the vintage champagne that had put him into a state of grace, though the year was certainly exceptional, but the conviction that Ruby Dore was without a doubt the most sublime woman he had ever met.

As they had sat alone in the tavern, the canary’s head long tucked under its wing, the landlady had told him the most fascinating tale about Thomas Hardy’s heart, which he had never heard before despite his lifelong passion for Westminster Abbey. As the landlady poured him another glass, she revealed that the author had stipulated in his will his desire to be buried in his home county of Wessex. However, after his death in 1928, the government had insisted that the national treasure be buried in the Abbey alongside the other famous poets. An undignified row broke out, after which Hardy’s heart was removed to be buried at Stinsford and given to his wife. The rest of his body was cremated and ceremonially entombed in the celebrated Abbey. However, legend had it that the heart was placed in a biscuit tin and put in the garden shed for safekeeping, only to be found by the household cat, who consumed the delicacy. It was said that on discovering the atrocity, the undertaker promptly wrung Cobweb’s neck, and placed its body in the casket before it was buried. When the landlady had finished her tale, it was all the chaplain could do to stop himself picking up her soft, pale hand and kissing the back of it in admiration.

But despite those intimate early hours spent with only the sticky wooden bar top separating them, the following evening Ruby Dore had acted as if they were little more than strangers. Every day since, no matter when he arrived at the bar, he would find himself the last to be served, the greatest indignity to befall an Englishman. Whenever the Beefeaters moved away to find a table, he would linger to talk to her, but the landlady would either pick up her knitting and start thrusting her needles, or disappear to change the barrels.
As he watched the soil greedily soak up the water, he wondered again what he had done to offend her, but was at a loss as to what it might be. Unable to stand the uncertainty any longer, he descended the battered wooden stairs, returned the watering can to the cupboard below the kitchen sink, and drew back the net curtain. As he feared, the chairwoman of the Richard III Appreciation Society was sitting like a sentinel on the bench by the White Tower, her knees pressed tightly together and the breeze lifting her gunmetal hair. Nevertheless, the clergyman grabbed his keys, and strode out of the house.

He made it as far as the Bloody Tower before he felt a tap on the shoulder. He turned round, and before the woman had a chance to speak, he held up his hand and told her that there was nothing she could say to convince him of the merits of the hunchback king. “If it’s a Richard III apologist you’re after, try the Yeoman Gaoler. He’s convinced that the Duke of Buckingham murdered the two little princes. He lives over there,” he added, pointing in the direction of number seven Tower Green.

As he continued towards the tavern, he felt a second tap on his shoulder. Assuming he still hadn’t shaken off the chairwoman, he turned swiftly to tell her that he was engaged in a matter of utmost importance. But standing next to him was the Keeper of Tower History, wringing his covetous fingers.

“Well if you do see him, tell him that a couple of oryx have just arrived,” he said.

Rev. Septimus Drew continued easing his way through the tourists. Passing the “Private” sign at the top of Water Lane, he pushed open the door of the Rack & Ruin. A crowd of Beefeaters stood in captivated awe around a table at which Dr. Evangeline Moore and the Ravenmaster were engrossed in a game of Monopoly started the previous evening. Since the game’s ban had been lifted, the Tower doctor hadn’t lost a single game, all of which she had played with the threepenny bit. After each win, during which the general practitioner would seize property with the ruthlessness of a bailiff, her next opponent would insist on playing with the coin that still bore the scars of having been lodged inside a flaming plum pudding. But nothing could convince the doctor to surrender the threepenny bit.

The chaplain approached the bar, and, when he was finally served, ordered a pint of Scavenger’s Daughter. But his choice of beverage did nothing to mellow the landlady, who silently slid his change towards him through the puddles of beer on the bar. She returned to her stool, picked up her knitting, and lowered her head. Rev. Septimus Drew watched as each furious stitch was dispatched onto the other needle the instant it was formed. He set down his pint, looked around him, and leaned forward. “May I have a word with you in private?” he muttered.

Ruby Dore looked up, said nothing for a moment, then replied: “I’ll meet you in the Well Tower in a minute. You’d better go before me or the gossip will be unbearable.”

As the chaplain waited in the gloom with his back to the fancy rats, he tried to keep his mind off the gruesome scrabbling by thinking about the magnificent carrots the retired ladies of the night were growing in the kitchen garden. It wasn’t long before the landlady entered, closing the door behind her with such force that the rodents fled to their burrows. She reached inside her jeans pocket, pulled out a piece of paper, and offered it to him. “I think you might have lost this,” she said. “One of the howler monkeys got hold of it when they ransacked your house and dropped it outside the pub.”

Rev. Septimus Drew unfolded it and started to read. Instantly recognising his own prose, he quickly folded it up again, and pushed it deep into his cassock pocket. He then told her of his passion for creative writing, inspired by his widowed mother’s love affair. He explained that he had attempted all other literary genres, but the country’s leading publishing houses had banned him from sending any more submissions. And he added that every penny he received went to a shelter he had set up to help prostitutes find a more wholesome means of employment and stop peddling their self-destructive love.

But the succulence of the ladies’ cabbages was not enough to appease Ruby Dore. She informed him that as a clergyman he had no place to be writing about rosebud nipples, and that he was putting not only the reputation of the Church in jeopardy, but also that of the Tower.

“Why aren’t men ever who they say they are?” she finally hurled at him as she headed for the door, her ponytail swinging. As he stood alone in the dark, her words echoed with such volume that he no longer heard the gruesome sound of gnawing coming from the enclosure behind him.

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FROM UNDER HER LUSTROUS LASHES, Valerie Jennings watched as Hebe Jones turned the corner to answer the call of the
Swiss cowbell. She got to her feet, hoisted up the waistband of her floral skirt, and walked over to the bookshelves. As she searched the titles of the obscure nineteenth-century novelist Miss E. Clutterbuck for something with which to escape the world, it struck her as strange that the only ticket inspector ever to discover the books was Arthur Catnip. Her mind turned once more to the last time she had seen him: on the steps of the Hotel Splendid, where he had risen to his toes and given her a goodnight kiss.

There had been no time after work to go home and change for dinner. Instead, she had made her way to the dress section of the Lost Property Office and rummaged through the racks with frantic fingers. Eventually, she found a black frock with three-quarter-length sleeves still with a label on, which she immediately snipped off. She then hunted in the handbag section for something to match it and eventually found a black clutch with a large diamante clasp that closed with a satisfying snap. Scrabbling through the drawer of abandoned perfumes, she deliberated over Evening Sensation and Mystic Musk. Unable to choose between the two, she decided on both, and stood with her eyes closed as the heady precipitation descended upon her in a fragrant confusion. She opened the drawer below and found amongst the necklaces a string of cream pearls. Noticing that the diamante clasp matched the one on the bag, she put it on with tremulous fingers. In front of the lavatory mirror, she released her dark curls from their usual mooring at the back of her head, and they tumbled to her shoulders.

Standing on the meticulously swept steps of the Hotel Splendid, pitched forward by the shoes that forced her toes into two red triangles, she adjusted her freshly polished spectacles as she waited. When the tattooed ticket inspector arrived, she almost failed to recognise him as his hair had been shorn into what appeared to be a crop circle.

As they entered the dining room, she saw that it was even grander than the hotel’s Victorian conservatory filled with orchids where Hebe Jones took her for lunch on her birthday. As the waiter pulled back her chair, she noticed that theirs was the only table with yellow roses. Arthur Catnip sat down opposite her and commented on how lovely she looked, and she no longer felt the humiliation of wearing a stranger’s dress that didn’t quite fit.

When their starters arrived, the ticket inspector looked at Valerie Jennings’s oysters and pointed out that one of the few things he remembered from science lessons was that the shellfish could change sex several times during its lifespan. Valerie Jennings replied that the closest she had ever got to a sex change was going to a hospital to distribute Christmas presents dressed as Santa, and having to use the gents’ lavatory so as not to confuse the children.

As the main courses were served, Valerie Jennings glanced uneasily at Arthur Catnip’s goose and told him how one had attacked her while she was feeding the ducks in the park. The ticket inspector recalled the time when he was six and ate all the bread his mother had given him for the ducks. His brother subsequently pushed him into the pond, and the park keeper had to pull him out by his hair when he sank.

While Valerie Jennings was waiting for her Danish apple cake, Arthur Catnip mentioned that if she ever fancied getting out her Santa suit again, Denmark was the place to go, as it held an international Father Christmas convention every summer. As they sipped their dessert wine, Valerie Jennings replied that she would never go to Denmark, as they had surrendered to the Nazis after just two minutes of occupation during the war.

The couple only realised it was time to leave when the waiter approached and told them that the restaurant would shortly be closing. They stood on the immaculate steps, oblivious to the bitterness of the night as the uniformed doorman hailed them each a taxi. When the first cab pulled up, Arthur Catnip wished her goodnight, then rose several inches and planted a kiss on her lips. It sent her into such a state of rapture she remembered nothing about her journey back home.

Cursing herself for muddling the time Denmark had taken to surrender, Valerie Jennings selected a book, returned to her desk, and slipped it into her handbag. As she sat down, the phone rang. “London Underground Lost Property Office. How may I help you?” she said in the voice of a 1930s radio announcer.

A heavily accented voice asked whether he was speaking to Valerie Jennings.

“You are indeed.”

The parson of the Danish Church explained that it had taken a bit of work, but he had managed to track down someone by the name of Niels Reinking. “I have no idea whether he’s the man you’re looking for, but I have his address. Maybe you could write to him,” he added.

“What a good idea,” she replied. “I’ve always thought it such a pity that the art of letter writing is no longer revered. What is it?”

Valerie Jennings had no intention of wasting time subjecting herself to the vagaries of Royal Mail. As soon as she put down the phone, she reached for her A to Z, and fetched her navy coat from the stand next to the inflatable doll.
Less than an hour later, she was standing outside an Edwardian house that rose gracefully to the sky, its front door flanked by two laurel bushes. She pressed the bell and glanced through the bay window as she waited. A blue-eyed man with a snowdrift of hair answered the door.

“May I help you?” he enquired, wiping his fingers on a rag covered in paint smudges.

“Are you Niels Reinking?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m Valerie Jennings from London Underground Lost Property Office. I was wondering whether you might have lost something.”

Niels Reinking put his hands on his hips. “I’m always losing things. Usually it’s my glasses, which my wife points out are on the top of my head. You haven’t found my chequebook by any chance, have you?” he asked, looking hopeful.

“It’s actually something a bit larger than that. It’s a safe.”

He looked at her for a moment, unable to speak. “I think you’d better come in,” he said eventually.

Valerie Jennings sat on the leather sofa in the drawing room looking at the curious paintings on the walls, while Niels Reinking disappeared into the kitchen. He returned with a pot of fresh coffee, which he poured with trembling fingers, then sat back in the matching armchair. Several years ago, he explained, the house was burgled and the thieves managed to make off with the safe. He should, of course, have followed the manufacturer’s instructions and bolted it to the wall, but he had never got round to it. Although he had reported the break-in to the police, he had heard nothing about it since, and had completely given up hope of getting the safe back. “And now you say you’ve found it?” he asked.

Valerie Jennings pushed her glasses up her nose. “A safe was left on the Tube a number of years ago, and we’ve just managed to open it,” she said. “But in order to verify that it’s yours, I need to ask you what was in it.”

Niels Reinking looked at the cream rug in front of him. “Well, it was a while ago,” he said, “but I suspect there would have been some documents relating to the shipping company I once worked for. I’ve been wondering where they’d got to. There was some cash in there too, which my wife quaintly referred to as her running away fund. Needless to say we’re still together. But I’m not bothered about any of that. What I’d like to know is whether there was a manuscript inside.”

“There was something of that nature in it,” Valerie Jennings replied.

The kiss that subsequently landed on her cheek startled her to such an extent that the coffee she was holding slopped into its saucer. Niels Reinking returned to his seat, then told her the story of the manuscript, which was of such historical significance to his home country that he had been unable to insure it. Back in the seventeenth century, one of his ancestors called Theodore Reinking had been so incensed by Denmark’s diminished fortunes following the Thirty Years’ War that he wrote a book entitled *Dania ad exertos de perfidia Suecorum*, or “From the Danes to the world on the treachery of the Swedes.” The defamed country promptly arrested him, and after many years in prison, offered him the choice of decapitation or eating his work. He made the book into a sauce, duly consumed it, and his life was spared. Once released, he returned home. But while he was thin, bearded, and foul smelling, victory was all his. The author produced from his mouldering stocking the most damning section of his work, which he had torn out and stuffed down his undergarment. The relic was highly revered by his kingdom not only as testament to the superior cunning of the Danes, but also for being part of the only book in the world ever to have been cooked and consumed, which, explained Niels Reinking, was a great source of national pride.

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*WHEN HEBE JONES ARRIVED* at the coffee shop, Tom Cotton was reading a newspaper on the front of which was a grainy photograph purporting to be of a bearded pig taken in the Scottish Highlands. She took off her turquoise coat and sat down, asking how his day had been.

“I had to go to Birmingham by helicopter to deliver a heart to one of the hospitals,” he said, folding his paper.

She tore open a sachet of sugar and poured it into the coffee he had ordered for her. “Whose was it?” she asked, looking at him as she stirred.

“A man who’d died in a car accident.”

Hebe Jones lowered her eyes. “At least they know why he died.” There was a long silence.

Eventually, when she found her voice again, Hebe Jones recounted that terrible, terrible day. The night before her
world ended, she had gone into Milo’s room to wish him goodnight as usual. He was lying in bed reading a book on Greek mythology that had belonged to his grandfather. After placing it on his bedside table, she pulled the duvet up to his chin and kissed him on the forehead. As she walked to the door, he asked who her favourite Greek god was. She turned, looked at her son, and replied in an instant: “Demeter, goddess of fertility.”

“What’s Daddy’s?” Milo then asked.

Hebe Jones thought for a minute. “I suppose it would have to be Dionysus, god of wine, merriment, and madness. What about you?”

“Hermes.”

“Why?”

“One of his symbols is a tortoise,” replied the boy.

The following morning, when Milo still hadn’t appeared for breakfast, she walked down the spiral staircase and opened his door. “A hungry bear doesn’t dance,” she said.

When he failed to stir, she approached his bed, and gave him a gentle shake. But still he didn’t wake. She then shook him more forcefully, which was when she started shouting for her husband. When the paramedics arrived, they had to pull him away, as he was still trying to revive the boy. They followed the ambulance to hospital, the only time in her life that she had ever seen her husband jump a red light.

It was a young Indian doctor who had told them that he was dead. After Hebe Jones collapsed, she came round in one of the cubicles, where the doctor informed her that she had to stay until she was fit enough to leave. And when she returned to the Salt Tower no longer a mother, she lay on her son’s bed for the rest of the day weeping as the ashes of her life rained down on her.

An expert pathologist examined Milo’s heart to find out why he had died. When the man stood up at the inquest, he announced that in about one in every twenty cases of sudden cardiac death no definite cause of death could be found, despite a specialist having examined the heart. This was called sudden arrhythmic death syndrome. He cleared his throat and said that a cardiac arrest was brought on by a disturbance in the heart’s rhythm. In some cases such deaths were caused by a group of relatively rare diseases that affected the electrical functioning of the heart, which could only be detected in life and not post-mortem. Some had no symptoms, he said, while others had blackouts. Some youngsters died in their sleep or on waking, others while exerting themselves or suffering from emotional stress. Before he sat down he added that twelve young people died from sudden cardiac death each week.

When the coroner had heard from all the witnesses, he raised his eyes from his paperwork and announced that Milo Jones had died from natural causes. It was then that Hebe Jones stood up and screamed: “What’s so natural about a child dying before his parents?”
As Balthazar Jones walked past the White Tower, he picked off an emerald feather that had landed on the front of his uniform. Refusing to look at its upside-down owner, he continued his journey across the fortress to number seven Tower Green, ignoring the common variety of sticky drizzle that had started to fall. He knocked on the door, and as he waited for it to open, he scratched the back of his left knee, ravished by fungus.

When the Yeoman Gaoler eventually answered the door, Balthazar Jones immediately detected the amber notes of gentlemen’s aftershave. As he followed him down the hall, he looked through the open door of the sitting room and spotted the chairwoman of the Richard III Appreciation Society perched on the edge of the chaise longue, a teacup clutched to her knees and her gunmetal hair in uproar.

The Yeoman Gaoler carefully closed the kitchen door behind them. He approached the table, opened the cage, and, with the flamboyance of a stage magician, took the lid off the tiny plastic house. Balthazar Jones peered inside. For a moment he was unable to speak. “But it’s twice the size of the old one,” he said, incredulous.

There was a pause.

The Yeoman Gaoler scratched the back of his neck. “It was all I could get my hands on in the circumstances,” he said. “There are only so many hedgerows a man can frisk.”

There was silence as the two men stared at the creature’s colossal hips.

Eventually Balthazar Jones sighed. “If anyone asks, you’ll just have to say you overfed it,” he said, and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

As he passed the scaffold site on Tower Green, the Beefeater looked at his watch. There was still a while to go before the tourists would be let in. He made his way to the Brick Tower, squinting to keep the rain out of his eyes, and climbed the spiral staircase, wiping his face with his handkerchief. He sat down next to the wandering albatross that mated for life, took off his hat, and leant against the cold wall. The movement caused a cloud of white feathers to take to the air, and they pirouetted on their way down, eventually settling on his navy trousers. The melancholic bird, which was losing its shimmering plumage, moved its ugly feet several paces sideways towards the Beefeater. It sat pressed against his thigh, protecting its pink patches from the draught skimming across the floorboards.

With the back of his fingers, the Beefeater stroked its head, as soft as silk. Savouring the time that he had his charges all to himself, he looked up at the King of Saxony bird of paradise, whose blue brow feathers were used by grey songbirds to decorate their courtship bowers. His eyes turned to the female lovebird, its green and peach feathers still puffed up in victory after savaging its mate, and his thoughts turned to the Yeoman Gaoler’s dishevelled lady guest, who must have stayed the night to be at the fortress so early. And he knew he would never want to wake up with anyone other than Hebe Jones.

As he continued to stroke the albatross’s head, he gazed at the rectangle of dirty sky in the window opposite him and wondered who was holding the hand of the woman he no longer deserved. He hoped that whoever it was appreciated her many virtues that he had spent most of their marriage counting, and that he realised that her great obstinacy was something to be admired rather than judged. But he knew that no one would be able to love her as much as he did.

The Beefeater jumped at the sound of the oak door opening, and the toucans instantly took to the air, carving multi-coloured circles with their alluring beaks, believed by the Aztecs to be made from rainbows. He turned his head to see Rev. Septimus Drew standing in the doorway.

“There you are,” the chaplain said, peering at Balthazar Jones through the fencing. “I thought you should know that a herd of wildebeest has just arrived. The Chief Yeoman Warder has called Oswin Fielding to get him to take them away.”

There was a pause as both men looked at each other.

“Can I come inside?” the clergyman asked.

“As long as you don’t make any sudden movements. It frightens the birds.”
The chaplain opened the wire door with his long, holy fingers, and carefully closed it again behind him. He gazed up in wonder at the birds with the colourful bills and deafening shrieks beating crazed circles in the air. Eventually, there was a thud of scaly, grey feet as they landed next to the lovebird, its jewel-coloured head cocked to one side as it peered at the clergyman with the scrutiny of a judge.

Balthazar Jones took a handful of sunflower seeds out of his tunic pocket and offered them to the chaplain. “If you hold these next to your shoulder, the lovebird will come and sit on it,” he said.

Rev. Septimus Drew took the seeds and sat with his back against the opposite wall, his excessively long legs stretched out in front of him. It wasn’t long before the lovebird landed on the clergyman’s shoulder in a flash of green and peach, and started to feed in nervous beakfuls. Once it had finished, it inched its way towards the chaplain’s face and proceeded to rub its head against his neck.

“It likes you,” the Beefeater said.

“At least somebody does,” Rev. Septimus Drew replied. “What’s wrong with that one?”

The Beefeater looked down at the albatross. “It doesn’t like being separated from its mate,” he replied.

There was a long silence as each man’s thoughts were blown into the same dark corner.

“How long has Hebe been gone? A month?” asked the chaplain.

Balthazar Jones nodded.

“Is she coming back?”

“No.”

There was silence.

“What have you done to try and persuade her?”

The Beefeater didn’t reply.

“Isn’t it worth trying to change her mind?” asked Rev. Septimus Drew. “If she were my wife, I’d spend the rest of my life trying to get her back.”

The Beefeater continued to look at his hands. Seduced by the intimacy of the birds, he eventually replied: “I don’t know how to love anymore.”

There was a pause.

“Try showing her some of the love you give to the animals,” the clergyman said. There was a flutter of wings, and the green and peach bird returned to its perch. Rev. Septimus Drew looked at his watch, got to his feet, and dusted himself down. As the chaplain opened the aviary door, the Beefeater turned his head and asked: “So whose bullet was it in the Rack & Ruin’s bar?”

The clergyman stopped and looked at him. “I don’t know, I was making it up as I went along. I was trying to cheer you up,” he replied, and the only sound that followed was the echo of his large feet on the ancient spiral staircase.

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As Hebe Jones pulled down the shutter, marking the sacred hour of elevenses, she felt the weight of dread in her empty stomach. Over the weeks she had considered bringing in her own snack to head off the mid-morning thunder that rolled beneath her blouse. But she had dismissed the idea as too cruel to a woman whose marvellous girth prevented her escaping the day’s torments by clambering inside the magician’s box. Bracing herself for another quartered apple, she wiped off the dust that had settled on the urn. Valerie Jennings approached with a cup and saucer giving off the undeniable bergamot and citrus scent of Lady Grey, as well as a small plate bearing a homemade rock cake of sufficient heft to start a landslide. Once she had finished staring at it, Hebe Jones looked over at her colleague, who had returned to her seat. Not only was she also drinking proper tea, but she had in her hand a rock cake of similar bulk. She glanced at Valerie Jennings again and noticed that she was no longer wearing makeup. Her eyes then travelled down to the woman’s footwear, and she saw that her colleague had returned to wearing her flat black shoes.

Hebe Jones had avoided all mention of the tattooed ticket inspector as each day passed without word from him. Initially she had shared Valerie Jennings’s optimism whenever the Swiss cowbell rang, and they would look at each other in silent hope that it was him. Eventually a black cloud of despair drifted into the office and remained over Valerie Jennings as a result of so many disappointments. She had begun to show such reluctance to go to the counter
that Hebe Jones had taken it upon herself to answer the clanking as often as she could.

“Lovely rock cake,” Hebe Jones said.

“Thanks.”

“Any idea how you’re going to spend the reward that the owner of the safe gave you?” Valerie Jennings looked at the cheque propped up against the Oscar statuette, which Niels Reinking had given her when he came to collect the safe. “I haven’t really thought about it,” she replied.

When elevenses were over, Hebe Jones suggested a game of Battleship to help get them through the morning, and handed Valerie Jennings a piece of paper with two grids already drawn on it before she could refuse. By lunchtime she found herself in the extraordinary position of having sunk her colleague’s entire fleet. She then fetched her the box set of theatrical facial hair. But not even the sudden arrival of her favourite Abraham Lincoln beard could tempt Valerie Jennings into trying it on.

Not knowing how else to cheer her, Hebe Jones looked at her watch and got up to meet Tom Cotton. As she stood buttoning up her coat, the phone rang. She turned round, hoping that Valerie Jennings would answer it so she wouldn’t be late, but saw her disappearing down one of the aisles carrying a violin case. She sighed and picked it up.

“Is that Mrs. Jones?” came a voice.

“It is.”

“This is Sandra Bell. You called me about an urn made from pomegranate wood.”

Hebe Jones immediately sat down. “Did you manage to find the man’s number?” she asked, fiddling with the telephone cord.

“I did, but unfortunately I haven’t been able to reach him. Maybe he’s gone away. Would you like his number so you can try yourself? I’ve got his address too, if you need it.”

Once she had hung up, Hebe Jones put the urn into her handbag and left a note for Valerie Jennings explaining where she was going. With the hint of a stoop she had acquired from the weight of her son’s and husband’s absences, she walked to the Tube station and managed to find an empty seat in the carriage. She spent the journey clutching her handbag, hoping that she would finally be able to reunite the urn with its owner.

Eventually she found the house, built in the 1950s to fill in the gap that the Blitz had left in a row of Victorian terraces. Pushing open the metal gate, she looked at the daffodils flanking the path and wondered whether those on the Salt Tower roof had flowered. She reached up and pressed the bell with a gloved hand, and felt the cold pierce her tights as she waited. When there was still no answer, she cupped her hands against the window and peered inside. There, in an armchair, was an elderly man asleep in front of the television. She knocked gently on the pane, causing the man to jump. He looked at her and she offered him a meek smile. Hauling himself to his feet, he came to open the door.

“Yes?” Reginald Perkins asked, his thin lips just above the steel door chain.

Hebe Jones looked at the old man, willing him to be the owner. “My name’s Mrs. Jones, and I work at London Underground Lost Property Office. We’ve found a wooden urn with a plaque bearing the name Clementine Perkins. I was wondering whether it might be yours.”

He remained silent for so long, Hebe Jones wondered whether the man had heard her. A solitary tear shone behind his smudged spectacles.

“You’ve found her?” he eventually managed to say.

While Hebe Jones unzipped her handbag, Reginald Perkins fumbled with the chain and opened the door. Reaching out hands that trembled like sparrows, he took the urn, and raised it to his lips that had no one left to kiss.

As he made tea in the kitchen, Hebe Jones waited on the sofa, grateful for the warmth of the gas fire. The living room had passed unscathed through decades of decorating fashions and retained the timid wallpaper it had first been dressed in. On the mantelpiece was an old black-and-white photograph of a young couple whose smiles bore the invincibility of new love as they stood in the church doorway fresh from the altar.

Hebe Jones spotted traces of Clementine Perkins around the room: the framed tapestry of a vase of flowers she had made hanging on the wall; a pink button in a china ashtray that she had not got round to sewing back on; and a coaster bearing her initial, which had since been used by her mourners.

Passing Hebe Jones her cup, Reginald Perkins lowered his brittle frame into his chair, placed his hands on the armrests, and began to tell the tale of Clementine Perkins’s extraordinary journey.
They had first met as children while queuing for their ration of sugar just after the war. Their mothers forged a friendship as they waited, bonded by the unforeseen difficulties of suddenly having their husbands home. The youngsters were left to play with each other when the women met to swap stories about the stranger in the house whom the children had long forgotten and now had to call Daddy.

Years later, the mothers lost touch when the Perkins family moved. But the distance was not enough to fell the friendship that had developed between their offspring. Unwilling to suffer the delays of the postal service, the teenagers sent each other notes via the milkman, who, recently married himself, understood the agonies of the love-afflicted. All went well for a while, until he started to confuse the notes given to him by the two lovers with those from his other customers. Before long housewives for miles were cursing the besotted milkman with his scribbled outpourings of devotion left on their doorsteps with the wrong order, while the lovers struggled to understand the romantic subtext of a request for an extra pint of milk.

The wedding was a small affair, and by the end of the year Clementine Perkins was pregnant. Two further children followed, and they lived a life of suburban contentment. Eventually, they both took early retirement in order to spend more time together, and their biggest pleasure was taking day trips to see England’s historical treasures. But as old age approached, Reginald Perkins was seized by a secret dread of being separated from his wife, and he would look at her in the garden from the living-room window, wondering which would be worse: dying first or second.

He still hadn’t made up his mind when he found her collapsed in the bathroom during a holiday to Spain, which they had taken to lift her spirits during the gloom of winter. He flew home in silence, his wife’s remains in his blue holdall on the empty seat next to him. For months he refused to leave their home, and no amount of begging by his children could prise him from her ashes.

One afternoon, as he was sitting in his armchair, he could no longer stomach the poison of loneliness. So he went into the kitchen, made some fish paste sandwiches, and put them into his holdall, along with the urn. He then made his way to Hampton Court Palace, the next stately home he and his wife had planned to visit.

It was the first of many places that he and Clementine Perkins visited following her death, and suddenly his life had meaning again. But, while returning from a trip to Kew Palace, he fell asleep on the Tube, lulled by the heat and the rhythm of the carriages. When he woke, he discovered someone had taken the bag containing his wife’s remains, and he sank into a decline.

“My greatest fear was having to face her in heaven, knowing what I’d done,” he said, a tear running down his sunken cheek. “Where was it found?”

Hebe Jones put down her tea that had gone cold as she listened. “On the Central Line,” she replied. “It’s not unusual for thieves to abandon things once they realise they’re of no value to them. Why, if you don’t mind my asking, was your wife’s death not registered?”

Reginald Perkins took out a white handkerchief and wiped his cheek. “We registered it in Spain,” he said, returning it to his trouser pocket. “You don’t have to do it here as well. What am I going to do with a certificate telling me she’s dead?”

There was a pause.

“The wood’s beautiful,” said Hebe Jones.

His eyes returned to the urn. “They gave me such a wretched thing to carry Clementine home in. I couldn’t bear the thought of her being in it, so I had something special made for her. It’s pomegranate wood. The fruit is a symbol of everlasting life.”

They sat in silence as the gas fire hissed.

Reginald Perkins suddenly turned to his visitor. “I think I’d better find Clementine a resting place before I lose her again. Would you care to help me?” he asked.

Hebe Jones followed him into the back garden, where he stood, a trowel in one hand, contemplating the borders. He knelt down stiffly on his worn-out knees, and dug a hole in the earth. Picking up the urn that had spent so many weeks on Hebe Jones’s desk, he gave it one final kiss, then placed it inside, and covered it with dark, moist soil. She helped him to his feet, and he stood surveying his handiwork.

“She’ll get the sun there,” he said with a smile. When there was no reply, he turned and looked at his visitor.

“Let’s get you inside, luvvie,” he said when he saw the tear fall.

When Hebe Jones was back on the sofa, warming her fingers on a fresh cup of tea, she told Reginald Perkins
about the terrible, terrible day. When she had finished, she added: “We still haven’t even scattered his ashes. We
couldn’t decide where. Neither of us could bear to talk about it.”

“Where are they now?”

“Still in the back of the wardrobe.”

It was Reginald Perkins who was left holding a cup of tea that had chilled as he listened. He put it down on the
table and sat back. After a while he said: “At least you’ve still got your husband. That should be some comfort.”

Hebe Jones stared at the ball of sodden tissue in her hand. “I haven’t,” she replied, and she told him how she had
walked out with her suitcase and hadn’t spoken to her husband since. “What I can’t forgive is that he’s never even
cried.”

The old man looked at her. “We might love each other in the same way,” he said, “but it doesn’t mean that we
grieve in the same way.”

Hebe Jones looked at him through a veil of tears. “It makes me wonder whether he ever loved him.”

Reginald Perkins held up a crooked finger. “Did you ever wonder whether he loved the boy when he was alive?”
he asked.

“Never.”

“There’s your answer, luvvie,” he said, lowering his hand.

SITTING IN HIS WHITE WROUGHT-IRON CHAIR, Rev. Septimus Drew gazed out over the fortress from his rooftop garden.
Through four varieties of sage ravished by winter he watched a group of tourists standing in contemplation at the
scaffold site, and another wandering out of Waterloo Barracks mesmerised by the shimmering vision of the Crown
Jewels. His eyes turned towards the chapel, and he thought again of what Ruby Dore had said to him in the Well
Tower. Was he really fit to call himself a servant of God? It was a question that had plagued him since his literary
career took off, but the transformation of the ladies, who nurtured the kitchen garden with more tenderness than they
had ever shown themselves, had always chased away his doubts.

Filled with regret that his relationship with the landlady was over before it had begun, he saw himself in years to
come still sitting on the sofa with the unruly spring in his melancholy bachelor’s sitting room. Unable to bear the
vision any longer, he rose to his feet and trudged down the stairs. Opening the door to his study, he sat down at his
desk to write a sermon. But inspiration evaded him. He got up and looked for it out of the window, then studied the
floorboards that he started to pace. When it still failed to arrive, he sat in his worn leather armchair with his eyes
closed, waiting for it to descend from heaven. But the only thing that dropped was a dusty spider, its legs clutched
neatly together in death. He got to his feet and stood on the singed rag rug before the hearth, gazing up at the portrait
of the Virgin Mary, the brushwork of which had seduced his father into buying it for his bride on their honeymoon.
But the memories of his parents’ happy marriage immediately drove his thoughts back to Ruby Dore, and his
torment increased. His gaze came to rest on the white embossed invitation to the Erotic Fiction Awards, propped up
on the mantelpiece. He picked it up and looked at it, the gold edging glittering in the embers of the afternoon light.
In a moment of utter lunacy, which he later put down to acute stress, he took off his cassock and dog collar, put on
his coat, and headed out of the Tower to buy himself a wig.

It was easier than the chaplain had imagined to transform himself into Vivienne Ventress. He had known exactly
where to go, having passed the shop on numerous occasions on his way to his favourite butcher’s. The Spanish
salesman, dressed in a frock that did nothing for a figure destroyed by patatas bravas, immediately came to his
rescue. After picking out a shoulder-length brunette wig, the assistant rifled through his racks for something smart
enough for dinner, but discreet enough not to attract attention. Rev. Septimus Drew contemplated each option with
mounting horror, and refused to try any of them on. The salesman returned to his racks and with the furious, quick
movements of the piqued, selected a second batch. Amongst them the clergyman spotted a plain black long-sleeved
dress, which he was willing to take into the changing room. And not even the difficulty of clambering into it with his
excessively long legs snapped him out of his madness.

When he drew back the curtain, his wig in place, the assistant clasped his hands together and ushered the chaplain
to the mirror in the middle of the shop. Both men cocked their heads to one side and knew instantly that nothing
could trump the long black frock with the charming row of pearl buttons. After broaching the delicate matter of
underwear, the assistant disappeared into the back and returned with a large cardboard box. He opened it with a
flourish, revealing a pair of black pumps of such colossal size an entire colony of rats could have set sail in them. By
the time the assistant had finished his terrifying assault with the weapons in his make-up bag, Rev. Septimus Drew, looking at his reflection, was convinced that he looked even more alluring than the bearded Lord Nithsdale had when he escaped from the Tower in a skirt.

Wearing his heavy overcoat, he stood on the opposite side of the road to the Park Lane hotel, where the ceremony was being held, feeling the wind through his tights. When he had gathered his courage, he crossed the road with the cumbersome gait of a man not used to the feminine pitch of heels. Not daring to raise his eyes from underneath his crow’s-wing lashes, he flashed his invitation at the woman on the door and slipped into the ballroom, where the guests were already seated around tables set for dinner. Standing at the back, away from the candlelight, he refused each invitation to sit down, having caught the attention of a number of single gentlemen. As the ceremony began, he resisted the urge to offer up a prayer for victory, and resorted instead to evoking the pagan god of good fortune by crossing his fingers. With his back against the wall to ease the ache caused by his footwear, he watched as the winners were called one by one to the stage, his only consolation being the conviction that his was the most elegant gown.

When the master of ceremonies left the stage and the waitresses filed in with the first course, the clergyman slipped out through the nearest door and found himself in the bar. He sank into an armchair and only remembered to close his legs when the waiter approached to take his order. He remained where he was for over an hour, distracted from the pinch of his shoes as he sat under the rockfall of failure. He was eventually brought round by the waiter asking him whether he wanted another drink, and he got up to go home. As he passed the door to the ballroom, he glanced in and saw that the master of ceremonies had returned to the stage.

“And now,” the man said, leaning towards the microphone, “the moment you’ve all been waiting for. It gives me great pleasure to announce the overall winner …”

Rev. Septimus Drew crept in for his final moment of humiliation. The man in the bow tie then opened an envelope, looked up, and uttered two words that sent the chaplain into a state of shock. He failed to hear the subsequent praise for Vivienne Ventress’s unique prose: the teasing chinks left for the reader’s imagination; the moralistic voice never previously heard in the genre; and her absolute belief in the existence of true love, which gave her work an extraordinary quaintness that rivals had tried to imitate without success.

It was the sight of his publisher getting to his feet to accept the award on Miss Ventress’s behalf that catapulted the chaplain towards the stage. He glided up the steps with his head bowed and received the award with a flutter of his crow’s-wing eyelashes. Despite the loud chorus of “speech!” he left the stage without uttering a word. And he maintained his demure silence all the way to the door, through which he escaped at speed, clutching his shoes before his publisher could shake his hairy hand.

REV. SEPTIMUS DREW WAS ALREADY SNORING, the award standing on the bedside table next to him, when Balthazar Jones took to the battlements to exercise the bearded pig. Halfway through their moonlit walk, he stopped and lowered himself to the ground. As he leant against the cold, ancient wall, hidden from the sentry, he was grateful for the warmth of the creature resting its head on his thigh, sending clouds of turnip-scented breath into the diamond-studded sky. Fingering its lead, he thought once again about the chaplain’s words in the Brick Tower. Eventually, when he had made his decision, he gently shook the pig awake and, making sure they wouldn’t be spotted, returned to the Develin Tower so it could continue its dreams.

As he headed home, he heard the mournful cry of the wandering albatross across the darkened fortress. Making his way to the Brick Tower in order to comfort it, he was joined by a group of Beefeaters returning home from the Rack & Ruin, having been asked to leave by the landlady for conspiring to seize the threepenny bit. They stopped outside the White Tower, where the men complimented him on the success of the menagerie, and each told him their favourite animal, which they admitted to visiting with a tasty little something when the tourists had left.

Suddenly the wind picked up and the hanging parrot, giddy from a series of furious revolutions as it clutched the weathervane above them, opened its toes. And as it plunged headfirst towards the ground, it let out a lusty moan that reduced the Beefeaters to silence, followed by the words: “Fuck me, Ravenmaster!”
Sitting bare-chested on his side of the bed, Balthazar Jones fed his pale feet into his crimson tights. He stood and hauled them up over his thighs and stomach, performing a low plié in order to raise the gusset. Striding across the room, the nylon hissing between his thighs, he pulled open the wardrobe door in search of his matching breeches. But the sudden movement caused it to collapse, having never fully recovered from being dismantled when it was first brought up the spiral staircase eight years ago.

Swearing in Greek, a habit picked up from his wife, the Beefeater hunted amongst the ruins for the rest of his red state dress uniform, which Oswin Fielding had advised him to wear when he rang moments earlier, requesting that he come to the Palace at once. Placing the tunic and breeches on the bed, he rushed to the trouser press and extracted his white linen ruff, which scalded his fingers. After attaching red, white, and blue rosettes to his knees and his shoes, he reached for his Tudor bonnet from the top of the wardrobe and fled down the stairs.

He spent the journey in the cab, pitched forward so as not to crush the back of his ruff, gripped by fear. Had the Portuguese found out about the death of the Etruscan shrew, he wondered, or had someone discovered the bearded pig? Maybe the Queen had suddenly realised that no one had ever given her four giraffes, and had decided to hand his job to someone else? By the time he arrived at the Palace, he had worked himself up into such a state that he could barely talk.

After being shown into a side door by a police officer, he was met by a silent footman whose polished buckled shoes were equally silent as they passed along the corridor of dense blue carpet. He escorted the Beefeater to Oswin Fielding’s office and knocked. Given the order to enter, he opened the door and stood back to let in Balthazar Jones. The equerry immediately rose to his feet. “Yeoman Warder Jones! Do have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk.

Balthazar Jones silently took off his Tudor bonnet and sat down, holding on to the brim.

“What we need is a cup of tea,” the equerry announced, picking up the phone. After requesting that some be brought, he added hastily: “No shortbread.”

He then sat back in his chair, crossed his fingers over his stomach, and asked: “So, all well with you?”

The Beefeater ran his palms down the armrests to dry them. “Fine,” he replied.

“And the boy? How’s he?”

“What boy?” he asked.

“You said you had a son. What’s his name?”

There was a pause.

“Milo,” Balthazar Jones replied.

“Nice name. Italian?”

“Greek.”

“Has your wife … ?”

“No.”

At that moment the door opened and the mute footman appeared with a tray. He served in silence, then retreated, closing the door behind him. Oswin Fielding helped himself to some sugar and finally got to the point. “I have some news, Yeoman Warder Jones.”

“I thought as much,” the Beefeater replied evenly.

“As you know, things have been going rather well with the menagerie. Very well, in fact. The Tower has been enjoying its highest visitor numbers for years. Her Majesty is immensely pleased.”

Balthazar Jones continued to look at him in silence.

“However, as you also know, a number of giant otters arrived from Guyana not so long ago, followed by a pair of
oryx from Qatar, and a herd of wildebeest from the President of Tanzania. Quite what that man was thinking of, I have no idea. Then this morning we heard that the Americans are sending over a couple of grizzly bears. At best these people are being generous. At worst they’re just PR stunts.”

The man from the Palace adjusted his rimless spectacles. “The Queen’s very great fear is that, the longer the menagerie stays open, the more it will encourage foreign rulers to send her increasing numbers of animals,” he continued. “Before we know it the Tower will be a veritable Noah’s ark.”

The equerry leant forward. “Between you and me, when she heard about the grizzlies she hit the roof. If you thought her shortbread was misshapen last time, you should have seen what came out of the oven earlier. Unrecognisable.”

Balthazar Jones swallowed.

“Her Majesty has made the decision to transfer the animals back to London Zoo before things get out of hand,” said the equerry.

“What do you mean?” asked the Beefeater.

“The menagerie is going to have to close, I’m afraid.”

Balthazar Jones was unable to reply.

“The Queen’s decision in no way reflects upon the efforts you have made, Yeoman Warder Jones. On the contrary,” the equerry continued. “She very much appreciates the care and attention you have shown to the collection of royal beasts and wanted to tell you in person, but she was suddenly called away. She has decided that you will remain Keeper of the Royal Menagerie, even though it will be just an honorific title. It will add a little intrigue for the tourists too. We’re sure that the renewed interest in the Tower will continue, what with all the coverage it’s had around the world. In appreciation of what you have achieved, Her Majesty has decided to make a small, but significant increase to your salary.”

“But what about the animals?” asked the Beefeater, clutching his armrests. “They’re all settled in. The Duchess of York is looking even better than when she first arrived. You should see the gloss on her coat. The fancy rats have learnt all sorts of tricks. And the Komodo dragon has just laid some eggs. It was a virgin birth. They can do that, you know.”

There was silence.

“And I’ve just put the glutton on a diet.”

The equerry closed the file in front of him and sat back. “I’m afraid the decision is final,” he said. He studied the penholder on his desk, while the Beefeater stared at the floor.

“So when are they going back to the zoo?” Balthazar Jones asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked, looking up. “That’s a bit soon, isn’t it?”

“The sooner we act, the sooner it will put a stop to this nonsense.”

Balthazar Jones brushed the black crown of his Tudor bonnet with his fingertips. Eventually, he stood up. “Make sure you don’t use the same removal people who lost the penguins,” he said, and headed for the door.

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THE FOLLOWING MORNING, the Beefeater flung back the waxy sheet that he hadn’t washed since Hebe Jones left, already feeling the blade of abandonment. He dressed as quickly as possible, clambering over the ruins of the wardrobe as he hunted for a clean pair of socks. Gripping the filthy rope handrail, he fled down the stairs to feed the animals one final time, and to say his goodbyes in private.

By the time he came out of the Brick Tower, a number of vans and lorries were already parked inside the fortress, and he spotted Oswin Fielding pointing at one of the towers with what looked to be a new silver-handled umbrella. As the animals were herded into the vehicles, the Beefeater stood issuing a stream of instructions to ensure their comfort and making sure that they had plenty of water for the journey. The equerry asked him to leave, insisting that he was getting in everyone’s way.

Unable to sit down, he paced the moat, and came to the spot he had once shown Milo where two medieval lion skulls had been unearthed in the 1930s. He sat down on the damp ground, and, as he fiddled with a piece of grass, he remembered the time he had told his son of the original menagerie’s demise.
By 1822 the collection had dwindled to an elephant, a bird or two, and a bear, Balthazar Jones explained to the boy as they sat on deckchairs on the Salt Tower roof. That year, Alfred Cops, a professional zoologist, was appointed keeper, and he became the first to actively purchase animals for the menagerie, rather than relying on gifts to the king or souvenirs from explorers. A collector himself, he also exhibited his own animals alongside the royal beasts. Six years later, the menagerie had over sixty species, and nearly three hundred animals. As well as kangaroos, mongooses, and dog-faced baboons, it boasted a five-fingered sloth, a pair of black swans from Van Dieman’s Land, a kangaroo rat from Botany Bay, a boa constrictor from Ceylon, a crocodile from the River Nile, and a Malayan bear from Bencoolen presented by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles. Visitors were charged nothing extra to watch feeding time at three o’clock, lion cubs were allowed to wander loose amongst the crowds, and there was always a long queue to see the female leopard with an appetite for umbrellas, muffs, and hats.

“So then why did they close it, if everyone wanted to go?” Milo asked.

“Unfortunately, the menagerie’s popularity was not enough to save it,” the Beefeater explained, resting his feet on one of his wife’s flower tubs.

After George IV’s death in 1830, the Duke of Wellington, an executor of his will and Constable of the Tower, set in motion a plan to transfer the one hundred and fifty royal animals to the gardens of the Zoological Society of London in Regent’s Park, which later became known as London Zoo. The new king, William IV, who had little interest in the menagerie, gave his approval in 1831 and the move went ahead.

“But how did they get there?” asked Milo, feeding Mrs. Cook a fuchsia.

The animals made the long journey across London on foot, Balthazar Jones told his son, herded by Beefeaters carrying the small birds and pheasants in baskets. The elephants were placed at the front in an effort to prevent injuries, but the five-fingered sloth suddenly snapped out of its life-long stupor and darted ahead, producing the first casualty. Despite the bags of flour that had been placed inside their pouches to slow them down, the kangaroos arrived way ahead of the rest. They were closely followed by the ostriches, one of which kicked a zebra. A stampede broke out, which the Beefeaters struggled to contain. By the time the serpents turned up, many of their undercarriages had been rubbed raw, and for the next three months they continuously shed their skins. The last to arrive—two days after the storks—were the pair of black swans from Van Dieman’s Land, smelling strongly of ale. Issued with leather booties to protect their feet during the mammoth trek, they had been invited into numerous taverns along the way by drinkers seduced by their footwear. They didn’t refuse a single invitation, and a number of public houses across the country changed their name to the Black Swan in the creatures’ honour.

“So what happened to the keeper?” asked Milo.

Alfred Cops also sold some of his own animals to the Zoological Society, Balthazar Jones replied, but continued to show the rest at the Tower, and the entrance fee was dropped from one shilling to sixpence to continue luring the crowds. Following the escape of a wolf, and a monkey biting a member of Wellington’s garrison on the leg, in 1835 the keeper closed the attraction in accordance with the King’s wishes. The remnants of his collection were disposed to an American gentleman and exported to America. Six hundred years of keeping wild animals at the Tower of London finally came to an end.

Milo picked up the tortoise. “Was he a good keeper, Daddy?” he asked.

“Yes, son, a very good keeper. He loved the animals very much. Hardly any of them died. Unfortunately the secretary bird, which had a particularly long neck, stuck it into the hyena den, and that was the end of it.”

There was a pause.

Milo turned to his father. “A bit like Mrs. Cook’s tail?” he asked.

“Exactly. Wouldn’t have felt a thing.”

STANDING ALONE ON THE WHARF as the early morning light flickered on the Thames, Balthazar Jones watched as the first vehicle slowly left the Tower, carrying the giraffes that had never been a gift from the King of Sweden. Next came the Komodo dragon with its eggs, the result of an immaculate conception. The reclusive ringtail possums followed, dreaming with their tails perfectly coiled below them, along with the sugar glider that had been given one final tickle with a toucan feather. Sitting in the lorry’s footwell was the cage containing the male lovebird, its leg still in a splint following the assault by its partner. Sensing an emergency, the crested water dragons rose onto their back legs and started running back and forth inside their van, their hands stretched out either side of them to keep their balance. Then came the glutton, which, despite having been put on a diet, had managed to hide a number of raw eggs within
its fur. The giant otters, which he had never gotten to know, were in the truck behind, and, judging by the smell, the
zorilla left next. The monkeys followed them in a vehicle with blacked-out windows lest the Geoffroy’s marmosets
feel threatened during the journey. And finally came the birds, which were flying from one end of their lorry to the
other, headed by the wandering albatross exposing its pink patches. The only creature that failed to take to the air
was the concussed hanging parrot, which clutched its perch with its toes for the entire length of its upside-down
journey.

Feeling a chill as he watched the last vehicle leave, Balthazar Jones turned and walked to the van he had hired for
the day, and drove out of the Tower headed for the zoo. Next to him on the passenger seat was the cage containing
the common shrew, which had finally squeezed its colossal hips out of the door of the tiny house.

Arriving at the wrought-iron gates that had nearly decapitated the giraffes, he parked at the entrance and carefully
carried the cage inside, putting the creature’s breathtaking girth down to a diet of Fig Rolls fed to it by the equally
corpulent Yeoman Gaoler. He checked to see that all the animals had arrived safely, and stood watching as they
rediscovered their enclosures. After witnessing the extraordinary sight of the reunion between the wandering
albatross and its mate, he gave a toucan feather to the sugar glider’s keeper, who looked at it in confusion. Returning
to his van, he stood on the pavement checking each direction. Once he was certain that he wouldn’t be seen, he slid
open the door and bowled a grapefruit along the ground through the main gates. The bearded pig hesitated for a
moment, then bounded after it, its tasselled tail flying at full mast over its generous buttocks.

WHEN REV. SEPTIMUS DREW PUSHED OPEN the heavy oak door of the Rack & Ruin, one of the Beefeaters was standing on his
head performing an ambitious impression of the hanging parrot’s historic cry as it dropped from the White Tower
weathervane. On recognising the chaplain’s skinny ankles, the Beefeater immediately turned himself upright and
apologised for his rendition of the unholy avian profanity. It wasn’t the first time that the clergyman had heard it: the
parrot’s lusty shriek had been repeated around the Tower with unreserved enthusiasm whenever the Ravenmaster
passed, much to the man’s humiliation.

The chaplain approached the birdcage and looked at its yellow occupant, which suddenly started to disgorge a
melody. Bending down to watch the creature empty itself of its cursed notes that threatened to choke it, he kept an
eye on Ruby Dore. As soon as the landlady was free, he approached and asked whether he could talk to her in
private. She looked up and hesitated. “They locked the Well Tower again after they took away the fancy rats,” she
replied. “I’ll meet you in Wakefield Tower in a couple of minutes.”

After looking at the small oratory, where the imprisoned Henry VI was said to have been murdered while
kneeling in prayer, he joined the tourists heading to the lower chamber, which housed the instruments of torture
exhibition. He listened to their murmurs of disappointment as they read the information panel stating that torture had
been very rare in England. Their mood lightened, however, as soon as they saw the rack with its tantalising rollers
that turned in opposite directions, the manacles from which prisoners would hang from their wrists, and the
Scavenger’s Daughter with its gruesome metal bars that compressed the body into an agonising kneeling position.

When the landlady appeared, apologising for having taken so long, the clergyman guided her towards the
shadows at the back of the room. He glanced behind him to make sure that he wouldn’t be heard, and told her of his
decision: “I’m going to leave the Church,” he said, looking at her through the gloom.

The chaplain explained how he thought he could do more of God’s work at the shelter than at the Tower, whose
congregation only seemed to come to his sermons to warm themselves against the radiators. His publishers had
offered him another six-book deal with an even bigger advance than the first, which meant that he would be able to
rescue many more ladies than he could at the moment. Not only that, but the succulence of the vegetables they grew
was such that they had just secured a contract to supply a local restaurant.

There was silence.

“Where will you live?” Ruby Dore finally asked, fiddling with the end of her scarf.

“I’m going to rent a little place near the shelter. I don’t need much.”

Ruby Dore glanced away. “I haven’t been entirely truthful with you either,” she admitted. “I’m not going to be
able to hide it forever, so I may as well tell you. I’m going to have a baby.”

It was Rev. Septimus Drew’s turn to be quiet, and both of them looked at the floor. The landlady eventually broke
the silence. “I’d better get back to work,” she said.

As she turned to leave, the clergyman suddenly found himself asking: “Do you fancy visiting the Florence
Nightingale Museum sometime? One of the exhibits is her pet owl called Athena.”

Ruby Dore stopped and looked at him.

“She rescued it in Athens, and it travelled everywhere in her pocket. She loved it so much she had it stuffed when it died,” he added.

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VALERIE JENNINGS LAY ON HER BACK in the empty sarcophagus, breathing in the dusty remains of an ancient Egyptian. She closed her eyes in the cedar-scented gloom, having just discovered that her favourite obscure nineteenth-century novelist had remained a spinster all her life.

Not even the sudden appearance of Dustin Hoffman at the original Victorian counter that morning had managed to lift her mood. She had simply asked for some identification and, without a word to Hebe Jones about the exalted presence at the counter, collected the Oscar that had been standing on her desk for the past two years. She handed it to the actor as if she were reuniting a member of the general public with a lost set of door keys.

Opening her eyes, she stared at the underside of the lid, its decoration visible in the light that came in courtesy of a hardback placed under the lid to prevent suffocation. Once again she thought how ridiculous she must have seemed to Arthur Catnip, whom she hadn’t heard from since their dinner together. And she bitterly regretted having worn someone else’s dress to dinner with him.

Suddenly there was a polite knock on the sarcophagus’s lid. It had taken a while for Hebe Jones to find her colleague. She had walked the aisles of mislaid possessions piled up on metal shelves stretching far into the distance, until she came across a pair of flat black shoes with rubber soles. She looked around, turning three hundred and sixty degrees in the process, but it seemed that Valerie Jennings had vanished. Eventually her eyes fell to the sarcophagus, and she spotted the book wedged underneath the lid.

Hearing the knock, Valerie Jennings sat up like Dracula rising from his coffin. Smelling strongly of cedar wood, she clambered out, made her way silently back to her desk, and opened a packet of Bakewell slices.

Hebe Jones followed her and sat down. “I just asked one of the ticket inspectors why we haven’t seen Arthur Catnip, and he said that he hadn’t been to work for ages,” she said. “Nor has he called them to explain why he hasn’t come in. Someone went to his house, but there was no reply and his neighbour hadn’t seen him either. They’re really worried about him.”

Valerie Jennings remained silent.

“Why don’t you try and find him?” Hebe Jones suggested.

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” she replied.

“If you can find the owner of the safe after five years, you can find a tattooed ticket inspector.”

Valerie Jennings looked at her. “Do you really think something’s happened to him?” she asked.

“People don’t just disappear like that. Especially him. He never even liked taking his holidays. Why don’t you ring round the hospitals?”

“Maybe he just got sick of the job.”

“They said all his stuff is still in his locker.”

Unconvinced, Valerie Jennings reached for the phone book. A few minutes later she replaced the receiver.

“Well?” asked Hebe Jones.

“They don’t have a patient there by that name.”

“Try the next one. The tree wasn’t felled by one stroke,” she said.

Less than half an hour later, Valerie Jennings moved aside a discarded copy of the Evening Standard and sat down heavily in a Tube carriage. She failed to notice the front-page story about the miraculous return of the bearded pig to London Zoo following its journey around Britain, and stared blindly ahead of her as the train started to rattle its way out of the station.

When she arrived at the hospital, Arthur Catnip was lying in a four-bed ward in much the same state that she had imagined. Despite his powers of intuition, he had not had the slightest premonition that he was going to suffer a heart attack more catastrophic than the first shortly after kissing Valerie Jennings on the well-swept steps of the Hotel Splendid, an oversight he later put down to being befuddled by love.
The sight of her in her navy coat, smeared glasses, and flat black shoes immediately set his monitors shrieking. When the nurses finally calmed him, Valerie Jennings was called from her seat outside the ward and permitted to approach the patient. She sat by the bed, took his cold hands in hers, and told him that when he was discharged he could convalesce on her armchair with the pop-up leg rest, and she would lend him the works of Miss E. Clutterbuck to keep up his spirits. She told him she would help him regain his strength by taking him for walks around the local park, despite the geese, and if he fell into the duck pond she would pull him out herself, no matter how little hair he had left. And she told him that when he had fully recovered, she would pay for them to go on a cruise with the reward she had been given by the owner of the safe he had found on the Circle Line five years ago, and he could show her the island on which he had been marooned after falling overboard sodden with cider while in the Navy.

By the time she had finished, the warmth had returned to Arthur Catnip’s hands. As she began to walk out of the ward he finally opened his eyes and turned his head. “I like your shoes,” he said.

Hebe Jones opened the drawer containing one hundred and fifty-seven pairs of false teeth and dropped another neatly labelled pair inside. Returning to her desk, she looked again at the bouquet of flowers from Reginald Perkins, and she thought of his wife tucked up safe and warm amongst her daffodils. Just as she put the tiny Chinese slippers into the mailbag, she heard the Swiss cowbell. Turning the corner, she saw Samuel Crapper standing at the original Victorian counter, the tips of his ochre hair standing up in triumph.

“Someone handed in your briefcase yesterday. Sorry, I meant to ring you,” she said.

“Did they?” he asked. “I didn’t know I’d lost it. I’ve come because I’ve actually found something for a change.” He then picked up a large Hamleys shopping bag and put it on the counter. “It was on the seat next to me on the Bakerloo Line and was still there when everyone got off. I forgot to bring it in, so it’s been sitting at home for a few days, I’m afraid. I can’t for the life of me work out what it is.”

Hebe Jones pulled the object out of the bag and looked at it. Eventually she was able to speak. “It’s a cabinet of rain samples,” she said.
Balthazar Jones stood on the bridge above the raven burial ground, where a tiny freshly dug grave contained the remains of an Etruscan shrew. As he watched the workmen dismantling the enclosures in the moat, he was struck once again by how empty the place seemed without the animals. Unable to watch, he made his way up Water Lane, passing the Bloody Tower with its red rambling rose said to have produced snow-white blossoms before the death of the two little princes. No longer bothering to look around him in case he was being watched, he unlocked the door to the Develin Tower and started to sweep up the straw that had once warmed the belly of the bearded pig. As he worked his brush into the corner next to the vast stone fireplace, he discovered Hebe Jones’s mouldering grapefruit.

Under an endless cinder sky, he crossed the fortress and made his final journey up the Brick Tower’s spiral staircase. The workmen had already taken away the aviary fencing, as well as the trees in their pots and the artificial perches. All that remained of its previous occupants were the seed husks covering the floor, dried droppings, and the white feathers shed by the wandering albatross. As he began to sweep the floor, he remembered the conversation he had had with Rev. Septimus Drew amongst the birds, and his subsequent decision to try and get his wife back. But despite the samples he had left on the Tube hoping Hebe Jones would come back, she had never gotten in touch, and the blade in his heart turned once more.

Picking up his black rubbish sack, he was about to leave when something on the windowsill caught his eye. He walked over and recognised one of the King of Saxony bird of paradise’s prized brow feathers that stretched twice the length of its body, a sight so extraordinary that early ornithologists dismissed the first stuffed specimen as taxidermic trickery. He picked up the bewitching blue plume and studied it in the light. After drawing it slowly through his fingers, he curled it up and put it in his pocket.

As he walked back to the Salt Tower, he was stopped by an American tourist who asked him whether he was the Keeper of the Royal Menagerie.

“I am,” the Beefeater replied.

“It’s such a shame that they took the Queen’s animals back to London Zoo,” the visitor said, adjusting his baseball cap. “By all accounts, the Geoffroy’s marmosets were a sight to be seen.”

Balthazar Jones put down his bag. “Maybe it was for the best,” he said, and he told the man about the wandering albatross that mated for life and had lost too many feathers mourning for its companion, which had remained at the zoo.

“I guess home is where the heart is,” the American said with a smile. But the Beefeater was unable to reply.

Picking up his bag, he crossed the lawn in front of the White Tower and looked at the marks left by the enclosure that had housed the reclusive ringtaill possums and the sugar glider. Hearing a shout, he turned to see the Ravenmaster standing in front of the odious birds’ pens, calling mournfully to his charges so that he could say his goodbyes. It hadn’t, in the end, been the Chief Yeoman Warder who had asked him to leave the Tower. He had refused to take the hanging parrot’s words as any proof of wrongdoing, and had threatened to sack anyone repeating the historic cry within earshot of the tourists. It had, in fact, been the Ravenmaster’s wife who insisted that their days at the Tower were over, recognising instantly the footprint of infidelity in the emerald shriek. She had suspected her husband’s affairs over the years and had done nothing about them, reasoning that the more of his awkward intimacies he shared with others, the less she would have to endure herself. But the public exposure of his philandering by a parrot had been a humiliation too far. Waiting until their daughter was out of the kitchen, she turned round from the sink and informed him he would have to choose between her and the Tower. The Ravenmaster instantly picked his wife as he knew he was nothing without her. Leaving her husband to do the packing, she took the opportunity to go shopping, and eventually found the precise weapon she had been searching for in an antiquarian bookshop. And, as she watched the sales assistant wrap up the 1882 first edition of *Vice Versa or A Lesson to Fathers* by F. Anstey, she very much hoped that her husband would find it as hilarious as the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope had. For, while laughing at a family reading of it, the author had suffered a stroke and died the following month.

When Balthazar Jones was called into the Chief Yeoman Warder’s office in the Byward Tower earlier that
morning, he had assumed he was going to have to account yet again for his lamentable record in catching pickpockets. Instead, the Chief Yeoman Warder had offered him the position of Ravenmaster. But the Beefeater immediately turned it down, keeping to himself his thoughts on the birds’ villainous character. Still gripping the brim of his hat, he took the opportunity to ask if he could nevertheless move into the Ravenmaster’s superior quarters to escape the Salt Tower’s wretched damp, the mournful sound of chiselling, and the smell of Catholic priests’ mouldering sandals. For a moment the Chief Yeoman Warder didn’t reply, and engaged instead in a short burst of drumming with his embalmer’s fingers. It was eventually followed by a sigh and the words: “If you must.”

Balthazar Jones threw the black rubbish sack into the bin by the Tower Café and turned to see Rev. Septimus Drew striding past on his way to the Rack & Ruin, his nibbled red cassock billowing in the wind. The Beefeater immediately ran to catch him up and asked whether it was true that he was leaving the Tower. The chaplain invited him to the tavern, where they sat at the bar waiting to be served while the landlady confiscated the threepenny bit from the Tower doctor. He listened with regret as the clergyman told him that he would be gone by the end of the month.

“But what about our bowling?” Balthazar Jones asked.

Rev. Septimus Drew emptied his glass and put it on the beer mat in front of him. “Everyone has to move on eventually,” he said. He then looked at his watch and apologised for not being able to stay any longer as he was taking Ruby Dore to see a little stuffed owl called Athena. He then put a hand on his old friend’s arm and asked whether he had done anything to persuade Hebe Jones to come back following their talk in the aviary. Balthazar Jones nodded.

“Any joy?” the chaplain asked.

The Beefeater’s eyes dropped to the bar.

“At least you tried,” said the clergyman, filling the silence.

After finishing his pint alone, the Beefeater wiped his mustache on the back of his hand and headed for the Salt Tower. As he climbed the spiral staircase, he heard the phone ringing and burst into the living room to answer it. But it was only the man from the Palace, and he sunk to the sofa.

“I thought you’d like to know that we’ve got the rockhopper penguins back,” the equerry said.

The Beefeater leant back. “Where were they?” he asked.

“They’d got all the way to Milton Keynes. A police officer noticed them on a roundabout in the early hours of yesterday morning.”

Once he had put down the phone, he made his way upstairs. Unable to bear the smell of Hebe Jones’s absence any longer, he stripped the bed, leaving her nightdress on his pillow. As he opened the airing cupboard to fetch a clean set of sheets, he noticed the gentleman’s white vest, and dropped it into the bin.

Confronted once more with the ruins of the wardrobe, he set about reassembling it. Once it was back on its feet, he picked up the clothes and started to hang them back up. Amongst the pile he found several of his wife’s sweaters, and as he folded them he discovered Milo’s urn. He picked it up and sat on the bed looking at it. He thought about all he had had in life, and all he had lost, and concluded that he had never deserved any of it in the first place. He dusted the urn gently with his handkerchief, stood up, and placed it on the windowsill.

Lying down on the clean bedclothes, he hoped to get some rest before resuming his duties. But he was unable to get comfortable because of the ache of solitude in his bones, and he immediately sat up again. He descended the stairs to the living room, but was unsettled by the sight of the front end of the pantomime horse. He wandered into the kitchen, pulled out a chair, and sat at the table. But he soon got up again when he spotted the picture above the sink of three smiling figures, two large, one small, standing next to a colourful blob. Crossing back through the living room, he walked down the corpse-cold stairs.

He pushed open Milo’s bedroom door and pulled back the curtains he had made all those years ago, filling the room with March’s brutal light. He sat on the bed and ran a hand over the soft pillow where his son’s head had once rested. He looked around at his possessions, which he would soon have to pack. Picking up the matchbox from the bookshelf, he slid it open and looked at the fifty-pence piece. He reached for the ammonite and ran his thumb over its contours. Opening the book on Greek gods on the nightstand, he flicked through the pages, stopping to look at a picture of Hermes and a tortoise. He didn’t know how long he had been there when he suddenly heard a sound. When he looked up with eyes as pale as opals he saw Hebe Jones standing in the doorway with her suitcase.

Neither said a word. Eventually, she put down her case and came to sit next to her husband. Balthazar Jones spoke first. “It was me who killed Milo,” he said, looking at the floor.
Hebe Jones raised a hand to her mouth. “What are you talking about?” she demanded, her eyes upon him.

The Beefeater haltingly told her about the argument he and Milo had the night he died, over the homework he had failed to finish, and his threat not to take the boy to the Science Museum at the weekend if it wasn’t done in time.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” she asked.

He reminded her of the words of the expert pathologist, spoken at the inquest for all to hear, that some children suffered sudden cardiac death after emotional stress.

Hebe Jones rested her hand on his thigh. “Is that what you’ve been thinking all these years?” she asked, searching his face. She then reminded him that the pathologist had also said that some died in their sleep, when they woke up, or while exercising, and Milo had been up and down the wretched stairs all evening.

She then gazed ahead of her in silence. At last she spoke: “If anything weakened that poor boy’s heart it was the love he had for you.”

His tears fell and fell and fell. And when they both thought it was finally over, they fell some more.

AFTER THEY HAD FINISHED TALKING, Hebe Jones unpacked her suitcase, checked on the daffodils blooming in her tubs on the roof, and discovered her nightgown on her husband’s pillow. While it was still light, they descended the spiral steps and walked to the Tower wharf. Standing next to each other, they looked out across the stretch of the Thames where Henry III’s polar bear used to fish for salmon while tied to a rope. When finally she was ready, he slowly took off the lid and turned the urn on its side. They watched as the ashes fluttered away with the breeze and came to rest on the water’s silver surface. As they began their journey out to the sea, Hebe Jones reached for the hand she would hold forever. When they had disappeared from view, Balthazar Jones told her about the house he wanted to buy in Greece to escape the English rain when he retired, which would be on the coast so they could be with Milo forever.

Later that night, as they lay in the sanctuary of each other’s arms, the magnificent blue brow plume used by grey songbirds to decorate their courtship bowers hung on the wall above their bed. And such was their contentment, neither of them heard the creaks as Mrs. Cook returned from her travels, an odious black feather still caught in her ancient mouth.
AUTHOR’S NOTE

Live animals given to Her Majesty the Queen and placed in the care of London Zoo have included a canary from Germany, following a state visit in 1965; jaguars and sloths from Brazil in 1968; two black beavers from Canada in 1970; two giant tortoises from the Seychelles in 1972; an elephant called Jumbo from the President of Cameroon in the same year to mark the Queen’s Silver Wedding Anniversary; and two more sloths, an armadillo, and an anteater from Brazil in 1976.

The animals most recently received from the Queen by the Zoological Society of London were six red kangaroos, kept at London Zoo, and two cranes sent to Whipsnade Zoo. They were presented by Melbourne Zoo in 1977 to mark Her Majesty’s Silver Jubilee. One of the cranes is still alive.
The Tower, The Zoo, and The Tortoise

By

Julia Stuart