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THE CURSE OF
PENRYTH HALL

JESS ARMSTRONG

Chapter One

An Unwanted Journey

Exeter, August 1922

There were three things a girl wanted after the night I'd had. One: a proper breakfast. Two: a scarcity of sunlight. And three – possibly most important – coffee. Dark, bitter, and at least two pots. But I had none of the aforementioned. What I *did* have, however, was a splitting headache, a sunburn, and my octogenarian employer sitting alongside me in a deck chair with the *Pall Mall Gazette and Globe* in his hands.

I blinked in the bright morning sun, then shut my eyes back tight. I braved a glance down at myself, still dressed in the same other silk evening gown from the night before. Details of which returned in the vaguest of flickers, none particularly illuminating. The nearby bells of Exeter Cathedral rang out loud and clear, rattling around in my gin-muddled head.

‘Is there coffee?’

‘Is that all you have to say for yourself?’ Mr Owen flicked another page in his paper, his dark-brown eyes fixed upon the newsprint. ‘When you didn’t come down for breakfast I thought you’d finally gone and drowned yourself in this death pit you’ve dug in my rose garden. But it seems you’ve nearly done the job in gin.’

I waved a hand at him, ignoring the twinge of truth in the last barb. ‘It’s a bathing pool, Mr Owen. They’re going to be all the

rage one day. Besides, your roses were dead when I moved here. I daresay I improved matters.'

He chuckled beneath his breath. At least he wasn't terribly cross. He seldom was, no matter how deep my provocation. I sat up in the wooden chair, pulling my knees against my chest, wincing at the light. The blackcap in the tree nearby was particularly effusive in his morning song. The fellow was a bit more cheerful than I.

He slid a wire-framed pair of sunglasses across the table between us, and I breathed out a sigh of relief, taking them at once. God bless him. A rapidly cooling cup of tea sat on the table beside me, and I couldn't help but smile. This was our habit, he and I, had been since I'd answered his advertisement for a room to let. Though I'd got quite a bit more in the bargain. We'd lived together in this strange little world here in the eastern part of Devon, and it suited us both fine. In name, he owned it all: the bookshop, the derelict mansion along with everything in it – with the exception of my little automobile and my clothing. Oh, and my jewellery. Not that I had much of that any more as I'd taken a rather bare-bones approach to life since the end of the war. Fewer ties, fewer things to lose.

With the sun no longer assaulting my head, I opened my eyes to the jade and gilt tiles of the pool, which sparkled back at me like a jewel box in the midmorning sun. And while *he* might detest the thing, it was my greatest joy as we weren't along the seaside. 'Has Mrs Adams arrived yet?'

'After last night, lass?' Mr Owen raised an incredulous bushy white eyebrow.

I bit my lip – well, if I could only recall last night it might clue me in a bit as to my current state of being as well as the location of our housekeeper. My parties did have a knack for

getting out of hand. Last night, from all evidence, was no exception. And it started off so lovely too, with dinner and a bit of port – which I believe was the 1907. We still had half a case in the cellar that I'd brought up specifically for the occasion. Followed by literature and poetry. A smattering of philosophy until things took a more libertine bend. *And they always took a libertine bend.* Mr Owen would join in the revelry for the first few hours, eager to debate Marx, Nietzsche, or Freud, his favourite – I despised the fellow, but no one was perfect. Not even dear Mr Owen.

‘How bad was it?’ I wrinkled my nose.

He snorted again and took a sip of tea, glancing at me over a gilt-rimmed teacup. ‘It wasn't nearly as bad as the one in February with the . . .’ He gestured with a furrowed brow. ‘You recall, the one with the goat dressed for the opera.’

I snorted back a laugh. ‘She wasn't dressed *for* the opera, she was Brünnhilde *from* Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. Come now, we even saw that one together in Hammersmith last winter. Remember?’

‘I do not recall any sopranic goats when we were in Hammersmith.’

‘That's not a word—’

He shrugged with a quirk of his white moustache. ‘It is if I say it is.’

I glanced around the eerily quiet garden. It was too quiet. Ordinarily by this time of day Mrs Adams would be bustling about, casting me annoyed glances as she went about her duties. Likely gathering bits of information to carry back to the ladies' auxiliary or whatever they call that sort of thing in Devon. ‘Mr Owen . . . where is Mrs Adams? She hasn't taken ill, has she?’

The old Scot's dark-brown eyes were warm and amused. Not

that he'd ever admit to either sentiment. 'Gone. Within ten minutes of setting foot over the threshold. Something about a den of sin and vice. What's that make now? The third housekeeper that's scarpered this month?'

'Second.' But really, who was counting at this point? Honestly, my parties weren't *that* scandalous. Even if I couldn't recall the exact details of the affair.

'It's for the best, as I wanted to speak with you about something, lass. And if that old hen were here she'd never leave us in peace.'

Something secret – now, that *was* interesting. My morning was looking better already.

'You see, girl, I've been thinking.'

Oh, dear. Mr Owen's *thinking* never boded well. Usually, it was followed by my being flung hither or yon on some mad escapade of his. I wondered briefly what he'd been like as a younger man, travelling the world until he ran out of funds, and returning back home with an unconventional wife to set up the bookshop here in Exeter. Of course, she passed away before the war, and all three of their sons during it. Leaving him a father in need of a child, and I a child in need of a father. He never spoke much about his life before I came into it. Nor did I for that matter. The past was no good to anyone, and digging about in it only brought about unpleasantness. It was best to leave it where it was. Past.

I took a sip of the tea, letting it wend its way, dark and strong, down my throat. 'Where am I off to this time?'

'Am I that easy to read?'

'Dreadfully so.'

He folded his paper with a harrumph and set it down between us on the little metal table. 'It shouldn't be too troublesome for

you this time. I need you to carry a box of books to a little town outside Tintagel. I've an old friend, you see.' He lifted his cup to his lips. 'He's a bit of a folk healer.'

I arched an eyebrow. 'A *bit* of a folk healer?'

Mr Owen ignored me and carried on. 'Lothlel Green, I believe the village is called. Tiny little spot. Nothing but cows and cliffs and sweeping vistas dotted by creatures of the ovine persuasion. I daresay you might even find the place charming.'

Lothlel Green. My stomach knotted at the name. A place I hadn't thought of in quite some time. *He's a baronet, Ruby. Don't you see what this means? I think, perhaps, I could be happy there.* Her voice echoed in my mind. In truth, I made it a point to *not* think on it. Or her. Or Cornwall for that matter. I'd expressly vowed to never set foot in the godforsaken county ever again.

'It isn't much of a town, mind. It's a handful of miles from Bodmin Moor, on the way to Tintagel. You've been there, haven't you? On one of your little sojourns. I could have sworn you'd gone off for a wedding some years back for a friend of yours. Just after you moved in here.'

Yes, well. The old man seemed to have a very keen memory. Any trace of my good humour evaporated as I stared into my teacup, wishing for something a bit stronger than oolong in its depths. Oh, I'd been there. And I'd watched my best friend – the only person I'd ever truly loved – marry another. And not out of love – that I could understand – but out of . . . I wasn't even sure out of what. Inertia, perhaps? 'I'm afraid I'm not feeling quite up to—'

'Nonsense, child, you were more than able to entertain your human menagerie last night. And if you could carry on in such a manner then, you can do this for me now. Tell me you took the handsome one to bed at least?'

Bed? I'd just spent the evening in a deck chair. What feats of acrobatics did he expect of me? Besides, I hadn't taken a lover in a scandalously long time, as sexual congress had lost a bit of its charm. I must be as dissipated as the neighbouring ladies' association whispered behind gloved hands. No, it was worse than that – I was suffering the worst case of ennui since the dawn of the nineteenth century.

'What was his name?'

I sniffed and took another sip of tea. 'I haven't a clue to whom you are referring. And I don't believe it's any of your business what cavorting I do, or do not do.'

He laughed again and shook his head. 'It's not the bed sport I take issue with, my darling girl, it's that you're wasting yourself on these young jackanapes.' He pointed at me with his forefinger. 'A girl like you, Ruby Vaughn, has more potential than the lot of those gents who come here every Saturday eve in hopes of getting in your good graces. Half of them couldn't decipher their arse from their elbows if given a Michelin guide.'

I nearly snorted the tea out my nose. My eyes watered. He wasn't wrong. I was searching for something. Needed it. Only I hadn't quite determined what exactly I sought.

Fiachna, Mr Owen's house cat, on the other hand, knew precisely what he was after. The great feline hopped up into my lap, purring loudly. I stroked his ebony ears. His claws caught the silk of my gown as he settled in for a good rub.

'I mean it, girl.'

'Why don't *you* go if it's that important?' I shot back, changing the subject.

'You know my gout has got to the point I can hardly walk.'

There was no arguing with him when he was in this mood.

He stretched, rising from his own deck chair, and steadied

himself on a simple rowan walking stick. ‘Come along. I have something to show you.’

Very well then. I scooped Fiachna into my arms and set off inside, following Mr Owen through the terrace doors into his personal library. He tugged on the heavy velvet drapes, allowing the morning sun in through the ancient leaded windows. Illuminated dust danced in the air. The room was lined floor-to-ceiling in books. Dark. Hidebound spines facing outward.

All the mundane titles he kept in the bookshop, but *this room* – this room housed all the exceptionally rare and valuable tomes, along with those particular titles that the government took issue with.

He lumbered across the room and thwacked an enormous case with his walking stick. ‘These are them.’

A box of books?! A trunk more like, and an old tatty one too. ‘What’s in there? The butcher? Are you certain Mrs Adams left, or did you do her in and stuff her in the trunk so I can dispose of what’s left of her?’ I wrinkled my nose, reaching down for the clasp and shifting Fiachna’s snoring form to one side. The black cat let out a mewling sound of protest at the inconvenience and I set him down.

Mr Owen’s cane came down on the top of the trunk with a loud crack about three inches from my fingers. ‘You’re not to open it. You understand me, girl?’

He’d never spoken to me that way before and I didn’t care much for his tone. I opened my mouth to tell him the same when it struck me – in the nearly four years I’d lived with him, he’d never forbidden me to touch anything. Never forbidden me to look at a book, even handle one. I’d gone through some of his most delicate volumes. Pages as thin as butterfly wings and twice as fragile without him voicing a single protest. What in this box could be so different?

‘These are ancient things, my girl . . . dangerous ones.’

‘Honestly, Mr Owen, they’re books. How dangerous can they be?’ I was beginning to wonder if perhaps he was the one who had too much to drink last night.

He set his jaw firm beneath his thick white beard.

I glanced back down at the trunk. ‘They are books, aren’t they? I was only teasing about Mrs Adams . . .’

‘Of course they are books, lass. But books themselves are seldom the danger, it’s what’s within them that carries the risk.’

‘Oh, good God, they’re not illegal, are they? After the last time I thought you’d had your fill of banned books.’

‘Me?’ He gave me an innocent look.

‘Fine. After the last time, I had my fill. I thought I made it perfectly clear I wasn’t moving any more illegal books for you after you got me locked up in Holloway Prison for four days!’

‘It did wonders for your temper too, if I recall.’ He chuckled low and shook his head, waving me off. ‘Don’t look at me like that. You’re far too pretty to glare like my great-aunt Petunia. Besides, there’s nothing in there to get you arrested this time.’

‘You don’t have a great-aunt Petunia. And why can’t you send me somewhere interesting? You know how much I’d like to go to Egypt with your friend Mr Carter. He invited me to join him last time we spoke. Said he could use someone with my translation abilities.’

Mr Owen grumbled beneath his breath. ‘I haven’t a clue why Lord Carnarvon is so patient with him. Mark my words, the man will find nothing in the Valley of the Kings. I don’t even know why he keeps throwing good money after bad. Though I’ve heard Carnarvon’s going to pull funding soon.’

‘I thought you liked him.’

‘Carter?’ Mr Owen drew his brows up. ‘I do. But even I know

a bad bet when I see one,' Mr Owen snapped, putting an end to that conversation. Again. Lucky Mr Carter goes to Egypt. I . . . I go to Cornwall.

'There's nothing illegal in the trunk. Stop glaring at the box.'

'Oh, that's a fine assurance.' But I was done arguing. I'd already made up my mind to go. His box of forbidden books piqued my curiosity more than I cared to admit, as I was quite certain he knew. I was a predictable thing. Dangle the faintest hint of mystery before me and I would be captured like a fox in a snare.

Mr Owen sensed the change in my mood. His wide mouth curved up into a smile and he laid a hand on my shoulder. 'Maybe this trip is precisely what you need, my darling. You'll come back with your head clear. I knew a chap once, William Bottrell, long dead now but he travelled all over the West Country collecting their stories. It's an ancient place – Cornwall – full of secrets and legends. I think you'd enjoy it if you gave it a chance.'

'Did Mr Bottrell die in pursuit of said stories?'

Mr Owen laughed merrily, shaking his head. 'The old Cornish folkways predate even the Romans. There are things that occur there no one can explain, no one dares question. After all, Tintagel is the birthplace of Arthur, they say. The seat of kings. Perhaps you'd find it interesting. Maybe it would help you to . . .' He gestured for a moment, a look of pain crossing his face before he shook his head. 'Never mind me, lass. You go on. I'll write down Mr Kivell's direction.'

Folk healers, superstition, and likely no electricity.

Lovely. Just lovely.