

Prologue

April 1851

The carriage comes to a halt outside the London house. A coachman springs down to open the door and a woman emerges. She is dressed in the height of fashion; emerald-green silk dress with three bands of darker green fringing at the hem, a bolero jacket with a green trim and a tremendous, high-poke bonnet ornamented by peacock feathers. She holds up her skirts with one gloved hand – the leather of such a pale green that it looks almost white.

‘Welcome home, Lady Serafina,’ says the butler who opens the door.

‘Thank you, Harrison.’ Her voice is low with just a trace of a foreign accent. A besotted admirer recently described her as having ‘the face, voice and name of an angel’. There are rumours that she was born in Russia, in the American West, in a Glasgow tenement. Lady Serafina herself has never revealed her birthplace but she lets enough clues slip for the more informed to infer a close relationship to one of the more respectable European royal families.

THE KILLING TIME

Lady Serafina Jones divests herself of jacket, gloves and bonnet and glides into the drawing room to peruse the *Morning Chronicle*. A footman brings her a glass of water with a slice of lemon, a delicacy of which her ladyship is very fond.

Lady Serafina runs her eyes along the columns of tiny print until she comes across something that obviously interests her.

The Great Exhibition

Amongst the curiosities that will be available for public perusal is The Seeing Glass, a mirror that is said to be able to see into the future . . .

Idly, Lady Serafina plays with one dark curl that has escaped from her coiffure. She dips her pen in the inkwell and then writes across the page with a flourish.

The Collectors

Chapter 1

Thursday, 20 June 2024

DI Ali Dawson is late for work. She's not unduly bothered. Life at the Cold Case Unit, known to some as the Frozen People, is not exactly deadline dependent. As she crosses the Old Kent Road she considers her worries which, in order, are:

1. Her cat, Terry, who seems off his food
2. The hot weather which has taken her by surprise and means she hasn't shaved her legs or unearthed any summer clothes
3. Her son, Finn, who has recently made ominous noises about wanting to leave London
4. Her colleague, Jones, who is currently stuck in the nineteenth century.

London, too, has been caught on the hop by the good weather. Office workers are shedding jackets and fanning themselves with

copies of *Metro*. Waiters are putting tables outside restaurants, looking nervously at the rough sleepers camping nearby. Al fresco dining is fairly new to this part of the East End. Ali gives money to one of the rough sleepers, whom she recognises. She sometimes buys him breakfast but knows he really prefers cash. She has a vision, as she presses two pound coins into his hand, of a Victorian woman giving a penny to the boy sweeping the street in front of her. There's something depressingly nineteenth century about charity. It shouldn't be necessary in a properly run society. Ali plans to tell Finn this when she next sees him. He works for a Labour MP who might soon become a cabinet minister. He has more influence than Ali will ever have.

Ali takes the turn into Eel Street, where the Department of Logistics hides itself in a sixties office block, indistinguishable from those around it. The lobby seems almost designed to depress, one lift permanently out of order, the letters falling off the noticeboard displaying the names of the companies on the different floors: Quantum Mechanics, Niffenegger and Co, Wells, Pevensie Ltd.

Ali takes the stairs to the third floor. An Italian-accented voice wafts through her subconscious: *Time travel is like taking the lift rather than the stairs*. 'Not now, Jones,' says Ali, aloud. She's found that her inner monologue is increasingly making its way into spoken utterance. She needs to stop it. She doesn't want the team to think she's cracking up.

Her colleagues John and Dina are both in the open-plan area. They stop talking when she comes in, probably out of politeness, but it makes Ali feel like the boss, left out of all the fun. Technically, she *is* in charge, promoted to DI after Geoff's death, but she still feels like an imposter. John, an experienced detective, was the obvious choice, but he refused to take the job, saying that he was

a better deputy. To delay going into her office, Ali offers to make drinks, a morning ritual she enjoys.

‘You’ve got a visitor,’ says Dina. ‘In your office. I’ll make coffee for you both.’

‘A visitor?’ says Ali, more shocked than she should be. Outsiders are rare in the Department of Logistics these days.

‘She’s called Margaret Fanshaw,’ says Dina. ‘That’s all I know.’

Ali looks almost fearfully towards the glass cube within the larger room. Secretly, she still thinks of it as Geoff’s sanctuary. She has shut his belongings – his woodland print, photographs and ‘World’s Best Boss’ mug – in a cupboard but sometimes she thinks she hears them clamouring to get out, like in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ by Edgar Allan Poe. Ali squares her shoulders and pushes open the door.

Margaret Fanshaw is a woman of about Ali’s own age, fiftyish, with ash-blond hair in a short bob. She’s wearing a smart grey dress which is too warm for the day. Ali finds this touching. Margaret has dressed up for the visit.

‘Are you DI Dawson?’

‘Yes,’ says Ali.

‘I hope you don’t mind me coming in without an appointment,’ says Margaret Fanshaw.

Do I look like someone with a busy diary? Ali wants to ask. Her desk is empty apart from a ‘Radical Women’ coffee mug. Instead, she says, ‘How did you find me?’ The Department is a closely guarded secret these days.

‘I work as a cleaner at Imperial,’ says Margaret. ‘You know, the university. Well, one of the lecturers is a man called Dr Bud Sirisema. I told him about Luke – he’s my son – and he suggested I contact you.’

Bud. Ali might have guessed. He's the worst in the team at keeping secrets. Except that, officially, Bud is not in the team anymore. When time-travel became a forbidden activity, Bud's expertise was no longer needed and he went back to the job he had before joining the unit – teaching physics. Ali warms towards Margaret. She used to work as a cleaner and she, too, has a son.

Her visitor's next words, though, chill her to the bone.

'Luke killed himself last month,' says Margaret. Her voice is flat as if she's steeled herself by saying this many times. 'He was only nineteen. The police just wrote it off as another teen suicide but I know there's more to it than that. I'm a single mother, I raised Luke on my own, we're very close. He was just a normal boy. A bit silly at times, but they all are. But then he met *him*.'

'Who?' Ali's skin crawls. She knows the statistics on young men committing suicide. It's still her darkest fear despite the fact that Finn appears to be happy and is now thirty-two.

'Barry Power,' says Margaret, almost in a whisper. 'He's a so-called psychic medium. Says he can speak to the dead and see into the future. He's very famous. Has tours all over the place. Well, Luke emailed him. At first, I thought that Luke wanted to get in contact with his grandad, who died last year, but no, it was this Victorian mesmerist called Klaus Kramer. Luke was obsessed with him. He went to see Power for a private consultation. Power went into a trance and supposedly spoke to this Kramer. Luke was rather quiet afterwards. He's always been a bit withdrawn but it suddenly got worse. One thing he said was that Power – pretending to channel Kramer's spirit – told Luke that he could fly. A week later Luke jumped from the roof of our flats.'

'Oh my God,' says Ali. 'How horrible. I'm so sorry.'

Dina comes in with the coffees, takes a look at Ali's stricken face, and backs out again.

Margaret picks up her mug and puts it down again without taking a sip. 'I want Barry Power to pay,' she says, in a stronger voice than she has used so far. 'He killed my Luke. Dr Sirisema said that you would help me. He says you specialise in cases where the police have closed their files but you know justice hasn't been done.'

This isn't quite the Department's official remit but Ali is rather touched that Bud thinks of them as champions of justice. All the same, she has to be careful not to raise Margaret's hopes.

'Power sounds like a real charlatan,' she says carefully. 'I will look into him but I have to warn you that it would be hard to make any charges stick. Luke went to see Barry Power of his own accord. It might be difficult to prove that Power committed any crime.'

'He needs to be stopped,' says Margaret. 'He's a liar and a conman, preying on vulnerable young men. You know he says he can time travel. Dr Sirisema was very interested in that part.'

I bet he was, thinks Ali.

Ali promises to do what she can and escorts Margaret out through the open-plan area. When she comes back in, Dina and John are looking at her expectantly. As succinctly as possible, Ali tells them about Luke Fanshaw.

'How awful,' says Dina. 'We must help his mum.'

'That's terrible,' says John in a quieter voice. Ali knows that John once tried to take his own life. John, an ex-murder detective, is open about his struggles with alcohol and a mental health crisis triggered by a break-up with his wife. Happily, John and Moira are now reconciled.

‘We will if we can,’ says Ali. ‘I certainly want to investigate this Barry Power. Apparently, he says he can time travel.’

‘That’s impossible,’ says Dina.

‘Except we know it isn’t,’ says John.

Back in her office, Ali opens her laptop and types in the name ‘Barry Power’. The results flood her screen. ‘Psychic wows crowd in Wales.’ ‘Barry Power spoke to my grandad – and his dog!’ ‘How *does* Barry Power do it? Your questions answered.’ There’s also a website where Ali can post a question to the mystic himself.

Ali is just composing a message when her phone buzzes. It’s a text from Dina.

‘Alert! TCTWBN is here.’ Ali stands up but escape is impossible. The only way out is back through the open-plan area. The initialism stands for The Creature That Walks By Night and it’s the team’s nickname for Nigel Palmer, the bureaucrat who is notionally in charge of the Department of Logistics. Ali thinks it makes him sound far too interesting. Nigel’s only weapon is dullness.

Seconds later, the door opens and Nigel Palmer materialises. He’s a smallish man with grey hair and horn-rimmed glasses. The team once had a competition to guess how old he was. The answers ranged from forty to sixty-five. Dina eventually found his date of birth through judicious digging online. Nigel is fifty-two.

‘Good morning, Alison.’

Nigel is almost the only person to call Ali by her full name. She’s been Ali since school. Even her parents use the abbreviated name.

‘Hi, Nigel.’

‘I was in the area and I just thought I’d check up on you . . . see how you’re doing.’

The first version is probably correct. Nigel always suspects that the team are plotting behind his back. And he's usually right.

'Everything is fine,' says Ali, in the hearty voice she saves for Nigel. 'All good.'

'Have you got any further with the Payne case?'

'I was just about to put it in an email. The parents have moved to Tenerife.'

The Payne case was one of several passed to the Frozen People in order, Ali thinks, to keep them busy and stop them dwelling on past adventures. Sisters Madge and Karen Payne visited their local police station in January convinced that their father had murdered their mother. This was easily disproved, both parents were alive and well. But the Payne sisters continued to pester the police, saying that a neighbour was filling their shared flat with poisonous gas. Ali visited the house, in company with the gas board, and found no evidence of leaks. She also interviewed the neighbour, a pleasant woman whose only crime had been trying to befriend Madge and Karen. The sisters have now turned their attentions to a distant cousin whom they think is planning to kill them for their inheritance. The parents have clearly emigrated to Tenerife to get away from it all.

'I've made a referral to social services,' says Ali.

Nigel grunts. 'Good luck with that.'

'It's very sad, really,' says Ali. 'Well, they're all quite sad.'

The other cases they were given included a woman called Camille Devine who said she was the reincarnation of Marie Antoinette (it was why she had a short neck, she said), and Fred Curtis, who believed he was being followed by the ghost of Marilyn Monroe ('older of course') and ended up becoming obsessed with Ali.

‘I’ll see what else I can find for you,’ says Nigel.

‘Please don’t,’ says Ali. ‘I’ve found us a case.’ She tells Nigel about Luke Fanshaw.

‘That’s just coincidence,’ he says. ‘You’ve got nothing that links this poor boy’s death to the psychic.’

‘Nothing yet,’ says Ali.

‘Well, tread carefully,’ says Nigel. ‘You don’t want a court case for harassment. Remember, no one is meant to know about the unit.’

‘It’s very difficult being a police officer under those conditions,’ says Ali.

‘You brought it on yourselves,’ says Nigel. ‘With your . . . adventures . . . last year.’

Nigel means when Ali travelled to 1850 in order to research a shadowy group called The Collectors and got stuck there. She’d had to be rescued by John who, in turn, was rescued by Jones, aka Dr Serafina Pellegrini, the brilliant Italian physicist who made time travel possible in the first place. Ali doesn’t really blame Nigel for not having the words for this. At first, the government had been cautiously interested in the work of the Department but now they seem to have decided that time travel is too dangerous an experiment. Nigel has been sent to close things down, which seems to be a speciality of his. Ali sometimes thinks Nigel was put in charge of them as punishment for him as much as them. He’s a high-ranking Home Office official. Surely, he should be looking forward to early retirement, not babysitting a bunch of oddballs who have managed to subvert the laws of physics.

‘If you remember,’ says Ali, ‘it was a cabinet minister who asked me to go to 1850. We had approval at the very highest level.’

Nigel can’t deny this, but his body language seems to imply that,

had he been in charge at the time, Ali would never have donned a quantity of uncomfortable Victorian clothes and gone in search of a supposed mass-murderer.

He counters with, 'Well, it went badly wrong, didn't it?'

'That wasn't our fault,' says Ali. 'Well, not entirely.'

'It was somebody's fault,' says Nigel.

'Not necessarily,' says Ali. 'Sometimes things just happen.'

'That's your analysis, is it? "Sometimes things just happen"?'

'Pretty much.'

Nigel gives her an owlish look behind his glasses. 'You're a good police officer, Alison,' he says, rather unexpectedly. 'Can't you be satisfied with that?'

'One of our colleagues is lost,' says Ali. 'I can't let that go.'

'Dr Pellegrini, I am glad to say, does not come under my remit. She's a civilian and must, regrettably, be written off as a casualty of this experiment.'

'That's easy for you to say,' says Ali. 'Dr Pellegrini – Jones – is our friend.'

'Friendship has nothing to do with policing,' says Nigel, although John would definitely argue that this is untrue; he claims his friends have kept him alive.

Nigel's passing shot is, 'Remember, any more of that business and the unit will be disbanded. Good day, Alison.'

When he's gone, Ali rests her head on the desk.

'Cheer up,' says a voice. 'I've got a lead.'

Ali looks up. Dina is standing in the doorway. She looks excited, a rare emotion in the Department these days.

'Barry Power,' she says. 'He's here! At the People's Palace tomorrow night. The ad says, "You'll believe you can fly."'

THE KILLING TIME

Ali thinks of Margaret Fanshaw. *He told Luke that he could fly. A week later Luke jumped from the roof of our flats.*

'Dina,' says Ali, 'I think we have to meet this man.'

'I've already cancelled my date,' says Dina.