

CHAPTER ONE

“Of course, this little beauty is not for racing, you understand. It has nothing on those J-class *monstrosities* you see in the America’s Cup nowadays. We don’t even have the Bermuda mast.”

Professor Khan nodded and smiled, being careful not to show his teeth. If there was anything more tiring than listening to Lord Blinkersly complain about the inadequacy of his fifty-foot yacht, it was his oft-repeated confession that he found Khan’s teeth “damned disconcerting.”

“Daddy!” Bertie Blinkersly called. He pronounced it *Duddy*. “You mustn’t bore the Professor talking about yacht races we won’t even enter!”

Bertie was a tall lad, topping six foot four inches, but despite being old enough to take up arms in defense of king and country, he still seemed unfinished, more of a gawky boy than man. Khan liked him the way one might like an enthusiastic puppy: near enough to make one laugh but not close enough to accidentally muss one’s tweed. Sadly, while the yacht was quite impressively long, it was also narrow. Bertie, clambering toward them in the bow, would soon be very close indeed.

Following carefully behind him was his fiancé, Petunia. She was a painfully shy young woman, but pretty in a colorless, self-effacing way. Khan had politely inquired after her health before they had set sail, but she had simply squeaked in response, then stared at the toes of her deck shoes. No matter. He had become accustomed to the unfortunate effect he had on people.

The bow struck a wave, raising a salty spray that soaked them all. Bertie and Lord Blinkersly did their best to bear it manfully. Petunia shielded her face, blinking down at the deck.

“Dear boy,” Lord Blinkersly answered. His jowls started at his lower eyelashes and stopped at the collar of his shirt. They jiggled hypnotically whenever he spoke. “I’m only talking about larger, more comfortable vessels! I do believe your professor is feeling a widge out of sorts, don’t you know?”

Khan realized his hands were gripping tightly to the wooden bench upon which he was seated. What’s more, he had not moved from the spot since they had first glided away from the dock.

“I’m fine,” he lied. “The sun is wonderful and I’ve always loved the smell of the sea.”

Lies were expected. Lies were polite. It was also expected that, when one of your most mediocre students invited you to go sailing with his father, a Lord Temporal who had endowed a chair at Oxford, you accepted. It wouldn’t affect Bertie’s grades one jot, no matter how much the Blinkerslys hoped otherwise, but still, the Professor could not bring himself to refuse Bertie’s offer.

He should have. Khan had been on the water before, but familiarity had not made the experience any easier. He was still terrified.

“I say, the water’s not particularly rough today, don’t you know, but I could always ask the fellows to turn us back in toward land.” *The fellows* were a pair of Portuguese sailors who actually did the business of sailing the yacht. Khan hadn’t been introduced and he half expected that the Blinkerslys did not know their names. “It would be no problem at all, my good fellow.”

“Oh! By Jove, Daddy, I think I’ve tackled it! It’s the life jacket.”

They all turned toward Professor Khan. He was, indeed, wearing his life jacket. Yes, he was the only one. Yes, he’d put it on before they’d even untied from the dock.

Lord Blinkersly harumphed and looked vaguely put out. “We haven’t sunk ourselves so far, and the fellows are quite skilled at fishing unfortunate passengers out of the drink. They’ve certainly hooked Bertie here back into the boat enough times.”

“Ha ha! I’ll say! There’s really nothing to fret about, Professor. Truly.”

Khan felt a chill run down his back. Would propriety require him to remove his life jacket, too?

“No,” Petunia said.

As they turned to her, she seemed to shrink in on herself. Bertie stood beside her but didn’t offer a comforting hand. In fact, he never seemed to touch her at all. Khan felt a sudden flush of anger he dared not show: They were engaged to be married, for pity’s sake! Yet Khan had never seen them so much as hold hands. Did they love each other at all? Or were public displays of affection “simply not done”?

By God, the boy mustn’t make the same mistake that Khan had, but of course it wasn’t his place to speak.

“You see...” Petunia forced herself to continue. “When Bertie told me we would be sailing with the Professor, I went to my library—”

Professor Khan felt his heart break a little. She was engaged to Bertie and she was bookish, too? Good Lord.

“... And did a little research. You see, the fellows would never be able to rescue Professor Khan if he fell overboard, because he’s not as buoyant as we are. Because he’s...”

Petunia couldn’t bring herself to say it, even though the fact was evident to anyone with eyes: *because he’s a gorilla.*

An intelligent gorilla, created by Doctor Methuselah as part of one of his obscure plots. In fact, there was an entire small nation of his kind out there in the world, ruled over by the iron hand of the Professor’s “father,” Gorilla Khan. The Professor could have lived among them as a prince, if he were willing to devote his life to carnage and war rather than science and learning.

But Professor Khan had turned his back on conquest. He had sided with the humans against his own people to protect innocent lives. Now he was both hero and exile, Englishman and ape, Oxford professor and barely-tolerated freak of nature.

Lord Blinkersly turned to Khan with a shocked look on his face. “I say, old boy, is that true?”

The Professor shrugged and glanced down at his bare feet. No one in all of England made shoes to fit those feet. “I weigh about four hundred pounds and, although I do prefer traditional English foods like bangers and mash, I don’t carry the same level of body fat humans do. If I were to lose my footing—”

“I say! You’d sink like a stone, jacket be damned! Fellows!” Lord Blinkersly began to wave toward the low, green shape of England off the starboard side. “Back-o to dock-o!”

The fellows trimmed sail and brought the boat about. Bertie knelt beside the Professor’s bench. “I had no idea, Professor. I wish you had popped the cork on this one when I lobbed the invitation toward you.”

“Nevermind that, boy,” Lord Blinkersly interrupted. “I understand why he didn’t say anything, although I can’t say the same for my *future daughter-in-law*.” Petunia drifted toward the stern, out of earshot of whatever scolding the old fellow had in mind. Everyone gripped the rails tightly as the ocean swells hit the yacht broadside, making her roll. “I imagine the Professor felt obliged by our name and title. It’s not unheard of for... er... *immigrants* to put a greater weight on the English system than we do, wot? Still, Professor, your life jacket looks better than that whorehouse window curtain my son is wearing.”

Bertie stroked the sleeve of his tangerine checked jacket. “Now, Daddy.”

Lord Blinkersly bent down to Khan. “Professor, how do you feel about sitting *by* the sea, wot? Would you enjoy feeling the sand between your... toes?”

Khan tried to hide his relief. The rolling yacht made him queasy and he had to relax his grip on the bench for fear of breaking the wood. “I would very much, thank you.”

Lord Blinkersly clapped him on the shoulder, looking more comfortable now that he was in a position to ease or exacerbate his guest’s fears. The yacht rolled hard to the port side, then back the other way. It was when the mast was pointed farthest to the west that the gleaming arrow flashed out of the sky and struck the boat, nearly neutering Professor Khan.

CHAPTER TWO

By Jove! It was bally chaos at first. Daddy began shouting orders as if he was back fighting the Boers. Petunia began shrieking about holes in the sky. As for Bertie himself, well, he would have to accept that there are certain occasions when a fellow—even a jolly solid English fellow of the best stock—occasionally panics like a chicken in a fox’s den. Even Miguel and Miguel 2, or whatever the fellows called themselves, abandoned the lines and rudder to come see.

Only Professor Khan seemed to hold himself together. In fact, it almost seemed to calm him, as though a mysterious attack out of nowhere was a comforting return to his normal routine.

The arrow was made of gleaming metal, bright like chrome, but Bertie could see it wasn’t, not really. It had struck while *Manor Born* was heeling to port, practically on her beam ends, piercing both the hem of Professor Khan’s kilt and the wooden bench below it. Right between his blinking legs.

Bertie felt positively wobbly at the idea, but the Professor scanned the western sky coolly. There were no other ships in evidence, no planes, nothing that could have harbored a bellicose archer.

“Intolerable!” Daddy shouted. “Intolerable! Intolerable!”

Professor Khan splintered the bench without apology as he withdrew the arrow. Not only was the shaft made of metal—and as thick as a pinkie finger, much larger than average—but so were the head and the feathers, too.

Bertie realized he was blubbering and slapped his hand over his mouth to shut himself up. “Petunia!” he said, his voice still high with panic, “Stop shrieking like a silly fool!”

“My dear,” Khan said, turning around to address her. Bertie could not imagine how the Professor kept his head. “What was that you said about a hole? I’m afraid you’re the only one of us to have seen it.”

She took several gasping breaths. “A hole,” she said, pointing above Khan’s head to the port side. The flush in her cheeks made her look almost pretty. “Right there above you. The arrow just... flew out of it.”

“Intolerable!” Daddy shouted again. “Not only that you should be... But to have one of my guests attacked! And the blasted thing just missed me, too!”

The Miguels had come forward to eyeball the arrow for themselves. A wave took the stern at an angle and soaked everyone to the skin.

“Intolerable!” Daddy shouted at them, his whole face wobbling. “Get back to your jibs and things, damn you! Climb the mast-o and tell me who could have attacked our guest-o!”

The Professor cleared his throat. “I don’t think it was an attack, Lord Blinkersly. I think it was a message.”

Bertie leaned in close. By Jove, there was a note tied to the front of the arrow, just behind the head. Professor Khan undid the slipknot—it was a black shoelace of all things—and put it in his pocket. Then he unfolded the note. Fine lavender paper, Bertie noted, the sort his aunts gave him at Christmas when they wanted to extort letters from him.

The Professor put on his reading glasses. “*Come to Los Angeles immediately. Anselme Leveque is in terrible danger.* There’s even an address.”

Daddy snorted. “Leveque? Sounds Frenchy. Why would someone send me a message about a Frenchy?”

“I daresay this note is for me, Lord Blinkersly. Professor Leveque is a brilliant theoretical physicist. He is also a friend and colleague of mine.”

Daddy snorted again, this time in relief. Bertie had never met a man who could be so incapable with words but so communicative without them. “Not terribly informative. Who is it from?”

The Professor folded the paper back up. “The forger didn’t sign it.”

“Forger? What do you mean by that?”

“What I mean,” the Professor said calmly as the Miguels turned them back toward the shore, “is that it appears to have been written in my hand.”

CHAPTER THREE

The dean had let his desk get out of control again. Damnation. His hatred of his own messiness was matched only by his inability to do anything about it. Where was Mrs. Evermore? She was supposed to be keeping him under control to avoid this sort of embarrassment.

As he pawed through the papers on his desk, he muttered: “Where did that fool woman put that—”

“AWAY!” came Mrs. Evermore’s voice from the front office. Good Lord, that woman had the ears of a barn owl.

Sure enough, the requisition approval forms were in the cabinet, just where they were supposed to be. The dean pulled out the folder and promptly spilled them across the window seat.

Damnation doubled. It was summer term! This was the time the university was most pleasant, when the teachers and students were supposed to be absent. Why couldn’t the professors go on holiday like sensible people? Couldn’t the physics department do their nuclear experiments without... He scanned the form in front of him. Lead shielding? Frivolous! Denied.

And the archaeology department, with their sealed rooms and their secret “special collection.” Not only was there no room in the budget for silver bullets, but to ask the Archbishop of Canterbury to bless them? The scandal would be humiliating! Denied.

The dean glanced out the window. “Speaking of scandals...” he muttered. That infuriating Professor Khan was coming up the walk with... Was that Lord Blinkersly’s son? Damnation, it was. As much as he wished otherwise, the dean knew they were coming to see him.

His first order of business when he’d started this job had been to force Khan out of the school, but the backlash he’d faced had been outrageous. The dean considered Khan little more than a circus freak, little better than a tenured horse that could do arithmetic, but the staff and faculty genuinely liked him. Even the students admired him, if that mattered.

Of course, the dean was no neophyte when it came to school politics. If he couldn’t force a teacher out directly, he knew how to make his position too uncomfortable to retain. Unfortunately, his order to move Khan’s office to the basement seemed to vanish from his outbox, his requirement that all staff shave daily never turned up in the day’s typing, and his rule that all male staff wear trousers... Well, that was the one that brought Mrs. Evermore into his office, her shrill voice rattling the windowpanes. Poor Professor Khan, she said, couldn’t be expected to wear *human* trousers because he wasn’t human (as if the dean had forgotten there was an Honest to Heavens mountain gorilla on the faculty). Besides, her maternal grandfather had been North Country, and he’d worn a kilt every day of his life. With pride.

The dean had admitted defeat at that point. Still, it had all been so embarrassing—for the institution.

However, there was hope. If Khan was coming here, it was because he needed research money—which he wasn’t going to get—or he needed to take leave for another of his adventures. As far as the dean was concerned, the only problem with Khan’s adventures was that he came back afterward.

Please, please, don’t let this visit be about money.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sally Slick had put on her clean coveralls and washed her face, too. She'd even looked in a mirror to make sure she hadn't missed a spot of engine grease. Yes, she was only going to New Jersey, but even so she had a special guest to meet.

The auto-gyro rumbled from out over the water with the rising sun behind it, then swung around toward the landing strip. Sally drove out onto the field to meet it. Before she clambered from her convertible, she checked herself in the rear view mirror one last time.

There was a smudge of black grease on the side of her nose. Aw, what was the use?

Professor Khan and his assistant climbed awkwardly down the auto-gyro's ladder. The old gorilla looked just as he always did, bundled in his professorial tweeds, tartan kilt and bare feet, with his reading spectacles poking from his pocket. His assistant wore a green bowler over a green jacket and pants. If he'd tripped and fallen, someone might have stuck a golf flagstick into his gaping mouth.

In a few hours, the July temperatures in New York would make them regret those sport jackets, but for now it was still early enough to be cool.

"Professor, it's so good to see you!" Sally rushed forward to embrace him, which he returned warmly. Boy, was he big. He was no taller than Sally, but beneath that thick black body hair, he was as solid as the prow of a tugboat. "Wasn't it nice to be met at sea and flown in, rather than wait in line to have your passport stamped?"

“You mean ‘be refused entry into the U.S. because my kind are still deeply distrusted.’”

“That, too,” she admitted.

“Thank you, Sally. I really am terribly grateful.”

How sad he seemed! She’d heard that he was still haunted by a previous adventure—a war on another planet, in fact, and a woman he left behind—but she didn’t know the details. Considering her own romantic history, better if she didn’t broach the subject at all. “The others asked me to tell you they’re sorry they couldn’t meet you. They’re out of the country.”

“My dear, never mind the others; what are you doing here? You shouldn’t be interrupting your work just to chauffeur an old gorilla around New York.”

“Hah! As if I’d let you pass through my city without seeing you. I don’t think so. We have a few hours before your train so I’m taking you someplace nice.”

As it turned out, *nice* meant a table at Katz’s Delicatessen. The room fell silent as Khan stepped through the door, but Sally called the owner’s name and he hustled two couples who were obviously finishing a night on the town out of a back booth.

Sally watched Benny closely as he placed plates and napkins on the table. He understood a little of who and what she was, and he’d always treated her well, but the gorilla obviously made him uneasy. The memory of the recent failed gorilla invasion was still strong, even if most people had no idea just how close things had been. Would he have thrown the Professor out if he’d come in alone? Considering everything Khan had done to save the city—against his own people, no less—it seemed unfair.

Khan’s assistant grimaced at the menu. “Is this... Jewish food?”

Sally turned away from him. “Professor, tell me about this mission of yours.”

He tried to insist that it wasn’t anything of the sort, but the more he described it, the more it sounded like exactly the sort of trouble the Centurions investigated. The Professor didn’t want her help, though. This was his friend, he insisted, not an invasion from outer space or an evil mastermind with a death ray.

There was something different in his voice and in his expression; it worried her. She'd known him to be fussy and she'd known him to cut loose like a wild animal, but she had never known him to look downcast. "Are you missing... that other place?" She couldn't bring herself to say *Mars*.

Khan gave her a steady look. Bingo. "Not the place so much as... Well, the place, too." He rubbed his face with a hairy paw. "You must understand, Sally: Oxford is my home. It was the first place I truly belonged. When I'm teaching a class and it's going well, I feel a tremendous sense of *connection* with my students. The same is true when I'm doing research in my library. The books on my desk and on my shelves, the information contained in them... I feel as though they are a part of me."

Sally stared deeply into Khan's small, dark eyes. "I think I know what you mean, Professor. When I'm in my shop, inventing something, I feel like I'm connected with everything at once. Sometimes I imagine I can feel the movement of the earth and the fury of the sun, the swirl of electricity all over the city, the warps of magnetic fields. That's when I know I'm about to solve a sticky problem or come up with something new and amazing."

Professor Khan stared back with a frankness that made her slightly uncomfortable. "That must be incredibly profound," he said at last. "But then, I imagine that's what makes you who you are."

The gangly assistant interrupted with the casual confidence of someone who believes everything he says is worth hearing. "I must say, I don't think much of this talk of 'connectedness.' It doesn't seem very full of veryness."

It was time to place their orders, and within a few hours Sally put the Professor and his ridiculous assistant on a westbound train.

CHAPTER FIVE

All the way to Wilshire she'd driven, just to buy those special Russian sausages for her Horst. Berta wouldn't tell him they were Russian, of course. Horst had no love for people he now called "Soviets," even if they'd come to America while the tsars were still in power, or had fled the Bolshevik armies... even if they were Jews fleeing pogroms.

Horst, her big, hairy bear of a man, was not fond of nuance.

But the sausage was fatty and had no sugar in it, which he liked, so Berta never told him it was made by former White Army deserters. Fifteen years of marriage had taught Berta a great many things, but chief among them was that little lies made life tolerable. She remembered all too well the imperious lecture he delivered when she'd told him she'd attended his Home State Picnic because she was tagging along with a friend, not because she'd moved here from Wisconsin as she'd claimed. What did it matter, four years later, to discover that she'd actually been born in Iowa? Why couldn't he just laugh about it like a sensible person?

So she never told him about the sausage, or how much time she spent in the auto fetching it. She certainly never told him about the lunchtime visits to restaurants that served food from all over the world.

How he would have fussed at the idea of her eating this way! For Horst every meal was wurst, spaetzel, potatoes and pickles; if he'd discovered that, for three months running, she had lunched twice a week at a family bodega because she loved their mole sauce, he would have taken her car keys away.

Today she had stopped at a tiny Filipino place, and her meal was made all the more delicious when she imagined Horst's outrage if he'd ever learned it had been prepared by a Malay family.

Luckily, he never asked. The thought brought a familiar tinge of loneliness, but she brushed it off as she gathered her groceries from the trunk of her car. Horst had his research and his lectures. The university kept him quite busy and his work was so very important. When a man spent long hours searching for "the mathematical name of God," well, was it any wonder that he wasn't interested in discussing the price of pickles?

Berta was startled out of her reverie by the sight of a car parked behind her husband's at the curb. A Renault Primaquatre may not have been an extravagant car, but it was probably out of the price range of most of the university employees who lived on the block.

Stranger still was that a young woman sat unmoving behind the wheel. She was pretty enough but otherwise unremarkable. However, she seemed to be in some sort of trance; her eyes were wide open and her head was held upright but she was so still she could have been sound asleep.

It was possible the poor woman was simply lost in thought, but there were other, more worrisome causes for such a trance, too. Berta resolved to slip her groceries into the icebox and come back out to check on her.

But when Berta stepped through her front door, she forgot about the woman in the car. Something about the house felt wrong. Everything looked in order, but nonetheless goose pimples ran down her arms and back.

"Horst?" she called, but there was only silence in return. His car was out front, so he had to be here, and he could never become so absorbed in his work that he would ignore her, not this close to suppertime.

She carried the shopping bags into the tiny kitchen and dropped them onto the table. A sudden certainty overcame her that he'd suffered a heart attack and collapsed somewhere in the house. Too many pastries, she thought bitterly as she hurried toward the back of the house.

What would have been a den in most homes had been turned into Horst's workshop. If he wasn't in the bath—and the door was open, so she knew he wasn't—that was where he would be. Why he needed a place to build and futz and blow out their fuse box at home when he had access to his university labs, she would never understand.

She opened the workroom door. "God in Heaven!"

Someone had torn the place apart. Horst had never been a tidy man, but he wouldn't have thrown his equipment about, shattering vacuum tubes and tearing out wires. He just didn't have the temperament to throw a tantrum.

Had something been stolen? The way everything was strewn about, she wasn't sure how a body could tell. But where was—

A shoe. One of Horst's sensible brown shoes stuck out from behind the workbench beside the far wall. Berta rushed to him, not caring about the equipment she broke beneath her heavy tread. She caught hold of the workbench and, with a mighty heave, toppled it and everything on it to the side, revealing—

Who was this? She'd expected to find her great hairy bear of a husband, but this fellow was as bald as an egg.

A wave of revulsion ran through her as she looked at the intruder's soft, pink, hairless flab. He was not dead, only comatose. Was he a burglar, who dressed himself in her husband's clothes? What madness was this?

A rush of footsteps passed in the hall behind her, and Berta turned and raced after them. By the sound, the shoes were made of metal. More madness. She reached the front room but found it empty. The front door was still shut and of course she would have heard it open.

Whoever had run by her was trapped in the house. It suddenly dawned on Berta that she was alone and had nothing to use as a weapon, not even the fish boning knife from the cutlery block. Maybe, whoever this intruder was, she ought to let them escape.

There was a metallic footstep behind her. When she turned toward it, she saw nothing but a brilliant turquoise light. Her mind was suddenly filled with numbers.

CHAPTER SIX

It was after sunset when Khan and Bertie arrived at Central Station, well past business hours. Nonetheless, Bertie was able to procure the Wanderer W22 the Blinkersly solicitors had arranged as well as a map of Los Angeles.

The route to Anselme's home took them through a small part of the Sunset Strip, making Professor Khan's first glimpses of the city contradictory and unpleasant. There were squat stone office buildings that lacked the art deco charm of Manhattan. There were intersections with pleasant little houses on one side and desolate scrub lots on the other.

And there was the strip itself: filled with neon advertisements for gambling and music, along with more subtle suggestions for other, less legal entertainments.

"I say," Bertie chattered nervously. "Sin city, wot?"

He wasn't wrong, Khan knew. Los Angeles seemed haphazard, self-indulgent, and flimsy. It looked as if it had been created to indulge the moment, without care for the long-lasting effect.

And yet, while he was waiting on Bertie at the station, or when they sat at a red light, the locals did no more than glance at him, raise an eyebrow, then look away. He felt none of the hostility he had grown accustomed to in New York and on the train ride west. No one scowled. No one stared at him while muttering to a companion. No one hurried away at his approach. It was almost refreshing.

"I'm awfully glad that the locals are not giving us so many awful looks," Bertie said. Khan was surprised he'd noticed. "Much better than in Oklahoma; I thought those fellows were going to draw their six-shooters and OK Corral us! Do you remember those fellows, Professor? They were dressed as cowboys even though they weren't from Texas."

"Bertie, I'm pretty sure there are cowboys in places other than Texas."

"Possibly, Professor, but they don't seem proper cowboys if they're not from Texas. I'm simply goggled that you haven't been treated more warmly. I thought you were famous, sir."

"Fame isn't all it's put up to be, my boy."

"Quite," Bertie said. "I say! Perhaps they think you are a movie actor! Or that we are driving around the city in costume to promote a new film! Wouldn't that be exciting! Tell me, sir, did you see that cracker about the colossal ape fellow? The one where he climbed that building in New York to win the heart of a beautiful woman?"

"I walked out of that film, Bertie."

"Ah. Yes. I'm sure she wasn't his type. My goodness! Is that a woman of ill-repute just standing out on the corner?"

"Er, I suspect not, Bertie." Khan checked his map. "Make a right at this corner, my boy."

He did. Like so much else about Los Angeles, it surprised them by changing rather suddenly. After a short block, the street began to wind up a steep hill and they found themselves almost lost among stands of trees.

Leveque's home wasn't far up the hill, but the trees were thick enough to obscure most of the garish light from the strip below. Bertie pulled off the narrow, winding road into a parking space in front of the house. "Pleasant-looking little place," Bertie said.

Professor Khan almost laughed. The house before them was a two-story Italian villa with a tall privacy hedge, a wrought-iron gate, and a picture window with leaded glass. It was a beautiful place, and should have been far outside the budget of a university professor. Only Bertie would describe it as if it was a vacation cottage.

The doorbell rang like chimes. Someone switched on a light above the lintel, and then, after a series of locks were thrown, the door swung open.

A young woman of about twenty-four stood in the entry, framed by the light behind her. Khan heard Bertie catch his breath; yes, he supposed she was pretty by human measures. Her blonde curls had been cut to show off her long, pale neck. She had Leveque's long, narrow nose but her blue eyes were large and expressive.

She was wearing a sleek, elegant dress. In black.

While Khan was considering his own gray tweed and Bertie's jaunty lemon yellow jacket and bowler, Bertie spoke up. "Pardon me, but we've come a long way to speak with Doctor Anselme Leveque."

She glanced back and forth between Khan and Bertie several times, then bared her teeth. "Is this supposed to be a joke? Am I supposed to be laughing? Are you bringing the circus to my house? Damn you!"

She slammed the door in their faces.

Bertie turned toward Khan with a bewildered expression. In all likelihood, no one had ever slammed a door on him before. "Does this mean we start back to England now, Professor?"

Khan laid his hand on Bertie's elbow and pulled him aside so he could reach the doorbell. When it rang again, the woman called through the door: "Go away!"

"I'm sorry to trouble you, but we have come all the way from England on a matter of some urgency about Doctor Leveque. I received a message saying he is in terrible danger." Khan had almost said *was in terrible danger*, but he corrected himself at the last moment. That black dress...

"One moment."

Khan and Bertie stood on the front steps for quite a little while, waiting. At first, the Professor thought the woman had gone to fetch a gun, but the delay was much too long for that. Finally, when the door swung open, the woman's cheeks were covered with tears. "What message?"

"Please let me take a moment to introduce myself. My name is Professor Khan. I corresponded with your father often over the last three years and I consider him my friend. This is Bertie Blinkersly, one of my students. We have come all the way from Oxford University to see him."

The woman sniffled. "Well, he never mentioned you to me. Let me see the message."

Professor Khan reluctantly took the folded sheet of paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. She glanced at it, then gave it back. "He didn't write that note."

"Certainly not. I should mention that it wasn't delivered in an envelope. It was tied to this."

Professor Khan took the metal arrow from his breast pocket. The young woman stood utterly still, staring at it as if it were a ghost. Finally, she took a long look at Khan and Bertie. It was clear she recognized the arrow, just as it was clear she was not sure what to do.

"Come inside," she said finally.

"Gosh, it's about time," Bertie said. "I thought we were going to be turned away like peddlers."

She led them down a few steps into a sunken living room. The couches were low and flat, almost like beds, and the walls were dominated by more picture windows. How much were university professors paid in the United States?

Professor Khan gripped his hat nervously in both hands. The young woman's eyes were wide and glistening, but she would not look directly at him. Her lips were pressed tightly together. Khan thought she might start crying right in front of them, or pull a gun.

Bertie threw his hat carelessly onto the nearest sofa as though he owned the place. "Is Dr. Leveque at home? We've come an awfully long way to jabber at him."

"This isn't his home," the woman said. "It's mine."

"Oh!" Bertie suddenly seemed utterly flummoxed.

Professor Khan laid a hand on his arm to silence him. "In that case, forgive us for calling at this hour. I'm sure it must have been a shock to open the door and see me standing there."

She drew a cigarette from a case, then returned it unlit. "This is Los Angeles. It's not that late and you aren't that shocking. How long has it been since you saw Dr. Leveque?"

Khan noted the pause before she said the name. "You're Sylvia, aren't you? Anselme's daughter."

She began to drum her fingers irritably on the metal rim of the case. "That's not what I would call an answer to my question, is it?"

“Three years ago,” Khan answered. “It was a convention in Salzburg. I thought I had been invited to deliver a paper, but in truth the attendees wanted to gawp at me as if I were a circus performer. Your father was the only one who treated me with respect. We spent several hours in his room that first night enjoying a very fine brandy and discussing the most fascinating topics. He really was the most brilliant theoretical physicist I’ve ever met.”

Sylvia’s tone was colorless and flat. “All right, maybe he did mention you. He told me that your letters helped advance his work.”

“Pish,” the Professor responded uncomfortably. “Tiny suggestions.”

“But he didn’t write that note,” she insisted.

“No,” Khan said. “Neither did I, although the handwriting is supposed to resemble my own. Obviously, your father would never use one of my letters to mimic my script, but someone who had access to them must have. That person was anxious for me to come here, to help him.”

“Well, he’s dead.” She tossed the case onto the end table as though it had disappointed her. “I’m sorry to say it so abruptly but the whole thing has been sudden. Everything is sudden. My father is dead.”

Bertie took an impulsive step toward her. “You poor old thing—”

She froze him with a glance. “What did you call me?”

“Forgive my student,” Professor Khan interjected. “It was not meant unkindly.”

“I’d hate to see what he’d say to someone he didn’t like. Look, I know you came a long way, but you’re too late.”

“My dear girl,” Professor Khan said gently. “I’m so terribly sorry for the tragedy you’ve suffered. I wish there was something I could say to ease the loss of a man like your father. Truly, if there’s anything I can do, please ask.”

Sylvia was quiet a moment as she considered Khan’s words. “You’re actually a decent sort, aren’t you? Boy, have you come to the wrong part of the world.”

Professor Khan accepted the compliment with a nod. “I’m sorry to ask, but considering the circumstances, I feel I must. How did it happen? And when?”

Before she could answer, there was a heavy pounding at the front door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sylvia looked mildly alarmed for a moment, but she excused herself and slipped into the foyer. Bertie looked at the Professor and said: “Not a bad looker, eh? If she stopped clipping her nails and put a splash of color on them—”

“Pick up your hat, Bertie.” The boy had not mentioned Petunia once since the start of their trip, even though she was only an ocean and a continent away. Khan couldn’t help but be sharp with him. It was such a short distance!

“Ah. Quite.” He stroked the yellow sleeve of his jacket, realizing too late that he was inappropriately dressed.

Professor Khan scanned the room again. There was a well-stocked bar but few bookshelves. Not what he would consider a comfortable home. At the back of the house was a large window that looked onto a deck, a smallish back yard, and the lights of another house on the far side of the fence. It would have been pleasant to sit out on that nice deck and talk in the cool evening breeze.

From out in the entryway, they heard a man’s voice, smooth and assured. “Don’t worry your pretty head about it, doll. I’m here.”

Two men strode into the living room. Both wore dark blue double-breasted suits with wide-brimmed fedoras. The one in the lead was in his early thirties; good-looking the way movie-criminals were, with a pencil mustache and an expression that suggested everything he saw was his for the taking. The crease in his pants looked sharp enough to slice an orange.

The man beside him was shorter, older and fatter, with a pug face and beady, mistrustful eyes. His mouth curled downwards in a contemptuous frown that Khan sensed was a permanent fixture. The hairs on Khan's arms prickled; both had the look of evil men.

They took badges from their jacket pockets. "LAPD Homicide," the younger one said, smiling like a shark. "I'm Detective Waters and my partner is Detective Cross. Who are you?"

Khan answered quickly, before Bertie could open his mouth. "This is Bertie Blinkersly. My name is Professor Khan. We've—"

Waters rolled his eyes. "Off with the mask, wise guy."

Professor Khan grew warm. "It's not a mask. This is my true self."

Waters put his hands on his hips. "You wanna play games with me? Because I play rough."

"Jim," Sylvia cut in. "It's true. He's one of the talking apes you read about in the paper."

"Oh!" Waters's expression became amused for some reason. "Like that crew invaded New York a couple years back. You're one of them?"

The Professor's memory of the invasion was quite different from most, of course, but there was no denying it. "I—"

"I say!" Bertie interjected. "Professor Khan was certainly not one of them. He fought on our side!"

Waters leaned forward even further. Khan was standing a couple of steps below him, giving the detective the illusion of physical supremacy. "Betrayed your own people, eh?"

Cross spit out the word "Traitor," with more venom than Khan had thought possible. Part of him marveled that humans would hold him in contempt because he'd risked his life to protect other humans, but they were going to bully him no matter what.

"So, Mr. Monkey," Waters said. "Where were you four nights ago at about 10:30?"

"Is that the night Anselme was murdered?"

Waters stuck a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. "Who said anything about murder?"

"You're homicide detectives, aren't you?"

Waters jabbed his finger into Khan's lapel. "Don't get cute with me. Where were you?"

"Somewhere near Albany, NY," Khan answered calmly. "We only just arrived in this city about two hours ago. Bertie has our tickets."

"Why, of course!" Bertie stuffed his hand into his jacket.

Detective Cross came forward like a shot, much faster than anyone might have expected from someone his age and shape. He bounded off the top step and bowled into Bertie, striking him across the forehead with a blackjack.

The young man sprawled across the couch, ticket stubs flying into the air like wedding confetti.

"Bertie!" Khan shouted, stepping toward the boy, but Cross was already holding a gun in his other hand, and it was already pointing at the Professor's belly.

Would it be worth taking a slug to tear off Cross's arm? If the detective planned to murder them in cold blood, he didn't see what choice—

"Now now," Waters said. His gun was drawn, too. Khan let his arms fall to the side. "Let's not get all excited. It's just that when my partner here sees someone stuff a hand under a jacket, he gets all anxious. Get it? Your pal there ain't what you call a savvy operator."

Khan looked between them. While Waters talked tough, it was Cross who would murder them both in cold blood and never lose a wink of sleep. "You're correct," Khan said. His voice sounded steadier than he felt. Bertie, his eyes wet and shining, stared up at Cross in astonishment. "He's led a sheltered life, but he's basically good-hearted."

Waters seemed to consider that the way Khan would consider a menu option. Sylvia stepped toward him. "Jim, they have one of my father's arrows."

Detective Waters turned a questioning look at Khan. He didn't wait for the inevitable question. "Someone shot it at me."

Waters rolled his eyes again, then holstered his revolver. He stepped down into the living room like a prizefighter heading into a fixed match. When he was just a few inches from Khan's face, he spoke very quietly.

"*Professor*, huh? Mr. Talking Monkey is a professor? Let me ask you, Monkey: Do you think you're better than me?"

"At what?" the Professor responded.

Bertie sat up, his hand over the growing lump on his head. Cross moved to the side, stepping up one stair for a better look out the window. His pudgy sneer had a tiny twist of confusion. "What the hell is that?"

They all turned to look out the front window. The ocean breezes made the trees shimmer in the faint light, but there was something else, too. Faint figures that seemed to bounce toward them.

The front door crashed open, and an Asian man hopped into the room, his arms stretched out in front of him. His face had the ghastly pallor of death.

"Jiangshi!" Bertie shouted. "By golly, it's a jiangshi!"

The front window shattered as more corpses hopped through.