THE BOX OF THE CURSED RINGS

A Novel of Marrowmere

in three parts and thirty chapters

"There are seven sins, and seven sorrows,

and seven rings to bind them all.

Pity the hand that opens the box."

— from a fragment, Abbey of St. Cyriacus, 1487

PART I

The Inheritance

CHAPTER ONE

The House on Vellum Street

The train to Marrowmere did not so much arrive at the station as surrender to it. For the last hour of the journey the windows had shown nothing but rain and the occasional gas-lamp blurred to a smear of yellow, and when the carriage finally shuddered to a halt Eleanor Vance realised she had been clutching her gloves so tightly that the seams had begun to give along the inside of her right thumb.

She let them go, finger by finger, and watched the porter outside the window struggle with a trunk that was not hers. The platform was almost empty. A single lamp swayed in the wind above the sign that read MARROWMERE, and beyond it the dark seemed thicker than dark had any right to be.

"Miss Vance?"

The voice belonged to a small man in a wet black coat, holding an umbrella that the wind had reduced to a sort of crippled bird. He had the apologetic face of a man who had spent his career delivering bad news politely.

"Mr. Quill?" she said.

"Quill, yes. Solicitor to the late Mr. Vance. My very sincere condolences. Your grandfather was a remarkable gentleman."

Eleanor had heard her grandfather called many things in her twenty-six years. Remarkable was a new one. She thanked Mr. Quill and accepted his arm, and together they crossed the platform and stepped down into a street that smelt of salt and coal-smoke and something faintly, unpleasantly sweet, like fruit left too long in a bowl.

"It is not a long walk," Mr. Quill said, in the tone of a man who had decided that not long was the safest measure he could offer. "The house is on Vellum Street. Most things in Marrowmere are on Vellum Street, in one sense or another."

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Marrowmere huddled. That was the word for it. The houses leaned toward one another across the narrow lanes as if conferring in low voices, and the upper storeys overhung the street so that the rain came down in irregular bursts rather than in any honest downpour. Eleanor counted three lit windows in the whole of the high street. From one of them, a woman watched her pass and did not look away when their eyes met.

"The town keeps to itself in October," Mr. Quill said. "The herring fleet has gone south. The visitors are all gone. It is only us who remain, you understand, and we are an old us."

"My grandfather lived here forty years."

"Forty-three." Mr. Quill cleared his throat. "He was not, if I may say so, regarded as a local. But then he did not seem to wish to be. He kept his own counsel and his own hours."

They turned into a lane so narrow that Mr. Quill had to collapse the umbrella entirely. The houses here were older, and the timbers had blackened with age until they seemed to be charred rather than painted. A sign creaked overhead in the wind. Eleanor looked up and saw it was a bookshop: HOLLOWAY & SON, ANTIQUARIAN, the letters faded almost to ghosts. A faint amber light burned in the upstairs window.

"That is the only shop that will still be open at this hour," Mr. Quill said, following her gaze. "Mr. Holloway sleeps strangely. He may call upon you tomorrow. I would advise that you receive him."

Eleanor filed the sentence away in the small mental drawer she kept for things she did not yet understand.

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Number Eleven, Vellum Street, was the last house in the lane, where the cobbles gave out and a low stone wall marked the edge of a garden that fell away toward the sea. The house was tall and narrow and very black against the sky. There were four storeys, and a gable, and a single round window in the gable that looked, in the lamplight, exactly like an eye.

Mr. Quill produced a ring of keys with the slow ceremony of a man unwilling to hurry the moment. The front door was painted a green so dark it might have been black, and the brass knocker had been worn smooth in the centre by what must have been thousands of hands. Eleanor wondered whose.

"There is no electricity," Mr. Quill said as he turned the lock. "Your grandfather refused it. There is gas in the principal rooms and oil lamps elsewhere. The housekeeper, Mrs. Pell, was in his employ for some twenty years. She gave notice the day after he died."

"Why?"

Mr. Quill did not answer. He pushed the door open.

The air that came out of the house was not the dead air of a closed-up place. It was cold and faintly sweet, and it carried on it the unmistakable smell of beeswax, recently polished.

"Please. Step in," said Mr. Quill. "You will catch your death."

She stepped in.

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Mr. Quill did not stay long. He showed her the principal rooms — a panelled parlour, a dining room with a single long table and twelve chairs as if her grandfather had been expecting a great deal of company that never came, a study lined floor to ceiling in books. He did not show her the cellar.

"There is a cellar, of course," he said at the foot of the stairs. "The door is in the scullery passage. Your grandfather kept it locked, and I have not been able to locate the key among his effects. Perhaps you will find it."

"Perhaps."

He gave her the keys to the house, and an envelope of papers he said would explain themselves, and his card in case of any difficulty. He told her, three times, that he would call again on Thursday. Then he stepped back out into the rain and the lane, and he walked away with the small hurried steps of a man who was trying very hard not to seem to be hurrying.

Eleanor closed the door. The house settled around her like a held breath finally let out.

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She had thought she would sleep at once, but the bedroom Mrs. Pell had prepared for her was the second-best bedroom, and Eleanor found that she could not lie down in a bed her grandfather had bought without first walking through the rooms he had lived in.

So she took up a lamp and walked.

Her grandfather had been a private man. He had visited her mother and herself perhaps a dozen times in Eleanor's entire life, always alone, always carrying a small leather case which he never opened in their presence. When her mother had died, four years ago, he had sent flowers and a cheque and a note expressing his regret that ill health prevented his attendance. He had not, so far as Eleanor knew, been ill a day in his life until the morning Mrs. Pell had found him at the foot of the cellar stairs with his neck broken and his eyes open and his right hand closed around a key.

The solicitor had not mentioned the key. The solicitor had not, in fact, mentioned anything that suggested her grandfather's death had been other than what the coroner had pronounced it: a fall, in the night, by an old man going down to fetch a bottle of wine.

Eleanor had read the coroner's report on the train. She had read it three times.

In the study she found a paperweight in the shape of a closed hand, cast in dull grey lead. Beneath it lay a folded piece of paper, brittle and brown along the creases. She unfolded it carefully. It was a list, in her grandfather's hand. Seven names. The first six had been crossed through, slowly and deliberately, with what looked like ink and then with what looked, in one case, like something darker. The seventh name had not been crossed through. The seventh name was her own.

Eleanor sat down in her grandfather's chair. She sat there for a long time.

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She found the coat in the hall cupboard at half past one in the morning. It was his — she recognised it at once, the dark green wool, the velvet collar gone slightly bald at the back. It still smelled of him. Pipe tobacco and bay rum and the dry sharp smell of old paper. She held it to her face and, for the first time since the telegram had arrived a fortnight ago, she cried.

She cried for perhaps two minutes. Then she stopped, because she was Eleanor Vance, and Eleanor Vance had not been raised to cry for long. She wiped her eyes on the velvet collar and went to hang the coat back up, and as she did so she felt something shift inside the lining.

Not a coin. A coin would have made a different sound. This was a flat hard thing, sewn into the silk of the lining just above the left breast pocket. Just above, she thought, where his heart had been.

She fetched the small scissors from the writing desk. She slit the silk along three inches, very neatly, and into her palm fell a key.

It was an old key. Iron, black with age, and cold in a way that seemed to go on being cold long after a thing of its size should have warmed to her hand. The bow of the key was wrought into the shape of a small flat ring, and around that ring, almost too small to see in the lamplight, seven tiny figures had been engraved. Each one was a different shape. Each shape was, very clearly, a ring.

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The cellar door was at the end of the scullery passage, half hidden behind a curtain of grey baize that had been nailed up across the lintel as

if to muffle a sound. The door itself was of black oak, banded with iron, and there were three locks. Eleanor had never in her life seen a house door with three locks, let alone an interior one.

The key fitted the topmost lock. It turned with a sound like a small bone breaking. It fitted the middle lock. It turned again. It fitted the bottom lock, and it turned, and the door swung inward of its own accord upon hinges that had been recently oiled.

Cold came up the stairs. Not the cold of an unheated room, but the deeper cold of a place that had never been warm. And on that cold rode the faint sweet smell she had first noticed on the platform — fruit left too long, or flowers in a vase no one had thought to change.

Eleanor lifted her lamp. She counted, as she descended, because counting is what one does in such places. Seventeen steps. Eighteen. Nineteen, and the stairs ended, and she stood in a small square room with a stone floor and walls of unmortared stone and no window and no other door.

In the centre of the room was a stone plinth, waist-high. On the plinth was an iron box, the size of a family Bible. It was black, and it was bound around with seven hasps of iron, and each hasp was fastened with a small iron pin. There was no padlock. There was no keyhole.

Eleanor stood at the foot of the stairs and looked at the box, and the box, in some manner she could not have explained to herself or to anyone else, looked back.

Behind her, very far above, the front door of the house knocked twice and was still.

CHAPTER TWO

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Seven Hasps

Eleanor did not move for a full minute. The knock had been deliberate — two raps, evenly spaced — and now the silence that followed it had a held quality, the quality of a person standing on a doorstep listening for whether they have been heard.

Then, very faintly, she heard the small wet sound of footsteps going away down the lane.

She turned back to the box.

The reasonable course was to leave it where it stood, to climb the stairs, to relock the three locks, and to return to bed. She knew this with the same clarity with which she knew she would do none of those things. She had inherited a house, an estate, and a question, and the question lay on a stone plinth seventeen steps beneath the scullery floor, and she had not come all this way to leave a question unopened.

She set the lamp on the floor at the foot of the plinth. She drew off her gloves. She stepped forward.

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The hasps were arranged not in a line but in a circle around the lid of the box, like the points of a clock face, except that there were seven of them

and not twelve. Each hasp was the same: a flat band of iron, hinged at one end, fastened at the other by a slim iron pin pushed through a corresponding loop.

Eleanor began with the hasp nearest her own breastbone, the one at the six-o'clock position, because some part of her mind had decided that was where one ought to begin.

The pin slid out of its loop without resistance. The hasp lifted with the small clean click of a thing that has been waiting to be unfastened.

Nothing happened.

Eleanor allowed herself to draw a single shallow breath, and moved on to the next.

The second hasp, at what she thought of as the seven-o'clock position, came open as easily as the first. So did the third, and the fourth, and the fifth. By the time she lifted the fifth pin she had begun to feel almost foolish — what had she expected, after all? A puff of green smoke? A cry from inside? The rings, if rings there were, were locked inside a piece of antique ironwork, and she was a young woman in a cellar at two o'clock in the morning, and the only mystery here was why her grandfather had thought any of this required so many locks.

The sixth hasp opened with a tiny sigh, as of trapped air escaping.

The seventh did not open.

She tried the pin. It would not move. She tried it harder, with her thumb braced beneath the hasp. It would not move. She fetched the small steel paperknife from the study upstairs — climbing the seventeen steps and descending them again, because she would not leave the open box alone in the cellar — and she worked the tip of the paperknife into the loop and pried at the pin until her hand cramped, and the pin did not move.

Eleanor sat back on her heels.

The lamp guttered. She steadied it. The cellar was very quiet. The sweet smell had grown stronger, or perhaps she had only stopped pretending not to notice it.

She looked at the seventh hasp. The pin was no different from the others — the same length, the same dark iron, the same blunt head. But where the other six pins had a small chamfered edge at the head, this one had been worked into a small sharp point.

Eleanor understood. She did not want to understand, but she did.

She pricked her finger on the point of the pin.

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There was no pain to speak of, only the dry small bite of iron through skin, and a single drop of blood that welled and hung and fell on to the head of the pin. The pin drank it. There is no other word for what she saw. The drop did not roll off, did not bead on the surface, did not even soak into a porous metal. It simply diminished, the way water diminishes on hot stone, and was gone, and the pin slid out of its loop as if a hand inside the box had pushed it.

The seventh hasp lifted.

Eleanor sat very still and watched the lid of the box.

It did not rise. It did not even tremble. After a moment in which her own breath was the loudest sound in the room, she put her hands on the lid and lifted it herself.

Inside, on faded velvet that had once been a deep red and was now almost black, lay seven rings.

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They were arranged in a careful circle, each in its own small indentation in the velvet, like the seven hasps reversed. Eleanor leaned over the box and looked at them one by one.

The first was bone. A thin pale band, ivory-coloured, polished smooth, with a faint hairline crack running around the inner circumference. It looked old, but not artefactually old; it looked, she thought, as if it had been worn.

The second was jet — black, dull, carved into a band that thickened on one side into a small flat oval like the head of a beetle.

The third was silver. Plain, undecorated, but the band had been worked into a single sharp ridge along its outer edge that would, she imagined, cut a fingertip drawn across it carelessly.

The fourth was a strange dark grey, neither iron nor lead but something with the dull glitter of salt. The fifth was pearl — not white but a faintly bluish grey, as if drawn from a pearl bred in cold water.

The sixth was antler. Brown, irregular, with the small whorls of growth still visible in the grain.

And the seventh —

The seventh sat in its indentation as the others did, but it was difficult to look at directly. Eleanor's eyes kept sliding off it. It was, as far as she could tell, a band of some material that was darker than the velvet on which it lay, and the dark of it seemed to pull at the lamplight without giving any of it back. She did not, in the end, look at it very closely. She found she did not want to.

Six rings she could see. The seventh she could only know was there.

Eleanor sat with her hands on her knees and considered what she had found.

She knew, with the certainty of a woman who has just unlocked three locks and bled into a seventh, that she was not going to close the box and walk away. She knew, too, that she had already made several mistakes — opening the door, descending the stairs, opening the lid — and that there was a sort of grim logic in continuing as she had begun.

She would take one of them out. Only one. Only to look at it. She would not put it on.

She reached for the bone ring.

It was the closest to her hand. That, she would later remember, was its trick.

She picked it up between thumb and forefinger. It was lighter than it should have been, and warmer, and as she lifted it from the velvet the ring seemed to settle, very faintly, into the curve of her fingers. She turned it in the lamplight. There was, she saw, a single character cut into the inside of the band, very small: a letter, perhaps, or a sigil. She tilted it to read.

And in the moment she tilted her hand, the bone ring slipped — not fell, slipped, with the small assured slide of a thing that knows where it is going — down the length of her forefinger and on to the base of it, and there it stopped.

It fitted exactly.

Eleanor tried to pull it off.

It would not come.

CHAPTER THREE

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The First Ring

She tried oil from the kitchen. She tried cold water. She tried soap. She tried, with a feeling of bleak embarrassment, butter from the small crock in the larder. The bone ring did not move. It was not tight; her finger was not swollen; the ring sat at the base of her forefinger as if it had been there since birth, and when she pulled at it she could feel the small clean grip of bone on skin, neither painful nor loose.

She gave up at three o'clock and went, at last, to bed. She closed the cellar. She locked the three locks. She put the iron key beneath her pillow, because she could think of nowhere else to put it. And she slept, although she had not expected to.

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She dreamed of a long hall lined with mirrors.

The mirrors were full-length, framed in dark wood, set into the panelling on either side at intervals of perhaps three feet. The hall went on further than she could see. There was no ceiling, only a darkness above; no floor that she could distinguish from the dark, only a sense that something was beneath her feet. The mirrors did not show her own reflection. Each one showed instead a small fragment of a man — a