

LONDON

1932





PROLOGUE

SHE'D HAD A DOLL ONCE, WITH A PAINTED-ON SMILE, AND pale hair and eyes like her own. For a long while, it had been her constant companion—a friend for tea when Alice was traveling with her papa, a confidant when she overheard her parents whispering secrets, someone who had to listen to her when no one else would. Her name was Zenobia, after the desert warrior queen Grandpapa had told her about. But one day, while Henry Hemlock chased her around the garden, the doll had fallen, and she'd stepped on her neck, shattering the fragile porcelain. The dreadful sound it made had sent her heart up into her throat.

Now, the sound of her mama's neck breaking under the heel of the man's boot made her vomit into her hands.

A pulse of fiery power washed through the room like an errant wave, carrying with it all the crushing chaos of the nearby passage as it collapsed. Rose was thrown back against the compartment's wall. The trembling air made her bones shiver, her teeth ache.

Dead.

Rose held her breath, clenching her eyes shut as her papa howled from where the shadowed man had him pinned to the floor, a sword driven through his shoulder. She knew better than to scream with him,

to try to reach for her mama the way he was reaching now. The hidden cupboard built into the wall behind the bookshelf would protect her, just as Grandpapa had promised, but only if she stayed *silent*, stayed *still*. The thin crack between the backing of the shelf and its frame was just enough to see through and not be seen.

Somehow the afternoon had slipped into night. Their dinner sat downstairs at the table, nearly untouched—their only warning of the intrusion had been the growls and whimpering of their neighbor’s dog before it was quickly silenced. Her papa had just had enough time to light the office’s lamps and fireplace, her mama to stow her away, before footsteps fell on the stairs. Now the lingering warmth and glow made the darkness in the room feel as though it was breathing.

“I told you to cooperate.” The man wore a fine black overcoat with silver buttons, engraved with some symbol she could not quite make out. A thin black scarf had been pulled up to cover the lower half of his face, but it did nothing to muffle the silky tones of his voice. “It need not be this way. Relinquish your claim to it, give the astrolabe to me, and our business here will conclude.”

Broken glass and scattered papers crunched beneath his boots as he circled around her mama . . . her mama’s . . .

No. Grandpapa would be back soon from his meeting. He had said he would tuck her in, and he didn’t break promises. He would make everything right again. This was . . . it was all a nightmare. It was her silly little mind, dreaming up all those stories about the shadows that came for traveler children. All of this would be over soon, and she would wake up.

“Bloody—*monsters*—the whole lot of you!” Papa tried to pull the sword out of himself by the blade, leaving a smear of blood. The man hovering above him only leaned onto the ornate golden hilt, driving it down further. Her papa thrashed, his legs kicking at nothing but air.

Mama did not move.

The sharp, hot edge of Rose’s scream began to tear up her throat.

The river of stinking blood had soaked through the rug and was beginning to creep toward her mama's bright hair.

Her father tried to surge up again, one hand gripping a stone paperweight that had fallen from his nearby desk in the initial scuffle. With a yell that ripped from his lungs, he swung the stone toward the masked man's head. The man caught it easily and, in turn, retrieved another thin-bladed sword from the second masked man standing guard at the door. With a grunt, he stabbed it through her father's arm, keeping that in place, too. When her papa let out his bellow of pain, it was not nearly loud enough to drown out the masked man's laughter.

You must watch, Rose thought, curling her knees up toward her chin. *You must tell Grandpapa what happened.*

Stay silent, stay still.

Be brave.

"You—you tell Ironwood that he can die knowing—he'll never—he'll *never* have it—"

Ironwood. Always the Ironwoods. The name was hissed in her family, always edging into their lives like a shadow. Grandpapa had said they would be safe here, but she should have known. They had never been *safe*, not since her aunts and uncles and cousins and grandmother had been stolen, one by one, across the centuries and continents.

And now Mama . . . and Papa . . .

Rose bit her lip again, this time tasting blood.

The other man kicked off from where he'd been leaning against the door. "Finish this. We'll search the floors and walls unhindered." And then, as the figure prowled forward, Rose saw that it wasn't a man at all, but a tall woman.

Her mama had once said that Ironwood liked to collect the girls in his family and keep them on shelves like glass figurines, never taking them down, not even to be dusted. He must have seen this one as unbreakable.

Mama was unbreakable, too.

Until . . . she wasn't.

The first masked man reached into the inner pocket of his coat and affixed a long silver blade to his index finger. It curved like a gleaming claw, pricked at the air.

Rose's eyes shifted away from the weapon, back to her papa's face, only to find him looking at the bookshelf—at her—his lips moving soundlessly. *Be still, be still, be still.* . . .

She wanted to scream, to tell him to fight, to tell him that *she* would fight, if he wouldn't. She had the bumps and scrapes on her hands and knees from tussling with Henry to prove it. This was not Papa. Papa was brave; he was the strongest person in the whole world, and so very—

The masked man leaned down and slid the blade into her papa's ear. His body jerked once more.

His lips stopped moving.

In the distance, false thunder broke against London's sky as another passage crumbled. It was fainter this time, but it still made every inch of her skin feel rubbed raw.

Papa was still there in his suit that smelled of tobacco and cologne, but Rose saw him disappear all the same.

"You start with the bedroom," the masked man said as he wiped the blade and stowed it back in its place.

"It's not here," the woman replied slowly. "Wouldn't we be able to feel it?"

"There may still be a record of it," came the gruff reply, and the man began yanking the desk drawers out one by one. He tossed out ancient coins, papyrus, tin soldiers, old keys, scoffing, "These ingrates are *collectors*."

The woman crossed in front of the bookshelf, making the floorboard squeal. Rose pressed her filthy hands against her mouth again to hold in her scream. She tried not to breathe in the smell of her own sick again, but her parents' blood was already making her stomach

churn. The dark woman's eyes swept over the shelves, and she came to a stop directly in front of where Rose was hidden.

The moment caught in her mind like a leaf on the surface of water. It trembled.

Be still.

But she didn't *want* to be still.

It would be so easy, she thought, to be as brave as Mama—to break through the compartment and try to throw the woman to the floor and run. To pick up one of the swords and slash and slash and slash until she cut the darkness away, the way Papa would.

But Papa had told her to *be still*.

In the corner, the grandfather clock carved out the lost seconds. *Tick, tick, tick . . . dead, dead, dead . . .*

The hot, tangled, thorny parts of herself began to twist around her heart, tightening again and again until Rose finally closed her eyes. She imagined her veins, her ribs, her whole chest hardening like stone to protect the parts of her that hurt so very badly. She was too little to fight them now; Rose knew this. But she also knew that one day she wouldn't be.

The woman's eyes flicked away, toward something on the next bookcase over. Rose let her fear be ground down to pure hate.

Ironwoods. Always the Ironwoods.

"How many place settings did you see on the table?" the woman asked. She backed away from the bookshelves, holding something—a picture frame—out for the man to see. Rose's throat squeezed as her fingers clawed at her dress. That was her papa's photograph of the three of them.

The old house groaned around them. The masked man placed a finger to his lips, his head cocked in the direction of the bookshelves. He stepped over her papa, crossing the distance between him and the woman.

Be still.

“We’ll take the child,” the man said finally. “He’ll want her—”

The bang of the front door as it cracked against the entryway’s wall carried up the flight of stairs. There was a furious bellow from below—“*Linden!*”—and the bones of the house trembled with the heavy footsteps that spilled up the stairs. Rose looked toward the door just as three men burst through it. The man in the front, his imposing form sweeping in like a thunderstorm, made her recoil. Her papa had shown her a photo of Cyrus Ironwood as often as he could, so she would know him by sight at any age. Know when to run and hide.

One of the men toed at her mama’s face. “Well, now we know why that passage closed behind us.”

Rose nearly threw herself out from behind the shelf to shove him away, but she realized something suddenly: the masked man and woman were gone. She hadn’t seen or heard the window open, nor had she heard the flutter of cloth or their footsteps. It was as if the masked ones had melted into the shadows.

From the shadows they come, to give you a fright.

From the shadows they come, to steal you this night. . . .

“The scum got nothing more than what they deserved,” Cyrus Ironwood snarled as he leaned down and yanked the sword up out of her papa’s arm, only to shove it down again through his chest. Rose jumped at the sound as the tip of the blade struck bone and wood, felt the soft growl leave her throat.

“This is one bounty I’ll *relish* paying,” Ironwood said. “I knew it would be the only motivation needed to put this into motion. It’s only a damn shame Benjamin wasn’t with them—what are you standing there for? Start searching!”

Ten thousand pieces of gold. Rose wasn’t supposed to have seen the notice Grandpapa had brought home in a fit of rage. She wasn’t supposed to know that Ironwood had put a price on the value of their lives, but Papa didn’t—*hadn’t* always locked his desk drawer.

The youngest man picked up the same gilded picture frame the

masked woman had, only this time from the corner of the desk. He pointed at the picture of Rose sitting primly between her mama and papa. “And her?”

Ironwood spat on her papa’s face before he took the photograph. Rose’s vision washed over with black, the temperature beneath her skin boiling until she was clawing at her soiled dress to keep herself still. His eyes swept around the room; she could make them out from where she crouched, the color as bright and burning as a lightning bolt. Then, without a word, he returned to her papa’s side, crouching down to study something—his ear?

“Boss?” the other young man queried.

“We should leave this place at once,” Ironwood said, sounding distracted by his own thoughts. “Take the bodies. We can’t risk a change if they’re discovered.”

“But what about the astro—”

Ironwood spun, throwing the picture frame at the man behind the desk, forcing him to duck. “If the bloody thing was here, it isn’t any longer. Now *take the bodies*. I’ll be in the car.”

He took his poisonous rage with him as he left. Rose let herself breathe for the first time, watching as one man retrieved the pink sheets from her nearby bedroom and, with the other man, went about the business of covering and wrapping first her mama, and then her papa.

The rug was carried out last, leaving nothing but scars in the wood. Rose waited until the front door shut and then counted to ten, listening for something to stir in the shadows. When nothing—and no one—did, she shoved the bookshelf forward and scrambled down the stairs, out the back door. Her eyes stung as she opened the gate, swung her leg over the bicycle that was propped against the fence, and began to pedal.

Rose felt nothing. She pedaled and pedaled and pedaled.

Her vision blurred, hot tears slipping past her lashes onto her cheeks, but it was only because it was so very cold and damp out.

Ironwood's lorry gleamed like the shell of a beetle under the streetlights as she trailed after it, staying back at a distance. All along the way, she remembered one of the fairy tales Grandpapa had read to her, about the man transformed into a monster by his own ugly heart, and she understood it for the first time. Rose imagined her nails turning to claws, her skin to a knight's armor, her teeth sharpening like a tiger's.

Rose had always known it would be a matter of time before Ironwood came back to stamp out the last of her family, but she wasn't like all of those Jacaranda or Hemlock children who had let Ironwood take them in after their own parents gave in, or were executed.

How sad for them, she thought, that they had grown up without any thorns with which to protect themselves.

One day she would take everything from Cyrus Ironwood. She would demolish his throne of hours and his crown of days. She would find him and finish what her mama and papa had started. But tonight Rose would only follow this monster through the shadows.

Because someone would need to tell Grandpapa where Ironwood had hidden the bodies.

TEXAS
1905



ONE

ETTA WOKE TO THE RUMBLING CALL OF THUNDER, HER BODY wrapped in ribbons of fire.

Her mind launched into sharp awareness. The skin was burning off her bones, peeling back to expose every tender nerve and vein to pure, unflinching agony. She choked as she inhaled, her lungs too tight to bring in more than a small gasp of air. She knew she wasn't in water—the ground was stiff and ragged beneath her—but the instinctive flare of panic, the way her body felt heavy as stone as it jerked, felt like drowning.

Etta turned her head to the side and tried to cough up the dust that filled her mouth. The small movement sent a fresh ripple of pain through her shoulder, down her ribs, and then back up her spine.

Fractured pieces of memories burst through the feverish haze of heat and delirium: *Damascus, astrolabe, Sophia, and—*

Etta forced her eyes open, then squeezed them shut again at the intensity of the sun. That single second was enough for her to absorb the image of the bone-white world around her, the way it flickered and shimmered as heat rose up from the pale dust. It made her think of the way sunlight played on the ocean waves. It made her think of . . .

Passage.

That was the thunder she was hearing, then. There was no storm coming—no break from the heat. She was surrounded by desert—everywhere, for miles—broken up by distant, unfamiliar plateaus instead of ancient structures and temples. Then this wasn't—

Not Palmyra. The air smelled different here, burning her nostrils as she breathed in again. There wasn't that hint of rotting, wet greens carried over from a nearby oasis. No camels, either.

Her chest tightened, fear and confusion knotting around her stomach.

“Nic—” Even that sliver of a name felt like broken glass in her throat; her dry lips cracked, and she tasted blood.

She shifted, pressing her palms against the rough ground to push herself up. *I need to get up. . . .*

Drawing her elbows in close to her side, she got no further than lifting her neck when the dull pain in her shoulder burst like a blister. A scream finally broke loose, ragged in her throat. Etta's arms buckled beneath her.

“Good God, shriek again a little louder this time, will you? It's bad enough the guardian's on his way, but by all means, bring the cavalry galloping up with him.”

A shadow fell over her. In the few seconds before the darkness reached up and dragged her back down, Etta thought she caught a glimpse of bright, almost unnaturally blue eyes that seemed to widen in recognition at the sight of her. “*Well.* Well, well, well. It seems like this Ironwood does have some luck left to his name, after all.”

NASSAU
1776



