

'Know thyself' was written over the portal
of the antiques world. Over the portal of the
new world 'Be thyself' shall be written.

OSCAR WILDE

Prologue

If Arthur Crockleford had been a normal antiques dealer, then perhaps this night would never have arrived.

Arthur hunched over his desk, making his final preparations. He had just finished gluing the last photograph into his journal when he heard the rumble of tyres on the cobbles behind his antiques shop. He checked the time on his Georgian longcase clock – he adored that clock; it was one of the first antiques he'd ever bought from a dealer on Portobello Road. The brass hands showed twenty-eight minutes past one in the morning.

A rush of icy night air swept through the back door as it opened and down the long corridor to enter the shop, which was lit by the table lamp on Arthur's desk. The gust pricked the hairs on the back of his neck.

They're here.

He shivered, and his fountain pen marked the final full stop in his journal. The clock chimed the half hour.

Time is up.

Arthur rose and hurried to the stairs leading to his flat above the shop. He knew each noisy step and had to climb over a couple to avoid detection. His old knee injury clicked.

At the top of the stairs he stopped, scanning the shadows below him, wondering which one of them had come. All the

C. L. MILLER

lights in the flat were off and he was surrounded by thick black night. A sweep of the rooms reassured him that everything was in order.

The tap of someone's footsteps on the medieval floorboards below made him shudder.

For decades, he had loved every second of his secret life. Until Cairo. If he'd made different choices, left this underground world behind, then maybe tonight could have been avoided. But what was done was done, wasn't it? He could only hope Freya would one day understand. And that it wasn't too late to make things right.

Arthur walked back down the stairs, this time intending to be heard.

In the dim light, he scanned the antiques around him. Each item was priced to sell, but it didn't mean he wanted to part with them. Seeing all the treasures he loved ignited a fury in him, but he knew this was one fight he, at last, would not be able to win. He ran his hand through his shaggy grey hair, readjusting his cravat with the other. If this was to be the end, at least Carole would be proud he'd made an effort to die stylishly.

'Hello? Is anyone there?' he called, hoping the neighbours would hear him. It would give a more accurate time of death, if that was needed.

He positioned himself beside a mahogany tilt-top table which held a couple of his favourite vases.

Maybe he should've tried to set the alarm. Maybe he should've screamed out. Maybe he should've raced for the phone to call the police. But the darker side of the antiques world was finally catching up with him and he conceded that he

The Antique Hunter's Guide to Murder

probably couldn't outrun it forever. He was too old for running.

It's over to you now, Freya.

Out of the coal-black corridor, a figure emerged. Arthur strained his eyes. Shadows hung over the intruder's face, but Arthur could just make out what they were doing: they were tugging at their gloves, checking they were on.

They stepped into the shop and into the light.

'You weren't who I was expecting,' Arthur said.



Chapter One

'All hunts begin with something that
has been lost . . . or taken.'

– ARTHUR CROCKLEFORD

Freya

Outside the Victoria and Albert Museum in London I brushed my fingertips over a shrapnel dent in the building's wall. It had seen a lot, that wall, and had survived whatever had been thrown at it since being built in 1909. No war or hurricane had taken it down. I wish I was as strong.

Early that morning I'd left my house before the estate agent arrived and fought the commuter's hustle, bus after bus, to get to South Kensington. I'd waited in a cafe nearby until the museum opened. The V&A was the place I always escaped to, my very own safe haven.

A smiling man opened the museum's main entrance. I was one of the first inside – the tourists were probably still having their buffet breakfasts.

The familiar smell of polish hit me first, then the echo of my boots tapping on the tiles in the cavernous hall. I smiled for the first time that day. It was almost enough to make me forget the For Sale sign being nailed to my gate.

Ever since my ex-husband, James, moved out almost nine

years ago, he had insisted the house be sold. Apparently a large Victorian house in an expensive suburb was wasted on me. James finally agreed I could live in the house until our daughter, Jade, was eighteen, but now she had left for university in America there was little I could do to stop it. I couldn't afford the mortgage alone when the child support stopped – Jade wasn't a child any longer.

I was almost on autopilot when I reached the beginning of the British Galleries on the first floor. I passed the Great Bed of Ware, an enormous bed so large it could sleep two families and so famous that it's mentioned in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Further along on my right was a free-standing bookcase like the one Samuel Pepys once owned. Eventually I reached the stone stairway to the third floor and the Chippendale furniture. I hadn't been part of the antiques world for over twenty years, but I still adored a finely crafted chair or a beautifully gilded mirror.

I knew each item in the Chippendale furniture section by heart, but something about the Chippendale Garrick bed (named after the once famed actor David Garrick) looked wrong. I leant as close as I dared and studied every inch of the ornate fabric. A couple of moments later I saw it. A very slight indent on the cover. A visitor had decided to check the comfort level of the mattress and left their mark.

Annoyance bubbled inside me and I looked around for a gallery assistant.

My phone rang with Aunt Carole's ringtone. Jade had put that jingly ringtone on before she left for LA and I'd never got around to changing it. I pulled out my phone and silenced it. I desperately wanted to hear my aunt's voice, but now wasn't the

time. I scanned the empty gallery and walked back towards the stairs in the hope of finding a member of staff when my phone rang again, vibrating insistently in my pocket. I should've known Carole was not to be ignored. She would only keep calling until I answered.

'Carole,' I whispered. 'I'm sorry, I—'

'Freya, darling,' Carole interrupted dramatically. 'Is it today?'

'Yes, they're putting a sign up this morning,' I replied.

'What a rotter James is.' She was trying to sound annoyed, but there was something strange in her tone; it was the voice she used when she was acting. 'Might be time to let go? Find a new path, a new adventure somewhere—'

'I won't move.' I tried to keep my voice steady. 'I won't give him the satisfaction.'

'Of course.' Carole sniffed. 'But, darling . . . I may need you to come home for a bit.'

'Why?' It wasn't like Carole to ask such a thing; I hadn't set foot in Little Meddington for decades. 'What's wrong?'

'Well . . .'

'Carole?' My gut twisted and my pulse picked up. It was unusual for her to be unsure of her words. 'Are you all right?'

She took a deep breath. 'Something terrible has happened . . . to Arthur . . . it's so . . .'

'*Arthur?*' The calm I had momentarily found was shattered. What on earth was Carole doing bringing up *that* man, when she knew what he'd put me through all those years ago in Cairo? She knew I hated to hear his very name, let alone discuss whatever trouble he was in. I headed for the stairs – this conversation was probably not one for a museum.

'It's just . . . they're saying he fell down those old stairs in the

C. L. MILLER

dark and had a heart attack, but there has to be more to it. I'd gone to check on him because he called on Saturday and sounded strange. When I got there . . .' Carole's voice cracked.

'Carole?' I froze on the museum staircase. 'Is he . . .?' I couldn't say the word *dead* out loud, but I knew in my heart that was what Carole meant.

Is he gone?

The cascading wave of relief caught me by surprise. But it was immediately chased by a sharp pang of guilt about my initial reaction. Arthur was the person I liked least in the world, but he was Carole's closest friend – Arthur was family to her. And once, long ago, he'd been like a grandfather to me.

'I wasn't going to call you, with everything going on today, but when I was standing outside the shop that new-boy solicitor slicked his way over and told me he needs to see me *and* you right away.'

I could hear the tremor in her voice, but I couldn't take in her words. 'I'm so sorry, Carole,' I managed to say. She blew her nose, and I could imagine the tears tracking down her cheeks. I wondered if she was fixated on this solicitor because the thought of losing Arthur was just too much to process. It was a quick, easy decision. 'Of course I'll come up and help you out with the solicitor.'

'Oh, how wonderful.' Carole brightened instantly, and I knew she'd been angling for that all along. 'I know you and Arthur didn't see eye to eye, ever since . . .' She hesitated. 'Well, we won't go into that, will we? Not the time. But I know he wanted you here.'

I knew he wouldn't have, but Carole needed me and that was what mattered. 'I'll pack a bag and get to Colchester Station this

afternoon – I'll stay for as long as you need me. We'll take on the solicitor together.'

'Excellent. I'll pick you up, if you text me when you're on your way.'

'No. It's quite all right. I'll catch a taxi,' I said quickly. Carole was the worst driver in East Anglia and her ancient convertible Mercedes was highly impractical for small country lanes. Carole believed she could handle any speed. We'd never agreed on the topic.

'Absolutely not! It's spring sunshine and roof down weather!'

How could I say no, after what had just happened? 'Well, if you're absolutely sure you're up to driving?' I would need to pack appropriately: weatherproof jacket, scarves for my hair and a copy of my life insurance.

'I'm absolutely fine to drive. See you soon.'

After I hung up, unwanted memories of Arthur began to surface. I tried to quash them by focusing on the merits of splurging on a taxi to get home, but they wouldn't be silenced.

I'd been a twelve-year-old orphan with a badly burnt right palm – after unsuccessfully trying to open my parents' flaming bedroom door – when Carole first took me in. The children at my new school had stared at my hand, but nobody wanted to befriend the odd girl. I couldn't answer all the prying questions of my inquisitive peers. Everyone wanted to know how I'd survived a fire but they didn't seem to want to know the girl behind the bandage. All I knew back then was that I was broken and different. Soon, I'd stopped talking altogether.

When Carole first introduced me to Arthur Crockleford, her best friend, he was standing in his antiques shop polishing a

C. L. MILLER

silver candlestick. He was about fifty, of average height, with salt-and-pepper hair immaculately swept to one side, and he wore a bright blue suit. Arthur's smile was warm and his eyes kind. 'It's lovely to meet you,' he said. 'Carole tells me you have an eye for detail.' He held the candlestick up to the light and I saw the unpolished side his cloth had missed. I walked over and pointed it out.

Arthur tutted and kept polishing. He asked about my father's job at the British Museum and my mother's talent as an art restorer. He was never perturbed by my lack of response; he would keep chatting while I absorbed the warmth of his presence. Arthur helped me focus on their lives, not their death. I loved him for it almost instantly.

Carole was worried about my silence, but Arthur had a plan.

Six months after my parents' death, he invited Carole and me to his shop one Saturday afternoon to show me an antique porcelain plate that had been repaired with *kintsugi* – the Japanese art of putting broken pottery back together with gold. I traced my finger along the shimmering lines. Words I'd shut away began to form on my tongue and in my breath. 'It's . . . beautiful.' My voice was rusty and weak, but Carole bear-hugged me when she heard it.

'This plate is different than before, but it's still precious,' said Arthur. 'Most of us have been broken in one way or another. We don't need to hide the scars, for they make us who we are. This break was mended with real powdered gold.'

In that shop, holding onto the *kintsugi* plate, I felt something loosen in my chest.

'Who broke the plate?' I asked. 'Why?' But Arthur shrugged and put the plate back on its stand in a glass cabinet.

'I must know how it was broken,' I demanded.

'That isn't the important part of the story,' he replied.

'It is to me. I need to know.'

Arthur smiled. 'Very well. Long ago, it belonged to a family who lived by the sea, until one night a tsunami crashed into their house. Only one son survived. When he returned to the land where his home once stood, all he found was that broken plate.' He tapped the cabinet. 'He mended it, placed it in his bag and set sail across the seas for new adventures.'

I pressed my nose to the glass. I understood how broken that boy must have felt, and I admired how he'd mended the plate and set out for a new life. Arthur had given me hope, showing me that items like the plate could glitter with mystery and exploration. It was that day when I began to understand that each item held a story waiting to be unlocked.

Years later, when I started working in the shop, I would sometimes pick up the plate and smile. I no longer believed Arthur's tall tale, but he had made me see that starting again was possible and given me the hope I needed.

By letting one memory in, others followed. The image of Arthur with one of his brightly coloured handkerchiefs neatly placed in his jacket pocket, sitting behind his grand mahogany desk and flicking through auction catalogues, his pen always clenched between his teeth, ready to circle an item he wanted to bid on. An aristocratic collector or a drinking partner calling him on the shop phone. Arthur was well known for his outrageous turns of phrase and his long chats with anyone who walked into the shop, which meant they always felt obliged to buy something before leaving. Everyone loved him.

Maybe if I'd focused on learning how to identify a big-profit

C. L. MILLER

artwork or antique to sell on, I wouldn't be in my current predicament. Although antiques dealing wasn't Arthur's main passion, he still kept an eye out for a 'sleeper' – an undiscovered or unidentified antique – at auctions or fairs: something that would give him a good payday. I had no interest in that kind of thing; I preferred hunting down items that had been stolen and returning them to their rightful homes. But that career had been taken from me and I couldn't get it back.

The sun dipped behind a cloud and the world darkened. I sighed, knowing I might have to accept there was nothing I could do to keep my home. But there was something I could do for Carole: I could try and help her in her unimaginable grief, just as she had helped me with mine when I'd lost my parents over thirty-five years ago.

I searched for a black cab and waved at the first one I saw; I no longer cared about the expense. There was somewhere I needed to be.



Chapter Two

‘Listen, Freya, always listen.’

– ARTHUR CROCKLEFORD

Later that afternoon, I sank into the passenger seat of Carole’s nautical-blue Mercedes, holding on for dear life as she sped around the narrow Dedham Vale lanes, driving and waving – simultaneously – at any dog walkers or cyclists she passed. Faint cries of terror trailed behind us as the vehicle swept along, and I wondered if this would be the drive that finally killed me.

‘If you gasp again,’ Carole called over the wind thundering in my ears, ‘I shall increase my speed, and then we’ll really see where all your gumption went.’

A gust whipped my hair and made my eyes stream. I retrieved one of my beloved vintage Hermès scarves, tying it around my wind-beaten curls, and demanded we stop and put the roof back on to give us some added protection in a crash.

Carole rolled her eyes. ‘You must stop being scared of everything. You can’t spend your life in museums and antiques fairs *looking* at things. You need to *do* things – get the wind in your hair. And anyway, I have expert collision-avoidance techniques. It’s taken years to master this skill.’

‘Skill!’ I gritted my teeth. I had a feeling Carole was looking

for a fight, anything to help her ignore the grief that must have been threatening to overwhelm her, but the criticism of my love of museums and antiques fairs stung. Over the years, it had become my only connection to a world I so adored. 'To be clear, I am *doing* something when I'm at the British Museum or the V&A or the Winter Antiques Fair at Olympia. I'm *studying* the craftsmanship and exquisite quality of the best antiques in the country.' After leaving the antiques world, I knew the only way to keep my skills sharp was to continually study the finest antiques I could find.

Carole shook her head and was about to respond when a top-of-the-range Land Rover came hurtling towards us. I held my breath, closed my eyes and waited for impact, wondering who to pray to when I only entered churches for births, marriages and deaths. The car swerved and came to a shuddering halt at an angle, branches brushing my cheek. My eyes snapped open, my hands still gripping the seat.

We'd stopped on one of those passing points cut into a hedge.

Carole was waving erratically, her turquoise bangles jangling together, as a large tractor came trundling around the blind bend.

'Morning, Simon! How are those prize cows?' she beamed.

Simon touched his fraying baseball cap. 'All well.' His Suffolk accent was broad and soft. 'Got guests, then, Carole?' The shiny new tractor's engine hummed.

'This is my niece over from London,' said Carole, throwing me a pitying look. 'She needs a bit of fresh air.'

Simon nodded knowingly, as though the very mention of London might give him breathing difficulties.

'And, well . . .' She paused, in the time-honoured tradition of giving bad news space to settle. 'We're arranging Arthur's funeral.'

'Terrible thing, him passing so suddenly. I'm sorry for you.' Simon touched his cap again.

'Thank you.' Carole put the car in gear and got ready to leave. 'We will see you there?'

'More than likely.' He turned and heaved at the brake. 'Go well, then,' he called back, in the local way.

Carole slammed her foot down on the accelerator. 'Lovely man – and Agatha, his wife. She took over the Teapot Tearooms from her mother *and* she's on the parish council.' She took her eyes from the road and gave me a knowing look. I didn't understand what Agatha or the parish council had to do with anything.

'And?' I asked.

'She knows everything before everyone else. We'll pop in and see her at the Tearooms and get the local news.'

In a village like Little Meddington, knowledge is the highest form of currency. Carole wasn't normally one to entertain gossip and I began to wonder what she was up to. I'd thought she was going to be a crumpled mess of emotions when I arrived.

The scented air of spring drummed my face as Carole spun the convertible around another corner.

'Seat belt,' I cried in vain, pointing to her shoulder.

'You used to be one of the most go-getter girls around here. All those travelling adventures you had when you were hunting stolen art and such –' Carole stopped herself, knowing not to speak of what happened back then. She changed the subject. 'I

curse that obnoxious James. He was always putting you down and making you believe you couldn't have your own career.'

'Our marriage was good at first . . .' I hesitated, before the lie became too great.

Carole's annoyance at the memory increased her pressure on the accelerator and at rocket speed we shot down our lane, passing the sign for the footpath to the pub. It was the route I'd stumbled down after a few too many when on holiday from my history degree at Newnham College, Cambridge. I remembered always being able to look up and see Aunt Carole watching from her bedroom window to check I was back safely.

Within seconds, my childhood home came into sight.

The Old Forge was a Grade II listed house which sat next to a little lane with high banks that looped around the outskirts of Little Meddington. The house's pointed thatched roof and wonky walls overlooked rolling farmland. One of John Constable's favourite churches to paint – St Mary's, built in the late fifteenth century – could be seen standing tall and proud in the distance. There was good reason the area was often referred to as 'Constable country'. I allowed myself a reluctant smile. It was good to be home again after so long, and I hoped my being there would help Carole. If I was honest, I was also grateful to be far away from the stream of prospective buyers who would be walking around my home over the next couple of days. I anxiously visualized them opening every cupboard, rummaging through my things before they'd even made an offer, as if snooping was a necessary part of house hunting.

The car came to a brisk halt and I clambered out, feeling unsteady. The house windows were wide open. 'You did lock the front door, didn't you?' I asked.

‘Who’s going to come thieving down these lanes?’

‘It’s exactly where they would come stealing because there’s no one around to see them. I’ve investigated enough thefts to know,’ I replied.

Carole laughed dismissively. ‘No one’s breaking in with Harley in there.’

Harley, named after a Harley Davidson motorbike she’d once owned, was my aunt’s ancient chocolate labradoodle. Carole took him swimming every Saturday in the Stour to keep his joints moving, but mostly Harley slept by the Aga or on the sofa.

‘You’ve been in the city too long. I promise to lock up while you’re here, and I’ve had all the fire alarms checked last month like you insisted.’

‘I’m making sure you’re safe.’ My right hand clenched over the burn scar on my palm.

Carole reached out and unfolded my fingers, entwining our hands together – the way she always did when she noticed me withdrawing – and gave a strong squeeze. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’ She pulled me into a hug. ‘Welcome home. Let’s get some tea on. We need a chat.’

I inhaled deeply and lifted my face to the sky, letting the sun warm my cheeks. I hadn’t allowed the pain of my home going on the market, or the muddled feelings I held over Arthur’s death, to reach me on the journey to Suffolk. As I watched Carole open the back door and walk into the house, I realized her comforting smile and big hugs were a way of trying to protect me from any worry. After the fire, I’d lost my parents and Carole had lost her older brother. I used to wake in the night screaming out for my parents, and Carole was always there to

soothe me – we had clung onto each other back then. I was glad I was home and could be here for her while the shock of losing Arthur sank in.

Beams of spring sunshine stretched through the leaded windows of the farmhouse-like kitchen, and dust motes danced over the large oak kitchen table. Even on a spring day, the Aga still pumped out heat. I ran my hand along the wooden countertop and reached for the kettle. It felt like I'd never left.

As I waited for the water to boil, I gazed out of the window and down the cottage garden filled with cow parsley, wild poppies and apple blossom. The lands beyond the garden could be walked for miles and there was always a nice country pub somewhere close by to stop for a large glass of wine. It reminded me how wonderful Suffolk could be in the sunshine.

'Your garden's just beautiful,' I said, reaching for the biscuit tin behind the sugar.

'It's the best time of year. Arthur was meant to mow the lawn for me tomorrow, and then we were going to go for breakfast at Agatha's.' The memory seemed to catch Carole by surprise, and she coughed down the pain that wrinkled her forehead. I gave her shoulder a brief squeeze. She was thinner than I remembered.

Carole tapped my hand to let me know she was grateful. 'Now you're here, we need to talk about Arthur.' Perhaps I rolled my eyes as she added, 'I *do* want to hear everything about Jade and her exciting new life in California, of course I do. But darling, first we must talk about Arthur, and I won't stop until you hear me out. No matter how cross you get.'

I sighed and nodded.

'Good, because when I looked through the shop window this

morning I saw the wrong vases on the table. It got me thinking, but I didn't want to talk about it over the phone.' Carole paused and lowered her voice, as if we might be overheard. 'I've got that "deep in my bones knowing", as my mother used to say. There's something fishy going on.'

Harley sauntered over and put his head on my lap, waiting for a biscuit. I stroked his ears.

'Are you sure?' My aunt had a wild imagination; it was a hangover from her glory days as an actor, surrounded by eccentric creative types.

'I am,' replied Carole. 'And I need you to do little bit of your digging.'

I opened my mouth to object.

'And don't say you can't.' Carole wiggled a finger at me as if I was a child. 'I've seen the files in your house. I know you sit late into the night on your computer, trying to search for all those missing old things from the safety of your bedroom.'

'Those *old things* are stolen antiquities, taken from their original country and kept in private black-market collections, away from their rightful places in museums.' I was trying to keep calm.

'Oh, absolutely, darling.' Carole retrieved the milk from the fridge. 'And if you can just put that snooping instinct to use, we'll get to the bottom of what happened to Arthur.' She gave the briefest nod to herself, the way she always did when she was satisfied.

I found I couldn't let what she had said drop. 'What do you think happened?'

'The week before Arthur died, he called me from the car after visiting some lord or other – I forget the name – and he

mentioned being “fit as a fiddle” and not having any accidents any time soon. Now, after what’s happened, that seems to me like a very bizarre thing for him to have said.’ She straightened. ‘And on that call, we were reminiscing over the past, all our trips, you and your trouble with the house, how he would love to help you . . . It was like he *knew* something was about to happen.’

The kettle whistled. I was more than a little shocked that Arthur had been talking about me. I played mother with the teapot, placing a cup of tea in front of Carole’s favourite chair at the kitchen table. ‘Maybe he was ill?’

‘No, that’s not it at all. I think he disturbed a burglar and that’s what made him fall. Or maybe he was pushed.’

‘Oh, Carole.’ This was getting outlandish. ‘Did the police say something was stolen? Is his death being treated as suspicious?’

‘No. The policeman I spoke to was rude and dismissive he said there were no signs of a break-in, and that Arthur was old. He implied there was no point wasting their time looking into it and acted like the elder generation around these parts were always falling over and dying. I’m quite sure they never even opened the case. But something is off and now it’s up to us.’

I sighed at the thought of being railroaded, which Carole took as acceptance. ‘Good! Tomorrow we can go and have a cuppa at Agatha’s Teapot Tearooms – Agatha really does know everything and everyone – then see the solicitor,’ she said, taking a sip of tea. She plucked a biscuit from the tin and pushed it towards me. ‘Go on, you have one.’

I’d no idea how to take Carole’s revelation, or what she

The Antique Hunter's Guide to Murder

thought I could do about it. Surely it was a job for the police, or the Scotland Yard Art and Antiques Squad.

My mind drifted to Arthur's antiques and his shop. I knew, having worked there, that the shop was a front for his real passion: hunting down stolen antiques and antiquities. It was a kind of detective agency for the antiques world, one used by private clients, police forces, insurance companies and museums around the globe. But I didn't understand why he'd told Carole he could help me, when we weren't even on speaking terms. It *was* strange.

I decided that even though I didn't have Carole's 'deep in my bones knowing', maybe a little look into things might be a good idea, for her sake.



Chapter Three

'In my world there's always a favour to repay,

Agatha. I told you that.'

– ARTHUR CROCKLEFORD

Agatha

Agatha had no idea how to keep her promise to Arthur. The previous Friday he'd handed over a letter and had been very insistent that she do exactly as he asked – and it was always hard to say no to Arthur.

Three days later, she'd learnt he was dead.

She knew she should have gone to the police. She also knew that if handing the letter over to the police was her intention she would have given it to her nephew, who was in the in the Suffolk Constabulary, when he came around for tea yesterday. But she hadn't. When she heard on the grapevine that the police believed Arthur's death to be a tragic accident and that he could be buried within the week, Agatha had told herself there was nothing untoward about the situation. It was all a terribly sad coincidence, but she intended on keeping her promise. She waited for Carole and Freya to arrive at the Teapot Tea-rooms to hand over Arthur's letter.

But Carole and Freya where nowhere to be seen.

It was most inconvenient.

C. L. MILLER

The letter had been in Agatha's pocket for the whole weekend. She had considered dropping it round to Carole's, but that wasn't what she'd promised Arthur. She'd promised him that when Carole or Freya came in she would hand it over, and Agatha was a woman of her word.

She was setting up for breakfast when she saw Carole's 1980s Mercedes drive past and park a little further down the high street. Agatha ran to the kitchen, where her handbag hung on the back of the door, and rummaged around inside until she felt the corner of the letter. The envelope was a little creased but she blamed Arthur for that – he should've posted it. She stuffed it into her apron pocket and opened the tearoom door, the little bell jangling as she did.

Where did they go?

The disappointment was crushing and she breathed deeply, running her hands over her head to smooth her grey bun. Why did Arthur have to be so mysterious? Not for the first time, she considered steaming the letter open, but she couldn't be sure it would close again and then how would she hand it over?

For now, the letter remained a heavy weight in her apron pocket.



Chapter Four

‘We can preserve the past while still striving
towards our future.’

– ARTHUR CROCKLEFORD

Freya

The Teapot Tearooms was housed in a pocket-sized, pink medieval building in the centre of Little Meddington. I’d asked Carole a number of times if she really did want to go there – it was where Arthur used to take her, one of their favourite places. I was worried it would be too painful, but she seemed determined and I didn’t want an argument. I hadn’t set foot in the centre of the village for a long time. In avoiding Little Meddington I had successfully avoided Arthur, and his shop.

I climbed out of the car and my eyes quickly focused on an elderly man walking towards us. Dread twisted inside me. Was I still trying to hide from Arthur, even though he couldn’t possibly have been there?

I made myself take a deep breath of fresh country air and tried to relax. The crisp morning sun lit the village shops on the eastern side of town and I marvelled at their old-world beauty. The sight was just as I remembered it – people in these parts didn’t like change, preferring the comfort of stagnation.

I'm finally free now that Arthur's gone.

Carole crossed the road and I followed, meeting her as she reached the Teapot door. It was clear she was on autopilot. The bell rang to warn Agatha we were entering.

'Won't be a minute,' called Agatha from the kitchen. 'Carole, that you?' Her head popped round the side of the kitchen door. Her cheeks were flushed, probably from the heat in the kitchen. 'Find a seat, love.' On seeing me, she said, 'Freya, it's been an age, hasn't it? I'm just *so* glad you're both here.' She nodded to herself. 'Just as you should be.'

I turned to frown at Carole; it seemed like a strange thing for Agatha to say, but Carole was already hovering over a couple of tourists draining the last of their coffee – they were sitting in Carole's table in the bay window. I hung back. In true Carole fashion, she struck up a conversation with the Canadian couple, telling them all about the local attractions and demanding that they see 'Constable's church' before leaving the village.

I took a moment to admire the shelves filled with tableware collected from local charity shops. I gravitated towards a delicate 1960s teacup and saucer and ran my finger around the edge of the 1980s 'Calypso' pastel cake plate. It was a nice example and made me think how many pieces ended up at the dump for no reason other than a change in fashion.

The couple hurried off and Carole settled down. We'd spent much of my youth in this cafe with Bridget, Agatha's mother, the welcoming proprietor. In the winter, Carole would meet me from the school bus and we would huddle next to the log burner in the Teapot drinking hot chocolate and eating toasted tea-cakes before heading home. It was a sterling plan, as Carole was

not a talented cook and it wasn't unheard of for her to burn the pesto pasta.

Agatha stood over us with a strange, anxious look on her face.

'Tea and teacake? Or a proper fry-up?' asked Carole.

'Just a coffee would be great.' I smiled at Agatha.

'Just like old times, eh Carole? . . .' Agatha trailed off and frowned.

'Everything OK?' I asked.

Agatha pulled at her apron. 'Oh, yes, all fine now.' Turning to attend to another customer who was waving at her for their bill, she said, 'I'll bring everything over in just a minute.'

In no time, Agatha brought out the toasted teacakes and placed them in front of us on mismatched floral plates. 'Sorry it took so long,' she said to Carole, although it hadn't been any time at all. She hesitated, and we both looked up at her. 'I have something for you . . . A letter.'

From her apron pocket, Agatha pulled out a blue envelope that was tattered at the edges, *Carole and Freya* scrawled on the front. She propped it against the little vase filled with wildflowers.

We all stared at it as Agatha said, 'It's the strangest thing. Arthur came in here last Friday telling me he wanted me to keep this safe and that if you two came in together, I was to give it to you.' She nodded to the envelope and Carole snatched it up, giving Agatha a questioning look. 'I did ask him, of course. You two haven't been in here together for twenty years. But he was quite adamant you would. Then . . . he . . . well, you know what happened on Sunday night. I've been waiting for you

both!’ Agatha picked at her nails. ‘Maybe I should have handed it in or something, but he was *so* insistent.’

Carole began to open the letter and smiled at Agatha. ‘You did exactly what was right, thank you so much.’

It was time for Agatha to leave but she hovered over us, eyeing the letter. Carole stopped unfolding the blue writing paper. ‘Thank you so much,’ she said again.

Agatha nodded and reluctantly turned away.

Carole opened the letter on the table so we could both read it. My chest twisted, seeing Arthur’s last words on the page.

Dear Carole and Freya,

If you’re holding this letter in your hands then it is over for me.

Carole, my dear, dear friend, I shall forever miss your sparkle. We had some fun. Didn’t we? Like that time in Hong Kong for your birthday. It’s time to put on those dancing shoes again!

Freya, I know how hard things have been for you. I’m deeply sorry and I have found a way for you to get back to the career that you were made for. But for this to happen you must first finish what I started. It has taken me over twenty years to find an item of immense value. I have been told its location, but it seems I will not be able to retrieve it. Get it back, Freya, and you will get your life and your career back. I’m sorry I cannot be clearer; I have been betrayed and can’t risk this letter being discovered. Tell no one. There is no one left to trust. Hunt the clues and you’ll find a reservation. I implore you to attend, but be careful. My betrayer will be following your every move.

The Antique Hunter's Guide to Murder

I always wanted to tell you the truth about Cairo, but I needed you out of the antique-hunting game back then, and now it seems fate has decided that I won't get the chance to set it right. You need to see the truth. I hope that in learning what really happened, you'll forgive the choice I had to make.

For your first clue – a bird in the box is more important than two in the hand.

*All my love,
Arthur*

The world shook ever so slightly and my hand bumped my cup, making it clatter in its saucer and coffee slosh over the side. Carole reached out, placing a hand on my arm to steady me. It was a lot to take in, Arthur writing a letter to me after all this time, but more than that, it was the ending that ripped at me. There wasn't anything Arthur could say to get me to forgive him. My whole world had come crashing down after Cairo – all because of him. I wasn't getting involved in whatever he was up to.

'What is this?' Confusion and annoyance dried my mouth and I lifted my eyes from the letter to my aunt, who was fighting to hold back her own tears. 'What has he started that I need to finish? I don't understand. Why now? Why didn't he call me up or . . .' But I knew why he hadn't called – it was because I wouldn't have answered.

Carole shook her head and didn't reply.

A lump formed in my throat. I wasn't ever going to be led on one of Arthur's 'antique-hunting trips' again.

'And what's that strange line about the bird box? That's not even how the saying goes,' I said.

C. L. MILLER

The colour had drained from Carole's cheeks. 'Something very bad happened in that shop last Sunday night. I'm sure of it,' she whispered. 'You'll get to the bottom of it, won't you? For me?' Her eyes filled.

I couldn't answer. I would do anything for my aunt. But Arthur calling the shots from beyond the grave?

It was all too much.



Chapter Five

‘To work in this trade, you must have the cunning
of a fox and the grace of a bird.’

– ARTHUR CROCKLEFORD

I sprinted out of the Teapot Tearooms, my head spinning. I reached the old oak tree next to the library, the one I used to stand beside while waiting for the school bus, and pressed my hands into the trunk, hard, to steady myself; as if the sting of my palms against the jagged bark could push the past away.

Arthur has no right! My heart hammered in my chest. Not after all this time, not after what he did. He has no right to ask anything of me. The sentences repeated in my mind over and over. I collapsed against the tree and ran my index finger over the scar on my palm – trying to stop the frightening memories that surfaced, of Cairo and of Arthur’s betrayal. I closed my hand around the scar and resisted the urge to run back to my safe London home. Only, very soon my home would be gone. I wished I’d never agreed to enter the village, even after Arthur’s death.

I could’ve been there for minutes or hours, for all I knew, when I heard shouting from behind me. I would have known that deep husky tone anywhere and turned around to see Carole hurrying towards me – my handbag and hers over her shoulder. The letter was nowhere in sight. She cupped her hands to her

mouth, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. Seeing her reminded me why I was there: to help the one person who had never let me down.

I rose and took a few steps towards her, but she violently shook her head and motioned for me to stay put. Her shouting was attracting quite a bit of attention and my cheeks warmed.

'Are you hugging the tree, darling? You always loved that tree and it's been a long time since you've seen it.'

A couple walked past and began to laugh.

'What?' My cheeks were flaming. 'I haven't missed the *tree*!'

Carole hurried past me, checking the people were watching, and headed towards the oak. 'Let me show you, and those nosy parkers, how to *properly* hug a tree.'

'What are you doing?' The morning was becoming more and more surreal.

'Come on – we have an audience, and I'm still the actor I once was.' Carole enveloped the old oak in what could only be described as a bear hug. 'You see, darling' – she raised her voice so that everyone could hear – 'there are wonderfully healing properties in tree hugging. I know you were trying, but I don't think you were giving it your all.' She shimmied around the tree in a strange sort of hug-dancing movement.

I cackled, far too loudly. It was a ridiculous sight, but there was nothing I could do to stop my aunt.

When I turned around again, our viewing public had lost interest and moved on. Carole winked at me and let go of the tree. I realized she was doing what she'd done when I was a child. Whenever the past had threatened to overwhelm me, Carole had always known how to break me out of it. I hugged her, instead of the tree.

The Antique Hunter's Guide to Murder

'Right,' she said, straightening her bright blue shirt dress. 'Off we go to the solicitor, or we'll be late.'

I had totally forgotten about our appointment and I was about to refuse, but I knew that it would be pointless. I'd said I would help, and I wasn't going to let my aunt down.

* * *

I followed Carole up the steep stairs to the Smith & Sons solicitors' office, above the butcher's on the high street. I groaned inwardly as we walked down the corridor; I didn't want to hear anything more about Arthur, even if it was to be told that I'd inherited something. Carole hadn't mentioned the letter again and I was perfectly happy to ignore its existence.

The reception was a small room with a large bay window overlooking the high street. There was a metallic whiff of blood from the butcher's shop downstairs mixed with expensive cologne. The spring sun was streaming through the grubby windows, turning the air into a muggy soup. It was an uncommonly hot morning for May, but then May can be like that, can't it? The month that you rush to unpack all your summer wardrobe, only to find you have to push it to the back again a week later.

Behind the G Plan 'Fresco' mid-century modern desk – which had probably been there since the 1960s – was a woman barely out of school. The teak desk had a floating top and solid teak legs and made her look like she should've been working at an ad agency in Hackney. I wondered if she knew how expensive it was, but she probably just thought it was old and orange. The woman had bright blonde hair, deep brown eyes and pink talons for nails, which tapped as she typed up some handwritten notes.

She looked up from her computer and smiled warmly at Carole. She didn't ask my name, and clearly knew who Carole was.

'He shouldn't be long.' She shuffled some papers around. 'I'm sorry about Arthur,' she said.

'Thank you, Annabelle, that's sweet of you.' Carole leant in. 'Do you know why this is all so urgent?'

Annabelle shrugged as a door opened to our left. A man well over six feet tall and in his late forties stood in the open doorway, his smile white against a slight tan. His shirt, tie and chinos looked expensive and his aftershave engulfed the reception. There was a squeaky polish to him that I didn't warm to, but I was sure many of the women in the village were enamoured by.

His smile faltered when our eyes met, but he composed himself and held out his hand for a limp handshake that made me shiver. 'It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Franklin Smith – and you are . . . ?'

'I'm Carole's niece, Freya Lockwood. Carole told me you asked us both to come to your office as quickly as possible.'

Franklin turned to Carole. 'Ah, yes; I assumed your niece wouldn't be able to make it. If you'd like to come in?' He walked into the office and relaxed into his large, reclining leather chair. 'First things first.' He intertwined his fingers. 'Do you have the keys or alarm code for the Crockleford Antiques Shop?'

Carole and I glanced at each other and shook our heads.

'As the executor of Arthur's estate, I need to enter the property, and no one seems to have the keys or code. I'm told the shop door was unlocked when the police arrived. That is most strange, isn't it? Harry, the boy who works there, says the police locked up and he doesn't know the alarm code because Arthur recently changed it. Does that sound right?'

I shrugged and Carole looked confused.

Franklin sighed. 'I suppose we'll need to get the locksmith in, and someone to deal with the alarm.'

'Is that why we're here?' I asked. 'I thought you asked to see us about the will?'

It all seemed very odd.

'Quite right, the will. Arthur came here the day after a friend's death and insisted I draw up a will that very moment.'

'Which friend? He never said anything.' Carole was almost tearful about being given news of Arthur that she'd known nothing about.

'Lord Metcalf?' Franklin raised an eyebrow enquiringly and we both shook our heads again. 'I'm the executor to both estates. Arthur informed me that he had written to you about it.' He crossed his arms, a puzzled expression on his face. 'Apparently he asked you, Ms Lockwood, if you would take over as verifier for the Metcalf estate. Of course, you absolutely don't need to. I'm more than capable of finding a proper expert to do this.'

'I don't know anything about being a verifier for an estate,' I replied.

He nodded with satisfaction. 'Of course you don't. I have no idea what Arthur was thinking. I will sort it.'

I didn't know what to make of Arthur recommending me, so I didn't dwell on it. But I wondered if there was a connection between the two deaths. 'If you don't mind me asking, how did this Lord Metcalf die?'

'He was an old man.' Franklin checked his watch and I noticed that it was a cheap reproduction Rolex; the second hand didn't have the sweeping motion. 'Long and short of it is,

C. L. MILLER

Carole and Freya Lockwood get the building and the business – half each. Though I’ve spoken to the accountant and I’m afraid the business is going under.’

The shop was ours? Why would Arthur do that?

The idea of it made me sick to my stomach. I couldn’t even imagine walking through the doors of Arthur’s shop, let alone owning it. Carole and I had no idea how to run the business, so it was clear we would have to find a buyer at the earliest opportunity.

Franklin opened a drawer and retrieved a small wooden box. ‘And he wanted you to have this.’ He slid the box across the table to me.

I reached out. ‘What is it?’

‘A plastic brooch,’ said Franklin, cocking his head as if he expected an explanation.

‘You’ve opened it already?’ asked Carole. We all knew he shouldn’t have looked inside the box. I was beginning to wonder if he was entirely legitimate.

Franklin shrugged nonchalantly.

I held the box in my palm, my hand shaking ever so slightly after the news of the inheritance. I creaked open the top and unwrapped a bundle of crisp cream tissue paper that sat inside. A luminous red plastic brooch in the shape of a fox fell into the palm of my hand; the fox’s tail curled back under itself, and it had a slender body with legs outstretched as if it was running. Without having to look, I knew the name ‘LEA STEIN’ was embossed on the silver pin.

‘Arthur gave me one like this when I was eighteen.’ I frowned at Carole.

Why is he giving me another one now? What is he trying to tell me?

My heart contracted as a tender memory came rushing back.

When Arthur had shown me the brooch all those years ago, he'd said, 'Tell me everything about this – what it is worth, who made it – and you can keep it.' In the days before the internet, being given a plastic brooch to investigate seemed like an impossible task. But I found I became engrossed in the research, talking to shops in London and reading books on costume jewellery. The more I learnt, the more determined I was to uncover the history of not only my brooch but also its designer, Léa Stein. Now Léa Stein was elderly, and her brooches were growing in value.

When I had reported my findings to Arthur, he smiled at me and said the brooch was mine to keep. Soon after, the antique hunting had begun.

'Is there anything else?' Carole asked Franklin.

'Your proof of identification?' Franklin held out his hand to Carole.

She reached into her bag for her driving licence and some utility bills and I did the same, handing them over.

Franklin seemed pleased at last. 'It would be best if you understand probate isn't a fast process. I will do my utmost to be swift, but this will take several months – sometimes a year or more.'

We bid him farewell and I left with a sense of unease. There was something strange about him, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I'd only taken a couple of steps out onto the street before I opened my phone and started to search for 'Lord Metcalf'.

'There's no obituary, nothing about his death. You'd think there would be *something* if a lord died, wouldn't you?'

'I do, darling, I most certainly do.'

C. L. MILLER

I considered. ‘It’s odd that this Lord Metcalf – an apparent friend of Arthur’s about whom we can’t find anything online – dies, and the very next day Arthur hurries to write *his* will with the same solicitor. *And* Arthur gives Franklin this for me.’ I held up the box containing the brooch. ‘If we believe Arthur’s death is suspicious, then perhaps the two deaths are related in some way?’

Carole grabbed my arm. ‘I think it might have been Lord Metcalf that Arthur went to see when he called me. Perhaps after his visit to Lord Metcalf he suspected something or discovered something when he was there?’ Arthur was up to something cunning when he left us the letter and that brooch.’

Hearing her say the word ‘cunning’ made me remember something – one of Arthur’s sayings: *An antique hunter needs to have the cunning of a fox and the grace of a bird.*

I was once a professional antique hunter with one of the best in the business. Arthur used to say to me before getting on a plane, *Ready for the next fox-hunt, then?*

I would smile and reply, *I’m always ready, old man.*

The fond memories shocked me, but even more so, I was surprised at how thrilling I found the idea of hunting again. What with all the turbulence of James insisting we sell the house, my sadness at Jade moving away, and now Arthur’s death, what I really needed was a distraction.

I didn’t know where it would lead, or if my skills were still there, but it was an easy decision. I would see what I could uncover.