Prologue

England, 1905

I DIDN'T KILL ALL THOSE PEOPLE… *IT WASN'T ME.*"

Tears welling up in his eyes, Layton pointed the electric torch at the thin gold wedding band in the palm of his hand.

He smiled and placed the ring in his pocket, then shone the light again on the skeleton from whose finger he had taken the ring.

"I don't know why you did this to me, Peter. But thank you for giving me back my life."

1

"I was outside a lunatic asylum one day, busy picking up stones
When along came a lunatic and said to me, 'Good morning, Mr. Jones;
Oh, how much a week do you get for doing that?'
'Thirty bob,' I cried."

"There ain't no finer music hall star than Roddy Doyle, lads, not in the whole bleedin' world," Jim Sheffield yelled.

His two boys didn't hear their father. They were too caught up in Roddy's performance, playing out on the brightly lit stage below. Like every member of the audience, the boys were stomping and singing along to his famous rendition of "Come Inside, You Silly Bugger."

It delighted Jim to see Clive and Edward enjoying themselves so much. Wasn't that what being a father was all about, bringing joy to your children? And they wouldn't be boys for long. Soon, they'd have to deal with all the harsh shite that came with being grown-up. So what was the harm in it, taking them to a brand-new London music hall on its opening night? It was something they'd never, ever forget.

To hell with his wife, complaining about the one-quid admission for the dress circle. The fancy first-balcony level was worth every penny. Jim remembered his granny, who could scarcely afford it, taking him weekly to the Norwich Hippodrome. Two hours with amazing people who could make you laugh till you cried—she'd always believed that was worth missing a meal or a pint.

And what a place! The new Britannia Empire was beautiful, Jim thought, looking up at the huge domed ceiling. Real electric lights twinkled above him like stars in the night sky. The elegant white plasterwork on the face of the horseshoe-tier balconies that wrapped around the theatre reminded him of crème frosting on a wedding cake. Plush red velvet, soft as a kitten, covered the seats. When the audience had filed in, they'd been so taken with the beauty of the interior that *they'd actually cheered and applauded the theatre itself.* The Britannia was bloody magical.

"He looked at me and shook his head,
And this is what he cried,
'What, thirty bob a week, with a wife and kids to keep?
Come inside, you silly bugger, come inside.'"

Roddy, who wore baggy checked trousers, a red derby, and a long, blue satin frock coat, started kicking out his gangly legs, dancing back and forth across the stage. The orchestra picked up on the excitement and played louder and faster, delighting the crowd, which sang louder and stamped their feet harder and faster. Roddy, the music hall legend, had that special skill to make the audience feel like they were part of what was going on onstage. He had the house in the palm of his hand, and he loved it.

Jim playfully slapped Clive's back, and the boy beamed at his father.

"'Come inside, you silly bugger, come inside.
You ought to have a bit more sense.
Working for a living? Take my tip;
Act a little screwy and become a lunatic.
Oh, you get your meals regular, and a brand-new suit besides.
Thirty bob a week, no wife and kids to keep.
Come inside, you silly bugger, come inside.'"

The orchestra played even louder, the brass section pounding away furiously. To keep the momentum going, they launched into another chorus.

That's when Jim felt a slight vibration in the bottoms of his shoes. It traveled through the heavy leather soles into his feet like an electrical current. He looked about and saw other patrons staring down in bewilderment. Clive and Edward were doing the same, with puzzled looks on their faces. And all the while, the orchestra and Doyle played on.

An ear-splitting crack sounded, as though someone had crashed cymbals next to Jim's ears. The house lights flickered, and the high-pitched screech of bending steel filled the air, adding to the terrible cacophony. Just as Jim's panic-stricken eyes met his sons', the floor collapsed beneath him. He dropped like a rock, Clive and Edward plummeting down alongside, their arms flailing above their shoulders.

Now, instead of a happy raucous song, nonstop screaming filled the theatre.

A half hour later, Douglas Layton stood across Shaftesbury Avenue. Feeling as though he were trapped in an unending nightmare, he watched the police carry body after body out of the Britannia Empire Theatre—the music hall he had designed.

2

One brown tweed suit with waistcoat, white shirt, collar, tie, one pair of brown Dunham shoes with black socks—all of which you're wearing now. One gold watch and fob, one house key, one man's comb, one silk handkerchief, one photo in a silver frame, one gold cigarette case, fifty-eight pounds in notes, and five bob in coins. Sign here that these items have been returned to your person."

Douglas Layton stared at the pen the prison officer had just dipped in the inkwell. Slowly, he reached across the battered wooden counter, took it in hand, and scratched his name across the form.

"That'll do ya, mate. Proceed out that door to the right. The alley'll lead you to the public thoroughfare—and mind you don't leave England."

Layton turned and shuffled toward the plate iron door. A blast of cold drizzle hit him in the face. Pausing, he gathered his jacket collar up around his neck. Staring down at the gray granite paving blocks, he began walking.

After twenty yards, the alley intersected a deserted road. He stopped and looked to his right, then his left. In both directions, brown gravel stretched through wet green countryside to the horizon. It didn't matter which turn he took, he thought. Either way led to a frightening and terrible future.

Before he made up his mind, Douglas Layton turned to face the place that had been his home for the last five years. Mulcaster Prison. He had never looked closely at its exterior. The day he had arrived in the fall of 1900, his head had hung low in shame. Now he saw—with an architect's eye—that the place was well designed, all imposing

stone walls topped with crenellations and punctuated with towers. A Crusader castle adapted for penal servitude. It gave the public reassurance that the felons inside could never get out and kill them in their sleep. Its design did its job beautifully, making the inmates feel less than human, as if they deserved to be there.

Prisons, Layton thought grimly, were designed by people who had never been in one. He must drop a line to the architect, Sir Laurence Chance, a former colleague in the Royal Institute of British Architects, to tell him how magnificent his design was. He could imagine Chance's expression: he'd drop the note in disgust, as if a dead rat had been placed in his hand.

Layton had known when he'd opened the door of the prison that there would be no one waiting for him. His wife, Edwina, had filed for divorce and left with their four-year-old son, Ronald, just six months after he entered Mulcaster. He knew everyone else would shun him too, even his closest friends and colleagues. Neither they nor his wife had ever come to visit him. But he couldn't blame them; British society had ironclad rules, and one was this: don't associate with an outcast. Layton had become a social leper. To avoid him infecting all he knew, years of friendship and family were thrown to the winds, as if he'd never existed.

Without thinking about it, Layton jammed his hands in his pockets and turned left. England's high-security prisons were always built in the countryside. Mulcaster stood in the middle of Lincolnshire in the East Midlands, which meant a long hike to a village or any other semblance of civilization. It was just ten in the morning; there was plenty of daylight left. With no future ahead, Layton saw no reason to hurry. He slowed his pace—and felt a hard blow on the top of his head.

Another missile flew past his ear. He ducked instinctively, touched his hair to see if there was blood.

"I've been waiting for this day, you murderin' bastard. I swore to Christ I'd be here!"

Layton whirled and saw the woman, standing just five yards away. She was in her forties, had hair tied in a bun and a dark frock under a black coat. His first thought was that she was drunk or mad, but as he took in her stern expression, Layton realized he was mistaken. He watched, bewildered, as she picked up another rock and cocked her arm to throw.

"You bloody bastard!" she cried. "You killed me daughter. Twelve was all she was. Me only child. Crushed to death by you, you goddamn monster!"

The woman hurled the stone, which sailed over Layton's head.

"*I was supposed to go that night!*" she screamed. "Did you know that? But I got the woman cramps, so I gave the ticket to me sister to take Isabelle. She'd bin lookin' forward to it for so long. I dinna want to disappoint her. And now she's dead."

The woman fell to her knees in the road and doubled over, shrieking as though she'd been stabbed in the stomach.

"I ain't got nobody now… Nobody!"

Layton cringed and ran like a beaten dog with his tail between his legs, the woman's screams ringing in his ears.

"Murderer! They shoulda hanged ya. You don't deserve to live, you miserable bag of shite!"

3

In prison, Layton had been surprised to discover that no one asked about the crimes an inmate had committed. It was a man's own business. If he wanted to talk about it, that was fine, but a person was never asked. This came as a great relief to him, as he'd been convicted of killing fourteen people and injuring scores more.

He was scared to death in his first days, sure he'd be beaten or killed. But nothing happened. Murderers, rapists, thieves, extortionists, pedophiles—in Mulcaster, no one seemed to care. It wasn't as if his fellow inmates didn't know who he was. His name and photograph had run in newspapers around the globe for months, beneath lurid headlines about the Britannia Empire Theatre disaster. It was all people talked about. But to the other prisoners, it wasn't a "regular" murder. Not like knifing a fellow in a pub fight or shooting your wife and her lover in bed. This had just been an accident. Most of the men with whom he'd served his time didn't understand why he'd been convicted.

But Layton did. Day after day in courtroom five of the Old Bailey, the prosecution had accused him of being an incompetent architect, of incorrectly designing the steel trusses that had supported the Britannia's balconies. Through his carelessness, those fourteen people, including two children, had been crushed to death. Among the many injured, twelve had lost arms or legs. One man's skull was so fractured that he never recovered; the accident left him with the mind of a five-year-old. The severity of their injuries meant many could no longer earn a living.

Sir John Chichester, the chief prosecutor, described every injury in gruesome detail, showing photos of bodies so mangled that some jury

members were sickened; one actually fled the courtroom to throw up. Witness after witness described that terrible night, the joy of experiencing opening night at the theatre turned in a millisecond to tragedy. Some wore stoic expressions. Some cried when they described the feeling of falling, of smashing into the floor and screaming desperately for help.

A man named Sheffield broke down when he described his son, Clive, a talented footballer who'd lost his leg. Roddy Doyle, the music hall star, took the box and, with tears in his eyes, described the carnage he'd seen from the stage.

Layton's barrister withered under the assault. By the second day, he'd all but given up. On the witness stand, Layton tried to tell the court that the cantilevered balcony trusses had been designed correctly, with a safety factor two and a half times stronger than what was needed. As an architect, he explained passionately, safety was an essential feature of his designs. The Victoria Hall disaster in 1883, where 183 panicked children were trampled to death while trying to get down to the stage for free toys given out after the performance, had shocked the British public. In its wake, the London County Council enacted strict new building codes. Layton made the Britannia's hallways and stairs wider than required, allowing the audience at every level to exit in a speedy, orderly manner at the first sign of danger. He used a newly invented "panic door," which couldn't be locked from the inside. Mindful of the horrible fire at the Exeter Theatre Royal—186 people dead in 1887—he used newly available asbestos fabric to fireproof the great theatre curtain.

No one believed him. He couldn't prove that Shaw Construction Ltd., the general contractor, had erected the steelwork incorrectly; upon examination, the surviving trusses passed muster, and the steel fabricator swore that everything had been manufactured to exact specifications. Layton was vilified in the press, called the greatest murderer in British history. *The Butcher of the West End*. The newspapers made

it seem as if the entire horseshoe-shaped first balcony had collapsed when, in reality, only a front section fifteen feet in width had failed.

The architect passed the ten-day trial in a dazed, dreamlike state. By the end, he believed himself guilty. Somehow, *he* was responsible for the death and destruction that night. He, and no one else. One of England's best architects had become a mass murderer.

Like the woman on the road, many Britons were outraged when Layton received only five years' hard labor. A man stealing sixpence from a tobacconist shop got put away for five years too. The papers howled for weeks. It was because Layton was a *gentleman* with friends in high places, they claimed. He should have been hanged.

But they didn't understand. The punishment wasn't just five years. It was daily torment for the rest of Layton's life. A day didn't pass when thoughts of the Britannia didn't crush him to earth, like a huge boulder dropping out of the sky. Visions of the two dead children were an especial torment; again and again, he saw their smashed bodies being carried out of the theatre. He agreed with the woman on the road. If only they had hanged him!

The day before his transfer from London to Mulcaster, Layton had tried to kill himself. In his cell, he cut strips of cloth from the underside of his musty mattress and formed them into a noose. Only the thought of his wife, Edwina, and his son, Ronald, stayed his hand. When they vanished from his life after only six months, the thoughts of suicide returned. But each time Layton was on the verge of carrying it out, he couldn't bring himself to do it. As far-fetched as it seemed, he believed it was still possible to hold his son in his arms again. Losing his wife, whom he loved with all his heart, was a terrible blow, but the loss of Ronald was almost as crushing as the guilt over the disaster. He thought of him constantly, but the one unforgettable memory of his son was seeing him run through a field of red poppies one summer at their home in Surrey. Barely taller than the flowers, Ronald crashed through them with joy. Layton ran that one image through his mind

thousands of times in prison. It never failed to bring a smile to his face, maybe the only time he did manage a smile in Mulcaster. He knew he was probably fooling himself about seeing his son again, but that was what they called hope, and it had prevented him from killing himself at least half a dozen times. Hope was what kept a man alive in life, and especially in prison. When his prison term drew to a close, Layton thought of committing suicide upon release. He had no family, friends, or profession. A dark, terrifying void awaited him. Why go on? But again, the thought of seeing Ronald kept him going, irrational as it seemed.

Layton walked slowly along the gravel road, looking at the farm fields that ran along both sides toward the horizon. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out the corn muffin he had smuggled out from his last prison breakfast this morning. Climbing over a low rubble wall, Layton found a place to sit under an elm tree. It was a sheer delight to sit on the grass and savor the muffin, chewing slowly, holding the flavorful crumbs on the tongue. After being in prison, the simplest of pleasures were wonderful. More than that, it was the feeling of being in an open field all by himself. There was no such thing as privacy in prison. One was constantly surrounded and watched by others, stuck in a six-by-eight-foot cell with another human.

Finishing the muffin, Layton lay flat on his back and gazed up into the bright-blue morning sky. A few wispy clouds drifted by. He closed his eyes, took long, deep breaths, and exhaled slowly. When some twenty minutes had passed, Layton rose, made his way back to the road, and started walking west. Except for a passing farm worker with a rake on his shoulder, he had the road to himself. At an intersection of the road was a weathered sign that read Wragby—5 Miles. This town may have a railway station, he thought.

Only when he heard a faint sound in the distance did his head lift up. The murmuring roar was like the growling of an animal. It increased in volume; curiosity won out, and he turned.

On the horizon line in the middle of the road, a small, squat object was coming toward him. Layton stood, mesmerized. At about two hundred yards, he recognized the source of the noise and smiled. It was a horseless carriage. In 1900, when he'd been sent to prison, they had still been extremely rare, more likely to be seen in France or Germany than in England. Although he'd seen pictures, he had never encountered one in person or known anybody who owned one. Not even his rich clients had such a thing. Besides terrifying horses, they were said to be very unreliable. Often, in an ironic twist, horses had to tow a broken-down horseless carriage to a mechanic.

But now, standing at the side of the road, he could see the oncoming vehicle roaring along without trouble, its engine humming steadily. Layton loved anything mechanical, and the machine hurtling down the road fascinated him. It was bright red; its thick rubber wheels had matching red spokes and no top. The driver wore goggles and a long, tan coat and was holding on to the thick wooden wheel with gloved hands. At the front of the carriage were two shiny brass headlights; a sculpted metal ornament was situated atop the engine.

As the machine drove past, the driver twisted his head at Layton and slowed to a stop.

Layton trotted over.

"Hello there. Need a lift, old chap?" the man shouted over the roar of the engine.

Layton nodded.

The driver opened the side door.

"Jolly good of you to stop," shouted Layton.

"Glad to help," said the driver, his eyes fixed on the road.

"This is quite a machine," Layton shouted as they took off.

"It's a Darracq Flying Fifteen from France. Runs like a top."

The feeling of the rushing wind exhilarated Layton. They must have been traveling at least thirty miles an hour! The countryside flew by in a blur; he felt an unfamiliar smile crease his face.

"Motoring's my passion, but you have to watch out these days. Constables are setting speed traps, fining you a quid for going too fast." The driver snorted. "Can you believe that nonsense?"

"It's bloody amazing. These things will put the horses out to pasture," Layton yelled over the roar of the engine.

"I hope so. Be far less shit and piss on the roads!"

"Any English cars?"

"I hear a fellow named Rolls is coming out with one."

"We live in remarkable times," said Layton, touching the metalwork of the vehicle.

"Yes. Soon, we'll be flying these things in the air." The driver saw Layton's look of disbelief and laughed. "S'true! Two American brothers have created a glider with an engine! It can stay up in the air for a good long time. Before you know it, we'll all be flying about like birds."

In prison, Layton had been entirely cut off from the world. Such isolation was part of his punishment; it was as if he'd lived on one of Jupiter's moons. Martians, like those in H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, could have conquered Earth, and he'd have been the last to know. To think, flying machines had been invented! What else had he missed?

"So you've never heard of the Wright brothers?" the man asked.

"No," Layton said and hesitated. "I've been away for a bit."

The driver glanced over at him. Even with his clothes hidden beneath his motoring outfit, Layton could tell he was an English gentleman, born and bred. He would be far too polite to ask another gentleman why he was out walking on the road.

"How far are you going?" he asked instead.

"Wragby."

"I turn off about a mile before."

"That's fine. So good of you to give me a lift."

"Please," the driver said. "Think nothing of it."

4

As Layton walked the short distance to Wragby, he fumbled about inside his trouser pockets. Among the coins, he felt a house key. A deep sense of gloom descended upon him as he stared at it.

The key to his house. His beloved house, designed so lovingly for his family. Every square inch calibrated to his personal satisfaction.

The wonderful thing about an architect designing his own home was that he didn't have to answer to anyone. Usually, he had to get the client's approval for every aspect of his design. Was this window style all right? Was the shape of the roof to their liking? They were paying for it, after all; they had the right. But when he built his own house, the architect had only to please himself. Every idea could be tried. The smallest detail could be included. No one could order him about. And his house in West Surrey had been the house of his dreams.

Layton remembered the wonderful day it was finished, standing before it with Edwina and Ronald. The rooms were spacious; the ceilings, high. The windows looked out onto a gorgeous garden designed by Daphne Scott-Thomas, the greatest gardener in England. Layton had enjoyed his home for only two years, but they had been wonderful, especially the Christmas celebrations with his boy. And Edwina's garden parties were some of the most popular society events of the summer season. In 1899, *Country Life Illustrated* even wrote a long article about one of them, including many photos of the house, which led to some new commissions. Layton never tired of compliments on his design, especially from fellow architects; that praise meant the most to

him. He had even won an award from the Royal Institute of British Architects. The framed and engraved certificate was no doubt moldering away now in some Surrey trash heap.

In his tiny shared cell in Mulcaster, Layton used to close his eyes and transport himself to the house. In his mind, he walked through its great rooms and garden. He experienced every square foot—the stonework, the paneling, the oak plank floors, the high ceilings. It helped keep his sanity intact during those long five years.

Now the house belonged to someone else. Convicted felons in England gave up their right to property. When the house became part of the divorce settlement with Edwina, there was nothing he could do. Layton's only satisfaction was that the money from the sale would eventually go to Ronald. His son had loved the house, especially when running through its wide, long halls, dragging a length of string that his orange-striped cat, Leo, chased after. He hoped that when Edwina left with the boy, she took Leo with them. It always gave Layton a warm feeling at night to see the cat snuggled in the covers, asleep with Ronald.

To his right, a stream paralleled the road before meandering off into the fields. Layton walked down the bank to its edge. He looked at the brass key once more, then threw it into the slow-flowing stream with a flick of his wrist. It made a faint *kerplunk* sound when it hit the surface. For a moment, Layton stared at the spot where it had sunk. Then he continued on his way.

About fifteen minutes later, the spires of a square neo-Gothic church tower appeared over the tops of the trees in the distance. He was almost to Wragby. All market towns in the English countryside had at least one church, which towered over the small cluster of buildings below.

Taking shelter behind a huge tree some ten yards off the road, Layton began an accounting of his capital. Damned lucky, he thought, that he'd forgotten to empty his pockets before he entered prison. The

fifty-eight pounds and five shillings made up every last cent he had in the world. This, for a man who'd earned at least five thousand per annum for the past six years. It was what an underbutler on a country estate would make in a year. He knew it would not last long.

Pocketing the cash, Layton walked back to the road. There were more people out now. He saw a couple driving a horse cart, a man on a bicycle. Once in town, he leisurely strolled past the shops, then stood in the doorway of a butcher and watched with great curiosity as the villagers passed by. He hadn't seen ordinary people in five years. A man in brown tweeds and a derby, a woman in a green dress with a scarlet shawl, an old man doddering along on a cane—each had a story, a life full of complications, happiness, and disappointment. What had their lives been like during the time he was in prison? Layton wondered. His jaw tightened. No matter how terrible their sadness and suffering, they had had their freedom. They could come and go as they pleased.

From the right, two young girls came skipping across the road. Of perhaps ten or twelve years in age, they were laughing and chattering away. One had shoulder-length chestnut hair; the other was blond, her locks tied with red ribbons. The second Layton laid eyes on them, his mind snapped like a light switch to the night of the disaster. He saw anew the limp body of a young girl being carried out of the theatre, her long hair hanging over the edge of the canvas stretcher. Perhaps the daughter of the woman outside the prison. A sick feeling swept over Layton; he clasped the corner of the storefront till his knuckles went white. Behind the stone walls of Mulcaster Prison, he had been cut off from the real world. Though the disaster haunted him, there were no sudden jolting reminders of the death he had caused. He turned his head as the girls passed, hoping it would lessen the pain. It didn't.

Layton sat on a bench outside the shop, breathing heavily, his head bent to the stone sidewalk. Directly across the road was a pub called the Yellow Dog, and he made his way to it. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the village pub was crowded with people laughing, joking, and

enjoying themselves. When he'd entered the pub, he'd feared everyone would recognize him, that a hush would descend upon the rowdy room. But not a single person noticed. He took his pint to the farthest corner anyway, claiming a small table well out of view. At any moment, he felt, someone's eyes might lock on him, a flicker of recognition might spark. He could hear the whispers now: "Blimey, isn't that Layton, the Butcher of the West End?" People would stare in disbelief, then attack him with fists and bottles.

But somehow, after four hours in the pub, nothing happened. The stout tasted wonderful. Layton ordered pint after pint, prompting the barmaid, who had seen her share of drinking, to comment that he was making the Guinness family even richer today. In prison, he'd forgotten a chief attribute of alcohol: it dulled the mind, made you forget your troubles and feel happy. There were times in Mulcaster when he'd wished he could tear off the top of his skull, reach in with his hands, and rip out the horrible memories. Now, thankfully, he had alcohol to rid him of the torment.

Layton kept drinking and drinking. Each swallow made it easier to forget. At closing time, the publican shoved his near-unconscious body into the street. Totally plastered, he staggered through the streets until he found the railway station, then passed out in a doorway of a grocer directly across the road. He didn't know that a man who had followed him from the pub was standing over him. The burly man backed away, then took a running start and swung his black hobnailed boot into Layton's stomach.

5

When the dawn came, Layton stirred and opened his eyes, which felt as if they had been glued shut. The first thing he saw was a blurry image of the Wragby railroad station across the street. People were milling about, meaning it was now open. As he rose to feet, he felt an excruciating pain in his midsection, which caused him to plop back down to the pavement. Taking hold of the doorframe in the entry to the grocer's, he pulled himself up, groaning in pain.

Layton dragged his body into the station and purchased a ticket on the next southbound train. Out of sheer habit, he paid for a first-class seat, though third class would have been one-quarter the price. Fifteen minutes passed, which he spent stooped over on a wrought iron bench, suffering from a pounding headache and blurred vision in addition to the terrible pain in his torso, before the train rumbled up to the platform. Compared to his living accommodations for the last five years, his plush scarlet upholstered seat in the first-class compartment felt cozy and quite luxurious. Watching the lush green countryside blur by the window soothed him and cleared the cobwebs from his head.

At Mulcaster, his cell had only a two-foot-square window that looked out over a rock-strewn dirt lot. Layton and hundreds of other inmates were sent there each day to crush stone with sledgehammers. In all his time in prison, he never laid eyes on anything verdant. Now, stone cottages, pastures full of cattle, groves of trees, and fields of rye and barley flew by. After about ten minutes, Layton turned from the window to his fellow passengers. One, a corpulent man in his fifties in a black suit who was already seated in the compartment when he

boarded, was staring at him. His puzzled look said all too clearly, "Where have I seen this fellow before? The army? The club?" When he saw that Layton had caught him staring, he averted his eyes and pretended to read the *Strand Magazine* on his lap. But his eyes kept flitting up, and he was clearly racking his brain, trying to remember. Layton squirmed in his seat, realizing that every stranger he encountered now was a potential enemy who could identify him. When the conductor came to check tickets, the man began staring again. Unable to bear such intense scrutiny, Layton rose, walked out of the compartment, and found an empty one. His head leaning against the window and the rails rumbling beneath his feet, he considered his options.

Rather, it seemed as if he had only one option. He had no choice but to take on a new identity and try to start life anew. Layton smiled to himself at that thought. A false identity did not trouble him, because he'd been living under a false identity for twenty years; he was as much an English gentleman as the hogs on the farms that the train was passing. *I am a fraud*, he thought. *A charlatan who skillfully hid my common-as-dirt, working-class origins.*

The instant a child in England was brought into the world, he was placed on a rung of a tall, invisible social ladder. And there he stayed for the rest of his life. Layton's rung was located in the village of Puddletown in Dorset, a lush farming country overlooking the English Channel. More specifically, on Cherry Lane, in a thatched-roof cottage of local stone built by his father, Thomas Layton. His late mother, Fanny, was the eldest daughter of a shoemaker in Charminster, a village to the west.

While Layton's rung was solidly on the working-class—and thus lower—half of the ladder, in England, each caste had its distinct parts. Sharp and often cruel divisions existed between those who worked for themselves and those who worked for others. Thomas Layton was a master brick- and stonemason with his own business, albeit a small one, that employed others. He thus enjoyed superior rank. Enhancing

his position further was the fact that he was a landholder; he owned a cottage and outbuildings on two acres.

In England's tight-knit rural society, the self-employed looked down on the "workfolk," especially farm workers. They rarely intermarried or even visited each other's homes. "We don't associate with the likes of them," was a common refrain heard during Layton's boyhood in Dorset.

This was not simple snobbery but part of the system of ironclad discrimination that ruled society. England's class system was not unlike the railways, with their segregated first-, second-, and third-class seating. A man could fall down the ladder—and many did—but almost never did he climb *up*. There was always someone directly above, ready to push him down with his boot. Privilege and status were the only things that determined one's social identity, and all Englishmen knew that, down to the lowliest guttersnipe.

But as a child, these concerns had not touched Layton's mind. The Dorset countryside had been a very wonderful place to grow up. Layton thought often of those long, dreamy days playing in the fields and woods, fishing in the streams, learning the names of plant and trees. It was an idyllic rural life that had changed little from medieval times. Time was measured by the progression of annual festivals and agricultural seasons—Easter, Whitsun, Christmas, lambing time, haymaking, the harvest. Layton had developed the sort of topographical intimacy one gains only by walking everywhere, by knowing every square foot of the land: the ponds; the sandy heaths and chalky downs; the histories, quarrels, and scandals of the occupants of every cottage.

Being the son of a tradesman, he had been isolated from the harsh realities of farm life. Many laborers worked for wages so low, they could barely feed a family. Layton remembered his father telling his mother about a boy on a nearby sheep farm who'd died of starvation; at the autopsy, his shriveled stomach held only raw turnips. Farmers sent children as young as seven to work full-time in the fields.

In contrast, Layton's childhood was solitary—his two brothers were older—but happy. He was part of a close-knit family; ten generations had lived in Dorset, and hardly any had left the county. Both his grandmothers were grand storytellers, inexhaustible sources of country lore. Music was a joy for his family; dancing, singing, and the playing of instruments held important sway in their lives. Layton could still hear the sounds of his uncle's fiddle and see his mother twirling a jig in front of the fireplace. Then there were the obligatory Sunday trips to Stinsford Church, with its time-honored rituals and music of the Church of England.

Due to his family's social standing, Layton attended school, a privilege not accorded to the unfortunate children of the workfolk. From his first day in grammar school in Puddletown, he excelled. His mother and her mother had been voracious readers, and the tradition was passed on. When he showed a talent for drawing, she arranged occasional lessons from a retired schoolmistress. By age eight, he'd won many academic prizes, including a copy of Homer's *Odyssey*. At ten, he walked four miles daily to the British School, run by Isaac Glanfield in Greyhound Yard, Dorchester, and there he continued his academic success.

By 1880, Dorchester, a county seat and provincial market town, had expanded well beyond its original Roman fortifications to become a small city with banks, shops, government offices, and a British army garrison. Among the bustle of town, soldiers in splendid red-and-gold uniforms strolled the streets. Layton loved the energy, the change from quiet, rural Puddletown. Dorchester had several entertainment venues, including a theatre and a music hall, which he attended regularly, either alone or with his parents. When Glanfield set up a private academy for older and more advanced students, Layton was invited to attend. There he took Latin and French, read history and the classics. He discovered a wonderful world of knowledge and plunged in with vigor.

Because Layton's father had made some tiny contributions to

Stinsford Church, the vicar, Reverend Donald Carter, had invited the Layton family for tea. It was at this repast that the fourteen-year-old Layton met Carter's son Ian, home from his studies at Oxford. Ian was refined, handsome, well dressed, and erudite on all subjects. Layton was completely taken by him, and that was what he decided to become: an Oxford man. He would take a history degree, and he accelerated his studies so that he might qualify for the rigorous entrance examinations at Oxford and Cambridge.

One day in his fifteenth year, Glanfield praised Layton's score on a mathematics exam. Brimming with pride, Layton told the schoolmaster that he had worked especially hard on the topic so that he might be accepted into Oxford. The smile fled Glanfield's face. With an expression of near pity, he explained the facts of British life to the boy—a day Layton would never forget.

In rapid succession, Glanfield spelled out the shortcomings in Layton's education, particularly his minimal knowledge of Greek. But the biggest blow of all was this: he was the son of a stonemason. Even if the boy were superbly trained, when he wrote the university asking permission to sit for the examination, they would reply that someone from his background would find better success in life by following his father's sensible and honorable trade.

"I once had the dream of being a university man," said Glanfield. He sighed. "And the idea was given up years ago." In those days, schoolmasters were not college trained.

Seeing the baffled look on the boy's face, he patted him on the head.

"I've given you the finest education for a boy of your *place*," he said.

Layton well remembered the long walk back to Puddletown that day in a state of disappointment and confusion.

What Glanfield had said, he realized, his parents had known all along. The prospect of a university education was pure fantasy. Ian was the son of an Oxford-educated vicar whose own father had been to Oxford. Layton's family had the money, and yet, what he was attempting

was still socially impossible. Cheeks flushing hotly, he remembered sitting in a pew in Stinsford Church listening to the vicar preach against the presumption of the lower classes who sought to rise into the ranks of the professional class. He hadn't known that applied to him too.

But his father had other plans. When Layton graduated from Glanfield's academy at sixteen, his father told him that he was to be articled for three years to John Hicks, a Dorchester architect, and trained in the architectural profession. Thomas Layton had already paid Hicks the first year's fee of forty pounds for his son's education.

Layton's mind had reeled. As a boy, he had liked to draw, especially portraits of his family and pets, but never expressed any interest in becoming an architect. But his father did the stone- and brickwork for church restorations throughout Dorset, and Hicks's specialty lay in this field. In the end, a business connection determined Layton's future. His father didn't want him to dirty his hands as a mason; in contrast, being an architect was highly respectable and provided a good middle-class income. When a father chose a trade or career path for his son, there was no argument. In the summer of 1886, Layton dutifully reported to the office of John Hicks on South Street in Dorchester.

There were two other pupils in the office, one finishing his tutelage, the other in his second year. Hicks, a genial, well-educated man, took great pride in training young architects, and Layton received first-rate instruction. It was a relief; like many in England, Layton had read Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which the innocent young hero was articled to a villainous and greedy architect, Seth Pecksniff, who lived off his students' fees and didn't teach them a thing. This was not Layton's fate. Hicks's specialty was the restoration of Gothic churches, and Layton took up the same. He was sent all over southern England to draw up floor plans, traveling to the parish churches of St. Mary's, Rampisham, Coombe Keynes, and Powerstock. In the process, he learned all there was to know about medieval construction and design.

Layton's exceptional intelligence and drawing talent proved useful;

he soon became an excellent draughtsman. After just a year, Hicks tasked him with designing small parts of renovation projects. When his three-year pupilage ended, Hicks offered him a full-time position, which Layton gladly accepted. His bitterness at being denied a university education had passed. Being an architect made him happy.

Three years later, his life changed again. As he stood in the nave of St. Timothy's Church in Somerset, making some sketches, an elderly man in a rumpled tweed suit approached and asked him about the renovation. Layton took the man around the church, describing the proposed work in great detail. Before starting a project, Layton made a thorough study of a church's history so that he might understand its original construction and alterations over the years. Sitting in a pew with the old man, he enthusiastically told him about this church's past.

After two hours, the man stood and introduced himself as the Marquess of Oxton. His family had donated the funds for the church's restoration, and for the next year, the marquess worked closely with Layton on the project. On the day of St. Timothy's rededication, the old man pulled the young architect aside and asked him to design a chapel on his estate.

All architects dream of going out on their own, but Layton, with his lack of social contacts and low-class standing, had never believed he could. But other projects for the marquess's estate and work for his titled friends soon followed. Layton set up an office to handle the rush of new jobs. The son of a mason found himself dining with the aristocratic and the wealthy—a new life far, far above his station. They valued his advice on architectural matters and liked him as a person.

It was at this point that he began his elaborate masquerade. He would never reveal his past as a workingman's son. Instead, he became a full-time actor, playing the role of a man born into the upper middle class. In England, a gentleman was not necessarily a member of the peerage; land ownership was tied to inheritance and wealth too, and a landowner was also deemed a gentleman. Layton took this path as his

story and lied, claiming he had inherited land in the south of England. With expert skill, he learned the accent, manner of dress, and etiquette of his betters. Every day, he took the stage and fooled the world. In England, how one was perceived as a gentleman was absolutely paramount, and Layton had transformed himself into a true gentleman. Within a remarkably short amount of time, he had scaled the citadels of British privilege, even acquiring the most unattainable—a choice marriage to an aristocrat. Lady Edwina, the only daughter of a viscount, Lord Charles Litton, was a classic society beauty with incredible auburn-colored hair. She took an instant liking to Layton, who wasn't such a bad-looking chap in his own right. They had met at a dinner party hosted by Layton's client, Sir Richard Bonneville, who had completed a new home next to Lord Litton's estate. The young architect was smitten with the twenty-year-old girl with the vivacious smile. In real life, a bumpkin like him would never get within one mile of a girl like that socially. With many suitors to choose from, Edwina's slightest attention was hard-won, and Layton was flattered. He believed she favored him because he actually knew how to do something to earn a living, and she respected that. A proper English gentleman never worked, and she found them boring or silly. Layton fell in love with Edwina and, despite her father's veiled disapproval, proposed marriage. He was incredibly happy—and very lucky.

By connecting with a wealthy aristocratic family, he was able to live and advance even further above his humble origin. How ironic, he thought. Professionally, he excelled in designing ornate façades; in life, he designed a façade too, covering up his real identity. He lied about his parents (long dead), his schooling, and his upbringing. He even shared his wife's snobbery, hiding his true roots so successfully that no one would have believed he came from a thatched-roof cottage on Cherry Lane in Dorset, a million light-years from the ballrooms of Mayfair. He had done what so few in England could: reinvented himself.

Now he had to do it again.

6

Hello, Dad."

The large, broad-shouldered man filled the doorway, and his head almost touched the top of the frame. The bright light of the lamp behind him silhouetted him against the dark.

"Would you like a nice cup of tea? I just put the kettle on," Layton's father said impassively. Then he turned away.

Layton followed. The second he set foot in the cottage, a feeling of great relief and happiness swept over him. *He was home!*

The room's plastered walls, flagstone floor, and large, open fireplace embraced him with a great welcoming warmth, like pulling a thick blanket over his body on a cold winter's night. The wooden staircase in the corner still wound its way up to the bedrooms on the second floor. To his right, he saw the extra room his parents had added for his widowed grandmother.

An unfamiliar smile swept across Layton's face. He saw before him the essence of his boyhood, a time when he had no troubles or concerns. If only he could snap his fingers and—just like that—be a boy again, living in this cottage, listening to his grandmother's stories, and playing with his lead soldiers in front of the hearth.

Thomas Layton pulled a cup and saucer from a cabinet and placed it on the blue-and-red-striped tablecloth of the dining table. Layton took the high-backed oak chair as his father began to pour the tea. They sat in silence, looking at each other for a long moment.

"I'm sorry I never visited you at Mulcaster, Douglas. I just couldn't do it."

Layton didn't reply. He just waited, absorbing his father's Dorset accent, which he hadn't heard in years. The sound brought back a flood of warm memories: long days spent sitting in this room, talking to his mother; the clamor of his many relatives. Was his own speech still tinged with that distinctive sound? He'd worked doggedly to get rid of it.

"I understand, Dad."

His father blinked at him with watery eyes. "That sad business of yours, coming on top of Raymond getting killed…" He shook his head.

Raymond. Three weeks before the theatre disaster, Layton's older brother had died in South Africa, killed in the Second Boer War. As a sergeant-major in the British Army, Raymond had spent twenty years fighting battles in the farthest outskirts of the British Empire: the Sudan, Afghanistan, Egypt. In the Battle of Omdurman in Khartoum, he'd received the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest decoration for valor. General Kitchener himself had pinned the medal to his chest. Thomas Layton had worshipped his soldier son.

When Layton turned toward the fireplace, he saw Raymond's photo on the mantel. In his dress uniform, smiling that wonderful ear-to-ear grin topped by a handlebar mustache.

There were no photos of Layton on the mantel. Though his father was a master mason who appreciated architecture, soldiering for queen and country was far manlier than sitting at a draughting table. Compared to a soldier with a VC, an architect seemed a poof. No matter how many impressive buildings Layton designed or how many upper-class clients he had, Raymond's achievements mattered more, for Raymond was an empire builder.

Once, when he was just starting out as an architect on his own, Layton had invited his father to a dedication of a library he'd designed in Bournemouth on the coast of Dorset. Because of his charade, he'd had no contact with his family, but in the very brief letter about the new library, he had let his dad know that he'd set up a practice and

was doing well but revealed no other details of his life. Like most sons, Layton probably still had the need for his father's approval, and that's why he had wanted him to come. But Thomas Layton had declined, claiming a business emergency. Layton never invited—or contacted—him again. Raymond's feats, he knew, had trumped him once more.

He was ashamed to admit it, but down deep, he had been relieved that his father had refused. The key to maintaining his charade had been never revealing to *anyone*—including his wife—his true background, which meant her family never meeting his family. In England, that revelation would be the kiss of death to one's position. Lord Litton would have looked at his father's rough mason's hands and ill-fitting clothes and snorted in disapproval. What had his beloved Edwina married? So his family wasn't at his wedding, because he never told them about it. Nor was he at his brother's funeral.

Growing up, his father had been stern but kind, and he was proud of Layton's academic successes. But every time Raymond had come home on leave and walked through the door in his uniform, Thomas Layton had almost levitated with excitement. After so many colonial battles conquered by Raymond, his father had come to believe his son invulnerable. A sergeant-major was the most important of the non-commissioned officers, relied upon by the regiment for leadership in the thick of fighting. So when the news came, Layton knew that his father's whole being had been pulverized to dust.

And when his father read in the papers about the theatre accident, the shame of it must have been overwhelming. Because Layton was a native son, Dorset gossiped constantly about the tragedy. His father must have felt like digging a hole and burying himself.

"It's all right, Dad," he said softly. "I understand."

But his father must have heard his stomach growling. "I have some leftover mutton and suet pudding in the larder if yer hungry."

When the food was set on the table, Layton had to prevent himself from devouring it like a wild animal. He ate slowly and drank a tankard

of ale. His father watched silently. Layton set down his fork, about to speak, and felt something at his leg. A solid black cat, purring and rubbing against him. He smiled and picked it up, setting it in his lap, where it curled into a ball.

"Midnight still remembers ya," said his father.

Petting the cat's head, Layton looked across the table.

"It's quite terrifying to face life all by oneself. I had no other place to go, Dad," he said in a low, quivering voice.

"I knew ya was gettin' out soon. 'ow long have ya been out?"

"Two days."

"You'll never get work around here, people knowing who you are." His father was never one to sugarcoat reality.

A harsh voice broke across their quiet conversation.

"Blimey. The black sheep of the family has returned to the fold."

Leaning forward on the thick oak railing of the staircase landing was his older brother, Roger, a tall and gangly man with a shock of sandy-blond hair. He skipped down the rest of the stairs like a seven-year-old.

"Hello, Roger," Layton said tersely.

"I won't bother to ask how things are with you, Little Brother. I can tell by lookin' at yer face." Roger sat down across from Layton, a cruel smile fixed on his face. "You look so different. Thinner, almost like a bloody skeleton. I'm surprised. I heard they give you a pound of raw meat every day in prison, like animals in the zoo."

Layton closed his eyes, let the abuse wash over him. Roger had always resented his ability to rise above his station. Now, he wondered if his brother had taken pleasure in his misfortunes too. It wasn't as if he had anything to complain about. Roger was a master carpenter and greatly admired for his skill. People across England hired him to build cabinetry, stairs, and millwork for mansions and other important buildings. And yet. While Roger had a true gift, Layton had never referred any work to him for fear of revealing his family connections. In doing so, perhaps he had hurt Roger more than he knew.

"Douglas here is lookin' for work," Thomas said, turning to Roger, who let out a harsh bark of a laugh.

"Oh, for sure, people'll be bangin' the door down to give Britain's most famous murderer a job."

"Don't take that tone, boy, or I'll thump ya," growled Thomas.

"What? None of your high and mighty friends were waitin' outside Mulcaster to give ya a job? Lord and Lady Bentham didn't have their carriage at your disposal? I'm shocked." Their father was glowering, but Roger continued, undaunted. "You know, we can't blame 'em, Dad, for never coming back to visit. It must have been bloody awkward for our Dougie to associate with his social inferiors."

He leaned over the table and looked straight into Layton's eyes. "But now you're an ex-convict. You're *everyone's* social inferior, mate."

Layton looked straight ahead and continued petting Midnight. Only the crackling of the fire broke the silence in the room.

"You look peaky, Doug. Maybe you should go upstairs and have a lie down in Raymond's room," said Thomas. His tone of voice wasn't compassionate but practical, as if he were telling a drenched man to come in out of the rain.

Layton set the cat on the floor and slowly stood. Like a weary old man, he trudged up the stairs. His torso still ached.

"At least you don't have to share a room anymore—or get buggered," Roger called after him.

"Shut your mouth, boy," Layton heard his father growl.

The lamp on the nightstand threw out a warm glow, illuminating the many objects attached to the walls, the trinkets and trophies of war that Raymond had brought home for Layton, who worshiped his soldier brother as a hero. A Dervish spear, a Zulu shield almost six feet tall, a jeweled saber from his posting on India's northwest frontier. These strange, exotic objects had fascinated Layton. He had looked forward to Raymond's leaves, to being beguiled by stories of adventures in far-off lands.

Many photographs of Raymond's regiment hung on the walls. Layton could find his brother instantly in every one. Raymond had called the Second Boer War a quick colonial skirmish; the British were expected to march into South Africa and easily whip the Boer farmers in a week. The Dutch-speaking settlers had accepted British rule but refused to let their republics, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, be annexed when diamonds and gold were discovered within their bounds. To the shock of the world, they had soundly licked the British.

The public had been furious. That mere farmers could beat the best army on the planet! The Boers had used hit-and-run tactics that were deemed cowardly. "Why don't they come out in the open and fight fair?" people had written in letters to the *Daily Mail*.

Reading the *Times* one morning at breakfast, Layton had learned to his horror that Raymond had been cut down in an ambush while leading a night patrol. One Boer bullet to the head ended his bright life. In the photograph of the regiment Raymond had sent his father from South Africa, Layton found his brother, seated in the second row, third from the left, looking confident and proud.

It was the last photo of his brother ever taken.