

CHAPTER 2

The woman sat skewed in the chair opposite Adrian, knees together, arms pressed to her sides, shoulders forward, feet tucked in. A zigzag on the metal chair. The flesh was sparse on her bones. Around her waist she wore a cloth of yellow-and-black faded geometric shapes. Her breasts were covered by a loose blouse. Adrian could not guess her age. The people here seemed ageless to him. She called him 'Doctor,' proffered answers to his questions in a toneless voice, so low he strained to hear. Not once did she meet his eye, but studied her hands folded in her lap. She complained of headaches and asked for medicine for the pain, but the doctors had found nothing wrong with her. So they sent her to him.

Adrian talked about what he could do for her, searched for words he thought she might understand. On the paper in front of him was written her name. He spoke it out loud. For the first time she looked at him. She pointed at a bottle of vitamins on his desk and so he gave it to her. It was an easy thing to do.

That night Adrian Lockheart dreamed. One of the few times he had done so since arriving in the country. He was on the edge of a waterfall, leaning forward, hovering over the rush of water. Down below, he could see nothing beyond the torrent of water. In the dream he was a child again. He stretched out his arms and swallow-dived, waking just as he would have been engulfed by the falling water. The dream was not of death, because he woke softly laughing.

An echo of the feeling returns to him as he sits and gazes out of the window, his thoughts carried adrift on the tide of the voice of the old man lying in the bed. A child's face appeared over the top of the wall, a child's grinning face. The eyes met Adrian's own. A moment later the face disappeared. Then came the sound of laughter and a memory of the dream rose up. The feeling of falling, a surge in his stomach, the glee that comes from an innocent physical pleasure. He turns to where the old man lies, his arms above the cotton sheet, pressed against the length of his body. The old man has stopped speaking and is watching

him. His eyes, surrounded by curtains of ashy skin, are small, dark and liquid bright.

Adrian is silent a few seconds longer; he hopes his lapse will appear deliberate, a moment of contemplation.

‘Shall I come by tomorrow?’

The old man inclines his head and continues to watch him.

Adrian, who might be used to such things, feels discomfited. Reflexively he continues, ‘Is there anything you want? Books? Newspapers? I’ll arrange it for you.’

‘Thank you. I have everything.’ The voice is hoarse. The words accompanied by a slight smile, a tightening of the facial muscles, a stretching of the lips, the impression more of pain than pleasure.

‘Very well, then.’

Midday. Adrian rises, gathers his briefcase and jacket and steps into the shaded corridor, where the air is cooler by a degree or two. He leans against the wall. The building has no air conditioning except in the ICU ward, and even there it seems to battle unequally against the burning outside air, which seeps through every fissure in the brickwork. He breathes deeply, counts to three, and walks down the corridor into the daylight.

He crosses the quadrangle towards his office, sun beating squarely down upon the crown of his head. The quadrangle is no more than a patch of yellowed grass, divided into triangles by a pair of crossing paths. Each triangle is hemmed with concrete and contains a single concrete bench. Never has Adrian seen anybody sitting there. Whoever designed the place must have imagined the occupants of the building relaxing or eating their lunch here. But the sun makes it impossible.

His office he sets the briefcase squarely upon the