



Lee Carroll

Black Swan Rising



You can't see them, but they are watching you.
Some are there to protect you, others to destroy . . .

About the Book

**Jeweller Gareth James isn't the same as everyone else.
She just doesn't know it yet.**

With her fair share of problems - money (lack of), an elderly father, a struggling business - Gareth should be just like any other young, single New Yorker. If only it was that simple ...

It began with the old silver box that had been soldered shut. All Gareth had to do was open it. A favour for the frail owner of the antiques shop. Who wouldn't help?

Only then things start to change. Gareth doesn't notice at first, the shifts are barely perceptible. But the city is beginning to reveal a darker, long-hidden side. Figures, shadows, flit in and out of her vision. She finds herself drawn to the mysterious Will Hughes. He's a stranger and yet Gareth feels she has known him for an eternity.

And whatever escaped the box has no intention of going back in ...

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Lee Carroll



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For our mothers, Elinor and Marge

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The Silver Box

I'd never been in the antiques store before.

That was the first strange circumstance. I knew the Village like the back of my hand. I grew up in a town house in the West Village, which I'd just learned was so heavily mortgaged that even if my father and I sold it we would still be under a mountain of debt. It was that news – along with a litany of dire economic circumstances – that had left me so shocked and disoriented that I'd walked back from the lawyer's office in lower Manhattan in a daze. I hadn't even noticed the light rain that had begun to fall or the fog rolling in from the Hudson River.

Only when a sudden violent deluge forced me to duck into a doorway did I realize I was lost. Looking out through a curtain of rain, I saw I was on a narrow cobblestone street. I was too far from either corner to see a street sign through the heavy mist. Somewhere in the West Village or Tribeca, maybe? Had I crossed Canal Street? This part of town had changed so much, become so much trendier, in recent years that it all looked different. I must be near the river, though. The wind was blowing from the south carrying with it the smell of the Hudson and, from beyond the bay, the deep Atlantic. On chill autumn days like this, with low-lying clouds obscuring the tops of buildings and fog softening the edges of brick and granite, I liked to imagine myself in an older Manhattan – a Dutch seaport where traders and merchants came from the Old World to make their fortunes – not the hub of the financial world on the edge of economic collapse.

I shivered – I was soaked to the skin – and turned toward the door to see if I could find an address. I found, instead, a tall, wild-eyed woman staring back at me, her long black hair hanging limply in front of her pale face like a vengeful ghost out of a Japanese horror film. It was my own reflection. I was pretty sure that when I left my house this morning I was a reasonably attractive twenty-six-year-old woman, but this is what bad news and rain had done to me. I tucked my hair behind my ears and leaned down to look for an address, but the gilt letters on the door had been worn away long ago, leaving a sprinkling of gold dust like a magician's veil and a few scattered letters. The only intact word was *mist*. Probably the tail end of *chemist*. It wasn't a chemist's anymore, though. It was an antiques store, that much was clear from the contents of the window – Georgian silver, sapphire and diamond rings, gold pocket watches – all beautiful, but a bit too precious for my taste. Peering through the glass door, I saw that the shop itself looked like a tiny jewel box, the walls paneled in dark wood, the sparkling glass cases lined with garnet-colored velvet, a curtain of wine-colored damask hanging behind a polished mahogany counter carved in sinuous art-nouveau curves. The white-haired man who sat behind the counter looked as if he had been set there as carefully as a pearl in an onyx brooch. He was examining something through a watchmaker's loupe, but then he looked up – one eye grotesquely magnified by the lens – and saw me standing in the doorway. He reached under the counter and pressed a button to ring me in.

I can ask for directions to the closest subway station, I thought as I opened the door. I wouldn't be so rude as to do it right away, though. I hated when tourists popped their heads into our art gallery to ask for directions. I'd look around first, although I doubted the shop carried the signet rings I used for my molds and I hardly ever shopped for myself anymore – and it didn't look as if I'd be doing so in

the near future. I wore on my right ring finger the silver signet ring my mother had given me for my sixteenth birthday. Engraved in the silver was a swan, its neck arched and wings spread out as if about to take flight – or in heraldry terms, *a swan rising*. Encircling the swan, reversed so that they would appear correct when pressed into wax, were the words *Rara avis in terris, nigroque simillima cygno*.

“A rare bird on earth, very much like a black swan,” my mother had translated for me. “That’s what you are, Gareth, a rare bird. Unique. Don’t ever let anyone make you think you have to be the same as everyone else.”

Someone had rubbed his finger over the words so often they could barely be read, and fine cracks ran through the design, but when I had pressed the ring into hot wax, the image and words were remarkably clear. My mother, who had worked as an apprentice at Asprey’s in London, had shown me how to make a mold from the wax print and cast a medallion from the imprint of the ring – the same medallion I still wore today, and every day. So many people asked about the medallion that I had gone out looking for more signet rings and made more medallions, which I had sold to students and teachers at my high school and to clients at the gallery. I’d made enough to put myself through a jewelry design program at FIT and to start a small company with a studio on the top floor of the town house. I called it Cygnet Designs after the Latin word for swan. It was doing pretty well four years later, but I didn’t make enough to repay the enormous debt my father had incurred.

How many of my customers will feel like they can afford to buy little trinkets like my medallions, I wondered as I entered the shop. How long will quaint little businesses like mine – or this one – survive if things really get bad?

If the proprietor of the shop was anxious about his present prospects of making a sale, he didn’t show it. He

continued to tinker with the watch he was fixing as I browsed the shelves. They held a strange assortment of wares. There were locket opened to show sepia-toned photographs under mottled glass, and brooches woven from the hair of the deceased. Many of the rings and brooches were adorned with urns, willow trees, and doves – all traditional symbols of mourning. One whole shelf contained nothing but brooches of painted eyes. I'd read about these in a jewelry history class. They were called lover's eye brooches, a Georgian style that had been made fashionable by the Prince of Wales when he commissioned his court miniaturist to paint just his mistress's eye so no one would guess her identity. I'd seen pictures of them in books and one or two in antiques shops, but it was disconcerting to see so many of the disembodied eyes in one place.

'Was there anything in particular you were looking for?'

The question was voiced so softly that for a moment I thought it was only in my head. I couldn't help responding, in my head, *A way out of my troubles, thank you very much.* But aloud I said, 'I'm always on the lookout for old signet rings. I use them in my jewelry designs.' I held up my necklace for the man to see. He held up his magnifying glass and leaned over the counter to get a better look.

The moment he saw the design he lowered the glass and looked up. His eyes were a curious shade of amber, all the more startling in a deeply bronzed face framed by snow-white hair and carefully trimmed goatee.

'Are you by any chance Garet James, the owner of Cygnet Designs?' he asked.

'Why, yes,' I said, pleased at the recognition. I'd gotten some good press, but I wasn't used to being 'recognized.' 'That's me. I'm surprised an antiques dealer would know it.'

'I like to keep abreast of modern times,' he said. When he smiled, a million fine lines spanned his deeply bronzed

skin. I had the notion that he had spent time at sea, squinting into sun and rain at the helm of a ship, but it was more likely he'd just played a few too many rounds on the golf course. 'I read the piece in *New York* magazine last week. I admire the way you make use of old materials to make something new. You're a real artist.'

'Just a craftsman,' I said quickly.

'You're being modest.'

'Not really. I know the difference.' I'd grown up among artists – painters and sculptors – and I knew what it meant to be a real artist, but I didn't have to tell this stranger all that – or that the last thing I wanted to be was an artist.

He narrowed his eyes. 'I've looked at your designs on your website. But I don't believe I've seen this particular design there.'

'No. This was the first medallion I made ... from this ring.' I held out my hand so he could see the signet ring. 'I've never reproduced it again.'

The jeweler took my hand in his and held it up to his loupe to see the ring better. His fingers were cold and powdery and he held my hand for what seemed like longer than was necessary. Maybe he was having trouble reading the quote.

'The words are backwards. It says, "A rare bird—"'

'I know the quote quite well,' he said, dropping my hand abruptly and looking up. 'In fact, I've seen this insignia before ... wait ... I'll show you.'

Before I could object, the jeweler rose from his stool. He was taller than I'd thought – and more robust. The long loose cardigan he was wearing had disguised his bulk while sitting, but when he stood he had quite a presence. He must have been close to my father's age – mideighties – but where my father had recently begun to look frail, this man looked powerful. Almost disconcertingly so, as if the cardigan and white hair were a disguise.

He excused himself and disappeared behind the maroon brocade curtain. I took another turn around the shop but there really wasn't much space to turn around in and wherever I stood those disembodied eyes seemed to follow me. I stared out the fogged window at the rain-slicked street instead. Why was I even waiting? I certainly had no intention of buying anything. Not after the news I'd received this morning.

My father's lawyer, Charles Chennery, had laid it all out for me in his blunt, Connecticut lockjaw. Five months ago my father had taken out a \$2.5 million home equity line of credit from a Wall Street firm against the \$4 million value of the Jane Street town house. He'd used it to buy several paintings – *steals*, he'd assured Charles – which had been appraised at \$5 million value for resale. But that was before the world financial and art markets had collapsed this autumn. Much of the artwork hadn't even sold at auction, and what had, sold for much less than what my father had anticipated. Now even well-collateralized loans were being called in prematurely. ('No one ever reads the fine print,' Chennery had somberly told me when I expressed surprise that investment banks could do that), and with the true value of the town house dropping every day, no creditor was likely to take chances. Indeed, the Wall Street firm was threatening to repossess the house and gallery in thirty days (*by January 11*, I mentally reminded myself) if we couldn't repay the loan. Chuck Chennery had outlined various ways of restructuring the loan, but none of the options had sounded even remotely feasible. If we restructured the debt, we'd have more time to repay it but at a significantly higher interest rate. We'd owe \$50,000 each month. Where would we get that kind of money in this market? And if we sold the gallery to repay the loan, what would we live on? And *where* would we live? The town house was our home as well as place of business. Just

thinking about it made me feel seasick. No wonder I had gotten lost walking here.

‘Yes, I was correct, the crest on this is nearly identical to the one on your ring and medallion.’ The shop owner’s voice broke into the ever-widening gyre of financial ruin spinning inside my head. ‘In fact, I believe it might be the *same* crest.’

I turned and looked at the object the jeweler had laid atop a blue velvet cloth on the glass counter. It was a shallow silver box about the length and width of my thirteen-inch MacBook, and so tarnished it was hard to make out the etched designs even when I moved closer to it. I was surprised the proprietor of such a fastidiously clean shop would allow the object to remain so tarnished. I peered at the design on the top of the box, looking for the crest he had spoken of, but the decoration on the lid was an abstract pattern of concentric ovals.

‘The crest is here,’ he said, pointing to the front of the box along its seam, to the place where there should have been a clasp. Instead of a clasp – or perhaps *over* the clasp – was a round lozenge of silver sealing the lid of the box to its base. Its edges were irregular and bulged around the perimeter, exactly like a pool of wax that has been stamped by a seal. It looked, in fact, a great deal like the medallions I made from wax seals. *And* it looked exactly like the seal on my ring: the same swan flexing its wings, the same Latin motto, even ... *could it be?*

I leaned closer to the box and the jeweler wordlessly handed me his magnifying loupe. I raised it to my right eye, startled by a tingle of electrical energy that ran along my eyebrow and cheekbone, as if the metal had picked up a charge from the jeweler. I bent down until the seal came into focus through the thick lens. Fine lines were impressed into the metal. I knew from experience that they came from cracks in the seal that made the image. I looked back at the

ring on my finger and then back to the box. The lines were identical.

'That's amazing.' I straightened up, the loupe still in my right eye, to look at the jeweler. The old man wavered in my vision, the edges around him blurring and streaking like sunflares. A cloud of shimmering lights, like a swarm of fireflies let loose in the shop, hovered above his head. I put down the loupe and closed my eyes to clear my vision.

'Sorry,' I said, 'I get—'

'Scintillations? Metamorphopsia?' the jeweler asked, naming two of the symptoms of an ocular migraine, a condition I had suffered from since my teens.

'Exactly. You must be a fellow sufferer.'

'Many of us are,' he said enigmatically.

What did he mean by *us*? The man was definitely a bit strange. I should ask for directions and get out of here. I certainly had no intention of buying the box. Not that I didn't want to. I felt, in fact, as if the box *should* belong to me. What were the chances of coming across an object that had been made with the very same ring my mother had given me? And on this day of all days when everything else in my life seemed so bleak? But that was exactly the reason why I couldn't even think of buying such an inessential item – it would be frivolous and foolish in such dire economic circumstances. Still ... I could imagine polishing the silver until it shone. ... I placed the tip of my finger on the surface of the box, imagining the whirling pattern released from its carapace of tarnish ... and was startled to see the finely etched lines glow blue. I leaned closer and watched in amazement as the incandescent lines rippled, swayed, and spread out from my fingertip, as if the box were made of water instead of silver and my touch had been the cast stone that disturbed its surface.

I moved my finger away and the lines stilled and turned dull again. I looked up and saw that the jeweler was staring at the box. Slowly he lifted his eyes up. They seemed to be

glowing with the same incandescent light that I had seen in the box a moment ago. His look was so intense I was afraid I had done something wrong. Damaged the box, perhaps. But instead of taking the box away he pushed it toward me. 'I have a proposition for you,' he said.

'What?' I asked, alarmed at the wording of his request.

'I'd like to make a trade.' He fluttered his hands between the seal on the box and my ring. They were trembling. When I'd entered the shop his hands had held the delicate tools of the watchmaker without a tremor, but now his hands quivered midair like butterfly wings.

'I'm sorry,' I said, afraid of agitating the man further. 'I don't understand. I don't really have anything to trade—'

'A trade for your services.' He clasped his hands together and forced his lips into a polite smile.

'What services?' I was suddenly aware of how isolated we were, alone in this little shop on a deserted street, the front door locked, the heavy rain like a curtain of silver chain mail separating us from the rest of the world. Was the man crazy? A hectic gleam was in his eyes and he was wringing his hands as if he were afraid they would fly away of their own volition.

'Your soldering services. I've seen what fine work you do with Cygnet Designs ... and you do metal sculpture as well, don't you? I believe you had a show last year in Chelsea. ... I've been looking for someone just like you for this job. It's quite delicate, you see ...' He released his hands and gestured toward the seam of the box. I noticed two things. He didn't touch the box and his fingernails were the same shade of yellow as his eyes. 'The box has been sealed all the way around.'

I looked down at the box and saw what he meant. Along the seam between the lid and the base was a thin line of metal, which, unlike the silver of the box, was untarnished. It gleamed like molten mercury. Someone had welded the box shut, then stamped the seal on it as if the box were a

letter that should only be opened by the intended recipient. And *I* was the one with the matching seal.

‘That’s strange.’

‘Yes, and rather inconvenient. I can’t very well sell a box that’s been sealed. If you open the box, I’ll let you have the seal and pay you a thousand dollars.’

‘That seems an awful lot ...’

‘Not for such a delicate job. It’s worth it to me to have someone with your skill do the job ... and besides, I believe it was fate that brought you in here today, and who are we to disregard the chances fate puts in our way?’

Who, indeed? After the dire financial revelations of the morning why not accept the one gift fate seemed willing to give me today? A thousand dollars wasn’t going to solve my financial problems, but could I really afford to turn down any extra income at all?

‘Okay,’ I said, holding out my hands for the box. ‘You’ve got a deal. I’ll open the box this evening and return it to you tomorrow morning.’

The jeweler picked up the box cradled in the blue velvet cloth, which I saw now was a jewelry sack. As he held it out to me, I heard something move inside, a rustling sound like leaves in autumn stirred by the wind.

‘Oh, and I’d like to have the papers that are inside it, as well,’ he said as I took the box. It was heavier than I expected. I looked down at it and saw the lines move once again. *It must be a trick of the design – a trompe l’oeil.* But instead of spreading outward, this time the lines coiled, crested and rolled like the waves of the ocean pulled by the force of the moon. For a moment the room was full of the brackish breath of low tide. I shook myself to shed the illusion and then, before he could change his mind about giving me the commission – or I could change my mind about taking it – I slipped the box into the velvet sack and then into my capacious messenger bag – my Mary Poppins

bag, my friend Becky always called it – thanked the jeweler, and went out into the rain.

The moment my foot hit the sidewalk a taxi appeared, its vacancy light gleaming through the mist and rain like a lighthouse beacon. Forgetting my vows to economize, I hailed the cab and sank gratefully into the backseat. I gave the driver my home address and closed my eyes to ward off any more of the ocular phenomena that came with my migraines. It was only when the taxi pulled up in front of the town house that I realized I hadn't gotten the name or address of the jeweler – or even noticed what street the shop was on. I had no idea how I would return the box after I opened it.

A Snowy Field in France

Although the gallery was closed Maia, the receptionist, was still there. Oddly, she seemed to be working longer and more energetic hours now that we could only afford to directly pay her three days a week. The 'consultant' status she'd been offered - with a small percentage of each sale in lieu of two days' salary - seemed to be much more to her liking even though we'd made no secret of the recession's risk to the gallery's survival.

'I wanted you to know that the Pissarros came back from Sotheby's,' she said as she slipped into a dove-gray brocade coat that looked as though it could have been worn by a Restoration courtier - only presumably not with a paisley velvet miniskirt and UGG boots. 'Mr. James took them into the back office, but I'm not sure he's had a chance to put them into the safe ... Mr. Reese came by around the same time.'

'With a bottle of Stolichnaya, no doubt,' I replied. Zach Reese was one of my father's oldest and best friends, an abstract artist whose paintings had sold well in the early eighties. They still sold well, only Zach didn't actually get around to painting any these days. He preferred to sit in the back room of his friend's gallery and relive the glory days of Basquiat and David Hockney. 'What was the occasion this time?' I asked.

'A welcome-home party for the Pissarros,' Maia said, rolling her eyes. 'It's too bad they didn't sell,' she added. 'But you know what they say about snow scenes ...'

'They don't sell in a recession. Speaking of which, any traffic?'

'Just a couple of Long Island matrons killing time after the Marc Jacobs sale. They spent the whole time comparing their new economies: bribing their colorist to come to their house at a fraction of the salon cost and limiting their daughters to one Marc Jacobs bag apiece.'

'Wow, things really *are* tough all over!' I forced myself to laugh even though the idea of Long Island matrons cutting back made me slightly ill. I did a brisk business in monogrammed pendants during the holidays and for sweet sixteens, confirmations, and bat mitzvahs yearlong. 'I'll make sure the Pissarros get locked up. Thanks for waiting for me.'

'No problem. I'm going to a show at the Knitting Factory anyway and I had some time to kill. Have a good weekend.'

I followed Maia to the front door and double-locked it behind her. Next I dimmed the lights and set the security system on 'Night,' activating the motion detectors. Then I let myself into the narrow corridor that opened onto the town-house stairwell and led to the back office. As I locked the door to the gallery behind me, I could hear Zach Reese's raucous laughter.

'... and then he said, "You pissed on it, you bought it," and handed him the bill.' It was an old story from Zach's early days at the Warhol Factory and one Zach pulled out to entertain Roman in particularly bad times. Usually it made my father roar, but this evening the only sound coming from the back office was Zach Reese's broad Midwestern guffaw.

My father looked up as I entered the office and I saw from the strain in his eyes that he'd been waiting for me. *He hasn't been eating well*, I thought, noting the sunken caverns under his cheekbones and the hectic gleam in his dark eyes, *or sleeping well*. I'd never minded having older parents - Roman was fifty-eight when I was born; my

mother was forty-five – because Roman was so vital and my mother ... well, she hadn't looked a day over thirty until her death at sixty-one. The town house had always been filled with artists and writers whom my mother had nurtured and entertained. But since my mother had died ten years ago in a car accident, I had become more aware of my father's health. Most of Roman's own family had died in Poland in the war, and my mother had been estranged from her relatives in France since the war as well. Roman was all the family I had in the world. I was sorry now for making him wait all afternoon. I should have come back from the meeting right away instead of wandering aimlessly around the city – browsing in antiques shops and talking to eccentric jewelers while Roman waited to hear how bad the news was.

'Hail the returning hero!' Zach Reese lifted a shot glass brimming with clear liquid that shivered in his trembling hands. 'We were afraid you'd been swallowed up by the gods of mammon. Sacrificed on an altar in Trinity Church to the Succubus of Greed and Subprime Mortgages.'

'You were gone so long,' Roman said with a tense smile. He passed a gnarled hand over his bald scalp, a gesture I'd come to recognize as a sign of stress. 'We thought the bank might be holding you as collateral on the loan.'

'If only I were that valuable,' I said, waving away Zach's offer of a drink and moving to the stove to put the kettle on. The back office – as opposed to the front office where we saw clients – was the old kitchen of the town house. Its cabinets held files and office supplies instead of dishes and plates now, and the pantry had been converted into a fireproof, steel-lined safe with a state-of-the-art lock and alarm system. I noticed that the safe door was open and the Pissarro snow scenes, unpacked from their crates, were propped up on two kitchen chairs. They were positioned so that they blocked the windows and French doors that let out onto the back garden, replacing the view of rainy

twilight Manhattan with crystalline expanses of snowcovered fields. *Why didn't snow scenes sell in a recession?* I'd buy the Pissarros for myself if I had the money. I'd step into that serene expanse of mauve-tinted snow right now if I could.

The whistle of the teakettle snapped me out of an oft-cherished childhood fantasy of being able to step into a favorite painting. I'd spent a large part of my childhood daydreaming myself into fields of van Gogh sunflowers and tidy Dutch street scenes. I spooned black Russian tea into a teapot and poured in the hot water. I brought the pot to the table, folding a striped-blue-and-white tea cloth under it, and two cups.

'So, how bad is it?' Roman asked as I poured his tea and handed him a cup.

'We'll talk later,' I said, sliding my eyes toward Zach.

'Uh-oh, I can see I'm in the way of a family confab. I'd better get going. One of my students has an opening I thought I'd check out.' Zach lurched unsteadily to his feet, six feet two inches of rangy Swedish farm stock teetering in paint-stained Doc Martens. *Even though he hasn't finished a painting in twenty years his clothes are always covered in paint*, I thought as I positioned myself in between him and the Pissarros. I wasn't sure he could even hold a paintbrush steady with the tremor that was always in his hands.

'Leave those college girls alone, Zach,' I said, tilting my head to receive an avuncular kiss on the cheek. 'It's not fair to the college boys.'

'Later, Jashemski,' he called to my father, using the name my father had changed when he moved to this country. I led Zach down the corridor to the front door and locked it behind him. When I got back to the kitchen, my father was sipping his tea. The Pissarros were gone and the safe door was closed but he was still staring at the spot where they had been.

‘Last year they would have sold for six million each,’ he said. ‘Even after the ‘87 crash we still moved inventory.’

‘I have a feeling things may be different from ‘87, Dad.’ I sat down and wrapped my hands around my tea mug, but I might as well have been in that snowy field in France for how little the warmth penetrated the chill I felt deep down in my bones.

* * *

Two hours later I went upstairs, exhausted from keeping up a false front of optimism. I’d outlined the plan of restructuring the loan that Chuck Chennery had offered as our last resort. My father had seemed to accept it, but even he must have seen that if the economy continued to worsen we didn’t have a chance in hell of ever getting out of debt. Still he’d preserved the optimism of an inveterate gambler throughout our talk.

‘Something will turn up!’ he’d shouted after me as I left him at the door to his apartment on the second floor.

By the time I reached my third-floor studio I felt as if my whole body had been cast in metal. I slipped the strap of the messenger bag over my head, dropped it gratefully onto the hardwood floor ... and heard a heavy clunk.

The silver box. I’d forgotten all about it. I’d meant to show it to my father, but there’d been too many monetary details to go over. He had traded in decorative objects a little after World War II and could possibly have dated it. I certainly couldn’t.

I lifted the box, still in its velvet sack, out of my bag and carried it over to my worktable, which stood at the far end of the room near the floor-to-ceiling windows under the slanted skylight that faced the garden. In the daytime the light poured in through the south-facing windows, making it the ideal workspace. An old secretary desk fit into a small alcove to the right of the table; on the left a tall metal

bookcase held my jewelry-making supplies and the scrap metal I collected for my metal sculptures. One of those sculptures, a six-foot-long dragon crafted of junk metal and chain links, hung from a hook in the ceiling. In the daytime his red headlight eyes caught the sun and gleamed mischievously, but tonight he cast a looming shadow against the rain-sparkled windows that made me feel vaguely uneasy.

I switched on the high-intensity work lamps on either side of the table. The strong light immediately picked up what I'd missed in the shop – a pattern of silver and gold shapes stitched into the blue velvet – circles, triangles, and crescent moons embellished with curves and squiggles. The shapes looked vaguely familiar.

I turned to my desk, flipped open my laptop, and hit the power key. While waiting for the screen to come to life I slid the box out of the velvet sack and brushed my fingers over the finely etched pattern of concentric ovals. The high-intensity studio lamps picked up a bluish cast in the lines – a delicate inlay of enamel, perhaps. I'd have to be careful not to damage it while opening the box.

I turned from the box to the laptop, placed my fingers on the touch pad ... and recoiled as sparks flew off my fingertips. The screen flickered and the laptop let out a low shriek that sounded like a Siamese cat in heat.

Damn! I shook my hand in the air and watched the computer screen reset to my home page. I approached the machine again warily, gingerly touching the keyboard. There was no shock this time. I typed in Symbols.com and entered the parameters for the signs on the cloth – single-axis, symmetric, open, both straight and soft shapes, crossing lines – then hit SEARCH SIGNS. An array of symbols appeared. I clicked on one that matched one of the signs on the cloth – an upside-down half circle topped with a vertical straight line that was crossed by two horizontal lines – and got this description: 'One of the signs for amalgam used in

alchemy and early chemistry. Amalgams are alloys made by combining mercury with other metals, preferably silver.'

Of course. I'd seen the symbol in one of my metallurgy classes. I typed in *alchemy* on Google and then clicked on the Wikipedia page. There I read that *alchemy* was derived from an Arabic word meaning the 'art of transformation,' that the word *chemist* came from it, and that historically it was best known as the pursuit of transforming metals into gold. I scrolled through a list of famous alchemists, then clicked on a link to a list of alchemical symbols. Looking back and forth between the screen and the cloth, I identified the symbols for silver, gold, copper, and lead, several of the planets, seasons, and the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Was the white-haired jeweler a closet alchemist then? I wouldn't be too surprised. The jewelry business was full of eccentrics and romantics. I'd met more than a few in my classes at FIT - professors and students - who were intrigued by the ancient mystic study of natural elements. Its devotees were fond of pointing out that some of its processes were still used in modern metallurgy. And who in these times wouldn't find appealing a system that professed to know the secret of turning lead into gold?

But unless I developed that skill soon, I'd need every penny I could bring in. I'd promised the jeweler to deliver the opened box tomorrow. Hopefully he'd get in touch when he realized he hadn't given me his contact information. And if not, I'd just have to comb the West Village and Tribeca until I found the store. In the meantime, I might as well get the job done.

I went into my bedroom - a tiny room tucked under the sharply sloping roof - and quickly changed out of the skirt and blouse I'd worn to the lawyer's office into old jeans, a sweatshirt, and thick leather boots. I'd learned early on in my jewelry and welding classes that a stray spark could ruin a favorite shirt and burn through delicate fabrics to

the skin. My soldering clothes were dotted with burn holes and smelled like gas and metal and ash. I felt instantly more like myself in them.

I scraped my hair back into a ponytail, went into the studio, and switched on the radio, which was always set to WROX, the alternative-rock station I liked to listen to when I worked. The night DJ's silky voice – her show was called *The Night Flight with Ariel Earhart* – always relaxed me. I smiled as a song by London Dispersion Force came on. My two best friends were in the band and I was happy they were getting the airtime. This was a new song, called 'Troubadour': 'The troubadours wrote songs to salve heartbreak,' the lead singer Fiona sang, 'to let their loves know all their endless pain.' I set up my soldering torch while swaying to the tune, feeling a calm settle over me that I hadn't felt all day. *Thank God for work*, I thought, pulling on heavy gloves and drawing the box toward me. *Now how the hell am I going to open this thing without damaging it?*

I reexamined the seam of metal that sealed the box. Since the edges of the box were unharmed, I had to assume that the metal of the seam was softer than the silver of the box – otherwise, the silver would have melted when the box was sealed. The same went for the seal that had been placed over the clasp. So if I could heat the sealant up, I should be able to slide a blade along the seam and under the seal. I picked out a steel blade and the finest nozzle for the soldering torch and adjusted the levels of acetylene and oxygen. When I had everything in place, I lowered a visor over my eyes and aimed the torch at the metal seam. At first there was no discernible change. If the box seal were composed of lead, it should have begun to melt already. It must be some other compound. I adjusted the level of the flame.

There was still no change.

'Come on,' I whispered to the metal, my breath steaming my visor. 'Don't be a bitch.'

As if responding to my voice, the metal seam beneath the torch point silkened and gleamed like a bright ribbon. It was beginning to melt.

'There's a good girl,' I cooed. I ran the torch along the seam of the box until the metal seal began to bubble. With my other hand I inserted the steel blade in between the lid and the base and ran it all the way around the three sides of the box and then underneath the round insignia. The metal around the seal began to glow, then the whole lozenge glowed white - all except for the figure of the rearing swan in the center. It remained black against the glowing white, like the silhouette of a black swan rising out of a shimmering sunlit pool. For a moment, I could have sworn I heard the sound of wings beating the air, then something popped and the white light enveloped and blinded me.

It was a light I could almost *feel*. An energy that made my bones vibrate, my blood tingle, and every hair on my body stand on end. It was like jumping into an ice-cold lake on a summer day or stepping into a hot bath full of fizzing bath salts or ... no, it was like *nothing* I had ever felt before. It was like being truly alive for the first time. I knew instantly that if I lived through it I would spend the rest of my life trying to duplicate the sensation.

When the light faded, I looked down at my arms and legs almost expecting to see burnt stubs, but nothing was even singed.

You're okay, you're okay, I said over and over as I patted myself down. I heard the ghost of my mother's voice in the words. It's what she said when I fell down or banged my head on something. *You're okay*, I repeated, trying to slow my racing heart. Nothing was hurt, not even ... I looked at the box and my heart shuddered to a halt.

It was open. A plume of blue smoke rose up from inside it, drifted toward the ceiling, and coiled around the metal dragon like a second airborne serpent. Mixed in with the smoke were flakes of soot fluttering in the air. But what stopped my heart was what I saw *inside* the box on the underside of the lid. Blue shapes glowed against the molten white of the silver, shapes that moved like icons scrolling across a computer screen.

I stepped closer and reached out a trembling gloved hand to touch the inside of the lid. A blue crescent moon morphed into a circle doubly bisected with two crossed lines and then changed into a triangle with a dot in its center. An upside-down eye turned into the letter Z, then the number 7, then into something that looked like a paramecium.

I closed my eyes, desperately hoping that when I opened them the illusion would be gone. When I had developed the symptoms of ocular migraines at sixteen, I thought at first that I was going crazy. Growing up in a house frequented by artists, I couldn't help hearing about those who had *gone over the edge*. Living on that edge had seemed to be both the gift and the burden of being an artist. And wasn't my mother always telling me how talented I was? Did that mean that I, too, had the potential of slipping over the edge of the rational world into madness? It had been a colossal relief when the eye doctor told me that the flashes of light, jagged-edged blind spots, and blurry coronas were normal. But what if he'd been wrong? What if those symptoms were only the beginning and now I really was going crazy?

I opened my eyes. The symbols were gone. The box had turned from white back to silver. *Polished* silver. There wasn't a trace of tarnish on it. *Okay, I thought, the lid had been treated with some kind of chemical. The symbols were scratched into each layer so that they appeared as the box heated and then cooled - the way lemon juice becomes visible on paper when held to a flame.* Feeling a little better

at the explanation, I took off my visor and gloves and touched the metal. It was slightly warm, but not too hot to touch. I lifted it and looked inside.

The box was empty.

I looked again at the flakes floating down through the air. They weren't soot, as I had first thought, they were charred scraps of paper. The papers that had been in the box had ignited when it flew open (*How had it opened?*). One fragment, which had landed by the side of the box, contained an ornate archaic script that I couldn't begin to read right now with my vision this blurred and my hands still shaking so hard. The only part I could make out was the signature - *Will Hughes*, writ large with an elaborate flourish just under the wax seal imprint of the swan insignia. The rest of whatever papers had been in the box had been reduced to confetti, feathery flakes in pale shades of white and mauve, turning my worktable into that snowy field in France Pissarro had painted over a century ago.

Shadowmen

After I cleaned up the paper confetti and stored it away in the box so I could show the jeweler tomorrow what had become of its contents, I closed the lid and left it on the worktable. I considered putting it in the safe where I kept my gold and silver supplies, but the whole house was alarmed. There was no reason to put it away unless my real motive was to keep me safe from *it* ... and that was just silly.

I took the one large scrap of paper and the silver seal that I had pried off the box with me into my bedroom though, because I wanted to look at them again when my vision cleared. I put them on my night table while I got undressed. The visual hallucinations were dissipating and I hadn't burned myself, I thought as I crawled under the covers and wrapped my arms around myself to stop my shivering. That strange sensation I'd felt when the light flashed ... well, that was some sort of electrical charge - a shock, nothing more. And the tremors I felt now were from fatigue. It had been a long day. Before I turned off the bedside lamp, though, I took off the medallion I had made when I was sixteen (I usually slept with it on) and picked up the seal that had come off the box so that I could look at them side by side. Yes, they were almost identical, but there must have been many rings made with this seal. It didn't *mean* anything. It *was* nice to have found a token that reminded me of my mother. Almost like a message from her. I fell asleep with the seal in my hand, my fingers tracing the shape of the swan beating its wings.