A Whispered Name

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Extract

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A novel by

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Part One

Chapter One

The Prior, in his wisdom, had made Anselm the beekeeper of Larkwood. As with many decisions made by Authority, the architecture of the 'Why?' remained obscure. Anselm's relationship with bees had never got past the sting issue. He'd made that clear when the Prior first raised the matter. But neither zeal nor aversion for a pending task had ever carried much weight for the Prior – his asking what you thought was simply another factor, as much a warning as an inquiry. 'The hives of Larkwood have been silent for too long,' he'd said, summoning the poetry of the Gilbertines. By that route, Anselm attended a beginner's course in Martlesham on apiculture; he bought the simplest how-to manual he could find (as he'd done with law in former times); and he duly took up the title and craft that had passed from Larkwood's life with the demise of Brother Peter who had loathed the taste of honey.

The hives were not well situated, according to Chapter One of the manual. But the choice of location had nothing to do with maximising productivity. Charm had been the deciding factor. Larkwood's cemetery was situated – literally – in a grove of aspens. At the eastern corner the trees thickened, rising on a gentle incline to a clearing. Here, among ferns, nettles and wild flowers, eight hives had been arranged in a circle. To each of these Anselm had given the name of a saint. For his own comfort, he'd secured a spot for himself, dumping an old pew between Thérèse de Lisieux and Augustine of Hippo. Memorising who was where among the rest had not been an easy task. Anselm only succeeded after Sylvester, the Gatekeeper, gave him a Christmas present after midnight mass: oblong labels cut from a worn leather apron. Upon these, in India ink, the old watchman had inscribed a name in glorious copperplate. Within the hour they'd baptised the hives.

It was summer and the time of harvest was fast approaching. The sun, low upon the Suffolk dales, cast long, lazy shadows. Now and again a breath of wind sent the aspens into a tinkling shiver. Anselm heard nothing. He sat legs crossed on his pew reading Chapter Seven on how to remove the main honey crop. Turning a page, he glanced up and saw a woman in a long black coat threading her way between the trees and white monastic crosses. She was in her fifties. Auburn hair, drawn into a bunch, fell behind her shoulders, giving contrast to her pale face. At intervals she paused to read an inscription like someone checking an address. Anselm's attention crept on, behind her . . . to a large, hunched figure with a rugged white beard. An old man had come to a sudden halt at the edge of the copse, leaving his escort to advance as though he dared not enter this strange place of graves. His capped head slowly fell and moments later his shoulders began to shake, like the leaves around him. His hands, one flat on top of the other, rested upon the bulb of a crooked stick. Anselm's eyes flicked back to the woman. She, too, had come to a halt; she, too, had lowered her gaze. Evidently, she'd found what she was looking for. Sunlight slipped through the branches, settling a reddish mist upon her head. Anselm laid his book on the pew and took off his glasses. Gingerly, the skin on his back prickling, he left the safety of the hives.

'Good afternoon,' he said, quietly. 'Can I help you?'

The woman raised her face and fixed Anselm with a look of unconcealed disappointment. Her features were cleanly drawn, with care lines around the eyes and mouth. A scattering of freckles patterned her nose and cheeks.

'Unfortunately, no,' she replied, a natural smile vanishing as she spoke. The Irish intonation was unmistakable, as was the hint of irony. 'The only person who could assist us lies buried here' – she arched a faint eyebrow – 'in quiet extraordinary peace.'

Anselm blinked at the cross between them. The paint was flaking and the work of roots had levered it to one side. A small plaque revealed the essential details of a monk's life: his name, birth, profession and death:

Father Herbert J Moore
1893 – 1925 – 1985

Anselm had first met Herbert at the outset of his own journey towards Larkwood. He'd stumbled upon the elderly monk in a remote part of the enclosure. There, sitting in a stranded car, Herbert had dropped some chance remarks about the monastic life that Anselm had never forgotten. They'd foamed in his mind like yeast. Upon joining the community Anselm had looked to him as friend and guide, though death was to take Herbert far too soon.

'We came here to see Father Moore,' resumed the woman. Delicate fingers reached for a necklace of shining black beads. 'I'd hoped against the odds that he might still be alive. I would so very much like to have met him . . . to have asked him so many questions.'

Her diction was exquisite. There was a fatigue around the mouth that would have looked like sorrow if it were not for the narrowed, unyielding eyes. Behind her, the old man had taken out a handkerchief and was dabbing his beard. A suit of tweed, too heavy for the season, blended naturally with the soft greens and blues of the landscape. It was like camouflage. He pulled down the nib of his wide cap, shuffling his bulk out of Anselm's line of vision.

'I knew him,' ventured Anselm, 'are you sure there isn't something I can say on his behalf?'

He was acutely aware of the gentleman who would not approach Herbert's grave. Though out of sight now, his distress had charged the air between the three of them.

'You knew him well?' The woman appraised Anselm with what seemed to be a last look of hope.

'Yes.' But not well enough, he thought. Not as much as I would have liked.

'Did you know that Father Moore had been an officer in the Northumberland Light Infantry during the First World War?'

Her eyes searched Anselm's face, knowing already the response.

'I'm afraid I didn't.'

She sighed, and her voice fell. 'Then you won't know that he was a member of a court martial that tried an Irish volunteer, Private Joseph Flanagan.'

Regretfully, Anselm shook his head.

'And that is the pity of it,' she said, 'no one does. Neither you,

nor anyone over there.' A tilt of the head brought Larkwood into the conversation, and Herbert's decades of close community living; the people who'd lived alongside him not knowing a part of his personal history.

Anselm was genuinely surprised to learn of Herbert's military career. He couldn't easily picture the man he'd known in uniform. He couldn't see him saluting or barking an order or holding a weapon of any kind. Herbert had been, if anything, a man wholly associated with peace and reconciliation. But the not knowing was hardly out of the ordinary. The Gilbertine value on silence tended to pare down both trivia and facts of substance. For this reason everyone was a surprise, at Larkwood. All it took was a loose question to prise out the most astounding personal details. What troubled Anselm, however, was the manifest importance of Herbert's past for this woman, or perhaps more particularly, the old man who'd blended into the trees. Without being able to justify his impression, Anselm sensed an ambience of blame; the suggestion of a wrong in which Herbert had played a part. He felt a sharp confusion in his spirit – to understand the aggrieved but also to defend the memory of a very special man.

'Was the court martial a matter of consequence?' Anselm blenched at the awkwardness of the question; but he could think of no other way to open up the central issue. And he sensed that the woman was ready to pull away, that this visit to Herbert's grave had run its course.

'For Joseph, I'd say so,' she replied, with her natural smile. 'The army sometimes shot a deserter.'

The old man cleared his throat. It was a gruff plea to leave in haste, to stop answering the monk's questions.

'This was no ordinary trial, Father,' she whispered with sudden feeling. 'It had a meaning, a special meaning among so much that was meaningless.' She fastened her disappointment on Herbert's cross. 'I'd hoped he would explain it to me . . . and bring an old man some peace before he died.'

Anselm fiddled with his belt, arranging the fall of his scapular. He was out of his depth, now, as much through ignorance as incomprehension. At such times he held his tongue.

'I must go,' she said, holding out her hand. 'Forgive me, I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Kate . . . Kate Seymour.'

She turned and stooped under a branch. All at once she slowed and said, over her shoulder, 'What does the middle date on the cross mean?'

'That's the year a man took his final vows.'

'I see,' she murmured, one arm resting on a branch. 'Over sixty years a monk and not a word to a soul.' Her voice was low and drained of colour. 'You know, Father, I get the impression this trial was almost as significant for him as it was for the man with his back to the wall. To keep quiet about something so important . . . well, it's almost a lie, wouldn't you say?'

Ms Seymour didn't elaborate. She tiptoed out of the shaded copse into a flush of sunlight leaving Anselm helpless, his arms swinging at his side, as though the activity might pump something sensible out of his mouth. Moments later he watched the two visitors on the track that led to a hotchpotch of red-tiled roofs huddling round a bell tower. They moved slowly, arm in arm, while the old man's stick rose and fell like a steady oar. They moved with the closeness of family.

Presently, Anselm was alone. Frowning, he went back to the hives and tried to enter the mysterious world of bees. He turned the pages of his manual, forcing himself to examine the funny diagrams and the bullet points in bold; but he kept seeing the judder in an old man's shoulders and the sunken head. There is nothing quite so painful to witness as the tears of the elderly, he thought. They accuse the natural order of things. Old age was a time for nodding by the fire, not hiding behind trees. Anselm tossed the book to one side, chewing his lower lip. He sensed again the vague atmosphere of wrong-doing; the hint of blame. Herbert had been one of the founding fathers of Larkwood, revered as much as loved – for his simplicity, as for the largeness of his heart. He was part of the Priory's ambience, a tonality that attracted believer and non-believer alike. The idea that someone could look on his grave and speak of a lie – in however abstract a fashion – was inconceivable. Inwardly, Anselm groaned. He sensed a movement beneath the trimmed lawn

of what was familiar and securely established in his understanding of things. 'Those moles are at it again,' he murmured. They turned up every so often, leaving little heaps of disappointment and excavations that couldn't be filled in. Herbert's face seemed to rise before him: fine bleach-white hair, meandering veins around the temples, hollowed cheeks, a mouth open as if ready to cry or laugh. The image dissolved. Soberly, Anselm eyed the labels on his hives. He liked to have his saints, he thought, without the stain of things he need not know.