



THE

# CARTOGRAPHERS

Author of *The Book of M*

# PENG SHEPHERD

A NOVEL

"Exquisitely written,  
brilliantly plotted,  
absolutely fantastic."  
—Brad Thor, #1 New York  
Times bestselling author

# The Cartographers

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*A Novel*

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Peng Shepherd

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



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## Author's Note

**W**e tend to think of maps as perfectly accurate—after all, that's the point of them. What good would a map that lied be? But in fact, many maps do just that. Unbeknownst to almost everyone who unfolds one and trusts it to take them to where they want to go, there's a longstanding secret practice among cartographers of hiding intentional errors—*phantom settlements*—in their works.

Most of the time, these intentional errors are so small and well disguised, they're never found. But every once in a while, a phantom settlement doesn't stay a phantom.

Sometimes, something magical happens.

*The Cartographers* is a work of fiction, but its inspiration is rooted in truth. This story is for anyone who's ever opened a map and gotten lost in it.

I  
**The Library**

## I

In the dim light of her desk's single bulb lamp, the map nearly glowed.

Fra Mauro, it was called. It had been created in 1450 A.D. by a Camaldolese monk of the same name, who had designed it in his small cartography studio in the Monastery of St. Michael, in that glittering, floating city of Venice. Fra Mauro had researched his map by interviewing merchants traveling through the area from afar, which allowed him to depict the known world of the time with far greater accuracy than those cartographers who had come before him. Even to this day, the Fra Mauro map was considered one of the finest pieces of medieval cartography in existence.

Gently, Nell traced her gaze over the painted gold circular frame, looking for blemishes, inconsistencies in color, errant lines. The Fra Mauro map was also unique in that it was drawn opposite to most other world maps—it oriented the south at the top of its design, rather than the north.

Simply put, it was nothing short of a masterpiece.

If she'd been at a workstation in the conservation lab of the New York Public Library, with the map carefully installed onto a drafting table and her personal assortment of custom restoration tools laid out beside her, she would have chosen her graphic knife edge to gently cut away a frayed edge of the vellum or faintly scrape back a layer of too-boldly restored ink. She would have delicately touched the leg of the repainted *T* in the *ANTARTICVS* of the map's lower right legend, to nick the most minuscule width away, so that it matched the original letter beneath it more perfectly.

Instead, she simply pressed print, and went to go retrieve another copy of the map from the clunky machine.

The Fra Mauro map—the *real* Fra Mauro map—was on permanent exhibit in the city of its creation, in Venice's Biblioteca Nazionale

Marciana. The diagrams before her were no more than a stack of cheap facsimiles.

What she was doing was not what she had trained her entire life to do: conservation and research on priceless, ancient pieces of art in a hermetically sealed museum laboratory. She was adding flourish—nonsense weathering marks and fading—to budget scans of those masterpieces at a cramped, sagging desk in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and then printing them out by the batch to be sold to casual enthusiasts to add a bit of academic flair to their decor.

Nell Young was not a scholar of cartography anymore. She was a design technician at CLASSIC MAPS AND ATLASES™, WE CAN MAKE ANY MAP!

Classic, as her boss called it for short, was the antithesis of conservation. Thousands upon thousands of reproductions of real ancient or rare works of art, mass printed onto modern, acid-free paper, then mass crinkled, or mass aged, or mass hand-decorated with anachronistic symbols, all able to be ordered with two-day shipping direct to a doorstep and hung in a living room that same afternoon.

It was also Nell's only paycheck.

It hadn't always been this way. Once, she'd been staring at a bright future ahead of her. She'd attended the best schools, successfully defended her Ph.D. dissertation, and landed an internship at none other than the awe-inspiring main branch of the New York Public Library, in its prestigious conservation department. She was on her way to someday matching, perhaps even surpassing, the illustrious reputation of her father, one of the NYPL's most celebrated scholars. People had even started to whisper about "the new Dr. Young" in the halls as she passed. Once, for a brief moment, she had been just a little bit famous in that tiny, overhead-fluorescent-lit, cluttered world of endless stacks and musty archive drawers.

Then the Junk Box Incident had happened.

Nell put her thumb on the right bottom corner of the Fra Mauro reproduction she'd just printed, to cover the small, unobtrusive logo. Seven letters in a faux-ancient font: *CLASSIC*. Every one of their products had the little word somewhere, to indicate that the map was indeed a known copy of the original and not attempting to pass itself off as the real thing. She didn't know how anyone could mistake an ancient work somehow printed onto matte-sheen finish poster paper for the real thing, but she ensured the logo was on every printout just the same. It was her only way of apologizing to the priceless originals.



“I don’t know how you get here so early with the trains like this,” a booming voice cried, preceding its owner. A moment later, Humphrey trudged around the corner into the office. “Do you just sleep here?”

“Obviously,” Nell shot back, without looking up. She could tell by the rustle of fabric that Humphrey was still in his coat, his face probably pink from the walk from the subway station in the crisp spring weather.

They were an artist’s perfect study of opposites. Nell was young, short even in heels, and in desperate need of some sun, topped off with a mop of mousy brown hair and tiny enough to completely disappear into an oversize cardigan, leaving only her glasses behind; and even though tall, bearded, warmly tanned Humphrey had to be in his sixties at least, everything was still huge about him—his voice, his build, his energy—and also his patience with her.

“So, what do you have for me today?” Humphrey was asking, leaning over Nell’s desk.

“The Fra Mauro,” she said. She spun it around and held it up by its corners. “I fixed the frame so the crackle will look perfectly accurate now, even under the matte finish and a layer of glass.”

Next to her mouse on the desk, her mobile phone lit up suddenly as a call came through. The glow caught her eye—*a job, perhaps?*—but she resisted looking in front of Humphrey just in case. That was always her first, most hopeful thought when she got a call at work. But she hadn’t applied for anything lately, not that she could remember, although after the first few hundred attempts, the applications all started to run together. The cartography field was small, and it always ended the same way. Once a potential employer realized who she was, and that none other than the elder Dr. Young himself had banished her from the industry all those years ago, she always stalled out at the next stage in the process.

“It’s good,” Humphrey nodded thoughtfully.

For a moment, Nell started to smile.

But then he said what he always did. “But we need it to look older.” He curled his meaty hands into claws as if to indicate—something. A crumpled pirate treasure map, or ancient sand running through his fingers, or trash. “Like much older. Gimme another hundred years, plus storm damage or something. I want it to look like it went on a dangerous voyage, then was smuggled to us in a sunken treasure chest.” He laughed. “You know?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Nell argued. Her phone lit up and buzzed again, a second call, but she continued to ignore it. “First of all, the Fra Mauro map was drawn on vellum, which lasts much longer than paper,

and second of all, it wasn't a pirate map. It was created by a monk in the personal offices of his monastery, and stored there for the entirety of its existence until it moved to the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, making it one of the best-preserved specimens we have from the fifteenth century—”

“Nell, Nell, *Nelllllll*.” Humphrey sighed over her, gesticulating dramatically. “Historical accuracy, due respect to the original work, the code of conservation, a cartographer’s honor. Spare me for once. It’s not even nine o’clock in the morning yet. This isn’t the Smithsonian. Our customers don’t want perfectly accurate reproductions. They want old, mysterious, antique-looking things.” He plopped the draft down on her desk, where she watched it halfway unfurl and come to a rest against her keyboard. He spread it out a little more, and caressed its minimally tarnished, historically accurate surface. “It’s more romantic that way.”

The phone screen went dark again, for the third or fourth time, and stayed that way at last. Whoever had been trying to reach her must have finally settled for voicemail.

Nell sighed, deflated. Humphrey was right, and she hated it.

“I get it,” she finally said.

“Look, I get it, too,” Humphrey replied, his voice gentler now. Even with her refusing to ever talk about the past, he’d been able to glean over the years just how passionate Nell had been about the work she used to do and the maps she used to curate. “I know this is not your dream career.”

“Humphrey, I’m sorry,” Nell started. Most of the time, Humphrey found their blue-collar boss versus uptight academic back-and-forth entertaining, but she knew she should be more grateful. After the Junk Box Incident, Humphrey was the only employer even just barely associated with the cartography industry that would take her in. Classic was hardly map work, but it was better than nothing at all. “Like you said, it’s not even nine A.M. —”

“Hey, all forgiven.” He rapped his knuckles on her desk, and then fished a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet. “How about some coffee? My treat. You want one of those fancy caramel-mocha-swirly-whipped-cappuccino things?”

Nell forced a smile at his generosity. She was his head design technician, but the office was small. She was also the head accountant. She knew how tight money was, and how badly the office was falling apart. “Just black with some cream.”

Humphrey smiled back and pressed the bill into her palm. “See you soon, then.”

“You are *insufferable*,” she laughed, reaching for her purse with her

other hand.

“Those stairs are insufferable!” he called after her over the slam of the office door.

Outside, the air was brisk and biting. Nell wrapped her cardigan tighter around her and set off, shivering. There was an artsy coffee shop across the street that would serve the kind of adjective-laden drink Humphrey had described, but she turned right and headed down the sidewalk for the bodega on the corner, where they bought their morning coffee most days. The owner was an old woman from Bangladesh, and Nell liked that no matter the weather or day, for as long as she’d known her, Farah always wore orange. There was at least some item of clothing on her that was bursting with that bright citrus hue. It made the whole shop warmer, somehow.

The bell on the door jangled sharply as she pushed her way in, and Farah—unfailingly, in orange—glanced up from her crossword puzzle and tipped her head. Nell made her way to the back of the bodega, where she poured two cups of coffee from the stainless-steel thermos, and then brought them to the counter.

““Something lines,”” Farah muttered, brow furrowed. She and Nell never chitchatted, just nodded at each other and occasionally traded puzzle hints, which made Nell like her even more. “Only three letters.”

“Try ‘ley,’” she replied as she held out Humphrey’s money.

“What?”

“Ley. L-E-Y.” *Ley lines*. She smiled. It was a mapmaking term.

The old woman studied the crossword, and then nodded briskly. It fit.

The cash register clicked, the drawer shot open, and Farah handed Nell her change. Nell grabbed a coffee with each hand and ducked into the cold morning again. She almost made it back to their building in one breath, but had to suffer one more lungful of biting air before she scrambled inside and up the stairs.

“Nell.” Humphrey’s voice echoed from the other side of the office as soon as she opened the door.

“I got the coffee,” she replied, but trailed off as she rounded the corner and saw the expression on his face.

“Did you take your phone with you?” he asked. He wasn’t in his office, but by her desk.

“No. What’s wrong?”

In response, his gaze slid over to where her phone sat, screen dark and silent.

“Someone’s been trying to reach you all morning. They just called the main line, in my room,” Humphrey finally said.

“Who was it?” she asked. “Humphrey. Who was it?”

He hesitated, but her warning glare forced him to continue. “You should check your messages,” he said. “Someone from the library needs to talk to you urgently.”

*The library.*

Nell went to her desk and set the coffees down, then gently picked up her mobile as if it were a small, not quite tame animal. Humphrey was still there, but was staring awkwardly at the pile of junk papers on the desk they used for dumping old mail instead of at her. Trying to give her support and privacy, but in fact just making everything more awkward. She wouldn’t have expected such a big, loud man to become so meek in a crisis. *Was this a crisis?* She knew she was stalling. Before she could think about it anymore, Nell swiped the screen to unlock the phone and poked the green icon to pull up her calls.

“Are you okay?” he finally asked.

“Yeah,” Nell said.

But she wasn’t. Not at all.

The one she’d missed, several times now, was from someone who wasn’t stored in her contacts anymore and so displayed only as a number rather than a name, but she still recognized it immediately. It was not a number she’d seen in almost a decade, since her unceremonious firing from the NYPL, and never expected to see again, because she’d sworn never to speak to him again for it.

But it was not her father who had made the call from his office phone.

*Nell, Swann’s voice was frantic and hushed after the beep. It startled her to hear him, after all this time. I’m sorry to call you like this after so long, but there’s been an emergency. Call me back as soon as you get this.*

As soon as the message ended, the phone rang again in her hand, startling her. This time it was the police.

**L**ess than an hour later, she’d gathered her things, assured Humphrey she’d text him if she needed anything, and scrambled through the morning rush hour subways to find herself standing in front of the main branch of the New York Public Library. It was a Tuesday, but the entrance was still teeming with visitors. Children on school trips to the city clamored up and down the stairs, teenagers flirted, and elderly regulars edged slowly forward, book bags and lists for the day’s research tucked under their elbows. Behind them, taxis honked as they jostled for space at the curb.

Somewhere, a busker was playing a fast, nervous violin.

Nell could hardly remember the last time she'd come to this part of town. How many years had her life been only her small, dingy apartment, endless subway rides, and the cramped offices of Classic? Everything on Fifth Avenue was three times brighter and louder, as if someone had turned up a dial on every surface.

Just before the towering wooden doors of the library, however, all sound fell away. As she passed between the thick marble pillars and beneath the arches that carved the entryway, Nell felt a familiar shiver of wonder. This had always been what she imagined when she'd dreamed of her future. Echoing hallways, vaulted ceilings, grand old academic buildings. Not rickety staircases, crammed cubicles, and the faint smell of mold.

The lobby was quietly bustling, seemingly full despite its vastness. As she pushed through the clusters of visitors, Nell caught a flash of a familiar face across the huge space, kind but sharp eyes scanning beneath a navy-blue hat. Henry Fong, one of the library's longest-serving security guards, was on shift today. He'd been with the NYPL almost as long as her father had.

She ducked her head on instinct—she was already inches from losing her nerve, and to be spotted by someone she knew before she could find Swann would make her turn and flee for certain—and edged through the milling crowd for the room at the end of the lobby's northern hallway, above which the words *The Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division* were carved in gold. Through there, she could reach the back offices, where Swann, and answers, would be.

A jolt of electricity went through her as she entered the Map Division. It was like resurfacing from a dark, cold lake into life. The air became warmer, the colors brighter, the sounds sharper. The reading tables waited, waxed wooden surfaces gleaming, and the shelves around the walls beckoned, bursting with relics. Sunlight, nearly blinding, streamed in through the huge windows. It took a moment for Nell to get ahold of herself.

It was so strange to be back again, after so many years. She had almost managed to block it out. To stop missing it so acutely. Every detail, every moment.

Just beyond the main reference desk, the unobtrusive side door marked Staff Only waited. She paused with her hand on the knob.

*Just do it*, she admonished herself. Her hand wavered. *Get it over with.*

Nell didn't really know what to prepare herself for, but the scene on the other side of the threshold was not it. She'd been bracing for chaos and

shouting, like the day of the Junk Box Incident, she realized as she waited awkwardly in the quiet, half in and half out of the door.

It wasn't just quiet, it was utterly silent, she thought. She'd never seen the back offices *this* deserted.

After a few seconds, the door started to slowly close on her before she snapped back to life and leapt clear.

"Hello?" she called softly.

"Oh," another voice answered. "Just a moment!" A librarian not much older than Nell poked her head out of the first office, surprised.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm trying to find Swann," Nell said. She didn't recognize the woman, which meant she must have been hired after Nell had left. "Do you know what's going on?" The police hadn't told her anything on the phone, just ordered her to come.

"There's been—" the woman paused. "Well, we don't quite know yet. But it looks bad."

"Ma'am?" Nell looked up to see a police officer appear out of the conference room partway down the hall, and his partner behind him. "Are you an employee here?"

The librarian was staring at Nell more intently now. "Oh my," she said. "You . . . you're Dr. Young's daughter, aren't you?"

"I am," Nell admitted. "Helen Young. Nell."

Her face darkened. "I'm so sorry, but all this"—she gestured to the stillness—"this is about Dr. Young."

Nell stared for what felt like an eternity, trying to discern the answer in the woman's face.

*What had he done now?*

Her father had always been an uncompromising, unstoppable force. It was what made him the best at what he did while also making him impossible to love. Had he attacked a colleague's work? Disagreed over the provenance of a new specimen? Quarreled with the board, even?

"Whose life did he ruin this time?" she finally managed.

"If you could come with me," the first officer replied.

From within the conference room, a familiar figure burst into the hall behind the other policeman. "Nell!"

"Swann!" she cried.

Her heart clenched. She had missed him! He'd been the director of the Map Division for decades, but he had been so much more than that to her, too. An uncle, a mentor, a friend. And he looked the same, even seven years later—tall, impossibly slender, wispy white hair—just like an actual swan. The sight of him brought tears to her eyes.



“Ma’am, please—” the officer near him started, but Swann had crossed the hall in three steps on his long legs and swept her up into a bony hug before she could move.

“I’m so, so sorry,” he said as he released her, his hands still on her shoulders. “I was hoping to pull you aside before you got here and tell you privately.”

The first officer beckoned, and they fell into step behind him, past the conference room, to where her father’s office waited. Nell tried to stay calm, but her heart was racing. She hadn’t set foot in that place since the day she’d run out, pathetically cliché cardboard box full of her things in hand, her life ruined, because of that man. And now not only did she have to go back in, but she didn’t know what waited there.

“Tell me now, then,” she whispered. “Fast.”

She could see that Swann wanted to say more than he was going to, to soften the blow of the news, but he knew her well and knew that she would just want it straight. She finally noticed, with a flutter of panic, just how red and puffy his eyes were, and how hoarse his voice seemed.

“I’m so sorry to say this,” Swann said shakily. “Your father passed away at his desk early this morning.”

*What?*

Nell blinked, not understanding at first.

“He’s—he’s dead, Nell.”

## II

A long time ago, the room in which Nell was now standing had been her favorite place in the whole city. The public areas of the library were breathtaking—she could not deny the almost otherworldly beauty of the rich wood-paneled walls, the gleaming chandeliers overhead, the old windows that loomed from floor to ceiling—but it was the simple, endless archives of the back offices of the Map Division that had secretly kept her heart. The library had been built in 1898, a year that had seemed impossibly long ago when Nell had learned the fact as a child, and contained tens of thousands of books and atlases, and almost half a *million* sheet maps, in its vast archives. If she had ever believed in magic, here would have been the place where she would have gone looking for it. Even now, it was hard not to imagine that there could be some secret tucked between the pages of an unassuming text, as she ran her hands over the back of her father’s leather office chair and breathed in the musty scent of ancient paper and wood. Every time he’d brought her with him to work in her youth, he’d sat her on its well-worn cushion and promised her in his deep, solemn voice that this office would be hers one day.

She had believed him.

“Heart attack,” the officer said, to draw her attention back. “Or stroke, maybe. It looks like he fell and hit his head on the way down.”

It was an open-and-shut case, they’d determined. Dr. Young had been alone—the security cameras in the Map Division didn’t turn on until the last employee in the department had clocked out, but they had already been running in the lobby since closing time the night before. The only reported movement was from the security guard on patrol, who had been the one to find him when he’d peeked in on his last loop around the library, sometime in the early hours of dawn.

“Age catches up to us all, unfortunately,” the officer concluded.

“Sixty-five?” Swann replied beside her, his voice hitching for a moment. As the director of the Map Division, he’d been not just her father’s boss, but his closest friend as well.

“Pardon?”

“He was sixty-five, I think.”

Nell tried to summon the will to do the calculation. Her father had been thirty when she’d been born, and her own thirty-fifth birthday was just months away. “Yes,” she finally confirmed. Swann squeezed her arm gently.

“Oh. Well.” The officer frowned. It wasn’t old, but it wasn’t so young that tragic accidents like this couldn’t happen either. It could have been any number of things. He had been at his desk late, probably tired, and he’d been having a little Scotch while he worked. He might have lost his balance when he went to stand. Or maybe it had been a stroke or heart attack, like the officer had suggested. He was smiling sympathetically at Nell now, as if waiting for her to burst into tears. Lieutenant Cabe, his name tag said. His utility belt jingled with all of his tools—handcuffs, radio, flashlight, holstered pistol.

“But where”—Nell hesitated—“where is he?”

“Heavens, Nell,” Swann cried. “Did you think you were going to have to identify him here at his desk?”

She shrugged and cleared her throat awkwardly. “I guess I did. I didn’t really know what to expect.”

“We wouldn’t make you do that,” Lieutenant Cabe said. “We try to prepare the remains first. Lay him comfortably, fix his clothes.”

Nell nodded, not knowing what else to say. All she could think was, *It’s not like he cares. Or I do, either.* She was grateful he hadn’t passed violently, she guessed, but now that he was gone, she didn’t think it would be any more traumatic to have seen him for the first time in nearly a decade slumped next to his desk than laid out on a cold, stainless-steel table. In fact, the desk probably would have been better. More natural. How many times had she peeked into his office and seen him napping in nearly the same way, leaned over in his chair, with his forehead against the polished wooden surface? She thought he would have preferred it, too.

Or would he? She hadn’t been back to the library in a long time, but this was not the way she remembered the esteemed Dr. Young’s office. Her father thought of himself as an artist, but not in the chaotic, inconsistent way of tormented painters and musicians. The study and making of maps demanded an organization and precision in line with the most technical of fields: the meticulous record keeping, the endless research, the calculations

to ensure absolute accuracy. He had always kept his space so pristine, it sometimes reminded Nell more of a science lab than a museum curator's office.

Today, however, it looked like the ruins of a building ravaged by a tornado.

Dr. Young had always kept his records filed neatly in the cabinet behind his leather chair, but they were open now, their contents dumped around the room. Aside from the corner of his heavy oak desk where the police had stacked their evidence bags, every surface was covered in papers—flying loose, wadded up, torn apart, scattered out of order—so much so that it was impossible to walk through the room without stepping on one. The texts in the bookcase had been similarly yanked from their shelves and strewn about with a carelessness that stunned Nell. For her father to treat an atlas like this, especially ones as old and rare as these, was unthinkable.

“You're also in the field?” Lieutenant Cabe interrupted her quiet study of the office at last.

Nell tore her eyes away and turned to him. “I work as . . .” She paused. “I reproduce maps.” It was as far into it as she wanted to go.

He smiled. “Like father, like daughter.”

She tried to smile back and failed. *Nothing like that at all.* If one had been able to ask him, Dr. Young would have said that nothing could have been further from cartography than Classic. It pained Nell that she had to agree.

But now whose fault was that, that she'd ended up there, after such a promising start to her short-lived career?

“We were hoping to ask you some background questions,” Lieutenant Cabe continued, oblivious. “Just for the official file.”

“I won't be much help,” she mumbled.

“Sure you will,” he replied encouragingly. “You're family.”

“I haven't seen him for seven years.”

“Oh,” he said. “I see.” But the notepad was still out in his hand, the pen still poised. She heard the implication in what he'd said. *You're family. His only family.*

Nell sighed.

If there was anything more tragic than the disgraceful demise of Nell's career, it had been the untimely end to her mother's: Dr. Tamara Jasper-Young.

She had died when Nell was no more than a toddler, and it had been Nell and her father ever since. Nell did not remember her, not beyond just a flickering moment or two, but she hardly needed to—Dr. Tamara Jasper-

Young had been even *more* famous than her father in their world, and had done it in such a short time. Words like *visionary* and *peerless* were always placed before her name in articles about her, and the list of awards and honors bestowed upon her, and the places where her work continued to be cited, even so long after her death, was dizzying.

It had been an accident, Nell knew. There had been a fire in the house where they were living in upstate New York when she was just a baby, and her mother died rescuing her from the blaze. She didn't remember that either, but knew it was true. There had been a short obituary in the local paper she'd once found using the library's old microfilm machines, with accompanying news headlines like "Tragedy Strikes Visiting Scholar Family" and "Mother Heroically Gives Her Life to Save Daughter from Fire." Her own left arm even bore the faint ghost of that night. The scars were no trouble at all, and most days she forgot about them—but she felt herself absently rubbing the flesh through the fabric of her sleeve now, as she sat there in her father's office.

Nell had always planned to ask her father more about her mother at some point, but every time even the hint of her came up, she could see the pain in his eyes, still just as raw as it must have been the first day. There had always been a gulf between them—he had been a protective, doting father when she was a child, but the older she grew, the wider the gap became, Dr. Young growing more gruffly formal and more distant, until he treated her more like one of his junior researchers than his daughter. Nell hadn't wanted to do even more damage to what was left of their relationship by causing him more agony. She could always talk to him about it later, she'd reasoned. Maybe after she'd proven herself, when she was an equal to him, another distinguished Dr. Young in her own right, and not just a bright, potential promise.

That secretly had become her life's goal, as soon as she was old enough to realize how passionate about maps she also was. Other than her mother, who also had been a cartographer, there was nothing Dr. Young loved more than maps, and so Nell had always hoped that if she could only impress him as a cartographer in her own right, that gulf might somehow be bridged, and they might finally, finally be able to open up to each other.

She had been well on the way to someday accomplishing that.

Until the Junk Box Incident, anyway.

Nell glanced around again, listening to the buzz and jabber of the police walkie-talkies as the other officer moved about the room. She wasn't getting out of the interview, she knew. "I'll try my best," she finally said.

"Do you know what he was working on lately? Any special projects or a

new focus?” Lieutenant Cabe asked.

Nell shook her head. They hadn’t spoken even once since the day she left the NYPL—she had no idea.

“I can answer that, if that’s okay,” Swann replied, to which the officer nodded. “Daniel worked primarily in early American colonial and post–Revolutionary War maps of the East Coast. We have an extensive collection of Dutch, French, *and* English naval maps, but Daniel . . .”

Lieutenant Cabe bravely tried to appreciate the extraneous details of Swann’s explanation. Swann had always been like that—even at a time like this, he simply couldn’t contain his passion for the field. He loved his work so much, and did his job with such dedication, that Nell sometimes wondered if he didn’t also secretly live in the department’s back rooms. Once, during one of her many summer internships as a teenager, she and her father had sneakily moved something small in a rare moment of levity between them—one of the antique green glass lamps in the main reading hall, no more than a few feet—just to see if Swann would catch it when he next came into the room.

The old man rushed so desperately to correct the error, it was as if it had caused him physical pain. In his panic, he’d nearly tripped over himself and gone sailing into one of the glass display cases. Nell and her father had laughed so hard they cried, but she never pulled something like that again. Pranks were much funnier without blood.

“Are early American colonial and post–Revolutionary War maps a . . .” Lieutenant Cabe paused. “A controversial area of study?”

Nell snorted, despite the grim setting.

“Sorry,” Swann said. “Sometimes I just . . . I get carried away.”

“It’s all right. We’re interested in any information that might be relevant.”

Nell looked at Lieutenant Cabe again, and the realization hit her all of a sudden, a cold knife through the fog of her shock.

*Oh.*

Was that why she was there? Because the police were considering her father’s death suspicious?

She could hardly fathom it. This was academia, for crying out loud. Rivals wrote counterarguments and published rebuttal papers. They didn’t *kill*.

“Do you think there was foul play?” she asked.

Swann gasped. “You mean because of the angle of the questions?”

“And the mess,” she said.

“Is Dr. Young ordinarily very tidy?” Lieutenant Cabe asked, his gaze