

BBC

BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO

THE SLEEP OF REASON



MARTIN DAY

The near future: a man in a psychiatric hospital claims to be an alien time-traveller called 'the Doctor'. He once adventured across countless galaxies, fighting evil.

The past: an asylum struggles to change Victorian attitudes to the mentally ill. It catches fire in mysterious circumstances.

Now: a young woman takes an overdose and slips into a coma. She dreams of death falling like a shroud over a benighted gothic building.

Caroline 'Laska' Darnell is admitted to the Retreat after her latest suicide attempt. To her horror, she recognises the medical centre from recent nightmares of an old building haunted by a ghostly dog with glowing eyes.

She knows that something is very wrong with the institute. Something, revelling in madness, is growing ever stronger. The mysterious Dr Smith is fascinated by Laska's waking dreams and prophetic nightmares. But if Laska is unable to trust her own perceptions, can she trust Dr Smith?

And, all the while, the long-dead hound draws near...

This is another in the series of adventures for the Eighth Doctor.

DOCTOR WHO

THE SLEEP OF REASON
MARTIN DAY

BBC
BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO: THE SLEEP OF REASON

Commissioning Editor: Ben Dunn
Editor & Creative Consultant: Justin Richards
Project Editor: Jacqueline Rayner

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Dedicated, as always, to Helen

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Beware the Sholem Luz –
Made mighty by madness,
Birthed in fire,
Reborn in terrible destruction.

Graffito etched into wall of
Bethlehem Royal Hospital ('Bedlam'), c. 1790

Prologue

Dreams Never End

[The Secret of Patient No. 1759]

‘It’s the stars I miss the most,’ the patient announced suddenly.

The nurse turned to look at the man. He hadn’t said a word since she had entered to clean his room, staring out of the window with haunted, unreal eyes. If eyes are windows into the soul, the nurse couldn’t decide if the man’s mind was empty and ill-formed – or so full of possibility that he couldn’t even begin to articulate the dramas, real or imagined, that took place there.

‘What do you mean?’ She’d been warned that this particular patient was obtuse at best. Still, it was as well to get to know everyone – especially on your first day.

The patient sighed, long and deep, as if toying with the idea of not breathing again. When he spoke he avoided direct eye contact, his fingers fiddling anxiously. ‘I don’t mean that I can’t see them, of course. One of the advantages of being so far from anywhere is the absence of light pollution. Do you know, an entire generation will grow up not being able to perceive the true majesty of the sky at night, the glory of this galaxy’s spiral arms etched into the dark?’

‘You’re assuming that people can even be bothered to look up at the sky.’

‘Indeed. This culture seems increasingly parochial. Not so much navel-gazing as downward-gazing.’

There was a long pause as the nurse folded away some linen, wondering if the man would ever explain himself further.

Finally more words came in a funereal whisper.

‘To travel out there, in the cosmos – and have that freedom taken from you... Can you imagine what it’s like to see the stars not as a mere backdrop to everyday life, but the very place where you roam? The almost limitless freedom... It’s impossible to describe.’

‘What do you like to be called?’ asked the nurse. She’d been warned that this patient never responded to his name, but was so attached to his alternative persona that almost nothing seemed to be able to get through the barriers and defences he had meticulously constructed.

'I am the Doctor,' replied the patient.

'Doctor of what?'

'More than any mere human could ever know.'

'You think you're not human?'

'You are a psychiatric nurse,' said the man. 'You of all people should understand that appearances cannot always be trusted. Do most people in here look "mad"? Something like a smile played across the man's lips. 'I don't accept that term, of course, but before you began your work as a nurse, did you not have some stereotypical picture of the mentally ill? It might be a subconscious one, of course, and I'm sure it was modified over the months and years of your training, but even so. . . How many of us would look out of place in everyday life?'

The nurse indicated the man's newspapers – apparently he had three broadsheets and two tabloids delivered daily, though he also subscribed to the *National Enquirer*, *New Scientist* and the *Beano*. 'When I see the House of Commons sometimes I do wonder about *their* sanity,' she commented with a grin.

'I notice a former Member of Parliament has been found guilty of perjury,' said the man. 'To be in such a privileged position, and then have your honour and dignity stripped away, one layer at a time. . . I know how he feels.'

The nurse reckoned the MP deserved everything he got. She tried to change the subject. 'What did you do, when you travelled in the stars?'

'Many things. I started as an observer, a traveller if you will, became – if I might be arrogant enough to use the term – a hero, then. . .' He paused again, staring at the bars on the window. 'Then it all became rather complicated.'

'And how did you end up somewhere as dull as the Retreat?'

'I have retired,' announced the man grandly. 'Illness and regret have caught up with me. I now need to rest – unfortunately, I have absolutely no choice in the matter. The rural isolation of the Retreat is as good a place as any to while away my remaining years.'

'And how long is that?' asked the nurse, sitting on the end of the bed.

'Oh, I expect I shall outlive this place – the bricks and mortar, I mean. I shall certainly be here long after you've gone.'

'You know that I'm new, then?'

'I'm not completely *stupid*,' said the man, momentarily irritated. 'Just because I am staying in the Retreat does not automatically make me mad – any more than standing in a garage would make you a car.'

The nurse smiled. 'Tell me what happened, then. What brought you here?'

The man looked square at the nurse for the first time, his ocean-blue eyes full of wonder and longing. Their brightness and vibrancy so surprised the nurse that she couldn't help but glance away.

'Like all good stories,' said the man, 'I suppose it started with a girl. . .'

One

Do You Remember the First Time?

(A Brief History of Self-Harm)

Caroline was fifteen when she'd first taken a blade to her arm.

It had never even occurred to her before, but suddenly, and without warning, the idea, the intent, were there. It wasn't some nascent feeling either, a dreamlike suggestion that recedes the more tightly it is grasped. It was fully formed, reasoned, and complete, as if someone had slotted a report straight into her mind, complete with headings and page numbers and a summary of pros and cons.

For a moment, Caroline had been tempted to turn around, to see if anyone was there, whispering silently at her ear. But she was alone in the too-bright bathroom, save for her mirrored self staring back from the medicine cupboard door, and the bright, clean blade between her fingers.

She brought the blade before her eyes, and for an instant it seemed to be the most magical thing she had ever seen. Somehow more than a simple slice of metal, it throbbed with possibility, with the potential to change her life from top to bottom, from centre to circumference. She knew she was standing on the threshold of something new and terrible – and, once she chose that path, she would always think in terms of 'before' and 'after'. It would be like being born again, into a different and more adult world.

The blade was one of her dad's spares, as anachronistic as the man who persisted in a one-man stand against packaging and all things cellophane. She remembered the first time she'd stumbled upon him shaving, his face blown-up and frothy, gracefully pulling the ivory handle down his cheek, and then back up towards his Adam's apple. The room smelled of soap and masculinity, the bristled brush on the edge of the sink still foaming gently.

'Dad, what ya doin?' Caroline had asked in a six-year-old's singsong voice, hopping from foot to foot as if dying for a pee.

Her dad had chuckled, running the blade under the tap. She noticed a tiny red spot on his cheek, pinhead bright against his pale skin. 'I'm shaving,' he said, pausing before adding, not unreasonably, 'You hate it when Daddy's prickly, don't you? This is how I get rid of my hedgehog face.'

‘Hedgepig, hedgepig!’ she exclaimed happily. She snorted and snuffled, though she knew that hedgehogs didn’t sound like pigs really, but moved noiselessly in gardens, and got squished flat under car wheels, silent and stoic. She watched as the blade went into the water again.

‘Where do all the prickles go?’ she asked.

‘Down the drain.’

She reached for one of the blades.

‘No, you mustn’t touch, darling. You might hurt yourself. That’s why Daddy keeps them up in the cupboard.’

And she had barely thought about the blades again until the day when the idea formed in her head, when she stood with one of the mythical, naked blades in her hand.

True, her dad had bought Caroline a woman’s shaving kit for her sixteenth birthday, a silent and unexplained gift like the book on puberty and her first bra. It was the antithesis of her dad’s razor, all girly coloured and with its many blades safely sheathed behind cages. A few days later, over breakfast, he commented that ‘There’s nothing like a really close shave’, rubbing his own cheeks and grinning, as if that explained everything. ‘Those battery things are all very well, but...’ His words trailed away, leaving her to put two and two together. As usual.

As she looked at the blade, Caroline noticed a white mark across the back of her index finger. Her dad had said that, when she was four or five, she’d sneaked into the kitchen, pulled a bread knife from the block, and had tried to turn an uncut loaf into a sandwich. He found her moments later, a big flap of skin hanging off the top of her finger, trying desperately to keep the blood from staining the bread.

Caroline still carried a memento of that precocity, shaped like a tiny archway, a doorway back to childhood. As the blade rested on her arm, gently testing the strength of her skin, she wondered how much pressure she would have to exert. She knew at that moment with shocking clarity that the path that lay invitingly before her was an internal one. It would have its outward manifestations, but the journey was about her mind, her thoughts and feelings.

She remembered getting her ears pierced at fourteen, the sensation of pressure, as if between great fingers and thumbs, and then the numbness.

As the blade came down for the first time, Caroline had prayed that numbness would follow.

The numbness rarely came. Caroline was a battleground, where conflicting emotions waged their terrible war, each side sacrificing much just to gain a precious square yard of bomb-ravaged soil. And, as she continued to strive for

the promised numbness, the price she paid was enormous. Soon, she had to cut herself more and more just to keep the status quo. Her guilt was always before her eyes, a constant, mocking pall.

In summer, when the others were wearing vests to better showoff their arms and fits, she persisted with long-sleeved blouses, buttoned up to the neck and at the cuffs, as if the disgust she felt would creep through any gaps in her clothing. Her only sport was fencing, and she would change swiftly while backs were turned, desperate to pull on the big, back-to-front white jacket. She would tug the already-long sleeves as far as they would go, and then yank aggressively at the strap that went between her legs and up at the back. Only when she pulled on the mask, when she was sure that no one could see her eyes and the pain behind them, did she feel safe.

Once she was too slow getting changed and a teacher spotted the white criss-crosses on Caroline's arms. Words were exchanged, but Caroline was not aware of anything being done as a result. Had her father known, or was it a surprise to him? She was never sure. She'd been going to the doctor, and hospital psychologists, on and off for years, but she couldn't remember the appointments becoming more frequent afterwards.

However, on the inside, where war was raging, the brief exposure of her secret was devastating. Battle escalated, as if biplanes and gas masks had been usurped by stealth fighters and cruise missiles. She wondered sometimes that people couldn't hear the explosions in her head, the screams of dying soldiers.

The moment her shame was exposed she resolved not to let it happen again. She wanted to pull on the mask every morning, would have lived behind its protective mesh if she could. Only behind the mask was she anonymous – bland and unmemorable.

Best of all, with a sword in her hand, she could fight back.

The battle in her mind would ease, and it was possible – just possible – to concentrate on one thing at a time. She wasn't vicious, but she was good. Very good.

Caroline remembered one particular explosive fight with Donna. Donna was small and unpredictable, a bitter mix of Barbie-doll looks and a tongue thick with gossip. Once Caroline had caught Donna in full flow, the words spilling out of her like pure propaganda. 'Of course, Carol's been under the shrink since she was a kid. I mean, have you seen the state of her arms? You could play noughts and crosses on them.' Caroline had walked in at that point, catching the still teacherless room in mid guffaw. After a moment people glanced away and chuckling gave way to embarrassed coughing, but for a split second everyone stared at Caroline. And their eyes burned with disgust, because everyone *knew*.

Caroline could not understand why Donna chose fencing over the other

sports on offer. Most of the lads who chose it were geeks, and thus not Donna's type at all. Netball or hockey would seem to offer more time to gossip, and greater prestige within the school. Whatever her original motivation, Donna appeared to genuinely lose herself in the sport, and Donna and Caroline were now the only female fencers regularly capable of beating the boys.

It was always funny, fencing the lads. If they were new to the sport, they proceeded cautiously at first, as if out of some bizarre, modernist chivalry. As if they didn't want to hurt you. This attitude only served to make Donna or Caroline yet more determined. A few good hits would normally put them straight. Then the lad in question would get angry, lashing out with pure aggression, and at that point, it was effectively over. It took more than brute strength to counter Donna's speed or Caroline's unpredictable flair.

Donna seemed to revel in her victories over the young male fencers, reminding them later – and publicly – of their humiliation. Some would only sulk in response, but occasionally one would congratulate Donna on her ability – and turn this into a desperate attempt to pull. Once Caroline had watched Donna and David, a big second-year kid with a rogue's smile and permanently bewildered hair, comparing bruises. David rolled up his sleeve, revealing the dull greenish circles on his upper right arm.

'It was the only part of your arm you weren't quite covering,' revealed Donna, running an enquiring finger over a quite presentable biceps. 'Still, you got me once, just above the waist. Fantastic parry.'

And she hoisted up her top, just enough to reveal her ruler-flat stomach and pierced navel.

'I can't see anything,' said David, staring hard. And Donna grinned a grin that said, *Exactly*.

Caroline hated Donna. She seemed to remind Caroline of everything that was wrong with the world, embodying overwhelming popularity and disgustingly pure physical perfection. That Monday morning the sports hall was particularly stuffy, the feral stench of the boys' changing rooms seeming to have seeped out and overpowered the entire building. The roof thrummed with disconsolate rain.

When the teacher announced her opponent, sweat immediately itched at the back of Caroline's neck and prickled in her just-shaved armpits. She tugged at the neck of her jacket, then noticed Donna's maskless eyes on hers. Intent. Calculating. Searching for a weakness.

Caroline let go of her jacket, and tried to relax into the *en garde* position. Through the dark mesh she aimed the point of the épée towards Donna's face, watching her fiddle about with her bunched hair before pulling on her own mask. And Caroline remembered Donna's cruelty. Every moment of it replayed before Caroline's eyes.

‘Ready?’ snapped the teacher.

There was an almost unnoticeable nod from both fencers.

‘Play.’

Normally cautious, Caroline instead waded in with a succession of clumsy attacks. Donna used Caroline’s aggression against her, parrying instinctively, landing a couple of hits on her chest before Caroline really knew what was going on. She felt the round plastic breast protectors jam into her chest; she didn’t need to check for the light on the box at the centre of the piste.

Caroline forced herself to calm – how stupid it would be now to do what the boys always did and let emotion and angry sentiment get in the way.

Caroline got her first point back via a parry of such ferocity that Donna’s épée almost flew out of her hand. She followed it with a simple attack that seemed aimed towards the shoulder but which dropped down to Donna’s knee at the last moment. Two all.

After some half-hearted attacks and parries both attacked simultaneously, their shoulders jarring. ‘*Bitch,*’ hissed Donna through the mask as they extricated themselves.

Now Caroline knew she was in the ascendancy, and two more points put this meaningless victory within reach. She had to remind herself of that: this was just a practice, not a tournament. It didn’t amount to anything – but to Caroline, just for an instant, it meant the world.

The final hit was on Donna’s mask. Momentarily her whole head swayed, like a cartoon character treading on a rake. Then, with a muffled cry that could have been surprise or pain, Donna jabbed her own épée forward. She was clearly out of time – there was no way her attack was going to count – but she threw her whole weight behind the thrust.

A surging, sharp fire bit into Caroline’s arm. She looked down to see that Donna’s épée had somehow found a gap between glove and sleeve that shouldn’t have been there. The very tip of the weapon had bent, and this had gouged a deep weal into her arm. Caroline stared at the sword, still stuck underneath her sleeve, and watched the blood begin to slide down her arm. She heard the cries of alarm from around her – even the muffled oath of surprise as Donna tore off her mask – then a shouted warning from the instructor. It was a fluke, an awful accident – no one had been injured before, or since, to the best of Caroline’s knowledge.

But Caroline had watched, mute, as the blood bloomed into the pure white sleeve.

Caroline remembered all the times she’d cut herself, from that first exploration in the bathroom to the inadvertent fencing injury. She stared at her body, framed in the medicine cabinet mirror. It sliced off her face and thick neck,

and clumsy feet and swollen ankles, leaving just the sexless pornography of chest, groin and legs.

Not that there was much here to get a man aroused: there was too much fat just over her hips, and her lower arms seemed huge, making her look unbalanced. Pendulous tits hung either side of a chest that freckled with the merest hint of sunlight. Pubic hair bristled in all directions, despite every attempt to keep the black, vile jungle under control.

She glanced at the shaver balanced on the edge of the sink. *No, you mustn't touch, darling. You might hurt yourself.* If only it were that simple.

She extended her arms, saw the criss-cross of scars towards her wrists, mostly lateral – her cries for help, the psychologist had said – but occasionally down the artery, from those moments when she was ill enough to *really* want something serious to happen. Her fencing scar, less pronounced than the others: a reminder of the power of spite and jealousy. And the half-moon on her finger, a memento of what life had once offered.

The deep ache washed over her again, throbbing outwards from her womb, her guts. She tried to knead the pain away with her skinny fingers, but the pain kept growing. If it was merely a physical ache she could have taken something for it, but this was truly internalised pain – emotional, psychological, sexual. Spiritual.

Some other memory washed over her without warning – the *first time*. We didn't make love, she reminded herself. She hadn't even lost her virginity – not really. She'd just let him screw her.

If you loved me, you would.

This has got nothing to do with love.

All the other girls –

I don't care about them!

I've seen you looking at me. That look in your eyes. I know you'd like it.

Then, when her resolve had crumbled, when she couldn't even remember all the arguments she'd rehearsed, all the things she'd said so many times before, he lumbered on top of her like she was an assault course to be conquered.

Tell me how much you like it.

And then, afterwards –

I love your bum. Gives me something to hold on to!

He had tried to make light of what had just happened, as if perhaps he dimly recognised the importance of the event – in her life, at least. To him it was little more than an unusually complicated wank, an explosion of hormonal, mind-bending crap that would sort him out for, oh, a few hours at least.

But for her. For her. . .

She rubbed her stomach again, feeling sick. Then she made herself turn around, looking over her shoulder. Her buttocks – were they really...? She'd always wanted to control her body, to show it who was boss. The minute her dad ceded authority, she had rings put through her nose, her eyebrow, her tongue, both nipples – trying desperately to force this lump of matter, this mass of biological *stuff*, to do her will. She thought she was in control – but all the time she'd been a victim.

She remembered that, the day after she lost her virginity, she'd started to make herself sick.

Caroline stood in the bathroom again. Remembering. Remembering the first time she'd cut herself, the first time she'd tried to kill herself, the first time she made herself puke. She remembered the scars, both inside and out, and the stories each one told.

Tomorrow she would be nineteen. For the first time her father wouldn't be there to wake her with bacon and toast on a tray, and a card full of record tokens and money – *he was so crap at choosing, but he loved her so much, and she said it didn't matter, but he wouldn't listen*. There was no one to pull back the curtains, no one to ask her brightly how the world looked through slightly older eyes. If he'd been around he'd probably remind her that some of his family were coming over to see her that afternoon, but that then she'd be free to go out with her mates. Maybe go for a meal up at that nice Italian and think about hitting the clubs. Caroline wondered if he'd have bought her another dress, like he had last year. It was still in her wardrobe, elegant and sleeveless.

'Happy birthday,' Caroline said, and slashed at her arm with the blade.

Two

Suicide Isn't Painless

(In Fact It Hurts Like Hell)

It came out of the darkness towards her, as if she were flying – or being carried – over a landscape choked by fog. Through the grey mist the familiar building emerged in a rush as emaciated tree-hands endlessly deferred to its majesty. She stopped, aware now only of the great stone walls, the dark corridors – the place swamped every sense, dominated every emotion. The building, set square on the gently ascending lawns made steel-grey by filtered sunlight, was all.

Over decades the structure had absorbed and perpetuated an atmosphere of disease. Three storeys tall, it resembled a demented castle as described in a twisted fairy tale. Its corners rose as stunted towers, its frontage, of dark and unwieldy granite, formed a crenellated archway pierced by huge windows. The cruciform main building was surrounded by a rectangle of shabby out-buildings and old stables. The piecemeal place seemed an extension of the dark soil that gave it birth, something that had evolved in secret away from human eyes. Ugly black walkways of cast iron linked the various wings; a bare frame of primitive scaffolding rested against the rear of the place. If it had once been temporary it now seemed locked into the bricks and mortar by thick ivy and calcification. Nothing moved in the courtyards or behind the barred windows; indeed, the only sign of life was the smoke that billowed from the east wing, where untidy metal pipes protruded from dirty brickwork.

Suddenly she was on the gravelled walkway that led up to the great house, surrounded on all sides by vast hedges and sombre angelic statues that stared down at motionless fountains of dust. She was running. Something was coming – through the fog, through the trees – something was coming for her.

Her feet pounded against the driveway, arms hitting out at the fists of twig and leaf that threatened to hold her back. Lungs burning, heart thudding, she ran towards the building. No longer a threat, no longer a tomb to the dead, it now became sanctuary.

She risked a glimpse behind – the creatures were coming, enormous and black, eyes roving from side to side like lamps. She could hear their paws

thudding through the grass, their snuffling breath as they surged effortlessly forward.

Just because you feel them, a distant, too-quiet voice in her mind tried to tell her, *it doesn't mean they're there*.

A coughing, rasping howl from one of the animals silenced the rational voice in her head. She fixed her eyes on the building, striving for speed, working arms and legs despite every tired protest of aching muscle and fatigued sinew. If anything the building slipped further and further away, almost sliding into the darkness at the back of the hill – as if the ground were a cloth map and the geography was changing beneath her. The door, a bright beacon in the velvet dark, receded still further, then blinked out of sight.

Death itself had fallen on the building, smothering it like a shroud. Death held limitless dominion over the landscape, over mankind and nature itself; Death's minions, though dull brutes, would soon play with her for their sport. Saliva-flecked jaws, crammed with teeth like shards of yellowed ivory, would snap about her legs. Great padded claws would cuff her, knock her to the floor, roll her over and over. Playing with their food.

She was lost. There was no hope.

Flight impossible, she turned to face her pursuers – she would at least stare them in the eyes as their mouths lunged for her neck. Her throbbing throat became clogged with bile and fear. The malevolent, mesmeric eyes came ever closer.

Then, with a roaring ocean rush, Death's hounds swallowed her utterly.

Laska came to with her eyes screwed shut against the light.

Laska. She was reborn now – she'd killed Caroline again.

Her stomach surged and roiled. Pain throbbed through her head, stabbing just behind eyes that seemed unused to the light.

Pain was helpful. Pain meant life – those two always went hand in hand.

She forced open her eyes. The inner light – heaven? hell? – receded, replaced by the unstinting glare of a neon lamp. Pale white walls, an angular bed frame, some sort of cubicle, a clutter of unused equipment and a bare wardrobe.

Bedside cabinet. Flowers, a card.

Laska let out a hissing sigh. She was alive. Elation left her now, left her alone – her mind suddenly lacked relief, or disappointment. She felt *nothing*.

'Welcome back,' said a voice.

Laska twisted her head – an explosion of discomfort set the room spinning – and saw a nurse staring down at her. The face, young and not unkind, broke into a smile. She reminded Laska of herself, when caught unawares by a secret

photograph, when momentarily relaxed – what might have happened if life had been different.

‘You’re in hospital,’ continued the nurse pointlessly, returning the clipboard to the bottom of the bed. ‘We thought we might lose you. An overdose and an attempt to cut your wrists – one of your more serious cries for help.’

‘I’m serious about everything I do,’ said Laska, her voice cracked and dry.

‘Do you think we should have let you die?’

Laska knew the game – cut to the chase. Is she still a danger to herself – or others?

Too tired to even think about constructing a façade, Laska answered honestly. ‘I don’t know.’

‘The consultant will be in to see you later.’

‘Which one?’ Laska was on first-name terms with many of the consultant psychiatrists, though each to her represented only invasive questions and the grim authority that kept her alive.

The nurse ducked the question. ‘Would you like a drink?’

Laska nodded, gratefully taking the offered glass. It tasted less bitter than the tap water she remembered swigging down with the tablets. ‘What will happen to me?’ she asked.

‘We have a proposal for you.’ The nurse smiled again. ‘Something new.’

The rest of the day – after the relief of unconsciousness – was a blur of people, suggestions and movement. From the hospital cubicle she was wheeled through corridors that smelled of vomit and NHS bleach by a succession of brusque porters who ignored her protests that there was nothing wrong with her legs, to be interviewed by an array of doctors, most of whom she did not recognise. There were forms to fill in, questions to be answered or dodged: though they kept saying that it was her choice, that what she wanted was important, all Laska wanted was to rest, to sleep for a hundred years and find out what happened next. She was passive, and thus easy to influence; she accepted a plan of action she knew she didn’t even begin to understand.

Then the ambulance came and swallowed her up, smothered her in blankets and the sympathy of a barely qualified nurse. This woman’s uniform seemed so smart Laska was sure it had only just come out of its cellophane wrapper, its logo – an intertwined ‘T’ and ‘R’ – formed from crisp stitching.

Laska began to panic when she saw the driveway and the building beyond. The young nurse flapped around, which only made Laska more anxious. Laska wasn’t sure who was most relieved when the journey was over and the doors finally opened.

Laska stepped down on to the gravelled driveway. Facing her was a woman wearing a tailored suit and an honest, tired smile. She was in her late thirties.

Laska reckoned her hairstyle implied hours in the salon deliberating over a series of *You know, I'm not really into this sort of pampering at all* alternatives. Twenty-five quid for the privilege of keeping up the pretence that you're a professional woman unconcerned by such surface distractions.

Laska breathed deeply, trying to get a grip on her giddy thoughts. The woman held out a hand, which Laska shook limply, momentarily grateful for the support, the physicality of a touch.

'Welcome to the Retreat,' said the woman. 'I'm Dr Elizabeth Bartholomew, the senior medical officer here. I hope that your stay with us will be beneficial.' She did not wear a white coat or carry a stethoscope around her neck, but a badge at her lapel confirmed her status.

The driver started up the ambulance again; Laska and Bartholomew moved inside the building and away from the stink of the diesel. Laska felt as if she had suddenly been parachuted into enemy territory – and now she had no means of escape. The brightly painted façades of the corridors could not disguise the dark and heavy stone and brick that now surrounded her.

It came out of the darkness towards her as if she were flying. . .

'Please,' said Laska suddenly, the frightened, girlish sound of her voice almost taking her by surprise. 'Has this place always been a hospital? It's never been. . . It's never been open to the public?'

'It has always been a hospital – of sorts,' said someone behind her.

Laska turned. Watching her intently was a distinguished-looking man in smart trousers and elegant waistcoat, a thick cravat and lightly curled, neck-length hair not entirely obscuring the youthful vigour of his face or manner. Laska reckoned he was two parts Lord Byron to one Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, but his eyes were something else again. As he strode towards her, they glittered, seeming to change colour from moment to moment – first an honest brown of earth and nature, then a peaceful green of inner strength and eternal hope, then finally a piercing electric blue.

The man didn't blink in all the time they spoke.

He came closer, walking nonchalantly, as if he just happened to be passing by – but, as he held out his hand, Laska wondered if the whole meeting hadn't been engineered, if he hadn't been watching the ambulance as it came down the driveway through some upper window.

Or perhaps that was just her innate paranoia talking.

'I'm Dr. . . Dr Smith,' announced the man. There was a pause, as if he was unsure of his identity. 'You're Caroline Darnell.' He sounded more certain now – confident of the people around him, if not himself.

'Laska,' she insisted. 'Everyone calls me Laska. Everyone I like, anyway.' She forced a smile, though she didn't want to think about how artificial it probably looked.

‘Laska,’ said Smith, nodding thoughtfully. ‘Unusual name.’

‘Short for “Alaska”.’ She couldn’t think why she was telling him this – or why he was interested. Most people weren’t.

‘A noble, if cold, domain,’ announced Smith. ‘I did try to tell them of Seward’s expansionist foreign policy, but would they listen?’

‘Lou Reed,’ said Laska, interrupting Smith’s peculiar reminiscence. ‘It’s a line from a song by Lou Reed. A friend used to sing it to me. It kind of stuck.’

Smith paused for a moment, deep in thought. Then – just as Dr Bartholomew was about to interject – he exclaimed loudly, “Caroline Says”! My, that is clever.’

‘You’ve heard of it?’ said Laska, surprised and delighted at the same time.

‘I think I knew someone who was...’ Smith paused again, some great drama clearly playing out behind his eyes. ‘Who was into that sort of thing.’

Smith’s manner was so unlike that of any doctor that Laska had ever encountered that she found herself glancing at Dr Bartholomew, as if seeking guidance. She wondered if her face betrayed her thoughts – *Is he a member of staff, or a patient?*

‘Dr Smith has been with us for a few months,’ said Bartholomew, picking up on the unspoken question. ‘Dr Oldfield and Dr Thomson will, I am sure, introduce themselves to you in due course.’ She made as if to usher Laska away.

‘You mentioned the history of this place,’ said Smith. ‘Perhaps you should talk to my friends Fitz and Trix.’

‘Unusual names,’ said Laska, mocking Smith’s earlier statement with a grin.

‘Really?’ said Smith. ‘I’d never thought about it. You should hear my full name!’

Laska was puzzled. ‘Something-or-other Smith? Hardly.’

‘Ah.’ Suddenly Smith looked embarrassed. ‘Of course.’

‘Dr Smith is hiring a cottage in the grounds,’ explained Bartholomew. ‘I’m quite jealous of him – what a wonderful commute every morning, just walking up the path to the front door!’

‘Fitz and Trix are researching the history of this house – a snapshot, if you will, of society’s attitudes to the mentally ill,’ said Smith. ‘In answer to your original question, I’m pretty sure this place has never been open to the public. Before it was a hospital it was an asylum, and before that a workhouse. Why do you ask?’

‘I just have a feeling that I’ve been here before,’ said Laska. ‘The kitchens are over in that wing,’ she continued, pointing, ‘there’s an old cellar immediately beneath our feet, the outer wall to the north is in need of repair.’ She pointed again. ‘The patients stay over there, the stables are – or were – some-

where *there*. On the second floor there's a bricked-up window that would have looked down over the formal gardens.' She smiled. 'How am I doing?'

Smith seemed to take all this in his stride, but Dr Bartholomew's voice betrayed her surprise. 'How do you know...?'

'Most nights I dream I'm here,' Laska said. 'And now, finally, I am.'

Three

Architecture and Morality

[Angel of Death]

Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Thursday 24th December 1903

I awoke feeling bitterly cold and am sure that the chill remained with me all day. I understand that we English are notorious in the eyes of our foreign neighbours for always wanting, above all other things, to talk about the weather; on a day such as this one can only imagine that it is because the climate behaves as if designed to assault our senses and dominate our every waking thought.

Dark clouds are gathering – both literal and, if I might be permitted so fanciful a notion, symbolic – and I do not happily watch them as they form.

My first appointment of the day was with one Joseph Sands, a well-to-do fellow who arrived early to complete his yearly ritual. Why the man should chose to come to Mausolus House on such a day – it bothers me not in the least, but Mr Sands seemed a God-fearing sort of fellow – I cannot fathom. Mind, perhaps I am doing him a grave disservice – he did not strike me as a casual hypocrite and I would always rather that good was done out of some sense of obligation than it not be done at all.

A less rational man than I might have stared down at the horses, wondering whether – brute creatures though they be – they might be able, in some way, to sense the air about this place. Did they flinch at the slightest noise? Were their ears pricked and alert for a potential danger they could not understand? I do not know the truth of this, for I was hard at work when Mr Sands knocked upon my door. (It transpired that he was able to make his way directly to the office without any help from the staff; it is indeed strange how, almost without our bidding, the human mind can remember those things we perhaps might wish to forget, and allow to fade to dust those things we most desire to cherish.)

I bade him enter – somewhere in the house I could make out the sound of a patient crying – and the man swept in. He was a tall, ascetic fellow with

hollow cheeks and grey eyes. His frock coat and dark silk choker were several decades out of fashion; he was every inch the Victorian gentleman, all these months after the death of the queen.

He rested a hand on the glass case with the stuffed oriental pheasants – a not-at-all-welcome remnant from the reign of my predecessor. The soulless glass eyes of the birds reflected Mr Sands's haunted visage.

'Ah. Dr Christie, I presume?'

'Indeed, sir. Welcome to Mausolus House.' I tried to make the man feel at home. 'Can I offer you... a little something?' I walked over to the case and reached down to the concealed compartment beneath. 'I know it is early in the day, but, given the time of year, I have some excellent port and...'

'My father used to say that only skippers and gegors drink before midday, sir. I have tried my best to follow his advice all the years of my life.' There was precious little humour in Sands's voice. I have often thought that anyone – even the Devil himself – would make fine company were they able to express humour, to indulge in wit... to revel in human warmth.

Still, Sands seemed cold rather than wicked, and I was desperate to keep our conversation sensible and civil. 'Very wise, yes, I'm sure. Your father then lived into long life, plagued little by gout or complaints of the liver?'

Mr Sands nodded but said nothing.

'Perhaps I could interest you in some tea or...?'

'Thank you, I am quite refreshed.' Mr Sands looked at the shelves of my office. 'You are clearly a most learned man, sir. It is good to see.'

'Oh, hardly, Mr Sands,' I replied, indicating that he should sit. 'A simpleton might collect books and the like, and store them assiduously, and not learn a thing. I am told that many rich gentlemen have entire rooms given over to the *collection* of books, and yet have no more idea as to how they might read them and further their knowledge than you or I know how to fly with the birds.'

This at last elucidated a smile from Mr Sands. 'Very true, Dr Christie. And yet I choose to take heart from the fact that you are more conversant with medical theory than the previous governor.'

'Perhaps you are right, sir,' I said. 'Old Porter was no doubt many things, but a physician he was not. I have been studying lunacy and its causes for many years – a professional diversion, you might say – and am glad that I am now able to dedicate myself to the task yet more fully.'

'I met Porter once or twice,' said Mr Sands. 'He very much thought of Mausolus as a community separate from society at large. He positively disavowed all thought of treatment and help for these... poor souls.'

I could not help but agree with the man. 'Few patients shed a single tear when his death was announced – and let me tell you that many of the people

here, I believe, feel emotions more strongly than you or I, though often as a form of hysteria.'

I could see that Mr Sands was interested in what I had to say – alas, I expect and have had great experience of the opposite! – and so continued.

'Some fascinating work is coming out of Europe. Yes, fascinating. They seem to have stolen a march on us, truth be told.'

This diary is well acquainted with my thoughts on Porter, and his regime. Professional courtesy would normally prevent me from impugning the reputation of a fellow medic, but in this case, I felt able to speak my mind. (I nearly wrote 'reputation and character', but decided that that at least was unfair. I do not think Porter a bad man, if indeed I am in any position to judge such things, but I do believe he was weak and wilfully ignorant, turning a blind eye to much abuse and corruption.)

'One cannot be surprised at Porter's manner,' I continued. 'This whole area of medicine is ostracised. It is not respectable. "Respectable" people try to eradicate this problem from their families by crude expulsion...'

I saw Mr Sands flinch slightly and realised that, however reasonable a fellow he might be, the ice was thin in some areas, and perhaps even ready to crack, if you follow me. I should tread carefully.

'Although many are here of their own volition,' I added, 'we doctors who have made it our duty to try to help such people find ourselves as if expelled from the profession, ignorant of advances in other areas that might throw some light on these particular conditions. While great leaps and bounds are being made elsewhere, most doctors treat the mad much as they did centuries ago – with bloodletting, purging and vomiting.'

Occasionally my bitterness comes to the surface – it has been hard to stomach so much derision, especially if prompted by what I hope are altruistic aims. I wondered again if I had overstepped the mark, but was gratified to see Mr Sands nodding in agreement. 'It is most regrettable,' he said.

'In a civilised society? Yes, I believe it is. But enough of such blabber. Do you wish to see your uncle now?'

'Indeed.' Mr Sands stood, slightly ill-at-ease. 'You must appreciate, Dr Christie, that I have no training in lunacy or madness. People such as I find these things most difficult to deal with. I have many affairs that demand my attention and I know it has been almost a year since –'

I sought to shake the man's hand, to reassure him. 'My dear fellow, you don't have to explain a thing to me. I sometimes find myself wondering if working with such people will one day make me mad!'

'I am sure we need not worry about that,' said Mr Sands with a nervous laugh.

I informed Mr Sands that Charles Torby would accompany us. 'You may have met him previously,' I said. 'He is a tremendous fellow – hard-working, compassionate, dedicated. Had circumstances been different I feel he would have made an excellent doctor.'

As I have recorded in this journal before, this much I know to be true. With his usual impeccable timing, Torby chose that moment to knock upon the door, and Mr Sands the younger proceeded to the next stage of his yearly ritual.

Though we three walked directly to the room occupied by Mr Samuel Sands, it gave the nephew time enough to comment on the apparent state of Mausolus House under my governorship. He stated that the walls were cleaner, the rooms and cells slightly better lit. ('This is a tomb of the nearly dead,' Porter is supposed to have intoned on one melodramatic occasion. 'That's what the name means! And tombs, I am afraid, are dark and dirty.') Doubtless, if Mr Sands had glanced into the cells as he passed, he may have noticed that most still had their chains in place, but one has to take pride in the small steps forward, as well as the great.

(I am, in some senses, the governor of this place in name only. In turn I answer to a council of trustees – with not a medic amongst them! – and they have released to me only a tenth of the money that I earnestly seek for such improvements, and that only after endless discussion and prevarication. As Longfellow would doubtless observe, their mills grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small. Though I remain steadfast in my opposition to purging and vomiting, one is entitled to ask what treatments may take their place. Mausolus is no modern Bedlam – the discreet money that we receive from 'respectable' families ensures that the lunacy of the well-to-do will never again be seen by the public – and yet I am still some way short of achieving my goal: the creation of a hospital in which the very atmosphere of the place helps to make poor souls well, not worse. Even if they cannot be cured, these wretches should not simply be allowed to die in chains.)

But I digress. Mr Sands was very interested to learn of his uncle's state of mind. As Mr Torby unlocked the door – alas such trappings of incarceration are still needed, even in the early years of this great twentieth century – he was able to offer some words of reassurance. Mr Torby said that Mr Samuel Sands had not improved; if anything, his condition had worsened (Torby's relentless yet cheerful honesty is an inspiration to me!). However, Torby was adamant that Mausolus does more good than harm. Samuel Sands is not one of our most disturbed patients – by many measures he is as sane as Mr Torby or myself!

I had asked Mr Torby to come with us as he has great everyday knowledge of all the patients here; I was thus not surprised to hear him say that he liked the old fellow a good deal. 'For all his lunacy,' he said, 'he makes fine

conversation.'

'Ah, a family trait!' exclaimed Sands cheerfully. (I cannot image Sands at the heart of some gay soir  e, impressing all and sundry with his wit and tale-telling, but we will let it pass. Perhaps the landed gentry and I have differing ideas on good conversation and fine company.) Sands then added 'As is. . . his condition.' – and he shook his head slowly, as if fearful for the moorings within his own mind. 'Are you one of those that believe we are all a little mad?' he directly asked of Torby.

Torby's response again did not surprise – it is a conversation we have often had. 'I think there is wisdom in most philosophies,' he said. 'When God came and walked among us, many thought him mad.'

'And what of working in a place such as this?'

Torby paused before replying. 'There are some, I am afraid, who simply cannot cope with the look of madness in these people's eyes. It pushes them too far. It can bring out the. . . demonic in even the heartiest of souls.'

Torby opened the door to reveal Mr Samuel Sands, sitting on the edge of a bunk fastened to the stonework, looking clean-shaven and healthy.

'Uncle?'

At this Samuel looked up. For a fleeting moment he seemed perplexed, but then he smiled brightly. 'Joseph! How wonderful it is to see you! It is so good of you to come and see me so often.'

I remained in the doorway, wondering whether the older man had even seen, or recognised, me. Joseph Sands, to his credit, sat, somewhat hesitantly, on the bunk. 'Are you well?'

The words tumbled out of Samuel's mouth in a torrent. 'Yes – I am more clever than those people give me credit, and can tell which food they have poisoned – it has a certain odour, you see. Consequently, I stay well – which in turn causes *them* much concern. I hear them talking about me when I put my ear to the floor. Sound travels well here.'

'Is it better now Porter has gone?'

'I do not see him as often as once I did. But no, nothing's changed.'

'Your family is well.' Doubtless Mr Sands hated moments like those – with no common ground, no reason to believe his uncle really understood him, there seemed to be so little to say. I am sure, at that moment at least, he wished he were at home with his family preparing for Christmas.

Samuel Sands brightened at this news. 'Good. They say I shall leave here soon.'

'Who? Dr Christie?' Joseph Sands glanced over at me, but I said nothing.

Samuel laughed. 'Oh no, *they* want to keep me here. When I lie down, my friends talk to me – I think they're in the next cell, the sound always comes from there. I am told St Joan heard always voices from the side, not from up

or down – I am in good company!’ He paused, turning his head as if struggling to listen to something. ‘My friends taught me to smell for poisoned food. They feel that I shall soon be well enough to travel home. Has it changed?’

‘Home? No, it is much as you remember it.’

‘How I long to sit under the oak in the grounds and sketch the hills. And yet. . . I seem to recall feeling much sadder then.’

‘Sadder, Uncle?’

‘Oh yes. No friends, so much to do. Whereas now. . . All the time I need – and my friends in the next room – but something’s still not quite right.’ Samuel pressed his fingers to his temples as if hoping to stem the tide of his worried thoughts. ‘Not altogether happy. A little muddled. I sometimes think that is why I am here.’

‘One day you will feel better, Uncle,’ said Joseph.

‘Really? Do you think so?’ asked Samuel, happily. ‘I cannot even remember how long I’ve been here! They say it has only been a few days.’ He reached over and patted his nephew’s hand. ‘It is so good of you to come and see me so often.’

I left the younger Mr Sands with Torby and went about my business. Miss Thorne seems to improve her outlook with every passing day, and I was impatient to snatch a few more minutes in her company.

I must admit I surveyed her room with a certain amount of satisfaction. What had once been a grim cell has been transformed into something that any servant, and not a few lords fallen on hard times, would be happy to have as their personal quarters. It sounds like little when I note it as such, but a few items of furniture and a general air of cleanliness can transform any dwelling. (I have observed before that I tend to be happy when my desk is tidy and unhappy when it is cluttered, though am still not sure whether the mood or the room first influences the other.) A couple of framed photographs sat on a ledge in front of the barred window; the room faces south, though little warmth pervaded it today, and looks out over the garden and wall at the rear of the house, and the sloping wooded hillside beyond.

Miss Thorne is some forty years of age, but today especially had the appearance of one far older, with her hair greying and pulled into a tight bun. Her face is dominated by a broad, noble forehead and large, beguiling eyes; she seems forever to be brushing invisible dust from her clothes.

‘Good morning, sir,’ she said.

‘Good morning, Miss Thorne.’

I sat in an old armchair in one corner of the room; it had lost an arm and stuffing was falling from underneath, but it was comfortable enough. With the exception of the letter I had been writing when Mr Sands had arrived –

a trivial but necessary appeal to the philanthropic nature of our patrons and neighbours – I felt that I had been on my feet all morning. There may be precious little festive cheer at Mausolus House, but what there is, I must oversee. But it felt good to return to what I feel I do best – talking and listening, all the while looking for any signs of progress.

(I know that I am a product of my time. I am not so arrogant – despite what my critics might say! – as to think that I may be remembered by future generations as a doctor who changed the course of medicine. But it still saddens me that, even in the twentieth century, it is unusual to treat the insane as *people*. I agree with most of my colleagues that madness is caused by a defect in the organic structure of the brain, and yet I remain equally committed to the effect that this has on the whole person. For all their faults and hallucinations, they are still *people*, made in *imago Dei* – notwithstanding whatever intellectual concerns I might have with the place of an interventionist God in a Darwinian world. They are blessed with souls and spirits that naturally yearn for release. I feel duty bound, as a doctor and fellow human being, to treat them as such – and now feel regret at, once more, frittering away precious writing time on self-justification and self-important pomposity. It is a most unappealing trait of mine, and one that seemingly limitless ink and parchment cannot quench.)

‘Are you better, my dear?’ I asked.

‘Much better, doctor. The influenza seems to have finished with me.’

She was right – she has been spared from that vile disease, at least for a season.

Remembering Samuel Sands’s earlier confusion of chronology, I asked her, ‘How long have you been here, Miss?’

Miss Thorne shrugged. ‘I couldn’t rightly say. It is a few years, I feel.’

‘A few years?’

‘So I would imagine.’

‘And what do you remember of your life before you came here?’

‘Much the same as anyone else, sir,’ said Thorne, her brow furrowed in attempted recollection.

‘What is your earliest memory?’

‘I recollect little from early times. I have... images, no more... until I was six or seven years of age.’ Suddenly her face lit up. ‘There was a rocking horse. I cried when paint chipped off the eye – I thought he would be blind. He was... mended.’

‘Where were you when this happened?’

‘At home.’

‘Do you remember home?’

Almost immediately Thorne shook her head. ‘No, sir. It is a word I have associated with... certain things. It brings no memories with it.’

'And more recently? What do you recall?'

'I am not sure my memory is working properly. Is the memory in the brain, doctor?'

'Yes, my dear, that's where your memories are.'

'Perhaps a bang on my head when I was young hurt my memory. That's my earliest recollection, sir – falling out of bed.'

'Did it hurt?'

'Oh no, sir.'

'Then I very much doubt that that is the source of your problems.'

'Oh.' Thorne fell silent, yet I could see that her thoughts were continually moving, hitting an impasse, and then travelling elsewhere. Her face changed between animation and dull vacancy a number of times, and then she smiled brightly. 'I remember also a doll I used to have, sir.'

'Yes?'

'I treated it as my baby. I always wanted a family, and when I was young, to help me. . . to help me wait, I was given a beautiful doll. . .' Her voice trailed off, and the smile faded. 'Yet. . . I cannot for the life of me remember what it looked like. Now I come to think of it, I am not sure how old I was. Is that not strange, sir?'

I felt we were on the verge of breakthrough, but was unable to continue. There was an impatient rap at the door.

It was Craig, calling on my 'most urgent' help.

I stood up to leave. 'I am afraid I must go. I will try to see you again within the week. . . And no, I do not count what you describe as being strange. Memory is a very malleable and ebbing thing – especially my own!'

As Thorne rose and held open the door for me I was, for all the world, a guest being escorted out of a country house.

'Goodbye, my dear.'

'Goodbye, doctor,' said Thorne, closing the door herself.

I allowed her that tiny courtesy, that illusion of a more normal world beyond the walls of Mausolus, before turning the key in the lock.

Craig brought word of another incident involving Mr Fern.

Now, as I have told the trustees on numerous occasions, I do not expect every single member of my staff to be blessed with the temperament of an angel and the patience of a saint. Fern, however, is irredeemably brutal and primitive. Behind his every word and action there seems to lurk the threat of violence; when that violence is actual rather than implied then I am afraid I must take action. In this case, I wish I could rely on poor Haward to tell me exactly what happened before my arrival, but his words are unreliable and full of untruths. (I cannot write 'lies', for lying implies the telling of deliberate

untruths within a moral framework, and I believe that Haward no longer has any understanding on what is truth – and what is good and ill.)

Mr Craig said that he was on his way to the kitchens. He said he wished to ensure that all was well there; my own belief is that he was wishing to talk to one of the village trollops. In any event, he passed Mr Haward's room. (To my shame, it remains one of the most bare and cell-like chambers in the whole of Mausolus.)

The chill sound of Fern's voice from within caused Craig to pause awhile.

'Friend, how are you today?' Craig said that there was nothing in Fern's voice that spoke of concern, only contempt.

Alas such subtleties of tone and tenor were lost on poor Haward. 'They say I am well, kind sir.'

Craig risked a glance into the cell. Haward cowered before Fern; indeed, would have slipped to the floor had it not been for the iron chains and rough manacles that held him. Doubtless Fern would claim that Haward had become violent, that he had been forced to use such awful measures to ensure his own safety. And, given that no one would be able to testify otherwise, and the fear that Fern engenders, Craig found himself for the moment mute and motionless, an impotent observer of Fern's casually divulged violence.

'I think you are lying,' said Fern – then the sound of that stick he always carries as he struck it against the wall.

This shook Craig from his stupor, and he came to find me.

By the time we neared Haward's cell his usual whispers had become a great shout of anguish. 'You know how I feel! My mind is open, like a book for you to read.' Before I could even look into the cell I imagined Haward's head shaking slowly, long clumps of greasy hair falling across small, grey eyes and down towards a mouth of broken teeth.

'No secrets?' bellowed Fern.

We arrived at that moment, and stood in the doorway to observe. As before, Fern's back was towards us, and Haward's own eyes saw naught but his inner turmoil. His head rocked from side to side, one arm twitching uncontrollably, but he said nothing.

'I have some food for you.' Fern had a beaker of water, a crust of bread on a tin plate. He let them clatter down at Haward's feet, though Haward continued to stare sightlessly beyond the four walls that enclosed him.

'Haward!' said Fern sharply.

Haward twitched suddenly, then gazed around.

'Haward! Food – at your feet.'

The poor wretch stared sadly downwards – and a look of horror crossed his face. 'Worms! Green worms! Magenta, umber. . . I cannot eat worms.'

'It's food! In the name of God, it's food!'

Haward was babbling now – I have seen it often enough, those moments when mania and lunacy grip a man so utterly that every vestige of his true humanity is lost. ‘Breaking open, turning into maggots and flies and moths, all colours. With faces. And colours. . . Reds of blood and the blacks of coal.’

Fern burned in his rage. ‘Old Porter was right to lock you all up! Starve then, you damned wretch.’ He grabbed Haward by the hair, and twisted his face up to look at him – and of course saw naught but vacancy in Haward’s eyes.

Fern swung his arm across Haward’s pitted face, the short wooden stick thudding into the man’s temple.

‘That will do, Mr Fern,’ I said, with as much authority as I could muster. ‘One cannot force another to eat, or to be well.’

Fern stopped, his back still towards me. I wondered for a moment how he would react.

‘I apologise, Dr Christie,’ he said, though his eyes were averted from mine – better to hide the anger that burned there, I believe. ‘The man was becoming fierce in his madness.’

I looked at Haward – slumped in the chains – and we both knew he could not harm the proverbial fly. (My good friend Summers reminded me the other day of his attendance of the Lyceum reading of Mr Stoker’s notorious vampire tale; the scurrilous story I am informed, contains a madman who *eats* insects. The pity of a man like Haward is in getting him to eat anything at all.)

I knew I was on the horns of a dilemma. What to say to Fern? I had tried to reprimand him before, and the impudent fellow had only threatened to have ‘words’ with the trustees, over whom, it seems, he has some sort of hold or influence. (I have observed that people like Fern delight in their knowledge of secrets and slander, as if with enough damaging ammunition they could silence any arsenal ranged against them. I shudder to imagine what secrets Fern himself might have, given how happy he is to use the failings of others for his own ends – and how little he tries to hide his own appalling wickedness.)

To my shame, I decided to let the matter rest.

Mr Fern pushed past me, muttering under his breath. ‘Evil should be left to die,’ he observed.

‘Evil,’ repeated Haward, trying to push the plate away with one foot, as if warding off a poisonous snake. ‘Evil. Always. . . Evil.’

We released Haward from his chains. Immediately he rolled himself on to all fours and began gently banging his head against the cold stone floor. The rhythm increased. Blood appeared on his forehead.

I held Haward’s shoulders gently and his head stopped moving. He had once articulated the desire to hurt himself – he wished to be reminded that

he was still alive, he had said. When the blood came, it was like a release of pressure, and at that moment he felt safe.

I did not quite understand what he meant by this, but I could not bear to see him hurt himself so.

‘How are you?’ I asked gently.

‘It’s quiet,’ he said, his voice tinged with disbelief. ‘How wonderful to be alone!’

I was about to get to my feet when suddenly he gripped my arm with preternatural strength.

‘I am told that there are those around me who suffer from diminished memories,’ he said. ‘What a delight that must be! To not remember, not be reminded. To be a new creation every day.’

I prised his fingers from my arm and let the hand drop limply to his side. ‘What do you mean?’ I queried.

‘My visitors... They make sure that I will never be able to forget – anything.’ I knew, of course, that no one visited Haward (even a troubled but dutiful nephew like Mr Sands would be preferable to the exclusion that Haward encountered). He was talking not of the literal but of something even more real and important to him. ‘They are not kind to me. For every word of praise there are twenty taunts and curses! They drag back from the tide images and sounds that I cry to God to wash away forever.’

Haward looked around and saw for the first time the food that was scattered across the floor. He reached for the dry bread and floury potato hungrily, tearing off chunks and – against all expectation – swallowing them whole. He started to hum a tune under his breath, pausing from time to time to encourage himself further. ‘Yes, that’s it, keep thinking of something else.’

I dismissed Craig, still standing nervously in the doorway, then returned my attention to poor Haward. He stopped eating, the tune now stillborn on his lips, and began once again to look around in panic.

‘No... Something has moved!’ he exclaimed. ‘A huge wave is coming. The beach is bloodied. The crescendo!’

He tumbled to the floor as if enveloped by a very literal tidal bore and lay still.

‘*There he is,*’ he said, but his voice was transformed now, almost into a woman’s shrill, mocking falsetto. ‘*On the floor, as usual. A disgrace.*’

Then, in his normal voice: ‘Do not speak about me as if I cannot hear you. Address me directly, let me explain my actions and protest my innocence – or leave me be.’

(I have noted in these journals before how incredibly rare it is to find such well-developed personalities within the one frame. Indeed, in all my years in the field, I have never before encountered a man such as Haward, who seems

to contain within him a plethora of disparate characters. I sometimes think I would not be surprised to hear him say, 'My name is Legion, because many devils have entered into me!' – not that I would accept this over-spiritualised way of looking at the world and its ills.)

'Does he think himself a man?' This time the voice was deep and sonorous. *'Does he have a purpose any longer?'*

'Do we need him?' Haward now sounded young and girlish.

'I heard that he was plagued by visions this morning. He hardly deserves to eat,' confided the woman's voice.

'What sort of visions?' asked the male 'visitor', as if intrigued.

Haward answered with the girl's voice. *'Visions of evil. Pure evil.'*

There was silence for a moment, and then Haward thrust his fingers into his temples as if an even greater pressure were now coursing through the channels of his mind. A final 'visitor' spoke, clear and analytical, tinted with what might have been a trace of sadness.

'I have seen this creature's future. So sad...'

Haward's head snapped from side to side, and I saw that his eyes were tightly closed as if to try to block out whatever it was that he saw. He pointed at the window. 'Do you see it?' he asked. 'Is it not fearsome to behold? A seraph of evil – the angel of death!' His eyes now snapped open, almost in wonder. 'She shows me many things.'

'What do you see?' I asked, desperate for anything that might help me understand Haward's condition.

'I see a murder – not feared, but welcomed with open arms. I see a woman, begging for merciful release.' A pause, then – 'Death itself stalking through room after room and finding no one to stop it! A body hangs from a tree. The fingers twitch.'

He turned from wall to wall as if every internal vista were different – and yet more hideous than the last. 'Spiders scuttle. Dogs bark and bay. They slaver, they want to hound me to my death – an open grave, a stone sarcophagus swallowing me up.' His eyes stretched wider still. 'And the angel of death is all in all. She scythes down souls. She reaps from the living a harvest of the dead. Beware!'

And then he collapsed on to the floor and was silent.

Four

There's a Ghost in My House [Frontier Psychiatrists]

'How am I doing?' Laska asked. She let her hands come to rest, palms upwards, as if revealing a poker hand. 'In layman's terms,' she added, alluding to the game that was being played, the game where she believed she had only driblets and drabs of sevens and eights, and Dr Thomson had all the picture cards.

Thomson chuckled. 'You forget, I've seen that bookshelf of yours.'

'*How to Bluff Your Way in Psychiatry* hardly makes me an expert,' she countered. 'It doesn't compare to seven years at med school, including a one-year degree in archaeology and an elective in Uganda.'

'You're very well informed – as ever.'

'You know what they say – knowledge is power. I was hoping to find some skeletons in your closet. For blackmail purposes, you understand. Unfortunately...' She sighed. 'Pure as the driven snow.'

Thomson shook his head. 'Sleet, more like.'

'Dr Thomson, you surprise me.' Laska cooed like a grandmother discovering that the local vicar has a secret passion for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Thomson glanced down at the notes in front of him. 'You know we have a patient review coming up?' he said.

'So my spies tell me,' said Laska, nodding. 'My eyes are everywhere, watching the evil and the good.'

Thomson glanced up, his face puzzled.

'The Bible,' explained Laska hurriedly. 'I think. That's what my dad used to say, when I was being naughty.' She began to laugh, almost uncontrollably. 'How very Freudian of me to suddenly say that!'

Laska stopped laughing and glanced away, as if concerned she'd said too much.

Thomson studied her for a moment. She was slim – though thankfully less skeletal than when Thomson had first seen her – and disguised her height well, often pulling her knees up to her chest when she sat down. He wondered if

that wasn't her default position – a foetal ball, offering maximum protection against the world.

Her hair, cropped short and showing porcelain-pale skin beneath, was blue this week. A few weeks ago it had been bright green, and she'd tried to shock Thomson, saying she'd done her pubes the same colour, and had tattooed a sign on her stomach that said 'Keep off the grass'. Thomson wouldn't put it past her – every week seemed to bring a new piercing, or a new way to shock – but Thomson prided himself on being not easily surprised. He'd been there, done that, and got the T-shirt and matching underpants.

Perhaps that was why he and Laska got on so well – two damaged people with little but a white coat to separate them.

Before he began working at the Retreat Thomson saw mental illness as a simple branch of medicine, with its own raft of logical diagnoses and prudent treatments. Psychiatric hospitals were, to him, no different from working in an institution full of people with cancer or broken bones. Now he wasn't so sure. Especially since the arrival of Dr Smith, the place had seemed to develop a brooding, unpleasant atmosphere – recounted delusions felt like a threat to Thomson's own peace of mind, whispered conversations suddenly sounded like conspiracy. Every trip back to town, back home, felt like a relief, a return to remembered normality.

He couldn't understand why Smith and the two young researchers were so keen to live on site. There's dedication to your work, thought Thomson, and then there's something unhealthy that smacks of obsession. And perhaps it was this unhealthy fascination with the past – in the history of the Retreat and the awful lives of the people once incarcerated here – that had been picked up by the patients.

Thomson remembered an uncle once showing him how to milk cows – and warning, that as a thunderstorm was coming, they wouldn't be themselves. Sure enough, the usually docile and obedient creatures resisted every encouragement to move, nervously fidgeting all the time. Huge white eyes, usually so beautiful and compassionate, darkened as the creatures became nervous and angry.

When the storm finally broke, like a wave bursting through a great, dark dam, everyone was relieved, and a beautiful calm descended, for all the pummelling of rain on the corrugated roof. The trouble with the Retreat, thought Thomson, was that the storm never came, and it left the patients nervously waiting for something they could not comprehend.

Laska bucked the trend, the one patient who, through sheer force of will, was making real progress. Today she was dressed from head to foot in black. She'd even taken out a couple of eyebrow rings. It wouldn't have got her a job at Marks & Spencer, but it did show she took these discussions relatively seri-

ously – an outer reflection of something approaching inner calm. Her mascara was still defiantly wayward, however – she looked like a dozing panda, or a Cure fan from the eighties.

Thomson indicated the notes in front of him. ‘Obviously, I can’t say at this present time what we’ll conclude, but... it’s all good stuff, Laska. You’ve been here, what, three months now? You’ve been making quantifiable progress in recent weeks. Your social interaction has improved, your outlook’s more positive... You’re even taking your antidepressants without too much argument.’

‘I just want to get out of here,’ Laska said, her eyes unfocused and slow for a moment. ‘This place... It makes me feel trapped.’ And then she grinned, a false smile as if she knew she’d dropped one barrier too many.

‘Oh, come on. It’s hardly Bedlam,’ Thomson gestured at the sun-filled lounge in which they sat, the gardens beyond. Both hinted at rock stars recovering from addiction and soap stars on a bender rather than incarceration and punishment.

Laska sighed. ‘I suppose.’

‘And you know, at the end of the day,’ Thomson continued, ‘that it’s your choice. You could walk out of here this moment if you really wanted to. You’re no longer sectioned, you’re not here against your will. I can only most strongly *recommend* that you stay here a little longer.’

Laska began to fidget, one hand running over her scalp as if in remembrance of the stresses of childhood. ‘But I’m not like *them*, Dr Thomson.’

‘Who?’

Laska indicated the entire room: the old men reading their newspapers and playing cards, the woman in her thirties, staring out over the garden, swaying from side to side. ‘There are people in here who are about a spit away from believing that they’re Napoleon.’

‘Come on, you’re exaggerating.’

‘Am I? You didn’t see Mrs Rogers the other night.’

‘I heard about that,’ said Thomson. Mrs Rogers – normally a mild eccentric who spoke her internal thoughts in whispers and railed against the ‘idiots’ on *Countdown* every afternoon – had tried to attack a fellow patient with a pair of scissors. She said that she could see the demons that lived inside him. It had happened at night: Thomson wasn’t on call, so was told about it the next day.

These things always happened at night.

‘An unfortunate incident for all concerned,’ added Thomson. ‘At least no one was hurt.’

Laska leaned forward, her eyes bright, refusing to let go of Thomson’s gaze once she had it. ‘My point is, can you ever imagine me doing something like that?’

'Well. . .'

'Of course you can't. I'm not schizophrenic, I'm not delusional. . .'

'How would you characterise your condition, then?'

'My "condition" is that I'm cooped up in here. It's enough to send anyone round the twist!'

'So there's nothing wrong with you?'

Laska shook her head firmly, like a child denying wrongdoing.

'Depression?' asked Thomson.

'Gone.'

'The desire to self-harm?'

Laska rolled up her sleeves. Her arm was covered with scars, but all were old and pale. 'When was the last time I cut myself?'

'It's been a while.'

'It's been *months*,' said Laska.

'Drugs?' asked Thomson. 'I mean, of course, illegal substances, not your medication.'

'I haven't taken anything mind-altering or mood-enhancing since I was admitted.'

Thomson nodded. He wasn't naïve enough to think there was a causal link – Laska's psychiatric problems dated back to puberty at least – but after her father's death she ingested enough hallucinogenics and smoked enough dope to stun an elephant. Thomson certainly hadn't warned her off the stuff out of some misguided sense of prudery. In his time as a medical student he *had* inhaled, though, frankly, he thought dope was overrated and alcohol was always his drug of choice. However, illegal drugs certainly hadn't helped Laska.

'And you've been eating well for how long?' he asked.

'Four weeks. Anyway, if you tried to treat every man, woman or child with a mild eating disorder and a touch of depression, you'd have a couple of million people in here.'

'Most of those millions wouldn't be able to afford our services, I'm afraid to say. Your father. . .'

'Don't,' warned Laska, her eyes hardening.

Thomson tried again, reforming his words. 'Your... situation... allows us to help you. You're my only concern. Not other people.' Thomson paused, trying to lighten the atmosphere. 'I'm no more a fan of capitalism than you are, Laska. But we sell a product. You agreed to try us out. And my recommendation to you is that you stay.'

'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just walk out of the door.'

Thomson settled on shock tactics of his own. He leaned forward earnestly. 'If you walk out of here today, I guarantee within six months you'll be living

in some squat, stuffing yourself stupid with crack, and paying for it by giving dirty old men hand jobs in public lavatories.'

Laska turned away, leaving Thomson to think he'd at last scored a point.

'Don't forget,' he continued, 'when you came in here, you were in such a state you didn't know who the hell you were, or what was going on. If I'd have said the sky was day-glo green with orange spots, you'd probably have agreed with me.'

'But I'm nothing like that now.'

'I know, and you owe it to yourself not to leave the job half done. A few more weeks – that's all it will take.'

Laska leaned back in her chair, suddenly more relaxed. There was a long pause, Thomson wondering what mental cogs and gears were moving in her mind, wondering if anything he ever said had any impact on the machinery that governed Laska's world and her perception of it.

When she spoke again, her voice was so hushed that Thomson had to strain to catch the words. 'My dad used to say... Only the foolish builder starts a job, not knowing if he has the tools, time and equipment to finish it.' Her voice hardened. 'I'm ready to finish the job, Dr Thomson.'

She said nothing else, and was still staring up at the ceiling when Thomson left the room.

Thomson found Liz Bartholomew in the staff room, deep in conversation with James Abel, a male nurse who had been working at the Retreat for some weeks. Thomson noticed that James was trying to smooth out the crumples and creases in his uniform; in fact, he looked like so many people in their early twenties, biologically incompatible with tidy clothing and rigid posture.

Thomson smiled – he was sounding more and more like his father. The next step would be to buy the *Daily Mail* and fret about the apparent youth of policemen. Thomson was 37, but he knew an unhealthy interest in gardening and Radio Four couldn't be far off.

'I was out near the orchards,' James was saying as he nervously fiddled with the cuff of his uniform. 'Just taking a walk.'

'You were having a sly fag you mean,' said Thomson, affecting to wander past and casually join in their conversation.

'Dr Thomson,' said Liz with mock irritation as James began to redden like the setting sun, 'you know what they say about people in glass houses.'

Thomson sat down, reaching for the back pages of one of the newspapers on the coffee table. 'I have no idea what you're talking about,' he said, trying to act the innocent. 'I never have so much as a *single puff* of the dreaded weed.'

'Single puff, no, but you'd smoke a packet in one go if I let you.' Liz turned back to James, still a delightfully inhuman shade of crimson. 'Ignore him. Do carry on.'

'I found a couple of boys from the village scrumping for apples,' continued James. 'Of course, you can't lay a finger on 'em, can you? Anyway, I just yelled at them and they scarpered.'

'It happens,' said Liz, sighing. Thomson knew this sort of nonsense wasn't exactly Liz's top priority.

'I have already advised Brown to check perimeter security,' came a voice from the doorway. Thomson didn't need to turn to see who it was – those stentorian, self-assured tones could belong to none other than Dr Oldfield. 'I am concerned that security is becoming lax,' he continued.

'Boys will be boys,' said Thomson, watching as Oldfield sat down. He was a stiff, grey-skinned man, who seemed able to drain the warmth out of any environment in which he found himself.

'Really?' said Oldfield gravely. 'I wasn't aware of that.'

Thomson couldn't imagine Oldfield climbing apple trees and having fun. But then he couldn't even imagine Oldfield as a boy – he was the sort of man who'd surely been born in a suit with a Conservative party membership card in the pocket.

'Just thought you should know,' said James, clearly terrified to have remained part of this conversation. Thomson sympathised – he suddenly had the overwhelming urge to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

'Of course,' said Liz, with a nod indicating that he could go.

Just as James was scurrying off Thomson called out, 'You still on for badminton after work?'

James turned, clearly irritated at having been hauled back. 'Sure.'

'Catch you later then.' Thomson noisily folded the newspaper. 'Liz, at risk of sounding like a bad stand-up comedian, did that man come to see you yesterday about the dog?'

'Dog?' queried Oldfield.

Liz nodded. 'Chap from the village,' she explained. 'He was walking his dog in the woods when the animal suddenly went, er...'

'"Bonkers" was the word he used to me,' said Thomson, revelling in this rare chance to be politically incorrect.

'The dog came into the grounds,' continued Liz. 'The owner wanted permission to search the area...'

'Which you denied him, I am sure?' said Oldfield.

'Well, no, actually,' said Liz, clearly flustered.

Thomson experienced a pang of regret – he hadn't helped the situation, or poor James for that matter. When would he learn to keep his big mouth shut?

'I didn't feel there would be any harm in letting Mr Farrell escort him around the place,' stated Liz.

Oldfield raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

'Anyway, they found nothing, so the man said he'd continue to search the woods,' concluded Liz.

'Hooligans invading the grounds, nosy locals searching for lost pets – this is hardly an environment in which we can expect our patients to thrive,' said Oldfield.

Thomson was about to counter that having *miserable gits* treating them was hardly going to help either, but he bit his tongue.

'All this on top of the cottage being used by Smith and those young researchers. . . ' Oldfield looked around, as if expecting to find support from his fellow doctors. 'This is a centre for serious scientific research, not a youth hostel for cash-strapped students.'

'Your opposition to Dr Smith and his colleagues remaining on site was noted at the time,' said Liz. 'I for one welcome his presence here.'

'Let's face it,' said Thomson, 'Smith has shown that he's more than willing to help out in an emergency, even if he isn't on call. You can't fault the man's commitment and compassion.'

'Perhaps,' said Oldfield. 'But the whole set-up strikes me as odd. Those two youngsters he brought with him. . . '

'Fitz and Trix. . . ' began Liz.

'Hideous names,' commented Oldfield. 'Them, and that "Laska" of yours, Dr Thomson. What is the matter with people today?'

Thomson remembered his earlier *grumpy old man* moment and wasn't too harsh. 'I know what you mean,' he said, desperate to build bridges. 'I have a nephew called Peter John. He already wants to be called "PJ". He's only five!'

'Fitz and Trix are mature students, doing some fascinating research into Victorian attitudes to the mentally ill,' said Liz. 'They're studying at the same university where Smith used to lecture. It seemed an ideal use of our resources.'

'And if you're worried they have coke-fuelled student orgies each night,' said Thomson, getting to his feet, 'I'm afraid they don't.' He folded the newspaper under his arm – he'd read it somewhere else. 'More's the pity,' he added, under his breath but still loud enough for Oldfield to hear. Anything to wind the old bugger up.

As Thomson left the staff room Oldfield still wasn't satisfied. He had turned to Liz, fixing her with his unblinking gaze. 'And another thing. . . ' he said.

James Abel leant against the crumbling rear wall of the Retreat, facing the orchards where he'd caught the local lads scrambling in the branches. He

didn't blame them, really – the area was a bit of a mess, and thus ripe for exploration. A retired army officer from the village kept the front gardens in a reasonable state but he rarely had time to come around the back. Most of the year the trees hung heavy with unpicked fruit and the grass was clogged with rotten brown apples.

James waved the smoke away from his face. Thomson had really landed him in it earlier – even if he had just been larking around, and Dr Bartholomew had taken it all right. He liked Thomson tremendously. If you stripped away the age difference, and all the educational and social privileges Thomson had been blessed with, they weren't that different – just two blokes muddling their way through life, looking for love, live football and cheap beer. But Thomson was the sort of bloke who'd strip naked and paint his willy blue if he thought it would get a laugh – his larking about would be the death of him. Thomson's attitude – which implied that he couldn't care less – had already prevented a number of promotions and pay rises. But James suspected that, underneath it all, Thomson was nothing if not conscientious and concerned, and worried by the fact that his career seemed to have hit a dead end since his arrival at the Retreat. It was a frequent topic of conversation during their post-badminton pints in the lounge of the Red Lion, when there was no money left for the trivia machine and drink was starting to make Thomson unusually honest. Thomson was a clown whose tomfoolery disguised an inner turmoil.

'Mind if I join you?'

James turned – it was Smith's young female student. Well, he said young, but he had no real idea how old she was. There was something about her eyes that spoke of having seen things. Terrible things. But the rest of her... She looked as fresh as a daisy, and much, much sexier.

'Be my guest,' said James, patting the ground next to him. 'Busy day in the library?'

'Something like that,' said Trix, settling herself down and accepting James's proffered cigarette. 'Thanks,' she said, drawing deeply, before adding, 'Got my figure to think about', by way of explanation.

'You've got nothing to fear,' said James, trying not to look too closely. He wasn't actively searching for a change of scenery on the girlfriend front, but then again, a little flirting never hurt anyone, did it?

'I suppose I should join you and Dr Thomson at the sports club one night...'

'You'd be more than welcome.'

'But I'm egotistical enough to not want you to see me looking all hot and sweaty,' continued Trix, feigning a look of innocence.

A million smutty responses crossed James's mind but he ignored them all.

'I was hoping to ask you about the history of the Retreat,' said Trix, her manner changing in an instant – suddenly cold and businesslike.

‘Oh, I don’t know anything,’ said James automatically. ‘You’ve got a library full of books in there...’ He gestured through the wall behind him as if to point out the dusty library in the heart of the building, with its crumbling documents and numerous rows of cracked leather books.

‘But they only tell you so much,’ said Trix. ‘I’m interested in a bit of background flavour. You’re a local, aren’t you? I’m wondering if you’d heard anything when you were growing up.’

‘It was just the nut-house,’ said James. ‘I always remember it being a bit of a wreck. Uninhabited. Mum used to say it was unsafe and should’ve been knocked down.’

‘Did you ever come here when you were younger?’

James looked around, remembering his earlier conversation with Liz and the lads he’d caught playing in the orchard.

‘It’s all right,’ said Trix. ‘I’m hardly going to report back to Dr Bartholomew!’

James nodded, his eyes downcast. ‘I used to come from time to time – a dare, that sort of thing. Me and my mate Richard, we were always ghost-hunting – and what better place to try to find a spook!’ He paused, remembering the place as it had been – the stone made dark by long-extinguished fires, the few surviving beams that crossed the roof space and divided the night sky into sections. ‘Richard reckoned he’d made a ghost detector in his dad’s garage. He always brought it with him. Never worked, though.’

Trix smiled. ‘What was it? The ghost detector, I mean.’

‘Just an oscilloscope and a couple of switches and lights he’d nicked from a toy light sabre. He only let me in on this a few years later, of course!’ James paused, stubbing out the cigarette. ‘It’s funny that you’re asking me this after all these years. Dad used to say that my great grandfather had worked here, back at the turn of the century when it was a “mad house”. I used to badger him all the time in case he’d heard some stories. Dad only knew that it had burnt down at some point, that they did some quick repairs on it during the Second World War – used it as a base for the Home Guard or something, but they didn’t like the atmosphere and soon moved out. Someone had tried to buy it in the sixties, turn it into some flats, but... It never happened. After that the only people interested in it were local arsonists.’

Trix nodded – clearly what James was saying was confirming what she already knew.

‘I was always asking him about the ghosts, of course. He said his granddad had never said anything about the place being haunted – but all the kids at school reckoned it was. You know how it is, an abandoned building in the middle of nowhere. It gets the imagination going.’

‘Did you ever see a ghost?’ Trix asked the question as lightly as if she had asked for the time.

James shook his head. 'No. Richard was always larking about, but... We never saw anything.'

He glanced at Trix – her lips were pursed, as if she were disappointed to hear that. Disappointed, but not surprised.

'Mind you,' he continued, 'we did have one strange night up here.'

Trix angled her face back towards him, eyes suddenly wide. 'Go on.'

'It wasn't Hallowe'en or anything,' James stressed firmly. 'Just another one of our ghost-hunting expeditions. We told each of our parents that we were going around the other's house – that was our usual trick. Richard really wanted to come up here again – I was a bit bored of it, though to be honest my real reason was I didn't like the place. It always gave me the creeps – much more so than the graveyard, which was our *other* haunt!' He looked about him, trying to strip back the veneer of progress to reveal the Victorian shell beneath. 'Sometimes it catches me out and I find myself thinking, "What the hell am I doing working here?" It's like some sort of sick joke. I mean, I don't mind the patients and all that – but, you know, because this place has always scared me, I sometimes get a shiver down my spine when I'm working. If I'm on my own, or it's dark outside...'

'Anyway, we came up here, and Richard went through the ritual of turning on his "ghost detector". A right old song and dance he made of it, I can tell you.'

'What happened?' asked Trix.

James paused, milking the moment.

'Nothing. Just a straight line on the oscilloscope. Richard suggested going down into the basement – we hadn't been there before. We made our way to a door... Do you know, when I came home for an interview here, I was still hoping to find this particular door? I was happy enough with the job I had in Bristol, but I was curious about working at the Retreat. I got offered the job, I came back to live with my parents for a few weeks... Two months later and I still haven't found that door! I suppose things have changed a lot since the eighties, when I stood there with Richard, trying to summon up enough bravery to go down to the cellars. The moment I gripped the handle – I always had to go first, you see, Richard was all mouth and no trousers – the oscilloscope started playing up. It made this clicking noise, like a Geiger counter or something, and the display – it was going wild, all overlapping lines and curves. It scared the crap out of us, I can tell you.'

'But I thought you said this "ghost detector" never worked.'

'I'm not saying it *did* work – just went a bit mad. Mind you, Richard later said there were no circuits in it that could have made the noise. I still don't know what happened. Maybe we just wished it into life.'

'What happened next?'

‘We just legged it – we suddenly didn’t feel so brave! Like I say, I never did open the door. There was this weird atmosphere – real goosebumps, hairs-on-the-back-of-your-neck stuff. Richard was laughing – I wondered if this was all some sort of wind-up – but when I looked in his eyes I could see how frightened he was. He didn’t think it was funny. He was hysterical.

‘We ran down the drive. I glanced back at one point – the building was just a black blob on the horizon. It was really dark by now, though I guess it wasn’t much beyond nine in the evening. But, as clear as day, I could see something moving around in the ruins – something bright, as if it had its own power source.’

‘Just a security guard with a torch?’

‘That’s what I think, now. I don’t believe in ghosts. Kids’ stuff, right? I don’t believe in anything I can’t see or touch. But at the time... I didn’t have a clue. I was so freaked out, by the time Richard reached the gate, I was about two hundred yards ahead of him. Didn’t half give myself a stitch,’ said James with a smile.

‘So it was definitely a guard?’

‘It’s the only thing that makes sense.’ James fumbled in his pocket, offering Trix a cigarette – she rejected it with a curt shake of the head – before lighting his own. ‘To be fair, we weren’t aware of this place being patrolled by guards, or we probably wouldn’t have come up here in the first place. And I’m not saying what I saw looked like a bloke with a torch – it just seemed like a blob of light. But... what other explanation is there?’ he asked.

Trix didn’t agree or disagree, but sat in silent contemplation, staring into the distance.

Five

Caroline Says

[I've Got My TV and My Pills]

'There's not much in life I dislike,' muttered Bernard Watson to himself as he clambered over the stile between Cole Street Lane and Barrow Field. 'I reckon I'm a pretty tolerant fellow. But irresponsible dog owners, who let their animals do their *business* just anywhere, so that little kids can play with it and get *whatsitcalled* and go blind. . . Well, it just ain't right.'

He reached down to pat Marion, his squat mongrel retriever. Marion gave him a look which, had she been human, might have implied that in reality Bernard's pet peeves encompassed almonds, American tourists, and anglers – and that was just the A's. But Marion wasn't human and, in any event, Bernard rarely looked for subtlety and subtext in anyone around him, be they human or canine.

'It strikes me that we're getting more and more selfish,' he continued, tugging on Marion's lead as she momentarily considered leaping up at a passing, low-flying sparrow. Marion shot him a disrespectful stare in return, as if not liking being part of Bernard's generalised 'we'. 'City folk come out here and let their dogs off their leads – and the dogs go bonkers when they see sheep running about. People just can't be bothered to think things through. And who gets the blame? The dog, that's who.'

He paused for a moment, trying to remember where the old footpath went next.

'Just look at Princess Anne,' he added.

Marion seemed to know the route well enough, and Bernard let her lead him towards the kissing gate set into the thick hedge at the far end of the field. For some years Bernard had decided against bringing his dogs up here, for these fields skirted around the Retreat, and the trust that owned it had, for a while, tried to prevent the public from gaining access to their land. But the ancient right of way that ran around one edge of the grounds was now legally established as a matter of fact, and a few weeks ago Bernard had returned to using one of his favourite walks.

Then, not three days previously, disaster had struck. Betsy, his beloved Irish

wolfhound with a dodgy left eye and a penchant for barking during the theme tune to *Coronation Street*, had gone missing. One minute she'd been behaving herself, as impeccable as ever, the next she pulled on the lead so hard that Bernard fell to the ground. He let go of her lead; she hurried towards the folly, just off the footpath, then started jumping around, saliva-flecked jaws snapping at nothing but fresh air. Her growling, as she landed momentarily before another leap into the air, was unlike anything Bernard had ever heard in all his thirty years of keeping abandoned dogs.

Bernard had tried to reassure Betsy, calling out to the hound to encourage her back to his side, but she seemed blind and deaf to anything other than whatever it was that she *thought* she saw.

Suddenly Betsy stopped jumping, and Bernard hoped that she would return to him, but moments later, and with an ear-splitting, shrieking howl, she ran straight towards the weeds and brambles at the back of the folly.

For all her odd behaviour, it wasn't until Betsy became eerily quiet that Bernard had become truly worried. By the time he padded over to the undergrowth he could no longer see or hear her. Bernard had called and called for the best part of an hour, pacing up and down differing stretches of the footpath, all the while expecting Betsy to suddenly come charging out of the hedges and brambles, perhaps with a freshly killed rabbit in her jaws.

But Betsy never returned. Bernard went home, then visited the Retreat the next day, asking if he could search all the grounds. The doctor in charge – a nice young woman with distracted eyes and a beautiful smile – had made arrangements, but neither Bernard nor Farrell, the security guard who accompanied him, could find a trace of dear Betsy.

Since then Bernard and Marion had come up to the public footpath near the Retreat every afternoon, but Bernard's expectation of finding Betsy again was beginning to fade. Marion in turn was behaving oddly at home, hiding behind the sofa and chewing on one of Bernard's slippers when she thought he wasn't watching.

Bernard was just considering the relative cost and merits of placing posters in the shops and pubs of the surrounding villages when they came upon the folly. It was a squat, ugly building with a domed roof and recessed areas that might once have contained urns or statues, though most of these had long since been destroyed. There was graffiti on one of the walls, bragging about some sexual conquest or other, but elsewhere twisting vines showed that nature wasn't far behind man when it came to denigrating the grey stone building.

Bernard paused, pulling up the collar on his coat, the recent memories still fresh in his mind. Marion, too, seemed suddenly nervous, knocking into Bernard's legs from time to time as if needing the reassurance that he was

still there.

‘It’s all right, girl,’ he said soothingly. ‘Nothing to worry about.’

All the same, he gripped the leash tighter.

Bernard and the retriever stood motionless for some time, listening intently.

He sensed nothing, bar the wind, which was picking up. The weatherman had predicted storms later. Perhaps it was time to be getting back.

Just as Bernard turned he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. A hint of light, twinkling like a star, from the folly itself. And, like the stars at night, it faded a little as he looked at it head-on, but if he turned his face away it glowed brightly, a tiny white bead of brightness from somewhere deep inside the building.

Intrigued, Bernard approached the folly, his head half-cocked to one side. The light was seeping through a minute gap between thick wooden boards that had been nailed over the doorway.

Marion was fidgeting at his side, but Bernard pressed on, making loud, confident noises, even if, inside, he felt anything but self-assured.

He placed a hand on the wooden boards, then carefully pressed his face against the gap. Before he could see anything he felt – or imagined? – the mustiness of the air within the chamber clawing at his nose and throat.

He blinked against the darkness, against the steady stream of expelled air. He stared until his eyes adjusted sufficiently to see what was within.

The light he could see more clearly now, like a rip in the fabric of the darkness, or falling crystal tears. It seemed to shift slightly, but Bernard was unsure if the light moved, or simply became brighter.

Suddenly Bernard was gripped by irrational, primal terror. He shivered, and pulled his face away, then half stumbled, half ran for the relative protection of the hedgerow, the kissing gate, the field and his parked car.

Around his legs, Marion the retriever yapped and jumped nervously, but Bernard didn’t say a word until they got back to the safety of his cottage.

Within the folly, something still lived.

James tapped on the door with the back of his hand.

No response.

He knocked a little harder, glancing up and down the corridor to make sure he was alone.

Still nothing. He placed his ear against the door – sometimes she had her music turned up too high – but the room seemed quiet.

He turned the handle and went in, carefully closing the door behind him before turning around. With its poster-covered walls and leaning towers of CDs, it was the only room he could think of in the whole of the Retreat that didn’t look like an offshoot of an antiseptic hospital ward. Laska had even

gone as far as changing the light fitting and hanging a drape of red sari material over the window. They'd stopped her painting the walls but had conceded on the other points – or, at least, that's what she said. Perhaps she'd just gone ahead and made the changes anyway – James didn't suppose anyone else was in the habit of coming in here.

Laska was standing in the centre of the room, her back to him. She'd discarded what she called her 'business suit' – the plainest, smartest, dullest clothes that she had with her – and was changing into her more usual black jeans and T-shirt. She hadn't quite finished; though the 'suit' was in a crumpled mound at her feet, the T-shirt was still in her hands in a ball. James noticed that she was wearing Walkman headphones. She was half dancing, half shaking in frustration, as if something she was listening to had sufficiently gripped her to stop her in her tracks.

James approached and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Laska swivelled on the spot, almost snarling at him. With one hand she tore off the headphones, with the other she tried to unravel the T-shirt and cover her arms. James glimpsed old white scars, remembered that when they made love Laska usually turned out the lights. There were some places even he wasn't permitted to go.

'What the bloody hell are you doing?' she spat.

'I knocked on the door,' said James, taking a step backwards. 'You didn't hear me.'

'Well, *duh*. I've got my Walkman on.'

'Look, if this isn't a good time. . .'

Laska shook her head. 'No. Sorry. I was just. . .' She paused for a moment, as if unsure what she had been doing. 'Just thinking about something. . .' She started pulling the long-sleeved T-shirt over her head.

'Nice bra,' said James with an appreciative grin.

'I'm not in the mood, right?' snapped Laska when her head emerged.

'Did you see Dr Thomson this morning?'

'Why is it, the moment I say I'm not interested in shagging or schoolboy innuendo, you automatically assume something has happened about my treatment?' She paused for a moment, combing her slender fingers through her hair.

James held her gaze. 'I'm not wrong though, am I? You've been talking about your session with Mike Thomson all week.' He paused, wondering what to say next. 'I care for you, Laska.'

It was a ridiculous statement, too trite and soapy, for all the reality he intended by it. But then, if James had been better with words, he wouldn't have ended up working at a dump like the Retreat.

Laska slumped on the bed. 'I know. I'm sorry.' She reached out for James's hand, gripped it for a moment before letting it fall. 'Yes, I saw Dr Thomson today. He recommended that I stay a bit longer.'

'And you're pissed off because you know he's right.' The words were harsh but they disguised a genuine concern.

Laska fiddled with the controls of the Walkman, cutting dead the trebly splash of sound from the headphones. 'I suppose.' She stretched out full-length on the bed, staring at the ceiling. She patted the space next to her.

James took the hint, lying beside her – a tight fit on the single bed, but that was no bad thing.

He felt a momentary pang of guilt: he'd used a similar gesture to get Trix to sit next to him not half an hour previously.

'Another busy working day comes to a close,' said Laska in a tone of voice that was half question, half statement. 'You thought you'd pop in to see me before going home to Mummy and Daddy and getting on with the rest of your life?'

'I'm here for as long as you can put up with me,' said James, propping himself on to one arm so that he could stroke her face.

Best not tell her about the badminton with Dr Thomson later.

'I'm flattered,' said Laska.

'Do I detect a hint of sarcasm?'

'No, really.' She turned towards him. 'I'm happy that you spend so much time with me.'

'You make it sound like a chore.'

Laska glanced away. 'I'm sure it was when I first came here. For you, I mean.'

James shook his head. 'Well, you're better now – I'm sure Thomson said as much this morning. But... it's never been a chore for me, Laska. I wouldn't be doing... I wouldn't be doing this if I wasn't absolutely obsessed by you.'

'Careful, that makes you sound like a stalker!'

'I don't care!' exclaimed James. 'You know how much I'm risking seeing you like this. I don't make a habit of bonking the patients!'

'I should hope not. Most of them are old and wrinkly.'

'Not absolutely true, but I take the point.'

'It's not just bonking, though, is it? There's more to us seeing each other than... just that?'

'Of course!' He stared at a poster for *Three Colours: Blue*; he'd watched it once, at Laska's request, and had fallen asleep halfway through. 'I mean, I admit I've got a bit of a one-track mind...'

'You and every other man on the planet.'

‘But can you blame me?’ He kissed Laska full on the lips. ‘As tracks go, it’s not a bad one...’

Laska awoke with a start.

The room was dark but for the sliver of light that burned under the door to the corridor. It was dark outside, and Laska knew in a moment that James had gone. She didn’t blame him, of course – if he was seen hanging around the place when he wasn’t working people would get suspicious, but even so, she wished he didn’t have to leave that like – guiltily, like a criminal.

It was generous, but disingenuous, to give Laska sole credit for all the progress she had made in recent weeks. It was true that she felt more settled and even – at times – relaxed, but this wasn’t simply because she was taking her medication as ordered. James’s interest in her spoke of something amazing, and Laska was beginning to believe that there were people out there who could see beyond the scars, the case notes, and the diagnoses; people able to get to know – maybe even love – who she was, deep down.

Laska scrabbled about on the bedside cabinet for her medication, and found instead a sheet of paper. She switched on the light.

See you tomorrow. J.

She grinned, unscrewed the bottle of tablets, popped a couple of the pills into her hand. She stared at them for a moment, remembering earlier times, different days. How she’d resented her medication when she was younger: her GP had tried to reassure her, saying that it was ‘just the same’ as taking tablets to combat hay fever, but Laska *knew*, even then. It meant she was different. It meant she was *weird*.

But now – she hoped, she dreamed – every tablet meant a step closer to freedom. She’d swallow a bottle of the things if it made time pass more quickly.

She swigged down the tablets with some stale water from a tumbler, then walked to the door to pull on her dressing gown. The TV remote was a heavy weight in the pocket. She switched on the portable television, turned over to BBC1. A soap, of course. Time to watch some pretend people with *real* problems.

James had mentioned that one of Dr Smith’s friends – either the dopey bloke or the bitchy blonde, he didn’t say which – had asked him about the history of the Retreat. Perhaps the time had come. Perhaps now it was right to re-open the past and, as if it was an objective scientific experiment, see how that made her feel. If she could look at this stuff without flinching, without it dragging her down into the grey mists of listlessness and depression, then she would be able to look Dr Thomson square in the eyes next time and say, yes, she was *better*.

She reached under the bed for the battered suitcase. It smelled of old leather and spilled sun cream; it was one of the few things she'd insisted they get from home before she'd even consider staying at the Retreat.

She pressed the two catches. One clicked easily, the other was red with rust but gave way in the end. The lid swung open.

Laska closed her eyes, inhaled deeply. In among the musty smell of mildew and damp she caught the faintest whiff of something else. Her father's after-shave. Just for a moment that most evocative of senses led her down a path; at its head was her father and the security of childhood. Afternoons in the park, playing eternally on the swings, always the sun – even in winter when little hands were wrapped in bright woollen gloves and burning ears were warmed by shapeless hats – and always a safe pair of hands to catch her, to push swings and roundabouts of delight, to smooth over grazed knees.

She forced open her eyes.

At the top of the pile of books and documents was a tiny plastic jewellery case that had no doubt originally contained something cheap and cheerful from Ratners. For the last year or so it had protected something much more precious.

She flipped open the lid. In the box, nestling on velvety padding, was a silver pendant. She removed it from the case, suddenly impatient. It was just as she remembered it, and the chain was unbroken, each rounded link perfect. It terminated with a kind of silver claw, which in turn was clamped tightly around a tooth. The tooth was sharp – a canine? – and would not have seemed out of place in the skull of some dog or great cat were it not for the fact that it was the same lustrous silver colour as the necklace. And yet, as Laska reached out to touch the pendant for the first time in months, it did not feel like metal. It was as smooth, and as light, as ivory, and it felt warm to the touch.

Her father had said that the necklace – though macabre – was an excellent example of English craftsmanship; indeed, Laska could barely remember a time when he didn't wear it, though he felt self-conscious on the beach. 'People will think it's a shark's tooth,' he said, 'and that I'm a complete poseur.' The pendant was one of the things that she most associated with her father – that, and poring over his books and papers as evening turned to night.

She put on the necklace, fiddling for a few moments with the delicate but surprisingly robust clasp. Then she began to rummage through the papers and books further down in the suitcase.

They weren't in any order – one day, after her father's death, she had cleared the old desk by simply sweeping what she could into the case. Under the desk there was another bag or two of documents, and she'd put the suitcase there, never intending to examine them further.

When she was about to be admitted to the Retreat she suddenly remembered the suitcase, and wanted it as a reminder of her old life. Now, with the tooth on the end of the necklace warming her chest, she had the desire to read, to explore, to find out what Dad had been up to all that time.

The first few pages she examined were diagrams representing family trees, annotated in her father's barely legible scrawl. That was so typical of him – despite appearances, he was very interested in matters of history, tradition and heritage. Apparently he'd done a course on genealogy at the local college, when Laska was tiny and Mum was still alive, and the passion for such matters had stacked with him.

Laska couldn't, for the moment, find any mention of the Darnells, so she wasn't sure how, if at all, she might fit in with these unfamiliar names from still less familiar times. She turned instead to a sheaf of papers, yellowed and crumbling, held together with a ribbon, but found the handwriting – all flourishes and interlocking serifs – impossible to fathom.

Beneath the papers was a large book with a cracked cover of black leather. As a child she remembered Dad coming back from antiquarian fairs with an array of volumes under his arm and, like Alice in Wonderland, she was continually disappointed that they never seemed to contain pictures. She opened the cracked cover and found that it was a personal diary that went back about a hundred years.

She almost immediately snapped shut the book, wondering if there was something else in the suitcase, something that was easier on the eyes and less invasive of the dead.

But she felt compelled to carry on.

Choosing a page at random she began to read – as the darkness began to swallow the world beyond her curtains.

Six

Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity

[Communion]

Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Thursday 24th December 1903 (continued)

Yet another tale of Fern's cruelty and evil was repeated within my hearing (Mary Jones is gripped by many confusions and illusions but, when the moment is right, she recounts recent events with nothing short of startling recall and the sort of precision that leads me to believe she is telling of an actual event, not some spontaneous fantasy). I imagine they may have happened as much as two or three days previously, but I note them here for the benefit of my own chronology and future remembrance.

Mary Jones described Fern closing the cell door behind him and turning the key in the lock. (I can only imagine, if she truly understood what she was seeing, the terror that must have gripped her at that moment.) Doubtless Fern laughed – that awful, throaty chuckle that so chills my soul – and his reputation, I am sure, went before him. The poor, dishevelled young woman pushed herself into a corner, trying to cover her face with her callused hands.

(It seems to me that although Christmas means nothing to such a man, beyond base thoughts of holiday and drink, yet still deep within him some kind of primal clock ticks: a longing for the new year, a desire to turn at last from the cold white heart of winter to the half-remembered power and vigour of spring. He is the sort of basic fellow who feels that seasonal shift, regardless of whatever religious or pagan rituals might be laid over it. He is less preoccupied by the season of Advent than driven by an uncomplicated lust, an earthly desire that niggles at him and is rarely satisfied.

I say this not to excuse his behaviour but to try to understand it the better; to understand why a place such as Mausolus can so swamp a degenerate man's mind. I have no doubt that each day within its dark walls feels to Fern like a month outside.)

All that followed took place after the end of Fern's working day: he could have been home already, and how I wished he had simply left Mausolus behind and returned to whatever family he possessed – poor wretches! But this

is the nature of addiction, and I have yet to perceive a finite limit to those things to which humans can become captivated and obsessed. When we – willingly, or in simple weakness – allow ourselves into bondage to any other power or desire, we become mere puppets to other forces, be they for good or ill.

I can see, in the eye of my mind, Fern looking around the cell, his nose wrinkling in disgust. There is no furniture in that room, and the dampness of the walls and floors (which refuse all attempts at treatment) seem immediately to seek out throat and lungs and make breathing harsh and ragged. There are ever-growing spirals on the rough stone walls, the mindless etching of deep layers of fungus.

The window is little more than a castle's arrow-slit, but what light penetrated glinted on the overturned metal pot in the centre of the room. Mary Jones said that Fern swaggered towards her, kicking the pot in disgust, banging the short stick against his thigh.

'You filthy pig,' he muttered. 'Is it not right and proper that I treat you like an animal? It's all you deserve.'

(I myself have heard Fern's tiresome attempts at self-justification.)

Mary tried to scream (I have seen it often enough, the bleeding fingers pulling at her hair, tugging her head from side to side in self-punishment) but I do not know if anything emerged from her thin lips. In response, Fern bent down and took hold of her hands.

'Don't you hurt yourself. Do you not recognise your lover from afar? See, I come in rich clothes, with beautiful gifts for my lady.'

I can see Fern puffing out his chest, strutting about, his rampaging desire like a fruitless demon in his breast. I am told he suddenly knelt at the woman's feet and clasped his hands together. His eyes ranged upwards, towards the heavens. 'Oh, dear beautiful lady,' he said in a shrill falsetto, 'your lord has come to seek your hand in marriage.' He laughed again. 'I will of course ask your father's permission. . . ' The low growl returned. 'But if 'e's dead, I'll 'ave you like a farmyard animal.'

Tears began to well in Mary's almost sightless eyes, her hands fidgeting in panic.

Fern sat next to her, placing a brotherly arm around her. 'Oh my love,' he said, looking at her closely. 'You might indeed have been pretty once.' (Mary Jones indicated his actions towards her at this point, stroking her matted hair, running a gentle finger down her bruised cheek.) 'I reckon you were a buxom farm wench – in a pretty dress you could gull many a choker, eh? And now. . . Your bad deeds have become filthy rags. You're not respectable, miss – look, your leg is bleeding, this room stinks of piss – you'll be a judy no more.' Fern's cruel baton emerged again, which he slapped repeatedly into his palm. 'But

I'll always love you!'

*Extract from the Diary of the Reverend Mr William Macksey
Thursday 24th December 1903*

This evening I had the pleasure of the company of Mr Charles Torby. After a most excellent meal I ushered him into the study.

He looked to me, as if for guidance. 'If one wished to be whimsical...' he began.

'Speak your mind, I said, 'on this night of all nights.'

Emboldened, he continued. 'I feel this room could be described as being both a haven from the outside world and a doorway to myriad other universes, each one based on a different assumption or premise.' He indicated my rows of books, musty – if I in turn might be permitted such grandiloquence – with learning and sunless libraries. My books and journals encompass theology, philosophy, philology, ecclesiastical history and – in those corners where the beams cast their darkest shadows – works whose very titles hint at the esoteric and the apocryphal.

I hoped that the gravity of all this learning would be offset by the voluminous armchairs that faced a roaring open fire. The damp logs spat from time to time, but I found the more usual background crackle like the breathing of a soothing animal. I poured Charles and myself a drink – the yellow light flickering through the cut crystal glasses brightened the tawny port to make miniature golden seas.

Yes, it was a night for fanciful thinking!

Charles Torby leaned back in his chair and sighed. 'Your good lady wife cooks food fit for the Lord.'

I nodded vigorously in agreement. 'I admit that there is no end to her talents.'

I know how I must appear to young men such as Charles – a large fellow, nearing retirement, and now accustomed to the finest things in life – but it is only in recent years that I have entirely shaken off the appearance of a youthful ascetic. I was such a different man, back then, when first I encountered the Lord. My passion burns as bright as ever; however, my expression of that has changed. Perhaps that is why I feel so relaxed in the company of a man some thirty years my junior.

Torby sipped at his glass again. 'It is most kind of you to perpetuate our old ritual...'

I thought of my personal, lonely burdens. 'I am afraid, Charles, that your company tonight is often something I need more than desire. Preaching at the midnight service would worry me greatly if I let it – how difficult it is to

say with conviction that the God who created all the world allowed himself to become a puny babe! And yet, I know this to be both true and important – indeed, it is perhaps the most vital thing I will say from my pulpit over the next year. The responsibility is great – yet sometimes I want to forget about my own words for a few hours, immersing myself instead in conversation. And then, I hope, my sermon for the service of Holy Communion will indeed be full of the majesty and wonder of God.’

Charles nodded. ‘All the same, it is a “ritual” that I enjoy, though I admit to being confounded that you should spend such time with me. You should really spend such precious hours with someone of Christie’s standing.’

‘I care not for such things,’ I said. ‘The Lord knows not one’s age, or class, or sex. He knows only the heart.’ I paused for a moment, wondering how much further to take this. ‘It is true, I knew your family well – you are of good stock, if you wish to think in such terms, and many great careers could have been yours – but I know you chose your work at Mausolus because your heart is full of love. In any event, I made your mother a simple promise, to cast my eye over you from time to time. . . And, well, here I sit!’

‘Nevertheless,’ persisted Charles, ‘it almost engenders a little awe, seeing a true man of God at rest before preaching with such conviction!’

I admit I laughed at this. ‘True man of God? How know you that?’ I sipped the last of my port and smacked my lips in glee. ‘I understand I have a reputation as being a forthright man, one who embarrasses many of my colleagues – they do not like what I say or the manner in which I encourage my flock. . . And yet, to argue for myself more than that would be for a sinful man to play at being Job. I know that I can be lazy, pompous, solemn. . . I drink too much perhaps – “Use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake”, as the apostle Paul says – and I dream too greatly. I have never worked for my salvation.’

‘Indeed,’ nodded Torby. ‘It is for all these reasons that I call you a man of God – all these reasons, and more. Unlike some clerics, you do not allow your life to be ruined by thoughts of having failed God.’

‘Gold and silver we might not have, but what we do have, we offer Him,’ I said.

A log moved in the grate, and a new pillar of flame roared upwards. It reminded me of the dream, so much on my mind in recent days.

‘Have you not read of our prayers mingling with holy incense as they ascend to God?’ I asked. ‘And of the tongues of fire at Pentecost?’ I looked deep into the fire. ‘Prayer is listening, too – “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth” – and although I am happy about tonight, I feel some apprehension about the coming days. . .’

Charles seemed to comprehend my obtuse intimations. 'Has the Lord spoken to you?' he whispered, perchance alarmed at my sudden change of tone.

'He has said nothing in words,' I replied. I looked around at the room, the shelves and their untapped knowledge. 'Despite all this, I am not a man of letters. Not by nature, in any case. God talks in a fitting manner to his people.' I sighed, spinning the glass in my hand. 'I simply do not feel that this Christmas promises peace and goodwill toward men.' I paused. 'How is Mausolus?' I asked, wondering if my secret desire was to talk of something else – or if, in fact, that place was at the root of all my dreams and fears.

'It is less like a prison than under Porter.'

'Good.'

'Dr Christie is a fine man – although I sense that he believes not in God but in good.'

The boy is perceptive. My impressions of Dr Christie have been noted in these pages.

'I feel happier there than I used to,' Torby continued. 'I feel more able to try to share love with the people. As you know, some there remain servants of evil.'

I stood up and went to the window. I gazed out at the stars. Clouds scurried across the velvet sky, and the village was bathed in the pooled glow of the gaslights. 'I feel that the Devil is sat under Mausolus House, waiting,' I admitted.

'For what?'

'I do not know. I am convicted that what is coming shows my fear of midnight mass to be as but a grain of sand on the shore in comparison. Perhaps I am getting old, letting my heart rule my head.'

'I do not know how much credence to give it,' said Torby, 'but one of the fellows – Haward is his name – has had... Well, I can only describe it as a vision. A dark vision of shadows and death and evil. Christie told me of it.'

'Do not dismiss such things over-hastily,' I said. 'The demon-possessed and the mad recognised our Lord for who He is much more swiftly than those whose vision had been clouded and dulled by the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. You remember the parable of the sower?'

Torby nodded. 'The Gospel of Matthew, chapter thirteen.'

I smiled. 'Would that my curate was as well versed in the scriptures!' I do Gore a disservice; he is diligent, but lacking in passion. I hope the Lord, and Mr Torby, can forgive the foolish irritation of an old man's loose tongue. 'Now, Charles, it is at such times that it is vitally important that you remember *who* you are, in whom is your salvation... The nature of the Rock on which you stand. I do believe that our Lord warns his people – and it is the same Lord who empowers them, eventually, to succeed.'

Torby stared at me, fascinated, as if he had never heard me talk on the subject before.

'Sometimes that success, that triumph, is indivisible from death,' I continued. 'I think, of course, of the sacrifice of our Lord, of the spilt blood of the martyrs, the missionaries facing unspeakable opposition on the fringes of the Empire. We need not fear death itself, only those who would have us doubt our faith and take away all that is dear and precious to us. If I am right – and I do not even pretend to be infallible – then we must prepare for an attack of the Devil. We must, over the coming days, fearlessly cling to what we know – not what we think we know, or what the situation would seem to tell us. God is love, but sometimes love is punishment – cling to that, cling to God, even if all hope has gone – in Him alone is our hope.'

I wondered in that moment if I had embarrassed myself. I apologised. 'My gift for melodrama does not abate as the years pass.'

'I cannot imagine anyone less given to melodrama than you,' said Torby. Good, kind, positive Torby. 'But... you meant what you said?'

'Of course – but let us pray that I am wrong.' I clasped my hands together, and closed my eyes. I wondered about praying even then – but instead I was searching my own mind, my own motivations.

My memories of that accursed dream, when Death itself fell like a shroud on Mausolus House. And spiders and dogs ran through empty corridors.

I opened my eyes again. 'What we must do now, is to celebrate the human birth of our Lord. We must celebrate, in our hearts, like never before. The Lord has declared tonight sacred. Let us prepare for His refining fire as if none of this happened.'

I could not help but put an arm around Torby's shoulders.

'Another drink, Charles?'

*Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Thursday 24th December 1903 (continued)*

When one is busy one is most likely to forget the least of our fellows, those that most completely rely on us.

I am thinking, of course, of my patients in the main, but also my beloved hounds. When I came to them this evening my precious wolfhounds looked up the moment I opened the door. As one they stretched languidly, then bounded towards me with increasing enthusiasm – each one with an accusing gaze, not unsympathetic yet still... disappointed.

I patted each muscular flank in turn, attaching leashes to cracked leather collars. 'Have I been neglecting you all?' I queried, as if they could answer me in any human tongue (ah, Mr Ruskin's pathetic fallacy!). Lyell – who I

suppose is now the oldest, his fur prominently marked with streaks of black – seemed to answer by trying to jump into my lap.

‘Easy,’ I warned. ‘Time aplenty for fun and games once we’re outside.’

Steadying myself, I gripped the three leashes, and led Lyell, Grant and Huxley through the door and outside. The enormous tug on my arms as the dogs pulled me through the doorway left me in little doubt as to who was leading whom for a greatly deserved walk!

I am, I suppose, a creature of habit. I took the dogs on their usual route, following the western outbuildings before ascending the gentle rise towards the coppice. As I have said, there was a definite chill in the air – snow was not out of the question – but I welcomed the freshness of it all, the freedom, the pretext of peace that allowed me to *think*. I wondered if I had, pointlessly, spent too long within Mausolus House; perhaps I served the patients there better if I remained true to myself, to my interests and passions. There are, I tried to reassure myself, only so many hours in the day, and there is only so much I can do.

And yet such limited aspirations did not sit easy in my heart. I have been accused of having a reformer’s zeal and an evangelist’s passion; in losing myself in my work I truly believe that I can find myself. (I write this as the stub of my candle is guttering down to almost nothing; all good folk are in their beds, I am sure. And yet it is during these long, night-time hours – when sleep does not come easily and I feel so strangely active and alert – that I feel most alive, most connected with my fellow man. Some people, I am told, feel at their most lonely in social situations, when they are surrounded by folk clamouring for their attention. I know exactly what they mean. After all, I have no wife or family to think of, no other claims on my time – apart from my precious hounds.)

If I sometimes find my work at Mausolus frustrating – for every room that I order be cleaned and put straight, another seems to appear that is caked with decades of filth and abuse – I know also that the fate of many rests in my hands, and I do not wish to let a single one of them down. Every time the trustees threaten to reduce the staff, or lower their weekly wage, I feel the old passion burn within me – the passion to do good things for the unfortunate few most deserving of pity and respect. When I confront the vested interests, the money-lending and acts of vainglorious public charity that allow Mausolus to operate, I know that I am sailing dose to the wind – but my patients deserve nothing less. (Of course, the trustees cannot be too unhappy with my work. Under Porter the reputation of the place had so declined that the well-off were less inclined to send their mad there; now they need a man with a fair and humanitarian reputation in order to restore their privileged standing!) I know that money speaks with a loud voice, but I take solace from the fact that

occasionally it has to listen, too.

But I am repeating myself interminably – and all to justify (if not to myself, then to whom?) a walk with my dogs! Alas, my delight at so simple a pleasure would soon turn to frustration and a growing sense of unease.

The dogs pulled me away from the coppice and towards the old folly, set as it is slightly apart from the crown of the hill and surrounded by stunted shrubs and unmanaged elms. Brambles trailed over the folly, rendering its walls and domed ceiling almost organic. A few feet in front of the folly stands a statue of a scythe-wielding angel, blanched white by the sun and softened by the rain. With little ceremony, one of the hounds trotted over and urinated against the base of the statue. I pulled on the leash, but could not resist a hearty chuckle. My hounds are innocent with love of life; frankly, they behave better than some of the supposed God-fearing folk who work at the hospital, and I couldn't find it in me to judge the creature too severely.

I was still pondering such idle thoughts – paying scant attention to the dogs, or my surroundings – when I felt the atmosphere around the folly change. I swear the light dimmed (though there was no cloud to see to filter out the rays of the sun); I would have dismissed this as mere fancy were not the hairs on the back of my neck beginning to rise. I shivered uncontrollably.

The effect on the hounds was yet more pronounced, if diverse. Lyell and Huxley both lay close to the ground, ears flattened, eyelids squeezed almost shut. Grant, on the other hand, jumped and barked, tugging so hard on the lead I thought he would pull me over. The din the dog made was tremendous; all the while Grant tried to pull himself towards the folly, the other two attempted to back away. All three had their eyes fixed on the folly – or, rather, on what appeared to be a light within.

It must have been a reflection of some sort, of course, or some other natural optical trickery, but it did seem, for a moment, that there was a gas lamp or some other illumination deep within the building. I could see a sulphurous glow through the outline of the doorway; the light flickered and sparked, brightened and dimmed, reminding me a little of the effect caused by dropping filings of iron on to a Bunsen flame, only writ large.

In any event, my first priority was my hounds, at that moment steadfastly engaged in pulling my arms from their sockets. As I bent to reassure Lyell and Huxley, Grant gave such a tug on the leash that I was forced to let go. Immediately the hound ran towards the folly (a blur of fur, saliva-flecked jaws, flattened ears), snapped as if at butterflies or moths that fluttered at its nose, then veered off into the bushes. A howl, a throttled yelp, and I heard no more – even the undergrowth became still.

The other hounds were hauling me impatiently back to the house. I resisted their demands for a few moments, calling for Grant, but there was no response

of any kind. By now the flickering light – whatever it was – had faded, though the hounds were still unsettled.

There was nothing else for it but to return to Mausolus – with a heavy heart.

*Extract from the Diary of the Reverend Mr William Macksey
Thursday 24th December 1903 (continued)*

Many conversations and dialogues within these pages are my remembrance of them, and are thus doubtless prone to error, confusion and, perchance, a deliberate bending of the truth on my part. I am not, after all, writing a Gospel of Our Lord, with the divine inspiration of the Holy Ghost to aid me!

But I trust these pages will forgive me if I am able to note salient phrases and the like from my own sermons, especially on a night such as this. I have my notes in front of me as an *aide-memoire*, after all.

I remember (and note here, perhaps to cut myself down to size!) that I revelled somewhat in the lull before the storm with an eloquent storm of my own making! As I surveyed the congregation I saw everything from fear and eager attention to boredom on the various faces.

‘The Lord came to earth,’ I said gravely, ‘because of the sins of man. Do we think our society needs Him less than ever before? Foggy, dank, murderous, brothel-stinking London might seem to be many miles from here, or indeed belong to another age, but are we so perfect that we can face the wrath of God alone?’

(I am not, of course, interested in condemnation in and of itself. If acknowledgement of our sinful state is to have purpose and power, it must lead towards the positive – towards God Himself.)

‘God longs to reach out to simple folk like you and I,’ I said. ‘Who did he tell first of his Son’s birth? Was it the rich and landed? No. Was it the keepers of religion? No. Men of authority and importance? No. The angels appeared to shepherds – outcasts from Jewish society, reputedly thieves and certainly men of low esteem. They looked after sacrificial lambs, but were unable to enter the cities, still less the great temple! Ponder for a moment on that.’ Some did seem willing to ponder, though one young lad at the front was more interested in the contents of his nose. ‘To *them* was the glory of Christ first revealed – shepherds, and foreign dabblers in occult practices, the so-called Wise Men. To a poor family, still haunted by accusations of illegitimacy, was He born. And thousands of young children would soon be murdered around Him as the Devil tried to cripple God’s most merciful plan.’

At the heart of the congregation I spied a clutch of people from Mausolus – noble yet unbelieving Christie, evil Fern, young Charles – and marvelled at their faces. Christie, all politeness, but a hint at the back of his eyes that he

wanted to be elsewhere, doubtless continuing the struggle with the weight of his responsibilities; Fern silently expressing his boredom and irritation, and poor Torby, a dove perchance amongst a brood of vipers.

I admit my heart dropped a little. Christie and Fern had doubtless spent their entire lives pushing God away; what could I do in the face of Christie's great learning, Fern's great apathy? Could not even the beauty of the church imply something of the wonder and majesty of God?

The ornate pulpit, the bronze eagle that carried the lectern Bible on huge arched wings, the stained glass windows of the hierarchy of angels, the flawless complexity of the roof and the weighty majesty of the supporting columns – what did they matter to a man like the good Dr Christie? He would see any such trappings as church extravagance in a world of need – and yet the Lord said that the poor will always be with us! What place does beauty have in a world of death?

I do not have easy answers for such questions. All I know is that to even begin to understand the Incarnation we must see that the stable rests under the shadow of a cross of death and torture.

'This sweet babe,' I continued, 'was killed, rose from the dead – and will one day stand in judgement over us all. Let us not be Herod, and murder all plans for life and love and mercy and peace – but let us all, like the shepherds, run to Him in whom is life free from fear and pain.'

I almost sighed rather than enunciated the 'Amen', and clutched my own Bible to my chest as I descended the steps. I wondered still if anyone would miss me if I never spoke again from the pulpit, if any tears would be shed for my death – if it is time! – at the hands of the impending evil?

But I must not look for reward this side of heaven. There are good men and women in this parish who serve the Lord diligently, and my role is merely to help and encourage and pray. I am no more accountable for the sins of my congregation than they are for mine!

As we sang the next hymn I felt warmed, for such worship is an example of real progress in the modern world. When my father was a boy the law still prohibited the singing of hymns. Ah, the perversity of God's people!

I remember glancing outwards, through one of the unadorned windows, and reflecting on the beauty of the sky at night. Within my own heart, the feelings of dread and terror seemed to have eased. Was I wrong? Was the dream that I had had of no real consequence, a simple, random act of the unconscious mind?

I prayed silently that my fears were groundless.

Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Thursday 24th December 1903 (continued)

I emerged from the church feeling slightly moved – albeit, I am sure, by human sentiment, and no more. Macksey greeted me warmly enough – pleased, perhaps, by my simple hypocritical attendance – and a number of us stood out in the thin, crisp air, scuffing our feet against the gravel pathway, watching our breath merge with the onward-marching fog.

Torby seemed pensive – with any other man I might think it was the temporary effect of Macksey's sermon as one strove in one's own power to live a better life – and Fern was sullen, like a child whose latest prank has been exposed. We talked of little of consequence until a ghostly owl swooped overhead, giving Mr Torby in particular quite a shock. He wondered aloud whether the craft of the brothers Wright was as silent or if, indeed, it sounded not unlike a steam engine or some other modern man-made miracle. I said I suspected the latter, for the newspaper had featured but a single illustration, revealing a precarious structure of rods and fabric, propellers and motors. I took their recent success, in circumstances most trying, as emblematic of the indomitable human spirit. It was, by rights, already Christmas Day, and I should excuse Torby his suggestion that behind the creative mind of man there must lie yet another creative impulse. I am afraid to say I somewhat shocked the man by stating that the only birth that I hoped to celebrate this day is that of Sir Isaac Newton, a scientist of rare insight and genius. I meant my comment but as a jest; I could see that I had stung Torby more than I meant. To give the fellow credit, he reminded me of Newton's own faith in the Christian God; I considered telling young Torby of Newton's well-attested interest in alchemy and other occultic matters doubtless proscribed by the Mother Church, but this time bit my tongue. I did not want to be the one to destroy, still yet question, this man's faith; I also realised that our relative standing made true and honest discourse hard.

I was about to say something to placate and reassure Mr Torby when I heard what sounded to all the world like a wounded animal whimpering somewhere in the bushes that edged the churchyard. I asked my companions if they had heard anything – none had – and I set off at once across the mounded grass and headstones. I hoped that Grant had returned to me – injured, perchance, but with untellable tales of chasing rabbits and baffling freedom from constraint. However, though I stood like a fool calling into the pitch-dark air, I received no reply, and no evidence of what I had heard. I thought I heard a snuffling from time to time – a choked sound of distress and pain – but I could not be sure it was not my imagination.

I trudged back to the others, already beginning the walk down the road to

the village and back to their homes, just as Craig came haring towards us all, hollering and gesturing wildly. (Indeed, I did not immediately recognise the man, so pained and extraordinary did his expression seem.)

I strode to the front of the knot of open-mouthed men that now surrounded him and challenged him to give an explanation of himself

'Sir, sir,' he repeated over and over while striving to gain control of his faculties. 'There's something in the woods!'

'There may indeed be many things in the woods,' I reasoned, 'birds, scurrying mammals. . . ' I admit I gripped Craig firmly by the lapels. 'What you were doing *there*? You were in charge of Mausolus House, at least until my return.'

'There is great evil there!' he repeated, as if he had not heard my rebuke in the least.

'Pull yourself together, man!' exclaimed Fern, whose patience was yet more finite than my own.

'And. . . And. . . ' There was clearly some other matter bothering Mr Craig but he seemed unable once more to speak the words clearly; I watched him breathing deeply and desperately gathering his wits.

'It's Samuel Sands, sir,' he eventually exclaimed, looking from my own to face to that of the others, as if wondering at the response of each. 'He's dead.' Craig's eyes widened still further. 'He died of fright.'

Seven

I'll Be Your Mirror

(Reflect What You Are)

Laska woke with a start. Disorientated, head swimming with unreality, she tried to establish who she was, what she was doing, where she found herself. Her eyes furiously processed and passed on what information they could: magnolia walls hidden by posters (*Betty Blue*, *Amnesiac*); a dark quilt covered with papers; a telephone, so useful when her mobile refused to work (which was often); a bedside lamp still switched on. She'd obviously fallen asleep reading the diaries and documents, and now... For a moment she considered retreating back under the covers, but as her eyes blinked against the light – the lamp, the slots of brightness that edged the window and curtains – she realised that it must be morning. She glanced at her bedside clock – 8.39 – and could not believe she had slept straight through.

Laska shook her head, trying to clear the fog that seemed to have gripped her mind. She was still wearing her gown and had obviously had a very disturbed night. Only one thing for it.

She climbed off the bed, throwing the documents and papers to the floor – plenty of time to tidy up later – and padded into the shower room. Still not sure if she was awake or asleep she approached the cubicle. She got the shower going and made herself jump straight in.

The jet of water was so cold she'd swear there was crushed ice in it. She certainly *swore*, streams of Anglo-Saxon to irritate her neighbours and some guttural noises that were just right in the circumstances. But at least it seemed to have kick-started her brain. She was awake.

Hello world.

But where had she been, what had she dreamed of? As the water began to warm she closed her eyes and relaxed, waiting for the memories – the memories of a night full of dreams – to come.

A dog.

Her eyes snapped open, blinking against the water. She'd dreamed about a dog, a creature of darkness, as big as a man, with glowing eyes and breath like steam from some great engine.

She forced her eyes shut, waiting for her pounding heart to relax. What had happened? She could not remember. Where had she encountered the hound? At the Retreat, of course – it so dominated her waking and subconscious world she was sure she hadn't dreamed of anywhere else for months. But the place she had visited had been empty of people – just her, and the dog.

What had happened?

Her mind refused to divulge the information – and, the more she thought about the dream, the further it receded. Or, she thought, changing the analogy, the harder she tried to grasp the substance of her imaginings, the more it slipped away, like wet soap in the hand.

She shook her head against her own meanderings. She had to relax, but she had to concentrate as well. It wasn't just her daily ritual, her most overt attempt to contact her subconscious self – somewhere, deep in her mind, something was trying to tell her that last night had been. . . important. The image of the dog wasn't enough. There was more.

But it wouldn't come. The rest of the dream had slipped through her hands. Like soap. . .

Soap reminded her of shower gel and shampoo. Time to wash. Although she washed every morning she never quite felt clean, as if the very act of living deposited on to her skin layer upon layer of debilitating detritus. It was a barrier she tried to scrub away, but the dirt always seemed more than skin deep.

As Laska reached out for the shower gel she saw the grazes on her arms for the first time. Not the neat cuts that she was so used to, the ruler-straight marks of her own will, but something random, unpredictable. Ferocious and animal-like.

Unprompted, an image from the dream came back to her, the strength of it knocking her against the wall of the cubicle: the great, hairy head of the beast, the fur made rough by the elements and matted in wet chunks, lunging towards her. A thick paw arcing towards her, catching her on the arm. The taste of blood in her own mouth that swamped the familiar sensation of having been cut.

Then the dog enveloped her, sweeping over her like a shroud. Then – nothing. The end of the dream?

And yet she had not woken up with a start, as she was so often prone to do (a physiological reaction, someone had once tried to explain to her – to do with blood pressure or something). She had remained asleep – she was sure – for many hours; she had drifted back to reality, to her bed, only gradually, as if the dream had continued even after the savage attack of the dog.

Nonsense, of course – there was no connection between dreams and reality. Her dreaming insight into the geography of the Retreat before her arrival she

now attributed to luck, or having watched a documentary set in just such a house, or some exploration as a kid that she'd long forgotten about. Indeed, such was her reinterpretation of Dr Bartholomew's surprised reaction to her incredible perception that Laska now genuinely believed she'd got some elements of her description wrong, and that her egocentric recollection was not to be trusted.

She loved her dreams, and the freedom they insinuated, but there was no connection between her subconscious fantasies and reality. If she was sure of anything, she was sure of that.

She looked down at her arms again, at the water that flowed over every scar, every hair, every inch of too-pale and despised flesh. They certainly looked like scratches from an animal – nothing as savage as a great hound, of course, but as if some over-enthusiastic pet had taken a shine to a jumper and persisted in pushing its jagged claws into your body.

As she looked down – the water spiralling away from her, the soapy suds that were beginning to gather at her feet – she distractedly reached for her throat. She rarely wore anything around her neck, but within moments of putting it on, the dogtooth pendant felt like it *belonged*. It had become part of her, had brought comfort – but now it was gone.

She turned off the shower, all thoughts of the dog in her dreams now gone. Where the hell was the necklace? Still wet, she pulled on her gown and began searching through the clutter on the bed and floor. To have discovered it again, after all this time, only to lose it. . .

She simply had to find it.

'And did you?' asked James.

'No sign of it,' said Laska. 'I thought maybe I'd broken it, but. . . I pulled off the sheet, checked inside the quilt, under the bed. . . Nothing.'

They were sitting in a glass-covered communal area that looked towards a central courtyard. At some point – in the sixties, if the architecture was any guide – someone had knocked down the entire external wall of a redundant wide corridor and replaced it with glass. This would have been a commendable step, had not the new structure, like an emaciated conservatory, been north-facing. Worse still, it looked out at nothing more than other walls and windows of the Retreat. In more recent times someone had at least tidied up the courtyard, and a fountain sat in the middle, water bubbling over an abstract pile of rounded stones. 'All very Charlie Dimmock,' James had caustically observed on one occasion, 'but – and call me biased if you will – I think that money would have been better used, you know, on buying medicine or paying the staff.'

Laska didn't know why she'd told James about the missing necklace – it didn't amount to much, one item of misplaced jewellery, in the wider scheme of things. And yet its absence had niggled at her all morning, almost seeming to say – and at this point she knew she was overreacting – that this would be the first of many things that would go wrong.

James sat on a rattan sofa and watched the fountain. 'Do you know what my gran used to do?' he asked. 'If something went missing she'd get a pin and stick it in a cushion or something and shout out "I pin the devil" – and, it's weird, but it worked every time.'

Laska snorted. 'Child sacrifice and voodoo are next on my list.'

'Always thought it was a bit odd myself. Poor old God gets the blame for every hurricane and famine, but what's the Devil guilty of? Hiding last week's *Radio Times* and Gran's hair rollers.'

Laska looked at James closely, who seemed very relaxed and comfortable on the chair. Usually, when he was anywhere near her, he was like some sort of frightened animal, always glancing around to make sure they weren't being watched and bounding off into the distance at the slightest opportunity. 'Haven't you got a job to do?' she asked – and, as always, it came out more savagely than she'd intended.

'Ah, I'm running errands for one of the doctors at the moment,' he said. 'I've got a message for you. Now, I happen to know where you tend to come at this time of day – but I can quite legitimately say I was searching for you.'

'What message?'

James wasn't really listening. 'I don't know about you, but I reckon that Dr Smith's up to something. Him, and those so-called researchers of his. They're always whispering and flashing each other meaningful glances.'

'The message, James,' said Laska.

'Dr Smith wants to see you.'

'But he's not my doctor.'

'Do you know, the other day, he said, "I'm *everyone's* doctor". I wonder what he meant.'

Liz Bartholomew came into the staff room to find Dr Smith staring at the kettle, a look of unabashed concern on his handsome face. In front of him he had carefully placed a tiny china cup and three tea bags; he had brought over the Tupperware box that held the sugar, and a bottle of milk; he had filled the kettle with water. . .

Liz sighed. He'd forgotten to turn on the kettle. Again.

She came over to him and switched on the kettle at the wall. Dr Smith's face broke into a childlike grin when the little red light illuminated at the base of the kettle; he acknowledged her help with a curt nod, but seemed not to

be embarrassed by his need for assistance. That was Smith all over – brilliant one moment (his lengthy qualifications had been one of the first things she had noticed about his typewritten curriculum vitae), almost an idiot savant the next. Smith watched the bubbles through the glass sides of the kettle with a childlike fascination.

‘Good morning, Dr Bartholomew,’ he said, without looking her in the eye. ‘I trust you are well?’

Liz paused – how best to respond? With honesty, or with socially acceptable niceties? As she watched Smith staring at the boiling water she realised that he might have many failings, but an overreliance on social mores was not one of them.

‘To be honest, I’m feeling a hit under the weather.’

Smith looked up suddenly, the intensity of his eyes almost taking her by surprise. Perhaps that was why Smith avoided eye contact for extended periods – he knew only too well the effect he could have on people. ‘I am sorry to hear that,’ he said, and she knew that he meant it. ‘Can I get you something? I know just the thing for colds and sundry emergencies. I’ll need a fresh lemon, a pint of dry sherry, four banana leaves, an ounce of pure red saffron. . .’ He looked around him eagerly, but saw only discarded magazines and congealing coffee mugs. ‘Or perhaps I could just find some paracetamol,’ he added, apologetically.

‘No, I’m fine, thanks,’ said Liz, collapsing on to a sprawling armchair. She knew that she and Smith were on their own, but, even so, she glanced around the room as if searching for spying devices or concealed listeners. ‘I suppose,’ she said at last, ‘I’m just feeling that my life is running away from me. Do you ever feel like that?’

‘Frequently,’ said Smith. ‘And it’s hard enough to keep a track on one life, let alone. . .’ His words trailed away, distracted as he was by the kettle coming to the boil.

‘You’re talking about your students?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Smith, pouring the boiling water over the tea bags.

‘You do seem very close to them – almost protective,’ observed Liz.

‘Well,’ said Smith, ‘the phrase “mature student” – it can be a bit of a misnomer!’

‘Oh, indeed,’ said Liz, thinking of her own time at medical school. Perhaps medical college was unusual, but many of the students that she could remember with alcohol or study problems were indeed in their twenties or thirties. They had switched to medicine later in life, and seemed to revel in both the freedom and excitement of their new position, whereas – if anything – some of the students in their late teens were boring to a fault.

She remembered well her own feelings of optimism: back then anything seemed possible, and she did not know where she might end up, or what branch of medicine she might specialise in. She'd made some good friends at medical school, people that she shared the very essence of her life with. For all the hard academic work and never-ending hospital shifts, every day felt fresh and vibrant.

But now, she knew exactly where she was, what was expected of her, what she'd be doing this time tomorrow, next week, next year... Her life was not so much measured out in coffee spoons, like Prufrock, but in pages ticked off in a Filofax, and a drawer full of identical white M&S knickers. She had everything she had ever wanted from life – a loving husband, a steady job bringing income and security – and yet she felt drained and empty, as if there should be something more.

'It's good to see your closeness with your friends,' said Liz at last. 'From what I've observed, you obviously have a lot of time for each other.'

'You should see the arguments!' said Smith. 'Of course, their... interests... differ from mine, but ultimately... I suppose we do look out for each other.' He looked at her closely. 'I know you sometimes feel like packing it all in, handing over the reins to Dr Oldfield...'

'He's been niggling away at me for years,' agreed Liz. 'Sometimes I just feel too tired to argue against the man.'

'It's at those times when you desperately need to remember who you are.'

'And who is that?' asked Liz.

'You are a fine human being,' said Smith. 'You are an excellent doctor, a more than competent administrator. You have security, you are happily married... There is someone in your life who wishes only to see the world through your eyes, to experience everything that you do.'

'You've never been married, have you?' asked Liz, surprising herself with the bitterness audible in every syllable.

'No,' said Smith, moving over to the window with his coffee. 'Well, not as such. Or, at least... ' His words trailed away, leaving Liz Bartholomew to fill in numerous, ridiculous blanks (divorce? A tragic death? Bigamy?). 'I am an observer of such things,' he said grandly. 'I watch from afar. But I did not mean to imply criticism or condemnation.'

'I know you didn't,' said Liz hurriedly. 'I'm sorry.'

She joined Smith by the window, observing a couple of patients strolling through the grounds. Mrs Rogers sat at an easel, sketching the lawns and the trees, the folly in the distance; inspired by *Watercolour Challenge*, she had taken to patrolling the Retreat with paints and sketchbook in hand, though each end result looked identical, a sea of black, punctured by yellow and pink stars.

'I suppose what you said... It's what I aspire to. But this job, running the Retreat... I see Joe so little, and when I do, I'm knackered. I'm such poor company. I'm sure I talk more than I listen – Joe could have changed jobs for all I know!'

'And you haven't been intimate in weeks,' said Smith, without a trace of embarrassment – or, perhaps, comprehension. It was a statement, not a question.

Liz drew breath sharply – were her marital problems that obvious to all and sundry? Did people gossip about her, or had Joe confided in Smith at some point? But it was all a nonsense: Joe had never even met Dr Smith, so far as she knew, and there was not a trace of malice on Smith's face. He didn't strike her as a man with an ear for gossip.

Thomson chose that moment to burst in, whistling tunelessly. He glanced over at Smith and Liz and seemed immediately to pick up the atmosphere between the pair. 'Oh, I'm sorry,' he said. 'Would you like me to...?'

'No, no, no,' said Liz hurriedly, grateful for the interruption but now worrying that Thomson might think there was something going on between the two of them. 'We were just talking about one of the patients.'

'That's right,' said Smith, seamlessly – to the man's credit, he was playing along without a pause. 'Laska Darnell,' he continued, now almost taking Liz by surprise. 'I know she is technically your patient, Dr Thomson, but I admit I find the woman quite fascinating!'

'That's right,' said Liz limply. 'We were just discussing...'

And then she tailed away, not having a clue as to what they might have been talking about.

'She strikes me as being a player of games,' said Smith grandly. 'Very hard to perceive what's really going on in that brilliant mind of hers.'

'That's about the size of it,' said Thomson. 'Will the real Caroline Darnell please stand up?' He paused, considering his next words carefully. 'Actually, under that couldn't-give-a-toss exterior, I reckon there's a little girl who just wants people to be nice to her.'

'I think that's what we all want, Dr Thomson,' said Smith.

Liz realised that Mike Thomson was looking at her with narrowed eyes, alert to every nuance of inflection and body language. 'You all right, Liz?' he asked.

Liz thought about opening up to him as well, but remembered Smith's puzzling, insightful reaction. She forced on her broadest, more relaxed smile. 'I'm fine,' she said.

Being told that Dr Smith wanted a word with you was one thing; actually finding him was quite another. Laska knocked on the door of Smith's office and, when she was sure it was empty, risked a look inside. The room was

awash with paper, boxes and books; there wouldn't have been anywhere to sit, even if Smith had been there. Next she tried the sports hall (a rather grand phrase for a room in the old stable block that contained a snooker table with too few balls and a ping-pong table with none at all) and the other communal areas, and then finally the staff room and the kitchens. No one she spoke to had seen him for hours.

She was beginning to wonder how on earth James had managed to contrive an encounter with Dr Smith. A dark thought crossed her mind – it was no mere coincidence, perhaps, that he had picked on James for this 'errand'. If Smith had specifically sought James then somehow he must know of James's relationship with Laska, and if he knew... Then at best James faced the sack, and Laska...

But hiring and firing wasn't Smith's job, which meant that either he didn't know – or he simply hadn't told Dr Bartholomew yet.

Nothing for it but to hunt the man down, find out what he wanted, discover whether he did know and was maybe open to some form of blackmail – or, just possibly, that he simply wanted a chat about nothing in particular, and that Laska's paranoia had got the better of her again. She pushed her way through the dark panelled doors of reception and out on to the gravel driveway. Past the ornamental garden, and then over to the left, almost halfway between the main building and the huge gateway on the edge of the grounds, she came upon the cottage, a beautiful Victorian confection, part gamekeeper's lodge, part fairy-tale chalet and built, doubtless, with the callused, underpaid, underage hands of long-dead workers.

She paused for a moment. Why could she take nothing at face value? Why couldn't she just enjoy the building for what it was instead of always seeking out the worst in it? It was a most unappealing character trait.

She knew the answer instantly: she hated 'face value', surfaces, coverings, veneer. She hated hypocrisy. What was under the surface might not be pretty, but at least it was honest.

Honest.

The word rang through her mind. Just how honest are you, Laska? Did you tell James about your dream, about the great dog thing that you imagined had attacked you? Do you ever answer a straight question without first weighing up a range of possible answers, without first asking what is the best reply, *in the circumstances*?

She was honest, but only up to a point. More than all these things, Laska was scared.

She banged on the cottage door firmly, trying to concentrate on what she was going to say, trying to bring her spinning thoughts under control... Trying to remember if she'd taken her medication that morning.

The young man called Fitz answered the door. He was tall and gangling, all uncombed hair and five o'clock shadow. He had a certain disreputable charm, a fag hanging out of one corner of his mouth.

He wafted the smoke away, his features breaking into a smile 'Thank goodness for that!' he exclaimed, waving Laska into the room. 'Thought it was the Doctor!'

'The Doctor?' queried Laska.

'Smith,' added Fitz quickly. 'Of course. Yes, Dr Smith. I just call him "The Doctor", it saves me from. . . Well, anyway, he doesn't approve of me smoking in the house.'

The living room into which they walked was like Smith's office, writ large. Extravagant trappings – a miniature chandelier, gothic wrought-iron curtain poles, gilt-framed portraits of stern Edwardian gentlemen – were dwarfed and masked by an amorphous mass of *clutter*. Expensive-looking books supported computer monitors, seemingly tuned to dead television channels; pizza boxes, each one containing a half-eaten Meat Feast and annotated cuttings from newspapers, formed a trail from here to the kitchen (Laska thought again of fairy tales, and whether slices of pizza would be a good substitute for breadcrumbs if trapped in a dark, modernist forest). A paper aeroplane had become lodged behind one of the portraits, and in the centre of the room stood a full-size plastic skeleton, hanging limply in its stand. Someone had written all sorts of anatomical notes on it in felt-tip. Someone else – she knew in a moment it was Fitz – had written *bonce* on the cranium, and *naughty bits* on the pelvic girdle.

'The Retreat has a strict no-smoking policy,' said Laska, still trying to come to terms with the room.

'Indeed it does. And quite right too,' said Fitz, puffing away on his cigarette.

'I never smoke, of course. Not tobacco, anyway.' She stared at Fitz, expecting some of reaction.

Nothing. Not a sausage.

'I gather most of the smokers meet out at the back of the house,' observed Fitz, trying to make some room to sit down. 'I suppose I should join them some time – get all the gossip, you know.'

'And what sort of gossip would you be interested in?'

Fitz chuckled. 'Anything involving good-looking nurses who haven't got boyfriends.'

'You go for that sexy uniform thing, do you?'

Fitz grinned. 'You show me a man who doesn't and I'll show you a big, fat liar.'

'But those tights they wear – so not sexy! Now, stockings on the other hand. . .'

She couldn't believe it – from nowhere, she was *flirting* with him. And Laska wasn't the sort of girl to go flirting with just any old Tom, Dick or Harriet. Was this what Fitz wanted? Was this what she had perceived in him, was already reflecting back to him?

'Well, you know what they say – *anything in a uniform, or out of it, preferably.*' Fitz smiled again but concentrated very hard on extinguishing his cigarette on what appeared to be a jam-jar lid. It was as if his own nature meant that he couldn't help but be interested in Laska, but he was actually under strict orders to not do anything. . . stupid.

Or maybe, Laska thought, I'm just deluding myself and he'd go for anyone with blue hair.

'When's Dr Smith due back?' she asked.

'Any minute now,' replied Fitz. 'You know how some people get itchy feet, can't bear being in the same place for more than five minutes? That's him all over.'

'You've been here, what, five months or so now?'

'Something like that,' said Fitz vaguely. 'Time flies, you know. When you're with the Doctor. . . Dr Smith. . . You pack a lot in. Sometimes days feel like weeks, other times months pass by in the blink of an eye.'

'I know that feeling,' said Laska. 'I don't wear a watch any more. Sometimes I'd rather go with my instincts than do something just because a piece of silicon tells me to.'

That wasn't strictly true. She had a clock in her room, which she used to strictly regulate her medication, though after this morning's events – the awful dream about the dog, losing the necklace, now this meeting with one of the doctors – she was starting to think she needed some sort of back-up system. But why did it bother her so? She guessed that, for all her hatred of medical intervention, of interminable questioning and pumping your bloodstream with God knows what, she knew that the drugs she was taking *were* helping to keep her focused and steady. Alternatively, perhaps she was already becoming dependent on them – and the mere thought of having to cope on her own, without the medication, was disturbing her more than she had thought possible.

Fitz had finally cleared enough space for them both to sit. 'I take it you got the Doctor's message?'

'No disrespect, but I wouldn't be here otherwise.'

'Of course, no.' He looked at her closely for the first time in a while. Perhaps he saw something of her fear. 'Don't worry, he just wants a chat,' he said reassuringly.

'I'm Dr Thomson's patient.'

‘Oh, I know,’ said Fitz. (Laska couldn’t work out how or why he would know that – he was supposed to be a student of medical history or something – but she let it pass.) ‘He just likes to meet all the patients. Even after all this time he realises there are still patients he’s not really acquainted with.’

‘I’m sure he’s very busy.’

‘You don’t know the half of it!’ he snorted – and then stopped, as if he’d said something out of turn. ‘Er, anyway...’ he added pointlessly, staring around the room as if he hoped to find something to change the subject.

He didn’t, and an embarrassing pause developed, Fitz fiddling with a shoe lace and Laska trying hard not to give in to her feelings of irritation.

‘So, how are things at the nut-house?’ exclaimed Fitz suddenly, his voice like a chiming grandfather clock against the growing silence.

Laska coughed involuntarily. ‘You what?’

‘I mean the Retreat. The hospital.’

‘Same old same old,’ said Laska, still not believing what she’d just heard.

‘Trix and I feel a bit out of touch here,’ continued Fitz, apparently ignorant of Laska’s reaction and the un-PC danger he’d just dropped.

(Laska couldn’t help but smile. Bollocks to political correctness.)

‘It’s all right for the Doctor, he’s part of what’s going on down there, but Trix and me...’ He trailed away. ‘Perhaps I should come and gatecrash one of your therapy sessions.’ He tapped the side of his head, looking momentarily bewildered and lost. ‘But you know, the amount of weird junk I’ve got in here, I’m not sure they’d let me out again.’

He was in full flow now, the words tumbling from his lips with barely a thought for who was sat next to him.

‘Or maybe I’ll help out with the security guards one night – they always seem to be short on numbers. You wouldn’t think there was much to do, but I was talking to this chap the other day, and he said –’

Fitz paused. From the kitchen there came the strangest, most haunting noise Laska had ever heard, like a grand piano falling down the stairs. In slow motion. The elephantine sighing concluded with a muffled thump, like an explosive blast from a distant quarry.

Fitz tried to carry on talking as though nothing was the matter but it was obvious that he was as relieved to hear the noise as Laska was intrigued by it. ‘Of course, the problem’s not so much trying to keep patients in,’ he was saying, ‘as keeping local schoolboys out...’

‘That’s another loose end tied up,’ came a precise and dignified voice from the doorway. ‘Now we’ve just got to...’ The voice belonged to Dr Smith, and his words trailed away when he realised that Fitz was not on his own. Momentarily this seemed to unsettle him, but then, remembering his manners,

he strode forward with a politely outstretched arm. 'My dear, so pleased to see you.'

The icy blonde Trix followed in his wake, glaring accusingly at Fitz. Laska spotted a half-hearted shrug from Fitz, a *Well, what else was I supposed to do?* gesture.

'You were talking about loose ends,' said Laska, briefly taking and then sliding from Smith's grip. She felt in the mood for turning the screw, even if she didn't know what Smith had been about to say, or why he had suddenly stopped. 'Am I one of your loose ends, Dr Smith?'

'Well, that has yet to be seen,' said Smith. Though the words were flippant and throwaway the tone was much more serious. 'I assume young Mr Abel managed to get hold of you?'

Laska's eyes narrowed – was this it, the start of the subtext, the start of a bargaining process hidden behind synonyms? But Smith's face was as open and as unchanged as before – if he was a poker player, he was a good one, though perhaps as likely to fool himself as his opponents.

Laska settled on a safe, meaningless nod.

'I just wanted to say "Hello",' said Smith. 'I've barely had time to speak to you since you were admitted.'

'That's OK,' said Laska, reduced to meaningless phrases because she couldn't yet work out the rules of this particular engagement. Should she play the role of the needy patient, the sulking teenager, the heroine imprisoned against her will? At least, when she'd been half flirting with Fitz, she knew what was expected of her.

'I was very struck, when first we met,' continued Smith, 'that you said you had dreamt of the Retreat. You knew the place intimately, and yet you had never been there before.'

'Lucky guess,' said Laska blandly, wondering where this was going.

'Oh hardly,' said Smith. He looked at her so intensely that Laska had to glance away. 'We shouldn't just dismiss our dreams, you know. Especially in a place like this. When our defences are down, our subconscious can finally get through to us.'

'You're a Freudian?' queried Laska.

Smith carried on as if he had not heard her, like a visiting academic ignoring an unruly pupil in the front row. 'The ancients, of course, concluded that our dreams are the gods – or other supernatural powers – trying to communicate with us.'

'A Jungian then,' said Laska.

'Jung, Freud, Lacan how I hate labels!' exclaimed Smith with sudden passion. 'Pigeonholes, categories, genres, marks out of ten – how they limit potential, ring-fence freedom, stamp on individuality...' He sat next to Laska –

straight on to a sheaf of papers and documents – and beamed a fatherly smile. ‘One morning I might believe one thing, one evening another – isn’t that what being alive is all about? The freedom to make mistakes in this wonderful, expansive, inexplicable cosmos!’

‘That’s one definition of being human, I suppose,’ said Laska.

‘Human. Yes, I suppose.’ There was a hint of disappointment in Smith’s voice, as if even ‘humanity’ might be a limiting factor in the worldview he was proposing.

‘So you don’t believe in objective truth?’ queried Laska more confidently – she knew where she was now, what was expected of her. A philosophical discussion.

‘Of course I believe in truth!’ exclaimed Smith hotly. ‘Good and evil, justice and prejudice, freedom and slavery – you cannot help but yearn for objectivity in such areas.’ He indicated the room in which they sat, the impassive forms of Fitz and Trix who exchanged long-suffering glances, the trees beyond the window, bent by the wind. ‘But here, in this world we know, we have only subjectivity. We each of us muddle through, as best we can.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ asked Laska. If she had to put the look on Trix’s face into words, it would doubtless be the same question.

‘Over the next few days... I don’t want you to dismiss anything out of hand. Don’t pigeonhole what you see, don’t trivialise what you dream. And, please, if you want to talk about anything... You know where I am.’

Laska didn’t have a clue what Smith was on about. She might have quizzed him further, but in this conversation Smith was the one with the authority, the power, the potential, along with the other doctors, to influence Laska’s very future. Best keep schtum. ‘I’ll... I’ll bear that in mind,’ she said, getting to her feet.

‘Is there anything you’d like to tell me, before you leave?’ asked Smith.

Laska thought of her pendant, seemingly vanished off the face of the earth, the dog that had hunted her through her dreams, the scratches on her arms that she couldn’t remember making. Then she turned for the door.

‘No, nothing,’ she said.

Eight

Cellar Door

(The Place You Fear the Most)

Laska retreated back to the sanctuary of her room, turning Smith's words over and over in her mind. She didn't know what to make of the man, much less his sudden concern for her. When he spoke to her he seemed to be talking on so many levels that she simply couldn't establish what he knew and what he *wanted* to know. His queries sounded like statements and his assertions like riddles. It was as if he was intimately familiar with Laska – her family, her way of looking at the world, her future even – yet still was powerless unless she gave him permission to proceed.

Proceed to do what? She interrogated herself further: what *did* he know? What could he know, or have surmised? Did he realise that she was having a relationship with James, or was it all just conjecture on his part or paranoia on hers? Did he – somehow – know about the missing pendant, about Laska's horrifying dreams of savage, degenerate hounds?

In any case, why was he so suddenly interested in her? She'd been bumping into him in the corridors and grounds for weeks and he'd barely said 'Hello' before. Now, after one dream about some black dogs, Smith was suddenly asking difficult questions, Fitz was trying to flirt with her (or was it the other way round?), and the blonde woman, Trix... Well, she and Fitz had very much kept themselves to themselves after their arrival at the Retreat, rarely leaving their cottage or the library. Now they seemed to be everywhere, Fitz patrolling the gardens and lawns with the security guards, Trix getting pally with the nurses... And Dr Smith had gone to the effort of arranging a meeting with Laska only to dribble on about the importance of belief and truth in the modern world.

Just before Laska had left Smith had tried another tack. 'Do you ever feel the need to tidy up a room – *really* tidy it, right down to the things that have been there so long, you've almost forgotten to see them? And have you noticed how you normally emerge from that tidying process feeling better, more positive? As if you've made a fresh start. And yet, from one point of view, what difference does it make, if you tidy a single room of your house?

Does it feed the poor, establish world peace, bring order to a chaotic cosmos?' Smith had shaken his head, still for all the world talking as much to himself as to Laska. 'Of course it doesn't – and yet we still experience the compulsion to try to put things right.'

By this point, Fitz was hanging on his every word; Trix looked as if she had heard it all before.

'My time here,' said Smith, indicating the Retreat, 'perhaps will not amount to much – though I say that not out of arrogance, but out of honesty. And yet, I still feel that there's some good to be done here – the chance to make a difference to a few lives.' Smith nodded triumphantly. 'Sometimes that's all you can do.'

'You make yourself sound like Superman,' said Laska, irritated by Smith's manner. 'And this week you're going to save one or two poor souls instead of stopping Lex Luthor blowing up the world!'

Smith only seemed to take Laska's flippant, almost sarcastic, words at face value. Smith had beamed, as if Laska had just uttered a declaration of intent with which Smith wholeheartedly agreed. 'That's it, my dear – that's absolutely right. A lovely analogy.' He turned his eyes towards her again. 'It's vital that you know,' he continued, 'those "poor souls", as you put it – they're as fundamental to me as anything, or anyone else. For too long now I've been concentrating on the "bigger picture", as you might say. Sometimes the details are just as important.'

Laska supposed that Smith meant that, although his interest in her was professional, it was motivated in no small part by his compassion. Well, bully for him.

Now she sat in her room, waiting for the irritation she had felt to boil away. She analysed and re-analysed the surreal conversation over and over, wondering if shades and tones of meaning remained to be extracted.

She walked to the window. The books and papers were still scattered across the floor. She realised that Smith's sudden interest in her had coincided not just with the dream, and the pendant, but with her opening her father's case and beginning to read the old diaries within. How on earth could they be connected to anything that Smith might be interested in? She glanced down at the turn-of-the-century doctor's diary; she was surprised how engaged she had been by the events it described. Something had drawn her on, and would doubtless draw her back to them tonight, turning pages of spider's scrawl that smelled of ages long gone.

She knew it wasn't normal to dwell on such things, to go over every conversation and encounter searching for evidence and additional information. Her inability to take even the most trivial conversation at face value had, apparently, been a symptom of her mental illness; when she had returned to

her room after seeing Smith the first thing she'd done was check her medication. But she was up-to-date with her tablets; perhaps the nagging unease that Laska felt had another cause.

Her introspection was disturbed by a sudden flicker of movement, from somewhere in the ornamental garden that her room looked over. Welcoming any distraction from her relentless analysis, Laska shifted her attention – there, over by the hedge that framed the fountain that had seen better days.

The hedge, once a topiarist's delight, was now a ragged mass of olive and green fragments, kept in check from time to time but often allowed to sprawl and grow as it saw fit. It ran at right angles to the side of the building, coming to an untidy halt at a point almost directly below Laska's window.

Further up, under the leaves and knotted wood, something appeared to be moving. Branches shook, then became still. Doubtless a stray cat or a fox or something, hugging the cover afforded by the base of the hedge.

Whatever it was, it was coming towards the building, stealthily advancing in the insipid, overcast gloom. A gradual wave of greenery and movement was drawing near. Laska looked further down the hedge, saw a ragged hole through which the creature would have to advance, and fixed her eyes on that spot.

In a rush, as if it knew that it was being observed, the animal passed through the exposed area, revealing only a flash of black or silver hair, and the faintest impression of a great, fur-covered skull.

Laska's eyes widened – had she really seen it? That thing, the dog from her dream, forging a path towards the Retreat, pushing its way through the undergrowth as surely as it made its way from the dream world to reality?

No, she had to be mistaken: it must have been a fox, as she had initially thought, made grey and large by the dim fluctuations of a cloud-weakened sun. It *had* to be. . .

She moved her eyes further down the hedge, to where the creature would surely have to emerge into plain view – but the entire length of hedge was motionless now.

Laska continued to stand at the window, watching the ornamental garden, as the sky darkened further into evening.

'You *have* been busy today.'

James turned. As always with Dr Oldfield, his words carried a hint of sarcastic menace, blurring the boundaries between polite enquiry and condemnation. James reminded himself that, whatever Oldfield's position in the place, he was answerable first and foremost to Dr Bartholomew, even if Oldfield tried to imply something different.

The patients have been keeping me on my toes. A couple of them reckon they've seen intruders in the grounds.'

Oldfield nodded, a hand rubbing his colourless chin. 'Indeed. And one of my patients has claimed to have seen a black panther in the orchard – just like the Beast of Bodmin, she said.' Oldfield perched casually on one of the sofas, as stiff and out of place as a bowler-hatted businessman at a Limp Bizkit gig.

'Nonsense, of course,' said James. Security, or the perceived lack of it, was always one of Oldfield's bugbears; James couldn't bear the thought that Oldfield might conclude that there was some truth in these wild claims.

'Of course,' agreed Oldfield. 'Though I am interested to note that Dr Smith seems keen to investigate these allegations, and others. You'd almost think him a detective, the way he's going round questioning the patients. And those two students of his! It can't be right to even begin to imply that these delusions are verifiable.'

'I suppose,' said James. He came over to his seat with a mug of coffee. He pointedly didn't ask Dr Oldfield if he'd like one.

'I'm told he's kept you busy today as well,' said Oldfield as he precisely unfolded his newspaper. 'Our mysterious Dr Smith. . .'

James shrugged. 'He just wanted to fit in a couple of extra patients.'

'Miss Darnell is one of Dr Thomson's patients. Most irregular.'

James worked hard at not expressing his surprise at Oldfield's mention of Laska. 'I'm sure Dr Thomson doesn't mind.'

Oldfield snorted. 'One of many things that could be sorted out with a little more thought – demarcation of patient care.' James knew that what Oldfield really meant was *This is one of the things I'd sort out, if I were in charge*. 'Waste of time and resources. Take young Miss Darnell, for instance.' As Oldfield's eyes bored into him, James couldn't help but wonder if he *knew* – after all, the man did seem incredibly well informed. 'Dr Thomson has told me that, though she's made progress, he doesn't expect to be in a position to recommend her release for at least another two or three months.'

James stopped what he was doing. When he'd spoken to Laska the day before she'd implied that Thomson was only expecting her to stay at the Retreat for a few more weeks at most.

'There's no point Dr Smith wasting his time and energy on her, at this stage, when perhaps in a month or two she might be more receptive, if you follow me.'

James sipped his coffee but said nothing. Frankly, he wanted to finish off his drink as quickly as he could, and then contrive some reason to leave. Dr Oldfield was not normally the sort of man to enjoy a relaxing coffee break; every moment of every waking day, it seemed, had to be work-orientated.

He hadn't wandered into the staff room by accident; James suspected some ulterior motive, and probably a grim one at that.

As the silence grew – the silence of two men with nothing in common and nothing of consequence to say – it seemed that the same thoughts were running through Oldfield's mind. He cleared his throat a few times, turned towards James conspiratorially, then returned to his newspaper. Finally he looked over and coughed again.

'Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you. Concerning Dr Thomson and Dr Bartholomew... It's good to see them getting on so well.'

'It doesn't hurt to get on with people you work with,' said James cautiously.

'You're right – a pleasant working environment is to the benefit of each one of us, especially in this particular branch of medicine. Sometimes, those two – well, "thick as thieves" hardly covers it! I almost imagine that their paths had crossed before they worked here – perhaps they trained at the same college or some such.'

James shrugged. 'I don't know. Mike has never mentioned it, if that's the case.'

'I was forgetting, you play badminton with Dr Thomson every week, don't you?'

James narrowed his eyes. Oldfield hadn't forgotten at all – he was fishing for something. 'We don't really talk about work,' said James.

'Oh?' Oldfield's feigned interest was as artificial as the colour of his hair.

'If you must know, we talk about sport mainly. And *Top Gear*. And the real ale they serve at the local.'

'And Dr Thomson never talks about Dr Bartholomew? About her work before she came to the Retreat?'

James shook his head and got to his feet. 'Mike's a very sore loser. Most weeks I thrash him. Afterwards, he doesn't want to talk about anything else.'

Laska checked the coast was clear – though she wasn't quite sure what the hell she was expecting to see in the corridor outside her room. She was certain of one thing, though: she'd been cooped up there all afternoon and it wasn't doing her any good.

She made her way down a couple of flights of stairs, along a corridor that smelled faintly of fresh paint, and towards the chapel. The chapel sat in the basement of the Retreat, surrounded by storerooms and old filing cabinets. As a consequence, it relied entirely on artificial light and a small team of volunteers to keep it tidy and bring what little warmth they could to the place. The harsh walls and unrelenting strip light were softened by silk drapes and intermittent candles. Rows of functional pews faced a simple wooden lectern

and a huge cross of oak; at the base of the cross someone had placed a Post-it note of scribbled, desperate prayers.

Laska sat down, rubbing her hands against the cold.

'Do you come here often?'

Laska turned – it seemed she couldn't get away from Smith today. He was standing at the back of the room, arms folded behind his hack, apparently ignorant of the neutered chat-up line he had just uttered.

'Yes. When I want to get away from people.'

As usual, Smith missed the point. 'Me too.' He sat on a seat a couple of rows behind Laska, half turned towards her, half regarding the lectern and the great book it effortlessly bore. 'And yet I face a problem. Every time I come down here, a chill grips me. There is something in my subconscious that warns me not to stay. It's something in the atmosphere – like a static electricity, you can almost taste it.'

'Doesn't bother me,' said Laska.

'Perhaps it's just me, then,' said Smith. 'An admonition given substance by fear itself!'

'Then why do you come?'

'It's intriguing, I don't understand it. . . And I never give in to my fears.'

'There's a place for you, writing those mottos you find in crackers,' observed Laska sharply.

'I won't intrude on your quiet reflection any longer,' said Smith, suddenly getting to his feet. Laska didn't know if he'd finally felt the venomous intent behind Laska's words, or if he simply remembered a meeting he had elsewhere. 'I was wondering though. . .'

Laska waited for a while, but nothing else came. 'Yes?' she snapped.

'Dr Thomson tells me you tend not to attend any of the group therapy sessions he organises.'

'“Tend not to”? That's one way of putting it. I never go.'

'Why would that be?'

'What, sit in a cold, draughty room listening to a bunch of nutcases droning on and on about how Daddy abused them when they were six? I've got better things to do than see patterns in ink blots or tell *anyone* about my childhood.'

'I would be fascinated to hear about your childhood,' said Smith. 'Perhaps in a different context.' As always, the man seemed irritatingly sanguine in the face of Laska's hatred of the Retreat and all that it stood for.

'What's the point? It's about one step away from crystals and all that New Age bollocks.'

'It will help you get better. And the sooner you get better, the sooner you can go home.'

'Dr Thomson said I could go home any time I wanted.'

‘He may be right,’ said Smith. ‘But I’m inclined to think you will find that harder than you imagine.’

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘Gracious, no,’ said Smith. ‘I have no bearing on your release, one way or the other. I was simply thinking... If you don’t know where home is, if you have no place in which you can truly be yourself... Just where are you trying to escape to?’

‘My father’s house. I inherited it when he died.’

‘Are you happy there?’

‘I have been.’

Laska paused, about to say more.

But no, that would be playing into Smith’s hands. She wouldn’t reveal the truth about herself that easily.

‘Look, the important thing is that I get out of here,’ said Laska. ‘I’ll listen to good advice when it comes my way – like when Dr Thomson said I should stay here a bit longer. Fine, I’ll go along with that for the moment.’ Unblinking and defiant, she stared at Smith’s unfathomable face. ‘But nothing is more important to me than leaving the Retreat.’ She paused, a sudden image of the dog she had seen – or thought she had seen – flashing across her vision. ‘Absolutely nothing,’ she said again.

Laska had arranged to meet James in the ornamental gardens when his shift ended. He’d complained that Fitz had taken to following him around – ‘spying’ was the word he’d used – and so a neutral venue seemed to be a sensible suggestion. Laska had grown weary of the brooding atmosphere of the chapel: even after Smith’s departure something of the man’s nature still lingered, almost palpable in the air. She had gone there, hoping that the place might bring her closer to her father, but had left, unsure if she really desired such an encounter with sensations and feelings so inextricably linked to her past.

As she turned to walk away she saw that one of the thick black curtains that normally screened off the true extent of the basement’s cavernous area stood open slightly; beyond it, lit only by the scattered light of the candles in the chapel, were angular blocks of deeper darkness. She could not tell if they were sarcophagi, or natural slabs of stone, or some part of the foundations of the building.

She didn’t want to know, either.

She hurried out to the gardens. It took her a few moments to realise that, without thinking, she had been creeping slowly and quietly forward, hugging the shade cast by the tall bottle-green hedges. She knew that her relationship with James had made her edgy and furtive, but she also realised that wasn’t

the whole story: creeping around, hoping not to be discovered, came naturally to her.

She was just about to step out into the open – after all, she had nothing to hide, she was simply enjoying a walk in the grounds – when she heard hushed voices from the other side of the hedge. Something about the tone of those voices – that heady mixture of the secretive and the couldn't-care-less – that Laska recognised only too well. She found herself leaning towards the voices, the hairs on the back of her neck rising, feeling excitement and guilt in equal measure.

It was clear that Laska and James were not the only people to use the gardens for a secretive rendezvous.

'You should have gone straight to see your darling wife,' said the woman. There was both serious concern and playful defiance in her voice.

At first Laska did not recognise the woman. It was, she supposed, one of the female nurses who, in Laska's mind, became a single patronising, peroxidised gestalt entity.

'You worry too much,' said the man.

Laska had to think long and hard before she could put a face to the male voice, and then at last it came. She'd only met him once, when she'd been reading in the south-facing lounge and he'd been waiting for Dr Bartholomew to finish some interminable meeting with the local council.

It was Joe Bartholomew, Liz's husband.

She remembered him as being square-jawed and darkly handsome, the sort of good-looking man only just the right side of obvious arrogance. He was some years younger than Liz and had almost seemed to play up to this, larking about with the nurses and reading out their horoscopes in a mock falsetto.

'It's all right for you,' the woman was saying. 'You don't have to work with her every day.'

Unbidden, a name came to Laska's mind: Susannah. Susannah something. Friendly enough and young enough to be attractive, Laska supposed, but not a patch on the dignified and elegant Elizabeth Bartholomew. But then, maybe that was what Joe was searching for – something different, and if she comes with her own uniform and a good pair of knockers, so much the better.

Joe whispered something to the woman – Laska could just make out Susannah giggling – and then their voices began to recede away and back towards the Retreat.

Laska pressed herself into the rough sanctuary of the hedge, waiting for them to disappear completely from sight – she could just see their backs as they made their way along a path of smooth cobbles – before she resumed her walk to the fountain.

Joe and Susannah appeared to lean into each other as they walked; this intimacy was even more revealing than the snatched excerpt from their conversation. It was obvious what she had stumbled upon. The question was, what, if anything, she should do with this information – and if, indeed, it was any of her business.

She found James sitting on a wrought-iron bench, his back to one of the hedges. The area that surrounded the fountain was sufficiently far from the spot chosen by Joe Bartholomew and the nurse to mean that he wouldn't have heard anything; even so, the resonance of two clandestine meetings in so close a proximity made Laska more nervous than ever.

Laska sat on the other end of the bench, pointedly some distance from James – as if some third party were watching from the crisscrossed hedges. She thought momentarily of the dog creature, then turned her mind to other things and forced a smile.

'Been busy?' she asked.

'The usual,' said James. There was a look in his eyes that Laska thought she recognised; the look of someone who wants to keep conversation simple, so that some secret won't spill out. 'I've just escaped from a close encounter with Dr Oldfield,' he added, too casually for Laska's liking.

'What did he want?'

'Just snooping for information,' said James. 'Sounds like he's trying to get some dirt on Dr Bartholomew.'

'Do you think he has some?' queried Laska, still preoccupied with what she'd heard Joe Bartholomew saying.

'Haven't got a clue,' said James. 'Anyway, I'm only a nurse – never get involved in medical politics, that's my motto.'

'You never seem to say much about what you hear,' said Laska. 'I sometimes think you're keeping me in the dark.'

'I'd tell you anything that involved you,' countered James – again, a little too automatically for Laska's liking. 'But, honestly, I just keep my head down. It's safer that way.' He looked around nervously, as if Laska's own fears and uncertainties were rubbing off on him. 'Especially at a time like this,' he added. 'I feel that...'. He paused again, avoiding eye contact with Laska. 'There's something going on, stuff happening in the background that perhaps I don't even *want* to know about.'

Remembering Joe Bartholomew's guilty conversation with the nurse, and Dr Smith's recent pronouncements, Laska reached out for James's hand. He seemed surprised at this unannounced boldness.

'I know,' she said, with a smile.

* * *

Joe Bartholomew and Susannah Harvey pushed open the door and staggered inside, giggling like guilty children.

Beneath their feet was that morning's post. Susannah bent down to pick up the letters and bills. 'Sorry,' she breathed.

'Doesn't matter,' said Joe.

Susannah handed over the post. 'Top one's got a health trust postmark,' she commented casually.

'Must be for Liz.'

'It's got your name on it, babe.'

'A mistake, then. Don't you hate it when that happens? I had a credit-card invitation for my dog once.'

'Don't tell me, you've never owned a dog,' said Susannah.

Joe turned on the main light and pulled off his coat, draping it over the back of a sofa. 'Drink?'

'Go on, then,' said Susannah. She found the remote, switched on the television, settled down to watch the news.

Joe pulled the bottle of champagne from the fridge – that would need replacing in the morning – and uncorked it swiftly. The cork exploded from the neck of the glass bottle and arced through the air, landing somewhere in the corner near the earthenware pot of utensils. Damn, he'd have to find that. Couldn't leave a trace.

Later.

He swept back into the room, hurriedly cleaned flutes in one hand and the bottle in the other.

Susannah looked up and grinned, a big, earthy smile that warmed his heart. 'That stuff goes straight to my head,' she said.

'That's the idea.'

'You don't have to get me drunk,' she commented. 'I am very likely to end up in bed with you anyway.'

Joe grinned, pouring out the champagne.

'Sit down,' said Susannah. 'Let's take it easy.'

Joe did as he was told. 'The thought of going to bed with a beautiful woman... It always makes me a touch excited!'

'Your wife is a beautiful woman.'

Just for a moment the atmosphere faltered. Joe's face stiffened.

'Still, I've got one thing she's not got,' added Susannah lightly. She pulled open her coat; she still had her nurse's uniform on, but tugged up the skirt to reveal black stockings underneath. 'A little imagination goes a long way.'

Joe passed her a glass. 'Drink up,' he said.

* * *

It was almost dark by the time Laska returned to her room. The clouds, which all day had been the colour of lead and ash, were now split with gashes of sullen red. The ribbons of the sunset reminded Laska of the tiny cuts that had appeared on her pale arms, which she had successfully hidden all day. Only now, when she once more found the sanctuary of her room, did she feel able to give in to the itching that she had been ignoring all day.

Away from prying eyes, she vigorously rubbed her lower arms. The marks had almost completely vanished, but she felt them as keenly as when she first noticed them.

She turned over and over in her mind what she had discovered about Joe Bartholomew, wondering at the synchronicity of it all. Smith was suddenly asking questions about her, her upbringing, her father; James had said that Oldfield seemed interested in Liz Bartholomew's past, before she came to the Retreat. Liz's husband Joe was clearly having an affair; Laska herself was involved in a secret relationship with a member of staff. And there, in the garden, overlooked by the looming bulk of the old Victorian house, all the threads had threatened to come together, as if someone with an eye for the absurd had planned some epic encounter, some sequence of unfolding revelations.

The most important question she had to ask herself was, did Liz deserve to know that her husband was playing away from home? The answer was, clearly, yes – any woman, any person, shouldn't have to endure such deceit. On the other hand, was Laska the right person to tell Liz Bartholomew? And would she be believed in any event?

'Dr Bartholomew? Do you realise your husband is bonking one of the nurses?'

'Don't talk rubbish! What makes you say that?'

'I overheard them talking in the garden.'

'And they came out and said that, did they?'

'Not as such, no. But I'm sure I'm right, and I'm sure I'm not just imagining things.'

'I'll be the judge of that.'

How do you tell someone, ensconced in an ongoing, committed relationship in which there should be no secrets or lies, that their partner is betraying them with more than just words? And how did that make Laska feel about her relationship with James? Was he committed to her, prepared to stand with her and support her when she was finally released – or was he just out for what he could get, a quick and easy alternative to on-line porn? She knew she took a pretty dim view of men, and their lusts, and her encounter with Joe Bartholomew hadn't exactly made that outlook any more positive.

She padded through to the bathroom and started the water running, then returned to the main room, running her fingers along the alphabetically sorted

CDs. She angled the hi-fi's speakers towards the bathroom and sank into the warm water.

From where she lay Laska could see the dark night sky through the window. The grey clouds had faded away to the horizon; now a dusting of stars burned against the velvet blankness. A clawlike branch of ancient, leafless ivy framed the window; tugged by wind, it tapped against the glass like an emaciated hand.

Laska closed her eyes. The CD clicked forward to another song – *her song* – and she remembered when she had first heard it. A birthday compilation, on a recordable CD that seemed only to play on her father's hi-fi. A friend had chosen the songs, clearly having intended to fill it with songs that featured the name 'Caroline' or, at a push, that came from the year of her birth. But obviously he'd got bored after a while and had just recorded a selection from his favourite groups of the moment, a jangly guitar band she couldn't even remember the name of, and a grungy band from the States who achieved brief notoriety by swearing on a live *Top of the Pops* and setting fire to their underpants.

Laska found her eyes becoming heavier behind their lids, the warmth of the water drawing her towards sleep. Myriad disparate images and thoughts tumbled through her mind, each one connecting to the next like an elaborate parlour game.

Suddenly she heard a noise at the door to her room. She jerked back into wakefulness, water splashing over the sides of the bath and on to the carpet. She twisted her head from side to side, desperate to pinpoint the sound.

Something was scratching at the base of the door that led out into the corridor. After the slightest of pauses, the noise resumed again – a scrabbling against the old wood of the door, a snuffling of exertion.

Panic gripped Laska. What the hell was going on? Had she locked the door? Was the dog creature trying to get in?

She climbed out of the bath, shivering despite the muggy moist atmosphere of the bathroom, and pulled on a gown. She came into the living room, switched off the music.

Just for a moment the noise stopped, as if the creature were concerned that it had been discovered. Then, enraged with desire, it began gnawing at the door once more. Wood began to splinter; in the gap under the door itself Laska could see a shadow bobbing back and forth.

She looked around her room desperately. Her eyes came to rest on a huge paperweight of split stone. She hefted it from hand to hand, finding strength in its unarguable weight, its utter solidity. She gripped the handle, the stone in her other hand. She paused for a moment, concentrating on her ragged breathing, the relentless gnawing at the door.

Then she pulled open the door.

She jerked back into wakefulness, water splashing over the sides of the bath and on to the carpet. She twisted her head from side to side, desperate to pinpoint the sound.

It was the CD she was listening to; it had gone over to a track recorded from vinyl, and it was popping and clicking wildly.

Laska relaxed back into the water. As she did so, she noticed her arms as they sank below the surface. There were new scratches, deep red cuts, like a shadow of all her suicide attempts, an outward manifestation of all her unhappiness. But they were ragged and random.

They looked like bite marks.

Nine

The Stolen Child

[World Full of Weeping]

Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Friday 25th December 1903

I have so much to recount, and so little time in which to do this, that I fear I shall not sleep this night. (Indeed, I am not sure when – if ever – I shall truly be able to come to terms with what has happened.) I once hoped that this journal would form an *aide memoire* to my work at Mausolus – a mere adjunct to my medical notes. Now I now feel *compelled* to write, for a great tragedy has befallen us.

Festive celebrations had barely made an impression on Christmas Day before being bludgeoned by the news of the death of Samuel Sands. A chill greater than the frost that had appeared from nowhere settled over Mausolus; every word spoken had the dull, sibilant resonance of a funeral reading.

We hurried back from the church. I knew I would get little sense out of Mr Craig until after I had examined Samuel Sands. He was indeed beyond help of God or man; I estimated that he had entered the twilight kingdom some hours before.

He was slumped by the window, which itself was of interest as he had clearly attempted to reach through the bars and open it. (Occasionally death can manifest itself in the most appalling ways, with a kind of mania afflicting the victim – a desire to escape, or to run, beyond the room and away from some nameless terror.)

Mr Torby noticed great scratches on the bars but I had no reason at that juncture to suspect foul play.

Craig continued to maintain that Mr Sands had died of fright; I did not agree with this diagnosis, of course, but I admit (here and here alone) that the face did seem most terribly contorted. The eyes were wide open, the pupils dilated; they seemed to continue to stare through the paper-thin eyelids even when I closed them gently.

After making the necessary arrangements I decided that there was little sense in questioning Mr Craig at that moment. Despite my tiredness, I made

sure that I wrote yesterday's diary entry before falling into troubled sleep (strictly speaking that entry encompassed the early hours of this day, but one cannot impose too strict a regime on so imperfect a journal).

I woke only a little later than usual, and sought immediately to question Mr Craig in my office. The fellow seemed nervous, and not without reason, for clearly he had some explaining to do. For all that, I tried to reassure him that soon he would be eating goose with the rest of his family, this entire matter forgotten, but Craig still seemed confused. To aid his recollection I asked him my questions in strict chronological order, although my particular interest was the death of Mr Sands, and Craig's apparent dereliction of duty.

He told me of a girl he knew from the village (it seemed to settle his mind a little to talk about how they had met, and his feelings for her – I suppose perceived beauty in such circumstances can be both calming and yet more beautiful). She is but a common milking girl, and he told me (in more detail than I found suitable) of their first meeting: he had gone to one of the farms for cream and found her, in all her maid's finery, bending over a tin bucket and milking a cow. It was, he says, love, or lust, or something of them both, at first sight.

This was several months ago. He mentioned all this doubtless to excuse his behaviour: with myself and Torby and the others as the cat, away at church, he was like a liberated mouse, desiring only to meet this bobtail in the woods near Mausolus. Craig strived at all points to blame himself, and not the girl, for what happened next. 'She kept askin' if the mad 'ouse'd be all right without me,' he said on more than one occasion. 'I wasn't expectin' anythin' to happen!'

(Have I overdone my recollection of his vernacular?)

Craig assured me that Mausolus was 'as quiet as the grave' before he left, and that he was not planning to be absent for long.

I draw a veil over the subsequent episode of Craig's account (he said he was 'putting Nebuchadnezzar out to grass'), but I do note that what came next was a might queer. In the blink of an eye, he said, the very atmosphere of the woods changed – became cold and oppressive. Mr Craig said it was as if a teacher had suddenly entered a room of rioting schoolchildren. The girl said she was sure they were being watched. Craig tried to reassure her, but now she wanted naught else but to escape back to the sanctuary of the farm.

They were both turning to leave when they saw a pair of great, glowing eyes watching them from the trees. These eyes, he said, were like two huge lanterns that split the darkness.

The girl fled in terror; Craig (to his credit) returned at once to Mausolus. He began checking the rooms and corridors.

'And what was the time?' I asked.

'A little after midnight,' he replied. 'I wanted nothing more than to settle down to wait for your return from Mass.'

'And this was when you found Mr Sands?'

Craig nodded. 'His room was the last on the list. I glanced in and... Well, I didn't 'ave to open the door to see that he was dead! Poor cove. He was by the window, as you saw. His eyes were like white marbles. I swear he'd been staring out at the trees when he died.'

'You cannot be sure of that.'

'The window,' said Craig simply. 'He'd either let something in, or was trying to keep something out.'

'That's nonsense,' I said firmly. 'His death was nothing if not normal. His body gave up on his mind. His heart ceased. A sad, but natural, occurrence.'

I told Craig that we would deal with his dereliction of duty at a later date, and asked him to get a suitable message through to Mr Joseph Sands.

I decided that, as soon as it was light (despite the lamps that burn every hour in the corridors of Mausolus the patients are deserving of their sleep, especially if they are to wake to such unfortunate news), I would question Mary Jones and Haward, whose rooms are either side of Mr Sands. I did not, for a moment, think that anything was amiss, but even if his death were natural, either one might have heard something.

I knew also that, for different reasons, coming out and asking uncomplicated questions might not elicit the answers I was searching for.

It is often my habit to play cards with Jones – she retains enough of her wits to beat me with bothersome regularity, and to understand why she is incarcerated.

'You are most kind to come and see me on Christmas morning,' she said as she dealt out two hands from a well-thumbed pack of cards. The once bright backs of the cards had faded, and there were occasional nicks and marks on them. (I would not put it past her to have memorised the precise complexion of each and every card.) 'It surely cannot be the quality of my card-playing that keeps you from celebrating Christmas.'

'The Reverend William Macksey would doubtless say that a true celebration of Christmas is to do what Christ did.'

'But what would you say?' she asked, with great perception.

'I would say that my real reason is concern at the death of Sands.'

I assume you have heard the sad news.'

A strange animation briefly held Jones's face, which oftentimes I had observed. Jones disliked any talk of emotion or sentiment or anything that implied extremity of feeling. (It is one of the reasons she plays cards so well.)

'Oh,' she said dismissively, as if I had mentioned the death of a butterfly. (But then, I reflected, why *should* she sound any more interested? Why

should Sands mean more to her than some mere dead insect? All that happens beyond the walls of her cell is largely unknowable, her own world extending little further than the barriers established and maintained by the deepest workings of her mind.)

‘Did you perchance hear anything unusual last night?’ I asked, keeping my eyes on my cards lest I concede some involuntary detail to Jones.

‘Scratching below the window,’ she said.

‘Did you investigate?’

‘No, I did not.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Oh, just screams,’ said Jones with the same casual tone that her voice adopted when discussing her superiority at cards. ‘But there are always screams.’

‘Sands?’

‘Oh, probably. . .’ She really seemed not to be interested, but smiled as she laid down her cards – a pyrrhic victory. She would say no more about what may or may not have happened, though she had at least implied that the night was less still and silent than Craig had indicated.

‘You seem to have forgotten,’ she said suddenly, moments later, ‘that we all scream at night.’

Extract from the Diary of the Reverend Mr William Macksey
Friday 25th December 1903

Having overheard Mr Craig’s excited proclamation about the death at Mausolus I was not unduly surprised when Mr Fern came to visit me after the morning service. I asked him immediately about the arrangements for the burial of the body, and was told that the man’s nephew was being informed, and that Christie’s hope was to hold a small service as soon as possible.

I assured Fern that I would do my very best to make myself available for whatever dignified and Christian service Christie might have in mind, though my commitments at this time of year are, of course, many.

I thought of my dreams and visions and asked him further about the death. The man muttered something about the dropsy, but seemed disinclined to elaborate.

I was still disturbed by Mr Craig’s horrified reaction to the death, and asked Fern about this. ‘Surely,’ I reasoned, ‘a hearty man like Craig, working where he does, must see death too often for it to worry him?’

I noticed Fern smile grimly. ‘Aye, but it’s not a pleasant place to be. It can rot your mind. I was not surprised to see Craig looking so troubled.’ I caught Fern staring at the Bible in my hand. ‘Does not the good book say, “The wages

of sin are death”?’

‘It does,’ I said, fascinated.

‘The sin of Adam, past hurts, working at a place like Mausolus. . .’

‘Excuses,’ I said gently. ‘Each one of us is in the same boat when we face the Lord. Anything that is not the golden fire of holiness results in death.’

Just for a moment I could have sworn I saw in Fern’s eyes his own vision of God: not a burning, creative Love, but an old man with a cane, threatening to beat him for all eternity. And I knew – I have met enough men like Fern – that his diseased logic runs thus: if one sin is enough to warrant such abuse, then he might as well wander down the glass-paved road of excess. I am well aware that with every step down the road, the pleasures increase – and the bodies pile up all around like stinking refuse, and the broken glass cuts further into your feet. This personal intimacy with the delights of sin I share with the fictional Prodigal. As the ‘good book’ says, ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practise deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.’

I dared to reach out to touch Fern’s arm. ‘And yet the Gospel is the story of forgiveness overcoming all that. I believe in a God of love.’

Fern took a step backwards, as if I, had done something to disturb his spirit. ‘I will inform Christie of your general agreement,’ he said quickly.

‘Yes. But. . . is there anything else I can do for you?’

But the moment had passed. ‘They will be wondering where I am,’ said Fern. He turned decisively for the door without a backward look.

Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Friday 25th December 1903 (continued)

My dialogue with Haward (and, later, a fascinating exchange with Miss Thorne) I note here based on verbatim notes that Mr Torby and myself made:

TC: Did you hear anything last night?

JH: Oh yes. Many things. Things you would not believe.

TC: Did you hear someone scratching below your window?

JH: I heard a conversation. Would you like to hear it?

TC: Very well.

(I was unsure that any intelligible sound could penetrate the thick walls between Haward and Sands but was in any event intrigued by what Haward

had to say. So distinct did the various voices of Haward sound that I have given them separate titles, thus JH i, JH ii, et cetera, in the dialogue that follows.)

JH: It went like this. . .

JH i: How am I ever to be free of this place and the plundering of my memories?

JH ii: There are two ways of escape. You sit where you are for what feels like all eternity, until, finally – O blessed day of peace! – the worms crawl in your ears and eat your brains and you turn back to dust. Or. . .

JH i: Yes? What?

JH ii: Or you forfeit all your rights to me – sell your soul, if you wish to use the language of the lowest melodrama. Enter into the first death in the blinking of an eye.

TC: Was that the end of the conversation?

JH: No. There was a moment of silence, then. . .

JH i: You leave me no alternative. Eternity in here is too long. Have your way.

JH ii: You have chosen wisely, my friend.

JH i: What beauty in that voice! What final peace and acceptance it entails!

JH ii: Do not be fooled into thinking that I do not bring gifts. I am the creator and the bringer of all good gifts.

JH i: And the greatest gift is death!

JH ii: Yes, you are right. No gift has greater value or beauty than death. If I could but describe what I feel now – oh, the libraries of the world have not enough paper to hold my description! Each star in heaven is a mere glimpse of what I now feel, minute by minute, decade by decade.

JH i: I am indeed yours. . .

(Haward's manner returned almost to normal.)

JH: That is what I heard.

TC: Did you hear this from Sands's cell?

JH: No. What I have told you I heard from my own lips. I am answering you quite truthfully.

TC: And from the next room?

JH: From the woman's room I heard only the shameless grunting of a woman without a man. And from the man's room I heard the sinful grunting of a man without a woman. How I long for them to be combined!

TC: Sands is dead.

JH: I know. There is no intercourse greater than death.

(At this point I turned for the door, saddened and sickened by what I had heard.)

JH: Before you leave, would you like to know what will happen? I know you do not look to the stars for your future, yet still you build castles in the air.

TC: Who has told you of the future?

JH: My friends – they speak with renewed clarity in these days. Let me tell you what will happen. I see a woman whose skull is smashed with such force that splinters of bone enter her brain. Do you know what that looks like? Black hair black with blood I see, and the blood nourishes someone else's baby. A baby growing fat with the blood of hatred of a mother it has never met. I see a man's swollen head and a rope at his neck. I see dogs, and I see spiders that look like men.

Haward then had some form of seizure and his words became unintelligible. Torby commented that he had observed Haward reading the tales of Mr Edgar Allan Poe in recent days; I would not be surprised if such macabre fantasies had prompted this display of lunacy.

A subsequent conversation with Miss Thorne, later that morning, was no less intriguing: after months of stoic silence on the subject of her family and her past, this morning she seemed almost desperate to tell me all that she could. (Such strange honesty was not unusual: to borrow Craig's phrase, it was as if the very atmosphere of this building had changed.) Indeed, as she lay on the couch, one arm draped over her face, she looked for all the world like a lady engaged in some grotesque parlour seance.

TC: Where are you? What do you see yourself doing?

CT: I am. . . graceful. I glide through immaculate corridors. My skirts stroke the polished wooden floor. Swish, swish, swish. I love the oil painting at the end of the hall, and I stop to gaze upon it. Then I am off, past the kitchens and the pantry and towards the back door. I can smell dinner. I look around, but it is very quiet. It is Sunday. It is peaceful. . . Now I'm outside. I'm keeping to the shadows. I am able to hold my dress just above the stony path. . . I come to the shed. I open the door and go inside.

TC: And what's there? Describe what you see.

CT: It's musty. The heat of summer has been captured. There's dirt on the blades of spades; I can smell it. I wait patiently.

TC: Who are you waiting for?

CT: Him. He walks in. It's like the first lightning flash of a storm. He holds me in his arms, stroking my back with the gentlest of caresses. . . Then that fades. I can't remember anything else from that day.

TC: What else do you remember?

CT: My stomach is just beginning to swell. I'm looking at myself in the mirror. I've made my body wet with tears. I can't hide any longer.

(As with Haward, what followed was some kind of internal dialogue, albeit in this case one seemingly based on recollections of actual past events. I had heard Haward talk in this way before – but never Miss Thorne.)

CT ii: Harlot! Whore! You are an abomination in the sight of God and in the eyes of your family! Tell me his name!

CT i: No, Father. I never –

(Her head recoiled then, as if physically struck.)

CT ii: Tell me his name, damn you!

CT i: No! Please, Father, don't. . .

TC: Try to remember something else, if you would rather.

CT: I am having a baby! I'm bellowing in pain – real pain, and the agony of rejection. I'm pushing and pushing and pushing. . .

TC: Did you give birth successfully?

CT: Yes, but. . . They've taken him away from me! My baby needs me! He belongs to me!

TC: What happened?

CT: Just for a moment I can see him – mottled skin, a dark and wailing mouth. Fingernails, so small and so perfect. Then. . .

TC: Then?

CT: I'm alone again. I'm alone, and I'm in the carriage, rattling away from the big house that once meant the world to me. It's not my world any more. It's fading already – I can hardly see it. It's falling back into the folds of the countryside and the gardens. It's gone.

(I tried to encourage Miss Thorne to cease her awful retrospection, but she seemed gripped by some dreaming mania, and another conversation began.)

CT iii: Mother?

CT i: My son! How you have grown!

TC: You see your boy?

CT: He has grown – what a mass of golden curls!

CT i: Come to me! I long to hold you!

CT iii: But you left me! Abandoned me!

CT i: I had no choice. You know that.

CT iii: You left me. Do you know what happened to me? Thrown out like a piece of rubbish! Is that what you thought of me?

CT i: No! Father would never do such a thing. He promised!

CT ii: Slut! Who was it? How often? Did you enjoy it? Slut! Maybe there was more than one? Maybe you spread your legs for all the servants! Never thinking I'd come along! Whore!

CT i: I will always love you, Father!

CT iii: I hate you! I hate you! I hate you more than anyone else!

CT i: You have every right to hate me. But I will always love you.

CT iii: But I hate you! If I ever saw you, I'd kill you. I'd take the biggest, longest knife I could find, and cut open your ugly belly.

CT i: But I would still love you.

CT iii: I wish you'd never been born.

CT i: So do I. But I have been. And I still love you.

Now animated, and in great distress, she kept repeating 'I still love you', over and over, all the while scratching at her wrists. If she had access to a knife – or if her eyes were truly open and saw where she was – I would have feared for her safety. As it was, Mr Torby was sufficiently moved to hold Miss Thorne close to him, like a parent with a struggling child. Eventually her attack subsided and she became still; we left her sleeping on the bed.

I feel it is important to note Miss Thorne's discourse here; she will return to our tale before long, and my reasoning may become clear. In any event, what she told me was tragically illuminating of many poor souls who came to Mausolus before my tenure.

While Torby and I were speaking with Miss Thorne, a great disaster was playing out in another part of the house. I now understand that when Mr Fern returned to Mausolus he was angry with both himself and with his God. I also understand that a terrifying fearlessness pulsed through his veins, and that he found himself in Mary Jones's room as if his legs were under the control of some foul demon. (Normally I would have held Fern personally – and eternally – responsible for what happened; subsequent events have given me, for the first time, something of an understanding of the man.)

In any event, I can see the picture that was painted in my mind's eye: he now stood in the doorway of the room, laughing at poor Jones shuffling a pack of cards and beating that stick against his leg.

He taunted her, I am sure. Perhaps he even resented the attention that Mr Torby and I lavish on certain patients, such as Mary Jones. I do not know whether Jones spoke to him, or was merely mute before him. Whatever she did, or said, was not enough to stem his anger.

Far from it.

Fern told me that he dragged her to her feet, pulled the dress from her shoulders. I dare say that he made much use of coarse language (he has often said that all cats seem grey in the dark) and perhaps even compared her shivering form to that of some wench he was intimate with. Certainly I have heard him joking, with me men, that he would rather catch the clap off "Lizbeth Harper" than spend a week on his own with Jones.

Moments later – Fern claimed – something hit him bodily. He described the sensation of being bowled over, as if by a physical presence – but the pain was

internal, his mind ‘exploding into flames’. This only made his anger swell, like a bull lashing out at a swarm of bees.

I imagine he hit her first at that moment.

He says that a nameless, wordless power coursed into him, which in turn broke whatever dam had previously existed within his dark mind, already so full of shadows. He felt a certain sense of strength, just for a moment in control of what was happening. He was, for the first and last time, a great man, filled to overflowing with absolute power, as Lord Acton has termed it.

‘I am your god!’ he bellowed to Jones. ‘I can love you, or I can hurt you, and the choice is mine alone. My choice is perfect! And I decide.’

By now he was kicking her in the stomach.

‘And I decide. . . to punish you. You are my scapegoat, my sacrificial lamb.’

He also said he used stick and belt.

‘This is for my mother, who was ripped open to let me out. . . This is for my father and his drink. . . This is for the first woman who betrayed me. . . This is for this place and what it’s done to me. . . This is for Macksey and his cursed God!’

(As he told his tale, Fern punctuated his exclamations with a fist pounding into his other hand. I winced at the image my mind painted.)

He says Jones was only able to murmur now. I hope that she was truly unconscious before the end.

Fern – I can hardly bear to use his name – said that the room suddenly seemed to explode with fire. He was aware only of himself and the dark, broken figure of Jones.

He picked up a large piece of cracked flagstone from the floor, held it over her face. He pinned her body to the floor with a dirty boot stamped between her breasts. As he described events to me, his voice deepened, and his face almost seemed to become shallow before my eyes, like a skull.

‘I am death!’ he bellowed.

And he dropped the stone.

Ten

Mad World

[The Start of the Breakdown]

Laska put down the diaries and rubbed at her eyes. The Retreat was gripped by a profound and silent darkness that seemed to amplify every movement or noise that she made. A sudden storm of wind and lashed rain had formed the perfect backdrop for her journey back in time; now everything was quiet, and the lack of sound merely irritated, her bored subconscious creating phantom noises every time she stopped reading or moved her head.

Laska clambered out of bed and got dressed. Her father, also prone to insomnia, had always said that if you can't sleep, you might as well get up and do something useful. And, Laska reckoned, one of the few good things about the Retreat was that there was always *someone* about. Just because her brain was buzzing with ideas and images, it didn't mean she had to suffer on her own.

As Laska stepped into the corridor and turned to shut the door, her mind momentarily presented her with the image she anticipated: an unpainted door of oak, set into a long corridor punctured with wood and window. Only after a moment did reality overlay itself upon expectation: there was a crack in the door, and bright splinters of timber were lying on the carpet.

She bent down, the fragments smelling faintly of sap and varnish. They had come away from the lower edge of the door, just where the dog creature had attacked in her dream. A coincidence, of course – perhaps the copper strip that held down the edge of the carpet had risen slightly, and was catching on the door every time it opened or closed. Perhaps. . .

Laska wasn't sure if the ambiguous splinters that she now held in her hand helped her, or weighed her down still further. If the creature was just something she had dreamed into life – if the splinters were just a fluke, some sick joke – then perhaps she was responding less well to her medication, which meant that she was still weeks or months off release from the cloying atmosphere of the Retreat. However, if the hound was real, if it really had chewed and clawed at her door, then it meant that she was sane – but, in turn, something strange and terrifying had come to the Retreat. In which case, Laska

had an obligation – a duty – to tell someone. But if she did, and it was all just a fantasy of her unconscious. . .

Suddenly Laska was desperate for company – a feeling she rarely experienced and still less ever gave in to. She no longer wanted dialogue with her own mind, or with dead men who lived on through words on faded parchment; she wanted to share in the perceptions of another person, even if only for a moment. She wanted simple, ordinary sanity, something rooted in the here-and-now; if she couldn't find that herself, then at least she could place herself in an uncomplicated environment and vicariously understand what normality might be, through the lives of other people.

Subjectivity was beginning to terrify her. Unexpectedly, even Smith's riddles, or Oldfield's bitterness, now had a certain appeal. Anything was better than the relentless questioning of her own subconscious, the terrifying tale of the men from the past.

Laska found Liz Bartholomew sitting on her own in the dining room. Liz had positioned herself in front of one of the big windows, and was staring out over the dark grounds, where trees were formed from swollen shadows and grass and ground were as dark as the night sky. She tapped occasionally at the laptop at her side, but most of the time Liz stared out through the window, watching as the trees became still and the storm rolled away into the distance.

Laska's heart sank. She would rather have encountered someone else – *anyone* else. Not because she disliked the woman – far from it, Laska found Dr Bartholomew nothing if not approachable and reasonable – but because of what Laska now suspected about Joe. To decide to keep quiet was merely a pragmatic decision when taken in the confines of her room; to continue with her studied silence while looking at Liz Bartholomew's troubled face was altogether another challenge.

Laska stood behind Liz for a few moments, wondering if she shouldn't try some other room (the nurses could usually be found in the staff room, telling crude jokes and exchanging tabloid gossip), or even return to her room to make an apologetic 'Yes, I know how late it is' call to James. But before Laska could walk away Liz noticed her reflection in the glass.

Liz turned with a grey smile. 'Hello, Caroline,' she said brightly.

'Hi,' said Laska, fidgeting nervously. There was nothing else to say, other than – 'Mind if I join you?'

'Please do,' said Liz. She hit a button on the laptop and the screen went dark. 'I'm not getting very far with this anyway. I thought getting away from my office might help.'

'You should be in bed.'

'Couldn't sleep.'

'You and me both,' said Laska, without thinking – then she tensed, wondering if Liz was likely to interrogate her further.

'It's OK,' said Liz, who must have seen the look cross Laska's face. 'I'm not fishing for information, professional or otherwise.' She yawned, flashing bright white teeth and patches of quicksilver filling, obviously too tired to be self-conscious. 'You could probably tell me you're seeing giant rabbits and I'd forget by morning.'

Laska smiled at an internalised joke. Giant rabbits she could handle. She'd always loved Jimmy Stewart in *Harvey*.

'I just had a nightmare,' she said, not entirely untruthfully. 'Couldn't get back to sleep.'

'I don't seem to have dreams any more,' commented Liz, watching the shifting darkness through the window. 'I used to have nightmares all the time – especially about this weird midget who was always trying to stab me with a dagger.'

'Could be a subconscious memory of *Don't Look Now*,' commented Laska. 'Ever seen it? Freaked me the first time I saw it.' But then, she had only been ten – she'd gone round to a boy's house and he'd managed to tape it off the television. Laska had been very attracted to the lad – he was the class rebel, always strutting about in a little leather jacket and getting lippy with the teachers – but he'd blown it by trying to snog her under some mistletoe he'd brought into school one Christmas.

And, far from being a rebel, he was a posh kid who always did what his mum told him. The first of many men to disappoint Laska.

'Hadn't thought of that,' said Liz. 'Maybe you're right. Hardly a week seemed to go by when I didn't dream about this bloke trying to do me in.' She glanced back at Laska for a moment. 'Then I came here, and everything seemed to stop – even the usual boring dreams. You know, falling from a great height, coming into work in the nude. Suddenly, *nothing*.'

'Perhaps you're too busy,' said Laska, sagely.

'Perhaps. When I get home I just seem to off-load on my poor husband. Everything that happened during the day, what I've been able to do, what I'll have to do tomorrow – it all just comes out in a rush of *stuff*. It drives Joe *nuts*.'

Laska made sure her face remained impassive at the mention of Joe.

'So maybe you're right, there's nothing left for my subconscious to file away each night,' continued Liz, who thankfully had noticed nothing amiss. She stretched in her chair, yawning again. 'You must excuse me, waffling on like this.'

'Don't worry,' said Laska. She'd noticed on other occasions tiredness affecting people a little like alcohol, knocking down social barriers and making even

the most introverted and taciturn person suddenly garrulous and engaging.

Liz was about to say something else when one of the nurses came into the empty dining room, arms flapping in anxiety. 'I've been looking everywhere for you!' she exclaimed, for all the world an irritated parent exasperated by a game of hide-and-seek.

'Well, here I am,' said Liz simply.

'It's Mrs Hersh,' continued the nurse. 'She's in a terrible state.'

'What's the matter with her?' asked Laska boldly.

The nurse would not have normally replied to such a direct question from a patient but was clearly too flustered, or too tired, to observe protocol. 'Reckons something's watching her from the dark. Says she suddenly woke up and saw a pair of great glowing eyes.'

Liz apologised to Laska and she and the nurse hurried away from the room, leaving Laska once more on her own, watching the darkness through the window.

She sat there, deep in thought, until the first bronzed hint of daylight glowed against the horizon. She took that as a hint that perhaps it was time to return to her room, when Fitz rushed in, even more agitated than the nurse had been.

'What's the matter?' asked Laska.

'I need to speak to Liz.'

'She went off to deal with a patient. I suppose –'

'I've got to speak to her,' said Fitz. 'I was out on patrol with Brown and some of the security guards. One of them went missing. He stopped answering his walkie-talkie.'

'So?' said Laska. 'Maybe he dropped it or something. Or he's somewhere where he can't get a decent signal. I have terrible trouble with my mobile. Everyone does.'

'But we *found him*,' said Fitz, barely listening to what Laska was saying. 'Dr Oldfield was standing over him. There was blood on Oldfield's shirt.' He made for the door, still talking; Laska had follow him to hear what he was saying.

'And the guard... He's been stabbed. He's dead.'

Liz heard of the security guard's death moments after she arrived to placate Mrs Hersh. By the time she got to the man's body – spread-eagled across the main corridor in the basement, midway between the chapel and a storeroom – it was already surrounded by a handful of hushed, whispering onlookers. Dr Oldfield, his hands still red with the man's blood, had found a seat, clearly shaken by what had happened. Dr Smith was bending over the body, his gloved hands minutely examining the great gash in the corpse's chest.

The dead man was Mike Farrell. He'd been at the Retreat for longer than Liz; seemed a nice enough guy, though he very much kept himself to himself. He'd organised the sweepstake for the last World Cup.

That was the only thing Liz could remember about him. And now he lay on the floor, his eyes empty and staring, and a deep incision in his chest that had, with almost medical accuracy, drained the life from him. Mike Farrell was dead, and Liz didn't even know if he had a family.

'Fascinating,' said Smith, the emotion of the situation – or was it mere sentiment? – seeming to have passed him by. He glanced up at Liz as he talked, though he spoke as if for the sole benefit of his two friends, who clustered behind him. 'It looks like the assailant stood behind him, used his – or her – left hand to silence the victim, while stabbing – two or three times, I'd say – into the chest cavity with the right. That's not going to help us find the murderer, though I suppose it may eliminate, what, 10 per cent of the British population. . .'

'Unless they're a left-hander trying to throw us off the scent,' said Trix.

'Of course, that's possible, but the force of this impact – look at the fractured rib just here – makes that a little unlikely.' Smith grinned at his friends, though neither seemed quite as interested in the minutiae of the body as Smith. 'And I'd say a woman – unless she was very strong – probably wouldn't have the strength to stab with the knife in quite this way.'

Liz shook her head. She'd clearly fallen asleep and had woken in a nightmare of the sort she said she never had any more. 'You're saying it's murder?' she said.

'If it isn't, it's one hell of a suicide,' said Fitz grimly.

'I'm no expert,' said Smith, more diplomatically, 'but I don't see there's any other conclusion one can draw.'

'Who found the body?'

'I did,' said Oldfield, finally getting to his feet. The front of his shirt showed blooming flowers of crimson. 'He was already dead. Still warm, but, with that injury. . . There was nothing I could do for him.' He sighed. 'A terrible tragedy. He was hoping to retire soon. He and his wife were looking for a property in Marbella, I believe.'

Liz felt a pang of guilt: she might have stopped short of thinking Dr Oldfield capable of murder, but she certainly wouldn't have expected him to know such junior staff members so intimately.

'What were you doing down here?' Liz's tone was more accusatory than she would have liked; it was a subconscious reaction, she supposed, to feeling so utterly and uniquely out of her depth.

'The Warwick team I told you about? They were waiting on me to read through their paper before submitting it to the *BMJ*. I thought I'd better come

in early and get cracking.’ Oldfield glanced at his watch. ‘I arrived about an hour ago, and went to my office, only to find that my printer was out of paper.’ He pointed to the stationery cupboard, no more than ten yards further down the corridor. ‘When I came down here to get a ream or two...’ He managed an apologetic grimace.

‘I imagine the police will confirm that Dr Oldfield is in the clear,’ announced Smith. ‘The arrangement of the particles of blood on his shirt seem wrong to me.’ He paused, looking around to see if any of the others found this as interesting as he obviously did. ‘And I’m almost certain that this poor man was not murdered here.’ He pointed at the mud and grass that clogged the dead man’s heels. ‘He was dragged in from outside. To throw us off the scent, I daresay.’

Liz shivered. She didn’t like this ‘us’ at all: for all Smith’s apparent and unexpected competence in the area, this was clearly a job for the police. And they were welcome to it.

‘I’ve never liked this part of the building,’ said Smith suddenly. ‘I have even less reason to like it now.’

‘Has anyone called the police?’ asked Liz, desperate to assert her authority.

‘I tried,’ said Fitz. ‘Looks like the lines are down.’

‘And the man’s next of kin will need informing,’ added Oldfield.

‘I’ll get someone to phone through, one way or another,’ said Liz. ‘Meanwhile, I suggest we leave well alone – let the professionals do their job.’

Smith, about to remove some blades of grass from the dead man’s boots, immediately withdrew his hand, and got to his feet. ‘But of course,’ he said. He turned to his friends with a smile. ‘Come on. We have work to do.’

‘Please let’s handle this matter sensitively,’ said Liz. ‘We need to get to the bottom of this mess, but I don’t want to cause any of the patients needless alarm.’

‘You can rely on me,’ said Smith, before ushering the two students away from the body.

‘I know the value of discretion,’ came the whispered voice of Oldfield at her ear, almost making Liz jump. ‘And if I happen to see Dr Thomson before you do, I will fill him in.’ Oldfield made a show of looking at his watch. ‘It’s now eight o’clock. He should be here any time in the next couple of hours.’

The smile that followed was doubtless Oldfield’s attempt at showing that he had a sense of humour, but as he turned for the stairs Liz wasn’t sure if she found his attitude any more bearable in the circumstances than Smith’s.

Tracy Wade had been roused from her sleep on many occasions in the past, and for a wide variety of professional reasons. Sometimes demented old biddies required a little gentle encouragement to return to their beds. Often pain

relief needed to be upped in the wee small hours to get the patient through the night. Once – dozing in the obstetrics department of an inner-city hospital – she'd been roused to help with a birth complication. A woman who spoke not a word of English had been about to give birth to triplets – and two out of three of the children were breech.

That had been quite a night. But nothing could have prepared her for the rough shaking of the shoulders that interrupted a weird dream about marshmallows and an identity parade of masked soap stars. Tracy was sitting in the staff room and must have nodded off in the middle of a gripping article on the UK's future at the heart of Europe.

Liz Bartholomew was standing over Tracy, her face utterly drained of colour. 'Sorry, Dr Bartholomew,' said Tracy, rubbing her eyes. 'Must have nodded off. . .'

'There's been. . . There's been an accident,' said Liz, almost babbling in her panic. 'Mike Farrell is dead.'

'Oh my goodness! What happened?'

'You'll find out soon enough. What I need you to do is contact the police, get an ambulance here – though there's nothing they'll be able to do for him. I've tried phoning but the line's dead.'

'That was one hell of a storm last night,' said Tracy. 'It came from nowhere. Must have knocked down one of the poles or something.'

'I need you to pop out and phone 999,' said Liz. 'If you can't get your mobile to work there's a phone box on Charnage Lane, just before you get to the village.'

'No problem,' said Tracy. 'I'll be back as soon as I can.'

She grabbed her coat from the peg on the back of the door and headed for the car park. She knew there was no point trying her mobile: even if you could get a signal you could guarantee the connection would drop at the most vital moment. The sudden storm had been followed by blank skies and sub-zero temperatures. Her red Metro was covered with frost; there was some antifreeze in the boot but, typically, she couldn't get it open. The back of her glove dealt with the worst of the ice on the front windscreen; after much cursing, the driver's door opened.

She turned the ignition, switched on the rear demist, put all the blowers on maximum. Almost immediately the interior temperature began to rise – a fault in the car's thermostat, the last mechanic she'd spoken to had said. It was great in winter, but a pain the rest of the year when Tracy had to drive round in a T-shirt with both windows down just to survive. She really should get the car sorted out, but there never seemed to be quite enough money to get it repaired properly. At the end of every month the story was the same: a big, fat zero in the bank account, or worse.

Soon she was off down the winding drive, taking it easy as she tried the front wipers. After a few nervous, protesting sweeps the remains of the ice on the screen cleared sufficiently for Tracy to feel confident with the winding lanes that led from the Retreat to the neighbouring towns and villages; another hundred yards or so and she'd be at the gatehouse, just beyond the bend that kept it almost entirely out of sight of the main building, then a left and it was only a couple of miles to the phone box just outside Norton.

A dark figure appeared in the centre of the drive, midway between her car and the gatehouse. He'd come out of nowhere.

Tracy slammed on the brakes.

The rear wheels locked; the car began to swing to one side, its front wheels squealing against the loose gravel. Still the car seemed to be sliding towards the person standing in the driveway – through the smeared windscreen Tracy couldn't make out features or clothing, just a sense of gathered darkness and an absolute lack of fear – and she knew the car wouldn't stop in time.

In a split second she released the brakes, reapplied them. Finally they bit, but the sideways momentum made the car lurch alarmingly.

There was an explosive noise. In a moment she was upside down. Glass everywhere. It had only taken a second or two for the man to appear, for the car to flip over.

There was a salty taste in her mouth. One arm felt suddenly hot and swollen. The seatbelt locked her in place. She instinctively pulled at the buckle, distantly heard a shrill noise – realised it was her own voice, screaming something – tried to push the door open.

It only took another second or two for the windscreen to shatter as someone, something, hurled itself at the glass; another moment and the dark shape had pushed its way into the car.

A second later and all was darkness.

Eleven

Spq vs Spq

[Life's a Riot]

'Mind if I join you?'

Laska looked up from her bowl of cornflakes. Dr Smith stood over her, a plate of dry toast in one hand and a mesmeric smile on his face.

Laska grunted. 'It's a free country.'

'Indeed it is.' Smith sat opposite Laska, positioning the toast *just so* in front of him. He proceeded to toy with the plate absently, rotating it first one way, then the other, but making no attempt to eat. In fact, now she thought of it, she'd never seen, still less could even imagine, Smith doing anything as mundane as eating, or sleeping, or scratching his balls. The foppish clothing he wore probably didn't help; he seemed so removed, so *above*, the trivia of everyday life that he reminded Laska of sanitised paintings of Christ that so concentrated on his divinity – a supernatural aura or distant, faraway eyes – they omitted to give him dirty fingernails or less than perfect teeth.

Laska and Smith sat in silence for a few moments, Laska feeling suddenly nervous, like a schoolgirl moments before her first meaningful exam. What had happened before was a mere exercise; this, now, was serious.

'Your light was on late last night,' said Smith suddenly.

Laska concentrated on her next mouthful of breakfast cereal before replying with great deliberation. 'I'm starting to think you're spying on me.'

To his great credit, Smith did not entirely dismiss Laska's suggestion. 'There is something going on here at the Retreat,' said Smith. 'You're not stupid. You must have felt it.'

'The murder of the security guard?'

'You've heard?'

'*Everyone's* heard.' Laska indicated the rest of the dining area, the people huddled in discreetly hushed groups. 'Anyway, Fitz told me.'

'Did he now?' Smith nodded. 'Yes, it involves the murder of that poor man – and much more besides.'

'You've got a building full of suspects,' said Laska. 'Why me?'

'Oh, I don't suspect you of the crime itself,' exclaimed Smith. Then he paused, and looked at her quizzically, as if for the first time. 'At least... I don't think... No, I don't suspect you of anything so absolutely evil.'

'Then what have I done wrong?'

'Don't sound so guilty,' said Smith with a chuckle. 'I'm not a policeman.'

'You're starting to sound like one.'

'My friends... I'm not sure if you know, their area of expertise is forensic psychiatry.'

'I thought they were historians. Anyway, what the hell is forensic psychiatry?'

Smith continued without an explanation. 'I suppose their interests, their specialisation... After a while it rubs off on you.'

Laska finished her cornflakes and pushed the bowl forward. 'I'm not sure I believe you,' she said. 'When I see the three of you together... They're learning from you, they're being influenced by you... Not the reverse.'

Smith smiled, neither denying nor agreeing with her comments.

'Where are they, anyway?' queried Laska. 'Off running an errand for you, I suppose.'

'I've asked them to inspect the grounds, search for clues – it'll help the police, when they get here.'

'Oh, I'm sure the police'll love that – a murder in the local nut-house and a member of staff who thinks he's Miss Marple!'

'Please,' said Smith, pretending to be hurt. 'Hercule Poirot, at least!'

'You haven't answered my question,' said Laska. 'Why are you spying on me?'

'I'm not,' said Smith.

'You can't deny you're suddenly very interested in...'

Smith held up his hand. 'Let me finish. I'm not spying on you – Trix is.'

'What?'

'Or she was, in any event. I had a feeling...' Smith glanced around, as if to make sure no one was eavesdropping – but it seemed that the news of Farrell's murder was more than enough to keep the others in the dining room distracted. 'I had a feeling that death was going to descend upon this place.'

'Oh, very melodramatic.'

Smith ignored her. 'I don't always act on my feelings, but this time I had some evidence to think that *your* life might be in danger.'

'You what?'

'After our meeting the other day I asked Trix to follow you. She has many and diverse faults but as an agent of stealth and intrigue, she cannot be faulted.'

'But, how...? What has she...?'

'She has logged every person into your room, made a note of everyone you've spoken to, and then passed that information on to me.'

Laska found herself reddening. If Dr Smith knew all about her relationship with James. . .

'I must stress to you I have no interest in your private life,' said Smith, as if reading her mind. 'I am simply trying to prevent an even greater tragedy than the murder of a security officer at a psychiatric hospital.'

Laska didn't know what to say – whether to ask directly about James, or to explain herself, or just keep quiet. Thankfully Smith's wider agenda seemed genuine and he seemed keen to move the conversation forward.

'I think that you're involved in what's going on here,' said Smith. 'It's not your fault,' he added hurriedly, 'it's not something you've deliberately set out to do. It's a more subtle link than that. But, from the moment you came here, and you mentioned dreaming about this building all the time. . . Well, I had my suspicions.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said Laska, though she remembered her dreams of the benighted Victorian building only too well.

'I would be surprised if you did,' said Smith. 'I can tell you what's going on here – what I think is going on – but you must be straight with me. You asked me what you've done wrong. The answer is *nothing* – a sin of omission rather commission, if you like.'

'Dad tried to explain that to me once,' said Laska. 'A bit hard to get your head round when you're seven!'

'That's exactly it!' said Smith, leaning forward. 'That's the sort of thing you're not telling me. You've never mentioned your father to me before.'

'So? Why are you so interested in him?'

'It's not just your father I'm interested in,' said Smith. 'But it's something about you, your family, some link to this place – and not just the dreams you used to have, either. Something more. . . concrete.' He paused, waiting for a couple of patients to pass by. 'I do understand your reluctance to talk about your family, your father in particular,' he whispered gently.

'I don't think you do,' said Laska, noticing her voice beginning to rise. 'You have no idea how I feel.'

'I don't wish to cause you any distress,' said Smith, his voice as calm as a midsummer lake. 'But I hope you will forgive me if I have to ask difficult questions at a time like this. The murder of Mr Farrell. . . Well, it raises the stakes somewhat. I sense that, all around me, things are changing gear – and though I've had a long time to prepare I now run the risk of being left behind. And that could be catastrophic for all of us.'

'You're sounding like someone walking down Oxford Street with *The End is Nigh* on a sandwich board.' Laska was desperate to change the subject, steer

the conversation away from her family, and Smith's justification of his prying questions.

'If you'd seen the things I have...' Smith sighed, looking through Laska and seemingly towards inexpressible horrors. 'I must ask you bluntly,' he said, swinging his attention back to Laska moments later, 'if you're aware of any connection between your family and this place?'

'No,' said Laska. 'But I dreamt about it last night, for the first time since I arrived. If you must know, that's why I was awake. I had a nightmare, and it freaked me out. It was all so vivid.'

'Would you like to tell me?' asked Smith.

Laska paused. She'd dropped the mention of her dream into the conversation as a sideshow, something to throw Smith off the scent. She hadn't expected him to seem quite so interested in it, though given his curiosity about all things personal and internal, perhaps she should have known better.

Of course, she'd dreamed about the Retreat almost every night since she'd come here, but she wasn't about to tell Smith that. She'd tell him about the latest dream, but she resolved to tell him nothing about the dog, or anything else about her father. She placed all such thoughts and recollections in a filing cabinet in her mind labelled *Private – Keep Out*.

Laska closed her eyes, partly to remember, and partly because it was a nice touch she imagined Smith would lap up. 'I was walking through the grounds. The grass was wet – I remember because I was trying to work out if it had just rained, or if it was dew. It was dark. I glanced up and saw dark clouds writhing in the sky, blocking out the light of the stars, the moon.'

She opened her eyes.

'When you dream, Dr Smith, are you in control?'

It was a diversionary tactic that Dr Thomson would have seen through in an instant, but Smith was for the moment suckered into it, like that maths teacher at school you know will waste half a lesson in remembrance if only you can get him on to the subject of the War.

'I try not to dream,' he said. 'Sleep does not come easily to me. I share your insomnia, Laska, your nightmares.'

For a moment Laska thought of Liz, of the dreams and nightmares she no longer had – her blank life, full of work and precious little else. Perhaps it was a sort of mercy not to dream, especially in a place like the Retreat.

'I suppose, in answer to your question,' continued Smith, 'in my dreams I have flashes of insight, of self-awareness. But control? I'm not sure. I wonder how in control of my own, waking, destiny I am. Why do you ask?'

'Normally I'm in control of my dreams,' said Laska. 'Or at least, whatever I'm doing seems natural, understandable. But I was walking towards the folly – do you know it...?'

Smith nodded.

'I was walking towards the folly,' continued Laska, 'but there was part of me – my subconscious I suppose – that didn't want to go there. It was wrong, I was resisting, and yet still my legs took me there.'

'That feeling of powerlessness in dreams – it's very common,' agreed Smith.

'It just seemed odd – different, somehow. Anyway, I felt something warm just below my neck.' Without thinking her fingers went to the place where her father's pendant had, so briefly, been. 'I looked down. The silver pendant was glowing, getting warmer. For a moment it was pleasant, it made me feel in control. But it kept getting hotter and hotter. I thought it was going to burn me.'

'Do you mind?' Smith extended his hand, gently resting his fingertips on Laska's throat.

Laska almost recoiled at Smith's touch – not sexual, not abusive, but sensual and powerful. For an instant her neck, her chest, flushed with warmth, just as they had when she had worn the necklace.

'I noticed a small mark on your skin,' explained Smith, withdrawing his perfect, almost sculpted hand. 'It looks like a burn.'

'Acne,' said Laska bluntly, still disturbed by Smith's awful, exciting intimacy. 'Never had it when I was 13 or 14. My body's *really* making up for it now.'

'It could be that, I suppose,' said Smith. 'They sometimes say that our bodies reflect inner reality.'

'And my zits reflect the disgust I feel at the world?'

'Perhaps. It might explain your piercings, as a way you hope to gain control of the world, your life, your body.' He smiled – he was observing, not criticising or condemning. 'What happened next in your dream?' he said.

'I had to pull off the necklace – it was just so hot! I hurled it away, towards-the folly. The moment it was gone from me, I woke up.'

'A most unusual nightmare.'

'I know it doesn't sound scary, but when I came to... My heart was pounding, my bedclothes were all over the place. And I couldn't get back to sleep.'

'And you're sure you had this dream last night?'

Laska nodded.

Smith rubbed his chin absently, deep in thought. 'And the pendant?'

'I put it on the night before.'

'But now...?' Smith indicated her unadorned throat. 'You've lost it?'

'My room's in such a state. It's probably there somewhere.'

'Do you think it possible that you lost it *two* nights ago, and what you dreamed last night wasn't a dream at all, but some sort of... repressed memory?'

'No, that's nonsense!' said Laska hotly.

'Why do you say that?' asked Smith, in his most reasonable voice.

'It's just a necklace! I've just mislaid it, and I had this odd dream, and... Why would I want to throw it away, and then forget about it?'

'Perhaps you weren't entirely yourself. I've asked you before, and I'll ask you again: are you feeling all right at the moment? Is everything OK?'

'I'm fine,' said Laska, suddenly getting to her feet. The scrape of her chair across the floor made one or two people look across. 'I'll see you around.'

And she left Smith playing with his toast.

Laska found a secluded corner and, after several attempts, managed to send a text to James. She continuously glanced up and down, looking for any signs of Smith – or Trix – spying on her, but the corridor remained deserted.

She contrived an 'accidental' meeting with James in the stunted conservatory that overlooked the courtyard. She would be sitting there, just minding her own business; James, about to pass by, would stop and make idle conversation for a few minutes. Even if one of Dr Smith's cronies were watching her, there would be nothing to see.

James ambled into view about five minutes later than she'd expected, looking even more distracted than usual. 'They've upped security patrols,' he explained. 'Some jobsworth who pretends not to know me keeps asking to see my badge.' As a mark of nascent rebellion, James always wore his badge – *James Abel, Psychiatric Nurse* and the logo of the Retreat – at ninety degrees and low down on his shirt. 'Can't blame 'em, I suppose. The management wants this place to keep a low profile – they don't need people thinking the Retreat is full of psychos or anything. But now... Everyone's keeping an eye on everyone else – at least, until the police get here.'

'That's sort of what I wanted to talk to you about.'

'Oh?'

'Dr Smith's been snooping. Or, at least, that blonde bitch of his has. I think he knows.'

'Knows?'

'About us.'

James puffed out his cheeks as he considered this: 'Well,' he said a few moments later. 'Smith doesn't strike me as the sort of bloke to make a fuss.'

'No, but it means he thinks he's justified in asking whatever questions he wants.'

'What's he been saying?' asked James, perching on one of the floral-patterned chairs.

'Just digging around – about my past, about this place.'

James nodded. 'I had a weird conversation with Trix a couple of days back,' he said. 'And I still reckon Fitz was following me. I guess they're just digging

for info as well. Still, the important thing is, you don't have to tell anyone anything you don't want.'

'That's the theory,' agreed Laska.

'And a very good theory it is, too.'

Both James and Laska jumped in surprise. They turned to see Dr Oldfield, who had silently come up behind them both.

'I become more and more concerned by Dr Smith's methods,' he continued. 'He and his friends are becoming a menace to the sound running of this place. I think it's one of many areas that need a firmer hand. And now that we've got a murder on our hands...'

James had said that Oldfield was quite shaken up by his discovery of the body in the basement. It seemed as if things were back to normal now, however.

'I don't think anyone could have predicted *that*,' James said.

'I am not so sure,' said Oldfield. 'I know I have a reputation for being "a bit of an old woman"...' He stared at James, who blushed – Laska had heard him use that very phrase often enough. 'But does this not prove what I have been saying all along? I've lost count of the times I've asked Dr Bartholomew to look into our security arrangements. They have CCTVs at most schools now, but we let anyone wander in and out of the Retreat.'

'Nobody wants to let me just wander out,' said Laska so quietly she was surprised that Oldfield heard her.

'Indeed,' said Oldfield. He paused, then smiled as if something had just occurred to him. 'Of course, if the Trust decide not to renew Dr Bartholomew's contract – or even ask for her to leave – then who knows who will end up in charge... Or what regime for the recommended release of patients they might operate.' He smiled again, and Laska knew full well who he imagined would end up in charge – and what sort of regime they might run. 'There are always exceptions that can be made,' he continued, staring resolutely at Laska. 'Once word of this murder gets out into the wider community Dr Bartholomew's stock will be at an all-time low. Perhaps it would be best not to prolong the agony...'

He held Laska's gaze just a moment longer, then turned away. 'My office door is always open,' he said, before sweeping away.

James waited until the man was well out of earshot before speaking. 'That bloke gives me the creeps,' he said. 'Wouldn't surprise me if he killed Farrell just to get Liz into trouble.' He turned to look at Laska. 'What was all that stuff about his office door?'

'His way of saying, *You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours*. He wants something.' Laska threw down the magazine she was pretending to read. 'Honestly, it was bad enough with Dr Smith sniffing around!'

‘Mike Thomson and I have chatted about Oldfield,’ said James. ‘It’s obvious that Oldfield thinks he should have been promoted into Liz’s job. But Mike reckons Oldfield is looking for some dirt in Liz’s past, some big secret she’s covering up.’

‘If there is... then perhaps Liz’s days are numbered.’ Laska shuddered – it wasn’t like Liz had a happy home life to fall back on.

James sighed. ‘If Oldfield ends up in charge of this place... Well, let me put it this way, I’ll be at the front of the queue to resign!’

James left Laska staring into space. She’d wanted his company, briefly, but now it was clear she needed time and space to think. James still wasn’t quite sure what Dr Oldfield sought from Laska – or if, indeed, she had anything worth giving him – but he realised, ultimately, it wasn’t his concern. He had problems enough of his own: there were security guards everywhere, nursing shifts had been doubled-up, and his arms ached after a lengthy session in the gym the night before.

All right, he realised that a little physical discomfort and occupational hassle barely compared to the death of the guard and all the implications that followed from that – but all these irritations came together and strengthened his desire just to get through the day as swiftly as possible, and go home.

His pager buzzed in his pocket. He needed to dig out some notes, sort out Mrs Bradfield’s medication, and now he was being reminded about some paperwork he’d left to gather dust on his desk.

He hurried down the corridor. At the far end, pushing his way through huge double doors of dark oak, he could see the crumple-suited form of Dr Thomson.

‘Oi, Mike!’ he called out, but Thomson seemed not to hear. The door slammed shut behind him.

James walked over to a small window of imperfect glass, set next to the door, and peered through. He could just make out Mike Thomson, head down, moving at speed over the dark grass and away from the Retreat.

Intrigued, James pushed open the doors and followed the older man out into the grounds. After the unearthly calm that followed the storm the wind had picked up again; it lashed it into James’s face and eyes. Blinking furiously, he set off after Thomson, who’d veered off to the left and was now climbing the gentle rise towards the folly.

James tried calling after Thomson, but either Thomson was ignoring him, or simply hadn’t heard him. The suited figure was some way up the rise now, seemingly heading straight for the dark folly with its fringe of desultory trees and brambles. James was sure Mike Thomson never came up here as a matter

of course: like the others, he knew that the *de facto* place for a ciggy was round the back of the house.

Thomson paused for a moment, looking around as if to see if he was being observed. Without thinking, James ducked down behind the bough of a fallen tree, only gradually emerging from cover. He was intrigued, almost disturbed, by Thomson's behaviour; he felt compelled to follow.

Keeping his distance, James watched as Thomson finally came up to the folly. There was an arched doorway of sorts that faced the main building of the Retreat; over the space a number of boards had now been nailed into place. It looked as if there had once been a notice, advising people to keep out for their own safety; successive layers of graffiti rendered this illegible. The writing formed a lurid splash of colour against the rainwater-grey building.

Thomson seemed to tug at the boards, alternately bending down to examine them, then running his hand along the edges, where, doubtless, crude nails held them in place. From James's distance, it was impossible to tell if he was checking to see that they were firmly attached – or if he was trying to tear his way inside.

Thomson stood in the doorway for some five minutes, then abruptly turned back to the main building. From another concealed position, James watched him pass by, then considered approaching the folly. Unbidden, memories from a childhood chasing ghosts came to mind. James wasn't sure if it was that, or the strange look on Thomson's face, that made a shiver roll down his spine.

Whatever it was, James had seen more than enough. Once Thomson was gone he walked back towards the Retreat, glancing over his shoulder from time to time at the thick, intimidating building on the hillside.

It was some time later that – almost involuntarily – Laska found herself standing outside Oldfield's office. Despite his earlier words the door was not, literally, open.

She stood for a moment, wondering how to play the whole thing – should she pretend that she was just passing by, or should she try her best to come across as strong and confident, a person ready to do a deal – but not at any price?

She knocked on the door, twice, confidently. She told herself that she was in charge of this situation – that, as James had said, she didn't have to say anything she didn't want to. But other, weaker, voices jostled for attention in her mind, querying just who had the power here – and who most wanted something from the other.

'Come.' The voice was as cold and brittle as winter leaves.

Laska pushed open the door. Oldfield looked up, and his face cracked – like an ashen egg – into a sickly approximation of a smile. 'Miss Darnell. Come

in.'

Laska shivered. She preferred it when he was being creepy and horrible.

Oldfield indicated the chair facing him across the expansive walnut desk; Laska sat in it, fidgeting nervously with her eyebrow ring, unsure what to say.

Oldfield broke the silence. 'I'm glad you came to see me,' he said. 'I know that word travels fast, and not always accurately, in a place like this. It's always good to give someone an opportunity to put their point across – should they so wish.'

'You think I know something.'

'There is... a grapevine, if you will, in the Retreat. It encompasses the doctors, the nurses, the patients, and more besides. One does not enjoy listening to gossip, of course, but when one hears so much...'

She hated herself for doing this; every word felt poisonous and full of self-loathing. But, despite all her better thoughts and judgements, the words spilled from her lips. 'Let's say I know something about Dr Bartholomew,' she said. 'What if it's not the sort of thing you want to hear...?'

Oldfield paused for a moment, evidently weighing up his options, then cleared his throat. 'Very well. Let me be quite straight with you. Every scrap of information I have about my colleagues helps me to decide where we, as an institution, might go from here. As I mentioned to you, and to young Mr Abel, I am very concerned about the day-to-day running of this place. The regrettable incident this morning merely underlines my concerns. Of course, what you tell me might be mere *tittle-tattle*, but even so... I believe the minutiae of our private lives say a lot about our leadership, our authority, our common sense. I'm not the sort of person, for example, who thinks there was no correlation between Clinton's peccadilloes and the nature of his presidency.'

'And in return?'

'In return? I shall not forget your honesty. If what you say has some bearing on the administration of the Retreat, and... let us say someone else is considered worthy of the position of chief medical officer...'

He paused, clearing a few papers away from the desk as if forging a path between himself and Laska. 'Let me put it this way, I know what you most desire. I know what fills your every waking thought. If I am ever in such a position as to give you what you want...'

Laska suddenly remembered her father, holding her in his arms and overseeing her childlike prayers. 'Be careful what you ask for,' he used to say. 'You might even get it.'

Laska leaned forward conspiratorially. Her vision seemed to contract, and she was only aware of the shadows around Oldfield's eyes. There was a heavy, churning feeling in her stomach – it was like being on a fairground roller coaster about to enter into a dark and unknown tunnel.

‘It seems to me that Dr Bartholomew’s been a bit distracted recently,’ she said – her voice echoing in her head, as if she were listening to someone in another room. ‘I think I know why.’ Within her, the game player, the actor, made her pause before delivering the *coup de grâce*. ‘It’s her husband, Joe. He’s having an affair with one of the nurses.’

Twelve

A Million Manias

[Torment]

Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Friday 25th December 1903 (continued)

I believe it was Mr Craig who brought me news of the murder – though, at that moment in time, I had no idea who the perpetrator might be. I hardly need say that this revelation shocked me to the core. I was fearfully saddened by the death, and disturbed that my manifold reforms seemed to count for naught.

I met Fern and Torby in the chapel beneath Mausolus. It seemed now a grotesque morgue, containing as it did two gurneys, one holding aloft the body of Mr Sands, the other the murdered form of Jones. I could scarce believe the injuries the woman had received; to call it butchery would do a disservice to the folk who work in the field. This was worse than barbarism, worse than anything one might find in nature. While the good things in life do not lead me to any specific belief in God, this awful, staved-in face inclined me to give more credence to the Devil.

Fern appeared stony-faced and resolute (I must say again that I did not consider his manner unusual at the time); Torby seemed delicate and wavering, as if all he held true was now dangling by a thread. But, to give the fellow credit, he stood at my side as I examined the injuries to Jones, and made not a sound until my examination was complete.

‘A most frenzied attack,’ I said, though this was obvious to all and sundry. ‘If it is any consolation, she will have died at the first blow, I am sure.’

‘What shall we do?’ Torby asked. ‘We must call the police.’

I laid a restraining hand upon his arm. ‘No,’ I said as gently as possible. ‘Not yet. What would be served by rousing the officers of the law on a day such as this? We know that the murderer is within these walls. There is every chance that we might be able to establish the truth in a way that the local constabulary never could.’

‘But the patients. . .’

'I am thinking of the patients, and no one else,' I explained. 'If knowledge of this death becomes commonplace... If word reaches the trustees and we are closed for ever... Do you think these wretches will end up at a yet more enlightened institution?'

Torby shook his head.

'Neither do I. We must ourselves oversee all contact between the patients.' (To my shame, and for all my grave suspicions of the fellow, it never occurred to me to suspect Mr Fern of such a cowardly act. I felt that this act spoke of extreme lunacy, and that Fern, for all his faults, would stop short of murder.)

'Let me seek the Reverend Macksey,' said Torby. 'He told Mr Fern he would come to perform the last rites over Mr Haward. Let me tell him this latest news. He would, I am sure, like to pray through the rooms of Mausolus. I know you do not acknowledge the power of prayer,' he said, before I could indeed articulate my concerns, 'but have you not noticed the atmosphere of this place? Almost every patient is crying out continually. They are cutting themselves with whatever flints they can find on the floor of their cells. Most of the staff have deserted us, like rats off a sinking ship!'

'I suppose it can do no harm,' I said. 'Perhaps prayer can improve the outlook of those of us who remain. Go then, Mr Torby! Return with the good reverend, and perchance his presence – or that of his God – will see us safely through this darkness.'

Mr Torby and I left the chapel; Fern remained behind, the gaslight giving his haunted features the appearance of wax. Had my senses been more keen I may have heard him cry out – penitent tears, his last truly human moment. I might have heard the terrible Evil as it advanced on him.

But I had my own nightmare to contend with.

*Extract from the Diary of the Reverend Mr William Macksey
Friday 25th December 1903 (continued)*

My dear wife brought word of young Torby's arrival. As I write now, I remember it clearly, as if the final sane moment before madness overtook my senses.

We took the cart back to Mausolus. Mr Torby tried to tell me that, to top the strange death of the first patient, a second poor soul had been beaten to death. My blood ran cold as he described the damage the woman's skull had sustained; he stated, almost guiltily, that he could only stare upon the shattered visage for a mere moment. I doubt I could have observed for that long.

Charles warned me that a deep and enveloping darkness had descended upon the place, and that with many staff having been granted a holiday for

Christmas there were few left to stem a tide of anarchy and evil. Even so, I was ill prepared for the scene we observed as we came down the expansive driveway. The front doors were standing open, patients were walking and running through the grounds without supervision. (It cannot have been more than an hour since Mr Torby left Mausolus House to find me; I could see by his face that even he was shocked by how much worse things had become in his absence.) Two or three orderlies passed us as we approached the building; it was clear that they were heading home with scant regard for what was happening at the hospital. Charles Torby tried to reason with them as we passed, but there was little time for any real debate and, in any case, the gentlemen simply turned up their collars and set their eyes yet more firmly on the sights and sounds of the village.

Mr Craig – a young man of about Charles Torby's age – stood outlined in the doorway, hand in mouth, aghast. We questioned him urgently. He said he could not be sure who had opened the doors to liberate the patients, nor did he know where Dr Christie was. He had last seen the governor when he had brought him yet more bad news – another brutal death, this time of a Mr Haward. Craig took us at once to see this latest body; Charles in particular was almost overcome by what he observed. It was like, he said, a scene from the tales of Edgar Allan Poe that the late Mr Haward was so fond of.

This poor fellow was sprawled across a corridor, frozen as if in the act of fleeing some threat. A dark handle protruded from his back; the weapon was so deeply embedded in him that I could not tell if it were a kitchen knife or some great cleaver.

I have never seen such blood.

It was imperative that we find Dr Christie. It would not be safe for us to search individually; I therefore followed Messrs Torby and Craig through the dark corridors of Mausolus House. Each of us was tense for any sound, any unexpected movement; at times, we inched forward into the shadows, and I would not be exaggerating to say that we feared for our very lives.

We searched the ground floor and the floor above that and found naught but overturned items of furniture and shed garments, often torn to ribbons. I estimated that around one half of the patients had been freed – and, in some cases, with doors forced off their hinges and lying in the corridors, I surmised that the incarcerated had somehow liberated themselves. The air stank of human filth; those gaslights that were working flickered feebly within a gathering gloom. It seemed always that there were shouts and curses coming from just around the corner, or the floor below, but we did not see a soul as we paced the cold, stone corridors. I felt that I was in my very own, very private hell, and that Hogarthian torture and abuse was forever happening just out of sight.

I could not believe that Christie would desert Mausolus, and neither could Torby. It was possible he had gone into the village to raise the alarm; more possible still that we had not yet found the man, and that he was trying to do what he could to staunch the gathering, growing lunacy.

We discovered him – just when we were considering our own flight to the village, or Charnage – within the chapel. He had locked himself inside, and we could hear his voice through the thick wooden door.

But this was not Dr Christie that we heard – not in any sense that I recognised the man within my spirit. This was a shell of a person, driven to the brink of insanity – possessed, perhaps, by nameless terrors and demons. I did not know how to address the man, for perhaps now his name was Legion.

Torby banged on the door, silencing for a moment the demented babble that emanated from what had once been this most learned and upright of men. ‘Sir, sir,’ he called. ‘What’s going on? Why won’t you let us in?’ And though he hauled on the handle repeatedly the door would not budge.

‘Get away from here!’ shouted Christie. ‘Save yourselves! I have seen the great evil in this place. It must be destroyed!’

‘Dr Christie,’ I said, with as much authority as I could muster. ‘It is the Reverend William Macksey. You sent Mr Torby to find me, and we returned as soon as we could. The situation in which we find ourselves is clearly dire, but there is no need to abandon all hope or sense. Let us talk. Please.’

I could hear Christie muttering to himself beyond the door; in my mind’s eye I saw him walking up and down, wringing his hands, his eyes now wide and staring. ‘Macksey? Macksey?’ he queried, as though unfamiliar with my name. ‘Torby I remember. Yes. Torby – a great fellow, great potential!’

I persevered. ‘How do you hope to destroy this evil?’

There was a low, frightened moan from within the room, then Christie seemed to gather his thoughts. ‘It must be purged. It must be burned. It is made mighty by madness.’

‘What do you mean? What have you done?’

‘Get Torby away from here!’ exclaimed Christie suddenly. ‘He should not have to die with me.’

I noticed that Craig was still a little way off, his face blank and crestfallen. I imagined that he could cope with the awful terrors he had seen as long as he was convinced that Dr Christie was in control and able to turn the situation from ill to good; now he knew that the great Dr Christie, humanitarian, researcher, man of letters, was as vulnerable to this vast, expanding evil as anyone else, it seemed that he had lost all hope.

But I was not about to give up so easily. I encouraged Charles to continue his dialogue with Christie, nodding at points, suggesting what to say at others. At

length something of the old Dr Christie seemed to return; we heard shuffling footsteps from within, and then, inch by inch, the door grated open.

Torby and I, followed by Craig, pushed our way into the chapel before Christie could change his mind.

At least, it had once been a chapel. Two bodies rested on gurneys in the central aisle; around them, pews and sundry wooden items had been overturned and smashed. Christie had heaped great mounds of rags around the room; these he had doused with oil. He had poured further oil over his head – he glistened in the torchlight like some newborn phantasm of evil – and was clearly about to turn his attention to the gaslights that flickered at the far end of the room.

He intended to set fire to himself, to the chapel, to Mausolus House.

Thirteen

My Life in a Bell Jar

(Where is My Mind?)

As darkness fell a loose collection of staff members came together in one of the offices. Working on the principle of keeping friends close and enemies closer still, Laska had spent much of the afternoon with Trix and Fitz, and so she shadowed Dr Smith's companions into the room. Liz Bartholomew seemed not to object to her presence. Either Smith had told Liz that he suspected Laska of some delicate involvement in what was going on, or she was simply too preoccupied to care.

'Pending the arrival of the police,' announced Dr Smith, as if in charge, 'Dr Bartholomew has ordered that the crime scene remain untouched.'

'But where are they?' said Liz, clearly frustrated by the delay. 'I know there's not a station in Norton any more, but you'd think a juicy murder at a place like the Retreat would bring every CID officer in the county running.' Liz's fingers were drumming furiously on the desktop, which Laska took as the sure sign of someone who had never smoked but was seriously thinking about starting. 'And where the hell is Tracy?' continued Liz. 'She's been gone for hours!'

Mike Thomson bustled into the room. Laska's keen eyes noticed that there was mud on his hands. 'I've just heard from an officer at the station,' he said, sounding a little out of breath. 'Managed to get a call through to my mobile. He said he was questioning Tracy. They'll be over shortly.'

Laska saw Dr Smith raise a suspicious eyebrow at this.

'I hardly need add,' said Liz, 'that we'll be helping the police in every way that we can.'

Smith glanced around the room and appeared to see Laska for the first time. 'We shall have to tell the truth about everything,' he said. 'It's the only way forward.'

It seemed that that was the end of the briefing. Liz and some of the nurses began to filter out of the room. Trix came over, followed by Fitz, and she bent down to whisper in Laska's ear. 'Fancy a coffee?'

Laska was not unduly surprised that Smith's friends should suddenly take the initiative in this way; doubtless he had ordered them to intensify their

interest in her.

She didn't know how much more of this pressure she could stand.

'All right,' said Laska.

The canteen was at most a hundred yards away. Only Fitz spoke as they walked, trying to fill the silence with pointless observations on the weather and last night's football results. It was hard to believe that this was the man who had, apparently, been patrolling with the security guards all night just before one of them had been stabbed.

Trix and Laska settled themselves down in the canteen while Fitz went off to get some drinks. The air of unease and suspicion in the Retreat had, if anything, intensified as the day wore on. The suggestion that the death was no mere accident was now accepted truth, and the fact that the police had not, as yet, put in an appearance only served to heighten the tension.

Trix leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. 'The Doctor said I'd been keeping tabs on you?' It was clear that Trix, when the mood took her, belonged to the bull-in-a-china-shop school of tact and diplomacy.

Laska nodded. 'I suppose I should compliment you – I had no idea I was being *stalked*.'

'I would say you're not my type,' said Trix without a pause, 'but it seems to me there's more than enough sexual tomfoolery going on in your life already.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning I know all about you and that nurse,' said Trix. 'Though there is an issue of abuse of power, I wouldn't normally bother myself with something so *trivial*. However, something's going on here that's much more important than a member of staff getting his end away with a patient.'

Laska said nothing, concentrating instead on staring at the blonde woman, trying to find a way through the icy veneer – sympathy, cynicism, mistrust. . . There must be something Laska could use, some way of turning the tables.

'If you were to tell the Doctor what he needs to know,' Trix continued, 'I'm sure I would be more than capable of keeping quiet.'

'You're blackmailing me?'

'Simply making an honest observation, one woman to another. The death of this security guard is just the beginning. If the Doctor and Fitz and I can crack on with this. . . whatever it is. . . Well, I'll be too busy to think about your private life.'

'I'm not doing anything wrong,' Laska blurted out before she could stop herself.

'I'm not here to judge,' said Trix. 'I'm just interested in getting results, for the Doctor. Understand?'

'What hold does he have over you?'

‘No hold at all,’ said Trix. ‘You probably don’t believe this, but we’re on the side of the angels. Honestly.’

‘But I don’t even know what Dr Smith wants!’

‘I’m not sure he knows either.’ Trix leaned towards Laska, her already husky voice dropping to an ominous whisper. ‘Word to the wise: stay away from Dr Oldfield. Don’t tell *him* anything.’

Laska remembered her earlier conversation with the man. A new wave of visceral guilt and anguish flooded over her. She wasn’t sure now what made her tell Oldfield about Joe Bartholomew and Susannah – or why she continued to refuse to open up to Dr Smith.

Trix leaned back as Fitz returned with three mugs of coffee, his brow furrowed in concentration as he tried not to spill them. Trix’s face relaxed, colour flooding into her cheeks and eyes. Laska wasn’t sure which face was really *her*, and which was the mask.

‘You girls getting on OK?’ asked Fitz as he settled down and pushed two of the cups away from him.

Trix and Laska exchanged an exasperated look of momentary honesty.

‘Like a house on fire,’ said Laska.

Susannah Harvey was having a terrible day. It wasn’t the guard’s fault that he should die – or get killed – on the last day of her block, but it was a monumental *pain*. Normally she’d be looking forward to going home, throwing off her shoes, and slobbering about the flat for a few days, but today she’d been warned not to leave the Retreat until given clearance to do so by the police. She didn’t even know if they’d arrived yet, still less how quickly they’d deal with staff members who were impatient to get away.

Still, rumour pointed to a cold-blooded stabbing, which meant it had to be one of the patients, didn’t it? Especially in the local papers, the Retreat had an unfortunate reputation for dealing with rich in-breds with largely imaginary neuroses and zonked-out, has-been rock stars who no longer knew what day of the week it was (she’d heard stories of one who smuggled in some acid and had spent the best part of a week believing that he was the entire Jackson Five, namely Michael, Marlon, Jermaine, Tito and the other one she could never remember). The truth was rather different, and there were one or two in the Retreat with serious problems, people who’d been prevented from becoming front-page news only by the timely intervention of an observant GP or family member. *That’s* where she’d start her questions – not that she wanted to tell the police how to do their job.

Susannah put down her pen. With her colleagues flapping about like headless chickens she’d taken the opportunity to get to grips with some overdue

paperwork. The other nurses considered her a bit of a gossip, but even Susannah had her limits – and murder was well beyond them. She was usually days behind on her form-filling; now she was almost up to date. She reckoned she deserved a celebratory fag.

She made her way to the back of the house. The corridors there were largely in darkness. She expected to be on her own: she supposed that everyone else would be busy exchanging conspiracy theories and checking up on each other. No matter, a bit of peace and quiet suited her. More time to think about what colour she was going to paint the spare room – and what the hell she was going to do about her relationship with Joe.

For all her reputation as a bimbo, Susannah knew which subject was the more important.

Joe was never far from her thoughts, though early on she had recognised that this was less to do with love – or even affection – and frankly a damn sight more to do with fear and guilt. She enjoyed spending time with him – they seemed very much on the same wavelength when they were fooling around or just *bonking* – but attempts by either of them to get serious always resulted in awkward disaster. What was there to be serious about? Both knew the relationship was a bit of fun, an exciting development at the fringes of their lives – but it was never going to go anywhere, was it?

And that was fine – a victimless crime – were it not for the fact that she had to work with Joe's wife. She'd never set out to be an *adulteress* – she had never got up one morning and said, 'Today I think I'll lead a married man astray'. In fact, she'd always prided herself, when she was growing up, that she wasn't an easy lay, and as an adult married men had always been a no-no.

But, when it was clear that Joe was interested in her, all her resolve crumbled. She'd just endured a couple of disastrous relationships; perhaps it was time for a bit of harmless fun.

But, with delicious irony, Joe's betrayal of Liz sat heavy in *Susannah's* stomach. Indeed, Susannah had tried to avoid Liz as much as possible – she couldn't even bear to look into Liz's eyes. The trouble was, if Susannah's unease became any more overt, Liz might begin to suspect something – and her fellow nurses would only be too happy to point the finger.

Far from being fun – posh restaurant meals with an older, richer man, nights at his place when Liz was working – it had become a balancing act, a worry. Perhaps she should quit, while she was ahead, and while no one knew. It would be impossible to keep a lid on this forever – and if the pure fun was balanced by thoughts such as responsibility it was surely time to go.

As Susannah stepped outside she was surprised to see Dr Oldfield coming towards her. It looked like he'd popped out to get something from his car and was now taking a short cut back into the building.

They exchanged reserved smiles and Oldfield seemed to pass by, his mind on other things.

Then Susannah noticed that he was still in the doorway, staring at her with his little piggy eyes.

Bollocks. That meant he wanted to talk to her.

'Would you care to join me, Dr Oldfield?' Susannah asked, offering the packet of cigarettes towards the man.

He almost visibly recoiled but was not, unfortunately, entirely repulsed. 'No. Thank you.'

'I know I should give up,' said Susannah, struggling with her lighter (it had the Playboy logo on it; Joe had given it to her, as a joke, though she wasn't quite sure on whom). 'Have you seen the latest adverts? *Gross*. But, when the moment comes... I just don't seem to be able to do it.'

'I'm not unsympathetic,' said Oldfield. 'It's an addiction, like any other.'

Susannah wasn't entirely sure she liked being equated with thieving inner-city junkies or churchyard tramps who smelled of meths.

Oldfield stood in the doorway, watching Susannah smoke. She wished he would just come out with whatever it was that was bothering him, and then bugger off.

'I was hoping to run into you,' he announced suddenly. 'Some interested parties have asked me to write a report on the Retreat. There are concerns that this place isn't as well managed as it could be.'

Susannah looked at him. She couldn't work out why he was telling her this.

'In the process of putting this together... I've heard many things, especially where Dr Bartholomew is concerned. I get the impression that there's some secret in her past that she wants to keep hidden.'

'We all have secrets, Dr Oldfield.'

The man smirked. 'Indeed we do. But this particular... undisclosed matter... is potentially vital. It calls into question the integrity of Dr Bartholomew and her suitability to be in charge of this establishment.'

'Well, I'm sorry I can't help you, Dr Oldfield.' A dark shadow formed at the back of Susannah's mind, the first inkling that she knew where this might be leading.

Oldfield's eyes narrowed. 'Are you sure? This conversation, of course, is off the record – but it's possible we might need to talk soon in a more official context.'

'I don't know the first thing about Liz!' exclaimed Susannah.

'I have heard that you're on very good terms with Dr Bartholomew's husband.'

'I don't know what you're talking about!'

‘Really? That is disappointing. An unguarded moment of pillow talk... That might be just what I’m looking for.’

‘How dare you!’ Susannah was furious now, furious that such information now seemed to be public knowledge, furious about what that might mean for her work at the Retreat. She was, after all, reasonably well paid for what she did, one of many benefits of the Retreat’s quasi-private employment practices. Susannah knew she’d never get another nursing job quite as cushy as this one; the anger that flowed through her veins now was triggered more by thoughts of survival than anything else.

‘I think you’re forgetting our relative positions here, *Nurse Harvey*.’ Oldfield’s voice now was as warm, and as relentless, as a glacial advance.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Susannah. ‘I didn’t mean... I just don’t see what business it is of yours.’

‘Oh, I agree,’ said Oldfield. ‘It’s none of my business whatsoever. Tell me what I need to know and it will stay that way.’ Susannah got the faintest impression of the man licking his dry lips with a narrow, pallid tongue. ‘If you can’t help me... Then it might not just be Dr Bartholomew’s professional integrity that I’m forced to investigate.’

‘I honestly don’t know anything about Liz’s past,’ said Susannah. ‘I’m sorry.’

Oldfield held her gaze for a moment longer, giving Susannah still longer to think of some scrap of information, some nugget that might be useful to him.

Then he turned his back to her, and moved through into the house.

‘A pity,’ he said.

‘Wait!’ said Susannah suddenly. Something had come to mind, some conversation she now barely remembered, a fragment that her subconscious had dredged back to life in barely the nick of time.

Oldfield turned to her, triumphant. ‘Yes?’ he asked quietly.

‘He... Joe... He did once talk about a stressful time that he and Liz had been through. It was before she came here, though they were both living locally.’

‘Yes?’ Oldfield’s eyes twitched in anticipation.

‘Something about a patient who died... It was... No, I don’t remember now.’

Oldfield almost laughed. ‘But, my dear, you must. You simply must remember.’

Susannah threw her cigarette to the floor, stamped on it, trying to get the gears of her mind working. ‘A mercy killing. That was the phrase he used. A bloke in his forties, I think. Liz was one of the doctors that assisted his suicide.’

‘And did Mr Bartholomew say what happened?’

‘I think it went to court. Liz was found innocent and the GMC took no further action against her.’

‘Thank you,’ said Oldfield. ‘That’s *just* the sort of thing I’ve been searching for. Something as important as this should have been stated on Dr Bartholomew’s application.’ He looked up at the great, dark house that dwarfed them both, clearly dreaming of the moment when he would be in charge. ‘I am in your debt, my dear.’ He paused, clearly enjoying the moment. ‘I don’t think it would be wrong of me to suggest that we might be seeing a few changes around here in the very near future.’

With a final nod of thanks, and a cold, grey smile, Oldfield disappeared inside the building.

Fourteen

Basket Case

[Where's Your Head At?]

Laska found Liz's door open. The office beyond was impeccably tidy with barely a sheet of paper or a folder out of place. The only jarring element was a series of framed cartoons on the walls; the one closest to Laska was of a patient lying down on a couch while a doctor took notes. The psychiatrist, who resembled Sigmund Freud, was saying 'I'd like you to join my research group. There are just ten of us – myself, Mr Smith, and Mr Smith's eight other personalities.'

Liz looked up from behind the desk and noticed what Laska was staring at. 'I know what you're thinking,' she said. 'It's not very funny, is it?'

'Well, I wouldn't say that,' said Laska cautiously. For all she knew, the artist could be Liz's brother or something. 'I mean, it could be worse. It could have been a variation on *You don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps.*'

'You know, if I go to *one more* dinner party where someone says that to me... Well, I might not be responsible for my actions.'

Laska was still staring at the cartoon. 'And, of course, that type of "split personality" isn't what schizophrenia is all about. It's the fragmentation of one's psychological functioning.'

Liz nodded. 'Mike is always saying how well read you are.'

Laska took an automatic step back from the framed picture. 'Yeah, well,' she said dismissively. 'That's just head knowledge. Any idiot can read books.'

'But to want to read about such things, when you yourself have had psychiatric problems... Don't do yourself down, Laska, that's pretty rare.'

'I suppose,' said Laska. 'Look, Dr Bartholomew... Liz... Can I have a word?'

'Of course,' said Liz. She indicated the seat in front of the desk; Laska pushed the door shut behind her but stayed on her feet.

'I've done... I've done something terrible,' said Laska, the words suddenly coming out in a rush before she was able to vet them. For all the emotion she felt – the guilt, the regret – Laska found herself studying Liz's reaction. There was just a sudden stiffness about the lips, the hint of a raised eyebrow

'I should have come to you straight away,' continued Laska. 'Instead I told... Instead I told someone else. That was stupid of me. Stupid, stupid, stupid.' She couldn't help but wring her hands, twist them into fists.

'What do you want to tell me?' asked Liz. There was a gravity in her voice that somewhat took Laska by surprise. 'If it's something about Mr Farrell...'

'Bloody hell!' Laska was laughing now, her anguish turned to momentary, absurd amusement. 'No, it's got nothing to do with that.'

'Well, I have to ask, because unless it's really important... Well, you know, I've got a lot on my plate just at the moment.'

'It's vital!' exclaimed Laska. 'It's about you, and Joe, and... ' The words dried up, suddenly. She was no longer sure this was the time or the place to come clean with Liz, to tell her what she knew.

'What about Joe?' said Liz, suddenly on the defensive – as if, at the back of her mind, some grim doubt was already gnawing away at her fragile inner calm.

'It's just... the other day... I saw Joe...' Again the words dried up, and Laska found herself staring into Liz's eyes, as if pleading with Liz not to make her go through with this.

Salvation came from an unexpected quarter, in the form of one of the gestalt nurses barging through the door. 'Dr Bartholomew? I think you'd better... Oh.' She saw Laska, sensed something of the atmosphere between the two women. 'I'm sorry I didn't realise...'

'That's OK,' said Laska, relieved.

'What is it?' asked Liz.

'It's William Butler,' said the nurse. 'He's killed himself.'

'That's all we need.' Liz got to her feet. 'Can you move the body down to the chapel?'

'Of course.'

Something clicked in Laska's mind, a synapse firing, a connection made, a resonance identified. She heard Liz asking, 'Was there a suicide note?'

The nurse shrugged. 'Not sure. We haven't checked the room thoroughly.'

Liz stared at Laska. 'Can what you were telling me... Can it wait?' Now there was a look of desperation in Liz's eyes – as if she didn't want to know the truth, for the moment. As if she feared it might be the straw that broke the camel's back.

'Sure,' said Laska. 'It's not important,' she added – and cursed herself for her dishonesty.

She turned to leave, suddenly impatient, almost brushing the nurse away. 'I've got to find Dr Smith, she said. 'There's something I've got to tell him.'

* * *

Laska found Smith in the library. He looked very much at home with the dark panelled walls and expansive shelves, almost an eccentric academic with an interest only in the dust and knowledge of ancient books.

To his left rested an enormous pile of A3 photocopies. They seemed to be a variety of stories from local newspapers, all involving the Retreat, its controversial planning applications, the locals who had fought its foundation tooth and nail.

To his right sat a laptop, with a complicated program that seemed to be running as a screensaver. It beeped from time to time, sounding not unlike a sonar on a submarine.

But in front of Dr Smith, and occupying all of his attention, was a single scrap of lined paper. He looked up from it, his eyes seeming not to focus on Laska for a moment.

Then he indicated that she should come closer. He pointed to the sheet of paper, and spoke as if trying to draw her in, to involve her in his concerns about the Retreat and his intention, doubtless, to put them right.

‘It’s the suicide note,’ he said simply. Only much later did it occur to Laska to wonder how Smith knew that Laska had heard of the man’s death – and why he sought to involve her in the matter. ‘I wish there was more we could have done for him.’

‘You shouldn’t have taken that!’ exclaimed Laska. ‘Liz will need it.’

‘Oh, I’ll give it to Liz, in time,’ said Smith. ‘But it’s vital that I see it first. I must stress, that’s not arrogance on my part. But I simply have to know what’s going on here.’

‘I think I might be able to help you,’ said Laska. She paused, wondering what to say. In its own way, this was harder than telling Liz about her husband. As with her suspicions about Joe Bartholomew, what she was about to tell Smith now seemed riddled with irrelevancies, coincidence and interpretation. And – worse still – they might possibly allow another person into her life, her past, her heart. There seemed only to be room for one person there – and he was long gone.

And yet, Smith, in these past few days, had clearly wanted nothing more than for Laska to open up to him. Although Trix had come on a bit strong, Smith himself had proved to be the opposite of Oldfield: he would clearly have never pressured her, or bribed her, or blackmailed her. It had to be knowledge – intimacy – given freely, or not at all.

Laska wondered, for a moment, if what she had in mind was mere trivia, a distraction from a murder and a suicide. But the awful parallels could not be ignored any longer. Smith had always said he felt that there was a link between her and what was going on at the Retreat – as if she had a unique insight, and on that insight rested the fate of many people.

'I've been reading some old documents – diaries, that sort of thing,' she said. Those first words she'd had to force out, almost gritting her teeth. Now they came in a liberating, heady rush. 'They were my dad's. I brought them here when I was admitted, but I've only just got around to reading them. That's where the pendant came from – it was in the suitcase, with Dad's papers. I keep being drawn back to the books... And they're freaking me out. What's happening now is just like what happened before...'

Dr Smith smiled. 'Thank you, Laska, for being honest with me. I can't tell you how vital this might be.' He pushed the suicide note slightly to one side, as if to imply that she now had his full attention. 'But the important thing is for you to tell me everything, calmly, and then I can read these diaries for myself.'

'Sure. No problem.'

'Perhaps you could tell me how your father came by these items.'

'Dad had always been fascinated by genealogy,' said Laska. 'He said... he said it helped him cope with Mum's death. It was as if, by seeing his position, and hers, in the wider scheme of things, by seeing that life continues despite death... That over the course of any one family there will be births and baptisms, pain and joy... It all somehow comforted him.'

'Go on.'

'I remember him scouring local book fairs, going to historical meetings, that sort of thing. When he wasn't working, and I was old enough to look after myself, he'd spend whole afternoons at the library.'

Smith patted the pile of photocopies at his side. 'Fitz and I have been making a nuisance of ourselves in just the same way.'

'I never used to mind – the book fairs were a bit boring, though he normally bought me a trashy paperback to keep me quiet. It all made him so happy, I wasn't about to complain. But I never understood it. It was just Dad's hobby, you know?'

Smith nodded.

'Anyway, when I became ill again...' She paused momentarily, then corrected herself. 'When I last tried to kill myself... I suddenly got interested in all this stuff. I kind of thought that, if I immersed myself in what Dad was interested in, it might...' She started to breathe deeply, fighting to keep the tears at bay, fighting to stay in control. 'It might help me to feel close to my dad again, just as it had... Just as it had helped him, with Mum.'

The words were beginning to slow, each one a gift-wrapped grenade of emotion. Wisely, Smith did not interrupt the ensuing silence, letting Laska gather her thoughts.

'Anyway, a few days back... I started looking through this suitcase of stuff that I'd brought with me. I found the necklace, some notes Dad had done

about the family tree, a couple of diaries. I was just trying to work out why Dad had bought them.'

'Do you remember your father buying them?'

Laska nodded. 'He worked out that both diaries belonged to people who lived and worked around here. Then, as he dug further, he seemed to imply that they might have a bearing on the family tree. Certainly he kept them with his family research stuff, and not his books of local history.'

'Fascinating,' said Smith. 'Would you mind if I had a look?'

Laska did not reply immediately. It was just another simple step, she was surprised she found it so hard – and yet, as she imagined Dr Smith rooting through the suitcase, his hands running over the sacred things within, her blood ran cold. But she had to do this. She couldn't come this far and then fail at the last moment.

'OK,' she said quietly, then, more confidently, 'no problem.'

'Thank you.' Smith got to his feet.

Fitz came into the room then, almost knocking into tables in his enthusiasm to reach Dr Smith. 'The suicide... you've heard?' he asked.

Smith nodded, and pointed at the note on the desk. 'Return this to the room. Dr Bartholomew will be looking for it.'

'Sure,' said Fitz.

Laska did not know whether to be impressed or appalled by Fitz's unquestioning loyalty.

Smith turned to her, resting his hand on her arm just for a moment.

She remembered his earlier touch, his fingertips on the pale skin of her neck. Without thinking her own hands went to her throat, seeking the necklace that – briefly worn – was no longer there.

'I'm assuming these books are in your room?'

Laska nodded dumbly.

'Perhaps you would like to lead the way,' said Smith. 'And, if you're interested, I can tell you about the note.'

'I've taken the opportunity to survey Mr Butler's records,' said Smith as he and Laska walked the corridors of the Retreat. 'You get the impression he spent most of his adult life in one hospital after another, barring a lengthy period when he was cared for in the wider community.'

Laska snorted but said nothing.

'Sometimes the authorities looked after him. Sometimes they let him down.'

Laska noted with interest that Smith didn't include himself in any phrase involving 'the authorities', but then, she could barely imagine him following rules and regulations, so mysterious and unknowable were his purposes.

'In any event, he seemed happy enough here. We can be satisfied with that, I suppose.'

Now he was using an inclusive 'we'. Perhaps he had come to see Laska as a confidante, someone who could be trusted and drawn into his world.

'What did the note say?' asked Laska.

'It spoke of a growing frustration. He seemed to think that his medication wasn't working. He was seeing things.'

'What things?'

'He didn't say – but they obviously affected him deeply. He was beginning to doubt the veracity of everything he perceived.'

'Then the drugs don't work,' said Laska.

'They just make it worse?' said Smith, wiping the smug smile from Laska's face. 'Actually, they *do* work, and in this case, I think they still were.' He stopped suddenly, turning to Laska. 'You're still taking your medication?' he asked.

'Of course,' said Laska. 'I'm a good girl.' But secretly her heart was beating faster now. Perhaps poor Mr Butler had seen a hound. Perhaps it was all real.

She remembered the last diary entry she had read, and for a moment she considered telling Smith about the creature she had seen – had dreamed of.

But Smith's priority seemed to be to read the diaries for himself. Laska reasoned that everything else could wait.

'Here we are,' she announced when they stood outside her room. 'I warn you, it's quite a mess. Please excuse any stale pizzas, old knickers or imprisoned ex-boyfriends you might find.' She giggled now, almost light-headed with her honesty and Smith's unquestioning acceptance of her.

She saw Smith staring at the splintered mess at the bottom of her door – much larger than she remembered it. They exchanged glances, but neither said a word.

Laska pushed open the door, ushered Smith inside. She was going to clear some of the detritus off her bed but Smith almost immediately sat on it, unembarrassed and unconcerned.

She hauled the suitcase over. 'It's not everything of Dad's,' she said. 'It's just what I grabbed before I came here.'

Smith glanced down at the array of notes and documents, clearly resisting the urge to dive in, as if in respect for Laska's memory of her father. As if not wanting to intrude any more than he had to.

'And the diaries?' he queried gently.

'They're here.' Laska brought them over, the large, dark one that belonged to the doctor, the smaller, red one that was the vicar's. 'I was reading them at lunch time,' she said. 'It took me a while to get used to the calligraphy, but now... I seem to keep coming back to them.'

'I'm glad that you did,' said Smith.

'When Liz mentioned taking Mr Butler's body to the chapel,' said Laska by way of explanation, 'well, it reminded me of what I'd just read.'

'And you don't believe in that sort of coincidence?' asked Smith.

'I suppose not,' said Laska.

'Good,' said Smith. 'You've been honest with me. Soon I will be completely honest with you.'

He smiled brightly, then turned back to the diaries.

'Let's see what we have here,' he said as he started to read.

Fifteen

A Hideous Strength

[Dominion]

*Extract from the Diary of the Reverend Mr William Macksey
Friday 25th December 1903 (continued)*

I stared at the governor, scarce believing what I saw. 'What madness is this?' I exclaimed.

'Not madness, sir,' Christie said, inching away from us as if suspecting that we might try to overpower him. 'It is what has to be done. It is what will bring all this to an end.' He paused, the awful confidence of his face now replaced with a look of utter, abject uncertainty. At least. . . I think. . . *Made mighty by madness, birthed in terrible destruction. . .*

He repeated this last phrase over and over again, like some grotesque religious refrain.

'Whatever is going on within Mausolus,' I said, 'you cannot hope to defeat it in this way!'

'But I must try.' His face contorted as if he were suddenly in great pain. 'Or perhaps. . . Perhaps this is some part of the plan. Perhaps my mind is not my own.'

Torby chose this moment to lunge at Christie. He had noticed that the good doctor had a Lucifer match in his hand and was preparing to strike it. Moments later Craig and I were also on the man; we quickly had him overpowered.

Our victory was but a glimpse of the sun on the morning of Armageddon. We were just beginning to wonder aloud what we would do next, and how this fuel-sodden room could be made safe, when the dark outline of a man stepped into the light of the doorway. He dragged an unresisting body behind him.

The man pushed the door closed, turned the key in the lock. We were all trapped in the chapel with Christie.

At the man's side was a hound – or what had once been a hound. It now seemed bloated, swollen like a corpse dragged from the sea. The skin, almost

entirely bare of fur, writhed continually, as if infested with parasites. The eyes glowed like nautical beacons, and spittle fell from the creature's jaws in a constant stream.

Although this domestic animal had been transformed into a veritable hound of hell, Christie recognised the creature. 'Grant?' he whispered. He would have walked towards the dog but Torby still had his arms in a vicelike grip.

Christie did not seem to notice. 'Is it you?' he continued.

The creature moved forward a few feet as if obediently shadowing its new master.

It was only then that I recognised the dark figure by the door. It was Fern – or what was left of him.

His eyes seemed to have shrunk back into the sockets, though, like the hound's, they now took on a ghastly inner light of their own. His skin was almost translucent, and on his cheeks glinted what I can only describe as tears.

At his feet lay the body of the late Mr Haward, the dark handle still jutting from his back. The limbs were lying at angles that would have been impossible in life.

'Are you behind all this lunacy?' I asked. I am not sure what I expected by way of an answer – whether our immediate deaths or a spoken reply that might make some sense of this terrible situation.

Just for a moment a more familiar, more human look ran across Fern's face. 'I tried to repent,' he said, his eyes fixed on mine – or, rather, on the absolute purity of the dog collar at my throat. 'I did try. You must believe me. There is such evil coursing through my mind...'

'Part of repentance,' I said, 'is looking to the future. You could start now. You could open the door, let us go.'

'But I cannot control myself!' He indicated the grotesque hound at his side in such a way as to imply that he was no longer sure who was master and who the servant. 'This creature attacked me...' He held up his arm – I could see a deep, ragged bite in his arm. All around the bite the skin – down towards his hand, up towards the shoulder – writhed as if alive. It had taken on a greyish sheen, not unlike the colour of the dog. I could well believe that it had a life of its own.

'I remained here, in this chapel. My mind was not my own. I tried to warn Dr Christie, to tell him what I had done...' He pressed his fingers hard into his temples. 'I know I am a bad man,' he said through ragged breaths, 'but now... What lives in me is so dark, so evil... We are but pawns... Even Christie...'

I tried to reason with the man. 'Did you kill these people?'

Fern spat out the words between gasps. 'Jones... Haward... I had no choice!'

I wanted to say that there is always choice, but, as I looked into the man's eyes, I was no longer so sure.

'What has made you do these terrible things?' I asked. 'To what end?'

'I don't know,' said Fern, his face contorted as if in great pain. 'I know only that... something is telling me... there are now enough bodies here.' He glanced around the chapel, at the living and the dead. 'It is now time... for fire to claim us all.'

He held up a lantern for all to see. The evil intent was apparent.

'Made mighty by madness,' he intoned. 'Birthed in fire, reborn in terrible destruction!' It was a subtle variation of Christie's refrain.

Mr Craig tried to lunge at Fern, but the huge hound placed itself between them. It bared its thick, yellow teeth at us all; Craig backed away.

'Birthed in fire!' cried Fern, before hurling the lantern towards one of Christie's oil-soaked piles of cloth.

In an instant, the lantern shattered, sparking the rags into flames. Any attempt to intercede was anticipated by Fern, or the great hound. Dr Christie was motionless, his eyes unseeing.

Mr Torby tried to talk to Fern, but it was too late. All humanity had gone. His only interest now was in ensuring that none of us interfered with the blaze he had created.

Dry panelled walls soon cracked and burst into flame. Pockets of fire pushed smoke and sparks at the ceiling, blackening plaster. Most vile of all, the corpses on their trolleys were soon like saints on pyres, blazing red fingers reaching up to envelop skin and bone and hair.

It was all too much for Mr Torby. He had seen too much – perhaps we all had, and a little madness gripped us. Torby was muttering something under his breath; only later did I understand that it was from one of Mr Haward's doom-laden books.

'And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.'

Sixteen

The Lunatics Have Taken Over the Asylum

(Kill Your Sons)

Laska watched as Smith read the two diaries, his brow furrowed in concentration. He had both open at once, urgently cross-referencing facts and statements, his thin lips drawn tighter still. Occasionally he sighed, or muttered under his breath, but for the most part he did not say anything for almost an hour.

Then suddenly he looked up, his blue eyes dazzling Laska momentarily. 'I assume you have realised that this "Mausolus House "...and the Retreat... are one and the same?'

'The details seemed a bit coincidental,' said Laska. 'But then, that makes me being here the biggest coincidence of all.'

'That word again,' said Smith. 'I don't like coincidences. Do you?'

'Can't say I've ever thought about it,' said Laska. She watched as Smith returned to the diaries, then began rooting through the suitcase.

'And you said your father had other documents?' he asked without looking up.

'There's more at home,' said Laska, shaking her head. 'I was in a bit of a rush before I came here,' she added defensively.

'Of course,' said Smith, holding up a scrap of vellum to the light. 'I should very much like to see everything else – if that's all right with you.'

'No problem,' said Laska. 'If someone could drive me into town... ,

Smith, suddenly invigorated, leaped to his feet, stuffing the two diaries into his pocket and slamming the suitcase shut. 'I'm sure Fitz can sort that out for you,' he said. 'Meanwhile, Trix and I need to talk to Dr Bartholomew.' He paused, just for a moment, shaking his head. 'I now know where we are in the rough chronology of things,' he said. 'But events are more advanced than I had thought possible. Sometimes ignorance is bliss!'

'You wish I hadn't come to you with this stuff?' asked Laska cautiously.

'No,' said Smith, holding her arms tightly. 'I can't tell you how pleased I am that you've told me about these diaries. Every scrap of information I can gain is critical.'

'Look, Dr Smith. . .'

'Hmm?'

'This honesty. . . It goes two ways, right?'

'But of course.'

'So. . . you said you'd tell me what's going on. Who are you, and what are you doing here? Truthfully. No more of this "I'm a superhero" guff, no more trite clichés. . .'

'You should have come to me,' said Trix, who suddenly appeared in Laska's doorway. 'I know all there is to know about the Doctor – and more.'

'That's a *slight* exaggeration,' said Smith. He turned to Trix. 'I need Fitz to drive Laska into town to get the rest of these documents – but what Laska's already shared with me has been vital.'

Trix seemed pleased to hear that Laska was now 'on their side', though she said nothing, merely fixing Laska with a smug, knowing smile.

'Right, I must have a word with Dr Bartholomew.' With a flash of a grin, Smith disappeared down the corridor like the Cheshire Cat, leaving Trix and Laska together.

'I'm delighted that you've been such a good girl,' said Trix. 'I'll go and get Fitz – I'll ask him to tell you anything you want to know.' She smiled. 'And I mean *anything*.'

Elizabeth Bartholomew stared unblinkingly at Dr Oldfield. Both were on their feet, faces flushed, hands balled into angry fists. 'With the greatest of respect. . . I don't think now is the right moment to worry about my management of the Retreat.'

'Really?' said Oldfield. 'In a few short hours we've had a suicide and a murder. Both speak of a shocking lack of security. I can scarcely imagine any circumstances under which a thorough discussion of management style is more warranted.'

'"Management style"? Liz could hardly believe what she was hearing. 'In the light of current events, such academic discussion. . .'

'But it's not academic,' persisted Oldfield. 'It's relevant, to today, to the running of this place. The problems created by your *laissez-faire* management are just coming home to roost!'

'My concern right now is the non-appearance of the police and the investigation that may follow,' said Liz. 'If I'm still here at the end of all that, if running the Retreat means so much to you. . . You can have the stinking job!'

Liz wasn't sure if she meant that, but it didn't half feel good to say it – to imagine, even for a split second, life beyond the Retreat, without its heavy organisational burdens forever on her back.

Oldfield's eyes lit up, a child suddenly offered the freedom of the sweet shop. Then, clearing his throat, he steadied himself. 'Management of the Retreat might not be yours to give, Dr Bartholomew.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is vital, is it not, that when we apply for jobs, especially a sensitive one such as this, we make known anything that might be considered relevant. *Anything*.'

'What are you getting at?'

'This place has been beset by controversy from the outset. Suspicion and cynicism in the national press, opposition from locals. What is the charming acronym?' He paused, though he seemed to know full well what he was referring to. 'NIMBYism! Not In My Back Yard!'

'Dealing with these concerns requires tact and person-management skills,' said Liz, staring at Oldfield with contempt. 'Something I don't think you're known for, Dr Oldfield.'

'Perhaps not,' said Oldfield. 'But at least my record is clean. I have no skeletons in my closet. Whereas you... a court case, possible suspension by the GMC, all over a grubby "mercy killing"...'

Liz's eyes narrowed. 'How do you know about that?' she spat.

'It's not so much a question of how I know,' said Oldfield, 'as why the board that appointed you doesn't.'

'I was the best candidate for the position!'

'So you say – yet you took a decision to omit that particular bit of information from your application. You did not mention it at interview. And now, with police investigating a mysterious death, an unfortunate suicide... One might be forgiven for asking why such unfortunate incidents seem to follow you around.'

'You know *nothing* about that case,' said Liz. 'You don't know the circumstances, the people involved...'

Oldfield grinned, and made a show of looking around. 'By the way, where are the police, Dr Bartholomew?'

'Oh, I don't think they'll be coming,' said Smith, breezing into the room.

'What?' said Liz, disturbed as much by Smith's blasé attitude as the fact that he'd just strolled in, without knocking, on a humiliating argument. Trix followed, her eyes bright and rejuvenated.

'It's no coincidence that the phone lines are down,' said Smith. 'I'm sure the storm we endured last night wasn't strong enough to bring down the lines. And even if it was, the nurse you sent out is still missing.'

'Dr Thomson said he'd heard from the police,' said Liz. 'Tracy was still with them.'

‘He did say that, didn’t he?’ Smith paused, turning to regard Oldfield as if only just noticing that he was there. ‘That is one of many things I wish to discuss with you, Liz – in private. But I certainly don’t feel there is any harm in making public my concerns about the non-appearance of the police.’ He kept his eyes on Oldfield as he spoke. ‘We won’t see a single police officer until tomorrow morning at the earliest – and by then it could be too late.’

‘Too late?’ breathed Oldfield. ‘Too late for what?’

Smith ignored him. ‘I would like that chat, in confidence, Liz.’

Oldfield took the hint with as much grace as he could muster. ‘I shall be in my office,’ he said stiffly. ‘I hope you bear in mind what we discussed, Dr Bartholomew.’

He marched from the room, pulling the door closed behind him. Smith dropped two leather-bound books on to Liz’s desk, as if that explained everything, and then slumped in the chair facing the desk. Liz, too, was forced to sit, watching Smith as he leaned back in the chair, nonchalant hands behind his head. Only Trix continued to stand, looking for all the world like someone spoiling for a fight.

‘What was all that about?’ Smith asked innocently.

‘The usual,’ said Liz dismissively. She leaned towards Smith, desperate to inject some gravity into proceedings. ‘How can you be so sure about the police not coming?’

‘I fear that Tracy Wade is dead,’ said Smith. ‘I’ve been unable to find her body, or her car for that matter – Fitz has been searching all morning. But there is evidence, if you know what you’re looking for, on the driveway, just as it bends out of sight and towards the gatehouse. Evidence that her car was involved in some sort of terrible accident, and that the incriminating material was then cleared away.’

Liz was stunned, for a moment not knowing what to say. ‘Who did it?’

‘That’s the one thing I don’t know,’ Smith said. ‘I suspect Dr Thomson may be involved in all this. He’s been behaving oddly today, and has been showing a particular interest in the folly on the hillside. Perhaps that is simply the stress of the current situation. It affects us all.’ He paused, his eyes ranging around the room. ‘However, his claim that he received a call from the local police station, that Tracy Wade arrived safely and that the police were on their way, is most suspect.’ He looked at the clock on Liz’s desk, watching the second hand move around the face ponderously. ‘Evening is upon us, and we have, as yet, seen not a single police officer.’

‘Have you asked Mike about this?’

‘As I said, he has been somewhat... preoccupied,’ continued Smith. ‘As has the good Dr Oldfield. I have my doubts about him also. Desire for leadership

and responsibility is not always wrong. . . But, in a place like Mausolus, that desire can be corrupted.'

'Mausolus?'

'The Retreat was once called Mausolus House,' explained Smith. 'A Victorian and Edwardian asylum. Before that, it was an especially vile workhouse.'

'I'm not sure I'm in the mood for a history lesson.'

'What I'm about to tell you has a very real bearing on recent events,' said Smith. 'I know your concern is the murder of Farrell, the suicide of Mr Butler. . . the fate of Tracy Wade. And that is as it should be. As I told you once before, Liz, you are a good doctor, concerned only for other people and their welfare. But, if you and I are to ensure that no other people die, then we must become intimately involved with the history of this building – and, as fantastical as it may sound, we must accept that history is, inexorably, beginning to repeat itself.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

Smith indicated the two diaries on the desk. 'These accounts, a hundred years old, tell of a great evil that visited Mausolus House. An evil that was made mighty by madness, that was birthed in fire, and that may yet be reborn in terrible destruction.'

'I still don't follow you.'

Smith pushed the diaries towards Liz. 'You will.'

'The Doctor told me to keep an eye on you,' said Fitz as he got behind the wheel of the car.

'I'm not a little kid,' said Laska, irritated.

'Oh, I know,' said Fitz. 'If it helps, think of me as your taxi driver.' He turned the key in the ignition, slipped the car into first, released the handbrake. 'Isn't she fabulous?' he breathed, running a hand over the plastic dashboard. 'Automatic choke, smooth gearbox. . . So modern!'

Laska looked around as if she'd missed something – to her it was just some crappy Ford something-or-other. 'If you say so.' She pulled on her seatbelt, noting that Fitz's still dangled at his side. 'Dad had an old Triumph, but he always wanted an E-type,' she added a few moments later.

'A wise man,' said Fitz, nodding his head as he completed the three-point turn. 'Who wouldn't?'

They proceeded down the driveway, a largely straight expanse of gravelled concrete that performed a dog-leg turn just shy of the ornate gatehouse. Laska noticed that Fitz gripped the steering wheel ever more tightly as they approached the end of the drive, his lips pursed in concentration.

'Everything OK?' asked Laska.

Fitz nodded but said nothing, his attitude utterly changed now. As they turned the corner he even went as far as locking the doors from the inside.

'What the hell's going on?' exclaimed Laska.

'Better safe than sorry,' said Fitz. 'As patronising as it might sound, I really am here to look after you.'

'We're in danger then?'

'The Doctor thinks we may not be allowed to leave.'

'But that's nuts! Who's going to stop...?'

Her words faded away to nothing as Fitz slowed the car.

Twenty yards or so in front of the gatehouse a great hound stood in the centre of the road, teeth bared. Its grey skin was mottled with patches of fur and exposed flesh. It resembled a terrible creature left to die in a raging inferno – or, Laska thought, some decaying animal, like in that Peter Greenaway film about the zoo. But its eyes were terrifyingly alive and bright, seeming to glow with an ethereal brightness against the twilight.

On huge padded paws it came closer still. Fitz stopped the car.

Laska couldn't help but grasp at Fitz's arm. 'Can you see it?' she whispered.

'Yep.' Fitz's eyes were locked on the creature. 'There it is.'

'What do you see?' Laska turned to look at Fitz as if nothing else mattered.

Fitz, square-jawed and staring at the creature, said nothing. His right hand ran over the steering wheel while his left gripped the gearstick.

'Tell me!' exclaimed Laska desperately.

'I see a dog,' replied Fitz simply. 'At least, I think it used to be a dog...'

'Thank goodness!' said Laska. She started laughing hysterically. 'We might both be mad, but at least we're sharing the same delusion. *Folie à deux*.'

'I was never very good at French,' said Fitz. 'Don't think I've got the nose for it.'

Laska was giggling, thinking of jokes involving dogs and noses, very much the antithesis of Fitz's grim determination. The relief that flooded over her was so all-encompassing, so profound, she frankly had no clue, and cared less, as to what happened next.

Suddenly Fitz slammed the car into first, let up the clutch. It shot forward, wheels spinning noisily against the gravel. Only now did Laska notice some dark stains further up the drive, as if a car had skidded completely off the road.

If there had been a crash, there was no sign of it now.

Two seconds to impact.

She gripped the arms of the seat. The dog stood motionless in the centre of the road, still staring at Fitz.

A second to impact.

At the last moment the hound leaped into the air, over the onrushing bonnet, and straight at the windscreen. There was an earsplitting crack of bone on glass; blood sprayed across the windscreen.

The dog's legs, its huge taloned paws, struggled for a grip, trying to push the creature upright. It forced its grotesque head, like a skinned skull, erect, turning its burning eyes to look at Fitz and Laska within the car.

The car was still travelling towards the gatehouse; if anything, it was picking up speed. Fitz's foot was planted firmly on the accelerator; his face bobbed from side to side, trying to see where he was going.

The hound powered its head forward, against the glass. There was another sickening thump as bone and blood smeared across the windscreen.

It was beginning to crack.

Laska was babbling now, all feelings of comfort and acceptance replaced by an instinctive terror.

The dog raised its head for another strike.

'Hold on!' said Fitz pointlessly. He tugged at the handbrake, jerked the steering wheel with his other hand.

The car lurched to one side, screaming wheels taking it sideways towards the gatehouse. Laska could see the ornate yellowing structure sliding towards Fitz's window.

There was a metallic thud as the car clipped the building. Momentum threw the dog into the air as the car settled back on its wheels. Laska could just see claws and eyes disappearing into the smoke of the protesting tyres.

The car gripped the driveway and lurched forward like a rocket. It was as if a great fist was pushing against Laska's chest, reaching down into her guts. But she was laughing again. They were out on the lane now and she knew that every moment took them further from the dog.

This time, Fitz joined her. 'I quite enjoyed that,' he said, changing up a gear to ease the car's shrieking protests.

Laska glanced over at Fitz. He was leaning towards her not out of new sense of intimacy but because his door had crumpled badly. His trousers were blossoming from white to red.

'You're hurt,' said Laska.

'Don't worry,' said Fitz. 'The adrenalin's doing its job. I'll survive.'

'Tis but a flesh wound!' And she chuckled again, a bright and warming relief flooding through her veins.

'Right,' said Fitz sternly, as they came to a rest at an anonymous junction. 'You'd better start telling me where I'm taking you.'

Liz looked up from the diaries. 'I grant you there are parallels,' she said. 'But that can't be anything other than coincidence, can it?'

'Shall I be straight with you?' asked Smith.

'That would be helpful.'

'No, I mean. . . Shall I? Would you believe me?'

'Only one way to find out.'

'My name's not Smith. I'm not a psychiatrist. I'm not even human.'

'OK. . .' Liz gripped the edge of her desk firmly, wishing there was some sort of panic button installed, like Mr Burns had on *The Simpsons*.

'I am medically trained,' continued Smith. 'I want to reassure you of that. You just might have some trouble accepting my credentials.'

Liz thought it was best to humour him. 'Consider me reassured.'

'I came to the Retreat because of. . . anomalies.'

'Anomalies?'

Smith nodded. 'In the very fabric of the universe. It was easy to fake some qualifications, ask a few favours. . .'

'You must know some very powerful people.'

'More than you can imagine,' said Smith. 'I've had to be very patient, working here while making my investigations. But thankfully time is something I have plenty of.'

Liz felt uncomfortably like a commuter stuck on a train with a charming drunk. Smith might have a lifetime in the world for this nonsense – she did not.

'It's not vital that you believe *who* I am,' continued Smith. 'But it is vital that we get to grips with what's going on. We have a job to do – and we must, it seems, do it without the help of the police, of anyone else.'

'I wish I could believe you!' exclaimed Liz. She indicated the diaries, the incredible story that they told. 'It would be so comforting to think that you know what you're talking about, that all that's happened. . . is about far more than the competence, of otherwise, of my management of the Retreat.'

'Are you still thinking about that?' said Smith.

'I'm thinking of Joe,' said Liz suddenly. 'He has that ability to make everything seem OK.' She sighed. 'And it has been a very long day.'

Laska pushed the key into the lock and paused for a moment before swinging open the door.

She'd not returned home since moving to the Retreat; it was only now, as she stood on its threshold, that she realised how much she missed the place – its echoes, its smell, its ghosts. How much she still considered it home.

When her father died her friends all expected her to sell the old place, get something smaller, blow some of the money on a holiday or a new telly. But she was adamant that she wanted to stay, though it was much too large for her needs and she joked that she rattled around in it like a depressed pea in

an oversized pod. To sell the house would mean severing another tie with the past; to continue to live there would allow her to imagine that not everything was lost. Sometimes she could still hear her father's voice in her mind, who had himself made a similar decision when Laska's mother died. 'I love it here,' he had said. 'It's a sanctuary. It's where I come to retreat from the outside world.'

Laska and Fitz stepped into the hall. It still had its original Edwardian tiled floor and its elegant, tall ceilings; not surprisingly, it was as cold as a tomb. Laska stepped over the circulars and local newspapers and headed straight for the cupboard under the stairs that contained the central heating controls.

She switched on the heating and hot water; immediately the pipes and radiators throughout the house began to gurgle and rattle with rushing water. 'Sorry it's not very welcoming,' said Laska. 'No one's been in for weeks.'

Fitz shook his head, looking around reverentially. 'It's great,' he said. 'Wish I could afford a place like this.'

'I've had some good parties here,' said Laska. 'New houses seem to be built of tissue paper. But the walls here are thick, the neighbours don't seem to mind too much.' She smiled. 'Actually, Mrs Booker on that side is deaf, so that helps.'

She showed Fitz the bathroom, and found some towels in the airing cupboard. His wound needed sorting out; he kept saying it didn't hurt, but she suspected his bravado might be covering a more serious injury.

She stood in the corridor outside while Fitz removed his trousers, swearing under his breath. Soon she heard the taps going, water sloshing around in the sink.

Between audible grimaces when he dabbed at his leg too hard Fitz quizzed her on the diaries. 'The Retreat used to be an asylum called Mausolus House?'

Laska was puzzled. 'Surely you know that – Dr Smith was always saying you were looking back into the history of the place.'

'Yeah. Of course.' There was another, instinctive 'Ow', then – 'Actually, to tell you the truth, I leave all that sort of thing to the Doctor.'

Laska considered asking Fitz what on earth he had been doing over the last few months, if it wasn't researching local history, but she let it pass.

'Not so surprising though, is it?' continued Fitz. 'I suppose buildings are always changing their function. There's a hotel I know in Puerto Rico. Used to be a brothel.' He laughed. 'Actually, on a Friday night, it wasn't so easy to work out *what* it was.' And he chuckled again.

'Tell me about Dr Smith,' said Laska suddenly. 'Trix said you'd answer all my questions.'

'Well, he's not human, for starters.'

'Yeah, *right*.'

'No, honestly. I mean, look at that dog that attacked us. Was that normal?'

'Well, no, but. . .'

'That's what happens. The Doctor is attracted to weird things. Alien stuff, holes in time, that sort of thing.'

'So he is a superhero.'

'He tries to put things right,' said Fitz, finally emerging from the bathroom. He grimaced slightly when he put weight on his right leg but other than that, and the bloodstain on his trousers, he seemed fine. 'He has great power, but chooses always to turn away from evil. I suppose that makes him heroic.' He smiled. 'Now, where are these documents?'

Laska led him to her father's study, a room she had barely touched in the years since his death, as if he might one day stroll back in and resume his research as though nothing had happened. She clicked on the desk lamp and started pulling open drawers and folders.

'The Doctor said he wanted anything to do with the history of that building – and your genealogy.'

Laska nodded, glancing down at an annotated family tree. It was a huge sheet of paper, covered with almost unreadable notes and dates, with branches and roots extending in all directions, encompassing those who died in childbirth and those who died in ripe old age, and every kind of imaginable life in-between. She found her name down towards the bottom. It seemed so bare and lonely, an only child of an only child, with the weight of years and decades of family heritage and expectation threatening to squash her utterly. She wondered if she had always carried the weight of all these dead men and women on her shoulders.

She was just about to roll up the paper when another name caught her eye. She stared at it in mute disbelief.

'What's the matter?' asked Fitz quietly.

Laska pointed.

'Carolina Thorne, 1862 to 1903,' read Fitz aloud. He shrugged. 'Er, so?'

Laska looked up. 'In the diaries. . . The doctor in 1903 talks of a patient called Miss Thorne. She came from a family that supported the asylum financially.' She glanced further back up the tree – unfamiliar names, early deaths. How many incarcerations? 'She had an illegitimate child and was admitted to the hospital, as many members of her family had been before.' Laska suddenly remembered a squat building full of death, a sleepwalking dream that felt more real than life itself, an attempt to throw away the burning necklace. . . 'The mausoleum,' she whispered.

'What?'

'The folly on the hill,' said Laska. 'It's a mausoleum.' She ran her finger

down from Carolina Thorne to her own name. 'And Miss Thorne is my great-great-grandmother.'

Seventeen

Matters of Life and Death

[Chiaroscuro]

Joe Bartholomew turned his car off the lane and on to the Retreat's driveway. With his mobile wedged between his face and shoulder he did not see the tyre marks on the driveway, the flecks of metal and paint that rested at the base of the gatehouse. His mind was entirely on other matters.

He'd been trying to get hold of Liz all day but the Retreat's phones seemed to be out of action. He'd tried Liz's mobile – and Susannah's, for good measure – but he hadn't been surprised when that hadn't worked either. Mobile reception there was pretty ropey; there had been talk of putting a mast smack-bang on the roof of the house, but publicity about the possible link between such transmitters and leukaemia clusters had put paid to that.

He dropped the phone on to the passenger seat, concentrating on his driving as he approached the car park.

Moments later, as he stepped out of the car, his mind was once more overcome with troubles and concerns. He did not see the misshapen animal emerge from the shadows behind him.

The creature turned its head to watch him, suppressing a low and hungry growl deep in its throat.

Laska and Fitz had driven back to the Retreat in near silence. Fitz seemed to scowl every time he had to brake suddenly, his silence the product of physical pain. Laska's pain was internalised and personal. Was she merely the latest in a long line of people from her family to find themselves locked up at the Retreat, and at Mausolus House before that? Had her father, unknowingly or wittingly, perpetuated another family tradition in making the financial arrangements for Laska to stay there?

Now they stood before Liz and Dr Smith like scouts returning from a mission, breathlessly reporting their encounter with the great hound, the discovery within the documents that they had returned with.

'And you did not see this creature when you came back?' asked Smith.

Fitz shook his head. 'Thankfully, no.'

'Maybe it's happy to let people in, but not out,' said Trix. 'The more the merrier.'

'You could be right,' said Smith. 'As long as word does not get out, as long as the authorities aren't called... It's confident that it can deal with those of us trapped here.'

"Deal with?" queried Liz. 'What is this creature? What does it have planned for us?'

'The creature is but a pawn of our true enemy,' said Smith. 'It lacks sufficient self-awareness and mental strength to be able to fight back. Indeed, from your description, Fitz, it's probably only the alien influence that's keeping it alive at the moment.'

'It's the dog from the diary?' queried Laska. 'The one the doctor owned?'

Smith shook his head. 'I don't think so. But something of it may have survived, and now lives within a new host.'

'A parasite,' said Fitz confidently.

'Perhaps,' said Smith. 'What survived from 1903 lives now in some other animal, some poor beast that was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's now part of a hybrid entity that does the bidding of a greater force. And the influence of that evil is spreading, seeking to infect, to influence, to dominate higher forms of life as well. Thus the murder, the suicide... We must stay calm!' he suddenly exclaimed in a loud voice, making Laska jump. 'This force, this influence, will seek out negative emotions, will try to cause discord. "Made mighty by madness", remember?' He turned to Liz. 'What does it want with us? Nothing more than our lives and our sanity.'

'Does this... influence have a name?' said Laska.

Smith did not answer immediately, but looked around the room as if sensing the dissonance in the very atmosphere of the canteen. 'In the universe,' he announced at length, 'are myriad creatures and intelligences. Life has taken on a multiplicity of forms, shapes and sizes... Numerous ways of procreating, numerous life cycles.'

'Life cycles?' queried Liz.

Smith nodded. 'What we're witnessing is the reproductive cycle of creatures... alien creatures... known as the Sholem-Luz.'

He'd taken care of the telephone lines hours ago. Now it was time to finish the job. It only took a few seconds to cut through the wires. One bundle, sheathed in colourful, protective plastic, gave power to the sprinkler systems; a little further over were the wires that operated the security and fire alarms. Skill was needed to avoid tripping the fail-safe systems into life, but the man knew exactly what he was doing.

Snip. Snip. Snip. Job done.

What he couldn't work out was *why* he was cutting through the wires in the first place.

'The Sholem-Luz are creatures of legend,' said Smith. As he spoke the lights seemed to dim a little, but moments later they were burning as bright and strong as before. 'Actually, they don't strictly speaking have a name,' he continued. 'Sholem-Luz is the most common phrase I've found in Earth literature. On other worlds they have other names, other myths attached to them. Some know them as the Dead Lords of the Everlasting. I believe that one civilisation even worships them as gods.' He smiled, as if aware he was wandering off the point somewhat. 'I do not believe I have encountered them before. Indeed, until I read the two diaries I was never even sure, on this world, that they existed beyond the confines of books of Eastern lore and myth.'

Liz stared at Smith, incredulous. She had worked with him for months; he'd become a dependable colleague and, in the nicest possible way, part of the fixture and fittings at the Retreat. She had trusted him utterly and, compared to the cheerful laddishness of Thomson, the awful formality of Oldfield, she'd welcomed his opinion, his input. Yes, he'd been eccentric, and given to moody stares into the middle distance as if his undoubtedly vast intellect were at that moment otherwise engaged. But how could this vibrant, beguiling man suddenly be revealed as a deluded maniac who saw alien menace at every turn? Why was this most human of men now claiming not to be human at all?

His stories, his claims, were fanciful – they had to be. All right, so he said he knew what was going on – he had an explanation, no matter how bizarre, for every strange event that had recently occurred – but he simply could not be telling the truth.

Could he?

Liz noticed that even Laska, that most admirable of arch-cynics, was hanging on his every word. But then, she had claimed to have been attacked by a dog creature near the gatehouse. The madness, or whatever it was, was spreading.

'In Bronze Age Persia,' continued Smith, as if unaware of the impact he was having on the others, 'the Sholem-Luz were said to flock to the insane like "bees to a honeypot". In medieval China their power and influence was reputed to wax and wane with the phases of the moon, and...'

'Yes, but what *are* they?' asked Laska impatiently.

'They're almost unique,' said Smith, infuriatingly. 'They create tunnels within the very fabric of space and time. They can ride the Time Winds without danger of physical or mental injury because, according to every accepted and normal biological definition, they are already dead.'

'Weird,' was Trix's considered assessment of this.

'You can perhaps understand why the legends say that to gaze upon a Sholem-Luz is to risk insanity – or death.'

'Not high on anyone's Christmas card list, then,' said Fitz.

'But what do they want?' asked Laska.

'I don't propose to ask them,' said Smith gravely. 'One cannot communicate with them, cannot reason with them, in any shape or form. They obey their biological imperative – if that's what it is – as surely as a computer executes a program without thinking of the consequences. One might as well ask a dragonfly larva – a voracious killer in its own little world – to consider the benefits of vegetarianism. The larva's sole aim in life is to feed, and to prepare the way for the next stage of its life cycle.'

'But, with these Sholem-Luz things... I take it they don't turn into dragonflies or anything *nice*?' said Trix.

Smith shook his head. 'Few who encounter the adult Sholem-Luz survive long enough to leave behind a report! But I've heard hints – from other worlds, other civilisations...'

'So you're not a superhero,' said Laska, the disappointment obvious in her voice. 'You're just some sort of intergalactic zoologist who wants to tick off another creature in his *I-Spy* book.'

Smith shook his head vehemently. 'I've always said that I am here to avert destruction, chaos and pain. That hasn't changed, not in the slightest.'

There was an uncertain pause. Liz allowed herself, just for a moment, to be sucked into Smith's fantasy. It was somehow comforting; Smith claimed to have the answers, and they were all sharing his delusion. It was down to him now. He was in charge.

'So,' said Laska, nodding as if taking all this on board. 'What do we do next?'

Joe Bartholomew stepped nervously through the corridors of the Retreat. He did not count himself a superstitious man, someone who gave much thought to intuitive matters, or to concerns of the heart. But even he could feel that something was wrong.

For a start, most of the corridors were deserted and quiet, the usual and continual bustle replaced by a disturbing, echoing stillness. Worse than that was an almost palpable apprehension; although the heating was on, Joe kept shivering, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. He'd read stories about the concentration camps, and how, decades later, you would never hear birdsong there; he'd thought them nonsense before, but for the first time he understood how such a place might feel.

It was like standing on the edge of Armageddon, looking down on the end of the world.

Overlaid on this sombre terror was a paradoxical thrill, an excitement that spoke of liberation from moral shackles. Anything goes, when the world's about to end. *Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die...*

In this state of dreaming uncertainty, Joe stumbled across Susannah. He wasn't sure if he felt drawn to her – or if some other influence were actively propelling him forward.

She was pacing one of the corridors, checking on the bedrooms that led off from it. Joe watched her for a moment; as she opened every door she seemed to steel herself, as if expecting something terrible beyond.

'All right?' said Joe, strolling towards her.

Susannah's smile was genuine and warm. 'God I'm glad to see you!'

'What's been going on?'

'One patient's died, another has killed himself. The staff are going crazy with worry, and the phones are down.'

'I had noticed that,' said Joe, before adding, as if to explain his presence, 'I was expecting Liz over an hour ago. Thought I'd better find out what was holding her up.'

Susannah glanced at her watch. 'My shift's over, but we're not allowed home yet. Not until all this is sorted out.'

'Let's go for a walk,' said Joe. 'Might help us both clear our heads.'

'I'm supposed to be checking on all the patients.'

'You can't keep forty-odd people on suicide watch!' exclaimed Joe. 'Anyway, by rights, you shouldn't even be here.'

Susannah looked uncertain. 'I suppose...'

'Go on,' urged Joe. 'It's not like you're going to get paid for overtime.'

'Yeah,' said Susannah, dropping the folder to the floor with sudden defiance. 'Sod 'em!'

Dr Smith, far from proposing any plan of action, stated that he was still at the information-gathering stage. Although he had finished with the diaries, he needed to sort through the additional material retrieved by Laska and Fitz; within moments his head had returned to ancient pages, leaving Liz and the others to shrug, wondering what to do.

Liz strolled over to the dining-room window; she'd been sitting there that morning when Fitz told her that Mr Farrell had been murdered. In that moment her world had started to change beyond all recognition.

She wondered, if she gave it long enough, whether she'd wake up soon and find everything back to normal.

Darkness was flowing over the grounds, enveloping trees and gardens; a deeper darkness already had hold of the Retreat, its corridors, its rooms. Liz had lost control. She simply did not know what to do next.

'You all right?' said Laska, who'd walked over from the table where Smith and the others sat with the documents.

Liz managed a brave smile. 'Just wish I knew what was going on. Just wish... Just wish I knew where Thomson and Oldfield have got to. I wish Joe was here, too. He must be going out of his mind with worry!'

Liz saw Laska almost flinch at this, though – whatever was the matter – she covered it expertly. 'Well, the Doctor said we should stay put. After our close encounter with the hound, I'm inclined to agree with him. You were right to order everyone to stay put until we know what's going on.'

'You seem to be taking all this rather well.'

'I thought I was going mad!' said Laska. 'Now at least I know that, whatever other garbage I've got going through my head, the dog thing I kept seeing is real.'

'But it's all so fantastical!' said Liz.

'Maybe,' said Laska. 'But there's been a murder. There's a dog out there, attacking people as they come and go. Black-and-white facts. Only the Doctor can offer any sort of explanation for what's happened.'

'You've started calling him *the* Doctor.'

'I think I trust him. Anyway, sometimes it's right to humour mad people, wouldn't you say?'

Liz laughed. 'I think there'll be a padded cell for all of us when this is over.' She paused, remembering her last encounter with Oldfield. Perhaps he was still in his office, plotting her downfall, planning his rise to power. 'I'm sure Dr Oldfield would love to hear that I've just, to all intents and purposes, put the Retreat in the hands of a man who thinks he's an alien.'

'You've got more important things to worry about than Oldfield,' said Laska.

'I know,' said Liz. 'I suppose that's part of the problem. I was distracted – by Oldfield, by... other things. Perhaps I took my eye off the ball – perhaps I missed something.'

'You mustn't be too hard on yourself,' insisted Laska. 'The murder, what's happened since then... It's nobody's fault.'

'I feel like it is!' said Liz.

'Well, I'm just as guilty as you, then,' said Laska. 'I've been having these weird dreams... I've been seeing this dog thing... And I didn't tell anyone. I was distracted as well – distracted by the thought of getting out of here, at any cost. I couldn't bear for Dr Thomson, or you, or anyone, to recommend that I stay here any longer.'

'Ah well,' said Liz. 'It's all in the past now.'

Laska was staring out of the window – doubtless searching for the dog, or the alien creatures who thrived on madness – and Liz was able to look at her

without interruption. Beneath the eyebrow rings, the outrageous hair, there lurked a simple, classical beauty. Cheekbones to die for, a broad forehead. . .

Every time Liz looked at Laska she remembered. . .

‘There’s something I ought to tell you,’ said Liz.

Laska turned, her eyes bright and clear. So familiar. . .

‘I’m really sorry,’ continued Liz. ‘I should have told you this months ago. I should have told you when you first came here.’

Laska’s lips were pulled tight, intrigued eyebrow half raised.

How the hell was Liz supposed to say something like this? In all her medical training she’d received no advice on how to break news to people; she’d learned more from bitter experience, and watching *Casualty*, than she ever had from any course or class.

Best come out with it. Hadn’t Dr Smith been going on about the importance of honesty for days?

‘Dr Oldfield has discovered that, before I came here, I was involved in what you might term a “mercy killing”,’ said Liz. ‘I was working as a GP back then. My patient was very ill, and in quite a lot of pain. I gave him the means to ease that pain. I suppose you could also say that I gave him the means to end his life.’

‘You killed a patient?’

‘No, though that’s what I was accused of – assisting in a suicide. After many lengthy discussions with my patient I made sure that he was not in pain. But sometimes one is only truly free of pain when you. . . pass on.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ asked Laska.

Liz compulsively grasped the younger woman’s hands, staring – almost pleadingly – into those eyes that she found so familiar.

‘It was your father,’ she said.

Eighteen

The World, the Flesh and the Devil

[O King of Chaos]

*Extract from the Diary of the Reverend Mr William Macksey
Friday 25th December 1903 (continued)*

It must have been at about this time, when all hope seemed lost, that Mr Joseph Sands, summoned by the death of his uncle, drew up outside Mausolus House.

I can only imagine the sight that greeted him. By now the building was very much ablaze, the flames having travelled up through timbers and floorboards to the areas above us. In the chapel, however, I feared more for the collapse of the building than for death coming in the form of flames burning up my earthly body.

In the cells and chambers of Mausolus House, many were less fortunate. I do not know if those still locked in their rooms were engulfed by flame or, more likely, were lost to an atmosphere of smoke that made breathing impossible. Neither demise is pleasant; I hope they found their rightful places in heavenly paradise soon after.

In any event, the air was choking and vile. Joseph Sands released those patients that he could and then made his way to the chapel. I do not know what drew him downwards, but I am grateful that he followed his instincts and sought us out.

Not that we knew of his imminent arrival, of course. Our concerns were – pitiful humans that we are! – simply to stay alive for as long as possible. Self-preservation, as Mr Darwin’s defenders have stated, can become, in such a situation, more vital than any loftier thought.

Dr Christie had, I am afraid to report, slumped to the floor, his brilliant mind now clouded – irreparably, I feared – by all that he had seen. Mr Craig, too, seemed bowed, resigned almost to the flames that licked and burned and grew stronger in every corner of the room.

Only Mr Torby and I observed Fern and the dog, who in turn watched us. As the flames burned away yet more of the fabric of the chapel – as they reached

yet higher into the building over our heads – we both knew that, at some moment, we would simply have to rush at Fern and the hound. Though we shared not a word I could see grim determination in Torby's square face; we would face our deaths active and strong.

Behind Fern and the creature, the bodies were now burning brightly (the stench was appalling and I shall not record its nature here). Indeed, given the things that I have seen this day, I do not think it fanciful to state that this was not a normal burning that had engulfed the bodies. This natural fire was the start of the process, of course, but now some other factors seemed to be coming into play. The flesh on the bodies, as Hamlet had desired, was beginning to melt like dew. Behind the corpses I saw, as faint as gossamer, movement, something like a tunnel, creatures within it. Whether these things that I saw were angels or demons, or phantasms of my own disturbed mind, I cannot be sure.

Charles and I exchanged a glance. Whatever we were about to attempt, we could not leave it much later.

It was at about that moment that Mr Sands made his most unexpected intervention. We all turned at the noise of an axe being brought to bear on the great door that kept us prisoners within the flame-filled room.

At once the diseased hound bounded across the room, snarling furiously. James and I knew that this was our moment; we ran towards Fern, who was distracted, and bowled him towards the flames and the trolleys at his back. He staggered, and seemed about to fall. Then the possessive and terrible power gripped him once more, as a child grips a doll, and he began to fight back, legs planted strongly against the floor now, arms whirling and flailing like an industrial engine.

I sustained a blow to the head that knocked me the ground; Torby dodged like a boxer, then kned his assailant with great force. Let us say that this was in the area of the lower stomach.

I risked a glance over at the door. The wood had now split asunder and the brave Mr Sands was pulling himself through. The dog immediately jumped up at the man's throat.

Sands swung with the axe – more in instinct than in premeditated attack – and the great blade lost itself deep in the head of the creature.

There was but a yelp from the beast. Still it pushed its jaws forward, teeth snapping against air but getting ever closer to Mr Sands, who was now using the embedded axe to keep the creature away from him.

At last Mr Craig seemed roused into action. Shivering, sobbing, he picked himself up from the floor, then lunged at the back of the dog, as if to wrestle it to the ground.

The animal turned at this new threat, its teeth closing on Craig's shoulder.

It was interruption enough to allow Sands into the room. He reached around to grip the axe handle, hefted the entire creature into the air, then hurled it against the wall.

There was a grotesque sound of splitting bone as the dog – axe still hideously lost in what remained of its head – slammed into the rough stone. It slipped down the wall, leaving behind a huge crimson stain – and into a pile of burning rags.

The creature was on fire, patches of fur and hair smouldering, adding to the awful stink of the hell-hole. It ran in circles, shaking, twitching, groaning.

Then it collapsed into the flames and was motionless.

There was a dull, inhuman cry from Fern. He knocked Torby away from him and ran over to the burning form of the dog. Plunging his hands into the flames, his face grimacing only as a man preparing a too-warm bath, he sought to engage with the remains of the creature.

Craig, who nursed his injured shoulder, and Sands sprinted across the room, over the unconscious form of Torby, and hurled themselves at Fern. They hit him as one; for a brief and terrifying moment all three seemed to sink down into the flames.

Then Sands emerged, pulling Mr Craig behind him. Both men's clothing seemed dark now, their pale faces smudged with dirt and grime, but both were clearly alive.

Behind them, the slumped form of Mr Fern seemed indistinguishable from the hound, from the ever-growing, ever more greedy conflagration that was expanding across the room.

We all stood, mute, for a moment, watching as the silent flames of hell wormed their way through Fern. Again I saw – perhaps I was alone in this? – an impression of great golden caverns of light behind the flames. They seemed always to move, to twist like some living thing, one moment indivisible from the fire, at another fading to nothing like a miasma.

And within the tunnels were living things, creatures that chilled my blood, demons and dark centaurs.

I blinked, and saw nothing more.

'We had best be leaving,' came a voice behind us.

Dr Christie was on his feet and, seemingly, in his right mind. A beam, pitch black and burning, chose that moment to fall from the ceiling at the far end of the chapel, as if to underline the simple and vital importance of Christie's warning.

Without a word we turned towards the door.

Nineteen

No Alarms

[No Surprises]

Liz stared at Laska, wholly unable to read her reaction.

From the far side of the dining room she could hear Dr Smith rustling with the documents. ‘The final piece of the puzzle,’ he announced loudly. ‘I think I now know how the Sholem-Luz survived, how the fragment was returned to this building. . .’

Liz returned her attention to Laska. Still there was no obvious change in the young woman’s face, though tears seem to be welling at the outer edges of her eyes.

Smith bustled over, seemingly ignorant of what had just happened. ‘Laska, we need to talk about the necklace of your father’s,’ he said.

‘Just a moment, Dr Smith,’ said Liz sternly. She’d just told Laska that she had, in effect, killed Laska’s father; she wasn’t about to let Smith ride roughshod over Laska’s emotions.

Smith paused, as if unused to being challenged in this way, folding his arms behind his back.

‘It’s OK,’ said Laska finally. She reached out for Liz’s hand, squeezed it, forced a miserable-looking half-smile. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered. Then she turned to Smith. ‘What have you found?’

‘Some of the pages you returned with,’ explained Smith. ‘They’re a coda to Dr Christie’s diary. He talks about picking up a dog’s tooth, turning it into a necklace. The tooth must have belonged to the hound that was possessed by the Sholem-Luz.’

‘So this tooth contains some Sholem-Luz material?’ asked Trix, who’d followed Smith over.

Smith nodded. ‘I had read references to the Sholem-Luz “seeding” their tunnels in time and space. I’d never before realised that the phrase could be interpreted so literally. That tooth contains a single Sholem-Luz seed. Hundreds, maybe thousands of them might have been created back in 1903, had the plans of the Sholem-Luz not been foiled. They would then have been scattered on the Time Winds, to infect untold areas of time and space. Each seed

is capable of causing untold destruction. Each seed could produce hundreds more seeds, more Sholem-Luz.'

'What went wrong?' asked Trix.

'It was something to do with the fire,' said Smith. 'They seem to rely on some external energy source at that stage of the life cycle. The flames were extinguished more quickly than anyone expected.'

Laska was clearly struggling to keep up. 'So, when I dreamt I was near the folly, and I had to get rid of the pendant... That really happened. And something was waiting for it.'

Smith nodded. 'The Sholem-Luz seem to have quite an affinity for dogs.'

'A man reported his dog missing in the grounds a few days back,' said Liz.

'History repeating,' said Smith. 'Back in 1903 it all started with a rip in the very fabric of reality as we know it. A seed was pushed through from some other point in space and time, and it infected Dr Christie's dog. It's as if the Sholem-Luz seeds are built to seek out and dominate lower life forms in the first instance. Perhaps they simply can't tolerate too much intellect and willpower early on.'

'Or they don't understand it,' said Fitz.

Smith nodded. 'Now some other dog has been infected, as you and Laska saw earlier,' continued Smith. 'The seeds need creatures such as these to give them corporeal form and energy.'

'Where is this dog now?' asked Trix. 'What does it plan to do?'

'It's quiet', said Fitz in a mock American accent. '"Too quiet".'

'Exactly!' said Smith. 'This is just the lull before the storm. It's vital that we keep our composure, that we keep our wits about us. As I said, we can expect the attack to come on many levels – physical, emotional...'

'I'm not scared of any *dog*,' said Trix.

'It's not just the dog we need to worry about,' said Smith gravely.

With immaculate timing James Abel chose that moment to burst into the dining area. 'There's been another murder,' he said. 'And I've just had to pull two patients apart. It's chaos out there!'

'Right,' said Smith firmly, assuming charge. 'I want everyone – staff, patients, the lot – to gather here.'

'Safety in numbers?' asked Fitz.

Smith didn't answer. 'Two exceptions,' he said, counting out on his hands. 'Doctors Oldfield and Thomson. I can't be sure, but aspects of their behaviour worry me.'

'How so?' asked Liz.

'Dr Thomson has been showing an unusual interest in the folly on the hillside,' said Smith. 'And he said he took a call from the police station, promising officers here within the hour...' Smith looked around, as if expecting, even

at this late stage, that policemen might suddenly burst through the door with copious notebooks and plastic forensic pouches.

'And Dr Oldfield?' asked Fitz.

'I fear that his desire for power may have become corrupted.'

'But he's always like that!' exclaimed Liz.

'Indeed,' said Smith, 'but his priorities have become utterly blinkered and self-seeking. Is it not possible that this influence would seek just such a man as its pawn?'

Laska muttered something under her breath; Liz doubted it was complimentary.

'Perhaps both are innocent,' continued Smith, 'and I certainly wouldn't want either man harmed. . . But I think we would do well to keep them away from everyone else, just in case. We can't afford them to be at liberty if they've been infected by the Sholem-Luz material.'

'In the diary account,' said Laska, 'that man, Fern. . . He was bitten by the dog.'

Smith nodded. 'That's right. He became a slave of the alien influence. The Sholem-Luz start with something primitive, then move on to higher creatures.'

'I'll sort out Thomson and Oldfield,' said Fitz. 'Leave it to me.'

'Perhaps you could help him, Trix,' said Smith, as if not swayed by Fitz's calm assurances. 'And Liz – you know the two men better than most. Would you mind. . .?'

Liz found herself nodding, though not quite sure what she was agreeing to.

Smith turned to James. 'Can I leave you to assemble the patients and staff here? Try not to frighten anyone. . .'

Someone, in another wing of the Retreat, was screaming.

'Well, try your best, in any event,' said Smith smoothly.

'And what will you be doing?' asked Trix.

'Laska and I shall be taking a stroll towards the folly,' said Smith. 'Or mausoleum, should I say? There's more to that place than meets the eye.' He turned to Laska with a grin. 'Time to meet your ancestors!'

Laska pulled up the collar of her coat. The wind seemed to have picked up again, bringing an arctic chill across the hills and trees that surrounded the Retreat. She hoped she'd be able to hear the dog thing over the groaning of the branches and the harsh sigh of the wind.

'It's brass monkeys out here,' said Laska, stamping her feet.

'I suppose it is,' said Smith, sounding distracted. He seemed not terribly perturbed by the cold; perhaps the jacket he always wore had built-in heating.

Or perhaps he just came from a cold planet. He seemed to make a habit of reminding Laska that he wasn't 'entirely' human.

Laska set off after Smith, and up the gently ascending hillside towards the squashed dark shadow of the folly, only to stumble into him as he suddenly turned. 'I heard what Dr Bartholomew told you,' he announced suddenly. 'About your father.'

'You were supposed to be reading the diaries!' exclaimed Laska. She probably sounded more irritated than she really meant. She didn't really mind Smith knowing. Indeed, she was becoming gradually more used to the idea of being honest with the people around her, even if she half expected Smith himself to turn out to be the biggest liar since Baron Münchhausen.

'I'm sorry,' said Smith. 'But you must know that Liz would only have had the best interests of your father at heart.'

'Of course,' said Laska. 'I don't doubt that for a moment. Towards the end, Dad was. . . He was in quite a bit of pain. I wanted him to die peacefully and with dignity.' She paused, wondering what else to say, trying to remember how she felt at the time. Trying to figure out how she felt *now*. 'I always suspected that. . . someone had helped him end it all.'

'How did that make you feel?' asked Smith.

Laska laughed. 'What, how did my own father killing himself. . . In effect that's what it was, wasn't it? How did that make me, someone who flirted with suicide for *no real reason*. . . How did that make me feel?'

'I wouldn't quite have put it in those terms,' admitted Smith.

'I did, at the time,' said Laska. 'I felt guilty.'

'I don't imagine it helped, though,' said Smith. 'Being so hard on yourself because, unlike your father, you had no ostensible reason to feel depressed. Depression – true depression – takes no account of reality.'

Laska nodded. 'I suppose.' She sighed. 'And, of course, I went to pieces after Dad died. If I hadn't been so *stupid* I'd have put two and two together myself. I never knew Liz had been Dad's GP. She thought back, over many encounters with Liz – ever since she was first admitted. Suddenly elements of conversation, the way Liz looked at her from time to time – it all made sense. Like Smith, Liz had always seemed unusually interested in Laska's treatment, though she'd gone out of her way to ensure that Laska was under Dr Thomson's care. It wasn't twisted paranoia on Laska's part; Liz's concern had been genuine.'

All because of Laska's father, who Liz had tried so hard to look after.

'I'd rather it was Liz than a lot of people I can think of,' said Laska suddenly. 'I wish she'd told me earlier, of course. . . Though with that git Oldfield around, I can understand why she wanted to keep schtum.' A dark cloud passed across Laska's mind – the memory of a close encounter with Joe Bartholomew. 'I'm pleased she was able to finally tell me. But I suppose. . . I

suppose I should have told her something in return. I did try. I did mean to tell her. . . ' She sighed. 'It'll have to wait now.'

'Yes,' said Smith. 'We must prioritise. But I did not mean to sound unkind earlier.' And with that, he set off for the darkness of the trees and the mausoleum beyond.

Liz walked through the Retreat in search of her colleagues. Even in the last few hours the mood of the place seemed to have changed. She'd often observed that human behaviour tended to sink towards its lowest level in the still darkness of the night, as if the shadows offered sanctuary to evil thoughts and deeds. Now it seemed that a deep darkness had descended upon them all. It was as if all social and moral shackles had been removed, and it was hard to imagine that the light of dawn would ever come again.

In each room some sort of altercation seemed to have broken out. In the kitchens the chef and his assistant were arguing over the use of mace in béchamel sauce; in one of the common rooms two patients had to be physically restrained from hurting each other. Apparently a disagreement over Liverpool's latest penalty – whether it had been a dive or not – was at its root. It sounded laughable, and, after some work in both cases, Liz was able to bring some common sense to bear. The two patients stared back at Liz, blinking slowly, clearly bewildered by what had happened; she told them all to go to the dining room, to pull themselves together and stop arguing. They'd obediently trooped off, though it was obvious that any accord was little more than temporary.

After a while Liz, Trix and Fitz had bored of acting as peacemakers (indeed, Fitz was now sporting a black eye for his troubles); they left such matters to James and the other nurses. They still hadn't found Oldfield or Thomson; that had to be their main concern.

First things first. They tried Oldfield's office, and, to their great surprise, found the man calmly sitting behind his desk tapping away at his PC. He looked up, irritated by the interruption but clearly not surprised to see Liz storming in, mob-handed.

'Everything all right, Dr Oldfield?' asked Liz sweetly.

'Yes,' said Oldfield, cautiously, as if this were a trick question. But then, given the acrimony of their last conversation, it wasn't surprising if he sounded suspicious.

'Good,' said Liz. 'Just checking.' She turned to usher the others out of the room. 'The police will be here any minute,' she added. It was childish, but it felt good to be lying to Oldfield, even over something trivial like that.

Then Liz wondered whether the alien influence – or whatever it was – was beginning to affect *her*. After all, given what Oldfield had done – what he

had threatened with regard to her job – lying was the *least* she could do. She considered Oldfield's slimy manner, his abrupt voice, every piece of *crap* he'd thrown at her over the years. . . How easy it would be to just go up to him and punch him, nice and hard, in the face. Or to take a letter-opening knife – she knew there was one on his desk – and plunge it into his chest.

How easy. . .

She shook her head and stepped into the corridor.

'Excellent,' Oldfield was saying, though he was clearly still preoccupied by what he was working on. Probably an official letter of complaint or something.

Liz pulled the door shut, then patted her pockets looking for her keys. 'The master key,' she whispered to Fitz and Trix as she pulled the bunch from her pocket. As quietly as she could, she turned the key in the lock.

There was a muffled click.

All three leaned towards the door, expecting an enraged reaction from within.

Tap tap tap. Oldfield was typing again, apparently unaware of his imprisonment.

'Cool,' breathed Fitz. 'And the windows?'

'They're usually left locked,' said Liz. 'Let's just hope he hasn't got a key.'

It was too much to hope that Mike Thomson would be sitting in his office, a picture of placid indifference. His office – once they'd used the master key to open the door – was empty, of Thomson at least. It was full to overflowing with junk and documents; he'd always had a tendency towards untidiness, thought Liz, but this was ridiculous. She exchanged a worried glance with Fitz and Trix, unsure whether the confused state of the office incriminated Mike or not.

Liz's office was next. From within they could hear muffled sounds, a subdued thumping, something like a harsh whisper.

Fitz indicated that he should go first.

He pushed the door open and jumped inside, all tense and heroic.

'Oh bollocks!' he exclaimed, immediately trying to work his way back out of the room.

Trix and Liz clustered around him, trying to see what was going on.

Fitz put himself between Liz and the interior, half pushing her back into the corridor. 'You don't need to see this,' he said.

'What the hell. . . ?' Liz shoved him aside impatiently.

In a moment what was left of her world flipped upside down.

On the floor, next to her desk, lay Joe. His trousers were down around his knees and he was endeavouring to pull them over his arse. Beneath him – *beneath him* – lay Susannah, struggling with her knickers under her skirt.

‘Look, Liz, I’m sorry, this isn’t. . .’ Joe was mumbling furiously, though just as steadfastly avoiding eye contact.

At least Susannah was doing the decent thing. She looked genuinely embarrassed by what had happened.

Joe just sounded irritated – pissed off that he’d been caught in the act.

‘You bastard!’ shouted Liz. All thoughts of self-control, all Dr Smith’s warnings – all were utterly lost. She shrugged off Fitz’s attempts to keep her away.

And she kicked Joe, hard, between the legs.

‘Dr Smith,’ said Laska as they approached the mausoleum. ‘Doctor. All this talk of Sholem-Luz seeds, of life cycles and reproduction. . . Where do the adult creatures fit into all this?’

‘A very pertinent question,’ observed Smith. ‘You remember in the diary account all the bodies ended up in one confined space, and that room was set ablaze?’

Laska nodded. ‘Like I said, it was when Liz ordered the moving of the body to the chapel. . .’ She put a hand to her mouth. ‘You don’t think Liz has been infected?’

‘For whatever reason,’ said Smith, ‘history is recurring. But, no, I do not think Liz is blindly obeying the Sholem-Luz. Do you?’

‘No – but you made sure that Fitz and Trix stayed with her.’

‘An insurance policy,’ said Smith with a grin. ‘Just in case.’

He paused. The mausoleum was only yards away now. Laska could see the graffiti-covered boards over the doorway.

‘Anyway, back in 1903,’ continued Smith, ‘It’s obvious that the Sholem-Luz seed needed two things: an energy source and raw material. The fire and the mental anguish was the energy source. . .’

‘And the corpses were raw material.’ Laska paused, her stomach churning. ‘That’s disgusting.’

‘To the Sholem-Luz,’ said Smith, ‘we’re not living creatures at all. We’re good sources of energy. And we’re good sources of carbon-based cells, which they can remodel with Sholem-Luz material and use for their own ends.’

‘So the people trapped in the chapel, the bodies already there. . . They were all about to be. . .’

‘Melted down,’ said Smith firmly. ‘From that mass of cells – alien and human – and with all that energy Sholem-Luz seeds are born. As are adult Sholem-Luz themselves.’

‘That’s just so weird,’ said Laska.

‘There is nothing quite like it in nature as you know it on Earth,’ said Smith.

Laska considered all this for some time. 'But why oppose it? If the Sholem-Luz are just blindly obeying their instincts, if what happens is just a natural thing. . .'

'If I might say,' observed Smith, 'that sounds like fatalism of the worst kind. I'm in the business of opposing pain and destruction. You might as well ask a doctor why he strives night and day to research cancer, leprosy, malaria. . . All these are "natural" things. It does not make them right.' He smiled. 'I am *the Doctor* – in the very broadest sense of the word!'

He bent down to examine the doorway.

'Anyway,' he continued, 'their tunnels make a tremendous mess of the space-time continuum. I'm afraid I feel rather protective towards it.'

Laska stared at the folly. 'What are you expecting to find here?'

'Do you know, I'm really not quite sure.' Smith looked about him, as if expecting something to have already happened. Perhaps that was the way Dr Smith sorted things out – he moved from place to place, trying to provoke a response from something.

He stood up, running a hand over the boards across the mausoleum door. He tugged at them experimentally. 'It looks like these have been fixed back in place recently.' He paused, glancing around him again. 'Probably coincidence, but in the diary Christie lost his dog somewhere near here. The recent dog that went missing was last seen not far away.'

He began tugging the boards from the doorway, showing a strength that seemed at odds with his slender frame.

Before Laska could even volunteer to help he'd pulled away enough boards to allow them to enter, bent double like pilgrims entering a temple.

Laska expected darkness and gloom inside the mausoleum. Instead there was radiance and illumination. An intense, twinkling point of light, almost too bright to gaze upon, hung as if suspended in the centre of the chamber.

Despite the sudden brightness, Laska felt herself drawn to the star. Ignoring the caskets, the stones, the cobwebs and the dirt, she stared continually at the burning light. It pulsed, grew, shrank back again. Occasionally it pushed against yet more of the darkness, and seemed to reach back further into the room – or into some other reality. It opened like a flower, revealing a shifting, almost organic tunnel. Shadows flitted by – shadows of movement. Shadows of something less than human.

'A tear in reality,' said Smith, gently turning Laska's head to one side with his finger. 'Don't look at it for too long. You might not like what you see.'

'Where did it come from?'

'It's one end of a tunnel. Or one expression of it, rather. Did I mention that the Sholem-Luz are like spiders with tunnels throughout space and time? This tunnel, this outer fragment of web, was caused by the events of 1903. I

imagine there might be another rip somewhere in the chapel, perhaps hidden from view. Or perhaps it only occasionally comes into plain sight.' Smith shivered. 'I never did like that place.'

Laska looked around at their dank and threatening environment. 'You prefer a mausoleum?'

Smith smiled. 'Odd, isn't it?'

'This rip,' said Laska, still mesmerised by the light. 'Why here?'

Smith paused. 'I'm just speculating,' he admitted. 'But it's a quiet place, full of the dead. And, at points in the past, full of emotion. . .'

Suddenly Smith grasped Laska's arms, staring deep into her eyes with unexpected urgency.

'Tell me about something positive. Tell me about your father. Something nice.'

'Nice?'

'Yes.'

Laska made as if to look around her but Smith held her fast. 'Please,' he said.

Laska remembered Smith's earlier comment on everyone thinking positively. Perhaps he was concerned that, in the midst of the darkness, Laska's depression would drag them all down.

'I suppose, for a while, I blamed Dad for dying, for leaving me on my own,' she said. 'Like I said earlier – even though I had to accept he had every reason to take his life, I still felt resentful.'

'No one likes feeling lonely.'

'But, just recently. . . I've been thinking more and more about him. You know, I had to try so hard not to keep blabbing about him, he was on my mind so much.'

'You succeeded very well,' observed Smith.

'I suddenly realised that all the bad memories of him. . . All the times we'd argued. . . Even the anger that I felt when he died. . . They'd all gone. All I had left was positive memories.'

'That often happens. That's a good thing, Laska.'

'I really loved my dad,' said Laska, suddenly, unbelievably, on the verge of tears. In a moment all her barriers had been brought down, all her defences destroyed. She was naked and vulnerable. It felt good to admit that she didn't have all the answers – that sometimes even Caroline Darnell was looking for love and affirmation.

'And he loved you,' said Smith. 'It's obvious from the way you talk about him: He risked a glance over Laska's shoulders, but kept his hands on Laska's arms.'

'He loved that pendant,' said Laska suddenly. 'I can't believe that it contains something so evil.'

'One should never trust appearances.'

'I remember we had a picnic one day. We were both milling about the house, not doing much – it must have been a Saturday – and out of the blue Dad suggested we get a hamper, fill it with fattening food, go find a nice spot. It was a really hot day. Summer – cricket not football on the radio.' She sighed. 'Of course, being England, by the time we got somewhere it was thinking about raining. We had to find cover under some trees.'

Smith nodded, encouraging her on.

'We had a lovely time, just chatting about things, what we wanted from life, what the future held for us both. He said I could have the necklace when he was gone – and, you know, it was one of those moments when it didn't all sound morbid.'

'You knew he had cancer?'

'No – that was all later, after he lost the pendant.'

'I see,' said Smith, deep in thought. Then, a few moments later, he released Laska's arms and added, 'Keep thinking good thoughts. Positive memories.'

From anyone else it would have sounded trite, the sort of New Age, power-of-positive-thinking garbage that Laska simply didn't have any time for. But, with Dr Smith, there was an authority to what he said – and a hint of menace.

'Why?' asked Laska.

This time Smith let her turn around.

In the doorway, framed by the dark stone of the archway, she could see the silhouette of the hound.

Twenty

No One Here Gets Out Alive

[A Person Isn't Safe Anywhere These Days]

Liz found herself being physically hauled away from Joe. She'd become some sort of enraged animal, spitting furiously and lashing out at anyone – anything – around her.

'Will you calm down?' she could hear Fitz saying. 'I don't want another black eye.' He sounded distant and muffled, as if he were calling from a far-off land. 'Especially not from you.'

Then she gave in, allowed herself to be manoeuvred away. Liz noticed that Trix, too, was having to hold her arms; there was a look of horror and surprise on Trix's face, and a ragged scratch had appeared just beneath her eye.

'It's vital,' Trix was saying, in an unnaturally unruffled voice, 'that we stay calm. Remember what the Doctor said. We can't afford to give this alien *thing* any more energy than we absolutely have to.'

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' Liz could hear herself saying – again, as if from a distance, though she was not quite sure who she was apologising to, and for what. She knew only that a deep, boiling rage burned within her – when she'd kicked Joe everything had, quite literally, gone red, blossoming and exploding in the colour of her anger and resentment – and that it would not readily subside.

Joe was crying in pain, his hands nursing his balls, lying on his side like some writhing child. 'Liz, I didn't mean...'

Liz shook her arms, and Fitz and Trix let her go. She just wanted to talk now – not that any of this, she was sure, would ever make sense or become any more palatable.

'Didn't mean what?' she spat. 'You didn't mean to get caught?'

Liz noticed that Susannah had straightened her clothing and was sitting in the corner, trying to stare into space as if none of this was happening. There was also a look on her face that Liz couldn't quite pin down – it seemed to be a mixture of deep embarrassment, and relief that it was all over.

'I've been so weak,' said Joe from the floor. 'I'm so sorry.'

There were a thousand questions passing through Liz's mind but she did not want to know the answers to any of them. 'You make me sick,' she shouted, the previous ferocity returning for a moment. 'With *her*, on the floor like that. . . It's disgusting!'

There was one part of Liz's mind, still, that felt like an observer – amazed that Elizabeth Bartholomew, who prided herself on her ability to remain calm and rational in all circumstances, could so easily and swiftly descend to something base and primal. Something that merely thought in simple terms of desire, revenge and retribution.

Liz forced herself to turn for the door.

'Both of you had better go to the dining room,' she heard Fitz saying, addressing Joe and Susannah. 'It's not safe to be anywhere else at the moment.'

Liz was fighting a losing battle against the aggressive hatred that burned within her; she didn't want Joe to feel safe *anywhere*.

She stood in the corridor, facing away from the office, waiting for Joe and Susannah to slink away behind her. Then Trix and Fitz joined her.

'We've still got to find Dr Thomson,' said Liz, hoping to imply that it was all over and that her mind was now on more immediate concerns. Whether they believed her or not, Fitz and Trix were quite happy to play along.

'Right,' said Fitz firmly. 'Where next?'

'What shall we do?' asked Laska. 'Other than think happy thoughts and hope it just goes away?'

'You know, that's not such a bad idea,' said Smith, his eyes fixed on the creature.

The dog moved further into the mausoleum, its ears flat against its wolflike face, its huge paws moving cautiously over the stone floor.

'You can't really be serious?'

'Oh, I'm quite serious when something like *that* is staring at me.'

The dog came closer still, the eerie green glow of its eyes like torch beams in the darkness. Spittle and blood fell from its jaws. Breath and sweat poured from it like early morning mist. Laska could see the great fractured depression where the dog had tried to batter its way into the car. No normal creature would have survived such a trauma.

'Go on, then,' said Laska.

'What?' asked Smith.

'Tell me something nice, something positive and uplifting.'

'Well. . . I don't know if anything comes to mind, to be absolutely truthful.'

'Go on,' breathed Laska as the hound came nearer still. 'Fair's fair. I told you about Dad. You've been all over. You must have *some* happy memories.'

‘I remember sitting at a café on the banks of the Loire,’ said Smith after some thought. ‘One of those quiet days when everything seems to make sense.’ Smith’s nose wrinkled slightly. ‘The wine was corked, though.’

The hound was coming closer – Laska could smell it now, an unholy mixture of rotten flesh, loamy soil and something not unlike hospital antiseptics – and frankly, just at the moment, she’d agree with anything that Smith said. But still the man seemed not to have a plan. He seemed to be more concerned with their conversation than with the slowly advancing dog, though his determined gaze implied he was only too aware of the potential threat of the creature.

Smith cleared his throat, took a step forward as if to address the creature. The starlike rip in reality had shifted slightly now, and was slightly behind and to Smith’s right. It seemed to be becoming brighter all the time, as if gloating and wanting only to illuminate every facet of the creature’s imminent attack.

Suddenly Smith angled his head away from the creature and towards Laska, whispering quietly.

‘When I say run. . .’

They found Mike Thomson in one of the consulting rooms. By day its huge bay window afforded a fine view of the edge of the ornamental gardens and the sloping rise towards the folly. By night it seemed only to show complex overlapping patterns of shadow.

Thomson was sitting on a small stool, a notepad perched on his lap. A cigarette burned in one hand, and he tapped a biro against his leg with the other.

‘Something’s out there,’ he said, as if expecting Liz and the others to find him. ‘It keeps flicking on the security light along the wall.’

‘What have you seen?’ asked Liz.

‘Something like a fox or a dog. Something like a ghost. Something like a centaur, or a spider. I spent most of the afternoon walking around the grounds. I thought I was losing my mind.’

Liz wordlessly exchanged a glance with the others.

‘For a while, a lot of activity seemed to centre on the old folly,’ continued Thomson. ‘Then on the basement. I can hear noises down there. We haven’t got the builders in, have we, Liz?’

He turned suddenly, and he looked – though tired and distressed – very much the old Thomson, his boyish charm papering the cracks of his maturity.

‘Not that I’m aware of,’ answered Liz. She worked hard at modulating her voice, sounding utterly relaxed – not given to deceit, or fear, or any of the myriad emotions that flickered brightly in her mind.

‘Are the police here yet?’ asked Thomson, getting to his feet. He indicated his notebook. ‘I don’t know whether it will help, but I’ve been keeping a log of

things. It's either evidence that might have some bearing on the murder case, or evidence that I'm losing my mind.'

'The police sent us to get you,' said Trix suddenly. 'They want to speak to you next.'

'That's right,' said Liz, going along with Trix's spontaneous subterfuge and only dimly aware that she was nodding rather too vigorously. 'I'll show you where they are.'

As Thomson passed by, Fitz looked like a bewildered cartoon animal. To his credit, though, at least he kept his mouth shut.

Liz had just the place for Thomson. It was a windowless room in the heart of the Retreat that was there for restraining the most violent patients – though, since she'd arrived, Liz could not remember ever having authorised its use. It wasn't quite a padded cell, but the walls were smooth and there was precious little in it that could be used to hurt yourself or other people.

She led Thomson down the deserted corridors, hoping that – whether he was implicated in all that had happened or not – he would be safe there. There was only one door, no obvious access to under-floor cavities or voids in the ceiling. As long as she kept an eye on the keys, he'd be as safe as Oldfield.

She wondered if Oldfield had uncovered their ruse yet, and what his reaction might be. He certainly wouldn't panic. He'd probably just take it as final and convincing proof of Liz's unsuitability and professional irresponsibility and wait calmly for rescue – and a promotion in due course.

Liz pushed open the door to the small room. Thankfully it wasn't already locked – that really would have given the game away. 'Here you go,' she said.

Thomson glanced inside. 'But it's dark. . .'

Fitz wasn't prepared to take any chances. He bowled into Thomson, sending him skidding into the room. 'Sorry, mate,' he said.

Liz slammed the door shut on Thomson, locking it quickly.

Immediately Thomson began hammering on the door. 'What's going on?' he cried. 'There's no need for this!'

'Sorry,' said Liz through the doorway. 'It's for your own good.'

They left Thomson hammering on the door in furious exasperation.

The dog lunged at Dr Smith, its wide-open jaws swallowing the distance between them.

Smith sidestepped expertly, even managing a flourish like a matador.

He didn't need to say anything to Laska – she was already lurching towards the doorway.

The dog landed gently on its feet, turning back towards Smith in a single movement.

‘I think it likes me,’ said Smith. ‘Must be all the pain and anguish I’ve experienced, over the years!’ Despite this, Smith was sounding remarkably cheerful, as if relishing the tussle.

Laska – now the light of the rip was effectively blocked by Smith’s body – groped forward in the semi-darkness. She stumbled into a great stone casket, grazing her knee.

Her colourful expletives only made Smith chuckle loudly. Laska wondered, through the pain, if *that* was the power of positive thinking in action.

She was about to shout at Smith – tell him to get the hell out of there – when she saw the dog tensing for another jump.

This time the creature came lower, arcing just above the ground and aiming straight at Smith’s knees. He moved, fractionally in time, but his weight was on the front foot.

He leaned away, arms flapping comically.

Then he pitched backwards, twisting as he fell.

Twisting, and falling, right towards the burning tear that had dropped lower still.

Laska cried out, but the noise was lost to the awful malignant silence as Smith’s arm touched the searing light. Immediately the rip became a great wound, blooming outwards like the mouth of some sea creature. It seemed to attach itself to Smith, sucking hungrily.

Laska caught the faintest impression of a struggle, a slight cry of pain – and then Dr Smith was gone.

The rip shrank back to a star and ascended slightly towards the ceiling, as if triumphant.

There was no trace of Smith left behind – no body, no clothing, no scraps of burnt material. Just dark and shade where moments before he had stood in brave triumphalism.

The dog shook its great head, catching sight of Laska, motionless near the doorway.

It began to advance on her.

James Abel was waiting for Liz and the others in the canteen doorway.

‘Where is everyone?’ asked Trix.

‘Change of plan,’ said James. ‘Dr Smith’s come back from the folly. He reckons everyone should gather down in the basement. It’ll be safer there.’

‘You got everyone together?’ asked Liz.

‘Everyone’s accounted for,’ explained James smoothly. ‘Including your husband.’

Liz said nothing.

‘We’d better get going, then,’ said Fitz.

Liz noticed that Trix continued to stare into the dining area for a moment longer, as if suspecting some sort of trick, that everyone was just waiting to leap out and yell ‘Surprise!’ at the top of their voices. Then she turned to follow the others.

They made their way to the stairs, passing through empty and silent corridors. James had certainly done a good job.

‘Did you have to deal with any fights?’ asked Fitz.

‘One or two,’ said James, nursing one hand like a threatening night-club bouncer. ‘I think things are starting to settle down now.’

‘Good,’ said Fitz. ‘Maybe the Doctor’s sorted everything out.’

‘I can’t imagine it will be that simple,’ said Trix.

‘And Laska was with Dr Smith?’ asked Liz.

Liz picked up the slightest of pauses before James’s reply. ‘Yes. Of course.’

She glanced at the others but only Trix seemed to be eyeing James with any suspicion. Fitz was trotting alongside the nurse, chattering away like nothing was the matter.

Trix interrupted Fitz impatiently. ‘James... are you sure the Doctor asked us to come down here?’

‘Oh yes,’ said James. ‘He went up to the folly, right? Sorted everything out. Just like Fitz said.’

‘Then why have we got to wait down here?’ asked Liz.

They were coming down the stairs now, into the cold void of the basement, at the centre of which sat the chapel.

‘Dr Smith said he’d explain everything. We’ve just got to stay here for a bit. Then it’s all over.’

There didn’t seem to be any option but to step into the chapel.

James seemed to be true to his word. Every patient, every member of staff, was gathered there. Liz saw that Joe and Susannah were standing in the corner, near the body of the patient who had committed suicide. Everyone else looked tired and dishevelled, huddled in whatever blankets they could find. Some sat, or lay, on the pews. Most paced the room, gathering in small groups to talk animatedly. It looked not unlike a tube station during the Blitz.

On top of the fear and trepidation, Liz became aware of something else. It was difficult to disentangle her external senses from her inner sense of confusion and contradictory anger, but the broiling evil, the darkness, did not seem to have diminished in the slightest.

She turned, about to ask James where Smith and Laska were.

James Abel had pulled shut the door and was just locking a great padlock into place – a padlock that Liz did not recognise.

‘What the hell’s going on, James?’ she asked.

Job done, he straightened, pocketing the key. 'It's like I said. It'll all be over soon.'

His face seemed to twist and melt like a candle of wax. His eyes took on an unnatural brightness of their own.

He pulled a huge Zippo lighter from his pocket, flicked it and ignited it in one movement. He stared at the guttering flame for a moment as if mesmerised.

Even Fitz had realised that something was very wrong now. He turned on the spot, fists ready.

'Don't try to resist,' said James in a singsong voice that wasn't quite his own. Just accept the inevitable.'

'What's going to happen?' asked Trix.

'What should have happened last time,' said James.

Behind him, the door was being transformed – or, rather, overlaid with another portal, another aspect of reality. Within this ever-changing tunnel Liz could make out what seemed at first a haze, then a shadow, then something with gradually strengthening form. It was huge, towering over James. In outline at least it was a creature that merged seamlessly from humanoid to spider, rearing up like a great centaur – like the creature Thomson had said he'd seen.

'Oh, Mike, I'm so sorry,' said Liz under her breath.

James held the lighter high up in the air.

It was only now that Liz could smell the oil that tainted the air, the fumes that seemed to pour off every solid surface near her. She could not understand how she, or the others, had managed to miss the smell before – or how James, or what controlled him, had disguised the flammable liquid.

Everything was soaked with petrol.

'Here we go again,' said James.

And he dropped the lighter to the floor.

Twenty-one

The Sweet Unknown

[Mausoleum]

Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Friday 25th December 1903 (continued)

I have almost no recollection of the events of the evening. It is as if a page has been torn from the book of my mind and memory. I remember instructing Mr Torby to fetch the Reverend Macksey from the vicarage; the next thing I truly recall is waking, as if from a deep sleep, on the floor of the chapel.

Torby tells me that, by his return, Mausolus was in uproar, and my own senses were lost utterly to this great Evil. I had planned to destroy the bodies in the chapel, as if this simple act of purging might rid us all of the malevolent wickedness that sought our very lives. Instead, I myself was deceived: the Evil wanted Mausolus in flames, and I was merely a tool to achieve this.

I do remember Mr Fern – utterly filled by this vile intent – swearing to complete the job that I had started; I also remember seeing the debased remains of my beloved hound following in his wake. Indeed, my clearest memory of that time is not my own recollection at all, but a vision – if you will – of Mr Fern's callous murder of Jones. I thought at first – even as I wrote, only a page or two previously – that he must have described to me what happened. Now I wonder if, in part, I was granted – or cursed – with some extraordinary insight into that man, the lusts that drove him, the evil that eventually consumed him utterly.

The Evil that had even cast its shadow over me.

If I am unclear as to what happened within the chapel, I have no difficulty in remembering our escape from the smouldering wreck of Mausolus. Avoiding falling beams and the worst of the fire, we emerged, coughing and eyes streaming, to see a fire engine coming down the great driveway towards us.

The firemen set about their task almost without words. I was delighted – and amazed – by their appearance. I assumed Mr Sands had called for them, but he later denied this. Indeed, he was reticent to talk about his arrival, or to declare what it was that drew him – with an axe – to the chapel door, deep in the cellars of Mausolus.

I exchanged brief words with the officer from the fire brigade, then left them to their business. I walked towards Mr Torby, who was tending to young Craig. Craig had sustained a bite to the shoulder. At first the flesh around the bite seemed grey and necrotic, then – as the fire that burned at the heart of Mausolus began to die down – the wound seemed almost to heal itself. We both viewed this miracle with a nonchalant shrug; we had seen too much, and were too tired, to be greatly amazed by this latest flash of phantasmagoria.

As we treated Craig's injuries on the lawn in front of the house, I watched Mr Sands as he stood by the horses of the fire engine, calming them against the cracking noise of burning timber and the sparks that mined down in the evening air like falling stars. The steam engine was working well, pumping water directly on to the conflagration, which ebbed away moment by moment.

In the literal heat of this terrible occurrence Mr Joseph Sands had proved himself a valiant and, remarkable man. When first I met the fellow I considered him a little stiff, a little formal, for my own tastes; now I considered him brave, a man of steely, hidden resolve, and I was thankful for all these aspects of his character.

In turn I noticed that Macksey stood watching all that ensued with a grateful eye. Perhaps he was praying. At that moment, I could forgive him – and these brave few others who stood with me as lunacy threatened to swallow us all – *anything*.

From my vantage point I could see no patients, and had no idea how many may have survived the frenzied violence, the ensuing flames. Such things belong to the future of Mausolus – if it has one.

A human sound, a distance from the house, caught my attention. I gathered my wits and set off towards it, and in time came upon Miss Thorne, slumped on a carpet of grass and pine needles a yard or two in front of the mausoleum. She was sobbing, and coughing against the worst effects of the fire, her face blackened yet pale.

'My dear,' I said as I approached, then sought to help her to her feet, 'what are you doing here?' She was shivering uncontrollably. 'You must get out of the cold,' I added – though where any of us might spend the night I had not yet considered.

Miss Thorne did not reply at first, striving to control her coughing and to steady her breathing. 'Is this not the right place to come to die?' she asked, managing a half-smile.

I gave her a few moments to rest – it was clear that she had very nearly crawled to this position from Mausolus itself – and then let her speak some more. She told me that a stranger had freed her from her locked cell (Mr Sands, I should imagine) and, as she sought to flee from the flames, she feared that she might be the only patient to survive the great fire. However, by the

time she emerged from the building and into the air, her breathing felt uncomfortable and hard; her first instinct, to run to the village, was supplanted by a more basic desire, which brought her to the mausoleum.

It is a grim building, half hidden from Mausolus House by a ragged curtain of pines and elms; it looks down on the older building as if a reminder of the certainty of death. I can just see the mausoleum, or the trees that hide it, from my window; it is not a view I care for greatly.

Up close, the building is as dreary and cold as one might expect, with numerous *faux* Grecian columns and alcoves. Carvings of long-dead gods stretch along outer walls marbled by years of rain and slowly creeping ivy; the doorway is framed by twin statues of sightless angels, their torn and ragged wings arching upwards and touching at the apex of the frame. I would swear that the building has become darker, even since my arrival, as if it is leaching death out of the rich soil, out of the bone-filled caskets that fill its central chamber.

'You know that my family are buried here?' asked Miss Thorne suddenly.

I nodded.

'You never spoke of it before.'

I tried to place my coat about her shoulders but she refused. 'There always seemed to be other things to discuss,' I said. 'Matters of life, and vibrancy, and hope.'

'I had always hoped that I would leave Mausolus one day,' said Thorne.

'That was my hope also,' I sighed. 'It still is.'

'Well, now *I have*,' she said with a triumphant smile. 'And I have brought myself to the family tomb, to the place that gave my prison its name.'

Miss Thorne was right. 'Your family bought the workhouse, turned it into an asylum, named it after dead King Mausolus as if in a joke. Then they built this mausoleum, to make the point once more.'

'It is but a short walk from Mausolus to here, as I have just discovered,' said Miss Thorne.

'You are not the first, nor shall you be the last, to make the journey from the asylum, the *hospital*, to the family tomb here,' I said. 'I am grateful for your family's generosity, but I need only to glance out of the window to be reminded that they do not do this out of altruism.'

'My father always used to say that our family is prone to afflictions of the mind. He said that my past... misdemeanours only proved the point.'

I could hardly bear to hear this. 'And yet, records show, that when you first came here, you were not in any way ill! You became ill because of your environment, because of your treatment.'

Miss Thorne nodded. 'That might indeed be true. But I do not wish you to think poorly of my father. He was a good man. He was brought up a certain way, a victim of his station, you could say. At the end, I know he expressed

his regret – and that he would have loved to have had me come home once more.’

I was surprised to hear this. ‘You remember your final meeting with your father?’ I asked.

‘It came back to me as I approached this place – as if drawing near to the body of my father was enough to bring forth buried memories. He was very ill when he saw me – it was clear in his eyes, his complexion. But his love, his regret – they both burned strong. “I wish things had been different,” he said. “There is not a day that goes by that I do not cry when I think of you here.”’

We both became still and quiet, watching the darkness grow deeper, watching it take on new hues and texture as if it were gently folded velvet.

‘I must take you back,’ I said at last. I could not bear to think that Miss Thorne had survived so much, endured such great torment, only to complete the circle of her family’s curse on this lonely hillside.

Miss Thorne shook her head. ‘No. I feel something within my chest. My breathing... I shall not survive,’ she concluded defiantly.

‘But you must try.’

‘It is as I said – I have come here to die.’ She struggled to her feet, an elegant figure in the deepening gloom. ‘But there is one thing you can do for me. I would like to lie with my father.’

I remembered again the stone caskets that lay within the structure. I had never met a relative of Miss Thorne but had, once, been shown around the grounds, and inside the mausoleum, by a family servant. I did not know how many were buried there, nor whether all of the Thorns ended their days within its walls. Perhaps it was only the mad, those intimately acquainted with Mausolus House, that were laid to rest within the mausoleum, and that the family had another, more respectable, crypt elsewhere.

Perhaps Miss Thorn’s father, out of regret and shame, had ordered that his body be buried within the mausoleum. Perhaps sentiment led him to imagine that, from this vantage point, he would be able to watch over his child.

I wish he had indeed been able to.

I rummaged for the keys that I always carried, searched for something old and unfamiliar that might open the lock. Eventually I found the right key, and we pushed open the door.

It was pitch dark within, and we waited for a moment just within the doorway as our eyes became accustomed to the lack of light. The shadow-filled forms of the stone caskets rose from the floor like rows of thick, monstrous teeth; the damp air, the moss-covered stone underfoot only furthered the impression of being within some great, dark maw.

I know not how, but Miss Thorne staggered towards one particular stone sarcophagus, sure that this contained the earthly remains of her father. It

certainly seemed newer, and less ostentatious, than many others I glimpsed in the darkness; a simple, unadorned stone coffin fit for a man with concerns other than the frivolous and temporal.

She threw herself at the foot of the huge casket, sobbing uncontrollably. I could also hear that her breathing was becoming more laboured; not quite a death rattle, but something that legitimated her judgement that her life in this world was nearly over. I have watched enough men and women die, their bodies slowing down in readiness for death, their spirit – if I believe in such a thing – beginning to drift elsewhere. I know the signs full well.

I decided there and then not to strive to persuade her to come back with me to the smoking remains of the house, to the fire brigade's resplendent engine, to those few individuals who stood with me as madness swept through Mausolus. Miss Thorne had made a decision that must be respected.

I cradled her in my arms, as I hope and trust her father did when she was small, when her future still spoke of potential. She did not resist, mumbling words I could not catch. Her tears lessened; her breathing became thicker and more difficult.

She passed away in my arms moments later.

Twenty-two

Time's Tides

[The Sleep of Reason]

Laska suddenly felt very alone.

As the dog creature moved inexorably towards her, her separation from Dr Smith – from the others in the Retreat, even from her father – began to weigh heavily on her.

She couldn't be sure the creature had meant to force Dr Smith into contact with the bright tear that still gleamed in the darkness of the mausoleum. Perhaps it had been as surprised as Laska had been by Smith's sudden and complete disappearance. But Laska had no intention of finding out. With her back to the doorway, she edged away from the creature – although she didn't have the first idea what she would do if the thing suddenly leaped at her.

'Think positive,' she found herself saying – perhaps to drown out the tiny voice in her mind that kept reminding her that such optimism hadn't done Dr Smith any good. *'Think positive.'*

But she couldn't think – not while the hound stared at her with its baleful eyes. She couldn't picture anything other than the great stoved-in skull, the flesh that writhed with alien influence, the grey, exposed muscle that clung to its ivory-white bones.

She closed her eyes.

This had better work.

She remembered a birthday, when she had been six or seven years old. Her father had told her that they simply couldn't afford a party, but that she'd get her presents after school. Laska had spent the day furiously glowering, drawing pictures of stick men with arrows in their heads and big drops of blood oozing from severed limbs.

When Dad picked her up from school he waved aside her queries about her presents. He apologised: some business had come up. 'I've got to see a man about a dog,' he said – his stock answer to everything.

He drove to a building in the middle of nowhere, either a farmhouse or a converted barn, Laska couldn't remember which. He'd disappeared inside and

seemed to have been gone for ages. Laska was so cross with him she didn't even look up when she heard the scrunch of footsteps on gravel.

The car door swung open. A puppy – a perfect, pale, Andrex puppy with floppy ears and wet nose – leapt immediately into her lap, licking Laska's face and managing high-pitched, squeaking barks of delight.

'Happy birthday, darling,' Dad had said, before driving her to a local pub. The skittle alley was decorated with *Happy Birthday* banners and already full of her friends. Everyone wanted to talk to Laska – to *Caroline* – and pet the puppy. It piddled in the corner, ruining the special paper plates that Dad had intended to put the party food on, but nothing could ruin the most perfect birthday.

She remembered – exhausted from the evening's fun and games – dozing in the back of the car on the way home. Dad had carried her to her bed, and – as if the final treat of the day – let her drift to sleep with her clothes on. Her final memory of that day was his arm around her tiny body, protective and warm.

Laska forced open her eyes. She half-expected to be eyeball to eyeball with the creature, or see it only as a blur through the air as it latched on to her throat with its teeth.

Instead the dog was resting on the floor, its head between its forelegs, as if induced into sleep by the lullaby of Laska's memories.

Laska crept through the doorway, ducking down under the planks that Smith had torn away.

Unbidden, another memory flashed across Laska's mind – another birthday, a suicide attempt – and she heard the hound stir, a half growl at its throat.

She shook her head, bringing the happy party back to mind: memories of little Simon Jones OD'ing on chocolate and going a very unusual shade of puce.

Eyes half-closed, Laska ran out of the mausoleum.

The flames took hold almost instantly, springing up to form a wall of red and orange just in front of James Abel. Behind him the grotesque dark centaur began to fade from view, but James seemed energised by its momentary appearance. He strode forward, through the wall of fire, and grasped Liz's terrified face in one outstretched hand.

'Who first, Liz?' he asked.

Fitz launched himself at James. James turned calmly – as if time were slowing down for his benefit – and reached out with his spare hand. He deflected Fitz's blows, turned on the spot, then powered his head forwards and on to the bridge of Fitz's nose, his whole upper body weight behind the head butt.

Fitz crumpled to the floor, his face and hands splashing red.

James turned back to Liz, still held in his vicelike grip. Liz caught sight of something moving beneath his skin, a concentration of darkness and shadow at what looked like a ragged animal bite just below his throat.

James straightened his shirt as if to hide the bite. 'Who first?' he asked again.

'First for what?' Liz managed to mumble through the pressure of James's fingers.

'For the flames!' said James, as if that explained everything. He let go of Liz, striding across the room. Liz watched the others, both patients and staff, shrinking back from James, perhaps in awe of the ease with which he had disposed of Fitz. Or perhaps, as Liz had done moments ago, they recognised that James was not on his own – that some huge, overpowering evil presence went with him, watching over his every step.

James strode up to Joe and Susannah. Joe tried to step in front of the cowering Susannah, but James knocked him to the floor with a single stiff arm. James dragged Susannah to her feet, and pulled her across the room, towards Liz and Trix.

Towards the ever-growing wall of fire.

'How about this one?' asked James. 'This *whore*, this *bitch*, this *cheap slapper*.' He shrugged, as if apologising for his language. 'I am merely reflecting back what I see in your mind. Why shouldn't she be the first? The first to have her energy sucked away from her screaming psyche even as the flesh burns away from her bones. The first to become part of the next generation of the Sholem-Luz.'

'Nobody should have to die like that,' said Trix.

James casually smashed her to the floor. 'I wasn't talking to you,' he said quietly.

'James,' pleaded Liz. 'You've got to fight. . . You've got to fight this thing.'

James stared back at Liz, impassive at her plea and the mention of his name. Whatever had influenced him seemed to be in complete control. Liz noticed that one of his arms seemed to be hanging oddly in its socket, as if he had dislocated it in one of his brutal attacks. He was a mere puppet of the Sholem-Luz – and Dr Smith had said that they could never be reasoned with.

The fire had expanded rapidly. A couple of pews were just beginning to burn now and the room was filling with smoke. Joe and the others had crawled and staggered to the far end of the chapel, concentrating on their own survival, concentrating on trying to stay alive that bit longer, on trying to breathe through the thick fumes.

Only Liz and Susannah stood with James, mere inches from the flames, with Fitz and Trix seemingly unconscious on the gently warming stone floor.

'I could hold her head in the flames,' James whispered. 'That would be good.'

Laska ran from the brooding darkness of the mausoleum to the shocking freshness of the night air. At first her only thought was to get back to the Retreat and away from the creature; she had no idea how much longer the thing might slumber, especially if her conscious mind was concerned with the activity of running, not forcing herself to remember, by sheer force of will, some random scraps of happiness from her past.

However, a hundred yards or so beyond the mausoleum, Laska stopped. What if Dr Smith reappeared? What if the dog didn't come out after her?

She looked around, eyes straining against the darkness, ears alert for the slightest noise, but could sense nothing, either from the direction of the Victorian mausoleum, or from elsewhere.

She waited as long as she dared, until it became clear that neither the dog, nor Dr Smith, were about to put in another appearance. There seemed nothing for it, but to head for the Retreat.

And it was as she turned that she noticed the smoke billowing from a ground-floor window.

Instead of following through with his threats James hurled Susannah to the floor, like a child spitefully bored of a favourite toy.

Her animosity now replaced by an all-enveloping fear, Liz bent down to check on the younger woman.

'I'm OK,' Susannah was saying, though her forehead was already swelling with a purplish bruise.

James turned his attention to the body of William Butler, the patient who had committed suicide. He strode over to the corner where the body had been placed and hoisted the corpse over his shoulder like a rag doll. Liz wanted to intercede, to preserve some final dignity for the dead man, but felt powerless against the awesome power that seemed to be coursing through James's body. Indeed, as she watched, she glimpsed a dark figure towering over James's form. Behind the many-legged creature she could just make out some sort of tunnel, and within that tunnel other living things were coming into focus.

The mirage around James Abel began to fade once more. He walked through its shimmering remnants with the patient's body and returned to the flames. The fire now had a grip on about a quarter of the chapel; pews and a number of bookcases were black outlines in the flickering mass of searing yellow.

Although one arm seemed unnaturally twisted, James hoisted the corpse over his head, then hurled it into the heart of the conflagration.

Fitz struggled to his feet. 'What's going on?' he asked blearily.

'I don't think you want to know,' said Liz.

She made herself watch, though. She saw the fire beginning its work of stripping skin and muscle away from the bones. Then the entire area began to glow, enveloping what was left of the body in a golden haze.

Despite the heat, Liz edged closer. The haze became stronger, seeming to eat away at the burning body.

There was a hideous, rending crash from the far side of the room. A beam had fallen from the ceiling, just where most of the people stood. The chorus of screams grew louder as the confused mass tried to find safety.

'Look.' Fitz was pointing back to the centre of the room. Another portal was appearing, this one more solid than any they had glimpsed before.

And at its heart a huge, deathly pale creature was taking form.

Laska ran through the corridors of the Retreat, trying to find the source of the fire.

She glanced into rooms as she passed by, and saw nothing but overturned tables and chairs, discarded clothing, and smashed lamp stands. In the ceiling of every room and corridor there were smoke alarms and sprinklers; she could not understand why these hadn't kicked in to dampen down the fire and alert the authorities.

Then she remembered the problems they'd all been having with the phones. There was a payphone just around the corner; she lifted the receiver but there was no dial tone.

Laska scrambled in her pockets for her mobile. If only she could get a call through to the fire brigade...

'Bollocks,' she muttered under her breath. Still no signal.

She skidded to a halt outside the dining room, but found the room empty, with barely a sign that anyone had gathered there less than an hour previously.

A miasma was beginning to gather just below the ceiling; she followed the smoke, watching it become blacker and thicker, until she reached the stairs down to the basement.

She stripped off her coat and her long-sleeved T-shirt, turning the latter into a makeshift mask to filter out the worst of the fumes. Now dressed in just a vest top and her combats she shivered involuntarily.

But it was unlikely to be cold where she was going.

James stared at the inchoate figure at the centre of the room. 'Isn't it beautiful?' he breathed.

That wasn't quite the word Liz would have used. The creature had little of the bearing, the stature, of a centaur from legend, but its pale grey skin, its

eyes like two dark orbs, gave it a grotesque, haunted demeanour. Its many-jointed legs held it high in the air; the humanoid torso turned from side to side to survey the scene, to revel in the destruction.

As Liz watched she gained the faintest impression that, beneath the skin of the creature, writhed many smaller bodies, hands and legs, grotesquely screaming faces. But her imagination seemed to be running away with her. She blinked, and the skin was unblemished and smooth again, like something newly born.

The creature looked down at her for a moment, and the lack of emotion on the face, or in the great, blank eyes, chilled her to the bone. She could understand how Smith had said that this creature was unfamiliar with concepts like sanity and madness – with life and death. It was distant and unknowable and utterly alien. A single glance was enough to make a shiver of utter dread run down her back.

Thankfully the Sholem-Luz inclined its head away from Liz and she was able to concentrate on James Abel. He was taunting Liz once more, seeming to revel in his newfound powers. ‘Perhaps your husband,’ he said. ‘He should be next. After all, I don’t hear you screaming.’

James was right about one thing – Liz was virtually the only person in the room not screaming. All the others, packed into one corner, as far from both the flames and the creature as they could possibly be, were screaming and shouting. Jostling was giving way to fighting, to the blind panic of animals given nowhere to run. The weakest would doubtless be crushed underfoot, if the flames didn’t get to them first.

‘James,’ said Liz desperately. ‘If there’s any way... If there’s anything you can do... You’ve got to stop this.’

A look of utter incomprehension crossed his face. ‘Why should I do that?’ He spoke as if Liz had just asked him the impossible, to stop breathing or to still his own heart. ‘How could I...?’ he whispered, more quietly, momentarily more human.

There was a sudden, rending sound from the big oak door. The business end of an axe blade appeared in the wood, then withdrew, then appeared again, further down, with another ear splitting shriek.

‘No!’ shouted James, leaping across the flames and towards the door. ‘This time there will be no interruption!’ He seemed for a moment to consider throwing himself bodily at the door, as if he could hold the splintered wood together with his outstretched arms. Then he paused – waiting, perhaps, for some way of attacking the person with the axe.

Without warning a tiny golden portal appeared the other side of the wall of flame, mere yards from James. It was just large enough to accommodate a man.

And within the glowing tunnel stood Dr Smith, still immaculately dressed and exuding calm authority

‘Fitz,’ he called through the confusion and the carnage. Liz didn’t dare look to see what, if anything, the centaur-creature was making of all this.

Fitz, still at Liz’s side, said nothing, his mouth gaping slightly.

It was good to see that even familiarity with Dr Smith’s methods did not lessen a sense of wonder at his unpredictability.

‘I want you to reconnect the fire alarms and especially the sprinklers,’ shouted Smith. ‘It looks like our friend. Mr Abel has done some damage with a pair of wire cutters.’

James turned at the mention of his name, swinging his attention away from the door that was still shuddering under the impact of the axe.

‘Of course,’ said Fitz. It didn’t seem to occur to him to ask just how they were to achieve that with James, and the creature, very much in control of the chapel area. Smith made his request sound like the most reasonable one he could have made, in the circumstances.

Thankfully, he was not entirely ignorant of the problems they faced. ‘Oh yes,’ he added. ‘One more thing.’

With that he hurled himself out of the flowing, fluctuating tunnel and towards James. He caught the young man in an ungainly bear hug, spinning him off his feet and pulling both of them back towards the tunnel.

The ethereal doorway expanded as they fell, engorging outwards like the mouth of a leech. For a moment it seemed to fill the space between floor and ceiling. A burning silver wind seemed to sweep over both men.

And behind them Liz could see the dim outline of a number of the Sholem-Luz creatures, rearing up as if to strike.

Her last vision was of Smith clutching James to himself as if he could protect the man by his sheer physical presence.

And then the portal snapped shut and faded to nothingness.

Twenty-three

There by the Grace of God

[The Dream of Reason]

Laska could hear screams and shouts from within the chapel. Just for a moment she thought she could hear Dr Smith's voice.

She knew she couldn't afford to be distracted. She shook her head and returned to the job of cutting through the locked door with the axe. She'd found the axe – a proper fire axe with a red handle and everything – just under the stairs that led into the basement area, along with a bucket of sand and a small fire extinguisher. She'd dragged both items to the chapel doorway, though from the smoke that was seeping under the doorway she wasn't sure either would prove adequate.

At last she had made a big enough hole to push away a section of the wood. She waved away some smoke and peered through the door.

Fitz was staring back at her, almost making her jump when he spoke. 'There's a padlock this side,' he said. 'I might be able to smash it.'

Laska passed the axe through. Fitz hefted the axe above his head and brought it down with all his strength. Even from where she was standing Laska could see sparks flying into the air.

Fitz swore and tried again.

Behind Fitz Laska could now make out a scene of utter devastation. It looked as if a good half of the chapel was ablaze; she could see a number of people, stick figures through the smoke, at the far end of the room. Between them, and the flames, she glimpsed what appeared to be the legs of some enormous spider, encircled by a yellowy haze.

She rubbed her eyes. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light.

Behind Fitz – still hacking away at the padlock and cursing in ever more colourful language – Laska saw Trix and Liz emerge from the smoke. 'Thank goodness you've come,' said Liz.

'What's been going on?' asked Laska through the split in the door.

Trix and Liz exchanged glances. 'That's hard to say,' said Liz.

'Is everyone OK?'

'We don't know yet,' said Trix. 'Get that bloody door open, Fitz!' she added, irritably.

'I'd like to see you get this done any faster,' said Fitz, before clenching his teeth for another strike.

This time there was the unmistakable dull thud as something heavy and metallic hit the floor. Laska pushed at the door – hot to the touch but perhaps the only wooden item in the whole of the chapel not already burning.

She staggered backwards when she saw the grotesque centaur thing in the centre of the room.

'What the bloody hell is that?' she exclaimed.

But, even as she spoke, the thing seemed to fade from view. Laska remembered her encounter with the dog creature and wondered if the opening of the door had brought with it such a promise of liberation and hope that even the creature found itself momentarily powerless.

'Thanks,' said Joe Bartholomew, who'd forded a path through the flames to the doorway. Susannah and a motley group of patients and staff were following him, coughing at the fumes. Joe was in a terrible state, bent double with a huge cut over one eye. The others didn't look much better.

'Is that everyone?' Liz wanted to know.

Susannah bit her lip. 'This is everyone that's left.'

'You mean...?'

'The burning beam,' she said. 'It trapped a couple of patients. I think I saw people getting crushed in the panic. There's no way we can reach them now.'

She was right – there remained only the smallest of pathways from one side of the chapel to the other. Everything else was writhing with fire and flame; sparks were beginning to fall from the ceiling like burning rain, and more timber beams were creaking ominously. The thick, oily heat was almost overpowering.

'Looks like these Sholem-Luz things have got some bodies to play with,' noted Fitz grimly. Even as he spoke a golden glow gripped the far side of the room – not fire, but a sure sign that the alien creatures were flaying away flesh and matter for their own purposes.

'Then it's even more important that we do what the Doctor asked,' said Trix. 'The sprinklers, the phone lines...'

'Damage limitation,' observed Liz sadly.

'You've seen the Doctor?' asked Laska excitedly.

'Briefly,' said Fitz enigmatically.

As Susannah led everyone she could to safety outside the Retreat, Liz and Fitz set about organising those that remained behind. Laska, Joe and Fitz volunteered to try to repair the emergency sprinkler system and reconnect the phone lines; Joe, who said he worked in IT, avoided eye contact with Liz and

seemed happy enough to be away from her. Laska drew her own conclusions from the couple's body language.

Meanwhile, Trix and Liz would go and release Thomson and Oldfield from their enforced incarceration. 'After all,' said Liz, 'we know they're in the clear now.'

It took a few moments for the full implications of this to register with Laska. 'Wait a minute, she exclaimed as they climbed the stairs away from the burning basement. 'Who was infected? Where's James?'

She thought perhaps that he was one of the poor unfortunates trapped in the chapel – dead or dying, about to be melted down by the Sholem-Luz – but truth chilled her even more.

'It was James who was infected,' said Liz sadly. 'Just before you arrived he and Dr Smith disappeared into some sort of tunnel.'

Laska fought back the tears.

'I'm sorry,' added Liz, resting a gentle hand on her arm.

Once more the connotations did not immediately dawn on Laska. Only as they stood at the top of the stairs, about to depart in their two groups, did Laska ask, 'You knew?'

'About you and James?' said Liz. 'I was trying to deal with it discreetly. I'd given Mr Abel an official warning, albeit in private.'

'He never told me.'

'It seems that wasn't the only secret he kept from us,' observed Liz. 'I'm sorry, Laska, but I had to deal with this relationship, once I knew of it. My hands are tied, but I wanted to behave honourably, for the good of both of you.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Laska. She knew they had to concentrate on the here and now, on the fire that blazed in the basement. For all that, though, she wondered what would happen to her – and Liz – when they came to pick up the pieces, once all this was over.

Assuming it ever would be.

Liz and Trix ran towards the offices. Progress was slow as the power had now failed; emergency lighting had kicked in, giving everything a fiery sheen. Even this illumination was patchy, leaving large expanses of shadow and darkness. The smoke was getting thicker, forming phantom shapes that writhed and twisted like souls in torment.

Liz unlocked Oldfield's door with nervous fingers.

The room was deserted, the window open. It was clear that Dr Oldfield had noticed the fire in the basement and had found a window key from somewhere. 'I notice he didn't try to come to save any of us,' noted Trix.

‘Good riddance,’ said Liz automatically. ‘Actually, if I ever see his spawnly face again, I’m going to tell him exactly what I think of him.’

Trix held up her hands in an intercessory gesture. ‘Easy,’ she warned. ‘We don’t want to give those creatures any more energy than we absolutely have to.’

‘That’s easy for you to say!’ exploded Liz. ‘You haven’t just caught your husband screwing some tart on the floor of your own office!’

Immediately Liz put a hand to her mouth, breathing hard. Just for a moment she remembered the rage that overcame her when she’d seen Joe with Susannah; she wanted to kick him all over again. ‘Sorry,’ she breathed.

‘That’s OK,’ said Trix. ‘You’ve every reason to feel angry and frustrated. But all that can wait, right?’

Liz nodded dumbly.

‘Come on,’ said Trix, putting a sisterly arm around Liz. ‘Let’s go and rescue Dr Thomson. Poor bloke will be wondering why we’ve turned up the heating...’

Laska’s group searched the smoke-filled corridors of the Retreat for a fuse box or a control panel that might help them reconnect the phones or the automatic sprinklers. Laska found herself being distracted by Fitz, who seemed to keep staring at her. The first time or two she let it pass. Then finally she snapped, swivelling on the spot and pushing a finger into his chest.

‘What the hell are you looking at?’ she said.

To his credit, Joe Bartholomew studiously concentrated on the wires he was following along the wall – as if he’d had enough of stroppy women for one day.

‘You’re, er, very attractive,’ said Fitz with a shrug. ‘I, um... I don’t think I’d noticed before.’

‘Well, *thanks*,’ said Laska, not sure how to take his uncomplicated honesty. ‘I think.’

‘You’re a damn sight better looking than Bruce Willis, anyway,’ observed Joe, on his hands and knees by some sort of junction box.

Laska had forgotten she’d stripped down to her sleeveless vest, her top now tied around her waist like a cricketing jumper. Her pale skin was smudged with soot. Instinctively she twisted her forearms upwards. Even the scars suddenly seemed less visible in the red glow of the emergency lighting.

‘Look, let’s just get on with the job at hand, OK?’ she said quickly.

‘Sorry,’ said Fitz apologetically. ‘I’m a bit of a klutz when it comes to women.’ ‘I had noticed.’

‘Still, no harm done, eh?’ said Fitz. ‘Anyway, the Doctor did tell us to think positive thoughts to combat these Sholem-Luz things, right? That is,

assuming you think a compliment from me is a good thing. You might find it utterly detestable.’ He paused, but only just long enough to draw breath. ‘I’m sorry. I’m such a twit. I really shouldn’t...’

‘Rule one when you’re in a hole,’ said Laska, cutting through Fitz’s babbling. ‘Stop digging.’

‘Right. Sorry.’

‘And stop saying “Sorry”.’

‘Right. Sor–’

‘You dare!’ Laska wagged her finger at him again, on the verge of helpless hysterics.

It felt good to have a laugh, even in the midst of the evil they faced – perhaps this was gallows humour at its most profound. Even when facing death and destruction someone like Fitz was honest enough to admit he was still thinking about sex. Perhaps Fitz had noticed how Laska had reacted when she’d been told that James was lost – lost in one of the time tunnels, and to the alien influence. Perhaps this was Fitz’s way of trying to cheer her up, or at least taking her mind off things. Laska smiled. He was quite sweet, really.

For a twit.

Even so, as Joe worked on the junction box, Laska pulled on her top. She didn’t want him copping a look at her bra when they should all be concentrating on something more important, like not dying hideously.

As her head emerged from the material she could hear Fitz babbling away about some time when he’d been particularly twitish and it had almost meant disaster for him and the Doctor.

‘Shut up, Fitz,’ Laska hissed urgently.

‘I was only saying...’

‘Fitz!’

Finally Fitz seemed to sense the fear in her voice. ‘What?’

Laska pointed.

The alien-infected dog had appeared in the corridor behind them. It edged closer, carefully placing one paw in front of the other, its eyes gleaming with an awful inner radiance.

‘I hope he’s all right,’ said Liz as they approached the locked room where they had left Mike Thomson. ‘If he’s not, I’ll never forgive myself.’

‘We were just doing what we thought was right,’ said Trix patiently. ‘We thought he’d be safe.’

They turned the corner and stopped in their tracks. One of the strange tunnels had appeared in the corridor, its far end fading from sight only yards from where they had locked Dr Thomson. Its open end, closer to them, bobbed

up and down like some grotesque fairground balloon. It seemed to sense their presence, stretching towards them.

'What are we going to do?' whispered Liz. She didn't fancy just trying to edge past the tunnel.

'Think positively?' suggested Trix desperately.

Liz wasn't convinced that something that seemed so solid – even if it had appeared seemingly out of nowhere – would be affected by their thoughts, positive or otherwise. 'Given what's happened today,' whispered Liz, 'I'm not sure I can find much to feel positive about.'

Liz and Trix inched closer to the ever-changing portal. Dark figures, distorted as if viewed through frosted glass, began to appear at the far end of the tunnel. If anything, the ghostly passageway was becoming more solid with every passing moment.

'We've got to do *something*,' said Liz. It might be her imagination, but she was sure that one of the enormous dark figures – made small by the tunnel, as if viewed down the wrong end of a telescope – had just noticed them. It had stopped what it was doing and was beginning to wade through invisible forces towards the portal.

Liz glanced at Trix. Trix had her eyes closed tightly. 'It's worth a try,' she whispered. 'It seemed to work down in the chapel.'

Liz tried to calm her turbulent worries and concerns, marvelling at Trix's Zenlike passivity in the face of God-knows-what, but she couldn't help but keep glancing at the tunnel.

Suddenly Trix, her eyes still shut, began laughing, an utterly atypical Sid James chuckle. She was grinning from ear to ear.

'What are you remembering?' asked Liz.

'Never you mind,' said Trix.

'Looks like we might have found the right junction box,' observed Fitz. He and Joe Bartholomew were backing away from the creature nervously.

'Leave this to me,' said Laska bravely. If the others thought she looked like Bruce Willis she might as well play up to their expectations.

She crouched just in front of the dog, staring at its malignant, haunted eyes. This time she effortlessly called to mind scraps of past joy and happiness – they might be little but specks of light on a sea of black depression, but perhaps that made them burn brighter. Even Dr Smith came to mind, and Laska found herself smiling. In some ways he was very like her dad – a bit odd and distant at times, but full of marvellous insight and irrepressible energy.

The dog thing opened its jaws – she saw razor-sharp teeth, a great, lolling tongue of grey – but then became motionless, a fly in amber mere yards from Laska's crouched form.

‘Best get on with it,’ Fitz whispered to Joe. ‘I don’t know how long you’ve got.’

Trix didn’t strike Liz as being the sort of woman who spent hours gazing into crystals or going to yoga classes to ‘find her inner self’. For all that, she seemed to be doing a remarkable job of holding the tunnel at bay. Huge expanses of it were fading from sight; the portal at the tunnel’s end was shrinking back on itself, folding up like a midnight flower.

Soon there was nothing left but a bright and burning star, hovering just over head-height. Trix had managed to transform the vision before them from an entrance to a different, deadly world to something that seemed to carry all the threat of Tinkerbell.

Or perhaps it was just a coincidence. But Liz wasn’t about to spoil the moment with her ungrateful cynicism.

She ran towards the door, the key already in her hand.

She sighed with relief when she saw Mike Thomson within the room, sitting calmly in the centre like some cheerful Buddha.

‘Thought you’d forgotten about me,’ said Thomson, bathed in the awful fiery glow of the emergency lighting.

‘Mike, I’m so sorry. We thought you were...’ Liz indicated that he should come with them. ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter now. We’ll explain later. Hopefully.’

Thomson got to his feet but did not seem immediately inclined to leave the security of the room. ‘I’ve seen some strange things in here. I’m starting to think...’

‘We’ve *all* seen strange things,’ said Trix, appearing in the doorway.

Thomson smiled. ‘Oh. Oh, that’s OK then.’

Liz was delighted to have Mike Thomson back at her side – not only because she couldn’t bear the thought of having lost him to the fire, but also for the very practical reason that he alone seemed to know where all the fire extinguishers were. Liz had been told, on numerous occasions, of the plans and procedures for a variety of emergencies, but she had simply trusted that something like this would never happen.

Struggling with two fire extinguishers each, they began the trek back to the basement. ‘If we end up looking like long-armed orang-utans after this, I know a very good plastic surgeon,’ joked Trix, trying to lighten the mood.

The smoke in the corridors was becoming thicker as they passed, but they found precious few fires worthy of operating their extinguishers. The structural integrity of the building was, for the moment, unaffected.

However, by the time they approached the chapel, it was clear that almost the entire area was lost to the conflagration. Wood and metal were blistering and cracking with the heat; the door that had kept them trapped was now a

blazing block of flame that licked at the stone archway. Even through the fire Liz could see that the golden haze of the alien sheen seemed brighter than ever before.

They set about keeping the fire from spreading further. The body of the poor security guard – laughably left in place for the police who had never appeared – was a distance down one of the corridors that edged the chapel. Some kind soul had draped a sheet over the corpse; the ends of this were now beginning to smoulder. Liz could imagine the evil presence striving to reach out for another body.

She struggled with the instructions on her extinguisher, ignoring Thomson's unhelpful shouted words of advice, and finally got the thing working. A huge spray of stifling foam arced through the air and landed on the smouldering sheet.

The filing cabinets next to Liz were radiating heat. They were against the wall that formed one boundary of the chapel room, and it was as if the entire place was just a ball of fire only temporarily held in check by the stone walls. They wouldn't hold much longer; great orange cracks were starting to appear in the masonry.

In quick succession two things happened.

Firstly, one of the portals appeared, just in front of her. Immediately a body was forced through, and someone slumped to the floor. Equally quickly, the tunnel snapped shut, and was gone.

Secondly, an alarm sounded. It was one of the many fire alarms, a great whirring chime like an alarm clock from hell. It was situated about six inches from Liz's left ear.

The combination of both actions was enough to make Liz jump, momentarily dropping the extinguisher, which fell to the floor like an uncoiled, spitting cobra.

The noise of the bell near Liz was soon joined by others, all around the Retreat.

She reached down for the extinguisher just as the sprinklers kicked into life. It was like the breaking of a tropical storm.

Drenched, Trix came over to Liz, beaming brightly. 'They've done it!' she said. 'Fitz and the others – they've reconnected everything.' It was only then that she noticed the body slumped at Liz's feet. 'Who's that?' she asked.

Liz was already trying to find out. She bent down, turning the body over on to its back.

It was James Abel. And he was still breathing.

Supporting his unconscious body between them, Trix and Liz headed back to the stairs. As they passed they glanced into the chapel. Although there was no way the sprinklers were going to entirely extinguish the fire, they

were clearly already having an effect. Most importantly of all, the golden mist seemed, abruptly, to have vanished. Just for a moment the undeveloped form of the newborn centaur seemed defiant; then it too blinked out of sight.

Mike Thomson joined them, seemingly unperturbed by James's sudden appearance. Perhaps he had by now seen enough strange things to last a lifetime. 'I think this is the moment where we beat a hasty retreat,' he said. 'We'd better leave this fire to the experts.'

No one was about to argue with that.

Thomson took over from Trix, draping one of James's limp arms about his shoulders. As he did so he suddenly exclaimed, 'Bloody hell. . .'

He'd seen something that the others had missed. Leaving James with the women he ran to the far end of the corridor, which formed one outer corner of the chapel. It was usually in semidarkness down here – a dumping ground for stuff that couldn't be accommodated elsewhere – but Thomson found a light and switched it on.

At the far end stood two stone sarcophagi. Liz seemed to remember seeing, on the original plans, that the chapel area was once much more extensive than it was now, encompassing most of the basement. As befitted a Victorian crypt there were caskets dotted around, though Liz wasn't sure if anyone was actually buried there.

It wasn't immediately clear from Liz's vantage point what Thomson had seen.

'What?' shouted Trix, exasperated and looking somewhat like a drowned poodle. It was clear that she now just wanted to get out of the artificial rain.

Thomson pointed at one of the caskets wordlessly.

Then Liz saw it: the lid was moving. It was being shifted from within.

Liz whispered an equal amount of oaths and prayers.

Once there was sufficient room, a figure sat bolt upright, like a vampire rising to life in a coffin. He turned to face the three open-mouthed onlookers, pale but obviously unharmed.

It was Dr Smith.

'Goodness, what a noise!' he exclaimed brightly. 'How is anyone expected to sleep through all this racket?'

Twenty-four

This is the Way the World Ends

[The Tooth]

Extract from the Diary of Dr Thomas Christie
Tuesday 3rd May 1904

Today I returned to Mausolus House for the first time since those terrible events of Christmas. Much has changed in my absence – and much has not.

It was immediately obvious that a great deal of money had been spent on renovating and improving the fabric of the building. All structural damage caused by the conflagration had been put right. In addition, there was much evidence of fresh paint and new plaster. Indeed, I believe in terms of cleanliness that Mausolus now outstrips even the building as it was when I was in charge of it. One could scarce imagine that this was the very place where so many had lost their lives (though I must always remind myself that many more would have died in the flames were it not for the bravery of a variety of folk, and the prompt arrival of the fire engine).

And yet one does not have to walk the corridors of Mausolus long to realise that these cosmetic exercises cannot fundamentally change the character of the building. It is only now that I realise how much more positive I have felt since being away from it – and how quickly the place sought to bring down my spirits. Even without patients, without nurses and orderlies, one cannot escape the impression that this is a building that, over the centuries, has gorged itself on sickness and decay. Even the hearty, vulgar shouts of the workmen, the insistent noise of their tools, could not entirely shift this feeling from my mind.

I am not sure what will happen to Mausolus – discussions continue with relentless constancy – but my thoughts on the matter are long now a matter of public record. It is not right to say, as some have done, that I am motivated out of some sentimental attachment to the memories of those who perished in the fire; nor do I have a proprietorial arrogance that leads me to suggest that no one else could manage Mausolus as well as I attempted to do. I simply feel that it would be right and proper for a new use to be found for this great

building; one that could, I hope, redeem something of its past misfortunes. I have attempted to make 'a fresh start' in my own life; it seems to me to be right and proper that Mausolus itself does the same.

I was shown around the building by a representative of the Thorne family as though I was unfamiliar with the geography of the place. I was impatient to be on my own, and as we approached the chapel I indicated that I would like to pay my respects to those that died in the fire (claptrap, of course, but I really did not feel like explaining my every reaction and motive to so complete a stranger).

Thus I found myself alone in the chapel, now restored to its former function and simple grandeur, wondering what had possessed me all those months ago, and agonising how close I came to complete dissolution. I was deceived, I suppose, into trying to execute a plan based in madness, but with good intent: I wanted to destroy the evil that had lodged in Mausolus. I do not suppose any of us like to feel that they have the potential for such lunacy, for such evil – I imagine the crowds that bellow at murderers as they are led to the gallows are not so much driven by hatred but out of a sense of relief that it is not *them* that have passed the thin dividing line between good and ill. Perhaps they are more honest than those of us in civilised society who feel ourselves somehow above such things. I do not know.

I tried to picture the chapel as I had last seen it, dripping in oil and burning brightly. Fern's death in the flames, the grotesque remains of my hound – these things I relive almost every night. How strange it was, then, to be back in a place now more familiar to me as a location in my mind than one in reality.

I placed myself where I remember standing as the grotesque drama played towards its conclusion and, as I looked to the corner where Fern had been engulfed, I saw that a patch of sooty darkness remained. I am not sure if an unsuccessful attempt had already been made to paint over this reminder of the fire, or if it were one of many little jobs still left to be tackled. In any event, I felt drawn to that area – not quite as mindlessly as my past behaviour in the chapel, I should stress, yet still with a sense of compulsion I could not entirely combat.

Almost immediately I noticed something gleaming, wedged into a crack where floor met wall, seemingly in the heart of the still visible black stain. I thought at first it was a coin, though what light was making it shine so I could not establish. As I moved closer I saw that it was not round; closer still and I saw that it was a tooth.

I bent down to look at it, reaching for it with nervous fingers.

As I brought it before my eyes I felt a thrilling warmth spread through my body, as inexplicable and puzzling as those more sombre feelings that I

associated with Mausolus.

I held the tooth up to the light. It was a canine, its graceful arc hinting at a bestial purpose. It was much too large to be human.

I turned it over, again and again, in my hand. Perhaps as a side effect of the flames it had taken on a metallic hue, as if it had been dipped in liquid silver and given a protective coating. I knew that the fire that claimed Fern and my dear Grant had somehow accelerated to unbelievable temperatures, consuming them both utterly and leaving next to nothing behind.

Could this be the only thing that had survived, the only remains left of my dearly departed hound?

I look around, almost guiltily. Why had this not been spotted before?

Perhaps it had, and had been dismissed as trivial. Only I would see importance in such a scrap, such a tiny part of a once great and noble creature.

I was unsure, though, whether I desired a reminder of my own brush with madness – a reminder of the mortality of all things.

But I could not bring myself to merely dispose of the tooth. The enticing warmth I felt, whenever I touched it, had me mesmerised.

Yes, I would keep it. Indeed, in my new spirit of redeeming the old and the bad, I would make something fresh with it.

I hope to take the tooth to the jewellers tomorrow.

I hope never to be parted from it.

Twenty-five Soldier Girl [She's Leaving]

Laska sat on the hillside, her back to the folly, sketching the Retreat through the trees. In the right light, the building had a dignity about it, a certain Victorian forcefulness. She was no great artist, but she was enjoying drawing her surroundings now – the building, the ornate gardens, the mausoleum behind her.

Not just any old mausoleum. The mausoleum of her family.

It sounded a bit weird when she thought of it in those terms; a bit of a goth's fantasy. But actually the continuity of it all comforted her; that at her back rested the earthly remains of so many ancestors who had had an intimate knowledge of this place.

And, unlike the vast majority of them, she was about to leave.

She returned to her sketch. For the second time in its history the Retreat – Mausolus House – had been the subject of extensive structural and cosmetic repairs. Whenever she had been able she watched the men as they worked on shoring up the foundations and strengthening the basement. Much of the building had been closed during the work – Laska had ended up with a temporary room – but its business was unaffected. Within days people were beginning to assemble for interview: Dr Smith had tendered his resignation the moment the last of the flames had been extinguished by the fire engines.

The fire at the Retreat had featured on the local news, even making a few national papers until the usual mix of soap stars and political spin returned to the fore. None of the reports got anywhere near the truth, of course. To be fair, every time Laska talked with someone else who had been there, their stories didn't quite seem to tally. And who would believe them anyway?

Laska remembered that Joe Bartholomew had triumphantly reconnected the fire alarms and sprinklers, then set about sorting out the phones. Both were, he said, simple enough repairs. Someone – he didn't actually say James, but it was clear enough who he meant – had hacked through the wires with some cutters. His only real skill was in overriding the failsafes.

After that, everything happened in a rush. Laska had gathered with the

others on the lawns, watching as the firemen set about dousing the flames and checking each room in turn for occupants. Other than those poor unfortunates who had been crushed either by the panic or the falling beam, most of the staff and patients had escaped with barely a scratch.

Laska had snuggled into her silver foil blanket, drained and exhausted by all that had happened. She watched as Liz quizzed Dr Smith, clearly unable to entirely accept his version of events.

‘It doesn’t matter how I ended up in the casket,’ Smith had said. ‘What’s vital is that the Sholem-Luz were destroyed, back in 1903.’

‘Destroyed?’ said Liz.

‘Destroyed in a fire of their own invention,’ said Smith. ‘Eliminated before they could scatter any more seeds on the Time Winds.’

Liz shook her head. ‘I still don’t believe half the things you’re telling me.’

Just for a moment Smith seemed upset by Liz’s unwillingness to trust him. ‘You’ve seen many strange events over the past few hours,’ he said. ‘Do you have a better explanation?’

Liz had laughed at that, just for a moment much more like her old self. ‘Of course I don’t!’

‘There you go, then,’ said Smith triumphantly, as if that confirmed everything.

Joe had come over at that moment, whispering urgently to Liz. It was obvious what they were talking about, but it was clear that Liz wasn’t in the mood to talk about their future – or even if they had one.

As if respecting their privacy, Smith and his friends had disappeared soon afterwards. Laska hadn’t seen him since. She missed him terribly, but Dr Thomson seemed to be trying his best to assume the mantle of the Retreat’s resident eccentric. He’d taught himself to juggle, and the purchase of a unicycle was planned. Laska wasn’t sure if this was the sort of behaviour that Dr Smith entirely approved of, but perhaps Mike Thomson was just glad to be alive, and was revelling in that.

Laska could identify with that feeling.

Dr Oldfield’s reaction to the fire was altogether different. He had returned to work even more sullen than before, though at least – it was said – he had withdrawn his threat to expose Liz’s secrecy. Laska was happy to hear that: Liz was a good woman, whatever mistakes she may or may not have made in the past. And Laska’s father clearly had the utmost time and respect for her.

After a week or two at work, Oldfield had abruptly quit, though against all expectation he had no job waiting for him elsewhere. Dr Thomson had joked that perhaps he had seen something on the night of the fire that made him doubt his own sanity. He wouldn’t have been the only one.

Whatever the reason for his departure, no one was sad to see him go.

'That's very good, you know.'

Laska turned, not entirely able to disguise her delight.

She'd hoped he'd come – especially today, of all days.

'Dr Smith!' she exclaimed. 'Doctor!'

There he stood, as calm and unruffled as ever, the wind playing through his flowing hair. Fitz and Trix stood a way off. They grinned at Laska and waved, but clearly did not wish to intrude any further.

Laska was delighted at their tact. Impulsively she leaped to her feet and hugged Dr Smith. 'I thought you'd forgotten about me!' she said.

'Of course not,' said Smith, grinning at Laska's reaction. 'But you'll understand why I didn't want to hang around for any enquiry.'

'You left the rest of us looking like loonies, though,' said Laska. 'None of our stories tallied, and what did was utterly nonsensical. Do you know, there's a researcher coming over from South Africa next week. He's researching mass hysteria!'

'Oh dear,' said Smith, though he looked not at all apologetic.

'Liz Bartholomew is convinced that's what happened – we all bought into some sort of temporary psychosis.'

'At least she's still here,' observed Smith. 'That's a good thing. And the Sholem-Luz were defeated. Lives were saved. That's what matters.'

'But what *did* happen?' said Laska. 'One moment we were both staring at that dog thing. The next you were gone. I didn't see you again until you turned up in that sarcophagus!'

'Ah, thereby hangs a tale,' said Smith, as infuriating as ever. 'I heard you dealt with the dog single-handedly. That's very impressive.'

'I had a very good Doctor,' said Laska. She paused. 'You're dodging the issue. Come on, what happened?'

'It involves James, of course,' said Smith sadly.

'Ah, well,' said Laska, momentarily off balance. 'I'd still like to know,' she added, moments later.

'Of course.' Smith sat and indicated that Laska should join him. He put his hands behind his head, leaning back against the mausoleum. 'I ended up in one of the Sholem-Luz tunnels. They're primitive rips through space and time, with very little protection from the Time Winds. Most humans who stepped inside would be destroyed – if not physically then mentally. I found a warren of tunnels and nests, linking different points in history, in geography, but all centred on the Retreat – or Mausolus House, should I say. I could just about make out where the various tunnels terminated in the real world. I tried to find James. I thought, if I could remove him from where you were, it might give you a fighting chance. I saw him once, briefly, but then that tunnel shut off. The whole area was so random, so frustratingly unpredictable!'

Smith paused, toying with a blade of grass.

'Then of course there were the Sholem-Luz. They were hunting me remorselessly.'

'You had something they needed?' said Laska.

'Oh yes,' said Smith. 'Plenty of bad memories.' He stared at his hands, as if there were blood on them. Then he began fiddling with the blade of grass again.

'I found a portal that led to the chapel. I told Fitz what to do – not one of my more elaborate plans perhaps, but the diaries said that something similar seemed to have worked back in 1903. Who am I to argue with history?' He grinned. 'Anyway, I grabbed James, effectively moving him out of space and time. This curbed his influence on events at the Retreat, but gave the Sholem-Luz another target within their nest. I tried to shield him as best I could – from the Sholem-Luz, from the Time Winds. I'm not sure what did most damage, to be fair. I could feel his mind being stripped away, layer by layer. The Dead Lords of the Everlasting are not noted for their pity.'

'But James reappeared,' said Laska. 'Liz found him in the cellar.'

Smith nodded. 'I was able to give him some of my memories – just enough to help him survive. A buffer against madness, if you will.' Smith shook his head as if something had come loose. 'I hope they weren't too important. Anyway,' he continued, 'I did my best for him. I pushed him through another tunnel – from your perspective in time, it was all over. I knew James would be safe. Physically, at least.'

Laska nodded slowly 'There's nothing visibly wrong with him,' she said. 'Liz and the others checked him over once the fire was out. But his mind...'

Smith nodded. 'He had been infected by the Sholem-Luz. His chances of a full recovery are slim.'

'The dog must have bitten him,' said Laska.

Smith nodded. 'He was quite fond of a cigarette outside, wasn't he? The dog must have attacked him then.' He dropped the blade of grass, looking up at the sky. 'From that moment on he wasn't entirely himself. At points, perhaps, he was unaffected. But increasingly the Sholem-Luz were using him as an agent of their destructive wills.'

'We all thought it was Oldfield, maybe Thomson.'

'Dr Oldfield is simply bitter,' said Smith. 'Not evil as such, but not very altruistic.'

'That's being very polite.'

'And Mike Thomson... He's a good man. He kept hearing stories about things going on at the folly... The mausoleum, should I say?' Smith corrected, turning around to look at the squat building behind them. 'And he *did* receive a call on his mobile, from someone impersonating a police officer.'

James.'

Smith nodded. James was nearby – perhaps that helped with the signal-strength problem you all experience here. Then James sabotaged the fire alarms. He'd already dealt with the phone lines. He murdered the security guard – perhaps the guard stumbled across James fiddling about with some wiring or something, I just don't know. Like Fern back in 1903, James was now driven only by one thought – to create panic and destruction. It's possible he found a way of driving the patient to commit suicide. Or perhaps, by then, the influence of the Sholem-Luz was just too strong over all of us. . .'

Laska shivered. She didn't like remembering the tense desperation that characterised the atmosphere in the Retreat on the night of the fire. 'Once you pushed James back through the portal,' said Laska, 'what did you do?'

'As I said, the Sholem-Luz took quite a shine to me. For centuries I have been. . . familiar with grief. As ancient Arab mythologists might have put it, I was a pot of honey, and the Sholem-Luz were the bees.'

'You knew they'd target you.'

'I had an inkling. Fitz and the others were about to extinguish the fire but – they live beyond time, remember – from one point of view, the fire in 1903 was still raging. I found a way back to Mausolus House. They followed me blindly now, utterly obsessed by the fire in 1903, and my memories – even the ones I don't know I have!'

'I take it you were doing the opposite of what I was trying to achieve,' said Laska. 'You were thinking about bad things.'

'Yes,' said Smith. 'Very bad things. I led them straight into the fire of 1903 – the fire that they themselves had instigated. I then "shut off" my memories. They had precious little energy left – especially as I knew that that conflagration, too, was about to end. Suddenly in the real world, so to speak, they were as vulnerable to fire as any other creature. Lacking pain receptors, they didn't even realise what was happening. The Sholem-Luz were destroyed in the flames before they could produce any seeds.'

'Apart from the dog's tooth.'

Smith nodded. 'Apart from the single seed that resembled a dog's tooth, which found its way to you, and purely by luck therefore back to Mausolus House, and this mausoleum behind us.'

'That's amazing,' said Laska. 'So you've destroyed the Sholem-Luz!'

'Not entirely,' said Smith. 'This was only a single colony. I daresay others remain. But at least I know how to defeat them now.'

'So that's another weirdo space monster crossed off your list,' said Laska.

Smith nodded. 'It's good to face your doubts and fears and come out on top.'

Laska smiled. For once she knew exactly what Dr Smith meant.

* * *

Laska and Dr Smith strolled through the ornamental gardens, enjoying the sunshine on their backs. Laska found herself glancing at her watch from time to time – the minute hand seemed barely to have moved since morning – but largely Smith's words held her captivated.

'So there I was, back in 1903,' said Smith, 'a hundred years or so from my craft, from Fitz and Trix. The Sholem-Luz tunnels were collapsing, you see.'

'What did you do?' asked Laska.

'The first person I met was Mr Sands. Do you remember him from the diary? The unexpected hero.' Smith grinned. 'I told him to head for the basement, then I set about saving what people I could – and calling for a fire engine, of course. I knew I had something of a head start on Dr Christie and the others, I suppose you could say. A head start in time. No more than twenty minutes or so, I suppose, but even so... It made all the difference.'

'Did you meet Dr Christie or the vicar?' said Laska, amazed. It was like trying to imagine fictional characters coming to life.

'Later on,' said Smith. 'Splendid fellows, both of them. Of course, I was very discreet. The odd conversation here and there. After both men died I followed the diaries for a few years, made sure they stayed together.'

'So it *wasn't* a coincidence that the dog tooth ended up with me – and back here.'

'That's hard to say,' said Smith evasively. 'But you know what I think about coincidences...' He paused for a moment, as if weighing up what he was about to say. 'I did notice some odd things about the Sholem-Luz seed,' he added in a hushed whisper. 'Some owners of the necklace became obsessed by it, triggering – in extreme cases – a type of schizophrenia. In others it appeared to give extraordinary longevity or resistance to illness. It's as if the pendant became what its wearer willed it to be.'

Laska nodded, thinking of her father, his decline into cancer when separated from the necklace. His death, and all that that meant to her. 'How did you end up in the casket?' she asked, not wanting to become maudlin. Not today.

'After a few months I got a little bored, I must admit,' said Smith. 'I had things to do elsewhere – I always have things to do! – but it was proving inconvenient having to hang around this place so much. People kept thinking I was a ghost!'

'It does have a reputation,' said Laska.

'Given what's happened here, you can understand why,' said Smith. 'I had other reasons to want to keep a low profile – one of the dangers of being a traveller in time and space, shall we say.'

'You don't want to meet yourself.'

Smith nodded. 'Anyway, I thought I'd better find somewhere to rest.'

'So you fell asleep, for decades... in a stone sarcophagus?'

‘It’s comfortable enough, after a while,’ said Smith. ‘It seemed as good a place as any – right at the heart of the action.’

‘Good job the fire alarms woke you,’ said Laska. ‘Or you’d have been burnt to a crisp.’

‘Indeed,’ said Smith. ‘And my presence there, sleeping soundly near the chapel... It explains why I hated the place so much!’

‘Why’s that?’ said Laska.

‘I’m not usually supposed to meet myself – not under circumstances like these, anyway. Can cause all sorts of trouble. So, every time I came down to the basement, I was gripped by an instinctive fear. It was a warning, if you will, triggered by the proximity of my future self – a warning that I was already there! Or *would be*, in any event.’

‘I’m confused,’ said Laska.

‘I’d draw you a time map,’ said Smith, ‘but I’m not sure it would help.’ He got to his feet. ‘It’s nearly time we were both going.’

Laska laid a hand on Smith’s arm. Just before you do,’ she said. ‘One thing’s been bugging me ever since the fire. You know about Liz’s husband, that he was having an affair with one of the nurses...’

Smith nodded impassively.

‘I found out about that, before the first murder. Well, I suspected, anyway. I should have told Liz, but I was so wrapped up in myself, my desire to get out of here...’

‘Normal life carries on, even in the midst of trauma and suffering,’ observed Smith. ‘We still have our own agendas, our own desires – and sometimes that’s no bad thing.’ He smiled. ‘In the midst of war, you’d almost expect the crime rate to decline, for people to be so swamped by the enormity of what’s going on that there are no murders, no betrayals, no theft... The truth is rather different.’

‘Even so, would it have made any difference if I’d warned Liz?’

‘It might have avoided a sticky situation on the floor of her office,’ said Fitz loudly. He and Trix had clearly bored of playing benign gooseberry. Both stood on the driveway, smiling at Laska.

Laska wasn’t about to be sidetracked by Fitz’s sledgehammer humour. ‘And... what if I’d told you about the dog earlier?’

Smith sighed. ‘These things may have helped,’ he said, ‘but, ultimately, who can tell now? We’re talking about nuances of time, of energy. I don’t want you to feel guilty – about anything. Not today.’

A taxi appeared at the far end of the drive.

‘You must be very excited,’ observed Trix.

‘I am,’ said Laska. She noticed Liz waving at her from a window at the front of the house and waved back. ‘As of this moment, I am officially not mad,

depressed, nutty, insane, round the twist or suicidal.' She grinned. 'Well, no more than anyone else, anyway.'

'That's good,' said Trix. 'And I'm sorry if I was... if I was a little heavy sometimes, back then. I was just trying to get to the truth.'

'That's OK,' said Laska. The two shook hands formally with a stiff, *no hard feelings* gesture.

Fitz, on the other hand, gave Laska a great bear hug. 'I've missed you,' he said. 'Fighting weirdo space monsters just isn't the same without you!'

Laska wondered how much of her conversation with Smith he'd overheard. But it was easy to forgive Fitz just about anything.

She gave him a peck on the cheek.

'Think of me when you're bedding alien babes and women from outer space,' she laughed.

Fitz started to go a deep shade of crimson.

Result.

Laska turned finally to Dr Smith: 'Thank you,' she said simply. 'For everything.'

Smith said nothing, but allowed himself to be hugged one last time.

'And if, on your travels, you ever see my father... Tell him I might be a screwed-up brat, but I'll always love him.'

Dr Smith nodded curtly.

The taxi pulled up, and Fitz opened the back door like a gentleman, then bundled Laska's bags into the boot.

Smith, Fitz and Trix stood and waved as the taxi turned and headed back down the driveway.

Laska waved back furiously, then settled into her seat.

She could hardly believe it – she was finally leaving.

'Where are we going, love?' asked the cabbie.

'Home,' replied Laska, with a grin.

Almost a year ago Laska had arrived at the Retreat.

Now, at last, Caroline was leaving.

Twenty-six

Good Riddance

[Time of Your Life]

‘That’s my story,’ concluded the man. ‘It’s all about a girl, life and death, sanity and evil...’

His voice was cracked and dry now; but then, he had been talking solidly for over an hour. He reached for a glass of water, and drank greedily.

‘So you defeated these Sholem-Luz creatures?’ asked the nurse.

‘That’s right,’ said the man.

‘And now you’ve retired here?’

‘I’ve grown rather attached to the place.’

Suddenly the patient looked old beyond his years. Indeed, the nurse had to keep double-checking the information in front of her to make sure she was talking to the right man.

But there it was, in black and white – Age: 22.

This man looked more like fifty.

She got to her feet. She’d been warned that this one regaled every new staff member with his story. It was unavoidable, like something out of Coleridge. A man compelled always to tell his tale.

‘Well, thanks for that, Mr...’

‘Please, call me Doctor.’

‘Doctor. It was fascinating. Now, I really must be getting on. I’ll see you again I’m sure.’

‘You know where I am,’ said the man, peacefully resigned. He turned back to stare out of the window, doubtless looking for stars, for alien worlds, for other times.

The nurse closed the door and bustled away, placing a tick next to yet another name on her clipboard.

James Abel done. Four more to go.

Epilogue

P.S. Goodbye

(Cuckoo's Nest)

*Extract from a private letter written by Joe Bartholomew,
undated*

Dear Liz

I understand from my solicitor that you wish to push ahead with the divorce. I have been stupid and reckless and I certainly won't stand in your way. I had hoped we might be able to sort things out, but you've never been one for papering over the cracks and I respect your honesty.

As you probably know, Susannah and I split up months ago. She meant nothing to me. I don't know whether that makes you feel better or worse – or even if you will read this far – but I will try to explain what happened. I'm not making excuses, I'm not even asking for forgiveness – what I have done was unforgivable – but it may help you to know the context of my actions.

I started the affair – Susannah was always the innocent party, being led on by *me* – about two weeks after I received some news from the doctor. I'd been to see a specialist, had some tests done. He told me the results were back, and that I had cancer.

Perhaps the fact that I didn't tell you any of this shows what a rocky state our marriage was in anyway. I don't know why I didn't want to tell you – I suppose I just hoped if I ignored it enough, it would all go away. You always seemed so busy with your work at the Retreat – not that I'm blaming you for *anything*. I don't want to go over old ground.

(I'll leave all the lurid medical details for later in this letter. Suffice it to say, it's all very advanced, and I haven't got long to live. The funny thing is, I feel fine. Actually, not sure 'funny' is quite the right word here.)

I certainly became very reckless – if my life was effectively over, then I no longer gave a damn, about anything. I *set out* to have an affair with Susannah. It was nothing but lust. I'd always thought she was quite good-looking. I started gambling, big-time – though, of course, I'm a past master at keeping most of the credit-card bills from you. Soon they'll just be my concern, and

my concern alone. (You should see the size of the flat I've got now – if you swung a cat in here you'd be done by the RSPCA. And, before you say it, yes, I know that phrase refers to a cat o' nine tails. I'm trying to make a joke in the midst of all this awful *crap*. I really shouldn't bother. Sorry.)

Anyway, I'm sorry I went off the rails. I'm sorry I let my dick lead my brain.

To be honest, I'm not sure I feel any better now. I'm still scared – scared of dying, scared of what's happening to my body.

Incidentally... you know I'm not one for quack medicine or miracle cures. But it's strange how you feel when you're staring down the barrel of death. You suddenly become a lot more open to all sorts of possibilities.

I mention this in passing because I found something, during the fire at the Retreat. I heard – from Susannah, and thus from the nurse's grapevine – that it actually belongs to one of your patients, or former patients. Her father had cancer when he stopped wearing this thing – I'm wondering if it works in reverse.

I suppose I should hand it back, and it sounds daft, but it kind of warms me when I wear it. I'm wearing it now. It's a pendant with a silver tooth on it. It probably won't make any difference – just mind over matter stuff – but maybe I'll give it a try.

You see, I really, really don't want to die.



The near future: a man in a psychiatric hospital claims to be an alien time-traveller called 'the Doctor'. He once adventured across countless galaxies, fighting evil.

The past: an asylum struggles to change Victorian attitudes to the mentally ill. It catches fire in mysterious circumstances.

Now: a young woman takes an overdose and slips into a coma. She dreams of death falling like a shroud over a benighted gothic building.

Caroline 'Laska' Darnell is admitted to the Retreat after her latest suicide attempt. To her horror, she recognises the medical centre from recent nightmares of an old building haunted by a ghostly dog with glowing eyes. She knows that something is very wrong with the institute. Something, revelling in madness, is growing ever stronger. The mysterious Dr Smith is fascinated by Laska's waking dreams and prophetic nightmares. But if Laska is unable to trust her own perceptions, can she trust Dr Smith?

And, all the while, the long-dead hound draws near...

This is another in the series of adventures for the Eighth Doctor.

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