



KIM
WILKINS

THE
RESURRECTIONISTS

KIM
WILKINS

THE
RESURRECTIONISTS

*For Elaine and Stella:
angels earthly and heavenly*

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Christina Rossetti

The dead have exhausted their power of deceiving.

Horace Walpole

CONTENTS

DEDICATION

EPIGRAPHS

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind...

The dead have exhausted...

PROLOGUE

The smell of decay and the cold...

CHAPTERS

- 1 On the first Thursday in November...
- 2 Maisie felt as though she had been traveling...
- 3 Though he was loath to admit it, Reverend Fowler ...
- 4 Adrian was a good singer and he knew it...
- 5 Maisie found herself anxiously peering...
- 6 Tuesday at around two p.m. Maisie...
- 7 And so, little book, prepare to become...

- 8 Maisie placed the little book in her lap...
- 9 Though far from being a blissful New Bride...
- 10 Maisie sat back to contemplate what...
- 11 Damp hair trailing about her face, Maisie...
- 12 Maisie and Cathy sat in a cramped corner...
- 13 Charlotte lies next to me, bleeding...
- 14 Yes, it is true I have not written...
- 15 My husband is still ill, and I begin to despair...
- 16 Maisie put the diary carefully aside...
- 17 The train slid into King's Cross station...
- 18 Maisie tried not to worry about wax dripping...
- 19 "Morning, Reverend. I've got that number...
- 20 With the fire at her back, with Tabby curled up...
- 21 Gloomy morning didn't dawn at all.
- 22 What a relief not to have to think of spells...
- 23 Adrian put off calling Janet as long as he could.
- 24 When the bell began to toll Maisie realised...
- 25 Virgil is much improved. His colour...

- 26 Another long silence from me...
- 27 ***** too cold to leave the house.
- 28 Maisie bit her lip and blinked back tears.
- 29 Dawn was still a half hour...
- 30 A bus was leaving for Whitby just as Maisie...
- 31 She couldn't keep her hands off him.
- 32 The heat of the afternoon hit Adrian ...
- 33 Because I cannot starve, because I have a child...
- 34 A week in relative Comfort has made me lazy...
- 35 I wonder, do houses have memories?
- 36 Maisie stopped reading and looked up.
- 37 Mila left in a flurry of apologies and promises...
- 38 The beach was dirty with sludgy...
- 39 Maisie dreaded leaving behind the warm...
- 40 She slept through Sunday and most of Monday.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FROM THE AUTHOR

CREDITS

COPYRIGHT PAGE

FRONT COVER

ABOUT PERFECTBOUND

PROLOGUE

SEPTEMBER

The smell of decay and the cold caress of a shadow, and the old woman knew how this would end. After all, she had read the story. She had never been afraid of crossing over: death was life's last great adventure, and at eighty-three years of age she'd be foolish to harbour fears still. But could she make the crossing if she died like this?

She gasped for air, her heart thudding in her chest. Bang, bang, bang. Her joints, worn and stiff with years, could not hold out for much longer. The ground was uneven and rough beneath her bare feet, her toes were frozen, her thick dress only dulled the edge of the biting autumn wind. The bells on the church were ringing Sunday night's service out. If she left the

world now, then nobody could stop him. Nobody would know.

“Please,” the old woman cried, panting, hands on her knees, running no more. Her back curved over, open to attack. “Please.” She didn’t know why she was saying please. Please meant nothing. Especially not to this kind of being. She tried to gather herself, but the agony of ripped flesh raced up her back in one hard, hot stroke. Dark arms enveloped her, choking her. Her blood felt hot as it ran over her legs. She did not struggle, using her energy instead to project herself out of her body as she had done so many times in her practice. Don’t feel the pain. Die quietly, peacefully. Don’t look at it.

But curiosity was burning in her. The ache of ruptured skin pulled her back and kept her pinned inside. Stiff, hard fingers crushed into each arm, turning her around. She dropped her head, closed her eyes. Felt life ebbing from her. *Go across, Sybill*, she told herself. *Jump the chasm. Don’t look at it. Don’t die in fear. Resist, resist.* Slowly she lifted her head, opening her eyes.

Her scream could be heard as far away as Solgreve Abbey.

In a warm dark bedroom, oceans away, the old woman’s granddaughter awoke with a sense of dread, billowing nausea churning deep in her stomach. She barely made it to the bathroom in time. Fifteen minutes of violent retching mercifully blurred the memory of the dream. All she could recall later, in the solicitous light of dawn, was that she had touched a nightmare, and that the nightmare had somehow reached out to touch her in return.

CHAPTER ONE

On the first Thursday in November, Maisie Fielding watched as her boyfriend murdered a woman in a fit of jealous passion, but her mind was elsewhere. Verdi's score rolled on around her, Desdemona – a chunky soprano at least fifteen years older than her leading man – died with all due drama, and the audience gradually fell in love with the handsome young tenor who had only been Otello's understudy until three o'clock that afternoon. It was the biggest break of Adrian's career, but Maisie was preoccupied with her lie.

And it was a big lie. It involved imaginary consultations with imaginary doctors, feigned tears and feigned winces of pain, and a reluctant acceptance of the fictional diagnosis – three months' break from playing the cello, for fear of permanent injury. Her mother had pressed her perfectly formed pianist's hand to her perfectly glossy black hair – still not a streak of

grey – and moaned, yes, *moaned*, in distress. *Your career, Maisie, your future.*

But damn it, she had been in an arranged marriage with the cello since she was four. It was time for a trial separation.

She glanced over at her mother who sat next to her, eyes soft with tears of pride. She loved Adrian. Everybody loved Adrian, he was eminently lovable. It was entirely her mother's own fault that she got lies instead of the truth. There was no question of Maisie approaching her and confessing that she needed a break from the orchestra, to try something different, to be someone different. Nobody ever argued with Janet Fielding, or at least, nobody ever won.

As if she knew her daughter was thinking of her, Janet reached out and touched Maisie's right hand, the injured hand. Her caress was gentle, almost reverent. Maisie realised she would never know for sure if the touch was meant for her, or just for the body part. She turned her hand over and squeezed her mother's in return. Everybody on stage was soon dead or lamenting a death, and the final curtain fell to rapturous applause.

"I think Adrian's going to be a star," Janet said, raising her voice over the din.

Maisie smiled. "He always has been. Now everybody else will know."

They met Adrian, wig-free and scrubbed of his make-up, one hour later at a cafe on Boundary Street. In the meantime, while they waited, Maisie had carefully steered conversation away from the lie, encouraging her mother instead to reminisce over a bottomless pot of Earl Grey tea. Past glory was always a favourite topic of conversation for Janet Fielding.

When Adrian walked into the room, blond hair glinting like a halo, everyone – men and women – looked up and appraised him. He had that kind of presence, and Maisie wondered for the zillionth time what he had ever seen in a neurotic, black-haired, black-eyed girl with bitten fingernails and too-straight eyebrows. She hoped it wasn't just her pedigree – Maisie's mother had been a renowned concert pianist before her surprise pregnancy at forty-two. Her father was a conductor with an international reputation. He had rarely been at home through most of her childhood. Now nearly seventy and semi-retired, Roland Fielding was the one who had introduced Maisie to Adrian four years ago.

Janet took up nearly half an hour in euphoric praise of Adrian's performance, and all the while he sat there beaming with the kind of self-pleasure which borders on vanity. But finally, as Maisie knew it would, the conversation turned elsewhere.

"I expect you haven't heard Maisie's bad news yet," Janet said, her mouth turning down in faint disapproval.

"Maisie?" Adrian turned to her with steady grey eyes.

"Ah ... yes. The final specialist's report came back this afternoon. I have to take a break, at least three months."

Adrian nodded his understanding. "I thought a break might be the best way to handle your condition." He knew the truth, of course. He knew that Maisie's condition was not about ligaments or muscles or carpal tunnels. Instead, it was about a vague but all-encompassing dissatisfaction with her life, a non-

specific longing which started way down in her toes and tickled like spider's feet in her solar plexus.

Janet shook her head. "I've been playing piano for more than fifty years, and I've never had to take a break."

"Not everybody is built the same way," Adrian replied gently.

"What will you do with your time, Maisie?" her mother asked. "Adrian will be touring over Christmas, and at summer school for most of January. I hope you aren't going to mope about at home while I'm trying to teach."

Maisie weighed up how to word her answer. However she said it, it was going to hurt Janet. Sometimes Maisie felt her circumstances had too quickly slipped from possibilities into inevitabilities. She had never made a conscious choice to be a musician; her parents being who they were, it was expected she would learn music, but she had never displayed her father's brilliance or her mother's fiery genius. Just a clear-eyed grasp of the skill, an aptitude that was little more than intellectual, probably little more than genetic. Increasingly, she had begun to wonder if there was something else out there for her, something for which she would feel the pangs of obsession that Adrian said he felt for his work. To sort it out properly she needed space, air, perspective, none of which she could find in her parents' sterile house during the endless subtropical summer. She cleared her throat, ventured a few words: "I thought I might go on a little trip away."

"Where?"

Adrian squeezed her hand under the table. The two of them had already had this conversation in private.

“I thought I might go look up my grandmother.”

“Grandma Fielding? She’s ninety-five and practically –”

“No. Not Dad’s mother. *Your* mother. In Yorkshire.”

Silence. Janet pushed her lips together.

“Mum?” Maisie asked.

Janet shook her head. “Are you trying to upset me? Is that why you’re doing this?”

“But Mum ... I’ve never met her. You and Dad never talk about her.”

“For a reason, Maisie.”

“What reason?”

Janet picked up a spoon and stirred her half-finished tea vigorously. “She’s a crazy old ... she’s mad. She could even be dangerous.”

“I’m sure she’s not. It would be perfect, Mum. To stay with her out on some windswept moor while I recover.”

“Forget it.”

“I don’t need your permission.”

Janet fixed her with an icy glare. “But you do need her address. You don’t even know her name.”

Maisie feigned indifference as a ward against her mother’s temper. “Whatever. Just think about it.”

“I don’t need to think about it.”

“Sleep on it. Please.” She looked around. The waitress was stacking chairs on top of tables. “I think they’re about to close. We should go.”

“I’ll get the bill,” Adrian volunteered. Maisie watched him move up to the counter then turned to look expectantly at her mother.

“The answer is no,” Janet said.

And so the first battle began.

Maisie booked a flight first thing Monday morning.

“She’s going to go nuts,” Adrian said as Maisie threw the airline ticket on the bed between them with a flourish. They lived together in a downstairs bedroom in Maisie’s parents’ house, a little cramped and cluttered, but it had its own ensuite bathroom and a separate entrance. Sometimes they could almost pretend they lived alone.

“She hasn’t objected to me going to England, just going to Yorkshire. In fact, she’s hardly spoken two words to me since Thursday night. I guess she thinks if she doesn’t get into a conversation with me I can’t bring it up again.”

“Do you even know where your grandmother lives? How are you going to find her?”

“I know this much. She lives near the seaside and her surname is probably Hartley – that’s Mum’s maiden name. I’ll find her if it takes me all summer.”

“Winter. It’s winter over there don’t forget. You’ll freeze.”

“It’s better than waiting here all alone while you gallivant around the country being an opera star.” Maisie fell back amongst the pillows. “I’m looking forward to it. Like an adventure.”

“Like finding a needle in a haystack.” Adrian lay beside her. “I’ll miss you.”

“You would have hardly seen me anyway.”

“It’s the distance. You’ll be on the other side of the world.”

Maisie shrugged. “We should get used to it. When my adventure is over I guess I’ll have to go back to playing in the orchestra, and you’ll be off all over the world without me.” She groaned and covered her eyes.

“I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to think about having to go back to the orchestra.”

“You’re crazy. I can’t imagine a better job.”

Maisie laughed. “God, you sound just like *her*. There’s a whole world out there, Adrian. There are millions of people who don’t even know there’s more than one Bach.” She uncovered her eyes and looked up at him. “Do you think my mother dyes her hair?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“There’s not a glimmer of grey and she says she doesn’t dye it.”

“Perhaps it’s natural.”

“She’s such an enigma. She’s so full of secrets.” Maisie rolled over and picked up her airline ticket. “This time she’s not going to win. I’m going to find my grandmother.”

Reverend Linden Fowler felt the cold more than most people. His bony body needed to be wrapped in four or five layers before he would venture into the church office most mornings, and even then he had to turn the radiator up to full and drink two hot cups of tea before he could think clearly enough to work. November was the worst time of the year with winter approaching and a wind which seemed to come direct from the Arctic roaring off the sea. As he walked the narrow path between his house and the church every morning in the chill air, he dreamed of tropical climes and sunny skies. He had no choice, however, but to remain here on the north Yorkshire coast. Solgreve’s tiny community needed him; it was a matter of Faith.

Reverend Fowler was surprised on this morning to find Tony Blake, the stout village constable, waiting in his

office. Rather than his uniform, the constable was wearing denim pants and a musty woollen pullover. The Reverend noted that he looked rather more stupid and slack-jawed without his crisp black and a badge to impress.

“Good morning, Reverend,” Tony said with a dip of his head.

“Tony. Is there some problem?” He went to the radiator and turned the dial up to the last notch, then hung his scarf and hat on a hook by the old bookcase.

“Could be. I saw a man snooping around Sybill Hartley’s cottage yesterday. Asked him what his business was, and he told me he’s a solicitor. Works on behalf of Mrs Hartley’s inheritors.”

“She had family?”

“In Australia, Reverend.”

Reverend Fowler released his trapped breath. “Oh. Well, that’s a long way off. Perhaps they’re just finding out how much it’s worth. If we’re lucky they’ll order the old place knocked down.” He shook his head. “The last thing we need in Solgreve is new people, Tony.”

“You don’t need to tell me that.”

“Did you get this solicitor’s name?”

“I got his business card.” Tony handed over a white square of card. The solicitor’s name was Perry Daniels and he kept offices in York.

“Awful warm in here, Reverend,” Tony said.

The Reverend waved a hand in dismissal. “I’ll take care of this. Keep an eye on the place, won’t you?”

“Of course. Of course I will.”

Tony closed the door quietly behind him as he left. The Reverend paced his office, studying the card. It was a habit of his to pace, and the beige carpet was worn in a path from door to bookcase. His office was not lush and

tidy. Rather, the furniture was built of that chunky amber-toned wood that was popular in the sixties, his desk scarred and ink-stained, the curtains and other fittings a sickly olive green. He came to rest near the window, looking out over the vast expanse of Solgreve cemetery, the sea a grey-blue streak beyond it under a slate sky. No, he wouldn't call Perry Daniels in York. It would only make the solicitor curious, and curiosity was best deflected away from Solgreve. The cottage was old and rundown, and the chances were that the solicitor was inspecting it merely to estimate the property's value. Who would come to a remote, freezing village like Solgreve and want to live in a centuries-old stone house with a sagging roof and rising damp? He was quite sure Solgreve would remain safe from the eyes of the world.

Adrian was halfway up the stairs, under orders from Maisie to get tea for them both, when he heard Janet and Roland Fielding engaged in heated discussion in the lounge room above him. This was one of the hazards of living with his girlfriend's parents: the unbearable discomfort of witnessing the occasional family argument. He was about to turn and go back to their room when he realised they were talking about Maisie's trip. Guiltily, he paused to listen.

"We can't stop her going, Janet," Roland was saying. "She's a grown woman and she can go on a holiday to England if she wants."

"But we can't let her go up to Yorkshire."

"I think you're being foolish. What your mother did was no great sin."

"Not once, Roland, but twice. Twice they caught her."

“She was old and bewildered. Perhaps even senile.”

“Never. Not my mother. You forget that I know her. I know about her foolish ideas, and I know about her stupid obsessions. And you, no matter how lapsed a Catholic you claim to be, you ought to be appalled at the idea of your daughter being part of that world.”

There was a short silence. Possibilities started to race through Adrian’s mind. Was Maisie’s grandmother some kind of criminal?

“Even if there was any danger in Maisie meeting her grandmother, Janet, that danger has now passed. You know that.”

“But Maisie’s like her, she always has been. Being in that environment might ... I don’t know ... stir things up. Besides, for all we know the house could be ready to fall down around her.”

“It’s not,” Roland said. “I sent your mother’s solicitor up there. He says it’s a bit rundown, but still livable.”

“You did what? Behind my back?” Adrian recognised that tone. Janet’s frighteningly icy indignation was rare, but unnerving. It was the reason everybody avoided fighting with her.

“Now don’t lose your temper.”

“Don’t lose my ... you contacted my mother’s solicitor without telling me?”

“She’s determined to go, Janet.”

“I’ve told her she can’t, so she won’t.”

“Perhaps we should get her up here so we can all discuss this rationally.”

Adrian realised now would be a good time to head back to his room. He turned and started down the stairs just as Roland rounded the corner. At precisely that moment Maisie opened the door of their bedroom.

“Hey, where’s my cup of tea?” she asked.

“I . . .”

“Maisie,” her father said. “Can we have a word with you?”

Janet was suddenly at Roland’s shoulder. “Adrian! You must talk some sense to her.”

Adrian stood trapped between them all on the stairs.

“What are you talking about, Mum?” Maisie asked, her black eyes narrowing.

“Adrian, please. It’s for her own good. You wouldn’t want her to be in any danger, would you?”

Roland shook his head. “Janet. There is no danger any more.”

“There *is!*” Janet cried, stamping her foot like a small girl. “I know my mother and I know that if Maisie goes there she’ll be in trouble.”

The top of the stairs was barred by Janet and Roland. Maisie stood at the bottom looking furious. Adrian hated conflict; he was sure it was bad for his voice. Stress created digestive problems. Digestive problems created throat problems.

“This is not about your mother,” Maisie said, spitting the words out. “This is about you. This is about you having to control everything that I do. Now I’ve left the orchestra, you can’t bear to think of me doing something that you aren’t totally in control of.”

“Maisie, that’s not true.” Janet’s eyes started with tears and Adrian glanced politely away.

“I am going. And if you don’t help me find her, then I’ll find her by myself.”

“Maisie, no. Adrian, talk to her.”

“I . . .”

“Don’t bring him into it, Janet,” Roland admonished.

“Nobody ever listens to me!” Janet cried. Her face was flushed and a strand of her normally smooth hair had escaped and clung to her cheek.

“Everybody always listens to you,” Maisie shot back. “Everybody always has to do what you say or you behave like this ... like a child.” Maisie turned her back and marched away. The bedroom door slammed behind her.

Janet turned on Roland. “Look at all the trouble you’ve caused. Why can’t you support me on this?” She too stormed off, and another door slammed somewhere within the house. Roland and Adrian stood looking at each other.

“I’m sorry about that,” Roland said.

Adrian shrugged. “I’d better go ...” He indicated towards their room.

“Yes.” Roland glanced over his shoulder, then back to Adrian. “Yes, me too.”

“It’s not true, is it? I mean, Maisie won’t be in any kind of ... danger from her grandmother?” It sounded almost laughable, but he kept a straight face.

“No. Any chance of that has ... passed.”

Adrian felt a surge of relief. “Thanks. Good luck with Janet.”

Roland gave a small, strained smile. “She’ll come round. She has to.”

Four days before she was due to leave, Maisie sat alone in her bedroom reading a Lonely Planet guide and highlighting bed-and-breakfast hotels in Yorkshire. Adrian was at rehearsal for a series of Christmas concerts which would take him touring around the country throughout December. She already hated letting

him out of her sight, knowing only a short time remained before they then wouldn't see each other for months. They had been apart before, but usually it was Adrian going away for master classes and tours. It felt strange to be leaving him behind for a change.

A brief knock sounded at the door and her mother came in. Maisie looked up in surprise. Janet had been icy towards her for weeks, not venturing down here once.

“Mum?”

Janet had strained lines around her mouth. She sat on the edge of the bed and ran a hand over her smooth hair. In her other hand she clutched something, so tightly her knuckles were almost white.

“Maisie, I have to say something to you.”

“What is it?”

A deep breath. “My mother and I ...” She paused, turning her dark eyes downwards. Maisie realised, with embarrassment, that her mother was about to cry.

“My mother and I did not get along,” Janet continued. “We had some fundamental differences of opinion which drove us apart. And I ...” A tear skidded down her pale cheek. “I regret that a very great deal.” Her words trailed off into little more than a breath.

Maisie tentatively reached out a hand, but her mother withdrew, standing and facing the small window instead. “I don't want that to happen with us,” she said, matter-of-fact.

“It won't,” Maisie said, not sure if it were true.

There was a long silence. Maisie watched Janet's back. The quiet beat hard in her ears.

“Mum. You can still make it up with your mother.”

A shake of the head, but no reply.

“You could come with me,” Maisie suggested,

guilty that she couldn't imbue her voice with more sincerity. "It's not too late. We'll go find her together. You can ... make amends." Not apologise. Janet Fielding did not apologise.

That silence again, longer. This time Janet's back trembled, as though she were trying to stop herself from crying.

"It is too late," she said finally, quietly.

"No, it's not. Come with me," Maisie said, even though having to share her holiday with her mother filled her with sick disappointment. It wasn't really escaping, it wasn't really running away if her mother came with her.

Janet turned, face stony, held out her hand and dropped something on the bed. Maisie looked down. A set of keys.

"Mum?"

"The keys to her cottage. Saint Mary's Lane, Solgreve."

Maisie picked up the keys and looked at them in astonishment.

"And whatever you find there, whatever you find out about her ... try to be sensible. Try to remember ... who you are. What I've brought you up to be."

"I don't understand. Have you spoken with her? Does she know I'm coming?"

Janet shook her head. "She's dead. She's been dead since September."

"Dead." Maisie's heart went cold. "Why didn't you tell me?"

But Janet was already out the door, closing it firmly behind her, leaving Maisie holding the keys, cool in her palm.

CHAPTER TWO

Maisie felt as though she had been travelling forever – one long, endless night, broken only by a few glimmers of daylight through foggy windows and heavy eyelids. The unbearable, wriggling discomfort of the plane from Brisbane to Heathrow, the zombie-like hour waiting at King’s Cross Station for the train to York, cursing herself for not arranging to stay in London for a few days to recover. And then from York the connecting bus direct to Whitby, but the service which ran through Solgreve – infrequent at the best of times – wasn’t running today. By then she was so close to the end of the journey that it made a weird kind of sense to jump into a taxi and pay whatever it cost to ride the twenty-three miles to Solgreve.

So she now sat in the back of an overheated taxi calculating that she had been travelling for nearly thirty-five hours. Apart from two blissful hours on the bus from York, when the seat next to her had been

empty and she'd been able to put her head down to sleep, she had been either wide awake or in a desperate half-doze which wasn't restful because it was so anxiously taken. She admitted to herself that she had never before fully understood what was meant by "dead tired." What she wanted, more than anything in the world, was a soft, warm bed.

"This is the turn-off to Solgreve," the taxi driver was saying. "Do you have any idea where you're going from here?"

Maisie roused herself out of her jet-lagged stupor. "Yes. Yes, I have a map." She fished in her bag for the hand-drawn map which Perry Daniels, the solicitor, had faxed her – was it only the previous day? It seemed like a lifetime ago – and gave it to the taxi driver. He pulled over and studied it.

"Right," he said, handing back the map. "I think I know where that is. I don't come out here much."

"I don't know how accurate it is," Maisie said. "It seems a bit out of proportion."

"No, it's about right," the taxi driver replied as he pulled back into the street.

Maisie looked at the map. "But the cemetery ..."

"One of the biggest in Yorkshire. It's Solgreve's only claim to fame. That and the fact that nobody here is very friendly."

Maisie didn't reply.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. You have family here, don't you?"

"Oh, no. I'm not offended. I'm just very tired."

"This is the main street," the taxi driver said. "The bus stop is over there, opposite the church. But the service only comes through three times a week."

Maisie peered out the window. Even though it wasn't quite four o'clock in the afternoon, the light was fading. On her left was a rusty sign with a picture of a bus on it. On her right was a little stone church. Behind the church were three pillars and a crumbling Gothic-style wall.

"That's the old abbey. They built the new church on the same foundations. It's been a sacred site for centuries."

"I see," said Maisie.

Something about its attenuated shadows both fascinated and unnerved her. But then, she was so tired she probably wasn't thinking straight. Through its empty arches she glimpsed the sea.

To the north of the abbey an enormous cemetery was laid out to the cliff's edge. On her other side were lichen-covered cottages, tiny shops, and narrow cobbled streets. She had started to feel weak and nauseous, and the closer they drew to her grandmother's cottage, the more this seemed like the stupidest idea she had ever had in her life.

"Here we are, Saint Mary's Lane. That must be the place you're looking for."

It was the only cottage on the lane. Overgrown lots lay empty beside it, and the road petered off to a dirt track leading to the cliffs beyond it. Between the house and the cliffs, trees grew wild for half a kilometre. The cottage itself was grey stone, a squat single storey with painted white sills, bars on the windows and a roof of motley tiles. It looked very old and very cold, and the low stone fence barely seemed able to defend it from the tangled wood which seemed to surround it, and the vast moors stretching out behind.

As the taxi pulled up, she felt in the side pocket of her bag for the keys, and clutched them in a trembling hand. The taxi driver was already out getting her suitcases from the boot. She climbed from the car on shaky legs and handed him the fare. The air was crisp and she shivered in her long-sleeved shirt. The smell of the sea was almost sharp in her nostrils, and she could hear it beating in the distance, late afternoon gulls calling to each other above.

“You know,” said the driver looking up at the front of the house, “I think I’ve been here before. I remember dropping off a real posh lady with lots of gold jewellery. Would have been about a year ago.”

“It might have been my grandmother,” Maisie said.

“No offence, love, but she wasn’t old enough to be anybody’s grandmother.” He turned back to her. “Good luck.”

“Thank you,” she replied, feeling fairly sure that she would be calling him tomorrow to take her all the way back to somewhere warm and modern.

She walked up the front path, weighed down by suitcases, and paused at the front door. With surprise, she noticed that the garden around the house was immaculate. Her grandmother had been dead for nearly three months, but the grass wasn’t overgrown and the flower beds were weed-free. Surely the solicitor hadn’t been out here gardening?

Despite her shaking hand, she managed to get the keys into one, two, three locks – clearly, her grandmother had been security conscious – and she opened the front door. It was only marginally warmer inside. She kicked her suitcases ahead of her and closed the door, reaching around on the wall for a light switch.

A dim, yellow light illuminated a grey hallway – it may have been white once – and a note on a hall table next to a coat rack. It was from Perry Daniels. She picked it up and moved further into the musty cottage.

On the left of the hallway was a small lounge room and a dim kitchen. On her right was a bedroom and beyond that a bathroom with – god forbid – no shower, just a bath. Attached to the tap was a hose with a shower nozzle on the end. Maisie's heart sank. Showers were one of life's great joys. Behind the bathroom was a laundry with an aged washing machine, a brand new wall-mounted dryer, and an old boiler which she turned on. It grumbled into life. The back door led out of the laundry. She didn't open it. The grand tour could wait until tomorrow. The last room on the left was a half-size bedroom, without a bed. It was filled instead with stacks and stacks of books and papers. An old, brown wardrobe leaned violently to its left on bent chipboard legs. A desk, overflowing with papers, was crammed into a corner. Maisie backed away. Plenty of time to clean that up later.

She returned to the bedroom. A radiator was mounted on the wall under the window and she cranked it up to high. Maisie looked at Perry Daniels's note. He explained that he had had the telephone and electricity reconnected the previous week. Hurrah for Perry Daniels. Maisie turned slowly, gazing around her. More books and papers, a large chest and, most importantly, a big, soft bed. She kicked her shoes off and lay down – only for a minute, of course. Just while she read the solicitor's note.

She yawned enormously and ran her eyes over the letter. *Milk, bread and eggs in the kitchen. Forty pounds in the box on the mantelpiece in the lounge*

room. Did that mean there was a fireplace? That was something to get excited about; not that she knew how to light a fire. *Call me if you have any problems. Regards, Perry Daniels.* Good old Perry Daniels. Her only friend in the near vicinity. She could have wept.

Instead, without making a conscious decision to do so, she dozed off.

When one of the locals dropped by that evening, she was fast asleep and dreaming about Adrian. Together they were trying to sort out reams and reams of sheet music that had become mixed up. She was trying to follow the lines of score from one page to the next but none of it was making any sense. Adrian had pulled out certain sheets and was pinning them to the wall of their bedroom, and he hammered each thumb tack in with the side of his fist. At some point she became aware that the knocking was not coming from her dream, but rather from outside it, and she woke, disoriented and dizzy in a strange bedroom.

Her grandmother's house, that's right. She was a million miles from home, and there had been that nightmare of travel in between. She checked her watch. Eight o'clock. And somebody was knocking at the door.

"Hang on," she croaked, heaving herself up from the bed. The light was still on in the dirty hallway. She approached the door and at the last moment remembered the bars on her grandmother's windows. Was it safe to open the door at night?

"Who is it?" she called, trying to sound capable and strong.

"It's the local Reverend."

The Reverend? She opened the door and peered

out. A short, pale man with watery blue eyes looked back at her. His overcoat was at least four sizes too big for him. She could just see his white collar peeking out from under the layers. He gave her a friendly smile, revealing a perfect set of false teeth, slightly ill-fitting. He was seventy if he was a day.

“Good evening. I’m Reverend Linden Fowler,” he said.

“Hello,” she said, smiling back. “I wasn’t expecting visitors just yet.” The air outside was frigid, and a fresh wind played with the treetops.

“Oh, you’ve only just arrived? I am sorry. I saw the light on and just wanted to check up on the place. It’s been empty since Sybill . . . passed.”

Sybill. Her grandmother’s name was Sybill. Her mother had responded to all Maisie’s questions with a standard “you’ll find out soon enough.” It was Janet’s way of punishing her. Maisie took a moment to think of the name. Sybill.

“Are you a relative of Sybill’s?”

Maisie looked up. He still had that friendly, crooked-denture smile on his face, and she found herself warming to him. “I’m her granddaughter, Maisie Fielding.” She extended her hand and he took it. His skin was very soft. “Please, come in out of the cold.”

He looked past her as though he longed to be inside, but he shook his head, withdrawing his hand.

“No, I won’t, thank you all the same. I’ve probably disturbed you sufficiently already. But feel free to drop by at the parish office if you like, and of course you’re welcome to come to a service. Though I don’t suppose you’ll be staying long.”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be staying.” Had she ever really thought three months away from home in this chilly, damp place a good idea?

“One week perhaps?”

“No, longer than that. But I’m not certain how much longer.”

“I’m sure this draughty house and our modest community wouldn’t interest someone like yourself for very long. No visitors ever stay for more than a week or so.”

Maisie, dazed and addled as she was, began to understand that the Reverend was anxious to know how long she would be here. She felt sorry for the little man, trying so hard to be polite and discreet.

“My original intention was to stay for the entire winter, sort out my grandmother’s things.”

He physically recoiled. “The entire winter. But . . . it’s so cold here,” he finished lamely.

Maisie considered him. She had thought he was concerned she would find his village unappealing and go home, but now she wasn’t sure what he was getting at. Her brain was too tired to process the information, so she just said, “I’m sorry, Reverend. I can’t tell you for certain. It could be that I’m ready to go home much sooner.”

He nodded and tried a smile again, but this time it was more strained. “Thank you for your time, Miss Fielding. I’d best be on my way.”

“Goodnight, then.”

“Yes, goodnight.” He had turned and headed up the path. She watched until he was on the road and then closed the door.

Maisie turned around and stood in the hall, looking

from left to right. What next? More sleep? She wasn't tired any more. Her stomach growled. Ah yes, food.

She made her way down to the kitchen and opened the fridge door. It was an old-fashioned fridge, off-white with rust spots. Inside, along with a funny smell, was a carton of milk and nothing else. She closed the door and began opening cupboards. Bread, butter, eggs, teabags, sugar were all stacked together in one of the cupboards, covering from the clutter of pots, pans and plastic containers. The kitchen was unfamiliar and the stove looked a century old, and nor could she find an electric kettle. She didn't have the mental energy to figure out how to cook anything, so she made herself bread and butter and a glass of milk and sat down at the kitchen table to eat it. As she did, she looked around the kitchen and tried to imagine it tidied and painted. Here was a principal difference between her mother and grandmother: Janet Fielding was very particular about her home; Sybill, clearly, was not.

Sybill. Maisie wished she had asked the Reverend more about her grandmother. What kind of person was she? What did she look like? Had she been lonely living up here on a cliff-top by herself? What did she do with her time, given that she wasn't cleaning the house? And most importantly, what was the secret that her mother was keeping from her? Maisie hadn't found any headless bodies in the cupboards yet, but there were a lot of cupboards in this place. Knowing Janet, their falling-out was probably over something minor, something about which her mother would say "but it's the *principle*", as if principles were life rafts and she a drowning swimmer.

Maisie rinsed her plate and glass and went to look for the telephone. She found it in the lounge room, but

she found no radiator. She looked behind curtains and armchairs, then realised that the room had a fireplace – no need for a radiator as well. Her problem now was that she had no clue how to light a fire. A stack of newspapers and a wire rack with a few logs on it sat next to the hearth, but she was too tired and homesick – yes, that was the other feeling no matter how much she resisted it – to work it out. She just wanted to call Adrian, hear his voice and make contact with something resembling normality.

No dial tone. How irritating. She checked the connection and everything looked okay. Perry Daniels had lied to her. Perhaps it wasn't his fault, perhaps it was British Telecom's. In any case, she hoped Adrian wouldn't worry that he hadn't heard from her yet. She replaced the receiver and picked up a photograph in a frame that sat next to the phone, examined the people in the picture.

A white-haired lady in a red dress – too bright a red for a woman that age, really – smiled out of the photo. Maisie guessed this was Sybill. She had a nice face, perhaps looked like she didn't take herself too seriously. She had her arm around a youngish man. Maisie wondered if he might be a long-lost cousin or something, as his hair was the same black as hers, his eyes the same dark, dark brown. But there was some kind of Eastern European aspect around his eyes and cheekbones, something a little exotic about his eyebrows. So her grandmother had friends. That was good.

Maisie stood and yawned. Was she tired enough to sleep again? She had a horrible feeling that if she did she would be awake at around three a.m. It hardly mattered really. So what if she was up at odd hours for

a few nights? All she had to do here was sort out her grandmother's clutter. This time she would turn out all the lights to discourage the visits of local Reverends.

She was in the kitchen, her hand just falling away from the light switch, when she heard . . . what was it? Footsteps? But light, gliding footsteps. Perhaps not footsteps at all. She froze where she was, her body tense as she listened. She had almost managed to convince herself that she had heard nothing when the sound came again. This time she could pinpoint it as being somewhere beyond the grotty laundry window.

"Now, Maisie," she said, under her breath. "This is a new place – you don't know what's a normal noise and what isn't." It could be the wind. Or a cat. Or a . . .

Suddenly, a scratch on the glass. Despite herself, she let out a little yelp of fright. She ran away from the noise, towards her grandmother's bedroom, burrowed under the covers and tried to compose herself. So it was a spooky noise. It didn't necessarily follow that it had a spooky cause. She remembered as a teenager a Danish exchange student had stayed with them for a month. On the first night he had freaked out and woken the whole household after hearing strange, light footsteps on the roof and a sinister growling. What he had imagined as a dark, diabolic figure running lithely from rooftop to rooftop in search of . . . souls? children's eyes? . . . was, in fact, the humble possum which had lived in their roof forever. This was just the Solgreve equivalent of a possum in the roof.

And anyway, she found that with the covers over her ears, she could hear nothing but her breath and the beating of her own heart.

CHAPTER THREE

Though he was loath to admit it, Reverend Fowler was afraid of Lester Baines. The big man sat across from him, all meaty forearms and ill-fitting clothes, looking like a criminal. Which was exactly what he was.

“Rev, don’t worry. I have sources all over the place – something will turn up soon.”

“But you mustn’t take unnecessary risks. Nobody must know.”

Lester twisted his lips into a kind of smile. “Hey, give me some credit. Haven’t I been doing this for you for ten years?”

That was true, taking away the short stretches Lester had spent in prison for various minor misdemeanours. But Reverend Fowler found it difficult to trust someone who could so blithely drive from one end of the country to the other with a body in the boot of his car.

Lester was on his feet now, looking around the

office, picking up framed photographs and inspecting them. He always did this, and it always made Reverend Fowler nervous. The big man was just so confident, as if nothing frightened him. In contrast, the Reverend was painfully aware of his own physical weakness – he had ever been a small man – and of his own inability to be calm. He felt like a bird, tiny delicate heart beating frantically just in the business of living, while Lester was a deep-sea turtle. Which meant that in ordinary circumstances the crook would outlive him a hundredfold. But ordinary circumstances did not apply in Solgreve.

“You mind me asking something, Rev?”

He did mind. Lester always asked the same question. “What is it?”

“Why is it a nice bloke like you . . . I mean, you’re a priest, yeah?”

Reverend Fowler shrugged, turned his palms upwards.

Lester came back to his chair, leaned forward on the ugly desk and asked earnestly, “What do you do with the bodies?”

“Lester, you know I can’t tell you.”

“But you seem like such a nice geezer.”

“I *am* a nice . . . geezer. I’ve made a study of being so. It’s my job.”

“The two don’t go together – you being so soft and then paying me to snatch bodies from morgues.”

Even though nobody could hear them, Reverend Fowler felt the urge to shush him. If he had his way, they wouldn’t discuss the hows and whys of this project. Lester would come to him, take his money, then return in a week or two weeks with the necessary

goods. But Lester was chatty, and the Reverend was too intimidated by him to try to shut him up. Another man might be able to be aloof, professionally cold, even arrogant. But Reverend Fowler was not that man.

“I serve a power greater than myself,” he said simply. “That is all I can say.”

Lester ran immense hands over his stubbly head. “I’ll never understand you, Rev. Still, I like working for you.” He pulled his massive body up to its full height and yawned immodestly. “I’ll have something for you in a week or two, yeah?”

“Thank you, Lester. And I can count on your discretion?” One of his greatest fears was that Lester would gossip among his friends about the business here in Solgreve, about the kindly priest who ordered the occasional corpse.

Lester nodded. “Of course you can,” he said, patting his jacket pocket. “You’ve paid for it.”

Maisie was discovering the delights of attempting to shower under an alternately freezing gush or scalding trickle when the telephone rang the next morning. She quickly twisted off the taps, grabbed a towel, and dashed to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Good morning. It’s Perry Daniels.”

“Oh, hi.” She heard the nasal twang of her accent for the first time in comparison with Perry Daniels’s perfect English pronunciation.

“How was your trip?”

“Traumatic.”

“Yes, it’s a long way. But the phone is connected now, which is good. I tried to call once or twice last

night without much luck. I do apologise. I had organised for it to be working when you arrived but these things can be unreliable.”

“It’s fine.” There it was again. *Foine*. How had she managed to get through her life so far talking like this? She had to work on her vowel sounds.

“Now, do you know how long you’ll be staying?”

Maisie turned and looked around the untidy room. It could take years. “That depends on how homesick I get. I intend to sort out my grandmother’s stuff at least. My return flight is booked for the fourteenth of February, but I don’t know if I’ll make it that far.”

“If you stay that long, you’ll probably see some snow.”

Snow. Her mind filled with fairytale pictures of winter wonderlands. Perhaps that would be worth staying for, especially compared to the oppressive summer waiting for her back home.

“I’ll let you know in plenty of time when I’m going back to Australia.”

“Good, because we’ll have to decide what to do with the property. In any case, Maisie, enjoy your stay. Don’t hesitate to phone me if I can help you in any way.”

“Thanks. I will.”

She was slightly relieved to hang up on that posh voice. Back home she had always considered herself well-spoken. *Don’t tell me I’m getting homesick already*. She dialled Adrian’s number. At least not homesick for Brisbane. That would be too tragic.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is that Adrian Lapidea, the famous opera singer?” The name was a joke. Adrian’s real surname was Stone, but given that most opera stars were

Spanish or Italian, she sometimes used the Latin translation to tease him.

“Maisie! God, I’m so glad you called. You’ve been gone for two days.”

“I tried to call last night – yesterday morning your time – but the phone hadn’t been connected.”

“Listen, I’ve got a rehearsal in twenty-five minutes. I’m literally just walking out the door.”

Maisie felt her heart sink. “But I haven’t spoken to you in so long.”

“I’ll phone when I get back around eleven. I have the number here from the fax the solicitor sent you.”

“This is going to cost us a fortune in phone calls, isn’t it?”

“We’ll manage. One other thing – it was so weird, but on the way back from dropping you at the airport I stopped in town and I ran into Sarah Ellis. Do you remember her?”

“Was she one of those two sisters who were in the choir you used to sing with? The hippy girls?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“What’s weird about seeing her?”

“Her sister, Cathy, the red-haired one, moved to York in September. She’s studying medieval archaeology at the university there.”

“Really?”

“You liked her, didn’t you? I mean, they were both friendly enough girls.”

“She’s okay. Why?”

“I got her phone number for you, in case you get lonely. It seemed like too much of a coincidence not to exploit it. York’s not far from where you are and I’d be much happier if I knew you had some company.”

Maisie scratched around for a pen and paper. She doubted that she would actually call Cathy Ellis, but as Adrian had gone to the trouble of getting the number she may as well write it down. “Go ahead.”

Adrian dictated the number. “Sarah seemed to think she’d be happy to hear from you. Apparently she’s been a bit lonely.”

“Whatever. I might call her.”

“I have to go, darling. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She was unprepared for how devastating the click at the other end of the phone could be. Tears sprung to her eyes. “Shit,” she said, “shit, shit, shit.” He was just so far away. She took a deep breath. She would not cry. Crying would solve nothing.

She took her towel back to the bathroom – whose idea had it been to paint the walls salmon pink with navy trim? – then went to the bedroom to get dressed and pack her things away. She found a tube of Pringles that she had bought while waiting at Kings Cross for the train, and they seemed just the thing to have for breakfast given she hadn’t found the toaster yet.

Maisie crammed some chips into her mouth and pulled the wardrobe door open with a creak. As she had suspected, the wardrobe was overflowing with more clutter. About two dozen dresses hung there with four or five coats, old clothes folded up in the bottom, shoes crowded in anywhere. This was going to be more difficult than she thought. But then, if she had been close to or fond of her grandmother, she might feel obliged to keep everything. Instead, she could simply package it all up and take it to Oxfam. One by one she pulled down the dresses and piled them near

the bedroom door. She hung up her own clothes and was so satisfied with her work that she started on the chest of drawers.

Sybill's underwear, cardigans, wool blouses and skirts were haphazardly folded among what smelled like decades-old soap and perfumed drawer liners. Maisie pulled it all out. In the bottom drawer she found a small jewellery box: bits and pieces of junky jewellery and old keys. Maybe she should hold on to one or two of these things for her mother, as a keepsake. No, that made no sense. The animosity there was too old and too deep, and besides, Maisie wanted to get the place cleared of as much clutter as she could as soon as possible so that she could live here comfortably. In that respect she was the same as her mother – she liked things to be tidy. She kept what looked valuable and threw the rest on the pile.

She filled the drawers with her own things, lined up her toiletries on top of the chest, then stopped to put on a bit of make-up when she saw how sickly she looked in the mirror. Jetlag was not a girl's kindest fashion accessory.

As she was sliding her suitcases under the bed, an old hatbox edged out. Curious, Maisie opened it. It was full of half-written short stories, scraps of poetry, pencil sketches and designs. The few lines of poetry Maisie glanced at were desperately bad, but the drawings were excellent which surprised her; like her mother, Maisie was capable of drawing nothing more complex than stick figures.

Maisie closed the box and reorganised under the bed so her suitcases could fit. This was fun – she was learning about her grandmother. Sybill wore bright

colours, she was creative, she had at least two friends – a handsome young man and a rich lady who caught cabs from Whitby to see her – and she was very, very untidy. Already, Maisie was sensing that Sybill might be eccentric, which would go some of the way towards explaining why Janet was so at odds with her. Some of the way, but not all of the way.

Maisie stripped the linen off the bed and prepared to change it. Kind of creepy to think that her grandmother had slept among these sheets before she had died. In fact, Maisie couldn't know for sure that the old woman hadn't died in her bed and lain there for a few days before anyone had found her. Last night she had been too tired to worry about things like that, but now it seemed urgent, ghastly. She turned the mattress over and took the sheets, pillowslips and quilt cover to the laundry. At the foot of her bed was a large chest, where Maisie expected to find more linen. She flipped it open.

A layer of red silk covered the contents. Maisie lifted it back and was surprised to find no linen. Instead, a bizarre collection of objects. A bronze dish with scorch marks inside, a brass cup, an incense holder, spare sticks of incense wrapped in plastic, candles, a mortar and pestle, a silver-handled knife, a long, grey robe. As she moved further into the chest, she found books of moon and tide charts, tables listing elements, types of rocks and flowers, a mirror wrapped in black velvet, and pouches of white linen tied with string, holding stones, dried herbs, seeds. The tarot cards were merely the confirmation of her suspicion. Her grandmother was a practising witch.

Maisie laughed out loud. Was this it? Was this what

her mother's warning was about? Janet Fielding had always been suspicious of anything that she couldn't see and bully into her service. Immediately, though, Maisie was overcome by a sense of sadness. Had Janet and Sybill really ended their relationship over this? Surely the mother-daughter bond of love was stronger than superstition and prejudice.

But she knew Janet.

"Oh, Mum. What were you thinking?" she said as she rummaged further in the chest. She found an old exercise book and flipped it open. The pages were filled with more tables and lists. The date of the first page was June 1960, the last was just months ago in April, and four blank pages followed it. She had never managed to finish the book. Maisie flicked through it. No personal information, just dispassionately noted magical properties and times. The final item in the chest was a large, inlaid, wooden box. It contained a collection of scrolls nestled in black velvet, with stones and herbs and dried petals accompanying them. Each scroll was made of homemade paper and tied with a black ribbon. She unrolled the scrolls one by one to read them. A simple line was inscribed upon each.

All I need to know is disclosed to me.

Across the miles I touch her heart and tell her to come.

He is protected always by divine love.

And one which, after last night's strange noises, laid a chill over Maisie's heart. *I call the black presence.*

What black presence? And who were the other people she had written about? Maisie sighed. She would never know, and she wasn't even sure she believed in witchcraft – white or black. She carefully placed all the objects back in the chest the way she had found them, and decided her grandmother had no spare sheets. That made sense given the condition of the rest of the house. She was overcome by a vague, nauseous headache, so she lay down on the bare mattress.

She dozed for about half an hour before she was woken by a voice heard faintly through the double glazing. Sitting up, she looked towards the window, expecting to see people walking past on their way to the cliffs. Instead, through the gauzy curtains, she saw a dark-haired man standing in the front garden, calling to a fat ginger cat who was digging beneath one of her grandmother's rosebushes.

“Tabby. Bad girl.”

An off-white van was parked at the end of the front path. Maisie rose and moved closer to the window to see if the man would leave now he had his cat. Then she noticed he had a wire basket containing a trowel, gardening gloves, and gardening fork. And, on closer inspection, the dark-haired man was not a stranger at all, but the young man who had posed for a photograph with Sybill. She checked her appearance in the mirror, then went to the front door.

“Hello,” she called, as she stepped out into the cold, cloud-lit day. “Can I help you with something?”

He turned with a start. The cat, Tabby, began to run towards her.

“Tabby, no,” he said. But Tabby kept on running, straight past her and into the house.

“I’m sorry,” he said, approaching her. “She used to live here. I didn’t know there was anybody home.”

“She used to live here?”

“Yes, with the previous occupant,” he said. Some exotic accent lingered subtly around his r’s and o’s. “Sybill.”

“My grandmother.”

“Oh. You’re Maisie. Nice to meet you.” He extended a hand in greeting. “I’m Sacha Lupus.”

“She knew of me? She knew my name?”

He seemed surprised. “Oh yes. She spoke of you often, though I gathered that you had never met.” Up close Sacha Lupus looked as though he may have been Russian or Romanian or Polish. He was about a head taller than she, with dark, watchful eyes, clear skin and a full mouth.

“No, we hadn’t. In fact, I didn’t even know her name until I got here yesterday. My mother never talked about her.”

“That’s a shame. She would have loved to meet you. She was a special woman. I liked her very much.”

“Did you . . . find her?”

He shook his head. “No, no. I only discovered she was dead when I came to do the gardens a few days later. Reverend Fowler came up to tell me. She took sick one night and tried to get herself down to the village for help. They found her body about a quarter mile from here.”

Even though she hadn’t known Sybill, the story touched her. How cold and pathetic to die alone on the road like that. “Why didn’t she just phone for help?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps she panicked. In any case, I took Tabby with me, but maybe you’d like her for

company. I'm sure she'd rather be here than in my tiny flat."

"You live nearby?"

"I live at Whitby."

"I'd love to have her, but I don't know how long I'll be staying. This isn't permanent."

"Take her. She's a good mouser, and unfortunately there's a problem here with mice. Just call me when you want me to come back for her. I'm in the phone book." He fished in the pocket of his jeans. "Oh, and here are the spare keys. Sybill gave them to me in case, well . . . in the end somebody else found her."

Maisie took the keys. "Thanks. And thank you for keeping the garden even though she's gone."

"It's been my pleasure. I won't bother you again. I'm very sorry if I gave you a fright."

"Oh, please. Feel free to keep looking after the garden. I'll pay you whatever Sybill was paying you." The words left her lips before she had even thought about it. Just how was she going to pay him? She was already praying for the exchange rate to improve just so she could afford to send Adrian a decent Christmas present.

Sacha grinned. "She didn't pay me. It was a labour of love."

"Oh. Then I won't impose on you any further."

He picked up his wire basket. "Well, I'll see you when you need me to fetch Tabby then."

"Yes, fine. Lupus was your surname right?"

"That's right. L-u-p-u-s. I'll see you."

He turned and headed toward his van. She desperately tried to think of a way to get him to stay. He knew stuff about her grandmother. He was fiercely attractive.

“Sacha,” she called just before he opened the van door.

He spun around. Was he glad she had called him back? No, that was just wishful thinking. “Yes?”

“I know you’ll think I’m a dope, but would you mind showing me how to light the fire?”

They sat in the lounge room, a healthy fire crackling in the grate, drinking coffee. Not only did he know how to start a fire, he knew how to find the kettle, the cups, even the cat food which Tabby was noisily crunching in the next room. She had watched him the whole time in the vague stupor of somebody besotted with beauty, musing all the while on the nobility of gardening as a profession. Imagine not going to university, not pursuing a glorious career, but spending all one’s working life with hands in the soil. It seemed beyond worthy.

“So, how long have you been a gardener?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I’m not a gardener. I only did it for your grandmother. She and my mother were friends.”

“I see.” Not a gardener. A poet perhaps? A sculptor?

“I work in a bakery.”

“Oh.” A baker.

“I serve behind the counter and sweep the floors.”

She didn’t know what to say. “That’s nice.”

“My mother and Sybill worked together for a short time in the eighties. Did you know your grandmother was a well-respected psychic?”

Maisie shook her head in astonishment. “No. Really? I found some witchy things in a chest, but I didn’t realise she was a psychic.”

“Yes. People used to travel miles to consult her. The police in York even got her to work on a couple of child disappearance cases.”

“The taxi driver said he remembered dropping a rich woman off here once.”

“It would have been a client. She was considered the best.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

Sacha finished his coffee and put the cup down. She felt a momentary anxiety. Would he leave now? “It’s why she wasn’t very popular around here,” he said.

“Not popular?”

“In Solgreve. Haven’t you noticed something about the residents?”

She shook her head. “I only arrived yesterday. I haven’t even looked in my back garden yet, let alone been to town.”

He laughed. “You’re in for a shock.”

“Why? What’s wrong with them?”

“It’s not that there’s something wrong ... well, I don’t know. Perhaps I’m about to be offensive.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They’re all very religious.”

“Like fundamentalist looneys?”

“I think they’re just ordinary Anglicans, but yes, they act like fundamentalist looneys at times.”

“The whole town is like this?”

“Practically. There’s only three hundred and twelve people living here. Three hundred and thirteen counting you, and you can be sure that as soon as they know you’re here it will make them nervous.”

“They already know I’m here. Reverend Fowler came up to introduce himself last night.”

Sacha smiled. "I bet he didn't just come to introduce himself."

"Come to think of it, he did seem kind of anxious that I tell him when I'm leaving."

Tabby trotted in to sit between them, delicately licked a paw.

"Sybill was particularly unpopular for doing her magic rituals out the back under the oak tree," he said. "They eventually asked her to stop."

"And did she?"

"I think she just did it later at night, when she was sure nobody was watching." He checked his watch.

"Would you like another coffee?" she asked, hopefully.

"No, thanks." At least he didn't say he'd better be going. At least he looked like he was happy to sit in her lounge a little longer.

"So when you say your mother used to work with Sybill ...?"

"Fortune-telling. My mother is Romany."

"A gypsy?" God, he was a gypsy. More exciting than a gardener or a baker by a long shot.

"Yes. My father was *gadžo*. Upper class English, an anthropology professor. Sent me to a fancy school but I didn't finish."

So what if he didn't finish school? He was a gypsy. "That's so interesting. Where is your mother now?"

He shook his head, clasped his hands between his knees. "I don't know. Wandering around somewhere. We sometimes go for months without hearing from each other. Anyway, what about you? Why are you here?"

She felt so boring by comparison. "I came to find Sybill. Or at least to find her house and maybe learn a

bit about her. Back home I'm a cellist with the City Symphony."

"Really? Did you bring your cello?"

"No. I'm a bit sick of it at the moment."

"I've never known a musician who could bear to be parted from her instrument before."

"It wasn't even what I wanted to do. My mother's a famous pianist, my father's a famous conductor. I kind of got pushed."

"What would you have rather done?"

She leaned back in her chair and thought about it. Nobody had ever actually asked her that before. "I'm not sure. I always preferred the piano, actually, but Mum wasn't too keen."

"Jealous?"

Maisie shook her head. "No, I just wasn't very good. Perhaps I could have studied history instead of music. I could have been a history teacher."

"Sybill was interested in history. You can tell from her book collection."

Maisie glanced up at the crowded bookshelf. "I guess the problem is I can't imagine liking anything enough to want to do it for the rest of my life. I don't like the idea of having to choose a career and stick by it. I'm twenty-four. If I'm lucky I'll live another sixty years. It's just too long to be doing the one thing."

"I know what you mean."

She got the sense very strongly that he did, in fact, know what she meant. It made her think of Adrian who never knew what she meant, and that made her feel guilty – entertaining a pretty boy in her lounge room while Adrian was so far away and missing her.

He checked his watch. "Listen, I have to go," he

said gently, as if he anticipated the disappointment it might cause her.

“Oh, of course. I shouldn’t hold you up.”

“But I want you to feel free to phone me if you have any other questions about Sybill you think I might be able to answer.”

“Thanks. Thanks very much. And please drop by any time if you’re out this way.”

“I’m hardly ever out this way.”

“Well, if you want to check up on Tabby,” she said lamely, feeling like an overeager fool for asking him.

He pulled himself to his feet and Maisie followed him to the door. “It was nice to meet you,” she said.

“Likewise. I’ll see you again.” In a minute he was starting his van. Tabby was rubbing against her ankles. Maisie waved him off then went back inside, half wishing their exchange could have lasted a little longer, and half wishing she wouldn’t hear from him again. She was lonely and vulnerable, and he was a gypsy. God, a gypsy.

“But he works in a bakery, Tabby,” she said to her new companion. “Sweeping floors. It’s not very noble, is it?” Of course, Tabby wouldn’t have cared. The ginger cat would have thought anybody who fed her was noble enough. She sighed and wished for the temperament of a housepet.

Maisie spent the afternoon cursorily tidying the kitchen while Tabby ran around getting underfoot and eagerly sniffing in cupboards for evidence of mice. Next time she checked her watch it was nearly three o’clock. It would be dark soon – she pulled Tabby out of a cupboard and closed it – and she still hadn’t been into the back garden or for a walk out to the cliffs. She

grabbed her overcoat and her keys and went out the laundry door.

The wind had picked up since the morning, and the smell of the sea was heavy on the gusts that tangled in her hair. She walked down under a massive oak tree, between two rose beds, and then into the trees behind Sybill's house, most of them made crooked by the years of insistent winds. The sky had come over dark grey and threatened rain. Maisie took deep, delirious breaths of the cold air. This was what she had imagined it might be like living here: stormy, windswept, exhilarating. Already she could hear the sea pounding the shore. She jammed her hands in her pockets, telling herself she should have worn gloves and a scarf.

But how brisk, how thrilling this kind of cold was. She wove through the trees. Most had lost their foliage apart from a few resolute yellow leaves clinging here and there to fine, bare branches. Moss grew in thick patches upon them. Sodden leaves formed a spongy carpet beneath her feet. The waves grew louder as she approached the cliffs. Finally, she emerged on the other side of the wood, and followed a dirt path down to the cliff's edge.

Under the lowering sky, the steel-grey sea and the curve of the headland spread out before her: to the north, ragged cliffs and a rocky outcrop; to the south, the cliffs becoming steeper, the cemetery laid out right to the edge, grey stones stained with black moss and leaning this way and that. Patches of long yellow grass grew here and there, spots of bright colour against the deep wet green. And below her, crashing over and over on to the black rocks, the ever-mobile sea. Her teeth

were chattering against each other, but she felt she had never seen anything more beautiful in her life. Suddenly, it seemed worth coming all this way.

After following the path that ran along the cliff's edge for about half an hour, she was desperate to get inside to the heating. Her ears ached and her fingers felt like icy sticks. Still, she dreaded the long evening ahead. Daylight was already dissolving around her and would not emerge again for fifteen hours – longer, if the rain set in. She headed back through the wood and returned to the garden. In a gust of wind, the enormous oak tree shook some brown leaves down upon her, and upon the mossed roof of the cottage. She rested her hand upon the tree trunk, trying to imagine her grandmother performing magic rituals here. Was it possible one could grow fond of a person one had never met? Because that's how she was starting to feel towards Sybill. Eccentric, psychic, creative Sybill. Her grandmother.

“And for all those years you were kept from me,” she said softly.

She turned slowly towards the house, then froze in astonishment. A dark shape, a hooded figure, shifted a shadowy reflection in the glass of the laundry window. Worse, it looked as though it were standing just behind her right shoulder. She spun round to check but could see nothing, and when she turned back to the laundry window the apparition was gone. Her heart sped a little, her skin shivered, but she remained rooted to the spot.

What if somebody was in the house? But no, the windows were reflective, not transparent, especially now night had fallen.

Perhaps – perhaps it was the spectre of her grandmother in her ritual cloak. But she had seen the cloak and it was grey, not that dirty brown. And there had been no sense of a warm or eccentric old woman about that apparition. Rather, something elongated and sinister.

No, she must be imagining things. She was still tired, disoriented. It was probably just the reflection of an oak branch bowing in the wind. She walked up to the house and let herself into the laundry. Tabby sat on the washing machine looking at her.

“Was it you, Tabby? Were you trying to frighten me?”

Maybe the cat, maybe a tree, maybe just the product of an overstimulated, overtired mind. It didn't matter. The house was warm and Tabby needed to be fed. And tonight she would watch television, drink hot tea, listen to the wind buffet the window panes, and enjoy her solitude, her time and space to think about life.

And when ten o'clock came and she was tired enough to sleep and had forgotten (almost) about the thing she thought she had seen, she looked up towards the end of the house and saw Tabby sitting on the washing machine, gazing out the laundry window into the back garden. And, just as she did when she guarded a mouse-hole, the cat swished her tail back and forth idly.

As though she were watching for something.

CHAPTER FOUR

Adrian was a good singer and he knew it, but he also knew he was a bad mathematician, which was why he was embarrassed but not surprised when his phone call to Maisie woke her up.

“It’s one in the morning,” she said, and from the other side of the world he heard her yawn.

“I thought it was nine p.m.”

“You have to add two hours then change a.m. to p.m.”

“Ah. I must have subtracted.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m just glad to hear your voice. It seems like years since I spoke to you.”

He stretched out on the bed. “So, tell me everything.”

Which she did. About her grandmother the witch, the local Reverend coming to visit, the gardener who told her to beware the tight-knit religious community,

her new cat, the view out along the cliff-tops and the vast Solgreve cemetery.

“And are you happy,” he asked, “or are you homesick?”

“A bit of both. But I’m not coming home. I’m going to tough it out.”

“I know. You can’t let Janet think she’s won.”

“I’m not just here to piss my mother off, Adrian. I’m not that shallow.”

“Sorry.” He changed ears. “Anyway, there wouldn’t be much point in your coming home just yet. The tour starts next Wednesday, and I’ll be gone until January.”

“You’ll have a wonderful time.”

“I’m sure I will.” There was nothing he loved more than performing in front of an audience, travelling from place to place, being treated like somebody important. Which was the case more and more since the *Otello* incident.

“I have other news,” he said. “First, the *Sydney Morning Herald* are interviewing me for the cover of their Good Weekend magazine.”

“Oh, Adrian! That’s fantastic. Make sure you send me a copy.”

“There’s more. Churchwheel’s want me.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not kidding.” Churchwheel’s was the most prestigious opera company in the country, a privately run organisation which toured throughout Australasia and quite often beyond. “I’m looking over the contracts at the moment. I’ll probably be signing up to start with them in February. Can you believe it?”

“Of course I can believe it,” Maisie said. “You’re the best. God, I wish I was there so I could give you a hug. You’re so far away.”

“Too far.” He sighed and rolled over, looked at the picture of them together at her Bachelor of Music graduation three years ago. Her hair had still been long then, all wild black ringlets. He had almost wept the day she cut it all off. “It’s all a bit flat without you here.”

“If you’re joining Churchwheel’s, we’d better get used to being apart.”

“I suppose. Though I could put in a good word for you. Who knows, the next time they need a cellist . . .”

“I don’t want to think about that now. Perhaps I’ll have a change of career when I come back.”

“But what would you do?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m here figuring out. I’m supposed to be finding myself.” She yawned. “Though I haven’t the faintest idea where to start looking.”

“I should let you go back to sleep,” he said gently.

“I miss you so much,” she said.

“Me too. Want me to call again tomorrow?”

“Would you? Would you call every day until you go away?”

“Sure,” he said. “I love you, Maisie.”

“I love you too. Bye.”

The phone clicked. He hung up and lay back, looking at the ceiling and daydreaming of crowded concert halls.

“We’re a special community,” Constable Tony Blake was saying to Lester Baines as they leaned against the boot of his car. “We have special needs.”

The Reverend hurried up to them. He had expected

to arrive first, but it was taking him longer and longer to get out of bed and dressed at this time of night. It frightened him a little, because it made him aware of how old he grew. He hated being outside in this weather: the black sky, the black icy wind coming off the sea, and the distinctive emptiness of three a.m. lying over the streets.

“Tony,” the Reverend said in what he hoped was a stern voice.

“Reverend,” Tony replied, stepping back from Lester and looking chastened. He was under orders not to get into conversation with the crook. Lester asked so many questions, and the Reverend knew Lester had the kind of mind which could figure things out eventually, given enough snippets of information.

The Reverend turned to Lester. “This is very quick work.”

“I got a call just after I’d seen you. This one’s from Manchester.”

“Well, let’s get him to his final destination, shall we?”

“Her. It’s a lady.”

The Reverend nodded, hoping his distaste wasn’t apparent. A lady. He didn’t like it when the bodies were female. A male body was generic, such a known quantity that he did not think about identity. But a female body was a mystery, full of variables. It made him wonder who she had been.

Lester opened the boot of his car. She was in a bag, but the Reverend could still make out the mounds of her breasts as he peered over the top of the open boot. “You two get her to the door of the abbey. I’ll have to take her the rest of the way.”

Tony and Lester took an end of the corpse each and lifted simultaneously. It was a sight to make a social worker smile, the crook and the police constable working in such happy co-operation. The Reverend followed as his two assistants carried the body to the iron door which was inset into the remains of one of the abbey spires. It led down into the foundations.

He pulled out his keys and unlocked the door, and Tony and Lester took the body in and laid it by the rusty trapdoor. They helped the Reverend to get the trapdoor up, and then turned to observe him expectantly, and, in Lester's case, curiously.

"Do you put them down there because it's cold?" Lester asked, even though he'd asked exactly the same question a dozen times before and never got an answer.

The Reverend ignored the question. "Thank you for your help."

"Can you manage alone?" Tony asked, sizing up the body against the Reverend's tiny frame. Clearly the Reverend's conviction that he was growing old was shared by his colleague.

"Yes. I have to. Tony, pay Mr Baines what he's due."

Tony reached inside his overcoat and pulled out a roll of money. They were sheltered enough from the wind for him to count it out without it blowing away.

"And you did this with the utmost discretion?" the Reverend couldn't help asking nervously.

"Of course, Rev," Lester replied, "and anyway she's just some junkie or teenage runaway. They probably won't even notice for a week."

A young girl. Even worse. The Reverend nodded.

“Both of you may go now. The next part I have to do alone.”

Lester blew on his hands and rubbed them together. “I’ll gladly get out of this cold. Give me a call when you need me again, yeah?”

“Yes.” The Reverend watched the crook get into his car and start to back down the laneway.

Tony turned to him. “Are you sure you’re okay with that? I’m certain it wouldn’t matter if I helped you get it down the stairs.”

The Reverend looked at the black girl-shaped bag on the ground. “No. I’m not so infirm that I can’t drag it behind me. She won’t feel a thing now in any case.”

Tony nodded and hurried off towards his police car. The Reverend waited until he heard the car engine start, then locked the trapdoor behind him. He descended the first few steps, then turned to grab the bag around the feet. He felt a twinge of pain in his left shoulder, and wished he could have asked Tony to stay and help. But that couldn’t be. A certain procedure had been set out by a higher intelligence, and all he could do was obey.

Two good reasons to go into the village. First, the hallway was too narrow to store all those old clothes, plates, pots and pans. Second, she had eaten nothing but toast and canned soup since she arrived. Maisie dressed carefully and soberly. If what Sacha said was true and the villagers were religious looneys, she didn’t want to cause offence on her first visit. Third reason to go: she was desperately curious to see if he was right.

She let Tabby into the garden and locked the door behind her. Small patches of pale blue showed between

the clouds above her, and she thought she could spy the sun about forty degrees off the horizon. Today she had remembered a scarf and gloves. Her breath made fog in front of her and the air felt slightly damp and salty on her lips. She followed the road from her grandmother's house and onto the main street. She glanced at the cemetery from time to time as she walked alongside it, and at the shadowy old abbey looming beyond it – eerie even in daylight. She passed the bus stop and soon found herself in the heart of the village.

A row of connected brick houses – they looked to be hundreds of years old – lined the cobbled alleys. Crooked drainpipes and wilting windowboxes shivered under mossy tiles. Up ahead were some newer places, shoe-box shaped with red roofs. She passed under an archway and into the village proper. A small, family run grocery store stood next to a locked craft shop and picture-framing business. She knew the store was family run because the sign over the front door declared it proudly. She went in, took a small basket and picked up the essentials: fruit and vegetables, herbs, pasta, rice, some frozen fish fingers. It was a sad business shopping for one, knowing the food was going to be split into such small portions. On impulse she bought some fresh chicken breasts, in case she worked up the courage to invite Sacha over for dinner. At worst she could always freeze them. She took her groceries up to the counter.

“Hi,” she said, “do you deliver?”

The girl behind the counter – perhaps the teenage daughter of the owners – looked up from the magazine

she was reading. "Sure. Dad can run them over to you straightaway," she said in an almost-indecipherable northern accent. "Where are you staying?"

"Up in Sybill Hartley's house on Saint Mary's Lane."

The girl looked surprised. "Have you bought the place?"

"No, I've inherited it. She was my grandmother."

"Really?" The girl keyed in the prices and Maisie packed the groceries in plastic bags as they went through. "Will you be staying long?"

"I don't know," Maisie replied.

"You should think about going down to Whitby. Or to York. That's where I went to school. There's nothing much on offer here in Solgreve." The girl fixed her with a direct, almost challenging, gaze. "That's seventeen pounds and forty."

Maisie paid her and waited for her change. First the Reverend and now the grocery store girl. Discouraging newcomers must be a local pastime. Was it a religious thing? Did Maisie look like a sinner?

"Is there a second-hand shop around here? Like an Oxfam or something?" Maisie said, tucking her purse away. "I have some old things I'd like to donate."

"Celia Parker runs a second-hand place on the next corner to raise money for the church." The girl turned away. "I'll have Dad run these things over shortly."

"If I'm not there just leave them at the door." Maisie went back into the cold. About a block further on, after passing a second-hand bookshop, a bakery, and an off-license (they couldn't be *that* fundamentalist if they had an off-license) she came to

Celia Parker's second-hand shop. A bell jingled over the door as she entered. A grey-haired woman was folding woollen clothes behind the counter. She glanced up as Maisie approached.

"Good morning."

"Hi," said Maisie. "Do you take donations? I have a whole bunch of clothes and stuff that I'd like to give to charity."

Celia Parker removed her glasses and smiled warmly. "Oh, you're Australian, are you? How delightful. I simply adore that accent. You know I watch *Neighbours* every night. I bet you miss the sunshine."

"Actually, it's a nice change to be here." At last, friendliness. Maisie felt herself relax into a smile. "It gets a bit too hot back home."

"In answer to your question, yes we do take donations. What we don't sell here we sell on to a trader, and all the money goes towards the church. Well, most of it. Some of it goes to the upkeep of the shop."

"And would you be able to come and pick it up? I don't have a car and I live a little too far to carry it all."

"You're living in Solgreve?"

"Yes. For the time being."

Celia Parker's smile had dwindled around the corners, but she still affected friendliness. "Well, I can send my son-in-law over to pick the things up this afternoon if you like. You'll have to give me the address."

"The cottage on Saint Mary's Lane at the top of the cliff."

And then the smile was gone. "Sybill Hartley's place?"

“She was my grandmother.”

Even the voice was vague now. “I see.”

“So, this afternoon? Somebody will come to collect the things?”

“Yes ... ah ... we’ll see what we can do.” She had her glasses back on and was inspecting a fluffy protrusion on a red cardigan. “Goodbye.”

Maisie had been dismissed: that back-at-school feeling, when the headmistress had finished cautioning her over chewing-gum or hem-length. It was as bewildering as it was annoying. The words “Sybill Hartley” seemed to trigger a weird, Solgreve-specific malaise. The bell over the door jingled again as she walked out into the street. Two greying women chatting on the corner gave her a curious glance. She had never felt more conspicuous in her life.

As she approached the cottage, she could see her grocery bags at the end of the pathway, outside the garden. Her first thought was that they were too lazy to take the bags all the way to the front door, but then a more disturbing thought occurred to her – perhaps they were too scared. Sybill’s house was, after all, a witch’s cottage. Exasperated, she picked up her bags, let herself into the house and went down to the kitchen to pack away the groceries. What on earth was there to be scared of? Her grandmother could hardly be dangerous, not now that she was dead.

“Ridiculous,” she said, slamming the freezer closed and scrunching an empty plastic bag between her hands. “Ridiculous superstition.”

She made tea and took it back to the lounge room. The bookcase by the fire was stuffed untidily with a variety of volumes. Dust-collecting statuettes and

knick-knacks were crammed into corners, and a couple of dusty, antique-looking lanterns were lined up haphazardly on the top. Maisie took down a book about Yorkshire history and placed it on a small table near the fireplace. Following Sacha's careful instructions, she soon had a fire crackling in the grate. She settled back in a comfortable chair with the book, and waited for the second-hand shop to come by for her grandmother's things, absently picking at a ragged nail with her teeth.

Of course, they didn't come. She knew they wouldn't. At four o'clock, when long night-time shadows already grew along the street, she moved all the junk down to the laundry, stacking it as neatly as she could by the washing machine. Tabby sat there, watching out the window, tail flicking from side to side.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked, giving the cat a rub behind the ears.

Tabby's eyes didn't waver. She kept them fixed on the back garden. Maisie felt uneasy but refused to admit the feeling had any foundation. Cats were allowed to do strange things. Humans, on the other hand, had to think and behave consistently. She was returning to the lounge room when she thought she heard a car engine outside. So she had been wrong, they had come. She went to the window and looked out to see a battered blue car parked across the road. The person inside – a man, she thought, though she couldn't be sure – sat with his face turned towards the cottage. She waited, expecting him to get out and come to the door, but he didn't.

"Well, are you coming in?" she said under her breath. Perhaps he needed persuading. She went to the door, opened it and stepped out.

“Hey!” she called. The engine started, the car pulled away and sped off. Maisie stood, bewildered, watching its tail-lights disappearing around the corner. What was going on? She looked around. Towards the cliffs, on the grass strip around the cemetery, an elderly woman with a dog had paused to watch her. When Maisie saw her, the woman quickly moved away.

Maisie came back inside and closed the door. Was she a curiosity, the witch’s granddaughter? She could have laughed, only she felt so lonely. All her fantasies of village life – getting to know the locals, downing pints with friendly farmers and milkmaids – were evaporating. They hated her already. Should she be frightened? Were they capable of hurting her? Solgreve was so remote, who would she turn to in an emergency?

Reality check: Jesus freaks probably weren’t murderers.

God, she was sick of her own company. If she was lonely after three days, how was she going to make it through three months? She checked her watch and did her calculations: it was nearly three in the morning back home, and Adrian would be asleep. More importantly, she was definitely not going to phone him and wail about how lonely she was. She couldn’t afford it, and he wouldn’t appreciate it.

She would just get used to being on her own.

But before long she found herself scrabbling around on the table near the phone for Cathy Ellis’s phone number. The weekdays were bearable, but the thought of an entire weekend in the muffled silence of her own company was too much to endure.

The phone rang forever before somebody finally answered it. “Hello?”

“Hi, I’m looking for Cathy Ellis.”

“Um . . . hang on. I’ll go check.”

Student accommodation. She was left waiting for nearly five minutes to muse on the cost of the call before Cathy picked up the phone.

“Hello, Cathy speaking.”

It disturbed Maisie how excited she was to hear another Australian accent. “Cathy, it’s Maisie Fielding. Remember me?”

“Oh my god. Maisie! I’m so glad to hear from you. Sarah said you might call. Where are you? What are you doing?”

“I’m in a little village called Solgreve, about two hours out of York. My grandmother died a few months ago and I’m sorting out her things. But I’m getting pretty lonely and was wondering if you were doing anything this weekend.”

“Lonely is my middle name. You should come down here this weekend. Stay over. I can take one of the mattresses off the bed and you can sleep on the floor. I’ll show you round York, we can go out for breakfast.”

And even though Maisie had never much liked Cathy, she could hear the desperate note of loneliness in her voice and knew her own would sound like that in a few weeks if she didn’t take up the offer. It was time for her to grow up and admit that it wasn’t fair to have a prejudice against someone based on the fact that they wore batik prints.

“It sounds great.”

Bus timetables were consulted and it was decided that Cathy would meet her at the bus station in York on Saturday at noon. Cathy chatted for a few minutes

about how expensive living in England was proving to be. Maisie was only half-listening. Outside she had heard a soft thump near the laundry door. Was it Tabby? There it was again. A soft thump and slither. If she hadn't seen that cloaked figure the previous day she wouldn't have suspected anything other than the cat, but her imagination was unstable.

"Hey, Cathy," Maisie said, "you're into all that supernatural stuff, aren't you? Spirits and so forth."

"I have an interest. Why?"

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I don't know. I've never seen one."

"What are the chances my grandmother is haunting me?"

"Have you seen her?"

Maisie became embarrassed. "No, I've just heard a few noises. It's probably nothing. This is an old house."

"Let's talk about it on the weekend," Cathy suggested.

"Okay, sure."

"See you Saturday."

She replaced the receiver and strained her ears. No more sinister noises. "Tabby?" Softly, walking down the hallway; Tabby was on the washing machine, ears pricked up. She turned to look at Maisie, miaowed. Maisie stroked her tail, trying to relax.

"If you see the ghost of my grandmother, Tabby, be sure and tell me," she said. "I've got a few questions I'd like to ask her. And I could use the company."

It was sometimes the case that Adrian went for days without seeing his girlfriend's parents, even though they all lived in the same house. If Janet was busy with

students, and Roland was busy rehearsing orchestras, it was not unusual to have the house to himself. The first time he saw Janet since Maisie had left was Friday morning. He was in his pyjamas in the sunlit kitchen making toast for breakfast. She came in, as always perfectly dressed and tidy-haired, and gave him a bemused look.

“Dressed for a power meeting, I see,” she said.

“Sorry. I thought I was home alone.” He could still be embarrassed by being caught in transit wrapped in a towel or his pj’s. Now he had the Churchwheel’s contract, he and Maisie had to think seriously about moving out.

“Have you heard from Maisie?” she said, going to the cupboard for the coffee jar.

“Yes, I spoke to her Wednesday. She got there safe and well.”

“Did she mention anything about her grandmother?”

Adrian looked up from buttering his toast. She had her head down, concentrating very hard on her coffee cup.

“Um ... I guess so.” He didn’t want to have this conversation.

“So she knows about her then?”

“She found out that she was a fortune-teller.”

“Nothing else?”

“She said something about ... well ... it’s silly really.”

“About the arrests?”

“Arrests? What arrests?” Adrian was shocked.

The kettle started whistling and Janet reached over to switch it off. She made her coffee in silence. Resolute silence.

“Janet,” Adrian said gently. “What was your mother arrested for?”

She shook her head. “It will all come out soon enough.”

“Was it to do with the other stuff ... the witchcraft?”

“Oh, so Maisie knows about that. Ridiculous nonsense, isn’t it? Casting circles and saying incantations and all that rubbish.” She poured some milk in her coffee and made to leave the kitchen.

“You don’t believe in it?”

“The most magical thing my mother managed to do was make her daughter disappear.”

“Then what about the arrests?”

Janet put up a graceful white hand. “Don’t ask me anything else. Nobody would listen to me before she went, and I won’t talk about it now. She’ll find out soon enough.”

And with that she departed to the piano room, leaving Adrian standing in the kitchen to wonder what grandmothers can be arrested for, and if that should make any difference to Maisie’s safety.

CHAPTER FIVE

Maisie found herself anxiously peering through the window as the bus pulled in to the stop outside York train station. York's medieval walls stood cold and grey under the dim sky. Her eyes passed over them only briefly. She was looking instead for . . .

“Cathy!” She hadn't meant to say it out loud, but when she saw Cathy Ellis standing there, long red hair tucked under a crocheted hat, skinny body wrapped tightly in a grey duffel coat, she couldn't control her excitement. She was the first person off the bus.

“Maisie!” Cathy exclaimed, grabbing her in a bear hug which somehow didn't seem inappropriate even though they had never been close. The most social thing they had ever done together was go out for coffee after choir rehearsals in a group of eight. Maisie had always found Cathy and her sister too blunt, too smugly comfortable with themselves, and way too fond of Adrian. But now, all was forgiven.

“What have you done to your beautiful hair?”
Cathy exclaimed.

“It bugged me so I got it cut.”

“Oh no. We all used to be so jealous of your hair.”

“It’s not that short.” Maisie self-consciously pulled at a curl.

“It barely comes to your shoulders. What did Adrian think?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

Cathy had taken her bag and grabbed her elbow, and was leading her away from the bus stop.

“I’m so glad to see you,” Cathy said. “I’ve been terribly lonely.”

“Don’t you have friends at your uni?”

She shook her head. “Not really. I’m doing research, not coursework. The only subject I have is Old English and the students are all quite tight with each other because they’re doing a lot of classes together.”

“What are you researching?” They were crossing the road now, past a statue and under a huge tree which was probably fantastically green in summer, but now was bare.

“I’m still narrowing it down. Probably something about early medieval women’s domestic roles.”

“Sounds interesting.” Maisie didn’t mean it.

“It is.”

“I can carry my own bag if you like,” Maisie offered, feeling guilty.

“It’s fine. Let me spoil you. You’re the only Australian accent I’ve heard in nearly three months. How was the weather back home when you left?”

“Not too bad. Starting to get hot.”

“You know, I used to hate the heat when I lived there, but now I’d give anything for just a few days in the sunshine.”

Maisie shook her head. “I will not miss the Brisbane summer. I swear I will not.”

“Give yourself a few more weeks. You’d be surprised what you can miss. So where are you staying again?”

“Solgreve. Two bus rides away. It’s a tiny little village on the coast.”

Cathy nodded, put the bag over her other shoulder. “I know of it. It used to be a busy fishing town up until the seventeenth century. Enormous cemetery right on the water, right?”

“Actually, it’s on a cliff. But yes, the cemetery is very big.”

“The reason I know about it is because our archaeology department have been itching to dig up the graveyard for years. Apparently the locals put a stop to it. A lot of the families have been there for generations, and we couldn’t guarantee we wouldn’t accidentally disinter somebody’s great-great-grandmother. It’s a real shame. The cemetery has one of the longest continuous histories in Europe. It’s never been built over or moved or reclaimed. I bet there are burials over a thousand years old there. Could be some amazing stuff in the ground.”

“That thought actually grosses me out a little.”

“It’s purely academic. Let’s hop on this bus. Your bag is getting heavy.”

“I said I’d carry it.”

“It’s fine. We’re not far from home now.”

Home was a single room in a boarding house, on a

street of other boarding houses and bed-and-breakfast hotels. Cathy's room was at the very top of a steep flight of stairs, beyond a communal lounge, a communal bathroom and a communal kitchen. Maisie couldn't bear to think about having to share a bathroom.

"Here we are," Cathy said, unlocking her bedroom door and letting them in. She hung her duffel coat and hat on a hook on the back of the door, and Maisie did the same with her overcoat. Cathy's hair was straight, parted directly down the middle and so long that it was becoming wispy on the ends. Maisie had always wanted to pin Cathy down and style cut her hair.

"At least it's warm in here," Maisie said.

"Yeah, it's pretty cosy. Some of the rooms on the west wing are like iceboxes."

Maisie looked around. The room was small. A bookshelf and desk were crammed in under the single window, a tiny basin hid behind the wardrobe. Cathy's walls were decorated with pictures: dolphins, Native Americans, mandalas, a poster listing the main character traits of Virgo, a "Sacred Sites 2000" calendar. A hand-woven dream catcher, decorated with beads and feathers, hung from one end of the curtain rod, a large crystal from the other. Cathy had already pulled apart her bed: one mattress was on the floor made up for Maisie, and the other mattress was still on the frame.

"So," Cathy said, settling cross-legged on what remained of her bed, "talk to me. About anything. I just want to hear somebody talk to me. And use my name as much as possible."

"Well, Cathy," Maisie said, giggling, "I've been

here five days, Cathy, and I'm stuck up on a windy cliff-top, Cathy, and I miss my boyfriend, Cathy."

Cathy laughed. "Yes, that's it. Halleluiah, somebody knows my name. They call me Catherine in class because that's the name I'm enrolled under. I never know who they're talking to. You know, I always wanted to ask if Maisie was short for anything."

Maisie shook her head. "It's my grandmother's name. That is, my paternal grandmother. I didn't even know my other grandmother's name until Tuesday night."

"Why not? Didn't you come here to sort out her things?"

"Mum never spoke of her. It was taboo to mention her in our house."

Cathy raised her eyebrows and flicked a long strand of hair off her shoulders. "Really? Wow, we all thought the Fieldings were the perfect family."

"You have no idea what goes on in that house."

"Like what?"

Cathy's interest was a little too eager. Maisie waved her hand dismissively. "Oh it's not that bad. Not like *Flowers in the Attic* or anything. It's just that my parents are kind of tense people. Adrian's always saying we have to move out because the stress is bad for his voice."

"So how come you haven't moved out yet?"

"The stress of buying a house is worse. But who knows? Next year we might do it. Adrian's just been signed to Churchwheel's."

Cathy clapped her hands together in delight. "Well done, Adrian. You know, Sarah and I always thought he was just gorgeous."

“He is gorgeous,” Maisie said.

“And so sweet-tempered.”

“Yeah, that too.” She was getting annoyed now. Perhaps it was the “sweet-tempered” thing. People always said it about Adrian, and she always took it as an implicit suggestion that she was bad-tempered or miserable by comparison. “But he’s not perfect,” she continued. “He’s vain like a girl sometimes.”

“You’re very lucky to have him. How great to be thinking of buying a house. You’ve got yourself sorted out so early.”

Maisie felt a quick pull in her solar plexus. Please, no, anything but that. Anything but being “sorted out” early. “Well, anything could happen. Adrian might have to take off overseas, or I might get a job in another state or something.”

“Are you applying for other jobs? Is it the Sydney Symphony?”

Maisie sighed and stretched out her legs. Her boots were starting to hurt her feet so she leaned down to unlace them. “No, I haven’t applied for other jobs. And if I did it certainly wouldn’t be with another orchestra. I’m tired of playing cello. I’m tired of that whole lifestyle.” She kicked off her left boot, then her right. “That’s kind of why I’m here.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked up and smiled. “I guess I’m on a journey of self-discovery. That’s the appropriate phrase for it, isn’t it?”

Cathy was looking at her in astonishment.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“I’m just surprised,” Cathy replied. “We all thought you had the perfect life.”

“Who is ‘we all’?”

“Me, Sarah, the other choristers, the other musicians. Everybody looks at you and Adrian and thinks, yes they have it all worked out.”

Rather than being flattered, Maisie found herself getting irritated. “Really?”

Cathy nodded emphatically. “Sure. You know, Sarah and I come from a rotten family. Our parents split when we were little, our mum was on welfare. We got no encouragement in anything. I was offered this university place two years ago, and it’s taken me that long to save and to work out scholarships so I could even come here. At the moment, I don’t know how I’m going to pay my rent after my first year. I’m hoping to get a job over summer. Meanwhile, Sarah keeps dating losers who cheat on her, and a man hasn’t looked my way in about four months. In the light of all that, you with your rich and famous parents, your soon-to-be rich and famous boyfriend who’s all sweetness and light *and* good-looking ... well, let’s just say you’ve always been the target for a lot of jealousy.”

Maisie didn’t know what to say. She was angry, but didn’t know if it was directed at Cathy, or her family, or herself. “You make it sound like I’ve got it easy,” she said. But even as she said it, she knew it was true: she did have it easy.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” Cathy said, seeming to sense Maisie’s irritation. “I’m just saying that’s how it looks from the outside.”

“I dare anybody to spend twenty-four years living with my mother and call themselves lucky,” Maisie muttered.

“Let’s go have some lunch,” Cathy said brightly, clearly comfortable with conspicuous subject-changes.

Maisie remembered she hadn’t had anything since a cup of tea that morning. “Good idea. I’ve just realised I’m starving.”

The church bells rang out from the cliff-top as Reverend Fowler farewelled his parishioners. The sky was clear and a cold northerly was blowing. The Reverend had learned over the years to take comfort in a clouded sky, because the clouds worked like insulation. On a day like this, the sky palely stretching into eternity, the distant sun visible off the horizon, it felt as though the world were shivering without cover on the edges of the cold, bleak universe.

“Thank you, Reverend.” Art Hayman, a fortyish man who had been born in Solgreve, shook the Reverend’s hand solemnly, not meeting his eye. It had not escaped the Reverend’s notice that Art had only put one pound in the collection plate this morning, the only non-paper donation of the day. This was the sign of guilt. This was the sign that Art Hayman had just found out what went on in the foundations of the old abbey.

“You’re welcome, Art. I hope we’ll see you again next week?”

Art nodded and mumbled, then headed towards his car. Of course he would be back next week. The Reverend had been doing this for more years than he could count, and they always came back.

The Reverend farewelled the last few stragglers and then thankfully took shelter from the cold in the church. He closed the doors behind him, muffling the

ringing of the bells, and headed towards the altar to check the collection plate. He doubted that any church in the country could boast such a huge percentage of the parishioners regularly turning up for services, and he challenged even the big churches to fill a collection plate the way he did. A hundred and sixty people – more than half the population – had turned up this morning, and all of them had donated at least five pounds.

Except Art Hayman.

But he would come round. They always did. In fact, the Reverend knew that if Art had been honest with himself he would have admitted that, in a way, he had known all along. Most citizens of Solgreve, whether they came to church or not, must suspect something. When villagers heard the news that Maria Thorpe's breast cancer had gone into remission, or that Linda Mercer's little boy had lived against all odds (though he had to be forcibly removed from intensive care at York), or that Allan Parker had walked again after fifteen years, they knew that this was not an ordinary place. That they were specially blessed in some way.

Usually, it was finding out about the bodies that bothered them. But no-one was being hurt. The bodies were just bodies – Lester Baines was not under orders to murder anyone. This is what the Reverend explained to people when they came to him, guilty and fearful, to admit that they had “just heard” about the abbey. In low, calm tones the Reverend always managed to convince them that it was all right, and within a few weeks the doubters would be back among the congregation, blithely shoving money into the collection

plate so that Solgreve would continue to function the way it had for . . . well, for centuries.

The Reverend sighed as he rolled the money up and pushed it into his pocket. Perhaps the truth wasn't as innocent as that, really, though he would dearly love to believe it was. He had heard things which might turn an ordinary person's blood to ice; things which, for a man of faith, were almost too awful to contemplate. But they were also things that weren't necessarily true, and the Reverend willingly held knowledge at arm's length.

The door at the other end of the church suddenly burst open and Tony Blake walked in, tidy in his police uniform, and wearing a huge grin.

"Reverend, good news."

"Close the door, Tony, it's freezing."

Tony did as asked then walked up between the pews to meet the Reverend halfway.

"What's the good news, then?"

"We think she's gone."

"Sybill's daughter?"

"Her granddaughter, Reverend."

The Reverend nodded. Keeping track of generations was not his strong point. "Convince me."

"Elsa Smith saw her waiting at the bus stop yesterday with a suitcase. Elsa watched for the afternoon bus and didn't see her come back. Last night I went past her place and the lights weren't on. I checked every half hour or so, but nobody was home. And this morning, I knocked and knocked, but nobody answered. She's definitely not there any more."

Reverend Fowler shook his head. "I hoped for more convincing than that. What if she's just away for the weekend?"

“She had a suitcase, Reverend.”

“Can Elsa Smith tell you how big it was?”

Tony shook his head. “I didn’t think to ask.”

The Reverend sat heavily on the end of a pew and considered. “I suppose it’s possible.”

“I’ve just got a good feeling about it.”

“Yes, yes, so have I.” The Reverend looked up. “But it could be wishful thinking.”

Tony shrugged. “I’ll keep an eye on the place and let you know. If she doesn’t come home today or tomorrow, I’m going to be twice as happy as I am now.”

“I know what you mean,” the Reverend said, clasping his hands between his bony knees. “Nobody would be gladder than I to see the girl disappear.”

“I really should go home.” Maisie and Cathy sat in a corner booth by the fireplace at the White Rabbit Inn. Somehow, her planned overnight stay had lasted until Monday night. She was starting to worry that Tabby might starve to death in her absence.

“I really should let you.” Cathy sipped a glass of cider. “I have a paper to write this week.”

Maisie shook her head, and was alarmed that the motion made her dizzy. Perhaps she had drunk too much. And this was the third night in a row. She knew the White Rabbit Inn so well now that if she closed her eyes she would be able to describe it perfectly: the high, grimy windows with their view of the dark sky outside; the red, patterned wallpaper; the watercolour of the Minster; the deep green tiles around the fireplace. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you from doing your work.”

“No, don’t apologise. I have three months worth of

social life to catch up on.” Cathy was wearing a green tie-dyed dress, a red crocheted vest and her hair loose about her shoulders. Maisie, in her usual greys and blacks, felt a bit colourless next to her. “Are you hungry?”

Maisie considered. “Yeah, but I don’t feel like going anywhere. It’s so warm in here.”

“I think they make sandwiches behind the bar. Does that sound okay?”

“Sure.”

Cathy grabbed her woven bag. “Back in a tick.”

Maisie turned to stare into the fire. It soothed her to watch the flames crackle and flicker. Her cheeks felt hot and she knew she was sitting too close, but what the hell. She had a warm, contented feeling in her stomach for a change, instead of that useless gnawing. Perhaps, just perhaps, she was starting to relax.

“Is this seat taken, love?”

Maisie looked up to see a tall man in his forties gesturing hopefully to Cathy’s seat.

“Sorry,” she said. “I have a friend.”

He nodded and moved to another table. Cathy came back in with a tray.

“Here,” Cathy said, plonking the tray down on the table and settling behind it. On the tray were two more ciders and two cheese and pickle sandwiches.

“Just perfect,” Maisie said, taking hers. The cheese was thickly hand-sliced and the pickle generously slathered on the fresh, white bread.

“Was he trying to pick you up?”

“Don’t know. Perhaps.”

“Do you realise what you said before?” Cathy asked.

“When?”

“When you talked about leaving. You said ‘I should go home’.”

“So?”

“So, you called it home.”

Maisie waved a dismissive left hand. “No. Just a figure of speech, I assure you. There is nothing home-like about Solgreve for me at the moment.”

“Come on, it can’t be that bad. It’s your grandmother’s house after all.”

Maisie took a sip of her cider. “I guess I’m comfortable at the cottage. It’s cosy and kind of fun going through Sybill’s stuff. But the locals aren’t fond of me.” She and Cathy had already discussed everything: anxious Reverends, strange night-time noises, hostile villagers. There had been times when Maisie felt they had talked so much there wouldn’t be any words left inside them for emergencies.

“Don’t worry about the locals. If you don’t tell any more of them who you are, or where you’re staying, or even how long you’re staying, then they won’t get their noses all out of joint thinking that you’re going to be a village-witch like your grandmother. They’re probably just worried you’ll start bringing in the new-age trade again. If what your gardener friend said is true about them being religious folk, it must have bummed them to see all those people driving straight past the church on their way to consult a fortune teller.”

Her point seemed to make sense, but Maisie wasn’t sure if it was the sense born of inebriation. “I guess you’re right.”

“You’ll survive. Think of it as an adventure. That’s what gets me through when I’m really depressed about being lonely and far from home.”

“I can’t imagine you being depressed.” Since Maisie’s arrival, Cathy had been almost unbearably positive.

“Well, not depressed so much as disillusioned. You know, I would march right up to that Reverend Whatsisname and lie outright. Tell him you’re going home just after Christmas. He might pass it on to the villagers and then they might be a bit friendlier. I mean, it’s not entirely untrue. You will go home sometime after Christmas.”

“Nearly two months after. I think I might have trouble lying to a priest.”

Cathy rearranged herself so she was cross-legged on the seat. “Why?”

“You know, the whole God thing.”

“You believe in God?”

Maisie shrugged, swallowed the last bite of her sandwich. “I suppose so. Don’t you?”

“Not the biblical God. I believe in a great spirit, a universal energy. He or she wouldn’t mind if you bent the truth a little to get some peace of mind.”

“I don’t think about things like that much. You know, spiritual matters.”

“I think about it a lot.”

“So what do you think about the sounds I’ve been hearing around the cottage, and the thing that I saw . . . do you think I have a ghost?”

“I don’t know. It could be your grandmother trying to contact you from the other side. Get your gypsy boy to phone his mother and ask her. If she’s a medium, she’d be able to tell you.”

“I don’t know if they’re in touch.” She couldn’t imagine herself asking Sacha such a weird question. He’d likely think her a head-case.

“Sybill might just be hanging around to see what you’re doing to her place. You said you two never met in this life; perhaps she’s curious about you.”

“Well, I wish she wouldn’t. She’s scaring me.”

“Don’t be scared. She won’t hurt you.”

Maisie wished she could be as confident as Cathy. Her mother had been so adamant that there was some kind of danger in going to Sybill’s cottage. Could she be certain her grandmother would be a good spirit after death, and not a malignant one?

“Anyway,” she said, forcing a bright tone. “It’s probably more likely to be the wind and the old architecture making me hear things. And cats often find a favourite place to sit.”

“Providing you still have a cat when you go back.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine. I left a mountain of food and clean litter. Don’t make me feel guilty.”

“I’m surprised your grandmother didn’t have a cat-flap for her.”

“My grandmother had bars on her windows and double deadlocks on both doors. I think a cat-flap may have constituted a breach in her defences.”

Cathy checked her watch. “The pub will close soon. I guess it’s time for our last round. You know what that means?”

Maisie beamed, nodding eagerly. “Caramel Rabbits. My shout.”

She stood unsteadily and headed to the bar. The last couple of nights they had closed their evening at the pub with a specialty of the house: hot milk, with caramel, honey and a shot of rum. Sweet and strangely comforting.

“Two Caramel Rabbits, thanks,” she said to the girl behind the bar.

“Five pounds. I’ll bring them out to you.”

Maisie fished in her pocket for the money. “Thanks. We’re just sitting in –”

“I know where you’re sitting,” the girl said. “You’re practically regulars now.”

Maisie went back to the lounge smiling. If only the locals in Solgreve were as friendly as the locals here. She slid behind the table and leaned back against the wall. “They’re coming.”

“It’s been great having you here.”

“It’s been great being here.”

“You know, Maisie, the first day you were here you said you were trying to discover yourself.”

“Did I? What a wanker.”

“I’m still curious. I mean, you nearly bit my head off on Saturday so I haven’t mentioned it again, but just what part of your life do you want to change?”

Their Caramel Rabbits arrived and Maisie waited for the waitress to be out of earshot before she answered. “I don’t know. Maybe all of it.”

“You’re going to have to explain this to me.”

Maisie sighed, reached a careful finger out to touch her cup. Too hot to drink just yet. “It’s just that sometimes I look around me, and for all the wonderful things I have, I feel I’ve settled too early. Like life is somehow over, the battle is won and I won’t know what to do with myself from here on. I’ll be trapped.”

“Trapped?”

“Yes. Trapped. Stuck. I want things to be different. But I don’t even know what I mean by that; perhaps to live somewhere different, meet different people, be something different myself.”

Cathy looked at her steadily. “You make life sound so difficult.”

“It is.” Maisie sipped at her drink. It tasted like the nectar of the gods.

“It’s not. It’s not a battle. It’s not all or nothing, now or never. It’s a *life*.”

Maisie laughed. “Why are you so goddamn well-adjusted?” she asked. “I thought you had a crappy upbringing.”

“I guess I could have gone either way. Luckily I chose to be happy instead of tortured. Everyone can make that choice. And it’s really not reasonable to go around being tortured. That’s not life, that’s art.”

“Maybe life is an art. You’re painting Constables and I’m painting Van Goghs.”

“I’m playing Haydn and you’re playing Wagner.”

“God, anything but that. You know when I get back home, I mean, back to the cottage, I’m going to make myself a Caramel Rabbit every night.”

“A fine idea,” Cathy said, reaching out to touch her hand gently. “Happiness is all about simple pleasures.”

Cathy’s homespun, commonsense, new-age advice slid right off Maisie. “You know Haydn’s always bored me to death.”

Cathy laughed. “Then I can’t help you. Come on, let’s find a warm place to collapse in a drunken stupor.”

CHAPTER SIX

Tuesday at around two p.m. Maisie finally arrived back in Solgreve. As she walked from the bus stop up to the cottage, she made several vows to herself. Number one, she would control her homesick loneliness. Cathy was only a bus ride away, she could call Sacha if she wanted, and surely not every resident of Solgreve could hold a grudge against her grandmother. Number two, she would be cheerful when she met the locals, not mention her grandmother, and, as Cathy had suggested, imply she wasn't staying very long. Number three, she had to make herself more comfortable at the cottage. She needed a CD player and a few good crime novels. She needed wine in the house all the time, and she had to stop eating microwaved noodles. Why be so reluctant to cook properly? What else was she going to do with her time? All of this starting today. But first, she had to drop off her bag and make sure that Tabby was still alive.

Of course the cat was fine, although her frantic weaving about between Maisie's ankles may have pointed to Tabby's own desperate conviction that she may starve. Her food bowl was empty, which made Maisie almost sick with guilt, but she still had plenty of water. Maisie gave her some cat biscuits and took the litter tray down to the back garden to empty it.

As she was walking back towards the cottage, she stopped to look at the laundry window where Tabby usually sat, where Maisie herself had last week thought she'd seen something. She gazed at it for a few moments, focusing on her own reflection in the louvres and trying to see what it might have been that had appeared behind her shoulder that night. But she saw nothing. No branches or bushes with the right colouring or shape to match her vision of a hooded figure. A tiny shiver crawled up her right arm as she thought about how close the thing, whatever it was, had been to her.

"Sybill, if it is you," she said under her breath, "please don't frighten me any more."

Drinking with the locals was one of the Reverend's rare pleasures in life. He lived a spartan existence huddled alone in his tiny cottage on the main street, had never married (not for want of trying), and generally had only his own thoughts for company. But every now and then a couple of the parishioners would come by and invite him over to the Black Cat for a few drinks. They always ended the evening with a standing invitation for him to join them, but the Reverend could never convince himself that they meant it. Drew and Wendy Beaumont, who had invited him, seemed far more interested in

their conversation with Morris, the pub-owner, than they were in him. He sat with them, quietly sipping a beer, feeling conspicuous and uncomfortable.

Still, it had been a good day so far. Not too cold, the arthritis in his knees not too severe, and Sybill's granddaughter still hadn't returned, leading him to think that Tony Blake was right. Laughter burst out around him, and he realised Drew was looking at him.

"What do you think, Reverend?"

"I'm sorry," he replied. "I'm afraid I missed that. My mind was elsewhere."

"Morris just said that ..."

But the Reverend heard not another word, for the door to the pub had opened and a pretty girl in dark clothes stepped in and looked around. It was her. He felt his stomach sink, and an old anxiety jittered in his hands.

"Reverend?" Morris asked.

"Do forgive me," the Reverend said, forcing a smile. "I'm rather preoccupied tonight."

When he returned his attention to the girl, he noticed with horror that she was heading towards him, a friendly grin on her face. He waited for her to arrive, his heart beating madly. Did she know something? Sybill Hartley had known so much. Had she left evidence of her investigations lying around? Shortly after her death, he and Tony had tried to break into the house, but it was like a fortress. Tony had suggested burning the place down, but the Reverend had dismissed the suggestion. Perhaps that had been a mistake.

"Good evening, Reverend Fowler," she said, extending her hand for him to shake. He reached out perfunctorily, closed her hand in his for an instant, then let go.

“Good evening, Miss ...” He trailed off, having forgotten her name.

“Fielding. But call me Maisie.” She looked expectantly at him and he realised she was waiting for an introduction to his friends.

“Oh, forgive me. Maisie, this is Drew Beaumont, his wife Wendy, and Morris Dollimore who owns the pub.”

Maisie turned to Morris. “Hi. I was wondering if I could buy a bottle of rum. The off-license is closed. I think I left it a little too late.”

Morris nodded. “Sure.” He excused himself to the others. “I’ll be back in a moment.” The Reverend watched him move over to the bar.

“Reverend, I’m just back from York,” Maisie was saying.

The Reverend returned his attention to her. “York?” he asked, bewildered. Why on earth was she talking to him? What was all this friendliness about?

“Yes. I have a friend down there. I expect I’ll be spending quite a bit of time with her. I shouldn’t be here much past Christmas.”

“Oh.” Pale hope began to wash through him.

“So you won’t be seeing me much. It’s a bit cold and dismal up here for me, as you suggested the first time we met.”

The first time they met. He barely remembered that now, but yes, he knew that he’d gone up there to find out how long she was staying. Here was his answer, his most coveted answer: not long.

“Dismal? Where are you staying?” Drew Beaumont asked in a friendly tone.

“Drew,” the Reverend said pointedly. “Maisie is

living in her grandmother's cottage, Sybill Hartley's place. I'm sure it's terribly cold and lonely up there."

Drew looked into his beer, chastened. Even if people around here weren't sure what went on in the foundations of the old abbey, they all knew that Sybill Hartley had endangered the whole village with her tourist trade and her incessant prying.

"I just thought I'd let you know," she continued, "and I won't be taking you up on the offer of coming to a service."

Once again, he couldn't remember making that offer, but if he had made it, it would not have been sincere. He would have said it to deflect suspicion. "Never mind. Do drop by the church office and let me know when you're leaving."

Maisie nodded. "I'll try to remember. Goodnight."

She went up to the bar to pay Morris and take her bottle of rum.

"Sybill's granddaughter?" Wendy said.

The Reverend nodded. "It's all right, she won't be here long."

"I should hope not. Especially if she's anything like Sybill."

"I have no reason to believe that she is," the Reverend replied, and took comfort in that. No evidence suggested that she had inherited any of Sybill's power along with the cottage. That had most likely died with the old woman.

Which is what they had intended, after all.

It had always fascinated Maisie how quickly the telephone could become a locus of anxiety. She had quite comfortably replaced the receiver after talking

with Cathy – she had called to make sure Maisie had got home safely – but now she sat staring at it as though it might bite her, wondering if she dared call Sacha.

Was it a misplaced and perhaps transitory sense of contentment which was leading her to contact him? To be honest, her new-found optimism about being in Solgreve surprised her. Of course, her conversations with Adrian had lifted her spirits; he was so excited about being on tour and working with her father again. Then there was the fact that she had spent a weekend away in good company, and her successful exchange with Reverend Fowler and the other locals at the pub. She now had a conviction that she would be able to survive at least until after New Year's. And in that positive spirit she had gone to the phone book to look up Sacha's number – only one Lupus in Whitby – and returned to the telephone to call and invite him over for dinner.

That's when it had all fallen apart, really. Because that tiny, doubting voice in her head suddenly weighed in on the issue, saying, "Perhaps he didn't give you the number because he didn't really want you to call."

It made sense. He'd had ample opportunity to scribble his number down somewhere for her, but he hadn't done so. Instead, he had told her to look it up. Had he been making it difficult for her on purpose?

But this was absurd. He had met her once: he couldn't possibly have formed any kind of prejudice against her, or not enough that he wouldn't want her to call. Unless he suspected how attractive she found him. Damn, had she been too attentive? Had she mentioned her boyfriend? She should have mentioned Adrian, then he couldn't have got the wrong idea.

Maisie sighed and sank back in the armchair next to the phone, gazing at the page of the phone book where she had circled Sacha's number. The wrong idea? Wasn't calling him and inviting him to dinner the wrong idea too?

This had happened once before, two years ago, while tutoring a university student in music theory; he too had been dark, exotic. The warm skin on his arm had always seemed to seek out hers as they sat together side by side at his piano, talking about bigger issues than triad inversions and parallel fifths, indulging in glances and intimations which she convinced herself weren't dangerous. But in truth she had been well beyond friendly, meeting him for coffee too often, devising too many convenient ways to be alone with him. One day Adrian had simply said to her, "What are you doing with that guy?"

"He's just a friend," she had replied, defensive as only a guilty person can be.

"If he's your friend, how come you've never introduced him to me?"

Her intimate friendship, or whatever it had been, ended there. The student had been referred to a colleague and she had snapped herself out of it. It was always smarter to avoid such complex matters of desire. She wouldn't ring Sacha.

Five minutes later she dialled his number.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is that Sacha?" Damn her girly voice, damn her stupid unexotic accent.

"Yes."

"It's Maisie here." Then, to save embarrassment: "Maisie Fielding, Sybill's granddaughter."

“I guessed that part. I only know one Maisie.”

She laughed. Probably too nervously. “I only know one Sacha,” she replied, suspecting immediately that she sounded like an idiot. “How have you been?”

“Good. How’s Tabby? Is she settling in okay?”

“Tabby’s fine.”

A short silence. Maisie waited for him to ask how she was, but he didn’t.

“Ah ... I was wondering if you’re doing anything on Friday night?” She realised her heart was pounding.

“Why?”

“Maybe you’d like to come over for dinner.”

“Friday night’s not a good night.”

“Oh.” Should she suggest another night, or wait for him to suggest it? Again, there was too much silence. She had to fill it. “Saturday then?”

“No, Saturday’s not good either.”

He had a girlfriend, that was it. Friday and Saturday nights were taken up with his glamorous, long-legged girlfriend.

“How have you been, anyway?” he said before she had a chance to suggest dinner another time.

“Okay. I’ve been in York with a friend the last couple of days. Before that I was a bit lonely and homesick but I think I’ve settled down now. And I’ve had a couple of run-ins with the locals like you said but –”

“Thursday would be all right.”

“Sorry?”

“Thursday. For dinner.”

“Of course. Yeah, sure. Come over Thursday night. Say about six? Six-thirty?”

“Okay. I’ll bring some wine.”

“Great. Great, I’ll see you then.”

“Bye.”

She put the phone down. She felt vaguely embarrassed, dissatisfied with the tone of the conversation. It had been so clunky. He had been so offhand. Was he socially inept or just rude? She should have worked Adrian’s name into the conversation. She didn’t want Sacha to think that she fancied him. Especially as she did fancy him.

She needed a diversion, something to get her mind off Sacha. The back room was crammed with piles of boxes she hadn’t even looked at yet. That would be good for a few hours of mindless sorting. She switched on the radio and turned the volume up loud. If there were strange noises outside tonight, she just didn’t want to hear them. Whether it was ghosts, or mad locals, or just ordinary Yorkshire seaside noises, what she didn’t hear couldn’t scare her. With purpose, she went to the back room.

By the looks of it, her grandmother had saved every piece of correspondence she had ever received, and that included junk mail. Maisie tried to be ruthless, putting aside only personal letters – most of them from Sacha’s mother, Mila, and none at all from her own mother – and throwing out the rest. She tried not to get sidetracked reading things, but it was hard. Sacha, she found out through the letters, was twenty-nine and had once attended a posh school called Aloysius College in London. Which made the fact that he now swept floors in a bakery even more tragic. Maisie told herself to get a grip on reality. What Sacha Lupus did or did not do, and how little he had achieved was nothing to do with her. She had a perfectly wonderful boyfriend back

home who, it must be added, was the same age as Sacha and was already going to be an opera star.

Maisie whittled down the clutter while Tabby sniffed around and was generally in the way. Bits of drawings, paperbacks too yellow and bent to give to a second-hand shop, empty envelopes, loose change, mouse droppings, a live spider (*ugh!*), pressed flowers between tissue paper, old handkerchiefs and cheap jewellery – all of it went into a stack in the hallway (except the spider which Tabby did not allow to live). Maisie's nose was itching from the dust, but the satisfaction of finally seeing the floor of the room – an Indian rug spread over bare polished boards – made up for any discomfort.

So she turned to the violently lurching cupboard and threw the doors open, started pulling everything out. The more she took out of it, the more it leaned to one side, as though the junk had been ballast. Finally, the whole thing tipped over. Tabby skittered away. Maisie crouched next to the cupboard, examining the legs. Perhaps she could knock them both off, or maybe she should just throw it out. It didn't look like an expensive antique, unless there was something expensive and antique about chipboard.

As she stood up, she felt something move under her foot, nearly overbalancing her. She looked down, and noticed that one of the floorboards was loose. The one, in fact, that had somehow supported the crooked cupboard for all these years. She took a step back and crouched down again, feeling along the board to see if it was safe. It wasn't. With a bit of weight on one end, the other end popped up. She picked up the free end and found that the whole board was not secured at all.

Just as she was dropping it back into place, the light caught something glinting dully underneath between the floor and the stone. She put the board aside and peered into the dark. An iron box, almost black around the corners.

“My god, buried treasure,” she muttered, and she would have been lying if she had said she wasn’t expecting to find jewels, banknotes, Spanish doubloons. She pulled the box out and flipped up the clasp. Opened it with shaking, eager hands.

No treasure. A tiny book. Or at least a section of a book. It had a hard front cover but looked like it had been torn apart. She flicked through it and saw that it was handwritten, but realised immediately it could not be her grandmother’s: the first page was headed with a date in 1793.

“A diary,” she breathed. An old, *old* diary, locked away in a rusty iron box under the floorboards. She couldn’t wait to tell Adrian. More importantly, she couldn’t wait to read it. She put the board back in place and shifted the fallen cupboard over it, so that she or Tabby wouldn’t accidentally fall through the floor, took the diary to the lounge room and turned the radio down. Outside, gusty rain was driving against the windows. She laid the book carefully aside while she made tea and stoked the fire, then settled in a lounge chair and prepared to decipher the centuries-old scrawl.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Saturday, 7 September 1793

And so, little book, prepare to become the custodian of all my News. For although I have a perfectly good diary, handsome and leather-bound, which Mme. Bombelles gave me some two years ago, You come from a far more precious, and certainly much more handsome source, than hideous Mme. Bombelles with her chin hair and rolling neck. Who, then, is this precious benefactor, little book? Why, none other than the most beautiful Man who ever did walk this earth in a human form: Mr. Marley, Mr. Virgil Marley, of Fenchurch-street. Not a salubrious Address, you understand, but one of which I am sure I could grow increasingly fond, given its dear inhabitant. He is tall and chestnut-haired, with warm brown eyes and skin like alabaster; but that does not describe the gentleness of his countenance, the slow, warm beat of his laughter, nor the swift intensity of his Mind. He has a

little of what Papa would call “la maladie anglaise” or the English condition: that is, he is given to fits of melancholy, but mostly he is charming fun. His favourite jest is to make fun of my English, as though it were very ill, when he knows that it was my first language on account of my Mother being born right here on St James’s Square (and not in Lyon where we live with Papa in general contemplation of the Necessity to “keep an irreproachable conduct”). Why, I hardly have an accent, at least in my ears, which I confess may be biased. Papa would think me monstrous for declaring it, but for Virgil I will gladly never speak French again. No French man can say my name the way Virgil says it – “Georgette” – in such a tone to make me ache, or sometimes only “Gette” which I infinitely prefer to the “George” to which some people shorten it. I dearly hope that I shall see him tomorrow, for there can be less than a fortnight before I must return to Lyon. Aunt Hattie’s friend Mrs. Ariel on Portman Square is hosting a ball: four hundred are expected, and an orchestra is to play. I hope to see him there.

Sunday, 8 September 1793. Late

How I am supposed to sleep after such excitement, I do not know. I did indeed attend Mrs. Ariel’s ball and Aunt Hattie accompanied me. She then left me in the company of one Miss Noble, a misnomer if ever there was one, for she is a Sickly and Dull creature who makes conversation only around the topic of her Father’s banking business: how many wealthy clients he has, how much money he makes, &c. I endured her company for an hour, always with my eyes returning

to the door in the hopes that Mr. Marley would come. He did not disappoint. In fact, he arrived with two friends: Mr. Edward Snowe, a merry-eyed young man with dark hair, and Miss Charlotte Andrews, a rather round girl with red curls. Edward is a fellow Poet (did I not mention that my Virgil is an excellent Poet? Shame on me for such an oversight!) and Charlotte is his Intended. I made my excuses to Miss Noble and joined them. She seemed hardly to notice I had gone. I suspect *any* person with ears enough for her vapid chatter would have suited as a companion.

After introductions had been completed, we withdrew to a card room where a number of older people were playing cribbage. We four found a sofa against the wall behind a bookcase and settled there for most of the evening. We laughed and joked, and we danced from time to time as well, though Virgil insists he is not a good dancer (he is, of course). I don't know that I like Miss Andrews particularly. She is only recently returned from a year in Italy, and some of the manners of that Country are apparent in her. Mr. Snowe is very nice – Virgil told me his father is merely an apothecary – and he has promised to show me some of his poetry on our next acquaintance. I do hope it will not be long before we are all reunited, because I cannot remember such good company at any time in my life before.

Monday, 9 September 1793

This morning Virgil called shortly after breakfast. I sat in the drawing room with Aunt Hattie and her dear friend Mrs. Ariel, and you, little Diary, were close at hand. It was Mrs. Ariel, in fact, who introduced Virgil

to us, because his father is a Barrister and a very close friend of hers. Virgil was a terrible tease and read what I had written so far (not aloud, thank goodness!), and said it was all rather dry and colourless. I was a little hurt, but did not want to show it, because if he knew he had embarrassed me it would upset him so. Later, when Hattie and Mrs. Ariel were deep in gossip and not paying attention to us, he leaned very close to me and said, "Gette, you must put colour and fire in your writing, you must say how you feel, what you see, hear and smell. You must pour out your heart. That is why God gave us words." So, Diary, I have made two vows. The first is to do as Virgil says, and put "colour and fire" in my writing. No more silly nonsense about Miss This and Mme. That and everybody's shortcomings. I was ever too full of petty criticism. My second vow is that I will hide you far more carefully, because if I am to pour out my heart, then I shall have to regulate very assiduously who may read the fruits of such labour.

Wednesday, 11 September 1793

Mama arrived today, and while I was glad to see her, it means there is only a week before we must return to France. Mama seems so serious compared to Aunt Hattie, I can scarcely believe they are sisters. Mrs. Ariel came by and we all sat in the drawing room to read or to talk. Mama asked me to play piano a little, which I did, and unfortunately it sparked an argument.

I play but three or four pieces very well, for I haven't the patience to learn new ones. I was in the middle of my second piece – a Mozart sonata – when I overheard Mrs. Ariel address Aunt Hattie thus:

"Hattie, we really must ask Georgette to play for

Mr. Marley next time he is by. I think he already has quite an eye for her.”

And then Mama’s voice, crisp and firm, “Who is Mr. Marley?”

I willed my fingers to keep playing without the assistance of my mind as I was concentrating all on listening to them.

“Mr. Virgil Marley, Annie,” Aunt Hattie said quickly. “He’s the son of a dear friend and has been calling for the last few weeks. He and Georgette have struck up a friendship.”

“He had best not have designs beyond friendship,” Mama said sternly, and returned to her reading. I felt myself grow hot in the face and neck, but played on. I remain certain that Mama would like Virgil if she met him – he is so very gentle and charming. But it is too sad! She has reminded me that soon I must return home, and that Papa has long favoured the son of one of his cousins as a possible husband for me. I will be eighteen in five months, and marriage is a Fate which I cannot reasonably avoid much longer.

I wish that Mama had not come, though I know I am terrible for thinking such a thing. Aunt Hattie is a Dear, and has always been quite happy for me to see Virgil. In fact, I do believe that she and Mrs. Ariel were enjoying watching the two of us become close, though it must not have escaped their notice that there is a great difference in Fortune between us. Still, what do I care for money? The only thing that I can imagine cheering me at the moment is a visit from Virgil, but I dread him not liking Mama, or Mama not liking him. I am in such a state over this that I can barely think.

Thursday, 12 September 1793

The very worst and the very best have happened on the self-same day. I feel afraid that I am so excited by it all I may not be able to constrain myself to write a narrative of the day's events! Though now I have just heard the church clock-tower ring out three times, and it appears that it is not Thursday at all but Friday morning. For company I have only this candle and the scratching of my pen against the paper. So much has happened since I last wrote, I almost feel like a different girl.

First, Virgil came by quite early to ask if I could go walking in St. James's Park. He was shown in as always, and bowed deeply to Hattie and Mama (though he did not, as yet, know who She was). He then turned his attention directly to me, and in that intimate way he has adopted, addressed me as "Gette, my pretty French poppet."

Fatal Mistake. Mama's eyes practically turned silver. They are usually very dark grey, you see, but when she is angry the pupils almost disappear, and her eyes seem to glitter.

"Sir," she said sternly, "I would prefer you to address my daughter as Mademoiselle Chantelouve."

He turned immediately to her, his eyes grew wide with – I know not whether it was fear or surprise. And instantly he bowed before her again and said, "Madame Chantelouve, forgive me. I did not know that we had the pleasure of your company this morning."

But the damage was done. The sad-eyed smile and the gentle flirtations which weaken the silly knees of Aunt Hattie and Mrs. Ariel were more than useless on

my mother, who took them as affectations, and saw in them evidence that Virgil was little more than a vain dandy. By the time he plucked up the courage to ask for the pleasure of my company on a walk, Mama had set her mind firmly against him. She declined on my behalf, as I stood speechless and blushing beside the fireplace.

Virgil looked to Aunt Hattie, who turned to Mama and said, "Come, Annie, let the young people enjoy some fresh air."

"No," Mama replied. "Georgette will stay here by me today."

And with that, Virgil was dismissed.

I heard the downstairs door close behind him, and surreptitiously moved to the window, which had a good view of the Street. To my surprise and embarrassment, Edward and Charlotte waited below for Virgil. I saw him emerge, explain quickly to his companions what had happened, and then Charlotte looked up at the front of the building. I know she probably did not see me, but I felt she had. And I felt she wore the most condescending expression on her face, as though I were a mere Baby and she knew something much more than I could ever know. It made my skin burn with anger, and I turned on my mother.

"This is so unfair!" I cried. "Why could I not go walking? I'm in no danger. Mr. Marley is the son of Mrs. Ariel's friend the Barrister, and a decent and respectable man."

Instead of responding to my lament, Mama fixed Aunt Hattie with a stern eye. "I blame you for letting this young man become too intimate an acquaintance. You should have known better."

Hattie looked chastened.

“Mama,” I said, moving to the sofa to put an arm around Aunt Hattie, “how can you be so cruel?”

She turned those silvery eyes on me and said, “I know more about Mr. Marley than you do. As does your aunt. It was ‘unfair’ and ‘cruel’ for her not to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“His father is not a Barrister. He is a clerk in a law firm, and that an ill-regarded law firm on Fenchurch-street. Mrs. Ariel’s interest in Mr. Marley Senior is spoken about in giggles and hushes all over town, and poor Mr. Ariel is constantly made a fool of. I expect Marley’s son to be just as bad, for all he’s dressed in the pretty things that Mrs. Ariel is too witless to refuse him.”

“Annie!” cried Aunt Hattie.

“Don’t dare to say otherwise, Hattie, for you know it’s true. As long as I am staying here, I request that you do not invite Virgil Marley again. Once Georgette and I have returned to Lyon, you may do as you please.”

Hattie, always a soft woman, mutely blinked back tears. I felt as though my whole world were collapsing from within. Not to see Virgil again? It was unthinkable. He had so quickly become the place from which the Daylight shone for me, that to remove him was to leave me in perpetual Night.

“Is it true, Aunt Hattie?” I asked quietly.

Hattie nodded, pulling out her handkerchief. “Most of it. Virgil’s family is indeed not a good family. But the rumours about Mrs. Ariel and his father are unfounded.”

Mama straightened her back. “Where smoke blows, fire glows, Hattie.”

“I feel unwell,” I said, standing. “Would you excuse me? I think I shall lie down until dinner.”

Mama dismissed me with a wave of her hand. “Go. Sleep, and rid yourself of thoughts of that young man. You will do much better than him, Georgette. Soon you will forget him.”

I wanted to cry out “Never!”, but instead I kept the word inside, and it beat in my head along with my footsteps up the staircase. *Ne-ver; ne-ver; ne-ver*. I was utterly hopeless and desolate, and threw myself upon my bed to rage, to cry, to dream in dozy fits. If I were a more deceitful girl, perhaps I could have contrived a method to contact Virgil and tell him of our misfortune.

As it turned out, he contrived a method to contact me.

I had supped half-heartedly with Mama and Hattie at around nine, and we had all retired to bed shortly after. Because of my excited state and because of the nap I had taken earlier in the day, I could not sleep. I spent an age brushing out my hair, watching myself in the little glass atop my dressing table, and wondering how on earth I was to endure the long night with Virgil so far away from me, and bound to be that way Forever.

In fact, he wasn't far away from me at all. My window is directly above the drawing room, and as such looks over the street. On my first visits to Hattie, many years ago when only a girl of four or five, the sound of voices and hooves and carriages had purposed to keep me awake most nights, but I had gradually come to be soothed by them. There is a certain comfort in knowing one is surrounded by Man, by his laws and his machines and his civilised intentions, and I never feel this comfort back home in our chateau, where to wake in the middle of the night

is to be surrounded by the blank darkness and amorality of Nature. Some say that Man is evil or wicked, but I hold that at least Man, or men, may be reasoned with, where wolves or blizzards or falling trees are invariably unheeding of entreaties.

Virgil knew where my bedroom was, on account of Aunt Hattie having mentioned more than once that she found the street noise in the drawing room most bothersome, and remarked thereafter on the strange solace I found in the same sounds. It took merely a handful of pebbles to bring me to my window.

He waited below, Edward and Charlotte with him once again. I lifted the sash and leaned out, my heart beating wildly, in love with his boldness, but terrified about where it may lead.

“Gette!” he called. “Come down.”

I looked over my shoulder and then back to the street. “Shh!” I said.

He motioned with his arms. *Come down.* I was frozen for a few moments, listening for footsteps in the hallway or curious voices. There were none. Although it went against everything in my upbringing (or perhaps *because* it went against everything in my upbringing), I nodded and closed the window.

It took me only a few minutes to dress and to pin my hair unevenly. I crept into the hallway. No light came from beneath my mother’s bedroom door so I knew she was asleep. I tiptoed down two flights of stairs and paused near the entrance-way, listening. I could hear the servants mumbling to each other in the kitchen as they finished their chores for the night. Nobody was in sight. Trembling, I reached for the door and within seconds stood out in the street.

Virgil was nowhere to be seen. At first I thought a cruel joke had been played on me, but then I saw Charlotte lean around the corner and beckon to me. I ran to the corner to find the three of them, laughing hysterically. I couldn't help but laugh too, I was in such a state of tumult and fear. Even though it was not proper, I threw my arms around Virgil's neck, almost weak with excitement.

"Oh, Gette, your mother doesn't like me, does she?" he said, very close to my ear.

I shook my head. "Hattie has been told not to invite you as long as I'm here."

"And how much longer are you here?"

"Barely a week."

He fell silent. Edward's and Charlotte's laughter were dying away now. Edward jabbed him in the ribs with an elbow. "Well. Tell her why we've come."

"Yes," said Virgil, brightening. "We've come to take you for that walk in the park after all."

I smiled up at him. "I should be delighted," I said.

He very properly offered me his arm and I took it. Edward and Charlotte adopted the same pose and we walked off in the direction of the park. It seemed so thrilling to be out walking at night, under the glowing lamplight. I love that London does not sleep, that at nearly any time of the day or night there are people about some business or other. Why, even as I write this, I can hear the occasional carriage roll by in the distance. I was almost disappointed when we came to the dark wilderness of the park, away from the lights and from humanity.

"Let us sit under a tree, far from the light," Charlotte suggested. "I do love to sit and talk in the dark."

She and Edward led the way further amongst the bushes, until we found an ash tree whose branches all but obscured the stars above us. We sat down. I was growing cold despite my wool coat, and Virgil urged me to nestle close to him. I cannot describe what it felt like to have his body pressed so near to mine. I swear I could almost feel his blood moving around hot in his veins, he seemed so very warm and so very *alive* to me.

“So, Mademoiselle Chantelouve,” Edward said as he settled nearby, Charlotte pressed up against him, “what do you make of the situation in France? I should like to know as you are a native and your father so wealthy a landowner.”

“Edward, let’s not talk politics,” Charlotte said, pouting. “I do abhor politics.”

“I agree, Edward,” Virgil said. “Georgette need not answer your questions.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. “Although I have little interest in such things myself, you should know that my Papa was always very sympathetic towards the Revolution. Against his own interests he supported the National Assembly. But daily we hear reports of new violence, and I think Papa is terribly disappointed by that.”

Edward shook his head. “Sometimes violence is the only way.”

“You’ll have to forgive Edward,” Virgil said, “he’s a raving Jacobin.”

“And you?” Edward asked, almost a challenge.

“I, my friend, am a poet. I occupy a realm above the politic.”

“I am a poet, too,” Edward declared. “And I can remember a time when you spoke with as much passion about the Revolution as any Jacobin.”

“Oh, stop arguing you two,” Charlotte said. “They’re the best of friends, really, Georgette. They pretend to disagree all the time just to keep themselves entertained.”

Virgil slipped his arm around my waist. “It’s true,” he said. “We’ve been the best of friends since we were but lads.”

Charlotte turned her face to Edward’s. “Edward, will you come a little way into the bushes with me for a moment. I have something I’d like to say in private.”

Edward smiled broadly. “Why, of course, Miss Andrews,” he said. “I think I might have something to say to you also.”

“Excuse us,” Charlotte said, rising. “We won’t be but a few minutes.”

The two of them wandered off into the dark, leaving Virgil and me alone. I was both thrilled and apprehensive. It seemed we had adopted such an intimate posture together, and every moment I expected my mother to find us, though she was fast, fast asleep in her bed.

“What can they have to talk about that they can’t say in front of us?” I asked him, feeling that Edward and Charlotte were rude for running off together.

“I think they may talk about love,” Virgil said, knowingly.

I looked at my gloved hands as they lay in my lap, and thought that perhaps I was the most naive girl in the universe. Of course: love. And on my brief acquaintance with Charlotte, I had no doubt that her expressions of love would omit very little.

“In any case,” he continued, “it allows us a chance to be alone.”

I nodded shyly, cursing myself for being shy. I knew I was to go home in less than a week, and our time together was so very precious.

He loosened my hair a little, and entwined a single finger in a stray golden curl. My heart lurched as he leaned in and kissed the fortunate curl delicately, then dropped it on my cheek. His breath seemed very close.

“Gette, look at me,” he said softly, his fingertips gently tilting my chin so that my gaze might meet his. In the dark, his eyes were almost black. But not sinister: feeling, tender.

“Do you know that I love you?” he asked.

I smiled. My heart fluttered madly.

“For I know that you love me,” he said, and before I could open my lips to tell him, *yes, yes, I do love you with all my heart and more*, his own mouth had pressed against mine. Yes, he kissed me! And what an upheaval it created in my body. My skin seemed to be turned to liquid, my stomach seemed to become quite hollow, my brain seemed to buzz, and my lips – as though independent of my thoughts and my fears – pressed hungrily against his and opened without protest to the insistence of his tongue. I had no idea that a kiss could wreak such chaos. I have seen Papa kiss Mama, but their kisses seem such a tidy affair. Virgil’s kiss was all body, all moisture, all hot *hot* blood, all pounding heart and wild thoughts. It was all I could do not to surrender to him completely, as I suspected somewhere close by Charlotte was surrendering to Edward.

We kissed and kissed. I had no idea it was an activity one could involve oneself in for such a long time! I was intoxicated by his mouth, and every time

he pulled away I would reach for him again. Finally, Edward and Charlotte emerged from their hiding place (and yes, her clothes were in disarray and he appeared quite flustered) and the four of us resumed our conversation. But by this stage I was becoming almost frantic with worry. I was certain that by now Mama had woken and that the house was in uproar because I was nowhere to be found. I couldn't relax for imagining what would happen if I didn't return home soon.

Charlotte and Edward stayed in St James's Park. For all I know they are still there now, though I can hear rain dripping off the eaves and suspect that the damp could discourage even their passion. Virgil accompanied me back to Aunt Hattie's, and of course nobody was awake when I came home. The house was not ablaze with lights and worry. I crept in as easily as I had crept out, and now, somehow, I am supposed to sleep. But two thoughts conspire to keep me awake. The first is the memory of Virgil's lips, and how thrilling and hot and delirious it feels when they are upon mine. The second is the knowledge that in only a handful of days, I must return to France without him.

Friday, 13 September 1793

I am so excessively tired that I can barely hold up my poor head. And yet, Diary, I have to relate the most recent Episode in the tale of Virgil and Georgette, for I fear it will soon come to its tragic close. I watched at my window after all had gone to bed this evening. A gusty wind had arisen, and the window panes all rattled. Windy nights always make me unsettled and, truth be told, I would rather have stayed in my warm

room and burrowed down very low under my covers. But of course I was aware, too, of how little time Virgil and I have remaining to us. Just when I thought that perhaps he would not come tonight, he and Charlotte and Edward rounded the corner and waited for me in the street.

Once away from the house, Virgil pressed me in his arms and called me his “pretty, pretty thing.” He seemed quite delirious with joy to see me, and was in very high spirits indeed. I expected that we would go once again to the park, but instead we started in a different direction.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To the churchyard,” Charlotte replied, and I think I heard something of a challenge in her voice, as though she expected me to protest and say I was too scared to go near a churchyard after dark. And while, perhaps, that may have been my response under normal circumstances, I was not going to allow Charlotte to feel superior to me, when she was all but a whore, and I was a nobleman’s daughter. I grasped Virgil’s hand in mine and set my heart against childish superstition.

We approached the churchyard in the dark. The tombstones stood ghostly grey beyond the gates. All around, the trees tossed their branches this way and that in the wind. I thought at first that we would have to climb over the wrought iron, and I was prepared to do so if Charlotte did, but they all seemed to know that the gates would be unlocked and proceeded through them and towards the mound where most of the graves lay. Clearly, they had been here many times before. It hurt to know that the three of them had shared this

adventure without me in the past, or perhaps even shared it with another girl in my place. And it hurt even more to know that when I had gone, they would probably still come here, and Virgil would recover from his broken heart and find someone new, while for the rest of my life I would be thinking only of him. I was growing despondent by the time Virgil pulled me down to sit next to him on a grassy patch between two graves. Charlotte and Edward daringly sat on a grave nearby, and were within seconds indulging in a passionate embrace directly in front of us.

“Not love tonight,” Virgil said, fumbling in his coat pocket for something. “Poetry, remember? If you weren’t so interested in making love you’d be a better poet, Edward.”

Edward all but dropped Charlotte and turned angrily on Virgil. “And when have you talked of anything but love since you met your French wench?”

“How dare you so infamously defame her?” Virgil demanded.

Charlotte intervened. “Stop it. What nonsense you pair go on with. Stop arguing. You know you’ll only be cooing over each other again in a few hours, so stop it.”

They apologised to each other, and everybody seemed to forget how monstrously I had been insulted. Virgil and Edward had now each produced a notebook, and were deciding between them who would read first. In the end, it was Edward who read first, and thereafter they took turns. I cannot express to you my delight at hearing them read their own works. And it is no bias on my part, but rather plain commonsense, to say that Virgil’s work was far superior to his friend’s. I only wish that I could

remember some of the lines well enough to write them down here, but Virgil insists he will make me a copy of all his best poems for me to keep forever. I could tell by the smug look on Charlotte's face that she thought Edward's writing superior, but that could only be Vanity, for if she had ears (which I have seen she does) there could be no doubt that Virgil was an infinitely better poet.

"How delightful!" I exclaimed when all were finished and the little books were safely tucked away in pockets. "Have either of you published anything?"

"Virgil and I are working on publishing a collection between us," Edward said, putting his arm around Charlotte's waist. He leaned with his back against a tombstone, and his legs stretched out before him as though completely oblivious to the poor soul who lay beneath him.

"Yes, Gette, we shall be wealthy men before long, you shall see," Virgil told me, excited eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

"You had better hope for wealth, Virgil, as you refuse to learn any other vocation," Edward said, laughing.

"I cannot squander my time so casually as you," Virgil shot back.

"Squander?"

"Learning to be an apothecary like your father. A poet must think always upon art, philosophy, the sublime. Not pills and potions."

"My father has a noble trade, and I should be proud to learn his business. After all, our poetry has paid for nothing yet."

"But it will," Virgil declared emphatically. "I know that it will."

“Enough!” Charlotte cried, and then did the most spectacularly shocking thing. She climbed across Edward’s lap. That is, she put a knee either side of him and sat there, facing him, her bosom close to his face. Edward responded by laughing and burying his nose right between her breasts. I glanced away quickly.

“It’s true, Gette,” Virgil said softly, ignoring the other two completely. “I know your mother must think I’m a ne’er-do-well, and not a fit suitor for such a wealthy young woman as yourself, but I shall make a fortune, I promise. My poetry is good – you can hear that for yourself – and I am certain it is better than other work that is published daily. I shall earn enough for a grand house in the countryside, and then I shall have you by me always.”

I gazed into his eyes, feeling my own well with tears. To be by him always was what I wanted more than anything in the world. “Virgil, we have only a few days.”

“But you’ll write to me? You’ll stay true to me?” His voice was earnest, almost desperate. “By the time you come back next year I may be wealthy and your mother will gladly allow me to call.”

“I fear that things will have changed too much within that year, Virgil.” I was thinking now about Papa’s cousin and how Mama’s disdain for my own choice may lead her to recommend a swift marriage for me.

“But how can I live?” he asked. “How can I live if you are not to return?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Charlotte let out a squeal of laughter across from us. Edward had loosened her dress and stays, and

freed one of her breasts. His mouth closed over the nipple and she threw her head back in delight. I purposefully rearranged myself so that my back was turned to them and I could not see them any more. The wind gusted in the tree branches around us, and I shivered with cold and with revulsion. Why must Charlotte cheapen herself so? In doing so, she cheapens Love.

“We could run away,” Virgil said, so quietly that at first I could not hear him.

“Pardon?”

“We could run away. Together.”

I am not a fool. I know that Virgil had little money of his own, that running away would cut me off from my family, from the luxury to which I was accustomed. But I imagined us, living humbly together, a rural life perhaps. I could milk cows for him. I could make bread for him. As long as we are together, surely that is all that matters.

“Virgil, I don’t know if it would be wise,” I said, for although my imagination was in love with the idea, I needed for him to sway my reason.

Instead, he nodded. “Perhaps you are right. I couldn’t take you away from the elegance and comfort that is due to you. Come, let me walk you back to your aunt’s.”

He stood and helped me to my feet.

“I’m taking Gette home,” Virgil said to Edward and Charlotte.

I dared a glance over my shoulder at them. Her breast was covered now, but I could see his hand moving under her skirts. “Good evening,” she said to me with that smug, knowing look.

“We may see you again tomorrow night,” Edward said, smiling up at me.

“Good evening,” I said, trying to sound frosty and wishing I wasn’t so interested in just which exact location he was placing his hand.

And so here I am at home again. Virgil did not kiss me last night, and I am sorry for that. All was too serious for kisses, but still I wished to experience that feeling again. And, God forgive me, I have not been able to stop thinking about Charlotte and Edward, and imagining in a guilty way if Virgil and I will ever do those same things. I know it is wrong, and in fact I am almost too ashamed to write it down. But if we were married it would not be wrong.

But alas, we are not destined to marry, are we? Who could have guessed, little book, that at such a short acquaintance you would become the repository of such tearful speculations? I am thankful to be so tired, for otherwise all these thoughts crowding my mind would keep me awake until dawn I am certain.

Sunday, 15 September 1793

I cannot write for very long because my life is about to change forever. I shall explain as quickly as my pen can keep up. Yesterday, Virgil sent me a letter in his own beautiful hand, with a few new and sublime lines of poetry enclosed. Mama saw me receive it and press it to my bosom, and followed me upstairs later to demand to read it. I had to refuse. You see, in the letter he outlined his plan for elopement, and addressed my concerns about how we would live. He and Edward sometimes do work for a certain Doctor in a village some miles from York in the North Country. Virgil

proposes for us to escape to this village, where he will earn enough money to support us for as long as it takes to have his poems published, which he assures me is but a few months away at the longest! Edward's great-uncle owns a cottage up there in which we might live for a nominal rent.

When Mama pressed me to give her the letter, I threw it into the fire though I would have dearly loved to keep it. We had such a great quarrel as to make Aunt Hattie come upstairs and intervene. Mama is now determined that we will return to Lyon tomorrow at first light. But, and my pen shakes as I admit this, I shall not be here tomorrow morning. It is nearly the appointed hour. I must pack you safely among my things. I can scarcely believe it, but by the next time I write it will be from my new abode on the Yorkshire coast. And I shall be Mrs. Virgil Marley.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Maisie placed the little book in her lap and leaned back in her chair. Her eyes were aching from the effort of deciphering the old writing and she needed a break. She had only read half of it, but she was hungry. She tucked the pages back in the iron box and placed it in an empty space on her grandmother's bookshelf. Maybe tomorrow night she would finish it off. It would be good to have a break from the television; when she was alone she always watched too much.

She went to the kitchen and thought about the diary as she wolfed down a Pot Noodle. A French aristocrat and an eighteenth-century dandy eloping to Solgreve. How fascinating; better than Jane Austen. By comparison her life was positively dull. No need for her to elope with Adrian; her parents would probably be more excited than she if they married. She rinsed her fork and threw her rubbish away. Time to think of

other things, mundane things. She needed a shower. She needed company and it was still a day and a half away. She went to the back door and called Tabby, who was sniffing around at the base of the old oak tree. Had the tree been there when Georgette lived in the cottage? How different had it been then?

“Tabby, come on girl.”

In typical cat fashion, Tabby decided she'd rather sit a few paces from the back door in the dark and not come in just yet. Maisie left the door open a crack and returned to the bathroom. She couldn't face showering under the unpredictable hose-nozzle so she started to fill up the bath with hot water and found some strawberry-scented bubble bath in the bottom of the cabinet: probably manufactured in 1976, but it would do. A bath was a good way to relax, to contemplate. Darkness would complete the mood. She turned out the light, disrobed, and slipped into the water.

“Aah,” she said, and because it was nice to hear a human voice, even though it was her own, she said it again. Longer. “Aaaaah.” That sounded like a relaxed person. She leaned her head back on the porcelain. The dark was not so bad, not so spooky, when the electric light was only four steps away and the television buzzed quietly in the background. Her toes were poking out of the water at the other end of the bath. The nails were painted black, a contrast against her pale skin. When she'd painted them she'd still been at home. Miles and miles and miles away. Might as well have been on the other side of the universe.

“Shit,” she said, palming the stupid tears off her cheeks. “Shit, shit, shit.”

She closed her eyes and tried to think of anything but home. Tabby's cold nose nudged at her elbow.

"Hello, puss," Maisie said. "Did you close the door behind you?"

She heard the cat settle next to her. A warm, dozy feeling began to descend on her limbs. It wouldn't be wise to go to sleep in the bath. What if she slipped into the water and drowned? Nobody would find her. Nobody would notice her missing. Adrian would call but assume she was out. Sacha would think she'd gone home. Tabby would have to catch mice and drink bath water to stay alive.

Stop it. Morbidity was not to be encouraged.

Even if she did go home, she knew what to expect: a long summer without Adrian; more long hours working with people she didn't understand or (be honest) like; her mother always preparing to be disappointed in her; her father looking at her as though he wasn't quite sure how he'd managed to have such a musically *ungifted* daughter – a mix-up at the hospital perhaps? She'd be no closer to ...

To what? That mythical moment when happiness would just magically materialise? When fulfilment was suddenly hers? She had no idea at all what it would take to bring her to that moment. She didn't even know where to start looking for it.

A bell in the distance. It would be Christmas soon. Perry Daniels had said it might snow. She had never seen a white Christmas before.

She began an unknowing descent into a light doze. The bell seemed to be tolling down a long tunnel – a sound that was both metallic and organic. Something familiar about it.

And somebody running. Somebody with cold bare feet. An unspeakable horror in pursuit.

With sudden ferocity, the back door slammed shut. Maisie sat up with a start, her heart racing. Tabby skittered off, her tail bushy with fear.

“What the . . .?”

The wind gusted frantically outside. The windowpanes rattled, and raindrops shook violently out of trees.

Maisie put her hand over her heart.

“Tabby?”

It was okay. Just a blast of wind. At least the back door was closed now. She had been dreaming, hadn't she? That strange bell sound, the awful feeling of something pursuing her. But it had felt horribly, almost unbearably familiar. She grabbed her towel and got out of the bath, switched the light on. Not enough light. Soon, every bulb in the house was burning. As she approached the bathroom again, she saw Tabby sitting on the laundry windowsill, her tail switching restlessly.

“What the hell are you looking at?” Maisie demanded, instantly hating her desperate tone. *Calm down, be nice to the cat. Right now she's your only friend.*

Breathe.

She dried herself and pulled on her dressing gown and a pair of woolly socks. Loud television would fix it. The faintly strawberry water swirled down the plughole. Light nausea curled into her stomach.

Breathe. Just breathe.

In the lounge room, Maisie turned the television volume up. What she needed was a Caramel Rabbit.

Lots of hot milk, rum, caramel topping and a tiny dollop of honey. That would relax her. She busied herself in the kitchen. Tabby was now enthusiastically playing hockey with a bottle cap across the kitchen floor. Maisie stepped out of her way as she skidded into the refrigerator door. The microwave hummed and she watched her cup turning around inside. It was one of those novelty mugs, with a mouse and a cat hugging, and “best friend in the world” written across the top. She wondered who had given it to her grandmother, who her “best friend in the world” was. Maisie had never had a “best friend” or even known someone who would buy her such a gift. She supposed Adrian was technically her closest friend. Other people she saw in groups. She wasn’t given much to gossip or to sharing personal feelings with other women: they never liked her. Or at least she imagined they didn’t.

Suddenly, Tabby dropped her bottle cap and pricked her ears up.

“What is it, Tab?” Maisie asked.

The cat dashed out of the kitchen.

“Not the laundry again,” Maisie groaned, following Tabby. A half moon glimmered a little light in through the louvred windows. The microwave stopped and beeped loudly. Tabby had already leapt up on to the washing machine and now sat there staring out the window. Maisie pushed her face up to the glass and peered out. To her horror, she could see a figure standing beside the oak tree, pressed up close to it, just half a silhouette. She pulled away from the window and flattened herself against the laundry door. Had he seen her? Was it a he? She crouched down next to the washing machine and cautiously peered over the

sill again. Perhaps it was just a shadow. She watched the dark shape for a few moments, wishing that the moon were bright enough to illuminate it clearly. The shape didn't move, and she started to believe it was merely a shadow behind the oak.

But then it detached itself from the tree and took one pace out. She stifled a cry of horror. It was a human shape, all right, and it looked like it was wearing a long cloak of some description. She dashed to the telephone and had the receiver to her ear before she realised she didn't know the local police station's number. The phone book was still lying on the floor next to her chair. With shaking hands she leafed through the pages and found the number, then dialled.

"Constable Tony Blake."

"Constable Blake. This is Maisie Fielding from the cottage on Saint Mary's Lane. There's an intruder in my back garden."

"I'm sorry?"

"There's a person in my back garden. Standing by the tree. I'm alone and I'm afraid. Could you come by?"

There was a short pause, and Maisie had been certain he was going to refuse. But then, reluctantly, he said, "Sure. Sure. I'll be there in a few minutes. Don't open the door to anyone but me. I'll knock three times."

He hung up. She turned the television and all the lights off, crept back to the laundry and surreptitiously peeked out the window again. The figure was still there. She waited, watching, with the awful sensation that the figure was watching her in return. But that wasn't possible. With no lights on in the house, he couldn't see inside. Tabby made a low growling noise, her tail swishing madly. Maisie turned to the cat.

“Who is it, Tabby?” She wished she could shake the feeling that the figure wasn’t flesh and blood. She wished that she couldn’t see the outline of a cloak and hood, like that apparition she had glimpsed last week.

She turned back to the garden, and the shape was gone. She pressed her face close to the glass. Definitely gone. But she had only looked away for a second, maybe two. How could it have disappeared so quickly?

For a few moments she merely gazed at the garden. A knock on the front door made her jump.

She rushed to the door, then realised there had only been two knocks. She stopped about a metre away, heart thudding in her chest. The village constable had told her to let no-one else in, that he would knock three times. And it had only been a few minutes since she had called him. He couldn’t be here yet.

She licked her lips. Her throat had gone dry. “Who is it?” she managed to say faintly.

Knock, knock.

Jesus, this was unbearable. Why couldn’t her grandmother have installed a peephole when she was putting all the deadlocks on the door?

The deadlocks. Had she shot them all when she came in? Her eyes quickly ran over the door. Only one of them was locked. As she stood, paralysed, one of the handles started to move, as though someone were trying it from the outside.

She reached out. Her hand was trembling. With a sudden movement, like touching a snake, she clicked the other deadlock into place. The handle stopped moving. Moments passed. The microwave beeped once to let her know it had been five minutes since her milk

stopped cooking. Darkness all around her and the intolerable pressure of fear in her chest.

Then, clearly, three short knocks.

“Who is it?” she called, terrified.

“Constable Tony Blake.”

She snapped the locks and pulled the door open. A big, burly man in a musty police uniform stood there. His face looked like it was made of granite, and his narrow eyes were hostile.

“Whoever it was, they came around the front and they knocked,” she said breathlessly.

“Probably campers. Kids on Christmas holidays. Let me check out back.”

Maisie showed him into her house almost reluctantly. She could hear that Tabby had resumed her hockey game in the kitchen. Constable Blake opened the back door and strode out into the garden, flashing his torch about. She waited for him by the door.

“Whoever it was, they’ve gone,” he said, returning to the house.

“Thank you for coming, anyway.”

He fixed her with those hostile eyes. “I used to say this to your grandmother and I’ll say it to you. This house is too far from the town for a woman living alone. It’s dangerous. You could be in danger.”

Maisie thought he sounded like he relished the idea. She locked the laundry door. He stood, barring her way into the hallway. She felt very small next to him.

“For your own safety, get yourself off to Whitby or Scarborough, or somewhere there are more people and a properly staffed police station,” he continued. “If you’d called half an hour later I would have been off duty. It’s not safe here for you.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” she said, willing him to move. She was beginning to regret calling him. Phantoms in the garden suddenly didn’t seem as menacing as the big policeman blocking her way.

Suddenly, thankfully, he turned and was heading back down the hallway to the front door. “Well, if there are people with mischief on their minds, they’re always going to come here first. The cottage stands out, alone here, and it’s an obvious target.”

“Thank you for coming. I’m sure your car must have scared them away.” *Just go.*

He stopped and turned to her once more. “Remember – I’m off duty between ten p.m. and six a.m., and Sundays. If it’s an *emergency* ...” he said this word emphatically “...you can call me at home. Otherwise, just keep everything locked and don’t answer the door.”

She nodded. He bade her goodnight and headed towards his car. She closed the door with some relief and carefully locked it. She headed to the laundry window and once again looked out.

The garden was empty. She felt almost certain that her intruder hadn’t been a thrill-seeking kid on a camping holiday. In fact, she had an awful suspicion that it wasn’t even human.

Adrian waited in a cafe at Darling Harbour: a tastefully decorated place in oak and chrome, soft lights glancing off polished surfaces, and the smell of ground coffee hanging heavy and sensual in the air. Even though he lived in Roland Fielding’s house, he still felt apprehensive about meeting him here. Of course, it made sense for them to meet up for lunch while they

were both in Sydney working on the same production. It was just that the two of them were so rarely alone together. Usually Maisie was there, calling Roland “Dad” and making fun of the way he couldn’t keep his hands still if music played in the background, even if it was the neighbour’s radio playing middle-of-the-road seventies rock. But to be alone with Roland Fielding, internationally acclaimed conductor, an imposing man with silver hair, an erect back, and a distracted gaze. It was all Adrian could do not to call him “maestro” when he arrived.

“Hi, Roland.”

“Hello, Adrian.” Roland settled across from him and picked up the menu. “Last night went well, don’t you think?”

Adrian nodded. “I think so.” He knew he wouldn’t get a compliment on his personal performance out of Roland, so he didn’t wait for one. “I thought I might have the pasta. What about you?”

“Hmmm . . . I’ll have the salmon.”

Roland motioned for a waitress, who came to take their orders. When Roland had handed her the menus and she was on her way back to the kitchen, he turned to Adrian.

“Have you heard from Maisie?”

“I spoke to her yesterday.”

“How is she?”

“She’s fine. She spent the weekend with a friend in York, and she sounds a lot less homesick than she was last week.”

“Next time you speak to her, tell her to call her mother.”

“Sure.”

“Janet’s too stubborn to call her, but I’m sure she’s worried sick.”

Adrian opened his mouth to ask Roland about Maisie’s grandmother and the arrests, but a loud burst of laughter from a neighbouring table interrupted him. Roland looked over his shoulder and bestowed on the group one of his trademark looks of disdain, but they didn’t notice him. By the time he turned back, Adrian had thought better of delving into personal matters.

Lunch arrived and they slipped into a discussion of difficult scores and errant flautists while they ate. Roland ordered a bottle of wine between them and started to relax into an afternoon reverie, reminiscing about other orchestras and other concerts, long ago and in faraway places. A three o’clock sunbeam lay across the table when he began to describe his years conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in the seventies. His eyes glinted with excitement as he spoke about the concerts he had been part of, the famous musicians he had worked with.

“So why did you leave Berlin?” Adrian asked.

“Janet was pregnant.” He refilled his wine glass. “But I don’t regret it, of course,” he continued, in a voice that suggested he may actually regret it but was trying to convince himself otherwise. “Maisie has been worth it.”

“But why come to Australia?”

“Berlin felt unsafe, and anywhere in England was too close for comfort to Janet’s mother. We both agreed that we wanted to bring up the child back here at home.”

Maybe it was the two glasses of wine – Adrian rarely drank alcohol – but he found himself asking, “Why did Janet and her mother fall out?”

The waitress stopped by to ask if they wanted to order dessert, but Roland waved her away. “I don’t know what to say in answer to that,” he replied finally.

“Maisie thought it might be to do with her fortune-telling business, then Janet let something slip the other day about her mother being arrested.”

Roland nodded. “So you already know a little.”

“Just enough to make me curious as hell.”

Roland tapped his cheek and considered for a moment, then decided to answer. “All right, I’ll tell you what I know. Janet and Sybill – that’s her mother’s name – had widely different values. Janet was a neglected child. She learned piano not because of a doting, encouraging mother, but because her neighbour was a music teacher and took pity upon her. Sybill never dressed her properly or took proper care of her. The silly woman had strange people over all the time, conducting seances and probably taking drugs. Janet had an enormous talent for music, but Sybill barely recognised it. Thanks to her neighbour, who could see something special in her, Janet won a scholarship to a music school at ten. The school was in Sydney and at the time they were living in country Victoria. So Janet left home while still a child and boarded with another family. Sybill, who was originally from Yorkshire, moved back there soon after.”

“Left the country?”

“Yes. Absolved herself of responsibility for her child. You can see now why Janet’s will is fired in iron.”

“I guess I can.”

Roland sighed and ran a hand through his silvery

hair. “Unfortunately, I confused the issue when Maisie was born. I had some traditional ideas about parenthood, and thought that Sybill should be informed. I contacted her without telling Janet, and was delighted when the old woman said she would come to Australia to see the child. I imagined there may be a tearful reunion, a forgetting of old grudges. I was very, very wrong.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Sybill arrived, as a surprise. Janet could barely conceal her hostility, but Sybill was very friendly, very relaxed. There were no apologies, and I think Janet needed to hear an apology. Maisie was only a few weeks old, and Sybill sat next to Janet and cooed and made all the noises a normal grandmother would. I still held out hope that things could be resolved. But then Sybill said, ‘You know, Janet, your daughter has the Gift.’ This upset Janet terribly, and she ordered her out of the room, crying and clutching Maisie to her chest.”

“The Gift?”

Roland finished his wine and pushed the glass away from him. The CD playing in the background was jumping, and a waitress hurried across the room to turn it off. Silence. Adrian waited.

“She meant that Maisie had inherited her psychic ability.” Roland shook his head. “I feel ridiculous even saying it, but Janet took it very seriously. Janet is far more superstitious than she lets on. She likes to pretend she thinks it’s all nonsense, but I think she saw some frightening things as a little girl in her mother’s house, things that have traumatised her.”

“You mean supernatural things.”

Roland shrugged. “Who knows what really happened? To a small child, all that talk of communicating with the dead would have been terrifying whether it was real or not.”

“I suppose you’re right. So Sybill went home?”

“No. She stayed for a few more days, and I convinced Janet to let her baby-sit Maisie while we went out for lunch. I wanted to give Janet a break from the baby – she’d been working and worrying herself to exhaustion over the little thing. We were only gone a few hours. When we came home we found Sybill leaning over Maisie’s cot, mumbling some strange incantations, and dropping some kind of sweet-smelling powder over her. Like something out of *Sleeping Beauty*, with the three fairy godmothers. And I’m sure it was just Sybill’s way of blessing the child, but Janet ...” He paused, shaking his head sadly. “It was all over. Sybill left the next morning, and Janet never, never forgave her.”

“What did she think Sybill was doing?”

“Casting a spell. Which she was. Of course she was. The woman believed she was a witch. But even if I believed in spells, I wouldn’t have been too concerned. Sybill clearly doted on the baby, and would only have been acting with benevolent intentions. Janet thought otherwise, Janet thought ...” Again he paused. An embarrassed smile. “Janet thought that Sybill was trying to turn Maisie into a witch too.”

Adrian leaned back in his chair. “Wow,” he said.

“I know. It’s all a little hard to believe.”

“And so what was the deal with the arrests? She was arrested twice, right?”

“Actually, it was three times. I managed to keep the first time a secret from Janet. Her solicitor contacted

me to ask if we'd help with the fine. We paid all three fines, but never heard a word of thanks from Sybill."

"But what did she do? What was she arrested for?"

"Desecrating graves."

Adrian was astonished. "What?"

"She desecrated some graves in the local cemetery."

"Vandalised them?"

Roland glanced away. "Something like that. I think she was senile, but once again, Janet has other ideas. But she won't talk about it. She simply won't be drawn on the subject. She didn't even shed a tear when we found out Sybill was dead. I think she was more relieved than anything else." He nodded at Adrian. "So you can understand now why she was upset over Maisie wanting to track Sybill down."

"Of course. My god, why didn't Janet just tell her?"

"Because she's stubborn. And besides, do you think it would have made a difference? Maisie probably would have been twice as interested."

Adrian nodded: he knew Maisie. "Perhaps you're right."

The waitress discreetly slipped the bill onto the table, and Roland laid his American Express card on top of it. "Now you mustn't let on that you know. Janet would throttle me."

"Of course not. But I can tell Maisie, right?"

"I don't know. You decide. Let's just make sure Janet never knows that we've had this conversation."

"You have my word."

"To bring it all into the open would be pointless," Roland said earnestly. "Let's just leave it in the past where it belongs."

After she had changed her bra three times, Maisie stopped to admonish herself. It didn't matter if she was wearing her white lacy bra, her cute gingham bra, or the black one that made her skin look creamy. Sacha was not going to see her underwear.

"Sacha is not going to see my underwear," she said to Tabby, who watched her from the bed. "Not tonight. Not ever." She wriggled into her long, black skirt and a dark grey top, smoothing both as best she could over that curve on her midriff, and turned to her make-up bag. Kept everything understated except for the red, red lipstick. She had taken care blow-drying her hair, coaxing it into glossy ringlets. If Adrian saw her, prettied up for company, he would have said she looked like a china doll. He always said that.

Out in the lounge room, she selected one of her new CDs – she only had two – and inserted it into her new portable CD player. It squeaked reluctantly for a few moments and then decided that, yes, it would play. The trip to Whitby that morning had been worth it. The place felt more comfortable already with music playing. Though she'd probably soon get sick of listening exclusively to Jeff Buckley and Tori Amos.

Five minutes to six. He might not be here for another half an hour. She hated waiting, the rubber band winding up in her stomach. She fed a couple of pine cones to the fire, checked on the lasagne that she had prepared in advance – anything to make the evening proceed more easily – and peed for the fifth time in an hour.

Why was she so nervous?

Because he was cute. She was always nervous around cute guys.

A knock at the door. He was punctual. She liked punctuality in a man.

“Hang on,” she called, checking her reflection once more before answering the door.

“Hi,” she said, offering her most dazzling smile.

“Hi.” He handed her a bottle of wine. “I wasn’t sure what to bring. I hope red is okay.”

“Red’s great. Come in.”

She closed the door behind him. He shrugged out of a brown leather coat and hung it on the hook by the entrance. Underneath, he was wearing black cords and a dark blue shirt.

She motioned towards the lounge room.

“You’ve done loads of cleaning,” he said.

“I sure have. I’ve got a stack of things to go to Oxfam. Would you mind taking them in your van? I asked the second-hand place in the village to collect them, but they wouldn’t come up here.”

“Of course.”

“Sit down,” she said, pointing to the armchair nearest the fire. “Would you like a drink?”

He sat down, stretched out his legs. “No, thanks.”

“Oh. Okay, I’ll just ... I’ll be in the kitchen for a moment.”

She went to the kitchen and dropped the wine on the table. It was set beautifully for two, but she hadn’t put candles out. Candles screamed intimacy. She took the lasagne from the fridge and slid it into the oven, guessed where medium was on the dial – hard to tell with figures still in fahrenheit. Now to make

conversation. She had carefully prepared a mental list of topics that day just in case things got uncomfortable. And she had to remember to drop Adrian's name in there somewhere: she couldn't have Sacha getting the wrong idea about her intentions. When she returned to the lounge room, Tabby was purring happily in Sacha's lap.

"She won't sit on my lap," Maisie said, feeling hurt.

"She's probably still getting used to you."

Maisie sat in the chair opposite him. "Do you have any idea how old she is?"

"Four or five, I think. She was a little stray when Sybill took her in."

"She probably misses her."

"Probably."

"She sits on the washing machine all the time, gazing out the back window. Do you think she's watching for Sybill?"

Sacha shook his head. "No. Tabby always did that. Sybill used to joke about her seeing the spirits that hung around the magic circle."

A little chill ran up Maisie's spine. She leaned forward. "Were you and my grandmother very close?"

He seemed to be considering his answer carefully. "I suppose I was the closest person to her in the last few years. I mean, I saw her more regularly than anybody else. But Sybill wasn't a chatty woman. She didn't divulge any secrets, if that's what you want to know."

"Yeah. That's what I want to know. I want to know what she used her magic for."

"It wasn't anything . . . black. I promise you, your grandmother was a white witch."

“I saw a figure in the back garden last night. I called the police, but it disappeared. It seemed ... I don’t know, not human.”

“If it was dark, windy, moonlit, anything would look scary. A lot of kids camp nearby. I used to do it when I was a lad. There’s a great little cove about a half mile from here, with a cave in the cliff face. It’s always been a popular spot. Most kids usually wouldn’t come anywhere near Solgreve, though. The reputation of the locals isn’t good.”

She nodded. “The locals don’t like me much.”

“I’m not surprised. You have Sybill Hartley genes.”

Maisie stretched her legs, settled back into the chair and vowed not to think about creepy things while Sacha was here. He and Constable Blake were probably right, it was some mischievous teenager trying to scare her. Or even a mischievous villager trying to scare her out of town. “They wouldn’t deliver my groceries to my door, they wouldn’t pick up the second-hand stuff, they all went silent when I walked into the pub the other night ...”

“Sybill liked to go up to the pub and sit by the bar listening to everyone’s conversations. They hated it.”

“I’m trying to give them the impression I’m not staying long. Trying to disarm them.”

He tilted his head to one side, scratched Tabby behind the ears. “Noticed how many old people there are around here?”

Maisie considered. “I suppose there are a few.”

“Next time you’re in the village, count the wrinkled heads. You’ll be surprised.”

“I suppose it’s the kind of place people would want to retire. It’s quiet, it’s near the sea.”

He shook his head. Tabby jumped off his lap and curled up in front of the fire. “They don’t retire here. They grow old here. Really, really old. And they stay healthy. Sybill told me she knew of at least twelve people who are over a hundred.”

“You’re kidding.”

“It’s true. Must be something in the sea air. Or something in all that fervent praying they do. A local television station tried to do an article on them late last year, but everybody refused to talk. They didn’t like the idea of the place being overrun by people wanting to live longer. Though I can’t think of anything worse than living to that age. Surely you’d be tired enough to die by eighty or so.” He looked up and smiled. “Sybill had dated Reverend Fowler to be at least ninety.”

“What do you mean ‘at least?’”

“She hadn’t found a record of his birth and the church records weren’t helpful. She was really obsessed for a while with finding out how old he was.”

Maisie considered this for a few moments, the fire crackling between them. “Sacha,” she said, looking up, “did Sybill ever mention to you a diary she had found? A really old one?”

“Yes, I think so. Is that the book she found hidden around the house in parts?”

“In parts? Then there’s more than one piece?”

“I think she found three. But she put them all back where she found them. Don’t ask me where.”

Maisie sighed. It was all too much. Strange shapes in the garden, unnaturally old priests and diaries stashed in floorboards.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Sorry?”

“You sighed. What’s up?”

Maisie smiled. She didn’t have to solve any of it now, she just had to entertain Sacha. “Nothing’s up. I’m fine. It’s just that Sybill left so much junk behind, I don’t know what to chuck and what to keep.”

“I don’t think she would have expected you to keep anything. She had a healthy disdain for all things material.”

“So why didn’t she throw away some of this stuff?”

Sacha shrugged. “Can I have a drink after all?”

Over a glass of wine each, they knocked off every topic on Maisie’s list – from siblings to favourite movies – except her boyfriend. There was no help for it, she simply had to bring it up. It couldn’t go unspoken any longer, not with the way Sacha was looking at her (though he may have just been squinting against the fire).

“We’re having lasagne tonight, is that okay?”

“Sure,” he said.

“It’s my boyfriend’s favourite.” This was untrue. Adrian stayed away from red meat and from cheese as much as possible. Just a couple more things which were bad for the voice.

“What’s your boyfriend’s name?” He hadn’t even blinked in surprise and he hadn’t changed the way he was looking at her: just a little too steadily.

“Adrian.”

“And is he a musician too?”

“He sings. Opera.” Why did she feel embarrassed to say that? Was it because Sacha swept floors in a bakery?

Sacha didn’t seem to be embarrassed that he swept floors in a bakery. “And why didn’t Adrian come with you?”

“He’s busy. He’s working all through Christmas and then he’s teaching at a summer school in January. Besides, I needed to be alone.”

Sacha raised his eyebrows.

“I’ve got a lot to think about,” she continued. “About my future.”

“Ah. The future.”

“Yes. Like what am I going to do with my life.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four. Nearly twenty-five.”

“I should say you’re already doing it.”

Maisie laughed. “Well, it doesn’t feel like that. It feels like I’m waiting and waiting for something amazing to happen, and the longer it doesn’t happen, the more stuck I’m going to be with second best.”

“You’re like your grandmother. She was always yearning after something, she didn’t know what. She used to go for long walks along the cliffs, gaze out at the waves and get herself all wound up. Then she’d come home and find me in her garden and say, ‘Sacha, the sea knows something about me. Even if no-one on earth can understand, the sea knows something about me.’ But I always understood her. And I think I understand you.” He rose and took two steps towards her. Maisie’s breath caught in her throat.

“I can smell something burning,” he said, walking straight past her and out to the kitchen.

“Oh, god. The lasagne.”

She raced to the oven and pulled open the door. It wasn’t ruined, but a dribble of the cheesy topping had dripped over the edge of the pan and was merrily burning on the element. The lasagne was well and

truly done. She'd have to remember that halfway on the dial wasn't necessarily a medium heat.

"Sit down," she said, indicating the table.

"You've really made a difference to this kitchen," he said, looking around him as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Thanks." She had spent hours cleaning the kitchen properly, adding decorative touches like dried flowers and fresh fruit. Now it was inviting and homey, rather than jumbled and smelly. She served up the lasagne with potato salad on the side, then filled two fresh glasses with wine and joined Sacha at the table.

"I can't imagine how Sybill lived amongst all the clutter," Maisie said.

"I don't think she noticed it. Hey, this tastes great."

"Thanks."

"You should have seen the place when I first met her, when I was just a lad. Really creepy. You could still see the roof beams – they were centuries old – and it was really dark and very gloomy. But over the years she renovated the inside, put in the new ceiling, new floors in places, the new bathroom – don't you love the colours?"

"Kind of sickening."

"In fact, the only thing she didn't change was the fireplace in the lounge room. That's why it looks a bit old and crumbly. It's original, probably dates to around the middle of the seventeenth century."

"Wow. Is the house that old?"

He nodded because his mouth was full of food.

"In Australia, we've got nothing that old. Not built by European settlement anyway."

“You get used to it living here. I hardly notice. So, what are you doing for Christmas?”

She shook her head. “Trying not to think about it. I might see if Cathy, that’s my friend in York, wants to get together.”

“Oh.” He kept eating.

Idiot. Maybe he was going to ask you to join him for Christmas. “But that’s not for certain,” she said quickly. “I don’t know what Cathy has planned.”

He didn’t respond. Had she missed her chance?

What chance, Maisie? What are you planning?

She had to stop thinking about him like this. By the end of the evening she had given herself a headache. *Don’t be encouraging. Don’t be unavailable. Don’t hold his gaze too long. Don’t look away too quickly. Don’t forget about Adrian. Don’t talk about your boyfriend so much.* Where was the voice of reason? Where was the voice telling her that flirting just proved she had a pulse, and if she could simply enjoy Sacha’s company all would be well?

“I’d better go,” Sacha said around nine-thirty, pulling himself to his feet. “I have to work early in the morning.”

“Okay.” She succeeded in not sounding too disappointed. She followed him to the door and waited while he put on his coat.

He stood still for a moment, looking at her. “Thanks for dinner,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

He leaned over and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. She could feel herself light up. He fumbled with the door and walked out into the cold evening air.

“I’ll see you soon,” he said.

“Great.”

Then he was on his way to the van, and it was too cold to hold the door open any longer, so she went back inside and sat by the fire. She was a little tipsy from the wine (she had drunk more than he because he had to drive), and a warm glow settled over her.

He had kissed her.

He had said he would see her soon.

It wouldn’t be soon enough.

She had to do something to get her mind off Sacha, so she pulled out the rest of the diary. It was late and she should have been sleepy from the wine, but lying alone in her bed was only an invitation to toss and turn all night. Maybe the diary would help her doze off.

CHAPTER NINE

Monday, 23 September 1793

Though far from being a blissful New Bride, I find myself quite comfortable and hopeful in my new surroundings. I notice it has been scarce a week since I last wrote, but I feel a lifetime has passed. Virgil and I made our escape on a series of mail coaches, with a corresponding series of disagreeable horsemen to make innuendoes about our circumstances.

We were due to stop over with friends of Virgil's in Nottingham, but found their residence deserted and boarded up. We slept on their doorstep, then continued on to Gretna Green, where we were married in the Scottish way. We headed immediately back to York, and from there we made our way by hackney coach to Solgreve, population 650. This village has the most extraordinarily large burial ground, which lies directly behind the great ruins of an old abbey and a small modern church. We have been reluctantly

welcomed to Solgreve by a pious Reverend named Fowler, who I can tell thinks little of our hasty Presbyterian marriage. We now live in a little stone cottage about a quarter-mile from the sea, on St. Mary's Lane. It is a rather old and curious place. Edward's great-uncle's father built it himself, and lived in it until he was 109! It has been empty for many years, and is quite small and dim.

We are very close to the sea here, and Virgil and I have already learned to appreciate its comforting sounds. In fact, we have been down to the beach on two occasions. I suppose I need not blush to admit these things now that I am a married woman, but there is a little story that I would like to record of our first trip to the beach. You see, we found there an old fishing boat. We pulled it out of the sand and saw that it looked whole and unbroken, and decided foolishly to try it in the water. It floated perfectly for the first five minutes, as Virgil and I paddled with our arms out onto the pale blue sea. Virgil christened her the Good Ship Sweetheart, and we thought ourselves terribly clever for finding such a sound vessel. But then I noticed my skirts becoming wet and it became apparent that there was a tiny leak somewhere. We hastily paddled back to shore, up to our ankles in seawater before long, and pulled the boat back up to its place behind the rocks. Here in the soggy boat, laughing and falling about like children, Virgil and I made love under the smiling sun. Yes, out in the open! I can scarce believe that I did it, now, as it seems so incontinent a thing to do. But there, I have done it, and I enjoyed it, and here I am, two days later, boasting about it like a silly fool!

I have written to my parents in Lyon and hope for a reply in the coming days. I know that they will be angry, but I'm sure they will come to love me again as time passes; perhaps even to help with our money problems which appear to be greater than either of us first anticipated. We have yet to acquire more than the most basic of Furniture, Silver and Plate, and I now regret not bringing more than one case with me, as I find myself with only three good dresses and one house dress, which I have hardly been out of these eight days. Still, Virgil is due to start work later this week, assisting a local medical researcher, Dr Aaron Flood. He says he has helped him once before, and insists the man pays well. I have some little savings of my own which will bear us until things improve, and there is always the prospect of Virgil's poetry being published very soon by an interested House in London. We hope daily to hear an answer from them.

You may sense in my words a kind of curious contentment with my lot, and I must admit that this is exactly how I feel. I have not the trappings of luxury to which I am used, but I have by my side the most beautiful partner for whom I could wish. We eat nothing more exotic than bread, bacon and cheese, and yet we eat it together. We have no fine linen, and yet we awake next to each other in the morning. We light no fancy lanterns, but we love each other just as well by rushlight. I feel every day that I have made the right choice, that I would much rather be here with Virgil than in France without him.

At this point, the only thing which troubles me is the inclement weather! This town must be the windiest place on Earth, and such a tumult of weather at night

did ever make me anxious. I expect I will become used to it very soon, and as long as I have my husband's body against which to warm myself at night, I vow that I shall not complain. Let the mad, rich world of barons and dukes and countryside mansions spin on without us. We shall nurture each other with love.

Tuesday, 1 October 1793

My entries, you see, are not as regular now I am occupied with the business of Marriage. It is usually Virgil to whom I turn when I need to express what I feel or think. However, tonight I am alone, for Virgil is out at his new place of employment. And tonight also, though I despise myself for admitting it, I am so very angry with him that I can only write it down, for to tell him would certainly cause an argument, and I have vowed we shall never argue.

It seems we are soon to have the company of Mr Snowe and Miss Andrews, living with us in this self-same house. You cannot imagine my misery, my disappointment. In the short time we have been together, Virgil and I have learned to live modestly, and I can endure modest living most sweetly when it is just we two. We create Peace between us. The thought of losing our privacy is intolerable to me. And to lose it because the house will contain those two! Of course I don't mind Edward on his own, but Charlotte I despise, and she leads him on to greater and greater ruin I am sure. When they come to share our house, all the harmony and agreeable solitude which Virgil and I have had will be gone.

Virgil says that as this house belongs to Edward's great-uncle, we can scarcely say No to him. But I rather think that Virgil may be looking forward to his

company, so that they may work on their poetry together. He has also mentioned that Edward may work for Dr Flood too, and that the extra income may –

Diary, the most odd thing has just happened. As I was writing, I heard a knock at the door. Upon answering it, there stood the local Reverend. I invited him in, but he refused my invitation.

“Not while your husband is out at work,” he said. “I shall not disturb your peace for long. I wanted only to ask whether or not you have been in touch with your family yet, to tell them of your new circumstances.”

The Reverend, of course, knew that we had been married in Scotland and could easily see I was under 21. It does not surprise me that he had deduced our marriage did not have the approval of our families.

“Yes, Reverend, I have written to my parents, but as yet I have not heard anything in reply. My aunt in London sent me a note just a day or so ago to tell me my mother’s last letter to her mentioned nothing of my marriage. So either she has not received my last letter –”

“Or she is not acknowledging you.”

“That is what I fear, Reverend.” I did not tell him that even Aunt Hattie had become frosty towards me, accusing me of not knowing the difference between Life and a Game. I do not know that they are so very different.

He nodded as though satisfied with my response. “Do let me know if you hear from them. Shall we see you in church this weekend?”

Virgil and I have not attended a service since our arrival. I was raised a Catholic (albeit a reluctant one), and Virgil is experimenting with atheism, so it hardly

seems appropriate. But we had promised the Reverend when we first met to become faithful members of his congregation.

“Perhaps,” I said, turning my eyes down so I wouldn’t see his disapproval.

“Very well. Goodnight, Mrs Marley.”

I bid him goodnight and returned to you, Diary. What a strange, inquisitive man he is. I’m sure Virgil would not be so kind in his summation. I wish the Reverend had not made me feel so guilty, for what should I care for his opinion of me? I suppose that I have been used to being treated as a Lady, as an example of moral fortitude and grace. However, when Reverend Fowler looks at me, I am sure he sees another Charlotte. I wanted to tell him that I was a virgin until my wedding night, and that this elopement is the first disobedient thing I have ever done, but I doubt he would have believed me. When he talks of my parents, my family, he would not believe that my father is noble, that my aunt a rich widow. He probably imagines they are cobblers or tailors or some other such lowly profession. Why, it makes my flesh burn with indignation.

But listen to me! As I write these words I must remember that I have chosen lowliness. We cannot afford even one servant, but Virgil promises upon Edward’s arrival to engage a maid-of-all-work immediately. The house shall be overcrowded, for it is only a little place, old and draughty and dark, with tiny, dingy rooms and hideous black beams in the ceiling that seem to weigh me down.

I am sorry. I really must pull myself out of my misery. It is Virgil’s place to be melancholy, and mine to

be all cheer and optimism. This place has been the seat of all my bliss as long as just Virgil and I were here, but I suppose I have always known that bliss would be short-lived. Virgil must go to work every evening now, and sometimes does not come home until nearly three a.m. If I hear the church clock strike two and he's not yet in bed with me, I worry and pace until he comes home. And when he does come in, he is too tired to talk with me or to make love (which I suppose I should be ashamed to admit an appetite for!). I think he dislikes his employer, because he often seems disturbed and distracted when he comes home, and sometimes must take a few drops of laudanum for his nerves.

Still, any day we may hear from my parents, with some forgiveness and perhaps generosity: I know I am entitled at least a little money. And any day we may hear from the publishing house in London who are considering Virgil and Edward's collection. I'm sure these circumstances are only temporary, and I must take heart that my misery will be short-lived. I have chosen this life, and I stand by my choice.

Sunday, 6 October 1793

What an evening we had last night! Edward and Charlotte arrived in the early afternoon, insisting that they will not stay long, a declaration that caused me no end of happiness. Already my spirits were buoyed, and became even more so when I saw how much Virgil cheered in Edward's company. I know that I have said I prefer it when only we two are here, but I perhaps was being selfish, and had not noticed how withdrawn Virgil was becoming. He is like his old self, full of teasing and gentle smiles (for Virgil smiles never more than gently).

With all Edward's raucous joking and Charlotte's squealing, and with all the conversation and drinking of wine, I could not hear the awful wind outside (which even now howls over the eaves and down the chimney).

Then, at suppertime as we sat around the table in the kitchen, Virgil began to tell Edward about his nerves, and that Dr Flood had given him opium, which he took as a tincture. I had heard stories about opium, and was immediately appalled.

"Virgil!" I exclaimed, "how is it that you have not told me about this?"

Virgil looked at me, bewildered. "But, Gette, you know that I take it. What do you think laudanum is? It is merely opium in alcohol."

Charlotte saw no shame in screaming with laughter at me.

"I did not know," I mumbled, not meeting anyone's eye. You see, I had always thought laudanum a medicinal, and opium-eating an immoral custom imported from the East. I remember my father breaking off a friendship with another man because he engaged in the debauchery of "*l'opiomane*". But then, my father is a stern and strictly self-regulated man.

As Charlotte's laughter trailed off, Edward said, "Do you have any left?"

I looked up. Virgil nodded. "Shall we?"

I began to protest, but Virgil grasped my hand. "Gette, do not worry. It's just like drinking wine, only a little more potent. We have had it before, and do not forget that it is a medicine. It works to heal the body, not to harm it."

I was not going to allow Charlotte to laugh at me again, so I merely nodded. He let go of my hand and

rose to go to the bedroom. One of the candles on the table began to splutter, so I went to the sideboard for my snuffers. We are trying to conserve our candles, so we have only two burning most nights, and they are tallow and smell faintly of sheep grease. I clipped the wick and the candle surged back to life.

Virgil returned with the crystal bottle which sat beside our bed, and proceeded to pour out a measure of the red liquid to all four of us. I picked up my glass and sniffed it gingerly, but could smell no Sin. Rather, the liquid smelled faintly of cinnamon and eastern spices. Charlotte and Edward held their glasses to each other's lips, quickly downed the tincture and then pressed their mouths together in a passionate kiss. I returned my attention to Virgil. He was gazing at me solemnly, his eyes nearly black in the candlelight, so beautiful that my breath stopped in my lungs.

"Gette?" he said quietly, holding his glass close to my face.

"I'm frightened," I whispered in return.

"I would never let anything bad happen to you," he replied.

I looked once again at my own glass, then boldly held it up to Virgil's mouth. At the same moment, I felt the cool of his glass touch my own lips, and we tilted in unison, the bitter-sweet drink passed over my tongue and I swallowed it. Virgil put our glasses aside and kissed me, but not in the animal way that Charlotte and Edward kissed, just a slow, gentle touch of warm reassurance.

"What now?" I asked.

"We wait," Edward said, pulling Charlotte on to his lap.

To my dismay, they returned to ordinary conversation. I felt no immediate difference, except perhaps a light sickness of the stomach. But within ten minutes (and some of the following descriptions may not make sense) it seemed as though the whole room began to pulse, as though with an unnatural heartbeat, and the candlelight seemed to glow suddenly so much brighter.

Then, oh, what a revolution to my senses! My hands had been resting on the table-top, and without realising it, my fingers were moving over the smooth polish. It felt like nothing I had ever felt before – like silky glass, or wet diamonds, sending tingles through my fingertips that wove icy cobweb patterns in my brain. I could not stop feeling the table-top. It seemed to me as though my hands could sense colours, but not the colours we ordinarily see: my hands could find the truth about colours. Although I had always known the table as chestnut, I realised now that it was actually glacial white. I said aloud, “The table-top is white,” and Virgil replied, “I know.”

So I touched Virgil, and found that he was the colour of red wine as one sees it by candlelight through glass: glowing darkly, mysterious, promising. I leaned over and kissed his hand, which was lying upon the table, and found he tasted the same.

“If only we had music,” he said, and even his voice was dark wine. My cheek rested on the table-top, my mouth closed around one of his fingers. I breathed in the impossible combination of the glacial wood and the dark liquid of his skin.

“Charlotte will sing,” Edward declared, and I looked up to see him propel Charlotte out of his lap so

that she stood unsteadily in the candlelight, an amused smile curling her lips.

“Where e’er you walk,” she began in a clear bell-like tone, *“Cool gales shall fan the glade, Trees where you sit shall crowd into a shade . . .”*

I closed my eyes to listen, and though her voice was unaccompanied, it was as though a choir of angels were singing with her. Even the wind outside seemed to have found a harmony for her voice. It was little short of rapture to listen, as I was, slumped over the table with Virgil’s finger still trapped between my lips.

But then Virgil withdrew his finger and I heard him say, “Bravo.”

I opened my eyes and sat up. Edward was now standing behind Charlotte, caressing her ribs while she sang.

“Where e’er you tread, the blushing flowers shall rise . . .”

“Yes. Come, my angel – sing, sing!” Edward cried as his hands rose and closed over her breasts.

“And all things flourish, and all things flourish, and all things flourish . . .”

Now his fingers had pulled apart her bodice.

“Where e’er you turn your eyes.”

He pushed underneath her breasts so that they spilled out of her stays. She stretched like a cat, clearly enjoying herself.

“Where e’er you turn your eyes, where e’er you turn your eyes.”

Indeed, I could not turn my eyes away. Edward gathered her skirt and chemise, pushing them up so we could see her thighs (I was not so out of my wits that I

didn't notice what awful, sturdy, man's legs she has). She had stopped singing now, and instead had leaned her head back on Edward's shoulder, letting him undress her before us. The sudden resumption of silence, or at least what passes for silence in this windy place, caused a strange shock to my senses. A peculiar panicky feeling came over me. When Edward grew bolder and exposed the very flower of her womanhood, I pushed myself out of my chair and thumped my fist on the table.

"Don't!" I cried. "Do not!"

"Jealous little virgin," Charlotte hissed in reply. As I looked at her, it seemed her mouth was a huge, wet thing; her breasts, her thighs, everything womanly about her suddenly became obscene, overdeveloped, grotesque and hungry.

Rather than look at her, I fled to our bedroom. It was blissfully dark. I threw myself upon the bed, and clutched at the sheets as though they might stop me from falling into the awful abyss that seemed to have opened around me. I realised after a few moments that I could hear muffled laughter from the parlour, and I became so angry that I thought my feelings would split me in two. I simply could not bear the thought that Virgil might be enjoying such a display of Harlotry, but I knew if I called him I would seem like the jealous little virgin which Charlotte had accused me of being.

I pressed my palms to my eyes and tried to calm my senses, which was impossible because they were in such a tumult from the opium. Once again, I heard the muffled laughter, and this time I heard Charlotte make a little moan of delight. I simply could not stand for it, so I called for my Husband.

“Virgil,” I cried, trying to sound pathetic and not at all angry. “I am so very ill. Would you please come?”

I heard him push his chair back and approach the room. In a moment he had closed the door behind him and sat down next to me.

“Gette?”

I sat up. “I have a sickness in my stomach.”

“It’s just the laudanum. You’ll get used to it.” He touched me tenderly on the forehead. I was so overwhelmed with sensation that I began to cry.

“Please, Virgil, promise you will always love me.”

“Of course, my little poppet, of course I will.”

What I really wanted for him to promise was never to love Charlotte, but he had gathered me in his arms to comfort me, and I knew that I would only demonstrate my jealousy if I asked him. He lay me down and wrapped me amongst the covers, then sat with me until he thought I was asleep. In fact, I dozed a little, but as soon as he got up to leave I woke again, and lay there listening. I dreaded hearing sounds from the parlour that may suggest Virgil was enjoying Charlotte and Edward’s debauchery, but even though I strained my ears over the gusts of wind which shook the windows, I could not hear her voice or her laughter. I did not know how long I had dozed, but I think perhaps she and Edward had finished their ridiculous business, and she had gone to bed also.

Still, I listened to Virgil and Edward talk. I found it comforting to hear the low rumble of male voices. Rain had just started falling outside, and a constant drip-drip sounded off the eaves. I burrowed further under the blankets, feeling warm and content.

I heard them speak of poetry and politics, and of

returning to London as soon as they could, as soon as they had enough money or their collection was published.

“And so you have told Flood that I’m looking for work?” Edward asked.

“He says he’ll be happy to have you work for him again,” Virgil replied. A clink of glass against glass told me they were drinking wine together.

“Does Georgette know what kind of work you’re doing?”

“No. And she won’t find out. It would disturb her too much.”

My skin prickled.

“Are you sure it’s not you who will become disturbed?” Edward asked. “I remember last time.”

“I’m better now. I can endure anything for Gette’s sake. No other employer would pay me so well for only a few nights’ work.”

“No other employer is a monster.”

A short silence prevailed. I could see reflected candlelight dipping and swelling against the wall of my room. The rain had become heavy, making it hard for me to listen.

“Do you think he is a monster?” Virgil said at last. “Truly?”

“You know he is,” Edward replied.

“He does monstrous things, I’ll grant you. But it is in the interests of scientific discovery.”

“I don’t believe that, Virgil. I think Flood is interested in far more personal goals than scientific discovery.” I heard one of them, Edward I think, stand and walk to the sideboard, perhaps to fetch the snuffers.

“Have you ever touched his hand?” Edward continued.

“Yes. Upon our first meeting I shook it.”

“His fingers are icy but smooth. So unnaturally smooth, like a pebble worn down by the sea.”

“I think he is very old.”

“I cannot imagine how he can live where he does,” Edward said.

“A fitting lair for a monster,” Virgil said laughing, but I sensed from his voice that it was only mock cheer. That perhaps Flood frightened him a little. “The dark, the cold, the half-finished experiments.”

“I once found half a frog in a glass dish behind his work bench. The back half. I almost didn’t recognise what it was, divorced from its context like that.” More laughter, the kind that we rely upon to disperse discomfort.

Their conversation turned elsewhere, and Virgil came to bed shortly after. I have not been able to rest for worry, so I left him sleeping peacefully and came here to the parlour to write. Dawn would be upon us if the sky were not so laden with the coming day’s rain.

I am all confusion, not knowing what to do with this new knowledge. I want to ask Virgil what it is that Flood does, but I find that I am irrationally afraid. Monstrous science? I simply cannot imagine. I shall think on it some more, for I cannot sleep. I cannot even close my eyes.

CHAPTER TEN

Maisie sat back to contemplate what she had just read. The rest of the page was empty, but Georgette always started a new entry on a fresh sheet. So Sacha was probably right, the diary didn't end here. Maisie had recognised her grandmother's handwriting in the margins clarifying a word here or there, and then, under the last entry, Sybill had written in pencil: "look up". Whatever that meant. Maybe she'd intended to look up some information about Dr Flood, or about Georgette herself.

Far from putting her to sleep, the diary had awakened a sense of unease, although she couldn't quite put her finger on why. It could have been the last mention of Dr Flood as some kind of monster, it could have been because Georgette had described the house – this house – in ways that made it seem old and grim and with a history that stretched back into a darker past.

She tipped her head back on the armchair and looked up at the ceiling. No black beams in the roof now. A new ceiling, painted pale yellow, had been put in. Double glazing blocked the wind, and electric lights warded off the night's shadows. The shadows that were deepening towards midnight beyond the windows.

No, she knew why she was unsettled. A "pious Reverend named Fowler" had come calling on Georgette when she first arrived, just as his namesake had called on Maisie. And Sacha had told her that very evening that Sybill, obsessed with finding out how old he was, had dated her own Reverend Fowler to at least ninety. But of course it *was* just his namesake. It was probably common for parishes to stay in one family for centuries. Or common to be surnamed Fowler in North Yorkshire. Or common for fabulous coincidences to occur when a girl was all alone in a cold place away from loved ones.

It meant nothing.

Still, she left the lights on in the lounge room when she went to bed, hoping the bright electric yellow would keep at bay the eerie shade of centuries.

The cold haze of morning hadn't yet lifted, and Maisie's breath made dragon puffs in the air as she left the house and headed towards the road. Icy threads of wind tangled in her hair. She jammed her hands into her pockets. Even with gloves on, her fingers felt numb.

Saturday. Empty time stretched out before her until Christmas. Since she had woken up that morning, her loneliness and emptiness had woken up with her.

The cold was everywhere and she was a long way from home.

She headed towards the cemetery, intending to seek out her grandmother's grave. She could hear the sea battering the bottom of the cliffs and thought about what Sacha told her Sybill used to say: "The sea knows something about me." Well, perhaps it knew something about Maisie as well.

All the trees lining the main road were now completely stripped of their leaves. Their bare branches were stark against the freezing sky. A blackbird on a gnarled branch watched her approach and flapped away. The abbey rose up like a phantom watching over the graves. Maisie still hadn't managed to shake her first impression of it, that unsettling, almost uncanny, sense of deep-buried dread. Other old ruins she had seen were beautiful, but there was something dark and rotted about the stone Solgreve Abbey was built from. She turned from it and headed towards the low cemetery wall: pale stone, covered in moss and creeping lichen. A sign on the wall, old and weather-beaten, said, Church Property: No Trespassers. She assumed it didn't apply to mourners and clambered over into the cemetery proper.

Maisie walked right down the centre of the cemetery until she came to the cliff, and stood there for a few minutes watching the sea foaming and bubbling, grey and white. Seagulls ducked and weaved above her. The yearning was back, that thing that lived inside her like a ravenous, puling child. How was she supposed to be happy while she had this feeling: this queasy, bored feeling which attached itself to the weirdest objects as though they had the answer to all life's problems? Every morning for as long as she could remember she woke up hoping that today she'd feel

satisfied, contented, fulfilled. But then the feeling would start to seek her out. It hid in her favourite songs, or it lazed on the eyebrows of exotic boys, or, like now, it rolled in with the grey waves as she watched them.

She turned her back on the sea and surveyed the expanse of the cemetery. How on earth was she to find her grandmother in here? Perhaps she should have contacted Reverend Fowler, asked for directions. She inspected the graves nearest her. Wind and rain had worn away the inscriptions on the headstones, nearly eaten the entire surface to wormwood ribbons. They looked as though they had rotted in sympathy with the bodies they stood guard over. One had worn through completely. The top half lay in the grass, as though in disgrace. She wandered slowly up towards the road.

If only she hadn't been thinking obsessively about Sacha all morning. Adrian was a known quantity, everything about him was known to her: his irrational fears and his vain habits and even how his breath smelled first thing in the morning. All was open with him, and she did love him. Of course she did. But here was Sacha, all darkness and mystery, exotic, dangerous even. She had gone over their conversation in her mind, scoured it for evidence of his feelings for her – (feelings for her? was she mad? she'd only met him twice) – and in her more reckless moments, imagined in shadowy detail where things could lead one freezing midwinter night.

Stop.

These graves were all too old. She paused to look at one. Sheltered a little from the wind by other headstones, some of its inscription was still legible.

Here lieth Mary Margaret Hapselth. Born ... Died 14-5-1715 of ... from Heaven and returned ... Forever missed. Forever? The inscription wasn't even going to make it to three hundred years by the looks of it. The entire mid-section of writing was missing. People died, and then some time later their mourners died, and then some time later, even the material signs of grief died too. There was nothing permanent about life, not even the loss of it.

Morbid thoughts again. She felt like she had been living entirely inside her head for the last two weeks. Perhaps even Cathy and Sacha were spontaneously created figments of fantasy.

Further back from the cliffs, the inscriptions were closer to entire. She stopped to read one, and was surprised by what she found. Below the usual details of name, date, birth, and mourners, were two extra lines:

Whoever disturbeth this peaceful bower/ Shall fall soon after to the devil's power.

A curse. She read it again and backed away. She was probably standing right on top of the remains. Was that disturbing the grave? Too much weird stuff had happened in the last two weeks for her not to be superstitious about things like that. She moved up the pathway, looking from gravestone to gravestone. It took only a few moments to realise that more than half the graves were protected by curses.

Damned is he who troubles this grave.

Eternal hellfire to all who attempt to resurrect the occupant.

The men who dare to diggeth upon this tomb will face God's mighty wrath.

It wasn't the cold that made her shiver this time. She strayed off the path, trying to be mindful of where bodies might be lying below the ground, and read as many headstones as she could.

The cold grey sky arched above, the cold grey sea endlessly pounded below, as Maisie flitted from grave to grave in the enormous cemetery, reading curse after curse. A few drops of rain spattered here and there, and the wind pulled her hair around, impatiently making knots. Maisie filled her eyes with grey stone and dark promises, and wished she wasn't totally alone.

She wove up through the cemetery towards a newer area. But over near the abbey were graves that looked even older than the eighteenth-century headstones on the cliff-top. She remembered what Cathy had said: "I bet there are burials over a thousand years old there. Could be some amazing stuff in the ground." Maybe she'd go over and have a look after she had found her grandmother.

A motor stopped nearby: Constable Blake's patrol car. She paused to watch as he got out and climbed over the cemetery wall, strode towards her. Her heart sped up a few beats. What did he want?

"What's the matter?" she called.

He didn't answer until he was with her. "I'm sorry. You'll have to leave."

"Leave?"

"The cemetery. It's private property."

Maisie nearly laughed, but he looked totally serious. "Private property? But I'm just looking for my grandmother's grave. To pay my respects."

"It's this way." He began to move off towards the west wall, and she had no choice but to follow him.

“Here,” he said, coming to a halt.

Maisie stopped next to him and looked down. A simple plaque set into a flat stone said: *Sybill Gloria Hartley. At peace.* She gazed at it, aware that the police officer hadn’t left her side. Growing irritated, she turned to him and said, “Is there any chance of being alone with my thoughts?”

He nodded. “You have to have church permission to come into the cemetery, and Reverend Fowler will accompany you. I’ll just be over there.” He indicated the wall nearest where his car was parked. He strode off, and Maisie watched him go. This was too bizarre.

“Hi, grandma,” she said softly. “Sorry, I can’t chat, but there’s a hairy policeman watching me. You lived here for a long time, so you’ll probably understand.” She wished she had brought some flowers.

Constable Blake was watching her like a hawk from his car. She gave him a quick wave and left her grandmother’s grave, headed out of the cemetery, over the wall and back up the main road home. She heard his car start and a moment later he drove past her. How embarrassing to be moved along like that as though she were a teenager. What was so wrong with visiting the cemetery? It wasn’t like it was midnight and she planned a Satanic rite. This village was full of crazy people.

Crazy enough to do what they did that night. Around ten-thirty, when she was getting ready for bed, Maisie was shocked to hear a loud thump on her roof.

“What the hell ...?” She dropped her toothbrush and went into the hallway. The noise again: a loud thump and a clatter. Tabby started and ran towards the back door. Please, not the hooded shape in the garden again – she couldn’t handle another bout with that.

Then the sound of smashing glass from the front of the house. Maisie raced up the hallway and into the lounge room. Someone had thrown a rock at the window. Glass lay in shards all over the floor. She immediately reached for the phone, but then remembered Constable Blake's warning: he went off duty at ten p.m.

Instead she crept across the hallway to her bedroom, and peered out the window cautiously. If she saw that hooded figure again, she was going to pack up and move tomorrow. But the hooded figure wasn't there – just a perfectly ordinary male of the species throwing another rock at her roof. This one clattered into the eaves and fell to ground. She fumbled with the latch and hoisted the window open.

“Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing?”

The man, whose face was obscured by shadows, immediately backed away and began to run down the street. Maisie raced to the door and threw it open, but thought better of chasing him. In the distance she could hear a car start, and knew she would never catch him. The bastard had probably timed the attack so that she couldn't call the police. She closed the door and walked carefully into the lounge room. She began to collect some of the glass. How was she going to patch up the hole in her window until she could get someone out here to fix it?

The sound of an engine outside brought her to the window again, but she wasn't in time to see the car or its licence plate. Only in time to hear the man bellow one bewildering word from his car window.

“Witch!”

Reverend Fowler placed his elbows carefully on his scarred desk and tried to look stern, but the five people facing him displayed no signs of discomfort. They were Tony Blake, who had called this meeting; Douglas and Elsa Smith, local busybodies by most standards, but invaluable members of the community in Solgreve; and their neighbours and close friends Walter and Margaret King. Last night, Walter King, encouraged by his wife and neighbours, had taken it into his own hands to try to run the girl out of town. Perhaps it had seemed like a good idea at the time, but by mid-morning it had turned out badly. She had called Tony up to the house to inspect the damage for an insurance company, her solicitor had arrived huffing and puffing and getting quotes from glaziers, and now, at three p.m., there was a truck parked out the front of the cottage and two workmen taking their time fixing the window. All it had caused was trouble.

“I don’t understand what the problem is,” Walter King was saying, his hairy eyebrows shooting up in consternation. “Nobody’s told her I did it, Tony’s not going to fine me over it, so why bother with this meeting?”

“Because you have to stay out of it. You have to let me take care of it,” the Reverend said, trying to sound reasonable but firm.

“*You* take care of it?” This was Elsa Smith, a sharp-eyed octogenarian with a shock of white hair. “What have you done? Sat here and waited and hoped – that’s all. Walter was just trying to scare her. We all want her out of here.”

“But his action brought more people to town, focused more attention on us. That solicitor could

mention it to people he knows in York. We don't want to arouse that kind of suspicion."

"She was in the cemetery!" Elsa almost shouted these words.

"We needn't worry," Tony replied. "She might not know anything."

"She's Sybill's granddaughter. These things are passed between generations," Margaret King said.

The Reverend had to stop himself from physically recoiling. It was his greatest fear that Maisie would prove to be just as powerful and formidable as Sybill.

"What are you going to do to protect this town if you won't let us protect it?" Douglas Smith demanded.

The Reverend put up his frail white hands. "Stop ... please ..." He had to raise his voice to be heard over the outraged questions. "Please ... be quiet."

Finally they ran out of steam. Tony gave the Reverend an encouraging smile.

"I hear your complaints," the Reverend said at last. "I understand your concerns because they are also my concerns. The girl has told me herself she won't be here much past Christmas. Why don't we wait until then? If she still hasn't gone, then I will do something about it."

"What will you do?" Elsa asked sharply.

"Try to understand this: when people are confronted by rock-throwing locals, they will always – *always* – report that to the authorities. It's a crime, and they know it's a crime. But when people are confronted by other frightening things, things they can't explain or even believe, they are very reluctant to come forward." The Reverend laid his hands on his desk, reached for a pen to idle with. "I can call on ... well, you know."

They were all nodding slowly now.

“I think she’s already had a visit from one of them,” Tony said. “I suspect that’s what was in her back garden when she called on Wednesday night.”

“Her presence may have aroused their interest,” the Reverend said. “But they can do more than stand in the back garden and look mysterious. We all know that.” He paused. “Sybill Hartley found that out.”

They all nodded, sagely, smugly.

“So if she’s not gone after Christmas –” the Reverend began.

“No. Now. Scare her now,” Elsa said. “Make sure she goes.”

“But if there’s no need –”

“Just once.” This was Tony interjecting. “What do you say, Reverend?”

He sighed, clasped his thin hands together. “All right. Just once before Christmas.”

“We’re agreed then,” said Walter King. “Just a little something to scare her now and we’ll leave her alone. And if she doesn’t go after Christmas, you’ll take care of it.”

“Yes, I shall,” the Reverend replied. Though he was hoping fervently that the girl would leave of her own accord as she had said she would. He would much prefer to avoid resorting to those tactics again.

“Hi, Maisie, it’s Cathy.”

“Cathy! How nice to hear from you.” Maisie sat heavily in her armchair. “I just made a cup of tea. Your timing’s perfect.”

“Well I’m standing in the freezing hallway in the boarding house. So enjoy your cosiness, won’t you.”

“I will. I’ve had a bugger of a day.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“Last night some dickhead put a rock through my front window, so today I’ve been sorting it out. I suppose I shouldn’t complain as it’s given me something to do. To top it off, though, now I think I’m coming down with a cold.” And nobody to make her hot lemon drinks. Colds were miserable at the best of times.

“Who threw a rock at your window?”

“One of the locals. I don’t think he meant to break it. It was a good shot to get it through the bars. This whole place is crazy. I got evicted from the cemetery yesterday while I was paying my grandmother my last respects.”

“Really? I wonder if it has anything to do with the archaeologists who keep asking to dig it up,” Cathy said.

Maisie sighed. “No, I just think everyone here is *loco*.” Though Cathy’s explanation did make sense. “Anyway, you don’t want to hear about that. You know, I found an old diary stashed under the floorboards.”

“A diary?” Cathy exclaimed. “Whose diary?”

Maisie summarised the story for Cathy, who found it all thrilling. “Hey, maybe you can help with something,” Maisie said. “Do you have access to historical records down there?”

“All kinds of historical records. What do you want to know?”

“I’m trying to find out some information about the local Reverend. Specifically, what year he was born.”

“I can look for you. Is this Reverend Fowler you were telling me about?”

“Yeah. The Reverend in the diary had the same name.”

“Maisie,” Cathy said with a suspicious tone, “what are you thinking?”

“Nothing too stupid. Don’t worry.”

“I’m glad. I thought for a minute the insanity in Solgreve might be contagious.”

“Would unhinged religious freaks scare you off coming up for Christmas?”

“Christmas? Oh, Maisie, I’m sorry. I’ve already organised Christmas.”

“Oh.”

“My aunt’s ex-husband’s family live in Edinburgh. I’m going to stay with them. I organised it weeks ago, I was so afraid of being alone at Christmas.”

“That’s great. I’m glad you’ve got friends to stay with.” An admirable effort at keeping her voice even there, not pitching into desperation. Christmas alone. It was unthinkable.

“I could ask if you could come too,” Cathy suggested.

“No, that would be too uncomfortable. It sounds like you barely know them yourself.”

“I can ask.”

“No. Don’t ask. I’ll be fine. I might even see Sacha.”

“Sacha?”

“The gypsy gardener.”

“You know,” Cathy said slowly, as though she were planning in her head. “I won’t be going up until Christmas Eve. I can catch the late train and we can go to the Christmas Eve service here at the Minster together. What do you think? You could come up on

Thursday and stay the night, then catch the late bus home. Or book into a B&B.”

Maisie suspected Cathy might be putting herself out, but simply couldn't refuse. “Okay. Yeah, that's a good idea. I'll come out on Thursday, same bus as last time. Will you meet me?”

“Of course. That'll be fun.”

“So, how are all the assignments going?”

“I'm finishing my last one off at the moment. It's already three days late. Hang on.” There was a clunk on the line and muffled voices as Cathy talked to somebody in the hallway. “Maisie? I'm going to have to go, there's a girl waiting to use the phone.”

“Okay. You won't forget to look the Reverend up for me?”

“No problem.”

“It's Reverend Linden Fowler.”

“Got it. I'll see you Thursday.”

“Sure. Bye.”

“Bye.”

“A penny for your thoughts.”

Adrian looked up. He was sitting in the Green Room backstage at The Duchess Theatre, waiting to go on. The woman standing at the doorway, looking at him with an amused smirk on her face, was Penny Dayly, the soprano with whom he sang the duet of *O Soave Fanciulla*. He suspected that she enjoyed the duet too much. She always held his hands too fervently, kept too appreciative an eye on him. That kind of female attention always annoyed him. Everyone knew he was with Maisie.

“Sorry?”

“Here I am – a penny for your thoughts. What’s on your mind? You look worried.”

Adrian shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

She smiled and approached him, sat down next to him. Too close. “Come on, you’re all pensive.”

“I’m a little worried about Maisie, that’s all.”
When in doubt about unwanted sexual attention, invoke the name of your girlfriend. That always worked.

“Maisie? Isn’t she in England?”

“Yes, I spoke to her before I came here tonight. Some vandals broke her front window with a rock, and I really just want her to come home.” There, it felt better to say it out loud.

“But you aren’t at home.”

“I know. Which is why she won’t come.”

“After Christmas maybe?”

“I’ll be in Auckland.”

“It’s going to be hard spending Christmas without her.”

Adrian nodded. “But I’ll be with my family. I won’t be lonely. I’m worried that she will be.”

Penny was clearly doing her best to sympathise with his girlfriend. “It would be awful to spend Christmas alone. But it was her choice to go.”

“That’s right.”

“Feel better for talking about it?”

Adrian looked across at her. Her thigh was pressed too close to his thigh. He stood. “I’d better warm up.” It was a lie. He’d warmed up ten minutes ago.

“Want some help?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine.”

Penny shrugged and got up to leave. He watched her go then sat down again and thought about Maisie.

It wasn't just the locals throwing rocks on her roof; it wasn't just the head cold that made her sound vulnerable and in need of care (so awful to be sick when you're alone). It was her reaction to the story Roland had told him about her grandmother, to the possibility that she, too, may have the Gift.

Excited. She'd been excited. Not dismissive. Not mildly interested and sceptical. Not disturbed. Really, really excited.

"It makes sense, Adrian," she had said. "I used to have these dreams when I was little, but they always made me sick. After a while I got so sick that the dreams wouldn't come any more, like my body was protecting itself."

"Dreams? Dreams about what?"

"About things that would happen. Just silly, trivial things, like what colour shirt somebody would wear the next day, or what the neighbours would name their dog."

"Why don't you come home?" he had suggested. "I don't want you to be in any danger."

"No way. Not now. I want to find out more about my grandmother."

"She wasn't a great person according to your father."

"That's all in the past."

"She desecrated graves."

"Which is clearly why I was evicted from the cemetery the other day. Probably why I got a rock through my window. What was she doing? I've got to keep looking through all her papers and things."

Adrian leaned his head back on the sofa and looked at the ceiling. All that talk of psychic powers unnerved him. Not because he was afraid, but because it sounded like crazy talk. He didn't like it when his girlfriend talked crazy. Maybe Janet had been right to be worried about Maisie going to the cottage. Maybe the danger wasn't physical, but emotional. Or spiritual.

He glanced at the clock. The concert started in ten minutes. Pushing all other thoughts out of his mind, he headed for the wings.

Frozen pinpoints of light far above her, the endlessly moving sea far below, Maisie paused on the cliff's edge, trying to ignore the wind needling through her scarf and overcoat. She looked up at the stars feeling ... what was she feeling? Was this happiness? It was too painful, hammering too hard under her ribs to be happiness. Excitement then? Perhaps.

She was different. She was special.

It had been ten hours since the phone call from Adrian, since she found out that she had met Sybill, and that Sybill had seen in her something that nobody else had ever seen. The Gift. She had the Gift. The regret about not inheriting her parents' musical talent paled into insignificance when she considered this much greater inheritance. Some kind of psychic ability lurked within her, long dormant. All she had to do now was to find it, lure it out of hiding. How she was to do that, she didn't yet know.

Perhaps the ache under her ribs was fear. How could she have not known that this power was inside her? And what could it do to her if she exercised it? If

only she had some kind of guidance. *I wish I'd known you, Sybill.* Her life could have been so different.

The wind dropped suddenly and the sky was very still. She took deep breaths of the cold, cold air. It was demented to be out here on the cliff-top after dark, but she felt a little mad. A little delirious.

Different. Special.

A new determination filled her. There were still stacks of boxes, mounds of papers tucked in corners of the cottage. She would go through all of them, come to know her grandmother and find out what her Gift might mean. It was time for some earnest excavation.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Damp hair trailing about her face, Maisie inspected herself in the bathroom mirror. A cold was not only miserable, it was bad for the complexion. Her eyes were watery and her nose was red. She spotted a blackhead just below her lip and gave it an enthusiastic squeezing. Strange, she'd have thought that being psychic might mean she was more than mortal. This morning she looked profoundly ordinary.

She pulled on her dressing gown and headed for the lounge room to open the curtains. Was it her imagination or was she walking straighter, taller, this morning? "I'm psychic," she said out loud, then laughed at her foolishness, held out her hand to an imaginary new acquaintance: "Pleased to meet you. I'm Maisie Fielding and I'm psychic."

She spent a moment gazing through the window surveying the weather: the freezing sky had descended,

embracing the world in mist. Trees were tall shadows behind the veil. But the mist was not so thick that she couldn't see Sacha's van pull around the corner, heading towards her house.

"Oh, my god!" she squealed in horror. Wet hair, red nose, blackhead, only in her dressing gown. She had roughly ten seconds to fix it all.

She raced into her bedroom and fumbled for some concealer, quickly pulled on a black skirt and cardigan. A knock at the door.

"Just a second," she called, quickly towelling her hair and pinning it back. Her reflection in the bathroom mirror scared her. She looked a mess.

"Just a second," she said again, heading back to the bedroom and trying again with some hastily-applied mascara. She ran her tongue across her teeth. No time to clean them. She would have to remember not to breathe on him.

"Hi, Sacha, I wasn't expecting you," she said.

"Can I come in?" No apology. No explanation.

"Sure." She stood aside and let him through, locked the door behind him. "I'm just making a cup of tea. Come down to the kitchen."

He followed her to the kitchen where he sat down, clearly more comfortable than she was. "I forgot to take that stuff for Oxfam the other night. Thought I'd pick it up today instead."

"Thanks, that's great." She switched the electric kettle on and got out two cups.

"You look nice," he said, nearly flooring her.

"Thanks. I don't feel nice."

"You have a cold?"

"Yes."

“Best to get it out of the way early in winter. Do you need anything? I can go up to the chemist for you.”

My hero. “No, I’m fine. I think the worst of it is over.” The kettle whistled. She made two cups of tea and then joined him at the kitchen table.

He took a sip of his tea and then sat back, considering her. “So, what kind of a weekend did you have?”

“An interesting one. Somebody put a rock through my front window.”

“Kids? Vandals?”

“Locals. Or at least *a* local. He called me a witch too.”

Sacha raised his eyebrows. “They must have you confused with Sybill.”

“Were they afraid of my grandmother?”

“I think so, yes. Sometimes they did nasty things: threatening letters and the like. Were you scared?”

She shook her head. “Not really. He seemed like a bit of a bumbling idiot, really. I was more irritated. Bewildered, even.”

“They’re afraid of you, Maisie.” She loved the way he said her name. He made it sound French or something.

“They needn’t be.”

“But they are.”

She sipped her tea, staring into middle distance, thinking about what Adrian had told her. “Maybe . . .” She trailed off and didn’t finish her sentence.

A few seconds ticked by. “Maybe what?” Sacha said at last.

She focused on him. Eyes met eyes. She couldn’t be safe as long as he met her gaze so evenly, didn’t deflect her interest. “Maybe they do have a reason to be afraid of me. Maybe I am like Sybill.”

“In what way?”

“I just heard why my mother and my grandmother didn’t get along.”

“Tell me.”

So she did tell him. Because of his background she felt she could trust him, that he would understand. Adrian had thought her crazy to believe what Sybill had said, but Sacha wouldn’t. His mother and Sybill had formed a bond over magic and fortune-telling.

When she had finished, Sacha sat quietly for a moment considering her.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, her stomach dipping. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

He shook his head. “Me? Never. I grew up at spook central.”

“Then what’s the matter?”

He leaned forward, spreading his hands, palms upwards, on the table. “While it’s true that psychic gifts are supposedly inherited, I just have a bit of trouble believing that you didn’t know.”

“But I *did* know. Or at least I did when I was younger. But then I got sick and ...” She shrugged. “It stopped happening.”

“Are you very intuitive? Know what people are going to say next? Know who’s on the telephone before you answer it?”

Maisie shook her head with an awful sense of deflation. Sacha’s mother was psychic, and he had known her grandmother well. If he didn’t think she had the Gift, then she probably didn’t. All her hope went rushing past her fingertips.

“What about dreams? Do you dream things that happen?”

“I used to.”

“Yes, you used to. But now? In the last few years?”

Again she shook her head. “Not really. Though I had a spooky dream in the bath the other night. And it seemed like I was *remembering* something.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

He nodded. “Remembering what?”

“Something bad. But not something that had happened to me.” She snapped her fingers, optimism returning. “And straight after I felt sick. Nauseous.”

He finished his tea and took the cup to the sink, leaned his back against the cupboards. “If you do have this ability, why would it make you sick?”

“You mean that’s not normal?”

“Not from what I understand. Something bad must have happened to you to have such a strong reaction to it. But you can probably overcome it if you know what you’re doing.”

Maisie sighed. “Here’s the problem. I don’t even know where to start. You know, to develop it.”

“I know a little about it.”

Excitement layered upon excitement. “You do?”

“Yeah. My mum tried to teach me. Unfortunately, I have no psychic ability. Or at least very little beyond a slightly heightened sense of intuition. She was very disappointed in me.”

“But you could teach me what she taught you?”

He shrugged. “I could try. But if you don’t have the Gift, I can’t help you.”

“We can try, though.”

“Sure. Here, let’s do a little experiment I used to help your grandmother with.” He moved across the

room and grabbed his chair, brought it around next to hers and turned her to face him. The touch of his fingers on her arms, even through the sleeves of her cardigan, made her heart race. They held that pose for a moment, he holding her upper arms, she gazing, scared-rabbit like, into his face.

“Close your eyes,” he said softly.

“Um ... okay.” Nervous laughter. *Get a grip, Maisie.* She closed her eyes.

“I’m going to get you to open up your energy centres. Ever done that before?”

“No. I don’t even know where my ‘energy centres’ are.”

“That’s fine. Most people don’t.” He laughed. “I always forget how ridiculous stuff like that must sound to someone who didn’t grow up steeped in it.” His hands left her arms. “Take a few deep breaths ... Good. At the base of your spine is a red light. See it spinning?”

“I can’t see anything.”

“Visualise it. You’re a musician, you must have some imagination.”

That stung. She concentrated, tried to imagine the red light.

“Now open it up. Imagine it, I mean.”

She followed his instructions as he described coloured lights all over her body, opening them up when he asked. Perhaps it was the deep breathing, but she was feeling very relaxed, almost buzzing with a sense of well-being. When he had taken her right to the top of her head – violet – he let her sit for a while, breathing deeply.

“Maisie, you’re open.”

He was turning her on. “Yeah, okay.”

“I’m going to ask you to do something. Don’t think about how to do it, just do it, okay?”

She nodded.

“Show me your Gift,” he said softly, darkly.

From somewhere inside her, a bubble of energy seemed to rise. Sacha grabbed her hands, placed them palm to palm against his own.

“Let it come,” he said.

Without even knowing what she was doing, she opened her mouth and dropped her head back. A wave washed over her and broke along her skin. There was a sound like a popping, and Sacha pulled his hands back.

“Ouch!”

She opened her eyes, came back to the kitchen. Feeling mildly embarrassed about what had just happened.

What *had* just happened?

“You zapped me,” Sacha said, rubbing his palms together. “You were on.”

“On?”

“On. As opposed to off. Sybill was right.”

“Then I am . . .?”

“I’m sure of it. I only wish I could get in touch with my mother, she’d love to teach you. But I have no idea where she is at the moment, so you’re stuck with me.”

Sacha as teacher? It was dazzlingly appropriate. Her feelings of excited anticipation about her psychic power matched her feelings for him exactly.

“I’ll work so hard,” she said.

“Do you feel sick?”

“No.”

“If you do it properly you shouldn’t get sick. Can I tell you something, Maisie?” He hadn’t moved his chair, but he leaned back, out of the danger zone.

“Sure. Anything.”

“I don’t want to scare you.”

A little thrill licked at the base of her neck. She placed a hand there, rubbed the skin. “Go on.”

“I’ve been around when my mother opens up, and Sybill. They’re both ... light. The energy seems bright, yellow almost.”

“And?”

“You’re not. I don’t know if that means anything.”

“What colour am I?”

“You’re dark. Really dark. It kind of frightened me at first.”

Her skin crawled. “I ...”

“Don’t worry. It might mean nothing. Perhaps it’s an auric cast. Ma would be able to tell me. She’ll probably call soon.” He rose from the chair and stretched his arms above his head, yawning. “I’d better get going. Where’s all this stuff you want me to take?”

She helped him load armfuls of old clothes and bric-a-brac into the back of his van. When they were done, he turned to her.

“I didn’t scare you, did I? I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No. No, really I’m fine,” she lied. She folded her arms over herself. She hadn’t bothered to put her overcoat on and it was freezing out here. And although she fancied him like mad, she didn’t want to give him a conspicuous nipple display.

“Okay. Well, I’ll see you again soon. I’ll look around my flat for any of my mother’s books.”

“Thanks.”

In a second he was revving up the van and taking off

down the main street. She shivered and turned to go back inside. Aching with fear and excitement and desire.

Maisie went directly to her grandmother's bookshelf and began checking the spines for titles about psychic development. Then she checked the cupboard beneath the shelf and found masses of rubbish. Amongst it, she located several books about chakras and meditation and theories of the Afterlife. She sat amid piles of junk, leafing through the pages for a few hours. She tried a couple of the meditation experiments, but they didn't work for her. That was okay, she was only new at it after all.

Setting the books aside, she decided to tackle the other piles of stuff looking for anything specific Sybill might have written down about psychic development. She found only old exercise books full of recipes and budgets, lots of badly written poems and stories, sketches, lists of phone numbers, and junk mail. And mouse shit. Plenty of that. It may as well all be thrown out. After the culling, she checked her watch; it was half past three and she had forgotten to have lunch. She filled an empty box with the rubbish and left it near the door.

Something seemed out of place but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Of course. Tabby. She hadn't seen the cat since this morning. She must have slunk out the front door when Sacha had come in. Maisie went to the laundry and opened the door, expecting to see the cat sitting there waiting. But the back garden was empty.

"Tabby!" she called, walking outside. A frosty wind from the north had blown all the mist away and now teased at the treetops. The cat was nowhere to be

seen. Maisie went back inside and closed the door. Yes, a cat flap would have been a great idea. Tabby would probably scratch and miaow if she wanted in, but the cottage felt kind of lonely without her.

Maisie toasted a sandwich and made some potato wedges to go with it, read a book while she ate, then cleaned it all up, and still Tabby wasn't home. It was well and truly dark outside now. She put on her overcoat and gloves and walked once more to the laundry.

Something's wrong.

The feeling was powerful, convincing. She tried to dismiss it. Maybe she'd spent too much time today reading books about the supernatural. She left the back door open in case Tabby returned and headed into the garden to search.

The cat wasn't under the rosebushes, or up the oak tree, nor was she anywhere in the front garden or along the street. Maisie turned and headed back through the trees that led down towards the cliffs, calling all the time. Fine wet branches caught on her clothes. The air was heavy with the smell of wet, mouldering foliage.

"Tabby! Come on, girl. Where are you?"

She could hear the sea grating against the rocks. Surely Tabby couldn't have gone over the cliff. She dreaded the idea, but felt she should check anyway. At the cliff's edge she looked down and saw nothing except phosphorescent seaspray.

"Tabby!" she called, and her voice was carried away behind her by the wind. She turned on her heel and slowly headed back.

Halfway through the wood, a shadow suddenly

detached itself from a tree and sprung out at her, hissing madly.

“Tabby!” Maisie cried, bending to pick up the cat.

Tabby hissed again and clawed out wildly, leaving a scratch across Maisie’s cheek. Maisie dropped her and put her hand to her face.

“Ow. Bitch . . .”

Tabby ran off towards the cottage, her tail bushed up and her fur on end. Maisie ran after her. Maybe she’d been injured. That would explain the wild behaviour. Maisie found her waiting, low to the ground, a few paces from the back door, looking warily inside.

“Tabby? Are you hurt?” Maisie kneeled and hesitantly reached out to stroke her head. Tabby fixed her gaze on the doorway, flicking her tail suspiciously. Maisie checked her over quickly in the dark, squeezed her paws and gently pulled her ears, but she didn’t react. A faint smell of something rotten clung to the cat, as though she may have rubbed herself on a dead animal.

“Okay. Come inside,” Maisie said, having satisfied herself that the cat was probably fine. But as she headed into the house, Tabby crawled a few cautious steps backwards and wouldn’t come in.

“Tabby?” Maisie looked from the cat to the cottage. It seemed very dark inside. A few seconds passed. She collected herself. *Just go in.* She strode into the laundry, switched on the light. Nothing, still dark. The bulb must have blown. She went to the kitchen and tried the light there. Again nothing. The pit of her stomach grew icy.

Probably just an electrical fault. The display on the microwave was blank and the fridge wasn’t humming.

An old place like this probably had dodgy wiring. It was only a matter of calling an electrician and it would soon be sorted. But first she needed candles.

Fumbling around in the dark, she dug inside Sybill's witch's chest for candles, then felt in her top drawer for matches. By candlelight she looked in the phone book for an electrician nearby, then picked up the phone to dial.

No dial tone.

"Shit!" she said, slamming down the phone. This was too creepy. No lights, no phone, the cat wouldn't come inside. She was just contemplating going down to the pub to ask for help when she heard a noise from the kitchen. Like four or five laboured breaths. Wet and eager.

"Tabby? Is that you?" She took one of the candles and rose from her chair. It wasn't Tabby, she knew it wasn't Tabby. She didn't want to go anywhere near the kitchen. If only the lights were working. If only she hadn't left the back door open. She was frozen to the spot, listening hard for the sound again, but all was silent. No amount of willing herself to calm down could bring her to go to the kitchen. Her heart thudded madly in her throat.

Suddenly, lights came on again and the noise stopped. Maisie let out a huge breath she hadn't even realised she'd been holding.

"Thank god," she muttered. She turned on the lounge room light and blew out the candles, then went through the rest of the house switching lights on. The kitchen, when she peeked in, was thankfully empty. She had panicked over nothing. When she got to the laundry, she called for Tabby again.

“Come on, girl, it’s all right. Just an electrical fault.” Tabby still refused to come in, and Maisie closed the door on her. When she was hungry enough, she would let Maisie know.

But she hadn’t checked the telephone. Perhaps there had been a local outage and the exchange had gone down. She went back up the hallway and reached for the phone.

The candles were still burning.

“What the . . .?” She had put them out, she could remember it clearly.

Okay, no need to panic. Perhaps she hadn’t blown hard enough or something. She tried again. They were definitely extinguished this time. She checked the phone. The dial tone was back, everything was normal. She checked the candles again. Definitely out. Smoky trails led from their wicks.

Calm down, Maisie.

God, she hated, *hated*, being alone.

Phone’s back on. Lights are back on. Everything’s okay.

But then, from the kitchen, the strange noise again. Four, five, six breaths and she was rooted to the spot. Her body was frozen over with fear. A scraping sound like bones on linoleum, a faint whiff of decay. The lights flickered, went down again. Then, horribly, in front of her eyes, the candles re-ignited.

Get out. Run.

She raced to the laundry, flung open the door and was nearly bowled over by Tabby running in. Two steps out the back door, her breath ragged, she turned back. Tabby was waiting for her.

No, Tabby was looking over her shoulder.

Maisie shrieked and ran back inside, slammed the door and shot the bolts. *Deadlocks, Maisie. There for a reason.*

Tabby skittered up onto the washing machine, but Maisie couldn't bear to look out the window to see if the dark shadow was by the tree. The lights came on once more and the fridge hummed back into life. She went to the lounge room, extinguished the candles for the third time, then took them to the kitchen and immersed them in a sinkful of water.

Maisie sagged against the sink with her hand to her face. Her cheek stung, and she remembered that Tabby had scratched her. She would deal with that later. Just for the moment, she had to collect her thoughts. Already the encounter – whatever it was – had taken on a surreal cast. Had it really happened at all? The memory of the candles, eerily flickering into life, already seemed indistinct, like a half-forgotten dream. Like something imagined.

Tabby trotted in then, tail merrily in the air as though nothing were wrong.

“Is he gone?” she asked the cat. In reply, Tabby went to the cupboard where her cat food was kept and tapped it with her nose. Situation normal. The cat wanted to be fed.

Maisie dished out some cat food, checked all the locks again, cleaned up the scratch on her face, checked the locks once more for good measure, then sat in the lounge room with the television blaring.

Although she was sure she wouldn't sleep, she dozed off sometime around three.

“Where the hell is he?” Tony Blake checked his watch for the third time in ten minutes, then gave the Reverend a sheepish smile. “Sorry, Reverend. Where the *heck* is he?”

The Reverend shook his head dismissively. Blasphemy and cursing had long since ceased to offend him. He, too, would like to know where the hell Lester Baines had got to. He sat with the village constable in the patrol car, the cloying scent of car deodorant giving him a headache, hoping that Lester would turn up soon. And alone. He was already half an hour late and the Reverend had started to worry that he had run afoul of the law, that any minute a few detective cars from York would round the bend and it would all be over. He rubbed his hands together nervously, papery skin chafing against papery skin.

“Don’t worry,” Tony said, as though sensing his thoughts. “He’s just late. He’s a criminal, we shouldn’t rely on him to be punctual.”

“Yes, yes. You’re right.”

“There’s another problem I need to discuss with you,” Tony said, shifting in his seat.

“What’s that?”

“Abe Cox is turning one hundred and thirty next month. We’ll need to sort out what to do about him. He’s too old.”

The Reverend nodded. They had to do this occasionally. Couldn’t have a one hundred and thirty year old roaming around, attracting media attention, medical experts, new-agers. Usually, they had Dr Honour from Cross Street issue a false death certificate (the Reverend always found it amusing that Dr Honour could be relied upon to be so dishonest), and

then the church provided a pension. On one or two occasions they had arranged for an entirely new identity for the person, which was far more risky. It involved bribing someone in public records, or employing Lester to do something illegal involving computers which the Reverend simply couldn't understand, but which he feared was extremely chancy. "The church can afford to support him," he said.

"But Reverend, with a single payment to Lester, we can give him the identity of a recently deceased octogenarian and then –"

"No. It's too dangerous."

"Reverend, it's not dangerous."

"I'd rather spend the money. The church isn't going to go broke."

"If people keep living this long, the church will soon be paying for everyone in the village."

"Tony, not everybody lives that long. You know that." Yes, there were one or two who made it to Abe Cox's age, but they usually died within a few years. There was only one person who kept on living. The Reverend shivered despite the cosy temperature in the car.

"Look. Is that Lester?"

The Reverend held his breath as he peered through the windscreen. Headlights coming closer. Finally he could make out the shape and colour of Lester's car. "Yes, it's him. Thank heavens." He opened his door and stepped out into the cold.

Tony followed his example, and soon Lester met them in the beam of the headlights. "How goes it, Rev? Sorry I'm late. Had a bit of car trouble."

"It's fine, it's fine," said the Reverend, following Lester around to the boot of his car.

“This geezer had a bit of car trouble, too,” Lester continued in a chatty tone as he opened the boot. “Hit by a van. No I.D. Bit of a mess, but that doesn’t matter, does it?”

“No. It doesn’t matter.”

Lester and Tony hoisted the body in its black bag out of the car and started towards the abbey. The Reverend was following close behind them when Tony tripped on a rock and pitched forward, dropping his end of the body. The bag was clearly not properly zipped, because the upper half of the corpse slipped out, its head thudding onto the ground. Lester dropped his end and kneeled to scoop the body back into the bag, but it was too late. The Reverend had already seen it in the glow of the headlights. The left arm was mangled almost beyond recognition, and huge spidery contusions purpled the left side of the body. His face, which had clearly been dragged along the road some distance, was a mess of grated flesh that would never heal, scraped down to the skull on one side of the forehead. The Reverend clutched his stomach and turned, sour bile shot up into his throat. He spat it out and took deep breaths, willing himself not to vomit.

“Reverend? You okay?” This was Lester, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“He’ll be fine if you give him a minute,” Tony said. “He has a delicate constitution, our Reverend. I’ve even seen him pass out at the sight of blood.”

“Yeah?” Lester was, by now, clearly perplexed. “Then why does he ... I mean, what does he do with ...?”

“You don’t need to know, Lester,” the Reverend replied, straightening his back. “Is it ...? Is he ... away, now?”

“Yeah. You can turn around,” Lester said.

The Reverend turned back to them. They had the body, anonymous once more, between them and were heading towards the abbey. He walked with them, unlocking the iron door while they laid the body on the ground.

“Are you all right with it, Rev?” Lester asked.

The Reverend nodded. “Thank you. Tony will pay you.” He dragged the body into the spire. “You may go now.”

Tony and Lester left and he paused at the top of the cold staircase, looking down at the body. Already queasy, he was remembering sickly smelling leaves of vellum, impossibly antiquated handwriting, dispassionate discussions of “extractions” and “immurements”. A blunt, nauseous dread welled up within him. Sometimes he felt as though things were out of control. He was frightened, and absolutely certain that he was too old for these arcane adventures.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maisie and Cathy sat in a cramped corner of Cafe Concerto on High Petergate, a half-demolished lunch of soup and baguettes between them. Cathy's chatter was just what she needed after two long bus rides to get to York with only her thoughts for company. She had tried to call Sacha before she left, to see if he would invite her to spend Christmas with him. But the obnoxious phone had rung out over and over and now she'd be away from home for three days and he wouldn't be able to contact her.

This time it was more than embarrassed desire that made her desperate to speak to him. She wanted to know if opening up her energy centres that day could have attracted Monday night's haunting. She didn't want it to happen again, so she had sworn off experimenting with psychic powers until she could talk to Sacha about it.

Sacha, Sacha, Sacha. The locus to which her

thoughts always returned. Default setting: fantasise about Sacha. About how his hands might feel on her ribs, how his lips might feel on her face, how his hair might fall if he was on top of her.

Stop.

It was all she could do not to pound the table in frustration with herself. Cathy was rummaging enthusiastically in her woven handbag. Maisie watched her, distractedly picking beansprouts off her baguette.

“Do you know anyone who actually likes beansprouts?” Maisie asked.

“Sure. But not me.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I’ve got something for you. Only I can’t find the damned thing.”

“What is it?” Maisie leaned over, curious.

Cathy pulled out a piece of paper, unfolded it, then screwed it up. “Not that. God, I’ve got so much junk in here.”

“You’d love my grandmother’s house.”

“I’m hoping to see it after Christmas. I’m on holiday until January the seventeenth.” She brushed a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. “Ah. Here it is.”

“What is it?” Maisie said again.

“I wrote it down. About your Reverend Fowler.” Cathy unfolded a handwritten note, and smoothed it on the table, pushing her soup dish out of the way. “I tracked down some university and church history lists.”

Maisie caught her breath. *Please, please, don’t let him be two hundred and fifty years old.* She was sure she’d go crazy.

“Linden Abraham Fowler,” Cathy read aloud. “Born fourteenth of April, nineteen hundred and

two, in Solgreve. Studied theology at University College, London. Worked for a few years in Devon as a clerk. Took over the rectorship of Solgreve Church from his father in nineteen thirty-two.” She looked up. “Answer some questions?”

“God, he’s ninety-eight!”

“You said he was old.”

“He’s in good nick for ninety-eight. I thought he was in his seventies.” Maisie leaned her elbows on the table. *Ninety-eight.*

“There’s more. The rectorship of Solgreve has been in his family since sixteen seventy-five. So the Reverend Fowler in the diary is probably his great-great-something-or-other.”

“But definitely not the same man.”

“Definitely not. You didn’t seriously suspect that did you?”

Maisie shook her head. “No. Not seriously. Though it was kind of creepy to consider. Anyway, it’s not as though you haven’t had kooky ideas yourself. Last time I was here you were talking about spirits and contacting the other side.”

“Yes . . . but that’s different.”

“It’s the supernatural. Believe one thing, you have to believe everything.”

“I just like to believe in the good things.”

“That’s a bit limited.”

“I need to be able to sleep at night.” Cathy folded the piece of paper up and handed it to Maisie. “Besides, if there were dark spirits, they would never be attracted to someone who only believed in good spirits.”

Maisie considered her. “That makes absolutely no sense.”

“Look, nobody can figure the universe out,” Cathy said patiently. “You have to make sense of it your own way.”

Maisie opened her mouth to tell Cathy about the presence in her house on Monday night, the dark shape in her garden. Then changed her mind. She would not think about it, not talk about it, not encourage it in any way. “Do you want a coffee?” she asked.

“If you’re having one.”

Maisie caught a waiter’s attention and he cleared their table and took their orders for coffee.

“Do you ever have a feeling when you first meet someone that they’re going to be important to you somehow?” Cathy asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it.” She remembered her reaction to Sacha, but that was different. He was good-looking. She couldn’t assume sexual attraction meant anything prophetic.

“Well, you know when we all used to go out for coffee after choir practice and you used to come with Adrian?”

“Yeah.”

“I always used to get a vibe off you.”

“A vibe?”

“Sure. I somehow *knew* that you would be important in my life in some way. That we were meant to be friends.”

Maisie forced a smile. If Cathy had been getting any kind of “vibe” off her, it would have been of the *fuck off and leave my boyfriend alone* variety.

“Really?”

“So I wasn’t surprised when you turned up in Yorkshire.”

Maisie didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. Silence lay between them. She had no idea how that silence sounded to Cathy, but to her it sounded embarrassed. She turned to look through the restaurant to the front doors. Outside, Christmas decorations dripped off everything. People huddled into long coats and scarves, hurrying past in the pale winter haze.

"A winter Christmas is so much better than a summer one," she said.

"Absolutely," Cathy replied. "Just imagine, back home it's probably thirty degrees already."

"And humid. Don't forget humid."

"And families will be having outdoor Christmas lunches – cold meat because nobody can bear to cook in that weather – and there will be flies buzzing around and sweat patches under everyone's armpits. They'll wash it all down with cold beer or chilled riesling."

Maisie sighed. "And there would be the sound of children splashing in swimming pools. Cicadas buzzing. The overripe smell of frangipani."

"I told you you'd start to miss it."

Maisie turned back to Cathy. "I don't."

"You can't fool me."

"It just seems so far away."

"It is far away. Do you miss Adrian?"

Good question. Whenever she thought of Adrian these last few days, it was with an awful sense of guilt. "I miss him physically. I want to be able to put my arms around him." But she didn't want to go back to him. Not yet. And why was that? Did she want to wait and see how things progressed with

Sacha? That was ridiculous. She spent a lot of time and energy on ridiculous thoughts lately.

“How wonderful to have a boyfriend to go home to. I’ve been loveless for longer than I can remember.”

The waiter brought their coffee. Maisie spooned sugar into it. “Aren’t there any nice guys at your uni?”

“There’s this one guy in my Old English class who seems nice but I’m pretty sure he’s gay. I found it hard enough to meet guys back home, but here it’s impossible.”

Maisie sipped her coffee. It was too strong. “Yuk.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Too strong.”

Cathy waved the waiter over and asked for some hot milk, which he brought back a few moments later. Maisie added some milk to her coffee and tried again.

“Better?” asked Cathy.

“Not bad. It’s drinkable.”

“Hey, how about your gypsy friend?”

“What about him?” Maisie said, her fingertips tingling. Guilt? Fear?

“I mean, do you think he has a girlfriend?”

“What? Why?”

“You could introduce me to him. You know, seeing as how I can’t meet guys down here.”

“Oh.” Was she serious?

“I’ve read a lot about gypsies. Does he have an accent?”

“A bit. But it’s only his mother who’s a gypsy really. His dad’s an anthropology professor or something.”

“Even better. He’s got good genes, *smart* genes.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know him that well.”

“But is he good-looking?”

Maisie couldn't help herself. "Very. Very, very."

Cathy raised her eyebrows. "Now, Maisie. I hope you're not keeping him all for yourself. That would hardly be fair."

"No, of course not. Really, I just don't know him that well. Not well enough to set you up on a date in any case."

"You like him, don't you?" Cathy asked, smiling.

"He's nice enough."

"I mean *like* him – in the ten-year-old sense."

Maisie couldn't meet her eye. "I don't know. He's okay I guess. But, you know, I'm spoken for."

"That's right."

"And I'd never cheat on Adrian."

"Of course not. God, I'd kill you if you did. He's such a sweetie."

Maisie pushed her coffee away. She no longer had an appetite for it.

"Is it hard?" Cathy asked. "After being with someone for such a long time, is it hard not to get tempted?"

"I love Adrian," Maisie said simply. "It's not hard." And here she was thinking of Sacha again, thinking about those intimate things she had laid out in her mind in loving detail. And knowing it would never be like that, not really. It was a fantasy, and in the real world she would never do it. "Affairs are so sordid," she said, "and there's *nobility* in unrequited longing."

Cathy laughed. "I know I've said this before, but you are soooo lucky."

But if that was true, how come she felt so dissatisfied? "Thanks," she said. "I know."

Outside York Minster, a cold and graceful gothic cathedral on a windy corner, the twilight world of Christmas Eve gathered, with all its tumult of anticipation and goodwill. Maisie stopped at the street corner, Cathy by her side, shivering and wishing she wasn't going to be alone on Christmas Day.

"Shall we go inside?" Cathy said. "I know it's a while before the service starts, but it'll be warmer."

"Good idea. My ears are aching."

"It might snow."

That would be too perfect. Too perfect to enjoy. It would simply make her melancholy. Miserable.

They found their way inside, sat right at the back wall so they could fit their overnight bags between their feet. Huge vaulted ceilings soared above them, and a pipe organ played quietly. Maisie leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes. Cathy was fiddling with the program, making comments to Maisie about her favourite carols.

Under her skin. This whole business with Sacha had got under her skin. She'd only met him less than three weeks ago, had only seen him in the flesh three times. But as she drifted into sleep at night, in her fantasies they were intimately acquainted, shared everything, knew every inch of each other's bodies. She simply had to stop thinking about him.

"Are you okay?"

Maisie rejoined the real world. "Yeah, I'm fine." She had vowed she wouldn't show Cathy how miserable she was about spending Christmas alone, didn't want to make her feel guilty.

The Minster filled slowly. There weren't enough seats and some people had to stand in the nave. Maisie

watched them all, in groups and families, laughing, expectant. Tonight they would go to bed with Christmas tree lights left glittering in their lounge rooms, then wake each other up tomorrow to share presents and Christmas lunches and reminiscences and ... damn, she was aching with it. Aching for company.

Suddenly the quiet organ music stopped. The chattering voices continued for a moment, and then the organist hit the volume and blasted out *The First Noel*. The choir filed in: small boys and bearded men in blue and white sang *Hark, the Herald Angels*. Then the congregation sang, then there was a reading from the Bible. This sequence of events repeated for the next two hours while Maisie sat gazing around her at the ancient stone walls, wondering if ever in the history of the Minster such a miserable person as Maisie Fielding had moped through a Christmas service.

As soon as the service was over, while the pipe organ played quiet departure music, Cathy checked her watch. "I'm going to have to hurry if I'm to catch my train."

"Well, go now. Before the crowd."

Cathy pulled her bag up onto her lap. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

Maisie wasn't at all sure she'd be okay. "Uh-huh."

"Really?"

No, no, no. Tears were springing to her eyes and she concentrated hard on not letting them spill over. "Go on, you'll miss your train."

"You're crying."

"No, I'm not." Dammit, she *was* crying. "It's just that the service was very moving."

Cathy grabbed her in her arms and pressed her close. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry. It was my choice to be here." Maisie could feel Cathy's ribs through her coat, there was so little of her to hold on to.

Cathy released her. "I really have to go. Are you coming?"

"No, I'll sit here a moment longer and listen to the music. Thanks for that info about the Reverend."

"Any time."

Maisie cleared her throat, composed herself. "If you could find out anything about their attachment to the cemetery . . ." Maisie had told her about the curses, about being called a witch after visiting her grandmother's grave.

"Sure, I'll ask around at uni." She looked anxiously towards the door. "I really have to go. I'll call you soon."

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

Cathy dashed off, red hair swinging. Maisie sighed and sank further into her overcoat. Too cold everywhere. She had booked a room in a B&B close by. Soon it would be too late to check in. She pulled herself to her feet and joined the slow queue shuffling out the front door. Bells rang on the crisp air outside. She walked away from the Minster and found a little supermarket, ducked inside and wandered in the yellow light, looking for ways to treat herself tomorrow. Chocolate, chips, biscuits, soft drink, wine – *don't shop when you're hungry, Maisie, or desperately miserable*. She put some of the things back, was having second thoughts about the wine. All

around her people were grabbing bottles of red, laughing among themselves. *It's Christmas, it's Christmas, hurrah we're all happy.* Maisie felt herself sink lower. Instead of putting the wine back, she grabbed a second bottle. She would spend the day sauced, consign herself to oblivion for that awful twenty-four hours when everyone else in the world was enjoying the festive season.

Dammit.

She checked her watch. In twenty minutes the last bus left for Whitby. Maybe Sacha was home. She left her shopping basket on an empty shelf and took the two bottles of wine up to the counter, and in a few minutes, between the tolls of Christmas bells, she was hurrying towards the bus stop.

Two hours later, Maisie stepped out of the warm bus into the night chill at Whitby. It was after nine o'clock. A few cabs waited at the rank near the bus stop and she wavered, thinking to hop straight into one, amongst warm air and upholstery, and head home to Tabby. Instead, she found a phone box and grabbed the phone directory, looked up Sacha's address and scribbled it down.

But of course, she had no idea where his street was and Whitby was a big place. She glanced back over her shoulder towards the bus stop. The last taxi on the rank was just being engaged by a well-dressed woman and man who had been on the bus with her. A service station was open a few blocks away so she headed towards it. The burly fellow behind the counter gave her directions and she was on her way.

The streets of Whitby were much quieter than York.

As she headed towards the sea, she found herself mostly alone. The wind whipped past her ears and she pulled her hat down close. Her hair would probably look terrible by the time she got to his place, her eyes would be streaming and her nose running, but it couldn't be helped. Eventually she approached the seafront road, looked left and right, then on a hunch headed to the left. Ten minutes later she was heading in the other direction. Eventually came to an old building, painted white, clearly a block of flats. She went up to the door, found the doorbell marked *Lupus* and rang it.

No answer. She tried again. Waited. It took her a few minutes to accept that he simply wasn't home.

She turned, sagged against the door, the weight of loneliness heavy on her shoulders. Of course he wasn't home, it was Christmas. She was the only person in the world who was spending it alone. This time she let herself cry, wandering back down the stairs and out onto the street. Fairy lights were strung between power poles, swinging in the breeze. She crossed the road, found a seat on the cliff-top a few metres from a street light, and collapsed into it, watching waves breaking on the shore below. The sea didn't know it was Christmas. She cried, then wept, then sobbed, tears tracing icy paths down her cheeks. Lights glimmered out at sea – perhaps even fishermen on rimy boats were sharing company in warm, lit cabins. The longing bubbled up inside her, threatened to break her open. Where was Sacha? Damn him. Was it possible to yearn to death?

She gave vent to her tears for as long as she could before admitting it was useless, and made her way back towards the bus stop. Two streets away a taxi approached, and she hailed it and got inside.

“I want to go to Solgreve,” she said, thankfully closing out the aching cold. “Is that too far?”

“It’s a job,” the taxi driver said, setting his meter.

“And can you turn the heat up a bit?”

“Sure.”

Just over half an hour later she paid him and hoisted her bag over her shoulder, looking up the path to her cottage. “Thanks,” she said. “Have a good Christmas.”

“I’m Jewish,” he replied.

“Oh.” She couldn’t remember the name of the Jewish festival, so she just said, “Have a good evening, then.”

“You too. What’s left of it.”

Her watch said eleven o’clock. She let herself inside. No Christmas lights, no Christmas tree. She had left the radiator on in her bedroom for Tabby, and found the cat in there, curled up on the end of the bed.

“Hey, Tabby,” she said.

Tabby looked up, chirped a greeting, stretched her legs. Maisie kicked her boots off, stripped to her underwear and climbed into bed. A feeling of sweet weariness, the kind one only experiences after crying like a baby for a good long time, settled over her. Tabby curled up over her knees for a few minutes, then thought better of it and went off in search of food. Tonight, Maisie promised herself, she would not think of Sacha. She would just go to sleep.

Imagining his arms were around her.

Something had changed about the girl.

The Reverend knew it the second he laid eyes on her on Christmas morning. God only knew why Sybill’s granddaughter (he always forgot her name)

had decided to come to his Christmas service anyway. A generous man might think she was there to worship, but he could not be generous with her, having known her grandmother. He suspected she was here to upset him. The kind of thing Sybill would have done.

“Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord,” he began, reading from his large print Bible. But his eyes kept returning to her dark head, bent over her hands, in the very back pew of the church. Almost as though she didn’t want to be noticed. But how could he not notice her? She had changed, he could sense it. He was a man trained in the ways of the soul, could know things about people just by looking at them. Credulity might call it reading auras, or having a sixth sense, but for him it was merely the attunement of the spirit, as was required for those who represented the Lord.

Something had definitely awakened in her. This morning, more than ever, she reminded him of Sybill. Sybill Hartley, village witch, snoop, amateur detective and, in the end, the holder of too much knowledge, a terrible threat to the community and their ongoing health and happiness.

He kept reading, watching his congregation. From time to time, one or two of them would look up and glance back at her. She was well-known throughout the village now. Most villagers had heard of her, knew who she was, and were a little afraid of her. He had told a number of people not to be afraid, that she was leaving soon, that they had no reason to believe she was anything like Sybill. But today, he didn’t believe that. Today he knew for certain that whatever power Sybill had possessed, this girl possessed it also.

The service drew to a close, his parishioners stood, adjusted clothing, pulled on hats and scarves as he made his way to the front door. He cast the door open, the church organist played *O Come All Ye Faithful*, and they began to file out past him, shaking his hand, wishing him Merry Christmas, some of them quizzing him with their expressions, did he know why she was here? He answered them with a blank smile, a slight lift of his shoulders.

Every moment he expected her to walk past. But it wasn't until he had farewelled the last parishioner, Elsa Smith, who gave him a stern glance, that he could check inside to see where she was. She still sat with her head bowed, the only other person in the church.

He stood at the end of her pew, wordlessly. Of course she looked up. She could sense him.

"I'm sorry, Reverend," she said, standing, pulling on her scarf and gloves. "I wanted to wait until everyone had left. I was hoping they wouldn't notice me."

"Why are you here?" he asked, in a much quieter voice than he'd intended to use.

"It's Christmas. I always go to church Christmas morning."

"But not on Sundays?"

"Never on Sundays. Christmas and Easter only. I . . . you know . . . I *believe*."

"Believe?"

"God. Jesus. Or at least, I want very much to believe, which is kind of the same thing."

She seemed so genuine, almost naive. Perhaps she was telling the truth, perhaps she wasn't here just to crow about how much she knew. As Sybill had done. He allowed himself to relax. "Maybe you're right."

“Merry Christmas,” she said, with a deferential nod of the head. “I’m sorry if I’ve upset anybody by coming here.”

She slid past him, was nearly out the door when he remembered himself. “God bless you,” he said.

She didn’t answer. He watched her move up the path and out onto the street, then closed the door behind her, feeling peculiarly affected by her candidness, her apologetic manner, her loneliness, for she was clearly lonely. He found himself hoping fervently that she would soon return to her family, to her warm home country. And not only because it would be better for Solgreve, but because it would be better for her. And much, much safer.

Yesterday she had been so confident. She had been talking to Adrian, home with his family in Toowoomba, and she had said, “Of course my mother will call me. It’s Christmas Day.” And she had waited and waited, and by bedtime that night, she realised that she and Janet had silently agreed, on opposite sides of the planet, to play a stupid game with each other. Who will give in first and phone on Christmas Day?

They both won. Her mother hadn’t phoned her and, pissed with her, Maisie hadn’t phoned home either.

So now it was Boxing Day and the game was officially over, Maisie called Janet.

Her father answered.

“Dad! It’s me.”

“Maisie! Merry Christmas, sweetheart. We thought you might call yesterday.”

“Likewise.”

“Your mother’s just here,” he said, letting her know that he wasn’t going to enter into a discussion about who should have called whom while Janet was standing by.

“I’ll talk to her in a second. Tell me about you. How was Sydney? Adrian was so excited about working with you.”

And so they chatted for a few minutes, and Maisie was struck for the first time how much her father sounded like Adrian. Not his voice, but his pauses and his deliberate consonants, and even the little blackouts where he answered a question different from the one she had asked just because his mind was elsewhere, roaming around among semibreves and quavers, and he’d misheard her.

“We miss you, sweetheart,” he said before he handed her to Janet. “When will you be home?”

“In a few weeks I guess. I’m a bit lonely. But Adrian will be away until the end of January so there’s not much point in coming back before then.”

“Well, I’ll look forward to seeing you again. We’ll have a family dinner, the four of us. My treat.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Of course he suggested a family outing. She could count on her fingers the number of times she’d been alone with her father. It was as though he was afraid of her. “You’d better put Mum on.”

The phone changed hands, then her mother’s voice came over the line. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mum.”

“Hello, Maisie.”

A short silence. Then her mother said. “How’s your hand?”

Maisie was momentarily dumbstruck ... her hand? Then she remembered her alleged injury and felt the

terrified relief of someone who had nearly stepped in front of a train. "It's not too bad. The cold makes it ache a bit, but I'm not really using it to do anything."

"Well, keep it warm. You don't want to make it worse."

"Merry Christmas," she said.

"You too. What did you do Christmas Day?"

"Nothing. I went to church then I came home and read a book. And ate a lot of chocolate." And drank an entire bottle of wine by herself, but Janet didn't need to know that. "It was a bit lonely."

"It's your choice to be there."

"I know." She leaned back in her armchair. The springs squeaked. "What are you and Dad doing for New Year's?"

"We've got dinner reservations at Sirocco. We should be able to see the fireworks from there. And you?"

"Nothing firm planned yet, but if my friend Cathy gets back from Edinburgh in time I'll probably spend it with her."

"Well, don't drink too much."

"I never do."

Another short silence. Unbelievable how her mother could hold a grudge this far across the universe. She could hear Luciano, their canary, chirruping in the background, and a wave of homesickness washed over her. "I should go, Mum. This is costing me a fortune."

"All right, then. Have a nice New Year, and phone again some time."

"I will. I love you, Mum."

"Yes. I know."

“And?”

“And I love you too. You know that.”

Maisie smiled. “Bye.”

Then her mother was gone and she was alone again. She replaced the receiver, unfolded herself from the armchair and headed for the kitchen to make tea. By far the best thing about spending Christmas alone was the absence of Boxing Day deflation. There was no way today was ever going to be worse than yesterday. Halfway to the kitchen she heard the phone ring. She returned to pick it up.

“Hello?”

“Maisie, it’s Sacha.”

Back on the roller-coaster. “Hi, Sacha. How was Christmas?”

“What are you doing New Year’s Eve?” he said, as though he hadn’t heard her.

Nothing, say you’re doing nothing.

What about Cathy? Cathy hurrying home from Edinburgh to comfort her teary friend?

“Nothing,” she said evenly, suddenly becoming aware of the pulse beating in her throat.

“I’m going down to London. Would you like to come?”

“Sure. Of course. That would be –”

“Great. I’ll pick you up Thursday morning.”

“How long will we be staying?”

“Just a few days, maybe a week. Don’t pack too much. And I’ve got a place we can stay for free.”

“Great. Where?”

“It’s really central, you’ll like it. I have to go, I’m late for work.”

“Oh. Okay, then I’ll see you –”

“Thursday. Around eleven. Bye, Maisie.”

“Bye.”

She glanced at the photograph next to the phone, her thumbnail caught between her teeth: Sybill and Sacha. She had gazed at it so many times, especially now she had this interest (*go on admit it, it's an obsession*) in Sacha. “Damn it!” she said, flipping the photo face down.

Nothing was going to happen. She was merely enjoying the company of a pleasant man on New Year's Eve. There was no reason to bring the turmoil inside her head out into the real world. Sacha didn't know how intimately they were acquainted in her imagination. This was just a friendly social outing. Nothing more.

“Okay. No problem,” she said. And calculated in her head that there were only ninety-seven hours to go.

The bulb blew in the back room on Monday evening, just as Maisie was making some headway with a box of promising-looking papers. She had developed an understandable prejudice against candlelight by this time, so had left things as they were and found a game show to watch instead, intending to return to the task the next day.

Busy daydreaming about Sacha and looking through Sybill's photo albums for more pictures of him (unsuccessfully), she forgot about the back room until Tuesday afternoon. Given that sunset was by then only a few hours away, she reluctantly dressed herself in heavy clothes and walked down to the village to buy a light bulb.

It was a particularly calm afternoon for a change.

Usually, Solgreve was being battered by rimy gusts as early as two p.m. Today felt different; still, the air almost fragile, as though it would break if: she spoke too loudly. She walked the mossy cobbles until she came to the grocery store, bought her light bulb, wove through a narrow alley and back out to the main road. Not the faintest sliver of pale blue lightened the sky above her. The cemetery on her right seemed to stretch into infinity. She glanced at the church office, and wondered if Reverend Fowler was in there, doing his church business. She had sensed something that was almost friendliness from him on Christmas Day, albeit a strange, tight-lipped friendliness. Ninety-eight. He was way too old to have the energy to be nasty.

Her forehead tingled with cold, almost as though crystals were forming on her skin. At the same time she noticed a tiny patch of pale white on her glove. She brought it close to her face to inspect it. Another fell onto the black goatskin. She caught her breath.

Snow! *Snow!*

“Oh, my god!” she breathed, excitement welling up high into her throat. She checked the arms of her overcoat. Tiny snowflakes were dropping onto her. She looked up at the sky, could see nothing. Down at the ground. Here and there, flakes were falling. She spun around, looking all around her. The flakes were growing bigger now. She caught a few in her gloves, examined them, tried to figure out their patterns.

She walked slowly, eyes wide like a child, watching the flakes settling on the road, nestling in the grass. By the time she arrived home, her front garden had a speckled layer of white across it, snowflakes were

caught in the hedgerows. She almost couldn't bear to go inside, but it was simply freezing outside.

"Tabby, it's snowing!" she cried, wishing she had someone to tell. Cathy was out of reach, Adrian would be fast asleep, and Sacha wouldn't be impressed. He'd probably seen it a hundred times before.

Night was approaching and she had to change the bulb in the back room before dark. She dragged a chair from the kitchen down to the room, and placed it under the light fitting, careful not to rest any of its legs on the loose board. She climbed up on it and changed the bulb without any problems, but before she climbed down from the chair she noticed the ceiling hatch. Presumably used to access electrical wires or heating ducts or some other thing she didn't understand, but directly parallel to the loose floorboard.

Look up.

Maybe Sybill's note on the bottom of Georgette's diary hadn't been a reminder to look up something in the history books. Maybe it had been a simple instruction. *Look up.*

Carefully, she moved the chair across a short distance, climbed back on and with eager hands reached for the hatch. It pushed up quite easily. She wished she had a torch so she could see the old beams in there. Or even see if there were spiders or other creepy crawlies because she had to reach a hand in and feel around before her fingers brushed a smooth cylindrical shape. Her hand closed around it and she carefully brought it out of the ceiling. A dim glass canister, which quite clearly had inside it some rolled up sheets of paper.

“Excellent.”

She left the ceiling hatch pushed slightly off-centre, climbed down again, checked the light, and took the chair back to the kitchen where she prised the lid off the canister and pulled the papers out. She recognised the handwriting immediately: definitely Georgette.

She moved to the lounge room and lit the fire. Outside the single streetlight had just flickered into life on the main street, and she could see the snowflakes, falling heavily now, lit up as they dove past. In late afternoon shadows, her front garden was now under a blanket of white. So strange to see it falling so heavily yet hear no sound. She still had a bottle of wine left over from Christmas, so she poured herself a glass and made herself comfortable. The photo of Sybill and Sacha was still face down on the table, and she used it as a coaster so she wouldn't be tempted to pick it up again.

She sipped her wine and tried to roll back the curled page edges. Smoothed them out in her lap, cosy in her firelit lounge.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Monday, 21 October 1793

Charlotte lies next to me, bleeding, yet still I find it hard to feel sympathy for her. I know she will not die; in fact she sleeps now, and looks as peaceful as any Babe. It is late evening. Virgil and Edward are gone to work, though I wish both were here. The wind is especially gusty tonight, and despite the fire and my warm gown, I am cold right at my core. I sometimes think the wind here will drive me mad.

But I started to write of Charlotte.

She came to me last week and swore me into her confidence. “What I am about to tell you, you must not tell Virgil and especially not Edward. It is for women only to know. Do you promise?”

Foolishly, because I was curious to know her secret, I promised.

She nodded, satisfied. “I must procure a miscarriage,” she said.

I was so shocked I could say nothing.

“Don’t look at me with your big, innocent eyes as though you’ve never heard of such a thing. Women have done it for centuries, Georgette.”

“But Edward ...” I managed to say, finally. “Is the child Edward’s?”

“Of course it is Edward’s. Do you think me a whore?”

“But should he not know?”

“He doesn’t have to bear the brat. The decision rests solely with me.”

Realising that it was pointless to disagree with her, I asked, “How do you need my help?”

“I will be sick. Rue and angelica make me nauseous.”

“You have done this before then?”

“Once, some time ago.”

I know it is wicked to judge others, Diary, so I will just say that Charlotte is so very different from me, and I simply cannot understand her.

In any case, her home remedy did not work, though it made her very sick. Despite many long walks and, judging from the noise issuing from their bedroom most nights, much vigorous lovemaking, the tiny babe clung to her womb assiduously. I tried not to be smug, but I suspect that I was, with my smiles and my false concern.

However, Charlotte was determined. This afternoon, while Edward and Virgil were across at the village pump fetching water, she begged me once again for my help. “I have to do something most unpleasant, and I wonder if you’d mind being there for me. I have no-one else.”

I agreed, but not because her supplications had moved me. No, I'm ashamed to admit that I enjoy watching Charlotte ruin herself. It helps me to feel fortitude in my own convictions. And makes me feel rather more superior.

Under the pretence of taking an afternoon walk, Charlotte and I left the house. We walked down St Mary's Lane and past the cemetery towards the church. When Charlotte led me down a side-lane to the old abbey I stopped.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"We have already arrived," she replied, untying her bonnet.

"But we are nowhere."

"Are we?" She removed her bonnet and gloves and handed them to me. "Hold these for me. I will be perhaps a half-hour. I may need you to help me home, so please stay and wait for me."

I nodded mutely, and she headed towards the abbey. I had not the slightest idea what she intended, as the abbey is really only two crumbling walls on a corner, an old spire, and a jutting foundation here and there. She went to the old spire and kneeled as though praying. The next thing, she had disappeared into the ground!

I gasped, hurried over. On closer inspection, an iron door was visible in the earth, and this was the Gateway through which Charlotte had passed. I found shelter from the wind behind the closest wall of the abbey, and there I sat to wait, wondering what on earth was down there that could help Charlotte solve her problem.

Nearly two hours passed before Charlotte returned. I had spent the time partly in curious speculation and

partly in growing anger. How dare she leave me here not knowing where she had gone or what she was doing? I had even weighed up the idea of going to Edward and telling him what was happening, and then letting him sort out the problem. But I did not. I waited, and when the door shot open and Charlotte appeared, I was glad that I no longer had to make the decision.

I walked over to her, more to see what was beyond the door than to help her. But I could see nothing except blackness, and Charlotte, pale and shaking, leaned on me heavily.

“Georgette, please take me home,” she gasped.

“Are you all right?” I asked, handing her bonnet and gloves to her.

“No, of course I’m not.” She pressed a hand low into her stomach.

“What has happened?”

“Just take me home. I’ll explain it all then.”

With Charlotte leaning on me, I made my way along the lane and up to the main road. We moved slowly, for Charlotte was quite clearly in pain. When we were about one hundred feet from home, Charlotte suddenly stumbled and fell. As her skirts spread out around her, I noticed spatters of blood on her petticoats.

“Charlotte, you’re bleeding.”

“Yes, I know.” She pulled her skirts up to her thighs. The skin was smeared with blood. “But I will be fine. I merely need to rest.”

I looked around to make sure that no carriages or other villagers were nearby to see her, and quickly smoothed her skirts down. “The miscarriage was

successful then?" I asked. I'm ashamed to admit that I did so in an imperious tone, and that this made Charlotte cry.

"Please . . ." she sobbed.

"Here, let me help you up." I put a hand under each of her arms and pulled her to her feet, then helped her to the cottage. Edward, sitting with Virgil at our dining table, shot out of his seat the moment he saw her.

"Charlotte, what is wrong?"

"Do not worry yourself, Edward," I replied evenly, never slowing my pace for a moment. "Charlotte has had a little fall and hurt her knee. I shall take care of her."

But Edward followed us into the back bedroom – the tiny room where they slept together, even though unmarried – and Charlotte had to demand that he leave.

"Really, Edward, I'm fine," she managed to say as I helped her onto the bed. "I've hurt my knee and grazed my shin, but I should be happy if only Georgette took care of it."

"Are you bleeding?" he asked. "Would you like me to call a surgeon?"

Charlotte grimaced, and waved Edward away. "I will require no surgeon. Leave me be."

Edward nodded once and then left, and I closed the door behind him. If only he knew what Charlotte had been up to, he probably would not have been so full of loving concern.

"Are you sure you don't want to tell Edward what has happened?" I whispered. "He is training as an apothecary after all."

"No. Edward shall never know. And nor shall Virgil, so don't be thinking to tell him either."

“Of course not. I gave you my word.”

“Here, then. Help me off with these clothes.”

I helped to undress her, to clean off the sticky blood and wrap her lower parts in some old towels. When she was clothed in a warm nightdress and safely beneath the covers, I could not constrain myself any longer.

“Charlotte, what is beneath the door at the abbey?”

She sighed and leaned back against her pillow, her red curls loose around her. “Once again, you must not tell anybody what I tell you.”

“I promise.”

“There is a doctor living in the foundations of the abbey.”

And then the conversation between Virgil and Edward which I had overheard a fortnight ago came back to me: *a fitting lair for a monster*.

“Doctor Flood?” I said, breathless.

Charlotte looked at me sharply. “Yes. How do you know? Has Virgil told you about him?”

“No. I overheard a conversation between Edward and him. Do you know what work they do for Doctor Flood?”

Charlotte shook her head. “No. I think they help him with his experiments.”

“He lives underground? Is it cold? Dark?” I was, and remain, completely horrified. I cannot forget how Edward proclaimed him a monster, how Virgil had spoken with the tremor of fear in his voice.

“He has a light as anybody has, but no fire. It is terribly cold in his rooms.”

“How do you know of him?”

“I knew of him before Edward and Virgil. When first we came here, the three of us, eighteen months

ago, I had reason to procure a first miscarriage. I asked a local woman if she knew who could help me, and she directed me to Flood. On that occasion I had only to swallow some herbs to make the child move.” She put a hand over her stomach again. “But this time he had to use other methods.”

“What did he do?”

“Could you bring me a glass of brandy? I wish that I could sleep.”

“Will you tell me what he did?”

“Of course. But bring me some brandy.”

I did as she asked, reassuring Edward that she was feeling much better, and it was just the shock of falling which had made her so pale. I returned with a glass of brandy. She drank it greedily then lay back, eyes closed.

“Charlotte? You promised to tell.”

Her eyes snapped open. “Yes, yes. You are very eager to hear this, Mrs Marley. Does the idea excite you?”

“No. I ...” This was so typical of the appalling things she said that I was hardly shocked. “My interest is in the doctor himself, not the details.”

“Very well. Listen, and be glad that womb of yours hasn’t quickened yet.”

“I should be glad to have Virgil’s baby,” I protested. “I should never procure a miscarriage if –”

“Shush. Now listen. Once you climb down the stairs that lead from the abbey, you have to walk a hundred feet in the dark, feeling your way along the walls until you can see the glow of light under the door to his chamber. You knock and he comes to let you in. He is a tall man, old, but I’m not certain how old, with pallid skin and grey eyes and a little grey hair. He wears a long red coat, buttoned down the

front with gold buttons. Another door beside leads to a secret chamber which I have never seen. He lives and works in the first room. He has pots and potions, gadgets and specimens on every surface. The room smells strange: earth and ointment mixed.”

“Is he a sinister man?” I asked. “Is he a monster?”

Charlotte laughed. “No. He’s just an old man who knows things. If I were afraid of him I certainly shouldn’t have gone to him for help, should I?”

“What did he do?”

“He cleared a bench of experiments and helped me onto it. To examine me.”

“You mean ...” I could hardly bear to think of some other man approaching those most delicate, most intimate parts of my body.

“Of course, down there. How else was he to remove the baby? And because the oral solution of herbs had not worked, he inserted a paste on a long piece of smooth metal. Almost immediately it began to burn, deep inside. He ordered me off the bench, and told me to walk around the room vigorously. I did so, and he went back to his experiments, almost as though I wasn’t there. He has snakes and spiders in jars – huge spiders, from tropical places – and in one corner an actual crocodile, preserved, which he brought back from China.”

“How appalling.”

“They’re all dead, Georgette, they can’t hurt you. After about an hour of pacing, the baby started to move. He helped me to push it out – it was just a tiny blob of blood really – and that’s when I came back upstairs.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Yes. The paste burned me inside I think. But I’m sure I’ll recover. I can feel the bleeding slowing down.”

“Perhaps you should sleep now,” I said.

And she did, while I sat next to her in Contemplation. Outside, night was approaching. I watched the last weak thread of afternoon sun shiver and fade into dark, lit a rushlight, and Charlotte has not woken since. I saw Virgil and Edward off an hour or so ago, then came back here to write.

I am frightened by the idea of this Dr Flood. I wish that Virgil didn’t work for him. I know he is a poet and I would not take that away from him, but sometimes I wish he would learn a trade so that our existence was not so precarious. He has never again mentioned a maid-of-all-work, and I suspect we simply cannot afford it. My hands are becoming rough and raw from the chores I must do. And I simply *hate* having Charlotte here. I dislike her so very much, and her behaviour today merely confirms my opinion of her. I have found myself on more than one occasion today wondering how much better things would be here if she bled to death. But she won’t die. People like Charlotte never do die of misadventure; rather they go on to live long and interesting lives, absolve themselves of their sins on their deathbeds and probably progress to the happy hereafter. It’s hardly fair. I wish that she and Edward would soon leave. Then perhaps I can persuade Virgil to find a different kind of job while he waits for his poems to be published.

Thursday, 24th October 1793

All is quiet once more in our cottage, Charlotte and Edward are gone at my request. What an awful,

painful, tumultuous week I have had to endure. Good riddance, good riddance, Charlotte Andrews. May you have nothing but bad luck from this moment on, for you are nothing but a whore. No, worse than a whore, for at least a whore has the good sense to charge money for her debauchery. And to do what she did only two days after she had been in Flood's cold chambers, deliberately miscarrying Edward's child! May she die and rot.

Yesterday, late afternoon, Virgil and Edward came back from the village with an entire turkey and a bottle of wine. Flood had paid them extra for some deed they had performed for him, and they had decided that we would have a feast to celebrate. As we had only dined that day on bread and cheese, we were all eager for a proper, cooked meal.

It was wonderful. Night fell outside, while inside all was warmth and cheer and wine and laughter. Charlotte, who had barely spoken a word to me since Monday, not even to thank me, was in particularly high spirits, singing and dancing in the kitchen. I allow that she does have a lovely singing voice, but she oughtn't be such a spectacle with it. We supped around seven, and were all quite drunk by the time the last morsel of flesh was eaten.

Charlotte continued to show off, she would not stop. And of course she and Edward descended into their usual displays of affection. At first I was not concerned. I was happy to sit in the firelight with Virgil's pale hand in mine, but in her typical fashion, Charlotte went beyond decency. She began to strip, singing and dancing.

"Don't cheapen yourself so, Charlotte," I said.

“Jealous, jealous, jealous,” she replied, and, with her breasts bare and her skirts around her waist, she lay on the table in front of us and invited Edward on top of her. He required little persuasion, and as I rose to leave the room, he was already upon her.

“Come, Virgil,” I said, touching his shoulder and refusing to watch them. I was embarrassed for Edward, for I knew he would not behave in such a way if it wasn’t for Charlotte’s encouragement.

“No, Virgil, stay,” Charlotte said, gasping, reaching out and clasping Virgil’s hand in her own. “Both of you stay.”

“We will do no such thing!” I cried. “Virgil?”

Virgil turned to me, took my hand, his other was still holding on to Charlotte’s. “Are you certain, Georgette?” he asked.

Could it be possible that he thought for an instant that I would be interested in such concupiscence, such *goatish* behaviour? As though we were all mad Greeks at a Bacchanal?

“I am certain,” I said pulling my hand away. “And if you are not, then perhaps I have made a terrible mistake in marrying you.”

I ran off towards our bedroom to hide from the awful pain of his temptation. He did not join me for a quarter hour, and I was frantic with worry the whole time. I vowed I would not ask, for I was afraid I would not like the answer. How she could offer herself in that way, only days after flushing life from her womb, I cannot fathom.

The next morning, I woke Virgil early. I had hardly slept, pondering upon the problem of Charlotte. I had run away from my family, left a life of luxury behind

for Virgil's sake, and now my marriage was being ruined by her presence. It was not to be endured.

"Wake up, Virgil," I said, shaking him softly. Outside, the sun was still on the other side of the horizon. The sky was dark blue, and I could see a single star through silhouetted tree branches.

"Gette?" he said groggily, eyes open a crack, peering at me.

"I must say something and it cannot wait. It is of the utmost importance."

He reached out his long, pale hand and brushed a curl off my cheek. "What is the matter, my sweetheart?"

And then, because he was so beautiful in the half-light, so warm and gentle, I began to cry. He enfolded me in his arms. His skin was hot beneath his white nightshirt, and I could feel his sparse, unshaved bristles as he pressed his face into my face to kiss my cheek.

"Virgil, you didn't . . . you didn't . . ."

"Didn't what, my pet?"

"With Charlotte?"

My cheek was pressed against his collar bone, and his voice rumbled deep in his chest. "Of course not. Darling, I'm sorry. I was drunk and Charlotte is so forward. I merely stayed to tell them to be kinder to you, to remind them you are not like them. You are pure. Delicate."

"And sad." I breathed in the salty scent of his sleepy skin.

"This morning you are sad. I'm so sorry."

"She will have to go."

He paused, his hand at rest on my hair. Then, "Charlotte?"

“Of course, Charlotte. Charlotte will have to go. Her presence makes my life a misery.”

“If Charlotte goes, then Edward will follow.”

“I don’t care. He’s almost as bad as her.” I pulled away from his embrace and considered him. “You can live without Edward, can’t you? I can be your friend as well as your wife.”

“And you will be desperately unhappy if they stay?”

I nodded firmly. “Yes. I don’t care if we have to move to another house or –”

“Edward will not make us leave.” He sighed deeply, ran a hand through his hair. “Edward has been such a help to me in my work,” he said carefully.

“I can help you. You need only tell me what you do and –”

“No,” he said with conviction. “I can manage on my own. I can manage without Edward. But I cannot manage without my wife’s smiles and laughter. I will speak to them today, and they will be gone in a matter of days.”

In fact, they left this morning. Charlotte was wearing one of my bonnets as she stepped into the coach, a challenge to me. I said nothing. I wish never to speak to her again, and she may keep the bonnet, though it was my favourite. Edward promised that his first task upon returning to London would be to call upon the press which has their poetry collection, and to find out when they intend to publish it. He said his Goodbye to Virgil then moved on to me.

“Georgette. I’m sorry if we disrupted your household while we were here.” His eyes were so sincere and apologetic that I forgave him instantly, and

wished that he could stay. But he was determined to be with Charlotte.

“I should always be very glad to see you, Edward,” I replied, taking his hand.

He kissed my fingers softly, then leaned in to embrace me. I stiffened – it hardly seemed appropriate – but he whispered urgently in my ear. “Watch Virgil closely. Do not let him become too melancholy. I fear for him.”

Then he released me and left me bewildered as he walked purposefully towards the coach. Virgil took my hand and smiled at me, and he seemed so perfectly contented as to make a mockery of Edward’s words.

And so now, Diary, we are back to our harmonious pace. From now on, I shall endeavour to talk with Virgil more and draw him out about his work. I care not what it is he does. I cannot bear to stay ignorant of such a large part of his life. We vowed to share everything when we married, and I shall hold him to that vow.

Wednesday, 6th November 1793

I can scarce believe it, I hope and hope that I am not imagining it, that the most wonderful Thing has happened. Still, it is only early and I shall not pin all my dreams upon it.

Diary, I think that I may soon become a Mother.

Tuesday, 12th November 1793

There can now be no doubt. All the signs are upon me. I am filled with such a joy, impossible to express. I shall tell Virgil on Saturday, for we often walk down to the

beach on Saturdays and sit to watch the sea for hours. I am certain his elation will be a match for mine, for there will be one more in this household to love.

Saturday, 16th November 1793

And so, in the scarce space of a month, I have been transformed into the happiest woman alive. Let me tell you about today.

Virgil woke me with kisses (his usual mode to wake me) and it was a sunny day – perhaps the last fine day of Autumn, for winter will soon be upon us. We dressed and broke our fast, then headed outside for our customary walk along the cliffs. I have longed to tell him since I first suspected and nearly blurted out my delightful secret as we were walking, but I saved it for the Perfect Moment.

Soon we reached the old boat behind the rocks, upon which we always sit to watch the sea. Virgil helped me across the stony beach and then we settled together, side by side on the creaky plank which was our love seat. The water was very still, as it often is in the mornings, like a pale blue glass lying bare under the sky. Small waves curled onto the shore, the air was fresh and salty, and a sunbeam kept us warm. We snuggled close and I watched Virgil watching a space, far, far out to sea. He seemed very content.

In fact, it was the first time he had appeared content since Edward's departure three weeks ago. I think that Virgil dislikes his work greatly, and that perhaps Edward's presence tempered that dislike. I notice him sipping from the crystal bottle of laudanum oftener and oftener, see him sitting dazed by the fire for the hour or so before he must leave the house to work. If I ask him

what is wrong, he tells me not to worry, that he is merely musing on a poem or some such thing. I have done as he says and not troubled myself too much over it, for Virgil was always a Melancholy. I'm sure now he will have the child to look forward to, these moods will become lighter and less frequent.

So, content on the seashore, I put my hand in his, beamed up at him and said, "Virgil, you are to be a Father."

Diary, the joy in his eyes! Those eyes, so dark and gentle, teardrops poised to brim over onto long lashes. And he smiled at me and said, "Gette? Are you certain?"

I nodded, overwhelmed, and he folded me in his arms and rocked me. "And how am I to keep my heart from bursting with happiness?" he asked, his voice thick with emotion. "How am I to keep my joy contained in this fragile, mortal body?"

I could not answer.

When he had calmed his passions, he began to dream out loud. "Imagine, Gette, a tiny you or a tiny me, a perfect life created by us. He will be so fair, so bright, with your kind nature I hope, and your golden hair and blue eyes."

"No, your chestnut hair," I said, laughing, "and your beautiful, beautiful dark eyes."

"And we shall teach him to read from babyhood, so that he is always clever. And then perhaps he can follow me into my profession." Here he frowned. "My writing profession, I mean, not the . . . not the other."

I rushed in to patch up the breach in his joy. "Of course he shall be a poet. Or *she*."

"Yes, yes. A little girl, how delightful. Either would be . . . delightful."

Virgil never fully recovered his uncontrollable joy after reminding himself of his work. I wish I knew what he did, but I cannot ask without giving away that I listened in on his conversation with Edward that night. Besides, it cannot be so bad, not really. Virgil is all Sensibility, and so any task that is not writing his beloved poetry would perhaps affect him adversely. I shall not worry.

He took me home and disappeared for a few hours on some task which he would not reveal, then returned with a posy of wild violets and daisies for me, hand-picked in the wood behind our home. This evening we sat comfortably, lovingly together. He cannot keep his hands off my body, and I would not resist him even if I could. We are so full of happiness and love.

I must to bed. My husband awaits.

Monday, 18th November 1793

I have just read over Saturday's entry. How much joy we shared upon that day, and indeed upon Sunday and even this morning. Even this morning. But now Virgil is all a-misery. As I write this he sits by the fire, as he has done since night fell, and gazes into it. He has avoided my every attempt to draw him into conversation for the past three hours, not responding at all. As though I weren't here. I should cry for being so ill-treated, but I am trying to understand his terrible pain.

We heard word this morning, in a letter from Edward, that the publishing house in London does not want Virgil's poems. With what shaking hands did Virgil pick off the seal on the letter, certain that this would be the fulfilment of his hopes. And then with what a sad droop about his shoulders did he hand me

the letter where I could read for myself the obliteration of those hopes.

Cripplegate, 13th November

Dear Virgil,

Bad news I'm afraid, my friend. As you know, I decided to pay a call upon the gentlemen at the Hammondslowe Press, to ascertain when they planned to publish our collection. They handed me the manuscript and thanked me for saving them posting a refusal. In fact, they admitted the manuscript had been lost for six weeks and had only been found again two days previously. I tried to press it back into the editor's hands, but he assured me he knew for certain that Marley and Snowe would not be printed with their press at any time. But don't despair, old friend. Why don't you and Georgette come down to London and we'll begin afresh?

Yours, EDWARD SNOWE

I handed the letter back to Virgil, comfort awaiting in my eyes. He seized the piece of paper from me, screwed it up with one hand and clenched it there, bilious words exploding from his lips. "Damn you, Edward Snowe! That untalented wretch has snatched away my glory!" he exclaimed, tears threatening then falling. "Why did I put my trust in him? He was so full of promises – he knew the editor, he said, and so I allowed his dreadful poetry to drag down my honour. That worthless hound, that wretched garreter!"

I tried to take him in my arms, but he resisted violently, and stalked from the room. He wrote a poisonous letter to Edward and went out to post it. I did not see him for many hours, and I believe he may have been walking along the cliff-top here, hoping the sea could wash away his sorrow. But he returned with the evening dark and has sat, ever since, by the fire without saying a word. If I did not know better, I should think an Enchantment has struck him dumb. When I recall how joyous we were just a few bare hours ago, it is as though –

Oh, oh. How can I steady my shaking hand sufficiently to write what has just transpired? I was so engrossed in recording today's events in my Diary that I did not notice Virgil had arisen from his chair and stood over me, glaring down upon me. I only looked up when he said, "What are you doing, Georgette?"

"Writing in my Diary," I replied. With his clothes in disarray, his hair dishevelled from running his hands through it in despair, and that strange glazed look he acquires when he has been taking laudanum, he resembled a Madman, lit from behind by the fire. My heart began to race.

"It's a pity you can't write for money, isn't it?" he said, his voice dark with sarcasm. "It's a pity you can't succeed where I have failed."

"You have not failed, Virgil. You have been refused by one publisher. There must be many more publishers who would be interested."

"And what would you know?" he snapped, pulling at his cravat as though it were choking him. "What would you know about life, or about art?" He turned his face upwards, the tears springing once again to his eyes.

“Virgil, do not distress yourself so,” I said, putting aside my Diary and moving to stand up. But he pushed me back into my chair and leaned over me, a hand on either arm of the chair, trapping me in the path of his invective.

“Do not distress myself? You shallow, shallow bauble.” He spoke these words so vehemently that spittle escaped his mouth. I felt it hit my hair. And then, remorseful, he collapsed to his knees and put his head in my lap.

“I ache, Gette, I ache. I ache to live, and all I get is this.” Here he gestured around him with one limp arm.

“But this is living, Virgil. You are alive.”

He shook his head. “I am only half alive, and I am dying all the time. In my head, I have beauty and peace and wings to fly, but here, here in this cottage it is all hardship and cold and . . . and . . .” He began to sob.

“Hush. You must try to calm yourself. In a day or two you will feel better, and you will be ready to try again.”

“I never want to feel better. To feel happiness is to be deceived. To feel misery is to know the truth about the world.”

“Hush, Virgil. Perhaps you should sleep.”

“Sleep?” Again anger edged into his voice, and he sat back on his haunches to look at me. “How can either of us sleep? We have no money, no future, and a child on the way.”

“We have enough. We’ll get by.”

“Oh yes, *you* needn’t worry, for it is not *you* who must go out at night and –”

“And what?” I prompted him.

“Never mind,” he said, climbing to his feet. “You just keep your silly secrets in your silly Diary. ‘Dear

Diary, today I ate well and was loved, and cared not that my husband grovels in the abyss –”

“Virgil! How can you say I do not care? You are all my care. I could be perfectly happy with nothing so long as you were with me. Look how much I have already given up.”

He quieted himself, then turned and headed towards the door. “I must go walking to clear my mind.”

I sprang from my chair to stop him. “Wait. Tell me what it is you do. What work do you perform for Doctor Flood?”

He didn’t stop. “I shall never tell.”

“You shall.” I ran in front of him and blocked the door. He reached around me to push it open and it swung out a little, exposing a crack of cold air on my back. “You shall tell me. I am your wife and I deserve to know.”

His lips formed a stubborn line. I did not move, though the cold November wind was biting through my clothes.

Finally, finally, and with more than a little anger, he said, “I dig graves.”

I thought to myself, digging graves is not so bad. A lowly job, yes, and perhaps dirty, though he always came home quite clean, but it is not monstrous. There is nothing frightening about digging graves.

“And this you are so ashamed to admit?” I said quietly.

“They are already occupied.”

“What?”

“Flood is a scientist. A mystic. He performs diverse experiments, looking for answers to such questions as why we die, and where is the seat of the soul.”

“What do you mean the graves are already occupied?” My heart was hammering in my chest, as I resisted the awful images that came to my mind.

“He needs bodies for his experiments. I dig graves and remove bodies from their coffins. Sometimes they are just skeletons,” he said, then his voice dropped, became breathy. “Sometimes they are grotesqueries such as a man should never look upon.”

“Virgil. Virgil say this isn’t true. You steal bodies from their graves so that Flood may experiment on them?”

“It’s true, Georgette,” he said, nodding. And then, because my body had become limp with shock, he pushed past me and out into the winter’s night. “Tell your Diary. Make your first black mark in it,” he called over his shoulder as he disappeared into the darkness. “But never tell me again that this existence of mine is a life. For I know it is nothing but a moving, breathing death.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Wednesday, 12th March 1794

Yes, it is true I have not written for nearly four months. I would beg forgiveness, but of whom? Last year when I wrote I somehow imagined an audience for my Heart, whether in my lifetime or after it. Now I know that I am perhaps the only person who will ever read back over these words. But that is not the reason I have not written. The reason shall be unfolded as I try to fill the gap with a brief summary of my most recent winter.

Virgil took the rejection of his poetry very badly. He behaved as though he did not want to recover from the disappointment, going over the details repeatedly, rereading his poems and sometimes delighting in them, sometimes grinding his teeth over how awful they were. On one occasion, I had to wrestle from his hands some pages which he intended to burn.

Most awful of all, however, was that he could not write.

I would see him sit down with pen in hand, fresh ink nearby, a new page to be filled. Some desperate scribbling would follow, then some desperate crossing-out, screwing up, throwing towards the fire. I could not bring myself to chastise him for wasting paper, which is an expense we can only barely afford. After trying for a few hours, he would slip quietly to the bedroom for his laudanum, then return to sit by the fire, that mute melancholy daze settled upon him, as the firelight reflected off his skin. During this time, if I so much as picked up a pen to write a letter to Hattie, he would adopt the most anxious expression, his fingers would begin to tap, and he would watch me as eagerly as a starving man might watch a feast. I could not bring myself to write in this Diary. Although it was never spoken aloud, we both held the vague superstition that every word I wrote was one less he could use.

The last of my savings ran out just before Christmas, and we became quite desperate financially. Virgil was anxious about our situation in the mornings when he awoke, but by midday he had taken some of his liquid saviour and would be more able to cope, and more likely to assuage my worries with vague assurances. He took less and less care of himself, and I thanked the Heavens that Dr Flood insisted that he bathe after every evening's work. Still, his fingernails were black with what I could only assume was graveyard dirt, his hair became lank and unkempt, his skin became pallid rather than pale, and his clothes were often misbuttoned or hastily layered upon him, so that he looked rather like a man who had slept on the road at night.

On Christmas Eve, we had an awful argument, for he let slip that Flood was paying him partly in opium. I must admit that I am still not fully able to tolerate the kind of work Virgil does for the Doctor, so any mention of his name always angers me. I insisted that there were more important things we needed than his laudanum. I have not had a new dress since I ran away from London, and the ones I now wear are so robbed of colour and shape that I cannot bear to look at myself in the glass. I resemble a pauper.

Of course, I must remember, I am a pauper.

While Virgil angrily defended his right to receive laudanum from Flood, I could read in his eyes an awful, awful guilt. His pain was too much for me, and I immediately despised myself for wanting to take away the only thing that made his life bearable. But, oh, how I wish it were *me* who could make him contented, or the prospect of our child's imminent birth. I never mentioned it again, though I am desperate he would stop taking the cure. I simply cannot bear to see that guilt and terror in his eyes.

My own pain I can endure, Diary. But I am not strong enough to endure his.

I heard from my parents, via Aunt Hattie, shortly after Christmas. I was informed that should I wish to return to Lyon, all would be forgiven, but that I was never to see or speak of Virgil again. Hattie has, I think, told my mother of the approaching birth, and that knowledge has worked upon her conscience. Still, I have no intention of leaving Virgil, though sometimes at night I dream of the chateau, and when I awake under the black roof beams of this tiny cottage, I nearly weep with shock and disappointment.

We somehow managed to make it through winter. We eat modestly, and have not had wine or spirits for many months. Virgil still has not written anything. The weight of unexpressed words upon his heart is very heavy, I fear. I cannot remember the last time I heard him laugh. He seems to have very little interest in me, though he is always kind and gentle and asks after the child. All this, though, with the interest an Uncle might show to a Niece, and I presume it goes without saying that we have not made love in a very long time. I would say that it breaks my heart, but I ... No. It does break my heart. Virgil is not the only occupant of this cottage who experiences pain or love or desire. *I* feel too, though I might not be able to express it so eloquently in tears and rages.

Yesterday, however, we had an unexpected visit. So much time has passed since I have seen any other face but Virgil's, that when the knock at the door came I dropped my darning in surprise. Virgil, who was dozing in the chair opposite me, awoke with a start.

"Is somebody at our door?" he asked.

"I think so."

He pulled himself to his feet and I followed him to the door. Outside it rained. It was late afternoon and Doctor Flood did not require Virgil's services that evening. I think we both feared the worst – bad news or debt collectors – but when the door was opened, it was Edward Snowe who stood upon our step, a leather bag held in one hand.

"Edward!" I exclaimed.

His smile of greeting died upon his lips as he looked over Virgil. My husband's decline has been gradual in my eyes, but now I looked upon him and saw what Edward must see. A sick, dirty, pauper.

“Virgil, are you unwell?” he asked.

I knew not whether Virgil would invite Edward in or send him packing. Most of his rage from his earlier disappointment centred around Edward, but he hadn't mentioned his old friend for many weeks now.

“No, I am very well,” Virgil replied, firmly. “And you?”

“I'm . . . May I come in? It's rather damp out here.”

We had not been host to guests for so long, it seemed we had forgotten how to treat them. We brought Edward inside and took his hat and cape, and settled him by the fire with a tray of tea. I felt as though it were a parody of true hospitality. The tea tray was tarnished, the cups cracked, the chairs upon which we sat threadbare, and our clothes were almost grey from prolonged wear. Edward, in contrast, was dressed in a brocade waistcoat and black coat, his boots obviously new. Dressed, in fact, how Virgil had himself once dressed. I felt a pang of sadness for the loss of my husband's fine taste and appearance.

Virgil and Edward re-acquainted themselves with each other, in polite tones which belied their long friendship. I could not restrain myself for very long from asking the question which was poised upon my lips.

“So, Edward, where is Miss Andrews?” From the moment I saw Edward, I had feared her arrival.

Edward gave a nervous laugh. “Ah, I wondered when somebody would ask me that. Charlotte has left me.”

“I'm very sorry,” I replied. I suppose I needn't reveal that I was not sorry.

“She has run off with an Italian count. Last time I saw her she insisted I call her Contessa, and she was

dressed very fine indeed. I suspect she has become a wealthy woman.”

Oh, what a twisting, churning envy I felt then. For I was once a wealthy woman in fine dress, and I was born to it and bred to it. In my sudden rage I nearly blurted out the truth about Charlotte’s two deliberate miscarriages, but seeing the downcast aspect of Edward’s glance, I held my tongue. I would only hurt him.

A short silence descended between us. I glanced at Virgil. He was always so transparent to me. While his eyebrows were drawn together and his mouth set in a hard line, as though he wanted to appear hostile to Edward, his eyes were warm and hopeful. Perhaps he was remembering the experiences and dreams he and Edward had once shared. Perhaps he longed for some company.

“Are you in Yorkshire for long, Edward?” I asked.

“I . . . well . . . I’ve just been to see Flood. He owed me some money and it should be enough to cover my coach fare back to London. I suppose I should leave this evening with the mail.”

Virgil’s mouth softened. But I knew he would not ask the question, so I asked it for him. “We should be most happy if you’d stay with us a little while, Edward,” I said. “Though we live very modestly, we have a room spare.”

“I should be most delighted to stay. That is, if Virgil agrees.”

We both turned to Virgil, who made a pretence of begrudgedness. “Yes, I suppose you had better stay.”

“I won’t impose for long. I must be back in London in a week. Here, I have brought you something.” Edward leaned down and opened his leather bag. He

pulled out three bottles of fine red wine and lined them up on the hearth.

Virgil's voice became strained with emotion as he murmured, "Thank you, old friend."

I scooped up one of the bottles. "Let us open one immediately. To celebrate your being here."

I went to the kitchen to uncork the wine and pour three glasses. When I returned, Edward and Virgil were engaged in easy conversation, the forced politeness gone. I sat with them, and we drank and talked, and Virgil even laughed once or twice, though it was merely a ghost of his laughter really.

Because we had not drunk wine for so long, I was cautious. Virgil was not, and within an hour seemed quite inebriated. Darkness had fallen outside, and the air was heavy with the greasy smell of tallow candles. Our rooms look grimy in the candlelight, the shifting shadows seeming to make dirty or wet patches more apparent. Virgil sat amongst it, clothes in disarray, nodding into his chest in quiet moments. Edward tried to give me reassuring smiles, but I think we were both concerned that Virgil had drunk too much.

"Come on, old fellow, perhaps you should to bed," Edward said, as Virgil began to doze once more.

"No, no," Virgil said, waking up and stretching out his legs. "I've plenty more life left in me. Don't be thinking to put me in my grave yet."

"Virgil, dear, you're very tired," I said soothingly. "Are you sure you've not had enough of company and conversation?"

He began to nod off again, then sat up with a start. "Did you know," he said, matter-of-fact, "that crocodiles can roar and hiss like lions?"

“No, I did not know that,” Edward said, trying to suppress a smile at Virgil’s odd change of topic.

“It’s true. And they can slow down their own hearts.”

“Come, Virgil, to bed,” I said, going to him and pulling him out of his chair. He went limp against me, and I practically had to drag him. Edward rose to help me.

“Don’t let me fall asleep. I shall dream of crocodiles,” he murmured.

“No, you shan’t,” I said, as we managed him into our bedroom. “You shall dream of summer forests and the smell of wildflowers.”

He flopped onto the bed and Edward removed his shoes. I straightened his head onto a pillow and pulled the covers over him. “A crocodile can run faster than a man,” he said. I kissed his eyes closed and he was soon drawing the deep, regular breaths of sleep. Edward and I exchanged glances and returned to the fireplace.

“Has he been very melancholy?” Edward asked. His voice was urgent, almost as though he had been wanting to ask the question since he had arrived.

“Virgil was always melancholy,” I replied, avoiding his eyes.

“Has he been drinking much of his drug?”

I nodded. “Every day. It seems to be his only solace.”

Edward gazed into the fire for some time, and I began to feel dozy myself.

“And how have you been, Gette?” he asked out of the silence. It was the first time he had ever used the pet version of my name. Somehow it seemed too intimate, but, starved as I was of affection, I responded too eagerly to the fondness in his voice.

“Not so very bad, Edward. We are managing, and soon there will be another one of us to love.” I laid a hand protectively across my great belly – I am such a cow at the moment, you cannot imagine – and looked across at him proudly.

“I can see that. Is Virgil happy about it?”

“Yes. At least I think he is. He is quite distant a great deal of the time.”

“Do you still keep your Diary?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. I have been too busy, and I wished to save the ink for Virgil’s work.” I nearly told him that Virgil had not written anything these last four months, but stopped myself. It would have been a betrayal of trust. Virgil might not want others to know that his creative wellspring was not flowing.

“I’m saddened to hear it, Gette. You must have a record of your life, so that when you are an old woman you may sit by the fire in your grand house and read about these leaner years.”

“Perhaps you are right,” I replied.

Which is when I formed the resolution to return to you, Diary. And now that I have done it, I do feel better. It helps to write some of my feelings down, helps to clarify my thoughts. And it matters not if the only person who ever reads it is me. I may be a very different me one day, as Edward suggested. My parents at any time could forgive me and offer us a house or some money. Virgil might recover from his malady and begin to write an empire of gold. Nobody can see into the future.

Here, then, is a message to myself when I am old. If you are reading this, old woman, it is because you survived those times of poverty in that little cottage by the wood. I commend you. Perhaps you are surrounded now

by children, by a loving husband returned to himself, and the fine things he buys for you. Enjoy it all, old woman, for here in the Past, things look very bleak indeed.

Saturday, 15th March 1794

The weather was so fine this morning that we decided to take our breakfast out of doors. Edward helped me pack a basket with cheese, bread, and cold cooked mutton, and we brought our last remaining bottle of wine with us. Virgil took an age to get dressed, and when he finally joined us in the kitchen, I was struck by how pale and sickly he appeared. However, I decided that it was merely because I had robust, sturdy Edward to compare him to. Around eleven, the three of us headed down to the cliff-top with our basket.

Spring is come a little early this year, and already the sun reflected off new shoots and green leaves, sticky in their infancy. We picked our way through the wood and found a soft square of green grass overlooking the sea, whereupon Edward and Virgil lay down their capes and we settled ourselves under the branches of an old, gnarled tree.

After we had eaten, I lay back and looked up at the pale blue sky through the branches of the tree, and watched clouds moving lazily in the spring breeze. Virgil and Edward were having a heated debate about Dante. I admit I was most pleased to hear Virgil's voice imbued with colour and passion once again. I had not realised how important his disputations with Edward had been to him.

“No, no, the second circle of hell is the gluttonous. The third is reserved for fornicators,” Virgil said emphatically.

“I am certain it is quite the reverse.”

“Are you concerned you’ll be closer to Satan than you had planned?”

They laughed between them, and after a while fell silent. I heaved myself over on my side, which is no easy task with the load I am carrying. Virgil smiled at me lovingly, a smile which had almost faded from my memory. I was almost too shocked to respond. I made the resolution then that I would do all in my power to make Edward stay. He had cheered Virgil out of his opium haze.

“And so, Virgil,” Edward said, leaning back on his elbows. “Have you enough poems now for another collection?”

Virgil shifted uncomfortably. I pressed his fingers in mine. “I’m working on a long piece,” he lied. “Why do you ask?”

“I have saved this information for the right moment. I had occasion to speak with Mr Pitt, formerly of the Hammondslowe Press, now the manager of a small press called Saint John Pitt at Russell Square. He remembered our previous collection and said that he had been most impressed with it at the time. He has asked if we have another in progress. With a view to publishing it this summer.”

I watched Virgil closely. His hands shook almost imperceptibly, a tiny muscle on his jawline pulled tight. “Is he not interested in publishing our first collection?”

Edward shook his head. “He said, and rightly so, that a number of the poems are immature in their stylings. He is only interested in new work.”

New work. Exactly what Virgil had been unable to produce in the last few months.

“What do you say, old friend? Shall we give it another go?”

Virgil faltered over his words. “I ... ah ... I shall have to think about it. I’ve been working on a long piece, a great epic. I have ... few ballads ... no sonnets.”

“Ah, but it won’t take you long to dream up a few more, I dare say.”

“I –”

“Come, let us talk no more of business,” I said, trying to change the topic before Virgil went to pieces. “It is a lovely day for a long walk.”

“A long walk, Georgette? In your condition?” Edward said.

“Why, yes. I feel as healthy as a horse, and have done since the very start. Let’s save your plans for later.”

Virgil stood and helped me to my feet. Edward packed up our basket and we left it beneath the tree and walked out towards the rocky cliff path. We followed it around towards the village and the cemetery, where I noticed a man walking towards us from the other direction.

“Virgil, is that Reverend Fowler I see up ahead?” I asked. I was immediately concerned for him seeing me in my condition. Around Edward and Virgil I was comfortable, but the eyes of the Reverend were less forgiving, more given to scrutiny and judgement. I know what Puritans the English can be.

“Yes, I believe it is.”

“Perhaps I should return home,” I said, stopping and placing my hands self-consciously over my belly.

“Nonsense,” Edward said. “It’s no shame to be seen as you are.”

And so within a few moments the Reverend was close enough to say hello. He stopped, as did we, to exchange pleasantries.

“Good morning, Reverend,” Edward said.

The Reverend smiled tightly. “It is afternoon. In any case, good afternoon to you.” He dealt with Virgil and I with a quick, condescending glance. “And good day to you, also. Is all well with you?” Never had a man’s words and his sentiments been so ill-matched. His thin lips, his distant tone, his barely disguised recoil from us, all spoke of a man who had no care at all if we were well or if we were dying. I had been worried that my pregnant body would offend him, but clearly our humble clothes were of more concern. I know not why I was so anxious that he approve of me – perhaps because he did not know that I was really a fine lady of high birth. So I foolishly blurted out, “Very well, sir. We expect to hear any day from my father, who lives enormously in Lyon. You may not see us in Solgreve for very much longer.”

“Is that so?” he said, nodding towards Virgil. “Doctor Flood will be most displeased when he hears. I must get on with business. Forgive me. Good day.”

And with that he was gone.

Virgil immediately turned on me. “Why on earth did you say that, Gette?”

“I’m sorry, I simply couldn’t bear him looking down upon me.”

Edward huffed a cynical laugh. “His opinion is hardly worth anything, Georgette.”

“He is the parish priest.”

“He is not what he appears,” Edward replied.

“Now I shall have to see Flood this afternoon to assure him I am staying,” Virgil muttered. “Really,

Gette, I wish you had said nothing. He is not a man whom we need impress.”

“I doubt that the Reverend would mix with your Doctor Flood, if he can hardly be civil to us,” I protested. “I only wanted him to know that I am not the lowly thing he thinks he sees.” I knew I was guilty of a crass silliness, of displaying a Pride which I had long ago given up as my right.

“Reverend Fowler knows full well what you are, Gette. And that is because I have told Flood and Flood would have passed it on,” Virgil replied. He turned his back to me to face out to sea. I had upset him greatly, not only because it meant an extra meeting with Doctor Flood, but because I had reminded him of the difference in our origins.

“Besides, Georgette,” Edward added, leaning idly against a gravestone, “there is hardly anyone lowlier than Reverend Fowler himself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean –”

“Don’t tell her,” Virgil snapped, whirling around. “She doesn’t need to know.”

“Know what?”

“Sorry, Georgette,” Edward said.

“No, that isn’t good enough. What is there to know about Reverend Fowler?”

Virgil sighed, pressed a restless hand against his mouth. Both of them were silent.

“Come, no secrets,” I said.

“Reverend Fowler knows, Gette,” Virgil said at last.

“Knows?”

“About Flood’s experiments. He and the Doctor are very close.”

“And he lets it happen? Right beneath the church?”
I was appalled.

“He encourages it to happen,” Edward said. “He benefits from it as much as anybody else in this community.”

“Benefits from . . . from that monstrous business?”

Edward nodded. “As will you. If you stay here long enough.”

“I do not understand.”

“Flood has performed some work here, a new kind of science,” Virgil said, not meeting my eye, “to profit the residents.”

“Have I told you my great-uncle’s father lived to one hundred and nine?” Edward asked me pointedly.

After a moment of confusion, the connection became apparent. I looked from Edward to Virgil and then out to sea. “Why, yes, Edward,” I said softly. “Yes, I believe you have.”

Tuesday 18th March 1794

Last night, Virgil had to go out to work, and so Edward and I sat together by the fire. I remember the look in Virgil’s eyes watching the two of us there, warm and untroubled. I despise what he does, and I am beyond horrified to know that Flood uses some inexplicable, heinous science to extend the lives of the residents, but what on earth can we do? We have a child on the way and there are days we can barely feed ourselves. And so while I see Virgil’s pain at having to go outside into the dark, I must shut off that urge to cry, “Don’t go! We shall manage without, my love. Do not go.”

After he had left, Edward asked, “Are you worried for him?”

“Of course,” I replied. “But there is no other way.”

“You could both return to London.”

“I cannot travel so far with a child inside me.”

“After the baby is born?”

“Perhaps. Would Virgil find work there?”

Edward considered. “If he stopped taking the opium, he might.”

“I fear Flood has a hold over him. He pays him in the drug sometimes.”

Edward fell silent. I shifted my chair a little closer to the fire, extended my hands towards the flames.

“He has nightmares, Gette.” Again the use of my pet name while we were alone.

“Nightmares? Why, everyone has nightmares,” I replied, not looking at him.

I heard him rise and go to his room. When he returned, he carried a tray with ink and paper. He sat down and began to write. I watched him with the edge of my gaze, scribbling, crossing out, but not cursing and wailing as Virgil curses and wails. He continued to write, working at the paper, growing excited sometimes and dipping his pen too hastily, sometimes slowing, tapping his fingers thoughtfully on the tray. I envied him for Virgil’s sake, poor Virgil who had not written in so long.

I began to doze in my chair, and was considering retiring for the evening when the front door opened and Virgil burst in, a good deal earlier than usual, shaking palely as though with shock or fear, his clothes in disarray.

“Virgil!” I exclaimed, leaping to my feet and leading him to the fire.

“Gette . . . I saw . . . I saw . . .”

“I’ll get some brandy,” Edward said, hastily laying

aside his work and heading for the kitchen. Edward had kindly brought some brandy and other medicinals with him. As much as Virgil had always condescended to his trade, Edward's being an apothecary proved very useful from time to time.

"What did you see, my love?" I asked, kneeling before him and taking his icy fingers in mine.

"Something in the graveyard."

A chill swept over me, and at first I believed the door must still be open, and the last of a winter breeze had crept in. But the door was firmly closed, the fire hot enough to defend me from any external cold.

"What was in the graveyard?" I asked, my throat so tight the words barely made it to my lips.

"Here, drink this," Edward said with authority, pushing a glass of brandy towards Virgil. Virgil took it with both hands and gulped it greedily.

"He says he saw something in the graveyard," I told Edward.

"Something in the graveyard, Virgil? What could it be that has you so upset?"

Virgil finished the brandy and let his arm go limp, dropping the glass gently beside him. "I was out near the cliff, readying myself to dig. The moon, though not full, was bright, the sea quite calm beneath me. I picked up my mattock and was about to plunge it into the earth, when something moved in the distance. Instantly, I dropped my tools. I did not want to be seen about my work. I tried to focus on the figure but it seemed to adhere to the shadows, gliding towards me from shadow to shadow, as if gravestones and uneven ground meant nothing to it. It stopped, perhaps thirty feet from me, pressed against a tree, and watched me."

“What was it?” Edward said.

“A figure. Cloaked, I think, in brown. But there was something awful, stretched and attenuated, about its shape.”

“Then it was just a person?” I asked, relief washing through me. Not a spectre, not a monster, but a person.

Virgil shook his head. “I believe it was a ghost. Perhaps a ghost of one of the poor souls I have uncovered in my work.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Virgil,” Edward said, his voice strong and confident.

“It watched me, and I heard it breathing. Even over the rattle of the leaves in the trees I could hear it breathing: wet and eager, like a dog about to devour a half-rotted corpse. I could not pick up my tools again. I ran home. Flood will be displeased with me. Oh, I cannot bear it. Such a phantom, sinister among shadows. Do you know that as I ran, I looked back over my shoulder to see if it was following me. But it had disappeared. Vanished into nothing.”

“You imagined it, Virgil,” Edward said. “Ghosts do not exist.”

“Perhaps you are unwell,” I said soothingly, brushing his hair off his brow.

“I hate myself for saying it,” Edward began carefully, “but perhaps you have had too much laudanum. It can addle a man’s senses.”

Virgil sank back into the chair. “I pray you are both right, for I would rather be unwell or addled than believe that such a thing as that phantom exists. I have disturbed too many graves to believe myself undeserving of some reprisal.”

“I will come with you to see Flood tomorrow.

Explain you were taken ill,” Edward offered. “He will not be angry. He has enough experiments to keep him busy.”

“Thank you, old friend,” Virgil said. “I feel much calmer already. If only you would bring me my laudanum I’m sure that –”

“No. Not tonight.” I know not from whence I found the voice to say this. “Please, Virgil. You may be ill.”

He looked at me with dark, anxious eyes. Reluctantly he said, “All right, Gette. If you insist.”

“I think it’s for the best,” Edward said. “Here, let us entertain you instead. Perhaps we can take your mind off your shock. I have just this evening written a poem. Would you like to hear it?”

I wanted to cry out, NO! The last thing Virgil needed to hear was the fruit of someone else’s creative labour. But he could not help himself, he had to know if Edward had managed anything worthwhile, so he said, “Yes, of course.”

Edward picked up his paper, sorted the bad lines from the good with a mark of his pen, then began to read a lovely ballad, perhaps fifty or sixty lines long. I leaned close to Virgil the whole time, feeling his body tense tighter and tighter. As I had suspected, it was more than he could bear. After Edward had finished, Virgil rose to his feet wordlessly and headed towards the bedroom.

“What do you think, Virgil?” Edward asked – still, after all, as vulnerable to opinion as Virgil.

“I am unwell. I must to bed,” Virgil muttered. We watched him go, close the door behind him.

“It was very good,” I said softly to Edward. “I think I should go to him.”

“Of course,” Edward replied, shuffling pages with embarrassed hands.

“Really. It was a lovely poem,” I said again.

“Thank you.”

I found Virgil lying, rigid, in bed. I climbed in with him and attempted to embrace him. He did not move.

“Virgil, you aren’t to fret so. You will write again, of course you will.”

He would not answer me. Though he pretended to be asleep, I suspected his eyes were open, staring up at the dark ceiling, poisonous jealousy in his heart.

I slept eventually, but for some reason awoke in the early hours of the morning. Perhaps I heard movement in the house, perhaps I simply became aware that I was alone in my bed. I rolled over and saw Virgil was not with me. Under the door I could see the faint glow that signalled somebody burned a candle in the kitchen. I arose, pulled a shawl around me, and tiptoed out into the hallway.

My husband was slumped over the kitchen table, paper, ink, pens strewn all around him. He was not moving, nor did he look like he was indulging in the comfort of sleep. I rushed to him, pulled him upright. “Virgil, are you all right?”

He lifted his head, focused mad, mad eyes on me. “I cannot. I cannot.”

“You cannot what?”

“I cannot write another word. I have tried and it has nearly killed me.” He extended a clumsy arm, knocking the pages off the table. “Burn them, Gette, burn them all. Promise me. It is all terrible, the worst lines ever committed to the page. Burn them.”

I helped him to his feet. His body was too hot, his

skin clammy. "Virgil, you are ill. Come to bed immediately."

"Promise me you'll burn them," he said, clutching my arm with long, bony fingers.

"Of course. Now, to bed."

I returned him to his bed, feeling his skin over and over, trying to convince myself it was not so hot and sickly. I tried to sit with him, to soothe him, but he would not relax until I had gone to the other room and cast his papers upon the fire. I went to the kitchen, gathered up the papers and scanned them anxiously. Senseless writing about swamps and crocodiles covered the pages. I took them to feed to the embers. They curled and blackened quickly.

"It is gone," I said, closing the bedroom door behind me.

"Thank you. Now I can sleep."

I sat with him as he drifted off, trying not to let my concern for his infirm state transform into panic. He had been ill before, I supposed, and he would be ill again. People grew ill, then recovered.

When he finally slept, I went to the box where I hid my Diary and fetched it out. I came to sit here in the kitchen to write about what has happened, for writing it down often makes it clearer, less frightening. For example, now I am not so worried about what Virgil saw in the graveyard. Of course it was not an evil spirit. Virgil was feverish, delirious, and had imagined it.

No, I need only fear the spectre of illness, not the spirits of the dead.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Wednesday, 26th March 1794

My husband is still ill, and I begin to despair of seeing him well again. Edward has just this morning left, following a terrible argument with Virgil. It breaks my heart because Edward has been so good to me, to us, in this awful past week.

When the sun came up on the morning I last wrote, I was awoken by a strange heat in my bed. It took me but a few moments to realise the heat was coming from Virgil, whose condition had worsened in the few hours he had been sleeping. His skin was now burning to the touch, a sheen of perspiration gleamed on his forehead and cheeks, and he shuddered and shook beneath the covers. I arose and dressed, and immediately went to wake Edward.

Within minutes, Edward was standing solicitously over Virgil, listening to his breathing, feeling his burning skin, asking him if joints ached, if his chest

felt tight. Virgil did his best to answer Edward's questions, but was slipping in and out of delirium as he spoke.

"Edward, beware. Stand not so close," he said in a raspy voice.

"I'm fine, Virgil. Please, can you tell me if your fingers and knees feel sore?"

"Stand not so close. The crocodile is under the bed."

"There is no crocodile under the bed," I said soothingly. "Crocodiles do not live in Solgreve."

"I ache all over," Virgil said. "I will probably die from this ague."

"You won't die," Edward said. "You must rest. You must stay warm."

"My blood boils," Virgil replied. "I am too warm already. I will die and be buried, then Flood will dig me up and feed me to the crocodiles."

"Do you have a pain in your side? A sharp pain?"

"No, indeed I do not. Give me quinine, Edward, for I know I have malaria. The swamps, the heat, have brought it on."

I looked across the bed at Edward, who raised his eyebrows and shook his head. "If you rest, Virgil, you will be well again in a matter of days. Do not worry yourself so. You do not have malaria, there are no swamps or crocodiles nearby. I will bring you a cordial as soon as I can, but until then, try to sleep. We will be at hand if you need us."

Edward beckoned me from the room and said in a hushed voice, "He is delirious. We will keep close watch on the fever. I do not think it serious, but if he insists upon worrying about these phantom reptiles, he may make himself more ill."

“I shall sit with him and try to soothe him.”

“And I’ll go to the village for a cordial. If he is no better by tomorrow morning, we will have to call a surgeon.”

I nodded, wondering how on earth we would afford a surgeon.

But the next day, when Virgil’s illness appeared more acute, it was apparent to me that we had no choice. A physician was well beyond our means, and I doubted if one even resided in Solgreve. But Edward knew a Mr Edghill, a surgeon from the village, who agreed to come that afternoon. Although I was relieved that calling for Flood had not been suggested, I still had to ask Edward why not. After all, he knew Virgil, and may perhaps deduct the fee from his wages.

“Flood does not come above ground, as far as I know,” Edward replied.

“Never?”

“I don’t believe so. Besides, he is a scientist, not a physician.”

And so Mr Edghill arrived at around two. He was a long, thin man with a large moustache and a booming voice. We led him to Virgil’s bedside where he reached for my husband’s wrist and felt for his pulse. Virgil had barely been aware of his surroundings all day, but for some reason the presence of the surgeon unsettled him.

“Who is this shadow?” he said, his voice tight with fear.

“Hush, Virgil, it is merely Mr Edghill, a surgeon come to help you be well again.”

Mr Edghill dropped Virgil’s hand and reached for his case. “His fever is too high. I will have to let some blood, at least twelve ounces.”

Virgil struggled to sit up, but couldn't manage. I pressed his hand in my own and told him to be calm.

"He shall bleed me to death," Virgil said, his voice quavering.

"No, no, indeed I shall not," Mr Edghill boomed. "I shall not even hurt you. Here, I have brought my little friends to meet you." He withdrew from his case a small glass jar with four black leeches in it.

Virgil gasped and recoiled. "They are taken from the very swamp from whence my illness came. Put them away. Put them away."

"No, I assure you they are friendly little Yorkshire leeches, from a clear pond near my house. Mrs Marley, could you help me with his clothes."

I reached over and unbuttoned Virgil's shirt. It stank with sweat and illness. Edward held one of Virgil's arms and I held the other as the doctor unscrewed the lid, and turned the jar over on Virgil's bare chest.

"Once they have tasted my blood, all the other creatures in the mud shall want some," Virgil cried. He was weakened by illness, and could only struggle feebly.

"Hush, Virgil. You are delirious." I watched with revulsion as the muscular little creatures moved across his white skin, expanding and contracting as they wriggled, until finally deciding to take purchase with their greedy suckers. Although leeches are supposed to be painless, Virgil howled.

"Stop them, stop them, they shall extract my very soul!"

"Quiet, old friend," Edward said.

Virgil lay back and took refuge in a brief, welcome moment of unconsciousness.

“His brain is very addled,” Mr Edghill noted.

“Will he be better after this?” I asked.

“Oh yes, much better. Mr Snowe, keep giving him regular doses of cordial. He’ll be well again in only a week or so.”

A week! Already it had been three days, and Virgil had not been to work. I did not know how we would eat if he had to stay away from work for another week.

Finally the leeches were finished their work. Mr Edghill picked them from Virgil’s chest with a pair of tweezers and mopped up four tiny trickles of blood. I closed up his shirt and covered him in blankets. It seemed he had fallen asleep. He was paler than ever, but seemed at peace.

“Thank you, Mr Edghill,” Edward was saying. “I shall accompany you to the door.”

“Goodbye, Mrs Marley,” the surgeon said.

I nodded my farewell and turned back to Virgil. Only after a few moments did I realise that I had not paid the surgeon. I dashed from the room to catch him before he left, and was met at the door by Edward.

“Edward, I haven’t paid Mr Edghill!” I exclaimed, moving to push the door open.

Edward stopped my hand. “It is no matter. I have paid him.”

I became aware of two awkward facts. First, that we now owed Edward money. Second, that Edward had not taken his fingers from around my wrist, and now stood uncomfortably close.

“Edward,” I said, deciding that dealing with the first problem was infinitely easier than dealing with the second. “I cannot be in debt to you. I have a little money put aside for –”

“I won’t hear of it. Virgil is my oldest friend. I love him like a brother, and I will not see you starve. I may not earn much from my trade, but I earn enough to be able to help a friend in need.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “Please, Gette, let me help.”

I carefully extracted my wrist from his fingers, and would not meet his eyes. “I thank you,” I said. “And hope one day to be able to repay your kindness.”

How am I to admit this? Virgil had been so detached towards me for such a long time that Edward’s intense interest, inappropriate though it may seem, filled me with guilty delight. And I did not move away from him. It seemed we stood like that for a century, the door on one side, my husband’s sickbed on the other. Finally, I lifted my head and looked into his face. He had been waiting.

“Gette, you deserve a different life from this.”

“I am happy with my life. I love my husband and we are good company for each other.”

“You have a child on the way.”

“And Virgil will be well by then. He looks forward to the birth.”

Edward shook his head, exasperated. “His job is killing him, Gette. Virgil is not like the rest of us, he cannot endure such ghastliness. He will not be able to stay in work much longer. Then what will you do for money?”

“Perhaps Aunt Hattie will help. Perhaps my parents...”

“You know they will not.”

“I will not allow hope to die within me. My parents love me. They would not see me starve.”

“Nor would I.” He made as though to reach out to touch me, then pulled his hand back. “Already I cannot bear to see your beauty clothed in rags.”

He thought me beautiful! Clad like a pauper, as great as a house with pregnancy, he thought me beautiful. I was flattered, and I ached for more. To feel like a Woman again, and not an easily disregarded piece of furniture.

“I am not so beautiful,” I said. I cringe now for my coquetry!

“Oh, but you are,” Edward replied, this time his touch reached my cheek. His finger lingered a moment there, then dropped to my collarbone. A dark thrill surged through me. “I have always thought you so. More beautiful than Charlotte – compared to you she was a working ox.”

My skin tingled where he touched me, his fingertip pressing the skin lightly as he trailed it down to the very edge of my bodice, coming to rest on the upside swell of my breast. His head dropped to my shoulder, and I felt his lips pressed urgently against my neck, making my pulse thunder. A light stubble grazed my skin as those lips descended, making to follow his fingers. Though I felt he was attached to me as inexorably as the leech had been to Virgil’s skin, I gathered my wits and lifted his head away from me. My fingers lingered a moment in his hair – clean, fresh-smelling – but soon they too were reluctantly called home and I took a significant step away from him.

“Edward, we must not. My husband, your friend, is sick in the bedroom. I am too selfish accepting such flattery from you. We know it cannot lead any further.”

He nodded, began to speak in hurried, embarrassed tones. “Yes, I am very sorry. It will not happen again,

forgive me, I shall go out for some fresh air.” He turned and opened the door, went outside and closed it behind him. I leaned against it, glad for the strong wood to support me, for my knees were like water and a guilty desire churned clumsy like molasses in the pit of my stomach.

Edward came back late that night and announced he had delayed his return to London so that he could help me to nurse Virgil back to health. No mention was made of that afternoon’s situation, and I made only scant eye contact with him while I fixed him supper. In fact, it was in the process of avoiding his eyes that I noticed the dark semi-circles under his fingernails, and I knew immediately he had spent the evening in the employ of Doctor Flood. I am no fool, and I realise he did this in Virgil’s stead, so that my husband’s salary might continue, and not because he had any need of the extra money. I did not speak of it, because I simply haven’t the vocabulary to express such gratitude. And I am afraid that the price Edward might ask for repayment would be too high.

Four days passed, and Virgil was delirious or barely conscious for most of that time. Every now and again he would squeeze my hand feebly and say my name, but other than that I might have believed his spirit resided in some other realm, and that I was to him as distant as the north star. I can write calmly now, but at the time I believed that it might all soon be over, that he would most certainly die. This conviction was accompanied by so many uncomfortable feelings I know not which was uppermost in my heart: grief, for I cannot imagine life without my husband, without his large warm hands, his melancholy eyes, his slow,

unaffected movements; guilt, for I had only a few days before allowed Edward extreme liberty. And (I can barely admit this) relief: without Virgil, my child and I would be welcomed by my family, and I would no longer have to worry whether the poor infant would be able to eat enough to grow strong.

But on the morning of the fifth day, I rose from where I had slept next to the fire and entered our bedroom, and Virgil's eyes fluttered open and focused upon me. Recognised me.

"Gette," he said weakly. "I die of thirst. Will you not bring me some water?"

As it was the first coherent thing he had said in nearly a week, my soul began to rejoice. He was going to be well again! I raced from his room and fetched Edward, who looked over him while I filled a cup with water. He drank the water greedily, settled back among the pillows, and said he felt he needed to sleep. We stood by while he drifted off. Tears stood in my eyes, and Edward, too, was Exultant.

"He will live," he said. "I would not have believed it just two days ago, but look at him. He will live."

Edward had, of course, never disclosed to me his fears for Virgil's life, but I knew he had felt such fears. It was the other unspoken topic which stood between us. Edward smiled at me and said, "I shall leave you alone with him. I need to walk up to the village."

I nodded and he left. I sank down onto the covers next to Virgil, and could no longer restrain myself from weeping. I wept and wept, a week's worth of anxious tears, and when those tears were all shed, I rested my face on Virgil's hand and dozed.

I awoke when I felt his fingers gently stroking my cheek. I sat up and Virgil smiled weakly at me.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I feel as though I have been trampled by a herd of cattle. But I am no longer feverish. I slept, just now, peaceful as a babe. None of those appalling nightmares.”

“I’m glad.”

“Gette, how long have I been ill?”

“An entire week.”

“Only a week?”

“Yes, seven days. Why, my love?”

He shook his head slowly. “Gette, it seems I was away for seventy years.”

“Away? But you have been here all the time.”

“It seems I was elsewhere. Hellish places, Gette.”

“Don’t concern yourself,” I said, smoothing his hair.

He wriggled into a half-sitting position, and laid his long pale hands upon the covers. “At first I was at sea.” He frowned, as though trying to recall a time long past. “Yes, that’s right. I became aware that I was upon a boat, becalmed on a vast, endless sea. The sun was a distant glimmer, the cold sky grazing icy teeth against my skin. Not a thing moved, not a breath of wind came. The surface gleamed like a great mirror. I burned with thirst. Then I heard sounds – strange, hollow clangings like the workings of a great machine, and every sound was a blow to my brain, and every sound made the water crack and snap, surging into violent currents which pulled my boat downwards. This seemed to go on forever, and I froze under the pale sun and yet I could not die though I dearly wished it.”

“Don’t speak of dying, Virgil. You will be well very soon.” I did not want him to become excited, to overstimulate his imagination with these feverish memories. Virgil’s imagination is too closely linked to his ill health.

“But then, a moist heat began to crawl upon me, and somehow I had been delivered from my boat into the very heart of an Asian swamp. And upon my skin were the scratching, ghostly legs of a thousand insects. No part of my body was beyond their prying, they skittered across my throat, gathered at my nose and mouth, and one had worked its way into the space between my skull and my brain and was buzzing around and around, desperate to escape its new prison. Hot, hot, vertical sunlight bore down upon me and my body ran with perspiration. I tried to brush the insects off, but they stuck to my skin and mashed and crunched between my fingers leaving pale, viscid imprints on my knuckles.” He mimed the movements with his hands, and I attempted to pin them under my own, to calm them. “All around me were the hard, lean trees of those unforgiving climes, mute and inscrutable in their upright lines and horizontal shadows. The smells of the swamp were hot in my nostrils, half-rotted things, stagnant water, beasts and reptiles close, so close by.” He stopped and held his breath.

“Please, Virgil. Do not agitate yourself so. They were mere dreams. Mere phantoms of the imagination.”

He breathed out slowly, his eyes wide. “And in the water, amongst mud, debris, logs finally hollowed and fallen from millennia-old trees, were the unblinking eyes of the crocodile; he had been waiting for me since

before history. Time slowed, the universe grew warm and hummed with waiting. When the beast moved it was too knowing, too deliberate. My limbs were paralysed, reptile skin dragged across my body. I tasted the slime of the swamp in my mouth. He pulled me under to suffocate in the mud.”

All was quiet for a moment, and then he turned his eyes back to mine. “And next I awoke, and you were there. My beautiful wife.”

“And here is where I shall always be. By you.”

Over the next twenty-four hours, Virgil grew strong enough to eat and to sit up properly in bed. But he was still very weak, and I suspect he may have a long recovery ahead of him. He began almost immediately to ask for laudanum, but Edward refused him, saying there was none in the house and that he would fetch some on the morrow. Of course, Virgil’s crystal phial was nearly full with the red-brown liquid, but I had carefully removed it from his room during his illness, and it now hid behind our tea-set on the sideboard. He did not question us, and seemed rather more concerned with sleeping on that first day, which was yesterday.

Then, late in the evening after supper, Edward came in to the bedroom to sit with me and look over Virgil. My husband was awake, but lying peacefully. I know not what possessed Edward to raise the topic of poetry again. Perhaps he had not guessed that Virgil had written nothing in months, and so was unaware that it may cause pain.

“So Virgil,” Edward said, “now you have a few weeks rest ahead of you, perhaps you can dash out a few poems for the new collection.”

“I ... ah ... I shall see. I’ve been rather involved in writing this long work: a great work, a masterpiece. I don’t want to pause in my thoughts of it, just to scratch out some petty lines for a collection.”

“Come, Virgil, we’ve had our best offer yet – why, it’s practically a guarantee of publication. Surely you must have a few morsels lying around, or some ideas that could be brought to fruition. Perhaps a segment of this epic you’re working on.” Edward grew excited. “Yes, why don’t you let me see it? I haven’t read anything new of yours for an age.”

“I’m tired,” Virgil snapped. “Leave me be.”

And now, realisation began to cross Edward’s countenance. He opened his mouth as if to say something, stopped himself, then started again. “Virgil, have you not written since last I was here?”

Virgil’s face lit up crimson with shame. “Get out of here,” he hissed. “My art does not have to answer to you.”

“It’s the laudanum, man. It has addled you. If you stay away from it, you will write again. My father told me –”

“Your *father*? Your father the apothecary dares to judge those of us who *create*? Why, what is that but the lowliest profession aspiring to clip the wings of the most elevated calling?”

“Now, Virgil, there’s no need to say such things,” Edward said. “Forget not your own origins. Forget not that I, too, write. That we have written together, and will again. And this time the collection will be published.”

Virgil’s hands shook with rage.

“Calm yourself, Virgil,” I said, but my words were lost, crushed to vapour in the thick atmosphere.

“The only reason the last collection failed was your miserable poetry,” he muttered darkly, twisting his hands on the bed covers. “I’d have been a bright star, only I was tarnished by your work.”

“Virgil, that is not true,” Edward said.

“It is true. I shall never write with you again.”

Edward snorted, Virgil’s insults coaxing his own temper out of hiding. “It seems you shall never write again anyway.”

“Leave me! Leave this house, leave this village. Return to your pills and your ointments and do not think to contact me again!”

I was horrified. “Virgil, no –”

“Leave now!” he cried.

“And so I shall,” Edward replied, rising. “Goodbye, Virgil Marley. I have forgiven you once for this insult, but I shall not forgive you again.”

He stormed out of the room and I followed him.

“Gette, where are you going?” Virgil called, but I did not reply. I followed Edward around as he packed up his remaining things and made to leave.

“Don’t go, Edward. He’ll be calm soon. You struck a raw nerve. He is so distraught over not writing.”

“Georgette, while I have all respect and fondness for you, and would stay happily on your behalf, a man can only endure so much damage to his reputation.” As he said this, he folded his shirts haphazardly into his bag and snapped it shut.

“But Edward, he has been ill. Can you not forgive him?” Now I was following him to the kitchen, where he collected notepaper and a glass jar of ink.

“No. I cannot.”

“Please don’t go, for I know we cannot survive without you.”

At this he turned and set his mouth firmly. “You are not my wife.” He indicated my belly with a nod of his head. “That is not my child.”

Of course, he was right. I had already accepted much more generosity from him than was proper. I hung my head, ashamed.

“Oh, Gette,” he said, softer now, reaching out to lift my chin with his fingers. “I still care. But Virgil will be on his feet in a few days, and able to work again. Flood will always have him back. He has developed an attachment to Virgil. I promise you this, though: if things get too bad, really bad, write me a letter. I will race up here as quickly as I can and do whatever you wish me to in order to ease your burden.”

I nodded. “Farewell, then.”

He leaned close, and perhaps he was going to kiss me, but at that moment Virgil stumbled from his bedroom and leaned himself against the sideboard. The plates in it rattled against each other. “I thought I told you to go,” Virgil snarled.

I immediately stepped away from Edward, but I think Virgil knew he had captured us sharing a moment of tenderness, and it had made him doubly angry.

“I’m leaving now,” Edward replied.

Virgil made to take a step towards him and slipped, once more having to grab the sideboard for support. I went to him.

“Virgil, back to bed. Edward is leaving. Do not become agitated.”

At that instant he looked down and spied his

laudanum. He snatched it up with a pale hand and walked unevenly back to his bedroom. "I am not agitated," he said. I heard the covers being adjusted and knew he was back in bed. Drinking the awful substance.

"I'm sorry," Edward said.

I shook my head. "He was bound to find it soon. It brings him such relief, I cannot bear to take it from him."

"I shall spend the night in the public house in the village, and head to London with the morning's mail."

"Thank you for all you have done."

And so, this morning, I listened for the mail-coach, but I heard nothing over the sound of rain dripping from our eaves. Virgil is looking much better, and the laudanum has lifted his spirits. He seems quite calm and content this morning. Neither of us has raised the topic of when he will return to work. (I wish I was not so heavily pregnant, or I would go and offer my services to some wealthy local family). But return to work he must, and soon. We have very little to keep us going.

Thursday, 3rd April 1794

I have been so busy nursing Virgil that I have scarce had time to think. However, I write today because I have received news which has unsettled me. This morning, I had a letter from Aunt Hattie. She is to remarry. She will wed a German baron and will soon be removing herself from London. He has a home in Württemberg, but they will first be travelling throughout warmer climes on some kind of business. In other words, I have lost the last relative I have in this country. I feel so alone.

She has sent me two guineas as a parting gift, to help with clothing and feeding the new baby. I shall put the money aside for just that, and attempt not to cut into it for our daily living expenses.

Hattie has not forgiven me. There is no inquiry in her letter as to the health of my husband or the happiness of our marriage. I burn with the injustice of it, for it was she and her silly friend, Mrs Ariel, whose matchmaking brought us together. Where did she expect it to end? One cannot play with young people's hearts. I need just some small mercy from her, or from my parents. All is becoming too desperate otherwise.

Monday, 7th April 1794

I gently questioned Virgil today on whether he thinks he might be able to rise soon from his sickbed, and he turned quite pale with dread. He knew I mean to ascertain when he might be able to return to work, and he very clearly did not want to.

"I am still ill, Gette," he said. "Please, give me time to heal."

"Edward suggested that Doctor Flood would hold your job for you," I replied. "Is that so?"

"Yes, I believe it is. I am in so deep now, Gette."

"So deep in what?"

He would not answer and I did not prompt him, for I felt guilty for bringing it up. He is still so weak – he can barely walk from the bedroom to the kitchen. It was cruel of me to remind him of his responsibility, but I feel so alone in my concern. I know not how much laudanum he is taking, but he seems always to be in a daze, off in a world of his own. It is up to me only to deal with the vicissitudes of the Real World.

All is so impossible. Virgil cannot work. I cannot work. I have made the decision that if Virgil is not much better by mid-week, I will personally call upon Doctor Flood and ask him for an advance on Virgil's wages while he recovers. The prospect unsettles me horribly, but I cannot see any other way to proceed.

Sunday, 13th April 1794

It is Sunday evening, and the bells on the church ring out in the clear spring air. I cannot hear them without thinking that the Reverend there is not a true Christian, that he is a crony of the most sinister man I have ever met. That perhaps many of the inhabitants of this village know and sanction what goes on beneath the old abbey.

I left it until Friday to call upon Flood. A hope lived in my heart that Virgil would be well at any moment. That he may wake up Wednesday morning, Thursday morning, with a clear head and his strength returning to his limbs. This was not to be. Friday morning he was as weak as ever, and I knew I had to go to the abbey.

I did not tell Virgil where I was going, for I know it would have filled him with dread. Instead I said I was going into the village for some bread, and he accepted that with a sleepy nod of his head. I could see the crystal bottle of laudanum was almost empty, and wondered how long he could manage without it.

I remembered Charlotte's description of Flood's chambers. In the curve of a crumbling spire, I found a rusted iron door with a large ring on it. I pulled the ring and it shuddered open. I could see nothing but the first two steps. A smell of earth and darkness arose from the

tunnel and I was afraid to go further. But my husband needed food to recover properly, so I had no choice.

I took first one step, then another. I pulled the door down behind me and was plunged into total darkness. The stairs had no banister upon which to find my footing, so I gingerly tested each step before me with my toes. I seemed to descend forever like that, but finally my foot found uneven earth instead of a smooth, carved step. Charlotte had said the next hundred feet were to be walked in the dark. I put my hands out on either side of me and felt for the walls of the tunnel. The stone was cool and rough beneath my fingers. In the distance, I could just make out an amber glow near the ground: the candlelight in his room seeping under the door. I walked carefully forward. I was desperate not to trip, knowing it would hurt the child if I fell. I had grown so enamoured of the feel of the little being within me – its wriggles and its kicks as it made itself comfortable – that I could not wait to see its face in the light of the outside world. That outside world seemed very far away then, as I crept along the tunnel towards the light.

As my eyes became adjusted to the dark, I could see the outlines of two stone doors. Elaborate carvings were shadowy upon them. The one on the right led to the illuminated chamber. The other door led to more darkness. I lifted my hand and cautiously knocked at the door on the right.

It seems I held my breath for a full minute. He did not come. Against my better instincts, I felt relief wash through me: I would not have to face him. I released my breath, turned upon my heel . . .

And then the door began to open. Locks clunked out of place, hinges creaked. I turned around.

“Who is it?”

I could see only the eyes and forehead of a very old man. But there was nothing feeble or haggard about those eyes. They were dark, knowing, scrutinising me with unmasked hostility.

“Good day, sir. I am Mrs Virgil Marley. May I speak with you a moment?”

He stood back and opened the door fully. He wore, as Charlotte had said, a long red coat – but dark red, not bright – fastened all the way down the front with gold buttons. Rather like a cross between a cardinal’s vestments and a soldier’s uniform. His skin was disfigured with wrinkles and the pale-brown spots of age, his head barely covered with fine white hair, through which I could see a furrowed and dappled scalp. Apart from his eyes, which were as alert as a child’s, he was quite simply the oldest person I had ever laid my eyes upon. I estimated he must be at least eighty, perhaps ninety. I remembered then what Edward had said about the prolonged life some people in the village had been granted, and realised he may even be one hundred!

“Come in, Mrs Marley.” He led me into his dimly-lit room, walking with as much ease as a young man. Something about that old, old skin moving across what seemed like healthy, mobile joints was unsettling. But then, perhaps I felt that way because I had heard stories of him, because I was expecting him to be a monster.

He moved to a large chair behind one of his experiment counters: more like a throne, actually, with intricately carved arms and an upholstered seat. Only one candle burned in the entire chamber, and shadows

clustered in corners. He settled himself upon his chair and looked up at me, his features in strange relief in the candlelight. "I'm afraid I have no chair to offer you, Mrs Marley."

In ordinary circumstances I would have thought him unspeakably rude to take the only chair while I was so great with child. But I was far too busy scanning the contents of his room to concern myself with such niceties. Here was such a confusion of specimens and experiments as to defy my pen. I saw a bellows in an enormous glass jar; tubes leading into other tubes; canisters lined upon shelves; spiders, snakes and other unutterable crawling things preserved in dim liquid; wooden tables with dark spreading stains; smooth benches crammed with dully glinting tools; a severed human hand pinned to a board; collections of papers covered with diagrams and writings; a hundred objects I could not identify.

"I see you find my chamber fascinating, Mrs Marley. Why don't you take a moment to view it more thoroughly?"

I snapped my attention back to him. He gave me a forced smile, probably meant to seem benevolent. I knew I should merely stand there and state my case, but I could not help myself. I moved from my spot and slowly circled the room, knowing his eyes were following my progress.

Here, the dreaded crocodile which had made its way into a dark corner of Virgil's imagination, hung from the ceiling, huge and glassy-eyed in the thin amber glow. There, a large glass container with a tiny unborn baby preserved within, pink and barely

formed. Along one side a row of antiquated texts, thick and hand-bound. Behind, an entire wall made of strangely luminous bricks, which appeared to glow if I looked upon them askance, but were mute and dark if considered directly. I stood in front of the bricks for a moment, turning my eyes upon them and away.

“Do you like it? It is glass imbued with a special phosphorescence. A project of mine.”

“Extraordinary,” I murmured. All around was the oddly discontinuous smell of the natural and the unnatural. Excavated soil, dank lime, the ephemeral scent of cool stone underground. All overlaid with emollients, medicines, solutions. And somewhere beneath it all, a faint rottenness. I returned to where I had stood before and studied him again. His smile was more natural this time, as though he had now remembered how to do it properly.

“You find my chamber interesting?” he asked.

“Yes. I have never seen anything like it.”

“Your husband must have told you I was a scientist.”

“He has said very little about you, Doctor Flood.”

“I’m surprised. Virgil has spoken a great deal about you. Your father is a wealthy French nobleman, is that correct?”

I dropped my head. “Indeed, sir. But I am cut off from my family.”

“Virgil also told me that. He adores you, my dear. Do not be ashamed of it.”

I faced him again. He had his elbows on the table, his chin cupped in his hands. I noticed an elaborate ring on his smallest finger. The stone within glowed dimly red.

He missed nothing. "You are looking at my ring."

"Yes, I am."

He held out his hand for me to inspect it. I moved in three paces and leaned close. I did not want to touch his hand, remembering what Edward had said – icy and unnaturally smooth.

"It once belonged to Cornelius Agrippa. Do you know who he is?"

"I have heard of him, sir. He was a German magician of the sixteenth century."

"The ring is quite, quite priceless." He withdrew his hand and examined the ring with a vain tilt of his head. Then he returned his attention to me. "Why are you here, Mrs Marley?"

"Virgil is ill. Severely ill."

"So Edward has told me. Why does Edward not come to fill his place?"

"Edward has returned to London. He and Virgil had a . . . disagreement."

Flood nodded. "I see."

"I can only be honest with you, sir. We are desperate. We can barely afford to feed ourselves. We have not lit a light in the house these four days for we haven't enough to buy candles or oil."

"And Virgil has other needs," he said. "I understand."

"I care only to feed us and keep us warm, sir. I would offer to work for you, only you can see I am in no condition to do so. I merely ask that you advance us some small portion of Virgil's wage. Please."

He examined me closely. He was silent for so long that I became uncomfortable. I was about to open my mouth to speak again, anything to fill that awful

silence, when he said, “You have some money put aside for the child.”

I was taken aback. It was impossible for him to know that. “How . . . how could you –”

He smiled. “Don’t be so surprised. It was a considered guess. You have wealthy relatives. No matter how angry they are with you, they will not see a baby die for starvation. It would cause them too much guilt.”

“Yes, I do have a little put aside. But I simply cannot spend it now. The child will need clothes, perhaps medicine.”

“I understand, Mrs Marley. What I do not understand is why you don’t simply return home. Your parents would welcome you and your child, surely. You are young, your attachment to Virgil will fade if you break it off now. So much pain may be saved. You know, surely, that you are yoked to a soul who cannot long remain part of this world.”

I shook my head, bewildered. “It is unthinkable, sir, that I should leave my husband.”

“It is not so unthinkable. You have thought it.”

Once again, it was as though he could read my mind. My skin seemed to shrink a little around me with fear. “Idle thoughts do not equate to concrete actions,” I replied quietly.

He pulled himself out of his chair. “Mrs Marley, you are unwise. Your husband is also unwise. But I am fond of him and I am pleased to have him working for me. I will grant your request.”

Relief washed through me. “Oh, thank you. Thank you, Doctor Flood. And Virgil will repay it as soon as –”

“I will not hear of it. This will be my gift to your child.” He moved towards a back corner of the room. I heard a drawer opening, but could not see what he was doing. His back was turned to me.

“I don’t know if we can accept such a gift.”

“Nonsense. Do not insult me with your false courtesy. You know you can and will accept this gift.”

I remained silent, fearing that any more words from me may persuade him to change his mind. He returned and slipped into my hand a roll of coins – more than we needed – and a bottle made of dark glass.

“What is in here?” I asked.

“A present for Virgil. Do not open it.”

I knew, of course, that it must be laudanum. My heart sank, for I wish that Virgil would stop taking it. But it gives him so much ease at the moment, and he has been so very sick.

“Thank you, sir. Thank you most sincerely.”

“Pass on my regards to Virgil.”

“I shall.” We were moving towards the door now, he with a lamp swinging in his hand. He reached over to open the door for me, and as he moved back he pressed his hand firmly against my stomach. I shrank from him in surprise and revulsion.

“You are to have a boy,” he said.

“How can you know?” My flesh crawled. He had touched me in such an intimate place with that unspeakably old hand.

“I have been a scientist for many, many years. I know many things. Go on, I will wait here and light your way to the stairs.”

I retraced my steps along the tunnel. When my foot hit the first stair, I turned to see if he was

watching me. He had closed the door to his chamber and stood in the tunnel with the lantern, unlocking the second door. Curiosity got the better of me; I had to see what was in there. The door swung inwards and he moved into the room. I caught only the faintest glimpse of its contents before the door clanged shut and I was left in darkness. But that faint glimpse has worked upon my imagination ever since. In the dim glow of lamplight, bodies were laid out upon long tables. I had seen the trembling shadow cast by a ribcage, a black pair of feet silhouetted against a wall, and – horror – a man cleft in two, his torso five inches away from his groin and legs, Flood's lamplight swinging between the two dark shapes. I pushed myself quickly up the stairs, heedless of my earlier fear of tripping, and opened the door to emerge in fresh sunlight.

Virgil was by turns disapproving of and overjoyed by my visit to Doctor Flood. In the end, I think he was just glad to have some more laudanum to ease his illness. I bought a goose on the way home and baked it that evening. Virgil's colour is returning, I am glad to say, but I fear it will be a long time before he is better.

It seems it is always the half-glimpsed horror, the half-told tale, that haunts one. The imagination works to finish narratives, to find causes and effects. But rather than providing a single resolution, the conclusions multiply into infinity, and every evil possible is played out in the mind's eye. I simply have not stopped thinking about Flood. I want so very badly to be away from this place. I know I cannot remove myself now, for my child cannot be far from birth. But

after he is with me (and here am I already accepting that the child will be a boy, merely because Flood told me so), I will have to reconsider. It is well enough for me to insist on staying here with Virgil, but I would be irresponsible to force such a fate on a child. I will have to persuade Virgil that we should go back to London. If he could swallow his pride and clean himself up and stay for a day or two away from the dreaded substance, I know he could find work as a law clerk.

And if he refuses ... Well, if he refuses I tried, did I not? And my parents have said they would have me back.

But I cannot think upon it. For now, we have food and comfort. All decisions are suspended until my child has arrived. I will stop my thoughts returning to the sinister Dr Flood, and I will not believe for a moment that I am “yoked to a soul who cannot long remain part of this world.” Flood is only a man, and no man can see the future.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Maisie put the diary carefully aside, noticed almost as if outside herself that her hands trembled.

What had Virgil seen in the graveyard? Okay, so he was delirious, he was out of his head on opium. But the description was so familiar: a brown, cloaked figure which stuck to the shadows; wet, anxious breaths.

A ghost. A ghost that had been haunting Solgreve for centuries, a ghost who liked to hang out in her back garden. She supposed if she could believe in her own psychic power, she could believe in a ghost. Suddenly she felt vulnerable, without protection. Couldn't ghosts walk through walls? Or was that only in movies?

She went to the bookcase and placed the diary pages in the iron box with the others she had found. Snapped the lid shut. She sagged against the bookshelf. The wine bottle was now nearly empty. Was she drinking too much? How much was too much? Surely

a few extra glasses of wine around Christmas time didn't amount to a drinking problem.

All right, focus. She felt a bit dizzy from the alcohol, but she had to concentrate on the problem at hand. She was being haunted, but she was psychic, right? Maybe she could make the ghost go away, especially as she thought she knew why the ghost was bothering her in the first place.

"Sybill," she said under her breath as she went to the bedroom. Her grandmother probably had good reason at the time for what she did, but Maisie was going to undo it. She flipped open the witch's chest and ploughed through to the bottom, where she found the spell scrolls. She pulled them out one by one and read them. Most of them meant as little to her now as when she had first read them. Except for one.

I call the black presence.

Maisie held the scroll in her left hand. This must be what had attracted the ghost. She hesitated for a moment. The figure was, after all, cloaked in brown, not black. But she assumed that figurative speech was probably common in magical practice. The ghost was a creature of the shadows, no matter what colour it wore.

She had no real idea how to reverse the spell, but thought tearing it up would be a good start. She went to the lounge room and threw the paper and a little bag which accompanied it onto the fire. The house filled with the sick-sweet smell of burning herbs. She returned to the witch's chest and read through the other spells again. One of them in particular was nagging at her.

Across the miles I touch her heart and tell her to come.

A realisation that this was about her; Sybill had known about Maisie and her Gift. If her grandmother couldn't contact her through the ordinary channels, what with Janet being such a bitch about it, perhaps she had tried another method to reach her. Maisie sat back and read the spell over and over. Had her grandmother, in fact, touched her heart and told her to come? Was that why she was here now, and not holidaying in Italy or France? Something about that thought made Maisie uncomfortable: like her free will was no match for Sybill's magic. She screwed up the piece of paper and threw it and the accompanying bag of herbs towards the bin. It bounced off the rim and landed on the floor next to her boots.

Maisie packed the items back in the chest, pulled herself to her feet and switched the light off, then went to the window to watch the snow falling outside. Oblique moonbeams lit up the white lawn, making it resemble a sickly kind of daylight – shadows too deep, a grey cast over everything. She thought about Georgette's diary and the advanced age of some of the villagers being attributed to Flood's magic. Did that magic still linger in Solgreve? She thought about Sacha and how he had offered to help her find her psychic power; her vague sense that she was betraying Adrian and her family. But most of all she thought about Sybill, this grandmother she had never known. Grandmothers were supposed to be kindly ladies who baked cakes and smelled of lavender, right? Not enigmatic witches, with cluttered cupboards, who defiled graves. For the first time, Sybill's eccentricities did not delight Maisie. Although part of her wanted to respond fondly to the idea that Sybill had loved her

enough to want her in her life, she couldn't help feeling she had been manipulated. And it was a feeling she didn't like.

"But you don't know anything about this guy!" Adrian sat on the edge of the bed, phone in his hand, talking to Maisie a million miles away. She had just told him she was heading off to London for New Year's with her grandmother's gardener. It didn't seem safe at all to Adrian. He felt the uncomfortable tickle of sweat across his stomach. It was a stinker of a day – humid and hazy.

"Adrian, he was a good friend of my grandmother's. He's not going to murder me."

"But you only just met him."

"I've spoken to him a few times. He came over and helped me get rid of some of Sybill's old things. Believe me, he's completely trustworthy."

"I don't know if I like this, Maisie. Why can't you spend New Year's with Cathy?"

"She's in Edinburgh. I doubt she'll be back in time."

Adrian sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Just be careful, okay?"

"I'm always careful," she replied, "and really, Adrian, he's just a nice, ordinary guy. It's very thoughtful of him to invite me. I would have been alone otherwise."

That in itself seemed suspicious to Adrian. Why would this guy invite her to London if they hardly knew each other? "He probably fancies you. He probably wants to get into your pants."

"Adrian!"

"Well, who wouldn't? You're gorgeous."

“You only think that because you’re my boyfriend.”

“Well? Do you think he fancies you?”

“No. I’m sure he doesn’t,” she said emphatically.

“Women can never tell. You should give me this guy’s name and phone number. You know, in case I don’t hear from you again – that way I’ll know where to send the homicide squad.”

Maisie laughed lightly, then dictated the name and number to him. Adrian scabbled on his bedside table for a pen and paper, and copied the details down. “Okay, I’ll try not to worry. As long as you promise to call when you get to London – and give me the phone number where you’re staying.”

“Of course.”

“And as long as you promise not to like him better than me.”

“Adrian, now you’re being silly.”

“How old is he? Is he good-looking?”

“He’s about your age. I guess he’s okay-looking. I hadn’t really noticed.” Was her voice getting snappy? Was she annoyed with him? “But you’re an opera star. There’s no comparison.”

“I’m sorry, Maisie. You’re just so far away and I’m afraid of losing you.”

“You won’t lose me,” she replied, softly. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He stood up and walked to the window, careful not to pull the phone off the table. “God, it’s so hot here.”

“How hot?”

He pushed the window open all the way and leaned his upper body out. Not a breath of wind came to his

relief. The cicada chorus was in full, grating voice. “About thirty degrees. And sticky. You know how it gets.”

“Well, it snowed here yesterday.”

“It sounds like heaven.”

“You’d hate it. You’re always going on about how the humidity’s good for your voice.”

“It is. And speaking of singing, I’m off to Auckland on the sixth of January now, instead of the eighth.”

“You must be looking forward to it.”

He turned around, leaned his back against the windowsill. “Ah, I don’t know. Everything kind of loses its gloss when you’re not around. Why don’t you come back early? Fly to Auckland? I could give you full body massages every day.”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. Which was encouraging. At least it wasn’t an outright no.

“Come on. I miss you. We should be together.”

“I don’t know if I’d come to Auckland. I’d be bored to death – you’d be out all day. And it’s probably crappy student accommodation. It would just make me depressed.”

“Well, come home to your parents, then. I know Janet would be glad to see you home.”

Maisie laughed. “I doubt that very much.”

“You know, I can be back in Brisbane by about the eighteenth. I can skip the last week of the program,” he said. While she was open to the idea he had to push his advantage. He missed her and he was worried about her. “Why don’t you change your flight to come home then?”

“Well . . .”

“Just think about it.”

“Okay. Okay, I’ll think about it.”

Maisie greeted Thursday morning with mixed feelings. Yes, she was looking forward to London, to hanging out with gorgeous Sacha, to savouring the sweet, sweet tension of being close to him. But she was sick with dread, too. Being with him for such a long period of time ... what if she was accidentally revolting? The body was such an unreliable vessel, capable of producing all kinds of offensive by-products. The great thing about a long-term relationship was being used to one another. She and Adrian had been sharing a bed and bathroom for so long now, they were incapable of offending each other.

And what about Adrian? He really hadn't wanted her to go with Sacha, and would like it even less if he knew how she felt. But he trusted her, obviously. Which meant, more than ever, that she had to fulfil his expectations.

Not that she was considering doing otherwise.

While she waited for Sacha (she was ready nearly an hour early), she phoned and left a message with Cathy's boarding house to say she'd be away for a while – guiltily. Then she called Perry Daniels' office to let him know she was in London for a week. The insurance claim was still pending on her front window and she didn't want the solicitor to think she'd skipped town.

Business taken care of, she sat back to wait.

Sacha's van pulled around the corner at ten to eleven. Outside, the snow had started to melt and turn dirty, and the sun shone on it from a long way off. Maisie placed a hand over her chest. *Guard your heart*. It was just a few days in London with a friend – nothing more.

Tabby was at the door miaowing already. She recognised the sound of Sacha's van. Maisie waited until after he had knocked before she opened the door.

"Hi."

"Hi," he said, coming in and closing the door behind him. He was wearing a deep red pullover and jeans. Maisie's eyes measured out the length of his legs. "Did it snow?"

"Yes, but only for two nights," she replied, picking up her small suitcase.

"Not at Christmas?"

"No, unfortunately."

"That's a shame." Tabby was winding between his legs.

"Do you think it would be safe to leave the heating on for Tabby?"

"Probably. But she's coming with us."

"To London?"

"No, just as far as York. I'm leaving the van at my friend Chris's house and we'll catch the train down. I hate driving in London. Tabby can stay with Chris too. Cats hate being alone."

"And is this friend okay with having the cat stay?"

"Yes, I've already asked."

"Okay then. Let's go."

She did a last-minute check of door locks and electrical items and then they headed to the van. The upholstery was tatty, the foot-well was full of junk, the dashboard was cracked, and over it all was the smell of diesel and dirt. Tabby went happily into the back, where she walked around a few times sniffing the carpet and looking for bugs in corners. Sacha slammed the sliding back door shut then came round to the driver's side.

“London here we come,” Sacha said, buckling his seat belt and starting the van.

Maisie turned to check on Tabby as they pulled away from the kerb. She had settled down on top of an old T-shirt scrunched up near the left wheel arch. Maisie watched the cottage disappear through the back window.

“What’s the matter? Homesick for Solgreve already?” Sacha asked.

“Hardly,” she said, facing the front. They were passing the abbey now, and it made her think about Georgette and Dr Flood. “Sacha, do you remember how many pieces of the diary Sybill found?”

“Three, I think.”

“Any idea where the third one is?”

“No. Maybe there wasn’t a third one. I really can’t remember.” He glanced at her quickly. “Sorry.”

“God, it could be anywhere in that house. I’m not cleaning the place as much as excavating it.” She leaned her head on the window as they left Solgreve and headed towards the motorway out on the moors.

“What did you do for Christmas?” he asked.

“I went to York for Christmas Eve, but I was back here alone on Christmas Day.” She edited out the part about trying to find him on Christmas Eve, and crying into a wine glass Christmas Day. “How about you?”

“I went down to Manchester to visit an aunt.”

Great! He hadn’t been with a gorgeous girlfriend. Maisie watched his hands on the steering wheel.

“Actually,” he continued, “my mother called. I told her about you.”

Maisie was stupidly flattered that he had been thinking about her while she wasn't around. "And?"

"She wants to meet you, but she's stuck over in Wales at the moment and won't be up here for a few weeks. But you never know. Ma turns up at odd, unexpected times."

"I'd like to meet her. I think I need her advice on something really scary that happened to me." This was her lead-in to telling him about the haunting last week, but he continued as though he hadn't heard.

"I asked her about the colour thing. You know, how I said I got a sense of dark colour around you, not yellow like her."

"Yes?"

"Apparently it's to do with intensity."

"Oh. So the brighter the colour, the more intense the power?"

"No. Other way around – the darker the colour."

"That doesn't make sense."

"That's what Ma said. She said Sybill would have been really jealous of you. She had spent her whole life developing and learning to use her powers, and she was extremely adept. But you were born with a raw power of great intensity."

She studied his profile for a few moments, taking all this in. "So, I'm more powerful than Sybill?"

He shook his head. "Not at the moment, you're not. You barely know how to use your Gift. You have virtually no stories to tell about psychic experiences in your life. It's like the power is buried. Ma says you're quite old to be starting to develop it, that it may even be too late."

Her stomach tightened. “Too late? But that’s not fair. How was I supposed to know?”

“You should have known. We can’t figure out how you didn’t know. People with way less power than you know as early as six or seven, or if not, then puberty will set it off. You should have known.”

“Damn.” Maisie leaned her head back on the seat.

“But we can still try to develop it. We’ve got a whole week together and a whole house to ourselves.”

Maisie liked the sound of that. “Okay. Where are we staying?”

“You’ll see when we get there. Anyway, what happened to you that was really scary?”

So he had been listening. “I don’t know,” she said, suddenly nervous of sounding like a fool. “You might laugh at me.”

“Something supernatural?” he asked.

“Yes.”

They were passing through a small town now. Sacha gently applied the brakes as an elderly lady in a lilac headscarf started to cross the road in front of them. It had snowed more heavily here, and a thick white blanket lay over grey stone fences and evergreen trees. The elderly lady safely on the other side of the road, they began to move again.

“You know,” Sacha said, “your reluctance to talk about supernatural things is probably one of the reasons you can’t access your power. As those pop psychologists always say, ‘you’re in denial.’”

“I’m just not used to it. If I told this stuff to Adrian he’d have me committed.” That came out with rather more vehemence than she’d intended. Was it to

impress Sacha, or was it because she was angrier than she'd realised with Adrian for not taking her seriously?

"You can tell me," he said, softly. Almost conspiratorially.

So she recounted for him the evening Tabby had gone missing and how some asthmatic phantom had played with her electricity. He listened carefully, not saying a word until she had finished.

"You must have been terrified," he said at last.

"Of course. I still am."

"Leave your doors closed from now on."

"Are you trying to tell me deadlocks can keep out spirits?"

"Not usually. But Sybill had cast a protection spell over the house. It's probably still active. She spent weeks working on it. An open door is like a gap in the spell."

"Is that why she doesn't have a kitty flap?"

Sacha laughed. "Maybe. Just keep your doors and windows closed after dark. And Tabby can probably fend for herself if she runs off."

"I found a spell in Sybill's chest: *I call the black presence.*"

"Might have something to do with it. Maybe she was calling it to banish it. I don't know." He gave her a brief smile. "Sorry, I'm not much help to you, am I?"

"No, no. You're a great help. I'd be all alone in this otherwise."

It took just under two hours to drive to York through the North Yorkshire Moors National Park, some parts of which were still under heavy layers of snow. Maisie was proud of herself for conversing with

Sacha as though he were a normal human being, and not a minor deity. She was almost certain he wouldn't be able to tell from talking to her that she spent upward of three hours a day fantasising about him. It wouldn't do for him to know that. She could barely admit it to herself.

Frosty York greeted them around one p.m. Maisie thought guiltily of Cathy, wondering if she was back from Edinburgh yet, but decided that all bets were off when a girl was a universe away from home at New Year's. She had to grasp social experiences as they were offered, without any moral obligation to keep old friends (especially ones who were never really friends) company.

"Chris lives just up this street. We'll leave the van here and walk up to the train station, okay? It's only a couple of blocks."

"Sure. That's fine."

He pulled into the driveway of a newish apartment complex, and parked around the back. He unbuckled his seat belt and opened his door, and Maisie followed suit.

"Um ... you may as well wait here. I won't be long," he said.

"Oh. Okay." Maisie stayed in her seat as he busied himself getting Tabby out of the back. She watched him disappear into the stairwell, then checked her appearance in the rear-vision mirror. She liked English daylight – it rendered her face in soft-focus.

After ten minutes she thought about going into the stairwell to call for him, realised she never would, and kept waiting. Why didn't he want his friend to meet her? Was it really expedience, or was he embarrassed about her?

She still hadn't decided when he emerged from the stairwell.

"Sorry it took so long," he said.

"That's fine."

He was around the back again, grabbing their suitcases. "Come on," he said, locking the doors. "Lock your side when you get out."

She did as he said, took her suitcase from him, and followed him two blocks to the station. Her ears were aching with cold by the time they took refuge in the warm ticket office.

"Wait here," he said, heading for the counter.

"Hang on, I'll give you some money."

"No. It's my treat."

"Sacha –"

"No, I promised you a trip to London. Call it a late Christmas present."

She imagined she must be glowing with pleasure. "Okay."

While Maisie hung out by the entrance, studying route maps and timetables, Sacha was engaged in some serious negotiation at the counter with the sales clerk. When he joined her, he brandished two tickets.

"The good news is, they still had tickets for the next train. It leaves in ten minutes."

"Is there bad news?" she asked.

"The seats are in different carriages. Sorry."

Her heart fell. "Different carriages?"

"Yeah. It was either that or wait an hour for the next train."

"Oh. Well, I have a book to read." This was a lie. She had been counting on a few hours of Sacha's undivided attention.

“I might not have been good company anyway. I was planning on dozing most of the way.”

“Really, it’s okay.”

She spent the journey looking out the window, her daydreams repeatedly returning to Sacha in spite of a solemn promise to herself not to do so. It was hopeless – if he felt about her the way she felt about him, he would have booked the tickets for the following train and not told her there were others available. That’s the way she would have handled it. She banged her head lightly three times against the window and groaned. The woman sitting across from her observed her warily.

Maisie plunged a hand into her handbag and fished out her wallet. Flipped it open. Here was a picture of Adrian and herself, taken the previous year on their third anniversary. She studied his face – his adored face. He had pale brown hair and calm, grey eyes. A slightly crooked smile which he was embarrassed about. She closed her eyes and remembered the feeling of holding him in her arms. There was only 175 centimetres of him, but his body was well-muscled and warm, and he smelled like lemon and sunlight. Edible. Yes, she missed him. But not with a pain in her soul. She only got that pain when she thought about what she might miss out on by committing herself to him.

A young man in the seat behind her was listening to U2 on a Discman. She could make out a couple of verses of “Stay”, scratchy and deprived of their shape by the tiny headphones.

Opening her eyes, she turned back to the landscape speeding by outside. Life was like that: just speeding past, beautiful in places, inhospitable in others, but

never able to be grasped, always in a state of transition. When was she going to be happy? When were things going to slow down enough for her to hold on to something wonderful, without being obsessed about how soon it would slip through her fingers? She thought about what Virgil had said to Georgette: *I ache to live, and all I get is this*. She felt like that too, sometimes, but upper middle-class girls from good homes could hardly compare themselves to starving poets who robbed graves for a living.

Still, she couldn't help it if she felt that way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The train slid into King's Cross station shortly after three forty-five. Maisie stepped out and waited anxiously on the platform. That would top it all off, if she couldn't find Sacha. But she spotted him within seconds, waving over the heads of three portly ladies chatting excitedly between themselves. She set her case down and waited for him, the crowd separating around her. In a few steps he was with her. She had the distinct feeling he was going to hug her, but he pulled back at the last moment. The disappointment tugged sharply in her stomach.

"We have to take the tube to Goodge Street now," he said, picking some fluff off the shoulder of his pullover.

"I'll stay with you. I don't know my way around at all." Maisie pulled on her gloves against the cold.

"My dad lives near the British Museum."

"Your dad? We're going to stay with your dad?"

“It’s his house, but he won’t be there. Don’t worry.” They had emerged into some kind of concourse with people rushing in a hundred different directions. “Stay close,” he said, grabbing her hand. “I don’t want to lose you.”

He dragged her through the crowd, up and down stairs, down an escalator and onto a platform. A train came along in a matter of seconds, but after one stop they had to change to another line. Maisie was having serious suitcase anxiety. Sacha seemed happy to leave their cases near the door and sit down, but Maisie was terrified somebody would take off with her stuff.

Finally they arrived at the right station. It was so far underground they had to ride a lift back to the surface. They emerged a few moments later into freezing cold on Tottenham Court Road.

“This way,” he said, leading her out across the road even though cars were zooming all around them. She clung to his hand and braced herself, but nothing hit them. It was growing dark by now, a freezing drizzle descended and car tyres hissed urgently along the slick street. Sacha took her down a side road, then off into another. Her shoulder was starting to ache from carrying her case, but if she swapped arms she’d have to let go of his hand. Luckily, they soon stopped outside the faux-Georgian facade of a block of modern apartments.

“There’s a great bookshop two streets over,” Sacha was saying as he entered a security code and waited for the door to unlock. There was a popping noise and the door swung inwards. Sacha led her into the warm foyer and kicked the door closed behind them. “I’ll take you there tomorrow.”

“I’d love that.”

“And it’s walking distance to Leicester Square, the British Museum, Soho – plenty of good coffee shops in Soho.”

“Uh-huh.” She was barely listening. A giant chandelier hung above them; terracotta and bluestone tiled the floor; the stairs wore a thick cream carpet. This was opulence as she had rarely seen it, and it was right in the heart of London. Was his dad a millionaire?

Up two flights of stairs, and then Sacha fitted a key in the lock of a heavy, polished wooden door. “Here we are,” he said. Within moments they were standing in a fabulously appointed lounge room: leather lounge suite, sunken television viewing area, tasteful lighting, glossy upright piano, mahogany furniture, designer coordinated turquoise and cream walls, and turquoise and cream curtains.

Maisie couldn’t hold back any longer. “Is your dad royalty or something?”

“Sorry?”

“How can he afford this place?”

Sacha went to the drapes and pulled them open. “Come and see the garden.”

She joined him at the window. Two storeys below them was a perfect courtyard garden, illuminated by an outdoor light.

“My dad comes from old money,” Sacha said. “Plus he’s a professor of anthropology at University College. But I think a trust fund bought this place.”

“Where is he at the moment?”

“On Grand Canary. With his wife, who is three years younger than me. They have two little boys. One’s three and one’s still a baby.” He turned to her and smiled wryly. “There goes my inheritance.”

“Does it bother you that he lives like this and you work in a bakery?”

Sacha shook his head. “No. He’d give me money if I asked for it. But I don’t want to ask for it. We don’t get along.”

“That’s a shame.”

“I have very little respect for him. He and my mother were never married, you know. And I’m sure you can figure out how an anthropologist and a gypsy got together.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean.”

“He was studying her family. She was seventeen, he was thirty. Nine months after his survey was completed, I came along.”

“So you never lived as a family? Together?”

“No. He didn’t even know about me until I was ten. He sent me loads of expensive toys every Christmas thereafter, tried to put me in a good school, paid my rent for two years while I lived in London.”

“But you never formed a bond?”

Sacha laughed. “No. And not for his want of trying. He always phones when he’s going away, tells me I can come and use the place. So I come. I invite friends, I eat all his food, I push his phone bill sky high – which reminds me, if you want to call Australia, please do – and I always leave dirty dishes in the sink. And he keeps on inviting me.” He drew the curtains closed once more and led her away from the window. “Come on, I’ll show you your bedroom.”

He gave her the master bedroom, which had its own en suite. She caught sight of herself in the mirrored wardrobe door as she dumped her suitcase on the bed. A mess.

“I might unpack my things and have a shower,” she said, her hands going self-consciously to her hair. “I feel all grimy from travelling.”

“Sure. Use a lot of hot water. I’ll organise some dinner.”

“Great.”

He left, closing the door behind him. A long, steamy shower should clear her head.

She took her time getting dressed again, brushing her hair and applying the tiniest bit of mascara. Just the right amount to enjoy dinner alone with Sacha in a fancy apartment in London.

When she emerged from her bedroom, Sacha was kneeling in front of the stereo flicking through a CD rack.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Looking for some music to put on.”

She joined him, glancing at the CDs. Mostly syrupy, middle-of-the-road collections of love songs.

“Slim pickings,” she said.

“These are mostly Claire’s.”

“Claire?”

“Dad’s wife. My twenty-six-year-old stepmother. Hey, why don’t you provide the music?”

“Me? What with?”

He leaned back on his haunches and pointed at the piano. “You can play, can’t you?”

“Yes, but not well.”

“Go on.”

She stood and moved to the piano. Playing music in front of somebody, even Sacha, could never make her uncomfortable. She’d been born into it.

“Okay, you asked for it.”

She flipped the lid up and did a quick scale to get a feel for the keyboard. Then launched into one of her old exam pieces, a Bach prelude which was fast and fun to play. When she finished she looked up.

“You play beautifully,” he said.

“No, I play *adequately*. You should hear my mother play. It would tear your heart out.”

“Are you better at cello?”

“A little. I mean, yes, of course I’m good at it. I do it for a living. But I’m never going to be a principal player, or a solo artist. My parents are really disappointed in me, though they’d never admit it. I’m sure they would have preferred to have a child prodigy. After all they gave up for me.” She picked out a little melody on the keys, watching her own fingers as though they didn’t belong to her. There was a long silence. Eventually Maisie filled it. “I just have no real passion for it.” She looked up. He was watching her, listening.

“What do you have a passion for?” he asked.

“Nothing. I’m empty at the core.”

“I don’t believe that.”

She shrugged. “I *want* to have a passion for something. Maybe this psychic stuff will work out for me. I could be passionate about that, I’m sure.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but at the same moment the doorbell rang. “Hang on,” he said, going to the door. He pressed the security buzzer to let whoever it was into the building. “That’ll be our dinner,” he said.

“Great.”

“I should warn you, a couple of my friends will be coming with it.”

“Oh?”

“I called Shaun and Curtis while you were in the shower and told them to bring a couple of pizzas over. Hope you don’t mind.”

Mind? Why should she mind? Just because she felt she was finally *talking* to him, and now the house would be full of a familiarity that she wouldn’t be a part of ...

Sacha opened the door and a few seconds later two men around his age burst in with loud greetings and pizza cartons.

Maisie was introduced as a “friend from Australia”. She couldn’t figure out if that bothered her or not. Shaun was tall and bespectacled, with fine white hair razor-cut close to his scalp. Curtis was a curly-haired bear with a stupid grin.

Sacha pulled out a couple of bottles of wine, and the four of them enjoyed a feast on the lounge room floor, accompanied by much raucous laughter and reminiscing about past girlfriends, school mates, and teenage misdeeds. Maisie was excluded from most of it. She smiled in all the right places, answered all the dumb, jokey questions about Australia (no, she did not have a pet kangaroo; no, dingoes rarely take babies; no, Ramsay Street is not a real place), and generally managed to be sociable. When it grew late and it looked like Curtis and Shaun weren’t going anywhere, Sacha told them they could sleep on the floor and brought them blankets and pillows. Eternally grateful for her own bathroom and a door with a lock on it, Maisie wished them all goodnight and went to bed to sulk.

“No lights on at Sybill’s house, Reverend,” Tony Blake said over the phone.

Reverend Fowler sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes with his free hand. He was an early riser, so he was often in bed and fast asleep by eight-thirty. Nobody ever understood this, and sometimes unapologetic callers would ring as late as ten o'clock. "Is that right?"

"I went up and shone my torch in a couple of windows. Kitchen, laundry. Not a sign of life. Not even the cat."

"She's gone away before and come back," the Reverend replied.

"But she did say she'd leave after Christmas."

"That's right."

"We need to do something, this time," Tony said. "We need to get in touch with the family and offer to buy the cottage. That way we can bulldoze it if we want."

"Perhaps you're right."

"You know I'm right. Do you still have the contact number for the solicitor in York?"

The Reverend yawned. "Yes. Yes I do. I'll call him on Monday, make an offer on the place."

"I'm sure it would be for the best. No more new people, Reverend. It's too much trouble."

"Of course, Tony. Now if you'll excuse me ..."

"Goodnight, Reverend."

The Reverend replaced the receiver and rearranged himself under the covers. He was still freezing, could feel his toes like ice in his bedsocks. Perhaps he should have run away to Australia with the girl – warm oceans and sunny parks. If it were warm he could relax, he wouldn't have to keep his shoulders hunched so tight against the cold. Maybe he would get there

some day. Maybe there would be a time when he was too old to be useful any more, and he could spend his last days in the sun. Thinking about his salvation.

“What are your New Year’s resolutions, Maisie?”

Maisie looked up from her drink despondently. Curtis and Shaun had simply refused to go home. Even worse, Curtis now appeared to have developed a crush on her. The two of them were squeezed into an Irish club in Fitzrovia. A man was smoking a cigar practically in her ear. She couldn’t breathe, and Shaun and Sacha had disappeared to buy cigarettes nearly an hour ago. Given that midnight was only twenty minutes away, she was understandably pissed off.

“I have none,” she muttered.

“So you’re perfect already?”

Ha ha. You’re so funny. “I just don’t believe in them.”

“My New Year’s resolution is to travel. Maybe I should come to Australia. What do you think?”

“I think I need another drink.”

“I’ll get it for you.” He was off to the bar before she could protest. She turned to peer out the front window. Where the hell was Sacha? Why had he stranded her in this awful place – the *Riverdance* soundtrack had been on a loop since ten-thirty – with his awful friend and an awful feeling that he didn’t have the slightest care for her comfort or happiness? In her imagination, this evening had been so different. It had been dinner for two someplace nice, a stroll through the streets, Trafalgar Square at midnight, and a kiss. And, goddammit, that would be the only kind of kiss she was allowed because it was sanctioned by the clock

ticking over into the New Year, which only happened one second a year. One second in the year, and he wasn't even going to be there. Fuck him. Fuck them all.

"Here's your drink." Curtis was back.

"Thanks," she said, not meaning it.

"Nearly midnight."

"Where the hell is Sacha?"

"They'll be back, don't worry." He took a swig of his beer and smiled. "Don't you trust me?"

"What?"

"You're awfully keen for Sacha to be back."

She shook her head, sipped her drink. "I don't know you that well. I'd just prefer it if he were here."

"I'm pretty nice once you get to know me."

"Look, I'm sure you are, it's just –"

"Maisie!" This was Sacha, enveloping her suddenly from behind with his leather sleeves and pressing his cheek momentarily to hers. His skin was icy.

"Where were you?" she asked, immediately wishing she could call back the exasperated demand.

He stood back. "We had to walk for ages to find the right brand, then Shaun decided he wanted something to eat. Sorry. I thought you'd be safe with Curtis."

"Yeah, safe and sound," she replied.

Shaun lit up a cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke which headed straight into her face. Her eyes were already stinging and she despaired of ever getting her clothes to smell fresh again. The closer midnight drew, the hungrier Curtis was looking at her. She hoped she didn't look like that at Sacha.

She gazed out the window once more as the other three shared a joke about somebody she had never met. The world seemed to shiver in the bitter midwinter cold

outside. A few people moved past, collars up against the wind, hurrying to be somewhere special or just to find a warm place to see the new year in. She had the most peculiar feeling of distance, almost as though she were watching herself from afar. What was she doing here, so far from home? It had been a new year for ten hours back in Brisbane. Her mother would be awake already, clearing Christmas leftovers out of the fridge, wiping down the shelves before she made her first breakfast of the year. Perhaps her father was awake too, reading a spy novel in bed. Adrian was probably trying to sleep off his late night in the sticky heat of morning. With an empty space next to him where she was supposed to be.

“... Maisie?”

“Huh?”

Shaun was asking her something. “Do you have any resolutions?”

“Oh. Curtis already asked me that. No.”

“Well, if you change your mind it had better be quick.”

Somebody had started a countdown at sixty seconds. Other voices joined in, until it seemed everybody in the whole place was chanting.

“Thirty-two, thirty-one ...”

As undetectably as she could, she inched away from Curtis. *Please don't let him get me.* She could see his shoulders lean forward for the pounce out of the corner of her eye.

“Fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven ...”

Sacha glanced at her with an unsteady smile. He had been drinking since seven that evening. In fact, all of them had. Maybe that was why her head was throbbing slowly.

“Five, four, three . . .”

She leaned close to Sacha, felt the proximity of his body like a promise.

“Happy New Year!” the chorus cried. *Auld Lang Syne* sprang from nowhere, everybody was singing along with the bits they knew.

“Happy New Year, Sacha,” Maisie said.

“Happy New Year, Maisie,” he replied. For an all-too-brief moment his lips were on hers, then she felt herself pulled into Curtis’s arms. She deftly out-stepped him and grabbed hold of Shaun: he smelled much better. Around them all, people were singing, laughing, squealing, hugging, kissing, blowing party favours. Streamers descended from everywhere. Shaun passed her back to Sacha who put his arm around her briefly, then reached instead for his drink. She had already forgotten how it had felt to kiss him.

They stumbled home about an hour later. Curtis and Shaun had taken it for granted that they were staying the night again. Maisie tried to cheer herself with the thought that at least she wasn’t alone like at Christmas. But next time she went on a voyage of self-discovery, she would have to make sure she planned it not to coincide with the major festive holidays.

“Goodnight,” she called to all of them and none of them particularly, disappearing into her bedroom.

“Goodnight.”

“Happy New Year.”

She locked the door and went to the bathroom to wash the stink of smoke out of her hair. When she emerged into the bedroom once more, in her robe, towel-drying her hair, she was surprised by a gentle knock at the door. Not Curtis, she hoped.

“Who is it?” she called, leaning close to the door.

“It’s Sacha.”

She checked her robe wasn’t gaping and opened the door a crack. “What is it?”

“Can I talk to you a second?”

“Sure.” She let him in and closed the door behind him. “What’s up?”

“I’ll get rid of them tomorrow.”

“Sorry?”

“Shaun and Curtis. I know they’ve overstayed their welcome with you.”

Was it that obvious? He must have thought she was an unfriendly bitch. “Don’t kick them out because of me. They’re nice guys, I like them.”

“No. We came here so that we could spend some time working on developing your psychism. We can’t do that with them around. We need to be alone together.” His breath smelled faintly of rum.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“So they’ll be gone tomorrow morning.” He paused for a second, as though debating telling her something else.

“Is there something else?”

“Um ... yes. This is a little embarrassing, but Curtis insisted I ask.”

She groaned inwardly. “Ask what?”

“He thinks you’re beautiful and wants to know if there’s any chance for him.”

“No. There’s no chance for him. I’m not interested.”

“Because of your boyfriend, right?”

“Notwithstanding my boyfriend, I’m still not interested. He’s not my type.”

“But if he was your type . . .”

“Really, he isn’t.”

“I think you’re missing the point of my question. Does the boyfriend back home – Adrian?”

She nodded.

“Is your relationship with Adrian exclusive?”

She was suddenly concerned that he wasn’t asking on Curtis’s behalf any more, and it became important that she give the right answer. Her heart was hammering under her ribcage. She was momentarily dumbfounded by the conflict within.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be insulting –”

“I’m not insulted,” she said quickly.

“Curtis just wants to know if Adrian has your whole heart.”

“Tell Curtis that Adrian and I are in a serious long-term relationship.”

“But does Adrian have your whole heart?”

She looked away. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“Okay.”

“But I’m certainly not interested in Curtis.”

“I didn’t think so. I’ll go and break the bad news. Goodnight.”

He was gone in a few moments. Maisie flopped down on her bed. Even though she’d washed her hair twice, the damp strands around her face still smelled of smoke. Her head was spinning and her body seemed to prickle lightly. She didn’t know if she was excited, terrified, or just drunk.

Does Adrian have your whole heart?

Perhaps a New Year’s resolution wouldn’t be such a bad idea after all.

“I resolve,” she said quietly to the ceiling, “to give my whole heart to something. To feel passion for something.” A desperate feeling closed in under her ribs and she closed her eyes as though that could stop it advancing. “I resolve to be happy. Sometime this year.”

But not tonight.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Maisie tried not to worry about wax dripping on the expensive carpet as she sat cross-legged with Sacha in a circle of candles. All electric lights were out, leaving only the amber glow to flicker around them. Sacha had a deck of small white cards which he was shuffling carefully.

“Now, remember what I taught you today?”

“Yep.” All day he’d had her doing breathing exercises, exercises to relax her body and open her mind. It had been difficult, and even a little boring, so the promise of candlelight and psychic experimentation was welcome.

“Concentrate in your third eye then.”

“Sure.” She tried to focus in her forehead.

“Okay. I’ll hold up a card so only I can see it. You’ve got to try to read from me which card it is. Look ...” He lay five of the cards down to demonstrate what they looked like. “Stars, circles,

lines, triangles and squares. Five out of twenty-five is average dumb luck. Any more than that and we're in psychic territory. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

He held up the first card so she could only see the smooth white back. "Now, see if you can read me."

She closed her eyes and tried to reach out her mind for his. Nothing. She guessed. "Star?"

"And this one?" He held up another.

"Did I get it right?"

"I'm not telling you until the end."

She guessed again. "Circle?"

On they went, through the pack. Every time she tried to reach out for his thoughts, and every time she couldn't feel a thing so she guessed.

"So, how did I do?" she asked as Sacha lay the last card down on top of the pack.

"You got four right."

"Four? Not even average dumb luck?"

"Sometimes when somebody is psychic and they're that far out, we look for presentience. That is, whether you're actually picking up what the next card will be, rather than the one I'm holding."

"And?"

"That wasn't the case."

Maisie slumped over, ran her fingertips through the carpet pile. "Great. I'm not psychic."

"But you are. You so definitely are. We just need to find where you've stored this ability for all these years." He squared off the cards and put them aside. "Are you still centred?"

"No. I'm annoyed and it's hard to be 'centred' when I'm annoyed."

“It doesn’t matter anyway. I don’t know what else to try. The Zener cards are usually a good indicator.”

“So I’ve failed already?”

“No. You know, your negative attitude is probably getting in the way.”

She felt a sharp retort on her lips, but bit it back. It wouldn’t do to get snappy with Sacha. “What can I do about it?”

“Try to stop being negative. Are you embarrassed by all this? Is that the problem?”

She considered. “Maybe. My family, Adrian, would all think this was terribly funny. If not a little looney.”

“Well, you’re not with them, you’re with me. And I’m a believer.” He unfolded his legs and stretched them out, one foot on either side of her knees. “Let’s try this. Can you cast your mind back to a time when you had a psychic experience?”

“Like, from childhood?”

“Yes. Anything you can remember?”

She thought hard. “I was about six when I dreamed that my neighbours bought a new dog – a golden retriever named Sandy. Two days later, it happened.”

“What kind of dream? Surreal? Realistic?”

“Just a dream. I don’t remember it standing out particularly – in fact, I forgot about it until the dog arrived. I guess that means I might not have dreamed it at all, that I may have thought I did after the fact.”

“Maybe. Any others?”

She brought her knees up under her chin, stretched her skirt out over them. “Yes ... I had an auntie ... Dad’s sister Jacqui.” Her mind reached for the memories. “I remember ... being distressed for some reason, though I can’t remember what it was. And

when Mum came to tuck me in, I said I couldn't sleep because Aunt Jacqui was sick and dying." She frowned. "I was right. She died two days later from chronic food poisoning."

"Could you have known beforehand that your aunt was sick?"

"No. Nobody did. And now it's coming to me a little clearer. I *dreamed* Jacqui was sick, and I woke up from it very upset. That's why Mum was there. I'd had this nightmare about it. And you know, I think that might have been the first time I got sick from it. I had this awful headache before I went to bed, then the nightmare ... no, I didn't get sick until the day after. Until after we found out it was true."

"Any other occasions?"

The memories were becoming clearer now as she concentrated on them. Being so sick after each occasion had served to push them far from her conscious mind. "A couple. You know, Sacha, I think they were all dreams. And I'd get the headache before I went to sleep and ... get sick after. I told Mum about the headaches and ... I can't really remember. I don't think Mum liked it, and I've since found out why." She looked up. "Could it be I stopped having these dreams because I knew my mother didn't approve?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think it's likely. Tell me about the dreams, again. Were you in them, or just watching them?"

"God, I can't remember. Watching, I think." Her forehead was tight with trying to concentrate. "I think."

"Perhaps your Gift is remote viewing."

"That doesn't sound very glamorous."

He ignored her comment. "It makes sense actually.

If, for some reason, your psychism was driven underground, I mean repressed from your consciousness, then dreams would be the obvious place for the premonitions to reappear.”

Something dark was scratching at the back of her mind, but wouldn't come to light. A memory of something? She felt a vague sense of fear but was not sure why.

“Maisie? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I'm fine. I just feel like I've been concentrating all evening. Maybe I'm overloaded.”

“Let's take a break and go somewhere really mundane for something to eat.”

“Sounds good.”

They ended up in the KFC on Tottenham Court Road. Maisie's chips were too greasy. She rolled them in napkins while Sacha looked on, amused.

“I hate it when they're too greasy,” she explained.

“Sorry. Would you have preferred something different?”

“No. I'm not a health nut or anything. I'm a big junk food fan. I wasn't allowed to eat it as a child.”

The restaurant was noisy and the fluorescent lighting was harsh. But she felt a little more comfortable now. It had been such an intense evening.

Sacha asked her a question just as she took a huge bite of her burger. “Do you know what lucid dreaming is?”

She chewed and swallowed too quickly, nearly choking on a sesame seed. She had to slurp urgently from her Tango to stop herself from coughing. Real ladylike.

“I think so. Is that when you dream and you’re aware that you’re dreaming?”

“Yes, something like that. Once you’re aware that you’re dreaming, you can control the dreams. I think that’s what we’ve got to try next.”

“How do you do it?”

“You’re probably already very open to it. Before you go to sleep, you have to centre yourself and open up your energy centres. Then, as you go to sleep, tell yourself over and over that you’ll be aware when you’re dreaming.”

“And then?”

“Then, you can ask your dreams for information. Maybe even go places.” He grew excited, leaned forward on the table. “Yes, we can do an experiment.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll write a note and leave it by my bed. You have to dream what it says.”

“Okay. We’ll try it.” Her excitement was short-lived. “What if I fail at this test too?”

“We’ll find something else. You underestimate my patience.”

“Thanks, Sacha. I really appreciate your help.”

“It’s my pleasure. The other thing you can do is, during the day, ask yourself over and over if you’re dreaming: ‘Am I dreaming now?’ Like a mantra.”

“What will that do?”

“If you get obsessive enough about it, you might find yourself asking yourself in your sleep. That’s another good way to start lucid dreaming. I’ll keep reminding you.”

“Okay, thanks.”

He wiped his hands on a napkin and stretched

back. “Of course, the wonderful thing about you doing dreamwork is that it leaves our days free to hang out in my favourite pubs and cafes.”

“That sounds pretty good to me. But when do we have to go back to Solgreve?” It seemed like a million miles away.

“My father will call to let me know when he’s coming back. Perhaps the end of the week? I definitely don’t want to be here when he gets home.”

“Why not?”

“I try to avoid him as much as possible.”

“You hate him that much?”

He leaned forward and considered his answer. “I don’t think I hate him. Though I certainly feel antagonistic towards him.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Do you think so?”

“It’s the flesh and blood thing, Sacha. Don’t you ever wonder about your father? Wonder what kind of a person he is? What he thinks about? He might be a lot like you.”

“I doubt it.”

“You wouldn’t know if you never talk to him.”

Sacha fell silent, thoughtful. “Maybe you’re right.”

Maisie finished the last of her chips. “I wish I’d met my grandmother. I’m finding out we had a lot in common.”

“Yes, you’re a lot like Sybill. But smarter, I think.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you dreaming now?”

“What? No.”

“You’re not supposed to answer, you’re just supposed to remind yourself to think of the question.”

Get into the habit.” He pushed his tray of rubbish away from him and grabbed his jacket. “We should head home, I’m tired out from all that drunken carousing we did over New Year’s.”

Maisie stood and picked up her handbag. “Okay, let’s go.” She could hardly wait to get to bed and start dreaming.

Reverend Fowler sat at his scarred desk, carefully going through the drawers. He knew he’d kept the card from that solicitor, but couldn’t remember quite where. His memory wasn’t what it used to be.

“Do you still have it?”

This was Tony, standing by the window, blocking out the view of the cool, clear sky. “Yes, I do. Somewhere here.”

“Do you want me to help look for it?”

“No. Here it is.” He held up the white square in triumph. “You don’t have to stay, Tony. I’m capable of dealing with this business alone.”

“Do you remember the girl’s name? Sybill’s granddaughter.”

The Reverend faltered. “Mary Hartley?”

“Maisie Fielding. I’d better stay.”

Last night there had been a community meeting in the village hall, which was a draughty building at the end of Cross Street. The church’s finances were examined, village donations were made or promised, and enough money was found to make a significant down payment on Sybill’s cottage. The citizens of Solgreve would soon own it and, once and for all, they would be safe from witches. Nobody had asked yet if they would knock it down or rent it out (to a local

family of course, not newcomers), but the Reverend knew there were a few in Solgreve who wanted to look inside, to delve into Sybill's secrets as she had delved into theirs. The Reverend was not one of them. He doubted Sybill kept Satanic idols and shrunken heads around the house – he understood that most modern witches didn't look or act like the ones in fifteenth-century woodcuts.

He lay the business card on his desk and reached for the phone. In a few moments, a receptionist took his call.

“Daniels and Young, how may I help you?”

“May I speak with Perry Daniels, please?”

“Who may I say is calling?”

“Reverend Linden Fowler from Solgreve.”

“Hold the line.”

He did as he was told, tapping his pen thoughtfully against his desk blotter.

“Hello, Reverend. This is Perry Daniels.”

“Hello, Mr Daniels.”

“What can I do for you?”

“It's about Sybill Hartley's cottage. Now that Miss Fielding has vacated it, we wonder if you might get in touch with her family for us. We'd like to make an offer to buy it.”

“I'm sorry, Reverend, you must be mistaken. Maisie hasn't gone home yet.”

“But there have been no lights on for –”

“She's in London with a friend. I believe she's due back in a few days. But when she does go home, I'll certainly pass on your offer to Roland and Janet.”

“Who?”

“The Fieldings. Maisie's parents.”

The Reverend scribbled down their names, the disillusion overwhelming. They had been so sure this time. They had felt so safe. “Thank you, I’d appreciate that.”

“I’m glad I could be of assistance.”

They said their goodbyes and the Reverend turned to face Tony. “She’s coming back, she’s just in London for a few days.”

Tony shook his head. “Why on earth would she want to come back?”

The Reverend handed him the piece of paper with the names of Maisie’s parents. “Do you think Lester could track down a phone number or address in Australia for these people?”

“I’m sure he could.”

“Perhaps we should call them.”

“But even if they sell eventually, the girl’s coming back soon.”

“I don’t mean to phone them about the cottage,” the Reverend said. “I mean to phone them about their daughter. Perhaps if she can’t be persuaded to leave, her family can be persuaded to bring her back.”

Although she hadn’t really expected anything to happen on the first night, Maisie was disappointed when she woke up Monday morning and realised she could hardly remember dreaming at all.

She told Sacha the disappointing news as they walked down towards the British Museum.

“That’s okay,” he said, “it might take some time.”

“I don’t know how much time I have. I’ll have to go back to Australia in a few weeks.” A deflating thought.

“Just keep asking yourself if you’re dreaming. And you don’t have to stop working on your ability when you leave the country, you know.”

Maybe she did know that, but she had such a strong sense that her return home might be an end to this adventure; that back home amongst the common details of her ordinary life, there was no place for psychic dreaming. It made her want to grab these moments with Sacha so hard that she might squeeze them to death. She pulled her hat down hard over her ears. A freezing wind was gusting up Gower Street. She relished it.

“Are you dreaming now?”

“Huh? Oh. Thanks for reminding me.” *Am I dreaming now? Am I dreaming now?* Sometimes she got it working so that the sentence kept repeating over and over in her mind, like background music to whatever else she was thinking.

They walked up the stone stairs and into the huge foyer of the building. Maisie had been here on her last two trips, but it never ceased to take her breath away.

“Come on, I want to show you something,” Sacha said, leading her up the stairs. They wandered through a few rooms until they came to the Elizabethan section. Sacha bent his knees in front of one of the glass cabinets and pointed to the display.

“See that? It’s John Dee’s magic mirror.”

Maisie found herself looking at a slab of shiny black rock, carved into a mirror shape. “What did he use it for?”

“For calling up spirits, I guess. Isn’t that what magicians do?”

“I don’t know.” Around the mirror were a couple of circular wax tablets, carved intricately with symbols

and numbers. “How is it that he needed to do all this to get in touch with the psychic world and I, supposedly, can do it just by dreaming?”

Sacha straightened his back and they started to wander past the other exhibits. “Different people have different abilities. Nobody knows why. And you should be able to understand that better than anybody, being a musician. Why can one person sing while another can’t? Like Adrian.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that. I’d always thought that if psychic power existed, then everybody must have it. It seems a bit unfair otherwise.”

“Of course it’s unfair. But when did you ever know life to be fair?” They were walking down the stairs now. “Greece? Or Egypt?”

“Um ... Greece. Hey, is it true that gypsies originally came from Egypt?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not in touch with my heritage. I grew up in England. I left Ma early to live like *gadźo*. Even Ma doesn’t really live like a gypsy any more. Though she still travels a lot.”

“And your accent?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Yes, you do. Just lightly.”

“Must have got it off Ma.” He glanced at her. “Sorry, is that disappointing? Did you think you were with someone much more exotic?”

“Of course not.” He worked in a bakery, lived in a dingy flat and didn’t get along with his father. Not strange and romantic at all. Maisie headed for a chair in front of a marble statue, sank into it and contemplated the display. Sacha sat next to her. His proximity, as always, made her skin tingle warmly.

“Are you dreaming now?” he asked.

She sighed. Didn’t say anything for a long time. Then, finally she said, “Maybe I am.”

On the third night it happened. In that half-world between waking and sleeping, she could hear what sounded like her own voice asking over and over, “Are you dreaming now?” It seemed to echo around in her head and bounce off her skull. She became aware of a sound like a bell tolling down a long tunnel. Then she found herself in a great stone hall and she was very cold. She turned to look around her, but her vision lagged a second or two behind her eyes. She held up her hands in front of her face and they seemed only able to move slowly. Like moving through deep water.

“Are you dreaming now?” Her own voice. The question didn’t seem to make sense, and then she realised that yes, yes, she was dreaming. She called it out loudly in her dream. “Yes, I am dreaming.” Her voice seemed lonely in the huge stone hall, and she could still hear the bell tolling far away. She looked up and saw that the hall did not have a roof. A flock of birds went past overhead, calling to each other. For some reason she felt very afraid.

Then she remembered again that she was dreaming and knew she had to try Sacha’s experiment. She watched as the walls of the great hall dissolved around her, and was afraid that the dream was unknitting (this was a word that her dream-self seemed to know) and that she would fall back into uninterrupted sleep. She willed herself to be back in the London apartment. There was a moment of black, then she found herself looking down at the layout of the lounge room. She was there!

Slowly and deliberately, like a child taking first steps, she floated towards Sacha's room. She could still hear the bell tolling, and every tone frightened her. Even though she was somewhere familiar, she felt a desolate loneliness, cold-deep in her stomach. Nothing seemed quite real. Strange shimmers of light and dark washed around her.

As she moved towards Sacha's room, the walls appeared to dissolve around her and she was all at once in a forest. The trees looked familiar, and she realised that it was the wood behind the cottage in Solgreve. This panicked her. It was cold and damp and she was shivering, and she was too old to be running so hard.

Too old? She held her hands in front of her again, and saw they were the hands of an old woman. An enormous, black terror rose up within her. *They are nearly upon me.* The sounds of something chasing her, tiny branches snapping, the undergrowth being kicked up. And the bell on Solgreve church ringing, carrying across the cliffs and out to sea.

Am I dreaming now?

As soon as the question was asked she was back in London. It seemed she was slipping in and out of the lucid dream. But in the dream in London it was now daylight and the fireplace and bookshelves from Sybill's cottage were here, and the clock from the hallway of her parents' house, too. Sacha walked out of his room and said, "I suppose you want to know what I wrote on the note beside my bed?"

"Yes," she replied. The bell still tolled in the distance, eerie and hollow.

"Here." He held up a piece of paper with red letters on it. They made no sense.

“I can’t read that,” she said. “You’ve made it confusing because you like to see me squirm.”

“That would be cruel,” he said. “Try harder.”

Am I dreaming now?

“Can you hear the bell?” she asked.

“Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

“Then you can hear it too?” The sound created a tumult of anxiety in her stomach.

“How did Sybill die?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I. But I think *she* wants you to know.”

Again, she was back in the forest, being pursued, her old knees aching from the effort. She was so terrified she tried to wake herself up. Instead she found herself once more up near the ceiling of the London apartment; it was night-time and she was just outside Sacha’s room. This seemed suddenly more real, and she hung on to the feeling of reality to help propel herself through the door. She found him there, asleep in a bed too small for him. It was a kid’s room, his little half-brother’s, with Teletubby wallpaper and an overflowing toy box. She took a moment to watch him in the dark.

“Sacha?” she said. Her voice seemed to be a whisper coming from the walls. He stirred but did not wake. Beside his bed was a glass of water and a piece of paper. She focused on the piece of paper. He had written on it, *Cupid is sitting on the skull of Humanity*. She memorised the line, said it over and over in her head. Now, to get back to bed.

She moved out of Sacha’s room across the apartment and to her own bedroom. The shock of

seeing herself asleep down there heightened her sense of fear and loneliness. She was cold. Very cold.

“Wake up, Maisie,” she said to herself. Nothing was happening. She wasn’t returning to her body, and the girl on the bed hadn’t stirred. She began to panic. Should she go and try to wake Sacha again, get him to help her? Fear engulfed her, and the tolling began again ... blood rushed past her ears and she kept running, running as hard as she could. Heavy breathing. Her own or ...?

Maisie woke with a start. She could hear Sacha in the kitchen, washing up last night’s dishes. Weak daylight outside her window.

“Am I dreaming now?” she said in a breathy voice.

The answer was quite definitely no. She sighed with relief, then remembered the note next to Sacha’s bed, threw back the covers and ran out to the kitchen in her pyjamas, all care for how she looked first thing in the morning forgotten.

Sacha turned as she came into the room. “Hi, Maisie. Want pancakes for breakfast?”

“Cupid is sitting on the skull of Humanity!”

He was momentarily struck dumb. “Maisie ... you ...”

“Cupid is sitting on the skull of Humanity! And you wear blue pyjamas. I can do it!” she cried, barely able to contain her excitement.

“You can,” he said, nodding slowly. “You can.”

In the end they went out for breakfast – Maisie was so excited she had decided to use her credit card, which was something she almost never did. (Her mother’s voice in her head, “If you can’t afford it now, you can’t

afford it later”, usually squashed the impulse). So they sat in a fancy Soho cafe with bacon, eggs, sausages, beans, toast and hot tea laid out between them.

“So where is the quote from?” Maisie asked, spreading marmalade on her toast.

“Which quote?”

“Cupid is sitting on the skull of Humanity.”

“Oh. I think it’s Baudelaire, an old girlfriend used to read it to me. I chose it because it sounded like something someone might say in a dream. And because it wasn’t a well-known quote. If I’d written ‘The cat sat on the mat’ and you’d got it right, I might have suspected you’d just made an educated guess.”

“God, it’s so exciting.”

“Tell me about the dream.”

“It was weird. I’ve only got a confused memory of most of it. Being in your dad’s flat is quite clear, because it wasn’t like dreaming. But the other stuff . . . No, I can’t quite remember. I think there was a bell ringing or something.”

“Are you going to do it again tonight?”

“Absolutely.” Even as she said this, though, she felt a vague fear.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“You frowned. You said ‘absolutely,’ then you frowned.”

“I don’t know . . . I felt afraid, suddenly. There was something cold and lonely about the dream. Something to dread.”

“Well, you’re overcoming years of resistance. That would be unsettling.” He poured himself another cup of tea and stirred in two sugars. “Don’t let it put you

off, this is exciting stuff. I can't wait to tell my mother. She and Sybill always used to –"

"Sybill!" Maisie exclaimed, the rest of the dream suddenly swelling into consciousness. "I dreamt about Sybill."

"What happened?"

Maisie caught her bottom lip between her teeth, going over the details in her head.

"Maisie?" Sacha prompted.

"I was in the wood behind the cottage, running away from something, but I was very old. And then I was back in your dad's place, but it was daytime and you were asking me . . . you were asking me how Sybill died. And you said, 'I think she wants you to know.'"

"But you do know. She got sick and went out looking for help, then collapsed on the way."

"What kind of sick? Was she injured? Was it her heart, her lungs, her stomach?" Maisie laid both her hands, palms down, on the table. "Do you think it could have been a message from her?"

"I don't know, Maisie," he said, helping himself to some more bacon. "What do you think?"

"Something about it was terribly familiar. And that bell tolling away in the background. It was scary."

"Dreams can be scary."

"Yes, I know."

"You're entering a different world now, Maisie," he said, leaning forward to touch her hand. "From now on you can't flinch from nightmares."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Morning, Reverend. I’ve got that number in Australia for you.” Lester Baines, hundreds of miles away safely on the other end of the phone.

The Reverend felt around on his desk for a pen and paper. “Thanks, Lester. Go on, I have a pen.”

Lester dictated the number and the Reverend read it back to check it.

“It was hard to get hold of, you know,” Lester said. “A silent number. Apparently they’re both famous.”

“Really?” Visions of movie stars or politicians came to mind.

“Yeah. The wife’s a pianist and the husband’s a conductor.”

So the young woman had genes other than Sybill’s coarse witchiness. “Very interesting.”

“Why are you going to call them?”

“None of your business, Lester.”

“If you need me –”

“Thank you. You’ve done a great job.”

He put the phone down and sat back looking at the number, making calculations in his head: it would be early evening over there. This task had to be done just right. He had never made a threatening phone call in his life, and wondered whether the person on the other end of the line would find his thin, trembling voice comical rather than menacing.

Once more, he reached for the receiver. Soon, in a far distant land, the phone was ringing.

“Hello?” A male voice. The father.

“Hello. Roland Fielding?”

“No, it’s Adrian.”

Adrian? This threw him. Who was Adrian? “Are you Maisie Fielding’s brother?”

“I’m her boyfriend. Who is this?”

Her boyfriend. Perhaps this was even better. “This is somebody who cares about Maisie’s safety. She’s a long way away from you and there’s nobody to protect her.”

“What are you talking about? Is Maisie okay?”

“She won’t be for long. If you don’t get her home soon, something very bad may happen to her.”

“Who is this?” Good, he could hear desperation in the young man’s voice now. “What are you talking about?”

The Reverend’s finger wavered for a moment, then pressed the button down. The line clicked. He replaced the receiver, aware that his heart was thumping violently. Was it excitement or fear? What if the young man made a complaint, and they tracked him down? He had visions of Interpol closing in on him, looking into his affairs, finding out his secrets.

Tony Blake opened the door, jolting the Reverend out of his morbid fantasy. "Sorry, Reverend," he said. "Didn't mean to surprise you."

The Reverend put his hand over his heart as though that could still it. "It's all right, Tony. What can I do for you?"

"Have you heard back from Lester, yet?"

"Yes, and I've called Australia. I think we can expect something to give soon."

"But you can't shrink from your other promise, now."

"What other promise?"

"When she gets back, you'll have to send the Wraiths."

The Reverend shuddered. He couldn't stand to have that word used in the friendly light of morning. "Tony, you know I can't send them. I can only ask and wait upon the providence of a greater power."

"But you will ask?"

"We'll see if it's necessary. Now don't mention it again. It unsettles me so."

Tony gave him a look that said he grew weary of trying to understand the Reverend's motives. "Why do you do it, Reverend?"

"Because it's what my father and my father's father did. That's not so surprising, surely. Your father was a policeman, too, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"We none of us fall so far from the tree that bore us," said the Reverend, not meeting Tony's eye. "I'm just fulfilling my destiny."

Maisie was in the wood behind the house again. Why did the dream always start here? A submerged terror was rising up through her body.

Am I dreaming now?

Yes, she was, and she refused to have this horrible dream again.

She stopped running and asked, "Why am I having this dream?"

In front of her, Reverend Fowler materialised, attempting a friendly smile with those misfitting false teeth. "How did your grandmother die?"

"She was sick. She went for help. She didn't make it."

"You should run. They're coming for you."

Reverend Fowler disappeared. The sounds of the chase were approaching. But she was dreaming, nothing could hurt her. She turned and stood her ground. Two dark shapes were moving in the distance, darting between trees. She breathed out and saw her breath like fog.

"I'm not afraid of you. I know I'm only dreaming." Then why did her heart begin to pound, her knees begin to quaver?

The ringing phone woke her up. She lay in bed, grateful for the bland comfort of a ceiling and four walls. She could hear Sacha in the lounge room, answering the phone. In a few moments, he was knocking at her door.

"Yes?" she asked cautiously.

"Telephone for you. It's Adrian."

Adrian? She checked her watch. It was only seven o'clock. She threw back the covers, pulled on a robe and went out to the lounge room. Sacha had left the phone on the table and gone back to bed.

"Hi, Adrian."

“Maisie, are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay. Why are you ringing so early?”

“I tried to ring last night. Where were you?”

“Sacha and I went to the pub, then we had a late dinner,” she said, wondering why she felt guilty. “You sound frantic. What’s the matter?”

“Somebody phoned from England last night, saying that you were in danger.”

“What?”

“He said if you didn’t come home soon, something bad was going to happen to you.”

She was temporarily dumbstruck. Eventually she said, “Who was it? What did he sound like?”

“He sounded like he was putting on a fake voice – kind of soft and high. Maisie, I want you to come home.”

Home? Now? “Who would do this? Why are you so sure it’s somebody from England?”

“I ... ah ... I guess he didn’t actually say where he was from. But it was probably the same lunatic who put a brick through your window.”

Was this typical Adrian, overreacting? “Adrian, you’re not making sense. Sure the people of Solgreve are a bit mad but they’re not dangerous. They’re all fundamentalist types –”

“Who think you’re a witch.”

Maisie leaned her elbows on the table. “You know, Adrian, how would somebody in Solgreve get our number? For a start, it’s silent. How do you know it wasn’t someone else, someone in Brisbane, someone who knows I’m away and wants to upset you?”

“Like who?”

“I don’t know – our family has hundreds of enemies. Mum’s not the most popular human being on the planet.”

“Maisie, listen to yourself. You’re being ridiculous. Just come home.”

“I’ll be home soon enough.”

“Come home *today*.”

Don’t tell me what to do. “No,” she said firmly. “I won’t be intimidated. I’m not finished here yet. I have to find out how my grandmother died.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It just seems impossible. You’re trying to tell me that the people of Solgreve, a bunch of dumb, backwater hicks, are international criminal masterminds who can find silent numbers in foreign places when they don’t even know my parents’ names. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’d be happier if you were back here,” he said softly. And it was his softness of voice, reminding her of all the reasons why she loved him, which moved her where his desperation couldn’t. She gave in a little.

“Okay, as soon as I get back to Solgreve I’ll phone and bring my return flight forward a couple of weeks. I’ll sort out a few more things, and I’ll try to be home around the same time you’re home from New Zealand.”

“And in the meantime, get somebody to come and stay with you. Cathy, or even that Sacha guy.”

“I’m sure Cathy would come for a while. And my grandmother’s house is like a fortress, believe me. Trust me to be smart enough to stay safe. And in the meantime, try to think of who else might be trying to upset you. Or Mum.”

“I can be back from Auckland on the eighteenth.”

“All right,” she said, even though it hurt her to say it. “I’ll be back the same day.” Less than a fortnight, a distance in time which was countable in days. Not really enough time for Sacha to fall in love with her, or for her to become a powerful psychic. Back to reality.

“I’m going to call you every day from Auckland. If you don’t answer I’m going to panic.”

“There will be no need for panicking. Have a good time at the summer school.”

“I love you, Maisie. Sorry if this has ruined your trip.”

Maisie said a half-hearted, “It’s okay.” The sky was gradually growing lighter outside. She watched rain drip off the eaves.

“It’ll be good to have you home,” Adrian continued.

Home. The word closed around her and stuck to her skin. She felt as though she’d just been told that she’d spend the rest of her life colour blind. “Yeah,” she said, not caring that Adrian would pick up her insincerity. “It’ll be good to be back.”

Janet listened to the whole story, nodding in that controlled, intellectual way she had. They sat in the air-conditioned music room, a tray of tea between them, taking refuge from the unbearable humidity which clung to the walls in every other room of the house.

“What do you think?” Adrian asked. He had to get on a flight to Auckland in less than twelve hours, but couldn’t stop worrying. Perhaps he should cancel and rush over to England.

Janet tapped a fingernail thoughtfully on her knee.

“I think Maisie’s right to be sceptical about who called. It is far more likely that it was somebody who already has our number. We made it a silent number in the first place because of harassment calls.”

Adrian felt his tension ease a little. Janet could always see things clearly – at least, things that didn’t relate to her. “So you’re not worried?”

“Oh, yes, I’m worried. But the whole trip has been a terrible worry to me. If, as you say, she’s going to have a friend staying with her and she’s coming home early, I think you can head off to Auckland without too much heartache.”

“I thought about cancelling the summer school, going over to be with her.”

Janet sniffed dismissively. “Don’t be ridiculous. You know you’re not serious. Your profile will be lifted enormously by teaching this school. It’s probably one of the reasons Churchwheel’s have contracted you. You have far too much riding on it to cancel it at the last minute. Professional musicians must be professional.”

“You’re right.”

She leaned forward and refilled his teacup. “I’ll call my mother’s solicitor in York and tell him to keep an eye on her. Would that make you feel better?”

“Much better.”

“Then consider it done. Now, when is she coming home?”

“Around the eighteenth. Less than two weeks.”

“I’ll have a word to the director of the City Symphony, see if she can have her old job back. I don’t think they found anybody permanent to replace her, and her hand must be better by now.”

Adrian spooned sugar into his tea and stirred it absently. “What’s wrong with her hand?” As soon as he said it, he remembered the fake injury. He could feel his heart pick up a beat as Janet scrutinised him. “Oh, that. I’d almost forgotten. Yes, I’m sure it’s much better.”

Janet’s eyes narrowed. “Adrian? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Adrian felt as though he were being examined on the end of a pin. Nothing got past this woman, nothing. What now? Lie more and really dig his own grave? Or admit everything? “I ... I don’t know what you mean.” He didn’t sound convincing and he knew it.

“Adrian, you’re lying to me. You live in my home, I treat you like a son, and you’re lying to me. I’d expect this from Maisie, but not from you.” Incredulous, accusing.

Adrian gulped. *Don’t get anxious.* “Janet, I ...” But he already knew he was defeated.

She smiled tightly, nodded once as if it had already been decided. “It would be better if you told me everything.”

“Should I try to contact my grandmother?”

Sacha looked up from his coffee. They were sitting in a crowded patisserie in Soho. A rowdy group of South African backpackers had taken over the table next to them, trapping them in a corner. From Maisie’s vantage point, there seemed to be no escape.

“That’s not too weird to ask, right? Trying to speak with the dead?” Maisie continued. She was so unused to talking about these things she always expected

laughter or accusations of insanity. Sacha didn't respond with either.

"You could try. I doubt if she's still around. Sybill was very ambitious about her Afterlife."

"What does that mean?"

The group next to them burst into loud laughter. Sacha waited until they had quietened down before proceeding. "Sybill spent a lot of time communicating with the dead."

Maisie didn't know why that made her feel queasy, but it did. "Is that so?"

"She had a theory about what happened after death. There are three places you could go. First, you could be earthbound, through psychic or emotional trauma."

"Like a ghost?"

"Exactly. She spent a lot of time working on helping earthbound spirits into the next life. Because that's the second option, to be born again as somebody else."

"Reincarnation."

"Right. But it's not an endless cycle of death and rebirth. Not according to Sybill. When you've collected enough psychic lessons, you go beyond that cycle. To a realm of perfection: heaven, or nirvana, or whatever you want to call it. Most people plug away at it for centuries, life after life, learning all the facets of humanity. Sybill was hopeful that she was approaching the end of the cycle. And to speed her passage, she was doing everything she could to develop her own psychic powers. With enough energy, she thought she could drive herself all the way across. She wanted her life as Sybill Hartley to be her last life."

"Do you think she managed it?"

“If anyone could, it would be Sybill.” He took a sip of his coffee and leaned back in his chair. “Or you.”

“Me?”

“Sybill believed that intense psychic ability was a sign that the cycle was closing down.”

“You’re scaring me. I don’t want to think about dying.”

“Sorry.”

“You mean that I’m on my last life?”

“Sybill would say so. But let’s not think about it.”

“I don’t feel particularly enlightened. I don’t feel like somebody who has learned everything.”

“I thought you didn’t want to think about it.”

“I’m so unprepared for all this weird stuff.” She looked down at her half-finished caramel tart. “Last night, I lay awake most of the night all panicked and bewildered. It’s overwhelming, the things I’ve seen and done. Dream-travelling, and evil spirits in my grandmother’s house, and finding out I’m psychic.” She raised her head, met his gaze. “You know, my family and Adrian aren’t just on another continent, they’re in another universe, one with different rules and laws of reality. They wouldn’t understand any of this.”

“They might understand. You don’t know.”

“I know. I know them. Part of me wants to run home and not be scared any more, but part of me is so afraid that if I do, things will return to normal and I’ll be miserable and unfulfilled for the rest of my life.” She pushed her hair behind her ears. “This psychic thing is the only thing I’ve ever had that didn’t come from them. It’s *mine*. It’s not in the Fielding how-to-live guide. I’m desperate not to lose it.” Coincidentally, she felt exactly the same way about Sacha himself.

“Don’t be desperate. You’ll be a better psychic if you learn to relax,” Sacha said with an indulgent smile. “Do you want another coffee?”

She didn’t really – it was expensive and a little too strong. But she said yes anyway because Sacha was half out of his seat and on his way to the counter. He picked his way through the backpackers. One of the girls looked at him admiringly. Maisie broke a piece of crust off her caramel tart and popped it into her mouth. The dreams were getting to her. They insisted that she find out for sure how Sybill died, but she didn’t know where to start. She was hardly equipped for private detection, and she had a vague notion that the whole project might be misguided and . . . well, stupid.

Sacha returned shortly with two more cups. “So, you don’t think you’ll play cello any more when you go back to Australia?” he asked, moving the empty cups to the edge of the table and setting the fresh ones down.

“I don’t want to.”

“Why not? Just because you’re not passionate about it?” He edged into his seat.

“Yeah, that. And the people. I never really felt like I fitted in with the orchestra.”

“No?”

“No. I mean, they all expected me to be a genius or a snob because of who my parents are, but I’m neither. A lot of them are geniuses and snobs though. They’re either incredibly out of touch with the real world because their whole being is consumed with music, or they want to pretend they’re that way. There was this one girl, a violin player, who really pissed me off. She always used to say that she’d never seen a Hollywood movie, and she was really proud of that. It’s so boring.

It's so elitist. And I think a lot of them disliked me even before they met me, because they thought I only got the job because of my dad."

"Are you sure you weren't just being paranoid?"

Maisie shrugged. "Maybe. But I still felt bad about it. I can't help the way I feel."

"What will you do instead?"

"I don't know. I'm desperate to stay out of the orchestra, but I bet that even as we speak my mum is making a deal with the management to get me back in. That's going to be the hardest part, telling Mum to butt out of it." She looked up, and noticed that he was staring past her shoulder and out the window. She guessed she'd bored him. "Did you ever have aspirations to do something different?" she asked carefully.

He returned his attention to her, smiled and said deadpan, "No, working in a bakery is my life's dream."

She laughed out loud.

"With me it's never been about career," he continued, more seriously. "It's always been about people or places. I don't really care what I do as long as I'm where I want to be, or with whom I want to be with. I like living across the road from the sea. I like Whitby, and I have friends nearby. It wouldn't really matter what I did. I don't need much money or fancy things like my dad does. Just enough to keep my van running and have a few drinks with the lads from time to time."

"It sounds very uncomplicated."

"Yeah, well life doesn't have to be complicated."

Maisie thought about this. It sounded good but she didn't believe it.

“My dad’s coming home tomorrow night,” Sacha said.

“Oh? So we have to leave?”

“I’m afraid so.”

The thought of returning to Solgreve made her fearful. She tried to analyse it, figure if it had anything to do with Adrian’s warning about the threatening phone call. But the fear seemed to be centred around the wood behind the cottage which she kept dreaming about.

“Maisie ...” Sacha started, then trailed off as if it was too difficult to say what he had to say.

“What?” she asked.

“You know what you said about how I should get to know my dad?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve thought a lot about it and I’ve decided you’re right. Would you mind terribly if I stayed a couple more days to talk to him? It would mean you have to go home alone.”

Alone was the last thing she wanted to be on returning to Solgreve. And what if Sacha and his dad got on so well that he never came back? Who would teach her to be psychic? She couldn’t stand the thought of not seeing him again.

“Maisie?”

“Of course I don’t mind.”

“I’ll give you Chris’s address and you can pick up Tabby and my van so you can drive straight home.”

While the idea of driving a strange vehicle along strange highways was kind of scary, at least if she had his van he would have to come back for it, right? “That will be fine.”

“Great. I’ll ring Chris beforehand so you’re expected. You’re a good sport, Maisie.”

She didn’t know how to respond, so she said nothing.

Maisie emerged from her bathroom and sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of the mirror to brush her hair. Going back to Solgreve tomorrow. Last few hours with Sacha. She put down the brush and stared at herself in the mirror. Hardly even recognised herself because she had dissected that face too many times: eyebrows, all wrong; mouth, too small; eyes, too dark; colouring, all the same. But all around her trembled the promise of seeing herself as desirable if only Sacha would look at her as if she were. He was probably asleep now, separated from her by two closed bedroom doors which would be easy enough to open. In less than two weeks she would have to leave England. Who knew how long he would stay with his father? Perhaps she should march out there right now, wake him up, tell him that she was his if he wanted her and damn the consequences. Damn the future, damn loyalty and all those other things that kept her suspended in one position, from where every other position looked more satisfying. She closed her eyes, thought about the way his top lip seemed to turn up a little in the middle, making it wide and flat. The thought of that tiny spot, less than a square centimetre of flesh, made her feel wild, desperate. As though all the answers to life beckoned there; if she could just touch it once with her own top lip, or her bottom lip, or even the tip of her smallest finger. This was a desire like lunacy.

But she didn't leave her room to seek out Sacha. And she wouldn't, she knew that. She would return to Solgreve tomorrow, and then a week or so later she would return to Brisbane and her life would pick up again like an orchestra returning from a coffee break. Crescendos and decrescendos in place, movements following on from one another as they had already been written down, the notes carrying her inexorably to the final cadence. Adrian, expensive wedding, upper-middle-class suburbia, children with good teeth, obligatory European trips, teaching music in hushed rooms, illness perhaps, then death.

Thanks for coming.

Clutching Sacha's hand-drawn map, Maisie walked up from York train station looking for the street where Sacha's friend Chris lived. She hoped he was home. She hoped he wasn't like Curtis. Leaving Sacha in London had been a wrench; as they waited on the platform at King's Cross Station he had confessed he didn't know when he'd be returning for his van, but he hoped it would be before she left the country. If not, she was to leave the van keys under a certain rock in the front garden for him. As well as she could, she hid the despair that the thought of never seeing him again awoke in her. When it was time for her to board the train he'd hugged her briefly, pressed his lips into her right cheek, and stood back to wave goodbye. As though it might be forever.

Maisie looked up and checked the house number. This was where Chris lived. She took the stairs slowly and knocked at flat number eight. Her next challenge was managing to get the van home without too much

drama or embarrassment. She waited by the door and within thirty seconds a short woman with a blonde ponytail answered it.

“Hi,” said Maisie. “I’m looking for Chris.”

“I’m Chris. You must be Daisy.”

Okay, so Chris was a girl. No need to panic. “Maisie,” Maisie corrected her. A grey cat and a white cat twined around the girl’s ankles. “I’m here for Tabby and Sacha’s van keys.”

“Sure,” Chris said. “Come in.”

Maisie followed her inside the tiny, but modern, flat. It smelled strongly of old cat litter and the heating was up too high. Tabby glanced up and wandered over at her own pace to say hello.

Chris was looking in a drawer for the keys. “So Sacha decided to stay in London with his father?” she asked. She said the “th” in father like a “v”.

“Yeah, apparently they don’t get on so well.”

“I know.”

She knew. Maisie looked around, wondering if she’d be staying long enough to remove her hat and gloves.

“Here they are,” Chris said, pulling out the keys and slamming the drawer with her hip. With a smile which Maisie suspected was one hundred percent false, Chris handed her the keys.

“Thanks.”

“You were expecting a man, weren’t you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You were expecting a man to open the door. I saw you were surprised.”

“Well, Sacha only referred to you as his friend Chris, and I guess that’s a man’s name.”

“His *friend*?”

“Yes,” Maisie said slowly, wondering what she was implying.

“I’m his girlfriend.”

“Oh.”

“He didn’t tell you that?”

“No.”

“We’re on a break. You know, having a bit of time apart.”

“I see.” A vague nausea sat in her stomach. And anger. Why hadn’t Sacha told her? But then, why should he tell her? Chris was still looking at her, chin slightly raised as though in challenge.

“I’d better take the cat and go home,” Maisie said.

“If you want a good home for Tabby when you go back to Australia, I’ll gladly take her. I’ve already got two but I could look after three.” Pronounced “free”.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Maisie bent over to pick up Tabby who squeaked in protest but didn’t try to run away.

“Do you want some help starting the van? It’s a temperamental old thing.”

Temperamental old “fing” or not, Maisie did not want this woman around her, demonstrating her intimate knowledge of Sacha and his possessions. “No, I’ll be fine. Thanks anyway.”

Downstairs, cooling off in the winter late afternoon, Maisie put Tabby in the van and got into the front to start the engine. Sacha had instructed her to let it warm up for a good five minutes. She did so, finding indicators, heating vents and windscreen wipers, and experimenting with levers to move the seat forward. She hadn’t driven a car with manual transmission in two years. She and

Adrian shared a shiny Japanese coupe with an automatic gearbox and power steering. The drive back to Solgreve was going to be a trial. She checked the other side of Sacha's map, where he had written instructions for which entries and exits to take to get home, and memorised them as best she could. When she was sure all was okay, she checked Tabby in the back (even the cat looked nervous), put the car in gear and drove as smoothly as possible away from that awful Chris woman and her smug smile and mispronounced consonants. Wondering what Sacha ever saw in her.

Maybe it was the unfamiliar car and the unfamiliar road; maybe it was the dark clouds building on the horizon, threatening rain; maybe it was the way the wind became gustier the closer she got to Solgreve. For some reason, anxiety began to drift around deep inside her on the last few kilometres home. She became aware of her own pulse in her throat, she couldn't stop nibbling her fingernails, and she had a vague, jittery feeling. She took deep breaths to try to fight it, but as she took the last turn-off before Solgreve's main street, she realised she was almost frantic with fear.

Something bad is going to happen.

This was unbearable. She wanted to turn the car around and drive straight to Heathrow. Instead, she drove down past the bus stop and the church and the cemetery and the ghostly remains of the abbey, took the right-hand turn into St Mary's Lane, and pulled up outside the cottage. Killed the engine. She leaned for a moment on the steering wheel, looking at the front of the cottage. It looked the same as it always had: no

broken windows, no pentagrams painted in pig's blood, no axe-wielding shadows moving around inside. Situation normal. This anxiety was not presentiment.

Tabby was already scratching at the door.

“Okay, cat. Let's go in.”

She opened the back and retrieved her suitcase. Tabby scampered out and, within seconds, was mewing at the front door. Maisie followed the cat down the front path to the house and unlocked the door.

Almost as soon as the door swung inwards, she was overcome with acute dizziness. A sudden shift in her perception popped in her ears. She let go of her case and cried out. Hands to her temples, she gulped for air. She dropped to sit on the doorstep, her mind reeling. Every sound in the street and beyond – the sea, the wind, every branch moving on every tree – was screaming at her. Every colour's brightness had been turned up, every scent on the air was acrid in her nostrils. And the horrible fear she had experienced indistinctly all the way home suddenly became an agonising black barb to her mind, the kind of terror one might feel on Judgement Day. Not just fear for her life, but fear for her eternal soul. She wondered for a split second whether she could live through this feeling.

Then as fast as it had hit her it was gone again, but she was left with the impression that her sensations were somehow magnified. The paint under her fingertips on the doorframe felt particularly smooth, the tickle of a strand of hair on her cheek particularly keen, the smell of the house behind her, musty from being locked up and unlived in for a week, particularly cloying. She knew, with certainty, that this had to be some kind of after-effect of all the psychic work she

had done in London. She shakily rose to her feet and closed the door behind her, stepped gingerly into the lounge room afraid that the act of entering a new room may set the feeling off again. No, she was fine. The hammering of her heart had begun to slow. She forced herself to make a fire, practical steps one after another, willing herself to return to normal. In the kitchen, Tabby was headbutting the cupboard where her food was kept. Maisie fed her, then went through each room in the house, reassuring herself that she was safe, that the awful feeling wouldn't come back again. She ended up in the laundry, peering out the back window, looking at the dark wood behind the garden. The wood she kept dreaming about. The sky was dimly overcast, but full darkness was still about an hour away.

How did Sybill die?

She opened the back door and strode across the back garden with more confidence than she felt. Still daylight – nothing was going to jump out and say boo to her. And while she was in this heightened state of sensitivity, perhaps there was something the wood could tell her.

Her strides became slower, less confident as she moved through the gap in the rosebushes. She braced herself for that awful feeling again, took a careful step, another. Past the first small trees, leaves spongy underfoot, grey clouds of tiny branches around her. Slowly, the sense of dread began to return. Every patch of moss looked like a portentous pattern, every branch tensed in waiting for some horror. She tried to keep her breathing deep and regular, to remain centred as Sacha had shown her. Rain started to spit from the sky

and a half-second later the wind picked up, making the tree branches sway crazily. She moved further into the woods, reached out her hand towards a tree trunk. Like an electric shock, a dark, cold energy shot up her fingers and into her brain. She pulled her hand back instantly.

“This is impossible,” she said aloud, her breath making fog. She reached out her fingertips again, let them rest on the tree trunk, and closed her eyes bravely. The dream images came back to her – she was an old lady running for her life from some unspeakable terror – here among these trees, which had somehow remembered her fear. She tried to keep her eyes closed for as long as possible, to experience as much of the scene as she could, but she felt she would explode from the terror. She opened her eyes and withdrew her hand, shoved it in her pocket. The rain grew heavy and she pulled up her collar; the wind crushed her breath in her throat. Enough. Her scepticism was misplaced. She knew what the dreams, what the trees here in the wood, were telling her. Her grandmother had died in fear, been pursued to her death in this very wood. But by whom, and for what purpose? She turned and walked back to the cottage. There was only one way to find out for certain the circumstances of Sybill’s death.

She would have to ask the old woman herself.

CHAPTER TWENTY

With the fire at her back, with Tabby curled up on her favourite armchair, and with a circle of thirteen candles around her, Maisie went through the preparations for psychic ritual which Sacha had taught her. Opening energy centres, focusing, breathing. She was flying without a safety net now; nobody was around to encourage her or save her. It was both frightening and exhilarating. Rain beat on the eaves and wind shook the panes. Though only early evening, it may as well have been midnight on doomsday outside. She really had no idea what she was doing as she closed her eyes and tried to sketch in her mind Sybill's face. As she had only ever seen photos of her grandmother, she found this difficult. For fifteen minutes or more she tried, but nothing happened. The problem was she had no memories of Sybill to draw upon. She climbed to her feet and carefully stepped outside her circle of candles. In her bedroom she found the few pieces of Sybill's jewellery that she had

kept, and selected an amber brooch. Perhaps this could provide the connection with her grandmother she needed.

Unless Sacha was right. Unless Sybill had already gone across.

But she had to try.

She switched off the bedroom light and went back to the circle. With the brooch closed tightly in her fist, she sat down and began the whole process again. Breathing, centring, focusing, lining up the coloured lights along her spine.

“Okay, Sybill,” Maisie said, a little embarrassed about speaking to herself in the dark. Then she remembered what Sacha had said, that her negative attitude might be holding her back. She breathed deeply and closed her eyes. “Sybill,” she said, more confidently. “This is your granddaughter, Maisie. I’m trying to contact you . . .” She trailed off, not quite sure what else to say. A cold breeze tickled at the base of her spine and she thought of getting up to close a window when she realised that she had no windows open. The cold must be coming from elsewhere. Her first instinct was to open her eyes, but instead she kept them closed.

“Sybill? Are you there? Can you speak to me?”

Suddenly, the cold engulfed her and a vision flashed into her mind: fists beating against a window, a mad flapping as though of wings, a muffled cry for help. Maisie’s eyes flew open. Safely back in the quiet, firelit lounge room.

More deep breaths.

She closed her eyes again. “Sybill?” Her voice sounded thin, fearful. “Do you have a message for me?”

Again the frantic beating as though from behind a

thick glass barrier. A muffled scream of terror. It went on and on, and once more Maisie had to break the trance. The sound was too horrible, too desperate and frenzied. She shook herself, stood and turned on the light. Had she made contact with Sybill? Was hers the voice of that awful smothered scream?

She blew out all the candles and placed them carefully on the hearth. If it was Sybill, why was she trapped? She cast her mind back to Sacha telling her how Sybill had died. He had said that Reverend Fowler brought him the news. Perhaps she should pay a visit to the Reverend tomorrow morning. He may know more than he let on.

“Sorry, Reverend. You know I’m no good with figures.”

Tony Blake passed the church ledger back to him and raised his hands, palms up, in a gesture of defeat. Every month they went through the figures together, and every month Tony’s dodgy adding-up made the Reverend think he either had more in the bank than he had anticipated, or that he was going to run out of money in a fortnight. The Reverend suspected the blame lay with Tony’s big, bear hands: his fat, round fingers couldn’t manage the small keys on the calculator.

Tony sat in silence while the Reverend added columns of figures again, checking totals off and making neat ticks in the appropriate columns. “All right,” he said at last, “what kind of expenses will we have to cover this month?”

The big policeman was about to open his mouth to answer when there was a knock at the office door. The two men exchanged glances.

The Reverend stood and crossed the room, mindful of his sore knee joints which seemed to get worse in wet weather. He opened the door to Sybill's granddaughter.

"Good morning," she said. She had a long, black raincoat on and clutched an umbrella. Behind her, rain drove diagonally across the cemetery and cliff-top.

"Good morning," he replied, jolted by seeing her.

"Can I come in? It's wet out here and I need to talk to you about something."

The Reverend stood aside and let her in, closed the rain out. He walked back to his desk while she slipped out of her raincoat. She was dressed all in dark grey.

"Good morning, Constable Blake," she said. Tony stared up at her suspiciously. She pulled off her gloves and hat and stood expectantly in front of the Reverend's desk.

"How may I help you, Miss Hartley?" the Reverend asked.

"Fielding. Hartley was my grandmother's surname."

"Of course."

"And anyway, call me Maisie."

"How may I help you?" he asked again.

She cast a significant glance in Tony's direction. "Could I speak with you alone?"

Tony's eyebrows shot up. The Reverend hesitated. What did she want with him?

"Tony, would you mind waiting in the church?" the Reverend asked.

Tony responded with a gruff affirmative, stood and then disappeared through the side door which led to the nave. When the door was shut behind him, the Reverend gestured to the vacated chair.

“Sit down.” He studied her as she sat. She seemed anxious about something. Her nails were bitten to the quick, her fingers laced and unlaced in front of her until she was properly settled.

“It’s about my grandmother,” she said at last.

A cold shock to the heart. What did she know? “I might not be able to help you. I didn’t know Sybill very well at all.”

“Who found her?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Who found her body?”

“Oh.” *Tread carefully now. This could be bad.* How had the story gone? He cursed his poor memory. “Now, I don’t know if I remember right. It was nearly a year ago.”

“It was September.”

“Oh. Let me see.” He tapped a finger thoughtfully on his desk blotter, trying to buy time.

“Sacha said that you told him she was found face down in the street.”

That triggered his memory. “Ah yes. It seemed she grew ill at home and was coming down to the village to get help.”

“Was it daytime or night-time?”

“I don’t rightly remember. But it was Elsa Smith who spotted her first as she collapsed right outside Elsa’s house. Elsa phoned Tony and he recovered her body.”

She leaned forward, fixed him with a keen gaze. “Where does Elsa Smith live?”

This was a nightmare. Questions like these could get him – get all of them – in a great deal of trouble. “On the main street. Number forty, I think.”

“And was she injured? My grandmother? Was she injured or just ...”

“I’m sorry, Miss Fielding. I wasn’t there. Why don’t I call Tony in? He might be able to help you.”

She nodded once then leaned back in her seat. Again, the lacing and unlacing of fingers. She was nervous, which was a good sign. At least it meant she wasn’t sure about what she was asking. Not like Sybill with her trick questions and conceited confidence. He rose once more and went to the side door. Tony was sitting in one of the pews and the Reverend beckoned him back to the office. In a few moments, Tony was seated on the edge of the desk and the Reverend stood uneasily by the window.

“Miss Fielding wants to ask about the night her grandmother died,” the Reverend said. He could see Tony’s shoulders tense, but when he answered, it was easily and confidently.

“She collapsed out on the street around two a.m. Elsa Smith noticed her and called me. When I got there she was already dead. I called the doctor and we took her back to his surgery. He pronounced her dead and wrote up the death certificate. We knew she didn’t have family so the church paid for her interment.”

“Why didn’t this Elsa Smith go out to help her?”

Tony cleared his throat. The Reverend jumped in. “I’m sure you’ve learned by now that your grandmother was held in some fear by the locals.”

“Okay. But why was she up at two a.m.?”

“Nobody knows why Sybill left her house that night,” Tony began, “but she had locked all her doors and –”

“No. Not Sybill. Why was Elsa Smith up at two a.m.?”

Silence. The Reverend cast a glance over his shoulder at the cemetery and the sea beyond. It was Tony who finally answered.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe she heard a noise. Maybe your grandmother cried out. I never asked her.”

“Perhaps I will.”

“Now, don’t you go disturbing the –”

“It’s all right, Tony,” the Reverend interjected. “I’m sure Elsa would be happy to answer Miss Fielding’s questions.”

“And who is the doctor who signed her death certificate?”

“Dr Honour on Cross Street,” the Reverend answered.

“I might go see him too.”

Tony’s knuckles had tightened on the edge of the desk. The Reverend felt just as tense but was trying not to show it.

“Again, I’m sure he’d be glad to answer your questions,” the Reverend said. “But, may I ask, why are you interested in Sybill’s death?”

It was clear she wasn’t expecting this question and she stumbled over the answer. “I ... ah ... I just wanted to know. You know, if it was cancer or liver disease or ... you know, in case it’s something hereditary.”

Comforting to see someone else in anxious turmoil rather than himself. “Your grandmother was an old woman, Miss Fielding,” he said, trying to sound kind. “And I’m afraid that dying of old age is undeniably hereditary.”

She stood and reached a hand out to shake Tony’s. The Reverend stepped forward and shook her hand too. She dipped her head nervously and left, closing the door gently behind her.

“This is very bad,” the Reverend breathed at last.

“Why is she asking these questions?”

“I don’t know. But it’s very bad. You call on Elsa, I’ll phone Doctor Honour. If our stories are straight, if it’s all watertight, she can’t suspect anything.”

“I hope you’re right, Reverend,” Tony said, pulling his car keys out of his pocket with a jingle. “Because if you’re wrong, we’re all undone.”

Maisie found the doctor’s surgery a few minutes later. The rain was gushing in gutters and along the cobbled streets, and the wind had blown her umbrella inside out twice. Her boots were starting to fill up with water, and each step made a squelching noise. She thankfully pulled open the door and entered a warm, dry waiting room which smelled of old paper and wood panelling. The receptionist was on the phone, and looked up as she came in. Maisie had the distinct feeling that she was expected. She walked up to the counter and waited.

“Yes ... yes ... I see. No, it isn’t a problem at all. Thank you for calling ... yes, goodbye.” The receptionist, a middle-aged woman with pink cheeks and salt and pepper hair, replaced the phone carefully then looked up at Maisie with a half-smile. “Yes? Can I help you?”

“I need to see Dr Honour,” Maisie replied.

“He doesn’t see patients without an appointment. Unless it’s an emergency.”

“Then I’ll make an appointment. I can sit here and wait.”

“I’m afraid the doctor is completely booked out today.”

Maisie opened her mouth to ask how the

receptionist knew that without checking her appointment book, but she stopped herself. Perhaps she was being paranoid and the doctor really was busy.

“Okay, I’ll make an appointment for tomorrow.”

“I’m afraid that tomorrow –”

“Can you just check your appointment book?”

“I ... ah ... just a moment.” The receptionist flipped open a small, leather diary in front of her. Maisie leaned forward on the counter and saw her find tomorrow’s date – plenty of blank space.

“Ah, it seems we have some time free in the morning. About eleven?”

“I’ll be here at eleven.”

“Your name?”

“Maisie Fielding.”

“Thank you, Miss Fielding. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Maisie braved the rain once more, headed home with sodden boots. These people had something to hide, she knew it. But if they were all in on it together, including the local constable, how could she ever get to the bottom of it?

In dry socks, sitting in front of the fire, she phoned the airline. They put her on hold and she listened to bland music and wondered why she had so many misgivings. There were good reasons for organising her return journey sooner. She had promised Adrian she would bring her flight forward; she was running out of money; Sacha might not be coming back. But, more importantly, she was becoming too scared to stay. In daylight she was fine, but as soon as night began to close in her imagination made evil spirits out of every creak or half-glimpsed shadow.

“I’m sorry.” A human voice interrupted the song mid-chorus. “We have no seats left for flights on the sixteenth.”

A reprieve.

“Would you like me to put you on a waiting list, or would you like me to check the seventeenth for you?”

Was it a reprieve? Or a curse?

“Miss Fielding?”

Maisie didn’t know how to answer. “I . . . um . . .”

“I can check the seventeenth for you.”

She couldn’t decide. “I . . . I’ll call you back.” She hung up. Her fingers twitched. Adrian would be angry, she should have put her name on the waiting list. The phone started to ring. Surprised, she scooped it up.

“Hello?”

“Maisie, it’s your mother.”

“Hi, Mum. I was just about to call Adrian in Auckland.”

“Why did you lie to me?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Why did you lie to me?”

Maisie’s blood dropped two degrees. Her mother’s anger could still do that to her. “Why did I lie to you about what?”

“Your hand.”

The pit of her stomach felt hollow. How had she found out?

“I . . .”

“Adrian told me everything. Don’t try to get out of it. You lied to me. Why?”

Maisie took a breath. “Because I didn’t think you’d understand if I said I just wanted a break.”

“A break? For what? So you could run off to

England and track down a mad, criminal, cruel old woman just because she happened to be related to you?”

“Mum ...”

“Well?”

“No. I don’t enjoy playing cello, Mum. It’s what you wanted for me, not what I wanted.” She tried to keep her voice gentle, reasonable. Her mother’s, however, was icy and demanding.

“What are you saying? You’ve been playing music all your life. What’s changed to make you say you don’t like it any more?”

“Because I’m an adult now. Because I don’t want it as a career.”

“But your father and I have invested so much time and money in it. Perhaps we’ve spoiled you.”

“Mum, please be reasonable –”

“Reasonable!” Her voice was a shriek down the telephone line. “You lied to me, you lied to all the doctors, you ...” Dawning realisation. “There were no doctors were there?”

“Mum ...”

“This is the most elaborate lie anyone has ever told me. Why go to all this trouble?”

“Because I couldn’t tell you the truth.”

“I don’t even know who you are. Perhaps it’s fitting that you’re over there in my mother’s house. It seems you’re more like her than us.”

“Please, Mum, don’t be so angry. I’m sorry if I hurt you, but you’ve got to understand that you overreact to things and it makes it hard for people to be honest with you.”

“How dare you blame me for your lies! As

though I deserved them!” Janet’s words were now pouring out in rapid confusion. “Maisie, don’t come home. Just stay there. With a bit of luck the old woman will come back from the dead and you’ll find out what kind of person she was and then you’ll be sorry that you lied to me. I only ever wanted what was best for you, and your father is going to be devastated. Devastated. I don’t even know who you are. Tell Adrian not to come back either. Both of you are out, it’s better if you stay away from me because I can’t bear to look at either of you.”

Click.

She had hung up.

Her mother’s anger had made her feel about eight years old again, and terrified. She carefully replaced the receiver. *Maisie, don’t come home.*

She would cool off. She didn’t mean it.

Damn Adrian. Why the hell had he told Janet about the lie? What was he thinking? Knowing Adrian, it had slipped out by accident and then he was too afraid to call and warn her. That was a typical Adrian way to handle things, or rather, not to handle things at all. She was too angry with him to phone him now. Let him think that she’d run off with Sacha on the way home from London, or that the local witch-hunters had been waiting for her to burn her at the stake.

Let him worry, let him get hysterical.

In the early hours of the morning she began to dream.

She was outside the cottage, hovering a few metres above the roof. She was frozen to the bone. Weird shifting shadows and dull rainbows glinted off objects

below her. The peculiar deserted feeling of the early morning hours told her that the world was asleep all around. Stillness lay over treetops apart from the occasional breath expelled from the lungs of the sea.

“What am I doing here?” she asked.

Silver sparks began to form around the cottage. She watched as they created an aura that encircled the walls, windows, roof. It must be Sybill’s spell to protect the house. Perhaps the dream was telling her she could feel safe. The aura was dazzling, beautiful.

But then she noticed areas in the silver that were dull, or thin. Weak points in the spell. She realised the back door was almost completely barren of protection. At the same moment she saw a shadow shiver in the wood behind the house and seem to move slowly towards her. The hooded figure!

“But how can I fix the spell?” she cried out. And what would happen to her sleeping self if the dark shape got to the back door before she awoke? The black panic that seized her almost pulled her up into consciousness, but she knew her only chance to find out how to fix her grandmother’s spell lay in staying in this dream.

The wall of silver light collapsed below her. She parted her hands and found between them a blue book. Before she could open its cover to see what was in it, the dark shape broke free of the wood. It moved without seeming to touch the ground, slid through the gap in the rosebushes and hovered there at the back of the garden. Its head moved back and Maisie realised it was looking at her. She caught a glimpse of bone and shadow, but her terror jolted her back into her body and she woke up with a start.

She sat up and clutched at her chest. Her heart was racing. *Calm down, perhaps it was only a dream.* She threw back the covers and made her way down to the laundry. Tabby sat atop the washing machine, tail frantically swishing. She looked around when Maisie arrived, chattered her teeth with a frustrated growl. Maisie crouched next to the washing machine and slowly stretched her neck up to peer out the bottom of the window.

The dark figure stood where she had last seen it in the dream, unmoving, as though waiting. Her heart was thundering under her ribs now. She was frozen to the spot, willing it not to move any closer to the house. Then, a slight disturbance of the trees in the wood behind it caught her eye. For a moment Maisie thought it was only a sea breeze, but then, to her horror, an identical dark figure emerged from the wood, moved past the rosebushes, and joined the first figure in the garden. It was all she could do to stop herself screaming.

She jumped back from the laundry window and ran to the bookshelf in the lounge room. The dying embers of the fire glowed weakly. She hit the light switch and started searching for a blue book. Despair clutched at her stomach: the way her grandmother kept house, the blue book from her dream could be anywhere. Still, she pulled every book with a blue spine from the shelf and gave it a cursory inspection. Not *Native Birds of Yorkshire*. Not *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Not *Eighteenth Century Philosophers*. One by one she threw the books on the floor, more and more frantic. Every minute felt like an hour.

Nothing.

“Okay, Maisie, don’t panic.” Blue books didn’t always have blue spines. She closed her eyes and tried to remember how thick the book in the dream had been, felt its weight in her hands. Opening her eyes, she began to scan the bookshelf again. Pulled out a book that matched the description here and there. The third book she pulled, with a dirty grey spine which was falling into disrepair, was entitled *Basic Magical Spells*. Basic? Would basic magic be enough? But the cover was blue, and it was about the same size and weight as the book in her dream. She went straight to the table of contents, her shaking fingers gliding down the page as though they were trying to read ahead of her desperate eyes. Spells of blessing, love spells, spells for finding lost items. She was tearing through the list so fast she almost missed it. Spells of protection.

Maisie flipped to the page. Protecting the self. Protecting a friend. There: protecting a house. She quickly skim-read it: psychic preparation – lucky she was becoming an expert at that – then visualisation, the silver wall of stars that she had already seen in her dream, then ... on the next page, the spell. But her grandmother had crossed out the simple spell printed in the book and had written in its place a few lines in a language Maisie had never seen before: *inne þære stowe þe ic bregde mid þissum steorran higes, anra gehwelc sie gesund of þære ealdan deorcnes*. She read it through a couple of times, trying to commit it to memory. She wasn’t even sure how to pronounce some of the letters, but did her best, repeating it in her head as she lit and set up the circle of thirteen candles and turned out the light.

inne þære stowe ...

She said it to herself over and over. Before she sat in the centre of her circle, she raced back down to the laundry and took another quick peek through the window. The two figures were standing together now, and she could see that they weren't quite identical. One was slightly taller and thinner than the other. They were turned towards each other, almost as though in conversation. She took a step back from the window and accidentally kicked the washing machine – the bump was loud in the early morning darkness, and she was certain she saw one of the figures turn quickly in her direction. She backed away from the laundry and returned to the lounge room, to her burning circle of candles. The task of centring herself and focusing on anything but the two shadows in her garden seemed impossible in her state of panic, but she forced herself to try.

Deep breaths, imagining the coloured lights.

inne þære stowe ...

And then, as though the words themselves had taken over, she felt her body slump and her throat open. The words came out and they sounded strange to her ears, a language she had never heard before but that she knew she was instinctively pronouncing perfectly. In her imagination, almost as vividly as she had seen in the dream, she could see the silver stars collecting around her house, pouring into the weak places. And she could also see the two dark shapes look up in surprise, move quickly towards the cottage, but pause a few metres back as though afraid to come any closer.

Over and over, in a stream, the words kept springing from her lips, the silver aura around the cottage became stronger and brighter in her mind's

eye, until finally – it may have been moments later, it may have been as much as an hour – the words stopped and she could once again sit up straight and look around her.

She stood, shakily, and moved down to the laundry. Tabby no longer sat on the washing machine. Outside, the garden was empty.

“Did I do that?” she asked the dark laundry. Had she got rid of the two dark figures? Had she made the spell work?

Her breath caught in her throat.

I did it.

She put a hand to her forehead. A spell. She had cast a spell of protection and it had scared off the dark figures.

“My god, my god,” Maisie said, checking out the window again. A surge of impossible-to-place feeling: pride? confidence? power?

I did it. She had made herself safe.

She turned and wandered back to bed, but stayed awake for a long time, staring into the dark. A first glimmer of understanding, of what her psychic ability was capable of. It had felt so *natural*, so meant-to-be. Her excitement was like delirium. It kept her awake nearly until dawn.

But when she finally drifted to sleep it was with a feeling of absolute security.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gloomy morning didn't dawn at all. The rain was back as a light drizzle. When Maisie checked her watch she was horrified to see that it was already ten forty-five: she was due in Dr Honour's surgery in fifteen minutes. She jumped out of bed and dressed, brushed her teeth quickly and fed the cat. The lounge room was still a mess from her adventure last night – books lay everywhere, candle wax had dribbled onto the carpet. The site of her first major psychic success. She remembered what had happened as though it were a dream. It was almost too much to contemplate – the awful dark shadows in her back garden, somehow sentient and yet not of this world. But at least she was safe. Grabbing her raincoat and umbrella, she left the house and closed the door behind her.

The sky was leaden. Every tree along the street seemed to be sagging under the weight of it. The sea was a dull pewter, white caps visible in the distance.

The line where the sky met the water was invisible. It was all one gloomy shade of grey as far as the eye could see.

She checked her watch and hurried her steps. She couldn't give them the slightest reason to cancel her appointment. And today she wouldn't be nervous and flustered like she was with the Reverend. Her questions were perfectly valid, and if the doctor had nothing to hide he would answer frankly.

She reached the surgery with about five seconds to spare, pushed the door open and went straight to the counter.

"Good morning, Miss Fielding," the receptionist said. "The doctor will see you in a moment."

"Thanks," Maisie said. She sat down in an uncomfortable plastic chair and picked up a copy of *Hello* magazine that was a few years old. She flicked through an article on the Spice Girls when they were still the full complement. After a few minutes, a voice announced her name.

"Maisie Fielding?"

She looked up. Standing near the receptionist's desk was a thin, stooped man without a hair on his head, and with old-fashioned horn-rimmed glasses. Like Reverend Fowler, he must have hailed from around the class of '24.

"Are you Doctor Honour?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, dourly. "Come through."

She stood and followed him past the receptionist's desk and into the back hallway. He led her into a small room which smelled like the doctors' surgeries of her childhood. Old carpet, damp corners, medicine. The benches were cold stainless steel. A

giraffe growth chart, with colours that had probably been faded since the sixties, hung on one wall, its edges curling up.

“Take a seat, Miss Fielding,” Dr Honour said. He gestured to a chair only marginally more comfortable than the one in the waiting room, then sat behind his desk and made a pretence of heading a new file card with her name.

“What’s your date of birth?” he asked.

“I’m not here about me.”

He dropped his pen and fixed her with his rheumy eyes. “Oh?”

“I’m here about my grandmother.”

“Your grandmother?”

“Sybill Hartley.”

“I remember Sybill. What can I help you with?”

“You signed her death certificate.”

“That’s right.”

“I want to know what she died of.”

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling, as though thinking. “I believe the cause of death on her certificate was listed as heart failure. It usually is in cases of old age.”

“And you examined her body?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Were there any injuries? Any ... cuts or bruises?” She was thinking of the mad chase through the wood which she always dreamed of. Surely that would have made a few marks on the old woman.

“Yes, there were. She collapsed in the street and injured herself in the fall. She had grazed her forearms and her knees.”

“No other injuries?”

“No. Miss Fielding, if I may ask, why do you want to know this?”

She wouldn't be intimidated. “I didn't know my grandmother at all, Doctor Honour. I'm just trying to find out as much about her as possible.”

“Is that really all? You're behaving almost as though you expect for there to be suspicious circumstances around Sybill's death. I assure you there weren't.” He rose from his seat and moved towards a grey filing cabinet, decorated sadly with peeling stickers advertising medicines. “I have a copy of the death certificate if you wish to see it.”

“No, don't bother,” she said, rising from her seat. She knew it would read exactly as he told her.

“I'm not an unfeeling person, Miss Fielding. None of us in Solgreve are. It's unfortunate that you and your grandmother never met, and it's unfortunate that she's no longer alive, but she was eighty-three. She was an old woman. There's nothing unusual about an old woman dying.”

Maisie paused, her hand on the door handle. She looked him up and down. His patronising voice and affected calmness made her furious. “Yeah. And how old are you Doctor Honour?”

“I . . .”

“Don't bother answering that.” She pushed the door open and left, back into the wet street.

She tried calling Sacha in London but got his dad's answering machine. She wanted to brag about her successful spell to him, and she was desperate to hear his voice. Depression began to stalk her. She called Adrian, woke him up but didn't care. Unleashed a

little of her anger on him. He apologised a million times for letting slip about her deception to her mother, but didn't seem to realise that his worst crime was not warning her in advance. Then she called Perry Daniels in York but he wasn't in so she left a message. Maisie knew she was avoiding calling Cathy because she'd left her hanging over New Year's, so she gritted her teeth and did it.

"Maisie! I was wondering when I might hear from you."

"I only got back from London the day before yesterday," she said. "Sorry about New Year's."

"It's okay. I kept myself busy. And I did abandon you at Christmas, don't forget. So now we're even." She sounded stuffed up and croaky, like she might have a cold.

"So why don't you come and visit me? I've got a warm cottage and a bunch of hostile villagers waiting for you. And it sounds like you could use a nurse."

"Yes, it's the kind of cold that could kill a brown dog. Do you know, nobody knows that expression over here?" She stopped to cough then came back to the phone. "I can be there tomorrow."

"Great. There should be a bus coming through tomorrow. It goes from Whitby at twelve o'clock."

"I'll be on it. Meet me at the bus stop?"

"Of course."

"Someone's waiting for the phone. I've got so much to tell you, Maisie. I found out heaps of information about Solgreve. You're going to be fascinated."

"Don't tease me. Tell me some stuff now."

"No, gotta go. This guy's about to turn purple. See you tomorrow."

“Okay, bye.” Maisie hung up and went to the bedroom. An old camp bed was folded up in the cupboard. She set it up in the back room. Knowing that linen wasn’t her grandmother’s strong point, she half-heartedly searched for single sheets then decided to go out and buy some.

On her way home, she counted street numbers along the main street and tried to figure out where it was her grandmother had supposedly collapsed. Outside number forty, Elsa Smith’s house, she paused and walked out to the middle of the road. She crouched down and lay her fingers on the bitumen, waiting to see if she got any kind of psychic feeling like she had in the wood the other day. Nothing. A car engine approached so she stood and walked to the side of the road again, watching the street. She needed to talk to Sacha, needed to ask him if she could trust to this conviction that there was something suspicious about her grandmother’s death. And if Sybill had been pursued to her death, who had pursued her? Even though the people of Solgreve seemed reluctant to talk about Sybill, alive or dead, she couldn’t imagine any of them actually being responsible. Covering it up, perhaps, but not causing the blind terror which the old woman had experienced before she died.

Cars passed. Rain descended. Understanding came no closer. She looked up at Elsa Smith’s house: old, grey stone and sagging roof tiles. A curtain moved. Somebody had been watching.

Maisie crossed the road and rapped at the door. No answer. She knocked again, louder and longer.

Finally, a little voice from the other side of the door. “Who is it?”

“My name’s Maisie. I wondered if I could ask you a couple of questions.”

“Go away.”

“Please, Mrs Smith. I just want to ask you about the night Sybill died.”

“I’ll call the police if you don’t leave.”

“You don’t need to be frightened of me. I’m not Sybill.”

The door opened a crack. She got a glimpse of a cluttered lounge room, a brief whiff of old vegetable peelings and floral air freshener. A white-haired woman with a face like a fox peered out.

“Can I come in?” Maisie asked.

“No. Go away. Your grandmother was a bad woman and the village is better off without her here.”

“She wasn’t a bad woman, Mrs Smith, she was just –”

“She was evil. If you know what’s good for you you’ll get out of that cottage and go home. The old witch is probably still haunting the place. There was nothing kind or generous or loving about that woman. You’d have been better off with Baba Yaga for a grandmother.”

Maisie put her hands up and took a step back. “Okay. Sorry to bother you.”

The door slammed. Baba Yaga? Was that the child-eating witch in Russian legend? At least the insult was imaginative.

She headed home. The phone was ringing as she let herself into the house. Sacha! – it had to be Sacha phoning to tell her he was coming back. She ran to answer it.

Not Sacha. Perry Daniels was on the other end of the line. They talked briefly about the insurance claim

and the weather in London. Maisie had spent most of the day so far in private investigator mode so she thought she might as well ask the solicitor if he knew anything about Solgreve.

“Did Sybill ever indicate that she didn’t feel safe here in Solgreve?”

There was a brief silence as he thought about it. “No, I think she felt safe. She knew she was unpopular, but your grandmother had a sense of self-assuredness that was almost . . . well . . . smug.”

Smug? At least he didn’t imply she roasted and ate children.

“I get the feeling they can’t wait for me to leave,” Maisie said.

“And I think I know the reason for that. While you were away the local Reverend called here, wanting to make an offer to buy the house. This may just be a real estate issue.”

“Why would they want the house?”

“Who knows? Perhaps they think there’s buried treasure beneath it. In any event, Maisie, I wouldn’t worry about it. If the most aggressive person they have on their team is Reverend Linden Fowler, I’d say that you’re safe.”

Perhaps the solicitor was right – maybe the villagers were too meek to have had anything to do with Sybill’s death. Clearly they had hated her, had been afraid of her, but that didn’t equate with murderous intentions. If they had been glad when Sybill died that would explain their guilty reaction to Maisie’s questions.

Okay, so if the villagers were innocent, then who? She had seen the two dark, hooded figures in her back garden with her own eyes, and she knew that there

was something sinister about them. What were they? If she was going to work out the circumstances of Sybill's death and what was happening to her in her Afterlife, maybe that was the next question she had to answer.

"God, this place is *wonderful*," Cathy enthused, dropping her bag in the lounge room and looking around. It was early afternoon and Maisie had just met her friend at the bus stop.

"You should have seen it when I first arrived. An absolute mess. It's still very cluttered and I haven't even opened some of the cupboards yet."

"It's so cosy. And what a location. Can we walk down to the cliff a little later on?"

Maisie didn't know if she was comfortable walking through the wood any more, but perhaps in broad daylight and accompanied by a friend it wouldn't be so bad. "Sure. But you promised me you'd tell me what you found out about Solgreve."

"You have to feed me first. I haven't had lunch."

"Come through to the kitchen then."

Maisie made sandwiches and a pot of tea. Cathy pulled a ring-binder out of her bag and laid it in front of her on the table, positioned a box of tissues next to it.

"Okay, here's food. Now tell me." Maisie sat opposite her.

Cathy blew her nose and tucked the tissue into her sleeve. She opened the folder. "Well, where do we begin? How about at the beginning. Settlement here dates back to five forty-three A.D."

"That long ago?"

"Yup." Cathy reached for a sandwich and took a bite.

"So how did you find that out?"

“I had a whole university library to myself and no company over New Year’s,” Cathy replied. “What else was I going to do?” She sipped some tea then continued. “The name Solgreve is a bastardisation of the original title, ‘Sawol Græf.’ Do you want to guess what that means?”

“No.”

“It’s Anglo-Saxon for ‘soul’s grave’.”

“That sounds kind of –”

“Creepy?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sure it’s not. It’s probably to do with some kind of Anglo-Saxon religious rite.”

Maisie leaned over and peered at Cathy’s notes. “So that’s Anglo-Saxon language?”

“Yes. Sometimes called Old English. I’m learning it as part of my degree.”

“Wait here. I want to show you something.” Maisie rose from the table and went to the lounge room. She found the blue spellbook she had used the other night and brought it back to the kitchen.

“Is this the same language?” She opened the book to the house protection spell and turned it so that Cathy could read her grandmother’s writing.

“Yes. Where did you get this?”

“What does it say?”

“It says something like ... ‘within the space I draw with these stars of the mind, everything or everybody will be free of the ancient darkness.’ Where did you get this?”

“It’s my grandmother’s handwriting. It’s a spell of protection for the house.”

“Fascinating. Your grandmother must have been an Anglo-Saxon scholar.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me to find out my grandmother shot JFK. She just gets more and more interesting.” Maisie closed the book and put it aside. “Go on. More information.” She reached for a triangle of cheese sandwich.

“All right. Sawol Græf was a sacred site for pagan worship. In fact, it was one of the last places to convert to Christianity which it did in six hundred and eighty-eight – that’s down in the early church records. Saint Junius is responsible for that, along with other things like getting himself eaten by a lion, supposedly in Cornwall. Because Sawol Græf had always been a site of worship a church was built on it, and then the original abbey was built in the same spot in twelve thirty-five. By then it was in the records as Solgreve. A lot of other old places like this have had their cemeteries dug up and built on over the years, but Solgreve is remarkable for having preserved the cemetery as it now stands since earliest settlement. That’s why it’s so big. The archaeologists at the university are dying to get in there and have a look . . . excuse the pun.”

“You’re excused. Have another sandwich.”

Cathy took another triangle and held it in her right hand while she talked. “Nothing notable on the record about the place until fifteen seventy-six. Solgreve was the site of one of the most severe punishments of witchcraft in England. Usually, we associate witch hunts with Catholicism and continental Europe. They didn’t burn witches in England – except for up here.”

“They burned witches?”

“Yes. They weren’t supposed to but they did. It was kind of a community-generated project.”

“I have no trouble believing that.”

Cathy sneezed violently, then took a moment to compose herself. “The village was a lot bigger back then. Around eighteen hundred people and quite a busy fishing town. That year they sent one hundred women to trial for witchcraft. Most were driven out of town with nothing but a warning. Twenty were hanged. And they lit up three women of a group of four who refused to testify.”

“What happened to the fourth?”

“She confessed under torture at the last moment. The transcripts are on microfilm at the library. She said the four of them had been trying to lift an ancient curse on the town.”

“What kind of curse?” Maisie’s tea was going cold in its cup.

“I copied a bit of this down, but it doesn’t make much sense.” Cathy turned a few pages and read: “For the ground in this village is cursed, and all the folk within are blighted and must be driven out.” She looked up. “Can you figure that out?”

“Nope. You?”

“No idea. You want to know what happened to her?”

“Who?”

“The fourth witch, the one who confessed under torture. They didn’t burn her with the others.”

Maisie shuddered. “I don’t think I want to know.”

“They buried her alive.”

“Yuk.”

“I agree,” Cathy said. “If we could get into the cemetery at some stage, we could probably find her grave.”

“You know that’s not possible. They’d have a SWAT team on us before you could say ‘parochial idiots’.”

“That’s a shame. I love it when I can touch a piece of history.” She flicked back through her pages.

“Is there more?”

“A little. The new church was built in seventeen hundred and two on the site of the old abbey, which had been sacked and largely destroyed when Catholicism was driven out of England. That’s the church that’s still there – still on the ancient pagan site.”

“That seems paradoxical.”

“A lot of the Christian holy places on this small, wet island are actually old pagan sites. It made it easier to convert people.”

“So, it’s an Anglican church, right?”

“Wrong. It *was* Anglican right up until eighteen forty-eight. But then the local parish cut all ties with the Anglican church and called themselves an independent reform church. But as you can see, they still look and behave like Anglicans.”

“Does that mean they’re fundamentalists?”

“Now this is the bit I had trouble finding out. Nobody really knows except for the people who belong to the church. Definitely not associated officially with the Anglican church. Most people I spoke to said, yes, they’re fundamentalist Christians. But one of the post-grads in archaeology said the church was closer to a graveyard cult, because they really are so obsessed with that cemetery. But, and this is the weird thing, hardly anybody who actually resided in Solgreve during their lives is buried there.”

“What? My grandmother’s buried there.”

“She’s one of the rare ones. They usually run their corpses into other towns nearby.”

“Are they trying to preserve the space?”

“Maybe. But why not just build another cemetery? There’s plenty of room on the other side of the village. And they do occasionally inter people from out of town. Some people have requested graves near the sea, and the village charges the family a small fee to have them buried here.”

“But that’s so weird.”

“Don’t ask me what it means. But that’s why the suggestion that they might be a graveyard cult came up.”

“They’re so ordinary, Cathy. They’re such ineffectual, small-minded people. I just can’t imagine it.” She picked up her tea, realised it was cold and took it to the microwave. “You want me to zap your tea?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Cathy handed Maisie her cup. “Are you ready for more?”

“There’s more?”

“I guess this last bit isn’t too weird, but since the new church was built, in seventeen hundred and two, there have been five Reverend Fowlers.”

“Go on.”

Cathy read from her notes. “Reverend Tristran Fowler, died in seventeen sixty-eight aged ninety-two. Passed it on to his great-nephew Reverend Brodie Fowler, died in eighteen twenty-nine aged – wait for it – one hundred and four. His son Charles was in charge until he died in nineteen hundred, followed by his son Philip, who is the current Reverend’s father. They all lived until ninety or beyond except for Philip, who died at seventy-four. Good genes, huh?”

“Might be something else.”

“Something else?”

“I’ll explain later. Any more to tell me?”

“That’s it. Does it clarify anything?”

The microwave pinged. Maisie pulled out their tea and settled down across from Cathy. “No. It only raises more questions. This place is full of secrets.”

“But what small town isn’t? I mean, it’s isolated, it’s tiny, probably half the locals are inbred. And so what if they’re superstitious about burial? It’s human nature to be worried about death and the soul’s progress. Perhaps they just express it more openly than most people.”

“I don’t think my grandmother died of natural causes.”

Cathy raised her eyebrows. “And you think the villagers had something to do with it?”

Maisie shook her head. “Not as such. But they might know the truth and be covering it up. They’re certainly delighted that she’s gone.”

“How do you think she died?”

“I think she was pursued to her death by evil forces.” Maisie smiled, embarrassed. “If that doesn’t sound too wild.”

Cathy watched her steadily, blue eyes round with anticipation. “Okay,” she said. “You’d better tell me everything.”

Sacha phoned at eleven o’clock.

“I’m coming home tomorrow.”

“How did it go with your father?”

“Is it okay if I pick my van up in the afternoon?”

“Sure. My friend Cathy’s here.” She glanced over at

Cathy, who had her nose deep in a book about elemental spirits. Her friend had not reacted well to the suggestion that evil forces were afoot in Solgreve, and was desperately seeking evidence to prove that no such thing existed. “Perhaps you can stay for dinner.”

“Maybe.” A sigh. “I’m pretty tired.”

“Well, the offer’s there.” She was dying to ask him about Chris, but he seemed so distant, like he wasn’t even really listening to her. That closeness they had shared in London seemed to have evaporated.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Around five.”

“Okay, then –”

The phone clicked before she could say goodbye.

The village hall on Cross Street was not the Reverend’s favourite venue. The cracks in the walls made a mockery of the heating, causing everybody to be wrapped up in scarves and overcoats. The room was illuminated by one flickering fluorescent light and one ordinary bulb which hung inside a dusty orange shade. The Reverend looked around him. A circle of concerned citizens – around seventy in all – sat in rickety stackable chairs, gossiping among themselves. He hated community meetings. Speaking publicly, defending his decisions, dealing with the egos – it was all too much for him. He’d rather be home in bed. He turned to Tony Blake, who sat next to him.

“Shall we begin?” he said.

“I think so.” Tony cleared his throat and said loudly, “Everybody, let’s start.” He waited for conversations to end and a few shushes to be passed around the circle. When it was quiet he said, “Elsa, you wanted this meeting called. Perhaps you should open.”

Elsa Smith stood. She held her index finger aloft and began to speak in sharp tones. "First, the girl's been asking Doctor Honour, the Reverend, and Tony about how Sybill died. Second," the second finger went up, "she turned up at my house the day before yesterday, asking me the same thing, being very aggressive and demanding. I was afraid for my safety." Finger number three joined the other two. "Third, she met a friend at the bus stop yesterday morning. The friend had a duffel bag and hasn't left yet. And this afternoon I saw another friend walk up towards her place. Who knows how long these people will be staying or what they'll get up to? We can't have it, and I propose that Reverend Fowler," his name was spoken heavily and accusingly, "live up to his earlier promise and do something about getting rid of her."

"Hear, hear," the Kings echoed loudly.

The Reverend resisted the urge to shrink down in his seat, and for all the world he wished he was a parish priest in a sunny alcove in some other part of the world. The eyes of the group were upon him as they waited for him to speak. He read hostility on their faces, or perhaps desperation. For hundreds of years Solgreve had kept its little secret and thousands of people had benefited from it. Those here were afraid they might be the first generation to face an old age full of pain and suffering, the first generation to expect death any time from seventy onwards. And because of Sybill that possibility had veered so close. They were all still skittish from the shock of finding out how close, and they were projecting their fear onto the girl.

He waited for Elsa to sit down. Her eyes were beady – that was the word, wasn't it? He supposed he should be thankful for such a concerned and involved parish. Other men of the cloth had to deal with indifference or the disavowal of responsibility. He straightened his back but did not stand, and tried to put as much power behind his voice as possible.

“I understand that you are concerned. But this girl is not her grandmother. She's a young woman on a holiday and she'll go home soon enough, and her friends will go home too. I think we should just wait it out.” Was he cutting his own throat? He, too, was afraid that the girl would find out Solgreve's secret and ruin it all for them – and because he was so implicated, he dreaded to think what his fate would be in such a situation, should he even live through it. But he knew what they were going to ask him to do. They were almost buying for her blood, they would like to see her disposed of as Sybill had been disposed of.

“Wait it out?” Elsa again. “Are you mad?”

A general murmur of belligerence went around the circle. Even Tony lowered his eyebrows at the Reverend.

“Come on, Reverend. You made us a promise once before. You have to use your ... influence,” the constable said. “The Wraiths should be all over that cottage. She'd be gone in a matter of days.”

Approval ran round the circle now. The Reverend considered telling them about the threatening phone call to her family, but that would only highlight his inadequacy. Because nothing had come of that phone call. He couldn't sound threatening and he knew it. Perhaps he should have had Lester make the call. No,

his fate was sealed. Tonight he would be walking down the cold staircase into the foundations of the abbey.

“Very well, I shall ask. And you know I can only ask.” He added this last to remind them that he was not superhuman. His power had always been derived power.

“We need other reassurances, though,” said Margaret King.

“In case she doesn’t go,” her husband said to clarify.

“What other reassurances can I give you?”

“Give her until the end of the month. If she’s still here ...” Margaret trailed off, almost as if voicing her idea out loud had made her realise its import.

Her husband nudged her. Elsa Smith glared down upon her. Clearly these speaking parts had been worked out in advance. Reverend Fowler wondered what chance he had ever had against these people.

“If she’s still here after the thirty-first of January, she gets what Sybill got.”

“Now, wait,” said the Reverend, “that’s a bit extreme. Sybill had been involved in –”

“I suggest we put it to a vote,” Elsa Smith declared. “Those in favour raise a hand.”

He didn’t need to count to see he was outvoted. What was he to do? This was the way decisions had been made in Solgreve for generations. He couldn’t warn the girl without incriminating himself. He had to hope that she would respond to the visits of the Wraiths.

“It’s decided,” Elsa Smith announced triumphantly. “At the end of the month.”

“I’ll go to him tonight,” the Reverend said, his shoulders slumping forward. “If that’s what you want, I’ll go to him tonight.”

The Reverend stood on the cliff's edge in the dark. All the villagers had gone home and now he was alone with this task. Somewhere to the north, past headstones and trees and houses, was Sybill's cottage. He longed to take the cliff path up to the house, knock on the door, go inside where it was warm and explain everything. "You must leave," he would say, "because you may very well die if you do not." But this wasn't possible. Not only would it be a betrayal of his calling, it would be an admission of his awful, awful guilt. No man should know what he knew and be able to withstand the pressure of self-condemnation. But then, he could be wrong, he could have misheard those old stories which had placed a chill in his stomach.

He was putting off the inevitable.

He walked to the abbey, found his keys and let himself into the spire. Opened the hatch, down the stairs, one at a time. Cold, cold earth. A glimmer under a door at the end of a tunnel. He knocked loudly. The door moved a crack, crepey fingers, like pallid worms, holding it open. Darkness within but for a strange, phosphorescent glow.

"I have a favour to ask from the villagers," he said, forcing his voice over the fear he felt, the fear he always felt no matter how often he came here.

"Come in, then." A croak, an impossible voice.

"Thank you, Doctor Flood."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

What a relief not to have to think of spells and psychic dreams and the possibility of evil spirits. How comfortable just to sit by the fire with two friends and a bottle of spiced mead (Sacha's contribution to the evening) and feel safe, warm and ... well, perhaps a little bit drunk.

"That was a damn fine meal," Sacha said, for the third time. Maisie wished she could take credit, but Cathy had cooked it. She was a committed vegetarian and had an amazing way with eggplant. Maisie had never cooked anything with eggplant in her life.

Cathy sat cross-legged on the hearth, hands stretched out towards the fire. "Do you know, Sacha, that when I arrived all she had in the cupboards were instant noodles and canned soup?"

Maisie squirmed in her chair. Sacha, who sat opposite, smiled at her. Her heart flipped over in her chest. It had been doing that all night.

“So you still haven’t told me how it went with your father,” she said to him.

“It went all right.”

“Just all right?”

“Yes, just all right. We didn’t shed tears and vow our undying love to each other. Sorry to disappoint.”

“But are you glad you stayed to talk to him?”

“I suppose so. Our relationship is slightly improved.”

“Meanwhile, my relationship with my mother has taken a serious nosedive,” Maisie said.

Cathy looked up. “Why? What happened?”

Maisie sighed. “Oh, it’s boring.”

“No, tell me. You should meet Maisie’s mother, Sacha. She’s the scariest woman on the planet.”

“Is that right?” Sacha replied lazily, suppressing a yawn.

“I kind of ... well, I wanted a break from the orchestra and I knew I couldn’t tell her that, so I kind of faked an injury. And Adrian let it slip the other day.”

“Was she angry?” Cathy asked.

“Indescribably. Adrian and I have been requested not to come home.”

“You live with Adrian?” This was Sacha.

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Was she serious?” Cathy asked, ignoring the exchange.

Maisie kept her eyes on Sacha, who was now refilling his glass.

“Maisie? Was she serious?”

“I doubt it. She wouldn’t kick us out. But I don’t want to go home until she’s cooled off a bit.”

“How long will that take?” Cathy asked.

“Couple of hundred years, knowing my mum.”

“Are you going to marry Adrian?” Sacha asked.

Before Maisie could answer, Cathy interjected. “Oh, they’re *meant* to be together. He’s such a sweetie, she’s so lucky. And her parents love him, don’t they, Maisie?”

“I think they’re annoyed with him at the moment, but yes, they think very highly of him. Though he hasn’t asked me to marry him,” she replied. But it was implied. Buy a house together, get married, start breeding. She felt suddenly short of breath.

“You’re so young. I always think those decisions should be put off as long as possible,” Sacha said.

“I agree.”

“But I think she’s so lucky to have met the right person so early,” Cathy said, flicking long hair off her shoulders. “Come on, Maisie, admit it. Can you think of anyone better than Adrian?”

Maisie took a gulp of her drink. “He’s certainly very special,” she answered softly. Sacha was gazing into the fire now, as though he wasn’t listening. Cathy’s eyes darted from Maisie to Sacha and back again, a small frown playing the corner of her mouth. Maisie felt a vague discomfort. Even though Cathy was here in Yorkshire, she was really part of Maisie’s other life, her real life with famous parents and Adrian and the orchestra. She didn’t like the idea of Sacha being touched by anything from that life – as if it would spoil him somehow. She watched his hands circling the glass, could see fine black hairs on his wrist beneath the cuff of his black pullover.

“I’d better go home,” he said, draining the last of his drink and putting the glass down beside his chair.

“It’s still pretty early,” Maisie said.

“I have to work tomorrow.” He stood and stretched his arms over his head. For a tantalising second she caught a glimpse of the skin on his stomach, but he soon readjusted his pullover. “Do you have my car keys?”

“Sure.” Maisie rose from her chair, placing her glass by the phone. The keys were on the mantelpiece. She picked them up and held them out to him. He plucked them out of her hand, almost as though he were being careful not to brush her fingers with his own.

“You left a jacket at my dad’s place,” he said.

“Oh. Was it my brown suede one?”

“It’s brown, yeah. I’ll bring it back before you go.”

“Well, you know you’re always welcome.”

“I should have brought it with me tonight, but I forgot.”

“That’s fine.”

“Okay. Well, I should get going.”

Maisie sneaked a quick look at Cathy, who was gazing into the fire. “I’ll walk you to the van.”

“There’s no need. It’s freezing out there.”

“No, it’s okay. Back in a tick, Cathy.”

“Sure,” Cathy said, not looking up.

Maisie closed the door behind them and followed Sacha up the front path. It was a still, icy night. Stars glowed far above, and she could hear the soft, regular swoosh of the sea in the distance.

“Hop in while I warm it up,” he said casually, letting himself in. He leaned over to unlock her door and she did as he said. Soon they were both sitting in the van – only marginally warmer than outside – with the engine running. Maisie glanced back at the house then at Sacha, whose head was bent over, looking at the dash instruments.

“What’s the matter? Trying to see if I ran up extra kilometres?” Maisie said.

“No. Just checking the fuel gauge. I should have asked you to put some diesel in. This thing always says it’s full when it’s not. You have to tap it a few times.” He did so, then leaned back. “It’s fine. I’ll make it home.”

The quiet, the intimacy, were overwhelming her. Her hand, as though it had intentions of its own, wanted to reach for his.

“Thanks again for dinner,” he said.

“I’ll tell Cathy. She did a great job.”

“Yeah.”

“She’s nice, isn’t she,” Maisie said, because she couldn’t think of what else to say.

“Yes, but she’s not like you.”

Maisie had to turn her face away to hide a stupidly delighted smile. “I guess not. She’s so . . .”

“Uncomplicated.”

“She’d probably hate for me to say it, but yes. I think she’s uncomplicated.” She turned back to him. “Do you think I’m complicated?”

“You told me so yourself.”

Had she? She didn’t remember that. This wasn’t getting her any closer to finding out what she really wanted to know, and luckily she’d drunk sufficient to be bold enough to ask. “Why didn’t you tell me Chris was your girlfriend?”

He blinked in surprise. “What?”

“I was expecting a guy. But I got your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you she was a girl, but she’s not my girlfriend. Is that what she said?”

“Yes. That you were taking a break.”

He shook his head. The lights on the dashboard illuminated the right side of his face in soft blue. “No. Chris is just a friend.”

“Then why would she say that?”

“It’s complicated.”

“So am I – I’m sure to understand,” she said, smiling.

He shrugged, a you-asked-for-it gesture. “Earlier this year we used to ... well, we um ... every time I was in York we’d have sex.”

A hot flush spread up her body. Jealousy and excitement warred in her blood. “Oh. I see.”

“But I made it clear it was nothing more than ... than that. She knows she’s not my girlfriend. And she’s not some poor, sad creature who’s been used and abused by me. We haven’t done it for months, so ... anyway, she was probably just being mischievous. She’s like that.”

Mischievous? Why didn’t he call her stupid? Deluded? Cretinous? But his voice was coloured with fondness, and now she had to cope with knowing that the short blonde girl – Janet would have called her “common” – had enjoyed in real life what Maisie had only daydreamed about.

“Maisie?”

She looked up.

“You’ve gone all quiet,” he said. “Do you think I’m a bastard?”

“No, of course not. What you do is none of my business.” Try as she might, she couldn’t make her voice sound natural. It baffled her. She was so disappointed in him.

Sacha smiled at her. One of his hands left the

steering wheel and was making its way to her cheek when he stopped suddenly, his gaze going past her to the house. She turned to see that Cathy had opened the door and stood in the hallway, peering out at them. When Maisie turned back, his hand was once more on the steering wheel.

“When are you going home?” he asked.

“I still don’t know.”

“I thought you were changing your flight.”

“I didn’t. As it stands, my return flight is in mid-February.” She glanced over her shoulder again. What was Cathy doing? Keeping an eye on her? “I should go inside.”

“Sure. I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye.” She opened the door and stepped out into the cold night. As Sacha drove off, she made her way down the path to the front door where Cathy was waiting for her.

“It’s cold out here,” Cathy said.

“You could have waited inside.” She immediately regretted the snap in her voice.

“I wondered what had happened to you. You were gone so long.”

They went into the house and Maisie closed the door behind them. “He was warming up his car.”

“I’m making caramel rabbits. Go wait in the lounge room. I’ll get them.”

Maisie settled in the lounge chair while Cathy potted in the kitchen. She stared into the fire, and in her mind the scene played out as it hadn’t in reality. Sacha had touched her cheek, leaned in to kiss her, that amazing top lip coming to rest on her own. Beyond that, she didn’t care. Just one kiss would do her. And a kiss

wasn't cheating on Adrian, not really. She closed her eyes and felt a humid warmth spread through her lower body.

"Here you are."

Maisie opened her eyes. Cathy held out a mug, the one with "best friend in the world" written across it. She hoped Cathy hadn't chosen it on purpose.

"Thanks, Cathy."

Her friend settled in the chair Sacha had sat in, nearly kicking over his empty glass. For a few minutes they joined in reverie, staring into the fire and sipping their warm drinks. Tabby came into the room, fresh from an evening nap, stretching one leg then the other behind her. Maisie dropped her right hand down the side of the chair and the cat rubbed her whiskers on Maisie's fingers.

"I thought you said he was good-looking."

Maisie looked up in surprise. "Don't you think he's good-looking?"

"He's okay. But his eyes are too close together, his nose is kind of pointy, and his lips are way too big. And he's too skinny."

Maisie stared at her in astonishment. In what alternative universe was Cathy living?

"You obviously disagree," Cathy said from behind her mug.

She feigned a shrug. "It hardly matters anyway."

"Don't pretend, Maisie. You couldn't keep your eyes off him. I've seen starving men look at three-course meals less avidly."

"That's not true. I like him but it's not ... you know, out of control or anything." She almost laughed, realising she had just said the exact opposite of the sick, sad truth. "Why are you worried about it, anyway?"

“Because I know and like your boyfriend. Who, by the way, is ten times better looking, more talented and smarter.” Cathy nursed her mug between her fingers. “I just don’t want you to have an emotional accident.”

“An emotional accident? What the hell is that?”

“You’re getting grumpy with me.”

“No I’m not. Really, I’m not. I just don’t know what you’re talking about. Sacha’s just a friend, I’m not in any danger.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

They fell silent. Maisie drained the last of her drink.

“It’s a bad term, anyway.”

“What is?” Maisie asked.

“Accident. An affair can’t be an accident.”

“Will you stop it?” Maisie said, forcing a laugh. “I’m not having an affair.”

“Because there are too many decisions to make along the way. People are always saying, oh, one thing led to another and before I knew it we were having sex. It’s like they can’t help themselves. But they forget they can stop at any point. That there’s about a hundred conscious decisions along the way.” She shook her head. “It’s not an accident. It’s always an act of deliberate disloyalty.”

“Is the lecture over now?” Maisie asked.

“No lecture. Just making an observation.”

“Adrian is in no danger of losing me, Cathy. I don’t know where you got the idea from.”

“I guess it’s a mystery,” Cathy replied, turning her attention to the fire again.

Maisie sipped her drink, tried to slip back into her semi-drunken reverie.

“How long have you and Adrian been together anyway?” Cathy asked, casually.

Maisie calculated in her head. “Just over four years.”

Cathy leaned forward, stretched her hands out to the fire. “Was he your first serious boyfriend?”

“No.” Maisie said. “I had a boyfriend in high school. And then I was going out with this other guy when I met Adrian. Why all the questions?”

“Just curious. God, you’re not good at this girly talk stuff are you.”

Maisie laughed at herself. “I guess not.”

“So tell me. How did you meet Adrian?” Cathy drew her feet up onto the chair.

“My father brought him home. They were working together and Dad had him over for dinner. I was smitten.” She smiled in the firelight, remembering the first time they saw each other. “He was smitten.”

“Love at first sight?”

“Maybe it was. In any event, the boyfriend didn’t stand a chance. Adrian and I were just friends for a few weeks, but I couldn’t get him out of my mind. We eventually both broke off the relationships we were in and got together.”

“Your dad must have been happy.”

“Both my parents were. I think it was the first time I got something right in their eyes.”

“Oh, nonsense, your parents are crazy about you.”

“Cathy, what can I say? You’re making judgements on what you see on the outside. Yes, we all get dressed up and head out to concerts together like a happy, affluent family. But they’re so disappointed in me. My mum’s a genius, my dad’s a genius. I’m just a girl.”

Cathy fell into silent reverie. Maisie warmed her hands on her cup.

“Do you want to know what my parents did?” Cathy said softly.

Maisie wasn't at all sure she did want to know. “Yes.”

“My mum got pregnant with me when Sarah was only two months old. Dad told her to get an abortion but she wouldn't, so he tried to do it himself.”

“What do you mean?”

“He punched her in the stomach and pushed her down the stairs.”

“Oh, my god.”

“Luckily, I was a tenacious little foetus. Mum went to stay with her sister until I was born, but then Dad wanted us back so Mum returned.”

“Why?”

“She didn't know any better,” Cathy said. Her voice was too even, almost as though she were suppressing the real horror of her origins with an affected calmness. “Dad got paid once a week. He'd drink half his pay cheque, come home, and beat Mum up. The next day we would go shopping for groceries. I came to understand that if my mum was bruised and stiff, it was time to go shopping.” Her voice dropped. “Mum put up with it for four years and then one night, Dad crossed the line.”

“What did he do?”

“He beat up on Sarah. She was only five. It was bad enough to put her in hospital. I remember the night so clearly. Waiting at the hospital, Mum's sister coming for us, talking to welfare people, being told we weren't going to see Daddy again.”

“I'm so sorry.”

Cathy flicked her hair off her shoulder, almost nonchalantly. “So we lived with Mum’s sister for a while. Mum was a mess, she couldn’t work. Mum’s sister had us doing the housework as soon as we were old enough to hold the vacuum cleaner. But then we met a really good teacher in grade five. Sarah and I were in the same year at school, and this teacher saw that we were a bit ragged and unpopular, and she encouraged us. We sang in the choir and we got better grades . . . I guess that was a turning point. Mum and her sister had a fight soon after that and we had to move and change schools, but we’d already had some sense of what it was like to be involved in things or to achieve something. Sarah and I moved out together after high school and went to uni together, and we’ve both made our lives okay.”

“Wow. I had no idea it was so bad.”

“So, I don’t know what it feels like to disappoint your parents,” she continued. “Mine never had any expectations in the first place.”

Maisie finished her drink and placed the cup beside the chair. “I guess you must think my problems are pretty insignificant.”

“Not at all. It’s relative. I’d say, despite everything, that I’m a happier person than you.” Cathy’s drained her drink. “Do you want me to take these empty cups to the kitchen?”

“Not yet. We can talk some more if you like.” Maisie wasn’t quite sure what to do with Cathy’s story. Should she offer comfort? Encourage her friend to express her rage? Ignore it and hope it went away?

Cathy yawned. “So, tell me the real truth about Sacha.”

“What about him?”

“Come on, Maisie. What do you really think of him?”

Maisie hesitated. Cathy had just opened her heart and told her the awful story of her childhood, so Maisie felt she owed a little honesty. And really, where was the harm? Cathy was in Yorkshire. Her family was in Brisbane. Opposite ends of the planet. “Everything I say is strictly in confidence,” she said quietly.

“Of course. That goes without saying. So you really do like him, hey?” Cathy wriggled in her chair. “I knew it. I could tell.”

“Well, I hope *he* can’t. I don’t want anything to come of it.”

“You’d never cheat on Adrian, would you?”

“Of course not.” Just a little kiss – that wasn’t cheating.

“I just don’t understand, though. Adrian should be enough for any girl.”

“Adrian’s wonderful. But ... when you’ve been with the same person for so many years ... I don’t know, it’s like having a bottomless packet of your favourite biscuits. After four years, it’s still your favourite biscuit, but they’ve gone a bit stale because the packet’s been open so long. But you’re not supposed to be greedy enough to open another packet, because you have a bottomless packet right there on hand.”

Cathy giggled. “Let me get this right, then. Sacha’s a fresh packet of biscuits?”

“Yes. I guess so.”

“What kind of biscuit?”

“What do you mean, what kind of biscuit?”

“Use your imagination. Like, a Tim Tam? Or a Scotch Finger?”

“Ooh, something chocolaty and exotic and rich.”

“And Adrian’s one of those honey biscuits with the white icing.”

“Exactly, a Honey Jumble.” Maisie laughed, then she stopped herself. “This is awful. Poor Adrian. I shouldn’t talk about him this way.”

“Hey, some people love Honey Jumbles. Don’t feel bad.”

“Well ...” Maisie had begun to feel unsafe, opening herself up like this. “I think it’s past my bedtime. I’m going to have a shower.”

“Okay then.”

Maisie went to the bathroom, wished for a long, hot, steamy shower, but only got a disappointing trickle which left a red burn on one side of her body while the other side was all gooseflesh. Afterwards, she pulled on her pyjamas and a dressing gown and made for her bedroom. Cathy stopped her in the hallway.

“Don’t be cross, but I’ve broken your spare bed.”

Maisie laughed. “How on earth did you do that?”

“I sat too close to the edge and one of the legs kind of buckled. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. But where will you sleep?”

“I’ve dragged the mattress in front of the fire – and I found this. Look.” She held up a skinny exercise book.

Maisie took it from her and opened it.

“Is it your grandmother’s handwriting?”

“Yes, it is. It looks like she was taking notes about something.” Maisie flicked through the pages, scanning quickly. “It’s her notes about Solgreve. It’s all here by the look of it – the witch burnings, everything.”

Cathy yawned. “Well, tell me if you find anything in there I didn’t know about. I’m off to bed.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

Maisie took the exercise book to read. Mostly scattered notes, obviously scribbled down as things occurred to her, or as she found them out herself. Maisie read for pages without finding anything new. There were references throughout to Georgette’s diary, with the occasional question mark in the margin, or an underlined word. Shortly after Sybill’s notes about the witch burnings (where she had underlined “cursed ground” with intensity), Maisie came across some jottings which awoke her curiosity.

Virgil and the Wraiths (cemetery) – Anglo-Saxon/pagan: religious ritual? (Diary no.3). [AS: Magical; pantheistic; earth/trees/space; Jutes (?); priests perhaps; possibly imported Scandinavian gods; tree spirits; power of chaos.] MAKE CONTACT.

Maisie read it again, trying to figure it out. At least she now knew for sure that there was a third section of the diary. But what were these “Wraiths” in the cemetery? She remembered the last part of the diary, where Virgil spoke of the dark shapes he thought had pursued him at his work. The dark shapes who were still hanging around Solgreve. So, was all the information about Anglo-Saxon paganism an attempt to explain what or who they were? Perhaps it was already explained in the diary, which made Maisie twice as eager to find it.

The last, underlined, scrap of note had captured her imagination the most, however. *Make contact.* Sacha had told her that Sybill’s specialty was communicating with the dead, and Maisie herself had read the spell in the trunk. Had the old woman tried to speak with the Wraiths? If she did, and if she learned anything from

it, it wasn't written in this notebook. The rest of the pages were mutely empty. Maisie scanned each one carefully, but they were all blank. She rose from her bed to place the notebook on the dresser, and turned the light off. She lay in the dark for a while, looking up at the ceiling with her mind bouncing between two chains of thought: Sybill and Sacha. Neither thought brought her any peace.

From his bedroom window, Reverend Fowler could make out the lights burning in Sybill's cottage. He could never sleep after one of his pilgrimages below the abbey, so he sat up in front of the radiator, watching through the dark. With that special attunement which men trained in the ways of the spirit had, he could sense some kind of protective veil over the house. Did that mean Sybill's protection spell was still working? Was that possible? The other explanation was that the girl was a witch too, but surely not powerful enough at such a young age to make the spell work. It didn't matter anyway. The point was just to scare her, not to injure her.

The last yellow light at the cottage extinguished. He wondered how long they would wait before they came. Not long. An hour or two, perhaps. He supposed he could watch, sitting there in the dark, for the lights to come back on. That would tell him that his request had been granted. But if he did watch, he'd feel too much a party to it, and he'd rather pretend he wasn't. So he climbed back into bed and closed his eyes, knowing he would not be the only person whom sleep would shun that night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Adrian put off calling Janet as long as he could. But knowing Maisie was getting angrier and angrier at him for not sorting the whole business out, he finally summoned his courage and marched down to the public phone in the foyer of the Auckland Music and Arts College where he was teaching. He inserted a fresh phone card, and dialled Australia. As he was due home in less than a week, it would be wise to ensure he still had a home.

Roland answered, and Adrian nearly lost his nerve.

“Ah, hi, Roland, it’s me.”

“Hello, Adrian. I thought you might call.”

“I guess I should talk to Janet,” he said, fiddling with the phone cord, “but I’ll be easily talked out of it if you don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Actually, I think it’s a very good idea. She’s just finishing up with a pupil.”

“Is she still angry?”

Roland gave a light laugh. “Of course she is. It’s

what she does best. But don't worry too much. You're welcome to come back as far as I'm concerned."

"Thanks, Roland."

"Have you heard from Maisie?"

"Yep, she's safe and sound. I'm still trying to convince her to come home. That's why I'll have to sort things out with Janet."

"Yes. Well, she's just here. Hold on."

Adrian could hear Roland explain to Janet who it was. There was an urgent, whispered exchange which he couldn't make out. He watched a pigeon land outside the double glass doors and peck at the ground. In the distance, up the stairs, somebody was practising endless scales on a piano.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Janet."

Silence.

"I owe you a very large apology," he said.

"Yes, you do."

"I hope you can understand that I was in an unfortunate position. I couldn't betray Maisie so I –"

"Betrayed me?"

Adrian sighed. "I guess you could say that."

"Tell me something, Adrian. Do you agree with what she did?"

"Agree with it? What do you mean?"

"Leaving the orchestra. Do you think she made the right decision?"

"Of course not. But Maisie's not like you or me or her father."

Janet sniffed derisively. "Of course she is. She's just having one of those mid-twenties indecisive periods, she'll come around. But I'm concerned that when she

does, it will be too late. If she loses her place in the orchestra now, she might not get it back. You know our Maisie's not ...” She paused, as though searching for the right words. “You know she isn't an outstanding talent.”

“I still think she should be allowed to make that decision.”

“What else can she do?”

“She could do anything. She's smart, she's attractive.”

“She has a music degree and no other experience. She can't even type. Do you want her to go and work in a record store? There's no money and no future in that. You know I'm right.”

Adrian wished Janet didn't have such a knack for expressing things that he felt but would never voice. Even though Maisie was dissatisfied with her job, Adrian couldn't help thinking she should stick with it – plenty of people went through periods of disenchantment with their choice of career, but managed to get through them. It was a matter of being adult, responsible. “I must admit I've thought it from time to time.”

“You can come back, you know. I was angry when I told Maisie to stay there. In fact, I want her back quite badly.”

“Thanks, Janet.”

“But I want you to do something for me.”

He knew there would be a catch. “What is it?”

“I want you to do your best to convince Maisie to rejoin the orchestra. I spoke to the director. The autumn season starts rehearsing in the second week of February. If she's back in time, her job is safe.”

“Okay. I'll mention it to her.”

“I think it's better coming from you than from me.”

I've already told him she will come back, but you're not to tell Maisie that. Let her think it's her decision."

Adrian didn't reply. This was too much like plotting against Maisie while she wasn't around. It made him uncomfortable.

"So, is she all right? Has anything come of the threatening phone call?" Janet asked.

"No. She seemed well and happy when I last spoke to her."

"I've said all along, the big danger she's facing over there isn't material."

"You mean her grandmother?"

"Yes."

"But she's dead."

"Her influence could live well after her."

"I find that a little hard to believe." Or did he? Since Maisie had been in Yorkshire, she had spoken oddly, had been too eager to talk about supernatural things and psychic powers. Though she had stopped around the time she went to London with the gardener.

"I know it's hard to believe, Adrian." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "When you come home I'd like to tell you something about my mother."

"What about her?"

"Well," now her voice was normal again, Janet Fielding at her confident best, "we'll have to see. Do you want us to come pick you up at the airport?"

"No, I'll catch a taxi."

"We'll see you on Tuesday then."

"Okay. See you Tuesday."

The phone beeped as he hung it up, and he withdrew his card. The piano scales had stopped upstairs. He turned to the staircase and prepared to

return to class, wondering what Janet planned to tell him about Sybill. He was dying to know.

The soft yet insistent knocking at Maisie's bedroom door woke her in the early hours. She sat up sleepily, wondering what Cathy's problem was this time.

"Yes?"

"Maisie, it's me. There's somebody at the door."

"What?" Comprehension eluded her.

The bedroom door opened a crack. "I know you think I'm an idiot, but it sounds like there's somebody knocking at the door."

"I didn't hear anything."

"The back door."

Maisie cast the covers back and climbed out of bed. "What time is it?"

"It's just after one. The cat's in the laundry and she's all agitated, and I swear I heard someone knocking at –"

"Tabby's in the laundry?"

"Yeah."

A chill crept into her stomach. But no, she wasn't to worry. The spell was active, they were safe.

She flicked on the light and pulled on her robe, joined Cathy in the hallway. Firelight glowed in the lounge room.

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait here." She crept quietly down the hallway to the laundry. Tabby was sitting on the washing machine watching out the window, her head moving quickly this way and that as though she was looking for something. Maisie edged up to the window. Nothing under the tree. Nothing near the rosebushes. She turned around, relieved. Cathy must have been dreaming.

“Maisie?” her friend called from the other end of the hall.

“I think you must have –”

Three sharp knocks at the laundry door. Maisie jumped, couldn't help letting out a little cry of surprise. She turned to the door and stared at it, wished she could see through it.

“Who's there?” she called, trying to sound braver than she was.

No answer.

Cathy had edged down the hallway and was standing near the entrance to the laundry. “Who is it?”

“Either really rude visitors or really polite ghosts,” Maisie replied, not taking her eyes off the door.

“Shall we open it?” Cathy asked in a breathy voice.

“Hell, no. No way.”

“Then put your ear to the door. Maybe you'll hear something.”

Maisie leaned close to the door, tentatively put her ear against it. The knocking came again, sending her two embarrassed steps into Cathy's arms. They clutched each other's forearms.

“Who is it?” Cathy called this time.

In response, a hideous hissing noise. Cathy let out a short, sharp shriek, ran out of the laundry. Tabby jumped, tail bushy, off the washing machine and raced away to hide. Maisie backed up the hall, found them both in the kitchen taking comfort in the electric light.

“What the hell is it?” Cathy asked. All the colour had drained from her face, and she was desperately clutching the edge of the sink as though it could anchor her to a more predictable reality.

“Don’t worry, we’re safe,” Maisie said, realising that she didn’t sound as confident as she should. “I put a protection spell over the cottage. As long as we don’t open any doors or windows, it can’t get in.”

“Get in? Why does it want to get in?”

Why indeed? She suspected that these Wraiths were capable of causing more than just fear. “I don’t know. But don’t worry. It can’t get in.” Then why were her hands trembling? She locked them inside one another to still them.

“Didn’t you say you saw two of them the other night?”

“It doesn’t matter if there are two or two dozen. The house is protected. We’re safe as long as we stay inside.”

Cathy clenched her jaw as though she were trying to stop herself from crying. At that moment, the lights flickered and went out. With a desperate leap Cathy launched herself from the sink into Maisie’s arms. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

Maisie held on to her thin body. “I’m scared too.”

“I didn’t believe you about . . . about bad spirits.”

Another knock. Both of them flinched. Tabby was gone, probably under the bed. Maisie was starting to think it wouldn’t be such a bad place to wait this out. At the same instant, movement caught her eye in the kitchen window. She glanced up to see a dark shape on the other side of the glass.

“Christ!” she shrieked.

As quick as it had appeared it was gone. Again, she’d had the impression of seeing dirty bone among the shadows under its hood, and the thought awoke fresh terror in her heart.

“What? What?” Cathy said, looking desperately around.

“I thought I saw something. Come on, let’s go to the bathroom. There are no windows there.”

“Was it at the window? Was it looking in? I can’t bear this.” Cathy was almost in tears. “Can’t we call the police?”

“This is Solgreve, population three hundred and twelve. The police constable doesn’t answer the phone at this time of night.”

“Then let’s get out of here. Let’s run and get help.”

“We are *not* leaving the house.” Maisie gave Cathy a little shove. “Come on. Bathroom.”

They went to the bathroom and shut the door behind them. Cathy perched nervously on the edge of the toilet seat, Maisie shifted from one foot to the other near the door.

“What now?” Cathy asked.

“We wait.”

“For what?”

“For it to stop.”

Cathy ran her hand through her hair and groaned softly. All was silent for a few moments. Maisie tried not to think about what those faces must look like beneath the hoods. She tried to compose herself. *I’m safe, I’m safe, I’m safe.*

“What’s that?” Cathy said suddenly.

“I can’t hear anything.”

“It sounds like something scratching.”

Maisie strained her ears. She could hear it, too: an awful rasping of something sharp on glass. “It’s scratching at the window,” she said.

Then, a quick, scuttling sound up the side of the

house. Maisie would not allow herself to picture how that sound was being made.

Cathy's mouth moved but no sound came out. Finally, she swallowed hard and managed to say, "There's two of them."

"I think you're right." Because she could still hear the scratching on glass, and now she could hear light, dreadful footsteps on the roof.

"What's it doing on the roof?"

"I don't know."

"Maisie, you said it could only get in through an open door or window."

"Yes."

Cathy gulped. "The chimney ... the chimney is ..."

Maisie's stomach turned to water. Cathy was right: the chimney was an opening in the roof, though only a small one. Could it get in? Could it turn itself to vapour and slide down the flue? She opened the bathroom door a crack and leaned an ear out. The scratching at the window had stopped. Now she could hear a quick, hard, rasping noise from the lounge room. From the chimney.

"Please no, please no," she said under her breath. Every corporeal instinct she possessed was screaming at her to run from the house, even though she knew it was the worst thing she could possibly do. The rasping noise continued, slower now, almost methodical. Maisie felt as though her skin was alive with wild, wild fear. Finally, it stopped, and the footsteps thudded lightly back across the roof then stopped. All was quiet. The moments ticked by silently, slowly. It had tried to get in the chimney and failed. Before she could allow herself a gasp of relief, she heard a slither, a light thump. She

looked down, saw her feet, enclosed in their stupid woolly socks, rooted to the floorboards.

She turned, saw that Cathy was also looking at the floor. “Did that come from down –” Before Cathy could finish the question, an uproar of banging and grating started below them. Cathy screamed, and the thing, whatever it was, screamed back, a nightmare sound. They both sprang from the bathroom and ran up the hall to the lounge where the floor was carpeted. Maisie could hear the presence dragging itself along below the floorboards then stop. Cathy leaped up onto a chair and stood there. The front of her nightdress was wet with urine and she clutched it between her hands, crying like a tiny child. The screaming had stopped, but now there was a wet, breathing noise coming from below them.

“Make it stop, make it stop!” Cathy howled.

“I don’t know how.”

Dark movement on the periphery of her vision, in the crack where the drapes didn’t quite meet. Cathy turned to the window and screamed. The shape was gone an instant later. Maisie fumbled with the curtains, pulled them closed and pinned them there with the back of a chair.

“We’re going to die,” Cathy gasped.

“We’re not going to die. If they could get in, they would be in by now.”

“Did you see it? Did you see it?”

“Only briefly.”

“It had no face . . . it had no –”

Bang. A huge echoing thump on the side of the house.

“That’s it!” Cathy shrieked. “That’s it, I’m going home.” She marched towards the door but Maisie

caught her round the wrist. In the dark, Cathy's eyes looked black with fear.

"No!" Maisie cried. "Are you fucking mad? You can't leave the house while they're out there. That's what they want."

Maisie noticed that beneath her hands Cathy seemed to have turned to rubber. As though her thin bones had melted with fear. Her pale face seemed tiny and so terribly afraid. She began to sob. "But they'll get in, they'll kill us."

"They *can't* get in." Maisie tried to recall how confident she had felt the night she cast the protection spell. It made her angry that her faith had been so easily undermined. She took a step away from Cathy and shouted, "Hear that? You can't get in. The house is protected so leave us alone."

More footsteps on the roof. Thumping, loud breathing, outside. And, awful sound, something like a croak of anger, a gasp of diabolical indignation. Maisie almost lost her nerve, but pounded all her fear down low inside. "I'm not leaving!" she called. "I'm not going fucking anywhere, so leave me alone."

Cathy hiccupped a pathetic little sob. Maisie encircled her in her arms. Her friend clung to her. She smelled like pee, but Maisie hung on tight. They stood like that for what seemed an age. Then the awful breathing stopped. A light slither from beneath the hall told Maisie that they were withdrawing. The lights flicked back on. Maisie tensed, waiting for more noises from some other part of the house. Minutes ticked past. Cathy's breathing grew more regular. Tentatively, Maisie drew away from Cathy and looked around. She could barely resist smiling with self-pleasure. The Wraiths had gone.

“I think it’s over.”

Cathy turned her tear-stained face up. “Can I sleep with you tonight?”

“Of course.”

When Maisie next opened her eyes it was morning. Pale daylight glimmered through open curtains, and Cathy wasn’t next to her. She sat up with a start. “Cathy?”

In a moment, Cathy stood in the doorway. She was fully dressed, overcoat, gloves, scarf, and held her small suitcase in her left hand. “Sorry, Maisie. I’m not staying.”

Maisie rubbed her eyes. “What time is it?”

“It’s nine-thirty. The bus goes through in fifteen minutes.”

“But Cathy ...”

“Last night you asked me if I was mad. I’d like to ask you the same thing. You can’t stay here. For heaven’s sake, Maisie, an evil presence tried to get into the house. God knows what its intentions are.”

“It can’t get in.”

Cathy put down her case and came to perch on the end of the bed. “Come with me.”

“I’m not coming with you.”

“Why would you want to stay here?”

Because it’s close to Sacha, because I still don’t know what happened to my grandmother, because there’s a third piece of the diary around here somewhere, because I desperately don’t want to stay in York with Cathy who is part of my old life. But she didn’t say any of these things. Instead she said, “I think my grandmother has me under a spell.”

“Last chance. I’m about to leave.”

“Do you want me to walk you to the bus stop?”

Cathy leaned over and hugged her. The kind of hug you might give someone if you thought you may never see them again. “Please take care. And you can come stay with me any time.” She stood, picked up her case again. “I’m going. Think about what you’re doing, Maisie. Your family, your boyfriend, your life back home in Australia – they’re real. They’re what matters. All this stuff here is mystery and excitement and the supernatural, but it’s not your real life.”

Maisie didn’t answer. She heard the front door close behind Cathy then got up to go to the phone. Nobody was home at Sacha’s. He must be at work. She looked up bakeries in Whitby in the phone book, tried two before she got the right one.

“Hi, I’m looking for Sacha Lupus.”

“Just a second.” In the background she could hear trays clattering, someone whistling loudly, the electronic beeping of a cash register. Sacha’s work. A whole life that he lived when she wasn’t around.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Sacha, it’s Maisie. I’m so sorry to call you at work, but I’m a little desperate.”

“What’s the matter?” She could hear no concern in his voice, but he was notoriously inept on the phone. She had learned that by now.

She quickly explained what had happened the previous night, and how she was certain the protection spell had kept her safe. “Cathy’s freaked out and gone back to York, and I don’t know what to do. Should I get out of here?”

“Do you want to leave?”

“No,” Maisie said emphatically. “I know it sounds

ridiculous but I don't. I don't want to go home. I don't want to go to York and hang out with Cathy. I still don't know how Sybill died and I know that the cottage is safe."

"Then don't leave. I'm not working this weekend. Do you want me to come and stay?"

"Would you?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, if you want," he said. "I'll be there tomorrow morning. Will you be scared tonight by yourself?"

"Maybe. But I've got Tabby for company."

"I have to go, Maisie. I'm supposed to be serving customers."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'd rather talk to you than serve customers, but a man's got to earn a living."

She laughed, vain, pleased with herself.

"Maisie, you haven't tried the most obvious way to find out how Sybill died," he said quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"Dream it. That's where your Gift is evident. Dream how she died. I'd hate to think we did all that work in London for nothing."

The idea hadn't occurred to her. Or maybe it had, but she had rejected the notion before it made it into full consciousness because it terrified her. Every time she had started to dream about the wood she had woken herself up, or tried to escape from it somehow.

"It wouldn't be a dream," she said. "It would be a nightmare."

"Be brave," he said. "I'll be there tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When the bell began to toll Maisie realised that she was dreaming – its echoes reverberated in uncanny jolts and eerie whispers as if being sounded down a long, iron tunnel.

“Am I dreaming?” she said, and the echo of the words appeared to come before them, rather than after. Yes, she was dreaming. She was dreaming the dream of the wood again, the dark shadows and the panting breath and the elevated heartbeat, all with the bell tolling dimly in the background. Just as she had intended to dream it.

Before bed, she had surrounded herself with photos of her grandmother, objects that she had owned, laid her ceremonial robe over the top of the bed covers, done everything she could to make some kind of contact with this memory. And over and over, as she had fallen asleep, she had asked, “How did my grandmother die?”

“How did my grandmother die?” she asked now in

the dream. In an instant, she found herself up near the ceiling of the cottage, somewhere near the back door. An old woman – sturdy, calm, white-haired and with pale grey eyes – came in to the laundry.

“Sybill!” Maisie’s voice echoed in her ears, but her grandmother didn’t hear her. A strange dislocation of the senses took place, and suddenly she *was* the old woman, boldly opening the laundry door and striding out. She turned and locked the door firmly, then moved towards the back of the garden.

No, don’t let’s go there, Maisie thought. She was at the same time both herself and Sybill.

But Sybill kept walking. Her feet were bare and cold, even though she was otherwise fully dressed in thick woollens. Bare feet for her witchcraft. To forge the bond with the earth. Maisie didn’t know how she knew this, but she knew. At the rosebushes, she stopped and slipped her house keys under a rock. Hiding them from the nosy villagers. Then she stood and straightened as though gathering determination, and they went together into the wood.

Not that.

Maisie swung up and out of Sybill’s point of view, hovered somewhere in the upper branches of the oak tree, watching the pale figure move between trees. The wood was slightly different from how Maisie knew it. Most of the trees still had their leaves, it smelled fresh and sweet. She swooped down closer, seemed to be in the air about a metre above and behind Sybill as she walked right into the heart of the wood. Then stopped and centred herself.

It took an age, and Maisie desperately hung on to the dream. Other dreams wanted to be dreamed, and

they were eroding the edges of this one. She thought she saw an owl fly past above and suddenly it was daylight, then she thought she heard a car pull up and knew that Sacha was coming. She pushed these dreams aside, concentrated hard on watching her grandmother. Deliberately dreaming the night Sybill died.

Sybill started to speak. Maisie could make no meaning of what she was saying – as though it were another language or too far away to hear. With purpose, she felt herself swing back into the old woman’s viewpoint. The words now seemed to be springing from her own lips.

“Ic eom openu þære yflan deorcnes. Com! Ic eom þinu geornful lac.” Maisie tried to memorise it with the muscles of her mouth, desperate to remember it when she woke in the morning. *Ic eom openu þære yflan deorcnes. Com! Ic eom þinu geornful lac.*

Sybill stood, calm – no, more than calm: self-possessed, almost arrogant – and waited for her spell to work. A noise broke in the bushes behind her. She turned to look, saw a dark shape. Puzzlement. Then bewilderment. Then fear, oh, awful fear. The thing approached, its companion a metre behind it. It turned its head up and faint moonlight fell for an instant on its –

Maisie was up and out of Sybill again. She could not bear to look upon it. The old woman yelped and turned, began to run. Desperate, flailing limbs; running between branches and the two hooded beings on her trail closely. No contest. Maisie wanted to wake up. She could feel consciousness seeping in. But she had to hold on to the dream, see what happened. Moments passed but felt like hours. Sybill was growing tired. Momentarily, Maisie would be in and then out of

Sybill's viewpoint, too terrified to take part in the awful chase.

Sybill stumbled, leaned over. An open target. Maisie wanted to scream out to her, but it was a dream, a memory of something past. She couldn't change it no matter how much she wanted to.

The beings were upon her in an instant. Maisie hovered around the back of them, not wanting to see, but unable to look away. She was horrified by the violence with which they attacked the old woman. One of them seemed to have split open her back with those strange, bony claws it used to tap at windows. The other pulled her up straight, held her face in its hands.

As these things happened, Maisie had an incredible and profound sense that she had witnessed this before, that she knew what was going to happen next. Maisie saw Sybill open her eyes to look at it. An expression of pure, hellish terror came over her, and she screamed so loudly, so horribly, that it could have woken Maisie up, had she not been prepared for it. And as the two creatures moved in close, one with a suffocating hold around her chest, the other effortlessly twisting her head so her neck snapped, Maisie saw it as the awful confirmation of something she had known all along. Something she had dreamed once before.

The dark shapes receded, leaving Sybill's body in the wood. Maisie hovered nearby, nightmare fear and aching loneliness blowing cold around her, waiting for what would happen next. Time ticked on. Once again she had to fight off other dreams and wakefulness. Perhaps an hour passed before she heard movement in the trees. She gathered herself and saw Reverend Fowler and Constable Blake approaching.

“Is there a lot of blood, Tony?” the Reverend was asking, his voice a nervous squeak.

Tony approached Sybill’s body and looked around. “Quite a lot. Don’t worry, I can manage this myself.”

“I feel just sick about this,” the Reverend said.

Tony glanced over his shoulder. “You hated her. We all did. She deserved this. She knew too much.”

“Everything could have been changed forever,” the Reverend said, as though convincing himself that Tony was right.

Maisie wanted to keep dreaming, to hear the rest, but an insistent ringing noise pulled her up and into consciousness. It was morning. The phone was ringing.

She lay still, trying to recall every particular of the dream, knowing that if she got involved in a phone conversation the details would fade. It rang out. She relived the whole horrific experience in her mind: the spell her grandmother had said in the wood, the way the Wraiths had closed in on her and killed her as though they were hunting. A tear slipped slowly down her right cheek. Sybill. Dying in fear.

And so the villagers here were not blameless after all. This was by far the most disturbing element. Here she was thinking they were harmless ninnies, but they had clearly had some foreknowledge of Sybill’s death, were covering it up even now.

Unless it was just a dream. Just a product of her imagination. The phone started ringing again. She ignored it and got out of bed, pulled on some clothes and shoes and went down to the garden. One small piece of proof would tell her if the dream was accurate or not. Below the rosebushes, under a round, smooth stone, she found Sybill’s house keys – two of them, tied

on a piece of pink string. Yes, it had been real. She held the keys in her clenched fist and her eyes wandered into the wood. It was around eight o'clock but becoming darkly overcast. The wood was shadowy and foreboding. She turned her back on it and returned to the cottage, locking the door behind her. The phone was still ringing. This time she answered it.

"Maisie?" It was Cathy. "Thank god you answered. I thought something had happened to you."

"No, no, I'm fine."

"Did they come again?"

It took a moment for Maisie to understand what Cathy meant. And it was only then she realised that she had slept right through with no visitations from evil spirits. Except in her dreams. "No. No, they didn't. Must have got fed up."

"Or they were trying to chase me away."

"Cathy, if I tell you some more Anglo-Saxon, can you translate it for me?"

"Probably. It's my best subject."

Maisie repeated the sentence her grandmother had said in the dream. "*Ic eom openu bære yflan deorcnes. Com! Ic eom þinu geornful lac.*"

"Say it again?" Cathy gasped.

Maisie did so.

"Where did you get it from?"

"I dreamed last night of Sybill's death. She went out into the woods and said that. I presumed it was another spell. Why? What does it mean?"

"God, Maisie, don't go saying that when those monsters are around the house. It means, I am open to the evil darkness. Come! I am your willing sacrifice."

Maisie's heart stood still. "What?"

"I'm certain of it."

"But why would she . . .?"

"I don't know. It's madness, isn't it? Unless she didn't know what she was saying."

"But then, where did she get the words from?" Silence at the other end of the line. Moments ticked by as Maisie considered, but couldn't figure it out. "You know," she said slowly, "I bet there's some information in the third diary piece about all this."

"Why do you think that?"

"Sybill made some notes about the third piece, and about Anglo-Saxon religion. But I have no idea where to start looking." She checked her watch, thought she'd better shower and dress properly before Sacha arrived.

"Maisie, why don't you get out of Solgreve for the weekend?" Cathy said. "You need a break from all this. Do you want to come down here for a couple of days?"

"No. Sacha's coming over this morning. He's going to stay."

"Oh," said Cathy. "Well, be careful. Protect yourself."

"The whole house is under a protection spell," Maisie replied.

Cathy laughed. "I didn't mean from monsters."

At the bottle shop, at the grocery store, Maisie couldn't stop thinking it. *Who knew?* The plump, middle-aged woman who unsmilingly shoved her two bottles of wine in a paper bag – did she know how Sybill had died? Had she wanted it as much as the

Reverend and the village constable had? And how about the grey-haired octogenarian at the counter ahead of her, buying cornflakes? And how about the fifteen-year-old girl who rang up her purchases? Had all of them known? For the first time, she honestly didn't care how unfriendly the locals were towards her. She had far more reason to hate them than they did to hate her. But what could she do about it?

She headed back up the main street towards the cottage. She couldn't go to the police unless she wanted to be certified insane: *I dreamed that ghosts in brown cloaks killed my grandmother and the local Reverend knew all about it.* In fact, there was nothing she could do about it unless she found out why her grandmother had been killed. In her dream Constable Blake said that Sybill knew too much, and the Reverend said that she could have changed things forever. So Maisie had to find out what Sybill knew. She shuddered as she thought about where that knowledge had led to for Sybill. But then Maisie wouldn't be stupid enough to go stand in the wood and proclaim that she was the willing sacrifice of the evil darkness. That was completely baffling. As Cathy had suggested, Sybill simply mustn't have understood what she was saying. So why did she say it? Where did she get it from?

Maisie stopped, realising she was opposite Elsa Smith's place again. She stood for a moment, gazing at the front of the house. The old bitch was a liar. Sybill hadn't collapsed out here in the street, Elsa had never spotted her body or phoned the police. It was all make-believe to cover up the truth, the horrible reality. Maisie watched the windows for a while hoping Elsa would see her and scare herself.

But then a white van sped up the street and stopped in front of her. Sacha.

“Want a lift?” he asked.

Maisie smiled and ran around to the other side of the van to climb in. “I wasn’t expecting you this early,” she said.

“What have you got there?” he said, putting the van in gear and heading towards home.

“Wine and foodstuffs. In honour of your visit.”

“Great. How did it go last night?”

“No nasty visitors, but I did dream about Sybill.”

“Any answers?”

“All the answers,” she replied. “But a few more questions with it. I’ll tell you about it inside.”

Tabby wound around between Maisie’s legs as she made tea. Sacha waited for her in the lounge room. When she’d left him there, he’d been sagging forward, elbows on knees, distraught. The truth about Sybill’s death had affected him more than she had anticipated. “You expect old people to die,” he had said, “but you never expect them to suffer. Not like that.”

She returned to the lounge room. He was sitting up now, staring into middle distance. She handed him a mug of tea and settled opposite him.

“Thanks,” he said. He took a sip and then looked up. “I suppose now you’re getting a real sense of what you’re capable of. Your psychic ability, I mean.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Though if I go into business as a psychic, I’ll have to find a more efficient method than dreaming people’s futures.”

Maisie sipped her tea. She was using the “best friend in the world” cup, and he pointed to it.

“That’s mine,” he said.

“Yours?”

“Sybill bought it for me to use when I was over here.”

“She thought you were her best friend in the world?” Maisie said, smiling.

Sacha shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe she was just being funny.” He looked down again. “You have to find out why they did it, Maisie,” he said.

“I’m working on it,” she replied. “I’m sure there’s stuff in the third part of the diary, but I don’t know where it is.”

“I want to go up there to the church and smack that Reverend Fowler in the jaw. He lied to me. I was planting some bulbs and he came here and said, ‘Sybill is dead.’ And when I asked him how, he told me that lie.” He ran his hand through the front of his hair, leaving a few strands standing up. “I’m sorry, Maisie, I know you didn’t know Sybill as well as I did. This really hurts me.”

“I understand.” She leaned forward, reached out and smoothed down his hair. He seemed not to have noticed.

“My mother’s going to be inconsolable. I’ll have to track her down. When she hears this, she’ll be up here in a flash. You’re not alone in this, Maisie.”

“Thanks. It’s nice to know that.” She watched him watching her, let her eyes drop for a moment to that top lip of his, then back to his eyes.

Their eyes met and some kind of charge seemed to pass between them. She could see his pupils dilate, and knew hers were doing the same. Then he stood up, put his back to her, and started looking at books on the shelf above the mantelpiece.

“What are you looking for?” she asked, her voice straining for normality. In that instant, it had seemed possible. Rather than being a daydream, having Sacha had been something that could be real in her world. She felt dizzy.

“Here,” he said, pulling a book from the shelf. “You should read this.”

It was a book about the tarot. “Thanks.”

He shrugged. He seemed uncomfortable. “I think you should learn it. If you’re really serious about not going back to the orchestra, serious about the psychism.”

“Of course I’m serious.”

“Sybill read cards. She used to charge forty quid a turn. You’ll need to memorise all the meanings.” He looked around. “Where does Sybill keep her cards?”

“In the chest at the end of the bed.”

He went off in that direction, and she watched him go, admiring his long legs and feeling the demented lust spinning inside her again. She would kiss him. That was it, it was decided. A kiss wouldn’t hurt anyone, wouldn’t necessarily lead anywhere. Tonight, after dinner, after a few glasses of wine, just one kiss and then it would be out of her system. She turned back to the book and realised her hands were shaking. Leafed through a few pages without taking anything in. She mapped out the conversation in her head: *I’m really attracted to you*. No, how about, *if I wasn’t practically a married woman*. It was useless, there were no good lines left. They’d all been overused, and none of them conveyed as much meaning as that glance that had just passed between them. In a few minutes he was back.

“I think Sybill would have been happy for you to have these,” he said, handing her a deck of cards wrapped in black cloth.

“Do you think I can do this?”

“Sure. It might take time. But your Gift is growing stronger every day.”

She nodded, opened the cloth and slowly thumbed through the cards. Sacha still hadn’t sat down. He stood in front of the fire, his hands on the mantelpiece.

“Where were the last two sections of the diary?” he asked.

“One was in the floorboards in the back room. The other was in the ceiling above it.”

“I wonder . . .” he started.

“What?”

“Well, she probably found them while the place was being renovated.”

“That’s what I figured. And?”

“So we have to work out what else she’s had done since the floor and the ceiling. The last thing she put in was the dryer. Down the back in the laundry.”

Maisie considered. “And she always returned them to their original location.”

“Shall we check?”

“It can’t hurt.” She stood and followed him down to the laundry. The dryer was mounted on brackets screwed to the wall.

“Do you have a screwdriver?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It’s entirely possible, but good luck finding it.”

Sacha bent to the cupboard underneath the laundry tub and began to rummage about. Maisie had turned to look in the kitchen when he called out, “Here’s one.”

He backed out of the cupboard and stood, brandishing a screwdriver.

“Is it the right size?” she asked.

“Not quite. But we’ll manage.” He fitted the screwdriver into the first screw and got to work, swearing and bumping his knuckles every now and again. Maisie watched as, one by one, the screws came out. Sacha had her prop up the dryer as the last one was freed, and then he heaved it off the wall and balanced it on top of the washing machine. He felt along the wall. Immediately, it was apparent that one of the planks was not nailed as tightly as the others. He easily picked out the nails with his fingers and the plank came loose. He plunged his hand behind it.

“What have we here?” he said as, with a dramatic flourish, he produced a small wad of paper.

“Let me see,” she said reaching for it. Yes, it was Georgette’s writing, but this section had clearly been water damaged. The first few lines were legible, but then pages and pages were nothing more than blurred black ink: *Virgil is much improved. His colour is returning and it shall be less than a week I am sure before he is* *****

“Damn,” she said.

“What’s wrong?” Sacha was peering over her shoulder.

“It’s in very bad condition. I don’t know how much of it is readable.” She flicked forward through swollen pages. “I guess I won’t know until I start.”

“Where’s the rest of the diary?”

“Back in the lounge room. Do you want to read it?”

“Spending an afternoon reading by the fire sounds like a good idea,” he said. “Can we fix the dryer up later?”

“Sure. Come on,” she said as they walked up the hallway. “Do you want another cup of tea? A glass of wine?”

“Yes to the latter. Though I suppose lunchtime is a little early to get started.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’ll be dark in a few hours.” She handed him the iron box with the first two sections of the diary in it. “The handwriting’s a bit difficult at first but you get used to it quickly.”

She left him in the lounge room, uncorked a bottle of wine and brought it back with two glasses.

“Cheers,” he said, as she handed him a glass.

“You too.” She watched him settle in his chair and start to read, spent a few moments in anticipation about the coming evening, then forgot everything as she was lost once more in Georgette’s world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sunday, 20th April 1794

Virgil is much improved. His colour is returning and it shall be less than a week I am sure before he is *****

***** would not meet my eye. He says it requires more than physical stamina: that it requires emotional and mental stamina also, and those strengths are not yet returned to him. I can only imagine how somebody like my father would respond to such a remark, for we are nearly starving. I've eaten nothing but *****

***** today sold the rest of our plate but for the barest of necessities. That means we have now sold

virtually everything that we owned when we came here. The house is so empty and I despise looking around and feeling that I am a pauper. I suspect that Virgil feels the same way, yet he is always *****
***** ***** ***** ***** ***** ***** *****
***** ***** ***** ***** ***** *****

***** for it is not so cold now and we need no fires at night. Summer will be upon us within a fortnight and while everything blooms outside I do not feel so desperate. We do not make love any more, Diary. Virgil has lost all interest in that. But we are still lovers of the soul. There is no-one but him for me. I'm sure that some women look forward to the birth of their first child with less anxiety than I, but no other woman has Virgil for a husband. No other woman will be able to look at her babe and see the traces of Virgil's gentle dignity in its face and hands. For that I am grateful. I do still love him very much.

Virgil is out of bed every day now, and often walks along the cliff-top. I will ask him once more to return to work before the baby is born. We simply cannot manage without it. I'm sure that it is not good for me to be so thin when the child is scarce six weeks away.

Friday 30th May, 1794

From where have I learned this quiet acceptance of horror? Is this how poor people understand the world? That it is a cruel and brutal place from which they may expect nothing but sorrow?

Diary, one week ago I was made an orphan and I knew it not. For a week, I went about my business, I scrubbed and cooked and cleaned and bathed and ate and drank and held my husband's hand, and I knew not that my parents were dead.

This morning, I received a letter with Hattie's seal on it. It is the first I have had of her in a very long time. I took it into the parlour and relished the opening of it, for I anticipated some money, or some news of her imminent return to England. I am – I was so very aware of her as the only bridge between myself and my family. And yet, the letter expressed something so very different from what I had hoped. It wasn't written by Hattie at all, but by her new husband Baron Thorsten Verhaiden:

Dear Mrs Marley

It is with the deepest regret and sympathy that I must impart to you some very unwelcome news. Your Aunt Harriet has this morning received word of the death of her sister, your mother, and her husband at Lyon. As you know, your father was an idealistic man who believed in the highest principles of liberty and justice. He and your mother were harbouring some peasants who had deserted the army. These deserters were old and infirm, and unfit to fight. An informant to Robespierre discovered them, and all were soon dispatched by guillotine, your parents among them.

Harriet extends her love to you and apologises for not writing in person, but she is inconsolable. We now do not intend to return to England at any stage,

as the house on St James Square holds too many memories of your mother for Hattie's endurance. It is to be sold forthwith.

With regret, T. VERHAIDEN

My hands shook as I put the letter aside. All through the past week, my mother and father were already cold in their graves and I knew it not. Surely impossible, yet it has happened. This is how things are now in France. Even the lowest classes, who were supposedly the beneficiaries of change, now must do as Robespierre orders or face the guillotine for being enemies of the Revolution. And now all my father's property belongs to France and not to me, and nor will it ever.

I am crushed below my grief, and cannot see a path beyond it. Writing, as always, helps a little. But it seems I cannot erase a certain scene from the Eye of my Mind, a scene which I, in fact, never witnessed. The scene does not involve Papa. My father, I am sure, would have been defiant until the last moment as he died for what he believed in. I rather wish he had believed so vehemently in me, but his support of the lower classes did not extend to marrying his daughter among them.

Rather, it is my mother I see, her hair shorn close to her head, in prison garb rather than one of her fine frocks. She is forced upon the bloody block, and I see in her eyes the kind of desperate fear we know from the eyes of hunted animals. Mama was afraid. She must have been afraid, for she knew she was to die. How am I to stop seeing her terrified eyes? For I know if I could stop, my pain would begin to ease.

I have not told Virgil, and perhaps I will not for some time. I fear any kind of shock or emotional strain may retard the progress of his Recovery. So I must keep this pain inside me, accept it, allow it to disperse along my limbs and settle in the bones of my fingers.

Of course, now that my parents are dead, it means I have no escape from poverty. I can not *****

***** said he could do it if I were there. I am Horrified in anticipation of such an event, but I must agree. For if Virgil does not return to work soon, I fear that he will never return. So, in two days, I shall accompany Virgil as he fulfils Flood's request for specimens, and somehow I shall survive it.

Saturday 14th June, 1794

Daylight is such a miracle, such a welcome balm. Nothing seems so very bad in daylight. Virgil has gone walking. I offered to join him but he preferred some time alone and so I sit here, instead, to recount last night's dreadful details.

Once I had agreed to accompany Virgil about his work, he cheered immensely and said he was sure he could manage with me there. The burden of returning to his employment seemed vastly lifted and in the afternoon I saw him pick up his crystal canister of laudanum, and then very deliberately place it back beside the bed, as though to show me he was making an effort to stay in the real world.

Night fell around nine – he can only work in the

darker hours – and he packed up a blanket for me and asked me once more if I was certain I wanted to come.

“Of course I am certain. If coming with you eases your burden, of course I shall come.”

“But, Gette,” here his voice dropped to a whisper, “you must promise me you will not look upon the product of my labour.”

“I shall not. I shall sit quietly under a tree and listen to the sea.”

He reached out and touched my great belly, his long fingers twitching nervously. “I must be a madman forcing you to accompany me.”

“You are not a madman. You have been very ill and it’s merely a matter of prudence that you have somebody nearby. It will be no strain upon myself or upon my body to wait for you.”

So we left the house. It was a fresh, clear night, and soft moonlight lit our way to the abbey.

“I must see the Doctor, first,” Virgil said, hesitating near the entrance.

“Are you well enough?” I asked.

“Yes. Yes, I am well enough.” He was clearly distracted. “Wait exactly here. I shall not be more than a few moments.”

“As you wish.” I moved into the shelter of the corner of the abbey. It was a mild night, but I worry about the infant, especially as I seem to have so little fat upon me to keep the poor child warm. Virgil disappeared through the hatch and into the dark stairs. Only a few minutes passed before he returned with a lantern. He took my hand and led me around to the other side of the abbey. There we found a two-wheeled cart.

“The tools of my trade,” he said dourly, picking up the cart and pulling it behind us. In it were a mattock, a spade, rope and hooks, and some rolls of canvas. Upon viewing these tools I began to feel fully the enormity of our activity. It hardly seemed possible that such an atrocity as this should be so important a part of our lives. We eat only on condition that Virgil pulls bodies from their graves. It is as simple and as horrifying as that.

Still, we must eat. And the folk disinterred are already dead and their souls long since gone to whichever hereafter they have earned.

“How do you know which . . .?” I could not voice the entire question.

“Flood instructs me. If I am lucky it is very fresh or very old.”

“Why?”

He mumbled something I couldn’t quite understand. Perhaps he said, “They are cleaner.” But perhaps, too, I did not want to know all the details, so I did not ask him to repeat himself.

We walked through the graveyard. Away from the shelter of the abbey, the sea breeze was fresh. The warmer summer weather had coaxed an awful stench from the poor’s hole, the open pit where those who could not afford a proper burial were cast. The fresh breeze carried the smell away from us a little, but I was glad when it seemed we were moving no closer to that side of the graveyard. We approached a certain grave – the ground was not yet overgrown with grass and so I deduced it must be quite fresh – and Virgil dropped the cart and reached for the blanket.

“Here, Gette, stay warm.”

I wrapped the blanket around my shoulders and leaned nearer to the gravestone, trying to read the name engraved upon it.

“No!” Virgil exclaimed, stepping in front of me to block my view. “Do not seek to know who this is, Gette. Identity will work upon your conscience.” He took my hand and led me ten or twelve paces away from the grave, behind the shelter of a large tree. “I can give you a canvas sheet to sit upon if the grass is wet,” he said.

I eased myself to the ground, tested the grass with my fingers. “It is quite dry.”

“Turn the other way, Gette. Do not watch.”

I did as he said, turning my back to the grave and watching instead over the expanse of the cemetery, and out to sea. He knelt in front of me, touched my cheek with his left hand. “I am so sorry, my love.”

“I will be perfectly safe and happy sitting here,” I said, though I knew it was not necessarily true.

“I am sorry for more than this evening,” he added quietly. “This is not the life I wanted for you.”

“Virgil, as long as we are together, nothing else is terribly serious.” I thought about my parents – it has been two weeks and still I have not told him – and I felt the awful tug in my heart, but said nothing.

He kissed me gently on the cheek and then went to his work.

I moved so that my back leaned against the rough bark of the tree trunk, then sat gazing over the shadows of headstones and out to sea for a long time. Behind me, I could hear the sounds of Virgil’s labour – the mattock to break up the soil, the spade to remove it. Perhaps a few hours passed, and perhaps I drowsed

a little. But after a time I felt restless, curious, and I shifted my angle so that I could see from a distance what Virgil was doing.

His work was illuminated by the lantern, which he had perched on top of the headstone. Around the grave he had laid the canvas sheets to catch the soil, which he threw from heaped spades. Virgil was only visible from his waist up, as he stood in the grave digging vigorously. He had stripped off his shirt, and it hung carelessly over the edge of the cart. I watched the muscles in his arms and back working, could see the gleam of sweat upon his skin and the dirt that stuck to him in sticky streaks. How unfair that he, of all people, should be employed in such a manner. Virgil is formed for finer things – for clean, warm places, for books and ink and quiet libraries. For a moment, watching him, it seemed so entirely out of possibility that he should have ended in such a task, that I almost laughed out loud. But Fate takes liberties with us in small steps: to go from writing poetry to unearthing graves happens quite easily by way of poverty, addiction, approaching parenthood. Circumstance and Opportunity are all that are required, and then any man can find himself a million miles from his heart's desire, though it seems he walked but a few feet to get there.

I turned back to the sea and tried not to think about my parents. But Virgil's task kept pulling my reflections back to that very topic. I did not know where they were buried, or even if they were buried. Such atrocities are daily committed in France, so it would not surprise me to learn they had received no honours for the passage of their souls at all. Perhaps one day I might return to France and try to find them, and I shall plant roses upon

their graves. It cheers me a little to think of that, to imagine beautiful flowers springing from their bones. And this I was considering when Virgil appeared next to me, streaked with dirt.

“Gette, you are not too tired, are you?”

“No, Virgil. I slept an hour or two I think. Are you nearly finished?”

“I have dug down to the coffin. Do you know they favour shallower burials in Solgreve than anywhere in England?”

“Surely it’s not because of Doctor Flood?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t imagine so. I’d hate to believe he had so wide an influence.” He looked down at his filthy hands. “I must now crack open the coffin and remove the occupant. There may be a ... bad smell. Perhaps you would like to walk a little further out near the cliffs for a half hour or so.”

How awful, Diary. What a dreadful circumstance to find oneself in, so openly confronted by the progress of the flesh. And poor Virgil having to work amongst it after being so ill! I allowed him to help me to my feet and, with the blanket around my shoulders like a shawl, I walked through the cemetery towards the cliff. I found a soft patch of grass beyond the last row of gravestones, and sat there with my back to Virgil. Without the shelter from the tree I felt the breeze coax my skin into gooseflesh. I did not mind, for it seems the sea is such a cleansing force, liberated and ever-moving, unlike the sickly cloying air of decay, which clings and settles.

I lay on my back to look at the stars, my hands over my belly. With a turn of my head to the right I could see the sea, with a turn to the left I could watch Virgil. I

switched between them. The sea did the same thing it always did, advanced and retreated restfully. Virgil was involved in quite a different enterprise. He dropped a hook on a rope into the grave, braced it around the headstone and jerked it a few times. Stopped to rest. Did the same again. When the first shadow of the body emerged from the pit I turned away. When I next looked back he was folding the shroud and dropping it into the grave. The body was wrapped in a bag at the foot of the pit. He picked up the edges of the canvas sheets and tipped soil back on to the coffin. I watched him for a few minutes as he fetched his spade and began to work in earnest, refilling the grave.

It was then that something dark moved on the edge of my vision. I leaned my head back and peered into the gloom but saw nothing. I felt strangely disturbed, so I struggled to sit and searched the darkness again. My eyes were drawn to the tree where I had rested earlier. I had the distinct impression that something was slightly out of place, but I did not know why. I watched carefully, but could see nothing that could confirm my suspicion.

Once more I turned to Virgil, and it was only when my eyes left the area that something moved there. I gasped as I saw a figure, dressed in a dark cloak, forsake the shadows in which it was hidden and move into the pale moonlight.

“Virgil!” I called.

My husband turned to me and the figure disappeared back into darkness. I stood with some difficulty and moved towards Virgil. He saw me and dropped his spade, came to meet me between gravestones.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I saw someone near the tree,” I said, pointing.

“Gette, there is nobody out here but us.” Even as he said this, he began to look around nervously, his dark eyes round with fear. It was then that I remembered the encounter he spoke of the night before he became very ill. How he had seen a cloaked figure who moved unnaturally through the graveyard, which Virgil had believed to be the spectre of one of the bodies he had pulled from its grave.

“Oh!” I said feigning relief. “Virgil, look. It was merely the shadow of that branch. See how it shifts as the wind moves it.” I pointed to a low branch on the tree. It did, indeed, cast a shifting shadow on the ground, but nothing like the figure I had just seen.

Virgil smiled fondly at me. “Gette, I should never have brought you out here. Graveyards at night always excite the darker criminals of the imagination.”

“Perhaps I shall sit close by while you finish your task,” I said. “But not under the tree. I’m afraid I’ve frightened myself too much for that.”

“I am only ten minutes away from finishing. You may stand near me as long as you promise not to peer too curiously at the grey canvas bag.”

“I shall stand with my back to you. Only let me stand with you.”

Indeed it was only a matter of minutes before he was finished. He put the body doubled over in the cart and we made our way back to the abbey. Virgil left the cart where he had found it and, with the body over his shoulder, approached the entrance to Flood’s rooms.

“I shall wait here,” I said.

“No. Come and wait inside. Flood insists that I bathe before I leave. I may be twenty minutes or more.”

“I don’t want to go down those stairs in the dark when I am so large with the child.” I could barely keep my eyes on Virgil’s face. Beneath the canvas, I believed I could make out the corner of an elbow, the curve of a thigh. Curiosity kept tempting my gaze to slip.

“Then sit upon the top stair. I shall hear you if you call me.”

Virgil descended into the darkness with his awful load and I sat on the top step, from the waist up above the ground, from the waist down below. Not that I have any waist to speak of at the moment really. Now that the task was over, now that Virgil had returned successfully to work, I allowed myself to feel a little more positive. Only the thought of the figure I had seen near the tree troubled me, and still does. Was it a man? If so, where had it disappeared to when I had called out to Virgil? Was it a ghost? If so, could it cause any harm to my husband other than frightening him back into a long illness?

But I must remember that it was dark, that I had been dozing on and off, that the location and the task we were about might have suggested such an imagined spectre to me. I simply should not believe otherwise.

One more thing happened last night on our way home, Virgil clean and in freshly laundered clothes (Flood, apparently, is quite obsessive about cleanliness). We walked up the path to our cottage and Virgil said this to me: “Gette, I want to tell you something, but you must promise me you will not think me raving or sick.”

I was surprised and a little afraid. “I will try to think the best of you always.”

“Because I am perfectly sober – and will continue

in that manner – and yet I learned something tonight which seems rather to belong to the twilight world I inhabit when I am ill or dazed.”

“What is it?”

“Doctor Flood is over three hundred years old.”

“That cannot be.”

“And yet it is so.”

I thought about Flood, about the old skin, the unnaturally limber joints. And it did indeed seem possible. “How do you know?”

“He told me.”

“Perhaps he lied.”

“He told me how Cornelius Agrippa himself gave him the ruby ring he wears on his right hand. I said, ‘That is not possible. Agrippa died in fifteen thirty-five.’ He replied, ‘And yet, he and I were born in the same year. Am I not rather more of a magician than he ever was?’”

“Virgil, it’s a lie. No man lives for such a long time.”

“What motive does Flood have to lie to me?”

“His own amusement. Virgil, do not think upon it.”

He fell silent. We were now at the entrance to our cottage. Dawn was scarce an hour away. Already streaks of daylight glimmered near the horizon. Virgil opened the door and I went in ahead of him. We prepared ourselves for bed and soon lay in each other’s arms, our faded drapes drawn against the coming sunlight. I was very nearly asleep when Virgil said, “Do you believe in redemption?”

“I do not know, Virgil.”

“Do you believe that God can forgive me?”

“A God who would not forgive you would not be good company for eternity.”

He turned on his side. “I have tried to believe in nothing, but I find myself always drawn back to the spirit.” He tapped his chest. “I believe it is in here.” He touched my own chest. “And in here.”

When framed in such a way, I believed it too. “Perhaps you are right, Virgil.”

“I hope that my spirit is worth saving,” he said.

“I know it would be. It is a beautiful spirit.”

“But a spirit can be eroded. Perhaps I need divine help.”

“Then call upon a guardian angel before you go to work.”

“Perhaps I shall,” he said yawning, settling once again beneath the covers. “Disbelief is a young man’s toy, whose power cannot last long when love and desire form his mind.”

“Sleep well, Virgil,” I said. And, for the first time in over a year, I prayed. It suddenly seemed like the right thing to do –

Virgil just returned and I can hear him now, whistling a melancholy tune in the front garden. All smiles now, Diary. I can’t let him see me worrying. It seems that Flood requires him to work again tonight, and the next night, and the next, and so forth. He has been without specimens for too long. I shall be surprised to find there are still bodies enough left in Solgreve cemetery, for all that it is the most enormous cemetery I have ever seen. I care not. We shall have money for the child, that is all it signifies.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sunday, 13th July 1794

Another long silence from me, not that anyone other than myself is taking note. This time I have a joyous excuse – yes, my little boy Henri, now just over a week old and my one, true blessing in this awful life.

I had heard such horrid tales about Childbirth, but Henri, perhaps sensing I was not equipped to deal with such trauma, appeared in an easy and straightforward manner only two hours after my first birth pang. Though the midwife did not greatly approve, Virgil was with me to welcome his son into this world, and feels such a connection with the tiny thing that I could almost grow jealous, were I not so tired all the time.

No, it was rather the emotional pain than the physical pain for which I was unprepared. I could not have imagined the sea of feeling into which I have been plunged, where just the clutch of his little hand is enough to make me sob, just the texture of his milky

skin causes a great weight of Fear to press upon my chest. I give him up to Virgil often, for I feel I have been flayed, and all my most delicate tissue is exposed to the stings and barbs of the world. Handing Henri over to my husband allows me to put my skin back on for a few moments, though my empty arms crave him while he is apart from me.

In fact, I sometimes feel a strange resentment towards the little creature, simply because I now have so much to lose. I know this must all sound as though I find him unpleasant, and not at all a joy. But this truth is born of love, and it *is* the truth.

I named him after my father. Perhaps that was a strange thing to do. I still have not told Virgil about my parents' death, and the greater the distance of time between the event and the present, the greater my reluctance to tell him. Now I risk angering Virgil for keeping it a secret so long, or causing him to feel that I have no faith in his fortitude (I do not, I confess, have any such faith). So this is how I have dealt with it. And had it been a little girl, she would have been called Anne after my mother. Their names are all I have left of my parents now.

But of course, it was not a girl, and I knew it would not be, for Flood predicted it. Flood, who I am to thank for returning us to a decent kind of life, for now we have food in our bellies, and coal and real wax candles and wine. I have bought a new dress – nothing extravagant, you understand – because my body has changed so much in the past months. I know some women try their old clothes after having a child and find them too small. Mine are rather all too large. Because of my huge belly it

was hard to see how thin I had grown, but now it is quite evident that I am gaunt and bony. I shall endeavour to fatten up, though it is too late for poor Henri – my breast milk simply does not flow sufficiently to keep him fed. We must buy goat’s milk from the village every morning instead.

I have not seen Virgil touch his laudanum for over a month, though he protested loudly when I offered to dispose of it. “Who knows when we may need it,” he argued, “for it has medicinal properties.” I suppose I must trust him. I have, however, memorised to which particular point of the bottle the laudanum is filled. I check daily, and it has not changed. For that, I am grateful. I am sure that as soon as Henri is a little older, we shall be able to leave Solgreve behind and return to a good – though still simple – life elsewhere. I shall not allow my son to have a grave-robber for a father.

Friday, 1st August 1794

Today Henri is four weeks old. He is sleeping at the moment, in an old cradle which Virgil brought back from the village and fixed and painted. Virgil sits beside him, gazing upon him as lovingly as any angel ever gazed upon a poor sinner here on earth. I often see him in such a posture, and it warms

***** **wish we could afford a proper physician. But Mr Edghill, the surgeon, will have to do for now. He says that Henri is not robust as a child his age should

be, but attributes that solely to my not eating enough during pregnancy. It merely means that he may be a little prone to illnesses until he is more grown, but Mr Edghill assured me it would have no lasting ill-effects. He is such a dear thing, my Henri, with his tiny fingers and his perfect nose. I know it is far too early to tell, but I think he will resemble my family rather than Virgil's.

Virgil has worked every night this week. He says that Flood talks about coming very close to a kind of breakthrough, and his need for specimens is overwhelming. I asked Virgil where Flood stores all these bodies.

“What do you mean, Gette?”

“He has only limited space in his chambers.”

“He disposes of them in the poor's hole. Or rather, he pays someone to do so.”

I suddenly had an idea. “Could you not do that job? Surely it would be less disturbing.”

“Oh, far *more* disturbing, Gette.”

“For what reason?”

“Sometimes they are ... unrecognisable when he has finished experimenting with them.”

“And so who fulfils that task?”

“I believe it is the Reverend.”

The Reverend! What kind of a man of the cloth would perform such a task? The sooner we are out of this village, the better. Henri began grizzling at this point and so I had no opportunity to ask further questions. Indeed, having to fulfil the role of a mother – softness and sweet love – means I necessarily cannot worry myself with Virgil's affairs. My son deserves for me to *****

***** was sitting in his customary position beside Henri's cradle, but I could not help noticing that he seemed rather less contented than he usually is about such an occupation. Virgil is so transparent to me, and always has been. Perhaps this is why I fell in love with him. He has scarcely entertained a thought than it immediately appears on his countenance. And this morning, the way he gazed upon Henri was too melancholy, as though the love he felt were causing him despair rather than joy.

I put down my darning and went to Virgil's side, rested my hand on his shoulder. "Are you troubled, my love?" I asked.

"No," he answered quickly, forcing a smile.

I knew he was in turmoil, and the fact that he lied about it immediately alerted me to its cause. This, Diary, was guilt. I had not checked the level of the laudanum in weeks, for it had not moved and Virgil seemed so very capable and mature. As soon as I could do so without arousing suspicion, I went to the bedroom. On Virgil's side of the bed, tucked away, almost behind a small table, I found his Decanter. It was full to the brim, which meant that he had drunk the remains and refilled it – I could never even guess how many times. I could not believe that I hadn't noticed. I have been tired. I have been involved in being a mother which means I am sometimes awake half the night and asleep at odd hours during the day. He had taken advantage of my inattention to renew his habit.

No, I should not say “taken advantage” for it implies that Virgil deliberately sets out to cause me pain. He does not. He simply can do no better for he is weak: weaker than I, because I am a mother and cannot afford the luxury of weakness. It seems that much is made of the idea that men are stronger than women. Perhaps this may be so if only physical ability is considered, but beyond that there is little evidence to support the conclusion.

Thursday, 4th September 1794

An unexpected letter arrived this morning. Virgil took delivery of it at the front door. I heard him call out, “Gette, that cur Edward Snowe has written!” I was feeding Henri at the time so I did not spend a second thought upon it, until a few moments later when Virgil entered the bedroom and held the letter out to me, unopened.

“Yes, Virgil, I heard you. Edward has written.”

Virgil’s hand shook, a tiny movement. “It is addressed only to you.”

I reached for the letter, apprehensive. What could Edward possibly want to say only to me? Now Virgil watched me closely. I thought about how Edward had kissed me, and how I had been so vain as to allow him express his desire. Guilt rolled into my stomach. For if Edward made mention of those things, how was I to keep it from Virgil? If I hid the letter, he would be suspicious and mistrustful. Yet if I showed him the letter he would know.

Virgil took Henri from me, and I quickly opened and scanned the letter.

Bootham, 3rd September

Dear Georgette,

I have now set up practice in York and I am living here permanently. I know that Virgil will not want to see me again, but I wrote this short note to inform you of my new address, and to offer you my services if ever you need them. I should be delighted to see you again, and if matters become unbearable for you up in Solgreve, you are most welcome to contact me.

Your friend, EDWARD SNOWE

“He has moved to York,” I said, dropping the letter on the bed with feigned carelessness, yet hoping that Virgil would not pick it up. Of course, he did pick it up.

“May I read it?”

“Certainly.”

He did so, then returned his attention to me. “What does he mean ‘if matters become unbearable?’”

“I expect he means if we need any financial assistance.”

“He means if *I* become unbearable, doesn’t he?”

“Virgil, of course not.”

“Why would he write to you in this manner? Have you shared our secrets with him?”

“Virgil, he was here when you were ill. He was once your best friend. He knows our situation.”

“But he offers no assistance to me.”

“You have made it clear you are no longer interested in his assistance.”

Henri grew tired of our strained conversation and

began to cry. Virgil rocked him absently. "It seems curious to me that he should write such a letter to you."

"Perhaps it is curious, but you appear to be punishing the recipient of the letter rather than the sender," I said sulkily. For I knew that I had encouraged Edward's intimacy by not discouraging it earlier.

Virgil turned and went to the window, the whole time rocking Henri who had quietened down to a snuffle. I watched his back. He appeared tense, even angry.

"What is it, Virgil?" I asked. "Why are you so upset?"

He turned. "You looked anxious when the letter arrived."

"I . . . thought it might be bad news."

"And once, when I was sick, I thought I saw Edward about to kiss you."

"That's nonsense."

He came forward, all pleading eyes. "Please swear, Georgette, that you've never felt more than is appropriate for Edward Snowe."

"I swear."

He held out Henri to me. The little creature came happily to my arms. "We shall keep no secrets in our house," he said.

But we keep the very worst secrets in our house. I am orphaned and I have not told him. He is once again drinking laudanum and he has not told me. It makes me afraid that a sickness may begin to eat away at our love if we cannot speak to each other more freely.

The trouble is that only Virgil will be hurt by bringing these matters into the open. He will be offended that I could not trust him with my grief.

He will be anguished to have me witness to his opium shame. So I must go about my life, raising my child and ignoring the dark horror which lurks below the surface.

Wednesday, 10th September 1794

I have been ill these last four days and feel only a little better today. I'm sitting up in bed and Henri is sleeping peacefully next to me. An early autumn breeze is in the trees outside, and the sun still shines and the sky is still blue. It is all such a welcome contrast to the awful dreams my illness brought trailing with it; dreams in which I saw my mother again and again go to the guillotine. I had not even the comfort upon waking of knowing the dream was not real. For at some point my mother really did put her white neck upon the block, and the most unimaginably cruel violence was done to her. This is what happens to a wound not tended to; it festers and grows worse. I should share my loss with Virgil, but he has so much else to concern him. He has been an Angel the last few days, taking care of everything so that I may recover. I had a fever – not nearly as severe as the one which gripped Virgil earlier in the year, but enough to warrant a visit from Mr Edghill. Still, that is all behind me now. One must become sick every so often so that one appreciates more the times of good health.

On Monday night, when my fever was at its height, Virgil sat between my bed and Henri's cradle, watching vigilantly over both of us. I was barely aware of my surroundings, drifting in and out of a fevered sleep, but at one point I became aware that Virgil was speaking in a low voice to Henri. I opened

my eyes a crack. He had just one candle burning and was whispering so he wouldn't disturb me. He was telling Henri a story.

"Once there was a little boy named Henri," he said, "who was the most beautiful little boy in the land. A prince, lost on his way to Heaven. His Mama was a beautiful queen, but his Papa was but a poor man. Yes, Henri's Papa was wicked. He didn't want to go to work to buy food and clothes for his family, but still he went to work because he needed his magical drink ..."

At this point, Virgil's head nodded forward and came to rest on the corner of the cradle. I could not see his face, but I suspected he was crying. I was too weak to utter any words of comfort.

"Ah, Henri," he said, "if I did not love you so much I should take myself forever from your sight. But I am selfish." He lifted his head again and quietly muttered. "Everything is wrong. Everything ... is wrong."

He composed himself, then resumed his story. "But one day, an angel will come to Henri's Papa, and the angel will forgive him. And because the angel can make fire, he will burn Papa's sins and he will not be such a wicked man any more, though the fire may cripple or blind him. Because Papa has tried and failed to be a good man. So now his fate is in the hands of the angels."

Virgil leaned over and kissed Henri's sleeping face, then turned to me. He saw that I was awake.

"Gette? I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

I shook my head. My skin felt clammy and yet I was very cold. "I heard what you said. I know that you have been at your laudanum again."

“I cannot stop myself, Gette. It is the only thing that makes my work bearable.”

“Then do not stop, my love. Only, can you not try to find another occupation?”

He curled up next to me on top of the covers, his head resting on my chest. I felt such tenderness towards him, like I had not felt since the child was born and stole my heart. He did not answer.

“Virgil?” I asked.

“Do not concern yourself while you are sick.”

“Surely it would be better to be a law clerk than a resurrectionist?”

“Gette, I am in too far.”

“I do not understand.”

“He has me, Gette. For now I know some of his secrets, and now I have kept them for long enough to make me complicit.”

“You will have to explain yourself better, Virgil,” I said, “for you are making little sense.”

He began to sob. I touched his hair and closed my eyes. He was right, I was too ill to deal with this. My mind tried to form the question, “What secrets does Flood have?”, but my body refused to comply. I sank back into sleep. When I awoke, Virgil sat on the end of my bed, facing neither me nor Henri, just staring into the emptiness before him.

Oh, he is an unhappy man. Such a burden of pain and of guilt and of fear rests upon him. I struggled weakly to sit up but could not. He turned his face to me and I said simply, “Virgil, I forgive you.”

At this he drooped his head and sighed, muttered something about angels and redemption, then stood and left the room. We have not spoken

of it since, and to be truthful I am too weak at this point to do so. But what a weight is on my heart for my dear husband.

Thursday, 11th September 1794

This morning I was feeling so much better that I ate the sizeable breakfast which Virgil had prepared: cheese, bread, cold turkey and hot tea. My favourite luxury now we have money once again is tea made on fresh leaves. At our most desperate, we stewed the same leaves over and over again, until our tea tasted like plain water.

The conversation I had with Virgil on Monday night seemed like a febrile dream, remembered only indistinctly. Virgil was quite contented when he brought me breakfast, though it was the glazed contentment which I alone cannot excite in him. He sat with me while I ate, making jokes about how fat I am getting (it's true that flesh is returning to my bones, but it will be many months before I can happily call myself plump once more), and playing with Henri's little fingers. My son is still tiny, but now he smiles at us and seems to know who we both are.

After Virgil had cleared away my breakfast, he returned to see if I needed anything else. I replied that I did not, and he adopted a pained expression.

“What is wrong? Are you not pleased that I am well again?”

“Yes, yes. It's just that I promised to drop in on Flood the instant you were better. He has work for me.”

It seemed no better time would present itself for us to discuss what we had started to discuss on Monday night, so I said, “Virgil, sit down, for we must resolve some things.”

He sat, looking guilty.

“Can we return to London and try to find you work which is more pleasant?”

“There are many things standing in the way of that.”

“What things?”

He cleared his throat and linked and unlinked his long fingers. “I cannot return to London for I left boasting that I would return a wealthy poet. That has not happened.”

I sighed with relief. “Is that your only concern? The least of your worries should be what others think of you. Why, let them say what they like. Imagine, you could work in a law firm like your father, and perhaps with a steady income and a comfortable life, your ability to write might return to you.” And I also hoped he might be able to disavow his addiction.

He looked down at his fingers and did not answer for a long time.

“Is there something else?” I prompted him gently.

Still no answer.

“You hinted the other night that Flood has some kind of hold over you.”

“I was talking nonsense. I was tired.”

“Virgil, please don’t lie to me. What is it? Perhaps it is just a silly matter which will be of no consequence once we are safely in London.”

He took his time in responding, but finally he said, “It is not that Flood has a hold over me. It’s that I suspect something bad is happening, and I fear greatly that I am contributing to it.”

“Can you explain to me?”

“No, for it is a poisonous knowledge. Once you know, you will forever wish not to know.”

Curse Doctor Aaron Flood. Dread and secrets accrete around him until I cannot think about him without fear in my heart. Never mind that the sun was shining outside, and that I could hear children calling to each other in the street, I was as frightened as any superstitious fool upon the witching hour.

“What is it you know?” I asked slowly.

He shook his head and stood. “I may be wrong. I may have misheard him, misread something. For who on this earth can fully understand the universe’s workings? The soul’s progress?”

“Then if you are not certain that you are trapped in such an awful position, you can consider moving away from here.”

“I shall consider it.”

I knew he was not in earnest, so I said, “Please, Virgil.”

“I said I shall consider it.” He left.

Henri sleeps, dear child. He knows nothing, and for that I am grateful. He is a holy innocent, with none of this “poisonous knowledge” to disrupt his peaceful dreams. Once, I too was as innocent, but that time is far, far behind me. *****

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

***** too cold to leave the house. And the rain has not ceased in a week. His work must be very dirty indeed. I should fear for his physical health if I weren't already so concerned for the health of his mind. It seems a great guilt is eating at him and causing him to dream and think obsessively about the fate of his Eternal Soul. And this is my Virgil, who proudly declared himself an atheist on our first meeting! I can scarce believe it.

Sunday, 14th December 1794

Well, Virgil has finally written something, though it is hardly a cause for celebration as it is more of the same obsessive fascination with redemption. In fact, he hid it from me, which makes me wonder if he has other poems around the house which I have not seen. It seems he thinks of little else but some awesome, imaginary burden of Guilt these days. With winter setting in, and my husband growing more and more unpredictable, I

sometimes feel as though I am trapped. All through spring I thought it might be possible to get away to London, but now it is becoming clear that we are in Solgreve for some time to come yet. Henri is still so small but he lives and eats well enough, so it should not matter where we are. Only I am so sick of this place and its secrets and its graveyard and its relentless wind. I wish to look out of my window and see civilisation, rational parks and ordered hedgerows.

We are in debt with the tailor. Virgil needed a new overcoat for his old one was quite threadbare, and I could not send him out to work in it. He would catch a chill and that would be the end of him. So yesterday I ordered a new one, and while I was there I ordered some warm clothes for Henri. We are also in debt to the glass man, for the last of our old crockery was dirty and chipped beyond recognition. It is not a comfortable feeling to be in debt, and nor would we have to be if Virgil took his payment all in money and not mostly in laudanum. What a misery it is to be so in love with a man whose actions are so very detrimental to my happiness.

I should not write such things down, I know, but who will ever see this Diary? Nobody. And I shall not tremble before the judgement of Nobody.

Monday, 15th December 1794

Last night I was sleeping soundly when I was awoken by the touch of an icy hand on my cheek. My eyes flew open and I shrieked when I saw a dark shape in front of me. It was only my husband, but what a sight he was! He held a single, guttering candle in his right hand, and with that dim illumination I could see that

he was filthy – clothes in disarray and splattered with mud. Even his face was streaked with dirt.

“Virgil,” I said sleepily, “why did you not bathe before returning home?”

“I have left in the middle of a dig,” he whispered. “I shall never go back and I don’t ever wish to see Doctor Flood again.”

I sat up, casting a wary eye over to Henri’s cradle to make sure he still slept soundly. “What do you mean? What has happened?” My first thought, I am ashamed to admit, was for the tailor’s bill.

“I know things ... I cannot go on ...” He ran a muddy hand through his hair and choked on a sob.

“Come, let us get you clean,” I said, throwing back the covers. I pulled him to his feet and took him to the parlour where I stoked the fire and bade him strip off and wait for me. Heating water would take time, and we didn’t have enough in the house for him to bathe entirely anyway. So I prepared some cold water and soap in a large bowl and grabbed some rags (which had been our clothes until two or three months ago). When I returned, he had removed his clothes and they lay on the hearth in a pile. He sat close by and his naked skin glowed in the firelight, and I felt a pull in my heart. I know not why. Perhaps because I still find him beautiful, though we have long ago ceased expressing our desire for one another. Perhaps because he seems thin and frail without clothes. Or perhaps it was because he was so obedient, waiting to be bathed like a child. I approached with my preparations and knelt in front of him.

“The water may be cold,” I warned.

He nodded. There was no question that he would take the soap and rags from me and manage this task

himself. He allowed me to dip the rag, rub some soap on it, squeeze it gently and apply it to his skin. I started with his hair, and then his face. By the time I was at his shoulders, he had decided to tell me what had happened.

“Flood was giving me my directions for the evening when another caller knocked at his chamber door. He left me by his bookshelf and went to the door and was some time involved in speaking with the caller. A book lay closed on the bench in front of me. I surreptitiously opened it and flicked through some pages, until I came to one which was headed in his own hand ‘soul magic.’ He has mentioned this term to me before. It is to do with why he is so old, and why he conducts his experiments.”

I carefully washed one arm, and then the other, and he was silent, thoughtful.

“You read it, Virgil? What did it say?”

“A week of torture would not persuade me to pass that information on to you,” he said, then continued in a whisper, “for if it is true, then it is enough to drive a sane man mad with guilt.”

Though his words frightened me, I chose to be rational. “Virgil, please, you must learn to approach things more calmly. Flood may very well write these things for his own amusement. They may mean nothing.”

“You won’t understand because you are not me,” he muttered. “You have not done the things I have done, nor seen the things I have seen.”

I did not answer, moving behind him instead and rubbing his muddy neck.

“Flood turned from the door and saw me reading. I immediately flipped the book closed, but I know he

saw me. He realised then, that I know what he does. But he said nothing, he merely gave me the instructions for tonight's disinterment and sent me on my way. His lack of reaction was probably more frightening to me than if he had lost his temper.

"I went to the graveyard and began my digging. The wind was icy and my hands felt numb even in my gloves. After an hour or so, though, the activity had warmed me, and I stripped off my coat to work with more ease. I hung it over the gravestone and turned to pick up my spade again when I noticed a movement in the distance. Do you remember, Georgette, early in the year before I grew sick, that I said I had seen something sinister in the graveyard?"

"Yes," I said, crouching once more in front of him. I, too, had seen something in the graveyard, but I would not tell him and add to his anxiety. His legs and feet were clean because they had been covered, but I bathed them anyway, keeping my eyes down.

"I know what it was now. Flood has explained, for he is the master of the Wraiths. I tried to go back to my work, but I could see a shape advancing on me from the left, and one from the right. They were certainly these phantoms of Flood's. I grew frightened, for they are accompanied by the most appalling breathing sound – though it is not really breathing for these beings are not living.

"For a little while I kept working. I reasoned Flood may have asked them to watch me, concerned that what I had read would send me running to the authorities. He bestows his trust poorly, does Flood, then regrets it deeply. This is why he has the Wraiths to attend upon him. I wished to prove that I deserved his trust and thus

kept working for a time. But the fear I felt the closer they advanced, gliding unnaturally in the misty air, unmanned me. I started to wonder if Flood meant for them to kill me, because I knew his secrets. Panic seized me. I stood and dropped my spade, climbed out of the grave trying to keep an eye on each of the creatures. Watching them so closely that I did not realise the proximity of the third. I took two steps back, and felt against my bare back the brush of rough cloth and an icy finger of bone. I turned, and there was the creature. It dropped its head before I could see properly what face gazed upon me from under the hood, but Gette, I don't believe there was a face."

I gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Below that hood, before darkness fell upon it, I saw a discord of features and voids to defy the imagination. And I know I never want to see that countenance in any sharper focus. I screamed, of course. I backed off, grabbed my coat and ran." He shivered in spite of the fire. "There is a half-dug grave in the middle of the cemetery, but I shall not return to it."

I picked up his clothes and squashed them into the bowl, took them to the kitchen. Fetched a blanket and placed it around his shoulders. Working, working, because it was easier than thinking. Virgil caught my hand. "Gette," he said, "do you think me mad?"

"You will not return to work?"

He shook his head. "I am done with it."

"Then we shall pack up our things, and we shall run away to London, and I do not care how cold it is, nor do I care if you are mad or not."

"We have debts in the village."

"We'll leave at night, when nobody can see us. I care nothing for our debts."

“Then it shall be so,” he said. “Tomorrow night.”

And that is tonight. And while I really should not spend the time sitting here and recounting it all – for I should be packing our things – I want to relate this tale for I think I shall leave this Diary behind. It is nothing but a chronicle of loss and sadness, and all shall soon be different. Thank God for those phantoms in the cemetery, thank God for Virgil’s delusions, thank God for sinister Dr Flood with his soul magic, whatever that is. For they have managed to convince Virgil to leave this cursed village at last!

Tuesday, 16th December 1794

It aches in my teeth that we are still here, but somehow it is unsurprising. It is as though the Old Gods have arisen on Mt Olympus and are plotting our destiny against our intentions. But on consideration, I rather think it’s an old Man in the abbey who is plotting our destiny.

Virgil sleeps. Henri sleeps. Only I am awake.

We spent yesterday packing what few possessions we had and deciding what to leave behind. Because we intended to leave at midnight and without being noticed, we had decided to go on foot to Whitby and take the morning’s mail coach. Yes, that is where I should be now, aboard a mail coach, on the way to London. Instead, I sit beside this fire, my belongings packed up around me. There are three or four books to my left, which I nearly cried over yesterday for we simply could not take them with us: my first Bible, a copy of Shakespeare’s sonnets, some other childish idles which meant more to me than they could to anybody else. Now I would gladly leave them behind.

Night fell. Early, as it always does this close to

Christmas. We waited. Little Henri sensed our anxiety and grizzled and would not sleep. At around nine o'clock, Virgil stood near the window in the parlour and gazed out towards the cemetery. I had just managed to get Henri off to sleep, and I joined my husband.

“What is the matter, Virgil?”

“He knows I'm not coming by now.”

“Flood?”

“Yes, I would have been at work by now if I were coming. And he would wonder why I didn't return to him with a corpse last night. And he would understand that I read about his methods for soul magic.”

“There have been other times when you haven't been to work. Perhaps he will think you are sick.”

Virgil turned his face to me. In the dim light reflected from the fireplace, I could suddenly see that Virgil had aged. The anxiety, the opium, the awful circumstances of our lives, had aged him. And I knew then that, of course, I must have aged too. That I probably looked like no other nineteen-year-old woman, just as he looked nearly twice his twenty-three years. I had a sense that there was no going back – even if we did return to London and manage to make a comfortable life there (never so comfortable as the expectation to which I had been bred), there was no regaining our youth. We were weathered and worn down by circumstance. I looked at my hands and saw that the skin was not fresh and silken as it had been just a little over a year ago when I met Virgil. Life has scarred me.

“He will know I am not sick,” Virgil said softly. “The Wraiths from the graveyard are his ears and his eyes above ground. I fear what he might do.”

“He will do nothing. We are leaving in a few

hours.” In the dark. Unprotected. “And he will be out of our lives forever.”

Virgil did not reply, but turned back to the window to watch. I sat nearby and gazed upon him for a little while, then began to drowse, and eventually slept. When I woke, Virgil no longer stood at the window.

“Virgil?” I called softly.

He emerged from the bedroom, holding Henri in his arms. “Take the babe,” he said urgently. “Cover his ears, rock him so he doesn’t wake.”

“What? What’s going on?” I said, taking the child.

He made a motion for me to be quiet and led me to the window. “There,” he said. “Waiting for us.”

I peered into the darkness. At the end of our front path, a dark, hooded figure waited. My blood froze in my veins. “Why is it here? How did it know we are leaving?”

“It didn’t know. It has come to frighten me into going back to work.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I know how Flood’s mind works. Another is in the back garden, but I know not where the third is.”

I felt helpless, hopeless. “What shall we do?” I asked, clutching the baby against my breast tightly.

“We can do nothing. We must stay inside. London will have to wait.”

From the back of the house, I could hear a faint scratching at a window.

“No, Virgil. We must be away from here.” I began to sob, for I was afraid and I was desperate to leave.

“I know, I know. Tomorrow night I will return to work for Flood. Just a few more times I shall work and convince him of my loyalty. And then we shall leave.”

At precisely this moment, we heard an awful scuttling sound from above us. Virgil's eyes went heavenwards. Henri woke and his little face began to work as though he might cry. I was too horrified to move.

"What was it?"

As though in answer the thing upon our roof let out a demonic screech. I jumped. Virgil drained of all colour and yelped. Henri began to sob. I rocked him and shushed him, as the footsteps receded across the roof towards the back of the house.

My heart was beating madly. "Now, Virgil!" I cried. "We must leave now!"

"Not now. Within a week, perhaps."

"A week! I want to go now. Tonight."

"We cannot go tonight. Those creatures would tear us to pieces."

The horror settled upon my heart and suffocated the last shred of Hope it contained. A year of desperation overcame me, and I lowered myself on to the ground to cry. Virgil crouched next to me, gently removed Henri from my arms. With a free hand he stroked my hair.

"Gette, I'm sorry. I am impossibly, unbearably sorry." I could hear the catch in his voice and knew that I had made him cry. I stopped my own sobbing immediately.

"I'm fine, Virgil, I'm fine," I said, though I was far from fine. "We shall go in a week. You're right. We must be prudent." I dared not look at him, for his eyes are so forlorn when he cries.

"I shall make amends for this," he muttered, getting to his feet. "All the suffering that Flood has caused. I shall make amends."

Virgil took Henri back to the bedroom. I waited near the window, watching the creature in the dark. It stood like a statue, seemed only to move when I looked away briefly, almost as though it could feel my gaze upon it. Virgil returned, stood by my side. I looked up at him.

“What is it? What is that creature? Is it a man?”

“It was once and perhaps will be again,” he replied.

“What do you mean?”

“It is a kind of ghost. Flood told me as much. Three of them work with him.”

I shuddered, and he pulled me closer. “I find it so unbelievable,” I said.

“I have seen many unbelievable things.”

“Whose ghost is it, then? Do you know that?”

Virgil spoke softly. “Three priests worshipped here in Solgreve before Britain became Christian. Although they are long dead, Flood summoned their souls. One of his experiments is bringing them back into this world.”

“And these are the pagan priests?”

“Yes.”

“How can he bring them back? Who can bring men back from the dead?”

“I can tell you no more.”

“But are they evil? Is Flood evil?”

He raised his voice, pulled his arm away from me. “Ask me no more!” he cried. Then, softer, “Gette, ask me no more.”

I turned him to me, my fingers resting upon his cheek. “If it causes you pain, I shall ask you no more.”

His eyes were black in the firelight. He blinked once, twice, slowly. Then leaned forward and gently pressed his lips against mine. It was like the first time

all over again, it had been so long since he had kissed me in this way.

“Gette, Gette,” he murmured against my lips. “I love you so.”

“I know,” I said, for his love was a tangible force in the room, full of despair and yearning. Then his kiss grew more intense, violent almost. He kissed me as though he might die were he to stop. I returned his passion, felt the familiar giddiness of desire sparking in my nerves. He parted my lips with his tongue, bent me so far I almost feared my back would break. We slid to the ground. An ache grew deep inside me. His despair was contagious. I held him as one might hold on to life itself. His warm hands had pushed up my skirts. I freed my breasts from their stays and his lips moved upon them, closing over the nipples one by one. I gasped and arched my body towards him. My hands fiddled with buttons and bindings, and I managed to get him half out of his clothes. But when I reached down, between his thighs, to find the hardness I wanted so much to guide within me, I found nothing but a handful of softness.

“Virgil?”

He did not reply. His face rested upon my breast. I stroked him, I kneaded him. Nothing. I pushed him onto his back, boldly attempted to arouse him with my lips and tongue, but he remained soft and powerless. Already my desire was waning – one cannot maintain lust through sadness, and Virgil seemed so hopeless, lying there half dressed. I could not speak. I readjusted his clothes and my own, and curled next to him on the floor in front of the fire.

“Never mind,” I said, for I felt I should say something.

“In a week, we shall be away from this place,” he said. “Everything will be different.”

“Of course. We shall have our happiness back.”

We took our embarrassed bodies to the bedroom, exchanged chaste goodnight nods, and soon Virgil was asleep. I could not sleep. I rose and returned to the window. The dark sentinel still stood there. I wondered where the others were. I sat in the chair by the fire, drowsing occasionally, getting up to check on the dark figure in between dozes. At one stage I was lost in dreams until the day broke. When I woke and looked again, the figure was gone. A creature of the darkness.

Pagan priests coming back from the dead. Where did my life take such a turn away from the ordinary and acceptable? Was it eloping with Virgil? Agreeing to move to Yorkshire? Maybe all this ruin is my own fault, for I cannot be harder on Virgil, I cannot force him to behave appropriately. His pain and guilt are a burden too great for me to bear. Falling in love has led me to such Misery, Diary. If I could live the last fifteen months differently, I should never do it again.

Wednesday, 17th December 1794

Virgil has been much occupied in writing today, furiously scribbling as I have not seen him do in nearly a year. While it buoys me that he is immersed in what he loves, I am still apprehensive about tonight, which is when he intends to return to work. I am also apprehensive about a call we had this morning from the glass man. Our account is overdue and because he knows how poor we have been in the past, he is demanding full payment immediately. I gave him a crown (which I had hoped to use for food

on our way down to London) and promised him the rest by the end of the week, by which time I hope to be away from here. But I do so hate to lie and to cheat and to steal.

Virgil insists that Flood will pay him tonight and we can use that money for our journey. I would do almost anything to get Virgil away from here and not have him go to work tonight, but I would not risk my son's life out there in the dark with those ghostly pagans waiting for us. So I remain in anticipation of our eventual escape, and I try not to panic –

As I was writing the last, Virgil approached me and handed me a sealed letter. It seems he has not been working on poetry at all today.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It is a letter, detailing all of Flood's activities. We will deliver it to the authorities in York on our way down to London.”

“Then why give it to me?”

“Tuck it for safekeeping in the back of your diary. I know you protect it avidly. And if anything should happen to me ...”

“What will happen to you?” I asked, frightened.
“Do you anticipate something happening to you?”

“No, no,” he said, smiling gently, shaking his head.
“Only if. He must be stopped.”

I turned the letter over in my hands, examined the seal.

“I have sealed it against your eyes, Georgette,” he said soberly. “I am sorry.”

He then readied himself for work, and I farewelled him half an hour ago. I did as he asked, and have tucked the letter in the back of this Diary. I

long to pick off the seal and read its contents, but he would know the instant he saw the letter again that I had betrayed his trust. Perhaps one day when we are away from here, he might volunteer to tell me what he knows.

I think I shall not sleep until he comes home, whole and uninjured. I do not like him to say “if anything should happen to me” as though it were a possibility.

Late

He is home and in bed next to me. My worries were unfounded.

Wednesday, 24th December 1794

These silent words fall upon no ears, and yet I must keep producing them, for should I leave the words inside me they will bruise me and poke me with their scratchy edges and heavy lines. So here are the words I must write, to preserve myself.

We were packed and ready to leave on Monday night, anticipating Christmas in York. I was anxious because it had started to snow in the afternoon, but by nightfall the snow had eased and not much had settled upon the ground. I was aware that my little Henri is not the most robust of babes, and I worry excessively about the cold. I knew that our journey on foot to Whitby would be cold, unpleasant, miserable – but I was eager to make it, to say goodbye to Solgreve.

Virgil had worked six nights in a row, and the dark figures had not returned to our home. Still, Flood had refused to pay him.

“He says he cannot pay me until next week,” Virgil admitted, coming home empty-handed again early Sunday morning. “But I do not want to wait. I suspect

he is withholding the money because he has some idea I'm leaving."

"Have you told him?"

"No. But Flood is an intuitive man. There have been times when I have thought he may be able to read my mind." Here he laughed nervously, but I remembered the time I visited Flood and suspected that he could hear my thoughts.

"You shall not go to him again," I said firmly. "We will away on our journey tonight. Sleep now. We will survive without Flood's money."

He woke in the early afternoon and we passed our time in preparations and plans. We thought we would stop by in York for a few days – I hoped that Virgil would not be too proud to call in on Edward Snowe, who I was certain would help us on our way to London. I would not even have minded staying in York, for it is a big town and I was certain that Virgil could find work there. Decent work so that Henri could one day be proud of his father.

Night fell, we waited. We had supper, though neither of us had much of an appetite. The snow had eased and the sky was clearing through clouds above, so some stars were visible. Stars that should have smiled down upon us on our way.

At last we gathered our few belongings. It soon became apparent to me that we would hardly be able to carry half of them, as I had to hold the baby and Virgil had only two arms.

"I have thought ahead, Gette," Virgil said. "I brought home with me last night the cart I use for transporting the bodies." And then he laughed and said, "the cart I *used*, for it is no longer my occupation."

I squeezed his hand and smiled up at him in hope. Yes, hope.

“You gather our possessions by the door. I have hidden the cart around the side of the house. I shall bring it, and we shall be away.”

He went to the door. I returned to the parlour, took a last look around, then picked up one of our bags – Henri’s clothes and a few books Virgil would not part with. I was halfway to the door when I heard the most –

How can I carry on? How can I write this as if it is of no concern to me? My whole body shakes and I cannot –

I heard the most appalling scream. I knew instantly, with the sickest dread in my heart, that it was my husband. I dropped everything, careless. Nothing mattered. My body was hot with fear, alive and on fire with fevered realisation. I raced, I ran as fast as I could. My eyes seemed to have clouded over, my senses ... as though in a dream, a nightmare. The cold air outside stung my face. I did not even think for my own safety. I saw the creature speeding away towards the graveyard. And a pale shape on the ground.

Virgil, oh God, my husband, my only love, the other half of my soul.

He lay in his own blood. The creature had gouged some sharp protrusion through his shirt and his flesh. Virgil was still conscious. His eyes were opened, he looked at the wound bewildered. I was at his side in an instant, my hands were covered in his blood, my skirts trailing in it. My mouth seemed to be stretched into a scream, a sob which would not emerge from my lungs.

“Gette,” he cried. His body shuddered. He turned his bewildered eyes upon me.

“Virgil,” I sobbed.

“I’m going to die.”

“I love you. I love you.”

“Don’t let them put me in the ground here in Solgreve.”

I was moaning and crying and could not heal his wound with my hands.

“Promise me,” he said. Breathless.

“Virgil, Virgil. Don’t die. I cannot bear for you to die.”

He fell silent. My sobs shuddered in the night air.

Yes, Virgil is dead. I watched the sun come up and I’ve watched it set and arise again and I am no closer to comprehension. His body is gone. The Reverend came for it. They will put him in the poor’s hole, and what am I to do? I have no money for a proper burial, for removing him to Whitby. I know he did not wish to be buried here, but Flood will surely not steal the body of one he knew in life. Even he must delineate a boundary he will not cross.

I sometimes find myself thinking of these things: my husband’s burial; whether I can face Flood and whether he will give me Virgil’s money; how Henri and I can get out of Solgreve without the tailor or the glass man seeing us go. Mundane, trivial things. They give me a moment’s respite from the grief, but always lead me back there eventually, for it is the terminus at which all my hopes for the future are irretrievably halted.

Henri cries and cries as though he understands what has happened. Were my heart not already

broken, I might go to him and pick him up and do anything to stop the progress of his tears. But it seems somehow a fitting accompaniment for my mood. I let him wail his distress and I sit here mutely. For if I let just one sob pass my lips, my body would crack in two and the breach would be impossible to mend.

Tomorrow is Christmas and Virgil is dead.

And so I shall copy out the last of the sonnets which he wrote, and I shall pray fervently that his eternal soul has received a more gentle reception than that he anticipated.

A brightly burning angel of the Lord
Spread his blazing wings and ope'd his eyes;
And fire licked round the edges of my soul,
Tearing from my throat my ragged sighs.
To my knees with wonderment I fell,
And fear with frozen tread in my heart crept –
The world with muffled heart-beats carried on,
While “God forgive!” I wept, and wept, and wept.

For not as watercolour to a child,
Nor soft with whispered breath of Bible page,
But sharp and hot with pain the seraph comes –
A messenger of grievéd Father's rage.

And though it is of mercy that he sings,
I find my spirit crushed between his wings.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Maisie bit her lip and blinked back tears. Sacha was still reading part two of the diary. She laid the section she had just read on the floor and stood. Sacha looked up.

“Any answers?” he asked.

“I don’t know. But it’s very sad.” Her voice trembled, she took a big breath.

“I’ll try to read faster.”

“Take your time, I’ll go cook something for dinner.”

He smiled. “Just not instant noodles.”

“When have I ever given you instant noodles?”

He returned his attention once more to the diary and Maisie went to the kitchen. Tabby followed her and nudged emphatically at her empty bowl. Distracted, Maisie pulled the cat food from the cupboard and poured some out for Tabby. Flood had brought pagan priests back from the dead? That fitted with Cathy’s information that Solgreve had once been a sacred pagan site, but it didn’t fit with any kind of

rational position. Virgil may have been delusional. He believed that Flood was centuries old, so he was hardly a reliable witness.

Maisie defrosted some chicken breasts in the microwave and leaned against the counter to think. Now was hardly the time to take a rational position. The Wraiths had been all over her house – but only two of them, not three – and she knew they were supernatural beings. Nothing human moved or sounded or looked like that. So they were still around, these phantoms that Flood had once summoned back from the grave. They had killed her grandmother just as they had killed Virgil, and they were still here. Was it the cottage? Did they have some kind of fascination with it? The microwave pinged and Maisie went about making a stir-fry, wondering who might have lived here between Georgette and Sybill, and if they'd also had problems with evil spirits.

She was getting wine glasses out when Sacha came into the kitchen.

“Finished?” she asked.

“Yeah. You’re right. It’s too sad.”

“I can’t bear to think of her pain.”

“She’s long dead by now, Maisie. And at peace.” He walked to the stove and checked in the pan. “Can I do anything?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“I’ve got your jacket in the van, the one you left at my dad’s.” He jingled his keys in his pocket. “I’ll go get it.”

“Sure. When you’re back dinner should be ready.”

“Great.” He disappeared. She poured the wine, hesitated a few moments and then thought, dammit,

she would light some candles. After all, sad tales aside, she still intended to elicit a romantic thrill out of the evening. She lit the candles, turned out the lights, and Sacha returned.

“Here,” he said, handing her the jacket. As he did so, some change fell out of the pocket.

“Thanks,” she said, hanging it over the back of her chair.

He bent to pick up the change. “Candlelight dinner, huh?” He offered her the handful of coins.

“Just put it in my purse.” She indicated where it lay on the bench. “The candles are just for atmosphere.” She felt embarrassed. Was it too obvious that she had romantic designs on him?

“Is this Adrian?” He had flipped open her purse to put the coins away and caught sight of the photograph she kept inside.

“Ah, yes.”

“You look happy together.”

“It was our third anniversary.”

He looked up from the photo to her, then closed her purse and sat at the table. “Three years?”

“Actually, nearly four,” she muttered.

“Cathy likes him.”

“Everybody likes him. You’d like him. He’s very easy to like.” She concentrated on serving their dinner. Trust likeable Adrian to make an appearance, albeit only photographically, just when she was entertaining another man by candlelight.

“Are you going to marry him?”

She sighed and slipped into her seat across from him. At length she answered him. “I don’t know. I suppose so.”

“You don’t sound very keen. Do you love him?”

She nodded. Kept her eyes on her food. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“It’s all right,” he said, tucking into his meal. “I understand. How you can love somebody and yet not be sure. They don’t tell you that in movies or books – love is supposed to be this thing that obliterates confusion.”

“Exactly.”

“Still, if you’ve got something special with Adrian, you should protect that.”

She looked up. He held her in his steady gaze. Was he warning her off? In that instant, she knew tonight would surrender no hot kisses, no murmured approval, no fulfilled desire. Before she’d even asked him, he was telling her no.

“I know.”

“The chicken’s good.”

“Thanks.” She sipped her wine. Wished she could gulp down the whole bottle. The thought that her desire, her intentions, were transparent to Sacha made her feel sick. She shouldn’t have lit the candles. What was she thinking? The problem was she wasn’t thinking. At least not with her head.

“Is it okay if I stay a few days? I don’t have to go back to work until Wednesday.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll show you the little cave I used to play in as a kid. It’ll be fun.”

Fun. Like friends have fun. Not the kind of fun lovers have. She forced herself to smile. “Yeah, that would be fun.”

“Is everything okay? You seem a bit down.”

She shrugged. “Just thinking about the diary. And about Sybill.” She looked up, embarrassed about the candles between them. “And what I can do about it.”

“What *we* can do about it,” he said. “Between the two of us, I’m sure we can figure it out.”

“Do you think it’s at all possible that the letter Virgil wrote is *still* tucked into the back of Georgette’s diary?”

“It’s possible.”

“Because there might be more diary around here somewhere.”

“Well then, that’s our first task.” He emptied the last of his wine and leaned forward to refill it. “Tomorrow, we start searching for diary number four.”

They spent all day Sunday digging through the junk in Sybill’s cottage. Maisie got stuck into the masses of stuff stacked in the old desk in the back room, while Sacha went about tapping walls and checking behind recent fittings. They found nothing important, but had enough useless papers and books to build a bonfire in the early evening. They watched television together and had spaghetti on toast for dinner.

Monday morning found them searching again, but by now Maisie realised she was soon going to run out of boxes of junk to sort. She had already done so much – half-heartedly though it may have been – since she first arrived. The cottage was starting to look almost spartan. Almost.

In the late afternoon, Sacha came to join her in the back room. “Let’s stop for a while. Go for a walk.”

“Fine,” she said, climbing to her feet and brushing dust off her pinafore. “You know, there may not even

be another diary piece. Or Sybill may not have found it. Or it could be destroyed.”

“I’ve thought all those things. But, damn, if we could get hold of that letter that Virgil wrote, detailing what Flood did . . .”

“I know, I know. But we might have to accept that it’s not here.”

She brushed past him and grabbed her coat, glove, scarves and hat from the bedroom. When she emerged, he too had rugged up against the cold.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll show you the cave.”

They locked the house and went through the back garden and into the wood. The air was freezing. Above them, no blue glimmered. All was white, as though the sky had fallen in. The sea breeze chafed their cheeks. Maisie pulled her hat down harder over her ears. As they approached the cliff-top in the sea wind, the cold intensified. She wasn’t so afraid walking through the wood with Sacha by her side. She stole a glance at him. He had pulled a grey beanie over his ears, and looked like a soccer hooligan.

On the edge of the cliff they paused and gazed out to sea. The wind came in powerful gusts that filled her mouth when she spoke. “It’s pretty frigging cold out here.”

“Don’t worry, the wind’s not so bad down on the beach.” He led her down the long, sloping path to the shore. She followed him, trying not to slip on loose pebbles. The salty sea air rushed around her, and the roar of the ocean nearly drowned out the sound of her own ragged breathing. A flock of seagulls shrieked past. On the shore, the wind was not so gusty, but the

crashing waves shot up sprinkles of rimy dampness. They picked their way over the rocks, trying not to tread in the cold pools. Maisie's nose started to run. She sniffed, wiped her glove across her face. Why did she never remember to bring a tissue?

"It's just up here a little further," Sacha said. Maisie nodded. Her ears were aching. She followed him about ten minutes more and then they started to ascend another slope.

"See?" He was pointing to a hollow in the cliff face.

"Uh-huh," she said. She was out of breath and her eyes were streaming.

In a few moments he was helping her the last, steep few metres into the cave. It smelled musty and junk food wrappers had been plugged into the corners. But it was a welcome relief from the wind battering outside. Not even enough room to stand inside. They wriggled into the back corner and stretched their legs out in front of them.

"I suppose we should have brought a picnic," Maisie said.

"Never mind," he replied. "Isn't this wonderful? You have a great view of the sea, but it's mostly protected from the wind."

"It's still cold," Maisie said, surreptitiously wiping her nose on her sleeve. Then, realising she was whingeing, she added, "It is great though."

"I came here all the time as a kid. I even built a little fire once, but I smoked myself out."

"And what did you do when you came here?"

"I just sat here to think. When I was about nine I wanted to be an inventor. I used to come here and imagine inventions."

“What kind of inventions?” she asked, removing her hat and self-consciously rearranging her hair.

“Stupid things. Toys that could communicate with you and put themselves away at night. A dog-walking machine. I had no idea how I’d make them, I’d just imagine them.”

“And you don’t still want to be an inventor?”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t have a head for science. How about you? What did you want to do when you were little?”

“I think I wanted to be a ballerina. I don’t know. It was decided for me really. By the time I was nine I could already play three instruments – cello, piano, and flute – and it was just a matter of finding out which one I’d be best at.” She leaned her back against the wall and they sat together in silence for a little while, watching the endless to and fro of the sea. But it was not a comfortable silence for Maisie. The sea made her feel restless, yearning. For what, she didn’t know. But it made it no easier that Sacha sat so close to her, his dark eyes fixed on some point beyond the horizon, his smooth cheek exposed to her hungry gaze.

“The other night you said you understood about how confusing love could be,” she ventured. “Have you been in love?”

“Yes, of course. I’m nearly thirty.”

“Who was she?”

“There have been a few.”

She didn’t want to hear it, not really. She imagined these other women, capable of attracting Sacha’s love, must have been superior beings – all beauty and wisdom and smooth body parts.

“Go on.”

“The last time was with a girl named Vanessa.”

A fitting name for a superior being, Maisie thought. She had been stuck with a grandma’s name, and other girls went around with names like Vanessa. She wondered if this was the girlfriend with the taste for Baudelaire. French poetry seemed like the kind of thing a girl named Vanessa would be interested in.

“It didn’t work out?”

“No. She wanted to get married and I didn’t, so she ditched me for some guy that did. I think they’re still very happy together. I probably made a mistake.”

“Do you still miss her?” A tug in her heart. Not sympathy, just plain jealousy.

“Not really. Sometimes.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. She wasn’t like me, really. She wanted different things, and perhaps if we’d stayed together we would have been miserable.” He turned to look at her. “Why do you ask?”

“You asked about Adrian. I suppose I was curious.”

His eyebrows drew almost imperceptibly closer, as though he was thinking, keeping her in his gaze. “Maisie . . .” he started.

“Yes?” For some reason her heart sped a little. He seemed so intense.

Then the intensity was gone. He shook his head. “No. It’s nothing.”

“Go on, what were you going to say?” She now knew the meaning of the phrase, dying to know.

“Nothing, honestly. Just me being stupid. Come on, let’s head home.”

He helped her up and they began the hike back to Solgreve. What had he been about to say? Something inconsequential? It drove her mad . . .

The air outside was positively crackling with cold by now, and tiny snowflakes started spinning out of the sky as they were walking up the front path of the house.

“Snow!” Maisie cried. “I’m still so excited by it.”

“Well, if we get a good layer, we’ll make a snowman tomorrow.”

She unlocked the house. It smelled warm and inviting. “That sounds like fun.”

He closed the door behind them and took off his coat. “If your phone bill can stand it, Maisie, can I make a few calls and see if I can track my mother down? I think we need her help. She might know if Sybill had ever found more than three pieces of the diary. She might know loads of helpful stuff.”

“Sure,” she said, waving him in the direction of the phone. “I’ll start dinner.”

She busied herself in the kitchen, cutting up vegetables and trying to keep an ear on what Sacha was doing. She could hear his voice, but not really what he was saying. In a few minutes he had joined her.

“I found her. She’s on her way up.”

“Up to Whitby?” Maisie asked, filling a pan with water and putting it on the stove.

“She’ll probably come here. Is that okay?”

“Of course? They were really close, weren’t they? Sybill and your mother?”

“Yes. Ma first met Sybill when she was only a teenager. They told fortunes together in Scarborough for a few years before Ma went wandering again and Sybill came up here. They even shared a flat while I was away at school.”

“I’m dying to meet her. I hope she won’t mind if I ask a million questions. When will she be here?”

“Hopefully by the weekend. I’ll come back here after work on Friday to wait for her.”

“Where will you both sleep?”

“Hey, we’re gypsies,” he joked, “we can sleep anywhere.”

The snow falling on the roof was not audible while Maisie was awake. But as soon as she slept, she could easily hear its soft whisper in the dark. She listened to it for a while, enjoying a feeling of peace, then realised she was dreaming. She was outside on the street, looking down at Sacha’s van and the cottage in darkness. The fire glowed somewhere deep inside the house.

“Why am I out here?”

She turned and looked around her. The snow fell in big flakes, the wind blowing it diagonally against her. Each delicate white spur seemed to bite into her hands and face with cold. Whatever she had to do in this dream, she wanted to get it over with quickly, before she froze. She moved along the street, past Elsa Smith’s house – all the lights were out there – and past the cemetery on the left. She stopped in front of the abbey. The snow appeared to glitter as it descended on the ruins. The wind and weather of centuries had worn the stone into gargoyles. Maisie’s eye followed the curves of the remaining arches and tried to imagine what the building had looked like when whole.

Almost as soon as she formed the question in her mind, her dream shifted and changed. In crisp daylight, the sun shone on the buttresses and darkly gleaming stone of a thirteenth-century cathedral. She

stood at the huge, arched doors. One of them creaked open and she peered inside, caught a glimpse of a large figure dressed in cardinal's robes, then found herself back outside the ruin of the abbey. Night-time. Wondering what she was supposed to do here.

"I want to go home." Her voice echoed dully around her skull. It was no use. She was stuck in this dream. She advanced to the corner of the abbey, remembering Georgette's diary, and moved like vapour through an iron door in the spire. Below her, a trapdoor in the ground.

All right, I'll go down there. Soon she was descending dark stairs, moving along the tunnel and up to the two sealed doors. Sealed doors could not stop her; she breezed through the one on the right easily and found herself in a dark chamber. No, not dark. Here at the back of the room, a wall of glass bricks gleamed dimly phosphorescent.

Around her, rather than an empty room, was a fully stocked scientist's studio. But not a modern scientist – in fact, the room was exactly as Georgette had described it, strange glass jars and old books and half-finished experiments cluttering the benches. As though it had not been disturbed in all these years. She approached the phosphorescent wall and looked at it closely. Something about the sick, pale glow caused a nauseous dread to churn in her stomach.

"I want to go home. I want to go back to bed."

Here she awoke. Still dark outside. She kicked off her covers and went to the window, watched the snow fall. She couldn't see the abbey from here, but she could imagine its ghostly lines and arches. Had she really gone below ground? Or had she just dreamed

what Georgette had described? She supposed it was possible that Flood's things might still be down there. If nobody knew about them, nobody would ever have cleared them out.

She anxiously scanned the front garden. She had woken up panicky, and that made her concerned that the Wraiths were out there somewhere. She opened the bedroom door and tiptoed into the hallway. Sacha, like Cathy, had chosen to drag the mattress out by the fire to sleep. Maisie saw Tabby curled up behind Sacha's knees, sleeping peacefully. She went to the laundry window and checked the back garden. Nothing. Thank god.

As she was moving quietly back up the hall, Sacha called out sleepily, "Maisie? Everything okay?"

"Yes," she said, standing in the doorway to the lounge room, "I had a weird dream is all."

He sat up, pulling Tabby into his lap. His skin was golden in the firelight, his drowsy face miraculously unpuffy. "What about?"

"I dreamed I went below the abbey and Flood's room was still there, just the way Georgette described it."

He yawned. "Maybe it is."

"Well, we can't know for sure unless we go down there, and I think that would be even less popular than looking in the cemetery, so don't suggest it."

"I wasn't going to suggest it."

Maisie watched Tabby sleeping contentedly in his arms. "She never sleeps on me," she said.

"You might move around too much."

"I'm going back to bed." She didn't want to go back to bed. She wanted to curl up there next to Sacha, near the fireplace.

“Goodnight,” he said, wriggling back under the covers again. “Snowman tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

The air-conditioning in the supermarket was a welcome relief from the sweltering heat outside. Adrian took a basket from near the entrance and headed in. It was his first day back in Brisbane and his fridge was almost empty. Sappy piped music accompanied him as he headed for the frozen food section. He was leaning into one of the freezers, grabbing a bag of frozen vegetables when he heard someone say his name.

“Adrian?”

He stood up and looked around. Sarah Ellis, Cathy’s sister, stood there, leaning on an overloaded shopping trolley.

“Sarah, hi!” he said, placing his basket on the ground. “How have you been?”

“Good. And you?”

“Not too bad.”

“I was sorry to hear about you and Maisie.”

Adrian tipped his head to one side. “Me and Maisie? What about us?”

“You know, how she’s run off with that other guy.”

“Maisie hasn’t run off with another guy.”

“Oh,” said Sarah, clearly embarrassed. She put her head down so her hair covered her face. “I’m sorry. I must have –”

“Has Cathy said something?”

“No, no.”

Adrian found himself suddenly awash with suspicion. He wanted to clutch her sleeve, ask her

desperately, What have you heard? Instead he said, feigning a normal tone, “Did Cathy say something about the gardener?”

“Um . . . yeah. The gypsy guy.”

Gypsy? “Sacha?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s his name. I thought Cathy said that Maisie had . . . you know, run off with him or something. But I must be mistaken.”

“You are. You are mistaken. You are very mistaken.”

“Sorry.” She laughed self-consciously. “God, what an idiot. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.” He picked up his basket and nodded goodbye. “Nice to see you.” It hadn’t been, not at all.

“Yeah, see you round.”

He was about ten metres away when she came running up. “Adrian, I’ve got to tell you. You deserve to know.”

He turned around, annoyed but curious. “Know what?”

“Cathy told me that Maisie is totally in love with this Sacha guy and that she talks about you like she’s bored with you.” She put her hands up, palms first. “There, now I’ve told you. Do what you want with that information.”

“It’s not true, Sarah.”

“Whatever. I just wanted to tell you what Cathy told me.” She was already backing away, rejoining her shopping trolley halfway up the aisle. “But you might want to ask yourself why Maisie didn’t come home early like she said she would.”

“She had a fight with her mother. And she hasn’t finished cleaning out her grandmother’s place.”

“Okay, then there’s nothing to worry about.” She

turned with her trolley, didn't look back. He stood watching her a few beats, then left his half-full basket in the aisle and headed for the car park. It was six in the morning over there, not too early to call. And even if it was too early, he didn't care.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Dawn was still a half hour from the Reverend's bedroom when he heard the faint tapping on his window. He sat up blearily, blinking against wakefulness. Had somebody knocked?

Again the tapping at the glass. He reluctantly climbed out of bed and reached for his robe. Padded on cold feet to the window, his heart speeding a little. He cautiously drew the curtain a crack and peeped out.

As he had expected, one of the Wraiths stood in the shadows outside. He opened the curtains fully and knocked on the window so the creature would know he was there. It lifted an arm, curled a bony finger in a beckoning gesture, then glided away in the last of the darkness, leaving the Reverend quaking in his bare feet on the thin carpet.

He had been summoned. He was hardly ever summoned. His meetings with the doctor were usually

scheduled. Sometimes the Reverend went below ground to ask favours. But being summoned was very, very rare.

The Reverend hurriedly dressed himself, washed his face and put his teeth in. He despised those dark creatures, whatever they were. The doctor had told him once, about how many centuries they had been his faithful servants, but he hadn't really listened. It was best not to listen too carefully when the doctor began to tell stories. One might hear something one couldn't live with. And for occasions when he did hear too much, a faulty memory came in handy.

He wrapped himself up tightly in overcoat and scarf, jammed a woollen hat over his head. He knew he looked ridiculous in it, but his scalp got so cold if he didn't wear it and besides, he was well past needing to care about his appearance. With trembling hands, he let himself out of the house and headed for the abbey.

Once down the stairs and along the dark hallway, he could see the glow of a light under Dr Flood's door. He knocked and was answered almost immediately.

"Reverend," Flood said, guiding him inside. "You see, I have lit the lantern in your honour."

The Reverend often complained – quietly, of course – about how difficult it was to see anything in the chamber. Flood worked solely by the light of the phosphorescent wall, a creature who had become adapted to the dark.

"Thank you," the Reverend murmured. "Why do you need me?"

"I do not *need* you," Flood replied, settling himself in his chair. "I am merely curious."

“About what?”

“Somebody has been in my chamber.”

“When?”

“Early this morning – a few hours ago. I was in the other chamber working on an experiment, and when I returned I could sense that I had been visited.”

“That’s not possible. I have the only key and I was fast asleep.”

Flood bowed his head a little way, giving the Reverend a chance to examine him in the dim light. In the nearly seven decades the Reverend had known Flood, the doctor’s appearance had not changed. As though his body had aged as much as a body could without the flesh actually falling from the bones. His scalp was crisscrossed with deep grooves, his face a sea of lines and sagging flesh. But when Flood looked up again, his eyes were as alert and shrewd as a teenager’s. “And yet, someone has been here.”

“It’s simply not possible.” The Reverend’s mind was racing. Could Tony have made another set of keys on the sly? Could somebody have broken in? More importantly, was *he* going to be blamed for it?

“Perhaps someone in spirit, and not in body,” Flood said cryptically. Then, “Tell me about the girl.”

“The girl . . .?”

“The one your parishioners want me to drive out of town. Is she like her grandmother? Does she have the Gift?”

“She’s nothing like Sybill. Sybill was cunning, deceitful, and quite openly out to get us. This young woman may be curious, but I don’t think she means us any harm. And I believe she will return home soon.” The Reverend didn’t know for certain why he

was protecting the girl. He put it down simply to not wanting another death on his hands.

“But does she have powers? Does she have the Gift?”

The Reverend nodded reluctantly. “I believe so, yes.”

Flood steeped his crepey fingers against each other and rested his chin upon them.

“But I don’t think –”

“Shh,” Flood said curtly, “I’m thinking.”

The Reverend shifted from one foot to the other. Flood never asked him to sit down, didn’t even have a spare chair. Minutes ticked by. He assumed dawn was breaking somewhere above them, not that Flood would ever see it down here in his dark chamber.

Finally, the doctor spoke. “I don’t think we need worry about the girl.”

“No?”

“Sybill knew things because one of my Wraiths told her. But the traitor was dispatched back to the grave, and my remaining two subjects are quite loyal. There is no way the young woman can find out anything.”

“But if she came here . . . in spirit as you say . . .?”

“It’s a matter of a simple protection spell, like the one over the cottage.” He shifted in his seat, grew more animated. “Of course, it’s *her* spell, a fresh spell, not Sybill’s. That’s why the Wraiths could not gain access.”

“Are they still trying? The villagers wanted her scared out of town.”

Flood shook his head. “No, they have given up.”

“But if she doesn’t leave soon . . . I mean . . . the villagers have demanded that I ask for her to be killed if she’s not gone by the end of this month.”

“It’s no matter. I’ll have her killed if that’s what they want. You know that I look after the villagers.”

“I don’t want her killed. There could be an investigation, her family would come, the media –”

“There are ways that do not look suspicious. A slip, a fall on the clifftop . . .”

“But . . . she doesn’t deserve to die. She’s no harm to us.”

Flood waved his hand dismissively. “The graveyard would only be improved by the addition of fresh young flesh. If they want it done, I’ll arrange it.”

“Can’t we just scare her off? Can’t we try –”

“She will not be scared off!” Flood boomed. Then, more quietly, “She has proved that to us. It may be she will come to regret her obstinacy. However it goes, I now know that she has been here and I can protect myself against her return. We have learned something this morning, Reverend. That’s the most a man can hope for, to learn something new each day.” He stood, moved forward and placed a hand on the Reverend’s shoulder. “I’m sorry to get you out of bed, Linden. Thank you for coming.”

The Reverend tried not to recoil from the doctor’s touch. “Goodbye, Dr Flood.”

“Take the lantern with you. It’s rather too bright and it hurts my eyes.” Flood handed him the paraffin lamp. The Reverend used it to light his way to the stairs and out into the weak daylight.

It seemed Maisie had only just got back to sleep when the phone rang and woke her again. She heard Sacha pick it up and was pulling on her dressing gown when he knocked lightly on the door.

“Maisie, Adrian’s on the phone.”

“Thanks,” she said opening the door. “Sorry to wake you again.”

“It’s fine. It’s after six. I’ll go make us some tea.”

She went to the lounge room and picked up the phone, trying not to yawn. “Hi Adrian, what’s up?”

“You tell me what’s up.” Hostility.

“Adrian?” She felt guilty even though she hadn’t done anything. As though her intentions had been broadcast to him across the miles.

“Is Sacha staying there?”

She looked over her shoulder, hoping Sacha wasn’t near by. “He’s just here for a couple of days. You suggested it yourself. You didn’t want me to be alone.”

“That was before I knew.” It was unlike him to be so angry. Usually Adrian was even-tempered until the last possible moment. So what had set him off?

“Knew what? Adrian, what are you talking about?”

“I ran into Sarah Ellis today in Coles.”

Sarah. Cathy. Realisation. “And?” Trying not to sound guilty.

“And she said that you told Cathy you were in love with Sacha.”

“That’s ridiculous. I never said –”

“And that you were bored with me.”

Such a confusion of emotions took hold of her she could barely stop her knees from shaking. Awful guilt for what she had said. Desperate fear that she had hurt Adrian. And savage anger at Cathy. She sat down and breathed deeply.

“I didn’t say those things.” Not exactly like that, anyway.

“What did you say, then, to make her think that?”

Next decision: how much to lie? Perhaps going all the way was safest. “I said nothing like it. I don’t know where Cathy got the idea from. Probably out of her own demented imagination. She and Sarah probably cooked it up between them – Sarah always fancied you, you know.”

Adrian fell silent a few moments.

“I’m going to fucking kill Cathy,” Maisie said.

“Don’t swear, Maisie. You know I don’t like it.” At least he sounded like he had cooled down a little. Not much, just a little.

“Well, how dare she say things like that to her sister?”

“Just come home. I’m sick of this. I’m sick of you being so far away and I don’t trust that Sacha guy. Just come home.”

“Not yet. I’m still –”

“Nothing that you’re doing there should be as important as being home with me.” He sighed. “Maisie, I know this sounds terrible, but I’m not even sure if I can trust you any more.”

“Me? What have I done? I’ve done nothing.”

“You’re just so reluctant to come home. And where would Cathy have got her ideas about you and Sacha from? I mean, even if you said nothing, maybe she can sense something between you, I don’t know. And he’s sleeping there . . . I really don’t like it.”

She could hear Sacha moving about in the kitchen. She dropped her voice to a harsh whisper. “Well, I really don’t like being told what to do.”

“Come home.”

“Soon.”

“When? Give me a date.”

“No.”

“If you don’t give me a date, I’ll come over there and get you.”

“Let me think about it a couple of days.”

Again, Adrian fell silent.

“Adrian?”

“I hate that you have to think about it. I hate that I’m not more important to you.”

“Oh, Adrian.” She could feel tears pricking her eyes. “You *are* important to me. You know I love you. This is just something I have to do. Please try to understand.” She brushed an untidy curl out of her eyes. “I’m not like you.”

“Are you like Sacha?”

“Don’t even ask that. That’s a really dumb question.”

Sacha entered the room then, set down a mug of tea in front of her. She wondered how much, if any, of the conversation he had heard. She gave him a strained smile.

“I’ll phone you Friday,” Adrian was saying. “And you’ll tell me what day you’re coming home.”

Although she hated it, she felt too guilty to disagree. “Okay.”

“I’ll speak to you then.”

“I love you,” she said.

“Yeah. Bye.” A click and he was gone. She replaced the receiver and sat back in her chair.

“Is everything okay?” Sacha asked.

She shrugged. “Fine.”

“Lovers’ tiff?”

“No. Everything’s fine.”

“Drink your tea. There’s a nice layer of snow out there, and you did promise me you’d build a snowman with me.”

She nodded, tried to look cheerful. “Okay, sure. After breakfast and a shower.”

“When the sun comes up.”

If the sun came up. At eleven o’clock, a heavy cloud layer kept full daylight at bay and threatened more snow. Somehow, despite her misery and anger, Maisie managed to get herself rugged up sufficiently to go outside. Sacha tried his best to keep the conversation light as they assembled a crooked snowman, and Maisie did her best to answer his questions and smile from time to time. But her heart was sick in her chest. Sick because Adrian had been hurt. Sicker because Cathy had betrayed her confidence. And sickest because she had to go home. She’d always known she’d have to go home eventually, but the longer she put it off, the easier she could pretend that this cool, damp journey into intrigue and psychic powers and desire was never going to end. Her joints ached with knowing that she had to return to her old life; as much as she loved Adrian, she didn’t want to go back to him. Not yet.

“Is there an old hat or something in Sybill’s cupboard?” Sacha was asking. “Something we can put on his head?”

“No,” Maisie said. “I threw out all the old clothes on the first day. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. He can stay bald.” Sacha’s eyes were bright and his cheeks pink from the cold. “Maisie, if you’re not up to this, we can just go back inside.”

“No, it’s fun.”

“Just which part of it are you enjoying?”

Maisie shrugged. “I . . .” Oh no, she was going to cry. She hated crying. “Damn,” she said, palming her eyes with her gloved fingers.

“Maisie?”

“Damn,” she said again, tearily, lowering herself to the ground and sitting on the snow. “Damn it. Damn it.”

Sacha crouched beside her, reached out to touch her cheek. “Why are you crying?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice cracking over her tears. “It’s all stupid.”

“It’s not stupid to feel something. Why are you crying?”

“Because Adrian and I had a fight and he wants me to come home, and I don’t want to go home,” she sobbed.

He put his arms around her and rocked her gently. She pressed her face into his sleeve and cried like a baby.

“Why don’t you want to go home?” he asked in a soft voice.

“Because I’ll be there forever.”

“Not necessarily. You’ll travel again. You might move somewhere different.”

“Home’s not just a geographical place.”

“Oh. I think I understand you now.”

Already the urge to cry was retreating, and now she felt foolish. She sat back and wiped her eyes. “Sorry. Sorry to be so stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. Maisie, why do you think it’s stupid to cry?”

She shrugged, wouldn’t answer.

He stood up, helped her to her feet. “Come on. Let’s go inside.”

“But it doesn’t look like a snowman yet,” Maisie said, surveying their work. It looked more like three

misshapen blobs on top of each other, with poorly positioned twigs for arms.

“We can finish him another time.”

Later that evening, after a few more idle attempts to find the fourth diary piece, Maisie stood in the lounge room gazing out onto the snowy front garden. Their snowman cast a shadow in the dark, standing sentinel out the front. Sacha was watching television, but keeping one eye on her. She knew she'd been distant all day. Not just for Adrian's sake, but for her own. Her desire for Sacha was more than half her problem, and having him there, being so concerned and caring, was compounding her misery.

The phone rang and Maisie sat in her chair to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Maisie, it's me.” Cathy. Maisie felt her temperature rise. But Sacha was sitting right there watching the TV, and she was hardly going to reveal the details of the conflict in front of him, seeing as how he was so thoroughly implicated.

“Hi, Cathy. How's uni?”

“Good. How are you going? No more scary stuff?”

“Not really. Couple of weird dreams.” She could hear that her own voice was strained over the top of her anger.

“Well, do you want to come to York for a few days? Get away from it all?” Cathy asked. “I'm getting lonely again. When classes start I'm always reminded that everybody else has friends and I don't.” She laughed lightly. Innocently. With no idea how despised she was.

“Sure, hang on.” Maisie covered the receiver with her left hand and turned to Sacha. “Sacha, can I get a lift to Whitby with you in the morning?”

“Of course,” he said.

“I’ll be there tomorrow morning,” Maisie said to Cathy.

“Hang on. I’ve got a class tomorrow morning. I thought you might like to come down on the weekend.”

“I’m busy on the weekend.”

“Okay, I’ll be back in my room by about three o’clock. Meet me then?”

“Sure.” Maisie relished the chance to let Cathy have the edge of her anger.

“And you’ll stay a couple of nights?”

“I’ll see how I feel.”

If Cathy sensed something was wrong, she didn’t let on. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Bye.” Maisie hung up.

“Going to see Cathy?” Sacha asked.

“Yes.” *Going to sort her out.*

“That should be fun.”

“Yeah. Heaps of fun.”

Because she was in York hours earlier than she needed to be, Maisie found herself wandering around the shops looking for a present for Adrian. She knew it was a peace token, a way to ease her own guilt, but it suddenly seemed very important that she prove to him that she loved him. It was only when she whipped out her credit card to spend £280 on a black suede jacket for him that she realised just how guilty she must be. She didn’t even have a job to pay her credit card bill

with when she got home, but all those worries could wait. Alleviate guilt now, pay later. She found a post office, packaged the gift up and sent it airmail to Australia with a hastily written note:

*Adrian,
I saw this and couldn't resist it. Love you
heaps, always and forever. M xxx*

Maisie spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around frosty York, planning in her head what she was going to say when she saw Cathy. She had never been particularly good at confrontations. But Cathy had it coming to her. By ten to three, when she walked up to Cathy's place, she was a wreck. Angry, tired, frustrated, teary again. What was happening to her? Evil spirits couldn't make her leave the house but an argument with Adrian could turn her into a gibbering mess. The front door was ajar so she let herself into the boarding house and walked up the stairs to Cathy's room. Knocked at the door.

"Maisie!" Cathy had opened the door and grabbed her in a hug before Maisie knew what was happening. "Come in. It's great to see you."

"Hi," Maisie said, extricating herself from the hug, not cracking a smile. She closed the door behind her. Didn't sit down.

Cathy was searching on her book shelf. "I've got something for you." She pulled a folded piece of paper out of a book and handed it to Maisie.

Maisie shoved the piece of paper in her bag without looking at it. Probably some new age ten

commandments where “Thou shalt not keep a secret” was top of the list.

“What’s up?” Cathy asked. “You look upset.”

“What did you tell Sarah about me and Sacha?”

Cathy’s blue eyes widened. A flush crept up her face. “What do you mean?”

“Sarah. Your sister.” Maisie worked to keep her voice cold. “She ran into Adrian in the supermarket and told him I was in love with somebody else.”

Cathy still didn’t answer. Obviously, she hadn’t anticipated that she’d be caught out.

“Have you any idea how much trouble you’ve caused me?” Maisie asked.

“Oh, Maisie, I’m so sorry,” Cathy blurted at last. “I mentioned it in passing – just that you had a bit of a crush on this guy – and Sarah should never have ... I’m going to kill her. Honestly, I am.”

“If you’d never told her anything, she couldn’t have passed it on to Adrian. And don’t give me this ‘mentioned it in passing’ bullshit. You and your sister – with all your new-age-hippy-bullshit-love-everybody crap that you go on with – you and your sister got so involved in gossip you didn’t even realise you could hurt someone. Not very fucking Zen is it?”

“Maisie. Maisie, I’m so sorry,” Cathy said again, reaching a hand out to touch her arm. Maisie flinched away from her, took a step back. “Was Adrian really angry?”

“I’ve been ordered to return home.” Maisie’s voice broke. She did her best not to cry. “He wants me home and I’m not finished here yet.”

“But Maisie, what are you doing here anyway? You’d be better off at home. You’ve –”

“Shut up!” Maisie shouted. “How dare you tell me how to run my life?”

“Now don’t get yourself all worked up,” Cathy said. Her reasonable tone was as intolerable as fingernails on a blackboard.

“You’re incredible. Do you understand what I came here to tell you? You betrayed my trust. You are not my friend.”

“Maisie, please try to calm down.”

“No,” Maisie spluttered, and the tears came and she could feel her whole body grow hot with anger. “I won’t calm down.”

“I’ve said sorry, what more do you want me to say?”

“Goodbye,” Maisie said. “I’m going back to Solgreve.”

“Come on, Maisie. Let me make you a cup of tea and we’ll talk reasonably, and you can stay over. You can’t have come all this way just to yell at me.”

“I did. And now I’m going to get on the next bus home. And I never want to see you again. And next time you talk to your sister tell her I never liked her. I never liked either of you, and if you weren’t the only person in this hemisphere that I know, I would never have called you.” Maisie wrenched the door open and stalked out.

“Jeez,” Cathy said in an exasperated gasp. “No wonder you’ve got no fucking friends.”

Behind her, Maisie heard the door slam.

CHAPTER THIRTY

A bus was leaving for Whitby just as Maisie arrived at the train station. She hopped aboard, leaned her head against the window and closed her eyes. In a few minutes they were pulling out into traffic. Cathy was right. It was no wonder she had no friends and it was a long way to come just to yell at her. Now she had a long bus ride home to contemplate what she'd done.

About half an hour into the trip she remembered the piece of paper Cathy had given her. She pulled it out of her bag and unfolded it. It was a photocopy of a page from a book: *Late Medieval Catholic History in England*. The entry that Cathy had copied for her was headed, "Aaron Flood." She gasped and scanned it quickly.

Aaron Elijah Flood, b. 1486, d. unknown. Born in England and studied divinity and medicine at

University of Cologne. Appointed court secretary to Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Germany, where he met Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim. Travelled to Rome in 1501. Ordained in Catholic Church 1508. Rose quickly to cardinal under Leo X. Had many serious disagreements with the pope, who demoted him by stages between 1518-1520. All accounts hold that Flood was eccentric and uncontrollable. He refused to give up his red cardinal's dress, even when sent to Solgreve Abbey, North Yorkshire. Finally excommunicated in 1521. No records of his life exist beyond his excommunication.

Maisie folded the paper carefully and turned it over and over in her hands. The same Flood? He told Virgil he had been born in the same year as Agrippa, and here was confirmation that they had been contemporaries. But how could he still be alive in 1794? And if he was still alive then, could he still be alive now?

Her hands stilled. *Please, not that.*

But she had seen too much weird stuff to dismiss it as an impossibility. Now she was more desperate than ever to find Virgil's letter. She gazed through the window of the bus. The moors were speeding past under the darkening sky. A feeling of weariness settled over her. What did it matter? What did it matter what had happened over two hundred years ago? What did it matter how Sybill had died? She was dead and knowing wouldn't bring her back. What did it matter what mysterious secret was being kept in Solgreve, because in a mere few weeks she would be back in the sunny sub-tropics, under aching blue skies, and the

village would seem like the furthest place in the world from her. She no longer had Cathy as a friend here. She knew she should stop seeing Sacha. The cat didn't even really like her. Cathy's words came back to her: *What are you doing here anyway? You'd be better off at home.* Tired nausea stirred in her stomach. Damn, what if Cathy was right?

By the time the bus pulled in at Whitby it was dark. Maisie thought about dropping in on Sacha but decided against it. A few days without seeing him would do her good. So she was surprised when she stepped off the bus and headed for a taxi, to hear him calling her.

"Maisie!"

She looked around. His van was parked around the corner from the bus station. He had rolled down the window and called out. Bewildered, she walked towards the van.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Get in. I'll explain on the way."

"On the way where?"

"To Solgreve."

"You don't have to give me a lift. I can catch a taxi."

"Just hop in. It's cold with the window down."

She walked around the front of the van and got in.

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"Cathy called me."

"Cathy?" Maisie was stunned. "What did she say?"

He started the van and pulled into the main street. "She said that you were really upset when you left and that she was worried about you."

"Did she tell you why I was upset?"

“She said you two had a fight.” He glanced at her quickly. “Is that right?”

“Yes. I can’t believe she phoned you. How did she even know your number?”

“I’m the only Lupus in the phone book.”

“I can’t believe she phoned you,” Maisie said again. “I’d have thought she’d realised she’d interfered enough. Bitch.”

“Temper.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Maisie leaned back in her seat, arms crossed in front of her.

They drove in silence for a while. Maisie stared out her window, boiling with anger, squirming with embarrassment. Cathy had probably sent Sacha to pick her up just to assuage her own conscience. Maisie hated that Sacha had been brought into such a petty, trivial quarrel. It demeaned him.

“Maisie?” Sacha ventured when they were about halfway home.

“Yeah?” Wary. Trying to be cool.

“Cathy told me what you fought about.”

Vertigo. “She what?”

“She told me.”

“What did she . . . what did she say?”

He kept his eyes straight ahead, and Maisie realised, horrified, that he was embarrassed. “That Adrian’s upset with you because of me.”

“That’s right,” Maisie said quietly.

“That she told her sister you and I were . . . you know.”

“That’s right,” Maisie said again. Couldn’t think of what else to say.

“Well, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. You’ve done nothing.” Absolutely nothing. “I don’t know where Cathy got the idea from.”

He said, “Mmm,” in a non-committal way and kept driving, silent. All her weariness, all her yearning seemed to be rising like a huge bubble in her throat. She felt she would scream. Instead, she picked at her fingernails by the dashboard light, hating them for being all bitten and ragged. It had started sleeting lightly outside. When they pulled into St Mary’s Lane, it had turned to snow.

“Let me come in and make you a cup of tea,” Sacha said.

“No, really, Sacha. I’m so embarrassed about this. I don’t want to put you out any further.”

“Please, Maisie. Let me come in.” He parked the van and turned the engine off, turning to her. “I know you’re acting cool because of your fight with Adrian, but Cathy and her sister and Adrian and all the gossip between them aren’t really anything to do with us. With you and me.” Gently, he pressed a finger into her chest and then his own. Her skin started to swarm with bright, warm colours.

“Okay,” she said, “come in.”

She led him inside and he went to the kitchen while she lit a fire in the lounge. She joined him in the kitchen a few minutes later. The kettle had boiled and he was pouring water into the teapot. The bubble was rising in her throat again. The tiny movement of the tendons under the skin of his hand as he replaced the teapot lid made her ache. Weary. Yearning.

Don’t cry again.

He reached for two mugs. Turned to her. “Want sugar?” he asked. “I’ve forgotten how you have it.”

She found herself staring at his lips, at that tiny, flat space. She kept staring and he didn't say anything. She reached out her right hand, index finger, slowly. Pressed the tip of her finger to his lip.

"Maisie," he said. Like that. No tone.

She let her hand drop to his neck. His skin was warm. Some kind of mad courage had seized her. She leaned in, face up to kiss him. Mortifying her, he flinched away, took two steps to the left.

This couldn't be happening.

"Maisie, there's something I have to say," Sacha started. And so this is how it was going to be. She had finally crossed the line, tried to claim the kiss that she ached for, and he was going to reject her. Her disappointment dropped like a black stone in her stomach. Her hands trembled and she could barely keep her eyes from becoming moist with frustrated tears.

"I'm sorry, Sacha," she said, before he could say anything else. She turned, but he caught her wrist.

"No, listen to me," he said, warm fingers pressing into her skin. She looked up into his black eyes, couldn't believe how impossibly perfect each eyelash was. "I want to say this. Don't start with me if you don't intend to finish."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean, don't kiss me unless you're prepared to keep going." He averted his eyes, diffident. "It's all or nothing."

At moments like these, Maisie knew, people were supposed to flush, to turn warm with desire. Instead, she felt the blood drain from her face, as though terrified. Even though she had imagined it a million

times, in reality the magnitude of his suggestion was overwhelming. Maisie felt her lips move but no words were coming out.

“What is it?” he asked.

“All,” she said, finally, feeling herself take a step into a canyon. “I’ll have it all.”

Going into his embrace was like collapsing, swooning. He caught her with warm, firm arms. Before she had a chance to relish the wait, his lips were upon hers. Everything about him was hot – his skin, his tongue, the inside of his mouth – and the heat was permeating her, saturating her. A stark contrast to the freezing wind outside which was shaking the treetops and driving snow against the windows.

Maisie’s flesh seemed to be alive and moving languidly, meltingly, across muscles and bones. Sacha’s hands ventured down her back, pressed into the curve at the bottom of her spine, lightly across her buttocks, around to her hips. He pulled her hips hard against his own and she could feel his erection beneath his jeans. A long-held breath shuddered out of her, rattling up past her ribs and making her shiver. He caught her breath in his mouth, little kisses on her top lip, her bottom lip, then another full pressing-down of his mouth, his tongue seeking hers.

Hands everywhere, he turned her around, pushed her hips up against the sink. His lips were on her neck, his right hand taking in the weight of first one breast, then the other. His fingers gliding, slight friction from the cotton, over her nipples. She had started to ache, deep and low inside. His other hand was drifting down to her thighs, rucking up her skirt,

hot fingers on her skin and then on the outside of her underwear, tentatively touching her.

“You’re damp,” he said, a smile in his voice.

“What do you expect? I’ve been waiting six weeks for this.”

“It’s sexy,” he said, “you’re sexy.” His fingers edged under the elastic of her knickers; one, then two pushed deep inside her. She let her head drop back, her eyes closed.

“Oh, god,” she said.

He kissed her again, his fingers still inside her. Unbearable desire threatened to shake loose every nerve in her body. He was inching down her underwear, but she didn’t want to do it like this, against the kitchen sink. None of her fantasies had involved the kitchen sink.

“Can we lie down?” she said, close to his ear.

“Sure.” He took a step back, reached for her hand, and guided her to the lounge room. His mattress still lay there in front of the fire. They stopped in front of it, reached out to unbutton her blouse. She stood, stupefied – literally made stupid – as he eased her out of her blouse and bra, arms encircling her waist to unzip her skirt and let it fall, pushing down her knickers. She stepped lightly out of her clothes and he pulled her against him; he still fully dressed, she completely naked.

“Do you think I’m beautiful?” she asked, before she found sense enough to stop herself.

“I think you’re perfect,” he replied, gently pushing her down onto the mattress. She felt the fire’s warmth on her skin, watched him as he stripped down to nothing. Couldn’t get enough of gazing at his flat

stomach, the way his skin stretched over his hip bones, the long, hard flanks of his thighs. He knelt over her, laying reverent kisses across her breasts and stomach. She closed her eyes and moaned – it was all she could do. When she next opened them, he had pulled her legs over his hips.

“Ready?”

No. She wasn't. She and Adrian, after four years, had it all worked out. She came first – she had to, because she wasn't one of those lucky women who could come through intercourse alone. But she didn't tell Sacha that. She didn't know why – perhaps she was embarrassed, perhaps she thought that it would all be different with him, perhaps thinking of Adrian had just struck her dumb. Sacha took her silence as acceptance and slid himself inside her with a loud groan.

“Jesus,” he said. “You feel incredible.” His fingers were pressed into her arms. She pulled him down close and ran her hands over his ribs. His skin was like hot velvet. She pressed her lips into his shoulder.

“Sacha,” she said, the word sinking into his flesh. As hard as she could, she wrapped her legs around him. The jolting thought that he was inside her, that this was actually happening, made her dizzy. She had to catch her breath. The tension in his body was mounting. She turned her face to look at him. A strand of hair fell over one eye, his eyes were closed, his mouth open. He began to cry out, “Oh,” first once, then another time, then over and over. She didn't want it to be finished, but it was happening. His body started to shudder, as though he was losing control of his muscles. She began to cry out with him, to crush

herself harder against him, to call his name. Before she even knew what she was doing, she had perfectly faked a simultaneous orgasm.

Sacha collapsed on top of her, breathing hard. She turned her face to the fire and almost immediately, the guilt hit her. Nearly obliterated her.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

He rolled off her, turned her face to his. “Feeling bad?”

“A little.”

“I understand.”

They lay in the firelight for a few minutes quietly. After a while he said, “Cathy told me, you know.”

“Told you?”

“That you had a crush on me.”

“She did?”

“But I already suspected. I wasn’t sure, though, what you wanted. You kept talking about Adrian . . .”

Adrian. God, Adrian. Tears pricked her eyes. “I need a shower,” she said, sitting up and gathering her clothes.

“I’ll finish making that tea.”

She tried a smile. It failed and she burst into tears.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” he asked, sitting up and bundling her into his arms.

“I’m okay,” she said, struggling away from him. “I’m going to take a shower, and I’ll be okay.”

He let her go and she left him there, naked by the fire. Sacha naked, and she was just walking away from him, *had* to get away from him.

My god, what have I done?

She asked herself this over and over as she sat in

the bathtub, idly running the shower nozzle over her body. Outside she could hear the wind in the eaves. If she strained she could hear – or imagined she could hear – the sea pounding at the rocks. That’s what she needed, to get down there to the cliff-top and gaze out and let the sea wash away her guilt and her pain. She needed to wade out there into the huge, grey, crashing ocean, not just to sit here with a warm shower and a bar of Dove. She allowed her legs to fall open and her fingers to creep between them. She touched herself where Sacha had touched her, felt the building tension and the sweet release, giving herself in reality what she had only pretended to have just half an hour ago. She felt stupid, ashamed, disappointed. And miserable.

That evening, Sacha made her cups of tea, and cooked dinner, and chose the television shows they would watch, and didn’t mention that she had lapsed into a profound and awkward reticence with him. And later, at bedtime, when he fell asleep next to her, she clung to him and sobbed quietly. If he heard her, if her arms were wrapped too tightly around him, he gave no indication.

Sacha had to leave for work at seven the next morning. She took guilty pleasure in the ritual of making his breakfast, sending him off to work with a kiss and a promise. His hands lingered in her hair, his dark eyes lit with longing.

“I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon, straight after work,” he said.

“Okay.”

“I could come back tonight, but I think you need some time alone. Am I right?”

She dropped her head, muttered a yes. Then he kissed her on the forehead and headed out into the frozen morning to start his van. She waited until he drove out of sight before closing the door and going inside.

She paused in the doorway to the lounge room, put a hand on each side of the frame and sagged. Alone again, and this time everything was different. This time she wanted to be alone. She wanted to run away to the very ends of the earth and sit in a cold house alone and contemplate what she had done. But how much further could she go? Norway? Iceland? She made it to the chair by the fire and slumped into it. Sat there for an hour reliving yesterday afternoon with sick, guilty pleasure. Sacha was hers now. He kissed her, he called her “beautiful girl,” he told her she was sexy over breakfast. But now he was hers, did she still want him?

She was stuck on this question. Yes, she still wanted him. No, he was not what she wanted. But that made no sense. She only knew that the thought of making love to him again was all that was holding her together, stopping her from feeling panicked and desperate.

“Please, don’t let me be in love with him,” she said. “Anything but that.”

Half-heartedly, she went to the back room and pulled out the last two boxes of Sybill’s things. She went through it all with an expectation of finding nothing – no fourth diary piece, no letter from Virgil Marley to the authorities in York – and her expectation was fulfilled. What did it matter now? Because it was all over. Tomorrow Adrian would call and ask for her return date, and everything she loved and was excited about would become the stuff of the

past, just events to muse over when she was old: *Remember that holiday I took to my grandmother's cottage? At the time it all seemed so thrilling and important, but now I see it was nothing, merely a brief few weeks of madness taken out of the relentless sanity of my real life.*

After lunch, she burned the last of Sybill's old papers on the fire, feeding them in one by one, watching the flames eat them. Time to give up. There was no more diary. Whatever Flood had done back in 1794 was trapped forever in history.

One of the things the guilty exchange for their sins is the ability to sleep peacefully, and even a dreamed remembrance of shame can wake them as easily as breaking glass. And so it was that at four a.m., Maisie found herself lying awake, staring at the ceiling. Tabby slept curled up on a corner of the bed. She calculated in her head that it was two in the afternoon back home. What was Adrian doing now? Was he safe and happy? She had started to develop an irrational fear that something awful would happen to him now that she had betrayed his trust – a divine punishment for her. She thought about his eyes and his smile and his hands and she missed him so profoundly it was as though she had been winded. The snow had stopped falling outside and everything seemed very still beyond her window. The world was restful and quiet and she wanted to be part of that quiet world, but she had made a choice that put her beyond its limit somewhere in the dark clutter which the sinful inhabited. Minutes ticked by into hours and when Adrian called at eight a.m. she was still awake.

“Hello?” she said, picking up the phone and falling into the chair.

“Hi, it’s me.”

“Hello, darling.” She became manifestly aware of the pulse in her throat. It seemed to be jumping beneath the skin. Would he be able to tell from her voice that she had betrayed him?

He got down to business. “Have you changed your flight?”

“Not yet.”

“When are you coming home?”

She swallowed, stilled her trembling hands. “Whenever you want me to.”

He didn’t even seem surprised by her sudden willingness. “I want you home, in my arms, two weeks from today. Friday the fourth of February. That should give you enough time to ... finish whatever it is you have to finish.”

She pictured a calendar in her mind. To get home by that date, she’d have to leave on the second. Twelve days. *Twelve days*. And then the rest of her life began. Long and listless, stretching out under the summer sun, all her yearning pushed down inside her. Would it eat her from within? And what of Sacha? Would he just let her go and forget her? She couldn’t stand the thought. But the thought of losing Adrian was twice as painful. *I’m just not ready yet.*

“Maisie?”

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll be home on the fourth. I’ll call the airline as soon as I –”

“You don’t need to.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ve already changed it. I phoned them this afternoon.”

“How did they let you?”

“I had your frequent flyer number, your password ... they were all in your top drawer. It was Janet’s idea.”

Of course it was her mother’s idea. But Adrian was still unapologetic. He’d agreed with Janet. He thought what he had done was right.

“Okay,” she said again. “It’s all settled then.”

He gave her the flight number and time and she dutifully wrote them down, doodled around them, drawing boxes and bars until she realised what she was doing and dropped her pen. He was telling her about the contract with Churchwheel’s, proposing a weekend in Sydney after she got back, and then he hit her with the bombshell.

“You’ll be back in time to start rehearsals.”

“What do you mean?” Though she suspected she knew exactly what he meant.

“With the orchestra. They start in the second week of February.”

“I don’t want to go back to the orchestra.”

“Well, what are you going to do instead?”

“I don’t know. I’ll decide when I get there.”

“Maisie, that’s not fair to me. I want to buy a house this year – we can’t live with your parents forever. We need financial stability to get a loan. You can’t just go work at McDonalds you know.”

A sob of desperation caught in Maisie’s throat and she remembered the sound of the big double doors at the practice studio closing behind her, the smell of newish carpet and furniture polish, the awful click of the clips that held her cello case together. Then the

misery of rehearsals, trying to be nice to people who hated her and whom she hated equally. Impossible to contemplate.

“Perhaps I will.”

“Your mother has already spoken to –”

“My mother ...” she started, intending to say something harsh then remembering at the last moment Adrian’s aversion to any word stronger than “shit”.

“I just want the old Maisie back,” he said quietly. “I just want things to be the way they used to be.”

“I’ve changed,” she said.

“You’ll change back. It’s just that you’re so far from home.” A few beats of silence. “So far from me. With other people that I don’t like.”

He meant Sacha of course, though he obviously couldn’t bear to use the name. And because of the awful burden of her guilt she said, “I’ll think about the orchestra. I mean seriously think about it.”

“That would make me really happy. And a bit more ... you know ... secure.”

“But if I could do something different, something that paid comparable money, you’d be okay with that?” She was thinking of her grandmother, charging forty pounds a throw for fortune-telling advice. Somehow knew that Adrian would find the idea ridiculous.

“Yeah, sure. I just want to put this horrible separation – and all this jealousy and confusion – I just want to put it all behind us and get on with our lives together.”

The conversation mercifully ended soon after. She replaced the receiver and purposefully pulled out Sybill’s tarot deck and guidebook, spread the cards

around her and determined to commit them all to long-term memory. She was desperate. She needed some way to use her psychic ability before she got home if she was going to foil Adrian's and Janet's plans for her. They couldn't argue if she was earning good money telling fortunes, right? She picked up each card and memorised its face, looked up its meaning, recited it over and over in her head. Knowing what they meant, however, was less than half the ability she needed to read them. She would have to work harder at developing her psychism, spend more time in meditation or psychic exercise, work, work, work. She heard the flap on the front door snap, meaning she had just been delivered mail. It was probably a bill, nobody ever wrote to her. She went on memorising her cards.

She was just finishing off the Major Arcana when Sacha arrived, a couple of hours early. His knock on the door brought her to her feet. The van was parked in the street outside. A tingle of light-headedness washed over her. Not guilt and desire – just hunger. She had forgotten to eat lunch.

“Hi,” she said, opening the door.

“Hi,” he replied. “It was a quiet afternoon so they let me go home early.” He stepped inside, pulled her into his arms. “I was dying to see you.”

He kissed her. Her head swam.

“What's this?” he said, bending to pick up her mail as she closed the door behind him.

She took the envelope from him. “It's my mother's handwriting.” She picked the envelope open as they went to the lounge room. He surveyed the cards laid out all over the floor.

He scooped up Tabby and gave her a scratch under the chin. "You've been busy."

"I've learned the entire Major Arcana. Well, I've got two to go: Judgement, and the World. I'll have to practise on you later."

He shook his head. "Won't work. You can't read for yourself or for someone you're close to."

"Well, I'll practise on Tabby," she laughed. "I have to practise on someone." She tipped the envelope into her lap and a folded-up copy of *Good Weekend* magazine fell out. A note from her mother was attached: *From last week's paper. Adrian hasn't seen it yet – still in NZ. Love Mum.*

She unfolded the paper. Adrian was on the cover.

"Wow," she said.

"What is it?"

"It's Adrian." She turned the magazine to face him. "He's a star."

"What does it say?" His voice seemed a bit tight. Was he jealous? Or was she imagining it?

"There's a whole article on him." She flipped through the pages looking for it. Sacha joined her, perching on the arm of her chair to read over her shoulder.

Maisie scanned quickly through the article. The story of Adrian's life – strangely streamlined and tidy. In the second-last paragraph: "He lives in Brisbane with his girlfriend who is a cellist with the City Symphony."

"What's her name?" Maisie yelled at the magazine, casting it away.

"Wait, I haven't finished yet," Sacha protested, picking up the magazine.

She waited, grumpy. She didn't like being reduced to "a cellist." Especially as she hadn't been a cellist for months.

"It's not his fault," Sacha said, folding the magazine and putting it aside. "He might have told them your name, but the journalist just didn't print it."

"Whatever."

"He's good-looking, isn't he? Adrian."

"Um ... yes. I guess so. I guess I'm kind of used to him. Anyway, it's weird to talk to you about him."

"You can talk to me about anything."

She leaned her head back against the chair and sighed. "I have to eat something. I'm starving."

"Do you want me to make you something?"

"I wish there was somewhere we could go out for dinner. Somewhere that wasn't the local pub."

"I'll take you out to dinner if you like. We could drive down to Whitby."

"No, it's too far. I'll microwave something shortly." She sat up and took his hand. "I have to go home soon."

"Oh."

"Adrian and my mother have already arranged it. I'm flying out on the second of February."

"That's still a long way off," he said.

"It's too close. And I haven't solved the mystery and ..."

"And what?"

"And Adrian and Mum are pressuring me about going back to the orchestra."

"It seems they have a lot of power over you."

She didn't answer.

He touched her cheek, let his fingers glide up under her hair. "Defy the system," he said softly.

“It’s not that easy. This is my life. My life is just like this. Mum and Dad and Adrian.”

“And Maisie? Where does Maisie fit in?”

“Somewhere. I don’t know. I’ve never been good at deciding things, making choices.”

“You can do whatever you want. It’s not so hard.”

She felt a flicker of anger ignite deep inside. What did he know? He was thirty and working in a bakery. “It’s harder than it looks.”

“Defy the system,” he said again, bending his lips to her ear. “Come to bed with me. That’s not in their master plan is it?”

“For all I know it could be. Perhaps my family paid you to seduce me. You know, ‘Maisie needed to get that out of her system before she could start breeding a new generation of musical geniuses.’”

“I assure you that’s not the case,” he said. He pushed her down among the spread-out tarot cards, and made love to her between the Fool and the Star.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

She couldn't keep her hands off him. It seemed they spent a lot of time that day and the next lying around naked. They debated about the meaning of life, about Star Trek, about which was the best breakfast cereal. When they did make love, she was brave enough to ask for what she wanted and he obliged happily, skilfully. The descent into the flesh was blissful for Maisie. An escape, a forgetting of all the anxieties which jittered and jangled against each other in her mind.

They were both clean and dressed just before one, planning to brave the local pub for lunch, when a taxi pulled up out the front of the cottage. Maisie was waiting for Sacha to get his shoes on when she heard the car engine. She twitched aside the curtains and saw a small, dark woman get out of the taxi.

“Who's that?” she said, to herself more than to Sacha.

Sacha joined her at the window. “That’s my mother.”

They opened the door while she was still only halfway up the path. Sacha walked out into the weak sunshine to lock her in a bear hug. He seemed nearly twice her size, and Maisie wondered how it was possible that such a large person could have once been carried by such a small one. Maisie was not a tall girl, but she stood at least ten centimetres taller than Sacha’s mother.

“This is Maisie,” Sacha said, arm around his mother, leading her inside.

“Maisie!” she cried, grabbing her and giving her a warm hug. “I’m delighted to meet you. I’m Mila.”

Maisie took a moment to look at Mila. She was golden skinned and dark haired, with eyes as dark as Sacha’s. She barely looked forty, but Maisie figured that she must be nearly fifty. Rather than being dressed in headscarves and bright colours as Maisie had expected, she wore a rather sober pale pink twinset and grey skirt. “Glad to meet you.”

“You look nothing like your grandmother,” Mila said. Her accent was particularly thick, central or eastern European. They were inside now, the cold shut out behind them. Mila dropped her battered carpetbag in the hall and looked around. “You’ve cleaned up, yes?” She peered into the bedroom and then the lounge. “Sybill wouldn’t recognise this house.”

“We’ve been searching for something,” Sacha said, leading Mila to a chair by the fire. “Did Sybill ever talk to you about a diary she found?”

“Oh, yes. She found three pieces over the years, while she was renovating.”

“Only three pieces?” Maisie asked.

“Yes, though she was convinced there was more around here somewhere. She never found it.” She reached up and patted the side of Maisie’s arm. “I bet you have a lot of questions about your grandmother, yes?”

“I sure do.”

“Ask away then. I’ll stay a few days if that’s all right.”

“Of course it’s all right. I . . . we need you.”

“We were about to go out for lunch,” Sacha said. “Want to come?”

“I’d love to.”

They found the most secluded corner they could at the Black Cat. It was Saturday afternoon and crowded. Sacha went up to the counter to order their lunches while Mila and Maisie sat down and faced each other.

“Your grandmother was so sad she never got to know you,” Mila said.

“I’m sad about that too. But my mother kept us apart.”

“Janet probably had her reasons, not all of them bad.”

“What do you mean?”

She tapped her finger on the table, thinking. “Sybill wasn’t a good mother,” she replied at last.

Maisie was surprised. “I know they didn’t really understand each other.”

“Oh, it was more than that. I believe Sybill treated Janet very poorly.”

Maisie gazed out the high window at the pale blue sky. Reassessed her mother. “I didn’t know that.”

“I never met Janet,” Mila said, qualifying her

statement. “I just gathered that from what Sybill told me. From some of the things she said. She regretted it.”

Sacha joined them, carefully placed three beers on the table in front of them. “Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding coming,” he said.

“Yum,” said Maisie. “Did they look at you strangely?”

“Not really. Though the bartender’s keeping a close eye on you.” He turned to Mila. “Maisie’s not very popular around here.”

“Neither was Sybill.” Mila sighed. “I miss her. I can’t believe I won’t see her again. Maisie, could you tell me about the dream you had, about the night Sybill died.”

Maisie checked to make sure nobody was sitting close enough to hear them. “I don’t know how much I can rely on the dream to be the truth,” she said.

“Oh, you can rely on it, my girl,” Mila said. “The Gift is so strong in you. I could feel it when I got out of the taxi, before you even opened the door. Come, tell me.”

So Maisie described it in detail. Their meals arrived, but sat untouched for the duration of the story. Mila listened intently, eyes locked on Maisie’s, tears welling when Maisie told about the Wraiths, and how they had attacked Sybill.

When Maisie had finished, Mila pulled a tissue out of her sleeve and composed herself. Sacha had started eating, Maisie did the same. Mila pushed her peas around on her plate for a minute before saying, “And there were definitely only two of them? Two of the Wraiths?”

Maisie nodded, her mouth full of food. “Mm-hmm.”

“But Sybill said there were three.”

“The diary said there were three, too,” Sacha said.

“She was in contact with one of them,” Mila said.

“What?” Maisie remembered her grandmother’s notebook, the words “make contact” underlined. “She spoke to one of those . . . things?”

“I looked back through my letters before I came up here,” Mila said. “They were cryptic – Sybill loved mystery, intrigue.” Mila laughed lightly. “Her specialty was communing with the dead. You know that, don’t you?”

“Sacha mentioned it.”

“One of these Wraiths responded to her attempts to contact it. It gave her a protection spell for the cottage.”

“Of course – the Anglo-Saxon spell,” Maisie said. “They were Anglo-Saxon priests. That’s why it was in their language. So she didn’t have a clue what she was saying, did she? When she went out there in the forest and said those words?”

“In her last letter, she said she had finally found the perfect banishing spell for the Wraiths.” Mila forked a carrot but brought it no closer to her mouth. “That’s probably what she thought she was doing when she went out that night.”

“She was betrayed.”

“And the third Wraith is gone,” Sacha said. “Perhaps destroyed by the others?”

“Maybe. That would explain a lot.”

Sacha stood. “I’m going to get another beer. Anyone?”

“Yes, please,” Maisie said.

“Not for me,” Mila replied.

He went up to the bar. Maisie leaned forward. “So in Sybill’s letters,” she asked, “did she ever mention me?”

Mila nodded. “Yes.”

“Did she put a spell on me to come here?”

“Not that she told me. But you may have felt drawn here by your inheritance – your psychic Gift.” Mila reached across and patted her hand. “She loved you very much, Maisie, though she didn’t have a chance to tell you that.”

“I don’t know if I loved her,” Maisie said. “It makes me guilty sometimes – you and Sacha are more upset about her death than I am. It’s just that I didn’t know her. She seems interesting and was probably a nice lady but . . . I didn’t know her.”

“Don’t feel bad.”

“I would have liked to know her.”

“You would have felt a very strong connection to her,” Mila replied. “As if your souls were made of the same substance.”

Maisie smiled. “That’s a nice thought.”

Mila’s eyes went to the bar and then back to Maisie. “You and my son are lovers?”

Maisie was surprised by Mila’s frank question, but she wanted to trust her. “Um . . . yes. Did he tell you that?”

“No. You know, the line between psychism and simple intuition is blurred. I think I could tell by the way you look at each other.”

“I have someone else. Back home in Australia.”

“It must be very difficult.”

“Don’t have sympathy for me,” Maisie said, laughing self-consciously. “I’m a lying, cheating bitch.”

“Sometimes it’s difficult being a lying, cheating bitch.”

Maisie laughed more freely this time. “It sure is.”

Mila smiled at her. “While I’m here, I’d like to help you develop your psychic ability. You’re alive with it. You simply must learn to use it.”

“I’d love to. Sacha’s working all day tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow then,” Mila said, sitting back. “You’ll be amazed by what you can do.”

“Dreaming is the most unreliable and unworkable way to use your psychic power,” Mila said on Sunday morning, just after Sacha had left for work. “You have very little control over it and you can forget what you dreamed on waking.”

“Sacha said my Gift might have been driven underground, that’s why I dream things.”

“But if you can remain conscious while you delve into your unconscious, you’ll have so much more power and control. It’s only a matter of learning to relax properly.”

“Sacha taught me how to relax, line up my energy centres, all of that.”

Mila smiled. “I’ve yet to meet a woman who can really relax around somebody she desires, yes? I don’t think you even know the meaning of the word relax – look at you. You’re so uptight. Your nails are bitten, your shoulders are stiff, you dart your eyes everywhere before you say anything. What are you afraid of? Who are you afraid is going to judge you? Not me. Come, let’s try it.”

Maisie had no idea she could work so hard on relaxing. Mila made her lie still on the mattress in front of the fire, not moving, just focusing on her breathing,

for three and a half hours. She thought for the first half hour that she would go mad with boredom, but then something started to change. A profound serenity began to creep into her body. At first it was physical – her limbs felt heavy and warm, her scalp and face smooth. In the next hour it became mental – the chatter in her head ceased, and a rush and swell like that of the sea began to take its place, the sound of her own breathing. Finally, it became spiritual. One moment, she was just Maisie Fielding, the next she was stunningly aware that she was part of some greater whole, some large, unmoving spirit at the centre of the universe. She gasped.

“Maisie?” Mila had been sitting quietly beside her, whispering encouraging words.

“I felt something.”

“Sit up and open your eyes.”

Maisie did so.

“Now you are relaxed, yes?” Mila asked. “You’ll never use the word so lightly again.”

Maisie shook her head. “I feel like I weigh nothing.”

“So now you can work. Here,” Mila passed her the deck of tarot cards, “read for me.”

Maisie held the cards in her hands, still a little dazed. “I don’t even know how to lay them out.”

Mila talked Maisie through it, the shuffling, the centring on Mila’s spirit vibration, the laying out.

“What if I can’t remember what they all mean?” Maisie asked.

“You don’t even need to, not really. They have no power in themselves. They are merely springboards for your thoughts.” Mila tapped the first card. “Go on. Read for me.”

Maisie turned the first card over. She recognised its

face and knew its meaning, but just as she was about to open her mouth to recite what she had learned a few days ago, another kind of knowledge overtook it and she said. “You are in love with a man named John, or Jean. I’m not sure which.”

Mila smiled. “Very good. It’s Jean.”

Maisie was about to ask how she could possibly know it, when something else came to her. She had to say it. Not to say it would be as hard as stopping herself from vomiting. “He’s already married.”

Mila’s smile froze on her face. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” Maisie said, embarrassed.

“No, no,” Mila said, her forehead creasing up. “Please, tell me more.”

“He has no children. His wife is a teacher. God, how do I know this stuff?”

“Don’t question. You’ll short-circuit the flow.”

“He has no intention of leaving her.”

“Why hasn’t he told me?”

Maisie had a block. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what to do with your question.”

“Repeat it in your head, darling, while you’re connected to Spirit.”

She repeated the question in her head, *Why hasn’t he told her?* And there was the answer, waiting for her.

“Because he knows you won’t continue to sleep with him if he does.” Maisie heard what she had said and felt herself blushing. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Mila, I have no faith in what I’m saying. What if it’s just garbage? What if I’m just making it up?”

Mila uncrossed her legs and stood. “May I use your phone?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll call Jean. I’ll find out for sure.”

Maisie shuffled the cards back into the deck. “I don’t want to do this any more.”

“Make us some tea. I’ll join you in the kitchen just as soon as I’ve spoken to him.”

Maisie made tea and opened a packet of biscuits. Tabby wandered in, sniffed around and settled on one of the kitchen chairs. Maisie sat down next to her and waited for Mila to finish on the phone, apprehensive. Hopeful. She wanted very badly for her reading to be accurate. Something about reading the cards felt so right. When she connected herself to that great well of energy at the centre of the universe, and pulled from it the answers to Mila’s questions, she felt as though she fit somehow, like she had finally fallen into the right place in the jigsaw, instead of having her corners bent into the wrong gap. For the first time, she could imagine being satisfied to devote her time and energy to the one task for the rest of her life. She could see in her mind’s eye a little shop in an arcade, soft music playing and dim lights, herself sitting among it, drawing information from that source to tell to people who needed help or guidance. The promise of peace, of contentment, hovered close by. Nearly within her reach, but she tried not to reach out for it too desperately.

Ten minutes later, Mila joined her, laying the tarot pack on the table near her left hand.

“Well?” Maisie asked.

“You were right.”

“I’m sorry.” She was too excited to infuse her voice with any sincerity.

“You did me a favour.” She grasped one of Maisie’s

hands. “Maisie, you have such a power. For a first-time divination, the accuracy and the detail are quite remarkable. I want you to finish the reading.”

“I don’t know if I can. I’m kind of . . . disconnected now. And I don’t want to meditate for another three and a half hours.”

“It won’t take so long from now on. Once you’ve touched spirit one time, you never forget how it feels. The preparation will become shorter and shorter, until you’ll find you need only blink to be ready.” Mila poured tea and reached for a biscuit. “We shall do some more exercises tonight. I doubt that Sacha will come back as he has to work early in the morning.”

Maisie sipped her tea, absently scratching Tabby behind the ears. “Do you think I’ll be able to make a living out of it?” she ventured.

“Is that what you want?”

Maisie nodded. “I think I’d like that. And then I wouldn’t have to go back to the orchestra.”

“I’m sure you could do it. Many people far less talented than you make a great deal of money telling fortunes. With your ability, you could probably do a number of things. Spiritual advice, contacting dead relatives for people, auric readings, psychometry, prophecy . . . but you have a lot of work to do.”

“I’m willing to learn.”

Mila pushed the pack of tarot cards across the table to her. “Go on then. Finish the reading.”

She did, and was surprised by how the ideas came to her – she told Mila things that she couldn’t possibly have known, read her as easily as if the information was written all over her, delved into her past and present as effortlessly as she could call up the details of

her own, and predicted events for her future which Mila said were logical possibilities. Finally, when she had finished, feeling exhausted and elated, she pushed the cards across to Mila.

“You read mine, now,” she said.

Mila shook her head. “I can’t.”

“It’s what you do, isn’t it?”

“I can’t do it with you.”

“Why not?”

“You’re so much stronger than me.”

“I don’t understand.”

Mila touched her hand softly. “You have a very great power. If I tried to open up with you around, I wouldn’t be able to control it. This dark energy is coming off you in waves.”

“That’s terrifying.”

“You’re right to fear your power – fear is a kind of respect. But you can learn to control it.”

“But where is it from?” Maisie pushed her hair behind her ears, an anxious gesture. “I don’t really understand it – you talk about powers and the Gift and energy, but it means nothing to me. I’m completely ignorant of all this stuff.”

“When you get back home, find yourself a good spiritual teacher. The right person will come along if you’re looking, and he or she will help you find your guides. Find somebody who can teach you how to be spiritually healthy, not just somebody who can show you how to do the tricks.” She tapped her finger on the table to make her point. “A power like yours can be dangerous if not balanced with the right amount of spiritual awareness, something which, unfortunately, you lack.”

Maisie bit her lip, thinking.

“You have more questions?” Mila prompted.

“Have I inherited this power from my grandmother?”

“Probably, but your grandmother was not as strong as you. She had a rather ordinary power which she employed extremely effectively.” Mila paused before continuing, as though weighing up what she would say next. “I have been wondering, since I met you, if you and Sybill would have got along.”

“Why?”

“Because Sybill would have been very envious of you, I think.”

Maisie considered this. “Was she a nice person?”

“She could be nice. But at times she wasn’t. She was always wonderful with Sacha and me. Generous, funny, such a wicked sense of humour.”

Maisie finished her tea and took her cup to the sink, began putting the biscuits back in the packet. “And can I lose my power?”

“No, not unless you give it up.”

“I could give it up?”

“Of course. If you wanted to.”

“I could just say, ‘Go away, I don’t want you any more?’”

“You’d probably have to find somebody willing to take it. Another psychic, a spiritual group.”

Maisie paused, leaned on the back of a chair. “Why didn’t I know I had the Gift?”

“I can’t say for sure. I think you should ask your mother.”

“My mother? She doesn’t believe in any of that stuff. She’d say I was deluded.”

Mila shrugged. “She knew you as a child. If something had happened, she’d remember.”

Maisie knew she was never going to ask her mother for advice on psychic development. “I don’t know about that.”

“Don’t dismiss it out of hand,” Mila said. “People are deep and complex, and not at all what they seem sometimes. You are too quick to judge – that is why you always find yourself judged.”

Maisie smiled politely, but the comment bounced off her. It sounded too much like something Cathy would say, and she knew the world didn’t operate quite so tidily.

When somebody died in Solgreve, it was always slightly more shocking and sad than it would have been anywhere else in the world. So when the Reverend got the call early on Monday morning that Douglas Smith had passed in his sleep in the early hours, he was shaken and unaccountably disturbed. He had made the necessary phone calls, spoken with Dr Honour and the constable, and Douglas’s body would be taken down to Whitby sometime the next morning.

He knew the reason he couldn’t bring himself to visit Elsa until late in the afternoon was because she frightened him a little. And that made him feel like such a silly old man – for he was an old man – frail and nervous and afraid. But it could not be put off forever. It was his duty to offer comfort to the bereaved.

He was unsurprised when Margaret King answered his knock at the door. She was Elsa’s neighbour and they were very close.

“Come in, Reverend,” she said, and her top lip seemed somehow stiff, as though she had resolved she

would not smile at him. He guessed then that he was losing favour in the parish.

The house smelled of old pot pourri and rising damp. He wiped his feet on the doormat and entered the house. Margaret closed the door behind him.

“Elsa, the Reverend’s here,” Margaret called, leading him down the hallway.

Elsa didn’t reply.

“She’s in her bed,” Margaret said to him. “She’s feeling poorly.”

“Of course she is.”

“It was so unexpected.”

Only in Solgreve could that be said about the death of an eighty-seven-year-old man. “Yes. A terrible shock.”

Margaret led him to Elsa’s bedroom. The curtains were drawn against the weak winter light. Her white hair contrasted with the dark maroon sheets and pillowslip. She sat in bed with the covers pulled up to her waist, staring towards the closed curtains. Margaret hurried in and took the spare chair next to the bed, so the Reverend had no choice but to stand.

“Elsa?” he said, tentatively.

She turned her head slowly and looked at him.

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” he said, taking a hesitant step forward. “The whole village will miss –”

“This wouldn’t have happened if not for *her*.”

The Reverend was taken aback. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s because *she*’s here, isn’t it?” Elsa spat. “She’s like Sybill, she’s a witch and she’s undoing our good luck. We’ll all become ill and die.”

“Elsa, I’m sure it has nothing to do with the girl,” the Reverend replied, trying to keep his voice even. “You know we can’t live forever. Perhaps Douglas would have died much earlier if it wasn’t for –”

“When are you going to get rid of her?” Margaret King demanded. “I agree with Elsa, she’s a witch. She’s bringing harm to the village.”

“You made a promise,” Elsa said. “Get rid of her.”

“She didn’t respond to the Wraiths. They couldn’t get into the cottage.”

“Then get her killed, for god’s sake!” Margaret King cried. “Before she kills all of us with her witchcraft.”

Did Elsa and Margaret really believe what they were saying? “Her . . . power, whatever it is, can’t hurt us,” the Reverend protested.

“Like Sybill? How long before she’s out there, digging up the cemetery?” Margaret said. “Mark my words, it will happen. And then it won’t just be Douglas who’s dead before his time.”

Elsa nodded curtly. “It might even be you, Reverend.”

It didn’t work like that, he wanted to scream. But he wouldn’t tell them how it really worked. That was his burden alone to know. The Reverend cleared his throat and took a step back. “I’ll see myself to the door, shall I?”

Elsa had returned her attention to the drawn curtains, as though she wanted to look beyond them but hadn’t the heart to face the day. Margaret stood but didn’t move towards him.

“I seem to remember a community meeting, not long ago,” she said. “And you promised that if she wasn’t out of here by the end of the month . . .”

“Yes, I remember that too.”

“And it will be done.”

The Reverend put his hands behind his back so she couldn't see them shake. “Yes.”

“You have a week,” she said.

A week. He knew it was a week. He had been watching the calendar as closely as they had. As he walked home along the cold, main street, the shivering afternoon wind piercing his overcoat, he turned the problem over and over in his mind.

“Maisie Fielding is not Sybill Hartley,” he said. He congratulated himself on finally remembering the young woman's name. Maisie was not Sybill, and she did not deserve Sybill's fate. But he didn't know how he could divert the course of events, not with the village so opposed to her being here. How long before Elsa and Margaret's mad notion that Maisie was undoing their good health spread to the wider community? And of course they'd all believe it, because they wanted to believe it. If only the girl had responded to the Wraiths. She was too brave for her own good.

He let himself into his house and closed the door firmly behind him, hung his coat and hat on the stand by the door. In his dim kitchen he put the kettle on to boil and contemplated where his duty lay. He wanted to warn the girl, but couldn't without betraying the others, without drawing attention to what happened here. He had no idea how much she already knew, but he couldn't risk leading her into information that she had no right to know.

But he couldn't let her die. He liked her. *Yes, admit it, Linden, you like her.* She was young and pretty and

seemed bright and sincere. If he had had a family, if she was his own granddaughter he would be proud of her, would have her over for afternoon tea and ask her to tell him what was happening in her life. And he would listen and be warmed by her company and her youthful vitality. Perhaps he was being an old fool, but he did not want to see her come to an unpleasant end. What to do?

The kettle was whistling so he pulled it off the hob and set it on the sink. He eyed the pad of writing paper he kept on the sideboard for shopping lists. A letter wouldn't necessarily give away its sender.

With determination he reached for the pad and a pen and sat at his kitchen table. He tapped the pen thoughtfully several times against the tabletop, then began to write, scribbling out and screwing up and beginning to write again. It took him an hour and his boiled water cooled on the sink, but when he was finished he felt a pleasant – if a little guilty – sense of satisfaction. He folded the letter and put it in an envelope.

What next? Deliver it to her door? He might be seen. Post it? The mail in Solgreve went via the Halletts' grocery store. He couldn't risk them seeing him dropping in a letter addressed to Maisie. It would have to be posted from outside town. Yet months often went by without him leaving Solgreve, and he knew nobody outside the village.

Well, almost nobody. He folded the letter in half and tucked it into another envelope which he addressed to Lester Baines, scribbled a quick note instructing him to post the letter to Maisie as soon as he got it. He picked up his keys and left the house,

heading for the grocery store. Valuable days would be wasted sending the letter by this method, but as much as he wanted to help the girl, he didn't want to incriminate himself. He had a responsibility to Solgreve. He would just have to hope and pray that she got the letter in time. And that she wasn't so foolish as to ignore it.

"Is it weird, being in here with me while your mum's out there?"

Sacha kissed her throat in the dark. The scent of their love-making hung heavy on the air. "No. She's very open-minded. And anyway, she's probably asleep by now. The witching hour is reserved for lovers."

"And witches."

"Well, you fall into both categories then, don't you?"

Funny how Maisie had once thought he had some kind of exotic accent. She couldn't hear it at all anymore, just ordinary middle-class English. Perhaps it was because she was growing used to the sound of Mila's voice. She yawned. "I'm not a witch. I don't ever want to be one. I love the psychism, the feeling of being connected. But I couldn't do all that rites of the equinox stuff. I'd feel like a dickhead."

Sacha laughed lightly. "Don't say things like that. My mother is already concerned you're lacking spiritual depth."

"Should I be offended?"

"No."

"Does she like me?" Maisie asked.

"Ma? She loves you. But don't feel too special, because she loves everybody."

“That’s not very discriminating.”

“No. But very charitable.” He rolled onto his back and she wriggled across to lean her head on his chest. Under his warm skin she could hear his heart beating, closed her eyes for a few moments and listened. Sweet music. Almost enough.

“What’s going to happen when I go home, Sacha?” she sighed.

“I don’t know.”

“Will you forget me?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“I don’t know about ‘never.’ What’s the etiquette on how long you should remember somebody?”

“I guess it depends on how passionate you were about the somebody,” Maisie said, frowning. She wished, right then, that he loved her. Even though she was going home soon, she wanted him to be in love with her, to die at the thought of losing her. “Am I just a holiday romance to you?”

“I’m not on holiday,” he said.

“You know what I mean. Am I a fling?”

“You have a lot of questions tonight.”

“Well?”

His reached across and gently played with her hair. “No, you’re not a fling.”

“What’s the difference between me and a fling?” Midnight gusts of wind moaned softly over the eaves. The shadows of tree branches moved beyond the window.

“I know your surname for one.”

“Anything else?”

“You’re classy.”

“Me? Classy?”

“You know you are. Flings are usually with a different kind of girl.”

“Like Chris?” The words were out of her mouth before she thought better of them.

“That’s not very nice.”

“Sometimes I’m not very nice. Go on, I’m classy and you know my surname. What else?”

He chuckled and she heard it rumbling deep in his chest. She snuggled against him, pressed her legs against his.

“You’re Maisie.”

“Which means?”

“You’re special and different.”

She smiled in the dark. “Thanks.” Her fingers lingered over his chest and she sighed. She couldn’t decide if this sweet longing was pleasure or pain. She was silent for a long while.

Eventually, Sacha said, “What’s on your mind?”

“What if I didn’t go home, Sacha?” she ventured softly.

He was quiet.

“Sacha?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Do you think we’d ... you know ... do you think we’d stay together?” Making love every night, somehow remaining young forever.

“I’m not sure,” he said.

Not sure? How could he not be sure? “Why not?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Don’t be upset.”

“I’m not.”

“Maisie, you’re never going to be satisfied.”

“I could be satisfied,” she said. “If I got what I wanted, I’d be satisfied.”

“I don’t even think you know what you want. Not really.” He gently pushed her off and lay on his side, his eyes seeking hers in the dark. “We could be together. You could stay and we could be together, but within a year or two, I’d be holding you in my arms and you’d be looking over my shoulder, looking for something beyond me, something I couldn’t give you. Something which you were absolutely sure was the one thing that would make you happy.”

“That’s not true,” she protested.

“Maisie, it’s true. I’ve told you right from the start that I understand you, and I do.” He shook his head, touched her lips softly with his index finger. “I understand you and I know that you’d grow weary of me just as you’ve grown weary of Adrian. Even quicker, because I’m not a musical genius and I don’t have an impressive IQ and I work in a bakery.”

Tears pricked her eyes. “I’m so tired, Sacha,” she said.

“Let’s go to sleep then.”

“Not that kind of tired,” she said. “I’m tired in my soul.”

He wrapped her in his arms, rocked her gently. “You’ve got it all in front of you, Maisie. Don’t give up on life just yet.”

She clung to him, pressed her face into his shoulder. Hoped against hope against hope that when she went home, things could be different for her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The heat of the afternoon hit Adrian like a wet slap as he left the cool rehearsal studio and headed for his car. The suffocating air weighed heavily on him; the sun mercilessly pounded down on the windscreens in the car park. He worked up a sweat walking ten metres.

As he unlocked his car, he heard a rumble in the distance. He pushed his sunglasses back on his head and looked up. Behind him, the sky on the horizon had turned black with storm clouds. Their underside was sickly green-grey. Hail. He'd have to get his car under cover quickly.

Traffic in the city was congested. The following day was Australia Day, a public holiday, and people were knocking off early. He took a shortcut up through Spring Hill and hurried home through suburban streets, racing against the storm. A news report came on the radio, a severe storm warning issued for the

metropolitan area. He ran an orange light and nervously eyed the clouds. When he pulled into the garage, the black had nearly eaten the whole sky, and a gusty wind had sprung up. He let himself into the house and closed the door behind him. Janet sat in the kitchen with a glass of wine, gazing out the window.

“It’s going to be a big one,” Janet said. “It’s been a stinker of a day.”

“Where’s Roland?”

“He’s meeting with some people at the Heritage. The car’s under cover so he thought he’d wait there. It looks like hail.”

Adrian dropped his car keys and came to stand by the window next to Janet. “Sure does.”

Janet looked up and gave him a smile. “How was rehearsal?”

“Good.”

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Um . . . Yeah, sure.”

Janet stood and went to the fridge, pulled out a half-finished bottle of chardonnay. Adrian wondered if she’d drunk the other half just that afternoon. She looked a bit unsteady.

“My mother’s solicitor called me today,” she said, concentrating very hard on pouring the wine.

“What did he want?”

“Now that Maisie’s coming back, he’s asking me about selling the cottage.” She corked the wine again and returned it to the fridge. “In fact, somebody has already made an offer on it.”

“That’s good,” Adrian said, pulling up a chair. The wind had wound up. Tree branches lashed madly back and forth outside and the guttering rattled.

“Is it good?” she asked, settling next to him and handing him a glass. “I find the whole business rather confusing.”

“Why?”

“Because I had long ago given up on the idea that I could benefit from my mother in any way.”

“I don’t know if I understand you.”

A massive flash of lightning jerked out of the sky, on its heels a crack of thunder. Luciano, their canary, cowered in the bottom of his cage. Adrian stood and pulled the cover over it, took Luciano out of the window.

Janet spoke carefully, weighing each word. “If I take money from my mother, I might have to forgive her.”

Adrian didn’t answer. One hailstone, two, clattered on the roof. The chunks of ice grew larger, more frequent, within a few moments were hammering down.

“That’s a very polite silence you’re maintaining,” Janet said, and he almost couldn’t hear her over the hail.

“I don’t really know what to say,” he replied. “I’m sorry that you and your mother didn’t get along, but Maisie seems to have developed a fondness for her.”

“Sybill would be easier to like dead than alive. It’s hardly Maisie’s fault.”

And although he felt a bit wild and presumptuous for asking it, the question came to his lips, “Just what did Sybill do to you that was so terrible?”

Janet smiled tightly. Indicated the fridge with a tilt of her head. “Get the wine.”

Adrian did as she told him, noticed the fridge light was out. “Power’s gone off,” he said. The clouds had turned the sky to premature night-time. “Do you want me to get out some candles?”

“No, it will be fine.” She held out her glass and he tipped the wine bottle up. “Thanks,” she said. “Leave the bottle here.”

He sat down again. She took a gulp of her wine then placed the glass on the table. “My mother didn’t love me,” she said, her voice strained.

Adrian was embarrassed, didn’t know what to say.

“I don’t even know who my father was,” Janet continued. “Sybill came to Australia to be with him, but he left when I was about six weeks old. I think she blamed me for his leaving. She was very cold towards me. I tried everything to get her attention, but it didn’t work. When I began piano lessons at my neighbour’s house, she ignored it, pretended to forget about it from one week to the next. And then, as soon as I went away to music school – I was only ten years old, mind you – she left the country. Oh, she wrote to me sporadically, but I didn’t see her again until I was twenty-one, and even then I had to go to her. She never came back here.” Her voice trailed off. She gazed into her glass.

“I’m sorry,” he said, because he knew he had to say something.

“You know, Maisie was a surprise. We never intended to have children. We were too busy with our careers. But I had her, and I raised her the best I could and I loved her, because I didn’t want her ever to feel like I felt. Like her mother didn’t love her. Can you imagine how much it hurts me that she’s gone in search of Sybill?”

The hail had turned to pelting rain. Thunder rolled nearby. “Yes, I suppose I can imagine that.” They sat without speaking for a few minutes. The sky was dark.

Twilight gathered in the kitchen. “I guess I can understand now why you didn’t want her to go. But at first you were talking about Maisie being in some kind of danger.”

“She is,” Janet said.

“How can she be if Sybill is dead?”

“Do you believe there is anything beyond the grave?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think about it.”

“Let me tell you a story.” She ran her long fingers through her smooth hair. “I grew up in a town called Skyring in rural Victoria. We had a little brick house on a dirt road, and our garden backed on to a huge park. There was an empty shed on our property which Sybill didn’t use. I had turned it into a playhouse, and a lot of the local kids came by to play with me. I remember there was a bush of brown and yellow flowers – I still have no idea what kind of flowers they were, but we called them bacon and egg flowers because of the colours.” She smiled, a little embarrassed. “Anyway, all this is beside the point, and I don’t want to bore you with reminiscences. I always promised myself I wouldn’t be one of those boring people when I was old. Do you think of me as boring, Adrian?”

“No, of course not. I don’t even think of you as old.” Not with that glossy black hair, that sleek figure, those shrewd eyes.

“The war was still going at the time, perhaps a year away from ending,” Janet continued. “So I guess I was eight or nine. I had long grown used to the house being full of strangers. Sybill liked to have people around – not because she needed friends, but because she needed acolytes. She needed to be told a hundred

times a day that she was wonderful, talented, wise. It became a regular thing on Wednesday nights at our house for my mother to hold quite long and involved seances. Don't look shocked. This was her business – she earned money from telling fortunes and contacting the dead. Good money, for she was considered one of the best.

“I had a secret crush on one of her regulars – a young man named Brian who was in his late teens, or perhaps early twenties. He was always very kind to me, while most of the others, taking their lead from Sybill, acted as though I wasn't there. Of course, I was just a little girl, and he had no interest in me beyond the interest one takes in a child, but I had interpreted his attention for love and would dream very earnestly about being a grown-up and being married to Brian.”

The rain continued to pour, driven diagonal by the wind. The dark sky fluttered on and off with brightness as lightning circled them. “My mother would send me to bed while the seances were taking place, and I went quite happily because her friends were noisy and drank and smoked too much. But one Wednesday, I had worn my best dress to greet Brian at the door, and he had said to me, ‘Janet, you look so pretty tonight.’ This set my imagination on fire. I was very rarely disobedient – the boundaries Sybill laid down for me were either non-existent or so arbitrary as to defy logic. So I had become, very early on, a self-regulated child. This Wednesday night, I was probably asleep by nine o'clock. But around midnight I woke up needing to go to the toilet, and on the way back I could hear Brian's voice. In my childish silliness, I suspected he might be talking

about me, so I crept up the hallway to the kitchen – which is where Sybill held the seances – and hid behind the door to listen.

“Of course, he wasn’t talking about me. I peeked around the corner, my face hidden by a potted plant, and watched the seance.

“The table was round and made of dark wood. My mother said she had brought it with her from England. During the day it was quite an ordinary kitchen table, with a checked tablecloth over it, and that’s where I’d eat my eggs for breakfast. But if you pulled the cloth off, you could see the table top was carved in the design of a ouija board. A single candle burned in the centre. The planchette, which is a pointer with a glass eye in it, was at the ready. My mother was only in her mid-twenties at the time, very young and pretty with blonde hair rolled up stylishly. All the sitters, six of them including Brian, had their hands placed lightly on the table, their fingers touching. They breathed deeply and silently.

“As I watched, Sybill lifted her head and said, ‘Are there any spirits here who wish to speak with us?’ A long silence followed, during which time I studied Brian’s face and wondered if he loved me as much as I loved him. After a few minutes I heard the sound of the planchette scraping across the table. Nobody was touching it, all their hands were joined. Sybill began to read what the planchette spelled out.

“‘No Name,’ Sybill said. Then, probably because she had a well-paying client at the table expecting more than nameless spirits, she said, ‘Can you tell me if Lydia’s mother is there?’ I could hear the planchette scratching two firm letters. I could guess they were N-O.”

Janet paused to refill her wine glass. Water gushed over the gutters outside. The wind howled. Adrian waited for her to resume, transfixed.

“Sybill asked, ‘What message do you have for us?’ A loud popping noise followed, and I saw the planchette flip up into the air and disintegrate. Just as though it had been blasted to pieces. Sybill’s face was pale in the candlelight. ‘Whatever happens,’ she said quietly to the others, ‘do not lift your hands from the table.’

“‘What is it, Sybill?’ one woman asked, frightened.

“Sybill didn’t answer. I could hear our kitchen clock ticking off the seconds. I was rooted to the spot. I knew I should have returned to bed, but I wanted to see what was going to happen. The sitters held their breath. When all had been silent for nearly five minutes, however, they began to relax, to murmur their relief to each other. Sybill looked shaken, but she managed a smile.

“‘Well,’ she said, ‘it looks as if –’

“Her sentence was broken by a horrific bellow. It seemed to go on forever, though it was probably only a few moments. Above the table, as though rising out of the middle of it, appeared a swirl of pale light. It began to spin slowly at first, then gathered speed. The bellowing stopped, but the room was soon filled with the sound of a howling wind. As the thing spun, it seemed to create a tornado. Books started to fly out of shelves, papers were cast up into the air, Sybill’s neat hairdo was whipped into a mess. I dropped to the floor and clung to the corner of a rug as though it could save me from being sucked up into that wind. Some of the sitters cried out. Sybill told them not to move.

“I command you to be gone!’ she shouted at the spirit.

“At once, the spirit stopped spinning in the middle of the table. There was a sound like a sharp intake of breath, as though it were gathering its energy – and the thing leaped off the table and headed in one shrieking movement towards me.

“It struck me full force and knocked me flat on my back. I heard Sybill call out my name, but she didn’t leave the circle. I could feel a strange buzzing sensation on my skin as the thing clung to me, and I madly tried to brush it off, but even as I did so, I could feel it seeping into my pores, into me. My body suddenly felt curiously swollen and I could no longer see. Like a dark cloud had been pulled over my eyes. I could hear sounds beyond my own body only faintly, while the sound of my heartbeat was magnified extraordinarily. The joints of my arms and legs began to ache. No, ache is the wrong word. The pain was sharp and hot and agonising. This all happened in a matter of seconds. I must have screamed, though I don’t remember hearing it. I do remember hearing Sybill telling the others that under no circumstance were they to break the circle. Something about ‘energy holes.’ Her maternal instinct was not as robust as her craving to master her magic. Rather than attending to me, she continued her attempts to command the spirit.

“When I finally felt the spirit withdraw from me, I was convinced that weeks or months had passed. But when I could see again, it was still the same night, the same seance. Confusion reigned. The pale light had begun to spin again, causing the rushing wind. Sybill tried to raise her voice against it, but it seemed all but

hopeless. Then the thing took aim again and launched itself at another one of the sitters. At Brian.”

Janet lifted her wine glass to her lips. Adrian saw her hand tremble, then still as though by a force of will. Three claps of lightning and thunder sounded before she continued.

“Brian’s body began to jerk and then to move in uncanny, unnatural ways. As though he were becoming disjointed under his skin. It was too much for most of the sitters. They were pushing their chairs back and breaking the circle before Sybill even had time to comprehend what was happening. I watched as Brian’s face became distorted and he hissed and spat, and said foul words.

“‘Keep the circle together!’ Sybill shrieked. ‘We can’t send it back unless we keep the circle together!’

“But it was too late. Two people had already made for the door. Others were cowering in corners, unable, like me, to take their eyes off Brian. He stood and began to scream the foulest things you can imagine – sexual things, toilet things. Sybill rose from her chair also and said, ‘I command you to be gone. I command you to be gone,’ and Brian spat at her and laughed in a voice that wasn’t his own, and said, ‘You cannot command me.’ He put his hands under the table and flipped it over as if it were made of paper. There were more screams and the sound of objects breaking, and a curtain caught fire when the candle flew at it. Sybill was trying to put it out when Brian stalked to the door and left.

“‘Don’t let him leave!’ Sybill shouted desperately. But nobody would move. Nobody wanted to touch him because they were afraid that they would be next. The

curtain was still burning as Sybill stood there stupefied. I found my wits and went to the sink for water and extinguished the fire before it could spread. The remaining sitters were looking to Sybill for advice, for reassurances. But she couldn't speak."

Janet drew a long, shuddering breath. Adrian was dumbstruck. "The following night," she continued, "I was getting ready for bed when I heard a sound outside my window. When I went to look, Brian stood there. My blood froze. He spotted me before I could hide, and he began to shout things, obscene things at me. 'Little fucking whore. How would you like to fuck me, you little whore. How would you like to suck my cock.' That kind of thing. But in far more detail than I can comfortably relate to you. I screamed for Sybill who came to my room and merely shut the window and the curtains, and took me to the lounge room to sleep.

"'Are you going to do anything?' I asked her.

"'There's nothing I can do,' she replied. But not hopelessly, not remorsefully. She was angry, and she directed it at me. 'I hope you've learned your lesson.'"

"What did she mean?" Adrian asked.

"She tried to infer that it was my fault the spirit had come, because I had been watching the seance. Brian showed up outside our house regularly until we finally moved. Sometimes he would knock on the door or beg to be let in. They say that people who are possessed by spirits will continually try to break free. Even though they are not themselves any more, some kind of residual sentience will keep driving them back to the place where the possession first took place, seeking help. But when Brian turned up, Sybill always handled it the same way – by ignoring him. At times,

when I was supposed to be asleep, I would creep to the window and peek out, and he would be there, standing inhumanly stiff by the letterbox, his eyes staring at some unfixed point. For all I know, if he's still alive, he's still possessed. Sybill never tried to help him.

“And for years I believed it was my fault. Well, Sybill had said as much, how could I think otherwise? My entire childhood I carried around that burden. Then when I was about twenty-five I found out that it couldn't have had anything to do with me. I wasn't part of the circle, none of my energy contributed to the seance – I was wholly innocent. Yet she let me believe I wasn't. No comfort was extended to me during one of the most harrowing experiences of my life, and somehow on top of that I was blamed for what happened. That is the kind of woman my mother was.”

Janet sat back, twirling her empty wine glass in her fingers. Adrian was aghast. Janet was the last person he would have expected to hear this kind of story from. She tilted her head to one side and he thought she looked at him, though in the dark it was hard to say for sure. The thunder and the wind had eased now. The rain fell steadily, almost soothingly.

“Do you think I'm crazy?”

He shook his head.

“Because I'm not making it up you know,” she continued.

“I don't know what to say.” He thought of Maisie alone in the cottage, experimenting with psychic powers.

“I just want Maisie to be home and for things to be normal again,” Janet said.

Adrian wanted that too. Craved a world where seances and spirit possession were back in books and movies where they belonged. “But Maisie has inherited some of this power, right?”

“How do you know that?” Janet snapped. “Did Maisie tell you that?”

Here, Adrian remembered that Roland had told him in confidence. “I ... ah ... no. Actually Roland mentioned it.”

“And you told Maisie?”

Adrian nodded, guilty.

Janet’s hands began to tremble once more. “But she wasn’t supposed to know. Ever. I took steps so she wouldn’t ...” She trailed off, distressed.

“Janet?”

“I love my daughter, Adrian.”

“I know.”

“When she was little, she started having dreams,” Janet said, leaning forward and placing her glass firmly on the table. She stood and went to open a window. Cool, soft air rushed into the stuffy kitchen. She leaned on the sill. “I guess you’d call them prophetic dreams. My sister-in-law grew ill and Maisie knew about it before we did. That kind of thing. I was so terrified. She was such a tiny thing, all big black eyes and innocence, and I couldn’t bear that she had been touched in some way by that awful power that Sybill had. The dreams became more regular. She would complain of a headache before sleep, and then during the night or the next morning she’d come to our bed and say that she dreamed a bad dream, and almost always it would come true. I couldn’t bear it. So I

did something that you might think is cruel or hateful, but I only did it because I loved her so much and I wanted to protect her.”

Adrian held his breath. A glimmer of lightning flashed far away on the horizon. “What did you do?”

“When she complained of a headache before bed, I would give her Ipecac syrup. To make her vomit.”

“Why?”

“So she began to associate these prophetic dreams with being sick. And then after a few months, I didn’t need to give her the syrup any more. She would have a dream and be sick immediately, by association. Then she stopped having the dreams – like her body was protecting itself. And I thought that the psychic power must have gone away.”

“So you think she’s safe now?” Adrian asked. “You think you drove this psychic ability out of her for good?” Though he shouldn’t approve of her methods, he had to admit he was glad she’d done it.

Janet shook her head. “Do you remember last September, one night Maisie became violently and unaccountably sick in the middle of the night?”

“Yes, of course. She threw up so much I thought we’d have to take her to hospital.”

“That was the night my mother died.”

“So ...”

“It means two things, Adrian. First, she must still be psychic. Second, my mother and she must have an incredibly strong bond.”

Adrian shook his head. “You should have told us, Janet. If I’d known all this, I could have stopped her going.”

“She’ll be home soon,” Janet said. “And I doubt if

we could have stopped her. You can imagine if I'd said, don't go because my mother was a dangerous psychic – it would have made her twice as interested. Because, you see, Maisie has made an error of judgement. She thinks that all grandmothers make teacakes and love children. She thinks that just because Sybill was old she must have been kind and good.”

“But she wasn't?” Adrian asked.

Janet turned her head and gazed outside at the rain. “No,” she said firmly, “she most certainly wasn't.”

“This commuting is tiring me out,” Sacha said, dropping his van keys on the kitchen table.

“You don't have to come over every night,” said Maisie, hopping up to kiss him. His hair smelled like a hot bread oven.

“Yes, I do. You're only here for nine more days.”

“Ugh, don't remind me.”

“Where's Ma?”

“Taking a bath.” Mila was leaving in a few days, and Maisie had to admit she was glad about it. Sacha's mother was working her hard, and robbing her of precious time alone with Sacha.

“You know,” said Sacha, “I was thinking about the diary today, Virgil's letter, what Flood was up to.”

“Don't get me started. I've given up on that.”

“You're too easily discouraged.”

“I have nine days,” Maisie said, slumping into a chair. “The chances of me cracking a centuries-old secret are slim.”

“No. Think again. You have an intense psychic ability. You've been drawn to this place. Maisie, it might be your *destiny* to solve this mystery.”

She looked at him, eyes wide, afraid. “I . . .”

He sat across from her, his hands folded in front of him. “You’ve been to Flood’s chamber, in a dream.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Virgil got his information out of one of Flood’s books – something about ‘soul magic,’ right?”

“Yes,” she said again, slower this time. “What are you suggesting? That we go down there and see if the books are still there? Constable Blake would have his fat hands around our skinny necks before we even got the trapdoor open.”

“No, you don’t have to go down there for real. Just in a dream.”

Maisie contemplated the idea for a few moments. It unsettled her. She remembered the awful dread she had felt in her last dream of Flood’s chamber. “Do you think it will work?”

“It could. All you do is dream of his chamber again, then see if you can look in any of the books,” Sacha said. “Then we find out Solgreve’s nasty secret, maybe even how to get rid of the Wraiths.”

“I suppose I could try.”

“Tonight?”

She smiled across at him. “I don’t know if I can dream with you lying next to me.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “If you can sleep, you can dream. The way my mother is sharpening up your psychic skills, it should be really easy.”

In fact, it was easier than she could ever have imagined. She was dreaming about seashells disappearing into bigger seashells when awareness washed over her and she found herself outside on the

street. Although she was getting used to the cold, dislocated feeling of travelling outside her body, she still hated it. She felt lonely and frightened, and wanted to get this trip over with as quickly as possible.

Just as Sacha had suggested, all Mila's help had put Maisie in superb control of her Gift. No other dreams bled into the edges of this one. Outside in the winter night, she glided effortlessly towards the abbey, past the cemetery with the sea in the background, under bare trees and pale moonlight. She paused for a few moments at the entrance to the tunnel, remembering what Mila had advised her. Go directly to the books, use your presentient skills to select the correct one, don't try to read it as much as to absorb it – then even if she didn't remember the information consciously, Mila could put her into a trance and get her to recall it. She dove down through the hatch and along the tunnel, through the door into Flood's chamber.

It was like hitting a wall. The feeling of drifting weightlessness was replaced by a massive resistance. She had long enough to draw a breath before she was repulsed violently, shot out of the room and back up the tunnel, only coming to rest when she found herself once more in the moonlight. But in that half-moment drawing breath in the chamber, she had seen something which horrified her into waking.

"Flood!" she cried, struggling to sit up. Sacha was awake next to her, taking her hand in his.

"What is it?" he asked.

She turned to him in the dark, her whole body trembling with fear. "He's still alive," she whispered in the dark. "Flood is still alive."

Nobody slept after Maisie's dream. Mila made tea and they sat in front of the fireplace. Tabby, excited that everybody was up at three a.m., raced about the house chasing imaginary mice.

"I suspected it, you know," Maisie said, stretching her hands out towards the fire. Though nothing could warm her after what she had seen. "After Cathy gave me that article about Doctor Flood, I had to allow that he might still be down there. But to see him. God, it was terrifying."

"And he was protecting himself," Mila said darkly. "He knew you were there."

Sacha shook his head. "We've been idiots. We assumed that everything had changed between Georgette's time and our own – but nothing has changed. Flood is still alive, he still commands the Wraiths, the local priest is still involved . . . And Sybill is dead because of it."

"But what's he doing down there? How is he staying alive?"

"I don't know, but I bet Sybill knew. I bet that's why he had her killed."

Maisie dropped her head and rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hand. "God, I wish I had more than nine days to sort this out."

"Eight," Sacha said.

Maisie looked up at Mila. "Any ideas?"

She shook her head. "No."

"We need to know what he's doing," Sacha said. "Virgil knew. If only we could find that letter."

"The letter is long gone."

“Not necessarily. Georgette’s diary survived,” Mila said.

“I don’t know what else to do.” Maisie stood and paced. “I’m tired and I’m frustrated and I have to go home soon.”

“Maisie,” Mila ventured. “Do you think you could try to find the diary psychically?”

“You’re assuming there is more diary. The last entry was the night her husband died. If I were her, I wouldn’t want to write any more.”

“But she still had a son. And she wrote to keep herself sane, she often said as much.”

Maisie considered this, nodded. “Okay. Okay, I’ll try. Mila, will you help me get centred?”

Half an hour later, after a fruitless wander through the house hoping to sense the presence of Georgette’s diary, Maisie was despondent and just wanted to go back to sleep.

“It’s no use. We’ll have to admit that we’ll never know,” she said to Mila and Sacha. “And we can’t go to the police and tell them what happened because the story’s ridiculous and there’s a death certificate saying Sybill died of old age.”

“But what if Flood’s doing something evil down there?” Mila asked. “We have a responsibility to stop him.”

“We do?”

“Maisie, you’ve been given your Gift for a reason,” Mila snapped. “It’s not just to tell fortunes and make beer money.”

Maisie was about to come back with a sharp retort, but Sacha stepped in. “Maisie’s not just interested in beer money, Ma.”

“Sorry,” Mila said, instantly contrite. “I’m tired.”

“We’re all tired,” Maisie said, collapsing once more in front of the fireplace. She despised the inference that she was shallow.

“Well, let’s go back to bed and think about this some more in the morning,” Sacha suggested.

Maisie stared at the fireplace, the uneven brickwork and the old mosaic, and a sudden moment of clarity – natural, not supernatural – washed over her.

“Sacha, Mila. Sybill never found more of the diary.”

“Not that she told me,” Mila said.

“And she found all the other pieces while renovating.”

“Yes,” Sacha said slowly. “What are you getting at?”

“And do you remember the first time you came here and showed me how to light a fire, you told me of the only thing inside this house that is still original?”

Sacha and Mila both turned to the fireplace.

Maisie stood. “Let’s take it to pieces.”

Dawn was bleeding into the sky and the hearth was a mess of old mortar and chipped stones when they finally found it, rolled up in a hollowed-out brick in the right outer wall of the fireplace.

“Let’s go to the kitchen,” Mila suggested. “It’s too cold in here without the fire burning.”

Maisie was already unrolling it, looking over the pages. “It’s legible. There’s nothing missing this time.”

“Is the letter still in there?”

Maisie flicked to the back, beyond many empty pages, but found nothing. “No,” she said with a tone of despair.

“But there might be other information we can use,” Sacha said.

“Kitchen,” Mila repeated. “I’ll make tea.”

Maisie wandered into the kitchen behind Sacha, trying to read the first few lines. “It’s in good condition, considering where it’s been.”

Sacha sat, and Mila went to fill the kettle. “Read it aloud, Maisie.”

“Okay,” she said, settling herself at the kitchen table and smoothing out the pages as well as she could. “Okay, listen up.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Saturday, 27th December 1794

Because I cannot starve, because I have a child to feed and clothe and care for, I can no longer sit in a miserable stupor. Virgil has been two days in the ground, and there is nothing I can do. It has addled my mind – I forget things, I lose track of time for I am always lost in a deep, dark reverie. Perhaps if I were not a mother, perhaps if Henri's warm little heart did not beat, I might let my grief overcome me and sink full-willing into its pit, take my own life and sleep in peace. But Henri is very much here, dear little prince, and I simply must overcome my pain.

Flood owes Virgil money – it is as uncomplicated as that. The thought of going to him to request it is abhorrent to me. I still suspect him implicated in Virgil's death, for the Wraiths belong to him. But perhaps, like rabid dogs, they also have a taste for

death which is independent of their master, and Flood assured me once that he was extremely fond of Virgil. He showed me tolerance and kindness once before, I can only hope he will do so again.

Late

Henri is finally asleep. The poor babe has supped only on stale bread and watered-down milk, but he did not complain. Nor would he, Darling Child, for he is the most sweet-natured creature that ever God put on this earth. I watch him sometimes, late at night (for I can barely sleep at all since Christmas), and I see the resemblance to my family growing in him. How I wish that I could see instead the fine lineaments of Virgil's countenance, for I could then feel as though I were gazing upon him again. It is not to be. Henri is a Chantelouve and not a Marley, not that it matters, for both names are now worth nothing.

I went to Flood. How my hands tremble while I write his abhorred name. I now have little doubt that he is responsible for Virgil's death, that he is as evil and wicked a monster as Edward first suggested, those many happy months ago when we first came here.

His chamber was even dimmer than I remember. The single candle he burned was spluttering in the dark. Only the vague phosphorescence of the glass bricks behind him gave illumination to his work. He led me in, but this time he did not attempt any smiling or friendliness. He sat behind his bench and eyed me coolly. It took a short while for my eyes to adjust to the dark. I had reluctantly left Henri sleeping in his cradle at home, and was now very glad that I had not brought him. The dank atmosphere would have upset him, I am sure.

“What can I do for you, Mrs Marley?”

“I believe you owed my husband money. I have come to collect it.”

He didn't refuse me outright. He gazed at me for a while, as though thinking. Or even as though he were trying to read my thoughts – I don't know why I should suppose that, but there it is.

“Mrs Marley, did your husband tell you anything unusual before his death?”

“My husband was not in his wits all the time, Doctor Flood. He told me many unusual things.”

“I'm wondering specifically if he said anything unusual about me.”

Vaguely, because as I have said my mind has been so addled by grief, I remembered Virgil talking about the doctor's extraordinarily advanced age, and that he used the Wraiths as his eyes and ears above ground. I shook my head, “No, he said nothing but that you owe him money, and that is why –”

“You believe me in league with spirits, Mrs Marley?”

“I believe there are spirits in this village, and I purpose to leave it as soon as possible.”

“That would be wise.” He shifted in his chair, pressed his chin into his hand. “I believe that you know little about my activities, Mrs Marley, and you are safer the less you know of me. Were Virgil still alive, he would attest to that.”

A threat. At this precise moment I realised Flood had ordered Virgil's murder. My blood grew icy in my hands, making my fingers tingle. Yes, my husband had spoken about Flood and some evil he was involved in, but I could not remember the details. So much of the

last few days before Virgil's death elude me in this way. It was all I could do just to repeat my earlier request, "Doctor Flood, the money."

"No, I don't believe I shall give it to you."

"My child and I are starving. You once kept in your heart some fondness for Virgil. Please do not let his infant starve."

"I care not for your infant. Virgil is gone. You are no use to me."

"But we are owed the money, fairly and truly."

He laughed. "Fair and true? Whatever shall you do, Mrs Marley? To whom will you turn? Can you imagine a single person who will hear your case?"

"I—"

"Leave Solgreve. Beg elsewhere. A healthy young woman like you would find employment. Or you could return to France."

"My family are all dead." And the horror of my aloneness weighed upon me so heavily as I confessed this, that I could feel my knees tremble and begin to give beneath me.

He stood and strode towards me, catching me under the elbow and leading me towards the door. "To lose so many loved ones is careless, Mrs Marley. Perhaps you should exercise more caution with him who you have left."

"But my money?"

"You are owed no money. Go." He opened the door and I was gently propelled beyond it, into the dark tunnel.

And so that was my meeting with Flood. I don't know quite what to make of him and of what he said. Truly, my mind is already so engaged with the barest

details of surviving, that I scarce have the energy to contemplate it. I will leave Solgreve. God help me, I will go to Edward, for nothing is so important as eating. Tomorrow I will approach the church for some food for the few days until I leave for York.

Sunday, 28th December 1794

There can be no doubt: even in my stupefied state I can see that I am no longer welcome in Solgreve. Reverend Fowler rejected my request for parish relief outright. “Perhaps you would be better served in another parish,” he said. And he, supposedly a man of God, asked me to leave the church, even though I had Henri puling in my arms – the poor child is too thin, I know he is.

Upon my return to the cottage, I passed the glass man leaving my front path with a large basket in hand. I asked him what he wanted, but he merely grunted and walked away. I soon found out why. He had taken all the last of my plate, a number of my remaining books – in fact, everything of any value in my house! Yes, we owed him money, but I am a poor widow with a young son. How am I supposed to live? Everything I have that is dear I hold in these two hands: my wedding band, and my Diary –

How could I have forgotten Virgil’s letter? Why it just occurred to me upon the last lines I wrote. Of course it was still there, tucked into the back of my Diary, its seal still intact. I am now faced with the decision about what to do with it. Curiosity burns in me, but I am afraid of Flood. He seems capable of reading my mind – what if I read the letter and he somehow knew, and then sent the Wraiths to injure me or, worse, to injure Henri?

The implication in his last statement to me was that I must take care of my beloved son.

No. I simply must read it, for Virgil died because of the contents of this letter. This afternoon, while there is still a little light, I will go to the village and borrow money against my wedding ring. I would dearly love to keep it, but I must have the coach fare to York. Edward, I know, will lend me the money to buy it back, perhaps within a week or two. I will read the letter this evening when Henri is asleep, and tomorrow I will travel safely to York.

Monday, 29th December 1794

My hand feels light, naked, without my wedding band.

It is unthinkable, really, that I should write something so ordinary as how the weight of my hand has changed, after what horrors last night held for me. I think, Diary, that I may be beginning to lose my mind. The world seems now as though shrouded in darkness for me, and while others may see and hear and understand what happens around them, I feel it all as if at one remove. I see my handwriting certainly appears to be that of a madwoman, but that is due to the motion of the carriage. I have all perched precariously in front of me, my ink well locked between my knees. I have twice already dribbled ink upon my dress, but nobody will notice if a pauper is dirty as well as ragged, so I care very little.

A most unpleasant woman and man were our companions for the first part of our journey, but they have now left and it is only myself and Henri in the carriage. He is awake and looking around, dear boy, and occasionally stretches one of his little arms out to

me for reassurance. Oh dear, I have just noticed he has ink upon his pink hand – I really am making quite a mess. But there are many hours to fill on this journey, and I have an awful tale to tell.

Hands and ink and fire. I will not lose my mind.

Virgil was not asking idly when he begged not to be buried in Solgreve. This was not the request of an addled mind. I have read his letter and, God help me, I know what happens in Solgreve.

Last night, Henri took so long to go to sleep. The poor child is hungry all the time now, as am I. Why, I have scarce eaten more than stale scraps for a week, and I feel light-headed if I must rise too suddenly.

It was very late when I picked the seal off the letter. I read through it once, then twice, and all the tremors of fear and horror traced patterns on my skin but I still had to read it a third time to comprehend it fully, if one can ever truly comprehend something so cruel.

And then I knew, Virgil could not stay in the ground. The fires of Judgement Day would not have convinced me to leave him there. I was desperate. My fare was booked for this morning and I had only one night in which to decide what to do.

The decision, however, was inescapable. If I tarried, or waited for Edward to come and help me, the pit might be filled and the task made impossible. Simply, I had to go to the cemetery and retrieve my husband's remains.

I waited until midnight. It makes me shudder now to remember that I did not give a thought to the Wraiths. This is how clouded my thinking has become. In any case, I was probably not at the cemetery for more than ten minutes, though it seemed an eternity.

I left Henri sleeping in his cradle, soothed on a few drops of his father's opium. I wondered whether I should tell him one day where Fate led me that night, and decided that, no, my life from this moment on would be all to do with protecting the child's innocence. I care not what kind of a man this will make him, I will die before I allow his innocence be sullied.

Where was I?

Yes, I crept from the cottage with a long length of rope. I was wrapped as warm as a poor woman can be. My gloves are nearly worn through, and there is a hole in my left shoe. A light breeze grazed my ears, icy and full of the scent of the sea. I stayed close to shadows as I made my way down to the cemetery, across and towards the poor's hole, which is at the far end near the cliff-top.

I had not been to the site of my husband's interment before this time. A physician and one of the Reverend's helpers from the church had been to collect Virgil's remains and no doubt had placed him in the pit without ceremony shortly thereafter. As I stood on the wild, windy cliff-top, I thought perhaps it was a fitting place for a restless soul such as Virgil to be buried, were not such a diabolical secret being kept in the village. I braced myself against the horror of the task and looked down into the pit. A number of bodies, anonymous beneath their winding sheets, lay jumbled against one another. I did not know which one was Virgil.

Although the weather was cool and the uppermost bodies not too much decayed, the smell from the bodies at the bottom of the pit was unbearable: a pungency

made somehow more offensive by its unexpected rotten sweetness. I wrapped my scarf around my nose and mouth and lowered myself into the pit, my feet finding cringing purchase along yielding limbs. I bent and examined the two bodies closest the top. One of them must be Virgil, but which? The body dimensions were similar, both were clearly male. I knew that I must pull back the shroud and identify him, but I could not bear to think of Virgil's face misformed or putrefied. I did not want the last image I carried of him in my mind to be the stuff of nightmares.

I found myself crouching in the pit, rocking to and fro, shuddering violently in the cold, with no idea at all what to do, yet knowing I had to do something. An old rhyme I had heard once as a child came back to me. A pauper funeral near Hattie's house, the body wrapped and loaded on to the cart, and three small children dancing alongside it on its way to the churchyard, singing:

*Rattle his bones
Over the stones
He's just a pauper
That nobody owns.*

The song repeated over and over in my head as I tried to decide how I was to identify Virgil. Then I remembered – my memory is so vague at the moment – that Virgil had written a great deal before his death. And when Virgil wrote, he always did it with such passion and vigour, that he would splatter ink all along his first two fingers. So, it was really only a matter of identifying him by his right hand.

I looked from one of the shrouded bodies to the other, then reached towards the one on the left. I tore open the shroud near the right wrist and poked inside to pull out the hand. The flesh felt spongy under my fingers. In the dark I could barely see what I was doing, so I had to lean very close.

I could not but notice that despite the many dead bodies in the grave, there were a disturbing amount of live insects and wriggling worms. They feasted on the flesh at the bottom of the pit, but were slowly working their way up towards the fresher food. I tried to ignore them, but one or two brushed my hands or skittered across my toes. And was that a dismembered limb I could spy below me? I recalled that Flood's experiments were disposed of in the pit. What other horrors hid in the dark? I shut off my imagination, and returned to my grisly task.

There is a strange, heavy coldness about dead limbs, and the memory of that coldness still resides in my own hands. I closed my fingers around the wrist and held the hand up to my face. There, along the index and middle finger, were two clear black splashes of ink. This, indeed, was my husband's hand.

The identification made, I now had ahead of me the task of pulling him from the pit. I am not a large woman, Diary, though you would not know for you have no eyes with which to see me. And Virgil, though slender, was tall and muscular. I struggled with him to prop him into an advantageous position, then wrapped the rope about his shoulders and climbed out of the pit. I looped the rope around a nearby tree and pulled as hard as I could. It is said in times of desperation that even the weakest mortal can display strength not

ordinarily possessed of them. Nobody was more desperate than I was last night. With every heartbeat, with every thrum of the blood pacing through my veins, I had but one thought: Virgil must not stay in the ground. He emerged from the pit, jerking along the grass in a horrible, unnatural fashion. I wound up the rope and then half-dragged, half-carried him back through the cemetery and towards the cottage.

In my addled state, I hadn't really decided what I should do with him once he was retrieved, and I got as far as the front path of our house before it occurred to me where I should properly dispose of his remains. I laid him carefully upon the ground and went inside. I checked on Henri, who was still sleeping, and went to the fire. I gathered firewood in a basket, and lit a lamp to hang over my wrist. I found the last of an old bottle of brandy which I tucked into the basket also, and went back outside.

My ability to carry Virgil was now even more limited. It must have taken me half an hour to drag him through the wood. Halfway to the cliff, I stopped to rest, laid all my goods upon the ground and caught my breath. It was then that I became bothered by the suspicion that I did not, indeed, have Virgil with me, but some other fellow who used a pen and ink for a living. And if I did not check, I knew the uncertainty would haunt me for the rest of my days.

I sighed, because there was nothing for it. I picked at the shroud, unwound it slowly from the top of his head and, by lamplight, beheld my husband's face.

Of course it was him, and had I been thinking straight, I would have known it by the mere shape of

his dear hands, those fingers which I had seen too many times pressed together in thought, or fluttering with anxiety. As it was – and I am eternally grateful to whichever angel was responsible – Virgil’s face was not horribly disfigured by decay yet. He was grey, his skin slightly pulpy beneath my fingertips (which, of their own accord, had flown to his cheek), his lips were white and his eye sockets seemed curiously hollow. I did not attempt to pull back the lids and gaze at his eyes once more, as they were probably sunk far back in his head. But he was still my Virgil, my beautiful husband, and I sobbed greatly to look upon him. I fell back on my haunches and dragged my fingers in the icy ground and sobbed until my body shook, and then I collected myself, carefully covered him again and went on my way down to the beach.

Our little fishing boat was there, and as I dropped my load upon the sand and gazed out to sea, I remembered the time we two hopelessly happy newlyweds had made love in the boat, our Good Ship Sweetheart. The keen scent of rime on the air was bracing, and there was something regular and rhythmic about the waves: here and away, here and away, over and over, ponderously. I turned my back on my task for a few minutes and breathed in the sea, and felt a glimmer of happiness that this would be Virgil’s final resting place.

But I could not spend so much time away from Henri. What if he was awake and crying for me? I could not bear the thought of his fear in the empty house, so I hurried. I dragged Virgil aboard the boat and I laid around him firewood and bits of dry driftwood I found upon the shore. I doused it all with brandy and set it alight from the lamp. It blazed into life.

I kicked off my shoes and got behind the stern of the boat, pushed it with what little strength I had left out into the cold ocean. I waded out deep, for I didn't want the waves close to the shore to bring it back to Solgreve. The water rose up and up my body, and the firewood around Virgil had started to burn. When I was chest deep in the water, and could feel the edge of some dark current pulling this way and that at my skirt, I gave him one last mighty push and headed back to shore. I collapsed upon the beach, exhausted, freezing and soaked, to watch. The current pulled the boat out further into the distance. By now it was ablaze. Then, as I waited, shivering on the shore, the fire began to dim. The leak in the bottom must have allowed in enough water to douse the flames. Lower and lower the fire faded, until it had gone out completely. The boat was far from the shore now, just a black shape against the sea. I lost sight of it in an eye-blink. Virgil sank to the bottom.

Farewell, my beloved. Wait for me.

Now I am off to York, perhaps to make a whore of myself. It is no matter, my heart is far away, deep in the briny depths of the ocean.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Friday, 2nd January 1795

A week in relative Comfort has made me lazy as you see, Diary. I am in York. Edward has a small apartment above his shop, and while he is downstairs at work or out on house calls, Henri and I try to stay warm and fed, and recover from the loss of our dear Virgil.

I arrived in York late on Monday evening. Along the way, Henri and I had eaten, thanks to the money left over from the pawning of my wedding ring, so we weren't too uncomfortable when I alighted the coach. York was under a fine layer of snow, but the weather was quite still as I cradled Henri in my arms and began to search for Edward's residence. I liked being in a large town. Solgreve is so small and lonely, but here I could see lights burning in windows and knew that others were awake and warm and comfortable. It helped me to imagine that I, too, may be like that one day.

I found Edward's shop thanks to the help of a gentleman passer-by. I am forever grateful that he did not look upon me with loathing, as so many who saw me did. He was kind and asked after the comfort of the infant, saying it was a cold night for such a young babe to be out. I suppose it was, though I don't seem to feel it any more. Perhaps cold is a condition one can only experience by contrast, when one's heart is warm.

The shop was closed, but I rang several times at the bell and finally Edward heard and came to the door. As he opened it and caught sight of me, he smiled affectionately.

"Gette," he said, ushering me in. And his use of Virgil's name for me undid me. I trembled and began to sob, and the next half hour is all confusion. I know he took Henri and my case from me; I know he led me up the stairs to his rooms and sat me before a fire; I know he gave me brandy, but the smell too keenly reminded me of the previous night's endeavours and made me cry all the worse; I know that I told him about Virgil's death and that he drew quite pale with shock; and I know that he held me in his arms and I clung to him like a tiny child and sobbed until my heart felt bruised. But when I remember all this now, it seems to have happened to somebody else. Perhaps it was the dose of laudanum that he gave me to sleep which renders the whole evening as though a dream. Feeling safe in Edward's good care, I slid between warm covers and, for the first time since Virgil's death, slept soundly.

It wasn't until the following morning when I awoke, comfortable and refreshed, that I realised Edward had given me his bed. I stumbled out into the sitting room and found him curled on the floor before the fire. He

had opened the bottom drawer of a large chest and filled it with blankets and soft things for Henri to sleep in. The child slept peacefully, but Edward woke the instant I came into the room. His hair was all messed with tossing and turning, and his eyes bleary.

“Gette, did you sleep well?”

I nodded and sank into a chair. “For the first time in forever.”

“I’m glad.” He sat up and stretched his arms over his head, yawned. “I know this is not how one should greet a lady, but your appearance is shocking.”

“I’m hardly a lady.”

“Last night, I thought you a phantom. You are more bone than flesh.”

“I give as much food as I can to Henri. I believe he is too small for his age and I’m desperately worried for him. It means I have sometimes gone without.”

As if he had heard his name, Henri began to grizzle in his drawer. Edward glanced in his direction then turned back to me. “Allow me to make you both some breakfast, and then today we shall buy you new clothes. You look like a beggar.”

I smiled a bitter smile. “Edward, why am I here with you if not to beg?”

“Perhaps you are here with me because I am your friend.”

His kindness touched my heart and I dropped my head to hide my foolish tears.

Edward is not a rich man, but he has no wife or family upon whom to spend his money. So he bought me two new dresses, both black because I insisted upon proper mourning wear. Neither was very expensive, but I felt his generosity was too great. Henri

also had new clothes, and he looks not so sick and poorly now he is well-dressed and properly fed. I supposed I should have felt uncomfortable that Edward, while being so charitable, should sleep on the floor to accommodate me, but grief makes people selfish and thoughtless, and so I was.

New Year's Eve arrived, and brought with it all the fears and uneasiness that the prospect of facing the future can bring. 1795. I would soon be twenty. The end of the century approached, and I tried to imagine how I might feel on the night before the calendar turned and I found myself in the nineteenth century. It seems so impossible, so strangely modern. By then, I shall be nearly twenty-five, and my life, I hope, will be greatly changed. I do not like to think upon it, but these are the thoughts that a New Year can arouse in one.

Edward and I drank wine while Henri slept, his little cheeks smooth, his long eyelashes fanned upon the silken skin. Even the fireworks, somewhere within the city walls, did not wake him. We heard the bell toll midnight and Edward yawned conspicuously and began to talk about a good night's sleep. It was time for me to make a decision. There is only one bed in this apartment, and yet there are three bodies. Henri is quite happy and comfortable in his drawer, but I knew Edward could no longer sleep on the floorboards for my comfort. I suppose that I could have chosen the floor – hardship and I are now quite devoted bedfellows – but the idea of the warm, soft, clean bed enchanted me. When Edward stood and stretched out his hand to me, I hesitated only a moment before taking it.

I think that once you have loved, loved Passionately and Deeply, the physical type of your first love becomes the only physical type you may find attractive. I knew that Edward was a handsome man – robust, bright-eyed and smooth-skinned – but I felt no attraction to him. I remembered the time, nearly a year past, when he had almost kissed me. I had felt something then, but it was more the thrill of being desired, rather than the thrill of desire. And now, after all the death and misery to which I have been witness, to be desired seems such a vain and trivial aspiration. Still, I went with Edward, knowing I would not be the first woman to bestow her favour where she felt no longing. He had fed me and clothed me when all else was lost. I owed him.

He led me to the bed and sat me down. Stood before me and loosened his cravat, removed his waistcoat, then sat beside me.

“How I wish you would have let me buy you a blue dress, Gette,” he said, tenderly loosening my hair from its bonds. “It would have shown up the colour of your eyes.”

“I am in mourning, Edward,” I replied.

He leaned in, laid a gentle kiss upon my neck. I felt nothing. Nothing. I had deliberately blocked up the passages to feeling. It was the only way to protect myself. His hands wandered to my breasts, his fingers slipping inside my bodice. I started to tremble, but not with desire. With revulsion. He felt me shake and he turned his face up to mine, fixed me within his gaze. Without knowing why, I began to cry.

“Gette?” he said.

“I’m sorry, Edward.”

He pulled away from me. “Do not be sorry. We can sleep here next to one another and we need not touch. Unless you need the comfort of my arms in the coldest part of the night.”

“Thank you,” I said, though it was probably more a whisper. My throat had closed over and I could barely speak.

I stripped down to my chemise and slid between the covers, let the heavy material fall over me. Edward lay beside me, turned to me, touching my hair. I fell asleep like that.

Last night, Edward did not press me, and yet we slept again in the same bed, like brother and sister. I do not know how long this can continue, but if I spent time contemplating it I should be more miserable than I am already. I know Edward dearly wants me – I can see it in his gaze, I could feel it in the chaste goodbye kiss he pressed to my cheek this morning before he went downstairs to work. Who am I to refuse him? What else do I have to exchange for my keep? It is not as though I am a virgin and must save my maidenhead for the man I shall marry. I have loved and my love is gone. He shall not come again. What matters it if I lie with another now? Edward has been good and kind to me and to Henri. Perhaps in the future he may marry me and be Henri’s father.

I cannot bear the thought. Forgive me my ingratitude.

Wednesday, 7th January 1795

How I hate to depend upon generosity. Edward will not let me help him with anything. He has a maid come three times a week to the apartment, and all is to be left to her. He says I must concentrate

solely on regaining my health and taking care of the infant, and that he will not hear any protests otherwise. But the more I take from him, the more I feel that I owe. The situation is rapidly becoming unbearable, and only the remembrance of my husband, not yet two weeks in his watery grave, stops me from surrendering my body to Edward. The loss is so fresh that to give myself to Edward would amount to a gross disloyalty. Yet he expects it, I know he does. He has not pressed me, but I see he is waiting patiently, knowing that soon my own conscience will send me into his embrace.

I cannot despise Edward, in spite of his expectations. He is so good to us, so solicitous of Henri, giving him cordials and the like to help him become stronger and fatter. Edward is also the first rational adult with whom I have spoken for many months. Virgil, towards the end, was half out of his wits with laudanum, Henri is just an infant, and we never had friends in Solgreve. So it is nice to have somebody to listen, to offer sympathy, to be rational and responsible. I need it.

Last night, we sat at the table finishing our supper. I was feeding a reluctant Henri some mashed pumpkin – how quickly he has become fussy over food, when scarce a week ago there was nothing for him to eat – and Edward began to ask about the future.

“What do you think you’ll do, Gette, when you’re recovered?”

I had barely given it a thought. He misread my confusion.

“I do not mean that I intend to remove you from my apartment any time soon,” he said quickly. Then,

with a self-conscious laugh, "I hope I didn't give you that impression."

"No, no," I replied. "Only I haven't thought much about the future. It seems so bleak and cold."

"Spring will come again," Edward said, slicing some cheese and folding it in bread. "It may not seem so at the moment, but it will. Perhaps you will remarry. Have you written yet to your parents? Do they know of your latest misfortune?"

I felt my breath trapped in my lungs. He didn't know. Of course he didn't, I had told no-one.

"Gette?"

"My parents are dead," I said, pretending to concentrate very hard on feeding Henri.

"Dead? Then you have an inheritance?"

I shook my head. "They were traitors to the revolution. The government of France took their property."

"Gette, I'm sorry. I had no idea. How much loss you've had to bear, you poor, poor child." He reached a hand across the table, but I did not respond. Henri took a breath and, for reasons only known to him, began to cry loudly.

"Sh, sh, little one," I said, dropping the spoon and putting him on my shoulder. "Don't cry, don't cry."

Edward waited while Henri screamed his lungs out, then by degrees fell to whimpering and then sleepy snuffles.

"And Virgil had nothing to leave you, I suppose?" he asked.

"No."

"Georgette, how did he die?"

"He grew ill. You know how prone he was to illness."

“I see. The way you spoke on the evening you arrived, I assumed he had died suddenly.”

“It was sudden. It was a shock.”

“And Flood had nothing to do with it?”

“Flood? Why would he?” No force in the universe was going to draw from me the secret I knew about Solgreve. I especially was not going to reveal it to Edward, who would have reason to develop a terrible guilt for the small part he may have played in it.

“Flood was a sinister man,” he said.

“Flood was nothing more than an old fool,” I replied, keeping my voice even. “I shall be glad never to return to Solgreve.” And then I remembered my wedding band. You see, Diary, how haphazard my memory has become. My own wedding band – it had slipped down a corridor in my mind and been forgotten. I gasped.

“What is it?” Edward asked.

“I have just remembered. I pawned my wedding band for the money to come to York. I intended to find work or borrow some money to return for it.”

“I shall lend you the money.”

“No, Edward, you have already done so much.”

“I shall *give* you the money,” he said imperiously. “You must have your ring. What else do you have to remember your marriage by?”

I felt helpless and desolate, and tears once more pricked at my eyes. I stood and took Henri to his drawer.

Edward called after me, “Gette, be not so proud. Let me help you.”

“I do not wish to think of it now,” I said.

So here I am, faced with the choice. To leave my wedding ring in a shop in Solgreve, perhaps never to see it again. Or to let Edward give me the money and admit finally that I can no longer remain chaste in his bed at nights. I tell myself the ring is not important. But it is important, desperately so. And then, if my marriage was so sacred that I must retrieve the ring, it must also be too sacred a bond for me to abuse it by lying with Edward so soon after I have been widowed. Perhaps you think me an idiot, Diary. Perhaps you think that I should merely take money from Edward for as long as he is fool enough to give it to me, but many months past I led him to believe that I desired him. And it is that belief which convinces him his patience will reward him, and I must take responsibility for it.

Sunday, 11th January 1795.

Where to begin?

I am in Whitby. I am alone.

There, that is a start. Now I shall try to pull threads of sense from the confusion and write this down, for I have reached the nadir of my affliction and must understand it in order to continue drawing breath.

Last night Henri lay upon a rug in front of the fire, amusing Edward and me with his smiles and gurgles and attempts to roll over. I noticed at one point Edward's firm hand pressed into Henri's side, as he leaned over to kiss him, and I felt the first glimmer of what might be an appreciation for Edward as a man, not just as a friend. At that moment, Edward looked up and his eyes met mine, and I suppose he saw affirmation there. And so the evening's outcome had been decided.

After Henri slept – my dear, dear Henri – Edward poured me a glass of wine and we sat up by the fire, talking in quiet voices in the dark so we did not wake the baby. We spoke of Virgil, and our tears fell freely. We spoke of his passion and his gentle humour, we remembered things he had said and done, we admired lines of his poetry and laughed at his vain weaknesses. Hours passed in this manner, and at the other side of this reminiscing I felt a little more reconciled to my loss. Do not mistake me: the pain was still very great, I remain raw with grief, and I still cannot believe that I will not see my husband again. But talking about him brought me a sneaking joy, a pride that I had known and loved the best of all men. It helped me think of approaching the future, of living my life always steeped in his memory, trying to find some small happiness because Virgil would have wanted me to find it, I know he would have.

When our conversation had stilled and it could be avoided no longer, Edward rose from his chair and knelt before me. I put my arms around his shoulders and he pressed his head into my belly. I stroked his hair and closed my eyes and, because we had been so much involved with memories of Virgil, I imagined it was Virgil's hair I was stroking. And then, it wasn't so bad. Edward's touch became Virgil's touch in my imagination, and his fingers as they pushed into my sides no longer made me shudder with distaste. Perfectly normal for my husband to touch me in that manner. Perfectly normal for my husband to kiss my lips, gently at first then with more force, his tongue moving into my mouth, his hands pushing my head back against the chair.

I felt myself go weak. My eyes remained closed, and every flicker and spark I felt was for Virgil. He unfastened the stays of my bodice, slowly stripped me down to my chemise.

“Gette,” he said softly, and because it was not Virgil’s voice, I said, “Shh.” Maybe he thought I didn’t want to wake the baby. He made no other sound. I heard his clothes drop to the ground, and then his hot body was against mine. He pushed up my chemise and I wriggled out of it, feeling the fire warm on my skin. Fingertips brushed my breasts, light and tentative. My body responded, remembering every touch that Virgil had ever bestowed upon it. Kisses descended upon me and I wore them gladly just as I would have worn Virgil’s.

I have spoken about my poor memory, about my fear that I am becoming addled in my mind. I know not when the precise moment was, but as Edward made love to me it suddenly and really became Virgil who was in my embrace. I do not know how to explain it better than that. I still had my eyes closed, and underneath my fingertips I really *could* feel Virgil’s long limbs and his fine hair. I gasped when it happened, and my lover took it as a gasp of desire. He pulled my legs gently forward and pushed them apart, clung to me and fumbled for a moment before entering me. Yes, it was Virgil. I felt my lips making his name, but the sound remained trapped in my throat. The hard pressure of his body against mine was divine. I moved with him, heard his breathing near my ear, and I loved him with every particle of my soul. Hot tears ran down my face and he kissed them away. His passion built. I locked my legs

around his back. But when the moment of his ecstasy arrived, he suddenly pulled out of me. The shock made me open my eyes, and it wasn't Virgil, of course it wasn't. It was just Edward, his eyes half-closed in sexual release, spilling his seed on my belly.

In an instant, my body began to shudder. Edward fell back on his haunches and I drew my legs up towards me, reached for my chemise to cover myself. The awful stickiness of his issue upon my skin revolted me. My hands flew to my face, and I hid behind them in shame.

"Gette?" he said, concerned.

"Be quiet," I said, "you'll wake Henri."

Henri. I glanced towards the drawer. My son. My husband's son. He was in the same room as my sin. What kind of woman was I?

Edward chuckled, gathered his clothes. "Henri could sleep through anything."

I could not look at him. I kept my eyes down, made no motion to get dressed. I wanted him to go away and I wanted to clean every trace of him off me.

"Oh, Gette, please," he said, standing and dressing himself. "It's not so bad, is it? I'm not so bad."

I merely shook my head, refusing to meet his eyes.

He touched my hair. "You are so beautiful, my dear. Come, let's go to bed."

"I'm not tired. I shall sit up a while."

He sighed, knelt once more beside me. "I know what might cheer you up. The day after tomorrow we shall travel to Solgreve to fetch your wedding ring. Here." He reached into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a handful of money, offered it to me. "Look, we have sufficient to buy it back three times."

This only made me feel worse, for if I had suspected myself a whore before, his handing me money directly after I had allowed him to use me was proof of my suspicions. Still, God help me, I reached out and took the money. "Thank you, Edward," I said softly.

"Coming to bed?"

"Not just yet."

He kissed my cheek. I turned my head away from him.

"I understand," he said, though I don't believe he did. He stood and gave my right shoulder a squeeze, then turned and went to bed.

He had left his cravat upon the floor next to the fire. I picked it up and scrubbed his seed off me, then cast it into the flames. I sat for a long time, naked, with a handful of banknotes, trying to feel nothing. I heard Henri grizzle a little and snuffle in his sleep and turned my head in that direction. Was he having a bad dream? The thought pierced my heart. I stood and pulled on my chemise and went to him, sat beside the drawer and allowed my fingers to caress the silken hair on his head. My touch brought him peace. I watched him for a long time. I seemed to remember, not long since, making a promise that I would never see his innocence compromised, and here I was, clutching the money Edward had given me, having betrayed Henri's father in the same room as the babe slept. I became disgusted with myself and I started to cry. I saw my hand upon my son's head, and my fingers looked bony, my wrists scrawny. I was not a fit mother.

I am not a fit mother.

Somewhere in the distance I heard church bells striking four. It was Sunday morning. Out there, I thought, somewhere in this city there was surely a good Christian woman with plump arms and a full bosom who would be a better mother than I could ever be. And so I formed my resolve.

While Edward slept, I dressed. He kept his firewood in a basket by the hearth. I carefully removed all the wood and then gently took Henri from his drawer and wrapped him up tightly in the basket. I used my second dress for more padding, ensuring he was sufficiently warm. I tucked the money into my stays and without a word to Edward, I left the apartment with Henri.

Outside the morning was cold, but not as cold as I had feared. I followed the direction in which I had heard the church bells. The streets were empty, chilled. I checked Henri again and again. Still he slept, warm and safe in his cocoon. My body shook as though it purposed to fall to pieces. Cold silence oppressed my ears. When I breathed, fog stood out in front of me. I felt as though I were the only person left in the world, layers of loneliness weighed heavily upon me.

My dear child.

I found the church and sat down upon the stone stairs with Henri. I touched his silken cheek with the back of my knuckle and whispered to him in the dark.

“Henri, I hope that one day you will understand why I am doing this. You deserve a better mother than I can ever be, and no doubt the church will find someone, perhaps even today. Someone with a warm hearth, someone who is not always on the edge of starvation, someone who does not prostitute herself.

Perhaps you will have brothers and sisters, and toys to play with.” My voice broke and I held a sob deep inside. It sank within me and bruised my soul. “Farewell forever, my love,” I said, holding my cheek against his. “Dawn is not far away, and the rector shall find you and take you in.” I could hear the sweet sucking sound of his sleeping breath and felt my heart would burst.

I placed the bundle carefully on the top step, nearest the door. The morning was very still, but I made sure he was sheltered from any icy breezes. I pulled the blankets tighter around him, up near his little face and the top of his head.

I kissed him once and then walked away.

I walked forever. I felt no pain, no exhaustion. I merely put one foot in front of the other and walked. A vast emptiness inhabited me and the only way to endure it was to keep moving. Daylight crept into the sky and I was still walking. Eventually, a coach came past and stopped beside me.

“Are you in trouble, Ma’am?”

I looked up, bewildered. Then I remembered that for once I was well-dressed and must look like a person worthy of attention.

The driver was concerned. “Ma’am?”

“I . . .”

“Where are you going?”

“Whitby.”

“I have room inside. I’m taking packages to Whitby.”

Now I had stopped walking, my legs threatened to give beneath me. The driver got down off the coach and helped me inside. “Shall I take you to a doctor, Ma’am?”

“No, no. Take me to a guesthouse.” Then, remembering my manners, I reached for the money inside my stays and held it out in a handful. “I can pay you.”

God bless him, he was a good man. “Now you put that away. You’re sick and you’re lost, and I’m going to Whitby anyways.”

I did as he said, and he closed the carriage door. It was cramped inside, filled with packages. I was hot, burning up, but I began to cool as I sat there among the packages, the motion of the carriage lulling me. Eventually, I slept.

I have known so much pain, Diary. I dare not even turn to the beginning of this book and read over the pages which record earlier happiness, for the contrast would be too much to bear. I can only take comfort in knowing that I have done the right thing, that Henri will have a good home. Why, by now, he may very well be settled with his new family, amongst warmth and merriment, receiving kisses and cuddles. He may fret for me for a while, but he will soon forget me. There is not very much of me to remember.

Though I wonder if he had resembled Virgil more, would I have kept him?

It does not pay to wonder about such things. I have sufficient misery. It would have been selfish to keep him under any circumstances. I will rest here in Whitby a few days, for this guesthouse is comfortable and clean. Then, later in the week, I will return briefly to Solgreve to rescue my wedding band. After that? Well, who can know the future.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Wednesday, 21st January 1795

I wonder, do houses have memories? This old cottage, here in Solgreve, for instance. Have events to which it has been witness imprinted themselves upon the walls and then seeped into the bricks and foundations to lie there, dormant, for years?

This shall be the last thing I shall ever write. One can achieve an awesome state of clarity when one realises one is truly the plaything of Fate. It is simple. One says, “Oh, I see, so now I shall die and that shall be an end of it,” and one accepts it. I am to die on a Wednesday. Strange. I have never held a particular prejudice against Wednesdays.

The pressure of the last few months has bent me and bent me and bent me, but finally I am broken. If what I write seems bleated of feeling, it is because I have no capacity left to feel. You will soon understand.

I spent a few days in Whitby. Every night I dreamed

of Henri and would wake in tears, craving the sweet scent of his breath or the bestowal of one of his little, wet smiles. I told myself again and again it was for the best, and tried to diminish my sadness by imagining him ensconced in a grand house with maids and cooks and warm arms to hold him.

During the days at Whitby, I would take long walks along the beach, through the town, and sometimes I would sit for hours in the markets, no matter that it was cold. I would watch the actions and listen to the conversations of others and take comfort in their mundaneness. I know not how many conversations I overheard about the best way to preserve apples or the possibility of more snow before the end of winter. But it was quite a different conversation that I heard the morning before yesterday which has broken me. Imagine, had I left earlier, had I chosen the opposite end of the market to sit, or had I decided to linger upon the beach, I would never have known.

Two women stood near a stall selling fish oil, and they conversed about their husbands and their daughters and the coal man, and then one of them, a large woman in a grey dress, said, "My niece from York has written me a letter this morning."

"How is she?" said the other.

"She is well. But she had a sad tale. An abandoned child was found dead on the steps of the church near her house."

Upon this moment my blood turned to cold angles.

"Oh, no. The poor child. How old?"

"Just a babe. Tiny little thing."

And upon this moment I thought, it could not possibly be Henri. For he was warm and sleepy when I

left him. This must be some other unfortunate child whose mother was not careful enough.

“Did it freeze to death?”

“No, it suffocated. The mother had wrapped it so tight, in a mourning dress of all things.”

And upon this moment I knew it was my child about whom these women spoke, as though he were just an object for their brief consternation. The horror was indescribable.

“A mourning dress? Fancy.”

“My niece said the rector told her the child was weak and sickly to begin with, as though it had starved a while first.”

“Its mother must have been a madwoman.”

A madwoman. Yes, perhaps I am. The women walked in another direction and I sat like a statue, for I feared moving. To move would be to fall to pieces. I resisted, and still do, resist the images that wish to draw themselves in my mind. It will do me no good to know how long Henri lived after I left him. If it was quick, or if he cried or struggled, or if the rector was only a few minutes away when his little heart stopped beating. It will do me no good to wonder had I been less tired, less oppressed by grief, whether I would have made a better decision about Henri's future, or even if I would have been attentive enough to notice that the clothes were too close around his face in the basket, that he need only turn his head to be smothered in my mourning dress. The lot has been cast. I have been dealt my Fate.

And so, you see, they are all dead, all those whom I dared to love. I sat at the market for hours, and I wished nothing so much as to die too, but that would

be an end to my suffering and I deserve much worse than to die. I deserve to contemplate daily, hourly, eternally, that I suffocated my own child.

I returned to Solgreve, bought back my wedding ring, and have had a day or two to decide upon how I shall punish myself. And I have decided.

This morning I visited Mr Edghill the surgeon to make a purchase, and then I mailed a letter to Edward. It said simply that Henri was dead and that I had returned to Solgreve, to the seat of my last happiness. And here in Solgreve, I wrote, I intended to die also. Mr Edghill had given me poison for mice and I would take a large dose that very afternoon (which is today, which is a Wednesday) and I requested Edward come to bury me as soon as possible. Bury me in my own garden and plant a rosebush over my bones and not tell a soul, so that Flood will never know I'm there and I can stay in the ground.

Buried in Solgreve. A fitting punishment. But Edward does not know that, and nor shall he. Virgil's letter I will stitch into the binding of my Diary to follow this last entry. I shall not send it to its designated recipient, for it reads like the speculations of a madman. I know everything in it is true, of course, for I have seen the Wraiths and met with Flood and know that such things as are beyond explanation exist in the world. But I cannot expect others to believe it.

And as for you, Diary, you who have been my indifferent companion through all that has befallen me, you are to remain after me as my memories, as the house's memories. I shall take you to pieces and hide you in the foundations and the walls. And perhaps

some day somebody will find you and read about my life and have a little sympathy for me, a woman who chose eternal torture to punish her guilt.

Lying deep in the earth.

A letter to the Constabulary:

Virgil Marley, St Mary's Lane, Solgreve.

17th December, 1794

Dear Sir,

I write of acts, arcane and heinous, which take place in Solgreve. A certain Doctor there, named Aaron Elijah Flood, has his residence in the foundations of the ruined Solgreve Abbey. In his chambers, he performs mystical science designed to prolong human life. Flood himself is over three centuries old. Others in Solgreve can expect to live to at least one century in age, with good health and no pain.

The price to be paid for this prolonging of life is dear. One thousand years ago, Solgreve was a site for heathen worship. Three priests in this godless religion cursed the ground in Solgreve for their own wicked ends. The curse works in this manner: normally, the soul of a man departs the body upon the point of death and begins its journey (no man knows, still, where this journey leads). If a body is buried in Solgreve, however, the flesh acts as an anchor for the soul. The soul is called back to the body and buried with it, thus denying it its true passage: no heaven nor hell, no rebirth nor rejoining the vast spirit of the Universe.

By far the most horrifying aspect of this entombment of the soul is the soul's awareness of its lot. They are buried forever *and they know*. The unfortunates interred in the earth in Solgreve are as though buried alive, trapped forever in their graves, conscious that they may never leave. Misery has saturated the ground in this village.

The benefit of this curse for the heathen priests, and now for Flood, is that the souls may be extracted and used for other purposes. The soul, you see, is a small sliver of eternal power. With these pieces of eternity trapped, Flood draws upon their power to prolong his life, and grants immaculate health to the villagers in exchange for their co-operation in his art.

The extraction of souls was taught to Flood by the three heathen priests, whom Flood calls the Wraiths. He called them up from their graves (they were killed and buried here during the Christian conversion) and now they work for him. In exchange, Flood uses Solgreve's evil magic to find ways to bring them back to life. They are gradually gaining more density, but are a horror to behold, being composed of old bones and evil.

I have read Flood's writing on extractions, which he calls "soul magic". I do not comprehend entirely, but will include here, if my memory will serve me, some of the lines which I have read:

"To use its power, the soul must be trapped

where the practitioner can see its light. One takes an appropriate vessel, with one hand on the body and one on the vessel, and calls forth the soul with these words: *spirit flows from right to left*. A practitioner must be an adept of many years' standing to be effective in this wise. Once the soul is immured and visible in the receptacle, the receptacle need only be caressed to release its power into the practitioner's hands."

Beyond the many bodies in Solgreve Cemetery, Flood sometimes imports bodies from other places and buries them shallowly in his chambers, long enough to perform soul magic. Their bodies are then dumped in the poor's hole. Flood also dissects many bodies, for he is curious to know to which fibres of the body the soul is attached. I do not believe he has yet found this answer.

The local Reverend, Brodie Fowler, is complicit in this black art, as are other local authorities (including constabulary and physicians). This village feeds off the despair interred in its soil for a few selfish years of extra life. Dr Flood must be arrested and forced to relinquish his soul magic, if an eternity of atrocity is to be averted.

Yours in truth
VIRGIL MARLEY

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Maisie stopped reading and looked up. Mila's mouth was open in shock. Sacha said, "Read the letter again, Maisie." She did so.

"It's too awful," said Mila, finding her voice at last. "Too unspeakably *awful*."

"Do you think it's true?" Sacha asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?" said Maisie. "The rest is true. We've seen the Wraiths, we know Flood is still alive, we know the village is obsessed with the graveyard, why should we start doubting now?" Her mind kept returning to Virgil's phrase, *the unfortunates interred in the earth in Solgreve are as though buried alive*. What would it feel like to be trapped in the ground? Frantic? Terrified? Desperate? She thought about her grandmother, her ambitions for the Afterlife. If Sybill was still stuck there in the ground, she wasn't progressing towards eternal bliss

as she had hoped. She must be mad with despair. And she'd only been dead four months. What of those who had been trapped in the earth for centuries?

"But what can we do?" Maisie said, closing the diary and putting it to one side. "I've scarcely a week left."

"You have to do something," Mila said firmly. "You have to rescue Sybill."

"Me? Why me?"

"It's your path. Don't you see, this is why you've been brought here."

"What can *I* do?" Maisie demanded. "This problem has been around for centuries. Sybill couldn't fix it, why me?"

Sacha touched her wrist. "Don't worry, Maisie, we're in this together."

Maisie didn't look at him, kept her eyes fixed on Mila.

"It's your path," Mila said again.

"I don't even know what that means."

"You should. You're given your power for a reason." Mila picked up the diary and opened it once more to the letter. "And the only way to defeat magic is with like magic."

"Meaning?"

"You're going to have to perform some soul magic of your own."

Maisie felt a tremble start in her ankles and was glad she was sitting down. "This is what Sybill was doing out in the cemetery, right? She wasn't vandalising the graves, she was trying to dig someone up, to extract a soul."

"She must have been," Sacha said.

“We’ll never be able to get into a grave. The way the villagers watch the cemetery, and the Wraiths, it’s simply impossible.”

Sacha shook his head. “Not impossible. We don’t need to go to the cemetery.” He tilted his head towards the back garden. “We have Georgette.”

The knock on his bedroom door surprised Adrian, because he’d assumed he was home alone. Janet and Roland had gone out for dinner. But when he glanced at the clock by his bed, he realised it was after eleven. He had been immersed in his vocal score for five hours.

“Come in,” he called, closing the book and placing it neatly on the side table.

Roland opened the door. “Sorry, didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No,” Adrian said indicating the score. “I was reading.”

Roland glanced at the cover. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Adrian had just been cast in his first lead role with Churchwheel’s: Manrico in *Il Trovatore*.

“Can I have a quick word with you?” Roland said.

“Sure,” Adrian replied.

“Janet and I just had a chat over dinner. We know you and Maisie are interested in buying a house this year.”

“That’s right.”

“We’ve decided to sell one of our investment properties and lend you the money. You’ll still have to pay it back, of course, but we won’t charge you interest.”

Adrian sat up, excited. “Roland, that would be wonderful. I don’t know how to say thank you.”

“We want to give you a head start. It’s tough now for young people.” Roland looked at the ground then up at Adrian again. “Janet has a small condition, though.”

“What is it?”

“Maisie must be employed full-time before we’ll lend you the money.”

“Just full-time? Not full-time in music?”

Roland laughed. “Well, that’s what she wanted to stipulate, but I told her she’s being unreasonable. Maisie is an adult, if she wants to work somewhere else, that’s up to her. But it would have to be stable, full-time work. Janet’s worried that she’ll become lazy and dependent. Of course, if you two were to decide to have children, we wouldn’t expect her to work.”

“I can’t wait to tell Maisie,” Adrian said.

“We’ll put the place on the market after the weekend,” Roland said. “If we’re lucky, we might have it sold in a couple of months and you kids can start looking for a place of your own.” Roland glanced around him. “You’re both getting a bit old to be living here. You need your own space.”

“Exactly,” Adrian answered, realising he sounded too enthusiastic, but not bothering to check himself. “That’s what I’m always saying to Maisie.”

Roland smiled and nodded, said goodnight and left. Adrian reached immediately for the phone. Could life get any better? The perfect job, a new home on the horizon, and Maisie coming back in a little over a week. He couldn’t wait to get started living.

When the phone rang at about one o’clock on Thursday afternoon, Maisie was dozing in the chair by the fire. Sacha had put the fireplace back together

before heading off to work, and Mila was somewhere in the back room, reading or perhaps sleeping. They'd all had a late night. Maisie sat up with a start and reached for the receiver.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

"Adrian, hi. I wasn't expecting to hear from you."

"I have good news."

Maisie tucked her legs up under her, made herself comfortable. "What is it?"

"Your parents are going to lend us the money to buy a place of our own."

Yes, she supposed that under ordinary circumstances, that was good news. It wasn't Adrian's fault that at the moment all she could think about was whether or not she wanted to try to solve the problem in Solgreve, or just run away from it. She feigned excitement. "Really? That's great."

"Isn't it?"

"What's the catch?"

Adrian chuckled. "You don't trust your parents."

"I don't trust my mother. What's the catch?"

"You have to be in full-time employment."

"She didn't specify which kind of employment?"

"No. I think Roland convinced her it would be a bit harsh to demand you go back to the orchestra. But still, you're going to have to get work as soon as you come home."

"No problem. I'm going into business for myself."

"Doing what?"

"Telling fortunes."

A long silence. Maisie felt further away from Adrian than she had ever felt. Obviously, he couldn't

bring himself to express his opinion about her new scheme, just as she couldn't tell him about the momentous decision she was facing right now. They were suddenly strangers.

"Adrian?" she said after a while. "This is an expensive way to give me the silent treatment. I take it you're not happy with my choice of career."

"Not happy? I'm *horrified*."

"Horrified? That's a strong word."

"Maisie," he said slowly, "your mother told me stuff about your grandmother. I'd be happy if you didn't want anything to do with her legacy."

"Mum really got to you, didn't she?"

"No, Maisie, if you'd heard what I heard ..."

"Go on then, tell me."

He proceeded to tell her, in a whisper, about some kind of weird seance Janet had witnessed when she was a child. Maisie listened carefully, not liking what she heard but determined not to let it affect her decision. When he had finished she said, "But Mum might have been exaggerating."

"She didn't act like she was exaggerating. She was really freaked out when she was telling me."

"I won't be doing seances. I'll just be reading fortunes." She could hear the flap on the mail-slot snap.

"Maisie, you know you're not that kind of person, not really. You've never been into that alternative stuff. It's one of the reasons you never liked Cathy and Sarah."

"But I'm really good at it." And I love it, she wanted to say, but she could sense Adrian wouldn't want to hear that.

"Let's not talk about this now."

Good idea. She had too much else on her mind.

“Maisie,” Adrian continued, “I want you to think about whether you want us to get married when you get home.”

“Is this a proposal?”

“I suppose it is.”

“Sure, I’ll think about it.” She had a sudden vision of herself on her wedding day, pledging herself until death do them part to Adrian, looking into his eyes and knowing that she had been unfaithful to him. It was going to haunt her forever, wasn’t it? Every important moment in her relationship with Adrian was going to be tainted by this. Wedding anniversaries, birthdays and Christmases, the birth of their first child – all the key moments were going to jolt her conscience. Her heart contracted with pity for Adrian. He deserved better. If she weren’t so selfish she’d tell him now, get it over with, let him break it off with her. But she was selfish, she knew she was. She felt so overwhelmed that she groaned.

“It’s not that bad, is it?” Adrian asked. “The idea of marrying me isn’t so bad?”

“Of course not. I was just thinking about organising a wedding. And my mother. She’ll boss us around.”

“We can do it however you want. We can go to a registry office while nobody’s looking.”

“Let’s discuss all of this when I get home.”

“Not long now.”

“No, not long.” Mila had entered the room and was hovering nearby, doing a bad impersonation of somebody who wasn’t listening in. Maisie turned her back on her. “It must be late over there,” she said.

“Yes, I’d better get to bed. I’ve got my score here for *Il Trovatore*.”

“Exciting. Better than a girlfriend.”

“Not quite, but close,” Adrian said, without a glimmer of humour. Maisie smiled to herself.

“Well, goodnight, sweetheart,” he said.

“I’ll see you soon.” She hung up and turned back to Mila.

“Was that your boyfriend?” Mila asked.

“Yes. He just proposed.”

“And you said . . .?”

“I haven’t answered. You know, it’s like a bloody arranged marriage. My parents found him for me, they’ll set us up in a house if I do what they say, I’ll probably be obliged to name my firstborn after one of them.”

Mila smiled, and held out an envelope. “This arrived.”

Maisie took it from her. The address was handwritten but there was no sender information on the back.

“I’ll be off tomorrow,” Mila said casually as Maisie picked open the envelope.

“You’re going?” she said, looking up startled. She couldn’t leave now. Maisie needed her.

“Yes, I’ve got to move my things out of the house I’m renting. The owners are back from France on the weekend.” She checked her watch. “I’m going for a walk. Would you like to come?”

Maisie shook her head, trying to control her anger and fear. How could Mila leave her in this mess? How did she expect Maisie to solve anything when she was so new at all this psychic stuff?

“Well then. I’ll see you in an hour or so.” Mila slipped out the front door. A blast of cold air rushed in but was soon shut out again. Maisie wandered into her bedroom and dropped down on the unmade bed, lay on her stomach and buried her face in Sacha’s pillow. It was rich with the scent of him. She breathed it deeply. She had never felt so helpless. Sacha wanted to try to find Georgette’s remains, extract her soul, and go after Dr Flood. Every thought of it horrified her. And it was Mila who was keeping the pressure on the hardest, telling her over and over that it was her “path”. This kind of thing was supposed to happen to people better-equipped than Maisie Fielding; she was far too ordinary to deal with such a huge responsibility.

But what of the people in the ground? Already Mila had corrected her on that. They weren’t people, they were souls, which made it infinitely worse. A person may live in ignorance, but a soul *knows* where it is supposed to be. And no soul is supposed to be trapped in the earth in Solgreve.

Maisie flipped over on her back and held the envelope in front of her face. She tipped it up and a letter fell out. She unfolded it and started to read.

You are in great danger. If you have not left Solgreve by the 31st of January, the hooded ghosts whom you have already seen will be instructed to kill you. Please, please, leave the village immediately. From a concerned citizen.
PS. Please, do not mention this letter to anyone. They are all in on it.

“What the ...?” She read it again. Who had written this? Did she have an ally in the community? She looked at the back of the envelope again. Definitely no return address. On the front, though, she noticed that the first letter of her surname had been overwritten. She peered at it. Yes, somebody had definitely written an “F” over some other original first letter. Was it an “H”? She remembered Reverend Fowler accidentally calling her Miss Hartley, getting her name confused with her grandmother’s.

“Reverend, you old sweetie.” Still, it didn’t mean that he was going to help her beat Flood and let all the wrinklies in the village die. Probably quite the opposite, but it was comforting all the same.

She dropped the envelope and letter next to her and closed her eyes to think. The 31st of January – that was Monday night. It was already Thursday. She had about four and a half days to rid the village of an evil that had been practised here for centuries. She repressed a desperate laugh.

“Okay,” she said to the ceiling. “Okay. I’ll go dig her up.”

Maisie withheld revealing her decision until later that night. She was angry at Mila, and even a little at Sacha who seemed to think it was reasonable that his mother leave when she was needed the most.

After Mila had gone to bed, Maisie sat, staring into the fire, contemplating her fate.

“What’s wrong?” Sacha asked.

Maisie tilted her head towards Mila’s room. “She’s deserting us.”

“She thinks she’s doing the right thing.”

“Yeah, it’s my ‘path.’ Not hers. Sounds like a cop-out.”

“My mother doesn’t take such things lightly.”

Maisie bit her tongue. The last thing she needed was to get Sacha offside.

“I’ve decided what to do. I think.”

He nodded. “Go on.”

“I’ll do it. I’ll dig her up. If you’ll help me, that is.”

“Of course I’ll help you. I feel just as responsible as you do for solving this problem.”

“But there are a few obstacles in our way.”

“Such as?”

“We don’t know if Edward actually buried her like she asked him. There might be nothing left of her. And the rosebushes down the back aren’t two hundred years old.”

He smiled. “You forget, I know these gardens well. I was here the day the old rosebush was removed. By then it was just thorny branches growing out of control. I know exactly where Georgette’s buried. Directly under the laundry window.”

Maisie nodded. “Okay, but once we find her – if we find her – I don’t fully understand the process for extracting her soul. The soul must be trapped where the practitioner can see its light – what does that mean?”

“We’ll have to have a closer look at Virgil’s letter. We’ve still got a week up our sleeves.”

She shook her head. She handed the Reverend’s letter to Sacha. “This came today. I think it’s from Reverend Fowler.”

Sacha quickly scanned the letter then handed it back. “Jesus, Maisie, my life was a lot less complicated before I met you.”

“So we’ll have to do it . . .”

“This weekend. I’ll bring a pick and shovel back with me tomorrow.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Are you sure the Reverend wrote it?”

“Not absolutely sure.”

“So we can’t go to him for help.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I’m up to this,” Sacha said, then fell silent. Maisie felt the same but didn’t say so.

After a long silence, Maisie said, “Adrian asked me to marry him today.”

“Did you say yes?”

“I said I’d think about it. Do you think I should say yes?”

“It’s none of my business. Not really.”

Maisie knew she was deliberately goading him, seeing if he’d get jealous. The tightening of his jaw was her reward. He turned away, opened the iron box and re-read Virgil’s letter. Maisie watched him.

“Any ideas?”

“Let’s think about it,” Sacha said. “Where can you see the soul’s light?”

“I don’t know. In heaven? In the dark?”

“Maybe that’s too symbolic. Let’s be more literal. He says you need a vessel.”

“A vessel you can see into.”

Sacha nodded. “Glass?”

“Yes. Yes, that makes sense.”

Sacha stood. From the top of the bookshelf he pulled down one of Sybill’s antique lanterns – black

iron and discoloured glass – and brushed the dust off it. He held it out to her. “Shall we try it?”

“We have to try something.”

“Tomorrow night, then?”

“Tomorrow night.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Mila left in a flurry of apologies and promises at seven the next morning. Already a sea breeze was teasing the treetops. It promised to be a cold day, and an even colder night.

She was to spend the day in meditation Mila had said. But it was hard to turn off the chatter in her head. She was frightened. Simple and understandable. Flood had been practising his magic in the village since the sixteenth century and nobody had managed to stop him yet. In fact, he had a pretty good record of getting rid of those who tried. When she had expressed these concerns to Mila, her reassurance had been that Maisie was the first with the right combination of information and psychic power. This, Mila said, was Maisie's destiny.

But then Mila had got in the van and left.

"One thing at a time," Maisie said to herself as she lay down on her bed next to a napping Tabby. If

she could just get through tonight, then she would worry about the rest. The Wraiths weren't coming after her until the thirty-first according to the Reverend's letter. No-one ought to be scared of digging in the garden.

Sacha was sent home from work early again. He let himself in just after three. When Maisie greeted him she noticed tiny white spots on his black jacket.

"It's snowing?" she asked.

"Yes. Not heavily enough to stop us, just enough to make the whole venture unpleasant."

"When shall we do it?"

"We'll wait for full dark." He glanced quickly out the window. Twilight was approaching. The wind blew tiny snowflakes against the glass. "The later the better. If anyone drives down the bottom of the street they may see us out there."

"It's not the kind of night I want to be out of doors."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "Everything will be fine. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. You can still change your mind."

She shook her head. "I can't. You know I can't. There are souls trapped forever in the ground. What happens to them? My grandmother is among them."

He leaned forward and kissed her, stealing her breath from her lips. "Don't think about it. Let's just get through tonight."

At ten o'clock, Maisie ran an extension lead out the laundry door and set up a lamp for illumination in the dark. The wind battered her ears, light snow swirled in frigid gusts. She was wearing so many layers of clothes she could barely move her arms.

Sacha fetched two spades and a pick from the van. He handed her a spade and laid the pick on the ground. “Perhaps we’d be better off doing this without the light on. Our eyes will get used to the dark quickly, and we’ve got at least a metre to get through before we can expect to find anything. I don’t want to draw any attention to what we’re doing.”

“Okay,” Maisie said, crouching to turn the light off.

“We’ll turn it back on when we get deeper. By then it should be nearly midnight. I’m sure nobody in Solgreve is up at midnight.”

Maisie stood and held the spade out in front of her. “Shall we get started?”

“Sure.”

Simultaneously, they plunged their spades into the earth.

The evening was far too cold for a community meeting. The Reverend was annoyed that Margaret King and her lynch mob had rejected his invitation to meet him personally in his heated office during daylight. Clearly she had a keen sense of drama; she wanted the whole town there to hear the showdown.

The Reverend rose, clutching the back of his chair to steady himself. Everyone in the hall looked up. He waited a few moments for the last remnants of conversation to subside. The wind howled over the gutters and forced its way through cracks in the wood. He shivered.

“I wanted to speak with you,” he started. He realised his voice was too tremulous, too feeble, and cleared his throat with purpose. “I wanted to speak with you about Miss Fielding.”

Raised eyebrows and smirks across the room. Walter King said, "What about her?"

"I want you to reconsider your decision about what should be done. The deadline is only a few days away and I think we should –"

"Reverend, Douglas Smith died because of her." This was Margaret. She had just dyed her hair and it was brassy orange under the fluorescent light.

"No. No that's not the case. I can't tell you for certain how it happens that some of us die younger than others, but I assure you there is nothing that anybody from outside can do that could –"

"Rubbish!" snorted Walter King. A few others echoed his anger.

"She is not Sybill Hartley," the Reverend said, trying to keep his voice even and strong. "She is an innocent young woman. Do you want her death on your consciences?"

A few moments of quiet conversation among the circle. With surprise, the Reverend noticed that Dr Honour had pulled himself to his feet.

"Reverend, my sister's grandson is finishing a master's degree in theology in Nottingham."

The Reverend was bewildered. "What? I don't see what this has to do with ..."

Margaret King clapped her hands together loudly. "Yes, perhaps that's what we need in Solgreve – somebody new and fresh in the church." She turned to the Reverend. "How do you feel about retiring, Linden? I don't know if you're equal to the responsibility any more."

"I ..." the Reverend started. "What are you saying?"

“My great-nephew might be willing to take up the post here if you feel you’re no longer able to serve the village,” Dr Honour said.

A mutiny. That’s what this was. That’s why Margaret King had wanted a community meeting. The question of his successor had always been a thorny one. He had never married, had no brothers or sisters. He always knew he would be the last Fowler to preside here in Solgreve, but had so far deferred making a decision about training a replacement. Guilt, perhaps? To explain what happened here in Solgreve was to acknowledge his complicity.

So, should he give in? Let them run him out of his job, perhaps even out of the village? It seemed an easy solution. But he had spent too many years of his life in the certain knowledge that he was destined to perform this task until the day he died. It had been in his family for centuries. Just because he was the last Fowler didn’t mean he should allow himself to be the least.

“I *am* able to serve the village,” the Reverend said emphatically.

“Then comply with our wishes,” Tony Blake said.

“Yes, yes,” the Reverend said. “I shall go to him tomorrow and make sure he knows.”

“And no more of this shrinking from your duty,” said Margaret imperiously. “We look to you to be a strong leader, not a mouse.”

The meeting broke up shortly after. The Reverend sagged in his chair, waiting for everyone to leave. One or two gave him an encouraging word and Tony Blake patted his shoulder. The hall slowly emptied. He stared at his hands in his lap. They were so old, he was so old. But apart from the occasional twinge in his joints, he

was as healthy as a horse. No heart problems, no lung problems; liver, kidneys, bladder, all in good order. It was unnatural. He recoiled, suddenly seeing himself as an unnatural being, some distant variation of what Flood had become. If he had been born into a different family, would he be dead already? Dead and on his way to whatever Afterlife was set out for him? In a way, he was just as trapped as all those others, all the souls held at a distance from their true destiny . . .

No, don't think of it. It may not be true. Just a half-remembered phrase he had heard from his father. The Reverend would prefer to believe that Flood was sinister but largely benign. That he performed his miracles through some kind of science that the rest of the world did not yet understand. Nobody suffered, or at least, only those who tried to stop him, and that was akin to self-defence.

Which brought his thoughts back to Maisie Fielding. What was he to do? He pulled himself out of his chair, turned off the lights and locked up the hall, then walked down the hill towards his own house. Sleep on it, that's what he would do.

But, as always when he had an imminent meeting with Flood, he could not sleep. Around midnight, he gave up trying and rose, went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. He filled the kettle and brought it down on the stove. His feet were cold so he wandered back to his bedroom for slippers. There he stopped a few moments to gaze out the window. The snow had been falling steadily, a fine layer spread out over road and pathways, collected on gravestones and the low cemetery walls. He looked towards Sybill's cottage and something caught his eye, some light reflected on

the snow on the far side of the house. Was it coming from the house itself? Something seemed curious about it, something seemed misplaced, and it made him nervous.

He was reminded of a time he had been walking down near the cliffs – it must have been nearly two years ago – and he had glanced up into Sybill's garden from the road. He couldn't even remember what he had been doing out so late. Perhaps, like tonight, it was merely sleeplessness that had driven him outside, but on that occasion it had been summer and pleasant to be near the sea in the balmy dark.

She had been standing under that old oak, a fire glowing before her, robed in grey, her hands over her head and calling out something . . . her words had been snatched from her mouth on a passing gust of wind. He had gone on his way – they already knew she was a witch – and been glad that only he had witnessed it. Others may have stoned her house or killed her cat or crossed one of those lines of legality which would draw attention to the village. But he hadn't known at the time that Sybill wasn't harmless. He hadn't known at the time that she was making contact with the Wraiths, was, in fact, only a month or two away from succeeding. One of them, perhaps tired of waiting for Flood's promise of embodiment to be fulfilled, had gone to her for help. It saw Sybill as its chance, told her things, laid plans with her. Plans which had, of course, been foiled.

The kettle whistling brought him out of his reverie. He went to the kitchen to take it off the stove. Without stopping to consider how cold it was out there, he opened the door and shuffled down his front stairs and

into the street, stood on the cobbles and peered into the darkness for a better view of Sybill's cottage. Snowflakes collected on his flannel dressing gown. Yes, some light in the back garden reflected on the snow lying on the curve of the road.

Surely things hadn't progressed so far. Surely this young woman wasn't trying to do what Sybill had done.

He went inside, wrapped himself quickly in overcoat, scarf, shoes. As loath as he was to go out in such inclement weather, he would have to make sure.

The cold could not have been harsher were he naked in it. He shivered and shuddered and, had his teeth been in, they would be jumping around between his trembling jaws. He walked purposefully, head down. He cut through the cemetery, looking quickly left and right for any sign of the Wraiths. They sometimes hovered about near their original graves, almost as though longing to go back to them. The Reverend found it impossible to think of them as having once been real people. They were to him monsters. In any case, they were nowhere in sight and he was nearly to the cliff's edge. He turned, and peered back up the road towards Sybill's garden. He could see nothing except the same reflected glow he had spotted from home. Yes, there was a light on outside. But it was not the flickering of firelight. So, the young woman was not performing some ritual of witchcraft. Still, he was outside now, and his curiosity led him to cross the road, stand close to a cluster of trees, and try to see exactly what she was doing. Maybe he was being an old fool. Maybe she had just installed an outdoor light in the hopes of keeping the Wraiths at bay.

He was not being an old fool. If it hadn't been winter, if branches in his line of vision hadn't been bare, he would never have seen them. But he did. The young woman and a man – perhaps the same fellow who had tended Sybill's gardens, he couldn't be quite sure at this distance – were digging a large pit behind the house.

The shock was electric. The Reverend jumped back into shadow, waited a few minutes to catch his breath, then crossed the road again and hurried home. Perhaps seeing a young couple digging in their garden at midnight would be looked upon as merely curious in other communities in the world. But in Solgreve, to dig up the earth was a far more portentous act. What on earth did the two of them think they were doing? And if they knew what they were doing, how on earth did they know?

Maisie's arms and shoulders ached and, despite the howling January wind, she was growing uncomfortably hot. They had been at it for more than two hours. Now that they were deeper into the ground, they had switched the light on. After two hundred years, neither of them expected to find a full skeleton, and they had to keep a careful eye out for any remains in the ground. Sacha had removed far more soil than she, of course. The first half metre or so was nearly impossible – the roots of the old rosebush still held firm in some places. But as they dug lower, the roots became more and more decayed and dried out and the soil easier to cut through with the edge of the spade. Still, they were up to their thighs in a pit in the ground, and there was not a trace of Georgette.

Maisie took a brief rest, drove her spade into the ground and leaned on it. The snow was still falling, dropping a layer into the pit, clinging to the strands of hair which had escaped from her cosy hat.

“Sacha, what if we’re digging in the wrong place?”

“We’re digging in the right place,” he said, not looking up, concentrating on removing soil.

“But what if we’re just a fraction out and we miss her?”

“We won’t miss her.”

“But what if –”

“Maisie!” he said sharply. “It’s after midnight, it’s snowing and I’m very tired. Just dig.”

Maisie picked up her spade again, her face stinging with embarrassment. She bit back tears and kept plunging her spade into the ground.

“Sorry,” he said gruffly a few minutes later.

“It’s okay.” One more shovelful. And another. And ...

“Sacha,” she said cautiously.

“Yes?”

“Is this a ...” She dropped her spade and knelt in the pit to examine the pile of dirt she had been about to remove. She plucked from it a grey-brown splinter of bone and held it up. “Is this her?”

Sacha crouched next to her, examined the bone. “I suppose it must be. We’d better go carefully, we might miss what’s left of her.”

“What do you suggest?”

He was already on his knees, clearing the dirt with his hands, pushing it into the sides of the pit. She did the same.

“Here,” said Sacha, “is this her ring?”

He handed Maisie a dirty band of metal and she

turned it over between her gloved fingers. “Yes, it must be.” She handed it back to Sacha, who slipped the ring into his pocket. For a few more minutes they combed through the dirt with their fingers, eventually uncovering a ragged curve of rib, and perhaps a plate of what was once skull. Maisie slipped her left hand out of her glove and touched what she imagined may once have been Georgette’s forehead. “So this is what it feels like to touch the past,” she breathed.

“I think this is all we’re going to find,” Sacha said, leaning back on his haunches. “The earth here is fairly limey, but it’s just been so long.”

“Still,” Maisie said, “it’s not the person, remember, it’s the soul. It’s in here somewhere in the soil.” She looked down again at the collection of fragments they had found. “Do you think she can hear us?” Maisie asked.

“I don’t know if souls can hear us. We’re on a different plane.”

“I feel like I should say something.”

“Go on. You never know.”

“Georgette,” she said, addressing the dirty piece of skull. She closed her eyes. “We’re going to use you to defeat Dr Flood. And then we’ll try to set you free.”

When she opened her eyes, Sacha was standing and climbing out of the pit. “I’ll go get the lantern.”

“Sure, okay.”

He left her sitting in the snowy pit with Georgette’s remains. Once again, she thought she ought to say something. “I read your story,” Maisie whispered. “It wasn’t your fault. None of it was your fault.”

Sacha was back in a few moments. He turned off the electric light, plunging the scene into darkness. He

handed her the antique lantern and sat on the edge of the pit. “Are you ready for this?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’ll soon find out.” She pulled her other glove off and sat cross-legged in the pit just above Georgette’s remains. The lantern was in her left hand, her right lay over the piece of skull. She closed her eyes again. Her body was cooling rapidly. Her fingers were tingling sharply and her nose was frozen. She tried to shut it all out, went searching for that place inside her that Mila had shown her how to find. Maisie had spent most of the day in meditation so, despite the hours of physical labour, the pains in her shoulders and the icy numbness creeping into her joints, it wasn’t as impossible as she had feared.

When she felt ready, she said the simple incantation Virgil had written in his letter.

“Spirit flows from right to left.”

She had been expecting nothing to happen. So it was a surprise to feel a little charge, like a mild electric shock, pass from her right hand, up her arm, across her shoulders and down into her left hand. She heard Sacha gasp. When she opened her eyes, she understood why.

The lantern glowed dimly, pale blue like phosphorescence on waves. Maisie held it up to her face. “My god,” she breathed.

“Flood’s chamber,” Sacha said. “The glowing wall.”

And suddenly the memory came back to her: the night she had tried to contact her grandmother, the frantic beating against glass. “He has Sybill.”

Maisie showered, ready for bed, then carefully placed the lantern on the beside table. From between the covers, she continued to gaze at its faint glow. It was

the colour of stars in distant galaxies, stars that seemed sometimes not to be there, but sometimes seemed to pulse palely in the night sky. When Sacha came in, he turned on the overhead light and the glow was no longer visible.

“I wonder,” said Maisie. “Is that why Flood works in darkness? Perhaps the magic is strongest when the light is strongest.”

“And the Wraiths only come out at night. Maybe soul magic only works in the dark.”

“That makes sense. Switch the light off again.”

Sacha did so, then climbed into bed next to her.

“I’m exhausted.”

“Me too,” she said. She could barely take her eyes off the lantern. “It was like she jumped in willingly, wasn’t it?” Maisie asked. “I’m sure I’m not that adept.”

“You might be,” Sacha said. “But yes, she did go in very easily.”

Maisie rolled onto her back. “You know what this means, don’t you? It means we have to do it. We have to go down there and . . . confront him.”

“Yes,” Sacha replied. “I know that.”

“I’m terrified of him.”

“Remember what Ma said, fight magic with like magic. We’ve got what he’s got.”

“But he’s so much more experienced, so much stronger.”

“It will be all right.”

“You don’t know that for sure.” Maisie sighed. “I’m not up to this.”

“Yes, you are,” he said, leaning over to kiss her forehead. “Come on, try to sleep.”

She snuggled against him, he smoothed her hair

with his hand. Yes, she was exhausted enough to sleep, despite the new terror growing in her stomach. Within minutes she felt herself beginning to drift away on a dark tide of slumber.

“Maisie, are you awake?” Sacha whispered. She heard him but couldn’t quite make her tongue move to say yes, so she supposed she wasn’t awake at all.

He drew his hand away and she felt him kiss her cheek gently. Right before sleep claimed her totally, she thought she heard him say, “I love you, Maisie.” But she might have been mistaken.

Reverend Fowler went just before dawn to see Flood. He hadn’t slept all night and besides, it always seemed more appropriate to visit him in darkness. This way, too, it was less likely that somebody would see him disappearing into the ruins of the abbey. The villagers didn’t like to be reminded that something sinister and obscure was going on in the foundations. Fewer than a dozen who knew of Flood’s work even knew his name.

He descended the stairs carefully, one hand extended to brush the cold wall. In his head, he had replayed the vision of the two young people in Sybill’s garden last night. What if he was wrong? What if they’d had an emergency plumbing problem, or if they were doing something harmless like planting marijuana and naively thought to do it at night? There was no reason to believe that a body had ever been buried behind Sybill’s house. If there had been, well, surely Sybill herself would have dug it up rather than risk being caught in the cemetery three times. While his sense of duty told him he should inform Flood immediately, he wanted to hold off until he was

certain. The villagers may have cast-iron consciences, but he didn't. The girl was not going to be killed. Today he was going to make sure of it, and if it meant telling lies, then so be it. It wouldn't be the worst thing he'd ever done. And if he found, later on, that the girl was involved in something which could threaten them, it would take only one visit to Flood to sort it out.

Reverend Fowler knocked warily. *Courage now, Linden*. Flood had power to read thoughts, but it was limited: not intentions or passing fancies, but solid facts that were embedded in the fabric of the mind. The Reverend would have to keep what he knew well-hidden. It wasn't impossible. He was trained in the ways of the spirit; he was capable of these things if he kept a cool head.

The door opened a crack. "Come, Reverend."

The Reverend ventured into the shadowy chamber.

"What is it?" Flood asked, moving back into the dark.

"A community meeting was held yesterday," the Reverend said. "To discuss whether the Wraiths should still be sent after the young woman on Monday night."

"Oh?"

"There were doubts," the Reverend said quickly. It was true, though the doubts were his only. "The decision was no longer unanimous and so I'm here to ask you to defer that action until a decision can be made."

"Certainly," Flood said, turning his back on the Reverend and fiddling with something on one of his benches. "You know I try to comply with the village's wishes."

Easy. The Reverend turned to go. "Thank you, Doctor."

“You must be pleased, Reverend. I know you didn’t want the girl to suffer.”

The Reverend hesitated, turned back. “No. No, I didn’t. She’s not Sybill. She’s quite a pleasant young woman.”

Flood turned around. “You must be very sure that she’s no threat to the village?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” He could hear his own voice waver and a flutter of panic rose up in his chest. Perhaps he shouldn’t have relied on himself to be dishonest.

“Good day, then, Reverend,” Flood said.

Relief. Flood hadn’t noticed. “Yes. Good day.”

He was halfway to the door when Flood said. “It may take you some time to earn my trust again.”

The Reverend paused, looked warily over his shoulder. “I . . .”

Flood stood there, head tilted to one side, a hulking figure in the gloom. “You saw her digging a pit and you weren’t going to tell me?”

“I don’t think it was –”

“She won’t die on Monday. She’ll die tonight. I’ll send the Wraiths.”

“But –”

“Reverend, my trust is not easily bestowed. Do not abuse it again.”

The Reverend nodded.

“There is something you can do to please me.”

“What is it?” the Reverend asked, dreading the task but longing to be restored in Flood’s favour. The Doctor was not a man one wanted as an enemy.

“Make it easy for them to get in.”

“How can I –”

“She’ll open the door to you. Go to the cottage, knock, tell her your name. Then step aside and let the Wraiths do the rest.”

The Reverend could feel his jaw tremble. To do as Flood asked was unimaginable. To be so near when it happened . . .

“Reverend?”

“Yes,” he said firmly.

“Will you do it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. The Wraiths will come for you after dark. Make sure you keep your promise.”

“My promise,” the Reverend said. “Of course, of course. I’ll go to the cottage.”

Maisie woke to the sound of knocking. Sacha stirred in his sleep next to her. She blearily rose and grabbed her robe from where it hung over the end of the bed. The knocking came again, more urgent, as she stumbled towards the front door.

“Okay, okay,” she muttered, then paused before opening it. “Who is it?” she called in a croaky voice.

“Reverend Fowler. It’s important.”

Reverend Fowler? Maisie remembered the letter. She pulled her robe closer about her and opened the door.

Daylight dazzled her. The sky was white, the road was white, tree branches and stone fences were all white. The world appeared to have turned to snow. Reverend Fowler stood in front of her, the sole black figure in the scene.

“What is it?” she asked him.

“I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

“Um . . . yes. What time is it?”

“It’s not quite ten a.m.”

“A few too many late nights,” she said. Her back started to ache with the memory of last night’s digging. “Would you like to come in?”

He checked nervously over his shoulder. “Yes, yes, I would. But only briefly you understand.”

She showed him into the lounge room, closing the door to the bedroom on the way. For some reason, the idea of him knowing she was sleeping with Sacha made her embarrassed. Even if Solgreve church *was* full of fundamentalists or cultists, she couldn’t forget her manners around a priest.

“I won’t sit down,” he said.

“Okay,” she replied and remained standing too, arms folded in front of her.

“You should leave.”

His frankness surprised her. For a few moments she couldn’t find her voice. “Why?”

“You must be gone by tonight.”

“Why?” she asked again. But the fear had already started to swirl in her stomach. Did they know? Had Flood found out what she was up to?

“I can’t tell you. I shouldn’t even be here.”

“Did you send me that letter?”

He put his hands up as if to say, stop. “I really have to go,” he said. “I shouldn’t even be here.”

“Reverend –”

“After dark, don’t open the door to anyone, not even me. Don’t leave the house. They will be waiting for you. They will be watching the house and waiting for you.” He was already nearly at the door.

“Reverend, wait. Stay. Talk to me about this. Perhaps I can help you, too.” Despite the fact that he

was so implicated in Sybill's murder, she couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He was so old and feeble and pathetic.

"No. I never came here. If you say I did I will deny it."

At that moment the bedroom door opened, and Sacha stepped out, dressed only in jeans. "Maisie? What's up?"

The Reverend saw him and nearly shrieked. Clearly he had expected her to be alone. He pulled open the door and disappeared into the white morning. Sacha went to the door and watched him go.

"What did he want?"

"Close the door, it's freezing."

Sacha closed the door and turned back to her. "Well?"

"He came to warn us. The Wraiths are coming for us. Tonight."

"They can't get in, right?"

"And we can't get out."

"They only come at night."

"Because the soul magic only works in darkness. So if we want to do what we have to do to Flood ..."

"We have to go out at night."

"Exactly."

Sacha ran his hand through his hair. Maisie sagged against the door. "This is too much. It's too hard," she said.

"It's not too hard. The Reverend was jumpy, nervous."

"Yes. He kept saying he shouldn't be here."

"So nobody knows he's warned us. Flood doesn't know, the Wraiths don't know."

“That’s right.”

“What else did he say?”

Maisie wrinkled her brow, trying to remember the exact wording. “Something like, after dark don’t leave the house or answer the door. ‘They’ll be watching the house and waiting for you.’”

Sacha bit his lip, thinking. “So, if we’re not in the house at night . . .”

“Meaning?”

“They’ll come after dark to watch the house. But if we’ve already left the house, they’ll be stuck here watching for us and we can be off breaking into Flood’s chamber.”

Maisie placed a hand over her heart. She was swimming in a warm bath of fear. “God, I’m so scared.”

“Don’t be scared.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Pack a cut lunch,” Sacha said with a smile. “This afternoon we’re going for a picnic.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The beach was dirty with sludgy, washed-out snow. The tide had come up and taken most of it out to sea, but some of it had banked up near the bottom of the cliff and was melting into the grey sand. Sacha and Maisie, swaddled in layers of clothes, picked their way over rock pools and up the sloping path to Sacha's cave. He took her hand the last few metres and she remembered the first time they had come here together, when she was still consumed with longing for him. This time it was terror that was making her nauseous.

"Are you okay?" he asked as they clambered into the corner of the cave and sat down.

"I think so. Under the circumstances."

He put an arm around her and she leaned her head on his shoulder. "You have to trust what Ma said – if this is your path, if this is the reason you have your power, the reason you're here on this planet, then you have nothing to worry about."

“Don’t tell me you’re not worried.”

He didn’t answer. She pulled away and looked at him. “Well?”

“Yes, I’m a little worried,” he said, opening his backpack and pulling out the lantern, a couple of blankets, a thermos and a bag of sandwiches. “Of course I am. My plans on a Saturday night don’t usually involve killing a five hundred-year-old magician.”

“Are we going to kill him?”

“We’re going to do what we have to do. And, yes, when we set the souls in his room free, I think he’ll die. I mean, that’s where he’s drawing his power from.”

Maisie shook her head, felt helpless tears coming to her eyes. “Sacha, I just want to go home.”

“Home? To the cottage, or to Adrian?”

Maisie dropped her head and didn’t answer. Home to Adrian was starting to look really good. Comfortable. Warm. Predictable. Before they left the cottage, she had written Adrian a brief note: *If I die, remember that I love you always.*

“If you died, like, right now, would you be happy?” she asked.

“Nobody’s going to die, Maisie.”

“Just . . . hypothetically.”

Sacha was quiet for a few moments. Finally, he said, “Yes. Yes, I would. I’ve drunk lots of beers with friends, I’ve read some good books and seen some good films. I’ve had a good time with my mother and, thanks to you, I’ve even sort of reconciled with my father. Yeah, I’d be happy. How about you?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve let people boss me around and whinged about it constantly, I’ve

cheated on the man I love and I can't stop biting my nails. It's not much of a resumé."

"Come on, you're not that bad. I wouldn't feel the way I feel about you if you were that bad."

Her gaze went to the horizon. The sea was calm, but as the afternoon wore on the wind would pick up, and by the time they had to go to the abbey, the waves would be battering the rocks. Although they were sheltered from the worst of the biting cold, Maisie still longed for a warm fire, a warm bed, a hot cup of tea. She couldn't stand that such an insurmountable task stood between her and comfort. She wanted to give up, but she wouldn't. There was too much misery here, and she was the only person who could stop it. Perhaps facing death for a good cause like this could make her resumé more impressive.

"How *do* you feel about me?" she said.

He smiled at her. "You know."

"Do I?"

"Let's try this: how do you feel about me?"

She studied him. His cheeks were lightly flushed from the cold. She pulled the beanie off his head and fiddled with his hair. She remembered how she had seen him once: exotic, a romantic hero. No, he wasn't any of those things, not really. Now, she saw a moderately handsome man who, bafflingly, thought he had done enough in his life to die satisfied. She felt mad, passionate, about him. Was it love? Or was it just that he represented something different and exciting, that he was inextricably bound up in her adventure, her yearning for mystery and magic?

"I don't know," she said.

"Yes."

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I don’t know either, how I feel about you.”

“But I’m going home. Soon. So we don’t have to work it out.”

“That’s right.”

“And you’re not going to ask me to stay are you?”

He shook his head. “You know I’m not.

“It wouldn’t be like it is in my imagination, would it? If we stayed together?”

“Let me ask you, did you once have the same kind of fantasies about Adrian?”

“Yes. Of course. We were going to be young and beautiful forever, we’d never argue, we’d never get tired of making love.” She nodded. “And the first eighteen months or so were like that. They really were.”

“And then you got a little bored, dissatisfied, started to look for something else?”

“Yeah. I guess that’s how it happened.”

“You know,” he said, “the best lover for you would be solitude.”

“I’d be lonely.”

“You’d never be disappointed.”

She handed him his beanie. “Enough. I’m bored of talking about me.”

They sat silent for a long time, gazing out to sea.

“You should be meditating,” he said at length.

“I know. Will you help?”

“Here, put your head in my lap.”

She lay down on the floor of the cave, her head in Sacha’s lap. She looked up at him and smiled. He spread a blanket over her.

“Maisie,” he said, “what were you writing before we left?”

“A letter to Adrian. Just in case, you know . . .”

“Did you tell him what we’re doing?”

“No. I can’t tell him any of that stuff. It makes me so sad.”

“Maybe you’ll tell him one day. I mean, if you’re going to be sharing your lives, he can’t help but see your powers growing, come to believe and understand it.”

This cheered Maisie a little. It was true. Once her Gift was evident in their daily lives, he couldn’t deny it. He would grow used to it, and one day perhaps she could tell him what had happened here on this wintry coastline. Perhaps the breach wasn’t so unbridgeable.

“Close your eyes,” he said.

She let her eyelids drop. She felt him lean over, his breath tickled her cheek, his warm lips closed over hers. No pressure, no tongue, just as if he were breathing life into her. She longed for time to freeze and for that moment to be forever. But already her desperation to hold it and possess it was eroding the pleasure. Her right hand went to his neck, her fingers finding a warm square of flesh under his hair. But he broke the kiss and drew away, started talking her through her breathing and meditation exercises. Outside the cave, night fell, the sea rose and grew hungry. Inside, the cold climbed all the way into Maisie’s heart, and the lantern began to glow. She felt a heavy sense of approaching destiny, and it made her stomach churn with anxiety.

Sacha waited until it was fully dark, and then he waited some more. They barely spoke; to do so was to acknowledge the enormity of what was ahead of them. It was after eight o’clock when he finally turned to her and said, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes.”

“We go to the abbey, we use the lantern to get in. If he’s there, I’ll take care of him while you go to the wall, set them free.”

“Sounds simple,” she said with a dry laugh.

“It will happen, and it will be over,” he said.

“Stop trying to pretend we’re not risking our lives.”

He fell silent, pressed his lips together. Then, “Ma would come for us. She wouldn’t let them bury us here.”

Maisie nearly wept. “But what about the others?”

“It just means we can’t mess this up.” He took her hand and nodded towards the sea. “Come on. It’s time.”

They left everything behind – blankets, Sacha’s backpack – and took only the lantern. Somehow leaving the objects behind to be collected later made Maisie feel a little more comfortable, a little more confident that there would be a later. Down the cliff face and along the beach again – this time a narrow strip because the ravenous tide had risen. Foamy spray shot up from behind the rocks. The wind was gusting madly, mocking their layers of clothes. They took the path up to the cemetery, moving slowly and cautiously when they approached the top. The path branched off north towards the cottage, south towards the snowy graves and the abbey.

“I wonder if they’re there yet,” Maisie said, indicating the cottage.

“Of course. They would have been there since dark.”

“I hope Tabby’s all right.”

“Don’t worry about the cat. She doesn’t even like you.”

“But still . . .”

“Come on, we’ll cut straight across the cemetery behind those trees.” They had reached the top of the path. Before her, spread out into the distance, were shadowy gravestones leaning this way and that in the dark, the clumps of snow which clung to them glistening dimly. Clusters of trees here and there were ghostly silhouettes with pockets of blackness huddling behind them, the bare branches casting veiny shadows which pulsed eerily with the wind. Maisie lifted the lantern to look at it glowing faintly blue in the dark.

“It’s like a magic lantern, isn’t it?” Sacha said. “Rub it and the genie appears.”

“We hope the genie will appear. We haven’t even tried it.”

“We couldn’t have. It’s for soul magic only.”

Maisie sighed, gazed at the abbey, a ruined black shadow in the distance. “Let’s get this over with.”

He squeezed her hand and they advanced into the cemetery.

They kept close to trees and shadows, picking their way over graves and between the headstones. Behind them, the sea pounded mournfully. Maisie could hear her heartbeat hammering past her ears. *Try not to think about it.* She clutched Sacha’s hand in her own, in the other hand held the lantern by her side. Dread weighed heavily upon her heart. Her breath was a cloud in front of her.

“What was that?” Sacha suddenly stopped, cocked his head to listen.

“I can’t hear anything over the waves,” Maisie replied.

“I thought I heard ...” He turned and looked in the direction of the cottage. “Oh, Jesus.”

Maisie spun round. Advancing in the distance were two gaunt, cloaked figures.

“Run,” Sacha said. And when she didn’t move, when she found herself frozen to the spot, he prodded her roughly in the back and yelled, “Run!”

They took off across the cemetery, over rough ground, between headstones and trees. When Maisie dared to look back, the Wraiths were closer, now only a hundred metres away. They moved with horrifying speed, gliding over shadows. Sacha was a little ahead of her. She kept her eyes forward. The skin on her back seemed to be prickling. She felt so vulnerable, so horribly exposed. She judged the distance ahead of them, then quickly checked the position of the Wraiths again. She was no mathematician, but she knew there was no way they were going to make it out of the cemetery before the Wraiths caught up. And even if they did make it to the street, which villager would let them in? Which villager would shelter them? She felt a scream trapped deep inside her, kept her head down and kept running. *This can’t be happening*. As though in a nightmare, she kept running, knowing it was useless.

Suddenly, Sacha fell down in front of her. He cried out in pain.

“Sacha!” she stopped and crouched next to him, trying to help him up.

“I tripped. I’ve hurt something.”

She got him to his feet, but he could barely stand let alone run. “Go, get away,” he said.

“Sacha, I can’t leave you here.” She looked up,

watching helplessly as the Wraiths advanced on them. “How did they find us?”

“Who cares how they found us? Maybe they can smell souls. Just run. I’ll be all right.”

Souls. Virgil’s letter said that the Wraiths were controlled by Flood’s magic, and the way to fight magic was with like magic. She straightened up, held the lantern out in front of her. Her arm was trembling so much that the lantern bobbed about in the dark. The Wraiths continued their relentless forward movement, almost casually. By now, she could hear that wet, rhythmic sound which might have been their breathing.

“Stay back!” she cried, holding the lantern high. “Stay back or I’ll ...” Ridiculous. She had no idea how to finish the sentence. Her knees had turned to water, her stomach was a hollow pit.

But, bafflingly, the Wraiths had paused about ten metres away.

“Maisie?” Sacha whispered.

“Soul magic,” she replied, feeling bolder. “It’s how Flood keeps them alive.”

“What are we going to do? We can’t just stand here looking at each other.”

“Start moving, slowly.”

They took two steps backwards. The moment they moved the Wraiths resumed their glide forward. Maisie screamed and backed into Sacha, who fell over again. She held the lantern forward once more.

“Stop!” she said. “I command you to stop.”

They didn’t stop. They moved slowly towards her. Her body seemed to be falling apart with fear. She couldn’t leave Sacha as their prey – she had seen what they had done to Sybill. *What do I do?*

The first time she held up the lantern, the Wraiths had stopped. It had unsettled them. Perhaps she needed to trust that it would work. She stood tall, forcing her body to stop trembling. She pulled her right glove off with her teeth and spat it out onto the ground. Closer still, they came. A faint smell of decay circled about them, and now she had a horrible idea that she could see under their hoods where their faces should have been. Some sick, gloomy light moved like liquid among a ragged jumble of bone fragments. Maisie realised with horror that the sound she had taken for breathing was actually the pulse of that unnatural light around the bones. The realisation almost undid her resolve. She took a huge breath, forced air into her lungs. With her right hand she touched the lantern.

At this movement, the Wraiths stopped. She barely knew what she was doing, but they had stopped, so she must be doing it right.

“Stay back,” she said, trying to sound menacing.

Sacha was climbing to his feet behind her. She glanced away from the Wraiths to check on him and in that instant they closed in, their speed unnatural and horrifying. In an automatic movement, she took her fingers away from the lantern and held them out, an instinctive “stop” gesture.

A loud electric crack followed. Maisie felt a shock in her fingers, thought for a second she saw pale phosphorescent lightning running along her hand. The crack was followed immediately by a howl of pain. No, two howls of pain, for both the Wraiths had stopped and were screaming: a deafening, black sound which made Maisie want to cover her ears. But she

stood firm, her hand in front of her, her whole arm shuddering with fear. The earth beneath her feet began to shake, tree branches swung all about her. Around the Wraiths the ground seemed to grow darker, as though a shadowy maw was opening up where they stood.

“Oh, god,” Maisie cried, afraid to blink.

A swirling, sucking noise came from the black earth, a gathering force scarcely two metres from her feet. Then, suddenly, amid screams and a ghastly deafening hiss, the Wraiths disappeared, both sucked violently into the ground.

The noise ceased abruptly. Maisie stood, still holding her hand in front of her. Her breathing was loud in her ears. The ground had stilled, the dark space closed over. She could hear the sea again, the graveyard was empty but for her and Sacha.

“Maisie?”

She didn’t answer him. He stood next to her, gently pushed her arm down.

“Maisie, I think they’re gone.”

“Then I . . . I did it?”

He looked around them, ventured a relieved smile. “Yeah, it looks like you did.”

It seemed she drew breath for the first time in an age. “Oh god. Oh, thank god.”

“But we don’t know for sure if they’ll stay put.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes. Not very fast. I’ve definitely torn something.”

“The guy’s not supposed to sprain his ankle, you know. I’m sure that should have been my job.”

They laughed cautiously, boldly.

“I can do it, Sacha,” she said. “If I could do it to them, I can do it to him.”

He bent to pick up her glove. "Let's get it over with then."

They hurried towards the abbey, Sacha hobbling on his injured leg. Her earlier fear had been displaced by an almost demented sense of relief. A voice of reason, way back, told her she was being too confident, that she needed to keep a cool head. But her nerves were in too much turmoil, her heart too close to bursting, to listen to reason.

Dirty snow still lay over the ruins of the abbey. Maisie led Sacha to the corner spire, where an iron door had been fitted.

"Here we are."

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so. Maybe I'm on a roll."

"Go on then."

She touched the lantern and then put her fingers out to the lock, expecting the same electric pop, expecting the door to open sesame. Nothing happened.

She tried again. Again, nothing.

"Maisie," Sacha said softly. "Magic for like magic, remember."

"Yes."

"This door isn't locked with magic. It's just locked."

"Shit." She turned to him. "Any good at picking locks?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't suppose they teach you that at music school?"

She didn't smile. "Quick, let's get back in the shadows. People might be able to see us from here."

They ducked back behind the ruins, facing the cemetery.

"I can't believe this!" Maisie said, setting the

lantern on the ground. “Just when I think I know what I’m doing, just when I feel I can beat this –”

“Don’t despair. We’ll think of something.”

“What? What can we do? Try to break in? It’s close enough to the road for some concerned citizen to see us, and then we’ll have Tony Blake all over us. I simply cannot fucking believe this!”

Maisie and Sacha stood in the path of the wind, frozen to the bone, trying to force their minds to turn over the problem.

Second passed, minutes. Then Maisie looked up, shook her damp hair out of her eyes. “Sacha,” she said, “how about we pay a visit on the Reverend?”

He was waiting for a tap at the window – one of the Wraiths come to fetch him. They would wait until late, but he found himself sitting on the edge of his chair from nightfall, hoping that the awful tapping wouldn’t come at all, that Maisie had left and they had sensed the house was empty – for they could sense such things – and given up. So when the knock came and it was at the front door, not the window, he was bewildered. He rose cautiously and went to answer it.

“Who’s there?”

“Reverend Fowler, let me in.” A female voice. She sounded desperate.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Maisie. Please, you have to let me in.”

What to do? Was she running from the Wraiths? Could he leave her on his own doorstep to be torn apart by those creatures? Before he thought better of it, he was unlocking the door. Two people pushed in. He stumbled back. Maisie and the young man – yes, it

was Sybill's gardener – entered the room and closed the door firmly behind them. He backed away, trembling.

“Please, Reverend. We're not going to hurt you,” Maisie said. She held an antique lantern in her right hand.

“I . . . I –”

“Just stay calm. Is there somewhere we can go to talk?”

He felt helpless, confused. “I shouldn't talk to you,” he said.

“We're here now. You have to talk to us,” the young man said.

He indicated towards his modest lounge room. They flanked him as they went forward, as though afraid he might run. Which was his instinct, of course. They gently propelled him towards an armchair. Maisie kneeled in front of him, the young man hovered nearby.

“Reverend, this is Sacha,” Maisie said.

The Reverend looked up at Sacha and then back to the girl. “What do you want with me?”

“You have to get us in to Flood's rooms,” she said urgently.

Flood's rooms? How much did she know? This was a nightmare.

“I can't. I don't know what you're talking about. Who is Flood? What do you mean?” He could hear his own unconvincing tones letting him down again.

“Reverend,” Sacha said, and the Reverend was surprised to hear his voice gentle and patient. “We know everything.”

“We've destroyed the Wraiths,” Maisie said. “It's

all over. Just get us into Flood's rooms. You know it's for the best."

"For the best?" He imagined how he must look to them, a bewildered old man. It made him angry enough to fight back. "For the best for whom? Not me. Flood has a temper. I'm not going to goad him."

"The Wraiths are gone. What more can he threaten you with?"

"Gone? How can they be?"

Maisie held up the lantern. "Soul magic. You know what that is, don't you?"

Soul magic. Two words which were light, musical, even inspiring when separated. But together they horrified him. "Soul magic isn't real. It's a tale told to children to frighten them."

Maisie and Sacha exchanged glances. Their consternation unsettled him. "Don't say anything else," he said. "I beg you, don't say anything else."

"Reverend, you know what Flood does, don't you?" This was Maisie. He met her dark brown eyes anxiously. She looked solicitous, concerned. This wasn't Sybill, who tried to tell him things to manipulate him. Outrageous things. Things he never wanted to hear again.

"Please," he whispered. "Please, don't say any more."

"But you've been involved all this time," she continued. "You *must* know."

He put his hands to his ears. Long ago – how old had he been, seven? eight? – his father had told him something, an awful tale of eternal burial alive, and how it had to happen to protect himself and his friends. But the Reverend had convinced himself it was

a fairy tale. And when evidence had mounted up over the years – including Sybill’s attempts to communicate with him – he had fallen back on that conviction. It was below the surface, just a few inches below, that the conviction could not be held. These young people were mining through those few inches now, and he couldn’t bear it.

“Stop!” he said. “Don’t say any more.”

Sacha impatiently pulled his hands down. “To be buried in Solgreve is to have your soul trapped in the earth forever,” he said. “That’s how you stay healthy even though you’re ninety-eight.”

“No. Doctor Flood has a special scientific way of –”

“Reverend, Doctor Flood is over five hundred years old. How do you think he’s doing that? Eating a lot of soy products?”

“Sacha, go easy,” Maisie said. “He’s an old man.”

“He’d be dead if he wasn’t feeding off the souls in the ground. He’s a fucking vampire.”

“Don’t, don’t,” the Reverend said putting up his hand. “Please, let me think.” He screwed his eyes closed, more to keep helpless tears from falling than from any need to concentrate.

Was this it? The Reverend was a practitioner of mysticism as much as any new-age guru or sage. He should recognise the end when it came. He was the last of his line, and that may have been for a reason. His father’s nightmare fairytale came back to him. It was true, of course it was true and he had always known it. He was ninety-eight. His entire life he had been denying this awful truth for fear it would send him mad. Well, what if he acknowledged it? And what if, instead of letting it send him mad, he fought against it?

She had soul magic, she had defeated the Wraiths. Maybe it was time to throw in his lot with the opposition, with this strange, black-eyed girl who could have been his granddaughter.

“Reverend?” Maisie said quietly. “Are you okay?”

“If you force me, I have no choice,” he said.

“We don’t want to force you,” Maisie said. “We don’t want to hurt you.”

“If you force me,” he said again, more emphatically, “I have no choice.”

He opened his eyes. Again the two young people were exchanging uncertain glances. He watched as their realisation evolved.

“If we force you –” Sacha said.

“I have no choice,” the Reverend finished for him.

Maisie nodded at Sacha. Sacha bent over and pulled the Reverend from his chair, twisted his arm – very gently – behind his back. “Okay, where are the keys to the door in the abbey spire?”

“I’ll show you,” the Reverend replied. “Only don’t hurt me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Maisie dreaded leaving behind the warm comfort of the Reverend's house to go out into the freezing weather once again. She was so tired, every joint in her body ached, and she wasn't at all sure they were doing the right thing. They had to wait ten minutes while the Reverend got dressed – he was a most obliging hostage – and found his key.

“Can we trust him?” she asked Sacha in a hushed voice while the Reverend was pulling on his gumboots.

Sacha shrugged. “He wants to help. Though I can't believe that he didn't know what Flood was doing.”

“Perhaps he never questioned it.”

“We don't have a choice in any case.”

The Reverend shuffled back up the hall and resumed his position in front of Sacha who, to complete the charade, held the Reverend's arm behind his back. Sacha could barely walk and would be easy enough to escape, but the Reverend was

determined he would only help them if it looked like he was being forced.

“I have an idea,” the Reverend said.

“What is it?”

“I’ll get him to go in his second chamber and you two can go and do whatever it is you have to do. He may never even know you’ve been.”

“How are we going to do that?” Maisie asked patiently.

“I’ll go on ahead, knock on his door, make up a story. You wait on the stairs. While he’s in the other chamber, you run down and ...” He trailed off, frightened, “and do what you have to do.”

“All right, Reverend,” Sacha said, “but don’t think of messing us around, okay? You may be too old to be scared of dying, but we have a freshly-dug pit in Maisie’s back garden which would fit you nicely.”

The Reverend went pale. Maisie picked up the lantern and showed them to the door. “After you,” she said.

The rush of the sea was almost deafening now, the wind thrusting their breath back down their throats as they stepped out into it, heads down, and made for the abbey. The Reverend looked left and right nervously. When he noticed Maisie’s lantern glowing dimly, he gasped.

“Is that ...?”

“God, you didn’t even know the wall in his room is made of souls?” Maisie said.

The Reverend looked away, focused ahead of him, placing one foot deliberately in front of the other. It was clear that Sacha was in great pain but trying to hide it, limping badly. Great, she was about to

confront a five-century-old evil force and she had a senile old man and a cripple for backup.

But she had the lantern. She had Georgette's soul, and she could work the magic. If the Reverend could indeed get Flood out of the room, it would just make it that much easier. Destroy the wall, set the souls free, and Flood would die.

They approached the abbey in the dark. The Reverend fitted the key in the lock and the door swung open, revealing the trapdoor. He pulled up the ring and beckoned to them. By now, he was visibly terrified. His body trembled and his voice was a nervous whisper. "You'll have to be quiet and stay on the top half of the staircase. Otherwise he'll sense you."

Maisie grabbed him by the shoulders. "Reverend Fowler, you have to pull yourself together. He'll be able to tell there's something wrong otherwise."

He nodded.

"Take some deep breaths," she said, taking his hand. "You're doing the right thing."

"I'm frightened," he said and his whisper was nearly carried away on the wind.

"I'm frightened too," she said, "but there are souls here who have been trapped in the ground for centuries. We have to set them free. You're nearly a hundred years old. This might be the most important thing you'll ever do."

He nodded, clung to her hand as they descended the stairs. About halfway down he dropped her hand and turned to them, motioned them to be quiet, and continued on his own. Maisie and Sacha stood on the step, waiting in the dark. If the worst happened,

if the Reverend betrayed them, they were close enough to the exit to run for their lives.

She heard knocking, a door opening, a voice – Flood’s – say, “Are you come to tell me she’s dead?”

Maisie’s skin crawled.

“Not yet. The Wraiths haven’t come for me yet.”

“Then what are you doing out of your home? I instructed you to –”

“Doctor. Tony Blake saw somebody break into the abbey spire.”

A pause. “What?”

“Somebody broke the lock and came down here.”

“How long ago?”

“Ten minutes. I came straight away. But there’s nobody in the tunnel.”

“And nobody has come to my door.”

“Perhaps it was the girl,” the Reverend said. Maisie could have cheered, hearing how convincing he sounded.

“Why would she be –?”

“Do you have any bodies next door? Any extractions waiting to be performed?”

There was a flurry of motion. “Quick. If she’s in there we still have time to stop her.” A door opening. Maisie cautiously advanced a few steps. The entrance to Flood’s chamber stood open, the other door was just closing.

“Now,” she hissed in the dark. She and Sacha hurried up the tunnel and into Flood’s chamber, closing the door as quietly as possible behind them.

“God, it’s pitch dark,” Sacha said.

Maisie tried to use the lantern as a torch. She made her way past benches crammed with devices and receptacles and experiments – just a clutter of

inexplicable dark shapes – to the wall of souls. Sacha stood by the door.

“Quick, Maisie, the Reverend won’t keep him forever.”

She raised her left hand and moved to touch the glass bricks. As though a powerful magnet was attracting it, her hand dropped to a brick in the centre of the wall. Her fingers stuck to it as though glued. She had a sudden and overwhelming sense of a feminine presence, old and wise, caring and immeasurably proud. It electrified her, filled her up, made her gasp.

“What?” Sacha asked. “What’s the matter?”

Tears burst from her eyes, her stomach clenched against the profound and devastating emotion. “It’s my grandmother.”

“There’s nobody here,” Flood was saying. Reverend Fowler pressed his back against the door.

“Perhaps she’s already gone.”

“I’d be able to sense if somebody had been here.” Flood turned and peered at the Reverend. He had the advantage, he could see in the dark. In this room, there wasn’t even the benefit of the phosphorous wall – (*God help him, were they really souls?*) – to see by. Or perhaps it was better that way. Perhaps there were things in here he did not want to see.

“Well, maybe Tony was mistaken,” the Reverend offered.

Flood shook his head. “What is this about, Reverend? Do you want to hide from the Wraiths, hide from your promise?”

“No, no. I just . . .”

Flood was walking towards him, making to leave

the room. The Reverend stilled his quaking knees and stood firm, determined to give Maisie as much time as possible. If she could set the souls free, Flood would be incredibly weakened, perhaps even destroyed. Nothing to be afraid of then.

“Out of my way,” Flood said.

“I –”

“Linden, what is this all about?” And in that instant, he could feel his own mind give up its secret to Flood. In the next instant, he felt the blow to his head.

“You mean to see me destroyed?” This was Flood’s voice, coming from a long way off. The Reverend realised he was on the ground. Flood spoke again as he stepped over him. “You’re a fool, Reverend. She’s only a girl.”

“She’s only a girl,” the Reverend echoed. He saw Flood’s feet heading towards the first chamber before unconsciousness dragged him under.

Maisie pressed her fingers fervently against the smooth glass. “Sybill,” she whispered. “Sybill.”

The door burst open. Maisie’s head snapped up in shock as Dr Flood strode in.

“Maisie!” Sacha called. Already he was hobbling towards Flood, trying to block him. In the half-light, Maisie could make out the doctor’s impossibly wrinkled skin. He had all the appearance of extreme age but, uncannily, he moved like a young man. He stopped Sacha easily, knocked him aside with a sweep of his arm, then kicked him and brought him to the ground.

Maisie cried out, but then remembered the task before her. She had to stay focused. She squared her shoulders and fixed her gaze on Flood.

“What do you hope to achieve?” he asked in a calm, regulated voice. “Do you even know what you’re doing?”

Did she? No, not really. She had never felt herself to be so young, so irrational and unprepared for anything. Horrible panic grabbed her in its prickly arms. But she had done it once this evening, why not again? There was nowhere to run in any case. Courage was forced upon her.

She brushed her fingers against the lantern then held up her hand. “Stop, don’t come any closer,” she said firmly.

Nothing happened.

“Oh, god.” Her bones turned to cold, cotton thread.

He moved around a bench and approached her. “Really, this is ridiculous,” he said. “I’m so much stronger than you.”

Her heart jumped around in her chest like a frantic bird. This couldn’t be happening. Once more she brushed her hand against the lantern, moved to hold it out. But this time, the wall’s strange magnetism yanked her fingertips towards the glass brick where Sybill’s soul glowed ghostly in the dark. A buzzing pressure built up under her skin, and suddenly, with a loud crack, the brick shattered in a blaze of blue light. Maisie thought she caught a brief glimpse of a human shape in the gloom, but then it was gone.

A sharp wince from Flood brought her attention back to him. He faltered a little, and his hand went to his chest. But then he straightened up and, with determination, kept coming towards her. A voice, like the echo of a memory, slid into her mind.

“You have to free the other souls.”

“What ...?”

“I’m with you, Maisie. It’s Sybill, I’m with you. Free the others. He can’t survive if we’re not trapped.”

Maisie didn’t stop to question. Her fingers went again to the lantern and then to the next brick in the wall. Again the pressure and the crack of electricity. Again, Flood seemed momentarily injured but kept coming forward.

“I can’t do it fast enough!” she cried.

“I can help.”

A barely visible glimmer of blue light concentrated over Maisie’s free hand and then bounced back into the wall. Bricks began to shatter. Maisie desperately crushed her fingers into as many bricks as she could, turning them to dust. The room filled with jolting, cracking sounds. All around, pale glimpses of human figures rushed past her. For every one she destroyed, Sybill was destroying ten. Flood had stopped and doubled over by a bench.

The wall of souls was now spontaneously self-destructing as the souls broke free, breaking other bricks on their way. Blue light flashed and sizzled around her, casting long gruesome shadows on the walls. The crackling was deafening – like standing next to fireworks as they went off. Maisie worked desperately. Her hands were cut and bleeding from flying glass. Flood had paused, jerked and spasmed as though he were being assaulted by an invisible assailant. Still Maisie pushed on, terror fuelling her. Seven more bricks to go, six, five...

Flood suddenly howled in pain and collapsed on the floor. In between the flashes of light and dark she watched as his hand clutched at the air, the movement strangely slow as though watching an actor perform in

a strobe light. With a thrash and a rattle, the howl died upon his lips and his hand fell beside him, twitched once or twice and then grew still.

In the dying light, she watched centuries advance upon Flood's face in seconds. His cheeks fell in, his forehead crumbled, his mouth and eye sockets dropped to hollows. His body, too, collapsed. His skin turned to dry paper, his bones crumbled beneath its weight. His hands turned to claws and disintegrated into nothing. Soon, all that remained was a heap of grey dust, an empty red coat. The final few flickers of the wall died away and she and Sacha were once more left in darkness.

She rushed to his side. "Sacha?"

He groaned.

"Are you okay?" She helped him up.

"No, but I'll live."

"Sybill," Maisie said. "Sybill was here."

"Is Flood dead?"

She glanced over her shoulder. Could see nothing in the dark. The only light in the room now was the faint glow from the lantern. "Flood's atomised," she said. "The souls are all gone. We set them free."

"But we still have Georgette."

"Sybill, are you still here?" Maisie called.

"I'm in the lantern with Georgette. I won't leave you until it's all over."

"There's more to be done," Maisie said.

They left Flood's chamber, slamming the door firmly behind them. Two steps down the tunnel, Maisie nearly tripped over the Reverend.

"Reverend? Are you all right?" she said, kneeling beside him.

He winced. Sacha pulled him to his feet. Impossible in the darkness to see if he was badly hurt. Maisie's impression was of the pale glimmer of the lantern and the sick reflection it made on Sacha's face, on the Reverend's white hair as they helped him along the tunnel and up the stairs, into the freezing night outside.

Reverend Fowler could not understand how he was home in bed, but here he was. The blankets were warm and the pillow was soft and a pair of kind hands were stroking his brow. He opened his eyes and saw the girl. He started, remembering what he had been doing when last he was conscious.

"It's all right," she said. "Flood is dead." She smiled at him. "How are you feeling?"

"I ..." He was feeling terrible. His body ached from being knocked down. "You did it?"

She nodded. "That was act one. Now I have to go out to the cemetery and set the rest of them free." She sighed. "I'm so tired."

He didn't reply. She had overcome Flood. He was no longer locked in servitude, he could do as he pleased.

"There was a time when I hated you," she said frankly. "When I found out that you had something to do with Sybill's murder."

Did she know everything? He was in awe of the young woman.

"But I think you kind of redeemed yourself tonight."

"Thank you," he said, unsure of what else to say.

"Things will change," she said, a frown drawing

down between her brows. "When the cemetery is cleared, things will be different."

He nodded. "I understand."

"What will you do?"

"Perhaps I'll go somewhere warm and sunny to die."

She tried a tired smile, withdrew her hand. "I have to go."

"Goodbye," he said uncertainly.

She rose and left, but there lingered in the room a sense of her warmth and youth. He fell asleep imagining her soft hand on his forehead.

"How is he?" Sacha looked up as Maisie came into the cottage. He sat with Tabby on his lap, the antique lantern safely on the mantelpiece.

"He's all right. Probably a bit stiff and sore. But after tonight, after we've cleared the cemetery –"

"He'll die. A lot of them will die."

"Maybe not straightaway. I mean, Flood was clearly past his natural life span, but all the villagers ever had was protection from illness. It might take a while for them to get sick. Months, perhaps."

Sacha smiled. "You mean after you've gone home when you won't feel guilty any more?"

"Maybe. God, I'm so tired."

"Me too."

She knelt on the floor next to him, put her head on the armrest. "Thanks for all your help tonight."

"Help?" he said, stroking her hair. "I sprained my ankle in the graveyard and then got knocked over by an old man – a really old man. I don't feel like much of a hero."

“I couldn’t have done it without you. Or without Sybill. Have you tried to talk to her?”

“I can’t, Maisie. You can do it because you’re psychic, and because of that intense bond you share with her. To me, it’s just a lantern.”

Maisie dragged herself to her feet and put her hand out to Sacha. “Let’s take them both out to the cemetery. I have to clear it somehow.”

“*Set Georgette free.*” This was Sybill’s voice in her head again. “*She’s been waiting longer than I have. I’ll help you clear the cemetery*”

“Sybill just told me to set Georgette free. She’ll help us instead.”

“Tell her hi for me,” Sacha said, reaching for the lantern. “Tell her I miss her.” He stood, winced as he came down on his injured leg.

“*We can heal him,*” Sybill said.

“How? I’ve never done anything like that.”

“Huh?” said Sacha.

“I’m talking to Sybill. She wants to heal you.”

“Tell her to go ahead.”

“*We have to do it together. You have the power, I have the skill.*”

“Sure. What do we do?”

“*Let me come into your body.*”

Maisie reached over and brushed her fingers against the lantern. She felt a cool tingle advance up her arm and into her body. She suddenly felt strangely bloated, made of air rather than flesh and blood.

“Now what?” she asked.

“*Put your Gift in my hands – your hands. Will it over to me.*”

Maisie closed her eyes and imagined handing her

Gift to Sybill. She felt a strange shifting sensation, as though her centre of balance were slightly changed.

“Now, ask him where it hurts.”

“Where does it hurt, Sacha?”

“Around my ankle mostly.”

Maisie dropped once more to her knees and put out her hands. It was as though Sybill was guiding her from within. She rolled up the leg of Sacha’s jeans and placed her fingers firmly on his ankle. A wonderful, fluttering sense of wellbeing swelled inside her, charged from her heart to her shoulders and down her arms. Sacha let out a little gasp. The feeling retreated, her centre of balance shifted back again as Sybill returned her Gift, and the bloated feeling drew away. She put her hand out to the lantern and released Sybill’s spirit back into the glass.

“That’s amazing,” Sacha said. “It’s like nothing ever happened to it.” He tried walking up and down the room, putting pressure on the injured leg. “It’s back to normal.” He looked up and smiled. “What a team!”

“Your power is incredibly intense,” Sybill said. *“It’s a Gift like no other.”*

“If we could work together –” Maisie started.

“We can’t. I have to go. I have to follow my soul’s destiny. The clearing of the cemetery is the last thing I’ll be able to help you with.”

Maisie felt her shoulders sag forward. That’s right, all over now. How desperately she wanted to draw on her grandmother’s wisdom, ask her the million questions which burned in her brain. But destinies had to be fulfilled. Somehow she had to free every soul trapped in the ground here. She remembered how far the graveyard stretched. It was monstrous.

First things first though. "Let's go set Georgette free."

Maisie and Sacha went for the last time outside, into the frosty mid-winter midnight. They walked out across the road and down through the graveyard, and paused on the cliff's edge. The ocean thundered on the rocks below. Light particles of snow were whipping up on the swirling gusts. The whole world seemed to be bending and shaking to the wind's will. Maisie pulled off her gloves and stuffed them in her pockets.

"Georgette always hated these windy nights," Maisie said.

"I'm sure she'll feel differently about tonight." Sacha smiled at Maisie. "It's a good feeling, isn't it? After all she went through."

"She'll be with her loved ones again. Wherever they are." Maisie held up the lantern, pressed her fingers momentarily against it and said aloud, "Georgette, you're free to go."

Upon the instant of the soul's release, there was a sizzle of blue light and a ghostly human form appeared. But rather than being a brief glimpse like the souls in Flood's room, the form paused before her. A ghost with long blonde hair, wide pale eyes; little more than a skinny teenager, really. A word formed in Maisie's mind: "*Beware.*" And then the ghost was gone.

Maisie laughed out loud. "She spoke to me. I can't believe it, after two hundred years, she spoke to me."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'Beware.' I've no idea what she meant."

"Do you think it was important?"

"I'll figure it out later. Flood and the Wraiths are dead, and soon all the souls in the village will be freed. Nothing else bad could happen."

“So what do we do now?” Sacha asked.

“Sybill, what now?”

“You have to release all the others. Grave by grave.”

“Grave by grave?” Maisie looked around her desperately, headstones stretched out into the distance in every direction. “I can’t. It will take forever. I’ve only got a few days left, and we can only do this at night-time.” Overwhelming tiredness seeped into her bones. She just wanted it to be over.

“You’re not yet adept enough to do it all at once. You have the power, but not the skill.”

“Do you have the skill?”

“Why, yes.”

“So why can’t we work together again, like when we fixed Sacha’s ankle?”

“Perhaps it’s our only option. With your power, I can clear this entire cemetery in one go. But you’ll have to hand your Gift to me again.”

Maisie turned to Sacha. “We’re going to do it together.”

He nodded.

She touched the lantern, closed her eyes. “Okay, Sybill. Come on in and take my Gift.” A lucid vision sprung into her mind – she was still standing on the cliff-top, but Sybill was with her. She smiled and opened her arms to Maisie and stepped towards her. Maisie spread her arms too, waiting. The embrace lasted a moment, and then Sybill advanced inside her body. Again the curious bloated feeling, again the strange shifting of her centre of balance as she handed over her powers.

“Are you ready?” Sybill asked.

“Yes,” Maisie said.

“Give the lantern to Sacha. It’s empty now.”

Maisie opened her eyes and handed the lantern to Sacha.

“Now!”

Maisie no longer felt in control of her body. She spun around and flung her arms up into the air. A cry sprung from her lips, louder than the wind howling and the ocean beating, and it was amazing to let it go, like the most incredible release she had ever experienced in her life. She felt as though she weighed nothing. Then a profound pressure started to shudder up her legs, through her body, up to her hands. The blue light surrounded her, the shuddering pressure shot out of her fingertips. The ground started to shake beneath her.

“Oh, my god,” Sacha said.

All around pale glowing shapes were rising from the earth and disappearing into the sky. They turned, they twisted, there were shouts of joy and relief. It went on and on, the shuddering electricity rocketing through Maisie’s body as thousands of souls were released into the sky. She shook, tears were pouring down her face as she stood, arms raised, watching centuries of misery vaporise into the icy wind.

An enormous cracking sound alerted her that something was wrong. Suddenly her footing didn’t feel so secure.

“Maisie!” Sacha shouted over the din of the sea, the wind and the exultant souls. “The cliff is giving way. Back off, quickly.”

She took a glance over her shoulder, saw a chunk of earth on the edge of the cliff loosen and drop. Rocks

shook and shimmied to the cliff's edge and splashed into the sea. When she looked back Sacha was running away from the edge.

“Sybill?” she asked.

“Run, Maisie. We’ve finished.”

The bloated feeling withdrew from her body and she took off as fast as she could. The earth felt unsteady beneath her. She heard an enormous, thundering crack behind but didn't look back, heading instead for the road. Sacha was up there already. “Come on, Maisie,” he said. “Get out of there.”

With a final burst of energy she made it to the road, was caught in Sacha's arms. She turned, gasping for breath, to watch as the earth on the point of the cliff gave way, crumbled into the sea, taking old gravestones down with it. Pale joyous light was still exploding from the ground everywhere. The fissure in the earth grew and expanded. More graves tumbled away into the water. It sounded as though the world was ending, and she was responsible. The rush of power was indescribable. She was laughing, crying, delirious, hysterical. This was it, the highest pinnacle of her existence. She flew with the gods, anything was possible. All up and down the main street, lights were coming on in houses. Maisie watched, awestruck, as the earth gave up the last of its prisoners. Then the fireworks began to slow and die away, the earth grew still, and soon the graveyard – now nearly two hundred square metres smaller – lay quiet once more under the winter sky.

She turned to Sacha. He shook his head with wonder.

“I did it!” she cried. “We did it! Sybill, we did it!”

No answer.

“Sybill?”

Everything in her head was quiet. She could remember Sybill’s spirit withdrawing from her body, but couldn’t remember the flutter, the shift of balance which meant Sybill had returned her power. Surely . . .

And then, Georgette’s warning – beware – made awful sense. A cold dawning of realisation washed through her. “No. Oh no.”

“Maisie? What’s the matter?” Sacha asked.

“Sybill’s gone. And she’s taken my Gift.”

CHAPTER FORTY

She slept through Sunday and most of Monday. Not just because she was tired – though she was tired, bone-achingly tired – but because she hoped to dream it right. She hoped to find that, once again, she had at least her power to dream, and through those dreams she could restore whatever it was Sybill had taken from her. When she woke on Monday at noon, she remembered no dreams.

Sacha was there. He had called in sick from work for a few days. She stumbled into the kitchen where he was playing with Tabby. They both looked up as she came in.

“I called Ma,” Sacha said. “I told her what happened.”

What happened ... That was how they spoke about Sybill’s betrayal, that was the euphemism they had chosen.

“And?”

“She said you shouldn’t have trusted her.”

Maisie huffed a scornful laugh. “Yeah, I could figure that out.”

“Anyway, she’ll be here tomorrow – you can talk to her then.”

Talking wouldn’t change anything. Maisie picked at a fingernail.

“Tea? I just made it,” Sacha said.

“I guess.” She sat at the table with her head in her hands.

“What are you going to do?” he asked. “You can’t sleep forever.”

She raised her head, took the cup of tea that he offered her. “I don’t know. Everything’s changed.”

“You mean, everything’s gone back to how it was.”

She sipped the tea, nearly scalding her tongue. She pushed it away. Her appetite for it had evaporated. “I need to get dressed. I need fresh air. Perhaps I’ll look in on Reverend Fowler.”

“I have something for you.”

“What is it?”

“I cleaned it up for you.” He pulled a small shiny object out of his pocket and slid it across the table to her.

She picked it up. Georgette’s ring. A tear threatened. “Thanks, Sacha,” she said softly.

“Does it fit? It’s so tiny.”

She put it on her right pinky finger, over a healing graze from flying glass. “Yes, it fits.” She couldn’t look at him. “I need fresh air,” she said, backing away from the table. “I’m going for a walk.”

She pulled on some clothes, tucked her hair up under her hat and opened the front door. The snow

had melted, the sky was a clear, though pale, blue. The sun shone from a long way off, as though it were a star from a distant galaxy. She closed the door behind her.

The outside seemed peculiarly still after Saturday night's adventures, almost a different place. She walked up the main road, glancing only briefly at the graveyard. The place of deception. The moment of betrayal. It made her skin swarm with anger to think of it. Sybill – her grandmother, the woman who had leaned over her baby crib and spoken proudly of her Gift. Only to steal it from her for some selfish purpose, to get across the distance she wanted to cover in the Afterlife. Maisie passed Elsa Smith's house and thought of what the old lady had said to her once: she'd be better off with Baba Yaga for a grandmother. Well, Sybill hadn't eaten her, but she had consumed her future.

As she approached the Reverend's house she could see Tony Blake's police car parked out the front. She cautiously advanced the last few metres, waited for a moment on the front path and then ventured up the stairs.

The front door burst open. Constable Blake stepped out, saw her and paused. They faced each other on the steps like that for nearly a full minute. Maisie shoved her hands hard into her pockets, shrugged. "I came to see the Reverend."

Constable Blake's jaw was set hard. "He's dead. He died yesterday."

Maisie felt tears pricking her eyes. Perhaps it was strange to have so much empathy for the Reverend, but he had spent his life doing what he thought he

should do, what others expected him to do. She knew how that felt. "I'm sorry," she said, and she meant it.

"That's the tenth person to die in Solgreve since Saturday night," the police constable continued.

"I'm sorry," she said again, and this time she did not mean it. She backed down the stairs and walked out onto the street.

"Miss Fielding. Get out of town," he said, his voice fed-up, exhausted. "Please, before somebody decides to take out their anger on you. I've more than enough deaths on my hands to deal with."

She turned and looked up at him. A cloud passed over the sun, placing her momentarily into a shivery shadow. "It's okay," she said. "I'm going the day after tomorrow. For good."

"I wish that you'd never come," the constable muttered descending the steps. Maisie watched him get in his car and pull away from the kerb.

"You think you lost something?" Maisie called to his departing tail lights. "Let me tell you about losing the only thing I ever really cared about."

She trudged home. Mila would be here tomorrow. Less than twenty-four hours left alone with Sacha. She was determined to make the most of it.

Mila arrived Tuesday morning and Maisie would not speak to her. Under the pretence of packing, Maisie lurked in her bedroom all morning until she heard the front door open and shut and saw through the window Mila and Sacha make their way up the front path and towards the graveyard. Then she let herself out of her bedroom and looked around. This cottage, this strange little place by the woods, had become home to her. It had

been exactly eight weeks since she had arrived, but it felt like a lifetime. Everything had changed but she had nothing to show for it. The whole eight weeks may as well not have happened. The fantasy of the little shop, the lifetime of psychic practice, had been snatched from her and she was right back where she started: frustrated, yearning, ordinary daughter of genius parents. She went to the phone. It was probably around ten p.m. back home and she wanted to speak to her mother with nobody around to eavesdrop. The phone beeped its double ring thousands of kilometres away. Janet answered it.

“Hello, Fielding residence.”

“It’s me.”

A short pause. “Maisie? How are you, darling?”

“You were right.”

“I’m sorry, Maisie, I don’t follow.”

“You were right about your mother. Does that make you happy?”

Again the silence. A faint electronic squeal on the line, somewhere in the telecommunications netherworld. Finally Janet said, “It doesn’t make me happy. It just makes me right.”

“I’ll be home in a couple of days.”

“I look forward to it. We’ve had an offer on the cottage and –”

“I shouldn’t imagine that offer stands any longer, Mum. The man who made it died yesterday.” She took pleasure in telling her this. Even though Janet had been right, even though Janet had warned her from the start about Sybill, Maisie took pleasure in deflating her hopes of a financial windfall.

“He did? Ah. Well, I expect we shall just lock it up and –”

“Sybill’s best friend is here – Mila Lupus. The cat seems to like her and she’s kind of between addresses at the moment. Can I give her the keys?”

Janet sighed. “I expect so, darling. It’s all the same to me. I’d as soon be without the place. I’d as soon put it all behind us. Now what’s this nonsense Adrian tells me about you wanting to read fortunes for a living?”

“Don’t worry, Mum. That possibility is now no longer open to me.”

“Oh, I see.”

Both of them fell silent. Maisie felt as though her face were made of stone.

“I’m sorry, Maisie, if things haven’t worked out the way you wanted,” Janet said gently. Maisie responded on an instinctive, almost child-like level to her mother’s sympathy. She started to cry.

“It’s all falling apart,” she said. “It’s all fallen apart.”

“You’ll be home soon. I’m sure that dismal weather is bringing you down. They’re always talking in magazines and on the television about that weather-related depression.”

“Yeah,” Maisie said, sniffing, pulling herself together.

“And it can’t be all bad. At least you can still play the cello.”

Maisie heard the front door open and Sacha came in, beckoned to her. “Mum, I have to go.”

“We’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah, sure. Bye.” She put down the phone and turned her attention to Sacha. “What is it?”

“Do you want to come and watch? Ma is going to bless the ground. So the curse is lifted forever.”

Maisie followed him out into the clear afternoon, down through the cemetery to the cliff's edge. Mila stood, her arms stretched out beside her, humming a strange, almost inaudible song. They waited a few metres away while she went through her ritual. Sacha stood behind Maisie with his arms around her. She felt his breath tickle her ear.

“Are you going to talk to Ma?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

“She might be able to help.”

“I doubt it.”

He squeezed her. She put her hands over his and hung on. It was as though his arms were the only thing keeping her together, keeping the ache inside from becoming a quake that would split her apart. A light sea breeze tangled her hair and the sun shone palely on her face. Mila stopped singing and crouched close to the ground, whispering something to the earth. Maisie looked up. Two seagulls, hanging on the breeze, watched dispassionately from above them.

“Finished!” Mila said, leaping to her feet. She clapped her hands. “Ah, it's a good feeling. So much pain and suffering over forever.”

Sacha let Maisie go, propelled her gently towards Mila. “I'll meet you two back at the cottage,” he said. “I'll make us some lunch.”

Maisie and Mila faced each other. Mila opened her arms, offered an embrace. Maisie stood her ground, waited until Sacha was out of earshot.

“If you'd been here it wouldn't have happened,” she said at last.

“Why do you think that?”

“You would have warned me not to will over my Gift to her.”

Mila dropped her arms. “I’m sure I told you not to give it up to anyone unless you wanted to be rid of it.”

“But you didn’t tell me that *she* would take it.” Maisie’s eyes filled with tears. “You didn’t tell me beware my own grandmother.”

“I’m sorry, Maisie, truly I am.”

“Is it really gone? It’s not just repressed like it used to be?”

Mila tried a smile. Shook her head. “I’m sorry. It was the first thing I noticed when I came back. There’s not a trace of psychic power about you. None of that dark tide remains.”

“And it’s not coming back? She’s not coming back?”

“If she took it, it was to get her across to the next world. She’s not coming back.”

Maisie darted her eyes away, blinked back the tears. The sea was pale silver blue, pulsing just below the surface.

“I’m sorry, Maisie,” Mila said again, advancing to touch her.

Maisie shrugged away. “I know it’s not your fault, but don’t expect me to be your best pal, okay?”

“I understand.”

“Mum wants you to have the house.”

“She does?”

“I’ll call the solicitor and let him know. But you have to take care of Tabby. I can’t take her back with me, and I don’t want her to be lonely or put in a refuge.”

“I’d love to have her.”

Maisie nodded. It was all sorted out then. “I suppose I should go home now.”

“Certainly. Sacha will have lunch ready and it’s getting cold out here.”

“No. Home.”

“Oh.” Mila touched her shoulder lightly. “Good luck with it all, Maisie.”

“Yeah, well at least I can still play the cello.”

Because of a delayed train from York, and a crowded tube which couldn’t fit Sacha, Maisie and her suitcases, Maisie actually thought she might miss her flight. Her heart hoped that she would miss her flight, because that would mean more time with Sacha. But when she raced up to check in her baggage, she found the flight had been delayed an hour and she would make it easily.

Hers was the departure lounge closest to the end of the universe. She bought magazines and lollies, changed money at the Amex office, Sacha lurking behind her. Her imminent departure had forced them into meaningless, polite conversation. All the way down from York they had tried to cram in a lifetime of words. Now they were reduced to talking about the exchange rate and whether over-the-counter sleeping pills worked.

“This is it,” she said, dropping into a seat at the departure lounge.

“Yeah. This is it,” he said. He sat next to her and put his arm around her. Neither of them could say anything. The triangle of soft edges between her ribs ached and ached. There was a jagged cry of pain trapped in there somewhere. He kissed the top of her head.

“I’ll miss you.”

“Don’t ...” she said, fighting back a sob. “I’m ugly when I cry. I don’t want you to remember me being ugly.”

“Oh, Maisie. You could never be ugly.”

She put her head on his shoulder, his arms encircled her and she let the tears fall. “I’m so unhappy,” she whispered.

The boarding call came over the loudspeaker. People were standing, gathering hand luggage, waving goodbye. She sat in the circle of his embrace, willing the world to stop.

“You’ll be happy. You’ll see Adrian again, all your friends. It will be sunny and warm, you won’t freeze every time you go outside.”

She palmed tears from her eyes, nodded. “Maybe.”

“You’ll be all right. Just stop letting everybody else tell you what to do. You could do anything. Anything.”

The final boarding call came. She looked around. Only she and a few other stragglers remained in the departure lounge. “Oh, god,” she said, feeling sick, “I’ve got to go.”

They stood. Embraced. She stepped back, gazed at him, his smooth skin, his dark hair, his full top lip.

“I will never see you again,” she said.

He drew a short breath as though he might answer with the requisite platitude. *Of course you will. Don’t be silly.* But he didn’t say it. He let her comment stand. He touched her face, pulled her to him, kissed her hard enough to bruise her.

“Goodbye,” he said, close to her lips.

“Goodbye.” She stepped back, picked up her hand luggage, hurried to the gate.

She paused before she stepped through, looked back. He had his hand up, a goodbye wave. She waved back, braved a smile.

“Defy the system, Maisie,” he called.

The flight attendant at the gate ushered her through. She lost sight of him.

She woke on the plane – had she really been sleeping? She must have been, because she had dreamed about Sacha, just a stupid dream which meant nothing. The shutters on every window were drawn, all the lights were off. The flight attendants had imposed artificial night-time, sleep-time. She let herself out of her seat belt and headed up towards the toilet. One shutter right near the tail was open, and daylight dazzled through it. She paused, peered out. A vast green and brown landscape spread out below, baking under bright sun. She had the sense that the plane wasn’t actually moving, that it had merely taken off and was now suspended, waiting for the world to turn underneath it. A man joined her at the window, looked out.

“Where do you suppose we are?” she said, to be polite.

“I don’t know. China?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think it’s China. Maybe the Middle East?”

He shrugged and went into the toilet. She leaned her head against the window and sighed. The daylight made her eyes hurt.

“I have no idea where I am,” she said, and her breath fogged the window. Below, the world kept turning towards home.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincerest thanks to Selwa Anthony, for ongoing service above and beyond the call of duty; to the twee temptresses Norna Scott and Hannah Collingridge at the University of York, for their help with details of Anglo-Saxon religion and language (all misuse of the info is entirely my responsibility); to Louise Cusack and Jan McKemmish who read and commented on the story in its earliest drafts; and to Mirko Ruckels for help with the particulars of music theory and opera singing (and also just for being a sweetie). The support of my friends and family is always appreciated, but special thanks must be extended, as always, to Kate the Great (B.F.).

FROM THE AUTHOR

I was born in London, and my family brought me to Australia when I was four. I grew up near the seaside in a creepy old Queenslander. Underneath it I had a cubbyhole where I used to go to write. I'd fill endless exercise books with earnest beginnings of stories, but didn't actually manage to finish my first novel until I was eleven. It was a story about three orphans who inherited a haunted house and somehow got mixed up with an international diamond smuggling ring. I wish I still had it, but I burned it in a fit of teenage disdain. During my teenage years, I wrote reams of unimaginative fantasy fiction, in which an unpopular buck-toothed girl saved the world. Then I got braces and my heroines were rather straighter-toothed.

I worked for a long time in bad jobs: hospitality, typing, and indulging an embarrassing wish to be an alternative rock goddess. Then I decided I didn't know enough and went to university, so far picking up an English degree with first class honours, a university medal, and an MA in creative writing. Right now, I'm a doctoral candidate in English at University of Queensland, writing a thesis about myths of creativity in British Romanticism.

All along, I've never stopped writing. In 1997 my first novel *The Infernal* was published. It was picked up in the UK and Europe, and went on to win the 1997 Aurealis Awards for best horror novel, and best fantasy novel. *Grimoire* was next in 1999, then I

changed publishers. HarperCollins published my third novel *The Resurrectionists* in October 2000, and it was reprinted in November 2000, and August 2001 (paperback size). HarperCollins also publishing my young adult novel *Bloodlace* in May 2001 (the first in a series about a teenage psychic detective); and my fourth novel *Angel of Ruin* in October 2001 (available as e-book in November 2003). Most of these novels will also be published in the UK and Europe as well. I love writing more than I can adequately express. It is the balm for my soul — I love to lose myself in a story, and I get so attached to the characters that it's not unusual for me to go to pieces emotionally while finishing a book. Everything I write is written with the utmost care and attention; I can honestly say that my heart is in my work.

I live in Brisbane where I own a little flat near the university for me and my two black cats, Polly and Petra. I love music, especially melancholy stuff like Jeff Buckley and Tori Amos, and 20th century composers like Tavener, Gorecki, Glass and Winston. My fave TV shows are *The Simpsons*, *The Practice*, *Friends* and *Neighbours* (yes, *Neighbours*). My partner is a talented singer-songwriter-guitarist-pianist-violinist who provides live music while I write, and always pats my head when I'm melancholy.

My plans for the future are to keep writing lots, keep reading lots, maybe have some kind of offspring, do lots more travel, learn lots of languages, and eventually be a happy old lady living in a house with a view of the sea.

Kim Wilkins

CREDITS

Cover photo kindly supplied by
Darian Causby

Cover and internal design by
HarperCollins Design Studio, Australia

THE RESURRECTIONISTS. COPYRIGHT © 2000 BY KIM WILKINS. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of PerfectBound™.

PerfectBound™ and the PerfectBound™ logo are trademarks of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader March 2003 ISBN 0-7322-7797-3

Print edition first published in 2000 by HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
<http://www.perfectbound.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada
<http://www.perfectbound.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.uk.perfectbound.com>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.perfectbound.com>