

HEADLAND HOUSE

(Sequel to 'The White House')

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Brian Saunders, a self-employed accountant, purchases Headland House for his family, but the house holds memories of multiple tragedies. When the occupants of the house begin to have strange dreams and experience supernatural events, Brian decides to investigate the house's history; but the house has ulterior motives concerning each of the occupants.

I

As they drove up the sloping gravel track towards the headland, the house came into view; first its tiled roof then the white walls and shuttered windows. There were few trees up here, the flora consisting mainly of heather and shrubs such as broom, gorse and bracken. Brian felt excitedly nervous but admittedly a little apprehensive wondering how Jenny would react when she saw it. Their two children Rodney (13) and Amanda (15) had been constantly asking from the back seat of the car what the house was like but their father's answer was always 'Wait and see.' or just 'Be patient we'll soon be there.'

The track approached the property to its rear and wound around the building in a loop several yards from the house at its closest. The front of the house faced south and overlooked the tip of the headland and the bay beyond. Brian brought the vehicle to a stop opposite the front door and turned off the engine. Jenny just sat there straight faced.

"Don't tell me that this is the property you have bought, Brian."

The children didn't look particularly overawed either. Brian felt a tinge of disappointment but it quickly passed.

"Okay, the property needs a bit of renovation work but the location and views across the bay are to die for; but wait until you see inside, or at least the potential of what can be done, without too much expense I might add. I don't anticipate that the required work will take very long either. Anyway, it's in a much more attractive location compared to our current house and much larger. The three of you have been complaining for a long time that our house is too small with us all getting in each other's way. Besides, it means that I can work from home."

Jenny looked rather despondent.

"But it looks so run down. Couldn't you have found a more modern property? This one looks like it needs a lot of work doing to it? How much did you have to pay for it anyway?"

"It was a bargain at the auction, Jenny, and besides, the business is doing well at the moment as you know. I have picked up several new clients and reckon that I'll soon need to start subcontracting out some of the workload as well. Things couldn't be more opportune to invest in a property like this. Think of its value once the work is complete."

The four of them sat staring at the house from the car for a few minutes. There was an old wooden post in the overgrown garden leaning precariously as though it was about to topple over. The board nailed to the top contained a trespasser's warning with a "SOLD" notice partially covering it but beginning to peel off. The rusty remains of an old iron gate, with little metal left, lay in the grass close to the track but nothing, other than some lengths of rotten wood, remained of what must have been the garden fence. Looking up, they could see that the house had three upstairs windows and two large ones on the ground floor either side of a sad looking wooden porch. All the windows had dilapidated shutters kept closed with planks nailed across them. The house had a slate tiled roof with tall brick chimneys at either end. Even at this distance they could see that the porch door was secured with a huge padlock.

"It looks a bit spooky" Amanda said.

"I expect it's haunted" Rodney added.

"Funny you should say that" Brian interjected.

"Haunted!" Jenny exclaimed grumpily. "That takes the biscuit. So, you've bought us not only a dilapidated house but one that's haunted."

"Only if one believes in ghosts, and I certainly don't; do you?" he challenged.

"No, not really I suppose."

Brian turned round to face the children. "What about you two? Do you believe ghosts exist?"

"Nope" they both replied, not particularly convincingly.

Brian opened the car door and started to climb out.

"Come on then. Let's show you the inside. It may make you feel more positive about the place."

"You have a key to that padlock I presume" Jenny asked rhetorically, climbing out her side.

Brian didn't bother to reply but just climbed out of the car to join the children who had eagerly got out, slamming the doors behind them, to Brian's annoyance.

"I told you not to slam the car doors; there's no need."

As he got out, Brian noticed that the grassy area extending from the gravel track to the edge of the headland had been flattened in places from car tyres. It was obvious that trippers had parked in the area in spite of a warning sign further down the track stating '*No Parking Beyond This Point*'. A couple of youths were sitting several yards away facing the bay chatting and smoking. One of them looked round when he heard the car door slam and said something

to his friend. They both got up and ambled past the house and back down the track.

Brian walked around the car towards the house. Jenny, Amanda and Rodney followed him through the long grass up to the porch where he stopped to fish a bunch of keys out of his pocket, selecting one to open and remove the padlock. Most of the wood around the porch looked rotten and probably needed replacing. Brian made a mental note to get a quote for a new brick-built replacement. The door creaked loudly as he pushed it open. Jenny noticed the nail holes in the door and frame where she assumed planks had been nailed across to stop trespassers from breaking in.

"Needs a new porch", she commented pointlessly as she stepped over the threshold, "and a new front door" she added.

Brian selected another key and opened the inner door. They found themselves in a long room that spanned the width of the house. Bands of light from the rotting window shutters partially illuminated what should have been a polished wooden floor, but which had discoloured in the entrance due to occupants passing in and out. It also had a thin layer of dust that had accumulated over the years. A few footprints were visible that suggested someone had been here recently. Brian assumed they were his prints and those of the agent when he came to view the house. The room itself was decorated with green and white vertically striped wallpaper, the alternating wide white stripes enclosing large red roses. Large chandeliers laced with multiple cobwebs hung from the ceiling in-line with the windows.

"Dreadful wallpaper" Jenny muttered, mournfully.

"Looks like a ballroom" Amanda said.

"Hmm, not very practical" Brian said. "It might be an idea if we divided it into two rooms; that would be more useful."

"We could always use it as a bowling alley" Rodney suggested.

"In your dreams" his father replied, sniggering.

Brian closed the front door as the others approached an ornamental arch opposite that led into a short corridor. Jenny's clattering high-heel shoes echoed loudly on the wooden floor. There were two doors opposite each other just before the arch. Both were slightly ajar. They all peeked briefly into each of the rooms, which were about five square metres in size.

"One could be the dining room and the other my study or office" Brian suggested. "I suppose we could always leave the room at the front as a large sun lounge to provide us with a panoramic view overlooking the headland."

Jenny nodded in agreement, a few thoughts passing through her mind.

“Hm. We could buy a grand piano which would look very posh at one end of the room. I could then practice my piano lessons.”

Brian turned to face her. “Since when have you been having piano lessons?”

“I thought I might like to start. I could plonk away without upsetting any neighbours, being so isolated up here.” She emphasised the word *isolated* as she glanced around the room. “If the other rooms are in this condition, I do agree that internally it shouldn’t take too much effort to redecorate them. It’s just the outside that looks rather tatty and probably requires most of the work doing.”

Passing through the arch, they stopped briefly to look at the supporting Pseudo-Greek columns faced with alabaster climbing vines that met over the hallway.

“Strange décor” Jenny said. “Might have to get rid of those.”

“The do look a bit out-of-place” Brian agreed.

They moved on to stop by a door on the left with drawn bolts top and bottom and a fixing that had once been used to padlock the room beyond.

“Rather well secured ...” commented Jenny “... and a bit over the top. I wonder why?”

“Who knows” replied Brian, pulling the door open and peering inside. Steps led down into a gloomy room. “Maybe the owner was growing marijuana. Anyway, it’s the basement.”

Jenny and the children stepped back quickly as a damp musky odour assaulted their senses.

“Horrible smell” Amanda commented holding her nose.

The children moved forward again to peer into the darkness. A little light filtered in from a partially clogged up ventilation grill high up on the wall opposite the door.

“Ooooh! The spirits are waking” Rodney said in a deep shaky voice.

“Oh shutup!” responded Amanda as Brian closed the door.

Deep in the basement, in a corner cupboard, something stirred.

Nearly opposite the basement door a bit further on to the right was a staircase leading to the upstairs rooms. Rodney started to climb.

“Let’s go and find our rooms, Amanda.”

“Kitchen first,” said their father “then we will go up together.”

The kitchen door had been left open, so the half glazed back door was visible opposite, which they could see was still boarded up on the outside.

Jenny glanced around the room noticing the old earthenware sink and cooking range.

"They will have to be ripped out" she said. "I want a modern kitchen, so a lot of work is required here."

"I have already made enquiries" Brian said, "and am expecting an estimate for the labour shortly. We just need to decide what units and appliances we would like. I have also approached an electrician I know, to check over the wiring, and a heating engineer to install central heating."

"Yes" Jenny confirmed. "I noticed that the only form of heating was from fireplaces, which I saw in the two rooms off the hall, so I expect it's bloody cold in the winter. You've certainly done your homework though. How long will all this work take and how soon can they start?"

"As it happens, the kitchen installers are just coming to the end of their current installation so can probably start on ours within the next two weeks."

"And the central heating?"

"A big job of course for a house of this size but the man said he could do it in stages, if we didn't mind the inconvenience, by using shut-off valves as each room is brought on-line."

"Where would the boiler go? In the kitchen?"

"It could do, but he suggested the basement might be the best place as the gas supply enters the property down there."

"This window is broken and boarded up" commented Amanda, pointing to the window to the left of the back door.

"We'll get that sorted" Brian responded. "I expect someone broke in as the house has been unoccupied for so long. Now, let's go investigate upstairs" he continued, putting an arm around each of the children.

"When was the last time anyone lived here then?" Rodney asked.

"Oh, about fifty years ago I think."

"Fifty years ago!" Jenny exclaimed. "God knows what we'll find after all this time!"

"It's okay" Brian said. "The surveyor found nothing amiss. If there had been anything seriously wrong or dangerous it would have been condemned and probably demolished."

The family returned to the hall and ascended the staircase. Many of the steps creaked as they trod on them.

"That would get on my nerves" Jenny complained, crossly.

"Don't worry, I'll get the fitters to sort them out when they lay the stair carpet" Brian said. "Which reminds me; that's something else we need to do:

choose carpets. Although in some rooms I think polished floorboards would look smart – and more modern.”

“They’ll probably need sanding down but, yes, I agree.”

They had now reached the top of the stairs that opened onto a long landing that ran along the centre of the house from front to back. A bedroom door faced them. The corridor to the left ended with a window over the front door and immediately to the left was a second bedroom door, which also displayed signs of having been padlocked and bolted. The same ‘*Strange?*’ thought passed through all of their minds as Brian opened the door for them to enter. Like the other rooms they had seen, it was empty except for an old iron bed and a wardrobe which showed traces of woodworm. Amanda wandered down to the window and peeked through gaps in the shutters at the view beyond. She noticed a well-worn footpath through the grass leading from the gravel track to the tip of the headland and thought she could see a handrail and the beginning of steps, presumably leading down to the sea.

Having checked the larger room opposite the staircase, Brian said “This will be your mum’s and my room.”

They then turned to follow the corridor towards the back of the house. There was a good-sized room on the left, a fourth small bedroom or boxroom at the end of the corridor over the kitchen, and which contained an old trunk, and finally a bathroom on the right which contained an old gas geyser over an old yellowing enamel bathtub.

“Something else to replace” suggested Jenny.

“I might also have a toilet installed off the kitchen” Brian said. “It will be useful to have one downstairs and the kitchen looks large enough to accommodate one.”

With Rodney and Amanda arguing over which of the bedrooms each was going to have, the family descended the stairs and, taking one last look around, locked up and returned to their car. They sat there for a while studying the house once again.

“I’ll get rid of those shutters” Brian said “... and I am sure the kids will help sort out the garden, especially now with the warmer weather and school holidays coming up.”

“What about going swimming in the sea?” suggested Amanda. “I think I saw some steps at the end of the headland that might go down to a beach.”

“I’m sure we will have time for a little relaxation and exploration” Brian replied.

Jenny seemed a bit happier and supportive now that she knew Brian had thoroughly planned and organized the whole project.

“Time to go and do a lot of choosing and shopping” she said, smiling with satisfaction.

Brian started the car and shoved it into gear.

“Let’s go make a new home, guys.”

Plans percolated through each of the family’s minds as they drove off.

Something in the cupboard in the basement settled back down, aware that the unwanted family had gone ... for good?

II

It wasn't long before work was started on the property with the electrician making the first appearance a couple of days later and spending several hours thoroughly checking out the wiring. The following day he reported back to Brian.

"The electrics appear to be quite sound but I will replace the old fuse box with a new trip system."

"Where actually is the fuse box, John?" Brian asked. "I didn't think of asking its location when I looked over the property."

"In the basement, along with the electricity and gas meters. It's a bit gloomy down there but at least they are easy to access."

Brian frowned slightly.

"Might it be better in the kitchen, then? If anything goes wrong and the mains trip out then groping one's way to the basement might not be the safest option. Although one can always use a torch I suppose"

"It will be easier and quicker if I just replace it with the new one in situ. I'll also install some emergency lighting using rechargeable batteries" John suggested.

"Okay. Whatever you think best." Brian turned away. "I'll leave you to it."

"Oh, by the way."

He turned back.

"Yes?"

"The basement."

Brian looked at him questioningly.

"What about it?"

"It smells very damp. I think you ought to get it checked out by a surveyor, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Yes, we noticed it too; most unpleasant. The property has been checked out by a surveyor but he didn't make any comment about the basement or mention anything about damp. I'll have to get back to him."

Brian left John to it and joined Jenny and the children for their shopping trip to select a new kitchen and appliances, the priority for Jenny, whilst Rodney and Amanda were going to choose paint colours and carpets for their bedrooms, under Jenny's guidance of course.

John, the electrician, managed to procure a new fuse box in town later that morning, returned to the house and took it down to the basement. He wasn't particularly looking forward to working in the room, partly because of the damp, musky smell but also because the room was cold and gloomy even with the high wattage bulb he had fitted in the socket hanging in the middle of the room. He also thought it odd to discover a padlocked trap door in the floor in the centre of the room, wondering what the purpose of it was. The electric and gas meters were situated on the wall to the right and it was while he was examining the wiring from the meter to the old fuse box that he heard a door creak over to his left. He glanced across to see an old built-in cupboard in the corner and wondered if it could be the source of the strong unpleasant odour. He stopped what he was doing and went over to investigate but, pulling on the door as hard as he could, he failed to open it. There was no keyhole, so it obviously wasn't locked. He shrugged his shoulders and returned to the job in hand, placing the new fuse box to one side and turning on his strong flashlight. He switched off the mains power and was about to disconnect the old fuse box when he heard another creak and had an uncomfortable feeling that something was moving up behind him. Jumping up and turning quickly he thought he detected a shadow or something standing behind him momentarily; but then it was gone. The door creaked again. Two or three times he tried to return to the job in hand but with similar results even to the point of imagining a seemingly aggressive intent on the part of the unseen presence. He told himself that he wasn't scared; it was just that his heart felt as though it was pounding. Finally, he decided he would just bypass the old fuse box and install the new one in the kitchen, so switched the mains back on, collected his equipment and hurried back upstairs to decide where he needed to install the new box. He had felt a great relief once he had left the basement and became aware that he was shaking when he finally located the output from the old fuse box. It was a cable bundle that was fed up into the kitchen through a plastic conduit at the back of one of the old floor cupboards. The bundle then split to provide power to various parts of the house. He was still shaking slightly as he hurriedly left the house, apprehensive about returning to the basement to install the bypass. The less time spent in that dreadful room the better.

When the family arrived home late afternoon there was no sign of John. Brian found the new fuse box lying on the kitchen floor.

“Oh, he hasn’t done it yet. He must have hit a problem. I hope it’s not serious.”

John appeared early the following day at the same time as a couple of lads from the kitchen installation company who started to rip out the old cupboards and equipment.

“Problems yesterday, John?” Brian asked.

John seemed a bit vague.

“Er, yes. I thought about what you said and agree it would make more sense to install the fuse box in the kitchen after all. It won’t be as big a job as I initially thought.”

He certainly wasn’t going to admit being spooked by a creaking door and imaginary shadows.

“I can put it on the wall at that end” he said, pointing to end of the kitchen which was directly above the basement.

“That would work out quite well” Brian commented. “We are having the other end partitioned off for a toilet and washbasin, which will more easily link up with the existing plumbing and it will be directly below the bathroom upstairs.”

Their discussions were interrupted by the appearance of the gas engineer, let in by Jenny. He walked up to Brian

“Hello Mr Saunders, I’m James Hetherington from ‘GS UK’. I thought I’d pop in on my way to a job this morning to find out where you want the boiler installed. It has to be on an external wall, preferably near where the gas supply enters the property; saves running copper piping all over your kitchen.”

“How soon can you start?” Brian asked, as he followed James around the kitchen whilst the latter was trying to find where the gas supply entered the room.

“A couple of weeks I reckon. I have got a few small jobs to finish off whilst I am getting hold of the materials to make a start.”

“That would be great.”

He bent down close to where John was working.

“Ah, here it is; coming up from the basement. The meter must be down there. I’ll go and check that the supply has been securely turned off.”

He started to walk towards the kitchen door.

“There’s a pull-cord on the left just inside the door to turn on the light” Brian called out.

“I’ll replace that with a switch on the hall wall by the door Mr Saunders” John commented. “Safer that way.”

“Thanks.”

James Hetherington opened the basement door and stepped back.

“God! What a stench!” he exclaimed to himself as a draft of cold, damp air hit him.

He turned the light on and descended the steps looking around the room. He first noticed the padlocked trapdoor in the floor then a sideboard/dresser close to the wall to the right of the steps and finally a single wooden chair. His eyes finally fell upon the electric and gas meters over to his left. As he made his way across the room the light flickered slightly. His initial thought was poor electrics, which he would mention to John when he returned to the kitchen. He glanced at the fuse box noticing a smear of what appeared to be slime on the cover then switched his attention to the gas meter. Brushing off the accumulated dust, he was checking that the supply had been turned off when the light flickered again and went out. He was just thinking that it was fortunate that he hadn’t closed the basement door thus, allowing some light to filter from the hall to counteract the darkness, when he heard a door creak. At the same time the room suddenly felt colder with the strong damp mouldy odour assaulting his nostrils. He shivered as his senses seemed to warn him of a threatening presence close by. Probably for the first time in his life he felt fear. With his heart pounding he quickly dashed over to the steps and scrambled his way out of the basement leaving the door open.

A door creaked and the light came back on

James Hetherington wandered back into the kitchen, shaking slightly, but smoothing down his hair in the pretence of being calm. Brian wasn’t there but John glanced briefly at him and stared.

“God! You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

James felt he wanted to throw up but managed to suppress the reaction by replying quickly.

“No, no” he replied. “It was the nauseous smell in that room; so overpowering.”

John returned to his work.

“You’re right there. They need to do something about it. It’s not a pleasant environment to work in.”

“No, it certainly isn’t. Well, I’ll be off now.”

He turned to leave the room.

“Did you find the gas meter?” John asked.

“Er, yes.” He paused a moment, then asked “How long were you down there?”

John recollected his own experience in the basement. “Oh, not long.”

“Was everything ... alright?”

“Yes” he lied, “apart from the smell.”

James left the house, glad to be away from the building and wondering whether he could get out of doing the work after all; but he had made a commitment and signed an agreement. He also knew that he couldn’t afford to turn down a job of this size nor afford a bad review by cancelling at such short notice. He decided that in future he wouldn’t enter that room alone but make some excuse for someone to accompany him.

The next moment, Jenny entered the kitchen.

“Hello John. Has Mr Hetherington left?”

“Yes Mrs Saunders. He left a few moments ago.”

“Hm, I thought it was him. He seemed to be in a bit of a hurry.”

John wasn’t sure how to reply, but then plucked up courage. He put his tools down and stood up.”

“Mrs Saunders.”

“Yes?”

He coughed. “I hope you don’t mind me saying this but that horrible smell in the basement. It’s really unpleasant. Mr Hetherington noticed it too.”

“Yes, we are aware of it. Brian will sort it out.”

“Without putting too fine a point on it, it makes working in there ... not impossible but ...”

He could sense that she was beginning to get a bit irate.

“I will tell him to make it a priority to sort it out” she replied quickly with a hint of annoyance.

John was taken aback.

“Thank you, Mrs Saunders; much appreciated.”

He returned to the job in-hand whilst Jenny quickly left the kitchen to find her husband. She nearly bumped into Amanda who was coming down the stairs.

“Mum?”

“Not now” her mother snapped. “Where’s your father?”

“I think he’s in the garden with Rodney.”

Jenny ignored her daughter and stomped towards the front door.

“Brian!”

Father and son were clearing the path to the front door slowly revealing a path constructed with bricks, some of which were missing. Brian looked up to see Jenny standing in the doorway. She shouted loudly and angrily.

“Instead of messing about in the bloody garden why don’t you come and sort out that awful smell in the basement. The workmen are refusing to go down there.”

The ‘occupant’ of the built-in cupboard in the basement shifted. It was disturbed.

Brian stood up.

“Carry on Rod” he said to his son. “I’ll be back in a moment.” He then called out to his wife. “What’s the trouble, darling?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Get it sorted. I’m going to get something for lunch. I’ll take Amanda.”

She went back into the house ahead of him. “Amanda!”

As Brian walked towards the kitchen, Jenny brushed past him with Amanda in tow to leave the house and head for the car, which she drove off rather angrily.

“Oh dear” Brian muttered.

He turned back to find John fixing the new fuse box to the kitchen wall.

“So, John, Jenny tells me you are refusing to go into the basement because of the unpleasant smell.”

John paused what he was doing.

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that I won’t go down there; rather just limit the time I need to spend in there. It’s the smell Mr Saunders. It’s really nauseating; and I think it may be coming from that old built-in cupboard in the corner. I did try to open it but it was stuck hard.”

“Perhaps it’s locked.”

“No. There’s no keyhole.”

Brian turned to make his way to the basement.

“Okay, I’ll go and have a look.”

He stepped back into the hall and opened the door to the basement. The odour was still present but he didn't consider it overpowering or bad enough so as to put anyone off working down there. He switched on the light and stood at the top of the steps glancing around the room. The first thing he noticed was the padlocked trap door in the floor and wondered what its function was. He also recollected not being given a key for the padlock. Just behind the trapdoor there was a single wooden chair. He descended the steps and walked over to a sideboard/dresser in the corner on the right and proceeded to check the draws and cupboard underneath. He was certainly surprised to find an old dagger in the top left-hand drawer. He picked it up to examine it but immediately dropped it when he thought he heard a scream and at the same time experienced what he could only describe as an icy cold feeling that swept over his body that made him shiver. He stared momentarily at the dagger lying there then quickly closed the drawer to continue his investigation of the room. He concluded that maybe he had imagined the weird experience after all. His gaze around the room soon located the electric and gas meters and, finally, the built-in cupboard in the left-hand corner which he now approached. As John had mentioned, there was no keyhole so Brian grabbed the door-knob, turned it and pulled hard. It was stuck fast. However much he tugged, even putting his foot against the wall, the door would not open. Sighing, he returned to the kitchen look for something with which to try and prise open the door.

John had finished mounting the new fuse box and looked up when Brian entered the kitchen.

"Any luck Mr Saunders?"

"No" he replied. "I think I need something to wedge between the door and the frame to try and lever it open. The door has probably expanded due to the damp."

Brian hesitated for a moment then felt he had to ask.

"Er, John."

"Yes Mr Saunders?"

"You didn't hear anything just now, did you? What sounded like a scream maybe?"

John's head flicked round with a disconcerting look on his face.

"No. Why? Did you?"

"I thought I did but it must have been my imagination or probably a bird or something."

Brian turned to leave.

"I'll just go and get my toolbox to see if I've got anything suitable."

John quickly rummaged around his own toolbox and took out a large screwdriver.

"You can borrow this heavy-duty screwdriver if you like" he said, handing the tool to Brian.

"Oh, thanks."

Brian took the screwdriver offered to him and was about to return to the basement then changed his mind.

"Fancy a coffee or tea, John?"

"Coffee please; milk and one sugar."

Brian put the kettle on and went back out to the front of the house, where Rodney was still busy clearing the weeds and the long grass along the brick path.

"Drink Rod?" he called out.

"Yes please Dad; a coke."

Brian and John sat drinking their coffees, munching bourbon biscuits and discussing the proposed kitchen layout. Rodney took his coke into the garden to continue weeding.

They were still talking when Jenny and Amanda returned with bags of food and a few bits and pieces for the kitchen, like a new cruet set and an electric can opener.

"Busy then" Jenny commented sarcastically as they entered the kitchen, but she was in a better mood now."

She looked around the room.

"Where are our drinks, and did you find out where the smell was coming from?"

"Drinks just coming and, no, I haven't but I was just about to go back down with John's screwdriver."

"Screwdriver?"

He put the kettle on for Jenny's drink. Amanda, like her brother, decided on a coke.

"Yes. We think the smell is coming from that cupboard in the corner but I can't get the door open; hence a tool to help me."

"Okay; you can have a doughnut when you've done it."

"You've bought doughnuts? Custard filled I hope."

"Amanda doesn't like custard, so they're strawberry ... and lots of it."

She looked over at John.

"Would you like one, John? I bought one for you."

John raised himself off the floor where he was labelling cables.

"I think I can just about manage one thanks Mrs Saunders, even though your husband has been plying me with biscuits.

Brian walked off with the screwdriver.

"I'll see you in a minute."

He returned to the basement and on reaching the cupboard once more, inserted the tip of screwdriver between the door and the frame just by the door-knob.

'Strange' he thought. There was definitely a small gap between the door and the frame so he wondered why the door wouldn't open.

Using the screwdriver as a lever, he tried to force the door open but it showed no inclination to move. He even checked the bottom to ensure that it wasn't scraping along the floor. There seemed to be no logical reason why it was stuck so hard. The light flickered for an instant. Instinctively, Brian looked over at the fuse-box which seemed to glisten slightly. Wandering over to look at it he noticed a film of some slimy matter on it, so touched it with his forefinger and smelt it.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, quickly withdrawing his finger away from his nose. It smelt awful: like something decomposing. He pulled an old tissue out of his pocket and wiped his finger with it.

Jenny appeared in the basement doorway.

"Haven't you got it open yet?"

"No. Isn't that obvious?" he retorted

.

She noticed him wiping his finger on the tissue.

"Cut yourself then?"

"No I didn't. There's some sort of slime on the fuse-box and it stinks. It's a wonder John didn't mention it."

She watched him for a few seconds then turned to return to the kitchen.

"I'll ask him to come and give you a hand. I'm sure he won't mind."

She disappeared.

A few moments later, John appeared.

"Need a hand Mr Saunders?"

"Thanks John. It's this door. There seems to be no reason why it shouldn't open."

John came down the steps and walked over to examine the door.

"You're right. There is a decent gap between it and the frame. Stick the screwdriver in again and try and lever it open while I pull."

Whilst Brian was inserting the screwdriver again he asked John about the slime on the fuse-box.

"Slime?" John replied. "No. It was a bit dusty and corroded but I didn't find any slime on it."

"I hope it wasn't Rodney or Amanda mucking about; it smells awful ... okay, I'm ready."

John grabbed the doorknob, turned it and pulled whilst Brian pushed hard against the handle of the screwdriver.

"It's not moving, John."

"No, it's not; really weird." He tugged hard. "One more tr..."

Suddenly it flew open causing John to fall back onto the floor. The screwdriver shot into the air and landed with its metal end embedded in the floor inches from John's hand that he had put out to break his fall.

"That was close" he said, staring at the tool. "It could have ..."

"God! The smell is awful." Brian interrupted, putting his hand over his nose.

John did likewise.

The unseen thing in the cupboard shifted.

The two men were staring at an old long dark coat hanging in the cupboard. Jenny and the children appeared in the basement doorway.

"Are you two alright? We heard a thump and a scream and thought one of you must have been hurt."

The two men glanced at each other with the same questioning look on their faces thinking the same thought. '*Scream? What scream?*'

"We didn't hear a scream" Brian replied. "Unless" But he couldn't think of any explanation, recollecting the scream earlier when he picked up the dagger.

Jenny descended the steps holding her nose.

"God, that smell!"

She approached the cupboard.

"Is it that old coat? You'd better get rid of it - now."

John left the room to return to the kitchen accompanied by the children, also put off by the smell.

Jenny peered inside the cupboard.

"What's that on the floor just inside the cupboard?"

Brian bent down to examine it.

“Looks like some sort of slime like I found on the fuse-box. I’ll go and get something to clean it up.”

“And chuck that coat out while you’re at it.”

As they both left the room the light flickered momentarily.

Brian returned wearing rubber gloves with a cloth and a bucket of disinfectant. He grabbed the coat and lifted it from the coat hook on which it was hanging. Even through the gloves it felt cold and damp. For a moment he was looking at an infinite blackness where the coat had been hanging instead of the back of the cupboard and thought he heard a deep moaning sound. He also shivered with the sensation that something evil was examining him. As the back of the cupboard took shape in his vision, he shook his head and attributed the weird sensations to the smell, the cold and the damp.

The doorframe was slightly dented where the screwdriver had been inserted but that didn’t bother him; he could sort it out later. He dropped the old coat on the floor behind him and proceeded to clean up the slime from the floor of the cupboard. He found that closing and opening the door was now quite easy and wondered again what had made it stick. Leaving it slightly ajar to let the floor dry out he left the room, taking the old coat with him and threw it in the skip that the kitchen installers had had delivered and dumped in the back garden, which the family hadn’t even begun to tackle.

Brian, Jenny and the children locked up and left the house just after 11pm to return to their old house, until such time that sufficient work had been completed so as to enable them to move in.

The ‘occupant’ in the built-in cupboard emerged and passed through the rooms, disturbed at what was happening in the house.

III

Early the following morning the family arrived back at Headland House. Brian and the children started unloading the car with some of the things they had brought from their old house whilst Jenny put the kettle on to make some drinks. They had made sure that they had brought enough spare mugs to make coffees and teas for the various tradesmen who were about to descend on their new home. In addition to all the inside work Brian had arranged for a six-foot fence to be erected around the back and sides of the property to provide some privacy against day-trippers, who occasionally passed by on their way to the headland and on down to the beach. He had also contacted a builder to erect a garage to the right of the property.

It wasn't until Jenny had left the kitchen to go and help the others that she noticed the muddy footsteps along the hall.

"What the ..."

She had mopped the floors before they had left the previous evening and was now angry. Stepping outside the front door and seeing Brian and the children approaching with bags from the car, she stood on the top step, hands on hips.

"Oh, very funny!"

"What?" they all asked in unison.

"Bloody wet footprints on my clean hall floor, that's what. Who did it?"

The three of them gave her questioning looks.

"It hasn't even rained" Amanda said.

"Rain or not, it's just selfish behaviour. If it was meant to be a joke then it's on one of you; so decide between you which one is going to clear it up because it won't be me."

Brian stepped up to the door to look past Jenny at the floor.

"What footprints?"

Jenny swung round.

"There" she said, pointing at the floor; and stopped. There were no footprints! "But ... I saw them. They were there; a line of them."

She turned round and headed back towards the kitchen muttering to herself. "They **were** there, I know they were. I saw them."

The other three glanced at each other, Rodney shrugging his shoulders, and followed her down the hall. As they passed by the basement door Brian noticed

something glistening on the doorknob. He stopped to examine it more closely. It looked like the same slime he had seen on the fuse-box.

“How did that slime get on the doorknob?” he asked rhetorically.

Rodney went to touch it.

“No Rodney” Brian warned. “Don’t touch it. It smells awful, if it’s the same stuff I found in the basement.”

He continued into the kitchen to put down the things he was carrying and grabbed some kitchen roll to wipe the knob. He then turned the light on and opened the door. The same smell as before reached his nostrils.

Jenny appeared beside him. She sniffed.

“I thought you’d sorted that out, Brian” she said, crossly.

Brian was confused.

“I did; and I spent ages cleaning the cupboard out.”

Stepping inside the room, he noticed that the door of the corner cupboard was closed, even though he had left it open the previous day, but he refrained from saying anything to Jenny. He didn’t want to start an argument and make her even more angry. He descended the steps into the basement followed by Jenny, who instructed the children to take the rest of the stuff into the kitchen.

As they approached the cupboard Brian noticed that the doorknob was also slimy.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“You tell me” Jenny replied brusquely.

The door was stiff again but with a sharp tug it opened. Brian couldn’t believe his eyes and Jenny couldn’t control her mounting anger when they saw the coat hanging there.

“I told you to get rid of that smelly coat” she shouted.

She started forward.

“I suppose I’ll have to get rid of the bloody thing myself.”

Brian stopped her.

“I did” he replied sharply in a raised voice. “I put it in the skip.”

Jenny turned to face the basement door and yelled out “Rodney! Amanda! Come here at once.”

The two children appeared with quizzical looks on their faces.

“What?”

“Which one of you hung that bloody coat back up?”

The children looked past her to see the coat hanging in the cupboard.

“I didn’t” they each replied.

"It must have been one of you two. Things don't happen on their own. Rodney, you can take it and throw it in the skip."

Rodney's nose wrinkled up.

"No, it's okay" Brian said. "I'll do it."

"Giving in again" snapped Jenny. "Anything to denigrate my authority."

She turned and flounced out back to the kitchen

"You can tell me, kids" Brian said quietly to the children.

"Honest Dad, it wasn't either of us" Amanda said, looking glum.

Rodney shook his head. "No, it wasn't. We don't know what you did with the coat when you removed it."

"Okay. Go and help your mother."

As they both turned to return to the kitchen, Brian called after them.

"Just say that I admitted to doing it ... as a joke."

"But dad," they replied with sad expressions "you didn't, did you?"

"No, but at least your mother might calm down."

As the children left the basement, Rodney muttered to Amanda "Poor Dad. Why is Mum so horrible to him?"

After they had gone, Brian stood scratching his head.

'Door closed. Coat back in there. What the hell's going on?' he thought to himself. 'All these weird happenings. If I didn't know any better I'd say the place was haunted.'

He removed the coat from the hook once again, left the cupboard door open and ascended the steps back up to the hall. He closed the basement door, turned the light out and took the coat back out to the skip.

A deep soft moan emanated from the cupboard as the cupboard door slowly swung shut.

Over the following weeks workmen were coming and going: fitting the new kitchen, a new boiler and starting work on the central heating. A pile of fence panels had been delivered along with materials for the garage. Jenny, with Amanda's help, started decorating the rooms whilst Brian and Rodney worked on clearing the front and rear gardens of the overgrown vegetation. It was during the work in the rear garden that Rodney found a grill blocked up with soil and weeds. After clearing it out they discovered that it was the ventilation grill for the basement.

The family had some respite time from all the work with occasional trips to the local beaches and exploring the steps that led from the tip of the headland down to the bay below. They even found a cave that seemed to reach deep into the headland maybe even as far as their house but it was far too dark to investigate and was also partially under water at high tide.

Although Brian was pleased the way things were turning out, the various incidents relating to the basement did disturb him, particularly as he couldn't think of any explanation as to the reason for the smell and slime, but he kept his concerns to himself rather than cause unnecessary worrying on the part of his family.

On two further occasions when Brian had descended into the basement to help John and James Hetherington, who again complained about the smell, he found the coat back in the cupboard along with instances of slime. He didn't dare mention it to Jenny and managed to remove the coat without her knowledge and dump it back into the skip, before eventually deciding to burn it. When Jenny asked why he had burnt it, he just said that it might attract vermin. He also found it odd that whenever John or James had to nip down to the basement, they each requested Brian's assistance, but he couldn't really understand why. In both cases his presence seemed unnecessary.

With the replacement fuse-box and boiler commissioned, the two contractors appeared relieved not to have to visit the room again but at least John had replaced the basement light pull cord with the more convenient switch on the wall in the hall.

Finally, the family moved in to their new home and the sale of their old house finalised to release funds required to complete the renovation work on Headland House. The fencing around the rear garden had been erected and provided the privacy they needed when wishing to relax on the new patio, that had been built. Brian also arranged for the delivery of turfs, which he enjoyed laying with Rodney's help. Fortunately, the children were able to continue at the same school but Jenny had to drop them off each day until they found friends that lived nearby with mums willing to partake in 'school runs'.

With the work in the basement also complete, Brian started thinking of a use for the room. It was a good size and he thought it would be a pity just to leave it empty, as just wasted space. So one evening, whilst Jenny and the

children were clearing up after their evening meal, he decided to venture down to the room to try and get some visual inspiration. At the top of the steps, he glanced around the room and, noticing the sole chair in the room, descended the steps and sat down on it with his back to the built-in cupboard. He glanced around trying to get a feel for its size and potential use and noticed how the evening light filtered through the ventilation grill that Rodney had cleared. It was certainly a gloomy room that needed brightening up with better lighting, some sort of covering over the concrete floor and even some pictures on the wall, before any of them would want to spend time down there. He shivered slightly and decided it also required some form of heating. The ventilation grill would also need to be changed to stop the ingress of cold air during the winter months.

Many thoughts passed through his mind: *Games room? Rodney's model railway layout? Library/music room?* when he was jolted out of his day-dreaming by the slamming of the basement door. The suddenness of it made him jump, to the extent that it actually frightened him for an instant and again brought to mind the old coat, the slime and weird sounds; but he would never admit to his family his feelings of unease. He could only assume that in this instance the slamming of the door was caused by a strong draft in the hall due to someone opening the back door.

For some reason, this made him think again about the dagger in the sideboard drawer and the strange sensation when he picked it up. He concluded that he had probably imagined it, so got off the chair, walked over to the sideboard and opened the drawer to stare at the weapon. It had a round silver coloured pommel with a leather-bound grip. The cross-guard was decorated with a pattern of winding metal strands with a central five-pointed star in the middle. The blade was also etched with what appeared to be Celtic symbols.

As he gingerly picked it up once again, the basement door flew open and Jenny was standing in the doorway.

"Always undermining me, aren't you?" she shouted. "Even the kids are against me. I wish we'd never moved here."

Then she noticed that he was holding the dagger.

"So, what are you going to do with that? Kill me I suppose."

Brian's anger boiled over.

"Yes, I am fed up with your moaning and criticizing us all."

He dashed over to her thrusting the dagger into her chest so that she fell down the steps and collapsed on the floor with blood pouring out of her wound.

“Oh God, what have I done?” Brian gasped, and dropped the dagger.

A wave of nausea swept over him as he lowered his head, his eyes focussing on the dagger. He stared at it, confused. It lay on the ground; clean! The basement door was closed and Jenny wasn't there. He had imagined the whole thing but it had been so real. He found himself shivering and perspiring and was becoming even more convinced that there was something sinister about the room. He was about to bend down to pick up the dagger but hesitated after the terrifying experience he had just had; then the light flickered and he heard a door creak. Instinctively he turned his head to glance at the built-in cupboard but saw nothing so assumed it must have been the basement door. He was now anxious to get out of the basement but couldn't just leave the dagger lying on the floor, so looked around to see if there was anything with which he could pick it up. His eyes then fell on the trap-door in the floor, which made him wonder again what was underneath. He bent down and fumbled with the padlock thinking that, if he could lift it open, he could kick the dagger into the space beneath. He then recollected that the agents had neglected to give him a key to the padlock, so made a mental note to ask them for it, should they even have it.

As he stood there slowly recovering from the fright he had just had, and also feeling a little drowsy from the wine they had had with their meal, he was unaware of the built-in cupboard door slowly opening behind him and a dark mass emerging. The light flickered again, which prompted Brian to glance up at the bulb as he felt a sudden drop in the room temperature accompanied by a smell of dampness. As the urgency to leave room returned, with the need to find something to put the dagger in, the light went out. Something dark stretched towards him. Sensing a presence, he turned his head and momentarily thought he saw two red ... eyes?

Suddenly the basement door flew open. Someone flicked the light switch a few times and the light came on.

“Dad,” Rodney said, “what are you doing down here in the dark? Mum was asking where you had disappeared to. And by the way, I think the light switch is dodgy.”

“It shouldn't be” Brian replied. “John is supposed to have checked it all out.”

Rodney didn't seem to be aware that his Dad was shaking slightly but did notice his face.

"You look a bit pale, Dad. Looks as though you've seen a ghost."

Brian didn't reply but the thought crossed his mind. *Maybe I have.*

Having grabbed a pair of rubber gloves from the kitchen and returned to the basement to hesitantly pick up the dagger, with no reaction, he returned it to the drawer and made a mental note to dispose of it the following day. He remained quiet for the rest of the evening whilst they all watched a drama on the television.

"You're very quiet this evening, dear" Jenny had said. "Are you okay?"

"Dad looked really pale earlier on" Rodney chipped in.

"I'm just fine" Brian responded. "Maybe it was the wine."

He certainly was not going to relate what happened in the basement and end up frightening the family.

"I think he saw a ghost in the basement" Rodney responded, giggling.

"Don't be so stupid" his mother replied.

"But he was all white, Mum."

"Enough, Rodney!"

"Maybe the house is haunted" Amanda added.

"I said enough!" Jenny said, crossly.

The rest of the evening was spent with no further discussion of the subject, but at the back of his mind Brian was disturbed.

Down in the basement the padlock on the trap-door flopped over from where Brian had lifted it up to examine it. It was now open. The door of the built-in cupboard slowly closed leaving a trail of slimy footprints from the trap door.

IV

It was Saturday morning and Brian was trying to drill a hole in the lounge wall above the windows to fit curtain pole brackets.

"You told me that it would only take you until lunch time" Jenny stated accusingly.

"I did not realize how difficult it would be to drill into the lintel. I really need a better drill bit; diamond tipped maybe."

"Then why don't we just nip down town to get one, and while we're there I can look for some cushions."

Brian lowered the drill and then noticed Rodney talking to a tall thin elderly man at the edge of the front garden.

"Who is Rodney talking to?"

Jenny looked out of the window.

"How should I know; go and ask him."

Brian climbed down the ladder and headed for the front door but as he opened it, he saw the man moving away.

"Rodney?" He called out, walking towards his son, who had bent down to continue his attending a flower border.

"When are we going to put the fence up, Dad?" his son asked, without looking up.

Brian had ordered a quantity of Saxon style wrought iron fencing just over waist height to erect around the front garden and asked Rodney if he would like to help him to put it up. The fencing had been stacked in the garage for a couple of weeks but Brian had been too busy to make a start. He ignored Rodney's question.

"Who was that man you were talking to just now?"

"Oh, he said his name was Jim Davies and he's lived here all his life."

"What did he want?"

"Nothing. He just asked me if we had just bought this house and whether I like it around here. I told him that we used to live the other side of town in an old Victorian semi and that you bought this one at an auction. I also told him that you were an accountant and if he needed any financial advice to let you know."

"Thanks for offering my services" Brian replied with a touch of sarcasm. "Did he say anything else? You seemed deep in conversation."

“He asked if I liked the house and commented on how much better it looks after all the work that’s been done on it.”

“Oh, right.”

“He also asked if we intend to stay here, which I thought was a rather strange thing to ask, but when I said we are, in spite of the funny noises and the smell...”

“You told him that? Why? You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“I was only joking but then he asked me if I knew the history of the house. I told him that I didn’t but suggested that it might be haunted.”

“Rodney!”

“I was only joking, Dad.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He saw you through the window climbing down the ladder and walked off.”

Brian felt a little concerned and told Jenny about their son’s encounter.

“If either of us sees him again, I think we need to have a word. One never knows with strangers.”

“Maybe not so strange if he has lived here all his life” Jenny countered, “but I know what you mean. Sometimes it’s the local ones to whom we have to pay attention.”

She still had a go at Rodney about talking to strangers, though.

Following a quick lunch, Brian and Jenny set off for town, instructing the children to behave in their absence and not to go down into the basement in case the light went out again and they hurt themselves in the dark. Brian had been too busy to decide on his plans for the room and, although John had thoroughly rechecked the light switch and the wiring, he could not find any reason for the flickering.

About half an hour after their parents had left, Rodney suggested that they quickly check out the basement for its potential use.

“No” replied Amanda. “We were told not to and Dad will be cross. Anyway, it smells.”

“Dad says it’s not so bad since he cleaned out that cupboard in the corner. He said that I might be able to put my model railway lay-out down there, so I want to see how much space I might have.”

He headed towards the basement door.

“Rodney! No. Come back.”

Her brother ignored her, turned on the light, opened the door and descended the steps. Reluctantly, Amanda followed him.

The two of them stood at the bottom of the steps looking around.

“This would be great for my railway” Rodney enthused.”

Amanda noticed the sideboard.

“I wonder if there’s anything in that sideboard.”

She walked over to it and opened the drawers, stepping back with a slight gasp. Rodney turned to look at her.

“What?”

She was staring in the drawer.

“There’s a knife in this one.”

“So?”

“It’s not a normal knife.”

Rodney walked over to join her and peered in the draw.

“It’s a dagger.”

He reached in to pick it up.

“No, Rodney! Don’t touch it.”

Rodney had already hesitated, as though a voice in his brain was telling him to leave it alone. He closed the drawer. Amanda had moved to the centre of the room.

“I wonder what’s under this trap-door.”

Rodney walked over to join her.

“Look, the padlock is open. Let’s lift it up and see what’s underneath.”

“No, Rodney. Dad might find out.”

“We’ll close it afterwards.”

Rodney removed the padlock and tugged at the trap-door.

“Help me, Amanda. Come on. Just a quick look.”

Together, they managed to lift the door and let it fall back with a crash onto the floor. They were unaware that the door of the built-in cupboard had opened slightly as they immediately heard the sound of crashing waves. They found themselves looking down a shaft hewn out of the rock.

“I can hear the sea” Amanda said. “It must go all the way down to the cave which Dad thinks might go under the house.”

“There’s a ladder attached to the wall” Rodney responded in excitement.

They were looking at a rusty ladder, parts of which were badly corroded such that the metal appeared to be rather thin in places.

“I’m going to have a look” Rodney said.

“No, Rodney. Don’t. You might fall.”

“It will be alright.”

He moved to the edge of the shaft to step onto the first rung.

“Please Rodney, don’t. You might fall and ... die, or be badly injured.”

Amanda appeared to be on the verge of tears.

“I’ll be careful, Amanda.

Rodney stepped gingerly onto the first rung and pressed on it.

“It’s firm enough.”

He moved his other foot to the next rung and grasped the ladder sides. They were rough with flaky rust, pieces of which were breaking off. He had now gone down far enough so that his hands now grasped the top rung. He moved a foot down to the next rung ... which wasn’t there. The light flickered and went out. Amanda called out.

“Rodney?”

The door of the built-in cupboard was wide open and a black mass glided over towards the shaft. The badly corroded ladder rung supporting Rodney’s other foot snapped and Rodney started to fall, his hands scraping the rusty sides of the ladder. He screamed.

“Amanda!”

Something cold grabbed Rodney’s right arm and slowly pulled him up to the top of the shaft so that he could grab the side and pull himself onto the basement floor. The hand, he supposed, that had grasped him let go. The next moment, the light came back on and Amanda was kneeling at the edge of the shaft with tears in her eyes.

“I thought you had fallen, Rodney. Oh gosh.”

“I would have if you hadn’t saved me” he replied, visibly shaken.

“But I didn’t, Rodney.”

“You grabbed my arm and pulled me up. I didn’t think you were that strong; and your hand was icy cold as well.”

“But I didn’t. I was standing up when the light went out and I heard you scream.”

She suddenly noticed Rodney’s hands and the T-shirt he was wearing.

“Look at your hands, Rodney; and your shirt. It’s got rust marks all over it. Mum will be cross.”

Both hands and shirt were streaked with brown rust and his hands were bleeding from a few bits of rust embedded in the skin. Rodney stared at his hands not really seeing what they were like but thinking about what had grabbed him and pulled him out of the shaft. He raised himself up and walked over to the cupboard.

“Where are you going?”

He opened the door and looked inside. He saw nothing but noticed some slime on the floor and detected a slight damp smell.

“What’s the matter, Rodney?”

“I’m not joking, Amanda, but there **is** something weird about this house.”

“What do you mean? Haunted?”

“Actually, yes. It’s all the things that have been happening since we got here: the smell, the flickering light in this room and the strange noises. Dad’s also been behaving oddly.”

“Mum’s been very grumpy lately as well. She keeps shouting at us all. I don’t think she likes this house.”

“No, I don’t think she does.” He paused. “Do you like it, Amanda?”

“Yes, and I like my room. It’s much bigger than my old room.”

“I like it too, and ...”

“You’d better clean up your hands before Mum and Dad arrive home” she interrupted.

Rodney looked at his hands again. They did seem in a bit of a mess and felt very sore.

With Amanda’s help they closed the trapdoor and put the padlock back; but it wouldn’t close up, so they left it open.

The children made their way to the bathroom where Rodney changed his shirt, washed his hands and, with Amanda’s help, managed to extract the few pieces of rust using a needle and a pair of their Mum’s tweezers laying on her dressing table. They were only just in time, as Rodney was cleaning the bathroom sink when their parents arrived home.

“Hi kids; where are you?” Brian called out.

“Up here in our bedrooms” they both replied.

“What, on a fine day like this? I thought you’d be outside enjoying the sunshine.”

“Nothing to do out there” Rodney replied.

“Mum’s bought a sponge cake for tea. She didn’t want to but I insisted. There’re some sweets down here for you both as well.”

“Thanks Dad” Amanda replied as they came bounding down the stairs.

“Liquorish Comforts for you, Amanda; and toffees for you, Rod.”

As Rodney reached out to take the packet from his father, Brian noticed his son’s hand.

“What happened to your hand?” He grabbed the other one. “Both hands in fact. They look badly grazed.”

“I fell over in the garden.”

Jenny had gone upstairs to change her clothes. The next minute she was yelling down the stairs.

“Rodney! Amanda! What is this blood doing on the towel? What have you two been up to?”

“Rodney fell over in the garden” Brian replied on his son’s behalf.

The towel with traces of blood suddenly appeared at the bottom of the stairs, followed by an irate Jenny.

“I’m sick and tired of cleaning up after you lot. I spend my time cleaning, washing, cooking while you lot just do what the hell you want. I wish we’d never moved here.”

She stormed out of the house, through the kitchen and sat in the back garden with her back to the house. Brian and the children just looked at each other with expressions of *What’s wrong with her now?*

The occupant in the basement shifted uncomfortably, disturbed by the outburst from the woman.

There was a full moon; a particularly bright one that night. It was between midnight and one o'clock and the house was quiet and peaceful. The cupboard door in the basement slowly opened and the occupant emerged, gliding slowly towards the basement door, which opened to let it through. It slowly ascended the stairs stopping momentarily at the top before turning left. The bedroom door to its left slowly opened as it entered the room which it hardly recognized. Its 'eyes' fell upon the sleeping girl tucked up in bed under a cover that had a floral design. It reached the sleeping form and paused. Memories! A protuberance extended from the dark mass and touched Amanda's long blonde hair.

Amanda was walking through a woodland. It would have been dark but for the moonlight filtering through the trees. She heard the sounds of nocturnal activity with the occasional scream of a fox. The trees began to thin out when she suddenly noticed the silhouette of a person bending over, looking at something. The person appeared very thin and shortly stood up, turned around and moved off. Amanda was about to call out but stopped herself. Something held her back. She slowly crept forward to investigate what the person was staring at and felt the ground becoming squelchy like a bog. The moon had disappeared behind a cloud momentarily but now lit up the whole area. Amanda gasped and put her hand to her mouth. Directly in front of her but out of reach was a man immersed up to his shoulders in a bog and slowly sinking. His eyes were full of terror and pleading as he silently mouthed the word 'Help'. Amanda frantically looked around for something that he might be able to grab hold of, even though his hands and arms were not visible. She eventually found a long branch and held it out for him to grab hold of. He shook his head, obviously unable to lift his arms out of the bog. The mud was now up to his neck. Amanda started to venture closer, sinking into the bog herself but the man's eyes seemed to convey sorrow and effectively telling her not to approach him. With tears running down her face, she watched him disappear with the sound of his last breath escaping from the mud.

She sat up with a start and became aware of the tears streaming down her face thinking how she couldn't save the poor man from sinking in the bog. There was a slight damp smell in her room but the moonlight penetrated her curtains enough to provide enough light to reveal that everything was as she expected. The image of the drowning man returned and she lay there for what

seemed hours until she finally turned on her side and went back to sleep. She just put it down to just a horrible bad dream.

The basement door slowly closed.

Amanda awoke early the following morning and, from the silence in the house, guessed that the rest of the family were still asleep. As she slid out of bed she noticed some marks on her carpet as though someone with dirty shoes had walked across it.

'Oh God' she thought 'Mum will be cross.'

Fortunately, no one came into her room when the family had all got up - her mother had told her and Rodney that it was their responsibility to keep their own rooms clean but woe betide them if she found them messy during one her random 'inspections'. Later, Amanda found that the vacuum cleaner was effective in removing the traces of mud once they had dried.

She had remained in her room reading once she was awake so as not to disturb the other family members but eventually someone banging and cursing soon disrupted the quiet household. Amanda decided it best to stay in her room, as did Rodney, who was also woken up by the commotion. Brian had donned a dressing gown and ventured downstairs to find out what all the noise was about. Jenny was standing at the bottom of the stairs with a mop and bucket.

"What's up dear?" he asked.

"What's up? What's up?" she shouted. "That's what's up" she yelled, pointing at muddy footprints on the wooden floor of the hall between the basement and the bottom of the stairs. "Who left mud on the floor this time? It's also on the stair carpet; and just as well it's dark and patterned."

Brian tried to calm her down.

"It was probably me last night when I locked up before coming to bed."

He didn't want her going on at the children again. Jenny carried on.

"I don't know why you keep going into that room or what you are doing down there, but I'm sick and tired of finding muddy footprints all over this house and I'm fed up of cleaning up after you lot."

She flung the mop on the floor.

"You do it!" she said, and stormed into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

Brian picked up the mop and commenced to clean the floor, as two bedroom doors opened and two children called down.

"Are you okay, Dad?"

“I’m fine” he replied, but he wasn’t.

There were definitely strange things happening in the house that he couldn’t explain. He wanted to discuss them with Jenny but knew what her reaction would be and make her grumpier and fuel her demand that they sell up and move somewhere else, an option he couldn’t contemplate at the present time.

He checked the stair carpet and noted traces of dried mud that he later vacuumed up. He had an increasing feeling that maybe there was some truth in the suggestion that it was haunted.

His last thought before taking his morning shower was to try and find out about the history of the property. Maybe he could uncover something that might throw some light on what was happening even though he didn’t believe in the supernatural.

A couple of days later, Amanda and Rodney were sitting together in the garden before their evening meal sharing information on some of their school colleagues.

“Harry Bragg fancies you, you know.”

“Does he really? Well, I don’t fancy him. I think he’s a creep.”

“He’s alright; just a bit shy with girls. I dreamt about Lucy Popham the other day. Do you think Mum or Dad would mind if I invited her for tea?”

“Dad wouldn’t care, but you know Mum; panics and gets all stressed and will tell you to concentrate on your schoolwork and stop thinking about girls.”

“Hmm.”

After a short pause in their conversation, Amanda turned to her brother.

“Rodney.”

“What?”

“You know we keep joking about this house being haunted.”

“I only say it to wind Mum and Dad up” he replied, grinning. “Why do you ask? Do you think it is?”

“Well, apart from what happened in the basement the other day, I had a weird dream the other night.”

“What, of ghouls and ghosts? It’s those ghost stories you’ve been reading.”

“No Rodney, I’m being serious.”

Rodney looked at his sister.

“What was it about then?”

Amanda described what had happened in her dream.

"It was so real that when I woke up, I had been crying. My room felt cold and there was a damp smell like in the basement and I'm sure something touched my hair."

"Nightmare more like" Rodney chuckled.

"It's not funny, Rodney."

Her brother frowned and tried to act concerned.

"You're serious aren't you? What was this ... ghost like? Was it like a white sheet with holes in it like eyes?"

Amanda turned away.

"That's it. Poking fun at me. I'm not going to say any more."

Rodney realized that his sister was being deadly serious and he was now becoming more interested, particularly when the incident in the shaft came flooding back - the hand that had pulled him up and Amanda's firm denial that she had helped him.

"Sorry Amanda; I was just thinking about the strange things going on in the basement: the smell, the slime, that old coat, Dad's strange behaviour and those incidents with John and Mr Hetherington and their reluctance to be alone in the basement."

"What? How do you know that?"

"Dad told me, but he didn't know why. He asked me to promise I wouldn't mention it to Mum ... or you."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"So, you really think this house is haunted" Rodney suggested.

"Yes, but I don't think it's an evil ghost."

"Not scary then. So, what's it like?"

"I don't really know, but in my mind it's something dark and ... cold ... like the swamp in my dream."

Amanda went quiet, obviously trying to think of a description of the thing.

"I suppose it could be a ... metamorph."

Rodney stared at his sister.

"A what? A metamorph? What on earth is a metamorph?"

"It's an organism that has undergone a physical change. In our biology lesson we learnt all about caterpillars and butterflies. I suppose that man in the swamp could have changed into something black and slimy."

Rodney tried to understand the implication of his sister's statement and thought back to the events of the dream she had related to him.

"So, going back to your dream; this man, whoever he is, sinks into the bog or swamp and comes back as ... swamp man!"

He was about to burst out laughing but knew it would upset Amanda again.

“Sort of” she replied, seriously.

“And swamp-man would probably smell and ... leave slimy muddy footprints.”

The children stared at each other suddenly aware of the connotation.

“He was asking for my help as he was sinking” Amanda continued, “but wouldn’t let me approach him because he knew it would be dangerous for me.”

“What about the person who put him there?”

“I don’t know. I just thought I saw someone walking away before I reached the bog.”

She grabbed her brother’s arm.

“I think the man in the bog was murdered, Rodney.”

“Are you going to tell Mum and Dad about the dream?”

“No. It’s got to be our secret. Dad will probably laugh and Mum will go bananas, like she always does.”

The back door opened and Brian appeared.

“Come on you two it’s dinner time. What have you been talking about so intently?”

“Oh, nothing much” Rodney replied. “Just school stuff.”

“Hm, better go wash your hands before your Mum gets cross about the dinner getting cold.”

As the children went indoors to clean up, Brian sensed that they had not been just talking about ‘school stuff’ but something more serious. He could tell from their demeanours that something was troubling them and that it was connected with the house. He thought it would be a good idea to talk to them on their own without Jenny being involved; she was never one to remain calm when faced with something she couldn’t understand.

Rodney was paddling hard as he and his companion steered the canoe towards a small stony beach. He knew that his companion was the man Jim Davies, to whom he had been speaking whilst he was gardening a few weeks prior, yet he didn’t at any point see his face. They beached the canoe at the mouth of a cave and Rodney suggested they investigate it, climbing out of the boat. Jim seemed hesitant but Rodney insisted so he also left the boat and followed Rodney into the cavern. Rodney thought it was surprisingly bright as they ventured further into the cave, the gravel floor of which squelched as they walked on due to the quantity of water on the ground from the recent high

tide. The cave started to narrow and Rodney sensed that they were nearing the end which he now saw ahead of them. He stopped. There was a pile of clothes lying on the ground a few yards in front of him. Except that it wasn't a pile of clothes; it was a body lying there face down. He slowly moved forward towards the inert form and bent down to turn the body over.

"It's a boy!" He exclaimed. "How did he get here?"

Jim Davies hadn't moved or said anything.

Instinctively, Rodney looked up and saw that they were standing below a shaft which stretched up into the darkness. The end of some iron steps attached to the shaft wall were just visible in the opening.

"He must have fallen down this shaft."

Jim remained silent.

"How did it happen? What's at the other end?"

"He couldn't save them."

"What?"

Jim made no further comment. Rodney turned to look at him but he didn't look like Jim Davies. He looked like some other man.

'*He couldn't save them.*' The man said again as Rodney turned back to look at the prostrate form once again.

"Who couldn't save them? What do you mean by 'them'? Are there others?"

There was still no reply as the phrase kept going over and over in Rodney's mind.

'*He couldn't save them. He couldn't save them.*'

Rodney turned to speak to Jim again but he was no longer there. He raised himself up and called out.

"Where are you, Jim? Come back."

'*He couldn't save them. He couldn't save them. He couldn't save*'

Rodney sat up with a jerk. The room was dark and he thought he heard a distant door creak. He realised that he had been dreaming and that his room felt chilly and smelt slightly damp. He glanced at his bedside clock: one o'clock. He made a mental note to relate the dream to his sister, laid there for a while trying to figure out what that phrase meant and gradually drifted off back to sleep.

The door of the built-in cupboard in the basement slowly closed.

Brian was first up the following morning. At first, he didn't notice the traces of mud on the stair carpet but did see the footprints from the basement door to the bottom step of the stairs. He quickly cleaned the floor, took a cup of tea up to Jenny and started to vacuum the stair carpet.

"What are you doing, Brian?" She called out. "I did that yesterday. Are you trying to undermine me?"

"No dear. I must have trodden in some mud last night before we went to bed."

"But it hasn't rained for days and I don't remember hearing you going outside."

"I popped out to water the plant pots whilst you were getting ready for bed."

Fortunately, she accepted his explanation but he was now convinced that the house harboured something supernatural, with all the weird things happening that he could not explain; and it had something to do with that built-in cupboard in the basement. Maybe he should just pull it down, but first he would make some enquiries at the library to research the history of the place to find out if anything unpleasant had happened in the past. He did not want the children, and certainly not Jenny, upset by anything inexplicable.

VI

Neither of Jenny's pregnancies had gone well. She had suffered weeks of morning sickness and was forced to pack up her job much sooner than she would have wished because of it. The births were natural but difficult. As a result of the trauma, she suffered from post-natal depression and although she managed to overcome this, with a lot of support from Brian, she now suffered from frequent mood swings that Brian found difficult to cope with. This was one reason why he decided it was a good idea to relocate and buy this house: to give her something to focus on and divert her mind from herself. In fact, Brian had resigned from his employment, as an accountant, in order to look after his wife. Fortunately, a number of his employer's clients were so impressed with Brian's knowledge and work ethic that they approached him privately to take on their accounts. This was the start of his own business which had grown rapidly thanks to his skills and genial personality. He had managed to rent an office in town, at a reduced rate from one of his clients, to run his business but with their new house he could now work from home and had already kitted out one of the spare rooms off the hall.

So one morning Jenny and he drove into town after dropping the children off at school. Brian told his wife that he intended to visit the library to undertake some research on a couple of potential clients and to try and discover the history of the house, just out of interest. They agreed to meet up just after noon for a spot of lunch together before returning home. As they walked away from the car park Brian attempted to hold her hand but her reticence was made obvious. Glancing across the road, Brian noticed an elderly man on the opposite side who looked familiar. He was tall, slimly built and wearing grey slacks and a navy-blue blazer. He looked about seventy, Brian thought. The man sensed Brian was looking at him so returned his gaze. They both stopped walking.

"What's up?" Jenny asked, following Brian's gaze.

"That man; he's the one who was talking with Rodney and quickly made off when I opened the front door."

"Perhaps we'd better have a word with him."

At which point the man waved at them and, checking that no traffic was coming, crossed the road.

"Are you the ...?" Brian didn't have time to finish what he was about to ask.

“Good morning, Mr and Mrs Saunders. You probably noticed that I was talking with your son, Rodney, the other day.”

“Yes.”

The man had pre-empted Brian’s next question.

“A charming intelligent lad if I may say so, and making a good job of the garden.”

“Thank you. Jim Davies, he said your name was.”

“Yes, that’s right.” He held out his hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

Brian shook his hand.

Jenny blurted out “What were you talking to our son about?”

Brian thought the tone rather accusatory, so took her hand and gave it a squeeze, hinting for her to be quiet.

“What?” she said, sharply.

Her blunt and rude interruption embarrassed Brian but Jim Davies appeared to take no offence.

“I am impressed how well you have renovated Headland House and the garden is looking splendid. I was complimenting your son on his efforts and asked if he liked living there. After so many years unoccupied and suffering from neglect I didn’t think anyone would ever buy it. A lot of us wondered why it hadn’t been pulled down.”

“Well” Brian responded “it is certainly structurally sound and I considered it a good investment, so bought it.”

“Regrettably” Jenny added. “Anyway, while you are discussing our ‘haunted’ house”, she added sarcastically, “I’ll get on with the things I came to do and see you later.”

She pulled her hand out of his and walked off. Jim looked embarrassed.

“I’m sorry” Brian added hastily. “My wife’s going through a bad time at the moment; a touch of depression from ...”

“Don’t worry about it Mr Saunders. I understand.”

“The name’s Brian and my wife is Jenny.”

“Nice to meet you both, Brian.”

“How did you know my name?” Brian asked, with a puzzled look. “Did my son tell you?”

“No. I noticed your ad in the local paper and put two-and-two together.”

“I believe he offered you my services.”

“If only; but my finances are such that I don’t really need an accountant.”

His face changed to a more serious countenance.

“I hope you don’t think I’m inquisitive but do you know the history of the house?”

"I was just on my way to the library to undertake some investigation. Why? Do you know anything about it? How long it's been here and who used to own it? Although we have lived in the area since our children were born, we've never really noticed it before and only became aware of it when it went up for auction."

"That's understandable. New agents took it over; the previous ones never bothered to try and sell it for"

Jim stopped suddenly.

"A number of reasons?" Brian finished.

"Yes, you could say that."

"And the reasons? Do you know what they were?"

Jim looked awkward.

"Can we go and talk somewhere?" he suggested. "I'll buy you coffee."

"Okay, that's kind of you. Thanks. I can go to the library some other time."

Jim led them to a small café down a side street that only had two other customers – two elderly ladies - chatting in a corner. He ordered a couple of coffees and started talking.

"Your son spoke of strange noises and smells and suggested, jokingly I might add, that the house could be haunted."

Brian wasn't sure how to respond. He didn't want go straight in with his own suspicions and possibly feed information for Jim to embellish.

"Go on."

"There is always a certain amount of rumour and exaggeration but the generally accepted opinion of certain 'happenings' that have taken place in the house is as follows."

Jim's voice dropped to a low murmur when one of the elderly ladies glanced round briefly before continuing the dialogue she was having with her friend. The waitress turned up with the coffees, milk and sugar. Brian declined the milk and sugar but Jim accepted both.

"The first instance ..." Jim continued.

"First instance!" exclaimed Brian. "So there's been more than one of these 'happenings' as you call them?"

"Well, yes, I suppose there has. Anyway, about fifty years ago a young family lived in the house. I'm not sure how old the parents were but their two children were only about five and three when it happened."

"When what happened?"

“Apparently, so I heard, the mother suffered post-natal depression coupled with psychiatric problems and was referred to a psychiatrist – a man named Silas Matthews. I don’t know why she was referred to him. He was a strange fellow: tall and thin with a long pointed nose. Nobody liked him very much, especially when he seemed to develop some sort of hold over her. Her husband, Nicholas, had a hard time coping with her behaviour and was very concerned about the impact on their children. It was said that he seemed to get quite depressed himself. Then one day he disappeared. No one knows what happened to him but he was never seen again; nor was his body ever discovered.”

Brian couldn’t help thinking about Jenny’s post-natal depression and how he and the children felt that at times like they were treading on eggshells.

“Were there any suspicions of foul play?”

“Yes, of course, but due to the lack of a body or even evidence the case was put aside as unsolved. Nicholas still remains a missing person.”

“So that was it?”

“No. Silas Matthews moved in with the woman to look after her and the children and several months later both children died in tragic accidents.”

“Accidents?”

“Well, that was the verdict based on the police and coroner’s report.”

“So you think this Silas Matthews might have killed them?”

Jim paused and took a sip of coffee.

“Personally, yes, because of what followed.”

Brian raised his eyebrows. “There’s more?”

“Oh yes. The woman’s body was found washed up on a beach with her throat cut, garrotted with a length of wire.”

“Oh my God!” Brian exclaimed. “So did this Silas get his just desserts?”

“Well yes, in a way.”

“Go on.”

Jim continued.

“Silas was found dead. His body also washed up in the bay.”

“Suicide? Out of remorse?”

“That was the final verdict, but apparently he was dead before he ended up in the water.

“So who bumped him off? A relative?”

Jim hesitated.

“You know the expression ‘scared to death’?”

“Are you telling me that he died from fright?”

“The expression on his face suggested that.”

“So what was it that he saw that was so bad?”

“We will never know, even after the last incident.”

Brian was dumfounded and found himself repeating Jim’s statement.

“The last incident.”

“The house remained empty after the family perished. No one showed any interest in the property and there were the usual reports of strange sounds and sightings of a ghost. Some people claimed that the father of the children had come back to haunt the place and exact his revenge. Then, about thirty years ago the bodies of two young lads were found near the house.”

Brian shook his head.

“I don’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“They were both tragic incidents. One lad was found outside the property with his throat cut. It looks like he jumped through a window and the glass severed a carotid artery in his neck.”

“Poor chap. What about the other lad?”

“Well, there’s a strange one. His body was again found washed up in the bay with the same expression of fear on his face. Really weird if you ask me.”

Brian sat staring into space, thinking ‘*What have I bought?*’ There was a clash in his mind. On the one hand his beliefs and scientific logic told him that the supernatural is a figment of the imagination but on the other hand the smell and footprints were real. Then again, maybe he was reading too much into those observations. There must be a logical explanation for the unpleasant odour, but what of the footprints?

Jim noticed that he gone quiet and was staring at the floor.

“Are you okay, Mr Saunders?”

The question shook Brian out of his confused thinking.

“Sure, sure” he said, lifting his head up. “I’m just finding it hard to believe that a house can have seen so much tragedy. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so hasty in buying it.”

He tried to make a joke of it, but it didn’t come out as a joke.

“Oh, sorry” Jim quickly said. “I shouldn’t have told you all that; not something you really wanted or needed to hear.”

“No Jim, it’s not your fault. I would have found out myself eventually. You have just saved me a lot of time and effort in unearthing the information. There have certainly been some strange incidents that have occurred in the house but I’ve always told myself that there must be a logical explanation for all of them. I’m not superstitious at all.”

“Glad to hear it. “I didn’t want to put a damper on your ‘dream’ home.”

“No, you haven’t. The incidents are more of an annoyance than anything threatening.”

Even as he made the statement he was wondering if there was anything sinister about the happenings.

Jim glanced at his watch.

“I’d better let you go. Your wife will be wondering where you have been.”

“It’s alright. I told her I would probably be a while in the library so she’s not expecting to see me until around noon for lunch. Another coffee, Jim?”

“No thanks, Brian. I must be off. I have a bit of shopping to do for an elderly neighbour. She’s a lonely old thing and can’t get out, so looks forward to me popping in to see her when I can.”

“Oh, that’s thoughtful of you.”

“I do my best to help people when I can; got to do something in retirement.”

They both stood up.

“Thanks again, Jim, and I hope to see you around sometime.”

“For another coffee perhaps.”

“Yes, that would be good. I can always update you on what I find out.”

“Oh, let me give you my phone number.”

Jim took out his phone so that Brian could enter the number into his own phone.

“I never remember my number” he commented.

Brian thanked him, at which point he walked off as Brian stood wondering how to fill in time before he met up with Jenny. There didn’t seem much point in going to the library now, other than to check the information Jim had provided. He decided to anyway and quickly confirmed from the local newspaper archives much of what Jim had told him. Then he had a surprise: the reporter’s name was Jim Davies.

“The man was a reporter” Brian said out loud without thinking.

A couple of elderly gentlemen sitting reading newspapers turned to give him looks of annoyance. Brian wondered why Jim hadn’t mentioned it but then thought that if he had then Brian would have assumed that Jim had embellished the story to make it sound more sensational – a scoop so to speak.

Brian left the library at about 11.45 and did a bit of window shopping on his way to the café where he agreed to meet Jenny. When he reached the café and peering through the window, he could see that she wasn’t there but went in anyway and ordered a cup of coffee.

Noon came and went. At a quarter past twelve Brian tried to ring Jenny on her mobile but there was no answer so he left a message. There was still no sign of her at half past twelve but he wasn't unduly worried. By one o'clock he was feeling annoyed rather than worried so ordered a Panini and another cup of coffee. She eventually breezed in at half past one apologizing profusely. She gave him peck on the forehead.

"Terribly sorry darling, I met up with an old school friend and got chatting; so much so that our lunch arrangement went completely out of my mind."

"I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you."

"I see you ordered lunch for yourself though."

"Well it's not the first time is it? I assumed that you were either visiting all the clothes shops in town or, as what actually happened is, that you had met someone you know."

She sat down and nodded. Brian thought she looked a bit flush but put it down to her rushing to the café.

"Who was this friend, by the way?"

"Oh ... it was Toni."

"Tony? That's a new one on me. What's he like, this Tony?"

"No, Toni, T-O-N-I. SHE is about my age and we were in the same class at school. Anyway, I don't know anything your school friends."

"I don't have any. We started to lose contact when we all went off to university and moved out of the area. I tried contacting a few, without much success. So, what's she like? Do you have any photos of her, like a class photo? You seem to have photos of most of your school chums."

Jenny seemed to hesitate as she sat down.

"Er ... no. Could you get me a coffee please?"

Brian got up.

"Sure. Anything to eat?"

"No thanks. I had a bite to eat with Toni."

While Brian was ordering the coffee he noticed Jenny quickly take her mobile phone out of her bag, do something on the keypad and put it back.

She had actually deleted a couple of texts that she had forgotten to do earlier.

"Secret liaison?" Brian asked suspiciously as he brought her coffee over.

Her immediate response was to return a questionable look but then she realised that he must have seen her take her phone out of or return it to her bag, albeit rather hastily.

"No, no, of course not. I thought I heard it ring, but it must have been someone else's."

Brian glanced around at the near empty café and sat back down.

“So, what’s this Toni like? Good looking like you?”

“Oh, yes, she’s quite attractive; my height, short blonde hair.”

“Oh, yes. Bit of a career girl? What does she do?”

Jenny was looking uncomfortable and tried to turn the questions around.

“Why are you asking all these questions about her? Do you fancy her or something?”

Brian decided to back off, sensing that she was hiding something. He didn’t want to start an argument in public.

“No, just interested. After all, I have never even met the woman.”

There was a slightly embarrassing silence between them.

“So, how did you get on at the library?” Jenny asked.

“Okay.” He glanced at his watch. “I think we should be getting back.”

VII

Brian knew that at some point he ought to relate his conversation with Jim Davies to Jenny. He had recently felt a distancing in his relationship with his wife, nothing one could put one's finger on, but it was small niggly things which seemed to send her into a strop. Failure to mention what had happened in the house and what he had learnt from Jim Davies would only exacerbate the situation and she would no doubt throw a wobbly, which she did when he mentioned it that evening.

"I knew it. I told you not to buy this house."

"No, you didn't. I told you that I bought it at an auction for bargain price."

"Whatever! We'll have to sell it. I can't stay here anymore with all this history of death around me. Sort it out Brian."

She was about to storm off again.

"Listen" he responded loudly. "I am not in a position to do anything about it for the next few months; I'm far too busy. Things will work out alright; just give it time."

"Give it time? I've given it enough time already. I'm fed up with the smell, the muddy footprints and ... the deaths."

Brian started to speak more sharply to her, a change from his normal stoic approach.

"You're just looking for excuses, Jenny. The smell for one thing; I am sure has diminished, as have the muddy footprints. And all this talk of death stalking the house; be logical. It's the past. Ghost, hauntings, the supernatural: they are all in the mind. Our brains can conjure up any realistic and believable situation if we let it. Let's face it, we have a lovely house in an ideal location. We have a new fitted kitchen, central heating and the children love it, as do I. You just don't like it because it was my idea."

Even as he said all this there was still that niggling feeling about the basement; but then he thought that maybe once it has been converted into a brighter usable room the strange happenings might stop. He had already thought of having a large window installed to replace the ventilation grill, even though it might be a rather expensive job.

Jenny wasn't giving up.

"It's always what you want; never a thought about me."

"What?"

Brian was at a loss as to how to respond. Hadn't he given up his job to help her through her depression? Hadn't he built up his own business, which

admittedly consumed a lot of his time during the first few years, to provide his family with a better life?

"It seems to me, Jenny, that as life gets better the more dissatisfied you become."

"Better for you maybe."

"What do you mean by that? I give you all the attention I can."

"Sure you do" she responded sarcastically, and walked off. "I'm going out for a bit."

"Where to? I'll come with you. I could do with a bit of fresh air."

"No. I want to go on my own."

She stormed off slamming the front door behind her, at which point Brian returned to his office. He wasn't aware that Jenny pulled out her phone as she walked away from the house and dialled a number.

Jenny hadn't returned when Alice dropped the children off from school.

"Thanks, Alice" Brian called out as the children got out of her car. "How is Ray?"

"Fine thanks" she called back. "He's off next week on a business conference. Things are getting busy, so I haven't seen much of him lately. Still, it's only temporary and gives us a better life. Like yours I guess."

I wish Brian thought, waving goodbye.

"Where's mum?" Amanda asked.

Rodney had disappeared up to his room.

"Gone out."

"Where?"

"I don't know. She went off in a strop."

"Oh, one of her moods again. When will she be back?"

"She didn't say."

"Do you want us to do anything?"

"No, it's okay. I still have some work to do and you have homework I presume."

"Yes, but not too much tonight."

Amanda went up to her room, fished out her phone and dialled her mum's number, but it went to answerphone, so she left a message.

Jenny arrived home about six o'clock. Brian was in the kitchen rummaging through the freezer wondering what to get out for dinner. He was angry.

"Where the heck have you been for the three and a half hours?"

"With Toni" she replied. "We were sharing memories and things."

“Oh great! No word. No phone call. We were wondering if something had happened to you. Amanda even sent you a message.”

“Well, I didn’t receive it” she replied, not very convincingly.

Brian didn’t believe her.

“How do I know that this ‘Toni’ isn’t a man?”

“Don’t be ridiculous darling.”

The slight emphasis on *darling* came across with a hint of sarcasm. Brian was definitely starting to get feelings of suspicion entering his mind.

“I’d like to meet this ‘Toni’. Why don’t you invite her around for coffee?”

Jenny’s raised voice brought Rodney and Amanda creeping down the stairs to stand behind the kitchen door.

“What? You think I’m having an affair? If only. It might add some spice to my life.”

She regretted the statement as soon as she had made it.

Brian slammed the freezer door close and turned to face her.

“What did you say? After all the support I have given you, not that I expected thanks. I considered it my duty to you, as my wife and mother of our children. I have provided us with a comfortable lifestyle and nice home. None of you want for anything.”

Brian was facing the kitchen door and became aware that Amanda and Rodney were standing in the hall and had probably heard most of their conversation.

“Maybe you are just bored with us. Maybe you should go and get a job: part time or voluntary. It’s not as though we need the money, but at least you will meet other people and maybe have a circle of friends to meet up with.”

“But I’ve got Toni.”

Brian couldn’t help himself.

“Bloody Toni. Is she, or he maybe, the only person in your life? What about your family? Do you find us all boring, now?”

Jenny realised she was creating a lot of tension and was also now aware that the children were nearby when she noticed Brian’s gaze flick momentarily towards the kitchen door. She sat down on a kitchen chair.

“Maybe you’re right. Perhaps I should get a job of some sort. It’s just that sitting around here all day with not much to do is getting to me.”

“But isn’t that’s the way it’s been for some time now? What’s changed?”

“The situation is different now. You are now working from home, the house doesn’t require much attention with everything so new and decorated and ... we don’t have any neighbours I can chat with. I feel isolated up here.”

“I’m sorry about that” Brian replied, slightly calmer. “What about hobbies? Maybe now’s the time to take up something new. You were talking about having piano lessons.”

She ignored the statement.

“Maybe I’ll visit the library tomorrow and look through the local papers for a part-time job.” She got up from her seat. “I’ll get the dinner.”

Brian was going to question her more about what she had been doing all afternoon but decided to let it lie. He walked out into the back garden, still with suspicions in his mind. Something wasn’t quite right. Their sex life hadn’t been that great since her depression but lately it had become almost non-existent. Romance didn’t seem to play a part in their relationship any more. After dinner, they spent the evening watching wildlife programs on the television with a glass of wine, but there was little conversation.

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Jenny was on top of him enjoying the ecstatic sensation when she sensed that somebody was watching them. She glanced over towards the door. A man was standing there staring at them. It was Brian, although it didn’t look like Brian. He was wearing an old scruffy coat that reached nearly to the ground. There were muddy marks where he stood and his eyes were very bloodshot - like two red saucers. She felt frightened more than embarrassed with her mouth partly open but not knowing what to say. He didn’t move or say anything but just stood there mouthing a word that she couldn’t make out at first. The man, Tony, beneath her didn’t seem to be aware of Brian standing there. Jenny now felt embarrassed at her nakedness and position. She was about to climb off Tony when the Brian figure glided, rather than walked, over to her and pulled out a dagger from beneath his coat. She could now see that he mouthing something and then realized what it was the word *Bitch*.

Jenny woke up with a start, perspiring, but didn’t notice the bedroom door slowly closing. Thankfully, Brian was fast asleep. The room felt cold with a smell of dampness and she had the sensation that somebody had been in the room. A feeling of guilt suddenly swept over her and she was about to get up to cool herself in the bathroom but then noticed the time on her bedside clock; it showed a quarter past one. Thinking that she might disturb Brian she just turned over and fell into a fitful sleep.

Brian was the first up, as was usually the case. He made a cup of coffee and, as it was still early, decided to nip down to the basement to measure up for the new flooring. He had decided on a wood-effect vinyl covering and had already given the builder the go-ahead to install a large window where the ventilation grill was. That, he thought, would provide sufficient light to brighten the room. He turned on the basement light and opened the door. Smeared on the wall that faced him was the word *BITCH* in large white letters. His eyes opened wide as he stood staring at it. The first question he asked himself was who could have written it. Then he wondered what it meant and who the bitch was supposed to be. Jenny came to mind, which initially made him feel guilty; but at the back of his mind he still suspected that she was having an affair with this Toni, or Tony more like. He knew that the message on the wall, if indeed it was a message, had not been there the previous day when he went to check out the cupboard in the corner once again, so who could have written it? The giggling feeling that there was something in the house, that was not completely benevolent, returned. A hand reached towards Brian from behind and made him jump when it lightly touched his shoulder. His heart seemed to miss a beat as he swivelled round.

"Jenny! I didn't realise that you had got up."

"I didn't sleep well and heard you getting up. What are you looking at?"

Brian moved aside so that she could see the wall. She gasped and put her hand to her mouth.

"Wha ...? Who did that?"

"I have no idea" Brian replied slowly. "Have you?"

"How would I know" she replied hastily. "Perhaps it was one of the children."

"No, it wasn't either of them."

"How do you know?"

"Because they would never do a thing like that. I know our children."

Jenny thought about the dream she had had that night. '*Somebody knows.*' She thought. '*But who? We have been so careful.*' She knew that Brian was getting suspicious, but with no evidence he couldn't accuse her of having an affair.

"I'll get something to clean it off" Jenny said, stepping towards the kitchen.

"No." Brian replied quickly. "I'll do it. You go up and get dressed."

"Okay."

Jenny climbed back up the stairs thinking about Tony but not feeling any guilt for what she was doing. After all, it is only a bit of fun; or is it!

Brian went into the kitchen to get a bucket of water and a cloth, but also his phone which he had left on charge. He returned to the basement and took a photograph of the message before wiping it off. He then sat down on the chair still wondering whether the house was actually haunted: something a few weeks ago he would never have believed. He picked up his phone to select the photo gallery to look at the message again. It wasn't there! The photograph he had just taken showed was a blank wall.

"What!" He exclaimed. "Where the hell has it gone?"

As his eyes lifted from the phone he noticed faint wet footprints between the built-in cupboard and the basement steps. He stood up, looking around.

"Where are you? What do you want? Leave us alone."

The cupboard door creaked. He dashed over to it, yanking it open. It was empty. He stepped inside and started to bang on the walls.

"Where are you, dammit? Show yourself. I'll find you yet."

"What are you doing, Dad?"

Brian swivelled round to see Amanda standing at the top of the basement steps looking at him.

"Are you looking for the metamorph?" she asked.

A quizzical confused expression came over his face.

"Metamorph? What's that? What do you mean? I ... er ... was just seeing how firm the walls are."

"You won't find him, Dad."

"What? Find who?"

"The metamorph. He's only trying to protect us."

Brian was confused. Maybe this was all just a dream.

"Trying to protect us? What on earth do you mean, Amanda? Who is trying to protect us?"

"The metamorph."

VIII

Rodney and Amanda decided they needed to tell their father about what happened to Rodney in the basement when their parents were out shopping; so when they said that they would like to talk with him alone about it, he told them to wait for the right opportunity. Fortunately, it came quite quickly when Jenny said she was going to the cinema with Toni. It surprised her when Brian refrained from questioning he about it on this occasion.

'Maybe he doesn't suspect anything after all' she thought as she drove off.

While she was out, Brian suggested that he and the children take a stroll over the headland to have little chat about the strange goings-on at the house, whilst not mentioning it to their Mum. They both agreed.

"It's not that I am being secretive, but you know what your mother like; she gets upset so quickly."

"It's okay Dad. We all love her but she seems to be so impatient and rather moany of late."

"She'll get over it I'm sure" he replied; but deep inside he wasn't convinced.

After a short walk, they found themselves descending to a small cove where they sat together on a large boulder, watching the evening sun sinking in the sky and the calm sea lapping against the rocks in front of them. Amanda and Rodney were either side of him.

"The tide's coming in, Dad" Rodney commented, throwing pebbles into the water with a plopping sound.

"It's okay" Brian replied. "We won't be here long, but I thought it might better to talk about the strange happenings away from the house."

He put a hand on each of their shoulders.

"So, Amanda and Rodney; what's all this about this 'metamorph' and what happened in the basement?"

The children now described their dreams in detail. Amanda told Brian about the man sinking in the bog and whether he could have metamorphosed into some strange creature that was creeping round the house. Brian not so much dismissed the theory about the metamorph but stated that it was scientifically impossible and postulated that maybe some sort of manifestation was occurring and being interpreted by observers in different ways. Rodney then related his dream about being with Jim Davies in the canoe and discovering the cave and shaft under the house.

“Interesting” their father replied. “But what about this incident in the basement you said you were going to tell me about.”

Rodney went on to relate how he was saved from falling down the shaft by an unseen hand.

“And it definitely wasn’t me, Dad” Amanda added. “I would never be strong enough to pull him up.”

“It’s okay, darling, I do believe you. In fact I believe you both.”

Amanda was relieved. “Thanks, Dad.”

Both children were quite surprised how easily he accepted their explanations, to the extent that he informed them that he intended to cover the hatch with new flooring he had ordered for the basement, seeing as the shaft was a potential risk to them all. He then told them about his own visualization in which he had killed their mother.

“My God!” exclaimed Rodney. “How awful. I wonder why you dreamt such a horrible dream.”

Brian also explained how it happened after he had picked up the dagger.

“Yes, we saw it too, Dad. Rodney was going to pick it up.” Amanda said quickly.

“But I was a bit frightened so didn’t” her brother replied.

“Good” Brian said. “I’ll get rid of it when we get back.”

“Do you think Mum has had any dreams, Dad?”

“Not that I know of, Amanda; or if she has, she hasn’t mentioned any to me.”

Brian then recounted how he found the message scrawled on the wall which Jenny had also seen.

“In a situation like this, I think we have to be completely open and honest with each other” he stated.

“You should have taken a photo, Dad” Rodney suggested.

“I did.”

“Show us” the children both replied eagerly.

“I can’t. It didn’t appear in the photo.”

Amanda and Rodney exchanged questioning glances.

“It’s true, kids. I took the photo and cleaned the message off the wall; but when I checked the photo gallery on my phone, the picture was of just a blank wall. The message wasn’t there.”

He also related his conversation with Jim Davies who had told him about the tragedies at the house.

Following much discussion, Brian attempted to summarize.

“So, we have a man drowning in a swamp, probably murdered, who then reappears as ...”

“A metamorph” Amanda added excitedly.

“Er, yes, if that were at all possible. Anyway, this er ... metamorph reappears to somehow communicate to Amanda how it died ... or not; and then saves Rodney from falling down the shaft. It also shows Rodney how one of two youths might have died thirty years ago.”

“Remember the broken window” Amanda added excitedly.

“Yes. I admit it all fits quite logically but if it is trying to communicate, why? What is it trying to tell us?”

They sat there quiet for a few moments until Amanda quietly said “What about your experience, Dad, and that word ‘bitch’ written on the wall? What does it mean?”

Brian couldn’t help but think of Jenny at that moment and now wondered whether she really was at the cinema with this ‘Toni’.

“I really don’t know, Amanda darling.”

“Not something to do with Mum is it?” Rodney asked.

Brian glanced at his son with a slightly stern expression.

“Rodney, what do you mean by that? Your Mum loves us all very much. I know she can be a bit short tempered and impatient sometimes but I have explained all that to you both; and, as Amanda said, we all love her and just need to give her more time and she will be fine.”

Brian actually found it difficult to believe what he was saying but was still shocked when Amanda said “She’s not having an affair is she, Dad?”

“That’s enough” Brian replied, sternly, getting to his feet.

There was an embarrassing moment until Rodney broke the silence.

“The water’s getting closer, Dad.”

“Yes, Rodney. I didn’t realize we had been here so long. We’d better be getting back before your Mum gets home.”

The three of them returned to the house in silence with Brian thinking that what Amanda had said tended to confirm his own suspicions about Jenny. Could or would he confront her? It may not even be true. Maybe he should follow her? But wasn’t that being a bit paranoid? The suspicion remained in his mind until she returned home.

Jenny was laying with Tony’s arm around her.

“That was good, Tony.”

"I couldn't agree more" he replied, grinning.

"It's always good with you."

"Isn't it just; and you are ... so responsive."

Jenny giggled, then stopped, turning serious.

"Something wrong, darling?"

"I had an awful dream the other night; more like a nightmare."

"Oh? Was Brian making love to you?"

She hit him, laughing.

"Don't be so stupid. No, it was really horrible – about you, me and ... Brian. Well, I think it was Brian. In my dream I knew it was Brian but it didn't look like him. He was thin with a pointed nose and big red eyes."

"A threesome! The mind boggles."

She turned to face him.

"I'm serious, Tony. It was awful."

He became attentive, lifting himself up on his elbow.

"Go on."

Jenny described how in the dream the 'Brian' thing had referred to her as a bitch and tried to stab her, and how Brian and her found the word scrawled on the wall of the basement.

"Do you think that he suspects something and it was actually him who wrote the word on the wall?"

"Hm, I never thought of that. He denies it of course but I suppose you could be right; but then, again, he seemed so shocked that I don't think he could have feigned it"

She sat up and pulled the covers up to hide her nakedness.

"Maybe it is him behind all the strange goings on in the house."

"Or perhaps he's trying to drive you bonkers and have you committed."

"Maybe he is."

She glanced over at the bedside clock.

"I had better be going. We'll have to be more careful. I do think Brian is getting suspicious."

She slid out of bed and made for the bathroom.

"I think I'll have a quick shower."

"What about the film we were supposed to have seen? Will Brian quiz you on it?"

"I've seen it before, so can describe everything that happened."

"Clever girl."

"Aren't I."

“And sexy.”

“With more to come.”

“Can’t wait.

“Good film?”

“Yes, Brian. I’m not sure that you wouldn’t have liked it though. A girlie romance.”

“No, not my thing.”

“I can tell you what it was about if you wish.”

“No, it’s okay. How’s Toni? Did she enjoy it?”

“She’s fine and, yes, she did enjoy it.”

“Has she got a boyfriend?”

“Did have. She got engaged once but he cheated on her, which put her off a regular boyfriend.”

“So ...?”

“She doesn’t ‘put herself around’ if that’s what you mean. In fact she’s not too bothered about having a regular partner; too wrapped up in her work.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s a PA I think and travels quite a lot; leads a very busy life.”

“But has plenty of time to see you.”

Jenny started to get annoyed.

“What is this? The third degree? Why all these questions?”

“Just interested. Who does she work for?”

“There you go again. Don’t you believe or trust me?”

“Maybe her employer is one of my clients.”

Jenny turned and headed for the kitchen.

“I’m getting a glass of wine. Want one?”

“Yes please.”

To Brian, this ‘Toni’ was still very much an unknown and could still be a fictitious person. He didn’t even have any idea what she looked like. Asking Jenny any more questions would make her angry and she would stomp off to bed and not talk to him. Her whole manner suggested that she was hiding something. She returned shortly with two glasses of red wine which she placed on the coffee table.

“Thanks. By the way, the builders are coming in next week to install the window in the basement.”

Jenny grabbed the TV control and sat down on the sofa.

“Good. Perhaps they can find out where that smell is coming from.”

“Yes, I’ll ask them if they can find any reason for it.”

They spent the rest of the evening watching some film on the TV. At one point Brian started to put his arm around her.

“Getting a bit amorous aren’t you” she said, half joking.

“I think we need to spend more time together, as a family and sometimes just the two of us. I can pass more of my work onto a couple of new and very competent contractors.”

“Hm” was her only reply.

“More wine?”

“No thanks. I’ve got a bit of a headache – probably the film and tiredness. I think I’ll have an early night.”

‘How convenient’ Brian thought. “Maybe I should have an early night too.”

Her response was quick and purposeful.

“No, no. You don’t have to. It’s just me.”

After she had gone up to bed, Brian sat sipping the rest of his wine with various thoughts running through his head: *‘Film; Toni or Tony; bitch; she didn’t even ask how the kids were when she got home.’* He was staring at the TV screen not really aware of what was on. He grabbed the remote, flicked through a few channels, then turned the TV off. The house was completely quiet as he finished off his wine.

Brian was just dozing off when he heard a noise coming from one of the bedrooms. He got up and walked to the foot of the stairs and listened. It sounded like a rhythmic gasping. Slowly he ascended the stairs, suddenly aware that the house felt cold. He stopped at the top of the stairs. The sound seemed to be coming from his and Jenny’s room. Instinct told him to first check on the children, so he first entered Amanda’s room. What he saw made him recoil in horror. His daughter was laying sprawled across her bed and appeared dead.

“No” he uttered, and immediately headed for Rodney’s where he found his son lying on the floor, also looking dead.

“Jenny, what have you done?” He cried out, and dashed back to their bedroom and threw open the door to see his wife making love and laughing with a strange man. She stopped and turned to face him.

“What do you want? Get out.” She shouted.

Brian just stood there not knowing what to say. Her response to his silence and expression of shock was to climb off her lover and walk towards him, naked. He stood there dumbfounded as she reached him and gave him a violent shove. He lost his balance and found himself falling backwards down the stairs.

Brian woke up and found himself on the floor.

“Oh my God. What ...?” He realized that he had been dreaming. The house was cold and quiet ... apart from the sound of a door creaking, seemingly coming from the basement. He jumped up and headed for the hallway, flicking on the basement light and throwing open the door. He looked over towards the built-in cupboard and thought he saw it moving. Leaping down the steps, just saving himself from falling flat on his face, he yanked open the cupboard door.

“Got you” he said.

There was no one in the cupboard. It was empty as usual. Brian turned around and shuffled across to sit on the chair. He put his face in his hands and sobbed.

“What’s happening to my family? Leave us alone, please. I didn’t know this house belonged to you. What do you want?”

The cupboard door creaked again and Brian felt the presence of someone or something behind him. He turned quickly but there was no one there. His eyes fell to the floor. He gasped and stood up. There were two wet footprints behind the chair.

Brian slept fitfully that night and was woken up by Jenny pushing him. He opened his eyes and found her standing by the bed in her dressing gown.

“Very funny. Very bloody funny. What’s wrong with you, Brian? Are you losing it?”

“What’s the matter now? He asked sleepily.

She pulled the covers off him.

“You know damn well, so come and explain it to me.”

She walked off towards the door muttering “Bloody sick joke”.

Brian climbed out of bed and followed her down the stairs where he noticed that the basement door was open wide. Memories of the previous night came flashing back.

“On the wall” Jenny barked.

He looked into the basement. Scrawled on the wall in the same style as on the previous occasion were the words: 'SAVE THE CHILDREN'.

"Who the ..." he started to say but Jenny interrupted.

"It's you isn't it? All the stupid things going on in this house - it's you. What are you trying to achieve? To scare us all to death? You're pathetic, Brian. Oh, maybe you're trying to cast doubt on my sanity. Whatever you are doing, it has to stop. Now! Do you hear me?"

"No, Jenny, you've got it all wrong. I bought his house with the best of intentions but didn't know anything about its history."

"Its history?" She mocked. "What history can a place like this have?"

She put a finger to her lips.

"Oh, of course; it's haunted; I forgot. Get a life, Brian."

She was about to disappear into the kitchen.

"Wait Jenny. We need to talk about this; when you have calmed down."

"When I have calmed down?" She shouted. "When you are trying to drive me crazy. There are alternatives you know."

"Listen, Jenny, I need to tell you something about this house and ..."

"Tell you what, just sell up and we'll go our own separate ways."

Brian was shocked and felt hurt.

"You can't mean that, Jenny, after all we've been through. I love you, Jenny, but you've changed."

He didn't want to say it, but it was at the back of his mind.

"Are you saying you don't love or wish to be with me anymore? Are you ... seeing someone else?"

She reddened slightly but denied it vigorously, if not too convincingly.

"Oh here we go again. Bloody Toni isn't it. Maybe the best thing I can do is to move in with hi ... her."

"Mum?"

They both turned to see Amanda and Rodney standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"You're not leaving us are you?" Amanda said, with a trace of tears in her eyes. "Don't you love us anymore?"

Jenny immediately calmed down, feeling guilty at upsetting her daughter. She put an arm around each of her children, smiling.

"No, darlings. I'm not. It's just that ... Daddy is doing silly things that upset me and I thought that he would stop if I threatened to leave."

"What silly things is Dad doing?" Rodney asked.

“Well” Jenny replied, thinking back when they first arrived at the house. “He keeps saying that the house is haunted, leaves muddy footprints everywhere and writes things on the wall, like that.”

She stepped back to point into the basement. Amanda and Rodney moved forward and looked in to see the words ‘SAVE THE CHILDREN’ written on the wall.

“Dad didn’t do that” Amanda said.

Jenny’s smile disappeared immediately.

“What?”

“The metamorph did it.”

“Metamorph!” Jenny snapped. “What the hell is a metamorph?”

Brian placed a hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“Calm down darling. There is something you need to hear.”

She pushed his hand away.

“Don’t patronise me” she shouted. “You’re even turning the children against me.”

“It’s the strange dreams” Rodney said. “Daddy, Amanda and I have all had them. Have you had any Mum?”

Jenny’s dream about being on top of Tony immediately came to mind.

“No I haven’t.”

“Are you sure?” Brian asked. “I thought I heard you moaning in your sleep the other night.”

“Calling me a liar now” she replied, flouncing off to hide her embarrassment. “I’m going up to have a shower and get dressed.”

“What did I say?” Brian said rhetorically as she climbed the stairs.

The children both shrugged.

“Is Mummy really going to leave us?” Rodney asked.

Brian wasn’t sure how to answer.

“I ... I’m sure she isn’t. She just needs our love and support. Once she has heard what we have to say, she will understand.”

“I don’t think the metamorph is evil” Amanda said.

Brian recollected his own dream.

“I hope not. I really do.”

IX

Brian and the children noticed the change in Jenny. She seemed a lot calmer and happier since she picked up the voluntary job at the charity shop; so much so, that there were no further arguments about the house and the three of them decided not to bring up the subject of strange dreams. She informed Brian that she had agreed to work 9am to 2 pm, Monday to Friday, and often came home talking about other staff members and some of the strange customers that came into the shop, especially those who quibbled over the prices.

“Would you believe it!” she exclaimed one day. “One woman asked about quantity discounts. It’s a charity shop for God’s sake!”

She seemed to enjoy evenings and days out with the family and even took some interest in the garden to look after the potted plants and hanging baskets. Brian found her a bit more tolerant of him touching her but lovemaking was not a regular or frequent activity, usually restricted to the occasional weekend. Brian also found her rather unresponsive and an inactive partner but relieved that the possibility of her walking out was now receding into the past.

Jenny was indeed content with her comfortable domestic life and the excitement of her secret liaison with Tony. Lying beside him late one morning she sighed.

“What’s up darling?” he asked.

“Just thinking how lucky we are. Sex when we like, without the commitments; something to look forward to.”

“What about doing it with Brian?”

“I have to let him now and again of course. Let’s say I tolerate it. It’s like ... having a meal, going to the dentist, attending a school concert; one of those things that has to be done – an obligation one might say; a duty.”

“I don’t know how you get away with it.”

“That’s why I took a voluntary job. I can take the time off now and again when it’s quiet.”

“So long as we don’t overrun, consumed with passion.”

She nudged him.

“It’s alright for you, being self-employed like Brian. You have total freedom.”

“I still have to put in quite a few hours to earn money you know. Anyway, how do you manage to spend most Wednesday mornings with me?”

“I just told Brian I worked the five weekdays and he believed it.”

“More fool him; but you still need to be careful. You might get found out one day.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll believe any story I can fob him off with.”

She picked her watch up from the bedside table.

“I’d better be getting back.”

Tony lay there watching her as she climbed out of bed and started getting dressed.

“You are happy with the arrangements aren’t you?”

She turned to face him, pulling up her skirt.

“Yes, of course. Are you?”

“Sure. As you said, no commitments.”

He hesitated.

“For how long though?”

“When the time is right.”

He watched her brushing her hair.

“Same time Thursday?”

“Sure. Can’t wait.”

“I still don’t know how you get away with it so often.”

“I told them I had a doctor’s appointment this time.”

.....

“The builders have nearly finished installing the window in the basement” Brian called out when Jenny came in. “It’s looking good. Go have a look.”

“I will” Jenny replied, “after dinner. There are a few pots I need to sort out in the garden.”

Watering the tubs of flowers she noticed that the builders had cleared away soil from around the external wall and had installed a wide window. It just remained for it to be glazed.

It was dark by the time she had finished in the garden and cleaned herself up. She walked along to the basement, opened the door but did not turn the light on. She was fascinated how the moonlight threw a pattern of the window onto the floor of the basement. Then something made her stare at the pattern. Instead of a clear rectangular patch of light a large dark shape blocked off the light in the centre as though someone was standing in the window.

“Hello” she called out. “Is that you Brian?”

She reached round the door frame and turned the basement light on but there was no one there. Her eyes then fell upon the built-in cupboard.

"I asked him to get rid of that cupboard" she muttered to herself, descending the steps and walking over to it.

She yanked open the door and stepped back quickly. It was as though someone had just come out and collided with her. She could see nothing solid but there was a hazy darkness in front of her that seemed to force her to step back and back nearer to ...

"Look out Mum!"

Jenny stopped as the darkness disappeared, completely unaware of what was happening to her and turned to see Rodney coming into the basement.

"You nearly fell down it" he said.

She looked down and saw that she was standing at the edge of the open shaft. For a moment she was speechless.

"What? ... How? ... Who opened the trap door?"

"It must have been the builders" Rodney replied. "Dad fitted a new padlock and took the key up to the kitchen." He turned and called out "Dad. Dad."

Brian appeared in the doorway.

"What's going on?"

"Mum nearly fell down the shaft."

Brian bounded down the steps.

"She couldn't have. I closed and padlocked it. Are you okay darling?"

"Rodney stopped me just in time."

Brian looked at where she was standing.

"It's a wonder you didn't fall down it when you walked across the basement. But what were you doing in the cupboard?"

Jenny was shaking.

"I ... I ... I'm sure that the trap door wasn't open when I came into the basement. I must have walked around it ... somehow."

"Why did you come down here anyway?"

Jenny was too shocked to reply; and that feeling of someone or something forcing her back had frightened her and suppressed any thought of her accusing anyone of leaving it open. Brian closed the door and refitted the padlock.

"I padlocked it earlier today and took the key up to the kitchen. It must have been one of the builders; but I don't know how because I remember fitting the new padlock as they were packing up. Anyway, why would they want to open it. There's nothing down there."

"It just drops down into a cave beneath the house" Rodney added.

Brian shot his son a glance to indicate that he shouldn't have said that, but fortunately Jenny did not question how he might have known. He looked around the room.

“Help me move that sideboard over the trap door, Rodney.”

They slid it over to its new position.

“There! It can’t be opened now.”

One of the drawers had been shaken open as they moved it. Jenny was staring at the contents.

“What’s that?”

Brian stepped round and looked inside.

“It’s a dagger.”

“What’s it doing in there?”

“I don’t know. It was there when we moved in. I keep meaning to get rid of it.”

Jenny recollected the dream she had had when Brian caught her with Tony. She remembered that he was holding a dagger – the same as or similar to the one she was now looking at.

“Get rid of it” she said quickly and nervously.

“I meant to when I first found it” Brian replied “but I’ll do it right away.”

He was staring at his wife.

“Are you alright, dear? You are looking very pale.”

Jenny had recovered from the shock but was thinking about the dream.

“Of course I’m not bloody okay. I nearly fell down that shaft and then I see a dangerous weapon in the house that the children could have found. Get rid of it, Brian, or I’ll do it myself.”

“I’ve just told you that I’m just about to dispose of it.”

He remembered what happened the last time he touched it. Jenny stepped towards the drawer and was about to reach into it but he quickly slammed it shut.

“What ...?”

“I’ll do it” Brian said sharply.

Jenny looked at him quizzically.

“I’ll go and get something to put it in” he said, leaving the basement.

Jenny stood staring at the closed drawer.

“What’s wrong with your father, Rodney?”

She slowly pulled open the drawer and peered at the dagger inside. Slowly she reached in until her fingers made contact with the implement.

“Ah!” She screamed and collapsed on the floor.

“Dad!” Rodney yelled out. “Mum’s fainted.”

Brian came dashing back followed by Amanda, looking very worried.

“Is she alright Dad?”

“I don’t know” he replied.

Brian knelt over his wife holding her head up and patting her face.

“What happened, Rodney? Jenny ... Jenny.”

He was feeling her pulse and was about to ask Rodney to call 999, when Jenny murmured.

“Are you okay, darling?”

She tried to lift herself up, so Brian sat alongside her raising her up with his arm around her shoulders. Jenny shook her head slowly.

“I’m okay, I think.”

“What happened?”

“I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my chest and passed out I guess.”

Brian noticed that the drawer was open.

“Did you touch the dagger?”

She recollected what had happened. As soon as her fingers made contact with the implement she had received a vision of an unseen hand plunging the dagger into her, resulting in a sharp pain that caused her to pass out.

“No” she lied, not wishing to explain why someone or something would want to stab her.

“I think we ought to get you checked out. It might be your heart.”

“It’s probably nothing. Perhaps a spot of indigestion.”

“Nevertheless, best to get a few tests done to make sure.”

They all helped to get Jenny up to go and rest on the bed, after which Brian found an old cloth with which to wrap the dagger before putting it in a plastic bag. As he was about to throw it in the rubbish bin, he hesitated. It was such an ornate weapon that he thought it might have some value to a collector, so decided he would put it somewhere safe in the garage. Thinking back to what had happened to him when he had touched the dagger, he knew that Jenny must also have touched it. He also recollected what Rodney and Amanda had told him about the metamorph. Maybe it did harbour evil intent after all, trying to turn the family members against each other. Was it was trying to make them kill one another? He couldn’t afford to wait to find out. Maybe they should leave the house before it was too late.

X

The builders, of course, denied having opened the trap door in the basement. *'Why would we want to?'* the foreman had replied to Brian's question. The only comments he made were related to the strange odour in the room and, on occasion, odd traces of what appeared to be slimy footprints. They had now finished glazing the basement window and had removed the built-in cupboard, as Brian had requested.

"You might want to treat the wall that formed the back of the cupboard" the foreman had suggested. "It seems to be damp but we can't ascertain where it's coming from. I suggest you ask a surveyor to come and investigate. We don't undertake that sort of work ourselves but we can always address the problem for you once the cause has been found."

Brian thanked them for their advice, said he would look into it and was now feeling a bit more positive about the house. He had already purchased pots of pale grey emulsion for the basement walls so planned to visit the local DIY store the following day to investigate damp-proofing materials. He was pleased with how much brighter the room appeared with the new window. All that now remained to finish the room off was to paint the wall, procure and lay the laminate floor, that would also cover the trap door, and install some strip-lighting. He retired for the night, discussing with Jenny possible uses for the extra space the basement provided.

"Has that smell gone now?" She asked.

"There is still a slight trace, but if we keep the window open during fine days, I think it will eventually go."

Although she had passed a comment on the smell, Brian knew that she wasn't really interested in the room's potential. He also sensed that she was still hiding something. He felt somewhat guilty about mistrusting her but needed to find out more about this friend 'Toni'. As sleep finally enveloped the couple, traces of slime oozed out of the wall which was once the back of the old built-in cupboard and something moved across the basement slightly confused at the things going on in the house. It headed towards the basement door.

Rodney woke up to faint sounds of something heavy being moved across the floor of the box room adjacent to his bedroom. It sounded like the old trunk they had found there being dragged across the floor, but knew it couldn't be because they had immediately carried it into the garage once it had been

erected. The tap on the door made him jump and tense until he heard Amanda's faint whisper.

"Rodney, are you awake?"

"Yes. Come in."

The door opened and Amanda came in wearing her dressing gown. As she closed the door the noise stopped.

"Did you hear that noise?" she asked.

"Yes. It sounds as though it's coming from the box room."

"It is" Amanda confirmed "and I'm surprised it didn't wake Mum and Dad. Shall I wake them?"

"No. Mum will be cross and in a mood. Anyway, it has stopped now."

The noise resumed.

"Oh no it hasn't. Do you think someone is in there? I'm scared, Rodney."

"Perhaps it's Dad in there doing something?"

"I don't think so. Their bedroom door is closed and I think I heard him snoring."

"Perhaps it's Mum snoring" Rodney sniggered.

"She would deny it."

Amanda held up a finger.

"Listen. The noise has stopped again."

After about five minutes sitting in silence, Amanda said "I'm going to have a look."

"You're brave. I thought you were scared just now."

"You're coming with me."

Rodney's eyes opened wide. "What?"

"You scared then?"

"Er, no, of course not. I'm not scared of ghosts. Anyway, they don't exist. Dad said so."

"Come on then."

Rodney followed Amanda reluctantly; he couldn't be less brave than his sister. They crept out of Rodney's room and stopped outside the box room. Amanda had switched the landing light on when she went to wake Rodney. There was no sound. As Amanda grasped the door handle, Rodney moved back a bit. Amanda shook her head slowly, mocking his lack of bravery. She pushed open the door until it was wide open. There was nothing in the room except a couple of their father's filing cabinets and various other household items, including surplus furniture that Brian had brought from his old office in town.

“See” said Amanda. “The trunk isn’t here and ...” she looked around “... nothing else looks as though it’s been moved.”

“Maybe it was the metamorph” Rodney suggested.

“Ghosts and spirits can’t move things” Amanda replied, but the two of them stood looking at each other, both thinking of all the strange things that had already happened in the house.

“Maybe it’s trying to tell us something” Rodney suggested. “Something to do with that trunk.”

Amanda nodded. “We’ll ask Dad about it in the morning.”

She closed the door and they made their way back to their rooms. Amanda turned the landing light off on the way. Rodney snuggled under his bedcovers and soon went to sleep.

During breakfast in the morning, Amanda posed the question to her father. “Dad?”

“Yes Amanda?”

“What’s in that old trunk that we found in the box room?”

“I don’t know. There is a hefty padlock on it with no sign of a key so I just dumped it at the back of the garage and forgot all about it. Why do you ask? Do you think there might be some valuables inside?”

“Just interested.”

“I suppose you are going to suggest there is a body in it” Jenny muttered sarcastically. “You three and your bloody ghosts and hauntings are getting on my nerves. Now hurry and finish your breakfast. I’ve got a bit of shopping to do before I start work, so I’ll drop you off at school.” She turned to Brian. “Oh, I may be a bit late home. Ethel asked if I can stay a bit late to help sort out and press a large batch of clothing that someone dropped off yesterday. It appears that the owner may have died and all their old clothing dumped on us to sort out.”

“What time do you think you’ll be home then?” Brian asked.

“Not sure; but don’t wait for me. I’ll grab a sandwich. You can get the kids something, can’t you.”

“Oh, okay.” Brian’s suspicions were aroused once again but he put them aside. “What do you want for dinner, kids?”

“Beef burger” Rodney said.

“Southern fried chicken” Amanda countered.

“I’ll check the freezer to see what we’ve got” Brian said. “I’m certainly not going shopping.”

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Amanda and Rodney were dropped off by Mary Williams, one of the other Mums.

“Jenny not home?” Mary had called out from her car window.

“No” Brian replied. “She’s working late today. A batch of clothing to sort out. Someone died apparently.”

“Oh, how sad. Which charity shop does she help in? I’ll look her up some time. She may be able to pop out for a cup of coffee.”

“Yes, that would be nice.” He thought for a moment. “Actually, I’m not sure which one she works in. She never told me and, to be honest, I never thought to ask. I suppose I ought to know in case of an emergency.”

“Hm. I might ask around tomorrow when I’ll be in town again.”

“Okay; but I will ask her anyway, when she gets home. Thanks for dropping the kids off.”

“No problem.”

Mary drove off as Brian returned to his office.

Amanda popped her head around the door.

“Dad?”

“I’ve sorted something out for dinner” he replied, continuing with his work.

“It’s not that, Dad.”

“Oh? What is it then?”

“You know that old trunk that’s in the garage.”

“Yes.”

“What do you think might be in it?”

Brian swung round in his chair to face his daughter.

“Why the sudden interest in an old trunk?”

Amanda hesitated.

“Rodney and I thought we heard it being dragged across the box room floor last night.”

Brian chuckled.

“I think you must have been dreaming or your imaginations have run away with you.”

“We definitely heard something, Dad. Ask Rodney. We think the metamorph was trying to tell us something about the trunk.”

“You’re not making any sense, Amanda. Start from the beginning.”

Amanda related to her father what happened the previous night and that she and Rodney were convinced that the trunk must hold some answers to what was happening in the house. Brian agreed to go along with his children's fantasy and try to get the trunk open, just to satisfy their curiosity.

It was at the back of the garage covered in an old cloth. Rodney offered to help Brian to carry it outside.

"It's okay, Rodney. It's not that heavy" Brian commented.

He placed the trunk on the ground, the three of them just standing there looking at it. It was a dark oak colour and measured about the size of an A3 sheet with the depth of about a foot. The lid was curved with three metal bands, the centre one thicker and supporting the padlock.

"I never found the key" Brian said.

"What about a hacksaw, Dad?" Rodney suggested.

"We can try, but the padlock might be made from hardened steel so won't be easy to cut."

Brian fetched his toolbox and picked out a large hacksaw. It took a while, but he did manage to cut the padlock off and lifted the lid of the trunk whilst Amanda and Rodney stood on either side of him watching. The top part of the trunk contained a number of books, a box, framed photos, a document folder and a collection of personal effects. Brian took out the large book at the top of the trunk and opened it. On the first page was printed, in bold letters, the following.

The Diary of Nicholas Johnson.

This is a record of events that have impacted my family since 1970 and which I believe will end badly for us if I don't do something about it soon. I do not normally believe that people can be innately evil but the psychiatrist (Silas Matthews) who is treating Margaret is such a person. I pray to God that tragedy will not befall us.

January 1974

Brian turned the page and read the first entry:

21st January 1974

I don't know exactly when it all started but recent events are such that I feel that I must record what is happening to our family. I will start

this diary by attempting to recall as best I can the events leading up to the present situation.

Brian closed the book and put it aside as Amanda took out a framed photograph.

"That might make interesting reading later" he said.

Rodney picked out another book which happened to be a photo album.

"Look Dad" Amanda said. "It's a family photograph."

The three of them were looking at a man and woman with a boy and girl between them standing in front of Headland House. The family were well-dressed; the adults appeared to be in their mid-twenties and the boy and girl about three and five respectively. The children were smiling, the mother looked sad and the father looked as though he was trying to be cheerful.

Rodney glanced at the photo.

"The house looks new but not as nice as it does now, does it Dad?"

"We've done a lot to improve both the house and the garden, thanks to your help, Rodney."

His son returned to leaf through the photo album.

"Lots of photos in here, including ones when the children were babies."

Brian and Amanda looked over Rodney's shoulder. They couldn't help notice how sad the mother looked in nearly all of them. Amanda had taken out another album and started turning the pages. Brian glanced between the two of them.

"Stop a minute."

Amanda stopped turning the pages.

"Go back a bit."

"What is it, Dad?" Amanda asked.

"Something about the photos bothers me."

"What?" Rodney asked.

"I'm not sure. Carry on, I'll look at them later."

Further rummaging through the box revealed a number of loose photographs where the subjects appeared older.

"He obviously didn't get around to mounting these" Brian commented.

The document folder included the birth certificates of the family members and a couple of death and marriage certificates relating to the parents of Nicholas and Margaret. The children's names were George and Edith. A second folder appeared to contain medical records. Flicking through, Brian noticed some letters with the letterhead:

*Dr Silas Matthews, Consultant Psychiatrist
Member of the Institute of Psychiatry and Human Behaviour.*

He remembered that it was the person that Jim Davies had mentioned during their conversation in the café.

There were a number of artefacts in the trunk: a few toys, including a small wooden engine probably made by Nicholas for his son, and some items of jewellery. There were also some baby clothes, presumably belonging to George and Edith.

"Aren't they sweet" Amanda said, picking out a blue knitted cardigan. "Can we take the things indoors, Dad?"

"Sure. I'll put the trunk in my office. Perhaps Mum will also find the contents interesting."

They returned the items to the trunk, which Brian carried back to the house.

"You'd better both be getting on with your homework now. I've just got a few things to finish off, then I'll start dinner."

After dinner, Brian and the children sat together looking through the photo albums. Most were typical shots of the family members in different poses and locations. Amanda and Rodney made humorous comments every now and again but Brian remained serious as they traced the family through the years.

"You're not saying much, Dad" Amanda said.

"No, Amanda. I can't help notice how sad the mother looks in nearly all of them and how her general appearance seems to deteriorate through the years. In the more recent shots Margaret is missing completely."

Then they received a shock. There was just one photograph of Silas Matthews, standing in front the house, and scrawled across the photo were the words: *THIS MAN IS EVIL*.

"He looks pretty evil" Rodney commented, staring at the photo.

"Scary, I'd say" added Amanda.

Silas Matthews was a man of average height and slightly stooped. He looked about forty-five with long, black, swept back hair and had an abnormally long pointed nose with tired deep-set eyes and a smallish mouth with thin lips. He was wearing a dark suit with baggy trousers and an open two-buttoned jacket.

Brian put the photo back in the trunk face down.

"I wonder" he muttered.

"Wonder what, Dad?" Amanda asked.

“Oh, nothing. I think that’s enough for tonight. You two need to be in bed.”

It wasn’t until the children had gone up to their rooms that Brian became aware of the time. Jenny returned home just after ten o’clock as he was scanning some of the diary entries.

“You’re late, Jenny” he stated, without looking up.

She was immediately on the defensive.

“You wouldn’t believe how much we had to sort out. I’m exhausted.”

She flopped down on the sofa. Brian put the diary down and went over to sit beside her.

“I think I’ll have an early night” she said, quickly.

Brian could smell alcohol on her breath.

“Have you been drinking?”

“No, of course ... well, we did have a glass of wine with our take-away.”

Brian couldn’t help notice that her whole demeanour indicated that she had consumed more than one glass of wine.

“You didn’t see Toni, then?”

She flicked her head round to stare at him.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked sharply with a hint of tension.

“I thought she might give you a hand, seeing that you two are so close.”

Jenny got up off the sofa, her expression relaxing somewhat.

“She’s too busy to get involved with charity work.”

She stepped over to peck him on the cheek.

“Night, darling. See you in the morning. I expect I’ll drop off quite quickly.”

It was only a quick flash of her hand but Brian could have sworn that she was not wearing her wedding ring.

XI

As it was not particularly late, Brian picked up the diary again and started reading some of the early entries.

August 1970

We were so excited. Our first baby had arrived - a daughter: Edith. Little Edie we called her. Both our parents said we were too young to start a family and needed to earn more and buy a house first but we loved each other so much and the flat, though small, was large enough for us. Our parents, between them, agreed to look after Edie so that Margaret could get a part-time job. She also managed to pick up evening work for a couple of nights a week while I 'baby sat'.

December 1970

Edie's first Christmas. We spent Christmas Day with my parents and Boxing Day with Margaret's parents. Embarrassingly, Margaret made it obvious that she was annoyed that Edie's grandparents had bought their granddaughter so many presents as we, ourselves, did not have any spare money.

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February 1971

Margaret expressed concern and is upset that Edie seems happier with our parents and me. I suggested that perhaps she should give up the evening job or try and reduce her part-time hours so as to spend more time with our daughter.

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August 1971

It's Edie's first birthday but she started walking when she was eleven and a half months whilst in the care of my parents. Margaret was distraught that she missed our daughter's first steps. She is becoming quite tearful and upset that she does not feel close to Edie. I suggested that she should consider giving up the jobs. It will be a struggle financially but we'll get by.

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December 1971

Margaret insisted that we spend Christmas alone this year and said that she didn't want our parents to buy Edie many presents. They were disappointed and expressed concern about Margaret's attitude towards them. Fortunately, I had received a Christmas bonus so we were able to buy her some small presents and a small chicken for Christmas dinner.

Further entries revealed that there was not a good mother-daughter bond and Margaret was taking it out on Edie so that she was always asking for her father. It became clear that Margaret was suffering from post-natal depression, so their GP put her on some tablets but Nicholas expressed doubt that they were working or whether she even took them. Things seem to improve when Margaret became pregnant again. Brian reached the entry when their son was born.

October 1972

Our son, George, was born just before midnight. We are both so happy and Margaret seems a changed person. I had also received a promotion so we were able to buy an old banger, which I managed to get road-worthy with the help of a friend.

Brian stopped at this point, finding himself starting to nod off. It was half past eleven. He closed the diary and took it into his office. He crept into the bedroom, but wasn't convinced that Jenny was asleep although she made out to be, so slid into bed with many questions running through his mind.

A dark shape emerged from the basement and entered Brian's office. It moved around the room and noted the trunk alongside his desk. It saw an old book laying on the desk with a bookmark several pages from the beginning. The pages slowly turned to the last of the entries. The shape left the office to ascend the stairs and made its way to Rodney's bedroom.

Rodney was in the front of a boat on a lake with Amanda and a woman, who was sitting at the back but mainly hidden from view by Silas Matthews who was rowing. From a momentary glimpse, when Silas briefly turned around to stare at the children, he saw a thin, pale looking woman with a sad expression staring at the bottom of the boat.

“Look over there, Rodney” Silas suddenly said, pointing across the lake. “Can you see the heron?”

Rodney looked across the lake with his back to Amanda. Suddenly the boat rocked and the next thing he heard was a scream and a splash. Amanda had fallen in and was shouting for help while Silas fumbled about with the oars. Suddenly there was a clonk sound and Amanda stopped shouting.

“Amanda!” Rodney called out and moved over to her side of the boat. There was no sign of her.

“Save her Mr Matthews” he yelled.

Silas just sat there. “I can’t swim.”

“Amanda! Amanda! Amanda!”

Rodney woke up with tears streaming down his face. The room light went on and Brian came over to his bed.

“Rodney, what’s the matter? I heard you calling out. Sounds like you’ve had a bad dream”

Brian thought he heard a door creak downstairs and then realised that the room had a damp odour and felt cold. Rodney wiped his eyes but wasn’t actually crying when he woke up. He described his dream to Brian.

“That is strange” Brian said. “You’ve had two dreams involving the deaths of children. I wonder what they mean; although I can understand why this Silas Matthews was in your dream after seeing that photo of him. It’s enough to give anyone a nightmare.”

They both laughed.

“I’ve also noticed” added Rodney “that every time I have one of those dreams, my room is cold when I wake up.”

“That is weird” his father replied. “It seems that every time something strange happens, that smell comes back and the temperature drops - and occasionally there are the muddy, slimy footprints.”

The diary from the trunk came to Brian’s mind.

“I haven’t read much of Nicholas’ diary yet but something definitely happened to the family who used to live here; something tragic; and we need to find out what it was.”

Rodney nodded and snuggled back under the covers.

“I’ll be okay now, Dad.”

Brian returned to his own bedroom where he found Jenny breathing deeply, indicating that she was fast asleep. He lay there for a while with a troubled mind and eventually drifted off to sleep.

The following morning when Brian entered his office, he was surprised to find the diary open, convinced that he had closed it when he put it on his desk the night before. He read the entry on the open page.

23rd October 1974

I am at my wits end and don’t know what to do. Margaret insists on continuing her ‘treatment’ with Silas Matthews. When I try to terminate his services she sinks into a deep depression, doesn’t speak to me or the children and stays in bed. Today, the children told me they are frightened of him.

He flicked forward to the last entry.

21st February 1975

Something is going on which disturbs me. Silas said he wished to have a talk with me about Margaret. He felt that the treatment was nearing conclusion so wished to discuss her future care with me. So that we can talk freely he suggested Margaret take the children out for a picnic. His behaviour is in complete contrast to his previous remonstrations. He is up to something. I must be careful.

Brian thought how fortunate it was that Nicholas had locked the diary in the trunk. Obviously, Silas was not aware that it existed. Now he needed to re-visit the library to search local papers for reports on when Nicholas disappeared and the dates of George’s and Edith’s accidents.

The following day, Wednesday, was free of appointments so Brian thought he could meet Jenny for lunch after completing his research. He was about to send her a message when the flooring for the basement arrived, so he asked the delivery men to take it down to the basement. He had already painted the walls and had had a plasterboard ceiling installed, so was ready to start laying the

floor. He had not done anything about the old sideboard as he wasn't sure what to do with it. It was a solid piece of furniture in good condition so he was positive that he could find a use for it rather than just dumping it. Before the delivery men departed, the driver gave Brian the delivery note, and commented on evidence of damp on the wall in the corner. Brian was annoyed, not at the delivery but at the fact that the dampness was still there. He made his way to the basement and walked over to the wall in question to examine it.

The paintwork had certainly discoloured slightly and the wall felt damp to the touch, slightly slimy in fact. He was doubly annoyed as he had spent time coating the wall with an expensive damp proofing compound. He would definitely have to call in a surveyor as recommended by the builder. Returning to his office to attend to the tasks he had set himself that day, he double-checked his diary for appointments and meetings with his clients and sub-contractors, made a few phone calls and after lunch wandered back to the basement to start unpacking the flooring.

Jenny arrived home not long after 2 o'clock and offered to go and pick up the children. She sounded more positive and started to take an interest in the basement or at least pretended to.

"It's looking good now" she said "and the flooring will finish it off nicely. Have you decided what to use the room for yet?"

"No, but I thought about a games room with a snooker table perhaps. We could also use it as a mini-cinema with a large plasma screen down one end."

"Yes, it will probably come in handy when Rodney and Amanda start bringing friends home. We could even buy a sofa-bed for sleep-overs."

Brian thought about the supernatural incidents and dreams connected with whatever was in the basement.

"Y-e-s" he responded hesitantly.

"Oh, that's it; dismiss my idea. It's always what you want, isn't it?"

Brian was taken aback.

"Hang on, Jenny; I wasn't dismissing it. I was just thinking that perhaps it might not be the best place to spend a night after what's been happening down there."

"Huh; still going on about ghosts and hauntings when you know damn well that it's you that's doing it."

"That's not true, Jenny; and you know it. Rodney, Amanda and I have all been impacted by what has happened in this house and I know that you have too."

"So what happened in this house? What aren't you telling me?"

"I've been trying to tell you for some time but you have been dismissive whenever I have raised the issue."

Brian thought it time he updated her on what he and the children had discovered.

"The children and I found a diary yesterday, kept by the previous owner and ..."

Jenny was irritable. "Where did you find it? Where is it now? Show me."

"Slow down, Jenny."

"Slow down? When the three of you are talking secretly amongst yourselves and acting as though I'm not here."

"That's not the way it is, Jenny. You know there have been a number of strange things that have happened here since we arrived and you have always been quick to blame me and other people. I now know that this house harbours many unsavoury memories and, after talking with Jim Davies and reading entries in the diary we found, I'm convinced that paranormal activity is actually happening. Until I started reading the diary, I kept wondering what was going on, who might be doing it and why. Now I hope I can start piecing things together once I have paid a visit to the library tomorrow. I have to go into town anyway to see a couple of clients."

Jenny was suddenly on the defensive. Being Wednesday the next day, Brian will think she will be working in the shop. Tony had warned her to be careful.

"Why do you want to go to the library?" she enquired nervously.

"I've just told you. To check out any news in the local papers that might help explain what happened here. I also thought that we could meet up for lunch. I could pick you up from the shop. Which one is it by the way?"

"Oh, er, I decided to reduce my hours to just the four days, so won't be going in to town."

Brian could sense that she was lying.

"Since when? You didn't tell me."

"From today. I told them yesterday and they were fine about it."

"But you didn't think to tell me of this decision?"

"It was like a spur-of-the-moment decision. Things suddenly got on top of me."

"Like Tony" Brian mumbled.

Jenny's expression changed instantly.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Just a joke."

“We are not a couple of lesbians you know. A woman sometimes needs female company; somebody with whom to talk about womanly things.”

“So, what are you plans for the day, as you won’t be working?”

“Nothing much. I might just potter about in the garden, go for a walk or just sit in the garden and read.”

“We could still nip out for a spot of lunch when I return from the library.”

“Hm, we’ll see.”

Brian left Jenny attending to housework and made his way to his office to attend to some business. After about fifteen minutes Jenny picked up her phone and sent a message.

‘Sorry, can’t meet up tomorrow. Brian is going into town and said was going to pick me up from the shop for lunch, so I had to pretend I had reduced my working hours. Hopefully we can meet up on Thursday. Love you. xxx’

A reply popped up in return.

‘Nearly got caught out then. I did warn you. We will have to be more careful. Love you and need you!!! xxx’

She smiled at the message then deleted the chat session.

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The following day Brian made his way to the library, calling in to see his clients first. Most of the local papers for the seventies had been scanned and uploaded to a database so it did not take Brian long to find the information he was seeking. The first report he found was in an issue dated the 14th March 1975. It stated that a Nicholas Johnson of Headland House had been reported missing by his wife’s psychiatrist, Silas Matthews. The article stated that Mr Johnson had been missing for over three weeks since he was last seen and his wife, Margaret, and children, George and Edith, were distraught. The psychiatrist stated that Nicholas had been very depressed recently and suggested that maybe things had got on top of him and he had decided to ‘disappear’ and seek a new life elsewhere. Brian found that hard to believe, having read the diary entries.

The second report he found was in an issue dated the 21st October 1975 which reported on the tragic death by drowning of Edith Johnson, the five-year old daughter of Nicholas and Margaret. Margaret, her two children and a family friend, Silas Matthews, were apparently enjoying a fishing trip on the country park lake when Edith fell overboard. The police ruled out any suspicious circumstances but reprimanded the two adults for negligence in not storing safety equipment on board the boat. The father, Nicholas, was also reported to have been missing now for over eight months. Brian shook his head in disbelief as he downloaded copies of the two articles.

The next report followed six months later when a brief article highlighted the tragedy surrounding the Johnson family when George, son of Margaret and the missing Nicholas, was found dead at the side of a road. Police believed it to be a hit-and-run and appealed for any witnesses to come forward. The incident had happened late on a Sunday evening and questions were asked as to why a small boy was walking along the road alone. Initially, the finger of suspicion pointed at Silas Matthews but the crime was never solved because two months later the bodies of both Margaret Johnson and Silas Matthews were found washed up on a beach close to the house. The woman was reported as have having had her throat cut and the man as having from died from fear, from the expression on his face.

Brian couldn't believe his eyes but was even more shocked when, after what Jim Davies had told him, he started browsing the newspapers published twenty years later and read about the deaths of two teenage boys who had broken into the house. So, following the disappearance of Nicholas Johnson, everyone who had lived or been inside the house has died. Could Nicholas Johnson actually be still alive and had his vengeance on Silas Matthews? But why kill two lads who happened to break into the house for fun? The theory that Nicholas was still alive and hiding somewhere, made more sense than believing in ghosts or the supernatural; but that would now put him in his eighties. Would an eighty-year-old really be able to hide and move around the house unseen? Brian found this explanation difficult to accept. And what about the weird dreams they'd all had, well at least him, Amanda and Rodney who admitted it. Brian couldn't get his head around it. He checked that he had downloaded copies of all the relevant articles into his cloud storage space and glanced at the clock on the library wall: it was two o'clock. He thanked the library staff and started to make his way to the car park, then paused. Jenny had certainly been evasive when asked about which charity shop she worked

in, so he thought he'd ask around. At least he could meet Ethel, her boss, and some other of her colleagues.

There were half a dozen charity shops in town, all within walking distance of each other so he thought it shouldn't take him long to find out which one she worked in. He initially concentrated on the more popular ones without much success then found one down a side street where footfall was likely to be lower.

"Good afternoon" he said as he walked up to the elderly lady on the till who was sitting on a tall stool reading a book. "You look busy."

He glanced around the shop and noted a couple of racks of clothes, a bookcase, containing books, CDs, DVD and a few video cassettes, and a number of shelves on which sat a number of items that looked like a load of junk left over from car boot sales.

The lady didn't initially respond to the sarcastic comment, but then put her book down.

"No, we don't get a lot of business; too much out-of-the-way if you ask me. I don't know why they chose this shop, there are plenty of empty ones in the High Street. Are you looking for something in particular?"

"No, just browsing. Oh, does Jenny Saunders work here?"

"Yes. She works Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays."

"What about Wednesdays?"

"No. She said she can't work on Wednesdays. Anyway, we are never busy so most of the helpers just come in to drink coffee and chat with the occasional customer."

"So how does she fill up the time then?"

"Well, she pops off early some days when she's not needed and ... why are you asking all these questions about her? Who are you? Not a stalker I hope."

"Good lord no. I'm a friend of the family but lost touch with them years ago. Then luck would have it, I met up with a mutual friend who told me she had seen her working in a charity shop in town and, as I didn't know her address, I thought ..."

She picked up a pen from her desk.

"I'll give you her mobile number."

"No" Brian responded quickly. "I'll give you mine; privacy and all that. Ask her to ring me."

"Of course" she replied, slightly embarrassed.

He wrote his mobile number on a slip of paper she handed to him.

"So, are you Ethel?"

“No, just a helper. Ethel’s not in today.”

“Does this acquaintance of mine ever work late? Maybe I could arrange to pick her up some time.”

“No need. As I said, we are never busy and people take most of the stuff they don’t want to the other shops.”

Brian wandered over to the bookcase, picked a book off the shelf and took it to the woman.

She picked up the book to check the price inside. “That’ll be two pounds please.”

He handed the cash over.

“Rubbish author by the way” she said, handing the book back to Brian.

“I’ll give it a shot” he replied.

Walking back to the car park he chucked the book in a bin, thinking when to confront his wife about her lies and deceit.

XII

Jenny and Tony were sitting together amongst the rocks in a secluded cove not visible from the coastal path above them.

"Lucky no one else decided to find their way down here, it could have been embarrassing" Tony chuckled.

"You just can't keep your hands off me, can you?" Jenny replied, with a broad smile across her face.

"Huh, you can talk. Anyway, what made you change your mind?"

"I got bored and Brian had gone off to the library to try and find answers to this ghost theory of his."

"Do you still think he is behind all the incidents?"

"I don't know. He is so adamant that something sinister happened in the house years ago and the children agree with him. He said something about multiple murders. The three of them have also had weird dreams."

"I'm not a person who normally believes in the supernatural but ..."

"Oh, I don't know what to believe."

"Has he sat down and discussed his thoughts with you?"

"Admittedly he has tried but he just irritates me at the moment."

"Have you any feelings for him at all? Still love him even?"

"No. I don't think I love him anymore but I'm a bit frightened that ... the children ... his happiness ..."

"Sounds like you do still care about him."

She sat there with his arm around her snuggling closer to him.

"I suppose I do care about him but I love you, Tony."

"And I love you, but you need to decide what you really want."

"I know."

She glanced at her watch.

"Gosh, it's nearly three o'clock. I'd better get back. The children will be home shortly."

They stood up brushing sand off their clothes.

"I will listen to what he has found out, if anything."

"Good."

Tony gave her a kiss.

"Leave it a few days; in fact leave it a week then give me a bell."

They made their way back up the steep narrow track to the coastal path, relieved that no-one was about.

"I'll miss you" she said.

“Likewise” he replied.

Jenny knew something was wrong as soon as she walked in the door. Brian was standing in the doorway of his office with his arms folded.

“The children not home yet?” she asked, stating the obvious.

“No” he replied abruptly. “We need to talk.”

“I’ll just ...”

“Now.” His voice was firm. “Come in here” he stated, stepping aside so that she could enter the office.

The back door opened as Amanda and Rodney stormed in excitedly.

“Hey, guess what, Dad, Mum.” Amanda said.

The moment had passed. Brian would have to confront her the next day. He turned to greet the children.

“What’s that?” he replied, smiling.

Jenny thoughts were on what Brian was going to say but she knew what was coming. Relieved by the interruption she also turned to face the two youngsters.

“Yes, what’s happened, love?”

“We were talking to Philip Brown today and told him that we had bought this house; and guess what?”

“The suspense is killing me” Brian replied, grinning.

“It’s not funny, Dad” Rodney interjected.

“Then tell me ... us” he said, glancing at Jenny.

“Philip’s Dad said that thirty years ago two boys died in this house.”

“Did they find out who killed them?” Jenny asked.

“No. They think it was an accident.”

“Accident?” Jenny replied in astonishment. “Where were they found?”

“One was found outside the house and the other was washed up on the beach.”

“And they were both accidents? Oh, come on” Jenny replied, disbelievingly.

“That’s what his Dad said, Mum” Amanda replied.

“They think one of them fell down that shaft in the basement and his body was dragged out to sea and then ...”

“Alright, alright” Brian interrupted. “Let’s leave out the gory details.”

“I knew this place was haunted” Rodney said.

“Stop being dramatic, Rodney” Jenny quickly said.

“Did you go to the library, Dad?”

Brian thought back to the confrontation he was going to have with Jenny.

“Yes, I did; and after dinner I want you all” he pointedly looked at Jenny “to hear what I have found out.”

“Tell us now, Dad” Rodney countered, excitedly.

“After dinner” Brian repeated.

“What is for dinner?” Amanda asked.

“Jacket spuds, sausages and baked beans. Now, off you two go and do your homework, that I am sure you have, and I’ll just finish off in my office.”

He looked across to Jenny with a straight face.

“Mum can sort out the dinner ... if she’s got time” he said pointedly.

She felt herself reddening slightly.

“I’ll just nip up and have a quick shower.”

Brian gave her a questioning look.

“I got quite hot on my walk so could do with freshening up.”

Her use of the word ‘hot’ raised connotations in both their minds. Jenny quickly left to take her shower. Brian was finding it difficult to speak civilly to Jenny but until he could find out what she had been up to, he didn’t want to involve the children.

Jenny had undressed in the bedroom and slipped into her dressing gown, making her way to the bathroom. She turned the shower on, checking that the thermostat was set for a pleasantly warm shower and stepped into the cubicle pulling the door closed behind her. She held her head up feeling relaxed with the warm water running over her body. Suddenly the cold water went off and hot water was on her body. She screamed and tried to shut it off but it kept flowing, scalding her body. She tried to push the door open but it appeared to be stuck. She edged away from the shower and tried to direct the shower head away from her but it was too hot to touch. The water started flowing faster, the cubicle filling with steam. She was beginning to feel faint from the scalding water. As she started to slide to the floor she saw a word outlined through the condensation on the glass panel next to the door -**ADULTERER**. The door suddenly opened and Brian dragged her out wrapping a bath towel around her. Her skin, particularly feet and legs were bright red.

“My God, Jenny, what happened?”

He carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed as Rodney and Amanda came running up the stairs.

“What’s happened to Mum?” Amanda asked anxiously.

“She’s been scalded in the shower. Can one of you check the medicine cabinet; you should find some paracetamol or ibuprofen in there.”

They both disappeared, Amanda quickly returning with the tablets followed by Rodney.

"I've turned the shower off, Dad" Rodney said.

Amanda disappeared again to fetch a glass of water.

"You should have left it for me; you could have burnt yourself" Brian said to his son."

"But it wasn't hot, Dad. It was just warm."

Brian looked up.

"What? But I saw the steam coming off it."

"Perhaps the cold valve got stuck."

Brian couldn't understand how a valve could suddenly shut off and then re-open.

"Thanks, son."

He returned his attention to Jenny and helped her swallow some ibuprofen.

"It hurts, Brian" she said, faintly.

"I can imagine it does, my darling. What happened?"

"I don't know. One minute it was nice and warm and the next it was boiling. I tried to open the door but it was stuck."

'Odd' thought Brian. *'It opened quite easily.'*

"I'll go and make you a coffee. Maybe a dash of brandy might help."

His planned confrontation with her had now gone from his mind.

Brian heard what sounded like the basement door creaking as he descended the stairs. Something unseen moved through the basement as Brian the light on and glanced inside, but there was nothing in there. A slight chill in the air made him shiver slightly as he closed the door, switched the light off and entered the kitchen. He added a good slug of brandy to Jenny's warm coffee and took a swig himself for good measure. She was shivering as he sat on the bed and lifted her head to help her drink.

"What happened, Brian? Did someone ..."

"No one did anything, Jenny. The door opened easily and when Rodney turned the shower off he said the temperature of the water was pleasantly warm – not hot."

"I didn't do it to myself, Brian, I ..."

"I know, Jenny. I could see the steam in the cubicle and what state you were in. The only logical explanation is that the cold water valve shut off and then reopened" he repeated "but that doesn't make much sense. I'll check it out tonight before anyone else uses it. Rest now; I'll get the dinner."

As he got up to go, Jenny put her hand out.

“Brian?”

“Yes?”

“Did you ... did you see anything on the shower panel next to the door?”

Brian looked puzzled.

“Like what?”

She pulled her red arm back.

“Oh, nothing really. It must have been the steam.”

Brian didn't pursue it, under the circumstances.

Jenny did manage to eat some dinner, which she had in bed, and shortly after, fell asleep. Brian checked the shower controls and found nothing untoward. He shook his head, puzzled. Once the children had also retired for night, he looked in on Jenny and then made his way to his office with a glass of wine. He made a note of that night's incident in the diary he had recently started, which included all the strange events that had occurred, including descriptions of the dreams he and the children had had. He knew Jenny had also had strange dreams and needed to find out what happened in them. His gut told him that his family's experiences, Nicholas' diary and the newspaper reports were all connected. Rather than just jack it all in and attempt to sell up though, he now felt it was his mission to solve the mystery.

XIII

Brian returned to his study with a glass of wine and picked up Nicholas' diary. He continued from the entry of George's birth and read about the tragic death of Margaret's parents during a skiing holiday in France at the beginning of 1973. Margaret took the loss very badly. The one positive outcome was that they managed to buy Headland House with her inheritance which Nicholas thought would give her something else to focus on; but it was wishful thinking on his part. (It was at this point that Brian thought of the analogy with his own situation: his decision to buy the property to help give his own wife, Jenny, some focus. An element of foreboding briefly crossed his mind which he quickly shook off.) Diary entries stated that Margaret's depression increased to the point that she was referred to a psychiatrist by her doctor. Unfortunately, rather than seeing one recommended by her GP she insisted on someone unknown to her surgery – afraid of the stigma of people knowing about her condition. Nicholas tried to console her, telling her that thousands of people suffering from depression are referred all the time, but she was adamant. Thus began the start of Margaret's relationship with Silas, which quickly developed such that her dependency on him increased over time.

Brian read how distant Margaret had become towards her family and started to invite Silas to the house for dinner. She couldn't seem to cope without him and when in his overpowering presence she was almost subservient. The thought of Rasputin even crossed Nicholas' mind. The children disliked Silas intensely and, when Nicholas was not around, he was sharp with them, constantly telling them not to upset their mother. There was no indication that it was a sexual relationship, more like having an intimate 'living in' counsellor. Nicholas' remonstrations were brushed aside. In numerous diary entries he talked about threatening to move out with the children but Margaret's reactions were violent outbursts or withdrawal into depression. Brian's discovery of an entry two weeks before the last one seemed to presage the tragedy that was soon to unfold.

8th February 1975

Today I informed Margaret and Silas of my intension to go to court to seek custody of the children and have Margaret examined by independent psychiatrists due to her erratic behaviour and frequent

mood changes. I believe her neglect of the children's wellbeing is affecting their health and resulting in disruption to their schoolwork.

Brian couldn't believe that Nicholas just walked away from the problem, as it was obvious from his diary entries that he loved his wife and children very much. He also had suspicions of Silas' motives. What did the man want from Margaret? Why was he trying to control her? Was it some bizarre form of sadism – controlling her life and watching her suffer to satisfy his own twisted needs. Brian was beginning to suspect that Nicholas must have been murdered by Silas. There was little doubt in his mind, but of course it could never be proven due the absence of a body. Once Nicholas was out of the way there were the children to take care of – and not in the guardianship sense, but meaning to remove them from the equation. They were becoming a nuisance and likely to cause trouble by blabbing about Silas' treatment of their mother to friends and schoolteachers. It was all beginning to fit together like a jigsaw. Having arranged 'accidents' for George and Edith he probably then murdered Margaret, maybe because she found out he was responsible for the children's and Nicholas' deaths. Police investigations must have ceased because Silas himself was found dead, which led to a conclusion of suicide. But why would he have gone through all that trouble and then topped himself? It didn't make sense; so who killed Silas?

As Brian began moved on to review the reports of the deaths of the two young lads thirty years later he thought he heard a door creak. He stopped reading and listened in the silence for a couple of minutes but there was no further sound. He returned his attention to the newspaper reports, trying to come up with an explanation as to how the boys ended up dead, but was unaware that the study door behind him was slowly opening. He shivered slightly, noticing that the temperature seemed to have dropped.

He poured out another glass of wine, beginning to feel a bit drowsy. He sensed a figure moving to his right but he found he couldn't turn his head to see who it was. In fact he couldn't move any part of his body. The figure, tall, thin and dressed in black, moved in front of him but the face was a blur. It moved closer to him and began to lift him up out of the chair. He tried to speak but no sound came from his mouth; in fact he was paralysed. He felt himself being flung over the stranger's shoulder and carried outside. He was panicking but unable to respond. He could see that it was dark and that he was being carried through a woodland, hearing the hoot of owls. Shortly the person

stopped. The next minute he found himself flung into a boggy pond. He tried desperately to raise his arms to try and get himself out of the bog but they wouldn't move. The figure was just standing, watching him. As he sunk lower into the bog he felt the pressure of the ...

Brian woke up, and found he had slipped down in his chair with his arms pinned by the chair arms. He pulled his body up to free them. He heard a door creak and jumped up, rushing to the basement. He switched on the light and flung open the door. There was just one word scrawled on the wall opposite – **BEWARE**. For a moment he was too dumbfounded to move, then rushed back to his study to fetch his phone to take a photograph; but when he returned, the word was no longer there. He sighed despondently, closed the door, turned the light off and slowly made his way back to his study. He sat down and took a gulp of wine, thought for a moment, then shuffled through the folder of notes he had compiled on the various incidents and reports until, in front of him, was the description of Amanda's dream where she saw a man sinking into a bog with a distant figure watching. He made a note of the scary experience he had just had and put the pen down.

'Silas murdered him' he thought *'by throwing him into a bog. That's why the body was never discovered.'* He sat back in his chair with fingers steepled together. *'So if Nicholas is dead, then how did Silas and the two teenagers end up dead.'* The mystery remained with him as he finally made his way upstairs to bed. There was a faint murmur from Jenny as he climbed in beside her. He glanced across at her sleeping form as the word BEWARE popped back into his mind until finally sleep took over.

Jenny felt somewhat better in the morning but her burns were still painful. Brian had decided that he wouldn't confront Jenny about the lies until she had completely recovered. Having ensured that she was comfortable he said he would do the school run and call in at the library again.

"You're obsessed with this house and the deaths that have taken place. I hope it isn't impacting your professional duties" Jenny said, with a hint of malice.

"You should know better than to challenge me on that score" he replied, as he was about to leave the bedroom. "My reputation is contingent on me providing a first-class service; and that will not change."

He stopped and turned his head.

“We all need to relax or at least take a break from our regular routine” he stated pointedly.

Jenny thought about Tony.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, my current hobby, if one can call it that, is to find out what happened in this house and to the family who lived here.”

“They all died, didn’t they?”

“It’s not as simple as that. It’s an interesting mystery which I’d like to solve, or at least try to solve.”

“Okay, if that what turns you on.”

She immediately regretted making the statement.

He stared at her.

“And we need to talk when you are feeling better.”

As he left, she picked up her phone to message Tony.

“Back again already Mr. Saunders?”

The librarian, a short, slightly rotund woman in her fifties with grey hair tied back in a bun, welcomed Brian with a beaming smile.

“Did you find what you were looking for when you were last here?”

“Yes thank you” replied Brian “and I believe I am a little closer to know what happened.”

During his previous visit, Brian had explained to the librarian what he was investigating and she kindly helped him locate the information he was after.

“Yes, I was too young to understand when that family all died but I do remember reading about the deaths of the two lads. Actually,” she continued “that gentleman over there” she was pointing to an elderly man in a navy blue blazer sitting at one of the tables reading a newspaper “might be able to tell you about the family.”

Brian thanked the librarian and wandered over to where the man was sitting and stood opposite him.

“Er, excuse me.”

The man looked over the top of his paper and lowered it to the table. He looked late seventies to eighties with a head of very short hair and a small beard on a thin face. He was wearing a check shirt and red tie.

“My name is Brian Saunders.”

Brian extended a hand out.

The man looked at it as though it was contaminated, then returned his gaze to Brian’s face through a pair of silver framed spectacles.

“Joseph Conrad” he replied, ignoring Brian’s hand. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you mind?” Brian said, nodding at the seat opposite Joseph’s.

“Be my guest.”

“I understand you may know something about the family who lived in Headland House and the tragedy that befell them.”

“Not the full details but, yes, I do remember the incident. Why do you ask?”

“I and my family live there and ...”

“Oh dear” was the simple reply.

Brian frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“Various reports.”

“Of what?”

“Some say the house is haunted – supernatural goings on. Then, of course, there were the deaths of the two young lads. I was about thirty when it happened so remember it quite well. They never found the person that did it though.”

“I’ve been doing some research, Joseph. You don’t mind me calling you Joseph do you?”

Joseph shook his head.

Brian continued.

“My family has been ... we have had some strange sightings ... weird dreams ... noises. Look, can I start from the beginning and tell you what I have found out? ... If you have time that is.”

“Well, I have nothing else to do, so why not.”

He folded the paper and put it on the table.

Brian went on to describe all the things that had happened with details of the dreams he and the children had had, particularly the ones relating to the man, supposedly Nicholas, being dumped in the bog. He finished with the single unanswered question: “If Nicholas was definitely dead, which would appear so, then who is trying to scare my family and why?”

Joseph chuckled. “Perhaps Nicholas is not dead.”

Brian stared at Joseph.

“What do you mean by that? Of course he’s dead. He must be de... unless he somehow survived ... but I can’t imagine him wandering around his old house for fifty odd years.”

“Perhaps he changed.”

Brian fidgeted in his seat.

“You’re talking in riddles. Joseph. What are you trying to say?”

“I’m not trying to say anything, Brian, and I don’t have any answers for you; but in some peoples imagination what could have happened to your Nicholas reminds me of a comic strip from the forties.”

Brian rose from his seat.

“I’m not looking for nor expect to find answers in a forties comic publication, Joseph, so if you would excuse me. I thank you for ...”

“He didn’t die either.”

Brian stared at Joseph.

“Who didn’t die?”

Joseph waited until Brian sat back down before he continued.

“In a forties comic called ‘Air Fighters Comics’ there was a Skywolf story about a German fighter pilot whose plane crashed and sank into a swamp in Poland. Mud, muck and vegetation slowly transformed him, alive but not alive, into a monstrosity called ‘the Heap’ that shambled around, mute and near-mindless.”

“I don’t think describing a silly comic strip story really helps me very much” Brian commented, with a hint of annoyance.

Joseph detected this.

“I’m sorry Brian if it sounds flippant, but I am not mocking you and it wasn’t intentional. I really do wish that I could help you more but ...”

“No matter. I appreciate your spending the time to listen to my problem, but now I must be going. Thank you.”

Brian left the library muttering to himself as he made his way to the car park. “The Heap! Just a heap of bloody rubbish if you ask me.”

But that thought now kept running through his mind: ‘*He didn’t die ... He didn’t die.*’ He stopped walking. “He didn’t die” he said out loud, as an explanation as to what happened took shape in his mind.

Nicholas’ hate and desire for revenge manifested itself as a formless creature. As preposterous as it sounded, Nicholas hadn’t died but undergone a metamorphosis like The Heap in that comic. He then thought of what Amanda had said about there being a metamorph in the house. That would explain the damp smell and slimy footprints. Brian returned to his car and sat there, staring through the windscreen. He couldn’t believe what he was telling himself. It went against all his beliefs. If there was such a creature, surely it would be solid and visible, not wandering around leaving messages and footprints and just ... disappearing. So, if it did exact its revenge on Silas then why did it kill the two teenage boys? Or did it kill them? What was it that Rodney visualized in his dream? ‘*He couldn’t save them.*’ The metamorph

didn't intend to kill the two boys, it was trying to save them! So what was its intention now by leaving evidence of its presence and messages on the basement walls? Was it trying to scare them away before a potential tragedy struck the family or was it trying to warn them that harm was going to come to one or more of them? Then there was Jenny's secretive and suspicious behaviour; and what about this mysterious 'friend' Toni or Tony? What was going on there? He had to get to the bottom of it before it was too late! But too late for what?

XIV

Jenny agreed with Brian that it would be best that she didn't return to the charity shop until her skin had settled down. He had indicated that it could take several days or even longer for the skin to heal. Fortunately, she had the opportunity whilst Brian was working in his study to send a message to Tony informing him that she wouldn't be in a position to see him for a while. She also mentioned to him her husband's statement that they 'needed to talk' and assumed that Brian suspected what was going on. Whenever Brian popped into town, she took the opportunities to give Tony a call.

"I'm not sure how I am going to get out of this one" she said to him with feelings of trepidation.

There was a short pause before he replied.

"Leave it with me, but tell Brian that your friend Toni is really a counsellor and has been giving you a lot of professional advice in helping you with your anxiety, which is why you have been meeting up with her so much."

"But I told him that she was a PA."

"Okay, a PA with a psychiatry qualification who decided on a career change. Oh, and I believe I can produce a 'Toni' should he insist on meeting **her**, which he probably will. I would have suggested myself as a counsellor but that would just feed his suspicions,"

Jenny relaxed. "Thanks Tony, you're a gem."

"All part of the service, my love."

He knew the moment had arrived after she suggested that she was feeling well enough to go back to the shop. Brian joined her one morning in the lounge.

"Oh, joining me for coffee, Brian? You don't normally."

"We need to talk, Jenny?"

"About what? I'm fine; or is it about the house? I think I'm okay with it now."

"No, it's not really anything to do with the house, except that you need to be honest about dreams that I know you have had. You are hiding things from me ... and the children, but more to the point I think you are having an affair."

Jenny put her coffee down with a feigned expression of surprise at what he was implying.

"You've got it wrong, Brian."

“What do you mean I’ve got it wrong? You lied about working on Wednesdays; you lied about working late; and it appears that on numerous occasions you take time off when the shop isn’t very busy. Admit it, Jenny; this friend that you are seeing so much of is T_O_N_Y, isn’t it?”

Jenny was ready with answers.

“No, Brian, you’ve got it all wrong. Okay, I haven’t been wholly truthful with you for ... various reasons; but it’s definitely T_O_N_I who I have been consulting.”

“Consulting now? Don’t take me for a fool, Jenny. It’s only too clear what you’re up to with this ... ‘counsellor’ of yours; and why would you even need to see a counsellor, without telling me? What’s going on, Jenny? If you are fed up with me, then just tell me. We can’t go on like we have been for the last few months.”

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Oh come on, Jenny. How long have we been married? Have I not been here for you and given you the support when you needed it?”

“Yes, Brian. It’s just that ...”

“Just what, Jenny? Just what?”

Jenny was trying to think back to when and how her affair with Tony started.

“I was depressed, anxious; but I didn’t want to worry you and be a burden to you after all that you have been through on my account.”

“But you’re my wife, Jenny, and the mother of our children. That’s what it’s all about: sharing our problems; as a family.”

“I’m sorry, Brian, but I didn’t want to appear a failure ... a bad wife and mother.”

They sat there in silence for a couple of minutes.

“Would you like to meet her?”

Brian thought for a moment, struggling to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“No, it’s alright ... yes, I would like to meet her. Maybe talking with her will help me to understand better what you say you are going through.”

Jenny agreed to arrange it, wondering from where Tony was going to conjure up Toni the counsellor. She picked up her coffee again relieved that he seemed to have accepted her explanation and would now leave her alone, but she was wrong.

“Going back to the house”, he continued, “I want you to tell me about dreams you have had; and I know you have had some.”

Jenny thought about the dream she had had about Tony and Brian, with the dagger, and knew that he wouldn’t accept her denying having had a dream.

“The only dream I have had is when I was sitting in bed reading” she lied. “You came into the bedroom and threatened me with that ... dagger we found in the basement.” She thought for a moment. “Perhaps the deaths in this house were at the back of my mind.”

“What!” Brian exclaimed, somewhat astounded, and brought to mind his own dream about stabbing her in the basement. “It seems that all of us have had tragic dreams involving the deaths of people.” He went on to tell her about Rodney’s and Amanda’s dreams and both his own, including the one where he caught her copulating with a man in their bed.”

Jenny reddened in embarrassment.

“Th-th-that’s because you keep thinking that I am having an affair.”

“Maybe so.” He paused. “It’s strange what one’s mind can conjure up.”

Brian went on to restate all the other events that had happened in the house.

“So what do they all mean?” Jenny asked nervously.

“I don’t know exactly, but I am of the opinion that it is definitely something supernatural.”

“So are you saying that you believe the house is actually haunted?”

“Although I am loath to admit it, yes.”

“So whatever is haunting us, what does it want?”

“I have spent a lot of time researching what has happened here over the last fifty years and I think that whatever it is, is trying to communicate with us; warn us.”

“What is trying to communicate with us? Warn us against what? That we might try and kill each other?” Jenny was looking distinctly uncomfortable. “Hadn’t we best just get out of here before something tragic does happen?”

“I have factored that into my research” Brian replied, with a serious tone in his voice. “But I now believe that it is asking for our help; trying to protect us; help put it to rest; give it some finality.”

“What!” Jenny exclaimed incredulously. “When it tried to scald me, which is what happened based on what you are telling me. In fact, it seems to have it in for me?”

Brian was struggling to come up with an answer. Jenny, of course, knew exactly why she was being targeted but had to feign bewilderment.

“Why, Brian? Why me? What is it trying to do? Drive me away?”

She glanced around nervously as though looking for someone or something.

“I want to leave this house, Brian, before whatever this ‘it’ is ... kills me.”

Brian took hold of her right hand. "Oh come on, Jenny; supernatural things can't kill people."

She snatched her hand away.

"I was scalded, Brian" she shouted. "It tried to kill me. Me. Your wife." Her hands were shaking slightly. "I need to get out ... and the children."

"They haven't been threatened. It seems to be communicating with them in a more benign way ... and even ... helped Rodney it would seem."

"Poppycock!" She exclaimed, standing up. "I'm going to pack some things now. You can do what you like."

"And the children?"

"Huh! It sounds like this ... thing has no issue with you or them."

She started to become vindictive.

"But that's how it's always been, hasn't it, Brian? You three and me. You never wanted them to be close to me, did you?"

Brian leapt up from his seat.

"That's not fair, Jenny; and you know damn well that it's not true. You rejected them both when they were born ..."

Jenny face assumed a look of spite, but before she could respond Brian continued.

"Jenny, I am not blaming you for anything. You have been a great Mum ..." (In his mind he was thinking the opposite.) "... but I know you had a tough time during your pregnancy and suffered debilitating post-natal depression. They are great children and perhaps you don't realize how much they love you."

"Yes, but they prefer you."

Brian was getting impatient and annoyed.

"Oh come on, Jenny, don't be so stupid."

"That's it isn't it. Poor stupid Jenny. Can't cope. She's a nutter."

Brian gripped her by the shoulders.

"That's enough, Jenny" he shouted. "There is nothing wrong with you. Maybe I've been overprotective, trying to shield you from the real world and I apologize if it appears that way; but you were in a bad way."

Jenny sat back down with her head in her hands sobbing. Brian sat next to her and put his arm around her.

"Bear with me, darling. I have just about finished my research and if these weird things keep on happening then I will arrange to put the house on the market."

He felt extremely disappointed inside at the thought but knew that if nothing changed then he would lose Jenny. Yet, there still remained the niggling thought that her protestations of innocence regarding an extramarital affair didn't quite ring true.

XV

Jenny was sitting in the rear garden reading a book when Rodney and Amanda were dropped off by Alice. Brian met them coming up the path.

"Hi Brian" Alice called out from her car.

"Hello Alice" he replied. "How are you?"

"I'm fine thanks but Jerry's got a bit of a cold and is making a meal of it; man flu."

Brian smiled.

"And the children?"

"Yes, they're both fine. Andrew has just finished his GSCE mocks and is quite happy with his results."

"That's pleasing for him. I wish him all the best."

"Thanks. I'd better dash; got some shopping to do for Laura's birthday party on Friday."

"Wish her a Happy Birthday from us."

Alice put the engine into gear. "Thanks Brian." She drove off.

"Bye Alice."

"Where's mum?" Amanda asked.

"In the garden, reading" her father replied.

"Has she gone back to work yet?" Rodney asked.

"No, but she said she is feeling well enough now. I suggested that there is no hurry for her to go back but she is adamant."

They were about to go and see her, but Brian called them back.

"Mum and I had a chat this morning" he said.

They joined him to sit either side of him on the front step.

"We talked about the hauntings and I told her about the dreams we have had. She also told me about her dream."

He went on to describe the results of his research into the events that had happened in the house and how he promised their mum that if she if anything else threatening happened they would sell up and move. They didn't receive the news well, expressed their disappointment but understood and agreed that their mother's happiness was more important.

"So what do we do now, Dad?" Amanda asked.

"Now that we know what happened to Nicholas and his family, but I'm still not sure what happened regarding the two boys, I think the ghost, if you want to call it that, is trying to tell us something."

"Or is it trying to protect us?" Rodney quipped.

“Protect us from what?” Amanda added.

“And who or what is supposed to be threatening us?” pondered Brian out loud.

Amanda got up to go in the house.

“Mum will be wondering why we are ignoring her.”

Rodney slowly got up to follow his sister but she soon returned.

“Mum’s asleep.”

The children sat back down.

“Da ... ad.” Amanda said slowly.

Brian turned his head to look at his daughter.

“Yes, Amanda?”

“Mum was scalded, wasn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“And that word *Bitch* appeared on the basement wall.”

“What are you implying, Amanda?”

“And in your dream weren’t you trying to kill her?” Rodney added.

“If you are suggesting that Mum is the threat that I was trying to eliminate” Brian stated rather crossly “then isn’t it more logical that I am the threat in trying to stab her?”

Rodney sat quietly looking down at the ground. Brian noticed.

“What are you thinking, Rodney?”

Rodney seemed embarrassed as he spoke.

“Well, mum is the one who gets grumpy and shouts at us and ...”

“And what?”

“She’s been behaving rather oddly.”

Brian couldn’t help thinking that he agreed with what Rodney was saying but felt he had to defend Jenny.

“Your Mum is going through a bad patch at the moment.”

“Maybe the ghost interprets that as a threat” Amanda suggested.

Brian was feeling uncomfortable about them criticizing their mother.

“Of course, it may have nothing to do with our family. Maybe it’s some other threat, like ... falling down that shaft, as you nearly did, Rodney.”

He started to get up.

Whatever it is, we need to identify it quickly.”

Following a further brief exchange of thoughts and suggestions, the children got up and made their way to the rear garden to check on their mother whilst Brian returned to his study. They went along each side of her and kissed her on the cheeks.

“Hello Mum” they said in unison.

“Hello darlings” she replied, having just woken up. “Did you both have a good day at school?”

Rodney answered for them both.

“It was okay.”

There was an awkward silence. Jenny glanced at each of their serious faces,

“Something wrong?”

“Dad said we might be moving again” Amanda said, with a note of disappointment in her voice.

Jenny smiled. “I .. I’m sorry kids but after what has been happening in this house I feel ... threatened ... unhappy. It’s not that I don’t like the house ...”

“You don’t like it, do you?” Rodney shot back accusingly. “Is it because Dad chose it?”

Jenny felt a bit flustered. “No, no, not at all.”

“But Dad likes it” Rodney said.

“And so do we” Amanda added.

“We don’t feel at all threatened” Rodney said.

“What! Even though you nearly fell down that shaft” Jenny snapped back.

“But I didn’t, did I? And anyway, Dad is going to cover it up with the new flooring.”

Jenny was getting cross. She got up off the garden chair to face the two children.

“And I got bloody scalded in the shower. Oh, and I must have done it myself because when clever sticks here ...” she glanced at Rodney “... came to turn it off, there was nothing wrong with it.”

She looked back and forth between the two of them.

“Maybe it was the three of you. One of you turned off the cold supply. You don’t want me here. You are trying to drive me out. What if I won’t go? Perhaps you will all try to kill me?”

The children backed away slightly with shocked expressions on their faces.

“Mum!” Amanda exclaimed. “What are you saying?”

“It’s always been the same” Jenny shouted.

Hearing Jenny shouting, Brian came rushing into the garden.

“What on earth is going on? What’s all the shouting about?”

He saw Jenny standing with her hands on her hips staring venomously at Amanda and Rodney and switched his attention to the children.

“Have you been upsetting your mother?” He asked accusingly.

“No” they replied together.

“We just wanted to know why Mum doesn’t want to live here anymore” Amanda said.

Noting the worried looks on the faces of the children he looked back at Jenny.

“Jenny?”

Jenny sat back down to stare at the ground.

“What?” She snapped back

“Have the children upset you?”

There was a long pause before she replied.

“No.”

“So what was all the shouting about?”

There was another long pause before she replied.

“You know damn well what the problem is.”

“But we’ve been through all that and I’m sorting it out.”

“Sorting what out exactly?”

Brian didn’t reply. Her outbursts and personality switches were disturbing. Perhaps it was time for him to meet this ‘Toni’.

“I think it time we both have a chat with your counsellor. I’m not convinced that she is helping you very much.”

Brian couldn’t help notice a momentary look of panic on her face as he made the statement, but it soon passed.

“Why don’t you give her a ring and make an appointment.” He thought for a moment. “In fact, why don’t you ask her to come here, to the house. If it’s the house that is upsetting you so much then she should be able to detect that and maybe offer a solution even if it is to recommend that we sell up and move somewhere else.”

Jenny reluctantly agreed, wondering what Tony was going to come up with.

“I’ll give her a ring tomorrow.”

“Why not now?” Brian turned to go into the house. “I’ll fetch the phone.”

“No. I’ll call her in the morning.”

Brian stopped and shrugged.

“Okay. But we have to get to the bottom of your problem.”

“My problem? I haven’t got a problem. It’s this bloody house and ... and ...”

“And what, Jenny? And what? I can’t make you out. You seemed happy enough when we moved in and while all the renovation work was being done. You helped with the decoration and in the garden; then you got that job in the charity shop. Okay, there are many incidents that have happened in this house

and I agreed that if they continued we would sell up and move.” He paused a few moments, glancing at the children. “I thought you were okay with this, what with your local walks and pottering around the house but it seems that I was under a misapprehension.”

Jenny sat there in silence not knowing what to say.

“Mum?” Amanda said.

Her mother stood up and walked towards the house.

“I’m going to get a drink; something strong.”

Brian shrugged as the three of them watched her.

“What’s wrong with Mum?” Rodney asked

No one offered an answer for several moments until Amanda said “I don’t think she is very happy with us anymore.”

Brian nodded and thought *‘Neither do I’* when he heard a scream and a glass breaking.

Jenny had opened one of the kitchen cupboards and taken out a tumbler and a half-drunk bottle of red wine. She had placed the tumbler on the work-surface and filled it up. As she picked it up the glass and raised it to her lips an icy-cold hand seemed to grip the hand holding the glass. She screamed as the glass slipped out of her grip. A door creaked.

Brian and the children rushed up the garden and burst into the kitchen to see Jenny standing there, shaking, with a look of fear on her face and with the broken glass and a pool of red liquid at her feet. Brian gripped her by the shoulders. “What happened, Jenny?”

He noticed that she was shaking. She just stood there, staring at the broken glass on the kitchen floor.

“I ... I don’t know. Something cold and clammy gripped my hand.”

She looked up at Brian and the two children staring at her.

“You don’t believe me, do you? I’m not drunk you know.”

Brian moved forward and took hold of her hand. I know you’re not and didn’t even suggest it. What happened?”

She shook her hand free.

“I’ve already told you. I had just poured out the wine and picked the glass up and ... it was as though someone had grasped my hand ... so I dropped it ... and then it let go.”

As the three of them helped to console Jenny, Brian knew that time was running out.

XVI

Amanda found herself on the side of a road at a sharp left-hand bend with dirt lay-by on the right. It was dusk and she was alone but didn't feel any fear. Part hidden by the hedgerow bordering the lay-by she espied an old wooden farm gate in a poor state of repair across a rough track that led into the field beyond. Something told her to go through the gate which she then approached. There was an old rotted wood stile to the left of the gate but as the latter wasn't padlocked she managed to open it enough to be able to squeeze through. A footpath continued across the field which sloped gently down to a copse in the distance. She knew that she had to go into the copse so made her way along the path to soon enter through the trees where it became overgrown. Just as she entered the dense tree cover, which immediately crowded in on her, she thought she saw what appeared to be a rectangular sign lying on the ground but ignored it. The trees began to thin out as the footpath started to become damp. She thought she heard a twig snap and sensed that she was not alone. She stopped to peer through the trees and, although it was gloomy, she spotted a figure slightly ahead of her to the right moving steadily to converge with her own path. She kept the figure in sight as she continued on, slowly. As they grew closer she noticed that the figure appeared to be carrying a large bundle over its shoulder whilst at the same time the ground was becoming muddier. The figure, obviously male from his more distinct silhouette, seemed unaware of her presence. The tree canopy was thinning out as the man came to a stop and dropped his bundle to the ground. Amanda gasped as she realized that the bundle was the body of someone - dead, she presumed. The man now dragged the body into a clearing where there appeared to be an extensive bog. He then lifted the body up again and inched his way forward onto a grassy promontory before heaving his load into the bog. He stood there for a few moments watching, before turning around and moving off back in the direction from which he had come. Amanda crept forward to investigate what he had thrown into the bog. She was shocked to discover that it was indeed a body – a man's body, which was upright and had now submerged up to his waist. She moved towards the promontory and just as she stepped onto it the man's eyes opened and looked directly at her, pleadingly. Frantically she looked around to see if she could find anything for him to grab onto so that she could try and pull him out and eventually found a hefty branch. When she returned to the promontory she saw that he had now sunk up to his neck. She held out the branch that just

about reached the man but it soon became apparent that he couldn't lift his arms out of the bog to grab it. Amanda inched forward but the man's eyes told her not to come any closer as the bog slowly crept up his face until he disappeared completely.

Amanda opened her eyes and sat up in bed aware that the dream was a repeat of the earlier one she had had but with much more detail, but there were no tears in her eyes this time. The room felt cold and she thought she heard a door creak but her immediate reaction was to fetch paper and pencil in order to write down the details of the dream, so she turned her bedside lamp on and got out of bed to fetch the materials. Her bedside clock showed it was 1.30 am. Having written down all that she remembered she climbed back into bed, turned the light out and soon fell asleep.

The following morning at breakfast she asked her father if he would take them to school that morning. Brian hesitated and glanced at his watch.

"I do have a phone call to make at nine ..."

"It's important, Dad."

He pondered her pleas for a few moments.

"Okay, but be ready to leave promptly at 8.15."

Jenny was in the process of cutting bread for the toaster.

"I can take you if your father is busy."

Amanda had a slight panicky look on her face.

"No, no, it's okay Mum; I ... (she was desperately trying to think of a reason why she had to go with her Dad and not upset her Mum) ... need to ask Dad about a maths question."

"Suit yourself."

Jenny dropped a couple of slices into the toaster and slammed the lever down in annoyance. Rodney sat quiet throughout breakfast thinking about what his friends would say about them moving again, particularly as he had told them that the house was probably haunted. They would probably taunt him about being scared of ghosts.

Once they were on their way to school Brian soon raised the issue. Amanda was sitting next to her father with Rodney in the back.

"What are you wanting to tell me, Amanda?"

"I had that dream again, Dad."

"What dream? The one about the man in the bog?"

"Yes; but this time it was more vivid. I now know where his body is."

Brian couldn't help but glance in the rear-view mirror to observe see Rodney's reaction.

"Look out, Dad!" he shouted.

Brian stamped on the brakes, his gaze switching back to the road just in time to see that the car in front had stopped.

"That was close" Rodney said.

"Sorry kids. Eyes on the road; always. I'm not making excuses."

Amanda offered her apologies.

"Sorry Dad. I didn't mean to shock you like that but I thought it important."

The traffic started moving again.

"That's alright. We'll talk about it tonight."

He dropped them off, slightly thrilled that yet another piece of the jigsaw had fallen into place. The picture was becoming clearer by the day.

That evening after dinner (and homework), Rodney and Amanda joined him in the study to analyse Amanda's dream. Jenny showed little interest and decided to watch a TV movie with a glass of wine.

"So, Amanda" Brian started, "what's all this about the location of Nicholas' body."

Amanda produced the piece of paper on which she had described the dream.

Brian read it through slowly.

"I've got a feeling that I know where that might be. It's called 'Spooky Hollow' for obvious reasons and isn't that far from here, which makes sense if one wanted to dispose of a body."

He called up Google Maps on his computer to view the road network within a 20 mile radius, to begin with.

"The topology shouldn't have changed much because it's mostly farmland."

As he manipulated the map in front of them Amanda suddenly pointed at the screen.

"There, Dad. Is that it?"

Brian noticed a narrow lane with a left-hand bend and a blob indicative of a pond or something close by. He switched to satellite mode which immediately showed a field and copse. Zooming in on the area soon revealed the bend in the road and the layby.

"It's still there" Brian said excitedly. "Fortuitous what?" He zoomed in to examine it more closely. "Looks like the style has been changed to a kissing gate ... and it looks like part of Fenshaws Farm" he added, zooming out again.

He moved away from the desk.

"We'll go there on Saturday."

The children also showed their excitement. Brian turned to face them.

"I hope you did finish your homework. You seemed to get through it rather quickly."

"Yes, I did" Amanda replied with a pleased expression on her face.

"Rodney?"

"Just about."

"Off you both go. I'll update your Mum."

Brian fetched himself a glass of wine and joined Jenny on the sofa. She carried on watching the film, ignoring him.

"We think we know where Nicholas Johnson's body is."

"Oh yes" she replied disinterestedly, continuing to watch the movie.

"Amanda had another dream and believes she knows the location."

"Good for her."

"We are going to find it on Saturday. Do you want to come? It will be like a nice country walk."

She pressed the 'pause' button on the TV control she had just picked up.

"What? To find a decomposed body" she replied with annoyance and pressed the 'pause' button again to continue the movie.

"Of course not. We are ..."

"No."

That was the end of any further conversation that evening.

.....

It was 1.30 am when Jenny woke up and looked at the bedside clock. She lifted her head and saw that Brian was fast asleep. Something had woken her but she didn't know what. She thought she heard the stairs creak and strained her hearing for other sounds. A door creaked. It seemed as though it was coming from the landing. She initially thought that it might be Amanda or Rodney going to the toilet or having popped downstairs to the kitchen, so lowered her head back down on to the pillow; but she couldn't get to sleep with her mind imagining someone moving around the house. She just had to get up and check the house, not thinking what she would do if she actually found someone. She slid out of bed and slowly walked to open the bedroom door to the landing. Sticking her head out, she looked up and down the landing but there was no one there. She was about to close the door when she heard another sound which sounded like a soft moan and instinctively glanced at Amanda's

door – it was slightly open. Her heart started banging and she told herself that it was probably her daughter having a dream, but she felt she had to go and check. As she stepped out onto the landing she noticed it seemed a lot cooler than her bedroom. She tiptoed over to her daughter's room and pushed the door open. Stepping inside, she was aware of a sudden temperature drop and a slightly damp odour. Her eyes scanned the room in the semi-darkness until they settled on the bed when she received a shock and gasped. There was thin figure in black leaning over her daughter. Shaking, she asked the figure what it was doing but it didn't respond, so walked around the bed at which point the figure lifted its head up to face her. She gasped. It was Silas Matthews; she recognized him from the photograph Brian had showed her and he was holding the dagger from the drawer in the basement. She wanted to ask him what he was doing but again, no sound came out. Moving closer to see the figure in the bed she suddenly realized it was Amanda with her eyes open and with her throat cut. She screamed and fainted.

A dark shape slowly descended the stairs and drifted towards the basement.

“Mum ... Jenny ... Mum.” The voices were faint, distant at first but then became louder and nearer. She opened her eyes to see Brian and the children kneeling over her with Brian holding one of her hands.

“What happened Jenny? What are you doing in Amanda's bedroom?”

Jenny was shaking.

“I ... I ... I thought I ... noises ... Silas Matthews ... with the dagger ... Amanda ... her throat cut.”

Brian helped her up and guided her back to bed.

“I think Mum's had a horrible nightmare” Rodney commented as he and Amanda watched as Brian tuck her back into bed where thankfully she soon fell asleep.

The three of them stood looking at her as Brian quietly said “I think we now know how Margaret Johnson met her end and I think things are slowly coming to a head,”

They were, but not in the way he expected.

XVI

Jenny had recovered from the shock of the night before but wasn't at all talkative during breakfast, to the extent that all her replies were either 'yes' or 'no'.

"What happened last night?" Brian asked.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Please Jenny. It's important. It will help us to understand what happened here."

She got up from her chair and put her breakfast bowl on the draining board.

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

"You need to."

"No I don't."

"Is that all you can say after the shock you have had?"

"Yes."

There was a long silence as she just stood staring out of the kitchen window whilst Brian, Amanda and Rodney sat quietly eating with occasional glances at each other.

Amanda spoke, mainly to break the silence. "Are you taking us to school today, Mum?"

"No." Jenny continued to stare out of the window.

"It's okay" Brian said. "I'll take you. We've got time to clear up the breakfast things; so, when you're ready." He shook his head and headed for the study.

Rodney felt uncomfortable with the silence.

"What's wrong Mum?"

"Nothing, dear" she replied.

"We do love you, Mum, and are all very worried about you."

Jenny still didn't turn around and appeared to be shaking slightly. A faint sniffle suggested that she was crying. The children got down from the table and stepped over to her, one each side, as she put a hand on each of their shoulders. Amanda laid her head on her mother's upper arm; Jenny's response was to stroke her daughter's face. She wiped away the few tears.

"I'm sorry Rodney and Amanda but I've had all I can take with this house. Whatever is causing all the strange things going on here seems to have it in for me. From what your father has been telling me this thing, whatever it is, is obviously trying to communicate with you three but is vindictive towards me, but I don't know why?"

She knew, of course, that whatever it was knew about her and Tony; but how? *‘How could a supernatural manifestation read people’s minds?’* She thought to herself. Maybe there is more to the theory going around that it is possible to separate mind from body after all. She quickly dismissed the thought as being illogical.

“Unfortunately my darlings, there is only one answer to what’s happening here.”

She was still staring out of the window anxious to talk to Tony again. He will be more sympathetic and comforting she was sure. The two children stood staring at each other in the silence that followed until Rodney spoke again.

“It’s okay mum.” He put his arm around her waist. “I know we will really miss this house but we want you to be better.”

She turned her head to face him, with an annoyed expression. “What do you mean better? There is nothing wrong with me even though your father thinks there is.”

“But you seem to get annoyed and cross with us all of the time” Amanda added.

Jenny now turned completely round.

“Look; I never wanted to move and certainly not to this house. It’s too isolated. I feel too far from friends. I never see anyone.”

The children thought about the job in the charity shop and the fact that she did go out quite a lot, meeting her mysterious friend Toni and going for long walks on her own.

“But mum” Amanda said, “you ...”

“I don’t want to discuss this anymore. Just tell your father to sell the house before something else happens to me.” She headed towards the kitchen door. “I’m going to work.”

Rodney looked at his watch.

“It’s a bit early isn’t ...” he began, but Amanda gave him a nudge not to say anything more.”

.....

Saturday turned out to be a fine day so Brian said he would take Rodney and Amanda to find the bog where they believe Nicholas Johnson’s body had been dumped.”

“I may not be here when you get back” Jenny said.

“Are you sure you won’t come with us?” Brian asked.

“No thanks, I have already made alternative arrangements.”

“Oh, where are you off to?”

The children glanced at each other again, wondering where she was going this time.”

“I’m meeting up with Toni.”

“When are we going to have her round for a chat?” Brian asked, still suspicious of her intentions.

“I’ll speak with her today.”

“Yes, do. Get her over next week.”

“Okay. Bye.”

The three of them watched her leave the house, with the same question on their minds. They stood there for several seconds until Brian broke the silence.

“Okay kids, let’s get going.”

Armed with an image of the location of the bog, Brian used the car’s satnav system to find their way to the layby which Amanda had described in her dream.

After about a half hour drive Amanda exclaimed excitedly “Here it is!”

Brian pulled over into layby and they all got out. The gate had been replaced with a metal one and with the kissing gate alongside. There was an old ‘Footpath’ sign leaning precariously and part hidden by the trees. The field had been planted with corn through which a track was just about visible heading down towards the copse.

“Not a well-used right-of-way” Brian commented as they passed though the kissing gate into the field and made their way towards their destination.

As they entered the copse the temperature seemed to drop several degrees and a slight breeze blew through the trees. A barbed wire fence stretched to their left and right but where the path skirted around the copse but the fence had been trodden down with the posts, a short distance either side, broken and leaning forward. A board lay in the grass to their left which Brian picked up and turned over. It contained a simple message:

DANGEROUS SWAMP

DO NOT ENTER

“Hm. I’ll go first but keep close and be careful where you step.”

“Looks rather gloomy” said Rodney, looking about. “See anyone with a body, Amanda?”

“Oh shut up Rodney” Amanda said. “Don’t be so stupid.”

Brian was leading the way through the undergrowth.

“Come on you two, just look where you are stepping. The path isn’t very clear and is quite overgrown.”

“Look, there’s someone over there carrying something!” Rodney suddenly exclaimed.

Brian and Amanda looked up and peered in the direction that Rodney was looking but saw nothing.

“That’s enough, Rodney. This not a murder-mystery jaunt. We are trying to complete the picture of what happened to the Johnson family.”

They continued to work their way forward as the trees thinned out and the ground became damp and slightly sticky. A vast pond or bog soon came into view which stopped them in their tracks.

“Here it is” Brian said. “Nicholas’ last resting place.”

“Or not” Rodney added.

Brian turned to face him. “What do you mean by that, Rodney?”

“Perhaps he never rested and is now this metamorph that Amanda talks about.”

“Look” Amanda said, pointing to the edge of the bog. “There’s the promontory from where Nicholas was thrown in; just like in my dream.”

She stepped forward.

“Careful” warned Brian. “We don’t want you falling in.”

Amanda bent down examining something.

“What are you looking at, Amanda?”

She rose up slowly with her mouth open.

“It ... it’s ... a ... footprint.”

She moved back a few steps.

“And there are more of them coming from the bog.”

Brian quickly joined her and noticed how indistinct the footprints were. They were leading across to their right but slowly disappeared in the undergrowth.

“Which direction are they going, Dad?” Rodney asked.

Brian stood up straight, glanced at the location image he had brought with him and looked around. He couldn’t believe what it was telling him.

“They’re headed towards the headland.”

The three of them stood there dumbfounded as a stronger breeze suddenly reached them.

“I’m cold” Amanda said, wrapping her arms around her body.

“Let’s get out of here” Brian said, pulling out his phone to take a few pictures of the area. As he focused on the bog, he thought he saw a black mass partially submerged in the water. He took the picture then moved the phone

away. There was nothing there. He quickly opened the photo gallery and found the picture he had just taken. There was nothing in the photo, only a picture of the bog. He stood there for a moment shaking his head, then took a few more pictures of the area.

“You coming, Dad?” Rodney called out.

As they made their way back to re-join the path across the field, a dark mass shadowed them until they had left the copse. Brian, leading the way, couldn’t help noticing that Rodney, at the rear, kept looking around.

“What’s wrong, Rodney?”

“Sorry Dad, but I just get the feeling that someone or something is following us.”

As they retraced their steps through the cornfield a faint moan pervaded the quiet of the countryside.

Amanda stopped. “What’s that sound, Dad?”

“It’s probably just the wind blowing through the corn.”

Fortunately, Amanda and Rodney seemed to accept the explanation but Brian was certainly aware that there that the wind or breeze had stopped. The three of them were visibly relieved once they were back at the layby.

“Home I think for lunch, think” Brian said. No one spoke during the journey back.

XVII

Brian was unsurprised when they arrived home and found that Jenny had not returned. Still, he felt a little relieved that she had, in admittedly an off-hand way, agreed to invite this Toni around to discuss her anxiety between the three of them but at the same time he harboured a suspicion that she would make some excuse to delay the meeting. He was pleasantly surprised, therefore, when Jenny breezed in just after lunch in an upbeat mood.

"Oh, you're back already" Brian said, somewhat sarcastically.

Jenny's expression briefly showed one of annoyance but quickly changed to a smile.

"I've fixed it up" she said, sitting on one of the kitchen chairs.

Brian knew what she was talking about but feigned ignorance.

"What?"

"The meeting ... with Toni ... next Friday."

"That's great. What time?"

"About nine o'clock; in the morning."

"Sounds good. I look forward to it."

'At last' Brian thought. *'Now to find out who this Toni was and what she is like.'*

"Have you and the children had lunch?" she asked.

"Yes. You?"

"Yes. Shall we have a take-away tonight?"

"Sure. The kids will like that. I'll tell them to look up the menu of Ho's Chinese Take-away; they like the food from that one."

The rest of that day and during the following week, Jenny seemed more contented as though she had just received good news. On the Sunday they enjoyed a day out walking several miles along the coastal path, returning tired and ravenously hungry so Jenny roasted the chicken they had bought and made an apple crumble, which surprised them somewhat as she hadn't made any desserts since they moved in. Then it was back to work and school on the Monday.

With all that had been going on over the past few weeks and with Brian preoccupied with his continuing house investigations and a busy work schedule any thoughts of challenging Jenny's activities didn't enter his mind, even though she still remained distant when it came to any romantic advances on his part. Wondering what Tony had sorted out with regard to the counsellor

‘Toni’, Jenny arranged to meet up with him on the Wednesday but told Brian she was going for a mid-morning stroll to allay any suspicions, not that he wholly believed her; but that week he was particularly busy with his accounting work, one of his subcontractors being off sick.

Tony picked her up as she walked along the open coastal road and drove to a woodland a few miles further on. He turned off the road and down a track to a secluded area hidden amongst the trees.

“You’re playing safe, Tony” Jenny said, as he switched off the engine.

“I’m just thinking of you. You told me that Brian is getting very suspicious so we need to be a lot more careful.”

Jenny nodded in agreement.

“Yes. Fortunately, he has been very busy lately so hasn’t been questioning my activities over the past few weeks. Anyway, who is this Toni you’ve conjured up?”

“She’s actually a very close friend ...”

Jenny turned to carefully examine the expression on his face.

“Oh yes, how close?”

“Certainly not this close” he replied, placing his left hand on her knee and sliding it up her leg under her skirt.

She grabbed his wrist and pulled it out.

“Concentrate on the matter in hand please.”

“As I was saying, she is a very close friend who I’ve known for a long time. She has a degree in psychology, did some psychiatric work and ended up in HR. She is very good at her job and now works freelance. I have briefed her on your situation and she sort of reluctantly agreed to help.”

“Oops! I told Brian she was a PA. What’s her name?”

“Barbara. She was a PA once but her boss kept making advances towards her, so she quit. And decided on HR.”

“What persuaded her to agree to help?”

“She owes me.”

“Oh; what for?”

“That doesn’t matter. Hopefully she will be able to allay Brian’s suspicions without getting dragged into discussions about your hauntings and the paranormal.”

“It sounds promising.”

“She has a lot of experience so I’m confident of a successful outcome. However, she did advise me that we need to bring this to a conclusion as it’s immoral and belittles the feelings of Brian and the children.”

He took hold of her hand.

"I love you, Jenny, and want you with me. You have got to decide what you want; soon."

Jenny sat staring out of the windscreen. Tears came into her eyes.

"I know, Tony; I know."

They sat quietly for about a minute until she spoke again.

"You know he's willing to sell the house for me even though the three of them love it; but I can't stay there. There is something evil in the place and it appears to be targeting me."

"That's it then. You mustn't give him false hope. Don't let him sell. Tell him you need a separation, temporary if necessary and take it from there."

"Yes. I suppose you're right. Maybe I'm being selfish or unreasonable."

"Toni, or Barbara should I say, will probably agree."

He leant over and kissed her cheek. She responded by grabbing his head and kissing him on the lips. The next minute they were all over each other and moved into the rear seat to make love.

Brian was out when Jenny returned home so she decided to take a shower before making a curry for dinner with the leftover chicken from their Sunday roast. Down in the basement the metamorph emerged from where the old corner cupboard had been and made its way up the stairs.

Jenny undressed in the bedroom, slipped into her dressing gown and entered the bathroom. She turned on the shower and checked the temperature and thermostat. Although there had not been a repetition of the instance when she was scalded she was still wary of the same thing happening again. She took off the gown and stepped into the shower cubicle to enjoy the water running over her body. As her back was to the bathroom door she wasn't aware of it opening slowly as she started washing her hair. Closing her eyes from the shampoo running down her face she suddenly felt as if someone was watching her. Wiping her eyes quickly she turned round and noticed that the bathroom door was open even though she was sure that she had closed it. Through the condensation on the shower cubicle she was sure that something was in the doorway. It didn't have any definite shape; more like a black mass with two red blobs at head height. She rubbed the glass to wipe away the water and shrank back with a scream. The blobs were like two large red eyes. She backed away from the shower door whilst at that moment the water suddenly turned icy cold as though someone had shut off the hot supply this time. She quickly turned off the water and looked back at the bathroom door but all she saw was the landing. Shivering from the cold she stepped out of the shower and grabbed

a bath towel to wrap around her body and slammed the bathroom door. Sitting on the small stool they kept in there to put clothes on she listened for a few minutes but there was no sound. Hesitantly she rinsed her hair in the washbasin and dried it with her towel. Plucking up courage, she carefully opened the bathroom door and peered down the landing but there was no-one there. She made her way to the bedroom, closing the door after her, dressed and did her hair before venturing back out onto the landing. She told herself that she had to check Rodney's and Amanda's bedrooms and nervously entered each room in turn, relieved to find nothing out of place. She was now even more convinced that whatever it was must have evil intentions towards her. She couldn't take it anymore. She just had to get out of the house before it destroyed her. She would have to have it out with Brian when he arrived home.

Somehow, she managed to bring herself round to make the curry and ensconced herself in the kitchen with a bottle of wine, waiting for the return of Brian and the children.

The children arrived home first, dropped off by Mary Williams. Jenny met them at the door when she heard the car on the gravel track and saw them coming up the garden path along with Mary.

"Hi Mum" Rodney and Amanda both said as they squeezed past her.

"Hello Mary. Thanks for bringing them home. I'll do the school run tomorrow."

"No, it's okay" Mary replied. "I've got to go into town early in the morning for a dental appointment."

"In that case, I will pick them all up after school."

Jenny was about to close the door but Mary just stood there looking at Jenny.

"I'm not being noseey, but is everything okay between you and Brian?"

Jenny felt annoyed but knew that rumours would get around, particularly where children were concerned.

"It's fine, Mary; just little tiffs. I admit I do get stressed rather quickly but I have always been like that since ..."

"Yes" Mary interrupted. "Brian did tell me that you had a bit of a hard time when the children came along."

Jenny's annoyance returned. "He did, did he."

"Oh, don't take that the wrong way, Jenny. He is just very concerned about you and how ... " Mary couldn't finish the statement.

"The house has it in for me?"

"Well, yes, in so many words."

She stepped back and smiled.

"But don't let me interrupt what you are doing." She sniffed the air. "I can smell that delicious curry you are cooking and don't want to spoil it."

"It's okay, I've more or less finished so just need to let it simmer for about half an hour."

As Mary started walking down the path, Jenny called out.

"Thanks for asking, but we are fine."

"Good. Bye."

"Bye."

Mary got back in her car and sat for a couple of minutes thinking '*There's something wrong with that woman*' before driving off.

The evening meal was spent with little conversation, the children and Brian were aware that Jenny was tense but at the same time a little tipsy from the wine.

"Are you okay darling?" Brian asked after they had finished the meal. "You are rather quiet and ..."

"... have drunk a bottle of wine" she finished off for him. "No Brian, I am not okay and I'm scared."

She related what happened in the bathroom when she took a shower.

"And this time the hot water went off and I had freezing water all over me. Whatever you and the children think of this house, it doesn't want me here, for some reason."

At 9 o'clock on the Friday morning the doorbell rang. Mary had taken the children to school as agreed. Brian opened the door to a slim short-haired brunette. She was about 5' 5" and wearing a black trouser suite with black patent-leather shoes.

"Mr Saunders?"

"Yes. You must be ..."

"Miss Anderssen, Toni Anderssen."

"Ah, Jenny's old school friend. Pleased to meet you at last." Brian said, smiling with hand outstretched but thought that Toni Anderssen looked a bit uncomfortable. He stepped aside. "Please come in. I'm looking forward to our discussions. Would you like a coffee, a glass of wine or something else?"

"Black coffee please" she replied, looking around the room. "I don't drink and drive."

“Please take a seat. Jenny will be here in a moment.”

At that point Jenny appeared from the kitchen and walked straight up to the visitor, giving her a hug.

“Toni, lovely to see you again as usual.”

“Yes, Jenny. And how are you feeling?”

“I’ll go and make the coffee” Brian said, heading for the kitchen.

“I have already put it on” Jenny responded.

“Okay.”

As he headed towards the hall, he couldn’t help notice that the two women’s body language did not suggest they were that close. It was as though they had only just met. That worried him. He left the kitchen door ajar as he waited for the coffee to filter through, straining hard to learn what the two of them were talking about, but all he could hear were muffled voices.

Brian returned to the lounge with a tray containing the coffees and a plate of assorted biscuits.

“Here we are.”

He placed the tray on the coffee table that Jenny had brought over.

“Thank you, Mr Saunders” Barbara Anderssen said.

“Brian please” he replied.

“Thank you, Brian. You can call me ‘Toni’ of course.”

There was a definite hesitation when she said ‘Toni.’

“So,” Brian began, “you have known Jenny for ...?”

“About twenty years. We were at school together; not in the same class but in the same year. We were always very close.”

“I’m surprised that Jenny hasn’t mentioned you before; only quite recently in fact.”

“No, we went our own separate ways and only met up again when I moved into the area.”

“I believe you are in HR.”

“Yes, freelance; but I have a degree in psychology and acquired a lot of experience when working with a psychiatrist. Hence the counselling services I offer.”

“A lot of experience then.”

“Yes. I would like to be able to give you names of some of my clients but confidentiality and ...”

“Of course, I understand. There is no need. I believe just talking and discussing Jenny’s problems will help me understand what I or we can do to

help her. And when I say 'we' I mean you, me and my children. They are very intelligent youngsters and we are generally a very close family."

"That's good to hear. So, shall we start?"

"Sure."

Throughout these introductions Jenny had remained silent, as advised by Tony.

"Let Barbara, our fictitious 'Toni', do all or most of the talking; and be careful what you say" Tony had told her. *"Remember; she is supposed to be your close friend."*

"First of all" Barbara began "we must be completely open and honest with each other. No holds barred."

"Of course" Brian responded.

They both looked at Jenny. Brian noticed her eyes flick briefly towards Barbara's as though she was wondering how to reply

"Yes, of course" she agreed.

Barbara took an electronic notebook out of the briefcase she had brought with her and turned it on.

"I just need to refer to a few notes I made when Jenny and I started to meet up."

Brian nodded.

"I will also make some notes about this visit, which I will share with you of course."

"Fine" Brian replied.

"Jenny told me that there were a few problems which started after your first child, Amanda, was born: post-natal depression was diagnosed."

"I think it dates further back than that" Brian said. "Ever since I met Jenny she has never been an overly confident person and has always looked at most things negatively."

"That's not true" Jenny objected loudly. "I have ..."

"Let's just hear Brian out" Barbara Henderssen interrupted. "I said at the beginning that we must be completely open."

Jenny calmed down and stopped talking.

"Please continue, Brian."

Brian outlined how depressed Jenny became when she longed for a baby and had trouble conceiving. He explained how her joy quickly dispelled when she found it difficult to cope with the baby and was not very willing to accept help when offered. The same thing happened when they decided to have their

second child – Rodney. He did admit that at times he was not always able to provide the support she needed, due to heavy demands in his professional life and they did struggle financially when he had to reduce his working hours quite considerably to look after her. The discussion moved on to their romantic feelings for each other and her increasing resistance to his sexual advances. Jenny now became more agitated and critical of Brian, to his surprise. Even Barbara looked slightly uncomfortable as her fingers ran over the keyboard. In the end she felt that she had to interrupt Jenny.

“I know we have talked a little about this, Jenny, but why do you feel this way towards Brian? What has brought on this resistance to his advances? Do you feel neglected or unappreciated?”

Jenny was flustered. “I ... I don’t know. I know that I don’t really want him touching me. Maybe ... maybe I’m falling out of love with him.”

Brian felt hurt, not wanting to believe what he was hearing. He also felt that something was wrong. Neither woman seemed to be acting as though they were old school friends. He turned to ‘Toni’.

“Being close friends, has Jenny ever complained about me? I am sure she must have. Let’s face it, most friends moan about their spouses or partners at some point.”

Barbara was already beginning to regret agreeing to pretend she was Jenny’s close friend ‘Toni’.

“Not excessively so” she replied. “Other than the usual spouse things like snoring and selective hearing.”

Brian smiled, but Jenny remained straight face looking a bit tense. Barbara thought it the right moment to bring in the third party.

“Although you have never mentioned it to me, Jenny, but do you ever find yourself attracted to other men, or women: someone who is giving you attention?”

Jenny reacted as though shocked. “Good lord no!”

The metamorph became disturbed and made its way across the basement towards the basement door.

‘Wrong answer’ Barbara thought to herself. She knew, of course, what Jenny was up to with her friend Tony and decided to pursue this line of questioning. She had to get this woman to admit some degree of infidelity or at least responsibility for the marriage breakdown. The trouble was that Jenny was in denial that she might be to blame for anything.

“Sometimes” Barbara continued “we find life becomes monotonous, boring and try to seek out excitement; the excitement of a secret liaison so to speak.”

Jenny became more agitated.

“I am beginning to find your line of questioning offensive, Toni, implying that I am having an affair, which is not true.”

Brian immediately picked up on the tone of the statement. This did not sound like something one would say to an old friend. Barbara quickly responded.

“I was implying no such thing, Jenny. I am merely trying to analyse your thought processes by suggesting what might be passing through your mind when you are with Brian. Things you might have, and I repeat **might have**, been reluctant to tell me before.”

“Well you’re wrong.”

Barbara hesitated, not sure how to continue.

“Have you considered a trial separation?”

Brian looked aghast.

“I know things have been difficult of late and ...” he didn’t want to say it but now felt he had to “...and I have even suspected Jenny of having an affair.”

Barbara glanced at Jenny, noticing a momentary look of being caught out before it changed to one of feigned surprise.

Brian continued, changing the subject.

“Has Jenny mentioned anything to you about this house being haunted?”

Barbara glanced over at Jenny, looking a bit uncomfortable.

“Well ... yes, as it happens.”

Jenny hesitated before confirming. “Yes, I did mention it to Toni.”

“And?” Barbara added, with raised eyebrows.

Jenny had a look on her face somewhere between guilt and being humble. She looked over at Brian.

“I told Toni that I thought that you might be doing it?”

Brian looked astounded.

“I can’t believe that you could even think that knowing what has happened here and what I’ve told you.” He looked over at Barbara. “Ms Henderssen?”

She looked a bit embarrassed and was fighting to provide a response.

“I ... I don’t believe in ghosts or the paranormal, Brian. I am of the opinion that there must be a logical explanation to ...”

It was Brian’s turn to get annoyed.

“No Toni. There is no logical explanation. The phenomena we have all experienced in this house cannot be explained; but they have definitely

happened and threatened only one person in this house – my wife, Jenny; but we don't know why."

Barbara Henderssen felt that she was now out of her depth and decided she needed to bring this to a conclusion. She would certainly have a go at Tony when she saw him next for dragging her into his relationship with Jenny.

She stood up.

"I don't feel that this discussion is proving beneficial to any of us, Mr Saunders. I would suggest that maybe your relationship does have something to do with this house."

"No" replied Brian. "Buying this house was supposed help her combat her depression; something to get her interested in. You are wrong Miss Henderssen."

Barbara was at a loss as to how to proceed. She needed a few moments to think.

"Do you mind if I use your bathroom?"

Brian nodded, suspicious now that there was more to this Toni Henderssen than appeared.

Barbara Henderssen ascended the stairs and made her way along the landing. She was followed. She entered the bathroom, sat on the stool and put her head in her hands.

"Oh what a mess" she muttered to herself. "How was I persuaded to get involved in his problems? That bloody Tony."

She got up off the stool and to check her hair in the mirror and posed the question to her reflection.

"How are you going to get out of this Barbara Henderssen?"

While she was waiting for her reflection to respond, she thought she noticed movement behind her in the mirror. A shadow appeared which slowly solidified into a dark mass. At the same time the room became cold and she detected a musky odour in the air. She stood there terrified as two large red blobs like eyes formed. Barbara Henderssen was not one to panic or scream her head off so she just stood there shaking, too frightened at first to turn around; but then made a dash for the door and rushed down the stairs. Brian appeared in the hall as she reached the bottom but she just brushed past him and grabbed her briefcase, ramming in her notebook.

"What ...?"

Brian didn't have time to finish what he was going to ask. As Barbara reached and opened the front door she called out "Get out of this house."

The door was slammed as Jenny got up to join Brian.

"What was that all about? What did you say to Toni?"

“I didn’t say anything. I don’t know what’s wrong with her but I don’t rank her as a very good counsellor or close friend, come to that.”

Jenny headed towards the kitchen. “But you heard her, Brian. She told us to get out of this house.”

Brian followed her. “Are you telling me that this Toni Henderssen is the person you have been pouring out your problems to over the past months? If so, then I don’t think ...”

“Leave it, Brian. I don’t want to talk about it now.”

“That’s just the problem, Jenny.”

“What is?”

“Every time I try to talk to you about your ... the problems you are having, you say ‘not now’.”

“I don’t have any problems” she snapped back, and stormed off up the stairs.

He was about to press the issue but stopped when he heard a door creak. He looked towards the basement door with the feeling that somebody or something had been listening to all that had been said since Toni Henderssen arrived. He shook his head, headed for the study and somehow managed to attend to some accounts which needed to be completed by the following Monday. With the turmoil and confusion his mind was in, he knew that they must come to some resolution to their marriage, soon. He had a premonition that things were going to get a lot worse.

XVIII

Brian was glad when Saturday arrived. The rest of Friday had been tense, even Rodney and Amanda noticed, but Brian signalled to them not to ask how the morning's discussion had gone or say anything that might cause Jenny to fly off the handle. She seemed calmer and relaxed when she came down in the morning after having a shower, and even cooked them breakfast. Brian had been up early and finished updating his chronological notes about all that had happened since they had moved into the house. He now felt that he had to broach the subject once again before he finally decided on his next course of action. He just had to select the right moment; and with Jenny in a better mood, now would appear to be the right time.

Jenny was loading the dishwasher when Brian returned to the kitchen. Amanda and Rodney had gone up to their rooms.

"What's on the menu today?" she asked. "A day in town, a stroll along the coastal path or have you got some jobs to do, like laying the flooring in the basement for example?"

"Yes, I really need to finish that off but first I want us, as a family, to discuss our future in this house."

Jenny was immediately on the defensive.

"Not now, Brian."

"I'm sorry Jenny but we must. We can't simply ignore what's been happening any longer."

She turned to face him, leaving the door of the dishwasher open. "What do you mean?"

"Come on Jenny, you know what I mean. The house. The thing in the cellar, the weird dreams that we've all had and what's been happening to you."

"You know my opinion on that and what Toni advised" she snapped back. Brian stared at her.

"There's more to it than that, Jenny."

"What?"

"Tell me that you're not having an affair."

She stood there open mouthed not knowing how to answer.

"Tell me, Jenny. If you are, then just admit it and we can finish with all this. I've tried my best, given you what you want, always defended you ..."

"What do you mean by that?" She shouted.

“Don’t you think the children haven’t noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

“Your constantly changing moods; going off for walks on your own - for hours sometimes; your accusation that I am behind all the paranormal activities and your reluctance to admit or share details of your dreams with us. Whatever it is in this house knows about you. That’s why you are being targeted and why those messages appeared in the basement.”

Jenny stormed out of the kitchen.

“I’m not listening to this.”

“Yes, go on; walk away from the problem like you always do.”

Jenny ascended the stairs to get her coat. Amanda and Rodney were sitting together on the top stair.

“Mum?” Amanda said, with a worried look on her face.

“I’m going out.”

“But Dad said ...”

“I don’t care what Dad said. I’ve had enough.”

Jenny entered the bedroom to grab a jacket from her wardrobe and brushed past the children back down the stairs. As she reached the hall, Brian called out.

“And another thing. That Toni Henderssen is no counsellor, unless she is doing it unofficially part-time. Her real name is Barbara Henderssen and I can guess who arranged for her to visit us.”

Jenny ignored his accusations and walked down the hall to the lounge.

Amanda and Rodney had heard their mother slam the front door and gone into Amanda’s bedroom to watch as she had stormed down the path towards the garden gate. As she about to reach out to open the gate she seemed to stumble and fell forward towards the fence. When she didn’t move, Amanda rushed out of her room and yelled out. “Dad! Something’s happened to Mum. I think she might ...”

Brian dropped what he was doing and rushed out of the house to see Jenny gripping hold of the fence with her head just above the arrow-head uprights of the fence, frozen. As he reached her, he noticed one of the iron ‘spikes’ pressed against her throat. He took hold of her and lifted her gently away from the fence.

“God! What happened, Jenny? You could have been killed or very badly injured.”

She slowly stood up, staring straight ahead. “Someone ... something ... pushed me.”

“Or perhaps you caught your foot on something. Amanda said she thought she saw you stumble.”

Jenny swung round to face Brian. The children were standing on the front steps.

“Something pushed me” she stabbed back.

“I think you’re being a bit paranoid.”

He immediately regretted making the statement. He took her by the arm but she aggressively shook it off.

“No Brian, I’m not bloody paranoid. Something is trying to kill me. First of all it tried to frighten me; then harm me and now?”

She opened the gate and stepped out onto the track.

“I am not staying in this house any longer than I have to. Do you all understand?” She flung the statement at the three of them, and proceeded to slam the gate behind her and walk off down the track.

Amanda and Rodney came down the steps towards their father, looking a bit guilty. Brian looked at them with his lips pressed together.

“We heard what you and Mum were saying to each other” Rodney said.

Brian put an arm around each of them. He didn’t know what to say.

“Is she going to leave us?” Amanda asked.

“I don’t know, but I think life is going to change for all of us.”

“Will you get divorced?”

“Let’s not think too far ahead but we certainly could end up having to move.”

“Oh Dad!”

“Don’t worry about it, Amanda, Rodney. Whatever happens, we will be okay. I’m just sorry that I got you all into this mess.”

“It’s not your fault, Dad” Rodney said. “We know what Mum has been like.”

There was no more to say, so Brian decided to take them out for lunch and the cinema, trying not to think where Jenny had gone or what she was up to; but he was now convinced that she was having an affair with a man called ‘Tony’.

Jenny returned home late but Brian didn’t bother to question her. In his mind his suspicions were confirmed and he had decided to contact a solicitor, one of his clients, on the Monday to seek his advice. He felt sick inside but

had to put on a brave face for the children's sake and kept asking himself: *'How did it get to this point?'* but the answer never came.

He tried raising the issue again on the Sunday. Jenny was sitting in the garden reading; the children had gone off together to look for shells in the bays. Brian advised them to take care but welcomed the opportunity to talk with Jenny alone. He pulled up a chair alongside her as she carried on reading.

"Look Jenny, I'm not blind and neither are the children. We know what's going on."

She slammed the book down on the small table next to her.

"Nothing's going on, Brian."

"Please don't take me for a fool, Jenny. I know you're having an affair even though I can't prove it. If I am the reason for your discontent, then perhaps we should end this marriage. I still love you but I can't go on living like this. You need to decide what you want."

"It's the house that's ... that's ... ruining our lives. I knew it was wrong to move here."

"No, Jenny, it's not just the house. If I thought it was, then I wouldn't hesitate to sell." He paused for a moment. "In fact it seems that I do not have much choice."

She turned to face him.

"What do you mean?"

"Most of our capital is now tied up in this house, so if our marriage is over I would have to sell anyway."

Jenny got up.

"Do what you want, Brian. You always do anyway. I'm going for a walk." She grabbed her phone, which was on the table beside her, and made her way to the garden gate."

"So that's it then?" Brian called out, but she wasn't listening.

The gate slammed shut.

The children returned with a bag of assorted shells not long after noon and hungry for their lunch.

"Where's mum?" Amanda asked.

"She's gone off again, hasn't she?" Rodney said, glumly.

Brian didn't really know what to say.

"I tried talking with her but she just walked off." A lump came to his throat.

"I think your mum and I will be separating, kids. I'm sorry."

The children came each side of him to give him a hug.

“What about the house, Dad? Are we going to have to sell it?” Amanda asked.

“Yes, I expect so.”

“Can we come and live with you?” Rodney asked.

“Let’s not talk about those things yet. I will be talking with a solicitor friend tomorrow and can then decide how we go forward.”

The children hugged him as he pulled them closer. He had to change the subject.

“Let’s get some lunch.”

The children moved off to get things out for lunch.

“Did you manage to collect any good shells?” Brian asked whilst he put the kettle on.

The children replied that they had found some interesting looking ones, but had now lost interest in their morning’s work.

Following lunch, the three of them spent most of the afternoon discussing the future; but there was little conversation when Jenny finally turned up, saying that she had met up with Toni and been for a ‘carvery’. Brian shook his head in disbelief that she could even think that he would believe her lies. Amanda and Rodney rustled up something out of the freezer for their and their father’s dinner.

XIX

Brian had managed to arrange appointments with both his solicitor friend and a local estate agent for the Monday morning. He knew that there was little hope of saving the marriage, the way Jenny was behaving, so was anxious to bring the whole business to some conclusion without it dragging on too long. He had also telephoned Jim Davies to meet up with him to update him on all the incidents that had occurred in the house since they last spoke. Jim had indicated that he was very interested in what Brian had to say. Jenny said she would drop the children off at school on her way to the charity shop so Brian took a number of photos of the property both inside and out to show the estate agent. As he was about to leave the house, he scrolled through the photos he had taken and stopped when he reached the one of the basement. There appeared to be someone or something standing in the middle of the room. It wasn't a sharp or even distinctive image, more like a formless mass with ... he zoomed in to the top of the mass where he thought the 'head' might be ... two round red eyes that seemed to bore into him. He shuddered with an uneasy feeling of portending doom and quickly put the phone in his jacket pocket. Leaving the house, he decided he would not download that photo for the agent.

On the way to town Brian thought he would take a detour via Fenshaws Farm to take a few more photos of the pool and surrounding area where they believed Nicholas Johnson was murdered. As he approached the bend in the road near the lay-by, where he had parked with Rodney and Amanda, he saw a figure standing in the middle of the road. It was a shapeless figure that appeared to be wearing an old tattered coat. He was about to slow down but then noticed that the figure appeared to have two round red eyes where the face would have been. For some inexplicable reason, instead of braking, his foot pressed on the accelerator as he leant forward to look at the figure. As he reached it, the figure seemed to fly over the top of his car, prompting him to glance in the rear-view mirror to see the two eyes that bored into him. As his eyes flicked back to the road ahead of him he was too late to see the tree rushing towards him.

A police vehicle was parked outside the house when Jenny arrived home. Her immediate thought was that something might have happened to the children, but then Brian would have called her. She paused at the garden gate and glanced over at the police car. As she opened the gate, a police officer got out of his vehicle and approached her.

"Mrs Saunders?" he asked.

"Y-e-s" she replied slowly. "What's happened? Is it my husband ... or the children?"

"The children are safe inside your house with my colleague" he replied, with a sombre expression. "Can we go inside?" he continued. "Somewhere private?"

Jenny was feeling panicky now.

"It's Brian, my husband, isn't it? What's happened? Has he been in an accident?"

"Please Mrs Saunders" the officer responded, with his hand gesturing for them to go into the house.

Jenny led the way into the house and showed the officer into the lounge where she noticed a police woman sitting and talking to the children. They glanced over as Jenny entered the house, followed by the policeman.

"Mum" Amanda said, looking very worried. "Something's happened to Dad."

Jenny's attention was drawn back to the policeman accompanying her.

"Mrs Saunders?"

"Oh; in here" she responded, indicating Brian's study.

They entered the room and the officer closed the door behind them.

"Do you want to sit down?"

Jenny now knew it was bad news; very bad news.

"No. Just tell me what has happened."

"I am Detective Inspector Henry Gough and my colleague with your children is Detective Sergeant Kathy Arnold." He paused briefly. "I regret that I have very bad news regarding your husband."

Jenny now slumped down in Brian's office chair.

"No. No. Don't tell me he's ..."

"Your husband, Brian Saunders, was involved in a road accident from which he did not survive. His car hit a tree head-on and he died on the way to hospital."

Jenny burst into tears.

"I'm truly sorry Mrs Saunders."

"How ... did ... it ... happen?" Jenny sobbed.

“We don’t know yet, but it appears that he hit a tree, at speed, head-on. There were no other vehicles involved or animals, come to that.”

Jenny looked up. “Animals?” She sobbed. “Why should there be any animals ... a dog?”

“It was near Fenshaws Farm” he replied.

“What? Why was he there? I don’t understand.”

“There are many unanswered questions at the moment, but first I think we had better tell your children” he said. “Perhaps you would like my colleague to stay with you for a while.”

“No, no. I think it would be better if we are left alone.”

“Is there anyone – a family member or close friend perhaps who can come and sit with you?”

“No, there is no-one” Jenny replied, raising herself off the chair.

As soon as they entered the lounge, Rodney and Amanda knew that their father was dead.

“It’s all your fault” Amanda stuttered through her sobbing.

The officers glanced at each other.

“You were making him sell our house” Rodney joined in. “He was going to see the estate agent because of you.” He hugged his sister tightly.

“I ... I ...” Jenny didn’t quite know what to say.

The DI spoke again. “Do you have any idea why he would have been going to Fenshaws Farm?”

“No, I don’t” Jenny replied.

“It’s where Nicholas Johnson was murdered” Amanda managed to say through her tears.

Again, the two officers looked at each other.

“Murdered?” the DS questioned. “Who is Nicholas Johnson?”

“The man who used to live in this house” Rodney replied. “They all died.”

The two police officers were now confused.

“When exactly was this murder?” the DS asked.

“Oh, years ago” Jenny said “long before we moved in. Look, could you please leave us alone now instead of asking pointless questions about a past occupant.”

“I’m sorry” Henry Gough said. “We will talk to you again but if you require any help we do have a support line for situations like this.”

He handed Jenny a card with a name and telephone number on it.

“We will let ourselves out and are truly sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you” Jenny replied and sat between the children with her arms around them as they sobbed heavily.

The DI turned before closing the door.

“Oh, unfortunately we will require a formal identification.”

“Yes” Jenny replied.

“Thank you Mrs Saunders. We’ll be in touch.”

As the police drove off, Kathy Arnold suggested that maybe they should call in to Fenshaws Farm.

“Perhaps Mr Saunders knew the owner.”

“Probably a waste of time” Henry replied, “but sure. He may be able to throw some light on the case.”

Mr Fenshaw could not help them of course. He had never heard of Brian Saunders or anything about a murder on his farm. He did say that there was a public right-of-way across his land that went through a copse with a small boggy pond.

“Maybe someone did get ‘done in’ years ago and the body dumped in the pond” he suggested. “No-one would ever find it.”

On returning to the station, George, from the records office, overheard Henry and Kathy discussing the case.

“I remember that case” he interrupted.

“Bit too young weren’t you, George. You don’t look that old” Kathy replied, being polite.

“No, not that one specifically. I was involved in a case thirty years ago regarding two young lads who were found dead near the property. When I looked further into it, I came across the incident I heard you talking about. It happened about fifty years ago and involved the owner of the house who went missing, followed by a series of accidental and the unexplained deaths of the other house occupants, which included two children. I think that’s why no one ever wanted to buy the property”. He paused a moment. “Now that another family have bought the house, I hope it’s not starting to happen again.”

“Maybe the house has a curse” Kathy ventured.

“Yes. Apparently, when the owner Nicholas Johnson disappeared, the wife’s psychiatrist moved in. Not long after that her two children died in accidents, then both the mother and the psychiatrist were found dead. Strange case. Nothing ever proven though. Just like the two lads I’ve just mentioned; one washed up on the beach and the other with his throat cut.”

“Gosh! How awful” Kathy said.

“Better keep an eye on the place” the older man suggested. “Just in case!” The three of them laughed. DI Gough turned serious.

“Perhaps we should we drain the bog at Fenshaws Farm? Maybe there is a body in there.”

“Huh! You’ll never get the funding” George added. “It’s too long ago, the case was closed and will never be re-opened.” He thought a moment. “When you go back to talk to the family, ask if Mr Saunders left any notes and talk to the children. He must have had some reason for going to Fenshaws Farm.”

“Yes, we plan to do just that” Henry replied.

“Can you dig out the case file, George?” Kathy asked. “I’d like to go through it.”

“A pointless exercise, if you ask me, and a waste of police time” Henry countered.

“In my own time” Kathy stated firmly.

XX

There was little conversation between Jenny, Amanda and Rodney as they each suffered in their loss. The children comforted each other but found it more difficult to share their grief with Jenny. The two police officers did call round the following day, again trying to establish if anything had happened that might have explained why Brian drove to Fenshaws Farm on his way to his solicitor and the estate agent. They were also confused as to how Brian lost control of his car on a clear day with no traffic on a clearly visible sharp bend. It did not make sense. Then there was the family; and not a happy one at that. The mother was hiding something. They had to find out what it was.

Before they left, DS Arnold asked if Brian had made any notes as to why he might have been visiting the farm. The children proved to be most forthcoming and took the two police officers into their father's study to show them the trunk they had found. The policeman bent down to open it.

"It's padlocked." He looked up at Amanda. "Do you have the key?"

"Looks like Dad fitted a new padlock, Rodney" Amanda said.

Her brother immediately began rummaging through the drawers in Brian's desk.

"Here it is. I wonder why he kept it locked?"

On opening the trunk, they found a couple of thick folders at the top of the trunk containing notes that Brian had made."

"Maybe we'll find some answers here" DS Arnold commented, picking up one of the files to find it stuffed with and hand-written and printed notes. She placed the file back and closed the lid.

DI Gough carried the trunk into the lounge and placed it on the floor.

"What's in there?" Jenny asked.

"Nicholas' and Dad's notes" Amanda replied.

"I didn't know anything about that" her mother muttered, with a look of annoyance.

"That's because you weren't interested in what Dad was investigating" Rodney replied.

"What was he investigating?" the DI asked.

"Oh, some stupid story about the house being haunted" Jenny replied harshly.

"It's not a story" Amanda added indignantly. "We know what happened to the people who used to live here."

Henry Gough raised his eyebrows, recollecting what George had told him and Kathy.

"Really? Would you mind if we borrow this trunk to look through it? We will return it of course."

The children nodded.

"Dad was going to show Jim Davies what he had found out" Amanda said.

"Jim Davies?" queried Kathy.

"He was the news reporter who wrote about the deaths in the newspaper."

Kathy entered his name into her mobile phone as Henry picked up the trunk.

"We'll return it as soon as possible, Amanda."

"This should make interesting reading" Kathy commented as they drove off.

"It will probably have to be in our or your spare time." Henry said. "I'm sure the Super won't want us to devote time on an old case that was closed years ago; especially one that was all about haunted houses."

Thus was their surprise when they reported in at the station and the Chief Constable summoned them into his office.

"Heh you two, come here; I've something to show you."

He noticed the trunk they had brought up with them.

"What's in there?"

"It's Mr Saunders' research notes about strange deaths that occurred at the house about fifty years ago."

"Fifty years ago? Don't go wasting police time on a case that's been closed for nearly that long. We still need to come up with an explanation of the circumstances of this guy Saunders' death; which reminds me, come and see these photographs on the camera that we found in his car."

"What about them? asked Kathy.

"See for yourself. They are of the inside and outside of the family's home. It looks like he was intending to put it on the market; but there is one photo, in particular, that is rather strange."

He handed the camera to Kathy first. Henry watched her flicking through them when she suddenly stopped. She was looking at the photograph of what looked like a basement which appeared quite normal except for a dark mass in the middle of the room.

For a moment she said nothing, then uttered "Weird."

She handed the camera to Henry who looked at the photo.

“I’d like to say ‘trick of the light’ but the image looks so real – if you can call an apparition or ghost real.”

“I don’t know what to make of it either” the Chief Constable said.

Henry handed the camera back to the Chief Constable who just pointed to the trunk.

“Maybe it will be worth you both looking through Saunders’ notes after all, but discretely I suggest.”

Henry Gough and Kathy Arnold decided to spend some of their off-duty time together to check out the contents of the trunk.

“But not when there is a full moon” Henry laughed, picking up the trunk.

Following an autopsy, the coroner’s report into Brian’s death was straight forward with a verdict of accidental death in a road accident. Other than ‘loss of control’ of a motor vehicle, no other cause was offered as to how it had happened. The funeral was a quiet affair with just a few friends and a number of Brian’s clients attending. Jenny had contacted Tony and agreed that it would be best if they didn’t meet up for a while until the initial traumatic effect on Amanda and Rodney had eased off.

Jim Davies was contacted and interviewed by the police, during which he reported on the discussions he and Brian had had about the strange deaths at the house.

“Mr Saunders had arranged for us to meet up to discuss the deaths at the house and the suggestion that it was haunted” he told them and went on to say that Brian had been confident that he now had a believable explanation for all the deaths, albeit the evidence could still be construed as circumstantial. Jim also called Jenny to offer his condolences and asked if he could visit the family some time. She wasn’t very keen on the idea, but the children were so insistent that she finally relented.

About three weeks after Brian’s death there was a knock at the door one evening. It was Jim Davies. Jenny answered the door.

“Oh, hello Jim” she said, without much enthusiasm. “Come on in”.

Jim stepped through the doorway.

“Thank you, Mrs Saunders”.

Just call me Jenny” she said, closing the door and showing him into the lounge.

"My, you have certainly done a lot to this property" Jim commented, looking around.

"Mainly Brian's hard work" she commented. "Please take a seat whilst I call the children."

She disappeared down the hallway and called up the stairs.

"Amanda. Rodney. Jim Davies is here. Come on down."

Sounds of activity came from upstairs followed by feet running down the stairs. Amanda and Rodney burst into the room, gave Jim a hug, which surprised Jenny, and sat on a couple of armchairs facing Jim on the sofa. Jenny sat down beside him,

"So, what brings you here tonight, Jim?" she asked.

Jim didn't quite know how to mention the reason he had come without possibly upsetting the family, being so close to Brian's death. Maybe he had come too soon; perhaps he was being too insensitive.

"Did Brian mention that he made an appointment to see me on the day he ...?"

"No" Amanda replied.

"He just said that he had an appointment with his solicitor and was also going to see an estate agent" Jenny said.

"He left me a message" Jim continued. "He said that he wanted to share with me an explanation for all the deaths that had occurred in this house. He said he had accumulated a lot of information."

"The trunk!" Rodney blurted out.

"What trunk?" Jim asked.

"Dad found a trunk in the spare room containing notes, photos and Nicholas Johnson's diary. He kept all his own notes in it" Amanda said.

"No one bothered to tell me anything about the trunk" Jenny added with annoyance.

The children didn't respond.

"What sort of notes did he make?"

"About things that have happened in the house: things we've seen and dreams we've had" Amanda replied.

"He didn't show any of it to me" Jenny commented, abruptly.

"Because you weren't interested, mum" Rodney replied.

Jenny got up impatiently. "I can't believe that your father's wild imaginations could be taken seriously ... and by the police at that. Mysterious writing on the wall, nightmares and ..."

"Come on, mum, you have to admit that strange things have happened to you too" Rodney said.

Jim was beginning to feel embarrassed at the arguments and decided that it best for him to depart.

“Would you mind if I borrow the trunk? I do have a genuine interest in this case because I reported on the deaths of the previous owner and his family when I was working for the local paper.”

Amanda replied immediately, noticing that her mother was about to say something that she guessed would be a ‘no’.

“That’s fine, Jim. It would be good to have someone like you, not part of the family, to look over dad’s notes.”

Jim also sensed that Jenny was against the idea.

“I will look through it and bring it back tomorrow evening” he replied, hurriedly. He glanced at his watch, anxious to go. “I think I’ll pop off now if you don’t mind.”

Rodney got up.

“Oh, the police have the trunk at the moment; but we will give it to you when they bring it back.”

“Thanks, Rodney. It is very kind of you all.”

There was a moment of awkward silence as Jim was accompanied towards the door by Amanda. He turned as he left.

“Thank you, Mrs Saunders.”

Jenny didn’t reply.

A few days later, DS Kathy Arnold returned the trunk and Rodney immediately called Jim. There was an awkward silence when Rodney gave Jim the trunk with a key. Jenny glanced at it with an annoyed look.

“Why did he lock it?”

“I don’t know” shrugged Rodney.

“I’d like to see exactly what’s inside it.”

“I could always pick it up tomorrow” Jim offered, seeing Jenny’s suspicious expression

Rodney helped Jim pick up the trunk and guided him towards the door.

“See you tomorrow, Jim.”

Jim felt uncomfortable, not sure what to do.

“We’ll show you the contents tomorrow, mum” Amanda said, “if you want to see them.”

The distraction allowed Rodney to ease Jim out.

“What are you two trying to hide?” Jenny demanded when Rodney returned.

“Nothing, mum” Amanda responded sharply. “It’s just that ...”

“What?”

Amanda hesitated. “Dad thought you might throw everything away.”

Jenny was getting angry. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you wouldn’t accept what was happening or believe that our house was ...”

“Haunted! By a bloody ghost” she shouted. “You two are as bad as your ... father.”

Tears welled up in the children’s eyes as they both left the room and made their way up to their rooms. Jenny watched as they left without speaking.

“I ... I ... am sorry” she said quietly. She stood staring towards the stairs until a distant creak jerked her out of her confused state of mind. She walked over and picked the phone off the table where she had left it and sent a text to Tony.

‘I need to see you, Tony. What with this interfering bloke Jim Davies and the police, this whole thing is getting to me. The children are as obsessed as Brian with this stupid ghost theory

. Love you. xxxx’

XXI

Jim opened the trunk and found a camera on the top of a number of folders labelled in Brian's handwriting, he presumed. He put the camera aside and picked up a diary and started browsing through it. His attention was soon alert as it turned out to be a detailed record of everything that had happened at the house including the dates, times and description of the dreams each of the family members had experienced. The only oddity was that there was only sparse information on Jenny's dreams, of which Brian had made comments that he thought that she was holding back details of her dreams. He next picked up Brian's camera and flicked through the photos Brian had taken for the estate agent and stopped in disbelief when he reached the one taken in the cellar with the image of the apparition.

He soon found himself completely absorbed in browsing through Nicholas' diary, photos and notes whilst cross referencing them to Brian's detailed explanation. He made a note to visit Fenshaws Farm to find the copse, photographed and described in Brian's notes, and also to seek out the cave under Headland House. It was two o'clock in the morning when he glanced at his watch and reluctantly decided to retire to bed with a pair of sore eyes.

The following day Jim immersed himself thoroughly in reading through the trunk contents once again, building a picture in his mind of all that had happened fifty years ago and agreeing with Brian's explanation of the deaths of the two teenage boys twenty years later. As he placed the first folder back into the empty trunk he felt the bottom wobble slightly. Curious, he took the file back out and discovered that the trunk had a false bottom. With some difficulty, and with the aid of a suitable tool he found in his kitchen drawer, he managed to lift the false bottom and found a sealed A4 sized envelope. On it was written the words:

In the event of my death, please ensure that the two letters within this envelope are delivered to the addressees.

He carefully opened the large envelope and found two further envelopes inside. One was addressed to his solicitor ('Symonds & Symonds') and the other to him: Jim Davies. Even more puzzled he turned his envelope over and read the following instruction:

My children's happiness and well-being are paramount. Should a situation arise that might deprive them of their due inheritance and independence then, and only then, should this envelope be opened and my final instructions contained within followed without question, otherwise I cannot be held responsible for the consequences.

Jim frowned. 'What on earth does that mean?' At this point, however, he was much too tired to do much else, so returned the two letters to the larger envelope and replaced the contents of the trunk.

He was mentally drained by time he turned up at Headland House during the evening. The tension between Jenny and her children appeared to have eased and this time he was offered a cup of coffee by Rodney as soon as he sat down. Jim placed the trunk on the floor in front of him.

"Am I allowed to see the contents now?" Jenny asked sarcastically, addressing her children.

"Not again" Jim thought to himself.

Fortunately, Amanda defused the tension before the atmosphere became uncomfortable again.

"What do you think, Jim?" she asked. "Do you agree with our father's analysis?"

"I must admit that his arguments are very convincing."

"But do you agree with what he thinks happened?"

There were a few moments of silence, when Jenny felt relieved that he was going to disappoint them; but she was wrong."

"I agree entirely with what your father has written and I am definitely of the opinion that something supernatural or otherwise is residing in this house; but what its intentions are I am not too clear."

"So what brings you to that opinion, Mr Davies?"

Jenny was no longer feeling particularly friendly towards Jim, who had surmised from Brian's notes that she was having an affair and was the target of the ghost's aggression. What should he say? What could he say? Jenny was staring at him waiting for his reply. Amanda and Rodney both knew what the answer was.

"Before I answer that Mrs Saunders, would you mind if I take a look in your cellar?"

"If you must" answered Jenny, taken aback at his request. "But I don't see how that will help." She turned her attention to Rodney. "Rodney, will you accom ..."

"No, it's alright" Jim interrupted. "I'd like to go alone if it's okay with you."

Rodney nodded before his mother could reply.

"Sure, Jim. The light switch is on the wall outside."

Jim made his way towards the cellar.

"Thank you, Rodney." He hesitated, stopped and turned round. "Have any of you looked through the photographs that Brian took of the house?"

"We didn't know he'd taken any" Amanda said. "Why would he do that?"

"Because his last notes stated that he was on his way to see an estate agent with the intention of selling the house."

Jim returned to open the trunk and took out the camera. Out of politeness, he handed it first to Jenny.

"Whilst I am in the cellar, Mrs Saunders, look through these photographs and tell me if see anything unusual in any of them."

Jenny took the camera and flicked through them quickly.

"No, no, they are all quite ..."

She stopped and stared at the photo she was looking at, bringing the camera closer to her for an instant then putting it down.

"A clever bit of trick photography I must say."

Amanda grabbed the camera and looked at the selected photo.

"It's Nicholas Johnson!" she exclaimed.

Jim was immediately alert as Amanda's mother shot her a sneering glance.

"Don't be so ridiculous, Amanda. He's dead. God! The extent your father has gone to fabricate a cock-and-bull story about a haunted house. The next thing he would have been doing is to organize tours or séances."

"Leave dad alone" Amanda countered. She had tears in her eyes.

"In spite of all the things that were happening" Rodney interjected "you never supported or believed us, Mum. You were too busy doing ... whatever you were doing."

"What does that supposed to mean?"

Jim was feeling embarrassed again.

"I'll just nip down to the basement then I'll be on my way."

Jenny turned around. "Er, um, okay."

Jim heard the arguments resume as he reached the cellar. He switched on the light and opened the door to reveal a set of steps leading down. As he descended into the room he noticed a slightly damp, musky smell. A stack of

wood flooring along one of the walls with an assortment of tools indicated that Brian was in the process of laying a new floor, and a window had been installed in the wall at ground level, which hadn't been there fifty years ago when he had visited the house as a reporter. The trap door was still there and, curiously, the old sideboard and chair. Something made Jim wander over to the sideboard and pull open one of the drawers. He gasped when he saw the ornate dagger inside and was about to pick it up, but hesitated and closed the drawer, thinking back to how Brian had described what happened when he and Jenny had touched it. He stood, thinking back to the time of the deaths fifty years ago. Suddenly, the cellar door slammed shut, followed by children's laughter. His head flicked round towards the door. It was definitely children's laughter and it wasn't from Amanda or Rodney. He turned, looking around the room. He sensed another presence; an unseen presence. He didn't feel fear; but sadness. The laughter returned which soon turned to sobbing, reminiscent of grief. An overwhelming feeling of sadness permeated the room. Something was trying to communicate with him – something with a message.

"Who are you?" Jim called out. "What do you want?"

In response, scrawled writing slowly appeared on the wall facing the door. It was white, as though someone was writing it in chalk and read:

SAVE THE CHILDREN

Jim stared at it. "What do you mean?" He called out. The message was replaced with a second:

I COULDN'T SAVE THEM

"Save them from what?" Again the message changed:

THOSE WHO WOULD HARM THEM

"Who is trying to harm them?"

I WILL PROTECT THEM

"How will you protect them?"

THEY MUST STAY IN THE HOUSE

“Protect them from whom?”

YOU MUST HELP THEM

“Me? How?”

HELP THEM

“Tell me how?” Jim asked again, but the response was:

HELP THEM ... HELP THEM ... HELP THEM

Even though Jim asked further questions, there were no more responses. The feeling of the unseen presence faded away. Whatever it was had now gone, as had the cold musky odour. He sat down on the chair and glanced at the sideboard containing the dagger; questions running through his mind searching for answers. He found two of them.

“Jim? Jim?”

Jim Davies was suddenly aware that Rodney was standing at the top of the steps.

“Oh, sorry Rodney; I was deep in thought.”

“Are you alright? You seem to have been down here for ages. Your coffee is cold.”

Jim glanced at the wall; there was no longer any writing on it.

“I was day-dreaming and admiring what your father has done down here.” Rodney was staring at him disbelievingly.

“I’ll come and get that coffee now.”

“You’ve seen it, haven’t you?” It was more like an accusation.

“Seen what?”

“The metamorph.”

Jim recalled reading in Brian’s notes about the murder of Nicholas Johnson and how he was dumped in the swamp while still conscious. Nicholas’ anger and overwhelming sense of revenge was such that his consciousness remained in a body of which the flesh did not actually decompose but was transformed or metamorphosed into a non-human form.

“No I haven’t” Jim replied, “but it has communicated with me.”

Rodney descended the steps into the cellar.

“How? What happened?” he asked excitedly.

"I think we need to speak with your mother."

Rodney's face adopted a glum expression.

"She won't listen. She'll just mock you."

"We have to convince her that there is danger here."

"What do you mean, Jim?"

"I know this may be difficult to believe but I think that whatever it is was, was trying to tell me that you and Amanda are in danger."

Rodney looked questioningly at Jim.

"What sort of danger? What did it say?"

Jim repeated to Rodney the messages that appeared on the wall, including the one which said '*They must stay in the house*'.

"Who must stay in the house, Jim?"

"You and Amanda."

Rodney went quiet, confusing thoughts crowding his mind.

"Why would it say that? We are not in any danger."

"That's just the problem. Nicholas was trying to tell me that there is a threat to you and Amanda but we have no idea what the threat is or how or when it might impact you, but whatever it is, this metamorph wants to protect you."

Amanda appeared at the top of the steps.

"Mum's asking what's going on; why you are spending so long down here."

Rodney beckoned Amanda to join them.

"Jim has been talking to Nicholas" he said excitedly, "and Nicholas told him that we are in danger."

"Actually, Nicholas just sent me some messages" Jim corrected.

"What happened?" Amanda asked.

"Rodney will fill you in, but now I think I should talk to your mother. I would though, like talk with you both, alone, some other time."

The children nodded and led the way back up the steps to re-join Jenny who was downing a glass of wine. As soon as they stepped into the room Jim knew that what he was about to say would be ridiculed by her.

"Well?" She snapped. "Find any ghosts in our haunted cellar?"

Jim coughed nervously.

"Mrs Saunders, I am or was a journalist and in normal situations only believe what I can see or hear with my own eyes and ears. I have never relied on third party statements unless I could verify them to my complete satisfaction. I don't intend to get into any arguments or discussion with you as

I am well aware of your views but I will ask you just one question. Have you, personally, ever received any strange messages or had any unexplainable experiences?"

"No."

Jim knew differently. "Okay, I will tell you what I think and then leave you all in peace.

Jenny just stared at him.

"Contrary to what you may believe, my opinion is that your husband had solved the mystery of what happened to the previous owner and his family and also what happened twenty years later. I am now convinced that ... something is trying to warn us that there is a threat directed towards your children and is trying to protect them."

"Oh don't be ridic..."

"I'm leaving now, Mrs Saunders, but think carefully. Amanda and Rodney are safe at the moment but there is a potential threat that might impact their lives."

He made his way to the door.

"I'll see myself out."

Once he had left, Jenny turned to Amanda and Rodney.

"That man's trouble. I don't want him coming here anymore. What did he say to you down there?"

"Nothing much" Rodney replied.

"He is as bad as your father with his cock-and-bull story. I hope he is not putting stupid ideas into your heads."

Neither Rodney nor Amanda could take any more. First Rodney made excuses and went up to his room followed by Amanda, who decided to take the trunk with her into her bedroom.

"He's got it all wrong" Jenny called up after them, but there were no replies. She picked up her phone and sent a text to Tony.

“This is Derek.”

‘Derek’ stood up as Jenny introduced him to the children. He was sitting on the sofa talking with their mother when Amanda and Rodney arrived home from school. Neither of them were very happy at seeing the stranger in their house.

“He’s been donating items to the charity shop. He recently lost his wife.”

To the children it sounded like an excuse or apology and they both felt that they were being lied to, but Amanda offered sympathy anyway.

“We’re sorry for your loss mister ...”

“James” the man replied. “Derek James.” He offered his hand. “Pleased to meet you Amanda and (*looking at Rodney*) Rodney.”

Amanda ignored the outstretched hand and turned her attention to her mother.

“There’s a parent’s evening next Thursday, mum. Are you going?”

Jenny hesitated and responded vaguely.

“I should be able to make it ... I think.”

“Dad always came” Rodney added.

“I know, darlings, but ...”

“You always said you were too busy or feeling unwell” Amanda interrupted, accusingly.

“No need to be rude to your mother” the man said.

Jenny nudged ‘Derek’ as Amanda glared at him.

‘Derek’ felt uncomfortable and glanced at his watch.

“I think I’ll be making a move.”

He turned his attention to Jenny.

“Thanks for inviting me round, Jenny. You have really have helped me a lot since ... I really appreciate it.”

He turned his attention back to the children.

“Bye Amanda and Rodney. Nice to have met you both.”

“Bye” they replied.

Jenny saw ‘Derek’ to the door, the children watching and listening to the murmuring dialogue, which they couldn’t make out, coming from the porch.

“He really is a nice man” Jenny said, when she came back into the room. “He has helped me as well.”

“Haven’t we ... helped each other?” Amanda said.

Jenny ignored Amanda’s comment.

"I've invited him round on Friday for a take-away. Are you two okay with that?"

Not that she was really bothered about what they thought. It was her life, her house; she could now do what she wanted whenever she wanted.

'Derek' turned up at about 7 o'clock.

"Sorry I'm a bit late; busy day today; lots of catching up to do. Have you ordered?"

"No" Jenny replied, picking up a menu from the table. "What do you fancy? Amanda and Rodney have made their choices. So far we have sweet and sour chicken balls, beef chow mein, fried vegetables and special fried rice."

"Perhaps some spare ribs and ... a prawn dish."

Jenny noted the extra dishes and called the shop. Amanda and Rodney disappeared up to their rooms to do their homework until the meal was delivered.

There remained an awkward silence as the four of them ate their meals, with Rodney fumbling around trying to eat his with chopsticks.

"Why don't you just give up?" his sister suggested.

"Nope. I'll get the hang of it. It will be useful when I visit China and need to merge in with the locals.

The other three laughed.

"Merge with the locals?" Amanda said. "You don't even look Chinese. Anyway, when are you going to China? School trips don't go that far."

"Our history teacher's been there and told us a bit about the past dynasties and the Terracotta Warriors."

"What are they?" 'Derek' asked. "Flowerpot men?"

Jenny laughed along with him but Amanda and Rodney didn't.

"You two are so ignorant" Rodney replied.

"That's enough young man" 'Derek' said, crossly, pointing a fork at Rodney.

"Leave it" Jenny said. "He's right. I've never been interested in history and nor have you."

Quickly she realised her mistake as the children stopped eating and looked at them both whilst 'Derek' looked uncomfortable.

"Remember?" she added hastily. "When I tried to persuade you to buy that encyclopaedia in the charity shop to ... broaden your knowledge and help you through your ... loss."

“Ah! Oh yes, I remember now.”

His reply was not very convincing.

The children offered to wash up whilst ‘Derek’ mouthed *‘Idiot’* at Jenny. The remainder of the evening passed by very quickly, with Amanda and Rodney shooting up to their rooms again, after washing up the dishes. By eleven fifteen they had both gone to bed.

After a few minutes, Jenny went to the kitchen to make coffee. She listened at the bottom of the stairs but here was no sound from either of the children’s rooms. Returning to the lounge with the coffees she sat next to ‘Derek’ and laid her head on his shoulder.

“Do you think they know, Tony?”

“I’m not sure. They seem to eye me with suspicion so be more careful what you say in front of them.”

“Hm, sorry. It just slipped out.”

There was a long pause as he put his arm around her.

“Do you miss Brian?”

Jenny thought back over her and Brian’s life together.

“I don’t quite know when things went wrong. We certainly had fun until Amanda was born and, because of my depression, I felt that Brian was smothering me. He obviously thought he was trying to help but ... maybe too much. I suppose I must take some of the blame but it was though he was trying to take over being father and mother to the children. I felt like a sideshow, if you know what I mean. He was always kind and gentle of course ... but maybe too much. I craved for independence and being able to make my own decisions.”

“I think I understand what you are saying.”

“You are completely different, Derek, sorry, Tony.” She grinned. “So, in answer to your question, no, I don’t really miss him much. The children will of course. They have always been *dad’s girl* and *dad’s boy* and they were devoted to him. They shared things with him and he with them. I sometimes felt like an outsider.”

“We’ll have to be careful for some time then.”

“Yes, we will.”

The children did miss their dad immensely. The fun and excitement seemed to have deserted them. They had hoped that their mother would become closer to them and develop the relationship they had had with their father; but it was too late for that. Jenny remained somewhat distant and the things she did

arrange with them seemed more like an obligation rather than out of love. She was talking more often about the man 'Derek' as though she had known him for years and the odd comments she made, appeared to the children to becoming more intimate.

Then 'Derek' started helping out with odd jobs around the house and garden.

"Why do you always ask Derek for his opinion and advice?" The children questioned Jenny one day.

"Well ... because he has some good ideas. He's an interior designer you know."

"You never ask our opinion any more" Amanda said accusingly.

"Dad always did" added Rodney.

"That's just it!" Jenny snapped back. "It was always you two and dad; never me."

"But you never showed any interest."

"I wasn't allowed to."

"He did try, mum" Amanda countered.

"Not enough!"

The children went quiet.

"We could do some of the jobs around the house" Rodney said, quietly. "Dad showed us how to do lots of things."

"I don't want anything to get in the way of your school work" Jenny replied. "Have you seen that man Jim Davies recently?" she asked, changing the subject. "He's a strange man; don't you think?"

"No" they both lied, having seen him the previous Sunday whilst out for a walk together along the coastal path.

"Amanda, Rodney, lovely to see you both again" he had said, with a beaming smile. "Any news on the house and your mum's ..."

"Affair?" they replied in unison.

"Well, I wasn't going to say it but guessed as much from your dad's diary entries. Which reminds me, has your mum looked through the contents of the trunk yet?"

"No" Rodney replied. "Maybe it's as well, considering what dad had written about his suspicions that mum was having an affair."

"Hm, what about the house? Has the 'metamorph', as you call it, communicated with you anymore?"

“No” Amanda replied. “And mum has decided not to sell the house, at least for the time being.”

The children went quiet. Jim looked at them quizzically.

“There’s something else, isn’t there.”

It was a statement rather than a question.

“Mum has met this bloke called Derek” Amanda said.

“In the charity shop, she said” Rodney added.

Amanda continued.

“She told us that he had recently lost his wife, but we don’t believe her.”

“You think it might be the man with whom she was having the affair” Jim stated.

“Yes” Amanda replied. “The way they talk and look at each other just doesn’t seem as though they have recently met.”

“That’s worrying” Jim said. “From what I understand about your family’s predicament, your metamorph might interpret that as a threat to you both.”

Derek’s visits to the house became more frequent and longer and on some occasions Amanda and Rodney knew that he had stayed the night, sneaking off in the early morning thinking that the children were still asleep. Then he started staying for dinner, when the conversation was always rather stilted. Most of the time, the children kept out of the way when Derek was in the house either working in their rooms or out with friends.

One day, Rodney suggested to Amanda that they finish off decorating the basement so that they could start using the room. Their father had promised to install a plasma screen so that they could invite friends to watch films and other forms of entertainment. Whether this would happen now, though, was questionable.

“It can still be our den” Rodney suggested.

Amanda agreed.

“What about the new flooring dad bought?”

“We can do that” Rodney replied confidently. “Dad showed me what to do. It’s quite easy really.”

They decided to begin at the start of the school holidays.

XXIII

It was Saturday morning and a rather gloomy day, ideal for working indoors. With tape measure and saw, the children started to lay the interlocking laminate flooring in the basement. Unbeknown to them, Derek had turned up.

"Where are the children?" he asked Jenny.

"In the basement laying the flooring."

"Not a job for kids" he responded. "I'll go and sort it out."

Jenny stopped what she was doing.

"But Tony ..."

He was already at the cellar door pulling it open. Amanda and Rodney looked up as he entered.

"What are you doing?" he demanded firmly.

"Laying the flooring" Rodney replied, with a touch of sarcasm.

Jenny was now standing behind Tony.

"You won't do it properly" he continued in a derogatory tone.

"Yes we will" Amanda replied, "Dad showed us how to lay it."

"Leave it. I'll lay it."

The children stopped what they were doing and looked at Jenny.

"Mum?" Rodney said, questioning Derek's takeover.

"I think Derek knows best, darling" she replied.

"But we're doing it as dad suggested" Rodney countered.

"Leave it" Jenny said, firmly. "Derek will finish it."

The children threw down the items they were holding and squeezed past Derek and Jenny to leave the basement.

"We're going for a walk" Rodney said as they went up to their rooms to change.

"Your children are so rude" Tony said, when they had gone.

"Don't forget they've just lost their lovely daddy" Jenny said, mockingly.

"They need more discipline. You're too easy on them. A pity you can't send them to a boarding school."

"Oh come on Tony, they're not that bad."

He glanced around the room.

"What's in that old dresser?"

"Nothing."

Then she remembered the dagger in the drawer.

“Oh, there was a strange looking dagger in the top left-hand drawer but I told Brian to get rid of it.

Tony stepped down onto the basement, walked over to the dresser and pulled open the drawers. He was looking at an ornate dagger with a round silver coloured pommel and a leather-bound grip. The cross-guard was decorated with a pattern of winding metal strands with a central five-pointed star in the middle. The blade was also etched with, what appeared to be, Celtic symbols.

“Interesting piece” he said, picking it up. “Ah!”

He winced in pain and dropped it on the floor.

“What? What happened, Tony? Did you cut yourself? I thought Brian had got rid of it.”

Tony was gripping his wrist with his other hand.

“No, but it seemed to burn my hand.”

He held it out.

Jenny stared at it.

“My God, Tony; it’s red and blistered.”

For the first time since Brian’s death, she recalled all the strange things that had happened in the house.

Tony noticed her staring at the trap door.

“What are you staring at?”

She carried on staring.

“Brian” she muttered.

“What about him?”

“He was convinced that this house was haunted or possessed by something.”

“Rubbish!” Tony barked, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapping it around his hand. He made his way back up the basement steps and headed for the kitchen.

“Have you got anything that I can put on this hand?”

“There’s some ointment in the bathroom cabinet. Try some of that.”

As he ascended the stairs to the bathroom he called back.

“I’ll lay some of that flooring after dinner; gives me an excuse to stay the night.”

“As if you needed one” Jenny chuckled.

As Tony closed the basement door a shadow emerged from the corner where the old cupboard used to be and drifted across the room pausing at the trap door.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Amanda and Rodney had met up with some friends with whom they spent most of the time telling them about their plans for a den in their house. Some were quite excited and looking forward to it whilst others mentioned rumours that the house was haunted – a suggestion that was brushed off by Amanda. Following dinner, Tony made his way to the cellar to lay some of the flooring. Amanda and Rodney sat with their mother to watch a film.

Tony switched on the basement light and descended into the room leaving the door open. He had to admit that the few pieces of flooring that Amanda and Rodney had laid had been fitted very well. Maybe he was being too tough on them; but it was ‘the principle’ he told himself.

Shortly after he had started laying the boards, the light flickered and the temperature of the room seemed to drop, followed by a damp and musky odour. Muttering to himself he heard a door creak followed by the slamming of the cellar door which made him jump.

“Oh very funny” he called out, thinking that maybe one of the children was trying to scare him; but there was no answer; not even a giggle.

He carried on working as the light flickered again.

“What’s wrong with that bloody light?” he asked himself. “I suppose Brian got some cowboy to fit it.”

He suddenly had an eerie sensation that someone was watching him and jerked his head round. He stared towards the corner where he was told an old built-in cupboard used to be. Was that something moving or just a trick of the light? As he slowly stood up, the light went out leaving him in complete darkness.

“Christ, that’s all I need” he muttered.

He began to shiver and sensed that something was moving towards him even though he couldn’t see it. He tried to remember where the basement door was and backed away in that direction. Then it was behind him.

“Who are you?” he called out. “What do you want?”

He felt something on his right shoulder and spun round to see what appeared to be two red eyes facing him. He staggered back bringing up his right hand in the act of defending himself and collided with the chair, falling back. He felt his head hit something hard and all went black.

“Tony? Tony?”

The voice came clearer as he opened his eyes to see Jenny crouched over him. His head hurt.

“What ... what happened?”

“You tell me” came the reply. “We heard a crash and I found you unconscious.”

He lifted his head and rubbed it, then noticed Amanda and Rodney standing in the cellar doorway staring at them.

“Bugger” he muttered quietly.

“I thought his name was Derek” Amanda said.

Jenny didn’t dare look round, and ignored her daughter.

“What happened?” she asked again.

“We’re getting out of here” he replied.

“What do you mean?”

“There is something evil in this house. I saw it.”

Amanda and Rodney looked at each other and nodded.

“Saw what?” Jenny said, thinking back to all the strange things she had experienced.

Tony clambered to his feet and headed towards the cellar door. Amanda and Rodney stepped aside as he brushed past them.

“Where are you going?” Jenny called after him. She also got up and followed him.

“Home” he stated.

“No” she replied quickly. “Please stay the night. You’re frightening me ... and the children.”

“We aren’t frightened” Amanda countered. “It only appears to those it sees as a threat to ...”

“To what?” Jenny snapped.

“Us.”

“Is that what bloody Jim Davies told you. I don’t know what his motives are, but it seems to me that he is trying to drive a wedge between this family.”

“But he was very supportive of dad’s investigations.”

“Your dad’s got a lot to answer for” Tony blurted out.

He stopped and composed himself. He stared at Amanda and Rodney.

“That’s it!”

“What?” Jenny said.

“It’s a plot concocted by Brian and this Jim Davies to drive your mum out of this house. Between them they were fabricating ghostly events to scare your mum; but it went wrong when your dad accidentally killed himself.”

Amanda and Rodney stood open mouthed and angry at the accusations being flung at their father. Although Jenny wasn’t wholly convinced with Tony’s theory, she felt herself agreeing with him.

“It does make some sort of sense.”

Amanda and Rodney were furious and stormed up to their rooms.

“And Tony isn’t a threat” she yelled as a door slammed upstairs.

Tony walked into the lounge and plonked himself on the sofa.

“I don’t know how he’s doing it, Jenny, but Jim Davies must be behind all that’s going on here. I think you ought to contact the police to put a restraining order on him. He’s up to no good.”

Jenny was confused. What Tony was saying was making sense but she was at a loss in trying to understand how anyone could fabricate all the incidents; and what about the dagger that ‘burnt’ Tony’s hand? Coated with a chemical?

“Let’s have a coffee and get to bed” she said cuddling up to him.

“I will stay tonight, but that’s it.”

“Thanks.”

“What about the children?”

“They’ll be alright in the morning and see sense.”

“I’m not so sure of that.”

Tony woke with a start and glanced at the bedside clock - it was one o’clock. Silence reigned throughout the house. No, there it was again – a distant scraping sound. He sat up and glanced at Jenny – she was fast asleep. *Bloody kids*, he thought. *Or perhaps it’s Jim bloody Davies*. He slid out of bed and slowly crept down the stairs. The sound was certainly coming from the basement, as he suspected. He paused at the cellar door and stepped into the kitchen to grab a carving knife out of the drawer. Suitably armed, he stepped back into the hall, put a hand on the basement door handle, flipped on the light and flung open the door.

“Got you!” he said loudly.

The room was empty. He glanced around and noticed writing scrawled on the wall opposite the door.

GET OUT OF THIS HOUSE OR YOU WILL DIE.

He stared at the message and descended into the room, looking around. “Where are you Davies? Come and show yourself you bastard.”

As his eyes scanned the room they fell upon the floor. He stared in disbelief when he saw that the trap door was open. He stepped over to it and approached the shaft, from which the sound of lapping water reached his ears.

“What the ...”

Then the basement door slammed shut and the light went out.

"Shit" he said, turning round in the dark towards where he knew the door must be. "I knew this was a bad idea."

As before, he became aware that the temperature in the room had dropped several degrees and the damp musky smell had returned. He realised that he was shaking and held a hand out in front of him groping his way back towards the basement door. Expecting his foot to make contact with the bottom step his outstretched hand, instead, made contact with some sort of cold damp material, like a coat. He pulled it back quickly, too scared to move forward. There was something in front of him barring his way to the door. As he peered into the darkness two red circles appeared which slowly took on the form of two eyes. He slowly backed away, his heart thumping madly, and stopped inches away from the edge of the shaft as the light suddenly came on and the basement door opened. Jenny was standing in the doorway in her nightgown.

"Tony" she yelled "look out!"

The 'presence' had gone and, turning his head, Tony saw that his heels were on the edge of the open shaft.

"My God!" he exclaimed, and stepped forward quickly.

Jenny descended the steps and took hold of his arm.

"I woke up when I heard you shouting and came down to see what was going on." She looked past Tony. "Who opened the trap door?"

Tony was shaking.

"How should I bloody know. The kids? Jim Davies? Whatever it was, it was trying to make me fall down that shaft."

Jenny looked puzzled.

"What are you talking about? What was?"

"The thing that's in this house."

Jenny guided him back towards the basement steps, confused.

"Maybe ..." she started.

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe Brian was right after all and there really is a paranormal entity in the house. I have never believed that there were such things as ghosts, but ..."

"Whatever it is, Jenny, we have got to get out of here before one or all of us end up dead."

"*Or one of us two.*" she thought to herself, remembering that Amanda and Rodney didn't believe that they, themselves, were in any danger.

"Well, I don't know why it's got it in for us" Tony said as he closed the trap door. "Now let's back to bed" he said, taking her by the hand and climbing back up the steps. "Or do I really want to go back to bed now" he added.

“What if something else happens?” Jenny said. Tony didn’t bother to reply.

XXIV

At breakfast the following morning Jenny told Amanda and Rodney that she had decided to sell the house after all, and also that the basement was now out of bounds.

"Why have you changed your mind?" Rodney asked. "Dad has done so much to the house and ..."

He was about to make a comment about the haunting but decided that it probably wasn't wise at that moment.

"That's just it. It's the house your father wanted without any consultation. It was always about him."

"That's not fair, Mum. You never showed much interest in where we've lived."

"There's something creepy about the place. I don't like it here. Too many weird and not very nice things keep happening. There's something evil here. It scares me."

"Nicholas isn't evil" Amanda responded. "He's just trying to protect us."

"That's enough!" Jenny snapped. "I'm selling the house and that's it."

Both children were downcast.

There was a long pause before Rodney asked "Where are we going to move to?"

"I don't know" Jenny responded, sharply. "I'll pick up some details from the estate agents next time I'm in town."

A couple of days later, a sales representative from one of the estate agents appeared with a camera and took a number of photographs of the property. As he was scanning through them afterwards, he stopped and stared at the image on the camera.

"What's wrong?" Jenny asked, frowning.

The man passed the camera to Jenny.

"Look at this photo."

Jenny briefly scanned the photo of the front of the house.

"What's wrong with it?"

She offered it back to the rep.

"Look closely" he said.

She looked at the photo again and zoomed in on it.

"What's that in the bedroom window?"

“You tell me.”

At the window of Amanda’s bedroom was what looked like a blurred image of a figure with two red eyes.

“Whatever it is, will certainly put people off.” He got up off the sofa. “I’ll go and take another one.”

He was a lot longer than Jenny thought he should have been to snap a few new shots.

“You’ve been a while?”

He was browsing through the frames with a frown on his face as he re-entered the house.

“What is it now?” Jenny asked.

He was shaking his head.

“It appears in every photo I take, from whatever angle. I can’t seem to get rid of it.”

“What are you going to do? Maybe it’s a trick of the light?”

“Tell you what; you go into the room and stand at the window whilst I take a couple more.”

Jenny suddenly felt a little nervous but agreed anyway. As soon as she entered Amanda’s room, she shivered; it was cold. There was also that pervading musky smell again. As she stood at the window and waved to the rep, who raised his camera to take more pictures, Jenny sensed a presence standing next to her. The rep lowered his camera and gave a thumbs-up sign. She left the room as quickly as possible.

The rep re-entered the house scrolling through the photos as Jenny entered the lounge.

“Well?”

He looked up at her and handed her the camera.

“You’ll never believe this.

Jenny snatched the camera from him and looked at the photograph. It certainly showed her standing at the window; but it also showed a dark shape with two red blobs at head height next to her. She wasn’t going to admit what she felt in the room so handed the camera back to him.

“So, what **are** you going to do?” she asked abruptly.

“Well, I can’t explain it; trick of the light; so I’ll just airbrush the image out.”

He was giving Jenny a questionable look as he made the statement.

“Whatever” she replied.

“I’ll put a contract in the post. I think it should sell easily.”

“Think or will?” Jenny questioned.

“You’ve certainly improved the property no end,” he stated “but it still has the reputation of being haunted.”

Having already measured up the property, he put his things in his briefcase and headed towards the door.

“Which makes me wonder why you bought it in the first place” he added, with a questionable look.

“My husband saw it as an investment and didn’t believe in ghosts.”

The man hesitated. “Why are you selling it by the way? It’s a lovely property.”

“I never really liked it and it’s a bit too isolated for me.”

“Not because you’ve seen ghosts then?”

“I don’t believe in ghosts either.”

Jenny accompanied the agent to the door. He turned to shake her hand.

“I’ll be in touch about viewings and any feedback we receive from interested parties, Mrs Saunders.”

“Thank you.”

“Best of luck with your search and move.”

“Thanks.”

Several days later, Amanda and Rodney were wandering along the coastal path in silence. Neither for them knew what to say but both were thinking the same thoughts when a voice brought them out of their thoughts. It was Jim Davies.

“Hello Amanda, Rodney. I haven’t seen you two for some time.”

The children looked up, having been walking along staring at the ground.

“I see that your house is up for sale” he continued. “How do you feel about that?”

Rodney spoke first.

“We don’t want to move. All the work dad put into it; and now Mum wants to move back into town with ...”

Jim looked questioningly at them. “The ... boyfriend?”

“Yes” Amanda confirmed. “He has been spending more and more time at the house but had some scares recently, so doesn’t want to stay the night anymore.”

“Is that why she wants to sell? ... No, you don’t need to answer that.”

“They are both really spooked about the ... ghost, metamorph or whatever we should call it; but it doesn’t worry us. We think Nicholas is a benign manifestation. It doesn’t threaten us.”

“No” Jim added. “From what I have learned from the contents of the trunk, it, or ‘he’ should I say, is trying to protect you because he failed to protect his own children and those two young lads. The metamorph knew that your father had worked out what had happened those fifty and thirty years ago and that he had decided it best to sell the house to try and keep the family together; but Nicholas did not agree with that solution. Your father had to be stopped. Now it sees your mother and her boyfriend as threats and will do anything to protect you against them.”

In his head, Jim was telling himself that it was Jenny who was now in danger but he didn’t want to frighten the children unnecessarily. It may not even come to that if Jenny could be persuaded not to sell the family home and get shot of that boyfriend of hers. He was about to tell them about the two letters found in the base of the trunk but decided that it might be better not to mention it.

“You must try and dissuade her from selling and, if you don’t mind me saying so, she needs to change her attitude towards you two. I hope it’s not too late for that.”

“We’ll see what we can do about the house” Amanda replied “but we don’t hold out much hope. She is adamant.”

The conversation changed to other subjects during which Amanda eventually asked: “Are you married, Jim?”

“I was” he replied, “but my wife died many years ago.”

“Did you have any children?”

“Sadly not. We both really wanted them but it was not to be. We could have adopted, I suppose, but by the time we were ready to give it serious consideration we were both totally engrossed with our careers.

As he left the children and wished them luck with retaining their home, he couldn’t help thinking that here was another family facing tragedy in that house. The logical solution, he thought, was for the family to get out immediately and never return, but that was not a viable option. Nicholas would now no longer rest until what he saw as a threat to the children was resolved to his satisfaction. He shook his head slowly, wondering how it all might end.

On their way home, the children chatted to each other about Jim. They always found him so easy to talk to and understanding – sharing their problems with him and listening to his advice.

“I like Jim” Rodney said to his sister on their way home.

"I like him too" Amanda agreed. "He's a bit like a dad to us, now that" She couldn't finish the statement as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Sometimes I wish he was living with us. He knows what happened in the house."

"Thanks to Dad's research" Rodney replied.

Tony's car was in the drive when they returned home.

"Oh no, not him again" Rodney muttered as they entered the house.

Tony and Jenny were sitting together with what one can only describe as guilty expressions on their faces. Amanda suspected that they had done something that they didn't want the children to know about. Rodney had disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a cold drink in his hand. "What have you been burning on that bonfire in the back garden?"

Amanda shot him a glance then turned and raced upstairs. Jenny and Tony exchanged guilty glances and Rodney put down his drink and started after Amanda. He had only reached the bottom of the stairs when Amanda appeared at the top.

"The trunk has gone" she shouted angrily. "They've done something with it."

She came down the stairs and, followed by Rodney, stormed into the lounge. "Where's the trunk?" She demanded, with no response. "Don't you dare tell me you've burnt the contents."

Neither Jenny nor Tony answered. Tears welled up in Amanda's eyes.

"You can't have. Please tell me you haven't."

"We decided it's for the best; for us all to move on and lead a more normal life."

Amanda burst into tears.

"No, no. I hate you both" she shouted. "It held a record of what happened to Nicholas and his family and also had Dad's notes in it. **You** might be able to forget about him but I can't."

With that, she turned and dashed upstairs to her room, followed by Rodney.

Jenny and Tony sat there in silence, stunned at the outburst.

"Something makes me think that maybe we shouldn't have done that" Tony said.

"Oh come on" Jenny replied. "The children were becoming obsessed with what happened in the house all those years ago; and you saw what Brian had written in his diary."

"Well, he certainly knew what was going on, didn't he" Tony stated.

Jenny shivered. "Has it suddenly got a bit chilly or am I imagining it?"
"Hmm, it does seem to have ... and yet it looks sunny and warm outside."

The children were sitting together on the floor by Amanda's bed. Rodney had his arm around his sister.

"How (sob) could (sob) Mum (sob) have (sob) done (sob) that, Rodney?"

Her brother didn't really know what to say. Although he felt anger and bitterness towards his mother and Tony, he found that he couldn't cry.

"I think it's all his fault or at least egged her on."

"Why did Dad have to die?" Amanda said. "Why didn't the metamorph just take Mum instead?"

Rodney felt guilty at partially agreeing with his sister's statement. He was never quite so emotionally attached to what his Dad had found out and hadn't wanted either of his parents to die, but he understood his sister's feelings and attributed her outburst to the emotions that had built up since their father's death. He shivered slightly.

"I'm cold."

Amanda stopped sobbing and lifted her head up, staring straight ahead.

"He knows" she stated.

"What?"

"Nicholas knows."

"Knows what?"

"That the trunk has been burnt."

"How could he?"

Amanda got up.

"I'm going down to the basement."

She quickly walked over to open her bedroom door. Rodney got up and followed her.

Jenny heard the children descend the stairs and briefly enter the kitchen looking for something. Then the basement door opened.

"What are they doing now?" she stated. "I locked that door and hid the key."

"You didn't hide it very well then, did you" Tony stated rhetorically.

She was about to get up.

"Oh, leave them to it" Tony responded. "They'll get over it in time in their own way."

The basement was noticeably colder than the rest of the house and the damp smell had returned with a vengeance. As the children stood at the top of the steps, shadows seemed to flit about haphazardly.

"He's angry" Amanda said.

Rodney shivered again.

"I know. I'm scared. Let's get out of here, Amanda."

"No" she replied. "We have to tell him that it wasn't our fault."

Rodney looked at his sister.

"What are you saying, Amanda? He can't hear us. He's ... a ghost; not real."

"He's not a ghost, Rodney. He's a metamorph, and ..." she stopped, slowly descending the steps into the room.

Rodney didn't move.

"What are you doing Amanda?"

She didn't reply.

"Please, Amanda, let's go."

Amanda stood in the middle of the room and said out loud "It wasn't our fault, Nicholas. You must understand."

Rodney shook his head. "Amanda. Please."

She turned round and re-joined Rodney. As they closed the basement door behind them, two words appeared scrawled on the wall opposite. They read

I KNOW

but the children didn't see them.

Amanda didn't come down for dinner but Jenny, under pressure from Tony, agreed that Rodney could take his and her meals up to Amanda's room. Jenny never saw them for the rest of the evening.

As Rodney left Amanda's room to go to bed, she looked straight at him and said "Something's going to happen tonight, Rodney."

Rodney stared back at her, questioningly.

"I feel it" she said, closing her door.

XXV

That night, Jenny found it difficult to get to sleep following Amanda's outburst. She didn't realise how much it had upset her daughter by burning the trunk's contents. It was for the best, she kept telling herself and was sure that in time her daughter would get over it. Tony had agreed to stay the night once more but insisted that Jenny expedite the sale of the house in order to make a new start.

"I won't initially move in with you." She recollected him saying as she drifted off into sleep.

She woke with a start. She had been dreaming of being chased by someone or something but couldn't see what it was or even where it was. She sensed that something was in the room. There was nothing distinct but she knew it was there ... somewhere. A shadow seemed to move across the room until it reached the door, then disappeared. She thought she heard stairs creaking and glanced at Tony lying beside her; but he was fast asleep and snoring slightly. She checked the bedside clock; it was a quarter past one. Although she felt a little nervous, she knew that no-one could have possibly gained entry to the house, so surmised that it was probably one of the children going down to get a drink or biscuit. The shadow in the room had probably been her imagination, what with all the talk about ghosts; nevertheless, she felt that she had to go and investigate and maybe apologise for what she had done. She slid carefully out of bed, so as not to disturb Tony, and crept downstairs expecting to find either Amanda or Rodney in the kitchen; but there were no lights on and no sounds of any activity. She shook her head and had just turned to re-ascend the stairs when she heard another creak and the faint sound of a drawer being opened; and it seemed to be coming from the basement. She immediately thought of the children.

"What are they doing down there?" She muttered to herself, making her way over to the basement door; then noticed that the light switch was off. Puzzled, she flicked it on and pulled open the door. The room was empty. She stepped inside and shivered. '*Why is it so cold?*' She thought to herself, '*And that bloody awful stench had returned. Thank God I'm selling the place.*' Glancing around, her eyes fell upon the wall opposite the door on which was scrawled a message which read:

I WILL PROTECT THE CHILDREN

Jenny stared at the words incredulously, muttering “What the ...”; then she noticed that the left-hand drawer in the old sideboard was open. “That bloody sideboard. Why didn’t Brian get rid of it?” She grumbled loudly, descending the steps into the room and curious as to why the drawer was open. Peeking inside was the ornate dagger that Tony had picked up and then dropped on the floor. She assumed that Amanda or Rodney had picked it up and returned it to the drawer. Then her mind went back to as why she here had come down here in the first place. ‘*Who was opening the drawer a few minutes ago and who wrote that message on the ...*’ She had turned to look at the wall again, moving to the centre of the room; but the message was no longer there. Annoyed, rather than feeling any sense of fear, she turned about to see an empty room.

“Where are you?” She said loudly. Her eyes fell upon the sideboard. “So that’s where you’re hiding.” She walked back over to the sideboard to catch whoever was hiding behind it but paused to grab the dagger first. “Now let’s see who wants to play games.”

Reaching in, she grabbed the implement and lifted it out. Her initial thought was that it didn’t ‘burn’ her hand, as what happened to Tony, then she slowly moved to look behind the dresser and screamed. Facing her was a huge black mass with two red circles like eyes. She backed away, dropping the dagger as she turned to run towards the steps. The implement fell to the floor, its leather-bound grip becoming jammed in the padlock fitting on the trapdoor. The light flickered as though it was about to go out and the basement door slammed shut. Her heart was now racing as panic set in. She had just about reached the top step when, instead of seeing the door in front of her she found the black mass with the red eyes facing her. Screaming again, she backed away, lost her footing and found herself falling back. The next thing she felt was something sharp piercing her back as she gasped, blackness enveloping her.

Tony heard Jenny scream and was quickly aware that she was not lying beside him. “Jenny”, he shouted as he bound out of bed and rushed out of the bedroom.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, Amanda woke up hearing all the commotion. Yawning, she went to Rodney’s door, knocked and opened it. Rodney stirred.

“Rodney, wake up” she said, shaking him.

“Whaat?” He replied sleepily.

“Can’t you hear all that noise?”

“What noise?”

“Someone downstairs ... shouting.”

“No, I was asleep.”

“Something’s happened. We have to go and see what’s going on.”

She dragged her brother out of bed and pulled him towards the door.

“Come on, Rodney.”

There were no lights on in the hall or kitchen but Tony sensed that Jenny had gone down into the basement. He flung open the door and saw Jenny lying still, on her back over the trap door in the floor.

“Jenny” he said, “are you ...”, but there was no sign of any movement.

He quickly descended the steps and grabbed one of her hands to feel for a pulse. It was very weak. He lifted her up putting his arm around her back and felt something metal sticking into her. He lifted her up and saw the dagger protruding from her back. He pulled her close to him.

“No, no. Jenny. Speak to me. Don’t go.”

As he stared at her face looking for some sign of consciousness, her eyes fluttered momentarily and then she went still. He pulled her close to his body again, sobbing.

“No, no. Why you? Why now?”

His thoughts went back to the trunk that Jenny had insisted that he burn, even though he had advised against it; but she had been adamant. He remembered the strange thing that happened when he set light to it. A cold, icy wind blew across the garden where he had burnt it and what sounded like a moan emanated from the house which they also attributed to the wind. Then all the lights in the house had gone out and, on investigation, Tony found that the main fuse in the fuse box had tripped. “Power surge” he had suggested. It all came flooding back.

“Why did you make me do it, Jenny” he sobbed.

At that exact moment, Amanda and Rodney appeared at the basement door.

“What’s happened to our Mum?” Rodney asked, with a worried look on his face.

Amanda was more accusatory.

“What have you done?”

Tony glanced round quickly at the children with a surprised but grief-ridden expression.

“Nothing” he replied. “She fell ... upon that ... bloody dagger.”

Amanda was staring at him.

“How could she have fallen on the dagger if it was just lying on the floor?”

Tony was shaking his head.

"I don't know. This is how I found her. You don't think that I killed her, do you?"

He turned back to look at Jenny and, although he knew she was dead, he shouted "Just call for an ambulance."

Amanda disappeared whilst Rodney just stood staring with tears in his eyes.

Amanda first called for an ambulance and then the police, who told her to instruct Tony not to touch anything and for them to try and remain calm. Surprisingly, she felt perfectly calm when she returned to the basement to tell Tony to lay her mother back down. It was only when she and Rodney went to sit in the lounge to wait for the police that she burst into tears.

The police and ambulance didn't take long to arrive. Detective Inspector Henry Gough and Detective Sergeant Kathy Arnold stepped into the house.

"Déjà vu" Kathy said.

"Seems like this house has got it in for whoever lives in it" Henry replied. "At least the children have been spared this time."

The two officers descended into the basement to examine Jenny's body before Kathy returned to the lounge where she separately interviewed Tony and the two children. Henry spoke with the pathologist who had just completed an initial assessment of the circumstances of Jenny's death.

"Well, Dave?"

"Death obviously resulted from the knife wound, but how it could have penetrated her back if it was just lying on the floor I don't understand. Still, once I get it back to the lab I can check for finger prints. Maybe that will throw some light on the subject."

"Time of death?"

"Some time between one and two o'clock."

"Hm; that checks with the time the daughter phoned us."

Henry made his way back to the lounge to find a distraught Tony sitting with his head in his hands on one sofa and the two children sitting together on another holding hands with blank expressions on their faces. Henry's immediate thought was that they seemed remarkably calm, considering that their mother had just died from a knife wound. Kathy got up from where she was sitting and went up to Henry.

"We need to talk."

“I need to get home” Tony suddenly burst out.
 Henry thought that a little odd.
 “What about the chil ...?”
 Kathy nudged Henry and shook her head slowly and turned to Tony.
 “Sure Mr. Bartle. One of our officers will take you home.”
 “I’ll be okay” Tony replied, standing up, shaking.”
 “No, you are not driving in the state you are in. One of our officers will take you.”
 Tony shrugged.
 “I’ll just get my things and change.”
 “Constable Higgins” Henry called out, loudly.
 PC Higgins appeared from outside the front door.
 “Sir?”
 “Please help Mr Bartle pack up his things and escort him home in the patrol car.”
 “I can manage” Tony replied.
 Henry flicked his head at PC Higgins, who followed Tony upstairs. Once they had left, he spoke to the children.
 “Is there anyone you can stay with or can come and sit with you, Amanda and Rodney?”
 “No” Rodney immediately answered, but Henry noticed Amanda’s hesitation.
 “Amanda?”
 “Mr Davies might come.”
 “Mr Davies?”
 “Jim Davies. He is a close friend of the family and was working with Dad on ... the history of the house.”
 “Ah yes, Jim Davies, the retired journalist?”
 “Yes.”
 Henry thought for a moment.
 “We’ll call him as soon as it gets light.”
 He turned to Kathy.
 “Meanwhile, Kathy, my Detective Sergeant, will stay with you until we can contact him.”
 He glanced at Kathy who nodded her agreement and returned his attention to the children, still wondering why they didn’t seem more upset.
 “Are you both sure that you will be alright staying here? Being a crime scene, we would normally escort you somewhere else, but under the circumstances ...”

“We knew it was going to happen” Amanda said.

Henry stared at Amanda.

“What?”

Kathy elbowed him.

“Let me get them settled, Henry. I’ll brief you in the morning.”

Henry got the hint. “Okay.” He glanced towards the hall. “I think they’ve taken your Mum. Kathy will stay here in the lounge.” He looked over at Kathy. “Is that alright?”

She nodded.

Soon, all was quiet in the house. Amanda and Rodney had gone back to bed and Kathy settled down with a cup of coffee and a book she found on the bookshelf in the room.

She woke with a start. The book was on the floor and the half cup of coffee remaining was cold. Something had woken her. She strained her ears, listening hard. There it was again - a faint scraping sound. She got up slowly and made her way towards the hall. At the foot of the stairs she stopped and was about to ascend them when the sound was repeated, behind her, from the basement. Who could be down there? They had locked it after Jenny’s body had been removed. She fetched the key from the lounge where they had left it and paused outside the room. She put her ear to the door and thought she heard faint scraping sounds. Carefully, she inserted the key into the lock, turned it slowly then switched the light on and pulled open the door. The cold damp air hit her first; then she saw the message written on the wall opposite.

PROTECT THE CHILDREN

She quickly glanced around the room but didn’t see anyone, only the blood stain on the floor where Jenny’s body had lain. Descending into room she checked out the dresser, in case someone might be hiding behind it. Scratching her head, she looked back at the wall; the message had disappeared! Did she imagine it? Even the temperature seemed to have risen. Puzzled, she shook her head and left the basement, locking up after her. How was she going to explain that to her DI? Before returning to the lounge, she crept up the stairs to check on the children – both were fast asleep. She returned to the lounge and made herself comfortable on the sofa.

Kathy woke up when she heard movement coming from upstairs. Amanda and Rodney had presumably got up. She made a quick call to her DI, who told her to sit tight and informed her that they had decided to bring in Tony Bartle for further questioning and finger printing. After taking a quick shower and helping Amanda and Rodney get some breakfast, the three of them spent the morning walking along the headland with the children talking about their father and the information he had discovered about the house. Kathy thought back to the contents of the trunk that she and Henry gone through and which included the copious notes and diary left by Nicholas.

“DI Gough and I examined the contents of your trunk very thoroughly and I can understand how they can lead to some very interesting and, I could say, unbelievable theories” she said; then added “We may need to go through them again as they could well throw some light on the cause or reasons for your parents’ deaths”.

“That won’t be possible” Amanda replied.

Kathy glanced at Amanda.

“Oh, why is that?”

The children went quiet and told her that their mother had told Tony Bartle to burn the trunk and its contents.

“That’s a great shame” Kathy said. “Although at the time we found the contents very interesting, the conclusions you father came to could only be interpreted as just suspicions or theories.” She thought for a minute. “Does anyone else know about the history of the house?”

“Jim Davies” Rodney replied instantly. “He was very supportive of dad and wrote about the past history of the house when he was a journalist.”

“Oh yes” Kathy replied. “I remember. We must have a word with him.”

DI Arnold Gough turned up not long after lunch.

“How are the children coping?” he asked Kathy in a low voice.

“Surprisingly well” she replied, “and from what they have told me, I think I can understand why. I also think that we need to have a conversation with this Jim Davies, who has developed a close relationship with the family, or at least with the children.”

Henry nodded.

“I’ll ask patrol to pick him up.”

At that moment, his phone rang.

“Yes! ... What? ... Ask patrol to bring him to the house.”

He switched off the phone.

“What?” Kathy queried.

“Jim Davies has just walked into the station.”

XXVI

Amanda and Rodney were surprised when Jim Davies turned up in a patrol car. As he walked in the door, he noticed Amanda and Rodney sitting together on a sofa in quiet conversation. DI Gough and DS Arnold were standing, also talking.

Henry immediately turned his attention to the visitor.

"I know that news, especially bad news, travels fast but am I right in assuming that your appearance at the station has something to do with what has happened here.

"Yes" Jim replied, and turned his attention to the children. "I am so sorry to hear what happened to your mother, Amanda and Rodney. So tragic."

The children didn't initially respond but just grabbed hold of each other's hand.

"Thank you, Jim" Amanda replied, glancing at her brother, who nodded in response.

"Would you mind if I had a word with these two officers in private?"

"No" Amanda replied and got up. "Come on Rodney, let's go for a walk."

Jim watched the children leave the house and walk down the garden path then turned to the two detectives. He extracted an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Henry, who took it with a questioning look on his face.

"I haven't opened it. I thought it best in the presence of ... an officer of the law or Mr Saunder's solicitor, whom you will be hearing from shortly.

Henry accepted the envelope proffered him but looked at Jim quizzically.

"Tell me, Mr Davies, how did you find out about Mrs. Saunder's death when no announcements have been made?"

Jim hesitated. "I ... I just knew."

"You just knew?"

"Yes. I can't explain it but ..."

"Never mind" the DI responded and read the instruction on the front of the envelope.

My children's happiness and well-being are paramount. Should a situation arise that might deprive them of their due inheritance and independence then, and only then, should this envelope be opened and my final instructions contained within followed without question, otherwise I cannot be responsible for the consequences.

“What a strange message” he said, “and what does he mean by ‘... *cannot be responsible for the consequences*’?”

He showed the envelope to Kathy.

“Well open it then” she said.

Henry glanced at Jim. “Jim?”

Jim hesitated before answering.

“I ... er ... do know exactly what Mr Saunders meant ... but ... I think you may find an answer of sorts if you refer to the notes that Brian left.”

“Ah!” Henry said. “Sadly, his wife had the trunk containing both his and Nicholas’ notes destroyed.”

“Lucky then that I made copies of everything. I had an inkling that she might do something like that.”

“So why would you even consider copying everything?”

“I was a journalist ...”

“So I hear.”

“... and I knew there was a story to tell.”

“We did read through both Nicholas’ and Mr Saunders’ notes when we borrowed the trunk, following Mr. Saunder’s death, but found the suggestion of paranormal activity, if you want to call it that, difficult to believe.”

Jim smiled. “I do agree that reading Mr. Saunder’s notes certainly challenges one’s beliefs but it offers the only explanation as to what has happened here and what could still happen.”

The DI turned the envelope over to slit it open.

You mean the consequences, Mr Davies?”

“Yes. I know it sounds stupid but the house will turn its anger on anyone who threatens the children.”

Kathy’s gasp made them both look at her.

“What?” Henry said.

“I forgot to tell you what happened during the night.”

She went on to relate all that had occurred when she was woken up, her visit to the basement and the message on the wall.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Henry demanded.

“Because I didn’t have the opportunity and I didn’t think you would believe what sounded more like a nightmare.”

“I think we might like to borrow your copies of the trunk contents to go over them again, Jim, but I think we will find it difficult, if not impossible, to convince the Super to believe or accept this ... story.”

“You don’t tell him” Jim suggested. “You’ll both be ridiculed and probably end up back on the beat; and another thing.”

“What?” Kathy and Henry both answered.

“I think a presence in this house killed Jenny ... and her husband.”

Henry looked aghast at Jim.

“But Mr Saunders’ death was an accident and ...”

Jim shook his head.

“There is definitely some force or presence, call it Nicholas, in this house that has the ability to control events ...”

Kathy was about to say something, but Jim continued.

“... but that’s all I am going to say. We’ll just have to follow the instructions that Mr Saunders left and let things take their course.”

Henry quickly slit open the envelope and pulled out a typewritten sheet of paper with Brian’s signature at the bottom. He spent a few moments scanning the text, casting Jim a brief glance. He folded the sheet back up and returned it to the envelope and looked at Jim and Kathy in turn.

“We need to have a talk with Mr. Saunder’s solicitor, with Amanda and Rodney present.”

As if on cue, the DI’s phone rang again.

“Yes? Right. ... Okay. Tell him we will be there at 4 o’clock.”

“Don’t tell me” Kathy said.

“Mr Saunders solicitor wishes to see us ... and Mr Davies.”

He turned his attention back to Jim Davies with a questioning look on his face.

“Yes” Jim responded. “I called on him earlier before I went to the police station to hand him an identical letter to the one I have just handed to you.”

The DI glanced at his watch.

“We’ve got half an hour. Let’s get Amanda and Rodney ready and make our way there.”

The two police officers, Jim, Amanda and Rodney were ushered into a waiting room by a slim middle-aged receptionist at the solicitors but were not kept waiting long. Behind a polished oak door, a voice could be heard followed by the sound of a telephone handset being replaced on its receiver. The next moment, the door was opened and a tall slim man in a dark suit appeared. He pushed the pair of spectacles he was wearing back up his nose and looked over the five waiting visitors. He focused on the DI.

“Inspector Gough?”

“Yes” Henry replied, getting up from his seat.

“Adam Symonds. Please come in.”

He shook Henry's hand and ushered the group into his office. It was a large room with a long and polished oval mahogany table a few feet in front of his desk. He signalled that they should each take one of several seats either side and sat himself at one end. An open folder lay in front of him which Jim noticed contained the open envelope which he had given him earlier. Having introduced himself and acquainted himself with the others in Henry's group the solicitor picked up the document that was laying on the folder.

"I must admit" he began "that I found Mr Saunders' instructions certainly unusual but, be that as it may, I have asked you here" he looked at the five people around the table in turn, "to inform you of Mr Saunders instructions following his death and the unusual circumstances in which Amanda and Rodney find themselves." He looked pointedly at the two children. "First of all, though, I offer you my deepest sympathy for your tragic losses, Amanda and Rodney, and I can't imagine how you both feel, losing both your parents in such a short time."

He paused momentarily, noting how the children grabbed each other's hand and looked at Jim.

"Your father's wishes are as follows" he continued, focusing his attention on the two children. "I believe you also have a copy of this document, Mr Davies" he added, transferring his attention to Jim.

"Yes" Jim replied, "and I passed it on to Detective Inspector Gough here." The solicitor nodded.

"He began, and read out the last will and testament of Brian Saunders with a caveat relating to the situation in the event of both their parents' deaths.

In summary, the document stated that the whole estate be left to Amanda and Rodney. It was revealed that Brian had a portfolio of substantial long-term investments with all liquid assets held in trust for the children. He had nominated Jim Davies as their guardian, pending his acceptance, to monitor their progress and well-being until they reached adulthood. Should Jim accept, he also included a substantial stipend for Jim Davies as payment for his services. He also advised that Jim appoint another person whom he could trust to verify that he was fulfilling his commitments to a satisfactory level - a third party one might say. After the solicitor had finished reading the document, Jim looked around him.

"I am deeply honoured of course but surely I am too old to look after two young children. Isn't there a relative who could better look after them?"

"No" the children responded together.

“Anyway, Dad trusted you, Jim” Amanda said. “You both understood what was happening in the house ...”

The solicitor had a puzzled expression on his face.

“Happenings in the house?” He questioned suspiciously. “What does that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a long story” replied Jim. “And if you don’t believe in ghosts, hauntings, the paranormal or the afterlife then I suggest we just follow the instructions.”

The solicitor glanced at Henry with a questioning look on his face.

“If you are satisfied that the documents are legal and valid” Henry said, “then I suggest we just implement the instructions. The police have no other interest in the outcome.”

Adam Symonds still looked a bit uncertain.

“I am certainly aware of the past tragedies at Headland house, but ‘happenings’?”

Amanda now spoke up.

“Our father found an old trunk in the house that included documents, photos and a diary that Nicholas Johnson left about the evil man called Silas Matthews.”

The solicitor looked even more confused. “Nicholas Johnson? Silas Matthews?”

“Previous occupants” added Kathy.

Amanda continued.

“When strange things started happening in the house, Dad started making lots of notes that went some way to prove what happened to Nicholas’ family ... and the two boys who died twenty years later.”

Adam Symonds nodded. “Interesting.”

“Dad also kept a diary” Amanda continued, then her faced dropped. “Unfortunately, Mum had them all burnt.”

Kathy now joined in again.

“Luckily, our Mr Davies here made copies of the trunk contents, so we have a complete record of everything that went on at Headland House. You are welcome to read through them if you wish.”

The solicitor shook his head.

“I think I’ll pass on that one. Far too busy.”

The children quickly turned to look at Jim with surprised looks on their faces.

“Did you, Jim?” Rodney said. “Copy everything?”

Jim nodded.

“As I said to these two officers, I had an inkling after your Dad died that your mother didn’t believe in or understand the supernatural nature of the events that had and were happening in the house, so thought it wise to take a copy of everything.”

At this point the solicitor was looking totally confused.

“I don’t know what on earth are you all talking about so can we just finalize and agree the arrangements regarding Amanda and Rodney, otherwise I will have to contact social service regarding their care.”

The looks on the children’s faces persuaded Jim to agree to abide by Brian’s wishes.

“But who is going to ensure that I will always have Amanda’s and Rodney’s best interests at heart, even though I have great respect for these two very intelligent and mature children?”

A period of silence followed while they all pondered who could fulfil the role.

“Kathy” Amanda blurted out.

“Me?” Kathy replied, taken aback. “I can’t ... I’m not qualified ... I ...”

Amanda switched her attention to Kathy Arnold.

“But you told us you would like to move into the family liaison division, so ...”

Henry glanced at Kathy.

“You didn’t tell me that” he said.

“I’d only been tossing the idea around in my head; nothing definite.”

“I think you have potential to be a great family liaison officer ... or even DI, should you decide not to follow that career path.”

“It’s more a question of working in a role where I can really make a difference ... helping people ...”

“Well, if you really want a transfer, make sure you apply for a senior position. You are more than capable. There will be a fair bit of training involved.”

“Of course” Kathy replied.

The solicitor was glancing at his watch.

“Excuse me interrupting discussions on the officer’s career plans but ...”

Jim, Amanda and Rodney looked questioningly at Kathy waiting for her response to Amanda’s suggestion. Kathy looked back at each of them in turn.

“Okay, I’ll do it but ...”

“Don’t worry” Henry said. “I’ll have a word with the Super. I’m sure they’ll be no problem.”

The solicitor returned the letter to the file in front of him and closed it.

"If that's all ladies and gentlemen and we are in agreement, I will draw up an appropriate document regarding the welfare of Amanda and Rodney Saunders, appointing Mr James Davies as their legal guardian."

The five of them thanked Adam Symonds and returned to Headland House to discuss plans for moving forward.

"Why don't you move in with us, Jim" Rodney suggested.

Jim was hesitant. "Well, I'm not sure that is a good idea. I ... er ... what ..."

"I think it's a good idea," Henry agreed, "unless there are particular reasons that suggest otherwise."

"Assuming I get clearance" Kathy added, "I should be able to call in regularly to see how you are all getting on. I've no other commitments at present and even if something does come up ..."

"Like a boyfriend?" Henry chuckled.

Kathy ignored the jibe and continued "... I can't see why it shouldn't continue. I enjoyed Amanda's and Rodney's company the other morning and when Amanda indicated that she might like to join the police, I thought I could help her to decide whether that's something she really wants to do."

"That's settled then" Henry stated. "I'll get on to the Super right away so that we can all work together to help Amanda and Rodney."

Jim seemed to becoming more agreeable to the idea.

"I'll work with Kathy to sort out the legal and financial issues and probably rent out my place whilst I am staying here."

Henry got up.

"Now we'll leave you three to sort yourselves out. Kathy and I have to get back to the office to file a report."

Kathy rose from her seat and the two officers made their way to the front door. As they were about to leave the house Henry turned round.

"Oh, Jim."

"Yes."

"As I indicated earlier, we'd like to borrow your copies of the notes and other material that Mr Saunders kept in the trunk. They may throw some light on how this tragedy unfolded and led to the two deaths."

"Sure" Jim replied. "I'll drop them in tomorrow."

"Thanks."

They left, leaving Jim and the children to sort out a room for Jim.

"I'll use the box room at the end of the landing" Jim suggested.

“No you won’t” Amanda said abruptly. “You can have Mum’s and Dad’s room, if you are okay with that.”

Jim looked uncertain. “It doesn’t seem right. It was your parents’ ...”

“Look Jim” Amanda interrupted. “We loved both our parents very much and, even though we were much closer to Dad and did feel sorry for Mum, we weren’t blind. We could see what was going on but what we don’t understand is why they had to die. It wasn’t as though our lives were being threatened.”

“Nicholas obviously didn’t see it that way” Jim said. “It seems that he couldn’t take the risk ... again.”

After a few moments of silence, they all started to speak at the same time.

“Do you ...” Rodney began.

“What do you ...” Amanda started.

“I thought ...” Jim said.

The three of them laughed.

“Go on, Jim” Amanda said, questioningly.

“It is my intention” he began “to write about the history of this house and how it took on a life of its own, in the form of Nicholas’ metamorph. I will of course need your permission as you two effectively have rights regarding all the documents.”

“That’s fine” Amanda replied, Rodney nodding in agreement.

“Do you think Nicholas will stay around?”

Jim hesitated for an instant.

“I don’t know, Rodney, but something tells me that Nicholas has at last fulfilled a promise he made himself.”

XXVII

About two weeks following Jenny's death, and after Jim had handed over to the police his copy of the trunk contents, Henry and Kathy turned up one day to talk with the three of them.

"There have been some developments regarding your Mum's death" Henry told Amanda and Rodney.

"Accidental death?" Jim asked.

"No" Henry replied. "More serious than that."

The children looked at each other questioningly.

"Tony Bartle has been charged with manslaughter."

"What?" Amanda gasped. "Manslaughter; but how?"

"His fingerprints were found on the dagger."

"But what about other prints?" Rodney asked. "There must be loads of them."

"That's just it" Henry replied. "There were no others."

"In spite of what happened" Amanda added, "we think he loved Mum and would never have harmed her. What made them think that he was responsible for Mum's death?"

"Your Dad's notes didn't actually accuse him of anything but they cast an element of suspicion which the prosecution picked up on."

"But he's innocent" Rodney said. "Nicholas killed her. We will tell them."

Kathy turned to Rodney.

"Forget what you think and know about this Nicholas and the house. The law works on substantiated facts; and the facts are that your mother died from a stab wound from a dagger with only one set of finger prints – Tony Bartle's."

"We didn't particularly like him but we can't believe he actually killed her" Amanda said.

"Well," Kathy continued "it may come down to just manslaughter or a crime of passion but we believe he is going down for some time."

No one knew what to say. Amanda offered to make some coffee which they drank in silence until Kathy asked a question that was bugging her.

"How are ... things with the house?"

"Oh, I think we're getting on very well; would you agree Amanda and Rodney" Jim responded, glancing at the children.

They both nodded their heads with broad smiles.

“We’ve just about finished laying the new floor in the basement” he continued, “so we are now tossing around ideas as to what to use the room for.”

“That’s good.” There was a long pause. “Anything else ... like ...?”

“Messages on the wall?” Jim postulated.

“Well ...”

“No, nothing. The room stays nice and warm and that horrible damp odour seems to have gone.”

Henry slapped his knees and stood up.

“Okay. I think we have just about wrapped this up. We’ll be off now and Kathy can keep me updated.”

“Thank you, Henry, for everything” Jim said. “I think this house has acquired a new lease of life.”

“And a better one we hope” Kathy added.

That night, Amanda had another dream. She was having a game of ‘swingball’ with Rodney in the garden when there was a shout from the kitchen door. She turned round to see three people waving to her: two of them were her parents, Brian and Jenny, and standing between them was Nicholas, smiling with an expression of satisfaction. That same night a black mass drifted from Headland House, made its way to Fenshaws Farm, through a copse and disappeared into a dark boggy pool.

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