

WINGS OF DARKNESS

Beryl Buxton

Chapter One

“Back again, already?” Mrs Prettle, of Prettle's Employment Bureau, shook her mauve rinsed head and looked disapproving. “Really, miss Chapel.”

“Not guilty this time,” Lucy protested, depositing her carrier bag of shopping on the floor and resting thankfully in the chair before Mrs Prettle's desk. “I am a victim of high finance, mergers and takeovers, skullduggery in the financial stratosphere.”

“You're out of work again,” Mrs Prettle said heavily.

“Redundant. if you please.”

“It amounts to the same thing.”

“True,” Lucy admitted, “but this time I am blameless and so exempt from one of your little lectures. Aren't I?”

“You are also exempted from picking up a wage packet at the end of the week,” Mrs Prettle said.

“Which is where you come in.” Lucy smiled disarmingly.

“No, I do not,” Mrs Prettle said firmly, pursing her thin lips, her slight, wiry frame erect beneath the large, fluffy Angora cardigan. “I would remind you that I run an agency for people who require employment; steady, permanent employment. I have no time to spare for people who regard work as a sort of hobby, and jobs as something to be collected, like postage stamps, or Victorian bric-a-brac.”

“I am the one who should be complaining: After all. you did provide me with a job that, three weeks later, suddenly ceased to exist. I am the injured party!” Lucy looked suitably aggrieved.

“Unfortunate.” Mrs Prettle's expression proved that she did not share Lucy's View point.

“To say the least!”

“But I daresay your past work record did nothing to convince your new employers that you would be a loyal, long serving employee.”

“Mr Webster was made redundant as well,” Lucy informed her.

“Never!” Mrs Prettle looked shocked. “The poor man has worked there for donkey's years.”

“I helped him move his plants from the office to his home. He was rather upset.”

“Why? Did you damage some of his plants?” Mrs Prettle looked aggressive.

“Upset about his job,” Lucy explained.

“I should think he is upset. And with very good reason. Redundancy is a fine reward for the years of service he has given. A fine gentleman, Mr Webster. Many of my girls have cause to be grateful for the help he has given. I must get in touch with him.” Mrs Prettle scribbled a note on her desk pad to remind her of her intentions.

“And what about me?”

“Well,” Mrs Prettle looked slightly less disapproving, “perhaps you were the victim of circumstance. This time.”

“So what have you got to offer me?”

“Nothing. You are about to become the victim for the second time, a victim of the economical situation. Jobs are very scarce at the moment.”

“But I must have a job. And soon.”

“I take it that thrift is not numbered among your few virtues. I'm sorry, I am afraid that my more dependable girls must take priority for the vacancies I do have,” Mrs Prettle said primly.

“If they are so dependable, why are they also out of work?” Lucy countered.

Mrs Prettle smiled coldly.

“You must have something.” Lucy said desperately. “I'll consider anything.”

“Anything?” Mrs Prettle asked casually, toying with her pen.

“Anything.” Lucy noticed the gleam in Mrs Prettle's eyes.

“Within reason, that is,” she added hurriedly.

“Within or without of reason, I should advise you to accept the position I will send you after. Against my better judgment, I might add. But this is the only vacancy I

have for you.” Mrs Prettle arose and pulled out a drawer in the filing cabinet behind her desk. She felt quite pleased with herself. This was one way of filling this obstinate vacancy, already refused by seven of her girls. And Nancy had been really upset when she had returned from her interview.

“Take it or leave it?” Lucy asked bitterly.

“Not at all.” Mrs Prettle smiled sweetly. “As far as you are concerned, it is purely a take it situation.” She scribbled down an address and passed the paper to Lucy.

“Valley House, Scarton,” Lucy read. She looked up. “Scarton? Where is that?” she asked, puzzled.

“A very long way from here.” Mrs Prettle said with satisfaction. She took out a cash box and counted out a number of pound notes. “Don't worry. expenses are provided.”

“Along with a map and a compass. I suppose?”

“Yes, it is a rather out of the way place.” Mrs Prettle laughed and looked pleased. “Now, I'll tell you the train you must catch and the times. And I will warn you again that there are very few jobs available at the moment.”

“That sounds more like a threat,” Lucy said dispiritedly.

“What must I do in Scarton? Milk cows? Build roads?”

“Nothing so drastic. But Miss Westgate will explain all. Please try not to antagonize her.”

“I shall be my usual charming self,” Lucy assured her.

“I would much rather you tried to make a favorable impression,” Mrs Prettle said sweetly.

Scarton Village was reached via a train and bus journey of three hours. The bus deposited Lucy outside a deserted warehouse that still bore the fading sign proclaiming: BOBBINS FAMOUS PICKLED HERRINGS.

Lucy stared around the small Square flanked by tiny shops and houses. The narrow streets leading from the Square were almost deserted, except for a distant figure hunched against the chill east wind that prowled the cobbled streets and moaned around the granite blocks of the buildings.

'Perhaps Mr Bobbins pickled the entire village before he left.' Lucy thought fancifully, for the village did indeed have the air of being preserved; captured and held on a day long ago and existing unchanged and out of place in a modern world.

An old gentleman with fiery red face enhanced by a shock of unruly, snow white hair ambled up to the bus stop. He peered at the timetable pasted on a telegraph pole, checked the watch taken from a waistcoat pocket, then shook his white head angrily.

"Missed the dang thing again," he barked in Lucy's direction. but not necessarily addressing her. "Banged buses."

"Is there a taxi?" Lucy asked.

"Taxi? Not at this hour, there ain't. Does be old Joe's dinner-time. And the pub don't shut 'til three." He chuckled and started to shuffle off.

"How do I get to Valley House?" Lucy called after him.

"You be young enough to walk, I reckon," the man answered without turning. "The road is straight ahead."

She passed along a street of shops and houses with low doorways and narrow windows, looking as though they had been Squeezed and compressed by the weight of time into their present cramped appearance. The road was named Valley Road. 'But that is no guarantee that it will lead to Valley House.' Lucy thought pessimistically, for she was expert at losing her bearings.

Some fifteen minutes from the outskirts of the village the road forked, left being Wood Lane, right the continuing Valley Road. As she took the road to the right, a car

came up behind her from the direction of the village, a taxi. She stopped and watched it pass. A bright red face under a shock of white hair smiled at her through the rear window of the taxi. Lucy shook her fist and the old man waved back happily and she laughed at his perkiness.

The narrow road winding through field and pasture land, was lined by high, thick hedges; dark, winter green still, although the new buds had started to form. The wind was stronger now and whined through the hedges and the branches of an occasional tree. Apart from the red-faced man, she had not seen a living soul. She adjusted the scarf about her neck and shivered, as much from the feeling of desolation as from the cold, and increased her pace, impatient to end her journey through this lonely land.

The house appeared on her right through a gap in a high hedge. A short driveway curved to the red bricked structure. Lucy paused and studied the building. It was not particularly large. She had expected something more imposing. Valley House was what she would have expected a country vicarage to look like; certainly old, not very impressive, but with a Certain quiet dignity, a feeling of gentility. The steps that led up to the wide front entrance were somehow too grand, a touch of pomposity about an otherwise fairly modest building.

“You be quite safe. She won't bite you.”

Lucy gasped and turned startled eyes in the direction of the ghostly voice. A small, Wizenen man leant on a garden spade and regarded her with amusement.

“Your nerves don't be of the highest quality, do they?” he observed.

“You gave me such a fright! I didn't see you there.”

He raised his battered, shapeless hat and rubbed the top of a completely bald head. “I been here so long now that I become part of the scenery,” he said solemnly, replacing his hat. “In fact, some folks do mistake me for one of those plaster gnomes folk keep at the bottom of their gardens. That's because I don't dash around so much these days.” His face remained completely straight, his expression serious.

Lucy laughed. She could well understand someone mistaking him for a garden

gnome. The diminutive man with pointed features and sparkling, playful eyes beneath the old hat certainly reminded her of an illustration from a child's book of fairy tales.

“You will be here about the job, I take it?” he asked.

Lucy nodded.

“Thought so. You'll be the twelfth victim this past two weeks.” He shook his head sadly.

“Victim? Steady on,” Lucy protested. “Are you trying to put me off before I even have my interview?”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” he said airily. “old Miss Westgate can put anyone off far better'n I.”

“You don't do much for a girl's confidence, do you?”

“I be like a long lost friend compared to her.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the house. “Fussy baggage, she is. But it won't matter anyway. not if you be of the wrong birthday.”

“What on earth does my birthday have to do with anything?” Lucy asked faintly.

“Search me. But it seems it does. You won't get past 'Good afternoon' if you be born under the wrong star sign.”

“And what is the right star sign?”

“Search me again. Codswallop all of them. if you asks me.” He took out an old briar pipe and jammed it between his teeth, struck a match on the seat of his trousers and puffed clouds of smoke into the atmosphere. “I don't like smoking this old thing, but it help keep the mosquitoes away.” he explained, waving his pipe before him.

“Mosquitoes at this time of year?” Lucy said doubtfully.

“Don't see any, do you?”

“None.”

“There!” he said triumphantly. “I told you this old pipe keeps them away. Place would be swarming without me here to control the pests.”

“Drive away more than insects, I should imagine.” Lucy observed, wrinkling her

nose as a cloud of pungent smoke drifted around her. “In fact. I think I would prefer mosquitoes: You force me to take shelter in the house.”

“Good luck.”

“If you are to be believed, I shall need it.”

He grinned after her as she made her way up the driveway.

She pushed the ivory button of the doorbell and admired the sparkling, highly polished brass surround, but not the actual sound of the bell, which was harsh and clamorous, demanding attention.

A shadowy figure appeared behind the frosted glass panels of the double doors, one side of which opened to reveal the inquiring expression of a maid.

Lucy waited in the hall while the girl hurried off to inform her mistress. The staircase was to her left, rising to the landing that ran across the width of the hall. Along the landing she could see doors, obviously leading to bedrooms. All the woodwork was dark, polished wood. The hall, which seemed much too wide and a waste of space in a house this size, was marble squares of black and white. The whole area was bare of decoration of any kind; no brass or prints or flowers brightened the rather austere atmosphere, and yet it did not appear dull, relying on the natural beauty of wood and stone sparkling spotlessly clean for a decorative effect. Lucy appreciated the effect and the obvious pride taken in the appearance of the house, but she would still have preferred a splash of color.

The maid came from the doorway at the foot of the stairs.

“The mistress will see you now,” she murmured and hurried away. Lucy entered a small ante room that was equipped as an office, crossed this and tapped on the door that stood ajar.

“Come,” a voice boomed and Lucy entered a most peculiar room. In the center of the floor stood a huge, solid looking desk. Square and paper littered, it dominated and seemed to dwarf everything, including the wide gray-stoned fireplace. The walls were lined with big, brightly colored charts. A bookcase practically groaned beneath the

weight of books jammed into and onto it. Two low, deep armchairs were situated either side of the fireplace. Everything in the room seemed large and heavy and substantial, including Miss Westgate. A Well built lady in her middle years, not one short gray hair out of place and her bulk encased in a full tweed suit of undistinguished heather hue.

“Lucy Chapel, is that right?” Agatha Westgate regarded her with bright, perceptive eyes. “Mmm. Bit of a wishy-washy sort of name, Lucy. Do you like it?” she asked keenly.

“It's the only name I have,” Lucy replied, slightly nettled, “and I find it serves its purpose.”

“Suppose it does, yes. Not your fault, of course. You didn't choose it. eh? I like a name with a bit more character, one you can get your teeth into. Good old fashioned names are best: Agnes, Tabitha, Henrietta, Juliana. I've always liked Juliana.” She repeated the name in a forceful, booming voice that echoed around the room.

“See what I mean? You couldn't get the same effect with Lucy. Tell you what,” Miss Westgate's face brightened with sudden inspiration, “I will choose a suitable name for you, a good name with lots of beef to it. How would that suit you?”

Lucy felt slightly confused. What was this all about? She was here for a job, not to be rechristened.

“Well? Speak up, girl, do you or don't you?” Miss Westgate asked impatiently.

Lucy looked at her boldly. “It's very kind of you to offer, Miss Westgate, but I could not agree to accept unless you allowed me to choose a suitable name for you,” she said with a quizzical smile.

“Rubbish! Agatha is not a name to be tampered with. Or replaced.” She jammed her hands into the pockets of her jacket and stared down at the girl before her. Suddenly she chuckled; a deep, rich sound. “There's no telling what impudent tag you might fix to me. But I take your point, my girl. As long as you are content with a silly name; Lucy it shall be. Though only you and heaven knows why. Golden opportunity wasted.”

She stalked across to the fireplace and reached for an ornate cigar box, from

which she took a slim cigar. She offered one to Lucy, who shook her head firmly and shuddered at the very thought of smoking one of the evil looking things.

“Don't approve, do you?” Agatha barked.

“No.”

“Neither does anyone else,” Agatha chuckled, lighting the cigar with a slim, golden lighter.

“It will be one of your duties to ensure that I don't smoke too many.”

“Why?” Lucy asked.

“Because the damn things make me cough.” Agatha demonstrated the effect of the cigars by immediately breaking into grasping cough.

“Why do you smoke them?” Lucy asked logically.

“Because I want to, I like to, and cigarettes are bad for my health. The world would be a happier place without those scientists poking their noses into our pleasures and telling us, graphically, how harmful everything is. Can't enjoy anything these days. What date is your birthday?”

“June twelfth.”

“Good enough. Now, any questions?”

“About what?” Lucy asked, undecided as to whether they were discussing scientists smoking cigarettes. Miss Westgate's cough, or whatever.

“Miss Chapel, you could show some interest in the position that you will soon be taking in this household.” Agatha said heavily.

“But you haven't asked.....”

“References? Experience? Qualifications?” Agatha Waved her cigar impatiently in the air, scattering ash onto the faded blue carpet. “Fiddlestickst I have wasted enough time interviewing silly girls these last few days. If you want the job, it's yours. Yes or no?”

“Well, yes. I think.” Lucy said uncertainly.

Agatha sighed and puffed furiously on her cigar.

“That is, yes,” Lucy said firmly.

“I hope you work faster than you take decisions.”

“I know nothing about you, or the work involved,” Lucy said defensively.

“I know nothing about you.” Agatha countered, "except that your name is Lucy! But I still made a decision. I think that we will get along fine together, although I must warn you that I'm not always so agreeable.”

Lucy wondered what Agatha Westgate's definition of disagreeable was. She watched the older woman as she flicked ash into the fireplace. Agatha stared solemnly back at her. There was, Lucy thought, a suspicion of amusement in the corners of Miss Westgate's eyes. And she found herself smiling friendlyly.

“Well, Miss Chapel, when can you start?” Agatha asked.

“Whenever you want me to.”

“Tomorrow,” Agatha said promptly.

“Tomorrow? But I have things to do. I have to settle....”

“Then, much as I know it pains you, I'm afraid that you will have to make another decision and decide when you can join us here,” Miss Westgate said heavily.

Lucy thought quickly. Today was Thursday. In spite of her protestations she did not have that much to see to before she would be able to move, a day would be plenty of time. But she felt the need for a breathing space. she felt slightly overwhelmed by the house and its owner, the suddenness of the change in her life. She needed a few days to herself to get used to the idea of living and working here.

“I should be ready to join you by Monday," she informed Agatha Westgate.

"Splendid! I was afraid you might start mumbling about the need to give a months notice or some other such nonsense. But Monday will be fine. Now, if you are arriving by train, and I presume you will be, noticing the absence of a car in the drive, then I am afraid I will be unable to meet you at the station. But you found your way here today. I daresay you will be capable of doing so again. No motor car, you see. Just didn't

want you to think that we were not concerned about your arrival. If there is nothing further. I will let you hurry off and attend to your business.”

“You haven't mentioned what my duties will be.” Lucy prompted.

“Varied. As a matter of fact, you will mostly be concerned with running the household, with a certain amount of typing and filing now and again. But it is most important that I have the time to continue my work and it will be your job to ensure that I am disturbed as little as possible.”

“And the salary?”

“Adequate,” Agatha said promptly. “I will draw up a contract and we can haggle over it on Monday.”

She took Lucy's arm and gently but firmly guided her towards the door.

“Until Monday, then. I must say, I am looking forward to working together. Have a safe journey home. I don't want to start that tiresome interviewing all over again, so do be careful.”

And Lucy found herself making the long walk back to the station and wondering just what she had let herself in for.

Chapter Two

Monday came. There was no one for Lucy to say goodbye to. She struggled the two suitcases containing her possessions downstairs to the hall and waited for the taxi to arrive, Mrs Sweeney, her hair permanently tangled in pink plastic curlers, popped her suspicious landlady face around the door of her ground floor flat. She had taken the news of departure, and most of the last of Lucy's precious few pound notes, with a disinterested sniff of her long, sharp nose. Now, she scurried up the stairs to inspect the room before her tenant departed out of reach of any possible claim for compensation.

Lucy watched with a feeling of distaste as the woman hurried out of sight. It did not matter to Mrs Sweeney who occupied her miserable little room, as long as they paid the exorbitant rent promptly and adhered firmly to the over-strict house rules, one person was the same as the next. Lucy had occupied the room for three months. and in a week Mrs Sweeney would have totally forgotten her face and name. Lucy felt depressed by the house and its occupants. Her stay there had been short and not so sweet and it was with a feeling of relief that she opened the door to the taxi- driver sounding his horn as a signal for his arrival.

She had never really settled anywhere. Lucy thought about that on the train journey to Scarton and wondered about the reason. Of course. her being unemployed on this occasion was not of her choosing. She thought she might have been happy with the courteous Mr Webster and his quaint ways in his funny little office. It was one job that she had been genuinely sorry to lose.

But wasn't that the way with everything? she thought with a sigh. Just when you were into something good. Fate with its big, flat feet, would wander clumsily into your life. trampling all over your plans and seedling dreams and reducing everything to confusion yet again. Jobs and flats and men, nothing was safe.

And what of Agatha Westgate? Lucy pursed her lips thoughtfully, unaware of the startled glance she received from her one fellow passenger in the compartment, who was

under the impression that she had suddenly pulled a face at him. Miss Westgate was.....? Lucy was not sure. Agatha was not a person who would fit easily into any known category. She was bright and busy, domineering and brusque to the point of rudeness. But there was an underlying vein of warmth. Lucy thought Agatha Westgate's friendship would not be given easily, but once won it would be enduring, 'And if we don't become friends, then heaven help me. My life will not be worth living,' Lucy decided.

She arrived on the steps of Valley House just after noon. The driver hauled her suitcases from his ramshackle cab and deposited them at the foot of the steps.

"You dare, Joe Wentwick," a voice boomed threateningly. Agatha Westgate stood atop the steps, hands on hips, and glared down at the unfortunate man.

"I can manage, Miss Westgate," Lucy called, as she paid the taxi fare.

"I dare say you can. But you won't! Not while there is a gentleman to assist you," Agatha said loudly, laying particular emphasis on the word 'gentleman'.

With a scowl, the driver picked up the suitcases and hauled them ungraciously up the steps.

"This don't be part of my duties." Joe Wentwick grumbled when he reached Agatha. "I don't be paid for a doin' this."

"Save your breath, man, you will need it for the remainder of your journey. Upstairs with you. Mary will show you the way," Agatha said briskly, motioning forward a small, dark-haired and pretty girl who was tugging nervously on the white apron she wore. Mary hurried up the stairs and Joe Wentwick reluctantly followed, bad temperedly bumping the suitcases as he did so.

"And you will pay for any damage you cause," Agatha called after him. She turned to Lucy, who was standing in the hallway.

"You must learn to be firm when dealing with trades people, especially the unwilling ones. And I find most of them fall into that category. Now, to the study." And she marched quickly into that room. Lucy followed and took the sheet of paper that Agatha Westgate thrust toward her. "Contract I promised you."

Lucy Swiftly scrutinized the paper.

“All in order and perfectly legal. I assure you. Solicitor friend of mine drew it up. Note the salary. Adequate?”

Lucy looked. Generous rather than adequate, and she nodded.

“Good. good. We can review the situation in six months, all being well. That is that out of the Way. Now to introduce you to the rest of the staff.” Agatha strode out of the study and across the hall, with Lucy in tow. Joe Wentwick was just leaving. He scowled at Agatha as she passed. She ignored him. Or appeared to. But as he Opened the door, she boomed: “Slam that door at your peril. Joe Wentwick.”

He did not. But there was a startled look on his face, as though he had intended to.

“And this is Martha. Mrs Lorrington. Martha has been with me simply ages. Place would fall down without her,” Agatha said. They were standing in the kitchen. Martha was gray-haired and fifty, a warm smile on her plump, red-cheeked face.

“Welcome, Miss Lucy,” she said cheerfully, wiping her hands on her spotlessly clean white apron. She spread her arms to indicate the large, stone floored kitchen, a scrubbed, whitewood table occupying the center of the floor. Along the walls hung various cooking utensils. Lucy’s attention was caught by the row of gleaming copper-bottomed pots that stretched the length of one full wall and reflected images like copper mirrors.

“This is my domain, Miss Lucy. A place of refuge, it is. for those who can take no more of being upstairs. Feel free to visit whenever your nerves do be jangling. And they often will,” she warned, with a sidelong glance at Agatha.

Agatha's booming laughter echoed around the kitchen.

“And it is also my refuge from incompetent workers. In fact, on a really bad day, we might all find ourselves down here, huddled over cups of Martha's excellent coffee and bemoaning our fates together.”

“Bless us: You all be welcome, but not altogether,” Martha laughed. “That would

be too much for a body to bear. One at a time, if you please, else I'll never get my work done. And if you want your lunch to be ready before teatime, I'll have to ask you to excuse me.”

Martha hustled away to prepare lunch and Agatha led the way upstairs to Lucy's room. The maid was waiting outside and was introduced to Lucy as one Mary Felale, who stared at Lucy with anxious eyes.

“I have not unpacked your things, Miss.” Mary said, in a voice so low it was almost a whisper. “There are people who would not thank you for touching their things. But I shall unpack if you want me to.”

“Thank you, no,” Lucy smiled. “I shall unpack later.”

“Very good, Miss. Will there be anything further, Ma'am?” Mary asked Agatha, who shook her head.

“No. Off you go, Mary.”

Mary's departure reminded Lucy of a shy, woodland creature bolting from some dangerous situation.

“And now there is only one member of the household left for you to meet,” Agatha said. “I have no doubt she will appear around lunchtime; Until then, I will leave you to inspect your room. Lunch in my study in thirty minutes,” Agatha Went downstairs.

The room was nothing out of the ordinary. The white painted woodwork and the cornflowered wallpaper had given good service. Lucy observed, as she glanced around her. As had the furniture: a large, cumbersome wardrobe, a dressing table with plenty of drawers, and an armchair that looked big enough and comfortable enough to make her feel like a little girl again. It was a splendid chair, ideal for a quiet evening with a good book. Lucy noted with approval the radiator beneath the window.

Although the room and its contents might have seen better days, everything and everywhere was spotlessly clean and bright. Rather homely, Lucy decided. She began to unpack her suitcases.

"I could be happy here," she remarked to her reflection in the dressing-table mirror. Her reflection grinned back at her. "At least you can try," her reflection said. "And if you are not happy, well, it's a nice Place to be for the summer and six months will soon pass by."

"Ah, here's lunch now," Agatha remarked, as Mary opened the study door and pushed a trolley into the room, "and look who is following her. I told you she would show herself at lunchtime. Come here, Tabitha, old girl." Agatha called to a huge cat that padded in behind Mary. The marmalade colored creature fixed unblinking green eyes upon Lucy, who stared back with curiosity. She was neither a cat lover or hater, being of the opinion that some were good and some were horrors. She would reserve her judgment of Tabitha until she knew the animal better. Tabitha, for her part, obviously decided that the newcomer was comparatively uninteresting and glided disdainfully to her mistress' side.

"Don't you dare jump up at me, beast," Agatha ordered. "I've no wish to wash my hands again. If you want something to eat, take yourself off to Martha."

Almost as if it had understood what Agatha had said, the cat turned and Wandered out of the room.

Mary uncovered the plates on the trolley and scurried away in her customary manner.

Agatha noticed the question in Lucy's eyes. "You will have to forgive Mary. You will soon get used to her ways."

"She always seems to be fleeing away from something," Lucy laughed.

"She is. The silly girl is petrified of me." Agatha sighed. "Although, goodness knows, I try my best not to alarm her. I try so hard and with so little effect that she irritates me and then I snap at the poor girl and make everything worse than before."

"Why should she be afraid of you?" Lucy asked. "Surely she has worked here

long enough to know your ways by now?"

"Mary lives in the village. They are a superstitious lot down there. They are firmly convinced that I am a witch." Agatha smiled with obvious satisfaction.

Lucy laughed incredulously. "I have heard of rural superstition but I never thought that it really existed, at least, not in this day and age."

"You would be surprised at the things that they believe. Why, some of them will run a mile to avoid meeting Tabitha out on her wanderings. In broad daylight, too. Silly creatures. The cat possesses more sense than they." Agatha passed Lucy a plate of cold meat and salad. "

But why should they think that of you?" Lucy persisted.

"Oh, it's a long story, m'dear. Perhaps one day I shall explain it to you. Now I just take advantage of their beliefs and exploit them unmercifully, which is only what they deserve."

Over the next few weeks Lucy became part of the household, slipping easily and quickly into the scheme of things. Agatha Westgate had described Lucy's duties as: 'varied...with a certain amount of typing.' This had been something of an understatement. There was, invariably, each morning a large amount of typing waiting for her. And on the strangest subject matter. It seemed an odd jumble of astrology, which Agatha practiced, folk lore, herbs and herbal remedies, strange cabalistic signs and their interpretation. There seemed little or no method to the way Agatha worked. Her mind jumped like a grasshopper from one subject to the next. She scribbled happily away about strange country medicines one day, the next might see her just as happily explaining a complicated theory of how modern society had accepted and adopted some ancient custom to its own needs.

As for ensuring that Agatha worked undisturbed. Lucy found this the easiest part

of her duties. The telephone hardly ever rang, visitors were few and seldom unexpected, nearly all having previously made an appointment. Martha ran the house like clockwork, which relieved Lucy enormously. She had neither the inclination nor the time to concern herself with domestic matters.

The time passed busily and quickly. And happily for Lucy, She found a restful contentment in this quiet, informal house. Agatha was seldom seen during the day. Lucy saw her at dinner in the evenings and afterwards they would discuss the work done, the work remaining.

Lucy was able to take advantage of any fine days to explore the surrounding countryside. Behind the house, over an expanse of rough moorland, were the cliffs and a small, protected beach. To the front of the house, across Valley Road, was a large meadow; beyond that was the woods and Wood Lane, which passed through it. Behind the woods was the curious geographical feature known as The Scar. This was a sort of inland cliff face, a sheer upheaval of rock, its steep face overgrown with plant and lichen and it did, from a distance, resemble a dark green scar across the face of the countryside. At its lowest point near the village, the Scar was only feet high, ending in an untidy jumble of boulders and rock; at its highest point, some one and a half miles from the village, it soared sixty feet into the air, its face unscaleable. The summit reached only by means of the grandly named Mountain Road, built to service the unoccupied and largely dilapidated Victorian building known as the Lodge.

Lucy had only once visited the woods, She found it dark and damp, broodingly ancient, a place of sinister, secretive silences. She much preferred the lighter places; the quiet hedge lined Valley Road, with its view of the wide meadow and the peaceful cattle grazing contentedly. She loved to walk across the turf to the clifftops, the fierce sea breezes buffeting her playfully, the cool, fresh tang of the cool, sparkling sea clearing her mind, sharpening her thoughts. The clifftop walks were her favorite, even more so when she discovered the small, secluded beach at the base of the cliffs. She gazed down at the small pocket of white sand. The only way it could be reached was to scramble

down a clutter of fallen rock. But it could be done without too much difficulty. Lucy's mind went to the approaching Summer. April was almost over, the days were growing warmer, soon it would be warm enough for the beach. She wondered if the waters were safe for bathing.

“Bless you, child, I be the wrong body to ask such things of,” Martha had chortled when Lucy had asked her. “It is a long time since my swinsuit saw the light of day. I prefer my bathing to be done in a nice hot, soapy bath, with lovely warm towels waiting for me. Here, Mary, do it be safe to go swimming by the cliff beach?” Martha called.

Mary had turned her big, dark eyes in their direction.

“The waters be safe, right enough. But I can't say the same for the rocks. You'd best be careful climbing up and down there,” Mary warned. “And there be a strong current if you go too far.”

“There won't be much danger of that,” Lucy laughed. “Four feet deep and I begin to feel out of my depth.”

“That be the sensible way,” Mary smiled. Away from Agatha Mary was a different person. Still shy and retiring and not prepared to speak until spoken to, her smile was more in evidence and there was a gentle humor to some of her remarks that amused Lucy and made her realize that behind the nervous facade there was a warm, positive person.

Once, when she had accompanied Mary to the village on some errand. Lucy had tried to broach the subject of their employer. They were walking along the Valley Road and Mary had been more communicative than normal, talking about the village and some of its history. Lucy had wanted to help ease Mary's fear of Agatha. There had been an incident in the house earlier. "

“Her bark is much worse than her bite,” Lucy had remarked, lightly, if not originally.

“She may bark more than she bites nowadays, Miss, but that don't mean she ain't

got teeth,” Mary had muttered, her dark eyes flashing.

Lucy had been surprised at the vehemence the remark held. Mary had fallen into a sullen silence which persisted until they reached the outskirts of the village, despite Lucy's attempts to re-establish the rapport there had been between them at the start of their journey. They were on the village main street when Mary touched Lucy's arm with tentative fingers.

“I'm sorry Miss, for the misery I've been,” she said, a troubled expression on her face as she stared at Lucy.

“There is nothing to apologize for,” Lucy smiled. “Except for the fact that you insist on calling me Miss, when my name is Lucy.”

Mary smiled gratefully. “It was bad manners, Miss Lucy, to be brooding in your company,” she insisted.

“Think nothing of it, Miss Mary.” Lucy answered. And Mary's surprised, tinkling laughter had echoed around them.

Lucy had learned that the first Wednesday in every month was an extra half-day holiday for her. She had discovered this when, on the afternoon of the first Wednesday that month, a positive crowd of ladies had suddenly appeared at the front door of the house. The peaceful atmosphere of the house was shattered and Lucy stared in bewilderment as twelve ladies of assorted size, weight and age trooped into the hall.

“Didn't I warn you?” Agatha boomed, amused by the uncomprehending expression on Lucy's face. “Must have slipped my mind. This m'dear, is the monthly meeting of my Astrological Society. Or, as the villagers prefer to call it. 'The Gathering of the Witches', 'The Meeting of the Coven'. I'm afraid that there will be very little peace in which you can work, so you can amuse yourself.”

Lucy had gone to the kitchen to see if Martha required any assistance in dealing

with the invasion.

“They've arrived, have they?” Martha asked, looking warm and flurried, her cheeks even more colorful than normal. “Humph. Astrological Society they calls themselves. I don't know about stars, but I do know that they put away an almighty amount of food and drink while they talk about them. If you could give Mary a hand fetching these trays through, she would be grateful. She will be wanting to make herself scarce now that they have arrived.”

Mary did indeed seem agitated. Lucy could sympathize with her, even if she did consider Mary to be foolish. If the poor girl has apprehensive in Agatha Westgate's company, how must she feel being positively surrounded by people who she suspected of dealing in the supernatural?

“You go home, Mary. I will see to anything further,” Lucy offered, after they had carried the large trays of cocktail foods into the study. And Mary hurried thankfully away.

The day was damp and misty. Walking was out of the question, so Lucy settled down in the warm kitchen to chat with Martha over a coffee.

Martha sank down with a thankful sigh.

“Such a state I was in! Bless me if I didn't forget completely about the meeting today. And me been seeing them arrive punctually every month for years now. Though Mary being quieter than usual should have sparked my memory. Has she taken herself off home?”

“Practically running.” Lucy smiled.

“Foolish creature, she is: But no worst than most of them around here, including my husband,” Martha said disapprovingly.

“I don't see any reason for their suspicions”” Lucy said.

“Ah, but you did not know Miss Agatha's parents,” Martha said knowingly. “Right rascally pair, they were. Full of mischief. Why, they even bought themselves long, black cloaks, flowed out behind them, and they would stalk around at dusk just to

scare the wits out of the village folk. And there were some maintained their tricks were far worse than mischief.”

“I started work here, let me see now, it must be all of twenty years ago. Just wedded to Ben Lorrying, I was, and jobs were scarce to come by then. And I was apprehensive when I started here, I can tell you. My head full of nonsense from the local folk, nonsense that I soon dismissed. Strange in their ways the old couple might have been, but they never showed aught but kindness to me. Fair broken up I was, when they passed away.”

“And Agatha inherited the house then?” Lucy prompted.

“Yes. The old boy was last to go, and he sent for Miss Agatha just before the end. She'd never been seen more than once or twice in all the years. Sent away to learn the Devil's trade in foreign parts, or so the tales would have us believe. And I'm not denying that she has her strange ways, but it's a free country and I can't see the harm in the things she believes. Leastway, I've never found myself hopping home toadlike after a day's work,” Martha chortled.

“It is surprising how people will cling to old beliefs,” Lucy observed.

“Afraid of taxing their minds with new thoughts that might need a little reasoning,” Martha said, rising to fetch the coffee-pot over to the table. She poured fresh cups for both of them.

From upstairs came a rising murmur of voices, strangely rhythmical. The wind blew the rain against the window pane, the large drops spattering noisily against the glass.

“The queerest part of it is,” Martha continued, as she sat down again opposite Lucy, “some of the really old folk of the village bless the day that the Westgates arrived in the district. They claim that there was an evil influence abroad, until the Westgates banished it. Their children will have none of that tale, though. They insist that the Westgate family IS the evil influence. So you pays your money and takes your choice.”

“It all sounds slightly dotty to me.” Lucy laughed.

“And so it should,” Martha said stoutly. "I'm relieved to hear it. Dark fairy tales of yesterday should have no place in today's world. But you must not judge Mary too harshly for her views. She has been influenced by her parents, friends and neighbors. The stories are a way of life to her now.“

“She seems convinced that Agatha Westgate is lying dormant, a sort of sleeping volcano that has erupted before and could do so again at any moment, without warning,” Lucy said.

“Tush: And many another thinks like that also, because it suits them to remember past grievances. And so they should remember, for their own benefit, more than anyone else's. Of course, there was a little bother when Miss Agatha first moved into the house.” Martha mused, sipping her coffee slowly. “But the trouble was none of Miss Agatha's doing. It was a case of greedy people trying to take advantage; using her land illegally and without her permission, tradespeople trying to feather their own nests at her expense. People wanted to see how canny she was, and they soon discovered: There was some right grumbling amongst those caught at their hanky-panky. And then the blame for every little bit of local misfortune was laid at Miss Agatha's doorstep. Not that it bothered her. 'If that's what they believe, Martha, then perhaps they will think twice before crossing my path again,' she would say, with a laugh. And it was the right attitude to take, in my opinion. She might not get the respect that is accorded to some folk, but by Jumbo: she is certainly treated with caution, which amounts to roughly the same thing around here.

But here an I clacking away like an old hen about the shortcomings of other folk, and you so tired you can hardly keep your eyes open.” Martha reprimanded herself.

“I do feel rather drowsy,” Lucy admitted. “But you must not think that I am bored.” she insisted, stifling a yawn. “I have enjoyed listening to the tales of the village. It is so warm and comfortable in here. I'm surprised that you don't find yourself nodding off to sleep.” She tried, and failed, to stifle another yawn.

“I often do,” Martha admitted with a chuckle. “And I shall do so again very

shortly, as soon as you are in your room.”

“Yes I think I will lie down.”

Lucy left the kitchen and made her way slowly upstairs to her room. She picked up a book she wanted to read and lay down on the bed. Below her room, the voices continued their muted, lilting harmonies that swirled comfortingly around her. And the book remained unopened as she slept soundly. She was awakened next morning by Mary, who remarked that she did not look at all well. Lucy peered into the mirror and had to admit that Mary was right. She spent the day trying to ignore a pounding headache and a bitter taste that lingered on her tongue.

Chapter Three

Lucy went swimming the first Wednesday in June. She awoke to a bright, cloudless sky. There had been other nice days, but this was the first that the sun had given real warmth. The temperature was approaching that of a summer's day and it was barely nine o'clock, Lucy noted gleefully, deciding to pay her first visit to the cliff beach.

She quickly finished the work for that morning and helped with the preparations for the Society's meeting, before dashing upstairs to pack her towels and sun things and change into her swimsuit and beach-robe.

By twelve o'clock she was striding happily through the lush spring growth along the clifftops. She swung the small picnic hamper that Martha had packed for her. And she felt as bright and clean and fresh as the day itself.

The path down the rocks was fairly simple to negotiate. Once down, Lucy looked back and decided it would not be so simple to return. But that remained in the future.

The sand of the beach was white and clean and hot from the sun's rays. The beach was enclosed on three sides by cliffs and fallen rock. On the fourth side by the sea itself, Lucy spread a towel on the sand and felt as though she was on her own very private beach. The sea was sparkling invitingly as she slipped off her beach-robe and ran gladly into the Waves. She was soon splashing shivering back to the warmth of the shore. The water was icy! Thankfully, she wrapped the sun warmed towels around her shivering shoulders. It would take more than one sunny day to improve the temperature of the sea. But the sun beat down gloriously and Lucy was soon basking contentedly.

It was after her lunch, near to three in the afternoon, when she sensed rather than saw the shadow fall across her prone figure. She jerked into a sitting position, shading her eyes with one hand as she peered at the dark figure outlined against the bright sky.

“Oh, Sorry,” a flustered voice apologized. “I didn't mean to alarm you.”

“What did you expect, creeping up on me like that?” Lucy asked peeishly, resenting his intrusion onto what she considered to be her own property.

“Thought you might have fallen, or something. Hurt yourself, perhaps,” the man said, still apologetically. He moved around out of the glare of the sun and she could now see his face. He was about twenty-five years of age, but his face had a boyish look to it that made him appear younger than his years. His hair was sandy and tousled, his eyes piercingly blue. He was wearing a faded checked shirt and blue jeans and his boots were muddy.

“I doubt if anyone could fall from the cliffs and land so far down the beach,” Lucy pointed out. “And they certainly would not land neatly on a towel, with their possessions grouped tidily around them.”

He grinned friendlily, ignoring her suspicions.

“You're from the Valley House, aren't you? I've seen you around there a few times when I've been moving the cattle from the meadow. We're practically neighbors. My name is Frank Walters,” he volunteered.

Lucy nodded slightly. The name meant nothing to her.

“Nice spot, this,” Frank Walters said, glancing around the beach. “Though I'm not one to do much swimming. Prefer my feet on dry land. Your day off, is it?”

“Yes.”

He had an open, friendly manner and she found it hard to be distant with him.

“Well, it's not my day off, more's the pity. Saturday's mine” He looked at her keenly. “I'll leave you to it. then.”

He tramped a few feet towards the cliff face, then turned back to her.

“There's a cinema in Bellbury.” he informed her in a loud voice.

“Is there?”

“Yes. I'll be going there this coming Saturday. Do you fancy the trip? They do say the film is a bit of a frightener. But I'll be there to hold your hand.” He grinned at her.

Lucy smiled back, amused. He sensed her hesitation.

“Be a break for you,” he said persuasively.

"I've never been to Bellbury," Lucy said.

"You're not missing much," he laughed. "I could pick you up at seven, by the house gate. Shall I?"

"Yes. Why not?" Lucy decided.

"Til Saturday, then." He waved and strode happily away. Lucy watched him clamber agilely up the fallen rocks, his long legs pushing his lean frame quickly and easily up to the clifftop, where he waved once more and disappeared.

Lucy lay back on the sand again, but she could not settle. The interruption had made her feel restless. Soon she gathered her things together and slowly made her way back to the house.

The meeting of the Society had ended earlier than usual. And unsatisfactorily, Lucy decided, as far as Agatha Westgate was concerned. Agatha hardly spoke two words all through the evening meal. Once or twice Lucy caught a frown flitting across her employer's face. After the meal, Agatha immediately returned to the study.

Lucy waited for thirty minutes before she knocked and entered the study to discuss work for the following day. Agatha was standing by the fireplace, her back to the door as Lucy entered. She was wearing one of her favorite heavy tweed suits, this one a sort of murky green color, and her hands were jammed into her jacket pockets.

"Have you prepared your notes for typing, Miss Westgate?" Lucy asked quietly. Agatha Westgate did not answer. Lucy wondered whether her employer had heard the question and was about to repeat it, when Agatha suddenly whirled around.

"You don't believe in all of this, do you, Lucy?" She flung out one arm to indicate the charts covering the walls, the books of mysticism.

"I don't know enough about it to make a decision one way or the other," Lucy replied thoughtfully. "I would say I was disinterested, rather than unbelieving."

“Then how do you View the future?” Agatha barked, reaching for one of her cigars.

“I don't.”

“Of course you do, girl: Everybody does. Or tries to,” Agatha said impatiently, slumping into her armchair. She puffed smoke furiously and waved Lucy into the armchair opposite.

“You must have some sort of philosophy.”

“No. I apply the same rules that I was taught when learning to take care of my pennies and they would grow into pounds.”

“And did they? Grow into pounds. these pampered pennies.”

“No,” Lucy admitted. “I am rather careless. But if I take care of today, then tomorrow will take care of itself.”

“A splendid idea. But utterly impractical,” Agatha chuckled. “An amusing, if lazy, way of thinking. Your theory places me in the role of a grasping financier, disdainful of the coins of small denomination, forever clutching at the more valuable notes.”

“Valuable, and elusive, judging by your present mood,” Lucy retorted, stung by Agatha's amusement.

“Oho!” Agatha laughed. “Ruffled your feathers. have I? You've only yourself to blame for being so naive.”

“Your method of judging the future does not seem to be giving you much satisfaction,” Lucy retorted.

“As you pointed out, you don't know enough about the subject to form an opinion,” Agatha said tartly.

“At least I'm not chasing shadows!”

“Shadows? Yes, that's about the size of it.” Agatha gazed speculatively into the large, empty fireplace. “the trouble with this damn business is that there are too many shadows. You can very seldom see things clearly, sharply. Everything is either very dark

or slightly out of focus, But that does not mean that they are not there, as you would no doubt maintain.”

“Is there something wrong?” Lucy asked with concern, ignoring the last barbed remark. She felt slightly alarmed by the troubled look in Agatha's eyes.

“Wrong? Of course there is, child!” Agatha snapped. “Or there very soon will be. Do you think my agitation is a sign of my well-being? And now you will inanely ask what it is that troubles me, and I will have to answer, like a foolish old woman with bad dreams, that I do not know. We can do nothing but wait.”

“But if there is nothing but a vague presentiment, perhaps it will not be as bad as you fear.” Lucy said re-assuringly.

“Are you trying to humor me, young lady?” Agatha glared at her.

“No. I was only trying to.....”

Agatha was not listening. She stared moodily about the room. Suddenly she jumped to her feet and strode across to the large, dark wood desk.

“Why can't I see it?” she cried angrily. “Dammit! The answer is here, to a question waiting in the future.” She roughly knocked a large, leather-bound book to the floor. “What good are books if you can't understand the language they are written in? I can actually FEEL a shadow stretching towards me. Can you understand that? So why can't I see what causes the shadow?” She struck the desk-top with her fist.

Lucy watched her silently, a little fearful.

Agatha calmed as quickly as she had exploded. She turned to Lucy and it was as if she had made a decision.

“I will write a letter. Do we have an airmail envelope?” she asked.

“Yes.” Lucy rose to fetch it. When she returned, Agatha was flicking through the pages of her diary. She took the thin, blue paper from Lucy and scrawled a short message upon it.

“This must be posted first thing in the morning,” she instructed, sealing and addressing the envelope.

“Very well.”

“That will be all for this evening. Don't worry about tomorrow's work.” Lucy went to her room. She propped the letter against the dressing-table mirror so that she would not forget to post it. The letter was addressed to a numbered postal box, there was no name, and Lucy wondered who it was that Agatha knew in Australia.

There was very little work for Lucy to do in the next few days. Agatha spent most of her time in the study, poring endlessly over her large, thick volumes of astrological charts and maps and plans. When she did venture out of the study the atmosphere in the house was electric. Everything and everyone seemed to displease Agatha.

Lucy, her supply of work having ceased abruptly, spent a good deal of her time in the kitchen.

“I've never known the mistress in such a mood before,” Martha muttered distractedly on the Friday afternoon, after a tearful Mary had returned with the pie intended for Agatha's lunch. “A cup of broth, indeed! For heaven's sake! How can I be expected to prepare a broth on five minutes notice?”

“That's what she said, Mrs Loring.” Mary Sniffed plaintively and looked dejectedly at the cook. “Fair put out, she was, when I placed the pie before her. Ranted and raved as if it be my fault.” Mary's eyes filled up and threatened to spill over again.

“Now, now. Calm yourself, girl,” Martha said soothingly, placing a comforting arm about Mary's shoulders. “It be nobody's fault. Except, perhaps, the person the mistress inherited such a wicked temper from.”

“Do you have a tin of soup, or something?” Lucy asked.

“Tush! She wouldn't thank you for anything out of a tin” Martha said scornfully. “But enough of this nonsense! I shall see her myself. I'll not have her complaining about good food.” Martha took off her apron, picked up the tray and marched determinedly from the kitchen.

Five minutes later she returned, minus the tray.

“Quiet as a lamb, she was. Told me not to go to any trouble on her account when I promised to prepare a broth for tomorrow.” Martha shook her head. “Lord knows what is on her mind. But you would be better steering clear of her for a few days,” she warned Mary. “You have an uncommon knack of rubbing her the wrong way.”

Mary nodded and looked miserable.

All in all, they were an uncomfortable few days and Lucy felt relieved at the prospect of a few hours respite as she prepared to meet Frank Walters on the Saturday evening.

Bellbury's cinema was small and slightly grubby: The 'Classic' by name, but not by nature. It was a relic from the nineteen fifties, the heyday of the cinema, and appeared to have gone steadily downhill from that time. In truth, an attempt had been made in the late 'sixties to restore some of the 'Classic's' faded glory, but it had been a halfhearted attempt by a zealous new owner with more memories than money and the cheap gilt paint had soon tarnished, the red, imitation velvet seat-covers soon worn threadbare. Now, the ornate building was slowly expiring in a depressing air of seediness.

The film was atrocious. It seemed that the promised 'frightener' film had aroused little curiosity amongst the citizens of Bellbury, and had quickly been replaced by a so-called sex-comedy: 'The Confessions of a Farmhand'. The main purpose of the plot, as far as Lucy could make out, was to expose as many bare breasts as possible in ninety minutes. Failing to see the humor in the semi-naked film antics, which were mainly childish, sometimes stupid, and always crude, Lucy yawned her way through a boring hour and a half.

Frank Walters enjoyed the film immensely. He laughed often, loud and heartily, and emerged from the cinema a happy man.

“That was a bit of luck, eh? Catching a good film like that,” he enthused, as they walked towards his battered, green Landrover. “I wouldn't mind our farm being a bit more like that one. Though Mum would have a few words to say if it was,” he laughed.

“You would not do much farming.” Lucy said.

“Shouldn't worry about it, not with girls like that around.”

The engine roared noisily and Lucy clung on tightly as the vehicle rattled and swayed alarmingly over a cobbled road surface.

“Still early yet.” Frank shouted over the noise of the engine. “Fancy a drink?”

“I'm not sure,” Lucy answered uncertainly, relaxing in her seat as the Landrover rolled onto the smooth surface of the main road.

“Might as well. We can go to the Plough in Scarton. Pretty lively on a Saturday night.” His face frowning with concentration, he negotiated the vehicle around a tricky bend, then sent it speeding forward.

“Not what you're used to, of course, you coming from the city. But the Plough's a nice pub. Friendly, like.”

“Just for one, then. I don't drink very much.”

“That's the ticket.” Frank grinned at her pleased.

Soon, the small houses huddled around the mean streets of Bellbury were far behind. They Sped down the unlighted, hedge lined lanes that bisected the farmland. At intervals, Frank informed Lucy whose land they were passing, how many acres that person owned, how many people farmed it. He knew everybody for miles around and enjoyed discussing their failings; who could farm well, and who could not, whose sheep were substandard and likely to stay that way through meanness and poor breeding. how this farm could easily increase its dairy yield by correct feeding of the cattle. All told in a casual, friendly manner that did not change even when he discussed his friends' and colleagues' personal problems; The farmer's daughter who was: 'No better'n you could expect, considering the tricks her mother used to get up to. Must be something in the blood I reckon'. The sheep farmer who was practically a hermit since his wife had left

him; 'Took it hard, he did. Anyone would think he'd lost his best dog or prize ewe or something important, like'. The couple who never uttered a word to each other unless it was absolutely necessary: 'You might see them in the Plough, sitting in a corner all sulky, like. Frightened to lose sight of each other in case one should start enjoying themselves and the other don't. A queer lot, folk'. Frank had laughed and shaken his head in admiration of the quirks of others.

They reached the crossroads and Frank steered the Landrover on to the Wood Lane, a decision he obviously regretted soon after. He fell silent as the brooding mass of the wood appeared before them. He hunched over the steering wheel, staring straight ahead and the speed of the vehicle increased noticeably.

“It may be the quickest way to the village, but I don't mind telling you I wished I'd taken the Valley Road,” he muttered. “This danged place gives me the creeps in the daytime. I can't abide it at night.”

The headlights flickered and flashed amongst the gnarled old trees along the roadside, the light painting the trees a ghostly gray for just an instant, the trees seeming to step back into the concealing darkness as the car passed.

They reached the end of the wood and Frank heaved a sigh of relief, relaxing a little as the lights of Scarton came into view.

“I expect you're glad to be out of there.” Frank said knowingly. “There's nothing to be afraid of, you know.”

Lucy smiled at him. To her, the wood seemed a more natural place at night; it was during the daylight hours, when the shadows of night lingered unnaturally among the trees, that it seemed an unhealthy place to be.

The Plough is Scarton's one public house. It was fairly crowded as they pushed their way into the bar. It was warm and brightly lit, humming with the noise of subdued conversation, the occasional burst of laughter. Lucy saw a few familiar faces among the crowd. Mrs Child, the postmistress, gave her a friendly wave, as did the rotund Mrs Fairfield, who ran the grocery and baker's shop.

Frank took Lucy's arm and guided her towards the dart board, where his usual drinking companions were congregated.

"Here's Frank now," someone called, and a chorus of voices greeted him.

"Did you have any trouble with him, Miss?" someone asked laughingly.

"Just popped in for a game of doubles." Frank said. "I've got me a new partner tonight." And he ushered Lucy forward.

"Have a better game of doubles outside, Frank," a carrot haired man called, leering.

"Have less of that, Lenny," Frank retorted.

"Lenny couldn't get any less of that." someone piped up, and was rewarded with hoots of laughter.

"This is Lucy." Frank introduced her in a general manner. "She's working at the House."

"Which house?" Lenny asked stiffly, still smarting at the laughter that had greeted the reference to his love life.

"Valley House, of course. Ain't no other house. is there?" Frank replied. He passed Lucy a small glass of beer, taking a full pint glass for himself.

"There's the Lodge. That's been taken again," Lenny said, with a secretive air.

"Get away! After all this time?" Frank pressed forward interestedly. "Who's taken it, then?"

"Some doctor chap, I hear tell," Lenny said casually.

"About time we got a new doctor in the district," someone chipped in. "Old Doctor Bill do be getting a bit past it now."

There was a murmur of agreement with this statement.

"What's his name, then?" Frank asked.

"Might be a she, Frank."

"No such luck. Probably older than Doctor Bill."

"Nobody's older than Doctor Bill."

“Cranling. Doctor F. Cranling. Though I dunno what the 'F' stands for,” Lenny admitted regretfully.

“Do hear tell that he's setting up surgery in Murray's old cottage.”

“Cranling. eh?” Frank mused. He took a long drink of his beer. “Seems to me I've heard the name before, somewhere around here, too. But I'll be blowed if I can remember.”

Someone pushed darts into his hand and he stepped in front of the dartboard, the new arrival forgotten for the time being.

“Can you play the game, Lucy?” Frank asked her.

“Er, yes,” Lucy answered doubtfully, trying desperately to remember the rules from the few times she had actually played the game.

“Good.” Frank threw the darts with practiced ease, each one landing precisely where he wanted it to.

“On second thoughts, no. I can't play,” Lucy laughed, noting his prowess.

“No matter, I can play well enough for both of us,” Frank said confidently. “We play for drinks, see? Losers pay for the winners.”

Lucy took a sip of her bitter tasting drink and hoped that she and Frank would not be too successful. She did not relish the thought of drinking much of this beer.

They won the first three games that they played. Lucy aimed for the center of the board and counted it as an achievement if each of her darts actually stuck in the board. The game was much more difficult than Frank and his friends made it seem. They lost the fourth game because Frank suddenly lost interest in the proceedings. He led Lucy to the bar and two empty stools. She perched herself atop the stool and looked at the drinks waiting for her attention. She still had half of her first drink and three more glasses ahead.

“You will have to drink some of these for me.” she told Frank. “I couldn't possibly drink four glasses.”

“Right,” Frank grinned, “anything to oblige a lady.”

Lucy glanced around the room. A low, beamed ceiling made it look much smaller than it actually was. The floor was bare wood; stout, rough hewn pillars two feet thick rising up to support the roof beams. Some of the tables at which the people sat looked positively ancient; thick wooden tops screwed onto cast-iron frames. They were the type of semi-antique that would be snapped up for the novelty value in the city.

“This place must be an age,” she remarked to Frank.

He nodded. “They do say that it hasn't changed in over a hundred years.”

“I could well believe it,” Lucy said.

“Well don't, a gruff voice said. “That young shaver don't know what he's on about.”

She turned to gaze into the elfin face of Thomas, the part-time gardener, the man she had encountered on the day of her interview with Agatha Westgate.

“So you got the job? Thanks to my advice on how to handle the matter, I daresay.” He grinned at her impishly.

“Advice? Gloomy pronouncements. you mean. If I had taken notice to you, I would have run a mile.”

“Ungrateful madam. And what are you doin' keeping company with this tittle tattle?”

“Steady on,” Frank protested.

“Didn't nobody warn you about him? He's only good for keeping an account of who is doin' what they shouldn't aughta. And who they're a doin' it with. Bigger gossip than my ol' granny,” Thomas said disdainfully.

Frank stalked off towards the men's room and Thomas grinned happily as he watched him go.

“That wasn't very polite,” Lucy said reproachfully.

“Then he should stop clacking his big tongue and people won't be able to say such things to him,” Thomas said practically.

“There speaks a man with no faults!”

“None that harms others.”

“What about your obnoxious pipe?” Lucy challenged, and Thomas chuckled.

“And if you don't stop your clacking, I shall light the ol' pipe here and now,” he threatened.

“Oh no! Peace.” Lucy begged.

“Aye, well you mind your manners, young lady, when you are in the presence of a gentleman.”

“A gentleman who has not been seen around the house gardens just lately,” Lucy reminded him.

“Nor will he be,” Thomas said placidly. “I seed it coming from a long way, and now the old Westgate is as happy as a cat with a tincan tied to its tail, I intends to stay well Out of harm's way.”

“She hasn't been that bad,” Lucy protested.

“As far as I be concerned, she hasn't been bad at all. Because I ain't been there since I heard her muttering about dark omens and suchlike. And speaking of unpleasant things. Here comes your gentleman friend.”

“Now, you stop goading him,” Lucy said, as Frank came towards them, “and drink this beer for me, please.”

Thomas touched the brim of his battered old hat and happily accepted the drink she pushed towards him.

Frank stared sulkily as Thomas took a large swallow from the glass.

“If he's getting free drink, you'll never get rid of the old coot,” he observed gloomily.

“I don't see why you're worrying,” Thomas countered. “I know you didn't buy them, you being tighter'n Mrs Fairfield's corset.”

Lucy covered her mouth with her hand to hide her smile. Frank angrily drained his glass and looked at her expectantly. Lucy followed suit, said goodbye to Thomas, who winked at her, and left with Frank. Various people called goodnight to her as she

left the pub, some were only vaguely familiar to her, all were friendly.

“You were right, Frank, the Plough is a pleasant place.” she said, as they walked towards his truck.

Frank grunted. “Most of the folk are alright, but I can't abide that old fool, Thomas.”

“He means no harm. And you do make it worse for yourself, you know, by reacting so violently. That only encourages him.”

Frank was silent for a moment as he unlocked the door of his vehicle and held it open for her.

“You're right, dang it!” he exclaimed as he climbed behind the wheel. “The more I argue, the worse he gets. I shall ignore him next time, real cold shoulder he'll get.”

Frank dropped her off and watched from the Landrover as she walked up the pathway to the house. At the steps she turned and he waved to her before roaring noisily off home. She watched the truck bounce on its way and realized that, for all the talking that Frank Walters had done that evening, he had said very little about himself or his family. 'Too busy with other people's affairs,' she thought, smiling as she entered the brightly lit hallway of Valley House.

Chapter Four

“I heard the car last night.” Agatha mentioned casually. “Anyone I know?”

They were sharing breakfast on this rainy Sunday morning.

“I went to the cinema with Frank Walters last night,” Lucy answered cautiously. One never knew what mood Agatha might be in these days.

“Good film?” Agatha asked.

“No, awful.” Lucy laughed.

“I haven't been to the cinema for years,” Agatha smiled. She seemed calmer, more assured this morning. “If I remember Frank Walters, though. Inquisitive little blighter as a boy.”

“He hasn't changed much.” Lucy admitted. “He seems to know everybody and their business.”

“Frank was always like that. Completely different from his father. Walters, Senior, only has time for his own worries. So much for the theory of like father. like son.”

“I have never subscribed to that theory anyway.”

“Are you like your mother?” Agatha asked curiously.

“I don't know. I never knew her.”

“Oh. Sorry. I shouldn't have asked,” Agatha said gruffly.

“No, I don't mind at all.” Lucy re-assured her. “Both my parents died when I was very young. And Aunt Harriet, who took me in, always claimed that I was more like a little devil than anything human. But she had three children of her own to take care of and I think we proved too much for her on occasion.”

“You lived with your aunt until recently?”

“No. I left as soon as I was old enough,” Lucy said slowly.

The rain ceased in the afternoon, though the sky remained clouded gray and a fine mist veiled the countryside. Agatha was thinking of her work again. She and Lucy discussed different aspects of it through the afternoon and again in the evening. Lucy concluded that whatever had been troubling Agatha had either been resolved or put into proper perspective and accepted as baseless, unsubstantiated premonition. She did not mention the subject and neither did her employer. Lucy retired to her room that night relieved that the imaginary crisis seemed to have passed.

The improvement in Agatha's disposition continued through the next week. The household settled into its normal routine. Mary, after a nervous Monday, brightened considerably as the Week progressed. There was a cheerful, contented feeling inside and outside the house, as late spring promises blossomed into the warm, bright days of summer.

Mary failed to report for work on a Tuesday morning.

“There was nothing wrong with her yesterday.” Martha informed Lucy. “Trouble at home, I expect. Or the fine weather proved too much of a temptation. She will 'phone or call in to tell us if she has a problem.” But there was no word and no sign of Mary on the Wednesday. “She could have the common decency to inform us as to what is going on” Martha grumbled. “I daresay she has her reasons for being absent, but that don't excuse bad manners.”

“Could the silly girl be sulking, d'you think?” Agatha asked Lucy on Thursday afternoon. “Although I must admit that I don't recall hurting her feelings lately, with someone as touchy as that girl is, jolly difficult not to tread on her corns, so to speak.”

“I haven't a clue.” Lucy admitted.

“Well, I could do with a breath of fresh air. I'll stroll down to her home later this afternoon, see what the problem is.”

Agatha left the house after dinner. Tabitha following at her heels like a faithful dog. She returned an hour later, a thunderous expression on her face.

“Is Mary ill?” Lucy asked, as Agatha stamped past her.

“Depends on what you mean by 'ill', m'dear,” Agatha barked angrily.

“Physically, I should say she is in perfect condition. Mentally, well. that's another story. At a rough guess I would say that the girl is completely off her rocker. I have just been sent packing!”

Agatha looked angrily around her, as if still unwilling to believe that the incident had occurred.

“Sent packing by that slip of a girl! She told me, and in no uncertain terms, to get about my business. And to look at her you wouldn't dream that she knew so many unladylike words!”

Lucy followed Agatha into the study. “I take it that she will not be returning,” she asked dryly.

“The girl must be unwell!” Agatha snapped, snatching a cigar from the mantelpiece. “It is the only possible explanation for her behavior.”

“One of the first patients for the new doctor.” Lucy said soothingly.

“Doctor?” Agatha glared angrily. “It's a psychiatrist she needs, not a doctor.”

“I'm sure that it is all a simple misunderstanding that can be easily cleared up,” Lucy said.

Agatha looked at her pityingly and silently puffed away at her cigar.

“Or perhaps she simply no longer wishes to work here,” Lucy reasoned. “And it would be understandable, I suppose, for her to vent some of her pent up resentment. You must admit that Mary and you have not enjoyed the ideal employee-employer relationship.”

Agatha Westgate stared long and thoughtfully before she answered and when she

spoke she was calm again, a re-assuring smile accompanying her words. “Yes, I'm sure you are right. The foolish girl was just being spiteful.” She smiled again and Lucy felt irritated by the smile, the tone of Agatha's voice. She knew her employer was humoring her.

“But now follows the tiresome business of replacing her,” Agatha sighed. “And I am in no mood for interviewing a succession of local girls. Perhaps you could have a word with Martha in the morning? See if she knows of a suitable girl, preferably not neurotic.”

Lucy promised to speak to Martha. But, on the following morning, she did not speak to Martha about a replacement for Mary, nor on any other subject. Martha did not show up for work. Lucy waited, hoping that Martha might merely have been delayed. By eleven-thirty that hope had faded and she went to inform Agatha.

“Has she not? I expect she will be in touch,” Agatha commented calmly and did not seem unduly surprised by Martha's absence. “In the meantime, We will have to manage as best we can. I hope you are more experienced at the culinary arts than I.”

“I'm rather good with a tin opener,” Lucy admitted.

Agatha shuddered and returned to studying the large, leather bound tome lying open on the desk. Lucy left her to her studies and wandered through the silent, empty house, an air of abandonment settling heavily around her.

Martha Loring's home was a small cottage situated on the outskirts of the village. The cottage, like its neighbors, was composed of large, gray blocks of local stone, weathered and worn by the constant winds from the sea. The small front garden was enclosed by a low wall of stone and slate and obviously used primarily as a vegetable garden, for there were very few flowers growing there.

Lucy stood at the garden-gate and was undecided about entering. But why should she not? she argued. She was only inquiring after Martha's health, re-assuring herself that there was nothing seriously amiss. But she still experienced a feeling of unease, as though she were intruding.

Silly, she told herself, pushing open the slightly warped gate and marching up the garden pathway. Of course Martha would be pleased to see her. In answer to her firm rapping, the small door of the cottage opened slowly, just wide enough to allow Martha to stare out at her. There was a startled look on Martha's face as she recognized her visitor.

"Hello." Lucy smiled friendlily. "I thought I'd pop down and make sure that you're not at death's door or anything."

"What? No, no. I'm fine, just fine. That is, I'm not too bad. Nothing to worry about. Thank you." Martha kept her voice low and appeared agitated.

"Good. I must admit that the reason for my visit is rather selfish: I'm absolutely hopeless in the kitchen and already Agatha and I are missing your cooking terribly. But I'm glad there is nothing serious troubling you. Perhaps you will be returning fairly soon?"

"I don't know. I'll have to see," Martha murmured, avoiding Lucy's eyes. "Anyhow, I'll be back when it suits me. When I'm good and ready."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I don't want you to think that I am prying...." Lucy stopped in confusion. It was quite plain that the elder woman resented this visit and Lucy wished that she had decided against coming. But it had seemed the right thing to do at the time. Now, she stood at the doorway feeling uncomfortable, while Martha stared past her with cold eyes.

"Who is it? Who's there?" a male voice barked from inside the cottage.

"Nobody, Ben. It's not important," Martha answered. She turned back to Lucy. "You'll have to go now. Tell the old girl that I'll be back when I'm good and ready, whenever that will be. If ever." The words were spoken harshly and Lucy was too

surprised to answer. She stepped back a pace, just as the door was pulled roughly open and a man's angry face appeared.

“Nobody. is it? You're a long time talking to nobody. Who is she, woman?” the man demanded of Martha. Then, before she could answer, he continued: “From the house, is she? Well. tell her to clear off.” All the time he spoke, or rather, shouted at his wife, his glittering eyes rested angrily on Lucy and she felt afraid of him.

“It's only Miss Chapel come to see that I'm all right?” Martha flared back.

“She's seen now, so tell her to go. We don't want anyone from the house hanging around here. Send her away.” The angry man turned and stomped back into the cottage.

“You had better go,” Martha said, slowly closing the door over.

“But I don't understand. Martha, what is wrong?” Lucy asked quickly, before the door closed in her face.

“Go away. Go home,” Martha snapped.

“And I don't mean Valley House.” And the door closed firmly.

Lucy shut the gate behind her and looked back bewilderedly at the cottage. A curtain twitched back and the man's angry face stared at her. He was mouthing words she could not hear, but his meaning was clear enough as he waved her away.

My God, what is happening? Lucy almost stumbled as she hurried away from the Lorrying cottage. She could hardly believe that the woman she had just spoken to was the same friendly, cheerful soul who had just yesterday been working happily in the kitchen of Valley House. Martha had been like a complete stranger. And that horrible, angry man: She shuddered at the memory and her pace quickened, as though by hurrying she could escape the recollection of those dark, glittering eyes.

She passed through the village and it was deserted. Already the shops were closed, although it was barely five o'clock in the afternoon. She hurried along the narrow streets and could not escape the feeling of unease; the silence around her was somehow ominous. She told herself she was being ridiculous. But she wished that she was closing the door of Valley House behind her, standing safe in the large hall.

But safe from what? she asked herself scornfully. She had probably interrupted an argument between Martha and her husband, a quarrel about something as silly as the housekeeping, or anything else a married couple might get heated about, and their anger had spilled over and included herself. There was nothing sinister about a married couple having a disagreement, she reasoned. It might be unpleasant but it was nothing to become alarmed over.

She deliberately slowed her walking pace, calming herself now that the incident was in proper perspective. She saw no one as she passed through the silent village, until she came to the house with the gleaming new brass plaque fixed to the wall. 'Doctor Francis Cranling', the brass plate proclaimed in large letters. In the garden of the house twelve or fifteen people were queuing, waiting patiently to be admitted to the doctor's surgery. 'And there is the answer to the apparent desertion of the village,' Lucy told herself. It was obvious that some kind of germ, or the flu, perhaps, was being passed around amongst the village inhabitants, hence the crowd waiting for the doctor's attention. See how normal things were when one disposed of imagination!

She examined the waiting people as she passed, idly seeking a face she recognized, a friendly smile. They were standing silently, not one person talking to his or her neighbor. Their faces were like blank, expressionless masks. They turned to stare at her. And a shiver slid coldly over her body. It was there again, naked hostility. The faces might be expressionless, but the eyes were not and they stared and glittered their hatred. It was all she could do to control her legs and walk calmly past without betraying her feelings. She could feel her face taut and pale as she strolled casually past, her head high, until, turning a corner, she was thankfully out of their sight. And then she abandoned all control and like a frightened child fled wildly and blindly from the staring people and the emotions they caused.

She stopped running when well down the Valley Road. Gasping for breath and trying to still her whirling thoughts, fighting for reason and breath at the same time. And feeling ashamed because she had allowed fear to take control of her senses. And fear of

what? she asked herself savagely. 'Were you running because people stared at you? Be reasonable, for heaven's sake!' But she remembered the hard eyes and her legs felt weak. She sat down to catch her breath, glancing back in the direction of the village and feeling relieved that the road was empty. After resting for five minutes she continued her journey at a brisk pace, turning thankfully into the drive leading to Valley House. By the side of the path a spade stood forlornly, leaning drunkenly. There was no sign of Thomas.

Agatha was coming from the study as Lucy closed the door behind her and leant against its solid, comforting frame. She regarded Lucy with curiosity.

"You look as if you have seen a ghost, my girl. What on earth have you been up to?" she asked, staring keenly at Lucy.

"I wish I had merely seen a ghost," Lucy replied ruefully. She removed her coat and hung it on the stand at the side of the stairs.

"Well?" Agatha asked impatiently. "I must warn you that I dislike mysteries, so stop being so damned mysterious!"

"I have been to visit Martha," Lucy began.

"I would not have thought that to have been a very distressing experience." Agatha said dryly. "So. what has upset you?"

Lucy's face was pale still, and her hand trembled slightly as she brushed her hair back from her face. Agatha tapped her foot impatiently. The girl might have had a shock, very well. But if she did not explain quickly, Agatha thought that she might shake her.

"I think," Lucy said slowly. "that my reception must have been very similar to the one you received from Mary. The language not so choice, perhaps. but the resentment just as strong."

"From Martha?" Agatha looked skeptical. "Are you sure? Sometimes the folk around here can be a bit brusque, offhand. But it's not intentional, it's just their way."

"I'm sure. I do recognize aggression when I see it. And experience it," Lucy said heatedly. "Her husband..... Ben, isn't it? He was particularly keen to see me 'clear off', as

he put it. It seems that anyone from the house is not exactly made welcome down there. And I had the strangest feeling that that applies to the the rest of the village as well.”

“Hmmm.” Agatha jammed her hands into her jacket pockets, hunched her large shoulders and stared thoughtfully past Lucy. She stayed like that for a few moments, puckering her lips to aid her thought processes, before she broke the silence. “It was atrocious.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“That coffee, so-called, that you made at lunchtime. It was atrocious. It tasted like stewed treacle. I shall make a proper pot. You wait for me in the study. And, for goodness sake, you can calm down now.” Agatha marched briskly towards the kitchen, leaving Lucy to stare after her resentfully. She had not expected her employer to show concern, but a little sympathy would not have gone amiss.

“Perhaps there is an epidemic of influenza.” Agatha said, refilling her cup from the coffee pot. “And maybe the stares you took for aggression were, in reality, nothing more than the cow-sick eyes of people not feeling very happy with themselves, or the world, at that particular moment.”

Lucy shook her head. “I would like to believe that. Truly, I would. But there was more to it than that; an atmosphere, a feeling that I can't define but which I won't forget in a hurry. It was very unpleasant.”

“Speaking of things unpleasant, you must admit that my coffee is far superior to that turgid liquid you manage to produce,” Agatha said, sipping her drink with relish.

Lucy was in no mood for a discussion on coffee making. She gave Agatha a withering look.

“Aha. I thought as much, too proud to admit second best,” Agatha chortled triumphantly. “You will not achieve very much if you refuse to learn from your

mistakes, my dear.”

“I don’t consider coffee to be of any great importance at the moment,” Lucy said coldly. “I suppose you think it rather silly of me to be speaking of strange atmospheres and vague feelings? Well, I don't care what you think, I know what I saw and experienced. And must you smoke those foul things?” Lucy cried, as Agatha lit a cigar.

“My, my. Touchy tonight, aren't we?” Agatha leant back in her chair and regarded Lucy with amusement. “The doctor has a few patients and you get the wind up: Perhaps you should visit the doctor. He might be able to assist you.” she suggested mildly.

Lucy jumped from her chair. “I won't stay here and listen....” she began heatedly, her face flushed.

Agatha slapped her thigh and laughed heartily. “Quite a little Spitfire. Not at all like a Lucy person. I knew you were misnamed.” Agatha chuckled. “Now, sit down, there's a good girl and we will discuss this like two rational people.”

“Stop treating me like a child,” Lucy said angrily.

“In the first place.” Agatha ignored Lucy's anger and stared solemnly at the end of her cigar, “I don't think your imagination was running riot this afternoon. so you can stop defending yourself and wipe that hard-done-by look from your face.”

“I don't know which attitude I find more annoying, yours or the villagers',” Lucy said coldly, still standing.

“I'm not going to apologize, so you might as well sit down.” Agatha said mildly.

“You really are insufferable at times. It's not surprising that your staff simply walk out and leave you.”

“If only it were that simple,” Agatha sighed. “By the way, I haven't seen Thomas pottering around the place lately.”

“And you're not likely to. Your muttering about impending disaster sent him scuttling for safety.” Lucy informed her.

“The safety of the Plough, if I know Thomas. He will insist on listening outside the study window, serves him right if he heard more than he bargained for.” Agatha

chuckled. "so, that leaves just you and I."

"But why?" Lucy asked, a puzzled expression on her face as she returned to her chair and sat down facing Agatha. "Why should they leave like that?"

"Something to do with their intolerable employer, according to your deduction," Agatha reminded her.

Lucy waved her hand impatiently. "We had learnt to tolerate you." she said graciously. "Certainly. no one, with the exception of Mary, could be afraid of you."

"You think that they were, are, afraid of something?" Agatha asked keenly. "Afraid?" Lucy thought for a moment, remembering the incident at Martha's cottage. "Yes. I think Martha did seem afraid of something. Her husband, perhaps? But he did not seem exactly at ease with the world either. Afraid might be the wrong word, agitated might best describe their behavior."

"And Mary, who wouldn't say boo to a goose, quite definitely was not afraid the last time I saw her. Not of me, at least. I wonder what it is that makes them act so out of character?" Agatha mused.

"It has to be illness. That would explain both their behavior and why there were so many people waiting to see the doctor."

"Yes." Agatha sounded doubtful. She smiled maliciously. "Old Bill Hughes will not be pleased with an increase in patients. He does not look favorably upon anyone, sick or not, if they force him to leave his beloved rose bushes for a moment longer than he considers necessary."

"Bill Hughes?"

"He is the doctor, dear," Agatha said heavily. "Remember? You passed his house this afternoon."

"You mean Doctor Cranling."

"No I don't." Agatha answered testily. "I may not be in at the heart of social affairs of the village, but I do at least know the name of the local pill-pusher."

"Francis Cranling is the new doctor. I thought you knew. It would seem,

according to the Plough's information bureau, that he resides at the Lodge," Lucy informed her, not without pleasure.

"Cranling, Cranling," Agatha murmured experimentally. "No, I don't recognize the name. Can't be a local man. He may have brought with him new brands of pills and potions which are having an adverse effect on our poor villagers."

"You can't blame the man simply because he is not a local," Lucy pointed out.

"I certainly can. One can't be too careful about outsiders. Take you, for instance."

"Yes?" Lucy said warningly.

"Who would have thought that you would turn out so versatile when faced with this present predicament? That you would take over the kitchen so efficiently? Apart from your coffee, that is. Shall We have tea with our meal?"

"You have the subtlety of a Sledgehammer." Lucy said. "But I'm feeling hungry myself. I shall prepare the meal."

"What a splendid idea. What delight shall you prepare for us tonight?" Lucy turned at the study door and smiled sweetly. "Tinned meat sandwiches. With or without pickles?"

"See what I mean about outsiders?" Agatha sighed. "They always fail to live up to expectation, they always fall at the final obstacle."

Chapter Five

Lucy plodded resolutely up the steep incline of Mountain Road and wondered how, even from a safe distance, she could have thought the road grandly titled. It seemed every inch a pathway up to the summit of a particularly high mountain. Ahead of her, far ahead. Agatha marched indefatigably onwards and upwards. Her head was high and she swung her walking stick nonchalantly. Lucy would not have been surprised to hear the strains of music floating down to her as Agatha whistled or hummed gaily as she progressed effortlessly up the road.

Lucy scowled and gave up the chase, sinking gratefully onto a rock conveniently placed at the roadside. Agatha might wish to do herself an injury, she thought rebelliously as she panted for breath, but she certainly did not intend to follow suit. It did cross her mind that she ought to be ashamed of herself for not being able to keep pace with a woman at least twice her age, but she quickly dismissed the thought. The older woman was, after all, Agatha Westgate.

Behind her, the green face of the Scar reared untidily, while below her the meadow lay peacefully bright in the afternoon sunlight and she could see in the distance the red tiled Valley House nestling in its surrounding greenery. The village was to her right, but hidden now by the dark mass of the woods. And why were they inflicting this torture upon themselves? Or, to be more precise, Why is Agatha inflicting this torture on me? Lucy thought. Surely Agatha was not doing it for pleasure.

“Never been up to the Scar. have you?” Agatha had asked after lunch; Lucy had shaken her head. “Thought not,” Agatha boomed, looking pleased. “I shall take you up there. Now. A brisk walk is just the thing we need to work off that stodge you dished up for lunch.”

While Lucy objected to her disastrous attempt at a quiche being referred to as 'that stodge', she had to admit that the dish did lie uncomfortably heavy, and the walk did not seem an unpleasant suggestion.

“Why the Scar?” Lucy asked. “I prefer to walk along the clifftops.”

“Perhaps you do, m'dear. But the Lodge is not situated on the clifftops.” Agatha pointed out.

“You're not going to barge in upon Doctor Cranling? I shouldn't think that a good idea.” Lucy said doubtfully.

“Nonsense! Why shouldn't I pay my respects to a new member of the community? Neighborly thing to do, I would have thought,” Agatha insisted.

“Judging by the number of patients waiting for him yesterday, if the poor man isn't busy then he will be grateful for a few hours peace and quiet. I don't like the idea of arriving unannounced.”

“You're far too sensitive, m'dear. Doctors expect to be imposed upon. They feel uneasy if you show them too much consideration.” Agatha dismissed Lucy's doubts. “Besides, I may fall ill and I should like to ascertain that the man is competent before the event, not when it is too late and he has me at his mercy. He might be one of those modern medics; very gullible, a permanent air of bewilderment about him as he strives vainly to keep abreast of every new scientific development.”

“There is nothing wrong with advancing medical knowledge.” Lucy said.

“Of course there isn't,” Agatha agreed. “As long as the new is based firmly on the old, natural methods. Good heavens, the man might be young and, like you, city bred and ignorant. Think of the help and advice I could give him on country cures and herbal medicines.”

“I can't see him being as enthusiastic about it as you.”

“Then it is just as well that I find that out immediately, before he starts poisoning my system with synthetic chemicals.” Lucy rose to her feet with resignation and plodded on, trying to ignore her aching calf muscles and comforting herself with the knowledge that the return journey was downhill all the way home. Unless Agatha knew of an alternative, more difficult route.

“Ah, there you are.” Agatha was seated on a small stile and beaming at her when

Lucy thankfully reached the summit. "I thought perhaps you had decided to wait for me to return. A bit steep for you, was it?" Agatha asked, grinning wickedly.

"Not at all. A pleasant little stroll." Lucy said gamely, if slightly breathlessly, as she practically crawled to a standstill. "I stopped to admire the view for a moment or two."

"And you obviously appreciated the view more than most. Not many people find themselves breathless and red in the face from the sheer pleasure of gazing upon the black treetops of the wood," Agatha said gleefully.

"I admire nature in all its many forms," Lucy murmured gallantly.

"I'm glad the climb has not affected you. We shan't waste any more time resting. Shall we press on?"

"Don't be so heartlessly active!" Lucy cried, planting herself firmly next to Agatha on the stile. "My feet are killing me!"

"I'm not surprised." Agatha glanced disapprovingly at Lucy's footwear. "You should get yourself some sensible walking shoes." She lifted a foot to show a stout, laced brogue that, to Lucy's eyes, weighed at least three pounds. She shuddered at the thought of walking any distance in shoes as heavy as an underseas diver's boots.

The Mountain Road, adequately surfaced to this point, petered out to little more than a farm-cart track, rutted and marked by vehicle wheels and promising to turn into a sea of mud after a moderate shower of rain. The land around was flat and featureless, sloping gently away from the Scar, and was scrubby and wild.

"Bad land," Agatha said, gazing around. "Unsuitable for grazing because the silly creatures keep leaping over the cliff edge, and the soil is too rocky for farming. Quite good grouse country, though, But that's all it is fit for; except herbs. Have you recovered yet?" Agatha asked impatiently.

With a look of long suffering Lucy pushed herself to her feet, grimacing as her muscles protested against their employment. "How far now?" she asked anxiously.

Agatha's stick pointed to a low, dark building small in the distance, and she

strode off.

“I still don’t like the idea of strolling up unannounced.” Lucy reminded Agatha, after they had marched for five minutes towards the Lodge that increased its dark size and gloomy appearance with every yard they advanced.

Agatha glanced perceptively at her companion. “It seems to me, young lady, that you simply do not wish to meet our friend the doctor, either with or without his foreknowledge.”

“I don't see the point, that's all” Lucy said. “And it seems a stupid place to build a house,” she remarked, pointing to the Lodge. “The surroundings are bleak enough, but that monstrosity does nothing to improve the View. It's like a dark shadow on the landscape.”

“It is ugly,” Agatha laughed. “Jackson's Folly, it used to be known as, after the gentleman whose enthusiasm was greater than his geographical and architectural judgment. But no one is asking you to purchase the place, or even stay there. All we shall do is merely pay.....”

“Good afternoon, ladies.” The voice was soft and pleasant, the man small and round, a cheerful smile on his chubby cheeked face. He wore a gray bowler-hat, and a long, gray, heavy overcoat. His eyebrows were peculiar; black and thick and rising sharply over each eye, like inverted 'V's. They gave his face an almost clownish appearance that was strengthened by his clothes, which looked a size too large for his roly-poly figure.

“Afternoon,” Agatha called disinterestedly, hardly glancing at him.

Lucy smiled friendlily.

“You are aware, ladies, that you are trespassing,” the man pointed out mildly.

“Poppycock!” Agatha snorted, halting and glaring at the man.

Lucy wondered why he wore heavy clothing on such a warm day.

“Trespassing,” he repeated. He nodded happily and took his hand from his coat pocket to gesticulate towards the surrounding countryside. And Lucy almost burst out

laughing to see that the sleeves of his clothes were much too long and almost covered his fingers.

“This is a public footpath,” Agatha boomed authoritatively. “Has been for centuries.”

“Not any longer, I'm afraid.” The man's face looked dutifully sorrowful at the bad news.

“Nonsense. But who says so?” Agatha snapped. “I should like a few words with that person.”

“And so you shall, indeed you shall. But first, let me introduce myself. Cranling, Doctor Francis. I shan't say at your service, because I don't expect to be. I own the land upon which you now trespass.”

“Public footpath, which I shall continue to use whenever I feel the need to,” Agatha grimly informed him.

“Ah. you must be the redoubtable Miss Eastgate.” Doctor Cranling nodded wisely.

“Westgate. sir.” Agatha sternly corrected him.

“One or the other, yes,” the doctor said vaguely. “But no matter, a gate by any other name is still a trespasser. I must ask you to leave. Well, when I say must. I don't really have to. But I want to. Please go.”

“Are you mad, sir?” Agatha stared at him keenly.

“Should I be?” A hurt expression crossed the doctor's face.

“I ask you, politely, to leave my land and you take this for a sign of madness? I would suggest, madam, that your attitude does nothing to commend your sanity.”

“Had,” Agatha stated. “And I will not take orders from you.” she barked. “I shall walk where I please. Stop me if you can, sir.” Agatha drew herself up to her full height and brandished her stick threateningly. The situation was so outlandish that Lucy wondered why she did not find it amusing. But, apart from the first few moments, she found the oddly dressed, cheerful faced doctor grotesque rather than comical. And now

he. clapped his hands gleefully and shuffled from foot to foot like an excited schoolboy.

“A challenge: I simply adore a challenge.”

Agatha looked at him pityingly. “Come. Lucy, we will leave the poor man with his delusions.” she said quietly, taking Lucy's arm. She added, patronizingly: “He is obviously a National Health Services practitioner.”

They were standing in the shadow of one of the few tall trees in the area, directly beneath the branches.

Cranling clapped his hands again, louder this time, purposefully. And the branches above their heads began to stir, as though moved by a freshening breeze. But there was no sensation of wind on their faces.

Cranling giggled happily as he clapped again, and again.

The branches overhead whipped and clashed and thrashed against themselves, bending and creaking alarmingly with the force of agitation, snapping the smaller branches, showering the women below with twigs and bark and crushed spring leaves.

And still Cranling clapped.

And the roots beneath their feet began to writhe and move, the ground trembled underfoot. Lucy screamed desperately as she almost fell onto the ground that concealed heaving, twisting tentacles that moved frantically, as though seeking a prey.

“It's a trick, an illusion,” Agatha shouted defiantly, striking at the wide trunk with her walking stick, as the tree continued to tear itself to pieces. A large branch split and cracked groaningly, crashed down, snapping lower branches as it plunged down, to strike Agatha a numbing blow on her left shoulder. She staggered and fell to her knees. And for the first time there was fear in her eyes. Illusions are not capable of knocking one to the ground.

“Run. Run, Lucy,” Agatha shouted, as she struggled to rise to her feet on the shifting, violent earth. Lucy, shielding her face from the debris falling around her, had failed to see the accident, Agatha falling. But now she saw her stagger and sprawl to the ground as the earth split open and a gnarled root whipped viciously into the air,

searching, searching. Lucy wrapped one arm around the quivering trunk of the tree. while her free hand clawed and gripped at Agatha's jacket, pulling and helping her regain a precarious foothold. Arms about each other for Support, they stumbled from under the tortured branches.

As soon as they were some distance from the tree. all activity ceased. Suddenly. Everything was calm. Lucy looked frantically, fearfully around for Doctor Cranling, but there was no sign of him. And the tree was still. But the broken branches and twigs, the wreckage of leaves and buds strewn around the base was evidence that the unbelievable had occurred.

“Are you hurt?” Agatha asked, and her face was ghostly-white in the sunlight.

Lucy shook her head. “And you?” she asked.

“My shoulder took a bang, but it's nothing serious. Confound the man and his tricks: I see that he has slunk away, afraid to face me. And well he might be afraid!” Agatha gingerly rubbed her injured shoulder, moved her arm experimentally.

“I don't understand what happened.” Lucy stared appealingly at the older woman, waiting, hoping for an explanation. “It..... it was unnatural. Frightening.”

“Poof: It was an illusion, a simple conjuring trick, Agatha declared confidently. “And the conjurer was even simpler.”

“Illusions do not injure people,” Lucy pointed out. “Neither do they rip branches from trees and leave them scattered about as evidence of having taken place.”

“You are as gullible as the village idiots.” Agatha snapped. But she glanced about her uneasily and offered no other explanation.

“We shall return home.” And she stalked towards the Mountain Road.

The return to Valley House was made rapidly, Lucy keeping pace with Agatha every step of the way. She did not relish the thought of falling behind, of walking alone in this suddenly hostile country. For. even though the day still retained its brightness, the warmth had gone. It was as though they had been cut off from reality. There was a feeling of isolation surrounding them as they hurried across the quiet countryside.

Agatha was experiencing the same as herself. Lucy was quite sure. And once she glanced behind her, back to the towering greenness of The Scar, and thought she saw a gray clad figure on the summit, watching their flight. But when, a few moments later, she turned again expectantly, there was no figure to be seen.

“And I tell you, for the tenth time. that I do not know,” Agatha exploded. “Good grief, girl, you are more persistent than an itch between the shoulder blades!” She glared at Lucy, who stared stubbornly back at her, waiting. Agatha sighed resignedly. “Very well, it was not an illusion. There, are you satisfied? I wish you were only an illusion so that I could banish your accusing facet. And why you should imagine that I understand what happened anymore clearly than you is beyond me.”

“Because it is something to do with you, with your work. All this.” Lucy spread her arm to indicate the study, its books and chart lined walls.

“If I don't know that, how can you possibly be so certain?” Agatha protested.

“But you do think that it is connected,” Lucy said triumphantly.

“I didn't say that.” Agatha denied wearily. “Stop putting meanings into my words. I am as mystified as you.”

“I bet you are.” Lucy said sceptically. “I have never seen or heard of the pitiful Doctor Cranling before. I had never heard the name until you spoke of it. I have no idea why he should want to play nasty little tricks upon us. That is the truth and you will jolly well have to believe it.”

“Well, I don't,” Lucy said firmly.

“Miss Chapel.” There was an ominous glint in Agatha's eye.

“Oh, you might never have heard of the doctor before.” Lucy conceded.

“Thank you,” Agatha said heavily.

“But I can't believe that you are mystified by these recent happenings. You are not the type to be baffled.”

“True.” Agatha mused, mollified. “Very true. Perhaps baffled is too strong a word. Then again, suspicion is not knowledge.”

“Then share your suspicions with me,” Lucy demanded. Agatha grimaced as she shifted in her armchair. “My shoulder is a little stiff,” she complained. Tabitha, asleep on her mistress' lap, stirred resentfully and stretched out a lazy, sharp paw to register her disapproval at being disturbed.

“Perhaps you should see the doctor,” Lucy said sullenly, aware that Agatha was being deliberately obtuse. “I'm sure that he could do something for you.”

“Oh ho, did you hear that Tabby?” Agatha chuckled as she fondled her pet's ears. “Methinks the Lucy bird's feathers are ruffled again.”

“I dislike Secretive people.” Lucy announced. “The very least you could do is give me your opinion of how and why this afternoon happened.”

“It is my opinion,” Agatha pulled a face as she felt pain in her shoulder, “that I will not spend a very comfortable night. Wouldn't surprise me if I can't sleep at all with this shoulder. Wonder if I should go into Bellbury tomorrow and have it seen to?”

“Your shoulder isn't the only thing that needs examining,” Lucy said archly, rising stiffly from her chair. “And I shall have no trouble sleeping tonight. Please try not to disturb me if you are restless. Goodnight.” She turned and walked regally from the study.

Lucy should have slept well. Physically, she was tired after the exertions of the day, emotionally she was troubled. She sat for an hour in the large armchair in her bedroom, re-living those terrifying moments when nature itself had seemed to attack Agatha and herself. And she felt angry with Agatha for withholding her confidence. That

Agatha did not fully understand herself, she had no doubt.

But she knew something. And anything would do, anything that threw light, however weak and feeble, on to this dark problem was welcome. For the most frightening thing about it was the fear itself, the fear of the unknown. Eventually, exhausted, she crept between the sheltering, comforting sheets, convinced that, despite everything, she would sleep for ever.

It was dark when she awoke. Only semi-conscious, she gazed blearily into the darkness. One half of her drowsy consciousness was peevishly demanding that it should be allowed to return to sleep, while the other half insisted that something or someone had disturbed her. She stretched lazily and the muscles in her legs protested against any activity. The luminous hands on her bedside clock stood at three-thirty. She noted the time incredulously, turning over and snuggling down for at least another four hours blessed sleep.

Outside. an owl shrieked stridently as it hunted in the night. The sound caused her to stir. Perhaps the bird had disturbed her in the first place. The owl screeched again and she tried to shut out the cruel sound. Somewhere in the house there was a muffled bumping sound.

Lucy half opened her eyes. She listened for a few moments. Everything was quiet. Until she lowered her head back to the pillow. There! Again there was a sound muffled by the darkness. Agatha? Was she feeling unwell? Her shoulder worsening? Serve her right, Lucy thought rebelliously, tossing and impatiently changing her position in the bed, seeking comfort. but she could not sleep now, not without investigating. She sat up with a sigh and reached for her dressing-gown.

The landing was in darkness. The stairs and the broad, Square hall below were faintly illuminated by moonlight through the door and windows. But the landing was in darkness. From the shadows came a faint rustling noise. like dead leaves in an autumn breeze.

“Agatha? Is that you?” Lucy called, and felt absurd because her voice was little

more than a whisper.

“Agatha?” Her answer was the sound again of faint, hesitant rustling. She strained her eyes to pierce the darkness that closed around her like black velvet.

“Miss Westgate, are you all right?” she called urgently, loudly to still her rising fear. From the darkness Tabitha mewed pathetically.

“Tabby!” She almost cried with relief. Tabitha hunting in the shadows was the source of the mysterious noises. “I’ll cut your tail off for giving me such a scare,” she promised the feline, as she groped for the electric light switch, found it, flooded the landing with harsh, bright light.

“Now, where are you.....” She stopped dead. her throat siezed by panic. There, in voluminous nightdress, her eyes closed and face impassive, stood Agatha. As Lucy watched with pounding heart, Agatha shuffled forward a few more inches, her night-clothes rustling and whispering like dried leaves as she moved a little nearer to the top of the stairs.

Sleepwalking: And what do I do? Lucy thought frantically, trying quickly to sift through the facts and accumulated fantasies of sleepwalking. Was it dangerous to suddenly waken the sleeping Person? She was not sure. One thing she was certain of, it was dangerous for the sleeping person to stand atop a stairway. As if imploring her to act with more haste. Tabitha again mewed pitifully, and dug her claws into the folds of her mistress' nightgown, tugging in a vain attempt to pull her away from the stairs.

“Keep calm now. Oh my God: Agatha, don't move. Keep still!” Lucy hissed urgently, as Agatha shuffled blindly nearer to an awaiting accident. Lucy stepped forward swiftly to pull her back to safety.

Downstairs the doors suddenly crashed open, curtains billowed out as if moved by a gigantic wind. The clothes-stand toppled and fell with a wooden thud. Above, the electric lamp swung and swayed, sending shadows careering crazily around.

But there was no wind: No movement of air at all.

Lucy shrank back, with a fear as primitive, as old, as man himself. What force

was here? What movement that made no sound at all? And it was as if the house was suddenly a huge vacuum. Except now for the noise of the cat, back arched and snarling, spitting, claws uncovered as it glared yellow-eyed malevolence down the stairs. Where there was nothing to be seen.

But soon would be, as Agatha moved blindly towards her last few inches of safety. Lucy fought off her confusion, frantically struggling for reality in the crazy shadows of the swinging light.

“Agatha!” She flung herself forward as the older woman swayed, toppled, fell. Lucy’s fingers were clutching and she felt her nails cut deep into the flesh of Agatha’s arm; falling together and Lucy grasping the cold, polished wood of the banister to keep them both from tumbling headlong down the many waiting stairs.

Then, suddenly, there were no stairs, but a carpeted passage utterly straight and safe and inviting. Down which Tabitha advanced hunched and snarling, fur standing rigidly on end.

‘I could leave go now and be completely safe.’ Lucy thought dreamily, but the strangeness around and inside her kept her fingers locked tightly around the hard, square rod of the banister. Agatha lay across her legs, numbingly heavy, a dead weight pulling against her arms, and her fingers trembled with the strain of holding them both safe on these top stairs. The hard wood gradually ceased to cut cruelly into her flesh, for the banister rod was no longer rigid and cutting, but soft and pliant. She could feel her finger sinking into the soft material. And the bar began to buckle in the confusing light, began to bend and stretch, was rubber and stretching further and further under their combined weights.

Lucy giggled softly. She felt suddenly light-headed. And in a completely ridiculous situation, lying on the floor of this corridor, tangled up with her employer who was snoring peacefully in her sleep, holding on to a bar of rubber that pretended to be a banister rod. It was all so silly. Lucy giggled happily again and the fingers clenched around Agatha’s arm relaxed slightly: Agatha slipped downward an inch.

And the light swayed backwards and forwards, pleasantly, hypnotically; Ding dong bell, pussy's in the well. Lovely colors floated lazily before her eyes like wisps of colored silk. Tabitha was back and grinning in her face. Even the cat was laughing at the funny humans sprawled on the floor. Lucy laughed joyously, the tears trickling down her face. What fun it all was. What a splendid party: Had she drunk too much wine? She must have to feel like this, to be in this position. But what did it matter? Everyone was enjoying the gaiety. And her fingers relaxed a little more, her grip slipped slightly.

The cat was joining in the fun now, toying with its mistress' fingers, tapping playfully with its paws. What a lovely dress Agatha is wearing, a beautiful party-dress. What a pity there is a ribbon loose. There. see? It must be tied to make the dress perfect again. But I can't tie it, Lucy remembered unhappily. How can I tie it when I am holding on with both my hands? And it was such a shame, so vexing to see Agatha's lovely dress ruined by a loose ribbon. A sadness swept over Lucy. The ribbon was ruining everything. It was a horrid ribbon! And she would tie it. There was no reason for her to hold onto anything, she was quite safe on the floor of this passageway. What good did it do anyway, holding tightly to this rubber bar? She would let go and tie that beastly ribbon.

Tabitha raked her claws hard across Agatha's hand, scratching deep and drawing blood and a reaction. Agatha drew her hand away from the pain and mumbled drowsily, reproachfully. The cat pounced again, scratching painfully. "

"Tabby." Agatha mumbled vaguely, pulling her hand across her. She winced and her eyes flickered open.

"What. . .?"

"I will do it. Agatha," Lucy sniffled tearfully.

"I will tie that horrid ribbon. You just lie still."

Agatha rolled over, scrambling onto her hands and knees, almost slithering down the stairs. The stairs? What the devil was she doing on the stairs? She blinked her eyes bemusedly as she struggled to her feet. And Lucy was now sobbing uncontrollably.

"Now that ribbon has woken you. And you were sleeping so peacefully. It was a

lovely party, and such a pretty dress.”

Had the girl gone stark staring mad? Agatha shook her head, impatient to clear her befuddled mind. What was going on here? She looked around her and the front doors were wide open, the chill night air seeping into the house. The light above her head was swinging gently to and fro. Outside, an owl shrieked and Tabitha's hackles rose and she hissed ferociously.

Lucy's tears were ceasing now and she sat on the stair and gazed up at Agatha in bewilderment.

“You're safe, then?” And she seemed puzzled by her own question.

“Safe? I seem to be,” Agatha said slowly. “But from what am I safe?”

“Was it the ribbon?” Lucy looked confused.

“What ribbon, for goodness' sake? What has happened?”

Lucy had to think hard. Everything was so distant, memories so elusive. “You were walking, I recall. We were at the party. No, it was before that. And you were asleep. The light was moving. Don't you remember?”

“I was sleepwalking?”

“Yes, I think you were. This is horrible,” Lucy cried anxiously. “I can't remember. I feel as though I am asleep, still dreaming.”

Agatha examined her scratched and bleeding hand. Her shoulder throbbed painfully, but she was awake now, her brain active. “Try to remember. From the beginning. Everything,” she said sharply. “Think, girl, think.”

Lucy shook her head. “I can't: Everything is so confused. What is happening?”

Agatha noted the distress on the girl's face and curbed her impatient questions. “There is no need to be alarmed,” she said soothingly. “If you calm yourself, everything will return.” She shivered with the cold. “Unless we both catch our deaths of pneumonia before, that is.” And she marched down to close the doors, her large nightdress billowing out behind her.

She closed and firmly locked the doors and wondered how they came to be open.

She would find out later. She turned to Lucy, now standing on the stairs. “We could both do with a strong cup of tea,” she declared.

“Wait for me!” Lucy hobbled painfully down the stairs on legs stiff and aching.

“I will be quite safe on my own,” Agatha re-assured her.

“But I might not be,” Lucy said. “I’m coming with you.”

In the kitchen, drinking sweet, warming tea, Lucy remembered. And Agatha pondered.

“It seems that I must thank you for saving my life,” she said briskly.

“Think nothing of it,” Lucy smiled, “just increase my salary.”

“Judging by the bruises and fingernail marks on my arm, I should dismiss you for not saving me with greater tenderness,” Agatha countered.

“And I thought you might be grateful.” Lucy sighed.

“It was an owl, you say, that woke you?”

“Yes. At least, I presume so. I heard it when I awoke. And again, later, more than once. Tabitha didn’t seem too keen on it, became quite upset, in fact.”

Agatha nodded thoughtfully as she absently stroked the fur of the cat resting contentedly on her lap.

“But why do you ask? It surely can’t be of any significance, apart from having woken me in time to catch you at the head of the stairs.”

Agatha shrugged her substantial shoulders. “Who can say what is or is not of significance?” she asked softly.

“But an owl?” Lucy looked skeptical.

“Don’t forget that it was a mere cat that aroused me from a sleep that might very well have proved permanent,” Agatha said sharply. “If Tabitha could ever be classed as a

'mere' cat," she added affectionately.

"You were probably awakening anyway," Lucy claimed. "The sheer discomfort of lying on the stairs, and across my bony knees. would be enough to rouse Rip Van Winkle himself."

"Perhaps." Agatha's tone made it clear that there was no doubt in her mind.

"Do you often ramble about in your sleep?" Lucy asked.

"Never." Agatha stated flatly. "Thing I've always associated with juveniles and people of suspect nervous dispositions. Curious that I should start at my age."

"Could it have been somehow connected with that incident this afternoon, do you think?" Lucy asked slowly.

"Stress brought about by anxiety? I doubt it," Agatha said confidently.

"I was thinking more of the doctor, Cranling. We know he was responsible for one strange experience, why not for this also?"

"We know nothing of the sort." Agatha scoffed. "Just because the man was present when something unexpected happened does not mean that he was instrumental to the cause."

"How can you say that?" Lucy looked at her in amazement. "You know very well that he was responsible. You admitted as much this evening."

"Responsible for what? Causing a wind to blow about the treetops? Come, come, my dear, your imagination is galloping away with your good sense."

"You are the most infuriating person! I should have left you to fall downstairs. That is a complete reversal of your earlier opinion," Lucy said furiously.

"I've had time to consider the matter calmly and rationally since then." Agatha informed her airily.

"Then what conclusion have you come to about tonight's episode?" Lucy challenged. "Explain calmly and rationally, if you please."

"Food poisoning," Agatha said demurely.

"What? I Warn you not to start criticizing my cooking again," Lucy said icily.

“It was something we ate.” Agatha insisted. “Something that affected us both. In a different way, admittedly, but affected we both were. Mee, Sleepwalking, you, hallucinations.”

“That is preposterous.”

“Oh, I don't blame you. my dear. Not in the least. Your cooking may be inedible. but it is hygienically inedible. No, I never have trusted those tinned chemical compounds that masquerade as food. And there is the answer to your problem: Tinned food.” Agatha smiled disarmingly.

“And the door? How do you explain the open front door? And please don't tell me that a tin of baked beans burst open the door in its desperate search for a saucepan in which to heat itself up.”

“Now you are being facetious, my dear.” Agatha said primly. “We simply forgot to bolt the door when we went upstairs to bed. It was blown open by a gust of wind during the night. I do wish that you would not try to turn every trifling incident into something mysterious. Really, it shows a lack of maturity.”

“Trifling: You wander about the house in your nightdress, attempt to throw yourself down the stairs, and then dismiss it as a trifling matter!”

“Now, now. I think we are exaggerating a little, don't you?”

“And you did not forget to lock the door last night. I distinctly remember you doing so.” Lucy claimed.

“You must be mistaken.”

“I am not,” Lucy insisted stubbornly. Agatha moved her shoulder experimentally. “I do believe that my shoulder is getting worse. I hope there is no real damage. Such a nuisance.” She passed her empty cup to Lucy. “Be a dear and pour me another cup.”

“Now you are deliberately avoiding the subject,” Lucy accused her. “If you think that I...”

“Listen!” Agatha held up her hand for silence. Lucy paused, listening tensely.

“What is it?” she whispered, her heart thudding painfully.

“The birds are beginning to awaken. It will be light soon,” Agatha observed pleasantly. “I do like to hear the dawn chorus.”

Lucy shook her head wearily and resumed pouring tea. She did not pursue her argument any further. If Agatha Westgate did not wish to discuss a subject, then that subject remained undiscussed.

Three times before nine o'clock Lucy telephoned Joe Wentwick's taxi office in an effort to hire transport for Agatha's trip to Bellbury for medical attention to her shoulder. Three times a surly voice informed her that Joe Wentwick was unavailable. Finally, Agatha herself telephoned a taxi-hire in Bellbury. She returned from the conversation red-faced and indignant.

“The insolent fellow is holding me to ransom,” she exploded. “He insists on being paid for driving out here to collect me.”

“It is rather a long way to drive for just one fare,” Lucy pointed out reasonably. “You can't expect him to lose money on the journey.”

“I do expect him to at least be civil. I shall have a word with that man when he arrives” Agatha promised.

“If I were you, I should say nothing until you have arrived at Bellbury,” Lucy advised. “And then only if you have an alternative means of transport for the return journey.”

The taxi arrived at nine-thirty. A ferret faced man with watery blue eyes sanded his horn impatiently. Agatha, who had insisted on her arm in a sling, sailed out to meet him.

“Please do not honk your horn at me, my man,” she said sternly. “And especially not on the time that I am paying for.”

Lucy waited for the expected retort, but the man ignored Agatha with an ease born of experience. He waited until Agatha had entered his cab, then turned and asked: "Where to, ma?" in a bored voice.

Agatha, with a sigh for the more respectful tradesmen of her girlhood, told him, then wound down the window to speak to Lucy,

"I thought, while I was in Bellbury, I might take the opportunity to look up a few friends. Two birds with one stone, as they say. Well, more than two birds, actually. So do not panic if I am a little late returning this evening. If I return."

"If you..... You don't expect me to stay here on my own?" Lucy cried.

"Why ever not? Do be sensible, my dear. Goodbye. And take great care of Tabitha for me."

"But you can't be serious!" Lucy looked aghast.

Agatha, having wound the window back into place, waved regally as the car pulled away.

"She is serious, you know," Lucy muttered, as she watched the car disappear down the drive. Tabitha sat on the steps and coolly surveyed Lucy.

"Your mistress, puss, is a menace," Lucy declared. The cat mewed softly. "I'm glad that you agree with me." Lucy said. She shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked out across the meadow bathed in strong sunlight. "And if she thinks that I am going to spend my day in this gloomy pile of bricks while she is out enjoying herself. then she has another thing coming. They do say that sea-water is the best thing for tired, aching muscles."

The cliff beach, as usual, was deserted. Lucy stretched herself luxuriously on the warm sand beneath the cloudless blue sky and felt her muscles soaking in the soothing heat of the sunlight. The day was almost windless, a slight sea breeze that occasionally,

and then only gently, ruffled her hair, as warm as an angel's breath upon her body. The waves lazily stretched themselves out upon the sand with only the slightest, contented murmur. The only sounds were the odd sea-bird calling plaintively, a wandering bee buzzing slowly past and, inevitably, the occasional roar of a high flying jet bearing passengers to and from foreign lands.

The empty stillness of the house seemed far away now, and she was glad that she had decided to come to the beach, a decision not easily or confidently reached. She felt apprehensive about venturing anywhere after the experiences of the previous day. But the feeling of loneliness the empty rooms of Valley House induced had persuaded her to gather her courage and come to this spot, which was like a place of refuge to her, quiet and peaceful. She dug her toes into the soft, fine sand; behind closed eyes she was dozing restfully.

Behind her, a rock clattered down from the cliffs. Immediately she was tense, listening alertly, nervously. Pebbles dribbled slowly, noisily from rock to rock before falling silently to rest in the sand. Lucy jerked upright and quickly turned to see Frank Walters clambering down to join her.

“Sunning yourself again?” he called.

“Hello, Frank.” She smiled with relief. It was the first time she had seen him since their visit to Bellbury's cinema. He plodded through the sand and stood before her. His gaze rested boldly on her body as he stood there openly examining her. She folded her arms self-consciously and felt very exposed in her brief bikini.

“I wonder you bother wearing anything at all down here,” he said softly.

“This isn't the South of France”” she said lightly, wishing his gaze would move elsewhere.”

“That outfit is so tiny that you might as well be bare,” he continued, his voice still low, but not friendly. He knelt down beside her.

She looked away but she could still feel his eyes roving over her.

“Does it give you pleasure, flaunting yourself?” He asked.

“That's enough, Frank,” she said coldly.

“If you want to flaunt yourself, then I will help you do a proper job.” His hand rested upon her shoulder. Roughly, she shrugged it off and leapt to her feet.

“This isn't funny,” she told him curtly, as he also stood. He grinned wolfishly and she backed away from him as he came towards her.

“You don't really mind. I know that.” he said confidently. “I've heard tales about you city girls. I know what you get up to back home. Why shouldn't I have some fun?”

“Don't be a fool!” Lucy snapped. She was afraid now. It was his eyes that frightened her most; they glittered cruelly, as hard as the pebbles underfoot.

He laughed harshly. “I'm not a fool anymore. I might have been, when I thought you were something different, with your long legs and shining hair and smiling, smiling all the while, as if you knew something the rest of us didn't know. But I know now. You're no different from anyone else, underneath you're just the same as me. You will enjoy it just as much as I will.”

He grabbed at her arm, clutching her tightly. She pulled away and his fingers slipped on the suntan lotion smeared on her skin. She turned and ran towards the rocks.

He followed her slowly, laughing mockingly, knowing that his long, strong legs could easily scale the fallen rocks faster than she.

Lucy's fingers scrabbled in the loose shingle as she searched frantically for a solid hand hold. Her legs trembling with fear caused her feet to slip and she almost slithered down towards him. And now he was standing directly below her, gazing up admiringly.

“Now that's a lovely sight to see,” he chuckled, reaching up for her. She felt his fingers touching her thigh. As the rock she was holding came away in her hand and she screamed in fear.

“Get your filthy hands off me.” And she hurled the rock she held.

He jumped to one side as the rock hurtled past his head, and he staggered and fell. He glared after her and there was animal fury on his face as he snarled: “You'll pay

for that, my pretty miss. You'll pay me a dozen times for trying to hurt me.”

But she could hear only the sound of her own sobbing, the breath rasping in her fear as she pulled herself desperately up the hindering rocks, dragged herself away from the animal now pursuing her in earnest. And she was nearing the clifftop. There was no safety there, but she couldn't think of that. First she must climb these torturous rocks and get away from him, get away from his pawing hands. But her muscles, already weakened, could not take the punishment of the climb. She knew she was slowing down, her progress reduced to a despairing crawl. She turned to look over her shoulder and his hate-filled face was only feet behind her and gaining fast. Sobbing she spurred herself to one last, exhausting effort.

As the shadow slipped noiselessly, swiftly past her, she hardly noticed it in her confusion. She heard the ferocious snarling behind her but she did not stop to investigate. Her hands reached the turf of the clifftop and she hauled herself over the edge and staggered and stumbled towards Valley House. While behind her Frank Walters stared upwards, his progress halted by the arch-backed creature snarling in his face. The man picked up a stone and threw it, shouting loudly, incomprehensibly in his anger. The cat leapt nimbly to one side, avoiding the stone, but giving ground, backing away as another stone was thrown. And the man inched his way slowly to the summit.

Lucy slammed the doors of Valley House behind her, trembling fingers awkwardly fumbled the stubborn bolts into place, before she collapsed onto all fours, choking for breath. The stone tiled floor was ice cold on her flesh as she lowered herself exhaustedly to rest. The shock of the cold stilled her reeling senses, slowed her racing brain. She could not rest, not yet. She was not safe. The kitchen door: Was it locked? Would he follow her here, Please God, not!

She levered herself onto unsteady legs and stumbled into the kitchen, crashing against a chair in her haste to reach and lock the door. Her knee throbbed painfully as she limped the last few paces to the door, to shoot the bolts home, then collapse into a chair, her head resting on the scrubbed white-table as she cried and trembled and waited.

The minutes ticked by sinisterly. Slowly, gradually she calmed herself, wiped her eyes. Her breathing eased to normal, her heartbeat steadied. And she listened. To the silence all around her. Was there any other way into the house? She did not know, and couldn't think rationally. Were all the windows closed? The bedroom windows? Could he gain entrance there? She felt panic welling up inside her again, and fought to control it. She tried to rise, to inspect the windows, but she couldn't bring herself to move. She did not feel safe where she was, but the thought of moving around this empty house paralyzed her limbs. So she sat and waited fearfully.

Nothing happened. No sound came from without or within the house. He had gone away. She hardly dared to believe it. But it must be true. The minutes ticked away and her hope grew stronger. She was safe: She waited a little longer, to be sure. No one came. And she was a fool, she told herself angrily. How could she be completely alone, with the telephone only a few steps away? And the thought of contact with ordinary, decent people renewed her confidence and she forced her tired legs to carry her into the study, where the telephone receiver was a cold, silent piece of plastic in her shaking fingers.

She replaced the receiver and stared down at the telephone, her face drained white. Was he here? Had he severed the line, her lifeline to safety? She backed away from the 'phone as though it was an object of ill omen and returned to the kitchen, for no better reason than it was where she had come from.

Still there was no sign or sound of Frank Walters. Perhaps the telephone line was being repaired. There need not necessarily be a sinister reason for the breakdown in communications. After all, machines went wrong, she assured herself, without any help from.....

"Luuuuuccccyyyy" Her name was crooned lovingly, the voice high and sing-song.

Oh no. NO!

"Lucy, where are you?" the voice crooned. "I'm coming to find you."

Her hands tightly gripped the edge of the table, and she forced back the scream of terror that rose from deep inside her.

“I know you want me to find you. I know you're waiting for me. Luuuucccyyyy.”

A shadow flitted across the small kitchen window. She tensed, waiting, her mind a seething turmoil of confusion. The glass panel suddenly shattered, the glass fragments tinkling musically to the floor. A hand reached in to pull back the bolt. She watched, mesmerized, as the door slowly swung open.

“Hello, Lucy,” Frank Walters crooned happily. “I'm glad to see you're waiting patiently for me.”

The chair toppled over with a crash as she sprang to her feet and backed away from his sickening smile.

He spread his arms wide and advanced towards her. “Come to me now. You know I'll find you wherever you run to.”

And suddenly she became very calm. When no longer able to avoid the confrontation, her mind accepted the fact and switched clearly and logically to defense. She glanced swiftly around for a weapon with which to defend herself. She urgently, clinically wanted to hurt this cruel man. Within reach was a heavy, copper-bottomed frying-pan. She grabbed it and held it ready, threatening him.

“Are you going to cook me something to eat?” He laughed nastily. “We'll wait until afterwards, then you can feed me. Before we start again.”

Behind him, Tabitha padded silently in through the door.

“We're going to have fun, Lucy,” Frank Walters hissed, as he drew almost close enough to reach out and touch the girl. His eyes glittered greedily as she came within his reach.

And Tabitha sprang silently, viciously upon his back, her claws slicing easily through the this material of his shirt as she clung tenaciously to his flesh. Frank Walters screamed and struggled to reach the cause of his pain, his hands groping wildly, vainly trying to seize the cat. And Lucy lashed out with the frying-pan, missed her target and

almost stumbled against him as the force of the effort swung her around. Tabitha hung on grimly, her claws sinking deeper into her adversary, as Lucy swung wildly at him again. He bent double, one arm shielding his head from the girl, the other still trying to reach the cat attached painfully to his back. One last blow from Lucy caught him hard and true, sending him to his knees, as the frying-pan resounded like a bell from the impact. Tabitha dropped from his back and slipped silently, watchfully into a corner. The man seemed not to notice that she had gone. He shook his head and moaned groggily.

Lucy dropped her weapon and fled into the hall. She jerked at the bolts of the front door, her frantic fingers failing to grip them tightly enough to pull them free. Her heart hammered as she glanced, fearfully back towards the kitchen. The doorway gaped emptily, threateningly. But he had not yet appeared. At last the bolts slid free and she feverishly pulled the door open and dashed outside. Straight into two waiting arms. And she could take no more. She screamed with terror as the darkness gathered and enveloped her. She slumped against her captor.

Chapter Six

She hung limply in his arms as the man picked her up and carried her effortlessly into the house. In the hallway he stared suspiciously about him, but there was no sign of a third person. From the rear of the house came the sound of crashing undergrowth. The man listened alertly, standing motionless. A voice, thick with rage, harsh with hate and pain, bellowed warningly: "I'll be back. So help me, you'll pay for this. Do you hear me? I'll be back to make you pay."

The man in the hall subconsciously held the girl closer to him, protectively, as he waited. Silence fell around the house, A huge marmalade cat padded softly through an open door, then paused warily, yellow eyes staring impassively at the figures in the hallway. The man ignored the cat. He listened for a few more moments, then, deciding that whoever had yelled the threat was no longer a danger, he carried the girl into a familiar, chart lined room that was Agatha's study.

He rested the girl in a large armchair and quickly, knowledgeably examined her body for evidence of injury. He noted the state of her hands, the scratches and bruises on her legs. But all these were superficial. Satisfied that there was no serious physical damage, he stood up and gazed curiously at the unconscious girl. A strap of her bikini top had slipped from one shoulder and he carefully replaced it, covering a half exposed breast, He brushed the tangle of hair from her face and wondered who she was, who she had been fleeing from, what had happened.

The cat had followed him into the room, watching him relentlessly, and now prepared to follow him again as he picked up the girl and headed for the stairs. On the landing he opened the door nearest to hand and was pleased to find a bed made and ready. He pulled back the covers and gently laid the girl to rest, covering her bruised and dusty figure, fetching an extra blanket from a drawer in the dresser. Shock required warmth and rest, and he had no doubt that she was in a state of shock. The cause of which he would find out later. He glanced about the room, then softly closed the door

behind him. The cat leapt onto the bed and settled itself watchfully at the girl's feet.

Downstairs, the man brought a small, battered, canvas holdall into the house and tossed it carelessly on the hall floor. He closed and locked the front doors, then proceeded to inspect every room in the house, ensuring that each was empty. He moved swiftly and silently, his body having the grace and movement of physical training, but without the power or muscularity of an athlete. In the kitchen he gazed thoughtfully at the kitchen utensils littering the floor before picking up each piece and stacking them on the table.

He frowned at the sight of the broken glass panel in the door. He did not like the picture that was beginning to form in his mind, and he thought of the girl lying upstairs. He left the house, to re-appear minutes later with wood and a hammer and nails, and he boarded up the space in the door. Satisfied that the house was reasonably secure, he filled the electric kettle and made coffee in a cup, carrying it through to the study. He sat at Agatha's desk and idly flipped through the notes she had written. He found her diary and read through the pages. Then he sat thoughtfully digesting what he had read as he sipped his drink. Soon, he rose and went up to the bedroom where the girl was resting.

As the bedroom door opened, the cat leapt to its feet, back arched threateningly, then it subsided when it recognized him. He settled himself into the armchair and waited for the girl to awaken.

Lucy fought against returning consciousness. The darkness surrounding her mind was calm and comforting, but now it was fading, the harshness of reality was beginning to illuminate her thoughts and battle. Her mind slowly returned to the present and memories of the recent past crowded horribly into her mind. She remembered vividly running from the house and hateful hands grasping her, holding her.... then nothing

more, until now. She lay still, her eyes tightly closed. She did not want to discover what had happened to her after her capture. Her mind shrunk from the possibilities. So she lay motionless, hardly daring to breath.

But slowly the fear and panic left her. She wondered where she was. It was warm and comfortable. She moved her fingers slightly, exploratively against smooth, cool material. And she recognized the clean, fresh smell of her own bed linen. Her heart beat frantically. So she was in bed: But where was he? Was she alone? She shuddered involuntarily at the realization that he might be lying next to her. The movement brought no response. And her fingers touched the lower half of her bikini. At least she was still dressed. She forced calmness upon herself. Think rationally, she urged herself. She could feel no pain, except for a dull ache in her arms and legs, which was only to be expected, she reasoned. But apart from that - nothing. And still there was no sounds around her. She must be alone.

She opened her eyes and stared breathlessly, expectantly at the expanse of discolored ceiling above her. If anything was to happen, it would surely happen now, now that she was awake. She noticed the web of a small Spider in the corner of the ceiling and it seemed reassuringly normal and commonplace. Cautiously, she sat upright. Tabitha was resting on the bed and she felt a rush of gratitude for the security the animal's presence gave her. She brought her arms from under the bedclothes to reach out to Tabitha. At least she was alone, she thought gratefully, now she could..... She gasped and scrambled backwards, pressing against the headboard of the bed as she realized that dark eyes were calmly watching her.

“There was no way to avoid this. I'm sorry. If I had knocked before entering, you would still have had heart failure.” His was matter-of-fact, emotionless.

She stared at him, wide eyed and distrustful. “Who are you?” she whispered.

“Who are you?” he countered coldly.

“Please, you must go. My...my husband will be home shortly, Please go.” She stared pleadingly into his dark eyes. His hair was dark, as was his short growth of beard,

and his clothes were dark. He was like a shadow sitting in her armchair and she felt afraid of him.

“Please don't be stupid.” His voice held a note of impatience. “You're not married, and I won't harm you. So calm down and stop trying to press yourself through the wall of the house.”

“You must go,” she insisted desperately. “I don't know who you...”

He stood up abruptly, and panic welled up inside of her. She raised her arm protectively. “Don't cringe,” he said harshly. There was anger in his eyes, but she was not to know that the anger was caused, not by her, but by the man, or men, who had reduced her to this condition. “And if you are contemplating hysterics, I suggest, instead, that you get yourself dressed. If you come downstairs in ten minutes I shall have tea ready. If you are not down within that time, I shall come to collect you,” he warned her, as he closed the door.

Lucy gazed at the closed door and felt bemused. Who was this dark stranger? What did he want here? And could she trust him?

The short answer to her last question was that she had to trust him, she had no choice. To be fair, he had given her no reason not to. She climbed off the bed and winced at the stiffness in her knees, and immediately became aware of a dozen different points of discomfort. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and was shocked by her appearance; her hair was wild and tangled, face and body streaked with dirt and tears. She badly needed a shower to cleanse herself, and also ease and relax strained muscles. But ten minutes, he had said. Did she have time to bathe? If there wasn't time, then that was too bad, she thought rebelliously, as she chose underwear and clothing from the wardrobe. She was the one who would decide how long it would take her to dress. She marched to the bathroom with a feeling of defiance; her spirit was returning.

Twenty minutes later, cleaned and refreshed, but not feeling half so bold, she entered Agatha's study. The man was sprawled untidily in Agatha's chair, and she resented him being there. He glanced at her briefly, then leant forward to pour tea into a

huge mug, spooned sugar into it and pushed the cup towards her.

“Thank you.” Lucy accepted the cup and sat down opposite the man. He was staring moodily into the fireplace, a brooding look on his dark features, and Lucy examined him closely.

His hair was long and untidy, and she could see now that the beard was not intentional, he just badly needed a shave. He was much taller than herself, she knew, his build wiry rather than muscular, although he was not slim, and the clothes he wore had seen better days. In fact, she decided, feeling uncharitable, he was definitely scruffy. Even his shoes were scuffed and unpolished, worn down at the heel. But there was something about him, the way he held himself, and assurance that looked out of place on his shabby frame.

“I suppose you work here?” he asked suddenly.

“What?” Lucy was startled out of her inspection.

“Do you work for Miss Westgate?” he asked curtly.

“Yes.”

“Where is she?”

“She - she will be back shortly,” Lucy said confidently.

“Oh?” He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Returning with your non-existent husband, I’ve no doubt.”

“And what makes you so certain he doesn't exist?” Lucy countered. She glanced at her watch. “You are due for a very unpleasant surprise,” she warned him.

He looked at her Wearily. “Are we still playing that silly game?” he asked boringly. “You disappoint me. And, unconscious, you look at least moderately intelligent. Very well. if it amuses you.” He He held up the fingers of one hand and ticked off each point he made. “Married women in this country, by tradition, wear wedding rings.”

Lucy automatically covered her ringless left hand with her equally ringless right hand.

“They seldom sleep alone, in bedrooms devoid of any male clothing or articles of toiletry. In fact, there is not one sign that a man has lived in this house recently. There isn't even a razor in the bathroom.”

“The absence of a razor is easily explained if you take into account the fact that some men, and you seem to be one of them, simply don't bother to shave.” Lucy said pointedly.

“Doesn't he bother to dress either? Is that your explanation for the absence of his clothes?” he asked sharply. “I shall have no difficulty recognizing him if we meet in the street.”

Lucy glared at him angrily. It had been stupid of her to claim the imminent arrival of a husband, she now realized, but at the time it had seemed a way of making him leave quickly. And now he was making her feel foolish. He sat across from her with a bored expression on his face and he had no right to be here, she did not want him here.

“Was it your husband who left as I arrived?” he continued softly, with a trace of malice. “Or was that your boyfriend? Did I interrupt your fun and games?”

“How dare you!” Lucy stood up angrily.

“Don't you think that you should tell me what is going on around here?” he asked, with the suggestion of a slight smile behind the dark growth on his face, as he gazed calmly back at her fierce indignation.

“I think you should leave now,” Lucy said firmly, controlling her voice with difficulty. She wanted to be cool and calm and make him leave as soon as possible. His dark, piercing eyes made her uneasy. They saw too much. Or had seen too much. “I shall inform Miss Westgate that you called. If you wish to leave a message. I will see that she receives it. Good evening.”

She stood waiting expectantly, gazing at a point above his head, avoiding his knowing stare. The seconds dragged slowly, painfully past. He was not going to leave, she realized with a sinking feeling. He had made no attempt to rise from his chair. What would she do now? Or more to the point, what did he intend to do next?

He felt a fleeting feeling of admiration for this girl standing before him, coolly dismissing him from the house. He knew she had received a dreadful shock. Only hours before he had held her crumpled, disheveled figure in his arms as she lay unconscious with fear. And now she stood there as bold as brass, looking impeccable, her hair brushed tidily, curling gracefully onto her shoulders, make-up used sparingly and to enhance not to hide features that looked a little stern at the moment, but which he thought would normally be gentle and kind rather than pretty. The jumper and skirt she wore were of a pale green color and the simple style suited her slight, firm figure. But although he might admire her strength of character, that did not stop irritation creeping into his eyes. He shook his head sadly.

“I thought you might have realized by now, but, evidently, you have not. I am not here on a flying visit. I did not 'drop in' because I happened to be passing. I came to visit. I intend to stay.”

“That will not be possible,” Lucy snapped coldly.

“Not only is it possible, it is inevitable, I'm afraid.”

“I'm sure that you will be able to find accommodation in the village,” Lucy said, adding: “Provided you don't leave it too late to make inquiries.” And she tapped the face of her wristwatch.

“I think it is too late already.” He was looking at her mockingly. “I passed through the village earlier today and I got a distinct impression that Westgate is not the most popular family in the district.”

“I don't see how the villagers' feelings towards Miss Westgate can be of any possible interest to you.”

“Oh?” His expression was quizzical. “It seems that you are not going to bother about introductions. Perhaps I should introduce myself?”

“If you leave your name, I shall inform Miss Westgate that you called,” Lucy said stiffly.

“That's very kind of you,” he said gravely. “You can inform Miss Westgate that

Mr Philip Westgate arrived to see her.” His words seemed to echo hollowly. Philip Westgate? “On the other hand,” he said reflectively, “perhaps I should stay and inform her myself. I don't think Aunt Agatha would be too pleased to learn that you had banished her favorite nephew from the ancestral home, do you?”

“Favorite nephew?” Lucy said vaguely. She could now see the resemblance, not so much in looks, but in character; the practical, no nonsense manner, the impatience. the baiting humor.

He nodded sympathetically. “When I claim favoritism, you must bear in mind the fact that I am her only nephew,” he said dryly.

Lucy slowly sank back into her chair. “But how do I know you are who you say you are?” she asked conquered. “Anyone could Walk in here and claim to be Miss Westgate's nephew.”

“Would anyone in his right mind voluntarily choose Agatha for a relative?” he asked sarcastically. “You don't give up easily, do you?” He reached inside his crumpled Jacket and pulled out a wallet, rummaged in its folds and produced a tattered document, which he handed to her. And she wondered if everything he owned was tattered and frayed. It was a passport. She looked at the photograph of the young, clean-shaven man gazing back at her. It had been taken many years ago, but the eyes had not changed. The man sitting before her was still recognizable from the youthful photograph.

“You could claim that the fresh-faced youth in the photograph bears little resemblance to me because he does not have a beard. “And you probably will,” he said dryly.

“I think you should have explained who you were when you first arrived,” Lucy said coldly, handing back his passport.

“You never asked.” He returned his wallet to his pocket. “You were far too preoccupied playing hide and seek with your mysterious friend.”

“That is no laughing matter,” she snapped.

“I have not laughed,” he replied quietly, and his words were like slivers of ice.

“Don’t you think you should explain?” Lucy hesitated. She wanted to confide in someone, trust somebody, even this dark, untidy man. But after the events of the last few days she found herself distrustful of everyone and everything. She remembered the letter that Agatha had written. It seemed like an age ago. “Have you just returned from Australia?” she asked him.

He shook his head. “Not recently. If Agatha has written to me there, and I presume, by your question, that she has, she will wait a long time for a reply. I haven't been in Australia for over twelve months.”

He rose to his feet with a lithe, easy action that she found surprisingly graceful.

“I see that you still prefer to regard me as something dark and sinister waiting for an opportune moment to pounce upon you,” he said tiredly. “I'm sorry, but you will be disappointed to learn that I gave up preying on young girls last year. I don't even make an exception for those wearing bikinis, just in case you were thinking of changing again.”

He crossed the room with a few easy strides. “If you're thinking of finding something to eat, I shan't refuse to share with you,” he said over his shoulder, as he left the room.

Tabitha appeared in the doorway and padded across to rub herself against Lucy's leg. She reached down and absently fondled the cat's ears as she tried to untangle her confused thoughts. He had known her fears and flippantly dismissed them with no thought for her feelings. She found his forthright manner rather crude and disconcerting.

He pushed his empty plate to one side. He had eaten hungrily, as though his last meal had been a long time before. Now, he leant back in his chair and eyed her thoughtfully. His face has clean-shaven, his skin weathered rather than tanned. Now that the beard had been removed, the features she had seen on the photograph were now disguised by the years and the deep lines that made his face severe and cynical. She judged his age to be around thirty, but he could easily be older or younger. It was hard to tell with a face so shaped by experience.

He had come downstairs and found her cooking an omelet in the kitchen. He knew it had taken an effort for her to come into the room alone after the experience of the afternoon, which he could still only guess at. He had again admired her courage and he had spoken kindly to her. His gentleness, while not endearing him to her, had at least allayed the last of her suspicions of him. While he ate, he listened as she told him the events, real and imaginary, that had occurred these last few days. After a hesitant start when she stumbled over her words while trying to describe events which, at best, seemed improbable, at worst, like the ravings of an unbalanced person, she realized that he was listening intently and, far from dismissing the incidents as unlikely, he insisted on her recalling the least little detail.

“.....and when I rushed from the house, I thought Frank Walters was waiting for me. I didn't see your face. Blind with panic, I suppose. The rest,” she shrugged her shoulders, “you know. Now I'm waiting,” Lucy finished, a note of apprehension in her voice, a note he was quick to catch.

“You are safe now,” he assured her quietly.

“Yes.” She sounded unsure. “But for how long? There is no telling what illogical thing might happen next. Or if.... He might return.”

“Walters? I should think he is bound to return.” he said, in an offhand manner. “But you need not worry.”

“That is very comforting,” Lucy said sarcastically. “You inform me that he will soon be knocking at the door, and in the same breath, tell me not to be concerned about it. Very cheerful.”

“Worry if you must.” he said mildly. “But it really isn't necessary. He is the least of your troubles. I find this doctor - Cranling? - far more interesting.”

“Interesting is not the word I would choose to describe him. I would think him to be more in need of a doctor than the patients he treats, if treats is the Proper description for his activities.”

“You have no evidence that he is behind, or the cause of, the villagers'

antagonism. Circumstances may point to him, but circumstances aren't necessarily the best guide," he pointed out, sipping his coffee.

"It is enough for me." Lucy answered promptly. "And you forget that I have more than circumstantial evidence. I have actually met the man and experienced his behavior. And I am in no hurry to repeat that experience."

"Neither, it would seem, is Agatha." he mused.

"Surely you can't think that she left deliberately to avoid meeting him again?" Lucy protested. The idea of Agatha being afraid of anyone or anything seemed ludicrous to her. "She simply went for medical treatment to her shoulder and took the opportunity to look up some of her old friends. That seems perfectly logical and reasonable to me."

"You don't know Agatha very well, do you?"

Lucy flushed. "I think I know her well enough to be confident, that she would not be intimidated by anyone." she said stiffly.

"No one suggested that she was afraid. Cautious perhaps." A thin smile barely touched his lips. "Even a stubborn old warhorse like Agatha has the good sense to know when to admit second best. And the friends she intends visiting, you will find, are all members of that group laughingly titled The Astrological Society."

"Why do you say laughingly?" Lucy asked, with a puzzled expression. "What they believe in might not be everybody's cup of tea, but that does not make them laughing stocks, I have been here when the Society met and they seemed a perfectly normal group of ladies."

"You really have been protected, haven't you?" he said softly.

"Protected from what, for heaven's sake?" she asked irritably.

"Did you never wonder about, for example, the noise issuing from those meetings? Or the atmosphere in the house? Did you never find yourself feeling very sleepy, for no apparent reason?"

"Yes, I noticed all those things," Lucy admitted reluctantly. "But, individually, they seemed unimportant. And if you hadn't suggested otherwise, then I would still

consider them so," she maintained.

"I would have thought that anyone with a modicum of curiosity would have wondered why a group of people, supposedly engaged in the pseudo-scientific pastime of plotting the courses of the zodiacal planets, should find it necessary to chant strange rhythms while doing so," he said sceptically.

"Do you? I don't see why," Lucy said challengingly, stung by his tone and attitude. "I am not interested in such things, Agatha and her friends are. I do not know what they do, or why. And I don't care, as long as they cause no harm."

"Of course they are interested in astrology, amongst other things. And if they confined their attentions to things that they understand they would cause no harm, to themselves or anyone else. But they don't confine themselves to what they know. Being creatures of the inquisitive sex, they have to meddle. Collectively, they can dabble in things that, individually, they are not capable of," he said disparagingly.

"I have not noticed that inquisitiveness is confined to one sex alone," Lucy replied coldly. "And didn't you just censure me for not being inquisitive enough for your taste? It would seem that your thinking is a little confused. I get the impression that you are trying to tell me something, what it is. I have no idea. Why don't you simply tell me what it is you want me to know, without your spiteful observations of other people?" She stared levelly at him. His face was expressionless; his eyes dark, emotionless. Staring at him, it reminded her of looking into the mouth of a dark cave; he gave the same feeling of forbidding loneliness; of dark secrets lurking in the sinister shadows, where the unsuspecting might soon regret disturbing the sad, abandoned stillness.

"You probably still share the view of the majority about the functions and activities of those people who band themselves into covens," he said calmly.

"If, by 'those people', you mean witches, then say so," Lucy said impatiently.

"Don't be so difficult. You might think, as most people do," he went on, unperturbed, "that a coven consists of a group of foolish people all bare skin and goosebumps as they prance naked under the full moon in some deserted hideaway. Do

you?"

"Yes, I think I do," Lucy answered reluctantly. "But I can't say that I've given the matter much attention. I'm not very interested in such things."

"And nor should you be. Those are usually the silly antics of bored people looking for cheap thrills. The reality, the activities of the professional as opposed to the amateur, is very different. As it should be. You wouldn't expect the members of, say, the local Music Appreciation Society to suddenly throw off their clothes and start behaving childishly, and worse. The members of most modern covens share that same point of view. They are not sensation seekers. They take their work, and usually themselves, far too seriously. So, nowadays, they can meet perfectly normally and naturally, just like the Music Appreciation Society, or a gathering for a bridge evening." He paused before adding: "Or an Astrological Society."

"At last!" Lucy heaved an exaggerated sigh of relief. "I thought you would never get to the point." But, the point having been made, she had to admit to herself that she felt rather shaken at the realization that she had been present in this house when supernatural activities had been in progress. And he could tell this from the expression on her face. the tone of her voice when she asked; "But surely it is a harmless pastime? There is nothing to fear, not these days?"

"From Agatha's group, nothing to fear at all, normally," he half reassured her. "They are usually harmless. Rather dotty, but nicely vague about the purpose of their activities. Actually, Agatha regards herself as something of a seer. She tends to use most of the group's energy for her own ends. And the interests of the others are mainly passive. A rather friendly bunch, really."

"If they are so harmless, why the veiled hints that they might be otherwise?" she demanded. "Or do you just like to put people down?" "

"You really can be slow on the uptake when you want to be, can't you? Do you always require explanations to be accompanied by diagrams?"

"In this case, the diagrams, if as meaningful as your explanations, would be mere

doodles,” she shot back.

He controlled his anger. “The point you refuse to see is that the occult, like everything else, can be misused. By its very nature and reputation it is open to suspicion and ridicule. People still tend to regard it as 'magic', either black or white, and it is feared or laughed at, depending on the mentality of the observer. But you must remember that many things, when looked upon with ignorance or by the ignorant, were regarded as magic. Yoga and the yogis of the east were considered part supernatural, part possessed, until we learnt that it was simply a physical science. Many ideas have been twisted and abused, even religion. Remember the inquisition? The holy wars? The occult is only dangerous when it attracts the attention and enthusiasm of fanatics and perverts, the unstable and the cruel. As always, knowledge itself isn't dangerous, but knowledge can make a certain type of person very, very dangerous,” he finished, a brooding look on his face.

“What you are trying to tell me,” Lucy said with skepticism, “is that there is no magic, until naughty people start behaving magically: Your magic, it seems, can disappear and reappear magically: And please don't place this occult nonsense on a par with religion,” she said severely.

“I'm telling you the way it is,” he said sharply. “There is no difference between the skills of a conjurer and those of a pickpocket, but there is a hell of a difference in the way those skills are employed. And stop being deliberately obtuse. I'm not Speaking to you because I like to hear the sound of my own voice. It is to your benefit to learn as much as possible about things you do not understand, people who can harm or help you.”

“You Seem to know a lot about this occult business,” she challenged. “Are you one of the good guys or one of the bad? Is your magic black or white?”

“I know enough about a car to drive one, but that doesn't make me a car mechanic,” he answered quietly. And she was sorry that she had scoffed. But it was his own fault. She disliked being dictated to, and his whole manner towards her was

dictatorial. He spoke down to her, patronizingly, as though she were a child. He reminded her of a particularly nasty maths teacher she had once had. She had always hated maths lessons after that, even when he had departed to find fresh targets for his stinging sarcasm. It wasn't knowledge or intellect that she objected to, it was the attitude of superiority that rankled.

He stood up abruptly. "I've had a long and tiring day. I'm going to bed now. I suggest that you do the same."

Another order! And one she would have to comply with. She nodded sullenly. She would have liked to refuse, to remain where she was. But she could not stay downstairs alone. She rose and meekly followed him upstairs.

On the landing, he paused until she was safely in her bedroom. He bade her a curt 'goodnight', and strode to his room.

She thought of him as she undressed and he disturbed her. There was a part of him remote; cold and hard and dark, it showed in his eyes, his tones of voice. Like a chill wind suddenly blowing across a bright day, it threatened unpleasantness.

She climbed into bed and switched off the light. And Philip Westgate himself had warned that there were people who would help, and people who would harm. Were there also people who could first help, then harm?

Quietly, she left her bed. Silently, she turned the key to lock her bedroom door.

A creature of the night is the owl; wide and gliding silently in darkened skies, searching for its prey in shadow and gloom.

Seeking.

Finding.

Moving swiftly, noiselessly downward towards its unsuspecting quarry. And the

victim is unaware of impending death until the very last second, until the hunting bird, cruel, deadly talons almost within striking distance, emits its terrifying shriek.

And the victim is transfixed by the sound. Paralyzed with fear, it waits; motionless, helpless, doomed.

Lucy's eyes fluttered open as the echo of the owl's cry faded into the night. The sound had dragged her from sleep.

She lay motionless, staring into the darkness, her heart pounding painfully as she struggled from nightmare dreams into dreaded reality.

No! Please, not again. Her mind whimpered fearfully, and she was shocked by the unknown, primitive fears that jostled frantically for recognition by her reason. She pushed the twisted shapes of fear back into the silent caverns of her mind and tried to think rationally. It was simply the cry of a bird that had awakened her, nothing unnatural. Jumping to conclusions would not help. Everything was silent now. Be calm.

In spite of her own assurances, she lay tensely, expectantly. Afraid of the darkness and what it might hide, she was nevertheless grateful for the shadows that concealed her. The minutes dragged by. Had Philip heard? she wondered. And hearing, would the sound mean anything to him? He had not experienced the last visit, he could not know the fear it had aroused in her. Tabitha: Where was the cat? She would know if it was the same dark force returning. Agatha had not heard that first horrible call, perhaps Philip would not.

Thought jumbled with fear in her mind. She contemplated switching on the light, but for what reason? She hoped there would be nothing to see. If there was, she did not wish to see it. And she did not want to move. Everything was still and quiet; even the

nocturnal creakiness of the old house were absent tonight. She felt irrationally, that to move might only make things worse, might disturb the peace that had now descended upon the house, like a comforting blanket that calms the fitful sleep of a restless child.

It was going to be all right, she thought confidently. Nothing had happened, nothing would. False alarm. She closed her eyes and gradually convinced her jangling nerves to be still, allow her to relax.

“Luuccyyy.”

Shock forced her bolt upright and covered her skin with crawling fingers of ice. She pressed the knuckles of her right hand against her mouth to force back the scream that was rising inside her.

“Luuuccyyyyy.” The voice was low and crooning happily, lovingly caressing the sound of her name. A low throated chuckle rippled upwards from the night and seemed to pound against her brain.

He had returned.

She scrambled from her bed. Shaking fingers sent the bedside lamp crashing to the floor. She was on her hands and knees reaching for it, panting frantically, desperate now to dispell the darkness around her. She found and pressed the switch, bathing the room with a gentle, yellow glow. She looked around to take comfort from familiarity. But there was no comfort. The room and the objects it contained might be familiar, but the atmosphere was charged with apprehension, distorting, isolating her in her loneliness.

“Luuuccyyyyy.” She grabbed her dressing-gown and was struggling into it when the handle of the bedroom door rattled softly. She gasped and spun around, her face drained of color.

“Stay here and wait for me.” Philip's voice was muffled behind the locked door. “I will not be long.”

She shook her head fiercely as she pulled the dressing-gown around her and turned the key to unlock the door.

He stared at her gravely as the door opened and she stood before him; small she seemed at that moment, tiny as she clutched her clothes around herself, as if holding herself together, as if in danger of falling apart with the strain of the night. He guessed against whom the door had been locked, but he gave no sign of knowing, nor was he concerned. He could understand her suspicion of every man she met, now, and perhaps throughout her life. Did trust, once abused, ever return to the bruised heart of the trusting? He thought not, not completely, never in the same pure form.

He thought of the sad madness waiting to gain entrance to the house, and the anger inside him was bright and sharp, yet cold enough to freeze any remnant of compassion that might remain. He realized, not for the first time and without curiosity at his feelings, or lack of them, that he no longer judged, not when it was so easy to act. Once, he might have felt pity for the man outside, might have tried to reconcile him with reality. But not now. The years had taught him too much, and he had been a willing pupil. He looked down at the ghostly face of the girl and remembered how she had lain limply in his arms earlier, and there was no thought of pity for the man outside, no wish to help him. The risk of failure was too great when he balanced what could be gained against what could be lost by this girl with her anxious, white face.

“There is nothing you can do. Stay here.” Philip's tone was insistent. He was growing impatient. He wanted to be away from her. There was something lurking in the depths of her eyes, an echo of emotion, that he could not recognize. But it nagged at his memory, reminding him vaguely of something, or someone, he had known long ago. He closed her bedroom door. As he walked away, he remembered who it was that her eyes brought to mind. After all this time, so many years. He did not pause, his step did not falter as he saw himself in her eyes, but so far away that he had forgotten. He wondered vaguely where the emotions and feelings of his youth had gone. These days he could not even experience fear. The loss was probably a gain, he thought cynically, given his way of life.

She was taken aback by the grim expression on his face as he closed the door,

leaving her alone again. She would not stay here, not knowing what might happen outside. If she knew, then she could face it, perhaps do something about it. She would not sit fearfully waiting, like a caged bird listening to a cat scratching nearer and nearer.

Slowly she eased the bedroom door open just wide enough for her to slip out onto the darkened landing. She could see nothing. She closed the door softly and advanced hesitantly to the landing rail, she peered down into the hallway dimly lighted by the glow from the open door to the study. There was no one to be seen, nor on the stairs as she searched frantically for Philip. Where was he? She felt a tug at her clothing and glanced sharply down into the bright, yellow eyes of Tabitha, and she felt better for the presence of the cat. She reached down to touch her, then stopped, jerking upright.

Just like before, the front doors burst open with a crash.

“Luuucccyyy, where are you?”

A strutting figure moved confidently into the hall. “I’ve come to see you. I promised I would. I’ve come to keep my promises.” Frank Walters was crooning still, his voice sing-song and unnatural as he glanced around him, then lifted his gaze upwards.

Lucy pressed herself quickly backwards. Had he seen her? Please, God, no!

“I’m coming to find you. And when I do, I’m going to....”

Lucy closed her eyes and shuddered as Walters happily sang a stream of vicious obscenities. Where was Philip? Why did he not stop him?

“I can see you.” Frank Walters claimed.

Oh no. No!

“I can see you waiting for me. You stay there and I’ll come to you. We’ll be nearer the bedroom.”

He giggled; a brittle, unreal sound that floated around her as she crouched, pressed against the wall. He had found her: Soon he would be here. Help me, help me help me.

“No, don’t you come down. I’m coming to you.” Lucy peered into the darkness. What did he mean?

“Impatient, are you? Can't wait a minute longer? Well, come on, my beauty. The sooner you are here, the sooner I can start to.....” Lucy closed her ears to the crude sounds. What was happening? She cautiously edged forward again. Frank Walters was standing a third of the way up the stairs. His arms were open welcoming, an ugly smile disfiguring his face. And slowly descending the stairs was Philip Westgate. But it was not Philip.

Lucy gripped the banister rail so tightly that her fingers ached. But she did not notice the pain. She was tenaciously clinging to sanity as she stood on the landing.

And watched herself slowly descending the stairs towards the waiting arms of Frank Walters.

She refused to accept it, her reason frantically protesting the impossibility of the situation. She was here! She could not be, would not be, walking voluntarily into the arms of that obscene man. She struggled with reality, forcing reason into the place of panic. And slowly the image shimmered and broke apart, to reveal Philip calmly descending.

But the illusion was not meant for her, it was for Frank Walters' benefit. And he leered with unconcealed delight.

“Come on, my beauty, just a few more steps and you'll get what you were promised. And more. I'll make you pay for hurting me. I said I would and I keeps my word, see.”

He reached eagerly towards the figure on the stairs, and was sent tumbling backwards. He landed face downward and twisted over, snarling furiously at the thought that his prize had eluded him again.

Lucy watched as Philip Westgate stood over the fallen man. There was no illusion now, she knew that by the expression on Walters' face, Surprise had given way to a look of unrestrained fury as he stared up at his assailant and realized that he had been tricked. With a scream of animal passion that made her shudder, he attempted to rise.

Philip Westgate did not utter a sound. He raised his hand and she saw that he held a length of silver chain. That was not chain, for it started to writhe and curl as she watched. It moved and twisted, snapping viciously first this way, then back again, struggling as if to escape. A sibilant sound of anger slowly rose in volume until the entire hallway was filled with the sound that blacked out everything else; all thought and feeling buried beneath the angry, serpent noise.

Frank Walters fell back, cowering, his wild eyes fear-filled as he watched the twisting, writhing serpent. His scrabbling feet pushed him jerkily away from the threat above him.

From outside, faintly through the open doors, came the harsh shriek of the night bird, barely penetrating the blanketing sound of a thousand sibilant warnings. Tabitha lay quietly by Lucy's side. The cat did not move at the sound of the bird, as though, this time, there was no danger.

Frank Walters hesitated. His lips curled back in a snarl of desperation. He looked like a trapped animal; afraid of the situation before him, even more afraid to retreat. And a trapped animal will spring and attack out of sheer desperation. Philip Westgate gave him no opportunity to attack. He flung the silver chain.

And Frank Walters screamed and clawed at his neck as the reptile curled itself about him, tightening, choking, and the hissing grew to a roar that reverberated around the house.

Lucy held her hands to her ears and watched in disbelief as the man on the floor struggled in a vain attempt to pull the chain from his neck. His eyes bulged outward and he gasped for precious breath through a mouth opened wide, but not wide enough for air to enter. She felt dazed by what she saw, deafened by the sound of this nightmare. If she relaxed her concentration for only a second, she knew that the silver strands would become as a snake to her also, and she would feel herself becoming enmeshed in a frightening series of images and emotions.

Philip bent forward and retrieved the chain.

Immediately he was free, Frank Walters staggered to his feet coughing and gasping. He stumbled to the door, and with one terrified backward glance, lurched out into the night.

The sounds that had filled every part of the house and its inhabitants gradually diminished, as though leaving in pursuit of the broken figure that had just departed.

Silence returned; that dreadful, abandoned silence that lingers after an act of violence.

Philip Westgate calmly closed and locked the doors. His actions were unhurried, his face, when he turned, was detached, almost indifferent. He started up the stairs, then paused when he saw the girl standing there, looking down, watching him. He stared at her silently but his mouth tightened as he saw the expression on her face.

“What are you?” Lucy whispered accusingly, “What kind of man are you?”

“I told you to stay in your room,” he said harshly.

She ignored his words, her mind too full of the scene she had just witnessed.

“I saw what you did to him. I saw it, but I don't know.....”

The Whisper tailed off into silence and she stared at him humbly.

“He won't return,” he said flatly, starting up the stairs. “That is what you wanted, isn't it?”

She did not answer. He stopped on the landing and watched her struggling to comprehend.

“Go to your room. There is nothing to be afraid of now,” he said gently.

“Isn't there?” Her eyes were challenging. “Why are you here?” Her voice came from far away, as if she was speaking absently while her thoughts dwelt elsewhere. “You are the same as - as whatever is out there. You are part of it. Why are you here?” she repeated shrilly.

“Be grateful that I am here,” he snapped. “Would you rather have been alone tonight?”

She stared past him coldly. “I feel as though I am alone,” she said slowly.

He turned and walked away from her.

She did not know how deeply her words struck home. Or how well they applied to both of them. For, in contact with her, he too felt alone, but, unlike her, not abandoned. He was like a sailor drifting on a vast desertion of ocean, who, glimpsing landfall on the horizon, stares at it lethargically, without speculation, curiosity unaroused. For there have been many lands on his journey, many places visited. All promising much, delivering little; all depressingly similar on departure so that they now merged into one, and the one impression applied to all. A sailor's place is the sea, and even if he wished to land, to escape the ceaseless, restless, searching motion of sea and sky and wind, he did not really think it possible. For his blood flowed in his veins now with the motion of the tides, and he could not believe that the conquering waves could be denied; accommodated, yes, served with wary respect, the heaving, storm lashed furies could be stoically weathered into calmness. But the land, as always, would pass, and once again there would only be the shifting, treacherous waves stretching from horizon to horizon and making a man vaguely aware of the meaning, the intensity and loneliness, of infinity.

She went to her room and lay down without undressing, her mind in turmoil. She was still lying, staring sightlessly at the yellowing ceiling when the first pale light of an empty tomorrow seeped into the room.

Chapter Seven

“I will be leaving.”

He did not turn to face her.

She had come downstairs to find the house empty. He was outside, sitting on the top step and staring out across the meadow. The Scar stood out livid and dark against a sky of pale gray velvet. The morning was cool and calm, with a smell of dampness in the air and the dew was lingering on the grass.

When he made no answer or motion, she spoke again.

“Did you hear me? I said I will be leaving today.”

“I heard you.” Still he did not turn to her. She gazed at his back, hunched beneath the dark material of his shirt, his hair hanging lankly to curl slightly about the collar, and she did not want him to face her. She did not want to look upon his face that was more of a mask. The memory of the previous night lay heavily between them, separating them as surely as would something solid and tangible.

“It may be too late for you to leave.” He sounded as if he was musing, rather than stating an opinion.

“For you, perhaps, but it isn't too late for me.” she said firmly. “I have no part in any of this, neither do I want one.”

“You were involved before I arrived. It is certainly too late to think that I am the cause of your troubles.”

He was only half correct in his assumption. She did not blame him. But he was involved, she was convinced of that. He was the focal point of her fears.

“I don't know. I don't understand what is happening. I won't pretend that I do, and I'm not hanging around to find out. You can play your little games without my help. I've had enough.”

“So have I.” He turned to her and his face was tired, he looked drawn and weary. For the illusions he had created in the night had taken their toll, had left him drained of

nervous energy. But his eyes still held their dark fire. "I, too, hope that you can leave. But first I must see that Agatha is safe. You will come to Bellbury with me."

"Will I?" She shook her head determinedly. "No, I don't think I will."

"It will be to your own benefit. We may even discover what this is all about. You may find that you have no significant part to play, then you will be free to leave."

"I am free to leave now," she insisted.

"You may leave, but that does not necessarily guarantee freedom." He stood upright with that curious fluid movement that seemed not to involve any effort whatsoever. "I should like you to go with me," he said quietly. "And you shall. I should prefer you to accompany me voluntarily."

She did not answer him, but his barely veiled threat had been received. "

I'm sorry that it has to come to this," he said, and his words seemed genuine. even if his expression left her guessing. He went into the house.

She hesitated before following him. The trip to Bellbury would involve no more than two or three hours of her time, then she would be free. She could leave this district to continue its mad, gruesome pantomime without her. It seemed a small price to pay, so she followed him indoors and waited for him.

The shop was dilapidated and seemed deserted. The few items of cheap, semi-antique furniture displayed in the grimy window had a thick covering of dust. There was no sign, no name above the window, no paint on woodwork bleached and cracked by weather. It stood in one of Bellbury's narrow side streets that were more like alleyways than streets. Opposite the shop was the blank wall of the rear of a large warehouse.

Philip pushed open the door to the shop, and Lucy, before entering, looked back

up the narrow passageway to where the noise and bustle of the main street seemed far away and detached from where she stood. She could see the jeweler's and the hands of the clock above the door stood at ten thirty. She checked the time against her own watch as she reluctantly followed the man into the gloomy interior.

He threaded his way through and past the dark varnished furniture, the dulled and grubby vases and crockery of faded, sad colors; the forlorn bric-a-brac of forgotten lives lay scattered haphazardly, the shop half empty of goods to trade, yet filled completely by memories of a thousand yesterdays. He walked past the bare, wooden counter and pulled back a dusty curtain to reveal a doorway. He stood aside to allow her to enter.

The woman was tiny and frail, almost hidden in the depths of a huge covered armchair. She wore a gray shawl draped around a dress of shining green satin, with black lines forming a simple pattern. Her hair tumbled around her in a confusion of gleaming curls, black as raven wings, twisting luxuriously to below her waist. Her face was serene, thin featured but not sharp, her lovely expression radiating peace and serenity.

She turned to inspect her visitors and there was no curiosity on her face. Lucy stopped short a pace inside the room and she was filled with confusion. When she entered, she had thought to meet a young girl; the face, complexion, the beautiful hair, all were girlish. But oh, her eyes, dark and deep as twin wells sunk unto the secrets of the world; their depths seemed to shift and move fluidly, like the shadows in the velvet darkness of a nursery night. The woman could be aged twenty or two hundred years, Lucy just did not know.

And the room, in sharp contrast to the shop outside, was spotless. A coal fire burned in the old fashioned black grate, the iron surrounds polished to a mirror finish; the ebony surfaces reflected the soft glow of brassware, the hard glitter of crystal. The room and all its contents, even the woman's clothes, Lucy noted, seemed of the Victorian or Edwardian period. It was like stepping back in time, standing in that tiny, cluttered room, and breathing the faint, fragile aroma of lavender.

Philip moved past Lucy into the room and a smile lit up the woman's face. For an instance, her time-filled eyes lost their hollowness. The sound she made was like a deep sigh of relief. She turned to gaze back into the glow of coals behind the thick metal bars of the grate, and she nodded slightly, satisfied.

“Hello, Angel” Philip said, with a gentleness that surprised Lucy. She looked at him and there was an expression of affection softening his bleak features, erasing the lines of sternness around his mouth. So, the mask could slip sometimes.

“See? Your traveling brought you no harm.” the woman said, and the sound was as low, as clear as the tinkling of a chandelier in a soft, summer breeze.

“No.”

“And did you find that which you sought?”

“No.”

She laughed; a friendly, mocking sound. “You are in danger of becoming a perpetual traveler, never enjoying your journey, and with no destination to end it. You are a child, Philip.” she shook her head. “No, not even a child; a puppy dog, whirling in circles, trying to catch your own tail.”

He smiled ruefully. “You could be right. But what is the alternative? That I stay put and become an ornament in a junk shop?”

She looked at him fondly. “This ornament, as you call me, might just crash another over your head for a remark like that,” she chided him in her low voice. “And with another woman present to hear your insult: Shame on you, Philip. You once had the saving grace of a small amount of gallantry. I see you have lost even that. And are you now so ashamed of me that you will not introduce your friends?”

“You know very well who she is,” Philip replied, with a sound that was almost an amused chuckle. Lucy realized that, for the first time since meeting him, she had almost heard him laugh. He was relaxed and easy as he bantered friendlily with this strange woman he called Angel.

“That may be true,” the woman acknowledged with a graceful movement of her

head. "But she does not know who I am."

"Nor do I, no more than you do yourself. How shall I introduce you? As simply one of a shopful of memories? Or are you feeling grand today? Shall you be a splendid creature from history, marooned by the tides of time in this brackish backwater?"

"So you remember my nicked words, you devil." She threw back her head to laugh delightedly and her hair shimmered darkly as it twisted about her with the movement. Her teeth were hand picked pearls set in a mouth with lips full but perfectly shaped. And Lucy knew that she would never again see such beauty. She felt large and clumsy and dowdy beside this diminutive figure of perfection, but she felt no envy. She watched the woman and it was, curiously, like viewing a painting, an object of art; one could admire and appreciate exquisiteness from a detached position, without becoming part of the beauty, without it intruding into your life. It was on a different level, beyond the daily life that swirled vulgarly past.

"You shall introduce me as your angel. That pleases me," she said graciously. "And how do you wish to be known, my dear?" For the first time, she addressed Lucy directly, turning her deep, dark eyes in her direction. And Lucy was struck by their similarity to Philip's eyes.

"Only as who I am. My name is Lucy."

Angel nodded approvingly. "That is all you can ever hope to be." She held out her hand.

Lucy reached forward to shake the tiny hand and felt, ridiculously as though she was being granted an audition by some noble-lady from long ago. Philip's words: 'Some Splendid creature from history' echoed through her mind as the tiny fingers curled around her own, like the soft fingers of a child holding its mother's hand.

Angel held her hand for a moment longer than necessary and when Lucy looked at her questioningly, she smiled friendlily.

"But don't make the mistake of thinking that you know who you are," she murmured. "To yourself, you are just as much a stranger as any casual passerby."

She turned her attention back to Philip. "I asked you to hurry when I wrote to you," she said, and the tone of her voice suggested that she had commanded, not asked.

"I came as soon as I could. I had other things to do."

"You are so tiresome: You think soon enough is immediately. No matter, you are here now. And it was soon enough. I gather?"

"Yes," Philip answered, and Lucy had the uncomfortable feeling that they were referring to her.

"Good. And the doctor, you have met him?"

Philip shook his head. "I have to know his reasons for his being here. Agatha is not active enough to attract the attention of someone like Cranling."

"Reasons? What good are reasons to you? You should know his purpose, and that is sufficient." Angel sounded impatient with him, "Agatha was only the cheese to bring the mouse sniffing."

He looked up sharply and a shadow of weariness flitted across his face. "And the mouse is now here," he said softly, thoughtfully, a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"Yes." There was sympathy in her look. "And he will know of your presence."

"Which knowledge will be of little use to him." The steel was back in his voice. "We came hoping to learn the whereabouts of Agatha."

"Then you came to the wrong place." Angel laughed. "Agatha would sooner sign a pact with the devil than visit me, as you very well know."

"But that would not stop you knowing where she is."

"She is safe, I will tell you that. If I sent you to her she would never forgive me. Not that she will forgive me now, for simply knowing more than she can ever guess at. I keep the peace for your sake. Agatha, like a female Robin Hood, has her merry gang safely hidden and happily plotting. I shall inform you if they decide to do anything alarming."

Philip smiled admiringly. "And Cranling?" he prompted.

"I...No, why should I always be the bearer of bad tidings?" Angel declared

petulantly. "You should visit a certain Mary Belling, who realizes nothing, but can tell you everything."

"Belling? Isn't she one of Agatha's cronies? Séances are her specialty, I believe: Teas and crumpets and cosy chats with the dear departed," he said scathingly. "I will have no dealings with such dabblers."

"You have no choice, Philip dear," Angel said demurely. "And you should not be so arrogant. It is not becoming, and it could be dangerous. Show the lady the better side of your nature, there's a good boy. Besides," she chuckled with amusement, "of late, the poor woman had had some bothersome evenings."

"Your cruelty today will be held against you at a later date," Philip threatened playfully.

"I know." Angel was unperturbed. "But I can't help it. I feel so spiteful today. And now you must go. I have work to do."

She turned to Lucy. "Goodbye, my dear. You must visit me again soon, without the presence of this ugly brute."

"That is highly improbable," Philip informed her. "Lucy is leaving today."

"Yes?" Angel stared at her thoughtfully, then smiled secretively. "But you have not yet departed, have you, my dear?"

She lifted her hand in regal dismissal and the 'audition' was at an end. Lucy stepped from the shop and took a deep breath of the fresh, clean air. She had felt stifled by the atmosphere inside and the cool, damp air against her face was a relief. Philip joined her and they made their way towards the main street. Suddenly she halted. Philip walked on a pace or two before he stopped and turned to see why she paused. She was holding her wristwatch to her ear and there was a puzzled expression on her face.

"It is ten thirty-one," she declared, frowning as she lowered her arm.

"Is the time significant?" he asked.

"But it was ten thirty when we entered that shop. I noticed the time on the jeweler's clock." She stared now at the square-faced clock above the shop window. As

she watched, the minute finger moved jerkily: Ten thirty-two.

“That is impossible!” she exclaimed. “We were in that place for more than one minute. Where did the time go to?”

Philip stared at her wordlessly.

“Where?” she demanded shrilly, angered by his blank expression.

“We have someone else to see before we return to Valley House,” he reminded her tonelessly, and she knew he would not give her an explanation. She shivered slightly as she fell in step beside him.

“Fancy you turning up like this. Only yesterday I told Mr Belling that I would ask Agatha about you the next time I met her. And here you are: Quite a coincidence.”

They sat in the front room of the neat, semi-detached house, one of a hundred identical houses on the council's new housing estate. Mary Belling poured tea from a silver teapot into cups covered with a red scrawl intended to represent the classic willow pattern. That the cups were large enough to be classed as mugs, and the artist who had drawn up the design having once obviously worked for a firm producing saucy seaside postcards, Seemed not to detract from the pleasure of ownership that Mary Belling felt. This was her best set, taken from the glass cabinet in their honor.

She was a woman of medium build, with a fluttery, birdlike nature that inclined towards lace and flimsy, brightly patterned, preferably flowered, fabrics for her clothing. The rayon dress she wore was full skirted in a style reminiscent of the nineteen fifties, and printed with bright red roses twelve inches in diameter and looking rather grotesque. Behind gold rimmed spectacles her eyes darted nervously, restlessly, like two small, muddy brown animals in glass cages. Her hair was rinsed blue to conceal the gray, the

color a shade too vivid, the curls close and tight about her skull; the whole effect looking like a blue mob-cap perched uneasily upon her head.

“Mr Belling will not believe he,” she declared, handing the tea to her visitors. “Philip Westgate? he will say. Never: I don't believe you.”

Philip shuffled his feet impatiently on the red, flowered, carpet and looked uncomfortable perched upon the edge of the chintz covered, frail cottage style settee. Lucy sat beside him and was amused by the friendly, busy woman with a garish taste in, seemingly, everything. The color scheme of this bright front room might be outlandish, but at least the room was a bright and cheerful place.

Philip balanced his cup and saucer precariously upon his knee and attempted to steer the conversation to the subject he was interested in.

“I believe you....” he started, but was immediately interrupted.

“I have not seen Agatha for, oh, simply ages,” Mary Belling exaggerated, and was so obviously lying that Lucy had to quickly cough to hide the giggle that rose to her lips.

“I do hope you're not catching a cold, dear,” Mrs Belling said, with concern. “Summer colds can last all year round, you know, Still, I daresay Agatha will have some little preparation to relieve you.”

“I'm not here about Agatha,” Philip assured her, “I'm here because.....”

“Oh?” she looked at him questioningly. “Are you sure you don't want to know where Agatha is? She said you would be bound to ask if I met you.”

“Well, of course I should like to know where she is, but....”

“Aha!” Mary Belling flagged an accusing finger. “But you were fibbing to me, weren't you? Agatha said you would. Naughty, naughty.”

Philip stared at her, nonplussed, but she seemed not to notice as she turned to Lucy.

“They are so devious, aren't they? Mr Belling can still surprise me with his little tricks and schemes. He never learns. Only the other day he.....” Mrs Belling prattled

happily about her husband and his wily ways, and Lucy listened, apparently attentively. Actually, she was maliciously enjoying Philip's growing impatience and obvious discomfort. His silence was not so much tactful as frustrated. But after five minutes, every second filled with the sound of Mrs Belling's high, insistent voice, even Lucy began to weary of the flow of words as ceaseless as a mountain stream. ".....not that I am sleeping too well, just lately," the woman complained.

"Why is that, Mrs Belling?" Lucy asked, eagerly seizing the opportunity to steer the conversation away from the mundane.

Mary Belling hesitated. She seemed reluctant to discuss the cause of her sleepless nights, but Lucy stared at her with wide eyes, attentive, conveying an attitude of great interest. Such a nice girl, Mrs Belling decided. And she did so badly want to discuss the matter with a friendly, sympathetic face. (She was usually willing to discuss any topic with any face, for that matter. So the decision she came to was reached without too much difficulty.)

"Well," she started uncertainly, "I take it you know about my little hobby?"

Lucy nodded.

"Harmless, really. And it can be so very interesting and rewarding at times. Or it used to be, until she started making a nuisance of herself. And no one asked her to communicate with our little group, she simply joins in uninvited." Mrs Belling was pulling nervously at her dress as she spoke, her eyes darting restlessly around the room.

Lucy could see that, beneath her mild manner, the woman was deeply disturbed.

"I normally make contact with a charming gentleman who used to live in Birmingham. Not that one can hold that against him," she added hastily. "He is obviously very well educated and a pleasure to converse with. Even Mr Belling agrees with me on that point. Then she started to make contact. Vexing girl: I had never heard such language before: Mr Belling had to practically act as an interpreter for me. He spent some years in the navy, you know. Heaven knows what she was like when she has down here. I don't wonder that someone was tempted to murder her."

“Murdered?” Lucy leant forward, intrigued.

“So she claims.” Mrs Belling sniffed disdainfully. “but you can't believe a word out of her mouth. At least, I don't. I wouldn't normally dream of speaking ill of the dead, but I make an exception in her case.”

“What else can one do, when the dead start speaking ill of the living,” Philip commented dryly, obviously bored with the whole conversation.

“Quite.” Mrs Belling completely missed the irony in his voice. “My view exactly. Although Mr Belling does urge me to be more charitable towards her. I'm afraid I find it impossible. It is me she uses as the medium for her foul tongue. And he always did have a weakness for young girls. I remember one occasion....”

“But what does she say?” Lucy interrupted quickly, not wishing to hear more of Mrs Belling's views on her husband.

“say? Oh, I couldn't possibly repeat anything that came from that girl. Not verbatim, as it were.” Mrs Belling looked horrified at the thought. “Your ears are much too delicate for such things. I only wish that I could be spared.”

“Me,too,” Philip commented with feeling.

The woman smiled at him and thought how understanding he was.

“She ruins every meeting I hold now. In fact, I've had to cancel all séances until further notice,” she admitted regretfully. “We can only hope that she will go away and leave us in peace.”

Philip deposited his cup on the small table and rose to his feet. “Unlike your ethereal friend, we will be only too pleased to leave you in peace,” he murmured.

“You are welcome to stay as long as you please, Philip,” Mrs Belling said generously.

“I have done.” he answered shortly.

“What,” Lucy intervened before he could say more and even Mrs Belling would notice his sarcasm, “does she say about the murder?”

“Very little, apart from ranting almost continuously about vengeance. She really

does possess a vitriolic tongue. I wish someone up there would do something about her. Do you think the dead can re-murder the dead?" she asked hopefully.

Philip, with a rude snort of disbelief, strode to the door.

Lucy stood up. "I must go now," she smiled. "Thank you for the tea and your time."

"It was my pleasure," Mrs Belling insisted. "I get so few visitors now that my meetings are canceled. And you must join our little group one evening, as soon as we can get rid of this Victoria person and her wretched ramblings."

"What?" Philip spun around and his face was taut with tension. Mrs Belling stepped timidly back a pace, alarmed by the fury his voice contained. "What did you say her name was?" he demanded aggressively.

"Philip, please," Lucy protested, she too alarmed at the force of his reaction.

"Her name is Victoria. Didn't I tell you? Oh dear, it must have slipped my mind," Mrs Belling said, flustered. "Yes, Victoria. That's all I know, Does it mean anything?" she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her alarm.

"She must tell you something about herself, about her life, the person she blames for her death," Philip persisted. "It was a man. Yes, I'm sure of that. She keeps saying, 'He will pay'."

"More than that." He shook his head impatiently. "Think, woman, think!"

"Shouting and bullying will not help," Lucy said coldly.

Mrs Belling glanced at her gratefully. "It's hard to remember anything specific," she complained. "She says so much, screaming most of the time. One thing that struck me as odd, I remember thinking at the time...."

"Yes. yes," Philip urged.

"She said: 'The cross could not help his own, it will not help him.' Strange, don't you think?" Philip nodded slowly, turned and left.

"I said it wouldn't make sense," Mrs Belling apologetically called after him. She turned to Lucy, "She seldom does make sense, you know, I'm surprised at Philip

becoming so animated. It's not the type of thing he is normally interested in."

"You must forgive him. He has had a tiring journey. And he is concerned about Agatha," Lucy fabricated rapidly.

"Of course he is. Quite naturally, but there is no need for him to be anxious. Really. Tell him not to worry."

"I will," Lucy promised, edging towards the door, "Oh, and she seems quite fond of her father, strangely enough."

"Agatha?"

"Victoria. She seems to think that he can cure something. Cure or cut away. Seems very important to her too, if the volume of her voice is a guide to her emotions. Goodbye."

Philip was waiting by the roadside.

"You were rude to her," Lucy said sharply.

"She is foolish," he answered indifferently, as though the incident did not matter.

"That is no excuse for boorish behavior," she insisted. "She had wasted enough of my time with her idle chatter," he snapped.

"She gave you her time. She made you welcome."

"Only to satisfy her own curiosity."

"She helped you. She deserved better thanks," Lucy insisted. "Angel said you were arrogant, but she doesn't know how badly you behave."

"I have no need for another conscience, one is sufficient," he growled.

"I doubt it. Seems you are in need of something extra, something is lacking inside you," she retorted sharply.

The gray sky that had lowered threateningly throughout the morning now delivered its promise of rain, sweeping coldly down on the brisk wind. Behind them came the roar of the ancient bus struggling noisily to keep to a hopeful timetable of two journeys per day between Bellbury and Scarton. This was the start of the second of its visits to Scarton and, judging by the noise and rattling beneath the bonnet, the return

journey was not a foregone conclusion.

Philip stepped into the road to flag down the battered red bus, which wheezed to a halt beside them, seeming almost grateful for the chance to rest for a moment or two.

They sat in silence at the rear of the bus. Philip staring straight ahead, his face stern and thoughtful. The rain trickled down the windows of the bus as Lucy looked out, observing the streets shining wetly, the people in the streets hurrying beneath umbrellas.

The bus was almost deserted, the passengers comprising of two large ladies returning laden from a shopping expedition; a tall, thin man with a beaked nose buried in the pages of a book; and two young girls giggling furtively, their heads close together to exclude the world from their private joke.

Lucy remembered a day like that, a schoolday, when Doris Williams had been her 'best friend' and everything, including themselves, had been bright and new. And Doris had been hopelessly infatuated with one Robin Bunting. Doris had been too well bred to scrawl that magic name upon walls or doorways or upon the seats of public transport vehicles, so she had taken to scribbling anonymous messages on scraps of paper, which she left lying about in the exciting hope that he might find and read one. Lucy could not remember much about the wording of these messages, except that they always declared her undying passion for R.B., and every message ended with, 'true by ????' . But poor Doris loved in vain, because Robin was not interested in anyone, or anything that was not connected with the great passion of his life: football. Lucy herself had been quite fond of an Alan, something or other, who had long since disappeared into the dreary world of adulthood, armed, if she recalled correctly, with a bagful of shiny new spanners and an apprenticeship with an engineering firm.

And in those days the far away future had always seemed exciting and mysterious, with an infinite variety of possibilities to choose from. In later years, Lucy had looked back from the dullness of routine, the reality of gray Monday mornings, and she had felt somehow cheated of all those hopes; the impossibly romantic dreams may have had little hope of fulfillment, but some, at least, deserved the chance to blossom,

instead of all being immediately stifled by the necessity of simply surviving in a careless, unfeeling world.

She watched the water streaming down the windows, oozing in through ill-fitting rubber seals, dripping to the floor to form a puddle around her cold feet, and she smiled wryly. She certainly could not complain of dull, routine days at the moment. But though the days might be different, given a choice, the difference was not quite what she would have chosen.

She glanced at the silent man beside her on the seat, his long hair glistening darkly wet, and she wondered if he had ever entertained simple, impossible childhood dreams? She doubted it; a frivolous thought would not survive long behind those hollow eyes. She very much doubted if he had ever been a child at all:

“It seems that Victoria has a father,” she said breaking the silence between them.

“Yes. I know.” He turned to her. “You’ve met him,” he said curtly.

“I? Not that I can recall.”

“He calls himself Cranling now.” The information did not really surprise her.

“Did you know this girl, Victoria?”

“Yes.”

Lucy hesitated, unwilling to ask the question forming, unable to resist asking: “And was she murdered, as she claims?”

“No.”

He resumed his stony silence and not another word passed between them for the remainder of the journey. With two hands needed to manage the suitcases, she descended cautiously down the stairs to the hall. She went to the study, to find it empty. She thought of calling to Philip, but he was not a man to be summoned with a shout, and the silence that filled the house discouraged noise by amplifying the least sound, she left her suitcase in the hall and found him seated in the kitchen, moodily staring into a coffee cup.

He glanced up as she entered the room, noting the scarf she wore, the raincoat

she carried. He motioned to the coffeepot and she shook her head in refusal. Words did not come easily between them now, nor ever did.

“The 'phone is still out of order. I shall walk to the village,” she informed him.

He stared at her expressionlessly. “Stay until the weather eases.” And still his suggestion sounded like a command. It was raining steadily, the wind gusting strongly now.

“No.” Her manner was determined, her mouth set. He stood up. She thought he would accompany her to the door, at least. But he fetched another cup, slowly poured coffee into it, then sat down again.

“You're not going anywhere. You can't,” he said stiffly.

“You watch me,” Lucy said warmly. “You will see just how fast I can go.”

He shrugged. “Save yourself the journey. You will only have to return.”

“Don't bet on that.”

“You have nowhere to go, not without me. I'm all you have now.”

“Oh well, I'm used to having very little,” she said unkindly.

He picked up his cup and held it with both hands. “Suit yourself. We'll see how much use a sharp tongue is to you when Walters catches up with you.”

“He won't follow me,” she said, but she looked at him uncertainly.

He said nothing, staring at her steadily as he drank from his cup.

“You could come as far as the village with me,” she said in a small voice, avoiding his eyes as she asked the favor.

“And after that?” he asked casually. “Who will accompany you beyond the village?”

“After I leave the accursed village, that should be an end to it,” she replied.

“Should it, indeed? What makes you think that there is an end to be reached?”

“For heaven's sake: Can't you communicate?” she snapped. “Stop trying to be so damned mysterious. Tell me what you know, the reasons why I should stay. Let me decide for myself.”

He was unperturbed by her outburst. He could see that her nerves were stretched taut. Tell me what you know, she had asked. And suddenly he hoped that she would never have an inkling of the knowledge inside of him. He looked at the eyes that were searching for understanding, the face transparently honest, the body soft and young. She was so alien to his world, the people he now lived amongst. She was like an echo resounding from his distant childhood days. He recognized an independent spirit, bruised and bewildered, perhaps, but still stubbornly insisting on independence. He hoped that she could preserve her individuality, could cling to it through and after what lay ahead. There were not many among those he knew who could live alone, who could be themselves without the constant support and assurance of others. But Lucy must learn that, at times, the help and protection of others is vital. Even he could not live without assistance.

“Tell me why I should stay,” she repeated, her voice quieter now. “Is it because of the girl, Victoria?”

He stared at her thoughtfully. To tell her enough to satisfy her, without revealing too much. That was his dilemma. He hesitated for so long that she thought he had no intention of answering her, and she felt exasperated.

“Victoria came into my life, very briefly, many years ago,” he said slowly, choosing his words carefully. “And she has no reason to regard me with affection. Nor I her,”

“Then you are the one she accuses of murder?”

He nodded.

“And did you? What happened?”

Her curiosity irked him. “She brought about her own misfortune,” he said irritably.

“Apparently she doesn't agree with you,” Lucy remarked.

“It doesn't matter what she thinks,” Philip said indifferently, “Without her father, the most she can hope to achieve is the harassment of feeble ladies like Mary Belling.

Alone, she can only make a great deal of noise; Cranling is the one who can give her claws.”

“Claws?” She looked at him puzzled. But he did not expand, and she was left to guess as to his meaning.

“And can they harm you?” she asked, when he showed no inclination to continue.

“Yes.” His tone was matter of fact. “But not so easily as they can harm you.”

“But why should they harm me?” she cried, appealing for a rational answer. “They must know by now that I have nothing to do with all this nonsense, no connection with you at all. Why can't I simply catch the next train and leave it all behind?”

“Why were you involved in the first place?” he asked, and angered her because a question is not an answer and she badly needed the right answers. “And Agatha, and the villagers? Agatha, presumably, because through her they could draw me here. But the rest is sheer mischief. And he does not know that there is no connection between us. We are together in this house. We have been seen together in public. He may think to hurt me by harming you. Or he may simply use you for his own amusement. Who can tell which way a madman's thoughts will twist next?”

“Do you know him? Cranling?” she asked. Again there has a long pause before he answered, but this time he seemed not so much searching for an answer, but reflecting on it.

“Personally, no. As one of a species, I know him only too well,” he said softly, bitterness creeping into his voice.

Outside, the trees twisted violently under the force of the wind, raindrops spattered noisily. Somewhere in the house a loose window-frame rattled hollowly. 'As one of a species.' he had said. Just how widespread was this evil?

He seemed to know her thoughts, for his next words were: “Here, at least, you know your enemy. And you are not alone.”

She looked at him silently. Suddenly, the thought of going outside, of walking

alone along the narrow, deserted lanes, was abhorrent to her. The sound of the wind swooping down from the gray skies reminded her of the afternoon when Cranling had whipped nature into a frenzy. Slowly, reluctantly she sank down on to a chair and removed the scarf from her head. Reluctantly, because, although she was afraid to leave this house, she was also afraid to stay. She would like, without traveling, to find herself a hundred miles away.

“The weather is a bit too unruly to attempt the walk to the village,” she said stiffly, not wanting to reveal her fears. “One more night won't make any difference.”

“No,” he agreed. “And the weather should clear by morning.” But he knew that she would not leave now, not until he decided that the time was right.

She sat forlornly, with a sinking feeling of defeat, of having somehow placed her fate into his safekeeping. And she was not certain that she trusted him, that he could be trusted. He could be so hard and cold and his priorities were different to hers. But, as before, there seemed no other alternative.

He felt relief that the small, thin figure was still before him, within his protection. He did not want complications. Strange, then, that the rational reasons for her remaining should only be of secondary importance, and his main feeling was one of pleasure at the knowledge that she would be there in the morning, the time when his cynical eyes most needed to gaze upon a freshness that the world no longer held for him.

He was alone downstairs. He paced the study floor. The events of the afternoon had left him feeling restless and impatient. Victoria's name had conjured up old feelings, dear memories that had lain idle for years. He strode to the cabinet and took a bottle of whisky from an assortment of bottles, changed his mind and replaced it. Alcohol might

dull his nagging thoughts and memories, but it would also deaden his senses and he could not afford to be unguarded, not at this time.

He unbuttoned his shirt, slipped his clothes off, removed shoes and socks and stood clothed only in an undergarment of black nylon barely sufficient for modesty. Sinking to the floor, he assumed a cross-legged position with each foot resting on the opposite thigh, wrists resting on knees, each thumb and forefinger combining to form a circle; a yoga position known as the Full Lotus and used for meditation. His breathing grew deep and even, his eyes practically closed as he settled his restless nature, dominated his impatience, and allowed himself the luxury of returning to the past.

Chapter Eight

Daniel Westgate had been a tall, gaunt man; gangling and large boned, with arms too long for even his rough hewn frame. so that knobbly wrists were always exposed by sleeves too short to function properly and serving only to emphasize his shabby appearance. He always looked untidy, from his coarse, unruly shock of graying hair, to his massive, ill shod feet; he looked like a traveling stall from a church hall jumble sale. And it was from such places, in fact, that his wife acquired most of his clothes. But his appearance did nothing to detract from the aura of power and strength that surrounded the man. Indeed, in a curious way, it emphasized his magnetism; for, people would reason subconsciously, if a man could have an impressive presence whilst giving a fair imitation of a ragbag, that man must be something special. Daniel was not liked. He was loved or respected, but 'like' was far too insubstantial an emotion to apply to such a person.

For Daniel was of that rare breed of people, the ones who possess purpose. Passion glowed deep and fiercely within him. He not only believed in Justice and right and goodness, he physically reflected these beliefs. Totally honest, without deceit or malice in even their mildest form, he had devoted his life to God, his wife, his son, and 'the people'. And such an undertaking, awesome in its implications when viewed logically by people who realize the difficulties in complete devotion to the first subject, without the added distractions and temptations a cynical world would use to protect itself when faced with such devotion, was simply the easiest and most natural path Daniel could take through life.

When his wife died at an early age, Daniel simply kneeled and thanked God for the privilege of knowing her, the honor of loving a woman whom he considered far superior to himself. He wept, and even his tears looked large and awkward, he wept with joy that his Lord should show such regard for his wife that he had taken her to live with him. It only confirmed his opinion that he was second best of the partnership. He

resumed his life and the only visible signs of his loss were an added gruffness in his voice at times, and a steady decline in his already deplorable standard of dress. But there was an aching loneliness inside him, a space that nothing or no one would ever fill.

Philip worshiped his father. And when the boy's mother died, this huge granite man simply expanded to encompass his son's loss, to become all things to the boy. Father and son were fortunate in that their personalities and mentalities were roughly similar. Both were indifferent to possessions, both preferred the mental to the physical world. In Daniel's case, poverty was a fact that accompanied the kind of life he led: There were more important things to do than strive for wealth. To Philip, who had always known poverty, it was a way of life. and there were more important things to learn than the knowledge of luxury. There was only one shadow in the man's life and, typically, his concern was not for his own future, but that of his son.

Daniel was aware that through the Westgate family there ran a streak of mystery. He thought himself fortunate that he had escaped affliction that brought a fascination for the darker side of life and he fervently prayed that his son might also be spared. But it became obvious in Philip's early years that the prayers had not been answered. The thing that Daniel regarded as a curse, and the other members of the Westgate family looked upon as a precious gift, was strong and active in Philip's nature. Many a night the boy would stumble tearfully into his father's bedroom to escape the whispering darkness, the vivid dreams that would eventually come to pass in reality; many an afternoon of bright sunlight had seen Philip fleeing to the safety of his father's arms, fleeing from things seen but which were not, should not have been, visible. And the big man, even in his sadness, was gentle and strong, his large, big knuckled hands held the boy safely away from the flickering shadows that would always be a part of his life.

Daniel explained as best he could to the child. He taught him how to control and, finally, how to subdue the interfering voices, the unbidden images, until the Westgate 'gift', its skills dulled by idleness, lay dormant in the boy. And Daniel now prayed that it would please God to keep his son that way.

Shortly after Philip's seventh birthday they moved to the dockland area of the city, to the crumbling hall that would be his father's church. It was evening as the boy held his father's hand and walked unsteadily over the dark, cobbled road surface. The oily, restless swell of a running tide glistened in the fading light as the river moved endlessly past the narrow street.

Daniel unlocked the hall door that had been recently, and badly, painted in honor of the new occupants. The unshaded electric lamp hung from its cord and glared harshly over the bare wooden floor, the battered piano in one corner, a spindly legged table that served as an altar, the wooden forms that did not resemble pews. But Daniel's eyes saw only the crude, hand made cross that was pinned to the wall, and he sighed contentedly.

He was home.

Derelict people wandered into the derelict hall. At first, it was regarded more of a soup kitchen than a church. But gradually, inevitably, Daniel's personality spread throughout the district. The rough people with their harsh lives came to respect this new preacher of few words but many deeds. They recognized him as one of their own. (And wasn't he even poorer than they were?) They came to hear his sermons, his simple words were given great eloquence by the honest truth they contained, the sincerity of the voice that spoke them. But above all, they crowded in to pay their respect to this untidy, ungainly man whose help and understanding were always available, any hour of the day or night. And that is what fixed him firmly in their hearts; the fact that in this unkindly world, here was one man who simply, genuinely cared for them, giving himself because that was the most valuable thing he possessed, helping because help was needed.

They were happy there, man and boy. They had carved themselves a place in this seaport neighborhood teeming with nationalities, many creeds, beliefs that ranged from dark superstition to quiet meditation. It was inevitable, given Daniel's background, the Westgate tradition, that he would eventually become involved in that which he had knowledge of: The supernatural. He did not broadcast his knowledge, nor the service he provided, but his superiors knew of and utilized his special knowledge.

Philip was fifteen before he experienced the bizarre service of exorcism performed by his father. Where another might have found the scene repugnant, Philip experienced only curiosity. After the first occasion, he watched the steady stream of unfortunates needing his father's help. He learnt to recognize those calling, or usually brought, for exorcism. And he wondered, eventually, whether they were possessed of evil or had abandoned good; whether his father took away from them or gave to them.

When asked, his father merely shrugged, "It is the same thing," he said sadly, wishing that his son would not show interest in such things. "To take away that which is unwanted, or to give that which is wanted. It is the same thing." And Philip wondered if, as there were people blessed with goodness, like his father, who could enrich the lives of others, were there also people equally powerful evilly, who could adversely affect other lives. It was idle speculation, because he could not imagine anyone enjoying the power to harm. Evil was a word that had no point of reference in his life.

The girl called in the afternoon. She came to the rear of the hall, where the living quarters were situated. Daniel answered her knock. Philip was sprawled untidily on a chair as he flipped through the pages of a magazine. He heard the murmur of voices by the door. The conversation was a lengthy one. He turned when his father entered the room, and she stood before him, breathtakingly lovely. Pale, with hair that glowed like sunlight, she stood demurely waiting, utterly feminine in this masculine room. She was dressed, or rather, draped, in lengths of flimsy material, silk or chiffon, he did not know the difference, he only knew that she was beautiful in pale and dark blue dress that flowed to the floor, and her breasts were tantalizingly visible, shadowy veiled, and she was like a vision before him.

Daniel brought his book and took the girl through to the hall. Philip stared at the closed door and hoped that she would return. He listened to his father's voice, low and deep and reassuring. Then the girl was talking, shouting, chanting, high and shrill and ugly. He shifted uneasily in his chair. He remembered later that there was a stillness, before the crashing, tearing, brutal noise shuddered through the whole building.

He was on his feet and across the room in an instant. The door would not open. He pushed frantically against it and it gave an inch. Inside the hall he could hear the rending of wood, the crash of breaking glass. And the sound of laughter.

His shoulder thudded desperately against the door time after time, forcing it open, pushing back the obstruction. And then he was in the hall. Into a scene of sheer destruction, of smashed and splintered furniture, glass from the broken windowpanes littering the floorboards, some of which had been ripped from the floor. The pages from Daniel's book lay scattered about the floor, some, like giant snowflakes, were still floating lazily down to earth. The only sound now was the ghostly humming of the piano wires in the smashed frame of the piano.

His father was lying in a crumpled heap on the floor, untidy in life, untidy in death. One outstretched hand still clutched the cross that used to rest upon the wall. And the girl stood over him. She looked across when Philip entered the room and her lovely lips parted in a smile of fiendish glee. He tried to move, to go to his father's assistance, but as he tried he was knocked to the floor by a force of terrifying energy. He crashed against the wall and was dazed by the impact. Through the mists, he heard her laughing softly, mockingly. He staggered to his feet, to see her throw back her head, laughing wildly now, uncontrollably. And about her neck was the silver image of an owl; cruel, staring eyes and curved, beak over huge, grasping talons.

They came on the day of the funeral, three of them, two men, one woman, all with understanding in their eyes and the same surname as himself. And these relatives that he had only been vaguely aware of possessing blew away the stultifying effects of shock that had him dazed. The woman, Agatha, bustled about efficiently, her voice booming as

she organized everyone and everything, dominating the proceedings, while the men spoke softly with the boy. They did not offer Sympathy, neither did they question him. Philip was aware that, in some strange way, these people knew and comprehended what had happened to his father. Although concerned about Daniel's death, they were more interested in who had caused it, rather than why or how. The official cause of death had been pronounced as heart failure, caused by the collapse of the building due to the foundations subsiding. Only Philip, these three Westgates, and the girl knew differently. And he could not give them the information they wanted because he did not know the name of the girl. He only knew her face and the sound of her cruelty.

After a service that had seemed meaningless and inadequate, he stood by the open grave long after everyone else had departed. The sun shone brightly, and the air seemed vibrant with life and living, cruelly accentuating the dark mass of freshly dug soil, the finality of the gaping wound in the earth into which the wooden casket had been placed. And now they were together again, man and wife, mother and father. Daniel would be contented. Philip stood alone with his memories of his father, and his sadness gave way to resentment. He pictured the girl again, for the thousandth time, and a wave of red anger swept through his mind. And deep inside him, that which had lain dormant, that his father had taught him to suppress, stirred under the warmth of his emotions. And it was as if a light had been switched on in a dark place. He felt curiously whole, as if before he had been only half a person, but now he was complete. Power surged through him as he stood wondering at the graveside; mental energy set his brain alight and his anger was no longer hot and uncontrollable, but cold and calculating. As he said a last goodbye to the influence, the teaching, and the body of his father, he thought of a phoenix rising from the ashes of itself, and the image was oddly appropriate. He turned and left his whole life behind him as he went in search of the girl with the silver owl about her neck.

It took him two days to find the girl, two days in which he began to become accustomed to this strange new force within him; this power that gave his sight where

others were blind, that enabled him to understand what others found incomprehensible. He found her on the outskirts of town, in a house of obvious affluence, with wide lawns and manicured gardens. He passed through the open front door and climbed the wide, marble staircase. The house appeared to be deserted but from outside laughter and the sound of voices drifted in from the rear garden. He walked straight to the bedroom door and opened it. And she was there.

She turned from the dressing table mirror with a look of surprise that turned to amusement as she recognized him. And she no longer looked beautiful to him, for he looked at her with new eyes. Dressed in a simple sheath of clinging white that left her arms and shoulders bare, she wore no jewelery except for the ugly silver image around her neck.

“Ah, the preacher's boy.” her voice was musical and light, her smile welcoming, as though she was greeting an old friend and admirer.

“Why?” he asked flatly. “He was a good man.”

She shrugged daintily. “Why not? He was in our way. He interfered.”

“And that is a reason to die?”

“Naturally.” She sounded disinterested as she picked up a silver purse and walked towards him. “So be warned, because you are now in my way, child,” she said softly.

He wanted to hurt her then, to make her realize the anger she had aroused. But even as he contemplated violence, she laughed lightly.

“Hit me if you can,” she said tauntingly.

As he watched there became two of her, then three, finally four; four figures with bright, mocking smiles. He was not confused. He knew how she worked and where she was. Her abilities were less than his. With a triumphant cruelty he completed the process she had begun, reversing the effect, so that she was disembodied, she was confused as to which of the four images was real, herself. And the eyes now stared at him from behind four masks of fear. He turned and walked from the room.

“No!” She screamed in terror.

At the tables on the patio below the bedroom window, the conversation halted at the sound from the bedroom. Chairs scraped as figures stood uncertainly, staring up at the open window. Where a figure appeared, white clad and stumbling blindly. And there was nothing the watchers could do but stand helpless as the girl teetered on the edge of the balcony before plunging silently into space. And a wailing cry of despair echoed from the room above, to be cut off abruptly as the falling figure crashed onto a table laden with food and drink.

Philip returned to the place that had once been his home, to find his relatives waiting for him. There was no mention of the girl, there was no need to speak of her now. There were more urgent matters to be considered. The three knew, better than did Philip himself, the enormity of the step he had taken. And they did not tell Philip that the girl would be the first of many encounters. There would be time enough for him to discover that fact for himself. Just as Daniel had dealt with evil as best he could, so Philip would continue the work; but his gifts being more powerful, so, too, would be the dangers he would face. There were things he would need to learn, and quickly. They took him with them to complete his education, to embark upon a life career.

The rain had stopped. The wind still blew fiercely, sending fragmented clouds scurrying across the dark sky tinged only faintly with the silver light from a moon almost waned.

The rear garden of The Lodge was sunken; bordered, and encompassing, huge rocks and slabs of granite that the original owner, in the perversity of his appreciation of beauty, had insisted should remain where they had lain for thousands of years. Electric

lighting imparted a yellow glow to everything it touched upon.

People from Scarton village and the outlying districts now moved about these rocks, or rested themselves upon them for a better view of what would shortly take place. For they had been called together as witnesses. A strange gathering, quarrelsome and garrulous. Fighting and arguments broke out continually between individuals and groups; short, heated exchanges that flared up and quickly died, as the combatants lost interest in the disagreement and moved away to seek new arguments. Here and there couples were locked in passionate embrace, locked together oblivious of the ground still squelching wet beneath their naked or semi-naked bodies, oblivious to the watching eyes and jeers of their audience, until they were torn apart to be replaced by a new partner or partners.

And over the scene of seething excitement and naked aggressiveness, a small figure in ill fitting clothes benignly presided. He sighed contentedly as he gazed down on the activities below. He was well satisfied with his handiwork; soon they would be ready for his purpose, very soon.

From out of the darkness silent wings glided noiselessly down, the wings beating to slow progress as the powerful talons settled upon and gripped the man's shoulder. The owl folded its wings and glared about, its head moving jerkily, hawk-like as it surveyed the gathering.

“Aren't they just perfect?” Doctor Frances Cranling smiled happily as he reached up to fondle the head of the bird. “Don't they enter into their little games with such enthusiasm? I do so like to see people enjoying themselves.”

He watched a group of men dragging a clawing, kicking girl away from the partner of her choice and taking her for themselves.

“But this one must be taught to take his enjoyment when it is offered.” His toe gently poked against the ribs of the outstretched figure lying at his feet, a man bound tightly to the rock, a man who stared vacantly into the night skies. An uncomprehending look on his face. Cranling raised his arm.

“A minute, my children,” he called amiably. A hush immediately settled on the crowd. Faces turned attentively, And the doctor beamed with pleasure.

“Aren't you nice?” He jigged with pleasure and the bird on his shoulder moved its wings uneasily. “You are all so horribly nice. So stupidly obedient. So I will only interrupt your fun and games for a few tiny minutes. This one,” he pointed to the man lying at his feet. “This one has been a naughty boy.” He paused to adjust his facial expression to one of suitable sorrow and disappointment. “He has been very naughty and he has made me sad. Should I punish him?”

An ugly murmur rose from the watching crowd. And Cranling giggled. “I thought you would agree with me. In fact, I knew you would agree. So we will punish him. And it will be a warning to any other naughty ones amongst us.”

The bird beat its wings and rose into the dark sky.

Anticipation thrilled through the watching people as Cranling clapped his chubby hands together.

For a second, nothing happened, all was breathlessly hushed. Then the bird swooped swiftly into the yellow glow, swooped low and purposefully. Its nerve jarring shriek shattered the silence a split second before its cruel talons raked across the exposed flesh of the man lying bound to the rock. And he cried out, twisting helplessly and unable to escape.

Again and again the bird dived at him, cutting and scratching. The murmur of approval from the crowd became a roar of appreciation, growing louder with every attack.

And the doctor jigged joyfully about the pain of his victim.

Then the cruel spectacle was ended. The bird returned to its master's shoulder and pruned its feathers unhurriedly as the doctor spoke to his subjects.

“Now, return to your jollifications, my little beasts. And tomorrow there will be greater fun in store for us. You will not only watch, you shall participate. Won't that be jolly fun for everyone?”

The fighting and quarreling broke out with renewed intensity as incited cruelty sought an outlet in viciousness. Cranling stroked the bird's head as he murmured:

“Tomorrow, my pet, you shall have your revenge.” And there was nothing ridiculous about the sinister figure as he absently considered the future.

Lucy awoke in the gray light of morning. She shook her head as if to scatter the last remnants of the dream she had just woken from, the horrible dream. She could still see the girl plunging down onto the tables in the garden. And the boy who had walked away, leaving her helpless, she recognized him from the photograph Philip had shown her. It was funny how people and events from reality could get mixed up crazily in dreams. She could swear that one of the men jumping up from his chair to watch the terrible accident was non other than Doctor Cranling.

“It is this house,” she told herself crossly. “It has a nasty effect whether I’m awake or sleeping.” But a house is just a building, and bricks and mortar cannot affect a person's mind to even the slightest degree.

She dressed and went downstairs. The study light was burning and she went to investigate.

Philip was sitting cross legged on the floor, in a position she recognized as one of yoga. his eyes were closed, his breathing even and relaxed. She stared at him attentively. How much younger he looked in repose, she thought, with sleep washing the lines of care from his face, the hardness inside concealed by lowered eyelids. He sat erect, his back straight, his shoulders unbowed. His body looked hard and fit, the muscles firm beneath skin weathered and tanned healthily.

She wondered whether or not to waken him. It was cold in the room, the chill of

night not yet dispelled by the feeble sunlight, but he showed no sign of discomfort. And it suddenly occurred to her that the dream she had recently woken from may not be a dream, or not completely her own dream. For on a face composed and gentle in sleep was the evidence that Philip was not as relaxed and at peace as he appeared: Like silver signs of sadness, were the tracks on each cheek, barely dry yet, of the tears that had trickled from beneath closed eyes. She did not awaken him. She gently closed the door and left him resting, resolving to ask him later if his father's name was Daniel. But in her heart she already knew the answer to that question.

Chapter Nine

“There is something in the meadow.”

Lucy shaded her eyes against the bright sun and tried to distinguish the shape and form of whatever was lying in the grass. “I can't make it out, though,” she said, lowering her hand.

Philip joined her on the step. “A sheep, perhaps?” he suggested, looking in the direction she pointed.

“It could be injured,” she said.

“That is the farmer's affair,” he said casually. “If it is a sheep. It might easily be a piece of cloth or paper.”

“Shouldn't we investigate?” she asked anxiously. “It may be in pain.”

“The cloth or the paper?” he asked, with unexpected lightness.

She laughed more in surprise at his flippancy than at his words. “In case it is an injured animal.”

“Will your curiosity allow you not to investigate?” he asked, with the suspicion of a smile.

“I don't think so.” She laughed. “I shall go and change into my boots, the field is bound to be soggy after the rain yesterday.”

He waited for her to rejoin him, then together they set out across the meadow. She walked by his side with a feeling almost of shyness. He had been in good humor that morning. All through breakfast, and after, he had been civil and friendly. At times there had been an awkwardness between them, as if both recognized that he was unaccustomed to simple pleasantries. But he had tried to be witty and she had been grateful, realizing that it was for her benefit. And this new relationship made such a difference in the atmosphere of the house, even seeming to brighten the gloomy corners and dispel the brooding silence. As they neared the white object half hidden in the grasses, his pace quickened.

“What is it?” she asked worriedly, having almost to run to keep pace with him.

“It isn't a sheep,” he said. And she knew from the tone of his voice that the grimness was back on his face, the wariness back in his eyes. “Wait here,” he said curtly, striding ahead.

But she did not wait. She peered over his shoulder as he knelt down examining whatever it was. She peered, then turned away feeling sick. Philip rose and looked about the meadow, his gaze sharp and questing. Everything was still and normal; the animals grazing at the far end of the meadow paid them no attention.

“Who was it?” she asked hollowly, afraid to look again.

“Who is it, you mean. He's not dead.” He stared down at the naked, unconscious man and there was no emotion in his eyes. “It is your amorous friend,” he said briefly.

“Frank Walters?” Despite her feelings against the man, she was shocked to think of him in such a state.

“None other than. He doesn't have much success at anything, does he?” he remarked casually, turning away.

“Philip! It's not something to joke about. It's horrible! What could have happened to him?”

“Do you really want to know?” he asked quietly. “It isn't necessary.”

“It is to me,” she said fiercely. “Stop treating me like a child.”

“Very well.” He turned to stare at the injured man. “He is a warning; a double warning, actually. First, he was punished for failing at his allotted task, namely you. Secondly, he was left here as a warning, or promise, of the treatment we can expect.”

She had stared at him wide eyed as he spoke, now she closed her eyes and shook her head, as if to shake his words from her mind. “That can't be true: No one could be that cruel. You can't be sure that you're right.” she whispered.

“I can be sure. Haven't you accepted that fact yet?” he asked harshly. “I have to be sure.” He took her arm roughly and began to lead her away from Walters.

“You're not leaving him there?” she asked, pulling herself free of his fingers.

“Why not? His own kind left him.” Philip said callously.

“And you don't intend to be any better than they are, is that it?” she asked bitterly.

“Certainly no worse,” he countered. “And what do you suggest I do with him? Take him back to the house with us?”

“At the last resort, yes.”

He stared at her in disbelief. “And will you nurse him back to health and give him strength to chase you lecherously around the garden again?” he asked sarcastically.

“He can't harm anyone at the moment,” she said quietly. To her, it seemed ludicrous to stand arguing while a human being needed help. To him, it seemed equally as ludicrous to give assistance to someone who would harm them at the first opportunity that presented itself.

“He lives with his parents. The farm isn't far from here,” she informed him hopefully.

“Then they haven't far to walk to collect their son,” he reasoned.

“They might be unaware of the situation.”

“Oh, they will know,” he said grimly. “Whether they care or not is another matter entirely.”

“Of course they can't know!” Her face was pale but determined. “How can you be so stupid? What parents would knowingly leave their son lying injured and unattended?”

And he realized just how little she knew, or would ever know. The gulf between them was as wide and deep as space; like two different worlds spinning in different orbits, they existed separately and on different levels. For her there would always be something better waiting in the future, something new to discover, a kindness to be gained from even the most miserable nature. Optimism and faith burned like flames inside her; the flames may flicker and dim in the currents of adversity, but they would never fade, could never be quenched. While experience had taught him to expect only

worse than had gone before, and pessimism clung to his shoulders like a dark cloak that could be wrapped around him protectively to justify and excuse the things he had to do.

“If you won’t help, then I will manage by myself”” She walked back and knelt beside the still form of the man lying on the damp ground. She avoided looking at him, his nakedness offensive to her. And he felt cold and his skin clammy as she placed her hands beneath him and tried to raise him. His head lolled to one side and her heart lurched at the thought that he might waken and his injuries might only be superficial. What would she do if his hands reached out to grip her, as they had tried to do before? But his eyes did not open, his hands did not move.

He was a dead weight and she could not move him more than a little. She could not manage on her own, and she felt sick with touching him. Tears welled hotly in her eyes, tears of helplessness, of frustration and failure, because she hated the man so much even as she tried to help him.

Philip's hands gently gripped her shoulders as he pulled her away, and she was soft and fragile, slight as a child beneath his fingers. He knew what was in her mind because he, too, had once tried to help first, protect himself secondly. But that was before the teachings of Daniel soured in the brightness of experience.

She shook herself free and lowered her head so that he could not see her tears as she angrily tried to brush them away.

“Where to?” he asked quietly, and when she turned he was holding Walters in his arms. She pointed the direction, not trusting her voice, which would tremble, she knew, and betray her feelings. Philip set off in the direction she indicated. She remove her cardigan and covered the injured man as best she could.

The farmyard was showing signs of neglect, of tasks left unfinished or unstarted. From every direction came the ceaseless lowing and bellowing of animals demanding attention.

She ran ahead and unfastened the gate, waiting for Philip to enter, then following him across the soiled concrete towards the low farmhouse with tiny windows staring like

narrowed, watching eyes at all who approached. The warning barking of dogs greeted their arrival and she saw three lean, hungry creatures chained to the side of the house, clamoring to be set free to deal with this intrusion. And someone did; A man stepped from the house and undid the chain holding the dogs. They bounded forward with snarls and growls issuing from behind bared teeth.

Lucy watched with dismay as the animals rushed threateningly towards them. Not normally afraid of dogs, she felt fear because she could see that they were half crazed and eager for battle. She stepped back a pace and instinctively reached for Philip's arm.

The vicious teeth were almost upon them before Philip paid attention to the snarling beasts. Then he simply stopped and stared. And Lucy, almost behind him now, still clinging to the hard, muscular arm, did not see his eyes glowing darkly, could not feel the force emanating from him. But the dogs stopped abruptly, stumbling, bumping into each other as they scrambled and twisted to slink away, whining and cowed by fear.

As Philip halted at the low entrance to the farm, the man who stood scowling at them was joined by a woman, who wiped her hands on her white apron. And the look she wore on her face was even less welcoming than the man's expression,

“This is yours, I think.” Philip laid his burden down on the cold ground and stepped back, ready to leave. But Lucy watched the reaction of the man and woman and felt horrified. For they simply stared at Philip with sullen, resentful eyes. They made no move to help their injured son, neither did they show any interest towards him.

“He needs help,” Lucy said. They ignored her, their eyes glittering hatefully, fixed unblinkingly on Philip. “You must help him!” she cried, scarcely believing what she saw.

How could anyone be so unfeeling? But neither parent paid heed to her voice, they made no sign of having heard her. Then the man took his wife's arm and drew her inside the doorway.

“No!” Lucy cried, turning desperately to Philip. Someone must do something.

The door continued to close. Philip saw the misery on Lucy's face, the hurt in her heart.

“Stop.” he said. The word was little more than a murmur but the door opened slowly. “Take him inside and care for him.” Again the low words that were like a bellowed command.

The couple hesitated. “He is to be punished,” the man mumbled sullenly.

“As you will be!” the woman cried harshly, her face twisting with hatred as she glared at Philip. “As you will be punished.”

“Do as I tell you,” Philip snarled, and his face was thunderous, “Before you find yourselves punished.”

And they moved reluctantly forward and bent over their son. Philip turned and strode away, and Lucy hurried after him. She turned at the gate and the farm door was closed, the yard deserted. She looked the gate and a wave of nausea swept through her as she thought of the implications of the scene she had just witnessed. She leant against the fence for support and she felt defeated, overwhelmed by the cruelty of the atmosphere around her. She lowered her head and quietly cried, her shoulders drooping.

Philip watched her with pity. He reached out a hand to touch her sympathetically, then lowered it before his fingers touched her shaking shoulders. Sympathy and the urge to comfort were strange emotions to him. But she continued to sob dejectedly and he stepped to her side and placed an awkward, comforting arm around her sad figure. And Was surprised that she did not push him away. He pulled her to him and cradled her, stroking the hair of the bowed head and talking gently to her. She allowed him to comfort her because, as he himself had told her, he was all she had. And he did not know that some of her tears were for him.

The journey back to the house was made in silence. Both were enmeshed in the confusion of their own thoughts and emotions. For with the simple action of reaching out for her, Philip had declared much to her and admitted more to himself. That simple contact should cause violent feelings in both of them was the wonder. She looked at him and wondered how a wilderness could contain such a wonderful place; an oasis of life in a barren land. And he marveled at the simple, quiet place amongst the clamoring of her noisy emotions; a deserted corner in a busy market Square.

Outside the house, that afternoon, the air was deathly still, as though the wind had exhausted itself with its violent exertions of the previous night. Clouds with a newly scrubbed whiteness billowed high and higher, hanging motionless against the bright blue of the clean day. The trees stood quietly where, only hours before, they had been tossed and twisted and bent to breaking point. Now there was not sufficient breeze for the leaves to whisper secrets into.

Inside the house there was also a stillness, but with a charged, emotive undercurrent. And now it was she who watched him struggling to comprehend emotions that he had never experienced before. He it was who did not understand. They spoke seldom during the long, quiet hours of afternoon, and then only when necessary and only on matters domestic or out of politeness, an exaggerated politeness as they deliberately held themselves apart, avoiding physical or emotional contact.

She went upstairs as the shadows grew deeper with the nearing of evening. She lay on her bed wondering. And when he came to her, this time it was she who held him, this strange shadow of a man who found substance inside of him and could not understand his feelings.

Time stood still, as surely as if they had returned to the strange shop tucked away from the world. And he who knew so much mystical and magical felt his heart tearing with the sheer, unparalleled joy of a moment suspended, frozen in ecstasy; a moment that held him spellbound until it shattered brilliantly and the seconds drifted around him like bright stars.

And below him the girl lay with eyes closed and lips parted in a smile as fresh as tomorrow, as old as time itself. He buried his face into the silken strands of her hair and, for the first time since the death of Daniel, he whispered:

“Dear God.” And it was not blasphemy but a cry of thanksgiving torn from the depths of his dark, lonely soul.

Chapter Ten

They came with the lengthening shadows of dusk. They came silently, singly, in pairs and groups, to meet and stand motionless in the garden, waiting for instruction.

Philip gently disengaged himself from the arms of the sleeping girl. Lucy breathed easily and steadily, not stirring as he left her side and stood gazing down at her still form for a long time; a time of unashamed emotion, for his eyes glistened with tenderness as they eagerly recorded every detail, every line and curve, every mark and blemish that, strangely, only seemed to enhance her attraction. For the first time in his life all his thoughts, all his senses, his very being, was concentrated on a person who only gave him pleasure and an overwhelming sense of belonging. For the restlessness within him was stilled, as if the force inside that had kept him seeking all these years had, at last, found a home.

He slipped from the room and went down into the study. He was sipping a drink and reflecting on the incredible, deciding on the immediate future. How Lucy must be made safe. She must go to the antique shop as soon as she awakened. She would be safe with Angel, and he would be free from any distractions. The window was suddenly shattered by a stone hurled from outside. And the subdued murmurings drifted into the room.

He was on his feet in an instant, the glass hurled from him, and he cursed his foolishness. He had been caught off-guard, unprepared. He had relaxed. And while he wallowed in the pleasure of new experience, the world outside had crept silently to within striking distance. He rushed from the room and into the hall, to be brought to an abrupt halt. There, standing in the open doorway, was a small man dressed in large clothes. His chubby, pleasant face beamed at him happily.

“Good evening,” Cranling said cheerfully. “I’ve come to see you about a little matter of murder. Yours, actually,” And he giggled Softly to himself.

The sound of breaking glass jerked Lucy from her sleep. She dressed and opened the door cautiously. Downstairs Philip faced the hateful figure of Doctor Cranling. She was afraid to leave the safety of her room, but there was only one place where she would feel safe now, one place that she wanted to be. She ran swiftly down the stairs to be by his side.

“Ah, here is your little lady friend.” Cranling smiled welcomingly at her as she gripped Philip's arm. “I am glad that you've joined us. my poppet. I hadn't forgotten you. Oh dear me, no. I have brought some little playmates for you. They're outside, waiting.”

“Stay upstairs,” Philip said curtly, not taking his eyes from the little man dressed in gray.

Lucy did not answer. She, too, was staring at Cranling, now jigging excitedly from foot to foot.

“We came to have a party,” he cried joyously, “but we decided to hold a wake instead.” He stopped and looked at them mournfully.

“How can we have a wake without a deceased?” he asked plaintively. “You appreciate I my predicament. I have promised those poor people outside, so poor that they haven't got one dead body between them, I have promised them a wake; a good, old fashioned death feast. So now I need a lifeless body.” He smiled at them happily. “I'm sure you two will oblige me, won't you?”

He began to jig about again, clumsily hopping, treading on trouser bottoms hanging over his shoes. “Look,” he laughed, “I'm dancing on your graves.”

“But, no. No, no. This will not do. It won't do at all.” He shook his head firmly and his gray bowler hat tipped low over his left ear, exposing an expanse of pink, bald scalp. “I can see that you two think that this is a very dull evening in prospect. Why, the

lady has not even bothered to dress properly: I'm afraid your mourners aren't going to be very pleased with you, my poppet. But I'll leave them to show their own disapproval, while we men discuss other matters.'"

He clapped his hands together and smiled pleasantly.

Philip remained silent; tense and waiting, he went through a mental routine perfected over many years, bringing himself to full alertness.

Lucy gazed horrified at the door opened wide to the dark night. She remembered vividly the condition they had found Frank Walters and she shuddered at the memory. Who, or what, would come through that door?

And a shadow moved stealthily along the landing to the stairs.

No one came through the door. Cranling clapped again, and there was a tiny frown on his jovial features. Still the doorway gaped emptily, filled only with the darkness pressing in from outside. And there came the sound of confusion, of babbling voices, a shout, a cry of fear.

"It seems that they have found their own amusement, the little dears," Cranling consented thoughtfully. Then his face brightened. "But no matter, I have someone else for you to meet."

As he spoke, Lucy felt herself literally thrown from her feet, to crash in a heap at the foot of the stairs.

And the cat froze on the stairs, pressing itself low and motionless, staring intently.

With a shriek that echoed horribly in the enclosed space, the great night bird winged into the hall.

Cranling closed his eyes. And his crazy world roared into the house. The very walls seemed to shudder and bulge, the floor tilt, the ceiling fall in huge flakes of shattered plaster as he unleashed his awesome power upon the man he hated. And Lucy closed her eyes and covered her ears with her hands as the very foundation of her sanity was threatened by this onslaught of terror. She shrank against the side of the stairs and

felt cruel fingers plucking at her flesh, scratching at her hands, and she screamed loudly to block her senses and keep the nightmare outside her mind.

And then it was diminishing. The sights and sounds of terror, so close to overwhelming her, were being pushed back farther and farther, now like thunder in the distance with flashes of far lightning. She opened her eyes to see Philip standing firm, his face was white with tension, his expression strained as he fought against the vile little conjurer whose eyes were screwed tightly shut and his fists clenched as he invoked his horrors. And Philip was triumphing, she realized exultantly. He was pushing Cranling's obscenities back into the slime from which they crawled. Now there was no wondering at Philip's powers, no condemning of his difference. For he was wiping away an evil.

Cranling shuddered violently. His eyes blinked open to reveal a glimpse of his despair.

“Vicky,” he cried desperately, and there was a sheen of fear glistening his face,

And the bird hurtled down viciously, striking at Philip's unprotected head. He raised his arm to ward off the attack and the huge talons fastened on to his forearm, sinking deep. And his concentration wavered beneath the pain as the owl struck again and again with its curved beak.

The nightmare was returning. Lucy watched the powerful wings beating the air, air that was filling again with sounds and shapes of terror. She struggled to her feet as everything she feared, or had ever feared, pressed threateningly around her, and foul whispering crowded into her ears. But more important than her own safety was the man she had shared herself with, who had given part of himself to her. She pressed forward through the slime of thought and unreason to reach his side, to seize the hateful feathers, dragging the bird from Philip and hurling it across the room.

But the bird recovered quickly. It fluttered upward, its wide eyes fixed unblinkingly upon her. Its curved beak opened but made no sound as the owl dived for her. And four golden girls screamed hatefully as they rushed towards Lucy, long,

crimson painted nails flashed as they reached for her, reached for her.....

The cat sprang. From the stairs it leapt as the bird hurtled down to tear at Lucy's face. It spat hatred as its claws sank into the mass of feathers and brought it crashing to the floor, to hold the desperately fluttering bird fast. The fight was brief, for the cat had waited long for this moment and would not be denied its victory. And the lifeless bird, one wing outstretched, was dragged across the floor to the door and out into the night where it belonged.

Another struggle was ending as Philip advanced towards the doctor, who stared at him with hatred, but who could not move away. Philip's hand flashed forward and the fingers pressed against Cranling's forehead. The doctor opened his mouth and the curse he began turned into a despairing wail. His eyes were wide and bright, then dull and glazed. Even though his knees buckled, he did not fall, not until Philip removed his hand did Cranling sink to the floor, to lie motionless, his forehead bearing five deathly white marks where Philip's fingers had touched him.

It was over. Philip walked to the stairs and sank down weakly, burying his face in his hands. The house was hushed. Not even an echo remained of the noise and violence that had filled the hall a short time ago. A gentle breeze wafted through the door and stirred the feathers scattered about the tiled floor, blew them against the still figure of Cranling. His gray bowler hat lay upside down beside him and rocked gently in the currents of clean, fresh air.

Lucy pulled herself to her feet and walked unsteadily to where Philip sat hunched and exhausted. On his arm, etched into his forearm, were the only signs of the violence that had raged around them. She fetched the first aid kit from the study and knelt before him. Her hand was trembling slightly as she took hold of the injured arm. He looked at her, lifting his head to stare at her with desultory eyes, a look of dejection covering his face. She bent her head low as she worked quickly to clean and dress his wounds, thankful for a task to occupy these empty minutes. She was confident that she could tend to his physical injuries, but how would she cope with his emotional hurt? She had no need to

worry, for she tended to both at the same time. As she finished he reached out and gently touched her face, and the warmth was rekindled in his eyes as she briefly pressed her cheek against his hand. She stood up.

“There. I think you will live,” she decided,

“Yes.” He took her hand and pulled her down beside him. “Yes, I think I will live. Now.”

The cat bounded through the door and leapt upon Lucy's lap, purring noisily. excitedly.

“Whoa.” She laughed as she pushed the cat to the floor. “I know I have a lot to thank you for, but that doesn't give you the right to jump all over me.”

“Agatha can have her uses, dramatic though she may be,” Philip said.

“Agatha? But the cat's name is Tabitha,” Lucy corrected him.

“Yes. Of course.” He avoided her eyes and bent forward to scratch behind Tabitha's ears.

“You don't mean to tell me.....” She gazed down at the purring animal and realization dawned. “But that is impossible!” she declared. Then asked in a voice of uncertainty: “Isn't it?”

“Impossible?” a voice boomed around the hallway. “Incredible is the word I would use to describe your behavior, my girl.”

A large tweed clad figure stood in the doorway and glowered at them.

“What the dickens is going on around here?” she demanded loudly. “I leave my home for a few hours and when I return, I find - chaos: Really, Lucy, it isn't good enough! Not good enough at all. And I bet you haven't found a replacement for Martha, have you? Too busy playing games with that disreputable character.” She waved towards Philip, who said:

“Hello, Aunt Agatha.”

“I might have known you would be behind this, Philip.” She glared at him, then boomed: “And don't call me aunt. A man of your age. I know you only do it to make me

feel positively ancient.”

She stalked across the hallway and peered suspiciously down at the prone figure of Doctor Cranling. “Bodies in the hall, morons parading around in my garden. Lucky for you that the ladies of the Society accompanied no hone tonight.”

“Very fortunate.” Philip said dryly.

“Don't you use that tone with me, young man,” she told him severely. “I shall want a few words with you later. Upsetting Mary Belling. I know the woman's an idiot, but I won't have the Westgates accused of bad manners.”

Lucy laughed hollowly at this last remark.

“I'm glad to see someone is amused,” Agatha said, but did not look very pleased. “Candice! Judy! Sarah!” she bellowed over her shoulder, and three large matrons appeared in the doorway.

“You can remove this now,” she told them, pointing at Cranling. And they did. Lifting him without any difficulty and carrying him outside.

Agatha turned to Philip, and she was smiling gleefully as she said: “And now you can tell that shadow in the rag and bone shop that she is not the only one who knows what is happening around here. I would love to be there when you tell her.”

“She probably knows already,” Philip said calmly.

“She can't know,” Agatha scoffed “How could she? Locked away like a family heirloom.” Agatha looked at him sternly. “You are only trying to spoil my moment of glory, aren't you?”

“Yes,” he answered mildly. “I hate to see you gloating.”

“Aha! You didn't think I could do it, did you? Me and the girls together. Well, we took care of Cranling's crazy gang with no trouble at all. So, in future, don't underestimate your old aunt..... don't underestimate me,” she finished hurriedly. “Now, by Jove, I could do with a decent cigar. And heaven help you if anything has happened to them,” she warned Lucy as she marched into the study.

“Agatha,” Lucy said carefully, “looks very well. Her shoulder has healed

remarkably quickly,”

“Yes. it's a pity she did not require a prolonged course of treatment. Say, a month in a hospital bed?” he suggested with feeling.

“Yes,” Lucy agreed, “It is.....”

“Lucy! Come and talk to me. And you, Philip, make yourself useful. Board up this broken window. There is such a draft in this room.”

“.....such a pity.”

“And I don't believe the draft is caused by the broken Window,” he said with a sigh, as he rose to his feet.

And Lucy laughed as she kissed his cheek and went into Agatha.

He was the better swimmer. His limbs moved with machine-like precision as he surged towards the shore. He stood knee-deep in the tide and watched her splashing towards him, he reached out and helped her to her feet, holding her hand as they ran across the hot sand. And Lucy fell against him, laughing breathlessly, as they tumbled down together. On the clifftop, a large marmalade cat bashed contentedly in the hot sunlight. It watched the couple lying on the sand and its eyes blinked slowly as it purred softly. A movement overhead caught the cat's attention and it stared balefully upward. It was only a gull, soaring lazily on the Warm air, its plaintive cry echoed mournfully over the calm sea waters. And the cat disregarded the bird. She lowered her head between her paws and closed her eyes contentedly.

Acknowledgments

I remember by father typing away in the small room that served as his study, writing short romance stories and publishing them under my mothers' name (which was on the cover of this manuscript). However, it wasn't until I was much older, long after he had passed away, that I discovered a couple of manuscripts; one of which you have just read. I imagine it was written around 1980. Interestingly, this was accompanied by a rejection letter from a publisher saying that there was no interest in romance novels with supernatural or horror storylines. How things have changed! For the past twenty or so years these manuscripts have been kept as photocopies of the original typed manuscripts on my bookshelf. Attempts to scan these in and digitize them were met with very poor results, when I first tried to do so several years ago. The quality was just too poor. However, thanks to Tesseract and CuniForm (some open source software) I am now able to get surprisingly good results! I present the manuscript as is, with very few alterations (the spell checker may have Americanized the spellings). And will attempt the get the remaining manuscript digitized in due course. Hope you enjoyed this!

Gavin Buxton