

ONE FINE SUMMER



MICHAEL KNELL

It is one of life's tragedies that we shall never again have friends like those we knew as a child. Everything was exciting then, including those friendships, and life was an adventure. But how much was *really* as we remember it? The characters in this story will tell you every word is true, and that makes it quite remarkable.

This novel is a work of fiction. The characters and events depicted exist only in its pages and in the imagination of the author.

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Chapter 1

Carrying his tennis racquet in one hand and a couple of schoolbooks in the other, Josh ran down the stairs and waited for the vehicle to stop. The lad's proper name was Joshua, but he wouldn't thank anyone for using it. Though a choirboy for many years, he hated the biblical name, insisting everybody use the abbreviation. However, no such annoying matters were on his mind that day as he leapt off the bus. School had broken up for the summer holidays. The athletically fit fifteen-year-old had six whole weeks to enjoy.

The bus waited. Josh crossed the road and waited too. Today he wasn't going indoors alone. No way. He waited impatiently for the connecting bus and the arrival of his younger brother. Tapping his foot on the ground to a pop song plaguing his mind, he was annoyed it was late and hoped it wouldn't be much longer. His schoolfriends on the bus he'd left were bothering him, banging on the windows, making faces and calling out. They were teasing him. They knew what he had in store for the holidays and he wished he'd never mentioned it.

Roger was first off when eventually the other bus arrived many minutes late. "Hi, bro," he said. There was a mocking grin on his face. "You don't normally wait for me. What are you, chicken or something? Need your little brother to back you up?"

Josh scowled at him. "You obviously can't remember our Auntie Beatrice. I can. Six weeks of her looking after us and I know you'll never forget her again."

“Is she really that bad?” Roger didn’t believe it for a moment.

“No, she’s worse than that bad — she’s horrific! You were lucky having the flu last month when she moved back to England. Dad warned me she was a little peculiar while we waited for her flight, but honestly, that don’t cover it.”

Roger laughed his disbelief. Seeing a break in the traffic, Josh grabbed his brother’s sleeve and pulled him across the road. Only a few yards from the bus stop where he’d alighted, the two of them crunched their way up the gravel drive to the rather grand Simpson’s family home, Manor House, on the main road.

The front door opened and an enormous middle-aged woman stood on the doorstep, staring at them for a moment. She was wearing a bright blue dress with white spots and her welcoming arms were outstretched wide. Josh took a deep breath. He knew, he just knew what she was about to do.

“My little nephews!” the woman shrieked, wobbling her way towards them.

The boys froze. Auntie Beatrice lunged at them. Her huge arms hugged the boys tightly into her, smothering the lads into her overpoweringly, scent-laden, massive frontage. Not satisfied with that, she pulled back enough to plant a noisy, lipstick-wet kiss on each of their cheeks; one that remained there prominent and ruby red.

Swallowing hard, the boys forced a smile back at the woman. It seemed to satisfy her. She grabbed hold of their arms, tugging at their clothing to lead them indoors. Being dragged along, Roger threw a glance at Josh. It screamed out that he sure believed his brother now.

“You’ll have to hurry up and get changed,” Auntie Beatrice said, closing the door behind them. “I’ve cooked you something special for your tea. I hope you like fish.”

Josh didn’t dare risk anything other than an approving look. He grinned at the woman.

Roger bravely asked, “Is it fish and chips?”

“Oh, no my lovelies. Fish and chips isn’t very good for you. All that fat! I’ve done you boiled cod with mashed potatoes, peas and parsley sauce. That’s much healthier.”

“Wonderful,” Josh sighed. He chased after his brother, up the stairs and into their bedroom.

“How are we going to survive six weeks of this?” Roger asked, starting to undress.

“It may not be six weeks. Don’t forget, mum said they could be home in four. It all depends on dad’s work and how well it goes,” Josh told him. He looked around the room, a puzzled expression growing on his face.

“Yeah, and if it doesn’t go well it could be eight or nine weeks, perhaps even longer than that. It doesn’t bear thinking about!”

“I know. Can you see my jeans anywhere?” Josh asked, still looking everywhere.

“Mine are missing too,” Roger said, giving a frown. “There’s not so much as a tee-shirt left out anywhere. I reckon our dear auntie has tidied up in here. Check your wardrobe.”

Josh threw open his wardrobe door. A long, wet tongue feverishly began licking his naked legs. He jumped back, surprised by the unexpected wash. Toby, their two-year-old Alsatian dog, looked up at him with sad eyes and sheepishly whimpered as if to say, “Please don’t give away my hiding place.”

“What are you doing in there?” Josh asked. He patted the dog, trying to reassure it that he was home now, everything would be alright.

The dog slunk out and lie down on the carpet between the two beds. Plainly distressed, the canine put its paws over its eyes and sighed. It was a long and deep sigh, more a soulful moan, really.

“Oh, you poor thing,” said Roger, concerned. He didn’t like seeing their pet so unhappy. “Don’t worry, we’ll be taking you out after tea.” He turned to his brother. “Crikey! Tea! I don’t really fancy that boiled cod, do you?”

Josh grimaced. “No, but we shall have to eat it. She’ll be upset if we don’t.”

“So?”

“So you really don’t want to see Auntie Beatrice when she’s upset. She’s not very nice, believe me.” Remembering something, Josh grinned knowingly at Roger, teasing him with the look.

“Bad?”

“Krakatoa!”

“Oh! That bad, really?”

“You should have seen her last month at the airport. One of her bags went missing for a while and she was prodding all the officials with her broolly, demanding they go and find it. They couldn’t get a word in edgeways. It’s not possible once *she* gets going. In the end, they did go and find it. Even the airport manager helped to search for the bag. Auntie Beatrice is not one to be messed with, I can tell you.”

“Crikey!”

Toby groaned again. Though he didn’t understand all the words, he knew by the tone of Josh’s voice that a groan was warranted. The boys found their casual attire had been neatly folded and put away in all the various but correct places. Finally dressed in their after school clothes, they slowly made their way down the stairs. They were in no hurry to face the dreaded boiled fish.

From somewhere below them, they heard Auntie Beatrice scream. The lads looked at each other questioningly for a split second and then they raced down the remaining steps, eager to learn what was wrong. They found the woman standing in the kitchen, her state of shock very evident.

“I only went to check the table was set properly,” she told them. Breathless, she was fanning her face with her hand. “I couldn’t have been more than a minute. When I came back the plates were empty. It’s gone! The meal I cooked has gone! That darn dog of yours has eaten it, I’ll bet. I’ll skin him alive when I catch him.” Plainly, she was a very unhappy woman.

“Toby hasn’t eaten it. He was upstairs with us,” Josh tried to explain.

Auntie Beatrice didn’t want to listen to any excuses. She snapped straight back at him, “Yes, you would say that, wouldn’t you?”

“But it’s the truth!” Roger protested, his eyes wide open staring at her. “Toby doesn’t eat anything that’s not in his bowl, not unless you tell him to.”

“Really?” Auntie Beatrice sneered, ignoring his sincerity and deliberately over-emphasising her sarcasm.

“Yes, really!” Josh replied. An annoyed look grew on his face. Walking over to the fridge, he took out a plate of sliced ham and placed it on the kitchen floor. “Toby!” he called.

Thinking it might be time for his walk, the dog cheered up. He raced down the stairs to sit wagging his tail excitedly in front of the two boys.

“Come with me,” Josh told his auntie. With Roger’s help, he enticed the woman out of the kitchen and closed the door, leaving the dog inside alone with the plate of meat.

“You can leave him in there all night if you want,” Roger explained. “He still won’t eat any of that ham.”

Auntie Beatrice checked her watch. She waited a full two minutes, annoyingly drumming her fingers on the timepiece, before re-opening the door. To her surprise, Toby was sitting by the plate, repeatedly looking down at it and then up at them, questioningly cocking his head from side to side. He had not touched so much as one slice of the meat.

Roger picked up the plate and selected one of the thicker slices. “Catch!” he said, throwing it at the eagerly waiting hound. He returned the rest to the fridge. He was tempted to turn around and poke his tongue out at Auntie Beatrice. He wanted to go, ‘Nah-nah-nah-nah!’ but resisted the urge, worried what she might do.

“I’m sorry I wrongly accused you,” Beatrice said. She walked over and patted the dog. “You’re a good boy and I don’t mind admitting it when I’m wrong. You sit there a

minute while I make some sandwiches with that ham and then we can share them, you included.”

Dumbfounded, Josh and Roger exchanged glances of disbelief. Maybe Auntie Beatrice wasn't so bad after all. Toby stood there with a look of disbelief too. He wasn't going to run away and hide now, not if there was a chance of some more ham.

As they sat around the kitchen table, tucking into the better-than-boiled-fish sandwiches with Toby too receiving his fair share, Auntie Beatrice stated, “I'd still like to know where that meal went. It's a mystery and I hate mysteries.”

“You left the back door wide open,” Josh said. “A fox might have taken it, or anybody, really. Mum never leaves the door open when she's not in the kitchen. Haven't you noticed all the windows have been fitted with security stays? From the outside they can't be opened wide enough for anyone to climb through. Dad had that done last year because we occasionally get groups of undesirables passing through the village on their way to Southampton.”

“It was after the village shop was broken into,” Roger explained. “Mrs Peatmore was really shook up. She was in at the time, watching television, but never heard them.”

Auntie Beatrice looked surprised. She stopped her noisy masticating, where her set of false teeth clicked with every chew, swallowing early in order to ask, “Do you mean Percy and Pauline Peatmore? Are they still running the shop after all these years?”

“Yes, it is Percy and Pauline,” Josh said, appreciating the respite. “They're quite old. Do you know them, then?”

“Why, of course I do! They took over the shop while your father and I were still at school. We used to buy our sweets from them. Don't forget I grew up here too. In this very house, it was.”

“You did?” Roger questioned, with a disbelieving frown.

“My initials are still out there in the garden, inscribed on the first apple tree to this very day. I checked earlier.”

“That’s you? That’s *your* initials in the heart? Then why did dad say he didn’t know whose they were when I asked him? He must have known, surely?” Josh asked. A frown of disbelief grew on his face too, with his wondering. Would his father really have lied to him? He didn’t want to consider the possibility but his brain kept re-firing the question.

“Yes, he’d have known alright,” said Auntie Beatrice. She noticed the torment growing on Josh’s face, quickly adding, “But he might not have wanted to talk about it. You see, the other initials refer to David Glover. He was your father’s best friend and the young man I would have married.”

“But you didn’t marry anyone, did you? Why didn’t you? What happened to David?” Josh wanted to know. His expression suggested his bewilderment was beginning to know no bounds.

“He was killed in a flying accident along with three other young men from the village. It was a helicopter ride at an air show. All of a sudden it came down, spinning out of control. Apparently something went wrong with the rotor. There were no survivors. The villagers rarely talked about the accident. In such a close community, it hurt everyone. I guess they still don’t talk about it much,” Auntie Beatrice said. She stood up to clear the table, carrying their empty plates to the sink, but really only so she could wipe away a forming tear unnoticed.

It was not unnoticed.

“Sorry, Auntie Beatrice,” Josh said, forgiving his father and now feeling bad about asking.

“It’s okay,” Auntie Beatrice said. She forced a smile over her shoulder at them through the rising clouds of steam coming from the hot water filling the sink. “I don’t mind talking about the old times, but for goodness sake do stop calling me Auntie Beatrice. It always makes me think of the Copenhagen ferry whenever I hear that. You must call me Bee, like the happy bumblebee. I have many fond memories of David. He was the only one for me, you see. That’s why I never married anyone else.”

“Okay, Bee it is then, but is that why you went abroad for all those years?” Josh asked, daring to pry further. Realising some of her frailties, he was beginning to warm to the woman he was to call Bee, though something in the back of his mind chose that very moment to remind him that bees could sting, couldn’t they?

“In a way, yes, it was. I knew there could be no one else so I decided to do something useful with my life,” said Bee.

“What did you do?” Roger joined in with the questions.

“Oh, I just helped out a bit, doing voluntary work,” she said. “In Africa, it was. It has many problems but Africa is a lovely place. You must go there one day.”

“Crikey, did you meet lots of lions and tigers?” Roger asked, excitedly.

“Quite a few lions, plenty of other animals too, but no tigers, I’m afraid. Last I heard, they like it too much in India to bother visiting Africa.” She turned from the washing up to wink jokingly at the boy. “Now, what have you two got planned for this evening?”

“We have to give Toby his walk,” Josh replied. He stood up and quietly pushed his chair back under the table. “He has one every day after tea for about an hour. Then, as it is a Friday, we have choir practice to go to from seven-thirty until around nine. After that, I guess we’ll be on our computers until bedtime. We usually are.”

“Right, well I’ll let you two get on, then. You have your phones, you’ll ring to let me know if there are any changes, won’t you?” Bee looked all about her for a clean tea towel, finally checking the cupboards. Opening one and discovering the dishwasher, she felt a little stupid. She wondered why the boys hadn’t mentioned it but said nothing.

“Yes, of course we will,” Josh confirmed, turning away to hide his unstoppable giggle. He called for Toby, grabbed the lead from off its hook, and quickly disappeared through the backdoor with the excited dog. He had foreseen the sloppy kiss that was likely to be coming.

Roger too had guessed one might be coming, but being on the wrong side of the table for the backdoor he wasn't fast enough to escape. He spent the next few minutes trying to wipe the slobbery kiss off his face, continuously asking his brother, "Has it gone yet?"

Teasing him, Josh kept replying, "Nearly."

The two brothers often teased each other, though never spitefully. They were very close, perhaps closer than most brothers, and that was why they still shared a bedroom. There was plenty of spare space for Josh to have his own room, it was an extremely large house, but he'd refused it because of Roger. Nearly two years younger, and though he took part in everything like swimming and climbing trees, his lesser-built and slightly colourless-looking brother knew his limitations. He could neither swim as far nor climb as high as Josh and he never would.

Roger suffered from asthma attacks, or at least that was the official diagnosis. They occurred only rarely, there had been but two of any note in the whole of his thirteen years, but they were unpredictable and so severe when they came as to be life-threatening. Josh had witnessed the last big one. Barely thirteen at the time, seeing his brother frantically gasping for his every breath one night, clawing at the air and almost dying in front of his eyes, had terrified him. The loneliness engulfing him that night of what it would be like living without Roger, that feeling of a chasmic loss and vast emptiness, still haunted him, though for most of the time he managed to hide it well.

On the terrible night of his last attack, Roger had knocked his bedside alarm onto the floor in his panic. It was probably only through that waking Josh up to raise the alarm that he had survived. Severely traumatised by the event, Josh made a vow that he would always be there for his brother whenever possible. Sharing a bedroom with him was a small price to pay for knowing he would be safer. Roger knew that and took comfort in it.

“What are we doing with ourselves this holiday?” Roger asked, as they left the road, heading towards the woods. He let Toby off his lead. “We’re supposed to be having some really good weather for the next few weeks.”

Watching the dog excitedly sniffing the grass, following a scent trail, Josh thought about his brother’s question, finally saying, “I don’t know. What would *you* like to do?”

Roger laughed. “You know!”

“Okay, I don’t mind, we’ll go camping again. That is, of course, as long as Bee doesn’t object.”

“Why should she?”

“She *is* responsible for looking after us until mum and dad come back. She might be worried for our safety. We’ll have to get the albums out and show her photos of previous camping trips, that should clinch it. But don’t be surprised if she waddles down there to check on us every so often.”

Roger laughed again. “If Ashley and Sammy come, and they’re sure to as they do every year, I wonder how our dear Bee will take to a girl sharing the tent with us. Do you think she might be a prude? She is a spinster, after all.”

Josh laughed too. “*We* know it is okay, Ashley is like a sister to us, but perhaps this time we ought to take the smaller tent with us as well, just for show, just in case.” He picked a daisy, one of many growing along the hedgerow, and began to pull the petals off one by one. Seeing Roger throw him a curious look, he dropped the flower before finding out whether or not she loved him.

“A sister? You’re joking, aren’t you? Ashley’s more like a brother than a sister. She won’t thank you for reminding her she’s a girl,” Roger stated. He grinned, winking at his brother.

“That’s true! Have they mentioned going camping, then?”

“No. It’s a bit worrying, actually. They weren’t at school today. Maybe because it was the last day, though they’ve never skipped before. Thinking about it, they’ve been acting a bit strange all week. I’ve been texting Sammy, and ringing both their numbers, but I think their phones are switched off. I

was going to go round there later but we could call in on them now if you like, while we're out this way.”

“Good thinking!”

Abandoning the idea of walking through the woods, they wandered around the field's perimeter until meeting up with the hedge of the Daniels' back garden. Squeezing through the gap in the hedge, lifting the overgrown barbed wire to allow Toby in safely, they made their way towards the cottage's back door. Following Josh closely, Roger didn't notice the metal watering can. His foot accidentally caught it, sending it scuttling along the crazy paving garden path. It made a lot of noise.

Not knowing why he should do such a thing, it was quite rude and something he wouldn't normally do, Josh cupped his hands to peer through the kitchen window on passing, before knocking on the backdoor. He never got to knocking.

Through the window, though the table almost hid them, he could see Ashley and Sammy huddled up on the floor in the far corner of the kitchen. They appeared to be terrified, cowering down as if hiding from someone. Ashley was trying to reassure her younger brother, hugging him tightly.

The girl leapt up as soon as she realised who was outside. Opening the door, she ran out and flung herself at Josh, crying on his shoulder, sobbing heavily. Sammy ran out too. With frightened eyes, he just stood in front of Roger, staring at him. He was shaking but trying to conceal it by fidgeting. Realising how stupidly weak a sight he must look, he lowered his gaze.

Roger grabbed Sammy by his arms. Tilting his head to look directly up into the boy's face, he asked, “What's wrong, Sammy? What are you frightened of? You look terrible! You both do!”

Between stuttered intakes of breath, Sammy managed to get out, “I can't tell you. I mustn't tell anyone.”

As there was plainly nothing immediately forthcoming from Ashley, she continued to bawl on Josh's shoulder, Roger persisted with Sammy. “We're best mates, aren't we? You

know how close we are and you ought to know by now that I'd tell *you* anything. Where's your dad? Why are you like this? You've gotta tell me." He shook him.

Sammy looked away again, over Roger's shoulder. "We haven't seen dad for a week," he finally spluttered. "He got very drunk one night and the next morning he was gone."

"Why didn't you tell anybody? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You know why," Sammy said, looking down at his feet.

Ashley pulled herself away from Josh's shoulder. Wiping tears from her red eyes, she snivelled, "If the authorities found out they'd put us in care. We probably wouldn't be together. I don't know what we're going to do, honestly I don't."

Josh thought about it. Ashley was very likely right, he guessed. With no mother, she was long dead, and now their father missing too, in the eyes of the authorities a fifteen-year-old girl couldn't look after a boy of thirteen, or come to that even herself. They would definitely be placed in care and that could mean being farmed out anywhere. With an arm around her shoulder, he led the girl back into the kitchen. Looking all around, he asked, "When did you last eat?"

She didn't answer the question, but Sammy was hungry.

"Yesterday, school dinners," he revealed, as Roger pulled him inside the cottage.

Josh could hardly believe the state of the kitchen. With no mother around to keep on top of things, the Daniels' place was usually cosy rather than palatial, but he had never before seen it so dirty. The kitchen was filthy, there was no other word for it, with piled high crockery that needed washing and festering stains on the worktops. Opening the fridge, he noted it wasn't only empty, smelling putrid, the internal light hadn't come on. He walked over and flicked the wall switch. Seeing there was no room light either, he asked, "How long have you been without electricity?"

"All week. It's been cut off. We can't even recharge our phones," Ashley revealed. "The water's turned off too."

Josh now understood the reason for the state of the kitchen. “Haven’t the bills been paid?” he asked.

“I think they have. It’s not that. It’s because the landlord wants us out. He’s more than trebled the rent even though dad said he couldn’t possibly pay that much. Turning everything off is his way of trying to make us leave. Dad reckons he wants to knock down the cottage and build a new house, a bigger and more valuable one, because around here you can only build on a plot where a house has already stood.”

“That doesn’t sound like old Bill Rowland to me. He normally gets on well with everyone. We were going to ask him if we could camp in his field down by the river again this year. Has he changed that much?” Josh asked, shocked.

“Oh, it’s not old Bill. Old Bill’s okay, but it seems he’s sold the land the house stands on; or rather it was his new farm manager who sold it. Some mean-looking bloke called Roy Royston owns it now — a pig of a man! That’s why we were hiding. We thought it was him again.”

“Again?” Roger interrupted.

“He came round Monday to turn everything off, shouting and screaming like a maniac. He threw a lot of the furniture about to frighten us. He even punched Sammy on his arm, really hurting him.”

Josh stood immersed in thought for a moment. He knew he didn’t have the right to decide such things but he also knew he couldn’t leave his closest friends there, not in that state and at the mercy of such a heartless rogue. Bee no longer seemed to be the ogre he’d once believed. Something inside him suggested that she would probably understand; she’d be sympathetic. She *had* to be, anyway. What else was there? What else could he do?

Daring to risk it, Josh took a deep breath and said, “You two are coming home with us. Leave a note with our phone number in case your dad comes back. I’m afraid it might be another fright for you, though. I hope you’re up for it, but you’re going to meet our Auntie Beatrice.”

One Fine Summer - Michael Knell

“Who?” asked Sammy.

“You’ll see,” giggled Roger.

Chapter 2

Josh was relieved to discover he had reassessed Bee to perfection. Shocked by their plight, she fussed all over Ashley and Sammy, straightaway preparing them a meal while she listened to more of their story. After they'd eaten, she made up two beds for them in a spare room, seeing to it they took a shower. His hunch had paid off. The woman was plainly no friend to authority, something he'd worked out from the way she'd behaved at the airport that time, and her voluntary work in Africa had been with children. The children part of it he'd only guessed at, hoped even, but fortunately correctly.

Bee fully appreciated the importance of keeping a brother and sister together. She wouldn't be notifying anyone of their apparent abandonment, not for a very long time. They were being looked after in a good house by a reputable well-off family, she said. She was able to provide everything the law demanded for Ashley and Sammy. If the authorities wanted to, they could pick the bones out of it later.

In his bed, before turning off the light that night to go to sleep, Roger looked across at Josh and said, "You know, we got Bee completely wrong, didn't we? She's fabulous. I really like her!"

"Me too!" Josh said.

Josh and Roger always left it wide open at night, but next morning Ashley and Sammy knocked on their bedroom door, waiting to be invited in. It appeared strange, almost alien to the two lads. They giggled, calling out for their friends to come on in. For years they had felt like family, close family,

and on their camping trips together no one had ever bothered to knock on the tent flap.

However as Ashley entered the room in one of their mother's nightdresses that Bee had lent her, for the first time the boys appreciated just how much time had moved on. Last year the barely discernable bumps had been the subject of great mirth, but now? Ashley had changed. She had turned into a young woman. The short boyish haircut could no longer conceal the fact. Any excuse of her being a tomboy would never suffice again. If they were to go camping this year, they would definitely need to take two tents. Anything less would seem improper.

"Wow!" Josh joked. He sat up in his bed, grinning. "You don't look like *that* in your school blouse! If you weren't like a sister to me . . ."

"Don't you dare say it!" Ashley threatened, trying to look serious but failing miserably. "We only came to tell you the vicar's downstairs. You three missed choir practice last night. With some boys going on holiday, he's trying to find out how many are likely to turn up for the services tomorrow."

Half getting out of bed and then stopping himself, Josh said, "Okay, we'll get up now . . . Er, that is, as soon as you've gone. You can stay if you want, Sammy."

Ashley began to look miserable. "Growing up is flipping annoying, isn't it?" she stated, stamping out of the room, leaving Sammy with them.

Sammy sat on the side of Roger's bed, stroking Toby. The brothers took turns in popping into the en-suite facilities to shower before getting dressed.

Looking more than a little sad, Sammy remarked, "Your Auntie Beatrice is awfully nice, isn't she? She'd make a really good mum."

"Yeah, but don't forget you've got to call her Bee, not Beatrice. Do you miss your mum a lot, then?" Roger asked, sniffing under the arms of a favourite tee shirt and deciding it would do another day.

“I didn’t, because I never knew her. Don’t forget, I was a baby when she died. But now I know what I’ve been missing. No one has ever fussed over me the way your Bee did last night. She really cared. Nobody has been like that before except my sister.” A tear took up residence in the corner of his eye, waiting for a chance to run down his cheek. He secretly tried to wipe it away.

“Your dad cares about you. We care too,” Roger said, pretending not to notice.

“Dad doesn’t really care. If he did, where is he, then? All he does is get drunk these days. I bet he’s on a bender now.”

Roger didn’t have an answer to that one, not anything suitable. Josh did though, coming back from his shower still drying his hair.

“That’d be some bender!” he said. “A whole week? Did you ever stop to think he might have had an accident? He could have been taken ill, or anything. Did Ashley not think to ring the hospital?”

“No, she didn’t,” Sammy said, turning white-faced. He was horrified, worried by their omission.

“We’ll get Bee to do it when we go downstairs. I’m sure she can come up with some excuse for the enquiry without having to mention you two.”

Downstairs, a few minutes later, once the three boys had assured the vicar they would turn up on Sunday and sent him on his way, Bee made the telephone call. The hospital could account for everyone admitted in the past week, there were no mystery patients with amnesia or anything like that, and none of them was their missing father. They also revealed they’d had no John Doe deaths that might be him but she omitted mentioning anything so sinister.

“You’re not to go worrying, now,” Bee told them, trying to appear convincing. “He’ll turn up sometime, you mark my words!”

Josh was ready to fetch his photo album, so he could ask about the camping, but their auntie had other ideas. After the

cooked breakfast that she had started to prepare for them, she said they needed to pick up Ashley and Sammy's clothes and anything else they might need from the cottage. She would ferry them there and back in her car.

So, at eleven o'clock they all piled into her dusty, old maroon Volvo estate for the short drive. They arrived at the cottage within minutes. The bright morning sunlight revealed all the squalor the place had descended into without electricity and water. While Ashley and Bee sorted out what clothes to take, the boys wandered around the rest of the cottage. Josh nosily fingered through the assortment of open mail piled on top of the bureau. He noted there were quite a few threatening letters there from the new owner of the property, a few bills, and some bank statements. When nobody was watching, he slipped a couple into his pocket.

Far more nosily in the father's bedroom, Josh rummaged through the pockets of the untidily strewn about clothing. Finding the man's wallet surprised him. Who would go off somewhere for a week without their wallet? Looking inside it, to confound the issue more, he discovered amongst other things it contained a credit card, a debit card, and sixty pounds in banknotes. It didn't make sense. He would have needed the wallet if he planned on going away, especially on a bender. Something crept into Josh's mind to make his stomach cramp. Perhaps he *hadn't* planned on going away. What if someone had taken him away, forcing him to go with them? And even worse, for what reason would anybody do that, to get rid of him? He quickly stuffed the wallet into his pocket.

"You're not nicking that, are you, bro?" whispered Roger. There was a look of total disbelief on his face.

"Of course not, stupid!" Josh whispered, annoyed that he should think such a thing. "I thought it might hold some clues, that's all. Anyway, it's safer with us than leaving it here in an empty house, isn't it?"

"Sorry, I should have known," Roger said, apologetically.

Sammy wandered out of the room. He was looking for some of his missing clothes and couldn't find them.

Josh took advantage of being left alone with Roger, saying, "There's a lot that doesn't make sense. I've stuffed some bank statements in my pocket too. Their dad isn't broke; he's loaded. He should easily be able to afford the rent."

"Loaded?"

"More than fifty grand!"

"Crikey!"

The sound of a car horn out the front saw them rushing to the window. A blue Mercedes car was unable to get past their Volvo in the narrow lane and the driver was venting his anger on the horn. It was not the polite toot one might expect for such a village but continuous lengthy blasts.

"Come on, we'd better go," called out Bee. "We've found all the clothes we need. Can you two boys grab the computer in Ashley's room? It is unplugged and all that."

"Righto!" Josh shouted.

They were right behind their auntie as they left the house. She locked the door and turned to the driver, signalling that they would only be two minutes. He was a large and sweaty man, an unpleasant-looking type who didn't seem at all at home in the blue-striped suit he wore.

"Just move it, you stupid old cow!" the bloke shouted, out of the car window.

Bee immediately turned her hand around, her two fingers signalling the minutes becoming a rude gesture. "I'm going to reverse onto the garage driveway. You'll have to back up a little way," she told the man, coldly.

Once they had everything safely stowed in the rear of the estate car, they all jumped inside. Ashley sat in the front passenger seat. The lads shared the back seat. Annoyingly, the man in the car behind continued to blast his horn.

"He hasn't bothered to back up yet," Sammy said, sounding concerned.

“He will!” Bee said, saying it so firmly it sounded like a promise. “Just make sure your seatbelts are tight!” She started the engine and slammed the car into reverse gear.

Seeing the reversing lights come on and the old estate car starting to move towards him, the man in the car behind stared at it stunned for a moment, and then in a panic he began to reverse, accelerating rapidly. Caught unawares like that, he made a poor job of it. One of his rear wheels slid into the grass verge. The more he revved to try to get away, the more the car slid towards the ditch, until finally the rear wheel hung in mid-air with the car falling onto its back axle. It was in no doubt at all that the Mercedes was firmly stuck. Adding to the man’s dilemma, those in the Volvo were all hanging out of their windows jeering at him.

“We can still carry on down the lane, do a couple of right turns and arrive back on the main road, can’t we?” Bee asked, now left with no option but to drive forwards.

“There’s a bit of a tight turn, a hairpin bend, but you sure can,” Josh said, still chuckling.

“That was the man who punched Sammy’s arm the other day,” Ashley said, quietly. “That’s Roy Royston. He’s the bloke who owns the cottage now.”

“Are you sure that’s him?” Roger asked, looking not at Ashley but at Sammy.

“Yeah, that’s him,” replied Sammy. “There’s still a bit of bruise there.”

“I wish you’d mentioned that before,” said Bee. “I’d have got out and prodded him with something.”

The three boys burst into fits of laughter. In the front seat, Ashley tried to hide her giggling behind her hands.

“What? What did I say? What’s so funny? Why are you all laughing?” Bee asked. She looked at each of them in turn, baffled by the reaction.

Josh finally managed to explain. “Sorry, Bee. I told them earlier about you prodding those airport officials when your bag went missing.”

“Oh, yes,” she chuckled. “I suppose I do enjoy having a good prod at times, don’t I?”

Back at the house, with Ashley’s and Sammy’s clothes totally mixed up, the clean with the already worn and little idea of which was which, Bee decided it would be best to wash them all. She started on the job straightaway. The rest of them went upstairs to set up Ashley’s computer so it could connect to the house’s wireless internet hub. Once they had done that, and it didn’t take them long, Josh nodded for them all to follow him into his bedroom, the one he shared with Roger. He switched on his own computer and told them to sit on the beds.

“I took this out of your cottage for safekeeping,” Josh said. He tossed the wallet across to Ashley. “You’d better look after it now. I also took some bank statements. Did you know your dad has quite a lot of money in the bank?”

Ashley looked up at him, puzzled by the question. “A lot of money?” she repeated. “No, he’s always said we were hard up. What’s a lot?”

Josh passed her over the bank statements. With Sammy craning his neck to see too, Ashley studied them closely, not understanding.

“That don’t make sense,” said Sammy. “According to that he’s had this money for ages, but less than a fortnight ago I was with him when he tried to get some out of a hole in the wall. He only wanted fifty quid but I saw it for myself, it said there were insufficient funds.”

Josh googled the Bentley-Western Bank and clicked on the link for its website. After a few minutes of studying the kinds of accounts they offered, he said, “I think I understand. That’s a Premium account, isn’t it? Because it pays the best interest by far, you can’t take any money out of it without giving six months notice. That’s his savings account. It would be his current account that is under-funded. I didn’t see any paperwork for a current account. I bet it’s an online one with probably next to nothing in it.”

“It is,” Ashley confirmed. “It is an online account. I’ve seen him go to it but don’t ask me the password or anything. I don’t know it.”

“Look, don’t take this the wrong way, will you? But I don’t think your old man is very good with money,” Josh said.

“No, of course I won’t take it wrong. But what makes you think that?”

“Well, it looks to me as if he’s tied up too much capital in a savings account where he can’t get hold of it quickly in an emergency. When he couldn’t get money out of his current account to pay what this rogue landlord was demanding, it seems he wrote him a cheque that had little hope of being cashed just to get him off his back.”

“How do you know all this?” Sammy asked.

“I was only trying to help. I wasn’t being nosey just for the sake of it. I had a rummage through the correspondence on your bureau. It looks like your dad’s played right into that git’s hands. You see, owing rent and then writing a cheque that bounced allowed the landlord to start proceedings in court. There’s already one judgement against your dad, with another one imminent. It’s for repossessing the property this time. With that poor credit rating he has now, even if he wanted to your dad couldn’t raise a loan to hold the landlord off until he is able to release funds from his savings account. He’s in a hell of a hole and it’s getting deeper all the time.”

“Crikey!” Roger exclaimed.

“So do you reckon he’s just given up and done a runner? We shall never see him again?” Ashley asked. She turned pale. The thought of never seeing her father again upset her.

“No, I didn’t say that. I don’t think he has done a runner. I don’t want to worry you but you need to remember he left his wallet behind. As stuck as he is for cash, he’d have needed that sixty quid that’s in it. Wherever he is, I have a strong suspicion he doesn’t want to be there.”

Sammy swallowed hard before asking. He didn’t want the words to stick in his throat. “Do you think he’s dead?”

“Do you think we ought to go the police? Or at least tell Bee what we know?” Ashley asked.

“He’s your dad, it’s up to you, but give it some thought first. A great deal of thought. I don’t want to sound heartless, but if he is dead, going to the police isn’t going to help him one bit and it certainly isn’t going to help you.”

“As soon as we reported him missing they’d take us into care, wouldn’t they? Even your auntie knowing everything we know could change things. She might feel she *has* to tell the police,” Ashley said, fighting back her tears. “Oh, I just don’t know what to do!”

“We could go camping, that is providing we can persuade Bee it is okay,” suggested Josh.

Ashley looked up at him shocked. “Camping? You want to go camping at a time like this?”

“It would give us a lot more freedom to check out a few things,” Josh said.

“Like what?” Ashley asked.

“Like where your old man’s car is right now. It can’t be too far away. He couldn’t undertake a long journey without having money. How would he buy petrol? Wherever he went, I reckon he intended on coming back that same night.”

“Blimey! You ain’t half got a brain on you, haven’t you? You sure your second name’s not Sherlock?” Sammy asked.

Josh laughed. “Don’t be silly!”

“But how would we ever find it? We can’t just go looking in everyone’s garage for miles, or knocking on doors, can we?” Ashley complained.

“If we go camping, it means we shall see quite a lot of old Bill Rowland, the farmer. He normally ferries all our stuff down there on his tractor-trailer and we get our fresh milk and eggs off him daily, don’t we? I think we need to get chatty with him and find out more about this Royston guy; who he is and where he lives. The fact he was down the lane today suggests to me he might be staying somewhere local. Maybe that’s where your father went that night, to see him or to

confront him. That man might easily have something to do with him disappearing.”

“Now tell me he ain’t Sherlock!” Sammy exclaimed.

“You’re right. But then, you’re always right, aren’t you? It must be something to do with that posh Winchester education. Now you’ve explained it like that, it *is* a good idea. We need to go camping,” Ashley said, standing up. Smiling, she walked over to Josh and squeezed his hand.

Josh froze, unable to move, his brain totally numbed. Sherlock or not, he had no definitive answer to the question now lodged firmly in his mind. Was that a show of affection off Ashley? Off tomboy Ashley? Surely not?

Sammy giggled.

Chapter 3

Bee wasn't totally against the idea of them camping, saying she would consider it, but it did bring up the subject of the rather unsatisfactory sleeping arrangements hurriedly put together the previous night. At his age, Sammy should not be sharing with his sister, she said, so she wanted the boys to dismantle his bed and move it into one of the empty dormer rooms in the attic. The lad looked horrified that anyone should want to billet him up there all alone in the roof space. When he suggested to his sister that she could move instead of him, she wasn't keen on the idea either.

"We could move Sammy in with us," Josh said, in an attempt to resolve the standoff. "Our bedroom is more like a ballroom, there's plenty of space for another bed."

"Wow! That would be brilliant!" Sammy said, excitedly.

Roger was all for it too, and so it was agreed.

Dismantling the bed and reassembling it, and moving Roger's computer desk along to under the window to allow the three beds to be in a line, took up most of the afternoon. So he wouldn't feel out of it, they put Sammy's bed in the centre. With a little more shuffling around, there was even enough space in the room for the chest of drawers he'd started using.

To test his computer had survived the move and he had everything plugged in correctly, Roger designed a sign and printed it out. Superimposed over three colourful clip-art pictures of beds, bold wording proclaimed: 'The Dormitory.'

With the help of an adhesive stick, they stuck it on the bedroom door.

“Very nice!” Ashley stated, looking into the room from the doorway. “Can I come in?”

“Of course you can,” Josh said. “We’re still one group, unit, family, or gang. Call it what you like, growing up isn’t going to change us that much, is it guys?”

“No,” said Sammy.

“Definitely not,” Roger added.

“That’s good. Bee has just had a chat with me,” Ashley confided. “Appropriately, as she’s Bee, it was about the birds and the bees.” She laughed. “I convinced her we’re not stupid, we all knew about those things, so she’s pretty much okay now about the camping. We can go tomorrow, Sunday, if you want, but we have to take her down there so she knows exactly where we’ll be. I think she wants the possibility of her turning up unexpectedly to be an extra assurance everything will be kept proper between us.”

“Don’t grownups worry a lot? I mean, I can’t imagine anything improper ever happening, can you?” asked Josh.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Ashley, giggling. “You did ask me to marry you once.”

“What? We were six at the time! Why, are you going to hold me to it or something?”

“You never know, I might one day. See you downstairs, tea’s ready.” She winked back at Josh teasingly from the doorway before running off down the stairs.

“Crikey, Josh! She’s definitely got the hots for you! Who would have believed it?” Roger joked, winking at Sammy.

“I would,” Sammy said, winking back at Roger,

Josh turned to stare at him. “You would? Why would you?” he asked, a puzzled look hanging on his face.

“You want to see what she’s got all over the inside of her wardrobe door back at the cottage,” said Sammy, grinning at him like a Cheshire cat.

“What?”

“Photos of you, and they ain’t just any old photos. Some of them go back quite a few years to the first time we all went swimming in the river.”

“No! But that young we often ran about . . .”

“Exactly!”

Over tea, a salad that a rabbit would have appreciated more but nevertheless preferable to boiled fish, Josh kept stealing glances across the table of Ashley. She caught each one, her eyes there waiting for it, giggling every time.

Josh wanted to find out the truth about the photos. Half convinced they were ribbing him in some joint wind-up, he needed proof either way. That being so, after tea he suggested they should walk down to the cottage. He used the excuse that Ashley and Sammy’s bicycles were still down there. With no one living in the property, somebody might steal them. They needed bringing home.

The bicycles were still there, chained to each other and the drainpipe when they arrived at the cottage around seven o’clock. Before unlocking them, Josh reckoned they should take a look inside the cottage in case their father had returned.

Despite the note lying untouched where Ashley had left it, Josh insisted they should check out all the rooms. Using that as his excuse, he immediately ran upstairs to scrutinise her wardrobe. Opening the doors slowly, fearful of what he might discover, he was pleased to find there were no photos, not of him or of anyone, and he sighed with relief.

“You silly boy, did you really think I would have left them behind?” Ashley asked, grinning at him.

Unnoticed, she had followed Josh upstairs. Standing so close behind him when she spoke, she made him physically leap with surprise.

“Er, er, what?” he spluttered, looking round at her and feeling stupid.

“Sammy’s told you about the photos, hasn’t he? I knew he would one day.”

“Why do you keep them?”

“You keep all your photos, don’t you?”

“Well, yes — but not stuck on my wardrobe door like pinups. Why do you?”

“You know why.”

“I do?”

“It’s not illegal to like someone, is it?”

“You like me? I mean, in that way? I didn’t realise you had a that way.”

“Haven’t you?”

Josh forced a swallow that didn’t want to happen. “Yes, of course I have,” he said, quietly, and looking down away from her.

“Well then, that’s okay, isn’t it? You have your secret, the person or persons you like, and I would have had mine were it not for Sammy being so nosey.”

“So are we like boyfriend and girlfriend, then?” Josh asked, looking up again, into her eyes.

Ashley laughed. “I don’t know, are we? You tell me.”

Forcing another one of those swallows, Josh took out his wallet and flipped it open to the compartment with a window for a bus pass. Instead of his bus pass it contained a photo of Ashley. “At least it’s not a naked one,” he said, grinning.

Laughing again, Ashley said, “I don’t know what Sammy’s been telling you but there’s only one like that and it’s from years and years ago. It’s a picture of all of us when we were not much more than toddlers. It’s just a happy group memory I like looking at sometimes, one of pure innocence, and anyway it’s so small you can’t see anything.”

“It’s *not* small!” Josh protested, pretending to sound hurt.

“Don’t you think I know that?” She kissed him, just a peck on the cheek, saying, “Come on lover boy, we’d better go down before Sammy jumps to some wrong conclusions.”

“Okay, but just one more thing. When did you first realise you, er, liked me in that way?”

“Oh, that’s easy! I’ve always liked you but it was at your twelfth birthday party when it became a bit more than that.

After we'd had our tea, we all played postman's knock, remember? How about you?"

"Same, I've always liked you and it was at the same party. We seemed to be thrown together quite a lot in that game, were you rigging it?"

"Might have been!" She laughed, guiltily blushing a little. Grabbing hold of his hand, she led him back downstairs.

The others were somewhere outside. Josh took advantage of their absence to say, "One more one more thing. You've always been a tomboy. Right up to a few weeks ago you were still a tomboy. What's made that change?"

"Oh, a couple of things cropped up," she said, looking down at herself and sighing. "But have you ever thought that if I hadn't been a tomboy we would never have had all those wonderful camping trips and adventures together. It was only because young boys don't normally like girls hanging around them that I made sure I dressed like you, had a haircut like you, never cried, and could always swim as far or climb as high as any one of you. It was great fun being a tomboy and it wasn't that hard to do."

"Do we need to tell everyone about us?"

"Don't you think they already know? They've known about us for years."

"They know? Really?"

"Ask them."

Locking up the cottage, Josh called Roger over. "Sammy said Ashley keeps photos of me, didn't he? So do you think I keep photos anywhere, say of a secret girlfriend? Do you think I've got someone I drool over?" he asked.

"What, apart from Ashley, you mean? No, there's only Ashley, isn't there? You keep her photo in your wallet."

"How do you know that?" Josh was shocked.

"I had to empty your jeans once, mum wanted to wash them. It was a long time back, about two years ago, I think. Anyway, when I put your wallet on your bed it unfolded to her photo, not that it was any surprise."

“It wasn’t?”

“No, of course not! You’re not going to break up with her, are you, bro?”

“Don’t be silly!”

Back at Manor House, they stored the cycles in the large, brick-built garden workshop alongside the bikes belonging to the house. Sammy and Roger disappeared up the orchard, madly chasing each other around. Josh studied the tool racks on the workshop wall until he found what he was looking for, and then with the chisel in his hand he led Ashley outside and across the lawn.

“The apple trees have grown a bit too knobbly, how do you feel about a beech tree?” he asked Ashley, taking her over to the first of a row of them.

“What for?”

“To chisel our names on, of course,” he said.

“I never knew you were such a romantic.” She laughed.

“I never knew you were really my girlfriend.” He laughed too, starting on the job of inscribing their names on the tree, large, their full names, not just initials, and within a perfectly symmetrical heart seated on the sign for infinity. The task took the best part of half an hour to complete. Before he’d finished it, Roger and Sammy were giving him their expert advice.

“You’ve got to kiss to make it official,” Roger told them.

“Yeah, it doesn’t count if you don’t kiss,” added Sammy.

“What, so you two can laugh at us?” Ashley asked, smiling at them.

“We wouldn’t laugh, would we, Roger?” Sammy said, looking the picture of innocence.

“Of course not,” Roger confirmed.

Josh pulled her tightly into him, kissing her properly, on the lips for the very first time ever. It was quite a long kiss, tender with a whole lot of meaning, ending in a little giggle, but only because Roger and Sammy *had* chosen to laugh, and hysterically so.

“You wait! I’ll get my own back! Your turn will come one day!” Josh threatened, jokingly.

“What, *our* turn?” giggled Sammy. He jokingly planted a noisy kiss on the side of Roger’s face. “Ooh, I don’t think so, sweetie!”

“Ugh! Get off!” shouted Roger, straightway wiping it off his cheek.

Josh would have chased the teasing two but with the chisel in his hand it didn’t seem the right thing to do. Instead, holding Ashley’s hand, he returned it to the workshop, closing the door behind them.

They might have stayed in the workshop much longer but for Bee cooing out from the kitchen door. Sammy and Roger appeared, running from way up the orchard, and together they went indoors to see what their auntie wanted.

“I’ve just had Bill Rowland on the phone,” she said. “He asked if you needed your camping gear moved again this year. If you do, he said it’ll either have to be tomorrow afternoon or Tuesday. He has his solicitor coming on Monday and doesn’t know how long the business will take. We got to talking, and anyway, he’s on his way over.”

“What, now? This late?” Josh asked.

“So he said.”

“What for?” Roger came back, not understanding.

“He wants to talk about the Daniels’ place. He had to tow that obnoxious bloke’s car out of the ditch yesterday. While he was over that way he had a good look around. He knew something was wrong but couldn’t tell what.”

“Oh! How much are we going to tell him, then? Or have you already told him?” Josh asked, worried. “He’s always been a nice bloke, friendly like, but we don’t know him *that* well.”

“But I do,” said Bee. “You youngsters seem to forget there was life in the village long before you lot came along. Trevor, David and your father were inseparable once, in the same way you are today. We all grew up together. It might

surprise you to know, when we weren't much older than you are now we used to have parties at the Rowland's farm. Barn dances we called them, though they were more like mad rock and roll parties. Half the village used to turn up. It was a good night out."

"Who's Trevor?" Josh asked, with a frown.

The rest of them questioned similarly.

"You don't know? My word, the villagers *have* kept things quiet! Trevor was Bill and Betty's son. He was another one of those lost in the helicopter crash. You'd best not mention him, then. They had him very late in life and he meant the world to them."

"How many more people don't we know about?" Roger asked.

"Two, I'm guessing now," replied Bee. "James, who was the vicar's lad, and Robert who was the Jennings' son. The Jennings had the pub years ago but they left the village soon after the accident."

"The Reverend Rivers had a son?" Josh asked, amazed.

"Yes, he did. When you are playing around, chasing each other through the gravestones over there before choir practice, perhaps you ought to stop and read a few of them. The four young men we lost are all in a line under the yew tree. David Glover, Trevor Rowland, James Rivers, and Robert Jennings, all of them once a bunch of wonderful inseparable young kids, just like you are today," Bee said, sniffing and wiping an eye.

"Eh? How do you know that we chase each other around the graveyard?" Sammy asked, guiltily.

Bee smiled. "Because they did too, in their time. All choirboys mess around in the graveyard before choir practice. You're not the first to do it, not the first to do most things. You'll realise that one day."

Josh broke the uncomfortable silence that followed. He had been thinking. "Bee, if as you say they were inseparable like we are, how come our dad was not with the rest of them in that helicopter?"

“You are only inseparable for so long, my love. People find partners, pair off and get married, and slowly that which you thought would last for ever all falls apart as you go your separate ways. Your dad had only just married your mother; they didn’t want to go to the air show, so the group was already fracturing.”

Sammy’s hand felt around for Roger’s hand, holding it tightly as they both looked round at Josh and Ashley. They in turn looked at them but could find no words to say. All four of them were questioning in their minds how long it would be before *they* drifted apart. It was something they’d never thought about before, being so unthinkable.

The second uncomfortable silence arrived in as many minutes, only broken by the doorbell ringing. Bee waddled off to answer it. Josh and Ashley both went to say something at the same time.

“You first,” Josh conceded.

“I only wanted to reassure our brothers we’ll never break the group up, no matter what. We won’t, will we?” asked Ashley.

Josh laughed. “I was going to say exactly the same thing. We’ve both been there for our brothers over the years and we always will be. If we ever go our separate ways, it will be them that break us up, not us.”

“We won’t ever break us up!” Roger blurted. “I’d even ask Sammy to marry me before that happened.”

“Yeah, and I’d marry him too!” Sammy confirmed.

“You might think differently in a few years time, unless of course you’ve already made up your minds on that score and it’s a practice run you’re having there,” Josh said, deliberately diverting his eyes down between them so they’d notice. “We don’t mind, honestly. So long as you’re both happy, it’s okay these days.”

Roger frowned. “What is? Oh, crikey!” He quickly let go of Sammy’s hand as they both turned a very bright shade of embarrassment red.

“Ah, well there you are, my young friends. Mind if I sit down? The old bones find the days a bit long now,” Bill Rowland said, shuffling into the room and taking a seat at the kitchen table. “Can’t even do the milking on me own no more else we’d be there till midnight.”

“You sit there, Bill. Rest your feet awhile. I’ll make us a pot of tea,” Bee told him.

After smiling at the bloke, Ashley immediately took on the tea-making task instead. The three boys greeted him too.

“Well now, missy,” Bill said, looking across at Ashley. “I hear Dave’s gone missing. I want you to know it was none of my doing, this mess. Looks like those rogues have ripped all of us off. We’re all suffering. That’s what I’m seeing my solicitor about on Monday, to see if there’s anything we can do about it.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how have *you* been ripped off?” Josh asked. “Didn’t you just sell the land and make a profit?”

“It might look like it but that’s not what happened,” Bill said. “The land I thought I was selling, the land my thieving farm manager showed me and I consented to, did not include the cottage, only the field.

“I would never have sold that cottage, not for anything. Dave has wanted to buy it ever since he moved in, even though his rent was less than half of what it should be, but I wouldn’t sell. It’s gone now though and all I’ve received is the agricultural price for the field next door, not a very good one at that. The land the cottage stands on is worth a fortune, far more than what the field is worth, and a whole lot more if he clears the site and rebuilds, as I know he will.

“You youngsters weren’t born then but once there used to be six farm workers’ cottages standing there. That’s why the garden is so long. Over the years they became rundown and dangerous so I had the middle ones knocked down, made a garage out of one end and repaired the cottage the other end. There was someone I had in mind for it at the time but they

were called away.” He sniffed. “Anyway, as six cottages once stood there, the new owner shouldn’t have any problem getting planning permission to build six new houses. He’ll make millions.”

“Does the solicitor hold any hope of sorting it out?” Bee quickly asked, so the man wouldn’t dwell on who he once had in mind for the cottage.

“I don’t think so but he’s a solicitor, he’s going to make it last as long as he can and charge me an absolute fortune, isn’t he? Nevertheless, what else can I do? I have to try to do something to put things right.

“You see, I trusted that farm manager. He showed me what I thought I was selling and I just signed the papers, but how can I prove he didn’t show me what I was *really* selling? How do I prove he showed me something different? I’m convinced now it was all a scam, anyway. He was only with me a couple of months. As soon as the sale went through he upped and left.”

“It’s a terrible to-do. Terrible,” said Bee, shaking her head sympathetically. “But you mustn’t go blaming yourself.”

“But I do,” Bill said, his eyes turning watery red. “I do blame myself. I’m just getting old and stupid.”

“Everyone gets old and vulnerable one day but that doesn’t make them stupid. I don’t blame you,” Ashley said. She put a cup of tea in front of the man, using the opportunity to give his clasped hands a friendly squeeze. “You were tricked and that can happen to anyone.”

“You’re such a lovely girl; such a lovely family. Both your families are. I don’t think we’ve had a bad family in the village, not ever, and then these shysters turn up and ruin everything.”

“Do you mean that ex farm manager of yours is living somewhere local?” Josh asked.

“I’m not sure. I only think so because I often sees him hanging around the camp.”

“Camp?” Josh queried. “The gypsy camp on the hill?”

“Yes, but this year the gypsies won’t be able to stop there. That Royston bloke who bought the cottage is living up there in a caravan. There are loads more of them there, and equipment, all waiting to start work on demolishing the cottage as soon as the court sanctions the eviction order.”

“Crikey!” Roger said.

“So that’s where he was going when he put his car in the ditch! A mile or so further on, that road goes right past the camp, doesn’t it?” Josh said.

“Yes, I only pulled his car out so me cows wouldn’t fall in the ditch the other side, pushing past to go for milking. Weren’t for that, I’d have left him there.”

Josh caught sight of Roger about to blurt something out. Guessing what it might be, he glared at him. He understood the look and realised straightaway why he shouldn’t say anything. If he mentioned it, Bee would definitely not let them go camping, or perhaps anywhere out of sight.

“It is okay to go camping, isn’t it, Bee?” Josh asked.

“I think I can trust you,” she said. “When do you want Bill to move your stuff?”

“Tomorrow afternoon, if that’s okay with you, Bill? We have a church service in the morning and the evening.”

“I’ll be up here around two,” the old man said. “It’s no problem at all.”

“Thanks,” Josh said. “We’ll set it all up and then come back home. That way we can get changed here straight after evensong, cycle down there, and everything will be ready waiting for us.”

“You’re going to have a very busy day tomorrow, aren’t you?” Bee said, looking at her watch.

Josh guessed she might want some time alone with Bill, perhaps to talk over old times. It was getting late, anyway. He yawned and said, “Yes, guys. It might be a good idea for us to turn in. What do you think?”

They agreed with him, but with no exit strategy planned each of them had to suffer one of Bee’s sloppy kisses before

making it upstairs. Toby followed them, thankful she didn't kiss dogs.

On reaching the boys' bedroom door, Josh said, "Once you've changed into your nightclothes, you can come in our room if you want, Ashley. We don't *really* want to go to bed yet, do we?"

"Bee won't be happy if she catches me in there with you this late, will she? Especially in my nightclothes. We might not hear her coming up the stairs."

"We don't have to. We know whenever someone enters the hall. I rigged up a silent alarm so we could stay up late on our computers. You'll have plenty of time to run back to your room and we to get under our covers," Josh said.

"Eh?"

"Josh is a whiz with electronics," Roger explained. "He's hidden a motion sensor in the hall. If anyone's down there, a bulb flashes on a little box that's plugged into his computer."

"It's an adaptation I made to the magic bulb circuit found in kids' electronic kits," Josh said. "I built it years ago. I thought of hiding a camera down there too, but I didn't want to push my luck."

"Really?" Ashley said, not having the faintest idea what they were talking about. "Okay then, I'll come back when I've changed, but you keep a close eye on that bulb!"

When she returned a few minutes later, she was not wearing the nightdress that had proved such a distraction that morning but an oversized tee shirt her father had once given her as a present, having no idea of what size to buy. Loose fitting, reaching way down past her knees, it was not in any way revealing.

The boys emerged from the ensuite bathroom together, having finished cleaning their teeth. They were dressed only in their boxer shorts. Ashley quickly turned away.

"I hope you're okay with us like this," said Josh. "We have discussed it. This is how we sleep, we always have done, but you know that anyway, don't you? Just because we're a

bit older, we don't want to go around hiding ourselves anymore than we have done in the past. That would mean everything has changed and we don't want it to change. I mean, we're all covered up decent, aren't we? You can see a lot more of us in our cossies when we're swimming than you can now. You don't really mind, do you?"

Ashley looked back at them. "No, of course I don't mind. I never wanted things to change either but this year I have to accept they have a little on my side. But I'm easy with it, if you are, it's just that some adults might not see it exactly the way we do."

"Then that's their problem, isn't it? Not ours." Josh laughed. "Earlier, in the workshop, we promised each other something important and that isn't going to change simply because we're in our nightwear. That still remains concrete."

"What did you promise?" Sammy asked, soon to cry, "Ouch!" when Roger pinched him, forgetfully on his bruise.

"It's no secret," said Josh. "Now we know we're really boyfriend and girlfriend we shall obviously be quite a bit closer in some ways, but we've promised ourselves we're not going to behave like they do in the soap operas."

"What do you mean?" Sammy asked, frowning his not understanding.

"They're not going to do anything they shouldn't do, stupid!" Roger whispered, loudly into his ear.

"Oh!" Sammy said, immediately grinning.

"So, what other gadgets have you built?" Ashley asked, quickly trying to change the subject.

"He's reconfigured my bedside alarm," Roger said. "If I were to have a bad turn in the night, it goes off automatically now as soon as I sit up in the bed."

"That's clever," said Ashley.

"Probably superfluous," Josh told her. "I wake up every time he so much as turns over."

"But he's not had an attack for years, has he? Not even when camping with all the smoke and that from the campfire.

You'd think that would start it off if it was asthma, wouldn't you?" asked Ashley.

"Our parents don't believe us," said Josh. "Or the doctors, but after reading about other cases on the internet, we both think the only two notable ones he's had were panic attacks rather than anything to do with asthma. If he has asthma, and he probably does because they've done all the tests, it's seems so mild and insignificant to not bother him most of the time."

"What makes you think that?" Ashley asked.

"Both times his bad attacks coincided with him being extremely worried about something. First time it was about starting school. The second time was when changing schools from junior to secondary. That time he was worried about the initiation ceremony at the new school, which as it turned out hadn't existed for years. The boys merely talked about it as a joke. I'm convinced his condition is stress related, though I still keep the alarm active and all his stuff handy just in case I'm wrong."

"I bet you *are* right. It all sounds so logical, doesn't it?"

"When's brain-box *ever* wrong?" Sammy asked.

"Oh, I can be wrong," Josh assured him.

"But what was so terrifying about this initiation that never was?" asked Ashley, looking at Roger.

"You don't wanna know, really you don't!" he said, laughing.

"Oh, as bad as that?"

"Worse!" Roger insisted.

"Now you really *have* got me interested," Ashley said, turning to look at Josh.

"Oh, alright, I'll tell you," Josh said. "Apparently, years ago the new boys had their heads pushed down a bog, the older lads sometimes peeing on them before pulling the flush to finish the soaking. It was a school tradition that went back for donkey's years, only relatively recently banned. Roger wasn't worried so much about the tradition as not being able

to breathe or hold his breath for that long and the lads not believing him. He feared he might die.”

“Goodness! Boys can be cruel, can’t they?” Ashley said.

“Some boys,” Josh corrected her.

“Did *you* have an initiation?” she asked Josh.

“Didn’t you?”

“No, what was yours?”

“It was banned but at my type of school, one that exists on many long-standing traditions, bans like that don’t work. It still goes on to this day. All new boys are debagged.”

Ashley laughed. “Really?”

“I didn’t mind. So what? It was nothing compared to what used to happen at Roger’s school, was it?” Josh said.

“Maybe for the first time ever, I’m really glad I’m not a boy,” Ashley joked.

“Not half as glad as I am right now,” said Josh, pulling her in close to kiss her on the cheek. “You will join the women in the choir tomorrow, won’t you? You won’t lie in bed until it’s too late?”

“No, I said I’d do it as he’s short this week, so I will. I don’t mind going to church, singing my socks off. I’d be in the choir were it not for those horrible maroon smocks and funny hats the women have to wear. Those smocks look like maternity wear! Why he doesn’t have choirgirls dressed in blue cassocks with smart ruffles and white surplices like the choirboys, I’ll never know.”

Josh laughed. “It’s that tradition thing again, I reckon. Lots of church choirs have girls in with the boys these days but it’s never happened here. I think the vicar’s far too old and set in his ways now to change.”

“I thought we could leave a few minutes early in the morning. I don’t know why but I feel we should take a look at those four graves before the service,” Ashley said. “I think Bee would appreciate it, anyway.”

“Okay, I don’t mind,” Josh said.

“Psst! The bulb’s just started flashing!” Roger warned.

“See you in the morning,” Josh said, quickly guiding Ashley to the door. “Loves you!”

They kissed, fleetingly on the lips, and then Ashley ran quietly back into her own bedroom. The three boys leapt into their beds and sat in them silently listening. Downstairs, they could hear Bee saying goodnight to old Bill and ushering him out of the front door.

Chapter 4

Exactly as Bee had said, the four neatly tended graves were in a line a few feet on the church side of the mushroom-shaped yew tree. They stood in front of them, reading the headstones, with lumps appearing in their throats. In just a few years they would be the same ages as those lying there and that was no age at all. Fresh flowers adorned each of the resting places. David's one had an added bunch of red roses. They guessed Bee had paid her respects the previous day.

"I'd be like Bee if anything ever happened to you, I know I would," said Ashley. She sniffed, quickly groping for the comfort of Josh's hand.

"What do you mean?" Josh asked, taking her hand and squeezing it tenderly.

"No one else would ever do for me. You're the only one I could marry. Come on, we ought to go," Ashley said, pulling Josh away. "I don't want to choke up halfway through the service."

Roger and Sammy followed them through the church's side door into the choristers' dressing area. Off the boys' changing room were two other doors and, coming out beside the organ, a way into the chancel. Josh gave Ashley's hand one final squeeze before she left them to go through the door into where the women changed.

With the good weather and the school holidays starting, it seemed as if half the village was away on vacation. Not only the choir, the congregation too erred towards the skeletal,

perhaps accounting for the unusually short sermon. Arriving back at Manor House by five minutes past twelve was without precedent, nevertheless welcome as they had so much to do that afternoon.

Bill Rowland arrived exactly on time, expertly backing the trailer up the drive and past the side of the house to the rear where they quickly loaded it. Bee wanted to go with them, just to see where they would be staying and how safe it was, so they left their bicycles behind, saying once the tents were up they would walk back with her and collect them then.

As they pulled away from the house, they were quite a sight. In amongst the trailer of piled high equipment and stores, Josh, Ashley, Roger and Sammy sprawled around in convenient gaps, happily enjoying the ride. Bee decided it safer to sit right at the front where she could hold on and that she did for dear life. Toby found the highest point on which to stand. Remembering the escapade from last year, he barked his happiness all the way to the riverside field.

Though heavily sweating from exerting themselves on such a hot, sunny afternoon, they didn't take long in erecting the tents and putting their campsite in a usable order; a job they had done many times before. Bee helped wherever she could. Sitting in front of the large tent to rest a while, she proclaimed to the world she felt like a girl guide. Leaving her to puzzle over their hooting laughter, the rest of them quickly changed into their swimwear, and running over to the lock gates, they bombed into the invigoratingly cool river.

Suitably refreshed by the quick dip, they pegged out their cossies to dry on the tent ropes before starting out on the trek home with Bee. She didn't walk as fast as they did, the journey taking a lot longer than Josh anticipated. However, there was still time for a wholesome meal before performing their duties at evensong. After the service, following the inescapable hugs and kisses as they were about to leave on their bicycles for the campsite, Bee presented each of them with a parcel of cakes, just in case they should feel hungry in

the night. Josh began laughing as they cycled off. He was still giggling when they entered the lane.

Puzzled, Ashley looked across at him, asking, "What's been pulling your chain all this time?"

"I can't tell you," Josh replied, straightaway bursting into another giggling fit.

"You can't?" She turned to look behind her at Roger and Sammy, asking them, "Do you know what's so funny?"

They obviously did, they were both giggling too.

"It's only Bee's choice of words before we left," Roger managed to splutter. "She's really out of touch. Didn't you hear what she said?"

"No, what?"

"I can't tell you," he said, creasing up again.

"Oh, don't! I'll wet myself in a minute!" Sammy howled, with the laughter tears flooding down his face.

Fearing Ashley might become annoyed, Josh promised he'd tell her later when they were alone. But that only went to make it more of a mystery to the girl.

Ashley stopped cycling. Putting her feet down firmly on the ground, she said, "I'm not going any further until someone tells me!"

Josh cycled in a loop to come around and stop alongside her. Putting his arm around her waist, stifling another massive giggle, he said, "It was aimed at me, just the way she came out with it, that's all. She said you and I were older now and because we were going camping, I needed to be good."

"That's funny? That's what made you laugh?" Ashley asked, not seeing any humour.

"Not really, it was more seeing the look on those two's faces," Josh confessed, wiping his eyes and nodding at Roger and Sammy, "and what they'd made of it that set me off laughing. I mean, it was open to different interpretations, wasn't it? Sorry!"

"Oh, I get it now," Ashley said, grinning. "You boys have one-track minds, don't you?"

“Sorry, sis,” said Sammy, still trying hard to compose himself. “It’s a boy thing; it comes with the territory.”

“I think we’d better start pedalling again,” said Josh, laughingly raising his eyes. “Quickly, before Sammy realises what he’s just said!”

They set off again. However, it was a full minute before Ashley worked it out, jokingly punching his arm and giggling.

Toby sniffed the air and excitedly ran on ahead. So on arriving at the campsite it was no surprise to find someone waiting for them outside the large tent. Patiently sitting there cross-legged, making a fuss of the dog, the young lad looked up at them and grinned.

“I knew if I sat here long enough you’d turn up,” he said, scrambling to his feet.

“Guaril!” Josh exclaimed. “I was frightened we might not see you this year. We heard the gypsy camp was full up. Did you manage to get on there, then?”

“No way, man! They are a nasty lot up there. Old farmer Rowland has let a few of us stay in the next field. The rest of them have gone further on to stay with farmer Doyle.” He laughed. “Farmer said we were not to trouble you. I’m not troubling you, am I?”

“Don’t be silly! You’d have troubled us if we *hadn’t* seen you this year. We’d have missed all those wonderful late night campfire stories. You know you’re always welcome wherever we are,” Josh told their fifteen-year-old Romany friend. “Can you stay with us again?”

“I dunno,” Guaril said, looking out of the corner of his eye at Ashley. “We have some very strict rules.”

“Rules?” Ashley had caught the furtive look.

“I’m sorry Ashley but you’ve grown up. You’re a young woman, anybody can see that. I’ve grown up too and I’d be in an awful lot of bother if I were to share a tent with you now.”

“You won’t have to, I’m sleeping in the little tent on my own. Josh is my boyfriend and he watches out for me. Doesn’t that take care of those strict rules?” Ashley asked.

“Sure it does!” Guaril laughed.

“That’s settled then,” Josh said. “You’re staying with us in the boys’ tent. When are you moving on, though? Not yet awhile, I hope.”

“What true Romany can ever tell you that?” the gypsy boy answered, grinning. “And technically I’m only a diddikai, what would I know?”

“You’re more a Romany than anything else. Your father is a true gypsy and a gypsy family raised your mother, didn’t they? Anyway, your gran can see the future, can’t she? Mama Mizelli should know when you’re leaving,” Roger teased him.

“Oh, she can see the future okay, she sees everything. It’s interpreting it correctly that’s not easy, especially things like exact times.”

“Can we walk over and call on her?” Ashley asked the lad. “Like tonight?”

“Sure you can. She’s expecting you to, anyway. You and Sammy have got some really big troubles right now, haven’t you?” Guaril asked.

“She knows that?” Ashley exclaimed.

“Of course she knows. She sees these things, but if you’re there with her she may see more.”

They left Toby to guard the tents. It was something Josh had taught him the previous year and he was happy to do it. At the end of the field, where the dividing hedge met with the river, they swung round on the fence post overhanging the water into the next field. Half a dozen modern gypsy caravans and their tow trucks stood on the far side. The group followed the riverbank, escorted part of the way by several inquisitive dogs, all of them fondly remembered old friends. They were at the gypsy homes within minutes. Shouting out to announce their arrival before opening the door, Guaril took them into one of the caravans.

“Blessings, my children. Come and sit down. I’ve made you all a nice cup of tea,” the old woman said, waving her scrawny hand appropriately at the already filled, enviably

expensive, bone china cups, picturesque on their saucers laden with solid silver teaspoons. The rest of the tea set was neatly positioned all around on the pure Irish linen tablecloth. "You know I won't help you to sorrow, you'll have to put your own sugar in. Now, come on, sit down, there's plenty of room."

"Hello, Mama Mizelli," Josh warmly said, taking one of the teas and adding his sugar. "You're certainly looking well. I guess it must be all that baked hedgehog."

"Ah, jog-jog is only a treat now. We eat more and more like you do as each day passes," the old woman said, with a sigh. "The boys go supermarket shopping every week. Who'd have thought Romanies would ever come to that? Shopping, freezers and frozen meals, tsk!" She shook her head and laughed. "We have changed so much in my lifetime. I mean, once upon a time, if you had used my cups to drink from I'd have had to break them afterwards."

Ashley felt she had sat long enough listening to tittle-tattle and past superstitions. She wanted some answers and dearly hoped the old woman might have some. "Do you know if our father's okay? Is he still alive?" she asked, while fighting to stop her eyes from watering.

The elderly gypsy woman pulled the girl in close to her, hugging her tightly, telling her, "Oh, he's alive alright, my beauty. He's somewhere very dark. He's hungry but he seems okay. You must stop your worrying."

"Where is he, then?" Ashley asked, anxiously.

"I don't know, my sweet. I can only see the darkness, but if I can see that, he can't be too far away. I would need to look into the eyes of those who took him there to know where they are keeping him. All I can see is the dark and I can feel a dampness. The kind of cold dampness that gnaws at your very bones." She shuddered, shivering with the cold, and took a sip of her tea to warm herself.

"Crikey!" Roger exclaimed.

"How far is not too far away?" Josh asked.

“It has to be less than a day’s travelling,” Mama Mizelli replied, after contemplating the question a moment. “That’s olden days travelling by a horse-drawn caravan, of course.”

“So probably this side of Winchester and not as far as Southampton?” Josh tempted.

The old woman closed her eyes and seemed to sniff the air, long and deeply. “Definitely this side of Winchester, I would say,” she replied, after a while. “You can smell the wind for miles north of Winchester but I smell only grass and trees. Trees, elm trees. Many dead elm trees. Dead. Long dead. I can smell death. There are old graves nearby.”

“Blimey!” Sammy grabbed hold of his sister’s hand, holding it tightly. “You wouldn’t half be good with the late night ghost stories around the campfire!”

“Mistletoe Abbey!” Guaril said, excitedly. “The derelict monastery sounds just like that. That has old graves and dead elms. Mama Mizelli might not know it. On route the women stay close to the travelling vans, and it’s off our pathway, but the men and boys roam afar daily looking for deals.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” said Josh, the others agreeing with him. “How far is it?”

“About five miles,” Guaril said. “The old road to it has nearly gone, worn away and overgrown. It’s more like a disused farm track now. Look out the window. Can you see that rusty old roller and harrow on the back of the lorry? We found that down there yesterday, a good bit of scrap metal, right near to the ruins.”

“Mistletoe Abbey? I do know where it is but the elms were being felled the last I heard. That was years ago. Do you mean the trees are still there?” Mama Mizelli asked.

“Yeah, loads of dead ones all around it,” said Guaril.

“I reckon the tree fellers must have been frightened off by the evil, then. Shout outside for Barney. Go and find him. I want to know what he was thinking of taking you down there. That place is nothing but pure evil. You stay away from there in future,” Mama Mizelli stated, her displeasure evident.

Guaril left them to search the campsite for Barney.

Meanwhile, Josh asked, “Evil? Why on earth should an old monastery be evil?”

“It is only known as Mistletoe Abbey because of the unnatural amount of mistletoe in the surrounding trees. The place was originally called St Martin’s Abbey, right up until the church deconsecrated it centuries ago, soon after it had been desecrated by devil worshipers. There are many strange stories about that place and none of them good,” the old woman said. “They can’t even give that land away now. It has a terrible reputation. Too many people have died around there, many of them being sacrificed.”

“Sacrificed?” Sammy asked. His eyes shot wide-open, agog. He began holding on to Ashley even more tightly.

“It’s the history they don’t teach you at school but it’s *your* history. Hampshire history. For hundreds of years that place has been a Mecca for those with the evil eye. Witches, warlocks, and devil worshippers! Do you know it doesn’t even appear on maps anymore? It’s not even named on the Ordnance Survey ones. Nobody has wanted to know anything about that place for centuries. Two hundred years ago, by royal proclamation the ruins became the property and responsibility of the Church of England. Within a generation they destroyed all evidence of their right to it and walked away. Since then nobody has owned that place, except perhaps the devil.”

“Crikey!” Roger moved closer to Sammy.

Guaril returned to say he couldn’t find Barney anywhere. He suggested, by now, the guy was probably supping pints down the pub with the rest of the men.

“I’ll deal with him tomorrow, then,” Mama Mizelli said, sternly. “And afore you go tonight, you move that lorry away from here. You take it over the far side of the field.”

“Yes, Mama Mizelli,” Guaril said, sheepishly.

Chapter 5

The silhouettes of the tall elms stood leafless against the starlit night sky, sinisterly alien, black and lifeless like giant skeletons. Pale yellow moonlight narrowly accentuated the tree trunks on one side, and passing through their tentacle-like limbs, it found the ivy-overgrown stone ruins beyond to torment, still wet with dew from the evening mist now fading. An occasional feathery cloud would fleetingly pass across in front of the moon, the shadowy scenes appearing to change, the lit areas retreating and chasms of pure darkness eagerly appearing to devour every vacant space. Somewhere, hidden high up in one of the dead trees, an owl called out irregularly, hooting its presence. Another, distant but perhaps debating an interest, sometimes returned the cry, though not venturing any closer.

“I have an awful bad feeling about this,” Sammy said, softly as the group dismounted after deciding to push their bikes the remainder of the way over the rough ground.

Apart from the intermittent noises of the screeching owls, there appeared to be an unholy silence to the night, one only somewhat tempered by the light breeze as mischievous eddies played in the nearby long grass. Between the rushing of these frolicking zephyrs chasing their tails, the closer the group came to the trees, the more and more they became aware of a sporadic underlying sound, a sort of faint background noise.

“Can you hear that?” Ashley asked, almost whispering it while coming to an abrupt stop. “It sounds like an old man wheezing, as if he’s fighting for his breath.”

They listened for quite some time, holding their own breaths and not daring to move a muscle. It was definitely there, seemingly coming from all around them.

“A wheezy old man is a pretty accurate description, I reckon,” Josh whispered, after a while.

Just occasionally the noise would change a little in tone, becoming harsher, but only momentarily. It was like someone was falling asleep wheezing, only to wake up immediately on hearing the rattle of their first snore.

Wiping his merriment-wet eyes, unable to hold back his chuckling any longer, Guaril spluttered, “It won’t hurt you, it’ll only be that owl breathing.”

“It is? That loud? Are you sure?” Ashley asked.

“Yeah, course I am. Owls commonly suffer from asthma, you can hear them a hell of a way off. Badgers too, but by now any badger around here would have heard us and gone deeper into its set. We often hear that breathing noise of a night.”

“Crikey! I have asthma. I don’t sound like that when I’m sleeping, do I, bro?” Roger asked, frightened for the wrong answer.

“No, of course you don’t!” Josh assured him.

Arriving at the first of the elm trees, they laid their bicycles in a line on the grass. Peering between the towering dead monsters at least six or more deep in places, they could just make out the uninviting bramble-covered descent leading to the ruins. There, shielded from any breezes, the ghostly grey mist still remained untouched, eerily wafting in and out of all the dilapidation. Through the prickly undergrowth, on closer inspection, there were what appeared to be several narrow but well-trodden pathways. Animals, not humans, were responsible for making most of the tracks, Guaril told them knowingly. Sammy wondered what then might have made the other ones but didn’t dare to ask.

As they slowly moved forward, the owl hooted loudly once more from directly overhead before taking flight, noisily

flapping its way until lost in the darkness of the field behind them. Its sudden flight caused a sharp intake of breath from Ashley. She grabbed hold of Josh's arm. Realising it was the bird and feeling stupid about her show of fear, she pretended she'd stumbled.

"I reckon we'd all starve to death if I had to take you lot poaching," Guaril stated, chuckling again. "If you want to be quiet, and that wouldn't be a bad idea, don't shuffle your feet. You need to lift them up high and place them down slowly but deliberately. That way the brambles won't catch on your legs or the leaves rustle as much when you tread on them."

"Do we really need to go further?" asked Ashley. "I can see from here it was plainly once a very large place but there's next to nothing left of it now, is there? There are no rooms surviving where anyone could keep a hostage. Our father can't be here."

"We ought to check it out, though. The signs Mama Mizelli saw pointed to here, don't forget," said Guaril.

"Maybe the signs were wrong this time," suggested Ashley. She stopped walking, causing the rest of them to come to a halt too.

"The images she sees are never wrong, only sometimes the interpretation," Guaril said. "I doubt she's got anything wrong. Don't forget, it was me who suggested here sounded like the right place. If anyone is wrong, it'll be me."

"You're well-travelled in these parts, better so than any of us, so if this is the wrong place, is there anywhere else that might remotely fit the bill?" Josh asked Guaril.

"None that I can think of," he replied, "and that's what I don't understand. Dead elm trees are a rarity these days, aren't they? Just about every diseased one has been felled."

"That's true. I vote we go down there and explore it fully," Josh said. "After all, it's the only way we can be absolutely certain it's the wrong place, isn't it?"

Flashing their torch beams around in all directions, they decided to continue on. Slowly they made their way through

the remaining brambles and began to wander amongst the remnants of the derelict building. Once vast, now all that remained of its many dividing walls ranged from the barely discernable ground level stones to the overgrown and perilously leaning erections standing four or five feet at their maximum height. The mist seemed to cling more around the taller ones, being denser in between them and throwing up an impenetrable white wall of light whenever probed by the bright torch beams. Several times they were forced to walk through one of the ghostly white clouds just to see what lie beyond. Finding nothing anywhere that could provide a hiding place for a hostage, they proceeded on with caution, right through the ancient once monolithic building until coming out the other side in the frighteningly, evil-looking graveyard that lie beyond.

Barely a gravestone, adorning cross or solemn angel still stood anything like upright. They were so heavily overgrown with mustard coloured moss and fungi, their sad tributes no longer provided a clue as to who were the long dead and now dusty occupants lying deep below. The moonlight continued to come and go with an annoying irregularity. In the darkest periods, even with their flashlights guiding them, they all took their share of tumbles when unsuspecting feet caught an unmarked mound hidden away in the long grass.

Sammy and Roger made no secret of tightly holding on to each other's hand as they nervously explored the dying monuments, so intensely frightened were they. Ready to go home to their campsite defeated, desperately wanting to do that by now, both their hearts sank when Josh's torch picked out a line of mausoleums some distance away in a ghostly mist and he ran towards the crumbling buildings, excited.

"You could easily hide someone in one of these," said Josh, when the rest caught up. "Not the above ground coffin-like tombs obviously, but those built like little houses to keep whole families in. Search for any where it looks like someone may have opened its door recently."

“How would we know?” Ashley asked. She shivered, quickly looking over her shoulder for the source of the cold chill she’d felt waft across the back of her neck. Worrying her, nothing she could see could have accounted for it.

“The rusty old padlock and chain holding the outer doors or iron gates closed will either be broken or replaced by a new one, I’m reckoning,” Josh told them. He too shivered, feeling a sudden coldness, and likewise began to look all about him questioningly.

“I don’t want to go inside any of *them*,” said Guaril, holding back. “Those kinds of places are real bad news. Dead bodies need burying beneath the earth. We bury all our dead as quickly as we can, then we burn any of their belongings they don’t need for their journey or we sell them to the gaje. That way they have nothing to return to us for, unlike all those lost souls, the undead that will be wandering about here.”

“Crikey! You do know how to make people feel good, don’t you?” Roger said. He felt Sammy shiver, using it as an excuse to squeeze tighter on his hand. Then he felt the cold draught on the back of his head and spun around.

Ashley shone her torch up and down the row of morbid buildings. “I think your idea about the padlock sucks,” she said. “It looks to me like they’ve *all* been broken into.”

“Oh, my God!” Sammy shrieked, as the beam from his torch picked out a bony frame. Lying by the open doorway to the closest burial chamber, one arm outstretched towards them in a pointing fashion, it looked to him as if the skeleton had collapsed there while trying to escape from its entombment. Daubed all around the stonework of the entrance to its last resting place, some in purple paint and some simply scratched into the stonework, there were lots of strange signs.

“Pentagrams! And they’re all inverted!” Guaril stated, shocked and frightened. “Black magic has been practised here! Witchcraft!” He took a couple of steps backwards.

“But you wear a sign a bit like that around your neck, don’t you? You’re never without that necklace on,” Josh said.

“It’s the other way up. The good way, not like them!”

“You don’t really believe in all that superstitious rubbish, do you?” Josh asked his friend. He was trying to laugh and sound brave because he felt somebody should. “I expect a bunch of nutcases have simply embellished the building as a joke, maybe then prancing around naked like they do, or else some town kids have desecrated it for a dare. What, do you think Satan is going to suddenly come rushing out of there or something?”

Josh had hardly finished saying the words when there was an almighty roar from the darkness within the tomb. Ashley screamed out loudly. She tried to run but her jellified legs wouldn’t allow it. Grabbing hold of Josh, she fell to the ground, pulling him down on top of her. The other three, like greyhounds out of the traps, also attempted to race away from the terror but the hidden mounds got the better of them in the darkness. They too tumbled to lie in a pile, trembling and looking up at the night sky where hundreds of bats flitted back and forth, ducking and diving in the moonlight. All the time, to their horror, seemingly never-ending reinforcements were noisily flying out from the vault to join them until they must have numbered thousands.

“Well, at least it wasn’t Satan!” Sammy said. Relieved, he pulled Roger up into a sitting position, nudging him out of his trance-like state.

“It might explain the cold I felt behind me earlier,” Roger said, feeling better. “It could have been the draught from a bat’s wings. At first, I expect there were only a few bombing around. They probably raised the alarm and that accounts for the rest of them.”

“You believe what you like,” Guaril said, standing up and walking further away. “In my book, bats in graveyards signify great evil.”

“You’re not going are you?” Sammy asked.

“Of course not. I couldn’t leave if I wanted to, anyway. I said I would bring you here and help you and to our friends

we are a people of our word,” said Guaril. “Gotta take a pee, though.” Because Ashley wasn’t too far away, for politeness he wandered behind a tall and very bushy shrub to perform the deed.

Roger and Sammy picked themselves up and sauntered over to where Josh was standing, holding on to Ashley. She said it was the noise and sheer suddenness of the creatures appearing she had found the most upsetting. The fact that they were bats had left her fearing they would become entangled in her hair. Trying to make light of it, telling his distressed girlfriend that the hair-tangling attribute was nothing more than an old wives’ tale, Josh was doing his best to comfort her with his cuddling.

“It’s not like you to be more scared of something than me, sis,” said Sammy. “You sure have changed.”

“Shut up!” she snapped.

“Yeah, shut up,” Josh said. “I like her like this. Girly, like she should be.”

“Crikey! You’ve changed too,” Roger said.

“And you might one day,” Josh said, his eyes searching all around the graveyard. “Where’s Guaril?”

“He’s having a pee,” Roger said, nodding towards the bush. “Over there, somewhere.”

“Must be a hell of long one, then. You sure he hasn’t done a runner?” Josh asked, his eyes still feverishly searching for the gypsy lad.

“He wanted to, says the place is evil, but reckons he couldn’t leave us because he always keeps his word. He is a long time though, isn’t he?” Roger conceded. “Come on, Sammy. Let’s go and find him.”

Sammy wasn’t keen on the idea at all, but wanting to hide his nervousness from his sister, he reluctantly went along with it. Arriving back at the bush where they’d last seen him, and walking completely around it, they could find no sign of their friend.

“He *has* done a runner,” Sammy stated.

“You reckon?”

“Well, he isn’t here, is he?”

“But I’ve never known him lie to us before. If he really wanted to leave that badly, he would have said. He wouldn’t have had to lie about it,” said Roger. “Let’s go and see if his bike is still there.”

“What, go all that way? On our own?” Sammy asked, looking at him horrified.

“It’s not *that* far! We got here safe enough, didn’t we?”

“S’pose so,” conceded Sammy, after thinking about it, though he was still plainly unhappy about going.

A few minutes later, after telling Josh what they were doing, they discovered the bikes were still there, all of them. Obviously Guaril had not left and gone home. He had to be somewhere close-by but exactly where? They hurried back to where Josh and Ashley were waiting, only to find Guaril had still not returned.

#

Mama Mizelli awoke with a start. She lay in her bed, looking up at the ceiling and thinking for a while in the darkness, the smell and taste of dankness as overpowering out of her dream as in it. Pulling herself up to a sitting position, she reached out and switched on her bedside lamp. Finding the old school handbell kept alongside the divan as an alarm, she grabbed it, swinging it to and fro vigorously. Lights began to come on in the other caravans. Soon their occupants were with her, spilling around the bed, anxious to know what was troubling the woman.

“Guaril is in grave danger,” she told them. “Barney, you check on the campsite in the next field. He should be there but I fear he isn’t. The rest of you get the trucks ready. We may need to go somewhere in a hurry. Somewhere not very nice.”

Barney, a little breathless, was back with the old woman within a few minutes. Outside, the sounds of several vehicles

starting up and revving were loud as they polluted the night air with their great envelopes of diesel fumes.

“There’s nobody over there except their dog,” Barney said. “The camp is deserted. Those kids normally have bikes with them, don’t they? There are no bikes either, to be sure, and Guaril’s bike is missing too.”

“I’m getting up,” Mama Mizelli announced.

“Where are we going?” Barney asked.

“Where you should never have taken the boy,” she said, unhappily. “We’re going to Mistletoe Abbey!”

The others crammed inside the caravan gasped. They were mostly women folk. With horrified faces, they excitedly began to mumble things to each other. It seemed Mistletoe Abbey wasn’t as unknown as Guaril had imagined.

Ten minutes later, loaded with the youths and menfolk, and all of them carrying an assortment of weapons, five vehicles, open-back trucks and lorries, pulled out of the field onto the road. Mama Mizelli was in the leading lorry, sitting upfront in the middle. Her face was expressionless. Prepared for the worst, in the closed bag she hugged tightly to her lap, amongst many other things was hidden the wax for sealing a body’s orifices so no evil spirit might enter. There was also a large shawl in forbidden white, a colour they only ever wore to signify a death or mourning.

“Bless us all,” cried out the old woman, as the convoy pulled up to park alongside the line of bicycles lying on the grass. “Quickly, help me down.”

Barney, and a beefy young lad they called Chal, helped Mama Mizelli to get out of the lorry, holding on to her as she knelt down to feel Guaril’s bike. Closing her eyes, the elderly matriarch caressed the saddle. Fondling it and sniffing the air long and deeply, she said, “Guaril is still alive but we must hurry!”

Chapter 6

Guaril had landed with a hell of a bump. Possibly it was only his arms and legs kicking and pushing out to slow his descent that had saved him from certain death. That and the countless years of built up dead grass, soft earth, twigs and leaves finding their way down the hole, never able to return. He lay there in the darkness for several moments, trying to work out what had happened to him. Looking up after a while, far above him a small circle in the darkness appeared to be a fraction lighter than the rest. Moving his head to one side, there was something that might easily be a star, he guessed.

Testing his limbs for broken, wriggling around and sitting up, although a few places were sore and naggingly ached, he was relieved to find everything still appeared to be in working order. He shouted out as loud as he could, upwards at the distant lighter area, calling for help. No one answered but suddenly he became aware of a movement somewhere in the darkness on his left, close to him. Something grabbed hold of his thigh.

“Jeepers!” he cried out, leaping up in fear.

“Nice of you to drop in,” a voice said. “Who the hell are you? You’re obviously not one of them or you’d realise nobody can hear you calling from down here.”

“Is that you, Dave? Dave Daniels?” Guaril questioned, believing he could recognise the voice.

“Yes, it is, but who are you?”

“It’s Guaril. Guaril Beanie. The Romany friend of Ashley and Sammy. I was with them up there only moments ago.

Josh and Roger are up there too. We've been searching everywhere for you."

"Are they okay? My kids, I mean?"

Guaril brought the man up to date with as much as he knew, explaining how the group had gone camping in order that they might search for him. The man managed a chuckle. Saying he remembered Beatrice from years ago, he suggested that perhaps it wasn't so bad down the hole after all.

"Did they lower you down the hole or just throw you down? Have you been stuck here since last week? With no food and water?" Guaril asked.

"That's just an air vent you fell through, I reckon. My entrance was much more civilised than yours, safer too. They brought me down here through one of the burial chambers. They've been looking after me okay, someone brings plenty of food and water daily, so I suppose I should be grateful. Is tomorrow Monday?"

"Yes, tomorrow's Monday. Why?"

"I think they're letting me go tomorrow, after the court case. They're just keeping me here until then so I have no chance of raising any money. It means I can't stop them from evicting me and claiming the house. They'll probably have it demolished by tomorrow night. Don't happen to have any matches, do you?"

"Sorry," said Guaril. "I gave up smoking earlier this year."

"Really? But you're only about thirteen or so, aren't you? You smoked?"

"I'm fifteen now, sixteen in a couple of months. What do you want matches for, so you can start me off smoking again? I'd probably want to start again if you were puffing away in such close proximity."

Dave laughed. "I don't smoke either but you're well educated for a young gypsy, aren't you? Proximity, indeed!"

"Now there's the internet, moving around and missing school doesn't matter anymore. We educate ourselves. Even

the elders are catching up with the gaje these days. Though a nation apart, we're becoming more and more like you every day," said Guaril.

"What's the gaje?"

"Oh, sorry. It's our word for non-gypsy people. Some use it as a derogatory term but it doesn't have to be and it wasn't meant that way then. If you don't smoke, what do you want the matches for?"

"So we can see if there's another way out of this tunnel, of course."

"This is a tunnel?"

"Feel the wall behind you. It's made of flint and some kind of mortar. It appears to finish just past where you were sitting but if that were really the case, why would it need such a large air vent?"

"I had a torch in my belt earlier. I wonder if it survived the fall," Guaril said, bending down and feeling all around in the darkness. "Found it!" he shouted, triumphantly just a few moments later.

Switching the torch on, Guaril found it still worked okay. They were able to see the tunnel did indeed continue further. However, they would first need to climb over a huge boulder or rock face in their way. One that the tunnel's builders, no doubt centuries ago, had decided against hacking a route through or, in a failed attempt, given up.

#

In case Guaril may have suffered an accident, something like falling over and banging his head, and be lying hidden in the long grass between the mounds, the group decided to systematically search the graveyard, making sure not to miss any of the rows. By methodically dividing it into areas, within minutes Sammy discovered the iron grating from tripping over it. Soon afterwards he found the deep air vent it should have been protecting, close to where they'd last seen Guaril.

Lying on the grass and looking down the hole, the combined power of the group's torches revealed nothing except that it was a very long drop. Could Guaril have fallen that far and survived? Their frantic shouting down the opening in the ground produced no response. Had he fallen to his death with his body then rolling out of sight? The discovery threw up many questions.

Josh knew they would be in an awful lot of trouble but he had to do it. He took out his phone, ready to phone the emergency services for help. As he pressed the first number, the screen lit up to inform him there was no signal available. His walking up and down searching for one proved to no avail. The others tried with their phones, they too wandering considerable distances in search of a signal, but nobody found one. It was then that Roger thought he heard something.

"Listen!" he called, though not loudly. "Hear that? That's not coming from the main road, it's closer, up by those elm trees. Someone's coming."

The others stood perfectly still, holding their breath to listen. It was undoubtedly the sound of vehicles approaching and quite a few. They waited, listening intently until one by one the sound of motor engines ceased. Whoever their visitors were, they had parked somewhere near to the bikes.

Josh signalled for the others to follow him. Doing so, they were soon hiding behind one of the tombs, peering over the top as several torchlights approached, feverishly probing all around. There were others they could see further back but only intermittently where people were still searching through the ruins. Someone called out, shouting Guaril's name, and then many more joined in.

"Here!" Josh shouted, standing up and shining the torch on himself. "Over here!"

"What are you doing?" Roger asked, looking up at his brother in alarm.

"That was Chal! It's the gypsies! All of them by the sound of it," Josh said, running out to greet them.

The gypsy group quickly retrieved ropes from their vehicles and only minutes later, amidst much excitement, one by one they were lowering three of their young lads down the hole. As the last of them descended out of sight, Mama Mizelli arrived on the scene, supported on either side by Barney and Chik. She was plainly displeased. Looking across at Josh, straight into his eyes, she demanded an explanation.

“Sorry, Mama Mizelli, I know we should have heeded your warnings but we *had* to do something. We had to find Dave. We didn’t force Guaril to come with us, though. He wanted to come, he volunteered, honestly he did!” Josh told her, his head bowed shamefully for most of it.

“I know you didn’t force him,” the old woman said. “No one could ever force Guaril to do anything he didn’t want to do but that’s not the point. From my visions you must have believed me that Dave might be here. That’s why you’re here. So why didn’t you believe me about the dangers of this place or that he was okay? Why do you only believe what you want to believe, disregarding all else? Don’t you think we’d have helped you find him tomorrow in the daylight? It’s not safe here of a night!”

“It is frighteningly creepy but we haven’t come across anything evil yet,” said Roger, interrupting in Josh’s defence.

“Haven’t you?” Mama Mizelli asked, staring piercingly into Roger’s eyes, waiting.

Roger forced a guilty swallow. “Well, we did see some graffiti that might be magic symbols,” he conceded, after a long silence, looking down away from her gaze.

“I suppose someone breaking into the vaults is evil, when you come to think about it,” added Ashley. “All those we’ve seen so far have been broken into.”

“It’s not who has broken into them that you might need to worry about so much as what will now have broken out,” the gypsy woman warned. “Why do you think the doors to mausoleums are always kept securely chained? There’s no money to be made from bodies anymore. The days of the

body snatchers are long gone, so for what reason do you think they keep them locked?"

"I don't know," Ashley replied. "It's something I've never really thought about."

"More like you've never been taught about it," Mama Mizelli said, snappily. "It's a fault of the gaje; what they don't like they don't talk about! Keeping the dead underground can be hard enough at times, it's utter stupidity building little houses for them and leaving the doors wide open."

"Do you mean the bodies can get up and walk around? They come back?" Sammy asked nervously.

"Only very rich people get entombed in one of those things, the landowners and the suchlike. You don't know why though, do you?" They all shook their heads. "It's because they can't bear the thought of being parted from their wealth. Given the opportunity, they *will* come back, but rarely in the like of how they left. They can return as all kinds of evil things," Mama Mizelli said. "Be afraid, be very afraid!"

"Crikey!" Roger gasped. Even in the gloomy moonlight he looked much paler than normal. He began fumbling in his pocket for his inhaler.

All three, Josh, Ashley and Sammy, saw Roger's hand move to his pocket. Guessing the reason for it, they quickly hugged him, telling him not to worry, everything would be okay. Ashley suggested that were it not so, people as superstitious as the gypsies wouldn't be there, though she didn't believe that herself. Somewhat reassured, Roger forced a grin at her and decided he didn't need the inhaler after all.

The wait for the boys exploring underground seemed eternal. Finally they could hear them returning, scrambling up the rope. The three that had gone down the hole were the first out and they rushed straight over to Mama Mizelli, one of them whispering something in her ear. Guaril's head appeared from out of the void next, searching for his friends. His eyes found them but they were peculiar-looking eyes, as if with them he was trying to convey a message, like some kind of a

warning that he dare not say. He clambered up and out over the top and waited, staring down the hole. Dave's head appeared soon afterwards and looking about him, he grinned at everyone.

"Dad!" Ashley shrieked in delight.

She and Sammy ran forward, calling out, relieved and immeasurably happy, and then their happiness turned to horror and them screaming as they saw Guaril put his boot into their father, kicking him as hard as he could in the face. In a lightning swift move, he grabbed the Bowie knife from its sheath on his belt and slashed the rope. The man opened his mouth, looking at them with panic in his eyes, and then he was gone, falling to the bottom of the shaft with a blood-curdling scream that trailed away into nothingness.

"You've gotta believe me," Guaril said, looking across at Ashley and Sammy with tears appearing for all the hurt he had just inflicted on them, "that wasn't Dave coming out of the hole. I thought it was him, he had me convinced for a while, but it wasn't. I promise you that was not your dad."

With both of them frozen to the spot in shock and disbelief, and Roger too, he couldn't move, it fell on Josh to ask, "How do you know it wasn't Dave? It sure looked like him to me."

"Mama Mizelli told us that Dave was hungry. Whatever that was, it was not hungry. It told me they were feeding it well. Besides, it didn't know what the gaje were, or that until recently I smoked, or even how old I was. It knew a lot about Dave but hardly anything about me. The real Dave knows me well enough to know my age and I've lost count of the number of times he's bawled me out over the years for smoking around you lot. He also knows what the gaje are. Trust me, I feel rotten about having to do that, but it wasn't Dave. Honestly, it wasn't." He sniffed, wiping his eyes.

A tough gypsy boy or not, as his actions had distressed his friends so deeply, perhaps unforgivably, Guaril was clearly hurting.

Josh ran over and put a comforting arm around his shoulders. "I believe you," he said.

"Come with me, my children," Mama Mizelli called, her arm outstretched, inviting them to join her.

The old gypsy woman moved to stand by the hole, where several others around her were pointing their torches down at the crumpled body lying still at the bottom. In a daze, the group joined her and gazed down at it too. Ashley and Sammy were holding each other tightly, incessantly crying. Josh was trying to console them but every time they looked at the mutilated form below they just broke down again.

Rummaging around in the bag she carried, the old gypsy woman produced a small bottle of seemingly water. Opening it, she sprinkled just a couple of droplets down into the hole and then very quickly took a step backwards, her bag arm outstretched forcing the group to take that step away with her. It was a step back to safety. With all the urgency and force of an express train, in an ear-piercing whistle, a cloud of red hot ash shot up and out of the hole, evaporating into nothing high above their heads in the night sky.

"That was definitely not your father, now was it?" Mama Mizelli asked, pulling Ashley and Sammy closer to her. "But I'm sure he is around here somewhere. Stop your worrying, we shall find him."

"Crikey! What does she keep in that bottle, hydrochloric acid?" Roger asked.

"Pure vodka," Guaril told him.

"Vodka?" Josh questioned.

Guaril chuckled. He was feeling a whole lot better now everyone had seen the proof. "It's what Mama Mizelli drinks; it's her favourite tipple. She has a little nip before going to bed, to make her sleep," he said. "Thing is though, the undead can't abide neat alcohol. If you splash some on them, it won't destroy them forever but they're sure not around for a while. It has to be some decent stuff, though. I mean, a bucket of shandy wouldn't do as much as one drop of a good proof

spirit. As it's sort of medicinal, so she can sleep, Mama Mizelli only buys the best stuff. That evil thing won't be coming back again tonight, you can bet on it."

Ashley and Sammy were feeling much better too.

"I might just take up drinking," quipped Sammy.

No one laughed at his little joke. There wasn't time to laugh before the long and mournful howl that came from somewhere beyond the abbey ruins to send cold shivers racing up and down their spines. Sammy grabbed hold of Ashley, cuddling up to her. Josh straightaway put his arm around her, managing to embrace both of them, and then Roger ran forward almost leaping on top of the trio. Huddled together like that, they stared over to where the noise had emanated.

"Don't tell me werewolves are for real?" Sammy asked, then wondering if he really wanted to know the answer.

"Sure they're real," Guaril said, strangely grinning at them. "What isn't though is that you only see them when there's a full moon. You can meet them anytime but they're not humans who physically change form, they're the undead that like to frighten people."

"How about vampires and zombies, then? Do they exist too?" Josh asked.

"Of course they do, they're just the undead again," Guaril explained. "You'll find all the frightening legends originate from the undead. It's only the storytellers and moviemakers who have changed them. The undead can return as anything imaginable and sometimes as things totally unimaginable."

"Sh . . .!"

Roger didn't get to finish his exclamation. Had he, it would have been a big one up on his more normal 'Crikey!' Nervously looking around, Sammy had interrupted him.

"Don't say that! Believe me, it's a high possibility before the night's over," he complained.

"You gypsy people certainly know a lot more about death and the hereafter than we do, don't you?" Josh said. "You're very superstitious too."

“Superstitious, yes we are. Superstitions only come about because the same consequences have occurred so many times before to make the results expected. And as for after death, most gypsies are equally as ignorant as you are but far more frightened. Whereas you joke about such things, tell stories and make films, they really fear the undead, even though few have ever met one.

“All races and religions keep things hidden from their ordinary people. Order is maintained by threatening the likes of hell and damnation on anyone straying from the laid down laws and traditions. However it’s not all without substance. I know because of Mamma Mizelli has told me. I’m a direct descendent. She tells me these things,” Guaril said. “One day I shall have to pass them on.”

“Isn’t it a bit strange a guy being told such things? I mean, keeping beliefs and superstitions alive is more of a woman’s role, isn’t it?” Josh asked.

“It is normally but don’t forget I’m not considered normal and nor is my family. We’ve had no females born to us for ages. I have no sisters and neither does my father. I am your genuine seventh son of a seventh son. Seventh born of a seventh with no girls in-between, I’m supposed to be magical, but wherever that magic hides, I haven’t found it yet. Don’t you dare tell anyone, though!” Guaril joked.

“You mentioned that years ago and we thought you were having us on. It’s for real, then?” Roger asked.

“Yeah, honestly. It’s true and it’s very worrying.”

“Worrying?” Josh questioned.

“What happens if I can’t come up with something magical one day when it’s really needed and expected? I don’t think I feel at all magical. What is magical supposed to feel like, anyway? I don’t know, I haven’t got a clue!”

“Well, I hope you’re a very fast learner,” said Sammy. He was still nervously staring in the direction of the howling they’d all heard. “There’s the small matter of a werewolf out there somewhere to consider.”

“That wasn’t a werewolf,” Guaril told him, the grin returning even more pronounced. “That was our Tiger, I’d recognise his howling anywhere. Mama Mizelli must have brought him with her and he’s guarding the trucks.”

“You’ve left me thinking that was a werewolf for all this time!” Sammy complained, thumping Guaril’s arm but not hard enough to hurt.

“Sorry,” Guaril laughed. “Come on, we’d better start looking for your dad again, hadn’t we?”

They walked off to join the others, heading for the line of mausoleums.

Josh had his head bowed. He was deep in thought. After a while he looked up and said, “Hang about! Chik, Djordji, Emilian and Ferka are your brothers. That only makes you the fifth son, not the seventh.”

Guaril laughed. “Haven’t you worked it out? We were named alphabetically. You missed out Andrzej and Boiko. They’re much older. They went off to do their own thing years ago, you’ve never met them.”

“Oh!”

“I’m surprised you even remembered his brothers’ names,” Ashley said. “When they’re all together at their usual campsite, there are so many kids and young teenagers running about I don’t know how anybody keeps tabs on them.”

“Once they’re off the teat and toddling, most the time it’s the older kids who look after the younger ones. That’s why you find so many of us together like that. It’s our way. Children are sort of the responsibility of everyone, so everyone mucks in to raise them,” Guaril explained. “That’s everyone except for a seventh son of a seventh son, of course. I’ve always been allowed to do pretty much as I like. I guess I shouldn’t knock it too much.”

Sammy shuddered. They had stopped outside one of the mausoleums. The gypsies, split up into twos and threes, were cautiously heading off to search the nearby burial chambers, leaving them to explore the largest and more unwelcoming

one directly in front of them with its pointing skeleton. It looked very uninviting.

Their torches probed the unfaltering blackness as in single file Josh slowly led them down the few steps into a kind of stone hallway. Roger, fourth in line, put a hand out behind him to find Sammy's hand to hold for reassurance. Feeling something, he made a grab at it and then screamed, a hair-raising scream, as something tumbled down knocking him to the ground to lie on top of him.

Torch beams quickly flew round to discover the cause of his shrieking. By the light of them Roger could see the decomposing body, its head only inches from his face, staring at him with its one eye. While its teeth grinned menacingly, its eyes were missing. It wasn't really staring, only the beetle struggling for survival in the centre of the writhing maggots occupying the optic cavity suggesting it. He screamed out again and again and again, loudly, until Josh grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him clear of the glaring monstrosity's cold, embracing clutches.

This time Roger definitely needed his inhaler. Scrambling to his feet, he gasped on it greedily several times before he could breathe properly again. The rest of them were hugging him, trying to give comfort, saying everything was okay, there was nothing to be scared about. It wasn't convincing. He didn't believe them and neither did Sammy who was clinging on to him tighter than ever. A long rasping noise somewhere in the darkness ahead of them, seemingly emanating from deep down within the bowels of the earth, soon had them all clinging to each other equally as tightly.

"What the freaking hell was that?" Guaril whispered, the whites of his eyes alarming in the torchlights as he turned towards the source of the sound.

"It . . . it . . . it sounded awfully l-l-like . . . l-l-like . . . like a tomb sliding open," Sammy stuttered, shaking violently.

"Don't be stupid!" Ashley retorted, sharply, and more to console herself than anyone else.

This time Roger made sure it was definitely Sammy's hand he was holding before nervously following the others further into the darkness and no one was more grateful about that than Sammy. Down a few more slippery, damp steps they carefully ventured, fighting their way through the drapes of cobwebs that were sticking like wisps of candyfloss and leaving them with a feeling of being crawled over by a million arachnids. The awful dank smell laced with something acrid became stronger. Their torchlights joined together, picking out the two stone tombs in the centre of the chasm. They gasped, all of them at once. They could see the lid of the one on the left was slidden part way open. Spiders, large gangly ones, their long spindly legs waving around, pawing and testing the air, were crawling in and out of the opening as if on a mission. Roger hit on his inhaler again.

They each took a deep breath and crept up to the tomb together, Roger and Sammy keeping up the rear. Nervously peering over the top, inside the tomb they found a mass of thick, furry-white cobwebs broken only by a more wispy space where at an earlier time someone had no doubt removed the corpse. Sammy wasn't alone in praying it would have been at a very much earlier time.

There was a noise. Ashley screamed. Her shrill outcry startled the unseen rats bravely watching and sitting out the intrusion, frozen in a still lifelessness. The vermin fled, scratching their way down cracks in the concrete and up walls to disappear in and behind caskets. Frightened more by her shrieking than by the rasping noise returning, or even the scurrying rats, they had all jumped. The sound was louder this time, coming from somewhere close to their left. Several quieter knocking sounds followed. Guaril began to wonder if they were coming from some of their knees, perhaps his own; he was bricking it.

Flashing their torches around, they could make out there were several cavities built into every wall of the large room, each one containing the remnants of a coffin, their once

occupants now spilling out of them or lying scattered as a pile of gnawed bones on the ground beneath. A narrow and sinister-looking doorway in the far left-hand corner was their only other route to anywhere. They shuffled towards it, nervously. There was no actual door, just an opening where beyond some treacherously steep and narrow spiralling steps uninvitingly dared them downwards. Josh led the way. They took them slowly, each with a hand resting on the shoulder in front, feeling all that person's fear and nervousness.

Arriving at the bottom of the stone staircase, Josh could hear his heart pounding. He wasn't alone, they could all hear their racing hearts. They had entered another chamber, pitch black, directly below the one they had left. Flashing their torches around revealed it was roughly of equal proportions and similarly it had cavities in the walls. They too housed desecrated caskets and though they couldn't see the rats, they knew they were there. The sweeter smell of rat urine was mixed with that of the acidic bat deposits and said so. Another two tombs stood in the middle of the void, again side by side but seemingly untouched this time. Beyond them, to take their breaths away, what looked like a shadowy figure moved.

"Dad?" called out Ashley, nervously.

The wooden chair rasped on the stone-slabbed floor as the man securely tied to it forced it round to face them. Then with his impatient rocking backwards and forwards on the seat, the chair made the knocking noises with the ground. Their combined torch beams came to rest on the man's gaunt and week-long bearded face where frightened eyes squinted back at them pleadingly against the bright lights.

"It *is* dad!" Sammy shouted. He let go of Roger's hand and ran up to the captive guy. With one sharp tug he ripped the gagging sticky tape away from his father's mouth, taking along with it a painful amount of the man's whiskers.

"Yikes! Steady on, son!" Dave croaked, in agony at the excruciating depilatory action. His hoarse voice was barely discernable. "Haven't brought anything to drink, have you?"

“No, dad, but Mamma Mizelli is outside and I know she has some vodka,” said Sammy. He and Ashley began fighting with the ropes, trying to untie him.

“Nectar!” Dave huskily muttered. “Absolute nectar! Do hurry up, I’m gasping for a drink.”

“Do you reckon this one really is Dave?” Josh turned and asked Guaril, in a whisper.

His gypsy friend confirmed it by taking out his Bowie knife again and slashing the difficult to untie ropes, freeing the man.

Chapter 7

Roy Royston let rip again, a long and rasping one. They all knew it was going to be a stinker, his earlier one had been a right choker. Jack Higgins threw his cards face down on the table and took a dive for the caravan door, opening it wide and trying to fan some of the clean night air inside.

“That’s disgusting!” Percy Palmer loudly stated. “You’re uncouth!” Holding his cards close to his chest, he moved closer to the open door, seeking relief.

“Gordon Bennett!” Ralph McDonald blurted. He retched violently. Thinking he was about to throw up, he pushed past the others and leapt through the doorway only to fall badly, his royal flush scattering across the tarmac.

Joe Douglas sat laughing. Bunged up with a heavy cold, he thought he’d be safe. Not so. His open-mouthed breathing allowed the foul air access, attacking and seriously offending his tastebuds. With his teeth trying to scrape all evidence of it from his tongue, he jumped up and also ran out, spitting and spluttering. “Ugh!” he choked, throwing his losing hand back through the door. “I’ve had enough of cards for tonight, I’m turning in!”

Laughing, Roy called after them, “Get back in here, you lot! I was winning! What’s a smelly fart between friends?”

The men ignored him and began walking over to Bert Milligan’s caravan where a light was on. The building works manager had been away on business, now obviously having returned. Jack and Percy called for them to wait. They too decided it prudent to vacate Roy’s van and joined them.

“Did it all go okay?” Ralph asked, as soon as the door opened.

“Of course,” Bert said, signalling for them to come inside with a nod. “It’s all on file in the council offices. As far as anyone will be able to tell, planning permission was granted awhile ago for six three bedroom dwellings. So much goes through those offices, by the time anyone questions it, if they ever do, no one on the planning committee will remember whether or not they did pass the application. I have the plans here, seemingly passed, signed and officially stamped. We can begin with demolishing everything tomorrow and start digging the new footings straightaway.”

“That’s good,” Percy said. “At least once we start work we shall all be too tired of a night to sit around playing cards in that smelly butt’s van.”

“You ought to have been in bed long before now,” Bert said. “I need a seven-thirty start from you in the morning.”

“We’ll be there,” Ralph, the foreman, promised. “But shouldn’t we wait for the result of the court case?”

“No, it’s only a formality,” said Bert. “That Dave bloke can’t get there to contest it or even appeal when he loses.”

“I guess you’re right,” Ralph said. The men left, heading off towards their sleeper van.

“Did the ten grand cover everything okay?” Roy called, from his caravan door.

“Yes, it’s all done! Goodnight! Early start! See you in the morning!” Bert shouted, quickly closing the door and turning off the light. The last thing he wanted was for the guy to wander over and start contaminating *his* air. He would have to sleep in it, for heaven’s sake.

#

Hearing a noise, Bee rolled out of her bed and went to the window. She moved the curtain just enough to see outside. She felt there was definitely somebody out there, perhaps two

or three people by the sound of it. They were somewhere by the front door, she could hear them, but they were too close to the house to be seen from the upstairs window. They might even be inside the porch already. She quickly pulled on her dressing gown and slipped into her slippers. Bending down by the side of her bed, the digital clock flashed two-fifteen into her eyes as she reached for the crowbar. Suitably armed, she crept downstairs.

The front door opened and a hand reached inside flipping the light switch. Standing behind the door, Bee raised the crowbar high over her head, ready to bring it down.

“Shh! We mustn’t wake Bee,” Josh whispered.

Bee poked her head around the door. “Josh? What are you doing home?” she asked, shocked to see him.

“Bee!” Josh said, jumping at seeing her and raising his arm defensively. Bee still had the crowbar held high.

“Don’t tell me the tent’s blown away,” Bee joked, lowering the crowbar and hiding it behind her back. “You should have rung, you frightened me half to death coming home unexpected at this time of the night.”

“Sorry, Bee. No, the tent’s okay. It’s just that we’ve found Dave. I said he could clean himself up here and catch forty winks. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Sorry, Beatrice,” Dave said, pushing forward so she could see him. “We tried not to disturb you.”

“My God! You look an absolute wreck. You’d better all come in. Who’s that one?”

“Oh, that’s Guaril. He’s our best friend,” Josh said.

“That’s an unusual name,” Bee said, after Guaril had greeted her.

“I’m a Romany,” Guaril explained. “I’ll leave if you don’t want me in your house.”

“You won’t!” Josh said.

“If you go, we go!” Roger stated.

“Hang on, hang on!” Bee shouted, over the dissent. “Who said anything about him going? I only said it was an unusual

name. I've nothing against gypsies. If he's your friend, he's welcome here."

"Sorry, Bee. We're just a bit on edge, I guess. It's been a strange kind of night," Josh said.

"I can imagine!" Bee said. "I'll change into something more appropriate and then you can tell me all about it. As for you, Dave, the bathroom's this way. I think everything you'll need is in there, if not just holler."

By the time Dave had shaved and showered, and Bee been brought up to date with the full story, it was well after three in the morning. Strangely, Bee made no attempt to reprimand her charges for their adventurous night.

"So what will you do, go to court today and contest the eviction, Dave?" she asked.

"No, there doesn't seem much point. Even if I had the money for the rent I owe, the eviction would still go ahead. Legally, that Royston guy has every right to pursue it. Officially, or as far as the court knows, I'm a bad paying tenant and he's given me notice. By tonight there'll be nothing left of the cottage, you can count on it."

"Where will you stay?" Bee asked.

"Tom at the garage has a spare room. I could probably stay there while I wait for my money to come through in September. That's if Ashley and Sammy can remain with you until then. I'll pay for their keep, obviously," Dave said, looking desperate.

"That's no problem," Bee said. "You can leave them here as long as you like; they're a pleasure to have."

Guaril kicked Josh's foot under the table. "Can you show me where the bathroom is, please?" he asked, staring into the lad's eyes so piercingly it was like he was seeing into his brain.

Josh got the message. "Sure, this way," he said, guiding his friend out of the room. In the hallway, he asked, "What did you want to tell me?"

“Are you going back to the campsite tonight or staying here?” Guaril asked.

“Back to the camp, and pretty soon as well, I hope. That way Dave will be able to grab a couple of hours shuteye on my bed. Ashley and Sammy will probably want to stay with him but we have to go back. I don’t want Toby thinking we’ve abandoned him. Why?”

“Well, don’t leave it too long,” Guaril said. “I’ve got some magic to do before daylight.”

“Eh?”

Guaril, Josh and Roger walked back to the campsite. To keep their noise to a minimum, they had all left their bicycles on the back of the gypsy lorry dropping them off earlier. Toby heard them as soon as they entered the field and ran over to greet them. He was pleased they were back, it had been a very long wait. Josh and Roger made a big fuss of the dog and gave him some treats they’d purloined from the fridge to make amends. Guaril lit the campfire while they were entertaining Toby.

“Cool!” Roger said, seeing the roaring fire. “Shall we cook some bangers and tell a few ghost stories before bed?”

“Banger sarnies would be great,” Josh said, “but it would need to be a really good ghost story to beat what we’ve been through tonight, wouldn’t it?” He chuckled.

“Will you do me some too? I’ll only be gone for about half an hour,” said Guaril, zipping up his jacket.

“Of course, but where you going?” Josh asked, looking up at him.

“To the campsite on the hill, where the workmen are. I need to put a hex on the digger and bulldozer they’ve got so they can’t demolish the cottage tomorrow. Officially, I’m still here with you. I never left, okay?”

“Okay,” Josh said and Roger agreed. “But a hex? How are you going to do that? I thought you said you didn’t feel at all magical.”

Guaril laughed and winked, as he walked off into the night, saying, "I don't. But they don't know that, do they?"

"I don't understand," Roger said, sticking a sausage on his toasting fork and thrusting it into the fire. "If he can't do magic, what's the point in him going up there?"

"Search me, but knowing him it'll all make sense when he tells us about it later," Josh replied.

Guaril was away for nearly three quarters of an hour. He looked very pleased with himself when he returned.

#

When away on a job, building site workmen getting up and turning to first thing in the morning are not a pretty sight. The sound of them can take some beating too. Ralph had overslept. Bert, the project manager, was trying to raise him and the rest of the workmen. All the shouting to and fro woke Roy Royston. No less a ghastly sight in a vest and underpants, he stood at his caravan door watching the scrum.

Catching sight of Roy, Bert called out, "Have you seen what's by the gate, guv?"

"No, what?" Roy asked. Puzzled, he stepped down onto the tarmac barefooted and walked over to the man.

Bert escorted him to the gate. The huge pentagram sprayed onto the tarmac contained the figure seven in the centre with a smaller seven within it. Taking the number as a reference, the point was directly above it signifying the pentacle was not evil in origin. Underneath, and underlined, were sprayed the words, 'Thou shalt not steal!'

"Idiots!" Roy dismissed the adornment. "That can only be those kids from the cottage trying to frighten us. Ignore it. It means nothing."

"Possibly it's them," Bert said, "but don't you find it strange how they've picked on a pentagram to make their point? They could have sprayed a million other things there,

why a pentagram? You don't think that Dave might have escaped, do you? He knows all about us, don't forget!"

"Nah, he couldn't possibly escape. Anyway, even if he had, you can bet he knows very little about the occult. He wouldn't have done that; that's the work of kids," Roy said, turning to walk back.

"You do know what the sevens mean, don't you?" Bert asked.

"I'm a high priest, aren't I? Of course I know! It's the sign for a seventh son of a seventh son. That proves they don't know what they're doing. No one for miles has a family that big. Anyway, there is reputedly only one true seventh of seven in the whole country and Christ only knows where he is," Roy said. "It's rubbish. It's the least of my problems. Are those idiots going to start work soon? It's nearly eight o'clock already."

"As soon as they've finished their brew. They won't start work without a hot drink first," replied Bert.

"Well, keep your boot firmly up their butts! They're costing me money," Roy snarled, going back inside his caravan.

Walking over to his crew, Ralph was not anywhere near convinced. He feared the pentagram. What kid would know about a seventh of seven *and* associate it correctly with the sign? It seemed so unlikely. Yet, if it was genuine, he knew Roy was outclassed big style. A high priest could never match a grand master of the occult. Such people didn't need ritual. They could employ immense powers with nothing more than a pointed finger or a mere glance.

"What's smelly butt say about it all?" Percy asked, from the group sitting around on piles of breezeblocks, supping tea.

"Ah, he reckons it's nothing. He's more concerned about when you lot are going to start work," Bert said.

"I bet *he* doesn't start without a morning cuppa," Jack said. "Let him wait!"

“Perhaps you ought to start up the JCB and bulldozer. Let them warm up a bit while you’re having your brew,” said Ralph. “It should keep him happy, thinking you’re doing something.”

Sighing, Percy and Joe got up and sauntered over to their respective machines and started them up. Clouds of thick exhaust flew out of them to choke the morning air. Leaving them on a fast tick over, they returned to their drinks, giggling.

“What’s so funny?” Bert asked.

“I don’t know,” said Percy, then bursting into a more pronounced fit of the giggles.

“Nor me,” said Joe. He had to wipe his eyes. His giggling grew to laughter, until it was totally disabling him.

Ralph began to giggle too and then Jack and Bert. Both machines, about the same time, spluttered and shook violently a few times before cutting out. The whole group of men looked across at them and howled hysterically, holding on to their stomachs, trying to stop the mirthful pain. Tears were pouring from their eyes as they rocked with laughter.

Supping his tea, Roy looked out of his window to investigate the noise. Seeing the bunch of incapable men, he rushed to the door. “What’s going on?” he demanded.

Only unintelligible sounds came back to answer him. So disabled were the men by now, two of them had fallen off their breezeblock seats and lie writhing around on the ground. Jack, still managing to cling on to his seat, laughed so much he passed wind violently. Crying out in mirth that it was a wet one, holding himself he began to run towards the toilet block, the evidence of his disaster becoming more and more apparent with his every move. Roy wanted to bawl them out but found he too burst out giggling. His stomach wasn’t good at the best of times and he too decided to make a dash for the toilets.

Roy was fuming. It was midday before sanity fully returned to the workmen’s camp and he’d missed the court case. He made a phone call. It confirmed the case had been

held in his absence and he'd won the repossession order. He tried to see that as at least something to make up for the wasted morning. "Can't you get even one of these vehicles started?" he barked, at the foreman.

"No, not one of them," said Ralph.

"What's wrong with them?" Roy asked.

"We don't know," Ralph said, shrugging. "The men say they've been hexed and it's all to do with the pentagram that appeared overnight. Even Bert believes that. I'm not entirely convinced. As a couple of them started up earlier, I reckon it's more likely someone has put water in the fuel tanks. If they have, that's a big job. The fuel systems will need to be blown through and the tanks might even need changing."

"What!"

"I know, it could take days if new tanks are needed. They would have to be ordered for a few of the big vehicles, they're not exactly off the shelf items. You might do better hiring some equipment," Ralph suggested.

"Do you know how much that would cost me?" Roy was one puff short of exploding.

"Well, of course I do," Ralph said. "A pretty penny. But you cannot do anything without equipment, can you? The cottage won't fall down on its own. Neither will the ground level, the footings dig themselves and the rubbish go away without you have the right equipment."

"Tell Bert to get on with it, order it for tomorrow. It's too late for today but tell him he needs to make sure he gets it properly coordinated. I don't want a digger on hire standing idle because we haven't got the lorries."

"Righto, guv!"

"Oh, yes! And before we get another hex, don't forget to flush out the water tanks of all our caravans, will you? If I ever find out who contaminated our drinking water overnight, I'll kill them!"

Chapter 8

Toby knew someone was coming and his whimpering as he fought to open the zip awoke Josh just as Dave arrived. Josh nudged the other two, waking them, and opened up the tent. Surprised to see how bright it was outside, he checked his watch. He discovered they had enjoyed a good lie-in, but then, they hadn't gone to bed until nearly five. Toby pushed past him to make a fuss of Dave.

"I don't know how some people can lie around in their pits stinking all day," Dave joked, looking into the tent.

"Mornin', Dave!" shouted the chorus.

"Is Ashley with you?" Josh questioned.

"No, like you, she and Sammy couldn't get up." Dave laughed.

"Wake-up dip, then?" Guaril asked, looking across at his friends.

"Wake-up dip," the other two agreed.

Covered by towels, they raced out of the tent, dropping them at the last minute to bomb into the river. They swam up to the lock and back, racing, before getting out refreshingly awake. Guaril won and Josh came a close second.

"That's better!" Josh said, drying himself.

"Yeah, I'm wide awake now!" Guaril said.

"I knew you were all mad," Dave said, laughing at them.

"Don't tell me you've never done that?" Roger asked.

"No, I can't say that I have," admitted Dave.

"You haven't lived!" Roger said, jumping into his jeans.

"I haven't caught pneumonia either," Dave said.

“So what brings you down here?” Josh asked. “We were coming up to see you later.” He started to get dressed too.

“I was expecting the workmen to make an early start on knocking down the cottage so I’ve been back there and taken everything I need. It’s in a pile in the corner of the field. But it’s nearly eleven now and nobody has turned up yet. It’s annoying in a way because until they leave their campsite I can’t sneak up there and recover my car. I need that to move my stuff.”

Guaril began to look sheepish. “Don’t you still have your old green Renault?” he asked, then holding his breath.

“No, that packed up. I had to get an old banger off Tom at the garage. It’s a red Hyundai. He let me pay for it weekly, though that only went to make it even harder to find the exorbitant rent that Royston bloke wanted. Still, I had to have it. There were no busses at the time I left for Eastleigh in the mornings. Not that it matters now. I’ve probably lost that job through being absent for a week. It’s all good news, isn’t it?” He threw a forced grin at them.

“Oh, dear!” Guaril said. “Don’t worry, I can get it fixed easy enough. Barney will have it going in no time at all.”

“Eh?” Dave was not understanding.

“I’m afraid I crept up there and sabotaged all the vehicles in the night so they couldn’t start work today,” Guaril said, his head bowed waiting for the bawling out.

It didn’t come. Instead, Dave curled up, uncontrollably laughing. Before long they were all laughing.

Dave finally stopped laughing enough to say, “I shouldn’t worry about it! It was only an old banger. I did a lot of thinking while they held me captive. It’s time for me to move on. I can’t win here. When my money comes through I’m moving up north. Houses are dirt cheap up there. My money will be a massive deposit, leaving only a very low mortgage. If I buy one in a town, I probably won’t even need a car.”

Shocked to his marrow, Roger spun round to look at Josh. His brother was already staring at him. They both appreciated

Dave's plans would break up the group. Josh further realised the girlfriend he'd only just had confirmed would be gone, perhaps forever. They could hardly ever meet, only holiday times if then. As it was they'd already been seeing too little of each other during term time.

"How do Ashley and Sammy feel about moving?" Josh asked.

"I haven't told them yet, but they'll be alright. They're kids, after all, they'll soon make some new friends," Dave said. "Besides, if I buy a town house it'll probably be nearer to their schools. In winter they won't have to wait around in the cold for those draughty old bone-shaking busses anymore, will they?" He laughed, expecting them all to laugh again but nobody else did.

Stunned didn't cover it for how Josh felt, however Roger was taking it worse. He began fighting for his breath. Josh dived into the tent, quickly returning with the inhaler. It was a bad one. Roger couldn't get his breathing right, not even with the aid, and his face was turning blue. Then his eyes rolled upwards and he sank to ground.

"No! No!" Josh screamed. He started shaking his brother, frantically pumping his chest and trying mouth to mouth, stopping occasionally to listen for a breath and trying to feel a pulse. There was nothing and he felt so helpless. He could hardly see Guaril through his flooding tears as he turned to him, looking up for help. Dave stood ashen-faced, staring down at the boy, just watching him and not knowing what to do. Toby was licking Roger's hands, trying to make him wake up. He didn't understand.

Guaril stepped forward. Brushing Josh and the dog to one side, he lifted Roger up and, carrying him, started running. As he threw the boy into the river, at the top of his voice, he bellowed, "If I truly am a magical seventh son of a seventh son, then I order it that Roger's life be spared!"

Roger gasped a sharp intake of breath, his eyes opened and he began to splash around. Guaril and Josh were at his

side in seconds, heaving him out of the water. Dave stood watching open-mouthed now. It was his turn to be stunned. The two lads quickly stripped Roger. After thoroughly drying the boy, they put him in his sleeping bag to get warm.

“What happened?” Roger asked, his teeth chattering, and Toby fussing all over him.

“Nothing. You just had one of your turns, that’s all,” Josh said, squeezing himself into the sleeping bag to share his warmth with Roger. Looking up at Guaril, he said, “Thanks, mate! You truly are a magical seventh of seven! Thanks! I don’t know what I’d do without Roger.” The tears started to flood again.

“I think it might only have been the shock of the cold water,” Guaril said. “I still don’t feel magical.”

“Whatever it was, it was you who did it, and I shall never forget that. Never! You’re the best mate a guy could ever have,” Josh said, wiping his eyes and sniffing.

Guaril began wringing out Roger’s clothes and pegging them on to the tent’s guy ropes to dry. He looked across at Dave, puzzled. The man was still standing there staring at the river open-mouthed, as if in shock. He hadn’t moved. “You alright, Dave?” he asked. The man didn’t answer. “Dave!” he tried again. “Are you okay?”

Slowly, Dave turned his head towards him. His face held a blank expression, almost lifeless. “Didn’t everyone else see the angel too?”

“What angel?” Guaril asked, screwing up his face.

“The one in the water with Roger.”

Guaril laughed. “Don’t be daft! There was no angel. You must have been hallucinating. It’s probably something to do with all that time you spent alone in the dark.”

“I think I might have seen him too,” Roger whispered, to Josh. “I saw somebody.”

“Eh?” Josh whispered, in return.

“I’m remembering it now. He was holding my hand, taking me somewhere, then Guaril shouted and we turned

round and started walking back. Suddenly I was in the water, splashing about and wondering what was happening.”

“I believe you but it might be best not to mention it to anyone else,” said Josh. “People might think you’ve flipped your lid.”

“Sammy will believe me.”

“He’s probably the only one,” Josh said. “What did this angel person look like?”

“Not like a proper angel. It was a young guy in a glowing white suit. He had golden curly hair, bright blue eyes and the cheekiest of grins. I wasn’t at all frightened; he was so warm and friendly, I just loved him.”

Dave had been thinking about Guaril’s reasoning. “Yeah, you’re probably right,” he finally conceded, his face coming back to life. “It must be that. I thought I saw a blond haired young guy in a white suit. But, I mean, he didn’t have any wings. He was only there for an second or so anyway, standing on the water, not in it. As soon as Roger opened his eyes, he turned and walked off across the water, disappearing into nothing before he reached the other bank. Don’t sound much like an angel, does it? I guess I *was* hallucinating.”

Guaril chuckled to himself. “Well, you won’t have been the only one to do *that* today, I can tell you,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Josh asked.

“Oh, I didn’t just disable the vehicles up there, I dropped a few bits of a plant into their drinking water tanks,” Guaril said, grinning at him. “They’re sure to have made their tea with that water this morning.”

“What plant? What does it do?” Josh asked.

Guaril looked around him. “Butterfly-cup. It’s a rare poisonous plant. If you use just the slightest amount of it to make a drink it turns you silly for hours. It’s very good for constipation too, so long as you don’t take too much when it would likely kill you. Works almost instantly.” He began to laugh, remembering just how much he had put in those tanks and picturing something rather unpleasant in his mind.

“Anything else?” Roger asked, laughing. He felt perfectly okay again, having full recovered. He couldn’t wait for his clothes to dry.

“I painted a huge copy of this on the tarmac, hoping to frighten them,” Guaril said, holding his necklace out as far as the chain would allow. “Mama Mizelli says it’s some real powerful magic. Stronger even than the Pentacle of Solomon, supposedly.”

Roger appeared warm enough now. Josh clambered out of the sleeping bag and walked over to inspect the charm.

“I’ve never looked at this closely before,” he said, scrutinising the piece of jewellery. “It *is* that sign we saw in the graveyard but the other way up and yours has two sevens in the middle. You certainly wouldn’t buy *that* in the high street, that’s for sure. Is it pure gold?”

“Solid gold with silver inscriptions. The chain and fittings aren’t though. Apparently they’ve got added titanium for strength so I don’t lose it.”

“Well, if you wear that, maybe you shouldn’t dismiss angels so readily. After all, it was an angel who gave Solomon the pentacle in the first place. Raphael, wasn’t it?” Josh asked.

“You’re asking *me*?” Guaril laughed.

“Sorry. Yes, according to legend it was the archangel Raphael. Unfortunately, Christianity chose to rewrite history in the twentieth century, replacing the five pointed star with the six pointed Star of David type everywhere it could, simply because most people had come to associate the pentacle with Satanism. It’s good to see the original is still around, and if there is any power to it, the one that actually works. After what you just did, I shall always believe it works.”

“Crikey! What a brain-box!” Roger said, sitting up. “Is there anything you *don’t* know?”

“Yes. I don’t know how to get Dave’s cottage back off that shyster,” Josh said.

Guaril thought of something and began to laugh. “Oh, my! The Butterfly-cup, of course! I know where there’s some

Butterfly-cup, don't I? A lot of it! It won't get the cottage back but it might stop them knocking it down."

"Eh? What on earth are you on about? Are you saying it's *that* rare?" Josh asked.

Dave walked over. "Butterfly-cup? Do you mean there's some in my garden?" he asked excitedly.

"No, there's none in your garden, not yet, but there will be within the hour. Leave it to me, they'll be everywhere. You need to phone the council, they'll know what to do. If you tell them some builders are ready to start work on knocking the cottage down, they'll be here like a shot with a protection notice."

"I'll run to Bee's and do it straightaway," Dave said. "I was going there anyway. I'm hoping she might let me borrow her car to pick up my stuff." He headed off across the field at a cracking pace. Toby followed him for part of the way and then ran back.

"I think I'm the only thick one round these parts," said Roger. "What's Butterfly-cup when it's at home?"

"It's an extremely rare meadow flower, one that only grows naturally in a few places. If it is genuinely a strain of the wild species it might easily be protected. Anyway, they'll definitely stop any work until some boffin has checked it out, so at least it might buy us a bit more time," Josh said.

"Crikey! How did Guaril know about that and I didn't?"

"Gypsies are taught about the flower from an early age. It's not really as rare as the gaje believe. We often see it. Our kids are warned not to lick their fingers after touching it. We found out how much the gaje treasure the plant a few years back when we passed through a Wiltshire village. Because the locals were worried we might camp in a field where some was growing, we were met by several botanists and more police and council officials than you'd find at a student protest march," Guaril said, laughing. "If they'd asked us nicely, we could have told them of countless other places where it grows far more prolifically than there."

“Talking of poisonous things, we were so tired that we left the lid off the cold box last night. The ice has melted. It’s been a warm night and a hot morning; I think we’d better dump the rest of those sausages. I’ll nip over to the farm shop and pick up some more along with some milk, eggs and more ice,” Josh said, pouring the water out of the container. “I’m absolutely starving!” Taking the box with him, Josh walked down river and carefully crossed over the lock gate, heading for the farm.

“Will you be alright for a few minutes, Roger?” Guaril asked. “You won’t suffer another attack if I go and dig some of those bulbs up, will you? I need to relocate them soon in case the council send somebody straightaway.”

“No, I’ll be alright. You go. Josh won’t be long, anyway. I don’t think I’ll ever have another one of those attacks, that was the last one ever.”

“Eh? How can you say that?” Guaril asked.

Roger lowered his head, looking over his eyebrows at his friend. He had a smile he was trying to hide. “An angel told me,” he said, drawing circles in the grass with his forefinger.

“Yeah, right!” Guaril laughed. “I’m only in the water meadow downstream if you want me. Just holler or make Toby bark and I’ll hear you.”

“Stop worrying, you’re like an old woman!” Roger laughed.

“It’s you that mustn’t worry, it’s what starts you off, isn’t it? I know you’re concerned about Sammy leaving but that’s more than a month away. It’ll be September before Dave gets his money and weeks more after that before he could buy a house. If we can’t sort it out before then, I’ll eat my hat,” said Guaril, walking off.

“You ain’t got a hat!” Roger shouted, after him.

“I’ll buy one!” Guaril shouted, back at him.

Ashley and Sammy turned up about an hour later. Bee dropped them off while on her way with Dave to collect his things. Guaril, Josh and Roger had just finished their very late

breakfast and were clearing up. The smell of sausages, eggs and bacon still hung in the air.

“You heard what my dad’s planning?” Ashley asked, looking red-eyed unhappy.

Josh put his arm around her. “Yes, we heard. Don’t worry about it, I don’t reckon it’ll happen.”

Sammy and Roger disappeared inside the tent to talk, and Toby went with them.

“You don’t? Why not?” Ashley asked.

“I’m sorry, I know I said it before, but your old man doesn’t know the first thing about money and the real world. He’s just had two court judgements against him, one an eviction order. Who in their right mind would give him a mortgage, even a small one? He’d probably need references just to rent somewhere and where’s he going to get them?”

“Bill Rowland would give him a reference,” said Ashley.

“Hmm . . . Stupid me! I’d forgotten about him and yet I was only talking to the guy a little while ago.” Josh’s hopes were dashed and he felt even more downbeat.

Guaril was sucking on his lucky charm necklace, deep in thought, something he often did without realising it. “Yikes!” He leapt up, spitting it from his mouth.

“What’s up?” Josh asked, looking concerned.

“It bit me! Well, gave me like a shock,” Guaril said, staring down at the necklace.

“What were you doing with it?” Ashley asked.

“Just sucking on it, thinking. Oh, wow! That’s it! It’s what I was thinking about.”

“Eh? What were you thinking about?” Josh asked.

“Mama Mizelli telling me about the olden days. Farms like old Bill’s employed dozens of workers years ago and a lot of them had tied cottages. Who owns the cottage up by the woods where you walk Toby? It’s gotta be on old Bill’s land.”

“Yes, so? It’s overgrown and derelict,” said Josh. “We used to play in it years ago.”

“Don’t you think I know that? It’s where I first met you; we all played there. The place might be overgrown and run down but it’s still a house and solidly built. With the money Dave wants to put down on that house up north, he could probably make it habitable.”

“As Roger would say, crikey!” Josh exclaimed. “You could be right. I’ve seen old houses on television programmes where they’ve taken them right back to the shell and done them up for less than what Dave’s got to spend. I wonder how much old Bill would want for it, though.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Guaril said.

They tidied up quickly and left Toby to guard the camp. He wasn’t very considerate of the chickens scratching around the farmyard the last time so he had to be left. It wasn’t that he wanted to kill them, he only wanted to play, but exciting the birds like that affected their laying. The group crossed over the lock and headed towards the farm. Josh and Ashley were walking arm in arm, talking. Sammy and Roger were in their usual position, bringing up the rear. Guaril hung back until the boys caught up with him.

“And what have you two been scheming while you were locked away in that tent?” Guaril asked.

“Nothing,” they both said, looking as guilty as sin.

“Didn’t I tell you not to worry?” Guaril looked at Roger, deep into his eyes with a seriousness. “Even if this doesn’t work out, it doesn’t matter. Something will. You won’t be parted, I promise you, so you’re not to plan on running away together. What do you think that would do to the rest of your families? I saw the state of Josh earlier; he couldn’t live without you, Roger.”

“It was only ever going to be as a last resort but how did you know we were planning it?” Sammy asked, taken aback.

“I’m a Romany, ain’t I? Seventh son of a seventh son. I may not be able to do magic but I do know a lot of things. Now, promise me you won’t go doing a runner.”

“I promise,” Roger said, with his head bowed. “As you say, it wouldn’t be fair on the family, especially Josh.”

“So do I. Ashley and dad would be heartbroken, anyway. But you’d better be right because I can’t afford to lose Roger. I just can’t!” Sammy added, sniffing.

“How much more do you know about us?” Roger asked sheepishly.

“Nothing that upsets me so stop your worrying. We all have our secrets.”

“Yeah, except I reckon you know ours,” Sammy said.

“Alright, if it’ll make you any happier, I’ll tell you my secret. I must never have any children. How do you think I feel about that?”

“Really? Oh no, why?” Roger was genuinely concerned.

“It’s the price I have to pay for being a seventh son of a seventh son and having the gift — wherever it is! According to legend, as a way of balancing out my good fortune, the chances are my firstborn would be evil incarnate; a way for Satan himself to enter the world and stay. It’s a chance I dare not take.”

“Crikey!”

Chapter 9

Roy was up very early Tuesday morning. With all that expensive plant on hire, he didn't want a minute wasted by the workmen being late. It was an unnecessary precaution. Ralph had them all up and ready to start by seven-ten. None of their own vehicles were working so they walked as a group down the hill, Roy with his sour look and the men laughing and joking, arriving there by seven-thirty.

Two large lorries were waiting for them with their crews, along with a JCB and a bulldozer on a low-loader that blocked the narrow lane completely. So too was a police car, a council van and two other cars. People seemed to be standing around everywhere. Two men were banging iron rods into the grass verge and all around the land that the cottage stood on. Another man was following them, attaching plastic yellow tape to the rods as fast as they were putting them in.

“What's going on here? What do you think you're doing? You'll have to remove all that tape,” Roy told the council official, angrily kicking over one of the iron rods. “My men are knocking that cottage down this morning.”

Roy had picked the wrong morning to upset Jimmy Jones, the council official. It was easily done; there were no right mornings. The man's wife was a compulsive nagger. Every morning before work, he suffered a row to set him up for the day.

“That, sir, is something they are definitely not doing today,” Jimmy said, though incensed by the man's destructive

action, quite calmly. He knew how to handle every situation. If there was any happiness to the man's life, it was in getting one over on someone like Roy. "Until further investigations have been carried out, no work may be carried out within the marked boundary. The local authority has applied a twenty-eight day emergency conservation order on the area. Pending those investigations, it may be extended."

"What! Twenty-eight days! But I've got men and plant on hire! What am I supposed to do with them?" Roy was fuming.

"I'm pleased to say that's not my problem, sir." Jimmy stated, overly smiling at him. He handed Roy a copy of the enforcement order, turned smartly on his heels and sauntered over to talk to his colleagues. One of them began to take photographs of the area from every conceivable angle.

"Holy mackerel! You'd better off-hire all that plant and equipment! Straightaway! It's doing nothing but costing me a freaking fortune!" Roy barked, at Ralph.

Ralph went in search of the guy in charge of all the stuff on hire. The man wasn't happy when the situation was explained to him. He phoned his boss. His boss wasn't happy either. After several heated minutes, Ralph returned.

"Apparently, under the terms of the contract, we have to pay for the three days hire whether we use them or not. They are happy enough to wait and see if the situation changes but you will need to provide the men with somewhere to park their vehicles off the public highway and, of course, the necessary site facilities."

"The what?" Roy snarled.

"I think he means the contract says we have to provide a bog and a washbasin for the workmen," said Ralph. He took a step backwards, waiting for the explosion.

It came, was immediate, and of gargantuan proportions. Ralph didn't quite get everything Roy said in amongst the tirade laced with an abundance of expletives but from what he did, he gathered the man was very unhappy. He literally had hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of plant and personal

vehicles unusable up at the campsite, a bill coming in likely to be well over a thousand pounds for their repair, the cost of three days hiring men, plant and machinery that he now couldn't use, and his own men standing around doing nothing, expecting to be paid. And all the time the cottage remained standing with no definite date when work could commence. If the conservation order were to become a permanent feature or even too restrictive, he stood to lose a fortune. It wasn't as if he had any other jobs he could put the men on. The building trade was going through hard times. This was his only project. Yet to fire the last of his men, all of them rogues who happily cut corners and had little respect for the building regulations, might be to lose them forever — and everyone knew that hiring legitimate tradesmen was a mug's game.

Roy's head was spinning, unable to believe the amount of bad luck he was suffering. He was drowning in it. Slowly the hired vehicles began to leave. A big thing was made out of the low-loader backing such a distance along the narrow lane. It took considerable time for the driver to accomplish the unenviable feat. Once the road was clear and they were sure no work would be undertaken, the council guys left along with the police car, all of them driving further up the lane towards the hill.

Sighing, taking one last look at the cottage before setting out on the long walk back, Roy shook his head. It was then that he saw the row of heads peering over the hedge at the far end of the garden.

Josh, the lightest sleeper, had been woken up by the sound of all the heavy plant arriving. Not stopping for breakfast, the group had raced up the river and across the fields to see what was happening. They feared their efforts with the rare flower had been in vain and the cottage was about to come down. Pleasantly surprised by events when they arrived on the scene, they stood there gloating.

Roy shook his fist at them, swore something, and then with his men headed off back to the caravans. A hot day

already, and becoming hotter, he was not looking forward to the long slow climb. At the top of the hill, twenty minutes later, the sweat-covered boss man came to an abrupt halt. The police car and the council van were parked outside the entrance to the campsite. The officials were waiting there, impatiently pacing up and down.

“What now?” Roy sighed, as he walked up to them.

“Are you responsible for all these vehicles and trailers parked here?” Jimmy asked, unable to hide his pleasure.

“I guess so,” Roy said, disdainfully. “You don’t need to worry, they’re all taxed and insured. They’re legal.”

“That’s not entirely correct, is it, sir? Have you not read the rules and regulations on this sign here?” Jimmy pointed at it. “These facilities are provided by the local authority to meet their requirements under the law to provide for the travelling community. They are not here for private or commercial use unless that stipulation applies. I can see quite clearly, in your case it does not. The penalty for infringement is one thousand pounds per day for each vehicle, trailer or whatever found in contravention of the law. So that’s a tidy penny you owe us already. As this only covers your overnight stay and up to the present time, I suggest you move them all within the hour to prevent a further summons.” He took Roy’s details down and handed over a penalty notice filled in to the tune of ten thousand pounds, payable within seven days. Turning to look at the two policemen, he said, “I’m finished for now, he’s all yours, officers.”

Jimmy and his council colleagues got into their cars and drove off smiling at Roy, emphasising their enjoyment of the situation.

The coppers took out their notebooks and walked up to Roy, grinning at him. “Now then, now then, sir,” the first one said. “There’s a small matter of leaving hazardous materials and substances lying around unprotected so the general public and legitimate users of this campsite might be endangered. May I have your full name and address, please?”

“What the hell is hazardous in there?” Roy asked. He wanted to spit at the departing council men but in the present company thought better of it.

“It’s like a building site, sir. It should be securely fenced off with warning notices displayed. Accessible cans of petrol, oil barrels and piled high palettes of bricks that kids could climb on and suffer an accident all contravene current laws on health and safety. They must be fenced off, except you can’t do that as you don’t own the land. Your only alternative is to remove them straightaway if you don’t want to incur more serious charges,” the officer said, politely smiling.

“But I can’t move them, not today! All the vehicles have packed up! I’m waiting for them to be fixed,” Roy protested.

“That’s no excuse to break the law, sir. You’ll need to find another way to move them, won’t you?” The policeman’s smile grew as he handed Roy several pieces of paper. “That’s the fixed penalty notices for the offences up to now, sir. You’ll see there is a slight reduction to the fines if you pay them within the specified period. However, if no attempt has been made to remove everything by the time we return later on today, I have to warn you, it will be an arrestable offence and you’ll be charged for the council removing and disposing of all the offending items and making the campsite safe.”

With another smile from each of them, the policemen turned and got into their car, driving off. Roy remained there motionless.

“How much was that lot for?” Ralph dared to ask.

Roy passed him the wodge of paper. “I don’t know,” he groaned.

Ralph quickly flipped through the paperwork. “Roughly eight hundred, I make it. Could have been worse, I suppose.”

“Worse? Worse? How on earth could it have ever been worse?” Roy blasted at the man.

“Well, they could have found out those oil barrels contain agricultural diesel for a start. That would have been a really hefty fine.”

“Oh. Jees! How am I going to get rid of *that* lot before they return? If the council take it away, they’ll be sure to check it.” Roy was deflating. He was feeling short of breath, there was a pain in his chest and his shoulders were slumped.

“I told you that pentagram was something special, didn’t I? Do you believe me now? That wasn’t kids who done that; that has to be the real McCoy!” Bert proclaimed, enjoying the moment.

“Rubbish! I don’t believe it. I know it was those kids. They were laughing at us down there just now. They’ll be laughing on the other side of their faces tomorrow, though. You’ll see!” Roy took out his phone and began to punch numbers into it.

“What yer doing, boss?” Ralph asked.

“One, I’m hiring a minibus and they’ll have to deliver it. Two, I’m phoning around to arrange a full meeting of the coven. And three, you and Bert can arrange. Get the lorries to turn back and that low-loader. We can use them to take everything from here down to the field behind the cottage. We’ll hide it up by the woods. It’s private land and I own it!”

“There’s public footpaths,” Ralph reminded him.

“Yes and people are supposed to stick to them. Just don’t put anything too near them.”

Ralph took out his phone. Before searching his contact list to make the call, he asked, “Why are we having a full meeting of the coven, boss? It’s normally the first Saturday night in the month and that’s awhile yet.”

Roy gave a smile. It was the first real sign of happiness to come from the man that day. He explained, “Because we are going to have an unscheduled meeting. We are going to raise some big dark forces by making a human sacrifice. We haven’t had one of those for years, it’s long overdue. I’ll show those flaming kids what power and the supernatural is *really* about, they’ll wish they’d never been born!”

“I doubt you’ll be able to raise any of the big boys by offering up that Dave,” Ralph said, dismissively.

“Who mentioned anything about Dave?” Roy asked. “I was thinking more of his two kids. A boy *and* a girl, and both of them pretty sure to be innocents. We could possibly get Beelzebub himself for a sacrifice like that. Of course, we shall have to dispose of Dave too otherwise he’ll run to the police, but that’s no problem.”

After arranging for delivery of a minibus, the next call Roy made was to his close friend, Matthew Price, who he had recently rewarded handsomely for taking on the role of manager at Bill Rowland’s farm, arranging the dodgy sale. His friend was extremely informative and able to fill him in on many of the Daniel kids’ habits, hopefully making their capture that much easier. For such a notable double sacrifice, the man promised Roy a very high turnout by the coven’s members.

Matthew was pleased to learn that Dave was due for termination. For two days now he’d been too busy to check on the prisoner and feed him but that didn’t matter anymore. However, it made him realise he’d better make sure he checked on the bloke today. If he was dead, he was dead. It didn’t really matter, though it was preferable the guy hadn’t soiled himself too much. Deciding on doing it straightaway, he picked up the bottle of water and the dried out sandwich he’d prepared for Dave the day before, setting off in his car on the three mile round trip.

#

The day was the hottest of the holiday so far. There was not a cloud in the sky and everyone was sweltering. Happy to see the relocated Butterfly-cups had at least earned Dave’s cottage a reprieve, the group sauntered back to the riverside camp. It didn’t matter, they were still as one, but there was a noticeable change between them. Josh and Ashley were much closer now, frequently canoodling and walking hand in hand, leaving Guaril spending more time than usual with Sammy

and Roger. None of them minded, they were pleased to see the lovebirds so happy, but it was a difference.

Arriving back at the river, they found Toby had come up with the right idea: he was still wet from taking a dip. They disappeared into their respective oven-like tents, quickly changing into swimwear. Too hot to race or undertake any strenuous swimming, they mostly splashed around having fun, sometimes chucking a ball between them that Toby would get to first. Satisfyingly refreshed, they sat on their towels on the riverbank afterwards, talking and applying sun block to each other. They were waiting, firstly hoping Bill would turn up and secondly wondering who would likely volunteer to cook breakfast. Josh and Ashley appeared far too busy.

“I don’t mind cooking it if you’ll give me a hand,” Guaril told Sammy and Roger.

“Yeah, okay,” Sammy said, getting up and pulling Roger with him. “I’m starving!”

On such a hot day it was certainly not the right time to light a campfire. He retrieved the portable gas cooker from the boys’ tent. Within a few minutes the mouth-watering aroma of frying sausages, eggs and bacon was filling the air, enhanced even more by all the sizzling and crackling sounds coming from the pans. Roger made the drinks while Sammy thickly buttered doorstep chunks of crusty bread to mop up the grease before they went over to prise Josh and Ashley apart long enough to eat.

Midday arrived and went. They were back to lying on their towels. It was too hot to do anything else. Guaril spotted Bill on his tractor coming towards them on the other side of the river. They jumped up and swam across to meet him.

“Now then, my beauties,” the old man said, climbing down from the tractor. “It’s all good news. I’ve phoned the council and they have checked the reason for condemning Woodland Cottage all those years ago. It wasn’t anything too serious, the place is structurally sound, but it needed a cesspit to comply with the new rules coming out in those days. It

seems my father, who owned the farm at the time, wasn't prepared to go to that expense. With all the advances in agricultural machinery, he was employing fewer and fewer farmhands each year and didn't really need the cottage."

"That's brilliant!" Josh said. "A cesspool wouldn't be too much expense for Dave, I shouldn't think, and it's already got running water plumbed in and electricity. So can he afford it? How much would you ask him for it?"

Bill chuckled. "If he pays a peppercorn pound and covers my solicitor's fees for the sale, I'll be happy enough," he said.

"Really?" Ashley squealed in delight.

"Well, what else would I do with it? I wouldn't sell it to just anyone. I don't want no townies buying it for a holiday let, do I?"

Ashley threw her arms around him. "Thanks, Bill! We can tell dad now. We haven't mentioned anything about it to him yet. We didn't want to get his hopes up until we were sure it was okay."

"Ah well, I should tell him soon if I were you. Don't want him doing no darn foolish thing like going up north, now do we?" Bill said, winking at her. "Tell him if it comes to it, my old tractor can dig the hole and trench for the cesspit. I've got the tools and add-ons for it. He don't need hire anything."

"You're a star!" Josh said.

"Ah, I am that, my beauties, but my old pappy may have been an even bigger star." Bill chuckled.

"Eh? What do you mean?" Josh asked. He had a feeling Bill wasn't revealing everything. Did he have a trump card hidden up his sleeve? His face suggested it.

"You can tell Dave not to give up hope yet on getting his old cottage back," Bill said. "That solicitor I saw yesterday may prove to be worth every penny he's cost me."

"How do you mean?" Josh asked.

Bill winked. "I'll tell you more when I know more."

They spent a little more time with Bill, just talking about things but nothing in particular, and then still thrilled by the

good news they swam back across the river and changed into their shorts and tee-shirts. The thugs had stolen Dave's mobile phone when they imprisoned him. Unable to ring the man, they set off in search of him.

#

Roy cursed when his phone rang. He always cursed when it rang regardless of who was calling him. This time it was Matthew Price and he seemed awful excited.

"Dave's gone! I don't know how but he's gone!" the man screamed, down the phone.

"What do you mean Dave's gone?" Roy hollered, back into his handset, he too becoming excited. "How can he be gone? He was securely tied up, bound hand and feet, there is no way he could have escaped."

"But he has, Roy. Someone must have found him and set him free. It's the only thing I can think of. I tell you the man's not here. What if he goes to the police?"

"He won't!" Roy barked. "He values his kids' lives too much. He's seen things he never thought possible. Marbus, the spirit watching the graveyard introduced himself, didn't he? He's not stupid, he knows the police could never protect his kids from the likes of him."

"I hope you're right," Matthew said.

"Of course I'm right."

Roy ended the call abruptly and stood deep in thought for a moment. It would have been longer but for the mail van arriving. The postman got out and strode over to him.

"Sign here, please," he said, carrying an official-looking envelope.

Glaring at the man, Roy scribbled down his signature. The postman handed over the letter and left while whistling 'There'll Always Be An England', rather well as it happens.

'Popplethwaite & Partners' the legend said on the back of the envelope. Roy tore it open and began reading the lengthy

correspondence it contained. The further he read down the first page, the further his jaw dropped. He turned distinctly pale, looking ready to collapse. Staggering a few steps so he could perch on a pile of bricks, and still reading, beads of cold perspiration, even on such a hot day, began appearing on his forehead. He finished reading the letter and gave the other pages, photocopies of various documents, just a cursory look before throwing them all to the ground.

“Bad news?” Bert asked.

The rest of the men began to gather around them.

Roy said nothing. He walked unsteadily to his caravan and went inside.

Bert picked up the paperwork and began to read it. “I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” he said, after a while, shaking his head.

“What’s it say?” Ralph asked.

The men were egging Bert on, eager to learn more.

“It’s a solicitor’s letter to remind Roy that contraventions to the terms of the sale will be pursued to the maximum extent through the courts. It seems he didn’t buy the land, including the cottage and land that he cheated the farmer out of, without some very strict covenants. The entirety of the Rowland’s lands and properties are covered by covenants made by Albert Rowland, Bill’s father. No matter who owns the land or property thereafter, it is pretty much written into the deeds that any changes to it must be approved by Albert or his successors. That’s Bill Rowland,” Bert said. “The list is a mile long: no change of use; no erections above six foot, temporary or permanent; no commercial or business concerns; no additional dwellings or extensions; no storage of hazardous substances or materials more than those for personal and private use; and it goes on and on.”

“Well, he certainly won’t be sanctioning six new houses on land he’s just been cheated out of, will he?” Percy laughed.

“But the planning permission has already been granted for them, or rigged I should say,” Joe replied, gloatingly.

“Yeah,” Jack added, “let’s see them pick the bones out of that one!”

“They don’t have to,” Bert said, turning round to look at him. “Planning permission only grants that something is suitable for building at a specific location. It does not, and cannot, give anyone the right to build it. Whatever happens down there to that cottage and land he bought must be with the farmer’s approval. It seems Roy has dropped a clanger. A right humdinger!”

“But people often buy houses with old covenants on them. Their solicitors just go to court and have them removed. Can’t Roy do that?” Percy asked.

“No,” Bert told him. “In those cases they *are* old and have no modern day meaning or relevance. But Roy bought what he did with covenants that are active and relevant today. They do have a meaning because Albert’s successor is alive and everything was agreed to and actually bought from him under those terms. Roy obviously didn’t read the small print. He was far too busy gloating, thinking he’d got one over on the old farmer. If he tried to get the covenants lifted now, he’d be laughed out of court.”

“Yeah, I shouldn’t go ordering the yacht yet, Percy,” Joe joked. “I can see us not getting our bonuses.”

“I can’t see us even getting our wages paid this week, never mind the blinking bonuses,” Bert said, glumly.

Chapter 10

Offering to relieve Tom for his lunch break at the garage meant Dave couldn't see Woodland Cottage until way after two o'clock. By the time he arrived there with the troop of youngsters, the hired vehicles had already towed Roy's cars and lorries into the adjacent field. A JCB was trying to drag the bulldozer off the back of the low-loader and lorries were dropping off bricks, breezeblocks, ballast and oil drums. Under threat of arrest, Roy had successfully cleared the council site set aside for travellers on top of the hill.

Dave took his time evaluating the old building. He made rough calculations of what it would cost him to make it habitable. "It's large enough and it could be made into a nice cottage again," he said finally. "It's certainly feasible to do on my money. I could undertake a lot of the work myself. Don't think much about the neighbours, though." He nodded across the field at the eyesore Roy's storage plans were making.

Old Bill arrived on his tractor. Climbing off it, after greeting everyone he handed Josh a digital camera. "I never did manage to get au fait with all this modern technology," he said, laughing. "Can you get me some good pictures of all that mess over there, young man? It has quite a good zoom so I'm told."

"Sure thing!" Josh replied. He began snapping away at Roy's new storage site.

"Now then, Dave," Bill said. "I hope the youngsters have told you this is only a last resort. If it has to come to it, you'll

have a lot of help and support from the village in getting this place up together. Everyone is up in arms about that shyster.”

“I know,” Dave said. “I’ve been amazed at all the offers of help already. Everyone has been so nice, but then, that’s our village, isn’t it? I’d hate to have to leave here.”

“Ah well, you won’t have to now, will you? And you mustn’t go giving up hope yet on getting your old cottage back. I haven’t, that’s for sure,” Bill said, with a wink.

“Why do I think that somehow you’re holding all the trump cards?” Dave laughed.

Bill laughed. “Because I am? You see, that solicitor has turned out to be worth far more than he’s cost me. His fee was quite reasonable, anyway. I never knew about all the rules and regulations my old man had attached to the estate should any of it be sold. In fact, I didn’t even know I owned the lane. It’s now a public right of way by default because I’ve never fenced it off for one day a year, but the cottages, the original six that stood there, were all supposed to contribute to its upkeep. Well, now that shyster has that bit of land, I reckon it could do with resurfacing, don’t you? He’ll have to pay six-sevenths of what it costs.”

Guaril thought about offering the services of the gypsies in the macadamisation but decided against it. A mile might be a bit too much for them and he doubted they could do it to acceptable specs.

“Is that the whole mile of it you own?” Dave asked.

“Every inch of it,” Bill laughed. “I know, it’ll cost a bomb.”

“But can you afford it yourself?” Dave asked, sounding concerned.

“Oh, yes! Easily! The only reason I sold the land is because that rogue of a farm manager convinced me I was losing money hand over fist and would need the capital soon. But the solicitor has had all my accounts thoroughly checked since then and it seems nothing could be further from the truth. I’m doing very nicely, thank-you.”

“There you go,” Josh said, offering the camera back to Bill. “There’s about twenty really good pictures. That Roy bloke is in some of them. I can take them home and print them off for you if you want.”

“Ah no, I think I can manage, thanks. It’s all set up for that, you see. They did that for me when they installed the computer so I could keep a record of the cows on there with their photos. Ear stamps and their yields and all that. But thank you, anyway. It was just me old eyes aren’t a lot of good on something that far off and I wouldn’t know if it was in focus and what to press if it wasn’t. I know sometimes the focus can be a bit dodgy when you use the zoom but a cow I can manage because it be close up,” Bill said.

“I didn’t realise you had a computer,” Josh said.

“Oh, yes, it’s the bane of my life but you have to have one otherwise everything you buy is dearer, isn’t it?” Bill said, then turning to Dave. “Which brings me to the other reason why I’ve come here. Do you remember how much time you spent as a lad helping out on the farm?”

“Of course I do,” Dave said. “They were the best days of my life. I’d do anything just for a few minutes of driving the tractor, wouldn’t I?” He laughed.

“There wasn’t much you didn’t know about the farm in those days. I could rely on you to help out at times more than I could my own boy. You were able to do everything from milking to working out how much fertiliser or cow cake to order and you did,” Bill said.

“I think that’s only because I was a few years younger than Trevor and his mates, too young to join their gang, otherwise I’d have probably been the same: off out gallivanting around. There were no other kids of my age for miles so helping out on the farm stopped me from being lonely. It was great fun, anyway.”

“Good! So, as I hear you’re currently unemployed, you’ll take on the job of farm manager, won’t you? It’s obvious I need one, I wouldn’t have landed up with that rogue if I

didn't, but I don't want to be caught again; this time I want someone I *know* I can trust. You'd be doing me a real big favour if you took the job."

"I'd love to take the job on," Dave said. "Thanks! But I ought to warn you, Josh here reckons I'm rubbish on the money side of things. Apparently I had all my banking set up wrong."

"Ah, what's he know? You managed okay for enough years to disprove that stupid idea and raised two wonderful kids on your own. They wanted for nothing. You'd still be doing okay now if it wasn't for those crooks," Bill said. "You only got into trouble because of *my* stupid mistake, not through anything you did wrong yourself and don't you go forgetting it."

Old Bill wasn't one to mince his words. Josh coloured up, embarrassed. Something he'd once read on a website shot across his mind in ten foot high letters: 'Today's experts are tomorrow's idiots far too often for anyone to take them seriously.' He wished now he'd been a little more diplomatic when describing Dave's monetary troubles. Everyone noticed his discomfort, Ashley felt sorry for him and squeezed his hand, but politely nobody passed comment.

Across the field, the workforce were puzzled when they caught sight of Dave and the youngsters crawling all over the old cottage half-hidden by shrubbery. There was some relief felt amongst them that Roy had been proven right; obviously the man had not gone to the police otherwise they would have arrived by now and he wouldn't be anywhere near them without a police escort. Then they saw Bill arrive. They were expecting him to drive over to tell them that according to the conditions of sale they couldn't stay there. When he didn't, that puzzled them too.

Roy didn't notice Josh taking the photos for quite some time. As soon as he did, he ran into his caravan, watching him from behind a curtain. He swore, realising the farmer wasn't out to stop them being there but to gather evidence so he

could claim compensation in court. That would be even more money he'd have to pay out! He would need to move everything again, and pretty darn soon, but to where? And how? The only place he could think of was his yard in Bolton but with all his vehicles broken down that would literally take days and cost a fortune. He swore again. Then he remembered Mistletoe Abbey. Nobody ever went anywhere near the place; he could safely store it all there. He opened the door and barked the moving on order to the men. Sweating profusely with so much heavy work on such a hot day, they groaned, a few of them revealing exactly how many expletives they had learned from their boss.

Bill, Dave and the youngsters watched with interest as the workmen began loading back onto the lorries what they had just struggled to unload. Minutes later they were waving as the first of the lorries, severely overloaded, rumbled past them onto the track leading to the road. Roy, in the minibus pulling his caravan, received an especially enthusiastic wave. He glared back at them, using his fingers for a rude gesture.

With the hired bulldozer pushing and assisting the straining winch, the broken-down bulldozer, already half off the low-loader, was successfully dragged back on. The young man driving looked at the waving group and giving a smile he shrugged his shoulders as the huge articulated vehicle rolled past them. They felt a bit guilty for ribbing him, realising he was only a hired driver and really nothing to do with the rogues. They couldn't possibly know, at that very moment, the poor guy was regretting ever getting up that day. The lengthy reversing in the lane that morning had tested his skill to its limits. Getting the huge beast of a vehicle into the field earlier from off such a narrow road with deep ditches on either side, he'd achieved more by luck than judgement. He wasn't too sure he could ever get it out again. It soon became apparent he couldn't. The group watched as the driver made attempt after attempt to get the monster out onto the road, each time driving more precariously closer to the ditch.

“Go on,” Josh said, turning to nudge Guaril. “You know you want to.”

Guaril grinned at him and then ran down the track to the distressed driver, offering his help. The young man seemed reluctant to accept it at first, perhaps frightened what his boss might do if the trailer were to hit the ditch and overturn, but after one more unsuccessful attempt, seeing no alternative, he jumped out of the cab and Guaril jumped in.

“Stand in the centre of the road with your hand in the air just there,” he told the guy, pointing to the spot where he wanted him. “If anything comes drop your hand immediately or it’ll be Meccano.”

The man swallowed heavily. Standing exactly where he was told, he raised his arm, listening and watching in case any traffic should come. The engine roared. Watching in his mirrors, Guaril competently reversed the beast a long way back up the track. Then racing down the track towards the road while flying up through the first three of its fourteen gears, he pulled the cab sharply to the right, completely off of the track onto the grass and then back onto the track immediately before the exit gap. Snaking, rolling slightly but not dangerously, the trailer followed the cab out, easily missing the sides of the entrance and the ditch across the road.

Jumping out of the cab, grinning madly, Guaril winked at the driver. “That’s the way to do it!” he said, jokingly in a cartoon-like voice.

Way back up the track, his onlookers were applauding.

“How did you learn to drive like that?” the guy asked. He looked stunned.

“We folk start learning to drive as soon as our legs are long enough to reach the pedals, sometimes before then.”

“We folk? What, are you a Romany or something?”

“Yeah, I’m a Romany,” Guaril said. “Why?”

“I’m Pali Popescu. I’m a Romany too, only emigrated here a couple of years ago, but I could never drive like that,

none of us could; you brought that artic out of there on the wings of angels!”

“I’m Guaril Beanie. Where you from, Pali?”

“Transylvania, but you’re *really* Guaril Beanie? The seventh son of a seventh son? Wait till I tell my folks I’ve met Guaril Beanie! You’re legendry back home!” Pali said, with a mile-wide grin.

“I am?” Guaril’s face screwed up, not understanding why he should be legendry to the guy or to anyone else come to that. “How do you know of me?”

“Your mother was Florica, one of us. Didn’t you know?”

“I know my mother was called Florica but I wasn’t even sure she was a true gypsy. Apparently she died soon after having me and our folk hardly ever speak of her, not even Mama Mizelli, or Barney, my father. They don’t like to talk about her and I thought it might be because I’m a diddikai.”

“Oh!” Pali looked uneasy. “Well, you’re not a diddikai, you’re a true-blood Romany. Look, I didn’t tell you any of this but it will be because, even after marrying Barney, your mother never fully accepted Mama Mizelli as her matriarch and that was disrespectful. It seems her loyalties and no doubt traditions continued to err towards Aisha and her old ways.

“Did you know Barney still contacts Florica’s mother every first of December, updating her on the family here? It’s how we know about you, and as you’re the seventh of seven, everyone is interested. Originally he used to contact her by letter, then when she bought one it was by phone, and now it’s by email. Times change, don’t they? Look at me, coming over here and driving for the gaje. Who would have thought it?”

“I didn’t know any of this. Is December the first a special day then, like when my parents met or anything?” Guaril asked, intrigued.

“No, it’s not special for you as far as I know but for us it’s the day we celebrate the unification of Transylvania into Greater Romania in 1918, following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.”

“Don’t know much about my origins, do I? It means nothing at all to me, I feel almost like a gaje!” Guaril said, despairingly.

Pali laughed. “It doesn’t mean much to most people. It’s called National Day and it’s just a day off work for the gaje. That’s all most people know these days, even my lot, and *we’re* all becoming like the gaje too so don’t worry about it.

“Look, I’ve got to go or else I’ll get a rollicking but I’ll be back for the JCB after I’ve dropped this off. If you’re still around, I’d sure appreciate help again and maybe we could catch up on some more,” Pali said. He jumped up into the cab.

“I’ll listen out for you,” Guaril told him. “How far have you got to go?”

“About five miles they told me. Mistletoe Abbey. They reckon I’d never find it on my own so someone will be waiting for me on the main road. I just hope the pull-in isn’t as tight as this one.”

“Mistletoe Abbey? Really? Well, it is as tight but there are no ditches to worry about. You’ll only drag some shrubs out if you miss,” said Guaril. “Don’t go hanging around there, it’s not a good place. I’ll tell you more about it later.” With a friendly wave as the lorry pulled away, Guaril set off up the track back to the waiting group.

“You certainly made that look easy,” Josh joked. “Did the poor guy feel foolish?”

“No, I don’t think so, it really is a tight one, there’s not many who could manage it. He’s a Romany too, from Transylvania. It seems I’m famous over there,” Guaril said, sounding more down about it than excited.

“He’s not Count Dracula is he?” Sammy asked.

“No, don’t be daft! He’s Pali Popescu. It seems my mother came from his tribe. That’s how he’s heard of me.”

“Transylvania? I thought that only existed in films and horror stories,” Roger said.

“Don’t tell anybody but so did I,” admitted Guaril.

“At least now you know you *are* a true gypsy,” Josh said, hoping to cheer up his friend.

“Yes and Mama Mizelli has some explaining to do! Why has she never confirmed it, not even to me? Why doesn’t anybody ever talk about my mother? I’ve got to go and see her. I’ll catch up with you later, gang.” Lost in his thoughts, shoulders hunched and his hands thrust in his pockets, Guaril slumped away from them. He was deeply troubled by the revelations and hurting. Not even Barney, who was apparently keeping in touch with his mother’s family, talked about her. He knew his older brothers were aware of things as well but no matter how much he pleaded, they would never reveal them. Why not?

Josh couldn’t help but notice their friend was disturbed by what he’d learned from the lorry driver and he shouted after him, “Hang on, we’re coming with you!”

Guaril waited for them. “You don’t have to,” he said.

“Yes we do,” Sammy said. Running up to him, he thrust his arm through Guaril’s arm.

Roger ran round the other side of their friend, doing likewise. Pulling him along the track while singing, “We’re off to see the Mama, the wonderful Mama Mizelli,” to the tune of the Wizard of Oz did manage to lift the lad’s mood somewhat, until they reached the gypsy woman’s caravan.

None of them were surprised to find Mama Mizelli was expecting them. She was pouring the teas as they entered her caravan.

“Do you really want your friends to hear it all too?” she asked Guaril.

“Yes, of course I do. We don’t keep any secrets from each other,” he replied, handing around the teas. They all started helping themselves to sugar. “Why have you never told me anything about my mother? Were you really *that* jealous because she kept Aisha as her matriarch?”

“Have you ever known me to be jealous about anything? I don’t do jealously!” Mama Mizelli replied, angrily. “What do

you know about Transylvania? Nothing at all, do you? But there is a very good reason why it was picked as the background for vampire stories. So many lives have been cruelly taken there in its wars, and by its barons in the many uprisings. The country is absolutely teeming with the undead. They are everywhere and Aisha uses them. She practises the dark art.”

“Crikey!” Roger exclaimed.

Sammy grabbed hold of Roger’s hand.

“She’s a witch? An evil witch?” Guaril asked, horrified.

“It’s one name for her type. I can think of far better ones but I couldn’t repeat them in front of children,” Mama Mizelli replied, glaring at him.

Guaril swallowed heavily. He was pretty sure now he knew the answer but still asked, “Was my mother a witch?”

“Florica was a mystery when we found her, with everything about her past hidden from me behind an impenetrable veil. Believing she might have blocked out her past because she’d suffered badly at someone’s hands, we took her in. Only years later, after she’d married Barney and given birth to Andrzej and Boiko, did we discover the dreadful truth,” Mama Mizelli said.

Ashen-faced, Guaril’s struggle with another swallow became a question all of its own.

The old woman continued, “Barney caught her one night, and thank God he did! We were parked up on the Gower Coast, in Wales, and she was about to make a human sacrifice of one of the local children in a cave there by the beach. You wanted to know once why we never travelled Wales. Well, that’s the reason why! That kid will have grown up by now and though nobody believed his story at the time, he might recognise one of us who saved him and pursue it.”

Sammy and Roger were almost hugging each other in fear. Ashley wondered the intended manner of the sacrifice and some of the pictures flashing through her mind made her feel faint. She rested her head on Josh’s shoulder.

“Did my mother die or did someone kill her?” Guaril asked. He didn’t feel too good himself and fidgeted, hoping his trembling wasn’t showing.

Mama Mizelli didn’t answer. She looked away and it was her turn to suffer a challenging swallow.

Guaril repeated the question, louder this time. “Did my mother die or did someone kill her? I’ve got to know! How did it happen? Who did it? You’ve gotta tell me!”

His desperation radiated throughout the caravan and the rest of the group became desperate to know too.

It was a long wait and a very deep breath Mama Mizelli took before answering. “It appears that you killed your own mother, Guaril, but you did it in self-defence and probably unknowingly. You were only a very small baby at the time.”

“What!” Guaril stood up.

All around him were shocked, white faces with startled eyes. Hugging each other, Sammy moved right on to Roger’s lap and Ashley clung on to Josh so hard she was hurting him.

“Florica never changed her ways. Were she not to have died that night, none of us might be here now. You see, as a seventh son of a seventh son, whoever gets you is supposed to be your choice and yours alone, but she tried to pre-empt that by baptising you in the name of Satan. However, it seems even as a baby you would not allow it.”

“Eh? What happened?” Guaril sat back down again but his shock was no less evident.

“Barney was there in the caravan, because both parents needed to be, but she had drugged him. He couldn’t stand up and was helpless to stop her. She made an altar to Satan. He could only watch in horror as she took an eggcup of water from the filled glass vessel containing the upturned crucifix. His story is that you began to scream, worse than anything he’d ever heard from you, and then just as she held the eggcup over your forehead and was about to pour the water, you lifted your little arm up and pointed at her with your forefinger. He reckons forked lightning shot out of your finger, burning her

to ashes that fell to the floor and somehow you floated several yards through the air until safely in his arms.

“It’s how I found him later, still cuddling you and staring down at the pile of ash, stunned. Of course, we only have Barney’s version of events and he was still heavily drugged when I found him, but I suspect it is close to the truth. His eyes tell it that way. There was certainly an altar to Satan in the caravan, the eggcup was on the floor and a few burnt but nevertheless recognisable things were sticking out of the ashes.”

Nobody said a word or moved even a muscle, though eyes shot between them rapidly, back and forth checking on each other’s reactions. The silence remained for some time.

Finally, Mama Mizelli gave in, sniffed a long hard one, and said, “You’d better boil another kettle, Guaril. I think more tea is called for.”

Guaril stood up and throwing his arms around the old gypsy woman’s neck, he sobbed, “I’m sorry, Mama Mizelli. I should have known there was a good reason for nobody wanting to talk about my mother. I’m sorry I doubted you. I’ve upset you, haven’t I?”

She hugged him. “No. Nothing you do could ever upset me,” she said. “None of us choose the life we are given. We do the best we can with it and that you have always done.”

“Is that why you gave me this, to protect me?” Guaril asked, pulling back from her and holding his necklace out.

Mama Mizelli managed a small chuckle. “Barney made that after having a strange dream, started on it the day you were born, but nobody gave it to you. We were leaving the path you chose to you. It used to hang over there, sparkling in my front window. You were about two years old when one day you pointed at it and asked us to give it to you. When we wouldn’t, you climbed up on the seat and took it yourself. You’ve never been without it since.”

“And I never will be. It means a lot to me,” Guaril said. He went to refill the kettle. “In a way, a big way really, it’s

good to know I might have once done something that was magical, you know?”

“You weren’t beginning to doubt yourself, were you? Don’t you remember Rusty and what you used to put him through?” Mama Mizelli asked, giving him a strange look.

Guaril thought back a long way, racking his brain. Suddenly his eyes lit up. “We had a dog called Rusty when I was a toddler and a load of spotty dogs too, didn’t we?”

“A hundred and one Dalmatians to be exact. All of them crazily leaping around the campsite and making nuisances of themselves on many an occasion. Sometimes you took a lot of bribing before you’d dismiss those darn dogs,” Mamma Mizelli said, with a nostalgic smile.

“I remember them now! I do! I used to make them, didn’t I? You’d tell me Rusty was an old dog and he needed a rest from them, just so I’d make them vanish. Oh, wow! I really have done magic! How old was I then? Two? Three?”

“Barney took you and your brothers to see the film on your third birthday. We regretted it for months afterwards.” She laughed, wiping away a remembering tear.

“So why can’t I do magic now? Why couldn’t I save myself when I fell down that hole? I don’t feel magical. I can’t remember how I used to do those things anymore.”

“But you did save yourself. You came out without a scratch on you. Who else could have done that?” Mama Mizelli asked. “The power is not to be wasted on frivolous things and the Seal of Solomon has given you the wisdom to realise that. It is there for when you really need it.”

“The Dalmatians weren’t frivolous?” Guaril questioned.

“Not to a three year old, they weren’t. By the time you were four, the Seal was teaching you and you rarely used your powers, doing less and less with them as each month passed.”

“Phew! This is even better than the ghost stories round the campfire,” Sammy said. “Can you make ice cream?”

Ashley glared at him. “Ice cream isn’t a necessity!” she snapped.

“It is if you want one,” Sammy complained.

Josh had been thinking about some of the things he’d heard earlier. “If that Pali comes from Aisha’s tribe, do you reckon he might be evil too?” he asked.

Mama Mizelli asked Guaril to look at her. He leant right forwards so she could see into his eyes, reading from them.

“No,” she said. “Florica was evil but not the rest of her family. Along with them, he belongs to the group that split away from those who followed Aisha. There were many who did not agree with her wicked ways and they left, going east to form a new tribe. Pali is a very insecure young man, lonely and frightened in a gaje world. He’s not what he seems to be but he’s an okay person. I do fear for his future, though.”

“I think I’ll give the tea a miss, Mama,” Guaril said, sounding concerned. “I promised Pali I’d help get his artic in and out the field. He might be back soon.”

“We’ll come with you,” Josh said, speaking for the rest of them and standing up ready to go.

“You be careful, Guaril,” Mama Mizelli said, looking seriously at him. “Though it is probably immense, the true extent of your gift remains an unknown quantity. It may not be invincible. There could be some you’ll meet who are able to destroy you.”

Chapter 11

Toby wouldn't settle. He kept padding over to the tent zip, sniffing it and then returning to lie down only to repeat the process a few minutes later. The boys thought it was probably because Guaril wasn't with them that night and he was expecting him to turn up.

"You don't think we've lost Guaril as a friend, do you?" Roger asked, as they lie in their sleeping bags. "He and Pali seemed awful close earlier, if you know what I mean?"

Josh laughed. "Don't be silly, Guaril isn't like that, he's just being friendly towards the guy. He couldn't simply dump him on his brothers and leave him, could he? Chances are, we haven't lost a friend, we've gained one."

"How do you know Guaril isn't like that?" Sammy asked.

"We've talked about things in the past when you've not been around. You know, girls and that? You were too young to understand then so we didn't include you. Guaril has a girlfriend. Unfortunately he only gets a chance to see her a couple of times a year when the tribes meet on Southampton Common and even then they don't get time alone. Gypsies have some very strict rules about courting."

"Well, that relationship's sure going to go a long way, isn't it?" Roger laughed.

"Pali is sort of strange. You don't think because Guaril knows he can't have kids he might be trying to be, you know, more than a friend?" Sammy asked.

Josh sat up. "Who told you Guaril can't have children?"

Sammy bit his lip. “Oh, I thought you knew. He told Roger so I took it for granted he’d already have told you.”

“What’s wrong with him, did he say?” Josh asked.

Sammy’s phone beeped, lighting up to inform him he’d received a text message. He read it, screwed up his face and said, “Back in a minute, guys. Sis reckons she forgot to tell me something important earlier. Why it can’t wait till morning, I don’t know!” He struggled out of his sleeping bag and left, pushing Toby’s inquisitive nose back inside and zipping up the tent.

With Sammy absent, it was left to Roger to answer Josh’s question. “Nothing is wrong with Guaril, not physically. He never said it didn’t work. It’s something to do with him having his gift and maintaining an equilibrium. To balance things, his firstborn might be evil in the extreme, possibly even Satan himself, so he daren’t risk having kids.”

“Strewth! I wonder why he’s never mentioned it to me?”

“Maybe he’s only just discovered it and hasn’t found the right moment to tell you. He only told me yesterday,” Roger said.

“Oh, poor Guaril. That’s a right bummer, isn’t it? But you of all people ought to know, even something like that couldn’t change anyone. You are what you are,” said Josh.

“Me of all people? You mean, you know?” Roger asked, sitting up shocked.

“We’ve known for ages. Why do you think we’ve joked about it so many times and told you it was okay and we didn’t mind? It was to give you an easy way of telling us,” Josh said, smiling sympathetically. “But you’re still quite young, are you a hundred percent sure?”

“Now you’re sounding like our parents! Still quite young! Of course I’m hundred percent sure. We both are. Kids grow up a lot faster today than our parents did. Things like that have been important to us for years now, we didn’t just discover it yesterday.”

“Alright! Alright! Don’t get on your high horse. You’re my brother and I only want you to be happy. I want for you what you want, and whatever it is, I’ll still love you.”

“Sorry. I know it’s supposed to be okay today but it still ain’t easy being different,” Roger said. “If they knew about us at school our lives would be hell.”

“Hey! Aren’t we supposed to be all for one and one for all? If anybody ever gives you grief, we’ll *all* sort it out.”

“Thanks, bro! You’re the best brother in the world. I’m so lucky having you. Sammy has been a long time, hasn’t he? I wonder what Ashley wanted with him?”

“He might have fallen asleep on her. I’ll go and see,” said Josh, scrambling out of his sleeping bag. It was a welcomed excuse to see his girlfriend again. Opening the tent up, he let Toby out. Banging on Ashley’s tent, he called, “Is there room in there for one more?”

There was no answer. Puzzled, he parted the already unzipped flaps and peered inside. It was too dark to be sure the tent was empty, so he called out again, and crawling inside began feeling all around. His hand fell on Ashley’s torch. Switching it on revealed there was no one in there. He quickly crawled back outside, shining the torch all around. There was no sign of anybody anywhere. In the distance a motor vehicle started up and drove off. Josh’s stomach churned.

“Roger!” he shouted.

The alarm in Josh’s voice made Roger’s stomach churn. It told him something was seriously amiss. He was outside the tent in a flash, asking, “What’s wrong?”

“Ashley and Sammy are missing,” Josh said, trying to stay calm so as not to alarm his brother too much. For him to suffer an asthma attack right then was the last thing he needed. He continued to shine the torch all around, hoping to see them somewhere, but in his heart he knew he wouldn’t. From the far corner of the field, in the direction he’d heard the motor vehicle, Toby came running back up its powerful beam towards them, still sniffing a scent trail.

“Do you think they’ve gone off somewhere together, like the gypsy camp, or they’ve been kidnapped?” Roger asked in a shaky voice.

“Sammy only had his skiddies on so they wouldn’t have gone visiting, would they? Are you okay? I mean, with your breathing? Have you got your inhaler handy?” Josh asked, fearing his brother might have an attack.

Roger took a deep breath. He didn’t want his voice to shake this time. “I’ve bunged the inhaler. I won’t be needing it anymore,” he said, unfalteringly. “What are we going to do? Should one of us cycle over to the garage and wake up Dave? I could do that while you try to find Guaril. I don’t know which caravan he’d be in though, do you?”

“No, we mustn’t split up,” Josh said. “I wish you hadn’t thrown your inhaler away. What are we going to do if you get an attack now?”

“I won’t. The angel told me I could bung it and he’s hardly likely to be wrong, is he? Forget about me and think what we’re going to do. Should we call the police?”

“But what if the angel was only an hallucination? What if he wasn’t real?” Josh persisted.

“Josh! Zip it, will you! The angel *was* real! Now, what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know, I just wish Guaril was here,” said Josh, sniffing. “I guess we ought to find him first. Mama Mizelli might know things, but at this time of the night we can hardly wake her, can we?” Feeling desperately at a loss, he jumped up and down on the spot, shouting, “Oh, Guaril, why did you have to pick *tonight* not to be with us?”

“But I am with you,” Guaril called, from somewhere in the distance behind them.

They spun round to see Guaril and Pali, both in various states of undress, running full pelt towards them. Guaril was hopping, trying to get his shoes on as he ran, and Pali was struggling to get his arm into a shirt that was flying along behind him in the wind.

“How did you know something was wrong?” Josh asked, in amazement.

“Because none of you lot come under the term frivolous. Get yourselves dressed, we need to move fast,” Guaril said.

Roger dived into the tent and threw their clothes outside where they could dress easier. “Should we call the police?” he asked, pulling on his jeans.

“No, we must tell no one what has happened,” said Guaril. “Just hurry up!”

“Why not? I’m ready now, anyway,” Roger said.

“Me too,” Josh said, checking his torch worked. He was taking that along with Ashley’s one. Roger had already tested Sammy’s torch and stuck it in his belt with his own.

“Who’d believe the truth? Valuable time would be lost trying to answer questions in a way others might understand. Come on, we’re taking Dave’s car. Barney has fixed it.”

They ran towards the next field where the gypsies were camped. As they swung around the post overhanging the river, lorries started up and began moving off. Dave’s car was waiting for them with its engine running. Josh and Roger leapt into the back, Guaril into the driving seat, and Pali sat next to him riding shotgun.

“Where are we going?” Josh asked.

“Mistletoe Abbey, where else? That’s where they’ll have taken them,” Guaril said, as the car raced up the lane.

“Why would they hold them hostage there of all places? After Dave’s escape, they must know it’s the first place we’d look,” said Roger.

Guaril took a moment before answering. “They’re not being held hostage,” he said, finally. “Roy and his friends are part of a coven of witches. They intend to sacrifice them.”

Josh gasped. He expected the news to immediately give his brother a panic attack. Without the inhaler he feared the worst, putting his arm around Roger and hugging him.

“Stop worrying about me, just worry we get there in time,” Roger said, annoyed. “I told you I was okay now.”

The family saloon that Dave referred to as his old banger wasn't made for high-speed driving. Nevertheless, once they hit the main road it still managed to overtake the fleet of lorries. They were several minutes ahead of them when they arrived. Roy's broken down lorries and equipment, and the workmen's caravans, were in the field on the left, hidden behind the hedge, but there was no one around that they could see. On the track where they had left their bicycles the last time, several cars were untidily parked in a long line. Guaril shot past them, on the field side, until level with where he wanted to be. They leapt out and raced through the elm trees, towards the ruins, ignoring the nettles and brambles.

"Where will they be doing it, in one of those mausoleum things?" Roger asked, panting from the running.

"I know where, it's an underground chamber, but the problem is I don't know how to get into it," Guaril said, flashing his torch around. "Spread out. Check behind every wall and under every bush. There will be a way in around here somewhere, there has to be, but if we don't find it, the only other way I can think of is down that hole."

"Crikey! We haven't got any rope," Roger said.

"My brothers will have rope when they arrive but we can't really afford to wait that long. If we don't find a way in soon we'll have to jump down the hole," Guaril said.

"Jump? But it's miles deep!" Roger protested.

"Forty foot or so," Guaril corrected him. "Not impossible. I've been down there, don't forget."

"Yeah, but you have something looking after you. We don't have that luxury," Josh said. He wasn't keen on the idea of jumping. What use would they be to Ashley and Sammy if they killed themselves in the fall or even broke a leg?

"I think you have," Pali said. "After all, *something* woke Guaril up tonight and told him you needed help. If that ain't something looking after you, I don't know what it is! Here, you'd better put these on, they'll help too." He handed each of them a necklace. Though they were not made from expensive

metals, they were similar to the one Guaril wore but without the sevens.

Quickly putting his on, Roger asked, "What will it do?"

"It'll protect you from demons; they're the opportunistic ones. The larger entities, those that like to be called gods or devils, will face up to you to do battle. I'm afraid it doesn't work so well on them, not unless you're a chosen one like Guaril," said Pali.

"You seem to know a lot about these things," Josh said.

"Where I come from everybody has to know, it's a necessity," Pali replied.

"Here!" Guaril shouted, from a short distance away. They raced over to him. He'd pulled two bushes apart to reveal a square hole in the ground next to a wall. Steps led downwards and there was evidence of a flickering light somewhere deep below. "I'll go first," he said. "Leave one of the spare torches on up here so my brothers can find us easily."

Pali followed Guaril down the steps, then Josh and finally Roger. There were many steps before they reached the tunnel and the flickering rag torches slotted into the flint walls, smelling of some kind of burning oil or perhaps wax. Guaril stopped for a moment to get his bearings. Deciding on which way the hole was that he'd plummeted down, he headed off in the opposite direction.

Roger dearly wished he wasn't last in the line. He kept looking back nervously over his shoulder. He missed having Sammy's hand to hold. There were things going on in his mind he knew should never be there but he couldn't dismiss them. If they were too late to save Sammy, he didn't want to be left without him. Josh was strong, it would be terrible for him, for everyone, but they'd get over it eventually, whereas he could never get over losing Sammy. He sniffed, wiping his eyes, a pointless exercise as they refilled straightaway. Josh heard and trailed a hand behind to grab Roger's hand.

"Don't go there," Josh told him, looking back over his shoulder and squeezing his hand reassuringly.

Roger tried to force a grin back but it wouldn't happen. He could see his brother's eyes were bright red and flooded too. He guessed he was in exactly the same place. If they were both lost, Ashley and Sammy, could he ask his brother the question now plaguing his mind? Together, jointly, would be a whole lot easier for both of them.

The double wooden doors, arched Norman-style with iron braces and tee hinges, focused their minds. Guaril had been there once before with the evil thing purporting to be Dave, guided then only by his flashlight. He knew what lie beyond. Hoping to conceal their entrance, he walked back a few yards and extinguish the flickering light so it wouldn't be seen when they opened the doors.

Guaril explained, "There's a big balcony behind these doors with stairs down on either side to a hall. At the far end of the hall there are a few steps up to a stage area with what I'd guess you'd call a large stone altar in the middle of it. Beyond that there is a huge old-fashioned type of armchair, the sort of thing a king would sit on, like a throne. Is everybody ready?"

'Ready for what?' flashed through Roger's mind in mile high neon lettering but he said, "I guess so."

Josh and Pali said much the same. Slowly, Guaril pulled on the right-hand doorhandle until there was enough of a gap for them to slip through.

As soon as they were inside, Guaril slapped his hand across Josh's mouth. Pali put his hand firmly over Roger's mouth. They crouched down, peering over the stone balustrade. The hall below was dimly lit by the rag torches in the walls and full of dark, barely describable things sloping around and murmuring. Beyond them the stage area was better lit by stands of portable lighting on either side. On the stage there were a dozen or so people dressed in long black robes with hoods that hid their faces and they were stood in a semi-circle, chanting. One of them was the obvious leader, the high priest, Guaril and Pali guessed. He stood aside from the

rest, in the middle and slightly raised up behind the altar. He was reading something aloud from the book he held. But neither Josh nor Roger noticed any of this. Their eyes were transfixed by the two naked bodies lying side by side, tied up on the stone altar slab. Ashley was the nearest to them. Both captives were sobbing heavily. Somehow they had managed to wriggle their restraints just far enough to allow their little fingers to interlock as a comfort to each other.

Josh looked away, at Guaril, his eyes signalling he wasn't going to scream out, he could handle it. He wanted to scream. He wanted to run down there and save them but he knew any attempt would be futile and just plain stupid. He *had* to handle it, there wasn't an alternative that bear thinking about. Guaril slowly unfurled his fingers. Satisfied Josh meant it, he removed his hand from his friend's mouth. Pali looked at Roger questioningly. He nodded at the guy, signalling he wouldn't scream either, and the hand was taken away from his mouth too.

Motionless, feeling pathetically helpless, their hearts and stomachs believing the inevitable and already turning into vast chasms of lonely emptiness, they stared at the vulnerable nakedness lying on the slab below. Josh studied Ashley's heavenly beauty, seeing parts of her he had only ever dreamed about. They were his fantasies now exposed, the naked truth, and they were everything he had believed them to be and much, much more. It seemed so impossible, so unliveable that this would be his only ever knowledge of them; that they were to be taken from him never to be experienced for real. He couldn't shut his eyes, he couldn't stop looking at her, and he began to pray like he'd never prayed before.

Roger's brain had seemingly turned to porridge. Nothing was making sense to him. Why was the world like this? Why couldn't it be nice, happy all the time, and loving? Why were people nasty? He clasped his hands together, staring longingly at Sammy's hands and trying to imagine he was holding one of them as he did so often. It wasn't working. It didn't feel the

same. The thought that the next time he felt one of those hands it would be cold and what was Sammy would not be in it entered his mind and he hated himself for even being able to imagine it. He wasn't simply praying. Everything he had was pleading with God, asking where that angel was now when he really needed it.

The murmuring and chanting below provided enough noise for them to speak softly to each other without being heard. In an attempt to snap out of his spiralling descent into non-recoverable despair, Roger asked in a whisper, "What are the ugly black things below us?"

"Mostly the undead, with a few demons mixed in," Pali whispered, in reply.

"But there are dozens," Roger whispered. "Nearly a hundred, at a guess."

"I shouldn't worry about them," Pali said, softly. "It's whatever appears on that stage you really need to fear."

Josh heard him and gulped. "Like what?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"Like any one or more of a million seriously bad entities. If we're lucky it'll be Lucifer. If we're unlucky it could be Satan. Worse would be Beelzebub himself," Pali explained.

"Crikey!" Roger said. He wanted to swear, very nearly doing so, but he stopped himself in time. It might have made him feel better but it would only have been for a split second. Josh didn't approve of swearing and he couldn't balance that split second against all his brother meant to him, especially as he was hurting equally.

The chanting stopped. They crouched down lower, looking through the stone pillars now instead of over the top of the balustrade. They could see less of what was going on but it was safer. The murmuring below them gradually died down until it was silent.

The leader began to hand out balaclavas to all the robed ones on the stage, except the headgear appeared to be made of black leather rather than wool. The people struggled to put

them on, inside their hoods, and then once they *were* on they disrobed to stand there naked apart from the newly-fitted headwear. Josh counted them. Disregarding the leader there were seven men and five women. With sagging breasts, beer bellies and scrawny, dangling scrotums, they made the most ghastly sight. He felt sickened. They moved to gather round their leader and as he disrobed they began to prance around him. It was a weird kind of dance where they reached into the air and then ducked down, stooping for a few steps until they leapt up and did it all again. With the dancers' bits bouncing and flapping around, it crossed Josh's mind that on any other occasion such a horrendous sight would have sent them all into hysterics. But it wasn't any other occasion and therefore nothing less than utterly revolting him.

One of the men disappeared behind the throne for a moment. In those few seconds of silence there was a barely discernable click and then taped music could be heard — a loose description being it was only a slow and monotonous drumbeat. The man returned carrying a silver tray and stood next to the leader. They recognised the high priest now as Roy Royston, an unpleasant sight at anytime but particularly so when naked. Amongst the several items on the tray, the most noticeable was the huge silver dagger. It glinted sinisterly in the lights. Roy avoided the dagger, instead selecting a brush, one like a woman might use to apply makeup. He dipped it in the small bowl on the tray and flicking droplets of the liquid over the two naked bodies, he led the group in yet another round of the monotonous chanting.

After a while it fell silent again. Someone had stopped the tape or it had run out. This time, going to the tray, Roy's hand fell on the dagger. He turned round to look high above the huge chair at the inverted crucifix on the wall.

"Come forth, Satan, I beseech thee," he shouted. "Appear before us now and witness this offering we make unto you of two young innocent souls. A boy and a girl of purity, they are brother and sister, O Mighty One!" He turned then to his

fellows. “The invocation,” he said, and together they began to recite something that sounded like a prayer.

Breathing had temporarily ceased on the balcony. They watched through the gaps, horror-stricken, as a green haze appeared to slowly fill the throne. Gradually it began to take on a form, becoming more and more solid, and then almost with a jerk it was there, complete: a man-like figure of huge proportions but with the head and legs of a goat. It was everybody’s mental picture of Satan seated on the throne. The group on the stage stood with their heads bowed towards the beast. The things making up the crowd jiggled about, dancing in a happy trance. Roy turned round and raised the dagger up, grasping it tightly in both hands high in the air above Sammy.

Roger leapt up. He couldn’t take any more and certainly not seeing Sammy slain. “He’s not innocent!” he screamed, at the top of his voice. “Leave him alone! I know for a fact he’s not innocent!”

Every eye in the building shot round to look at Roger.

“Couldn’t you keep your trap shut for just a moment longer? Do you think I’d have let him kill Sammy?” Guaril asked, annoyed. He stood up.

Josh and Pali stood up too. There was little point in any of them hiding now.

The undead and the demons, all of them so grotesque they couldn’t tell which was which, rushed to climb the stairs on either side of the balcony. Josh thought of running back through the door and trying to escape along the tunnel but as Guaril hadn’t moved he guessed it was pointless. He watched, frozen in terror as the ineffable reached the top stair nearest to him and stepped on to the balcony. Guaril pointed to the one arriving at the top of the stairs to his left. It exploded loudly, disappearing into nothing as a lightning bolt hit it. He traced an arc with his finger, down the stairs, across the hall and back up the other staircase. The sounds resembled dozens of firecrackers being let off on Guy Fawkes night with each one of the evil things noisily exploding as lightning bolts hit it.

Those remaining below in the hall turned to stare at the stage as if waiting for instructions before going to their doom.

Roy raised his hand, signalling for the beastly things to remain where they were. "That's a nice party trick," he shouted, looking up at Guaril. "Of course, it is no match for what *we* can do. It won't save any of you. If you all surrender yourselves now, I promise to make your deaths easier. They will be quick rather than agonisingly slow."

Guaril laughed loudly at the man. "If you surrender now and sell back to farmer Bill everything you bought from him at a price substantially less than you paid for it, you never know, I might just spare you," he said.

The return, and coming so calm and calculated, threw Roy for a moment. He'd expected the group to be pleading for their lives.

"You do know who this is sitting behind me?" he asked.

"You mean Satan?" Guaril asked, still unruffled. "Oh yes, I know who he is. Unfortunately for you though, even the combined powers of Satan and Beelzebub could never be a match for those of a genuine seventh son of a seventh son."

"Who are you trying to kid?" Roy laughed now. Turning round, he said, "He insults you, Satan. He calls you weak. Perhaps you wish to deal with him yourself so we may get on and complete the sacrifices to you?"

The enormous goat-like creature rose up to its full stature. The goat eyes stared, trying to probe Guaril. The goat head tilted a little taking on a puzzled expression and then the beast lifted an arm and pointed it at the balcony. A huge ball of rolling flame shot through the air. Josh, Roger and Pali all shut their eyes, flinching and waiting for it, believing the end had come. Guaril remained unperturbed and stood his ground. As the fireball approached he lifted his hand, palm pushing outwards. Growing all the time in size and now enormous, the ball of fiery destruction seemed to hit an invisible wall only a few feet away from his hand and bounce back towards the stage, scattering all those who were on it apart from Satan. He

caught the massive fireball and with a fast-growing puzzled expression, he snuffed it out.

Josh opened his eyes. By his calculations the fireball should have hit them by now and they should all be dead. He looked around him, not understanding. Pali opened his eyes and he shook Roger who in turn opened his eyes.

“O ye of little faith,” Guaril whispered, out the corner of his mouth at them.

“What happened?” Roger asked.

“I happened,” Guaril said.

A thunderous voice boomed through the hall, shaking the walls, “Who are you?” Satan demanded. “Whose power do you possess?”

Roy clambered back onto the stage, believing he was safe again standing in front of the evil one.

“I am,” Guaril said, smiling at the beast.

Roger waited for his gypsy friend to continue with ‘what I am,’ in the words of his favourite anthem, but he didn’t.

Instead, Guaril shouted, “Kneel before I am!”

Roy became confused. He wasn’t understanding. The gypsy boy’s grammar seemed appalling. He turned his head to look up at Satan, soon realising he needed to lower it. Satan was kneeling with his head bowed so low it was touching the floor. Roy’s head spun back round again to look up at Guaril. With Satan kneeling, along with every other evil entity in the building, the men and women making up the coven chose to kneel too. They weren’t understanding what was happening either but it seemed the correct and probably the safest thing to do in the circumstances.

From behind Guaril a dozen beefy gypsy men burst in through the doors. They stood in a long line, staring down expressionless at Roy with their arms folded like bouncers at a nightclub.

“Release my friends. Sever their ropes and give them your capes to cover themselves,” Guaril ordered, “and I may yet spare you.”

Roy began hacking away at Sammy's ropes, at the same time asking, "Who are you? A seventh son of a seventh son? Are you really what you say you are?"

"Right now, I am I am," Guaril replied, staring at the man threateningly. "If I allow you to live, you might want to look up exactly what I am means. Now, do I get the agreement on the land and cottage sale?"

"Do I have a choice?" Roy asked, glaring back at Guaril while continuing to hack away at the ropes. The dagger was decidedly blunt and he cursed Ralph whose job it had been to attend to the preparations.

"Not one that you'd like," Guaril replied, coldly.

Freed, Sammy jumped up. He grabbed the dagger off Roy, preferring to cut his sister's restraining ropes himself in case the man should slip with the weapon. He was already sporting a gash himself where the idiot had slipped while talking to Guaril. Once Ashley was free, Sammy handed her a cape and helped her down off the altar. They were about to pick their way through the grotesque and ineffable to reach the stairs up to the balcony, but Guaril decided Ashley should not be subjected to such horror. He extended his hand invitingly towards them. A silver pathway appeared and it retracted as soon as they stepped on to it, gliding them safely all the way up to the balcony. Ashley and Josh hugged each other, frantically kissing, laughing and crying thankful tears of joy. Sammy looked at Roger not knowing what he should do. He knew what he so desperately wanted to do but should he? What would the others say?

Roger stepped forward. Grabbing hold of Sammy he pulled him into him, hugging him tightly. He whispered into his ear, "It's okay, they've known about us for ages."

Sammy pulled back for a moment to look into his eyes, to see the truth, the giggling now as unavoidable as the tears. Daring to go for it, he kissed him. It was only a brief one, just a peck on the lips, he wasn't brave enough for anything more, but it meant everything to both of them.

“That’s the way to do it!” Guaril joked in his cartoon voice. It was then that he noticed Sammy’s badly bleeding wrist where Roy had slipped and stabbed him with the point of the dagger, the only sharp bit of it. He reached out and touched it. The wound healed immediately, leaving not so much as the smallest scar.

Pali witnessed the miracle. “You *really* are I am?” he questioned.

“To all intents and purposes, I was for a while,” Guaril said, grinning at him. “It was my guardian angel who woke me earlier tonight and alerted me to the troubles. I didn’t know it until then but anyone who is truly the seventh son of a seventh son is given a very high-ranking guardian angel. Mine just happens to be the archangel Michael. There is no angel higher than him and of all the angels he alone has the power to exercise the Hand of God; the power of the omnipotent entity that calls itself simply, I am. The archangel Michael can channel that limitless power through anyone he wishes to and he did so with me tonight.”

“Crikey!” Roger said. “Is that who I saw at the river? Is that the angel who cured me of my panic attacks?”

“Sure it was. The curly-haired guy in the white suit. I should have believed Dave at the time, shouldn’t I? Do you reckon I ought to tell him?”

“Don’t be silly, he’d never believe you that angels don’t have wings,” Roger laughed.

“What are we doing with Roy and his gang? Can we really get the cottage back for Dave?” Josh had managed to pull his face away from Ashley’s long enough to ask the questions.

“Of course we can,” Guaril said, raising his forefinger and circling it. A vortex plucked Roy and Ralph from off the stage, spinning them madly through the air to land heavily next to the group on the balcony. “Sign here,” Guaril told Roy, immediately producing the contract and a pen from nowhere. Roy signed. “Sign here as witness,” he told Ralph,

and he signed too. “There we go, the deal is done, Bill has bought everything back. Tomorrow his solicitor can reclaim the deeds and transfer the money to Roy. It won’t be a lot, I had Bill’s expenses to consider, but it’ll be enough to get him and his cronies out of our hair and back to Bolton.

“Now, I think we’d better get out of here mighty pronto. I have this funny feeling a minor earthquake is imminent, one with just enough energy to destroy this evil place.”

The group hurried out, following the line of gypsy guys. Some of them were Guaril’s brothers.

Guaril stayed behind only long enough to call over the balustrade, “Be gone!”

Satan, the demons and the undead, all still kneeling in reverence, vanished in an instant, leaving only the naked coven members. Laughing at their nakedness, Guaril blew a frost at them and left.

Chapter 12

The story they told to explain the return of the cottage and land, and to account for Roy and his cronies suddenly leaving, was not so much a pack of lies as greatly lacking in truth. The incredible had to be removed. After all, who would believe the truth if it was the whole truth?

Ashley wanted to tell the whole truth, she was desperate to, but Josh finally managed to dissuade her. He feared they'd become labelled village idiots. He'd debated angels existing once, at school in the debating society. He was well-versed on the subject and able to explain.

He told her, "People's beliefs are strange and often have nothing at all to do with truth. People will stand up in court and swear on the Bible before God to tell the truth and there are other people who will believe them. However should an angel stand up in court and taking the same oath say he is an angel, who even out of a wholly Christian jury would be inclined to believe it?"

"People are happy to believe in angels, telling you they have faith, but show them one and they won't believe it. They will want to see proof, like witness a miracle, because without it their belief will become that they are being deceived. Is it any wonder that angels are rarely seen? Who do we know of who has claimed to have seen an angel that inwardly we don't suspect of either lying, being mistaken, or suffering from a mental condition? Most people who say they believe in angels don't. They hold a hope, one that they may even follow like people go to Lourdes, but it is *only* a hope and that is all.

Angels are personal. You can only really believe in them after you've met one."

It was almost word for word to what Josh had spewed out at school. However, unlike then, this time it wasn't received with a rapturous applause, more with silent accord.

The adapted account of events seemed to satisfy everyone. On the strength of it, Bee decided a party was warranted. So, the following Wednesday night, one was in full swing. There were a few mixed emotions, the gypsies were planning to move on the following day, but mostly it was a joyous affair. Toby decided he liked parties. There was so much food, he didn't know where to sit and stare with his soulful eyes.

Roy and his cronies had fled days ago, pretty much with only the clothes they stood in and presumably back to Bolton. They wouldn't be in a position to cheat anyone for a very long time. Old Bill had reclaimed his land and cottage, and after all the loose ends were tied up, he'd actually made a lot of money out of the original shady deal. Dave was enjoying his new job as farm manager. The position meant he lived rent-free in his old cottage, though at the moment minus his children. Just the right amount of whining had allowed them to remain with Josh and Roger for the rest of the holiday. With the good weather continuing, they were still camping out most nights. Everyone was thrilled to learn Bee had done a deal with Bill, intending to have Woodland Cottage renovated, supposedly for herself. However, as a two storey extension was involved in the restoration that was open to debate by some. Sammy was particularly happy she would be staying in the village as he felt she was like a mother to him.

"We're really going to miss you guys," Josh said. "A year is a long time, isn't it? Where will you go when you leave here?"

Guaril gave a light-hearted laugh. "I forgot to ask but we normally go Salisbury way after here. You could always come with us, you know?"

“You could always stay here,” Sammy said.

“Yeah, why don’t you stay?” Roger asked.

“And do what?” Guaril asked. “I would stay here if I could. I love this place, nobody here has a bad word to say about gypsies, but I have to make a living, don’t I?”

“You could come back with me,” Pali said. “Why don’t you visit the other side of your family?”

“What, with all the undead you’ve got over there? I’ve seen more than enough of them, thanks very much,” Guaril said, immediately dismissing the idea.

“Are you returning to Transylvania, then?” Roger asked.

“I think it’s for the best. I’m fed up looking over my shoulder. It’s only a matter of time before someone finds out half my papers are forgeries,” Pali said.

“Mama Mizelli said you weren’t what you seemed to be. I bet that’s what she meant, you had false papers,” Roger said.

Pali laughed. “I’m not an illegal immigrant, if that was what you were thinking, but I am only nineteen really and all I know about is building work. Done that since I was twelve. There weren’t any jobs in construction worth having when I got here. Being I was a young foreigner, they were offering less than the minimum wage and expecting me to share accommodation, eight to a bedroom in a slum. I’m used to living rough, but there are limits, so I changed my age and got a job driving. Over here I shouldn’t really have been driving articulated lorries yet. And don’t you dare say I haven’t been driving them, Guaril, I did the best I could!”

“I wasn’t going to say a word,” said Guaril, grinning at him like a Cheshire cat on dope.

Pali playfully thumped his arm in return.

“Now then, now then, young gentlemen,” Old Bill said, shuffling across the room to join them. “Budge up, young man. Sit on your boyfriend’s lap a minute and let an olden have a seat.”

“Eh? You know too? Is there anyone around who doesn’t know?” Sammy asked, sliding across onto Roger’s lap.

“Don’t think there’s no one in the village who don’t know about you two,” he said. “Been like that awhile now. No need to do no protest marching around here. We’re happy enough with you, you’re two wonderful local grown kids, so you’d better be happy about it.”

“We are,” Roger said, putting his arms around Sammy and squeezing him.

“Now then, what I’m here for,” Bill looked at the gypsy lads. “That field I sold and got back again ain’t a lot of use to me. And it ain’t only a field now. The funny way things went, I now own three lorries, a JCB, three caravans and a ruddy great caterpillar thing along with a whole lot of other junk like bricks, breezeblocks, ballast and cement. You name it, it’s there — or it will be once it’s dragged back from Mistletoe Abbey. I reckon that would be a good start for two young men like you. Like as not, you could make something of it.”

“It’s good of you to think of us but we don’t have that kind of money, Bill. That bulldozer alone has to be worth about a hundred grand,” Guaril said.

“I’m not selling any of it, you silly asses, I’m giving it to you providing you try to make something of it. You can have the lot, but I wouldn’t want you to just sell it or scrap it for the metal value. You’ve got your first job, anyway. Woodland Cottage needs renovating and an extension built. There’s another job you can do as well, maintaining the ditches round the village for the local council. Pays good money but I’m getting too old to do it now, fair knocks me out that does. Dave will teach you anything you don’t know.”

“You can’t just go giving away hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of stuff to a couple of gypsy lads like us, Bill. You ought to sell it if you don’t want it. Treat yourself to a world cruise or something on the proceeds,” Guaril said. He was astonished by man’s generosity.

Old Bill laughed. “Bah! Done the world long time ago. Hated it! There’s nowhere like home. I’m an old man, I can’t take it with me and I don’t have any kin to leave it to no more.

What have I got to do to make you two see sense, take the pair of you over me knee? I have enough assets in the farm to last me and Betty far more years than we shall ever see.”

Guaril and Pali stared at each other for a few moments and they were both reading all the right signals.

“I’ve never met a man in my life who I’ve wanted to kiss, Bill, but you’ve gotta be coming mighty close,” Guaril said.

Bill chuckled. “Good, that’s settled then. I know you gypsies don’t like paperwork but you’ll need some to make sure you’re secure should anything happen to me. I’ll get the solicitor on it first thing. Oh, and when I checked on Woodland Cottage, I found out a few things. Won’t be no problem you building two homes there for yourselves. Used to be a row of four cottages years ago. You could park those caravans on-site and live in them until you’re ready to build. And something else, Guaril, while I think of it. I know gypsies are supposed to marry young, so if you need a horse, two cows, a chicken and a goat to buy your Simza off her parents one day soon, you’ll find I’ve got everything but the goat.” He slapped his thigh and sat there shaking with laughter at his little joke.

“Seems you ain’t the only ones that the villagers know everything about,” Guaril said, winking at Sammy and Roger.

Josh flashed his ‘I told you so!’ look at Roger and he burst out laughing.

“I didn’t think it was *that* funny!” Guaril said, puzzled.

“Sorry,” Roger said, wiping his eyes. “It’s just something I got completely wrong the other day. Are *you* married, Pali?” He was hoping to change the subject, just slightly, before Guaril could ask exactly what he’d got wrong.

“Three years now, and there’s a sprig too, Ion, who I haven’t seen for nearly two years. Tsura and the boy were going to join me here as soon as I could afford it. Haven’t been able to so far but if Guaril and I are going into business together maybe it’ll happen soon,” Pali said. “Like him, I come from a gypsy family with a realistic outlook and every

year we adopt more and more western ways. We'll never forget the old ways, of course, but they don't really have much of a place in the modern world. Tsuru is my equal partner. That's a whole lot more than the traditional gypsy wife so I really miss her."

Guaril wrestled his phone out of his pocket, stood up and headed for the hallway as if seeking somewhere quiet to make a call. Josh noticed he looked very emotional and quickly followed him.

"Where you going?" Josh asked, seeing Guaril hesitating at the front door.

Guaril turned round. His eyes were streaming. "I can't bawl in front of everybody, can I?" he snivelled.

Josh put his arm around his friend's shoulder. "No, but you can in my bedroom. You can bawl as much as you like up there, no one will see you, and I won't say anything. Come on," he said, guiding him upstairs.

They sat on Josh's bed.

"Sorry, this is stupid, isn't it?" Guaril said, drying his eyes. "I should be happy, not miserable. We won't be moving on tomorrow and I know Barney and the rest will stay a while longer and drag the stuff back for us, repair it and set it up ready to work. I should be so happy, it's everything I could ever want, but I'm not. I can never be happy, not really and truly happy."

"But why not? What's upset you? I've never seen you like this before. Was it Pali telling us about his wife and kid? Or was it just the extent of old Bill's generosity? You've been looking on edge since not long after he joined us," said Josh.

"It's everything, I guess. Everyone is so good and kind to me here and I don't deserve it. I'm just a poor gypsy boy, for heaven's sake! And yes, hearing Pali talk about his wife and little one did hurt. It hurt a lot. Simza wants us to get married and start having kids as soon as we're both sixteen, and that's only a couple of months away now, but there's something terrible I could never tell her, and I've never told you . . ."

“But I do know about it,” Josh said, interrupting him. “I was told. Roger mentioned it to Sammy. They don’t keep anything from each other and he accidentally let it out.”

“What am I going to do? Not having kids will hurt. It’s my lot in life and I shall have to suffer it, but I can’t go hurting Simza too, it wouldn’t be right. I can’t marry her if she wants kids, can I? I shall have to walk away and try to forget her. But if I take that chance of a lifetime, staying here and working with Pali like I want to, she’ll hear about it and turn up one day. What do I do then? I hate travelling. I love it here. Nothing could be better than spending the rest of my life here, but at least while I’m on the road I stand a chance of avoiding her, don’t I?” Guaril sobbed. His shoulders were lurching, the flood barriers broken and the tears gushing down his cheeks.

“Avoiding her? Don’t you love her?”

Guaril turned his head and his red eyes looked out at Josh over a waterfall. “Oh, Jees, man! You could never know how much I love her!”

The bedroom light flickered. A whisper echoed loudly around the bedroom. “O ye of little faith!”

It was Guaril’s voice and just as Josh remembered him saying the words on the balcony at Mistletoe Abbey, but though the whisper had arrived at nigh on shouting level, the gypsy boy’s mouth had been firmly closed at the time. It opened straightaway afterwards though. He sat open-mouthed staring about the room.

Recovering from the initial shock, Josh said, “I guess that was like a reprimand and it could only have been for you. The way I see it, your guardian angel didn’t save your nuts for you to live a life of misery. That contract you magically produced, the one that Roy had to sign to return the cottage and field, didn’t have all that plant and equipment added to it for no reason. It was no use to Bill, he didn’t want it, so why do you think it was added? I reckon you should forget about legends and old wives’ tales. Hasn’t your guardian angel already

proven himself? Haven't you? Stay here like you want to, marry the girl you love, have loads of kids and like everything else in your life, whatever turns up you'll deal with it as it comes. Have some faith in yourself. You've already defeated Satan once so he's hardly likely to turn up as one of your kids, now is he? There's no one else I know who comes with those odds, so what more do you want?"

Guaril went silent for a moment, thinking about it, and then he began to laugh through his tears unstopably. He was happy again and he threw his arms around Josh. Hugging him tightly, he kissed him on the cheek.

Startled, Josh pulled away, asking, "What was that for?"

Wiping his eyes dry, to stay dry this time, Guaril grinned and said, "Because I'm so stupid and you're so clever. What you just said was more valuable to me than even everything old Bill has given us. If I was ever going to kiss a guy in my lifetime it had to be you for that. You are that special."

"I didn't do the loud whisper," Josh said, hesitantly.

"No, I know you didn't. But you were able to make sense out of it. You explained where I was going wrong in my thinking. I couldn't see it, not until you rearranged everything and put it into your logical terms. As Ashley would say, it's probably all down to that posh Winchester education you're getting. That's a point, I haven't seen her for a long time, where is Ashley?"

Josh chuckled. "In the front room with Dave, Bee and a few others, but it wasn't me who told you it's because she's convinced there's something going on between Dave and Bee and she's earwiggling."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Sammy will be pleased," Guaril said.

"He's praying for it. Come on, follow me. Your eyes look terrible. We'll need to pretty your face before we go down."

Guaril followed him. "Jees, man! You got a bathroom in your bedroom? And this big? You could get two or three

people in that shower, it's like a spaceship! What's those silver knob things on the walls?"

"It's not exactly *in* the bedroom, is it? I have shared the shower with Roger a couple of times when we've been very late up for school, it is a double, but I don't recommend it. The way he pokes his elbows everywhere you come out black and blue. The knob things are jet sprays programmable by these buttons. There's ten modes, do you want to try it out?"

"Can I? It sure looks like it'll beat those in the shower blocks we normally use."

"Help yourself! Play as long as you want. Use what you want, there's plenty of shower gel, stink and all that, and a mountain-load of towels in that cupboard."

"Stink?"

"Aftershaves, rejuvenating oils, talcs, deodorants, hair gels, that kind of thing; four shelves of them. I'll leave you to it. See you downstairs later. Take as long as you like. Imagine Simza is with you like I do with Ashley. Have fun!" Josh said, winking before going out the door.

"Is Guaril alright?" Sammy asked when Josh returned.

"Yeah, he's fine. He so happy, he just got a bit emotional, that's all. He's upstairs trying out our shower; reckons it's like a spaceship."

Roger giggled manically. "I hope you remembered to tell him about button ten."

"Oh, sugar! Ice mode! I forgot!"

"Yeeeeeeeeeeooooow!"

Everyone heard Guaril's scream, even those sitting in the kitchen.

