



There is no such thing as a good night.

You may think you can hide away in dreams. Safely tucked up in bed,
nothing can touch you.

But, as every child knows, there are bad dreams. And bad dreams are
where the monsters are.

The Doctor knows all about monsters. And he knows that sometimes they
can still be there when you wake up. And when the horror is more than
just a memory, there is nowhere to hide.

Even here, today, tonight... in the most ordinary of homes, and against the
most ordinary people, the terror will strike.

A young boy will suffer terrifying visions...

... and his family will encounter a deathless horror.

Only the Doctor can help – but first he must uncover the fearsome secret
of the Deadstone Memorial.

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

The Deadstone Memorial

Trevor Baxendale

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For Mum

who loved books of all kinds

Avril M. Baxendale
1930–2003

Chapter 1

The Old Man

The old man told ghost stories: creepy little tales full of deathly chills and cold horror, just the way Cal liked them.

He stood at the gate of the old cottage, where he'd lived for as long as anyone could remember, and watched the children as they walked home from school. Some of the younger kids were scared of him, because of the way his eyes would fix hungrily on them as though he was imagining a big, hot oven and a tasty meal to follow.

He had a pit bull terrier that was so bad-tempered everyone was scared of it. Rumour had it that the old man set the vicious little dog on other people's pets, and children too, if he could get away with it. Everyone knew about the time a gang of fifth-formers had kicked the old man's bin bags along the road until they broke open. In among the debris was a dead cat, stiff and skeletal and teeming with maggots. The old man had run out of his house yelling and swearing, as the boys, laughing, backed away. The old man had cursed them and picked up his rubbish, muttering and grumbling.

'You'll feel the bite o' my dog, you little beggars! You'll see!'

They laughed again and taunted him, but they always steered clear of that dog.

In fact the old man never did anything about it, and his dog tended to stay in the front garden, sniffing around for rats or growling at passers-by. Mostly the old man would just stand and stare and talk to any of the kids who stopped to chat – the ones who talked to the old man for a dare, or the ones who just liked to hear his stories, like Cal.

Cal was lively and inquisitive and had what his teachers called 'a vivid imagination'. He always tried to come home from school this way, ignoring the short cut through the park that most of the children used, so that he could pass by the old man's house.

The old man would always be there, waiting, with that strange smile on his whiskery face and a hungry glint in his eye. It was cold today and looked like rain and Cal wanted to get home, but he couldn't resist the chance of seeing the old man first.

The house had a small front garden overgrown with weeds and bushes. There was a rusting lawnmower propped up against the front wall and a stack of crumbling house bricks. The dog prowled around the little patch of garden while the old man stood at the gate, rolling his own cigarettes and licking the paper with a trembling red tongue. His fingers were dirty, the tips ringed with black grime and stained with nicotine. Now that it was getting on for winter, he wore a long coat with a grubby red scarf tied around his throat.

He caught sight of Cal as he approached and nodded a greeting as he finished his cigarette. The dog growled at his feet but the old man dismissed it with a cursory grunt: 'Gurtcha!'

Cal stopped and waited politely for the old man to light up. He always used a match struck on the rusty hinge of his garden gate. 'On yer own?' the old man asked at last.

'Yeah,' said Cal. It was Wednesday, so most of his school mates were staying behind for football practice. But something made him add, 'My sister will be along soon, though, I think.' He looked back along the lane to check, but there was no sign of pursuit just yet. Cal was ten, and his mum seemed to think that he needed looking after by his older sister. He was supposed to wait for her outside the school gates, but Cal did his best to avoid her because she didn't like the old man much.

The old man blew a perfect blue smoke ring and they both watched it disintegrate in the chilly grey air. Occasionally the old man would reach up and scratch his neck, and sometimes Cal thought he could see scabs beneath the red necktie. The other week, the old man had reached out and ruffled Cal's dark, untidy hair with fingers that felt like dry sticks. Cal had remembered the dark scabs and ever since then made sure he stood just out of reach.

'Gettin' colder now,' said the old man. 'Cold as the grave.'

This was what Cal loved. He stayed silent, knowing the old man would continue.

'I dug graves once,' he said, ominously.

Cal felt a shiver run across his shoulders that was only partially due to the cold weather. The old man was staring at him. His eyes were the colour of dishwater, and the black pupils were very small, as if they were just little holes made with a knitting needle.

'Nasty business, diggin' graves.' The old man took a long drag on his

cigarette. ‘Specially if yer know who’s goin’ to fill ’em.’

Cal glanced quickly back towards school. Still no sign of his sister. He looked back at the old man eagerly.

‘This grave I dug was for a woman. Up there, in the woods. All legit, like, but in the woods. That was what she wanted, see. Didn’t want to be buried in no graveyard, as she was special. Or so she said! Didn’t matter to me, I just dug the grave. Six foot deep an’ it was rainin’, so I was knee-deep in mud an’ worms by the time I’d finished. I dunno what the woman died of, I never asked, but they put the coffin down there good an’ proper like, except for one thing.’

Here the old man paused again, dramatically, to take another puff on his ciggie. Then he licked his lips and, leaning forward slightly and lowering his voice, said: ‘No service. They didn’t give the woman no proper service, see. Didn’t bury her like a God-fearin’ Christian at all. Weren’t natural, I tell yer! Said so at the time, I did. “This ain’t right,” I said, “this ain’t natural!” But they didn’t take no notice of me, lad. I was just the digger, see. None of my business, they said. Well... I reckon I had the last laugh, in the end. Not one of them that buried her up there, in the woods, is still alive today. Everyone of them’s dead as a damned doornail. And each man was found dead in his bed, with the breath squeezed out of him like a strangled rat and muddy handprints all over his neck!’

Cal had practically stopped breathing himself.

‘Now I don’t believe in ghosts, mind,’ said the old man quietly. ‘But I never reckoned on that woman lying peaceful in that grave, on account of the way she was buried. I still remember watchin’ that coffin sink into the filthy water, an’ the worms a-crawlin’ all over it as it went down. An’ I said then that I didn’t agree with it. An’ maybe, just maybe, the old bird inside it heard me, and that’s why she’s never come for me.’

‘Cal!’

Cal jumped guiltily at the sound of his sister’s voice.

Jade was running down the path towards him, shooting a brief look of disdain at the old man before grabbing Cal by his anorak and dragging him along. ‘Mum said no stopping,’ she said. ‘And you were supposed to wait for me at the school gate, not start off on your own!’

Cal’s sister was older than him and a lot stronger. She was blonde and tough and didn’t like having to watch out for her brother. There was no resisting her in this mood, but Cal managed to twist around to look back at the old man. He was watching them with his hungry eyes. ‘I know my own way home,’ Cal said, and yanked his arm free of Jade’s grip. He stomped off ahead of her to prove it.

‘Suit yourself, stupid,’ Jade called after him. ‘But I’ll tell Mum.’

'How about you, sweet thing,' asked the old man. 'Do you believe in ghosts?'

'No.'

The old man answered with nothing more than a rasping chuckle.

Scowling, Jade caught up with Cal and matched him stride for stride. 'You know you're not supposed to talk to him. Mum *said*.'

'Everyone does things they're not supposed to,' was Cal's instant rejoinder. 'Even Mum. And you. Especially you.'

'Oh shut up.' Jade marched on ahead, making him hurry to keep up, but Cal knew he'd won this particular battle. Jade was fifteen and had her own secrets to keep. 'I'll forget about it this once,' she muttered. 'Just don't do it again, all right?'

'Right,' agreed Cal, turning with a grin to look back at the old man's house.

But the old man had disappeared.

Chapter 2

Hazel

'I'm home!' Hazel McKeown called out wearily as she opened the front door. There was no answer, of course. 'I said, I'm home...'

Jade was lying on the settee with her headphones on, texting her friends on her mobile. Cal was lying in front of the TV watching *Scooby-Doo*.

'Hey! Earth to children. Are you receiving me?'

Jade waved but didn't look up from her Nokia. Cal turned, saw his mum, jumped up and hugged her 'What's for tea?' he asked.

'Hello, Mummy,' said Hazel. 'How are you, Mummy? Let me help you with those heavy bags, Mummy.'

With a grin Cal grabbed one of the carrier bags and lugged it through the living room towards the kitchen. Hazel followed him with the rest, scooping up the TV remote on the way and zapping it. With the telly off she could finally hear the tinny whisper of Eminem escaping from Jade's headphones, and the little bleeps of her mobile as she thumbed out the next text message.

'Come on, lend a hand,' Hazel said, loudly enough to be heard over the private din.

The texting continued unabated. 'In a minute.'

Hazel was too tired and fed up to argue. She staggered into the kitchen and, after nearly tripping over the bag Cal had left in the middle of the floor, dumped the last two on the work surface. 'Did you have to leave that in the middle of the floor?' Hazel asked. 'I nearly broke my neck. Oh for heaven's sake, who left the fridge open? Jade!'

'It was Cal,' Jade called back, surprising Hazel with any response at all.

'No way,' said Cal. 'Jade wanted orange juice.'

'Did not!'

'Never mind!' Hazel pushed the door shut with her foot. 'Put the kettle on, Cal.'

Cal clicked the kettle. 'So what's for tea?'
'Give me a chance, I haven't even got my coat off yet. Fish fingers, probably.'
'Cool.'
'Have you done your homework?'
'Sort of.'
'What about Jade? Has she done hers?'
Jade's voice sailed in from the living room: 'Haven't got any!'
'Don't believe it!' Hazel called back.
'Mr Barlow was off sick,' Jade called out. 'So, no homework.'
Hazel let out a sigh of irritation. 'Can't you come out here and have a normal conversation?'
'I'm busy!' Jade called back.
'Can I go round to Robert's tomorrow after school?' Cal asked. 'His mum said I can.'
'Well, I say you can't.' With practised efficiency Hazel began to unpack the shopping, sorting as she went: cupboard stuff, fridge stuff, freezer stuff. 'Robert's mum will have to ask me first. And you can tell Robert that. Besides which you have way too much homework to do this week. And you're tired. You look tired. Did you eat your dinner?'
'Yeah, yeah.' Cal took an orange juice from the fridge and disappeared back into the living room. A second later *Scooby-Doo* was back on.
The kettle boiled. Hazel emptied out the cold tea from the pot, rinsed it, threw in a fresh pair of tea bags and poured on the boiling water. She felt exhausted, and the prospect of the evening ahead filled her with gloom – but not as much gloom, she reminded herself bleakly, as the night that would follow it.
She blanked it from her mind and took off her wet coat, hanging it over the back of a kitchen chair to dry out. Then she noticed the fridge door hanging open again. 'Cal!'
Tea-time was traditionally a stressful occasion.
'Fish fingers?' said Jade as soon as she sat down. Her lip curled as if there was a turd on her plate. 'Again? I think I'm turning into a fish finger.'
Hazel glared balefully at her. 'There are worse fates...'
'You know she can't stand anything other than human flesh, Mum,' Cal said, squeezing far too much ketchup on to his plate.
'Don't be horrible. And watch it with that ketchup, please.'
'I'm going to *starve* living here,' moaned Jade, pushing a fish finger experimentally with her fork, as if she expected it to move of its own accord. 'I *hate* fish fingers.'

Hazel knew the best tactic here was to ignore Jade. The more you tried to argue the point with her, the harder she would dig her heels in. She turned to Cal, who was already halfway through his dinner. 'So, any news?'

Cal shook his head and said, 'Nope,' through a mouthful.

'So nothing happened to you all day?'

Cal shrugged and swallowed. 'Just the usual.'

Hazel felt herself getting physically heavier. She wanted to just lay her head down on the table and go to sleep. But there was still a long way to go before she could do that, before she could collapse into bed and close her eyes and drop like a stone into the blissful oblivion of unconsciousness. And probably not even then, she reminded herself severely. The thought woke her up a bit and she watched Cal finishing off his tea. She liked to see him eat.

Jade said, 'Cass texted me before. There's going to be a sleepover at Sharon's on Saturday. Can I go?'

'Well, I don't know,' Hazel replied cautiously. She still wasn't comfortable with the idea of Jade spending the night in someone else's house. She knew Sharon's parents but there would be other girls there and Hazel knew what they could be like in a group. She'd been a teenager herself once – *about twenty years ago*, she reminded herself ruefully.

Plus it meant there would be one less person to share the night with *here*.

'I *knew* you'd say no,' said Jade unfairly.

'I did not say no!'

'If she can go to Sharon's then I can go to Robert's,' said Cal.

'Who's "she", the cat's mother?' asked Jade.

Cal wiped a finger through the last of his ketchup and smeared it over his teeth, baring them at Jade and making claws with his hands. 'Vampire girls together!'

'Grow up,' said Jade.

'All right, that's enough!' Hazel raised her voice. 'Can't we have one meal a day without a family argument?'

'If you can call this a family,' muttered Jade.

'I said that's *enough*,' Hazel said. Cal simply looked down at his empty plate, crestfallen. Jade sniffed and crossed her arms defensively. Trying to sound as calm and certain as possible, Hazel added, 'We *are* a family.'

'We *were* a family,' Jade responded under her breath. She picked up her fork and toyed sullenly with a fish finger.

Hazel glared warningly at her. 'I don't know what's happened to you Jade.'

Jade pointed at Cal. *'He happened! Or had you forgotten?'*

'Mum!' Cal wailed plaintively.

'Get out!' Hazel yelled at Jade, the accumulated fury of the day suddenly finding its way out. *'Come back when you can think of something decent to say!'* She felt annoyed and ashamed as soon as she said it, but it was too late.

'Don't worry I'm going.' Jade stood up abruptly and marched out of the kitchen, slamming the door as she went.

In the hard silence that followed, Cal said, *'I'm sorry Mum.'*

Hazel's shoulders slumped. *'It's all right. It's me who should be sorry. She doesn't mean it. She's just... tired, confused. It's a difficult age, fifteen. You'll understand in a few years, believe me.'* She tried on a smile. *'She loves you really.'*

Cal didn't look convinced. *'She blames me.'*

'Jade blames everyone. I told you, it's just her age. Take no notice.' She stroked his head. *'It's not your fault.'* On impulse she hugged him to her, burying her face in his untidy brown hair and inhaling the deep, lovely smell of him. How could there be this much anger between people who loved each other so much? Of course there was hurt; no marriage can break apart without damage. In many ways it was unfortunate that Jade was old enough to remember their father, and that she remembered him only through the eyes of an adoring five-year-old girl. It was a horrible mess, one that brother and sister would have to deal with as they both grew up. In the meantime it felt as though all Hazel could do was act as referee during the stresses and strains of each day.

And each night.

Hazel felt the quiver in her stomach, the first threat of panic. From the moment she got out of bed in the morning, Hazel began to dread the night ahead. She forced herself to breathe deeply and slowly, to bring her pulse right back down under control.

'Jade doesn't like me,' Cal said quietly as he finished brushing his teeth.

Hazel looked up sharply from folding the bath towel. *'What makes you say that?'*

Cal rinsed his toothbrush and put it back with the others. He was wearing his new England rugby pyjamas. They were a size too large so he'd have plenty of growing room, but they made him look so small, and so very young. Her baby. He wiped his mouth with his facecloth and said, *'She doesn't like me, I can tell.'*

Hazel sighed. *'Of course she does, don't be silly. Brothers and sisters always fight. Wouldn't be natural otherwise.'*

‘She thinks I’m mental.’

‘That’s nonsense and you know it.’ Hazel felt a dark flicker of annoyance. ‘Has she said that to you?’

Cal shrugged in his mother’s arms.

‘Well, has she?’

He shook his head.

Hazel turned him around and looked into his eyes. Brown eyes, like his father’s. There was irony for you, she thought. ‘There’s *nothing* wrong with you, Cal. You mustn’t think things like that!’

‘Are you going to take me to the doctor’s again?’

‘No,’ she lied, after only a tiny hesitation. ‘Of course not.’ In fact she had already made an appointment for the beginning of next week with Dr Green. But as she spoke she resolved to cancel it, to make what she had said into the truth. ‘Why?’

‘Well, he might think I’m mental too.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘I thought he wanted me to see a psycho... psycha... *psychriatist*.’

‘Psychiatrist. No, he doesn’t want you to see anyone. I keep telling you, you’re fine.’ She hated the lie as soon as she said it, because it was so transparently untrue. Feebly she added, ‘Every child has nightmares at some time.’

Cal padded barefoot from the bathroom towards his bedroom. ‘I’m not a little kid any more.’

Hazel watched him closely, the first tremor of anxiety running through her shoulders. This was it. What she had been avoiding all day. What she tried never to think about. He looked so frail and young. So harmless. Just a boy who liked boy things: rugby, soldiers, spacemen, comics. But not all that long ago it had been *The Tweenies*. She smiled at the thought, but it wasn’t quite enough to quell the rising nausea she felt at each and every bedtime; the gnawing trepidation that made her hands feel cold and clammy.

She followed Cal into his room. He climbed into bed. ‘Has Jade said goodnight?’ Hazel practically choked on that last word; a contradiction in terms if ever there was one.

Cal indicated that his sister had said goodnight, then started the usual attempt to stay up for a bit longer.

‘No way,’ Hazel told him, pulling the Action Man duvet up over his chest as he lay down. She was tempted to let him stay up late – she always was, in a vain attempt to forestall the inevitable. It had never worked.

‘Jade doesn’t go to bed until half past ten,’ Cal insisted.

‘Ten o’clock,’ Hazel corrected. Jade’s bedtime was no longer officially enforceable, but she stuck to it in theory. Hazel had basically given up with her and left it to nature; Jade simply went to bed when she was tired, which in term-time meant around ten-thirty. ‘And anyway she’s older than you.’

‘When will I be able to stay up late?’

‘I don’t know. When you’re older.’

‘When I’m eleven?’

‘Maybe. Maybe when you’re twelve.’ Hazel forced a smile and ruffled his hair. ‘Maybe not until you’re eighteen!’

He groaned and lay down.

‘Wait a mo.’ Hazel suddenly remembered something, ‘Have you had your tablet?’

Cal shook his head. ‘I forgot.’

With a sigh Hazel took out the little packet of capsules from his bedside cabinet. ‘Come on, you know the rules...’

‘Must I?’

She broke a pill out of the bubble-pack. ‘Let’s not argue. It can’t do any harm, can it?’

Dutifully, almost stoically, Cal took the tablet and swallowed it with a sip of the water that Hazel fetched in a glass from the bathroom. She suddenly wanted to hold him close and tight and not let go, ever. He was coping so well; better than she was. Anxious that a sudden, panicky expression of motherly love might unsettle him, Hazel settled for cupping his face in her hands and saying, ‘Goodnight,’ even though she knew it was a lie, and she had long since given up adding, ‘Sweet dreams.’

‘Mummm...’ Cal complained.

She let him go and sat down on the chair by the bed. ‘OK. Where were we?’ She picked up a book from the bedside cabinet. Cal was a bit old for her to be reading him a bedtime story, but these days she was prepared to try anything that might help him settle. At the moment they were working their way through *Treasure Island*. ‘Jim had just rowed back out to the *Hispaniola*, I seem to recall...’ She flicked through to the right page and began to read.

Hazel sat with Cal even after sleep had stolen him from her. She always did this. Partly to check that he had indeed settled properly, and partly because she liked to watch him sleep. His face was relaxed, care-free, and this was how she liked to remember him when she went to bed herself. What lay ahead was, at least for now, in the future, a storm on the horizon, but for the time being she could enjoy the peace and tranquillity of a gently sleeping child.

Checking Cal's alarm clock, she was surprised to find it was later than she had thought. She must have sat with him for longer than she had intended.

She went into Jade's room and found her curled up on top of the duvet with her headphones still on. Pop music ticked loudly into her oblivious ears. Hazel switched off the CD player and gently removed the headphones. Jade was a beautiful girl, but asleep she looked so young. 'Night, sweetheart,' Hazel whispered, kissing her lightly on the forehead.

She dosed the bedroom door quietly on her way out and went downstairs.

She wondered how long it would be before the screaming began.

Chapter 3

Bedtime

Later.

Hazel climbed beneath the duvet in her own room and lay down cautiously. She didn't want to disturb the quietness. It sometimes felt as though the night was waiting for her, aware of her in some cunning, instinctive way, watching her until it was sure she had relaxed into the darkness.

Hazel thought she could beat it by simply staying awake.

She would go through the day in her mind – everything – just to keep her thoughts occupied. The big rush to school, the lunchboxes she had prepared. The argument with Jade over how much make-up was acceptable in school (none). The bitterly cold trip to work. The spat with one of the younger check-out girls who had insisted on reading the horoscopes out from a tabloid during their break. 'What star sign are you, *Haze?*' she had asked in her loud nasal voice. Hazel had replied, 'The two-fingered one.' She despised astrology, hated anything she couldn't truly believe in, and was never very good at hiding it.

Hazel was desperately tired but she made herself think about the housework that was still to be done, the pile of ironing she had yet to start, the homework that still had to be completed. Anything to cut through the fog of apprehension that lurked on the edges of her mind.

After half an hour she got out of bed and checked on the children. She could see Jade in the gloom, curled up like a baby in the middle of her bed. Gently Hazel pulled the duvet up over her bare shoulders – Jade insisted on wearing a vest and joggers to bed, even at this time of year.

She took a deep breath and went in to Cal's room. She had dug out his old *Scooby-Doo* night light a few days ago in the hope that it would help, and Cal was now sleeping peacefully in its soft glow. She resisted the temptation to touch his cheek, or even his hair. He looked so tranquil and quiet, and she didn't want to spoil it.

Reluctantly she returned to her own bedroom, but before getting back under the covers she had quick look out of the window. Her room was at the front of the house, so she had a good view of the main road, with the park railings opposite just visible in the amber glare of the streetlamps. It was still raining steadily. The gutters were slick black rivers with splashes of orange light.

If Hazel had been asked to describe her house, she would have said *ordinary*. An ordinary house in an ordinary road. And although she knew that ordinariness was relative, she also knew that, unlike wealth, it largely depended on one's point of view. Hazel's was resolutely down-to-Earth; and anyway she *liked* ordinary.

Someone was waiting in the bus shelter further up the road. It was an odd time to still be waiting for a bus, but then the figure moved slightly and Hazel caught the tiny, faint glints of a pair of eyes looking up at her.

Shocked, she pulled back from the window and let the curtain close.

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. Whoever it was must have seen the curtains twitching, become aware of her staring. They were bound to have looked up!

Gingerly, she pulled back the edge of the curtain, just an inch, with the tip of her finger. Keeping back from the window, she angled herself so that she could see the bus shelter again.

It was empty.

But no bus had gone past. She would have heard it. She checked up and down the road, but she could see no one. A solitary cat caught her attention as it slipped through the railings into the park, but other than that – nothing, not a sign of life.

Hazel climbed back into her cold bed and lay down, her mind whirring. She pulled the covets up to her chin and tried to wriggle around into a position of warmth. She contemplated getting a hot-water bottle but couldn't be bothered going downstairs. She was too tired.

But she kept thinking of the person at the bus stop. Come to think of it, she wasn't all that sure she *had* seen anyone. It was dark, and it was wet. There was rain water trickling down the window pane. It could easily have been just a trick of the light.

She turned over and shut her eyes, pushing her head into the pillow, trying to force herself into sleep. It didn't work. She listened carefully for any signs of disturbance from Cal's room, but she could hear nothing apart from the quiet hush of rain outside. If she concentrated, she could hear her own heartbeat, counting down the seconds.

In the end she did what she always did; stared numbly into the darkness until sleep crept slowly over her.

The screaming started sometime later.

Hazel woke up instantly, as she always did, and automatically checked the alarm clock as she swung her legs out of bed. It was 2.35. 'OK, I'm coming,' she mumbled. 'It's OK...'

The screaming grew suddenly louder as she opened the door to Cal's room.

He was lying on his back, his eyes wide open in terror. His lips were pulled back from his teeth and gums as he shrieked at the ceiling, spittle flying with the force of the cry. After each agonised scream, he would draw in the next breath with a harsh, unnatural gasp – and then let go with the next bloodcurdling screech.

'Cal, it's me, it's all right,' Hazel said, and she had to raise her voice to be heard. She laid a hand on his cold, sweating forehead. He screamed once more, a great bellow of pure fear, and his eyes rolled in their sockets to stare blindly at her. Hazel hushed him and kissed him and stroked his head. 'It's all right, sweetheart. I'm here. It's OK. It's just a dream, that's all. Just a dream.'

Cal shook like a leaf, his breathing was coming in ragged, difficult gulps. Eventually he managed to raise a hand and grab hold of his mother's arm, so that he could pull her closer. The damp sheets stuck to him as he moved. He buried his face in her hair and sobbed. Hazel held him and squeezed back the tears in her own eyes. She could hear Jade moving in the other room, probably burying her head under the pillow to hide herself from the commotion.

'Help me,' Cal whispered. 'Please help me...'

'I'm here.' Hazel spoke as soothingly as she could. 'You're safe.'

'No. No...'

'It's all right...'

But then Cal gave a violent shudder and gasped, '*She's coming for me!*'

'It's just another bad dream,' Hazel insisted gently. 'No one's coming for you. You're safe.'

Gradually the panic and the terror slowly drained away, leaving Cal wrung out and cold. Now he was trembling in a chill lather of his own sweat. Gently, Hazel felt down the bedclothes. At least he hadn't wet himself, this time.

She held him until the tremors passed, and he could lie down again. He was barely awake. The wide, staring eyes had narrowed to a pale glimmer. She brushed the damp hair off his forehead and waited until she was sure he was asleep again.

Eventually she left him, listening outside Jade's room to see if she was awake or not. After a moment she decided that Jade was, miraculously,

still asleep.

Hazel went back to her bed and sat down slowly. Her heart was thudding in her chest, reminding her that it wasn't over yet.

The rain fell more heavily as the night wore on. Hazel listened to its steady beat against the bedroom window in an uncomfortable half-sleep, never quite unconscious, but never fully awake. She didn't dream, but her mind gradually fell into an exhausted doze. The digital display on the clock flickered on in her mind's eye until 3.49.

She heard the first whisper and was instantly alert. Her heart gave one great lurch as she lay there, waiting for the next one.

It came nearly a minute later: quietly spoken words, so hushed that Hazel could not make out what was being said. Cal was talking – *whispering* – in his sleep. Hazel heaved herself out of bed once again. She tried to listen to what he was saying, but none of it made sense: *'Down... dark... help me! Helpmehelpmehelpme!'*

She went in, and the whispering stopped instantly. Cal lay asleep in his bed. He looked fine. The duvet was half on the floor, but that was all. Hazel quickly pulled up the duvet, repositioning it on the bed.

She stood and watched him for a full minute, trying to control her natural urge to tremble.

Cal was breathing deeply and steadily, fast asleep. There were no more noises, not while she stood in his room watching. Instinctively she looked around, over the bookcase and the wardrobe. Out of habit she checked inside the wardrobe, but there was nothing there except Cal's clothes and stuff, some old toys and a cricket bat. Feeling slightly stupid, Hazel quietly shut the wardrobe and then left the room.

She closed his bedroom door behind her, just to see.

The whispering started straight away, louder now and more quickly, mocking her.

Hazel went back to her bed and sat down, seriously prepared to wake up Jade because she was so scared. But what would be the point? She'd done that before and simply ended up scaring Jade too. It wasn't fair to do that to her. Hazel took a deep breath. She was the mother, she was in charge. She had to handle the problems, and illnesses, as they arose.

She lay down, checking the clock: just gone four. The rain was flinging itself against the windows now, as if it was trying to get her attention. She knew that this was the worst time of the night, when her body and mind were at their lowest ebb, and yet she knew that the worst was still to come.

She closed her eyes as the whispers continued.

For a few seconds she made herself lie there, eyes tight shut, but then she couldn't stand it any longer and she leaped out of bed, hurling herself out on to the landing and into Cal's room.

The whispering ceased a moment before she got there.

Surely this was a joke. A cruel, sick and twisted game specifically designed to drive her mad. Hazel sank to the floor next to Cal's bed and began to cry. This was the only way to stop the whispering, to stay in here with him and stay awake. Then it wouldn't come back.

Ten minutes later she felt Cal move. She had laid one hand next to his face, just close enough to feel the warmth of his breath on her skin. Now Cal reached for her hand. She clasped it gently and lifted it up to her own face.

As she did so, Cal's eyes snapped open. They were completely black, and he was screaming, screeching at her, the veins and tendons in his neck bulging under the pressure.

Hazel fell backwards under the onslaught, frozen in shock. Cal wrenched his hand away as he sat up and clutched his own throat, still screaming. The noise became a rasping cry as his lungs emptied, spent, and then he collapsed back against the wall, gasping and choking.

Hazel grabbed hold of him. 'Cal! For heaven's sake, it's me! Cal! Wake up!'

He had flopped now, heavy and loose like a fresh corpse. She had to lower him clumsily on to his pillow. 'Please wake up, Cal! Please wake up!'

His eyes opened slowly, bloodshot and sore, but not like the deep black pools she'd seen moments before. Or had she? Maybe she'd imagined it, what with the shock and everything. It was the middle of the night and she hadn't had much sleep. She was confused. All these thoughts ran through her mind in a panic as she urged him to wake up.

'Mum?'

It's all right, baby... It's all right. I'm here. I've got you. No more nightmares.' The words came out in a jumble as she pulled him to her. 'Mummy's here.'

'I'm tired,' he mumbled. 'Can I have a drink?'

'Sure, of course.' She fetched what was left of his glass of water, but by this time he was lying peacefully with his eyes shut. She put the glass back down.

Jade was calling for her blearily.

'It's OK, love. Go back to sleep.' Hazel took a deep breath. 'Cal's just had a nightmare, that's all.'

She watched as Cal's eyes moved under the lids and then she made a decision.

She went back into her room and picked up the phone, dialling the number for Dr Green's surgery. She knew it off by heart. She knew that at this time of night the call would be automatically transferred to an out-of-hours medical centre. When the operator answered, she explained in a shaky voice that her son was ill, and gave a brief description of what the problem was. She gave his name and date of birth, then left her own name and phone number. A nurse would return her call shortly, she was told.

Hazel felt nervous as she hung up. She glanced at the clock: only a couple of hours before the alarm went off and it was time to get up. *Yeah, right.*

She sat on the bed and hugged her knees for the next twenty minutes, until the phone finally rang. She snatched it up and a brisk female voice asked her to confirm the details she had already left. The voice then introduced herself, in only slightly warmer tones, as Nurse Somebody-or-other, Hazel failed to catch the name, from the out-of-hours Medical Call Centre.

When she was asked to describe what was wrong with Cal, Hazel only managed to say, 'It's my son...'

'What's the matter with him?'

She said, 'He keeps having nightmares, terrible nightmares...'

'Is he sick?'

'Well... Not *sick*, exactly.'

'Has he eaten anything out of the ordinary today? Has he been vomiting?'

'No, it's nothing like that. But I'm sure he's ill.'

'What are his symptoms?'

Hazel hurriedly gathered her wits, trying not to get too upset. She sat up straight and cleared her throat. 'Erm, well, he woke up in the night screaming – some sort of nightmare, I think, but he has been having them every night... He's on medication for it, actually, under Dr Green. But tonight, he looked ill. Really ill. His eyes...'

'He *looked* ill? Is he actually ill, Mrs McKeown?'

'Well, yes, I think so...'

'Is it a medical emergency?'

'I don't know! Isn't there anyone you could send out? Just to look at him? I'm frightened.'

'There are no out-of-hours doctor calls,' explained the voice matter-of-factly. 'But there is a one-stop medical centre on the Langton Estate. There is a doctor on duty there all night. You can take your son there if you like.'

'What, now?'

'If you think it's urgent, yes.'

'It's the middle of the night.' Hazel felt a flash of irritation. 'And I don't have a car, anyway.'

'You don't have a car?'

'No. I can't get to the Langton Estate. It's impossible.'

There was a momentary pause. 'If it is a medical emergency, you could call for an ambulance.'

Hazel listened to Cal sleeping peacefully in his bed. Then she said, 'No, I don't want an ambulance. I just want someone to see him. Please.'

'We don't do house calls at night.'

'But –'

The voice relented, slightly. 'You could try phoning the one-stop centre, if you like. But no one can come out, I'm afraid. There's only one doctor on duty there, and he has to stay on the premises.'

'I understand.'

'My advice is to keep your son warm and comfortable, and if you're still worried in the morning, take him along to your local surgery and make an appointment.'

Hazel knew when she was beaten. 'OK. Thanks.'

'It's all right. If you have any further problems, please don't hesitate to call.'

I will, thought Hazel. 'I won't,' she said. She replaced the receiver with deliberate care. The only alternative would have been to smash it down with enough force to break it.

Cal was starting to moan in his sleep now Hazel stood up wearily and caught sight of herself in the dressing-table mirror. In the lonely glow of the bedside lamp she looked like a ghost, drained of colour, with dark rings under her eyes.

With a shudder Hazel plodded back into Cal's room. His eyelids were fluttering and his lips were moving, as if he was trying to say something.

Hazel bent down to listen.

'KEEP AWAY FROM ME!' he screamed suddenly.

Hazel leaped back, half deafened and half stunned. She stood with her back to the wall, transfixed, as Cal rose up from his bed. '*Keep away from me!*' he roared again, his voice bestial, his face twisted into an unrecognisable expression of hate and loathing.

Then he threw himself off the bed and crashed into the wall next to Hazel. She watched in stunned horror as he flung himself back off the wall, and then hurled himself bodily at the window. He smacked hard against the frame and jumped back, still yelling and screaming, flinging himself against one wall and then another, bouncing off the wardrobe with a sickening crunch, hurtling backwards until he sprawled across the bed.

Instinctively Hazel fell on him and held him down. She was terrified he was going to hurt himself. ‘Stop it, Cal!’ she cried. ‘Stop it! Wake up! You’re going to –’

He flung out an arm and caught her with a hard slap to the side of the head. She sat down heavily on the floor, more shocked than hurt.

Cal writhed on the bed, unintelligible words pouring out of him, his lips foamed with saliva.

Then, incongruously, the doorbell rang.

For a second she thought she’d imagined the loud, cheery *bing-bong* – a result, perhaps, of the painful blow to her head. Cal continued to lie on his bed, tossing and turning and muttering. But for the moment at least he had stopped throwing himself against the walls.

Bing-bong!

‘All right, I’m coming!’ Hazel crawled to her feet, pulled on her dressing gown and went downstairs. She switched on the hall light, utterly bewildered. She made one last, fast attempt to tidy her hair as she passed the hall mirror and then unlocked the front door. Bracing herself, she opened it and found a man in a long, rain-soaked coat standing on the doorstep. He looked directly at Hazel and said, ‘Mrs McKeown?’

For a second Hazel was quite distracted by his clear, very blue eyes. Then she noticed he was holding something: an old-fashioned Gladstone bag. Relief flooded through her. ‘Oh, they did send someone after all! Thank goodness. Please come in...’

‘I’m the doctor,’ said the man as he stepped inside.

‘Yes, thank you so much for coming. He’s upstairs.’

The doctor directed a glance upstairs. As he did so there was a long, piercing scream from Cal’s room and a series of crashes as he began throwing himself at the walls again.

‘Oh no,’ said Hazel.

The next thing she knew the doctor had brushed past her and was taking the stairs three at a time.

Chapter 4

House Call

Hazel hurried after the man as he charged up the stairs and quickly located Cal's room. It wasn't difficult: from behind the door came a series of heavy thuds and crashes, mixed with the boy's shrill cries of fear and pain.

The doctor rattled the door handle impatiently. 'It's locked.'

'It doesn't have a lock on it,' said Hazel.

The man reacted instantly, throwing his full weight against the door. There was a sharp crack of splintering wood and then they were in.

'Wait a minute!' Hazel began, shocked. What kind of doctor shoulder-charged a bedroom door? But then she saw, over his shoulder, an image that would stay in her nightmares for ever more: her son, clutching weakly at his throat as he choked to death. His tongue, protruded obscenely from between cyanosed lips.

Hazel felt her blood turn cold with an immediate and awful dread.

The doctor did not hesitate; even as he entered the room, he seemed to take instant stock of the situation and hurled himself at Cal. A perfect rugby tackle brought the boy crashing down on to his bed.

Only then did Hazel realise that she was standing there, paralysed, almost overcome by a plain, primal fear for her son's life.

But the doctor was already making sure that Cal's airway was clear and that he was still breathing. He lay on his back, gasping and panting but otherwise unhurt, and *alive*.

'It's all right,' the doctor said. 'He's OK. He's going to be fine. What's his name?'

'Callum. Cal.'

'You're all right now, Cal,' the doctor told him quietly, calmly. He had a confident, soothing voice. His hands, which were long and artistic but powerful-looking, patted the boy's head and stroked his face. Gradually the harsh breathing subsided and a stillness settled over him. The doctor

held Cal's wrist lightly and checked his pulse; after a few moments he gave a short nod of satisfaction.

'Is he all right?' Hazel asked in a whisper.

'He's asleep, that's all.' The doctor straightened up. 'It's lucky I arrived when I did. How long has this been going on for?'

Hazel sank back against the wall, numb with fatigue. 'Oh, hell, it seems like forever. Certainly the last few weeks. Tonight has been the worst, though. Are you sure he's OK?'

'He's OK for now. But tell me more about his condition.'

Hazel pulled the duvet up over Cal's shoulders and regarded him sadly 'It's the nightmares,' she said softly, scared of waking him. 'It's been just awful.' The doctor indicated that they should leave Cal to sleep, and Hazel nodded wearily.

'Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?' Hazel asked, blinking in the bright fluorescent light. The kitchen was cold and echoing, suddenly seeming a strange, unfamiliar place at 4.00 a.m. She shivered.

'Tea would be good.'

Hazel filled the kettle and switched it on. She was feeling a strange mixture of relief and nervousness now that a doctor had arrived. She wanted help for Cal, but she was worried about what the probable diagnosis would be. A form of madness? How could it be anything else? And at the same time, as this doctor sat down at the kitchen table and regarded her with his careful, hooded blue eyes, she felt acutely conscious of her physical state: she wanted to get dressed and fix her hair. She pulled her dressing gown around her and smiled apologetically at him. 'I haven't had a wink of sleep.'

'You're hurt,' he said.

Hazel touched the swelling over her cheekbone where Cal had struck her. 'It was just an accident, it's nothing.'

'You must be very worried.'

'Frankly, I don't know how much more of this I can stand.' The kettle boiled loudly and Hazel poured the water into the teapot. 'Listen to me: more concerned about how I feel than about what's wrong with – I mean, how Cal feels.'

'This affects you as much as him.'

Hazel looked sceptical, but it was nice of him to say so. 'I've had him to the doctor's about the nightmares already, on a number of occasions. I saw Dr Green, and he just keeps telling me it's normal.'

He raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

'I mean, he says it's normal for kids to have nightmares. He says it's called "night terrors" or something, an unreasonable state of fear brought

on by bad dreams or whatever. It usually affects small children but it can be found in older kids too.’ Hazel took a pair of mugs from the drainer and put milk in them. ‘But I’m not convinced, to be honest. It’s more than that with Cal, I know it is. Well, you saw for yourself. What do you think?’

He considered his answer before speaking. ‘I think it’s high time we sorted this business out.’

Hazel felt herself go cold. With a heavy sigh she said, ‘I know what you’re going to say: Dr Green has already mentioned the possibility of referring Cal to a specialist. A child psychiatrist. I don’t want that.’

He looked surprised, as if the notion had never occurred to him. For a second Hazel was worried that, with her having raised the idea, he might now consider it an option, but to her relief he shook his head. ‘I don’t think that’s necessary at all. There’s nothing really wrong with Cal.’

She thought this was odd and frowned. ‘Nothing wrong with him? I’m sorry, but...’

‘No no no, hear me out: I didn’t say Cal wasn’t affected. But he’s not ill, or disturbed – not in the way that you’re worried about, at least.’

Hazel struggled to understand. This was more than she had hoped for, but it seemed too good to be true. She had to doubt it. Distractedly, she swirled the teapot and then poured two mugs. ‘Er, sugar?’

‘Yes, please. I’ve always had a liking for hot, sweet tea – like the army makes.’

‘Help yourself.’ She put the mug and a bowl of sugar in front of him, wondering if he had any kind of military background. He didn’t look the type; his hair was too long for a start. Although he could have been in the armed forces once, a long time ago perhaps. She couldn’t tell how old he was but she guessed he was in his forties. He might have let his hair grow, but there was a determined, self-confident look in his eyes that suggested a willingness to be tough when necessary. Although, at the moment, he didn’t look all that tough. The coat he was wearing was velvet. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I didn’t catch your name in all the excitement earlier.’

He smiled warmly. ‘Just call me “the Doctor”. It saves a lot of confusion in the end.’

‘All right.’ Hazel shrugged. It was peculiar, but it made a kind of sense. What did his name matter? At the end of the day he was a doctor. Maybe he thought she was trying to chat him up, and this was his polite way of avoiding the situation? Her cheeks coloured slightly even as she checked to see if he wore a ring. He didn’t, although he was wearing a waistcoat and a cravat, as if he was on the way to a wedding. Some sort of stag party, perhaps. Maybe he’d been bleeped and had to come away to answer her call.

'Are these Cal's?' the Doctor asked, pulling an untidy pile of papers towards him. Hazel remembered shuffling together a load of Cal's stuff and dumping it on the kitchen table. There was some homework waiting to be finished and some drawings, and his old pencil case full of half-dried felt-tips and blunt coloured pencils. The Doctor pulled out one of Cal's more detailed drawings. Hazel recalled congratulating him on a very good picture of a tree.

'He's certainly got an eye for detail,' the Doctor commented. 'I love children's pictures. The way they draw exactly what they see, only mixed up with what they think should be there.'

Hazel nodded proudly. 'That's my favourite. I like the way he's done the berries.'

The Doctor frowned. 'They're not berries,' he said. 'They're drops of blood.'

'What?'

'Look.' He swivelled the picture around so she could see what he was pointing at. 'You can see it dripping from the branches – and there, running down the trunk. Blood.'

Hazel shuddered, and then took the picture off him. 'I don't think he's finished.'

'He has a good imagination,' the Doctor suggested.

'Too good!'

'Perhaps that's why he dreams so vividly.'

'What are you saying?' asked Hazel sharply. 'That he's not right in the head?'

'I told you, he's fine,' said the Doctor evenly. 'But there's *something* wrong here.'

Hazel didn't like the way he was watching her now, as if he was monitoring her reaction, and choosing his words very carefully. 'I don't understand what you mean,' she said.

'Can I talk to Cal?'

'I don't know.' Hazel folded her arms. 'If he's asleep, I don't want to wake him up. He'll be exhausted as it is when it's time to get up, and he's got school.'

'Enjoys school, does he?'

Hazel nodded firmly. 'Yes, he does. I checked all that already, if you think he's being bullied or something. He isn't. He loves school, and that's why I still send him in. It's a normal day for him, the only time he can really relax. Because he certainly can't at night.'

The Doctor nodded, and, hearing the catch in her voice, plucked a clean white handkerchief from his coat pocket and handed it over. Hazel cleared

her throat and blinked back the tears. 'I'm sorry,' she croaked, quickly wiping at one eye.

'Don't mention it.' The Doctor downed the last of his tea appreciatively 'Hm! That was lovely, thanks.' He took his empty mug over to the sink and left it on the drainer. 'If it's all right with you, I'd like to see Cal again before I go.'

Hazel glanced down at the picture of the tree and nodded.

Chapter 5

Diagnosis

‘Cal? Wake up, sweetheart.’ Hazel gently stroked his face with the back of her hand. There was no sign of any distress or tension in his features now. He was sleeping like a baby, and Hazel hated herself for waking him. ‘The doctor’s here, love. He’d like to have a chat with you. Is that all right?’

Cal peered blearily at the Doctor.

‘Hello there,’ the Doctor said. ‘Your mum’s very worried about you, you know.’

Cal nodded unhappily and Hazel felt the tears prickling in her eyes again.

‘But I’ve told her it’s all right because there’s nothing wrong with you,’ the Doctor carried on. Suddenly he had the boy’s full attention. The Doctor got down on his haunches and smiled. ‘And I mean that: you’re fine. But I think there’s something on your mind, isn’t there?’

Cal nodded. ‘It’s the bad dreams. I can’t help it. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t apologise. Not your fault. But listen to me: if your poor mum’s going to have any chance of a decent night’s kip then we need to sort all this out, don’t we?’

Cal sat up. ‘But it happens every night...’

‘What does?’

‘I see things in my dreams. Bad things.’

‘Such as?’

‘Bad people. Dead people.’

‘Where?’

Cal closed his eyes, clearly upset. Hazel tensed. ‘Is it important?’

The Doctor made a tiny gesture with his hand to silence her. He kept his gaze fixed steadily on the boy. ‘Somewhere where there are trees?’

‘Now wait a second...’ Hazel began, alarmed.

‘Yes,’ said Cal. ‘Where there are trees. Bad trees. Blood trees.’

Hazel felt a chill in the air and pressed her hands together in unconscious prayer. 'I don't like this...'

'OK, Cal,' said the Doctor warmly, 'that's fine. Great, in fact. I think we're getting somewhere.'

'Somewhere I don't want to go.'

'I know. But you go there anyway, don't you? At night, in your dreams. You see the trees and the dead people, don't you?'

Cal screwed up his eyes with a whimper. 'Yes...'

'Please stop,' pleaded Hazel.

The Doctor shook his head. 'But if we go there on purpose, Cal, then we can stay in control. Do you understand? You don't have to be taken there against your will. It can be your decision. And I'll be with you all the way; there's nothing to be frightened of.'

Cal regarded him for a long moment with his large brown eyes. Then, very definitely, he shook his head.

'I think you're frightening him,' Hazel said quietly. They all heard the rain lash against the window as the wind blustered outside.

'All right,' the Doctor rubbed a hand over his jaw as he considered. Then a thought seemed to strike him. 'Wait a minute, I know: let's have a look in here.' The Doctor opened his Gladstone bag and peered inside. 'I'm sure I've got something that'll – aha!' He reached inside and pulled out a crumpled paper bag. He offered it to Cal. 'Gobstopper?'

Cal shook his head.

'No? Well, let's see...'

The Doctor scratched his head. 'What else could they be? I know! Fizz bombs!'

Again Cal shook his head.

'Jelly babies, then!' He rustled the paper bag seductively.

'I like sherbet lemons best,' Cal told him.

The Doctor laughed gently. 'Now you're just trying to catch me out. I should have started with the comics.'

'Comics?' Cal frowned quizzically. 'But you're a doctor.'

'So what? I can still read, can't I?' The Doctor opened his bag and pulled out a large, thick comic. 'This is my favourite.'

Cal twisted his head to read the cover. '*Eagle*. I've never heard of it.'

'Ah, well, it's a bit before your time, Cal. This was published in the 1950s.'

Cal looked horrified. 'But that's –'

'A very long time ago, yes.'

'But it looks brand new.'

The Doctor dropped his voice to a whisper. 'That's because it *is* new. Only bought it yesterday, in fact.'

'I don't understand. That's impossible.'

'Nothing's impossible.'

Cal was fully alert now. 'What you were saying before... about the dreams.'

The Doctor looked at him seriously. 'Are they really bad?'

Cal nodded glumly. 'I get scared.'

'That's all right,' said the Doctor. 'I'm here now.'

Cal pursed his lips in thought. Hazel watched him from the doorway, her fingernails digging into the palms of her hands. This was agonising to watch. The Doctor was unconventional, that was for sure: she had seen in his Gladstone bag and it was stuffed with useless toys and books, not a stethoscope or prescription pad in sight. But he had brought about a definite tranquillity in Cal, a kind of childish trust, which was impossible to ignore.

'All right,' Cal said softly. 'I'll tell you. I'll take you there, to the dead trees. Where the Queen of the Dead walks in the woods leaving a trail of cold blood behind her, and where people who have been buried in mud rise up and choke their own murderers...'

Hazel swallowed hard. This wasn't Cal talking. He was a bright lad but this was something else. The Doctor was watching him intently, listening to every word, keeping his eyes fixed on the boy as he spoke in a quiet, strangely cool voice:

'She came for me in my dreams and tried to kill me.'

'Who did, Cal?' the Doctor asked.

'The mud woman. An old hag covered in soil and worms. But she had fingers as strong as tree wood.' Cal was beginning to breathe a little quicker now, as his pulse began to speed up. 'I could feel them... around my neck. Squeezing. Squeezing!' His hands leaped up to his throat as he began to panic.

'It's all right, Cal,' said the Doctor quickly.

'Forget about it, sweetheart,' Hazel called out, moving closer. 'It was just a dream, that's all!'

Cal shook his head violently. 'No, no, there's mud on my neck. Where her hands touched me. Look!'

He lifted his chin up so they could see his throat clearly. The Doctor and Hazel both peered at it.

'There's no mud there, Cal,' said the Doctor gently.

Hazel bit her lip and tore her gaze away. 'He's right. There's no mud.'

Cal closed his eyes and sagged back on to the bed. The Doctor caught him and lowered him on to his pillow. 'He's exhausted, poor lad.'

'And no wonder!' hissed Hazel furiously 'After what you tried to do! Couldn't you see how upset he was? Did you have to do that? I thought you were going to make him better, for goodness' sake!'

The Doctor stood up and regarded her levelly. 'He's asleep, that's all.'
'No thanks to you.'

'No, indeed not,' the Doctor agreed. 'He's on something, some kind of tranquilliser or sleeping tablet, am I right?'

Hazel yanked open Cal's bedside cabinet drawer and angrily took out the strip of sleeping pills. 'You know he is! You're a doctor, aren't you?'

The Doctor took the strip of tablets and spared them barely a glance. 'Rubbish,' he spat, flinging the pills with accuracy into the waste paper basket in the far corner of the room. 'They're probably making things worse.'

'Worse?'

'Relaxing him too much, allowing the psychic influence into his mind more easily.'

He seemed to be almost talking to himself, but Hazel felt her confidence in him slip quite suddenly. 'What did you say? Psychic what?'

The Doctor took a deep breath. 'This might be hard for you to believe, Mrs McKeown... Cal's condition is rather unconventional.'

'And you're an unconventional doctor. I gathered that. I thought you might be able to help, but I didn't think they'd send me someone so... so...'

'Unorthodox?'

'Unbelievable. I mean, what are you? Some sort of homeopathic doctor? A faith healer? I don't even know your name. Doctor who?'

'I've already told you, names aren't important. What *is* important is that I'm here to help. And I *can* help you. But you've got to be prepared to believe me when I say that there's more to this than bad dreams!'

'I've had enough. I'd like you to leave now.' Hazel walked out on to the landing and the Doctor had to follow her. 'I'll take Cal to the doctor's in the morning. My doctor's.'

'They can't do anything for him.' The Doctor gripped her arm in his hand and spoke urgently but precisely: 'It's not just bad dreams, is it? You haven't mentioned the rest. I'm sure there must have been noises – things that go bump in the night!'

Hazel pulled her arm free as she felt a kind of panic building up inside her, rising on a tide of frustration. 'Will you please keep your voice down? My daughter is – heaven knows *how* – sleeping and I don't want her woken up!'

'I'm right, aren't I? You seen things, heard things, that you just can't explain.'

‘Now I know you’re mad.’ Hazel turned and went quickly down the stairs.

The Doctor followed her. ‘I’m not mad and neither is your son. He’s being subjected to some kind of psychic –’

‘Get out.’ Hazel yanked open the front door. ‘Now.’

The Doctor caught his breath and closed his eyes. ‘You *know* there’s more to this. Much more.’

‘I said *out*.’ She stood aside so that he could pass. A gust of cold, wet air filled the little hallway as the Doctor left, chilling Hazel to the bone. She ignored it.

The Doctor had paused on the doorstep, turning to stare at her. His eyes were mesmerising but icy cool. ‘You saw it too, didn’t you? There was no mud on Cal’s neck, but there were marks. Red marks, left by someone – or some *thing* – that had tried to strangle the life out of him!’

With a sob Hazel slammed the door shut.

Chapter 6

Scary Stories

Almost as soon as Hazel shut the door, she heard the letterbox click open and the Doctor's voice drift through: 'You're making a big mistake, Hazel! I'm the only one who can help you.'

Hazel leaped away from the door as if stung. She could faintly see the Doctor through the frosted glass, bending down to speak into the letterbox slot. 'Go away! Or I'll call the police!'

There was a moment's pause. 'All right, go ahead. Call the police. We can explain everything to them.'

Hazel's stomach churned at the thought. If only he would stop shouting through her letterbox! What if the neighbours saw him?

'Come on, Hazel,' he called, imploringly. 'Let's talk about this in a rational way.'

'Rational?' She almost laughed out loud. 'You've got a damned nerve!'

'I know it's hard for you to believe, but if you'd just let me explain...'

'Leave us alone,' she begged. 'Please!'

The letterbox snapped shut with a grunt of frustration from the other side of the door. For a short while they both stood in silence, and Hazel listened to the steady wet purr of the rain. He must be getting very wet, she thought with grim satisfaction. Then she jumped as the letterbox suddenly snapped open again.

'All right then,' came the Doctor's voice. He sounded resigned, at last. 'But give this to Cal, will you, when he wakes up.'

A comic slid through the slot and plopped on to the doormat. It was the *Eagle*. Hazel regarded it cautiously without saying a thing, as if the Doctor had just posted a live snake through her door. Then she switched her attention back to the frosted window above the letterbox, only now she couldn't see anything except the rainwater trickling steadily down the glass. Her heart gave a little beat of hope. Please, please be *gone*.

‘Mum...’ She heard Cal’s voice on the stairs behind her. She turned to him with a warm rush of relief.

And then stopped dead.

Cal was walking down the stairs, his arms held out towards her for a hug.

But there was blood pouring from his nose, running like tap water over his mouth and chin, a great wet patch of it on his pyjama top.

‘Mum...’ he said again, red bubbles forming on his lips.

‘Cal –’ she began in a stupefied whisper, stunned by the sheer amount of blood.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and began to shamble towards her, hands extended, and now she saw that although his eyes were wide open, all she could see of them were glistening black orbs.

Hazel wanted to scream now, in fear and despair and *anger* – fury that she had to witness this, that her son was being put through this unbelievable torment. But the breath was held rigid in her chest, kept at bay by the fierce drumming of her heart.

And the pounding on the front door behind her.

‘Hazel!’ the Doctor’s voice leaped out of the letterbox once more. ‘Let me in! I can help!’

‘Mum...’ Cal reached her now, his slow shuffling journey finally complete. She cringed as his fingers dug into her arms. ‘Help me!’ he gasped, and a little spray of blood dotted Hazel’s dressing gown.

She forced herself to hold on to him, quaking at the sight of the blood coursing from his nose and mouth and by the stone-cold touch of his hands. ‘Oh, Cal...’

The front door banged loudly again as the Doctor hammered on it with his fist. The doorbell rang as well.

Cal said, ‘Help me! Please!’ and his eyes continued to stare darkly at her.

With one hand Hazel quickly unlocked the front door and pulled it open. The Doctor spilled into the hallway, took one look at Cal and said, ‘Towels and a bowl of warm water – quickly.’

He effortlessly took the boy in his arms and carried him through to the kitchen, Hazel hurrying behind.

‘Don’t worry’ she heard him call over his shoulder, ‘it looks far worse than it is.’

But Hazel’s vision had disappeared behind a stinging welter of tears.

The Doctor cleaned up Cal quickly and expertly, leaving a bundle of towels and a bowl of water stained red.

Hazel stood to one side, watching silently, chewing the knuckle of her thumb as she tried to deal with the conflicting senses of terror and relief that were battling it out in her gut.

‘There,’ said the Doctor at last, wiping his fingers on a blood-smeared towel.

‘I can’t believe this,’ Hazel said quietly. She couldn’t take her eyes off Cal as he lay comfortably slumped over the kitchen table. ‘It can’t be happening.’

‘It’s not as bad as it looks,’ repeated the Doctor. ‘He hasn’t lost all that much blood and he’s actually still asleep.’

‘How come?’

‘He’s exhausted. He needs to sleep, and it’s the best thing for him.’

Hazel snorted.

‘And of course it’s his subconscious mind that’s bearing the brunt of this, so he can seem to be awake – walking, talking and so on – when he isn’t.’

‘Like sleepwalking, you mean.’

‘Exactly.’

‘That sounds so normal.’ She reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair off Cal’s forehead. ‘What about the blood?’

‘Nothing more than a bad nosebleed.’

She could tell he was trying to make it sound unimportant, but she caught a tiny flicker of something in those too-blue eyes that made her feel as though he was holding something back. ‘Why? What caused it?’

‘He could have knocked it, if he was hurling himself around his room again.’

She shook her head. ‘He wasn’t. I didn’t hear anything, and I would have. What other explanation can you give? There must be one.’

She was daring him to answer and he knew it. ‘Are you sure you want to hear it?’ he asked.

‘You tell me what you think it is and I’ll make up my own mind.’

‘That’s fair enough.’ He pulled out a chair from under the table and sat down. She did likewise as he continued:

‘It’s more likely to be the result of a build-up of psychic pressure, causing localised soft tissue trauma. Bleeding from the nose or gums, or even ears, isn’t uncommon.’

‘I see,’ she said, carefully, after a moment’s consideration. ‘And you’ve seen this before, I take it?’

‘I’m afraid I have.’

‘Where?’

It seemed like a reasonable question, but he hesitated anyway. ‘Are you sure you want me to tell you?’

She gave this question due consideration, if only to be fair. She felt as though this was his chance to redeem himself, to be straight with her. 'Yes,' she said.

'Certain?'

'Just say it.'

'I mean really certain?'

'Yes!'

'OK.' The Doctor looked her in the eyes and said, 'It was many years ago, but the last time I personally saw something like this was on the planet Kufan.'

Hazel stared at him blankly. 'I'm sorry, for a moment I thought you said the planet Kufan.'

'I did. Why, have you heard of it?'

She stood up and walked to the other side of the kitchen, needing more than anything else to get away from him. *She had let a madman into her house!* Hazel's band flew to her mouth in shock and fear.

'You *have* heard of it!' cried the Doctor excitedly.

She shook her head very deliberately. 'Stop it. It's not funny!' She could feel the anger boiling up inside her again. 'Why couldn't you just have said Africa, or Borneo, or the bloody Arctic Circle or something?'

'Because that would have been a lie.'

But I would have believed you, Hazel thought. Before she could say anything, however, a tousled blonde figure appeared in the kitchen doorway. 'Mum?'

Hazel threw her arms around her daughter with a cry of relief. 'Jade! Oh, thank goodness. Someone sane at last. How are you, baby? Did we wake you up?'

'What's going on?' Jade asked drowsily. 'Who's this?'

The Doctor had got to his feet, in a rather old-fashioned way, as soon as Jade appeared.

Hazel wanted to say, 'This is the lunatic I've let into our home in the middle of the night.' But she didn't want to frighten Jade any more than she probably already was. Instead she fumbled an automatic response: 'This is Doctor... erm...'

He smiled charmingly at Jade. 'Sorry if we woke you up.'

Jade looked past him at her brother, still snoring on the kitchen table. 'What's up with him?'

Hazel said, 'He's had another bad night.'

Jade sniffed, unimpressed. She poked Cal with a knuckle. 'Hey, wake up, stupid. No reason why you should get any sleep if we can't.'

'Jade!'

‘Chill out, Mum. It’s virtually time to get up anyway.’ With a yawn Jade opened the fridge and took out a carton of orange juice.

Hazel turned back to the Doctor, ready to give him a piece of her mind, only to find Cal sitting up slowly. He blinked and his eyes looked sore but normal. ‘Hi,’ he mumbled. ‘Can I have a drink too?’

‘Jade, give Cal some orange juice please. And don’t forget to shut the fridge when you’ve finished.’

Jade huffed. ‘What did his last slave die of?’ She sloshed some juice into a glass and slid it across the kitchen table. As she did so she caught sight of the pile of bloody towels by the washing machine. ‘Oh, yuk! What’s happened?’

‘An accident, nothing to worry about,’ said the Doctor quickly.

‘Cal had a nosebleed,’ added Hazel, with a single sharp glance at the Doctor. She hoped he got the message: *no outer-space stuff*.

‘A nosebleed?’ echoed Cal, immediately touching his face.

‘Oh, gross!’ offered Jade. ‘Why can’t I have a normal brother? What’s wrong with him?’ This last question was directed specifically at the Doctor, and it was clear Jade expected an answer.

‘Well,’ he began, with an awkward look at her mother. ‘It’s complicated.’

‘The Doctor was trying to find out what’s causing the nightmares,’ Hazel said quickly. She hardened her voice and added, ‘But no luck so far.’

‘Well, I do have a theory,’ the Doctor said, and Hazel thought she detected a somewhat mischievous tone in his voice. She shot him another warning glare, but Jade said:

‘Never mind theories. I *know* what’s giving him nightmares.’

‘You do?’

‘Course.’ Jade looked askance at the Doctor and her mother, as if wondering how they could both be so stupid. ‘It’s obvious: Cal’s been talking to Old Man Crawley again.’

‘I have not!’ Cal protested.

Hazel frowned. ‘What? Cal, is this true?’

‘Yes, it’s true,’ said Jade in a bored voice.

‘Be quiet, Jade.’ Hazel’s voice turned to steel. ‘Well, Callum? The truth, now.’

Cal looked abashed. ‘I haven’t been talking to him, not as such...’

‘He *has*!’ Jade insisted. ‘I saw him last night, on the way home from school.’

Hazel rounded on her angrily ‘I thought I told you to stay with him, Jade!’

‘He got out before me! I didn’t catch up with him until Old Man Crawley’s house.’

Now Hazel turned her fury back on Cal. 'And I told *you* to wait for your sister! Are you both incapable of doing as you're told?'

Cal stared miserably at the kitchen table while Jade suddenly concentrated all her attention on her glass of orange juice.

'Who's Old Man Crawley?' asked the Doctor.

'Oh, just some old nutter,' Hazel said irritably. She gave the Doctor a hard stare, full of parental frustration: 'There's a lot of them about.'

'He lives on his own by the woods,' explained Jade. 'Creepy old bloke who likes to tell ghost stories and stuff.'

'That's enough from you, young lady!'

'He did ask.'

'The Doctor won't be interested in a stupid old man, Jade.'

'No no no,' protested the Doctor. 'Well, I'm not interested in stupid old men. But I *love* ghost stories. Tell me more.'

Hazel sighed impatiently. 'Jade's right, he's just a silly old man. He lives on his own. I think he lost someone in the war or something. His wife, probably. It made him a bit, you know, addled or whatever. But he stops the kids on the way home from school and tells them scary stories. It's very irresponsible. He shouldn't be allowed to scare children like that.'

'Oh, I don't know,' the Doctor said. 'In my experience children like to be scared, occasionally.'

Hazel looked doubtful. 'He's popular with some of the older kids,' she conceded, 'probably because he's a bit of a scoundrel. Mostly they like to bait him, though. I suppose he's harmless in his own way, but I don't want Cal or Jade going near him. He keeps a vicious little dog with him all the time.'

'What kind of ghost stories does he tell?' the Doctor asked.

'Is that important?'

'It could be, if Cal's been listening to them.' The Doctor turned back to the boy. 'Well, Cal?'

'I wasn't doing any harm!' said Cal.

Hazel huffed. 'Just tell us exactly what happened. *Exactly*.'

'Well, nothing. He was standing by his gate, as usual, that's all...' Grudgingly, Cal recounted his brief conversation with Old Man Crawley, and the little horror story he had been told. When he had finished, Hazel felt as though all the strength had left her. She felt drained and bad-tempered.

'I knew it,' she said unfairly. 'I can't stand that stupid old man!' She turned to the Doctor. 'Well, there you have it. Your cause: a nasty little story about an old woman coming back from the dead, for heaven's sake!'

Cal looked ashamed and close to tears.

'Psychic pressure indeed!' Hazel spat at the Doctor. 'Planet Karfoon! You're as bad as he is.'

The Doctor said nothing.

'Right, you two.' Hazel spoke to her children in the mother's tone that brooked no nonsense. 'Back up to bed.'

'But it's nearly time to get up,' moaned Jade.

'Don't argue with me, Jade, I'm not in the mood.'

'All right, all right. I'm going!'

Cal nodded and followed his sister out of the kitchen, offering an embarrassed, 'Sorry, Mum,' which Hazel greeted with a frosty stare. Cal mumbled a goodnight to the Doctor as he left the kitchen.

'And tomorrow you make damn sure you stick with each other on the way home from school,' Hazel called after them. 'And keep away from Old Man Crawley's place!'

'OK Mum,' Cal's voice drifted back despondently.

'Or I'll come and pick you up myself!' she added.

'Whatever,' called Jade, already bored with the conversation.

Hazel let out a deep breath as a brittle quietness filled the kitchen. She was aware of the Doctor watching her with those hooded, rather other-worldly eyes. 'I suppose I ought to thank you,' she said wearily 'You were a big help with Cal when...' she gestured to the pile of bloodied towels. 'I'm afraid I froze.'

'It's understandable.'

She didn't respond straight away. She felt confused, because although she very much wanted the Doctor to leave again, she couldn't dismiss the strange sense of power that he exuded; something she couldn't define, something a part of her refused to call *magical*, but couldn't actually explain. He was attractive, certainly. He had a nice voice. He was charismatic. But he was wrong.

'Sorry to have, um, wasted your time,' she offered eventually.

'You haven't,' he smiled and stood up.

She gave a rueful smile too. 'I should have realised about that old man sooner. He's a bloody nuisance.'

'You mustn't blame yourself.'

'No. Well, thanks again anyway. Don't take this the wrong way, but I hope I don't see you again!' She gave a nervous laugh to show it was a joke, albeit one that she meant. 'And I hope I haven't ruined your night – you know, the party or whatever.' She gestured shyly at his velvet coat.

He looked puzzled. 'What? Oh, no. Of course not.' He looked around him. 'Now, I think I had a bag when I arrived...'

She hurriedly located his old Gladstone bag and showed him to the front door. 'I'll take Cal to the doctor's in the morning,' she said, more to fill the awkward silence than anything. 'Just to be sure.'

'Fine,' he said. 'But it won't help.'

She decided to humour him because she was just too tired to argue any more. 'Maybe not, but I'd feel happier. No offence.'

He nodded, apparently not willing to argue either. 'None taken.'

'Goodbye.' She opened the door.

He stepped out into the rain, and then turned. 'By the way, it was the planet Kufan, not Karfoon.'

She forced out a smile and nodded. 'I'll remember that.'

He smiled graciously. 'It's not important.'

And with that, he was gone, swallowed up by the night and the rain.

A little later, Hazel went back to her bedroom and checked out of the window. It was still dark but there was no sign of him. Then she caught sight of the bus stop and something clicked in her memory: the person she thought she'd seen lurking in the shelter earlier in the night – could that have been the Doctor, watching the house all along? She discounted the idea instantly as impossible. Well, unlikely. Certainly ridiculous!

There was still an hour to go before her alarm was due to go off, and she quickly checked on the children before making any attempt to sleep. Jade was snoring and Cal seemed to be dozing peacefully again.

On the way out of Cal's room she found the little paper bag of sweets the Doctor had left. She took them quietly back to her own room and, on impulse, checked to see what was inside.

Sherbet lemons. Cal's favourites.

A sudden jumble of memories slewed through her mind: the Doctor rushing headlong up the stairs in instant response to Cal's screams; shoulder-charging the door open – a door that could not have been locked, or even jammed.

Cal choking to death.

Cal's eyes, black as night.

Cal hurling himself around the room, ricocheting off the furniture.

Hazel knew that none of these things could be explained away by mere nightmares. But to accept that, to believe it, represented an even worse nightmare, something she could not possibly cope with.

She took out a sherbet lemon and put it slowly in her mouth, feeling frightened and alone again. Deep in her chest, panic started to flutter its dark wings once more.

Chapter 7

The Ghost Hunters

Bernard Harris turned off the footpath as soon as he passed through the park gates. It was quicker for him to cut across the grass. There was a thick, frosty dew and it meant getting his trainers soaked – as well as risking the dog dirt – but it was worth it.

This short cut led him straight into the woods and he liked to think it was his own, private path.

Harris tried to keep up his rhythm but it was tough going. He wasn't running fast but the grass was on a slight incline as it led up to the trees. Looking ahead, he could see the bare branches silhouetted against the gun-metal clouds. There was a thin, clinging mist in the air but at least it wasn't raining. When he reached the edge of the forest he paused, hands on hips, sucking in air and looking back the way he had come.

To his left he could see the orange sparkles of light where the street-lamps glowed, and the occasional flare of headlamps in the distance as a car turned down Osbourne Avenue. The rest of the town was starting to wake up.

Harris turned and jogged into the woods, taking the route he seldom varied. At this pace it would take him ten minutes to reach the far side, then another ten to circle back around to the gates. Five more to reach his house and then a nice, warm, soapy shower.

He loved the woods; he relished the strange hush of the trees and the unique fragrance of the forest. The scent was stronger when it was wet, like today, and Harris breathed it in like a precious, intoxicating perfume.

Occasionally a twig broke underfoot, but otherwise he moved quietly through the damp mulch. Soon the town lights and concrete were far behind him and he was alone in his private world.

He liked it that way. This was his special place, away from the maddening chatter of the day, the strangulating routine of work and life.

Harris paused in the middle of his run, blowing out big, steamy breaths, which drifted away like ghosts into the shadows. It was very dark here, despite the grey slices of dawn now visible through the trees, but it only took him a moment to get his bearings. Near here was his most special place, the one he made sure to visit every morning without fail.

He located the big yew tree, and from there he worked his way through the undergrowth and bushes until he reached the black shade beneath the Old Tree, a huge dead ash that dominated this part of the forest. Its trunk was coated in a heavy bark, cracked and pitted with many hard winters. The chilly, early morning wind made the twisted branches click and snap like a hundred grotesque fingers trying to attract attention.

He stood and watched the tree as he got his breath back. It stood solid and impassive, and he always felt humble beneath its thick, creaking limbs and great age.

‘Excuse me,’ said a voice behind him.

Harris actually leaped with surprise, whirling around to find a man standing behind him. He was unshaven and wore a beat-up leather jacket. The man grinned wolfishly at Harris’s shocked reaction and said, ‘Sorry, did I startle you?’

‘I – I didn’t hear you coming,’ Harris said.

The man took a puff on a cigarette and shrugged. ‘Well, you wouldn’t.’

‘We’ve been here all night, you see,’ said a woman.

Harris turned to see a youngish blonde wearing a parka and a baseball cap. She looked altogether better company than the man, and Harris felt a little flutter of relief in his stomach. For a few moments he had felt certain he was about to be mugged, or worse. ‘What do you want?’ he asked.

‘The question is, what do you want?’ said the smoker. ‘Here, I mean.’

Harris quailed, all his fears resurging. ‘I always come here. I’m jogging. I run along this path every morning.’

‘Ah, well, that explains it,’ said the woman. ‘Tracksuit and trainers, I mean.’

‘I’d best be going,’ stammered Harris, turning to leave.

‘Hold it,’ said the man, stepping neatly into his path. He took a final pull on the last inch of cigarette and then flicked the stub into the undergrowth.

Harris felt a flash of annoyance. ‘Don’t do that.’

‘What?’

‘Throw your cigarette end away like that.’ That was as far as Harris felt able to carry the reprimand. All he wanted was to get away from here now. These two had spoiled his morning, his special place, and he very much wanted to go home. ‘Excuse me.’

‘Not yet, mate,’ the man said, placing his hand on Harris’s chest.

Harris froze. 'Look, I haven't got any money with me. I've nothing for you.'

'We don't want your money,' said the woman. 'We just want a little chat.'

'Yeah,' said the man. It was impossible to ignore his menacing tone. 'A little chat.'

Harris began to shake. 'Please, I just want to go home...'

'But you don't know what it is we want to have a chat about yet,' said the woman, and her voice was as sweet and smooth as honey, in direct contrast with the growling drawl of her companion.

'W-what do you want to talk about?' Harris asked dutifully.

The man leant in close and said very quietly, 'Ghosts.'

'Ghosts?'

'Yeah. You know. Paranormal apparitions, that kind of thing...'

A wave of relief flooded through Harris. At least they weren't muggers. 'I haven't seen any ghosts,' he told them. 'Although they do say these woods are haunted.' A sudden thought came to him, a way to turn the tables. 'Have *you* seen any ghosts?'

'Not a damn thing,' the man said, his shoulders slumping as his whole attitude changed completely from intimidating thug to frustrated ghost-hunter. 'Been here all flaming night and not so much as a spooky sheet has come floating by. Just thought you might've spotted something... anything... unusual.'

Harris smiled and shook his head. 'No, I'm afraid not. I don't actually believe in ghosts. The stories that go around about these woods are just that – stories.'

'What stories would these be, then?' asked the woman. She sounded brisk, almost businesslike, as if she was some kind of professional investigator. She didn't seem so threatening any more, either, just a little brusque. She was shooting black looks at her companion now, as if irritated that he had dropped the pretence of menace.

'Load of rubbish, mostly,' Harris said. 'But I can show you something that might interest you. Not many people know about it.'

He brushed past the man with growing confidence, wading through the wet ferns towards a clump of trees not far from the Old Tree. Harris shared a secret smile with it on the way past.

'What is it?' asked the woman, following, but not enthusiastically, as if she would rather stay out of the undergrowth. 'We've been sitting in the dark and the wet for hours, and we're freezing, so it's going to take something really good to impress us.'

'Well it's not a ghost, obviously,' Harris said. Now that he was back on what he considered his own turf, and the danger of personal assault

seemed to have diminished, his self-assurance was returning. 'But it is still interesting. Well, I think so.'

He pushed aside the low branches of a sapling and stepped into a clearing. In the glimmering dawn light, a dark, oblong shape could be seen standing at the centre. It was no more than head height, perhaps five or six feet, and less than a yard square.

'What is it?' asked the man. 'Looks like a ruddy big gravestone if you ask me.'

'Yes,' agreed Harris. 'I've often thought that. But it isn't. It's pretty old, I think, but there are no markings on it. I think it must be some kind of monument, though.'

It was covered in dark green patches of moss, and the stonework beneath was black with age. The woman walked all around the stone, examining it in detail. There were some weeds sprouting up thickly around the base, and a number of fine cobwebs glistening with the morning dew.

'What's it for?' she asked.

Harris shrugged. 'Damned if I know. It must have been here for years, I should think.'

Somewhere in the forest an owl hooted, and Harris checked his watch. Time to get going; he didn't want to be late for work again. He turned to say goodbye, hoping to make a quick dart into the trees and run for home, when something made him stop in his tracks.

The mist had risen in the clearing, smearing the area and the surrounding trees with a silver film. In the first rays of daylight, filtering through the branches, it looked eerily beautiful; cold yet alluring. The man and the woman stood to one side of the stone, dark silhouettes in the haze, and beyond them Harris had seen a strange figure in the trees.

It moved slowly between the trunks, as pale and grey as the morning mist. Harris blinked, took a few steps forward for a better look, raising a hand to point in the direction of the apparition. The man and the woman turned to look, and they saw it too: the spectral figure of a man drifting through the woods towards them.

Chapter 8

Inscription

Harris watched as the spectral shape stepped into the clearing. The strange figure was wearing clothes that were a century out of date. Harris stood transfixed as the long, rather sorrowful face split into a warm grin.

‘Morning, everyone!’ said the ghost genially. ‘Any luck?’

‘Nothing,’ said the man in the leather coat. ‘Big fat zero on the ghost front, I’m afraid.’

Harris suddenly remembered to breathe, and half choked on the chilly air. The newcomer stepped out of the mist, crunching leaves and twigs underfoot. He was now clearly visible as an ordinary man, somewhat extraordinarily dressed in a long dark jacket and cravat.

‘We were about to give up on you,’ said the woman. ‘Where’ve you been all night?’

The newcomer ignored her, because he had just seen Harris. Harris felt an intense gaze sweep across him in the space of a heartbeat. ‘Who’s your new friend?’

‘We haven’t been properly introduced yet,’ admitted the man in the leather coat. He looked at Harris and jerked a thumb at the newcomer. ‘This is the Doctor. I’m Fitz, and that’s Trix.’

‘Uh, hello,’ said Harris very warily. ‘Look, I’d better be going. I’m running late as it is.’

‘Wait wait wait, don’t go,’ pleaded the Doctor, striding towards Harris. ‘What brings you to this neck of the woods?’

Harris gritted his teeth. ‘As I’ve already told your friends, I come here every morning.’

Fitz said, ‘He was just showing us this.’ He gestured toward the stone. ‘Dunno if it’s significant or not.’

The Doctor darted over to the heavy stone. ‘What’ve you found here, then?’

'I really don't know what it is,' said Harris. 'I pointed it out because I thought you might be interested in it. It's a bit of a mystery, I suppose. But I really can't stay any longer. I've got to get ready for work.'

But the Doctor seemed to have already lost interest in him, turning his full attention to the monument instead. 'Yes, yes, of course,' he murmured. 'Don't hang around on my account. Wait – what's this?'

Despite himself, Harris was intrigued. The Doctor was scratching at the surface of the stone, digging strong, nimble fingers into the moss and accumulated muck. 'There's something under here,' he said. 'An inscription of some sort.'

'It's not very clear,' said Trix, peering at the patch of stone where the Doctor was working.

Harris stepped closer. 'It doesn't say anything,' he told them. 'I've looked before... there are no markings on it at all.'

'Here we are,' said the Doctor, brushing away the last few scraps of green lichen. Faintly visible beneath the grime was a single word, cut into the granite:

DEADSTONE

'Very helpful,' said Trix drily.

'Bit literal, isn't it?' said Fitz.

Harris was about to say that he had never seen any evidence of an inscription before, until he realised that, firstly, he hadn't actually looked very hard for one in the past, and secondly, he could see that all three of them were now utterly absorbed in their study of the old monument. So he took this as his perfect opportunity to leave.

He closed his mouth, turned deliberately on his heel and simply walked away, not even daring to look back. All he could think of was getting home now. As soon as he had made it out of the clearing without being spotted, Harris stated to run. He had to get away. It was one thing showing them the stone; it was quite another having to share his secret place with strangers.

Especially strangers who were looking for ghosts.

'Looks like our friend's scarpered,' said Fitz. 'He's scarpered.'

'Good,' said the Doctor. He fished out a small electronic instrument from his Gladstone bag and, holding it out at arm's length, swept it across the monument once or twice. A couple of small light bulbs mounted into the device flashed rhythmically, and Fitz could see a gauge with a quivering needle.

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a psionic beam locator,’ replied the Doctor, as if that explained everything. He peered intently at the readout and frowned. ‘I had hoped to get some kind of fix on the source, but there’s nothing doing here...’

‘Tell us about it,’ said Trix. ‘We’ve been out here all night and the weirdest thing we’ve seen is the local jogger.’

‘Who’s very worried about being late for work,’ commented Fitz. ‘Wonder what he does?’

‘He’s a schoolteacher,’ said the Doctor, without looking up from his instrument.

‘Schoolteacher? How do you know?’

The Doctor adjusted some dials on the device and turned slowly in a circle, studying the needle in the gauge. ‘Chalk marks on the thumb and index finger of his right hand.’

Fitz gave a rueful shrug, and Trix smiled. ‘How did you get on, anyway?’ she asked the Doctor. ‘At the house, I mean?’

‘Not good. The boy is definitely acting as a focus for some sort of telekinetic force. His mother doesn’t want to believe it’s anything more serious than bad dreams brought on by a few ghost stories and an overactive imagination. I still maintain it’s a psionic field of some sort, and I’m convinced there’s a connection with these woods.’ The Doctor gave his device an experimental shake, as if listening for a loose component. ‘Maybe this thing needs recalibrating. I did cobble it together in a bit of a rush last night...’

Last night, Fitz recalled, had been when the Doctor had decided to plunge them all headlong into another adventure...

The Doctor had been moping around his time and space machine, weighed down by one of the sudden bouts of ennui that sometimes affected him. Mercurial mood swings were not uncommon with the Doctor, but lately he seemed to have become unnecessarily grumpy and distracted. Trix and Fitz had started to avoid him. In a fit of pique, the Doctor had fed a series of random co-ordinates into the TARDIS flight controls and then stretched out full length on a chaise-longue to work his way through a stack of books from the library he claimed never to have read. These included a Venusian translation of Beatrix Potter (‘ridiculous’), *Another Brief History of Time* (‘amusing’), *Quantum Tachyonics in Time Travel* (‘twaddle’), *A Princess of Mars* (signed by the author – ‘To my good friend the Doctor, many thanks’), and the *Blue Peter Thirteenth Book*.

Eventually he had dozed off, a copy of the *Eagle* spread open over his chest. When Fitz had crept back into the console room, the Doctor was

muttering something in his sleep about Peter Rabbit versus the Mekon. Lying in a corner was the splintered remains of a violin, which had been snapped in two and flung across the room the day before with a loud cry of '*Boring!*' Books littered the floor, and an empty tea cup was perched on the rim of the hexagonal control console in the centre of the room.

Fitz knew enough about the TARDIS to know when it had materialised. He checked the instruments and was unsurprised to see that, given free rein, the ship had taken the Doctor straight back to his favourite planet – Earth.

Fitz had woken the Doctor up with a fresh cuppa: lapsang souchong, his usual morning brew, with just a dab of honey. 'What time is it?'

Fitz had no idea. 'Er – time to get up?'

'I mean what *time* is it?' The Doctor had jumped up to examine the control console. 'Aha. Humanian Era, early twenty-first century... Good, good. And it's today as well.'

'Today?'

'Every day is today for us, Fitz.' His old friend had then smiled mischievously, all traces of his earlier sulk gone. But his sky-blue eyes clouded momentarily as he glanced again at the complex array of gauges and dials that covered the console. 'That's odd! The TARDIS has detected a localised psionic field flux...'

Trix, yawning as she came in, had asked what a localised psionic field flux meant, exactly. 'It means, Trix, that we've got to investigate.' He'd patted the console affectionately 'Good old TARDIS! The old girl's found me something *interesting*.'

'And you know what *that* means,' Fitz had muttered.

It had meant, inevitably, a mad dash out into a cold, dark November night, with the Doctor heading off in one direction, leaving his companions with a flask of coffee and terse orders to wait in the woods for any sign of 'paranormal, supernatural or extrascientific phenomena'.

'So what now?' Fitz asked.

The Doctor tossed the beam locator back into his bag. 'We need to keep looking, whatever happens we must pinpoint the source of the psionic field and nullify it.'

'Is it really that much of a threat?' asked Trix.

'Callum McKeown would seem to think so, and I'm sure his mum would agree, once she's opened her eyes to the real world. It's ruining their lives, Trix. That's enough to make it worth our while.' The Doctor smiled. 'And anyway, at the very least it should be interesting. It might even be fun!'

Fitz and Trix exchanged a rueful glance. Experience had taught them that what the Doctor often referred to as 'fun' usually involved a monstrous threat and mortal danger.

'Well, I've had enough fun for one night already,' said Fitz. 'I have an appointment with my bed and I'm already late.'

'Yes, yes,' agreed the Doctor. 'You should both go back to the TARDIS and get some rest.'

'What about you?' asked Trix.

'I'm fine, don't worry. I'll have a nap in a week or two. At the moment this is all far too exciting...'

Trix gazed around the quiet, misty woodland. 'Exciting?'

'Yes, look!' The Doctor pointed at his feet. For a moment Trix couldn't see what he meant, but then she realised that, deep in the leafy mulch that covered the forest floor, things were moving: worms and beetles squirmed and crawled out of the soil in a frenzy of activity.

'That's disgusting,' said Trix, stepping back and checking the ground at her feet.

The Doctor had bent down to pick up something. Trix watched with distaste as he allowed a large centipede to run all over his hand and fingers. The Doctor simply smiled. 'What's up with you, then, my multi-legged friend?'

'If you're planning to mind-meld or something with a centipede,' said Trix, 'please wait until I'm gone.'

'No no no,' replied the Doctor, apparently serious, 'that shouldn't be necessary. It could just be acid rain causing all this fuss.'

'Acid rain?' queried Fitz.

The Doctor returned the centipede to the earth and stood up. 'On this planet rain is naturally acidic, because the water reacts with carbon dioxide in the air. You generally find an average pH of around five-point-six – although it's sometimes slightly higher in Europe, at about four-point-one.'

'Er, why?'

'Sulphur dioxide, mainly – from the burning of antiquated fossil fuels such as coal and oil. Comes out of the chimneys and factories and gets incorporated into the clouds to form acid.'

'Not nice if you're a worm, then.' Fitz looked anxiously at the wriggling specimens at his feet.

'Water droplets in fog or mist can be the worst culprits,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. There was still a heavy skein of mist floating over the ground. 'Hey, look! Here's a big one!' He pointed enthusiastically at a thick, healthy-looking worm probing its way through the dross.

'Eww,' Trix said, folding her arms tightly with a shiver. 'Pardon me if I can't get worked up about worms, but I really need a hot bath and a stiff drink.'

'Mind if I join you?' asked Fitz brightly, before he caught her withering look and added, 'For the drink, I mean...'

The Doctor was stalking around the stone monument, staring at the ground. His long face wore a dark frown. As far as he was concerned, his friends were no longer there.

Chapter 9

The Travellers

Bernard Harris went straight upstairs for his shower, tearing out his track-suit as he went. Despite the cold weather he was feeling hot and sweaty after the run back. In the bathroom mirror his skin looked red and blotchy. His dark eyebrows were fastened in a frown over his slightly prominent nose and thin-lipped mouth. The severe expression was matched by his mood.

Five minutes under the shower helped to slow down his pulse and he began to collect his thoughts. He had to get his nerves back under control. Those people in the woods had been looking for something, that much was certain.

He dressed quickly, his eyes fixed on nothing as he turned the events of the morning over and over in his mind. Had he managed to divert their attention successfully? Showing them the old stone was a good idea but it wouldn't occupy them for long. The man – Fitz – had said they were looking for ghosts, although Harris wasn't sure he really believed it. But they were looking for *something* all right.

Harris pulled on his old brown corduroy jacket, picked up his briefcase and grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl on the way out. That would have to do for breakfast.

He had a day's work ahead of him and he had to concentrate, but he couldn't get those three strange people out of his mind. They were going to be trouble, he knew it. He felt his hands beginning to shake again as he locked the front door behind him.

'I wish I was dead,' said Hazel McKeown. 'I certainly look it.'

Her reflection stared back at her in disgust, dark-eyed with tiredness, little cracks appearing at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Oh no, she thought, not *already*. *I look like my mother*.

Cal and Jade were ready for school, which was nothing short of a miracle. Jade looked sulky and disinterested, so Hazel knew she was all right. Cal looked pale but, as usual, relieved that it was morning again and he had a whole day ahead of him. Hazel could sympathise with that feeling.

'OK,' she said, as brightly as she could manage. 'You'll do.'

'Sharon Hargreaves wears a thong,' Jade said. 'And make-up.'

'Sharon Hargreaves is no better than she ought to be,' Hazel retorted, and then thought: *I even sound like my mother now*. 'Wasn't she the one who the Headmaster caught smoking last year and she said, "So what, it's a free country"?''

'Yeah,' smirked Jade.

'Well there you are then. And you can wipe that smile off your face. No make-up, no thongs, and that's final.'

'What about at the weekend?'

'We'll see!'

'You wear make-up.'

'I *have* to! Can we talk about this another time?' Hazel pushed Jade's school bag into her arms. 'You're going to be late. Have a good day and be careful.' She kissed her and then turned to Cal. 'Have you got your homework?'

'Yeah.'

'Good.'

'Mum, are you going to take me back to Dr Green?'

'Er, no. I don't know. I don't think so.' Hazel hated being put on the spot like this. 'Why, do you want to see him again?'

'No!' Cal pulled his rucksack over his shoulder and kissed her quickly. 'I want to see the doctor who came last night. Will he come back?'

'I hope not!'

'Didn't you like him?'

'Not really.' Hazel said this automatically, but in truth the Doctor had been difficult to dislike. At the same time, however, there had been something ever-so-slightly *scary* about him: as if, just behind him, there was something awful about to follow. And Hazel had enough awful things to contend with at the moment.

She opened the front door. 'Take care, and I'll see you both tonight. And remember: absolutely no going near Old Man Crawley's place. And you're to come home together. Cal, if you get out early then you're to wait for Jade, clear?'

He turned around and mock-saluted her as they waked up the path. She smiled for them and waved cheerfully, although she felt washed up and empty inside.

‘Come on slowcoach,’ she heard Jade calling to her brother. She saw the wisp of Cal’s reply in the cold air, but the sound was lost to the distance. Hazel closed the door sadly.

Before she left for work herself, Hazel went back upstairs to Cal’s room. The ugly split in the wood of the doorway, where the Doctor had barged through, was a sharp reminder of the night’s events. Without a doubt it had been the worst night so far; if she took Cal back to the doctor’s now then she wouldn’t know where to begin. But she knew where it would end – a psychiatrist’s couch. Or at least a child psychologist. Would that really be so bad? She had to consider it, if only because she couldn’t stand any more nights like the last one.

Hazel retrieved the strip of sleeping pills from Cal’s bin. She looked at them for a long moment and then put them back in his bedside drawer.

The stranger had wandered through the trees for quite some time, looking at everything: the ground, the roots, the bark and the leaf-bare tangle overhead. At one point he stood for several minutes and stared up through the dark canopy of branches, gazing at the sky beyond as it slowly gave up the night and surrendered, albeit reluctantly, to the day. Towards the east, a weak sunlight had thrown streaks of dirty pink across the clouds, but only for a few sorrowful moments. The sky quickly turned into a blanket of grey from horizon to horizon.

The mist had evaporated with the sunrise, leaving the forest floor cruelly exposed; black and moist and redolent. A couple of rats disappeared into the undergrowth with barely a rustle. The man had sat down on a fallen tree trunk and started to fiddle with some sort of electronic device. It looked home-made. He used a silver tool from the inside pocket of his velvet coat to make a series of adjustments, but he never seemed quite happy with the result. Eventually he put the thing away and started walking again.

Making his way through the trees, he paused occasionally and crouched down to examine the earth. He did this several times until he reached the Old Tree.

‘You can come out now,’ he said in a loud voice.

After a pause, the youth stepped out from behind another tree and stood with his hands in his pockets without saying anything. He wore grubby trainers and jeans and an ex-army combat jacket. He had dirty blond hair tied back in a ponytail, and a number of metal studs in his face – lip, nostril and eyebrow. He looked at the man with an expression of studied truculence.

‘I’m the Doctor,’ said the man. ‘Who are you?’

The youth shrugged. 'Nobody.'

'Nobody's nobody,' the Doctor said sternly. 'You've been following me – skilfully, it has to be said, but not skilfully enough – for the last hour. I've been waiting for you to introduce yourself but I've run out of patience.'

The youth shrugged again, as if he wasn't really bothered. But his curiosity got the better of him. 'How did you know I was here? Did you hear me?'

The man gave a silent *'huh!'* and a small cloud of vapour drifted from his mouth. 'I saw your breath.'

The youth nodded but refused to look impressed. 'What's a doctor doin' here, anyway?'

'What does it look like?'

'Like you're lookin' for somethin'.'

'Spot on. Now – what are you doing here? Besides watching me?'

'Nothin'.'

'Glad to hear it. What did you say your name was?'

'Lewis,' said the youth, before he remembered that he hadn't already given his name.

'Pleased to meet you, Lewis.' The Doctor's manner was suddenly warm again. Lewis found the change startling, but hardly had time to think about it before the Doctor added, 'Come and tell me what you think of this...'

He led Lewis quickly back to the centre of the clearing where the stone monument stood. In the grey daylight it appeared smaller, slightly reduced, less mysterious. Just an old sandstone block standing upright. The Doctor walked around it, trailing his fingers over the inscription.

'Deadstone,' Lewis read in a whisper.

The Doctor watched the youth closely. 'Mean anything to you?'

'Should it?'

'You know it does,' said the Doctor sharply. 'I can see it in your eyes!'

Lewis said, 'I know these woods. I practically live in 'em.' He eyed the monument for a short while, but he didn't touch it. 'This thing's a memorial stone.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'I rather thought as much.'

Lewis sniffed. 'Me uncle says 'e saw a ghost 'ere, once.'

'Really?'

'Yeah,' Lewis said with sudden enthusiasm. 'Do you believe in ghosts?'

'I've learned to keep an open mind.'

'My uncle, 'e believes in ghosts. The one 'e saw drove 'im mad, it did.'

'That sounds awful. Is he all right now?'

Lewis shrugged.

'Can I meet him?' asked the Doctor.

Jade McKeown sat at the back of the classroom. While the boys argued and fought about football, and the girls chatted eagerly about *Pop Idol* and *I'm a Celebrity...*, Jade sat and mulled over her home life. Cal was, she considered, going too far with these so-uncool nightmares. For one thing, it was disturbing her mum. She was short-tempered and unhappy and Jade knew this all stemmed from Cal and his stupid inability to fall asleep and stay asleep like any normal kid.

Jade took out her purse and opened it. Oblivious to the clamour of 10C around her, she looked at the dog-eared photo she kept of her dad: the one where he was smiling, with his arms around her mum. A baby girl stared out of the picture, wedged on her mother's knee, isolated from the future in the safety of a snapshot. Happy times, they must have been. They had been on a holiday, Jade had found out some years later, in Scarborough. The first break her mum and dad had after they'd been married. Just before Jade's first birthday. Her dad looked tanned and fit and healthy, with short-cropped blond hair and an energetic smile. Jade wished her mum had been smiling in the photo as well, but in this glimpse of an unremembered past, Hazel McKeown had only ever worn the same look of wary bemusement.

Jade touched the picture of her father and wondered where he was now, what he was doing, what he even looked like. Her mum had short hair in the picture; maybe her dad had grown his as well in the intervening years.

A sudden commotion distracted her as everyone stopped the noise and quickly found their seats. The clatter died as the classroom door opened and the teacher walked in.

'Settle down everyone,' said Mr Harris.

Jade stuffed her purse back in her bag and smiled at him. He caught her eye and smiled back.

'Right then,' he announced, dumping his briefcase heavily on the desk. 'Let's see who's forgotten their homework.'

Lewis lived in a caravan parked in the corner of a field, not far from the woods. He led the Doctor over a wide expanse of open park land, across the corner of a farmer's field and then down a gentle hill to the site. This was actually a piece of disputed land – not quite wasteland, not quite farmland. It was neglected and overgrown and only accessible by a sturdy 4×4 from the nearby A362. There was a copse of trees, bare and forlorn, behind the caravan. Parked alongside was a battered, muddy blue Land Rover with a cracked windscreen.

'Uncle Tommo!' called Lewis as they approached.

At the front of the caravan was a large, thickset man in a padded plaid shirt and faded denims. He looked up as Lewis and the Doctor approached.

'This is Uncle Tommo,' Lewis told the Doctor.

'Good morning,' the Doctor said. 'Or is it afternoon already? I can never keep track.'

Uncle Tommo said nothing. A pair of suspicious black eyes glittered beneath bushy grey brows and a filthy woollen hat. There was a two-week growth of iron-coloured stubble over his jaw and neck.

'This is the Doctor,' Lewis told him. 'He was in the woods, looking at the memorial.'

Uncle Tommo spat something wet and sticky on the ground by his heavy Wellington boots and sniffed. Ignoring both Lewis and the Doctor, he turned back to what he had been doing when they arrived: lifting a large butane gas cylinder on to the A-frame at the front of the caravan.

'Don't need a bloody doctor,' said Uncle Tommo. He had a voice like gravel coated in treacle. He hefted the big steel canister with one beefy hand and dropped it into position with a clang.

'I'm not that kind of doctor,' explained the Doctor.

Uncle Tommo twisted the gas tube into place on the cylinder and spun open the valve. 'What kind of doctor are you then?'

'Hard to say. I'm actually a scientist. Physics, chemistry and all that. And an inventor. And an explorer. I'm an expert swordsman, I can play the violin, and I'm a poet but I don't know it.' He shrugged. 'Generally it's easier to just say Doctor.'

Uncle Tommo wiped his bands on a rag and looked the newcomer up and down. 'Yer look like a poofter.'

'Above all, said the Doctor, 'I'm a traveller.'

'That's as mebbe. Still don't know what yer business is with us.'

Lewis said, 'The Doctor was lookin' round in the woods, Uncle Tommo.'

'Tree doctor, then.' Uncle Tommo allowed himself a quick smile at this, showing a number of missing teeth. The smile faded as he turned his attention back to his nephew. 'Thought yer said somethin' about the memorial.'

'The Doctor wants to know more about it,' said Lewis. 'I thought 'e could ask you.'

Uncle Tommo said nothing. He picked up the empty gas canister and hefted it over to the Land Rover. 'This needs takin' back, Lew. Yull 'ave t'see to it in the mornin'.'

'Yeah, right. But 'what about, y'know, the memorial...?'

Uncle Tommo threw the cylinder into the back of the Land Rover and slammed the door shut. 'Y'know I don't talk about that.' When he spoke, there was an unmistakable edge to his voice. He avoided making any eye contact with either Lewis or the Doctor.

The Doctor said, 'I don't want to cause any trouble.'

‘Hmph!’ said Uncle Tommo, heading back for the caravan. ‘If yer been messin’ wi’ that stone, you’ll be causin’ trouble already.’

‘Really? What kind of trouble?’

The big man stopped and fixed the Doctor with a black stare. ‘More trouble than you can handle.’

‘Can you be more specific?’

‘Aye.’ Uncle Tommo reached inside the open caravan door and pulled out a heavy shotgun. The butt had been sawn away, but there was no doubting the efficacy of the double-barrels that now pointed at the Doctor’s legs. ‘It’s bad, that stone, it’s always been bad, an’ bad things’ll come of it if you poke yer nose round it. Geddit?’

‘Perfectly.’ The Doctor kept his eyes on the man’s trigger finger, watching for the slightest sign of movement. ‘At least, I understand that you don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Dead right. So, if yer want to walk away from ’ere, start now. Otherwise yer leavin’ in an ambulance. Geddit?’

‘Goddit.’

‘You’d best go, Doctor,’ said Lewis nervously. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t think...’

‘It’s all right, I’m going.’

‘I’ll show you the way back.’

‘It’s quite all right, I’ve an excellent sense of direction.’ The Doctor turned and walked slowly away.

Lewis caught up with him as he headed up the hill towards the farm. ‘Sorry about that...’

‘Don’t be!’ The Doctor seemed genuinely happy. ‘At least now I know I’m on the right track.’

‘For what?’

‘That’s what I’m trying to find out.’ They stopped at the top of the hill. When they looked back down at the caravan, they could still see Uncle Tommo watching them, still holding the shotgun. ‘The ghost he saw must’ve really frightened him. When did you say it happened?’

‘Years ago. Uncle Tommo always calls it his “hateful memory”.’

‘It must be, to make him reach for a gun like that.’ The Doctor stroked his chin. ‘Is there anyone else who might be able to help?’

Lewis shrugged. ‘You might try Old Man Crawley. He’s been round here the longest, probably. Lives on ’is own, down by the school.’

‘Yes, his name’s cropped up already. I think I’ll pay him a visit.’ The Doctor hesitated. ‘This Old Man Crawley – he’s not likely to be armed as well, is he?’

‘Nah,’ said Lewis. ‘But ’e’s got a right mean dog you might wanna watch out for. They reckon it’s rabid.’

'Lovely.'

Chapter 10

Home Time

Cal was waiting at the school gate for his sister. He was looking morose and cold, huddled up in his anorak, the red tip of his nose poking out of the hood.

‘All right, Face-ache,’ said Jade, ‘let’s go.’ She walked straight past him and carried on, not looking to see if he was keeping up. But she could hear his shoes scuffing and slipping along behind her as they crossed the road and stepped through a gutter full of wet autumn leaves.

There were hundreds of kids milling around, and some parents, and quite a lot of cars, too, many trying to pull away from the kerb after picking people up. It was busy and Jade had to keep a discreet eye on her brother to make sure he didn’t do something totally stupid like get run over or abducted.

‘Don’t walk so fast,’ Cal moaned. ‘This bag weighs a ton.’

‘You shouldn’t bring all your books home with you. There are lockers, even for Year Seven.’

‘Someone’s bust my padlock.’

Jade huffed and quickened her pace. Cal moaned and struggled to keep up. ‘Wait a minute, this way goes past Old Man Crawley’s...’

‘So?’

‘Mum said not to go past his place.’

‘She said *you* weren’t to stop and talk to the old fool,’ Jade corrected him. It wasn’t strictly true but she was walking too fast for him to argue back. ‘It’ll be all right if we just walk straight past.’

They trudged up the grassy slope that led away from the school towards Old Man Crawley’s cottage. Cal’s shoes slid in the wet and he stumbled. Jade reached the top and looked back down impatiently. ‘Hurry up. It’s freezing.’

‘It’s slippery!’

Jade felt a pang of sympathy. She squashed it back down but said, 'It'll be OK. Just stick with me.'

'I don't want to get Mum cross with me tonight,' Cal explained as he joined her. It was quite exposed up here and a chill wind blustered from across the nearby woods, flicking crisp brown leaves all around them. '*Professor X* is on UK Gold tonight and I don't want to miss it.'

'Mum doesn't like you watching that rubbish anyway,' Jade retorted. 'It gives you nightmares.'

'Does not!'

'Come on!' Jade started down towards the lane that led past Old Man Crawley's house. There were already a few kids on their way home down here, because it was a handy short cut. Avoiding it completely meant an extra ten-minute walk and it was *freezing*. Up ahead, they could already see the cottage – a ramshackle affair that should probably have been demolished years ago. It stood on its own among a number of bare, bony-looking trees.

'You could always video it,' Jade suggested.

'And when would I get the chance to watch it?'

'Tomorrow night, after school. Mum won't be home, you'd have a good half hour.'

Cal nodded, considering. Then his face brightened. 'Yeah!'

Jade sniffed. 'See, I'm not all bad, am I?'

Cal caught up with her and together they approached Old Man Crawley's cottage. As they drew near, they could hear his dog barking madly, although there was no sign of the old man himself.

'Filthy thing's probably caught a rat,' said Jade.

'Something's definitely got him going,' agreed Cal, who had never heard the thing barking as furiously as this. A minute later they had drawn level with the cottage, and there was still no sight of Old Man Crawley. Cal felt a little disappointed, although he supposed it would be easier to pass by without stopping now.

There was a sudden increase in the ferocity of the dog's yapping and someone backed into view. Cal recognised him instantly. 'Look! It's *him*. From last night!'

Jade watched in amazement as a long-haired man in a dark green velvet coat backed slowly towards them. He was inside Old Man Crawley's garden, retreating inch by inch from the snapping little beast in front of him.

'Good dog,' the Doctor was saying. He was standing stiffly upright, with his hands held down by his sides. Any attempt to reach out to the dog

would probably cost him some fingers. 'Good dog... It's all right, I'm going now...'

He backed up to the gate and fumbled behind him for the latch with his left hand. In that moment of distraction, the dog went for him, moving in a blur of snapping teeth. The Doctor lashed out with his foot and caught the beast a stinging blow across the nose. It yelped and then leaped back at him in a paroxysm of bloodlust, but the Doctor had already vaulted the gate to safety. The dog crashed into the rotten wood and tried to chew his way through, growling and snarling.

'What a charming pet!' said the Doctor, brushing his hands and glaring at the snapping creature with distaste. It kept hurling itself at the gate, and the old wood shook with each assault.

'What were you doing in there?' asked Cal. 'That thing's flipping mad.'

'I'd noticed.' The Doctor suddenly smiled at Jade and Cal. 'Well, good afternoon to you both!' Then his face darkened. 'I thought your mum told you not to come near this place.'

'It's cool,' said Jade. She raised her voice so that he could hear her over the noise of the dog. 'I'm taking Cal straight home. Relax.'

The dog began to leap up in the air, barking and biting at nothing, but almost managing to clear the top of the gate. Every time it appeared over the top, it thrust its evil little jaws out at the Doctor and tried to tear a lump out of him. It showed no sign of tiring, and with each frenzied leap it managed to get closer, saliva dripping from its vicious yellow teeth.

'Excuse me a moment,' said the Doctor. He took a metal instrument from his jacket pocket, made a brisk adjustment, and then held it out towards the dog. As the animal made its next leap, the device gave a sudden high-pitched whine and the dog fell back with a startled '*yip!*' It landed with a thud and lay still.

'Just stunned,' said the Doctor, returning the device to his pocket with a satisfied nod.

'What was that?' asked Cal, impressed.

'Sonic screwdriver,' said the Doctor. 'Dogs hate it.'

Jade peered cautiously over the gate and saw the dog lying with its legs in the air and its tongue hanging out. 'Are you sure he'll be OK?'

'Positive,' the Doctor replied. 'Given time.'

'Old Man Crawley'll go mad,' Cal pointed out. 'What were you doing in there anyway?'

'Actually, I was looking for the mysterious Mr Crawley myself. But there's no sign of him anywhere. I went around the back of the cottage for a look and found our drooling friend here.'

'He's called Milton.'

'After the poet, or the disinfectant?'

Milton was starting to snore gently. All three of them peered over the gate for a closer look. 'There,' said the Doctor. 'You could tickle his tum now, if you like.'

Cal gasped. 'Not likely!'

With a grin, the Doctor reached down and gave the short white fur a scratch. Milton twitched violently and the Doctor hurriedly withdrew his hand. 'He'll be fine,' he said. He turned back to the children. 'Good day at school?'

'All right,' said Cal.

'I thought I'd pop in and see your mum again, if that's all right.' Cal didn't hesitate. 'Sure. She'd like that.'

'Do you think so?'

'Er, no, probably not. But come anyway.'

'I intend to. In fact, I'll come with you now, if you like. You can show me the way.'

Jade said, 'It's not far: straight down this lane and then across the road. Cut through the entry and you're on Osbourne Avenue.'

'Number seventy-seven,' recalled the Doctor.

'That's the one.' Jade smiled brightly. 'If you take Cal home, can I make a quick trip to my friend's? She only lives over there.'

The Doctor looked unsure. 'You shouldn't let your brother go off with a stranger, you know.'

'But you're not a stranger, you're a doctor.'

'Even so...'

'I'll be half an hour, max,' Jade insisted. 'Please. It's my friend; her mum and dad have just split up and I'd really like to see her. *Please.*'

'We could come with you,' suggested the Doctor.

'No way! She'd freak!'

'All right, we'll wait for you here.'

'No chance,' protested Cal. 'It's absolutely freezing. My Mum'll kill you if I catch a cold.'

'And besides,' added Jade quickly 'what would she say if she knew you were both hanging around outside Old Man Crawley's?'

'You two are ganging up on me,' said the Doctor.

'Yeah, we're the biggest school bullies you'll ever meet,' agreed Jade. 'So watch out.' She suddenly rummaged in her bag and produced her mobile phone. 'See? Got my moby. No worries.'

'Very responsible of you, I'm sure.' The Doctor sighed. 'All right. Half an hour. See you back at your mum's house.'

'Great!' Jade grinned and waved, already running. 'See ya!'

'Boy,' said Cal as they watched her go. 'Mum is going to be so mad with you.'

Uncle Tommo was still in a foul temper.

'You stupid idiot!' he snarled, as soon as Lewis poked his head inside the caravan. 'What were yer thinkin' of? Bringin' someone 'ere like that?'

'I thought he could help!' said Lewis.

'Help!' spat Uncle Tommo. 'What with?'

Lewis sat down on the bench seat at the opposite end of the caravan. Uncle Tommo filled the other end, crouched over the little table, where he had been trying to fix the thermostat on the gas fire. His tools were scattered across the Formica, along with a bottle of Scotch and his shotgun. Lewis licked his lips. 'Well, y'know... with yer problem.'

'I ain't got no problem, you damn fool!' Uncle Tommo took a swig from the bottle. 'Except you, of course. Talk to anyone, you will, you soft bugger.'

'He was a doctor,' muttered Lewis despondently.

Uncle Tommo snorted. 'Doctor! He was no doctor, you fool.'

'But he seemed OK, Uncle Tommo. Honest. Like he was one of us, almost.'

Uncle Tommo glowered back at his nephew, his little eyes bloodshot. 'He weren't no traveller, either. See them clothes he had on? Good stuff, they were. That coat were real velvet. No, he weren't no traveller – unless he come from a circus or somethin'.'

'He wanted to know about the memorial.'

Uncle Tommo took another pull on the Scotch. As he put the bottle back down, Lewis noticed that his uncle's hand was trembling.

'The Doctor found writin' on the stone,' Lewis said. 'An inscription or somethin'.'

'Writin'?' Uncle Tommo sat up at this news, and a dangerous spark had appeared in his eyes. 'What did it say?'

'Deadstone.'

Uncle Tommo said nothing. He sat and stared into space for a long moment, and then a sudden spasm seemed to run through him, and, with a savage roar, he swept the bottle of Scotch off the table with the back of his hand. The bottle flew down the length of the caravan and shattered behind Lewis's head. Lewis had ducked instinctively, but felt the cold spirit and broken glass splash over his back. As he got to his feet, however, he found Uncle Tommo bearing down on him, his big meaty hands reaching for his throat. Lewis was lifted into the air and slammed against the wardrobe door with enough force to split it in two. Lewis tried to fight, but it was no good. He was choking, and through the red mist of his fear he could see

the look in his uncle's eyes: deranged and murderous. Lewis clawed at the massive hands as they gripped his neck, but Uncle Tommo was incredibly strong. Lewis felt his vision blur as he began to pass out.

Then, with a sudden sob, Uncle Tommo turned and hurled Lewis clean out of the caravan door. Lewis felt the world spin overhead and then landed on his back. He slid through the mud until he came to a rest against an old, broken washing machine.

Quickly he staggered upright, dizzy and terrified, expecting another assault. But Uncle Tommo was sitting in the doorway of the van, crumpled up against the cooker, hands over his face as he wept.

Chapter 11

Dinner

Hazel had been thinking about the Doctor all day.

When Cal had asked her about him that morning, her casual dismissal had been instinctive, almost defensive: *no way do I want to see that man again.*

But there was no denying there was something about him... something unusual, extraordinary. And not just in the way he dressed. Something in his eyes, perhaps...

If only he hadn't started talking more like someone out of *Professor X* than *Holby City*. The planet Doofus, indeed! Or whatever. Of course, it all seemed a bit ridiculous now. Perhaps the outer-space stuff had just been a bad joke. Hazel gave a lot of credit to alternative medicine, but he was just too alternative for comfort.

But he did have a lovely voice.

Stop thinking like that! He is *not* going to come back and furthermore you do not *want* him to come back. Cal has a serious problem and it should not be dealt with by a bloody *crank*. All right, so this 'Doctor' person had handled the situation with Cal reasonably well – the *immediate* situation. But she'd panicked last night, and anybody – any other adult who wasn't emotionally involved in the problem – would have been able to come in and do the right thing.

Yes, Hazel thought to herself on the bus on the way home. That had to be it.

With a heavy sigh Hazel tried to turn her mind to other things. Mundane things, more important things, like what on Earth she was going to do for tea tonight. She couldn't try fish fingers on Jade again. There were some individual pizzas in the freezer, perhaps she could put them under the grill. Or even a couple of those microwave dinners she'd brought home last night. But didn't they have to be defrosted first?

When Hazel finally arrived home that evening, she had actually forgotten about the Doctor, so it came as quite a shock to find him standing in her kitchen.

She stood in the doorway and stared, feeling a mixture of expressions contorting her face: surprise, confusion, fear, anger, and *what* was that delicious smell?

'Baked salmon,' the Doctor told her quickly. He was standing by the cooker, surrounded by pots and pans and wearing an apron. 'With parsley sauce.'

Hazel turned to Cal, who was sitting at the kitchen table doing his homework. One unbelievable sight after another, she thought.

'Close your mouth, Mum,' Cal advised.

'What the *hell*...' she said, slowly and carefully so there could be no misunderstanding, 'are you doing in my kitchen?' She directed this at the Doctor, who was gently stirring something in a pan.

'Cooking dinner,' he replied.

Hazel blinked. 'Did I hear you say salmon?'

'Foil-baked. Five more minutes and it'll be perfect.' He smacked his lips theatrically. 'Just time for you to change. And don't forget to wash your hands.'

'What?' Hazel glanced back and forth between the Doctor and her son as they both exchanged a grin.

'Cal, get the table ready, would you?' asked the Doctor.

Cal nodded and gathered his stuff together, but Hazel stopped him quickly, banging the flat of her hand down on the paper. 'Wait one second. That is not homework.'

'It's a picture,' said Cal. 'For you.'

Hazel looked at it. It didn't look like anything, certainly no trees dripping blood, but the colours were amazing. Vibrant and perfect and almost glowing, in a beautiful kaleidoscope pattern. 'Cal, that's marvellous,' she said, truthfully. 'How did you...?'

'It's the Doctor's special felt-tip pen,' he said, holding up a thick marker. 'It can do any colour you can think of. Look!' He took a blank piece of paper and drew across it with the marker. A thick stripe of colour appeared, first red, then orange, the yellow then green and blue and then a whole slew of colours Hazel wasn't able to identify. All with one line from the same pen. 'He's borrowed it to me,' Cal added.

'Lent it,' Hazel corrected him automatically.

'It's the only felt-tip you'll ever need,' the Doctor said. 'And it'll never run out.'

'Mum, did you hear that? An everlasting felt-tip! Cool!'

Hazel ground her teeth. 'Cal, pack your things up, *now*. Then go upstairs and wash your hands.' Cal recognised that tone. She watched him go and then turned towards the Doctor. 'Get out of my house, right away, or I'll call the police.'

'Oh, not that again, please...'

'Try me.'

'There's one problem,' said the Doctor. 'This parsley sauce will be ready in exactly one minute and it would be such a shame to waste it. Can't you wait until we've eaten and then call the police?'

Hazel snatched up the phone from its cradle on the worktop. She switched it on and checked for the dial tone, just in case the Doctor had already disconnected it. 'I'll count to three. If you're not going out of my front door by then, I dial 999. One.'

'Wait wait wait...'

'Two.'

'Listen to me –'

'Three. Oh, the sauce –' Hazel pointed with the phone at the pan, where a thick creamy sauce was started to boil over.

The Doctor whirled and deftly removed the saucepan from the ring. He gave a hiss of pain and sucked his finger.

'Are you all right?' Hazel heard herself ask.

'Just a splash, it's nothing.' The Doctor sucked his finger again, a little more appreciatively. 'Actually, that's *very* good.'

'Is dinner ready yet?' asked Cal. 'I'm starving.'

Hazel stood there, with her coat still on and the phone in her hand, as her son began to lay the table. It was something she had never seen before. Under the Doctor's quiet instruction, Cal set out six place mats around the dining table, and then the appropriate cutlery – all in the correct places.

She felt the phone lifted gently out of her fingers, and when she turned to look, the Doctor was replacing it with a glass of sherry. 'You're going to need it,' he said.

Damn right, she thought. And took a large sip. 'Where's Jade?' she croaked as Cal strolled back into the kitchen.

'She went to visit a friend,' he said.

'What friend?' Hazel found her suspicions instantly roused. 'You were supposed to walk home with her!'

'I did! Some of the way.'

Hazel's voice hardened. '*Some* of the way?'

'I think I can explain,' said the Doctor.

Hazel took a deep breath, without ever releasing him from her iron gaze. 'You have clearly *never* had a teenage daughter, Doctor.'

The Doctor looked as if he was about to argue the point when the doorbell rang.

'If that's her then there's going to be hell to pay,' snapped Hazel, storming out of the kitchen. Halfway to the front door she realised she was still wearing her coat and holding a half-drunk glass of sherry.

'Allow me,' said the Doctor as he swept past and opened the door.

To Hazel's astonishment a man and a woman stepped straight in, saying hello to the Doctor as if they knew him well.

The man was scruffy, wearing jeans, an old leather jacket and a four-day beard. The woman was altogether smarter: well-cut trousers, a brand new puffer jacket and a stylish baseball cap over neat blonde hair.

'This is Fitz and Trix,' announced the Doctor. 'My associates.'

'Hi,' said Fitz, waving a hand as he looked around the living room. 'Mmm, something smells good.'

'Hello,' smiled Trix. 'Pleased to meet you, Mrs McKeown.'

Hazel found herself shaking the woman's hand. 'Associates?'

'Nurse MacAlister, if you want to be very formal about it,' said Trix. 'Though I'd rather you weren't. Trix will do just fine.'

Alarm bells rang in Hazel's head. She means *psychiatric* nurse, she thought. *They've come for Cal.*

'You're just in time for dinner,' the Doctor was saying. 'Ditch your coats and sit down.'

Hazel knocked back the rest of her sherry. 'Give me another one of those, would you?' she asked the Doctor.

Jade phoned on her mobile to say she would eat at her friend's house: pizza, so she wouldn't miss baked salmon at all. Hazel didn't even try to argue. She was having enough difficulty dealing with the beautiful and very civilised meal the Doctor had prepared. He made sure everyone knew that it was what he called a *classic* English parsley sauce, made with freshly chopped herbs, cream and lemon juice. 'But it's the black peppercorns that really make it.'

'That was perfect,' said Fitz later, pushing back his empty plate. 'Thanks, Doc.'

'Yes, it was lovely,' Hazel admitted. 'Not to mention something of a surprise.' She had genuinely enjoyed the meal, and the white table wine that accompanied it. To her amusement she was beginning to feel rather mellow.

'It's the peppercorns,' explained the Doctor with a smile. 'Works every time.'

'No, I didn't mean that. I actually didn't expect to see you again. I still don't know what you're doing here.'

'Yes, you do,' the Doctor said levelly, his eyes fixed on Hazel as he spoke. 'Cal will have another bad night tonight. And another tomorrow night. And the night after that. And each night it will get worse. Until...'

Hazel felt Cal's hand find her own and she squeezed it. 'Until what?'

'I wouldn't like to say.'

Hazel put an arm around her son. 'You're trying to frighten us.'

'I don't need to,' the Doctor replied. 'You're frightened already. You're frightened of what tonight will bring. You, Hazel, are frightened of what is happening to your son. And you're frightened of us.'

'Whatever gave you that idea? Three complete strangers inviting themselves into my house?' Hazel sat back. 'All right, so you're not armed robbers. But *what* are you?'

'We're here to help,' the Doctor said.

Hazel refused to give in too easily. 'How? Another prescription for sherbet lemons?'

'I'm not sure yet,' replied the Doctor, 'if you want the truth.'

Hazel raised a warning hand. 'OK, but let's just keep it simple. I'm very down-to-earth.'

The Doctor nodded. 'All right. As I said, Cal will have another bad night tonight. At this stage I don't think I can prevent that. But I want to observe the process as it happens, and, if possible, minimise its effects. And I want to try to establish the actual cause.'

'Mum, I want the nightmares to stop,' said Cal. 'I'm tired of them. I'm tired of going to bed afraid.'

'I know, sweetheart,' she said, biting her lip. 'Me too.' Hazel was starting to feel the usual evening panic building inside her. And she knew there was nothing she could do, nothing at all. The terrible sensation of things being out of control was growing, not only night after night, but hour after hour. With an effort she forced down the bilious fear in her chest, and then turned back to the Doctor and his friends. 'Listen, I don't pretend to understand what's going on here. I just want what's best for my children, and I don't think I have much choice at the moment but to trust you – just a little.' She took a deep, calming breath. 'There will, however, have to be some rules.'

'Go on,' said the Doctor.

'First, I don't want you scaring Cal any more than he already is. Second, I certainly don't want you raising his hopes unfairly. Do I make myself clear so far?'

'Yes.'

'And third?' prompted Fitz.

'I can call the whole thing off any time I like.' Hazel looked at each of them to ensure their agreement.

Both Fitz and Trix turned to look at the Doctor, who simply nodded. 'Of course.'

'Fine.' With a trembling hand Hazel started to pour herself another glass of wine, but then thought better of it. Tempted as she was to get very drunk as quickly as possible, she thought it would be best to keep a clear head. Well, a reasonably clear head. 'I'll make us some coffee.'

'Good idea,' said the Doctor, getting to his feet with her. 'Fitz and Trix can do the dishes.'

'I certainly will not,' said Trix.

'Whoa,' said Fitz. 'I have a rubber glove allergy, y'know...'

'Definitely not part of our job description.'

The Doctor looked scandalised. 'You just can't get the staff these days. Never mind, I'll do them myself.'

'I'll help,' volunteered Cal.

'Great!' said the Doctor. 'We'll have them done in no time. I'll wash, you dry. And I'll show you all the tricks and short cuts your mum'll never notice.'

Hazel laughed despite herself. 'Hey, I'll be checking them afterwards.' She turned back to Trix, who was helping herself to more wine. 'Cal's never washed a dish in his life.'

'The Doctor has a way of getting people to do things they wouldn't normally contemplate,' Trix said. Hazel thought she could detect a slightly rueful tone.

'Mind if I smoke?' asked Fitz, pulling a crumpled packet of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of his shirt.

'Not if you're in the garden,' answered Hazel, pointing at the back door. Looking slightly disappointed, Fitz shrugged and excused himself.

Hazel and Trix watched the Doctor and Cal start the dishes, which soon developed into a foam fight. The Doctor admitted defeat only when his head and face were covered in fluffy white foam and everyone was laughing. Trix said he looked like Father Christmas. Hazel shook her head and threw him a hand towel.

'What is going to happen to Cal?' Hazel asked Trix, when they both had a cup of coffee in front of them. 'It must be something bad for three of you to turn up like this. At first I thought you were going to take him away.'

'Of course not,' Trix assured her 'But we do want to monitor him tonight. The Doctor's keen to find out what's causing the nightmares.'

‘I know. He tried to find out last night, but it didn’t work. In fact it made things worse.’ Hazel sipped her coffee and looked directly at Trix. ‘I’m serious: I don’t want any harm to come to my son.’

‘Believe me, your son couldn’t be in better hands. The Doctor is an expert in this kind of stuff.’

‘He seems a bit... eccentric.’ Hazel watched the Doctor as he did the washing up. He was still wearing the stiff-collared shirt and cravat, with a rather old-fashioned waistcoat. His hair was straggly and unkempt. He reminded her of someone from a Jane Austen novel – but one of the dark, risky and unsuitable fellows. An artist or a highwayman.

‘Eccentric?’ Trix repeated quizzically. She took a long look at the Doctor. ‘Can’t say I’ve ever noticed,’ she said, and they both laughed.

Chapter 12

Closer Than You Think

Fitz stood outside in the dark and shivered. He was just stepping on his cigarette butt when the door opened behind him and light from the kitchen spilled out. The Doctor stood silhouetted. 'You'll catch your death out here.'

'Should've got me coat first,' said Fitz. 'To think in the twenty-first century we'll all have to smoke in the back yard.'

The Doctor shut the door behind him, pulling on his own coat. 'Some people call it progress.'

'I call it criminal.'

'Cheer up, Fitz. What's got into you?'

'It's the wine. It always makes me morose. I prefer beer.'

'Hazel's made some coffee. Go and get some, it'll help warm you up.'

'It's not that, Doc.' Fitz sighed. 'I just don't know what we're doing here. Here, in this house, with this family. They're normal, nice people. What are we doing getting mixed up with them?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'They've got a problem, and we can help. What other reason do we need?'

Fitz looked up at the night sky. It was a cold, freezing night with no cloud. The stars were just about visible through the haze of city lights. 'We should be out there, roaming through time and space. Saving planets, galaxies, all of that.'

'I see,' said the Doctor. 'You mean the McKeowns are too small for us to be bothering with?'

'No, that's not what I mean,' Fitz said, sharply. 'It's just that I'm used to the bigger picture, I suppose.'

'Ah, the bigger picture. Well, you know what they say: the Devil's in the detail. It's a big universe, all right – one of many – but in the end the important things in any universe are the people. People like the McKeowns. People like you and me, Fitz.'

Fitz sighed. 'Yeah, I know. Ignore me, it's the wine talking.'

'It could also be that you're frightened of the Earth,' said the Doctor casually.

'What? Get outta here! This is my home planet you're talking about.'

'Is it?'

Fitz said nothing. The Doctor watched him carefully 'I mean, it's been a long time, hasn't it, since you left the Earth to see the universe with me.'

Fitz had lost track of the time he had spent in the Doctor's TARDIS. It felt like years; in fact it *must* have been years. Long enough for him to not really remember a life beforehand, at least. He sniffed and said, 'Yeah, well, you need someone to look out for you, don't you?' He paused long enough to light another cigarette and added, 'Besides, where else have I got to go?'

'Exactly,' said the Doctor, and Fitz didn't much like the way he said it. 'The TARDIS is more of a home to you now than this planet, or any planet.'

'So what are you saying?' Fitz asked. 'That I'm just like you?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Like I said, you're scared of being here – scared of being on Earth. Because when it's time to leave you might find you want to stay.'

'No chance.' Fitz straightened and took a final, decisive drag on his cigarette. 'Let's stop talking about it because it's not going to happen. We've got a job to do here, haven't we? Let's get on with it.'

The Doctor watched him for a long moment, and then clapped him affectionately on the arm. 'Of course. I think I've made a little progress today, as it happens.'

'Yeah? You got your psychic detector gizmo working properly?'

'No, better than that: I met a mad old Gypsy who warned me not to interfere in things I didn't understand.'

'You always know the nicest people. Interfere with what, exactly?'

'The old stone monument you found in the woods. Apparently it's haunted. This old Gypsy saw a ghost there once and when I mentioned the word "Deadstone" he threatened me with a gun!' The Doctor looked delighted.

'So, we're on the right track?'

'Of course. In fact, I want another look at that memorial stone.'

Jade came home just after nine, phoning first to say she was on her way. Hazel was feeling considerably better about things in general and decided to let the misdemeanour of not coming straight home pass. This once.

When Jade came in, she found Cal and Trix in the living room.

'Hi,' said Trix, introducing herself. 'You must be Jade.'

'Hi,' Jade said.

'Trix is one of the Doctor's assistants,' Cal explained.

'What are you up to?' Jade asked.

'Drawing.' Cal had some sheets of paper and the Doctor's multicoloured pen. He was busy scribbling away, his tongue poking out through his lips as he concentrated.

Trix said, 'He's quite an artist, your brother.'

'He's always drawing,' Jade commented. 'Usually monsters and stuff.'

Cal said, 'I'm doing a picture of our house. Look.' He showed them a fine drawing of their house, complete with strangely proportioned figures standing in the garden.

'What are they?' Jade asked, raising an eyebrow. 'Aliens?'

'Let's not go there,' Trix muttered.

'You draw something,' Cal said, offering the magic pen to Trix. 'Go on!'

'I can't draw...'

'Of course you can. Just put the right colours in the right places.'

'You make it sound easy.' Trix sucked in her cheeks, unwilling to disappoint the boy. 'What should I draw?'

'Draw your house.'

'I don't have a house.'

'Draw where you live, then.'

Trix shrugged and drew a tall blue box with two small windows near the top. Above these she wrote *Police Public Call Box* in small letters. Finally she put a lamp on the roof, with little yellow zigzags coming out of it to show it was flashing.

Cal frowned. 'That's where you live?'

'It's a long story,' she told him.

Hazel came into the living room and said, 'Hey, you. It's time for bed. School tomorrow.'

'But we're drawing!' Cal protested.

'No buts, young man. Bed.'

'Come on,' said Trix. 'Do what your mum says. Maybe we can do some more pictures tomorrow.'

Cal nodded glumly and put the top back on the pen. Trix looked at Hazel and shrugged. 'Just trying to keep his mind off things, that's all.'

Hazel nodded. 'It's all right. You're doing fine. He's a good lad.' Cal looked pale and tired. Hazel knew the signs; he was starting to feel the same tension that she felt, the same build up of nerves that preceded every night. The cold undercurrent of fear that gathered them all into the darkness.

Trix had noticed it as well. She smiled at Hazel and said, 'It'll be all right. We'll look after him.'

'I'll wash up the coffee things,' Hazel said. 'You go up and get ready for bed.' She squeezed Cal's shoulder and headed for the kitchen.

Hazel dropped the mugs into the washing-up bowl. Through the window over the sink, she could just see the Doctor and his friend in the light from the kitchen. They were talking happily, affectionately, clearly old friends and colleagues. Eventually Fitz extinguished his cigarette and came back inside, complaining about the cold. The Doctor, however, had paused to look up at the night sky. Craning her neck, Hazel tried to see what he was looking at, but there was too much reflection in the glass of the window.

Deciding she needed some fresh air, she went out to join him.

The Doctor continued to stare up into the blackness, where a hundred or more stars gleamed in the cold night air. He said, 'I love looking at the stars. Do you?'

Hazel hugged herself, trying to keep the bitter cold at bay. She'd never been one for stargazing. 'I don't know,' she said. 'They always seem so very far away, don't they?'

'Oh, I don't know...' replied the Doctor. 'Some of them are closer than you think.'

'They're too distant to mean anything to me, I'm afraid.'

The Doctor looked at her for the first time. 'Then you must get closer to them. Come on!' He hopped nimbly on to the low brick wall fronting the lawn, and then stepped up from there on to the roof of the small potting shed. The wooden roof creaked slightly and Hazel laughed. 'Don't be silly, get down.'

'No no no, you come up here!' urged the Doctor, holding out his hand. 'Come on!'

'You're mad.'

'It's been said before. Maybe I am. Who knows? Now, come up here with me and let me show you something!'

Hazel shrugged and then clambered awkwardly on to the garden wall. 'I hope I'm not going to regret this...' She took his hand, and, surprised by his gentle strength, found herself stepping up on to the shed. The roof creaked again. 'Is this safe?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Isn't that exciting?'

'I think I'll get down now.'

'No, wait! We're not finished yet.' The Doctor glanced up at the sky. 'We're closer, but not nearly close enough.' Still holding her hand, he led Hazel along the shed towards the garage roof. It was slightly higher than the shed, and about a metre away. The Doctor jumped easily across. 'Come on, keep up!'

‘Don’t be an idiot!’ Hazel scolded. ‘Get back down here at once!’

‘Ah, now that’s a mother talking.’

‘I’m going back inside,’ Hazel said firmly.

‘Fine,’ said the Doctor. ‘But you’ll miss the view from up here.’

‘What view? It’s barely higher than the shed.’

‘So what’s the problem?’

There was the tiniest challenge in his voice, and Hazel felt her hackles rise. Gritting her teeth she walked towards the edge of the shed and leaped across to the garage roof. ‘There! Satisfied?’

‘Rarely.’ The Doctor crossed the garage roof to where the back room extension of Hazel’s house jutted out. The top of it was just level with his head. ‘This way.’

‘You must be joking!’ Hazel protested as the Doctor heaved himself up and then swung his legs on to the edge of the extension roof. ‘That’s the roof of the house, you fool!’

‘I know!’ The Doctor crouched down. ‘Come on, I’ll help you up!’

‘No!’

‘Don’t be a goose, Hazel!’

I don’t believe I’m doing this, thought Hazel, as she took his outstretched hand and allowed herself to be pulled up on to the roof to join him. He led her across the flat roof of the extension to where it joined the tiled roof. He trotted up the tiles to the apex, and she had no choice but to follow. Because, she realised, she was absolutely not letting go of his hand now. She had definitely had too much wine!

They stood at the very top of the roof and surveyed the world around them: the avenue along the front of the house, the parked cars, the orange glow of the streetlamps, which they were now *above*. The other houses stretched away, lights on in the windows, until they turned into a jumbled suburban haze. To the north was the dark hill where the woods were, and beyond that, open fields and roads. Turning around carefully Hazel found her back garden looked dark and mysterious, apart from the – rather small – patch of light shining from the kitchen door.

Hazel shivered. ‘It’s freezing up here!’ she hissed. Almost instantly, as if the Doctor had anticipated the complaint, she felt his velvet jacket being draped warmly over her shoulders.

‘Now, look up there!’ he told her.

He was pointing at the sky, where the stars glittered in a wonderfully clear night. ‘Now we’re almost close enough to touch them!’ he said.

She laughed, and he reached a little higher, standing on tiptoe until he lost his balance and wobbled and she squealed. ‘Don’t!’

'All right,' he said. 'But you could touch them if you wanted. They're not so distant.'

'You're the most amazing man I've ever met,' Hazel gasped, truthfully. She regretted it as soon as she said it, and hoped he hadn't heard. The wind was blowing up here and it may have taken her words with it. 'Why are you doing this?' she asked, a little louder.

'Why not?' He pointed at a bright star. 'That's Alpha Centauri, the nearest star to Earth's own sun.'

Hazel pulled a face. 'So what?'

'Well, say hello to your neighbours!' The Doctor waved at the star. 'Hello there!'

'You're mad.'

'You keep saying that. But I know for a fact that someone up there is waving back, with all six arms!'

They both laughed. 'I can't believe I'm doing this!' Hazel cried. 'I must be mad too. I'm worried sick about my son and you've got me standing on the roof waving at stars!'

'Which means that anything else you see tonight will make perfect sense,' declared the Doctor.

'I don't like the sound of that. What will happen tonight? What will I see?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'More of the same, only worse.'

'It's definitely going to get worse?'

'Yes. Until we do something to stop it.'

At that moment they heard a shout from down below, in the back garden. Trix was standing in the light from the kitchen, waving up at them. 'Doctor!' she called, apparently not surprised to find him up on the roof. 'You'd better come down. Cal's not well.'

Hazel felt her heart plunge, and she started to fall. The Doctor caught her in a strong grip and held her up. 'Keep calm, it'll be all right,' he told her. 'I'll help you down.'

Shivering with anxiety, Hazel allowed herself to be led back down to the garden. She barely noticed the journey, because her mind was fully occupied by the sound of her son screaming.

Chapter 13

Lost

Inside, Cal was literally climbing the walls.

He was on top of the sideboard, pointing at the carpet and screaming, 'Get them away! Get them away!'

Hazel ran across to him and grabbed his hands, trying to calm him down. He was dancing up and down in terror, shrieking at the top of his voice, his eyes wide and round as he looked all about him. 'They're coming up the furniture!' he yelled. 'Stop them! *Stop them!*'

Hazel looked frantically at the floor but she could see nothing. 'What is it?'

'Fitz, help me get him down,' ordered the Doctor. The two men closed in and lifted Cal bodily off the sideboard, ignoring his protestations. They carried him across to the settee and laid him down, where he continued to fight and squirm. 'No! No! Don't let them get me!'

'What is it?' asked Hazel desperately 'What's he talking about?'

The Doctor had placed one hand firmly on the boy's forehead. He muttered something under his breath and almost immediately Cal stopped struggling. 'Hush, now, Cal,' he said in a soothing voice. 'It's all right.' He kept his hand clamped down on Cal's forehead. Under the Doctor's thumb, Cal's eyes rolled feverishly in their sockets.

'What did he see?' asked Hazel.

'Rats,' whispered Cal, and there was saliva foaming at the corners of his mouth. 'Hundreds of them!'

Instinctively Hazel looked all around them room. 'Is he hallucinating?' she asked.

'Perhaps,' said the Doctor. He slowly brought his hand down over Cal's face, and the boy sagged into sleep. 'Or possibly just another nightmare...'

'But he wasn't asleep,' argued Trix. 'He was standing in here with me, talking about his new felt-tip pen. He just looked down at the floor and

suddenly started screaming about rats. Rats everywhere, he said...'

'He doesn't have to be asleep to suffer the nightmares any more,' said the Doctor, straightening up.

'Oh no...' Hazel put a hand over her mouth. 'You said it would get worse! Is this what you meant?'

'It could be the start of it, yes.'

Hazel looked horrified. 'The *start* of it?'

'And the worse it gets, the more clues we have as to what's going on,' the Doctor said. 'This simply demonstrates that whatever is influencing Cal's subconscious is growing more powerful.'

'That doesn't sound good,' said Fitz.

'It's not, but that's what's happening and we've got to deal with it.' The Doctor turned to Hazel. 'I promise you we will find a way to stop this.'

She sat down on the edge of an armchair, trembling. 'I can't take any more of this!'

'Trix, I think a nice pot of tea would be appropriate now,' the Doctor said, and Trix nodded in agreement. 'Well,' the Doctor added meaningfully, 'would you like to go and make one?'

'What?' Trix frowned. 'Oh, sorry. Yes. Be right back.'

Nervously, Hazel watched Cal sleeping, afraid that he would wake up screaming again. When he didn't, a thought struck her. 'What did you do to him?' she asked quietly. 'To make him fall asleep like that.'

'It's just a trick,' explained the Doctor. 'To help him relax. I doubt it will work again.'

A heavy silence fell over the living room. While Trix got busy in the kitchen, the Doctor turned to Fitz. 'I want to have another look at that memorial stone in the woods.'

'Yeah, you said.'

'I mean now.'

Fitz stopped. 'What, *now* now?'

'Get your coat.'

Fitz picked up his coat and Hazel looked up, confused. 'You're not going, are you?'

The Doctor nodded. 'It's important. Trix will stay here with you.'

'But I had hoped...' Hazel glanced at Cal. 'I mean, what if he has another nightmare or something?'

'He's resting for now.' The Doctor thought for a moment and then said, 'It's entirely likely that there will be further developments tonight, Hazel. If that is so, then I want to be where I think the source of the problem is...'

'Which is where?'

'You don't need to worry about that now. All you need to do is look after your son. As long as he's here, with you and Jade and Trix, he'll be safe.'

Hazel nodded, but she felt wretched. Trix came back in with a tea tray and Hazel managed a weak smile. 'It should be me doing that.'

'Rubbish. Put your feet up and have a cuppa.'

Hazel looked at Cal, asleep on the settee, fully dressed. He looked peaceful, but she knew it wouldn't last.

Fitz hurried after the Doctor, checking that the torch Hazel had found for him actually worked. 'Hold on,' he called. 'Have I got this right? We're heading up towards the haunted woods in the middle of the night?'

'What's the problem? You and Trix spent all last night there.'

'Yeah, but we didn't see a thing. What's different now?'

'Cal's psychic fits are getting worse. I think the old Gypsy had a similar experience once, and it has something to do with the Deadstone memorial.'

'Ah, the thing he warned you not to interfere with.'

'And I always ignore old Gypsy warnings,' said the Doctor as they crossed the road. 'It's a matter of principle.'

They fell into step on the pavement and headed for the park. A man passed them walking his dog, and further up the avenue a bus was pulling away from a stop. Otherwise it was quiet.

'I've been thinking,' began Fitz after a short while, 'about what we talked about in the garden.' The Doctor said nothing, so he carried on: 'Maybe you're right. I don't feel like I belong on Earth any more. The TARDIS is my home now. But I'm cool with that.'

The Doctor said, 'Good.'

'So... I was wondering,' Fitz continued, as they started up the long slope of grass that led to the trees. 'What about you?'

'What about me?'

'Well, you were stuck here for a hundred years, once. And even now we keep coming back to Earth, or at least the TARDIS keeps bringing us back. So how do you feel about that?'

'Fine.'

Just "fine"? Fitz switched on the torch as they left the amber glow of the street lights behind. 'All Time and Space is yours to roam, and you think it's *fine* to keep coming back to Earth?'

'Fitz, Fitz, Fitz,' said the Doctor, stopping. Fitz raised the torch until the light fell across his friend's long face. 'Don't you understand? I love Earth. *I love it*. The people, the countryside, the animals. The arts, the sciences, the languages and music, and, of course, the cooking.' He suddenly started walking again, arms upraised, turning and looking at the stars as he spoke:

'Where would I be without the Earth? *What* would I be? And you've only got to look at the TARDIS to see how much the old thing loves Earth too. No matter where we go, or when, we always come back here because only this place feels like *home*.'

Fitz grinned as the Doctor spun around in the torch light. 'But what do you like about it the *most*?'

'The monsters.'

When Cal woke up he had forgotten all about the rats. He was pale and dazed, and clearly sleepy, but otherwise all right. Hazel knew it to be the calm before the storm, and, with a heavy heart, she sent him upstairs to get ready for bed. 'May as well try and keep as normal a routine as possible,' she told Trix dully.

Jade asked if Cal was really going crazy. Hazel bit her lip, knowing that losing her temper would not be a good thing now. She wanted a calm household. 'No, love,' she replied with steely patience. 'Nothing like that.'

'The Doctor will sort things out, don't worry,' added Trix.

Jade looked sceptical. 'If you say so.'

Hazel snapped at her then. It was just teenage backchat, of course, but she was feeling too edgy to put up with that kind of tone.

'All right, all right,' Jade said. 'No need to go mad. I just think he looks a bit...' she waggled her head, '... you know.'

'What?' Hazel demanded, unsure why she was bothering to defend him. Apart from the fact that, at the moment, he seemed to be her only hope.

'You know,' Jade repeated. 'He just looks like he was, well, into Ozzy Osbourne the first time round.' She raised both hands in two-fingered 'peace' gestures.

Hazel and Trix stared at her for a moment before they burst out laughing.

Cal came down in his pyjamas and, after Hazel made him a milky drink, went to bed. As she settled him down, he said, 'What about my tablet?'

Hazel thought for a moment. 'Not tonight,' she said. 'Tonight it's just *Treasure Island*.'

He blinked sleepily 'OK. Will the Doctor come back tonight?'

'Yes.'

'Will I have bad dreams again tonight?'

'I don't know,' she lied. 'We'll see. Whatever happens, I'll be here for you.'

'Bacon, eggs, sausage and black pudding!' said the Doctor.

'With fried bread and plenty of brown sauce!' laughed Fitz.

'And strong, hot army tea!'

'Pure malt Scotch.'

'The smell of freshly cut grass.'

'The sound of a rotary mower on a summer afternoon...'

They were walking through the dark woods now, keeping to the path in the circle of light thrown by Fitz's torch. They were still bouncing favourite Earth things back and forth.

'Snow on Christmas Day,' said the Doctor.

'A winter evening in front of a real fire,' said Fitz.

'The sound of a cat purring.'

'Beautiful women...' said Fitz wistfully.

'Ghost stories!' cried the Doctor. 'I love ghost stories. I knew Edgar Allan Poe, you know.'

'I could have guessed,' smiled Fitz ruefully.

'Did you know the TARDIS is haunted?' asked the Doctor eagerly. A breath of silver air floated from his mouth into the torch beam as Fitz turned to look at him. 'Honestly!' he added.

'I once saw a grey lady in the engine room,' admitted Fitz. 'But it could have been Trix mucking about.'

'No, no, no. I've seen this ghost recently, in the console room.'

Now Fitz was intrigued. 'What ghost? You never told me about a ghost.'

'Didn't seem much point.' The Doctor walked on a few paces. 'I wasn't sure I'd actually seen anything at the time. But now...'

Fitz urged him to continue.

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'you know the chess game?'

Fitz knew it: on a games table at one side of the TARDIS control chamber was an antique chess set. The figures were carved from ebony and ivory; it was, allegedly, a gift from Sir Winston Churchill, 'For Special Services'. The Doctor had set it up ages ago. 'You decided to play against yourself,' recalled Fitz. 'Because no one else could give you a good enough game.'

'That's right,' said the Doctor without a trace of embarrassment. 'Every now and again I move a piece. White one day, black the next. I think I've nearly beaten myself, although I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve that I haven't spotted yet.'

'Er, quite,' said Fitz.

'Well, recently, someone else has been making moves.'

'Trix?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I asked her, but she said she hadn't and I believed her.'

'You never asked me if I'd made any moves,' said Fitz, slightly aggrieved.

‘Well, no, I didn’t need to. None of the moves that were made were the kind of moves you would have made.’

Fitz eyed him suspiciously. ‘In what way, exactly?’

‘They were too cunning, too well planned. Your game is spontaneous and chancy. No, whoever was moving the pieces is in possession of a first-class mind.’

‘Thank you,’ said Fitz drily.

Caught up in his story, the Doctor ignored him. ‘At first I thought it was still me moving them and then forgetting about it. But in all honesty I’m not that absent-minded and one or two simple traps proved that my unseen opponent was most *definitely* not me.’

‘So who was it? A ghost? I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts.’

‘I don’t know. Suddenly the chess game turned from a real struggle – because I am a very good opponent – into a definite grudge match. Whoever was moving the pieces was out to beat me.’

‘And you never saw the pieces move?’

‘No, it always happened when I was out of the console room.’ They had reached the thickest part of the forest now, and they had to be careful to keep to the path. Twisted black undergrowth snagged at their legs as they picked their way in the torchlight. ‘One evening I decided to double-check the helmic regulators. They’ve been slipping a bit lately. I think it must have been very late by your standards, because you’d both gone to bed. The console room was dark – the only light came from the controls, and of course the faint glow of the central column. Everywhere else was in shadow. I thought it was noticeably colder when I stepped into the room, and paused for a moment on the threshold. I listened, but all I could hear was the distant, rhythmic groan of the TARDIS engines.

‘I peered into the gloom, because I could make out a few shapes in the darkness – the hat stand, the chaise-longue, my armchair. And of course, deep in the shadows, the chess table.’

‘Wait a sec,’ interrupted Fitz. ‘Why didn’t the console room light up when you came in? I thought it did that automatically.’

‘It did. But not right away. And in those first few seconds of darkness, I saw something that quite shocked me: a man, sitting at the chess table. I didn’t see him properly, because then the lights came on and the figure simply vanished with the shadows. But I saw enough.’

Fitz swallowed. ‘Enough to recognise him?’

‘It was an old man. I can’t be sure, but he seemed to be wearing dark, Victorian clothes. He had long, white hair swept back from his head. I was just about to say hello when he looked up at me. But I didn’t recognise him, Fitz, *because he had the face of a skull.*’

Fitz caught his breath and stopped. 'Hell's teeth, Doc, I'm glad you didn't tell me about this in the TARDIS. I'm not so glad you waited until we were walking through a haunted forest in the middle of the flipping night, though!'

In the torchlight, the Doctor was grinning wolfishly. 'Best place for a ghost story, Fitz.'

'Is that all it was? A story?'

The Doctor's smile faded. 'Well, it's a good one. I never saw him again, but the chess game carried on, move for move.'

'And who won?'

'He did.' The Doctor sounded irritated. 'Perfect Kronsteen manoeuvre. I should have seen it coming, but there you are. I must have been distracted.'

'Is that why you've been so grumpy recently?'

'Grumpy? Don't be ridiculous. I'm never grumpy.' The Doctor suddenly halted in mid-step. 'Do you know, Fitz, I think we're lost.'

It took a second for Fitz to realise what he'd just said. 'Lost?'

'Yes. This path should've taken us directly to the big old tree at the north end of the wood. The dead tree. Not far from that is the memorial stone. But we're nowhere near it.'

Fitz swept the torch beam around and watched it flicker over branches and bushes. The closest trees appeared as a tangle of gnarled and lumpy grey shapes in the darkness. The shadows lurched sickeningly as the torch moved, and occasionally the beam would pick out the pink tail of a rat as it scurried away into the undergrowth. 'Are you sure?' Fitz asked anxiously.

'Positive. I have a superb sense of direction.' The Doctor loomed into the torchlight. 'At least, I thought I had...'

Somewhere in the rustling darkness around them they heard a sound: a distant, awful moan that might have been the wind sighing through the trees, or the low, hungry murmur of an unnatural predator. And then they saw, for the first time, a thin white mist creeping slowly across the ground towards them.

Chapter 14

The Ghost

Jade said that she was tired and wanted to go to bed. Hazel didn't argue, and, after Jade had said goodnight, Trix said, 'It's her age, I suppose. Very tiring being a teenager, all that lying about and sulking.'

'She just finds it easier to communicate via text messages, I think.' Hazel smiled wanly. 'She's not a bad girl, really. There are plenty worse, and I'm lucky to have her.'

'Forgive me for asking, but is there a Mr McKeown?'

'Yes, somewhere. I've no idea where. He could be dead for all I know.' Trix said nothing, and Hazel felt compelled to fill in the gap. 'He left us soon after Cal was born.'

'That's terrible.'

Hazel shrugged. 'Seemed so at the time. But I'm used to it now. Cal was six months old, so it was a long time ago.'

'But not long enough for Jade to have forgotten him?'

'And there you have the problem in a nutshell. Jade's dad was around right up to her fifth birthday. She remembers that very well, because he bought her a bike. It was a beauty, bright pink with gleaming white tyres and a basket on the front. She loved it. And she loved her dad. She was too young to see him for what he was. Stupidly, I thought he was worth clinging on to – better to have a rotten husband than no husband at all. What rubbish. When Cal came along, I thought it might make things better. Quite the opposite. Six long, crappy months later he was gone. And good riddance.'

'Let me guess,' said Trix. 'Jade blames Cal for her dad leaving.'

'Got it in one.'

'That isn't fair, though. Does Jade know what her father was really like? She's old enough to know the truth, surely.'

'Maybe. But do I have that right? Jade's only memories are those of

a five-year-old girl. To her, he was “Daddy”. And she’s full of resentment about him leaving, resentment of Cal and of me. If I start trying to poison her memory of “Daddy” as well, she might just leave me completely.’

‘She’s only fifteen.’

‘Going on twenty-five. In less than twelve months she’ll be sixteen and then she can do what she likes with the full backing of the law.’

‘That sounds very brutal. I’m sure she’ll be fine. She obviously loves you and Cal.’

‘I’m not brutal, but I am realistic. Being on my own I’ve had to be.’

Trix opened her mouth to reply, but before she could say anything they both heard Cal screaming upstairs.

‘We can’t be lost,’ said Fitz nervously. ‘It’s not *that* big a wood.’

‘We’ve been walking for the last twenty minutes, Fitz,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’re more than lost. We’re trapped.’

‘What?’ Fitz trained the torchlight on the back of the Doctor’s head.

‘We’ve been walking in a straight line. We should have come to the edge of the trees already. But look: we’re as deep as ever.’

Reluctantly, Fitz turned the light on to the surrounding trees again. They reared up in the gloom like huge, mutant skeletons, reaching down for them with long, bony fingers instead of branches. And it was bitterly cold. His breath was forming huge clouds of mist as he began to panic. ‘I don’t understand,’ he stammered. ‘How can that be?’

‘There’s only one explanation,’ said the Doctor. ‘It knows we’re looking for it. And it’s hiding.’

‘Hiding?’ Fitz was confused; he rather felt he and the Doctor should be the ones hiding.

The Doctor stepped closer to Fitz, lowering his voice, even though all around them was unnaturally quiet. ‘Whatever it is, it doesn’t want us to find it. It’s deliberately avoiding us.’

‘It? You keep saying “it”. What is it?’

‘That’s what we’re trying to find out, Fitz...’

Fitz struggled to bring his breathing under control. A mist was starting to develop around them, and he didn’t want to contribute to it. ‘All right. But how can it make us get lost?’

‘I don’t know. It’s rather interesting, isn’t it? But I think we’re getting closer, Fitz...’

Fitz’s teeth were chattering. ‘I thought you said we were lost!’

‘And the more lost we get, the closer we must be to finding it,’ said the Doctor. ‘Take this mist, for instance.’ He stepped into the milky torch beam,

where a thin vapour enveloped his legs. Fitz couldn't see his feet any more. 'It's clearly unnatural.'

'Not the result of acid rain, then?'

'No, this is much more dangerous. Look!'

Tendrils of mist were winding up the Doctor's legs, slowly, deliberately, like thin, transparent tentacles. The mist clung to his trousers, then began to seep through the fabric. The Doctor jerked away, gasping. 'It's cold!' he said. 'Deathly cold!' He took another three steps, leaving wisps of grey curling in the air behind him.

Fitz looked down at his own legs to find the freezing vapours snaking their way up past his knees. With a yell he turned and staggered towards the Doctor. 'Run!' he shouted.

Cal's screams had gradually subsided into desperate moans. He was still asleep, cradled in Hazel's arms, but his eyelids flickered with hidden dreams. 'It's all right, sweetheart,' she said. 'I'm here.'

Trix felt awkward; she waited in the doorway of the bedroom, not wanting to intrude, but the Doctor had instructed her to stay close and observe Cal's behaviour. 'Be prepared,' he had told her cryptically. When she had asked him what it was she should be prepared for, he had merely shrugged: 'Anything.'

Cal twisted and turned as his nightmare took hold. He began to mumble words, although nothing was coherent. Hazel took out a tissue and wiped away the spittle on his murmuring lips.

'Should we wake him up?' Trix asked.

'You can't,' Hazel told her. 'Not when he's like this.'

'What's likely to happen?'

'I wish I knew.'

The boy continued to writhe, caught in the grip of his febrile dream. The movements were getting stronger, wilder, and Trix was afraid that a major convulsion or fit was imminent. Hazel tried to hold on to him, but his limbs were flailing. He moaned and cried, lips pulling back from his teeth as some kind of pain ran through him like an electric shock. He gave a sudden, massive shudder and then began to writhe and squirm as if trying to escape some kind of dreadful, sucking grasp.

Then, to her horror, she saw Cal's arms twist and turn like snakes inside his pyjama sleeves: the writhing motion of his body became a boneless, sinuous flexing.

Hazel sobbed and let go of him. Together they watched Cal's arms and legs wind and curl in abnormal coils, like giant worms caught in sunlight.

'What's happening?' asked Trix.

'I've never seen this before,' Hazel replied. Then, with determination, she knelt down to hold him again, wrapping her arms around his distorting body and holding him close to her. With a desperate cry, Cal rested his head on her shoulder.

Trix could see his eyes. The lids flickered and then opened, but there was only a blank whiteness beneath. The sightless orbs looked directly up at Trix, and then, as she watched, filled with dark red blood.

The Doctor and Fitz stumbled through the dark wood, heedless of the branches that scratched at their hands and faces as they pushed through the undergrowth. Glancing behind, Fitz was relieved to see the obscene mist fading into the gloom.

'What's that?' asked the Doctor, crashing to a stop. Fitz caught hold of him, and realised he was pointing up ahead. Heart pounding, Fitz directed the torchlight in the direction of the Doctor's finger. Most of the beam was caught in twigs and branches, but some of it penetrated the blackness beyond, and, caught for a moment in a web of light, they saw a man.

'Wait!' called the Doctor instantly, starting forward.

The figure turned and disappeared into the shadow. Fitz chased him with the torch, but there were too many branches in the way. He followed the Doctor, tripping over roots and slipping through dead leaves, more terrified of being left alone in these woods than catching up with the man.

If it *had* been a man.

Because only a ghost could disappear like that, surely?

'Wait!' the Doctor called again, as if catching a fleeting glimpse of his prey in the night. 'Stop! Please!'

Fitz pointed the torch directly ahead and the light fixed momentarily on a tall, old man just before he disappeared behind a huge tree. Fitz and the Doctor surged forward, passing on either side of the great black trunk. But, of course, the old man had disappeared.

'Who was it?' panted Fitz as they slowed to a halt. 'One of your Gypsy pals?'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor. 'Could have been. Could've been anyone – or anything. A phantom.'

'Wait a sec,' Fitz said. 'Look where we are.'

They were in a familiar clearing; in a moment Fitz's torch had picked out the heavy, square shape of the stone monument at its centre.

'I'll be damned,' Fitz whispered.

They began to walk towards the stone. Almost immediately, Fitz knew there was something wrong underfoot: the ground seemed to be moving, undulating, beneath the soles of his shoes. The Doctor had noticed it too.

Fitz pointed the torch downwards. The moist brown leaves stirred in the circle of light, and the soil beneath them pulsed visibly. Long, glistening shapes writhed around their feet.

‘Worms!’ said Fitz, repulsed. ‘Hundreds of ’em!’

‘And centipedes and slugs!’ added the Doctor, fascinated. ‘Every kind of insect and invertebrate, leaving the ground. Look at them, Fitz, they’re trying to escape!’

‘From what?’ Fitz’s voice cracked, betraying his revulsion. He swung the torch beam over the ground nearby, and saw countless glossy, wriggling creatures oozing from the dirt.

‘Over here,’ said the Doctor, grabbing Fitz roughly by the arm and dragging him forward. Fitz tried not to think about what he was slipping and sliding on as he allowed himself to be led over to the stone monument.

‘They’re trying to get away from this thing,’ the Doctor told him.

With his back against the cold stone, Fitz shone the torch around the base. There didn’t seem to be any worms there. He drew in a deep, shuddering breath and closed his eyes.

‘This *must* be it,’ said the Doctor. Fitz opened his eyes and saw his friend fumbling with his psionic detector gadget. He aimed the torch at the device. The Doctor’s fingers slipped with unaccustomed nervousness over the controls, and the instrument began to bleep and flash brightly in the darkness. ‘Yes!’ he hissed triumphantly.

‘Doctor,’ said Fitz. ‘Look.’

He pointed towards the blackness at the edge of the clearing. In the thin moonlight, they could just see the gnarled vegetation that marked the tree line. And through the dark tangle of root and stem drifted a creamy fog. Long sinuous fingers of it crept slowly forward, probing at the wet ground, gently stroking the worms and grubs beneath.

‘Uh-oh,’ said the Doctor.

The mist rolled forward, all around the monument, surrounding the Doctor and Fitz. Hands shaking, Fitz shone the torch beam directly into the flowing vapour. A pale, wraithlike shape rose up before them, driven forward by an invisible current. It was the colour of ancient ivory, with dark sockets for eyes and a yawning, gaping mouth.

Chapter 15

Night Terrors

Hazel gently lowered Cal back on to the bed. He was limp in her arms, too limp: not the loose-limbed state of relaxation that is the sign of deep sleep in a child, but the soft, cold slackness of a rag doll.

She laid him down and stared for a long while at his face, featureless and drooping, a faint glimmer of red beneath the half-closed eyelids. Hazel wept bitterly, great choking sobs that shook her shoulders.

Trix stepped out of Cal's cold bedroom and stood on the landing, biting her thumbnail. She had a terrible feeling the boy was dead. Trix thought that she ought to check, but she didn't want to upset or frighten Hazel any further. She felt numb herself; she couldn't shake the memory of those blood-filled eyes staring at her over Hazel's shoulder. The child had given one last convulsion and then collapsed like an empty sack.

'What's happened?' asked Jade, stepping out of her bedroom. It was clear she hadn't been asleep.

Trix told her the truth: 'I don't know.'

Jade listened to her mum crying for a few seconds and then went into Cal's room. Trix followed her.

'Mum?'

'I can't get him to wake up,' Hazel croaked.

Suddenly Cal took in a breath, a great gulp of air as if he had been held under water for far too long. He rose up in panic, coughing and spluttering and Hazel almost choked with relief.

Trix stole forward and grasped Cal's hand. It was warm, and she could feel the bones beneath. She felt his wrist and arm and breathed a sigh of relief. They were back to normal.

'Mum...' he gasped. 'Mum...' Cal was awake, but his eyes were filled with terror, as if he was looking at something no one else could see. Trix felt a sudden chill envelop the room once again and shivered. Then there

was a quietness broken only by Cal's small voice:

'There's a dead man... and he's walking... walking in the trees...' Cal rocked back and forth, arms locked around his mother, his small fingers clenching and unclenching in the material of her sweatshirt. She tried to soothe him, but he continued murmuring, 'The dead woman's with him... they walk together in the woods at night, hand in hand, laughing at the people who are still alive, eating worms and soil.'

'Hush, Cal, that's enough,' Hazel told him, sounding a little sterner now. 'That's enough. It's just a bad dream, brought on by that silly old man and his stupid, stupid stories!'

Cal shook his head and screwed up his eyes fiercely. A jet of blood came from his nose and Jade screamed.

'Quickly,' said Hazel, untangling herself from Cal, 'get some towels! And water!'

The bleeding stopped as quickly as it had started; they mopped up the worst of it and cleaned his face and then put him back into bed. The sudden haemorrhage had snapped Cal from his rambling state, and now he seemed to be sleeping peacefully again.

Exhausted, Hazel ran a hand through her hair. 'You'd think I'd be used to this by now.'

'It's not over yet,' warned Trix, as Cal began to stir. He was frowning, shaking his head gently, muttering again. Hazel rested a hand on his head, like the Doctor had done, hoping it would have the same effect. Cal's eyes opened, but they were rolled so far up that only the whites showed.

'Oh Lord, what's going to happen to him?' Hazel asked. 'Where's the Doctor? He should be here!'

Trix agreed with her but said nothing. She was watching Cal closely, because she could tell there was still something badly wrong with him. Then he let out a cry, which turned instantly into a terrible rattle, and his mouth filled with a green and evil-smelling froth, boiling up over his lips just before his choking breath sprayed it high into the air.

The mist congealed around the Doctor and Fitz, ice cold and penetrating. Fitz felt the warmth drain from his blood, his muscles and bones. His knees shook and he started to slide down the stone monument, robbed of the will to live. Dimly, as consciousness left him, he thought he heard something odd: a sharp, electric whine like a dentist's drill, very close by.

And then nothing. Fitz felt as though he was in a clotting void, sinking, drowning in the bitter fog, until suddenly his head was filled with a terrible, ghoulish shriek and he felt himself hit the earth with a bone-shaking crash.

He scrambled to his feet, slipping in the wet leaves, his heart pounding. The Doctor was standing braced against the memorial stone, holding out his psionic gadget like Van Helsing with a crucifix. The gadget was emitting a shrill whine, growing more and more piercing with each second. The mist rolled back, recoiling like a slug covered in salt. Fitz thought he saw a glimpse of a snarling, screaming skull as the ghost suddenly dissipated.

The Doctor's instrument exploded with a crack like a firework and he yelped, stumbling.

Fitz grabbed him and hauled him upright. The Doctor held up the gadget, which was now no more than a tangle of burnt wires. 'Oh no,' the Doctor groaned. 'It's ruined!' Then: 'Yeow!' and he dropped the smoking remains and started blowing hurriedly on his fingers.

'What did you do?' Fitz asked, still holding on to him.

The Doctor was shaking his scorched hand and breathing hard through clenched teeth. 'Reversed the polarity of the psionic wave,' he said. 'Turned the detector into a shield. Took a few seconds to hit the correct frequency, but I think it worked in the end.'

Fitz looked around. The clearing was free of mist. It was dark and deathly quiet, apart from their own ragged breathing.

'I doubt it'll ever work again, though,' the Doctor added, prodding the smouldering lump of metal and plastic with the toe of his shoe.

'Never mind, you can build another one,' Fitz told him. 'Let's get out of here.'

Cal dropped to the floor, shivering.

'Get the blanket,' said Trix. 'Keep him warm.' She hoped it was the right thing to do: for a long moment she, Hazel and Jade had just stood there, speckled with foaming bile, while Cal coughed and gagged and then fell out of the bed.

Hazel pulled the duvet off the bed and draped it over Cal's shoulders. Jade offered, a little weakly, to get more towels. She ran to the bathroom.

Hazel and Trix lifted Cal back on to the bed. 'He's out for the count,' noted Trix, with some relief.

'For now,' warned Hazel. She used a handkerchief to clear the worst of the green slime from Cal's chin. He lay still, his jaw slack. But he was breathing. Trix checked his pulse, and it felt normal.

Jade came back with some towels and Trix helped her clean up the room. Hazel said that she would have to change the bed covers. 'And I think,' she added, 'that I should call a doctor now.'

Trix looked up at her sharply. 'No,' she said. 'I mean, don't bother. It's not necessary..'

'Not necessary? I don't think Cal can take much more. I'm frightened that something awful is going to happen.' She lowered her voice to a harsh whisper: 'I'm frightened he's going to *die*. I want to call a doctor. A real doctor.'

'The Doctor will be back soon,' Trix said. 'He'll know what to do.'

'I doubt it,' Hazel retorted. 'He hasn't been much use so far. Where is he now?'

Trix said, 'Look. Just give it another half an hour. I'm sure they won't be long.' She tried a smile. 'Fitz won't want to be out in the cold a minute longer than he has to, believe me.'

Hazel sighed, exhausted. Eventually she lifted her head and looked Trix in the eye. 'I've had enough,' she said. 'First thing in the morning, I'm going to take Cal back to a real doctor, and this time I'll get some proper help. I'll take a day off work and keep Cal off school...'

'That's really not advisable,' Trix said. 'The Doctor is best qualified to deal with this kind of thing, honestly.'

'This kind of thing?' Hazel spoke through gritted teeth. 'And just what is "this kind of thing"?''

Trix bit her lip. 'He deals with this stuff all the time. It's hard to explain.'

'Don't worry, he's told me all about it: psychic powers, space aliens, different planets. I've heard the lot.'

Trix smiled tightly. 'Really, you haven't,' she said.

'I've heard enough to know you're all nuts.'

Trix opened her mouth to reply, when they heard a noise from downstairs. Fitz's voice drifted up from the hallway: 'Hi, honey, we're home...!'

Chapter 16

Plan of Action

‘We were attacked by an ectoplasmic force,’ the Doctor said.

‘A what?’ Trix asked.

‘A ghost,’ said Fitz helpfully. He was slumped in the armchair, shivering, clutching a cup of coffee.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake,’ Hazel snapped, her eyes blazing. ‘I thought Cal was going to die tonight! And you two reckon you “saw a ghost”. Why don’t you just grow up?’

‘Actually, it was an ectop-’ began the Doctor, but he fell silent when he saw Trix surreptitiously shake her head.

‘It’s half past four,’ Hazel said, checking the clock on the mantelpiece before glaring at Jade. ‘You should be in bed.’

‘No way!’ Jade folded her arms sullenly ‘How am I supposed to sleep with all this going on?’

‘I don’t know, but there’s still three hours to go until it’s time to get up. And you need your sleep. Your school work’s already suffering.’

‘Hardly seems worth it.’

‘Jade, don’t argue with me. I’m not up to it.’

‘Well, we all know why *that* is,’ Jade said. ‘You’re just cranky because you’re so worried about Cal all the time!’

‘Is that so bad?’

‘It is if you take it out on me!’

‘Calm down,’ said the Doctor, firmly. ‘We need to talk about this – not fight over it.’

Hazel turned on the Doctor, her eyes flashing. ‘All right. Let’s have some answers, then. What’s happening? What’ve you found out? You’ve got one minute to explain – and no more messing about.’

The Doctor sat down in an armchair with a mug of tea. To her consternation, Hazel saw that his face looked extremely grave. Whatever he was

about to say couldn't be good. She took a deep breath and braced herself.

'There is some kind of psychic force causing all the bad dreams. It's centred in the woods, around the memorial stone.'

'What memorial stone?'

'There's some kind of old monument in the middle of the woods,' Fitz explained. 'It has the word "Deadstone" inscribed on it. Mean anything to you?'

Hazel shook her head. 'Nothing at all.'

The Doctor said, 'I don't know why it's affecting Cal so badly. Perhaps he's particularly susceptible to psychic phenomena. It's not unheard of, especially in young children.'

'Might've known,' Jade said quietly.

'I've never noticed anything unusual about him,' Hazel said. 'Until recently, that is.'

'But what about me?' asked Jade abruptly. She was still sitting next to her mother, wearing the truculent frown of a teenager needing to be treated as an adult. 'Well, I'm not having nightmares or anything, am I?'

The Doctor said, 'There could be any number of reasons why one person picks up the psychic field, and another doesn't. In the end, it's the field that's important. We have to find it and eliminate it.'

'How?'

'Well, I think we've found *where* it is, if not *what* it is.' The Doctor drained the last of his tea. 'The trick will be eliminating it.'

'Why?'

The Doctor briefly described his and Fitz's adventure in the woods. 'Whatever it is, it didn't want us there,' he concluded. 'Its reaction was unmistakably hostile. And it's growing more powerful by the day. We need to be cautious.'

'A bit like finding an unexploded bomb from World War Two in your back garden,' suggested Trix. 'You don't just dig it up. You call in the bomb-disposal experts. But even they don't simply charge in with spades. The bomb has to be identified correctly and then defused or disarmed accordingly.'

'Oh, that's very good,' said the Doctor approvingly.

But something had set Hazel thinking. Eventually she asked, 'Well, why don't you just report it?'

'To whom?' asked the Doctor mildly.

'The authorities,' she replied. 'The, er, relevant authorities.'

'Such as the Ministry of Psychic Phenomena.'

'There's no need to be sarcastic. I mean the police or something.'

'Do you think they would believe me?'

‘Not for a moment,’ Hazel replied easily. ‘I’m still wondering why I should believe you.’

‘Because it’s affecting *your* family. Not the police.’

He had a point, she supposed. ‘Wait a minute, though. You say this is affecting Cal, perhaps because he’s a child or just naturally susceptible. How do we know it’s not affecting other young kids in the area? In this street, even?’

‘Why don’t we ask the expert?’ suggested Trix, nodding at Jade.

Jade looked up blearily ‘What?’

‘Have you noticed anything strange at school? Any of your mates acting oddly, or talking about nightmares?’

Jade shrugged, as if the idea was ludicrous. ‘No. Nothing. Just the usual stuff, boyfriends and music and things.’

‘Maybe you could ask around in school,’ said Fitz. ‘Do a bit of investigating.’

‘This isn’t the *Famous Five*,’ snapped Trix, and Jade let out an amused snort. ‘But here’s an idea: if the psychic field is localised, why don’t you just move away? Temporarily at least.’

Hazel shrugged. ‘We’ve got nowhere to move away to. I have a cousin in Canada, but that’s not much good. And anyway, I don’t want to move away. I don’t want to have to take the kids out of school. I just want to live *here*, peacefully and safely.’

‘Well said,’ the Doctor nodded. ‘That’s the spirit! Besides, we don’t know that the psychic influence is governed by Cal’s physical proximity. I’ve known person-specific telepathic force fields to stretch across entire star systems.’

‘But we still don’t know if it is affecting anyone else besides Cal,’ Hazel pointed out.

‘No, we don’t,’ conceded the Doctor. ‘There’s still too much we just don’t know.’

‘So, what next, then?’ asked Fitz, stifling a yawn. ‘It’s nearly daybreak – that’s bedtime for us. I think I’m becoming nocturnal.’

‘I don’t mind admitting I’m exhausted,’ Hazel said, climbing slowly to her feet. ‘But I doubt I could sleep now. I need time to think.’

Hazel put the empty mugs into the sink and then lowered herself wearily into a chair at the kitchen table. The Doctor sat down opposite her. They were alone. ‘You still don’t believe me,’ ventured the Doctor after a short while. ‘Do you?’

‘A psychic force field,’ Hazel said dully ‘Why shouldn’t I believe you?’

‘Because it’s outrageous. Impossible. Nonsense.’

'Is it?'

'You tell me.'

She folded her arms. 'Well, I'm afraid I'm just a natural sceptic, Doctor.' 'There's no such thing as a sceptic – only disappointed dreamers.'

Hazel looked at him carefully, not wanting him to misunderstand. 'The reason I don't believe it,' she said, 'is because it's too easy. Psychic phenomena, ghosts, horoscopes, aliens, UFOs... it's all too easy. It's too convenient an explanation for anything we can't understand. A catch-all bit of nonsense for some people to believe in.'

'But not you?'

She sat back. 'I'm afraid not.'

The Doctor laid the palms of his hands flat on the table, but he continued to stare directly at her. She was slightly disturbed by the unearthly look in his eyes. 'All right,' he began, 'I'll tell you a story. It's about a little girl. She's five years old. She loves ponies and princesses and anything pink. And she's just found out that Father Christmas *doesn't exist*...'

Hazel stared back, frozen in time. She felt her eyes stinging with sudden tears, felt them rolling hotly down her cheeks. Looking up at her father in stunned disbelief. It was her first day at school. She had her new uniform on, with a thick, grey cardigan with the cuffs turned back, and white socks pulled up to her knees. Her shoes were black, shiny, and stiff. In one hand was a little packet of sandwiches wrapped in tin foil, and in the other hand was her teddy Mr Fluff.

'*You won't need that, either,*' her father said, prising the soft toy out of her fingers. His hands seemed so huge. Mr Fluff really looked very small.

'*And stop your crying,*' he told her. '*You can't cry on your first day at school. You're not allowed. All the other children will laugh at you.*'

She flinched, visibly, but she couldn't stop the tears flowing.

'*Look,*' her father said, kneeling down so he could speak to her face. '*I don't want to upset you, but you have to know. He isn't real. Your mother and I buy all your Christmas presents. And that's the same for all children. If the other kids think you still believe in Father Christmas, they'll laugh at you. And we don't want that, do we?*'

She shook her head.

'*That's my girl.*' He smiled and scraped away her tears with his big thumbs. '*Now. Ready for school?*'

'I want Mummy.'

'*Your mother's in hospital, love. You know that. But she'll be home in a couple of weeks, you'll see. Everything'll be fine, then.*'

'He and my mother had a terrible row when she came out of hospital,' Hazel remembered. 'I didn't realise it at the time, of course, but I'm pretty

sure it must have been about Father Christmas.'

The Doctor nodded. 'But by then the damage had been done.'

'Yes,' she said. 'The damage had been done.'

'It's all right to believe in something that just makes you feel good, you know.'

She smiled tearfully. 'Is it? I wouldn't know any more.'

Chapter 17

The Cellar

Hazel opened her eyes and lay quietly for a few minutes, dreamily savouring the aroma of bacon and eggs frying, and the lovely sound of a kettle boiling. She checked the alarm clock: 7.30 a.m. on the dot. She had been in bed for barely two-and-a-half hours. She got up and pulled on her dressing gown before heading downstairs.

'You're just in time,' said the Doctor, putting a plate of sizzling bacon and eggs on the table as she came in. 'Good morning, by the way.'

'Thank you,' she replied automatically; feeling a little bewildered.

Cal was up but still in his pyjamas, bleary-eyed but sipping a glass of orange juice. Jade was in her school trousers and blouse, nibbling half-heartedly on a piece of toast while she read a magazine.

'Where's Trix?' Hazel asked. She had seen Fitz in the living room, stretched out on the settee and snoring under a blanket.

'Gone for some provisions,' explained the Doctor as he poured her some orange juice from a freshly opened carton. 'You're getting low on milk and we need more bread.'

'There's a loaf in the freezer,' Hazel said. 'Third drawer down.'

'I know,' replied the Doctor. 'But I want extra – I'm planning on bread-and-butter pudding tonight.'

Hazel smiled. 'I don't get this at all. It's like *Mary Poppins* meets *The Exorcist*.'

The Doctor was already humming 'A Spoonful of Sugar' when Fitz came in, yawning and coughing and patting his jeans for his cigarettes. The Doctor offered him bacon and eggs but he shook his head, holding up his lighter and a crumpled packet of Gauloise. 'First things first,' he mumbled, and, following Hazel's firmly pointing finger, went out into the back garden.

'I don't want you to go into school today, Cal,' said Hazel. 'You're not well enough.'

‘But I feel much better,’ Cal argued. ‘You know I’m OK in the day, Mum.’ Hazel glanced at the Doctor to check his reaction. ‘What do you think, Doctor?’

‘He’s lost a lot of sleep,’ the Doctor said, putting a cafetière down in front of her. ‘He’s bound to be tired.’

Hazel nodded. Clearly the Doctor thought Cal would be better off at home as well. If the hallucinations – or psychic attacks, or whatever – could now come at *any* time, then she didn’t want him in school. ‘No, Cal, you’re too tired. You need to rest. I’m not going into work today so I can stay off and look after you.’ She took a sip of coffee. ‘I’ll send a note in with Jade.’

‘Oh, Mum!’ Jade complained. ‘Why do I have to go in? How come he gets to stay off?’

‘It isn’t a family holiday, Jade.’

‘It’s not fair.’

‘It’s life,’ Hazel said. ‘Deal.’

Jade dropped her last piece of toast in disgust and went up to her room. Trix passed her on the way in, carrying two bulging carrier bags. ‘What’s up with Jade?’

‘The same as usual,’ Hazel said. ‘Being fifteen.’

Trix dumped the bags. ‘Got everything, including the cream and the brown sugar.’

‘Fantastic,’ said the Doctor. He held out his hand and Trix handed over a key on a chain. Hazel wondered about this, and the fact that Trix had changed her clothes – she now wore a pair of bootleg jeans, heeled boots, and a long Afghan-style suede coat. Before she could comment, or even remark that there were no local grocery shops open at this time in the morning, Fitz came back in from the garden.

‘It’s flipping brass monkeys out there,’ he grumbled.

The Doctor served up more bacon and eggs for his friends, and Hazel marvelled at the fact that she was sitting down to a cooked breakfast with what felt like a houseful of guests. She took a few moments to enjoy the experience, topping up her coffee cup from the cafetière. ‘What are you going to do today?’ she asked the Doctor after a while.

The Doctor was chewing on the last rasher of bacon. ‘I want to find out more about that memorial stone in the woods.’

‘You’re not going back to your Gypsy chums?’ queried Fitz, alarmed.

‘What Gypsies?’ asked Trix.

The Doctor described his encounter with Lewis and his mad uncle Tommo.

‘You’ll more likely end up shot if you go back there,’ Fitz advised.

‘Hm,’ responded the Doctor ambiguously. He began to collect the dirty plates and transfer them to the sink.

Jade came back down, pulling on her school coat. ‘Time for me to go, if I’ve got to,’ she muttered. Hazel glanced at her and said, ‘Take off the eye make-up.’ Handing her a tissue, Hazel checked Jade over once again, a morning ritual that Jade endured with impatience. ‘OK, you’re good. Wait a minute...’ Hazel stopped to write out a note for Cal. ‘Give this to Mr Hayes,’ she instructed Jade. ‘If anyone asks, tell them Cal should be back in school on Monday.’

‘Whatever.’

‘And don’t go past Old Man Crawley’s place on the way home, will you?’

Jade rolled her eyes. ‘I’m not *stupid*,’ she said, with a hard look at Cal. Cal smiled and waved at her.

‘Who’s Old Man Crawley?’ asked Fitz as the front door slammed shut.

‘The local old nutter and tramp,’ Hazel said. ‘Well, he’s not a tramp, really. He lives in an old cottage by the woods. Filthy-looking place, but he’s been there ages. As long as anyone can remember round here, anyway. Even when I was little, they used to say he was over a hundred years old.’

The Doctor pulled a face. ‘You’re as young as you look.’

‘He’s got a horrible little pit bull terrier as well,’ Hazel continued. ‘People used to say he set it on other people’s pets.’

‘And other people, probably, given half a chance,’ mused Fitz.

‘The kids sometimes pass by Crawley’s house on the way home from school, if they’re taking a short cut. The older ones taunt him, but he sometimes tries to talk to the young ones.’

‘He tells them ghost stories,’ said the Doctor, without sufficient disapproval in his tone for Hazel’s liking.

It sparked a memory, however, and Hazel told the Doctor about Cal’s nightmare. ‘From the way he was talking, I think it was that old man’s stupid ghost stories setting him off again last night.’

‘Really?’ The Doctor downed the last of his orange juice and stood up. He took off his apron and tossed it to Hazel. ‘I think it’s high time I met this Mr Crawley.’

‘Mr Crawley may not be a hundred years old, but by all accounts he’s been around here the longest,’ the Doctor told his friends as they left Hazel’s house. ‘He’s bound to know something about the memorial stone – even if it’s just another ghost story.’

Trix was worried about leaving Hazel and Cal, but the Doctor shook his head firmly. ‘No, they need time on their own. And we don’t want to impose.’

'I think Hazel's pretty fed up with us already,' Trix said as they all crossed the road.

'Rubbish,' Fitz laughed. 'She's loving it: a cooked breakfast and two good-looking blokes around the house!'

'You know, I never noticed that,' said Trix drily.

By mid-morning the grey clouds were back and it was trying to rain. A light drizzle accompanied the Doctor and his companions as they walked and chatted. It took them ten minutes to reach Old Man Crawley's place. When they arrived, the windows were all dark and there was no sign of life.

'Doesn't look like anyone's home,' observed Fitz, hunched miserably up against the damp weather.

They walked carefully up to the front door of the old cottage, having to negotiate the various messages Milton had left for them along the garden path. 'Hello!' called the Doctor. 'Mr Crawley?' There was no response.

'Maybe Mr Crawley is the ghost,' suggested Fitz.

'No doorbell,' observed Trix, 'and no knocker either. Clearly he's not keen on visitors.'

'Then why has he left his front door open?' asked the Doctor, prodding it gently with a fingertip. The old, unvarnished door moved back slightly on stiff hinges.

Trix was peering through the nearest window, or rather trying to: 'It's filthy,' she complained. 'No one's cleaned these for years.'

The Doctor pushed open the front door and stepped inside. With a shrug, Fitz and Trix followed him.

Trix took one look inside and said, 'If anyone asks, we can say we're from the Environmental Health Department.'

The small hallway faced a flight of stairs covered with a grubby, thread-bare carpet. Parts of it were either loose or dangerously frayed. There were some empty milk bottles standing on the bottom step, all dirty. A faint aroma of rancid milk permeated the house.

The Doctor led the way into a small living room. Inside were two old armchairs, with the stuffing hanging from tears in the fabric. The seat cushions were covered in a layer of matted dog hairs. In here, the overwhelming smell was that of an old man living in poor hygiene: dust and mildew were everywhere, and patches of spotty black mould had grown all over the walls. The ceiling had been stained yellow by cigarette smoke.

'Yuck,' said Trix, with feeling.

'It's a dump,' Fitz said. 'And I can smell something else, too.'

'Urine,' said the Doctor. 'Milton's, hopefully.'

'I think I'm going to be sick,' said Trix.

‘There’s no place like home,’ Fitz said. ‘And this *is* no place like home.’

The Doctor was flicking through a pile of paperbacks left by the empty fireplace. He always maintained that one could tell a lot about a person from their reading matter – sometimes all you ever needed to know. But when Fitz asked him what the books were, he gave a puzzled shrug. ‘Pretty mixed bag, actually: a couple of thrillers, a crime novel, and... aha! This is more like it: an M.R. James collection.’

‘Ghost stories,’ realised Fitz.

‘Inspiration?’ asked Trix.

‘Inspired,’ said the Doctor. He put the books back down on the mantelpiece, and then went through to the back room, where there was an old dining table covered with newspaper and a battered sideboard. The Doctor looked quickly around the walls and floor, crouching down to inspect the darker, grimmer corners. ‘Interesting,’ he said. ‘There’s evidence of rat infestation.’

‘Rats?’ said Fitz dubiously.

‘Droppings,’ confirmed the Doctor, pointing. ‘Here and here. Which is odd, don’t you think, given that Old Man Crawley keeps such a ferocious terrier?’

‘Maybe that’s *why* he keeps one,’ suggested Trix.

‘All the same, better take some precautions,’ said Fitz, bending down to tuck his trouser legs into his socks. Both the Doctor and Trix started chuckling at him. ‘What’s up with you two?’

‘What are you doing?’ Trix asked. ‘You look ridiculous.’

‘I don’t want any rat running up my trouser leg like a drainpipe, thank you very much.’ Fitz straightened up. ‘My next-door neighbour used to be a rat-man for the council. He taught me this trick.’

‘We’re speechless,’ said the Doctor, laughing softly.

‘Hey, look what I’ve found,’ said Trix, indicating the dining table. On the sheets of tabloid newspaper pages spread across the surface were a number of large brown spots and smudges.

The Doctor identified them as dried blood stains. ‘But from what, I wonder?’

‘Maybe it’s time we left,’ proposed Trix. ‘The smell of this place is getting on my nerves, anyway. You’d think some people had never heard of soap.’

‘Wait wait wait,’ said the Doctor quickly. He had crossed over to the far side of the room, where there was a short, stout door hidden in the shadows. There was a heavy key in the lock. ‘Wonder where this leads?’

Without hesitation the Doctor turned the key and opened the door. They all stared into a large, square, black hole, from which damp, chill air slowly emerged. A pencil-torch appeared in the Doctor’s hand and he clicked it

on. The beam stabbed into the darkness, but revealed nothing. 'I think it's a cellar,' he reported eagerly, stepping through. Fitz and Trix heard him climb down a series of wooden steps, and then there was silence.

Fitz felt compelled to call after him: 'Everything all right, Doc?'

After a few seconds the Doctor's grim reply echoed out of the void: 'Come and have a look at this.'

Fitz and Trix exchanged a look. 'It can't be good,' noted Trix.

'I'll stay up here on guard,' Fitz told her. 'In case Old Man Crawley comes back. We don't want us all to get shut in down there or anything, do we?'

'You're just scared there'll be rats.'

'Well, if you do come across any, be sure to give them my fondest regards.'

'You're such a gent, Kreiner.' Biting her lip, Trix followed the Doctor into the cellar.

It was, unsurprisingly, cold and damp. There was also a mustiness in the air, and Trix could detect something else: a faint, organic whiff of decay.

She could see the pale circle of light from the Doctor's torch about ten or fifteen feet away. It was seeping over the brick walls of the cellar, picking out dirty grey cobwebs thick with dust and dead flies. Big black spiders darted quickly away from the torchlight, as if embarrassed to be found living in such squalor.

The Doctor directed the beam back at Trix, or rather at a spot on the wall beside her, at the foot of the wooden steps leading down from the door. There was an electric light switch, and Trix flicked it with relief.

A 40-watt bulb glowed weakly in the middle of the ceiling, but it was enough to reveal every corner of the cellar: a grimy concrete floor, brick walls with crumbling mortar, a couple of empty boxes, an old mattress, and, in one corner, a pile of what looked like bones.

Trix's mouth went dry as she realised they really *were* bones.

The Doctor had knelt down to examine them. They looked quite small, many were broken, and some still had scraps of matter stuck to them. He lifted one yellowed piece up and inspected it in the torchlight. 'Cat femur,' he said, curiously.

'You mean they're animal bones?'

The Doctor nodded, sorting through the remains. The bones rattled under his fingers, and Trix caught a glimpse of a small, fist-sized ribcage and the odd skull or tiny jaw. 'Cats and dogs, mainly,' the Doctor was saying. 'The occasional rabbit.'

'Pets,' realised Trix. 'Hazel said Old Man Crawley fed his dog on other people's pets.'

'She said *other people* said it.'

'Well, I reckon this must be proof!'

A large rat suddenly emerged from the pile of bones, alive and healthy. 'Hello!' said the Doctor. The rat ignored him, scurrying away along the base of the wall towards a narrow hole in the far corner. The torch beam just caught its long, hairless tail as it disappeared.

Trix had been too surprised and revolted even to cry out, but now she felt her stomach churn badly. 'Let's get out of here,' she pleaded.

'Wait a minute,' the Doctor ordered tersely. He held up a hand for silence. Then he slowly stood up and, still with one hand raised, moved to the centre of the room. His eyes fell into deep shadows beneath the glare of the light bulb, but Trix knew he was looking straight at her. 'Can't you feel it?' he asked quietly.

'Feel what?'

Silence. Trix hardly dared to breathe, but she had no idea what it was she was supposed to be feeling. A draft? A vibration? Something strange in the air?

'Everything OK down there?' Fitz called down with sudden loudness, but Trix didn't respond immediately. She was watching the Doctor, who was now standing perfectly still with his eyes shut. There was a small furrow of concentration over his eyebrows. She was about to ask him what the matter was, but he held up his hand for silence again, before she had even opened her mouth to speak.

'Doctor?' Fitz called again. 'Trix?'

The Doctor's frown deepened suddenly. 'I think I've found it,' he said.

'Found what?' asked Trix.

He still had his eyes closed. 'I'm not sure. It's very faint...' The Doctor's voice was very quiet, as if every spare ounce of concentration was being directed elsewhere. Some place that Trix simply couldn't see.

She heard Fitz cautiously descending the steps behind her. He still had his trousers tucked into his socks. Not so daft after all, she decided, remembering the rat.

She jumped as the Doctor suddenly inhaled, nostrils flaring. He flung back his head, but kept his eyes shut. 'It's here,' he said thickly. 'Can't you sense it?'

Fitz and Trix looked at each other and then said, 'No.'

The Doctor ground his teeth. 'Something... on the periphery of conscious perception... Invisible and intangible...' He was stationary, arms loose at his sides, head back, eyes shut. The light from the bulb overhead

shone on the green velvet of his shoulders, the white wings of his collar, the wild tangle of his hair. Slowly, he tilted his head back down and opened his eyes.

They were completely black.

'Doctor!' said Fitz, shocked.

'Gnnnh,' said the Doctor, as blood began to run from his nose. Then his legs buckled and he collapsed on the floor.

They lifted him up into a sitting position, and he produced a clean white handkerchief for the blood. He was blinking, dazed, but his eyes were back to normal. He sat cross-legged and held his nose. 'What happened?' he asked, his voice muffled by the hanky.

'We were hoping you'd tell us,' said Trix.

'Psychic energy!' he shouted suddenly, startling them both.

'Bless you.'

He scrambled to his feet, screwing up the red-spotted handkerchief and stuffing it back in a pocket. 'Psychic energy,' he repeated carefully. 'Somewhere in here...'

Fitz glanced around. 'Can't see anything – except those...' His eyes narrowed. 'Are they what I think they are?'

'Yes,' said Trix. 'Animal bones.'

'Never mind about those!' said the Doctor. He suddenly darted over to the steps and charged up them, out of the cellar.

Trix and Fitz caught up with him in Old Man Crawley's living room. 'We don't have a moment to lose,' he called back, heading for the front door. 'I can't keep it in my head for long,' he explained as they followed him into the garden.

It was cold and fresh outside, and the thin rainfall was a relief after the claustrophobic, malodorous interior of the cottage.

'Can't keep what in your head?' asked Trix impatiently.

'The dream!'

'What dream? I thought you'd found some psychic energy or something...'

'Same thing!' The Doctor stopped abruptly, and they almost piled into each other. 'It's like a dream, or a forgotten memory... It's hard to keep hold of; it's so transient, so vague...'

A dream,' Fitz repeated anxiously. 'Like Cal's, you mean.'

'Possibly.' The Doctor's piercing blue eyes were shining with excitement. 'It is a bit like someone else's dream. Someone else's bad dream.'

Chapter 18

The Dead Ghost

It had stopped raining and a watery sunlight was leaking out from behind the clouds. The Doctor led the way back from Old Man Crawley's place, walking briskly and saying nothing. He needed to concentrate, he told them: not too hard, in case the dream vanished under close scrutiny, but just enough to keep it alive.

The way the Doctor talked about it made Fitz think it was alive; living in the Doctor's head like a cuckoo in a nest. And he knew his old friend well enough to recognise the nascent frown on his forehead as a sign of deep concern.

'You sure you know what you're doing?' he asked as they hurried across the road by the park. They were attracting a few interested looks from passers-by, intrigued perhaps by the purposeful stride of the long-haired gent in the velvet coat and cravat.

The Doctor did not reply. He reached the opposite pavement and turned left.

'Hang on,' called Trix. 'Hazel's is this way...' She pointed to the right.

The Doctor jabbed a finger in the direction he was marching in and said, 'TARDIS.'

They hurried to catch up with him, but then something attracted Trix's attention. 'Hey, look over there.'

Fitz looked. On the far side of the road junction they had reached, a man was waiting to cross at the traffic lights. He wore a sports jacket with leather elbow patches and loose corduroy trousers. He was in his early thirties, with mousy brown hair and a worried expression. He looked oddly familiar.

'Recognise him?' queried Trix. 'Think of him in a tracksuit.'

'It's the jogger!' Fitz realised suddenly. 'The one we saw in the woods. Showed us the Deadstone memorial.'

The man crossed the road and hurried on. He glanced across at Fitz and Trix and then looked away very quickly.

'He's clocked us,' Fitz noted. Then he suddenly clicked his fingers and said, 'His name was Harris, something Harris. The Doctor said he was a teacher...'

'What a coincidence, seeing him again.'

'The Doctor once told me that *everything* is a coincidence,' said Fitz thoughtfully. 'But that we only notice the important ones.' He made a decision. 'You go with the Doctor. I want another word with our Mr Harris. I'll catch you up – go on!'

He set off before Trix could argue. With a sigh she turned around to follow the Doctor, only to find that he had already disappeared from sight.

Fitz followed Harris all the way to his house, a modest semi only ten minutes' walk from where the McKeowns lived. The teacher was clearly in a hurry, and Fitz suspected he was on his lunch break. Fitz's digital watch said 12.05, so that made sense. Perhaps Harris had just forgotten his sandwiches or left some homework books at home, and needed to collect them. Whatever the reason, Fitz wanted a word. He could spot someone behaving shiftily a mile off: *you can't kid a kidder*. He watched Harris open his front door and go inside. Fitz waited five more minutes, long enough to smoke a quick cigarette in the bus shelter opposite, before making his move.

When he walked up the path, he started to feel a little more apprehensive. Was this such a good idea, after all? What if this quiet, mild-looking teacher was also a Judo expert? There was no Trix to back him up now.

Fitz knocked on the door with slightly less vigour than he had intended.

There was no answer, so Fitz knocked again, a little more confidently. He had seen Harris go in, after all. Maybe he was having a shower or on the loo. Fitz waited and then knocked again, and rang the bell for good measure. He stood on the doorstep and tapped his foot, waiting.

Nothing.

Hands in pockets, and starting to feel a bit foolish, Fitz stepped back and looked at the house. No sign of anyone in the windows. Then he saw that the garage door was ajar. Maybe Harris was in there, and that's why he hadn't answered the front door.

Fitz pushed the garage door open. It was pretty dark inside, but he could make out the shape of an old workbench; some metal shelves, a freezer, and something covered in a sheet or tarpaulin in the centre of the room. Probably a motorbike, he thought, although Harris didn't seem the type. In fact there was an ordinary push-bike propped up against the far wall, which seemed more his thing.

Fitz heard himself say, 'Mr Harris?' but his voice sounded weak. He cleared his throat and said, 'Anyone here?' with a bit more firmness.

Still no response.

There must be a light switch, realised Fitz. He checked the wall near the door and found one. A fluorescent strip-light began to flicker into life and filled the garage with a series of lightning strikes. When it steadied, Fitz's attention was caught by the tarpaulin.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he lifted the corner of the heavy fabric for a peek. In doing so the weight shifted and the tarpaulin slid off with a loud rush, revealing what lay beneath.

Fitz gaped.

It was a ghost.

It was a *ghost*, laid out on an old kitchen table. He could see the wood through the spectral shape as it lay there. Its limbs and features were little more than a faint, milky outline. Inside the torso he could clearly see a sickly blue-grey mass, which must have been its internal organs.

It was roughly humanoid, but it seemed alien: the skull was oddly shaped, and it could have been formed from glass rather than bone, because the brain matter was visible inside.

'Well,' Fitz breathed, after he had overcome his initial shock and revulsion. 'Paint me green and call me a Martian.'

'What the hell are you doing here?'

Fitz jumped and whirled around at the sound of the voice. Bernard Harris was standing behind him in the garage doorway, and he didn't look happy.

'I see you found your ghost then, in the end,' Harris said. He shut the door after him.

'But not before you did,' Fitz replied. He jerked his thumb at the spectral shape on the table. 'Not bad. Where'd you find him?'

Harris watched Fitz carefully as he spoke. 'In the woods, of course.'

'Of course.'

'Everyone knows the woods are supposed to be haunted,' Harris said with a smile. 'It's funny, I run through them every morning, and on TV that's usually how dead bodies are discovered: an innocent jogger, or just a bloke walking his dog, stumbling over a corpse in the undergrowth.'

'True,' Fitz nodded. 'But you've gone one better. You found a real, live ghost.'

'That's an oxymoron.'

Fitz shrugged. 'Call it what you like – ghou, phantom, restless spirit... You know what they say: if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck...'

'Then it's a duck.' Harris made sure that he was positioned between Fitz and the door. Fitz had been gradually moving towards the exit as he talked. 'Stay where you are. You're trespassing.'

'What are you going to do? Call the police?' Fitz smirked at the ghost on the table. 'I was only asking how you found it. Trix and I didn't see a thing.'

'It wasn't difficult. The thing came at me, right out of the darkness. Don't mind admitting that it scared the daylights out of me at the time. But almost as soon as I saw it floating towards me, it sort of... collapsed. Laid itself spark out right in front of me.'

'How convenient.'

'If you say so.' Harris stared at the ghostly figure. 'Didn't feel like it at the time. I had to run back home, collect my car, and drive back to the woods. It was still very early and there was no one around. I put on some gardening gloves, heaved the thing into the boot and drove back home. Had to leave it in the boot until the following night. Backed the car into here and took the body out.'

'Must've been hard on your own. You *are* on your own, I take it?'

Harris nodded. 'Must be galling for you, I suppose: you lot spend all your time searching for proof of the paranormal or whatever, and then a bona fide ghost walks out right in front of someone like me.'

'I'm no stranger to the paranormal, mate.'

Harris snorted. 'What? Spoon-bending and seances? Leave it out.'

'What do you call that, then?' Fitz nodded at the ghost.

'Tough luck – for you. I found it.'

'I've a friend who'd like to have a look at this,' Fitz said.

'Forget it.'

'Look, the Doctor knows all about this kind of thing...'

'No doctors. No police. No reporters. I don't want any of that.'

'Then what? Money?'

'I don't know yet.' Harris looked at his watch. 'Anyway, I'm on my lunch hour at the moment. I can't stay.'

'Well, I'll be on my way as well, then... thanks for the chat.'

'Stay where you are,' Harris ordered. 'You're not going anywhere yet.'

'Don't be daft,' Fitz said. 'You can't keep me here.'

'I certainly can't let you go running off to your doctor friend.'

'OK, you're right,' Fitz said, visibly relaxing. 'I'll stay put, shall I?' As he finished speaking he sprang into action, leaping past the teacher for the door. He reckoned he could make it, and he had established Harris was working alone. What he hadn't banked on was the patch of engine oil on the garage floor. As Harris made a grab for him Fitz jerked sideways, hit

the oil and suddenly he was flat on his back. The crunch of his landing on the concrete echoed through his skull – just long enough for him to realise that he'd knocked himself out, and everything faded into black.

Harris was shaking. He hadn't planned on anything like this. Swallowing down his nausea, Harris nervously checked that Fitz was all right. He seemed to be breathing normally and his pulse, when Harris found it with his own sweat-cold fingers, was pretty strong.

With trembling hands, Harris felt the back of Fitz's head. Underneath the hair, a nasty lump was starting to develop, but the skin didn't seem to be broken and there wasn't any blood. Harris could only hope that he hadn't actually fractured his skull.

He thought about calling for an ambulance. It had been an accident, after all. But he didn't want the authorities involved. That would be disastrous. And he simply didn't have time to think of anything else. Harris checked his watch: he definitely had to get back to school.

Fitz began to stir, moaning softly to himself on the concrete floor. He was looking a bit pale now, and Harris supposed this was due to shock. Still, it was good to see the smug oaf looking a bit worse for wear.

Fitz moved slightly, hunching himself up into a foetal position. One hand moved unsteadily, instinctively, to the back of his head.

Harris gathered up some lengths of plastic washing line and then stooped to bind Fitz's wrists and ankles together. He made sure the knots were tight and then carefully replaced the fallen tarpaulin over the creature's body.

Chapter 19

Dark Dreams

When Trix eventually found the Doctor, he was leaning on a lamppost halfway along the High Street. Not casually, waiting for her to catch up, but in a manner that suggested that, without the lamp-post, he would simply keel over and lie in the gutter.

In fact, people were avoiding him. Pedestrians took one look at the long-haired man in fancy dress, clutching awkwardly at the lamp-post as his legs began to give way, and thought: *drunk*. They took care not to make any eye contact and moved swiftly on.

The Doctor pushed himself away from the lamppost and staggered along the pavement until he was able to grab hold of a pillar box. He began to slither down it, heading for the pavement again.

Trix caught him under the arms and helped him up.

'I am not a post man,' he told her emphatically. 'Unhand me at once!'

'Best place for you is bed, I think,' Trix said. And, for the benefit of any passers-by, added loudly, 'And some black coffee!'

'TARDIS,' croaked the Doctor, pointing weakly down the street.

'Yeah,' Trix nodded, glancing up at the reassuring shape of the old blue police box. 'Not far now. Come on. Best foot forward and all that.'

He nodded, and squared his shoulders like a lush trying to act sober. Trix helped him weave along the pavement until they reached the TARDIS. Blinking with concentration, the Doctor made several attempts to fit the key into the lock before finally getting it right. The door opened and he tumbled in.

'There,' Trix said, putting the cup and saucer down on the mahogany rim of the console. 'Nice hot cup of tea, just what the Doctor ordered.'

Once inside the TARDIS, the Doctor had seemed to recover some of his wits. He had walked stiffly over to the central control console and started

operating the controls. For a horrible moment Trix had seriously thought he was preparing to dematerialise.

‘No no no,’ he said. ‘Just recalibrating the telepathic circuits. Won’t be a tick.’

She had offered him coffee, but he had insisted on tea: ‘Assam, or China Yunnan, if you would.’ From the galley, she had watched him leaning heavily on the wooden rim of the console, eyes closed, muttering to himself.

‘If you told me what you were trying to do,’ she said, as he stared at the controls, ‘I might be able to help.’

‘What, you?’ he snorted. ‘Why? There’s nothing in it for you. No *profit*.’

She felt a bit hurt by that, considering what she had been through for him in the past. She was careful not to show it, though: wouldn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he had needled her. ‘Oh, you know,’ she said, with just a hint of iciness, ‘giving is its own reward.’ She tapped the cup and saucer. ‘Enjoy your tea. Mind you don’t choke on it.’

The Doctor looked blankly at the tea for a moment and then blurted: ‘Sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry.’ He ran a hand through his wild tangle of hair. ‘Lost concentration... trying to convert the TARDIS telepathic circuits into a psionic filter. Isolate the dream, you know.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Trix said coolly. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. I never know what you’re talking about.’

‘Nonsense,’ the Doctor said, flicking switches and twisting dials again. ‘You’re doing very well. You make a good nurse. And an excellent cup of Assam tea.’

‘You haven’t even tasted it yet.’

‘I can tell by looking at it,’ he said. ‘It’s a gift.’

Suddenly, he began to smack himself violently and repeatedly on the forehead. ‘Don’t worry!’ he cried between blows, ‘I have to do this!’

‘What on Earth for?’

‘Pain is an essential stimulant.’

‘I’ve heard about men like you.’

‘I’ve got to activate certain endocrines in my brain to help facilitate the dream,’ he told her impatiently between slaps. ‘Do you honestly think I’m enjoying this?’

‘Takes all sorts, I suppose,’ Trix shrugged. She winced as he continued to strike himself viciously about the head. ‘I just don’t think it’s very scientific.’

‘I haven’t got time for brain surgery!’ he yelled. ‘It’s the dendrons, you see. Nerve fibres... that carry impulses... between prosencephalon cells.’

‘I’m sure you know what you’re talking about,’ Trix said, raising her voice over the sound of the repeated blows, ‘if not what you’re doing.’

‘I’ll need some help,’ the Doctor told her.

Trix bunched her fists. 'OK, if you say so...'

'Not with the pain!' cried the Doctor. 'With the console! I can't see straight at the moment. My vision is impaired.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Hit that purple switch, please! *Now!*'

Such was the apparent urgency of the request that Trix didn't question him further. She simply reached across the console and hit the purple switch. Instantly the Doctor said, '*Gnnnh!*' and collapsed, sagging against the metal rail that surrounded the control console like a boxer struggling to stay in the ring. Trix dashed across to him as he slid down on to the parquet floor.

'Thank you,' he said, lying utterly motionless. Apart from his mouth. 'Help me to my chair, would you? I seem to have lost the use of my eggs.'

'Eggs?'

'I mean legs. Sorry, brain's a bit scrambled. Like eggs. And I mean eggs this time. Chair, please.'

Trix tried to pull him across the floor towards his armchair, but he was too heavy. Annoyingly, he had shut his eyes and begun to snore. Trix grabbed him by the ankles and heaved. Inch by inch, she managed to drag him off the low plinth that supported the control console, biting her lip as his head thudded off the edge. The jolt made him cry out in his sleep: 'Hypothalamus!'

'Bless you,' she muttered.

Trix hauled him slowly across to the area where the Doctor kept his everyday stuff; a kind of informal work-cum-relaxation area that reminded her of a gentleman's study. There was an ornate, antique armchair with a side table piled high with half-read books, bits of electronic equipment and a magnifying glass. A rather beautiful reading lamp cast a warm glow over the furniture.

The Doctor groaned and sleepily climbed up into the chair, slumping down in it with his collar and cravat all astray. Trix lifted his feet on to the stool. 'Thank you, thank you,' he murmured, eyes flickering open for a moment. 'In some sensory neurones the dendron may be over a metre in length,' he added, and then shut his eyes and started snoring again.

Trix staggered back to the galley and poured herself a stiff drink. She kept a bottle of Gordon's and some tonic water in one of the cupboards for these sorts of occasions.

It was very quiet. There was the customary background hum of the TARDIS at rest, and the console instruments gave an occasional click or bleep, but otherwise the ship was silent and still. It wasn't very brightly lit, either, which could sometimes make it seem gloomy. In fact, Trix reflected

as she finished her G&T, it was downright spooky. She almost wished Fitz was here with her. What if the Doctor had a fit? Or started turning into a human jelly like Cal, or throwing up green vomit? What if he simply didn't wake up at all?

Before now, Trix had spent a lot of time alone in the TARDIS. She liked to think she knew it quite well – but recently, she had felt a strange sense of... well, *unease* was too strong a word for it. More like a kind of tension, or a sense of anticipation. Like the feeling you get when you open your eyes in the morning and see the time is exactly 6.59:59 – that one, long second before the alarm goes off. Or the feeling when you're walking along and there's a kerb or an extra step you hadn't noticed. The very moment of that slight disorientation. Something in the air... something hanging over the TARDIS, as if the future was holding its breath.

On an impulse Trix took out her mobile phone and speed-dialled a number from the memory. It connected after a few seconds and she said, 'Yes, hello. It's Tricia MacAlister here. I wonder if you could tell me how my mother is, please. Yes, Mrs MacAlister, that's right.' There was a short wait, and Trix bit her lip. Then she listened to the warm voice at the other end of the line for a minute. 'Thanks very much. Yes, I just wanted to make sure she was OK. No, I'm afraid I don't know when I'll be able to visit next, but I'll try and make it soon. All right. Any message? Well, er... um... just tell her that I rang, would you? Yes. Thanks again. Bye.'

She sat and stared into her memories for a few seconds, and then dialled another number. It rang twice and then switched to a voice-mail service, which is what she expected. 'Hi, Anji,' she said, switching to a breezier tone altogether. 'This is your Fairy Godmother speaking. Trust you and the sprog are doing all right. But – just in case you're still interested – I've posted a copy of one of next year's *Financial Times* to the usual address. Hope it's useful. See ya.'

Trix switched off the phone. *I must be going soft in my old age*, she thought.

Then she jumped as she heard something, like a soft footstep, or a door quietly closing. She ran out of the galley and looked in disbelief at the Doctor's armchair.

It was empty.

The Doctor walked along the corridor without thinking about where he was going, in fact without thinking anything at all. It was dark, but there were some candles burning. It was lighter up ahead, where there were more candelabra. Despite the quantity of candles, it was cold, and he could see his breath.

At the end of the passage was a small table surrounded by candles. Huge drips of wax hung from the brass mountings, and there were small circles of the stuff, like flattened pearls, all over the flagstones beneath. Behind the table was a large, gilt-framed mirror. It was very dusty, and thick cobwebs were stretched across the glass.

The Doctor reached out and brushed away the flakes of dead skin tissue and tacky spider silk. The webs hung like grey rags from his fingers.

In the mirror he could see a man. He looked ill; pasty-faced in the flickering candlelight and with frightened, bloodshot eyes. It took him a minute to realise that it was his own reflection.

‘You took your time,’ his reflection said.

‘Am I dreaming?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘That doesn’t answer my question.’

The man in the mirror laughed softly, like a wolf who had been asked for directions by a lost, lonely little pig. ‘Oh dear, what exactly is going on inside that head of yours, Doctor?’

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor. ‘Answering a question with another question. That old trick.’

‘You’ll find I’m full of old tricks.’

And then the Doctor saw that the man in the mirror didn’t actually look much like him any more. Squinting through the smear of dust, he could discern a neat, black goatee and dark eyes. ‘Oh, it’s you,’ the Doctor said. ‘Why are you haunting me? Who are you?’

The bearded man chuckled dangerously. ‘How easily we forget, Doctor...’ Then his dark eyes hardened and he said, ‘You still haven’t answered my question.’

The Doctor thought back, confused. ‘Oh – my head. And what’s going on inside it. Yes, that’s a good question, all right. Better than mine, certainly. But I’ll only answer your question if you answer mine first.’

‘No,’ the man in the mirror said. ‘You are not dreaming.’

The Doctor looked disappointed. ‘Drat. That means this headache must be real.’

The man in the mirror looked equally disappointed. And he no longer had a beard; his hair was long and unkempt and his eyes were a bright, alert blue. ‘Oh, hello again,’ said the Doctor. And his reflection said it too. He smiled, but the smile turned into a grimace as the headache grew suddenly worse. It felt like something was scratching and scraping at his skull.

From the inside.

‘Perhaps,’ he thought, wincing, ‘my brain wants to get out. Or perhaps there’s something or someone inside me who wants to be free.’ He had felt that quite a lot, recently, as if he was someone else, looking down at himself, watching, waiting. He’d put it down to his general melancholy, caused by – what? Too much work? Not enough work? Or just some fluff caught in the TARDIS telepathic circuits again?

The pain was getting worse. It felt like a great spike being driven into the top of his skull. His legs buckled and he fell forward on to the table. The mirror rocked and he found himself close to his own reflection.

A trickle of blood was running down his face. It had drawn a glistening red line down his nose, starting from somewhere in his hair. As he watched, more blood ran down and he heard a distinct, painful crack.

Something moved in his hair.

Then the top of his skull split open like an egg hatching. Blood flowed down his face as a large, wet red shape began to emerge from inside his head, clawing its way out. He stared in fascinated horror as the dark, bristling creature squirmed free and slipped forward on to the tabletop.

It was a rat.

Its black fur was slick with his blood, and sticky, mucus strands stretched between its naked tail and the Doctor’s hair. The rat shook itself and stared back at the Doctor.

‘Hello!’ the Doctor gasped, just before everything went black.

Chapter 20

The Doctor's Ghost

Jade said, 'You don't know what it's been like.'

'You can say that again,' muttered Harris. It was later in the afternoon; he had just finished his last lesson of the day and was packing up. He'd been distracted all afternoon, completely unable to concentrate on the lesson. All he could think about was the man he'd left tied up in his garage.

Jade McKeown had stayed behind after the rest of her class had departed. 'I mean about the homework,' she said. 'I just haven't had time. It's been like, just totally weird at home recently...'

'Yes,' Harris nodded as he stuffed the rest of 10C's homework into his briefcase. 'You mentioned something about that. Cal still causing problems, is he?'

'You could say that.'

'I'm sure it'll all blow over soon.' Harris clipped his bag shut, not really listening. 'You can have an extension on the homework – Monday, no later. And it had better be good.'

'Thanks, sir!'

The bell sounded for the start of the next lesson and there was a racket of running footsteps in the corridor outside. 'You'll be late for your next lesson,' Harris warned her, lifting his briefcase off the desk.

'It's only Art and Design,' Jade sniffed. 'Cal's always drawing. He loves it. You should see his new pen. It can do any colour you think of.'

'That sounds handy.' Harris walked with her to the door. 'Where'd he get one of those?'

'Mum's freaky doctor gave it to him.'

Harris actually smiled. 'Freaky doctor?'

'Yeah. She's brought this guy in to help with Cal. But he's, well, pretty weird. I mean, he's cool, sometimes... but other times he's *very* strange.'

'Strange?' Harris was intrigued. There were kids gathering outside the

classroom door, but they could wait a few more minutes. There was something niggling at the back of his mind.

Jade was warming to her subject. 'Take last night, for instance. He cooked everyone dinner – everyone except me, that is. Fish. Urgh. And then afterwards he had Mum up on the roof.'

Harris raised an eyebrow. 'Did he, indeed?'

'Oh, not like *that*. Ugh, gross. But he dresses like a freak as well.'

Harris stopped dead. 'In what way, exactly?'

'Sort of old-fashioned. And I don't mean Sixties old-fashioned. I mean *old* old-fashioned.' Jade thought for a moment. 'He should look like a right idiot, but somehow... he doesn't. If you know what I mean.'

Harris stared at her for a long time. 'This doctor. Does he have a name?'

'Not that I know of. Why?'

'Does he have any friends? Colleagues?'

'Yeah. A man and a woman. I do know their names: Fitz and Trix.'

Harris felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. Jade, this could be important,' he managed to say calmly.

'Why? What are you looking at me like that for?'

'I think I know this doctor.' Harris's mind was racing, flicking through possible ways forward. But he was panicking too much to think straight. Eventually, forced to fill the expectant gap, he said: 'I've seen him before, prowling around the woods.'

'No!' Jade looked amazed. 'The Doctor's always going on about the woods...'

Harris felt a hot rush of fear run right through him. He licked his lips and said, 'He's a crank. A local UFO nut, you know the type. He and his friends are nothing other than interfering idiots.'

Jade looked uncertain. 'Well, Mum seems to think they're OK. Although I can tell she's not totally happy with them.'

'Your mum's confused and worried about your brother. She's probably prepared to believe anything, or anyone. And I'm afraid these types always prey on the most vulnerable people.'

'But...'

'But nothing. Trust me, Jade, I know.' A sudden thought struck Harris: 'Remember that crazy old bloke who lives in the cottage? They call him Old Man Crawley...' Harris saw the light dawning in Jade's eyes and pressed on. 'Well, these people are his friends.'

'Old Man Crawley's?'

'Yes. they're as crazy as he is.'

Jade thought hard. 'Old Man Crawley's been telling Cal ghost stories. Mum reckons that's what started his nightmares.'

'Very probably,' said Harris. 'And then – hey presto, a mysterious “doctor” turns up on the doorstep, claiming to be able to cure Cal of his problems. Don't you see? they're in cahoots.'

'I did see the Doctor outside Old Man Crawley's last night, on the way home.'

'Caught him there, most likely.' Harris thought of something else. 'Like I said, I've come across this guy and his friends before.'

There were sounds of a commotion outside the classroom door. Another teacher had arrived for the next lesson. 'Come on,' said Harris, ushering Jade towards the door. 'Time to go.'

'Wake up,' said Trix. 'Come on, Doctor. This isn't funny any more.'

It had taken her a couple of hours to find him. She knew the TARDIS pretty well, or at least the parts of it that were closest to the console room: the living quarters, the cloisters, the laboratories. There was even an art gallery, which impressed her deeply. Trix knew enough to recognise a genuine old master when she saw several. Then there was the extensive library, another room containing a huge collection of clocks, a greenhouse where the Doctor grew his own tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet corn, and something that looked like a plant but turned around and watched as you walked past. Trix didn't linger in there.

In fact, she had tried every room she knew – even the smallest one.

But the Doctor hadn't been in any of them, not even his own room – a place he seldom visited, as far as she could tell. He seemed to split most of his time when in the ship between the console room, the library and the labs.

Eventually, having run up and down the great spiralling staircase more times than she could enjoy, and even tried the lift – which contained a shocking number of buttons – she had been forced to give up.

'Admit it, Trix old thing,' she had said to herself as she walked round the control console, 'you're scared.'

She did one more circuit, nervously tapping her fingers along the sections of rail, and then turned to face the great bank of instrumentation. There were dials, gauges, switches, levers and lights aplenty. But nothing that might tell her where the captain of the vessel might be hiding. In fact, she only knew about two of the controls: the door lever and the scanner.

Then her gaze fell on to the purple switch that the Doctor had told her to hit. She peered closely at it. None of the TARDIS controls made any sense to her, and none of them appeared to be set out in any logical order. Sometimes it looked as though the designer had simply lobbed them anywhere and everywhere. But occasionally, she knew, the Doctor had

written alongside some of the controls little reminders to himself of what they did. One lever was labelled, rather intriguingly, *'emergency flip-flop'*. Another switch had *'fast return'* written next to it.

And the purple switch, she noticed now, was also labelled. She peered closer. It said: *'Do not press this'*.

Never one to willingly obey an instruction, Trix reached out to press it.

But then she heard the lift arriving, and hesitated. It chimed loudly and she swung around to glare at the double doors. Something moved – a strange, milky glow appearing in the middle of the doors, taking on the shape of a man stepping straight through them.

Like a ghost.

It was painfully transparent, barely visible in the gloom, but Trix could make out long, untidy hair and a frock coat. And then, with a heart-stopping shock, she realised it was the Doctor.

He stepped slowly forward, as fragile as glass. Trix could make out the beginnings of some colour – the green of his jacket, the embroidery on his waistcoat, as he began to solidify. Then, as he took another agonised step towards her, the doors of the elevator hissed incongruously open behind him.

In another few steps, the Doctor had regained all his colour and substance, but as he did so he grew weaker and weaker, until eventually he fell heavily forward and lay his length on the floor.

She ran over to him. He was face down, utterly inert. With an effort she rolled him on to his back. Typically, she thought, after wasting all that time trying to find him, *he* had found her.

'Come on, wake up,' she repeated. 'Or do I have to get the water-pistol?'

'Water is extremely rare on the planet Eskon,' the Doctor said, without opening his eyes.

'I'll take your word for it.'

His eyes snapped open, wide and blue, looking directly at her. 'Benoit Mandelbrot was born in 1924.'

'Was he? Is that relevant?'

'Not at all. I was just checking I could remember a random fact.' The Doctor sat up abruptly. 'Let's check some others: The atomic number of beryllium is 4. Clocks! I love clocks, don't you?'

'Simply adore them, Doctor. Now, will you please start talking sense?'

'Aren't I talking sense?'

'No, not really.'

'Do you know what a Mandelbrot Set is?' Without waiting for her to answer, he said: 'It's a particularly famous fractal, often described as the most complex and beautiful object in mathematics.'

'OK, Doctor, now you're beginning to bore me. Where the hell have you been?'

'Dreaming!' he declared. 'I hope. At least, I think I was.' He suddenly gripped her arm. 'I managed to tune in my mind to the psionic field, you see.'

'Are you all right?'

The Doctor's eyes clouded momentarily, and when he next spoke, his voice had dropped to a whisper. 'No. I suffered a terrible psychic haemorrhage, Trix. As if my mind was being torn apart, thought by thought, until there was nothing left at all. It was... well, it wasn't pleasant.'

'You looked like a ghost.'

'Well, I'd had a bit of a shock!' The Doctor jumped to his feet and headed for the central console, apparently none the worse for wear.

'No,' said Trix, hurrying to catch up. 'I mean, you *really* looked like a ghost. I could see right through you, and you walked straight through the lift doors *before* they opened.'

The Doctor looked troubled. 'Did I really? How strange!' He began to make some careful adjustments to the controls. 'The psionic field must have shifted me right out of corporeal existence. That's incredible.' He stopped and bit his lip thoughtfully 'It's also very worrying, because it means that the field effect is even more powerful and far-reaching than I had thought.'

Trix gritted her teeth. 'I wish you'd told me what you were going to do,' she said.

The Doctor was concentrating on his work, but he said, 'I thought I had.'

'I was scared, Doctor.'

He glanced up at her, his face blue in the glow of the central column. He looked as if he was about to come back with a witty response, or some faintly sardonic remark, but he seemed to change his mind at the last minute. Instead, he simply nodded and said, 'Me too.'

Trix cleared her throat. 'What are you doing?'

He turned back to the instruments. 'I'm trying to work out the precise psychic wavelength on which the field is based. I had a rough idea, but the TARDIS should now be able to tell me *exactly*.'

'And what then?'

The Doctor hit a sequence of buttons and a number of gauges lit up. Needles quivered and slowly settled into various readings. The Doctor quickly jotted them down on the back of his hand with a ballpoint pen. Then he looked up and said, 'We fight back.'

Chapter 21

Jade

Hazel and Cal had enjoyed their day. It seemed like a miracle, after the dark despair of the last few weeks, and the regular, nightly stress and fear they had been forced to endure. Both knew it wasn't over yet, but today had at least been a respite, and a very welcome one.

After everyone had left, Hazel phoned the supermarket and told them she was too ill to come into work. Hazel had never 'thrown a sickie' before in her life, but the truth was she had reached the end of her strength and needed a break. And so did Cal. The weeks had taken a clearly visible toll on him: he was white-faced, almost gaunt, with dark circles under his eyes and rounded shoulders.

No young boy should look so cowed, thought Hazel sadly. He had slumped in front of the TV for an hour while Hazel did a bit of tidying and caught up on some housework. She was surprised, and a little embarrassed, about how it had built up. She finished the morning with some ironing and then fixed some sandwiches for dinner. They had them together on the settee, watching a daytime quiz show.

Afterwards, his strength seemed to return and Cal got busy with the Doctor's trick pen, drawing some pictures that Hazel promised to pin up in the kitchen.

'The Doctor's great, isn't he?' asked Cal, putting the finishing touches to a spectacular picture of a snarling tiger, resplendent in vivid orange and black stripes, glowing green eyes and blood-red tongue – all from the same felt-tip.

Hazel cleared away the plates with a smile. 'He's pretty unusual, I'll say that.'

'But you do like him.'

'I'll like him a whole lot more if he really can stop these nightmares of yours.'

Cal sat back and put the top back on his felt-tip. 'It's not just nightmares, though, is it, Mum?'

'What do you mean?'

'You know. It's more than just bad dreams. I know it is.' Cal looked incredibly young and fragile. 'It makes me do strange things, doesn't it? Say things. Things I can't help.'

With a shiver Hazel recalled the previous night; the macabre convulsions and the blood and bile. 'The Doctor will sort it out,' she said.

Cal chewed his lip thoughtfully. 'What if he can't?'

'Then we'll find someone else,' said Hazel. 'Another doctor.'

'I don't think there are any other doctors like him.'

Hazel stroked his hair. 'No, I don't suppose there are.'

Hazel told Cal to bring some games down after lunch, and they spent the afternoon playing first draughts, and then, after Hazel had been beaten too many times, Monopoly.

Hazel felt strangely happy. Could it be that things really were improving? When Cal raised the subject of the Doctor once more, she found she didn't mind.

'Do you really think the Doctor comes from space?'

'No, I don't,' Hazel answered with a smile.

'Then why does he talk like he does?'

Hazel shrugged. 'I'm not sure. Maybe he's like a magician: he likes to dress his tricks up to look special.' When Cal didn't look convinced, Hazel had to laugh. 'Well, it's got to be a better explanation than coming from the planet Mongo or whatever!'

They'd both laughed, and by the time Jade arrived home from school, Hazel was broke and Cal owned all four railway stations and several hotels on Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly and Leicester Square.

'Oh, not Monopoly,' said Jade disapprovingly. 'Looks like I was better off in school after all.'

'To what do we owe this sunny disposition?' asked Hazel lightly, flicking on the TV for *Newsround*.

Hazel pulled a face. 'Dunno. What's for tea?'

Hazel let out a theatrical groan. 'Do you know, I haven't the faintest idea. I haven't even thought about it. Blame your brother: he's been fleecing me all afternoon with his chain of very expensive hotels.'

'Can we carry on?' asked Cal.

'Forget it, I'm broke. You won.' Hazel got up off the floor and started switching on the lights. It was dark outside, and the familiar tension of the evening was returning. As she drew the living-room curtains, Hazel

recognised the dull ache of anxiety forming in her stomach. Another long night lay ahead, in contempt of the short hours of daylight.

Jade said, 'Is it OK if I go out to Gina's tonight?'

Hazel pursed her lips, unsure.

'Only we're supposed to be working on a homework project together,' Jade added.

'That old chestnut,' mused Hazel.

'Well, can I?'

Before Hazel could reply, the doorbell sounded. Cal answered the door to the Doctor and Trix, who came in with some shopping. Cal was like a dog with a bone, following the Doctor and Trix into the kitchen. But Jade sat and stared coldly at the floor, refusing even to say hello. When Hazel asked her why, she flashed her eyes and said, 'I just can't stand the way they breeze in here like they own the place. Gives me the creeps.'

'It won't be forever,' Hazel said.

'And I don't understand why you believe everything he says.'

'I don't,' Hazel replied stonily. She shook her head and went through to the kitchen, where the Doctor was unpacking his carrier bags while Cal showed Trix his new drawings. Hazel realised there was someone missing. 'Where's Fitz?'

Trix shrugged. 'We thought he'd be here.'

Hazel said she hadn't seen him.

Trix frowned, a little concerned. 'He'll turn up, I suppose,' she said at last. 'He always does.'

'Been shopping?' Hazel asked the Doctor, watching him unload a series of solid-looking vegetables and some meat, including four lambs' kidneys, freshly wrapped in butcher's paper.

'I was going to try boeuf bourguignon,' he said, sorting out carrots, onions and a small turnip. 'But I couldn't decide on a decent red wine, and I'm not overly keen on garlic. So I decided to go for a good old Lancashire hotpot instead. You'll love it.'

Hazel picked up a brand new stainless steel colander. 'I've already got a colander. You could have used mine.'

'That's for something else,' the Doctor said, taking it off her and putting it down next to his Gladstone bag.

Hazel thought the Doctor looked a bit pale, almost worn out. In hushed tones, so that Cal wouldn't hear, she asked him if he had managed to see Old Man Crawley.

'He wasn't in,' replied the Doctor, spreading his ingredients out over the work surface. 'But it wasn't a complete waste of time. There's more to this

Old Man Crawley person than a few horror stories: I found a psionic blister in the cellar.'

Here we go, thought Hazel, mustering all her patience. 'Which means what, exactly?' She had hoped the Doctor was going to sort out the old fool – warn him off scaring young children. Instead he'd come back with a load more space talk. And Hazel had not failed to notice Jade scowling in the doorway, listening to everything.

'To cut a long story short,' explained the Doctor, 'it means that I've been able to calculate the exact wavelength of the psychic field.'

He surprised her by suddenly brandishing his fist. Hazel dodged back until she glimpsed what looked like a long quadratic equation scribbled on the back of his hand. 'And that helps us, does it?'

'Of course. For one thing, I can now stop Cal's nightmares.'

Despite her mounting reservations, Hazel felt her heart lift. 'How?'

'First things first,' the Doctor replied, heaving a bag of spuds on to the drainer. 'Right now I need your potato peeler.'

The Doctor's Lancashire hotpot was superb – the lambs' kidneys were absolutely perfect: the Doctor said the trick was to skin them first, then cut them in half and use kitchen scissors to snip out the white cores. Even Jade joined them for dinner, although she didn't eat much and didn't join in with the general conversation – until the Doctor returned to the subject of the 'psionic blister' in Old Man Crawley's cellar, and how he found it.

'What exactly is a psionic blister, then?' she asked.

'It's a bit difficult to explain,' began the Doctor.

'I'll bet,' she muttered.

'But I'll try.' The Doctor gave her a slightly reproving look. 'Imagine you've just glimpsed something out of the corner of your eye. You're not sure what it is, but something attracted your attention – or at least the attention of your subconscious mind, the part of your mind that works on automatic. Something you saw triggered a response, a reaction. It may have been a familiar face in a crowd, or a particular name in a long list. You register it subliminally; without even trying. Now imagine glimpsing something out of the corner of your *mind*.'

'Like *déjà vu*?' said Hazel.

'Not quite.'

'Extrasensory perception,' suggested Trix.

'Almost.' The Doctor thought for a moment. 'It's very much like remembering a dream – only in this case, someone else's dream.'

The conversation moved on to other things. Eventually, after pushing the food around on her plate for a little longer, Jade asked again if she

could go to Gina's.

'Well, all right,' Hazel said. 'But be careful.'

'Another visit to a friend?' queried the Doctor, as Jade disappeared upstairs to get ready.

'Don't ask. Teenage stuff.'

The Doctor smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. Hazel was surprised to see that his plate had hardly been touched either. 'Something wrong?'

The Doctor nodded and sat forward. 'There are three things wrong,' he confirmed. 'Firstly, I had assumed the psychic field was generated by an artefact located somewhere in the woods – probably the Deadstone memorial. Now I'm not so sure. When I discovered it in the cellar and made... contact... I sensed something that I hadn't expected: an *intelligence*. I couldn't make much sense of it, except for one thing: an overwhelming feeling of being trapped, *confined*.'

A cold hush had settled around them all and Hazel shivered.

The Doctor said, 'There is a deadly, feral psychic presence trapped somewhere and it's desperate, *desperate*, to be free. And there really is no telling what someone – or something – that desperate may attempt in order to regain its freedom.'

Hazel, Trix and Cal all watched the Doctor intently.

'It is far more powerful than I had first thought,' he continued. 'Merely making mental contact with it resulted in my being moved into an extrinsic continuum.'

'A what?' queried Hazel, unable to keep a note of scorn out of her voice.

'A sort of astral plane, if you like.'

'I don't,' she said. 'I really don't.'

'Trix saw it,' insisted the Doctor, mistaking her tone for one of doubt rather than dislike. 'I actually appeared briefly in an ectoplasmic form to her.'

'But –'

'If Trix says she saw it, then she saw it,' said the Doctor curtly. He seemed to find the memory disturbing. 'At any rate,' he added with a slight shudder, 'I was lucky to make it back to reality.'

Hazel raised an eyebrow at that.

For a moment all they heard was the clink of the Doctor's mug as he took another sip of tea. Then: 'Secondly, my making contact with this entity may have... alerted it.'

'Alerted it?'

'It knows I'm on to it now,' explained the Doctor quietly. 'It may react.' And the way he said 'react' left no one in any doubt that he considered this a Bad Thing.

'Like poking a stick into a wasps' nest,' Trix realised. 'Only worse.'

'Much worse,' mused the Doctor grimly.

Instinctively Hazel placed an arm around Cal. 'But you said you could stop the nightmares.'

'Yes,' agreed the Doctor. 'I'll need to – because the next psychic attack could be deadly if it goes unchecked.'

Hazel held her son closer. 'What will you do?'

'Well, now that I've got the right frequency, I can come up with something to block the signal. It should act as a sort of psychic shield, until we can locate the actual source and nullify it.' The Doctor got to his feet. 'In fact, I'll make a start now. There's quite a lot to do.'

'Hold on,' said Trix. 'I thought you said there were three things worrying you.'

'What?' The Doctor did a quick count on his fingers. 'Oh yes: thirdly, I'm worried about Fitz. He's been missing since lunchtime, and he should have met us here or at the TARDIS.'

'TARDIS?' queried Hazel.

'Our headquarters,' Trix said. 'It's on the High Street.'

Cal said, 'Why don't you call him? Doesn't he have a mobile phone?'

'Fitz is a bit old-fashioned like that,' Trix smiled.

'Nothing wrong with being a bit old-fashioned,' said the Doctor.

'Perhaps there's no network coverage on the planet Mongo,' Hazel whispered to Cal, who sniggered.

'Actually they use a hyper-modulated visio-graph net on Mongo,' said the Doctor.

Hazel rolled her eyes. 'Doesn't he ever give up?' she asked Trix.

'No,' she replied. 'Never.'

When Fitz woke up he felt instantly nauseous. It took a few seconds for the sickness to diminish sufficiently for him to actually open his eyes.

And when his vision cleared, he finally realised he was lying on his side, on a concrete floor, bound and gagged. Gradually he remembered what had happened. He could see the old table from where he lay, and the grey tarpaulin that covered it.

Painfully, Fitz twisted around until he could sit up. His head was pounding, and he could tell there was a big, tender lump on the back of it. From this position, however, he could see the big shape that lay beneath the tarp.

Then he heard the garage door open and someone came in.

'Oh, you're awake,' said Bernard Harris.

The relief was evident in the teacher's voice, but Fitz didn't care much for it. 'No thanks to you,' he said, but, thanks to the gag in his mouth, it

sounded more like, 'Mm mmm gnh uhhh.'

'I'm sorry,' said Harris. 'I didn't mean to hurt you. But I had no choice.'

'Hhh ugh mmm!' replied Fitz tersely.

'I don't know what you and your pals want here,' said Harris, 'but I can't let you have the ghost.'

Fitz let loose with a torrent of grunts and snarls. He hadn't failed to notice that Harris had a heavy winter coat on, and was now in the process of pulling on a pair of gloves. With a sinking feeling he wondered how he could defend himself with his ankles and wrists securely tied.

'Don't worry' Harris told him, perhaps detecting the bright glint of fear in Fitz's eyes. 'I'm not going to hurt you...'

'Hngh huuuh,' said Fitz drily.

'... but I can't let you go yet.' Harris smiled tightly. 'Don't take it personally. I'll be back soon.' Harris turned to leave and then paused for a moment, his hand on the light switch. 'For what it's worth, I really am glad you're all right.'

Fitz's reply was lost on the closing door. He heard a key being turned in the mortise lock, and then Harris's footsteps fading away.

Immediately, Fitz tried to stand up. After much effort he managed to get into a kneeling position, but he had grazed his knuckles on the floor and he felt incredibly faint. There was always the possibility, he thought glumly, of concussion. Right now, he felt that if he could actually stand up, he would simply fall over again. And without his arms free to break the fall, he'd probably end up knocking himself out again.

With an impatient, muffled sigh, Fitz closed his eyes and waited for the world to stop spinning.

Harris needed some air. He couldn't think straight. He knew he had to clear his mind and come up with a plan of action.

He walked without paying the slightest attention to where he was going. He kept his head down and his hands thrust into his coat pockets, barely registering the cold. All he knew was that he was in deep trouble. He could scarcely believe that, in addition to a ghost in his garage, he now had a man tied up in there. He was actually holding someone captive! It beggared belief. How had he let himself get into this awful mess? What on Earth was he going to do? He could feel a helpless, guilty panic rising in his chest.

He walked for quite a while, thinking furiously, until he kept coming round in circles to the one, simple solution: he had to go back home and release Fitz. And then face up to the consequences.

Having made the decision, he immediately felt a little better. He stopped and took in a deep breath of the biting chilly air. He'd been a fool. Now it was time to correct a terrible mistake.

'Mr Harris!'

His head jerked up as he heard the shout from across the street. He had wandered near the park, and, on the opposite side of the road, there was a young girl waving at him.

'Mr Harris! It's me – Jade McKeown!'

He hadn't recognised her at first. 'Jade! What are you doing out here?'

'Had to get out,' she told him as she crossed the road. She was wearing a velour tracksuit top and low waisted cargo pants.

'Aren't you cold like that?' Harris asked with a flash of irritation. 'It's the middle of November!'

Jade gave him the amused, slightly pitying look that all teenagers reserve for anyone over thirty-five. 'Where are you going, sir?'

Out of my mind, he thought. 'I needed a breath of fresh air,' he told her. 'I've not been feeling too good. In fact, I'd better head for home... which is what you should be doing, before you catch the flu or something.'

'Get real. I'm not going back there in a hurry, not while Cal's going mental and the Doctor's hanging around.'

'It'll blow over soon,' Harris assured her. 'See what happens over the weekend. We can talk about it on Monday if you like.'

Jade raised her eyebrows. 'We can do better than that. The Doctor was talking about psychic forces and stuff again tonight. Mum usually hates that kind of thing, she can't stand astrology and all that stuff, but... well, I can't believe how gullible she's being. Cal, I can understand, he's just a kid. But Mum should know better.'

'This Doctor must be very persuasive, Jade.' He smiled, aware of the irony. 'A real conman.'

'That's what I thought,' Jade said. 'Which is why I've had an idea!'

Harris's smile faded 'Oh yes?'

'Yes. The Doctor went to see Old Man Crawley this morning. He says he found something in his cottage, in the cellar.'

'What sort of something?'

'I'm not really sure. I think he called it a "psychic blister".'

Harris felt a rush of anger. 'And you believe him?'

'Nah, of course not.' Jade quickly brushed aside the hair that was blowing across her face. 'But I'm going to go and have a look anyway.'

Harris didn't like the sound of this at all. 'Have a look at what?'

'Old Man Crawley's place, of course!' Jade's eyes gleamed with determination in the evening light. 'The Doctor's talking rubbish and I'm going

to prove it!

Chapter 22

Quiet Time

‘There,’ said the Doctor with satisfaction. ‘That should do the trick.’

The ‘trick’, he had explained, was to create a psychic interference field around Cal’s brain. And *that* consisted of an inverted metal colander placed on the boy’s head, with a large pack of AA batteries taped to the top of it and a cannibalised transceiver – actually Jade’s personal CD player – connected to a telepathic circuit from the TARDIS via a spaghetti of coiled telephone cables and a torch bulb.

Hazel regarded it with a mounting sense of disquiet, and even Trix looked a bit worried.

Cal thought it was brilliant.

‘It’s not finished yet,’ said the Doctor, speaking with a cluster of wires poking out between his teeth. ‘Just a couple more adjustments to fine-tune it.’ He worked at the exposed circuitry of the CD player with his sonic screwdriver for another minute or so.

‘That’s pathetic,’ said Hazel.

The Doctor looked hurt. ‘Well, I haven’t switched it on yet.’

‘Is it safe?’ asked Trix, and the Doctor shot her a black look.

‘It’s a good sight safer than leaving him unprotected,’ he muttered peevishly. He checked the strap was fitting comfortably under Cal’s chin and then said, ‘Righto. Let’s see what happens.’

Which didn’t exactly help Hazel to feel any better, but it was too late now. The Doctor switched the CD player on and the colander hummed into life. Quickly he adjusted the volume to zero.

The little torch bulb began to blink on and off in a steady metronomic rhythm.

‘Is that it?’ asked Trix.

The Doctor beamed and nodded.

‘It’s working,’ said Hazel quietly. ‘Look. It’s working.’

Trix looked – but all she could see was the light slowly flashing on top of the colander. Then she shifted her gaze down to Cal, who was sitting looking blissfully happy underneath it. Blissfully.

‘He’s not looked that well in weeks,’ Hazel said, her voice full of emotion. ‘He looks like... like himself again.’

The shadows beneath Cal’s eyes had vanished, the pallor had gone from his cheeks. His eyes were shining again, looking up at his mother with undisguised glee. ‘It’s gone!’ he announced. ‘It’s gone from inside my head – the feeling that was there before.’

‘It’s cut the psychic field right out,’ said the Doctor. ‘He’s free of it – for now.’

Hazel sat down and put her arm around Cal. ‘For now?’

‘I said the force behind this was intelligent,’ the Doctor reminded her. ‘It’s possible that, if it can detect the barrier I’ve placed around Cal’s mind, it will try to break through.’

Hazel felt her heart sink. ‘How will we know? What will happen?’

‘It will take a lot to break through the force field,’ the Doctor advised her. ‘I can’t rule out the possibility, but it’s unlikely.’

‘But – how will I know if it *is* trying to break through the force field?’

‘The light will stop flashing and remain illuminated,’ the Doctor told her.

‘And then what should we do?’

The Doctor did not reply straight away. He picked up his coat and shrugged it on. ‘Our best hope of preventing anything untoward is to stop it at source,’ he said quietly.

‘Is that what you’re going to do now?’ asked Cal hopefully, as Trix put on her parka. ‘Stop it? Forever?’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘But first, we need to find Fitz.’

It was pitch black with the light turned off, but a faint orange light from the street lamp outside slid beneath the garage’s swing door. After a minute or two, this small amount of light afforded Fitz a dim view of his surroundings.

Not that there was much to see in the gloom: the freezer, the bench, the shelves, the bike.

And the big black shape of the tarpaulin in the middle.

Fitz’s head was ringing with pain, but he couldn’t rest any longer. For one thing, he was freezing. It was bitterly cold in the garage and worse still lying on the concrete. Summoning all of his resistance to pain, which didn’t take very long, Fitz got to his knees once again.

Then he wondered what to do next. He had to get rid of his bonds, that was for sure. If he could actually get to his feet, then he might be able

to hop around the garage until he found something sharp enough to slice through the plastic rope.

It would simply be a matter of leaping from a kneeling position into a standing position with his hands and feet tied. Simple. He was just about to make the first attempt when he heard something in the shadows.

Immediately he froze and held his breath.

It sounded like there was something in the garage with him. With him and the ghost.

For a long half minute he crouched and listened to the hammering of his heart in the darkness. Any number of nasty thoughts were running around in his head. Foremost was that there must be a rat loose in here with him.

And even as he thought that, and felt the sweat prickling in his scalp despite the cold, he heard it again: a tiny rustle, or scratch, from deep within the shadow.

Kneeling in the cold and dark, Fitz wondered what to do next.

‘We shouldn’t be doing this,’ said Harris as they approached the old, ramshackle cottage. In the distant light of the streetlamps, it reminded him of something from a fairy tale, old and grim and full of spiders.

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Jade, pushing open the gate. ‘The Doctor said there was no one here.’

‘No one here when *he* came to visit, perhaps. Old Man Crawley could’ve come back home by now.’

‘Then we’ll knock.’ Jade marched up to the front door and did just that. Nervously, Harris joined her on the doorstep. The door itself was thrown into deep shadow, but there was enough grey light from the cloud-scraped moon above to show that it was unlocked and open.

‘He mustn’t ever lock his door,’ Jade said.

‘That doesn’t mean we can go in,’ Harris warned her. ‘It’s still trespassing, even if we don’t actually break and enter.’

She grinned at him in the gloom. ‘Cool, isn’t it?’

Harris frowned at her. ‘Jade, I’m serious. Let’s leave it. You should go home and so should I.’

He turned to leave but she did not. ‘OK, go if you want,’ she said. ‘I’m not giving up.’

‘Jade!’ he hissed peremptorily, hoping to bring her in line with his best teacher’s tone.

She turned then and looked fiercely at him. ‘I’m not in school now. If Old Man Crawley and the Doctor are messing about with my family, then I want to know why. And I want to stop them.’ And with that, she turned and went inside.

'Jade!' Harris hurried back down the path and followed her in.

It was silent and cold and very smelly inside. Harris kept his hands firmly in the pockets of his anorak. 'Jade, you could get into a lot of trouble doing this!'

'You could,' she corrected him. 'I'm just a kid, remember.'

'I'm going to leave!'

'Go on, then.' A small torch clicked on and she waved the beam around the decaying living room.

Harris was astonished that she had thought to bring a torch at all. Now Harris could see that the cottage was filthy, with mildewed wallpaper hanging off the walls.

'Ugh,' Jade said. 'It's minging...'

She led the way through to the back room. 'The Doctor said he found that thing in the cellar.'

'His psychic thing, you mean?' Harris was intrigued, despite his immense reservations. But he felt it was only right that he should maintain a level-headed approach. 'He's making it up, Jade. He must be.'

'Well, let's see.' Jade's torchlight found the cellar door. 'Well, are you going to be a gentleman and open it for me, or must I do everything myself?'

Fitz had strained his ears until he thought he would pass out. He hadn't heard anything but his own breathing for several minutes. He was also developing cramp in his legs.

He listened for another few seconds, but all he heard was a car passing along the road outside. He wondered what time it was. And whether or not the Doctor and Trix had realised he was missing and starting looking for him.

And it was then, and only then, that Fitz realised something so obvious that he actually laughed out loud. Or as loud as he could through the gag.

There was a light switch by the garage door. His first priority should be to reach that and switch the flaming light on!

Enthused by this sudden, clear mission, Fitz started to shuffle across the concrete towards the corner where the door and the light switch were. It took him a few short seconds to reach it. Then, twisting around until his back was against the brickwork, he straightened his legs until he had pushed himself upright. Breathing hard, Fitz had begun to feel around with his forehead for the switch. He spluttered away a cobweb and then found the switch. It took him a few more seconds to find a way to operate it with only his head, cheekbones, chin or nose to work with. Eventually, he managed to do it, rather painfully, with the bone over his right eye socket.

He blinked in the sudden flickering light, quickly scanning the garage for any sign of the rat. But he couldn't find one. Probably his progress across the room had frightened it off. But at least he had plenty of light and could actually see what he was doing now.

He hopped towards the workbench, hoping to find a hacksaw or something to cut through the rope around his wrists.

Then, as he passed the table, he thought he saw the tarpaulin move.

In the cellar beneath Old Man Crawley's cottage, Jade and Harris had made an unwelcome discovery.

'Bones,' Harris said, peering at the pile of animal detritus picked out by Jade's torch.

'The Doctor never mentioned anything about bones,' Jade said quietly. She was shivering now, and Harris hoped she was losing her nerve.

'Well, he wouldn't, would he?' Harris muttered.

Jade said, 'People used to say Old Man Crawley fed his dog on other people's pets. I never believed them, but now... *yuk*.'

'My thoughts exactly,' Harris said. 'So let's go. We shouldn't be here. But we could call the police, maybe – get them to come and take a look around.'

'They won't find what we're looking for, though.' Jade shone the torch around the cellar. 'The psychic thingy.'

Harris's patience finally snapped. 'Stop being stupid, Jade! We're going – *now*.' And with that, he turned on his heel and headed for the wooden steps that led back up to the back room of the cottage.

And the door slammed shut.

Both Harris and Jade stopped in their tracks. 'Oh *hell*,' spat Harris, lurching for the steps. But they could already hear the sound of bolts being thrown, of the door being *locked*. 'Wait!' he yelled. 'We're down here! Don't lock it!'

His voice echoed around the cellar.

He spun around, ready to yell at Jade for getting them into this.

But he couldn't see her. The torch was on the floor, shining its beam in one long dagger of light across the concrete. 'Jade?' he hissed. 'Where are you?'

Getting no response, Harris bent down to pick up the torch, and as he did so he saw the edge of Jade's trainer. She was standing right there in the middle of the room, with the torch by her feet. Perhaps she'd dropped it in fright when the door was shut.

He raised the torch and aimed it at her face. 'Jade, what the hell are you _'

The question died in his mouth.
Jade's eyes were completely black.

Hazel sat down with a mug of hot chocolate and *Treasure Island*. Cal was sitting on the settee with his knees tucked up underneath him, wearing his pyjamas. The colander was still on his head, the little light flashing away on top.

'I can't believe that works,' she said to him, smiling at the helmet, 'but I'm glad it does. It's good to have you back, Cal.'

He smiled back at her, his eyes warm and full of life but tired. He was looked drowsy, ready for bed. She was looking forward to reading a bit more of *Treasure Island*; Cal loved it, and she had forgotten what a good yarn it was. She only hoped the Doctor and Trix would have some luck tonight. For the first time in ages, Hazel thought there was a real chance of success. He was the biggest oddball she'd ever met, but it looked as though the Doctor might be coming through for her after all.

Then the light on top of Cal's head stopped flashing. It burned brightly and steadily, like a torch. Hazel felt her stomach clench with sudden apprehension. She immediately looked down at Cal's face, and she knew he could sense it too: the fear was back in his big, wide eyes.

'Mum...' he said, very quietly, and reached out to her.

'It's all right, baby,' she said, taking his hand. It was cold and clammy. 'I'm here.'

'Something's woken up,' he said.

Fitz had found an old, rusty blade on the workbench and, after a few awkward minutes, succeeded in hacking through his bonds. He rubbed his wrists for a minute, and then looked back at the grey material of the tarp. He stared at it for a long time, suspecting there was a rat or something underneath it.

The table was positioned directly beneath the fluorescent strip light attached to the ceiling. And yet now he thought he could detect a faint, pulsating luminescence seeping out from under the tarp.

Tentatively, holding his breath, Fitz reached out and pulled the tarp away.

The ghost still lay there – but now it was glowing. Fitz's attention was drawn to the strange sheen on the transparent skin. Almost as if the flesh was beginning to putrefy.

Then he realised that the glow was in fact moving over the glasslike flesh beneath, oozing around the ghost like a thin mist. A vaporous haze started to envelop the spectral shape.

Fitz felt his guts turn, and instinctively looked at the distorted, translucent face of the creature.

In one sudden and violent movement, it reached up and grabbed him by the throat.

Chapter 23

Contact

Fitz reeled back, a cry of shock squeaking out from between his teeth.

The ghost answered with a sudden, chilling scream, and as Fitz tried to step backwards he realised, too late, that his ankles were still bound. His dive for safety was transformed into a clumsy, backwards hop. He crashed into the chest freezer behind him and lay flat on his back.

And then the spectre was on him. Its glistening eyes – half a dozen of them – bored into his as it stepped over him. The wraithlike rags, flapped in the air like wings, spreading tendrils of glowing mist. The skull's jaws sprang open and Fitz got a good view straight down its mucus-veined gullet just before his instinct for self-preservation finally went into top gear and he thrust his feet straight up into the creature's groin.

The teeth closed on empty air as the ghost staggered back. Fitz rolled, driven by the need for survival, not to mention pure terror, until he was under the table. The ghoul swung a clawed fist at the table and clove it in two with a splintering crack. The remains were swept away by another sweep of the creature's arm. Fitz twisted and turned like a worm on a hook, knowing what it must feel like to be the bait for a blood-crazed pike.

Fitz backed away until his shoulders met the cold metal of the garage swing door. The ghost moved in, opening its obscene jaws for the kill.

'Jade!' Harris called. 'Wake up, for goodness's sake!'

Her glistening black eyes stared sightlessly back at him. She began swaying on her feet, and Harris only just managed to catch her as she collapsed, violently shaking with some kind of fit.

Harris looked back up into the darkness towards the door. 'Open up! D'you hear me? Open up, she's sick!'

There was no answer. Jade convulsed in his arms and cried out suddenly: '*Mum!*'

‘Mum!’ Cal said. ‘I’m scared again!’

‘Just try to stay calm,’ Hazel said tenderly. ‘You’ll be all right, promise.’

The light on top of the helmet remained stubbornly on. Cal was trembling with fear, waiting for the nightmare to strike, and so was Hazel. Together they held on to each other, curled up on the settee, stranded on a little island of hope in a sea of dread. She hushed him and whispered into his hair and skin that she loved him and that everything, *everything*, would be all right, he was just to keep calm and not give in.

‘It’s trying to get inside my mind,’ he told her, ‘I can feel it!’

‘Don’t let it in, Cal,’ she urged. ‘Keep it out, do you hear? Keep it out! It has no right to be in your head!’

She realised she was shouting, but Cal was looking up at her with renewed hope, she could see it in his eyes behind the fear. But she could smell burning insulation somewhere, and saw a wisp of smoke around the wires covering the colander. The Doctor’s contraption was overheating. But what could she do? She felt herself starting to panic. If she left the helmet where it was, Cal could be burned. But she didn’t dare remove it.

‘Keep away from him!’ she screamed into the air. ‘*Leave my son alone!*’

The ghost bent down towards him, and Fitz could see the fluorescent light above straight through it. He screwed up his eyes just as the garage door burst open. When, surprised, he opened them again, it was just in time to see the Doctor and Trix rushing in.

The Doctor took two quick strides across the garage, picked up one half of the broken table on his way and swung it down with shattering force on the ghost’s shoulder. It snarled and twisted away, just as the Doctor began his return swing. The ghost snatched at the table leg and wrenched it easily out of the Doctor’s grip.

Trix had a penknife out and was sawing through the cords around Fitz’s ankles.

The Doctor and the ghost faced each other.

‘Sorry about that,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’m not a fan of violence but it did look to me – at first glance – like you were about to hurt my friend. And I can’t have that.’

Fitz felt a surge of pride and relief. With Trix’s help he climbed to his feet. ‘What the hell is that thing?’ she asked.

‘A ghost, I think.’

‘Isn’t it a bit on the solid side for a ghost?’

‘It’s not a ghost,’ said the Doctor. He eyed the creature. ‘It’s some kind of ectoplasmic life form.’

The ghost – or ectoplasmic life form – snapped its jaws open and shut. There was no way of telling if this was an attempt at communication, or a warning. Or just a nervous twitch.

Either way, it was an ugly stand-off. And even though it was technically three against one, Fitz thought the odds were poor. He had no doubt that the creature could, and would, tear its way through all of them if it had to.

‘It’s my guess that you’re a long way from home, my friend,’ the Doctor said. ‘You must be very frightened.’

The creature started to circle around towards the open door, never taking its multiple eyes off the Doctor. It kept its fangs bared and the long, sinewy fingers kept flexing, making the sharp, curled claws scrape against each other like scissor-blades.

‘Don’t go,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m sure we can help...’

The ghost-creature let out a low, keening noise like a distant foghorn. At first Fitz thought it was trying to speak, to communicate, but then it moved, swiftly and aggressively, knocking the Doctor clean across the garage with one sudden, lunging swipe. The Doctor smashed into the metal shelves with a terrible clatter and hit the floor amid a shower of screwdrivers, spanners and old jam jars. ‘Stop him, Fitz!’

Ridiculously, Fitz dived towards it as it leaped for the door. All at once, Fitz thought: *I’m either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid, and bow come I’m doing this anyway, just because the Doctor yelled at me?*

But he might as well have tackled a charging rhino. He felt himself lifted bodily into the air, and then an excruciating, crunching pain in his arm as the ectoplasm tore free.

He hit the ground heavily and lay still. When he opened his eyes, he was lying on the floor staring up at Trix and the Doctor. He was aware of the Doctor speaking: ‘Wake up, Fitz! Wake up!’

‘It broke my wrist!’ Fitz moaned. His arm felt as though it was on fire, and the flesh was already beginning to swell around his hand. ‘I felt it break,’ he whimpered. ‘Bones all crunched up...’

The Doctor said, ‘We can’t stay here – it’s getting away. We have to follow it.’ He was glancing impatiently back over his shoulder towards the open door. ‘You *can* move, can’t you?’

‘It *hurts*, Doctor!’

‘But you can still run.’

‘Doctor!’ said Trix, surprised. ‘His arm’s broken! Have a heart!’

‘Leave me here,’ Fitz said weakly. ‘Or call an ambulance. You go without me.’

The Doctor’s only response was to grab Fitz’s wrist – ‘*Yeeeooww!*’ – and place his other hand firmly on Fitz’s head. ‘*You will not feel any pain,*’ he said.

Fitz blinked. 'What did you say?'

'It's an old Red Indian trick,' said the Doctor tersely. 'On your feet.'

'He's right,' said Fitz, laughing suddenly. 'The pain's gone. Completely!' He clambered to his feet with help from Trix. 'Unbelievable...'

'As always,' said Trix. She turned to say something to the Doctor, only to find that he had already sprinted out of the garage after the ghost.

They caught up with him further down the street, standing on the corner looking quickly in both directions. 'Which way, which way, which way?'

'He can't have gone that far already,' Fitz said, hoping the Doctor wasn't going to blame him for the delay. He was holding his arm crookedly, but there was still no pain.

'How did you do that?' Trix asked the Doctor. 'Stop the pain, I mean?'

'I haven't stopped it, merely masked it. Mild hypnosis. The pain will break through sooner or later: be prepared.'

Trix glanced nervously at Fitz, who started to look a little worried himself. 'Riiight.'

The Doctor stood with his hands on his hips, still peering up and down the road. 'Fitz,' he said, 'I never thought to ask at the time, but what exactly were you doing tied up in that man's garage with an ectoplasmic life form?'

'It's funny you should mention it,' Fitz said. 'I was wondering about it myself.'

'Are we to take it that it's actually some kind of alien?' Trix asked.

'Some kind, yes,' the Doctor said.

'You don't recognise the species?'

The Doctor shook his head irritably. 'Don't recall meeting anything much in the way of intelligent ectoplasm before.'

At that moment a man came around the corner walking his dog. The Doctor stopped him and asked if he'd seen anyone passing that way: 'Tall, transparent, spectral...?'

The man shook his head.

'Are you sure?' the Doctor pressed. 'He had teeth like this, you couldn't miss him.' He demonstrated the size of the alien's teeth with his fingers.

'No, really,' the man muttered, quickening his pace and yanking his dog after him.

'Look,' said Trix, pointing into the road. On the tarmac was a thin trail of faintly glowing slime. 'He must've crossed the road, gone that way.'

'*Ectoplasm!*' The Doctor slapped his forehead. 'Of course! I might have known: it's heading for the woods!' He whirled and grabbed Fitz's hand, shaking it gratefully. 'Well done, Fitz! I knew I could rely on you!'

Fitz grinned and watched as the Doctor tore off again in hot pursuit. He looked down wonderingly at his hand, marvelling that it could have been shaken with such vigour without the slightest twinge of pain. Not bad, considering the wrist was broken.

The light on top of Cal's head suddenly started flashing again, and Hazel released the breath she had been holding. His eyes fluttered open weakly and he smiled up at her. 'It's gone,' he said.

'I know,' she smiled, wafting aside the faint whiff of smoke as the colander cooled down. 'I know.'

'Jade, can you hear me?' Harris bent over her, shining the torch into her face as he spoke. He prised open an eyelid, and found the pupil dilated. But at least there *was* a pupil. And she was breathing, which had to be good.

She coughed and started to get up. Harris helped her into a sitting position. 'Thank God you're all right,' he said. 'I was worried sick.'

'I've had a terrible dream,' she said.

They had to run up the long slope of grass towards the trees. The Doctor scrambled sure-footedly through the dark tangle of root and bramble, leaving his companions to stumble along behind. He kept urging them onward, faster. And they knew he was heading straight for the centre of the wood, and the Deadstone memorial.

The soil was soft and wet, clinging to their shoes and making the path slippery with mud. A grey fog clung to the leafy mulch, which didn't do anything to raise Fitz's hopes. He recalled the aggressive mist of the previous night's visit only too well.

'Wait!' he shouted ahead to the vague black shadow that was the Doctor. 'Let's not get in too deep again... Remember what happened last time!'

'It's precisely because of what happened last time that I want to catch it,' the Doctor replied. 'That ectoplasm is the missing link here.'

'Do we really want to see it again?' asked Fitz. 'It didn't seem exactly *pleased* to see us.'

'It was frightened, Fitz,' said the Doctor. 'Cornered. It just wanted to escape.'

'Then I know exactly how it felt.'

'If it is some kind of ghost, it might just disappear,' Trix observed.

The Doctor gritted his teeth. 'I sincerely hope not.'

They stepped over twisting, gnarled roots and ditches full of brown water. The mist was all around them now, cold and damp and milky in the starlight.

'It's still here somewhere, I'm sure of it,' the Doctor told them. His shoes squelched through the slime as he stalked around the tree trunks. 'It must be...'

'Must?' queried Trix.

'It's too much of a coincidence.'

'I thought you didn't believe in coincidences.'

'Everything that happens is a coincidence of some sort,' the Doctor said.

Trix gave him a look. 'I can't run any further, anyway. I'm puffed out.'

'Too much Lancashire hotpot,' said the Doctor.

'Eh?' Fitz said.

'Shh,' hissed the Doctor. 'What was that?'

'My stomach rumbling, I think.'

'This way...'

 The Doctor climbed quickly back up the leafy slope and clambered through the bushes. Fitz and Trix trudged wearily after him.

They had reached the clearing where the Deadstone memorial stood. In the murky light of the moon, it looked like a black obelisk. Mist coiled around the stone like fat white snakes, and, only faintly visible, they could see a tall figure standing next to it.

The Doctor stepped cautiously out of the trees.

The tall figure turned slowly at the sound of his approach. It was impossible to discern any details: but something moved suddenly at his feet, giving a low animal snarl. A pit bull terrier stalked forwards, emerging from the fog with its teeth bared, growling at the Doctor.

'Oh, it's you,' said the Doctor, disappointed.

The tall figure stepped forward out of the mist, into the moonlight.

'Old Man Crawley.'

Chapter 24

Graveside

Old Man Crawley was taller than either Fitz or Trix had expected. He was thin, but wiry rather than frail. His gaunt face had the kind of bone structure that might, once, have been that of a handsome young man. They were bleakly commanding features, the sort that Fitz associated with old war heroes gone to seed. His hair was fine and bleached of any colour, combed back from a tall, bony forehead. Beneath grey eyebrows burned a pair of bright, powerful eyes. When he spoke, his voice was strong and sharp: ‘And who might you be?’

‘I might indeed,’ answered the Doctor easily. ‘But most people prefer to call me plain old Doctor.’

The dog snapped and growled, and both Fitz and Trix took an involuntary step backwards. But the Doctor stood his ground, a wry smile on his lips. Amazingly, the dog stopped barking, but it did not come any nearer. ‘I’m usually quite good with animals,’ claimed the Doctor, ‘particularly those with ultra-high-frequency hearing.’

He bent down, looking the dog straight in the eyes. ‘Hello again, Milton. How are you, boy?’ He kept one hand in his jacket pocket, and Trix, who had been told about the Doctor’s first encounter with Old Man Crawley’s obnoxious hound, guessed that he was making sure the sonic screwdriver was accessible. But when he gently withdrew his hand, the Doctor was holding a biscuit. Not a dog biscuit, but what looked suspiciously like a Custard Cream.

He held it out towards Milton. ‘Here you go, old thing. No hard feelings.’

The dog snarled, but didn’t approach. Old Man Crawley was watching the exchange very carefully.

‘Not sure?’ the Doctor asked Milton. He made a few tempting noises. ‘I would have brought some chocolate, but it’s not very good for dogs. You

can't digest it properly. But these are my favourite biscuits. Go on, you can have it.' Accepting that the dog wasn't going to come any closer, he tossed the Custard Cream lightly towards it.

Milton's jaws snapped around the biscuit with ferocious speed, and he gobbled it down in a moment. Old Man Crawley curled his lip.

'There,' said the Doctor doubtfully, straightening up. He switched his smile back on for Crawley. 'These are my friends, Fitz and Trix.'

'Evenin',' said the old man, with a curt nod. He raised an elbow and leaned against the Deadstone memorial. Fitz and Trix mumbled their hellos.

'We've heard a lot about you, Mr Crawley,' said the Doctor. 'I've been dying to meet you.'

'Is that a fact?'

'Well, not literally, of course.' The Doctor's smile dropped slightly 'Must admit, I didn't expect to see you here. Out for a midnight stroll?'

'Walkin' the dog.'

'Of course.' The Doctor winked at Milton, who growled at him.

'You?'

The Doctor puffed out his cheeks. 'Well, believe it or not, we were pursuing an ectoplasmic life form. I don't suppose you saw him pass this way? Tall, transparent, glowing...?'

Old Man Crawley smiled, revealing grey teeth and gums. 'You're fuller rubbish, ain't yer?'

'That doesn't answer my question.'

The old man sniffed. 'Nah, I ain't seen nothin'. I mind me own business, see. I wish everyone else would.' He began to pick at the stringy moss on the memorial stone. 'Some folk just want to poke their noses in where they ain't wanted.'

'Here, for instance?'

Crawley hawked and spat something yellow out on to the earth. 'Best left alone, this place.'

'People say it's haunted,' the Doctor said. 'Is that true?'

He snorted. 'Yer could say that!'

'Why?'

Old Man Crawley tipped his head back and eyed the Doctor narrowly. 'What's your interest in it?'

'I like ghost stories. Don't you?'

The old man laughed wetly. 'I know a few stories, all right. But, mind, that's all they are: stories. I don't mean no harm, see.'

'Go on, tell us one,' urged the Doctor.

The old man looked around the clearing and sniffed. 'What, here?'

'It's the perfect place,' said the Doctor enthusiastically. 'A cold, dark, misty night... Barely any light from a cloudy moon... Surrounded by sinister, whispering trees... Go on, Mr Crawley, give us a fright.'

Fitz coughed into his hand. 'I think you're doing fine on your own, Doc...'

'Don't think yer mates are so keen,' cackled Old Man Crawley.

'Oh, don't mind them,' said the Doctor. 'They love a good scare. Don't you?'

'Oh yes,' said Trix drily. 'Love them.'

'I actually have quite a low scare threshold,' said Fitz, still keeping an uneasy watch on Milton.

'Don't take any notice,' laughed the Doctor. 'Trix is a lot tougher than she looks. Tough as a pair of old leathery boots, in fact...'

'Thanks, Doctor.'

'... and Fitz just likes to pretend he's a big wuss.'

During all this, Old Man Crawley had continued to pick away at the moss on the stone. He appeared to be paying little attention, but his eyes, with their sharp little pupils, kept darting between the Doctor and his companions.

'They used to hang children here,' he said at last, without preamble. His voice was riot loud, but it carried clearly around the clearing. He reached up and scratched at the material of his neckerchief. 'Over there, from that very tree...'

He pointed a bony finger at the Old Tree, the dead tree, which loomed up over the clearing. Its branches stood out against the thin moonlight.

'What children?' asked the Doctor.

'Kids they thought was possessed by the Devil,' replied the old man. 'Or worse.'

'Worse? What could be worse?'

Old Man Crawley smiled darkly 'Wouldn't like t'say. But there's worse things than the Devil in the world. There's things that ain't natural. Things most good people have forgotten about.'

'Like ghosts, you mean?'

He shrugged. 'Yer could say that, if yer was so inclined. Ghosts. Well, it's a fact that some people don't rest easy when they pass on. The kids they hanged here, for witchcraft an' stuff, they was the worst. Evil little blighters and no mistake.'

'And they didn't rest easy?'

The old man shook his head sadly 'Not one. They buried 'em up here, too – face down in their coffins, so's they couldn't even dig their way out if they tried. Didn't stop 'em tryin', mind...'

The trees rustled around them as the November wind stole through their branches, leaving frost behind it. Trix and Fitz shivered in their coats, but the Doctor and Crawley didn't seem to feel the cold. They simply watched each other, very carefully. After a while, the old man said, 'Some say they're still trying t'get out... clawin' and bangin' in their coffins like mad things. If yer listen hard enough, yer can still hear 'em.'

'Really?' said the Doctor.

'Yeah,' the old man replied with a cruel smile. 'Go on. Listen.'

The Doctor knelt down and lowered his ear to the ground.

'Don't be daft, Doctor,' said Fitz nervously.

'Shh!' said the Doctor, not moving. 'Come and listen!'

With a resigned look at Trix, Fitz got down by the Doctor and put his ear as close as he could to the wet earth. 'This is stupid –' he began, and then stopped. His eyes widened.

'What is it?' asked Trix, kneeling down.

'Can you hear it?' asked the Doctor in a whisper.

'I can hear it,' said Fitz.

Trix knelt down and, pulling her hair out of the way of the mud, lowered her ear to the ground. 'I can't hear any –'

And then she could.

Distant, muffled, barely audible: a slow, desperate thudding from deep within the soil. The sound of something exhausted, hopeless, lost. Trix felt her gorge rising at the sound, and then it grew worse – the pounding increased in pace, almost as if it was suddenly aware that there was someone listening at last... banging, scraping... and then behind that came the most awful noise: distant, infant screams of terrible anguish.

With a gasp of horror Trix sat back up, to find Fitz looking at her, ashen-faced. His eyes were wide and staring.

The Doctor got slowly to his feet, brushing at the wet leaves and twigs stuck to his trousers. His eyes were grim and hooded. 'He's gone,' he said simply. 'Of course.'

Numb, his friends turned to see that Old Man Crawley had completely disappeared.

Cal slept peacefully in his mother's arms. He still wore the colander on his head, but it hadn't stopped him getting as comfortable as he could. Hazel dozed with him, half wondering where the Doctor and his friends were, half glad they weren't here. She pulled Cal closer and looked down at his face. It seemed like a long time since she'd seen him resting so fully.

His eyes flickered open, as if he was aware of her attention. He smiled sleepily up at her. 'I'm hungry,' he said.

‘What would you like to eat?’

‘Soil and worms and things that live under the ground,’ he said.

Hazel twisted away from him. ‘Cal! Oh, for goodness’ sake...’

He glared at her ‘Dead, rotting puppies and headless cats...’

‘Stop it!’

Still wearing the helmet with its stupidly flashing light bulb, Cal sat up and grinned. Blood glistened on his lips.

Harris had given up trying to force the door. It was difficult to get any purchase on the stairs, hard to get enough leverage for a really powerful heave, but he had given it a go. His shoulder and neck ached with the strain, but the door wouldn’t move an inch.

‘It’s totally secure,’ he told Jade as he climbed back down. ‘We won’t get out of here until someone opens up.’

‘Old Man Crawley?’ Jade sounded doubtful.

Harris rubbed his neck. ‘Well, he must come down here sometime.’

‘Who says?’ A note of hysteria in her voice now.

Harris knew he had to keep her as calm as possible. ‘He knows we’re down here. He must have heard us when he locked the door All right, so he wants to keep us prisoner for some reason. But he’s bound to come back.’ As he spoke, Harris’s gaze fell on the pile of animal bones against the far wall.

‘And what then?’ Jade checked her mobile phone. ‘I still can’t get anything on this – it’s useless!’

‘We’ll get things sorted out, don’t worry.’ Harris took out his own mobile phone. ‘I’ll try mine again.’ This would be the fifth attempt to get a clear signal – or rather, any signal at all. He switched the phone on and off, and the little screen lit up clearly with the same message every time: *no signal*. He’d tried walking around every part of the cellar, but at no point did the signal indicator change from zero.

‘Blast it,’ he muttered. He stowed the mobile. A thought came to him then: ‘Someone’s bound to miss us soon. Or at least, miss you. Won’t your mum be expecting you home?’

No reply.

‘Jade?’ He turned around to look at her and gasped. Her eyes were completely black again.

‘Don’t let it get to you, Cal!’ Hazel was shouting; she couldn’t help it, she was in the grip of a terrible rage, a fundamental reaction against whatever it was that could do this to her own child. Before, she hadn’t known how to deal with it. But, now that the Doctor had said there was some sort

of *intelligence* behind all this, something malevolent and deliberate, all her protective instincts had been triggered. And that included being ready to *fight*.

Hazel seized Cal by his shoulders, digging her fingers into the flesh. 'Stop doing this to him! Do you hear me? Get away from him! Get *away!*'

Cal looked blankly at her. He wasn't in there. But someone else was. Or something.

'Get away from my son, you filth!' Hazel ground out through her teeth. 'If you want to mess with someone's mind, *come and mess with mine!*' She bawled this last challenge and meant every word.

Jade's eyes were as black as tar: Harris could see himself reflected in them, a little man looking terrified. The eyes glistened redly for a moment and then blood seeped out of the corners, running down her face.

In his shock, Harris pushed her away. She fell sideways and sprawled on the concrete, not moving. Then she gave a long, choking cough and began to sob.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he stammered, shuffling over to her on his knees. He turned her over and, although there was blood smeared across her cheeks, her eyes had returned to normal.

'What's happening?' she whimpered. 'I want my mum...!'

With a tiny noise in the back of his throat, Cal suddenly stiffened and tried to wrench the colander off his head. Tight-lipped, and with the speed and strength of a lioness protecting her cub, Hazel clamped her hands down on it and held the metal in place. Cal cried out and fainted, falling into her arms.

'Got you,' Hazel said. '*Got you.*'

The Doctor walked stiffly over to the memorial stone.

'Doctor,' said Fitz. 'What's going on? What was that... underneath the ground?'

'Nothing,' the Doctor replied tersely. 'Just a story, Fitz.'

'But we heard –'

'Just a story. A distraction.'

Fitz looked back at Trix. They both knew what they had heard. 'What about the ghost?' Trix wondered suddenly. They all seemed to have forgotten what had brought them here.

'Yes,' mused the Doctor as he circled the stone. 'What about our ectoplasmic friend? He seems to have disappeared, too.'

'Very conveniently,' added Fitz.

'Told you he would,' Trix said. 'Just like a ghost.'

The Doctor had continued with his inspection of the memorial. He walked slowly around it, looking carefully at the ground and at the stonework. He seemed to have lost all interest in the alien, which Fitz thought was a bit unfair. After waiting in vain for the Doctor to say anything else, Fitz asked, 'What are you doing, exactly?'

The Doctor was peering at the monument, specifically the patch of moss at which Old Man Crawley had been picking. The Doctor fished in his pockets for his pen torch and switched it on. 'Now this is interesting...'

Trix crossed over to look at the patch of light on the stone. 'What is it?'

With a finger the Doctor traced some angular shapes cut into the granite. 'More of the inscription. Look.'

IN HATEFUL MEMORY
HENRY DEADSTONE

'Blimey,' said Fitz.

'I hate this place,' Trix said with a deep shudder. 'Can we go now, please?'

The Doctor stared thoughtfully at the words on the memorial stone. He was just about to speak when Fitz let out a huge bellow of pain and collapsed to his knees, holding his wrist.

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'It's worn off.'

Chapter 25

Visitors

It took them nearly twenty minutes to get back to the TARDIS. Once inside, the Doctor and Trix helped Fitz through to what was, sometimes disparagingly, referred to as the infirmary.

There were a couple of metal-framed hospital beds, which looked like they'd seen better days in the 1950s. The mattresses were in good condition, though, and all the bed linen was starched and spotlessly clean. With little gasps and yelps of pain, Fitz managed to sit himself up on one of the beds, opposite a series of yellowing wall charts showing biological diagrams of the human eye, head and, rather off-puttingly, the digestive system. In one corner of the room was a full-sized skeleton on a frame, which looked human until you realised it had three eye-sockets and four arms. A pair of double doors filled one wall, and through the roundel-windows could be seen a fully equipped operating theatre.

Let's not even go there, thought Fitz glumly.

The Doctor was rummaging through the contents of an old glass-fronted medicine cabinet. There were hundreds of brown bottles on the dusty shelves, full of pills or potions that hardly ever saw the light of day. 'Any chance of some painkillers in that collection, Doc?' Fitz asked weakly.

The Doctor selected a bottle, opened it, sniffed it, and then quickly put the lid back on. 'Those would stun a brontosaurus,' he muttered, picking up something else. He read the label: 'Eye of newt, wing of bat. Want to try some?'

Fitz shook his head.

'Ah, here we are: Bones, broken, pain, for the relief of.' He held up a small phial and blew the dust off it.

Fitz gulped. 'Can't you just put the 'fluence on me again?'

The Doctor smiled and shook his head. 'Won't work twice. Anyway, it won't help fix your wrist.'

‘But what will?’ asked Trix dubiously – both she and Fitz knew full well that, while the Doctor’s areas of expertise were phenomenally eclectic, he had never claimed to be a medical doctor. ‘Those?’

The Doctor was shaking out some brilliant blue pills into the palm of one hand. ‘Not specifically, no. But they’ll help with the pain. Here, take seventeen of these...’ The Doctor passed a handful of the blue pills over to Fitz while Trix fetched him a glass of water.

‘Then what?’

‘That wrist needs strapping up. If you would be so kind, Nurse MacAlister...?’

Trix began to look through the stuff in the medical cabinet. ‘Will this do?’ she asked, holding up a strangely striped bandage.

‘Perfect,’ beamed the Doctor.

‘You’re sure?’ asked Fitz dubiously.

‘Trust me, I’m a Doctor.’

‘And I’m a trained nurse,’ smiled Trix, unravelling the bandage. ‘Sort of.’ Fitz swallowed the pills. ‘I’ve always quite fancied nurses.’

‘Down, boy.’

‘Grrrr.’

‘You really should rest, Fitz,’ insisted the Doctor.

‘OK, but not in there. Hospitals give me the willies. I’ll come and put my feet up in the console room.’

‘No change there, then,’ said Trix.

In the control room, the Doctor checked the instruments while Trix put the kettle on and Fitz lay cautiously down on the chaise-longue. ‘Two sugars in mine!’ he called towards the galley, already feeling better. He twisted around so he could see the Doctor and asked, ‘What now, then?’

‘We need to find that ectoplasm,’ said the Doctor, making some adjustments to the controls. ‘I’m sure it’s some kind of alien life form. I’ll try a sensor sweep of the immediate area, see if the TARDIS can pick up any sign of a spaceship.’

‘Surely someone would notice a spaceship parked around here,’ commented Trix as she came in from the kitchen area.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘Like this one, you mean?’

‘Point taken.’

The Doctor grinned and flicked switches. His smile faded as he checked the results of his handiwork. ‘Nothing!’ He thumped the edge of the console in frustration. ‘Not a sausage.’

‘No alien spaceships?’

‘Nothing in a hundred-mile radius. So the big question is: how did our alien friend get here?’ The Doctor stroked his chin thoughtfully.

‘Maybe he was dropped off by a passing flying saucer,’ Fitz suggested.

‘Or perhaps it’s his stag night and he was left here by his alien mates for a laugh,’ tried Trix.

The Doctor eyed them both balefully ‘You’re not taking this very seriously, are you?’

‘Maybe we should just concentrate on the psychic force field, Doc,’ said Fitz. ‘I mean, that’s what got us involved in the first place. Y’know, ghosts and nightmares and stuff. That’s what’s causing the problems for Cal McKeown and his family.’

‘Yes, you’re right.’ The Doctor deactivated the TARDIS scanners. ‘But I can’t help thinking there must be a connection.’ He sighed, and ran a hand through his tangle of hair. ‘Did you see Old Man Crawley’s reaction when I mentioned our ectoplasmic friend? He was worried.’

‘Yeah – and what about that inscription on the memorial?’ prompted Trix.

‘“In Hateful Memory of Henry Deadstone”,’ recalled the Doctor.

‘So who was Henry Deadstone?’ wondered Fitz.

‘He wasn’t very popular, by the sounds of it,’ observed Trix.

The Doctor chewed his lip thoughtfully. ‘“In Hateful Memory”. That reminds me of something...’

‘It’s horrible,’ said Trix.

‘Still doesn’t tell us who Henry Deadstone was,’ Fitz said. ‘Or what he did to deserve a memorial stone like that.’

‘Where can we find out?’ asked Trix. ‘Local records – a church register, maybe. Or the Internet?’

‘It’d be a start, I suppose.’

The Doctor was pacing around the console, tapping the rail with his fingers. ‘No, no, no... I don’t want any outside involvement. If we start making official enquiries or alerting interested parties, then who knows where we might end up. We can sort this out ourselves.’

‘Would Hazel McKeown agree with that?’ asked Fitz.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that, since we arrived, we haven’t exactly made things a whole lot better for her or her children. She’s sceptical enough as it is. Her son is still suffering nightmares, getting worse all the time, and we’re still in the dark.’

‘There’s more to this than a child’s nightmare, Fitz,’ said the Doctor sharply. He stopped pacing and turned to face them both. ‘When I made contact with the psychic force, it almost tore my mind in half. I was lucky

to survive, and that was in *here* – in the TARDIS. It sucked me into a kind of dream-state, a parallel existence if you like...'

'Extrinsic continuum, I think you said,' Trix noted.

'Did I?' The Doctor's eyes looked haunted. 'For the briefest moment, I knew what it must be like to be a ghost,' he said quietly. 'I only just made it back. Whichever way you look at it, I was at the mercy of an incredible power. The force that we are up against here has that power. At the moment it's trapped, somehow imprisoned. Naturally it wants to be free.'

'Something we should try to prevent.'

'Precisely. And that is why we need to move carefully. Very carefully.'

'OK, message received and understood.' Fitz folded his arms. 'So what do we do now, then?'

'Make more tea,' ordered the Doctor. 'Full-strength army issue. I've got some thinking to do.'

The Doctor took his cup and saucer over to his armchair and sat down for what he called 'a really good think'. Inside a minute his eyes were shut and he was snoring, but his companions knew him well enough to know that this really did constitute, for him, a state of intense concentration.

Fitz's wrist had been expertly bandaged. The pain had diminished and he could move it just a little. Trix had gone off to powder her nose or something, leaving him to tidy up. The results of the Doctor's earlier fit of depression were still in evidence: various half-read books scattered around the room, bits of electronic apparatus dumped on seats or tables, and of course the remains of the violin.

Picking it up, Fitz discovered that it appeared to be a genuine Stradivarius. He chuckled softly to himself imagining what Trix would have made of it. It must have been worth a bit, after all, and Trix had a jackdaw's eye for any item of value. He decided to hide the bits in one of the many wooden drawers where the Doctor kept all kinds of useless stuff, but couldn't decide whether or not to file it under V for 'violin' or S for 'Stradivarius'. Eventually he compromised and stored it under B for 'broken'. Or possibly 'boring'.

Fitz loved the TARDIS. It had been, as the Doctor had already observed, his home for longer than he wanted to remember. His previous life was like a distant country now, to which he had no intention of returning. Sometimes, in the quieter moments – between materialisation – Fitz thought about the future. The fact was, he couldn't foresee a time when he wouldn't be with the Doctor, when the TARDIS wouldn't be his home. For him, wandering in the fourth dimension, visiting distant planets and strange times,

had become a way of life. His life.

Trix came back, having changed into a pair of suede bootlegs and a sweater. 'Still thinking?' she asked, nodding at the prone figure in the armchair.

'Telekinetic manipulation,' muttered the Doctor without opening his eyes.

Fitz nodded. 'Yup.'

Trix perched on the edge of the control console and said, 'Do you believe in ghosts, Fitz?'

'I've travelled the length and breadth of time and space, Trix. I've seen a lot of *strange* things. I'm just about prepared to believe anything.'

They both heard the knock. It was faint at first, but then more confident. Louder. Urgent.

'What's that?' wondered Trix, and they both looked automatically towards the Doctor.

The Doctor's eyes had opened. 'There's someone at the door,' he said.

The knocking came again, and it *did* sound like someone at the door.

'I don't believe it,' said Fitz, getting up. Trix raised an eyebrow at him. 'It's just kids,' he added with a shrug. 'Y'know, messing about. I mean, who'd knock on the TARDIS door?'

'Let's find out,' declared the Doctor, signalling to Trix to operate the door control.

They all walked towards the big double doors as they swung slowly open.

And stopped in their tracks as Hazel McKeown stepped in.

'Hazel!' The Doctor sounded delighted, but there was concern in his voice. Cal was with her, and both were looking scared.

They looked around them in stupefied wonder for a moment, and then came hesitantly forward. Hazel concentrated on the Doctor, clearly blanking out everything else as she said, simply, 'Jade's missing.'

Chapter 26

Missing

There was an ominous silence in the TARDIS control room.

They sat Hazel down in the Doctor's study area. Cal stayed near her, peering all around the TARDIS with huge, wondering eyes. Hazel tried not to focus on anything other than the Doctor and his friends.

'Jade hasn't come home,' she explained. Her voice was brittle, the sound of someone being pushed towards an edge. 'She's been gone all night. She's never been out this long.'

'You phoned her friend's?' asked Trix.

'Of course. She never went there.' Hazel shuddered. 'I might have known. I should have checked! I should have made certain!'

'What about her mobile?'

'Switched off or unable to make a connection.' Hazel's worried gaze flicked from one strange sight to another: the Doctor's pile of unread books, the odd mix of furniture, the antique clock collection, the galley, the library...

The Doctor patted her hand. 'You were right to come here, Hazel.'

Hazel tore her eyes off the flashing lights on the console and let out a nervous little laugh. 'You did say you were based on the High Street... but I never expected anything like this.'

'Which makes me wonder,' the Doctor continued. 'How did you find us here? Not everyone would think of knocking on the door of an old police box.'

'Not everyone has a son like mine,' Hazel smiled weakly.

Cal dug in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. When he unfolded it, they saw the picture of a police box Trix had drawn for him. 'You said you lived here,' he explained.

'I didn't believe him at first,' Hazel said. 'But I didn't know what else to do in the end. I'm so *scared!*'

The Doctor asked Fitz to put the kettle on. 'And in the circumstances, I think you should break out the chocolate Hobnobs.'

'I never knew you were anything to do with the police,' Hazel said. 'What is this place? Is it a trick?'

The Doctor sat down, smiling. 'We're not anything to do with the police. The outside of the TARDIS is simply a disguise. And, yes, it is a trick.'

'How's it done?'

The Doctor spread his hands in submission. 'I wish I knew.'

'It's cool!' said Cal.

'We like to think so.' The Doctor sat forward. 'You're looking very well, Cal. How did the psychic deflector helmet go?'

'Excellent!'

Hazel squeezed Cal's hand. 'There was one worrying moment,' she said, and described what had happened.

'But nothing since?'

'No,' she said. 'He's been OK. He took the helmet off because it was getting a bit hot.'

'All right, but it won't be a good idea to go without it for too long. Not until we've sorted all this out.'

'But, Doctor, I'm so worried about Jade. It's not like her to stay out all night. She's been gone for hours.'

'Have you contacted the police?' asked Trix.

Hazel shook her head. 'Not yet...' Her face crumpled as she began to cry. 'Oh God, it's my fault. I've been so taken up with Cal. She's run away, I know she has!'

'You don't know anything of the sort,' Trix told her. 'She's probably out somewhere having a fantastic time. Maybe she's gone to a club. She's fifteen. She'll be back home before you know it.' She tried to sound convincing, but she was very aware of the solemn expression on the Doctor's face.

'She might be home already,' Hazel agreed bravely 'Maybe I should check. Do you have a phone?'

'She isn't home,' said Cal.

'How would you know?'

The boy shrugged. 'I don't know. But she isn't at home.'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. 'Where is she, Cal?'

'I don't know!' he protested. 'I keep telling you – *I don't know!*'

'It's all right, Cal,' the Doctor said. 'Let's just stay calm...'

'*Calm?*' exploded Hazel. 'This is my daughter we're talking about! She's *missing!*'

‘And we won’t do her any good by panicking,’ the Doctor said firmly. He held her gaze for a long moment. ‘We’ll find her, I promise...’

Fitz put down a tray of tea things on the table and began to pour. ‘Here,’ he said, passing a mug to Hazel. ‘Get this down you.’

Hazel took the mug with trembling hands and sipped. ‘Look at me,’ she said quietly. ‘I’m a wreck. Some mum. First sign of trouble and I go to pieces!’

‘That’s not true,’ said Trix. ‘You’ve had a lot to contend with.’

‘But what am I going to do?’ Hazel asked. ‘I can’t just sit here. I’ve got to find her! I should call the police...’

‘No,’ said the Doctor curtly. ‘There’s no need. Besides, if you bring the police in now, it will just confuse everything and the consequences of that could be dire.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You’re forgetting the Deadstone memorial,’ he told her. ‘There’s a powerful psychic force at work here – something that’s struggling to be free. We have to stop it.’

‘But what’s that got to do with Jade? She’s *gone*, Doctor!’

‘Perhaps nothing,’ he said. ‘Perhaps everything. If Cal can sense her, or just sense where she *isn’t*, then that might suggest some faint telepathic link exists between them.’

Hazel frowned. ‘Because of the Deadstone memorial, you mean?’

‘It’s possible.’

She stared back numbly. ‘There must be something we can do!’

‘There is,’ the Doctor said. ‘But you’re going to have to trust me.’

Hazel raised an eyebrow at the cavernous TARDIS interior. ‘Do I have any choice?’

Fitz shut the police box door behind him. Hazel and Cal looked at it with amazement, and he couldn’t help grinning. ‘How does it all fit in there?’ Cal asked. ‘Really?’

‘Search me,’ replied Fitz. ‘I don’t think even the Doctor knows for sure. It just does.’

‘It must be magic,’ Cal suggested.

‘We don’t believe in magic,’ Hazel stated firmly.

Fitz shrugged as they began to walk away ‘It isn’t magic. The Doctor is always certain about that, at least.’

‘It must be a *kind* of magic, though,’ Cal insisted.

Fitz laughed. ‘Yes, I suppose it must.’

Hazel glanced back at the police box and shook her head. Fitz knew she would never understand. Besides, she had other, more important things on

her mind. 'Where do you suggest we start looking?' he asked.

'First we check back home,' Hazel replied. 'She might be there after all.'

'And what if she's not?' asked Cal.

'Then you're right, and we can start looking for her elsewhere. She must be somewhere, and she can't have gone far.' Hazel stopped and looked into his eyes. 'But I have to be *sure*. I have to check. Do you understand? If there's no luck there, then I'll phone the hospitals, see if she's been admitted to casualty or something.'

He nodded. 'I'm sorry I keep being so weird, Mum.'

She knuckled his jaw affectionately. 'Hey – weird is starting to seem normal for us now.'

When they left the TARDIS, the Doctor and Trix headed straight for the woods. The Doctor surprised Trix by giving the Deadstone memorial a wide berth, however. Instead, he continued through to the far side of the woodland and then led her down towards the open fields and scrubby hedgerows beyond. They crossed a weed-ridden wasteland area bordered by a broken chain-link fence and then finally breached a slight rise, just as the first real light of the new day began to cast its long, grey shadows.

'Where are we going?' Trix asked, picking her way through some wild thistles. 'I thought you wanted another look at the Deadstone memorial?'

'I said I'd heard the expression "hateful memory" before,' he replied. 'Now I've remembered where.'

There was a slight dip in the land, and at the bottom was an old, rather shabby caravan with a muddy 4×4 off-roader parked next to it. Trix pulled a face. 'Gypsies?'

The Doctor trotted down the hill and she followed him, treading carefully through the mud and over bits of old, broken-down cars.

The Doctor walked up to the caravan and thumped on the door. 'Wake up! Rise and shine!'

There was a muffled shout from inside the van and then the door opened. A tousle-headed youth looked blearily out, blinking in the weak sunlight. 'Oh,' he said thickly. 'It's you. And yer brought a friend, I see.' His eyes sharpened up considerably as he looked Trix up and down. She smiled coldly at him.

'This is Lewis,' said the Doctor to Trix.

'Hello, Lewis,' said Trix dutifully. She noticed that the Doctor did not introduce her.

'What do you want, anyway?' asked Lewis, stepping down from the van. He was only wearing a vest and joggers, and stood hunched and shivering,

his breath steaming in the cold air. 'Didn't think you'd wanna come back 'ere.'

'I take it Uncle Tommo's not at home,' said the Doctor.

'He's out, yeah,' Lewis confirmed with a sniff. 'Boozin', most likely.'

'Oh, that's a pity' said the Doctor. 'I was hoping to have a little chat.'

'You must be jokin'. What about?'

'The Deadstone memorial.'

'He's already told yer – there's nowt more to say.'

'Oh, I think there is. In fact I think your uncle knows a good deal more than he was prepared to tell me yesterday.'

Lewis shrugged. 'Best not askin' him, if yer take my advice.'

'All right, then I'll ask *you*.'

'I don't know anything, honest.'

The Doctor took a step closer to the youth, his eyes hooded. 'Don't lie to me, Lewis. I can see right through you – like a ghost.'

Lewis swallowed hard, backing away, but the Doctor followed him until his back was pressed against the caravan. Trix stood back, hands deep in the pockets of her coat, and gave the youth her iciest stare.

'Wh-what d'yer mean, ghost?' he stammered.

'Uncle Tommo's seen the ghost, hasn't he?' asked the Doctor. 'That's what drove him mad, you said. But you were there with him, weren't you, Lewis? Just a kid, no more than nine or ten, I'd say... sticking close to your uncle in the woods, joining him on a poaching trip. You didn't like it though, you just wanted to go home, back to your caravan and your mam. But Uncle Tommo wouldn't give up. He wanted to see the Deadstone memorial, didn't he?' The Doctor didn't give Lewis time to reply, he simply pressed on, narrowing his eyes slightly: 'Big mistake, that.'

'I never meant to see nothin',' Lewis protested. 'An' I didn't.'

'No, but Uncle Tommo did. He saw everything, didn't he? Everything. He knows what's in there. What's underneath it...'

Lewis nodded frantically. 'He went in, he did. Went inside. I told 'im not to, I told 'im he shouldn't... But he went *inside*.'

No one said anything more. The Doctor and Trix had both heard the metallic double-click from behind them, and they both recognised it for what it was.

The Doctor slowly raised his hands, and Trix nervously followed suit. When they turned around, it was to find Mad Uncle Tommo covering them both with his shotgun.

'I got two barrels 'ere,' he said needlessly. 'One for each of yer!'

Jade had not been waiting at home. Fitz was disappointed, but Hazel had

been genuinely surprised. Perhaps she had allowed everyone else's optimism to build her own hopes up.

'Told you she wasn't home,' said Cal.

'All right, Cal,' his mother snapped. 'We had to check.' She had tried Jade's mobile several times without success. She wanted to start phoning the hospitals, but something made her turn back to Cal first. 'Have you any idea where she *might* be, rather than where she isn't?'

He closed his eyes. 'I'm not sure.'

'Anything might be a help,' prompted Fitz. He could see the strain in Hazel's face now; in the dawn light she looked grey and tired. And Jade had now been missing all night. He was starting to feel a bit morose himself.

'It's too dark,' Cal said eventually. 'I can't see anything.'

Hazel looked up at the pearl-coloured stripe of dawn, just visible over the woodland. 'It's getting light now, Cal.'

He shrugged.

'Keep trying,' suggested Fitz. 'You never know...' He turned back to Hazel, rubbing his hands together for warmth. 'Where now, then?'

'I don't know,' Hazel said, rubbing her eyes. 'I'll have to try the hospitals, I suppose. Maybe we should just go straight to the police, after all.'

Fitz shook his head. 'I wouldn't bother with them. The Doctor knows what he's doing.'

Hazel looked sceptical. 'Is that a fact? First he's a doctor, then a psychic researcher, now a missing-persons expert.'

'You left out violinist,' Fitz muttered. 'Look, I've known the Doctor a helluva lot longer than you. If you want to know the truth, I'd trust him with my life. In fact, I have done on several occasions. So don't knock him, all right?'

He found that he had spoken with such unexpected passion that Hazel actually blinked. 'All right,' she said quietly. 'All right.'

'Yer bin warned once,' said Uncle Tommo, aiming the shotgun steadily. 'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't blow yer legs off.'

'Well, it'd ruin my trousers for a start,' answered the Doctor.

'Think yer right clever, don't yer, *Doctor*,' spat Tommo, circling around them. He kept back far enough to remain out of range of any sudden moves by either the Doctor or Trix. The muzzle of the shotgun was aimed exactly between them, requiring the merest flick to point at either of them. And at this range the blast would be fatal.

'I just want to ask you some questions,' the Doctor said calmly. 'About the Deadstone memorial.'

The shotgun jerked, fractionally, pointing straight at the Doctor for a second before reverting to its central position. 'Nothin' to say. It's just trouble, that's all. Trouble. I keep tellin' yer – stay out of it.'

'You didn't though, did you?'

Tommo licked his red lips. 'Never mind that. Jus' clear off, or so help me God I'll shoot.'

'Please,' the Doctor insisted, 'It's very important...'

'There's a girl missing,' said Trix.

Tommo's mean little eyes switched to look at her. Automatically, they checked her up and down. Trix looked him in the eye, and then gave him a small, nervous smile. 'Her name's Jade,' she said. 'She's only fifteen years old and she's gone missing.'

'What's that gotta do wi' me?'

'Her mother's worried sick,' Trix said. She tried the barest flutter of her eyelashes, nothing more than a twitch. 'We thought you might be able to help.'

'Why?' he grunted. 'Yer Doctor friend wants to talk about... about the Deadstone memorial.'

'It could be connected,' said the Doctor. 'Don't ask me to explain how, because there isn't time. But we need to know about Henry Deadstone.'

Tommo's nostrils flared and he gripped the shotgun again. His Wellington boots shuffled in the mud. 'What about 'im?'

'Can we please talk without the gun?'

Slowly, reluctantly, the shotgun was lowered. But not completely. It stopped at an angle that suggested that it could be brought to bear again in an instant. And Uncle Tommo's beady eyes never left the Doctor. 'How d'yer know about Henry Deadstone?'

'His name is inscribed on the memorial stone in the woods. Along with the phrase, "In Hateful Memory".' The Doctor finally lowered his hands. 'I knew it reminded me of something. And then I remembered: I heard something like it when I first came here. Lewis said something about your *hateful memory*. I'd like to know what it was.'

'No yer wouldn't,' said Tommo. 'Least, not when you've heard it. Then yer'll wish yer never heard the name. Never in all yer life.'

Chapter 27

Interview With a Traveller

Jade was shivering with the cold. In the harsh light of the cellar she looked wan and unhealthy. Harris checked his watch. It was 6.35 am. Surely someone would be looking for them by now? It was Saturday, which meant no one would be missing *him*, but Jade's family would know she hadn't come home last night. But would the police know to look here? It might take them ages to search the area before they closed in on Old Man Crawley's place. *If* they ever did.

'Try to walk around a bit,' he told Jade. 'Keep your circulation going.' He was on his feet, pacing up and down, trying to stay alert. He wanted to be ready when the door opened, as he knew it must eventually.

Jade shook her head. 'What's going to happen to us? Will anyone find us?'

'I don't know,' Harris replied honestly. Something moved near his foot and he kicked out. The rat scurried off and disappeared beneath the pile of bones in one corner. 'I just don't know.'

'Jade's in a hole,' said Cal suddenly.

'Oh, don't *start*, Cal,' Hazel snapped. 'Can't you see I'm already scared sh—'

Fitz held up a hand to quieten her, looking at Cal. 'How do you know she's in a hole, Cal?'

'I don't know. I just do. I can feel it.'

Hazel turned to Fitz. 'Some kind of telepathic link?'

'The Doctor said it was possible.' He turned back to Cal. 'What kind of hole? Can you be more specific?'

'It's full of rats and worms and bones and stuff. Like a grave.'

Hazel put a hand over her face and swore again. 'What do you mean – like a grave?'

'I don't know.'

Hazel looked at Fitz. 'What does he mean, like a grave?'

'I don't know either,' Fitz said. 'But why would Cal suddenly be able to read his sister's mind? He never has before, has he?'

'Not that I know of,' said Hazel.

'Then why now?' Fitz asked, and then answered his own question: 'Because she's close to something that might *allow* that to happen.'

Hazel frowned, not understanding.

'Old Man Crawley's cellar,' said Fitz. 'The Doctor found a psychic thingy there, remember? Now *that* might help Jade make telepathic contact with Cal.'

'In the cellar..' Hazel began to make the connection. 'In a hole.'

'Rats and bones and stuff,' Fitz added. 'It fits, doesn't it?'

'But what the hell would she be doing there?' Hazel demanded.

'Let's find out.'

They went straight to Old Man Crawley's place. It was bitterly cold and Fitz would have preferred a coffee and a cigarette first, but there was no stopping Hazel. As they approached the old cottage, her pace quickened and Fitz and Cal had to hurry to keep up. 'Hold on, Hazel!' Fitz called. 'Wait. We don't know for sure that she's even in there. It's only a guess!'

She stopped at the gate. 'Even a guess is better than nothing.'

'I'm *not* guessing,' Cal insisted.

'What are you going to say to him?' Fitz asked Hazel. 'And don't forget he's got a dog. Could get nasty.'

Her hand paused on the gate. 'It'll take more than a bloody dog to stop me if he's got Jade.'

'Think about it, first!' Fitz implored. 'We have no evidence – only Cal's *feeling* that she's in a hole. The rest is supposition.'

'You've changed your tune, Fitz.'

'I just don't want you to make a fool out of yourself.'

'It's a risk I'm willing to take.' She swung open the gate and walked down the drive. She stopped at the shabby front door and turned back. Fitz was still lurking anxiously by the gate. He was in a dilemma. He had already met Old Man Crawley once, and he was in no hurry for a reacquaintance. Seeing the look on his face, Hazel sighed and said, 'If it makes you feel any better I'll just ask him if he's seen Jade at all. Maybe it'll rattle him a bit.'

'*If* he's got her. What if he doesn't react? What if he says he hasn't seen her?'

'Then I'll call the police and they can search his house – including the cellar.' She turned back to the door and hammered on it with her fist.

Fitz looked down at Cal. 'I hope you're wrong about this, mate,' he said quietly.

There was no answer. Hazel banged on the door another couple of times, but there was still no response.

'Maybe he's out,' suggested Fitz.

'At this time of the morning?'

'We are.' Hazel shot him a look, but he carried on: 'He could be out walking his dog or something.'

Hazel tried peering in through the front room window, but it was too dirty. She stepped back and ran a hand through her hair. She turned to Cal. 'Can't you sense anything? Anything at all?'

He shook his head miserably. 'It's all gone dark again,' he said. 'Very, very dark...'

Hazel began pounding on the front door again.

Inside the cottage, Old Man Crawley sits in the armchair and listens to the sound of voices talking outside and the banging on the front door. Milton rests on the floor by his feet, whining. 'Gurtcha,' mutters the old man quietly. 'Don't want no one hearin' yer.'

Milton puts his head down on the floor and pants as quietly as he can.

'Yer wants yer breakfast, I know,' says the old man, chuckling. 'I can 'ear yer guts rumblin' from 'ere.'

Eventually the knocking on the door stops.

Milton whines, and Old Man Crawley stands. 'Come on, then, you old ratter. Let's gets some grub for yer.' Milton stands up and scampers after him. The old man walks through to the kitchen muttering to himself. 'People jus' can't leave things alone, can they?'

The door rattled, and Harris froze in astonishment. For a moment it occurred to him that it might be the police, or someone else, coming to rescue them. He was halfway up the stairs when the door was flung open and a bull terrier knocked him clean off his feet. He crashed back to the floor and felt the animal's jaws snapping all over him, trying for a grip. He twisted and turned and tried to get up, but the dog was too strong, and he could already hear Jade screaming in the background because she could see the dog was going to kill him.

'Get off him, yer damn fool beast!' snarled a voice from the doorway.

The terrier snapped and growled but stopped his frenzied attack. Harris clawed his way free, gasping with shock and pain. As he put his arm out in front of him he saw that there was blood on his sleeve. A lot of blood. The

thing had bitten him! Actually bitten him! A sharp wave of pain shot up his arm, to be joined by several others from his chest and neck.

He reached Jade, who was sobbing with fear. He became aware at that point of someone laughing from behind him.

Coming down the steps was Old Man Crawley. 'He never tasted human flesh before,' he cackled, 'if yer can believe that!'

The dog growled and barked loudly.

'Looks like he'd fancy another bite, eh?' laughed the old man.

'What the hell are you doing, keeping us here?' Harris had to speak through clenched jaws. He could feel the dog bites throbbing, and the blood oozing out of the tears in his flesh with every massive, heaving beat of his heart. 'Let us go!'

'Yer trespassin',' snapped the old man. 'Breakin' and enterin'.'

'You can't keep us here!'

'Already have.'

Harris twisted around, bringing his feet back underneath him, preparing to spring. He felt sick with anger and fear.

'Don't try anythin' stupid,' warned Old Man Crawley. 'Milton's a runt but he's strong an' vicious! He'll chew yer balls off before yer got near me. I've seen 'im go one-on-one with an Alsatian before now, and come away with an ear in 'is teeth.' The old man seemed to find this very funny.

'Just let us go,' Jade pleaded.

'Oh no,' Old Man Crawley said, leaning back against the wall. 'Yer done it now, sweet thing. Yer done it now...'

Lewis sat at one end of the caravan, pulling on jeans and a sweater, while Uncle Tommo sat down behind a melamine table and regarded his visitors with intense suspicion. He kept the shotgun on the table, his grip loose, but with the business end pointing at the Doctor.

The Doctor sat down carefully opposite him. He kept his eyes on the older man, alert for the slightest impression that things were about to turn nasty. At least, that was what Trix hoped, although if Uncle Tommo did suddenly go berserk, they stood little chance. The phrase 'rats in a barrel' came into her head.

'Smaller on the inside, I see,' commented the Doctor as he looked around.

Tommo watched the Doctor with mean, deep eyes. With his free hand he reached down and pulled up a half bottle of Scotch. 'Lewis,' he growled, and his nephew appeared a moment later with two murky-looking whisky glasses. Wordlessly Uncle Tommo unscrewed the cap and poured two large shots. He used his own glass to push the other towards the Doctor.

'No thanks,' the Doctor said.

'I don't trust a man who don't drink,' rumbled Uncle Tommo. Inside the caravan, the alcohol on his own breath was very apparent. He opened his lips slowly and then tossed down the Scotch in one gulp.

The Doctor raised his own glass. 'Cheers,' he said, smiling, and as he said it his other hand grasped the barrel of the shotgun, pulling it hard and fast and flipping it up so that the stock lodged under his own arm, trigger side up. His hand dropped down and his thumb found the triggers.

The whole manoeuvre had been lightning-fast, and Tommo found himself staring into the twin muzzles of his own weapon. The barrels were tilted up so that the gun was aimed directly at his head. His fear-filled eyes flicked up to meet the Doctor's steady, clear gaze.

'Don't shoot,' said Lewis. 'Please don't shoot him!'

'Wouldn't dream of it,' said the Doctor casually. Without looking, he broke the gun open with one hand and extracted the cartridges with his fingers. The shells went into his jacket pocket and he pushed the shotgun contemptuously back across the table. 'I don't talk over firearms,' he said.

Tommo grunted. 'I could break yer neck wi' me bare hands.'

'Try it,' said the Doctor.

The two men stared at each other for a long while, neither of them blinking.

'You goin' ter drink that?' asked Uncle Tommo eventually, nodding at the untouched glass still held in the Doctor's left hand. When the Doctor shook his head, Tommo took the Scotch off him and drained it himself.

'Better?' asked the Doctor.

'Gettin' there,' the Gypsy growled. His eyes looked heavy and his speech was slurring.

'Well, tell me about the Deadstone memorial before you do get there, won't you?'

Tommo sat back, apparently relaxed, although his lips were curled into a sneer. 'Henry Deadstone...' he began, '... now there's a black-hearted name if ever there was one. Not many round here still remember him, an' that's a good thing. World's better off without him.'

'Really? When did he die?'

'Must be two hundred year ago – that's if he *did* die.'

'Ah, our mysterious ghost, I take it...'

'You might find it funny, Doctor, but no one who knows him does. He was a villain, a mean an' cruel man who knew no god nor law. A thief, a highwayman, and a killer – and worse!' Uncle Tommo sat forward, warming to his story 'Old Henry, he was hanged as a witch. Right up there –' he

pointed a thick forger in the direction of the woods – ‘from the biggest tree they could find. A good, solid oak it were. It’s still there now...’

‘Let me guess,’ said the Doctor. ‘The Old Tree?’

‘That’s the one. It died the night they hanged Henry Deadstone from its branches, or so they say. Never sprouted a single leaf after that, and nothing lived in it, not even worms or bugs, let alone birds. Cursed, it was, like Henry himself.’

‘How was Henry cursed?’

‘By us, o’course.’

‘You?’

‘Travellers. There were lots round these parts then, a lot more than there are now. Proper, real Gypsies who knew the old ways.’

‘Ah, the *old ways*,’ said the Doctor fondly.

Tommo squinted at him. ‘Don’t make fun of it, sunshine. Henry were cursed on account of his dealings with witches. He took the Black Oath himself. They say he fed demons, fed ’em with little kids and babies. But he made a mistake, yer see: he took a Gypsy girl and fed ’er to the Devil. They found her bones all crunched up in the mornin’, and no one was prepared to let Henry Deadstone get away with it no more. We had to look out for our own in those days, just like now, ’cause no one else is interested – not the law or the Church. So we looked after our own.’

‘You – the travellers – hanged Henry Deadstone?’

‘Aye, from that tree, up there, in the middle of the woods. An’ good riddance too. He may have poisoned that tree as he died, but there weren’t no one who wasn’t grateful that he was gone.’

‘But *has* he gone?’ asked the Doctor.

Tommo sat back with a grim look on his face. ‘He was hanged till he died.’

‘That doesn’t answer my question. Did he stay dead?’

The older man did not answer straight away. Instead he poured himself another glass of Scotch, and this time his hands were trembling.

‘Lewis said you went to the Deadstone memorial,’ the Doctor prompted. ‘What did you see?’

Uncle Tommo threw back his whisky, and then let out his breath in a long, hot hiss between his missing teeth. ‘Henry Deadstone may well ’ave died that night. But I reckons his curse lives on.’

The Doctor leaned forward intently. ‘In the memorial stone, you mean?’

‘No, not in the stone.’ Tommo put a hand over his face, and his voice grew thick and choked. ‘*Underneath*.’

Chapter 28

The Hanging of Henry

'It's no good,' said Hazel, walking away from Old Man Crawley's door. 'There's no answer.'

'Try her mobile again,' suggested Fitz. 'You never know...'

Hazel dialled and listened. Then pulled a face. 'Still won't connect.' Fitz put his arm around her. 'We'll have to try your house again. See if she's come home already.'

Hazel shook her head. 'What's the use? We know she's not there. She's in a *hole*, remember! It's time to stop kidding ourselves. We've been kidding ourselves all along! Jade's been abducted, and now she's probably – she's probably...' She had to stop, unable to keep the fear from choking her.

Fitz said, 'We should at least check,' but even he didn't sound convinced now.

'Look, it's already first light,' said Hazel, increasing her pace. 'I'm going to the police. I shouldn't have left it this long.'

'Don't think yer'll be getting' out o' here in a hurry,' said Old Man Crawley.

'Are you insane?' asked Bernard Harris. He was feverishly hot and running with sweat. The dog bites were throbbing and stinging, and his hands were sticky with blood. 'I need medical attention, man! I need to go to a hospital!'

Milton growled threateningly, his big tongue flopping out hungrily at the sight of Harris's wounds.

'Please let us go,' whimpered Jade. 'Please. We won't tell anyone, honest. Just let us go. My mum'll be worried...'

Old Man Crawley laughed softly. 'Ah, yer mum'll be worried, will she? Yer mum'll be worried!' He leaned forward and his eyes flashed darkly 'So she should be, sweet thing! So she should be! Breakin' an' enterin' at your age! Kids, these days!'

'You should call the police,' Harris sneered.

'Don't try an' be clever with me, mister,' warned the old man sharply. 'That's yer trouble. Too clever by half...'

'M-Mr Harris,' said Jade, gripping his arm. 'It's s-starting again...'

Harris twisted around to look at her and gasped. Her eyes were turning black. She started to shake and saliva foamed from her mouth.

'What the devil are you doing to her?' Harris demanded, turning on Old Man Crawley. The pain from his wounds vanished, to be replaced by fear.

The old man's laughter echoed around the cellar as Jade fell back, twisting and writhing and spitting.

'She's having some kind of seizure,' Harris bellowed. 'Help her!'

But the old man just continued to laugh.

Cal collapsed on the way home. He was walking normally, and then he simply dropped to the ground and sprawled across the pavement. His legs and arms began trembling violently and his head twisted from side to side. Fitz knelt down immediately and Hazel ran back at his shout.

'Some kind of fit,' said Fitz, holding on to the boy's shoulders. His eyes opened and they were a deep, glossy black. 'Oh, hell... Cal! Come on, mate. Wake up...'

'It's starting again,' Hazel said bitterly. 'We need to get him home.'

With an effort, Fitz managed to scoop Cal up into his arms. It was difficult to hold him steady while the shaking continued, but somehow he managed to stagger along. 'Have you still got that gizmo the Doctor made?' he asked. Hazel through clenched jaws. 'The psychic-whatsit helmet thing?'

'I don't know if it'll still work.'

'We have to try!'

Jade moaned, staring towards the ceiling, her eyes empty but for the blackness that only she could truly perceive. Harris watched, full of horror and nausea, as her lips peeled back from her teeth and she let out a terrible cry, half scream, half howl.

'Well, I'll leave you both to it,' said Old Man Crawley when the noise abated. Jade's harsh panting filled the cellar, and the old man's dog watched her, uncertain. He began to whine. 'Come on, yer old whinger,' said his master.

'For goodness' sake,' Harris shouted. 'You can't leave her here like this! What's happening to her?'

Old Man Crawley turned at the top of the steps and looked back down at Jade, watching her curiously for a few seconds as she cried out and spat

bile into the air. 'Don't yer know, Mr Clever?' he asked, and cackled loudly. 'Don't yer know?'

Jade screamed, suddenly and shrilly. When Harris looked, he could see a red light flickering in the depths of her round, black eyes. Her head was thrown back, her mouth open and strung with saliva.

'Oh no,' he breathed, backing away. His voice rose hysterically 'What's happening to her? What's happening?'

But his only reply was the sound of Old Man Crawley's venomous laughter, and the loud crash of the door closing at the top of the stairs.

Hazel unlocked the front door and Fitz shouldered his way past, still carrying the struggling Cal. He stumbled through to the living room and dumped him unceremoniously on the sofa. Cal was rigid, his breath coming in deep, ragged gasps.

Hazel quickly fetched the Doctor's contraption. She switched it on as Fitz tried to raise the boy's head. Cal snarled and fought like an animal, scratching Fitz across the face with his fingers and snapping at him like a mad dog. Even in the heat of the moment, Fitz could see the boy's black eyes now burned with a fierce red glow.

Hazel rammed the colander on to her son's head while Fitz tried to hold him. The light bulb flashed as the helmet connected, just as Cal's snapping jaws clamped shut on Fitz's forearm. Fitz felt as though he'd been caught by a police Alsatian.

He used the moment to force Cal back down with the leather coat stuffed between his teeth, while Hazel fumbled with the straps beneath the colander to keep it in place. The light bulb glowed brightly for several long seconds and then suddenly began to flash again. Cal then collapsed, panting and still.

'It worked,' said Hazel, full of relief.

Fitz carefully prised his arm free of the boy's jaws.

Jade snapped and snarled like a rabid dog and then suddenly threw herself to the ground. She lay still, wheezing slightly, crying softly.

Gingerly Harris turned her over. He took out his handkerchief and gently wiped away the spit from her chin and she murmured, 'Cal... Cal...'

'Henry Deadstone's memorial ain't just a stone,' said Uncle Tommo slowly 'An' there's a good reason fer that.' The stench of alcohol hung in the air about him now, the bottle of Scotch nearly finished. His small eyes were half closed and his lips were loose. It was almost as if he needed to be very drunk before he could bring himself to speak about the Deadstone memorial.

Lewis sat at the far end of the caravan, hugging his knees, staring straight at his uncle. Occasionally he would look across at the Doctor, who sat watching Tommo with razor-sharp interest. Behind him stood Trix, looking ill in the thick, warm atmosphere. The smell of male sweat filled the caravan.

Uncle Tommo said, 'I dunno why, but when they killed Henry, they buried 'im there right by the tree they hanged 'im from. So's they say, anyway. Face down, too, I expect, the way they did in them days when they was buryin' someone who'd taken the Black Oath. No escape, see, even if they came back from Hell...

'The tree was dead, an' it were rottin', but rottin' slow-like, takin' its time. Poisoned somehow, prob'ly because o' Henry bein' buried so near its roots I shouldn't wonder. Nothin' would grow anywhere near, anyway, and no animals would go close. The birds kept away, an' dogs yelped when they went up the woods, and 'orses threw their riders. There was always flies an' things buzzin' round there, 'specially in the summer. An' that went on fer years an' years. Eventually, people got frightened again. So's they organised a diggin' party and they dug old Henry up. They even had a priest there, ready-like, in case of any trouble. Some people believed that when they brought the old, rotten coffin up, it'd be empty, that old Henry would've found his way out long since. But no...

'They dragged the coffin up out the mud an' slime and turned it over so's it was face up. It didn't take much work with a pair o' spades to get the lid off, 'cos the wood was so wet and soft by this time. So off came the lid. An' inside the box lay Henry still, withered an' shrunk... *but not young any more, like he was when they banged 'im*. His hair was white and his skin was yellow like old paper, close on the bone. His fingers were curled up with big, swollen joints like an old man's... *but with no fingernails*. An' there were deep scratches on the inside of the coffin lid too. Well, some of 'em swore an' the priest crossed hisself over an' over. It were plain obvious that old Henry had lived on for years in that grave, tryin' to dig his way out...

'He was dead fer sure now, though, but no cemetery in the county'd take him, so they 'ad to put him back down in the ground right there. They weren't goin' ter take any chances, though, so they dug a bigger hole and lined it with bricks, five deep in every direction. They cemented it and put Henry's body in a fresh coffin, wrapped up in sailcloth soaked in Holy Water. They nailed the lid down an' turned it over an' dropped it back into this pit, and bricked it over an' then they put up that monument, tellin' people who it was that lay buried there in the soil, poisonin' the place.'

Uncle Tommo sat silent for a minute after that, his eyes focused on the distant past as told to him, perhaps, by his grandparents. He drank the last

of his Scotch, steeling himself to tell the remainder of his story.

'Now I'm comin' to my part...' he muttered. 'I was lookin' after Lewis, see. But he was a little lad then an' I didn't want ter be bothered with 'im. So's I thought I'd try an' scare 'im a bit, so's he wasn't so keen to hang around me neck all the time. Should've known better. I took 'im to the woods, an' I told 'im about the story of Henry Deadstone, same's I just told you.

'It were gettin' dark then, even though it were late. It were midsummer. The grass was long an' thick in the woods, and the trees were fuller leaves and birds, even late on in the evenin'. But there were no birds singing around the Old Tree, of course. Never were. And there were no grass, either, an' a terrible smell – always was a rotten stink there in the hot months, risin' up from the soil. An' the air was fuller flies.

'We found the stone all right, but there was something strange: it were cold, icy cold, to touch. Colder than stone should be in summer, at any rate. An' there were some sort of subsidence round it, where the soil looked like it had collapsed down into somethin'... I couldn't help meself, then, I had to look closer. Should've stayed away, like Lewis said... He were pleadin' with me then, but I wanted ter show 'im how tough I was, see, like some stupid old fool.

'I stamped around, laughin' an' jokin' I was, pullin' faces at Lewis like a damn' fool...' Tommo blinked and licked his dry lips, trying to concentrate on a memory he clearly hated. 'I were stupid, so stupid... The ground give way under me feet, an' under the dry earth it were cold and wet, slippery mud. I fell straight down into the crypt beneath, covered in dirt an' what have yer...'

There was a long pause while Tommo collected his thoughts. He looked ill, his skin sallow and haggard in the grey early morning light as it struggled in through the grimy caravan window. 'It were freezin' cold down there. I could see me breath in the air, even though a few feet up it were still a bright, hot evenin'. The soil was all around me, as clammy as dead flesh... I sat there fer a minute or two, a bit dazed I s'pose, spittin' out earth an' stuff. *An' then I saw it.*'

Uncle Tommo stopped there, his lips clamped together in a thin white line. For the first time in the telling of the story, the Doctor spoke: 'What? What did you see?'

The older man's eyes opened a fraction, burning with disgust. For a while they seemed to stare murderously at the Doctor, but the Doctor simply sat there and looked back at him. Uncle Tommo's meaty hand crept up to his head and scraped off the grubby woollen hat. His head was bald and scarred with age. He began to twist the hat around in his thick fingers as

he spoke. 'Something... Something...' He threw his hands up to his face and let out a deep sob into his hat. 'Something *horrible!*'

'Describe it,' ordered the Doctor.

'Steady on,' warned Trix quietly, but the Doctor shook his head.

Tommo wept into his hands. 'It were... awful... not a real thing at all... somethin'. from a place worse then hell! In the soil... with... with... the *worms...*'

Lewis leaned down to his uncle, putting his hand on his shoulder.

'All right, Uncle Tommo. Leave it there, mate. Forget it.'

'*I can't forget it!*' screamed Tommo, lashing out with his fist and knocking down Lewis.

The Doctor sprang to his feet, but Uncle Tommo suddenly looked up at him and his eyes were a deep, frozen black. '*I can't forget it!*' he roared, and launched himself at the Doctor. The table and glasses went flying as the big Gypsy bore the Doctor backwards, hands clamped around his neck. The pair of them smashed to and fro along the length of the old caravan as Tommo tried to throttle the life out of his struggling opponent. The Doctor smashed his arms up inside Tommo's wrists, breaking the savage grip, and then headbutted the man fiercely between the eyes. Tommo plunged backwards, blood jetting from a broken nose. The Doctor scrambled away, choking, wide-eyed with shock. 'Terribly sorry about that,' he gasped, sinking back down on to a seat and loosening his cravat.

Tommo roared and flung himself back down the caravan at him, huge hands outstretched, blood bubbling in his teeth. In two long strides he was on top of the Doctor again, and then Trix smashed the empty Scotch bottle right over the top of the Gypsy's bald head and he sprawled his length on the floor.

The Doctor stood up shakily. 'Thanks,' he said. 'But I could've handled him...'

'Sure,' said Trix, tossing down the remains of the bottle. Lewis was staring at the devastation in complete astonishment. When he looked up at the Doctor and Trix there was anger in his eyes.

'Time to go,' said Trix, leading the Doctor quickly out of the caravan.

Chapter 29

Digging the Dirt

‘Fat lot of good that was,’ said Trix.

The Doctor was trying to fix his collar, but the wings were all crumpled. ‘Actually, it was very informative.’

They trudged up the hill towards the woodland. ‘Oh yeah,’ Trix nodded. ‘Very informative, very educational. And a good fight with a homicidal maniac to round it all off with. Thank you, Doctor.’

‘There’s no need for sarcasm. I’m the one he tried to kill, remember.’ The Doctor gave up on his cravat, removing it completely and stuffing it in his pocket. He opened his shirt and massaged his neck ruefully. ‘And besides, he’s not a homicidal maniac. He’s just been traumatised, that’s all.’

‘I’m sure he had a difficult childhood, too.’

‘Didn’t we all?’ The Doctor smiled and then looked puzzled. ‘Come to think of it, I can’t even remember my childhood. But I suspect it was difficult.’

Trix smiled back. ‘All right, so what did we learn from Uncle Tommo? Besides how to finish half a bottle of Scotch and start a fight.’

‘Whatever Tommo saw in the Deadstone crypt that day affected him very deeply indeed. I suspect a lot of his more unpleasant personality traits stem from that encounter.’

‘Encounter with what? He didn’t exactly go into detail.’

‘He didn’t have to.’

‘Do you think he saw the ghost? The one Fitz found in Harris’s garage?’

‘Ectoplasmic life form.’ The Doctor shook his head. ‘Almost certainly not. An alien being isn’t enough to send a man like Tommo insane with fear. Whatever it is that’s lurking beneath the Deadstone memorial is *fundamentally* out of kilter with this planet, Trix. Something utterly *wrong*. Wrong enough to twist Tommo’s mind completely out of shape at close range.’

'And give a healthy young boy he worst nightmares of his life,' Trix added.

'Yes,' the Doctor agreed thoughtfully. 'That too.'

Lewis helped Uncle Tommo sit up. Tommo was drunk, ridiculously heavy, and still bleeding. Nevertheless, he had been in worse fights in his life. He shook Lewis off and hauled himself upright, wiping the blood from his face with the back of one solid hand.

'Take it easy, Uncle Tommo,' said Lewis nervously. 'Sit down...'

'Get lost,' snarled the older man. 'I ain't taken it easy in twenty years! And that Doctor's gotta be stopped.' He picked up his shotgun and then fetched a box of fresh cartridges from a drawer.

'Yer can't go after him,' said Lewis, watching as his uncle started to load the gun.

'Can an' I will,' said Tommo, swaying on his feet. He was too drunk to see property, and kept missing the chamber. But eventually both shells clicked home and he snapped the gun shut.

Lewis bit his lip. He wanted to say that Tommo was too drunk, and too old, but he was scared that his uncle would turn on him again in his rage. But when he looked at the man, and saw the steely determination in his old, sunken eyes and the drying blood on his lips and chin, he felt a sudden swell of emotion – a strange mixture of pride and pity.

'That Doctor's goin' ter stir up a rats' nest,' Tommo said. 'He means trouble. Said so from the start. An' it's got ter be stopped.'

The grey dawn light picked out every pit and scar on Tommo's head, and Lewis could see a thick, S-shaped vein throbbing at his temple. He couldn't bear to see his uncle so frightened. 'Stay here, Uncle Tommo,' he said quietly. He reached out and took the shotgun. 'I'll go.'

'This is where it all started,' said the Doctor, circling the Deadstone memorial. It looked bleak in the cold, hard light of a November morning. 'There must be a way in.'

'Must there?' asked Trix, shivering. She stamped her feet up and down in the squelching mud.

The Doctor was oblivious to the cold, and totally caught up in his examination of the memorial stone. 'Uncle Tommo found a way in...' he insisted.

'By accident,' Trix reminded him. 'And look what happened to him.'

'There must be a trick to it,' the Doctor muttered. 'A hidden catch or something.'

'This isn't *Scooby-Doo*.'

The Doctor scowled and started to kick the stone experimentally in a variety of places.

‘Are you sure that’s wise?’ Trix asked, pulling her coat tighter. ‘You might be disturbing something.’

‘Disturbing something?’ The Doctor looked up at her, eyes gleaming. ‘I *want* to disturb something! I’d knock on the front door if it had one. Ring the bell. *I want some answers!*’ This last was yelled straight at the memorial.

In the silence that followed, neither the Doctor nor Trix could have failed to hear the now familiar sound of a shotgun being cocked behind them. They both turned slowly around to find Lewis aiming at the Doctor’s head.

‘My uncle says you’re goin’ to cause a lot of trouble,’ he said.

‘He’s wrong,’ replied the Doctor. ‘I’m here to stop a lot of trouble.’

‘He says you’re goin’ to stir up a rats’ nest if yer keep on pokin’ yer nose in where it don’t belong.’

The Doctor smiled and shrugged. ‘What can I say? It’s what I do.’ The smile faded. ‘But someone’s got to sort this mess out, Lewis.’

‘What’s down there needs to stay dead an’ buried,’ Lewis warned. He kept the shotgun trained on the Doctor’s forehead.

‘What’s down there *isn’t* dead. And it certainly won’t stay buried.’

‘You’re a danger to us all!’

‘*You’re* the one with the shotgun.’

Lewis licked his lips, shuffling his feet. ‘Wh-what is it? Down there, in the crypt?’

‘I don’t know, Lewis. But I need to find out.’ Deliberately, the Doctor turned his back on Lewis and inspected the Deadstone memorial again. ‘Your uncle found something. I had hoped he could tell me how...’

‘He fell down a hole,’ said Lewis, without a trace of irony. He kept the shotgun pointed at the Doctor’s back.

‘And what happened to this hole?’ asked the Doctor, circling the stone. ‘After Uncle Tommo came out?’

‘It were filled in.’

‘But not by Tommo,’ surmised the Doctor. ‘I mean, he was too traumatised by what he’d found down there, wasn’t he? He’d been driven mad. Hardly like to leap up out of a big hole and start filling it in straight away. So who did, I wonder?’ The Doctor turned his wide blue eyes on Lewis. ‘I think it was you.’

Lewis stared back. Then, slowly, he lowered the shotgun, and Trix finally relaxed. ‘Can you help us, Lewis?’ she asked. ‘It’s very important.’

‘It’s dangerous,’ Lewis insisted.

‘We know,’ said the Doctor calmly. ‘That’s why we must do something to stop it – forever. Help us, Lewis.’

‘I filled the hole in,’ Lewis confessed miserably. ‘Right where you’re standin’. When he came out, Uncle Tommo was fit for nothin’. He just lay there, crying an’ wailin’ like a baby.. I had to do somethin’. There was a hole, I could see right down inside but it were dark, really dark inside. Seein’ how Uncle Tommo was I didn’t look too close. But I knew I had to fill that hole.’

The Doctor dropped to his haunches and inspected the earth at his feet. ‘We’ll need a couple of spades.’

Fitz took a last, deep drag on his cigarette and then dropped it on the floor, crushing it with the toe of his boot. He went back inside then and switched on the electric kettle. He could do with a brew, and in all honesty he couldn’t think what else to do.

Hazel had been on the verge of calling in a medical doctor or even the police. Now she was upstairs, lying on her bed. Fitz had listened to her crying for an hour, not knowing what to do. Eventually, exhausted, she had succumbed to a dazed, fretful sleep.

Cal lay on the settee, still wearing the psychic deflector helmet. The light was flashing steadily on top, and the boy appeared to be in some kind of trance. At least, his eyes were open, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling. He didn’t appear to be hearing anything or reacting to anything.

Fitz checked Cal’s pulse. He seemed to be stable. Which had to be good. Unless he was in some sort of coma. Fitz wished more than anything – and not for the first time in his life – that the Doctor could be here with them. He would know what to do.

Fitz looked out of the living-room window, checking both ways up and down the street. He was hoping for a sign of Jade, hoping that she would come slouching along the road, home from wherever it was she’d damned well got to. Then, at least, he would have some good news for Hazel.

But there was nothing. It was Saturday according to the calendar, mid-day according to the clock on the mantelpiece. It didn’t look good.

‘She’s dead,’ said Cal suddenly, and Fitz nearly jumped out of his skin.

‘Cal! Did you have to do that? You frightened me half to –’ Fitz stopped talking. Cal was still lying staring up at the ceiling, but his eyes were blank. ‘Cal?’

‘She’s dead,’ he repeated dully.

‘Who is? Jade? How do you know?’

‘She’s dead, and soon I’ll be dead too.’

Fitz cleared his throat. 'OK, that's enough of that kind of talk. You'll scare your mother. As if you haven't scared her enough already...'

'We'll all be dead,' Cal whispered.

Fitz didn't respond. He bit his lip and turned to look back out of the window.

Lewis returned very quickly with two old spades, crusty with mud. 'I must be mad to be doing this,' he said, passing one to the Doctor. The Doctor gave him a rueful look and set to with his spade. Fortunately the ground was relatively soft for the time of year, although the soil, being wet, was very heavy. After a couple of minutes' work, however, the Doctor and Lewis had cleared away the topsoil and were into the more compacted earth beneath.

'Interesting,' said the Doctor, as he tipped a spadeful of mud to one side. 'No worms.'

Lewis glanced up at him. 'Not yet,' he said, anxiously... The youth grew paler the deeper they went.

Suddenly the Doctor's spade struck something solid. 'What's this?'

Trix was peering into the hole. 'A piece of wood?'

'It's a plank,' said Lewis. 'I put it there to help block off the first hole.' He inserted the blade of his spade under the edge of the wood and started to prise it up. The Doctor helped with his own spade, trying to find a good point of leverage, but the wood was damp and rotten and splintered easily.

Lewis paused to blow on his fingers and hands. 'It's so cold!'

'Wait,' said Trix. 'I can see something. Look!' She pointed down and they all saw the black space beneath the edge of the crumbling plank of wood, like a sliver of midnight caught in the mud.

'That's it!' cried the Doctor eagerly. 'Come on!'

Lewis stared down into the muck, and he was about to say something, but his words were drowned out by a loud crack as the wood suddenly gave way beneath the Doctor's spade. A gust of cold air was sucked down into a large black space, and as the Doctor slid forward under his own momentum Trix had to grab him to stop him falling. His spade slipped from his fingers and dropped soundlessly into the darkness.

They all peered down into the shadowy depths, and then a sudden blast of warm, fetid air from the mouth of the hole made them all rear back. 'Extraordinary,' commented the Doctor. 'I wonder what's down there?'

'Do we *have* to find out?' asked Trix.

'Of course!'

She pulled a face. 'I'm not really dressed for it, Doctor,' she said, indicating her suede trousers and sheepskin coat. 'I mean, ordinarily I'd be the

first one to jump into an evil-smelling mud hole, but...'

'Quite, quite,' said the Doctor. 'Never mind, Lewis can come with me.'

'No,' said Lewis immediately. 'I can't!'

'Why not? You won't get any dirtier than you are now.' The Doctor nodded at his muddy boots and jeans. 'Come on! I'll lead the way.' And with that he stepped gingerly towards the edge of the hole, being careful not to slip in the mud, and lowered himself down. He stopped when his head and shoulders were all that remained poking out and said, 'Coming, Lewis?'

'I'm not going down there!'

'That's all right,' the Doctor replied. 'I'll go on my own.' And he disappeared from view.

'Wait!' cried Lewis, and the Doctor's head popped back up. Lewis took a deep breath and said, 'I – I'll come. At least I've got this...' He hefted the sawn-off shotgun.

'That's the spirit,' said the Doctor. 'But you can leave the gun. We won't need it.'

'How d'you know?'

'It's very simple: I don't use guns.'

'You may not, but I do.' Lewis gripped the shotgun firmly and clambered down towards the hole.

The Doctor huffed. 'Well, all right, if it makes you feel better.' He looked back up. 'Trix – you keep Dixie.'

'Consider Dixie kept,' she said gratefully as Lewis followed the Doctor into the hole. 'But don't be long.'

The Doctor and Lewis slipped down into a wide, damp chamber directly beneath the Deadstone memorial. The Doctor fished out his pen torch and shone the beam around the crypt: the circle of light flickered over crumbling, brick-lined walls and mud. Tangled knots of tree roots and decayed vegetation protruded from between the bricks and hung groping from the roof. The floor was littered with soil and insects, and in among the filth the torchlight picked out the occasional gleam of bone.

Lewis stood behind the Doctor, shivering with fright. The Doctor shone the beam up into his own face and smiled. 'Charming place,' he said. 'Could do with a spot of redecorating, though. I wonder if anyone's home?'

'Don't joke,' whispered Lewis sharply.

'Hello!' called the Doctor, and his voice bounced dully around the cold walls. 'Yoo-hoo! Anyone home?'

There was no reply. The Doctor moved forward, heading away from the entrance hole, the thin torch beam cutting through the shadows like a

scalpel. 'This place is bigger than it looks,' he commented. 'Come on – let's explore!'

Trix stamped her feet and flapped her arms to keep warm. The sky was full of cold, wet-looking cloud, and it had started to spot with rain. The mud had already coated her boots with a slimy grey skin. The Doctor and Lewis had disappeared from sight, and she was beginning to regret volunteering to stay behind. And considering it was Saturday lunchtime, there weren't many people about. But then she had to admit this wasn't the most attractive spot in the woods.

'Hurry up, Doctor,' she murmured. She wondered how Fitz and Hazel McKeown were doing: had they found Jade yet? Perhaps she and the Doctor should have gone back to check first, rather than stopping to investigate a mysterious crypt likely to contain an unknown horror. *Yeah, right, like the Doctor would pass up a chance like that.*

Her boots squelched in the mud as she trudged around the clearing, and the rain began to get heavier. The sound of it falling through the dead leaves around her was like hissing laughter. She pulled up the hood of her parka and shivered. 'Hurry up, Doctor...'

'He won't be back in a hurry, sweet thing,' said a dry voice behind her.

Trix spun around with a gasp. Standing at the edge of the clearing was Old Man Crawley, baring his yellow teeth in a hideous grin.

'Just a bit further,' said the Doctor, shuffling forward. The pen-light was beginning to fade: the circle of light that wavered over the muddy walls of the crypt was turning a feeble yellow colour.

'There's nothin' down here,' said Lewis, and the relief in his voice was clear. 'It's empty. Whatever scared Uncle Tommo's gone.'

'So it would seem,' the Doctor said, and he sounded faintly disappointed. He played the torchlight over the rearmost wall, where a number of thick, twisted roots had forced the bricks out into a pile of mud and rotten vegetation. Beetles and centipedes crawled through the mulch, slowly chewing through the decaying matter. Something caught the Doctor's eye and he bent down to poke it with his finger.

'What is it?' asked Lewis.

'A piece of bone,' replied the Doctor thoughtfully.

'Could be rats or foxes using the place as a larder,' suggested Lewis. 'Badgers, even.'

'Possibly.' The Doctor rubbed his chin. 'Interesting that you should say larder, though...'

'Why?'

'Because *something's* been gnawing this.'

'Rats?'

'I don't think so.' He tossed the bone back to the insects and stood up. 'Come on – we'd better get back to Trix.' There was no hiding the disappointment in his voice now, although he was clearly puzzled. He swept the torch back over the walls one last time and then suddenly gripped Lewis's arm. 'Look!'

The light had fixed on a lump of soil in the wall at head-height, thrust out between two gnarled roots. The shadows moved strangely over the mud as he repositioned the torch and said, 'What does that look like to you?'

Lewis peered at the soil. 'I dunno. Soil.'

'Yes, it is soil – but look at the shape! Can't you see it?'

Lewis squinted in the dim light. 'Looks like a ball to me. A football.'

'No, no no,' said the Doctor impatiently. He pointed at various lumps in the earth. 'Look! There's a sort of nose. That could be a mouth...' He grinned. 'Do you see? Looks a bit like a face, doesn't it?'

Lewis frowned. 'Suppose so. Ugly-lookin' thing. Let's go.'

'All right,' said the Doctor, gazing one last time at the muddy protrusion. And then two glistening eyes opened in the soil and stared back at him.

Chapter 30

Beast

Old Man Crawley's thin hand closed around Trix's wrist with incredible strength. For a shocking moment she thought he was going to snap the bones like twigs and she felt herself freeze with surprise and fear.

'You can come with me, my lovely,' said Crawley, leering at her from beneath his wispy grey eyebrows. The rain trickled down his leathery skin, leaving glistening trails in the grime.

'Get lost!' Trix tried to kick him, but he was a lot stronger than he looked – stronger, she thought, than an old git like him had any right to be – and he twisted her around until she lost her balance in the mud and slipped. In a moment he'd bent her arm backwards and up between her shoulder-blades in an agonising half nelson. Trix felt her legs buckling with the pain but she refused to cry out. She wasn't that kind of girl, she reminded herself fiercely, although it was only then that she found herself face-to-face with Milton.

The dog barked viciously, his powerful little jaws snapping cruelly at her, forcing her to pull herself upright, which only increased the pain in her shoulder from her twisted arm. 'Let me go, you b-

'Hush now, my sweet,' Old Man Crawley said in her ear, and she felt his cold breath on her skin and flinched. 'We don't want any trouble. Milton 'ere, he's missed 'is breakfast, an' he does like a lady, if yer know what I mean!'

The pain in her arm and neck was now excruciating, and Trix felt a whimper slip through her teeth. She turned it into a defiant snarl, which Milton took as a challenge, increasing the ferocity of his harking.

Old Man Crawley pushed her face against the Deadstone memorial, and she felt the wet stone bite into her cheek. 'Let! Me! Go!' She managed to grind out the words through clenched jaws, but the old man took no notice.

'Won't be a moment, my lovely,' he hissed. He kept Trix hard against the

memorial. She couldn't see what he was doing, but he seemed to be shifting something with his free hand. Trix struggled mightily but he seemed to have the traditional strength of ten, and she felt ridiculously powerless. She was also aware of Milton snapping hungrily at her ankles, and was thankful that she'd chosen a pair of leather knee-boots from the TARDIS stores.

'Touch me and I'll kill you,' she yelled. 'Or my friends will kill you!'

Crawley's only response was a cackling laugh, and suddenly she smelled his breath again, close to her face. Trix tensed, ready to fight for her life if necessary.

But then he pulled her away from the memorial stone and pushed her forwards, towards the tree line. Trix tried to turn and look at the hole by the stone, hoping that the Doctor and Lewis might have heard her cries and even now were scrambling out of the rain-slicked earth to defend her.

But they were not.

In fact, there wasn't even a hole any more. The plank must have been replaced, and the loose earth had been pushed back. Mud swilled around the troughs and cavities, a hundred brown puddles dancing merrily in the rain.

Trix went cold, suddenly aware of every drop of water as it plastered her hair against her scalp, ran down her face and neck and inside her clothes. 'You idiot!' she cried. 'My friends are down there! You've sealed them in!'

The eyes burned in the mud and the Doctor staggered backwards in surprise. The soil was moving, the round lump of earth swelling and twisting in the torchlight. The eyes, like wet, grey toadstools, swivelled in their sockets to watch him, and the soil beneath split open to reveal a gaping mouth full of sharp brown teeth. Inside was a gnarled, mud-streaked tongue.

The thing hissed and spat, the teeth biting at the air. But the creature – or whatever it was – stayed in the crypt wall, apparently unable to free itself.

The Doctor recovered and took a cautious step back towards it. The eyes rolled and the mouth gnashed, but he seemed to be out of range of the teeth. Looking more closely, he saw that the teeth were splinters of wood, and the tongue was a thick, writhing tree root.

'What is it?' Lewis whispered, horror-struck but fascinated. He had the shotgun out and levelled.

'I don't know,' the Doctor admitted. 'I thought it was stuck in the mud, at first... but in actual fact it is the mud. Look – it's made from soil and roots and rock...'

As they watched, a long, fat worm squeezed out of a hole just above the champing maw, probing the dark air with its glistening, wavering tip. A terrible, scraping cry emerged from the mouth of the mud-creature, the sound of something scratching at the earth in awful torment.

‘Don’t shoot,’ the Doctor ordered Lewis firmly. ‘Let’s just leave.’

The Doctor and Lewis backed away, slowly at first, then hastily, making for the exit hole. The Doctor’s fading torch beam found the ceiling but no hole. Brown water trickled down through the heavy plank of wood, bringing lumps of mud spattering down into the slime at their feet. Swimming through the muck were sinewy, bristling shapes dragging long pink tails: rats, lots of them, searching through the debris.

Lewis cried out in revulsion and kicked the nearest rat into the shadows. The rats squealed and crawled over each other, slipping and sliding in the mud.

The Doctor ignored them, concentrating instead on the crumbling brickwork overhead. The circle of light from his torch zigzagged around, frantically searching for the exit.

‘It’s been closed over!’ The Doctor raised his voice: ‘*Trix! Trix!*’

Lewis leapt for the wood, banging and punching it with his fists, but it didn’t move an inch. Every time he struck it, mud and earth settled heavily between the gaps, and dirty rain water splashed down over his upturned face, streaking it brown.

‘We’re trapped!’ screamed Lewis. ‘With those!’ He kicked out at some more rats.

‘And with *that!*’ said the Doctor, pointing back to where the thing in the mud was twisting and turning and pulling itself slowly out of the wall. Worms oozed from its sucking orifices and the lumpy root in its mouth shook with every long, unworldly screech.

It was then that the Doctor’s pen torch gave up and the chamber was plunged into darkness.

Fitz watched the rain sliding down the windows. With a quiet but meaningfully spoken swear word, he turned away and checked on Cal again. The boy was lying flat, grey-faced and fighting for breath. His mother, her face drawn and tear-stained, was bent over him. Fitz had taken her a cup of tea half an hour ago, but she had ignored it. She hadn’t spoken a word. She had simply got up from her bed and walked downstairs to see her son.

‘The Doctor will be here soon, I’m sure,’ Fitz said, but he didn’t need to see Hazel’s scathing look to know she didn’t believe him.

‘He can’t breathe properly.’ Hazel complained. Cal was gasping for air, the tendons in his neck standing out as he tried to suck in ragged gulps of

air. 'Listen to him! He needs a doctor – a *proper* doctor! I'm calling for an ambulance.' She stood up and went into the kitchen for the phone.

'And while you're at it,' Fitz said despondently, 'you might as well tell the police about Jade.'

'I'm going to,' she replied. She came back in with the phone, and looked down at Cal. He felt powerless, and he could see the fear and anger in Hazel's eyes as she looked up at him. Fitz knew what she was thinking: that the Doctor had let her down, and worse, had let Cal down. Fitz felt ashamed.

Hazel grasped the colander and wrenched it off the boy's head. 'And *that* can go in the bloody bin as well!' she sobbed angrily.

The result was instant. Cal drew in a sudden, wrenching breath and then spewed out a long, throat-scratching yell. His body spasmed and then seemed to leap up from the settee as though electrified, catapulted into the air by the violence of the seizure.

Hazel and Fitz watched as Cal's eyes blazed red and he roared, 'Get me free! *Get me free!*'

'All right, Cal,' pleaded Hazel. 'It's all right!'

Cal's head snapped around towards her, his eyes like twin orbs of scarlet. Blood ran down his face. '*GET ME FREEEEEE!*'

'Freeeee!' screamed Jade. Her eyes were full of blood, her cheeks smeared red. Saliva hung thickly from her chin as she staggered around the cellar, punching the walls with her small fists.

Terrified, Harris moved towards her. Jade, please! Stop! You're frightening me!'

She turned on him, snarling like an animal, her face a mask of red. 'Help me!' she gasped. 'Help me... help *meeee...*'

Harris caught her as she began to collapse, lowering her gently to the cold ground. His own wounds stung like hell, and were probably infected. The rats could smell the blood, he was sure, because there were more of them in the cellar now and they kept creeping closer. And now he could feel the pressure of sheer panic in his chest, a terrible buzzing in his head. He couldn't even think straight any more. Whenever a rat crawled near enough, he would lash out with his foot, trying to kick it away, but they were getting bolder.

And he was getting weaker. The fear and loss of blood were sapping his strength.

Jade was unconscious again. Harris wiped her face feebly with his handkerchief, which was already dark and stiff with dried blood. 'Free... ' Jade whispered faintly, and Harris began to weep.

Light flowered in the darkness with a sulphurous rasp: the Doctor held up the match, carefully so that it wouldn't blow out, anxious in case it was caught in any of the streams of brown water trickling down from the ceiling.

In the flickering glow, the crypt looked like a glimpse into the dungeons of Hell: dripping, decrepit brickwork and a floor ankle-deep in mud, full of insects and rats crawling everywhere.

And then there was the creature: the malformed beast of mud and roots, which, even now, was trying to struggle free of the compacted ground behind the crypt wall. Its splintered teeth scraped together and its blind, grey eyes fastened on the hot flame of the Doctor's matchstick. The creature snarled and twisted to and fro, like an animal frantically trying to free itself from a trap.

The Doctor grabbed Lewis's arm with his free hand and pulled him back down towards the back of the crypt. 'This way!' he yelled over the squeal of the rats, and together the two men slithered and splashed through the filthy water, squashing rats into the slime beneath their shoes.

'You're mad!' screamed Lewis, pulling back. 'I'm not going near that thing!'

The Doctor glanced up and saw the monster in the wall as it gnashed and tore in a frenzy. Soil crumbled from the earth around it and spattered into the seething mud below. The rats scrambled over the fallen bricks and stones, clawing their way up over each other, falling back down into the water, a squirming mass of fur and whipping tails in the light of the flame.

'We've got to!' cried the Doctor, yanking Lewis back again. 'It's the only way! Look at the rats – they're all heading that way... It must be a way out!'

The monster lurched forward amid the vomit of mud and worms, its fangs snapping greedily in the air at the Doctor's arm. He jerked it away just in time, but the beast was at the limits of its freedom now, roots and stones entwined in its distended neck and shoulders. It roared and bit at the air like a mad dog on a leash.

Then Lewis held up something, and the match-light glimmered on the blue steel of the double-barrels.

'Wait, Lewis!' said the Doctor, but it was too late. Lewis blasted the creature in the face at point-blank range. With a scream, it sucked itself back into the soil, lumps of earth and wood flying around in the darkness. The noise was deafening in the confines of the crypt, and both the Doctor and Lewis instinctively recoiled. The Doctor's match fell into the water and died. When their ears stopped ringing, all they could hear was a frenetic squealing, and neither of them could tell if it came from the maddened rats or the beast in the wall.

Chapter 31

Escape

Trix couldn't move. Old Man Crawley held her from behind, one arm twisted up behind her back. The old man's free hand was clamped around her neck, making her shoulders hunch up as fingers of pain clawed at her spine. He walked through the trees, pushing her ahead of him, and all the while Milton growled and bit at her ankles. Only her boots saved her from injury, and Old Man Crawley's snarls of '*Gurtcha!*' accompanied by the occasional kick.

They walked on, Trix stumbling over roots that were slippery with moss and rain. She couldn't even speak, and she wanted to ask where she was being taken. But in her heart she already knew: the squalid den that was the old man's cottage, and the ugly little cellar beneath it.

Milton stopped barking, and Trix felt Crawley slow his pace. She tried to look round, but couldn't see anything through the hissing downpour. Trust it to rain today, she thought. It was broad daylight and no one was around to see her being kidnapped.

'What's the matter with yer?' Old Man Crawley asked his dog. 'Git goin'!'

But Milton whined and backed away slowly. Crawley swore and tried to push Trix onwards, but she dug her heels in. And she *did* have heels.

'Move, yer little vixen!' he ordered, but she fought back, bracing herself against a thick, knobbly root.

And then they both stopped struggling together, because they saw at the same time what had made Milton back away.

Directly in front of them, coming through the dark trees, was a ghost.

It was tall and faintly glowing; a vague, tattered shape drifting through the steaming wood, mist curling around its motionless feet.

'By the Devil,' whispered Old Man Crawley hoarsely, and Trix smelled the acetone scent of fear on his breath. '*You'll not get me!*' And with that

he threw Trix forwards with all his wiry strength, catapulting her over the tree root. She crashed into the undergrowth with a startled cry, scrambling to her feet in time to watch Old Man Crawley tearing off through the trees, Milton at his heels.

Without any time to think, Trix turned around to find the ghost bearing down on her. Its shimmering form reared over her, long, skeletal fingers reaching down towards her. The last thing she saw was its hideous face, wreathed in a glowing mist.

Harris felt the stubble covering his chin, a rough reminder of just how long he'd been locked in this dirty cellar. He tried to look at his watch but his vision kept blurring: he couldn't tell if this was due to blood loss or tears.

Jade was curled up at the bottom of the steps, white-faced and shaking. Her knuckles were pressed against her teeth as she kept quietly repeating the same words over and over: 'Mum... I'm sorry, Mum... so sorry...' A rat sniffed experimentally at her trainer but she barely noticed.

Harris crawled over to her and shooed away the rat. It looked at him, its nose twitching, smelling the air, scenting the sweat and blood that caked his skin. More rats were scurrying around the cellar now, and Harris had counted over a dozen in the last few minutes. They seemed to be coming from the big black crack at the base of the far wall, next to the litter of bones and animal detritus. Several were nosing around the bones, rattling them noisily as they fought and scavenged for scraps of dried meat. He felt sure it wouldn't be long before they gave up and had a go at Harris or Jade.

Sick with revulsion, Harris thought that there were more rats than ever now, wriggling up out of the gap in the wall. Some of them looked wet, their greasy fur spiky with moisture.

And then, as he watched, something very odd happened: part of the cellar wall suddenly split open, like a narrow door in the brickwork. A lot more rats poured through the dark opening, squealing and fighting, and then, bizarrely, two bedraggled men stepped out. They were covered in mud, their eyes blinking almost comically in the comparative brightness of the cellar's dim 40-watt bulb.

The first man had damp, straggling hair hanging over his face like a tramp, and a long, soiled jacket. He stood for a moment as the rats swarmed around his feet and then broke into a charming smile, his teeth brilliant white against his dirty face. 'Good afternoon! I'm the Doctor.' He gestured to the other man and said, 'This is my friend Lewis.'

Lewis was carrying a sawn-off shotgun. A whirlwind of thoughts flew around inside Harris's head as he gawped at the unlikely duo. It had never once occurred to him that there might be another entrance – or exit – to

the cellar.

'A secret door!' he heard himself say, with an almost hysterical laugh. 'I don't believe it!'

'It's Mr Harris, isn't it?' the Doctor was saying. He extended his hand, but then realised how muddy it was and lowered it. Then he caught sight of the girl lying prone on the old mattress behind Harris. 'And Jade McKeown!'

Instantly the Doctor was kneeling down beside her, checking her over, impatiently brushing aside a couple of nosy rats. 'Still alive!' he declared happily... But Jade was barely conscious now, muttering to herself in a kind of stupor. The Doctor felt her forehead and then her pulse. 'We're just in time...'

'Thank God you've come,' Harris said. He sagged against the wall, weak with relief. 'We've been trapped down here for hours.'

'Where are we?' asked the youth called Lewis. He looked wild-eyed, fearful, and kept swinging his shotgun around to cover the door in the brick wall behind him, as if expecting someone or something to follow them out.

'Old Man Crawley's cellar,' the Doctor answered for him. 'Connected to the burial chamber beneath the Deadstone memorial via an underground passage. Very interesting!' He jumped to his feet. 'Jade's in a bad way... We need to get her out of here, and quickly.'

'Can we get out that way?' Harris pointed towards the door through which the Doctor and Lewis had emerged.

'No chance,' said Lewis.

'It's not advisable,' the Doctor agreed. 'It's been sealed at the other end, anyway...'

Harris nodded at the door at the top of the stairs and said, 'That's locked and bolted. So we're still stuck.'

The Doctor sprang up the steps and inspected the heavy door. 'Don't worry, I'm an expert at escaping from places like this.' He glanced back at Harris, his quick eyes taking in the blood on his clothes. 'What happened to you?'

'Old Man Crawley's dog,' Harris replied. He slid despairingly down the wall and sat on the floor. He felt dizzy and sick, as if he had only managed to keep going until help arrived, and now didn't have the strength to carry on. The irony was that help had arrived – from an unexpected quarter – but they were still trapped in the cellar. The dog bites were throbbing and he felt feverish. 'I don't feel very well,' he said quietly.

The Doctor shot him a look of brief concern and then returned his attention to the door, searching through his pockets. 'If I can undo the screws on the hinges with my sonic screwdriver, we might stand a chance...' he told Lewis, who had come to join him on the steps.

‘From this side?’ asked Lewis, puzzled.

‘It’s a reverse-angle screwdriver,’ explained the Doctor.

‘This would be quicker,’ Lewis said, raising the shotgun.

‘But a lot louder,’ the Doctor countered. ‘And anyway, if I can manage without recourse to firearms, then all the better.’ He pointed the sonic screwdriver at the edge of the door and it hummed and trilled for a few seconds. He altered the angle and tried again. Then he made some adjustments to the screwdriver and tried a third time.

‘I thought you said you were an expert,’ remarked Lewis, when the door refused to budge.

The Doctor rapped his sonic screwdriver against the wall a couple of times. ‘Probably got mud in it,’ he complained.

Hazel threw the phone down on the table in disgust.

‘Well?’ prompted Fitz.

‘They can’t send an ambulance for Cal because it’s not an emergency,’ she said, her shoulders slumping. ‘I suppose they only use them for heart attacks and so on.’ She had not been able to bring herself to describe the extent of Cal’s seizure. She looked stricken.

Fitz felt a moment’s guilty relief. He hated hospitals. ‘What about Jade?’ he asked.

‘There have been no casualty admissions for any one under that name, or, as far as they know, anyone fitting her description. I don’t know whether to be relieved or not. I was actually *hoping* she’d had an accident, and was being treated in hospital. How sick is that?’

Fitz put a hand on her shoulder. ‘Don’t be so hard on yourself. Did you try the police?’

‘Jade has to be missing for 24 hours before they will start a missing persons operation. Until then, all they can do is issue her description to patrol cars and bobbies on the beat.’

‘I’m sure something’ll turn up soon.’

She wiped her eyes and nose with a tissue. ‘You heard Cal: something awful has happened to her. I know it.’ She gave a rueful snort. ‘Unfortunately, the police won’t act on psychic evidence. And neither would have I, a couple of days ago.’

Fitz turned and looked into the living room, where Cal was sitting on the floor, hugging his knees and staring at nothing. ‘He seems pretty quiet now. I think he’s OK.’

‘I can’t tell any more.’ Hazel ran a hand through her hair. ‘I don’t know who to worry about the most at the moment.’

'I'll go out and look for Jade again, if you like,' Fitz offered. He felt he had to do *something*.

Hazel opened her mouth to reply, but it was Cal who spoke: 'It's coming,' he said tonelessly. 'And it knows we're here. It knows we're all here...'

They went in to see him. His eyes were black, staring at the floor. Saliva hung from his lips as he continued: 'It's coming out of the ground... *coming for all of us...*'

'Move out of the way,' urged Lewis, brandishing the shotgun. 'Let me blast it!'

'I can do it!' the Doctor said petulantly. He began fiddling with the sonic screwdriver again. 'Just give me a moment!'

'For God's sake let him blast it,' called Harris from his position on the floor. He looked sick and weak, but he had forced himself into a kneeling position, holding on to Jade. 'We need to get out of here!'

The Doctor huffed and glanced down at the teacher and the girl. Jade was barely conscious, and Harris looked like he was about to pass out as well. 'All right,' he snapped, moving out of the way. 'But I don't like shooting my way out of places. Reminds me too much of the Alamo.'

Lewis braced his feet on the stairs and aimed the shotgun at the door. He pulled the trigger and there was a loud, but rather unimpressive, *click*. He swore. 'I don't believe it!'

'See,' said the Doctor with satisfaction. 'Never put your trust in guns.'

Lewis broke open the shotgun and examined the cartridges. 'Damn! I must've given that thing both barrels!' He extracted the spent shells and flung them across the cellar in disgust.

'Oh marvellous,' said Bernard Harris. 'Absolutely bloody marvellous.'

'I don't see you helping!' snarled Lewis.

'Here,' said the Doctor, rummaging in his coat pocket again. A second later he produced the two unused shotgun cartridges he had removed in Uncle Tommo's caravan. 'Try these.'

Lewis grabbed them and hurriedly stuffed them into the twin firing chambers. 'Great! Thanks!'

'But only because we've no other option,' the Doctor grumbled, 'and it's only a door.'

Lewis snapped the gun shut and cocked the hammers. Then he raised it up and aimed at the lock.

And then watched in total surprise as the bolt rattled back and the door was flung open. Looking down at them was Old Man Crawley his sharp eyes quickly taking in Lewis and the Doctor. For a moment they all stared at each other in astonishment.

'Hello there!' said the Doctor cheerfully.

And then Lewis squeezed both triggers. The blast threw Old Man Crawley backwards with a terrible roar.

'Lewis!' bellowed the Doctor furiously. He caught up with the youth in two paces and tore the smoking gun out of his hands. The Doctor's face was white with anger. 'You stupid little fool!'

Lewis glared at him and then sprinted up the steps. The Doctor raced after him, hearing the sudden bark of a frightened dog. In the back room of Old Man Crawley's cottage, Lewis stood looking down at Milton, who was crouched over his master's body. Old Man Crawley lay on his back, his shirt front now a mass of scarlet rags.

'Look what you've done!' the Doctor hissed at Lewis, grabbing him by the arm. Lewis, ashen-faced, pulled free and ran for the exit. 'I had to!' he yelled, and then he was gone, his footsteps fading away rapidly.

Scowling, the Doctor knelt down by Old Man Crawley, but Milton started growling at him. 'Keep quiet, Milton,' the Doctor said as he concentrated on the old man's wounds. Bright red blood was soaking the grubby old shirt, and he could see a froth of scarlet bubbles that could only indicate terrible lung damage. The old man's eyes were staring sightlessly up at the ceiling, but he was gasping for breath.

'Wait,' the Doctor told him. 'I'll get help!'

Old Man Crawley gave a ragged gasp, coughing up blood, and then he laughed. His face turned towards the Doctor, and he cackled at him through crimson lips. His eyes burned with a dark flame of madness.

The Doctor backed away as the old man started to sit up.

The blood oozing from his chest wounds, the life blood that had been pumping out of him, started to flow backwards. The red strain shrank in a matter of seconds, leaving the shirt front nothing more than shredded fabric. The mangled flesh beneath reformed, sucking the blood back inside.

And Old Man Crawley continued to laugh.

The Doctor, tight-lipped, spun around and leapt back down to the cellar, taking the stairs in two bounds. Harris was waiting for him at the bottom of the steps, holding up Jade. 'What's going on?' he asked.

'Can you walk?' the Doctor asked him tersely, bending to hike Jade's limp form up on to his shoulders in a practised fireman's lift.

'If I have to,' Harris replied.

'You have to.' The Doctor turned and charged back up the steps with Jade, twisting awkwardly so that he didn't bang her head as he negotiated the door. Harris hauled himself up after them, spurred on through his pain and weakness by the prospect of freedom.

In the room above, Old Man Crawley was climbing to his feet. He watched as the Doctor cleared the doorway with Jade, then turned to face him.

‘Yer won’t get far like that,’ the old man laughed. His crooked teeth were smeared with blood.

Milton was barking and snapping in a frenzy, positioned between the Doctor and the exit. As Harris followed the Doctor out of the cellar, the terrier went for him, sinking his teeth into the teacher’s leg and tearing at the flesh beneath. Harris screamed and tried to shake off the dog, but the pit bull’s jaws were fastened tight and its little eyes were showing the whites.

‘Enough!’ roared the Doctor, but Old Man Crawley simply laughed.

Twisting around, the Doctor brought the shotgun to bear on the dog. He still held Jade on his shoulders, but he had managed to keep a grip on the gun. ‘Call it off!’ he yelled. ‘Or the dog gets it!’ He jerked the shotgun meaningfully. ‘You might be able to shrug off death, Crawley, but I doubt if Milton can.’

‘Gurtcha!’ called Old Man Crawley, bending down and grabbing the terrier by the neck. ‘Leave ’im, boy! Leave ’im for another time!’

Reluctantly Milton released his grip on Harris’s leg and the teacher staggered free. Milton snarled at him, his tongue slobbering with Harris’s blood, but Old Man Crawley kept him back. His eyes remained fixed on the sawn-off shotgun held awkwardly in the Doctor’s hand, before slowly rising up to meet the Doctor’s steely blue glare. A wealth of understanding passed between the two men like an invisible spark, and in that moment Old Man Crawley knew the truth: that the Doctor would not – *could not* – harm the dog.

‘The gun’s empty,’ the Doctor said, letting go of it. The shotgun hit the floor with a metallic thud and he turned to follow Harris out through the dingy living room and then the front door.

Old Man Crawley licked his stained lips and then spat blood. ‘All right, Doctor... you’ve done it now, my son. You’ve done it now..’

Chapter 32

Extraction

Someone was pounding on the front door.

The noise was so sudden and unexpected, Fitz and Hazel stared dumbly at each other before they both leapt for the door. Hazel reached it first and, fumbling with the latch, yanked it open.

Standing on the doorstep was the Doctor, and in his arms was Jade.

With an incoherent cry of emotion, Hazel threw her arms around both of them. The Doctor staggered into the living room and lowered Jade on to the settee. Then he looked back up at Hazel with a mud-stained smile and said, 'Told you we'd find her.'

Hazel couldn't stop the tears of relief and happiness from streaming down her face. She hugged and kissed her daughter, totally absorbed in their reunion, while Fitz clapped the Doctor on the back and asked, 'Where the *hell* have you been?'

'Never mind that now,' said the Doctor, turning around to introduce Bernard Harris.

'We've met,' said Fitz stonily.

'He needs help, Fitz.' As the Doctor helped Harris into an armchair, Fitz saw that the teacher's face was white with strain and bloody lacerations covered his neck, arms and legs. The rain had diluted much of the blood but the wounds looked raw and inflamed. 'Never did like dogs much,' Harris said with a faint smile.

'I'll get some antiseptic,' offered Fitz.

'Oh my goodness,' said Hazel, suddenly realising the state Harris was in. 'What happened?'

'He was mauled by Old Man Crawley's dog,' the Doctor explained. 'Twice.'

Briefly he described what had happened in the crypt beneath the Dead-stone memorial. He told them about the face in the soil and the tunnel

leading to Old Man Crawley's cellar. 'Which reminds me,' the Doctor said to Fitz as he finished, 'I left Trix in the woods as lookout.'

'I thought you said the crypt was sealed again while you were down there?'

'Exactly.'

'So where's Trix now?'

'I don't know.'

'Wait a minute,' interrupted Hazel. 'Are you saying Jade was in Old Man Crawley's place all the time?'

She shot a reproachful look at Fitz, who shrugged helplessly. 'At least she's safe and sound now,' he said.

'Is she?' Hazel sounded more impatient now, as the heady sensation of relief began to wear off. 'What's happened to her, exactly? Why's she unconscious?'

'Probably psychic shock,' the Doctor said, lifting one of Jade's eyelids to peer into the dilated pupil beneath.

'And I suppose it's the same for him?' Hazel asked, indicating Cal. The boy was still curled up asleep on the opposite chair.

'Very likely,' agreed the Doctor. But there was no hiding the clear intensity in his big, worried eyes: he might have brought Jade home but they were all far from safe. He turned back to Jade and examined her eyes again.

In a smaller, more contrite voice, Hazel said, 'I took the colander thing off. I'm sorry.'

'Probably for the best,' the Doctor muttered. 'The thing in the crypt is causing all this, anyway. It's growing in power all the time. If it tried another psychic assault on Cal, it would probably burn his mind out regardless of any defence mechanism I could build.'

'Doctor,' began Fitz, 'I'm worried about Trix. What if she's –'

'Trix will have to fend for herself for the moment,' the Doctor replied, absorbed in his inspection of Jade. 'We have more urgent concerns here...'

What is it?' asked Hazel 'What's wrong now?'

'See for yourself,' the Doctor said. Hazel bent down and looked into her daughter's eyes. As she did so, the pupils suddenly seemed to expand until each eye was entirely black. Jade sat bolt upright, and in the other armchair, Cal also jerked awake, and his eyes were dark, malignant pools as well.

The Doctor gripped Jade's shoulders and held her down, speaking urgently. 'Jade! Listen to me – it's the Doctor. Something has invaded your mind. It's alien, powerful, and it wants to use you. Don't –'

'Let me out of here!' roared Jade and Cal together. Jade flung away the Doctor's arms and lunged for the door. The Doctor yelled for someone to stop them, but only Fitz was close enough to grab Cal. He caught the boy by the scruff of the neck and lifted him bodily into the air. Cal screamed and kicked and punched at him, but Fitz managed to throw him down on to the settee and hold him there.

The Doctor had bounded after Jade. She wrenched open the front door and dashed out into the rain. The Doctor sprinted after her, shouting for her to stop. She ran straight across the road without looking, and the Doctor followed her. In the grey sheets of rain, he failed to see the car coming until it was too late. There was a nasty screech of tyres on rain-slicked tarmac and then a heavy thud. The Doctor spun over the bonnet and hit the windscreen before finally sliding off and landing in the gutter.

The car swerved and skidded to a halt. The driver's door sprang open and a woman, white-faced, looked back at the unmoving bundle of clothes lying at the side of the road. She ran back to him and knelt down. 'Oh my God! Are you all right? Please be all right! *Please be all right!* I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...'

The Doctor groaned and rolled over. 'My fault entirely,' he said. 'One should always remember to stop, look and listen before crossing –' He sat suddenly upright. 'Did you see a young girl running across the road?'

Miserably the woman shook her head. 'I didn't even see you until...'

'It's all right.' The Doctor clambered to his feet, looking all around, but the rain was too heavy to see far. It danced across the road and splattered along the gutters and pavements. 'No bones broken. Well, not many.'

'I can't believe you're all right,' the woman said.

'It's all relative,' he insisted. 'What's a couple of fractured ribs when a young girl's life is at stake?'

'What's going on?' This was from Fitz, who quickly took in the Doctor, the woman, and the car parked sideways across the road. A bright star of cracks was evident on the windscreen, even through the rain. 'Did you just knock him over?' Fitz demanded, turning on the woman.

'It's all right, Fitz,' the Doctor said. 'She never stood a chance, it was my own fault.'

Fitz looked from the Doctor to the woman. 'I think he must have banged his head or something,' she said.

'No,' Fitz replied. 'He's always like this.'

There were more cars drawing up, unable to get past. Windscreen wipers clacked impatiently to and fro, and someone blew their horn.

'You'd better go,' the Doctor told her. 'You're holding up the traffic.'

The woman was about to argue, but the Doctor simply turned and limped back towards the house. Fitz shrugged helplessly at her and followed.

‘Where’s Jade?’ asked Hazel as they came back in. The Doctor was dripping wet and there was a graze on his face that was beginning to bleed.

‘She got away,’ he said.

‘Where?’ Hazel was holding on to Cal, who was curled into a foetal position on the settee.

‘At a guess, I’d say the Deadstone memorial.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Because it’s the thing underneath the memorial that’s controlling her – and Cal.’ The Doctor knelt stiffly down by him. ‘How is he?’

‘He’s gone quiet for now,’ she said. ‘Shouldn’t we be going after Jade?’

‘Let me see what I can do with Cal first.’

Cal opened his eyes a fraction as the Doctor spoke his name. He stayed curled up in a protective ball, but his eyes were thin slits of darkness. ‘*Go away!*’ he hissed. ‘*Let me go!*’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I know what’s in there now, Cal,’ he said quietly tapping Cal’s head with a long finger. ‘I should have realised before. There had to be a receiver. It’s been in your head all the time... I just didn’t work it out until Jade suffered the same thing. She’s been in Old Man Crawley’s cellar. She found the psychic energy. It broke into her mind and set up a little nest in there, just like it did with you.’

‘But that can’t be right,’ argued Hazel. ‘Cal’s never been in Old Man Crawley’s cellar. Have you?’

Cal squirmed and tried to curl up tighter, and the Doctor said, ‘It doesn’t really matter how it got in there, Hazel. *But it’s got to come out.*’

‘How?’

The Doctor took in a deep breath and then, quick as a flash, his hand shot out and gripped Cal’s head. His fingers dug hard into his hair and face. Cal twisted and turned but the Doctor held him fast, reinforcing his grip by holding his wrist with his free hand. ‘Hold him steady,’ he commanded, and both Hazel and Fitz grabbed hold of Cal and pushed him flat.

‘Let go of me!’ Cal snarled and squealed. His eyes opened wide, as black as oil, swirling with scarlet hate and fear. His mouth opened and his teeth seemed longer and sharper than Fitz thought possible, growing out of the gums like blades as they snapped at the Doctor.

‘It’s time to let go,’ ordered the Doctor, speaking through clenched teeth. The muscles in his face jerked spasmodically in concentration, but his eyes remained open, as cold and clear as ice. ‘Time. To. Let. *Go!*’

Cal screamed and thrashed, and blood welled from his eyes until they looked like blackcurrants swimming in their own crimson juice. The Doctor's breath came in hard, sudden gasps and then he threw back his head and roared out loud. When he looked back down at Cal, his own eyes were burning black.

Cal gave a sudden jerk, as though something deep inside him had kicked. His scream faded into a childish cry and he sagged in his mother's arms. His eyes blinked away tears of blood and looked up, mercifully normal, but very frightened.

The Doctor let him go and toppled backwards. Fitz, satisfied that Cal was all right, rushed over to his old friend. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor lay on the carpet, shaking and twitching, his arms and legs quivering as though every nerve in his body was being fired at once.

'Doctor?' Fitz held him by the face, twisting him round so that he could see him. 'Doctor?'

The spasms stopped abruptly and he lay completely limp. A dull gasp rattled from between his lifeless lips.

'Doctor?'

His eyes snapped open – and were completely normal. 'Yes, Fitz?'

'What did you do? Are you OK?'

'I'm not sure. I've got two broken ribs and my mind's just been half fried.' The Doctor sat up and sniffed. 'I'm sure I can smell burning. Can you?'

'It's gone,' said Cal. 'It's gone.'

They turned to look at him. He was smiling, his face bright and full of relief. Not even the smears of blood on his cheeks could disguise the joyous expression. 'I can tell it's gone!' He leapt to his feet and began to bounce around the living room in wild elation. 'It's gone! It's gone! It's gone!'

Hazel grabbed him bodily off the floor and hugged him. 'I know! *I know!*' She kissed him and then turned to the Doctor with tears in her eyes. 'I can't tell you how grateful I am, Doctor. I've never been so scared.'

He smiled bleakly at her. 'It's not over yet, Hazel.'

'But what did you do? And why didn't you do it earlier?'

The Doctor stood up, swaying slightly until Fitz put out a hand to support him. 'I reached into his mind and pulled out the tiny psychic node that had been left in there.'

'I never went into Old Man Crawley's house, Mum,' Cal said. 'Never. Honestly, that's the truth.'

'Did he ever touch you, Cal?' the Doctor asked.

The boy frowned, thinking hard. 'Only once – when he ruffled my hair.'

‘That would’ve been enough,’ the Doctor confirmed. ‘Enough to make contact – to plant a tiny telepathic seed in your mind.’

‘Which you’ve just dug up?’ asked Fitz.

‘In a manner of speaking.’ The Doctor rubbed his head. ‘Not something I’d recommend, by the way.’

‘But what about Jade?’ asked Hazel. ‘You said it had got her as well!’

‘I’m hoping the psychic connection was strong enough for me to have removed Jade’s at the same time.’ The Doctor looked at Fitz. ‘We need to get after her.’

‘And find Trix.’

‘I’m coming too,’ said Hazel immediately.

‘It could be dangerous,’ the Doctor argued. ‘That thing in the crypt will be very annoyed, to say the least – and Old Man Crawley is still out there, remember.’

‘Even more reason why we’re coming,’ answered Hazel. ‘I want to find my daughter and I want to put an end to this for good. Cal, get your coat and trainers.’

As Cal ran out to the hall, the Doctor turned back to Fitz. ‘We don’t have much time, Fitz...’

‘To find Trix, you mean?’

The Doctor shook his head.

‘But –’

‘Where do you think that psychic energy has gone?’ The Doctor reached up and slowly tapped his own skull. ‘It’s in here. I can contain it for now – but it’s getting stronger and it wants to be free. I’ve already had a dose of that in the TARDIS, remember, and I don’t want to repeat the experience. We have to get to the Deadstone memorial straightaway...’

‘All right,’ Fitz nodded, but he was clearly troubled. ‘And what then?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Glad to see you’ve got a plan.’

‘Fitz, what I’ve got is an angry psychic monster in my head trying to break out. If I don’t get rid of it soon, then it’s very likely that my skull will literally explode.’

‘Which is had news.’

The Doctor smiled thinly... ‘Let’s just say you wouldn’t want to be standing too close when it happens.’

Chapter 33

The Hanged Man

Jade woke up to find herself running through the rain.

She stumbled on a few more paces before stopping short, soaked to the skin and freezing cold. She could only dimly remember how she had come to be in the woods. She turned around, hoping to retrace her steps and then run all the way back home, but all she could see were twisting branches and tree trunks with crooked roots, and a thin steam rising up from the sodden leaves beneath.

‘H-hello?’ she called, hoping someone might be nearby, someone who could help point her in the right direction. She leant against the nearest tree and bit her lip fiercely, promising to herself that she wasn’t going to cry any more. But she couldn’t stop trembling. She listened to the watery drip of the forest for a full minute before calling out again: ‘P-please! Can anyone hear me?’

She heard something behind her, something in the bushes. It might have been an animal or a bird, sheltering from the rain. Shivering, she turned so that her back was to the damp hole of the tree and peered into the misty undergrowth. ‘Hello?’ she whispered. ‘Is there anyone there?’

A tall shape stepped out of the foliage, wreathed in mist. ‘Hello again, sweet thing,’ said Old Man Crawley.

They hurried through the rain towards the wood. The Doctor led the way, splashing through puddles and urging them on. Hazel and Cal ran after him, huddled inside anoraks, the boy clutching his mother’s hand as they slipped and stumbled across the wet grass. Fitz lagged behind with Bernard Harris: Fitz hadn’t wanted the schoolteacher to come at all, but Harris had insisted, and the Doctor said they didn’t have time to argue. Despite his reservations, Fitz had to admire the determination with which Harris was attempting to ignore his wounds.

‘Not far now!’ he puffed, trying to keep the man’s spirits up.

‘I’m not sure where we’re even going,’ Harris panted.

‘The Deadstone memorial,’ Fitz answered confidently. ‘The Doctor’s going to sort all this out for good.’

‘How’s he going to do that, then?’

‘He doesn’t know yet,’ Fitz replied grimly.

Hazel and Cal pushed on through the trees until they caught up with the Doctor. ‘I think the rain’s easing off,’ he told them, as if discussing the weather was the most obvious thing to talk about. He pushed wet hair off his face and smiled at them, but the pain and concern in his eyes was clear; there were deep creases in the skin around his eyes and they looked bloodshot.

‘Shouldn’t we call the police?’ asked Hazel. ‘We know where she is now – but it’ll take ages for us to find her in all this...’ She gestured at the forest ahead.

‘We don’t have time to wait for the police,’ said the Doctor simply, and charged on. Hazel and Cal ploughed after him, trying to keep up before he disappeared into the rising mist. Every so often Hazel would look down at her son and smile reassuringly, squeezing his hand tighter. Cal would look back up at her with big, clear brown eyes, full of life.

They heard the Doctor’s sudden cry: ‘There she is!’

Hazel sprinted forward, practically dragging Cal behind her, tripping over roots and undergrowth without any thought but to find her daughter Jade!’ she yelled, and Cal called out with her. ‘Jade! Wait! It’s us!’

They caught up with the Doctor at the edge of a muddy clearing, and saw the flash of Jade’s tracksuit top in the mist. ‘*Jade!*’

The Doctor grabbed Hazel by the arm, yanking her to a halt with a sharp command. ‘Wait!’

Hazel could see Jade leaning against a tall block of stone, which she realised must be the Deadstone memorial. Jade’s hair was plastered across her face with rain, but they could clearly see her slack, open mouth and staring eyes. A bright red flower bloomed in her hair, spreading across her face with the trickling water.

Hazel felt all the life drain out of her, a sudden, breathtaking abyss of fear yawning open in her heart.

Jade wasn’t moving.

Hazel stood frozen, unable to move, unable even to speak. She was faintly aware of Cal’s hand gripping her tighter and tighter, and the Doctor’s fingers digging into her arm.

Another figure appeared by the memorial, tall and gaunt in an old frayed black coat and a scarf that was as red as the blood streaming down Jade's face.

'If you've harmed her, Crawley,' growled the Doctor, stepping forwards into the clearing.

Old Man Crawley had one hand on Jade's shoulder. 'Don't worry yerself, Doctor,' he said. 'She's not dead – yet!' He pulled the girl to her feet, where she sagged against him with a groan. 'Just had to smack her pretty head against this old stone to stop her hollerin'. You know how it is with these girls who like to scream. Gets on yer nerves, don't it?'

The Doctor continued to walk towards the Deadstone memorial. 'Let her go,' he said. 'Now.'

'Can't help yer there, Doctor,' Old Man Crawley said, almost apologetic. 'I was needin' a bit of help and this young lass just came along at the right time.'

'Help? With what?'

'Well, look at her,' the old man urged, and he held Jade up by the neck and smiled to show all his uneven grey teeth. 'Plenty of good, young meat on them bones! More than can be said for her scrawny little brother!'

Hazel stood by the Doctor and glared at the old man. 'Give me my daughter, or so help me God I'll kill you!'

'I'm sure yer mean it, my love,' replied Old Man Crawley, 'but I can't help yer there, either. As the good Doctor will explain, killin' me ain't easy. In fact; it ain't even possible.'

Hazel glanced at the Doctor. 'What's he talking about?'

Fitz and Harris arrived then, crashing through the undergrowth until they both saw Crawley and Jade. Fitz immediately started forward, only to be stopped by the merest flicker of the Doctor's hand. 'What's going on? Is Jade all right?'

'She's fine!' called Old Man Crawley. 'Just a bit dazed, that's all. Nice an' cooperative. Hello there, by the way... and you too, teacher.' The old man winked at Harris. 'Milton never forgets a taste he likes, yer know...'

The Doctor took another step nearer, but the old man stiffened and tightened his grip on Jade's neck. 'Not another inch, Doctor, or I'll snap her head off! I'd prefer to keep her alive, but I'll manage if she's dead.'

'I wondered when you'd show your true colours,' the Doctor said. 'Aren't you going to introduce yourself properly?'

'I don't understand,' Hazel said. 'What does he want her for? Who is he really?'

'He's Henry Deadstone.'

There was a stunned silence until Fitz said, 'But you said Henry Deadstone was hanged by Gypsies two hundred years ago!'

Old Man Crawley's cackling laughter rang out across the clearing. 'I was!' he declared. 'Hanged by the neck until I was dead – an' I've got the scars to prove it!' He reached up with his free hand and unwound the red scarf from his throat. Clearly visible against the gaunt white skin of his neck were a number of harsh, blistered weals where a hangman's noose had cut deep into the flesh.

Chapter 34

Ground Force

'You're still alive?' asked Fitz in clear disgust.

'More like dead but still moving,' said the Doctor. 'They buried him after they hanged him.'

Old Man Crawley's face darkened. 'True, but I wouldn't die. The Gypsies did their best, but it wasn't good enough. Not for me.'

'Not for the thing in the crypt, you mean,' said the Doctor as he slowly closed in. 'The thing that has kept you alive for over two hundred years. What was it like in that coffin, by the way? Bit cramped, I expect.'

'Joke all you like, Doctor,' replied the old man, twisting his face into a smile. 'I'm still here. Nothing can harm me! Pity the same can't be said about *you*.' As he spoke, his free hand reached out suddenly, stabbing the Doctor in the ribs with brutal, supernatural accuracy. The Doctor howled as his fractured ribs bent under the impact, and he sagged to the ground.

Fitz leapt towards his fallen friend as Crawley laughed. The Doctor was clutching his chest, breathing painfully. Fitz caught a glimpse of red seeping through the Doctor's waistcoat and swallowed.

Then he felt something shift underneath him, something in the ground itself. The mud under his knees squelched and lurched. The Doctor noticed it too, and pointed at Crawley. 'Stop him!'

Old Man Crawley – or Henry Deadstone – had stepped away from his own memorial stone, still holding Jade McKeown by the throat. The earth was heaving at the old man's feet like porridge on the boil. Roots crawled out like fingers through the mud. The trees all around the clearing started to shake, branches creaking and cracking as the earth in which they were rooted began to move.

With a horrible sucking noise, a giant mouth yawned open under Old Man Crawley. A thick nest of muddy roots writhed like snakes in the hole, supporting him, lowering him down into the ground with Jade.

Ignoring the pain from his ribs and Fitz's protests, the Doctor crawled desperately towards the churning gorge. 'Stop! You don't know what you're doing, Deadstone!' But the ground buckled in front of him, pushing him back, and a number of thin, fibrous roots caught around his shoes and hands as he pulled himself forward. Mud and clay rose up beneath his chest, pressing on his broken ribs until he gasped.

Old Man Crawley descended into the earth with Jade, mud bubbling up around the lips of the hole like thick brown spittle. The ground was swallowing them.

'No!' cried Hazel, charging forward. Cal yelled and ran after her. Fitz made a grab for the boy but slipped in the mire and they both fell forward in a heap of arms and legs.

Hazel dived for Jade, but she had already disappeared into the quaking ground. Hazel slid down into the trembling crater, screaming for her daughter, clawing through the soil after her. With a final, terrible gulp the ground closed over them all.

'Help!' squealed Cal. 'It's got me! It's got me!'

The last upheaval had buried Cal's legs in a mound of soil. As he tried to pull himself free, tree roots clogged with mud tightened around his ankles. Fitz grabbed hold of him under the arms and hauled backwards, heels skidding. The Doctor joined them, pulling at the roots with his fingers, trying to loosen their unearthly grip. They twisted blindly under the touch of his hands, groping for a hold on his wrists and arms. With a last wrench, Fitz pulled Cal free of the clutching mud and fell backwards, scrabbling on all fours through the grass to get clear of the area. As all three drew away, the ground quietened and fell still. All that moved on its surface now were hundreds of confused worms.

'Mum!' Cal was shouting, tears running down his dirty face, 'Mum! Mum!'

Hazel fell through the ground, lips and eyes tight shut against the cold, clotted darkness until she felt herself hit something solid. Her legs buckled under her and she lay in the pitch dark for several seconds, stunned and helpless. There was damp clay pressed against her face, and she felt lumps of it falling on her back and head from the ground above. She had managed to follow Crawley and Jade underground, and the earth had somehow closed over them.

Looking up she found to her surprise that she could see perfectly well. There was a light up ahead, a torch or lantern perhaps. It glinted on the metal edge of a spade lying in the mud. Automatically Hazel picked up the heavy spade.

She felt scared but strangely exhilarated. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she was almost breathless with terror, but behind it all was the knowledge that she was *still alive*, that she was down here with her daughter, and she was ready to fight for her, to fight like she never had before. Because there was no turning back now, and she was fuelled by the anger and fear that had brought her here, and she was determined that *somehow* the evil down here would be made to pay..

Hazel crawled quietly forwards through the mud and bricks until she could see Old Man Crawley or Henry Deadstone as he once had been, standing at the far end of the burial chamber. His head brushed the crumbling brickwork that formed the ceiling. In one hand he held an old oil lantern, the wick turned up high and burning brightly. Its hot, waxy smell filled the darkness.

Jade lay on the ground at his feet, conscious but dazed. Her eyes didn't look focused. Hazel felt a pang of worry, which she forced back down into her gut. She couldn't afford to let herself be distracted now. She had to stop Crawley, find the Doctor's secret tunnel and get the hell out of here with Jade. She tightened her grip on the spade.

But then she saw the thing in the soil.

Crawley had moved, and behind him was a nightmare. It hung from the wall like a dark, quivering tumour, a distended bulge of mud with roots sprouting from it like twisted spider's legs.

It was moving, clumsily and blindly, waving its roots in the darkness as Old Man Crawley talked to it. He addressed it tenderly, almost reverently. Hazel couldn't hear what he was saying, but the creature jerked as he spoke, responding to him. Tendrils of matter crept out of the mud, wriggling from its obscene body to grope at the brickwork around it. The sinuous fingers probed at the joints, working their way between the gaps, disturbing the ancient mortar. As if the thing was trying to get a good grip on the earth around it, preparing to haul itself free.

Hazel crouched in the shadows, watching, appalled and sickened. Her mind was numb; she couldn't think what to do next.

Fitz pulled Cal to his feet as the lad bawled, 'It's got my mum! And Jade! It's got them both!'

'We'll get them back!' Fitz shouted, looking to the Doctor. 'Won't we?'

The Doctor looked shocked. 'We've got to get down there!'

'How?' Fitz looked at the Deadstone memorial, and the ground all around it, which had now returned to its original state. He turned to look back at the Doctor again. 'How?'

Cal broke free of Fitz and hurled himself on to the patch of churned

mud where he had seen his mother disappear. He dug into the soil with his hands and fingers, until the Doctor appeared at his shoulder.

‘She’s under here somewhere,’ the boy wept. ‘Under here!’

The Doctor picked Cal up and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘We’ll get her back, Cal. And Jade too. There’s a vault under here – a burial chamber. It’s just a case of finding the way in.’

The Doctor walked with Cal over to the Deadstone memorial, inspecting the earth around it, the hollows full of brackish water. Bubbles burst in the slime beneath, the last breath of the ground’s hideous movement, and Cal tensed. The Doctor found a piece of broken wood lying in a ditch, and said, ‘This is where Lewis’s entrance to the vault was...’ As he spoke, thick roots began to squirm beneath his shoes, and the mud pulsed and spat.

‘We can’t get down this way,’ he said, backing off. ‘Come on – we need to get to Crawley’s cottage.’ Without another word he turned and led Cal away from the clearing. Fitz hurried after them.

Hazel watched in horror as the thing in the chamber wall pulled itself slowly out of the mud. It wasn’t completely free, because part of its body, webbed with a thick skin of slime and root, was still attached to the wall behind it. Hazel was reminded, terribly, of afterbirth. This thing had been spawned from the earth itself, a tangled lump of filth and clay with rolling grey eyes and ugly jaws.

‘There, my lovely,’ Old Man Crawley crooned. ‘Nearly there...’

The beast’s mouth gaped and brown water gushed out between its jagged fangs, splashing over Jade as she lay beneath it.

‘You’re still hungry, aren’t you, my lovely?’ Crawley said tenderly ‘You can’t live on dogs and cats and rats, can you? You need proper meat!’

The creature bent down its terrible head to nudge at Jade’s limp form. Long roots and worms uncoiled from beneath the thick layer of slime that covered the soil, reaching out to probe greedily at the child’s skin.

That finally broke Hazel’s trance. With a choking cry of rage she hurled herself forward, determined to drag Jade away, put herself in the beast’s path, *anything*. Old Man Crawley turned quickly as she rushed out of the shadows, the lantern swaying in his hand. He caught Hazel roughly with one hand and pulled her down, away from the drooling nightmare stretching from the wall to the floor, away from Jade.

Hazel swore and kicked but the old man was unnaturally strong, easily able to hold her at bay, twisting his fingers into her flesh until her outraged cries turned into a scream of pain. He shook her like a rag and then threw her down. She dropped the spade and it slithered away into the mud.

The beast made some guttural noises, aware of the sudden violence. Its glistening eyes rolled towards Hazel, and she froze in its alien stare.

‘There, my lovely,’ Old Man Crawley said soothingly turning back to his monster. ‘You eat up, now, and get nice and strong. There’s plenty more where this one came from!’

The beast snorted and looked back down at Jade. She was beginning to stir, perhaps alerted by the sound of her mother’s voice, trying to crawl towards her. But with ferocious speed, the jaws closed on her, dragging her back like a predator toying with its catch.

‘Jade!’ Hazel was barely able to speak. She started forwards, but Old Man Crawley’s boot stamped down on her shoulder, grinding her into the mud, holding her there like a terrible, cold weight. She felt the ground oozing beneath her, saw the worms moving slowly through the mire. And when she looked up she saw the creature’s horrid brown teeth searching for a grip on her daughter.

The Doctor broke open the cottage’s front door with two hard kicks. It snapped back on its hinges and bounced off the wall, still vibrating with the impact as the Doctor, Fitz and Cal rushed in.

Milton was waiting for them.

The moment the front door crashed open, the dog leapt up with a torrent of savage barking. The Doctor, however, already had his sonic screwdriver ready. As he held it up, Milton stopped barking and visibly cringed. ‘It’s all right, Milton,’ the Doctor said with a smile, ‘I wouldn’t do that to you again...’ With his free hand he rummaged in his coat pocket and produced a packet of biscuits. ‘Not when I’ve got a present for you!’

The dog growled, shifting its position, unsure whether to attack or simply to accept the delights of a whole packet of custard creams to itself.

‘I wondered where you’d got to,’ the Doctor told Milton amiably. ‘Old Man Crawley left you here on guard, has he?’

Milton growled and narrowed his beastly little eyes.

The Doctor gave the custard creams a gentle shake. ‘Here you are, boy! Good dog!’

‘You could’ve waited for me,’ complained Bernard Harris as he finally caught up.

Perhaps Milton had waited, thought Fitz, because the dog leapt straight past the Doctor and his biscuits and sank his teeth into Harris’s left leg. Harris screamed and fell backwards, the dog on top of him, savaging any bit of flesh that came near his jaws, working his way up the struggling teacher towards his throat.

The Doctor had already activated his sonic screwdriver, and Milton whined, but refused to let go of Harris's shoulder. His teeth had penetrated the material of the coat and pierced the skin beneath. Harris lay still, whimpering with pain.

Fitz picked up a length of old rope from the floor and quickly tied a slipknot in one end. While the Doctor kept the sonic screwdriver trained on the dog, and the dog kept its jaws clamped on Harris, Fitz shuffled around behind the animal and very quickly looped the end over its head. Milton growled loudly, and in doing so loosened his grip on Harris. Fitz yanked the rope and the noose tightened around Milton's snout, fastening his jaws together. Milton twisted and turned, but Fitz gritted his teeth and held the rope taut. The Doctor came closer with the sonic screwdriver until the dog flattened its ears and lowered its head.

Harris crawled away, swearing profusely.

'Don't worry,' the Doctor told him, 'it just means he likes you.'

With Milton subdued, Fitz was able to wind the rope a couple more times around his snout. 'You should've gone for the custard creams, chum,' he said, and the dog panted miserably through his nose while Fitz tied the rope to the leg of the armchair. As soon as the Doctor switched off the sonic screwdriver, Milton started to growl again, albeit in a rather muffled fashion. Fitz helped Harris to his feet and then followed the Doctor and Cal into the back room.

'What's the plan, Doc?' Fitz asked.

'We use the tunnel to get to the burial chamber,' the Doctor replied. He was already sliding the bolts on the cellar door. As he did so, the door rattled suddenly and he snatched away his fingers.

'What is it?' asked Fitz.

'I don't know,' he answered. 'Something's trying to get out.'

'Hazel?' suggested Fitz.

'Mum!' Cal yelled, and darted forward to unfasten the last bolt. As he pulled the door open, a seething mass of fur and tails poured out of the cellar, dark shapes squealing and running everywhere. Cal tumbled back into the Doctor's arms and they both disappeared under a torrent of maddened rats.

Chapter 35

One for the Pot

Fitz leapt away, yelling and shouting, as a rat scurried straight up his trouser leg. He bounded around the room, bellowing and stamping his foot like a demented flamenco dancer.

The Doctor scrambled to his feet, slipping on the darting black shapes as they swarmed around the cottage. He lifted Cal up and on to the kitchen table, swiping a rat off his shoulder. 'Stay there,' he ordered, and, not waiting for a reply turned to look for Bernard Harris.

Harris had his back to the wall, staring at the rats running around his feet in utter disbelief.

'Climb on to something,' advised the Doctor, and then they both heard a terrible racket from the front room. 'Milton!'

Running through, the Doctor found Milton buried under a heap of angry rats, utterly unable to defend himself. The rats were all over him, biting at his eyes and ears. 'Help me!' bellowed the Doctor, calling to Bernard Harris. The teacher staggered into the room and saw the Doctor trying to swat the rats away from the terrier's head, but as soon as he removed one, another would take its place, scratching and gnawing at the fur beneath. 'They'll skin him alive!' said the Doctor. 'Help me!'

'Serves the little beggar right!' Harris said, but, teeth gritted, he began to pull some of the rodents off by their tails, allowing the Doctor to reach in and untie the rope around the dog's snout. Freed from his muzzle, Milton instantly leapt into the fray, biting at rats left and right, shaking them and tossing them into the air.

Harris grabbed a poker from the fireplace and began lashing at the things as they fled from the enraged terrier.

The Doctor went back through to the kitchen, where only a few rats remained scurrying around the floor looking for an exit. Cal was still on the table, and Fitz was running around with his jeans of swinging them

around his head while he yelled at the top of his voice. The trousers acted as a sling, and eventually the rat inside couldn't fight the centrifugal force any longer and shot out of one leg. The Doctor ducked as the rodent flew past his head and straight through the open window.

The Doctor dashed over to the window and looked out. 'It's OK he landed on the grass,' he reported.

'Flippin' heck!' roared Fitz, panting. 'Never mind if it's all right or not! What about me?'

'They've all gone,' announced Harris, coming in from the front room. He sagged into a kitchen chair, exhausted, the poker slipping from his fingers. 'Milton's seeing the last of them off. But where the hell did they all come from?'

'More importantly – why?' said the Doctor, now peering down the cellar steps. 'Something must've spooked them.'

'The poor little dears!' Fitz muttered, pulling his jeans back on.

'I mean, something in the crypt must have really terrorised them, Fitz.' The Doctor stepped down into the cellar. 'And I think I know what.'

'Where's my mum?' Cal demanded. 'Where's Jade?'

'This way!' the Doctor's voice echoed from the cellar. 'Come on, you lot! What are you waiting for?'

Fitz, Cal and Harris climbed down the rickety steps to join the Doctor. 'We're just checking the rats have all gone,' said Fitz.

'There's still the odd one down here,' the Doctor informed them pointing to a dark shape running along the back wall.

Fitz shuddered. 'I don't want to see another rat for as long as I live.'

As he finished speaking, the back wall caved in with a loud crash collapsing under the weight of several thousand squealing rats.

Beneath the Deadstone memorial, the soil-beast was dragging itself slowly and painfully from the earth. It held Jade in its spindly arms, almost cradling her, preparing to devour her the moment it was free.

Consumed with fear, Hazel struggled weakly in the mud beneath Old Man Crawley's boot. From where she lay, she could see thick, crusted black shoots corkscrewing out of the ground around the beast, behind it, over it. Something alien was manifesting itself inside the clay, drawing itself from somewhere unknown and unknowable, and thrusting, inserting itself into the basic fabric of the planetary matter around it. Hazel found the process abhorrent, and the creature's gradual, persistent swelling made her feel sick. It was heaving itself into her world like a maggot burrowing into a corpse.

Suddenly the creature gave a shudder and twisted its head around, as if alerted by some faint sound.

Hazel felt a stab of hope. Anything that made the thing pause had to be good. Her heart battered inside her ribs as she watched the beast's glowing eyes narrow, and an unworldly noise, like the scrape of broken bones across granite, emerged from its mouth.

Old Man Crawley stepped towards it, releasing Hazel momentarily. 'What is it?' he asked, and it seemed to Hazel that he dared not approach too closely as the monster seemed to taste the dank air around it. 'What is it?' he repeated.

But the creature's only response was to release another fetid, abrasive gasp, spraying Jade with its muddy spittle once again.

Fitz clamped his eyes shut the moment he realised that the struggling mountain of fur and pink tails was heading for him. He felt himself knocked off his feet under the weight of the rats, felt a hundred tiny claws scratching him as they scrambled for freedom. He was dimly aware of the Doctor shielding Cal with his own body as the rats poured over them.

For a moment all Fitz heard was the squealing, right up close in his ears as the rodents scabbled over his head. It was a sound he would never forget, one that he knew would bring him to a sweating wakefulness in the middle of many nights to come.

And then nothing.

The sound abruptly ceased, as if someone had turned the volume on a radio right down. Instinctively he opened his eyes, just a crack, and was amazed to find the cellar full of a strange blue light. All around him lay rats, hundreds of them, motionless.

The Doctor straightened, one arm around Cal's shoulders, equally perplexed. Then he stared in momentary wonder at something behind Fitz and said, 'You took your time!'

Fitz turned and was astonished to see Trix standing on the steps that led down into the cellar.

'Trix!' he gawped. 'Where've you been? What -'

Trix wasn't alone. With her was a pale, glowing figure that he recognised all too easily. The alien ghost – the ectoplasm.

'Tell him to stop it!' ordered the Doctor suddenly looking from the ghostly alien to Trix. 'Now, before he kills them all!'

'I can't,' said Trix.

'What?' asked Fitz desperately. 'Can't *what*?'

The Doctor strode through the rats towards the ectoplasm. 'You must stop it,' he urged. 'The psychic wave will kill them otherwise – burn out

every single one of their minds!

It took a moment for Fitz to fully comprehend that the Doctor was talking about the rats. Looking down, he realised that the rodents were in fact unconscious. They were breathing rapidly, trembling and twitching, struck down by some invisible force. 'Are you saying Mr Transparent here is responsible for nobbling these things?'

The Doctor nodded, never taking his eyes off the alien. It stood and stared back at him, aloof and unmoved. 'Please,' the Doctor said urgently. 'These creatures have done you no harm at all! They don't deserve to die!'

'But thanks for trying, anyway,' Fitz added.

A thin membrane seemed to pass sideways over each of the alien's eyes, no more than a faint wisp of ectoplasm. But the effect was obvious to Fitz – with a slight blink, the alien stopped doing whatever it was that had nailed the rats.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor with relief. The rats began to stir groggily.

'Wait a sec,' said Fitz. 'Where the hell has he come from?'

Trix said, 'I found him in the woods – or rather, he found me.'

'I left you to keep watch,' the Doctor said accusingly. 'What happened?'

'It's a long story.'

'And he's explained everything, I assume?' Fitz nodded at the floating ectoplasm.

'Er, not really.' Trix actually looked apologetic. 'He doesn't say much. Nothing at all, in fact. I just sort of followed him here.'

'He's homed in on the psychic energy,' the Doctor explained quickly. 'He's been searching for it – haven't you?'

The alien looked at the Doctor and blinked.

'Not the chatty type, is he?' said Fitz.

'He doesn't talk like us,' the Doctor snapped. 'He communicates on a completely different level, something akin to telepathy...'

'Can you tell what he's thinking?'

'Unfortunately not. I doubt he can tell what we're thinking either. Incompatible brainwaves, I shouldn't wonder.' The Doctor licked his lips. 'Could be a problem.'

'I'll tell you something else that could be a problem,' said Fitz, pointing at the collapsed wall at the back of the cellar. The Doctor turned just in time to see Cal disappearing into the darkness.

'Cal!' he roared. 'Come back!'

'I want my mum!' The boy's voice drifted out of the shadows.

The Doctor bared his teeth in a momentary display of anger and then turned back to Fitz. 'Stay with our ectoplasmic pal, Fitz. We're going to need him.'

‘What? Why? What are we going to do?’

But the Doctor had already charged into the tunnel after Cal.

Fitz turned to look at the glowing figure standing behind him. ‘Well, come on, then! What are you waiting for?’

The ectoplasm moved forward without a sound, floating towards the black mouth of the tunnel. Its soft grey light filled the entrance for a moment as it followed the Doctor inside.

Trix looked at Fitz in confusion. ‘So where’s he off to now?’

‘The Doctor said it had homed in on the psychic energy,’ recalled Fitz worriedly.

‘Well, fine.’

‘The psychic energy that is now inside the Doctor’s head.’

‘What? How?’ Trix shook her head and said, ‘Never mind. You’d better get after them.’

Fitz hesitated, glancing uncertainly at Bernard Harris.

‘I’m all right,’ protested Harris weakly... He was holding himself awkwardly clearly in great pain. Fresh blood was seeping from his wounds. ‘You go on. I’ll get out and call the police or something.’

‘No,’ said Trix. ‘No cops. I know who can help.’ She turned back to Fitz. ‘You still here? Get going!’

Fitz looked anxiously at Trix for a second and then turned to leave. He knew that he simply didn’t have time to argue.

Cal had nearly reached the end of the tunnel. He had run all the way through the blackness, stumbling and picking himself up and racing on. He couldn’t see a thing. But eventually he did see a light up ahead a light that quickly opened out into a dungeon or vault just as the Doctor had described. Old Man Crawley stood holding a lantern and Cal’s mother lay in the mud at his feet.

‘Mum!’ Cal shouted, rushing forwards without another thought.

His mother looked up, astounded. ‘Cal!’

As he entered the crypt, Cal saw the monster, and quickly slowed to a dumbfounded halt.

‘No, Cal!’ his mother yelled. ‘Go back!’

The monster raised its head and looked at him. Cal felt himself freeze in its terrible gaze, and realised with sudden, hollow fear that the bundle of muddy clothes before it was Jade.

Then he felt a cold hand grab him around the neck from behind and a familiar voice in his ear: ‘Another one for the pot, my lovely!’ said Old Man Crawley gleefully.

The tunnel was cold and damp and as black as night. Fitz could only see because of the faint luminescence of the ectoplasm. He moved as quickly as he could through the thick gloom, chasing the flickering glow, occasionally scraping his elbows against the walls of the narrow passage. He had to stoop because the ceiling was so low. Occasionally he felt a rat underfoot: probably dead, crushed in the rush to escape. If this led all the way to the chamber beneath the Deadstone memorial, he reasoned, then it must extend for nearly a mile. It was damned claustrophobic and he was beginning to breathe hard already.

Fitz pushed on, scraping cobwebs from his face, gaining on the ectoplasm all the time. The passage was growing brighter with every step. Eventually he saw the alien's back, or rather the pulsating organ within, and a section of tunnel beyond it.

'Hold on,' Fitz panted, and to his surprise the ectoplasm slowed down. He trotted up to it, but was careful not to get too close. The transparent head turned and regarded him with baleful, glassy eyes. Fitz tried a smile. 'You may not have cigarettes where you come from, but I do and I've got the lungs to prove it. Yours, I can see, are in perfect shape.'

The alien turned away and floated down the tunnel.

Old Man Crawley swung Cal around and threw him against the wall. Cal whimpered and stared at the slavering monster hanging from the soil. It was, quite literally, something from his worst nightmares. Boneless fingers writhed all over it like huge worms, grasping at the air.

'Let him go!' sobbed Hazel, climbing shakily to her knees. 'Please...!'

'I've had my eye on this wee feller for a good while,' said Old Man Crawley. 'He's a bit scrawny but he won't go to waste.' Gritting his yellow teeth, the old man picked up Cal and dangled him in front of the beast.

The Doctor burst into the crypt in a whirl of dark velvet, cannoning into Old Man Crawley. For a second the man who had been Henry Deadstone was lifted clean off his feet, and the Doctor drove him back into the wall with a sickening crunch. In any other circumstances it might have been a fatal blow.

But Crawley simply gasped and cackled, sliding down the brickwork as the Doctor untangled himself. 'You can't hurt me, you fool,' the old man sneered.

The Doctor picked Cal up off the floor and pushed him across the crypt towards his mother. Hazel caught him and hugged him to her.

The Doctor bent down towards Jade, but the creature in the soil behind her snarled and spat venomously at him. The Doctor met its grey gaze and continued to reach down for the girl. 'All right,' he said, quietly but clearly.

'You've done your best to keep him alive. But it won't work forever. You've got to let him go.'

Old Man Crawley laughed harshly. 'Yer too late, Doctor!'

'I wasn't talking to you,' snapped the Doctor. He turned back to the soil-creature, holding its cold stare. It was trembling with effort, its thick, curved legs skittering on the crypt floor and walls, trying to find a grip as it unbound itself from the earth. Strands of brown slime stretched from the swollen body to the cavity in the mud. It was nearly free...

'I was talking to *her*,' the Doctor said.

Chapter 36

Deadstone

The Doctor regarded the monster curiously. His gaze was cool, dispassionate, almost pitying. The beast seemed exhausted, as if its efforts to tear itself free of the mud were proving too much. Its harsh breathing filled the crypt with a sour, earthy stench.

Hesitantly, as if fearing that any movement at all might galvanise the creature into action, Jade McKeown started to crawl towards her mother.

Hazel hugged Cal with one arm and held out a hand towards her daughter.

‘It’s all right, it needs to rest.’ The Doctor helped Jade up and she ran the rest of the way.

Hazel held both her children close and looked at the Doctor. ‘What is that thing?’

‘It’s a hybrid being from another universe,’ he replied, and he managed to sound grim but matter of fact, as if he was a gardener identifying an unusual yet troublesome weed. ‘Something formed from the earth by an alien telekinetic force – soil and root and worm forged into a living creature by psychic energy.’

‘How? How has it come to be here like this?’

‘I found it,’ said Old Man Crawley, his voice cracked and strained. He was gazing at the recumbent monster. It bared its jagged fangs, drooling slime. ‘Two hundred year ago, near enough.’

‘Tell us what happened,’ said the Doctor, not unkindly.

Crawley gave a slow nod. ‘I were young an’ fuller life then: Henry Deadstone, a real Jack the Lad. I were in the area lookin’ for work They weren’t keen on strangers round ’ere, then, though. I were sleepin’ rough, livin’ in the woods. One night, after I’d been into town I wandered back, drunk as a lord. It were dark an’ rainin’ hard an’ couldn’t see nothin’ clearly on account of the drink, anyway. But I saw somethin’ in the trees – somethin’

glowin', pale like a little drop of the moon had fallen down to Earth. It were cryin' and howlin' something awful. That were when I saw the first ghost, driftin' through the trees wailin' like the wind. I waited until it had faded away and then I fount this thing in the ground... Couldn't see nothin' at first, mind... Just at ugly hole in the soil. Then I saw it movin', twistin' and turnin' like worm sliced in half.'

'It must have been injured,' said the Doctor. 'Probably traumatised by its arrival in this universe. I doubt it even intended to come here; it crash-materialised through the dimensions. It would have been confused and in pain. Everything here was completely alien to it.'

'I don't mind tellin' yer, I hated the sight of it, an' tried to kill it,' said Old Man Crawley. 'Chopped it up with an axe. Buried it. *But it weren't dead!*'

The Doctor pursed his lips. 'How did you know that, Henry?'

'I knew it weren't dead because it spoke to me in my dreams that night, an' every night after that! Callin' me, beggin' me, askin' me to help it, to keep it alive...' The old man's eyes were dewy with the memory, and he blinked rapidly, trying to clear his mind.

'And you kept it alive the only way you knew how – by feeding it.'

A wicked smile grew on Crawley's lips. 'It were hungry, of course it were! It needed good meat!'

The Doctor watched him solemnly. 'And in exchange, the creature shared with you the very essence of its being... a whiff of its own powerful psychic energy... Just enough to make you invulnerable, to keep you alive against all the laws of nature. You couldn't be hurt, or injured. You couldn't age – at least, not so anyone would notice. That must have felt good, for a young *Jack the Lad* like you.'

'The locals thought I were a witch,' laughed Crawley. 'Gypsies even tried ter hang me, but of course it didn't work. Ever. They hanged me an' buried me face down an' I tried ter claw my way out!' He held up his fingertips, which were devoid of nails. 'My hands were red wit my own blood. But I couldn't die. The coffin rotted around me and the worms tried to eat me, but *I wouldn't die!*'

'Eventually the travellers dug you up to be sure you were dead. You had them fooled, even though you'd aged a bit. Although that was probably stress, I should think.'

'Joke all yer like, Doctor.' Henry Deadstone leered at them all, his little eyes shining in the light of his lantern. 'But I'm still alive now! *I can't die!*'

'And very well you're looking on it, too,' said the Doctor. 'Very spry for someone who must be pushing two-hundred-and-twenty-something. No, you can't die, Henry. And neither can your extra-dimensional chum here.'

The beast gurgled and dribbled mud between its uneven fangs, watching the Doctor and Crawley, or Deadstone, as they circled each other slowly around the crypt.

'You must have seen some things, Henry, in your time,' mused the Doctor. 'Watching the world change over the years. The advent of the motor car. Aeroplanes. World wars. Trips to the moon. Nuclear power...'

'Can't say the world's improved,' Crawley grumbled.

'It's been an exciting time for the human race, the last couple of centuries,' argued the Doctor. 'I was here for the last one – all of it – and I enjoyed every minute. Well, almost every minute.'

'Good fer you.'

'Well, my circumstances were a little different to yours, it has to be said. I was free to travel the world, watch it develop, live, learn, love...'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Not like you – stuck here, trapped, vilified, utterly dependent on a telekinetic disaster living like a worm under the ground. That thing may have kept you alive against all the odds, Henry, but you have to admit it's not big on conversation.'

'You don't know what yer talkin' about,' said Crawley, sneering. His eyes glittered darkly, full of hate.

'Come on, Henry! Look at it: it's a crash victim. It's injured!'

'Rubbish!' Crawley glowered at the monster as it quivered.

'You see, what you couldn't have known,' the Doctor said, 'is that *this* is not the being's whole form.'

Hazel and her children glanced nervously, reluctantly at the monster. It seemed to be recovering, tugging at the thick strings of mucus that held it in the wall. Hazel quickly looked about for the spade.

The Doctor continued: 'When the alien crash-materialised, it split into two wholly separate organisms. Probably as a result of the trauma, or perhaps the transference was interrupted. This half – the psychic energy – made it through into our universe and ended up buried in the mud. But the other half didn't make it. Not fully. It's stuck halfway, fluctuating between the dimensions, only existing in *our* universe as ectoplasm. It's faded in and out of view for many years, occasionally glimpsed by the humans who live round here as a ghost in the woods. And all the time it has been searching for its other half – its psychic energy. Year after year, decade after decade, the ectoplasm has grown weaker and weaker, and more and more desperate. Eventually it simply collapsed, exhausted, to be found by a local schoolteacher out jogging in the woods.'

'And the psychic energy?' asked Hazel.

'Well, it had been attacked and buried by Henry Deadstone. And like any creature buried alive, it was terrified. It clutched at anything that might

help it – the earth, tree roots, mud and clay and insects. Moulded them and merged with them to obtain a physical presence. Eventually it took on a strange, unique existence of its own. By which time I imagine it was quite insane.’

‘And that’s what’s been giving me the nightmares?’ asked Cal.

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘Deadstone and the soil-creature kept each other alive – the creature had developed an appetite that Henry kept satisfied with animals and, it has to be said, the occasional child. But it wasn’t enough: the psychic energy needed to be free, and it was desperate to escape this damp, claustrophobic prison beneath the earth. It reached out through Deadstone, or Crawley as he later called himself, to touch another mind, a younger, more vulnerable mind.’

Hazel pulled her children closer to her. ‘I don’t know which of them is the worst kind of monster,’ she said. She kissed both Jade and Cal and then climbed to her feet. She felt strangely calm. ‘But I know what’s got to be done.’

Before anyone could react, Hazel had picked up the spade and swung it with furious strength at the mud-monster. The metal edge of the blade thudded into the soil and the creature screamed and writhed.

‘No!’ roared Old Man Crawley, lunging for her. The Doctor caught hold of him and pulled him back.

The spade was embedded deep inside the glistening lump of mire that formed the monster’s head, dissecting it between the eyes. Teeth gritted, Hazel levered the spade so that the head split wide open. A nest of grey worms boiled inside the gaping wound like a wriggling brain. The creature shrieked and threw itself backwards, legs and roots lashing blindly. The spade, still lodged in the thing’s head, was torn from Hazel’s grasp.

Old Man Crawley screamed and clutched his own head, as if sharing the pain.

Driven by pain and anger, the beast finally pulled itself free of the mud with an awful sucking noise. Its broken head lashed from side to side until the spade slipped free and hit the crypt wall with a clang.

Crawley’s wheezing sobs of pain began to turn to laughter. ‘You see, you’re too late, Doctor. My lovely creature has been growing stronger, year by year! She’s feasted on the blood and bones of animal and child... And she’s shared her meals with me!’ His eyes were gleaming with madness. ‘She’s been like a mother to me, Doctor! I looked after her an’ she’s looked after me!’

The Doctor grabbed Crawley by the arms. ‘Don’t be a fool, Deadstone! This has gone far enough. *It ends tonight!*’

The old man shook his head. ‘I’ve already told you: I can’t be killed *and*

neither can she!

The Doctor turned to face the monster as it bore down on him. The seething mass of worms in its brain cavity suddenly surged out of the wound, uncoiling like a hundred thin white fingers to grasp the Doctor's face. He cried out in sudden, intense agony as the creature pulled him down into a deadly kiss, the worms groping around his skull, searching for a way to get at the meat inside. The Doctor struggled ferociously, eventually managing to slide painfully free of the writhing nest, just before his legs gave way and he crumpled to the floor. He lay staring blindly upwards, making feeble, sporadic movements.

The mud-beast scuttled along on a mass of jerking roots and spines, each leg moving independently of the others like the fingers of a giant hand. The last sticky remnants of the mucous membrane from which it had been spawned hung in quivering strands beneath it. The worm-filled gash in its head closed up as the mud ran together, sealed with frothing brown spittle. Its jaws distended and it let out a murderous screech, spraying filthy matter across the crypt.

Then it hurled itself straight at Hazel McKeown.

Chapter 37

Death at Last

The Doctor scrambled to his feet and threw his shoulder into the beast's flank, but it was a worthless gesture. The weight of the soil was too great and he was too weak; he was knocked aside without a second glance as the creature charged at Hazel, and her children screamed.

At the same instant, a deathly light flooded the crypt. A silvery glow shimmered all around them, as cold and hard as moonshine. For a second the crypt seemed to be caught in time, like a snapshot: Crawley and the Doctor, Cal and Jade, Hazel and the monster.

The monster screeched and recoiled from the light suddenly, losing all interest in Hazel. It twisted around, as if searching for shadow, for somewhere to retreat. And as it moved, it saw the ghostly figure gliding out of the light. Tall, skeletal, wreathed in glimmering rags, the ectoplasm emerged from the tunnel mouth.

'Fitz!' shouted the Doctor gleefully. Fitz staggered into the crypt after the ectoplasm, looking confused and dishevelled.

The ghost floated towards the soil-beast with a distant, echoing cry, fingers reaching out to touch it.

'What've I missed?' asked Fitz.

'The ectoplasm has finally found the psychic energy it split away from two hundred years ago,' the Doctor explained weakly. 'Only in the meantime the psychic energy has been busy creating its own physical form. Out of soil.'

'Nice.'

'Don't worry. Once the two halves are reunited, they should be able to go home – back their own universe, at least.'

But the soil recoiled and thrashed its roots as the ectoplasm closed in. Like a cornered rat left with no choice but to attack, the monster suddenly hurled itself at the grey figure with a howl of frustration. The ectoplasm

dispersed, its shining radiance flickering around the confines of the tomb like lightning.

‘It’s rejecting the ectoplasm!’ the Doctor realised. ‘Not good!’

With an unearthly scream, the ghostly shape shimmered and whirled like water, losing all shape and purpose. The soil-beast roared in triumph, thrashing from side to side in an effort to scatter the ectoplasm still further.

‘Get down!’ cried the Doctor, grabbing Fitz and pulling him to the ground. Old Man Crawley hung back, staring in bewilderment at the raging contest. He was trying to speak to the soil-beast, but his words were lost in the savage battle.

The Doctor and Fitz crawled across the rubble to join Hazel, Cal and Jade. ‘What’s wrong?’ asked Hazel.

‘Well, the good news is that the ectoplasm has finally found its other half,’ explained the Doctor. ‘But the bad news is that its other half isn’t happy about it. It’s not quite the joyful reunion I’d hoped for.’

‘Which is a big problem,’ Fitz said.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Hazel. ‘I thought the monster was injured or something.’

‘Not necessarily a good thing. It’s mad with pain and confusion.’

‘What about the psychic energy you took out of Cal and Jade?’ asked Fitz. ‘Won’t that help?’

‘Not any more,’ the Doctor replied ruefully. ‘The monster sucked it out of my mind shortly after Hazel attacked it. At least that’s back where it belongs. But right now, that ectoplasm is the only thing that can stop the monster.’

‘I doubt it’s strong enough for the job now,’ observed Fitz. The ectoplasm had been reduced to a haze of shining mist. The soil-monster roared in triumph and a spasm of psychic energy thudded into the walls of the burial chamber. Bricks tumbled from the ceiling amid a shower of mortar and dust. The monster sat in the middle of the tomb and a thick, nauseating aura of power vibrated the air around it.

Wincing as the psychic energy flowed around them, the Doctor shouted, ‘It’s going to break free!’

‘Look at Old Man Crawley!’ said Cal, pointing.

Crawley was flat against the opposite wall. He looked stricken, old and frail and frightened. ‘Stop!’ he shouted, but his voice was thin and sharp and unable to compete with the monster’s humming power. ‘Stop it! Stop it!’ He moved towards the creature, arms outstretched, the skin of his hands dry and brittle, the bones in his fingers clearly visible. He stumbled, falling painfully to one knee.

‘Uh-oh,’ said the Doctor.

The creature turned and looked down at Crawley... The old man stared up at it through moist, rheumy eyes. 'Don't leave me!' he begged. 'Don't leave me now!'

A massive force suddenly rippled through the ground, a pulse of movement that tore open the roof of the vault as though a giant, invisible fist had punched its way out. Mud and bricks were blasted upwards with a thunderous crack. Everyone buried their faces as stones, clumps of soil, torn root and earth rained back down. Eventually the tumult died and a stunned silence settled over the debris.

The Doctor pushed aside a mound of crumbling earth and helped Hazel to her knees. She coughed and gagged and found Jade and Cal clinging to each other, covered in mud. 'Are you all right?' she asked them, still half choked, and they both nodded vigorously, eyes wide with fear and bewilderment.

A cold wind brushed past them in the darkness, startling and fresh after the clammy atmosphere of the crypt. They were out in the open.

'What happened?' asked Cal.

'Is it over?' asked Jade hopefully.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'The monster's escaped.' He stood up, a grim figure in a torn and dirty frock coat, silhouetted against a full moon.

'What happened to the root?' asked Fitz, blinking in the moonlight.

'See for yourself.'

They were standing in the middle of a crater, ten feet deep and thirty feet wide. Thick, churned mud steamed around them. Broken chunks of rock were scattered everywhere, and on one piece Fitz could see the words 'HATEFUL MEMORY' inscribed. A sense of shock filled the clearing where the Deadstone memorial had stood.

'Don't leave me!' a voice cried plaintively. 'Please come back! Come back to me...!'

'It's Crawley,' said the Doctor, clambering across to where the old man lay. In the moonlight, he looked ancient: his face was shrunken, his eyes wide and fearful, rolling in deep, dark sockets. 'Hold still,' the Doctor told him. 'You'll be all right.'

Crawley shook his head miserably. 'Where's she gone?' he asked in a whisper. 'Where is she?'

The Doctor helped him to his feet. 'The creature's escaped, Henry! It's been working towards this for two hundred years, and you've been helping it!'

The old man shivered. 'Why did she leave me?'

'She doesn't need you any more,' the Doctor said. 'She's been using you, Henry.'

Crawley blinked rapidly like a confused old man. He trembled in the Doctor's warm grip, feeling cold and empty.

'You know what that means, don't you, Henry?' asked the Doctor quietly.

Crawley looked sharply at him, with a spark of his former vigour in his eyes. But there was something else: trepidation, a sudden, terrible fear rising up from the pit of his stomach 'She's *gone*, hasn't she?' he croaked. His lips were dry and cracked.

'From you, yes,' said the Doctor. He was watching the old man through hooded eyes, knowing what was to come.

'I can't die,' Crawley said, freeing himself from the Doctor's grasp. He straightened, and the dry click of his bones was clearly audible. A twinge of pain crossed his face. 'I can't die,' he repeated, and turned to walk away.

'You're not going to let him go, surely?' Fitz said, joining the Doctor.

'You can't!' said Hazel, stepping forward. Her voice trembled with anger. 'He started all this! He's got to be made to pay!'

Crawley had turned around at the sound of Hazel's voice. He looked at her for a long moment, and then screwed up his eyes to focus on the small boy at her side. He smiled. 'It's been a pleasure,' he said with a soft cackle, but the laugh turned into a hacking cough, his tongue protruding between his jagged teeth. His lips shrunk back, exposing his grey gums as he suddenly struggled for breath.

Then the skin on his face split open and peeled away from the bone like paper. He staggered towards them, leering as the muscles beneath wasted away and hung like rags from his skull. His clothes sagged, darkening as they soaked up the blood, bulging as his entrails unwound through the thinning, shredding membrane of his gut. Within a few seconds, Henry Deadstone had transformed into a shambling corpse, strung together with dried-up tendons and webbed with empty veins. He took three more faltering steps towards Hazel McKeown and then his mouth gaped again, showing a blackened tongue curling up like an autumn leaf as he gasped, '*I... can't... die!*'

Then he pitched forward and collapsed into the mud.

The Doctor knelt down quickly beside him. The yellowed skull turned and looked up at him even as the eyes within the sockets shrivelled and vanished. The jawbone fell open and a last, dry hiss escaped with a sigh that might have contained the words, '*At last...*'

'What happened?' asked Fitz.

'The psychic energy had left him,' the Doctor explained, surveying the

damage with dispassionate curiosity. 'His two hundred years had to catch up fast.'

'That was horrible,' said Hazel flatly... 'But I don't feel sorry for him.'

'He died a long time ago,' the Doctor said, standing up. 'There's nothing to mourn.'

In the moonlight, the remains of Henry Deadstone's small, twisted skeleton crumbled to dust and joined the earth.

'What now?' Fitz asked the Doctor.

'We still have to stop the creature.'

'Any ideas how?'

'The ectoplasm is the key... We need the ghost.'

'Been there, done that,' said Fitz. 'No good. If I read it right, Mr Mud blew our ectoplasmic friend away.'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'It's still here – all around us. Can't you feel it?'

'No,' Fitz said.

'Shh,' the Doctor replied. Fitz shivered as a cold breeze entered the clearing and the Doctor closed his eyes. 'It's like trying to remember a dream...'

'I can't see anything,' Fitz muttered, looking around. The scene reminded him of the Somme during the First World War, bathed in the merciless silver light of the moon. The place looked alien and deadly.

'It's hurt,' said the Doctor. 'Weak. Fighting for survival. It won't last much longer without help.'

Strands of mist were borne on the wind, curling around the crater, thickening, glowing, forming into a familiar, gaunt, transparent figure.

The Doctor smiled. 'If only you could talk.'

The ectoplasm floated towards him, bathing him in its wan light. But the glow was pallid and sickly, with a green cast like putrescent meat. It started to fade and the Doctor reached out to the thin mist. 'No!'

'What's wrong?' asked Hazel. 'Why is it fading?'

'It's dying.'

'Isn't there anything we can do?' asked Fitz.

'I need to make contact with it,' said the Doctor. 'It should be simple, because it has such a strong telepathic presence... but I daren't.'

'Why not?'

'The last time I opened my subconscious to it, it almost ripped my mind in two.'

The ghost faded away, barely visible, reaching out towards them.

'You've got to do something,' Fitz urged. 'It doesn't look like it's got long left.'

'It might be possible,' ventured the Doctor hurriedly, 'if I had some help...'

'Name it.'

'I need someone to share the mental burden. Someone who can help make telepathic contact, help me keep my mind together long enough.'

Fitz straightened. 'Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get to it.'

'It could be dangerous,' the Doctor told him. 'It *will* be dangerous.' 'I'm ready for it,' Fitz promised. 'Best take the offer while my nerve holds, Doc.'

The Doctor smiled fondly at him. 'Fitz, it can't be you. It has to be someone who's already made contact with the psychic energy.'

There was a moment's silence before Cal said, 'Like me, you mean?'

'And me,' added Jade.

The Doctor simply looked at them, and then at Hazel.

'Not a chance,' she said. 'Not in a million years. They've been through enough, Doctor. I can't let them take that risk.'

'I know,' the Doctor replied.

'We'll do it,' said Jade. She looked at Cal. 'Won't we?'

'Yeah,' he said, reaching out to hold her hand. 'Course.'

'No!' said Hazel hotly. 'You will not!'

'We must, Mum,' argued Jade. 'Or else all of this will have been for nothing.'

'No!'

Cal reached out with his free hand and touched his mother. 'The Doctor can't do it on his own, Mum. We have to help.'

Tears stung her eyes and she shook her head, biting her lip. 'No...'

'He's helped us all along,' Cal said. 'He helped me. And Jade. And you.'

Hazel covered her mouth with her hand, eyes wide with a different kind of terror now. Everything that had happened in the crypt was nothing compared to this, nothing compared to the moment when she had to risk the lives of her own children. She turned to the Doctor. 'Isn't there any other way? Any other way at all?'

'I wish there was.'

'How dangerous will it really be?' she asked.

He didn't reply at first. 'We don't have long, Hazel,' he said eventually. 'Whatever we do, we must do it now.'

'Come on!' said Jade. 'Let's just get on with it, for goodness' sake!'

'I love you!' Hazel cried. 'I love you both, so very, very much...'

Tears appeared in Jade's eyes as she squeezed Cal's hand and smiled back at her mother. 'We love you too, Mum...'

The Doctor reached out and placed a hand on each of their heads.

'Will it hurt?' asked Cal faintly.

‘Yes.’

Chapter 38

Contact

Trix banged on the caravan door until her knuckles hurt. It was raining again, a thin but persistent drizzle drawn like a curtain around the scrapyard. The clouds were darkening overhead.

‘Come on!’ Trix urged, rapping on the thin plastic of the door again.

‘Maybe they’re out,’ said Bernard Harris behind her, hunched up inside a soaking anorak. His hair was plastered to his head, but the rain had sluiced away the blood on his face and left him looking somewhat reinvigorated.

‘In this weather?’ snapped Trix.

The caravan door opened and Lewis glared out, his eyes narrowing when he recognised Trix. ‘Get lost!’

Trix jammed her boot in the doorway to prevent it closing. ‘We need your help!’

‘You’ve had it,’ Lewis answered. ‘Nearly got me killed!’ His eyes glanced across at Harris with a flicker of shame.

‘Come on, man,’ Harris said. ‘This is important! There are lives at stake!’

‘The girl’s safe, ain’t she?’

‘No one’s safe,’ Trix said, ‘until we stop that thing in the burial chamber. It’s trying to get out, Lewis. The thing that drove your uncle insane is going to be on the loose. Think about it!’

‘I shot a man today!’ Lewis blurted. ‘I ain’t stayin’ around here to take the consequences! We’re leavin’, and if yer take my advice, you’ll be leavin’ too.’

‘It’s not over yet, Lewis,’ Trix insisted. ‘Unless you help us now, you’ll never be free of it!’

Lewis bit his lip. ‘I don’t see what we can do. You saw what happened to Uncle Tommo when the Doctor was here last time!’

Lewis was abruptly pushed aside as Uncle Tommo filled the doorway. His mean little eyes bored into Trix. ‘You heard ’im,’ Tommo growled.

‘And you heard *me*,’ Trix shot back. ‘It’s going to get out, Tommo. Who knows, it might even come after *you*.’

Tommo stared at her, his eyes full of hate and fear. The rain was getting heavier as they talked, the clouds darker. Something rumbled in the distance and it might have been thunder, but Tommo’s narrow gaze was drawn away, up the hill towards the woods. From here, the tops of the trees were a blurred stripe of grey, almost invisible in the downpour. A strange sound drifted down the hillside, something caught on the wind, like the cry of an animal in pain.

Tommo swore and then turned to Lewis. ‘Get the spare guns, lad.’

The beast tastes the moonlight.

It has tasted the flesh of the indescribable things that exist in this world, has tasted the juice within them and the matter that gives them weight and being, and that had tasted just the same: cold, flat, meaningless.

It sees the moon’s metallic brilliance shimmering through the confusion of matter above. It feels the cold touch of its light. This whole world feels alien and obscene, pitifully weak, repulsive.

The beast halts for a short time, trying to gather itself, to make sense of its surroundings, but it is impossible. Everything here is hard and tangled, cold and wet and hostile. It has been a prisoner for so long beneath the soil of this other world, longer than it can really understand, longer than makes sense. It has no plan, no purpose, no means of escape. All it knows is that it has to be free, it has to get away...

It hauls itself forward, not even understanding its own heavy bulk, confused as to why it feels a kinship with the ground over which it passes. A rising sense of dread starts to form in its mind, a terrible panic as it suddenly realises the seriousness of its plight, the sheer hopelessness...

Hazel forced herself to watch as her children each took hold of one of the Doctor’s hands. The moment they touched him, there was a fierce jolt of something Hazel could only feel in her mind. She could sense the tingle of power humming through them, through the ground and the trees around the crater. It lasted for barely a moment just long enough for her to realise that there had been a significant and dangerous transition in the world around them. The rain hissed as it touched the earth and wisps of steam ran away with the evening wind.

‘It’ll be OK,’ she heard Fitz say trying his best to sound reassuring. But she could tell that he was as fearful as she was.

The ectoplasm drifted down towards the Doctor, Cal and Jade. It reached out and took hold of Cal’s hand and Jade’s hand. The circuit com-

plete, the faint glow within the ghost suddenly brightened burning for a long, painful second. The Doctor, Jade and Cal all gasped as one with the impact, and an actinic flash of light filled the clearing like a lightning strike with no bolt. When the glare faded, the ghost was gone, but a deep blue light shone from within Cal and Jade flowing through them from the Doctor. His eyes were black, as were those of Cal and Jade.

'*Now I know,*' said the Doctor, and his voice sounded strange, distant. '*Now I can understand...*' With a pang of fear, Hazel saw that he was becoming transparent. She could see the dark trees through him, and the dashing rain as it glittered in the moonlight. It was as if he was being slowly turned to glass.

Worse still, the same thing was happening to Jade and Cal. Haze watched, helpless, as her children began to fade away before her eye.

It sprouts long, dark growths, hard with a thick, scabrous skit splitting into hundreds of arms and fingers. The gnarled hands pull it bulk through the moist undergrowth, uncaring of the direction in which it moves.

It only knows one thing: *that it has to move, it has to get away.*

It rushes along, scuttling over fallen trees and down muddy gullies, slipping and sliding in its desperate flight. Suddenly it falls, heavily, the world spinning over it until it lands with a wrenching smack in a thicket of brambles. It scrambles to its feet and tears aside the ripping thorns, utterly disregarding the tiny nicks they leave in its flesh.

It settles down for a moment to get its bearings. Above, it can see – dimly with its weak, physical eyes – a dark ridge of earth, and behind that, the bright smudge of the moon. Silhouetted against the light are a number of moving figures.

Trix looked down at the beast. In the moonlight, it was difficult to see it in any detail and for that she was grateful. She had glimpsed enough to know that it didn't bear close inspection. A confusion of mud and roots and filth was all she had seen.

It rolled around the bottom of the pit, thrashing in the briars, snapping its fangs.

'What the hell is it?' asked Bernard Harris.

Trix shrugged. 'Monster.'

Harris peered over the edge of the pit and pulled a face. 'I'll take your word for it.'

Two more people stepped up in the darkness. Lewis and Uncle Tommo were both carrying loaded shotguns.

‘Never would’ve believed it,’ said Lewis shakily, ‘if I ain’t seen it wi’ me own two eyes.’

Uncle Tommo was looking down into the pit as well, his face an expressionless mask. ‘Take my advice,’ he rumbled. ‘Forget all about it.’ He raised his shotgun to his shoulder, took a careful aim at the snarling creature, and pulled the trigger. A large chunk of soil was blasted out of the thing’s back, but it barely seemed to notice. Lewis joined his uncle and, aiming together, they both opened fire once more. The shots echoed and re-echoed through the night, scaring every living thing in the woods into a stunned silence.

Everything except the monster.

It screeched up at its assailants, and as it opened its mouth, two more shots rang out and blasted through its teeth. The creature drew back, spitting out the lead grains with an explosive hiss, and then launched itself up at the edge of the ditch.

But the shotguns had been reloaded, and they discharged again. The creature fell back into the pit, enraged.

‘It doesn’t seem to be harmed at all,’ observed Harris, shining his torch down into the thrashing mass of roots.

‘We’ve only a few shots left,’ said Lewis anxiously.

‘You may as well shoot at the ground,’ said a familiar voice. They all turned to see the Doctor moving towards them through the forest. Trix stared at him; for a moment it had looked as though she could see right through him, as if the dark tangle of vegetation behind him had shown through his chest and head. There was a faint silvery aura around him too, but that could have been the moonlight.

But then she saw Cal and Jade McKeown behind him, and they had the same milky glow about them. The three of them looked like ghosts.

Fitz crashed through the undergrowth, bringing up the rear with Hazel.

‘What’s going on?’ Trix shouted.

‘Same as usual,’ Fitz replied. ‘Terrifying danger, horrifying death, all hell breaking loose.’

The beast bellowed in defiance, as if sensing the people congregating above. Roots and tendrils of mutated matter swelled from its core, burrowing into the wall of the pit, pulling itself upwards. With a surge of power it crested the edge of the ditch, extending its limbs into the overhanging branches of the trees surrounding it.

Hazel and Fitz stepped back instinctively as the creature growled and thrashed, roots groping for them, snaking out of the soil, lashing at the air.

They watched the Doctor glide up to the edge of the pit, followed by Cal and Jade. A soft glow enveloped the three of them as they approached, spreading outwards and into the air to form a mist of grey energy. The mist

coalesced into a shape, a form, not humanoid, trailing ectoplasm, hovering for one long moment before suddenly rushing down towards the soil-beast.

The air hummed as the light increased until the whole forest seemed to have turned a silvery blue and the ground throbbed beneath their feet. Hazel felt herself losing her balance, and she grabbed hold of Fitz for support. They clutched each other as the world vibrated, and she could see him looking around for Trix, but there was no sign of anyone else now. Leaves and twigs whirled around them in a storm of debris, trailing silken threads of ectoplasm, winding an intricate grey web in the air.

Hazel kept her streaming eyes fixed on Cal and Jade. They were barely visible, obscured by the ectoplasmic haze, but also transparent, like faint memories. She tried to call out to them but her voice was lost in the storm.

Beyond their ghostly figures, beyond the grey wisp that was the Doctor, the soil-monster writhed; roots flailing in the darkening air, it seem to be fighting the ectoplasm off, but every movement it made seemed to bind it more tightly in the shimmering cobweb of energy.

Finally a glittering nimbus of light filled the pit. For a moment Hazel felt her heart dare to lift, thinking that this could be *it*, the moment when it ended, when things returned to normal. She forced herself to watch it, to make sure she witnessed every last second, to see her children before they – then her heart gave a massive, fearful lurch in her chest.

Her mouth opened in silent, abject protest.

The soil-beast was fighting free of the ectoplasm. The grey mist around it grew thinner, darker, as curling roots whipped viciously at the air, spraying rainwater around the woods, snatching hold of this tree, and that branch, coiling, gripping, pulling the great beast out of its pit.

Ugly black tendrils oozed from the ground, bursting forth like mad-dened snakes, winding themselves around everything they touched: rock, log, root, tree, everything was suddenly disappearing under a bubbling crust of black matter.

‘It’s not working!’ Fitz yelled, because now it was obvious things were going badly awry. ‘The stupid thing’s still rejecting the ectoplasm!’

Tentacles leapt out of the soil and the trees, grabbing Lewis, pulling him down, shaking him like a rat. Tommo lunged for his nephew but more blackened limbs unfolded from the ground, tearing the old traveller away, hurling him to one side. He began to scream, disappearing in a dark nest of wriggling matter.

Harris and Trix were caught too, their cries for help barely heard beneath the horrid screech of the soil monster.

Fitz let go of Hazel and scrambled forwards, unseen things reaching up from the earth to grab at his ankles. He was calling for the Doctor, but no

one could hear him except Hazel.

Hazel had kept her gaze fixed on Cal and Jade. Behind them, the Doctor had opened his eyes again. They were black, but as she looked she saw them bubbling with blood.

Hazel ran towards her children, heedless now of the snapping seething matter around her. The Doctor, Jade and Cal were fading away, growing more and more transparent as she approached.

The Doctor was trying to say something.

She couldn't hear him, but she could see his lips moving: *'...help us!'*

'How?' she screamed back. *'How?'*

The Doctor's lips moved again. *'...being torn... apart... can't...'*

He began to disappear from view, a faint white smudge against the swirling ectoplasm. All at once Hazel saw the soil-beast rise up behind him, its eyes bulging as it saw her through him.

'Help!' the Doctor's mouth said silently, just before he disappeared completely.

Hazel watched, aghast, as both Jade and Cal faded away with him and they were looking at her as they went, pleading with her, holding out delicate glasslike hands towards her in a final, terrible farewell.

Chapter 39

Gone

The ground heaved, as if turning over in its sleep after a troubled dream.

Earth fell in muddy lumps, splashing into puddles and ditches swimming with brown water. Soon all the commotion had been sucked back down into the soil. The trees shuddered and then stood still as if pretending nothing had happened. They ignored the pouring rain, standing aloof and cold as the night drew in and the moon flickered behind black clouds.

Trix rolled on to her back and let the rain fall on her face, washing away the dirt. *Heaven only knows what state my clothes are in*, she thought, doubting that even the TARDIS laundry could deal with this lot now.

When she opened her eyes she found Fitz kneeling over her, his unkempt hair stuck to his head. His darting eyes were full of concern. 'Where's the Doctor?' he asked.

'I'm fine, thank you very much,' Trix said. She got up, swatting aside his helping hand. Bernard Harris lay nearby, groaning into the damp grass. Beyond him, Uncle Tommo was pulling dead roots off Lewis.

'What happened?' Lewis was asking dimly. 'Is it over?'

'Yes,' Tommo told him.

'I don't understand it,' Lewis insisted. 'One minute it was there – and the next... nothing. Vanished. *Gone...*'

'I didn't even see it go,' grumbled Bernard Harris.

Fitz and Trix were looking all around, checking in the trees and the pit for any sign of the Doctor. But he had disappeared – and so had Hazel, Cal and Jade.

'They've gone,' Fitz said stupidly. 'They've *all* gone.'

Trix stared at him. 'Where?'

Hazel opened her eyes and saw nothing.

She knew she was moving, but there was no wind, nothing to see, just a feeling in her mind that she was flying or falling, or floating.

The world had disappeared.

She could feel Cal and Jade holding her hands, warm and tight. She gripped them both like lifelines. She looked from one to the other because she could see them now that she knew they were there. Cal was bright-eyed, enjoying the ride. Jade was trying not to look bewildered.

Opposite Hazel was the Doctor, also holding hands with Cal and Jade. Together they all formed a circle, whirling and spinning through a void that was neither black nor white nor grey... a strange non-place that blossomed suddenly with bright colours, as soon as Hazel realised that there must be colour here. Vivid rainbow patterns all around them, streaming past, blurring shifting, coalescing into shapes and landscapes that might have defined land or sea or cloud or some other matter she couldn't begin to describe. It was like falling into a kaleidoscope.

The Doctor was laughing like a kid on a roller coaster.

'Look!' he yelled indicating the way ahead Hazel could see something swirling in the colours, distinct and separate but somehow also a part of it... something huge, the size of a whale a town or a country, she couldn't be sure, trailing a mass of tentacles like a jellyfish, splaying out hundreds of slender tendrils in a bright crown. It was like a glass flower opening, and Hazel knew it was the alien, the psychic energy and the ectoplasm as they truly were in their own universe, combined, immense, beautiful, grateful.

The creature spun slowly ahead of them, the rainbows shining through its transparent membranes.

'It's home,' the Doctor said, relieved. 'We did it!'

'Is that what it really looks like?' asked Cal, full of wonder.

'Probably,' said the Doctor. 'Insofar as a psychic-energy-ectoplasm creature looks like anything.'

'It's beautiful,' said Jade.

'I thought I'd lost you!' Hazel called, smiling broadly at her children.

'We couldn't do it without you, Mum,' Cal told her. 'It was too big.'

Jade said, 'I'm glad you're here with us, Mum.'

'So am I.'

'I don't understand it,' Trix said. 'Where are they? Where did the monster go?'

They watched as Bernard Harris limped away. He was freezing cold, and he wanted to go home. They had offered, a little half-heartedly, to go with him to the local A&E, but Harris said he wanted to change into some dry clothes first and then he would drive himself over to the hospital. He

thanked them for their offer and started home, hunched up inside his coat, although it had finally stopped raining.

‘As I understand it,’ Fitz said, ‘the Doctor helped the ectoplasm to re-join the psychic energy. The alien could only go home – back to its own dimension or whatever – when its two halves were combined.’

‘If you say so,’ Trix muttered dubiously...

‘Hey, this is *me*. I know about these kind of things, remember. The Doctor had to link up with the ectoplasm first, though, because it was too weak to do it on its own. In fact he needed Cal and Jade’s help too, and, presumably, Hazel.’

Trix grunted, unconvinced. ‘Still doesn’t explain where they’ve gone.’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Fitz said. ‘The alien went back to its own dimension and they got sucked along with it.’

‘They got sucked along with it?’ Trix echoed disdainfully.

‘You know what I mean.’

Uncle Tommo and Lewis had come over. Lewis was looking pale and shocked, but Tommo stood straight and proud, his eyes holding none of the hostility Trix had seen before. He scraped the old woollen beanie off his head and looked around the woods, taking in the upturned earth and broken branches. After a few moments he gave a nod of satisfaction. ‘It’ll sort itself out,’ he rumbled. He glanced back at Trix and put his hat back on. ‘Be seein’ yer, I suppose.’

‘Yes,’ said Trix, unsure what else to say.

Tommo dug an elbow into Lewis’s ribs and turned to go.

‘Thanks,’ Lewis said, awkwardly. Trix smiled back at him. Together, the two men walked away, not speaking, not even looking back. They wanted to leave this place forever.

Trix turned to Fitz. ‘So how will they get back? The Doctor and Hazel and the kids?’

‘Dunno.’ Fitz sniffed, groping in a pocket for his cigarettes. ‘The Doc’ll find a way – he always does.’

They waited together in the forest for a few more minutes. Trix tried to brush some of the muck off her coat but just made it worse, and Fitz gratefully smoked his cigarette. The tip of it glowed in the dark like a tiny beacon.

They spun on through the kaleidoscope, watching as the alien shrank into the distance. It was leaving them, hurrying home. Perhaps it was going to rejoin its loved ones, Hazel thought. That would be good.

‘How do we get back?’ Cal asked, voicing a concern that was only just starting to niggle at the back of Hazel’s mind. Jade nodded too, also worried.

'I want to go home now.'

The Doctor smiled back at them, but Hazel noticed that the smile didn't touch his eyes. 'I'm not really sure,' he said.

'Well, we can't stay here,' Jade said 'I don't want to stay here.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I understand. I imagine it's just a case of retracing our steps.'

'I don't remember taking any,' Hazel said.

'I didn't say it would be easy.'

'But it is possible, right?' Jade wanted to know. 'We're not stuck here? We can go back.'

The Doctor said, 'Anything's possible.'

'That's not an answer,' Hazel said 'Tell us now: can you get us home?'

'Of course I can! I'm the Doctor!'

'Then do it!'

'You'll need to concentrate,' he told them. 'I can't promise anything, but I think I can find you a way back.'

Was that a tiny uncertainty in his eyes? The Doctor had closed them before Hazel could be sure. Worried, Hazel shut her eyes too and prepared to concentrate.

And then she quickly opened them again as she realised exactly what he had said. 'Wait a minute. What do you mean – find us a way back? What about you?'

'I can't come with you,' he explained. 'Someone has to stay here to hold the way open. It's a psychic energy thing.'

'You can't be serious! You must come back.'

'I'm afraid I can't. For me, this was a one-way trip. For you, just a little glimpse of something else...' He looked into her eyes. 'Something to believe in.'

'I don't want to leave you here!' she cried.

'Don't be a goose, Hazel.'

'Don't stay, Doctor!' Cal pleaded. 'Come back with us! You can, I know you can...!'

The Doctor shook his head. 'It's time for you to go back, Cal. You and Jade have got school on Monday, remember.'

Hazel pulled her children closer to her 'I'm sorry, Doctor. Truly. Thank you for everything. Everything!'

But he was already fading away, growing more and more transparent until the flare of colour behind him was all she could see. She felt herself spinning out of control, faster and faster, the colours turning into a blur of nothing. She could feel Jade and Cal clinging on to her, their fingers digging into her hands. 'What's happening?' yelled Cal.

'We're going home,' she told him.

Then Hazel heard the Doctor's voice, calling to her from a distance. 'Hazel! Don't forget to wave at the stars!'

'I won't!'

'I'll be waving right b—'

'How long will it take him, then?' Trix asked eventually. 'To find a way back?'

'I don't know. He'll be along in a minute.'

'You make it sound like there's a bus service running backwards and forwards between here and the other dimension.'

'If there is then the Doctor will be sure to find it.'

There was a sudden gust of wind, throwing up a couple of wet leaves and playing with Trix's damp hair. She shivered, and then realised that something odd was happening. In the trees, she could see a faint mist appearing out of nowhere. 'Look!' she said, grabbing Fitz's arm.

The mist expanded into glowing shapes, human shapes, which suddenly resolved themselves into the ghosts of Hazel McKeown and her children. The ghosts solidified and the three of them looked at Fitz and Trix.

'Well?' Fitz prompted after a pause. 'Where is he?'

Chapter 40

Still Dreaming

Two days later.

Fitz rolled out of bed, pulled on his jeans and padded out to the bathroom. His watch said it was 8.37 a.m., which was early for him. Very early. He hadn't been sleeping well.

He went straight to the control room next. It was empty, quiet, the console powered down. The machinery ticked faintly in the stillness, and he could feel the TARDIS hum through his socks, but somehow the relative silence still unnerved him.

He went through to the galley and put the kettle on. He was ready for his first cigarette of the day, but he never smoked in the TARDIS. Well, almost never. Doctor's orders, he thought with a sad smile.

The TARDIS seemed more than empty without him: it felt bereft. The lights were dimmed in the main control chamber, and the old place looked deserted. At one point Fitz thought he saw something move in the faint light of the central column, but he couldn't be sure. Squinting from his position at the kitchen table, Fitz thought that he could see someone – Trix, presumably – on the far side of the chamber. He was about to call out to her when the words died in his mouth: a dark shape had moved, just for a second, into the soft glow of one of the monitors by the Doctor's chessboard. A tall, thin man with intense, deep-set eyes and a long, bony nose. Fitz felt his stomach clench in shock, but then the man was gone, nothing more than a shadow of a dream.

'What's up?' he heard Trix ask sleepily. She was in her dressing gown, which surprised him. For Trix, this was late.

'I thought I saw something...'

'Yeah – me. I woke up and smelled the coffee, as they say.' Trix shuffled into the galley and sat down. Her eyes looked tired and full of sleep.

'No...'

story about a ghost in the TARDIS, but what Fitz had seen just now had not been an old man, or a vision of death. It had been something – *someone* – else. Just for a moment...

Fitz supposed that it was more than possible for a time machine to show glimpses of the past: was it too much to accept that it might also show a glimpse of the future? And if so, then what future? Whose? For the first time Fitz actually found himself having to contemplate a future here on Earth. *Stuck* here on Earth. That's what it felt like. The Doctor had been spot on, of course, in his assessment: Fitz was scared of the Earth, scared that one day he might be forced to choose between his home planet and the TARDIS.

Or that the choice would be made for him.

'How long are we going to give it?' Trix asked quietly as she sipped her coffee.

'As long as it takes,' Fitz said.

Trix pursed her lips, and Fitz guessed that she was probably getting itchy feet. Without the prospect of being able to whizz off to another time and place, Trix was already getting bored. She didn't have the same feelings that he did for the TARDIS and the Doctor. To her, travelling the cosmos was just an opportunity. The TARDIS was just her ticket to a great sightseeing tour of the universe. Without it she would simply move on anyway, looking for the next chance of a hustle. Outside the TARDIS door, her world was still waiting for her.

'Fitz,' she said eventually, 'sooner or later you're going to have to face the fact that he's *gone*. For good.'

He shook his head. 'No way.'

'It's no use just denying it.'

'You don't understand,' he said bitterly. 'You don't know him like I do.'

'Nobody lives forever, Fitz.'

'He *isn't* dead,' Fitz said bluntly. He let his gaze settle on the control console, watched its little lights blinking slowly in the darkness. 'I know he isn't.'

He stood up because he could feel his eyes burning and he didn't want her to see. 'You can go if you want to, Trix,' he told her. 'I'm staying.' He picked up his mug and headed for his room.

Cal and Jade had gone back to school. Hazel hadn't wanted them to stay off for any longer than was necessary; she didn't believe in swinging the lead and, besides, she wanted things to get back to normal. The last week already felt like a weird dream best forgotten. Hazel planned to return to

work herself tomorrow. Today she just wanted to sit on her own and think things through. She hadn't allowed herself that luxury for so long now.

Fitz had visited the day before, clearly distraught but trying to hide it. Both Cal and Jade were upset about the Doctor, but their lives, like Hazel's own, continued regardless. The same patterns and routines dominated the day, although they were coloured by a feeling of – well, not grief, but a certain disquiet. The nightmare was over, but they couldn't forget that the Doctor was missing.

The effect on Fitz was profound, she knew. His life had changed drastically, and he looked like a lost soul. He kept up the cool act but Hazel, like any good mother, could see straight through that.

He'd stayed for dinner the night before, but he was distant and unusually reserved. Hazel wondered what had happened to Trix – she hadn't visited, and Fitz had been non-committal in his replies to any questions. When he'd said goodbye – playfully knuckling Cal's jaw and winking at Jade so that she actually *blushed* – it had sounded very final. Hazel knew she wouldn't see him again.

The Doctor haunted Hazel's memory like a guilty conscience. He had given his life for her and her children, and she felt humbled by that sacrifice. It was no less, of course, than what she herself would have done for Cal and Jade in the same circumstances.

She dreamed about him that night, although she didn't realise that until she woke up. It was 3.00 a.m. The house was quiet; even Cal was enjoying a good night's sleep. He had a lot of catching up to do.

Hazel stared into the darkness and thought about the Doctor. In her dream, he had always been there for her: when she'd found out about Santa Claus, he had dried her tears and held her hand and walked her to school. He'd been there during all her exams, and waiting for her after every job interview. When she had got married, he had been sitting at the back of the church on a pew by himself. So he'd been there, of course, when her husband had left her. He was always there, always waiting, ready to tell her about some outrageous alien world he'd visited, or whisk her away on an amazing journey through time and space.

It was all a dream of course, but how marvellous it must have been, she thought, to join him on his travels like Fitz or Trix. But now Hazel had her own adventure to live – her own future to explore with Cal and Jade, and for that she had the Doctor to thank.

For a moment she thought he was actually there, in the shadows of her room. She could detect the electric thrill of his presence, and just the faintest scent of him – a curious mixture of coziness and adventure.

He was there.

After a few minutes she forced herself to wake up properly, and found the room empty. She got out of bed and went to the window.

The street was silent, and dark. A few nights ago, Hazel had looked out on this same scene with a terrible sense of fear and dread in her heart, and she had seen a shadowy figure lurking at the bus stop further up the road.

There was no one there now.

But something caught her eye in the darkness again, someone moving through the orange glow of a streetlamp. She peered into the night, the glass misting over as she breathed on it. Impatiently, she wiped it clear, but now she couldn't see anything at all. The pavement was empty. All she was left with was the fleeting impression of a man with long hair, walking quickly away heading for the woods.

On the third morning, Fitz left the TARDIS and went for a walk. Trix had stayed in her room, and Fitz suspected that she was packing. He guessed that by the time he returned, she would be gone. Strangely, he felt an acute sense of panic at the thought. He didn't want to be alone.

Fitz had seldom felt as despondent as he did now.

He wandered down to look at Old Man Crawley's place. It was deserted. In fact, it now looked positively derelict. He guessed it wouldn't be long before the council or someone came along and emptied it or demolished it.

He headed for the woods, trying, and failing, to enjoy the brisk November morning. There were no clouds, but it was cold and he kept his hands deep in the pockets of the old reefer jacket he'd found in the TARDIS. He trudged up the grassy slope towards the trees, and when he reached the edge he stopped to light a cigarette. He stood for a few minutes, smoking and thinking. Eventually he flicked the stub away...

'I thought I told you not to do that,' said a voice behind him.

Fitz turned to find Bernard Harris leaning on a pair of crutches. 'Well, if it isn't Long John Silver himself.'

Harris smiled. 'Ho ho ho.'

'How's it going?' Fitz asked.

'I had to have a few stitches and a number of extremely painful injections. And I'm on antibiotics. And crutches, although I only use them if I want some sympathy.'

'Right,' Fitz said, offering none. A familiar pit bull terrier wandered into view from behind Harris's legs, its pink tongue hanging out.

'Milton,' said Fitz, surprised. The dog glanced up at him, swivelling its little ears. 'I wondered where you'd got to.'

Harris said, 'Damned brute's sort of latched on to me – although not, thankfully, with his teeth any more. I can't seem to get rid of him.'

Milton looked up at Harris with questioning eyes and a whimper.

'He seems to have calmed down a bit,' Fitz observed.

'I think we've all changed,' Harris replied. 'Any sign of the Doctor yet?'

Fitz shook his head.

'He was an extraordinary guy,' Harris said. 'You must miss him.'

Fitz nodded.

'Well,' Harris straightened up on his crutches. 'I'd best be off. Back to work next week, so I'll have to make the most of this. Be seeing you.'

'Yeah,' said Fitz.

'Come on, boy,' said Harris, limping away. Milton trotted behind him, and Fitz had to smile.

Lewis and Uncle Tommo were packing up. Their few belongings had been stowed away, and now Lewis was reversing the old Land Rover up to the caravan, ready to hitch up. Uncle Tommo stood with his hands in his pockets, watching, grunting occasionally so that Lewis would know how far he had to go.

'Where will you go?' Trix enquired as she walked down the scrubby slope. It was a clear, sunny morning, and although it was very cold, she was feeling warm and refreshed after the long walk.

Uncle Tommo turned and regarded her silently for a moment from under his bushy eyebrows. 'North,' he said, simply.

'Have you been here a long time?' Trix asked.

'Long enough.' Tommo raised a big, grubby hand for Lewis to stop. The Land Rover jerked to a halt 'That'll do,' he rumbled.

Lewis jumped out of the 4×4 and chanced a shy smile at Trix. 'Come to see us off?'

Trix smiled back. 'Thought I'd better say cheerio, yes. And thanks, for all your help.'

'Hm,' grunted Uncle Tommo.

'It's going to feel funny, leaving this place,' Lewis said, as he wound the hitch down on to the Land Rover's tow bar. 'We've been here a long time. As long as I can remember, anyway...'

'Yer can stay still fer too long,' Tommo said. 'It's time to move on, lad.'

'Aye,' Lewis agreed. 'Happen you're right.'

'I'm always right, yer fool,' Tommo muttered.

'What'll you be doin, Miss?' Lewis asked, pulling the van's jockey wheel up and tightening it off. 'Will you be movin' on?'

'I don't know,' she answered truthfully.

'There,' Lewis announced, straightening up and wiping his hands down his jeans. 'We're all set, Uncle Tommo.'

'Right' Uncle Tommo sniffed and spat out on the ground. When he turned to face Trix, he surprised her with a brief, embarrassed smile. 'If yer see that Doctor friend of yours,' he said, 'give him a message from me: tell him I'm right sorry fer the way I behaved. I weren't in my right mind, see.' Tommo's little eyes glistened and then he just shrugged, unsure what else to say. 'I dunno know what happened up in them woods the other night, but thanks to him, I *can* move on now.'

'Good,' Trix said, feeling her throat tighten. 'I'd like to tell him that.'

Fitz walked up to where the Deadstone memorial had stood. The clearing was little more than a shallow crater now, with a pile of crumbling bricks and sandstone in the middle. He picked his way through the mud and poked the odd brick with his toe.

He looked up as he heard someone stepping through the trees towards him. He was surprised to find it was Trix.

'Thought I might find you here,' she said.

'Didn't know where else to go,' Fitz said. 'I was getting fed up in the TARDIS. I needed some air.'

'Me too. I went to see Lewis and Tommo. They're moving on.'

'That's good.' Fitz told her about Bernard Harris and Milton, and she laughed softly.

'That's the Doctor for you,' she remarked. 'Always making things better.'

'Yeah.' Fitz sniffed. 'So, how about you, Trix? Will you be "moving on"?''

She didn't reply straight away, and when she did, it was with a question: 'Will you?'

'I've got nowhere to move on to,' he said bleakly.

Trix cleared her throat and said, 'Well, if all else fails, you can come with me, if you want. I mean, stay at my place. For a bit. So long as you don't smoke indoors or anything...'

Fitz stared at her. He didn't know what to say, and anyway his mouth had gone completely dry. They stood and stared at each other for a long, silent second.

'Well, you two look like a right miserable pair this morning,' announced a voice from the far side of the clearing.

They both looked up, stunned.

'Morning!' said the Doctor cheerily. He walked out through the trees, fresh as a spring daisy. His shirt and collar were white, his cravat perfect, his dark velvet frock coat brushed and trim. His hair was in its usual mess.

Fitz stared at him, open-mouthed, while Trix simply swore.

'I thought you were...' Fitz began. 'I mean, we both thought...'

‘Never mind all that.’ The Doctor waved the protestations aside. ‘What are you doing moping around this old place?’

‘Returning to the scene of the crime?’ suggested Trix.

The Doctor pulled a face, picking up a large chunk of sandstone. It was badly cracked but the word DEAD was still visible on it.

‘All that remains of Deadstone’s headstone,’ Fitz said.

‘He was just a weak man caught up with powerful forces he didn’t understand,’ the Doctor said. ‘It’s not uncommon, just tragic.’ He threw the stone back down into the mud, where it landed with a dull smack.

He dusted his hands and looked at his companions. ‘Well, who fancies a quick trip to the Horsehead Nebula?’

‘You make it sound like a local pub,’ laughed Trix.

‘Best ginger ale this side of Andromeda.’

‘I think I’ve time for a quick one,’ Fitz smiled.

‘Right,’ the Doctor said. ‘Race you back to the TARDIS.’

‘Wait just a moment,’ Fitz said. The Doctor stopped in his tracks and looked back expectantly. ‘How did you get back? Hazel said... Well, she thinks you gave your life for her and her kids. She ought to know that you’re back.’

‘Hazel already knows I’m back,’ the Doctor replied.

‘How?’

‘She brought me back.’ The Doctor tapped the side of his head meaningfully, but he wouldn’t be drawn any further. Raising his voice above their protests, he set off at a run, shouting, ‘Come on!’

They had no choice but to run after him, laughing and joking and full of new dreams.

Hazel got up early and told Cal and Jade the good news.

‘The Doctor’s back?’ Jade couldn’t believe it. ‘How? Where is he?’

‘I don’t know,’ Hazel laughed. ‘But I saw him in a dream last night, if you must know.’

‘Oh, right,’ Jade drawled pityingly.

‘Oh, Mum,’ Cal complained, ‘I thought you meant it. I thought he really *was* back.’

‘I do mean it! And he *is* back!’ Hazel kissed them both and added, seriously, ‘Have I ever lied to you?’ They shook their heads. ‘Exactly. So believe what I tell you now. Whatever happens, wherever you are, he’ll *always* be out there. Trust me, I’m your mother. Now go to school and be happy.’

Later.

Hazel had to go back to work, but on the way she took a detour to the High Street. Hurrying along, dodging all the people, she knew she had to check. She had to be sure.

She did feel a tiny jolt of disappointment when she found the empty square on the pavement. There was no sign of the old blue police box. It was as if it had never been there at all.

But gradually the disappointment gave way to a tingle of excitement, and satisfaction, and hope.

That night she took Cal and Jade outside into the back garden to look up at the sky. It was a clear night, sparkling with a thousand stars. They waved up at them, and Hazel knew he was out there, somewhere, waving right back.

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About the Author

TREVOR BAXENDALE was born in Liverpool in 1966.

This is his fifth *Doctor Who* novel for BBC Books. He has contributed short stories to various anthologies published by BBC Books and Big Finish Productions. He has also written the scripts for two audio plays produced by Big Finish.

He is married with two children. His wife already knows more about *Doctor Who* than she wants to, and his children may be the only 8- and 5-year-olds in their school who can identify a Dalek, let alone a Cyberman or a Zygon or even the various Doctors.

Hopefully, that will soon change... 2005 is nearly here.

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