



ELLWOOD

*Michael Snell*

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

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## Chapter 1

Jason Trent knew he was different from a very early age, though not the true extent of that difference. He was four when he first asked his mother where he had come from. She telling him he was a gift from the angels puzzled him. Though coming from an assortment of places, some of them quite unbelievable, none of the other children at the nursery school he attended had come from the angels. There was something else strange too: he was the only child there who had a much older boy as a friend, one that nobody else could see.

Toby was always there, and he always had been, smiling, watching, talking, and playing games with him. The first intelligent word Jason ever spoke was: 'Toby'. However thinking it was a poor attempt at: 'Daddy', his father almost performed somersaults across the living room floor that initial time, much to the annoyance of his mother. A clear 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' both came sometime later, but strangely 'Toby' remained in the toddler's vocabulary, and when saying the name he often looked up at someone who wasn't there, chuckling away happily.

The doctor's laughing explanation that such peculiarities weren't uncommon in children, and Jason might simply have invented a giant rabbit as an invisible friend, convinced no one, least of all his mother. She couldn't understand how a rabbit, invisible or not, had many times now put toys in the child's playpen when she wasn't looking. Sometimes these toys were not even in the same room, like his teddy bear regularly forgotten about and left upstairs in the cot. However this addition to the oddity was not something she dared mention to the doctor, or anyone come to that, for fear of the consequences. She might be seen as unstable, and an unfit parent.

By the time Jason was five, and started going to the local infants' school, he had learned not to talk to Toby when anyone else was around. He also tried not to look at him at those times. His parents, Jenny and Peter, were overjoyed, believing his imagination had finally settled down and he was a normal kid after all. Of course, in the matter of the relocated toys, such an explanation

immediately put Jenny's sanity into question, but she was happy to live with that for the prize of having a perfectly normal child. Anyway, nobody else knew of such things, and they were now not only unbelievable by their sheer impossibility, but also by their number. She had to accept some kind of insanity undoubtedly did account for them.

There was the time of Jason's fifth birthday when he fell off the swing in the park. He had been going higher and higher, past horizontal, frightening her, and she'd pleaded with him not to be so silly. When he'd slid off, and she'd screamed, running forward knowing she could never make it in time to save him as he stood up in the path of the returning heavy wooden seat, the swing had simply stopped dead, coming to rest in the perpendicular position only inches from his face. Who would believe that? Not even she could believe that, so it had to be her mind playing tricks.

Equally as incredible was the afternoon of fishing. He was six then, running ahead of her along the river bank, laughing and running back. Holding the fishing net and jam jar, she was a long way behind him when he tripped and fell in. Screaming again, throwing the net and jar to the wind in her panic, and racing up to the spot to look down into the deep murky water several feet below, she had been so sure he could never survive. There was no sign of him. Diving into the water, thrashing around frantically searching, she'd been in there for several minutes when he called down to her from the bank. Unable to get out there herself, with the steep bank far too high, she swam for quite a distance before finding a place where she could escape the water. So how and where had he climbed out, and unnoticed too? Explaining away both their wet clothes was difficult, and all but impossible, if she put the escapade down to insanity or her imagination, but what else was there?

Jason accepted without question Toby being around until he was past ten years old. To him it was a normal state of affairs, day or night the boy would always be there, until one night, on getting into bed, doubts to the normality of it came into play. "Are you real?" he asked Toby, in a whisper so his parents downstairs wouldn't hear.

"Of course I'm real," Toby said, cuddling the boy and stroking his hair, as he would every night, ready for him to fall asleep.

"Then why don't you get any older like me and all my friends? How old are you really?"

“Oh, I can be any age I want, but right now I’m sixteen. When you catch up with me, when you become sixteen, I’ll start to grow older again, along with you,” Toby told him.

“Eh? How do you work that out?” Jason asked.

“I’ll tell you all about it one day, after we’ve moved, now go to sleep,” Toby said, kissing Jason on his forehead. The drowsiness was immediate, and the boy soon asleep.

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Toby was there as usual, lying beside him, when Jason woke the next morning. It was a Saturday, so no getting ready for school to bother about. Nevertheless Toby still gave the boy his instructions to shower well, wash behind his ears, tend to all those other important little places, and make sure he cleaned his teeth thoroughly.

Jason smiled at his friend, giving him a quick hug before he left the bedroom. The bathroom was the one place where he never saw Toby, but he knew he was in there somewhere, watching him. He’d tested it. If he should ever miss doing his teeth, or forget to wriggle out his ears, Toby would always know about it and send him back.

It was while Jason was sitting on the loo that morning, deep in thought, that Toby’s words of last night, just before he fell asleep, crept back into his mind. Move? Move where? He knew nothing about them moving. Looking all about the bathroom, he couldn’t see his friend anywhere, not even as a shadow or a twinkle of light, but still he whisperingly asked, “Where are we moving to, Toby? When are we moving?”

Toby didn’t answer, or rather he didn’t speak anything, but a thought wandered into the boy’s head, a strange kind of thought that came with the suggestion of a tingle to it, and it said as if in answer to his question: ‘Ellwood Common. We shall move there one day.’ Jason had never heard of the place. A common? Did that mean they were moving to a field? Surely not? Where was this place? Within seconds another tingling thought appeared, this time to tell him Ellwood Common was the name of a village, one hidden away deep within the New Forest.

As he stepped under the shower, the noise of the water hiding his voice, Jason said, “I really don’t mind seeing you in here, Toby.

I know it's the bathroom, but honestly I don't. You're always with me anyway, so what's the difference?"

"I have to be with you. I can never leave you, not for a moment, but there will be many times and places in your life you won't want to be seeing me. I thought this might easily be one of them," Toby said, wetting the sponge, applying some shower gel, and starting to wash the youngster's back.

Jason turned his head to look at his friend, surprised to find him wet and naked too. "No, there's nowhere I don't want to see you," he said. "But I reckon you know that anyway, don't you? You seem to know everything. I shall be eleven in a few months time; can't you tell me why you're here? Nobody else seems to have anyone like you, none of my friends do. Please tell me why I have you."

"Would you rather not have me around?"

"Oh, no! I want you around forever, honestly I do. Don't you ever go leaving me," Jason said, frightened in case his friend should be thinking of it. "It's just that I want to know why I have you."

Toby spun him round, and with a seriousness Jason had never seen in that face before, he looked directly into his eyes. "I can't tell you everything yet, not for a long while, but you are a very sensible boy and your mind has advanced much faster than your years. So I will reveal that one day we shall really need each other. You, like me, are different from all the others. We are special. You in this world, and me in another, but we are linked for a purpose. One day I will have to tell you that purpose, but not now."

"Thank you," Jason said, grinning at his friend as he got out of the shower. "I always knew I was special, I just needed to hear you say it." He laughed as he began to dry himself, winking at Toby. "Don't forget to do all your important little places while you're in there, will you?" he said. Ducking to one side, he caught the wet sponge thrown at him, and threw it back.

## Chapter 2

More than five years passed before the predicted move to Ellwood Common, and Jason had almost forgotten all about it, but then one day the time arrived. Saying goodbye to his school and all his friends had been a tough call for Jason, but not a patch on learning to exactly where they were moving. Nobody ever spoke about Nanny Wilson at home, so he'd been oblivious to the woman dying and leaving her house to his mother. She'd attended the funeral, of course, while Jason was at school, but along with the deceased wishes no one else from that side of the family. It turned out his father never hit it off with Nanny Wilson. She feeling her daughter married way beneath her status, explaining the lack of visits to his home.

Jason had only met that grandmother once, a very long time ago when he was still a toddler accompanying his mother on a rare visit, but even then that had been once too many. Like the dark old house she lived in, the cackling woman had terrified him. Being so young and unaware of his surroundings at the time, he'd never associated that frightening visit to Nanny Wilson with the Ellwood Common to which they were moving, and he was very unhappy on discovering the truth of the matter.

In the back seat of the car, following the removal lorry fighting its way along the overgrown stony drive, with dead branches on either side bending and snapping off, Toby squeezed Jason's hand and grinned across at him reassuringly. Devoid of all colour, Jason looked back at him and forced a smile, though he couldn't hide his nervousness. As the drive turned slightly before opening up into a large square car parking area, like some decrepit long since stately home, the huge grey rambling building came into sight for the first time, immediately dwarfing the pantehnicon. It was mid-July, early on a warm Tuesday afternoon, and Jason shivered.

While his parents flustered around the removal men, telling them where everything needed to go as they struggled the furniture inside, Jason took a slow walk, surveying the outside of the building. Half of the house looked to him as if it was ready to collapse. Behind all the twisted and dusty ivy, and in places that

hung down off the walls in drapes, he could see many rotten window frames, some with broken windows, whole sections of stonework missing on a few of the corners, a bit of a tower at one end which precariously leaned into the wind, several paint-peeled and mould-covered blocked off doorways where nailed planks prevented access, and higher up countless threatening gargoyles seemingly defying gravity to remain staring down from long lost guttering. Jason just knew the inside would be no better.

“It could have been worse,” Toby said.

“Are you sure of that?” Jason asked, sighing.

“No, not really, but it’s a good way of thinking about it.”

“I can’t believe anyone has actually lived here for years. I mean: just how?”

Toby laughed, putting a comforting arm around the young lad’s shoulders. “Only a part of the building is used. You’ll find the large flat in the west wing, where you’ll be living, really isn’t too bad — that’s if you can put up with your grandma’s taste of decor. Come on, let’s go and have a look.”

The flat turned out to be huge, room after room, but Jason wasn’t impressed. Dingy throughout, most of the walls were panelled in dark wood, and those that weren’t sported ages-old faded floral wallpaper, clashing violently with the elaborately patterned carpets and rugs scattered around everywhere, and all of them worn threadbare. One room, with not a window to it, was a library, still filled on every wall, floor to ceiling, with old books, many of them leather bound. Checking the naked single lamp in the centre of the room, Jason could see it claimed to be a 100 watt bulb, and he wondered how the room could still remain so dark.

Inspecting the kitchen, it was a step back into the sixties, he guessed, complete with an old-fashioned unit with two glass panelled doors at the top and a pull down horizontal cupboard door that doubled as a work surface. He’d seen things like that on ‘All Our Yesterdays’. Walking out of the museum piece, and deciding he needed a pee, Jason went in search of the bathroom. Uninvitingly, he found that came with worn through green linoleum flooring. The rust stained chipped enamel bath standing behind the door on claw-like legs under two rows of tiles, some of them cracked and one missing, totally horrified him. To the side of it, the rickety old handbasin, loose on a pedestal, was equally as stained, and the choked with limescale lavatory was nothing short of

frightening. He kept a watchful eye on the hanging loose overhead cistern as he relieved himself, and quickly stepped back a couple of paces when he pulled on the rusty chain to flush, in case the whole lot should come crashing down on him.

“Don’t worry. I’ll catch it if it tries to fall on your head one morning,” Toby promised him.

There were tears in Jason’s eyes, as he said, “I can’t live here. Honestly, I can’t.”

“Of course you can. Though it may not all have been worn out like this is here at the time, people survived okay in places like this for years. It is possible to live without an electric power shower, a fully-fitted modern kitchen, or central heating. You’ll get through it, I know you will. After all, you are special, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but it won’t be you freezing your nuts off in here tomorrow morning, will it? I bet you can’t even feel the cold.”

“I can if I want to. From now on I’ll feel it every day that you do. I’ll even share your bath with you; it’s big enough for two. Happy now?”

“How do I know you’ll really be feeling it like me? You might be cheating.”

Toby looked seriously at him. “You’ve known me nearly sixteen years now. Tell me of even once when I’ve lied to you. I can’t lie to you, it’s not allowed.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. He looked away, feeling guilty for suggesting it.

“Don’t worry, it won’t be for long. I know these things. You’ll have your modern conveniences back within a few days. Your father has already arranged for the updating work. Now, when you see your bedroom, please remember it does have a few redeeming features,” Toby said, as he led the way.

Jason felt a little better, chuckling, “What like all the glass is still in the window?”

Toby laughed. “It is, and it’s at least twice the size of your old room. The view from the window isn’t bad, and you now have a double bed. It’s not the one that Nanny Wilson died in, either. It might be quite old now, but it’s a good strong bed that no one has ever slept in before,” he said, opening the door. “See?”

“A double bed!” Jason said, running in, bouncing on it, and then lying there looking up at Toby. “A double bed is really good, though it’s never felt cramped in a single one, has it? I always know

you're there of a night, I can feel you and you keep me warm when it's cold, but you take up absolutely no space at all. I've never worked out how you do that."

"Shh, don't tell anybody, I sleep in the wall," Toby joked, winking.

"Hey! Tell me something: I know you can read my mind, you're right inside my head sometimes, and I know when you are there, but can I read your mind? Is that possible?" Jason asked.

"Why, what made you think you might be able to?" Toby asked, with an inquisitive look on his face.

"When you told me about the bed a few moments ago, did you think of more than it just being a good strong one, but pulled back from saying it at the last minute?"

"Like what?" Toby asked.

"Like the bed doesn't squeak when I you know what? Were you thinking that?"

"You really are special. I didn't expect you to attain the ability to enter my mind yet. I guess I'll have to be more careful with what I think about in future. It's not really a good idea for you to go wandering through my mind. There are some dangerous places in there."

"Is one of them that bright light?" Jason asked.

"Yes, and you must never go there. That's *my* connection. You have your own, and you will find it one day, but to use mine would set us back nearly sixteen years," Toby told him.

"You mean I'd die?"

"It's the way of things. We would have to start all over again, and then we might easily be too late."

"For what?" Jason asked.

"You know I can't tell you that yet," Toby said.

"I love you, brother. So when were you going to tell me all about that then?"

"You really did have a good old rummage around in there, didn't you? I was going to tell you when you were sixteen, so very soon."

"Why wait until I'm sixteen?" Jason asked.

"Because that's when your parents plan to tell you something else rather important," Toby said.

"*My* parents? Not *our* parents?"

Toby sighed; he'd fallen into a trap of his own making. "No, not our parents," he said.

Jason thought about it for a moment. "So which one of us was adopted?" he asked.

"You love your parents, don't you? They really love you, because you are something truly special to them. You didn't just pop up one day, like most kids do, they actually went out and chose you. You are the child they desperately wanted, but could never have produced themselves. From out of all those they could have chosen, they picked you."

"Don't worry, I'd had my suspicions anyway. I don't look anything like either of them, do I? Every day I look more and more like you. Knowing for sure now hasn't changed how I feel about them, though. They're the best parents in the world, and I love them to bits, but who are my real parents? Why was I adopted and you weren't?"

Toby sat on the side of the bed and put his arm around Jason, pulling him closer. "In the way things were arranged, we are from an unknown father, and our mother died while giving birth." He took a deep breath, swallowing heavily. "That was when it was written I should die too. You see, it was a twin birth."

"We're twins? Oh, wow! I said we looked alike!"

"Yes, we're twins, so I'm glad you like the look of me," Toby said.

"Like the look of you? I love you, brother. I've already told you that!"

"I love you too, brother. And to answer your next question, time only exists for mortals. Beyond here there are few constraints, and anything that's thinkable, is usually possible. That's how I could be ahead of you, appearing as a sixteen year old lad right from when you first became aware of me by the side of your cot. After all, I couldn't have looked after you very well if I'd been a toddler too, could I?"

Giggling, Jason said, "I shall never have any secrets from you, will I? Or risk having any serious girlfriends, I reckon. I mean, you'd know everything, wouldn't you? Even if you were hidden from me, you'd still be there."

"Don't worry, there's nothing at all you do now in front of me that embarrasses you, is there? And think of everything you do. When you find yourself a girlfriend or a boyfriend, whichever way

it turns out, it'll be just the same. You won't feel any different, I promise."

"A boyfriend? Why did you mention a boyfriend? I know some boys have same-sex infatuations, I have them at times, and I get awfully confused, but am I really going to be . . . You know, one of them? I do like girls." Jason's face had taken on a shocked appearance.

"I don't know what you'll finally be, your body is still working that out, but that's never been important to me. Would it bother you if you were? There's nothing wrong with being one of them, as you call it. And I know that officially."

"I suppose it wouldn't really bother me. Having to finally accept the possibility of it just came as a bit of a shock, that's all. No, thinking about it, I suppose it doesn't really matter too much what I am."

"That's my bro! Sensible!"

"You've already thought it through, though, haven't you? You reckon the chances are I will be gay. It's something to do with I'm not really meant to be here, isn't it? Because I'm like something extra, I must have no input to the gene pool. It looks to me as if I'm either going to be gay, or firing blanks as a straight, but it doesn't matter. I don't mind so long as I'm happy about it, and with you there looking after me, I know I will be."

"You are extremely intelligent, and correct in your assumption. You must not add to the gene pool, so that will be prevented, somehow."

Jason laughed. "There are kids out there becoming fathers and screwing up their lives much younger than me," he said. "At least I have no worries on that score to contend with, and whichever way it goes in the future that can work to my favour. Quite a few of the boys in my class back at school have serious relationships, bonking all the time if they're to be believed, so when will it happen for me? When will I be putting it around?"

"Very soon, I guess. But if you do play the field, you might need to remember: there's not a lot of difference between breaking a heart and breaking an egg. Neither can ever again be what they once were."

"I was only joking. I won't really go playing the field and breaking hearts, I know I won't. I don't do bad thing things, do I? It's like inbuilt with me. I would only do it with someone if I really

cared about them, and knowing who and what I am, if I really did care about someone then I probably wouldn't do it at all, would I?"

"Everybody is born pure, but few people die that way."

"I hope I do. It doesn't feel right looking in your mind, and I don't like doing it. So I don't have to, will you always tell me anything I ask you?"

"Apart from the things I'm not allowed to tell you yet, of course I will. I don't like searching your mind either, especially as you're my brother, but I have to do it sometimes, it's one of my purposes here."

"I know, and I don't mind, honestly. It has its good points anyway: it makes me double-check I'm never doing anything I'd be ashamed of you knowing about. First question then: will we always be together, forever and ever no matter what?"

"It's what you want, isn't it? Yes we will. It's guaranteed." Toby winked at him.

"But supposing I did something really wrong one day. Really, really wrong. It couldn't be, could it?" Jason asked. "And that frightens me."

"You will only ever do what you *have* to do. As you said: doing the right thing is inbuilt with you. So stop worrying about it, I've already told you it is guaranteed, and when you are a little bit older, I'll explain the reason for that."

### Chapter 3

The next morning, Wednesday, after suffering all the joys offered by the bathroom and a breakfast minus any eggs as the move had broken them all, Jason set off to explore his new surroundings. Looking both ways at the end of the drive, he could see to the right disappeared into a heavily wooded area where half the trees appeared to be dying, their leaves matching the sun-toasted ferns beneath them. To his left a little way stood the road junction with a peculiar wooden post, a part of the crossroads sign. He headed towards it.

'ELLWOOD' the sign told him, pointing for the way from which he had come, and in chalk someone had cleverly added a bold 'H' before the name to turn it into: 'HELLWOOD'. Examining the post holding it more closely, Jason realised the directional signs were all attached to the upright of an old gallows, probably where once they hung highwaymen, he guessed, shuddering and looking around him. It was sure a lonely place to die, he thought. With Lyndhurst to the right and Brockenhurst straight on, both of them miles away, he decided to wander left down the tree-arched narrow lane to where the sign claimed the village of Ellwood Common was a quarter of a mile away.

Hearing his every footstep crunching on the tarmac road littered with dead twigs, old leaves, and some of last year's acorns, Jason said, "Creepy isn't it? So many trees and not a single sound apart from me, not even some birdsong." He waited, but Toby didn't answer him, yet he knew he would be close by. "Tell me, I want to know," he said.

"It's always quiet in this part of the forest," Toby answered, finally, but remaining unseen.

Jason knew him well enough to realise there was something he wasn't telling him. "Why?" he asked. "Why is it quiet in this part of the forest?"

"Because the other parts are noisier," Toby told him jokingly, in an attempt to avoid giving a straight answer.

Jason was becoming annoyed, and he wanted to push Toby for a proper answer, but an acorn hit him on the head and a voice shouted: "Oy! Who are you?" He stopped dead in his tracks as a lad

of about his own age emerged from behind a bush, and then from behind other foliage three more youngsters appeared, give or take a year all about the same age.

“Well, who are you?” the first boy demanded again, walking up to him threateningly followed by his friends.

“I’m Jason Trent. I’m your best friend or your worst nightmare,” he replied, standing his ground and grinning. “The choice is yours.”

“Ooh, a tough guy, eh? Think you’re some kind of a big shot, do you?” His eyes were probing Jason’s eyes, deeply, as if wanting to exchange recognition, and then something interrupted the communication.

“Leave him alone, Paul. He ain’t hurting anyone, is he?” a girl’s voice shouted from the group.

Jason broke away from the stare and glanced in her direction. Until then he hadn’t realised one of them was a girl. He smiled at her, and winked. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?” he cheekily asked the one who was obviously Paul.

“That’s Debbie, my sister. You keep your eyes off her,” Paul threatened.

“Or what?” Jason asked, grinning at him, and realising their eyes were locked together again.

“Or this,” Paul brought his hands up and half-heartedly shoved him. Jason staggered back a couple of steps.

Still grinning, Jason retraced the couple of steps. “That was a bit weak, wasn’t it?” he said. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the girl, and she was signalling for him not to provoke her brother. “I can shove a lot harder than that!” he said, pushing the young lad.

Paul flew backwards, his feet not touching the ground, until several yards away the bushes stopped his travel. His three companions were spinning their necks, doing double takes, unable to believe how far Jason had shoved him, and so easily.

Jason walked over to Paul, smiling and pulling him up from the ground to dust the leaves off him. “Well,” he said, “are we going to be friends or enemies?”

“I guess we’d better be friends,” Paul said, trying not to look nervous in front of his mates. “Do you want to join our little gang?”

“Gang? What do you do, rob banks or something?”

“Don’t be silly, we just hang out together. There’s only me, Josh, and Tabs, and my sister I suppose. My mum always lumbers us with her. There’s an initiation you have to do to join us, though.”

“What?”

“There’s a big old haunted house just off the crossroads. You have to go in there after dark and stay put for half an hour.”

Laughing, Jason said, “Oh, that’s easy then. I live there.”

Paul looked at him in horror for a second, the others too. Then with not a word said between them, as if one, they raced off up the road. Jason stared after them in disbelief.

“Was it something I said?” Jason called out.

Toby chuckled, appearing beside him. “That was fun, wasn’t it?” he said, as they continued walking slowly towards the village.

“Thanks for pushing that Paul for me. He was quite strong; I’d have lost the argument without you. Wish they’d have stayed around though. I’m going to need some mates, aren’t I? Why do you think they were so frightened of our house? It’s creepy, yes. But they seemed absolutely terrified when I said I lived there,” Jason said.

“You are going to find out within a few days anyway, so I might as well tell you now. There are some very strong beliefs around here about our house. It’s the reason the modernisation has had to wait until after we moved in. No local firms would touch it, and the one coming from Southampton would only work on it while the family were actually living there, on site.”

“Eh? What do they believe then? It’s haunted?”

“It has a reputation, and the name given to the house years ago doesn’t help. People for miles around know it because their grandparents named it, but your parents haven’t discovered the name yet. It’s hidden in the bushes, on the right at the entrance to the drive.”

“What is it?”

“Cerberus Manor,”

“What’s wrong with that? It sounds quite classy.”

“According to mythology, Cerberus is a fierce, three-headed watchdog. He forever stands guard, with a separate head for the past, the present, and the future. His main task is to prevent demons escaping from Hell. The locals believe Ellwood, the woods beyond the brook past our house, is one of the gateways to Hell. Nobody will cross that brook. It’s not on any map, and because it often dries

up in the summer months it doesn't even have an official name, but around here they know it as the River Styx. Few people will even come up that road as far as our house. You see: another task for Cerberus is to deter anyone from approaching Hell, and that he achieves by eating them."

"Crikey!"

"Don't worry, it's not all true. There is no three headed doglike creature."

"That's a relief! What about the rest of it though?"

"It's not the River Styx. That doesn't exist in this world."

"And?"

"And the rest of it we'll worry about another time. There are no threats to worry about at the moment."

"So the woods really are the way in to Hell?"

"No, not at all. There are literally thousands of such places around the world. Souls can only enter Hell by crossing the Styx, and that, as I said, is not of this world. The woods are just one of those places where there is a weak spot, and from time to time demons try to escape."

"Do they ever get out?"

"Oh, yes. Quite often."

"Can't these weak spots be fixed then?"

"Weak spots can only appear where a great evil has taken place. Some of them *have* been fixed, like Hitler's death camps, but many still remain, their evil untold."

"So what evil happened here?"

"Built in nineteen-twenty, there are the ruins of a government radio station in those woods, only it wasn't really a radio station. Secretly they experimented with chemicals and nerve gasses. Before abandoning the place in nineteen-thirty, several mistakes resulted in the deaths of local people. Seven children, some playing in the woods, others picking bluebells, and a family out walking, all died during those ten years of experiments. Most of them made it to our house to seek help before dying there — hence its haunted reputation."

"The government covered up the disasters, arranging for reports each time to say the deaths had nothing at all to do with the installation. But no local has dared enter those woods since, and the fact that nothing ever grows well there now, it's totally devoid of wildlife and the greenery always looks half-dead, has only bolstered

the people's fears. Told the government installation hadn't killed those people, the locals began to believe something evil had — and that produced the weak spot. It's the way of things. It's the power of faith working. Believe in something strongly enough and it will happen."

"But why didn't the people see it was a cover up? Nobody ever believes anything the government says, do they?" Jason asked.

"They lived in entirely different times. Folk weren't so cynical in those days, and mostly they respected their politicians. The elected parliamentarians weren't anything like the money-grabbing, caught out, persistent liars that make up such a great part of the riff-raff you have today."

"Oh. So is that why we're here? Is that our purpose: to fix the weak spot?"

"If only that was all! You'd better stop talking to me now; you've got company again, up ahead."

Jason kept on walking at the same slow pace, his eyes searching the road and surrounding foliage for whoever the company might be. A few steps more and Debbie stepped out from behind a tree. She was smiling tauntingly at him. Jason returned the smile.

"Don't worry, not that you have to by the way you saw Paul off, but I am on my own," she said, leaning back against the tree.

"Where are the others, then?" Jason asked. He walked over to the girl.

"Probably hiding under their beds by now." She laughed. "But I don't believe all the rubbish they do."

"That's good, because it is rubbish. We moved into that house yesterday, I slept there last night, and though it's a dump and horribly run down I haven't met any ghosts yet."

"How old are you?" Debbie asked.

"Almost sixteen, why how old are you?"

Debbie giggled. "Fifteen today," she said. "Do you want to be my boyfriend?"

"Happy birthday! Haven't you got a boyfriend?"

"I've got lots of boy friends that I grew up with, but not a proper boyfriend."

"Okay I don't mind, I'll be your boyfriend if you want."

"Good," she said, pulling him in close to her. "You'd better give me a kiss then."

Jason swallowed heavily, not having much of an idea what to do. Fortunately he didn't really have to know anything, she took over and within seconds their tongues were exploring, and so too was one of her hands, diving straight down inside his belt.

"Crikey!" Jason exclaimed when they broke off almost gasping for air. "You're not slow at coming forward, are you?"

The girl giggled again. "I'm not a tart," she said. "You are the first boy I've done that to. My older sister told me what to do a long time ago, but I never have, not with anybody else."

"Did I kiss alright?" Jason asked, nervously. "It was my first time kissing a girl."

"It was? You were really brilliant! And you're all there, aren't you?" She rubbed her hand teasingly against the prominent lump in his trousers.

Jason blushed, stuck for something to say. Anything. Feeling sure he must be looking as red as a beetroot, and knowing no words were forthcoming, he just grinned at her.

"You are *so* cute! Now you're my boyfriend, you'll have to come to my party tonight!"

"Really?"

"Of course! *Everybody* will be there! I've got to go now, I'll see you later," she said, giggling as she ran off.

"But who are you? I mean, where do you live?" Jason called after her.

"Debbie Wilkes. The house is 'The Pines', on the main road, this road. Six o'clock. Don't be late!" she shouted back.

"Phew!" Jason said out loud. Deciding he'd walk back home, he turned round and began the short journey in a daze.

"Well, to all intents and purposes, the equipment is obviously up and running okay," Toby joked.

"Do you like her?" Jason asked.

"Of course I do, but it's you that has to like her, not me. You do like her, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. And you really don't want to know what I want to do to her."

Toby laughed. "That's not a barometer between your legs. It's no measure of true love, believe me! That'll be giving you a lot of torment from now on, and though it may kid you at times, it'll never really be in love with your hand either!"

"Don't say that! Oh, no! It's actually hurting me now!"

Jason arrived home to find his parents were out. Shopping at the supermarket the note said. Desperate, he went to lie down on his bed, still tormented.

“I’ll make myself scarce while you deal with that,” Toby said, grinning before he disappeared.

Drifting off into a contented sleep afterwards, Jason woke up about an hour later and took his second bath of the day. He called Toby and said, “Sorry, I just had to, it was driving me mad. I bet that doesn’t happen where you come from.”

Toby laughed. “There’s nothing to be sorry about, it’s only natural. You really don’t grow hair on the palm of your hand, I promise you. Where I come from is not the deadly serious place some people here have come to believe it is. It’s not all about harps and singing. If it were, would it really be worth going there? It is a truly fantastic place, and anything goes.”

“You are able to do some pretty fantastic things in this world too, aren’t you?”

“Yes, when they’re needed. Why?”

“I don’t have a present to take tonight, and I don’t know where to get one. If I buy anything from the village, somebody else might have bought the same. Do your fantastic things stretch to acquiring presents?”

Toby chuckled. “What, you mean like that one over there?” He nodded across the bathroom.

“What is it?” Jason asked, excitedly. He stood up to see the wrapped present better. It had a red rose pinned to the bow.

“A box of fancy chocs, twice the size of anything sold around here.”

“Thanks, bro! There’s one other thing though, if it’s at all possible. Debbie seems like a very forward girl. Don’t let it happen, please. If the opportunity arises I might desperately want to at the time, but please don’t let it happen. She’s only fifteen. She might regret it later.”

“Okay, but don’t hate me later.”

## Chapter 4

Jason guessed Debbie had been right. It seemed everybody, or at least it was likely everybody around their age the village could have, was at the party. They were packing out the house when he arrived at a few minutes after six. He had been half expecting some of her guests to shrink away from him, or run out the house screaming when they saw him, but it didn't happen. Debbie had already explained to everyone that he was okay, especially to her brother who she made accept him as her desperately wanted boyfriend. She was thrilled with the box of chocolates and the red rose, kissing him and wanting to know where he'd bought them from. He told her that was a secret, and felt thankful when she left it at that.

"Sorry, mate," Paul said, coming up to him and putting an arm around his shoulder. "I'm not always such a pillock, honestly. Do you want a drink? It's proper punch, but you'd better take it easy until our parents go out. They don't know."

"What's in it?" Jason asked.

"It started off as loads of different fruit drinks, but we added a bottle of vodka. I expect several other things have been sneaked into it by now as well."

"Really? I've never tried alcohol. I'll have a small one."

Paul laughed. "You've never had alcohol? At your age? Oh, boy! You sure are going to have a brilliant night! You do know my sis is desperate for you tonight, don't you? She reckons you're the one she's been saving herself for." The laugh went, as quickly as it came, and he was looking at his feet.

"Saving herself? But she's only fifteen."

"And this is the twenty-first century. Get real!"

"I suppose so. It's a whole different world to what our parents imagine, isn't it?"

"I hope you remembered to bring some."

"Some what?"

"Blimey! Where do come from, the nineteen hundreds?" He fumbled in his pocket. "Here, here's a few. You'll have to shout if you want more. I don't want you getting my sister pregnant." He

handed over the handful of condoms, and momentarily stared into Jason's eyes, before wandering off to speak to someone else.

Embarrassed, Jason quickly thrust them into his pocket; just the thought of it was making something stir so he sat down on the end of the settee hoping to hide it. Debbie came up with two drinks, sitting down heavily on his lap, him gasping and she squealing with delight. "Wow! You're really ready for it, aren't you? Swallow that drink down," she said, "I've brought you a better one."

The parents went out at eight o'clock, and by that time Jason's head was swimming. Debbie gave it a couple of minutes and then she turned the music up loud and dimmed the lights. Paired off, all around the room her friends started on some serious snogging. Paul immediately grabbed two of the girls, and they didn't need a second invitation to follow him up the stairs, laughing and giggling. Then Debbie came over and teasingly tugged him off the settee, and he followed her upstairs to her bedroom, where she locked the door. In there, waiting was a bottle of vodka. She took a swig from the bottle and then handed it to him.

Jason took a large mouthful, gasping for breath when neat like that it burnt his throat going down. "Will I still be your boyfriend if I don't screw you tonight?" he asked.

"You don't want to?" Debbie asked, looking disappointed.

"I want to, it would be great to actually experience a screw, but not yet. Not for a few years. It doesn't mean I don't like you. It's because I do like you I don't want to do it."

"Of course you'll still be my boyfriend, but will you stay here with me then, so my brother *thinks* we're doing it? Don't tell him we haven't done it, please."

"If that's what you want, but what's your brother have to do with it?"

"He teases me rotten, just because he's been putting it around for ages. There can't be a young girl in the village he hasn't been through several times. Some of the older ones too. He reckons I'm frigid, but I'm not. There's just been nobody I fancied like that in the village up till now. I do fancy you, really I do, and it's not just to shut him up."

"I know," Jason said, sitting on her bed and pulling her down next to him. "We can still have some fun, if you want. Kissing and cuddling, even exploring, I don't mind, I'm not ruling out everything. If you want to get one over on your brother we can even

bang the headboard against the wall a few times, and scream out as if we're having a lot more fun than he is."

"You really are a great guy," she said, laughing, and pulling him to fall back and lie on her bed. "We shall have to pretend to do it at least six times."

"Six? Crikey!"

"Yes, it'll have to be six. He reckons he's done it four times before, two girls and twice each, like he probably will again tonight, so you've got to appear a lot better than him!"

"Six it is, then," Jason said, kissing her tenderly, and letting his hands explore.

Debbie allowed him to explore her everywhere, and he gladly reciprocated. "You honestly would have been the first," she panted. "And I hope you will be, one day when you're ready."

Jason said, "If that's what you really want." The thought of it turned him on terribly, and he was ready to explode. Sweating, he didn't know what to do for relief. Trapped there, it was hurting him again.

Noticing Jason's discomfort and grabbing it in her hands, she asked, "Is it okay for me to deal with it? You are never going to hold on to that until you go home, are you?"

Jason didn't answer, he couldn't think of what to say, he just lay back and let her do whatever she wanted with him, and she found a lot of pleasing things to do. In between their times of heavy snogging, screaming out and banging the headboard for effect, and just lying there talking and enjoying each other's company, Debbie had to deal with him again later that evening, and that thrilled her. It thrilled him too.

Coming down the stairs just before eleven, they could see her brother frantically running around doing the last of the cleaning up. Everyone else had gone.

Looking up, Paul said, "My God, sis! You look really done for! You ought to go to bed before they come home, there's no hiding what you've been doing all night, noisy bitch! You were screaming the house down! Both of you were at one point! How many times did you do it?"

Jason just looked at the guy, but she pretended to confess. "Six," she said, then giggling at the hurt look on her brother's face. Saying goodnight, they kissed and cuddled for a few minutes at the front door, and then Jason set off on the journey home, his head

spinning more in the fresh air, his gait very unsteady, and the music still circling in his head.

Creeping indoors, Jason shouted out goodnight to his parents, telling them he was very tired, and rushed straight into his bedroom, throwing his clothes untidily on the floor before jumping on the bed and lying there naked on his back to relive the fantastic night again in his mind. "Thank you for stopping it happening," he said to Toby, turning over to cuddle him tightly.

Toby laughed. "I didn't stop you. That you did for yourself, and considering how much drink you'd chucked down your throat, I'm quite impressed."

"That's good. I love you, my brother, I really love you. Still, thank you for letting me have such a wonderful night," Jason said, drifting off into a deep sleep in Toby's arms.

"I love you too," Toby murmured, stroking Jason's head fondly. Sighing contentedly, he closed his eyes.

## Chapter 5

Jason became aware of his mother shaking him. His head was still swimming madly, his cheeky face smacked of happiness and satisfaction, and he giggled up at her. Putting his arms out he pulled her towards him, hugged her, and told her she was the best mum in the world.

“That must have been quite some party you went to last night,” his mother said. “I hope you behaved.”

“Mum! Come on! What do you think we were doing, having an orgy? Everyone was only about fifteen.”

She touched his nose teasingly. “And I was sixteen when I first got tipsy, which wasn’t bad for those times. I can tell just by looking at you what kind of party it was, and I know jelly and ice cream didn’t come into it!” she said, laughingly. “Now, if you want a bath you’d better move yourself. The builders are ripping everything out and replacing it today, and they’ll be here soon. Oh, and open your window when you’re up, it smells like a brewery in here!”

“Love you, mum!” Jason said, watching his mother pick up his dirty clothing and leave the room with it.

“Love you, son!” she called back.

With the bathroom functions over, the bedroom window opened, and the room’s untidiness hastily remedied, Jason sat on the side of his bed, and said, “Now what?”

“Now you have breakfast, while you wait to see how popular you are.”

“She will come, won’t she?”

“I can see all the possibilities, and they change continuously, but not even where I come from can anyone accurately predict the future, but I reckon she will come, and you might be pleased to know: I don’t think she’ll be alone.”

“I don’t feel hungry, but I suppose I’d better try to eat it as mum’s cooking it.”

“Ah, that happens to mortals when they’re in love.” Toby put his hand out and lifted Jason’s chin, so he looked at him. “When a

person really loves you, they usually agree to what you want, even if it does involve waiting a while, don't worry."

"You don't think I'm being silly?"

"In the great scheme of things it might be seen that way, humankind has adopted some peculiar values, but considering the guidelines instilled in you by your school and parents, it is only to be expected," Toby told him.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, Jason had to force a swallow that didn't want to happen. Preparing his jeans for washing, his mother had discovered the condoms he'd shoved in his pocket, and they stared up at him from the table. His mother placed his breakfast in front of him. Not daring to look up at her, he didn't notice her mood. Instead he quickly grabbed the packets, putting them in his pocket.

"I'm pleased to see you're sensible," she said, ruffling his hair to put him at ease.

"We didn't really do it, I swear!" he said, finally looking up at her. "I could have, but I didn't want to." His eyes were dampening.

"So you've found someone really special, have you?"

"I think so, and I hope she feels the same, because if she doesn't I don't know what I'll do."

"Kids grow up so fast these days. You'll never forget your dear old mum and dad, will you? You mean so much to us." Now his mother's eyes were wet too.

Standing up quickly, Jason threw his arms around her. "Don't be silly! I shall never forget you! How could I? If I'd had the choice, I'd have picked you too!"

His mother wiped her eyes, and with an impossible to conceal stunned look, she asked, "What do you mean: you'd have picked us too?"

"Sorry, that shouldn't have come out."

"You know? But how?"

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is you two are the ones for me, and I'm the luckiest kid alive." He squeezed her tightly.

"We certainly made the best choice, I know that," she said, hugging him back.

A knocking at the front door broke them apart. Jason started to tackle his breakfast, while his mother went to the door expecting to let the workmen in. Coming back into the kitchen moments later, a girl and three young lads accompanied her. The boys appeared

nervous, continually looking around the room, perhaps waiting for a ghost to appear, but Debbie just ran over to hug Jason.

“Hello, my sexy boyfriend,” she said. “I couldn’t sleep last night, thinking of you. It was rotten what I asked, so I told my brother the truth this morning: that we never really did it. He was so pleased, absolutely over the moon, and he’s promised never to rib me about saving myself ever again.”

Jason pulled the condoms out of his pocket, placing them in Paul’s hand, and closing it over them. “And there’s the proof,” he said. “Every single one you gave me. You can look after them; I might want them back in a few years.”

Paul grinned, “Sorry mate, it was only a joke. I’ve never *really* done it four times.”

“And?” Debbie demanded.

Her brother looked at his feet. “I’ve never ever done it at all. I don’t think any of us have yet. We’re not like the townies. We only ever seem to snog. It was just boasting, so thinking you’d done it for real six times with sis last night was doing my head in! It was hurting me!” He stared into Jason eyes.

Jason’s mother, at the sink washing up, turned her head in surprise. “Six times, and half-drunk the way Jason was when he came home!” she exclaimed, the funny tears appearing in her eyes. “I hope life doesn’t turn out to be a big disappointment for some of you kids!”

The workmen arrived, and Jason just managed to clean his teeth again before they began ripping the bathroom to pieces. Outside it had started to spit with rain, so deciding to explore the parts of the house Jason hadn’t seen yet, after a warning from his mother to be careful, they set off with Jason caringly holding Debbie’s hand. So frightened of the excursion were the three boys, they were holding hands too.

Climbing the elaborate staircases, checking out the top floor, then the middle, and finally the ground floor, Jason was surprised to find the rest of the house in a far better condition than he’d expected. There was damp and mould in places, especially in those rooms with broken windows, but nothing severe. Most of the building he found still furnished, with large dustcovers protecting everything.

Huge paintings hung from some of the walls, and in one room they found dozens covered up protectively. At first he wondered

their worth, and thought they might be priceless masterpieces, but decided in the end they couldn't be of any great value otherwise someone would have stolen them long before now. After all, Paul and some of the village kids knew a way in for that initiation, so probably anybody could have gained access.

Moving a painting to one side, inspecting it, Jason woke a sleepy spider and it raced along the top of the picture frame, its long spindly legs testing the air, trying to learn of what had disturbed it. Debbie screamed and ran back. Jason quickly let go of the painting, he didn't like spiders either.

"I guess you don't like spiders," Jason laughed, concealing his own fear of anything with more than four limbs.

"No! I can't stand them! Ugh!" Debbie shuddered.

Paul laughed at his sister, ridiculing her phobia, and whispering to Jason, "She used to swap sandwiches with a boy at school until he picked up a spider. Now she won't go near him!"

Noticing more spiders appearing out of the stack of pictures, Jason quickly moved the excursion on to the next room.

"Wow! Think of the party you could have in here!" Paul said, as they entered the massive baronial hall, complete with crossed swords and a coat of arms on the end wall. Turning to the other two boys, he said, "Your disco would go well in here, wouldn't it?"

"Disco?" Jason questioned.

"Josh and Tabs have a mobile disco," Debbie explained, "but it never goes anywhere. It's normally stacked away because they've nowhere to set it up properly. They live together, opposite us in a tumbledown cottage. They both have family in the next village, but they are always too busy to move the disco to functions for them."

"Tabs? That's a weird name," Jason said, turning away so the boys didn't hear him.

Debbie giggled. "Sorry, it's Terry really. Everyone just calls him Tabs because of his ears."

"Are they brothers? They don't look alike."

"No, but you'll rarely find them apart. They're boyfriends, gay like. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course not. Are they sure they're gay? How old are they?"

"Josh is sixteen, nearly seventeen, Tabs a few months younger, and they reckon they're sure. We're pretty sure too."

"Oh. I don't even know how old your brother is."

“He acts like five at times, but he’s sixteen.”

“It’s my birthday this Saturday, I shall be sixteen. I wonder if mum would let me have a party, what with the state of the house with the builders in. If I could persuade her, do you think anyone would come, or would they all be too frightened? Maybe we could get the disco in here.”

“They’d definitely come for a party, but how would we get the disco here? It’s too big to go in a car, and far too heavy to carry all the way, you’d need a van.”

Jason pulled her towards him and kissed her. “Dad owns a removal firm, and that has every size of van imaginable! Hey, Josh, Terry!”

“What?” they both asked, running over.

“If I could have a party here this Saturday, how much would you charge me to hire your disco?”

They looked at each other, and then giggled. “For a dishy guy like you, one kiss for each of us,” Josh said.

Jason looked at Debbie. “I don’t mind,” she said, laughing. “*Everybody* kisses those two. I mean, they’re no threat to anyone, are they?”

In the hope it might help to clinch the deal, Paul grabbed hold of the two lads in turn and showed him exactly how. There was a small amount of groping involved, on all sides, and as Jason found it was affecting him he looked away Nevertheless he reckoned if her brother could handle it, then so could he.

“Okay, you’re on, if I can arrange it,” Jason told them, to the lads’ delight. Turning back to Debbie, he said, “You *sure* you’d be okay with that?”

“Of course! You’ve got me, haven’t you? You won’t be looking for any favours there, will you? I already do everything they’d do.”

Swallowing hard, Jason said, “You mean some of the boys go to them for a blow . . . ?”

She put her fingers to his lips, silencing him. “They don’t know I know, but when they’re between girlfriends it has happened. Shh! Paul goes there regularly. I’m sure he’s a bit bi on the quiet.”

“What, hard man Paul?” They both burst into a fit of the giggles, trying to shut each other up, for fear the others would guess what they found so hysterical. Once they had managed to compose

themselves again, Jason left everyone there while he went to check on the likelihood of having the party.

Crossing the hallway, Toby appeared next to Jason, looking serious and saying, “You didn’t find the possibility of Paul being bisexual funny, did you?”

“No, not at all, only the fact he appears so butch and thought he was hiding it from everyone,” Jason said. “Why?”

“I’ve been there and looked. Inside, Paul is in a terrible state. The truth is he’s really gay, and only gay. Frightened, he is simply putting on an act. The torment he is going through is so affecting him I fear for his safety, and you do know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

Jason froze, and with tears forming in his eyes, he said, “But I can’t do anything about it, can I? Yes, I like him, I could love him, and maybe I do already, but that would mean me being unfaithful, wouldn’t it? Oh, what am I going to do?”

“Who did your mind exchange the magic with first? What did those first looks say to each other? How confirming were they? You need to work out who and what you really are, and exactly who you are being unfaithful to — Debbie, Paul, or yourself?”

“Oh, help me, please! I don’t know what to do!”

“I am helping, but I can’t make your decisions for you, or even influence situations in any other way than fairly. You might need to consider all the possible eventualities.”

“You mean Paul might top himself?” Jason asked, turning to him white in horror.

“I told you earlier I only know of possibilities, I cannot foretell the future. Nobody can.”

“If he does, I will too!”

“So where does that stand in the equation?”

“How the hell should I know?” They were definite tears now, and rolling down his cheeks.

“But you do know, don’t you?”

“I know if I’d been with Paul last night, there’s nothing he could have wanted that I wouldn’t have done. I couldn’t have stopped myself for him, like I did for Debbie. Oh, hell! I promised you once I wouldn’t break anybody’s heart, and now look at me!”

Paul nervously wandered into the hallway. Seeing the back of Jason, he asked, “Is it okay if I use one of those bathrooms upstairs?”

I'm absolutely bursting. Will you come with me? It's a bit frightening up there alone."

Jason turned to look at him, offering out his hand. "Come on, I'll take you," he managed to splutter.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying? Tell me! Oh, please don't cry!"

"I think we both know why I'm crying, don't we? Look how we hold hands so naturally. Remember when I picked you up after shoving you? I couldn't let go of you, I held on to you for ages and you didn't pull your hand away. How do we look at each other? We know, don't we? We both know it's you I really love, we've known it all along, but I can't hurt Debbie, not now," he said, holding on to Paul's hand tightly, and feeling all the warmth and magic of him as he led him up the stairs.

"I was hoping upon hope you did. You had me real confused. But now I know for sure, that's all that really matters to me, that you really do love me, because I love you like crazy. I have right from that first time of seeing you; I couldn't even shove you hard, could I? Oh, I'm so happy now. We can keep it a secret if you want, I don't mind." He looked at Jason, the tears beginning to flow from his eyes too.

"But would that be right? Deceiving Debbie? Anyway, we could never spend any rewarding time together, could we?"

"It might not be right, but it's all we're left with, isn't it? As for having time together, I can always visit your bedroom. When I can't sleep, I often climb out my window and go for a walk. Sorry, as frightened as I am of this place, I couldn't stop myself. I crept up here last night. By nosing around I discovered your bedroom, and I stood outside your window for ages, watching you sleeping."

"You did?"

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, I only wish I'd known you were there. I'd have let you in. Oh, God! Haven't I made a mess of things?"

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes, don't you?"

"I have to, don't I? He answered my prayers. He sent you."

"Share?" Jason asked, arriving in the bathroom.

"Of course!"

"Sorry about the giggling earlier, it was only because it hurt me seeing you kissing and groping Josh and Tabs."

“I know. It hurts me seeing you with my sister. Every time you kiss, I want it to be my lips.”

As soon as they had both finished peeing, Jason spun Paul round and kissed him. From the second their lips touched it was obvious it was going to go much further, so Jason pulled away and quickly ran over to lock the door. Returning to his lover, their eyes met and not a word needed saying. They ripped off their clothes, embraced, kissing, cuddling, moaning, groaning, and in tears of happiness they tumbled to floor to enjoy each other. It was a very long time later they emerged to go back downstairs.

The flat looked more like a building site than a home, and the noise painfully overpowering, when Jason, accompanied by Paul, returned there to go in search of his mother. There were men and materials strewn around everywhere, and as he passed his bedroom he could see even that contained a couple of blokes busy banging away at something. Exactly what, he had no idea.

Finding his mother in the kitchen, he asked her about having a party that Saturday, and explained about the disco he wanted in the baronial hall. She had no objections, but felt she should check with his father. That unfortunately involved a tediously long phone call where, because of the noise, everything needed repeating many times, but in the end it did prove fruitful and result in him learning his father too had no objections, and would see to it they had a van there Saturday to ferry the disco to and fro.

“You do realise as your mother I have to tell you: no alcohol, don’t you?” she said, giving him a knowing look. “Of course, although we’ll be in the flat here if you need us for anything, we won’t be checking up on you. You’re old enough to look after yourself, and besides we’re both past enjoying discos. This noise today is more than enough for me, I can tell you! What time do you plan on the party finishing?”

“Thanks, mum! Not much alcohol and it won’t get too mad, I promise. I was thinking perhaps two o’clock for finishing? By the way, what are those blokes doing in my bedroom?”

“Two is okay, but no later! As for the blokes in your bedroom, they are fitting your en-suite. With the amount of time you take in the bathroom preening yourself some days, it’s become a necessity.”

“Really? Oh, that’s brilliant, my own bathroom!”

“You’re not frightened Paul is going to get lost in here, are you?” his mother asked, enquiringly frowning and looking down at where Jason and Paul’s hands were still tightly interlocked.

“Oh, sorry!” Trying not to colour up with the embarrassment, Jason quickly pulled his hand free. “I was helping him climb over all that the stuff in the passage just now, I must have forgotten to let go,” he said. Paul had already turned bright red, and he was trying to swallow a giggle wanting for out.

## Chapter 6

The news the party was definitely on overjoyed the others and they started on the preparations straightaway. They swept floors, moved furniture between rooms, and cleaned and polished until late into the evening, with Jason's mother regularly providing them with refreshments throughout. She even sorted out the boxes of Christmas decorations, and they were able to raid them for some suitable adornments. Before everyone left that night they made arrangements to meet up the following morning, at ten by the crossroads. The bus from there would take them in to town, and the supermarket they planned to visit to buy the party goodies would deliver their order later in the day. They needed to be home by three, before the delivery arrived, to whisk the alcohol out of sight before Jason's mother saw it, but that should present no problem. Debbie's older sister, who worked at the supermarket, would buy the alcohol to make the purchase legal, but the delivery was the only way of it getting home.

Kissing Debbie goodnight at the end of the drive, and to make it more bearable telling himself she was made of the same stuff as the guy he really loved, Jason found he was staring longingly over her shoulder at Paul. He, along with the other two, was egging her on to hurry up, so it wasn't a prolonged kiss goodnight. Being careful to wave every time Debbie looked back, he watched Paul walking down the road, finding the way his athletic body and firm buns moved so sexily turned him on, until the group disappeared out of sight at the corner. Enjoying one, feeling rotten for deceiving the other one, he sauntered back indoors, said goodnight to his parents, and went to his bedroom.

Feeling grimy from the cleaning, after lying on his bed in thought for a while, Jason decided to try out his en-suite before turning in. There was a lavatory, a washbasin under a steam-resistant mirror, a corner unit for all his stuff, and a sizeable shower, certainly large enough for two. He spent considerable time waiting around, rearranging his shower gels, shampoos, deodorants and suchlike, before getting in the shower. They had made no positive arrangements, but he was hopeful and had left the bedroom

window slightly open. He wasn't disappointed. A little later Paul opened the door a fraction and nervously peered in. Jason beckoned him, and within seconds they were sensually lathering each other up under the shower. After enjoying themselves in there, Jason set his alarm for early and they found more enjoyment in bed, before much later falling asleep in each other's arms. Paul left at four-thirty in the morning, but not before a hasty session that culminated in some very prolonged kissing. Jason watched him from the window, grinning happily, until, waving back at him, his lover ran out of sight down the drive.

"You can come out now," Jason told Toby, as he climbed back into bed.

"My, you two certainly go at it, don't you?" Toby joked.

"I wish I'd been brave enough to accept what I am before committing to Debbie," Jason sighed. "I like her such a lot, but since being with Paul I know I could never love her, not in the way she wants. I mean, it's impossible. She doesn't have the bits I yearn for. The other night it was just the alcohol and my raging hormones deceiving me. I'd have let a horse blow me, the state I was in then. What am I going to do?"

"So you've made your decision?"

"It wasn't mine to make really, was it? I am what I am. And I am deeply in love with Paul. I want to spend the rest of my time with him. Forever would be better."

"The rest of your time? Not the rest of your life?"

"I don't have a life, do I? Not one I could truly call my own. When I've fulfilled my purpose, I'm guessing my time here will end. Yours too. Am I right?"

"Yes, but you shouldn't be downhearted about that. Whenever that time arrives we shall both return to whence we came. I shouldn't be telling you any of this yet, but for your sanity and the good of our mission you need to know: when you leave here you can have whatever you want, and that includes Paul. Bar the one we all serve, there are none to overrule you."

Jason laughed. "You make us sound so damn important!" he said, sarcastically.

"In the order of things, we are important, and each of us has responsibilities beyond your comprehension here. Rarely has there been a need for even one of the seven to come to this place. However for the first time, six of us are here now."

“Six of the seven? What seven?”

“Have you never heard of: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Zerachiel and Remiel?”

“Angels?”

“The seven Archangels, darling. Get it right!”

“Are you suggesting I’m really one of them? Get off! You’re winding me up!”

“Oh, yes. You are one of them, and in more ways than you may imagine. It would upset a lot of people here to know that before their time, but we are all one of them. The name I am mostly known by is Zerachiel, and you my flower are better known as Uriel, but we may not use those names here, so never say them.”

Jason laughed, punching Toby’s arm. “Yeah, right! Prove it then!”

“For the part you play in this task you must be a mortal, so you may use none of your power here. Like you are, that is in my safekeeping. But I have no such restriction, and therefore as proof I grant you one wish for right now. Anything you want, and it will be.”

“Can I be in bed with Paul again right now? I bet you can’t do that!”

“He’s not made it home yet, so this will only work if his future allows him to safely go home to bed. I can see no bad possibilities for him in the near future, so the chances are it *will* work. Five minutes, so make it quick.”

“Blimey! How did you get in my bed? Dad will kill us if he finds you in here naked with me!” Paul said, waking up in alarm and sitting bolt upright.

“Shh! He won’t find us, trust me,” Jason said, before kissing him, and letting his hand dive beneath the covers to find what he desired to hold. The five minutes passed quickly, but not a second of them was wasted. They whispered their love to each other while savouring every touch, breath, and look given, Jason needing to tell him how much he meant to him again, and Paul responding by swearing undying equal devotion. As the five minutes approached, happy in a loving embrace, tiredness overwhelmed them and they drifted off into a deep sleep, and then Jason found himself back in his own bed again, lying alongside Toby.

“When he wakes up he’ll think it was a wonderful dream. I reckon he’ll probably tell you all about it in the morning,” Toby said.

“I’m sorry I doubted you. I mean, simply you being with me has to be a miracle, doesn’t it? And look how easily you could provide that present for me when I asked. I’m sorry I ever doubted you. I’m just plain stupid. Are you sure I’m good enough for this job I’m supposed to do? I keep messing up, don’t I?” Jason said.

“That’s what mortals do. Don’t worry about it. Everything will come right, eventually. It’s the way of things.”

“But I messed up then, didn’t I. Really, instead of being so selfish and thinking only of me, I should have asked for a way out without hurting Debbie. Putting that mess-up of mine right would have been a far better use for that miracle.”

“But that doesn’t require unearthly strengths to happen. You can achieve that for yourself.”

“I wish I knew how.”

“Seek and you will find. There is nothing that doesn’t have an answer. Not seeing it, doesn’t mean it isn’t there. Remember: you are playing the part of a mortal, so someone will pay for your every wrongdoing. If you pay for it yourself, you do the best you can do, maybe even cancelling out the wrong, but if someone else has to pay you will simply multiply it. Sometimes mortals will need to confront their worst fears to put things right.”

Jason thought hard about what Toby had said for several minutes, shutting himself away in his mind, and then the enlightenment hit him with all the force of an express train. His face lit up, and he threw his arms around Toby. “I love you!” he said. “I think I can do it. No, I bloody well *will* do it!”

#

The Friday went well for Jason. It was a day filled with expectation. Up early, he’d made all the preparations before leaving to meet the others at the crossroads. All he needed was a few minutes alone with Paul to tell him of his plan, and that they found when Debbie insisted on going into a shop to enquire on the price of some clothing. It was only natural he wouldn’t want to accompany her in that kind of shop, so he and Paul wandered up the

street together to stand and wait on a corner, where he divulged his solution to their problem.

Spotting Josh and Tabs sneaking off into a small shop down the side road, they moseyed there to investigate. Quizzing the lads on what they'd bought when they came out, they discovered a sudden need. It was so strong it saw them swearing the lads to secrecy as they confessed their secret love. Understanding, they'd been there once themselves, they gave Jason and Paul some quick advice, and took them into the shop where they purchased several items, hiding them amongst their own stuff until later.

For the rest of the day Paul was plagued with bouts of inexplicable giggling. He only had to think of the planned solution to the Debbie problem, or the items they'd purchased from that shop, and he was off again, creasing up. Jason had to fight each time not to join him in the show of humorous emotion.

Pooling some of their money and adding it to the generous donation Jason's mother had made, they were able to buy everything they wanted for the party. There would be plenty of cold food, from pies and pasties to sandwiches and flans, and more importantly for the spirit of the party there were the spirits for the party, several large bottles for topping up the punchbowl. Happy they'd thought of everything, they caught the bus back home.

The shopping arrived at four o'clock, and while Debbie and the three boys each carried some to the kitchen, Jason whisked the spirits away, hiding them in a barely discernable cupboard in the baronial hall. With the others still chatting with his mother in the kitchen, on his return he was able to go through the bag Josh had left by the door, removing his own purchased items and finding places to keep them in his bedroom. It was a wonderful day, and he couldn't wait for bedtime and Paul's secret visit. Tonight, for the first time, they would do everything.

## Chapter 7

Three calls on Saturday morning, and still Jason hadn't emerged. His mother opened his bedroom door to wake him, the smell of amyl nitrate immediately fascinating her nose. She picked up the small bottle from off the bedside cabinet, studying it for a few moments. Ignoring the several used condoms in the wastepaper basket, one having not quite made it dangling over the edge of the receptacle to add extra charm, she shook the two boys on the bed lying naked in each other's arms.

Paul woke and, seeing her, immediately shot bright red, elbowing Jason while he fought to cover himself with some of the duvet. Still not fully awake and appreciating the situation, Jason merely put an arm over to stroke Paul's head, murmuring, "I don't half love you."

It wasn't until he heard his mother's voice that Jason became fully awake. "Happy birthday, Jason! Is there something you want to tell me, son?" she asked, quite calmly.

"Mum!" he shrieked, sitting bolt upright, and then realising his nakedness diving under the cover to hide a particularly eager morning enragement, one soon flagging though as the reality of his predicament became apparent.

"Did you two drink a lot of alcohol last night, or something?" she asked, perching on the side of the bed to make Paul shrink back in fear. "Don't worry," she told him, "I'm not having a go at you. I'd just like to know if Jason has something to tell me."

Jason rubbed his eyes, looked across at the clock not believing they hadn't heard the alarm, and then putting an arm around Paul and pulling him closer, he said, "Sorry mum. I hope you don't hate me too much. I got it wrong. This is who I really love. I can't help it, but I do, and he means everything to me. Do you want me to leave home?"

"Yes," she said, "but only to get some milk. You lot drunk the house dry of it last night and I haven't had a morning cuppa yet. Finding you two like this without a morning cuppa is hard to swallow. Are you sure you've got it right this time?"

"Yes, mum. I'm sure. We're both sure, one hundred percent. Really, I knew before Debbie, but for some stupid reason I just

wanted to appear normal, and I tried to be. Can you live with a gay son?"

She touched the still fearful Paul's nose teasingly. "And his partner, if he's picked as wisely as this one," she said. Paul swallowed heavily, and smiled. "Now if you can pull yourselves apart for ten minutes, is there any chance of me getting some milk?"

"I'll go," Paul said, trying to reach across the floor as far as his underpants.

"I'll be in the kitchen," Jason's mother said, winking before leaving them to get up.

"Happy birthday, my hero. You haven't half got a fantastic mother," Paul said, hastily dressing. "Mine would kill me if she found out. I'll have to creep in and ruffle up my bed before getting the milk. That way it'll look like I was up and out early."

"Okay, but don't be long, it's my birthday and I should have everything I want, and I want you," Jason said, hugging and kissing him before he rushed out of the room.

After relishing his quick shower, remembering all the many wonderful experiences of the night, some of them new and long-questioned, and opening the window to freshen the bedroom, Jason waited for Paul and the milk in the kitchen with his mother and a simmering kettle. Leaving nothing out, apart from mentioning Toby, he told her the full story, and of the way he hoped to break it off with Debbie without hurting her. She hoped he could pull it off, and admired his courage, saying she could never do such a thing. Then Paul returned with the milk, happy that nobody had risen at home yet so he'd probably got away with his night out, and with Jason producing the welcome cups of tea, and his mother firing up a cooked breakfast, the three of them sat down to enjoy it together.

"Will you tell dad about us?" Jason asked between mouthfuls.

"Why, of course! We don't keep anything from each other, that is never a good policy between couples."

"What will you say?"

She laughed. "Well I won't say I found you asleep naked together, thermometers out and probing the morning air, I'll simply let him know you've told me you're gay and you have found a wonderful partner in Paul. Don't worry; he'll be perfectly alright about it. After all, his brother was gay, and he never had a problem with that."

“I never knew he was gay. But then, I never knew my uncle Bob, did I?”

“No, he died when you were only weeks old. I believe he was what you would call an ‘in the closet’ gay man, but he really loved you.”

“I don’t think we’ll be in the closet for long, not once Debbie is sorted, do you?” Jason asked his partner, laughing.

“My parents won’t be happy about it, but I don’t care. Until Josh and Tabs came out last year, they were very unhappy. I don’t want to be like they were, creeping around frightened in case anyone should guess. Once they’d come out, they were able to move in together and nobody said a word.”

Sending Paul off to take a shower in his room, telling him as he’d rushed out earlier without one he still reeked of their hectic night, Jason volunteered to help his mother with the washing up. Taking the tea towel off him, she told him not to be so silly, and with a wink suggested he should make sure Paul knew how to operate the shower. Jason didn’t need telling twice, within seconds he was sharing the shower with Paul, and there was a lot going on.

It was as they were drying themselves, Paul nervously said, “You know your mum said couples shouldn’t keep anything from each other?”

“Yes,” Jason said, wondering what he might ask or reveal.

“If you ever catch me talking to myself, please don’t think I’m mad. I’ve had an invisible friend since I was a very young child. I think lots of kids have them, but mine never went away. I didn’t want to keep that from you.”

“No, I wouldn’t think you’re mad. Do you know happen much about him? Is he one of a special seven?”

“How did you know that?” Paul stopped drying himself to look at him, astonished.

“Because I think I talk to his mate.”

“You do? You’re kidding me!”

“No, I’m not, honestly. Do you know our purpose?”

“No, he won’t tell me our true purpose, not yet anyway. Ellwood is only an extra, I believe.”

“An extra? What do we have to do here?”

“Some of it is nearly done. The party tonight will take away a lot of the local people’s fears. I think you might be having a few more parties, until the job’s completed and the weak spot healed.”

Jason laughed. "It seems you know a lot more than I do."

Paul looked away. "That's probably because of something I nearly did. He stopped me that night after I thought you and my sister had done it, gave me his word it would work out, and told me a few things to reassure me. I was hurting real bad over you."

Jason went over and held him tightly. "You'll never hurt again over me, and that's a promise. I know I was silly, and mixed up, but if you'd have done it, I would have been right behind you. I couldn't live without you."

"I wish I could live here with you."

"So do I. You could leave home now as you're sixteen, but you'd need to have a job. Not a lot of hope for that around here, is there?"

"No, I've tried everywhere, even further than Southampton. Nothing I could get was worthwhile once I'd paid for all the travelling."

"How does Monday strike you?" a familiar voice said.

"Toby!" they both said, spinning round to see him lying on the bed, grinning at them.

"He's *your* Toby? I thought he was *my* Toby," Paul said.

"Stop thinking in earthly terms, I can be a billion places at once, if I have to. Now, I can do Monday, Wednesday, or Friday for you to move in. Is Monday okay?"

"You can work it? Really?" Jason asked.

"I managed to work that five minutes in his bed with him for you, didn't I?" Toby said.

"That was real? I thought I'd dreamed it. I meant to tell you about that!" Paul said, looking at Jason.

"Monday will be great! How will you do it, though?" Jason asked.

"Those three days every week a freight plane flies directly overhead, backwards and forwards to the Scilly Isles. It'll have a rough flight and landing with an engine missing, but nobody will be hurt. There'll be nothing left of Paul's bedroom, or the roof above it. Paul just has to say he knows someone who will put him up. Simple?" Toby laughed.

"Simple!" Jason said, hugging his partner.

"My mum might want to see where I'm sleeping," Paul said.

"There are three bedrooms in the flat we don't use, we can tart up a pretend one for you," Jason said. "They've all had en-suites

added. I think dad wants to do the place up to sell and move on one day, but that'll take years with the state of some of it. Thankfully though, the new kitchen goes in on Monday."

"Yes, well you might want to tart up two of the rooms. Before bouncing to take out Paul's bedroom, the engine will as good as demolish the little cottage opposite that Josh and Tabs rent. It's already half falling down now," Toby explained. "Don't worry, it will happen easily enough, no one else has room for them, they'll move in."

"Are they like us?" Jason asked.

"Yes, they are," Toby said.

"So are you their Toby too?" Jason asked.

"No, they share one they grew up knowing as Tommy," Toby said. "There are four of you making up the two couples, and each couple has shared one of us. That makes the six. The six of the seven, remember? Now we all need to be together."

"Does that mean what we have to do will be soon?" Jason asked.

"No, not necessarily, but we ought to be prepared. There might be years to wait yet, in which case, like Ellwood, we may find other things to occupy us."

"Crikey! This'll be known as 'Poof's Corner' by the villagers before long!" Paul said.

"Or 'Mincing Manor', once Josh and Tabs move in!" Toby laughed.

"We don't mince, do we?" Jason asked, horrified for a bad answer. "Not us two?"

"No, of course you don't, but you wouldn't want to give either Josh or Tabs a toffee to chew on, would you? I mean, whoosh, gal! To which end would you offer it?" Toby said, to crease them up.

#

The disco went extremely well. The news of it had spread, with not the couple of dozen they expected turning up, but more than sixty. Friends of friends came from several of the nearby villages, most of them bringing along some drinks, so Jason was thankful his mother kept to her word and didn't check up on them. With their ages roughly between thirteen and twenty, long before

midnight there was enough action in the dark corners to suggest an orgy was kicking off.

It was around midnight when Jason put his plan into action. Leaving Debbie while he went to replenish their drinks from the punchbowl, before returning he took a deep breath, and looked lovingly at Paul, knowing he had to do it. He opened the matchbox in his pocket and teased the hairy monster out and onto his tee-shirt, gritting his teeth as it ran up to his shoulder. Hurrying back to her with the drinks, she immediately saw the beast on his white top and screamed.

Jason took another deep breath, put his drink down, and picked the huge house spider up by one of its long hairy legs. The other legs came up to curl around his fingers as it fought to pull free. "You can't stay in here, little fella." he told it, "You'll get trodden on. Let me take you outside." Smiling at the turned white, shaking and fearfully breathless Debbie, he told her he wouldn't be long.

Returning minutes later, having raced to the front door shuddering once out of her sight to throw the horrid thing as far and fast as he could, he couldn't see her anywhere. He wondered if she'd left while, after touching the monster, he'd felt the need to wash his hands and sweaty brow, in the bathroom. Casually walking over to Paul, who was picking out some music for the disco guys, he asked where she'd gone.

Winking happily, he said, "You managed to do it, then? Considering you can't stand them yourself, you are brave! Debbie got Billy, a kid from the next village, Ellwood Moorstead, to take her home. He'd been eyeing her up all night, and by the way they left together, her screaming on about you and the spider, I don't think we have a problem anymore. She has found a new hero. Can we dance together now?"

"You bet!" Jason grabbed him, didn't care who saw, and kissed him before joining the dancers.

It was two-thirty by the time the last of their guests left. Apart from hiding all the evidence of the abundant alcohol, they decided to leave everything as it was and clean up the following day. Josh and Tabs revealed people were asking all evening for the party to become a regular event. Jason told them he'd run the idea past his parents, and suggested they left the disco there until after he'd found a good time to ask. He wasn't sure how much they knew of

the events Toby had programmed for Monday, and it needed to stay there to avoid destruction.

“I don’t have to go home tonight,” Paul said, watching Jason lock the door after seeing Josh and Tabs out. “I haven’t been home to make my bed, so it’ll still look like I’ve slept in it.”

“That’s good, because I want to do everything we did last night, all over again,” Jason said.

Paul giggled. “Including crashing out and having all our bits on display for your mother when she comes in to wake you in the morning?”

“I don’t think she’ll be doing that again in a hurry! Have you had a good day?”

“Of course I have! Brilliant! Every day with you is a good day. I can hardly believe we were actually dancing together in public, and kissing each other too. A few people were talking about us, I saw them, but nobody objected, I think it was just the sort of news factor. I feel so free and happy now; I don’t give a damn who knows about us.”

“You don’t think Debbie got too hurt, do you? With her extreme phobia, I am counting on the love she had for me just dying, sort of instantly.”

“No, she was okay. She’s probably popped her cherry by now with that Billy. I hope so; he’s a real steady guy. He’d only do it if she really meant something to him.”

“Eh?”

“That’s what she’s really wanted all along. You didn’t think it was my idea to make sure you had condoms last Wednesday night, did you? The thought of you having her when I wanted you so much myself was doing my head in, but she made me do it, saying she wouldn’t bother with them if I didn’t. You getting her pregnant didn’t bear thinking about!”

“Sorry my foolishness put you through all that; I’ll let you into a secret though.”

“What?”

“I had to lie back twice and let her play with it, and I was hurting too.”

“You were?”

“I was turned on bad, real bad, but still it wouldn’t work unless I thought of you. I didn’t want to look a fool, so I thought of you twice. I was awfully confused. When we came down and I saw the

way you looked so hurt when she told you that lie, I just wanted to hug you.”

“God! You don’t know how much I could have done with that hug right then!”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. It was just life being cruel. In the end it all worked out okay, didn’t it? I’m happier now than I ever have been.”

“That’s good. So am I. I’ve never been so happy. Are you game for it again tonight then? Everything?”

Paul grinned. “You bet I am! I even sneaked off and hid some bottles in your room for us tonight. We’ve got vodka and coke waiting for us. Now everybody has gone home, it’s our turn to get nailed.” Grabbing Jason’s hand, he led him to the bedroom.

“Nail me! Nail me! Nail me to the mattress!” Jason laughed.

“That was my line!” Paul giggled.

## Chapter 8

They had no intentions of getting up early on Sunday, so Jason and Paul were still in bed when there was a knock on the window. Sitting up and turning to see who it was, Paul said, “Crikey! It’s only Debbie! It must be alright though, she’s seen us and she’s laughing.”

Jason slid out of the bed, opened the window and told her to climb in, and then he jumped back under the cover. Paul cuddled him from behind, wondering what she might say, but not unduly caring. She didn’t make an easy job of climbing through the window, but finally she made it inside.

“Really? You two?” she said, glancing around at the poppers, drink, and what lie in the wastepaper bin. “I’m so pleased. I only came round to make sure you were okay, Jason. I felt guilty running off like that, but it seems you are okay. You are, aren’t you?”

“Yes, very okay. Are you?”

“Yes, I am too. I went off with Billy after that episode with the spider. It’s my phobia, I can’t help it. As soon as you touched that evil thing I saw you differently.”

“And are you hitting it off with Billy? Is it serious?”

“Yes. I let him do it, well more forced him really. Like you he hadn’t wanted to, it was respecting me he said, but I wasn’t going to miss out twice. We still friends?”

“Of course we are! I’m sorry about the spider. I only did it because I pretty much knew what would happen. You see, I got it wrong. It was always Paul.”

“Sorry, sis. I loved him since first setting eyes on him. I never really liked girls in that way, it was only an act, trying to look normal, but now I have Jason, I don’t care who knows about me.”

“Well, I guess we both popped it last night and everybody’s happy, so that’s good.”

“Jason and I had each other the night before,” Paul told her, giggling and poking out his tongue teasingly.

“That figures! It wouldn’t be you if you couldn’t get one over on me, would it?” She laughed. “I don’t mind. I’ve got to go now;

Billy is meeting me in a minute. Have fun, you two!” And with a wave goodbye, she climbed back out of the window.

“I suppose we’d better get up. It is nearly midday,” Jason said. Getting out of the bed, he tugged for Paul to follow him into the shower.

As they came out of Jason’s bedroom half an hour later, his mother called out, “I thought I heard you moving. Dinner won’t be long. I’ve made enough for Paul too.”

“How did you know he was still here?” Jason asked, as they entered the kitchen.

“We checked earlier. You were both fast asleep.”

“We?”

“Yes, his parents have been round. They were worried about him not going home last night,” she said. “They checked this morning to see he’d got back safely because it was a late party. Debbie reckoned she didn’t know where he was, but guessed he’d got drunk and crashed out, hopefully here. Don’t worry. I checked on the state of your decency before they saw you. After yesterday, I had to make sure of that, didn’t I? We only looked in because they wanted reassurance he was okay.”

“Crikey! What did they say, seeing me in bed with Jason?” Paul asked, turning pale.

“We had a long talk, having found you cuddled up asleep in each others arms, with faces telling everything. They said you made a lovely couple.”

“They did?” Paul asked, in disbelief.

“Yes, I told them you’d stayed over the night before too. They’re far happier knowing you’re in a steady relationship with Jason, than when they thought you were putting it around every girl in the village, with all the risks that entailed. Times have changed, and it’s good to see, like us, your parents have managed to keep up with them.”

“Phew! I never thought they’d be okay with me being gay, that’s why I’ve kept it hidden.”

“Well, they are, and you don’t need to hide it from them any longer. They don’t mind how often you stay over, and neither do I, but you should tell them whenever you are, so they don’t worry.”

“I will in future,” Paul said.

“Sometime today you’d better tell them you’re staying over again tonight, then,” Jason said, before turning to his mother. “You

talked to them, mum. Do you think they'd let him move in? How would you feel about that? How much money would you want?"

"I'd be okay, I only want what makes you happy, but Paul moving out would be a big step for them. They'd miss him if he didn't promise to see them every day. Why don't you walk round there and ask, while I finish making the dinner? Money-wise, I'm sure there are plenty of jobs around here the both of you could do to pay for his keep."

As they left the house, Paul said, "I thought we had the moving in arranged. The plane, have you forgotten?"

"No, of course I haven't, but if it could happen naturally it would save your parents a lot of turmoil. Apart from the shock factor, it won't be fun for them sorting out insurances, builders, and living in all that mess. The house could be in a state for months."

"I never thought of that. I suppose Toby could arrange for the engine to miss the house?"

"Toby can do anything," Jason said.

"Do you realise we hardly ever talk to him now? We don't see so much of him, do we?"

"I'm still here, for what it's worth," Toby said, appearing to them, and not looking happy.

"What's up? Have we done something wrong?" Jason asked.

"You are going to need to think things through better than you are at present. Stop thinking just of yourselves. Everything you do has consequences, you should know that," Toby said.

"What haven't we thought through?" Paul asked.

"I need the four of you together, and arrangements were in place to that end. But if today Paul moves out to avoid damaging his house, when the other two's cottage is destroyed tomorrow the most obvious ones to put them up will be his family. They have known the lads far longer, are handily right across the road, and bonus: they will have just acquired a spare room. That room has to go, whatever happens."

Jason went quiet, deep in thought, for a few moments. Then nudging Paul, he asked Toby, "Where we come from, is there ranking?"

"There's seniority that commands respect," Toby said. His face looked serious, he knew what was coming.

"So how does that equate to the six of us? The four and the two?"

“Why do you want to know?”

“I need to know. As I am now, I have the gift of freewill given to all mortals. I’ve worked out that not even you can influence freewill, and at the moment mine does not want to go on with this purpose of ours, not unless I know the full story, and approve of it,” Jason said.

“That goes for me too,” Paul said, immediately backing him up.

“What is this, a mutiny?” Toby asked, trying to make light of it by casually laughing.

“I don’t know, is it? Surely that would depend on exactly who outranks who, wouldn’t it? Do you outrank me, or Paul? It’s a straight question, and it demands a straight answer,” Jason said.

“But why do you want to know? Have I done something you don’t agree with?”

“Yes, you have. Of all the possible ways you could come up with to attain the end you want, the four of us together, I’m not happy that with the vast power at your disposal you can only find a solution which involves the suffering of people who mean a lot to us. To be so thoughtless about that gives me to suspect when our time comes to depart, you will give equally little consideration to the people we leave behind.

“The way I see it we are merely extras here, something aside from any great scheme of things, and that being so, in my mind, means no innocent people should suffer because of us. So maybe it’s *your* methods that need some thinking through!” Jason was plainly not happy, and his mood growing more than a little argumentative.

“I couldn’t have put it better myself!” Paul said. Stating the obvious, he turned and winked at Jason.

“Stop it! Stop fighting me! You mustn’t argue, you’ll break the dream!” Toby shouted.

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Jason woke up with a start. “What are you doing?” he asked, his doey eyes looking up at Toby, in bewilderment.

“Don’t you like what I’m doing to you?” Toby smiled down at him.

“With Paul I like doing it, but not with you. You’re my brother, aren’t you?”

“Only in your dreams, Jason. That’s where Paul exists too, only in your dreams. Do you want to go back to him? You can. Do you want to dream again?”

“Who are you really, then?” Jason asked, catching his breath as the lad thrust into him once more.

“Why, I’m your uncle Bob, of course. I really care about you, you know? I love you. Don’t you remember your mother telling you that? Would you like to return to your dreams of Paul now, so we may both continue to enjoy ourselves? You should, really,” the young guy said, kissing Jason on his forehead. The drowsiness was immediate, and the ten year old boy soon asleep again, and dreaming lovingly of Paul.

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