BOLD SLASHER

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To my parents,
for all their loving support.

PROLOGUE

1 August 1978.
Parleycote, Oxfordshire.

THEY WERE OUTSIDE, circling the front of the house, burning fires and daubing something thick and perfumed on the brickwork.

There were twelve of them.

The man and his golden-haired son watched from the porch.

The strangers scared the boy.

It was mainly their appearance. They were powerful columns of radiant darkness, their bodies covered in sharp black scales which glittered in the sun. Their heads were metal and featureless. They reminded him of the massive, frightening men lining the way to the chapel. Had those ghastly things come alive to walk in daylight?

Then there were the noises they made. The howling and singing, the chanting and incantations, the unnaturally high and low-pitched voices that did not sound human, and the unearthly music coming from under the trees where many of them lurked.

And they were never still. Despite their heavy, clunky exterior, they whirled, twisted and swooped like bats, kicking up the pebbles around the house and on the driveway, their chaotic presence at odds with the precision and order of the manicured lawns.

Creatures of darkness plucked from nightmare, caught out of time and place on this gorgeous summer day.

Only the presence of his father – ramrod-straight and emotionless as a soldier on parade, arms grasped tightly behind his back, head raised to survey the scene, the familiar figure of control and authority - stopped him from panicking at the pandemonium. Moreover, he knew that the strangers had come at his father's invitation, and it was only with his permission that they were now running wild on the estate…within a tight boundary. They were confined to the front lawns and banned from the house and gardens.

Big copper pans on the grass were filled with something aromatic and herbal. These containers emitted tall flames and an intense sickly sweetness into the air which made the boy feel nauseous.

The afternoon wore on. Time passed. The strangers were becoming tired and worn down by their exertions and bored by the constraint in their movement. They had stopped their noises and dervish-like behaviour and now roamed about like drunken guests at the end of a party. Some of them were sitting on the grass. A few were laid out, sleeping under the trees. They looked like black snakes. The sun had started to dip in the sky, shadows were lengthening, and there was a chilly whisper in the air.

The boy was suddenly aware that his father had vanished. He did not know for how long he had been alone. For the past ten minutes he had been lost in play, running his Matchbox cars up and down the stone floor of the front porch.

No, not alone.

The strangers were still here.

Two of them sat cross-legged and motionless on the lawn. He could feel eyes watching him from behind the narrow slits in their metal helmets. It was very unnerving, being observed by faces you could not see. He stood up and hid behind a pillar.

There was still no sign of his father.

He did not know what time it was – he was not wearing the

Star Wars watch his parents had bought him for his birthday – but judging by the milky blue of the cloudless sky, he thought it was probably around five o'clock.

The dying embers of the afternoon.

The boy suddenly wanted his mother. He had not seen her for hours, not since the interlopers had arrived. She had not wanted them here and had shown her disapproval of their presence by vanishing from sight, refusing to play hostess, leaving his father to receive them alone. Her son knew where she would be at this time of day.

In her favourite place.

The walled kitchen garden, watering her plants.

He would join her.

The boy emerged from his hiding-place on the porch and ventured nervously onto the lawn. Looking up at the house, he saw the dark, sticky graffiti left on the facade by the strangers. It had dried in the sun to a bumpy, glue-like mess. He was surprised that his father had allowed them to deface the house in such a way but then he had been acting strangely lately. Tomorrow, one of the estate men would have to get up a ladder and remove the unsightly paste with soapy water and a scraper before it permanently stained the eighteenth-century brickwork.

The boy ran back onto the stone porch, pushed open the door and tore through the house - a small but determined dart in a tank top, shorts and sandals - down the Great Hall, the drawing-room and out onto the terrace.

He ran down the steps leading to the parterre. Up the central path cutting through an intricate knotwork of dwarf hedges, skirting around the three-tiered water fountain in the middle, speeding to the far end and the wall of box, through the secret door and on to the formal gardens.

The boy powered through each one at top speed. One miniature Eden after another flashed by. These gardens were among the finest in England, but he was still too young to appreciate their perfection and exquisiteness. Now, they were just

places for boyhood fun and games, a vast, personal playground. He also did not realise that one day they would belong to him. At his age, he had no conception of ageing and death, of loss and replacement. He thought that time would stand still, that he would always be a boy, living here forever, in blissful contentment with his parents.

His mood had lifted considerably. The black horrors prowling the grounds had now been completely forgotten. Ten-year old boys did not remain solemn for long and it was impossible to be unhappy in these gardens in high summer.

Best of all, he would now have his mother all to himself for the first time since the morning. Running through the estate, his little heart was soaring with joy and love. These were precious, prelapsarian moments but he did not know it. This was to be the last time that he would be happy and at peace. His life of innocence was about to end.

The boy reached the rose garden and ran down the centre, past the sundial and the stone seats, past the statue of the nude Aphrodite which he usually paused to stare at. Then he came to the end and the high brick wall. The wooden door set into it was wide open. The kitchen garden and his mother lay on the other side. She was the only one who had a key. Not even his father was allowed in here without her permission.

Usually, if the boy joined his mother, he would call out in advance but sometimes, like today, he crept up and silently surprised her. He liked to catch her in the act, bending down to the plants as she whispered her secrets to them, her long hair hanging like a flaxen shower of silk. Other times, she would be talking nonsense to the plants, calling them endearments and pet names, encouraging their growth, patting the earth covering their roots like it was an infant's belly, or down on her hands and knees, caressing them. She treated them like her babies, which made him a little jealous.

He was her only baby!

His mother had a talent and passion for horticulture which

went beyond the normal. Gardening absorbed her life. She knew the Latin names for every tree, plant and flower on the estate. Sometimes, if her son requested it, she would walk around the walled garden reeling off the ancient names of everything planted there and the sound of all that Latin on the air was like a prayer or a magic charm.

He peered round the door, expecting to see his mother doing her late-afternoon stroll with the watering can up and down the long rows of vegetables, giving them their final drink of the day, bending down to examine them and pick off any greenfly and leaf spot. This produce would end up on the family table. It would also be shared with the staff, family friends, random villagers and anyone else taking her fancy, so his mother was conscientious about its condition and took great pride in her burgeoning reputation as a grower.

But she was not there.

The boy stepped through the door in the wall. From the gravel path border, he scanned the whole garden, over line after line of crops, right down to the bottom, and that was a long way. About four hundred feet. It was deserted. Among the neat cabbage rows, he could see one of her watering cans, lying on its side like a scuttled ship.

The only place she could be was the new glasshouse, potting something up or examining her grapevines, but he could not see her through the side-panes.

The sound of insect-hum was insistent in his ears. They were always at their loudest and most agitated at this time of day, when the temperature dropped, or maybe they were always this active and their aggression was just more audible as afternoon faded into twilight because everything else was so quiet. At that moment, he wished he could shut off their cacophony.

The boy was facing directly into the sun, which was still powerful despite the hour and the nip in the air. The white-light radiance was blinding him and making his eyes water, so he turned away. Hands in pockets, head down, he ambled his way

up the right-hand of the path, mulling over the disappearance of both parents.

Something lying still on the path further up caught his eye. It was big, white and diaphanous, like a large version of one of the hated cabbage white butterflies who plagued and decimated this garden during the summer months.

The boy ran over and picked it up.

It was his mother's sun hat.

She wore it for gardening during the summer months. It was bought for protection two summers ago, when they had the heat wave and the drought. Father and son had stayed inside the house during that period for fear of heatstroke and illness from late-June until the end of August when, mercifully, the thunderstorms came to relieve the impasse. His mother, however, had braved the pitiless sun. She went out every day in her white hat to monitor the damage being done to the grounds. The gardens were in a bad way. The flowers and grass had shrivelled and died, leeched of all colour. Her beloved kitchen garden looked as if it had been scorched by fire. No crops would grow in the cracked earth and the hosepipe ban meant there was no water for them anyway. It was a brutal time.

The Ladybird Summer.

Someone had called it that.

Scores of ladybirds everywhere, tiny tablets of red and black.

The following June she had re-planted everything, assisted by staff and some extra hired help from the village, as the undertaking was too great for one woman. Now, two years on from that terrible summer, all the gardens had been restored to their former beauty, a testament to her dedication.

Holding the hat in his hands, the boy thought of the heat wave. Unpleasant memories flickered for a moment.

Being a prisoner in the house, with its labyrinth of dusty, stuffy rooms.

Feeling constantly hot, sticky and uncomfortable.

Long, sleepless nights with the windows open, tossing and turning on top of sweat-soaked sheets.

Three months of stifling tension and boredom.

And someone had died.

There had been some trouble over it.

He could not quite remember what had happened.

And it did not matter now anyway.

Why had his mother thrown her hat on the floor?

And where was she?

The boy yawned, suddenly feeling exhausted and a little drowsy. His mother grew many varieties of herbs and medicinal plants in this garden as well as vegetables. They were making him sleepy. Their aroma tickled his nose, making him want to sneeze, and dulled his senses to a soporific standstill.

Like the insects, the herbs seemed to roar into life as dusk approached. Their scent, so soft and unobtrusive during the day, would become stronger and more intoxicating, more dramatic and potent, as the light receded.

His mother had told him that plants and herbs could save life but take it away too. A few years ago, when he was little, she had roped off an area of the most toxic and lethal ones. It was a makeshift arrangement, four wooden stakes arranged in a square and tied together with old rags. Brightly coloured pegs had been pinned on the rags like pennants. They made the plot look jolly and inviting, which was rather at odds with what grew there. She had named this place 'The Poison Patch.'

It was a self-contained castle of the forbidden. The plants within were sinister, exotic and intriguing. For the boy, they held a dark allure, and he was always drawn to this part of the garden. Some of the varieties looked good enough to eat, especially the ones with glossy black berries bursting with juice, but his mother had told him not to go near them. He was banned from even touching those bad plants as that by itself could prove fatal, she said. He believed her and obeyed. His mother knew a great deal about plants and their properties. That was a fact known beyond this estate.

The Poison Patch was not there now.

He recalled watching the gardeners uproot the entire contents and burn it on a bonfire two years ago, during that hot summer. His father had directed them to do it, the only time the boy had ever seen him in the kitchen garden. The boy's father had been in a terrible rage that day. He had stood over the men, hands on his hips, with a face like thunder, and bellowed at them to work faster, dig deeper, uproot, uproot, destroy it all. He had wanted every vestige of those plants gone with some urgency.

His mother was not present to witness any of it. She remained back at the house, where she had locked herself in her room. She did not come out for a few days. The boy had been told not to disturb her. He had heard her through the door once, crying.

It had happened right after…

No, the memory had slipped away.

There were forbidden zones in this garden for the boy. The Poison Patch had been one of them. There were two others.

It would soon be his bedtime. The boy knew he should return to the house but instead he lingered. It had been a long day for a ten-year old. What he really wanted to do was curl up among the cabbages like a caterpillar and sleep. If he went missing, his parents would have to come looking for him. That would teach them both to disappear!

The boy fanned himself with the hat, smiling at the thought of his mother finding him slumbering among her cabbage 'babies.' A dandelion clock floated past and settled on his nose. He brushed it away with one hand and closed his eyes, sighing deeply, lost in happy daydream.

There was a noise from the glasshouse.

The boy jumped and opened his eyes. He was instantly alert, the fatigue gone. He looked at the glasshouse. The ancient, crumbling outhouses had been demolished last year at his mother's request and this modern building – all fresh, shiny paintwork and big windows - erected in their place. His father referred to it as 'the greenhouse in the vegetable garden' but his mother styled it something far grander.

The Vinery.

She grew grapes in there.

The boy eyed the building, biting his bottom lip, hardly daring to breathe, waiting for another sound to come, for some movement within. But the place was silent. That sound was probably a terracotta plant pot being dashed to the floor by a bird flying in, or by a fox looking for food, he thought. It happened frequently when the door was left open. The foxes from the forest were particularly troublesome and destructive.

The boy looked around nervously. He had stayed too long here. He was all alone, there were strange noises, and the light was fading.

And then there was the hole.

The boy looked down the garden at it and frowned, remembering the friction it had caused between his parents. The wall encircling the kitchen garden was old, thick and sturdy, standing fifteen feet high. Over the years, its faded red bricks had survived generations, wars and a protracted battering from the elements.

But it had a weakness.

On the left-hand side of the wall, about ten feet from the bottom of the garden, the lower half of the brickwork had collapsed, leaving a gaping arch. Underneath, broken bricks, sharp rubble, tangled overgrowth and wasp-nests littered the floor, making it a dangerous wilderness. His mother made him stay away from it.

That was the second part of the garden that was outlawed.

The boy knew that the hole was a gnawing source of anxiety for his mother. Once, he had heard his parents discussing it. All three of them were downstairs in the drawing-room one winter's night, wrapped in quilts, shivering in the dark of a power-cut, the only light afforded by a few candles throwing shapes on the walls. His parents thought he was asleep on the sofa, but he was just pretending. He was wide awake and listening to them talking.

His mother was saying that the hole *must* be filled in as a matter of urgency. It was a means for intruders to access the

kitchen garden and, from there, the house. For as long as the hole remained unattended to, she would be keeping the door in the wall locked.

But his mother had another concern about it. She said that someone spied on her from the hole. She would be working in the garden and sense that she was not alone, that she was being watched. She told him how, one morning in October, she was bedding down the crops for winter when she felt a presence staring in at her from the breach in the wall. Quick as a flash, she turned around but there was no one there. All she had was an impression of hurried movement out of the corner of her eye, someone scrambling over the rubble and back across the fields. She had been nervous about entering the garden on her own ever since.

His father was silent while she spoke. When he replied, he sounded detached and dismissive. He said that she was over-reacting, that it was probably just a curious animal looking in at her - a dog, hare or deer - searching for food. Maybe it was one of the estate men playing Peeping Tom or the village children playing about or looking for something to steal. He promised to send a man down there to repair the damage so that she could rest easy.

That conversation had been just over a year ago and the hole was still there.

A twilight breeze whipped round the garden, making the taller plants quiver and shake from side to side. Shadows were entering the garden, making everything inky. The glasshouse cast a dark and ballooning silhouette across the rows of crops. The air was full of seed heads, gracefully floating by like tiny planets. The garden had looked so ordinary when the boy entered it but in a short time it had turned into a dreamscape, a place of mystery and nightshade.

It was time for him to return to the house. He turned and made for the door, but then he stopped.

There was another noise from the glasshouse.

Two voices.

A man and woman.

Hers was the first sound, a soft gasp, very low and faint.

It was followed by his, a guttural grunt, also barely audible through the thick glass.

The boy spun round. He stared intently at the building, willing it to make another sound.

There were people in there!

Now he felt a little more comfortable and at ease. To this little boy, human voices – especially female ones - meant authority, care and love. Besides, he thought he knew to whom those voices belonged.

His mother and father.

They were hiding from him.

He had been searching for them all afternoon and here they were all along, in the glasshouse, playing a prank on him. A game of hide-and-seek, like the ones they all played up at the house, with its many dark rooms and places of concealment.

He could not see his parents through the windows. Were they crouching on the floor, secretly watching him? To the boy, those noises sounded like stifled adult laughter.

Well, he would seek them out!

The glasshouse took up most of the right-hand wall, about three-quarters of its length. The boy started skipping back down the path. He turned down a track that led deeper into the garden, straight to the door of the glasshouse. There was a gorgeous profusion of lavender growing on either side of this path. His mother called it 'The Royal Walk' because of all the purple. The lavender was high and unchecked, brushing his face as he walked, filling his nostrils with its sweet, powdery perfume.

The boy reached the door. It was ajar. He stepped inside. The Vinery was shaped like a right-sided triangle, with a sloping roof of glass. The interior was painted a dazzling white and consisted of two large rooms.

In the first one, where he stood, grew the grapevines that had given the building its grand title. They were espaliered against the panes and the vines had grown their way up to the very top. They

were regularly trimmed back so that they were flush with the bare, right-hand wall. Big, bulging bunches of white grapes, pearly with moisture, hung down like pendulums. There was a pleasing smell in here, fresh greenery cut by the sharp crispness of white wine.

The tiled floor was bare except for two small stoves, which spat and crackled bad-temperedly. Even in hot weather, the stoves were kept on full blast. No other furniture. There was nothing here except the vines, no sound apart from the gurgling stoves. It was like a stifling, bone-coloured crypt with a ceiling of leaves and green stems.

His parents were not in here and there was nowhere to hide. There was a utility room off to the right where his mother kept her tools, watering cans, pots and general supplies. The door was open; that little chamber was empty too.

That just left the second room, at the far end. This was the third of his mother's taboo places. He had been banned from entering that part of the glasshouse. She was growing something in there that she did not want him or anyone else to see. Usually, the door to this area was closed but today it stood wide open. He tiptoed down the green avenue, paused on the threshold for a moment, then went inside.

He saw two rows of cultivation separated by a walkway. On the left-hand side was a close line of dwarf fruit trees. They formed a wall of concealment for what lay yonder from anyone peering through the glass from outside.

On the right-hand side of the room, his mother was growing copious amounts of a new plant, a tall, straggly thing with massive, splayed green leaves. It looked like a nettle and had a sweet, herbaceous aroma.

Further up was a new Poison Patch. His mother was growing it again, in secret. The boy recognised the familiar flowers from the old, banished plot. The blue-and-purple toxic trumpets of foxglove, wolfsbane and columbine. Black rosettes of hellebore and tiny white starbursts of hemlock. Henbane, with its repulsive veins and sticky hairs, and the midnight berries of pokeweed and

deadly nightshade. There were many others too, weird, unearthly succulents that disturbed rather delighted. The plants had a sickly smell, as if they were decaying.

What would his father say if he knew about them?

There was a mess up the far end of the room. Earth and broken plants were strewn all over the walkway, displaced by something thrashing about among the beds. It was this creature that was making the broken panting he had heard outside, the sound he had mistaken for his father's laughter. The boy edged closer to get a better look.

Now he could see. This was not one of the fantastical invaders, the wailing wall-painters and lawn-caperers from earlier. It was someone quite different. A man, encased in black from head to foot. No scales, no glittering metal. Just tight black clothing, including a balaclava and gloves.

Crouching, head down, back arched.

Initially, the man did not notice the boy's presence. He was lost in a frenzy of activity, left hand pressed down hard against the earth for support, the right hand repeatedly stabbing and slashing with shocking intensity at something obscured beneath it. A groan of anger and excitement was emitted with each fresh assault.

The man momentarily raised its right arm aloft and the boy saw a sharp silver object dripping with something red and ghastly flash in his gloved hand.

It was a large knife – or rather a tool.

The type with a thick, curved blade used by the estate workers for the forestry. The man lunged again, and the arm came down on whatever it was splayed over. The boy heard vicious metal plunge deep into something soft and yielding. He winced. He was a country child and accustomed to seeing animals killed and skinned on the estate with knives, but this was no deer or rabbit.

Something was protruding from underneath the man.

A human hand.

It was grubby and belonged to a gardener, soil trapped under the nails, but the fingers were elegant and tapering. The hand was

motionless, like the body part of a sleeper or waxwork.

The boy stood behind the man, just a few feet away, transfixed and rooted to the spot. He felt nothing, no fear or curiosity, for he did not understand what he was seeing. All he could do was watch.

Suddenly, the man stopped what he was doing and was completely still.

He knew that someone else was here.

Carefully, the man placed the blade down then rose slowly to his full height and turned around. Standing, he exposed what had been lying underneath him on the crushed flowerbed. The thing he had been stabbing at. When the boy saw it, he gasped in horror and grief. It was one pulped bloody mass, apart from the head, the face….

…*like the time he had found a woodpigeon in the garden that had been caught and opened up by a cat*…

The boy suddenly felt cold and faint. His legs started to buckle under him.

Suddenly, the man sprang. He caught the boy, holding him roughly by the scruff of the neck, forcing his small head into his own gore-spattered chest, suffocating him. A strange and terrible stench filled the boy's nostrils, making him gag. It was the metallic stench of blood…and something else. A strong, underlying scent that was familiar to him. A wave of nausea washed over the boy, and he knew that he would never forget that smell for as long as he lived.

The boy could taste salty blood in his mouth, feel it getting into his eyes and hair and staining the front of his clothes. The boy twisted and turned, trying to escape, but he was held fast. He tried to scream but he could hardly breathe. The man started chuckling, a gloating sound of triumph and lunacy.

The boy knew he was fighting for his life and a wave of adrenaline surged through his body. He kicked out, catching his attacker a sharp blow on the shin. The man let out a howl of pain and momentarily loosened the grip on his neck. The boy seized his chance and pulled away with one quick, abrupt movement.

He was free.

Turning fast, the boy ran out of the room and back down the length of the grape-house. He was trying to spit out the terrible coppery taste in his mouth. With relief, he burst out into fresh air, rocketing down the lavender walkway towards the door in the wall that would lead him out of this garden of evil. Reaching that blessed exit seemed to take an age and when he did, the boy spared a second to look back at the glasshouse.

The man had not given chase.

He was still inside, maybe completing his interrupted work. Far off, down the bottom of the garden, a movement by the hole in the wall caught the boy's attention. There was a flash of oval white. At first, he thought it was a doll's head but then it moved. A face was peering at him round the side of the brickwork.

A young girl in a pale, wispy dress was standing in the gap among the rubble. She was slightly older than him, at the beginning of adolescence. Dark-haired and ethereal. A phantom, another daylight horror for him to contend with. No, she was real. He recognised her.

It was the girl from the adjoining estate.

Her eyes were fixed on the blood covering the boy's face and clothes.

For a second, he was distracted by her presence in the garden and wondered why she was here but then he remembered the atrocity in the glasshouse.

The man was coming for him now.

He was storming through the room of grapevines, brandishing the curved knife. The boy screamed and bolted through the door in the wall, down the rose garden, back towards the house.

The girl stared after the boy. She was about to step into the garden but then someone came out of the glasshouse. He was dressed all in black. How incongruous he looked on this glorious summer's day when everything should be light and bright. She had never seen this startling vision here before and she visited this garden all the time, sometimes at the invitation of the kind

lady who owned it, sometimes in secret. The sight of the man made her afraid and obviously the boy had been running away from him. Quickly, she dodged behind the wall.

The girl peered out, taking care not to be seen. The man had covered the lavender path in a few strides and stood on the path at the far corner of the garden. He was carrying a big knife in one hand. The blade and hilt were covered in something red and wet. It looked like blood. The man reached up with the other hand and grasped the bottom of the balaclava. He was about to remove it. The girl leaned in closer, craning her head round the edge of the arch, straining to see his face. Then she stepped into a dip in the rubble-carpet, sending a shower of brick-shards tumbling into the garden.

The man spun round.

She steadied herself and bobbed out of sight, but it was too late.

He had seen her.

The man started walking towards her, wielding the knife, gradually increasing speed until he was almost running. She was aware that he meant to do her a terrible harm. Turning, she raced back through the hole. The rubble from the wall was like an assault course but she was used to it. Nimbly, she picked her way over the sharp and nasty detritus, side-stepping the worst of it with practised dexterity, then dropped down into the field on the other side. She had to reach the woods, she could disappear in there and get back home. The girl scrambled and stumbled over the long grass, watched in the distance by a motionless muntjac.

Back at the house, a blood-spattered boy stood sobbing in the middle of the drawing-room. He was being held by the cook, face pressed against her apron for comfort, his little arms around her plump waist, while the housekeeper was trying to wipe his face clean with saliva and a handkerchief

Someone was thundering up the terrace steps, taking two steps at a time. They all recognised those boldly confident footfalls.

A voice called out to them.

'Has anyone seen my wife?'

CHAPTER ONE

I REMEMBER WHEN I met Johnny Longmarch. It was the night that St George was killed and brought back to life. The time was early December 1990, near the end of Michaelmas term. I was nineteen years old and in my second year at Oxford. It was a Friday and Pascoe Trelawney, my boyfriend, was taking me to a Christmas party. When he knocked on the door of my room around 7pm, I was still rummaging around in my wardrobe for something to wear. He sat down on the bed.

'How formal is this event?' I asked him, eyeing his suit. 'Party dress or jeans?'

'Dress, I should think,' he said.

I reached for the midnight blue velvet, diamante-studded evening gown that I kept for college dinners and other formal occasions. It was one of only two dresses I owned, the other being a tasteless bright pink puffball number bought in the late-80s which I had quickly realised was completely unsuitable for Oxford life.

I changed, grabbed my coat and we headed off. Outside, it was dark and bitterly cold, and the pavement was coated in hoarfrost and slippery underfoot. In the hall of residence, light came from the occupied student rooms, lots of glowing yellow boxes. Part of me wished that I was tucked up in bed with a book and a bowl of soup instead of freezing in the street waiting for our friends to arrive, but Pascoe had been adamant about

attending this party.

I felt apprehensive. I was shy by nature and not much of a social animal, avoiding the many shindigs, soirees and frolics on offer at Oxford, and the thought of tonight's party, in a strange house in the middle of nowhere, made me more nervous than usual. Maybe I had some intimation of how life-changing it would be.

The car pulled up with Matthew at the wheel and Harry in the passenger seat. In the back was Celia, Matthew's girlfriend. They were all in their second year at the college, like me and Pascoe. We formed a little gang and usually went out together somewhere on a Friday night, even if it was just to the student bar.

Pascoe and I climbed in the back, next to Celia. We greeted each other and happy, noisy chatter ensued. The five of us were young and light of spirit, plus it would be Christmas soon. Life was good and, thanks to our Oxford golden tickets, the future was unknown but very exciting.

'Everyone ready?' asked Matthew.

'Yes,' we chorused.

'Right, let's hit the road then.'

He started the engine and we drove off. The hall of residence receded from view and the car turned into the town centre. The streets were festooned with Christmas lights and full of late-night shoppers. We reached the junction of St Giles, went down past the Martyr's Memorial, and carried on along Woodstock Road. The suburban part of Oxford went by and then we left the town altogether and were out on the motorway for about thirty minutes.

Matthew turned off at a junction and the landscape changed. Suddenly, we were in the heart of the Oxfordshire countryside. Mile after mile of night-stained fields, farm buildings, pubs and lonely, isolated cottages flashed past. Soon, we had left all signs of habitation behind. We drove deeper and deeper, down narrow, unlit, deserted lanes boxed in on either side by hedgerows. I tried to keep track of our whereabouts, looking out for the dilapidated old grey signposts tucked away behind trees, but I

became confused and disorientated and after a while, all the lanes merged into one big labyrinth. Everyone stopped talking and there was a tense silence as the lanes became increasingly more hairpin. Matthew slowed down as the car slithered dangerously on the icy road.

Then, to our relief, we turned up a track which ended in the sweeping driveway of a large private house. There were about fifty cars collected there and the place was ablaze with lights. Music and laughter filtered out onto the night air. Inside, a party was in full swing.

Matthew parked and we all got out. The house was a large Victorian country mansion, sprawling and grandiose, set in secluded wooded grounds. The residence of people with a great deal of money. Simon, the host who greeted us at the door, was one of Pascoe's college friends. I later learned that the house belonged to his parents. They were out of the country for the month, and he had the run of the place.

The hallway was full of revellers milling around a tall and imposing Christmas tree and there were more of them on the stairs and the landing. It was a young, affluent student crowd, well-dressed, well-heeled and supremely confident. An array of expensive suits and silk evening dresses with a diamond or sapphire sparkling here and there. I did not recognise any of them.

I had been to other big parties before but that had been in the 1980s when I was a kid, with my friends from school and off the estate. Back then, there had been a fun and innocent atmosphere, all purple-and-fuchsia taffeta, crimped hair, and rainbow eyeshadow against a soundtrack of New Romantic hits and electro-pop. But as soon as I walked through the door of this house, I could tell that the scene had changed with the new decade. Maybe it was because the crowd was older and richer, but the frivolity had gone, replaced by something darker, heavier and more mind-expanding. The after-effects of the Second Summer of Love.

We were led into the elegant drawing room, which was

heaving with people, some of them sprawled on the sofas and armchairs. The lighting was dim, just a few table-lamps here and there, and the coloured scarves draped over some of them gave the room a cavernous aspect. There were dusty rectangular shapes on the walls where some of the better paintings had been removed. The host did not trust his guests.

Trippy Indie murmured from the speakers and the atmosphere was thick with cigarette smoke and the pheromones of nubile heavenly bodies. I felt the familiar feeling of being overwhelmed and intimidated creeping over me. Despite nearly four terms at Oxford, I could never get used to the huge wealth on display everywhere and tonight, in this room of strangers, the air was perfumed with privilege.

Matthew, Harry and Celia had melted into the crowd. Pascoe was still by my side, but he ignored me, his eyes scanning the room like a bird of prey. I could sense his excitement and impatience. He was waiting for something to happen.

I looked at my watch. It was nearly 9pm. Someone had turned off the music. A festive punch called *Winter's Blood* was being passed around the room. I took a sip from my goblet, tasting red wine, hot spices, sugar. All the good, delicious things. I finished it quickly, feeling my cheeks flush, and helped myself to another. Soon, everyone in the room was on their third or fourth toddy and the atmosphere in the room was raucous and merry.

Something else was being circulated too, creating a stir. It was a booklet of some kind, and a copy was handed to each guest. I was given one and saw that it was a programme, not the professional glossy kind but one typed and stapled on plain paper.

The frontispiece bore the following words:

'The Parleycote Wheelers present:

'St George and Black Tancred:

A Christmas Mummers' Play'

I still have that programme to this day, a relic of that evening.

Inside was a list of the players.

Cast in Order of Appearance:

Father Christmas..... Sep Turner

St George..... Simon Simoneaux

Turkish Knight..... Lewis Ford

Doctor..... Milton Ruskin

Bold Slasher..... Colin Peacock

King of Egypt..... Rollo Stafford

Fool..... Finlay Williamson

Jack-in-the-Green..... Owen Pennyroyal

Beelzebub..... Hugh Fitzpaine

Black Tancred..... Dominic Burgess

Men-at-Arms..... Will Bloxham, Mike Maple.

There followed a transcript of the short play that was to be performed that night.

I prodded Pascoe in the arm.

'So, this is the reason that you wanted to come to the party,' I said to him. 'It was to see this mummers' play.'

Pascoe was a folklore nut.

'They're a troupe of travelling folk performers, supposedly one of the best in Oxfordshire. I've been wanting to see them for a long time so when I heard that Simon had hired them to provide the entertainment at his Christmas party, I had to come,' he said.

As we stood looking through the programme, weird music started to fill the room. It was insidious and creeping, like a wisp of smoke. Strings played slowly and gently on unseen instruments, with the occasional percussive interruption of a

triangle or tambourine. The effect was uncanny and mysterious, preparing us for something strange.

Everyone was suddenly moving back, forming a circular space in front of the fireplace. No one spoke, all we could hear was the music, coming from a concealed stereo-player in the room. Now the music was dying away. We all held our breath in expectation, staring at the makeshift stage.

Suddenly, the door was flung open, and we all jumped in fright. A tall, very stout, snowy-bearded man dressed in a red cloak and hood trimmed with white fur strode in, ringing a hand bell to clear a path for himself through the crowd. There was a collective sigh of relief as everyone recognised the familiar figure of Father Christmas. He stood in front of the fireplace and delivered a speech. His voice boomed around the room, orotund and fruity:

'*Solstice of winter, Yule's fires a-burn,*
We gather here tonight to see the year turn,
But before the chime of midnight brings a new twelvemonth made,
The Parleycote Wheelers present our motley parade,
Three knights of valour, good, bad and pitch,
A monarch, a swordsman, one born in a ditch,
The devil in person, trickster ever dealing,
One man of leaves and another of healing,
And I, Father Christmas, fat as a duck,
For the coming year we wish you all health, wealth and luck,
But before you laugh along, drink deep and make hay,
Be silent, be still, and watch our mummers' play.'

Then he disappeared into the crowd and a figure representing St George came into the room. He wore a helmet, chainmail and the crusader's white tabard with a red cross. In one hand, he carried a shield painted with the same two colours and in the other was a silver sword, which I assumed was a toy. St George started his speech:

'In comes I, valiant St George, England's patriot best,

Returned from the Holy Land, now on a new quest,
To fight a demon worse than the Devil in disguise,
The mask he wears is blacker than the Father of Lies.'

There was some more about his adventures in the Holy Land and the Turkish Knight, the adversary he had evaded there.

Then another character stormed into the room.

It was the Turkish Knight himself!

He wore a long, purple-and-gold Arabian costume with a headdress and brandished a scimitar with a broad, curving blade. Like his predecessor, The Turkish Knight introduced himself with '*In comes I*' and said his piece, about how he had followed St George half-way across the globe to challenge him to a duel. Now everyone in the room was thoroughly enjoying themselves, especially as a sword fight was about to start. There were lots of cheers for St George and boos and catcalls for his opponent.

The two men squared up with their weapons, lifting them aloft. To my surprise, I saw that the swords were not imitation but the real thing. Long, thick blades that had been polished so that they gleamed in the firelight. Their combat started, an orchestrated but still thrilling spectacle. The swords must have been very heavy as the pair needed both hands to lift them.

Mummers' plays are folk-based and ritualistic. Traditionally performed at Christmas, they can be traced back to the late-thirteenth century. The script usually follows a familiar pattern. There is a combat element between two characters or 'guisers,' traditionally St George and the Turkish Knight, during which one of them is slain. He is then revived by the Doctor, his death and rebirth a symbol of the end of the old year and the coming of the new one. Various figures and archetypes from history and folklore wander through the proceedings, adding colour, humour and an element of pageantry.

The play that night conformed to this model. After a hugely enjoyable sword fight, St George fell to the ground, mortally wounded. A collective exclamation of disappointment went

around the room. Then the Doctor entered, wearing a black suit and a top hat. He delivered his '*In comes I*' part, administered the medicine and St George sprang up like a Jack-in-the-Box. We all cheered. Decency, civility and national pride had been restored.

But the play was not yet over.

A whirligig of activity unfolded, with more 'guisers' rushing on, one by one, all introducing themselves with a witty little speech. First Bold Slasher, St George's henchman, wearing grey helmet, chain mail and armour. He expressed joy at his master's return from the dead. Then the King of Egypt, in a golden pharaoh costume, to extoll the bravery of St George and pin a jewel on his tabard. Next came the Fool and Jack-in-the-Green, both with painted faces, wearing flowery hats and the traditional mummers' tatter-coat, an apparel consisting of layer upon layer of rags. The Fool's garb was gay and rainbow-coloured whereas Jack's coat consisted of tiers of leaves. With his green face, he resembled a tree in motion. Both made speeches praising St George. It was all very jolly, but then the tone darkened when another character stepped into the circle.

'*In comes I…*'

It was Beelzebub – the Devil - in horns and scarlet skin-tight body stocking with a split tail at the back, wielding a pitchfork. His face was blood-red and malevolent. The audience gasped. I looked around the room at the semi-circle of fearful faces and grinned. This play was splendid, and everyone was loving it. Someone at the back, in the shadows over by the door caught my eye. A young man. I had an impression of golden hair and controlled rage blazing out of blue eyes before I turned back to the play.

There followed another test for St George in the form of a dialogue between St George and Beelzebub about the nature of good and evil, with the latter trying to tempt the former into ways of wickedness, but our hero stood firm and resisted his blandishments.

Mummers' plays usually end at point but not this one. There

was more to come. The Devil had been thwarted but he had an ace up his sleeve. He started another speech:

'*Bravo to the brave St George, champion of the good,*
You have countered my seductions as any hero would,
Now I send you my agent, one black in heart and metal,
You must chop him, lop him, slay him to truly prove your fettle.'

At that point, something quite frightening burst into the room. It was a new character, even more alarming than Satan. A tall, black obelisk of a knight, with armour of smooth obsidian and a helmet like a rectangular chunk of onyx. He was carrying a long, slate-like blade.

This was Black Tancred.

He was hellish and terrible, like something from a bad dream.

This new warrior delivered no speech. Instead, he launched straight into ferocious combat with St George, who quickly raised his sword to meet the oncoming blow from the new assailant. We all gasped aloud at the violence of the show. This combat was so much more disturbing than the other, less stylised, more authentic, almost like something separate from the play we had just watched. I winced at the sound of those cruel blades clashing against each other without choreograph, narrowly missing flesh.

The black knight was a dirty fighter and our hero struggled against him. St George was suddenly on his knees, desperately trying to fend off his attacker. It looked as if he was about to be vanquished but then he staged a last-minute comeback, lunged forward with his sword to deliver a lethal feint and Black Tancred fell to the ground, dead.

Two soldiers immediately rushed in, shouting in unison: *'In come we, the men-at arms…'* Their robust male voices brought the play to a close and all the mummers returned, joined hands and took their final bow. The room erupted into enthusiastic applause. St George removed his helmet so that we could see his face. The players were all middle-aged men, flushed from their exertions.

Black Tancred remained motionless on the floor.

We were waiting for him to receive the same life-giving elixir from the Doctor that had been administered to St George but that did not happen. There was some concern for the fallen knight. Guests were pointing at him, asking each other what was wrong. For a moment, we thought he was genuinely hurt.

Then, calmly and unhurriedly, Black Tancred raised himself from the floor. He stood in front of the other mummers, like a star actor taking the final curtain call, and removed the helmet, revealing the man underneath. This performer was much younger than the others, hence the wild, impetuous energy. He looked my age. Later, much later, I found out that he was a student at the university. He took a solitary bow and there was more clapping from the very happy and entertained audience.

The players joined us all for a drink before leaving. Their flamboyant costumes, with the spangled colours, shiny surfaces and ragged, voluminous silliness, made them stand out. Pascoe left me and rushed over to speak to them. I watched him talking animatedly to the men, mining them for information about their play and anything they knew about local folklore. I wandered over, keeping my distance as I did not want to be drawn into the conversation, but I heard some of it.

'Tell me, who is Black Tancred? Am I right in thinking that he is not part of the traditional mummers' play? I've seen a few of them and he's a completely new character to me,' said Pascoe.

'Tancred? He's part of Oxfordshire legend,' said the man with the resonant voice who had played Father Christmas. The face behind the white beard was gaunt and fine-boned and, underneath his red cloak, I glimpsed thick padding.

'Fascinating,' said Pascoe, agog. 'I must do some research on him.'

'Tancred was a regular Bluebeard,' said St George.

'Bluebeard…'

Pascoe looked faraway and dreamy as he said the word. His mind was full of ideas and pictures.

'Lock up your daughters if you see Black Tancred coming.'

This from the Turkish Knight.

'And your wives, sisters, mothers…' added the King of Egypt.

There was a ripple of laughter from the men. It had a dark undercurrent and made me uneasy. Father Christmas shot them a disapproving look and shook his head. Then they all fell silent and looked at a point in the crowd. I turned around and followed their gaze. They were staring at the fair-haired young man who had been at the back of the room. He had come forward, so that he was visible to them. Then, when he was sure that they had all registered his presence, he turned away and vanished into the throng of revellers.

'See who that was?'

'I recognised him too.'

'After all these years…'

'I didn't know he was here.'

'He heard what we said.'

'He saw us laughing.'

The men gabbled like geese, looking shaken. Then Father Christmas, who seemed to be their leader, raised his hand to quieten them.

'He's entitled to watch us. And we are entitled to perform.'

'But he watched the play – to the end,' said one of the men. 'He saw…'

'What if he did?' interrupted the actor who had played the Doctor. 'What can he do? We can include the Black Tancred character if we like. He doesn't own it. As Sep said, he's part of Oxfordshire legend. Anyone can use him.'

Pascoe had been avidly listening to all this, looking from one speaker to the other. 'Who was that?' he asked.

'Just someone we once performed for,' said the man called Sep. 'Not a happy outcome.'

Pascoe opened his mouth to quiz them some more but his conversation with the troupe was over. Sep made a signal and all twelve men put down their goblets and swiftly made their way

through the crowd towards the door. A minute later, they had gone, with Pascoe looking forlornly after them. I should have joined him, but I knew that I would only end up as the sounding-board for whatever was now on his mind, and I was not in the mood for that, so I turned on my heels before he spotted me.

I slipped out of the room and went into the hall, pushing my way through the mass of bodies. I was unfamiliar with the house and did not know where I was going. There was a grand buffet laid out in the kitchen and I was heading there for some supper but somehow, I ended up in the conservatory. It was a large, rectangular body of leaded glass with white frames and timbers, modern in design with lots of tropical plants and obviously a recent addition to the old mansion. I expected it to be crammed with party overspill, but it was virtually empty, with just a few people milling about.

There was someone in here with his back to me, staring out of the window into the darkness of the garden. It was the mysterious young man who had unnerved the mummers. I studied him from behind. He was slender and very tall, about six feet three. I was tall myself, five feet ten. The young man's hair was thick and the exact same natural shade of burnished gold as my own, but his had a busy curl and skimmed his collar. My own locks had a gentle wave and descended to the small of my back. I had a sudden odd sensation, as if I were seeing my phantom twin or male doppelganger.

He was dressed in a tweed jacket, cinnamon-brown corduroy trousers and leather Hush Puppies. He did not look sharp, edgy or super-cool like all the other guests. His style was more rustic and shabby chic. This was someone who did not care much for clothes or appearances and felt no need to impress anyone. He saw me in the glass of the window, staring at him, and spun round.

I caught my breath. Now I saw his face up close for the first time.

I remember as a child seeing an image in a picture-book of Jack Frost. It wasn't the traditional cruel and evil representation.

Instead, he was depicted as a mysterious elemental with a face of flawless perfection carved out of ice. Straight, rather feminine nose formed from a long, delicate bone of cartilage, diamond-cut cheekbones, lips that were neither thin nor over-full, skin of pale, soft cream and eyes of a piercing ice blue. More fallen angel than cruel winter spirit. The young man sitting next to me looked just like him, only his eyes were darker, like murky sapphires, and heavily lashed. He was extremely handsome. The most beautiful man I had ever seen. A dreamy boy. Do girls still use the word 'dreamy' about boys they fancy?

We stared at each other. My legs went a little weak. My mouth fell open and would not close. I could not take my eyes off him. Then he spoke.

'You came in here to escape the pandemonium?'

His voice was cut-glass and refined. Plummy, some would say.

'Oh yes, it…it's a little loud,' I stammered.

'That's why I'm in here too. I wanted some peace to be able to think.'

'Would you like me to leave you alone?'

'No. Please stay. I need some company right now.'

His voice was warm and friendly. He smiled at me, showing two rows of perfect white teeth. The effect was very disarming. This was no statue or spirit, but a flesh-and-blood man and he wanted to talk to me.

'Are you a friend of Simon's?'

'Yes. Don't worry. I was invited. I'm not a gate-crasher.'

'Sorry, I didn't mean to imply…'

'That's alright. I know you didn't. I'm just pulling your leg.'

He smiled more widely and extended his hand to me.

'I'm Johnny Longmarch.'

'Louise Reeves.'

He had a gentle but firm handshake. His hands were elegant, with long, tapering fingers but a little rough with reddened knuckles, as if he did manual labour. This was a gentleman unafraid to get his hands dirty. I wondered what his body looked

like underneath those unflattering clothes. Stealing glances at him, I pictured the form concealed within. Perfect alabaster skin bronzed by the sun in the summer months, long, muscular limbs and a classic triangular tautness of back and torso.

'Let's sit down,' he said.

I hesitated, wondering if Pascoe was looking for me in the drawing-room but then I remembered the way he had ignored me all night to chase after those mummers and guessed that he had probably latched onto someone else in the room and was currently bending their ear with his estimation of the play. Pascoe would barely be missing me, and if this was not the case, then he would just have to wait for my reappearance because I intended spending a little time in here with Johnny Longmarch.

There was a four-seater sofa, bookended by pot plants with enormous, waxy-looking leaves. Johnny moved over to it with grace and poise, like a snow leopard. He sat down and beckoned me over to him with one crooked finger. It was like a benevolent command. His whole being had taken on an irresistible, seductive quality. This was something he was able to turn on at will.

'How did you meet Simon?' he asked when I had installed myself in one of the end seats, at what I judged to be a polite and wholesome distance.

'He's in the same class as my boyfriend, Pascoe.'

'Pascoe. That's an unusual name.'

'It's Cornish. He brought me here tonight. He wanted to see the mummers' play.'

Johnny's jewel-like eyes narrowed and emptied of their light.

'Did you enjoy their play?' I asked.

'No. Too much horrid verse and terrible costumes. Reminded me of a bad pantomime.'

'The mummers seemed to know you.'

He shook his head. 'They don't know me at all.'

'You upset them. They left early because they saw you.'

'They performed at my house once. Terrible job. Seeing me was probably a painful reminder of the event.'

'Yet you still watched them perform tonight.'

'I wanted to see if they had improved with the years.'

'And have they?'

'No. Do you live in Oxford?' he said, deftly changing the subject.

'Yes. I'm a student there.'

I told him the name of my college.

'What are you reading?'

'English Language and Literature.'

Johnny revealed that he was an Oxford alumnus himself. He had graduated that year, having read Chemistry at Balliol. We discussed student stuff and that led on to me telling him my life story. I talked about my mother dying of cancer when I was seven, about living with my grandmother and winning a scholarship place at Oxford. I did not mention the housing estate or my absentee father. He did not need to know about that.

We discussed our memories of the 1980s of how strange it felt to have left that loud and colourful decade behind, and about our hopes and expectations for the 1990s. The Berlin Wall had fallen a year ago and there was a tremendous sense of optimism in the air, with people believing that we were entering a new age of peace and love and that everything in the world was going to get better.

I did most of the talking. Johnny was a wonderful listener. He gave me his full attention, looking interested in what I had to say, and did not interrupt. Quite unlike Pascoe and many other boys I had known. He was so easy to talk to and I was completely relaxed in his company. For me to feel that way with a stranger was unheard of. I was wary of people and usually, I needed to know someone for ages before I felt completely comfortable with them but with Johnny it was different. I connected with him instantly. It was strange. I felt as if I had known him for many years. I was so captivated by him that I failed to notice how little he had told me about himself until we had been talking for an hour. I asked him what he did for a living.

'Oh, compared to you I'm incredibly dull,' he said with a sigh. 'I'm now enrolled on a rather boring course at the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester. We're doing agronomy now, which ties in well with my science degree. I do a bit of labouring when I can too.'

'So…a gentleman roustabout.'

He beamed.

'I like that.'

He looked at his watch.

'It's getting on for midnight. I must go now, Louise. I have an early start tomorrow.'

Johnny rose to leave. He pulled a cashmere scarf out of his jacket pocket and tied it around his neck.

I had to say something. I wanted to see him again.

'Would you like to go for a coffee sometime? There's a great place near my college?' I said, trying not to sound too eager. I think I must have failed because Johnny sighed and his eyes clouded over, like a shutdown.

'I've got a fiancé,' he said tonelessly.

I felt an inner deflation, like the phantom of a hope flying out of my body, leaving me crushed. I suppose I was already madly in love with him by then.

'Her name's Karina. She couldn't come to the party with me tonight. She had a rehearsal. She's an actress. Look, I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea…'

'No, it's fine,' I said in a voice I hoped did not betray my true feelings. 'It was just a coffee. No big deal.'

'Why not take your Cornishman for the coffee? He'll enjoy that. Well, it's been lovely meeting you, Louise.'

We shook hands and then he walked out of the conservatory and - I assumed – right out of my life forever.