Something Borrowed

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Extract

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Chapter One
The Shame of Sheila Mancha

Good morning!

I love waking up in my gorgeous, multicoloured attic at home. I love the north-eastern light and the angry calls of gulls across the sheer blue sky; the ghostly aromas of a hundred thousand cooked breakfasts and the steam rising from the spouts of a hundred thousand teapots over the slate blue rooftops.

Friday morning. There's a spring chill in my room and I'm pushing back the night with the thick bedclothes and I'm doing my stretching exercises briskly when there comes the clattering of the letter box at the bottom of the stairs.

I need to be up and about! Doing things! Getting on

with business! I start jogging on the spot. Star jumps. Thump thump thump on the bedroom floor. Not bad for my age, eh? How old would you say I was, hm?

You'd be wrong.

Thump thump thump down the stairs.

Ah. This morning, a note shoved through by hand. I recognise the prim italics of my neighbour and best friend, Effie. She hasn't written much:

> *Brenda, dear. We're needed. Are you free today? I will meet you at 9.30 a.m. in our usual spot at the Walrus and the Carpenter. Coffee and walnut cake are on me.*

It isn't at all like Effie to offer to pay. And what does she mean, we're 'needed'? I hope she's not determined to get us involved in any more funny business. We had enough of that at the end of last year.

This is supposed to be my retirement. This is my quiet bed and breakfast, and my quiet landlady life. But I'll meet Effie at the Walrus and the Carpenter nevertheless, and see what it is she wants. Just in case it's something important.

I feel as if I am in the swim of things here, at the heart of Whitby. My establishment is quite close to the harbour and the seafront and the bridge across to the old town. I am

surrounded by hundreds of these intricate Victorian streets. Living here, looking after guests here, I am in the middle of all the places and things I think I'll ever need. This morning, togged up in my heaviest coat and fleece-lined boots, I'm taking deep lungfuls of sea air and I nod and exchange a few good mornings with people I know.

I skirt round the harbour mouth and I'm watching the fishing boats bobbing at their moorings. The rooftops over the bay are shining in the morning sun and, when I look up, there's the ancient abbey, hulking and dark and jagged against the horizon. I try not to look too hard at it. I hurry over the bridge and into the old part of town.

Whitby still feels like the perfect place for my well-earned semi-retirement. Last year, setting myself up in my B&B, I decided I would take in a few, select, paying guests. I would fuss over them, and make my rooms luxurious for them. I would keep my head down and live out a quiet life in my seaside retreat.

That was my plan, anyway.

When I arrived here, descending upon these higgledy-piggledy streets, I established a gentle routine of none-too-strenuous work, cookery and contemplation. I made friends here, with a few quite ordinary-seeming souls. I enjoyed mornings of coffee, cake and conversation with my new friend Effie from the junk shop next door. We ventured out

to the occasional not-very-extravagant restaurant along the seafront. We went to a bingo night or two, even a tea dance in one of the stately hotels on the Royal Crescent.

Above all I felt that I was fitting in at last. I was happily inconspicuous. A little tall, perhaps. I am a heavy-set woman, with undistinguished features. My hands are rather large. I tend to keep them out of the way, and try not to gesticulate when I speak. My accent is difficult to pin down, for I have lived in many different towns and counties. I slather my face in thick make-up, so that it always has a slightly unnatural hue to it. Not out of vanity, you understand. I look more like someone covering something up than I do someone deliberately flaunting herself. I hear people wonder: burns? Scars? My clothes are rather demure and modest; old-fashioned.

I don't look in the windows of the shops as I pass them this morning. I glide past the sweet shops, the jewellery and novelty shops, and I'm not tempted to glance sideways at my reflection. I'm less self-conscious than I was before. I'm out in bright sunshine, in full make-up, and my head's held high. Things are better for me these days.

People find it difficult to tell exactly how old I am. And that's just as well. That's how I like it. I appear old enough to be harmless. Old enough for folk to believe I live a blameless life. A life above suspicion.

Oh, dear.

My life has been rather fraught with terrors and disasters. And it still is.

I seem to have the knack for drawing into my orbit people and things, events and occurrences, that can only be described as *macabre*.

The Walrus and the Carpenter is a very small café, tucked away in the old part of town, halfway up the long sloping street that leads to the one hundred and ninety-nine steps that take you up to the church and the abbey. If you sit inside that café by the chintz curtains of the bow windows, you can watch everyone traipsing up and down the cobbled lane. After a while you'll see everyone in Whitby passing by. Maybe that's why Effie and I have made it our regular morning coffee haunt.

The bell chimes as I let myself into the small parlour. I'm inhaling the welcoming scent of hot coffee and freshly baked cake. And there she is. There's Effie, already at our usual place. She's looking stern and watchful in a new beige mac. She's also – when I approach I can see them under the table – wearing what can only be described as running shoes. Ambitious, in one knocking on seventy.

The waitress is very polite. She takes our order and leaves us to our conversation.

'Are you free this evening, Brenda?' Effie asks airily as she takes a first, scalding sip of coffee.

'I am,' I say. 'What do you have in mind?'

'Oh, nothing in particular . . .' she says, and I know she has something very definite in mind. But I play along, and concentrate on a forkful of moist walnut cake.

'I simply thought,' Effie continues, 'that our previous experiences might come in handy, that's all.'

'Previous experiences?' I shoot her a suspicious look. 'Which experiences are we talking about here, Effie?'

'Oh, don't be coy, Brenda. You know very well . . . the kinds of things that the two of us encountered last year.' I get a dark look from her. She dabs her thin lips with a cotton napkin. 'And there's a certain person who might be needing our particular brand of expertise.'

'What have you been telling people?' I ask her, more sharply than I mean to. 'Who have you been talking to?'

'Now, Brenda,' she says, dropping her voice. 'I'm not going to tell you anything at all until you calm down. Eat your cake.' Her eyes are actually twinkling. She's loving this. 'I merely happened to mention to someone who I know is in trouble that you and I have a little experience in . . . well, sorting out situations of a rather delicate nature.'

'Delicate!' I have to laugh at this. 'Effie, the situations that you and I got ourselves into last autumn were down-

right bizarre. They were weird. They were shocking and they were absolutely hair-raising. They were exactly the sort of thing that I used to get involved in during my previous life. My old life, before I came here for some peace and quiet.'

'Exactly!' Effie cries. 'And so we've both got a bit of expertise in dealing with the . . . supernatural.'

I sigh. She won't be put off. Effie has developed a taste for strange goings-on. Things have been a bit quiet during the winter and the early part of this year, but now I can see that she's all worked up at the idea of something a bit spooky coming our way. I could do without it, myself.

'We were brilliant!' Effie says, all gung-ho. 'Remember how we dealt with that nasty, slimy Mr Danby and his Deadly Boutique? When he was offering makeovers to all the women of Whitby and everyone was flocking there to get rejuvenated? And he was sucking their life essences out of them! Well, we soon put a stop to that, didn't we?'

I frown. 'More by luck than design, though.' I'm still a bit embarrassed to recall that particular escapade. I was the one who clambered naked into his Deadly Makeover machine and made it explode. I was the one who brought an end to his evil boutique, and I'd rather forget the fact.

'And what about that business of the pies at the Christmas Hotel?' Effie hisses. 'When we heard that they were made out of the flesh of the waiting staff? Who was it

went investigating then? Who was it found the dead body in the meat lockers, eh?'

'It was us,' I admit. 'But . . . just because we got caught up in all of that, it doesn't make us experts . . .'

'Yes it does!' Effie chuckles. 'Last autumn we faced all sorts of terrible, supernatural dangers together. Ghosts in my attic! Those awful monkey women from the Deadly Boutique! And we even had to hoist poor rejuvenated Jessie out of her grave, when she came back as a zombie, poor thing. As if she hadn't already been through enough.'

'Hm,' I sniff. 'I'd have thought you'd seen enough funny business. After your fancy man and all.'

Effie stiffens and I wonder if I've gone too far. 'Well,' she says. 'You're right. I fell a little in love. Rather foolishly in love. With a supernatural being I should have kept right away from. And I lost him, didn't I? And if that doesn't qualify me for dealing with . . . spooky investigations, then I don't know what would.'

We sit in silence for a while, and I pour us some more coffee. Effie first clapped eyes on the dashingly handsome and urbane Kristoff Alucard in this very café. From that first moment she was transfixed by him. She was lost. She who had never had her head turned by any man in all her long life. And I think he probably had true feelings for her, too, but he was more interested in the books of arcane lore

she has stashed in her attic rooms. It was those that led the suave Alucard to his doom. Using those books, he found his way to the hidden gateway to hell – or Bitch's Maw – in a forgotten corner of the abbey ruins. Then Effie and I were both there with him in the dead of one freezing night when the tiny, ancient abbess suddenly appeared and sent Alucard spinning off into hell. And that's where he still is. And here Effie is, with a supposedly broken heart.

'And besides.' Effie perks up at last. 'What did the old abbess tell us, that night, eh?'

I shrug. 'Something about the Bitch's Maw. Something about us.'

'Aha!' cries Effie. 'So you do remember. She told us that hell is bursting at the seams. And there are tortured souls escaping all the time. Coming through that portal, Brenda. Escaping here, into Whitby. Here we are, standing on the very doorway into hell. And we have a duty of care. To deal with the monsters, for good or ill.'

'All right, all right,' I tell her. 'I know. I remember.' I wish I didn't, though. I can still see that tiny abbess's wizened face in the moonlight, up at the abbey. The way she told us that we were stuck with this job. It felt like a life sentence. And I realised then, all at once, that this must be the reason I was drawn here to this town by the sea. It wasn't in order to live a quiet life at all. I had been dragged here unwittingly, to

team up with Effie, the descendant of generations of Whitby witches. And together we had to fend off the forces of darkness.

What a palaver.

'So what is it?' I ask her. 'What's this latest spooky thing?'

Effie taps her beaky nose. 'You'll just have to wait till this evening. Glam yourself up. We're going somewhere surprising.' And with that, she slurps up the last of the molten sugar in her cup.

When I walk back home, leaving her in the town to do her shopping, I'm thinking that, really, she's a lonely old soul. She's been in the dumps since her fancy man Alucard was banished into hell. Maybe being asked to investigate something will keep her mind occupied. It might do her good to feel wanted, I suppose.

The afternoon whooshes by in a blur of scouring powder and self-raising flour. I'm in my most welcoming landlady mode as my guests arrive in enthusiastic dribs and drabs, fresh from the railway station, throughout that afternoon. They are a polite, undemanding bunch. I see them settled in with minimal fuss and they seem genuinely delighted by the airy, immaculate rooms I have provided for them. I explain rules and routines and, as I'm in such a good mood, I even consider cooking Sunday lunch for them.

I like it when I have a full house.

I roll up my sleeves and get on with my work. All around me, the other landladies of Whitby are doing likewise as we advance into the sun-warmed weekend.

Teatime rolls round and I pause with spicy tea and ginger biscuits. I'm thinking about Effie again. Effie and her mysteries. She'd be gutted if I didn't go out with her tonight. I suppose I should show willing. My work here is finished for the day.

What did she say about glad rags?

I wonder where it is she's taking us. And who it is who needs our help so badly.

It's quite a walk up the hill. We're heading out of town in our best outfits, on foot. We're passing other B&Bs, other guest houses. This area is a good fifteen minutes away from my place, and the sea. I'm sure the advertising for these establishments doesn't say that.

At last we're standing in front of a particular hotel. It's a sprawling stucco monstrosity, freshly painted in ice cream shades of yellow and pink. Banners advertise 'Big Screen Sport' in the lounge bar and others proclaim 'Seventies Nite Tonight!' in the basement nightclub.

'Here?' I can hardly believe it. Effie leads me across the road determinedly. I might have known, though. Effie's in

her dancing shoes. She's in a glitzy black frock, too, topped off with a fur wrap. A vintage outfit, fetched from some deep wardrobe in that museum-like house of hers. And here I am, ready for a proper night out, clumping along in my nicest shoes, with a smart print dress I chose in the sales. I've set my wig nicely, in a modish way, and I'm ready to face the world on Friday night. 'But here? The Hotel Miramar? You always say it's a terrible den of vice, Effie . . .'

She shrugs. She purses her lips. 'It's not so bad,' she tells me, linking one of her skinny old arms into my much heftier one as we dodge the traffic. It's a balmy spring evening, with the sun just sliding down over the headland. The breeze is warm and, given a choice, I wouldn't be spending the evening sitting in some sweaty bar. And certainly not one with the reputation that the Hotel Miramar has.

'You came here last year, didn't you? When you were courting?' I shoot her a quick look.

'Indeed,' she murmurs, hunting through her beaded clutch bag as we stand outside the main door. 'Look. Membership card. You can come in as my guest.' We're standing under one of the ubiquitous flashing signs. This one is advertising the nightclub (or 'niterie') in the basement of the hotel: the Yellow Peril. When Effie opens the heavy double doors to the foyer, there's a sickening smell of spirits and chicken Kiev.

'I wish you'd warned me that we were coming here,' I said. 'I don't feel dressed right.' I'm buttoning up the cardy I've slipped over my dress.

'You look fine,' Effie tells me. She's gone into concentrated, alert mode, her eyes glinting about suspiciously.

'Who are we here to help, anyway?' I ask. 'You haven't told me anything yet.'

Effie is just about to explain something to me when we're descended on by a woman in a lime green blouse. 'Terrible with the complexion she's got,' Effie hisses. She's never liked Rosie Twist, who is a journalist on the local rag, *The Willing Spirit*. (And features editor on its hedonistic weekend supplement, *The Flesh is Weak*.)

Rosie has frizzy magenta hair and a salon tan like meat paste. I think the poor woman is colour blind.

'Well!' she says. 'I never thought I'd see you two here.' You can feel her mind whirring over the possibilities. Her fingers twitch, itching to fetch her notebook out of her bag. She'll have us in her tawdry gossip column, I just know. Respectable ladies on binge-drinking jolly at local hellhole.

Effie is frowning at her. 'Hello, Rosie.' She's never forgiven Rosie or *The Willing Spirit* for a feature article on her shop which described the place as a danger to local health and safety. 'A bit of dust!' she had bellowed at the time, tearing the page to shreds. 'A bit of dust never hurt

anyone! Why does everything these days have to be gleaming, antiseptic and safe? What kind of world is it turning into?' Ever since then – last Christmas – Effie has despised Rosie Twist.

'Come on, then,' Rosie jeers. 'Tell me. What are you two doing in a place like this?'

'None of your business,' Effie huffs. 'Come along, Brenda.'

'This isn't your usual old lady kind of place. You must be here for a reason . . .' Rosie follows us with a glint in her eye.

Effie draws herself up proudly and glares at Rosie. She glances to make sure none of the other hotel guests – propping up the bar – can hear. 'We simply fancied having a nice dance.'

'Oh, come on.' Rosie laughs. 'I've got my eye on you two. Nothing good happens when you two are around. So tell me. Is something going on here at the Miramar? Something weird?'

I cough politely, in order to gain their attention. Rosie has been fixated on Effie – like a mongoose. I can see Effie's about to lose her temper. They both look up at me. 'I'd keep it quiet, if I were you, Rosie, love. You see, you're right. We are, in fact, involved in all sorts of dark and nasty business . . .'

'I knew it!' she snaps triumphantly.

'And wherever we go, danger is bound to follow. Terrible things have happened.'

'So?' she says. 'That's good! That's the kind of thing I want to know. I knew there was a story about you two . . .'

I lower my voice again, and stare unblinkingly into her eyes. 'Terrible things might happen to *you*.'

She gulps. She backs off. I can see I've jarred her composure. 'Oh, rubbish,' she stammers. 'I'll find out what you're doing here, don't you worry. It'll all come out in the end.' With that, she totters off to the ladies' lav, and slams the door.

'Blue eyeshadow with that tan,' Effie tuts.

'We'll have to watch out for her.'

'Yes, but let's not threaten too many people, eh?' Effie tells me.

There's a throbbing and a pounding from the basement. The monogrammed carpet underfoot is pulsing like a gold and scarlet migraine. The disco has started up downstairs in the Yellow Peril, and it's time for us to show Effie's membership card and to descend into the underworld.

There's a surprise waiting for us at the little desk at the bottom of the stairs.

'Robert!' He's sitting in a bubble of light, crouching over the membership book. Next thing I know he's giving me a swift hug.

It's weeks since I've seen Robert. He's my young friend who used to work at the Christmas Hotel, and who helped us during some of our investigations last year. 'I *am* glad you've got yourself another job,' I tell him. Though, secretly, I wish it was somewhere nicer than this.

Mind, he looks very dapper in his black tie and tails. He steps back for us to admire him. 'Better than my work clothes in the last place, eh?' he grins. Handsome boy. I turn to see Effie gazing at him with her usual wry disapproval.

'Good evening, young man,' she says, passing over her card and bending to sign us both in. 'How is your aunt keeping these days?'

Oh, dear. Robert's face falls at that. Poor Jessie. He tries to rally. 'As well as we can expect. Some of the things she's been through . . .'

Effie straightens up and nods briskly. 'Quite. We can't expect miracles, can we?'

Robert's eyes widen. 'But I think it's a miracle that she's still here, in the land of the living. That's a miracle to me.'

'Hm,' says Effie. 'Are we ready to go in, Brenda? I believe it's Seventies Night, isn't it, Robert?'

I ask him, quietly, 'Is she still living in the same place?'

He nods quickly. 'It's not ideal, of course. But it's where she wants to be. I wouldn't want to argue with her. She can flare up very quickly.'

I pat his hand.

'She'd love a visit from you,' he says impulsively. 'Both of you.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' Effie says, not at all keen. Robert is looking at us imploringly.

'We'll see.' I smile. Of course, we will have to go and check on his Aunt Jessie. I feel responsible, in a strange way, for how she's ended up. Of course we'll go.

'So how come you're here?' Robert asks. 'Are you going to dance the night away?'

The disco noise is already overpowering. I can see Effie is keen to get through the swing doors into the inner sanctum.

'I quite enjoy a nice bop,' I tell him playfully. 'But actually, it's Effie who's dragged us here. Something's up.'

Robert's eyes go wide. 'You're investigating!' He grins at me.

Effie swings round on us. 'Do you two have to go blethering on about our business? Keep a tin lid on it. That idiot journalist Rosie Twist will be coming down the stairs after us. We don't want just anyone finding out what we're up to.'

I roll my eyes. '*I* don't even know what we're up to.'

Robert clicks his fingers. 'It's Sheila, isn't it?'

Effie twitches. 'Sssh,' she hisses.

Robert lowers his voice and leans in. 'You're here to see

Sheila. I just know it. Oh, thank goodness. I'm glad she took my advice. It was me who told her that you two are . . . good at looking into . . . mysteries and that.'

I bite my lip, because I don't want to yell at Robert. But I'd rather the whole town didn't know about my and Effie's adventures. Instead I ask him, 'What's wrong with Sheila?' I don't really know the woman. I've met her a couple of times. Busty, glamorous type. Owns this place. All this silver hair, right down her back. Feathers and satin and fussy make-up.

'She's been in a proper old state,' Robert says. 'Since yesterday morning. I've never seen anything like it. She's inconsolable.'

'Come on, Brenda,' Effie says firmly, grasping my arm.

Rosie Twist has appeared behind us, brandishing her membership card. 'Who's inconsolable?' she pipes up.

'The DJ,' Robert puts in smoothly. 'Snapped her twelve-inch Donna Summer right across. No more "I Feel Love"! On a Seventies Night! What a disaster!'

Rosie scowls and bends to sign the book. I wink at Robert and Effie drags me into the noisiest disco I've ever been to.

It's like the Belle Epoque inside, mixed with Lucrezia Borgia and *Saturday Night Fever*. The place is heaving with half-familiar faces, surging between Hawaiian bar and the lit-up

dance floor, which is pulsing its amber checkerboard like crazy. Effie seems quite at home, slipping through the mostly older crowd. She's intent on getting to the bar; cutting a swathe through the electric boogaloo and all the hullaballoo. She orders drinks and soon we're perched on chrome stools. Effie has a slim flute of something sophisticated-looking and I feel foolish holding a half-coconut of a funny-tasting concoction that I'm sucking through a curly straw. I wasn't made for high stools.

'What's wrong with Sheila?' I ask her.

'I don't know yet. I only got the message this morning.'

'Inconsolable, Robert said.' I suck up a whole mouthful of my cocktail. I'm just about getting used to its weird, foamy texture. 'I never knew you were such great pals with her.'

'I'm not,' Effie says. 'I'm intrigued. She didn't sound like herself on the phone. She said Robert had told her what a great help we had been with his poor Aunty Jessie.'

'I'm not sure that's true,' I say. Poor Jessie. She turned into a Neanderthal – or, what was it? An Australopithecus-type woman in that makeover machine. Then she died of a heart attack, and then she came back to life. It was a horrible do all round. Still, it was nice of Robert to say we had been a help to him.

'So Sheila said she'd like to talk to us. She offered us a free night out here at the Yellow Peril and that's why we're here.

That way she can have a word with us without drawing attention. We look like we're here for a night out, rather than actually investigating. Do you see?'

'I do.'

'I must say, poor Sheila sounded rather spooked on the phone.'

Spooked. I nod understandingly. That sounds like one for us.

And then there's a change of record and a shift in atmosphere for the crowd standing immediately around us. The red-faced drinkers draw back a little to allow the owner and manageress to pass like a whisper to the bar.

She's like their queen in here, is Sheila. Some of them go so far as to applaud her appearance as she steps across the sticky floor to greet us. She looks composed and beautiful in a long silky dressing gown affair, trimmed with blue feathers. She's come down in her nightie, it seems, though somehow that doesn't look out of place. When she smiles her whole face crinkles up and, oddly, all her extra flesh only adds to her sexiness and her allure. She greets Effie as if she is a long-lost best buddy. As Sheila kisses my cheek I realise that what she seems most of all is grateful. She is brimming with gratitude that we have turned up on a Friday night in response to her plea. She looks as if we have agreed to save her life.

'Come into my office for a moment, would you?' she asks. 'Not for long. It won't take long to explain.'

Of course, of course. There's no turning down a request from her. Without a word, Effie and I are off our stools, shouldering our handbags and holding our exotic drinks aloft. We swim through the crowd in Sheila's wake. We're both agog to learn what's behind all this. We don't even question the wisdom of getting involved.

Something is telling me this must be very murky business indeed. It must be nasty, to have spooked a woman like Sheila Manchu.

She sits down at her desk very gracefully. Effie and I pull up chairs and prepare to listen carefully to what she has to say.

'I imagine that the two of you have heard all sorts of gossip about me.' She raises an eyebrow. 'I know how people here in this town talk. I know the kinds of thing they say about me. Perhaps they don't mean to be unkind, but I do have feelings, you know. I'm not impervious to the harsh opinion of the world.'

Effie says kindly, 'Tell us, Sheila. What's happened?'

Sheila's chin trembles. The whole of her large body is trembling. 'I'm sorry. You might well think I'm over-reacting. I'm taking it too much to heart. But it's the kind of thing that can really get to you, this. It can knock your confidence.'

Effie takes a handkerchief out of her clutch bag and passes it to her. 'Start at the beginning,' she tells Sheila.

And Sheila does.

'I suppose I've never really felt accepted here. I know how long it takes to be accepted by Yorkshire people. Well, we moved up here in 1974 and that's over thirty years ago. Still I feel like some southern interloper. Someone who'll never fit in.' Sheila spares me a glance here. She knows that I'm a much more recent interloper. 'I realise this hotel of mine is vulgar and silly. And that people here think I'm trashy. And I can't help that. But I didn't think anyone actually meant me any harm.'

'Harm?' I ask. 'Has someone threatened you?'

She smiles sadly. 'In the old days, death threats and so on were ten a penny. We'd get them arriving in the post almost daily. Every time I picked up the phone there'd be some anonymous sinister voice promising my husband or myself a grisly end.'

'Why?'

'My husband was rather notorious in his line of work.' She sighs. 'When he lived in London he was a proper terror, I suppose. Some people would say he deserved everything he got, all that aggro, when all he wanted to do really was retire from the shady scene he was involved with.'

I cast a glance at Effie and she's nodding patiently.

She already knows all this, it seems, about Sheila's old man.

'I met him late in his life, you see,' Sheila explains. 'When he was wanting to turn his back on all his schemes and nefarious plots. He'd had enough. He was worn out. A jaded skeleton of a man. But he had such panache and charm about him, even then. What was I? Just a girl. A dolly bird in Soho. I was a waitress in a go-go bar when he met me. I was seventeen and he was a hundred and nine.'

'That's some age gap,' I say.

Sheila nods. 'My husband was a unique man.'

'You married when you were so young?'

'You have to understand what he was like. He had been a criminal mastermind of truly global reach. He was a mandarin. A genius. He could flatter and charm like no one I had ever met. He was so sophisticated, so witty. And there was still some glamour about him, some remnants of the handsome man he had been so long before . . .

'And also, he couldn't do enough for me. He was so powerful, he had only to snap his fingers and his will was done. My will was done. Now, that's very seductive to a girl from nowhere. A girl who had nothing. But still . . . at first . . . I had my qualms about him. He had, he admitted, been rather wicked in his past. He sat me down and told me exactly how heinous his crimes had been. He had a flat deep

under the ground in Limehouse and I remember sitting there, in this opulent pleasure palace, and thinking: I don't care. He could be the very devil and I wouldn't care. Because I wanted him, do you understand?'

'I think so,' I say.

Effie looks less sure. 'I think you were making a whole lot of bother for yourself.'

Sheila smiles, as if she should have known Effie wouldn't understand. 'I told him I didn't care what had gone on in the past. So long as he treated me proper. I know all his other girlfriends and wives, even his grown-up daughter, hadn't met very pleasant fates. He was a dangerous man to be around. But I was seventeen and gorgeous and I thought I was invulnerable.' She pauses and says, 'Let me show you something.'

Sheila leads us to a concealed door and opens it with great ceremony. The space inside glows like a shrine and she lights a stick of incense and mumbles a prayer of greeting to the assemblage of objects within. Effie and I draw in our breath sharply at what we see.

A gold and green silken robe stands suspended, as if still occupied by his withered body. On a shelf above, a skullcap, and, beneath that, several jars and pots elaborately lacquered in gold and black. There is a photo in a blood red frame, of a refined-looking Chinese gentleman of advanced

years. His hooded eyes are blank and dark and yet they still seem to project amazing malevolence across the gap of years.

'Sweetheart,' Sheila sighs. 'This is Brenda and Effie, and they are here to help us. I know you would approve of them. They will get to the bottom of all this. They'll find out who it is who's wanting to hurt your Sheila.' She looks to us and smiles proudly. 'Isn't he handsome? Look how wide his brow was. Just imagine how magnificently huge his brain used to be, plotting away inside there! He was a criminal mastermind! A complete genius!'

What do you say in these situations? I stammer politely and say, 'I like his robe.'

'Ah.' Sheila chuckles. 'That's how he got his name. Mu-Mu Manchu. It was my pet name for him and it stuck.' Gently she closes the door and bolts it carefully. 'Good night, my darling.'

Effie is shooting me sideways glances.

Sheila picks up her story, sitting back heavily on her swivel chair. 'So. 1974. We leave the big smoke. The dirty city. We leave the bright lights of my Soho and the dingy lights of his East End behind for ever. My husband gives up his various schemes to conquer the western world. It hadn't worked out in the end, but he wasn't completely disheartened. He didn't think his life wasted. He'd had a

smashing time, he said, and I don't think it's vain of me to think of myself as some small consolation.'

'Indeed,' Effie says.

'So he was happy when we came here. He set me up with this place. The Hotel Miramar. He knew I would need some security after he passed on. Obviously, being ninety-two years older than me, he knew that I'd need something to see me through. And I flung myself and all my energies into this place. Into making it work. But, like I say, people weren't always welcoming. They looked down at me, and I was just doing my best. "Never mind them, girl," Mu-Mu would tell me. "You just do your thing." So I did, vulgar as they might have found it. All-night gambling and the discotheque. Strippers and Grab-a-Granny Nites. Swingers' weekends. Whatever I could think of to bring the punters in.'

Effie looks uncomfortable and I realise that hers must have been one of the voices commenting disfavourably on the Hotel Miramar back then.

' "Just be yourself, girl," Mu-Mu would tell me. "There's nothing wrong in doing exactly what you want and stuff the rest of them." And he was right, bless him. He passed away three years after we got here. He didn't get a chance to see this place at its best. He didn't get to see what a success, a gold mine, I've managed to turn it into.

He'd be so proud to see the naysayers so jealous of me. He died in 1977. During a street party for the Silver Jubilee. A fit of anti-British apoplexy.' Sheila sighed. 'I always told him he'd do himself a mischief, one of these days.'

We fall quiet, respectfully, at this turn in the tale. Effie is still trying to catch my attention subtly. I can't look at her to find out what she wants.

'So . . . what can we help you with?' I prompt. 'Won't you tell us what's happened?'

Great big tears are welling up in her green, glittering eyes. 'I . . . had a letter, yesterday morning. What you might call a poison pen letter. It was saying the vilest things. Horrible, vindictive things. All about me and Mu-Mu and the long-buried past.' She lets out a shuddering sigh and dabs her eyes with Effie's lilac hanky. 'Whoever wrote it knew all about everything. Everything that ever went on in our lives. They knew things that shouldn't be known. Impossible things. Damaging things . . .'

I gulp. 'Where is it? This letter? May we see it?'

Sheila looks at us sharply. 'You'll help me then? You'll look into this?'

'We'll see what we can do,' Effie says. Her voice is calm and determined, with only a hint of warmth to it. 'But we'll need to see the evidence, of course.'

'Oh, thank you both,' Sheila gasps. 'It has really upset me, this. You wouldn't believe how hideous it's been. Someone dredging up the past like this . . .'

'So where is it?' asked Effie. 'The letter?'

'It's in my room. Upstairs in the hotel. Locked away. I didn't want to take any chances of it slipping out of my grasp. And I wanted to be sure you would help me before I passed it over to you.'

'Sensible.' Effie nods.

'Is the writer of the letter threatening you?' I ask her. 'Or trying to extort money from you?'

'No, nothing like that. Just saying awful things. Gloating. Jeering. Letting me know that they . . . know absolutely everything about . . . Mu-Mu and me . . .'

I reach across the desk and pat her dimpled hand. 'We will do our best. You asked the right people for help.'

Sheila tells us to enjoy ourselves. We have come all this way to see her and listen to her woes – the least she can do is offer us a few free drinks and a decent night out at the Yellow Peril. 'Don't even think about my dreadful story for the rest of this evening,' she says, showing us out of her office. 'Put it out of your minds. Enjoy. Make merry. And, if you will, return tomorrow and I will hand the horrible document over into your care.'

'Very well,' says Effie. I can see her eyes light up. She can't wait to find out what the letter says.

At first I'm not so sure about us sticking around at the Yellow Peril for the evening. Effie's not the kind to make merry at the drop of a hat, and it really isn't my scene at all. But when Sheila opens the soundproof door and lets us back into the subterranean discotheque, something about the wild drumming and pounding of the music gets into me. It gets into Effie too, like a demon, like a spirit of devilment.

Next thing we know, having bidden Sheila good night, we're having a twirl around together on the fringes of the dance floor. It must be a very popular tune this one, as it seems everyone is up on their feet, bopping about and grinning. Sheila has melted away into the crowd and it's as if she has taken all her sadness and gloom with her.

Effie is puffing and panting and strutting about with her hands in the air. What's got into her? Shimmying about. Dancing rings round me. Shaking her skinny old bottom! But I'm the same! I'm hopping about on one leg and then the other, the slightly slimmer one, the one that's better at dancing. I'm clapping my hands in the air, in time to the beat. It's a long time since I've gone on like this. We're up on the checkerboard dance floor. We're moving towards the centre. Somehow the crowd of busy, jostling show-offs has

opened up a space and we're bang in the middle! We're in with the in-crowd! It's Friday night and we've gone dance crazy!

'What are we doing?' I lean in, laughing, and ask Effie at the top of my voice.

'I don't know!' she gasps. 'But isn't it great?'

'What do you think about Sheila?' I ask.

'Were those tears put on, do you think?' she bellows over the blasting music. 'There's certainly something going on here. Something a bit nasty.'

I pull a face. Sheila seemed genuine enough to me. But what do I care? I'm dancing! I'm spinning around! I can hardly catch my breath!

And then I notice something that slows me down a bit.

There's someone watching us from a table at the edge of the floor. He's drinking a green cocktail and nodding in time to the music. An older gent with a crimson bald head, which he mops now and then with his handkerchief. He's wearing a tweedy three-piece, rather antiquated. He must be lathered in here. The mirrored walls are misted up with steam. What's he looking at? What's so amazing about Effie and me? How come he's not eyeing up all the young ones in their hotpants and what-have-yous? But he isn't. The old gent with the silver 'tache – I nudge Effie and point him out to her – he's

watching us. He catches my eye and raises his glass to us.

'Cheeky old thing,' Effie mouths at me. We pretend to ignore him, shuffling our feet and jogging our elbows to a slower track.

And so the night goes on at the Yellow Peril.

I'm awake at three twenty. I'm sitting up straight in my bed and my heart's thudding like an old boiler with its blue pilot light flaring like mad. Outside, in the hall, there're these awful noises. Scritch. Scratch. And I'm frozen solid. I can't budge an inch.

What is it with me? Come on, Brenda. You're old enough and ugly enough. But I want to scream. There's a scream wedged solid in my throat, as if I've swallowed a whole frozen chicken. Tap tap tap. Is it one of the guests? Have they come up the top flight of stairs to taunt me? To scare me in my bed?

There's the hollow, clopping sound of tiny feet on the wooden stairs. I'm being haunted by midgets. Heavy, determined, club-wielding midgets.

Now I'm shaking. This is ridiculous. I've faced worse things than this.

But not in my home. Not up here in my attic.

There's a pause. There's quiet again. Then a distant tapping. Trip-trap-trap. Whatever it was is moving away. Trap-trap.

It's gone.

I don't want to go out there. I sit on my bed. I wrap my duvet about me and I sit there for more than an hour, staring at my door. Once, twenty-odd minutes later, I hear scuttling noises. Giant mice in wainscoting. But that's an end to it for tonight. The worst night yet.

There have been several of these weird visitations in recent weeks. Each one has rattled me more than the last.

But I have to pull myself together. I have guests and responsibilities. I need to stow these terrible thoughts away and sleep a little more. Just a couple of hours. I need to rest in order to face the day.

I manage almost two hours of sleep. And then I'm up, doing star jumps, bathing, dressing, and seeing to my duties.

Soon I'm bustling between kitchen and breakfast room, seeing to cooked breakfasts and pots of coffee and tea. My guests are in pairs at the floating islands of their tables, bleary-eyed and crunching away on their triangles of toast, their cereals. As I pass back and forth with steaming plates I can see them casting each other sidelong glances. One of them – a young woman in a tracksuit – takes me aside when breakfast is just about finished. She's used the pretext of asking me about local walks, and she expresses her concern about the noises in the night. I wring my tea towel in my hands as she leans in and looks so earnest and polite. 'We

just wondered . . .' she said, 'what it was, and whether everything is all right . . .'

What can I say to her? I try to allay her fears. But what can I tell her? I mumble something about my blundering into a small coffee table in the dark. Cheerfully telling her that's what they must have heard. Even laughing about it, I am! But it must ring hollow, because she still looks concerned as she moves away. What will they be thinking? That their landlady's a secret drinker, staggering about and falling on things at three in the morning.

I plunge into the kitchen and set about the washing-up. I listen to them all leaving for their Saturday out in the town; exploring the abbey and the winding streets. I've not given any of them my usual, upbeat spiel about what to do and what to see. My nerves are too shattered to do my job properly, and they all know it. This is no good. I'll be losing business. I try to assuage my fears in the hot frothing water and the dinful clatter of claggy plates.

And I try to clear my head with a brisk Saturday morning walk of my own, togged up against the April breeze. I head down to the harbour and take huge lungfuls of salty air, watching the fishing boats sliding and jostling and the tourists getting pecked by undaunted gulls. I'm hurrying across the bridge then, on to the path through the old town, to meet Effie for morning coffee.

I dash through the narrow arcades of shops – yellowing books; glutinous home-made toffee and parkin; Celtic jewellery and dense, carved jet. Peering in one of those jet shop windows I notice a man in serge green tweeds, gaiters and walking shoes. As I scoot by, he obviously feels my eyes burning into the back of his head, because he turns and his ruddy face lights up. He grins under that silver 'tache of his, and gives a strange kind of salute.

It's the old bloke who was sitting in the Yellow Peril last night. The old geezer who was watching me and Effie bopping about on the glass floor. I nod at him brusquely – not at all encouragingly – and hurry on by. He could be anyone. A pervert. Anything. But his smile snags a memory for me. I don't know. I'm sure I've seen his face before. His manner is very familiar.

Never mind him, though. Effie will be getting cross as two sticks, waiting all this time.

I'm watching Effie divide up her sticky fruit cake with her fork. 'Sheila Manchu lived the life of Riley,' she hisses. 'What was she saying? Swingers' parties? Gambling and all sorts. And I'm guessing that's not all. I bet that's just the tip of the iceberg. Oh, yes. Whatever is written in that poison pen letter must be pretty strong stuff.'

'I bet she's got some hair-raising secrets for someone

to expose,' I say, blowing on my black coffee.

'Yet she said that it wasn't trying to extort money,' says Effie. 'Not that sort of letter at all. She really did sound spooked to me, by whatever it said.'

There's that word again, I think. *Spooked*. Well, I'm spooked as well, as it happens. I'm always spooked, and just lately I'm more spooked than ever. And who can I tell? Who's going to care? Who's going to come to my rescue? No one will. Of course no one will. I'm on my own with whatever has started to trip-trap around on my bare attic boards in the middle of the night.

Effie goes on. 'We have a job here, don't we? To look into these queer affairs? Isn't that what we were told late last autumn?'

I nod. 'The abbess told us that we are both here for a reason. We are meant to team up and guard the gateway into hell. To keep an eye on who comes popping out. If you believe in that kind of thing, I mean. Destiny. Karma, all that stuff. I'm not sure whether I do or not. I believe in free will.'

'You *would* do,' Effie says pointedly.

I raise an eyebrow. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I just mean that you've had to look after yourself, haven't you? And take care of your own destiny.'

I pull a face. She's quite right. I've had to make up my

own rules for a very long time, and I hate the thought of being a pawn for someone else.

But we're getting off the subject. I bring us back: 'I still don't think we should go running to help just anyone . . . and drawing attention to ourselves. If people think we go looking for trouble and danger, then we're bound to find a whole lot more of it at our door.'

'I thought you liked Sheila more than you expected to,' says Effie through a mouthful of cake. 'I must say, I was very happily surprised. I'd always thought she was a boring, blowsy floozy. But I found her rather simpatico, actually. And I was quite touched by the tale she told.'

'I never thought I'd hear you talk like that about the owner of the Hotel Miramar.' I shake my head. Then I remember, and tell Effie about the silver-haired bloke in the green tweed, saluting me in the street.

'Perhaps you've got an admirer,' says Effie dryly, casting her eyes up and down my outfit.

I snort. 'I doubt that, lovey.' Then I think – what if? Wouldn't that be something! But surely not. Surely never again. I'm past all that. I've had my day. I don't draw the stares the way I used to. I don't catch the passing fancy of ageing men any more. But . . . maybe I do! Maybe I have! The thought is a novelty: a suddenly delicious one. I slurp my tea, just thinking about it, and have to dab my chin

quickly. I'm light-headed with sleep deprivation and the idea of someone paying attention. I need to pull myself together.

'Where would we start?' I ask her. 'Poison pen letters. That's like real mystery-solving. Proper detective work, isn't it? We don't have those skills, do we?'

She shrugs, as if skills are the last thing you need.

I persist. 'I mean, we say we can help. We claim to be investigating things. But really, we don't know anything, do we? We can't really *do* anything. We just blunder in . . . and often make situations worse than they were before . . .' I've lowered my voice because there's a new party arriving and shuffling in at the table beside us. This place is so tiny, it's easy to give away all your business.

'I can see you're going to be no help today.' Effie sighs. 'Does a night on the razzamatazz always put you in such a negative mood the next morning?'

I bite my lip. I want to tell her about my noises, about the haunting. Somehow I can't. Effie's the one who really believes in ghosts. I'd be mortified to have spirits of my own, polluting my place. Effie would smirk, I'm sure.

'I think,' I say, 'since we've as good as promised Sheila Manchu our help, we had better just get on with it. We need to see the letter itself and then we'll get to the bottom of it. Somehow.'

'I knew you'd do it!' Effie smiles. 'I knew you were looking forward to getting your teeth into a new mystery.'

'Well . . .' I say modestly. 'I didn't really mean it, when I said we had *no* skills. I think we're quite talented, actually. Intuitive, rather than logical and intellectual.'

'We follow our noses,' Effie says. 'So . . . let's follow them back to the Hotel Miramar.'

Sheila greets us effusively in the foyer of her hotel. This time she's wearing a silken oriental shift, which strains over all of her curves. She shows us to the lounge bar and has a tray of drinks brought, so we can wet our whistles as we think over her case.

Effie sips her bitter lemon and realises Sheila is staring at her with a curious kind of respect. 'I understand that there is a tradition here, in this town,' Sheila says quietly, so that guests at the other bar tables won't hear.

'Pardon?'

'For women in trouble like me, going to the women of your family, Effie. And begging them for help. I understand this tradition goes back for generations. Hundreds of years, even.'

Effie is frowning. 'I'm not so sure about that.'

'Oh, I am.' Sheila smiles. 'Like it or not, you're the local wise woman, you are. And everyone knows it, somehow.'

'I assure you—'

'And you're lucky, because you've got Brenda to help you.' Sheila glances round at me, clinking her half of shandy to mine. 'You're a formidable team, I understand.'

'Who have you been talking to?' says Effie darkly.

Sheila shrugs, suddenly inscrutable. She sips her drink in a very ladylike fashion, and a great wash of sadness seems to come over her again. 'You will help me, won't you?'

I pitch in. 'Maybe you should think about whether you have any enemies here in Whitby. Start making a list of those who might resent you so much they'd be prepared to write you a poisonous letter . . .'

'I don't know!' Sheila bursts out, going red. 'There could be dozens! People here have resented me for years. They think I'm sleazy and rich. They come here to enjoy themselves, and then they go whispering about this being a house of ill repute . . . a decadent pleasure palace . . . It could be just about anyone . . .'

I nod, thinking: those are just the terms Effie always used to use when talking about the Hotel Miramar. Most people, when mentioning the place and Sheila herself, would allow a pleasurably thrilling note of scandal to creep into their tone. But would someone like Effie, say, actually write to Sheila with the express intention of upsetting her?

'I think we need to see it, Sheila,' says Effie gently.

We both watch as Sheila glances round to make sure she is unobserved. Then, almost reverentially, she reaches into the gold-embroidered clutch bag on the table in front of her. The envelope and paper are a very plain white. She unfolds the letter and lays it in front of us. It's typewritten, so not many clues there. Effie and I crane forward to read.

Sheila Manchu, you fat old hag, you are a vile strumpet and a festering harlot. You and your husband came here, you slag, and you shamed us all with your nasty and devilish ways. You used your hotel as a front for crime and drugs and sexual perversion, all sorts of wickedness. Everyone in this town despises you! And all of us are glad your old husband is dead and gone into the fiery pit like he has. The gateway into hell is right on your doorstep, Sheila Manchu, and it's waiting for you next. You'll be shoved in there quicker than you can blink one of these days, oh yes. You and your horrible hubby, you'll be writhing on a spit as Satan turns it through all eternity . . . You've never fitted in here, and everyone here has hated your stinking guts for thirty-odd years. The people of Whitby would burn you if they could get away with it. Everyone makes snide comments about you. When you walk through town people turn aside to comment, and to tell each other how horrible you are. There's whispering

behind your back all the time. Behind every smile there's venom and bile.

I must say, it would have given me quite a turn too, had it arrived on my doormat with the day's usual freight of junk and business correspondence. I read it through a couple of times and what snags my eye most is the mention of the gateway to hell. Funny thing to drop in, I think. Very specific. Almost as if someone knows it is a proper geographical location rather than a metaphor. Who else in Whitby would know about the Bitch's Maw? Who else besides Effie and myself? Not many, surely, would be aware that the gateway is concealed in the ruins of the abbey. I shudder at the very thought. But for now, I keep it to myself.

'I can see why that would be distressing,' says Effie, stiffly sympathetic.

Sheila is close to tears again. She's shredded her beer mat into fluffy pulp. 'It's that bit about everyone whispering and making snide comments behind my back. That's the worst bit.'

She stops and lets this sink in. I realise that what she's just described is a familiar paranoia of mine. On my worst days, that's exactly how I imagine the world works, with everyone sniggering, pointing and commenting behind my back. Poor Sheila!

'Yes, well,' says Effie. 'That's very helpful, seeing that. May we take it away with us?'

'Of course,' Sheila tells us, and watches as Effie carefully stows the letter in her own plain brown handbag.

No sooner has she done this than we are suddenly joined by a fourth person. She pops up as if out of nowhere, all garish colours and insinuating manner. Rosie Twist is in our midst and we all clam up. How long has she been listening? What has she gleaned? She'll know something juicy is in the offing: we all seem so guilty and quiet.

'Hello, Rosie,' Sheila says, with a sniffle.

'I'd heard something has happened to upset you, Sheila. What's up?' Rosie's manner is, as it is with everyone, pushy and peremptory. There's never any standing on ceremony with Rosie.

'It's nothing,' Sheila says, mopping her eye make-up.

'Come on, I've never seen you like this. You're indestructible! You never get upset! You could have the seven plagues of Egypt unleashed on the Miramar and you'd take it in your stride . . .'

'Just leave it, Rosie,' Effie snaps. 'Whatever it is, Sheila's hardly going to tell you about it, is she? Unless she wants it splashed on the front page of *The Willing Spirit*.'

Rosie shrugs. 'Please yourselves. As it happens, I was

asking out of the spirit of friendliness. Not anything else.' She moves to turn away, sulkily.

'Oh, Rosie,' Sheila bursts out. 'I didn't mean to offend you—'

'I'm quite used to it,' Rosie says. 'Everyone thinks the worst of me. Just because of *The Willing Spirit*.'

'That's because it's the most awful, gossipy rag,' Effie tells her.

Rosie glares at her and storms out of the bar.

'Silly woman.' Effie sighs.

'You shouldn't upset her,' Sheila says. 'She wields a lot of power with that paper. She could destroy anyone in this town. And she knows it.'

'She's *nowt*,' Effie says, using a very precise Yorkshire term. 'And she doesn't scare me. Hardly anything does.'

Now I know Effie is saying this for effect. There are plenty of things that scare her. And somehow, as the shandy goes right through me like a fizzy wave of foreboding, I feel we're straying close to something that's going to scare us both daft.

I have an early night, Saturday, because of all the sleep I've been missing. But round about one in the morning I'm awake again and I'm afraid I make something of a fool of myself.

Who can blame me, though? After the ghastly, wakeful nights I've had, when I hear the noises at one a.m. of course I assume they come from the same source as the sounds that have taunted me for a fortnight or more. I leap out of my bed, furious with fatigue, and I lumber heavily to my bedroom door.

Now, if I had stopped to really listen to those noises, I'd have realised they were different from what usually comes to haunt me. These weren't pitter-patter, scritchy-scratch. These were heavier treads on the stair carpet; these were doors slamming downstairs. These were tipsy giggles from my paying guests. But I hurtled out on to my landing, bellowing at the top of my voice. I'm squirming, even as I remember this, and the spectacle I must have made of myself in my voluminous nightie with my wig not on. I must have been terrifying as I came crashing down the top flight and then the bottom flight of stairs, screeching and howling like a great bald golem.

I came face to face with Mr and Mrs Marsden from Room Three. They were struggling with their keys and they looked appalled to see me. In fact, they looked horrified at the sight of me. They both shrieked and I was brought to my senses with a jolt.

Almost immediately, others were coming out of their rooms to see what was going on. The couple from Room

Two, across the landing, looked bleary and perplexed.

I started stammering apologies. They must have thought I was a wild woman. A maniac. They would all want to leave early in the morning, I was sure of it.

'I thought we had burglars . . . It's so very late in the evening, you see . . .'

Mr Marsden had a protective arm round his wife. He waggled his Yale key at me. 'We have been out dancing. Enjoying ourselves. We didn't expect to be greeted like this.'

He looks me up and down. And then I see that all of them, all four of them – and the other two, now coming up from downstairs to see what's going on – they're all looking me up and down, somewhat disturbed by my physical presence. Mrs Marsden is still whimpering in her husband's arms, she got such a fright when I jumped round the corner. And I think: I've got no make-up on, nor my wig. All my scars are on show. I might as well be standing here in the nuddy. I'm here before my paying guests in all my glory. My horrifying glory. No wonder they're looking at me like that.

I apologise again and beat a hasty retreat.

'Get an alarm fitted!' Mr Marsden yells after me, and I colour with shame.

He's right. But an alarm would be no good against the noises I usually hear in the night.

I lie awake in my bed for some time, imagining what

these couples under my roof will be whispering to each other in their rooms: what will they be saying about me? Will they leave straight away in the morning? Have I disturbed them that much? I'm dreading getting up to do the breakfasts. Imagining their snide looks. Their smirks.

I toss and turn, dreading the coming of the real noises.

I try to distract myself by thinking about Sheila Manchu's case.

On our walk back into town at teatime, Effie talked a bit about her experience of Sheila over the years, which didn't amount to much. She wanted to fill me in on the things I didn't know, since I only arrived here last year. There wasn't much to tell me, beyond the tittle-tattle I had already heard. For over thirty years stories had circulated about the town, of the petty crimes and misdemeanours and the scandalous things that went on at the Miramar. Effie tried to make me appreciate quite how wicked it all seemed, back in the seventies. People would discuss Sheila's doings in whispers. And, while Mu-Mu was still alive, there was always that threat: the glamorous danger that came with his name. People were scared of Sheila and her husband. They were connected to all sorts of badness.

This is how my thoughts go swirling round in my head, over and over, as I lie there in the night, spent and exhausted. Waiting for my haunting to start up again. But

nothing comes. Not tonight. Or if it does, I am insensible to it. For the first night in ages, I sleep like a dream.

And I wake feeling marvellous. And if my guests give me funny looks over their breakfasts I hardly notice. Luckily, no one leaves early, and no one asks for a refund.

The next day or so passes in a haze of hard work. I feel obliged to smarm up to my house guests by cooking them a proper Sunday lunch. I know it's not the kind of thing most B&B ladies do, but it's my firm belief that extras like this are what draw the punters back. My guests this weekend are rather surly and ungrateful, I think. In the end I regret spending my time basting the joint, straining the greens, fluffing up the Yorkshire puddings. I am pleased to see the back of my visitors, come Monday morning. Funny, some of these people passing through your life, you just don't seem to take to them. By lunchtime on Monday I can hardly recall their faces.

My memory's not the best though, as you know. Especially when it comes to faces.

Still, Monday afternoon gives me one of those rare moments when the synapses (is that the right word?) fire off in the right order, and the old skeins of cobweb come floating down from the rafters of my mind and suddenly something comes back to me. Light dawns! Sparks shoot

across my vision. My face cracks out in a huge grin.

I have remembered something so gobsmackingly obvious I can hardly credit the fact I would let something so important slip out of my head.

I'm in the beer garden of the Hotel Miramar when it happens.

I've had a wander up there alone, just mulling things over. Sometimes I think better when I'm not accompanied by Effie's constant chatter. I can't tell her this, of course. She'd be mortified. Anyway, it's a stuffy, standstill kind of afternoon, and I know Effie is home, stewing over the puzzle of Sheila Manchu's letter. As ever, I prefer to be up and doing. Before I know it I'm up at the Miramar and I'm delighted to bump into Robert, who is on duty for the afternoon.

We're out in the beer garden – or the scrubby bit of grass at the back that Sheila wants to turn into a beer garden – when I have my blinding revelation. We're standing on the terrace and Robert is describing to me what the garden will look like.

'A barbecue?' I'm saying. 'Marvellous. I'm surprised she's never had one before.'

'She's going for the whole Polynesian, Tikki look,' Robert's enthusing. 'Waitresses in grass skirts and what-have-you. She's ordered all this very expensive bamboo garden furniture . . .'

'It'll take her mind off her upset,' I muse.

'That's what I think it's for,' he says. 'She's throwing herself into this beer garden project so she doesn't have to think about whoever it is who means her harm.'

I turn back to him. 'Do you have any ideas who it might be?'

Robert looks uneasy. 'Loads of people in Whitby have secrets. There's lots of shady characters, too. People who enjoy making others suffer. What I'm thinking is, what if there's a whole rash of these letters? Who knows what might come tumbling out into the open?'

He loves a bit of melodrama, does Robert. Still, the thought makes me shiver, as we stand in the afternoon sunshine. And that's when I have my revelation, or my flash of remembrance, or whatever it is.

'Oh, look, it's him!' I hiss, clutching Robert's arm.

There's the old feller, coming out through the French windows, into the garden. He's stretching and yawning, presumably after a post-lunch nap. He's in his green tweeds again and his walking boots.

'It's really him! I know who he is! I remember now!'

Robert looks alarmed. 'Who? Brenda, what are you on about?'

Very dapper and self-possessed he looks, too, as the sunshine gleams off his bald pate and his immaculate

moustache. He hasn't heard me squawking out – luckily. I'm drawing Robert back behind the box hedge, so we can watch him unobserved.

'I know who he is!' I whisper harshly into Robert's ear.

'Brenda,' he says impatiently. 'You are acting very oddly.' Bless Robert: he feels it's his duty to alert me to these moments. As if I could rectify them somehow and start to behave properly!

'Henry . . .' I gasp, as memories come floating back to me through the past's vortex. 'His name is Henry.'

From afar we watch the old gent take a few deep breaths. Then he strides out, wielding his walking cane. He toddles off happily down the garden path.

Robert frowns. 'What's the big deal, Brenda?'

I watch the old feller disappear round the corner, off on his walk.

'I've seen him about the place. In the nightclub, and then in town. He recognises me too, but he hasn't come over to talk to me. He's just nodded and winked . . .'

Robert laughs at this. 'You've got an admirer, Brenda!' He's chuckling, but I'm disturbed by all of this.

'Henry Cleavis . . .' I say. 'But . . . but it can't be. It really can't be him.' Now I'm pacing heavily around the yellowed grass of what will become Sheila's beer garden. I'm just about pounding my fists into my brow, forcing the

memories to return. 'Think! Think! When did you last see him? When did it end?'

Robert's after me, concerned. 'Brenda . . .?'

'It really can't be him, Robert,' I gabble. 'There's something wrong here . . .'

And then I'm off, before Robert can say anything more. I'm pulling my anorak back on and hurrying round to the front of the hotel, even trampling on the flowerbeds in my haste. Back to the main road. But Henry Cleavis has gone. I've missed him again.

But it can't be him, can it? Surely he'd be dead by now.

Me, with my long-lived life: I'm used to knowing people and leaving them and losing them and having to forget them. Just for my own sanity's sake. Otherwise there is just too much to remember. Too many memories to fit inside one body.

And so, in order to ensure that I go on surviving, I have to quite deliberately make sure that I forget them. And so these people – these lovers, friends, allies and enemies – they vanish somewhere, back in the past. That's the cruel way it's always been. No one – hardly anyone – endures as long as I do.

But now this . . . Henry Cleavis. Here in Whitby. He has come back. He has reminded me that he was once in my past. Here he is, sprightly and cheery as ever before.

If I knew which way he'd set off walking, I'd go chasing after him. I would. Now I know it's him, I'd hound his footsteps.

But I've missed him. All I can do is hurry home, back down the hill into town. I knock up Effie and she's been having a siesta. She looks rumpled and cross when she comes to the door. I don't know how she makes any money in that shop of hers.

'What? What is it?' she demands.

I drag her on a walk over to the old part of town, to our favourite confectioners, where we can buy home-made dark chocolate and black treacle toffee. So we have something to chew on as we go over our quandaries.

We often wander like this, pausing to peer in the tourist shop windows as we go by. We are wending, that's what we're doing. Wending our way up the cobbled lane that leads to the one hundred and ninety-nine steps going up to the abbey that overlooks Whitby. I'm not sure we'll clamber all that way today. In recent months Effie and I have kept away from that Gothic monstrosity, and not without reason.

We're happy simply peering through the thick pebble glass and sucking on our shards of treacle toffee. Except Effie is crunching hers. I can hear it, as I bend in close to

look at a brooch she points out to me. How can she crunch things with her false gnashers in?

'All this jet,' she says, gesturing to the shelves and shelves of matte black jewellery. 'In years gone by it was supposed to have a function quite other than being purely decorative, you know. The townspeople would take a cross, say, carved out of jet, and nail it above their front doors.'

'To ward off the devil?'

'Amongst other things.' She squinches up her mouth. 'Jet is supposed to emit a foul vapour of some kind, quite lethal to evil spirits or evil-doers . . .' She harrumphs, as if dismissing the idea. 'I believe that several of my ancestresses were seen off that way. According to local legend, anyway.' She shrugs lightly.

'Oh really?' I go quiet, wanting her to go on. It's rare that Effie talks about her witchy forebears. She certainly doesn't expound upon the topic of their ultimate demises. But then she sighs and straightens up and rustles in her paper bag for the last sticky hunk of toffee. We amble up the sloping path and she changes the subject.

'Two names stand out for me,' she says. 'Two possible suspects. I don't know yet why they would be doing such a thing. I don't know what they have got against Sheila Manchu. But the two women I am thinking of are two who know plenty of secrets. They know more than anyone else here . . .'

I have dressed up too warm for this spring afternoon. Woolly tights . . . what was I thinking of? My old heart's yammering and banging away with all the exertion. My palms and the backs of my knees are itching and trickling with perspiration. 'Which two women?' I ask Effie. What I really want to say is: Oh, do let's have a sit in the Walrus and the Carpenter, Effie. But Effie's in full flow.

'For one,' she says, 'Rosie Twist.'

The crowds are denser here, near the antiques market and the shop where they smoke kippers. Effie should keep her voice down. 'Oh,' I say. 'You just don't like Rosie. Why would she send letters like that? When she can write whatever she wants – very publicly – in *The Willing Spirit* every week? Why would she need to sneak around?'

'Hmmm,' says Effie.

'Who else?'

'Mrs Claus,' Effie says, in a much more tight-lipped and ominous fashion. By now we are at an ironwork bench at the foot of the famous steps. Gratefully I plonk myself down on it and Effie perches beside me, rather more elegantly. From here we can look out and survey all the blue and purple rooftops across the steely sheen of the harbour. We can see right over the other side and the Georgian splendour of the hotels on the Royal Crescent.

'You've a point there,' I mutter, and find that I'm staring

at the tall windows of the Christmas Hotel. I am glaring at that gaudy tribute to bad festive taste: that tawdry establishment where the grotesque Mrs Claus rules her own fantasy empire.

'She knows many things she oughtn't,' Effie says.

'Don't I know it.'

'She is malign and powerful. She will stop at nothing.'

'I know that too,' I say. In fact, thinking about it now, I am astonished that no one has tried to put a stop to her. Why haven't the authorities intervened? Are the police all terrified of her? She seems to run the whole town. Her fingers are in every single pudding. How come no one has got rid of that monstrous yuletide hag?

I am embarrassed that Effie and I – after tangling briefly with her evil schemes last year – haven't been back in order to sort her out. We have just let her continue, getting up to whatever nefarious doings she fancies.

Surely it's about time that someone put an end to the evil reign of Mrs Claus?

'But why would she be threatening Sheila Manchu in particular?' Effie sighs.

'They're business rivals. Vying for the holiday trade.'

'They have very different clienteles. Mrs Claus has the elderly and the Christmas-obsessed. Sheila caters for an altogether racier crowd.'

'That's true.' I think again. I click my fingers. 'What about Robert? He left the Christmas Hotel in order to go and work for Sheila. Perhaps Mrs Claus is very sore about that?'

Effie gives me a withering look. 'You may think a lot of Robert, Brenda, but I hardly think Mrs Claus would declare war over the loss of a single elf.'

I shrug. 'We don't know how her mind works. There could be any number of twisted reasons behind this.' I sit back on the groaning bench and pretend to be mulling it over. My mind is elsewhere, of course, and Effie realises it. She turns on me with a shrewd look in her eye.

'What is it?'

I've been caught out. 'I've remembered who he is. The old bloke I've seen round and about the town; staying at the Miramar. He's someone I used to know, a great deal of time ago.'

'Oh, really?'

I nod firmly. 'And I've got a funny feeling in my water' – Effie makes a squeamish face at this – 'that Henry Cleavis is here in order to see *me*.'

'You?' Effie cries. 'How can you be so sure?'

'You don't understand. A lot went on in the past. Between me and Henry. I don't recall all of it – yet. But it's coming back to me in dribs and drabs. Like his name did. I'm sure

the whole thing will click into place, and then I'll know. I'll know why dear old Henry has come looking for me . . .'

Effie's face softens. Now she looks concerned. She shields her eyes against the sun's glare and stares at me. I know I must sound a bit crackers to her. So sure. So convinced. 'Oh, Brenda. Don't go setting yourself up for a disappointment.'

I assure her that won't happen.

'I mean, if he was here to see you, then surely he would have popped over by now and said something? He's noticed you, hasn't he? He's looked straight at you. So how come he hasn't come over and said anything. Hmm?'

Cheeky mare. *And* she's finished the last of the toffee.

These midweek days with no guests booked in, I'm at the mercy of my nightly brouhahas. The skittering and pattering on the staircase. The terrible footfalls. The profound pauses – which are even worse. At least there is no one to hear me crying out in the night. I have no need to stifle my shrieks of alarm. I don't have to be embarrassed by these terrors of mine. Terrors that are growing wilder and more uncontrollable with each passing night.

But why should I be scared?

Who on earth could hurt me, really?

I am the indestructible woman. I have survived so much.

So many years. So many adventures. I've always come through the other end. I've hardly ever been injured or ill. Nothing much has disturbed the remorseless plod of my life. So why should these noises get under my skin like this? What is the matter with me? Am I turning soft in my advanced old age?

Wednesday morning and the phone goes early.

It's Robert, on an early desk shift at the Miramar. It's his first chance to check the bookings. 'You're right,' he tells me, without preamble. 'Henry Cleavis *is* his name. He booked in a week ago. Gives an address in Cambridge.'

My heart's banging and I'm starting to see whirling spots. I grip the receiver more tightly and thank Robert profusely. 'I knew it was him.' But it's something else again to hear proper confirmation.

Robert says, 'You sound disturbed by all of this. Is he an old friend of yours? Aren't you glad to see him again?'

I swallow hard and tell Robert: 'I last saw Henry Cleavis in . . . it must have been 1946.'

'That's a long while,' Robert says, clearly unsure of my point.

'Sixty years or more.'

'So? Were you brought up in the same place?'

I smile. 'You flatter me, Robert. But you know I'm considerably older than that.'

'Oh,' he says. 'So you are.'

'And so is Henry Cleavis,' I add. 'If I recall correctly, he was in his mid-fifties in 1946. He was a don and erudite as anything. He was bald as a coot even then. He must be well over a hundred now and he hasn't aged a day. So what's that all about, eh?'

Of course, Robert can't possibly know what it's all about. Once again the poor boy is out of his depth. Just as he was last year, when he and his poor Aunty Jessie ran into trouble at the Christmas Hotel, and Effie and I had to do our best to rescue them (with mixed results). Anyway, I thank Robert for his efforts and the info, and I struggle into my housecoat and the day ahead. I've a family of six called the Pinkneys invading this afternoon.

Downstairs, picking up provisions in the grocery store beneath my B&B, I discover that my pre-dawn hullaballoos haven't gone unnoticed by shop-owners Leena and Rafiq. They live right next door, of course. I hadn't even thought they might hear my shrieks and wails. Now Leena is staring at me, full of concern, as she rings up my comestibles on her antiquated till. 'I really wouldn't be complaining,' she's telling me, 'and it's not like we really mind about the noise and everything. It's just that we are worrying about you, Brenda. This cannot be right. Shouting out like that in the dark.'

I am mortified, packing my stuff into my shopping bag as quickly as I can. I want to be out of here, and right away from Leena's unctuous care. 'It won't happen again. I've got some sleeping pills now.'

'Nightmares, is it?' Leena simpers. 'Only Rafiq could have sworn he heard you running up and down your stairs. Throwing things about. Heavy things, too. I told him, don't be silly, Raf. Anyone can have nightmares.'

'Quite,' I say stiffly, thrusting cash into her eager mitts.

At last I escape from the shop. And I try to put all of that nonsense out of my head. The hauntings are something best kept for the night. If I think about them at all in the daytime I could really start to believe that I'm cracking up. And I don't want to think about that possibility.

I hurry home. It's time to get to work.

But: on my doorstep there's a hand-delivered letter.

I frown as I stoop to snatch it up. Someone's dashed up the side passage with this in the small span of time that I've been fetching my groceries. It isn't one of Effie's urgent spurs to action. And then I think – jarringly – what if it's a poison pen letter? What if I have received my very own envelope crammed full of bilious hatred and spite? What if persons unknown – armed with a rattly typewriter, somewhere out there, at large in Whitby – what if they know me and all my (admittedly terrible) secrets?

I quell my ragged breathing. I slam the front door shut. I struggle with my bag up the stairs to the cool seclusion of my kitchen. And I make sure I am quite settled and calm when I rip open the mysterious communication.

The handwriting is awful. Erratic, all over the place. The stationery is serviceable and plain. There's an air of distraction about the whole thing: as if it's been written by a man (I see at once that it must have been written by a man) with much on his mind. A very brilliant mind.

Halfway down there is a spot of what might be jam.

My dear Brenda –

Oh, my dear, is it really you? Why haven't you said anything? Why don't you say hello? At first I couldn't be sure. You were squinting at me, and I was squinting at you. The two of us were squinting like mad across the crowded dance floor, weren't we? And then I was sure. And I saw you again in the town! And I knew, I knew it had to be you.

I would love to take you to dinner this – no – tomorrow night – evening – Thurs. We have so much to say to each other, I am sure. I hope you are free and available.

All this time! So long! So much to say! Hello, my dear!

I thought you must – felt sure you must be – dead – deceased – by now. Luckily you are not.

I thought you were long gone. Remember the last time? You ran out on me, didn't you? I never saw you again after that terrible scene down in London. What happened then, Brenda? How did you survive?

I'm sorry. I am being impolite. Firing questions at you like this. But I can hardly believe it! Who would have thought we'd just bump into each other like this, all these years afterwards.

Here we are! Two great survivors of the twentieth century! In the land of the living!

How do you feel about fish and chips? I've noticed somewhere down on the harbour front – looks promising – Cod Almighty. Do you know it?

Well – enough of me for now. There will be time enough to discuss everything on Thursday night. Don't go dressing up.

I will call for you at seven, shall I?

Oh, you are a treasure! You always were!

With very best wishes and my admiration,

Henry (Cleavis).

I should have guessed it, but Effie is sceptical about the whole thing. Thursday morning, we're having coffee

together, and I wish I hadn't told her anything about my impending date.

'I thought you'd gone a bit coy,' she says, sucking liquid sugar off her spoon.

'Coy!' I laugh.

'No wonder, if you're running about the town with old men. No wonder you've lost interest in the job we've been asked to do.'

I sigh, mashing up the layers of my custard slice. 'I haven't lost interest . . .'

'Have you asked me about the latest development then?'

I frown. 'Is there one?'

'I received a phone call early this morning. Sheila had thought of someone who she has confided in in the past. Someone she told all her secrets to.'

'Who's that?'

'The Reverend Mr Small,' Effie says. 'I've never liked him much. Fancy telling that old gossip all your secrets!'

'But surely he would never write a letter like that . . .'

Effie shrugs. 'Who knows? But I'm going over to the church to have a word with him, this afternoon. I'm going to check him out. Will you come?'

Now I'm torn. I've work to do. I've got to get a lot done this afternoon, if I'm going out this evening. I tell Effie this as we leave the Walrus. She doesn't look impressed. 'You need

to prioritise,' she tells me, clipping off down the cobbles.

'That's what I am doing!'

'So I have to go and see the Reverend myself? While you go gallivanting? I thought we were a team, Brenda!'

She's laying it on a bit thick. 'It's hardly gallivanting, Effie. It's only Cod Almighty. And can't you see? There's a mystery here, too. I mean, how can Henry Cleavis be as old as he is? And why's he here? In my experience of him, wherever he was, there was always something fishy going on.'

We're striding out over the low bridge, across to our part of town.

'He'll be after something from you,' Effie warns me. 'You mark my words. This isn't some cosy, harmless little reunion. This old chap will have ulterior motives in getting in contact with you. It won't make you happy.' She's shaking her finger at me. Suddenly I want to be away from her. I make my excuses and dart away to Woollies. I'm embarrassed when she starts yelling at me across the busy road: 'Hanging about with strange men only leads to disaster, Brenda! You should nip this one in the bud straight away!'

People are looking. They'll think we're both crazy. I give her a hurried wave and slip into the shop. I'm using it as an escape route, for the door at the back – but while I'm here

there's no harm in picking up my usual bag of pick 'n' mix.

As I'm scooping up my favourites and having them weighed, and then hurrying off again, Effie's words are ringing inside my head. I try to clear it. She's gone bitter because of Kristoff Alucard. He gave her the proper runaround. I was the one warning her about him. Does she think this is payback time? Has she been put off men for ever? Can't she even conceive of a gent's wanting to take me out on his arm?

Poor Effie. Beneath that respectable frontage of hers, it's all confusion and just a little bitterness. She's not a very happy soul.

Now. Put it all out of my thoughts. I have the Pinkneys' rooms to attend to. They've left such a mess. They've come through my house like a boisterous whirlwind. I've my work cut out for me today. But that's okay. Tending to them will take my mind off my nervousness. I need to press my new outfit, and tease my best wig into some sort of style. I've got to exfoliate. Consider my make-up. Consider what to say to him. And try to remember as much as I can.

I feel as though Cleavis is coming towards me across a vast gulf of years. He's bringing me gifts. That's how he was in my troubling and nebulous dreams last night. He was bringing me the gift of myself. Bits of forgotten me. Whatever it was we got up to together, in the 1940s, he's

bringing those memories back with him. On a funeral barge, moving through the mists. Like something from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. He'll have organs of mine, and slices of my raddled mind in ornate jars with dinky lids and handles. His job will be to reunite me with these forgotten parts. In my strange dream of last night he was passing me these beautiful vases and jars and restoring me to myself.

Everything I have deliberately put away and forgotten. He'll be bringing pieces of it back to me.

I slept so deeply, so contentedly, I never woke once. I don't even know if those wicked noises came again.

I was standing on a sandy beach, clutching these jars with my organs inside, and my memories were flooding back. Then I was watching Cleavis set sail again in his ancient barge, on the black and oily water. He cut an impressive figure in his tweedy suit, drifting away from me across Lethe or Styx or whatever it was.

I'm having a little sit as I wait for Henry to arrive. I don't want to spoil the perfection of my ensemble: to muss my hairdo or wrinkle my dress.

There's his gentle rapping at the door downstairs. After all this time he has come for me. It's all I can do not to leap up and fly down the stairs. But I don't want to seem too keen. I don't want to frighten him off.

He's examining the peonies in the tubs in the side passage. He turns to beam at me. 'Brenda, my dear.' And he embraces me. His mustard worsted jacket is rather tickly and mothbally and it's this that sets my eyes watering. That's what I tell him.

'Sixty years!' he gasps, holding me at arms' length and sighing with pleasure. 'You're still the same! How?'

I'm rather blunter with my own, almost simultaneous question: 'Why aren't you dead?'

He laughs at this. 'Still the same! Still the same!' Then he takes my arm. I check I've got my bag, my keys, everything I need. Then I walk out with him, into the high street, and allow him to guide me to Cod Almighty, which just happens to be my favourite restaurant in town.

I'm aware of Effie's upstairs window and the raggy curtain billowing. She's desperate for us not to see her but I catch just a glimpse of her eager expression.

Cod Almighty isn't particularly smart. It's homely and quick and does the best fish and chips in town. My own favourite is whitebait, which arrive steaming and golden in a neat little heap. It's like eating a whole miniature shoal of fish.

Cleavis nibbles at a triangle of white bread and he explains why he isn't a day older than the last time I saw him. 'Ah, yes. Um. Well – that's hard to – explain. It's – not

the easiest. Well. Um. Well, you know how I was wont to go on my little jaunts and adventures. And. Um. I went all over the world. Underground societies. Spy rings. Satanic cults. That sort of thing.'

I smile and nod encouragingly. He doesn't mean, of course, that he was actually *involved* in satanic cults or spy rings, or whatever. What he really means is that it was often his job to infiltrate them, and to destabilise them from within. Under the guise of a bumbling, middle-aged, harmless academic – an Icelandic specialist at that – it was relatively and surprisingly easy for Henry to inveigle himself into the most alarming of places.

'I remember your adventures, yes,' I say. In fact . . . I remember that we were embroiled in hair-raising adventures together, once or twice. It's starting to come back now. I think.

'Anyway, in the fifties. Some time. I was sent to Africa. Deep into the heart of Africa. I don't know. Some hidden-away place. Lost city kind of thing. High priestess. Gods and goddesses. Funny business with old treasure. Elixirs of life, that type of. You know, malarkey. Blah-blah. And terrible danger, I don't mind telling you.'

'I can imagine,' I say, spearing up a whole load of whitebait and crunching them up. Delicious.

'Anyway . . . well. The upshot was. Yes, I did. I walked

into the blue flame. Absolute sacrilege. They were horrified. As they might be. And their old queen is lying there, dead as a doornail. And the city is shaking and rattling and falling down about their ears. And I say, "Whoops," or something and everyone's a bit stunned. And there I am, with eternal youth! Well, eternal middle age. I live for ever! Hurrah!' He turns his attention to the chips he's left cooling on his side plate.

'Are you sure?' I frown.

'Seems to be the way. I'm over a hundred now. Not doing too bad. Lived a bit of a quieter life, since the seventies, anyway. Fewer adventures and all. I've taken up writing. Marvellous fun! Lovely!'

'I don't believe you, Henry,' I tell him.

He slurps his tea. His moustache is soggy with it. 'What's that?'

'I don't believe you've given up the adventure business. Secret cults and elixirs. Monsters and demons. I can't see you ever giving that up.'

'Ah, well. Maybe. Maybe not. It's different these days. The other Smudgelings are all dead. It's hard. Watching everyone die before you. You know. You know that, of course, better than. Better than anyone, Brenda.'

'You're right. I do know. But I know that I've got to go on. I can't just get sad and stop living, much as I might want to.'

'Oh, I'd never feel like that,' Henry says happily, chomping on his chips. 'There's still so much to do! So much! Busy! Busy all the time!'

Now I want to get down to business. 'Why are you here?' I lower my voice and my head, until I'm staring him dead in the eye. Milky blue, bright, alert. He blinks at my question. 'Did you come looking for me, Henry?'

'Why . . .' he says, slowly smiling. 'Do you want me to be here, looking for you?' And now he has dropped that somewhat affected stammering manner. He's staring back at me and holding my gaze.

I look away first. 'I'm not sure. My memory is patchy, you know. Far too patchy. I can't even remember how and why we parted. I don't know where it was, or when. Some time in 1946. But under what circumstances, I have no idea. Not any more.'

'Really?' He's produced a huge paisley handkerchief and he's dabbing at his 'tache. 'That's a shame. Memory. Funny thing. My own . . . well, it's quite good. Surprisingly.'

'Lucky you.' We go a bit quiet for a while. I'm not going to beg him or blurt out all the questions. I know I could ask him what it was we were up to, on that adventure together in London back then. But I'm not going to ask him. I must have had good reason for putting those memories away. And so I am content to trust my younger self and her reasons for

forgetting, and for protecting me now.

This is my new life. I'm happy here. He can't make it any better than it is. Whatever he might tell me. Whatever missing pieces he might bring back to me.

At last he says, 'I had no idea you were here, Brenda. Came as quite a shock. Really. Seeing you there. Amazing! What a coincidence! I mean, really!'

I'm such a foolish old woman. Of course he's not here for my sake. Of course not. Why would he be?

'So . . . why *are* you here, Henry?' I ask him, and my voice is thick with disappointment.

'What else?' he chuckles. 'Same old. Funny business. Demons. Satanic stuff. All that terrible stuff!' He grins at me, as if he expects me to share his delight. Old fool.

But I'm a worse fool, of course. I grab up the dessert menu and waft it savagely in my face to dispel my embarrassment. 'Knickerbocker glory? There's a glorious one with crème de menthe . . .'

So we finish off our night spooning up green ice cream and acid-coloured minty sauce.

'You know, Henry,' I say airily, as we finish. 'Your business and mine, they're not so very different these days. Demons and whatnot.'

He looks at me quizzically, but I just tap my nose. Let him stew over that for a bit.

*

After all the excitement, Friday night sees me quite content to slop around at home in my dressing gown. I'm brewing up a pot of spicy tea when Effie comes knocking. Of course she wants to hear all about my date, and you can tell she's miffed I haven't already been round hers to report.

'There's nothing to tell . . .' I try to protest. We carry out tea things to the living-room area of my attic and curl up on the two squashy armchairs. I turn my attention to the record player, flick through some old albums.

'Come off it, Brenda.' Effie chuckles. 'I want to hear every detail. You must be bursting to tell me.'

So I tell her everything I think she might be interested in. Everything about my reunion with Cleavis that she might find amusing. What we ate. How he looked and how he treated me (like a lady, though I insisted on paying half. 'What?' Effie gasps, incredulous). I put on a nice old soothing Billie Holiday album.

What I don't tell Effie is how Cleavis has jogged my memories of the 1940s. I don't know why I withhold this. My longevity isn't exactly a secret from Effie. Poor old Effie has been made privy to most of my secrets. Somehow, still, I don't like alluding to them when I'm talking to her. It doesn't seem very tactful, reminding an old lady like her that I'm nearly immortal. So when it comes to my

erstwhile adventures in 1946 and all that, I keep schtum. I focus on the events of last night which were, of course, rather pleasant. He walked me back to my door and came in for a mug of this gingery, peppery tea. He was sitting where Effie's sitting now and we shared a companionable silence in which nothing particularly earth-shattering was said or done.

'Will you see him again?'

'Oh, I'm sure I will.'

Effie frowns and slurps her tea. 'It's not sounding like the romance of the century, so far.'

'It's not,' I said. 'Just a meeting of old friends.'

'But he came here looking for you . . .?'

Sadly I shake my head. I have to own up. 'I'm afraid not.'

'What?'

'I asked him. He said no. He's here for other reasons altogether. Seeing me again was just a shocking bonus.'

'Ah, Brenda. I'm sorry. Are you disappointed?'

I think about this. 'Not really,' I tell her.

'I did warn you,' she says, 'about setting yourself up for a disappointment.'

I'm thinking: how could he have come looking for me anyway? After all, I've left no trail that I know about. I'm missing off official records, aren't I? It's a tangled old route that leads to my door. Not even Cleavis – not even if he had

been really looking – could have found me. Not through any normal channels.

I let the topic slide. I don't want to be discussing my Henry with Effie like this. I try to get her talking about poison pen letters.

'Sheila Manchu's gone a bit quiet and ashamed and won't be pushed. She says she wants to forget about it all. And, meanwhile, the Reverend Mr Small didn't give anything away whatsoever.' She sighs, and holds out her mug for more tea. I wrestle with the knitted cosy.

'I really don't think he could have written that letter. Not the Reverend.'

'I suppose you're right.' Effie sighs wistfully. I can tell she'd enjoy pinning the blame for the letters on him.

'I think it's got to be Mrs Claus who sent it,' I say at last. 'Only she would be rotten enough. Anything bad in this town, and it always seems to be her behind it.'

'Perhaps.' Effie pulls a face. 'But I still fancy it's that idiot Rosie Twist. Just think of the way she looked the two of us up and down. Last weekend at the Yellow Peril. She has this insinuating manner about her, like she knows far more than she's telling.'

'You're just being paranoid, Effie.'

'Am I?' Effie tuts. 'I still think it's her. With her nasty tan and her awful clothes. I think she's gone crackers. I expect

to get one of those wicked notes myself, any day now.'

'What can she accuse you of ? What have you done that's so bad?'

Effie gives me a peculiar, dark look at this.

The record finishes and I get up to turn it over. I hobble across the sheepskin rug because one of my legs has gone to sleep.

And then – I don't know why – I launch into the tale of my almost-nightly hauntings. I haven't told Effie anything about them yet. I've kept all of that quite private because it makes me feel a bit foolish. But now, for some reason, it seems time to share.

So I tell her. Every detail. The scratching and tapping. The tiny footsteps in the hall. The creaking doors. The whumps and thumps. And me: sitting up rigid in bed, holding my breath and passing out with fear in the wee small hours of nearly every night.

'Brenda!' she cries. 'Why didn't you say something before? That sounds awful!'

'It's been really horrible,' I tell her. 'I don't know what to do about it.'

'Do?' She frowns. 'I'm not sure there's anything you can do about it. Not if your ghosts are like my ghosts. I've got them, too, as you know. My hauntings are a bit gentler than yours, though no less persistent. My female forebears are

there all the time: hanging around, disapproving of me. Trying to get me to do precisely what they want. They mutter and agitate and peer down at me from the walls. But I have learned to live with them. I ignore them. It drives them crazy! But I simply won't give in to them. And you must learn to do the same, Brenda. You've just got to rise above all this fuss and nonsense.'

'I'm not sure I can . . .'

She's looking at me oddly. She's surprised I'm so disturbed. I've shown my weakness to Effie and now she doesn't know what to say. We finish our tea in quiet, and then it's time for Effie to go home, and nothing more is said.

And I am left alone in my attic, once again, to face my night terrors.

They come again, of course.

It sounds as if there's an octopus dancing on the wooden landing outside my bedroom door. Or a giant spider, maybe, trip-trapping so softly out there. I can see its shadow creeping under the gap of light.

But the biggest shock and the worst thing comes with first light. Effie's back at mine, banging on the front door with bad news. She's heard something dreadful. Gossip in the downstairs shop while she was fetching her newspaper and milk. She thinks I need to be up and witnessing this.

She thinks it's germane to our investigations. And she's right. But I still resent having to fling on my clothes and follow her out into the chilly town before eight o'clock on a Saturday morning. I follow her, though. I'm tingling with weariness and pins and needles as the sun warms up the whole of Whitby. I follow her through the centre of town and up on to the cliff edge in front of the Royal Crescent.

Just yards away from the corner of the Christmas Hotel there are police vans and a cordon that's only just been set up. Ghoulish spectators are gathering and that's what we are, too, as we approach and bustle our way to the front: craning our necks to see.

At first I think the cordon and police activity are to do with the Christmas Hotel. Perhaps there's something dreadful going on there again. Or perhaps Mrs Claus has been busted at last. But, no. The police are scared of her. They'll never take her in. And now I can see that the cordon is over on the grass: around the very edge of the cliff. The vans and cars have pulled up to the edge. There are police down on the beach, far below on the narrow strip of dirty sand.

'It's a jumper,' Effie says.

I look at her curiously, thinking it's an article of clothing she's seen, but then I realise what she must have meant by that. The small crowd around us is whispering, muttering,

pointing. The surf below is lashing at the rocks and it's hard to hear anything. We peer down at the coppers and the medics by the body of the jumper, which is spreadeagled there in their midst and obviously stone dead.

Just before they cover it up and roll it away we see enough of the body and what it's wearing. That lime green dress. That red overcoat. That dayglo tan.

We don't have to say anything to each other. Effie and I both know who it is who's gone plummeting off the tallest and cruellest of these cliffs.

It's Rosie Twist lying down there. She'll be missing her weekend deadlines, I think. For both *The Willing Spirit* and its supplement, *The Flesh is Weak*.

Effie's a bit heartless. 'This makes things more complicated,' she says, with a sniff. 'I could murder some breakfast. What do you say, Brenda?'