

Chapter Three

It was just before Christmas that year when I first saw it. Up to that point, I didn't really know what I thought about everything we'd been discovering. In those early days, there was just so much for me to learn about how Jo went about things, how she thought, that I sort of took the apparitions in my stride. She had that effect on you. Every day could take you somewhere different. Somehow, the sightings were just part and parcel of this huge upheaval in my life.

Prestbury in December was pretty good. The old sandstone buildings in the centre were draped in Christmas decorations, the church put up cheerful lights all around the graveyard, and kids used to go carol-singing in little gangs, knocking on cottage doors and standing there tunelessly warbling Silent Night. They're probably not allowed to do it any more — it's been years since I've spent a Christmas in the village. Or if they do, they're bound to be accompanied by over-protective parents pushing their little Johnnies and Julias to the front, filming the little bastards on their phones.

I'd done a couple of Saturday night stake-outs with Jo in the cemetery, her with camera in hand, me smoking roll-ups and wandering around the gravestones, reading the inscriptions in the moonlight. I liked to say the names out loud: Emily Travers, spinster of this parish, beloved sister of Hugh; Nicholas Barber, Captain in Her Majesty's Royal Navy, forever sailing in our hearts. Every so often, we'd wander off from the graveyard and head back down the Burgage, hoping to catch sight of the Abbot. But maybe I put him off, because he never appeared on those occasions I was out with her.

Early one Sunday morning, it must have been about four o'clock, Jo said she was tired so we headed back to her cottage. She said she'd make us a cup of tea before I walked back to Mum's. We'd been talking about her parents for the last hour, or rather, she'd been telling me some of the stories about growing up with them in London. We'd been sitting on one of the benches in the graveyard and I think we'd both given up any idea of seeing anything out of the ordinary that night. I remember thinking, I'd give anything to take away the sadness in her voice when she talked about being a kid in that perfect rose-clad Fulham house.

When I was a kid in Prestbury, I was in one of the little rough-house gangs that used to roam around the estate on the edge of the village and, I promise you, I have no bad memories from my own childhood. I was too young to be badly affected by my Dad dying, so I just grew up thinking that other people had dads but I didn't. Mum encouraged me to be a survivor — if I'd come home crying about someone bullying me, she'd send me back out with

a clip round the ear and tell me to hit them back. I got the hang of it soon enough and, honestly, I liked being a kid. So much so, Mum used to say I never grew out of it.

That's not the childhood Jo had. That Sunday morning in her kitchen with two mugs of tea, the chill of a December night still in our bones, she carried on talking about the arguments between her Mum and Dad, the schemes both of them came up with to try and paint the other in a worse light. It was depressing to hear, but I knew just how much more damaging it must have been for her to have to live through. So I let her talk, and her dark hair fell over her eyes as she stared down at the wooden table top, the auburn highlights released from the dragonfly clip, which lay beside her mug. She talked quietly and I didn't interrupt, just leafed silently through a photography book about the history of the area.

I don't know why, but I suddenly felt something. I looked up from the book, looked at the top of Jo's head that was still leaning over the table relating this story about how her Mum had locked her in a cupboard after she'd accidentally dropped a glass vase. Then I shifted my gaze towards the kitchen window and that's when I saw it.

What can I tell you? Lying here tonight with the windows open in this stifling London heat, I'm shivering at the memory of it. Even now, all these years later, I don't know what 'it' was. I grabbed Jo's hand and she started — I'd never done that before. I was still staring at the window but I couldn't speak and I could feel her looking at me, confused about what had happened. I'd interrupted her talking, grabbed her hand. What was I playing at? she must have thought. I couldn't take my eyes from the window and I must have been squeezing her hand too tightly because she tried to pull it away.

That's when she turned her head to see what I was looking at. And the still, quiet early morning was broken by the crash of her mug which she knocked off the table as she leaped to her feet. I jumped out of my seat to avoid the tea that was now spilling off the table top. When I looked back at the window, the face was gone.

OK, so what can I tell you? It was a child's face, that much I know. But like no child I had ever seen. It was the face of a creature that could have been any age, that might not even have been human. The face was distorted into a kind of crazy, maniacal scream: the mouth was wide open, the eyes were bulging, the hair was sticking up and wild. But there was no noise, just this silent monstrosity which, while not really presenting a threat to us, at the same time offered something much, much worse. It felt to me that it was filled with pure, burning anger and malevolence and yet also, combined with that, there was this feeling of childish vulnerability, as though it was also crying out for help.

The hair was pale, straw-coloured, I think, although, later, Jo disagreed. This was the only time I saw it but, for Jo, it was the first of several sightings so she was probably right about the thing's hair being dark but that the light from inside the kitchen had made it appear more blonde. Witch's hair, that's how I described it, but Jo said that was just lazy talk.

'You can't compare it to anything else, AJ, that's the thing,' she said a week later. 'It wasn't like anything you or I have seen before, so you can't compare it to something like how you think a witch looks. That's just lazy. It was...'

'I know,' I said. 'It was dreadful.'

And it was. When I first saw it, while Jo was still talking I was filled, for the only time in my life, with a sense of utter despair, as though I was looking at the end of everything. This creature, out there in the cold night air pressed soundlessly up against the glass of the kitchen window, an ageless, tormented child creature filled with both pain and fury; whatever it was, it represented the depths of any torment you could imagine. It was how, I imagine, Hell must be.

Even now, all these years later, I have to deliberately banish that vision from my mind most days. It will just appear, out of the blue, when I'm walking down the street or sitting in a chair at home: not the ghastly vision itself, but the memory of it, which has somehow been imprinted itself on my mind. I'll never be rid of it. That's how it feels, as though that terrible child's face is forever a part of me.

I didn't see Jo for a week after that. Once the horrific vision had disappeared, it was obvious that Jo wanted to be on her own. The light of dawn was beginning to filter in through the kitchen window and, in the grey silence, I left to walk back home to my house. I tried to contact her a couple of times over the following days but she didn't pick up the telephone, and she cancelled Mum's cleaning visit the following week. I went to work every night as usual, but now all I could see was that thing; as I loaded up a trolley with boxes off the back of a truck, I had those staring eyes in front of me, that silent scream. As I weaved my way around all the piles of goods in the warehouse with the bright electric lights flooding the loading bay, I felt that face following me. I felt like I was being watched.

She rang the following weekend, the last weekend before Christmas. I was with Mum on Saturday afternoon putting up the shitty little imitation tree we kept in an old cardboard box in the attic. Mum was laughing when she picked the phone up because I'd just tripped on the cable of Christmas lights in our tiny little front room and I'd squashed the fairy we normally stick on top of the tree.

'Hello love,' I heard Mum say from the hallway, her voice still full of laughter. 'The boy genius here is destroying my Christmas decorations. I'm having a glass of sherry. Why don't you come over?'

To my surprise, she did. Jo had never visited our house before but then maybe I'd never invited her. I don't know, I suppose it's sort of an unspoken thing: people who lived in a big house in Deep Street didn't hang around with people who lived on our estate. But half an hour later, there she was, standing in a duffel coat in our front room, laughing as Mum told her about my clumsiness. She had a canvas tote bag in her hand and when Mum brought her a sherry, she handed the bag over.

'Your Christmas presents,' she said. There were two of them, wrapped in proper expensive paper and Mum placed them carefully underneath our plastic tree. Jo still had something in the tote but she tucked it between her feet as she sat down on the sofa and sipped her drink. That Saturday afternoon is still so vivid. There was a repeat of one of the old Morecambe and Wise Christmas shows on the TV, our little front room was a mess of scrunched-up newspaper as I unpacked each of the decorations and carefully hung them on the tree, and Mum and Jo just sat next to each other on the sofa and got tipsy on sherry, laughing at me while I kept cursing the fiddly bits of tinsel that kept falling off each time I tried to attach them.

I'd never seen Jo so relaxed. It was as though she didn't have a care in the world, and she and Mum were like a couple of naughty kids. The only time there was anything like a flicker was when Mum asked her where she'd be for Christmas Day.

'Oh, in London with my parents. I'm leaving tomorrow,' she replied and did that thing I recognised, dropping her head a little so her black hair fell over her eyes. Mum and I exchanged one of those split-second looks, and then Jo was back being all bright and cheerful again.

'You know, a traditional family Christmas: ghastly relatives, Marks and Sparks turkey, Midnight Mass at the Brompton Oratory, Harrods sale.'

That was so far away from the kind of Christmas Mum and I normally had that we just smiled and nodded, then Mum changed the subject and soon they were laughing at Morecambe and Wise again, and my clumsiness, and we carried on like that until I'd finished the tree and they both gave me a round of applause.

I was meeting a couple of mates that evening in Cheltenham so I suggested that I walk her back to Deep Street before getting the bus, but Mum said, 'I think she's quite capable of making her own way home, aren't you love?'

Mum was enjoying the company and I think Jo was too, so I left them to it. But as I was heading for the front door, Jo came up behind me and pressed the canvas bag into my hand. It was really heavy.

'I want you to look after this,' she whispered. Mum was still in the front room.

I frowned. 'What is it?' I started to look inside.

She put her hand over mine to stop me. 'You don't need to look at it. You know what it is. I don't want it in the house. While I'm away. You understand, don't you?'

All the Christmas boozy bonhomie had gone. She was looking hard into my eyes and there was something like fear there. Yes, that's it, she was scared. Scared of having it in the house.

'But it's just...'

'Please,' she said. 'Please.' She was almost begging me and I could see the tension in her face.

'Yes, of course,' I said, more gently this time. 'Let me put it up in my room.'

'Don't open it, while I'm gone over Christmas,' she said. 'Just leave it in the bag. Don't touch it.'

'OK.'

She grabbed my leather jacket and now her face was really close to mine.

'I saw her,' she whispered.

'Not...'

She nodded, her eyes really wide. I can still see the glint of light from the Star of David Mum had hung up in the hall reflecting on the dragonfly clip in her hair. I hadn't got the front door open yet, but I felt chilled all the same.

'How do you know it's a her?' I still hadn't been able to make my mind up, the image from the previous weekend was so horrific it just didn't make any sense to me.

'I saw her.'

'Was...she at the window again?'

Jo shook her head. She stepped back, then she pointed at the canvas tote bag that was in my hand.

'I saw her. In there.'

And she turned around and went back into the front room. I lugged the grimoire upstairs and pushed it under my bed. When I came back down, they were both laughing again and I went out to get pissed in Cheltenham.