

NOTORIOUS

BY

JOHN JONES

© 2006 John Jones

Cover and back illustrations by John Jones

TICKTOCK, TICKTOCK, DOWN THE COUNTDOWN GOES....

Her cold, dead eyes stared up at the night sky, and the men who stood looking down at her stopped digging. They had found what they had sought. Detective Inspector Edward Stanton smiled a humourless smile. He had found the woman after five months of fruitless searching, of wild goose chases and roads to nowhere. Here she was, decaying in a shallow grave, the method of murder as yet unknown, but murder he suspected it was. One of the men pointed a flashlight at her face, making it startlingly white. He could see marks around her neck, and he was confident that she had been strangled. He walked to the edge of the path that led into Hale bank, South Liverpool and got into his vehicle. It was 11:04pm. There was no moon in the sky. The rough trail cut through sloping fields until it eventually wound its way to a Mersey river bank nature reserve. It was popular with joggers and bikers. Around ten metres from the path, beneath an over hanging oak tree, the woman's body had been found. With her husband being a suspect, now seemed like a good enough time as any to go and see him. He had been questioned many times while she had been missing, all the time protesting his innocence. As the house was only a ten minute drive away, he realised that his instant decision to confront the husband was taking a risk on his own. Yet, the man was not exactly Mr Universe, but he was capable, however, of strangling his wife. In the times Edward had seen him, not once had he been violent. In fact, if he was innocent, he would probably burst into tears, and that was something he could do without, being a shoulder to cry on and a tea-maker. It had to be done, though, and he wanted to get it over with.

He pulled up outside the semi-detached, and saw that somebody was home. Everywhere was quiet, the moon behind wisps of cloud, a nearby street lamp casting the car in a muted orange. Edward left the vehicle and walked through the gate, up to the front door. He knocked quietly and stood back. After a few moments, the hall light came on and the door opened. The woman's husband recognised who it was instantly.

"Detective, strange time to be calling," said Peter Selden. Edward smiled that humourless smile again.

"We've found her," he said. "She's dead". Peter closed his eyes, slowly breathed in through his nose, then took a few steps back. He collapsed to his knees, his face in his hands.

“Alright, alright, it was me. I killed her,” he said. Edward stared at him for a few moments. That was it, he thought. Case closed. He took from his pocket a mobile telephone, and before he began the necessary procedures, there was one person he decided to call first. After a few rings, it went to an answering machine.

“Congratulations,” said Edward. “You’ve done it again”.

Curio Enchantment, real name Philip Harrison, played the message for the eleventh time, and it was still satisfying: 'Congratulations, you've done it again'. That was all it said. He had a huge satisfied grin on his face, knowing exactly what it meant, further understanding the status and significance of his role when it came to locating missing persons. His talent was increasingly being proven, and people knew it. This was another string to his bow, another success, another blow to the sceptics who would find it all amusing. Philip was 34 years old, and lived alone on the fifth floor of a block of flats in Widnes. He was lean, 6 foot 2 inches, mostly wore black pullovers and trousers, and had long, curly hair that reached his shoulders.

The flat was sparsely furnished when he had moved in. It had basically consisted of a table, a TV cabinet, a bed with a stained mattress, a two door alpine wardrobe, and an armchair. All were second hand, maybe fifth and sixth hand. He had bought a couple of items himself, such as a bedside cabinet, a desk and a coffee table, but not much else. He used to have a girlfriend, and had lived with her for seven years in her parent's house. They had died of carbon monoxide poisoning in their beds, so it was left to her. Yet, Philip's increasing involvement with learning about supernatural activity had led him to believe that he had a 'gift'. He had a mind like a radio. It could tune in to the spirit world. At least he thought it could. Soon his obsession had caused her to show him the door, and find a cheap flat in a threatened block. The council were always threatening to knock it down, but as is usually the case, not much ever happened at all. It was all speculation, but Philip didn't care. If he carried on like this, he thought, then he'd make enough money to move out of the pokey little abode and buy a proper house. At this rate, he would start making money soon, he was sure of it. That's if his success rate kept up, which he was confident it would, because he knew his star was rising. This was the fourth missing person he had located by psychic detection. When the police were running out of leads, they called him for help, and out of the six times they had called, four had been a success. He didn't pinpoint exactly where they were, but it was usually within a fifty foot circumference. The latest had been located within the area only by one of the officers spotting disturbed earth, thanks to Philip for his detective work for which his reward was the kudos and esteem it would bring.

When called upon to help discover the whereabouts of a missing person, Philip would be picked up by Edward Stanton, as it had always been him who called, and driven to a secluded location where he could perform his work. Edward would always provide a personal item from the missing person, borrowed from a concerned friend, or parent. Philip required as much silence as possible. He would grasp the item in both hands, raise them to his fore-head, close his eyes, and concentrate to see if he could pick up on traumatic brainwaves emanating from that person. If the person was alive, then no energy would be detected. If, however, the person was deceased, he could locate their whereabouts by the trauma that would still pulse like radio waves from a distressed brain. The spirit may be gone, but there was still activity, especially if the person had recently passed away. Should they have been dead for a long time, then this energy would eventually fade, and he would not have been able to pick up on any waves. He guessed that a traumatised brain could be active for up to eight months after a person had died. When Edward could find no indications as to their whereabouts, he would call Philip, as at that point he had reached the conclusion that the person was dead. He had always been correct. They had been murdered, and upon confrontation with the suspects, they had always confessed. Philip had picked up on the traumatised brainwaves, from which the personal item acted as a tuner to the correct frequency. He could trace it to its source, and give Edward an approximate location.

Many people had asked him for this technique which he had readily given, but he knew that it was difficult to achieve, so did not mind revealing his system. If it was easy, he had thought, then everybody would be doing it. He 'knew' he had a unique gift, and gladly told his method to anybody who inquired.

His successes had proven him to be talented in the eyes of the believers. Of course there were sceptics. On the few occasions when he had been invited onto radio shows as a guest, he would sometimes receive calls from the public, and while most of them believed, there was always somebody who thought it was 'a load of garbage'. However, they always rang off with their tail between their legs when Philip asked them how did he do it then, when on all four of his successes, all of them murder, the killer had soon confessed afterwards. How did he know where the bodies were? Long silence. 'Ah, loada garbage', click. Cue a grin from Philip. There was nothing like the satisfaction of being proved right.

His kudos had now been raised even higher, and he was sure he would be invited onto more shows now, maybe even onto local regional television. He knew he would sleep well tonight, his dreams of fame now much more realistic. His dreams could possibly now come true. Fame, celebrity status. Imagine that, he thought. Your body and soul may be gone, but your name remains forever. He wondered how long it would be before the police rang again for his help in locating another missing person.

After his third success, he had been invited onto a late-night phone in with a local DJ who had only been in the business for nine months, and brought local people in who had had a modicum of success to discuss their work and take questions from the public. Curio's first interview had gone well, and he saw it as the first step in the path to fame. He gave out his contact details and stated that he is not only a specialist in finding missing persons, but can give readings and predict people's future. It was basically anything supernatural, or anything that science had not proven. Philip always believed he had some sort of talent when it came to the unexplained, the unexplained in scientific terms anyway, things that can be deemed paranormal or supernatural. He believed in it. He knew that not everything can be explained by science, and that evidence for the unknown cannot always be wrong. He never expressed doubt. There was no need for him to question. If he could detect where missing bodies were then it would be highly likely he could tune his mind to the spirit world, a world which was parallel to ours, according to him. We cannot see them, but they can see us. We have free will in reality, so there was no reason to suggest that spirits do not, or that their personalities alter after passing over. Basically, they were and are invisible, and can spy on whoever they wish, because it is their choosing. However, they cannot interact with reality. To do that, they must attain a certain power from somewhere unknown within the spirit world, and thus become a poltergeist.

Philip was gullible without doubt. His reasoning behind a lot of what he had learned was taken from books, articles, and newsletters. He thought that because it was published, because it was in a shop, for sale, then what was between the covers must be true, must have some basis in fact, not realising that a lot of it was probably self published by the author who just had to tell people he had crossed over and came back, had an out of body experience and spoke with his long dead relatives. He

believed newspapers, even the tabloids that were aimed at the less intelligent people in society. He was a believer who rarely questioned what he read, like a devout religious person who reads their holy book and does not question what is written. It must be true, and that is that. Deep down within the person, there was a conviction that it was true. They could 'feel' that it was correct. They just 'knew'. They didn't need proof. Philip didn't need scepticism. What was the point when he knew ghosts existed? When he knew the reality of telepathy and aliens? He just needed more practice in performance and understanding. He wanted to explain the unexplained. He wanted the unknown to become known. He wanted to pioneer the proof of supernatural activity. He wanted to go down in history as the man who finally silenced the sceptics, who made them embarrassed and apologetic. He wanted them on their knees, begging his forgiveness, worshipping him as an idol. A man to be looked up to, to be respected, a pillar of society. A man whose kudos was full to the brim, whose portrait hung in believers houses, especially in houses where once there was misgivings, where they looked at his picture in awe. They would thank him for showing them the reality of paranormal activity, for turning them into believers. Where once there was doubt, now there was fact, and Philip would show them that. He would shove it in their faces until they could ask no more questions. Here is my proof, show me yours. No-one would doubt him. They would beg him for his advice and wisdom. By that time he would probably be rich. Nice car, nice house, glamour model girlfriend. His rewards for his knowledge, and his sharing of it with the world. He had changed his name to Curio Enchantment. Not by deed poll, but by simply referring to it when strangers asked. That was what he would be known as when it circulated further. For now though, his dreams of fame and notoriety were simply that, dreams. He had a mountain to climb, and he just wondered how much further he had to go. His attempts at seeing the future where he was lifting an award was somewhat clouded. He had to practice precognition, and many other abilities. Now that he was known to the police as a possibility in helping with their investigations, they should help his career no end, and he hoped that the telephone would ring more often, as sometimes months would pass where it remained silent.

Malcolm Selden wasn't listening to a lecture about Electronic and computer engineering at Widnes university. His mind was elsewhere. Perhaps if the lecturer was saying something interesting, he would still be in a world of his own, as he had come to try and take his mind off his concern, but it was no use. He was sat at the back of the lecture theatre, slouched in a chair, his arms folded, staring at the back of the chair in front, but not seeing it. He was 27 years old, single, wore casual clothes that always bordered on old-fashioned, and had a 'business man's cut' hairstyle. He was studying for a first degree with honours in Information systems development. His friend, Tom Parker was sat in a seat diagonal from him. He was watching Malcolm with curiosity.

"You still worried?" he whispered. Malcolm looked at him, breaking from his stupor.

"Worried?" he said. "I can't stop thinking of it. It just doesn't make sense. My dad isn't like that. He wouldn't just kill my mum like that. I'm sorry. It doesn't add up. I know he did it. He admitted it, and all the forensics have confirmed that it was him who strangled her, but it just doesn't make sense. He was never violent. As far as I know, he never lifted a finger to her. I don't remember him even shouting at me. He just would not suddenly decide to kill my mum like that". He clicked his fingers, and noticed that the theatre was quiet. He saw that the lecturer had stopped speaking, had folded his arms, and was staring up at Malcolm. Other faces looked in his direction. His face went red and he went back to staring at the back of the chair.

The lecturer continued:

"After their establishment, both systems become peers". Malcolm and Tom exchanged glances, which basically said: 'I'll speak to you later'.

The building was a modern structure, with orange bricks and oddly angled windows, reflecting an attempt to come into modern society by basically resembling what was probably a student's architectural design project. In the foyer, where there was always a constant stream of students, coming and going, and standing outside, smoking, Malcolm and Tom walked slowly to the exit, their day over in the place. It was 12:00 noon.

"So what are you going to do?" asked Tom. Malcolm was deep in thought.

“What can I do? Tell the police I think my Dad just had a moment of madness? He won’t do it again, promise”. Tom had no answer.

“I’ll have to go and see him” Malcolm continued, “There’s nothing else I can do. I have to understand why”. They walked outside. Tom was 25, three inches shorter than Malcolm, always wore clothing that was white, or cream, with a cap that seemed perfectly suited to him. He was one of those people that easily suited headgear.

“Hey, there’s that girl you fancy,” he said, looking in the direction of a group of girls, chatting near a metal bench. One in particular had long black hair and was wearing a dusty pink sequin neck dress. She had her back to them.

“Where? This uni’s is full of girls I fancy. It must be a prerequisite of entry. All girls must be fit,” said Malcolm. He saw her.

“She’s with her mates,”. Tom frowned, and said:

“I bet even if she was on her own, you wouldn’t talk to her”. He smiled, but Malcolm’s sour expression reminded him of what was on his mind, and it vanished. They both walked away.

When his father appeared, he looked as though he had just woken up. He had a stubble and his hair was dishevelled. Sitting down opposite Malcolm, and folding his arms, he regarded him like an unwelcome stranger.

“What?” he asked. Malcolm leaned forward on the desk.

“Dad! What are you doing? Why d’you suddenly decide to kill mum? It doesn’t make sense. That’s not like you at all, now what where you thinking? Why Dad, why? Tell me”. Peter Selden’s expression did not change. He took a few moments to answer, and shrugged.

“I wanted to”.

“Is that it? You just felt like. Suddenly you just decided to strangle my mum, drive her out into a field, and bury her. From the moment you put your hands round her neck, you knew exactly what you where doing. What I don’t understand is why. What did she do? 38 years you’ve been married. 38 years, and now you just decide to kill her just because you felt like!”. Peter nodded.

“I just killed her. That’s the way it is. It’s what I did”. His expression became introverted, thinking back to the event.

“Yep,” he nodded. “I killed her, I drove her out into the field, strangled her, buried her, drove back. Then I watched that soap opera that I like”. He smiled, thinking of that.

“Bobby started an affair with the bar-maid. When it finished, I went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, but while the kettle boiled, there was a knock on the door. I answered it, and...”. Peter’s face changed to one of concern, with a slight hint of fear.

“Then I...I don’t know”. Malcolm shook his head.

“That’s not a reason. You just wanted to. You just decided to kill her! Come on dad, tell me. Make me understand. It’s not like you at all. You wouldn’t kill her for no reason, just ‘cos you felt like. It doesn’t make fucking sense”. Peter just sat there, as though he wasn’t listening.

“What happened Dad? What happened? Why didn’t you just tell me to mind my language? The Dad I knew would have done”. Peter shrugged. Malcolm quickly stood up, the plastic chair clattering backwards. He banged both his palms on the table.

“For fuck’s sake Dad, tell me why?” Malcolm felt hands grab his arms and pull him backwards.

“Time’s up, son” someone said to him. Peter still looked introverted. He wasn’t looking at Malcolm.

“She had to die,” he said, “She had to die”.

Malcolm was sat in a paved shopping area, on a bench, staring at a few scruffy pigeons searching for food. It had begun to rain slightly, and his face and hair was covered in light drizzle. All he could think of was his father’s words: “She had to die”. What did he mean by that? and why did she have to die? He had no answers, but knew he could not function properly without knowing, without understanding. It was no use in persisting with Dad, he was useless, he thought, but what else can I do? Maybe it would be worth trying him again though, and the police are going to grill him anyway. They should be able to prise a proper answer out of him. Then I’ll have to get the answer from them, he thought. It wasn’t simply a case of just walking into the police station and saying: ‘So what did my Dad say? Why’d he kill my Mum?’. It might be even harder to get an answer out of them. Still, it would be worth going back again sometime, just in case he’s gone back to being the Dad I once knew.

The telephone only rang twice in the following two days. One was a wrong number, the other was from 'Kickin' FM radio who wanted to invite Curio onto one of their shows with DJ Space Hoppa. He always had guests on to answer calls from the public, interspersed with the latest chart tracks. It was basically aimed at teenagers. Hoppa's guests were never truly famous. They were people who had made a fragment of a name for themselves locally, and saw that coming onto Hoppa's show was an amazing career boost, even though the airwaves only covered half of the north-west. Basically, when Hoppa announced who the guest was, it was usually a case of: 'I've never heard of them'. However, Curio's appearance on the show was the following day. As the body was not headline news, its discovery by Curio only warranted a small section in the corner of page seven of the local free circular. They used his real name and no picture.

Today, he had to suffer the embarrassment of walking into the jobcentre and signing on. He could not yet tell them where to go, where they could stick their girocheques, but he was quite sure he wasn't far away from doing that. A balding man in his late forties looked at Curio across the desk as though he was wondering whether or not he was serious.

"OK, Mr Enchantment. You wish to have your name altered to Curio. Is that right? You want me to change what it says on the system".

"I don't want to be known as Philip anymore. Could you change it please?" The man shook his head.

"No, I can't do that. I'll have to book you in to see an advisor. Tell them, they'll do it". Curio frowned, disbelieving.

"An appointment? Are you serious? Look, forget it. Just give me a pen". The man did so, trying desperately not to grin. Philip signed his name and went to stand up.

"Er, hold on, Mr Enchantment. What have you been doing to look for work?"

"This and that," he muttered. He hadn't done a thing lately, so enamoured and convinced was he that riches were just over the horizon, that finding a job was pointless.

"What?"

“Sent some letters off to a few supermarkets”. The man nodded, and typed something on the computer.

“There’s no vacancies for psychic detectives yet, but I’ll keep you posted”, the man said, not hiding his grin.

“Glad to see you know who I am,” said Curio. He was handed his card, and got up and left. Outside in the cold air, beneath a white sky and gathering wind, Curio nodded at what he had just said in the jobcentre. The man knew who he was, it seemed outside of the records. He headed home, people around him passing by like robots, as they always did to everybody who looked normal. Soon they would recognise me, he thought. They would stop me in the street and want autographs and a chat about anything. No-one gave him a second glance, though, but they would, he guessed. Soon they would know his name.

‘Guess wt I bought?’

‘Wt?’

‘Go on, guess’

‘A sex change operation. Ha ha ha ha ha’

‘Hilarious. No. I tk ur advice, remember, bout tht place, now I’ve bought an Alfa Romeo 156 1.8TS Brand new. 9K’

‘Ace. C? I told you it ws ripe 4 th taking’

‘Damn right it ws, anyway got 2 go. C U L8r’. Thomas Parker nodded, and ended the email conversation. He sat back in his chair and shook his head. Alfa Romeo, eh. Maybe I’ll change my car, he thought. Get myself a Porsche Boxster. That’ll show him. He grinned. Let’s see what he thinks when I pull up in that. Not yet though, let him have his fun, driving round in his new car, showing off. Tom lived with his mother at their elaborate detached home in Halton view, east of Widnes. He had bought it himself from his ‘gathered funds’. He basically didn’t need to work. His income was regular and more than sufficient. All he had to do was preserve it, keep it balanced, and adapt with any changes it made. He and his email friend, Anthony Kendrick, both lived lavish lifestyles, and could afford most luxurious items. His mother was not wise to what Tom did. She just thought that he had earned it somehow over ‘those computer thingies’. Yet, she was right. He was studying Networks and telecommunications engineering. His bank balance was healthy due to his knowledge of computer systems and modern technology. He had hacked into the mainframe of a bank by creating a virus, which he had sent via anonymous email. The only unstable and unknown factor with regards to it was whether or not it would be opened by the recipient. He had written as the subject: ‘IMPORTANT INFORMATION’. The workers had been told to be suspicious of email, because they may cause viruses, but Tom had altered the address of the sender so it looked as if it had come from another branch, from a person superior to them, so without thinking, they opened it, only to find an advert:

‘Protect your computer from viruses. Updated software shield ‘Viralguard’. You can purchase for just \$49.99’. There followed a list of benefits for this package. It basically looked like a normal advert, and was therefore ignored. However, the very opening of the email had sent the virus into the bank’s mainframe computer where it had been programmed

to hide. It was not a virus that had been made to simply cause damage. It was to dismantle part of the bank's security firewall. He only needed one puncture. The engineers would need to look microscopically to see any anomalies. To them, the shield was still active, and security was still strong. Once it had been breached, the virus had to self destruct. Basically, it deleted itself, leaving no trace whatsoever. Tom then had a direct link to the bank mainframe, and had sent another virus, again, not to be destructive, but to gather data about people's accounts and send them to him via the firewall gap. He obtained pin and account numbers, and the amount of money each account holder had. He also had the ability to alter those numbers. Therefore he could give people money, or take it away. Tom had two bank accounts, one with this bank, under the name Floyd Bracewell, who was a sales manager for a health food company, and one with another branch, under his normal name. This one had his funds from income support, and was basically his front. When he had to undertake financial dealings, then this was the account he referred to, as everything about it was above board, but the Floyd account was where his riches had built up. He discovered that many of the accounts people held were consistently in the four figure bracket. The person took out money, it went in, and this was normal. People spent their earnings, and then they were paid their wages until their jobs ended. Tom had found this with many of the accounts. The amount they had was never stable. It meant that he could siphon off a few pounds from each into Floyd's account. The person would not notice a few pounds missing. They would trust the bank to be reliable. If that's how much they had left, then that was that. Maybe there was a slight extra charge for something. A charge for sending out a letter. A direct debit bill payment with slightly added expense for something the account holder failed to do. It didn't matter, because Tom knew that should they even notice anything missing, they should cease their questioning after reading his ready made message that would be relayed to the inquirer upon investigation: 'System error. Information unavailable. There may be technical difficulties for this setting, PCT.3.0.' It looked important, but had absolutely no meaning. Its job was to simply put off any further probing. He had not needed it yet. Of 1097 bank accounts that Tom had picked, because of the four figure reason, two pounds per week from each transferred into Floyd's account, and with the statements not declaring where the money had actually gone to, he was basically an anonymous cyber thief. However, as

with most people who had considerable funds, they always wanted more. There was no cap they would put on the attainment of wealth. As there was no highest number, there was therefore no limit to greed. They would be unlikely to find out where two pounds had gone, even if they bothered to check. Only Malcolm, Anthony, and his girlfriend knew how he acquired his money. The seed of his skills was planted in night school the previous year. The computer course he had taken, 'Digital applications', gave him the realisation and the knowledge to build upon. His first success came when he hacked into the university finances and diverted some of the student grants into his account. He got away with it, but knew it was dangerous putting the money into the account in his name. It wasn't long before Floyd came along. Following him was further riches. A nice house in an expensive area, a Mitsubishi Colt, a £500 watch, gold bracelet, and many high quality brand name clothes. He knew that his girlfriend was a gold-digger, that if his money ever stopped, then she would find some other man whom she would pretend to love, when her real love existed in the bank. He didn't care. She wasn't very attractive, and had an attitude problem. He would leave her soon, he had told himself, let her find some other mug. She would be more upset at the stopping of the money he spent on her. She'd get over it, he thought. She would have to. He had other things on his mind, as well as further boosting his bank balance, his interest had been piqued by the proposal of a new building being erected fifteen miles from where he lived. It was set to become a research facility for medicine and vaccinations. Tom wasn't a malicious person. In a physical fight he would be the first to run away, but he had every intention of bringing the company to its knees.

“That was Bob Funk with: ‘My Baby’s left me for a custard pie’” The psychedelic jangles faded away across the airwaves.

“I’m joined by my guest, a Mr Curio Enchantment. That’s a ‘curious’ name” said DJ Space Hoppa, bursting into laughter. Curio just smiled out of sympathy, wearing his headphones, across the desk from Hoppa, a microphone before his mouth. Hoppa was ten years younger than Curio, but he acted even ten years younger. His radio persona was of a ‘wacky guy’, who was down with the street kids, rather like some of the children’s TV programme presenters whose ego swells to massive proportions and think they’re the funniest thing on the planet, who talk down to the viewers, and are subconsciously saying: ‘Look at me, I’m on TV, and you’re not. I’m just so crazy’. That was Hoppa. He thought he was a big personality because he was on the radio. Yet Hoppa had settled for now on one of the steps to fame, and Curio had not reached that height yet, but he was close.

“Later on we’ll be having a phone-in, so you can put your questions to him, but he might know already what you’re gonna ask.” said Hoppa He looked across at his guest.

“So, Curio. Mr Enchantingment. You’re a psychic detective, you hunt down dead people with your mind”. He said it as a statement.

“You could put it like that. I’m out to prove the existence of paranormal phenomena. No longer is it speculative and unprovable. I focus not just on finding missing persons, but on all things that science cannot prove”.

“Phernominaaaa!. Maybe you are a ghost, Curio. How am I to know?” There was a pause. Curio didn’t answer.

“I saw a ghost once” Hoppa continued. “At the time I was eating an ice screeeeeeem!” Hoppa yelled the last word, and suddenly Curio got the urge to punch Hoppa hard in the face. He’s not taking this seriously, he finally realised.

“So can you speak with ghosts, like?”

“I do believe I can commune with the spirits of the deceased. I can feel their concerns and emotions”.

“What do they say? I ain’t got nobody?”. Hoppa laughed again, and waved up to the webcam.

“Smile, you’re live worldwide”.

“What? I didn’t know that”, Ah, a bigger audience, thought Curio.

“I also believe there’s.....”

“I’ll stop you there Curio lad. Time for a choon”. A hard house track came on, and all Curio heard was the warblings of a woman, who, he found, actually had a nice voice. The music she sang to however, was undoubtedly made on a cheap keyboard in some wannabe DJ’s bedroom.

Hoppa never looked at Curio during the track. Instead, he busied himself by staring at a monitor and clicking a mouse. Curio guessed he was rifling through tracks to play later. When the song finished, Hoppa became more animated and went back to the microphone.

“That was DJ Stevie with Heartbreakin’ lover. My guest this morning is a Mr Curio Enchantment. Psychic detective and ghost hunter extraordinaire.

He can read minds and tell you your future. He’s an all round mystic”. Curio smiled without humour.

“Tell me Curio, what’s my future hold?”

“What’s your date of birth?”

“I ain’t tellin’ ‘cos you should tell me. What’s my date of birth?”

“Well...”

“OK, I’ll help you out. My star sign is Sagaquarius. Ha ha ha. Fooled ya”.

“Astrology is fast becoming more and more recognised as a genuine phenomenon. What’s the point of the stars being there, if they’re not for our benefit?”

“Phernominaaaaa! Tell me Enchantingment, you claim to read minds, what am I thinking now?” He closed his eyes and put his hands over his headphones. Curio then had an idea. It would raise his profile, create some controversy, and embarrass Hoppa.

“OK,” said Curio. “You’re thinking these exact words: I’m a pathetic, talentless little cunt”. It felt good to say that, Curio found. Hoppa’s eyes opened and he looked shocked. Curio stood up and took his headphones off. He pointed at the buttons beside Hoppa, who was speechless.

“Is that what you’re looking for? The ten second delay switch. Uh oh! too late. It’s gone out. Ha, it’s into the bosses office for you. You’re sacked”. Hoppa’s face reddened and he stood up angrily.

“Get out!” he shouted, pointing to the door. Curio duly obliged.

The sun was threatening to come out from behind the clouds, and the wind had lessened to a slight breeze. Curio had decided to walk home, as

it was only three miles away. As he did, he found himself passing by his old university, where his academic aspirations nearly came to fruition. He had wanted to be a doctor, and had managed four years until he realised that he did not have the audacity to see it through. From there he had found himself in various jobs that were not exactly brain taxing. At that time he had had many friends, mostly from university with medical ambitions, and his social circle could have been seemed to be normal. When he found that he had ‘the gift’, that he could commune with spirits, could hear voices in his head, he found that the telephone had rang less and less. They’re far too busy, was Curio’s delusion, and to this day he believed that.

Further towards his home, he passed by a library, and decided to do some further reading up on the paranormal. It wasn’t long before he was sat reading about ancient astronauts.

He was drunk, but he didn't care. Redundancy was hanging over his head like a grey cloud, and he found himself more and more at his local pub than at home with his wife. He was 43, and worked at a vehicle manufacturer whom he knew was having financial difficulties. He also knew that should it get any worse, he would be one of the first out of the door and into the dole queue. Today wasn't much better. He'd been told what he already knew, that there was a possibility he might lose his job. It was basically affirming his beliefs, but he wasn't alone. The trade union wouldn't take this lying down. He guessed that at some point there would be a strike, and he would join the picket line, but until then, he drowned his sorrows with some of his other workmates who were in the same boat. David Morley was the type of person who couldn't work out their levels of intoxication, and always ended up drunk, but thought they were 'fine', when his colleagues knew exactly that he wasn't. He had spent more time looking at the bottom of a pint glass, now that the cloud above him didn't show any signs of leaving. He had started to occupy the same place in the pub, and was certainly a regular face. He knew it wouldn't be long before all the bar staff would simply say: 'Usual Dave?'

He downed the last of his lager, and put it down on a cardboard coaster. He nodded, more to himself than his colleagues.

"OK, time for me to go," he said. He mimed a talking puppet with his right hand against his ear.

"Yak yak yak, that's all I'll get now off the missus. Where've you been? How much 'av yer spent?". He sighed a sigh of despair and he looked longingly at the empty glass, wishing it would refill so he could put off going home, but he knew he had to get it over with, so stood up, put on his coat, and bid farewell to his friends whom he knew would stay for that extra pint.

A biting wind met him when he stepped out onto the pavement. There were not many street lamps, and he was bathed in the light from the pub windows behind him. Besides these lights, the village was gloomy and quiet, and David set off towards his house, feeling the effects of inebriation which desensitised him to the cold, but meant he had to take it slow. He'd done it before, but it didn't get any easier. His jagged sauntering eventually led him along his garden path. He fumbled with his key for a few moments, and was soon stepping into the hallway. He

closed the door and stood there, trying to focus, trying to keep his composure. He took off his coat and hung it up beneath the stairs. He walked into the living room and saw his wife standing in front of the unlit coal fire.

“I know what yer gonna say,” he said to her, “but I didn’t spend too much”. Sheila Morley turned and looked at him. She grabbed a bread knife which had been on the mantle-piece. She said nothing, instead walked across to him and stabbed him in the neck. David tried to yell but it came out as a gurgle. She sent the knife again and again into his neck, and then turned the blade around and started stabbing his chest. She made no sound as she repeatedly plunged the blade into him. He collapsed back, crashing the door shut. Still she would not stop. She kept stabbing until his chest and neck became a bloody pulp. After a few minutes, she stepped back, blood soaking the carpet, door and wall, and looked at him to see if there was any signs of life. There wasn’t. He was dead. Her face and front dripped crimson, but she didn’t seem to notice, or care. Dropping the blade, she grabbed his hair and pulled him around so she could drag him. It was too difficult. Instead, she pulled him by his mouth, her hand over the upper teeth. It was tough, but she was physically capable, and had prepared the pathway to the garden earlier. Just as the knife had been specially placed, so had the spade. She dragged him onto the grass, then began digging.

The house was silent. The police had gone, and Malcolm guessed that they would not return. He was stood in the living room. It was as it was before his father decided he didn't want his mother around. It was normal. Television. DVD, Hi-fi, a few newspapers. A few clothes over the back of the sofa. Paraphernalia covered the mantle-piece. Bills, circulars, notes, a few coins. The rest of the house was similar. Normal. He collapsed onto an armchair and closed his eyes. Bang goes uni work, he thought. Aspirations on becoming a software engineer would have to wait. He had a 3000 word essay to write on 'File formats and extensions', before Thursday, in two days time. He hadn't written a word, hadn't given it a thought, and knew he wouldn't. He just had to know what drove his mild mannered father to murder his mother. He could not concentrate on anything else. He got up and was about to walk into the kitchen when his mobile telephone rang. It was in his coat in the hall, and he hurried quickly to find it. Eventually he flipped it open. It read: Anonymous call.

"Hello," he said. "Who this?"

"Malcolm, this is Sergeant Drake. I'm ringing with regards to your father". He paused for a few moments, waiting for Malcolm's acknowledgement.

"OK," he prompted.

"I'm afraid he's dead. He committed suicide this morning". The news didn't need time to sink in. He threw the phone at the wall.

"Fuck!" he shouted. He leaned with his forehead resting on his arm against the wall, breathing fast and unevenly. His eyes were as tightly closed as they could possibly be. No comprehensible question would stay in his mind for longer than an instant, but all of them indicated confusion. All wanted answers he could not give. After a while, his eyes red and watered, he picked up the mobile and found that it was still working. He rang Tom Parker, who answered after two rings.

"Tom, I need a fucking drink," he said.

It was late evening. The sky was veiled in darkness, the streets bathed in orange. Curio's face was cast in blue and white from a monitor on his desk, six feet away from his living room window. Whenever he used his computer of a night, he always kept the light off. The only light would come from the screen. It wasn't a top of the range model. It was four years old, and had an internet connection. It was paid for back when he had a job as a customer services assistant at an electrical goods store and could afford such items. He had never understood why they cost so much. They had their benefits, obviously, and used correctly, they could yield great rewards. However, Curio had paid £599 for his now outdated model, and found that, as with most computers, he sometimes wanted to throw it through the window. It would sometimes crash. The screen would freeze. His mouse pointer would not click on anything, and he sometimes found himself having to switch it off at the mains. They were precarious, unstable, and downright expensive. It was however, a central point of Curio's world. He had been musing over writing a book to put down his evidence for the existence of paranormal reality, but he knew that before he could even start, he would have to gather a lot more evidence. For now, one of the main reasons he had acquired the internet, was for emails and the use of forums. He could connect with many other believers, and could save their postings. There were many others out there with 'gifts'. Curio wondered that because of his talents, he should practise all areas of the supernatural. The others in cyberspace had talents in certain areas. Curio was convinced he could have it all. Max, in Texas, could read animals minds. Phabio, in Berlin could foretell the future just by staring at cloud formations. Jazz, in Argentina could become possessed by any human that had died since the apes walked upright. Miko, in Singapore could telepathy talk to aliens. Their evidence, to Curio was compelling, and their stories, with their permission, would be used in his book.

He checked his email, and found he had four new messages. Two were from Africa. Somebody urgently needed a correspondent in the UK and could they help them. They were obviously cons, and he deleted them without hesitation. One was from a newsletter he had signed up to: 'Uncanny kingdoms'. It gathered together and documented actual

evidence, actual according to the writers on the site, of paranormal activity. Curio had signed up instantly. They had a forum, and Curio had signed up as himself. There was no need to hide behind a moniker, like a lot of others he had come across. Be yourself, he had thought, not Beefluvva69, or Twisted Sinna. Or Red eye. It was all very well feeling a sense of anonymity, and he knew why people did it. It was for that reason. They hid behind obscure names and gave out abuse across the network because nobody knew who they were. They could sit in their little hovels, tapping away at the keyboard, clicking 'Send' every two minutes, saying anything they liked, to anybody who had left messages. There was a lot of weirdo's out there, Curio had found, and their posts, and the way they were written told him more about the person, than what they meant to say. What would the moniker 'Angel eyes', say about that person? Probably a woman, maybe she thinks she is attractive. All in all, she may be half decent, a bit egotistical, but normal. Whereas 'Spunkmonkey', meant that that person didn't take themselves too seriously, was probably the 'crazy one' in his social circle. If he had one. Yet, would be second choice to meet over 'Angel eyes'. All signatures were like that, let a part of the real personality of that person through, albeit, slight, but still significant in understanding a person. Curio, the previous week had posted up a question on the forum: 'Does anybody out there have any real experiences of regression or reincarnation? Who were you in a past life? I might use it in a proposed book. Post here, or email me at enchantment@surfcity.com Thanks, Curio'. Since he had checked yesterday, other than the 14 replies he had, he saw that there were 3 more, unread. The others were all positive, and usable as evidence. Before he read those, he opened up the email he hadn't read:

'Dear Curio,

As a fan of yours, I was pleased to see your posting on the internet regarding regression. I felt I had to write to you. I have to confide in someone. I don't think anybody will believe me. So I write to you, hoping that you can explain the meaning of what happened to me. I know and understand the techniques of regression. It's a serious interest I have. I wanted to find out who I used to be, so I used the techniques on myself. I set up a video recorder to film what happened, but I ended up kicking the tripod and it fell over. Now it needs fixing. What I found out was that I was around in the seventeenth century. The visions I had were vivid. They were real. I was looking at me in my past. I saw myself digging. I was

removing bodies. I knew, I don't know how I knew, but they were for research. Doctors paid me. That was how I made money. It never paid well though, so I started murdering. It didn't matter how they died. Drowning, strangling, beating, burning, stabbing. All I know is that I took to it like a bird takes to the air. I could feel myself enjoying it. I made more money then. Then after a while, a lynch mob found me, strung me up out in a field and burned me. I could feel the flames, and when I woke, I was much hotter. My temperature had risen. Please help.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Yours.

Ribbet'.

Curio frowned. What exactly was he asking? OK, he was murderer. Did he want to go back to the life before that and change his destiny, so that the following existence would not yield psychopathic tendencies? He didn't have an answer, but decided to reply as best he could:

'Dear Ribbet,

I appreciate your letter. You must not be an amateur in order to regress yourself, so you obviously know what you're doing. Perhaps you should confirm that it is true that you were a murderer by looking, basically, in the history books. There would probably have been some reference to it. Also, you could try regressing yourself again, and if you see the same vision, then that should confirm it. Yet, you may regress to other lives as well. There is no telling with it. Once you go back, it's down to chance which life you see.

I would be interested to know if you do this. I think it's impossible to change anything that's happened. Basically, you would have to alter time, and that, I believe is impossible. You enter the realms of fantasy down that route. You cannot change the past. However, that's my opinion. Maybe it is possible. Who am I to say it isn't?

Regards.

Curio.'

He clicked 'send', and sat back, satisfied. He read the other forum replies, and found two to be of value, but one was from 'Abe', who seemed quite sceptical:

'Curio, you can't expect common, decent folk to just believe something on hearsay. There is a lot of what you would call 'evidence' that cannot stand up to scrutiny. That goes for all things paranormal. If you look at

them closely, then the proof that they offer is thin, insubstantial, and built on quicksand. I know you, Curio. I've heard you on the radio. You talk drivel. Why don't you subject yourself to scrutiny, or become silent until you know what you're talking about'.

Curio folded his arms and shook his head. Cheeky git, he thought. He typed hard on the keyboard:

'Abe', you don't think I know what I'm talking about? Well chew on this. The police have called me in six times to telepathically find missing persons. I will admit I've got it wrong twice. The other four, I've got it spot on. Is that chance, considering how big Britain is? They could have been anywhere, but I got them right. Also, four times in a row. Now is that not proof that I have some ability? and if I have some ability, then that surely proves that telepathy is real. It is fact". Curio sent that message, and spent the next few minutes reading other posts, and the latest newsletter. He went back to the forum and found that 'Abe' had replied.

'OK, that is good, but it cannot be called proof. Not yet anyway. You need a few more hits to reduce the laws of chance and possibly consider the fact that you may indeed have some ability that could be deemed 'psychic'. If you provide further evidence of your 'powers', then maybe I'll start believing. Until then, goodbye'.

Surely that was proof enough, he thought. Nevermind. He shut everything down and turned the computer off. Soon, the room was plunged into darkness.

Malcolm stared at the bubbles racing to the top of his lager as if he'd never seen them before, like a curious cat watching a fly. He was sat with Tom in the corner of 'The Silver Wheels', onto his third pint of lager. It didn't help bring him closer to any answers. It didn't help with anything, but he needed to do something, and to speak to someone. Tom had listened, had understood, but could not give any explanation for his predicament. He just sipped his bitter, feeling rather helpless.

"I can't just do nothing," said Malcolm. "Or else I'll never know. Anyway, enough about me. What about you? What have you been up to? Where have you been hacking now?". Tom looked around him, deciding whether or not he was in earshot of anybody else. The pub was approximately half full, and there was sufficient noise for Tom to keep his voice heard by Malcolm alone.

"If I tell you, you've got to promise not to breathe a word".

"I've got quite enough to worry about, thank you. I hardly think that whatever you're up to will stop me finding out why my Dad went mental". Tom was quiet for a few moments, then leaned in closer to Malcolm.

"My source of income is fine. No detections. Well, did you know that there is a new company opening up just off the M53. Ryvak centre for medical research?". Malcolm shrugged.

"You're not going to hack into them?" he said, his tone rather loud. Tom's eyes became shifty, his face turned a light scarlet, and he quickly scanned the pub for anybody who might have heard. Nobody had.

"Shhh!" he said, looking back. "Keep your voice down".

"Come on, be realistic," said Malcolm, "You can't steal money from them. It's like stealing from a charity". Tom shook his head.

"No. It's not. They're going to experiment on animals, and use them for nothing that can't be done without them. Why can't they experiment on prisoners or volunteers? 'Cos that's too much like common sense".

"I thought they stopped testing cosmetics. Isn't that banned now?"

"You think they're going to stop that if it makes a profit? They test on the voiceless. Animals cannot protest, say no, tell the scientists to fuck off and stick the needles in their throats. You think they care about animals? Well trust me, I guarantee that they don't. They're subjects. Objects to be

probed and examined. Cannon fodder. Barcodes. Statistics. I don't need to go anywhere near the place to bring it crashing down".

"Crashing down?"

"Well not literally. I mean they'll start losing money, but I won't be taking it. It will actually be going nowhere".

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you when I start doing it".

"How tempting is it to just go there and burn it down?" Malcolm asked.

"Very," Tom said. "It's tempting to just go there with a machine gun, walk around the place killing everyone, rescue the animals, then burn the damn place down so it can't be used again. Still, what I intend to do will have a similar effect, but no-one will die. No animals should come to any harm, 'cos harm is exactly what they will come to if they go in there. So I'm going to harm them right where it hurts the most". There was a few moments silence.

"I think it's my round," he said, standing up.

The library on campus was the type where the air itself was very still, where every sound was amplified, even down to the turning of pages by students who looked lost in their work, with open textbooks spread around them, along with rulers, rubbers, pens, calculators. They were probably those who were fast approaching a deadline, so made a beeline for the library to scribble down what they could. Malcolm sometimes wondered if half of them cheated by copying out of books. Maybe they did. He was often tempted himself to do so. He was here to see a student whom he did not particularly know, but was on nodding terms with. The type of person whom he would acknowledge passing by in a corridor, but would have nothing else to say in other situations, such as in a lift, or a queue. This time, however, Malcolm was seeking him out because he was a student of psychology with criminology, studying for a first degree with honours, and was coming to the end of his last year. In a few months time, he would either have a career in it, or would be stacking shelves in a supermarket.

Malcolm eventually found him upstairs, unsurprisingly in the psychology section. He had a table to himself in the corner, and Malcolm hovered near the rail overlooking the tables below. Ryan Vaughn was 24, and was one of those students who looked much older. This was self imposed primarily because he was the type of student who could easily grow a moustache and beard within a few days. In every class, along with the stereotypical skinny kid, overweight kid, shy kid, loud kid, big-eared kid, freckle faced kid, handsome kid, buck-toothed kid, there was always the kid who would display none of these, but would be the first to grow a moustache, and they would feel like the more mature pupil, the one who had taken further steps into adulthood. Most of the kids would look up to their elders, and emulate them by trying smoking and alcohol at young ages, but then in an ironic turnaround, when they reached adulthood, when they became 'mature', they longed for their childhood and wasted youth. It was basically a case of 'If only....!' If only I'd done this, if only I'd done that. Everybody to some degree had some regrets that could not be rectified. Malcolm would probably regret not talking to the girl he is attracted to around the university. Should she vanish altogether, then no scientist on the planet could help him reverse time. If only, it seemed was a bane on the conscience when the irreversible decision was wrong.

However, for Ryan, making himself look older may prove in the long term to be a mistake. An integral part in shaping the persona of the adult is in the decisions made in youth. A teenager prone to hostility sees an old woman carrying a purse. His decision is made right there. His life could alter based on that choice. If he steals the purse, then maybe he is caught and sent to a place where there are others like him, and he is therefore influenced by them. Should he not steal the purse, his life would take a separate path. The choices Ryan, and indeed Malcolm, had made, had led them here, to this moment, and any regrets they had accepted, and not entirely forgotten, but sometimes reluctantly remembered.

Ryan had a few psychology books around him, but he was reading a newspaper, the rustle of the pages amplified. Malcolm wondered if the books were simply for show, for some extra esteem from passing women. He didn't have any stationary around him, just a mobile telephone on a closed book entitled: 'Assessment of industrial psychology'. It probably hadn't even been opened. Ryan looked like the type of person who never stopped being a student. He wore what could be described as a casual suit. It was dark brown, and matched his hair and two-inch beard. Malcolm didn't know why he felt reluctant to approach him. Was it a natural desire not to disturb him? Was it a fear of saying something to offend him and losing the respect he already had with him? It didn't matter, he needed answers, and Ryan may indeed possibly enlighten him. He could but try.

After a few minutes, they were talking as if they had known each other for years. Ryan seemed pleased that he had been asked to help out, as it was an actual incident, in the real world that he could perhaps have some involvement with. What he said to Malcolm may change his mind and therefore he would have played a part in his investigation. His input may be minimal, but depending on how Malcolm used it, may be very significant.

"See, what you've got to understand is that..." said Ryan, trying to get his point in order. "Nobody really knows anybody 100%. We cannot say that it is really unlike somebody, because we do not understand them fully. Think of a first date. They don't know each other really, but they want to. It's where they discover each other, their likes, fears, hopes, and as they come to understand them more fully, they get to 'know' the person, get to know their personality. It's a voyage of discovery, but in the end, they could be married for 50 years or more, and still make new discoveries about each other".

“But murder, though, I’m convinced my Dad would have abhorred the thought of hurting my mother. He never hit me, and for him to just do what he did, and blatantly admit it as though it was something he just decided to do, just doesn’t make sense. He said to me: ‘She had to die’, now why would he say that? and why would he kill himself afterwards? when that, to me, is not like my Dad at all. I just don’t get it”.

“He killed himself?” said Ryan, “I didn’t know”. He looked deep in thought.

“Seems to be more of an occurrence up here in the north lately. I suppose you know of the others”. Malcolm shook his head.

“I hardly pay attention to news lately. It’s all too depressing”. Ryan rifled through the newspaper, and eventually found what he was looking for. He folded the paper so that the article was prominent and pushed it towards Malcolm. It was small, sidebar news, on page nine, pushed aside for the more important revelation that a popstar had broken a photographer’s jaw, a photographer from the same newspaper, who were taking out their frustrations by printing as much sordid details about them as they could get away with. The story was of a labourer from a vehicle manufacturers who had been stabbed to death by his wife. She had buried him in the back garden. When he had been found, she had confessed to killing him, but then, later on, she had killed herself in custody. A neighbour had been quoted as saying: ‘I knew her for years. That was unlike her. I didn’t think she would do that’. Malcolm sat back and stared at the article.

“See,” said Ryan, “No-one truly understands the idiosyncrasies of the human mind. You could be the nicest man on the planet, yet sleep with animal corpses every night as though it was completely normal. Incidentally, while I must put it down to coincidence, this has been more prominent lately, leading me to think there may be more to it than that. Over the past year, you probably know anyway, but there have been a few people going missing, then found by the same person by psychic detection. Of those he has got right, which I believe is four in a row, the killers confess, then soon after kill themselves. They are responsible for the murders, but those who knew them all say similar things to her”. He gestured to the newspaper. “It’s not surprising that they would say that, considering the fact that most people don’t have murderous tendencies unless truly provoked. If you had a wife and kids brutally murdered by me in your house, and you came home to find me drenched in blood, sitting

in your armchair watching TV, and I then told you to go and make me a cuppa, well...you would see the chopped up corpses, then you would see me, and then you would see red. Well, you'd see red anyway but you know what I mean. What I'm saying is we are all capable of murder. When driven to the absolute edge. Kill or be killed, we would surprise ourselves at what we are capable of". Malcolm nodded.

"Yes, but is it really a coincidence that four unrelated murders were committed by someone close to them whom, presumably wouldn't dream of murder".

"They are linked. The psychic, I forget his name. The one who found them, who, don't forget, found your mother".

"Then that makes him a suspect. I should call the police and explain it".

"How can he be a suspect? All he did was find them telepathically. He didn't actually murder them. If he finds four in a row, then that does not make him a killer. The police would make nothing of that. Each case is wrapped up. The killer confesses, and that's that. Like I say, you cannot fully understand the human mind and motivations. There is plenty of untapped and unknown areas still to be probed. Basically, these things happen, and we have to just accept it as a mysterious aspect of behaviour". Malcolm nodded, pushed the newspaper back, then stood up. He thanked Ryan for his help, but left feeling unsatisfied. There was just something that didn't fit, didn't make 100% sense. He thought again of his father's departing words: 'She had to die'. Why though? Why did she 'have' to die? He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that when he left the main building, he didn't notice the girl he was attracted to walk straight past him.

That was it, he thought. No more avenues. Would a talk with the psychic reveal anything? he wondered. Probably not. He couldn't help but think that Ryan was right. These things happen. It was one of those mysteries of life that are never explained. He had to accept that he wasn't going to find an answer, and when he decided that his coursework was important after all, he knew it would prey on his mind less and less.

It was one of those mornings where the comfort of the bed was even more welcoming, as grey clouds covered the sky and poured out rain like a forceful shower. Deep rumblings punctuated the sound of the downpour and the occasional flash lit the town for a split second. No-one would actively want to go out in this weather, that was except for George Dennison, who, while not actually 'wanting' to go out, was fulfilling what he felt was a duty every morning to his Staffordshire bull terrier. Basically, every morning at 07:30, he would take it for a walk around the park behind his house. It didn't matter what the weather was like, the dog had to be taken out, so he found himself in the park, walking along a path, carrying a dog chain while 'Fang' ran around on the grass, sniffing everything and chasing a ball that George threw often.

George was one of those bachelors whose life revolved around motorbikes. He was overweight, had a large grey beard, and wore leather no matter what the weather was like. His house was like a garage, with spare parts and tools scattered everywhere. His pride and joy sat in his backyard, a Harley Davidson heritage softail classic, which he occasionally rode around the streets and would take to conventions and shows. He was basically a north-western 47 year old hell's angel.

Fang was his alarm. At nigh on 7am, the dog would go into George's bedroom, jump on the bed, and wake him up by licking his face. Half an hour later, they would be out in the park. This morning, George was forced to wear a rain coat, beneath which was his well worn leather jacket. The dog didn't seem to notice the rain. Sometimes he would meet other dog walkers and not end up back in the house for three hours or more. Today, he knew he wouldn't be out for too long. The others had probably decided that there was no way they were going out in that, no matter how much their dogs whined.

Further into the park they walked, George walking slowly, as per usual as Fang always explored everything as though he was seeing it for the first time. He was sniffing around bushes. George saw that up ahead, the path curved to the left, and on one of two opposite benches, somebody was lying on the left one. George frowned and walked towards them. As he drew closer, he saw that it was a teenage boy, old enough to still be called a boy, but not quite old enough to be called a man. He was however, nearly of that age. It was though he was dead, wearing a white shirt and

‘going out’ trousers. George just stared at him, watching as the rain lashed him, soaking him to the bone.

Jake Ingram was 17, and was one of those teenagers who seemed to have it all. He had good looks, a job at his father’s restaurant, a good physique, and a seemingly constant appearance of wealth. He couldn’t walk past a mirror without checking his appearance. His hair was spiky, although not now in this rain, and streaked blonde. He wore a diamond earring, along with a gold chain necklace, an expensive watch and a thick bracelet. Sometimes he would wear sunglasses, no matter what the weather was like, often even indoors. He was what could be described as a ‘pretty-boy’, an aspiring male model who was halfway to getting a presentable portfolio of photographs of himself to show to agencies. Whilst celebrating one of his friend’s 18th birthday parties the previous night, he decided he was strong minded enough to ingest more alcohol than he had ever had before. It was mainly to show his friends, and girls, that he was mature and adult. As well as seven pints of lager, he had also taken four shots of vodka and three double whiskeys. These were like bullets to the brain. The shots he had taken were basically made to ‘down in one’, which he did, to show he could do it, that he could handle it all, that he had made the transition from boy to man, and here was the proof. However, he had in fact deluded himself. With his mind and vision blurred, the music not being comprehended, his sweat stained shirt clinging to him, no T-shirt beneath, of course, the shirt purposefully a size too small, he began to make less sense to everybody, and people could see he was clearly drunk. He and his friends made sense to each other, because they were all on the downward path to intoxication, and in the end, the inevitable happened, Jake was sick in the toilets, and at 01:30am, devoid of female company, they all staggered out of the social club together. Jake was sick again in the car-park, but all six of them reached a point where they had had to go their separate ways. Jake lived three and a half miles from the club, and deep in the recesses of his mind, something told him that he could take a shortcut through the park. Taxis were none existent. He had staggered, zombie-like, through the park, until he had crashed into, rather than seen, a bench. He worked out what it was, and decided to rest there a while until he felt he could carry on. He didn’t think he would fall asleep.

George continued to stare at him like a scientist would stare at a new species of mammal in a zoo. He looked back at Fang who had had

crossed the path and was now sniffing around the edge of the park pond. The dog chain hung at his side dripping rain. He wound it slowly, once around his hand, and then stepped forward and grabbed pretty-boy's soaking hair. He pulled him off the bench and began to drag him in to the bushes behind. He could feel the scalp coming loose as he dragged, so dropped him and gripped his throat. Jake was still virtually unconscious. George dragged him into a clearing. Bushes surrounded them and he threw Jake down who regained consciousness.

"Wass goin' on?" he said, blinking. George ignored him, instead, sent the chain across his face. Jake slammed back into the ground, into the dead leaves and twigs. George struck him again, shattering teeth and splitting his jawbone. There was a scream ready to leave Jake, but it wouldn't come. George repeatedly sent the chain smashing into his face until it collapsed inwards. Blood splashed out as George relentlessly pummelled away until the eyes slid into the leaves, and his skull cracked enough to show the web of nerves across his brain. Pretty-boy wasn't so pretty any more.

George dropped the chain. It was exhausting work, even for a man of his strength. He saw that only about two metres away, there was a brand new spade, which he picked up. The work was about to get even more exhausting.

With Jake satisfactorily buried, George left the bushes and walked across to the pond. He threw the spade into the water and wound the chain back around his hand, as it always was when the dog wasn't attached to it. He went back to the path, and continued as he did, every morning.

"Come on Fang," he said, having to say it loudly as the rain continued to shower down. The dog, as usual, did as it was told.

Outside his dirt smeared window, Curio watched as a plane slowly made its way across the sky, which was slowly beginning to darken as evening crept in. He thought about closing the curtain, but it wasn't quite dark enough. He was sat at his computer, his face multi-coloured, a mug of tea curling steam in front of the monitor. His inbox had only one new email. He saw it was from Ribbet:

'Dear Curio,

I appreciate you responding to my email. I decided to regress myself again. I was much more in control this time. You were right about it being down to chance which life I see. I can't control it. I went back even further, and I came to a conclusion that there is something in me that's generic, and they're proven scientific facts aren't they? I'm going to keep trying this, I want to see all the lives I have been. This latest vision of me has taught me a lesson. I finally understood the meaning of the pyramids in Egypt. In my vision, I was exhausted. I was standing at the side of a river. My hands were aching, and I was watching, ahead of me, about half a mile in the distance, the pyramids actually being built. They were about halfway done. I noticed something floating above them, some dark, round objects that I know were helping them. I know of your interest in ancient astronauts, and how else could they have built such magnificent edifices, with little technology if they didn't have outside help? Outside of this world, I mean. I believe in that now, as I've seen them, and when I see the pyramids, these days, I realise what they mean. They correspond exactly with the constellation of Orion. I know now that the pyramids are pointers. Markers left on earth to point the way to the stars where we come from. Whoever created us are simply stating where they are. This is us. I'm not sure I would go so far as to use the word 'aliens', but obviously they're not of this earth. As I stood watching the construction, I looked down and saw why my hands ached. There was a woman lying dead beside me. I had strangled her. I pushed her into the water, and I had no feelings. No remorse. I turned then and walked away. Then I awoke. Maybe you don't believe me, but I do, and that's what matters. I thought I would share my experiences with you. I'm going to regress again, and I will tell you the result.

Thanks for reading this.

Yours.

Ribbet.

Curio sat back in his creaking chair, staring at the screen. He was right, he thought, he had to be right. The pyramids were pointers to the home of the creators of humans and animals, and maybe the earth itself. Perhaps they had always been there. There had been no mystery. Hieroglyphs and mythology had been created by society. He couldn't bring himself to reply just yet, the information was still sinking in.

"I wonder who you are, Ribbet" he said. Finally, he managed a response:

'Ribbet, I can only thank you. The information you have given me cannot be wrong. It's been staring us in the face all these years. I cannot disagree with you. One thing I must correct you on though is the word 'Generic'. I think you meant 'Genetic', the passing on through the generations of certain traits, characteristics. Yours, unfortunately so, seems to be the desire for, I suppose, murder. When you regress, this seems to be a prominent feature, as though your genes are trying to tell you what you were. I wonder if this has been a feature in all your previous lives, and if so, then it must feature now, in this life. I would be interested to know if this is so. Do you have any murderous tendencies these days? and how hard is it to suppress them? And of course I would be interested to know what you were when you regress again. If you have any more revelations then I hope you will again, think of me first. I don't know if you know of my intention to write a book which will explain the facts of the paranormal. Other people's experiences as well as my own will be documented, and I hope, taken seriously. I suspect you already know of my success as a psychic detective. Four in a row. Now if that is not proof, I don't know what is. The implications of that are quite undeniable, such as the understanding of the energies and brainwaves that I use to find them. They need to be investigated more. What other secrets could they yield? If any paranormal activity is proven to be correct, then that could have a positive domino effect. If you could please refrain from telling others about what the pyramids are, I would be grateful. I won't claim it for myself. It will be used in my book with your permission, and you will get a special mention. Anyway, time for me to sign off.

Hope you get back to me soon.
Curio’.

He sent the reply, then checked the ‘Uncanny kingdoms’ website for any new additions on the forum, but there were not many, and they were not of any interest. He shut down the computer, then stood up and crossed to the window. He looked down onto a glass strewn car park, at two cars parked there, at two youths leaning against a nearby wall chatting animatedly, at two girls of similar age sauntering over to them, at their unheard banter. They wandered away, one of them putting his arm around one of the girls. They disappeared around a corner, and nothing moved down there, except for an empty crisp packet, rolling along in a gathering wind. He sighed, and closed the curtains. He manoeuvred his way through the dark until he switched on a lamp beside his sofa.

He was about to pick up a TV guide to see if there was anything worth watching, when the telephone rang. Its shrill, high pitched tone punctuated throughout the small flat, and no doubt his neighbours could hear it as well. With the walls being so thin, Curio sometimes thought that not only could they hear him talking, but the person on the other end as well. He picked up the receiver.

“Hello,” he said.

“Oh, is that Mr Curio Enchantment?” came a woman’s voice. She sounded elderly.

“It certainly is, how can I help?”

“I’d like a reading, I wonder if...”

“Where do you live? I’ll be round as soon as I can”.

The wind was growing stronger and bringing with it an increasing chill. He had put his winter coat on, as none of his others were warm enough. He hardly felt the cold though. He was pleased because it was another chance to prove himself to be psychic. The woman lived a 15 minute walk away, and he found the streets to be fairly empty. He reached her bungalow and was soon stepping inside the hallway. Soon after that, he was in the living room with a steaming cup of tea, perched facing Mrs Abercrombie on the edge of a sofa. She was in a similar position, looking at Curio with sad, hopeful eyes. She looked to be in her late eighties, a small woman who would be unable to stand up in strong wind, or even an ordinary gale. She had the type of face that was basically a mask of wrinkles. She still however, tried to make herself look attractive by

applying yellow eye shadow. It had been poorly applied though, a line of it almost reached her left temple. He wondered if she had applied it while he was on his way. It didn't matter though, what mattered was the advancement of his familiarity and experience, his education. She had asked him to get in touched with Max, who was recently deceased. She wanted to know if he was happy wherever he was, and to tell him that she was thinking of him.

"Right," said Curio, sipping his tea and putting it down on a coffee table.

"I need an item, something belonging to Max. Something that was personal to him. She uncurled her hands that had been resting on her lap, and Curio saw that she had been holding an object. Handing it to him, he saw that it was a cat's collar. A tear ran through the maze down her right cheek.

"Tell me he's alright," she said. Curio just looked at it for a while.

"Max is a cat," he said, as a statement. "Not your husband". Mrs Abercrombie shook her head.

"I had 'im for years. He always used to jump up when I was sitting here and demand, demand that I stroke him. He could sleep anywhere. Once, I found him sleeping in the cupboard upstairs. He would always...." Curio interjected:

"I always thought Max was a dog's name. Anyway, I'll see if he's in the spirit world, and see if he's got any messages for you". He tried not to speak through clenched teeth. A fucking cat, he thought. Not a husband, son, human. He sighed, closed his eyes and hovered his hand around two inches over the collar. He knew he could basically make it up as he went along, but decided against it. If there was potential for humans to contact people, then there was no reason to suggest that it was not possible to contact animals. If everything living had a soul, then once the physical shell can no longer sustain it, death occurs of the tissue, and can no longer be deemed to be living. The soul, life-force, or spirit, can not die, as it is an energy. It converted into something else, and that something else, is deemed to be inside the spirit world. That was according to Curio. He guessed that the deceased may be somewhere close, watching them like a guardian angel, waiting for their loved ones in the real world to join them, so they would be first person they would see upon crossing over. Yet, with cats being cats, their loyalty to humans is never a strong point, so it was probably away cavorting with other cats, being chased by dogs and

chasing mice, generally being the way it was in life. Its personality, according to Curio, would stay the same, as with humans. If you were a happy go-lucky kind of person, then that's what you'd be in the spirit world. It was the same if you were a cantankerous, greedy, miserable person, then that's what you'd be in death. He had often wondered about people who died with their minds so bitter and twisted and disturbed, that perhaps that was the way they would be for eternity. If in life you were fairly 'normal' or sane, then should insanity take over the mind, then upon crossing over, does the psyche revert back to normality? Curio didn't know, and couldn't begin to give any sort of answer, other than that of speculation. He was convinced they could communicate with the living, and a cat may provide good exercise, as he knew he was nowhere near good enough to do it professionally. His mind, he believed, was almost tuned into the spirit world, rather like static on a television screen. He hoped it would disappear in time, leaving a clear picture. As it was with his abilities, he could not call himself an expert, only an amateur, and he knew that all opportunities to practice the crafts were to be taken up.

He was silent for a few moments, his mind trying to tune in to the spirit world with the help of vibrations that he believed he could sense coming from the collar.

"He was a loving cat," he said. Then he smiled. A white Angora cat came into his mind. It was swiping at a feather trying to drift to the ground. Curio smiled.

"A playful cat". The image then changed to the cat rubbing itself against somebody's shin. He guessed it was Mrs Abercrombie. In the image, she crouched down and stroked him.

"Liked to be stroked". Mrs Abercrombie snivelled.

"Yes, he did". Curio then saw him playing with other cats in a field. The sun was shining and butterflies fluttered around. These thoughts of the cat simply sprung into his mind, and he fell silent for a few moments more, contemplating as to whether or not this was real. It felt real. He decided that it was.

"I see him now," he said, "Playing with other cats. He's happy now, in what I can only describe as a paradise". Mrs Abercrombie put her hands to her face, and more tears flowed. The image then faded away, and Curio opened his eyes.

“I saw him,” he said. “He was a white cat, wasn’t he? He was very caring”. Mrs Abercrombie seemed to produce a handkerchief from nowhere. She dabbed her eyes and stood up.

“Mr Enchantment, you were amazing. I can’t thank you enough”. She crossed to the mantle-piece and picked up a twenty pound note that had been behind an ornament of a golden eagle. She handed it to him.

“Take this as a thank-you”, she said. Curio just looked at it, surprised. He did not expect to be paid. The practice and experience would have been enough, but he took it.

“You don’t have to do that”, he said, feeling obliged to say it, and putting it into his pocket. He expected her reaction to be the one she gave:

“No, please, I insist”.

Out in the hallway, he put on his coat. Mrs Abercrombie opened the door. As he went to walk out, he noticed a framed photograph of an Angora cat on the wall.

“Was that him?” he asked. Mrs Abercrombie looked to the floor and nodded. She bid him farewell, and Curio walked back through the darkened streets, trying to work out whether or not he had actually seen the real cat, or whether it had been concocted by his subconscious to meet with expectations. He had once heard a psychologist on the radio discussing why people are susceptible to believing strange things. Most of what he had said, Curio had thought to be complete baloney. He was basically being sceptical about things paranormal. The man had said that when people try to contact dead people, try to speak with them, or ‘connect’, what is actually happening is the mind is believing at an abnormal rate the fact that there is a presence, so therefore the mind creates the conditions inside your own body to make you think that there is a ghost present. You become cold, you may enter a trance-like state, and the subconscious creates images, that of which you were expecting. The part of the mind responsible for dreams is activated in consciousness. Dreams cannot be predicted or controlled, and in a conscious state, is activated by belief and expectation. It feeds you with what you had already presumed. Sometimes belief is so real and powerful, that the mind projects images out into the real world, seen only by the believer, who sees what they had expected in the haunted house, and therefore, believe that they had seen a ghost which reinforces their convictions. That becomes their proof, what they ‘know’. He had concluded by saying that

people should stop believing in fantasies, and concentrate on what is known already known, and is fact. Basically, add to existing knowledge. Of course, at the time, Curio had said loudly at the time to the radio: 'What? Restrict freedom of thought? Absolute load of bollocks', and switched it off. The only seed of it that had remained was that of the part of the mind responsible for dreams. Was it really responsible for the images of the cat? No, it wasn't he thought, because how then did he know that the cat was an Angora? He smiled. Yes, he thought, I'm improving.

The imposing, cold, faceless building where he lived, loomed above him, and he hoped he wouldn't have to live there much longer. If his talent kept growing, he thought, then so will his reputation, and people may even, some day, see this as a tourist destination. He hoped that when he was long gone, into the spirit world, his fame will be so high that his flat will have been preserved. Perhaps there would a plaque to him. '...and this is where he used to live before he became famous throughout the world' a tour guide may say. That thought gave Curio some comfort as he climbed the lightless stairs. He had never known the lift to work.

“This is it” said Tom, pointing to a building, behind a fence, beyond a football pitch sized field, which was seemingly surrounded by construction materials and vehicles.

“Is that Ryvak?” said Anthony Kendrick, pulling the Alfa Romeo across onto the kerb. He stopped the car and they both looked at the building for a few moments. Anthony was 24, five feet three inches, had a mousy appearance with a mop of curly hair. He wore a charcoal ribbed half zip neck sweater and stone cord bootcut jeans. Eventually, Tom said:

“I just had to see the place, had to know that what they are building there is going to close very soon”.

“Is that it then, shall we go? We don’t really need to see it do we, and, you know, do you really think it’s a good idea? What we’re doing”.

“Yes. It is, what ‘we’re’ doing. If you want out, then it won’t bother me, I can do it myself. To be quite honest, it doesn’t really need two at all, but you can hack into other databases while I concentrate on the main one. Once I screw that up, then whatever you do won’t matter. It screws them up faster with two”. Anthony folded his arms and stared at the steering wheel.

“I don’t know, you know. It’s a bit risky”.

“Oh, really? And screwing the banks isn’t more risky? We’re not stealing money here. We’re taking down a company that tortures animals. They won’t trace us. Do you know what type of prison sentence we’re in for if we’re caught? That’s ‘we’, me and you. We’re in this together. You know you can end it without being traced, but no, you’re quite happy to siphon off money from people’s accounts to pay for your posh cars and clothes. Quite happy with that, aren’t you? But now you’re having second thoughts because you’re not getting anything out of it. Shall I tell you what I’m getting out of it? Satisfaction, that’s what. Seeing those greedy bastards in there getting fucked, that’s what. I can do it on my own, bail out if you like.

As soon as I get home I’m starting it, I hope you will as well. Think of the animals”. Anthony pulled away from the kerb.

“I’m in anyway aren’t I? If I’m caught then I’m in for a long jail term, so let’s do it”. Tom smiled.

“Long jail term?” said Tom. “You can be the most psychopathic killer on the planet and get a light prison sentence, but if you steal money, then they’ll bring back the death penalty”.

They drove in silence for a while, and Anthony knew Tom’s mind was churning with possibilities and naivety. He changed the topic of conversation:

“I see that psychic detective has found another body by that remote viewing he does. That’s four successes in a row. Doesn’t that tell you that there must be something in it?” Tom just looked at him for a few seconds, as though his thoughts were on pause. He shrugged.

“Coincidence, that’s what it is. You’re not going to bottle out of this are you?”.

“What? no, not at all”.

Anthony drove Tom home, and promised to keep him updated as to his progress. He didn’t like it, didn’t like it at all. As he drove homeward, his instinctive reactions switched to auto-pilot, enabling him to drive while his mind toiled with guilt and apprehension. He thought it quite ironic that he had no guilt whatsoever in stealing from people’s bank accounts, keeping him constantly with a regular income. Tom and he both targeted separate banks, but here, they were both going to hack into Ryvak to put them out of business, and minor surges of adrenalin coursed through Anthony at the prospect of being caught. He quite liked animals, but to risk a prison sentence for them was, to him, absurd. He knew it was hypocritical to basically steal from people’s accounts, but it was remote, faceless. He would feel more guilty if he was to steal from somebody’s purse or pocket, which if he was given the opportunity, would refuse. He would not lower himself to such a level. It was only Tom’s success and inducement that made him take the risk in the first place. He would never have done it alone. Now though, his influence was leading him down a path where he did not want to go, where he would never have tread. He wondered how he could tell him that he didn’t want to do it. He always felt guilty saying no to people for fear of upsetting them. He’d lost count of how much he was owed by people, students who saw him as a cash-pot. ‘Lend’s a tenner, Ant, I need it to buy a lecky card. I’ll give it you back, ‘onest’. They’d look at him with wide, hopeful eyes, and Anthony would give in. ‘You’ll give it me back in a few days, ye?’.

‘a promise, Ant’. Days would turn to weeks. Weeks would turn to months. He knew he was a doormat, and could do nothing about it. He was just

glad he could now afford it, so if they didn't pay him back, it didn't matter, he wouldn't miss it. He knew that most of the people that came back to him to 'lend a tenner', would be banging on the door should they be owed any money. Still, money was no concern for him now. A long spell in prison was, however. The courts would grant him no favours, and probably give him the harshest sentence they could. Siphoning money from people's accounts, and aiding in the closing of a company responsible for medical research. 'Not only do you steal from the innocent, Mr Kendrick, but you may very well have cost more innocent people their lives because of your naivety and lack of understanding. I therefore find you guilty of these counts, and have no hesitation in sentencing you to 35 years in a maximum security prison, TAKE HIM DOWN!'. The judge slammed down his gavel in his mind, and Anthony jolted. He dry washed his face with his hands, and wondered why he was parked outside a line of shops. He then saw a telephone box and remembered. A card stuck above the telephone read: 'Shop a con. Call Crimespy anonymously'. Being a 'grass' was something he had never contemplated. He knew that there were not many types of people hated more than grasses. Paedophiles, murderers and rapists would always be ahead, but a grass would always follow in their shadow. He didn't want to do it, Tom was a good friend. Yet, he knew that if Tom knew it was him that did it, and that was fairly probable, then he also would go down with him. They may very well end up in the same cell together, not friends though, not as they once were. It would be more trouble than it was worth, he thought, starting the engine. He pulled away from the kerb, and drove away.

Tom drank from bottled water, looking out of his bedroom window. He found himself mostly gazing at the reflection of his monitor which awaited his input. It was time to do it, he thought, time to begin the process of taking down the company responsible for the inhumane experiments inflicted upon animals. It was time to become the animal's voice, assuming their reaction to be hostile to those who would use them as objects manipulated without choice.

He knew it would be easy, he thought, grinning slightly as he took another swig. It was simple. As they were still under construction, he guessed that they probably would not have their computer system fully up and running yet, but have the basics ready for installation. Security would be down, and it would be easy to hack into the accounts database. He

wanted the screen which basically gave him the overall total funds that the company had. It would be an ever changing number as costs were spent and funds were received. All he needed to do was copy the screen. He would then overlap the original, but alter the total, so it gradually reduced, so it would look like the company was losing money. The fact that they were not was of no concern. He wanted the bosses to see and believe that their profits were falling. He would do it slowly, so as not to arouse suspicion. As the money decreased, people would lose their jobs. He hoped that the first to go would be the torturing scientists. As long as everybody profiting from the place lost their jobs, that was all that mattered. The managers and directors at the top would be running around in panic as their worst nightmares came true. Goodbye profits, hello giro. He smiled at that prospect. He could imagine the absolute shame and humiliation of the bosses, walking into a jobcentre, their shoulders slumped, heads down.

‘I’ve come to make a claim’. Tom nodded, drank the rest of his water, and turned and crossed to his computer. He stretched, cracked his knuckles, and said quietly: ‘Right, let’s do this’.

After 10 minutes, he was finding it difficult in trying to find a backdoor server which would allow him access to the administrator record files and directories which in turn would link him directly to the salaries of all the employees and to the company finances. A few more minutes went by before a message popped up: ‘Input system password:’. It needed the IP address of one of the computers connected to the internal server. Usually Tom could easily evade passwords, but as he tried to bypass this one, it simply kept popping back up, no matter what he did. His face became more and more crimson each time it appeared. Eventually he slammed his palms down on the table.

“Shit, no!” he shouted, folding his arms. His mother looked around his bedroom door.

“Everything alright dear? Would you like a cup of tea?”.

Anthony was lying on his bed, channel surfing. All these channels and there’s nothing on, he thought. His mobile telephone rang on his bedside table, and he picked it up and saw that it was Tom. He didn’t have time to acknowledge him before Tom spoke:

“Ant! Crisis! I can’t hack the mainframe. It needs an IP address of one of the computers in the building”.

“Ah, oh well, I thought it was a bit risky anyway”.

“No, I’m still doing it. I know you won’t help me with this one you big coward, but I’m breaking in. I just need to access one of the computers, get the address, and get out of there”.

“And maybe rescue a few animals while you’re there”.

“No, the place isn’t ready. They won’t have any animals there yet. They’ll be the last things to go in. Security will be low, so I’ve got to do it as soon as possible. I’m doing it tonight. I’ll tell you how it went tomorrow, anyway, catch you later”. He hung up, and Anthony sighed. He returned the telephone and put his hands to his face. He knew his conscience was gearing up, ready to assault him. He couldn’t let this go without telling somebody.

Malcolm had decided that his university work was redeemable, that he could still pick up from where he had left off after the discovery of his Father's attack of insanity. He had guessed that he wasn't going to find any answers, just mere speculation, no real facts. 'My Father killed my Mother because....,' seemed unlikely would ever be completed, especially without assumption. He had found himself thinking more about his work than his Father, and this, he thought, was his mind's way of accepting the fact that there wouldn't be any answers, no real truths. He was in limbo, after the police having asked him all they needed for the time being, and the headaches regarding lack of wills and who now owned the house. He wanted to ignore all of that, and had taken the landline off the hook. He had enough to think about. They had the killer, he committed suicide, just one of those things, case forgotten. He wondered if all the paperwork regarding it was now in a bottom drawer somewhere, amongst other old cases that had been solved. Perhaps the police that were involved had already forgotten about it. Crimes were committed every second of every day, so their attention would be elsewhere, not on a past case that now didn't warrant any thoughts by anybody except Malcolm, an only child. Even if somebody was to remind them about it, months later they would perhaps be hard pressed to remember.

"D'you remember that case where the husband strangled his wife, took her out in to a field and buried her?" The officer's confused look would indicate no.

"Erm...Oh, hang on, is that the case that was solved by the psychic detective?"

"Yep, that's the one". Malcolm wondered why they would even bother remembering it. It was not as if husbands killing wives was unique. Motivations however, were occasionally less understood, the murderers sometimes taking their reasons to the grave. None of the neighbours had knocked yet to offer their condolences. Not even Mrs Byrne from around the corner, who was the hub of local gossip. He was in that limbo as well. The calm before the storm, before all the 'sorry to hears', and 'deepest sympathies'. He wondered if he should leave the house, move somewhere else. The place still seemed to harbour his parent's presence.

He was sat in his bedroom, at a table that had all of his work spread out. His assignment was to find an existing, successful website, and

identify its targeted audience, its content, and its purpose. Of these, he had to make sub categories and write about them, such as sales and marketing. He had borrowed books from the library, and was currently doing what a lot of students always did when taking notes, highlight certain sentences with a marker. Somebody had beaten him to it in all the books he'd taken out, but for a different task at a different time. As usual, there were not many books available for what he wanted, the closest being 'Marketing your web site, Millennium edition', and that was dog-eared by student's previous use. Pages had been folded over, and throughout, pink, green and yellow marker highlighted sentences. It had probably been used by those who were on the same course as Malcolm, but for a different task. The tutors probably turned out the same tasks and assignments every term, until technology forced them to change. Malcolm neither knew, nor cared. He had to get on with it, had to show something for his efforts. He had a notepad, and was scribbling notes to take in to university to type out there.

"....of the customer, and their requirements are paramount. Potential sales may be lost if the site agenda does not give customer satisfaction, and this site, I believe, aims to do that, however, not at the cost of defective goods". With his highlighter, he marked:

'The product, or service must equal or exceed expectations if your business is to compete for the value of the customer'. He went back to his notepad:

'If a customer does not value a service, then it will be more than likely that their requirements have been let down by the expectations of the service provider, and there will have been an inadequate understanding of the customers needs. If high standards are maintained, your Dad's a psychopath'. Malcolm stopped, then frowned. He was trying not to think of his Father, but sometimes he simply failed, and his mind would run amok. After a few moments, he began to write again:

'Good business ventures will sustain profitability, especially when they are providing what could be deemed to be a necessary service. The site I have chosen can not be called unique, and the service it provides is not essential, but its profits and achievements are testament to the fact that your Dad's a lunatic, killed your mum, for no reason, damn psycho". Malcolm sighed and put down his pen. Why bother? he thought. All this for a better looking CV. Why not find a job now? He knew it was easier to find work when he had a job, so if he could get his foot in the door, it

would probably be less difficult to climb the career ladder, instead of working at a subject, aspects of which did not interest him. Yes, the internet is an interesting eighth wonder of the world, but who cared about mark-up languages and server concepts? Someone had to. Some people had to find them interesting, as without them, nothing would work properly. Those people were the drivers behind the vast machine, people who showed an interest in things many people frowned upon. Rather like train spotters. It would basically be a case of: 'Yes, that was a nice train ride, but I couldn't care less what its number is, who built it, and when'. Someone had to make things for those who did not understand, or did not want to understand. People unique amongst others. Necessary people playing a crucial role, behind the scenes, beneath the radar. The world needed people like that. If nobody showed an interest, then the machine would simply stop, if the interest was ever there in the first place for it to have been created. Malcolm tried to be interested, but felt like a youth who wanted to kill the enemy in computer games, who wanted to blast away at anything that moved, but did not care for how it was made, how the software behind it worked. He put pen to paper again, but it did not move.

A few moments later, he was in his parent's bedroom, looking at a framed photograph of his father at a holiday camp. He wore large, plastic glasses upside down, and a balloon hat. Malcolm looked at it as though all the answers would be revealed, but his father just stared out at him with eyes that captured everything within that moment. 'Look at me, what am I doing?'. It would probably be obvious from just the photograph that his father never usually did anything of that sort, and that it was completely out of the ordinary for him to do that. That was quite ironic, Malcolm thought, him doing something he would not usually contemplate. Yet, it was a holiday, a place where inhibitions vanished, where people who had worked day in and day out for months and years could let themselves go, could perform acts they would never dream of at home, because holidays simply did that. A change of scenery for a few days or weeks would sometimes mean a change of personality, where pent up frustrations caused by stress at work or within a social circle could be breathed out like a sigh of satisfaction. People 'let their hair down' on holiday, like Peter Selden was displaying in the photograph, so his change in persona could not be linked to his recent drastic change. Malcolm decided that there was no connection, and didn't give it any more thought.

The room was heavy with silence, the room frozen in time. The bed was made, curtains drawn, and all items left as they were. A hair dryer next to the bedside cabinet. A pinstripe suit hanging on the cupboard door handle. A pair of skewif slippers beside his father's side of the bed. He almost felt as though he was being watched by his parents. He looked around to see, but saw only the dark side of the room. He had switched on the bedside lamp when he had came in, and the red lampshade gave the room a maroon hue, and cast muted shadows. He turned back, but still felt eyes watching him. Maybe his mother was trying to tell him that it was fine, there was no need for him to worry, she had forgiven his father who was stood there also, trying to apologise for the thousandth time. He had a moment of insanity, his mother had understood, and that was that, no more madness on the other side. Or maybe it was all in his mind, maybe he wanted them to be there, when in fact it was his subconscious trying to reassure him. He gripped the top of the photograph, and laid it face down. He then switched off the light, and left the room.

Tom had parked approximately one mile from Ryvak, around a corner of a country lane as much onto the verge as possible. It was situated in Landican, 300 metres from the M53. He had managed to turn it around, so that driving away would be easier when he had to make his getaway. It was 01:06am, and he had brought with him a torch, a crowbar, and a pair of pliers, infiltration not his strong point, but he did not think he would be doing it. Even on the electronic super highway, nothing went to plan all the time. The sky was flecked with stars, but there was no moon to light his surroundings. He had to use the torch as he walked in the middle of the lane. Previously, he had turned a corner, and knew that the building had been in view, so had pointed his light at the ground. The place looked further away than normal. It was basically a rectangle silhouette against a dark sky. Onwards he had walked, in the cold, in the slight wind. There was the occasional spot of rain that hit his face, but he knew now that there was no turning back, he'd come this far.

He now stood on a grass verge, wondering how far he had left to walk, pointing the torch downwards so any guards or security didn't pick him out and vaporise him where he stood. It wouldn't have surprised him if they could do that. He'd read and heard enough to know that a lot of conspiracy theories were based on fact. Tom wasn't surprised by anything any more. If secret government agencies were at work behind the scenes, they were no doubt working on weaponry, according to him, to combat any threat to the shores, to the destabilising of the hierarchy. He guessed that paranoia was not a part of the human make-up, but rather acquired depending upon levels of belief. They could watch people from the sky, and gather as much data as possible about a person, but they themselves had to be paranoid about each other. Who could trust who? Who was watching the watchers?

He walked further, and eventually his torch picked out a wire fence. Walking quickly across to it and switching off his torch, he was soon finding it difficult to cut through, knowing he should have sharpened the blades before he left, but thought they would be fine, should he need them. They worked, but cost him some exhaustion. After around ten minutes, he managed to squeeze through, and found himself ankle deep in grass and weeds. They could use a lawn mower, he thought, but then,

when it was up and running, they probably would. Cutting grass was certainly not high on their list of priorities at the moment. He decided not to turn the torch back on. The building was around seventy metres away, so he hurried as quietly as he could, and soon yelled out in surprise as he hit another fence. He felt around, and discovered that this was not the same as the other barrier, but could still be breached by the wire cutters. This was even more difficult, but was compensated for by there being less wires to cut through. After around fifteen minutes, he squeezed through. Had he switched on the torch, he would have discovered a sign on the fence that read: 'Power line. Danger of death'. With their security still not up and running, they were not ready to activate it yet. The building was only forty metres away, and Tom found his footfalls had changed. He was walking on gravel. He saw a light further away, above what looked like a shed, and Tom guessed that a security guard would be there, or maybe two. One thing he had not accounted for, and knew he should have, was guard dogs. Maybe they could smell him, maybe they could smell fear. Maybe there were no dogs. He hoped so, and walked slowly across to the building, his hands outstretched until he touched the wall. He leaned back against it, pausing for breath. After a few minutes, he decided to walk to his right, away from the security station. He hoped sooner or later to come across a door. As he progressed, he discovered pieces of wood propped against the wall and two large tyres that must have come from construction vehicles which he could not see nearby. Some of the wood clattered to the floor and he had to stop and look back in fear for signs of movement. All was quiet, and he continued. Moments later, his foot hit a step and he collapsed forward, the loud noise seemingly amplified. He froze, looking back again, but nothing moved. Standing up, he discovered a steel door. It was a fire exit. He guessed his crowbar would have a difficult job in opening it, but he fumbled around and managed to get it wedged tightly in the frame. He pushed once, and that was all that was needed. The door slowly opened, and invited him into a silent, black corridor. Security really is lapse, he thought, then the thought struck him that maybe there was nothing worth stealing. Maybe they hadn't installed computers yet. The rooms may be bare. Was security too lapse? Or were they just careless, with everything in disarray before being furnished? Someone had forgotten to lock one of the doors, or maybe all of them. The attraction to thieves was when they knew there was something inside worth stealing, worth bothering about. To make the effort to come all the

way out to break into a building on speculation made no sense to the intelligent thief. To the drug user and opportunist, all buildings were targets. Ryvak had minimal protection, but with the building not being set to install the staff, its security equalled it in readiness. However, Tom knew that door still should have been locked, but did not hesitate to enter. He wondered about security cameras. They could only be using night vision if they were active. He thought that it was unlikely, and decided to turn on the torch. A long, linoleum floored corridor spanned away in front of him. It was wide, at least fifteen feet, and what he deduced were offices lined either side at regular intervals. All had windows, and some of those had blinds. He walked slowly, pointing the beam in to all of them as he went. Most of them were bare. Some had tables and chairs, but none had any computers. He reached a pair of doors at the end, and slowly pushed them open. There was a wall just ahead of him. The corridor continued left. He pointed the torch right and saw stairs leading up. He decided to try there first, and hoped he didn't have to search the whole building all night, but he knew he would, as he was here, and could not leave until he had got what he had come for. As he walked slowly up the stairs, the only thing he could hear was his own nervous breathing and muted footsteps. He reached the first floor and walked through another set of double doors into a passage that must be above the other, left corridor. Doors along here were not as frequent as previously, and some did not have windows. He discovered that some of these were locked. Further he went, into the gloom, and discovered two rooms similar to those downstairs on the left. The room nearest him had nothing inside it, but the other, had what he sought. The torch beam picked out several computers on a table. He tried the door, but it was locked. It was however, wooden, and susceptible to the crowbar. A sharp, loud crack reverberated throughout the corridor, and Tom froze once again. After a few moments, he entered the room. The computers were not set up. Wires were wrapped around keyboards and monitors looked at him blankly, as though they had never been used. He sighed, and positioned the torch on the table so he could get to work. It took him twenty minutes, but eventually he managed to set one up and get the information he required. With his face cast in a white hue, he scribbled down the IP address, and all other information he thought he might need, just in case, and shut it down. He unplugged everything, and put it back the way he had found it. He didn't want them to know he had been here. Then he

remembered the door, and the large crack near the handle. It didn't matter though, he supposed. Maybe it was a careless worker who needed to get in, but had forgotten his key. He had kicked it in because he could. Perhaps the door was being replaced anyway. How were they going to know it was him? he thought, thinking also that it was easier to infiltrate the place in person than by hacking at home.

Satisfied that everything was as it was, he picked up the torch, and looked around for the crowbar. He saw it balanced precariously on the edge of the table. As he had manoeuvred the monitor into position, it was effectively in the semi dark, and had been pushed near the edge. He stepped across to pick it up, but as he did, banged his foot against the table leg, and the crowbar fell to the floor, clanging noisily.

"Somebody there!" came a voice. It sounded close. The corridor lights flickered on, and Tom turned and ran for the door. He ran back the way he had came, and as he slammed open the double doors, he looked back and saw a security guard looking at him with a stern face, as though he was still comprehending what was happening.

"You! Stop right there!" he shouted, as Tom hurtled down the stairs. Crashing through the other doors, he tried to keep his torch level to see where he was going, and managed quite well. He slammed open the fire door and ran out across the gravel in the general direction of his car. He was soon stopped in his tracks by the fence.

"Fuck!" he shouted, trying to find where the gap was. Through his panic, he discovered that the fence was climbable, and had no hesitation in clambering over. He landed heavily, but kept his torch gripped firmly. The untended grass hindered his progress, but as he ran, he heard the fire exit door slam back against the wall, and looked around to see a more powerful torch wavering, and getting closer.

He reached the other fence and saw that this one was not climbable, as barbed wire lined the top. He desperately searched for the gap, hoping he wasn't getting further away from it. He looked back and saw that the torch was wavering haphazardly. The guard was climbing the fence. Onwards Tom searched, frantically pushing at the fence as he went in case the torch missed it. He eventually found it, looked back to see that the torch was unsurprisingly getting closer. He shoved his way through and collapsed on the lane, but did not stop pushing onwards, his torch frenetically shaking as he ran. Inevitably, he began to slow down as exhaustion wrapped its hand around him, squeezing tighter and tighter

until he simply had to stop. He was on the turn, where a little further and the building would have been out of sight. As he panted, he looked back and saw that the torch was simply a speck in the distance. The guard seemed to be trying to find the gap. Tom knew that the car was literally only around twenty metres away, but decided to run to it anyway. He entered the vehicle, fumbled around in his pocket for the keys, fired the engine, and sped away. He realised quickly that the headlights were off, so flicked them on just as he drove over an incline. He did not see the policeman's bike light until it was too late. He swerved, as the rider did, but corrected the vehicle. The policeman screeched to a halt and nearly went over the handle bars. Their eyes met for a second.

“Watch where you're bloody going!” he shouted, as Tom drove away.

“I’m sorry Mr...Enchantment, your request has been refused”. Curio nodded.

“OK, if you change your mind” he said, “then please give me a ring”.

“The decision is not mine to make, but I will certainly let you know if they decide otherwise. OK, bye”. He slowly put down the receiver. He didn’t expect permission, but knew he had to ask. Walking back into his living room, he put on the radio. ‘Jazzstyle’ fm filled the flat with an eclectic mix of rhythm and blues. It was 10:46am and cold sunlight angled into his abode. He sat on his well worn armchair opposite the blank television and looked down at the coffee table, at the book on it, the reason for his telephone call. It was a well worn copy of: ‘Macabre Lancashire tales of myths and mysteries’. It featured fifteen stories that basically held little truth about them. They were essentially sensationalist versions of tales that were probably second or third mouth, scant rumours that have built up to make them more interesting and strange. Somebody sees out of the corner of their eye a shape or figure that the brain confuses as a ghost. Of course it vanishes when looked at properly, but then they tell a friend. ‘Our Sandra says she saw a ghost the other day, and Sandra wouldn’t lie’.

“That’s strange, didn’t someone die there 84 years ago?”

‘I think they did yes. It must be the ghost of them’ That friend will then pass it on to another friend who knew of somebody whose great-grand father died there, and therefore that place is now haunted by them, simply down to word of mouth, and a distortion of certainty, because of somebody’s eagerness to believe their brain’s initial interpretation. It, however, could very well have been a ghost, and could hold a hundred percent truth, but the balance of likelihood in Curio’s book seemed to favour doubt, as it was written by an ex-journalist who once worked for a tabloid newspaper. Sensationalism would always win out over fact. Some truth was probably in there somewhere, but as always, it was down to the reader to decide, and Curio’s susceptible mind believed it all. He had bought it from a discount book centre, and was brand new when he had obtained it. After countless re-readings, there was one story more than the others he felt he had to investigate. The hub of its story was focused 14 miles away in Saint Emilia’s junior school in Crosby. He had rang to see if he could go into the gymnasium after closing time to see if he could

contact the subjects of the story which was unjustifiably called: 'The terror twins'.

The tale or 'legend' began when two girls, Stacey and Milla, were eight years old. They were mirror images of each other, virtual clones, born to a Norwegian mother and a Scottish father. They had settled in Skelmersdale in 1958, the father plying his trade as a baker, the mother as a matron. The girls grew up normally, talking alike, playing alike, dressing alike. They would never tussle or argue, and were strongly emotionally attached, until their parents had decided to separate. The divorce courts seemed like the only option, but both amicably agreed that they would each take one of the daughters. There was no emotional farewell. The father had simply one day took Milla on a train, and didn't even look back at the house. He had taken her when they were not together, and Stacey had not heard Milla's crying as she was taken away. She was taken 174 kilometres away, to York, and soon settled there, but without adequate transport, and her father's refusal to even think about going back, she was to get used to life without her sister, and Stacey, likewise. They could not cope without their bond, without their friendship, and neither were the same after their parting. They were both moody and morose, and were like that for the next nine years. Both parents kept them from travelling to see each other, because of the dangerous journey, as well as a twisted sense of principal which kept all involvement with the other half non-existent. They controlled their money, and trains were not frequent, or cheap. Cars were impractical, and nobody they knew was going to secretly drive them all that way. They never got used to life without each other, and one night, both fast asleep, they had dreamed a similar dream, where they both left their beds and walked out of their respective homes. Stacey had walked all the way to her school. She seemed focused on entering the gymnasium, and had subsequently found all of the gates and doors open. Milla had walked to the train station. Nobody had been around. The train was at the platform, steam billowing around it. One of the carriage doors was open, seemingly inviting her in. She entered, the door closed, and the train began to move. She had sat at a window seat, looking out at the dark landscape, at distant, red, blue and yellow sky. The journey was quiet, save for a mild humming of wheels on rails. After what seemed like ten minutes, the train slowed and stopped, the door opened, and Milla knew to vacate. The platform was deserted, but did not seem sinister. There was something warm and inviting about it, but it was after all, a dream. Her

instinct was to head for her old school. It was all she focused on, and the streets did not seem hostile, the walk taking only around five minutes. She, like Stacey, found all of the entrances open, and entered the gymnasium, to find her sister standing near the middle. They had stood opposite each other. In the gloom, they had glowed a radiant blue, and standing approximately ten feet apart, they had smiled at each other. Between them, a grandfather clock had shimmered into view. It was so placed that both girls could see the face. It showed 1:30am, its pendulum slowly tick-tocking, the sound piercing the calm space around them.

They had both awoken then, and spent the following day pondering it, trying to decide if it had any meaning. Yet, that night, when their respective watches struck 1:30am, something had clicked in their minds, and there came an overwhelming urge to travel to the gymnasium. Both had left their beds as they had in their dreams, and found everything exactly the same, except for the fact that they had entered their kitchens and retrieved the sharpest knife they could find. They had left the house, and reality had mirrored their dream. It seemed as though the 01:35 to Crosby had been laid on especially for her. Even the timing was the same. Normally the journey would have been much longer, and also the journey from the platform to the school, but they were not. They were identical, even the atmosphere of the deserted platform and roads. Again, the entrances had been open, and soon Milla faced Stacey in the gymnasium, ten feet apart, but without the grandfather clock. Their nightgowns had billowed slightly, yet there had been no breeze, nor was there any sound. They were illuminated by the light blue glow that emanated around them like a visible aura. They had smiled at each other again and stayed like that for around fifteen minutes in silence. Then, as if on cue, both of them had lifted the knives to their throats and did not hesitate in slicing it across. They had then walked towards their sister, arms outstretched, necks pumping out blood, embracing each other, collapsing to their knees. With their heads resting on each other's shoulder, they knew that their sacrifice would ensure they would never be apart again. Together forever.

Curio had never heard about them other than what he had read in the book, and he wanted to speak with them, but such was his temptation to learn psychic communication, he knew he had to get in there somehow, so decided to visit there in the evening. According to the book, their apparitions had been seen occasionally throughout the school, but the gymnasium, Curio had guessed, was probably the best place to commune

with them, where they had entered the spirit world. He had never visited that school, nor knew of its existence outside the book, so he wondered if it was still there, still standing, still occupied. Just a slight fracture of the law would alleviate his curiosity and urge to develop the gift he knew he had. Depending on how long it would take to commune with them, he was sure he wouldn't be there long, but how to go about it. If he was caught, he wondered, then that might dent his future career. It might damage his credibility. A criminal record would hinder his path to fame, yet, may also create publicity for him that could have a positive effect. After all, publicity was publicity, and being caught communing with twins in a gymnasium was hardly crime of the century. He would obviously try and not get caught, but if he was, no kudos lost. This seemed like too good an opportunity to miss. It was simply a small break-in, which probably happened all the time. Yet, he knew he could not purchase a crowbar, because if he did, that might link him to the crime. A security camera may picture him buying it at the counter, and then that may correspond with the incident, and then there would be a knock on the door from Constable Bobby, he had guessed, but creating publicity for himself by advertising the fact that he had done it would not create too much in the way of positive regard, because he knew his star was not bright enough to warrant such a reputation. He was a Z-list 'celeb', and would maybe be laughed at for being so blatantly obvious as to declare his little foray into the world of crime. He decided he was definitely going to do it, but there was no way he would relish being caught. This was all necessary in the path to fame. Slight risk taking for good results. He knew that nobody got anywhere by following the rules. Those who did follow, who didn't make a sound, who kept their heads down beneath a metaphorical radar, wheresoon forgotten, where soon confined to the attic in a few photographs in a shoe-box to be looked at by future generations.

'Who's that, mummy?,' little Chantelle would say on a rare attic clearance foray, pointing at a picture of a man, who may be looking at the camera as if to say: 'What are you doing? Are you taking my picture?' They would never be camera friendly, always awkward with painted smiles, frozen in time, a small testament to their existence, a little window into that world at that time, captured forever, but fading in the memories of those related to them, at the person who never made a mark. They may well have had children, and continued their bloodline, but there wouldn't be anything

else. Memories would fade in their future grandchildren, and their graves would go untended. They would make no impact on their generations. Nobody would know who they were, and even if they did, would probably barely think of them except when come across in a photograph. 'I've no idea,' Chantelle's mother would say. 'He might be your Grandad's brother, or something'. Next picture. No way, thought Curio, not me. OK, OK, I haven't got any kids yet, but if I get famous, then I...No, when, I get famous, I can feel it, women will be begging for me to give them children, and why not spread my seed far and wide? He nodded. Yes, the children will automatically be born famous, because of me. That was good, he thought, have as many kids as possible, widen the bloodline. He hugged the book to his chest, closed his eyes, lounged back in his seat, and listened to Jerry Altkin's experimental bebop infused jazz recordings from 1956.

The mobile telephone rang, and Anthony stared at the little screen that said: 'Tom calling'. Was he calling from prison, and knew he had told the police of his excursion in to Ryvak? He knew he had to answer it, had to face up to him at some time. Why not get it over with now?

"Hi, Tom", he said, sombrely.

"Ant, I did it, I got the address, and I hacked in. It's fine now, I've just got to wait. The place'll probably never open. Anyway, I'll tell you about it later. You're in this avvy, right?"

"Yes, yes, I'll see you then". He ended the call, and stood still on the pavement for a few moments. Shoppers passed by him without giving him a glance. He had decided to browse around the shops for a while before heading into university. He crossed to a low wall, near a bus-stop and sat down. It didn't work, then, he thought, his call. It was rather scant and brief. He had called 'Crimespy' and simply said: 'There's going to be a break-in at Ryvak tonight', and put the receiver down. He was paranoid about his call being traced, and if it was, then others may find out and he would then be labelled a 'grass'. He had thought afterwards, that should Tom have been caught, and given a caution, he would then maybe hack into the police records and find out where the call was made and at what time, maybe even hear a recording of the call. There would be no denying it then. No excuses. Having not specified where the break-in would be, he wondered if he should have dared to mention more detail about who was breaking in, and at what location. He wished he had, but fear had made him rush the sentence and slam down the receiver. For all he knew, Ryvak might have hundreds of buildings across the country, or even world-wide. He hoped they assumed it was the new place, but nothing had seemed to come from it, so his information was obviously too scant for Tom to have been greeted by the police already there. He wondered if he should give Ryvak a call: 'I know who broke in the other night, and I know that he's hacked into your database. I know what he's doing, why you think you're losing money'. Then he thought that perhaps a letter would be easier. No calls, no e-mails, no way of being traced. All he had to do was write it down. His mother had an old typewriter collecting dust in the shed. If he could produce a letter on that, then travel to a different postal district, post it to the police, then that would be less traceable, certainly by Tom. He decided there and then that he was going to do it. Yet, he still didn't

want to lose Tom as a friend. If they find out he's hacked into that company, then they may find out about his bank siphoning, which may then in turn, link to him. Was it worth taking the risk? he wondered. If he could keep Tom as a friend, then he would be unlikely to turn him in. It shouldn't be a case of: 'If I'm going down, you're coming with me'. Or maybe he should just forget the whole thing. What's done is now done. If Ryvak loses business then so what, it doesn't affect me. I'm not going to notice anything different. The world isn't going to stop spinning. Why should I care? Yet, he did care, because it was a research company. Maybe they will come up with all sorts of wonderful cures and remedies. They were only there for the benefit of humans, for the progress and advancement of medicine, medicine which may well have taken a path via a few rats, rabbits and monkeys, but ended up on the chemist's shelf, selling by the bucket load because it was a new wonder cure for any aches and pains and symptoms that would persist without the sacrifice of a few animals. Who cared about a few rats? The monkeys had no emotional attachment to any humans, and besides, it was all behind the scenes. Out of sight, out of mind. It was the same with burgers at fast-food outlets. The cow wasn't killed there and then. There was no choice. 'Choose your cow, sir' was not something ever said. They were killed behind closed doors, and then presented as 'nice' as possible in the packages and on the plate. So Anthony could not feel any regard or attachment to the animals. If they had to die to further human progress, then so be it. Ryvak could not close. The workers could not lose their jobs. What if one rat had to die to further medical research? Who's going to shed a tear? Not me, thought Anthony. What if Tom's meddling cost people the chance of a cure for their ailments? Innocent people whose pain may persist because of his concerns over animal cruelty. One man's meddling, who cannot see past the animal's suffering for the cause of medicine, could simply cost lives, lives that I may be able to save if I stop Tom. It basically came down to two types of pain. Either the animals suffered for the human cause, or people continued to suffer because Ryvak could no longer continue. There was no choice. It's my moral duty, he thought. How can I do nothing? How can I have the knowledge of who is causing them ruin and not do anything about it? Yes, I have an obligation to medicinal advancement. I've got to stop Tom in his blind crusade against them. He wondered if he could use his hacking skills to somehow prevent him, but then decided against it. Tom may somehow find out. Even an e-mail to

Ryvak would be out of the question. Tom would easily find out who sent it, and from what computer. There was only one way he could see that he could do it without being traced, and with Tom remaining a friend of his, none the wiser. He would write the letter and hope that the police would act upon it to stop Tom's interference.

He stood up and walked past a telephone box, glancing at a leaflet attached to one of the windows: 'MISSING. Have you seen Jake Ingram? Please call this number or the police'. There was a picture of him looking stern. It was probably his passport or bus pass photograph. There was a number to ring, but Anthony paid it no attention, lost in his own thoughts, in his world of concern and fear.

He was one of three people to step off the train, and as he shrugged on a rucksack, walking towards the exit, he realised that this must have been the station where Milla had left for the school. A warm, tingling feeling ran through him and he smiled. Walking out onto the pavement, he knew where the school would be, as he had bought an A-Z featuring it, but still ended up walking along a road which was not in its direction. At one point he thought about asking somebody, but eventually the map started to make sense again and he found it after twenty-six minutes, when it should easily have took him ten. It was 18:09, and Curio stood outside locked gates to a wide path that led up to the school which was obviously much still in use. On either side of him, thick, granite walls that were obviously built to last spanned away. They were just about too high to climb, and if he was seen trying to clamber over, then that would do his reputation no good whatsoever. He had to find another way in, so walked along the wall to the right, hoping for a gap. After a while, it turned left and became a fence, beyond which were high, untended bushes that had been left to grow wildly. Continuing along, the fence eventually stopped at the corner to a field behind the school. This was obviously where they played their sports as there were a few traffic cones dotted around, and large patches of mud where goal mouths must have been. He walked onto the grass and headed back towards the school. He found a four foot brick wall at the back of the playground. One section had a locked gate, but near this, there was a tree on a rise in the grass, so the base of it was around two feet from the top of the wall. From there he could step on the wall and drop into the yard. Getting out wouldn't be a problem either. With nobody to see him, getting over a four foot wall should be quite easy. He landed heavily in the yard, but composed himself, noticing as he did, his heart racing faster. He was now trespassing, and suddenly felt the urge to turn and leave while he could. No, he thought. I've come this far. Across the yard to his right, he saw the gymnasium. From his angle, he could not see inside because the windows reflected the school building. He walked slowly across, across a large painted, winding snake, and a hopscotch diagram. With the sky gradually darkening, the interior of the gymnasium looked foreboding and ominous. He could make nothing out, and wondered just how he was going to get inside. He knew it would have been a problem, but decided to come here to try and find a way in, rather

like going to a concert without a ticket. There were other ways in besides the normal way. Basically, he didn't know without a crowbar, and was hopeful of gaining entry, such was his desire for contact with the twins.

He noticed that in the lower left corner, near a fire exit, a window had a large piece of plywood over it. He guessed it was a smashed window. They obviously hadn't had time to mend it. If he could take it off and see how big the hole was, maybe he could get in that way, he thought. He gripped a corner and pulled. Whoever had put it up had not done a very good job, as it took two pulls to come away. It crashed to the floor and he crouched down nervously, looking around for any signs that he had been spotted. After a few moments, he decided he could continue as the only movement seemed to come from a few dead leaves blowing across the yard. The window had been smashed by what was probably a football. It was just about too small for him to climb in, so he decided to brave kicking in the glass below the jagged hole. It took five kicks to get it to a satisfactory size, the sound on each blow seemingly amplified. He hurried around the corner beyond the fire doors and hugged the wall for a few minutes, listening. What sounded like a gate banging reached his ears and he froze further in fear, but nothing came of it, and after a few more minutes, he ventured cautiously back to the window, slowly stepping inside. With one last look across the yard, he walked into the gloom towards the middle of the varnished wooden floorboards.

With the darkening sky turning the yard a mixture of black and Prussian blue, the gymnasium's darkness blended gradually into the gloom outside. Curio took out a torch from his rucksack and risked switching it on. He picked out a few white lines, and guessed that they must mark out a five-a-side football, or tennis area. He found the centre and sat down cross-legged. He also took from his rucksack a flask and egg mayonnaise sandwiches, as well as a single, eight inch candle. It was cold, and he hugged his coat around him. With the lighter he'd bought especially, he stood the candle up and lit it. Switching off the torch, his face was bathed in a muted yellow hue. Realising that this must have been the exact spot where Stacey and Milla had died, another shiver shot through him. He wondered whether or not to begin trying to make contact, or have his sandwiches and tea. A slight pang of hunger gave him his answer, and he tore open the aluminium foil and poured himself a lukewarm drink. Slight wisps of steam curled slowly in the wavering light, and the only sound came from his sipping and chewing. After a while, he had consumed

everything, and decided it was time to connect with the girls. He closed his eyes, and blanked his mind.

“Stacey, Milla,” he whispered, “Can you hear me? My name is Curio Enchantment. Give me a sign. Show me that you know I am here. Speak to me, let me see you”. He opened his eyes, and noticed that the temperature had dropped significantly. The candle flame flickered and he almost fell back. He shot out an arm to stop himself falling.

“You’re here,” he said. “I know you are”. He could feel that there was another presence in the place, that he was being watched.

“Where are you?” he said, adrenalin surging fear in his system. He knew he had to confront it, had to be in the presence of ghosts if he was to train himself up to be a professional psychic, or mystic. After a few more seconds, he heard, very faintly, on the border between reality and imagination, what sounded like slow footsteps in the far left corner. There were five steps before they stopped, as though they had changed their minds in presenting themselves to him. His wide eyes stared in that direction, at the dark shadowy gloom, but saw nothing. Was that breathing he heard now? slight breaths coming from just ahead. His fear level rose significantly.

“Whe..where are you?”. He didn’t know why, but he started slowly to clamber backwards, away from the slow footsteps that had started up again, and the slight breathing that seemed to be louder and clearer. He didn’t know what he was afraid of, but he was. The candle flame flickered again, and the temperature seemed to get even colder. As he slowly made more distance from the candle, images suddenly flashed into his mind. Twins smiling at each other. Twins lying dead, soaked in blood. Twins dancing happily in a garden. Twins clutching knives, looking at him with slight inquisitive smiles. These images rapidly cycled like a music video stuck on fast forward. Further away he crawled, and stared in astonishment as two identical shapes seemed to shimmer into view on the fringe of the candle light, two little girls that looked at him with slight inquisitive smiles. He put a hand to his face and stared through his fingers. His heart pounded as though trying to break his ribs. With his eyes having been open for so long, he had to blink, so blinked once, and then saw that the girls had gone, as though they had never been there. A sudden gust of wind snuffed out the candle, and as the darkness surrounded him a high pitched shrill noise reverberated around the gymnasium. He shouted aloud in abject fear, and then realised that it was

his mobile telephone in his rucksack. He composed himself, but knew he couldn't just get up and walk across to it. He crawled as best he could, his heart still hammering away.

"They were real, they were real" he said quietly, not thinking for one second that it could have all been in his mind, caused by expectations and belief which projected forth hallucinations, visions that could only have been seen by him. He rummaged around in his bag for the contraption and found it. The small screen read: 'Anonymous call'. He laid on his back, trying to control his breathing, and answered it after two more rings.

"Hello," he said, "Curio Enchantment".

"Er, Oh, have I got the right number? I wanted to speak with Philip Harrison". Curio paused for a few seconds.

"Yes, that's me. I've changed my name".

"Oh, right. This is Edward Stanton here. I'm looking for a missing boy called Jake Ingram, and before I literally send out a search party, I thought I would come to you first, just in case. I need your help again. I can pay you if you like, this time, but only if you find him". Curio smiled.

In a corner of a student bar, behind the Arts faculty office, Anthony watched as Tom walked towards him, carefully carrying three glasses of cola. He set them down, and sat opposite him.

“What a rip-off,” he said. “£1.20 each they were. No wonder students are poor all the time, having to pay prices like that”.

“Look,” said Anthony, gesturing to the rest of the sombre, quiet, dimly lit pub. “It’s empty, we’re the only ones in here”.

“That’s cos it’s half ten in the morning. Business is business. This place is always reluctant to close. It’s to lure in daft punters like me who’ll pay ridiculous prices that keeps them selling. I don’t know why I bother. Maybe it’s ‘cos I can afford it,” he said, smiling.

“But that only encourages them to keep their prices high. If people were willing to pay, say a tenner for one pint, you can bet they’ll charge that. In fact, they’ll probably charge about 11 or 12 quid, ‘cos if they’re willing to pay a tenner, then what’s an extra few quid? It’s all about this,” Anthony held up his hand and rubbed together the tips of his middle, index finger and thumb.

“Spondoolica. The dosh”. Tom nodded.

“Yep, legalised theft if you ask me”, he said, scowling in the direction of the bar. The entrance door opened and they looked around to see Malcolm walking across to them. He nodded an acknowledgement to them and pulled up a stool and sat down.

“You’ve met Anthony, haven’t you?” asked Tom.

“No, I’ve seen you around though,” Malcolm said to Anthony, proffering his hand. Anthony shook it, then took a sip from his coke.

“I still can’t believe you actually broke in. I can’t believe you actually got away with it either,” said Malcolm. Tom held out his hand, palm downwards, and then over exaggerated it trembling.

“Like that I was, when I was being chased by the guard, but it was worth it, at this moment, those greedy assed bosses are probably staring at their monitors going: ‘What’s going on? We should have more than this’, when the money is right under their snouts. I don’t know how long it’s going to take though, but I reckon that building will never open properly. That means no animals will ever be taken in there, used as objects to be abused and tortured. It’ll be closed soon”. Anthony took a deep breath through his nose, and slowly sipped his drink.

“So why didn’t you just set fire to the place while you were there?” Malcolm asked.

“I thought of that,” Tom replied. “But see, what if I did do that, and a security guard gets caught up in it and dies? Or some late night worker. I can’t murder someone for doing something I disagree with. If I did that, I’d be the biggest serial killer on the planet. No, no matter how much I despise those scientists, and people who work there, I couldn’t let them burn. It’s not right. If I could have been absolutely certain that no-one was in there, not even a mouse, then I would have had no hesitation. I’ll go there right now and torch the damned place if I was sure of that, but I can’t be, so I’ll take it down this way, by stealth I suppose”.

“A cyber ninja,” said Malcolm, taking a sip.

“Yes, in a way. No-one gets hurt this way, well, not physically anyway, emotionally maybe. The ones that work there should be signing on pretty soon. What a culture shock that’ll be. Well all I say is you shouldn’t have been injecting animals with all sorts, then should you. You don’t even deserve a fucking giro you heartless twat”.

“Time will tell, I suppose,” said Malcolm. “If the place opens, you’ve screwed up, then what are you going to do?”.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to see at the time. Hopefully it’ll be closed soon”. There was a long pause while they all sipped their drinks. Somebody else came in, crossed to the bar, muttered something to the barmaid, and then walked out again.

“What about you? How’s the detective work?” Tom asked.

“I’m pretty much at a dead end. I’ve started getting back into my studies. I don’t think I’ll ever find out why my Dad went mental”. Anthony frowned.

“I heard about that,” he said, “I’m sorry to hear about it”. Malcolm smiled a humourless smile. My first sympathiser, he thought.

“It’s OK, these things happen, so I’m told”.

“Your Mum was found by a psychic detective, wasn’t she?” Anthony asked. Malcolm nodded, sipping his drink.

“Well, it was his fourth success apparently at finding bodies that have gone missing. Which means there must be something in it. He must have some...er, gift. If he’s genuine, and can perform psychic...erm..”

“Trickery,” said Tom, grinning.

“No, perform psychic skills, then maybe he could be able to get in contact with your Dad, or maybe your Mum, and tell you what happened. What have you got to lose?” Malcolm thought about it, sipping his drink.

“I’m not really a believer,” he said, “but I suppose that’s because I haven’t thought about it much. It could be a possibility, but how am I to know he isn’t just going to spin me all sorts of things that I already know? ‘Your mother, she’s...hold on, she’s...a woman...Your father..a man..right, that’ll be fifty quid’”. Anthony sipped his drink.

“No, what if he does know? What if it’s real, and he can contact them? Like I say, what have you got to lose?”. Malcolm was quiet for a moment, the only sound the sipping of drinks. He then nodded.

“Yes, I suppose you are right. I’ll have to somehow find him”.

“Don’t worry”, said Anthony, “I know some media students who are doing a group project for their multimedia course. They’ve decided to go ghost hunting, and are going to film everything. I mentioned Curio’s name to them...”.

“Curio?” said Malcolm.

“Yes, that’s his name, Curio Enchantment”. Malcolm and Tom simply looked at each other.

“I told them about him” Anthony continued, “Well he’s local isn’t he? lives here in Widnes. I mentioned him to them and they thought he could help their project, having a genuine psychic there. So at some point they’ll be contacting him, and Curio will be here, or wherever the students will be, so you’ll be able to speak to him then. Give me your number. I’ll let you know when he’s coming. If he decides to come, that is”. Malcolm finished his drink, and all of them rummaged around in their pockets for a pen. Tom had a bus ticket, and Malcolm borrowed a pencil from the bar-maid. After scribbling down the number, they all left, walking out into a sunny morning, the type of which held a chill in the air. The sun had decided to show itself, but not give out any heat. Tom and Malcolm were heading for their class in quantum information and computation, Anthony to a lecture on internet and multimedia computing. He bid them both farewell and pocketed Malcolm’s number, disappearing around the bar corner.

“That’s it then,” said Malcolm, “That’s my only thread, my only hope of finding an answer. Waiting for a phone call from somebody who I don’t really know, to tell me that some students who I don’t know at all,

are going to try and persuade someone to help them out in their project, someone who hears voices inside their head”.

“What else have you got?” said Tom. They both walked across campus, discussing Tom’s foray further into the world of cyber crime and his increment within it.

They reached the few steps leading into the building and were about to enter when Tom stopped and looked across at a road separating the building from a small park where several students lounged around, relaxing. Standing on the kerb, but obviously not waiting to cross was Erica Riordan.

“Eh? Look, there’s that girl you fancy, on her own, waiting for Mr Perfect to come and sweep her off her feet and spend lots of cash on her...See you then” said Tom, walking a few steps towards her. With a big grin on his face, he turned and joined Malcolm at his side. Erica was around forty metres away, and was not aware she was being watched. She had her arms folded, with a wedged in folder, and kept looking in both directions.

“Well?” said Tom.

“Well what?” asked Malcolm, knowing exactly what he meant.

“Aren’t you going to talk to her?” He was silent for a few moments.

“I’m not Mr Perfect. She’s probably the type who wouldn’t consider going out without anyone who wasn’t their idea of Mr Perfect, Mr Right. If someone had all the signs she was after, but had one thing slightly wrong, she’d probably tell him to eff off, he’s not quite right”.

“Yep, and in the meantime, while she’s waiting, she’s getting older, and less and less attractive, and then one day if Mr Right finally crossed her path, her eyes will light up and she will reach out to embrace him, but because she’s become so unattractive, Mr Right doesn’t even notice her, or look twice. He’s probably searching for Mrs Right, and she ain’t it. She grows old a bitter and twisted woman, who hates everybody and everything, who is only remembered because she was such a misery”.

Malcolm nodded.

“If only such a girl would lower her standards”.

“Only one way to find out,” said Tom. Malcolm clenched his fists and his face tinged red slightly.

“I’m gonna do it,” he said. “I’m gonna do it”. He was about to take the first step when a silver Mitsubishi lancer evolution pulled up in front of her. The driver had the window down and Malcolm and Tom could see

that he wasn't happy, and neither, it seemed, was Erica. They were too far away to catch what they were saying, but a few words were audible. Erica over exaggeratedly tapped her watch, and her folder dropped to the pavement, papers scattering about.

"...ime d'you call this?"

The man got out and slammed the door. He was tall, had very short hair all over, wore combat trousers and a white T-shirt. He looked like he spent considerable time in the gymnasium.

".....cks sake girl.....ken busy". He helped her grab the papers.

"...reful...wi em". He opened the back door and threw them and the folder in, slamming it shut. He hooked a thumb to the car, his face set in a scowl.

"Gerrin the fuckin' car.....nt go time". He got into the drivers seat and slammed the door. Erica gestured wildly as she walked around to the passenger side.

"....kin problem?". She got in, and before she had a chance to slam the door, the tyres screeched for a split second before the car sped away, leaving one lone sheet of A4 on the kerb.

"See that?" said Tom. "That's her Mr Perfect. Good physique. Probably handsome, I couldn't see properly. Nice car, probably rich. He has all the hallmarks of Mr Right". Malcolm shook his head.

"No, he might have all that, but he's got one downfall. He's a cunt. Rich and handsome, yes, but with the personality of a dead rat. You could just tell he was obviously some sort of gangster, a steroid pumped thug. It was obvious soon as I saw him".

"Thing is though," said Tom, "He's rich, handsome, all that, and he's got the girl. Your girl". Malcolm shook his head.

"No way, you know, that tells me more about her than it does him. That fucker's done me a favour". They were both quiet for a few seconds, staring at where Erica had been standing. They then turned and entered the building.

The shed looked as though it hadn't been opened in years. The wood was rotting, the locks were rusty, and grass grew around it as though the structure had emerged from the ground. Moss and cobwebs were abundant, and the window was so ground in with dirt that even the most powerful torch would barely be able to penetrate it. Anthony was staring at it from the doorway of his backyard. His Mother and Father had recently departed for Blackpool to stay overnight with their childhood friends, so Anthony had his best chance to write the letter to the police. The old typewriter was in there somewhere, he thought. It was basically now or never. The shed was not locked, and its contents would have been no good to thieves. A cracked bucket. A rusty fork and spade. A well used museum piece of a lawnmower. It was crowded with bits and pieces of paraphernalia that at one point had stopped being of any use, but was still good enough not to throw away, just in case one day they may be useful again, but they never had, and they had weathered down in time to be of little use at all. Anthony hoped the typewriter was still useful, and still had ribbon. He crossed the lawn which was in serious need of mowing, and opened the shed, and instantly knew he would have problems locating it. It was in there somewhere. He clambered around inside, moving pieces of furniture and carpet, and eventually located it right at the back. For his efforts, he was jabbed in the side by a broken handle of a sweeping brush, but he got the contraption out, and carried it back to the house. The underside was rusty, and some of the side, but it seemed workable. In his bedroom, he had already prepared his small desk by laying a towel across it. He placed the typewriter on it and wound in a sheet of paper. He then decided that he was hungry, and went downstairs to the kitchen and made himself a strawberry jam sandwich. He sat in the living room eating it, reading a pull-out section of a newspaper about property, but after a few minutes, he had to admit to himself that he needed to face up to the letter. He had to write it. Finishing his sandwich, he went upstairs, sat down at the typewriter, and began to write:

'Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to you because there is something I have to tell you. My conscience will not let me let him get away with what he is doing. As you are probably aware, there is a medical research company called 'Ryvak'

which is intending to open in the Wirral, just off the M53. This is a facility that will use animals for experiments that I feel will enhance our medical knowledge. However, because of this, because they are going to use animals, somebody I know is hacking into it. He is quite adept at hacking into various places, and Ryvak is his latest attack. Basically what he is doing is manipulating the finances of the company, so it looks like they're losing money. When the managers realise this, then what will become of the employees jobs? Nobody will be able to contemplate the research while they are losing funds. They must continue this work, and I cannot sit back and let him do it, so I am appealing to you to please investigate, and stop him from doing any further damage than what he has already done. His name is Thomas Parker. He lives at 35 Glenmere road. Widnes. That is the address where he is hacking from.

Yours Faithfully
Anon.'

That should do it, he thought. He read it over. The ink was grey, and some of the letters were smudged, but it was readable. He found an envelope, and wondered whether or not he should just post it at the police station. That way he would not need to travel to a different postal district. Yet paranoia usually always got the better of him. What if there were cameras outside the station, and they recorded me posting it? he thought. No, he guessed he would have to travel a few miles, post it, then listen to Tom's frantic worrying. 'They're on to me. They're on to me'. He hoped they wouldn't discover his bank activity, which in turn would perhaps mean that Anthony's infiltration may be discovered as they may investigate whether or not other banks had defective firewalls that allowed hackers access. They could then easily trace it back to the perpetrator. Anthony knew he had to risk it. The advancement of medical knowledge was a higher priority to him than being wealthy, and wished he could just tell Tom his way of thinking, wished he could simply disagree and have a proper discussion about the pros and cons of the argument. Yet, it may lose Tom's friendship, which he did not want, in becoming the thing he hated. He would basically be the enemy. If Tom ever found out, then he didn't know what would happen. Yet he knew that if he did discover it, there would be no tears. So be it.

He sped along a main road which was on a downward gradient, speeding past vehicles towards red lights which eventually made him slow down. He rode through them, around a corner, onto the kerb, riding through a few pedestrians until he came to a lamp post. He chained his bike up, rummaged around in his denim jacket for his ipod. He wore it, and walked along the pavement listening to Geoff White's greatest hits. It was country and western, his favourite genre, so much so that his house was a virtual shrine to all things country. He always wore related clothing, and his record collection featured only 6% of other genres. It was his obsession which had brought him here, and to other main high street shopping areas across the northwest and sometimes beyond. Most days he would be out searching second hand and charity shops for basically all country records, no matter who they were. Robert Layton had long hair that nearly touched the top of his trousers. It was tied back in a pony tail. He had a long curving moustache down both sides of his mouth. He was 39, and lived alone. He had always lived alone, never truly integrating with anybody, choosing part-time employment as a delivery man at a local take-away. He had few friends, but that was exactly how he liked it. Those friends had never seen the inside of his house. Not many people had since he had moved in there 7 years ago. He was an intensely private man, a man of few words in public. When he had reason to speak to anybody other than his friends, he spoke as little as possible, and would never make eye contact. His answers were usually always 'Yep,' and 'nope'. He had a western acoustic guitar which he always practised at home, and he had written a few songs, but did not have an albums worth of material, but it was only a matter of time. He would soon try and get a disc made to send to prospective record companies. He was, however, afraid of success. What if he was signed up straight away, and sent on the promotional circuit? All eyes on him, basically. Performing to an audience was his most daunting fear. He knew he had the talent, but did not want all the accolades that came with it, simply because his privacy would shrink, and he would lose his seclusion. No longer would he be able to walk along the street and rifle through old records. Photographers would be camped outside his house. Yet, he guessed his talent was too good to not be heard, so decided that should he obtain a record deal, he would make it absolutely clear that all he wanted to do was make an album.

Signings, TV appearances and gigs he could quite easily do without. He guessed he would maybe do it to simply promote the album, and once it was out there, in the charts, he would disappear from public view. Until then however, that deal was not even a forgotten thought of the deal makers. Studio time was expensive, so he had to be certain of the tracks he had lain down. He had even thought of doing a few cover versions, but wanted the album to float on its own merits. He was confident in his own ability to write songs, and until the album was completed and finalised he continued to gain influence from his idols, and there were always albums he would find of artists he had never heard of in his particular genre, so would snap them up straight away. Country music was his life, other aspects simply paid visits every now and then.

He was heading towards a charity shop he had not visited in over a week, so hoped they would have new stock. He walked along a line of shops to it, but outside a newsagents, before his destination, there was a person stood with a clipboard, trying, and failing, to catch the eye of pedestrians who walked past as though she was not there. She looked to be in her early twenties, had long, dark curly hair, and wore a bright yellow body warmer with the name of the company she worked for splashed across it: 'Eco benefit trust'. She was a 'chugger', or charity mugger, who would try and enlist people to sign up to make donations for good causes, usually by direct debit. Each charity seemed to have adopted the same method of enrolment, with the chugger well versed in what seemed like a prepared speech. Isabel Clemence was no different. She spoke the same words to every body she caught, and knew that the more she said, the more likely they were to sign up, because the feeling of guilt at walking away became more intense as she talked. Whether this was intentional by the company, she did not know, and was not told to make them feel guilty enough to sign up, but she did anyway. Having been doing it for five months as a simple career step towards becoming a public sector accountant, she knew she had to start somewhere. This was her second step. She had previously volunteered for an animal charity, and also knew that to get where she wanted to be, there were many more steps to take.

Robert tried to avoid eye contact, but he couldn't. Isabel gave him a big painted smile, as she did to everybody.

"Scuse me sir, I wonder if I could just have a few seconds of your time." Few seconds? thought Robert. More like half an hour. Ten minutes it took. Robert couldn't get away, and the more she spoke, the more

interested he became in the charity. He eventually wrote down his address and bank details.

“Thank you sir, we’ll post information out to you,” she said. Robert walked away towards the charity shop, and Isabel looked down at the form, at his hastily written address. She tore it off, folded it, and put it in her pocket, then threw down the clipboard and walked along the row of shops. Crossing main roads, three bridges, and walking along side roads, Isabel eventually emerged at a busy shopping area. She stood in the middle of a car-park, looking for the shop she sought. Rummaging around in her pocket, she took out fifty pounds in ten pound notes, and walked across to a DIY store. The doors slid open as she entered. It took a good five minutes of walking up and down the aisles to find what she was looking for, but eventually, she was stood in front of four hand axes, their blades gleaming as though they had recently been polished. She picked up two, and further along, found the spades, and picked one up. She paid, finding she still had fifteen pounds left. In the car park, she put down her goods and took out the form that Peter had filled in. She saw that his address was at least five miles away, so decided to get a taxi. It took only a few minutes before she was heading in that direction. The driver was the silent type, and wore small, dark sunglasses. He pulled up outside the house. She gave him the rest of the money which was much more than the total fare, and this produced a small nod and a small smile from the driver who then sped away. With the two axes in one hand, the spade in the other, Isabel just stood on the pavement, looking at the house. From where she was standing, most of it was obscured by a privet hedge. It seemed to be an old Victorian house, semi-detached, crawling with ivy. The windows looked as though they hadn’t been washed in years. The front door was once white, but was now grey and brown, its paint flaking. There wasn’t what could be called a pathway. From the black, rusty iron gate, to the front door, it was around four feet, and was probably an insect paradise. Pushing the gate open with the axes, she stepped across the cracked, weed-ridden tiles and knocked on the door. No sounds came from within and she knocked again. There was no answer. He wasn’t home. There was nothing she could do but wait, and walked along the road, trying to find a way in behind the house. There was a narrow trail that ran behind the houses, flanked on one side by nasty looking bushes which looked like a huge tangle of disguised barbed wire. The sky was becoming darker as evening crept in, and Isabel found the back of

Robert's house. He had quite a large garden. There was an unused wooden door separating the path from his property, and was locked by a small rusty padlock. One strike from the spade and she was through. The garden fared no better than the front of the house. It was overgrown by grass and weeds, and somewhere beneath it all, a path cut through it from the patio behind the house to the door she had just entered. With the soil being soft, she plunged the spade into the ground, and left it there as she walked onto the patio. It was scattered with biking equipment. Several airpumps, several inner tubings from wheels, and what looked like several bicycle repair kits were simply strewn across the paving. The window of the upper half of the back door had a net curtain across it so she could not see in, but that did not matter, it only took one strike from an axe to allow her to put her hand through and unlock the door. She walked in, glass crunching beneath her feet. The kitchen was fairly typical, the counter scattered with crumbs and pieces of dried food. The fridge was covered in magnets, from metal American flags to plastic cartoon characters. Out in the hallway, there were many framed pictures of men she did not recognise, but they all looked like country music singers. Most of them wore wide, Stetson hats and grinned out at the world with a certain smugness as though they were the most famous person in the world. Some of them were signed. A large, American flag adorned the left wall, so it was the first thing Robert would see when he came home. She climbed the creaking stairs and saw that only one door was ajar. Crossing to it, she entered his bedroom. It was much like the hallway, only with more country related paraphernalia. More framed portraits adorned the walls, along with posters and photocopies of album covers. The room was fairly small, made even smaller by the single bed which took up nearly half of it. There was a bedside cabinet, upon which was a tape recorder. Cassettes were scattered around it, and there were rows of them beneath. She sat on the bed, placing the axes beside her, and waited.

Robert was fairly pleased with what he had bought. Three albums and a light brown leather waistcoat. He already had several of these, but could never resist buying them when he could afford them. He entered his house, carrying the bike in, and closed the front door. He hung up his jacket, picked up the bike and carried it through into the kitchen, as he did every time he'd been out riding. He would always put it out on the patio, and lock it to a drainpipe. Despite this area not being particularly known for thieves, he trusted nobody.

He flicked on the light as he entered the kitchen, and his suspicions were confirmed. He slowly put down the bike. I've been burgled, he thought. Someone had invaded his privacy. It was then that he heard the stairs creaking. Footsteps. A rush of adrenalin shot through him in the form of fear. They reached the hallway and he heard them walking towards the kitchen. He frantically looked around for a weapon, and saw a steak knife on the counter. He snatched it up and spun around as Isabel walked in, an axe in each hand. Her face was statuesque, showing absolutely no emotion. Robert pointed the knife towards her. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was sure she looked familiar.

"You...you just git out ma house. Or I call the police" he said.

"Get out!" He gestured to the back door, but Isabel simply came at him, as though she had not only not understood, but not heard him at all. With the right axe, she swung at his face, but the knife was on its way to point at her again, and he leaned back. The axe chopped at his wrist, cracking the ulna bone. He screamed and staggered back, dropping the knife, clutching the wound. Blood streamed out, splashing the floor and his trousers. Isabel came at him again, raising both axes. One hit his cheekbone, the other cracked his clavicle. He raised up both arms to protect himself, staggering back over the bike. Collapsing onto it, he rolled onto his front in an attempt to scramble away, but he didn't even begin before Isabel stepped across to him and sent blow after blow into his back. The blows were soon concentrated around the same place, his lower spine. She hacked away at the bone, chopping into his kidneys and hips. Robert screamed throughout, but it was ignored. Blood spattered her face and body warmer, pooling onto the tiles beneath the bike. After a couple of minutes, she had to stop because of sheer exhaustion. As she regained her breath, Robert tried to crawl forward, but found it difficult. His spine had been severed, but the skin across his stomach was still attached. He managed around two feet, skin tearing as he did, his innards oozing out onto the bicycle spokes, sinking through them to the floor. His mind was still in shock, and there were ruminations of pain somewhere on the outer edges of his psyche. Isabel stepped across to him again. She felt as though she could continue, and had no hesitation in doing so. She began to hack away at the back of his neck. With the blades being relatively small, she found herself tired again fairly quickly, but did her best to continue. Robert yelled again, trying to raise a hand in a plea for her to stop, but it was though she could not see it. She was much too

focused on chopping away. The spinal cord was severed for the second time, and with one final, hoarse cry for help, Robert seemed to quickly relax. He was deflated. He was dead. With a sudden burst of energy, like a runner slowing down who sees the finishing line, and finds a hidden force to cross it, Isabel sent both axes into the back of his neck and left them there. Blood spread around his head. It was caked on Isabel, dripping from her hands. She stood there for a while, regaining her breath, and after a few minutes, reached down and grabbed his hair. She found it difficult to drag him, but eventually the stomach skin tore away and the innards spread across the tiles as she took him out onto the grass. Leaving him near the spade, she went back and picked up his lower half. She wrapped both arms around it, her footsteps splashing through the blood as she took it outside and placed it next to his other half. Back in the kitchen, there were crushed pieces of liver and spleen to pick up, along with the intestines and pieces of vertebrae. She had to make a few journeys to pick them all up and take them out to the others. Exhausted, Isabel sat down, crossed legged next to the spade. Gripping it with both hands, she leaned her head against it. After five minutes, she stood up, and began to dig.

It was another twenty minutes before she walked back into the kitchen, soil mixing with the blood on her hands like a second skin. She opened the fridge, found a bottle of milk, and poured herself a glass, barely taking a breath as she drank it all. She walked into the hallway and went back upstairs to his bathroom. There was only a small mirror between the basin taps, and she set about cleaning herself. She thought that he could have done with a new towel, as the only one she could see, which was over the bath, had unsightly stains on it, and looked as though he had never used any other. She used it anyway, deciding not to bother getting a bath. After a few minutes, she was satisfied that her face and hands were clean. The body warmer took most of the splashes. She took it off and threw it into the bath. Her dark green tunic was matted in places but she decided it would do for the journey home. Walking down the stairs, she went into the kitchen and switched off the light. She was cold, and saw that beneath the stairs, several coats were hanging up. Choosing the warmest, a stone sport jacket, she put it on, and left the house, closing the door quietly behind her. The sky was a dark, monestial blue, with black creeping in. Streetlamps had recently illuminated, and most vehicles had their headlights on. She left the gate open as she walked in the

direction of Penketh, her home. Mrs Caley across the road was outside, watering the plants in her hanging basket. She had to stop and stare at Isabel, simply because of where she had come from. Well well, she thought, a girl leaving Robert's house. A 'person', other than him, leaving his house. There's a first time for everything.

Curio nodded, disinterestedly. He was stood at his landline telephone, listening to Mrs Abercrombie as she talked about her husband. For nearly twenty minutes, all he had said was: 'Ye', 'really', or 'right'. It was another ten minutes before she finally let him go, and he was relieved to put down the receiver. He walked through into the kitchen. On the door, there was a photocopy of a book cover which featured the stern face of the author, behind him a silhouette of a castle. There were no castles in it, or references to the past. 'There and back' by Daryl Paloma, was basically his account of his tour of the other side by his guardian angel. Often at night, in his dreams, he would be awoken by Aisha, to walk amongst fluttering petals, to see his relatives who had crossed over, to taste the crisp, fresh atmosphere of paradise. His trips there had now ended. It was basically Aisha taking him for a visit of where he would cross to after his death. On his last visit, she had told him that the next time he came, he would stay there permanently. There had been no more visits after that, and Daryl could not just sit by and not tell people. He had to let the world know by writing his account of his experience. Daryl had not always been on the straight and narrow. At one point in his life, he had found himself homeless, and taking hallucinogens to forget his circumstances. It was here, at his lowest ebb, that Aisha came down to visit him, and he then knew that he had to clean himself up, get back on track, and become an example to others in similar predicaments.

Curio opened a tin marked: 'Sugar'. In it were four ginger biscuits which he took out and ate on the way back to his computer. Switching it on, he sat in relative silence, crunching away as the machine started up. A few minutes later, he was browsing through the message board on 'Uncanny kingdoms', and began to read the messages on a thread entitled: 'The facts of Aliens'. It was basically somebody writing about how they had seen foreign objects in the distance, where else? outside their kitchen. This simple observation was their evidence of life beyond the stars. The lights darted about the sky like confused fireflies. That was it, that was proof. Aliens existed, and to the observer, was fact. They were however, only a few steps away from believing fully the truth about abductions. Now that they knew aliens existed, then the reality of abductions was not too much of a step to take regarding their convictions.

‘Taser09’ from Phoenix, Arizona had written in one of his posts from the original thread he had started, in reply to ‘Owl hunter’, about those with secret knowledge about what the lights were: ‘Yes, no question about it. Why is it always us kept in the dark? We know, though. They think they can fool us, but they are wrong. Those crafts were definitely over that military base, and I reckon it proves that the government know about them, but they’re not telling us, as usual’. ‘Owl hunter’ had replied:

‘I heard once that the government have known about aliens for years, but it would create panic if they told the world. So it’s they who examine the aliens. I don’t know about abductions. Maybe there’s different species of them. The weaker ones get caught by the military, taken in and examined. Others maybe experiment on humans, and animals. Remember, animal mutilations still happen today, but nobody sees it. These aliens must be more intelligent than us. They must be to build such specialised ships’. The following reply was from ‘Abe’:

‘Strange isn’t it? how these aliens can build such fantastic spaceships, fly all the way to earth, then dart about the planet and not be seen by anybody except the ‘government’. Funny how the government knows everything doesn’t it? When you’ve no answers yourself, the government’s always to blame. Have you ever stopped to consider the fact that these lights might not actually be UFOs? or is that too much for you to comprehend? If they’re not, then what of other cases? Oh no! Maybe they’re not UFOs either. Maybe aliens don’t exist at all. These beings come all this way just to communicate with the government? Seriously, how likely is that?’. Hello Abe, Curio thought. I think you’re the one who doubted me. He then began to type a reply:

‘Abe, you’re the one who doubted my abilities. I seem to remember you wanting more evidence of my ‘powers’, well I’ve more news that will dampen your argument against me. Remember I had four psychic detections in a row. Well it’s now FIVE. Five in a row. The police came to me first. Soon after that, a man came forward to hand himself in. He confessed, and it was proven to be him. So put that in your pipe and smoke it, Mr Cynic. Surely now, that is proof that I have a gift. Not only have I proven that I can find missing persons, I can commune with spirits, predict the future, and believe I can psychically heal. Not just those, but many others besides. Science cannot answer everything. There is a world outside its boundaries, and it is here where I explore, and prove it as a fact, as I have recently done’.

Curio posted it, and was surprised when a reply came seconds later from 'Taser09':

'Oil Get back on topic'.

After a brief scan through the rest of the new posts on various subjects, he opened up his email, and saw that he had a new message from Ribbet:

'Curio, I've done it again. I've regressed myself to an unknown time. I was on a pathway near a bridge, sat next to the body of a crow. It turns out I was a cat in this life. I had blood around my mouth and sat there completely satisfied at what I had done. This proves to me that reincarnation is not simply about coming back as the same species, but all species that have consciousness. Anyway, got to go.

Yours

Ribbet.'

Curio didn't need to think about what his response would be, he instantly knew it, and clicked: 'reply'.

'Ribbet, thank-you for keeping me informed of your regressions. I don't doubt your sincerity, or of what you used to be. Reincarnation has never been about returning as the same species. Maybe you will return in the next life as a fish, or a Koala bear. I doubt you, or anyone would know what their next incarnation will be. So it is no surprise to me that you have been something other than a human. I have sometimes wondered about this phenomenon, because it systematically proves that there is life beyond death. It is here that I wonder whether or not we get to choose what our next embodiment will be. Do we decide? Maybe in the next life I would like to be a bird, but not if you're around as a cat. The thing is, although it would make sense to believe that none of us can choose our parents, and none of us can choose our appearance, I wonder if this is really the case. Do we choose ugliness, and ailments? It would also make sense to believe that we would prefer to be fit and healthy, as attractive as it's possible to be. Wouldn't that be the sensible option? Well, I wonder. Maybe some of us choose to be ugly with miserable childhoods, with useless parents. Why, I hear you ask? Why choose this? I think the answer is basically trying something different. If you choose to be handsome and healthy in ten or fifteen consecutive lives, then are you not going to want a change at some point? Maybe it could be a case of: 'Okay, been there, done that. I want to be a Jaguar, or a Crocodile'. If time is infinite, and I

believe it is, then surely you would want to try all aspects of life at least once. That is simply my opinion.

Regards.

Curio’.

He clicked: ‘send’, and waited for it to acknowledge his message. As he did, there was a knock on his door. He frowned, looking in that direction. Who could that be? he thought. Nobody had knocked on his door for months. He saw his message had been sent, then shut down the computer. The knock came again, and he looked around the place to see if it was clean enough for a visitor in case they wanted to come in. It wasn’t, but he had to see who it was, and went through to the hall and opened it slightly, peering out into the muted light of the hallway.

“Good evening,” said a man who looked to be in his late thirties with a short back and sides haircut and small glasses. He produced identification and held it before Curio.

“My name is Michael Patrick, I work for the ‘North-West report’, I wonder if I could interview you about your psychic detection?”.

“A reporter!” Curio said as a statement. “You want to interview me?”. The man simply nodded and put away his identification. Curio smiled and opened the door wide. He gestured inside.

“Come in, Come in”.

He was unaware that a speed camera had caught him as he sped along the A552. Anthony was worried about the repercussions of posting the letter. It was lying on the passenger seat without an address, or a stamp. He didn't know what to write. 'Widnes police force' seemed too vague, and with the post always seemingly unstable, he found it increasingly hard to trust them, so wondered whether it might be better if he simply handed it in to a police station outside of Widnes to divert Tom's attention if caught. He didn't realise it would be quite so difficult, fraught as it was, with obstacles ready to trip him up and have Tom's angry face stare down at him. 'Grass' he would shout: 'Call yourself a mate?'. The Wirral seemed as good a place as anywhere to post it from. Tom should be none the wiser. Anthony hoped that the police station had a letter-box outside. Perhaps it would be better to be unmarked, he thought. What if it goes unopened, though? It would not attract much attention and could be mistaken for a circular, an advert for bank loans which are sometimes posted in blank envelopes, or they may simply say: 'To the occupier'. It could perhaps head straight for the waste. Some sort of attention catcher was required, he thought. He had guessed he might need to do that, so had brought a black marker, which he had decided to discard, should it be used. His fingerprints would be deeply impressed on it, so disposing of it seemed the only option. He had wondered at one point, whether or not his fingerprints could be left on the letter, and on the envelope, so handled them on the edges, even after realising that the police records did not have his fingerprints. He was unfamiliar with this area, so turned off the road and drove into Prenton. After ten minutes of fruitless petrol burning, he eventually found a sign that pointed the way to a police station, and drove past it, not wanting to appear conspicuous by parking outside. He didn't know how large a range the CCTV camera outside had, or indeed, if there was one there, but it could have been hidden, and he took no chances, so drove around a corner, and parked further up, around fifty metres away, outside the wall to an expansive cemetery. He switched off the engine, and looked down at the envelope. It's not going to post itself, he thought, and picked it up. His mobile telephone then rang, and he looked at the small screen. It was Tom. His fear elevated, and he had the sudden notion that he was ringing him to try and stop him posting the letter. His hand reached slowly forward and he picked it up, then answered.

“Tom,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “Hi”.

“Ant, I’ve been thinking, and I’ve come to a decision. You know the money that Ryvak think they’re losing? well now I’m going to start siphoning it away”.

“What? I thought the bank money was more than enough.” The doubts he had had about posting it had now completely vanished.

“Yes, it is. I’m not keeping it for myself. There are many animal organisations that exist to prevent cruelty such as this, and well, virtually everything else, every injustice caused to them. I’m going to distribute Ryvak’s funds into these organisation’s accounts, and they’ll never know where the money will be coming from. I just thought you should know. I’ll catch up with you later. See ya”. Anthony heard a click, then nothing. He put the mobile back, then put the envelope back on the passenger seat. His doubts came flooding back.

Now it came down to two choices, he thought. That money is going to be used for good causes, and yet, the animals used in the experiments were going to be used for good causes. It was a case of humans or animals. Medical advancement, or animal rights. He wondered if Tom was still trying to close down Ryvak, or keep its funds at an even level so that it distributed the money over as long a period of time as possible. There would be no point in having Ryvak close. He thought about calling him back, but then guessed that it may be suspicious if he asked probing questions about Ryvak’s finances. Ask him subtly, he thought. Also, perhaps, if Ryvak was not to close, then the animals would be brought in, and experiments would probably go ahead as planned, so Tom was probably helping out both causes. Whereas I would be only helping out one, if I post this, he thought, looking at the envelope. He pulled away from the kerb, and headed back towards the Mersey tunnel.

Nobody looked twice at him. Everybody seemed locked inside their own little world, focused as they were on nothing else but their own agendas. Malcolm was stood inside a large department store. 'Benna's' was situated near Widnes eastern bypass. They sold 75% clothes, but had recently begun to include items which it seemed were sold nowhere else. Discounted cookery and wine books, low-budget, made for TV films, and paraphernalia that was obviously cheaply made and cheaply sold. It reminded Malcolm of a supermarket. Not content with providing food, as they were originally built for, they began to sell other items, which eventually came so prominent that they were no longer places to go simply for food. They sold most of what the average person needed and wanted. However, they were not the first places to think of for certain items. Baked beans, check. Bread rolls, check. Semi-skimmed milk, check. 24inch widescreen television, check. Low-fat yoghurt, check. He wondered if they would start selling their own brand vehicles. It wouldn't have surprised him at all, and it didn't matter to Malcolm, he didn't care. All that mattered to him was finding out why his mother was murdered, and to do that, he had to get inside the mind of his father, but as he had joined her, his motives had gone with him. He was here to see Andy Forbes, his best friend. Malcolm had never known where he lived, but knew he worked with his father who used to be a warehouse supervisor in this store. Andy was the customer services manager, and he hoped it wasn't his day off, or he had left. He also hoped he would take time to talk to him. If not, then as soon as he was available. Malcolm wanted his answers as fast as possible, to alleviate the weight on his mind that was becoming heavier, because he was sure that the motives were available. His father must have left something behind to point the way. If he knew that there was absolutely no way of getting an answer, then he knew he would easily have accepted it. There was no point in trying to run a marathon in five minutes. It wasn't going to happen, and that is accepted. Yet Malcolm was convinced there was something which would ease the weight from his mind. He wondered if Andy could help him.

At the 'please pay here' counter near the entrance, there was only one till occupied of three available. A queue had formed, and a red faced young girl serving did not look happy, even behind her customary smile at the customers. Her professional façade failed to mask the fact that she

obviously hated every second of being there, and that there was absolutely no other motivation whatsoever than that she was being paid. Probably a pittance. Probably minimum wage, but it seemed obvious that should she receive a better offer, she would be out of the door like a bullet. Malcolm thought it best not to queue up simply to ask for Andy's whereabouts, and instead decided to ask one of the general assistants. It didn't take long to find one, an acne faced teenager sorting through a rack of men's fleece tops who watched Malcolm's approach with trepidation. He was probably here on a government backed work experience project, or scheme, and could only perform the barest minimum of basic skills required for the job.

"Hi, I wonder if you could tell me if Andy Forbes is in? the customer services manager" Malcolm asked. The boy thought for a few seconds, then pointed upwards.

"Customer service desk, upstairs, he should be there".

"Thanks," said Malcolm, and walked to an elevator. He was walking past ladies lingerie when he saw at the back, the customer service counter. In front of it, another young female assistant was being spoken to by a man who Malcolm assumed was her superior. She also had a red face, but this looked to be because of embarrassment. She was looking at the man with wide, concerned eyes, and nodding appropriately. Malcolm stopped and looked with feigned interest at cushions and bedsheets.

"....and I hope you'll remember that next time," the man said.

"K" said the girl, turning and walking away. Malcolm approached the man.

"Excuse me," he said, "I wonder if you could tell me where I could find Andy Forbes?"

"Yes, I do" he said. Malcolm then noticed his name badge.

"How can I help?"

"I've come to ask you about my father". Andy looked curious for a moment.

"Yes, I recognise you, you're his son", he said as a statement. A melancholy expression dawned on his face as he remembered his friend.

"Sad business that. He was a good mate".

"I hoped you might be able to tell me why he might have killed my mother, or offer me some explanation that might help me understand more". Andy looked around the store, then at the customer service counter. It was not occupied.

“Come through,” he said, and Malcolm was taken behind the counter into an office where a woman was hunched over a computer, her face inches from the screen. There was another office at the back, the window in the door bearing his name. They both entered, Andy closing the door behind him. The office was small and cramped, with far too many items in it, most of which Malcolm guessed was useless, hardly ever used, or read. Papers, folders, files, all strewn around haphazardly, but Andy knew where everything was. He gestured for him to sit down. Before he did, Malcolm he had to remove a cardboard box, but they were soon sat opposite each other, Andy reclining in his creaking swivel chair.

“I don’t know why Peter did what he did. I don’t suppose I ever will know, unless you find out and let me know. However, there is one reason which may point towards his actions. Whether it’s the reason or not, I do not know,” said Andy.

“I’m open to all suggestions. Anything that will make me even the slightest bit more satisfied will be a great help”. Andy was silent for a few moments, looking as though he was contemplating whether or not to carry on talking.

“Earlier this year, I had gone away for a few days in Austria, taking the wife and kids. Whilst there, I came upon an antiques shop. It sold all sorts, and one thing I couldn’t leave there without, was an old flint lock pistol. You’re probably aware that customs in this country is probably amongst the tightest in the world. So I rang and asked your father for his advice. Should I basically try and bring it into this country? I suppose I could use the word ‘smuggle’. Your father didn’t advise me not to. He never said to not take the risk. He left it up to me. Not that the choice was his anyway. All I wanted was his advice, and he kind of told me to give it a try. Well, I bought the gun, and decided not to declare it at customs. I got through, nobody stopped me, and I still have it at home. The thing is, Peter was concerned enough to tell your mother, who, I believe tried to get him to ring me back to tell me not to do it. They argued about it, but in the end, he obviously won. I believe he declined to give her the number, so she could try and persuade me not to do it. Maybe she did find the number, but never got the chance to ring”. Malcolm waited for him to continue, but he didn’t.

“So...you mean, that my mother was going to ring you? and Dad stopped her by strangling her, taking her out into a field and burying her. All because you wanted to smuggle a gun through customs?”.

“It could be a possibility”. Malcolm shook his head.

“No, sorry, I’m not satisfied. That’s very unlikely”. With both palms upwards, Andy shrugged.

“You never know”. He then stood up, and it was obvious to Malcolm that he wished for him to leave. They both walked out to where they had met, and shook hands.

“It’s been good to see you,” said Andy, “Come and see me again sometime”. Malcolm guessed that that was not meant. It was simply a formality, something polite to say upon departure.

“Right, OK, bye,” said Malcolm, then turned and headed for the elevator.

The alarm had been set for 8am, two hours earlier than normal, and Curio had dressed quickly, skipped breakfast, and headed to the newsagents where he was told the article featuring him would be in the 'North west report'. He was the first to buy a copy, and couldn't wait to get back to his flat to read it, so walked out of the shop, stopped and rifled through the pages, looking for it. It was on page seven, and took up the upper half. There was a picture of him which the reporter had taken, and the headline read: 'PSYCHIC FINDS FIFTH BODY IN A ROW'. He smiled as he read the article. It was all positive. The reporter seemed to have found Curio to be very constructive and newsworthy. The last paragraph read: 'I am always sceptical of all things supernatural, but Curio offered to give me a reading. He told me things that nobody else could have known, and predicted future occurrences which would not surprise me should they come true. A unique individual with a talent I am certainly in awe of. I can honestly say that Curio Enchantment is a psychic genius'. Curio punched his fist in the air.

"Yes!" he said aloud. "Psychic genius". An elderly man looked at him with curiosity as he walked by, but he didn't care. Beneath the article, both of his telephone numbers, and his email had been printed. He had mentioned that he was available to give readings for a fee of £20 per time, and to ring for details. He would not have people go to the flat, rather arrange a meeting in a neutral place, or visit their home.

He then realised that he should get back to the flat soon, as people may already be ringing him. The stairs leading up did not seem as tiring this time, even though he had probably ascended them in the fastest time he had ever walked up them. Opening the door, he didn't close it, or take off his coat, but strode across to the landline telephone. He saw that he had three messages, and smiled. He did not hesitate in playing them:

'Hi...er Curio. Just wondered can you give me a reading? Give us a call on...' the man gave his telephone number and clicked off.

'Curio. I saw your article and I am hoping you can give me and my friend a reading in our apartment. We're available all day. Please call back on...' The woman gave her number. He wondered what type of reading she was thinking of.

'Mr Enchantment. I would like for you to give me a reading please. My name is Geoff Bridgeman. Please call me back on...' He gave his number.

This is where I can start earning proper money, he thought. This is a significant step on the path to fame. If I do well, then maybe I can start charging more. My reputation will grow and people will be familiar with me. Nothing much had come from his recent forays into the public consciousness. Now with his successes and with people recommending him, he could show people the reality of the paranormal, receive high eminence and celebrity status. No going back now, he thought. There would be no dipping of the toe into the glamorous world of stardom and pulling away to go back into hiding because it was not liked, not as he thought it would be. He would embrace it, would love to be surrounded by new friends, people who admired him for showing them reality. He hoped they would, because he knew, and believed with absolute certainty that he represented truth.

His mobile telephone had two messages, both of which wanted readings, and he decided to get his breakfast before answering any of them. While he ate his crispy flakes in the kitchen, the telephone rang again, and he put the bowl down on the counter, spilling some. He dashed to the telephone and answered it.

The café was fairly quiet. Occasionally a raised voice and a clattering of cutlery from the kitchen pierced the ambience, but the place harboured a sombre atmosphere, and provided students with a welcome relief from studying and classes. Yet, the only students in there, Melissa Callum, Jane Fielding, Adam Leonard, and Stuart Harper, were rather anxious about their group project. Jane and Adam both had steaming cups of coffee before them.

“Right, OK, this seems to be the only thing we’ve got so far,” said Adam, holding up a folder containing the project brief and details of their chosen subject. Their project was to make a ten minute documentary on any topic. They had chosen ghosts, and had printed from the internet, details of an urban farm, four miles away which had a reputation for being haunted. Ted Lester had owned the farm, and ran it single-handedly. He had been 57, and had not given retirement any consideration at all. Sometimes he accepted youths from government schemes on work experience over winter, but most of the time he liked to keep the wheels oiled and turning himself. There were not many animals kept. There were a few chickens, two horses, several pigs, and four goats that made up the inhabitants. For 19 years he had kept order, and enjoyed his little urban outcrop on the fringe of Rainhill until 1979. The nearest bus stopped half a mile away, and it was not signposted. He never appreciated too many visitors, and those that he did have had not been searching for it. A lot of them were ramblers coming into the town from their walks, and spotted the farm on the way. It was when he received a letter from the local council stating that a dual-carriageway was to be built in its path, that he decided to sell all of his livestock and fight the battle against what the committee had called ‘progress’. Ted had simply called it ‘pollution’. Chartered surveyors and architects had to bring police with them when they inspected the site, as while Ted always preferred negotiation to violence, he thought he was justified in nearly breaking the jaw of one of the surveyors when they had first examined the site. Basically, Ted had thought that no matter how intelligent and diplomatic a person, there came a time when a simple strike to the jaw was reasonable. Beurocratic red tape had meant that Ted was not entitled to sell the farm, as it had never technically been his. Deals were not finalised when the place was built, and Ted had lived there rent free, but never the actual owner. It

meant the council could repossess the property and basically evict Ted, giving him no alternative accommodation. It did not matter to them where he went, or what he did. Ted knew that if they got their way, he would be homeless. He didn't have any kin, or any real friends who could even let him stay until suitable accommodation arose. When the vehicles came to flatten the farm, Ted had picked up a pickfork and chased one of the workers. The man had left his transit pick-up and ran into a haybarn, next to the stables, in panic. He had left the handbrake off, and while Ted followed the man into the shelter, the vehicle gathered speed on a gradual incline. All Ted saw was fury. Everything around him was shut out. The scared, cowering man had become even more terrified when a shadow had fallen over them. He pointed and screamed for him to look out, but Ted realised too late. The huge machine had crushed him beneath its wheels. The worker pressing himself against bales of hay as the vehicle had thundered past, crashing through the wall, to gradually come to a halt in the field.

Despite Ted's demise, the only damage done to the farm was that done by the lorry. Funding for the project had been cut, and it meant that the dual-carriageway would never be built. In the story, as the students understood it, people that went there were soon leaving, as Ted's ghost soon haunted them into leaving. He believed they had come to take his home away from him, and was also bitter about dying for nothing. The farm was now derelict, home to rodents and insects, his company.

The students were to try and film the spirit and basically establish whether or not there was any truth regarding the activity of any supernatural occurrences. Any evidence at all that they deemed to be mysterious, and unanswerable by logical means, meant that they would have to give serious consideration to any implications and connotations of the reality of the paranormal as they saw it, and record any deductions and conclusions they would reach in their documentary.

"How are you getting on with the equipment?" Melissa asked Stuart.

"Well, I've got two digital video cameras, a Geiger counter, and a Gaussmaster,"

"A what?" asked Adam.

"A gaussmaster. It detects energy levels around it, and makes a noise when it fluctuates. I got it second hand in a market. Tenner, which I think was a bargain".

“That’s it then,” said Jane. “If we’re starting this tomorrow, then surely we’re going to need more than that”. Jane was 24, had red hair, was small and thin, and wore no make-up or cosmetics that could have enhanced her looks. She even ‘dressed down’.

“What happened to that psychic we were going to ask?” asked Melissa. Nobody answered. They hadn’t given it serious thought.

“He could help us a great deal. If we have a genuine psychic there, then it may boost our marks”. Melissa was 27, tall, had dark brown wavy hair, and wore a stretch trouser suit.

“Let’s just see how things go for now,” said Adam. “We might require his services if it all screws up”. Adam was 31, slightly overweight, wore thick rimmed glasses, and most of the time wore different shades of green.

“We still need to finalise exactly how much we are going to film, and what exactly we’re going to say” said Jane, “ So I’ve written a few notes down in case you may want to say them in the event of the ghost not showing up. ‘Cos if it turns up, then that’d be great, we’ll have our doc”. She rummaged in her bag and brought out a notebook, flipped it open and rifled through the pages until she had found what she was looking for.

“Here we are. This is not like a script or anything. Say it however you like: ‘With the popularity of this place as what can be called a haunting ground, I believe that there has to be some truth in it. Not everybody can see the same apparition without it being based in reality. Therefore, the spirit of Ted Lester must still be here. Not all believers can be wrong’. There what d’you reckon?” Melissa shrugged.

“That’s a concluding statement isn’t it? I suppose I could say that, but obviously nearer the time it comes to say it, it might change”. Jane nodded. None of them noticed Anthony approaching. They all looked up when he loomed over them.

“Hi,” he said, a little nervously. Being around females was never a strong point of his.

“How’s the project going?”

“Not very good,” said Stuart, “We haven’t got much equipment. We don’t really know how we’re going to go about it. I think most of it’s going to be improv, but we’ll just have to see how it goes. We could do with the ghost showing up”. Anthony was holding a newspaper, folded to a specific page. Placing it on the table, he pointed to the article.

“It’s that psychic you we’re going to ring. Five in a row now. He must have genuine ability, and look, there’s his numbers. Anyway, hope you get on alright, see you later”. He then turned and wandered away to the entrance.

In the foyer, Tom was waiting for Anthony while he gave the students the newspaper. Anthony crossed to a confectionary vending machine near the main entrance. He slotted in a few coins and waited for the spindle to drop his bar of chocolate.

“So how long do you think Ryvak will stay open?” Anthony asked. Tom looked deep in thought.

“I dunno. I’m hopin’ that it will close before any animals are brought in. Imagine their faces if they realised where their money is actually going”.

“So you’re definitely still going to close it?” Tom nodded.

“Absolutely. It’s my moral obligation. The money will be distributed to those charities until it closes”. Anthony retrieved his chocolate bar, and ate it as they both walked out of the building into a sunny morning.

Curio had thought about buying some form of transport. He did not like having to rely on buses and trains. They restricted him somewhat in how far he was willing to travel. At £20 per reading, he had made, since the publication of his article, £140. Together with his jobseeker's allowance, he knew that even a good bicycle would be expensive. As for a car or motorbike, they were still distant, but he was hopeful they would come. He was stood next to a wall, bordering the car-park of a leisure centre, counting through some of his money. He had just come from a private reading at a client's house. It went quite well, he thought, as had most of the others. Only one had wanted their money back. 'A reading is a reading, and if you're not happy with what I say, then I cannot help that' Curio had said. The person had accused him of being a fraud, and had enlisted the help of his wife who had been upstairs, watching a hospital programme. She had sided with Curio. He left them arguing, and still £20 better off. He was pleased with the other readings, as they proved to him that he was developing his abilities and becoming a more competent psychic. He knew that nothing beat experience. Practising for a certain task or skill was all very well in preparation, but unless you experienced what you practised for, then proficiency would come a lot faster. Curio 'knew' he had psychic abilities, and nothing would convince him otherwise. Lack of success simply meant he was still not fully versed in its art. With practise, he was sure he would be able to access the spirit world easier, and find whoever the client required, communicate with them and convey the information. In his mind's eye, a blurred image of the person would emerge, would relay information to give to their loved ones, and tell them things that Curio could not possibly know, according to the client. He guessed that the image, with practise, would become clearer. The money certainly helped to confirm that people also thought that he had ability. The prestige received certainly helped his own convictions, helped to reinforce his knowledge that he was a unique individual with a gift. He had never had doubts, so had never had misgivings to reinforce. Curio believed and spoke his own truth.

The next entry in his newly acquired diary read: 'Kimberley Elaneor-11:00am. 39 Roseacre street'. The house was situated across the road. It was a bungalow, mostly painted white. Somebody had had the bright idea to paint the roof tiles white. There was a small, neatly kept garden, fronted

by a white gate and white wall. That was the place, he thought. He was soon ringing the bell, and it was soon opened. A woman wearing an orange linen mix dress answered. She looked to be around Curio's age, and if Curio had not been so preoccupied with his own agendas and certainties, he would have found her attractive.

"Curio Enchantment?" she said. He nodded authoritatively.

"Yes, you wanted a reading?"

"Come in," she said, stepping back to allow him in, then closed the door. The hall was gloomy, helped by the fact that the wallpaper was dark green. The only light came in through a small panel in the door, and the window above the doorframe. They both had net curtains. Curio took off his coat and hung it up.

"Through there," she said, pointing to the lounge. He walked in and saw that the curtains were closed, and drapes were across the furniture. A coal fire smouldered, and two candles burned on the mantle-piece, creating a sombre, pleasant ambience. There was a footstool before the fireplace upon a pseudo sheep-skin rug. Kimberley followed him in. Curio simply stood there, looking around.

"Nice place" he said.

"Yes, I thought it would help create an atmosphere, beneficial to the session", she said. "I understand you do healing as well". Curio nodded.

"Yes, I'm afraid a healing costs more. Altogether it'll be fifty pounds". Kimberley nodded. She walked through into the backroom and disappeared through another door, returning moments later with the money. He slid the notes into his wallet.

"So what's the problem?" he asked.

"Well I've been feeling rather depressed lately. Ever since my husband left me, I've been taking anti-depressants, but I want to get off them. I'm a great advocate of natural therapies. All ailments can be cured naturally. We don't need pills". Curio nodded in agreement.

"Absolutely," he said. "If you'd like to sit there," He pointed to the footstool. Kimberley sat, facing the fire. He looked at her hair and slender figure, standing directly behind her.

"If you could just give me a minute," he said. "I need to see and feel for your aura". Curio placed his hands palm downwards around three inches above her shoulders. He concentrated, staring at her. Eventually, he perceived a slight glow on her outline, and his hands detected sensations.

“There are slight dark patches here,” he said. “Your aura is multi-coloured, but there are black marks. This is your depression.” His hands then proceeded to slowly push away these marks. It was as though his hands were feeling through fog. He slowly waved these patches away, not considering that other feelings must also be affected. Or that the aura was a creation from his own mind. He saw that there were no more dark patches, and that her aura radiated like a vivid kaleidoscope. Not once was there any temptation to touch her skin.

“Ok,” he said, “All the negativity has gone”. Kimberley stood up, a beaming smile on her face. She wrapped her hands around him and kissed his cheek.

“Thank-you,” she said, “I feel much better”. Curio’s face had turned red, but the fire light made it look like a light shade of orange. She stood back.

“Ok, have you got some item of personal value that’s exclusive only to you?” said Curio, “Something you’ve had for a long time. A set of keys perhaps”

“Yes,” she said, then went and retrieved them. She gave them to him and he sat down on the footstool. He gestured to the couch. She sat opposite him, but leaned forward, watching him intently. Curio cupped the keys in his hands as though they were holding water, then delicately closed them over and brought them to his forehead. He squeezed his eyes closed and concentrated.

“You need to be careful,” he said. “Things need to be kept under control. Strength and vigour is absolutely essential if you are to gain the peace of mind you need. I see you are an optimistic woman. You take chances somewhat haphazardly and suffer the consequences. Well, do not. No risk is worth taking for the state of mind you find yourself in. Yet, you still need more confidence within yourself to achieve your goals. This month is going to be more productive. You need the love of somebody who cares for you. Loneliness frightens you, but being sociable also makes you apprehensive. You need to find your balance, and as such means you have become rather indecisive, and this has meant that it has been a factor in the trauma in your life. You need stability of mind and you will get it. A profound change will occur for you. A man will come into your life, but be careful, he will manipulate your feelings and cause emotional harm if you are not in control”. Kimberly sat there rapt, her eyes wide. Everything Curio had said, she had been nodding to.

“I’m getting....I’m getting Steven. Do you know a Steven?”

“I work with a Steven. Is he attracted to me?”

“Yes. He is soon going to declare his love, yes, love for you with a single red rose, and I see that you are going to accept. Yet vulnerability is a virtue you must halt in its tracks. Control is key. This will keep your emotions from spiralling out of control. You can be feisty and strong-minded when you want to be, however, that has been lacking of late, and you need to bring such strength of mind back. Your courtship will last seven months. After that, I see white. Snow. No, it’s confetti”. Curio slowly opened his eyes and lowered the keys. He saw Kimberley’s exited, hopeful face.

“I’m getting married!” she said, as a statement. Curio nodded. She stood up and embraced him, kissing his cheek again.

“Thanks,” she said. “You were great”. Curio smiled sheepishly.

“Well, if ever you want another reading, or what ever, just give me a call”. He made his way into the hall, retrieved his coat, slid into it, then opened the door. She saw him to the gate.

“Thanks again,” she said, “I feel great”.

“Remember, I’m only a phone call away”. He walked away, feeling better himself. Not because he was £50 better off, but because his affirmations had been enhanced by more success. He made his way home rather satisfied and content.

He stepped off the bus, and as he did, one of the people who were waiting to get on walked across to him. He was a few years younger, and wore a second or third hand jacket with unkempt jeans.

“Are you Curio?” he asked. Curio stopped. You’re not going to spoil my mood, fucko, he thought. He nodded.

“Yes, that’s right”. The man smiled and grabbed Curio’s hand to shake.

“Wow, five times in a row, Five times, you’ve got something, you’ve got a gift there, seriously”. He looked at the bus driver who was staring at him with a stern expression on his face. He got on and turned and waved at Curio. The doors hissed shut and the bus pulled away. Curio was even happier. A fan, he thought. Someone actually recognised me. He made his way to his flat with a smile on his face. Closing the door behind him, he hung up his coat and crossed to the telephone. There were eight messages. He pressed play.

“Curio....Do us a favour, lad, find our Terry. He’s been missin’ for days. Ta”. Curio shook his head at the contraption.

“Well don’t leave your number then” he said. The second message played.

“Hi, Curio Enchantment. I’m calling on behalf of a group of students...”.

Adam Leonard pulled on a cigarette, then dropped it to the floor. He squashed it and looked at the others who were sat waiting. Jane and Melissa were sat on the steps that lead into 'Medical Imaging', while Stuart leaned, with his hands in his pockets, against his Rover 416S. They were waiting for Curio. Jane was examining the camcorder.

"I think that button there, switches it to nightvision," she said to Melissa.

"What?" said Stuart, turning around to look at them.

"Nightvision? You must be joking. What do we need that for? There's no way I'm spending the night there, you can forget it".

"No, no-one's sleeping over. It's just good to have if we need it for any reason".

"Where is he, anyway?" said Adam.

"It doesn't matter how late he is," said Stuart. "Just as long as he gets here, and helps us get good marks. That's all I'm bothered about".

"Well can you ring one of them up and tell him to wait?" said Malcolm, on his mobile phone to Anthony. Anthony had rang him to let him know that the students were expecting Curio.

"I can be there in ten minutes" he added.

"I'm sure they're expecting him now, this minute. I'll ring Adam then and tell him to ask him if he'll wait when he arrives. They're outside Medical Imaging".

"Alright, I appreciate it. I'll be as fast as I can". Malcolm ended the call. He had been in a queue for a cash machine when he'd received the call. He pocketed the phone and quickly hurried in the direction of the students.

It was good to see the old place again, Curio thought as he walked across campus. Nothing had changed since his days before he'd tried and failed to become a doctor. He was glad he left, but still, there was an old flame that burned for the place, that burned for the enthusiasm he once had. Something about school and university days had crept beneath his skin, as he was sure it did to other students, where once the place is left, then it was looked back on with fondness. The work may have been hard and boring, but still, there was something about it that made students reflect on it in appreciation. As Curio walked through, it was like a trip along memory lane. There was the guild of students. There was the

student and examinations division. There was veterinary pathology. For this learning experience, for the potential knowledge, Curio had decided to give his services for free. He turned the corner of a sports centre. The students were across the road, Melissa and Jane now leaning against the fence outside the building. He waited for a Mazda to drive past, then crossed the road. Stuart walked across to him. They shook hands, the other students introducing themselves and smiling as though they were meeting an icon. Malcolm had reached them a few minutes earlier and explained to them that he needed to speak with Curio before they left. He was the last to introduce himself. He shook his hand, nodding an acknowledgement.

“Curio,” he said. “I’m not part of this project. I just needed to ask if you could give me a reading”.

“I’ll have to book you in. I can’t do it today”.

“Well...you were the one that found my mother. Bridget You discovered her whereabouts”. Curio thought for a few moments.

“Oh, right”.

“I need you to get in contact with my mum or dad, because there’s no way on earth that my Dad would have murdered my mother. Something had to have caused him to do what he did. And when I spoke to him afterwards, it was like talking to a different person who just looked like my Dad. I need answers Curio. I can’t concentrate on my studies. I can barely do anything with this weight bearing down on me. I’ll admit, I’m not a believer in this kind of thing, but I’m willing to accept that I might be wrong. I want to believe that I can still get answers from my parents. Can you help me? Contact them, and ask them to give me answers. I can’t be satisfied until I understand why”.

Curio nodded.

“A reading is a reading, and it will still cost the same. I cannot give you favouritism”.

“Yes, alright. When can you do it?”

“Excuse me,” said Melissa. “You’re giving him a reading” she said to Curio, as a statement. Malcolm and Curio simply looked at her for a few seconds.

“It’s just that it may help our project if you allow us to film it. Would that be possible?” Curio and Malcolm looked at each other, suddenly feeling pressurised into saying yes.

“Well...I suppose I don’t mind” said Malcolm. Curio contemplated it. Filming it, he thought. Maybe that would be beneficial. Who knows who might see it? It would be more publicity and make my name known further, especially if the reading is a complete success. This could prove to be rather positive. He nodded.

“Yes, alright. How about tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yes, that’d be great,” said Melissa. “I can get our tutor to open one of the classrooms that won’t be being used. We can do it there”.

“Good, I’ll need you to bring along a personal item of your father’s, something he was close to” Curio said to Malcolm.

“Ok, that’s fine. See you tomorrow,” said Malcolm. He shook Curio’s hand again, then turned and walked away.

Three of the students squashed themselves into the backseat, while Curio sat in the front. Stuart drove, pulling away from the kerb.

“You mentioned on the phone that you were going to tell me about this farmer,” said Curio.

Anthony and Tom manoeuvred their way through parked cars outside the lecture theatre until they reached Anthony's Alfa Romeo. They had just come from a lecture on economics and information systems, and neither had found any inspiration or stimulation from it. They spent most of the time trying to stay awake, so it was a relief to be out in the fresh air, even though it did bring with it a chill.

"I can't be doing with much more of that," said Tom.

"What are you doing it for? You don't need to work" said Anthony. "Nor do I," he continued, "So I suppose it's for the same reason as me".

"Achievement," said Tom. "What's the point in climbing Everest? It's the achievement of the goal. The fact you can say, I did it. I passed. I got this certificate. Anyway, if something happens to our source of income, but we don't get caught, then that means we'll have to get a proper job then, doesn't it?"

"I suppose," Anthony said. "Are you sure you want to go to wired world?" he asked.

"Absolutely. I need a new sound system. I want one with bluetooth. Should get one yourself. Kit out your car a bit better. Anyway, you haven't got anywhere better to go, have you? My car's in for its MOT, so I need a lift. It's good of you to offer" Tom said, smiling. Anthony entered the vehicle. He immediately saw the letter on the passenger seat and made to snatch it up, but Tom entered, and picked it up first. He made no reference to it as he put it on the dashboard, then fastened his seat belt. Anthony did like wise, looking out of his side window as he felt his face redden. He slowly breathed out a nervous sigh, then started the engine.

As the car headed towards the retail park, Anthony's eyes sometimes couldn't help but glance at the letter. He tried to keep Tom's attention from it.

"Do you think any animals will have been brought into Ryvak yet? I wonder if they're ready to bring them in. Your intervention will probably have halted it, won't it?"

"I don't know about halted, but look at this". He put his hand into his inside jacket pocket. "I hacked back into to their server and had a nose at their internal emails. They must have set up the system after I went there". He brought out a sheet of paper. On it were the printouts of two emails.

“None of it was of much interest until I saw these. These were the most recent messages as well. I had to print them off to show you. I’ll read you them. This is from the financial accountant to the executive director: ‘It has come to my attention that incoming funds have not been covering costs of late. I was under the distinct impression that we were receiving a much higher total. At the present rate we will increasingly find ourselves closer to the red. Should this occur then I would recommend the ceasing of employment of non-essential staff. If our funds continue they way they are, then we will find ourselves having to make further cuts, and this I hope we do not even have to think about. However, I recommend that we must think about reviewing the pay of certain employees. It was always my view that they were receiving too much for the work they do. Now it seems they will probably have to take a pay cut in order to remain employed here, but if we continue to lose funds then there will probably be only the essential staff here, probably on a lower wage. I do hope there will not be industrial action. I write with a request for you to organise a meeting of the board of directors. We need to see if we can halt the slide in funds’ And here’s the reply: ‘It troubled me greatly to receive your message. I do think we need to prioritise our agendas, and obviously our finances is top of the list. I will organise an urgent meeting and trust you will attend. I will notify you immediately when it has been arranged.’ See, they’re flapping around, desperately trying to save their asses. Watch them sack everyone now. Non-essential staff eh? You can bet these directors will sack the scientists before themselves. They’ll be the last to go, but they will go”. The car pulled into a large square car-park of the retail area and he parked close to the entrance, shutting off the engine. He looked at Tom and frowned.

“Wouldn’t they know where their money is going? Surely they keep track of outgoing finances”

“Yes, I’m sure they do. The funds they are using now still is automatically directed to where it was already programmed to go, such as employees wages and the repayments of debts, but this money is gradually getting less and less as it filters into the accounts of the banks that the charities use. I’ve still got the false screen that comes up when they check their capital, and it’s still getting less. Soon the workers will be complaining about their low wages. When they check where their outgoing funds are going to, they will find it exactly where it has been programmed to go, not by me. So while the records will show that the

workers were paid their usual amount, their accounts will show different. I even had to hack into the bank that Ryvak uses in case they get them to look at where the money has gone. I needed to change the direction of the information that told them where the money went. Instead of Animal action, or Bird sanctuary, it will come up with the account of the workers it was meant to go to. It will mean that the banks records will be all present and correct, and will make the workers out to look like liars”.

“You should become a teacher” said Anthony. “You probably know much more than half the tutors here”.

“Imagine the shame I would feel if I was to fail. That’s the challenge”. Anthony managed a slight smile.

“Let’s go and get this sound system” he said. Tom left the vehicle. Anthony looked at the letter, then sighed. He fitted a steering wheel bar lock, then left the car, locked it, and joined Tom.

While Melissa and Adam were setting up the camcorder on a tripod and checking that it was working properly, Jane was pouring out a cup of warm tea from a flask to give to Curio. Stuart had wandered over to the farmhouse where Ted had lived. It was a shell. Windows and doors were missing. Squatters and drug users had been and gone. It seemed that the place was not even fit for them anymore. The stairs had collapsed, but it was still possible to climb up there. Should anybody have troubled themselves to do that, they would have found nothing. The place had literally been gutted since Ted's death. Time had rapidly fast forwarded the deterioration of the place, as though it had been abandoned for much longer than it had. The stables were barely standing, as was the chicken shed and haybarn. The students stood around the centre of the yard, their car parked near the main entrance. There was a large space in a wall where a gate had once been. The sun blazed in a cloudless sky. It still seemed to retain its heat, as the air brought with it a biting chill. Jane handed Curio the tea.

"Thanks," he said, taking a sip. "I can feel it already. There's a certain energy here synonymous with the human spirit. We're not alone". Jane nodded, and turned to the others.

"Is that ready yet?" she asked.

"No, it's not" said Melissa, staring at the small camcorder screen. "Why is that symbol flashing?...Oh, hold on". She pressed one of the buttons. "That's it. I think we're about ready". Adam was unwinding wire from a microphone. Stuart walked across the yard to join them. After a few minutes, Melissa was stood in front of the camera, microphone in hand, stables in the background. Adam manned the camcorder. The others stood behind, watching. She was centred on screen. Adam pressed record, and waved his hand for her to begin.

"I am here at Pendlebridge farm to investigate whether or not there is any truth behind the rumours that it is haunted by the ghost of man named Ted Lester". She proceeded to explain the story of him, and why he is said to guard the place.

"...so we're here to try and find out if the farm really is haunted. We've enlisted the help of a psychic who is to try and contact Ted, to see if he can provide us with any answers". While Melissa had described the story of the farm's owner, Curio had been instructed by Stuart's gesturing

to position himself slightly off camera, so Adam could pan to him when introduced.

“Curio Enchantment is a well-known professional psychic, and we’re grateful for him giving up some of his time to help us out in our project.” The camera panned to the right, and he and Melissa both shared the little screen. Curio was smiling inanely into the lens.

“Curio,” continued Melissa. “Could you please explain the implications of ghosts being real, and how you receive messages from the spirit world”. She put the microphone in front of him, but he subconsciously took it, and centred himself in front of the camera.

“Well Melissa. There is a strong possibility that Ted is watching us right now. He could be standing here, next to us. Incidentally, I have often wondered just how much any person is actually alone. The spirits, or essences of those that have crossed over, could very well be all around us, as their world is parallel to ours. How many humans and animals, and indeed insects, have died over centuries, since life began on earth? It’s impossible to put a number on. We, in the real world cannot see the afterlife. We cannot see where we will go. Look into space and we cannot see our destination. Therefore ghosts, and indeed thoughts are parallel to reality. When we open up the human skull, we cannot see dreams, or what we are thinking. We see the physical, the brain, the nerves. Yet we ‘know’ we have thoughts, we ‘know’ there’s a mind’s eye that enables this. This is reality, as thoughts do not require the brain in order to function. We need our physical forms in order to interact with the real world, and to procreate. If life is a form of energy, and energy cannot be destroyed, it must therefore convert at the point of death into something else. This is the afterlife, and the crossing over into the world of the spirits. It must therefore be logical to think that this world is parallel. Obviously we cannot see into their world, but I believe that they can see into ours. They can after all, interact with reality. Poltergeists being the prime example of this. Now there is no question of there being life after death. Empirical evidence points to its truth. Yet, it only needs one ghost, one ghost to be a proven fact, and then, what of the implications? If one spirit or phenomena outside the realms of science can be proved, then that will confirm the reality of the paranormal. That will be undoubted proof to the sceptics and cynics who think that science can answer everything. If science cannot answer it, then they don’t want to know. These people have limited minds. Limited insofar as their beliefs allow them. It’s facts,

or nothing. Yet, I ‘know’, as I have proven, that science is not the answer to everything. If it is possible to have an out of body experience, as many people are reported to have, then that proves we do not need flesh to have consciousness. Ghosts that manifest themselves to enable us to see them, do so only to let us know who they once were. Mostly they exist as floating minds. Now here, at this farm, I believe we have a prime example of this. Ted Lester haunts, well, resides here, and I’m here to try and contact him. Not everybody has the ability to connect, but we all have potential. I can tune into to the spirit world, which I am going to prove, here today. It takes a lot of dedication and practise, and not everybody can do it.” He paused for a few seconds, before continuing:

“I was pleased to receive such an accurate introduction by Melissa. Her use of the word ‘professional’, was I believe, no exaggeration, but I must profess that that is not how I see myself. Although, I believe I am very close. My clients will attest to that. Now, I shall prove my ability by going to the place where Ted passed into the spirit world”. He turned and walked towards the hay barn, and Adam saw that the wire was about to become taut. Curio was only focusing on his task, and had forgotten he was holding the microphone. Adam quickly took the camcorder off the tripod and lifted it to eye level. He centred Curio on the screen and followed him. He didn’t say anything else until he entered the barn. It was well lit, as the wooden roof had many holes, and the wall where the pick-up had crashed through was still there. Curio became aware of the microphone and handed it to Melissa. Adam stood near the entrance to get them, and most of the barn in shot.

“Right,” said Curio, standing near the centre. “It is around here where Ted will have entered the spirit world”. He could feel the temperature gradually decreasing.

“I feel that there is a drop in temperature”.

“Yes,” said Melissa, “I feel it as well”. The others agreed. Curio closed his eyes and put his hands to the sides of his head. Melissa just looked at him. The film continued to roll. All eyes were on Curio.

“Can you hear me Ted Lester?” he said. “Show me a sign that you are here. We are here in peace”. Curio stood like that for a few more seconds. Melissa turned to the camera, her face seemingly hopeful not towards the average viewer, but the tutor. She turned to look back at him, and Adam continued to watch the screen, centred on Curio. It watched him as he

screamed out in pain, then fall to his knees. Adam surged forward, his natural instinct had forced him try and help.

“No!” said Melissa, shooting out a hand to stop him.

“Keep filming! It could be dangerous to interfere”. Adam composed himself and centred Curio again. The screen saw that he was staring at the floor. It saw him slowly look up, then get to his feet. His eyes stared at the students with hatred.

“GET OUT!” he yelled, his arm gesturing away, finger pointing. He came forward. The students scattered.

“GET OUT OF MY FARM, GET OUT OF MY FARM, NOOOOW!” he screamed. He only managed four steps before his eyes rolled upwards and he collapsed back to his knees, his hands clutching his head again. He gave another cry of pain, breathing heavily, then stared at the floor for a few moments. The students were in the yard, all at various distances away from the car. They all looked at each other for answers. Eventually, Stuart edged his way back to him. Curio slowly stood up, rubbing the back of his neck as though it were aching. He looked at the students.

“That’s never happened before,” he said.

“You’re back?” said Stuart. “It’s you, Curio?”. Curio nodded.

“Yes, I’m sorry, but I need to go home,” he said. Stuart put his arm around him. Curio allowed himself to be helped to the car. Nobody spoke. They were all trying to understand what it was that they had just seen. All of them believed in some aspects of the supernatural to one degree or another, so Curio’s ‘possession’ caused them to contemplate their own ideas about it. They each gave it credence and were in no doubt that Curio had some link, or connection to the unknown, to areas where science did not tread.

“Are you sure you’re going to be alright?” said Jane from the wound down back window of the car. Curio nodded.

“If you need me again, well, just ring” he said. The car drove away, turning a corner. They had dropped him near Leigh recreation grounds after he had told them he needed fresh air. It was only half a mile from his flat, which he slowly headed towards. Eventually, he closed the door behind him, and slowly managed to hang his coat up. The kettle was soon boiling, and he was staring in fascination at the cup he had readied. Possessed, he thought. I was possessed. He guessed that his mind was not strong enough for such a phenomenon just yet. It was Curio’s psyche which had broken the link because it was unable to sustain it for more

than a few seconds. With more possessions, he knew he could probably hold the connection for longer. However, his whole being came under Ted's control, and Curio wondered just what forces he was getting himself involved with.

The kettle boiled and he poured himself a cup of tea. Walking into the living room, he crossed to the window and looked out at the car-park, sipping his drink. How dangerous was it? he thought. What am I getting myself involved with? His mind, he knew, was becoming more and more receptive to spirits, which meant he was gaining more ease of access into their world. It was as though his mind was a key to a door leading there. The door to the spirit world, was, however, a giant steel entranceway that only the most determined and strongest of minds in the real world could open. Curio did not know how wide it was. His calling to Ted had allowed him to come through directly into his mind. He wondered if other souls may venture through the entrance. Was it now possible for them to stream out and interact with him at will? He thought perhaps that each person had a metaphorical doorway to the world of the spirits. When he had discovered his 'gift', that was the moment when the door unlocked. To the unreceptive, untrained, maybe even disbelieving mind, it remained firmly closed. They didn't even have a key, and the key was belief. With more experience, it would gradually open wider and wider, allowing Curio easier access to spirits. Perhaps each person's door automatically unlocked upon their death, enabling them to cross the threshold to the afterlife, to their new home.

Curio left a quarter of the tea on the window ledge. He was tired, and turned and walked through into his bedroom. Possessed, he thought again. He didn't think he would be quite as fearful as he was, but there was no practice quite like experience, so he knew that should he be possessed again, he would welcome it. Curling himself up on his bed in a foetus-like position, Curio rested.

“Where are the others?” asked Malcolm, standing outside the corporate communications building. Only Melissa had turned up.

“They decided it wasn’t worth them coming. They didn’t need to be there. All I need to do is film it”.

“So he was possessed?” said Malcolm, looking rather cynical. Melissa nodded.

“Yes, he was, I’m quite certain. I know at least that that farm is definitely haunted. It’s on film. I haven’t got the tape here, but I’ll show it to you”.

They saw Curio walking along the pavement to them. He gave a small wave. Melissa didn’t want to make reference to what had happened to him, as it may have upset him to talk about it, if he wished to discuss it at all. If he did, then he would be the one to bring it up.

“Right,” said Melissa. She walked up the few steps and pushed open a large blue door. Curio and Malcolm entered. They followed Melissa up a flight of wooden stairs to room B18. She walked into a small room, occupied by too many tables. On one wall there was a white board which featured a lot of numbers. There were a few algebraic equations. There were also too many plastic chairs, but Curio and Malcolm eventually settled near the back, sitting facing each other and leaning forward. Melissa stood nearby holding up the camcorder.

“Whenever you’re ready?” she said.

“Did you bring a personal item of your Father’s?” Curio asked.

“Yes, I brought these”. He produced from his pocket, a pair of glasses.

“Are these alright?” Curio nodded.

“Certainly”. He took them, and closed both hands over them. He closed his eyes and brought them to his fore-head.

“I need to speak to Peter Selden” he said. “Can you hear me?” There was a few seconds silence before he continued.

“Ah, yes. I can see you. I feel that you are a kind, mild man. I have here your son, Malcolm. He wishes to speak with you”.

“What? I thought you did the speaking” Malcolm said. Curio did not answer, as though he was in a little world of his own.

“He wishes for you to provide him with answers as to why you...erm”.

“Killed my mother. Might as well tell it like it is”.

“Killed, his mother”.

“Is she there? Can you call her?”. Curio was silent for a few moments.

“Peter says hello, and also says he and your mother are happy together, as they were, as you knew them, in the spirit world. Your father says that if you want answers to the ‘realm of the partisan’, which will let you know why he did what he did, then travel to Liverpool, to the pier head, to see an old friend of his. Ian. Your father says to see Ian, and give him what he wants. He is a vagabond, and will be around that area. His wife left him, taking the house. He became an alcoholic, and he still is, but he will still know Peter. A sad state of affairs, really. He had such potential, but you can still give him what he requires. You’ll make him so proud. You’ll give him back his respect, his dignity. You can make him a valued enthusiast once again”. Curio then shivered, as though an ice cold droplet had slid down his back. He opened his eyes and handed back the glasses.

“Well I don’t know what you make of that,” he said, “but that’s what he said. Ian will have the answers if you travel to the Pier head”.

“Realm of the partisan? Enthusiast? What does it mean?” asked Malcolm.

“I don’t know,” said Curio. “It’s just what your father was telling me. All I can do is relay the information. What you make of it is down to you, I can do nothing else”.

“Well, you could get in contact with him again, I suppose”. Curio nodded.

“It’s not easy, and spirits do not always like to be disturbed. Granted, your father seemed the type who would not mind, and, I can try again if you wish, but not today. I have other appointments”. Malcolm nodded, thoughtfully.

“I have sympathy for you, I really do,” Curio continued, “but please understand, the price must still be the same”.

“Er...Oh,” said Malcolm, rummaging in his pocket for a £20 note. He gave it to him. Melissa stopped the camcorder. Curio stood up, and shook both their hands.

“If you need me again....well, you know where I am. I’ll see myself out”. He left the room, the door closing quietly.

“If you’re going to the Pier head,” said Melissa, holding up the camcorder. Malcolm smiled slightly, but there was no humour there at all.

“Thank you Mr Enchantment, that was excellent”, said Mrs Cassian, handing him a £20 note over the garden gate. He had given her a reading, and like most of the others, she did not question, simply took everything he said to be absolute and true. Curio thought that of himself also, so both existed in a state of blissful ignorance of the reservations that could be levelled against its validity. Doubt was a stranger in the believer’s mind.

“Can you give me another reading sometime?” she said. “Next week, perhaps”. Curio was about to say that that would prove to be fruitless, because the prophecies he had told her would be the same. When they came to pass, then another reading may be justified, but he would be telling her the same predictions and information, but, he thought, if she wants to pay for the same facts, just worded differently, then what was wrong with that?

“Ok,” he said, “Give me a ring”. She gave him a wide, satisfied grin, and waved him farewell.

As he passed by Greenoaks shopping centre, two teenage girls walked past him with big wide grins on their reddened faces.

“Hi, Curio” one of them said, giving him a brief wave. They were obviously too embarrassed to stop, so quickly walked on, glancing back slightly before walking across the main road. Curio couldn’t help but smile. His face too, became similar, and he had to stop. Fans, he thought. They recognised me. He walked into a newsagent’s and bought a loaf of bread and a newspaper. It was hard to not smile, even walking all the way up the flights of stairs to his abode.

He was soon relaxing in front of a blank television, reading the newspaper, the only sound that of the pages turning. Perhaps the story that piqued his interest more than anything else was filed away in a side column on page nine. ‘Charity worker suicide’. He read how a Miss Isabel Clemence had been talking to a volunteer in a charity shop with which she was associated. She had been on a lunch break, the volunteer standing at the till. It is reported that midway through a normal conversation, Isabel had pulled out a knife, taken out her tongue, sliced it across, and put her hand tightly over her mouth to stop any blood coming out. The volunteer had been frozen to the spot while Isabel choked to death. After a few minutes, he was standing at the telephone. There was one message. He played it:

“Curio..please help”. The woman sounded upset, as though the very act of talking was difficult for her.

“I’ve lost Fingal, my cockatiel....he’s....he’s been missin now...for about six hours...please ..could you find him for me...?” She clicked off, and Curio shook his head at the telephone. Try the parks, try the roofs. Speak to a few cats that are not hungry, he thought. Turning to walk into the kitchen, the contraption rang, and he hurriedly snatched it up.

“Hi, Curio Enchantment speaking”.

“Hello, Mr Enchantment, I work for a magazine called: ‘Lazy days’. It’s a weekly real-life experiences publication with a national circulation. I wish to do a feature on you”. Curio smiled, a rush of pleasure firing through him.

After a few minutes, he put the telephone down. He was still happy. They wanted to do a double page spread article on him, and take a few pictures of him in his home. They were due in three days time. He checked his diary. Two readings that day would have to be rescheduled. Today, he had to be at Mr Glendon’s house for a reading at 2pm. He made himself a cup of tea and then sat at the computer, starting it up.

National circulation, he thought. This could be it, recognition nationwide. It would be a showcase for him to prove to the rest of the world that he had a genuine gift. The journalist wanted to focus on his psychic detection. Curio was to discuss his technique and the implications of it, but as that was an aspect of his endowment, he knew he would ask the journalist to include his other attributes. Should the person simply want to focus on his success at detection, then that would be fine, he thought. He didn’t want to give the person any reason to not go through with the article. It was to be one of those features that gave £200 for a ‘true story’. It was the type of magazine that featured what seemed to be ex-tabloid journalists who simply couldn’t let go of their urges to create exaggerated tales geared towards sensationalism rather than truth. To attach the words: ‘true story’ to it, seemed to be rather fanciful. They featured such headlines as: ‘I killed and ate my Father’. ‘Why I adore my trans-sexual convict lover’, and ‘I married my son’. Curio wondered what his would be: ‘Master of detection strikes a fifth’. ‘The North-west Psyking finds five in a row’. Yes, he thought, nodding, that’ll do nicely. £200, plus it was a bigger platform for appreciation. He checked his email, and saw that there was nothing of any interest. There was nothing from Ribbet, or Abe. There was nothing of any significance on the ‘Uncanny

kingdoms' message board either. Well, Abe, he thought. Scared to face me? Sitting there in a bad mood because you've been proven wrong? Nevermind. He shut down the computer, stood up and walked across to the window. The car-park was empty, and he stood there, looking out until it was time for his appointment.

They emerged into Lime street station in Liverpool. It was a while since Malcolm had been there. Melissa had been many times, but not since she had started university, two years ago. Many people were simply waiting around, waiting for their trains. Some stared up at the arrivals and departures board. A lot of people simply passed through. Outside of a café, four sets of steel tables and chairs had been set up. One of them was occupied by a white moustached, overweight man who looked to be in his late forties. He only had a black coffee before him. He was just staring at nothing, daydreaming his own private thoughts, in his own private world.

“Shall we grab a coffee before we make our way down there?” asked Malcolm, looking at the tables.

“Why not?” said Melissa, and they were soon sat opposite each other, tea and coffee both curling steam between them.

“So what’s all this for then?” he asked, gesturing to the camcorder bag. “What’s it aiming towards?”. Melissa took a sip of tea and said:

“It’ll be aiming towards you when you find Ian”. Malcolm smiled slightly. She continued:

“I’m studying for a foundation degree in digital media production. I’m hoping to become a multimedia designer. It’s a niche market to get into, and there’s plenty of competition. If I can’t get into that, then I’ll try and settle for something related in some way”. There was a few seconds silence. Then she asked:

“So what about you, what d’you hope to do after Uni?”. He sipped his coffee.

“I’d like to be a systems analyst, although at the present rate it doesn’t look as if I’ll get very far. I suppose I should be studying now, not travelling up here to find ‘Ian’, who exists in the mind of some psychic who I gave twenty quid to”.

“What if he’s right? this Curio. What if Ian is here? and he tells you everything to put your mind at ease. Curio must have something, some gift. I mean, he’s found five missing persons in a row. That must have some significance in proving that he has some connection with the paranormal. If Ian is here, then that will definitely prove it. Curio will have some connections with the other side. It won’t be speculation any more. No more, are ghosts real? It’ll prove life after death as well, won’t it? Do you think he communicated with your father?”.

“I’d like to think so, but the cynic in me has doubts. Let’s go and find Ian, then I’ll give Curio more credibility if he’s right”.

They left the station, the large structure of St George’s hall imposing over to their right. They were faced with a choice of directions.

“What way is it?” asked Melissa. “I haven’t been here for ages”.

“Erm...I think we go straight ahead” said Malcolm.

After around ten minutes, they arrived at the wide paved area between the Liver buildings and the railing looking out across the River Mersey to the Wirral. Melissa took out the camcorder and set about getting it ready. They headed closer to the water and stopped at the metal barrier.

“If we find him,” said Malcolm, “Are you just going to start filming? or are you going to ask for his permission? He might be camera shy”.

“Well I need the marks, so I’ve decided to just take the risk. If he tells me to stop filming, then I will. Actually, I suppose I should do an introduction to say what it is we’re actually doing. Can you film me?”. Malcolm nodded, and she handed him the camera. Soon she was in shot, the river behind, the film rolling.

“I’m here with Malcolm...” she went to say his second name, but then realised that she didn’t know it. “..and with regards to the reading he had from Curio Enchantment, he has kindly agreed to let me follow up the information he was given by the psychic. We are here at the Pier head, looking for ‘Ian’. I’m hoping we find him”. She nodded for Malcolm to finish, and he stopped the film and handed it back to Melissa.

“Right then,” he said. “Where do we begin?”. He scanned around. The passers-by and tourists did not fit into the vagabond description. For around five minutes they wondered around, but could see no candidates. There was an archway near the fence, and they decided to search through there. It was a wide walkway that led to the Albert dock. When they walked through, Malcolm stopped, as around halfway along, leaning against the rail, looking down at the irregular surface of the Mersey, was a candidate. From around thirty metres away, he could see that he had wiry, unwashed hair, and a dark brown coat that was stained and rough, as though he’d found it in a skip, and had never taken it off in many years. Malcolm looked at Melissa and nodded in his direction. She saw him, then prepared the camcorder.

“Get a bit closer,” she said, “and I’ll film you as you approach him”.

“Are you sure you’re going to take the risk? He’ll probably take one look at that and grab it, and run off to buy some meths”. He looked back

at him. He was now staring at the Wirral. Malcolm slowly breathed in a nervous breath, then slowly walked across to him. Melissa approached around four metres behind, and a few people passed between them, casting curious glances at the lens.

“Excuse me,” said Malcolm, tapping the man’s shoulder. He quickly turned and looked directly at him, as though his peace and solitude had been rudely interrupted. His face was reddened and wrinkled. He looked to be in his late fifties, and had a curly white beard at around half an inch, stained tobacco yellow.

“What?” he said, frowning. Malcolm felt even more nervous.

“Are you...er..Ian? A friend of Peter Selden’s, my father”. The man’s face changed to one of surprise.

“Malcolm,” he said. “Malcolm. Yes, I knew your Father. It’s such an honour to meet you”. He proffered a wrinkled, tobacco stained hand to him. Malcolm shook it reluctantly.

“Oh...Ok.” he said “I was hoping you could tell me why he would kill my Mother. There must have been a reason behind it”. He noticed a tear trickle down Ian’s face.

“It’s such an honour,” he said. “To meet the son of a partisan. Peter was such a good man, and now he’s let me back in by sending me his son to give me back my dignity”. Melissa edged closer, keeping both of them in shot. Ian didn’t look at her.

“What the hell was my Father into? Was he member of a cult or something?”

“I was with him. I was with him but I never was infected. I was too scared”.

“Infected? Infected with what?”

“Don’t you see? Peter has sent you to help me finish what I never started. My fear stopped me, but not now. It cannot stop me now. Peter has forgiven me by giving you to me. We were meant to be infected together, and your Father was. He took the life of the willing victim”.

“What?...hold on, are you saying my mother was involved? She wanted to be killed?”.

“Absolutely. To die for the virus is an honour. Now that your father has absolved me, and let me back in, I hope to rectify my mistakes by taking the first step to redemption.”

“Virus? Redemption? What the fuck?” More tears flowed down the man’s face.

“Thank-you, Malcolm, for restoring my nobility and infecting me with your father’s inheritance. To send me you I cannot hope to repay my thanks and support. It is with honour and a sympathetic spirit that truly must be considered for there is the devotion of kindred essence within us that can be...”. He then stopped. No more tears flowed, and his face became stern and he stared with absolute abhorrence at Malcolm. He reached into his inside pocket.

“What do you...?” Malcolm asked.

“Malcolm look out!” shouted Melissa. Ian swiftly brought out a gleaming carving knife and swiped at Malcolm. Malcolm stepped quickly back. He turned and made to run, but looked at Melissa who was backing away quickly, staring in panic at Ian. Ian did not seem to notice her. He broke into a run, his eyes fixed on Malcolm. Malcolm turned and ran. The man was fast. He advanced rapidly, but Malcolm kept the edge as they ran across the paved area of the pier head. Malcolm gained around ten metres, looking around sporadically to see that Ian was still in pursuit, knife glinting. Without thinking straight, Malcolm dashed into a road. A bus screeched to a halt, the driver angrily banging the horn. He ran onto the pavement. On the other side of the bus, a transit van appeared and slammed into Ian. It was a loud crack that made Malcolm stop and turn around. Ian was lying on his back about eight metres before the vehicle. The windshield was cracked. The driver walked across to Malcolm, his face one of despair.

“I’m sorry mate,” he said. “I’m sorry, he just came outta nowhere”. Melissa had caught up, but she had decided not to carry on filming. She joined Malcolm, and was about to speak, when they saw Ian move. They all looked at him, and saw him slowly getting to his feet. The left side of his face had a deep laceration, and was bleeding. There was also a burn mark where his face had scraped along the tar-mac. His expression was the same. He was still clutching the knife, and looked up at Malcolm, then began to run at him again. He did not look at anybody else. Malcolm turned and ran again. Ian dashed between Melissa and the driver.

“Stop him, he’s got a knife,” she said to the driver. He looked in the direction of the pursuit, then hurriedly got back in his van. His passenger looked at him as if to say: ‘What’s going on? What are we doing?’ Performing a swift U-turn, he sped onwards, and found Ian around five metres behind Malcolm, dashing along the pavement. Ian did not look at the van, even though it was rapidly bearing down on him. It slammed into

his side and he was sent careering into the side of a parked Hyundai Elantra. The van screeched to a halt and both occupants quickly left the vehicle and hurried across to Ian who was getting to his feet again, knife still in hand. Malcolm had stopped on the other side of the road and was looking back, ready to make another dash, even though he was breathing heavily. Ian was pushed to the floor, but got back up, was pushed to floor, but went to get back up. Ray Denton grabbed him with both hands and shoved him to the ground. Ian started to struggle in the direction of Malcolm. He did not utter a word, or indeed, a sound. Ray found his strength surprising for such a lithe man. He thrashed around, and Ray's forearms were slashed a few times, but not on purpose.

"Ah!...Ste, open the van, open the van, let's lock this fucker inside". He slammed Ian twice against the pavement.

"What the fuck d'you think you're doing? Calm the fuck down". Ian continued to thrash, and more wounds were opened. He was looking in the general direction of Malcolm, even though a car door was in the way. He continued to try and crawl towards him, but Ray kept him pressed down. He looked back at Steven Rowley

"You opened that van yet? Fuckin' hurry up. This bastard's fucking mental". Steve came hurrying over, and together they grabbed Ian who continued to thrash. Both of them received lacerations by the wildly swinging blade, and Ian continued to be silent. They dragged him to the back of the van, and hurled him inside. There were bags of cement and a bag of tools inside. Ray and Steve both slammed the doors, but then they heard a loud crash on the driver's side. They walked around, and it came again. Melissa had joined Malcolm on the other side of the road. She was filming the van, watching as it rocked each time Ian threw himself in Malcolm's direction. A few onlookers had stopped to watch. The van never had time to stabilise before Ian launched himself again. Some of the metal actually dented, but still, Ian was relentless. Soon though, the bangs became less and less, until the van stabilised. Ray and Steve just looked at each other, not knowing what to do. It was around two minutes before Ray slowly made his way to the back, and then cautiously opened one of the doors. Ian was dead. His head had collapsed over a bag of cement, his skull caved in as though it had been crushed in a vice. Each time he had hurled himself at the side of the van, his head had cracked against it simultaneously. A lot of his bones were also shattered, and he looked deflated, a puppet whose strings had been cut, cast aside, of use no longer.

Malcolm looked wide-eyed at Melissa.

“What the fuck was that about?” he asked, as if she would know.

“That Curio was in touch with my Dad. I’ve got speak to him again”.

As more curious onlookers gathered, they both hurried away.

“Yes, it’s good of you to tell me, Curio, I’m quite sure I can use your information, as it makes perfect sense. I’m sure I’m psychic myself, as I have just demonstrated. I pick up vibrations. Whenever I walk into an old building, or sometimes just walking along the road, I begin to sense that there was some kind of trauma that went on there. I look into the history of the place and discover that some kind of distress took place there,” said Trevor Clement, who had rang Curio for a reading. Curio had been unaware that Trevor was also a practising psychic, and wished to discuss techniques and experiences with him. It was quite a pleasant surprise for Curio to find a fellow medium with whom to exchange thoughts. He had given him a reading, and it was fairly typical. Trevor, who was 46, wore steel rimmed spectacles, had thin wispy hair, and wore stone cord jeans with a white polo top. Trevor had offered to give Curio a reading, which he had accepted. His technique was different to Curio’s but the result was similar. He had closed his eyes and had laid a hand on Curio’s shoulder. ‘I feel you are strong person. Good natured and talented’. After five minutes, he had felt a presence within his mind.

‘Sarah. I’m getting a Sarah. Blond hair, about thirtyish.’. Curio had had to think for a few moments.

“Yes,” he had said, “One of my tutors when I was in uni”. Trevor had then let go of him, a big smile creased across his face.

“Very good,” Curio had said. “I’m impressed. Sarah must have died”. He had looked saddened.

“I haven’t reached your standard yet,” Trevor had said.

“If that was anything to go by, you’ll be overtaking me rather soon”.

Curio had been given a saucer of digestive biscuits. He ate the last of them and looked at the small crown dynasty plate as though willing for more to appear.

“Yes, traumatic incidents leave an imprint in reality at the place of the disturbance,” he said, “The sensations from it enable us, psychics, to pick up on its meaning. We can feel that something happened there, some event, but we must also decipher what actually happened. Through the feelings we gain we can work out just what the cause of the disturbance was, and work our way backwards to the source. It is possible to discover exactly what happened, and should you check up its history, if it’s available, then they should match exactly. Checking what happened is

simply a formality to please those who still harbour doubts. As the disturbance is so major, it must have some resonance within the plane it is in, and maybe others that are perhaps parallel, and that includes our dimension, hence our picking up its vibrations. That's what I believe". Trevor nodded. Curio continued:

"Maybe there are other earth's where the deceased go. I mean, look up into the sky, there's infinity in all directions, and with pro-creation ongoing, then there has to be infinity to house those that have crossed over. From the earth's creation, the very first life forms must have had some form of soul, or energy in order to have movement, and when that died, it must have transferred somewhere. Was it the first form of life to enter the spirit world? There's plenty of space out there to take the deceased, unseen to ours eyes, but there nonetheless". He pointed upwards.

"Space," he said. "A Parallel universe where everything goes upon death. Although, I don't know what the planets or stars are for. Another mystery, I suppose. Maybe they are havens. With space being so vast, they could be like other countries are to us. I believe spirits can choose whether or not to stay in that place, or be born into this world in a form of their choosing. Or maybe another world, a different earth, a different reality".

"Yes," said Trevor, nodding, "Certainly". He stood up and crossed to the mantle-piece where there was a bulging wallet.

"What's the damage?" he asked.

"Twenty," said Curio, standing up. Trevor handed him a note and they walked into the hallway. Curio shrugged on his coat.

"I hope you do well, anyway," he said, zipping up.

"Yes," said Trevor. "It's not easy, but still, you've given me more scope to work on". They shook hands.

"See you again," said Curio, then closed the gate behind him, and walked around a corner.

He waited at a crossing, and vehicles pulled up at the line. As he crossed, his mobile phone rang, and he hurriedly retrieved it. The number it was displaying was unfamiliar. He walked across to a small patch of grass on the side of one of the paths that led to a supermarket. He answered it, covering his other ear.

“Hello,” he said, “Curio Enchantment”. Even though he had given both of his numbers out, most of the people who called for readings called his landline.

“Curio...I need to see you again as soon as possible. It’s Malcolm. Remember you gave me a reading, and told me to go and see an ‘Ian’ at the pier head? Well you were right, he was there, and he tried to kill me...He tried to kill me. I need you to get in touch with my Dad again. Ian knew him, and he was involved in some weird cult or something. I need to know what he was involved with. Can I see you as soon as...I’ll pay you more”.

“Well,” said Curio. “I could meet you at the same place as last time if you wish. How long will it take you to get there?”

“No. Come to my parent’s house. I’ve got it on video, and there’s more objects there of my father’s”.

“Er...Ok,” said Curio, “What’s the address?”.

While Melissa tried to figure out how to attach the camcorder to the television, Malcolm was standing at the window, looking through net curtains for any signs of Curio.

"Maybe I should have checked the van, to make sure he was dead. What if he wasn't? You saw the way he just got up after being knocked down. You don't think he knows where I am, do you?" he asked.

"No, I doubt it," Melissa replied. He'll have lost you, and I think he'll probably be dead. It could be on the local news anyway. They'll say whether he's dead or not". Malcolm nodded.

"Yes, news is every hour isn't it? We've got twenty minutes. Maybe I should put it on just in case". He walked into the hall and went up the stairs into the bedroom. There was small radio on his father's bedside table. He saw the picture he had previously placed flat, and walked around the bed to pick it up. His father's smiling face greeted him again.

"Come on, fucker!" he said "Tell me what you know". He then felt guilty for swearing at him, as though he had heard. He guessed that maybe he had, and turned away, took the radio, and walked downstairs. Melissa was kneeling in front of the television with a remote control. The screen displayed static, or white noise.

"I think I've got to tune it in," she said, looking confused. She kept her finger on the programme button, and the screen flickered until her own image appeared, at Pendlebridge farm.

"Here we are," she said, "I'll get it to the pier head". Malcolm was about to turn on the radio when the doorbell rang. He crossed to the window.

"It's Curio," he said, and went to answer it.

Soon, Curio and Malcolm entered the living room and Melissa nodded an acknowledgement. The gesture was returned.

"Take a seat" said Malcolm, gesturing to the couch. Curio sat on one side of the Navy Genoa sofa. Malcolm took the armchair. Melissa was crouched at the camcorder.

"He tried to kill you, you say?" asked Curio. Malcolm nodded emphatically.

"He was going on about some virus, and how Peter sent me to him so he can redeem himself or something. Then he just took out a knife and tried to kill me. Watch, you'll see it here". He gestured to the television.

“Is this the same tape used at the farm?” asked Curio.

“Yes,” said Melissa, nodding, but not turning to look at him. She was too engrossed in getting the right place on the tape.

“Let’s see it from the start,” said Curio, “At the farm,”.

“Ok,” said Melissa, and rewound the tape.

Melissa sat on the other side of the sofa to Curio, and all was quiet until the screen came on. Melissa smiled coyly when she appeared, and Curio smiled complacently when he delivered his talk on spirits.

“I think you’re right,” said Melissa, nodding as Curio continued to speak. Soon, Curio watched the screen with fear as he saw himself become possessed.

“I do apologise for going home after that, but it was quite traumatic, being possessed. I’ll admit, it was the first time that has happened to me”, he said, still watching the screen. Melissa and Malcolm looked across at each other, Malcolm with a look of reservation, Melissa with a look of concern due to her lack of understanding of possession, but willing to fear it, because she was sure it happened, and did not doubt what she did not understand. Curio was dealing with forces that held a certain mystique for her, and plenty of fear. She, like thousands of other people, feared the unknown.

The room was silent. The video cut to Curio’s reading at the university, followed by Melissa at the pier head, then Malcolm’s approach to Ian. It soon cut to Ian banging at the side of the van, then cut off. Malcolm gestured to the screen. Melissa knelt down and switch off the camcorder and television.

“See?” he said. “He was involved in whatever it is with my Dad, so you see why I need you to speak with him again to understand just what the f.....just what’s going on”. Curio leaned forward.

“I must say I am quite reluctant to call upon your father again. Whatever he was involved with,” he gestured to the blank screen. “It’s obvious he was involved in some kind of sect. Your father sent you to him to be his sacrifice by the looks of things. I do not want to involve myself with forces that not even I understand. You saw what happened to me at the farm. I am subjecting myself to certain energies that have the potential to be very dangerous. What you ask of me is very precarious, Malcolm”. Malcolm reached into pocket and pulled out fifty pounds in cash. He handed it to him, and Curio just stared at it.

“Please,” said Malcolm. “One more time”.

“I take it by this you are no longer a sceptic?”

“Sceptical of some things, I suppose, but not sceptical enough to not hand my money over”. Curio sighed, then took the money.

“Very well, I need a personal object of his”. Melissa pointed to the armchair where Malcolm was sitting.

“Was that his chair? Did he sit in that often? That would make a good object, wouldn’t it?”. Malcolm nodded and stood up.

“Yes, this is where he sat mostly”. Curio looked at it apprehensively. He tried not to think of the farm.

Standing up, he stepped across to it, and reluctantly sat down. He rested back, and closed his eyes. Malcolm and Melissa both sat on the sofa and looked at each other with concern. They then watched Curio.

“Peter Selden,” he said, “Are you there? I need to speak with you. I have here your son, Malcolm. He wishes to speak further”. All was silent for a few moments, and Curio began to twitch, as though he was having a vivid dream.

“I can see you” he said. “Malcolm wishes for more answers as to what you were involved with”. He twitched more intently, and then stopped, and slowly opened his eyes.

“Peter does not wish to speak with you,” he said. “He is saddened that you did not sacrifice yourself to Ian, and therefore is remaining quiet. He left, telling me to convey that information. That is all I can do, and as far as I am willing to go on this”. He then stood up. They walked out into the hall where Curio put on his coat.

“That’s it?” said Malcolm, “He’s not speaking to me?” He ran his hand through his hair.

“Now what?” he continued. “Now where do I go? You were my last hope”. Curio shook his head.

“I am sure there are other psychics who will be willing to help, but I hope you would be decent enough to let them know just what kind of forces they are dealing with. I will admit, I am not competent enough to handle such energy. Don’t forget, everything in this world has its opposite. If there are forces for good, then logically there are forces for bad, and the inkling I get from your father is most certainly bad. Please do not ring me again, Malcolm, I will not do it again for any price”. He opened the door and walked out, giving a curt wave at the gate before walking around a curve in the road. Melissa then appeared at the door with her camcorder and coat.

“I suppose I’d better be going,” she said, “See you again. Come up to my class and let me know if anything develops from this, I mean...” she held up the camcorder bag. “Can I still do further follow-up for the project?” Malcolm stared at the bag for a few seconds, then nodded.

“Ok,” he said, quietly. Melissa left, and Malcolm closed the door gently. He walked slowly up the stairs and went into his parent’s bedroom. He grabbed the picture of his father and threw it to the floor. He then turned to walk out of the room, but then stopped and frowned. He walked back and stood looking down at the photograph.

“How hard can it be?” he said, quietly, picking it up. He walked around and sat on the side of the bed where his father had slept, and laid the picture down. He breathed in slowly, and closed his eyes. With one hand touching the pillow, the other at the side of his head, it was a few seconds before he spoke:

“Dad, can you hear me? I need answers. Show me you’re here. Show me that you can hear me?” There was a moments silence. Outside, a car drove past, and a dog barked, but his mind remained blank. No image, or feeling came to him, yet, he got the impression that somebody was standing close-by, simply watching him. He wondered if it was his father, refusing to acknowledge him, or maybe it was simply his mind wanting to believe that an entity was there. If he absolutely did not believe in the supernatural, then maybe the inkling or sense would not be there. Perhaps it was testament to his increasing willingness to believe that life after death was a likely possibility. Still, he slowly opened his eyes, and did not believe that his father was there. The feeling remained, and he wondered if it was a kind of delayed reaction to the fact that both his parent’s were dead. His emotions had been trapped within him, his tears converted into despair, into a longing for answers. When that plug had been pulled out, had been satisfied, maybe then he could grieve properly, could cry at their graveside, but if he knew that they were safe and happy in another place, that wherever they were, it was a good, then there would be no need for tears. Not even any need for sympathy. Perhaps it was not knowing what happened to a person after death that sent people to psychics in a vain hope that they could speak with the deceased again, that they could tell them they were happy. Maybe all they wanted to know was that they were somewhere else, not consigned to a state of oblivion, of absolute nothingness. No consciousness, no coma-like dormancy, no dreams. Nothing. They had travelled to another place, and they were blissful there.

If only they could tell them that, then maybe there would be no need for grief.

Malcolm was fairly sure that death was not the end. There was ‘something’, and he was sure that Curio had tapped into it. No mental image, or feeling told him that his father was not going to acknowledge his presence, if he was even there at all. It did not hinder Malcolm’s belief that science did not hold all the answers. He picked up the picture, stood up, threw it at the floor again, and with both fists clenched, stamped on the glass, shattering it.

“Fuck!” he shouted, and walked out of the room.

He felt like a murderer surveying the scene of his crime, pushing his way through a crowd to see what was happening. ‘What happened here? What’s going on?’. Except Tom had committed no homicide, and there were no crowds. He was sat in his Maserati 3200 FH, parked on the other side of the road from the main gate into Ryvak. The building was huge and imposing, even at sixty metres away from its entrance. It was the only domineering aspect of the place. He did not know what was going on inside, but he was sure that work had stopped. He saw what looked to be removal vans in the courtyard, and people walking to and fro. Building equipment was still scattered around, but nobody was using it. There didn’t seem to be any security at the gate, which itself was wide open. Tom had decided to risk driving here, and parked in such a place as to survey the damage he had caused. There were a few cars parked along the side of the road where he was, so another one would not cause any suspicion, as he was quite convinced that the security guard that had chased him would not recognise him, if he was here, but he had parked there just in case. His windows were tinted, but he had risked taking down his side window halfway. He just had to see the place up close, had to watch as it metaphorically collapsed in on itself. In his pocket, he had another print out of another email that had brought him here. It was from the same source:

‘It is with regret that I have to inform you of our current situation. At the present rate, we are unable to sustain employees despite cut-backs. We are therefore in no other position than to cease functioning of our Landican branch. I will inform you of further developments and advise you as and when of the procedures necessary in due course. As of today, Ryvak will close”.

“Ryvak will close,” Tom said, smiling. He nodded. “Fucking right it will”. Cars and vans came and went through the gates, and he was optimistic that none of it was to do with keeping it open. He hoped that the ones leaving were employees, whose next stop was the job centre.

He pressed the button for the window to close, and it hissed upwards. He started the engine, then gave a brief wave to the place as he U-turned.

“Sayonara,” he said, pressing his foot down on the accelerator. As he drove with one hand, he rang Anthony, who was standing outside a take-away, eating a fish cake, waiting for Stuart Harper. He answered it.

“Hi Tom,” he said, “What have you been up to now?”

“It’s closed,” he said cheerfully. “Ryvak is no longer functioning. Here, I’ll read the email”. The phone went silent for a few moments, and Anthony heard ruffling and distant traffic. He came back on.

“Here we are,” he said, and read out the email, while Anthony closed his eyes and faced the floor.

“Great,” he said, with as much enthusiasm as he could gather.

“What’s next then, the hospitals?”. Anthony realised what he had just said, and flushed with embarrassment.

“Hospitals? What do you mean?”

“Er, I mean to give money to, now that erm, the Ryvak money will be gone, and its got to go somewhere, hasn’t it?”

“What? No. Ryvak’s money will cease. The charities won’t get any more because there’s no money to give them from Ryvak, see?” It seemed fine, Anthony thought. Tom had obviously misunderstood for the better what he had said, and remained oblivious. Stuart came out of the take-away eating a spring roll from a portion he had bought. He nodded in the direction of campus, and they both headed in that direction.

“I’ll just bask in the glory of this for a while before I choose my next target.” Tom continued.

“Yes, well, anyway, I’ve got to go, see you later” said Anthony.

“Speak to you soon”.

“Ye...I’ll show you the video when I get it off Melissa,” said Stuart. “I had my doubts, but I reckon he was possessed”.

“Really?” said Anthony. The image of the letter to the police flashed into his mind, and the words: ‘...bask in the glory of this for a while.’ made him slow down.

“I need to go back to the house,” he said, “I’ll see you in class”. Stuart ate the last of one of the spring rolls. He nodded.

“Ok, catch you later”. He walked away, and Anthony felt a rush of fear surging through him. He still had a moral obligation to inform the police of Tom’s recent activity, despite the fact he had failed to prevent him in his sabotage. He knew he still had to do something. Post the letter anyway, he thought. Yet, he guessed that that was perhaps a petty form of revenge as a reaction to his futile attempt to stop him. There was still the

obligation he felt to the people who may have benefited from the experiments. Yet, it seemed remote, and somewhat fanciful he thought to suggest that hundreds, maybe thousands of people may have been helped if he had posted the letter. Perhaps if they understood how Tom did it, and took control of their finances again, then maybe they would get back on track. Again, his sense of moral obligation would not let him see Ryvak close without at least some sort of attempt at resuscitation. To begin that process, he knew that all he had to do was post the letter, and from there, he did not know. It would be down to the police from there. Anthony would anonymously watch as Ryvak returned to its feet, with Tom explaining his actions to the police. They would perhaps wave the letter in his face. 'We know what you've been up to'. That seemed quite fanciful as well. Yet, Anthony couldn't predict the future, and in order to proceed with what could potentially be the restoration of Ryvak, he could only wait to see what came of his posting. As Ryvak returned to normal, he thought perhaps he would bask in his own glory, while Tom lay in a prison cell.

After ten minutes, he was driving through the Mersey tunnel. He decided not to take it directly to the police, but to a post-box. He didn't like the thought of him posting it, then have the door open and a policeman come out and say: 'I'll take that', because then he would have had a good close up, and would recognise him in any negative repercussions. It meant Tom may have a more increased chance of finding out who posted it. He turned off his mobile as he drove, in case he called again. He hoped he wouldn't hesitate in posting it, because he knew that if he did, then it would probably never be posted.

After a few minutes he was driving on ordinary roads again, looking for a post-box. He knew one was bound to be where the shops were, and he pulled up at red-lights, spying one outside a post-office over to his right.

A loud horn blared behind him, and he saw in the rear-view mirror an angry faced youth. The lights were on green, and he drove quickly forward and pulled the vehicle across the road and parked beside the post-box. He heard the distant engine of the car that had beeped him. Someone who thinks they're on a race-track, he thought. He retrieved a pen from the glove compartment and picked up the letter. What address was he going to put? he thought. After a few moments deliberation, he wrote: 'FOR THE ATTENTION OF THE POLICE. URGENT'. This

is very necessary, he thought. 'This is something I just have to do. I cannot sit back and do nothing, watch Tom's grinning face for the next few days. This'll wipe the grin away. Still though, he thought, getting out of the vehicle and crossing to the post-box. If it was a choice between the possibility of helping with medical advancements by getting Rylvak back on track or losing Tom as a friend, then he knew what the obvious answer was. He posted the letter.

Eric Murray leaned back in a creaking metal chair and watched the video with a cynical expression on his face. In a small classroom, with six tables arranged in a rectangle, a television that looked like it belonged in a museum had been set up with the camcorder attached in one corner. He was 38, and had once been a student in the same place, so liked to think of himself as a kind of ‘trendy tutor’ with regards to what the students were going through. He knew how they felt, as he was constantly telling his students. ‘I know what it’s like. I’ve done it’. He thought himself kind of integrated into the student schema, yet his priority was firmly embedded in the work he was paid to do. He would try and be like a student while he was within his working time, laughing with them, listening to them talking about subjects unrelated to the work, yet when he was out of hours, he would not mingle with them, and would only talk to them if it was necessary. Even then he would be strictly formal and brief. When he came to work in the morning, and the clock struck nine, it was back to being the smiling ex-student who knew what they were going through. He had wanted to see how they were progressing, and to give them any pointers and advice to help them gain good marks. It wasn’t favouritism. All students gained equal support, and now it was their turn for his assistance, and he watched the screen with his arms folded. Jane and Melissa looked at each other with unease. Did he hate it? Was it the worst documentary he had ever seen? Not that it was a documentary any more, more an in-depth view of spirituality by Curio and Malcolm who were not part of the project. They hoped he didn’t point that out. He was watching the part where Curio gave his talk on the spirit world.

“Oh what’s he talking about?” said Eric. “Where did you find him? You got a psychic to help you out? He hears voices in his head and ‘speaks’ to dead people. Er, right...ok. That’s 50 points deducted right away”. They all looked at him in unison.

“What?” said Adam. Eric leaned even further back in the chair, and it protested loudly.

“Only joking. It’s good that you enlisted the help of somebody else. It shows commitment and how serious you are about the project”. He continued to watch, and his face become even more sceptical when he saw Curio become supposedly possessed.

“Seriously,” said Eric, “If this guy believes all this then he needs help”. The others glanced at each other, not wishing to say anything, preferring to keep quiet their willingness to mainly agree with Curio. His expression did not change until he saw Ian talking to Malcolm.

“What’s this? Surely you’ve set this up. This is not serious”.

“It is. It is” said Melissa. “His father was involved in a weird sect or something, and so was Ian. I’d like to continue following this up....” Eric stared at the screen as Ian tried to break through the van.

“Is this for real? If you’ve set this up just for marks then I’m afraid I really will have to be making deductions, but if it’s real....”.

“It’s most definitely real,” said Stuart. “It was on the news”.

“Well...” said Robert, leaning forward on the table. “Have you shown this to the police?” The long silence gave him his answer.

“Why not?...It’s the first thing you should have done”. Melissa couldn’t meet his gaze.

“I thought perhaps, that considering Ian was dead, and there were witnesses, then they did not need this tape,” she said. Eric nodded.

“If they take away the tape, then you have no documentary, I see”. He leaned back in the chair again, his hands behind his head.

“Make a copy. Give the original to the police, and you may continue as you were”. He stood up, picked up a folder he had brought in, but never opened, and walked out. Before the door had swung closed, it was pushed open by another tutor whom they vaguely recognised. He stopped and looked at them all. They looked back. There were three seconds of silence.

“Are all of you doing the paranormal documentary?” he asked. They nodded.

“There’s nobody else?” he added. Jane shook her head.

“No, we’re all here”.

“You’re doing a video, right?” Well considering it’s a documentary, I would think so, Melissa thought.

“All of you are in it?” he said. “All of you are doing the project?”. They nodded again, and looked at each other.

“My name is Kenneth Romney. I work over in Civil engineering”. He was 53, was overweight, his belt straining at the lowest notch, had wild brown and white hair that did not take too kindly to a comb. He made no pretensions of knowing what the students were going through. He was a student in the early seventies, where peace and freedom was the order of

the time, and he, like thousands of others, had made themselves visually known to be of like mind. The most daring he went, however, was to wear a multi-coloured shirt and a pony-tail at the same time, and when he looked back at photographs of himself looking like that, he would redden with embarrassment. He was the type of tutor who always seemed to wear the same clothes, every day they were working, in all seasons. It was a dark brown suit that he would probably be buried in.

“I’m collating data about student projects within this term. It’s to store in the archives unit. I need details about this assignment, and I’m going to need your addresses”. Jane frowned.

“Our addresses?” he said. Kenneth nodded.

“For the records. Your addresses are in a separate database and cannot be attained for this purpose, therefore I will need you to write it down”. Suspiciously, and reluctantly, the students set about writing their addresses on pieces of paper. Kenneth collected them and put them in his top pocket.

“I need the video as well,” he said, crossing to the camcorder.

“What?” said Melissa. He picked up the camcorder and looked at it as though he didn’t know what it was.

“I want the tape. Give me the tape”.

“What for?” asked Melissa.

“For the record,” he said, finding the eject button. He took the tape out and let the camcorder drop to the floor. A piece broke away and hit the wall. The students all looked at the contraption, then at the class door, which was slowly closing.

Curio watched contentedly as a Land rover pulled out of the car-park, and drove away out of sight. It was driven by the journalist from 'Lazy days' who had been to interview him and take pictures. He had tidied the flat to the best of his ability, which had basically meant going over the well worn carpet with a cheap, pre-owned hand-held hoover, and giving the coffee table a quick wipe with a cloth. The man had taken several pictures of him in various positions, and had questioned him about his psychic detection. Curio had mentioned the other aspects of his talents as well, and it was all written down by the journalist who seemed genuinely interested. With national distribution he hoped the phone would ring more often, yet, he knew he had to get himself transport. Perhaps until he did, he wondered, only do readings with those people who were willing to travel up to the north-west. Where to meet though, that was a problem. He thought about enquiring into whether he should find premises to do his readings, set himself up with a little stall somewhere. There was also the predicament he would have regarding his rent. At present, because he was receiving jobseeker's allowance, his rent was paid for by housing benefit, but should he ask for more assistance in setting himself up with premises, then he knew the benefits agency would discover his added income. His allowance may be stopped altogether or reduced. He would cross that bridge if it came, he thought, but with such publicity as this, his aspirations were enhanced by his further success, and the time, he hoped was coming closer when he could finally leave this 'fucking dump', as he often thought of it. His prestige he knew was increasing, as was his talent, and he hoped to make enough money soon to buy himself driving lessons to pass the test to buy a cheap second-hand runaround which would mean more access to more clients. How he wished he'd kept his lessons up before entering university. He wondered where he would be now if he had. Living in a posh house? Mingling with celebrities? Still, he thought, turning around and sitting at his computer, there was plenty of time to enjoy the kudos that his eminence would bring.

After a few minutes, he was reading through the 'Uncanny kingdoms' message board, but found no response to his request for information regarding the book he was intending to write proving the reality of the paranormal. He had decided to put that on hold for a while until he was more practised and further understood the forces and energies he was

dealing with. Checking his email, he saw that he had two new messages. One from an electrical company with new special offers. The other from Ribbet.

Before he opened it, he stood up and walked into the kitchen and put two slices of bread in a toaster he had bought three months ago from a market. He had an hour before another reading, a Mr P. Merryll who was half an hour's bus ride away. After a few minutes, he was sat back at his computer, opening Ribbet's email and crunching toast.

'Dear Curio,

I think I have reached my limit. I have regressed to all the previous lives I once had. There must have been around fifteen. Everytime I try now, there is darkness. The one thing I understand they all had in common was the pleasure I had in causing harm to others. Yet, I did not deliberately seek to do this. I suppose I just get a little heavy-handed at times. Sometimes if somebody looks at me in a strange way, or if they bump into me, I get so irritated. I used to be a night-club bouncer, but it got to be quite exhaustive, and I was sacked. Sacked? Well I'll have to give credit to the fella that told me this, but he still ended up in hospital in intensive care. Is this going to be my legacy Curio? When I die, am I still going to have these tendencies in the next life? The strange thing is, I hope I do, but I don't know why. They say I'm here for my own safety and the safety of others, but I heard a rumour that changes are being made, and that there are going to be transfers. Those on best behaviour, like me, will have a good chance of being released, and when that happens, I'll be able to come and visit you, Curio. I'd like that. We can chat away and discuss ideas. If I am right, then could you send me your address. I hope to hear from you, and see you soon.

Yours

Ribbet.'

Curio shook his head. No way, No way, he thought. A prisoner with violent tendencies. There's nothing to think about. He typed his reply:

'Dear Ribbet,

Yes, In the next life you probably will have these kinds of tendencies again, as you obviously have now. I would like to thank-you Ribbet for sharing your experiences with me, and hope that one day you do not feel like harming anybody. Perhaps whoever locked you away was right, and you need to stay where you are for the safety of others. I would prefer it if

you did not meet with me, and I choose not to send you my address. In fact, please do not email me again.

Thank-you

Curio’.

He clicked ‘send’, shook his head again, wondering where Ribbet was. Was he in another country? or just a few miles away? That was an interesting facet of the internet, he thought, the fact that you could communicate with anybody across the globe within seconds. Maybe Ribbet was playing with him, and was in the flat above, giggling over his keyboard. He did not know any of his neighbours, and would not recognise most of them if he passed them in the street. His instinct told him that Ribbet was real. He was a psychopath who had been rewarded for his good behaviour. ‘Alright Ribbet, we’ll let you use a computer’. ‘Ok, we’ll let you film yourself regressing, but don’t forget your tablets when your done’. He hoped never to see Ribbet. He was another ‘voice’ in cyberspace, another faceless individual hiding behind the screen, playing the tough guy, when in reality, he was probably a spotty, dribbling little boy with absolutely nothing better to do. Curio hoped he was, and not the image of a red faced, muscle bound, tattooed thug he had in mind. He shut down the computer, and stood at the window, looking down at a man with a car bonnet up, looking confused at the intricate workings of the engine. The crunch of toast was the only sound in his flat.

40

Ominous clouds gathered, threatening rain, but Malcolm and Melissa did not notice the change in weather, as they were in a small, curtained room, dominated by a round table. In the middle of that table was a crystal ball, and that was surrounded by tarot cards. Melissa was stood nearby, the camcorder wrapped in masking tape and new film inside. Malcolm kept glancing at it as Mystical Aurora, real name Jean Williams, clasped his left hand, and looked deep in concentration. She was an elderly lady, who looked to be in her early seventies. She wore a glamorous dress which was covered in symbols from the zodiac, and each finger had a glittering ring. Around each wrist were many bracelets, many of them with charms. She

wore crystals around her neck, some attached to a headband. Melissa had enquired about these and was told that the energy from the crystals could be deciphered through brainwaves, or the power of thought. It was easier for her to contact the deceased, or to read a person's future. She liked to think of the crystals as giving her a seventh sense. This was the second medium Malcolm had been to try and contact his father again, deliberately not mentioning his mother, or Ian. He did not wish to explain why, and doing so would give them fuel for their readings. The other had been useless. It was basically standard fare. He told him exactly what he thought Malcolm wanted to hear. Yes, he was happy. Yes, he was in a better place, yes, he told Malcolm not to worry about him. Suddenly his father was speaking to him again, he had thought, so had decided to try one more. He knew there were many sharks out there willing to take people's money to tell them what they wished to hear. Perhaps they were paying for peace of mind. Either way, the medium in that case knew exactly what they were doing, and played to the weaknesses of those who believed what they were told. There was always somebody willing to relieve the gullible of their money, no matter what it was, no matter how low in society's perception. If there was money to be made in certain areas, then the shark's sense it like they sense a trace of blood in the water. He hoped this medium was 'genuine', which meant that if they were not in touch with spirits, or anything supernatural, he hoped they were deluded into thinking that they were. There was always an alternative account to what the medium felt, and when there could be no explanation, other than what they believed, then that would be the proof of paranormal reality. Eliminate all other possible explanations, and if you are left with only one, then this was evidence of that which would not be described scientifically. Malcolm hoped that that window, that one account that could not be answered by any other means meant it was a direct route to the spirit world, and Aurora was in connection with it, as was Curio. If Aurora told him that his father was not happy with him for not sacrificing himself, then he would be quite impressed. It would mean he would seek out another medium, believe the other to be a shark, and choose carefully those mediums who looked to be in the profession for their genuine belief, not to make money from the gullible. If subsequent mediums all told him that his father was unhappy with him, then he would begin to believe more, but he guessed that they would only generalise. What they said could be widespread enough to include

everybody. The gullible would find meaning in it that could be geared to them. Rather like reading a horoscope. Read them all on one day and in each there will be something that each person could find that related to them. Cover up the dates and words, jumble up the texts for each of them, then pick out which one you could most relate to, and there would be a one in twelve chance that you would be correct, that it would be your sign. Malcolm couldn't help but believe that those psychics that believed themselves to be 'genuine', actually thought they had a gift, thought they had some form of connection, of link direct to the spirit world, or to what the scientific community had not proven to be real, or factual. A lot of them he thought were simply deluding themselves. Images in their minds and voices were activated by their willingness to believe, and by an active subconscious mind that gave the consciousness what it deemed to be related to the subject given to them at the time. Haunted houses simply meant stories passed around of active spirits in that place, but there was never any collective sightings. Only one person susceptible to believing, and especially the mediums who thought they were psychic, were usually the only witnesses to the 'ghost'. If many people saw the same ghost, at the same time, then credibility would be due, but Malcolm had always thought he had to see it to believe it, and belief in the spirit world for Malcolm was closer than he had ever thought possible. Curio had taught him that. Curio seemed to have been much more close. If there was only one genuine psychic with a direct link to the spirit world, and to his father, then Curio was it. His father had told him through Curio to go and see 'Ian', and Ian had existed. Perhaps Curio did have a real gift, a real link to 'something'. Maybe that was the spirit world. Whatever forces his father was involved with, Curio had tapped into it, and was the closest link he had to finding out what his father had been up to. He hoped he was right. If Aurora conveyed similar information, then he knew he would be on his way to becoming a true believer.

Aurora gripped his hand tightly.

"Yes," she said. "He is here, I can feel him" Just you then, he thought. Melissa panned every few seconds between them. Two red lava lamps bathed the room in crimson, and all was quiet, despite the fact that outside there was a public walkway. The building they were in, 'Rose arcade' catered for the type of shop that could be described as 'alternative'. It had a tattoo and piercing parlour, a shop that specified in selling used vinyl records, and many shops that sold bizarre types of

fashion. Mystical aurora catered for many types of spirituality, such as tarot card reading, and healing. Mediation between the real and the spirit world was simply one of her ‘talents’. Malcolm glanced occasionally at her hand, while she seemed to play-act. He hoped she wasn’t.

“Yes,” she said again. “You wish to tell your son that you are in paradise”. He glanced again at the camera, his face conveying despondency. He had chosen not to give any details about his father, simply that he wished for her to contact him.

“Ah....I see him now. Come closer. He is a big, strong man. Why are you limping? What’s that? A work accident. Where you a builder?” Malcolm shook his head, even though Aurora’s eyes were still closed. He then shook his head at the camera and shrugged.

“He says you’ve got nothing to worry about”. Yep, thought Malcolm, exactly what the other one said. Now he’s talking to me. Perhaps if he did go to many psychics, and they all conveyed similar information, then maybe that would single Curio out to be shark, or simply wrong. Yet, Curio had been the most accurate, on a more precise pathway to his father’s new existence.

“He says to tell Joanne to go for that new job. Is she... your sister?”. Malcolm shook his head at the camera, and mouthed the words: ‘Let’s go’, and hooked a thumb towards the exit.

“Er...My sister’s name is Joan, and she lives in London. She mentioned she was looking for another job, yes”, he lied, simply wanting to make her feel good. He believed that Aurora was one of those psychics deluded into believing they had a gift, so had fed her a morsel that she could grasp onto, and make her feel pleased in the knowledge that she was right, or close.

“She’s living with a good man. Your father says you should see him more often”.

“Yes,” said Malcolm. “I’ve been meaning to”.

“Yes, do”. He looked at her hand again, and wished she would let go. She spoke for another few minutes about his ‘sister’, her man, and her man’s best friend. ‘Tell her to be careful, he has a roving eye’. He had found himself agreeing mostly with what she had said. Not entirely saying yes all the time, because then he thought that that may make her suspicious. He just gave her enough hooks to lead her along, because he knew that she was in about as much contact with her father as he was.

“He says he’ll be waiting, with...your mother. Is she there as well?”. Ah, at last, he thought, she’s got something right.

“Yes, but it was just my father I wanted to speak with”. She opened her eyes and looked at him with concern in her eyes.

“You wanted to speak to him?”

“I just...Oh, nevermind”.

“The connection’s broken now. Your father’s gone back. Would you like me to try again?”

“Er, no thanks. It’s fine”. Melissa stopped the tape, and put it back in the bag while Malcolm rummaged around in his pockets for £25 pounds to pay her.

They bid her goodbye, and walked past shops that were void of customers.

“Honestly, at this rate, my account’s going to be bare, and I don’t get another grant until next month,” he said, dejectedly.

“Have you really got a sister?” Melissa asked.

“No. I haven’t. Anyway, it looks like Curio is the only one who can ‘talk’ to my father. I think he could be real psychic”. Melissa nodded.

“I think he is,” she said.

“I think he could be a goldfish in a sea of sharks. I’ve got to see him again”. he said, as they walked down a steep set of stairs.

A Subaru legacy pulled up in the car park outside the sports centre on campus, and Kenneth Romney got out of the vehicle and surveyed the area. The clouds were grey, but threatened nothing. A slight breeze had built up, but it was hardly noticeable. He turned and looked across at the lecture rooms. A few students came and went through glass doors. There were not many vehicles parked there. The Subaru was alone in the middle, and Kenneth simply continued to stare.

“Sir! Sir!” came a loud voice from his left. A small student, early twenties, wearing flares and a dark green blazer, eagerly came rushing across to him.

“Sir, I finished my essay on construction and transport of oil and gas along continental pipelines”. He rifled through many sheets of paper in a folder he was carrying, and eventually produced a paperclipped essay. Kenneth simply stared at him. He did not look at the papers.

“I need to see Stuart Harper,” Kenneth said. “Where is he?”. The student looked confused, proffering his essay.

“I don’t know who he is” said Gareth Lester.

“I think he’s in there,” said Kenneth, looking at the lecture building. The student nodded, clearly more interested in his essay.

“Sir, will you check my essay?”.

“I think he’s in there”, said Kenneth, walking in that direction. His chest pushed the essay out of the way, and the student stood there, looking puzzled.

“Sir, you’ve left your car door open,” Kenneth walked towards the lecture rooms, stepping over a low bush border. He pushed his way through the glass doors and stood in the foyer, looking around. A woman tutor, late forties, walked by and he looked directly at her.

“Stuart Harper. Where is he?” he asked. The woman stopped in her tracks. Despite being a fellow tutor, the university was big enough for them to be strangers. She could decipher that he wasn’t a student, nor a member of the public. Tutors always seemed to have a certain look and mannerism that was unique to them, that marked them out as teachers, and to a trained eye, perhaps even as they walked amongst the public. She guessed instantly that he was a tutor.

“Sorry, I don’t know,” she said, and continued walking. She frowned, and looked back. Kenneth walked further into the hall, and looked across to his right at a pair of double doors, from where he could hear laughter.

“.....and I said, no, it’s just frost on my moustache”. The room erupted into more laughter. Billy Jenson was a lecturer in Human anatomy and cell biology, and he was convinced that the only reason that the place was filled every time he gave a lecture was because of his excellent communication skills. He made what he had to say interesting. There were a lot of lecturers that simply droned on in the same flat monotone which served to send the student into a world of daydreams. It didn’t matter how interesting the subject was, or the aspect of it spoken by the lecturer, some of them, eminent professors and doctors never seemed to grasp that it was unconstructive, but Billy knew, and had geared his lectures accordingly so that student’s attention was as much on him as possible. As an ex-student himself, he was always the joker in the pack, always had a funny story to tell, always seemed cheerful and full of confidence. That was still the case. When an adolescent left school to face the outside world, it is always a daunting task, but one which must be overcome. Billy saw this as he faced the end of his university years. The end of that was even more frightening to him. He had been shaped and honed by his time there, and knew that to face the world outside would be a drastic change of environment for him, so what better than to continue being a student than to work there? and continue to receive the adulation and respect of like-minded individuals? Billy had found his home from home, and was one of those rare people that enjoyed going to work. He had once asked himself, though, would he do the work for no pay?, and he was quite saddened to find that the answer had been no.

“...but seriously, the pivot joints of the forearms radius and ulna permit rotation along the bone’s length. This is unlike hinge joints”. He looked across to the entrance as Kenneth walked in and stood there, surveying the faces that had all turned to look in his direction. Billy recognised him, but did not know him. He walked across, his footsteps loud in the hushed theatre.

“I’m looking for Stuart Harper,” said Kenneth, walking forward. He pushed past Billy as though he was not there.

“Excuse me,” said Billy. “Do you mind?”. In the midst of the faces, he saw a student with his hand raised.

“Are you Stuart Harper?” he asked, stopping. Stuart nodded.

“Yes, I am”. He was sandwiched halfway up the theatre. The seats were cramped and uncomfortable, the type where half of the row had to stand should somebody midway wish to leave. Kenneth walked up the steps towards him, his footsteps amplified, the theatre designed in a steep sloping semi-circle so that those at the back could hear clearly. All eyes followed him, and there were a few murmurs. Billy just stared up at him. He had only been a lecturer for six months, and he stood there in a state of indecision. Wouldn’t it have just been easier for him to have Stuart leave and talk to him outside? he thought, as he watched as a row of students all stood up as Kenneth slowly squeezed his way through. He stepped over bags, and a pair of ankle boots, his gaze firmly fixed on Stuart who looked up at him in perplexity. He was leaning forward on the narrow strip of mahogany where students took notes and laid their belongings. It was the most comfortable position. He leaned back to speak as the tutor stood over him, but he never had time as Kenneth’s right hand darted forward and gripped the back of his head. He shoved him forward forcefully, slamming his face onto the wooden strip. He did not bring any materials as he was one of the students that came to see Billy. His glasses shattered instantly, and shards pierced his eyes. He screamed as Kenneth slammed his head down again and again, cracking his teeth and splitting his jaw. Some students covered their ears as the amplified scream pierced their eardrums. Still, he relentlessly slammed his face onto the wood, his nose crushing, his forehead cracking. The students finally recovered from their surprise, as it sank in just what was happening. As pandemonium erupted, and screams reverberated throughout the theatre, and students clambered for the exits as though the place was burning, Kenneth slammed and slammed Stuart’s scarlet covered face, and he felt a give in his skull which meant that his hand became closer and closer to the wood as the cranium parted. His brain became exposed, glistening from the overhead lights. Kenneth stopped, letting go of the scalp and hair. He was breathing heavily, his face reddened. He looked at Stuart for a few moments, then stood up straight, looking around. All of the students were panicking, trying to leave. He made his way back to the steps.

“Where is Jane Fielding?” he asked them. “I need to see her”. The last student finally managed to run from the theatre, and the sound of Kenneth’s footsteps were amplified again. He walked out into the hallway, and saw a crowd gathered around the main entrance. The screams became

louder as a few of them saw him approaching, but they eventually made it through and ran in all directions. He walked back out and saw Gareth looking around him, confused. He was still stood near the car. Kenneth approached, and the student looked quite satisfied to see him.

“Ah, sir, what’s going on? Is there a fire? I thought I would mind your car while you went and saw...who was it? Anyway...”

“Where is Jane Fielding?” he asked. “I need to see her”. Gareth shook his head.

“I don’t know, sir. Well, could you check my essay now?” he asked, proffering it again.

“I think she’s this way,” he said, walking away. Gareth looked at him, then down at the essay. He sighed. His shoulders slumped, and he walked in the opposite direction.

'Drum 'n bass' blasted from Tom's car, and could be heard all around the houses. He had both doors open, sat in the driving seat outside his house, sipping from a carton of orange, one foot on the pavement. Anthony was sitting in the passenger seat, looking at his new sound system.

"Top isn't it?" said Tom. "DAB, bluetooth. Just listen to how clear that is?" Anthony nodded upwards in a 'what?' gesture. He then frowned, and reached forward and lowered the volume.

"The whole neighbourhood can hear that," he said. "I don't know why you need so many radio stations, anyway. You probably won't listen to most of them".

"No need to be jealous. It's not as if you can't afford one". He looked at his chronograph watch.

"I suppose we'd better be going," he said, "We'll be late for class," They closed both doors, and Tom started the engine. They were soon approaching campus. He switched down the indicator to turn left, the clicking sound loud in the confines of the vehicle. As he straightened the car, he had to brake quickly as there was a stationary vehicle in front of him, and one in front of that.

"What's this?" he said, more to himself. The vehicles in front slowly moved forward and turned left into a side street. Tom saw that a policeman was standing in the middle of the road. He was gesturing for him to follow the others. He saw that beyond the man, parked at odd angles on a wide paving area in front of halls of residence, were two police cars. There were also many students wandering around, looking puzzled.

"I wonder what happened here?" Tom said, turning left. He looked at Anthony who was staring straight ahead, his face approaching ashen.

"What's up with you? You look like you've seen a ghost". Anthony swallowed, trying to hide his concern. Surely not, he thought. Surely this cannot be because of the letter. Are the police searching the university for Tom? Should I really jump to such a conclusion and get out of the car and go across to the policeman and point Tom out? No, he thought that the police would, after deciding whether or not to act upon the letter, investigate it to see if Ryvak was being infiltrated, and should they find any nefarious activity, would perhaps be knocking on Tom's door for him to answer questions. Although Anthony knew how much cyber crime was taken seriously, it wouldn't have surprised him should there be any

helicopters hovering above, and were tracking Tom's car, watching him drive straight into a spider's trap. Maybe they've already singled Tom out, and in the course of their investigations have discovered Anthony's dealings with the bank as well. They would know that they had a class. All they had to do was check and see that they would both be in there at the same time.

"Relax," said Tom, "It's only my girlfriend and Malcolm that knows how we obtain our money. I know how paranoid you can be. They haven't come for our 'loans'. ". Anthony frowned. It was as though he had read his mind.

"How do you know?". Tom saw that a police cordon had blocked another road.

"Great, I'm trapped in a maze," he said, driving onwards.

"Well, I can't be tracked," he said. "Alright, it's possible to find out what we're up to, but only by the most determined and knowledgeable computer minds. Not even they would even begin to even try and attempt it, though, and d'you know why?". He waited for an answer.

"Er...no,"

"They don't know it's happening. How can you investigate a crime, when you don't know that a crime is being committed? Ok, should somebody find out, then it would take their best techno boffin to find me, and if that happens...", He turned right and straightened the car. He was caught in a slow moving line, each trying to find somewhere to park.

"...If that happens then I'll hold my hands up," He held his hands up in a gesture of: 'You got me', and put them back on the steering wheel.

"..and say fair enough, I was caught by a better man. I'll come quietly. How likely is that to happen though?". There were a few moments silence, the warmth of the car harbouring its own solitude. Anthony looked out of the passenger window.

"I suppose it's the same with Ryvak," he said. "How likely are they to find you?" Tom shook his head.

"Absolutely no chance," he said, matter of factly. "Well, not if they get the same guy, I suppose, but again, very unlikely. They first have to suspect that somebody is infiltrating them and fucking with their finances. They can check all they like, but they won't find anything. It was simply geared to look like they were losing money, and now since they've announced that they are closing, the money that I re-routed in to the charities gets rebounded to the donator with a little note, saying

something like: 'We thank you for your investment, and your support for RYVAK. Your funds are no longer required'. I was tempted to add: 'Now get fucked', but absolute secrecy is everything in the world of espionage, so I couldn't, but my involvement has stopped now. That message will last for about a month, giving the building enough time to have no activity whatsoever, from RYVAK anyway. When that deletes itself, there should be no money at all going in, and even if it did, it wouldn't make any difference. The place will still be closed, and no animals will be tortured. So when that message deletes, not even that feller could trace me. It's nothing to do with me anymore. I'll be completely undetectable. I'm not even suspected, though. They thought they were losing money, so would not have supposed that a crime was being committed." He smiled, and looked at the car ahead.

"Come on, move, class'll be starting soon". Anthony sighed as quietly as he could, and stared at the dashboard. He was jolted alert by the ringing of Tom's mobile telephone.

"It's Malcolm," he said, picking it up.

"Hi, Malcolm, How's it going?"

"Tom, I need you to do me a favour. I need your hacking skills to..."

"Hold on, what? What was that? It's a bad line.....Listen, don't use the 'h' word on the phone, not with so many police around".

"What? Police?"

"Yes. Something's happened at uni by the looks of things. I'll have to meet you if there's anything you wish to discuss".

"Er...Oh!. Come round to the house. I'll be there.". Tom nodded, and ended the call.

"That was Malcolm," he said, as if Anthony didn't know. "He wants me to use my hacking skills on something." Anthony saw that his face was content, as if there was nothing much that would make him happier.

"I think class is off today," he said. "What do you want to do? I'm going to see Malcolm". Anthony thought for a few moments.

"I want to see if class is still on, and find out what's happened here". Tom nodded. Anthony took off his seat belt and opened the door. He got out.

"See you later," he said, receiving a brief wave. He closed the door, wandering away. Tom saw that there was a car behind him. The one in front was not making much progress. There was an expanse of grass to his left, bordered by intermittent trees. He mounted the kerb, leaving deep

tyre tracks in the grass and manouvered his way back onto another road, away from campus.

After around ten minutes, he was knocking on the front door of Malcolm's parent's house. Malcolm opened the door and let him in. They were soon sitting in the front room, Tom reclining on the armchair, Malcolm on the sofa.

"So what's happened at uni then? You mentioned police," Malcolm asked. Tom nodded.

"Yes. There was a bit of commotion going on, roads blocked off, and well, I don't know what's happened. So what is it you want me to do?". Malcolm stood up and crossed to the mantle-piece where he retrieved a piece of paper which he handed to Tom. He sat down. Tom saw that it read: 'Curio Enchantment'. It was followed by two telephone numbers and an email address.

"Curio Enchantment? Isn't he the bloke that found your.....? Anthony's mentioned him".

"I need his address. He's not in the phonebook under that name. Using those, can you find it for me?". Tom nodded.

"Easily," he said.

43

Curio paced authoritatively up and down the small area before a rectangle arrangement of orange plastic chairs. In an upstairs meeting room of an Earlestown library, there was a monthly meeting of: 'The truth society for paranormal facts'. Curio had received an email from them to invite him to be a guest speaker at their meeting, and he replied yes instantly, and had endured an hour and a half's journey to get there on bus and train. They gave themselves an exaggerated name, as they were a group that simply met to discuss the supernatural, to talk about happenings that have occurred to them that could not easily be explained, and to discuss the many various subjects related to it. They appointed 'Vice-chairmen' and 'presidents', all seemingly to make themselves feel rather superior, when in fact, it was simply a group of like-minded individuals, discussing the unknown. The youngest of them was 62, the oldest 89. There were 16 in the group, but they were always open to new members. The email had used the words: 'special guest', and Curio had felt jubilant. He was to discuss his psychic detection technique and his beliefs, and up to now had been talking for just over an hour. The faces that looked up at him were

all attentive, listening and nodding as he spoke. Nobody had asked questions, nobody had looked as though they disagreed. Everything he had said did not require questioning. Not by them, not by the believer. Believers didn't need proof. Yet, evidence however would always be leapt upon like finding money in a street. 'Here is evidence of my belief. See, I told you I was right'. Such evidence, though, could always present more questions. For the truth society for paranormal facts, a lot of evidence came through experiences, through the telling of incidents that could not possibly be lies, or misunderstandings to them. They didn't need proof, because they already knew the truth, as did Curio. Doubtful questions were strangers around the borders of their knowledge of their own facts.

With his hands behind his back, and a stern expression, Curio pivoted on his heels and slowly made his way back along the front of the class.

"....so, yes. The pyramids are pointers to where we may have come from, or to another world entirely". This produced a spate of nodding. He paused for effect, and reached the same point again, where he swivelled and continued.

"What about freewill? If we can predict future occurrences, then how is it possible to have complete control over ourselves? Is everything preordained, mapped out? It seems impossible, even in the knowledge of what will happen, to avert such events. What will happen, will happen. I can simply offer advice, and you can be prepared in the knowledge that the event will happen. You can be aware of it. If it is fated, then nothing will prevent it. It is like me saying that in the middle of summer, there will be one day of icy storms and snow. Let's say that the weather reporters did not see it coming, but I, or somebody else, did. I can warn you of it, and you will wear warm clothes that day, while everybody else will be caught wearing T-shirts and shorts. You would have preparation, knowledge of certainty, certain in the knowledge that something will happen at that preordained time. You have the freewill to warn others, to prepare them. This, force, this, power, sometimes will give warnings, omens and premonitions to the gifted, and it therefore is possible to have freewill, and the power of foresight". He paused again, watching them nod their appreciation.

"So what of knowledge?" he asked, stopping, and opening his arms in an expansive gesture.

“Why have memories? We collect experiences and recollections throughout our lives, and knowledge”. He paused for effect again, put his arms behind his back, and began pacing once more.

“When we die, we take with us into the spirit world our personalities, and the memories we collected in the real world. If there was no afterlife, then why remember? We would be geared simply for survival. There would only be the knowledge necessary to survive, and procreate. Yet, we learn things that are totally unnecessary to either of those. Why? We must continue our existence outside of this world. We must continue in a separate plane, or realm. The afterlife, I suppose. Do we die there, and convert to another plane? Perhaps. I cannot say otherwise. Is this real world one of many steps towards nirvana, or utopia? Maybe we have to experience everything in order to qualify for such a place. Yet, as animals have souls, they too must go somewhere, as they cannot comprehend the sheer scale of human knowledge. We, humans, after all, are the only species with imaginations. It is exclusive to us. This is another aspect of what separates us from them. This does not mean they should be treated any differently to us, or treated without respect. They provide us with food and warmth, and loyalty. They, after all, only kill for survival, to eat. They only need their base instincts to survive. Which is why when people call muggers, and gangsters, ‘animals’, they are in fact giving them a compliment in a roundabout way. Which would you rather be, a murderer or an animal?” The image of Ribbet flashed into Curio’s mind, and he gave a humourless smile, but made no reference to it. “They don’t have man-made worries, such as money, or relationships” He paused for a few moments. “I often wonder though, if we die insane, or mentally unbalanced, do we stay like that in the afterlife? Or do we become ‘normal?’” He stopped again and made another expansive gesture.

“I will admit, I do not know. Yet, these are questions I suppose we should be asking those in the spirit world, instead of, how are you? Are you alright? What we should be asking is: What’s it like there? Who have you met? How big is your world? What can you see? We know they are there, so we gain peace of mind in this knowledge. We know that that is where we will go. It is still fearful, however. We still fear our demise. Yet, on the basis of all the evidence spanning back hundreds of years, at least one paranormal event must be real, only one event that points to the existence of the afterlife. What would be the consequences? It would throw open the floodgates to all sorts of significant truths and facts. This

is my legacy. This is what I am attempting to prove. It has already been confirmed by my accurate readings, and finding five bodies in a row by psychic detection. Perhaps it is my destiny. My vocation is to prove the existence of the paranormal to as wide an audience as possible. I know it exists, I have proven it. We have no need to fear death". Curio stopped. They waited for him to continue, and when he didn't, a woman at the front started clapping, and it was soon followed by an applause. Curio reddened slightly, and nodded his appreciation. It lasted for nearly a minute, and the vice-chairman stood up and crossed to him, clapping and smiling at the audience. He shook his hand, and gestured for him to walk across to a row of chairs lining the side of the wall. One of the women announced it was time for a tea-break, and the man, Derek Stockton, a large, rotund, white haired 76 year-old man slowly limped across to Curio and sat down heavily. He sat one chair away.

"Thanks, Curio, that was much appreciated. We can't thank you enough" He paused for a few seconds. "As you can see, I'm not getting any younger, and for a while I've been thinking of stepping down. We need new blood in here. I know you're genuine, I 'know,'" he tapped the side of head. "I can see you are gifted, so despite it being somewhat unorthodox, and unconventional, I would like you to take my place". Curio looked surprised.

"Vice-chairman!" he said, "Well...I'm...I'm honoured". He was stuck for words for a few moments.

"Thank-you," he said. "It will be a pleasure". It was soon announced to the rest of the group who put their drinks down to clap again. One of them was kind enough to go out of their way to offer him a lift home, and Curio was soon climbing the cold stairway, walking along the cold, dimly lit corridor, and opening the door to his cold flat. 'Psychic genius', 'Vice-chairman' he thought, smiling, closing the door behind him.

Tom brought the car to a halt in the car park that was filled to three-quarter capacity.

"This is it" he said. "He lives here". Daylight had faded, but night-time had not truly taken over yet, as the sky was a prussian blue, laced with grey wispy clouds. Somewhere behind them, a half moon glowed, and what little light it gave out was reflected in the windows of the block of flats which loomed above them. It looked dark and ominous. A few windows glowed yellow and orange, but even they seemed swamped by the darkness surrounding them. Malcolm looked up with a confused look of altered expectation.

"Well," he said, "I would have thought he lived in a house, some posh place, but obviously not. He's not that rich". Tom nodded.

"So are we going to wait for him? You know where he lives now, and this has got nothing to do with me, so I don't want to be waiting for hours for someone who you think can get in touch with your parents, who you're willing to give money to".

"He can get in touch with my dad. I told you about Ian, didn't I?" Tom nodded.

"A set-up. If Ian had have caught you, he would have done nothing".

"Oh really? So why did he die in the attempt to get to me? If he'd have caught me, he'd have killed me".

"Still, though. I reckon this Curio is just another con-man. If you want to throw money at him, then fine, go right ahead". Malcolm looked out of the window for a few moments. He could barely make anything out, and nothing moved.

"Money", said Malcolm, looking back. "That's one thing I'm short of".

"Aren't we all?" said Tom, who then frowned and said: "Hold on, no, what am I saying? I've got buckets of the stuff".

"Thing is..." said Malcolm, but before he could continue, Tom grinned and said:

"How much do you want? If it's to give to him, you can forget it". He pointed at the block of flats.

"Curio said last time, he wouldn't get in touch with my Dad again, because he was dealing with dangerous forces, but the thing is, of the other psychics I've been to, Curio's been the most...correct, so I need to

persuade him. I just hope my Dad is speaking to me now". Tom shook his head.

"Honestly. You believe this now, don't you? You're asking me to give you money to give to Curio, so he can talk to your Father?"

"He was the one who discovered where my Mum was, and spoke to my Dad who led me to Ian. He must have something".

"If he can get money out of gullible people then that's a gift," said Tom. Malcolm sighed. All was quiet for a few moments.

"I can't let you have it for nothing," said Tom. "I know you probably won't be able to pay me back, so perhaps a favour would be in order".

"Such as?"

"I don't know, I haven't thought of it yet. How much do you want?"

"How about a hundred?" Tom looked at him with complete distaste.

"A hundred? You want a hundred to give to him?" He pointed at the flats again, and continued:

"Don't forget, he can probably just tell you anything he likes and pocket the cash. Actually, that's what they probably all do".

"I'm not sure whether a hundred will be enough, though. Perhaps he might want more".

"Well, see how much he wants, then come back and tell me". Malcolm got out of the car and closed the door. Tom got out also and locked the vehicle.

"I'm not waiting here while you go up there. What if he does your reading there and then?" he said, "You could be ages. How's that going to make me look if I just drive away? Anyway, I can tell whether or not if he's genuine. I've only seen con-men so far. I wonder if this one can prove me wrong. I doubt it".

"What do you have in mind?" asked Malcolm as they walked across to the entrance.

"Nothing. I'm just going to observe. That's all". He pressed the round, steel button of number 38, and waited. Silence hung around them like fog. It was broken by a loud crackle and a hazy voice.

"Hello," it said.

"Curio Enchantment? This is Malcolm, remember? You've given me two readings. I need to speak to you again".

"Are you with Melissa?"

"No. I'm with Tom, a friend". There was a pause, followed by what Malcolm thought was a sigh.

“Come up,” he said. There was a loud buzz as the door allowed them through. They walked into a dimly lit hallway. The flats seemed as though they were not occupied. The fog of silence followed them, their footsteps reverberating throughout the corridor. They walked its length, looking for the stairs, and eventually found them at the end, near a lift. Tom tried opening the door, but it would not budge. It looked as though it was stuck between floors. Malcolm pointed at the stairs.

“Come on, it’s good exercise” he said.

They began their ascent to the fifth floor.

“So who’s this Melissa?” asked Tom.

“She and some other students are doing a group project at uni, about the paranormal or something, and she’s using the readings I’ve had as part of it. As it’s related to what their doing, a documentary, she’s incorporated my ‘investigations’, I suppose, into it. It’s part of her coursework”. They reached the corridor.

“Is she nice? Do you fancy her?” Malcolm smiled, and said nothing. His face reddened slightly, but in the poor light, Tom couldn’t see it. They reached Curio’s door, and Malcolm knocked.

“Nevermind that,” he said. “How’s Ryvak coming along?”. Tom looked surprised .

“Didn’t I tell you?” he said. “Ryvak is no more,” He lifted both his arms in the air, his hands in fists. The door opened.

“Ryvak is closed”. Curio leaned against the door frame.

“Ryvak?” he said, “Isn’t that some research company?” Tom’s hands shot down.

“Er..yes. I heard that they’re closing. They won’t be using animals to experiment on now. Lack of funds or something”. Curio nodded, and looked at Malcolm, who was looking at Tom with a cynical expression. He looked at Curio.

“I meant what I said,” said Curio.

“If I can at least just try,” he said. “I’ve been to other psychics”.

“Really?” He stepped back and nodded for them to come in. They walked into the living room, trying to make it seem as if they were not looking around.

“Sit down,” said Curio, gesturing to the well worn, food stained rex two seater sofa. Curio sat in the armchair, opposite the television which was off. A small lamp in a corner illuminated the room.

“I’m afraid I cannot perform such an act without some form of recompense,” Curio said. “It’s like asking me to just enter an enemy compound, rescue your daughter, and walk out. There are forces in this universe that are unexplored, and these I believe, can present differing levels of danger. Also differing levels of positivity. These energies are balanced out, each having an opposite. Now what these represent, or perform is something I cannot answer. Now when I contact your father, a negative, hostile energy comes through, and from within it, he emerges. What he has dealt with, and what he is still doing out there, I do not know. Now if you wish for me to bring him here, in this room, I will be metaphorically playing with fire, and if you wish for me to play with fire, then I’m going to require an incentive. Do you wish for me to perform this now?”.

“What would it take? Actually, maybe you could get in touch with my mother, or Ian, if my Dad still isn’t speaking”. Curio was quiet for a few moments.

“Do you know how serious this is? I know you’re not a true believer, but you’re at least 98% there, I can see”.

“You were right, though Curio. You were closer than the other psychics. Ian was real”. Curio nodded.

“The forces I am involved with are as real as that sofa, that window, as real as you or I, or Tom”. Tom had been surveying the room, and looked around at the mention of his name.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Curio, still looking at Malcolm. Tom continued surveying the room, and when he found nothing of interest, looked back and listened to Curio.

“....and this, spirit world, is equally as factual as this, real world. The occupants of that world have passed through this existence, so can be contacted. Some psychics will cold read, leap on information you give them and tell you things that they couldn’t possibly know without unknowing assistance from the believer. Unlike them, I actually do commune with the other side. I have proven the existence of the paranormal. Five bodies in a row must say something, must point to some form of truth that science cannot answer. Basically, the spirit world exists, and that’s a fact. Your mother, father, and Ian are there, within the differing levels of energy and forces. Within the most sorrowful, most negative, those who are dealing with these forces dwell. It is where they

went after death. That is an area of the spirit world where I would wish not to venture. Ever used a ouija board?” Malcolm shook his head.

“Nor have I,” said Curio. “They are like gateways directly to these negative forces. I’m not an expert. I wouldn’t entirely call myself a professional. Maybe other people would, but I am rather like a person who is progressing through the ranks of the martial arts grading system. I’m not quite a black belt, but I’m close. I know one day I will have to learn a ouija board, and to understand these forces, but they are for the more advanced than I, for the black belts, the professionals. You cannot learn to swim by just throwing yourself in at the deep end. You cannot run a marathon on your first day of training. I learnt that when I saw your father. It ‘hurt’ speaking with him, and I mean ‘hurt’. I am very reluctant to do it again. However. I will do it for a price, but please, do not ask me again until I am versed. It could be many years, but it is certainly not here, not now”.

“Wouldn’t it be good practise though?” interjected Tom.

“Yes. It would,” said Curio. “It is still painful, and I honestly do not wish to venture there again, but I will do it for an incentive, or ask me again at a later date, if I am ready”. There were a few moments silence.

“Just ask them what all this ‘realm of the partisan’ means” said Malcolm. “This virus, and why on earth my father killed my mother. Well, just get him to talk about it, or my mother, or Ian”, Curio nodded, looked at Tom, then back at Malcolm.

“How much?” Malcolm asked. “What will it take?”

“Five hundred. No less. You have no idea of the forces I am dealing with”.

“Five hundred!” He looked at Tom with wide, surprised eyes. Tom shook his head, but did not speak. Malcolm sighed, then stood up.

“No less?” he asked.

“No. I’m sorry. It’s the way it has to be”. Malcolm nodded, solemnly, then turned and headed for the door.

“Come on Tom, I want to go home”. He opened the door and walked out. Tom was still sitting on the sofa, looking in the direction of where Malcolm had left. He then looked at Curio, shrugged, then stood up, bid farewell, and followed Malcolm.

He was soon walking across the car-park to where Malcolm was leaning against the car. They were soon closing the doors behind them. Tom started the engine.

“Well?” asked Malcolm. “Was he genuine?”. Tom gave a slight, wry smile, and pulled away.

“Maybe,” he said, leaving the car park. Curio watched them from his window. He sighed, closed his eyes, and turned away.

Tom pulled the car up outside Malcolm's parent's house.

"Thanks," said Malcolm. He was about to pull the latch to open the door when he saw the front of the house. He frowned.

"Why is the front door open?" he asked nobody in particular.

"What?" Tom asked. He followed Malcolm's gaze. There was a black rectangle where the front door should have been. The door frame next to the lock had been split.

"It looks like someone's broken in," said Tom. There was silence for a few moments. Malcolm looked at Tom, his expression asking questions that he knew Tom could not answer.

"D'you think I should go in?" he asked. "What if someone's in there?"

"Maybe you should just call the police" said Tom. Malcolm looked back at the doorway. The car was bathed on the fringe of light from a street lamp, and barely illuminated the front of the house. It seemed none of that radiance went into the house, as though the darkness was absorbing it.

"I'm not sure they'd appreciate it if they came out and saw us two sat out here, while they go in and find nothing. There's two of us. If someone's in there, we can just come straight out and we can drive away," said Malcolm. Tom frowned at him.

"Thanks," he said. "First you want me to lend you money. Now you want me to back you up in case you have an intruder". Malcolm shook his head.

"It's up to you. You don't have to help me".

"Yes, but what d'you think that'd do to my conscience? Come on, but it's like you said right? If someone's in there, we get the fuck out, ok?". They hesitated for a few seconds.

"If we hesitate," said Malcolm. "We'll never do it". Tom nodded. Malcolm quickly got out of the car and walked across to the gate. He looked back at Tom who had joined him. They slowly edged their way to the doorway, and stopped to look inside. There was darkness, and there was silence. Malcolm leaned forward and whispered in Tom's ear:

"I think it might be best if we just went in noisily, turning on the lights. If someone's in there, they might be surprised, and we should know more quickly than if we went in quietly whether or not someone's in there". Tom thought about that for a few seconds, then nodded.

Malcolm stepped inside. The living room door was next to him. He only had to open it, reach inside and press on the light. This he did, and bravely announced:

“If there’s anybody in.....!”. There was a man standing by the fireplace. He looked up at Malcolm and asked:

“Are you Malcolm?” Anger swept over Malcolm’s fear.

“Who the fuck are you?”. The man, who looked to be in his forties, wore a white T-shirt and pyjama bottoms. His hair was dishevelled, his feet were bare.

“Are you Malcolm?”

“Yes, now who are you?” he hooked a thumb to the front door.

“Out, before I call....” The man had had his hands at his sides, and Malcolm noticed that he was lifting up a claw hammer. With a look of complete rage and hate, he hurled it at Malcolm, who ducked to the side. It cracked the living room door, and bounced on the carpet. Malcolm ran quickly out to find Tom standing at the gate.

“What is it? What’s happened?”

“Move!” shouted Malcolm, “Gerrin’ the car an’ fuckin’ drive!”. Tom did not ask a second time. He ran to the vehicle. Malcolm ran to the passenger side. The man appeared at the doorway, and saw Malcolm as he slammed the door shut. He hurled the hammer again. It struck the door beneath Malcolm’s side window. The car sped away on screeching tyres. The man hurried to the gate, and did not bother to pick up the hammer. He ran as fast as he could along the middle of the road. Tom looked in the rear view mirror as the man became smaller and smaller. He had seen a look of sheer despair and fear on the man’s face. Malcolm looked back, just as a curve in the road took him out of sight. Tom’s foot was pressed on the accelerator hard, but he had to brake as he emerged into a main road. He turned to the right. There were no other vehicles on the road. He speeded up, and Malcolm kept looking around.

“He’s gone,” said Tom, but did not slow down.

The man puffed and panted his way to the main road, and when he reached the T-junction, stopped, looked left and right, but could not decide where Malcolm went. His breathing grew heavier. He looked all around him, his face one of absolute panic, but he did not utter a sound. He reached towards the left, and towards the right. His head snapped one way, then the other, and he began slowly to vibrate, as though a mild electric current was passing through him. He spun around, reaching in all

directions, searching for Malcolm. His face grew more and more crimson, and his vibrations became more intense. Again, his head snapped left, snapped right, and he fell to his knees, his hands at his head as his eyes bulged. What seemed like a power surge coursed through him. His arms reached out again, and he fell forward, still, not making a sound. He crashed on his side, his head cracking against the tar-mac. Still, he continued to shudder. Blood began to seep from his eyes, from the corner of his mouth, and from his left ear, to pool around his head. It was soon joined by another substance, a dark, greyish liquid that could only be the result of a melted brain. Soon, the trembling stopped, his right arm frozen, reaching out for Malcolm. It wasn't long before onlookers gathered.

What was perhaps Jane Fielding's last tear for her departed friend, escaped from her left eye as she walked along the quiet pavement towards her house. It was 01:06am, and she had been at her friend's house who had basically offered her emotional support, someone to talk to, someone to whom she could confide in. Stuart had once been the object of her affection, but her inhibitions had prevented her from making her feelings known. She had never told anybody that she had a burning candle for him. She couldn't even bring herself to do that. She had hoped that by being around him, getting to know him better, he would eventually ask her out, but now he never would. So other than Stuart's kith and kin, she had been the most emotional, and had needed somebody to turn to. She had felt that she was overstaying her welcome, and rejected the offer to stay the night. Instead, she had decided to walk home through the deserted streets, to her parent's council house, sandwiched between identical houses in identical roads. There was no gate, just a front step between the front door and pavement. She fumbled to get her keys out, and eventually let herself in. She closed the door quietly. Her parent's would be fast asleep. For some reason she could never understand, they always went to bed early. After five minutes, she was settled in front of the television, a steaming mug of cocoa curling steam in front of her face which was bathed in changing colours from the programme. It was the only form of light. She didn't know why she had put it on. She wasn't exactly watching it. There were two women arguing. It looked like a late night chat show. She had muted the sound. After a few more minutes, her eyelids started to feel heavy, and tiredness began to tighten its unrelenting grip on her consciousness. Her eyes kept opening and closing for longer and longer seconds. She didn't jolt when the front door banged. She did the second time. The third time, the door burst open and she never had time to look around as a large, overweight woman with straggly black hair, wearing a towelling robe strode in and looked at Jane who blinked up at her, trying to comprehend what had happened. She was not back to full consciousness.

"Are you Jane Fielding?" the woman asked, quite courteous.

"What?" asked Jane, sitting up straight. She was almost at full awareness.

"Are you Jane Fielding?" The intruder looked to be in her early fifties.

“Yes..., who.... are you?” A glint caught her eye, and she saw that the trespasser was holding a meat cleaver. The woman stepped directly in front of Jane, who squinted up at her. Fear was a spilt-second away, as was full consciousness, then suddenly, a pain caught her on the cheek. The meat cleaver wedged into her jaw, splitting two of her teeth. A sharp tug wrenched it out, but before a scream left Jane’s mouth, her cheekbone was cracked. The woman hacked away at Jane’s face and neck with a powerful, driving force. A scream tore from her throat, but the woman seemed not to notice. Instead, she gripped Jane’s hair in a strong grasp, and chopped at her neck. The woman’s face became soaked in crimson. It reflected the kaleidoscopic colours from the television. She could not scream anymore, but the woman continued to hack away, and when the cleaver wedged into her spine, she wrenched it free and stood there for a few moments staring down at her. Satisfied, she stood up straight, and as she stepped across to the living room entrance, the hallway light came on. She walked out and saw a man and woman descending the stairs. A balding man with a bushy grey moustache, wearing a dressing gown stopped.

“What’s going on?” he asked. The woman pointed back towards the living room.

“I’ve just killed Jane,” she said, as though it was perfectly normal.

“She’s dead”. She then walked out.

“Who was that?” asked Jane’s mother. Mr Fielding shrugged.

“No idea,” he said.

The woman had almost walked a mile in her bare feet. The meat cleaver still dripped blood. She was three miles from home, so had decided to take a short cut across a field where sunday league football was played. The grass was cold beneath her feet, and when she reached a goal mouth area, the ground had changed into congealed mud, and she stopped. The orange glow of the town around her blended into an ultramarine sky, dotted with stars. She was surrounded by darkness, and looked down at the cleaver in her right hand. She couldn’t see it. Not even when she sent it into her neck. She hacked away, tearing a vicious rent, blood pumping out, splashing onto the mud. Even as she began to become light-headed, and weak, she still tried to lift the cleaver, but eventually couldn’t. It dropped to the ground, and she followed two seconds later.

Curio was pacing around his flat, nervously. It was midday, and sunlight angled in through the window. He had washed his cups and plates, ordered and folded his clothes neatly, but none of it could take his mind off the fact that in twenty minutes time, he would be live on radio. It was a national station, 'Audiowave fm' and he had received a phone call from the presenter of 'Discussion time', to be one half of an issue, or subject. Normally, psychics of Curio's stature would not have been invited or pondered for such a show. Only those most famous in their field would have been sought. Despite Curio's successes in his pursuit of fame, he was not the most well known psychic, but 'Abe', the only person Curio knew to be sceptical about his claims, was a biomedical scientist and with the topic being: 'Psychic communication: true or false', it was Abe who recommended Curio to represent true. He was asked if he wished to participate, and had leapt at the chance. It was an opportunity to 'speak to the nation' about his beliefs and truths, and show up and embarrass Abe, live on air. They were going to ring him at 12:30, and he was surprised at how nervous he was. He couldn't eat, and had only drank a glass of water. He tried to watch television, but failed. He thought about putting on his computer, but decided against it. Instead, he paced around his flat trying to think of certain points that he would like to raise. Checking his watch, and then sitting down on the sofa, the telephone began to ring, and he leapt up and rushed across to pick it up.

"Hello," he said, "Leigh Somerton?"

"Yes, that's right. Curio Enchantment, you're live on air. I'm also here with 'Abe', a biomedical scientist with an interest in the supernatural. He is a sceptic, and debunks claims made by those, like Curio, who declare themselves to have certain powers, or gifts, that can be deemed paranormal. They represent both ends of the spectrum. Now, Curio, it is a fact that you have discovered the whereabouts of five missing persons in a row. That must surely be some indication of a gift".

"Indication?" said Curio, "I think that should I have failures in all other aspects of paranormal activity, then that very fact alone is sufficient to prove that there is something out there that cannot be readily explained".

"Yes," said Abe. "Science has its mysteries. It cannot explain everything. When I say everything, I mean, 'everything'. From the initial

spark that brought the earth into being, to the atomic fabric of matter in the furthest place you can imagine. The fact that you have discovered the whereabouts of five missing persons...”

“I’ll admit to having got a few wrong,” interjected Curio, “but the five previous have all been successful”. Abe sounded like a person who could easily have been a drama teacher. Each word was pronounced with absolute clarity. He would pause for just the right length, and his voice varied in inflections, but kept balanced. He sounded as though he was in his late fifties.

“Your success borders on the fringe of chance. It is possible to roll a die infinitely and get the same number every time. However, it cannot be related to this, but I assume you see the similarity. Should you get eight or nine successes, or ‘hits’, then, Mr Enchantment, I shall be impressed”.

“I have other accomplishments as well. I have a direct link to the spirit world, and can convey information...”

“You’re a medium, yes. You can ‘talk’ to the dead. Or they talk to you”.

“Well...yes, they do, but only when I get in contact, or open the door. There are not many who can commune. It is difficult to practise, to actually communicate with the other side, which is why not everybody can do it. If it was easy, then we would all be doing it, trying to contact our loved ones to make sure that they were fine, and were, I suppose, happy.”

“That’s why it’s popular isn’t it? That’s why people give their money to you, and other psychics, because you offer them hope. Your successes in that field come from latching onto the hits, and ignoring the misses. Strange how a lot of people ignore the misses, because chances are you would score a hit anyway if you use cold reading techniques. If you latch onto this, and convert it to evidence of the spirit world, or to the fact that the deceased are communicating with you, then those susceptible to believe easily will accept everything you say. Give out many names to person, and on the eighth, it may have some meaning. ‘Yes, that was the name of my uncle’. Then you will discuss this uncle, and ignore the other seven names. This is not evidence of the supernatural, Curio”.

“There are many documented cases where there are things said that are just impossible to ignore, that could not be obtained any other way than by through the conveyance of information through a spirit”.

“Documented cases? Written by whom? The practitioners? The witnesses? It could be second and third, or seventeenth hand information,

and because it is written down, does not make it true. They may very well be documented, and it sounds quite good, doesn't it, 'documented'. It almost makes what you say to be correct. Well, unless it has undergone rigorous testing by scientific methods, then any documentation may as well be written in sand".

"Look, I know the spirit world exists".

"No you don't. You don't 'know'. You believe. People confuse knowing with believing. They believe enough and it becomes a fact, but only for them. If enough people believe the same thing then you have an order, or maybe a cult".

"If a lot of people believe in the same thing, then surely that must give it some credence. There must be some truth in it. Look at aliens. How many believe in them?"

"I suspect a fair few. Observational evidence is crucial to the discovery of new data. Experimentation is repeated over and over again, and if the same result occurs every time, then we have scientific fact. Evidence regarding aliens is the same as it is for ghosts and astrology. It is scant, and what evidence you do have can be explained easily, leaving you with nothing. If you eliminate all other explanations as to what something could be, let's say for instance an apparition, or ghost. If you have conceived of every possibility as to what it could be, but are left with only one, then that one will be your ghost. The thing is though, it would have to go through rigorous scientific testing to pass the test, and be left with only one explanation, and on the day that happens, I'll be round at your house Curio, to say I'm sorry, and you were right. There is no evidence for the spirit world. No evidence for aliens, no evidence for astrology, and no evidence for many other things you call paranormal. All of it can be explained logically, but in your world Curio, logic doesn't exist, does it?"

"You still haven't told me why if many people believe a certain thing, there must be truth in it".

"There doesn't have to be evidence for people to believe something. If I told you at the age of five, that there was an albino koala bear, living in a cave, on the other side of the moon, then with such an impressionable mind, chances are you would believe it. You would not have the maturity to question. You would believe it. Told by an adult, a child has no reason, or I suppose, the facility to doubt. If this is then reinforced by other adults, 'Yes, the koala exists, there is no doubt, look, it says here,' then during the lifetime of that person, who believed absolutely, without seeing

the koala, going purely on belief, they devoted themselves to the koala in some way, and the devotee was actually taken to the moon to meet the koala, and was shown that it didn't exist, that there was the proof, 'look, it's not here, you can see for yourself'. Can you imagine what that would do to a person who had devoted his whole life to it? There are two possibilities. One would be that they would just say: 'OK, fair enough, that's that'. The other would be for them to live in denial. With the power of belief so strong, they may still believe in the koala, and make excuses as to why it wasn't there, but still come away believing. This could be applied to you Curio. I think you are in denial about your 'gift'. You may be receptive to hearing voices, but these voices come from your own belief that they come from the deceased. It is your own subconscious, deluding your belief".

"So that's it, then?" said Curio. "No life after death, no aliens. How can you ignore the evidence when it's right in front of you? Don't forget, many scientists believe in the afterlife".

"I suspect they do, but those people cannot really call themselves scientists. Believers in the paranormal would love it to be proven scientifically, which is why they use it so often, to make it sound authentic. All your so called evidence, or arguments for, are built on quicksand. Investigated properly, they fall down. Why do you think psychics and people who involve themselves in some way with the supernatural are so reluctant to be tested scientifically?" He paused long enough to continue speaking without Curio answering.

"They're scared. While they have absolute belief in their abilities, they're scared in case all their beliefs are shattered. How about you Curio? Do you believe enough in your ability to have it scientifically tested?"

"Well...yes, I would".

"Then how about it? Come to London, to the research centre where I work, and subject yourself. Prove to me, and to others, that you have a gift, Curio. Are you up for the challenge?". The airwaves were silent for six seconds.

"How about it Curio?" said Leigh. "Thousands of listeners. No pressure".

"I believe in my ability," Curio said. "Challenge accepted".

In the car-park of the halls of residence, Adam Leonard pulled up in his second hand Citroen Saxo VTR, and took out his sports bag. He locked it and walked through an archway, up a flight of stone steps and along to his apartment where his girlfriend, Danielle Alden, was standing outside, looking anxious. She saw him and came rushing across.

“Adam! Adam! You’ve arrived,” she said as a statement. Her face was flushed with scarlet. It looked as though she had been crying.

“Hey, hey, what’s wrong?” he said, grabbing both her hands.

“I know it’s upsetting,” he continued. “Stuart was good friend. I’m sorry he’s gone, but.....hey, look at this. I got something to show you”. He set about revealing his right upper arm.

“Adam, there’s a man in our flat”.

“Look,” he said, showing her his new tattoo. The arm was reddened, the image three by five inches on the skin. It was of a dagger, wrapped around by a serpent, which in turn was wrapped by a ribbon. On that ribbon, the words: ‘Danielle forever’ were inscribed. He frowned and looked at her sternly.

“What did you just say? There’s someone in our flat? Who? What are they doing there?” A tear trickled down Danielle’s face.

“He...he knocked. I opened the door, he asked for you. I said you weren’t in, so he just pushes in and goes into the living room and stands there. I tried to ask him what he was doing, and all he said was: ‘waiting for Adam’, that’s it. I asked him again and he said the same thing. I left, then. I didn’t like to say any more. He looks like one ‘o them rough types, so I got out of there. That was ten minutes ago. What are we going to do?”

“Have you called the police?” She shook her head.

“No, my phones in there. I’m not going back in to get it while he’s there. I was waiting for you as I knew you were due home now. Maybe you know him or something”. He took from his pocket his mobile telephone and gave it to her.

“I think you should ring them”. He then walked to the flat entrance.

“I’ll sort this. Actually don’t call the police yet. It might not be necessary”. He then turned and walked inside the flat. Danielle stared at the contraption, at her passport photograph as his wallpaper. She looked in fear at the doorway.

Adam walked into the front room and was confronted by a scruffy individual who looked like he slept rough, but was not quite scruffy enough to be labelled a vagabond, or drifter. He wore a cream jacket, and well worn jeans. His hair was short, black and wiry. He looked like the type of person whom on first sight could be judged to be completely untrustworthy, and somebody whose life revolved around being on the other side of the law. The first impression of such a person could simply be: 'criminal'. It was he who spoke before Adam.

"Are you Adam Leonard?"

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"Are you Adam Leonard?"

"Yes. Now who are you and what are you doing.....?" The man raised his right hand, and Adam saw that it held a gun. For one whole second, only the whites of the man's eyes were visible. He fired the PPK Calibre 9mm, and the bullet entered above Adam's left eye. It lodged in his brain. The man fired again, shattering his teeth. Adam was propelled back, collapsing back into the hallway. The intruder walked across to him and levelled the gun four inches from between his eyes. He fired, the bullet splitting his cranium apart. He fired again, and kept on firing. Adam's head collapsed across the carpet, and the man kept pulling the trigger, even when all the bullets were spent. He looked at the gun as though there should be more ammunition, and then at the glistening mass of flesh and bone. He stood, then turned and left the flat. He walked past Danielle, not giving her a glance.

She nervously looked at the man as he left, trembling as though she was out in freezing cold. Edging her way to the doorway, she was about to call for Adam, but saw him lying in the hallway. She first noticed his tattoo, which now had lost all meaning, then saw his head. Two hundred metres away, a student wearing an old fashioned cassette walkman heard her scream.

The man walked along pavements and across roads in the direction of his sister's house where he had promised to be earlier. He checked his watch and saw that he was 25 minutes late. She was usually accepting of him when he was late, and he knew that she didn't like it, but rarely said anything. He did not liked to disappoint, and never had a reputation for poor time-keeping, but this time she may give voice to her opinion. He speeded up. Passers-by looked at him with surprise as they saw his face

and jacket spattered with blood, as well as the fact that he still openly carried the gun.

As he neared a telephone box outside of a wine bar, he stopped and looked down at the weapon. There were two people waiting to use the telephone, and a couple standing outside the entrance to the bar. They looked like they were deciding whether or not to go in. He put the gun to side of his head and pulled the trigger. It simply clicked, and he frowned at it, then dropped it. His breathing grew more rapid and he looked around, panic increasing. The other people were all staring at him with apprehension. He placed one hand on the back of his head, the other on his jaw. He forcefully tried to snap his neck, but it didn't work. He tried again, but failed. He grabbed his throat and squeezed as tightly as he could. His face gradually began to turn blue and his eyes bulged, but a forceful cough released his grip and he looked frantically around again. He was beginning to tremble. Near the entrance to the wine bar, somebody had left half a pint of lager. He strode across to it, leaned down and tipped it on its side and then stood on it. The glass broke easily, and he picked up the base and had no hesitation in sending it into his neck. The glass carved easily through his veins, and he repeatedly stabbed until half of his hand went into his neck on each successive strike. People screamed, and ran, but he did not notice. Blood showered the pavement, and when he no longer had the strength to lift his arm, when no more blood reached his brain, he collapsed forward into a carpet of crimson.

From Tom's bedroom, Malcolm looked out anxiously behind a net curtain as Tom pulled up in the driveway. At the first opportunity, he had called the police, who had said they would look into it. So far, he had heard nothing in reply. He guessed it was too early.

"You alright love?" asked Tom's mother, looking around the door and smiling. She didn't wait for answer before walking out along the hallway.

"No, I'm not," he said, quietly. He could hear Tom as he entered the house. His mother walked down the stairs. He could hear them talking, but couldn't make out what they were saying. Tom came up the stairs and into the room.

"I think you can relax, you know, they shouldn't know you are here. You can stay the night again if you like, or until you get yourself back to normal".

"Normal? People are trying to kill me. The only way I can see to understand why and maybe get them to stop, is by if I get Curio to get in contact with my Dad again, or Ian, or maybe my mother".

"Well, don't worry about that," said Tom. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. He handed it to Malcolm.

"Five hundred quid," he said.

"Seriously?" said Malcolm. Tom nodded.

"Thanks. You don't know what this means to me. I appreciate it, really. Thanks".

"No problem. There's no rush to pay me back. I know you're a poor student. Maybe you can pay me back with five hundred quids worth of favours or something. Do my coursework and make sure I pass," he said with a slight grin, a vain attempt to reduce the sliding of Malcolm's mood since he was attacked, and even though his own mood was not much higher, he knew that it was not incisive to dwell within depression or gloom.

"I ought to go there straight away" said Malcolm.

"I'll run you if you like. Why don't you call whatsername? Melissa, was it? If you're going to see Curio, and he's going to get in contact with your dad, then why don't you give her a ring so she can come and film it?" Malcolm thought about it for a few moments.

"I really ought to just get down there".

"Have her meet us on the way".

“I suppose”.

“Go on, you never know, she might appreciate it,” he said with another grin. Malcolm said nothing, but turned and looked back out of the window, then looked back again.

“Come on, let's go” he said, walking past, into the hall.

“I have to pick up Anthony anyway,” said Tom, “cos we've got a class in half an hour, so we best move”.

A few minutes later, Tom was sitting in the driving seat, as Malcolm stood outside of the pavement, ringing Melissa. He heard a muffled voice, then the door opened and Tom started the engine.

“Ten minutes, at the corner of the Mechanical engineering building” Malcolm said. Tom nodded, and started the engine.

“How's your uni work coming along then?” he asked.

“Uni work?” said Malcolm. “I've almost forgotten what I'm studying. Actually, I might as well forget it now, anyway. I've fallen too far behind. I'll probably drop out”. After a few minutes, Tom saw Melissa waiting, and slowed the car down.

“Hey look,” said Tom, “She's wearing a nice frilly dress. I don't think she got dressed up to go to uni. I think she might have her eye on somebody”. He leaned closer to Malcolm and said rather loudly:

“Who do you think it could be?”. Malcolm reddened and looked out of the passenger window. Tom stopped the car, and Melissa walked across with her bag containing the camcorder. She got into the back seat.

“Hi guys,” she said, closing the back door. “Did you hear what happened at uni?” Tom looked around.

“I know there were loads of police around”.

“It's Stuart. One of the tutors killed him”. Malcolm and Tom both frowned.

“Part of the uni is still closed, but some classes are still ok. Pity, he was a good guy”. She looked solemn. Tom, in his unofficial role of lightener of moods, said:

“Well, if he didn't do his work on time....”. Melissa simply looked at him with a face that conveyed more than words. Malcolm did the same. Tom sighed, and pulled the car away from the kerb. There were a few moments of heavy silence, and Tom, still in his role, decided to risk another mood lightening statement:

“I understand that you're doing a project on the supernatural, and Stuart was part of it, wasn't he? Well, he's taken things a bit too far hasn't

he? in actually going to see the spirit world. Anything for those marks”. He looked in the mirror and saw Melissa not so much smile, but seem to accept it as an attempt to make her feel better. She did not say anything, but her expression was at least lighter. He saw Malcolm looking at him as though he’d told a ‘groaner’. He shook his head. Tom wished he hadn’t mentioned the end of the last comment, as he remembered that Melissa had her camcorder, and that despite Stuart’s recent passing away, there was still a project to complete. He thought it should continue, but not so soon, but then, he guessed there were not too many opportunities to film professional psychics at work, so his moral judgement forgave her what he thought was slight impropriety.

“So you managed to persuade Curio to give you another reading?” Melissa asked Malcolm. It was Tom who answered.

“Yes, his fantastic powers of persuasion managed to win him round, that and five hundred smackeroonies”.

“Five hundred pounds?” she said, loudly. “I thought you were poor”.

“He is,” Tom continued, “Yours truly has bailed him out”.

“Well, that’s very kind of you” she said.

“I’ve told him, there’s no need to hurry in paying me back. It’s not as if I need it”. He wondered about letting her in on the secret of his finances, but then decided against it. No, he thought. She was a stranger. What if her father worked in a bank? What if she abhorred thieves and demanded to be let out of the car? Would that jeopardise a potential relationship between her and Malcolm? ‘How could you be friends with a thief?’. It meant that should she question its roots, he would have to lie, and let Malcolm know the same falsehood should it be needed. Tom decided he’d already told enough people anyway, and he knew Anthony didn’t want to lose what he had gained, so would probably stay quiet about it. It was in both their interests.

He drove to Anthony’s house, to find him stood at the gate, folder under his arm, coat zipped up tightly, waiting patiently for his transport as his vehicle was being fitted with a new radiator. Tom didn’t pull up to the kerb. He simply stopped and let Anthony walk across and slide into the back seat.

“Hi, alright?” he said as an acknowledgement to them all. He closed the door, and Tom drove onward.

“Slight detour,” said Tom, “I’m running these two to see Curio Enchantment. Malcolm’s getting a reading”.

“He can’t,” said Anthony, “He won’t be in”. Malcolm frowned, and turned as fully as the seat belt would allow him to look at him.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“He’s down in London. He’s having some tests done to find out if he really has got psychic powers. He’s basically gone down to prove to scientists that he’s gifted. I don’t know how long he’s going to spend down there. Probably not long I should imagine, ‘cos he lives here, doesn’t he?”. Malcolm sighed, and looked forward, out of the windscreen, only to find that Tom had pulled up outside of a newsagents, and was leaving the vehicle.

“Where’s he going?” asked Anthony, watching him walk into the shop.

“What now?” Melissa asked Malcolm.

“I’ve got to get another reading. I’ve got to somehow get in touch with my parents, or that Ian. They’ll know why people are trying to kill me, and they’ll also know how to call them off”.

“Can you be sure of that?” Malcolm shook his head.

“No, but I can’t see what else I can do. Call the police? Yes, officer, these people are trying to kill me. Why? Well, it looks like their after some virus or something that I may or may not have, and the only ones that know are my parents who are both dead. A psychic told me that my Dad’s angry with me for not letting ‘Ian’ kill me. So maybe, officer, my Dad has sent these people to kill me as part of some cult ritual. I think I’ve become part of it, and they want me as a sacrifice. Any chance of putting me in a safe house? I mean, seriously, they’ll lock me up and send me to a lunatic asylum. I suppose there I should have some protection”. Anthony was looking at him with wide eyes.

“What if it’s right?” he said, “If Curio has a genuine link to the other side, then who knows what implications it could have. Perhaps there’s some truth in what you say”.

“Perhaps,” said Malcolm. Tom opened the door and slid back into his seat.

“Why the pit stop?” asked Anthony. Tom slid a box of matches into his cream jacket.

“I’m going to burn Ryvak,” he said, then started the engine, his grip tightening on the steering wheel. By the tone of his voice, Anthony believed that Tom was serious.

“NO!” he shouted. “You can’t. It’s closed. It’s closed, you can’t burn it”. Malcolm frowned, but Melissa asked the question he was about to ask:

“What’s going on?” She was not answered. Malcolm saw that Tom’s face had become set in a serious expression. Tom revved the engine hard. A few passers-by looked in their direction.

“Tom, no, don’t” said Anthony. “I’ve told the police. I sent them a letter telling them that it was you causing them to go bust”. Tom did not look at him, or seem to hear. Anthony realised what he had said aloud, and knew that there were no excuses now. His real feelings had to be known to Tom.

“I had to. I had to,”. He felt the car move forward slightly.

“Tom? Are you alright?” asked Malcolm. He was not answered. Anthony got out of the vehicle and walked quickly in front of the car. He held up both hands in a gesture for him to stop, but the car kept coming forward.

“Tom, no, you can’t do it. It can be saved. Ryvak can open. Don’t do it, Tom, please”. He walked backwards in time with the car at around five feet away, but then it stopped. Tom revved the engine again, his face stern. It was as though he wasn’t seeing Anthony, as though he wasn’t there.

“Tom, what are you doing?” said Melissa. “Come on, let’s get to uni, or...”.

Malcolm locked the handbrake, and Tom looked confused as to why he couldn’t drive forward.

“Come on Tom, what’s going on?”. Tom looked down at the handbrake, and took it off. Malcolm saw that his face had not changed. The engine was revved again, and the tyres spun and screeched before the vehicle surged onward. Anthony was still backing away when the full realisation struck him that the vehicle was speeding straight at him. The car also struck him before he could leap out of the way. The bumper hit his knees, and he crashed onto the bonnet. The car stalled, Anthony sliding to the ground. The vehicle started, and came forward again, hitting Anthony’s right shoulder. He sprawled back, screaming. The car drove on, the right wheel rolling onto his foot, cracking his heel and ankle. Anthony screamed and collapsed back. Melissa screamed also, and Malcolm froze in fear, scared in case Tom turned on him. With the impact of falling back, and the weight of the tyre and engine, Anthony’s heel and ankle were shattered. The tyre rolled forward, splitting his femur. He screamed as the tyre crushed his hip-bone, and his right side ribs. Tom was frowning. The car wasn’t moving as fast as he’d thought. He stopped and

revved the engine again. Anthony could not scream as his lungs were pressing against his spinal column. He arched his head back and opened his mouth in a vain attempt to breathe, but the tyre spun again, ripping the skin from his chest. The vehicle surged onwards, the tyre rolling across his throat. With his head at a 45 degree angle, the full weight of the machine crushed and cracked his head, his eyes bulging before being squashed against his brain, which in turn was squashed against the pavement. Pieces of brain, cranium and hair were caught in the grooves of the tyre as it gained purchase on the road. The tyre behind followed the same path. When that gained purchase, they were all jolted back in their seat as they surged forward. Tom built up speed, weaving his way through traffic, ignoring car horns and the occasional shout. At 80mph, he sped towards Liverpool.

Malcolm and Melissa were clinging onto anything they could, their faces white with fear. Their occasional shouts for him to stop went ignored, or unheard. There were a few red lights he sped through, and near misses of people and other vehicles, but he managed to reach the entrance to the Mersey tunnel after around twenty minutes. The car overtook all the other vehicles driving through, and the passengers tried again to plead with him to stop, but it was futile. Malcolm saw the look on Tom's face and that told him that he knew he would not listen. It may not be best to interfere until the car stopped.

"When the car stops, Mel, we bail out, ok?" Malcolm shouted.

"Yes," came a hoarse reply. There were many vehicles queuing at the toll booths, but two on the far left were free, so he headed for one. Two men in yellow fluorescent jackets waved at him to stop, but when they realised Tom had no intention of doing so, they quickly backed away and watched as the vehicle crashed through the barrier and continued. Malcolm and Melissa then heard the sound of a police siren. She turned around and saw two vehicles in pursuit, but Tom did not seem to acknowledge them. Instead, he sped along the A552 until he reached a motorway turn-off, then speeded along the M53. He weaved through the other vehicles, as did the police cars until he reached Junction 4 where he tore across the road in the wrong direction, causing other drivers to brake and bang their horns. He speedily made two more bends and then straightened the car on a road. The police cars were closing in, but then Tom quickly spun the steering wheel to the right and brought the vehicle to a screeching halt. Malcolm and Melissa were breathing heavily.

Malcolm saw that before them were open gates, beyond which was a large looming building. It was unnamed.

“What are you doing?” it was Melissa who spoke.

“Ryvak” said Tom, revving the engine again. “I’m gonna burn it”.

“Get out Mel!” said Malcolm, opening his door, but it was soon slammed shut as the car surged forward again. He braked hard before the glass frontage of the reception area. Malcolm and Melissa quickly left the vehicle and backed away. The police also left their vehicles and came through the gates. The building seemed empty, yet there were a few people around. The car-park was occupied by what looked to be removal vans. Nothing was finished, or finalised. Tom walked into an empty reception. It was spacious, and quietly hollow. He walked into the centre and stopped, looking around.

“You stop right there!” yelled a policeman behind him. Tom did not seem to hear, or acknowledge his presence. On the floor, next the right wall, there was a large rolled up carpet. He walked across to it, taking out the matches.

“Hold it!” the policeman called, reluctant to approach. Others joined him, but proceeded with caution. They slowly approached, trying to get his attention. Tom kneeled down at the end of the carpet. He struck a match, then put the flame into the box to create a flare-up. He placed his left hand on top of the carpet. As he was hunched over, next to the wall, the police could not see what he was doing, but when yellow light bathed the white wall, one of them realised.

“No!” he called, and ran across, but in that short time, Tom had put the flame to the bottom of his trousers, the material soon becoming alight. The fire quickly, and eagerly ate away at the fabric, burning his flesh. As he was crouched, his arm was soon alight, but Tom did not acknowledge it. He didn’t seem to be in any pain. He had simply ceased to move, as though he had run out of batteries. The policeman turned and ran back.

“Fire!” he yelled, but they were already running around trying to find a fire extinguisher. Outside, another policeman was looking around, trying to find the other two passengers. By the time somebody emerged with an extinguisher, it proved to be useless. The flames grew out of control, and as Tom burned, Ryvak followed suit.

The journey had been longer than he had anticipated, and he was glad of the sit down, despite being on a train for two and a half hours. Curio had walked with a London A-Z, wishing he knew how the transport and underground system worked, but he had decided it was probably best to walk. He had thought about a taxi, but knew that the cost of living in London was dearer than in Widnes, and did not want to risk getting to the place only to have an irate driver with a passenger who could not pay. With a small x marking the place he needed to get to, and knowing where he was on the map, it had been seven miles, and that was taking the shortest route. Eventually, along a side road and up an incline, he reached the 'Institute of psychological research', and was surprised at just how quickly he was seen. They seemed to know exactly who he was and what he was there for. Two women had seen him. The first when he had walked in to what resembled a converted Victorian house, the second when he was shown upstairs to be greeted by another, younger woman who had led him into what she had described as a sound chamber. It had been converted, she had said, for this occasion. The window and door sealed out all acoustics, and Curio was left sitting on what resembled a dentist's chair. The whole place could easily have once been a dentists. He had been told to take a seat, but he didn't particularly want to sit there without being attended to, so after adequate respite, decided to stand at the window of the surprisingly small room, looking through wooden blinds at the street below. Fear was slowly flowing through his system. He guessed that it was probably natural. All psychics scientifically tested probably felt the same, he hoped, but he didn't know of any that had. He had every confidence in his ability, so could not understand the feeling. He wondered if Abe would show up. He should, he thought. He was the reason he was here. The room was silent, as if time itself stood still in there. A biker rode by. A car came the other way. Two pigeons walked on the roof opposite, one following the other. He turned and crossed back to the chair, looking at the machines on the counter on the other side of it, near the door. A random event generator had five small red lights across the top. Attached to it was a Geiger counter, and attached to that was an oscillator. As he was looking at them, the door opened and silently closed.

"I know they're not exactly modern, but they don't seem to be built these days. Perhaps it is testament to the fact that it is accepted generally

that the supernatural does not exist, and nor can it be proven". Curio saw that a man who seemed to be in his late sixties had entered the room. He wore a single breasted white tuxedo, his black shoes shining. He extended his hand, and Curio looked at it, knowing that he represented the other side of the argument, the 'enemy', or foe, but it was amicable disagreement, rather like two boxers between bouts who always touch gloves to signify the fact that despite repeatedly hitting each other, they still had respect for their foe. Curio shook his hand, and smiled without humour.

"My name is Abiel Hartman, you'll know me as Abe". Curio nodded, and looked at the machines.

"What are you going to do to me?" he asked.

"Ah, well, basically, you're going to prove the existence of the paranormal, aren't you?" Curio didn't look at him, but simply nodded.

"We'll start you off with zener cards, and we'll end up with the acid test. You will bring a spirit into the room. Or at least you will attempt to. Electrodes will be attached to your temples as you try to conjure up an entity. Any electrical activity that we cannot attribute to your normal brain functions will be taken into account and examined. The activity in your temporal lobes and your limbic system will be monitored, and should they alter due to outside influences, well, we'll know about it, but of course, that will not prove paranormal activity at that stage. When it can be nothing else, then you will gain the honour of being the only person in history who showed the real world that there is life after death, that there is a spirit world. If you can show me that spirits exist, then the paranormal will be real". Curio turned and wandered back to the window. Abe continued: "Obviously you can back out at any moment. You're under no obligation". Curio looked at Abe.

"When do I begin?" he asked.

After three hours, Curio was being driven through London's streets towards Euston train station.

"The implications will be huge," said Abe, pulling up at traffic lights.

"I can't believe after all these years of scepticism, somebody's shown me the truth". Abe shook his head. "I can't thank you enough, Curio, really".

"That's ok" said Curio. "There are thousands of doubters who will come to see the reality of the paranormal. I can show them it, but it's up

to them whether or not they believe". The lights turned to green and he continued along a main road.

"Well, as I mentioned, I will organise a press briefing in a few days, and present you as the man who scientifically proved the existence of the paranormal. This will go worldwide. I still can't believe you passed 100% on every test".

"I was showing you the reality of it,"

"..and you brought my dear old mother back. She'd been gone sixteen years, but she's still happy where she is. I can't tell you how glad that makes me feel".

"I'm going to be down here a lot now aren't I? I'll need to find accommodation".

"When you come back for the briefing, I'll have a place for you until you find a permanent place. Have you got much to pack?"

"No," said Curio, "There isn't much. I'll probably sell my computer and TV".

"I'm sure you'll be able to buy new ones now," said Abe, as he drove into the station. He pulled up at a kerb and Curio took off his seat belt and opened the door.

"Thanks again," said Abe, shaking Curio's hand, "You'll hear from me very soon". Curio smiled.

"Much appreciated," he said, leaving the vehicle, "Bye". With a self-satisfied look on his face, Curio walked amongst the throng towards his platform. A woman in her early forties saw him and approached.

"Excuse me? Curio Enchantment?" Curio's smile widened.

"Yes, that's me".

"Could I have a reading?" He nodded. "Just give me a ring," he said, "but leave it until next week. I'm going to be quite busy in the next few days. There's going to be an important announcement."

"Really?" she said, "Any chance of telling me". He shook his head.

"Watch the news," he said.

"Oh...ok," she smiled at him. "Well, good to meet you, bye", she said, then disappeared amongst the crowd. Curio wondered how she would know of him. It then dawned on him, and he headed for a newsagents. He was soon walking towards his platform, reading his article in 'Lazy days'. The reporter was glowing about him. '....and I was amazed at his ability'. 'I used to be sceptical'. '...most talented psychic I've ever seen'. 'There are a lot of fakes out there, preying on the gullible, but Curio is no predator.

He has proven to me that he is in touch with the other side, and can communicate with the deceased. A man with a unique talent whom I hold in absolute high esteem. He is most certainly a genuine psychic'. The double page spread had two pictures of him. One taken at his window of him looking out at the sky. The other of him smiling, sat on his sofa, leaning forward. He read the article word for word six times on the journey back to Liverpool. He had a corner all to himself with a small table. The magazine was left open throughout the journey in case anybody sat near him. They didn't. The rest of the time he spent relaxed back in his seat, looking out of the window, with his self satisfied expression. When he returned to Liverpool, it wasn't long before he was heading for Widnes. Nobody else recognised him. He was soon stood in his cold flat, looking around. I'll soon be out of this hovel, he thought. He wondered if he would have to visit the jobcentre to sign off. Not yet, he thought. It was too early. What about housing benefit? Would they pay for accommodation in London? He decided to cross those bridges when the time came. For now, he crossed to the hi-fi and selected a CD. Bob Perry's jazz moods, volume 2. The sound filled the flat and he made himself a cup of tea. As he sat down in his armchair to drink it, his mobile telephone rang. He put down the tea on the coffee table and went to his coat. He retrieved it and saw that there was an unfamiliar telephone number. He answered it as he walked back to his chair.

"Hello, who's this?" he asked.

"Curio, it's Abe. I figured you'd be back by now. I wondered if you are free tomorrow. I'm playing golf with a couple of work colleagues and wondered if you would join us. If you agree then we will arrange a round on a course up where you live. There's no need for you to travel back here. Anyway, there's somebody who wishes to meet you. What do you say, fancy a round?". Curio thought for a few moments.

"Who wants to meet me?" he asked.

"I'll bring him along if you agree".

"Alright," Curio said. "I'll need to borrow some clubs, though".

As the sun sank beyond the horizon, Malcolm was staring out of the window of Melissa's seven storey penthouse apartment, which she shared with her sister. He could not make much out from her bedroom on the top floor. As Ryvak had burned, attention had been diverted from them, and they knew that if they stayed, they would have faced questions that neither of them wanted to answer. They would have slowed down Malcolm's urge to get to Curio for his reading. It would have been hassle they could have both done without, so quickly vacated the area as quickly as they could, making sure to be out of view of anybody in a uniform. They had hurried to the nearest train station, and with them running every fifteen minutes to Liverpool, they had only 6 minutes to wait upon arrival. Since their return, they had stayed in the apartment. Melissa had had to explain to her sister, but knew she would not object. They had to talk quietly as she was in bed. She was nurse, and was up at 06:30am.

"I've got to get to Curio's as soon as possible," he said. "I wonder if he's back from London. I suppose he should be".

"I think you're getting paranoid," said Melissa, standing behind him.

"Yes, I am, I've every right to be. People are trying to kill me, but I don't know why. I have to get my parents and Ian to tell me. I've got the cash..." he took the envelope out of his trouser pocket and held it up.

"£500 quid to get Curio to give me another reading. £500 quid".

"If it stops people trying to kill you, then it's worth it".

"You know, I wouldn't have thought Tom would just suddenly decide to go and do something like that. He was normally very careful. That's why he always had money. He covered his tracks, but to just decide to drive to Ryvak to burn it down. That's not the Tom I knew".

"Like your father," said Melissa.

"Yes. Maybe Ian was right, maybe I have got some virus. Maybe it infects people around me into doing things they wouldn't normally do, but Ian wanted it". He saw the expression on Melissa's face. It was one of fear.

"Do you think you have?" she asked, "Got a virus?" She stepped back. Malcolm's shoulders slumped and he looked to the floor.

"I don't know. I'll have to get Curio to find out".

“Are you going now?” she asked. “Might it be better to go in the morning? You can stay here, you know. Where else have you got? Your parent’s house is out of the question now, isn’t it?” He nodded.

“It’s probably better if I go to Curio’s now,” he said.

“I’ll stay here,” said Melissa, “I’ll wait up”. A loud knock came on the door, and they both spun in the direction of the sound.

“Who’s that?” asked Melissa, as if Malcolm would know.

“It can’t be the police,” said Malcolm. The banging came again.

“They’re going to wake Fiona,” said Melissa, frowning. More banging came, louder.

“It sounds like they’re going to stay until someone answers. Maybe they know we’re here. I suppose we’ll have to face whoever it is,” said Malcolm. Melissa walked out towards the door. She put the light on and opened it on a chain. She couldn’t make out properly who stood there, as the hallway outside was in darkness.

“Who’s that?” she asked, but she was not answered as the door was kicked forcefully, breaking the chain and sending Melissa collapsing back onto the carpet. She saw as a woman walked in, wearing a long black coat, with dark red hair and piercings in her lip and ears. She had black eye liner and black fingernails. The boots she wore were heavy and metallic. Melissa saw that she was a ‘goth’, and looked to be of a similar age. She did not recognise her.

“Are you Melissa?” the woman asked. Melissa stood up.

“What? Who are you? Get out!”

“Are you Melissa?” Malcolm appeared at Melissa’s side.

“What’s going on?” he asked, but was not answered.

“Are you Melissa?” the woman asked.

“What do you want? Get out!” Melissa gestured to the door.

“Who are you?” asked Malcolm. His question went unanswered, or unheard.

The woman walked closer, and Malcolm stepped in her way, but she forced him to the side, but only because Malcolm had not retained his balance. He stumbled against the wall. It seemed as though she had tried to walk through him, as though he was not there.

“Are you Melissa?”

“What do you want?”

“I want Melissa. Is that you?”

“Yes, now who are you and what do you want?” The goth grabbed her dress at the shoulders and shoved her to the ground. Fiona appeared in a nightgown, hair dishevelled, eyes tired. She didn’t say anything, simply tried to focus and understand what she was seeing.

“Get back in!” shouted Malcolm. Melissa got to her feet quickly and ran for her bedroom. She was quickly followed by the woman. Melissa slammed the door, but it was kicked back, Melissa behind it, falling again to the floor. The goth walked in, vehemence on her face. She reached forward and grabbed Melissa’s hair, pulling her to her feet. Malcolm ran in and grabbed the woman from behind. She let Melissa go, but still did not acknowledge Malcolm. Instead, she reached forward towards Melissa, and with surprising strength walked forward, breaking Malcolm’s weak grip. Melissa held her hands up, her face streaked with tears in a gesture to stop her advance. It was futile as she was pushed back, cracking the window. The goth took one step forward, and shoved her again, harder. The window shattered easily, and Melissa crashed through it, screaming as she fell eighty feet to the concrete.

“No!” yelled Malcolm, running to the window sill. The goth turned and walked out of the room. Malcolm ran past her, past a confused looking Fiona, and out into the hallway of the apartments. It wasn’t long before he found her beneath the glare of a nightlight. She was motionless, lying on her front, a pool of spreading blood around her head. Malcolm knew it was futile to attempt recovery. He could see that she was dead. He collapsed to his knees, his hands on his face, breathing heavily. Tears coursed down his face, more for Melissa than there had been for his parents. The goth appeared, and strode across to Melissa. Malcolm stood up, and nervously backed away. Fear and anger conflicted within him, and he simply watched as the goth crouched down beside her. She stared at her for a few moments. Eventually, anger won the skirmish, and Malcolm stepped towards her.

“Hey,” he said, loudly. She didn’t seem to hear him. She nodded, satisfied, then stood up, and saw Malcolm.

“What the fuck?” he said, “Why?”

“Why what?” she asked. He gestured towards Melissa.

“What the fuck d’you mean, what?” She looked in the direction of her.

“She had to die,” she said, and began walking away. Malcolm walked with her.

“Just like that?” he said. “Why?”

“She had to die”.

“Come on, at least tell me why”.

“Leave me alone, she had to die, that’s that”.

“Just tell me why?” he shouted, standing still. The woman looked back at him, as though to see if he was following her.

“She had to die,” she said, turning a corner. Malcolm was left on a silent pavement, bathed in orange from a nearby street-lamp. He sighed, knowing it was useless to pursue her.

“That’s what my father said,” he said aloud. “She had to die.”. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope containing the money.

“Curio,” he said, quietly, then looked back at Melissa. Tears streaked his face again, and he turned and ran into the darkness.

After two minutes, the woman found herself walking along a deserted road. Street lamps illuminated their surrounding areas at irregular intervals, bathing cars and buildings in a muted orange hue. Silence surrounded her. No lights were on in any of the houses. It seemed that even cats and insects were asleep. She stopped and looked around her, searching. Her eyes rested on the railings of a semi-detached nearby. They were atop of a three foot wall. Parts of it were rusted and flaking. It was in need of a good paint. The spikes did not look sharp, but this did not concern her. She stepped across and with both hands, gripped the horizontal rail, four inches below the spikes. Her hands were approximately twenty inches apart, and she did not hesitate, did not take a breath before she sent her face into the spikes. The tension in her arms pulled her downwards as one spike punctured through her right eye. As the spikes were four inches apart, another tore the skin from the side of her face, taking an ear. The spike sank into her brain, and she collapsed to the floor, her skull cracking apart.

It was twenty minutes by the time Curio's block of flats came into view, and Malcolm was taking it in turns to walk, then run, walk, then run, as he was so over exerted. He eventually walked into the car-park, and could see that the main entrance door was being propped open by one of two men who looked to be chatting. He was leaning against the door frame, one arm keeping the door open. The other man was nodding and gesticulating. It seemed that the man holding open the door was a resident. The other man saw Malcolm approach, and his stopping of conversation caused the tenant to look in his direction. Malcolm ignored them and pushed past into the corridor. The tenant looked back at him, shrugged, and looked back at the other man.

"...and that's what he said, anyway".

Malcolm sighed when he reached the stairs. He ascended as quickly as he could, but he had to stop and lean against a wall to regain his breath on Curio's floor. After a few moments, he walked along the corridor to his flat and banged on the door. He banged again after two seconds.

"Curio," he shouted. "It's me, Malcolm. I've got to see you". The door opened, and Curio appeared, looking tired.

"What?" he asked. Malcolm pushed his way in, and walked into the living room. Curio closed the door, and slipped on the latch. He followed Malcolm inside, who was standing in front of the television. He was holding forth the envelope.

"£500 quid. £500 quid. I need a reading Curio. I need it now. Melissa's dead. Tom's dead. Everyone I know is dead". Curio nodded, and took the envelope.

"So you want me to get in touch with your parent's to see what they know?"

"Yes,". Malcolm's face was scarlet, and tears threatened to burst forth again.

"Please, Curio, Please". Curio laid the envelope on the coffee table, and walked around for a few moments, deep in thought, as though he was deciding whether or not to give him a reading. The television had been on mute. He switched it off, the room illuminated by the lamp in the corner.

"Sit down," he said. "In the armchair". Malcolm did so, but leaned forward towards Curio.

“Lean back, relax” Curio continued. “I suppose you forgot to bring a personal item. It doesn’t matter though. I don’t need it. All I need for you to do, is close your eyes and bring up a vivid image in your mind’s eye of your father”. Malcolm nodded. He sat back, and closed his eyes. Curio stood in front of the television for a few moments, looking at him. He stepped across to the side of the armchair and leaned towards Malcolm’s left ear.

“Sleep,” he whispered, and clicked his fingers in front of his face. Malcolm slept, his head leaning on his shoulder. Curio nodded, smiled, and stood up straight.

“Got you,” he said, then walked in front of him. He sat on the sofa for a few minutes, simply staring at him, satisfied.

“What am I going to do with you?” he asked himself, quietly. He stood up, stretched and walked back to Malcolm.

“When I snap my fingers, you will wake, but the chair will have become like glue. You won’t be able to budge. You can move your head, you can speak, but nothing else”. He clicked his fingers.

“Eyes open, wide awake”. Malcolm woke up, and looked at Curio who was smiling down at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I fell asleep”. He frowned. “What’s happened? I can’t move. What’s happened, Curio? I can’t move!” He tried to struggle, but he couldn’t, his eyes becoming wide with fear.

“Relax,” said Curio. “You’ll be alright, but not for long”.

“What? What have you done?”

“Congratulations Malcolm, you are my final threat. You were one of the hurdles in my path to fame, the last one. You were the only one who came close to threatening my notoriety”.

“What the fuck...?”.

“There is no virus,” said Curio. “That was just something I told Ian to confuse you in case he never managed to kill you. It throws you off my scent. There is no weird cult. I tried not to speak to your father. In fact, I was very reluctant to do so. He did not come to me, yet he has more reason to be angry with me”.

“You killed him?” said Malcolm, as a statement, trying and failing to move.

“No, he killed himself, and he killed your wife. I hypnotised him into doing so. I then implanted the suggestion in his mind to admit it upon the knowledge of her discovery. Then I planted a timer in his mind that

counts down to his suicide, so it does not connect to me. Actually, I should have given your father less time to do so. Instead of three days, I should have said one, but nevermind. It's the same with the others. The later ones I gave less time to. I suppose I am too paranoid. I can make people forget, can make them not even think of me, but it has potential for failure. My system has not yet been fully explored, but it works. It has many implications which I have yet to understand. The basis of it, Malcolm, is that I can get anybody to do anything. Anybody".

"You killed everyone, why? Why can't I move?"

"I am not a strong man, Malcolm, as you can see, but I can make even the most hardened person into a weakling. All I need is about ten seconds alone with them. That's all. If I get that, they're mine. If I let you up as you were, what will you do to me?"

"You're not a psychic?" asked Malcolm. Curio scowled and pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Yes I am," he said, loudly, "Yes I am. I have proven the supernatural exists. I know it exists. I am using the hypnosis to help me prove it".

"How does that work? Hypnosis is not supernatural, and anyway, you have to be susceptible to believe that you are hypnotised. If I don't believe, I can't be hypnotised".

"Then get up", said Curio, grinning. Malcolm tried, but failed.

"Anyone, Malcolm, anyone".

"Why did you kill Melissa?" Curio thought about that for a few moments.

"Oh, that goth. She killed her didn't she? See? There's no blood on my hands. Melissa, and the others, were all a threat to my path to fame. I wanted to prove the supernatural in the normal, conventional sense, without using hypnosis, but when I knew the potential of it, I knew that I could use it to help me achieve this, achieve recognition, and now I've got it. In a few days time, there'll be a press conference where I'll be shown to the world as the man who proved the existence of the paranormal. I knew that the tests I had were not achieving what I had wanted, and I used the opportunity when Abe was alone in the room with me to convince him that I had passed the tests and proved the existence of the paranormal. I told him to then leave the room and had sent in five other scientists one by one whom I induced into thinking the same. The thing is, I made a hard choice when I decided to hypnotise Abe"

"Who's Abe?"

“That doesn’t matter to you. You’ll never meet him. Anyway. I could have done the tests, achieve what were probably average scores, and walked away, not proving the supernatural. Yet I know it exists, so I used hypnosis to convince them that I am right. It’s like an athlete that uses steroids to enhance performance, I suppose”.

“You get notoriety as well. Fame, riches. Was that an incentive?” Malcolm asked, sarcastically.

“I know I am right, Malcolm. Fame and fortune comes secondary to proving the facts. I use hypnosis to assist me”.

“You have innocent people murdered?” Malcolm shouted.

“They’re strangers!” replied Curio, pointing at his window. “Who cares about them?”

“Obviously not you”.

“Such small sacrifices reap great rewards. I simply give them the order, and they obey. They have to. I have never had somebody not carry out a task I give them. Once, for an experiment, I gave an order for someone to touch the moon. You know, an impossible task, just to see what would happen if he couldn’t carry out his order. Well, I had to get out of his way, his brain, well, I got the impression it melted because of overheating. His inability to carry out the task gave him burnout”.

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Well, when I was in uni, training to be a doctor, I reached the part where we learned about hypnotherapy. The thing is, it’s standard. You learn this and that’s that, but I saw that there was more potential. There were areas of it untapped. So I began to basically learn more and more about it and concocted my own experiments to see how much potential there was. Those stage hypnotists that get adults up on stage to make fools of themselves haven’t even scratched the surface. It goes, literally, much more deeper than that. Don’t they say, whoever ‘they’ are, that we only use 10% of our brains. Well, what lurks in the depths of the unknown? Potential, Malcolm, potential. If this gets out, then we’re all fucked, you know that? I discovered this, it’s mine.”

“Why would we all be fucked?”

“Control. Anybody can be controlled within seconds Malcolm. I can order them to walk to their bank accounts, withdraw money and simply give it me, then forget me. Easy. I didn’t, I wanted my fortune to come from legitimate sources, and it was too risky. Perhaps I should have, but then, I know I have a healthy amount of paranoia. Basically, I didn’t want

to get caught. I suppose I could risk it nowadays though, because I understand it more, but my profile is increasing. If I'm caught, then my method could get out and I'm off to prison. This I why I wanted to wipe you out Malcolm, and those linked to you, paranoia, because you started asking questions about why your father murdered your mother".

"Just to give you a bunk up the ladder, you're a fucking loon".

"Now now, Malcolm, that's not very nice is it? Don't forget what I can make you do. You can choose the method of your execution, a method you're going to carry out. So you'd better be nice to me". With his hands on his hips, he wondered whether or not to send him out now, but then decided against it.

"I suppose you could sleep with any woman you liked?" Malcolm said.

"Absolutely. I could do anything I liked, but see, that would be none consensual, wouldn't it? I have never used it for that purpose, I have a conscience".

"A conscience? A fucking conscience? You murder innocent people to help you get famous".

"No, I don't" Curio said, calmly. "They aid my acceptance in the eyes of the public with regards to them believing the truth. I know the paranormal is real, that's a fact, but the people whom I have helped the police to discover are part of my proof".

"What proof? You're a shark, Curio, conning people into believing you're real".

"I am real. I do have psychic ability, the hypnosis helps people take me more seriously. I use it to show that the supernatural is real, that there is a spirit world. It helps people believe".

"I bet it does, so why can't I get out of this chair. I'm not a believer. I should be able to just get up". Curio nodded, looking at Malcolm as though surveying an aesthetically pleasing work of art.

"My probing discoveries led me further into the workings of the human mind. No need to count backwards from ten. No need for you to even relax and then me saying that you are feeling sleepy. The autonomic nervous system, which controls involuntary actions, such as heart rate and blood pressure, is connected to the subconscious, which is responsible for dreams and unwanted thoughts. Don't think of a dog, Malcolm". Malcolm frowned. He thought of a dog.

"See?" continued Curio, "You thought of a dog. It's the uncontrolled actions of our brain that we, our consciousness has no command over.

This link between automatic reactions and the subconscious can be manipulated by resonance, Malcolm, resonance. It is the dark area of the mind untapped by science. It is the gateway to the parts of the mind unknown, unexplored”.

“Maybe consciousness passes through that when we die,” said Malcolm.

“Through in to the spirit world”. Curio nodded.

“One path we may take” Curio continued. “I do not know, but we do get there, and very soon, Malcolm, you will find out if you are right. This area is susceptible to suggestion from the outside, but not by ordinary sound. It needs to be low, Malcolm, a very low ‘frequency’ that the human voice needs to practise. Obviously I have done it. I am proof of that. It is like a whisper, only lower in tone. This taps directly into this area and your autonomic system becomes open to suggestion. I tell the person to sleep. This they understand anyway, so fall asleep instantly. Clicking my fingers helps also as that taps into the areas used by normal hypnotists, the subconscious, but obviously this goes much deeper. All I have to do, is, when I’ve got somebody I want to hypnotise alone, whisper ‘sleep’ at the practised low tone, click my fingers in front of their face, and they’re mine. They fall into a deep sleep, and I can suggest anything. I can then talk to them in my normal voice, and set their clocks. They cannot be manipulated by anybody other than me, the person that put them under. They become receptive only to my voice, nobody else’s. I can do what I like with them. They always obey”.

“Can’t you just make me forget? I’ll never know you existed”.

“That’s a possibility. I’m sure I could do that, but my healthy paranoia says no. What if you do remember? With my profile as it is, as it’s going to become, I cannot risk keeping you alive after I have hypnotised you. I have given the scientists differing times to commit suicide, after my press conference. How will that link to me? They committed suicide. It happens”.

“Yet, they’re connected to you,” said Malcolm. “Scientists all commit suicide after being with you. Isn’t that suspicious?”

“Two of them are to organise flights to foreign locations, and kill themselves there. All of them commit suicide at differing times. The first, two weeks after the conference finishes. Another four months away. It’s the biggest risk I’ve taken, keeping them alive for so long after induction. Yet, it’s the price I pay for notoriety”.

“So what happens in their mind to make them do it?” Malcolm asked.

“A timer, counting down to zero. The mind has sense of time, inborn, and learned in childhood. It is subconscious, and the person is unaware that it is counting down. When it hits zero, they perform the action I have given them. They have to. It becomes their only goal, their sole purpose. They must perform that action and see it through. Their drive is to complete the task, which is why when I give the order for them to kill, they make sure that they are dead. When their minds decide that that person is dead, they revert back to ‘normal’, I suppose. What they have done becomes something they believe they had decided to do. I suppose I have spared them the reality of what they had done. When they know that that person is dead, a timer activates that counts down to their suicide. It becomes their sole purpose, as it will be yours”.

“I’ve done nothing to you, though Curio. Look, I’m giving you five hundred pounds”.

“For which I am grateful, but you are in my way, as were all the others. They were potential threats to me, because they were linked to you. Now it’s only you. I am showing people the reality of the paranormal, and you are hindering me”.

“Where’s your proof, Curio? Prove the spirit world, prove ghosts. You’re just a talentless psychic who can prove nothing”.

“When I snap my fingers, slap yourself across the face,” said Curio. He snapped his fingers. Malcolm’s right hand slapped his face.

“Fuck!” said Malcolm, “Alright, alright. The paranormal is real, anything you say”. He said it quite sarcastically, but never meant to. Curio simply stood, staring at him for a few seconds.

“Your student friends were linked to you, so they had to die”.

“She had to die. That’s what my father said, and that goth,” said Malcolm.

“Is it?” asked Curio. “Well, I hypnotised one of the tutors into finding where they were and getting all of the addresses in case he failed to kill them all. Maybe it was too much of me to suggest for him to kill all of them, so the addresses were my back-up, should he fail, which he did. He killed one, I know, so I needed to send people to those addresses to kill the others. One person, one kill. One of them I hypnotised was a fucking gangster. I only realised afterwards. There he was fixing a car engine in his garage. He was alone. I went across and put him under. Only on the back

seat there was shotgun and a load of pirate DVDs. See what you were making me do Malcolm? You'll never make me do that again".

"What about Tom? What did he do?"

"He was linked to you. He knew you, so he had to die. Who knows what you've told him? Well, you do, I suppose. I couldn't take that risk. When you walked out after I told you the price of another reading, I had precious few seconds with Tom to give him the suggestion to take himself to that, Ryvak, was it? to burn it down. I agreed with him over the animal experiments. I 'encouraged' two reporters to write good articles on me. They'll be dead now. Also, I am also taking a big risk in having people killed, because I was genuinely reluctant to get in touch with your father. He has more right to be angry with me, than you. Angry spirits I do not want to deal with, so calling upon him was something I did not want. I was already possessed once, as you saw on that video".

"You weren't possessed. You're dealing with untapped areas of the mind. You should understand how susceptible people are to belief. Then again, maybe you can't see the woods for the trees. You're altering people's brainwaves and thoughts. Don't you think it will affect you?" The look on Curio's face told him it didn't.

"I know what I'm doing, Malcolm. I know the truth when I see it".

"You can't prove it. Nobody can".

"I can!" Curio shouted, his face reddening. He pointed an accusing finger at Malcolm.

"And I am. I'm showing people that I have psychic ability to prove what is real".

"Using hypnosis to help you".

"It's an aid in the path to showing people what is true".

"You're fucking mental". Malcolm then wished he had not said that, but Curio knew that by the look on his face, so did nothing.

"Less of that, thank-you" he said. "If this is the path I must take to show people that the supernatural exists, then that is fine with me".

"Have you ever hypnotised yourself?" Malcolm asked. Curio shook his head.

"No, never. It's the most powerful form of hypnosis I know. So there's no way I would ever put myself under. I knew I had the gift at that point in my studies. I knew I had the ability to become psychic".

"Is that when you started hearing voices inside your head?" Malcolm said, sarcastically, this time meant.

“Go on then,” said Curio, “Choose the manner of your demise”.

“What? I certainly will not”.

“Then I’ll have to do it for you?” Curio thought for a few moments, then clicked his fingers and said:

“Sleep,” in his normal voice. He only needed to say it once in the practised tone. Malcolm slept. Curio walked into the kitchen, and crossed to the fridge. He opened it, then opened the freezer compartment. There were two bundles wrapped in sugar paper. Carefully, he took out one, and carried it through to the coffee table, in front of the sofa. He laid it carefully down, and collected the other. Soon, he was sat staring at the bundles. He hadn’t seen them in a long time, and wondered what state they would be in. They had to go, he thought. With his kudos raising in public profile, to have these in the flat would subject him to serious questioning if discovered, and his stature would no doubt fade, his fame converting to that which he would not want.

He reached forward and opened the left bundle. The paper cracked open and he stared at its contents. He then did the same with the other, and looked at each in turn. The two chopped up human brains had a layer of ice over them. They seemed identical, but he had hoped for that not to be the case when he had acquired them, for it was a potential difference that caused him to see for himself, but he couldn’t see any at all, so had stored them away in case he ever wanted to study them again. One of them had belonged to a fellow student when Curio was studying, the other, the man’s friend. He had hypnotised the student into killing his friend, then had him commit suicide. Curio had wanted the brains because one had been hypnotised, and the other was normal. He had wanted to see if there was any dissimilarity by chopping them up and looking inside. When he did this, he had thought there might be a factor that could distinguish a normal brain from one that had been hypnotised, but there had been nothing. After one night, he had returned home from a hospital placement, his mind at the time concerned with learning more about the hypnosis, and his coursework, as he had not yet dropped out of university, so when he had opened the cupboard beneath the sink to bring them out for study, he could not tell them apart. He had concluded that hypnotism is purely psychological. Suggestion made no physical mark. It was only by the reactions made by the person, that they could be deemed hypnotised. The suggestions made were accepted, and therefore, to the person, that reaction was normal, so no physical change was present. He

had stored them in his freezer. His paranoia would not let him dispose of them in case they were found and somehow linked back to him. He did not know how, but just in case there was something that brought the police to his door.

He stood up and walked into his bedroom. At the bottom of his cupboard there was an old rucksack that he hardly used. Walking back into the living room, he said: "Wake", as he passed Malcolm. He sat on the sofa. Malcolm awoke, only to find that he still could not move.

"What have you done to me? What have you been telling me to do?"

"Nothing," said Curio, looking at the brains. Malcolm saw them.

"What the fuck are they? Are they ... are they ... human brains?", Curio simply nodded.

"See? You're a fucking lunatic, you just can't see it".

"Have your insults, Malcolm, if they make you feel any better. You're still going to die". Curio stood up and carefully gathered each bundle and put them in the rucksack. He zipped it up and put it beside him, then simply looked at Malcolm.

"I've chosen your method of execution," he said, "and you're taking these with you. It's night-time. Now is the best time to do it".

"There's got to be a way," said Malcolm. "Please Curio, just let me go". Curio shook his head.

"If there was a way to break it, and as far as I know, there isn't, do you really think I would tell you? Sorry, Malcolm, you've got to go". Curio stood up and walked back into his bedroom, returning moments later with his A-Z. He stood beside Malcolm and leaned towards him, pointing to an area on one of the pages.

"From here, it will take about twenty minutes to half an hour to walk here, west bank dock estate. Just beyond that, is where the river Mersey meets the Runcorn gap. This is where I want you to go. Around that area, there are a lot of marshes and quicksand. That's what Abe said my arguments were based on, so I thought it would be good for getting rid of evidence and threats. I want you to walk into it, and make sure you sink. No-one will ever find you. I doubt if anybody will call me to find you. If they did, then I won't get six in a row. You'll have ended my run, and because you were a hurdle in my way, and because you've insulted me, I'm going to make you very aware of what you're doing. In the others, I make them 'want' to do it. I make it their sole desire, their drive. Not with you. Your mind will stay the same, but your body will take you there. Rather

like falling from a great height. You know you're going to die. The time it takes from realisation to impact is what you will feel walking into the marshes. On my command, you will stand up, pick up and wear the rucksack. This you will want to do, then you will leave my flat, and do what I said. Kill yourself in the quicksand. Before that, though, don't think I'm going to leave you with the power of speech. You're not going to cry for help along the way. You're going to be mute. So have you anything final to say before you die?"

"Please, Curio, have you no mercy at all?" Curio could see fear on Malcolm's face.

"Well, I suppose I could make you want to go there, but when you see the marsh, or feel it, depending on how dark it is, you will become aware of what you're doing, but you still won't be able to speak, or scream, or stop yourself. You will perform my command. Now after I click my fingers, you will do what I have just said. Have you anything to say?" Malcolm thought for a few moments.

"You're just a fucking psychopath", Curio shook his head, and clicked his fingers. Malcolm got up from the chair and stepped across to the rucksack. He shrugged it on. Curio stood up and walked into the hallway. He unlocked and opened the door. Malcolm walked past him towards the stairs. Curio watched him, then gently closed the door and walked back to look out of his window. After a few minutes, he saw Malcolm leave, walking into the darkness.

"Farewell, Malcolm," he said, quietly.

A slight breeze had built up, and there were no stars in the sky, or moon to cast any form of light across the area. The only light came from streetlamps, and the occasional front window of a house. Malcolm knew exactly where he was going, focused as he was, on his task. He could still think as normal, but his goal had been incorporated into his psyche. As far as he knew, it was something he wanted to do. It was his drive. Should he be prevented from completing it, then he would become like Ian and Kenneth, dying by repeatedly throwing themselves in the direction of their targets. Kenneth had been sedated at the university. He had been prevented from completing his task and awoke in a police cell. He had hurled himself at the cell wall in the direction where he thought his target laid. Malcolm had no such hindrances. He walked along streets and roads, crossed over the A533, passing by the West bank dock estate. The air took on a more icy chill, ruffling his hair. When he reached a narrow road,

ahead of him the darkness of the River Mersey, he saw that just ahead, there was the edge of a marsh. A street lamp nearby illuminated the area, bathing him in an orange hue as he passed by. His mind had reverted to what he would deem to be 'normal', but his body had its command, and took him onwards.

What am I doing? he thought. No, No, stop. I've got to stop, but he walked onto the marsh, into the darkness. Quicksand lay metres before him at the water's edge. Malcolm tried to yell, tried to shout, but Curio had taken that from him, and it was his mind that screamed. He began to stumble and stagger. The muddy waters went up to his knees, further as he trudged on.

Stop! his mind yelled. No! He fell, but clambered forward. The marsh blended into quicksand, and he was only four metres from the shoreline. He crawled into it and stopped, not through his own freewill. He couldn't scramble, couldn't attempt to get out. Fuck, no! his mind screamed, as he slowly sank beneath the surface. Soon, there was no trace of him.

Curio lined up a golf club against a ball, resting on a tee, then swung it back. Striking it, he shielded his eyes against the sun as he watched it sail into the air, towards the eighteenth hole. Abe nodded, his driver resting against his shoulder.

“That was good,” he said, “Right on the fairway”. Abe had brought two of his colleagues from the institute, and they had spent most of the day on the course. The press conference had been organised for the following day in London, at the ‘Wood Valley house hotel’. An apartment had been organised for Curio, and he had packed his meagre belongings into three plastic bags. He had sold his computer and telephone at a second hand goods store, where they bought such equipment at low prices. They had given him £75 for the computer, and £5 for the telephone. Curio had accepted without protest. He had neglected to inform the DHSS of his change of location, deciding to simply leave. He was to spend one last night in the flat before being driven to the capital in the morning.

The other players each took their turn, and they all walked slowly along the fairway towards their next shots. Curio hid his nervousness well. He had taken a big gamble in the choice he had made. He hoped the public would not wish for a practical demonstration, instead hoping that the approval of the scientific community would suffice in their acceptance of his truth. He knew that there would be some people who would simply say: ‘Show me’. He hoped he would never have to try and induce them. How he would do it, he did not know. He simply wanted to convince them of his beliefs. If people chose not to believe, then that would be fine. He wondered if the hypnosis could be done through television. Could mass hypnosis be possible? He knew that should that work, and he was given the opportunity to do it, he would not. It was too risky, but even if there was no risk involved, he would still decline, as he wished for them to believe without persuasion, without inducement, but what to show the doubters, those people who do not believe until it is presented to them. Other than the scientists he had ‘persuaded’, he knew that other scientists would want to see the evidence, and the hole he had dug for himself through the choice he had made would undoubtedly widen. Was Abe’s and his colleagues stature enough for them to simply say: ‘Curio has shown the truth of the supernatural. We believe’? He hoped it was. If they

believed, then that would maybe be enough for other scientists to simply accept it as fact, on their authority. What evidence to show the doubters, was a bridge he knew he would maybe have to cross one day, but for now, the announcement to the world by scientists that the paranormal had been scientifically proven was Curio's step into the world of recognition, of infamy. Through the success of managing to keep Malcolm and his friends away from his path to eminence, he hoped he could do it in the media spotlight despite the sceptics who could see no evidence. Still, he had his other fears as to the victims of his influencing, but the lure of recognition and wealth was too much for him to ignore. If he was to go down in history as the man who proved the supernatural, then at sometime he may have to face his victims. Perhaps Malcolm, Ian, all those he had helped along to see if there was an 'other side', would come back to haunt him. Would they try and possess him? He was after all, possessed at the farm. At least he believed he was. Angry ghosts were real to him, but again, that was a risk he was willing to take. He also wondered that because the consciousness was altered under hypnosis, did it stay the same in the spirit world? If you died in a trance, or your mind passed over in a state of insanity, did you revert to being 'normal' on the other side? He could not answer that. He simply hoped that he would not be haunted, or possessed.

It was his shot, and he lined up the ball with a four iron. He struck it, and shielded his eyes again against the sun that had no clouds to obscure it, and had decided to give out minimal heat. His ball landed in the rough, and he saw Abe smile as he lined up to take his shot. After a few more minutes, Curio was taking his third shot with a seven iron. He swung the club and hit the ball, but took with it a clump of grass. It bounced and rolled onto the green. Abe nodded, as he lined up his own shot. His ball landed eight feet away from the hole. Eventually, all players managed to get onto the green, and Curio found that he was nearest to the hole at four feet away. One of Abe's colleagues took out the pole, and watched as Curio meticulously lined up his shot. After a few moments, he hit it. It slowed as it reached the hole, then fell inside. He smiled at the others and retrieved his ball. The eighteenth hole was on a high mound, and the hill sloped down towards the club car-park, beyond which was the clubhouse. As Abe was lining up his shot, the main entrance door opened and he recognised the two people that came out. One of them stopped and waved up at him. Abe waved back. They made their way through the

many vehicles to the slope. Abe took his shot. He missed. It rolled to an inch from the rim. He walked across and tapped it in. The other men took their shots, each getting the hole. The two men arrived onto the green. One of them, a man who looked to be in his early forties, bearing a 'goatee' beard and brown suit strode across to Abe and vigorously shook his hand.

"Good to see you Abe, it's been a while. Who won?" he said, looking around.

"That'll be me" said one of Abe's colleagues. He pointed at the other players in turn.

"Second," he said, pointing at Curio, "Third" he pointed at Abe.

"Fourth," he pointed at the other colleague, who seemed preoccupied with putting clubs back into his stand bag. The man nodded.

"Gerry," said Abe, "This is Curio Enchantment," he said, gesturing in his direction. Curio walked across and shook Gerry's hand.

"Good to meet you" said Curio.

"I've brought a fan along to meet you, Curio. Somebody who's been wanting to meet you for a while". Curio had hardly taken any notice of the man he had come with, stood as he was, on the edge of the green, staring at the floor like he didn't know what to do, or say, rather like a stranger surrounded by people who know each other. It didn't matter how many people you were surrounded with, if you didn't know anybody, it could feel like the loneliest place on earth. Yet, he wasn't exactly lonely, rather outcast, but subject to their scrutiny. Curio saw that he was tall, and broad. He wore a white, sleeveless shirt, open to reveal a muscled body. His hair was cut short, and he wore black, pleated trousers with ankle boots. Curio thought that he somehow didn't suit the clothes. He had tattoos along both arms and across his chest. Even from the distance of 15 metres, he could see that he had scars on his arms. Gerry waved for the man to walk across. He did so.

"Curio, this is Dominic Ribmour". Curio then realised who it was, and he almost fitted his description of what he thought he would look like.

"Ribbet," he said. Ribbet nodded, and shook his hand.

"He's a reformed character, aren't you Ribbet?" said Gerry, smiling up at him. Reformed character! thought Curio, a psycho who exhibits good behaviour, who is then allowed to walk amongst the public. He hoped their judgements were correct, and that Ribbet was no longer a violent

person, but even so, the lack of chains or bodyguards meant that they had faith in him.

"I don't murder any more, or do things I shouldn't," said Ribbet, as though reading his mind.

"Yes," said Abe, "We've been studying him for eight years, and he always used to attack other inmates and staff, but he hasn't done that in a while, have you Ribbet? I think you are quite safe in the company of others now. We let you on a computer, didn't we? You've got a nice sofa, and satellite television. It was Ribbet who found you, Curio. He led me to you".

"Really? I have Ribbet to thank for this?" Curio smiled genuinely and shook Ribbet's hand again.

"Thank-you, Ribbet, much appreciated".

"I'm a big fan of yours," said Ribbet. "Big fan".

"Shall we go to the club-house?" said Abe, walking in that direction. They all turned and walked across the green, Ribbet at the back. Curio heard the sliding of metal, heard a crack, then heard a slump. All of them turned to see Abe, lying on the grass, twitching, a six iron wedged into the top of his head. One trickle of blood seeped from the wound. Ribbet pulled it free and advanced towards Curio.

"Ribbet!" shouted Gerry, but Ribbet grabbed Curio's lapels before he could turn to run.

"You stay here," he said, turning with him and throwing him to the ground. The others all ran as fast as they could down the slope. Ribbet lifted the six iron and sent it towards Curio's right shin. It carved through the bone easily. Curio screamed, his face red, his eyes wide. He grasped at the wound, but Ribbet cracked the other shin bone. Curio screamed again.

"Now you can't run away," said Ribbet. He paced around for a few moments, while Curio tried in vain to put right his feet. When he finally accepted that he could do nothing, he lay back trying to clamber away from Ribbet who walked with him, swinging the club around.

"You get away from me you fucking maniac!" Curio shouted. Ribbet pointed the club at him accusingly.

"I want to know, Curio, I want to know if you meant what you said on the email".

"What?"

"Why? Curio, Why? I respected you, you were my friend. You said you didn't want me to email you again. I'm a fan, Curio, a fan, but you ignored

me, you cut off our friendship, now tell me why". Curio was breathing heavily.

"Have you, have you, been on good behaviour to see me?" Ribbet nodded.

"I was thinking about getting out anyway. Sometimes I think about getting out to see the rest of the world, but then I get scared. I've got a home, Curio. They let me have a computer, yes, TV. Comforts. Regular food. I don't mind it. Being observed and studied doesn't bother me. The outside world does. It scares me, I don't mind telling you, so I commit violence to stay inside, but you, you got me so fucking angry when you said for me not to email you. You were my friend in the outside world. You 'were' my friend. I want to know if you meant what you said. If you didn't, then we can go back to being friends".

"What?" asked Curio, "Friends? Friends? Are you fucking stupid? I wouldn't want you as a friend, you're a mental case". Ribbet raised the club and stepped towards him. Curio clambered back, but stopped, knowing it was futile.

"Didn't you think?" Curio continued. "Didn't you think that killing Abe, and breaking my legs would mean you'll never get out. They'll take your computer off you, and your TV, and everything else. Are you so stupid that you didn't think of that?" Ribbet stood astride Curio at his chest, the club ready to strike. He hit his clavicle, cracking it. Curio yelled.

"I wanted to see you. Now look what you're making me do".

"You came here to save a friendship, but you can't salvage it, can you?" said Curio, breathing heavily through waves of pain. "You're one of those people who sometimes seem quite normal, yet can be absolutely insane". Ribbet sent the four iron into his jaw, but it didn't break. Curio screamed.

"Stop it, Curio. If you want my respect, you be nice to me, ok? I don't want to hurt you". Curio fell back, his head over the eighteenth hole.

"You want me to be nice? You want me to be your friend?" Ribbet nodded.

"Yes, Curio. I want to respect you, but I can't, until you've told me that what you said on the email was not true". Curio hesitated for a few seconds. This was picked up by Ribbet.

"Well?" he said "I think you meant it, didn't you? 'cos if you didn't mean it, you would have said so by now, but you mean it, don't you? You mean it?"

“How can I mean it?” said Curio, attempting to appease him.
“Who wouldn’t want you as a friend?”

“You said that sarcastically, didn’t you? You did, didn’t you? What’s wrong with me? Why don’t you want me as a friend?”

“Why the fuck would I want you as a friend?” Curio shouted.
“You’re a fucking lunatic”.

“No!” screamed Ribbet, and hit Curio repeatedly on the side of the head with the club. Curio screamed. Ribbet saw that lying beside Curio was the eighteenth flagpole. He threw the club aside, and reached down to pick it up. He straightened up, and held it like a sacrificial dagger. He looked down at Curio’s bloodied face, who saw the stern expression of Ribbet. Their eyes met, and Curio knew at that point, in a nano-second, that his dreams were shattered.

“Ribbet! No, no, please!” Ribbet tensed his muscular arms, and sent the pole down. Curio screamed, but the pole cut it short as it tore through his mouth, splitting his spinal vertebrae tearing out of the back of his head until it could go no further. Ribbet stepped away from him, watching him twitch. He turned and walked back towards the club house, but stopped when he reached the rough. Looking down at the grass, he sighed.

“Curio,” he said, quietly. He looked back at him. Curio was unmoving. He was dead.

A tear trickled from Ribbet’s right eye. All was quiet. He walked slowly back towards Curio, his left eye now shedding a tear.

“I’m sorry, Curio, I didn’t mean it” he said. He reached the body and knelt down beside him. He stared at Curio’s glazed eyes.

“Wake up, Curio” he said. “I’m your friend”. He shook Curio’s left hand in a vain attempt to wake him.

“Curio, please. Please wake up”. More tears flowed, and it dawned upon him that Curio would not be waking up. Perhaps he had discovered if the spirit world was real. If it wasn’t, then he had discovered nothing.

Ribbet’s face grew red. I’ve done it again, he thought. I’ve killed another potential friend. They always hurt me. Always disrespect my loyalty. He shook his head. He had no answers. He did not know why people avoided him. When the hand of friendship was offered his way, it was usually always retracted when Ribbet’s past history was revealed to them, but he could never let them go. With such an unstable mind, he was prone to emotional attachments even without seeing the other person, with few interactions.

“I’m sorry Curio,” he said. “I know, like you did, that the spirit world is real, and that is where you are now. Don’t worry, we can still be friends. I’m coming. Wait for me”. He looked around him, then back at Curio. He clenched his left fist, and brought his wrist to his mouth. He forcefully bit into the skin, and tore away flesh. It fell from his lips. Blood pumped from the wound. He did the same to the other wrist. He looked up to the sky, both wrists pouring blood onto the grass.

“I’m coming Curio. We can be...friends. Wait for me”. It took a few minutes, but Ribbet began to sway, and eventually, he collapsed to the side, alongside his friend, his dead eyes staring at Curio.

A Sparrowhawk was sat upon a branch of a sapling, looking down at the green. The place was quiet, and a slight breeze ruffled its feathers. It stretched its wings, and took flight.