

Alchester Vampire

by

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*With love to Garth, my first reader:
with grateful thanks for his patience, forbearance, and understanding..
..and indefatigable proof reading!*

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Part 1 Orlando

1. Miss Fairchild

The cat slunk along the edge of the field, keeping close to the ground, low, every sense finely tuned. It had been in a fight, that much was evident. It was covered in blood. One ear was torn. Patches of fur were missing. All the cat knew was that it must get away from that 'thing' out there, the thing that had attacked it. It was a miracle the cat had ever got away at all. Now it needed to get back home, to get some milk and to recover. But at the same time it could feel the thing calling to it, calling it back to finish the fight, and it was an irresistible call. It couldn't be ignored. The cat knew that whatever it was out there was evil, utterly evil. But it had invaded the cat's territory and it had to be challenged, it must be fought. Even if it meant a fight to the death!

Alchester was a small country town. Its only claim to fame was a huge white horse carved on one of the hills that overlooked the town from the north. Otherwise it had nothing of interest to offer, and nothing very much ever happened there. If you wanted excitement you had to travel 20 miles to Harcliffe where they had a big shopping mall, a decent multiplex, clubs you could get into if you looked cool enough, a choice of bistros and coffee bars where you could hang out, in short it had everything.

But Alchester was boring.

Dead boring.

It was full of respectable people living in respectable houses in respectable estates. They had respectable gardens and respectable driveways with respectable cars in them. They even had respectable babies in respectable baby buggies on the front lawn. There was a respectable park in the middle of town where respectable old people sat eating their respectable sandwiches and feeding the respectable pigeons. The only cinema it had ever had was now a furniture warehouse and the nearest they had to a bistro was a MacDonald's. Otherwise you had to go to the lorry driver's caff out on the Harcliffe road where all the St Joseph's boys went.

Okay it *did* have a shopping mall in the town centre, next door to the respectable park, but all it had in it was a big supermarket in it plus two or three shops and a couple of teashops that you wouldn't be seen dead in. Nobody under about 75 ever went to *them*.

There were three schools in Alchester, and a couple of others in the countryside outside the town, one to the north and the other to the southwest. In the town there was Alworth College, which served the respectable Wessex Estate, and Aston High, which served the respectable suburb of Aston, and there was St Josephs which was down the rough end of town by the trading estate. Out in the country there was Wilmington High, and Long Elford School.

Alworth College was the largest. It had the only sixth form in the area and the kids from the other schools who wanted to stay on and study, all came there. There was a specially built sixth form centre with its own common room with a coffee machine, a

coin operated vending machine that sold cans of drink, a television that the students could watch, etc.

In addition the college had the local sports centre attached to it. There was a big sports hall, a gym, and a pool, plus the usual changing rooms, lockers, and showers.

Anne-Marie Jeffries was a student at the college. She had had good results in her exams the previous year and she was one of the ones who had decided to stay on. She had set her heart on becoming a doctor, and she was a hard worker, which you had to be if you wanted to be a doctor, and she was determined to succeed.

Today was the very first day of the new school year, so everyone was waiting to see the new students from the other schools. Would there be some good looking boys to choose from? Would there be some sexy girls to choose from.

Anne-Marie herself was looking forward to getting to college that particular morning because that was also where her boyfriend, Jimmy, went. She got there in good time, and sure enough there he was, waiting where he always waited, under a big elm tree just down the road a little way from the gates. And once she got there they would sneak behind the tree for a long passionate kiss. This morning was no exception!

The sixth form was organised into tutor groups and Anne-Marie and her friend Maisie were together in one of them and Jimmy was in another. This year they were going to get a new French teacher who was also going to be the tutor for Anne-Marie's tutor group. When they heard it was a woman they assumed that she would be at least fifty, that she would never smile, that she would have a face like the back end of a bus, and that as far as clothes were concerned she would be a total frump. But when Dr. Olsen, the principal, came into the tutor group, he didn't have anybody with him who looked like a French teacher at all. Instead the person with him looked like someone's older sister. Not only did she look like someone's older sister, she looked like someone's very attractive older sister.

Dr Olsen cleared his throat and asked for them to be quiet.

They were expecting him to tell them whose older sister she was, so they were considerably surprised when he announced:-

"This is your new tutor, Miss Fairchild. For those of you who are taking French she is also your new French teacher."

She was young. She was blonde. She was pretty. Her clothes were fashionable. And she had a great smile. In short she was totally cool.

The boys promptly all fancied her rotten, except for Christopher Whitman who everybody knew was gay, and the girls all thought she was great. Even Charlotte De-Lyle, who had always wanted to be a beautician and who spent most lessons filing her nails and admiring them, changed her mind and decided it would be really romantic to become a French teacher instead.

Miss Fairchild introduced herself. "Hello everybody. Like Dr. Olsen has just said, I'm Miss Fairchild, and I'm your tutor, and I'm looking forward to getting to know you and to working with you. Right, now *I've* introduced *myself*," she continued, "perhaps you could do the same," and with that she went round the tutor group and asked everyone to tell her who they were.

Anne-Marie listened with interest. She knew all the students who had come up through Alworth with her, but she was interested in the new ones who had come from the other schools.

There was a nice looking girl who seemed to have plenty of confidence, and who said her name was Francesca Ellis.

There was an attractive boy with a nice smile and blond hair, who was new to the area, called Gabriel Ekard,

There was Orlando Reid, who was very pale but with dark hair and dark eyes. He glared at them ferociously from beneath heavy brows, almost like some sort of animal, Anne-Marie thought. He certainly didn't look very friendly, and when he said who he was he just growled his name and had to be asked to repeat it.

There was Lizzie Blaire who looked up boldly and flashed a smile at everyone, particularly the boys. Anne-Marie took an instant dislike to her and decided that she was wearing too much makeup.

And finally there was a boy who had thick glasses, who could barely look anyone in the face, and stuttered out that his name was Martin Huxley. Anne-Marie decided that he was a total nerd.

Walking home with Jimmy that afternoon she told him all about Miss Fairchild.

"That must have been who I saw getting into her car in the teachers' car park. I wondered who she was. I didn't think she could possibly be a teacher, she was far too sexy!" he told her. She thumped him on the arm, but he just grinned at her.

They were soon at her house, and were just about to have a goodbye kiss when her mum came up the road. She was pleased to see Jimmy, she approved of Anne-Marie's choice of boyfriend.

"Oh hello Jimmy, would you like to come in for a bit?"

"Thanks Mrs. Jeffries, that would be great."

Once inside, Anne-Marie gave her mum a kiss. "How was work today, Mum? Anything exciting happen?" Anne-Marie's mum worked in the library and nothing exciting ever happened.

"Well you know what work is like," replied Mrs Jeffries. "One book is very much like another when it comes to scanning them into the system. The only excitement was Phyllis going on about her ginger cat, which has gone missing."

Phyllis was one of Mrs Jeffries' colleagues. Anne-Marie thought she was a sour faced old prune, but her mum always said she was quite a kindly soul underneath it all, and was very good with the old people.

"Anyway," Mrs Jeffries continued, "she told us that the day before yesterday her cat had come in with its coat in a right mess. It looked as if it had been in a really nasty fight, with a torn ear and patches of fur missing and everything. She said it was always getting into fights. If anything trespassed onto its territory it had to be fought off. But she said it had never been so badly hurt before."

"Oh Mum, that sounds horrible!" said Anne-Marie. She may have thought Phyllis was an old frump, but that didn't stop her from having a soft spot for her cat.

"Well anyway Phyllis gave it a bowl of milk which it lapped up immediately, and she hoped it would settle down for the evening and lick its wounds, but not a bit of it. The moment it had finished its milk it was back out again through the cat flap. Phyllis

said it looked as if it had unfinished business to attend to. But the next morning, when she came downstairs, it was nowhere to be seen. And it always comes back from its nightly prowls looking for its morning feed. She called for it apparently, but there was no sign of it and she had to come to work with it still missing. Well yesterday evening there was still no sign of it, and no sign of it this morning either, so she was in a right state. She'd even rung the police. They told her they had better things to do than to chase after stray cats! So you can imagine!"

While she'd been telling them the story, she'd been making the tea and Jimmy and Anne-Marie took it up to Anne-Marie's room where they started working out what classes they had together. Jimmy was hoping to get into computers like his dad, and was taking Maths and Computing as his main subjects, but they would share Chemistry in common.

It was time to go and Jimmy was just kissing Anne-Marie her goodbye in the front porch when her younger brother Paul came in.

"It's impossible to get in and out of this house: you two are always snogging in the doorway!" he commented, pushing rudely between them, and he ducked under Anne-Marie's hand as she aimed a blow at his head.

"Sorry about my obnoxious brother," she apologised to Jimmy.

When he had gone she went back inside and her brother was getting the whole cat story over again while he had a coke. "Perhaps it was stolen by cat burglar!" he joked

"Why you horrible thing!" Anne-Marie exploded, but Paul was unmoved.

"The burglar obviously went, 'Was it a cat I saw?' and took it!" and still laughing he ran upstairs and in a couple of minutes they heard one of his video games going.

"Homework first!" their mum shouted up the stairs, then turned to Anne-Marie. "Sometimes I just despair of that boy," she said. "What was that bit about 'was it a cat I saw'?"

"Oh he's always on about things that spell the same backwards as forwards. You know. Palindromes."

"Palindromes!" her mother exclaimed. "Whatever will he come up with next?"

They would have forgotten all about the cat, but the next day, after Anne-Marie got back from College, there was a knock at the front door. She answered, and it was old Mrs. Pettigrew from down the road in a very distressed state.

"Have you seen my dog?" she asked. "He's gone missing."

"No." said Anne Marie. "What sort is it? What's his name?"

"He's a little black and white terrier. He's called Tommy. I let him out into the garden this morning to do his business but when I went to let him back in he wasn't there. I thought he must have scrambled through the back hedge and taken himself for a run across the field, he's a bit naughty like that, but he usually comes back pretty quickly. But he's been gone all day!"

Anne-Marie could see that Mrs Pettigrew was almost in tears. "Don't worry, Mrs. Pettigrew. Would you like me and my brother to have a look for him?"

"Oh would you dear, I'm so afraid something's happened to him. I'd go myself but at my age I can't manage that field."

No sooner had she gone than Anne-Marie called up to her brother, "Paul! We've got to go and look for a dog!"

Paul stuck his head round his bedroom door. "What?"

"We've got to go and look for Mrs. Pettigrew's dog," and she told him what Mrs. Pettigrew had told her.

"What about homework? Mum will kill us if we haven't done it by the time she gets back."

"We'll have to do it later but we've got to go now while it's still light. I'll leave a note for Mum. She'll understand," said Anne-Marie

So leaving a note saying GONE TO LOOK FOR DOG. BACK LATER, they went down the road to the pathway that led between the houses to the field. They started by exploring the ditch that ran along the back of the houses, but found nothing.

"What about the wood?" Paul suggested. "Perhaps it's got caught in a trap or stuck in some brambles."

That sounded like a more promising idea, so they set off around the back of the old cemetery and went across the field to Elford Wood. The undergrowth was thick on either side of them.

"You look on that side and I'll look on this," said Anne-Marie, "and try calling his name. Perhaps if he hears us he'll bark."

They set off, calling "Tommy" at regular intervals, but to no avail. There was no answering bark, nothing.

"This is a waste of time," said Paul, "we're never going to find it like this."

"I know," said Anne-Marie. "And Mum will be wondering where we are. We'd better go back."

"Okay. Come on then," said Paul, and they set off back towards the field. They were just about to leave the wood when Paul saw something.

"What's that?" he asked.

"What's what?"

"That," Paul said, pointing. There was something that looked black and white in the brambles, and they cleared a way through to get closer.

It was not a pretty sight.

It was Mrs. Pettigrew's dog alright, but it was very dead. Carefully they rolled it over on to its back.

There was a wound in its throat.

A deep wound, exposing the flesh.

Anne-Marie recoiled in horror. "What on earth's done that?" she exclaimed, but after she had overcome her initial distaste her biological curiosity took over and she looked more closely.

The whole throat had been ripped out.

The wound was covered with dirt from the damp ground under the trees, but they could certainly see what had happened.

"Look," said Anne-Marie, "it's even bitten through the windpipe."

"Some vicious animal must have attacked it," Paul exclaimed.

"What are we going to do with it?" Anne-Marie asked. "We can't take it back to Mrs Pettigrew looking like this."

"We'll have to," said Paul. "What else can we do?"

"Let's take it home first and see what Mum suggests," said Anne-Marie, and they picked it up carefully. Anne-Marie cradled it in her arms and they set off back across the

field. She was almost in tears. "It's very cold," she said, "it must have been dead since this morning."

Their mum was home when they got back, and she was just about to tell them off when she saw the dog in Anne-Marie's arms.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "That looks like Tommy, May Pettigrew's dog. What are you doing with it?" Before they had time to answer she looked at it more closely. "Oh that's awful! What on earth's done that?"

They explained. "The point is Mum what are we going to do with it? We can't take it down to Mrs Pettigrew's looking like this."

"She'll be beside herself when she sees it," said their mum. "She doted on that dog. It's been such a comfort to her since her husband died."

She thought for a moment.

"Well you're going to have to take it down to her, but let's see if we can clean it up a bit first. Anne-Marie, get me one of those old rags from underneath the sink and run it under the tap. We'll see what a damp cloth can do. Now hold it Paul, so that I can get at it." Using the cloth she managed to get most of the dirt and even some of the dried blood off. "Well that's the best I can do. You'll have to take it down to her. Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, it's alright, Mum, we'll manage," they said, and dreading what Mrs. Pettigrew was going to say, they went down the street with their burden and knocked on her door.

They heard her footsteps, and heard her call out, "Who is it?"

"It's Anne-Marie and Paul from down the road, Mrs. Pettigrew. We've got your dog."

The door opened. Mrs Pettigrew took one look at what they were carrying and gave a wail of despair. "Tommy! Oh what's happened to you!" She took him off them and cradled him in her arms. "Oh Tommy, Tommy! My poor Tommy! What's done this to you? You can't leave me!" and she kissed his poor dead head.

"Let us come in," said Anne-Marie, "and we'll make you a cup of tea."

Mrs Pettigrew just went on saying his name so they went in anyway, took her through to the kitchen, whereupon she went very white and almost collapsed onto a chair while they made her a cup of tea.

When they got back home Paul was thoughtful. "There was something odd about that dog," he said, "but I can't think what."

Sunday was always a good day for Anne-Marie and Jimmy. They would study together, either at his house or hers, and once the work was done they had the rest of the day to themselves.

This particular Sunday they had decided to go for a hike through Elford Wood and up the hill beyond it known locally as White Horse Hill, which somewhat obviously got its name from the huge white horse that was carved on it. On the way Anne-Marie showed Jimmy where they had found Mrs. Pettigrew's dog.

"It's funny," said Jimmy, "Adrian Edwards was telling me that one of his dad's sheep has been killed, and that it had had its throat ripped out. And one of his lambs is missing. And somebody was saying that a calf over Elford way has also been killed. I wonder if that was done the same way."

“Well it’s obviously some animal that’s doing it,” said Anne-Marie.

“Yes, but what?” said Jimmy.

“Some sort of fox that’s gone loco?” she suggested.

“Or maybe something bigger, something that’s escaped from a Zoo.”

In the middle of the wood there was an old stone hut with a low thatched roof, and as they approached it Anne Marie spotted something ginger half hidden in the undergrowth.

They investigated . . .

. . . and found the headless body of a ginger cat.

It had been dead for a couple of days.

There were flies all over it. and it was already beginning to rot.

“Oh my God, it’s Phyllis’s ginger cat!” exclaimed Anne-Marie, and told Jimmy about it. “It’s been killed just like Mrs Pettigrew’s dog was, except that this time the whole head’s missing.”

Worse was to come.

They got to the hut . . .

. . . and there was another carcase, this time a lamb. It too had begun to decay and as they got closer the flies rose in a cloud. The place stank of rotting meat.

“I think I’m going to be sick!” said Anne-Marie.

“That must be Adrian’s dad’s lamb. Whatever’s done it must’ve dragged the lamb through here before it started on it.” He looked around. “Yes, look there, you can see where the wool’s come off where it’s been dragged though the undergrowth. But what I don’t understand is why whatever it is hasn’t *eaten* the animals. Do you think it was just after their blood? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t care what it is,” said Anne-Marie. “All I know is that it’s beginning to feel really creepy and I want to get out of here. And we’re not coming back this way!” she added.

Once they got out of the wood into the fresh air and up the hill a bit, Anne-Marie stopped wanting to throw up and felt a good deal better. They went back to discussing what animal might have done it.

“It obviously wasn’t a fox,” said Jimmy. “No fox could have dragged a lamb all that way. The only thing it could have been is some sort of animal that’s escaped from a zoo, like a panther or something.”

“But we don’t have a zoo near here,” said Anne-Marie, “and besides if there’d been a panther on the loose it would have been on the news, and there’s been nothing on the news about an escaped panther.”

On the way back Jimmy was quiet and thoughtful. “There’s something puzzling me, but I can’t put my finger on it,” he said.

“That’s what Paul said,” said Anne-Marie.

When they got in Paul, of course, pestered them for all the gruesome details. “What were the corpses like? Were they covered in lots of delicious gore?”

Suddenly Jimmy & Anne-Marie looked at each other. “That’s it!” they both exclaimed together. “There was hardly any gore and there should have been!”

“Whatever it is out there, it must have drunk all the blood.” Jimmy added thoughtfully.

Later that evening Anne-Marie and Paul were still discussing it.

“What if it isn’t an animal at all?” Paul asked.

“What on earth else could it have been?”

“Perhaps it’s a werewolf,” he suggested ghoulishly, trying to get a rise out of his sister, “or maybe even a vampire!” he laughed, “sucking out their blood!”

“A vampire!” Anne-Marie exclaimed. “Sometimes, Paul, you’re just unbelievably stupid!”

2. The Copse

It was the second week of term. Jimmy and Anne-Marie were comparing notes about the new students.

“You start,” said Jimmy.

“Well I like the look of that new one in your group that you seem to be friendly with. What’s his name?”

“Adrian Edwards.”

“Oh that’s him is it? The one whose dad’s got a farm? You were already hanging out with him last week. How come you know him?” she asked.

“He used to play football for Long Elford, and it looks like he’ll be in our team. He came for trials on Saturday afternoon, and he looked pretty good.” he told her. “What about your lot? What about that Gabriel Ekard who does chemistry with us?”

“Oh, he’s really nice. All the girls think he’s gorgeous with that blonde hair, but he’s not a bit bothered by it, not superior in that sort of way if you know what I mean.”

“What about you? Do you think he’s gorgeous too?” Jimmy teased her.

“Well he is very sexy...” she started to say, but Jimmy glared at her so she rapidly said, “It’s alright I’m only teasing! In any case I much prefer your friend Adrian!”

Jimmy’s glare softened a bit.

“But Gabriel’s really nice. He’s very good at making friends, but he never comes on to you. He’s even friendly with Christopher Whitman. And you know it’s mostly the girls that talk to *him*, the other boys usually steer well clear of him.”

“The other one I like,” she continued, “is Francesca Ellis. She’s from Aston High. She’s dead serious, but she’s quite friendly when you get to know her. And it’s not as if she isn’t attractive, because she is. Maisie and I were talking to her in lunch the other day. She wants to be a lawyer. She said her dad’s a lawyer and that he’s said that if that’s what she wants to do there’d always be a place in the family firm for her.”

“Oh, and there’s Martin Huxley,” she continued. “He’s a real nerd. He also comes from Aston High. He and Francesca always arrive together but I don’t think they’re boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“Oh yes. He’s not so bad. I’ve met him in computer club. Your Paul is trying to develop a data retrieval programme, and Mr Knight has suggested that he and Martin work together on it because Martin knows a lot about that stuff. Mr Knight calls it a mentor system.”

“What’s a mentor?”

“Well it’s where someone who’s more knowledgeable works on something with someone who’s less knowledgeable. So I expect you’ll see him around your place a bit because he and Paul will be working together,” he concluded.

“But I’ll tell you who I don’t like the look of,” he added, “and that’s that Orlando Reid. He looks really shifty to me.”

“I know,” said Anne-Marie “He’s horrible. He hardly ever speaks to anyone and he seems always to be hanging out in the shadows. And he won’t look at you properly. He sort of glares at you sideways from underneath those horrible threatening eyebrows, as if he’s sizing you up. It’s almost as if he’s an animal waiting to pounce. Maisie thinks he’s real creepy. But that Lizzie Blair, you know, the one who always wears too much make up and is always flashing her eyes at the boys. She says he may be dark and brooding,

but he has an irresistible animal magnetism. She's the only one who's really talked to him."

The next morning Anne-Marie's tutor group assembled as usual, sat chatting as usual, and waiting for Miss Fairchild as usual.

This morning she was late.

They waited a bit more, and chatted a bit more.

Finally Maisie spoke for all of them. "She's a bit late this morning isn't she?" Everyone looked at the clock and it was already twenty past nine. "She's never normally this late," she added

Maisie's boyfriend, Craig, spoke up. "If she doesn't turn up soon we'd better get going. They'll be wondering what's happened to us." There was a murmur of agreement, and everyone started collecting their stuff together. They were just about to move when the Principal came in.

"Miss Fairchild isn't here today," he told them, "so you'd better be getting to your classes."

They didn't think much about it, but it was a bit puzzling. The Principal hadn't said that Miss Fairchild was ill, and when somebody in the French group asked one of the teachers why she wasn't there, they said they didn't know.

Then after lunch a rumour started that she was missing.

No-one quite knew who started it, but when Anne-Marie saw her brother at lunch time he told her that his friend Johnny had told him that he'd overheard some kids in year 7 talking about it. It was *that* sort of rumour. So when Anne-Marie mentioned it to Jimmy later he dismissed it out of hand.

"Like you say, it's just a rumour. You know what the younger kids are like. They'd believe anything."

But as they were to discover, the rumour wasn't far from the truth.

Anne-Marie's dad always watched the news when he came in from work. First the national news, then the local news. Suddenly he called out to the family, "Hey, come and watch this. Isn't that the college, Anne-Marie? There seems to be something on about one of the teachers."

The reporter was standing outside the college gates.

"Reports about a missing person are just coming in. Anne Fairchild, a French teacher at Alworth College in Alchester has been reported missing. When she didn't turn up at work today colleagues assumed she was sick, but their suspicions were alerted when the principal tried unsuccessfully to contact her at home. Friends of the missing teacher have not seen her since yesterday, and neighbours confirmed that there were no lights on in the house yesterday evening. Her fiancé, who was in London overnight on a business trip, became worried when he couldn't get an answer on her cell phone last night, and became even more worried when he tried again this morning. When he phoned her parents they knew nothing either. So he contacted the police, who are now treating it as an official missing person case."

A picture of Miss Fairchild then appeared on the screen and the reporter's voiceover said, "Police have asked the public be on the watch for this woman, and if they see her to report to the nearest police station."

The picture cut back to the news reader, "Local team Harcliffe United beat records today by losing sixteen nil to nearest rivals Stanford Rovers. Harcliffe manager Phil Jones said in an interview . . ."

. . . but they never did discover what the Harcliffe manager had said, since excited conversation had broken out in the living room.

"She's the new French teacher," Anne-Marie told her parents. "The one who's our new tutor for our tutor group."

Paul as ever was the first with the suggestions, the more outrageous the better. "I bet she's been murdered! Or she's been kidnapped and is being held to ransom! I know, she's an undercover agent for the CIA. Or perhaps she's been abducted as a sex slave!"

"Paul!!" his Mum exploded.

"How about abducted by aliens?" Anne-Marie suggested ironically. "You missed those out!"

"Well Billy Fox was only saying yesterday he'd seen a UFO over the town hall! I bet that's it!" Paul loved teasing his sister and just avoided the sideswipe she gave him.

"You spend far too much time playing your video games, they're bad for your imagination," his Mum told him.

"I think it's the other way around," said his dad. "They're far too good for his imagination. It's far too over-stimulated."

That evening Anne-Marie and Jimmy discussed it on the phone. "I bet there's a simple explanation," he said. "She's just gone to visit a relative who was taken ill suddenly."

"Yes, but she would have phoned someone wouldn't she? I mean even her fiancé doesn't know where she is."

For all that Anne-Marie had dismissed some of her brother's more absurd suggestions, she did herself wonder if there was something in the teacher's past that had caught up with her. "I mean it's all a bit odd though isn't it."

But Jimmy was dismissive. "I'm sure it will turn out to be something perfectly simple," he said. "She's had a car accident and ended up in hospital or something like that." Jimmy was always the one with the rational explanations.

Next day, when Miss Fairchild didn't turn up again, the college was rife with rumours and stories, the more outrageous the better. Billy Fox, with his stories of UFOs over the town hall, led the way with his 'abducted by aliens' explanation, and a number of the more gullible juniors really believed it.

Amongst the older boys the 'abducted as a sex slave' story had some supporters, though it was doubtless wishful thinking on their part. As for the girls, they favoured a version that suggested she had been killed by a jealous ex boyfriend. Anne-Marie herself didn't go as far as that, but she did wonder if a jealous ex boyfriend came into it somewhere.

"It's all rubbish," said Jimmy, dismissing it out of hand, and he changed the subject and started talking to Anne-Marie about his chemistry assignment. "I've been paired with Gabriel Ekard to look at the chemistry of the carbon cycle and the ways in which it's being affected by pollution across the world," he told her. "He's going to join us on Sunday morning so that we can work on it. You can come round to me for a change."

That evening there was only a very brief item on the local news, reporting that Miss Fairchild had not yet been found, but the next morning it made the front page of the local paper, The Alchester Chronicle:

POLICE BAFFLED

Police are baffled in the missing school teacher case. Anne Fairchild, a teacher at Alworth College, has been missing since Monday evening. An appeal on local television has brought reports of a number of sightings, some of which the police have dismissed as 'frivolous' but others of which they are taking more seriously.

Amongst the frivolous reports are claims that she was seen being dragged up a ramp into some sort of circular machine that appeared to be hovering a few feet above the ground. Her captors were described as translucent elongated green creatures.

Other more down to earth sightings have been reported from as far afield as London and Manchester, and there have been a number of more local sightings. A police spokesperson said that any serious lead would be followed up, but they are currently focussing on the more local ones. They are trying to trace her movements on Monday evening to see if that will give them a clue as to her whereabouts.

Anne Fairchild's fiancé, Mark Daniels, told this newspaper, "I have no idea what can have happened to her. If anyone has seen her or has any idea of where she is can they please contact the police. Her parents are beside themselves with worry."

There was then a picture of Miss Fairchild with a caption underneath:

'Please inform the police if you see this person.'

That morning a policeman and policewoman were at the college. They had one further piece of important news, Miss Fairchild's car had been found at Alchester Mall just next door to the park. So far they had found no-one at the mall who remembered seeing her on Monday evening, so they wanted to check out her movements at the college, to try to establish who was the last person to have seen her alive. Her last session on the Monday had been French with the sixth form, so the police concentrated their enquiries there.

Yes she had been there for the session, they told them, but no-one had paid very much attention to where she might have gone afterwards. It was only when the police questioned each of them on their own that Christopher Whitman remembered that he had seen her heading for her car about half an hour later. He thought there was someone with her, but he wasn't certain.

The policeman told him to picture the scene in his head to see if he could remember any details and the more he tried to picture the scene the more details he did remember. Someone had definitely been with her, a boy. He had been carrying something, perhaps her bag. "He seemed to have been looking at the ground, it was like he couldn't look her in the eye."

Christopher told the others what he had told the police, and when he got to the bit about the boy Maisie interrupted him.

"It's Orlando," she exclaimed before she could stop herself. Within seconds the whole tutor group had shared the same thought, except for Orlando himself who, they suddenly realised, wasn't there.

"We should tell the police," Maisie said, and she was just about to go and do it when Orlando himself walked into the room. For a moment everyone fell silent. Then everyone hastily turned to their next door neighbour and they all started talking at once.

The policewoman came back. "Is there anyone we haven't talked to?" she asked.

Everyone looked at Orlando.

She saw who they were looking at.

"What about you, son?"

Orlando looked her up and down, then smiled. It was a triumphant smile. It was a gloating smile. He even licked his lips as if he was savouring some pleasant remembered taste. The smile sent a shiver down Anne-Marie's back, and even the police officer moved uncomfortably from foot to foot.

"What about me? What have I done?" he said lightly

She told him why they were there.

"Oh yes. That was me," he told her. "I walked her to her car. I helped her carry her books." He glanced around the room as if to dare them to contradict him. "And she offered me a ride," he said easily, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "She said she'd seen me walking home and thought I probably lived in the same direction as her. So I went with her. She dropped me off at the mall because she said she was going shopping, and I went on home from there."

The others were amazed. This was an Orlando they had never seen before. There was something triumphant about him, as if he had succeeded where the others had failed. He looked around the rest of the group as if challenging them to contradict him.

The officer looked at him. You could see that she was still uneasy. "It sounds like you might have been the last person to see her. We'll let the others get on with the rest of their day, but if you come with us you can fill in some of the details. And we'll have a look at the CCTV footage while we're about it to see if we can find her on that."

It wasn't until the morning break that they saw Orlando again. Only Lizzie Blaire had the courage to approach him, flashing a defiant glance at the rest of them.

But again Orlando smiled that complacent smile, as if carrying a secret that only he knew about. It was, as Anne-Marie told Jimmy later, really creepy.

The friendship between Anne-Marie and Francesca Ellis had grown. They discovered that they both liked reading, and both of them had read all the Harry Potters. Anne-Marie had devoured each one as it had come out, and so had Francesca, though she'd got a bit bored with them in the end. "I started to think they were all the same," she said, but Anne-Marie would hear none of it. She'd read the whole series over twice.

She changed the subject. "What do you make of Martin Huxley? Wasn't he at Aston High with you? Has he always been a nerd?"

Francesca laughed. "Oh, he's not a nerd, he's just really shy. But I've known him for ages, we've been next door neighbours ever since we've been little and he's really nice when you get to know him. And he's interested in everything, and knows an awful lot, about everything from centipedes to semiconductors. He got bullied a lot when he was younger because he was so short-sighted and so he gets nervous with people. But if he thinks you're okay then he'll talk to you, particularly if you want him to explain something he knows about. You can't stop him sometimes!"

In fact Francesca and Martin always walked home together. They'd learned not to be seen together too much when they'd been at Aston High because then they got teased for being boyfriend and girlfriend, but once they were clear of the school gates they were safe. Their route home from College took them through the park, and as usual they were deep in discussion about their school work. Suddenly Martin stopped and pointed.

"Look!"

Francesca looked.

Martin was pointing at a butterfly with bright red wing tips.

"It's a Red Admiral. You don't often see them," he told her.

It fluttered away from them towards a little copse of trees and bushes in the centre of the park and disappeared amongst them. Martin tried to follow it, pushing the bushes to one side. Then he stopped and stood up suddenly. He'd gone a bit white. "Um," he said. "I think you'd better come and have a look at this."

There was a pair of legs protruding from under the bush, looking pale and blotchy.

There were women's shoes on the feet.

"It must be a mannequin, like they have in shop widows," said Francesca. For some reason she was whispering.

Carefully Martin pushed first one branch then another to the side and finally uncovered the whole thing.

It wasn't a mannequin, it was a body!

It was Miss Fairchild's body!

Francesca was the first to speak. Her voice was shaky. "We'd better call the police hadn't we?" and without waiting for an answer she keyed the emergency number into her cell phone.

Martin went on examining the body.

"There's a gash in her throat. It looks as if something has bitten her."

Taking care not to disturb the crime scene he examined the rest of the body. "She's so pale, she's almost white. Almost as if all the blood's been drained out of her. No wonder we thought it was a mannequin." The body was indeed very pale, though there was plenty of dried blood around her throat and some had even spilled down her dress.

"We'd better wait here until the police arrive," said Francesca, and no sooner were the words out of her mouth than they heard the siren.

The police rapidly cordoned off the area, and took the two of them back to the police station to get their statements.

That night the story was all over the local news.

"News just in," the newsreader announced. "The body of missing school teacher, Anne Fairchild, has been found in Alchester. Two students discovered it hidden in bushes in Alchester Park in the centre of the town. We go over to our local reporter, Anne Evans, at the scene of the crime."

The shot cut to the park. Anne Evans was addressing the camera.

"I'm standing in front of the copse where the body was found this afternoon by two students on their way home from Alchester College. I have with me Inspector Griffin who is leading the investigation. Inspector, what can you tell us about the crime?" She pointed the microphone towards him.

"The body was found around 4.30 this afternoon. We are currently withholding the identities of the two students who found the body for their own safety."

"Do you think they might be at risk then?" she asked.

"Until we have made further enquiries we are not in a position to say."

"What can you tell us about the body itself? Do you have any leads?" she asked him.

"All we can say at the moment is that it appears to have been a particularly brutal murder, and there are aspects of the case that are somewhat unusual. We are currently pursuing our enquiries as to who the perpetrator might be, but until we know more we are not in a position to give any further details."

"Do you have any clues as to the time of death?"

"Initial evidence does suggest that she was murdered sometime early Monday evening, which is the time at which she is thought to have disappeared. And we are appealing for witnesses to come forward who might have seen anything unusual at the time. In the meantime we do ask the public to be on their guard, particularly if approached by a stranger. We don't know if the murderer will strike again but we want to avoid another death if possible."

The next morning there was an explosion of rumour and speculation: about how Miss Fairchild had died; about who might have killed her; about why they might have

killed her; and about who the two students were who had found her. The only two who didn't take part were Francesca and Martin.

Anne-Marie saw. "Those two are very quiet, have you noticed? I wonder if they know anything," she told Maisie.

"Perhaps it was them that found the body," said Maisie.

Anne-Marie was sceptical. Serious people like Martin Huxley and Francesca Ellis didn't find bodies in parks. It was always kids that were chasing around, or exploring places where they weren't supposed to go. People like Martin Huxley and Francesca Ellis didn't explore places where they weren't supposed to go.

But then Maisie had a sudden thought. "Listen. Perhaps it was them after all. They both live in Aston and that means that the park must be on their way home. Let's ask them."

They waited for a quiet moment and then took Martin and Francesca to one side. Maisie went straight to the point. "You found the body didn't you?"

"How did you know?" said Martin before he could stop himself. Maisie told him how she'd guessed. "Well we're not supposed to say anything. The police say we should keep quiet for our own safety."

"Why?" Anne-Marie asked.

"Well they think whoever did it might come after us too if they know that we were the first witnesses," he told them. He was so pleased that anyone wanted to know what he thought, that before Francesca could stop him he told them everything, from the butterfly to the body. He even told them about the wound in her throat and the blood being drained out of her.

At lunchtime there was more information on the news. Everyone crowded round the TV in the common room. The police had recovered the CCTV footage and were broadcasting it to see if it would jog anybody's memory. It showed Miss Fairchild coming out of the supermarket. She loaded her car and was just shutting the boot when a large and apparently friendly dog approached her. She reached down and patted it whereupon it trotted a few feet away from her, then stopped and looked around. It looked as if it was barking.

She watched it for a moment, but then turned back to get into her car, but it came back and stood and looked up at her, then trotted away again and turned and looked at her again. She appeared to be talking to it. They could see her gesturing.

"It looks as if it wants her to follow it," said Anne-Marie

"And she's asking it if that's what it wants," said Maisie.

The dog came back for a third time and gave her a nudge. It was almost as if it was pushing her in the direction it wanted her to go.

"Well there's no doubt about that," said Anne-Marie. "It's telling her it wants her to move."

"And it's telling her where it wants her to move to," said Jimmy.

They watched as Miss Fairchild again seemed to speak to the dog, and then she started to walk in the direction that it had indicated, waving it on in front of her. Together they moved towards the park and out of the range of the camera.

There followed a brief interview with Mark Daniels, Miss Fairchild's fiancé.

"Can you throw any light on her behaviour?" the reporter asked him.

“She’s always been fond of animals, dogs in particular,” he told her, “and if she thought one was in trouble she would go to every length to help it. It looks as if she thought this one was in trouble, that perhaps it had wounded puppies somewhere, and it would be just like her to drop everything and to follow it to try to help it.”

“I gather this has happened before.”

“Yes that’s right. She once saw a stray dog which seemed to be wanting her to follow it, and she found one of its puppies caught up in some brambles. She’s always been like that, wanting to help out animals that are hurt or in trouble.”

Mark’s Daniel’s story had been confirmed by two witnesses in the park who had reported that they had seen a woman with a dog that kept stopping and looking around at her as if it wanted her to follow it. She in her turn seemed to be talking to it and waving her arm as if to encourage it to go on.

It was a large dog with a bit of wolfhound in it they said.

It had disappeared into the copse in the middle of the park and the woman had disappeared after it.

Nobody had seen either of them come out.

Everyone burst into excited conversation, speculating on what might have happened, and Anne-Marie and Jimmy carried on talking about it as they walked home. She told him about how Martin Huxley had actually found the body.

“But do you know” she went on, “there’s something about his story that’s been niggling away at the back of my mind all day but I can’t think what it is.”

They walked along in silence for a bit, then Anne-Marie suddenly realised exactly what it was that was niggling away. “I know what it is, it’s the bit about the body looked as if all the blood had been drained out of it.”

“So. What about it?”

“Well do you remember when we were talking about the dead animals, how we said it was strange that they hadn’t been eaten, that it was as if whatever it was had only been after the blood?”

“Yeah”

“Well that’s what Martin said. It looked as if all the blood had been drained out of her. What sort of animal does that . . . ?”

3. Club Night

Anne-Marie didn't go round to Jimmy's house as often as he came to hers. Her parents were more sort of homely, and always interested in what they were doing. Jimmy's parents by contrast left them much more to themselves and never asked about their work. But this Sunday they were at Jimmy's because that was where he had arranged to meet Gabriel.

When Anne-Marie arrived she wasn't at all surprised to meet Mrs Brownside coming out of their front door in her smart clothes. "Oh there you are," she said airily. "I can't stop, I'm just off to a coffee morning. I think we're raising money for the starving in Ethiopia this week. I expect you know where to find Jimmy."

Anne-Marie made her way upstairs to Jimmy's study bedroom. It was about twice the size as hers, with the computer in pride of place on one side, and with Jimmy's large worktable on another, and a pile of his dirty football clothes in the corner. At home Anne-Marie had to make do with a single table, with her computer and all her work books jostling for space on it.

"Your mum let me in," she told him. "She said she's off to raise money for the starving in Ethiopia."

"Oh that was last week!" said Jimmy. "This week it's the Alchester Heritage Trust. She only goes to meet her friends and gossip anyway."

There was a ring at the doorbell. Jimmy went down to the front door and opened it to find Gabriel standing there.

"Hi Gabriel. Come on in. Anne-Marie's here already."

Anne-Marie went off to get a glass of milk for Jimmy and cokes for herself and Gabriel, leaving the two boys to get onto the web to start researching their project. When she came back Gabriel was in mid sentence, "...yes, but we've got to include the biological side too. The carbon cycle is the basis of life and death."

He smiled at Anne-Marie. "We need your help. How does all this fit together?" and very soon the three of them were sat around Jimmy's computer.

They finished their drinks, sat back, and started talking about the murder. "I'm sure Orlando has got something to do with it," said Anne-Marie.

"I don't like him any more than you do," said Jimmy, "but I can't see how he can be linked with the death. The CCTV camera didn't show him so far as we know. The witnesses in the park only talked about a dog being with her."

"I still think he looks pretty suspicious if you ask me," said Anne-Marie. "He can't meet you in the eye, he's always late and he has a permanent scowl. *And* he comes from St Josephs which is where all the rough kids go," she added.

"Well just because he comes from St Joseph's doesn't mean he's a murderer," said Jimmy. "In any case she didn't have her throat cut, she was bitten, and that's what an animal would do. It's got to be the dog."

"But then why didn't anyone see it leaving the copse?"

"Or the corpse," Jimmy interrupted with grim humour.

"It seems to have disappeared into thin air," Anne-Marie continued, ignoring him.

Jimmy had a sudden thought: "I wonder if the animal deaths are linked with it in some way. In which case we're back to the theory that it was some sort of big cat: a panther, or a leopard or something."

"Or even a wolf," Anne-Marie added.

“But if it really was one of those big cats, surely it would have devoured the animals,” said Anne-Marie. “All that would have been left of that lamb would have been a bloody carcass. Nor would it explain why Miss Fairchild’s body was drained of blood but not eaten,” she added.

Anne-Marie turned to Gabriel who had been silent up to that point. “What do you think?” she asked him.

“I think there’s something out there that we need to seriously worry about,” he said. “But I wouldn’t care at this stage to suggest just quite what it could be,” he added.

“At the rate we’re going I’m going to end up believing Paul’s suggestion, that it’s a vampire!” Anne-Marie joked, and they all laughed.

The following morning, next to an article about volunteers being wanted to clean up the White Horse on White Horse Hill, the local paper printed a warning from the police:

DANGEROUS ANIMAL AT LARGE

Police have today issued a warning to the general public to be on the watch for a wild animal that may be at loose in the Alchester area. They describe the animal as probably being a wolf, or possibly a large cat, like a panther, or a leopard. If any member of the public should sight the animal they should contact the police immediately. Under no circumstances must the animal be approached as it is likely to be highly dangerous. Parents are urged to keep an eye on small children, and the public in general should avoid dark or isolated places at night. Police suspect the animal may have escaped from a private zoo and the owners of any such zoo are asked to contact the police urgently if they have lost such an animal in the past week or so.

There was no suggestion that this had anything to do with the Fairchild case, and so far as her death was concerned, a brief article at the bottom of the page simply said that the police had a number of leads which they were following up. After a warning like that, there was panic in the town.

All the playgrounds were deserted.

None of the infant schools let the children out at break time.

Parents drove their kids to school rather than letting them walk or cycle.

Speculation was rife.

And the students at Alworth tended to stay in tight groups if they went out.

For all that the police had made no explicit link between Miss Fairchild's death and the warning about an escaped panther or leopard, it didn't take long for them to make the link for themselves.

As for Francesca Ellis and Martin Huxley, the police had told them that they no longer thought that they were at risk. Naturally reticent, they didn't spread the word about finding Miss Fairchild's body, but Anne-Marie and Jimmy did. There didn't seem to be any need for secrecy any more, so they told their friends, who told *their* friends, and very soon it was common knowledge. For the first time in his life Martin Huxley was the centre of attention, and blinked his way into the limelight like a mole emerging from a long hibernation.

Francesca took it all more in her stride, answering questions when she was asked, but doing her best to concentrate on her work despite everything. And as the details about the wound became more widely known so the wild animal theory gained the support of the majority. The majority, however, did *not* know about the animal killings, nor did they know about the business about the blood that seemed to link the four deaths. That remained a mystery.

Monday passed without incident.

Tuesday passed without incident.

By Wednesday people were beginning to relax. There'd been no more deaths. No more sheep had gone missing off Adrian Edwards's farm. There'd been no more dead pets so far as anyone knew.

On the Saturday there was going to be what they called a club night.

Gabriel asked Anne-Marie about it.

"Oh it's here at College every other Saturday," Anne-Marie told him. "They do all the lights and everything and get a local DJ in. And there's a bar selling coke and that, but they don't allow alcohol. Everyone comes, it's not just the sixth formers. Like my brother and his mates will be there worse luck!"

As it happened, that Saturday the football team was playing away, and Jimmy would only be back later. They decided to all meet at his house and go on to College from there. He was worried about Anne-Marie though, and asked Gabriel to pick her up and to come across with her. "Just in case there *is* something still out there, two people should be safer than one."

"You'd better come early," she told Gabriel. "Then you can meet my parents."

Gabriel turned up at four o'clock. Anne-Marie wasn't expecting him *that* early, so when the doorbell rang she thought it was one of Paul's mates, probably Johnny Day. He was always visiting and Paul and he spent hours on the computer together. Or these days it could even be Martin Huxley who took his role as Paul's mentor very seriously, and who Paul got on very well with.

So she was a bit surprised when Paul called upstairs that it was for her.

When she got downstairs she found Gabriel smiling at the door, and her brother, silent for once, looking perplexed. Who was this boy who had come calling for his sister?

“Hey, Gabriel!” she said. “Come on in, Mum and Dad are out the back. I’ll tell them you’re here. Come into the living room. Do you fancy some coffee or a coke or something? I’ll make a cup of tea anyway because Mum’s sure to want one,” and she went out into the kitchen leaving Gabriel and her brother together.

Gabriel picked up a computing magazine. “Are you into computers?” he asked him, and of course that broke the ice and soon he and Paul were deep in conversation about the latest editing programs on the market. Gabriel told Paul he shot and edited his own movies.

“I’ve got a program but I’ve never used it,” said Paul.

“It depends which program you’ve got but it’s dead easy. I can show you if you like.”

Anne-Marie came in with her mum.

Gabriel was introduced.

He did and said all the right things. He told Anne-Marie’s mum what a lovely house it was and very soon Anne-Marie could see her mum was quite smitten.

“Anne-Marie tells me you’re new to Alchester,” she said, and plied him with questions about where he lived, what his dad did, what his mum did etc. She wanted all the details.

“We’ve got a house on Elford Road,” he told her. “Dad’s in life insurance and Mum writes exotic cookery books. The last one was called *Spice up Your Life with Something Different*.”

Finally Anne-Marie managed to get a word in. “Come outside and meet my dad,” she said, but the doorbell went again before they could move. This time it was Paul’s mate, Johnny, and he and Paul disappeared upstairs.

“Come on up after,” Paul said to Gabriel.

“I’ve been hearing that you’ve been working with Jimmy and Anne-Marie on her chemistry project,” said her dad. “What’s it all about?”

Gabriel told him and soon they were in deep conversation. “You must talk to Paul if you’re interested in computers,” said her dad. “Did you meet him just now?”

“Yes. I said I’d go and show him the editing program I have,” said Gabriel.

“Well you’d better get up there, but be warned, once he starts talking about his favourite topic he doesn’t stop!”

Gabriel went up.

Downstairs Anne-Marie helped her mum with the dishes and they heard lots of laughter from upstairs. “Well they’re obviously getting on well,” her mum commented. “And what a beautiful boy! I’m sure all the girls must be after him!”

Anne-Marie felt herself going red.

“Why you’re blushing!” said her mother.

“I’m not blushing!” said Anne-Marie crossly, but she was!

After about three quarters of an hour Anne-Marie went up and told Gabriel that Jimmy would be back by now and that they’d better get going.

“You two take care now. Watch out for any wild animals!” said her Mum.

“Look after her,” her dad said.

“Dad! I can look after myself thank you very much!” she said crossly, but she still gave Gabriel a smile.

After they’d gone her dad and her mum compared notes. Her mum gave him ten out of ten. “What a lovely boy. So good looking and such a lovely smile!” she said. “And he got on well with the boys too, you could hear the laughter right down here.”

“Well he’s certainly very bright, not like some of the wet fish we’ve met. But if you ask me, that Jimmy had better look out, or he’ll find he’s got competition,” said her dad.

He had certainly been a hit with Paul and Johnny. “He was dead cool,” said Paul. “Editing is dead easy. Now all I need is a decent digital camera so I can make movies!”

“Uh-uh! I knew there’d be a catch!” said his father.

Anne-Marie and Gabriel picked Jimmy up and went on to College. There was a good crowd already there when they arrived, and the lights were swirling, the DJ was up on the stage, and the music was already pounding away. Maisie and Craig joined them.

Gabriel looked at the two couples. “I can see I’m one too many here!” he said, and he went off, pushing through the press of bodies that were already on the dance floor to get up to the other end of the hall. He soon had a gaggle of girls surrounding him.

“He works fast!” said Jimmy

Anne-Marie had watched him go with a tiny pang of regret and was now watching him chatting with the other girls.

Had she rather hoped he would stay with them?

And was she envious of those other girls?

‘Don’t be stupid,’ she told herself. But Jimmy caught her watching him.

“You look very interested.” he said to her. “What were you two doing on the way over to pick me up?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nothing!” she said defiantly, and gave him a reassuring hug, though whether she was reassuring him or reassuring herself she wasn’t quite sure, but Jimmy grinned at her.

“I was only teasing,” he laughed, and gave her a hug back.

They started comparing notes about who was there with who. They had to shout to make themselves heard. “Look at that Christopher Whitman. He’s dancing with three girls at once!”

“And three of the most attractive ones too!” said Craig, who had joined in the conversation. “How does he do that?”

“Well he’s the best dancer in the place, he’s dead friendly, he’s fun to be with, and he’s not after only one thing, unlike some I could mention!” said Maisie, and dug Craig in the ribs.

“Ouch!” said Craig, but still went on watching them. Maisie saw him.

“Well if you want to dance with those three you’re going to have to turn gay yourself!” she teased.

“No fear!” he exclaimed, and turned to Jimmy for support.

“What about you Jimmy?” Maisie asked him.

“Well you never know. It might be worth it,” he said, teasing Anne-Marie in his turn, and getting a thump for his pains.

“Well if that’s the way you two feel, why don’t you go and dance with *him!*” said Maisie.

Jimmy watched him for a moment as if he was actually considering the idea “Nah, I don’t fancy him!” he said at last.

“What about you Craig?” Anne Marie was teasing Craig in his turn.

“Christ no!” he said hastily, but both boys had to duck and run as a rain of blows descended on them from the laughing girls.

At that point Paul and Johnny came past. “Hi Anne-Marie. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” he teased, and pushed off down to the back of the hall. They too had a gaggle of girls in tow.

“Which one’s his girlfriend?” Maisie asked

“Goodness knows,” said Anne Marie. “It’s a different one every time. I think he and Johnny take it in turns!”

“Look at Lizzie Blair,” said Maisie, “getting it together with Orlando.”

“I don’t know what she sees in him,” said Craig.

“Oh I don’t know,” said Maisie, watching them. “There’s a sort of animal magnetism about him isn’t there, that’s sort of sexy,” and she looked at Anne-Marie for confirmation.

“I know what you mean.”

“Not him as well!” exclaimed Jimmy. “First Gabriel and now him!” but for once Anne-Marie replied seriously.

“It’s not that,” she said, “I mean he’s quite repulsive, but he sort of catches your attention.”

Maisie agreed.

Lizzie knew that she and Orlando were being watched.

“I don’t like that Anne-Marie Jeffries,” she told him. “She’s so stuck up! They’re all the same. Just because they’ve always been here at Alworth they think they’re so superior to newcomers like us. I mean it’s just about alright if you come from Aston High, but if you come from St Josephs, like you, or from one of the villages, like me, you’ve had it.”

“Forget them,” said Orlando. “Just give us a kiss!”

“Oh well, if you’re asking,” she said, and wrapped her arms around him and clamped her lips on his.

They disentangled themselves. “Come on, let’s dance.”

After they’d been dancing for a while Lizzie wanted a breath of fresh air.

“I’m going out the back,” she told him. “You coming?”

There was a doorway at the back of the stage that led out into an enclosed courtyard that had high gates which were closed at night. It was used for deliveries during the day.

When the doorway to the hall was open the centre of the yard was lit by the light streaming out of the door, but even then there was plenty of deep shadow in the corners, and if the doorway was closed the only light came from the lights on the service road outside the gates.

Lizzie went out while Orlando went to the loo. She had expected to find other people out there, but she was on her own. “I hope there’s nothing lurking in those dark corners,” she thought to herself.

She looked around and saw the high gates. “Well at least nothing could get in here, it should be perfectly safe,” she thought, trying to reassure herself.

But there was no denying that it was a bit creepy.

Then she thought she saw a movement in one of the dark corners.

Was that a pair of eyes catching the light?

As she looked, the two spots of light disappeared, just as if the eyes had closed.

“You’re just imagining things,” she told herself, but she could feel her heart beginning to pound. She started to wish that she was not totally on her own. She almost went back in, but her pride wouldn’t let her. She wanted to make a good impression on Orlando.

But the more she was out there the creepier it got.

Suddenly the hall door slammed shut and Lizzie nearly jumped out of her skin. Her heart pounded and she gasped for air. Without the light spilling from the hall the courtyard was virtually dark.

Then she heard a movement.

There was no doubt about it this time, there was definitely something out there with her.

She heard it again, as if someone, or something, was stealthily creeping up on her.

She froze, listening with all her ears.

Then something touched her on the shoulder.

With a strangled cry she spun around . . .

. . . and it was Orlando laughing at her!

“Don’t you *ever* do that to me again!” she screamed into his face and she hit him, hard, beating on his chest.

“Okay, okay,” he said, pushing her off him. “Did I make you jump! It was just a joke.”

“Well it wasn’t a bloody joke as far as I’m concerned, and don’t ever bloody do it again!”

It took her a while to calm down, but she did eventually, and soon she was completely relaxed and laughing at her own imaginings.

“Let’s get a couple of cokes and come back out,” Orlando suggested. They went in, bought them, and Lizzie led the way back out. The light from the hall again disappeared as the door shut behind them.

“Well, where’s my coke then?” she asked, and turned around expecting to find him just behind her.

He wasn’t there.

Thinking he was doing it again she said, “Oh come on Orlando. It’s not funny, it’s just boring.”

She heard a movement in the corner. “I’ll get my own back,” she thought to herself. “I’ll creep up on him and see how he likes it.”

It was then that she felt a hand on the back of her neck.

Whoever it was had an extraordinarily strong grip.

Still thinking it was Orlando, she was just about to yell at him when a second hand clamped itself over her mouth.

Then her neck was released but now an arm gripped her around the chest. She felt the breath being squeezed out of her.

She tried to shout “Let go of me!” but all that came out was muffled noise, “Lt gff uff mff!”

She tried to struggle. She kicked backwards but hit nothing. She found herself lifted off the ground writhing helplessly.

Her head was pulled back.

There was a strong feral smell of live animal mingled something ancient and stale, as if it had been entombed for a long time.

The last thing she was to feel in this world before she lost consciousness was two razor sharp teeth biting deep into her neck.

A strange gurgling noise came from her throat and she sank to the ground, scarlet blood spilling down her front.

Meanwhile Jimmy, Anne-Marie, Maisie and Craig had been getting cokes at the bar and idly watching the crowd. They had seen Lizzie invite Orlando to go out for the first time. Anne-Marie and Maisie looked at each other meaningfully. They watched them come back in, Lizzie seemed to be telling him off.

“I bet he’s being trying it on and she’s told him to get lost!” said Maisie, but even as they watched they saw Orlando smiling to himself as if he had pulled off a huge joke.

“I still don’t like him,” said Anne-Marie

“He’s a nasty piece of work,” said Jimmy.

“And sort of sly,” said Maisie.

“As for that Lizzie Blaire, I’ve never liked her either, they deserve each other if you ask me.” They stopped watching and went back onto the dance floor.

They’d been dancing for about 10 minutes when there was a huge disturbance at the door. Orlando came rushing into the hall. He was wild eyed and shouting something incoherent. He had blood all over his hands. He rushed wildly up to the four of them – they were the nearest – and grabbed Jimmy and tried to pull him towards the door.

“Come quickly!” he shouted. “Lizzie’s been attacked!” They looked at each other, decided that Orlando was serious, and rushed out after him. Lizzie was lying on the ground, covered with blood, and with a great gash in her neck.

But otherwise she was deathly pale.

“Is she dead? Is she dead?” Maisie was panicking.

Jimmy bent down to listen at her mouth. “I think she’s still breathing,” he said. “Help me carry her,” and between the four of them they lifted the body up and took it into the hall.

Lizzie’s head lolled to one side.

Everyone crowded round.

Someone told the DJ, and the music stopped and the hall lights came up. There was a yell of dismay from the dance floor, but the word got round rapidly as to what had happened.

“Somebody get a mirror,” yelled Jimmy.

One was produced and Jimmy held it to Lizzie’s mouth.

It didn’t mist up.

“She is dead isn’t she,” said Orlando. It was the first time he’d spoken but it sounded more like a statement than a question.

“We’d better call an ambulance, and the police,” said Jimmy.

The ambulance came and went and they told the police their story. Orlando remained silent.

“Well since you were the last person to see Lizzie alive,” they said to him, “you’d better come down to the police station to fill in the details.” Then turning back to the others: “You’re free to go, but we may want to talk to you again,” they told them, “so keep yourselves available for the next couple of days.”

The four of them, keeping very close together, set off home. Paul joined them. At first he pestered them for details, but they remained very silent and it didn’t take very long for him to shut up too.

Finally Craig asked the question that had been in all their minds: “Well did you see them?”

“Yes,” said Jimmy.

Anne-Marie looked at him.

“Two teeth marks,” said Jimmy, in answer to her unasked question.

Craig nodded. “Yes. Just as if something with two long canine teeth had bitten deep into her neck.”

“Are you two thinking what I think you’re thinking?” Anne-Marie asked.

“You don’t really mean . . . ?” Maisie tailed off in mid question.

It was Paul that said the word, and for once he wasn’t joking.

“My God, it really is a vampire?”

4. The Archive

It was next morning and Jimmy was round at Anne-Marie's. In the cold light of day they felt very differently about the previous night's killing.

"That vampire theory, you don't really believe it do you?" Anne-Marie asked him.

"No it's just nonsense," said Jimmy. "It was because it was dark and we were all hyped up that we started thinking like that. I mean everyone knows it's just horror film stuff. You know, *I Dated a Vampire*, or *The Bite that Kills*, that sort of rubbish."

They were joined by Paul. He was not prepared to let go of the vampire theory so quickly.

"But how do you *know* it's rubbish?" he argued.

"Because like Jimmy said, vampires don't exist. It's scary movie stuff. You can't take it seriously."

"Just because you've never met one doesn't mean they don't exist," Paul countered.

Anne-Marie conceded the point, but still went on arguing. "Well even if they did exist you wouldn't get them in boring places like Alchester. It's all Transylvania, and dark castles and stuff."

"That was in the old films," said Paul. "Now they're often just like motorcycle gangs and stuff. And think about all those unexplained deaths there are. There's tons of them, and nobody ever finds out who's done the killing. Don't you remember, there was all those kids who were killed last year in Harcliffe but they never found out who it was or arrested anyone did they?"

"But that was gang warfare. They said it was gang warfare."

"But they could've been lying. They couldn't prove it. I mean no-one was ever caught."

At that point their dad came in. He and their mum had been ringing around the other parents to see if they could find out anything else to add to the account that Anne-Marie and Paul had given them the previous night.

"Things are serious enough," he said to Paul, "without you coming out with nonsense like that."

"What have you found out Dad?"

"All anyone knows is that Orlando Reid has been held overnight for questioning. It seems that he has a habit of being around the place when these killings happen. First that teacher, and now this girl. I've tried to ring Freddy Olsen" – their dad was on friendly terms with their principal of the college – "but all I get is an engaged tone. I expect he's being swamped with calls."

"What about Lizzie Blaire?" Jimmy asked. "Do they know how she was killed?"

"All I know is that the police are saying nothing at the moment, except that they expect to make a statement soon."

"When's 'soon', Dad?" Paul asked.

"I don't know, Paul. Maybe later today, or more likely tomorrow morning."

Later that morning a policeman came round and questioned Anne-Marie and Jimmy about what they had seen. They could only repeat their story, that Orlando had come running in shouting that Lizzie had been hurt badly, that they had gone out and helped to carry her in, and that once they got her inside they realised she was dead.

“His story was that when he tried to follow Lizzie out the door slammed in his face and that he couldn’t get out for ages. The door seemed to be locked. And that by the time he’d forced his way out Lizzie was either dying or already dead,” the policemen told them. “Can you shed any light on that?” he asked.

“Well we saw them disappear back stage and come back in again the first time,” Anne-Marie told him, “but then we were dancing and didn’t see any more until Orlando came rushing in and grabbed Jimmy.”

“And you can’t see the actual door from the main hall, so we wouldn’t have seen what was going on anyway,” Jimmy added.

“What about the clothes you were wearing last night?”

Jimmy told her that his were at his place, but Anne-Marie retrieved hers from where she had put them to be washed. There was blood all over them.

“I was going to put them through the washing machine, though my mum says it will never come out.”

“Well it’s a good thing you didn’t,” said the policeman, “because we may need them as evidence. You don’t have to worry, the blood is bound to match the dead girl’s since you helped to carry her in, but we just need to make sure.”

“What about the others?” they asked him, “Maisie, and Craig? And what about Orlando?”

“Other officers will be visiting them, and as you know we questioned Orlando last night, since it was he who actually discovered the body. But everyone’s story seems to match, so I am sure you’re all off the hook.”

It was inevitably Paul who asked the question that was on everyone’s lips: “Do you know who did it then?”

“That,” he said, “is what we intend to find out.”

The murder was on the local news at midday. Once again there was a shot of the reporter, Anne Evans, standing outside College.

“There has been another unexplained death in the quiet town of Alchester. Last night a teenager was savagely attacked and killed at a club night at the local college. All that we know is that the victim was a girl, but her identity has not been confirmed. Early this morning a couple whom we presume are the girl’s parents, were seen leaving the police station.”

Her account was inter-cut with a shot of two people, their heads shrouded in coats, being shepherded out of the police station and into a waiting police car.

Then there was a shot of Inspector Griffin. Anne Evans was holding the microphone up to him.

“We can confirm that there was an incident at Alworth College last night, but we are not in a position to release further details at this point,” he said.

“When can we expect a more definite statement?” she asked him.

“As soon as we know more. In the meantime we’re asking the public to be careful, and we are suggesting that people should take special care if they are out after dark.”

“Are you suggesting a curfew?” she asked.

“Not at all. There is no need for people to disrupt their normal lives, but we do suggest that people who are out on foot should be cautious, and to not go out on their own if it can be avoided.”

The shot cut back to the reporter outside the college. “This is the second death in as many weeks that has been associated with Alchester College. Last week a teacher who works here was found dead in the local park.” There was a shot of the park. “It is not clear whether the two deaths are related. Unofficial sources suggest that a student is being held for questioning. We will keep you updated with further details when they emerge, but in the meantime, back to studio.”

At College the next day the excitement was intense. The subject was on everyone’s lips. The Principal called an assembly for the whole college and in an attempt to calm the speculation down he made an announcement in which he appealed for restraint.

“As many of you will know, one of our students was killed at the club night on Saturday. The police have empowered me to release her name officially so I can tell you that it was Elizabeth Blaire, one of our new sixth formers this term. I am well aware that the rumours will be rife about who might have perpetrated this dreadful act, but the police have questioned the main witnesses and have confirmed that none of our students is currently under any suspicion. I am not going to tell you the names of those witnesses, though I am sure many of you will know who they are, but I do urge you not to pester them with questions about what happened. In the meantime I am sure you will join me in sending Mr. & Mrs. Blaire our deepest sympathy at this dreadful time.”

Of course whatever the Principal might have said the talk was of nothing else, and speculation intensified when Orlando didn’t appear. At morning break everyone crowded round the four chief witnesses.

It was mostly Martin Huxley, serious as ever, who asked the questions, though everyone else chipped in.

“How pale was she?” he asked.

“How do you mean, pale?”

“Well when me and Francesca found Fairchild’s body it was very pale, as if she had been drained of blood.”

It was the same with the animals,” said Anne-Marie

There was a chorus of voices: “What animals?” “Which animals?” “Where?” “When?” and they had to explain to the others about the cat and the dog and the lamb.

“But there was still blood on Lizzie,” said Maisie, bringing the conversation back to the human victims and shuddering at the memory.

“Well even if something was... er... drinking it, her blood would have been pumping out of her pretty fast, and some of it would be bound to have got spilt,” said Martin.

It was Anne-Marie asked the next logical question: “So what would have been drinking it?”

Everybody started talking at once. “Something must have been drinking it, like some animal or something,” said someone. “Yeah, like a vampire bat!” exclaimed someone else.

“Or maybe not a vampire bat even, but a vampire itself . . .”

There was a long silence. Somebody had said the word.

Vampire!

They looked round to see who it was, and it was Christopher Whitman, who had just joined them.

“You look as if you’re even hoping it might be one?” Anne-Marie said to him. It was more of a question than a statement.

“Well it would be fascinating to meet one. There’s all sorts of things I’d want to ask it,” said Christopher.

“About what?”

“Oh you know. About what it feels like to be different. That sort of stuff.”

Anne-Marie looked at him in silence for a moment, but then Jimmy broke the spell.

“Oh come on you lot!” said Jimmy. “A vampire! That’s what Anne-Marie’s idiot brother said. It’s got to have been Orlando. Look, he was the last person to see Fairchild alive, he was the last person to see Lizzie alive. It stands to reason.”

“That doesn’t stop *him* being a vampire,” said Maisie. “I mean you think about that dark brooding animalistic look he’s got about him. He never lets you see his eyes. And what about his name, Orlando, it’s a bit exotic isn’t it?”

“Yes, but a vampire!” Jimmy stuck to his guns. “I mean everyone knows they’re rubbish.”

“Well if he’s not a vampire then at the very least he’s a serial killer,” said Craig.

“Well okay, but then what about the teeth marks?” Martin asked.

“Well perhaps he wanted to make us *think* it was a vampire,” said Anne-Marie.

“God!” said Maisie, “I’ve just thought of something.” They all looked at her. “You know I do English, French & German.”

“So?”

“Well Orlando does too, and guess what his English project is about?”

“So, tell us.”

“He’s only doing a project on Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, that’s all!” she exclaimed. “So he’d know all about teeth marks and that.”

“Well I guess that’s possible,” said Martin. “But one way of checking it out would be to see if there have been other attacks in other places that Orlando couldn’t have done.”

“Well,” said Anne-Marie somewhat reluctantly, “Paul did say there’d been unexplained deaths in Harcliffe last year, but knowing him he probably dreamed it.”

“Well we could check that out at least,” said Francesca Ellis. It was the first time she’d spoken. “I’m working in the county archive tomorrow for my history project, and it’s got all the back copies of the Harcliffe Chronicle. I’ll see what I can find out.”

The county archives were in an isolated building out on the Wilmington Road. Francesca went there regularly because she was researching her family history and had a card which allowed her access to the archive whenever she wanted. The main archive was in a huge basement filled with rows and rows of dusty shelves full of documents and records. Every now and then there was a worktable illuminated by a reading light for people to sit down and read whatever they had come to look for.

There were passageways and occasional gaps between the shelves so that you could get from one row to another, and as a result the place was like a labyrinth. If you didn’t know your way around you could spend hours walking up and down looking for the right shelf.

On the occasions that Francesca had been there she had found the place pretty deserted and had even been on her own down there once or twice. Some people would

have found the whole place creepy, but Francesca didn't mind. She was always so absorbed in whatever she was doing that it never even occurred to her that someone might be lurking in the shadows. So when on this particular afternoon the curator said to her, "You're on your own down there this afternoon my love. Nobody's going to disturb you," she wasn't the least bit bothered.

Once in the archive she went straight for the Harcliffe Chronicle shelves. The actual newspapers themselves were not yet on line, but they were computer indexed, so she entered 'UNEXPLAINED DEATHS' into the search engine, and she found that there had indeed been a number of reports all dated at around the same time about a year previously.

Each of them was about an unexplained death.

And each of them had happened in Harcliffe itself.

The newspapers were kept in huge heavy binders and she found the one that covered the dates she needed, lugged it to the nearest table, switched on the table light, and started leafing through the individual papers. She found the first report:

Schoolgirl Murdered: Police Baffled

Police today are searching for the killer of schoolgirl Amy MacDonald, whose body was found last night after her parents reported that she hadn't returned home. The body was discovered in the Waverly Estate playground, just around the corner from her home, and police have reported that her death was caused by a particularly vicious attack

The police are looking for witnesses, and have asked anyone who noticed anything unusual in the vicinity of the death to come forward. In the meantime they are warning people not to go out on their own after dark if they can help it.

Already there seemed to be a number of similarities between the Harcliffe killing and the two Alchester killings, and Francesca started making notes.

She was busy writing when she heard a sound.

She listened, and decided it was just the door, but that meant that someone must have come in.

She listened again but there was no sound of any movement, so she told herself that no-one had actually come in, someone must have just looked in to make sure everything was okay.

She went back to her notes and was just finishing off when the main lights went out. Only her worktable light was left on, and she was otherwise surrounded by darkness.

'Oh bother,' she thought, 'they must have thought there was no-one here.'

She called out. "Hello! Is there anyone there?"

Silence.

"Can you turn the lights back on, I'm still in here!"

Silence.

She started to feel a bit frightened. 'I don't like this very much,' she thought to herself.

Then she heard a movement, a creak of a floorboard perhaps, and the hairs on the back of her neck start to prickle.

She suddenly realised that when she sat down at the table she hadn't really paid much attention to which way she was sitting. It was going to be difficult to find her way out in the dark through the maze of bookshelves.

She heard another movement, much closer to her now, then a hiss like an indrawn breath.

She felt a constriction of fear in the back her throat. She needed to hear the sound of her own voice just to try to curb her rising panic.

"Please stop this," she called out, "I don't like these games."

Her voice echoed back to her out of the emptiness.

Then out of the side of her eye she saw the glimmer of a movement, and panic took over completely.

She ran.

Shafts of light from her worktable lit the occasional corridor of books, but the rest of the place was in complete darkness.

Where was the exit?

She didn't know, but she ran anyway, and there was no mistaking it now, someone, or something, was chasing her.

She lost all sense of direction and ran smack into a bookshelf. Gasping to regain her breath she turned and ran again, hoping that she was running *towards* the exit, not away from it.

She hit more shelves and heavy volumes of documents fell and crashed to the floor behind her.

Every now and then she caught a glimmer of movement, it seemed to be there whichever way she turned. Either there was more than one of them, or it could move extremely quickly.

And it could obviously see in the dark.

Finally it moved in for the kill. She heard an unearthly shriek and she realised that it was her own scream she was hearing. The thing grabbed her from behind, clamping its hand over her mouth.

"It's no use screaming," it hissed in her ear, "no-one will hear you. There's nobody here. They've all gone home."

Keeping its hand over her mouth it flung her around so that she was facing it. With a strength she didn't know she had, she fought back, kicking and scratching at it but it was implacable. Then she tripped backwards on one of the volumes that had fallen from the shelves and immediately it was on top of her, pinning her to the ground.

She felt its panting breath on her face, and smelt what seemed to be a smell of centuries old decay.

As it pressed itself closer to her a glimmer of light from her worktable shone on its face, and with a last final shock she recognised who it was, but before she could shout out the name it clamped its hand over her mouth again.

“That’s right, it is me!” it gloated, and it sank its teeth into her neck and drank deeply. Only when it was satisfied did it pull away, and as the last of the blood splashed out of her, her beating heart slowed and stopped.

She was dead.

The vampire wiped the back of its hand over its mouth and was gone.

5. Arrest

“Alchester residents have been shocked by yet another brutal killing,” said the newsreader’s voice.

The Jeffries family were listening to the local news on the radio while they were getting their breakfast. Everyone instantly stopped what they were doing.

“Once again Alworth College is the focus of horrifying events with yet another of their students being found dead,” the voice continued.

“Quick Dad, turn on the tele,” said Paul. The television newsreader had just started the item.

“The body was discovered at 7 o’ clock this morning when the caretaker opened the archive for the cleaners,” he announced. “We’re going over to our reporter who is at the scene,” and the shot cut to her, with yet again Inspector Griffin standing beside her.

“Thank you John,” she said to the newsreader. “As you can see once again I have Inspector Griffin with me from the local C.I.D. Inspector, can you give us any more details about what the girl was doing in the archive in the first place?”

“The evidence we have so far comes from the material we found on her worktable. She appears to have been searching through back copies of the Harcliffe Chronicle, and had been making notes on a murder that occurred in Harcliffe about a year ago. We are making this detail public since we are very anxious to talk to anyone who can throw any light on why she was researching this particular material.”

“Does that Harcliffe murder have any similarities with the current spate of murders here in Alchester?”

“Yes it does. It was one of a number of murders that occurred there last year, all of which were similar in character to the murders that have occurred here.”

“Do you think we are looking at the work of a serial killer?”

“It’s early to say but it certainly looks as if that is the case,” said the inspector. “The similarities in the ways that all these victims were killed certainly suggest that they are the work of one person.”

The reporter continued with her questioning. “All the victims are associated with Alworth College in one way or another, first the teacher, and now two students. Do you think there is a connection there?”

“It’s College!” Paul exclaimed. “Who’s been killed now?”

“Shush! Listen!” said Anne Marie

“There does seem to be a connection with the college,” said the Inspector, “and we are concentrating our inquiries in that direction.”

“Do you have any suspects?”

“Not at the moment, but we will be interviewing all the girl’s fellow students to see if they can shed any light on this dreadful crime.”

“Yes but who’s been killed? Who’s been killed?” Anne-Marie shouted at the television. She was on tenterhooks.

The shot cut back to the reporter herself.

“We don’t know much more at this stage,” she said. “Not surprisingly the girl’s parents don’t feel able to talk to the press for the moment, they have been up all night helping the police to find her and are of course quite distraught now that they know she’s dead. However we have managed to talk to Mrs. Ellis’s sister....”

“My God, it’s Francesca! It’s Francesca!” exclaimed Anne-Marie.

“... who had this to say:” and it cut to a shot of a tearful woman talking directly to the camera.

“I just hope they catch whoever did this, he deserves to be hung. He’s nothing but an animal! They should bring back the death penalty for an animal like this!”

Inspector Griffin was at the college already when Anne-Marie and the others got there that morning, and was questioning everyone about what Francesca was doing in the archive. They told him she was following up rumours about the Harcliffe murders.

“She said she was going to have a look at the back copies of the paper, so that’s what she must have been doing when she was um... murdered,” Anne-Marie told him.

“Well that explains why she was there,” he said, “but in the meantime what can you tell me about Orlando Reid?”

Everybody looked at every one else.

“You’ve obviously all been talking about him,” he said.

After a bit of a silence where everyone looked at everyone else again, Jimmy spoke up. He knew he had to be careful about what he said.

“We don’t like to accuse anyone without any evidence, but he didn’t make any friends, and the only one who liked him was Lizzie Blair and she ended up like.. um... you know... dead.”

“Yes,” said Maisie, “and then when Martin told us about Miss Fairchild’s body looking as if it had been drained of blood, just like Lizzie’s was too, I mean I know it sounds stupid but somebody did suggest it looked as if it was some sort of animal that drank blood, like, you know, a vampire bat or something. And then it was just that Orlando was doing his English project on Dracula, well it all seemed to tie up somehow. I mean it’s not as if we think that he’s a vampire or anything stupid like that,” she added hurriedly.

“We knew he was the last person here to see Miss Fairchild alive, and he was with Lizzie when she was killed,” said Jimmy. “But then it doesn’t look like he was anywhere near Francesca when she was killed, so I don’t expect it’s him really...” he added rather lamely.

“Okay, thanks,” said the inspector, “but for goodness sake don’t start going on about vampires or any nonsense like that or you’ll only end up scaring yourselves half to death, never mind what it will do to your younger brothers and sisters!”

After the inspector had gone Craig said idly, “I wonder where he lives.”

“Where who lives?”

“Orlando.”

They all looked at him. “God yes, we never thought of that,” said Maisie.

“I wonder who would know,” said Anne-Marie. “Jimmy, you know that girl in your tutor group, Mandy Davies?”

“Yes.”

“Well she came from St Josephs too didn’t she?”

“So?”

“God, sometimes Jimmy you’re so dense!” said Anne-Marie. “So ask her.”

“Well I could I suppose,” said Jimmy uncertainly, so Maisie interrupted him.

“Don’t worry, I’ll ask her,” she said,

So she did.

And when she saw them again later, they could see that she was bursting with news:

“He only lives on the Wilmington Road! Down there by the Archive!” she told them. “So you see it must be him,” she added, jumping to the obvious conclusion.

“The thing that’s still peculiar is the neck wounds,” said Anne-Marie.

“That’s right. I know it’s absurd, but we keep coming back to the vampire theory,” said Craig.

Jimmy was still scathing: “The next thing you’re going to tell me is that Orlando himself is a vampire,” he said.

“Well . . .” Maisie tailed off.

“Well if he isn’t then perhaps he deliberately stabbed his victims in the neck in such a way as to suggest that it really was a vampire that had killed them,” said Anne-Marie. “I mean we know that he was doing that project on *Dracula* don’t we, so he’d know what to do.”

“How would he do that?” Craig asked. “It sounds pretty difficult to me. If you ask me, it’s been a vampire all along, right from when it killed those animals at the back of your house,” he looked at Anne-Marie, “and if it is one, then Orlando’s *my* prime suspect.” He turned to Gabriel, who had so far said nothing. “What about you, Gabriel, what do you think?”

“I think vampires do exist,” he said quietly. “In which case you’re going to need a vampire hunter, a seeker,” he added.

Anne-Marie took a different route to college the next morning because her mother had asked her to drop off a note for one of her colleagues who lived on Elford Road. She was walking along thinking about her work when she was startled by a footstep behind her. Her heart jumped into her mouth for a second and she spun around . . . and there was Gabriel smiling at her.

“Don’t panic, it’s only me,” he said.

“You scared me, creeping up on me like that.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to. What are you doing coming this way?” he asked. “You don’t normally come this way or I’d have seen you. I only live up the road you know.”

Anne-Marie explained. Then she asked him, “Do you really think vampires exist?”

“Yes, I do.”

“What makes you think so?” she asked.

“I’ve had some experience of them,” he said.

“What sort of experience?” she asked, but Gabriel just looked at her.

Anne-Marie was not to be put off so easily. “You sound as if you’re a seeker yourself.”

But Gabriel was still evasive. “I’ll explain it to you when I know you a bit better. I wouldn’t want to alarm you unnecessarily.”

Anne-Marie’s heart jumped again, but this time it was for quite a different reason. What did he mean, ‘know you a bit better’?

She suddenly couldn’t think of anything to say.

They walked along in silence and she desperately tried to think of a way of changing the subject. The silence became more and more oppressive, and she was beginning to

feel as if she would burst if one of them didn't say something. Then Gabriel came to her rescue:

"How did your biology assignment work out?" he asked, and to her great relief they started talking about work, but as they got nearer to College, Anne-Marie started to feel nervous again.

She didn't want anyone to see them together.

In particular she realised that she didn't want Jimmy to see them together.

"You go on," she said, "and I'll catch up with you later."

He turned and smiled at her, and he put into words what she had been thinking. "No that's fine," he said. "We don't want people getting the wrong idea. We don't want Jimmy to get jealous!" and he gave her another smile and went on alone.

As Anne-Marie watched him go she wondered what he'd meant about 'getting to know her better'. Did he mean like girlfriend and boyfriend? 'No!' she told herself firmly, 'Jimmy's your boyfriend.' But still there was no denying that Gabriel was very attractive! She tried to think what the difference was between him and Jimmy. Jimmy, she thought, was good looking, but Gabriel was... what? She struggled to find the word:

Beautiful?

Yes, that was the word, Gabriel was beautiful.

As far as personality went, Jimmy was tough and independent, which was what she loved about him, and he was always considerate to her, which made her love him even more. But Gabriel was... again she struggled for the word... sensitive? Yes that was the word. Sensitive. And he did have a lovely smile!

This morning everyone had decided that there *was* a vampire on the loose. But what exactly was a vampire? Where did they come from? How did you recognise one? What could you do about it?

Both Christopher Whitman and Martin Huxley knew quite a bit about them. Christopher had been reading up on their history, and Martin had been doing the more scientific investigations.

"Vampires have roamed the world since the beginning of time," Christopher told them, "but historically, vampires are descended from a famous fifteenth century warrior called Vlad the Impaler. He used to stick long spikes into the ground with the pointed ends sticking upwards and he impaled his enemies on them. They didn't die immediately, it was a slow and painful death. Basically they bled to death. Vlad caught the blood and drank it, believing it would give him extra strength as a warrior."

"Well okay," said Jimmy, "so far, so bloody. But what's this got to do with vampires?"

"Well his father was Vlad Dracul," said Christopher.

"Which is where the name Dracula comes from!" exclaimed Maisie

"Of course, and rumours grew that because he had consumed so much human blood in his lifetime, when he died he became a vampire himself. One of the undead, condemned forever to roam the underworld, and forced to survive on a diet of human blood."

Martin completed the picture from a scientific perspective.

"They get their blood by biting into the carotid artery in the neck," he told them, "which is where the blood flow is fresh. The jugular vein is not so good because that is

returning blood that has lost a lot of its richness and its nutritive value. The fresh blood in the arteries is much richer in the necessary nutrients.”

“Do they drink all the blood?” asked Maisie, “because Lizzie had a lot spilt over her.”

“Well it depends how good a bite they get. If they hit the carotid artery dead on, the blood spurts out faster than they can drink it.”

“What about animals? Do they like animal blood?” Anne-Marie asked him. “Because we’ve got all the dead animals to explain.”

“They prefer human blood, but they can survive on animal blood if they have to.”

“Right, well that’s all the basic stuff,” said Jimmy, “but how do we find it and how do we kill it?”

“That’s where the problems start,” said Christopher. “There isn’t any one single way. In the histories some of them have been killed by having a stake hammered through their hearts. Some of them have been killed by fire. Some of them have been killed by having their heads blown off their bodies. That tends to be very messy, particularly as the heads tend to explode in the process!”

“But how do we know which is which?” Anne-Marie asked.

Martin answered her this time. “First off there are many different species and sub-species,” he started to explain. “Like for instance the first one to be identified was *Vampyrus Stokensius*,” but before he could get any further Maisie interrupted:

“Don’t get too technical,” she told him. “Just give us the basics.”

“Start with sunlight,” Anne-Marie told him. “Aren’t they supposed to burn up in sunlight?”

“*Vampyrus Pueris Perdiditio* is fried to a crisp by sunlight,” he told her, “but a recently discovered species, *Vampyrus Crepusculens*, is quite immune.”

“What about garlic and crosses and all that?”

“Well garlic was certainly good for keeping the older species away, but modern species are not bothered by it. And crosses used to work, but they seem to have grown immune to them too.”

“So is there no definite other certain way you can kill them, whatever the species?” Craig asked.

“The only certain way is by fire. If you can capture them in a burning building you can kill them. But it has to be fire that completely consumes them. You can’t just burn a limb off, because they can still reconstitute themselves.”

“Do they have any natural enemies?” Anne-Marie asked

“Werewolves,” Christopher told them.

“Werewolves?”

“Historically vampires had assistants in the form of large dogs or wolves. Some of them could even shape-change into wolves themselves. But at some stage one of the wolf varieties separated off and became werewolves, dedicated to attacking their former masters.”

“What about turning into vampires if you’re bitten,” asked Maisie, “because so far none of the victims have been turned into vampires, they’ve just been killed.”

“They have to take special care when they’re biting you,” Martin told her. “They won’t drink your blood, they will just infect you so that you turn into a vampire yourself,

and in a number of cases you have to drink *their* blood before you are completely turned.”

“And if somebody is turned can they be cured?” Maisie asked.

“You have to find the source, the original vampire that bit you. Kill them and you’re cured,” Christopher told them.

“And what about the bit in between? After you’ve been bitten, but before your source has been killed?” Craig asked.

“I don’t know,” said Christopher, “but I must say it would be fascinating to find out.”

Anne-Marie gave him a quick look. It was the second time he’d suggested he’d like to meet one.

“Are they all male, or do you get female ones?” Craig asked. “I wouldn’t mind meeting a female one,” he joked. Maisie turned on him angrily:

“This is serious Craig!” she yelled at him. “Francesca’s been murdered, and any one of us could be next.”

But Martin took his question seriously. “You get both,” he told them. “One of the earliest species to be discovered, *Vampyrus Bathoriensis*, is female. And you get lesbian and gay ones” – he resisted the temptation to give Christopher a quick look – “*Vampyrus Carmilliensis* is lesbian, and *Vampyrus Nox Consternatio* is gay, but either way they will drink the blood of anybody who comes their way, male or female,” he continued.

“And whichever way round, they do tend to be strangely attractive, even sexy,” Christopher added.

“So we’re none of us safe?” said Anne-Marie.

“No.”

“Anything else?” asked Jimmy.

“Christopher’s right about shape changing,” Martin told them. “Vampirologists at the Van Helsing Institute have discovered that they can shape-change into other animals at will. The most obvious is a huge vampire bat, but there are reports of them changing into panthers, or leopards, and like Christopher said, into wolves.”

“And it’s impossible to catch them,” he added. “They have the power of instantaneous movement, and attempts to hold one in captivity have been quite futile. *Vampyrus Stokensius*, for example, can even dematerialise and seep through the narrowest cracks in the form of a sort of mist.”

“Alright, but you still haven’t told us how to find them,” said Jimmy.

“Ideally you need a seeker.”

It was not the first time that Anne-Marie had heard the word. “So what exactly is seeker?” she asked, “and what can they do?”

“They are better than ordinary mortals at reading the signs that a vampire is about the place. And they have very highly attuned senses that can detect one when they are in its presence. Some people say it’s because they’ve got a drop of vampire blood in them themselves. Perhaps an ancestor was bitten but survived, or something like that,” Christopher told them.

“Are they sexy too?” Maisie asked, “with all that vampire blood in them.”

“They can be,” said Christopher, “and they tend to give the impression of being extra sensitive . . .”

. . . and for some reason an image of Gabriel flashed through Ann-Marie’s mind. She even looked around to find him, but he wasn’t there.

“Well we haven’t got one of those so what else can we do?” said Jimmy. He had obviously *not* thought of Gabriel

“You have to look for unexplained deaths that sound suspicious,” Christopher told him.

“Like we’ve got here?” said Craig.

“Yes, particularly if the victims have been attacked in the throat.”

“Again, just like we’ve got here?”

“Yes.”

“Well that proves it as far as I am concerned. That dog that was supposed to have killed Fairchild: some of the witnesses said it looked like a wolfhound,” said Craig. “So whatever that police inspector had to say, I reckon we’ve got a vampire on our hands.”

And the others had to agree.

That evening on the news Anne-Marie and her family watched as it was announced that Orlando had been taken in for questioning. There followed an interview with two people who were obviously Orlando’s parents. Mrs Reid was speaking:

“The police have no evidence to hold him on. The only reason he’s being questioned is because the other students at the college have lied about him. They have never made him welcome. They had it in for him from day one. He will certainly not be returning there when he is released.”

“Do you have any comments to add, Mr Reid?” the reporter asked.

“No. Only that those students who have been lying about him know who they are, and we know who they are. They had better watch out or they will live to regret it!”

“That’s you,” said Paul to Anne-Marie after they switched off. “It’s you and Jimmy and all your lot who’ve been talking to the police.”

“It’s you they’re threatening,” he added.

And Anne-Marie realised that it was.

6. Orienteering

On Saturday morning Paul and Johnny were going orienteering. The college had organised it and they had to be there at 8 o'clock to get their instructions. Paul was up and out of the house by 7.30.

The rest of the family got their breakfast more slowly.

"Turn on the tele," Anne-Marie's mother said to her. "It's half past 8 so we should just catch the weather forecast. Let's see what sort of weather Paul's going to have this morning."

Anne-Marie did so. They were just in time to catch the end of the news.

"We return to our top story this morning, the brutal killing of two policemen last night in Alchester," said the newsreader. "We are now in a position to go over to our reporter live at the scene."

The programme cut to a shot of Anne Evans standing outside Alchester police station.

The newsreader's voice continued. "Anne, we gather the murders actually occurred in the police station itself. Do we know who the victims are?"

"Two policemen on night duty have been attacked and killed. When the day shift arrived they discovered the bodies. One of the bodies was slumped in the toilet, and the other body was blocking the passageway outside the cells."

"The attacks were very brutal," she continued. "It looked as if their throats had been ripped out by some savage animal. The body of the first policemen had been completely drained of blood but the second was covered in it. He obviously bled profusely before he died. His blood covered the floor and was even splashed up the walls. The word that is being used is bloodbath."

"Do the police have a weapon?" he asked

"No," she said. "They can't find one."

"This is now the fourth murder in the town in as many weeks. Do we know if they are linked in any way?"

"All of them have been savage, and the suggestion is that in this case the killer arranged the bodies in such a way that it would look as if they were the result of an animal attack."

"We gather they have one of the Alworth students in custody?"

"That's right," she replied. "The police were holding an Alworth College student, Orlando Reid, who was being questioned about the murder of the most recent victim, fellow student Francesca Ellis, whose body was discovered in the Alchester archive on Wednesday. But his name has been linked to all four murders."

"What has happened to him?" the newsreader asked.

"He's disappeared," she replied, "though they don't know how he escaped. There's no sign of a forced entry."

"And that presumably means that he is at large again?" said the newsreader.

"That's correct. Police have warned that he is dangerous and should not be approached."

"And I gather there is a further gruesome detail in his whole business. Can you enlighten us on that?" the newsreader asked.

"It's the most bizarre aspect of the whole case," she replied. "Apparently the words *I Will Be Revenged* were scrawled on the walls in blood."

The shot cut back to the newsreader. “Reports there of a horrendous bloodbath in Alchester,” he said. “We will be returning to the story as more details emerge, but in the meantime here is the weather forecast....”

Anne-Marie’s dad turned the television off and the three of them sat looking at each other in a stunned silence.

The organisers of the orienteering morning had heard nothing of the deaths in the police station, so the morning had proceeded as planned. People were organised in pairs, and they were sent off at 10 minute intervals. Paul and Johnny were last. They’d been given a map and a set of map references that would take them from point to point, and at each point there was a question to be answered.

The first map reference took them to the corner of Wessex Estate, the estate where Paul lived. The question was: *‘What road name sounds like a county but isn’t?’*

“That’s easy,” said Paul. “It’s Wessex Road, the road that runs along at the bottom of our estate. Wessex sounds like Essex, or Sussex, and they’re both counties, but Wessex isn’t.”

The second map reference took them along the Elford Road. There were two instructions:

‘1. Proceed along the road until you come to the map reference. What is odd on your left?’

‘2. There is a pathway to your left between the houses. Where does it go?’

The first question was puzzling. They looked at the houses on the left, they all seemed to be the same as each other. They looked at the gardens. There was nothing odd in any of them. Paul even looked at the numbers – they all *looked* the same: 1, 3, 5, 7... etc. Then he realised . .

“I’ve got it!” he exclaimed. “It’s all odd numbers. The even numbers are on the other side of the road. Look!”

They looked, and sure enough the houses on the right were numbered 2, 4, 6, 8.. and so on. So that was the answer to that one.

The pathway was easier to find. It was just beside number 11. On the other side of the path was there was some ground that was overgrown with bushes and brambles, with the ruins of some old stone walls hidden in the undergrowth.

A sign at the end said ‘To the Cemetery’

‘Follow the path’, said the instruction. *‘What do you find there? What is unusual about it?’*

They followed the path and came to the cemetery. There was a crumbling wooden board, almost rotten, covered with green moss. They could just make out the words that were carved into it.

The Cemetery of the Monastery of St. Michael.

To one side of the rotting board there was a much smaller notice board, a wooden case with a broken glass front, which had a yellowing page of information giving a more detailed account of the history of the cemetery.

Site of the Monastery of St Michael

This cemetery stands on the site of the ancient monastery of St Michael. In 1349, at the time of the Black Death, all the inhabitants of the monastery perished, and the local people, believing the Black Death to be the work of the Devil, burned the monastery down. The cemetery was seen as the burial place for the Devil's spawn, so it was deconsecrated at the same time. However, dates on the gravestones suggest that it continued to be used as a burial site until Victorian times.

In the Second World War a German bomb destroyed what was left of the cemetery, revealing human remains. These were disinterred and have been reburied in the Churchyard of St. Michael and All Angels in the nearby village of Elford.

They made notes and looked at the next instruction: *'What is upside down?'* A thick yew hedge divided the cemetery into two and they decided to split the search between them.

"I'll take this side and you take that side," said Paul, and they set off.

Paul's side was shaded by bushes and low trees, while Johnny's side was out in the full sun. Paul started to explore, pushing through the undergrowth, and discovered that the ground fell away unexpectedly into dips and hollows full of tumbled gravestones. Some of them were upside down, and there was even an upside down cross half buried in the ground, so obviously that was the answer to the question.

But then his attention was caught by one of the names, Azreal. It struck him as being a very unusual name, so he looked around at the other gravestones, and sure enough there were more: Sammael, Belial, Asmodeus, Sariel, Daemon.

And even though the gravestones were old, they didn't look as if they dated from 1349. Sure enough the first one he came to was dated 1822, so whoever was buried here must have been buried in deconsecrated ground. Then even more surprisingly, in the furthest corner of the graveyard, he found what were obviously three newly dug graves.

They had no headstones at all.

There were fresh piles of earth next to each of them.

He stood there in silence for a moment, wondering who on earth would still want to use the cemetery for burying their dead, when he heard a rustling in the dark undergrowth behind him.

When he looked up he realised he was in a deep shaded hollow, so deep in fact that he could hardly see over the edge of it. He could just see the very top of the yew hedge several yards away.

He couldn't see Johnny.

He turned around and peered into the darkness to see what the rustling was, and thought he just caught a glimpse of a pair of yellow eyes.

They were watching him.

But he had no sooner seen them than there was a sudden eddy of cold wind and they were gone.

He shivered, and for some unaccountable reason started to feel nervous.

Telling himself not to be so stupid, and that it must have been a small animal, he went back to writing up his notes.

But there was the rustling again.

Still behind him.

Even though he was now facing the other way.

He spun around, and again thought he caught a glimpse of those watching eyes. And again there was a sudden eddy of cold wind. And again the eyes were gone.

The hairs on the back of his neck started to prickle and he felt a slight constriction in his throat as a tinge of fear was added to his nervousness. He thought of calling out for Johnny but he knew that Johnny would only make fun of him. So he told himself firmly to calm down: 'There's nothing there. You're just imagining things.'

But the moment he'd thought that, he heard the whisperings again, first to one side of him, then to the other side of him, then behind him, and the more he spun round the more frequent they became and the more frightened he got.

And all the while the cold wind eddied around him.

There was no question about it now, there *were* eyes and they *were* watching him, and he began to realise they were getting closer.

And they were not the eyes of some ordinary domestic cat, they were the ferocious eyes of a much larger animal.

And they were no longer yellow, now they glowed a fiery red.

And there was more than one of them, unless whatever it was could move instantaneously, and he didn't see how that could be possible. So there was no doubt about it, he was being hunted down.

He started to panic, and when the eyes were so close to him that he thought the animal must be ready to pounce, his panic took over and he dropped his notes and ran.

He ran for his very life.

The thing was so close behind him he could feel its breath on the back of his neck.

He crashed into bushes.

He smashed into trees

His breath was knocked out of him.

He yelled Johnny's name at the top of his voice.

At last he burst out into the full sunlight . . . and immediately the thing was gone.

And there was Johnny calmly taking notes just as if nothing had happened.

"Where were you? Didn't you hear me yelling?" Paul demanded.

Johnny looked up, he was clearly unconcerned. "What's the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I... I..." Paul panted. He searched for words but could hardly find any. Eventually he just said, "There was something in there chasing me."

"Oh come on, don't be stupid. There's nothing in there but rabbits. You've just been chased by a rabbit!" he laughed.

“It certainly wasn’t a rabbit. It was some sort of large animal. I could see its eyes in the dark.” Paul was still panting.

“You’re not serious!” Johnny exclaimed. “Your dad always says you’ve got an over-stimulated imagination. You imagined it. Or did you think it was one of your vampires? Don’t tell me: it had huge bat like wings, and piercing yellow eyes, and it was lurking in the undergrowth waiting to pounce on you and suck out your blood!”

Paul started to answer, but then thought better of it. Johnny obviously wasn’t going to take him seriously. And perhaps he *had* imagined the whole thing, but it had seemed so real at the time.

“Anyhow, where are your notes?” Johnny asked

“I must’ve dropped them,” he replied.

They went back to look for them. Oddly there seemed to be much more light now, and it seemed to be much less threatening this time. There was obviously nothing there. Paul convinced himself that he *had* let his imagination run away with him.

They looked at the next map reference. It took them to Elford Church.

“Come on, let’s go,” said Johnny. “We’ve wasted enough time chasing your vampire,” and they set off. “Anyway what did you discover? I never found anything that was upside down.”

“It was the cross,” Paul told him, “and the upside down gravestones. They had the weirdest names on them,” and he told him about what he had found. “And none of the gravestones dated back to 1349. They were all like: 1822, or 1857, or 1901, so all those people must have been buried in deconsecrated ground. There were even three unfinished graves without any headstones at all.”

Johnny had to agree that it was all a bit odd.

They soon got to the church.

‘*What is drunken?*’ was the first question. They looked around and saw a stone column leaning to one side.

“Perhaps that’s it, said Johnny,” and they went across to look at it.

There was a metal plate beside it which read simply ‘*The Drunken Obelisk*’, but behind it on the wall of the church there was another glass fronted notice board with more details:

The Drunken Obelisk

The Drunken Obelisk marks the final resting place of human remains found in the cemetery of the Monastery of St. Michael. The remains were discovered after a German bomb hit the cemetery in the Second World War, disturbing a number of the graves in the process. The obelisk was consecrated on June 11th 1944, but the next morning it was found leaning to one side.

Various theories have been put forward to explain this. The most popular story is that immediately after the burial

drunken revellers leaned against it, and tilted it in the soft ground. This story has given rise to its popular name 'The Drunken Obelisk' All attempts to straighten it, however, have proved futile, and a more sinister legend suggests that something evil was buried here that could not rest in consecrated ground. It tilted the obelisk when it escaped, and it then put a curse on the ground to prevent the obelisk from ever being straightened again.

They read the account and then looked at each other in silence. Finally Paul said, "Well that all goes with the dates on the graves all being after the cemetery was deconsecrated"

"Do you mean the drunken bit or the evil bit?" Johnny asked him.

"The evil bit. Look. It's even got the same names on it, Azreal and all that lot."

"You're back to your vampires again aren't you," Johnny teased him.

"All I'm saying is it's weird," said Paul, and wisely changed the subject: "What's the next instruction?"

Johnny read it out: *'List the four gargoyles on the tower.'* They peered up at the tower. There was a fantastical winged animal projecting from each corner, each of them had a snarling open mouth.

"Well the first one looks like a dog or wolf," said Paul. "Then there's something that looks like a panther." They walked round to the other side. "Well that looks like a serpent, and the last one..." Paul paused when he saw what it was, and a cold breeze, just like the one at the cemetery, seemed to wrap itself around him for an instant.

"What?" said Johnny

Paul tried to pass it off. "Nothing," he said, "but do you see what I see?"

Johnny looked. There was no doubt about it. "Well I guess it *is* a bat," he had to confess. Not only was it a bat, it was a particularly malevolent looking vampire bat. Again it had a snarling open mouth, with two very prominent canine teeth.

"I guess it's just a case of bats in the belfry!" Johnny joked, but even he was beginning to think that the coincidences were piling up.

Paul laughed too, but he did have this awful feeling that there was something out there that was getting at him. It was as if a sort of heavy weight of anxiety had lodged itself in the pit of his stomach.

The next instruction, which had a bad joke in it, took them to a map reference in the middle of Elford village. The question was: *'What goes woof woof quack quack!'* The answer was easy enough, it was the village pub, which was called 'The Dog & Duck'! There was a board outside advertising sandwiches and rolls: 'Salami Salad with Garlic Bread', that sort of thing. But there was nothing about bats, or the evil eye, or anything sinister at all. Paul decided that, like his dad always said, he had been letting his imagination run away with him. But the feeling in the pit of his stomach still lingered. Johnny, of course, had never been that convinced anyway.

Just behind Elford church there was a track that led up to the car park at the base of White Horse Hill, and the next map reference took them there. There was a very simple question: *'How many, and of what?'* The answer was on the board:

**White Horse Hill Car Park.
Parking for 23 Cars**

The map reference after that took them up the hill until they were at the very top of the horse itself, and could see its white head and body stretching down the hill beneath their feet. There were two instructions. The first one simply read: *'When?'*, and the second asked: *'What is the legend?'*

There was a plinth with information carved into it:

The White Horse of Elford

The earliest mention of the White Horse of Elford is in a medieval manuscript of 1356, at the time of the plague known as the Black Death. The plague wiped out the nearby Monastery of St Michael and many of the inhabitants of Elford died too.

A white horse is seen as a symbol of purity. It will ward off approaching danger and stands ready to carry a god or hero to fight off evil forces and triumph over them. The plague and pestilence brought by the Black Death was seen as the work of the devil, and legend has it that the horse was originally carved on the hillside in order to prevent its return.

The horse was created by clearing the plants off the hillside to reveal the white chalk underneath and ridges were carved into the chalk to represent its mane. There is a local superstition that kissing the mane of the horse will ward off evil spirits.

The local population has continued to maintain the horse, particularly at times of

danger or threat. It was last cleaned in 1909 when there was an unexplained spate of savage animal attacks.

Paul didn't hesitate. As soon as he read the bit about the mane he knelt down and kissed it.

Johnny laughed at him. "You don't mean to tell me that you believe all that stupid stuff," he jeered.

"I don't care what you say," said Paul, "but I'm not taking any chances, particularly with all that stuff about the Black Death again. It's too much of a coincidence if you ask me."

Suddenly he realised that the moment he had kissed the mane of the horse the weight on his stomach had lifted and his anxiety had disappeared. The world looked brighter and he felt as if he had been hit by an unexpected shaft of sunlight.

But Johnny was unmoved. "Well, I don't believe all that superstitious rubbish!" he said defiantly. "Come on, let's get on to the next clue."

"Okay," said Paul, now much more cheerful. He looked at the map reference. "It looks as if it takes us to Adrian Edwards's dad's barn. It's just down there," and he pointed to the foot of the hill itself.

They went down. The instruction was: '*What is the date?*' and it was easy enough to answer since it was carved into the stone lintel above the barn door: 1838.

Johnny looked inside the barn.

"What are you looking for?" Paul asked.

"Just checking for vampires! But you're quite safe, there's no sign of them!" Johnny was obviously going to tease Paul mercilessly for the rest of the trip.

The final map reference took them back towards the town, to the middle of Elford Wood where the old stone hut with the thatched roof was.

"We used to call it the witch's hut, like in Hansel & Gretel," Johnny reminded him. "So you see, it's witches again!" he joked. "Specially for you! They must have seen us coming!"

Paul laughed too. He no longer felt threatened. "Do you remember how we used to scare each other when we were kids?"

"That's right. Do you remember that time your dad put on that Halloween mask and jumped out at us. You didn't half scream!"

"Well you screamed too. You screamed more than me! You thought it was a real witch!" said Paul, and Johnny gave him a friendly thump.

They were soon in the wood and heading towards the hut. "I'm dying for a pee," said Paul, and disappeared behind a tree, yelling out: "As I pee, Sir, I see Pisa!" as he went.

"You come out with any more of those palindromes, you'll be peeing backwards instead of forwards!" Johnny yelled back, and went on on his own.

The hut was low.

The thatched roof reached nearly to the ground.

As he approached it, Johnny thought he saw a wisp of luminescent green mist writhing its way around the old stonework. He watched as it disappeared through the door of the hut itself, just as if someone had gathered it up and sucked it in. There was a little swirl of cold breeze at the same time, and Johnny presumed that that was the reason it had gone.

He looked at the clue.

The question was: *'Which one is a Shakespeare play?'*

There was nothing on the outside that gave him any hint of an answer, but on the doorway itself he found some graffiti. Perhaps there was something in the graffiti that would provide an answer, but he could find nothing. He stepped into the hut... and shivered as another pocket of cold air seemed to wrap itself around him for an instant.

The walls were thick and the doorway was small.

There was not much light.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom he could see that there was more graffiti. Some of it was chalked on the walls; some of it was even painted on. Apart from the usual rude drawings there were four hearts with initials written through them. Perhaps this was where he would find the answer.

O 4 D was the first one. He couldn't see any connection with any Shakespeare play that he'd ever heard of.

B 4 B was the next one, but again he could think of no connection with Shakespeare.

G 4 C was the third one: no connection there either.

He heard a faint hiss above him. He looked up but could see nothing in the gloom of the roof, so telling himself that it must have been the wind, he went on to the next one.

R 4 J. That was it. *Romeo & Juliet* of course.

He was just about to yell out to Paul that he'd found it when there was another hiss above him. And this time there was no mistaking it.

Someone or something had drawn a whispering breath in through its teeth.

He looked back up into the roof again.

It was gloomier than ever, almost dark. He looked harder and was suddenly sure that one piece of the roof was darker than the rest. It looked like some sort of animal shape maybe.

And there were two spots of light: a pair of unblinking eyes staring down at him.

Fear grasped him by the throat.

He tried to run, but suddenly he was transfixed.

Mesmerised.

His legs wouldn't move.

The animal shaped piece of darkness detached itself from the roof and came floating down towards him.

He opened his mouth to yell but no sound came out. The constriction of fear in his throat left him gasping for breath.

Then it was upon him. Something scaly wrapped itself around him. Too late, Johnny realised that he was in the grasp of the very thing he had been teasing Paul about.

He struggled desperately but the thing just gripped harder.

Again he tried to yell, but the thing had squeezed all the air out of his lungs.

All he could manage was a strangled croak.

Then it must have changed itself into some sort of human form because he felt what were now vice like hands, as cold as ice, grasp him around the throat and start to squeeze.

Then it was talking to him, its mouth close to his ear.

“You weren’t my first choice for today’s sustenance” it hissed. “It was going to be Paul. I got him running scared in the cemetery, but I wanted him to chase the clues so that he would know what it was that had got him, so I was saving him until now. But then he kissed the horse’s mane and it gave him protection.

..you should have kissed it too shouldn’t you Johnny?

..it’s too late now.

..I’m sure your blood will taste just as sweet!

..You will let me have a taste won’t you? I do so love the taste of young blood. So delicious!” and with that the vampire sank its teeth into Johnny’s neck and greedily drank the blood that spurted out.

Johnny’s life slowly seeped away.

When Paul got to the hut he found a pale and lifeless corpse. Its throat had been torn out, and it was covered with vivid streaks of spilt blood.

Paul ran.

He ran faster than he knew he could run.

It felt as if some great animal was leaping after him.

He could hear its panting.

He could feel its breath on the back of his neck.

Then it was some huge flying thing, diving and swooping at him, brushing his head with its wing as it swept past.

Ducking and weaving he crashed through the undergrowth of the wood, heedless of the brambles which shredded his jeans and ripped into his legs.

The thing was nearly upon him.

Just in time he broke out into the open.

He put on speed, streaking along the track across the field.

In a trice he was through the narrow pathway between the houses and swung into the driveway leading up to his own front door. He flung himself through it, slamming it shut behind him and fell onto the hall floor.

He was safe.

Johnny’s body was recovered that afternoon and the police came round to interview Paul. He told them the bare bones of the story, about Johnny going on on his own while he was having a pee, and about finding his body once he got to the hut.

But he told Anne-Marie the full story, about the sense he had that he was being stalked in the cemetery, and the sense that he was being chased when he ran home. He even told her about kissing the mane of the horse and the sense of relief he had had when he had done it. But it would take him a long time come to terms with the horrific death of his friend. Whatever else he felt, he knew that the idea of a vampire was no longer a joke.

When Jimmy came round the next day Anne-Marie and Paul told him the story.

“We know that Orlando escaped before Johnny was killed, so whatever sort of monster he is, he almost certainly killed Johnny,” Jimmy reasoned. “The message in blood in the police station made it perfectly clear that he was going to get his revenge, and killing Johnny was his way of doing it. And the way that the policemen themselves were killed means that he must have transformed himself into some sort of ravening beast to do it. He is certainly no ordinary human being. But how did he get out of his cell in the first place?”

“Martin told us that vampires are able to move through the narrowest of cracks in the form of a mist, so bars would have been no problem,” Anne-Marie reminded him. “That’s the only explanation I can think of.”

The following day at College everyone was very subdued. The police hadn’t found Orlando, and the Reid family had disappeared. Paul was with them and told them about Johnny’s murder.

Nobody said anything.

Again everyone was waiting for someone else to say something.

“Okay,” said Jimmy, breaking the silence. “I know I’m the one that has been most sceptical so far, but I’m finally convinced. Orlando’s the killer but he’s not human. He must be some sort of supernatural entity, a shape-changer who can become a savage animal. No ordinary human being of his size and strength could have overcome and killed two hefty policeman like that.”

“Right, and all the other attacks have been described as animal attacks, too,” said Craig. “Which, like Martin said before, means that a vampire is an obvious explanation.”

“And the only explanation for how he or it escaped must be because it was able to transform itself in some sort of way in order to flow through the bars just as if as if they weren’t even there,” Anne-Marie concluded.

“Even the oldest species, *Vampyrus Stokensius*,” Martin added, “would have no problem.”

“And we reckon that the message about getting revenge explains why Johnny was killed,” Jimmy told them. “In revenge.”

“But then why didn’t it kill Paul too?” Maisie asked. “It was obviously chasing him and could have overtaken him easily if it had wanted to?”

“I think it’s because Paul had kissed the mane of the horse,” said Christopher, who had joined them. “It could scare him but it couldn’t kill him.”

“Then you think that the legend about the mane of the horse is true then?”

“Yes I do. All the other stuff that Paul found, the overturned crosses, the legend of the drunken obelisk, suggests that this area has been a happy hunting ground for vampires for centuries. Even the gargoyles on the church are there to ward off surrounding evil.”

“And what about all the weird names on the gravestones, Azreal and all that lot?” Paul asked. “Have they got anything to do with it?”

Martin asked Paul if he had a list.

“Yes I do. Don’t we need data retrieval?” and Paul looked at Martin for confirmation.

These days Martin was not a bit embarrassed to be seen working with Paul, and they went off to check it out.

Later that morning they returned with the results.

“They’re all angels of death,” Paul told them.

“Yes,” Martin added. “Some of them are Christian, some of them are Jewish, some of them are Islamic, and some of them are a mixture. The one we really noticed was Sammael, who’s a seducer and destroyer, just like a vampire is.”

“So no wonder they didn’t like being reburied in St Michael’s churchyard,” said Craig. “That legend about something evil being buried under the obelisk and having to escape was obviously true.”

Then Paul suddenly remembered something. “You know the warning in the paper, just after Miss Fairchild was murdered, about a wild animal being at large?”

“Yes.”

“Well it was printed next to something about cleaning up the white horse,” he continued. “That’s what the superstitious local population do when there is evil about. So we’re not the only ones who think there’s something evil out there . . .”

Part 2 Vampire

7. The Seven & Five

A couple of days later Anne-Marie had to drop another letter off in Elford Road for her mother, and was again joined by Gabriel on the way to College.

“You never said anything when we were talking about how Johnny and those two policeman got killed,” she said to him. “What do you think about it? Do you think it was the work of a vampire? ”

“Yes, or maybe even more than one.”

“More than one!” she exclaimed.

“These days they live in families,” he told her, “and that means they work together as a family. It would’ve been a family that killed the policemen and got Orlando out.”

“And I suppose they feed together?” she asked him.

“Oh yes. The more blood the better. If they get more than they need with a kill they can start a blood bank, and if they get enough blood in the bank it can keep them going for weeks.”

“Why are some people just killed and why are some people turned?” she asked him.

“It has to be the right person. A vampire has to choose that special person that they think that they can work together with, and those are the ones that get to join the brotherhood or the sisterhood.”

“But then there’s another problem isn’t there? Because when someone has been bitten, before they’ve actually turned they can say who’s bitten them, they can identify the source?”

“Yes these days, when everyone knows about that stuff, that is a problem. You have to find some way of making them disappear until they’ve become a full member of the community of vampires.”

“You mean kidnap them?”

“Yes.”

“But wouldn’t people come looking for them?”

“Not if they thought they were dead. You can always engineer some sort of catastrophe to cover your tracks.”

“You mean like a fire, or a flood or something?”

“Exactly.”

A fortnight passed. *Vampyrus Orlandus*, as Martin had taken to calling him, had disappeared, taking his family with him. There’d been no more slaughter, so it was pretty clear that Orlando and his family had been responsible for it all.

There were two ranges of hills above Alchester and both started at White Horse Hill. Seven hills ran to the north west, and five ran due north, and together they made a sort of V shape. Runners would set themselves the challenge of running both ranges in a morning, it was known as running the Seven & Five. Walkers took it more steadily, walking one range one day and the other the next. Jimmy and Anne-Marie and their friends were planning to walk both ranges.

“Good idea,” said Mr. Jeffries. “Blow the cobwebs away.”

They would walk the Seven on the first day, would sleep overnight in Adrian Edwards’s barn and walk the Five on the second day.

Jimmy & Anne-Marie, and Craig & Maisie collected at Anne-Marie’s house on the Saturday morning and after Mrs. Jeffries had fussed over them they set off, heading across the field at the back, through Elford Wood, and on towards White Horse Hill itself. They went round the foot of the hill to the barn, and there they met Adrian, his girlfriend Alison, and Alison’s dog, Robbie. Robbie gave them all a sniff to check out who they were, and gambolled around them as if he was impatient to be off.

“Is he coming too?” Anne Marie asked.

“Just try and stop him!” said Alison and they all laughed.

They dumped their stuff, climbed the hill, and set off along the ridge that ran over the tops of the hills. Robbie raced ahead of them or dropped behind if he found an interesting smell.

After all the events of the first half of term it was a relief to be away from the town. “It’s a good thing we hadn’t planned to do this a fortnight ago,” said Anne-Marie. “My mum would have never let me out of the house.”

“Me neither,” said Maisie. “My dad was dead scared of what might happen just on the way to College, even with lots of people about.”

“Well all I can say is thank God that that creature and his family have gone and we haven’t had any more deaths,” said Alison.

“And I don’t care where they’ve gone so long as they keep clear of Alchester,” Maisie added, “so long as they’ve taken their evil with them.”

The weather was bright, the breeze was invigorating, and as they dropped down the side of one hill and scrambled up the next they soon got into the rhythm of walking and climbing. As Mr. Jeffries had predicted, the exercise had indeed ‘blown the cobwebs away’.

They got to the furthest hill, sat down for some food, and while the boys were looking at maps and seeing who’d got the biggest compass, the three girls got talking. Alison and Maisie were telling Anne-Marie all about how they were doing *Romeo & Juliet* for their English course.

“Mr Aidan, he makes us act it all out, it’s really good.”

“So who’s Romeo, and who’s Juliet?” Anne-Marie asked, all innocent..

Alison blushed. “Well I’m Juliet at in my group at the moment,” she had to confess. “But we take it in turns,” she added hastily.

“And who’s playing Romeo and the moment?”

“Well Mark Dutton is at the moment. You know, he’s the brother of the DJ we had the night Lizzie was killed?”

“You mean the handsome one?” Anne-Marie teased her.

“Yes, but don’t tell Adrian, he’d only get jealous!”

“So, who else?”

She named another boy, Raymond Haines, a dull boy who Anne-Marie knew slightly, “but he was really boring!”

Anne-Marie pressed her: “So if you could choose out of your English group, who would it be?”

Alison dropped her voice down so the boys couldn't hear. "Well if I could really choose it would be Gabriel Ekard. He's so totally gorgeous it isn't true!"

"I know." Maisie kept her voice low too. "He'd make a great Romeo."

"All the girls fancy him to bits! And it's really weird, he doesn't even have a girlfriend. I mean if he asked me out I'd jump at the chance!"

"Me too," said Maisie, giving Craig a guilty look.

"So why hasn't he been Romeo then?" Anne-Marie asked.

"Well Mr Aidan keeps asking him, but he says he'd rather not. He says he might get carried away!" said Alison.

"He can carry me away whenever he likes!" said Maisie, and all three girls shrieked with laughter.

Craig looked up. "What are you three going on about?" he asked. "And looking all guilty about it."

"Oh I expect it's boys. It's always boys," said Adrian.

"So what if it is, Mr. Adrian Edwards," Alison said defiantly. "Don't pretend you lot don't talk about girls when we're not around because I know jolly well that you do."

"And if you really want to know, we were talking about work," said Maisie, "so you can shut up too Craig!"

"Well Romeo & Juliet is work isn't it?" she added quietly when the boys returned to their own discussions.

They went back to talking about Gabriel. Alison was speculating: "I mean I wonder why he doesn't have any girlfriends with being him being so gorgeous and all. Do you think he's gay?"

"We could ask Christopher Whitman. He'd know. Or if he didn't he could always ask him," Maisie suggested.

"Whether he's gay or not I still can't quite make him out," said Anne-Marie. "It's not like he's shy or anything, because he's dead friendly, but he's like reserved. As if he's holding back all the time. As if he knows more than he says. I mean he's never said much when we've been talking about Orlando and the vampires, but when I got him on his own he was really knowledgeable. Like a vampire hunter would be knowledgeable. But it's like he doesn't want to say anything in case it alarms us."

"Why, when did you get him on his own?" Maisie sounded suspicious, even a bit jealous. "You never told me about it."

"Oh he just comes the same way to college as me sometimes. We only met accidentally." Anne-Marie tried to make her answer sound casual, but she couldn't stop herself from blushing. Maisie saw it straightaway.

"You fancy him too, don't you," she accused her.

"No I don't," she said defiantly.

"But you've got to confess he is dead sexy haven't you?"

And despite herself Anne-Marie couldn't deny it.

By the time they had finished their food and set off back it was already mid afternoon, so when they got to the barn the light was beginning to fade. They started to get a fire going and Anne-Marie asked Alison and Adrian where they were going to sleep. They took her into the barn itself to show her. Hay bales were stacked to the roof in the middle and there was a narrow passage that went around behind them.

“Where’s that go to?” Anne-Marie asked.

“Oh it just goes to an old tool store.”

“Adrian and me used to play there when we were kids,” Alison added.

They took her round the back to show her, and there was a sort of wooden shed built inside the barn itself. The door was held shut on the outside by a hook. Alison opened it and invited Anne-Marie to look in. She peered into the gloom and could just see some old tools. There were a couple of scythes, an axe, and a couple of double pronged pitchforks with sharp gleaming points.

“That’s funny,” said Adrian. “It looks as if someone’s been sharpening them up. You need to be careful with them, they can be pretty lethal if they get into the wrong hands,” he told her, and by way of demonstration he picked one up and threw it at the wall where it stuck, quivering, in the wood.

“Show off!” Alison teased him.

He pulled it out, put it back with the other tools, and they went out hooking the door shut behind them.

In the meantime the others had got the fire going and by the time it was properly dark it was blazing away. Their faces were lit by the flickering flames, but behind them there was only blackness. Anything could have been out there and they wouldn’t have known.

They had brought sausages and they toasted them in the flames while Robbie stuck his nose through in between them to see if there were any titbits coming his way. When they’d finished their food they pushed their feet down into their sleeping bags and lay propped up on their elbows warming themselves by the fire. They felt pleasantly full and tired.

Alison suddenly realised Robbie was missing.

“Where’s Robbie?” she asked. “He’s usually hanging around waiting to be fed, or lying in front of the fire.”

“Oh don’t fuss” said Adrian. “I’m sure he’s alright. He’s probably gone off hunting rats. You know what he’s like.”

“Rats?” Maisie asked, and shuddered at the thought.

“Oh, yes, they’re never far away. You always get them in barns like this” he told them. “They’ll only gang up and attack you if they’ve got nothing better to do!”

“What if they’ve nothing better to do tonight?” Maisie asked him. “How do we keep them at bay?”

“Well you can always sleep out here by the fire. They’ll keep away from that.”

“I think I might just do that!” said Anne-Marie

“Me too. Definitely!” Maisie added.

“Oh, and I should have told you, we have bats as well,” said Adrian. “They live up in the roof of the barn. Look, there’s one,” and they just caught sight of it in the fire light as it flitted over their heads.

“First rats, now bats. You could have warned us,” Anne-Marie chided him, but Adrian only laughed.

“Don’t worry, they’re more frightened of you than you are of them,” he told them.

Alison was still worried about Robbie. “I’m going to look for him,” she said, and picking up her torch she went out into the surrounding darkness.

“Robbie! Robbie! Here boy!” she called.

She heard a muffled whining and a couple of barks. They came from inside the barn itself.

‘He must have come across the scent of a couple of rats,’ she thought.

“He’s in the barn!” she yelled to the others. “I’m going in to get him!” and holding her torch to light the way she went in.

Robbie’s barks turned to growls. He was behind the haystack.

She went round and found him intently watching the door to the tool store with his hackles raised. Alison realised with a sudden shock that the door was open.

‘That’s funny,’ she thought. ‘I’m sure I left it closed with the hook over. It couldn’t have come open on its own.’

Robbie’s growls turned into snarls. Alison had never seen him so fierce. It was frightening. He turned towards her and it seemed for a moment as if he was snarling at *her*.

As if he was wanting to keep her away from the door.

“You silly dog, it’s only rats,” she told him. “There’s nothing to be frightened of,” and she went forward and patted him reassuringly on the head.

He stopped snarling, dropped his head, put his tail between his legs, whimpered, and ran.

Fast.

Alison glanced nervously inside the store to check if everything was all right before she shut the door. Her torch made a circle of light on the opposite wall but she could see nothing in the surrounding darkness.

Then there was a sudden scuttling chattering noise.

It was coming from the end of the store.

She moved the circle of light until it was pointing at the tools that were stacked there. There was a quick movement at floor level, but by the time she had shone her torch at it, it had gone.

‘It’s only a rat,’ she thought with relief. ‘I wonder why Robbie was so scared. He’s not usually scared of rats.’

But there was more movement, and again she shone the torch at the end of the shed.

There was a hand on the handle of one of the pitchforks . . .

She froze.

She watched as the hand lifted up the pitchfork until it was pointing directly at her.

“Who are you?” Her voice was bold, though inside she was quaking. “Come out, whoever you are. You’ve no business in here.”

No answer. Just a hissing sound, like an indrawn breath.

The gleaming points of the pitchfork moved into the circle of light and she watched as they moved inexorably towards her.

She tried to shout for help but her voice was a strangled croak.

“It’s no use shouting, they’ll never hear you,” the thing hissed at her. “It’s you that I want, and you that I’m going to have.”

And with a sudden movement the thing plunged the pitchfork at her. Instantly she was pinned to the wall, one prong on each side of her neck.

“A perfect fit!” the thing hissed. “It will just hold you there until I’m ready to feed.”

Finally she managed to cry out but she was too late. Her yell was cut short as the thing clamped its hand over her mouth. But at last she could move the torch.

Her eyes widened in disbelieving shock as she recognised the face that was leering at her.

“That’s right,” said the vampire, “it’s me. You thought it was safe now but I’ve fooled you all along haven’t I? It was such a good idea to lure the dog in here, so useful to be able to leave a scent that he would find irresistible. I knew you’d come looking for him.”

Desperately she tried to call out, but the vampire had its hand too firmly clamped over her mouth for any sound to emerge.

“And I was so thirsty,” he said, “I couldn’t resist you! And you’ll see that I have canines,” it continued, “just like Robbie’s, except that mine are longer and a good deal sharper. So useful, I think you’ll agree, for my purposes!” And Alison watched in horror as his lips pulled back to reveal the snout of some horrible animal, exposing his long canine teeth in the process. His face became the snarl of a slavering beast. Any sense that he was still human disappeared. ‘He’ had turned into an ‘it’.

Allison’s gaze was riveted by the two protruding fangs.

She tried to struggle, but she was too firmly pinned by the pitchfork to move. Again she tried to cry out, but the thing still had its hand clamped firmly to her mouth. Finally, pushing her up against the wall, it plunged its teeth into her neck and drank deeply. When it had drunk its fill it pulled the pitchfork out and let go of her.

She sank, lifeless, to the floor.

The others were warming themselves by the fire. They heard Robbie’s muffled barks, but they didn’t pay much attention.

“Well she’s obviously found him,” said Adrian, and they went on chatting.

Time passed.

“She’s been gone a long time hasn’t she?” said Anne-Marie eventually, and they realised she had. “I hope she’s alright.”

“I’ll go and see what’s happened to her,” said Adrian, and picking up his torch he went into the barn.

“Alison!” he called.

No reply.

“Alison!” he called louder this time.

He heard a noise and he swung his torch around. It wasn’t Alison, it was Robbie, cowering in one corner and whimpering.

His heartbeat went up a notch, a cold chill swept up from the pit of his stomach to his throat. Prickles of sweat stood out on his forehead. There was something seriously wrong.

“Alison!” he yelled. He was shouting now. “Where are you? Answer me ! What’s happened to you?”

The others heard him shouting, and when his yells got louder they all scrambled out of their sleeping bags and rushed into the barn.

“I can’t find her,” Adrian cried.

“Okay, everyone look,” Jimmy ordered. “But we need to stick together.”

They shone their torches around but could see no obvious sign of her.

“What about the tool store?” Anne-Marie asked.

“We’d better have a look,” said Jimmy,

They went around behind the stacked hay.

“The door’s open. It shouldn’t be.” Adrian’s voice was suddenly very low.

With a dreadful sinking feeling they approached the door, shone their torches inside . . .

. . . and found her pale body lying on the floor, covered with the blood from a gaping neck wound.

“Is she...?” but Adrian didn’t need to finish his sentence.

She was very obviously dead.

8. The Swimming Pool

The ambulance came and went, taking Alison's body away with it. The police came and questioned them. Adrian's dad and Mr Jeffries were coming to pick them up.

Adrian started shouting, blaming himself.

"If only I'd gone with her! I might have been able to do something!" he went. He was sobbing, distraught, and he beat his fists on the stone wall of the barn in pure frustration. Craig and Jimmy had to restrain him.

"Stop it," Craig cried. "You'll hurt yourself!"

"I don't care! I should've been with her! It wouldn't have happened if I'd been with her!"

The other two boys held him until he calmed down.

"It's not your fault. You couldn't have known," they told him.

Anne-Marie was watching to see if she could help, but suddenly the sky was full of bats. They were swarming out of the barn and flitting low over their heads. Anne-Marie beat them off as well as she could, and behind her Maisie screamed. Anne-Marie spun round to find her crouched in a corner covering up her face and flailing her arms.

"Keep them away from me! Keep them away from me!" she cried.

The bats went as rapidly as they had come, but Maisie was still flailing her arms.

"It's alright! It's alright! They've gone now! They've gone now!"

Anne-Marie had to keep reassuring her, and she held her tight to comfort her. Slowly Maisie calmed down and finally looked up fearfully. She was almost frozen with terror, and when Anne-Marie's dad turned up to take them home it was only with some difficulty that they even managed to get her into the car.

Half term break came and went.

"I thought we'd seen the end of them," said Craig to Jimmy when they met up at College after the break. "What with Orlando and his family gone and all."

"Well it seems we were wrong," Jimmy admitted ruefully. "I reckon he's come back to take his revenge like he said he would."

"But I thought he was up North with his family," said Anne-Marie.

"Distance isn't a problem for them," Craig reminded her. "Like Martin said, they can move very fast if they want too."

"Can't we change the subject," Maisie pleaded. She was still very shaken up.

"First Johnny, now Alison," said Anne-Marie. "But he *must* have taken his revenge by now. I agree with Maisie, let's change the subject."

Jimmy agreed. "Let's hope that this is the last of it."

And for a while it seemed that it was.

Jimmy and Adrian both played football for the college, and they both played hard. Adrian played particularly hard, as if he was trying to get Alison's death worked out of his system. He certainly took it out on opposition teams, tackling hard, sometimes too hard, and all but the boldest of opposition players learned to keep clear of him.

The two boys trained after school.

They swam in the pool.

They worked out in the gym.

Both of them were well muscled and very fit. Adrian was reckoned to be the stronger of the two and nothing and nobody could get past him if he chose to fight them off.

They became firm friends.

As the season progressed and the days got shorter it was often near dark before they came into the sports centre to shower. The centre closed at 6.00 on weekdays, so they could be the last people in the place before it was locked up.

Such was the case on one Wednesday later in the term when they were already late walking up from the field.

"It's a shame we haven't got time for a swim," said Jimmy, "but I reckon we're too late for that."

In fact they were so late that Old Sammy, the college caretaker, was already locking up when they arrived.

They watched him as he made his way slowly round the college buildings.

"Come on," said Craig. "If we're quick we can get changed, get our stuff, and be out before he gets back. You know he always does the sports hall last."

"Okay," said Jimmy, "but we need to be quick."

They slipped inside, got to their lockers, and stripped their footballing kit off.

Craig looked down at himself. "I'm filthy!" he exclaimed. "I'm not putting my clothes on like this. I'm going to take a shower."

"Well turn the water on," said Jimmy, "but get a move on or we'll be locked in. And watch out for all those sharp edges where they've been repairing them. I cut myself quite badly on one of those tiles last week"

They got under the showers and were just beginning to enjoy the force of the hot water on their skin when the main lights went out. Only the dim security lighting remained switched on.

At the same time they heard the bang of the front doors as Old Sammy slammed them shut.

"Damn! We are locked in now." Jimmy exclaimed. "What are we going to do?"

"It doesn't matter, there's the emergency exit doors at the back of the pool," said Adrian, "and we can get out through them. You can slam them shut after you've got out."

Then he had a thought. "Hey, how about that swim? Since we're here we might as well have one. And there's nobody else here. So we can go in just as we are. Skinny dipping."

"Sounds like a great idea!" Jimmy exclaimed. "Why not!" And the two naked boys went through the glass doors into the pool itself.

The only light in the place came from the underwater security lights, and the movement of the water cast rippling shadows over the roof and the walls. The effect was eerie.

Jimmy dived in and trod water for a moment and Adrian plunged in after him. They raced for the other end.

"Best of five!" Jimmy challenged him.

"You're on!" and they set off without a pause. Adrian won by a short head, and they paused to take breath.

“It’s not fair, you always bloody win!” Jimmy exclaimed, laughing.

“Of course!” said Adrian, laughing back at him.

Their voices echoed and re-echoed, distorting the sound. You couldn’t tell who said what or what direction it was coming from; and their swimming had sent the waves bouncing off the sides and crisscrossing in the middle of the pool. Jimmy watched the fluid shadows as they rippled and dipped across the walls and roof, throwing corners into deep shadow one second, and revealing them in the next.

Then he saw, or thought he saw a movement in the roof. He could have sworn that a black shadow was swooping down on top of them.

He had no sooner seen it than it was gone.

‘It must have been a trick of the light,’ he told himself, but he now had the insistent feeling that they were not alone.

Was there a movement in the corner? He couldn’t be sure.

“I think there’s somebody here,” he told Adrian quietly.

He saw another slight movement.

“Look!” he yelled, now convinced now there was someone there. He grabbed Adrian’s arm and pointed into the corner leading through to the changing rooms.

“There!”

“...air..” the echoes came back mockingly.

They both peered into the corner, but if there was somebody there he was so concealed by the rippling shadows they couldn’t make him out.

“There’s nothing there,” said Adrian eventually. “You’re just imagining it.”

But Jimmy went on watching. He was convinced he could see something. And also for some reason his anxiety was building.

Then the light, or was it the shadow, seemed to swing round, just as if the glass door out of the pool had been opened and closed.

He saw no more movement, and the feeling that they were being watched had gone just as suddenly as it had arrived.

He discovered he’d been holding his breath. He let it out, and immediately his feeling of anxiety lifted.

“It’s alright, it’s gone. I expect I just imagined it.”

“I told you there was nothing there, said Adrian. “Anyhow I’m going in,” he said. “Coming?”

“I’ll just swim a couple more lengths, “Jimmy told him, “then I’ll join you.”

Adrian got out and went through to the showers.

The vampire was taking a shower.

“Hi,” said Adrian. “Did you get locked in too? I didn’t think there was anyone here but us.”

“I was working out in the gym when the lights went off, but when I came through I saw you swimming so I knew I wasn’t alone,” the vampire told him.

“So Jimmy was right,” said Adrian. “He thought he saw you. But we couldn’t be sure because of the rippling effect of the shadows.”

“Oh, I tend to disappear into the shadows,” the vampire said airily.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, just that people don’t see me if I don’t want them to. Anyhow I thought I’d come through here to wait for you,” he told him.

Adrian didn't know which question to ask first. In the end he asked both of them.

"What do you mean, if you don't want them to, and why did you want to wait for us anyway?"

"Well one always wants to take advantage of any opportunities that come along," said the vampire, looking him up and down.

Adrian assumed that he was making some sort of a joke, even if he didn't understand it, so he just grinned at him. Inside, however, he was beginning to feel uneasy. What did this guy want?

And what was all this talk about disappearing into the shadows and not being seen?

He reached round to turn off the shower and as he did so he cut his arm on a broken tile.

It was a deep cut.

Blood flowed out and ran down his arm.

The vampire was riveted by the sight. A shudder of desire swept up his body and grasped him by the throat. He had intended to take his time killing this one, but at the sight of the blood the desire became urgent.

Adrian held his arm, trying to stem the flow of blood, but then the vampire stepped forward.

"Let me help you!"

He was speaking quietly, but Adrian thought there was something strangely insinuating about his tone. He could almost hear the desire in his voice. But before he could protest the vampire came closer and grasped him by the arm.

"No, it's alright. I can manage," said Adrian, and tried to pull away.

The vampire held him.

Hard.

Adrian didn't like this boy pressed against him. "Let go!" he yelled. "Get off me!"

The vampire's grip tightened even further. Adrian tried to push him off but the vampire was too strong for him.

Then, to his incredulous disbelief, the vampire started to lick the blood off his arm.

"Fuck off! I don't need you to do this!"

"Oh, but I need to do it!" the vampire insisted.

Bracing himself against the wall, Adrian pushed at the creature with all the strength in his body. But he might as well have been pushing a tank for all the difference it made. The creature was immovable.

'Creature'!

As soon as the word came into Adrian's head he realised what he was dealing with.

"Yes, that's right, I'm it." The vampire was gloating now. It was as if it could read his mind. "First your girlfriend, and now you. I do so like couples!" it confided.

Adrian realised he needed help. "Jimmy!" he yelled, but the vampire just laughed.

"He'll never hear you! You know what the echoes are like in there," and Adrian watched with horror as the face in front of him distorted and changed until it had become the face of an some horrendous animal.

Adrian tried one final yell but it was too late. All that came out was a strangled cry bubbling with blood. The Vampire had pinned him to the wall, bared its fangs, and bitten deep, deep into his throat.

The blood washed down over Adrian's body onto the tiled floor, mingled with the running water, and swirled away down the drain.

Meanwhile Jimmy was enjoying his swim. He'd done two or three lengths when he thought he heard a voice calling "... -iiiiimmmeeee-...", but he decided it was the echoes playing tricks, and in any case he couldn't resist another couple of lengths. If Adrian was ready to go he'd come and get him.

But Adrian didn't arrive.

Finally, wondering what had happened to him, Jimmy got out and went through to the showers.

There he found Adrian's slumped body.

On the wall, smeared in blood, a simple, chilling, message: *'Finally Revenged!'*

9. Footsteps in the Fog

Three weeks had elapsed since Adrian had been murdered and Christmas was not far away. They saw quite a bit of Gabriel since he now came round regularly to Anne-Marie's, generally to work with her and Jimmy on their end of term assignments. In fact he was there so often that Anne-Marie had the feeling that he was being a bit protective of her in a strange sort of way.

Paul, too, was becoming curious about him.

"Where was Gabriel before he came to Alchester?" he asked her.

Anne-Marie realised she didn't know.

"And you don't know anything else about him either, do you?"

"So?" she asked him.

"Well he's round here more and more. And he's always looking at you, as if he fancies you, or as if he wants to protect you or something."

"He does not!" Anne-Marie tried her best to sound indignant, but inside she did wonder if her all too observant younger brother was right.

"And you've never even been round to his place or met his parents. You don't even know where he actually lives." Paul persisted. "I know it's up the Elford Road, but where up the Elford Road?"

"Well if you want to know all this stuff so badly why don't you ask him," she told him indignantly. "He's coming round on Sunday to work with me and Jimmy so you'll have your chance then."

"Alright, I will."

For all that she had told Paul to do all the asking, Anne-Marie herself was puzzled, so she decided that she would ask Gabriel some questions of her own. She arrived at College next morning fully determined to confront him, and it was with a feeling of anticlimax that she discovered that he wasn't there.

In his absence the four friends got talking.

"I mean we don't know anything about him. No-body's visited his house. No-one knows where he came from before he was here," said Anne-Marie

"He's sort of reserved," said Craig thoughtfully. "You never quite know what's going on in his head."

"Well we do know he's good at his work," said Jimmy.

"And he's dead knowledgeable about all sorts of stuff," Maisie added.

"But we don't know anything about *him*?" Anne-Marie insisted. "I mean he's dead friendly with us, but then he's dead friendly with everyone. But outside work he doesn't actually hang out with anyone."

"And it's not as if he's got a girlfriend," said Maisie, "because he hasn't."

"And all you girls fancy him to bits, so he'd have plenty of choice!" Craig teased her. "I've seen you all talking about him."

"Well you can talk Craig Richards! I've seen you looking at that Charlotte De-Lyle!"

"Well she has got nice..." but before he could finish the sentence Maisie thumped him one!

"We're getting off the subject," Anne-Marie chided them. "We're supposed to be talking about Gabriel."

“So what are you saying?” Jimmy asked them. “That he’s gay?”

“We were wondering,” said Anne-Marie.

He’s friendly with Christopher Whitman,” said Maisie. “He’s even doing an English project with him.”

“So Christopher would know if anyone would,” Anne-Marie added.

They were silent for a moment.

“Okay, so let’s ask Christopher himself,” said Maisie, finally breaking the silence.

Craig looked at her as if to say ‘not me!’

“Alright, Craig, don’t panic. We’ll ask him. You’re perfectly safe!” she said, laughing at him.

Anne-Marie changed the subject. “You know you were going on about him being dead knowledgeable, Maisie?”

“Yes.”

“Well one of the things he’s dead knowledgeable *about* is vampires. And he just knows it. He doesn’t have to look it up in books or anything, like you do,” she said turning to Martin, who’d just joined them.

“So if he knows all this stuff about vampires what does that mean?” Craig speculated. “Who knows lots of stuff about Vampires?”

“Vampire hunters,” said Martin.

Maisie and Anne-Marie wasted no time in seeking Christopher out, and Maisie broke the ice by asking him how his and Gabriel’s assignment was coming along.

“We’ve nearly finished,” he told her. “We’ve just got to the last bit where they’re in the tomb together and Juliet stabs herself and bleeds to death.”

“So what’s it like working with Gabriel?”

“Oh, he’s really into it, all the stuff about being fated to die.”

“But what’s *he* like?” Anne-Marie asked him.

“How do you mean, ‘What’s *he* like?’”

“In general, how do you get on with him?”

“Well he’s dead friendly, but then he’s dead friendly with everyone. Why?”

“Because my brother Paul, he was asking what we really knew about him,” she explained. “He comes round to our place quite a lot to work with me and Jimmy, and we’ve realised we don’t actually know anything about him himself at all, not even where he lives.”

“And we thought that you might know him better than we did,” Maisie added.

“Well he knows about all this vampire stuff, because I was asking him what he thought about the murders,” he told them.

“So how come he knows all that stuff? He doesn’t have to look it all up like you and Martin did,” said Anne-Marie.

“We even thought he might be a vampire hunter,” Maisie added.

“And another thing,” she went on. “He doesn’t even have a girlfriend.”

The light dawned.

“Oh I see!” Christopher exclaimed. “You want to know if I think he’s gay?”

“Because we thought if anyone knew . . .” Maisie tailed off.

“It would be me!” Christopher finished the sentence for her.

They both looked at him rather nervously as they realised it was a bit of a cheek asking him, but Christopher just laughed.

“It’s alright, don’t panic. I’m used to it. It’s like ‘it takes one to know one’!”

“Well um... we did just wonder.” Maisie was suddenly apologetic, but Christopher became serious for a moment.

“I’ve never asked him and he’s never said,” he told them.

“And not just about whether he’s gay, but whether you knew any more about him in general,” said Anne-Marie.

“You could even ask him if he’s a vampire hunter,” Maisie added.

Sunday arrived and Jimmy & Gabriel were round at Anne-Marie’s as usual. They’d finished their work and Gabriel was just going. He’d already said goodbye to Mrs. Jeffries and was almost out of the door and Paul realised that this was his opportunity to ask questions.

“Hey, Gabriel, where did you live before you came to live in Alchester?”

“Paul, don’t be rude” his mother admonished him, but Gabriel answered him anyway.

“We were working in Harcliffe last year, but once we’d finished our work there we came here.”

“So where do you actually live? Because when me and Johnny were on that orienteering day, before Johnny got..” Paul broke off and Gabriel finished off the sentence for him.

“Killed you mean?”

“Yes. Well we were up the Elford Road and we wondered which house you actually lived in. Like what number?”

“We’ve rented number 13,” he told him. “For the time being,” he added.

Even Mrs. Jeffries was curious. “So do you move around a lot?” she asked him.

“Yes we do. We’re a very restless family.”

“So how long are you going to be staying in Alchester do you think?”

“We’re not quite sure. We might even have finished our work by Christmas,” he told them.

“Christmas!” they all exclaimed in unison.

“So does that mean you’ll be moving again?” Anne-Marie asked. She struggled to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

“We might be,” he told them. And then as if he sensed Anne-Marie’s disappointment he smiled at her as he added, “You never know. We may need to come back. Sometimes we have to return to places where we have unfinished business. And who knows, when we go we might recruit one of you with us to help us in our work if they’d like to come!” he said teasingly, smiling at her again.

Then oddly he said, “There’s one thing I’m hoping to do before we go, and another that I’ve got to do to reach my target for this visit, then we’re off.”

And before they could ask him what he meant, he smiled a third smile at Anne-Marie, and was gone.

Christopher tried several times to get Gabriel on his own, but had no success. Gabriel would always be in a rush. “Got to go. Catch you later,” he would say.

Eventually Christopher gave up. He knew Gabriel was leaving at the end of term anyway so there didn't seem much point. He decided to forget about it.

Christopher lived in the country.

To get home he had to catch the bus, get off at the last stop, and walk on from there. He would pass the last house on the outskirts of the town and his house was then a couple of fields away. As a kid he used to run from one streetlight to the next, racing as fast as he could through the patches of darkness in between. The last stretch was the worst because there was a big gap between the last streetlight and his own house.

Those childhood fears were long gone, he now actually enjoyed the darkness: on a clear night it gave him the opportunity to gaze up at the stars and try to identify the constellations.

It was the Wednesday before the Christmas break.

He had as usual caught the bus from the town centre.

He had got off at his usual stop and he was, as usual, walking home from there. He had already passed the last streetlight.

Tonight, as it happened, there was fog. There were no stars to be seen, but even then it wasn't totally dark, and Christopher was used to that too. Fog held no fears for him either.

But for some reason tonight was different, though he couldn't put his finger on quite why. It almost felt as if a piece of the fog itself was following him.

An owl hooted and swept low over his head making him jump.

Again he had the oddest sensation he was being followed. He became convinced he could hear footsteps behind him.

He stopped and listened.

Nothing.

He turned round.

The fog was impenetrable.

He started walking again.

The footsteps started again.

He stopped and listened again.

Again nothing.

Again he looked around.

Again just the fog.

But he could feel the old childhood fears coming back: the hairs on the back of his neck started to prickle, and a desire to scream gripped him by the throat. He certainly couldn't keep thoughts of the vampire attacks of recent weeks out of his head. So that didn't help either.

Suppose Orlando had come back yet again and was lurking out there.

But Christopher knew that if he started to think like that he wouldn't be able to move, so telling himself firmly that he was imagining it, that his own footsteps must have been echoing in the fog, he set off again.

But he did have to resist the temptation to run.

This time there was no doubt about it, there *were* footsteps behind him, and they were running footsteps. He turned again to look . . .

. . . and Gabriel emerged from the fog and came running towards him.

“Hey Christopher!” Gabriel shouted in greeting.

Relief flooded through him. Now that there was somebody else with him he immediately lost any sense of fear, particularly since that somebody else was the vampire hunter himself.

“Oh, it’s you. I wondered who it was,” he said.

“I told you I’d catch you later!”

“I was beginning to imagine all sorts of things out there,” Christopher told him, and laughed. “And there’s no point in calling out, the fog just absorbs the sound.”

Gabriel laughed too. “You can’t be too careful! You never know what’s lurking!”

“What are you doing out here anyway?” Christopher was curious.

“Oh, it was just something I was hoping to do before I went,” said Gabriel.

Christopher realised that if he wanted to know more about Gabriel, now was the time.

“Do you know what I was going to ask you...?” he started, but Gabriel interrupted him.

“You want to know if I’m gay?”

“Well yes.. um.. well no..” Christopher was confused. “Well what I *was* going to ask you was about all this vampire stuff.”

“Ask away.”

“How come you know so much about it? I mean me and Martin did all that research, but you knew it all already. It was like you’d done the research already. You know all the stuff that vampire hunters would need to know.”

“I guess I’ve learned it from my parents,” Gabriel told him.

“So did you come here because of all the vampire attacks we were having?”

“Oh yes. But if we say too much about what we do, it makes people feel anxious, so we don’t exactly advertise. We don’t want our enemies to know we’re around.”

“And now that Orlando’s gone and the attacks have finished, that’s why you don’t need to stay any more?”

“Something like that. Like I say there are a couple of things I want to do before we go, and then we’re off.”

“What sorts of things?”

“Well amongst other things I suppose you could say I’m recruiting.”

“Recruiting?”

“Yes. Looking for that one person who would be the perfect candidate to join us. And it can only be one person I’m afraid, and they’ve already been chosen.”

For the life of him Christopher couldn’t understand what Gabriel meant, so he just looked at him. Gabriel didn’t explain any further. But he *was* looking at him in a very odd way. It was as if he was sizing him up. As if he was still wondering how much he should tell him. It made Christopher feel a bit uncomfortable.

They walked in silence for a couple of minutes. Eventually Christopher changed the subject.

“So are you?” he asked,

“Am I what?”

“Gay?”

“Oh that!” Gabriel laughed again. “I’ve never bothered about all that rubbish. Gay, straight, girls, boys. It doesn’t make any difference to me. I just go for whoever I fancy.”

Christopher was beginning to feel that in some way he was under attack. Surely you had to decide which you were. Gabriel’s answer seemed decidedly strange.

His next was even stranger: “I think you should just enjoy what you do while you’re still around to enjoy it,” he said. “After all,” he added, and he sounded suddenly bitter, “death comes soon enough.”

Angry? Bitter? Gabriel had never been like this before. Everyone had wanted to know what he was really like, and now Christopher was finding out. He’d got beneath Gabriel’s friendly surface and found something quite different. Perhaps it had been a mistake to ask him if he was gay, so he changed the subject back to vampires, hoping that Gabriel would be happier to talk about them.

“You were saying that your work is done here and that you’re going?”

Gabriel just looked at him, so finally Christopher asked the question directly:

“So are you actual vampire hunters? And it’s because Orlando’s gone that your work is finished?”

Now there was no doubt about it, Gabriel *was* looking at him differently.

“Vampire hunters,” he said, laughing. “I knew it was a good idea to put that thought into your heads. You ended up being so busy looking for vampire hunters that you stopped looking for actual vampires didn’t you?”

Christopher was confused.

“Orlando provided the perfect camouflage,” Gabriel continued. “If you hadn’t been so convinced he was the vampire we would probably have had to leave a good deal sooner.”

At last Christopher had a glimmering of the truth, but somehow his curiosity outweighed his fear.

“What do you mean, ‘he provided the perfect camouflage’?”

“I mean that now that we’re leaving, we don’t need Orlando anymore. While your attention was focussed on Orlando we could carry on without anybody suspecting *us*.”

Finally Christopher understood: “You just wanted us to *think* that Orlando was the vampire.

..It was you all along,

..You’re not a vampire hunter at all, you’re an actual vampire,” he said wonderingly.

..A real live vampire,” he added, almost to himself.

“Well I suppose it would be more accurate to say a real dead vampire,” said Gabriel, laughing again, “but yes, that’s right. I’m a real live vampire.”

For some reason Christopher still wasn’t afraid. He felt impelled to find out as much as he could. It was almost as if Gabriel was *inviting* him to ask to ask more, and Christopher couldn’t resist the invitation.

Furthermore Gabriel seemed to be enjoying explaining it all to him. Revealing the secrets of his trade.

So Christopher asked his next question: “If Orlando didn’t have supernatural powers, how did he get out of jail?”

“That was a stroke of genius wasn’t it,” said Gabriel, smiling at the memory. “We knew that getting him out like that would confirm all your suspicions. That wasn’t just

me of course, it was a family affair. I had to dig my parents out to help on that occasion. Of course we took care not to let Orlando see us. One minute he was enveloped in a thick fog, and the next he was outside the police station wondering what had happened. We wiped his memory too, just to make sure.”

“And that’s why you wrote ‘finally revenged’ on the wall in the shower too isn’t it, you *still* wanted us to think it was Orlando.”

“Of course,” said Gabriel. “Anything else you’d like to know?”

“It’s just your name. Gabriel? What sort of name is that for a vampire?”

“It’s the perfect disguise isn’t it. Who would ever think that Gabriel was the name of a vampire?”

Up until that point he had been answering Christopher almost casually, but now he was gazing at him with a sudden intensity.

“You’ve got one final thing to ask haven’t you?”

“Well I guess I want to know if you’re going to turn me.”

“You’d like to be turned wouldn’t you, to find out what it’s like?

But it’s not going to happen I’m afraid.

I’m afraid you’re not the person that’s been chosen this time.

We can only take one at a time.

Any more and it starts to look suspicious.

But I must say it’s been a real pleasure talking to you.

I hoped I’d get the chance to talk to somebody who wasn’t afraid,

..to someone who was so interested,

..who wants to find out as much as they can about us.”

“Though I must confess I did rather lead you on,” he added.

At last Christopher *was* scared. He wanted to run, but Gabriel was looking at him so intensely that he was unable to move.

“Now you *are* frightened aren’t you?” said Gabriel. “So long as you kept asking questions you thought you’d be safe, but you’ve run out of questions haven’t you?

It’s a shame really that I’m so thirsty, but there it is.”

Finally Christopher tried to run, but Gabriel grabbed him and pulled him towards him.

He tried to pull free, but Gabriel’s grip was like a band of steel around his arm, and his eyes now blazed red with desire. In a final attempt to prevent the inevitable, Christopher yelled for help.

“There’s no point in yelling. You yourself told me no-one would hear you in the fog.”

And Christopher watched with growing horror as Gabriel transformed himself into the vampire itself. He stopped being Gabriel, that beautiful human being that everyone desired, and became instead Gabriel / Vampire.

His face a demonic mask.

His skin a livid purple.

His lips pulled back to reveal the long canine teeth, still stained with the blood of his previous victims.

Christopher tried to struggle, even managing to scratch Gabriel hard enough to draw blood, but to no avail. He was too strong for him.

He grabbed Christopher by the hair, pulled his head firmly to one side exposing his neck..

..and sank his teeth deep into it.

Hot blood gushed into his mouth.

He drank deeply, as if overcome by an unquenchable thirst, and having drunk his fill, let go of the body and let it slip gently to the ground. As his features returned to normal he looked down at it regretfully.

“What a shame,” he said quietly. “You actually wanted to become one of us didn’t you. You’d have made a good vampire.”

10. The Final Act

Apart from Christopher himself, everyone still thought that Orlando was the vampire, and that after the ‘finally revenged’ message in the shower he’d finally gone.

But obviously he hadn’t.

Only the victims had known the truth, that it wasn’t Orlando at all, and none of them had stayed alive long enough to tell anyone.

It was the first day of the Christmas break. Anne-Marie and her brother were still working under the assumption that Gabriel was a seeker.

“If Gabriel’s a vampire hunter, why didn’t he do something to stop Orlando?” Paul asked his sister.

“I know,” she said. “I wish he’d done something before it was too late.”

But Paul was just beginning to have his doubts. “Perhaps he isn’t a seeker at all. Perhaps we’ve been wrong all along.”

Again something was niggling away at the back of Paul’s mind, something he couldn’t put his finger on.

“There’s something that Gabriel told us that last time he was here. But I can’t think what it was. I mean why was he only with us for a term?”

“We never really found out very much about him, did we.”

“And you could tell he really fancied you the way he smiled at you that last time,” he reminded her.

Again she couldn’t deny it. She did think that Paul was right and that Gabriel *had* fancied her. And that in some strange sort of way that she had actually *hoped* they would get to know each other better.

“But it wasn’t that,” said Paul, “it was something quite different, but I can’t think what it was.”

The next day Anne-Marie and Jimmy caught the early bus into Harcliffe to do their Christmas shopping.

As they were leaving Paul yelled to his sister, “Make sure you get all the stuff I want! I’ll phone you to check you’ve got everything!”

“You do, and I’ll turn the phone off!” she yelled in reply.

Later that morning Martin came round to work with Paul on their computer project, and when he arrived Paul again started talking about the whole business.

“You know all those graves we found with the names of angels of death on them?” he said.

“Yes.”

“And the three freshly dug graves?”

“Yes.”

“Well how do they fit in with the Orlando story?” Paul asked him.

“I’ve been wondering that too,” said Martin. “I mean all the stuff you found on your orienteering trip did suggest that there have been vampires here before. And the business about the White Horse having been cleaned suggests that they’ve returned. But I don’t

see how the graveyard fits in. It's not even as if Orlando lived anywhere near it. He lived right across the other side of town on the Wilmington Road."

Finally Paul started to have glimmerings of the truth.

"Of course you know who *does* live up there?" he said.

"No. Who?"

"Gabriel!" Paul exclaimed. "Gabriel lives up there!"

"How do you know?"

"He told us. He told us the other day. He lives at number 13."

He had no sooner said it than the light dawned.

"Number 13! That's it!"

"What do you mean, 'that's it'?"

"There *isn't* a number 13!"

Martin was beginning to look at him as if he was mad.

"Because when me and Johnny were looking for the pathway through to the graveyard off the Elford Road," Paul continued excitedly, "we counted the house numbers, and we got as far as 11, and the pathway was there. But where the next house would have been there was a gap. And that house would have been number 13! So there isn't a number 13! There's just the graveyard!"

They looked at each other for a minute.

"We'd better go and check it out," said Martin.

So they did.

It was just as Paul had said it was. The pathway to the graveyard ran down the side of number 11. Next door, where number 13 should have been, there was just an overgrown patch of ground, with here and there the bits of the ruined stone wall that Paul and Johnny had seen before.

"We'd better just check that it really would have been number 13," said Martin, and sure enough, they discovered that the first house past the gap was number 15. Number 13 *was* missing.

Paul tried to puzzle it out. "So if there isn't a house at number 13, what does that mean?" he asked Martin.

"It means," Martin replied, "that number 13 is the graveyard itself."

"And if Gabriel doesn't live in a house then that means he must live in the graveyard. And if he lives in the graveyard it means . . ."

Martin finished the sentence for him. It means," he said, "that Gabriel is the vampire!"

"And those three open graves I found must belong to him and his parents."

It was clear what they were going to have to do next. Martin put it into words.

"There's nothing for it, we've got to go and have a look."

It was an understatement to say that Paul was not keen, but even he recognised that they couldn't stop now. So with quaking heart and considerable trepidation he led Martin down into the graveyard itself. He showed him the overturned cross and the graves with the names of the angels of death on them.

"The three open graves were through here," he told him, and led him through to where he remembered that they had been.

There was no sign of them, just three more old gravestones.

“I’m sure they were here. I must have got the place wrong.”

“No you didn’t,” said Martin. “Look at the gravestones!”

The first stone had *Carl Ekard 1860-1909* carved on it.

The second had *Helena Ekard 1864-1909* carved on it

The third had *Gabriel Ekard 1892-1909* carved on it.

“It’s Gabriel,” Paul whispered.

“Yes, and look, they all died in the same year, 1909, it’s really weird.” Martin too was talking quietly, as if he was afraid of being overheard. “And they’ve all got the same inscription.”

The inscription *The Restless Shall Return* was carved on each of the gravestones.

Things suddenly started to make sense in Paul’s mind.

“The last time we saw him he said his family was restless,” he told Martin. “And he said they sometimes returned to places that they had been to before, so that’s when they were here before, 1909.”

Paul realised something else too. He grabbed Martin’s arm. “1909!” he exclaimed. “That was the last time they cleaned the horse, so that proves it.”

“He was seventeen then and he’s seventeen now,” Martin added, working out the dates. “So it all fits. He never was a seeker. We had it the wrong way round all along.” He went on musing. “The wrong way round... the wrong way round...? There’s still something here we’re not seeing.”

Then Paul saw it. “It’s the name!” he exclaimed. “Ekard is Drake backwards. It’s the wrong way round. And Drake is just a modern version of Dracula!”

“*Vampyrus Novacula Trinitens!* Of course! How stupid of me! I should have remembered,” Martin exclaimed. “The species *Vampyrus Novacula Trinitens* was otherwise known as Drake.”

They shuddered, and looked around, but there was nothing else to see. They started back.

“And the name? Gabriel?” Paul asked once they’d set off. “Gabriel’s not an angel of death.”

“He guards the gates of Heaven, and decides who is to be let in and who is to be thrown into the fiery depths of Hell, so I suppose it sort of fits. Besides, it’s a good cover. Nobody would ever think that Gabriel was the name of a vampire.” Gabriel had said exactly the same thing to Christopher of course, but Martin wasn’t to know that.

“What does the fact that the graves have been filled in mean?”

“It means they’ve finished their work here and gone,” said Martin. “So the next question is where have they gone to? Did Gabriel say anything about where they were going?”

“I think he said something about Harcliffe,” said Paul. A sudden realisation struck him: “Anne-Marie’s there today!” he exclaimed. “I’ve got to warn her!”

Harcliffe’s shopping mall was large. There was a ground floor with a fountain in the middle, and above that there were four more floors. In the centre of each of them there was a circular gallery, and above the galleries there was a multicoloured glass dome. On the fourth floor there was a coffee bar, *Top-4*, with high stools set all the way round the gallery edge. If you looked over the balustrade you had a great view all the way down four floors to the fountain below.

Underneath the mall was a basement, a whole underground network of stockrooms containing stock for the shops above. In one there were rails full of clothes, in another boxes of books and stationery, in another, shelves full of toys. There was a stockroom stacked with furniture. There was a stockroom with crates of china packed in polystyrene chips and wood shavings. In other words for every shop above there was a stockroom down below. A lot of the goods stored in the basement were highly flammable and if a fire really took hold the whole basement could become a raging inferno, and to prevent that from happening there were smoke detectors and a sprinkler system. Smokers had to get rid of their cigarettes before they entered.

Right at the centre of the basement, directly beneath the fountain, there was the heating system. It was fuelled from a rank of large cylinders of liquid gas set up against one wall.

There was an underground car park for the staff.

The last person to arrive that morning was late. Running from her car, she took a last drag on her cigarette, flung it to the ground, and made a dash for the stairs.

A little puff of air came from nowhere, wreathed the still glowing cigarette end in smoke, and rolled it towards the entrance. The same puff of air then wrapped itself around some waste paper that lay just inside the entrance, wreathed *it* in smoke, and blew it gently outside towards the glowing cigarette.

The two met.

A small fire started.

The fire ran back along the trail of waste paper into a stockroom where four hundred and thirty nine dresses hung from rails, each in its polythene wrapping.

The fire licked around the base of one of them.

The polythene started to melt.

The melted polythene caught fire.

The dress caught fire.

The next dress caught fire.

Then the next.

Before long the whole stockroom was blazing.

Another little whirlwind of air picked up a piece of burning polythene and blew it into the china stockroom across the corridor. Half the crates were unpacked and packing material lay scattered all over the floor. That too burst into flames.

The smoke detectors did not go off.

The sprinkler system did not start sprinkling.

Someone had turned them off.

*

At exactly the same time as that breath of wind had blown the cigarette end towards the basement entrance, Anne-Marie and Jimmy had arrived at the mall. They split up, each to do their own shopping, and arranged to meet later at *Top-4*. Anne-Marie got there first. She was just wondering where Jimmy had got to when she saw Gabriel.

And Gabriel saw her.

*

Back in Alchester Paul and Martin had just discovered the graves, and Paul was trying to ring Anne-Marie.

*

The fire in the basement was spreading from stockroom to stockroom.

*

Ann-Marie invited Gabriel over. “Hi Gabriel! Come and join us.”

He got a vanilla coffee and came and sat on the stool next to her.

“Jimmy’s on his way. He should be here any minute.”

“Yes, I just saw him in the distance. He was in the CD store and him and the assistant were trying to sort out a stack of CDs that had somehow fallen down all around him.”

Anne-Marie groaned. “That means he’s going to be ages. Trust him!”

“Never mind. It means I’ve got you to myself for a bit,” and he gave her one of those smiles that made Anne-Marie’s heart do a little hop and skip.

“It’s nice to see you, we thought you’d gone,” she said, smiling back.

“Oh, I’ve left Alchester alright, but now we’re here in Harcliffe I’ve got one final task to do.”

“Just exactly is your one last task?” Anne-Marie felt a bit shy asking him but went ahead anyway. “Has got anything to do with these vampire attacks?”

Gabriel said nothing.

Then taking her courage in both hands, she asked just the same question that Christopher had asked.

“Are you actually a vampire hunter, a seeker?” And before he could answer she went on a bit breathlessly: “And now that Orlando’s gone you can go too?”

“Do *you* think I’m a seeker?” he asked her back.

“Well it’s just that you know so much about vampires, and only a seeker would know so much?”

“So what do you want to know?”

“At the beginning it was just the animals that got killed, then it was human beings?” She paused to let him answer.

“Vampires soon get tired of the blood of animals and have to move on to human blood. It’s *so* much sweeter and *much* more nourishing. Animals are like the hors d’oeuvres and humans are like the main course!” he told her. He smiled at her again, and licked his lips.

She looked at him a bit nervously, it was almost as if he was savouring the taste, but she decided it went with the job of being a seeker. She was just about to ask the next question when her cell phone went.

It was Paul ringing from Alchester.

“Oh it’s only Paul. He told me he’d ring to tell me what to get him for Christmas. I told him I wouldn’t answer.”

*

Paul listened to the ringing tone. “She’s not answering” he told Martin. “Come on Anne-Marie, it’s urgent!” he said to the phone.

“Send her a text,” Martin suggested.

So Paul did: *Plse rnsr! Urgnt!*

He gave Anne-Marie time to read the message, and then rang again.

*

Anne-Marie read the message, but when the phone went again she still didn’t answer.

“He says it’s urgent but I’m still not answering,” she told Gabriel.

“Younger brothers can be such a pain can’t they,” he sympathised.

*

“What shall we do?” Paul asked. “I hope she’s not already in trouble.”

“Send her a message telling her Gabriel’s the vampire,” Martin suggested.

Paul quickly keyed in the message. “She’s got to answer now,” he told Martin.

*

Anne-Marie looked at the message. *Gbl vmpr B crfl!*

“I don’t understand it,” she told Gabriel. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Here, let me have a look,” Gabriel offered, and he took the phone off her. He understood the message alright.

“I expect it’s nothing,” he lied, and went to hand it back. But as he did so his hand touched hers, and it was if she had been hit by an electric shock. The phone leapt out of her hand, went flying over the balustrade, plunged down four floors, and smashed into the fountain below.

Anne-Marie watched in dismay. “Oh my God!” she cried.

“I’m afraid that’s not going to be any use to you now is it,” Gabriel observed casually.

Anne-Marie looked up at him. He wasn’t usually casual like this. There was suddenly something different about him. Unfeeling. The thought even crossed her mind that there was something sinister in his tone.

But still she ignored it.

*

“We’ll have to ring Jimmy,” said Paul....

*

“So what else were you going to ask me?” Gabriel asked Anne-Marie innocently.

Dismissing her qualms, Anne-Marie asked him the next question. “You know when someone gets turned?”

“Yes.”

“Well you said it has to be a special person. So how does a vampire decide on the special person?”

“It’s up to the vampire. If he’s just thirsty for blood then he’ll kill them. But if the vampire really fancies them he will want them to join him. So he won’t kill them, he’ll just turn them. I mean if it was me and I really fancied you, I’d turn you rather than killing you.”

His manner was still casual, but it didn’t stop Anne-Marie’s heart giving another little hop and skip. Was Paul right about Gabriel really fancying her? She still couldn’t see the trap that Gabriel was setting for her.

“But you’d have to be willing as well,” he continued. “Some vampires give you the choice. That’s what I’d do. I’d bite you, then I’d give you the choice. You would decide whether you wanted to actually die, or whether you wanted to join me forever. I’d ask you which you would do.”

Just for a moment the thought of living forever with Gabriel was very appealing to Anne-Marie, but her head was so full of conflicting emotions she couldn’t speak.

So Gabriel asked her outright.

“If it *was* me, and if it *was* you, what *would* you do?”

“I um..” Anne-Marie couldn’t stop herself. “I guess I’d rather join you.”

“That’s what I hoped you’d say,” said Gabriel quietly.

And although she didn't know it, she was caught, like a fly in a spider's web, like a fish in a net, like a rabbit with its leg caught in a snare. No matter how much she struggled she wouldn't be able to escape the web, the net, the snare. But if she wasn't aware that she was caught, she did feel as if Gabriel was inexorably drawing her on to ask more and more questions.

"You'd have to kidnap me so that I couldn't tell anyone that you were my source. And you'd have to make them think I was dead."

"Oh that's all planned.."

"How do you mean, 'planned'?"

"The stockrooms would be on fire."

Anne-Marie was bewildered. "What stockrooms. What fire?"

"Underneath the mall. Stockrooms. With the stock for all the stores above."

"I still don't understand."

"The plan would involve setting those alight,

. .the fire would spread up into the mall,

. .the mall would become an inferno,

. .everyone would panic,

. .and in the panic I would be able to carry you off.

When no-one found you they would assume you had died in the fire and that your body had been consumed by the flames. Simple!"

"That's an awful lot of trouble to go to isn't it, just for me?"

"If the prize is worth having, then vampires like to be thorough, and to leave no trace," he told her.

Anne-Marie felt totally dazed. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"You're talking as if you're the vampire himself! "she said wonderingly, "not a vampire hunter."

"I never said I was a vampire hunter."

*

In the basement several stockrooms were ablaze. Smoke began seeping up the lift shafts and the service stairs. People on the ground floor started to smell burning.

*

Jimmy had just finished helping the assistant to stack the CDs that had so mysteriously collapsed, when his phone went.

"Is that you Jimmy?"

He recognised Paul's voice. He assumed he was still on about his Christmas presents. "It's no use trying to get me to tell Anne-Marie what you want, because she's already said she'd ignore you."

"No it's not that," Paul said from the other end, "it's Anne-Marie. Where is she? Is she with you? I've tried to ring her but she won't answer."

Jimmy could hear the urgency in Paul's voice. "I expect she's waiting for me at *Top-4*. Why? What's so urgent?"

"Is Gabriel with her?" Paul sounded even more urgent.

"Gabriel? Gabriel's gone you idiot!"

"He said he was only going as far as Harcliffe, so he could easily be there."

"What are you on about?"

"He's the vampire!"

"Gabriel? You cannot be serious!" Jimmy exclaimed. "You're making it up!"

“No we’re not. Me and Martin have discovered the graves.” Paul quickly explained about what they’d found. “So you see, Gabriel *is* the vampire!”

Anne-Marie asked her final question. She knew she knew the answer before she asked it, but she asked it anyway:

“So if you’re not a vampire hunter, what are you?”

“I think you’ve guessed haven’t you,” was all that he said.

And Anne-Marie finally knew that she was afraid.

She was very afraid.

Her mind filled with images of Allyson’s dead body in the barn, images of Lizzie Blair dying in a pool of blood at the club night, images of Mrs Pettigrew’s dog in the undergrowth in the wood, and images of all the others, even though she hadn’t seen them with her own eyes. Adrian lying in a pool of blood in the shower, serious Francesca Ellis who would never have done anyone any harm, friendly Christopher Whitman, nice Miss Fairchild.

And Anne-Marie realised she was next.

But she couldn’t move. She was mesmerised by the intensity of his gaze.

“When you said you’d rather live with me forever than die, that was when I knew it was going to be you,” Gabriel continued. It was a voice full of silky menace, but it was also a voice full of invitation.

“I’m not tough...” he said the word as if he despised people who were tough, “or independent,” he went on in the same tone. “Or considerate. Or even good looking, like Jimmy...” he paused as Anne-Marie gasped.

Those were her very thoughts after that first conversation she’d had with Gabriel on the way to college that time.

“You see. I know everything you’re thinking. And that’s why I also know that there’s something about me that you find fatally attractive. Irresistible. ‘Beautiful’ is your word isn’t it. You’ve even told the others you think I’m beautiful haven’t you. But then they all find me beautiful don’t they, the boys as well as the girls. That’s how I intend it to be.”

His eyes seemed to pierce her very soul. She was totally transfixed.

Creswell’s toyshop on the ground floor was full. Full of mums and dads buying Christmas presents for their kids. Full of kids telling their mums and dads what *they* wanted for Christmas.

Among them was Mrs Liddell who couldn’t decide what toy to buy for her daughter.

“Alice is such a dreamy girl,” she explained to the assistant, “I never know what to get her..” and it was while she was waiting for the assistant to help her choose that she saw the smoke.

“Excuse me, but isn’t that smoke?”

The assistant turned to see, and even as they looked flames started licking around a stack of dolls in their cardboard boxes.

“Oh my God! Fire!” the assistant exclaimed, and as the full realisation of the danger hit her, she yelled the word at the top of her voice, “FIRE!!”.

Everyone in the shop froze.

They saw the fire.

They ran.

Mums and dads grabbed their children and pushed them out in front of them.

The doors were jammed with people.

Then the jam broke and people exploded out into the mall itself. Their panic was infectious, and cries of 'FIRE' echoed up and down the crowded building. Finally the fire alarm went off, blaring its message throughout the whole mall, and finally somebody turned the sprinklers back on.

*

The basement was by now an inferno. Only the room with the heating system remained untouched. There was nothing there to burn.

But the gas cylinders were getting dangerously hot.

They were getting ready to explode.

*

Two minutes earlier, even though he thought Paul's story sounded fantastic, Jimmy decided that he had better go and find Anne-Marie just to check that she was safe.

Then the fire alarm went off.

Real fear gripped him.

He couldn't have explained it, but for some reason he suddenly knew that Anne-Marie was in serious danger. He had to get to the coffee bar. But the panicking crowd was rushing in the opposite direction. They crashed into him, and yelled at him that he was going in the wrong way, and he had to push and shove with all his might to make any headway.

His heart thumped, he gasped for breath, but his determination drove him onwards.

*

Gabriel held Anne-Marie in his most intense gaze.

His eyes were two grey green vortexes and she felt herself spiralling helplessly into them.

She was still transfixed, still totally mesmerised.

She would do anything he asked her.

So when the fire alarm went off she barely heard it. She was completely unaware that the other customers had gone, leaving half drunk cups of coffee behind them. All she was aware of was the caressing seductiveness of his voice.

"Oh, it's just the fire alarm," he purred. "But don't worry, I'll take good care of you. You're perfectly safe with me." And as if it was the most natural thing in the world he hopped on to the top rail of the balustrade. The image of some hideous insect perched there flashed through Anne-Marie's mind, but even then she was powerless to resist him.

"Let me tempt you. Come on up. Let me show you what's on offer," and he reached down and gave Anne-Marie his hand.

She couldn't help herself.

He had a demonic hold over her.

She took his hand and she found herself up there on the rail beside him, and as long as he was holding her, she knew she wouldn't fall.

"There you are. Look down. There's the whole world down there and it's yours for the asking."

Anne-Marie looked down. The panicking crowd looked like scurrying ants rushing madly in every direction.

"Just like ants aren't they," he said, echoing her thoughts.

She glanced at him and for a second she had a vision of a monstrous creature, half hawk, half wolf, with its great talons extended, grasping for her. She saw its snarling wolf's head, its eyes burning red with desire, its lips pulled back to expose its bloodstained teeth. It was the very devil incarnate.

But as quickly as the image had come it had gone, and there was silky, smiling Gabriel standing beside her, as beguiling as ever.

"You only have to say the word and it's yours," the voice was velvety with desire.

She knew she was sliding into the abyss, but she couldn't help herself.

*

Jimmy plunged through the last of the crowd, raced up the final staircase and saw Anne-Marie and Gabriel poised on the edge of the balcony.

"ANNE-MARIE!" he yelled. "NO!!"

He rushed towards them, searching desperately for some weapon. Seeing the heavy stools he grabbed one and rushed for the two of them.

"ANNE-MARIE. DON'T JUMP! GET AWAY FROM HIM!"

The sound of Jimmy's voice snapped Anne-Marie out of her trance. Immediately she saw her danger.

A wave of dizziness swept over her.

Within seconds she would fall and join the scuttling ants down below.

Arms flailing she swayed on the brink.

Jimmy swung the stool around and hit the side of Gabriel's head with all the force he could muster, and with a final desperate lunge he grabbed Anne-Marie and pulled her down to safety.

If Gabriel had been an ordinary human being the blow would have broken his neck. Instead he danced away from them and hung tantalisingly in the very air itself, snarling contemptuously at them.

It was at that point that the gas cylinders in the basement exploded.

With a horrendous roar, a roar that was heard five miles away, an almost volcanic eruption shot a column of flame and debris from the bottom of the mall to the very top. It shattered the glass dome above them and splinters of coloured glass poured down.

Desperately Jimmy pulled Anne-Marie down under one of the tables for protection.

And just for once Gabriel was not fast enough.

The blast of flame hit him and a piercing shriek of pain and despair split the air. It was as if the very Devil himself had met his end.

From the comparative safety of their hiding place Jimmy and Anne-Marie watched with horror as a writhing Gabriel desperately tried to escape his fate. But to no avail.

Falling shards of glass shredded the already melting flesh, flesh which was falling off him in flaming streams of fire, and soon all that was left was a flailing skeleton. Then the skeleton itself fell away leaving just a grinning skull of white ash. It hung before them for a second before it too was finally consumed by the leaping flames.

Gabriel was gone.

*

The mall didn't burn down. The sprinklers had restricted the fire to the central core. As for Jimmy and Anne-Marie, how they escaped unhurt they never knew. All that Anne-Marie could remember was a sense of searing heat and a feeling that everything was going into slow motion. As if time itself was stretching. As if seconds had turned into minutes and minutes into hours.

Jimmy pulled at her desperately and yelled at her to run.

She felt him frantically beating at her and realised that her clothes were alight, and that he was trying to put them out with his bare hands. There was a smell of singeing which she suddenly realised was her own hair.

Finally, after what felt like hours, but in reality was only about 15 seconds, they got into the blessed relief of the sprinkler systems. Jimmy's hands were badly burned, and there were burns down Anne-Marie's back. And it was going to take some time for her burnt hair to grow out. Otherwise, miraculously, they were unhurt.

And the cause of the fire? An electrical fault they said. Mercifully everyone had escaped and been accounted for.

There *was* one exception of course, but no-one knew he had ever been there in the first place.

It took Anne-Marie some time to recover from the experience. Jimmy helped her through it. She told him all about her last conversation with Gabriel, and about how close she had come to submitting to his will. She told him about the sensation she had had that she was on the slippery slope into the abyss, and that she had felt powerless to stop herself. She told him that it was only when she heard him shouting that she was able to snap out of it to get back into control.

Jimmy looked at her for along time before he said anything. Then, "You nearly went with him didn't you?" he said.

She looked at him but she couldn't answer him.

"It's alright, I understand," he said, and kissed her very, very gently.

Anne-Marie didn't tell anyone else anything.

She didn't tell her parents.

She didn't tell Maisie, her best friend in all the world.

She didn't even tell Paul the story, even though he guessed the truth.

"He was there, wasn't he?" he said to Anne-Marie, but she never answered him. And just for once Paul didn't tease her about it, he realised it was too serious, and from that day to this he has never raised the subject again.

And Alchester?

Slowly, very slowly it drew its breath.

Had the murders stopped?

Maybe.

The more time that passed the safer they felt, and the horror that had gripped the town for the last three months gradually dissipated.

Winter turned into spring, spring turned into summer. Apart from the fact that the murders remained unsolved, the town gradually, gradually got back to normal.

And Gabriel? Every now and then people wondered what had happened to him, and every now and then people remembered how beautiful he had been, but neither Anne-Marie, nor Jimmy, nor Paul, ever said anything about what had happened in the mall that day, and people soon put him out of their minds. There was the new term ahead, and people had to get back to work.

He was forgotten.

And if anyone did venture into the deserted graveyard out of curiosity. And if they found the upturned cross and the gravestones with the strange names. And if they pressed further through the dark undergrowth until they got to the very corner of the graveyard itself.. they might have found a couple of gravestones covered with creepers and moss. And if they rubbed the moss off they might just have made out the names Carl Ekard and Helena Ekard.

But of the third grave, Gabriel's grave, there was no sign.
It was just as if he had never existed.

THE END

With apologies from Martin to the following:

J S Cardone

Francis Ford Coppola

David S. Goyer

Tom Holland

Neil Jordan

Sheridan Le Fanu

Stephanie Meyer

Stephen Norrington

Roman Polanski

Anne Rice

Joel Schumacher

Stephen Sommers

Bram Stoker

Guillermo del Toro

Len Wiseman

Wikipedia

(Note: It will be seen from the above list that Martin's research merely scraped the surface of the available material.)

. . .and the author offers a nod to Mr Hitchcock and Mr Tourneur.

And never forget Professor Abronsius. Long may he dance!

Also by Charles Sarland....
....a thriller for kids:

Art & Crew