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The Limbgate Visions: A Novel

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The Limbgate Visions

A Novel

Sean Jackson
April 20, 2015

Introduction

Charlotte Crow was killed on her eighth birthday.

Or perhaps Charlotte never existed, and the whole tale was a product of a few children's fevered imaginations.

Perhaps those children were themselves driven to murder by their imaginations.

Perhaps Charlotte's dream world outlived her. Or perhaps it was her father's dream.

I cannot judge the truth or presume to understand this story. I can only present the testimony of a few witnesses, to judges more knowledgeable than I.

I went to immense lengths to compile these diaries. My search began a few months ago when my grandfather, Robert Lamb, passed away. I found in his possession a memoir of his life at Limbgate Orphanage, but there were numerous gaps in the narrative. So I traveled to Limbgate, which is now the home of a close friend of mine, Clara Candlewright. Together we searched the house for clues, and succeeded in finding a number of diaries. A few of the names mentioned by my grandfather, though, were still unaccounted for, so we continued our search. We found that a handful of the orphans remained alive, and visited each in turn. They gladly provided us with the missing diaries.

We did our best to arrange the diary entries in chronological order. Just when we thought we had completed our project, Clara found a package on her doorstep. Within, to her astonishment, was Charlotte's diary. The entries were sparse, but helped shed some light on the mysterious girl. After adding the new diary, we congratulated ourselves with a glass of wine and a good night's rest. We hope that this chronicle will prove useful to any who may read it.

-E. Lamb, December 21, 2012

Chapter I

Robert Lamb's Memoir

I am deeply afraid to tell my story. The memories alone are bitter enough, but to persuade someone that my bizarre tale is the simple, unadorned truth seems a hopeless endeavor.

I am going mad with silence, however, and I must write. Every night I dream I am back in the old orphanage with all those familiar faces. Sometimes I am sitting before a weak candle as young Charlotte whispers to me. Sometimes I am sharing a cup of tea with Janice. I have decided to write this private memoir for my own sake, no matter what people may think of me when they find this little black book after I am dead.

I was born to a middle-class family. My father was a schoolmaster and my mother wrote children's books. I was hopelessly spoiled. They took me to the movies, the zoo, or some other attraction every weekend, though I doubt they could well afford such extravagance. That is not to say we got along perfectly. I think they wanted me to become a doctor, but I wanted to become a poet. My father in particular felt that such a pursuit was not only unprofitable, but unmanly, and urged me to seek a more seemly vocation. Try as he might, he could not stop me from winning the adoration of my literature teachers. We were a peaceful family, content to eat dinner at home every evening, go to church every Sunday, and generally live quiet lives.

That changed when I was fourteen years old. I was staying at Uncle Croxley's house in Sheffield while my parents went on a trip to Dover for the weekend. Uncle Croxley was a single man, gaunt and red-eyed. I always got a bad taste in my mouth when I saw him. I am not sure if it was because of his dragging way of speaking or his leering eyes. His house was almost as decrepit as he. Numerous cobwebs hung from the rafters, the bedrooms smelled like unwashed clothes, and the dishes were never done. He was only forty, but to my young eyes he looked like some wicked old misanthropic wizard.

On April 18, 1950, my childhood ended. I was watching television, though I cannot recall the program. Uncle Croxley was whispering to someone on the phone. "That's . . . regrettable," I heard him say. "Yes. A tragedy indeed . . . indeed . . . yes . . . I will inform him. But of course. Goodbye." I ignored him, assuming that his words had nothing to do with me. I nearly jumped when he crept behind me and laid a spindly-fingered hand on my shoulder.

"Robert," he said, "I have some unfortunate news for you."

"What is it, Uncle Croxley?" I pulled away from him and stood to my feet.

"Well, um, how to say this? Bad things happen, you see, and no one is safe. Not even you, Robert."

"What is it?" I asked again.

"Well, you understand your parents were driving down to the seaside to have a little time together, don't you? Well, regrettably, they had an, um . . . an automobile accident. The both of them are quite dead."

The words hurt. I didn't want to breathe. All that I loved was gone forever, and I couldn't move or think or feel anything.

"Robert?"

My shock turned to anger. I awakened to the senselessness of the moment and screamed. I grabbed the television and threw it on the floor, smashing the screen and putting an end to the dull driveling voices of the actors. Uncle Croxley seized me by the shoulders and shook me.

"What's gotten into you, boy?"

I wrenched myself free, fell to the floor, and cried. Croxley watched.

Three days passed. I ate little and lay in bed most of the time. I never turned on the light. I entertained myself by scrutinizing the swirling patterns on the curtains above my bed. I felt half alive and, if I'd had the will to move, would have ended my life. My uncle would not have cared.

On the morning of April 21, he knocked at my door. "Robert! It's time to wake up!"

I rubbed my eyes and wondered at this violation of routine. He never told me when to wake up. I looked at the little clock by my bed. It was only 4. I groaned and lay down once more.

Uncle Croxley knocked more adamantly. "For shame, nephew! You must – you simply must wake up at once!"

Reluctantly I slipped out of bed, put on my slippers, and shuffled to the door. I opened it and scowled at Uncle Croxley.

"Pack your things, child, we mustn't miss the northward train!"

I hated the thought of travel, but I obeyed. Most of my belongings were at home, but I was afraid to mention this lest Croxley lose his temper. I had a suitcase large enough to carry several changes of clothes, my toiletries, and a couple of books.

As I packed and dressed, Uncle Croxley prepared breakfast. Whatever else may be said of the man, he was an admirable cook. I dragged my suitcase down the stairs and set it by the door, then went to the kitchen.

Croxley mumbled as he fixed a plate for me. "After much consideration, my dear nephew, I have come to a decision concerning you."

"What is there to decide?"

"Your fate." He set the plate before me. The enchanting smell of eggs and toast and fresh mushrooms eased my mind. "I am an old man," he continued. "And you are young. While my mind is set upon heavenly things, yours is set on cars and music and girls. I fear that you would find life here unpleasant."

I nodded in agreement, though I suspected his thoughts were far from heavenly.

"The point being that you, being young, would be better off making your own way in the world. That said, I have found an orphanage for you where you will be made comfortable."

"You're putting me in an orphanage?"

"If it is any consolation, there will be girls."

"You think that's—"

Croxley held out a mug of coffee. "Take this. It will please you."

I hated him, but I took the coffee.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"It is on the outskirts of Dalby Forest. It is called Limbgate."

"Odd."

"It is indeed an odd name, and that's coming from a man named Croxley!" He chuckled. "But I digress. You will find it agreeable, I am sure. The master of the house is a man of intellect, though sullen and unpleasant in character. But he is not cruel like some foul men. You will have a room of your own. There will be eight or ten other children, I believe, but I cannot remember the precise number. But as for Master Denford, I like him generally, though he is an admirer of Kant, whom I cannot abide. I met a few of the children on my visit. There was a delightful young man among them, though his name has slipped my mind. I feel he would be a good influence upon you."

Uncle Croxley continued to rattle away as I finished my breakfast. The moment I drained the last drop of coffee from the mug he hurried me to my feet and out the door. He clenched my arm with his vice-like fingers and dragged me halfway across Sheffield, through crowded thoroughfares, disreputable neighborhoods, and dark alleys until we reached the train station. We arrived a full two hours before the departure time. Uncle Croxley explained that he hated being late. I diverted myself with my books until the train arrived and we hurried on board. I managed to secure an excellent view through a window. The train screeched and howled. We were off.

For the first time that day I had time to think. Even when I thought everything was over, life went on. I was being spirited off to a new beginning. I only wondered whether it was the beginning of my life or the end. At that point I could not quite consider suicide, but I still felt that it would be very convenient to die. And then what? Despite my upbringing I was inclined to think of death as a cold dark place where everyone, good or evil, became nothing. A little like a train ride without a destination.

I watched the grey weather worsen into black. The rain became a torrent and the sky crackled with lightning. My uncle was rather irritated, but I found the storm thrilling. I felt I was standing on the verge of a terrible, wonderful thing.

After a lusterless journey lengthened by a monstrous delay due to an engine failure, the train stopped in Pickering. We alone stood to disembark. The other passengers carried on with their various doings. One man quickly glanced up from his newspaper, but just as quickly buried his head in the pages. I clumsily lugged my suitcase over the gap.

The station was a cold and lonely place. The platform was exposed to the rain and I had no umbrella. My uncle opened his own and smugly hummed an old hymn.

There was a man there. He noticed us and nodded to my uncle, then approached with a firm gait. He extended his hand first to my uncle, and then to me. Only after this did he speak. "Good afternoon. I am Mr. Douglas Denford. Robert Lamb, I assume?"

I cannot quite explain my first impression of him. His deep, commanding voice filled me with fear, fascination, and admiration. He was somewhat tall, but not lanky. His face was firmly set in an expression of grim determination. His eyes were

small and black, but a little hard to see beneath the scratched lenses of his glasses. His hair was light brown, a little long, and poorly cut. He wore a long black coat, unbuttoned, reaching his knees. He had no umbrella, but did not seem to mind the rain. He looked like a hardened soldier in the guise of an eccentric scholar.

"Yes, this is my nephew Robert," my uncle answered for me.

"Good. We can discuss the regulations, your living arrangements, and the like later. I prefer to conduct business in my office. For now, allow me to show you to my car." He turned abruptly and led us through the main building, where a tired mother watched her two young sons race back and forth across the room. Mr. Denford held the door open for us and pointed to a weathered black car with a cracked windshield. "That one is mine."

Uncle Croxley snorted in disgust. "Surely you intend to buy a new car soon?"

"She has served me well enough." He coughed and trudged through the mud to the car. He unlocked it with a quick hand. I climbed in and pressed myself against the far door. I had always found it more comfortable to seek the edges of things, whether rooms, cars, trains, crowds, or classrooms, and now I needed that comfort more than ever. Uncle Croxley sat beside Mr. Denford and hummed as we drove through the countryside. The city soon vanished and left only the violent landscape of the moors. The trees were sparse at first, but the occasional knotted trunks grew in number until the road was flanked on either side by crooked brown hands. I could see no sign of human dwellings until, with a sudden turn, Mr. Denford drove onto a gravel path leading directly to the Limbgate Orphanage.

Limbgate was built of grey-brown stone towering four stories above the earth. Countless windows overlooked the path, some lit with weak electric light and others black. A lonely silhouette watched from an upper room. After a hundred years of storm and battering rain, the walls were badly cracked and eroded. Vines and ivy climbed the walls, the path, and the trees. The merciless assaults of time and nature would soon topple the old stonework to the ground, one more sacrifice to whatever gods dwelt in the trees.

Mr. Denford cruised to a stop before the five steps leading to the double door. I eased the car door open and, mindful of the puddles, set my feet upon the ground. I put my hands in my pockets and climbed the steps. The doors were old and rusted, inlaid with images of angels and devils. At the center of each door, a serene angel held a candle high above her head. Her eyes were closed to the war raging around her. The Latin phrase "*Respice Finem*" was inscribed above the door.

"Why is that written there?" I asked.

"I cannot say," Mr. Denford said after a moment's thought. "The building is much older than I am."

"How old?"

"I never did care to know." Mr. Denford took a rusty key from his pocket and unlocked the door. I walked into the dark front hall. Mr. Denford groped at the left wall and switched on the lights. "It was a nightmare to install the electricity," he said. "Perhaps it was wrong to corrupt the old with the new, but what is done is done. It will be dinnertime soon. I wish to speak with you in my office. Mr. Croxley, goodbye."

“Goodbye, sir. Farewell, young nephew. This almost brings a tear to my eyes, but I am sure you will be good and happy. Farewell, farewell.”

“Goodbye.” I shook his hand and hoped I would never lay eyes upon him again.

I could barely keep up with Mr. Denford as he strode through the winding halls of the orphanage. I studied my surroundings as much as I could, but only formed half-impressions of Baroque paintings, statues of angels and muses and peasants, and many strangely colored doors and rooms. Mr. Denford stopped in what looked to be the main hall. A chandelier filled the room with shimmering light. There were curved twin stairways leading to a higher floor overlooking the main hall, guarded by a white railing. A row of eyes peered over the railing at me. I counted three girls. The smallest waved at me.

“Introductions later.” The girls hurriedly retreated to the shadows, but I could hear repressed giggling as we left through the far door. We were in a bare, darkened passage now, with an oak door at the end. Mr. Denford slowed his pace considerably. He guided me through the door and asked me to stand in front of a desk. He took a seat behind it in a great armchair.

I had never seen such a strange office. For all his rigor, Mr. Denford seemed to care little for personal tidiness. The office was littered with hundreds of sheets of paper. Some seemed mathematical in nature, while others were purely artistic. These latter were a little unusual. Most were half-finished sketches of disfigured monsters. Only one was perfectly complete, a pencil drawing framed and signed at the back of the room. Its face was blurred, with hints of heavy eyelids. It was entitled “Man of Dust, or the Sand-Man.” A medieval sword was mounted above the drawing.

“What are they?” I asked.

“The drawings? Dreams. I suffer from nightmares. I draw to keep myself sane. Now, business.” Mr. Denford cupped his hands together. “Let me state from the outset that I am not fond of children. Don’t expect me to go around patting you on the head and handing out sweets or being like a second father. I will spend most of my time in my office. You may not enter unless I ask you to enter or there is an emergency. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir.”

“On the other hand, you need not fear any cruelty from me. I expect very little of you during your time here. Once you are settled in you will begin attending school in the village. Upon your return each afternoon, you will devote your time to reading, the arts, or your chores. I do not ask for obedience, only discipline. You must make your own life here.”

“Sir, do you mean to say I will not be punished for bad behavior?”

“Eviction is the only punishment. Unless you would like to be sent to a harsher facility, I would advise you to remain in good standing with me.”

“Yes sir.”

“You will share a room with Jack Rake. There you will find a complete list of rules, as well as a bed, a closet, and other necessities. I believe it is dinnertime now, so you may see your room afterward. Follow me.”

Dinner was a fine but meager meal of roast chicken and rice. The children drank water while Mr. Denford drank wine. The black wood table was draped with a white cloth and adorned with three unlit candles. Eight children were present, along with Mr. Denford, leaving three empty seats. I took one between a black-haired girl and a nervous-looking boy.

Mr. Denford muttered a brief, subdued prayer, then glanced around the table. "Well, it is time for introductions. Please stand, Robert."

"Um, my name is Robert Lamb. I am from Sheffield."

"Have you nothing more interesting to say of yourself?"

"I like poetry."

Mr. Denford did not look impressed, but he nodded. "Very well, Robert. You may sit down."

As though they had rehearsed, the other children took turns making introductions. One after another they stood and spoke, proceeding clockwise around the table.

"Richard Weslow. Twelve years. Murder."

"Celeste Wight. Fifteen years. Illness."

"Jack Rake. Seventeen years. Unknown."

"Christina Burns, but I prefer Christie. Sixteen years. Abandonment."

"Ava Leann. Sixteen years. War and heart attack."

"Emily Weslow. Ten years. Murder."

"Daniel Dimling. Thirteen years. Stroke and madness."

"Agnes Violet. Seventeen years. Living but unfit."

Mr. Denford looked at me. "Robert?"

Shaken, I stood again. "Robert Lamb. Fourteen years. Automobile accident."

I sat down again and tried not to think about what had passed. It was then that I first began to feel uneasy about Limbgate, and Mr. Denford in particular. How could he be so unapologetically morbid that he could ask his wards to introduce themselves by the manner of their bereavement?

The children did not seem quite so disturbed. Richard, the nervous one, kept unfolding and refolding his napkin. Celeste was tense and timid. She never uttered a word. Jack was tall and handsome. His blue eyes glowed with energy. Christie had a quiet but warm manner. She was a bit darkly dressed and wore a rosary. Ava Leann had large black eyes with a haunting stare. She would fix her eyes on one thing after another and slip into some kind of trance. Once she stared at me, but I found it curiously comforting. Emily Weslow looked considerably younger than the others. She had long blond hair and wore a faded light blue dress. I paid little attention to Daniel, a dark-haired, sulking boy. Agnes Violet talked a great deal, but once in a while she would lean on her hand, smile, and breathe a long sigh of contentment.

Christie looked at me and asked if I had to come a long way to reach the orphanage.

"Far enough. I lived in Sheffield."

"Do you have any family there?"

"Only an uncle. We don't like each other."

"Why not?" Emily said. "I would die to have relatives."

"Not all relatives are worth having."

"Why doesn't he like you?"

"I don't know. I don't think he likes anyone, actually."

"And that's why you don't like him?"

"It's one reason."

Emily turned to Ava with bright eyes. "Ava, Robert needs to hear you play! Please?"

Ava shook herself out of a reverie. "What? Play . . .?"

"Please play the piano?"

"I don't know. I'll be a disappointment."

"I, for one, agree with Emily," Jack said. "Only an idiot wouldn't want to hear music."

"But . . . I think . . . Mr. Douglas Denford has a Rubinstein recording. Yes. That would do just as well."

"Play for us, Ava," Mr. Denford said. "If you want to perform in public some day, you must learn to control your nerves."

Ava, now sick with embarrassment, relented. "I will play, then. But only one song."

So, when dinner was over, we gathered round the black grand piano in the music room. Ava sat before the piano, laid her ghost-white hands on the keys, and began playing a tender, rolling melody.

*When sickness cripples me,
Will you stay and sing?
When shadows cloud my heart,
Will you light my room?*

*When blackened waters blind me,
Will you lift me free?
On paths of twisted terror,
Please lead me home.*

*When madness descends,
Calm me.
When I cower alone,
Hold me.
When pain devours me,
Forgive me.
When love betrays me,
Mourn me.*

*When I look at you with bloodied hands,
Will you wash me clean?
When I am gone to an early grave,
Find me and guide me home.*

I felt numb. "What is it called?" I asked.

“ ‘Forest Song.’ ”

I now realize the song was not Ava’s. She was only the medium of the spirit of Limbgate. I glimpsed it in her eyes.

That night, in the security of my room, I had the chance to learn more about Jack Rake.

“How do you like it here, Robert?” he asked, reclined on his bed, eating an apple.

“Well enough. This room is more than I expected.” Indeed, it was far more. My romantic imagination had threatened me with rats and spiders, cold gruel and whippings, and cruel, foul-mouthed boys. It was true my situation was humble, for the room was small and poorly furnished. Nevertheless there was a still, sad comfort about the blue wallpaper, the innocent angel in the painting by the window, and the unlit candle on the desk.

“Denford’s a good man, as far as any of us can tell,” Jack said. “A bit boring, though.”

“The others . . . are they nice?”

“You don’t need to worry about them. You’re in good company. Ava’s a bit crazy, but she never causes trouble.”

“Crazy?”

“Perhaps that’s a bit unfair. She has that stare, though. She could melt iron just by staring! And she can cry over anything: dead birds, spilt water, once even a crack in the wall. But for all that she’s a good girl.”

“I was afraid it would be worse than this.”

“We all were when we first came. Sure, Limbgate isn’t home, but it’s the next best thing.”

I sat cross-legged on my bed and glanced at the rule-sheet taped to the wall.

“I should tell you now, the rules are for show. Denford doesn’t care about anything, really, as long as we behave and stay out of danger. Hell, I think he saw me kiss Agnes once and he pretended not to notice!”

“Are you and Agnes . . . ”

“We’ve been in love for a year now. She’s an angel, I tell you.” Jack finished his apple and threw it in the wastebasket. “Any girls catch your eye?”

“I don’t know, I’m still feeling rather rotten.”

“At least you have someone to miss. I don’t know who my parents are or what happened to them. I don’t know if they loved or hated me, or if I’m just a lost bastard.”

“I don’t know. It hurts to lose someone.”

“It hurts to have no one there to begin with.” He looked angry for a moment, but calmed himself. “We shouldn’t argue over who’s got it worse, should we? Let’s talk about something else.”

And we did. We talked late into the night, well past the rule-sheet curfew. Jack was my first friend.

Christina Burns's Diary

Concerning Ava and the new boy

Note: Finish reading Dante for class. Mr. Peeks is threatening to kill me.

The others must think I'm weird to spend so much time in the graveyard. It's their fault, though. I used to write in my room but the girls kept trying to read over my shoulder. They drove me here. At least the dead don't try to read your diary. Or do they?

It's a nice place, really. Mr. Denford says this house once belonged to an old noble family, the Crows. I see the name on many of the tombstones. I've found the crest here and there. And then there are the crow sculptures. They're everywhere. I suppose they're a kind of gargoyle? They scare me, with their wide wings and empty eyes.

I sat with Ava as she practiced this morning. She told me Schumann could hear the voices of angels – I wonder if it's true. The others tease me for my religion, but Ava believes more strongly in angels and demons than I ever could. Sometimes I think she's more spirit than flesh. Maybe that's why she's so beautiful.

Yesterday we received a new friend. His name is Robert Lamb. He looked so timid and distressed that I couldn't help but feel sorry for him. I want to tell him everything will be all right. I want to lie to him and say life goes on, even though it doesn't. Limbgate will eat him alive.

He needs love. You can always tell the ones that have hurt themselves, if you look in their eyes. Thousands walk the world in agony. If only those of us still breathing would look in their eyes and tell them –

Hang it, someone's here.

Agnes Violet's Diary

Dance

I'm quite excited about my newest dress. I couldn't decide whether to make it red or blue, so I asked Emily. She said to make it violet, to match my name. I've pricked myself with the needle twelve times or so, but I'm very nearly done, and while it may be a bit plain, at least I can call it my own.

This morning I awoke from a distressing dream. I was at a ballroom dance when a handsome young man approached me. I remember wishing that he would leave me be, but he kept begging me to dance with him. As he talked he began to age. His hands stretched out till they were thin and wrinkled. I screamed and opened my eyes.

The night before I stayed up rather late in Christie and Ava's room. I had felt anxious for no particular reason, and blathered on about my future and how little I had to which I could look forward. Christie soothed my anxieties. She has such a

loving heart. I asked her if she ever wished to marry. She claimed she had never been in love. I am sure her time will come.

Ava was sullen. I mean no insult to her, but she is somewhat like an animal. They say animals are restless on the eve of a storm. She clawed at her bed sheets and growled like a disgruntled cat.

My God, she must be a cat. Her eyes . . .

Ava Leann's Diary

Songs

In the morning, I lost my comb. In the afternoon, I found a piece of string. And in the evening?

In the evening, I had a vision of black water. I wrote it down on the wall with the other visions. There are so many now, and so few of them are happy. I can tell Christie is upset when she sees my wall, and who wouldn't be? Sometimes I wonder how I have managed to stay sane.

I wish I had wings. Then I could fly with my angels to heaven and escape Limbgate forever. Here I am, caged and lightless. Yet somehow, I am happy. Happier than any of them. For at night my angels sing to me, and at day I sing their song to the world.

I hear things the others cannot hear: the spinning of the world, the distant roar of the night-seas, the burning of the life-stars. I hear the whirlwind and the fire and the whisper, the laughing and the screaming and the mourning of all humanity. The song of the universe will be my song forever and always, even in death, when I am reborn in the body of spirit.

When Robert came I could see his soul burning. I could see demons stoking the fire and telling him terrible things. I wish to love him and quench the fire in his soul. If only I could save all my friends from the coming desolation.

Daniel Dimling's Diary

Rain

It looks like another miserable day of rain is at hand. It isn't helping to relieve the oppression of this damn orphanage.

I don't mind the way of life so much as the building. I hate seeing modern conveniences like telephones or electric lights juxtaposed against the old architecture. And then there are my fellow wards – dull, shallow people, especially the girls. Agnes is all over Jack, Emily's too young, Christie's too religious, Ava's too strange, and Celeste's too shy. Jack's an ass who thinks everyone loves him. Rick's a bore. Robert, if my first impression is right, is an emotional wreck who is always bawling his eyes out.

And who does Mr. Denford think he is? He shuts himself in his office with his books on demonology and pretends to the outside world that he is taking care of us. We don't need him. I wish he would die.

I wish there was a proper girl here. Someone beautiful.

Charlotte's Diary

Robert

Welcome to my home, Robert. I am happy to have a new friend.

If only you could hear what I hear. Ava knows, and I know, but you don't. Soon we're all going to have a nightmare. I hope you wake up. Dear Robert, please be very brave.

Robert's Memoir

The next morning I awoke in a strange room and did not know where I was. Panic became sorrow as I remembered the truth: my parents were dead and I was in a secluded orphanage.

My emotions are always intense but brief. Days ago I had intended to remain forever grief-stricken. Now, though I remained broken, my brokenness was overshadowed by curiosity. Any boy left unsupervised in a decaying, mysterious mansion will seek an adventure.

I did not discover much. The second floor was devoted mostly to bedrooms. One, at the end of the hall, was locked. A door near the stairs revealed a half-furnished billiard room lacking sufficient equipment for a game of any kind. It did, however, have a full shelf of books about demons. I saw a hatch in a back hall that must have led to the attic, but I feared to open it without help.

I noted an abundance of empty rooms. Some had one or two useless pieces of furniture, and some had nothing at all. One whole wing of the house, in fact, was bare. I concluded it was a natural consequence of Mr. Denford's singleness.

The first floor was only slightly more interesting than the second. It contained the kitchen, a large affair from a time when the house was actually staffed with servants. There was a piano room with a window to the garden, a living room, a dining room, and, of course, Mr. Denford's office. On the first floor as the second, there were many unused rooms. In one I found a series of penciled messages on the wall in the corner.

"15/05/1948. Piano string broke. Bored to death."

"15/05/1948. I saw you writing on the wall. Shall I tell on you?"

"15/06/1948. How could you see me? I shut the door."

"15/06/1948. I looked in the keyhole."

"15/07/1948. Who are you?"

"15/07/1948. A friend."

"15/08/1948. What is your name?"

The messages ended with a childish drawing of a little girl with angel's wings.

Now I chose to see what lay outside. Having seen the driveway, I took the back door and found a garden. I could not have guessed that such vibrant colors could thrive in Denford's grey-black world. Lush green vines and violet flowers graced winged stone dragons and tunic-clad nymphs, gentle goddesses that lured me deeper into the garden. The farther I ventured the more the bright colors stifled me. It was too green, more like poison than life. There were many thorns and many serpents. I found an apple tree enclosed in a circle of hedges in the middle of the garden.

Though I was sick of the greenery, there was still more to be seen. I followed a narrow dirt path and escaped into a graveyard on a hill. The rain-marked tombstones stood proudly and declared the legacy of their ancient families. While the common dead slept beneath dull ignominious stones with little more than a name and an epitaph, the Crows had all been buried in splendid graves watched over by the black guardian of their family.

At the height of the hill, there stood a mausoleum, the jewel of the cemetery. And there, Christie Burns leaned against the door and wrote in a white notebook. She looked up at me and waved meekly. Meaningless moments remain with me. Whatever else I have forgotten in old age, I remember flawlessly the day I saw Christie waving from the mausoleum, like an old friend found in a dream. She hurriedly wrote a few last words in her diary, then beckoned me to come talk to her.

I walked up the hill and glanced at the name on the mausoleum. It said simply, "Charlotte." She had no surname, no epitaph, nor even a birth or death. Only a name. I then turned to Christie. Her long chestnut hair straggled down her shoulders and her face. Although she often brushed it out of her eyes, one way or another it would blind her again. She wore a plain black dress.

"Good morning, Robert," she said.

"Good morning. Am I interrupting anything?"

"No, I was only writing a little. I've got all the time in the world, in a place like this. Are you sure you're comfortable standing there?"

"I'm fine."

She looked at me skeptically. "You worry me more than anyone."

"Why should you care about me?"

"We're all trapped in this place. We have no choice but to look after one another."

"I guess." I hesitated. "What do you mean 'trapped?'"

"Nothing, really. But none of us chose to live in Limbgate, did we? We're not allowed to leave. Live here long enough and you begin to feel . . . dead."

"Oh."

"That's why we need each other. Rick and Emily have each other, but the rest of us have no family. We have to make one."

"But won't we lose that too, in the end?"

"I don't know." She looked past me and seemed sad. "Robert, do you ever want to kill yourself?"

I bowed my head in shame. "Sometimes. At night, usually. I just don't understand why I'm here. It isn't fair."

"I understand."

I had heard many people say that lightly, but when I saw tears stream down Christie's cheeks I knew she meant it.

"I was abandoned. I don't understand why I'm here either. And it isn't fair." She wiped away her tears and smiled.

I didn't want to talk about it anymore. "I have a question."

"What is it?"

"Is there a ghost at Limbgate?"

An eerie voice behind me answered. "I met one."

I turned around and almost fell backward in fright. Ava had been standing three feet behind me.

I caught my breath. "How did I not hear you coming?"

"Maybe you weren't listening," she said. "But yes, there is a ghost at Limbgate."

"You and your ghosts!" Christie sighed.

"Hello, fairy girl," Ava said.

Christie noticed that I was confused. "Only a nickname," she said.

Ava squinted at me. "I don't know what I'll call you yet. You're really strange." She paused. "But you wanted to talk about ghosts?"

"Uh . . . yes. I saw some strange writing in the corner of a room not long ago," I said.

Ava nodded. "Ghost."

"I don't believe you," Christie objected.

"I'll summon it, then. Let's all meet in the attic tonight. We'll have fun."

"I'm not breaking the curfew!"

"You'll come to the attic, won't you Robert?"

"Um, sure," I said.

"Please, Christie? Mr. Denford doesn't mind anything as long as we don't smoke or curse. He wouldn't fault us for summoning ghosts."

"If you insist. I'll go to the attic with you." Christie crossed her arms. "But only to make sure nothing gets out of hand."

Ava smiled and clapped her hands. "We'll have such fun. And there will be candles! Dozens of thin white waxy candles! Robert, try to stay awake tonight. I'll knock three times when it's midnight."

"This is absurd," Christie muttered.

That night I had little trouble staying awake. The real world was so much like a fever dream that I feared what sleep might bring. For the first time in several days I tried to turn my mind away from death and loneliness. I thought about the other orphans and whether we might become friends. To all appearances, Jack and Christie had accepted me as one of their own. Ava, in her own way, was doing the same. I had not spoken to the others much, but all except Daniel were friendly.

There was no clock in the room. I had no idea what time it was until, as promised, there came three gentle knocks. I rose and looked at Jack to make sure he was fast asleep. Hastily I slipped into my clothes and cracked open the door. Ava was there. Christie peered over her shoulder and held aloft a candle in her left hand. In her right she clutched three more unlit candlesticks.

"Are you ready?" Ava whispered. With pale face and large eyes, she looked like a ghost herself.

"Yes."

"Follow me."

Nighttime made Limbgate look wild and fantastic. Christie's faint candle could not penetrate the deep black emptiness of the many rooms. Anyone could lurk unseen in a lonely corner, waiting for us to come near. If I were lost here, unable to call out, would anyone ever find me again?

We arrived at the back hall. Christie held her candle high so we could see the hatch.

"There's a chair in the room to the left of us," Ava said. "Or was it the next room down? No, no, no, it was this room. I'll get it."

"Let me give you some light," Christie said.

"Oh, I don't mind. I wander the house in the dark all the time."

Ava vanished through the door. After a few seconds, she shrieked. Christie nearly dropped the candle. "Are you all right?"

"I found it! My comb!" Ava returned with the chair in one hand and a small silver comb in the other. "You're not afraid, are you, Christie?"

Christie frowned.

"It's a family heirloom, and it's very pretty. I think I had good reason to be excited."

"If you say so."

"Robert, I will open the hatch. I need you to catch the ladder and let it down ever so gently so we don't wake the others."

"Why don't you want anyone else here?"

"If there are too many of us, we might scare away the ghost."

We managed well, considering we had only candlelight. The ladder did not break my skull, at any rate. With the hardest part out of the way we climbed into the attic in single file.

I did not like it there. Stacks of boxes, most nailed shut, tottered over our heads. Cobwebs draped the boxes and stretched across the rafters above us. A high window at the far end looked into the black night.

We sat in a circle in the middle of the room. Christie set the candle before herself. She passed two candles to Ava and me, and placed the fourth in the middle of the circle. She lit the candles with her own.

Ava closed her eyes. "We are here, spirit. We wish to see you. We wish to find you."

"I don't like this," Christie whispered.

"We wish to speak with you. What is your name?"

We closed our eyes and waited. A minute of silence passed.

Ava gasped. Christie and I looked up.

"What is this?"

"What?" Christie urged.

"This. It appeared in my hand."

"Hold it to the candlelight."

She did. It was an iron stake. Its tip was crusted in dry blood.

She dropped it and staggered back into the darkness. Somewhere in the black, she whimpered unintelligibly.

I felt heavy. The room was blacking out. Though the candle still flickered, my vision began to fade. I dropped to the floor, asleep.

Chapter II

Robert's Memoir

I opened my eyes. The candles gleamed hazily. Light rain pattered the window. Ava whimpered in the dark.

Christie lifted her head. "What happened?" she asked. "I fell asleep."

"So did I."

She looked around. "Ava? Are you all right? Where are you?"

Ava did not answer. Christie took a candle and we searched the attic. We found Ava huddled behind a worn wooden crate.

Christie knelt before her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Ava?"

Ava suddenly caught Christie in a tight, clawing embrace, nestled her head on Christie's shoulder, and sobbed wildly. "I don't know what happened! I don't know what to do! I don't know!"

"Hush, it's all right. Everything will be all right."

Christie rocked her like a child and let the music of the rain calm her. She was soon still.

"We need to sleep," Christie said. "I'll walk with you to the room."

Ava said nothing. She tried to stand but staggered. Christie caught her and helped her.

"Do you mind walking with us, Robert?" Christie asked.

"No."

We walked quietly. Christie supported Ava, who weakly shuffled onward. The darkness was more disquieting now. The halls were harshly narrow, and through the windows the sky glowed a weird violet hue. Everything changed after we left the attic.

When we came to the hall outside the girls' rooms, a thin voice spoke. "Christie? Is that you?"

We stopped. "Who's there?" Christie asked.

"It's me . . . Celeste . . . I don't feel well." Celeste stepped into the candlelight. She looked more distraught than Ava. Her face was pale, her eyes were red, and her hands shook at her sides.

"Don't worry," Christie said, herself worried to death. "Ava, can you stand alone?"

"I think so."

"All right. I'm letting go now." Christie gently pulled away from her. "Robert, could you take Ava to Mr. Denford? Tell him she has had a panic attack, and that Celeste is ill."

I nodded.

"I'll stay with you until Mr. Denford comes," Christie told Celeste. "He'll know what to do. You'll be safe with me."

Christie gave me the candle and took Celeste to her room.

As I had not been at Limbgate long, Ava told me the way while I walked ahead to light the path. I recalled a time when I was five years old. I woke up at my grandmother's house in the middle of the night, dying of thirst. I was alone, too scared of the dark to leave my room and too thirsty to stay. I chose to leave. When I reached the kitchen, I turned on the light and sat awake until dawn.

"That's the office," Ava said, bringing me back to the present. "The light's on."

I was glad. The mundane electric light would be a welcome change from the sublime terror of candles. I hastened my steps, anxious to entrust Ava into Mr. Denford's care and ask him to call a doctor, to heal Celeste, and to fix everything. But the mad nightmare of the orphanage played a trick of distance. No matter how far we walked, no matter how many side doors we counted and passed, the office remained far away at the end of a hall of twelve doors. We walked faster and faster, finally running until we were out of breath, but it was no use. We turned around and saw that we were still at the beginning of the hall.

Ava sat on the floor with her back to the wall and closed her eyes.

"I . . . I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know-"

"I'm fine," Ava interrupted.

"I thought we could ask him for help."

"I guess we're alone." Ava smiled sadly. "Isn't it curious? I was so, so scared when I thought we could do something. Now there's no hope of help . . . and I'm calm. I'm a thread in fate's black cloth. It couldn't be any other way, and it couldn't be more beautiful."

"What do you mean? Everything will be fine."

"It will. But not in the way you mean. Someone will be killed tonight."

"Ava, please."

"Be strong for me, Robert. You don't yet know what killing is."

"Stop talking like this."

"I'm sorry. I only wanted to talk. I feel so calm right now, I'm afraid of falling asleep." She opened her eyes. "But I don't want to sleep. When I sleep I dream I'm in a field with a gun in my hand. Then there's light everywhere and I burn up. What do you dream about?"

"I never dream. Unless this is a dream."

"It can't be real. We would have reached the office if it were. But it can't be a dream either. Dreams don't feel like this."

"Then what is it?"

Ava leapt to her feet. "We shouldn't be here. Look."

She pointed at the wall behind me. I saw nothing until I leaned in for a better look. A shadow lay on the woodwork that belonged to neither Ava nor me. I looked all over the wall and found one shadow-child after another, all quivering hand in hand in the candlelight.

Ava touched the shadow. "Why do I want to kill it?"

"I want to kill you," a chorus of voices echoed through the hall.

Ava recoiled. "What are they?"

"Animal demon," the voices said. "I wear beautiful masks, but my face is an animal demon face. What are they?"

Ava covered her ears. "Stay away! Get out of me!"

I looked at the shadow. I loathed it. I wanted to burn it away. If I only held the candle to the wall, the shadows would turn to smoke and go to hell. I brought the candle closer, closer, lit the shadow, watched the flame spring to life, and heard the animal demon's delighted scream.

The fire died just as quickly as it was born. A breath killed the candle. A hand slipped into mine and a new, flutelike voice whispered, "Run!" Before I had time to obey, the little hand dragged me away. I tumbled through passages of total darkness with no guide but the voice. "We'll be safe soon," she told me.

Christie's Diary

Illness

Poor Celeste! She begged me to turn on the light, because the dark hurts her eyes. I did as she asked. Everything feels safe in clean, electric light. I felt her forehead. She has a violent fever. She shivers pitifully and can barely speak, yet forces herself to ramble on and on as though she has something dreadfully important to tell me. Her illness has brought out a morbid obsession with hospitals. I'll record her words as well as I can.

"I'm glad to be sick in a house. Houses are clean. Hospitals are only sterile."

I wanted her to talk. It was a sign that she had a little strength. "Have you often been ill?"

"Never like this. Doctors couldn't help me now. Doctors tear your body open, but they can't unlock the soul. I think I'm soul-sick."

"You need rest. Try to sleep."

"NO!" She lifted herself, but fell back groaning. "No. Don't let me sleep."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to excite you." I knelt by her bed and held her hand.

"I forgive you." She turned her head to me. "Thank you. You're so much more human than the doctors. They keep people in white rooms and take their blood with needles. Like vampires. And everyone dies in a hospital . . . They're morgues, really."

"Many doctors are kind and want to heal people."

"Then why does everyone die?" Celeste coughed and fell into a rasping, cynical laugh. It chilled me. "There are two kinds of people. Those who bleed and those who drink blood."

"And we are the ones who bleed?"

Celeste laughed more violently, as though I had told a joke. "Yes! We bleed! And who's drinking us?"

I told her to stay calm and try to turn her thoughts away from hospitals. I hope Mr. Denford comes soon. I need help.

Robert's Memoir

We passed through a door and stopped. The hand slipped out of mine. "Could you turn on the light?" the voice asked.

Light scattered the dark and, with profound relief, I saw Ava standing by the switch. Though her red, tear-marked eyes betrayed a harrowed spirit, her face was stoic.

We were in a little girl's room. At the end of the room was a small bed beneath a window. All around us a legion of battered toys peeped from the toy box, the shelves, and the floor. In the basement of a white dollhouse lay a picture-perfect family of three. A white rocking horse with empty yellow eyes peered from beneath a scarlet blanket. A teddy bear crouched on a moth-eaten pillow. A doll leaned against a book of fairytales and dangled its legs over the edge of a shelf. Its torso was almost completely torn from its legs.

Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed, watching us with a playful smirk, was the little girl herself. I thought she was seven or eight years old. Her face was thin and freckled. Her flaxen hair was tangled. She wore a ragged nightgown. Her thin hands lovingly caressed a stuffed rabbit.

"Thank you kindly for saving us, little ghost." Ava said. "What is your name?"

"I'm Charlotte."

"I'm—"

"I already know your names. You're Ava. And he's Robert." She grinned.

"Please, Charlotte, can you tell us what is happening?" Ava asked.

Charlotte did not answer right away. After an uncomfortable silence, she said, "I don't know. I've tried so hard to get out." Charlotte hugged her rabbit more tightly. "I only want to go to heaven, but I can't find my way out. I don't want to go through the forest alone."

Ava nodded. "I know. Living is like that too, sometimes. You must be so sad."

"You understand me?"

"A little. How long have you been lost?"

"I don't know. Time doesn't really matter anymore. But it was April. April 23, 1938. My birthday."

"Twelve years to the day," I said.

"So it's . . . let me think . . . 1950? It feels like forever. I want to escape." Charlotte dropped off the bed to her feet. "Ava, Robert, you've been my friends, even if you didn't know it. It made me happy to hear people that were alive. Please help me. I want to go home."

"We'll do our—"

"Ava, we can't trust her!" I broke in. "Look around. Look at the doll on the shelf."

Ava glanced at the half-torn doll, but only regarded Charlotte with all the more compassion. "You didn't want to kill the doll. You were scared, weren't you, Charlotte?"

Charlotte nodded. "I didn't mean to hurt her. I was so afraid, because they couldn't hear me screaming after I died. I really loved her! I didn't want – I didn't mean to—" She began crying.

"I promise we will help you, little ghost."

Charlotte hugged Ava. "Thank you!" She slipped the rabbit into Ava's hand. "If you can't save me, please keep him with you. His name is Sleepy." She turned to me. "Robert, I know you don't trust me, but at least trust me about one thing."

“What is it?” I asked.

“Stay away from Mother. Run if you see her. Please.”

“I will.” Charlotte’s urgency in this regard was enough to persuade me.

Christie’s Diary

Eyes

Celeste is stable. She hasn’t spoken much, but maybe that’s a good thing.

I wish I had tried harder to be her friend. She came a year ago. She’s always so shy and stays alone in her room, but tries hard to love the rest of us. She devotes herself to woodcarving. God himself must guide her hand, for she fashions wonders with her knife. She gave me a lovely carving of a deer two weeks ago and was deeply embarrassed when I thanked her.

Her room is musty and bare. I can see mildew in the corners, and the air is not at all fresh. Mr. Denford ought to have it cleaned, but I doubt he knows. Celeste would never ask anything for herself. I wonder if her illness could be cured with a little fresh air? I will show him the mildew when he arrives. What is taking him so long?

There’s a carving beside her bed. Her work is usually pristine and innocent, but this is deeply evil. It has the body of an angel and the head of a crow. This must be a disease of soul, not only the body, which festered in her head long before tonight. I pray to God that she escapes soon.

Poor girl. Why did we let you sleep alone? Could I have saved you if I’d paid attention?

Wood-carving

I should have stayed at her side. She screamed that there was an eye in her hand. Then she laid her hand on the table by her bed, took the carving knife, and drove it through her palm. Blood is streaming round the feet of the crow.

I came to her side too late. It won’t happen again. I will stay here, holding her hand, even if I must stay until the morning.

Waiting

I’ll try to write without letting her go.

The night is always darkest before dawn, everything will be fine, no one is going to get hurt, Mr. Denford will know what to do. Robert and Ava left almost half an hour ago. What’s going on? Where are they?

Celeste is talking again, but hallucination has taken the place of paranoia. She claimed to be in room 313 of a hospital. She thought she was surrounded by crow-headed doctors drinking the blood from her throat. When the vision ended she

asked me why the dying see the throne of God in their last moments. God save her. I can only wait.

Unwritten entry

I don't – I can't take this. It's not –
Nevermind.

No more waiting

I'm sorry.

The light began flickering like a wind-blown fire. Celeste fell into a seizure and writhed so wildly I couldn't hold her hand. I could only watch the desecration of the pathetic child. A strong, invisible hand seized my neck and threw me against the wall. The light went out, but a dim white glow enwrapped Celeste. Her flesh was covered in lidless golden eyes. A six-winged spirit hovered over her and clawed at her stomach. I was too weak to stand. I heard her scream one last time before the glow died. All was quiet, and the spirit vanished.

I lit the candle again. I checked her pulse. She is dead.

Robert's Memoir

We returned to Celeste's room only to find her tangled lifeless in the sheets. At first, in the dim light, her skin appeared to have broken out in swollen lesions, but after a closer look, I saw that they were yellow, cat-like eyes. Christie knelt by the bedside, paralyzed in shock. She fixed her eyes on Celeste's hand and asked, "Why did you take so long?"

Ava began calmly. "We couldn't reach Mr. Denford's office. We were attacked by a hell-demon, a shadow on the walls. The ghost Charlotte saved us and took us to her room."

"But why did you take so long?" Christie persisted. "I've waited nearly an hour for you."

"But we were only gone a few minutes," I said.

"What?"

"We left you shortly after midnight. We went straight to the hall outside Mr. Denford's office. We were there about two minutes. Then we went to Charlotte's room for a minute or so."

"That's impossible," she said, only to look at Celeste's legion eyes.

"What happened?" Ava asked.

"She was sick. A fallen angel attacked her. I think her wound is deeper than the body itself, and the body is more than dead."

"She didn't want to die, did she?" Ava touched Celeste's still screaming face.

Christie laid her head on the bed. "What's happening to us?"

Ava closed her eyes in thought. "I understand a little. This isn't a dream, but it isn't real. It isn't death, but it isn't life."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I don't quite know, myself. It's all so . . . weird? Confusing? But I'm beginning to understand. This nightmare is only a shadow of reality. This is the world of ghosts, souls that can't reach heaven or hell. Charlotte is trapped here, but I don't know why she is trapped. We need to find her again and ask her what happened. The more we understand about this shadow-world, the better."

"And how would we find her?" I asked.

"We wait. She will visit us in her own good time."

"I can't wait here again," Christie said bitterly.

I nodded. "I don't feel safe in this room. We should go to the living room."

Before we left that room, I looked at Celeste Wight one last time. She was the girl I hadn't noticed. She was the girl whose life and dreams were now locked away in a mutilated, frightened corpse. Within that corpse her soul screamed noiselessly long into the night, in the room where a night was like a year, and a year was like hell.

So the first of us died.

Charlotte's Diary

Friends

I'm so happy! My friends saw me for the first time today. I think they like me. We'll have so much fun, now that we're together. I can show them my toys, and we can play all night. And when we're too tired to keep our eyes open, we can all go home.

Maybe this dream is meant to help us be better friends to each other. We've all been lonely, but now, even if the house is a little sad, we can be together. Mother used to say that love was the best virtue. I think she was right. Only now she's confused and I miss the way she used to be.

I hope Celeste doesn't have any more nightmares.

Chapter III

Jack Rake's Diary

The dream begins

I got up about a quarter after midnight from a falling dream. I lay back down for a minute, but felt frantic and knew I wouldn't sleep tonight. I got up and dressed. I was going to sit in the living room, until I saw that Robert was missing.

The more I studied the room the weirder it looked. The furniture was tilted at weird angles and the walls creaked loudly. Through the window I could see Dalby Forest stretched out for miles and miles, a wide wood beneath a violet sky.

I wasn't alone. I could feel someone breathing down my neck at every turn as the walls creaked more and more violently. I tried to turn on the lights but they wouldn't work. I stood still and nearly decided to search for Robert when I noticed shadows on the walls, darker than the rest of the room. Nine shadows, all children, surrounded me.

They spoke. "What are we?"

"What do you mean?" I was scared senseless, but couldn't bring myself to run.

"What does it mean? I'm a violet lover with a hero's mask and a sword of roses."

"Please, go away. Let me find Robert."

They laughed like goblins till I wished to kill them. "You will never be rid of me until you have known the pain of living," they whispered. "I die when you die, I bleed when you bleed."

I saw the key hanging from the door. I took it in my hand, clenched my teeth, and slashed the key down my arm. A drop of blood slipped to the floor. The shadows screamed and scattered, leaving dark stains on the walls.

My arm stung, but the wound wasn't deep. Pleased with my victory, I pulled myself together and left the room to find Robert. Outside my room I ran into Rick and Daniel.

"What's going on?" Rick asked.

"How should I know? Have you seen anything?"

"No, but we heard a girl scream."

"Odd, I heard nothing. Where did it come from?"

"We don't know. It may have been downstairs."

Without another word I sprinted to the stairs. Rick and Daniel followed close behind.

Agnes and Emily were waiting in the living room. They stared at the floor with bored expressions.

"Is everything all right?" I asked. "Rick says he heard a scream."

Emily raised her eyebrows. "What scream? We haven't heard anything."

"Then what are you doing down here?"

"We didn't want to sleep."

"We thought the living room would feel more homely than our bedroom," Agnes added.

I turned to Rick. "Are you sure you heard it?"

"I swear!"

Daniel nodded. "We both heard it. Sound must travel strange here."

It was then that Robert, Christie, and Ava arrived. They stared at us with tired eyes and shuffled into the room. Christie kept scratching her cheek. I feared the worst.

"Have you seen Celeste?" I asked.

Christie nodded.

"Is she all right?"

She shook her head.

"What happened? Do you need me to find Mr. Denford?"

"Celeste is dead."

The words shook us. We were quiet. No sound but a weak sob broke the silence.

A long time later Christie spoke. "I think we're in terrible danger. Celeste didn't just die. She was killed brutally."

"Sit down and tell us what you saw," I said. Christie did so. She told us of Celeste's sickness and of the monster that had killed her. Robert and Ava followed with their own story of the ghost Charlotte.

"Well," I sighed.

"Jack?" Christie pleaded. "Are you all right?"

"I'm only thinking. You were right, Robert, not to trust Charlotte. We can't take any chances. There's something much stranger than ghosts or angels at work here. I wish it were just a nightmare."

"But it isn't only a nightmare." Ava said. "We are trapped in another world. It has the form of Limbgate, but it's all wrong. Time is scrambled between rooms. The sky is the wrong color. Charlotte's room did not exist until tonight."

"Can we not escape?" Agnes asked.

"I don't know."

Agnes hung her head and cast one prayerful glance at me.

Then Rick spoke. "We have to try. I have something of a plan, I think."

"Tell us," I replied.

"We need to find a way out. I suggest we form two groups. One will search upstairs, the other will search downstairs and outside. As soon as one group finds an escape, it returns here. The other group will return once it has searched everywhere."

Agnes asked, with uncharacteristic bitterness, "And if we find nothing?"

"Then we wait. But until then, we've got to have hope."

I nodded. "Does anyone object to Rick's plan?"

None objected. We were desperate for even the weakest hope.

"Good," I said. "Let's keep Emily and Rick together. I will go with them."

"And I will follow Jack," Agnes chimed.

"That leaves Daniel, Christie, Ava, and Robert."

"You didn't ask if I wanted to be with them," Daniel muttered.

"I don't care what you want."

Daniel scowled.

"Now," I continued, "in order to protect ourselves, we need to understand our enemies. I've found that the shadows, at least, have a weakness: the sight of blood. I think one member of each group should be chosen to bleed in the event of an attack. I volunteer for my own group."

"I will bleed too," Christie said, a little squeamishly.

Now Robert spoke. "Maybe we should all record anything we find. If I were to die, I could at least leave behind useful information. There are notebooks on the shelf by the television."

We all agreed to this idea. Rick took the notebooks and a handful of pencils and handed them out.

I looked around. "Are we ready, then?"

"Are there torches?" Robert asked.

I shook my head. "There's one somewhere, but I don't have a clue where Mr. Denford keeps it. Until we find it we can use the candles. There are plenty in the drawer over there. Matches too, I think."

"I want to leave," Emily whined.

"We'll leave as soon as we can. You can search downstairs with Rick and Agnes and me."

"I don't want to find anything, I want to leave!" Emily stood and dashed out of the room. Rick and I chased her. We tumbled through the house until we turned a corner into the front hall. Just as we entered, Emily slipped through the great door and slammed it shut. We followed her outside.

She stood at the foot of the steps, frozen in wonder. The forest had cut off the driveway with vines. The trees rose higher than the house and their branches groped for its bricks. All around us, the sound of a million screams whirled filled the forest. Smoke wisped to the sky far away.

Emily looked over her shoulder, then broke into a run. Rick caught her just before she could crawl beneath the vines. She didn't struggle. Rick held her in his arms as she covered her ears and whimpered, "I want to leave. I want to leave. I want to leave . . ."

Richard Weslow's Diary

Hell

I'm not much of a writer, but Robert says we should all keep diaries. Jack's agreed to do most of the writing for our group, but I think this diary could still keep me from losing my head.

We'll need to collect anything useful we might find. Candles and matches, I think, will be our biggest priority, but we should also take any weapons. I hope food won't be a problem, but we should keep a good stock in case we get hungry.

Emily's a wreck. Ever since she tried to run away, she's been asking me if we're going to die. I tell her comforting lies.

The screams in the forest are still ringing in my ears. I wonder if hell's somewhere out there – or if we're already there? Our father used to tell us that there are many hells. The greater the sin, the worse the hell.

Daniel Dimling's Diary

Desertion

Robert, Christie, Ava, I want to strangle you.

During our search Robert has been a burden on us all with his endless fretting. I wonder if he's suicidal. I hope he is.

As for Christie and Ava, they've been a real bother in their own way. They're always crying on each other's shoulders, holding hands, and saying everything will work out. Every few minutes we have to stop and talk about how scared we are. After a good cry, it's hugs all round and back to business.

I admit I'm anxious about all this. I don't want to die any more than the next fellow. So, in the interest of my own survival, I intend to abandon the others and search on my own. I could accomplish much more without their help.

There's a faint sound of song in the distance that touches my secret thoughts. With every note I see more clearly a white form. At the first opportunity I will leave the others and follow the song.

Chapter IV

Ava's Diary

Furniture

The path to the right leads backwards, the path to the left leads down, and the path to the sky leads . . . to God?

I remember the day I was brought here. I sat alone in my old graveyard house and waited for Mr. Denford to knock. Spiders danced out of the cracks in the floorboards and dared to scuttle past my feet. I couldn't kill them. I was sick of all the radio babble of killing. Hours passed. Twice I read the dry little telegram that cracked my mother's heart in two. I paced the house all morning and touched all the safe-warm furniture. It was a pity to see so many memories auctioned to strangers for the profit of strangers. I thought little of it, though. I was mainly preoccupied with a new sensation: an anxious wondering, a desire to reach out and touch a strange new thing, to walk a new and lonely road.

That sensation is strong again tonight. I have often wondered how it feels to die. Will there be a light, as some say? Will I be carried to heaven in the arms of the howling tomb-maidens? I find myself touching familiar furniture again, so to speak. I talk just to hear Christie's voice one more time. I study the walls so that, in whatever heaven or hell awaits me, I will never forget its patterns. I breathe just to feel breath in my lungs. I don't mind dying. I only wish someone could walk with me.

Whatever may happen to me, I swear I will protect Robert and Christie from harm. They are pretty-hearted people and deserve to live. However, I'm afraid there's no hope for Daniel, now. He's disappeared.

It happened not long ago. Christie wanted to return to Celeste's room to get the carving knife. I tried to reason with her, but she feels that her own blood will protect us from Satan. When she opened the door, though, she saw Charlotte standing over Celeste's body. "Leave her alone," she begged. It was no use. Charlotte vanished and took Celeste with her. I was a little shocked, but I assured the others that Charlotte has a pretty heart. I think she may want to save Celeste somehow, but the others wouldn't listen.

We argued until we saw that Daniel was gone. Christie is rarely angry, but she was boiling with rage then. "How can he be so stupid?" she fumed. "He's been nothing but a burden on us all, and now takes it on himself to run off on his own! He'll get himself killed!" She continued like this for some time. When she was calm enough to listen to reason, Robert asked, as gently as he could, "Should we look for him?"

"No. No, it's too late for that. We don't have any idea where he's gone." She smiled to hide the anger. "I should get the carving knife."

Robert's Memoir

We never did find anything upstairs except an old pistol and a handful of bullets. Ava took them. Her mother taught her to use it, she said, in case the Germans took England. We dared not say aloud that guns might be useless against these enemies. We tried and failed to break into the locked bedroom.

"Maybe it's the way out," Christie said.

"But how can we know?" I asked. "There's nothing different about it."

"I don't know."

"What do we do, then?"

A dull thump interrupted our conversation. It came from my room.

"I'm going to look in there," Ava whispered.

Christie laid a hand on her shoulder. "Ava, don't."

"I want to know what is in there." She pulled away.

"Ava, it's dangerous."

"I need to see."

Christie grabbed her arm tightly. "Listen to me! I don't want anything to happen to you! Not you!"

"Then come with me. I have to go in there."

Christie pleaded with her eyes. She didn't want Ava to go in the room. Their wills strove against one another, until Christie saw that Ava couldn't be swayed. She let go.

"All right. I'll come with you."

Ava led the way with her pistol at the ready. Seconds passed. Christie held her head high, determined to be brave, foolishly brave, for Ava's sake. I could not share in their courage. I glanced from wall to wall in apprehension. As Ava eased the door open I clenched my fingers. "God help us," Christie muttered.

We walked in. All the furniture was gone except the painting, but even that had altered. Now the angel seemed to watch us through tearful eyes. Violet light streamed through the window and fell on a small girl, smaller even than Emily. She lay dead in the middle of the floor.

Ava cautiously came closer and dropped to her knees. She laid her head on the girl's chest, then turned to us. "No breath," she said. "I do not know who she is."

"It's not Charlotte?" Christie asked.

"No. Nothing like Charlotte."

In a sudden, spastic flailing of limbs, the girl leapt to her feet. Ava fell back and stifled a scream. The girl turned on her feet and looked at each of us, jerking her head side to side and struggling to keep her balance.

She smiled and waved. "Hello."

Ava stood, dusted her skirt, and waved back. "Hello, dead girl. What's your name?"

"J-J-Janice," she stammered.

"I am Ava. This is Christie, and that's Robert. We haven't met you before. How did you get here?"

"I don't know. I was lost in the f-f-forest."

As the girl whipped her head from side to side, I began to feel as if, somehow, we were kin. It felt natural to wish that I were her brother. Christie, too, seemed genial toward her.

“Are you hurt?” Christie asked. “We thought you were dead.”

“I must have hit my head. It happens, you know, but it’s not strange, not strange, not strange, is it?”

“Why don’t you stay with us? We could use a companion.”

“I think I will. Let’s go to the tea room. The host has graciously provided us with a tea party.”

“Odd, I don’t recall a tea room.”

“Oh, but there is a tea room! And a very gah – gah –” She froze for a second, then shook her head and continued. “Good tea room at that. Follow me.”

Janice walked out the door with a stilted gait. We, charmed by this new friend, followed without question. She led us a short way down the hall to a room that I distinctly remembered having been empty. Now it was furnished with a small round table over which a white cloth was cast. The table was set for tea with an excellent china set, inlaid with intricate scenes that depicted some oriental tale of manipulation and betrayal. The teapot steamed cheerily, numbing our senses. I thought to myself that this was the most pleasant tea party I had ever known. Piles of books, newspapers, photographs, and film rolls lay cluttered in the corners. Spiders crawled there.

I sat across from Janice, with my back to the door. Janice said grace and poured our tea, and remarked, amid fractured giggling, that she had never had such very good friends.

“Do you take cream, Christie?” she asked.

“Yes please.”

“Your wish is my c-command. It is – crucial – that the host bow to the whims of the guests. And when the guests are so kind and amiable, how could I do otherwise? Do otherwise?”

“Indeed. One could say that is the key to courteousness.”

“And good manners are so rare these days. F-forgive my mannerisms, I have a speech imp – imp –”

“Oh, please don’t worry yourself. You have truly been a gracious host.”

Something peculiar happened to Janice. She was, in a passing moment, stricken with profound terror and confusion, and looked at me with wide eyes, as though trying to ask a distressing question. But the terror vanished quickly, replaced again with whimsical good cheer.

“Tell me, Janice,” Christie asked, between sips of tea, “do you like to read?”

“Only picture-books. Anything else bores me. But I like dolls more. I have many dolls at home.”

“I played with dolls once, but I suppose I’ve gotten old and boring now.” She chuckled.

“I could never tire of dolls. I like making them do things. They are always happy to do things. They’re never sad. Who would want a sad doll?”

“Don’t you ever pretend your dolls are sad?”

“I only make-believe that they’re sad. They’re actually always happy.”

"But on their own they don't have any feelings, not even happiness."

"That's why they're happy."

Christie looked more than a little perplexed at this logic.

"What's that noise?" Ava asked.

Indeed, there was a harsh metallic scratching in the air. It was barely audible, but once noticed, it was impossible to ignore.

"Must be the birds," Janice said. "There are so many birds in the forest. But the birds sleep in winter . . . why should there be birds in winter? Where am I?" Janice shivered. "What am I saying? Tea! More tea, Robert?"

"Yes, please."

"What is this place?" Janice asked. "It's a little scary, but it seems like such a nice place to live."

"Limbgate Orphanage," Christie replied.

"And where is that?"

"Nowhere in particular, really. It's outside Dalby Forest."

"Oh . . . I'm from Rosedale Abbey. Am I terribly far from home?"

"Mr. Denford could drive you there without much trouble."

"Good. I d-don't know how I got here. Are you all orphans?"

"Yes."

"I should ask my mother to - to - to adopt you. I would love having such a family as you."

"Do you have any siblings?"

"No. I'm an only child. I—" She paused. "It's so cold in here."

"Perhaps you should drink more tea."

"No! It doesn't make any sense! Make any sense! Make any sense! Make any—"

"Janice! Calm down!"

Janice shook her head. "Sorry. That was rude behavior for a host."

"There is no need to be ashamed. Are you unwell?"

"I'm never unwell. I haven't been unwell for four years. There's no excuse for my behavior. I'm a spoiled, impudent, oafish hag."

"There's no need to be so hard on yourself!"

"But it's entertaining."

"No it's not!"

Janice changed the subject. "Do you like living at Limbgate?"

I answered now. "Yes. It may be gloomy at times, but it's far more than I could have hoped for."

Ava drained her cup and stood.

Janice frowned. "Where are you going?"

"I only want to look around the room. I saw something shiny in the corner."

"Don't read anything."

Ava walked to one of the piles, bent down, and picked up a newspaper.

"Don't . . . read . . . anything!" Janice madly shook her fists.

"I'm only curious . . . wait." Her eyes widened as she scanned the pages.

Janice watched Ava intently. The scratching stopped.

“December 19, 1946,” Ava read aloud. “The search for North Yorkshire’s missing children has been unfruitful, but the police have not yet given up hope.’ . . . ‘The children disappear while their parents sleep. Their footprints often lead to rivers or lakes, after which no trace of the children can be found.’ . . . ‘The latest victim was Janice Wood, a resident of Rosedale Abbey. She was traced as far as the River Seven, where she vanished. The ice was undisturbed.’”

“I remember,” Janice said dreamily. “I was so cold. I heard a sound like heaven – a voice that was calling me. It was a lovely winters’ night, like a painting. Everything was so white and pure, and the falling snow tickled my nose. And I heard such a strange thing. Birds, singing! It was midnight, and so dreadfully cold. I asked them why they were singing in the cold at night. They told me they were singing for me. Then I saw that they were crying. I asked them why, and they said they were crying for me.

“I wanted to go home, but I was lost. I sat on a rock and cried with the birds. But then a rabbit, pure as the snow, came and said he would lead me home. I thanked him and followed him, because he was so kind.

“The rabbit led me to the river. The heavenly voice was all around me now. I looked into the ice and – and – I saw him! He held out his fingers and beckoned me. I couldn’t deny him.

“And I’m still there at Rosedale on a crisp, December night. I can still see the tree branches hanging over me. I can still hear the birds crying and the voice calling. I can still feel the cold, black blanket of ice in my fingers and eyes.”

“But you’re here at Limbgate,” I said.

“He took me out of my flesh. I – I’m happy, really. Flesh is such a painful thing. He s-saved me. The world is hell, with so many p-people fretting and frittering away their lives in m-m-meaningless choices. They all want control, all want control. But the kind man in the ice saved me from all that. Control is pain. Control is knowing you made the wrong choice. I don’t want control. I only want to watch the kind man control me. He never makes the wrong choice.” She turned to me. “He can control you too, Robert! I want you to be my brother. If you only close your eyes you will be his forever. Please, Robert? You would never have to hurt again. You would never choose to kill yourself. You would be safe forever.”

I wavered. She offered freedom from the demons that urged me toward the irrevocable choice. I could remain free in that orphanage of fallen angels until at last I died by my own hand, or I could accept her offer and live happily ever after with her. We would be brother and sister. I closed my eyes. “I’ll be your brother.”

“Thank you, thank you!”

Ava slapped me. I opened my eyes, shocked. Janice was bewildered at first, but she soon seethed with hate and glared at Ava. The scratching became a screech.

“Can’t you see the strings?” Ava cried. “She’s only a puppet!”

Her words broke the spell. I saw clearly now: Janice dangled from thin strings like spider-webs.

“I ha – ha – hate you,” Janice stuttered, pointing a shaking finger at Ava. “I’ll ssstring you up by your little neck and make you dance for me!”

The dishes flew into the air of their own accord and attacked Ava. She shielded her face as they battered her and shattered into a thousand pieces.

“Run, Ava!” Christie shouted. Ava drew her gun and shot Janice in the shoulder, then stumbled after us out the door. She slammed it shut.

The strings ran the length of the hall, all the way to the billiard room. We ran for it, ignoring Janice’s wild screams as she clumsily tore down the door.

Ava kicked open the billiard room door. The room was laced with strings, and the furniture shook as though shivering in the cold. The books slipped off the shelves and crawled beneath the billiard table. Crouching on the table was a black-cloaked man or creature that peered at us through a blank-faced mask, holding out his hands and working his spidery fingers like a mad insect.

He dexterously guided the strings and lifted the books and shelves and billiard balls off the ground. We ducked as they careened over our heads. Ava shot him. The bullet tore through his heart, but his fingers still twitched with life.

We heard the clicking of shoes as Janice approached. She stopped just behind us. “I was lucky,” she said. “The k-kind man didn’t break me like he b-b-broke the other children. Do you want to play with them? The broken children?”

Cracks erupted all over the walls as little wooden fingers pried their way out. Abominations slipped through the cracks and groped at us. On every side I saw monstrous mockeries of humanity: masses of quivering arms, babbling five-headed puppets, and other ghastly, contorted inventions, all at the mercy of the kind man.

Sometimes desperation is better than security. Once Ava’s gun failed us, I knew we couldn’t escape, and so did not hesitate to make one last bid for my pathetic life. I dashed through the horde of puppets and climbed onto the billiard table. Before the kind man could stop me I seized his hands and tore at them. With little effort I broke them off his arms. He screamed in pain and slithered through the corpses of his limp puppets, out the door and into the dark house. His hands turned to rotten black wood. I dropped them in disgust.

“Robert?” a broken child cried. “I’m sorry!”

I looked at Janice. She sat in the midst of the puppets and wiped her eyes. “It’s all right,” I assured her. “You weren’t yourself.”

She cried uncontrollably, but I think it was the best feeling she had known in twelve years. It was her, the real Janice, crying her own tears. “Thank you,” she whimpered.

“Do you want to stay with us?” Ava asked.

“She’s not safe,” a familiar voice said. Charlotte appeared in the room, sitting on the billiard table. “I’ll take care of her.”

“Like you took care of Celeste?” Christie asked sarcastically.

“Yes.” She grinned.

“We saved Janice already,” I said. “We have to protect her.”

“I hoped you’d trust me by now. You can’t protect her half as well me. But if Janice wants to stay with you, it’s her choice.”

Janice looked from Charlotte to me and back again. “I don’t know,” she muttered. “You’re my friends,” she told us, “but I don’t want anyone to die because of me. You have enough trouble protecting yourselves.”

Charlotte held out her hand. Janice hesitated, but gripped it firmly and took her place next to Charlotte. “Goodbye,” Janice waved.

I wanted to stop her, but her serene smile stilled my impulse. Charlotte uttered a few last words of warning. "Be careful. There are a lot of monsters here from the forest. You can't kill them as easily as you killed the Kind Man."

And with that she vanished, taking Janice with her.

Ava's Diary

Found the key

I am angry and confused and upset.

I can't believe they forgot to ask Charlotte how she died. I pray that nothing kills us before we get our next chance. If only Robert and Christie would treat Charlotte like the little ghost friend that she is!

Already I miss the piano. If this were not such an urgent situation I would beg the others to let me go downstairs and practice *Waldszenen* for a few hours. I need music more than life. My angels will leave me if I don't make music. I could scream right now.

On the bright side, the Kind Man seems to have dropped a key on his way out. Robert found it. We are going to try to unlock the back bedroom after we've rested a few minutes.

I apologized to Robert for slapping him. I didn't do it out of spite. I only wanted to save him from Janice's spell. Still, I was afraid he would think I hated him. He said it didn't matter, but doesn't pain always matter? I'm sad. I think I'll stop writing now.

Charlotte's Diary

Playmate

Just when I thought I couldn't be happier, I made a new friend. Her name is Janice. She likes to play with dolls, and she's really good at singing, but not as good as Ava. We played in my room, ate snacks in the kitchen, and then ran around in the cemetery. She was crying at first because she misses her family, but I told her that we could pretend to be sisters. That made her smile and wipe the tears out of her eyes.

Chapter V

Agnes's Diary

Through Mother's eyes

Why do I feel sad? Why do I, of all people, feel helpless against fate? A fortnight ago Ava behaved in a peculiar manner. It was an ordinary day. We were passing one another in a hall when she stopped and stared at me. I am slightly accustomed to her uncanny stare, but that day it was different. She said, "I'm sorry." I asked why she was apologizing, but she shook her head. "I'm sorry for you."

And I remember it now, of all times. Now, when I must rally my wits and keep a cool head in the face of adversity.

I should get on with my writing. Christie, Ava, Daniel, and Robert had left us. Emily lay in Rick's lap, wearied by her recent panic. Poor thing.

"So where will we look first?" Rick asked.

Jack crossed his arms. "If it's only a dream, we won't have to find a way out. We've only got to wait until, one day, we wake up."

"One day?" I asked.

"In the real world, this is just one night. But here, time means nothing, and a whole lifetime could pass before it ends. But that's only if it's a dream. If this is real, we've got to escape. And if we can escape, where do we go? Outside there's nothing but the forest, and God knows what might live there. Any chance we have lies inside the house. Maybe even beneath the house."

"The basement?" My voice must have betrayed some slight dread.

"Why should we be afraid of it? Because ghost stories tell us basements are deadly? Celeste was killed in the comfort of her own well-lit room."

"True," Rick said. "But don't you think there's a reason for the ghost stories? As far as we know, there's only one way out of the basement. There are spiders, winding passages, dead-end rooms, and a treasure trove of dusty antiques. Swords, old guns, and the like. Even an unarmed man could efficiently murder every one of us. Imagine what Celeste's demon could do in that basement."

Jack nodded. "Good point. I suppose the basement can wait until we have no other choice."

"I want to go to the piano room," Emily muttered.

"Why?"

"I just do. I want to practice."

"Can't we-"

"Please?"

Jack gave in. "All right. We'll go there, and then try some of the rooms nearby."

"Thank you."

We followed Jack to the piano room. I fear Emily's mind must have broken. She sat at the piano and played a dull, plodding finger exercise, blissfully humming each note as if no evil could touch her in that room.

As I watched her something quite curious happened to me. I did not tell the others, and I don't think I ever shall. I was reminded of a day long gone. In this same room, another girl practiced the same exercise as I gently urged her on and congratulated her success. I was proud of her, my wonderful daughter Charlotte.

I know the memory is not my own, but what I saw was as real as my own hands. I saw Mother.

Jack's Diary

Faint

Agnes fainted. I caught her before she hit the floor.

She's breathing. I think – I hope – this is nothing out of the ordinary. The stress of this situation might have been more than she could take. I'm worried, though. Celeste's death began with a sickness.

Agnes's Diary

First vision

I gave the others a good fright, it seems. Shortly after I scribbled that last entry I fell into a trance. The piano room vanished, and I found myself in another house altogether. I was in a circular room with four doors. I lay in the middle of the room. I saw numerous white candles around me, and the walls were drenched in blood. Strangely, I found the room comforting, and I lay still for some time, drinking in its dissonant calm.

The longer I lay, the more I knew I must go on. Though it hurt to tear myself away from the security of the room, I rose to my feet. I cast wild shadows on the red walls. I had to choose a door. They were all identical except one, a locked black door that frightened me greatly. I opened the door farthest from the black one.

I found within a man and a woman. The woman, little older than I, was dressed very finely in red and black. I envied her black locks, her fair skin, and her red lips. The man was monstrous, like a bleeding shadow. He knelt before her, holding what looked to be a ring.

"I couldn't imagine life without you," he declared. "We've been through so much together, and . . . and I want you to stay with me. Mary, will you be my wife?"

Mary choked, through joyful tears, "Of course, Lucas! Of course!"

Pictures flashed before my eyes. A church, a wedding, a nervous bridegroom, a mirror, a white dress, and a hundred beaming faces danced through my head. Then I was back in the room. The couple was gone. I saw only candles and a bloodstained wall.

"I remember that day," a voice in the air said. "I was so glad to marry this weak young man."

"Who are you?"

"I was Mary Crow, in life."

"Whatever was the matter with the man? Why was he ugly?"

"You will soon see."

"Why are you showing me this?"

"I want to help you. It isn't too late to save you from my fate."

"But I am in no danger."

"You don't see what I see, Agnes. What Ava sees. What Charlotte sees. You blind yourself to a man's heart, as I did; but hearts are not to be played with. They are wrapped in venomous thorns."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I can't burden you with the truth too quickly. Gradually, I will show you. But you must not continue down this path."

The room faded and I opened my eyes back in the piano room. Jack held me tenderly. I was glad to see relief in his face.

"You scared us, Agnes! Are you all right?"

"I believe so."

"You've got to hold yourself together. You'll only be a burden to us if you let your fear get to you like that."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm just glad you're awake."

I told them about the dream, but neglected to mention the warning. It troubled me too greatly.

"Maybe this will bring us closer to the truth," Rick said.

Jack was skeptical. "Maybe. There's nothing here we can trust. Robert and Ava said there was a mother ghost somewhere in Limbgate."

"Do you think she will do me any harm?" I asked.

"I don't know. Try to be careful. If you have that dream again, stay away from the black door. Trust your instinct."

"I shall."

Though I was unconscious at the time, the vision has left me deathly tired. Yet I am terrified of sleep. It could be that I am afraid to sink deeper into the nightmare. I keep whispering to myself, "I mustn't close my eyes." With every thought of my warm bed I repeat those words, lest I fall on the floor and lose myself in some new nightmare.

Second vision

I returned to the candle room a few minutes ago.

Little had changed. Only the first door was gone. Again I yearned to remain forever in the sad candlelight, but now the air was tinged with foreboding. The blood dripped from the roof and mingled with the candlewax.

"Must I go on?" I asked.

Mary spoke inside my head. "There is no other way."

"What about the black door? Must I go there?"

"In time."

I rose from the floor and studied the doors. I sought some detail, some way to distinguish one from another, to choose rightly. It was useless.

I chose a door near the black, this time, and prayed there would be no shadow-man to taint this vision. The door led me to the garden. I saw the familiar bench in the garden beneath the apple tree. Mary Crow sat there with a little girl. The girl plucked blades of grass from the earth and tore them into little pieces as she conversed with her mother.

"Mother," she asked, "where is father?"

"He has gone to Edinburgh."

"He didn't say goodbye."

"He had to leave early."

"I miss him."

"So do I, Charlotte. But you must be patient. You are more precious to your father than all the wisdom of the world."

"And he loves you more than all the money in the world, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Mary nodded. "He does."

"And you love him more than . . . more than . . ." Charlotte scrunched up her eyes.

"More than life."

"And I love you and Father more than Limbgate."

Mary laughed. "And how much do you love Limbgate?"

"It's the most beautiful house in all the world. I hope we never leave."

"But Charlotte, houses fall apart. The garden will wither away, the walls will crumble, and the foundation will crack."

"But it's home. Home is forever."

"Yes. Home is forever." Mary took Charlotte's hand. "Come, it is time you practiced piano."

Charlotte nodded reluctantly. "Yes, Mother."

They walked away, leaving me alone in the garden.

"Charlotte," I muttered. "She's your daughter."

"Yes," the voice of Mary answered.

"Charlotte Crow . . ." I trailed off. "But she passed away. And so did you. What happened?"

"Patience, Agnes. There will be more visions, but none pleasant. For now, return to your friends, and ready yourself for painful sights." There the vision ended.

Third vision

It was a long time before I fainted again. We spent much time looking for a way to escape the house, but found nothing. No door, no key, no path, no answers. Poor Jack is handling it rather poorly. He yelled at me when I said I was tired. I felt

dreadful. I didn't mean to be selfish. But it matters little, as Jack is now calm, albeit sullen.

We stopped to discuss our predicament. No one wanted to venture outside. A magnificent storm struck Limbgate not long ago. Emily clings more tightly to Rick's hand with every peal of fury.

All the same, Rick was still reluctant to explore the basement. He said there was no better place to disturb dark family secrets than a winding labyrinth full of Crow relics. Jack dismissed his words as nonsense. After a harshly worded exchange, Rick acquiesced.

At the door to the basement I fell a third time. The round room was familiar now, more familiar than Limbgate itself. I fondly touched the bloody wall. I entertained a fleeting thought of tasting the blood before laughing at my perversity. I suppose dire circumstances can work mischief on the mind. Nevertheless I could not deny the beauty of the blood's exquisite dark hue, nor resist the congealed texture that made it so delightful to the touch. I hardly noticed that there were fewer candles, and only a couple were lit.

I suppose Mary must have grown impatient. "Agnes, there is more you need to see."

"I – I'm sorry," I stammered. I pulled away from the blood and opened a new door.

I was in a bedroom of Limbgate. It was night. The shadow-man and a strange woman with a grotesque anatomy squirmed fiercely in the bed. I could hardly watch the shameful scene, but though I shielded my eyes I could not shut out the passionate whispers. I considered walking out, when the door opened behind me. I looked and saw, to my shock, little Charlotte.

I will never forget that. I saw her soul's innocence break through her questioning eyes. The shadow-man and the ugly woman heard her trembling voice. "Father, what are you doing?"

"Charlotte . . ." he gasped.

I couldn't watch this. I walked out and slammed the door, choking back my tears like a child.

Mary tried to comfort me. "I'm sorry. Are you all right, Agnes?"

I shook my head.

"Do you think you can go on?"

"I don't know. I don't particularly wish to see what's in the black door."

"Very well."

"May I leave?"

Mary didn't answer.

"Please, I would like to leave."

"I can't let you go."

"Why?"

"Agnes, I am only a ghost. I am nearly powerless without a body. You have seen but a small part of the evil I endured in life."

"You . . . you want my body?"

"I'm tired. I want to go to heaven, but I cannot leave this shadow world until I am avenged. You needn't be afraid of me. I will take care of you, and your spirit can keep me company."

"I don't know if I can trust you."

Mary growled. "You can't trust me? And yet you'd fling yourself into the wolfish arms of Jack Rake? He's no better than Lucas! In the end he'll strangle your soul and leave you naked in the cold! Trust me, Agnes. I can protect you. I'll make sure you never come to harm. But please, please don't walk this path! I only want to save you!"

"No!"

"Then I must take you by force. I'm sorry, Agnes, but this is for your good."

My vision blurred and my head ached. I fell to my knees, clutching my head and trying to resist Mary's attack. Blood poured down from the roof and pooled around my legs. "Please . . . please stop," I cried. But the blood would not relent.

I nearly gave up. When the blood had risen to my neck I closed my eyes and resigned myself to death. But I knew it was a terrible way to die. I could have accepted illness or old age or even murder, but never this. Even as the blood swallowed me, as a few drops trickled down my throat, I tried to wake up. I tried to see Rick and Emily and Jack. I tried to see the living room. I saw that I was trembling and sweating on the sofa. I felt Jack's firm, strong hand in mine. I felt a few stray drops of blood run down my chin. I felt awake.

"What happened?" Jack asked. "You were coughing up blood."

"I don't want to say."

I wish it had ended then, but Mother's voice rang in my head still. "If you will not help me, then so be it. I don't need you."

"Then leave me alone," I thought.

"I can take a weaker host. I'll leave you, Agnes. I'll leave you to your false lover, but know that I could have saved you. You have chosen your destiny."

Mary left me. I felt lightheaded and sank back on the sofa. I thought I had defeated her until I saw Emily shut her eyes and wipe a little blood from her mouth. She smiled dully.

"Jack, Rick," I whispered, "we need to run."

Charlotte's Diary

Dance of the angels

There are many angels here that like to dance in the hidden rooms. They have soft white wings that are very pretty. But they won't let me dance with them, so I dance alone in the back hall. I like to listen to that Russian man with a long name, and pretend I'm a beautiful swan. When I go home, I'm going to have wings just like the angels, and then they'll let me dance with them. I wonder if God himself taught them how to dance?

Now I don't have to dance alone, because Janice is with me. We tried to be serious at first, but then I started running in circles, and Janice did the same, and we

fell down laughing. I haven't had such a good time since the birthday before I died. My other friends think Limbgate is a scary place, but they don't understand. It's not a house for dead people, but living people.

Chapter VI

Christie's Diary

Confusion

I don't know what to say. It's all . . . I'm a bit shaken. I knew Ava was strange, but this?

She wanted to go to the kitchen to talk to me privately. I tried to tell her Robert wouldn't be safe alone, but she made such a fuss about it that I agreed. I followed her downstairs. The kitchen was already a mess. Someone spilt milk all over the table and left the bread and jam sitting out. Ava pulled out a chair for me. I sat.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I thought you might be hungry," she said. "I wanted to make you a sandwich."

"If you insist, but don't you think this is a bad time?"

"It is never a bad time for sandwiches." Her hands shook as she opened cabinets and gathered ham, cheese, and lettuce. She took two slices of the bread and threw together a sloppy sandwich with the lettuce sliding out the sides. I took it and began eating. She took a seat next to me.

"Um, fairy girl . . ."

"What is it?"

"I have a question."

"I'm listening."

"Do you like me?"

"Of course. You are a bit eccentric sometimes, but I think you're a special person."

"That isn't what I meant."

I nearly choked. I set down the sandwich and tried to convince myself I was misunderstanding. But Ava was blushing and refusing to look me in the eyes. I fumbled for words.

"I . . . I'm not . . . am I understanding you correctly?"

"I don't know. Are you upset?"

"No, I'm not upset. I'm just a bit confused, but it's nothing. Really."

"Should I have kept quiet?"

"Um, maybe it would have been better if . . . never mind . . . I didn't see it coming."

"It doesn't matter if you don't like me. I won't be angry. I won't bother you about it anymore if you don't want me to."

"Maybe we should go back upstairs. Robert probably wonders where we are."

"I'm sorry."

"Let's just go."

We left without another word. Ava hasn't spoken to me since we returned. Robert wants to try the key, but I asked him to give me a moment. I need to write.

I thought I knew her. I would sit with her while she played piano. We even shared a room! Had I known her character I would have been more cautious. I wish I knew what to do now. I guess I should keep a safe distance, for her own sake as well as mine.

She's young. We're both young. Surely it's not extraordinary that she and I should entertain such strange thoughts now and then? Be that as it may, it would be wrong. For now, I'll stop thinking about it. I absolutely must stop thinking about it.

The forbidden room

We've narrowly escaped death, but I'm not relieved. I feel more than dead when I think how I earlier entertained such naive hope, blissfully believing that if we only unlocked the forbidden room we would discover the truth about this place. I was wrong. Now we are left with one more riddle in a long night of confusion.

After killing the Kind Man we hurried to the locked room and tried the key. The door creaked open of its own accord. The smell of human decay filled the room, but we covered our nostrils and ventured onward into a scene of elegant dilapidation. Candles lit wooden desks beneath the feet of porcelain statuettes. By the door, a musty old closet filled with filthy clothes hung open. A gilded lamp stood uselessly at its post by the bedside. The bed itself, an ornate affair, was draped in scarlet sheets. An adult figure lay beneath the sheets.

He was sleeping. I quietly warned the others not to disturb him and began the horrid task of rummaging through the damp, dusty pile of soiled garments in the closet. I shivered at the touch of every creeping silverfish that lurked in the fabric, but I endured this ordeal in the hazy hope of finding another key. It was foolish, in retrospect. What could I have hoped to unlock?

Robert and Ava searched the drawers, but only found a stash of bloody stakes like the one in the attic. Disappointed, I was standing to leave when I stupidly knocked over the lamp. The man rose and looked at me. I retched at the sight of his head, a mass of flesh and matted hair punctured with large iron nails. His calloused, groping hand reached for me. I stumbled over the lamp. Robert seized my arm and dragged me out the door. Ava followed and slammed the door shut behind her.

"The window in my room," I gasped. There's a tree by the window. We can climb out. He won't follow us."

We went to the room and opened the window. The tree tossed madly in the wind and rain. Robert caught a branch and slipped out the window. "I'll go next," I told Ava.

The moment I left the room a blast of savage night air stung my face. I struggled to find footholds in the treacherous branches, but managed to climb down. Ava did not fare so well. She is such a frail girl, the unearthly wind threatened to throw her to the ground. She lodged one of her shoes between two branches. She could barely cling to the tree, much less rescue the shoe. In the end she reached the ground safely and casually tossed her remaining shoe aside.

We are at the edge of the garden, on the steps leading back to the house. Deep within the garden, where the ground is lower, the rainwater has collected in a vast but shallow pool. The swirling black clouds over us blot out whatever moonlight there may be, leaving us in darkness greater than any that festered in the house. But I know that it can't be so terribly dark as it seems. Is it all in my head? My heart whispers a warning that my time has come. This is the darkness that will break me.

Robert's Memoir

The garden called us. With melancholy resolve we ventured into the deep cavern of thorns and wet vines. For Ava's sake we walked slowly, allowing her to calculate her steps and avoid the thorns. We followed the slippery cobblestone path toward the heart of the garden, through twisted passages teeming with devilish greenery and crawling creatures. Nymphs lay broken behind the green walls, toppled by the unnatural growth of the garden. Serpents slithered in their eyes.

As we approached the deepest places we descended into a pool of still black water. We could not see the ground. Vines hung from above, dangling in the water like limp spider legs. The maddening hum of flies filled my ears. I recalled the feeling of suffocation I suffered when I first visited the garden. Now it was stronger. I could hardly breathe, the air was so corrupted by the noxious poison of a thousand living things, all united in foul intent. I thought I would die.

We were passing an alcove when a cold, weak voice asked, "Who's there?"

We stopped. It was Daniel, curled in the alcove, watching us with a bitter glare.

"Is that you, Daniel?" Christie asked. "You're alive?"

Daniel scoffed. "Alive? Is that what you call it? I'm more than alive. What was your name again? And who's that goblin with you? The one with the tangled black hair?"

"Daniel! How can you say something so cruel?"

"Why won't you tell me your name? No matter. God, she's ugly. Nothing but skin and bones. She's probably better off dead."

"You're not yourself. What happened to you?"

"You say it like I scraped a knee or broke a finger! Can't you see? I've been washed clean! I've touched the divine! I've drunk of the water of the goddesses!"

"You're crazy!"

"What of it? Never mind all that. Never mind 'crazy.' But really, I can't stand the sight of that goblin. She makes me want to puke." Daniel crawled out of the alcove. "I'll just kill her right now. Everyone will thank me in the morning."

Ava drew her pistol and aimed at Daniel's head. "Take one more step and I'll shoot you."

"Oh, but don't you wish you were dead, little imp? Don't you cry whenever you look in the mirror and see your deformity? You don't have the guts to kill me." Daniel stepped closer. "Here, let me do you a favor and-

A flash of light and a shriek pierced the shadows. Daniel fell and a murky cloud of crimson tainted the water.

Ava stared at the dead boy. "He won't wake up," she said.

"He will," Christie assured her. "We all will."

"What have I done?"

Christie suddenly clapped her hands over her ears and winced.

"Christie?" I cried.

"They're screaming." She staggered away from us. "Don't you hear the song?"

"Don't listen," I said urgently. "It's not real."

"They have such lovely voices. It hurts so much."

I grabbed her arm. "It's not real!"

"They want me to sing with them. They want me to touch them." A power greater than Christie broke my grip. She fled.

Ava and I chased her. The garden seemed to come to life, willing us to lose our way. The black serpents leered at us from the vines. Thorns tore our clothes and flesh. I imagined, once, I saw a flurry of white wings. We ran until we had to stop, but every path circled back to the alcove where Daniel lay. We had lost Christie.

"Robert?" Ava asked. She was crying. "I don't want her to leave me."

"It's only a dream."

"Is it?"

I wavered.

"If this is real, then Christie will sleep forever like Daniel. I don't want to give up. I don't want to feel sad."

"All right. But running has gotten us nowhere."

"We need to try something new. I'm going to crawl through the vines."

"But they're too thick!"

"We are small. It will hurt, but we can make it." Ava clawed through a wall of thorny vines and stepped in. Blood trickled down her arm. "It's not so bad."

"Very well." I followed her into the black wall. Many thorns lodged in my skin. I felt something cold slither over my neck. Had Ava not been a step ahead of me, welcoming every new scar as a sacrifice for her friend, I could not have borne the agony.

My will was dying when Ava took my hand and pulled me into a clearing. We had reached the great circle at the center of the garden. The apple tree was thin and stretched far into the sky. Its fruit rotted on its leafless branches and dripped with green liquid. The water leapt and fell in tall, vicious waves. The wind smelled of disease.

Christie stood at the foot of the tree in a circle of nine women in thin white robes. Their heads were twisted backwards. They folded their hands together and mouthed a noiseless chant. Christie closed her eyes and joined their song, her face glowing with morbid ecstasy. The women closed in. They laid their hands upon her and pulled her down. The enchantment must have been broken too late, for as they forced her beneath the water Christie screamed.

Ava raised her revolver with shaking hands. "Leave her." The sirens raised their heads to see a shower of bullets. Ava killed three. The remaining six dropped Christie and walked toward us.

"I'll kill you all!" Ava growled.

The sirens sank into the water. Six white specters darted past our feet and into the shadows. A comforting silence fell over the garden.

Christie clung to the apple tree. Her clothes were torn. Her wet hair hung pathetically over her shoulders. She whimpered and muttered harshly to herself.

"Christie?" Ava asked. "Are you all right?"

Christie turned her head. Her eyes were red and shadowed. "Get away from me," she said scornfully.

"What?"

Christie let go of the tree. "I said get away from me. Don't ever let me near you."

"Why?"

"You don't need to know why! Just get out! Or . . . I'll kill you. Just like Daniel tried to kill you. Let me run away!"

"I can't . . ."

Christie took the carving knife from her pocket. "I'm going to run. Promise me you won't follow. If you break your promise I will kill you. Do you understand?"

"I don't understand! What's wrong? Tell me. Tell me something!"

"I told you to promise!"

"I . . . I promise."

Christie ran, quickly vanishing around a corner. Ava listened numbly until the steady splash of her feet died away.

Ava wrapped her arms around me and cried. We stood there for many wordless minutes. I dared not let her know how broken I felt. I told myself that I couldn't burden her with my pain. If the loss of her friend was so devastating, how could she bear to hear of my own hopelessness, my fears, or my bitterness? How could I tell her I wanted to kill myself, now more than ever?

At last she spoke so softly I barely caught her words. "I didn't save her, in the end."

"She's still alive."

"Her soul is dying. She doesn't have long."

"We have to try to find her. You pulled me through a forest of thorns just because you wanted to save her!"

"She hates me now. I was . . . she meant the world to me. But I don't know what to think anymore. I am nothing to her."

"Ava, you said her soul is dying. What does it look like?"

"Like a star that becomes little more than a candle. The eyes turn dark. She feels scared and alone, as though she were falling into an endless pit."

"Then don't you think she needs you?"

"Why could I do anything for her?"

"Because you're still alive."

Ava nodded. "But she said she would kill me."

"She isn't in her right mind."

"All right." Ava let me go. "I will find her. I think I know where she is."

"Good."

When Ava smiled, I felt a pain I hadn't felt in a long time. I felt I could fight the darkness.

Christie's Diary

Death of Christie

I laugh at my own prayers. Christ, I think, is disgusted by my cry for help. I have been drowned in the waters of hell, and I don't think I shall ever be pure again.

This is a death, of a kind, but not an ordinary death. I answered the sirens' song and welcomed the death of my spirit. I flew to the gates of heaven in their arms, only to fall again to the lake of fire. I wish that God would snuff out my flesh so that I could accept my inevitable damnation.

I am filled with such perverse thoughts. The demon in me speaks lust and murder, and as my old fortifications crumble I fear that the demon will prevail. Where is my faith? Was it nothing more than a reassuring ritual? I don't want to be a demon.

Ava is safe, at least. I could not let her near me, lest I corrupt her and drag her to hell with me. How can I make her understand that my kindness was a mask, that I am a beast at heart? I would destroy her. Ava and I must never see one another again.

I cannot shake the feeling that hungry eyes are watching me. The graveyard has a stillness about it that makes me feel naked. I look behind my back and see nothing. I am going to bleed myself, if only to feel safe.

It's not working. There is something I can't see, and it's coming closer. I keep cutting my arm. The monster smells my blood. I'm scared to death. Just let me run away. Don't eat me. I just want to stop bleeding.

Charlotte's Diary

Going home

I prayed today, and God told me something. He said it was almost time for me to go through the forest. I've been having such a good time, and I'm not sure I want to go. What if I get lost? What if I miss my friends?

I'll ask him if I can take Janice with me. She needs a home too, and I think heaven would make her smile.

Chapter VII

Jack's Diary

A fairytale

Once upon a time there was a princess more beautiful than the angels. She was born in wealth and happiness, and God blessed her birth. All the kingdoms of the earth belonged to her. All the nations hoped in her, for she was kind and just and the light of heaven shone in her eyes.

But there was a black serpent, swift and cunning, and he was called the Killer. He was jealous of her majesty and wished to steal her throne. One cloudless night, the princess studied the stars from her great tower. The Killer came to her there and whispered lies to her. He told her she was as a god and urged her to embrace her divinity. But she, in humility, rejected his flattery. Angry that he could not corrupt her, the Killer bit her neck and cursed her with eternal sleep.

The Killer locked the princess in the tower and, with his black magic, caused a forest of thorns to grow around the castle. For a hundred years after, the Killer reigned over the world in pride and cruelty. The guardians of the princess, the White Knights and the Black Knights and the Red Knights, all tried to rescue her. One by one they proudly rode into the thorns, never to return. When a hundred years had passed, only one remained: the Knight of the Evening.

No one knows when the Knight of the Evening was born, but all revered him for his courage and his unquenchable love for his lady. All wept when he declared that he would go to the castle, but none dared deter him from his sacred quest. He took up his sword and rode forth on a black steed, knowing full well that this would be the end.

When he came to the castle, his love was so great that God granted his sword the power to cut through the thorns. The Killer, in his long reign, had grown and become the mighty Leviathan. He looked down from the heavens and laughed at the Knight, so blinded by pride was he. But God, in His wisdom, declared that wrong would be made right, and the Killer himself would be killed. So the Knight, consumed with love for his lady, drove his sword through the Killer's neck. The Killer fell into the western sea and perished.

The Knight entered the castle. He walked down the hall and into the room where the princess slept. Then, burning with love for his lady, he pierced her heart with his blade. Then he devoured her and cast her bones into the thorns. He set the thorns on fire, and the fire burned all the earth. The Knight of the Evening ascended to heaven, where he cast the stars into the sea and slew the Archangel. Then, when all had been made desolate, he killed God, and so the end came. And he was alone in the emptiness for all eternity.

What the hell? I don't remember writing this. But it's my own hand. Would I really tell such a story?

No, it can't be. I may have my secrets, but this can't be my own doing. It must be another trick of the orphanage, meant to break down my sanity. I will not give in.

Agnes's Diary

Meeting Janice

Rick struggled to hold his sister back. The ghost, however, had made her strong. She threw him to the ground, digging her fingernails into his face. Jack tore her from Rick and dealt her a blow to the head. She tumbled over an armchair and fell to the floor. I pulled Rick to his feet.

We fled upstairs, hoping to find Christie and the others, but there was only a hollow loneliness. The violet light from the windows was dim and dead. Heads and limbs of faceless puppets hung from the ceiling on twirling strings. The door to the forbidden room hung open. The shadow-children laughed within. Jack bled himself and they fell silent.

The door to the attic was open. A strange girl sat on the lowest rung of the ladder and watched us as she sipped a cup of black tea.

"Who are you?" Jack asked.

"I'm Janice Wood. You must be Jack and Agnes and Rick. Charlotte told me about you. Where's Emily?"

"Why should we tell you anything?" Jack asked.

"I only want to help. Charlotte told me to find you. I have a message for you, Jack. Can I talk to you alone in the attic?"

I thought he would refuse, but he shrugged his shoulders. "Why not? Someone will kill me soon enough anyway."

Janice smiled and set her cup on the floor. "Thank you. Rick, Agnes, there's tea in the fourth room, on the right. You'll be safe there until we come back."

Jack's Diary

In the attic

Janice sat on a small crate and cupped her hands together. I stood and waited.

"Well?" I demanded.

"Charlotte was right," she said. "You're hiding so much."

"What?"

"Charlotte's been with you a long time, long before tonight. She knows you better than you know yourself. She hopes that you'll learn to love people."

"And that's the message?"

"Yes."

I scowled. "You say it like it's such a simple thing."

"Do I?"

"Oh, I try to love. I want love more than anything in the world. But I feel numb. I practice little kindnesses for the others, especially Agnes, but the kindness becomes stale and meaningless with time. I think I'm beginning to understand why."

"Really?"

"I look at the world and see war and starvation and oppression and murder, all the hell and misery that ravage our lives. My love is such a petty thing in comparison. All my kind gestures to Agnes are nothing more than a joke in poor taste that blinds her to the truth: life is cruel."

"So when I look at her, I feel a sickening urge to break her heart. That way, at least, I could show her the truth and put an end to this happy facade. I suppose, though, when it comes down to it, it's really only a brutish lust for pain that none but a complete monster could comfortably entertain. And I'm not comfortable. Every hour my mind is plagued with guilt and shame. I love and hate her, just as I love and hate myself."

"There's still time. Only a little, but the end can change."

"How?"

"I don't know. But it can."

"You know nothing of me, do you? I envy you. I never knew the meaning of innocence."

"I don't believe you." She stood. "I have to go. Charlotte will wonder where I am." With that she disappeared.

I'm alone in the attic. I'm pathetic. I try to pray and evil thoughts fill my head. I feel like an iron hand is wrapped round my throat, crushing my will and cutting off my breath. I want to love. Am I asking too much? Why have I been given such a devilish heart? Why can't I be a child?

Agnes's Diary

Tea

Rick and I are alone. This is quite a pleasant room, and the tea has lifted my spirits a little. Rick, I fear, is not faring so well.

What am I to say to him? Ever since Mary took Emily he's been fidgety and fretful. I poured a cup of Yorkshire tea for him, but his hand trembled as he lifted the cup to his lips.

"I'm not scared of death," he said. "But I'm scared for Emily. She must be miserable."

"We shall save her yet."

"How?"

"I don't know. Perhaps Jack will work it out."

"Jack's not God. He's a good man, but good men are worthless here." He took a drink. "Remember when we thought we were dreaming? We told ourselves that everything would be better when morning came, that the house would flood with light and all the ghosts and demons would melt away. How much time has passed? Several hours?"

"It can't be more than three. Perhaps it is nearly morning."

"And who says demons fear the sun?"

"Couldn't it be a dream? Ava isn't quite mentally stable. Why should we take her word for it that this is real?"

"Then which of us is dreaming? Whose sick mind built this place?"

"It's got to be my own dream, since I know for certain that I, at least, am real."

He shook his head. "That can't be right. There's something evil at work, and I don't think you're evil. None of us are, really. Not even Daniel."

A new thought came to me. "What about Mr. Denford?"

Rick nodded. "He could be keeping a few secrets. But that only presents another problem. How can you or I be self-aware if we're only dreams?"

"I don't know."

"Even so, I do wish it were a dream. Hell, I wish my whole life were a dream."

"What?"

"You don't know what it was like. My room was large back then, the sort of place my imagination would fill with a thousand monsters. Well, that night there was a monster. Only he didn't come to my room, he went to my parents' room. I held my sheets over my head, but that did nothing to dull the sound of the gun. What could I do? My parents could kill the monsters in my closet. They couldn't kill the jealousy of a sad, lonely gunman."

I didn't know what to say.

He coughed. "What does it matter? What's done is done."

I nodded. "Perhaps we would do well to embrace the present."

"What present? A dark house with a murderous ghost?"

"We must remain calm. This kind of despair won't do us any good."

"I'm sorry. I'm trying not to think about it all, but I can't focus. If I could only be alone for a good long while, I could sort out my thoughts and enjoy a little peace of mind."

"Well, Janice did say this room was safe. How would you like to stay here while I go to the attic to see how Jack is faring?"

"I think I would like that. Nothing against you, of course. I only need a few minutes to clear my head."

"All right." I stood and walked away. As I gently shut the door behind me, Rick laid his head on the table and sighed deeply.

Charlotte's Diary

Guests

I'm in my hiding place. Celeste is sleeping. I thought I'd lose her, but she is safe now. Her dreams are sad but calm. I'm afraid, though, she won't get better for a long time, and even then the scars won't go away.

This dream has been my home for twelve years. It's not as bad as it seems. Sometimes I can climb to the roof and see the stars. My toys and books are all here when it rains. I like playing in the garden, and even though the women in white

scare me they don't hurt me. And whenever I feel lonely I can come here to remember the happy days.

But things are falling apart now. With so many guests my world is getting out of control. The sky is a strange color and the house is shaken by the worst storm I've ever seen. I can save them from the ghosts, but that isn't enough anymore. Not long ago I heard a gunshot. Someone's dead.

I keep thinking about Christie. When she lost Celeste her courage broke, and now she's scared and alone. I think she's in danger. I'm going to go look for her.

Chapter VIII

Robert's Memoir

Ava and I lost no time in leaving the garden. A gust of cold wind welcomed us. Had Christie's wellbeing not been a concern I would have stood still and let the wind cleanse my lungs of the garden's stench. But we could not stop.

We climbed over the stone wall encircling the cemetery. Tombstones lay broken in the mud. Decaying flesh hung from the branches of barren trees, exposed to hungry flies and worms. The cemetery, so small the morning before, now seemed a grotesque, ever growing, ever hungry necropolis. If the garden was too stifling, the cemetery was too exposed. I saw the graves of the dead around me and the tumultuous storm clouds above, and I felt crushingly alone.

"I miss shoes," Ava moaned. The reddish worm-ridden mud rose to her heels. I offered to let her borrow my own shoes.

"Keep them," she said. "I would be sad for you."

Some distance away Charlotte's mausoleum rose from the filth, a melancholy monument in the midst of the sickening landscape. The silhouette of a girl stood before the door. She dropped to the ground when she saw us. "Is it . . . it can't be her," Ava said. The girl crawled nimbly over the tombstones, more like a snake than a human. As she drew closer she began to look familiar. Only when she was nearly upon us could we see her face. Though her eyes were streaked with red cracks and she drooled white liquid from her mouth, it was Christie.

Ava did not raise her hands in defense when Christie lunged at her. Both fell in the mud with a scream and a growl. Christie sunk her teeth in Ava's neck as Ava begged her to come to her senses. "I'm Ava!" she cried, over and over. But Christie could not hear her. She heard only the voice in her head that thirsted for blood.

I seized Christie by the shoulders and pulled her away. Newly aware of my presence, she wrapped her fingers around my throat and began slowly crushing it. I staggered back against a stone cross. I felt light, and the pain lifted from my body. A comforting darkness began to fall on the cemetery.

Some instinct took hold of me. I grabbed Christie's arms and spun around. She hit her head against the cross and screamed. Her hands fell from my neck. A patch of burnt and bleeding skin clung to the side of her face. Her jaw dropped open as if to speak. A long white worm slid out of her mouth, fell on the ground, and writhed at her feet. Christie stared down at the worm with revulsion. Her eyes met mine. She let out a soft groan and fainted.

Ava hastened to Christie's side. "Can you hear me?" she whispered. She took her wrist and felt for a pulse. She sighed and shut her eyes. "Still alive."

Christie, without awakening from her trance, sat upright, reached into her pocket, and took out her little diary and a pen.

"What's she doing?" I asked.

"I don't know." Ava watched Christie nervously. "She's still dying."

Christie thumbed through the diary to the first blank page. Ava and I sat on either side of her and watched her furiously write a new entry.

Christie's Diary

April 23, 1938

4:44 p.m.

The dream

The waiting room would be silent were it not for the dripping faucet on the wall. I do wish the dripping would stop. It's driving me mad and my shoes are soaked in the green water. There's a weight about this place, a significance I can't grasp. Some woman is babbling on the television screen. How strange. It seems so real and colorful. I could reach in and touch her, I think, but I dare not try.

She's talking about a murder. A nurse was strangled in London. The woman blurs and a hay-man appears in her place. He's speaking to me in soft soothing tones, lulling me to sleep. But he's gone now. The television screen cracked.

I must leave. The dripping faucet will break my mind if I don't go away – I hate this place so much – I want to go home. What am I saying? Those were her words when she –

I'm walking down the hall. There are so many doors here. Where do I go? She died in room 313. I'm opening the door. There's a man here. The poor fellow's got spider legs twitching in his eyes. I doubt the doctors will save him.

Is someone calling my name? The voice is so familiar. I remember now; I have a gift from a friend with me. This little rabbit. I'm glad to have a little comfort in this place. I can't recall why I'm here, but I must be sick. I wonder if I am dying.

I'm following the voice. I've left the room with the spider legs, and I'm back in the long hall. I can't believe I didn't notice the paintings. Each is of a lovely black-haired girl that I feel I must have known a long time ago. I – I thought her lips moved. Is she asking me to wake up? The paintings are so pleasant. They remind me of a simple time before I drowned in the garden, before the hay-man and the dripping water.

There's an annoying faucet here too. It's fortunate, though, for I now see my arms are still bleeding. It was stupid of me to bleed myself to death like that, but a little water should cleanse me.

The blood keeps flowing. I can't bleed forever, can I? I only want to be clean! Now the blood is staining the floor, and even the water is filthy now. I've made a mess of things.

I suppose I must go find the doctors. They can help me, can't they? I've got to run if I'm ever to reach the end of the hall.

I'm tired. My heart is pounding faster than the dripping water. I'll take a moment to catch my breath, and then I'll go through this last door and ask the kind doctors to bandage my arms.

It's dark and foul in here. Don't they care for any light in this hospital? At least the doctors are here, all gathered round a deathbed. Someone's dying. I'm

pushing through to get a better look – Celeste! What are they doing to you? These vampires, these crow-headed fiends – what have they done to you? They’re cutting open her stomach as she screams. Leathery hands reach out of her wounds toward me. I’ve got to get out of here. The doctors are drawing their knives and looking at me hungrily. Can’t they see I want no part of their ritual?

I’ve got to get away. They’re not far behind me. I’m running around the corner, down the stairs – I’ve slipped – I’m falling –

I’m in the back seat of a car, rushing down the streets at an alarming speed. There is strange music playing. I am with three other people. The driver is a man in a suit with thick eyebrows and the eyes of a hawk. In the front seat there is a young woman in white coughing up blood. To my left, there’s a woman in black. Their faces are blurry. I don’t remember how I got here.

“Christie,” the woman in black says, “you have to wake up. Don’t you remember where you are?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I fell down the stairs.”

“Not far now,” the driver mutters. He looks at the woman in white. “We haven’t got much time.”

“You’re trapped in a dream,” the woman in black says. “Don’t let the Dustman find you.”

“How do I wake up?”

“Just try. Try to get out of here. You’ve got to live. He’s coming. If you don’t live he’ll kill us all. Please, Christie, you’ve got to wake up! Don’t let him—”

I’m outside a cathedral. The city streets are quiet beneath a deep black sky. I walk through the door to seek the priest. Maybe he can cleanse me.

The congregants watch me closely. They are all as bruised and bloodied as I. The priest lies dead in the confessional, shot through the heart not long ago. A strange spirit without hands glides over the stone floor toward me.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“I killed the priest,” the spirit answers. Its voice is at once gentle and wicked.

“But I needed him. I needed him to cleanse me.”

“But my love, you belong to me. I will take you to hell, where you will never leave me.”

“I don’t want to go to hell.” I’m crying. “What have I done? How can I make myself clean? There’s got to be a way! Let me go!”

The animal spirit is holding me tightly. I am growing weak. The spirit is killing me. I fall dead on the floor. The congregants shake their heads and mutter sympathies at the sight of my corpse. A little girl runs through the door of the cathedral. Was she looking for me? The animal mask falls from the spirit and she tries to shake me out of slumber. “Come back,” she says.

I am at the end. I could not run from the Dustman forever. He is waiting in the black room.

I see him now. He sits in the wheelchair waiting for me. His skin is like fabric, or like leathery flesh, or like dust. I catch the glint of little golden eyes in deep sockets. I tread softly lest I frighten him.

"I tried to wash myself," I say. "I have failed. It's my turn to die, isn't it?"

He nods.

"I'm afraid to kill myself. Please, sir, will you do it for me? I can't bear the thought of bleeding myself anymore."

He nods.

"I am ready." I get down on my knees and await my judgment. He raises a hand. Everything goes black. I am falling into the abyss, and there is nothing to hold on to. I open my arms to accept my damnation. I feel like I am flying.

Robert's Memoir

Christie suddenly dropped her diary and fell backward. Ava watched her intently, searching for some sign that this was not the end. "Come back," she whimpered.

She was answered by the fury of the wind. She laid her head on Christie's chest to listen for a little life. At first she despaired. Then, for a moment, Christie breathed ever so softly. Her breath grew in power until it was a rasping cough, then a scream. At last she opened her eyes.

Ava could hardly speak, and dared not hope too hastily. But she quickly saw that Christie, though broken and weak, was in her right mind. "You're alive!" Ava cried. "I'm so happy you're alive!"

"I . . . you were here with me. You and Robert."

"Of course we were here with you. Did you think we could ever let you die?"

"You followed me."

"You won't kill me, will you?"

Christie shook her head. "No. Of course I won't kill you. I wish you had left me alone, though."

"You would be dead now," I remarked.

"I mean it. It's better for you if you leave me alone for a while, Ava," Christie insisted. "I'm glad you and Robert saved my life, I truly am. But I don't think I've been quite right in the head ever since my incident in the garden. I think you should keep your distance."

"I will never let you come so close to death again. I will not leave." Ava held her hand. "Please let me stay with you, fairy girl. That's all I ask."

Christie smiled. "You're so strange," she said. "But you can stay with me."

We remained in the graveyard for a long time. Christie, weakened by her ordeal, needed a little rest. The three of us sat among the tombstones in placid silence. The rain subsided and the clouds parted. Thousands of brilliant stars glinted in the black night sky. The beauty of the stars overwhelmed me. It cut through all the fear and darkness and blood and hatred and death. In that graveyard, full of maggot-ridden flesh and broken memories of past lives, I tasted a little happiness

and yearned for escape. For once that night, the thought of killing myself seemed laughably absurd.

Christie's Diary

Not alone

Everything is quiet now. I've read through my previous entry twice, just to be sure I remember my dream right. The others know what happened. It's a bit funny, actually, that the night they decide to read my diary would be the night I write that passage. Maybe I should show them the rest of my diary just to prove I'm not mad.

I feel like a ghost. I experienced more agony in one night than some experience in a lifetime, yet I lived. I don't know how I'll endure living with these memories. I'll have to smile and shake hands with people and know that I've been hurt more than they could ever imagine. If I could express to them the guilt I felt in the garden, or the hunger in the graveyard, or the loneliness in the dream, would they understand?

I only tried to help. I wanted to be the one to comfort the others and calm their fears, but instead it was I who fell into the deepest hell. I don't know what will become of me now, but I know I'm forever changed. I am weaker in body and soul, and while the others may find healing, I will always be haunted by the Dustman.

I couldn't tell Ava to leave me alone. I ought to have done so. I can only offer her pain and sadness, and I think she knows. But she doesn't care. For all my pretensions it is she, not I, that is the kind one.

Robert seems glad. I must have scared him. He doesn't do a terribly good job of expressing it, but he does love those around him. He's been trapped in a world of his own, full of grief and bitterness. I wish with all my heart I could save him, but I know now that I was never meant to be a savior. I can only share what little light I have.

Charlotte visited us in the graveyard. She appeared at the door of the mausoleum. She hung her head in exhaustion and looked at me with such sorrow that, even in my distrust, I felt sorry for her.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"What's the matter?"

"Christie . . . I'm sorry . . . I didn't know . . ."

"Didn't know what? Tell me, what's wrong?"

"I didn't know how broken you were."

I remembered the girl looking for me in the cathedral. "You saw my dream?"

Charlotte nodded.

"Don't worry. I'm safe now."

"The Dustman tried to kill you. Your soul is weak now. You won't get away if he comes back for you."

"I don't think he can scare me anymore. He showed me the darkest corners of my mind and I lived."

"It wasn't all in your head. The Dustman knows everything. He can show you the past and the future, truth and lies, your own heart and the other hearts."

"What does that mean?"

"Something evil is coming to life."

"I've known a long time now," Ava said. "I've felt restless. Some nights I sweat in fear. I feel I am haunted, but not by a spirit. Can you help us, little ghost? Is there a way out?"

"There is, but you can't find it yourself. Even I can't find it. Tell me, did you ever look in the office?"

"We couldn't get there. The hall stretched on forever."

"Did you try walking backwards?"

"What?" Ava looked stunned, then smiled. "Would that work?"

"It took me a long time to learn that trick, but yes. It works."

"Thank you!"

"You're welcome." Charlotte hugged Ava. "Please don't let Christie fall asleep again."

"I won't."

"Good. Well, I need to rest. Goodbye, everyone." She shyly waved and faded away, leaving a faint white mist.

"This is wonderful!" Ava said. "We need to go back to the house! We can reach the office!"

"Calm down!" Robert said.

"Ha! Calm!" She laughed hysterically. "Calm? Christie nearly died! I killed Daniel in cold blood! I can't calm down! Don't be ridiculous, Robert, I'm happy and sad and scared all at once and it's making me sick!"

Robert and I could only watch as Ava doubled over in witch-like laughter. After many seconds of mad cackling she spluttered and lost her breath. She coughed, pulled herself together, and spoke. "I meant to say I'm very glad. Now that we know the way to the office, we can ask Mr. Denford to help us."

Chapter IX

Rick's Diary

White lilies

Agnes left me. I was alone with my thoughts. I tried to sleep, but whenever I began to nod off, a feeling like cold fingers stroked my neck and I started. I heard a rat scratching behind the wall. I wanted to find Agnes, but was afraid of what might happen if I left.

I finally slept for a minute or two, but such awful pictures flashed through my head that I was glad when I woke up. Even now I remember bloody scenes of men and women impaled or beheaded, and of beasts so grotesque and evil I can't begin to describe them. The room was darker when I woke up, and the rat scratched more loudly.

It wasn't until then that I noticed the back door. Strange, really, that I didn't see it before. It would have been a plain wooden door were it not for the red paint smeared on the frame.

I didn't hesitate long. I was sick of running from danger and hiding in dark little rooms. I considered leaving a note for Jack and Agnes, but I was sure they would see that I'd taken the back door and come after me.

Inside I found a winding wooden staircase. Although I couldn't see any light source, the staircase glowed with something like moonlight. White lily petals rained from above. It was hard to decide whether to climb up or down, since I couldn't see far in either direction, but I went upward to see where the lily petals came from.

I'm afraid the staircase may go on forever, but I can't turn back, or I'll forever wonder what waited at the end. Could this be my escape from Limbgate?

The Woodland Stream

I came to a bleak room. There was no light except a single candle in the center of the room. I was dead tired and sat cross-legged by the candle, humming snatches of old songs and wondering why I ever bothered climbing the stairs. As my eyes adjusted to the weak light, I saw an unpleasant ghost on the far wall, a plain white hollow-eyed face. A long forked tongue hung from its mouth and twitched as the eyes studied me. I scrambled to my feet and meant to leave, but the stairs had disappeared. I could only gaze at the face in disgust.

I tried to reason with it. "What do you want with me?" I would ask, with no answer. I tried both flattery and insults, but the face remained cruelly amused at my words. Hours must have passed as I sank into insanity. I cried and laughed and pinched myself, hoping someone would find me.

The candle went out and I panicked. I cringed at the thought that the face might be floating toward me, flicking its tongue through its teeth, unseen and

deadly. I begged it to leave me alone and take pity on my lonely little soul, but it remained quiet. Then, in the midst of my fear, I felt a comforting hand on my shoulder and a voice spoke. I don't know how to describe it. I couldn't guess its age or sex, but it felt familiar and human.

"Don't be afraid," the voice said.

"I can't see you," I cried.

"I'll lead you to safety. Don't worry."

"What was that – that face?"

"Only a petty demon. It cannot harm you. This way."

A door opened to a woodland path and the room filled with sunlight. The face was gone, and in front of me, calling me into the forest, was a figure a little taller than me, cloaked in black. I couldn't make out its face. Its small hands were colorless. It held out its hand to me and I took it. We walked into the forest together.

The path winded through a bright autumn scene beneath a canopy of leaves. Wind stirred the grass under our feet. Birds chattered in the branches, spiders and beetles and ladybugs crawled in the dirt, and a young deer watched us from the trees.

I looked at my friend. It seemed either joyful or sorrowful, or possibly both at once. Though it never showed its face, it seemed it could see me clearly and, at the moment, was analyzing me.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"I'm only curious. Do you have a name?"

"It doesn't matter."

"But you're my friend. I want to know."

"Friend?" I think it might have smiled at the word. "I'm Friend."

We talked little. To be honest, I felt no need to talk or question the Friend. I was content to simply accept the situation and enjoy the majestic forest around me. We came to a lone tree not far from the path, on the edge of a rippling stream. The water was clear and clean, and fish darted down the river. "We're here," the Friend said.

"Is there something important about this place?"

"Sit." The Friend pointed to the foot of the tree, then sat and waited for me. I joined it. Nature's music began to put me to sleep and I closed my eyes. I promised myself never to return to Limbgate.

"No, nothing important," the Friend said. "Only rest."

I fell asleep.

Jack's Diary

Liar

Agnes came to me in my solitude. Whatever the hell I may be, I know she's a thousand times better. She's an idiot lover, a blind and dumb child in a world that

wants to kill her. Damn you, why don't you run? Why can't you see my soul? Why can't you look through my eyes?

"What's the matter?" she asked. How could I have told her of the schemes played out over and over in my head? Here a knife, there a hanging, and there a beheading.

"Nothing," I answered. It was a lie, of course. What if I had told her the truth? What if I told her God was a killer, and the world his slaughterhouse? That I was a coward who couldn't kill, that I fantasized of murder yet never carried it out? Best to protect her innocence, I told myself. She wasn't ready.

"Nothing?" she asked.

"Do you love me?"

"Of course! How can you ask that?" She tried to smile, but I suppose even she could see some portion of my distress. "What is it?"

"I'm tired, that's all. I guess . . . I guess you're a changed man when you've met the devil."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You change when you see it. You change when you realize there never was an angel named Lucifer, or a war in heaven. There was only a God and a man, and the man fought God. He lost, of course, but what could he do? He couldn't help it. God never deserved to sit in the mercy seat. Someone had to fight."

"I don't like this."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bothered you."

She sat beside me and kissed me. In the dim window light her eyes glowed with her last effort to save me, though she hardly knew she was fighting for my soul. Then she laid her head in my lap and smiled, content to be at the mercy of the devil. "I cannot guess the cause of your suffering," she said. "I wish you would tell me plainly. Do you recall how it used to be? We could talk about everything. You told me when you thought you couldn't bear it anymore, and I told you that you were the most wonderful man I had met. You told me when you hated yourself, and I told you when I loved you. So please speak to me now. If it causes me pain, what of it? I wish to help you."

I stammered. "I can't - you wouldn't understand—"

"I know, I'm a bit stupid. But I do love you."

"I'll tell you when we wake up."

She sighed. "If you say so. But I shall hold you to your word." She held her hand to my eye and wiped away a tear. "We'll wake up, Jack. Don't worry."

"Did you leave Rick alone in the room?" I asked.

"He said he needed a moment's privacy."

"We should go back. It's not safe to be alone that long."

She sat up and gave me one last kiss on the cheek. Then we left the attic.

We never found Rick. Not a drop of blood told of his death. Somehow, though, we knew that we could never see him again, and that he could never come back.

I also knew that I had failed. God had killed Rick, just as he killed Celeste and Emily, just as he killed Charlotte, and just as he would kill us all. I had no choice now, and not even Agnes could save me.

“I think I know the way out,” I told her. “But I’m scared. Will you come with me?”

She nodded.

Charlotte’s Diary

Love

Janice and I packed our things and made sandwiches for the road. I hope Ava takes good care of Sleepy.

It’s not time to leave yet, but we’ll be ready. I still need to make sure my friends are safe. I’m really worried about them. They don’t always know how to love each other, and they don’t remember that God has a home for them. But he loves them all anyway, so I love them all too.

Chapter X

Ava's Diary

Mr. Denford

What walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?

No, not a man. The answer is me. I crawl out of bed when I wake up, stand upright after a good cup of coffee, and use a crutch after breaking a leg in the evening! What a clever joke! Marvel at my comedic genius! Not even the most killjoy of killjoys can withstand my wit!

That was a sorry excuse of a joke. I am ashamed.

My spirit spins, sometimes, when I am upset. The world seems to swing back and forth on a pendulum as I shudder and scream. The doctors told me I suffered from mild epilepsy, but they didn't understand at all. A spirit as fragile as mine will naturally thrash about against its vessel when it is hurt. I had one such episode in the hallway outside Mr. Denford's office, compelling me to sit down a moment. I wanted water, but to ask that of Christie and Robert at such a time, when merely passing from one room to another might awaken the killing spirits and the death heralds, would have been cruel. What was it that disturbed me? Perhaps it was the memory of the shadows on the walls. I faintly heard Robert's concern, and Christie's calm explanation of my condition.

A few minutes later I came to myself again. "I think I'm better," I said as I stood again.

Christie nodded. "All right. I hope Charlotte wasn't lying." She turned her back to the office and took a deep breath. Then, with faltering steps, she walked backward. Robert and I followed. I couldn't help thinking that we looked silly to whatever spirits might have been watching, but that didn't matter. "It worked," Christie said. We all turned round to see the oak office door. Robert knocked twice.

There was no answer. He knocked more loudly.

Again, no answer.

"Let me try," I said, and gave the door a savage beating with both my fists. The force was so strong it creaked open of its own accord.

"Show a little restraint," Christie whispered harshly. "Look, he's sleeping."

Mr. Denford was snoring like a sleepy ogre in his armchair, legs thrown over the right arm, and head hanging back over the left. An ancient edition of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia Libri III* rested on his chest, rising and falling in rhythm with his breath. The room was cluttered with the usual pretty sketches. Today, though, having walked in the nightmare so long, I could recognize a few of the demons. I tiptoed through the mess to Mr. Denford and shook him awake. He cracked his eyes open, yawned, and said, "Only a day here, Robert, and you've already broken curfew? Alone, at night, with two girls? You devil."

"I can explain, sir," he replied.

"I'm impressed, really. In all my life I have not met anyone capable of such efficient delinquency. Given another week, who knows? Perhaps you'll make a name for yourself in organized crime!"

"Mr. Denford!" Christie shouted. "Celeste and Daniel are dead!"

Mr. Denford stared at her grimly. "What?" He put a hand to his brow. "Tell me what happened. Now."

Christie told our tale. Mr. Denford listened, occasionally questioning her. He was very interested in the hell-spirits, and asked for detailed descriptions. When it was over, he fell deep in thought.

"Well?" Robert asked.

"Well, I will begin by saying I had trusted you to know better than to attempt to contact the dead, but it seems that I will have to spell that out on the list of rules. Humor aside, though, I can enlighten you on several points. Let us begin with the nightmare itself."

"So it's only a dream?"

"Not only a dream. It's a world of its own, different but connected to the real world. I've had the nightmare for years. I've tried to make it stop. I've even tried leaving this house, but nothing works. I must remain at Limbgate until I can destroy it."

"But if none of this is real, aren't we safe?"

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"Reality is a fragile thing. We like to think the line between reality and imagination, between existence and nonexistence, is fixed. The truth, however, is quite complicated. The real world is constantly under attack from the outside, from the abyss of chaos. Under the right circumstances, imagination can become a reality of its own. An individual might be born with extraordinary power, an outside entity might find its way into reality, or there may be an event that creates such spiritual distress that reality itself is broken. So yes, this is a nightmare, but it is a living nightmare, one that could bring death in the waking world if we do not destroy it."

"So where did the nightmare come from?"

"I have been trying to solve the mystery for some time. When I first moved into Limbgate to found the orphanage, I began to suffer recurring nightmares. At first I thought nothing of them, but they persisted for months, and patterns began developing. Mother and Charlotte, the sirens in the garden, and the road through hell."

"The what?"

"You will see soon enough. But more about that later. I consulted with various friends of mine: psychologists, physicists, priests, monks, mediums, psychics, and anyone else who might possibly have something to contribute to my investigation. So far I have few details, but I know for certain that Charlotte and her mother were savagely murdered by the father, Lucas Crow. This nightmare began that night. Perhaps Charlotte dreamt it into being as she died, or perhaps the very evil of the act called it into being. No matter the cause, Mary and Charlotte Crow remain in Limbgate, wandering as ghosts, seeking peace and never finding it."

"Is Lucas here somewhere?" I asked. "If the victims can't find peace, shouldn't the killer be trapped as well?"

"I have not met him in person, but I believe he lurks somewhere. You remember the man in the bedroom whose head was filled with nails? I believe that to be one manifestation of his presence. Many nights, I have heard his voice in the basement, begging God to show mercy for his crime.

"Now, regarding the monsters, you were incorrect to call them demons. Though some resemble angels in appearance, they are mere mockeries of angelic beings. We stand on the very brink of nonexistence, and there are many terrible things that do not exist. The nightmare is weak, sustained only by the memory of the murder, and it cannot keep out the strange creatures that wander here from the void. The shadow children, however, I believe to be entirely different. Remember that their answers echoed your questions? That, I would suggest, is because they are your own shadows. Bleeding yourselves didn't banish them because they were afraid of blood. It banished them because you were attacking them at the source. Christie, are you all right?"

"I . . . didn't have to bleed?"

"No, you didn't have to bleed. Left to themselves, the shadows would not have harmed you. I believe, in fact, that your blood was what attracted the monster in the graveyard. Attacking yourself will never scare the devils away. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Lastly, I think you deserve some reassurance concerning the fate of Celeste. I have died many times in the nightmare, only to wake up the next morning. Celeste, I think, will survive."

"Then why don't we simply find a way to die and wake up then?" Christie asked.

"Because death in the nightmare is never painless. Even now, your deepest fears can smell your scent. They will hunt you down and ravage your spirit in the most horrifying manner you can imagine. Trust me, it's far better to find the safe way out."

"And what of Daniel?" I asked.

"I can't say. If the nightmare had killed him, I would have no worries. Since you killed him, however, I cannot predict his fate in the real world. He might wake up, or we might find him lying in bed with a bullet through his heart."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It wasn't your fault. You had to protect yourself. Besides, guilt will only stand in your way right now. You have more important problems. You need to escape."

"How?"

"There is a tunnel underneath the house that leads to a shrine in the middle of the forest. If you sleep inside the shrine, you will wake up in your own bed, back in the real world. The entrance to the tunnel, however, is hidden somewhere in the basement."

"And what's in the basement?"

“I regret to tell you, but I don’t know. It is much larger than the rest of the house, a labyrinth of rooms without rhyme or reason. You may walk into a room, only to find a wall behind you where the door once stood. You may climb down a flight of stairs, and find yourself standing at the beginning of the basement again. The tunnel could be anywhere. And there are always monsters lurking within. I can predict nothing.”

“Will you come with us, at least?”

“Oh, certainly. As far as the tunnel, anyway.”

“Surely you plan on leaving as well?”

“I do. But I cannot be content with simply leaving this time. Remember that this is a recurring nightmare. You may escape tonight, but you will return again soon enough. Perhaps in a few weeks, perhaps a few days, perhaps tomorrow. I had hoped that my nightmares wouldn’t effect the rest of you. But now that you’ve entered the nightmare, it is my responsibility to destroy it once and for all. I must protect my wards.”

“And what if you never escape?”

Mr. Denford shrugged. “What if I don’t? It doesn’t matter to me.”

We said little else. Mr. Denford collected a few candles and a matchbox from the desk.

Chapter XI

Jack's Diary

Hell

I can hardly still my trembling hand long enough to pen a legible sentence. No matter, I owe it to God and man to tell the truth.

How did it happen? I suppose I must be mad, for sane men can do no wrong. But I feel fairly sound-minded. If anything, I have ascended to a higher consciousness, an ability to smell, if you will, the guilt and bitterness around me, and the abject pain of every living thing within these walls. I feel the proper emotions: remorse, sorrow, terror that I should be caught, but in all that there is something lacking. I could hardly recognize my reflection in a mirror a moment ago. If the eyes are the windows of the soul, as they say, then my soul is dead.

My ascension began many years ago, long before I even suspected that I was somehow unique among the human race. I was an impressionable boy, and religiously pursued knowledge of every kind. I read books, I listened to the radio, I watched the television, and I conversed with the young and the old. Every story left its mark, and before long the pleasant stories were overshadowed by the darker ones. I heard of wars, of famines, of holocausts, and of grisly murders. It was the murders that struck me most, though I know not why. However despicable the other evils may have been, I became addicted to these stories of psychopathic killers. Though I hardly realized it at the time, I began to relish the more grotesque deeds, scouring the newspapers for the latest crimes. The truth was that, as much as my better self loathed the depravity of these men, my bestial nature craved the blood of the victims.

I was, of course, blind to this. Then, one night, I suffered a nightmare. A form like a man stood in my room, watching me. He wore a buttoned white shirt and grey trousers. His head was covered with a thin brown film. Bloodstains marred the inside of the film, around the eyes and mouth. I could make out none of his features. "Find me," he said, gasping like a dying man. Though I cursed him and begged him to depart, he repeated this three times before I awoke.

That happened a year ago. I believed, at first, that my obsession with murder had simply taken its toll. However, my mind was quite shaken, and I began to regard my comrades with deep contempt. I became frustrated with life and even God. The senselessness of the evil in the world weighed on me, yet I could not abandon the nagging feeling that some omnipotent being was watching me and reading my thoughts. So I concluded that this omnipotent being, this God, must logically be just as senseless as the world he had created. This conclusion was the genesis of a thought, a lurid fantasy, a mere story with which to entertain myself during my lonely nights.

And now I arrive at the present, at the first chapter of this grand story. All my life before was only a prologue to my great masterpiece, the tale of the wondrous Jack Rake. It began in the basement. Agnes and I, searching for a means of escape from Limbgate, had been driven at last to the eighth circle of our little hell.

"Something's wrong," Agnes told me as I opened the door.

"It's all right, we'll be safe soon." I flung the door open. A flight of splintery stairs led downward into the void.

"This is the end, then?" she mused. "We'll find a door, and wake up?"

"How else could it end? I'll go in first if you're afraid."

"No, please. I'd like to walk in front."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Agnes, feeling her way along the wall, seemed so helpless and yet so brave. Her candle shook erratically, but she walked onward in measured steps. I almost regretted my schemes.

"Are you watching me?" she asked.

"Why would you ask?"

"Nothing, I only had a queer feeling."

The stairs seemed endless. We must have descended a hundred flights when we at last found even ground in a nasty room of rusted treasures and broken mirrors. Several coils of barbed wire rusted in a corner. All around us, fire-scorched wooden sculptures of young women greeted us with painted eyes. Many lay on the floor in disturbing postures, as though waiting hungrily for my attentions.

Agnes looked at them disgustedly. "What are they?"

"Ignore them. We need to keep moving."

She tiptoed cautiously through their splayed limbs to the nearest door and opened it.

"This room's better," she said. "Get in here, will you?"

I looked over her shoulder into a calm domestic scene. Here, three such wooden dolls sat around a dinner table, holding hands and smiling to one another. Even after a whole night on an empty stomach, the food looked revolting. Streams of greenish-yellow paint flowed down the sides of a pile of raw meat, and a bowl of old figs stood at the center of the table. A crude moustache of horsehair dangled from the father's nose. The mother's face must have been painted rather hastily, as there was an ugly red streak from her mouth to her chin. The child looked like a grotesque, bloated, rosy-cheeked hobgoblin.

"Not much better," I said.

"Anything is better than that . . . that brothel."

Christ, how I would soon prove her wrong. There were three paths to choose from. I cared little, so Agnes chose the door nearest the mother.

Still another scene awaited us there. A mannequin, bereft of all paint or clothing, sat in a creaky rocking chair. Otherwise, the room was utterly empty.

"Strangely, I like this room best," Agnes said.

"You like my room?" a voice asked. It came from the mannequin. "Thank you. But it matters little now. I'm here to warn you."

"Warn us of what?"

"Of what lies ahead. You are near the heart of Limbgate. Never open a heart if you are not prepared for the pain."

"We're going to find a way out no matter what the cost," I said. "We've experienced pain already."

The mannequin laughed. "Liar!"

"What?"

"Liar! Liar with a hero's mask! Liar with a sword of roses!"

"Let's get out," I whispered to Agnes. She nodded and we returned the way we came.

The room with the family was gone. We were in a damp hall with creaking walls and cracked, dripping pipes. Broken planks of wood hung from nails above our heads. The darkness was complete but for the glow of the candle.

We walked for hours. Occasionally, we found doors leading to still more dripping walls and creaking pipes, but nothing ever changed. The overwhelming desolation of the place echoed in every footstep, in every creak of the floorboards, in every drip of the water. Agnes began to complain of her thirst. I told her to shut up. We passed what looked to be a well and peered in. A putrid smell rose from the pit, but as soon as I turned my back Agnes tried to throw herself in. I caught her and scolded her.

"Can't you tell the water's filthy?"

"I need water," she whimpered.

She found her water, soon enough. Farther into the basement we passed a pipe that protruded from the wall, pouring filthy water onto the floor. Agnes knelt down and licked up the water like a dog. "That's disgusting," I told her. She paid no attention.

A sudden rattling startled her. "What was that?" she screamed. The noise had come from within the wall, not far from the leaking pipe. I looked through a crack in the wall and saw glimmering black scales.

"What is it? What do you see?" Agnes asked.

"Nothing. We've got to keep going."

"There was something, wasn't there?"

"For God's sake, get the candle and get a move on! We haven't got forever!"

"All right!"

Agnes was losing her will. Even I found the basement to be a harrowing experience, but she, the weaker of us, was very nearly broken by it. She muttered fragmented psalms to herself, but kept mistakenly mixing them with William Blake. She shook her head from time to time and bit her fingers. I feared she would not last long enough to enjoy what was soon to come, but at last we found our way out. In a dreary corner at the end of a long passage, something had torn a hole in the wall. It was just large enough for crawling.

"I won't be able to take the candle in there," Agnes said. "What if it isn't the way? What if it's too dark?"

"I've got one last candle," I told her. "It can't be far, I'm sure."

Agnes lay down and pulled herself through the opening. I followed close behind. The candlelight was behind us, and ahead was the final darkness. It was wet in there, and the ground was jagged. I watched for any strange movements in the

shadows, but we passed to the other side unharmed. Agnes and I groped our way into the deepest chamber of the basement, the last trial before the end.

This was a room of stone walls. It glowed with an unnerving red hue that rendered my candle unnecessary. A light wind danced through the chamber and rattled the chains that hung from the ceiling. Many people stood in the chamber, young and old, male and female, all clothed in white tunics. They hung their heads in a listless stupor as dozens of small, devil-eyed black snakes slithered across their skin and through their hair. Some people appeared entirely unaware of our presence, while others stared at us. None acted. At the center of the great chamber was a bed of iron on a patch of dewy grass. A woman in bridal array lay there, like one of the princesses in the old fairytales.

“What is this place?” Agnes wondered.

I couldn’t answer. It all felt too familiar, as though I had returned to some bitter memory of childish fear. The weight of a wicked and magnificent destiny hung over the room and burned within the damning eyes of the snake-people. I looked round and smiled at them. The snakes hissed.

“There’s a knife beside the bride,” Agnes said. “I wonder . . .”

I was hardly listening. My head spun with excitement, with elation at this godlike power over life and death. The snakes were welcoming me into their fold, urging me to become their king. I need only sacrifice my heart and I would ascend to the stars themselves.

“I won’t do it,” Agnes said. “But there’s no door. There’s no way out.”

It took great strength of will not to laugh at her. She was a weakling, squeamishly refusing to desecrate a dead body while I opened my eyes to the secrets of God himself. Though she could not see it, the man was standing there. The man from my nightmare, the man with the bloody eyes! At last, I had found him!

One of the snake-people, a little child, seized Agnes’s arms, eliciting a sharp shriek.

“Don’t go on!” the child begged her. “If you leave you can never come back! Stay with us! Please, please don’t do this! Please!”

“Let go of me!”

“Just kill him! If you kill him everyone will be safe!” The child was pointing at me.

“Let go!” Agnes swiftly and decisively plunged the knife into the heart of the bride. The child fell back, crying and murmuring half-hearted warnings. A fragment of the wall crumbled to dust, revealing a dark tunnel.

Agnes gaped at her blood-stained hands. “I can’t believe I did that!” she said.

“Hush, we’re almost there.”

“I want to go home.”

She dropped the knife. I offered to hold her hand, but she refused. She hugged herself and walked onward, into the tunnel. I followed her.

I have tried to explain myself, but I suppose, in the end, some things can never be understood. I will say only that even God cannot stop me now. Fate decreed that one day, in an age of death machines and blasphemous lords of men, an infant would be left to die in the streets of London, and that infant would hate all things, and grow to become a god of desolation. His name was Jack Rake.

It was all as I had dreamed. The tunnel was tediously long, and I was beginning to grow bored when finally we came to the door. I knew it well. It was identical to the door to Agnes's room, where I had spent many a night listening to the innocent rhythms of her breath.

"How strange!" Agnes exclaimed. "Should I go in?"

"Why not?" I said, struggling not to betray my eagerness.

She turned the doorknob and eased the door open.

"Nothing strange here," she remarked. "And my window! Must be a sorry view," she laughed.

"Perhaps you should look?" I suggested.

She obeyed. "By God, it's the garden! Won't you come look?"

"In a moment. I'm a bit winded."

"All right."

My fantasy was unfolding exactly as I had imagined it. Agnes lingered long at the window, and began to doze off as I looked in the closet door. Coils of barbed wire filled the closet. I took one, wincing as the barbs cut through my palm.

"Agnes," I whispered.

Dear reader, please remember her kindly. A rose by any other name is still sweet, whether it be clothed in white or wrapped in scarlet thorns. So it is with Agnes, for even in death her beauty surpassed that of the common flowers. I found such a lovely flower, and cherished it for a time; but flowers, in truth, were never meant to live.

Not once did she shed a tear. She only asked why.

Why?

Farewell, lovely flower.

Charlotte's Diary

Broken world

I'm hurt. My heart's bleeding all over my dress, the white dress I liked so much. I was sitting in the graveyard, looking for my favorite star and praying that I would make it home safe, when the sky cracked and bled. The earth shook and the tombstones broke. Before I could run away I started to hurt. My death-scar had broken. I screamed and couldn't walk, but Janice heard me and dragged me into the mausoleum.

We don't know what to do. It's no use trying to make the scar better because I'm dead, and even if I were alive, we aren't doctors. But it hurts a lot, and even though it isn't so bad anymore, I need to help my friends. In a few minutes I'll go back to the house, whether I feel better or not. I wonder what could've shaken my whole world like that. The demons don't scare me anymore. I think it's something else.

Chapter XII

Christie's Diary

In the Knight's Footsteps

Ava is either a seer or a lunatic. Maybe a bit of both? At any rate, she told me that she felt a monster had been awakened in the deepest regions of the mansion. Even if she's wrong, I can't forget the panicked fear in her eyes. The worst of it is that our path will undoubtedly lead to the monster. I hope she's nothing more than a lunatic.

Mr. Denford led us to the door of the basement without mishap. As he laid his hand on the doorknob, he gave us a grave warning. "Once we descend, there is no God to save us. In the deep rooms, the spirits do as they please. If anything should happen, run. Don't look back, even to save a fallen friend. Is that clear?"

"I don't want to go," I said.

"There is no other way to end the dream. You can stay here for eternity, or you can try to escape."

"All right. I'll go."

"Excellent. Prepare yourselves, and pray while you can."

Denford opened the door and ushered us in. Robert followed close behind him. Ava and I tarried in the back. She refused to let go of me. There was such warmth in her hand, and such light in her eyes.

The stairs were narrow and treacherous. Large black spider legs hung from the cracked walls. A million blinking eyes watched us as devilish creatures darted across broken pipes.

"I've never seen them before," Denford murmured to himself.

We came to the end of the stairs. Waiting in welcome, a spectacle of wooden mannequins, painted like whores, hung from nooses of barbed wire and smiled down at us. Violet blood dripped from their necks. Shards of broken glass were strewn across the ground.

"What does it mean?" Robert asked.

"I don't know," Denford said. "I don't know what devilry this is. Let's get out."

I shuddered. Even Denford was afraid.

The next room looked like a dollhouse, decorated with blockish, brightly colored furniture. There was a table set for three with wooden utensils and empty cups. Some kind of yellow sauce had been spilt all over the floor. A woman, presumably the mother, lay in the pool of sauce with a knife in her eye. The father stood over her, flailing his arms like an ape. Ava's curiosity was piqued by a silver platter on the table. She daintily lifted the lid, only to drop it in disgust. The platter boasted a pile of human flesh, crowned with a bloated head.

"I don't want to be here," Ava said, holding me close. "Can we leave?"

"We have to go on," Denford answered, a little harshly. "That door. It's as good as any, I suppose."

Ava nodded, and we walked around the mother's corpse to a little white door. The next room was exceedingly bare and occupied only by a mannequin in a rocking chair. He reminded me all too strongly of the Dustman.

"Who's there?" the mannequin asked. "Not the gentleman and the young lady again, I hope?"

"This is Douglas Denford."

"Ah! Ha ha! Back again?"

"What is he?" I asked.

"Some spirit that haunts this basement, on occasion," Mr. Denford answered. "You have nothing to fear from him." He turned now to the mannequin. "You mentioned a gentleman and a lady. Tell me about them."

"The lady was quite pretty. But the gentleman! A knight he was, the Knight of the Evening, slayer of serpents and ravisher of souls. I wouldn't go any further, if I were you."

"Did they tell you their names?"

"No. They were too afraid for friendliness."

"Thank you." Denford turned to us. "It's only a dead end. Let's go back to the other room."

Much to our surprise, the dining room had vanished. In its place was a dismal corridor, frozen over and chilled by a biting wind. Black worms clung to the floor. At our approach they would inch toward us, hoping to suck the life from our veins. Gaps in the walls revealed an intricate network of pipes, many of which were leaking black liquid.

We spent many dreary hours in the cold tunnel. Though we passed most of that time in silence, I did have a conversation with Robert. I asked him, purely out of curiosity, what he would do after the dream ended.

"I don't know," he said. "I only want to be alive, really."

"That's understandable."

"I was lonely when I came here. Even if this night has been hell, you and Ava made me feel safe. I don't want to be alone again."

I nodded.

"And you?"

"I think I'll take a walk in the forest. It's actually a lovely place, in the daytime. You should see it some time. What about you, Ava?"

"I shall eat a warm breakfast. Fried eggs and toast with jam. And coffee. Three cups of coffee, at least."

"You know you'll have to cook it first?"

"I don't care. It will be worth the trouble."

"That leaves Mr. Denford."

"Me? I'm going to turn myself in to the psychiatric ward."

"It's not funny, sir."

"I know, my humor is a bit dark. But in all seriousness, should this experience destroy either my life or my sanity, you need to know what to do. You will find my will in the drawer beside my bed, along with a phone number. The number belongs to an old friend of mine, Reverend Candlewright. He will see to your wellbeing after I am gone."

"Yes sir. But I'm sure it won't be necessary."

"You're sure? Don't delude yourself with groundless hopes."

Ava started. "I heard something. Someone is following us."

"Stay calm. Keep walking, but quietly."

We've stopped to rest. I'm painfully bored now, but I suppose that's preferable to terror. In the place of monsters and satanic visions, there is only unquiet stillness. Still, I cannot be at peace. Something stirs within the walls of this dungeon. I hope it's only a rat.

Robert's Memoir

After a brief respite, Christie stood to wander around. Though Mr. Denford cautioned her against it, she promised she would not stray far. Ava lay on the floor, eyes glazed over and hands laid over her heart. She muttered strange words to herself and hardly noticed Christie's absence.

Christie rounded a corner. Mr. Denford called her back.

She screamed. Ava shook herself out of her trance. I leapt to my feet, but Mr. Denford caught me before I could run after Christie. A little girl soon came into view, her nightgown soaked in blood. She carried a small kitchen knife. I couldn't recognize her until Ava said, with a shaken voice, "It's Emily."

Mr. Denford did not flinch. "Run!"

"We need to save Christie!" Ava cried.

Denford seized her shoulder. "It's too late! Just get away!"

We fled. Ava wept pitifully. The halls seemed blurred and phantasmic as the last fragile vestiges of hope crumbled. I heard Ava screaming, less like a human than a cornered beast. "What's happening?! Robert! Don't let them touch me!" Cataracts of water rushed around us and muddled our vision. I felt the ground break beneath me, and saw a chaotic flurry of half-rotted hands and smooth black scales. Ava and I fell, swallowed alive by the darkness.

I felt a sharp, numbing pain when I landed in a murky pool of water. I couldn't swim, and briefly feared that I would drown; but to my relief, I was able to find my footing. The water reached my neck. Even so, I did not dare wander far. I was in a spacious, lightless cavern filled with putrid odors.

"Ava?" I called. "Where are you?"

"Over here," she answered. "I cannot see, but I am alive. Are you close?"

"I think so." I reached out and felt a thin wisp of her hair. "There you are."

"I'm so glad you're not hurt." She took my hand. "Don't let go. We mustn't get lost."

"Let's try to find a way out, if there is one."

"Right. Walk slowly."

We had not walked far when a voice stopped us. "Dear little children, won't you stay a while with me?"

Ava trembled. "We only wish to leave this place. We mean no trouble."

"Quite right, but you see I've been very lonely, down in the cold dark water. I too mean no trouble, but if you do not entertain me I fear I shall become downright psychotic! Surely you understand my plight?"

"We don't trust you," I said.

"That stings, you know. I am deeply hurt. All right, then. I've tried to be amiable, but this is my dominion. If you won't play, I will make you play."

We tried to run, but a thousand crooked fingers caught us and pulled us back. "First we must become better acquainted with one another. What are your names, children?"

We didn't answer.

"Tell me your names!" the demon screeched.

"I-I'm Ava."

"I am Robert."

"Good, good. You're beginning to display proper manners. Well done. Let's see, who shall I question first? Robert, was it?"

"Yes."

"Do you like the smell of roses?"

"Yes."

"What of dead roses?"

"I'm not sure."

"Pity, I was rather anxious to hear your opinion. How would you like to touch the skin of a dead rose?"

"I don't understand."

"What a dense child! Would you cut the skin of a living rose?"

"I don't think so."

"What of hair? Do you like the smell of hair?"

"I've had enough of this nonsense! Leave us alone."

"Well, since you're such a sourpuss, I'll let Ava have a turn. Ava, my dear, have you ever kissed anyone?"

"No."

"Would you like to kiss anyone?"

"Certainly not you."

"I suggested nothing of the sort! You're a filthy-minded oaf, Ava. Have you ever held a gun to your head?"

"Never."

"Not only are you a sick pervert, you're also a liar! Has a man ever stroked your neck while you slept?"

"No!"

"Lies, lies, and more lies! One last chance. Did God love you when he put a bullet through your father's gut?"

Ava clenched her fists. "How dare you."

The demon laughed. "It's only a question."

"How dare you mock me?"

"I'm growing impatient, Ava. Answer truthfully, or I will be compelled to punish you."

"Punish me," she said. "Have your fun."

The demon hissed. Its hands seized Ava roughly and carried her far into the darkness. I called her name frantically, but heard only a few tortured shrieks amid the sadistic cackling of the demon. Soon it threw her body back to me. She was crying uncontrollably. I reached for her hand, but felt instead a trembling mass of flesh coated in warm liquid.

"My hands . . ." Ava sobbed.

"I hate liars," the demon said. "Now you will know the weight of your sins. Whenever you wish to know the warmth of human touch, whenever you long to make music again, whenever you wake from nightmares of the lake beneath the basement, you will remember to be truthful.

"As for you, Robert, it's hardly fair to let Ava suffer alone. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Don't hurt him!" Ava screamed.

"I shan't. Be quiet now, little bird."

Ava closed her eyes and fell into a trance. She would have drowned, had the demon not lifted her from the water.

"Now, Robert, I believe we've met before, though you can't remember it. You were an imaginative child, alone in a little room."

I began to recall visions of a serpent hissing at the foot of my bed, and of hands holding me to the mattress.

"I didn't want your life, or even your fear. I only wanted your darkness. For a young child, you had a vivid imagination, and all it took was a mere suggestion, a fragment of an idea, to drain your soul."

Something brushed against my ankle.

"And now I've found you again, more delicious than ever! Your heart is clouded with unquenchable sorrow. I'm hungry, Robert. I'm hungry enough to destroy you."

I tried to run, but fell. Cold scales wrapped around my neck and submerged my head in the water. The diamond eyes of the Snake King met mine. It bit my neck, injected its venom, and put me to sleep.

I was floating in a realm of shadows. All around me humanoid beings of mist wisped through the void. There was no weight or substance here, only shadow. The place shouldered the weight of unspeakable loneliness, and the silence quickly began to hurt my ears. Every soul without companionship, without hope, and without love wandered futilely through this world of fog. I wanted to scream, but feared the mist people. If they knew of my presence, surely they would kill me. There was no escape. The Snake King had dragged me to hell.

It seemed a hundred years passed, without a single voice to speak words of comfort to me. I tried to kill myself, but my hands had become misty and formless. I gave up all hope, ready to become like the mist people. Then I saw a spirit.

She was thin and tall, wrapped in a red robe embroidered with exotic designs. Black smoke spilled from her arms. She wore a mask resembling the face of a deer.

I tried to speak, but could not.

"Awake," the spirit muttered. It raised its arms, as though beckoning me forward.

I managed to utter a few words. "I can't move."

"Awake." The spirit drew a little closer. "Awake! Awake, please!"

"Who are you?"

"Please be awake! Robert, you can't die! Awake, please! Awake, please! Awake, please!"

The shadow realm faded from sight but the spirit's voice grew louder with each second. When the realm vanished altogether, I was back in the Snake King's chamber. The water was gone, and I lay on the floor. Ava stood over me, fervently chanting, "Awake, please! Awake, please!"

"Stop that," I groaned.

"Are you awake?" she asked.

"Of course I'm awake."

"What did he do to you?"

"I don't want to say."

"Oh."

I stood. "Ava? Can you keep going?"

"He took my hands," Ava answered. "I can never make music again."

"Ava . . ."

"He killed me, in a way. I think he killed you too."

"Could you see the shadows?" I asked.

"Shadows?"

"Never mind. We shouldn't linger here." I looked at her arms. "We need to stop the bleeding."

"I don't know how. It doesn't matter, though. It's only a little pain, and we don't have much farther to travel."

"I can't let you die."

"It's too late. Right now, we need to find the shrine."

"Fine. Is there a way out?"

"Look behind you."

I turned around. All this time, the door had been there. It bore inscriptions in an ancient, barbaric tongue. Though I did not know the language, the markings spoke to me of dread and mayhem.

"Are you sure this is the way?" I asked.

"I see no other."

"So be it."

Ava and I opened the door and passed through together. The Forest of Chaos greeted us with a violent blast of wind and snow, but now we felt the time had come to walk this path. The trees bent under the weight of the ice and snow, and a few branches were even broken. The full moon lit the forest floor with a silver, sad light. The white road called us into the night, and with what little strength we could muster, we wished one another a safe journey.

Chapter XIII

Christie's Diary

The Shrine

I was dreaming again. I was snugly nestled in a large bed, and felt the warmth of a mother tenderly holding me. But it wasn't my mother, it wasn't my bed, and it wasn't my room. Nevertheless, it was all vaguely familiar: the scarlet wallpaper, the angel figurines on the shelf, the tree outside the window, and the golden lamp by the bed. I tried to push the mother away, but I couldn't move of my own accord; I could only watch. I sensed a familiar presence with me. The thought that it might be the Dustman frightened me, but this spirit was calm and gentle.

I heard the voice of a little girl. "He betrayed my mother."

I tried to squirm.

"He sought the love of another woman, and blamed my mother when that woman forsook him. In time, she was driven mad by his faithlessness. He was a reckless man who prized nothing more than his own freedom, and he came to hate the burden of caring for a young daughter and an insane wife. His heart became like ice."

The door to the room creaked open. My body lurched from the bed. "Father?" I said, involuntarily. All the while I wanted to flee. I knew what little Charlotte, so long ago, could not have guessed.

A man, if I dare call it a man, entered. Its shadowy figure towered to the ceiling, robed in streams of blood. Its eyes gleamed yellow, and in its right hand it held a wooden stake.

Mary stirred. Charlotte, sensing that something was amiss, clutched her more tightly. I felt her heart race. Mary shielded her from the shadow. "Don't touch her!" she shrieked. "Stay away!" The shadow, deaf to her pleas, strode across the room. He wrestled with Mary, who fought well until he dealt a blow to her head. Charlotte slipped away to the floor and took shelter beneath the bed. She hoped Father, in his excitement, would forget her. She would run away to a distant land, where the sun would shine brightly and the ancient song of the sea would greet her every morning.

Mary screamed. Charlotte lay on her stomach, as far out of reach as possible. She shut her eyes and prayed that she would live.

A hand grabbed her ankle. I felt pain shoot through her leg as the hand twisted it. I felt every splinter in her palms and head as she tried to cling to the floorboards. She looked in his burning eyes, hoping to find some glimmer of mercy. There was none. The stake, already doused in Mary's blood, pierced Charlotte's heart. I felt her agony in that last living moment. The room faded, and I was alone in the dark.

"He learned remorse in his later years," Charlotte said. "After he realized what he had done, his heart melted and he sought to atone for his crime. Still, he is

cursed, like all murderers. He is trapped in Limbgate with the ghosts of his family, wandering the halls and witnessing all the horrors of the Realm of Chaos.”

I began to awaken. I could faintly see the dark room in the basement, littered with coils of barbed wire and rusted nails. Still, I could not move. Charlotte stood before me, but now her dress was covered in blood.

“I’ve told you my story,” she said. “I hope you know me better. Can you trust me?”

“I think so.”

“I can help you escape, but only if you trust me completely.”

“All right. I will trust you.”

“Thank you. Now, close your eyes.”

I obeyed her. I felt her hand touch me, then a strange energy surged through my body. I opened my eyes, but not of my own accord. I couldn’t see Charlotte, but knew she was very near. I could hear her voice in my head.

“Your soul is so broken that you can’t move on your own,” she told me. “I can take you home this way, but even with my help you’re weak and hurt. We don’t have much time.”

Charlotte lifted me to my feet. I shuffled out of the room and back to the hall where I had left my friends, who were long gone. A dark pit torn in the floor blocked the way back. Charlotte led me away from there, through many twists and turns, to a small hole in the wall. I crawled through on my hands and knees. A protruding nail ripped my sleeve, but I myself was unharmed.

Beyond the tunnel was a vast chamber with an eerie red glow. This room contained a diverse collection of torture devices of which I had never heard. Corpses in white robes lay upon or hung from the iron machines. All were burned, bled, maimed, and impaled by whatever fiend conceived this chamber. Among them were men, women, and children, whose faces still expressed bewildered torment. A marriage bed with a billowing lace canopy was in the middle of this spectacle, and there the bride awaited her bridegroom. She was a disfigured freak, with many arms and legs sewn to her body and a face with three eyes. Chains ran through her cracked flesh, holding her to the bed as a swarm of little black snakes ate her skin.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Charlotte answered. “We shouldn’t stay here.”

I walked to the opposite side of the room. Charlotte was careful to keep me well away from the snakes. A gloomy, damp tunnel led out of the torture chamber.

The tunnel was long and chilly. A crisp winter breeze gusted swirls of snow into my face, awakening a childish memory of Christmas games in the cold. I slipped on the ice several times. I suppose it was difficult for Charlotte to maneuver me on such treacherous ground. We passed a door midway through the tunnel, but it gave me a horrible feeling. Charlotte didn’t take me inside.

The tunnel opened to a serene woodland path. The midnight moon, full and sweet, shone through a veil of grey clouds. Birds sang their tearful songs in the high fir branches. I think I saw a rabbit stir in the brush. I could faintly hear the screams of a multitude, but the picturesque scenery had hypnotized me. I paid no heed to the screams, or even to my own discomfort. True, my dress was hardly sufficient

clothing for a windy winter day, but what a beautiful night it was! I asked Charlotte if we could stay.

“You’re dying! You need to reach the shrine quickly!”

She was right. I looked back and saw a trail of my own blood. I sighed and acquiesced.

Before long the shrine was in sight. It was a tower, a thin and ghostly apparition that seemed a natural part of the forest. Its silver-grey walls were made of an otherworldly kind of stone. At its peak there stood a statue of an angel with outstretched wings. She had long, flowing hair and a face with the beauty of a goddess. In her left hand she held a sword. In her right, lifted toward the sky, was a candle lit with a lively fire. Its flame, glowing and vibrant, flickered in impossible defiance against the storm.

The sight made me curious. “Who is the angel?” I asked.

“Will you believe me if I tell you?”

“I said I trusted you, didn’t I?”

“I’m the angel.” I heard her laugh ring through my head. “Father built the shrine for me.”

“But why? What is it for?”

“Read for yourself.” Charlotte led me to a plaque at the foot of the shrine. It read, “In memory of Charlotte Crow, 1930-1938. My dear child, I am sorry. I hope that, whenever Limbgate becomes too terrifying, you can take shelter here. I know I can never pay the full price of my evil, but please accept this fragile gift.”

Charlotte made me take my diary from my pocket and tear out a page. She guided my pen over the paper, scrawling out a barely legible message: “I forgive you.” I then tucked the note into a crack in the wall.

“Will he find it?” I asked.

“I hope so. I think he will.”

I pushed open the wooden door. The interior was decorated with crystal vases of white lilies and roses. A young child’s amateur drawings of deer and rabbits and cranes hung from the walls in silver frames. A spiral staircase led to the peak of the tower. The place was quiet, as though nature itself showed silent respect for the memorial. I climbed the stairway, drawing ever closer to the light, to the angel, and to the morning.

I emerged from the tower onto the upper balcony. The blue floor was frozen over. Seeing the angel more closely, I was struck with its Hellenistic perfection, manifest in the meticulous detail in each little feather of the wings, in each ripple of the robe, and in the angel’s expression of bittersweet compassion. I had a spectacular view of the forest. Until then I had not imagined exactly how vast and magnificent that dominion was. There was not a single town within sight. There was little else to be seen in the tower itself, except a side door that led to the uppermost room.

We weren’t alone. A man stood at the railing, gazing emptily across the wintry landscape. His head was bowed, his shoulders arched.

“Hello, Christie,” he said, and turned around.

“Jack?”

I can't say what it was that made me fear him. I have seen my share of evil men. Some look normal, perhaps even friendly. Others look broken and irrational. A few, when you look too long and too deeply into their eyes, will appear lifeless, as though their soul was long dead and all that remained was a machine with a dull voice and a softly beating heart. So it was with Jack Rake. He was dead, even while he lived.

"Jack? Say something."

"I said hello, Christie." He grinned deviously.

"Something's wrong. What happened to Rick and Agnes? Why did Emily try to kill me?"

"Emily is possessed, and I doubt she can be cured. Rick vanished, though I suspect Emily killed him. As for Agnes, that is a rather long story. Care to admire the view with me?" He extended his hand.

"I'd rather not."

"I insist."

"Fine." I didn't want to anger him, for even then I felt vaguely threatened by his presence. I stood next to him, crossed my arms, and leaned against the railing.

"I truly loved her, Christie. I tried so hard to love her, but in the end I failed. You see, when God creates a beautiful thing and places it in this wretched world, he knows full well what he is doing. He's a god of destruction, bloated on the blood of tens of thousands of generations. Beauty, in a world such as this, is destined to be desecrated and devoured by the wolves. So I..."

"Jack?"

"Agnes had to die, sooner or later. Better, I thought, that she die innocent than live long enough to lose her soul."

"You murdered her."

"I did it, supposedly, to spare her the pain of living, and to spite God by depriving him of his prey. But the truth is, Christie, I'm quite a bit less complicated than that. I am a morbid man. The agony of the dying fascinates me. Even as my mind loathed the sight of her mangled body, my flesh was stirred by it. It was a liberating experience. I've seen beyond the temporal and into the deepest mysteries of existence. I saw God in that room, and I killed him."

I stared at him in horror.

"You're bothered by me? You must've passed through so much adversity to come this far, yet you are still innocent! What's wrong with you? I never took you for an idiot." Jack reached for my hand. "What does it matter? I can still cure you of your naivety."

I recoiled from him. "Don't touch me!"

"I thought you would understand me. You, who dared to explore the lowest circle of hell! You could have helped me. We could have returned to the daylight world and killed together. We could have walked the earth as god and goddess, worshiped by the fearful maggots. It's a shame you're so dull." Jack took a knife from his pocket.

I knew I had little hope. I could hardly move without Charlotte's help, and she was quite uncoordinated. Moreover, Limbgate had left me physically and psychologically weak. I was shivering with cold and bleeding to death. Jack, on the

other hand, had reached the Shrine mostly unscathed, his spirit dead but his mind sharp.

Jack lunged at me. Charlotte threw me back. I landed on the floor and ached terribly. He tried to pin me down, but Charlotte slid me across the ice, into the railing. I was bruised all over.

Jack laughed. "What is this? Are you possessed?"

"I don't know!" I lied.

"Now, what ghost would meddle in our affairs? Charlotte, perhaps? Is that you? Are you there?"

"It's not Charlotte! She's not here!"

"I wonder, Charlotte, if you will be able to feel Christie's pain when I slit her throat. If you'll wish you could scream as I carve open her body and leave her to freeze in the snow."

I grabbed the railing and lifted myself to my feet. My head was spinning. I knew I had only minutes to live.

Jack attacked again, but this time Charlotte couldn't pull me away in time. He pressed himself against me and held the knife against my throat. I considered throwing myself over the balcony, just so he wouldn't be the one to kill me.

But when he began to cut through, he got a weird, sickly look in his eyes. He dropped the knife, mouthing words but failing to speak. I fell to the floor. Charlotte had left me.

Jack clutched his neck and wildly shook his head. He began coughing fitfully. Then he vomited blood, which landed in a pool at my feet. He staggered backward, trying to hold his ground and failing pathetically. Charlotte dragged him to the edge of the balcony.

"Let go, you bitch! No! Don't!"

She threw him over the railing.

I was alone. Snowflakes nestled in my hair. I did not stir.

Robert's Memoir

Ava and I reached a solitary silver tower. An angelic statue stood at its summit, holding a candle to guide us home. A few feet away from the door, a disfigured body lay bleeding in the snow. It was Jack Rake. Ava wretched when she saw him. His skull had been shattered, leaking blood and nerve tissue onto the snow. We looked with pity upon him, but spoke not a word. There was nothing to say.

Charlotte waited at the open door. "Welcome home," she said, smiling kindly. We ran to her. She led us into the tower, up a winding staircase, and onto a balcony far above the forest. We found Christie sprawled on the floor. She had been stabbed in the stomach, and her throat was slightly cut. Yet she lived. Her eyelids fluttered at our arrival and glimmered with joy.

Charlotte pointed to a side door. "You can sleep in there."

I took Christie's arms and dragged her to the door. Charlotte opened it for us.

"Charlotte," Christie said, "thank you. Thank you so much."

Inside, an oil lamp hung from a chain on the ceiling, giving the blue room a comforting glow. At the very back was hung a painting of an angel, much like the one in my own room. Rows of beds with clean white linens lined each wall. Celeste was sleeping soundly in a far corner, and bore no sign of her suffering. Janice Wood slept in a bed next to her. She talked in her sleep, but I couldn't make out her words.

I helped Christie into a bed. She thanked me and shut her eyes, ready to rest from her troubles. Ava stood next to her, whimpered softly, then climbed into her own bed.

I didn't want to think about the things I had seen. I lay down far from the others, pulled the sheets over myself, and fell fast asleep. My last memory of that twisted land was Charlotte's voice. She waved to us, whispered "goodnight," and vanished.

Chapter XIV

Christie's Diary

Awake

It's morning. A beam of sunlight shone through the window. I was back in my room, in the spring of 1950.

I glanced at Ava's bed. To my relief, she was there, tucked snugly beneath the sheets. I grinned, leapt out of bed, and shook her awake. "Ava! Ava, we're home!"

She blinked and yawned. "What time is it?"

"Why should we care? We're alive!"

She looked at me curiously, and then broke into tears. "I can't . . . I don't know what to do. Everything that happened . . ."

I hugged her and kissed her cheek. "We're safe now."

"You're not dying. It was only a dream."

We said nothing for a while. We were satisfied simply with one another's company and the joy of knowing we had triumphed over all the evil that hell could muster. The demons and ghosts that lurked in the nightmare could no longer touch us.

After Ava had finished crying, we sat on her bed and exchanged stories. When I noticed that she had lost her hands, she told me of the Snake King and his sadistic games. I told her Jack had killed Agnes, and tried to kill me. It occurred to me that he too might be awake, but before I could say anything we heard a knock. I climbed off the bed and opened the door.

Robert and Celeste were there. "Is Ava inside?" Robert asked. He seemed a bit grim. Celeste was quite shaken, but that was no surprise, considering what she had endured.

"I'm here," Ava replied.

"Good."

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"The others are missing."

"What?"

"I shared a room with Jack, but he was nowhere to be seen. I found Celeste wandering in the hall, and we checked the other rooms together. Agnes, Emily, and Rick are all gone."

"Oh."

I wanted to ask him if he had looked elsewhere in the house, but then a scream cut me short. It was a little girl.

We all ran downstairs. She kept screaming, leading us down the hall to Mr. Denford's office. Robert threw the door open.

A dim candle on the desk lit the room, which was more cluttered than ever. The sketches, with all their grotesque, half-finished demons, were strewn all over the floor, stained with oil, candlewax, and blood. Books were scattered everywhere,

and many of them had been viciously torn apart. Emily cowered in the corner. She clutched a bloody knife and stared at us through tear-stained eyes.

“Finally, he got what he . . . what he . . . why . . . I don’t remember . . . I didn’t mean to . . .”

Emily’s eyes regained their color as the ghost of Mary Crow left her. She dropped the knife and ran to hug Ava. In the middle of the floor, dressed in his long, drab black coat, gazing at us through lifeless eyes, was Mr. Denford.

Letter to Robert Lamb, December 15, 1960

Dear Robert,

It’s been a long time since we last saw one another. I hear you are to be married soon! I give you my congratulations.

I write because this week, after searching the whole house, we found Mr. Denford’s diary in the attic. It confirmed our suspicions. His real name was, in fact, Lucas Crow. He did kill Mary and Charlotte. He founded the orphanage out of remorse, hoping to atone for his crime.

I’m afraid there is little of interest to tell you. Reverend Candlewright’s health is declining, but he and his wife still drive to town everyday to buy our food. Under their watch Limbgate has been coming to life again. A few months ago I took a walk in the garden for the first time since the nightmare. It was lovely, made lovelier by the snow.

Celeste has begun to open up. She lives in a cottage not far from York, where she has built an exceptional reputation for her woodcarving. She’s still quite shy, but she laughs more than she used to. Emily, sadly, is still severely traumatized by Mr. Denford’s death. She remains with us at Limbgate.

This house changed me profoundly, but despite its horrors I have come see the dark beauty it hides. Some nights, when I come to bed late, I imagine I see something stir in the hallway. A few times I even think I hear Charlotte’s voice, but it is only the wind. Ava and I have trekked through the forest on numerous occasions searching for the shrine, but so far we’ve had no luck. I doubt it even exists, at least in this world.

These days I no longer dream about the demons. Instead I dream of faraway realms, of bright planets in distant galaxies, of thriving kingdoms entombed in the deep, of heavenly cities built of white marble. I fear if I were to leave this place, I would no longer have such dreams. Limbgate is built on the very precipice of our world. Here I can catch a glimpse of the great mysteries beyond this corporeal existence. The view is breathtaking.

Your dear friend,
Christie Burns