



S.M Cashmore

THE KEY

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*In memory of
Mary Cashmore*

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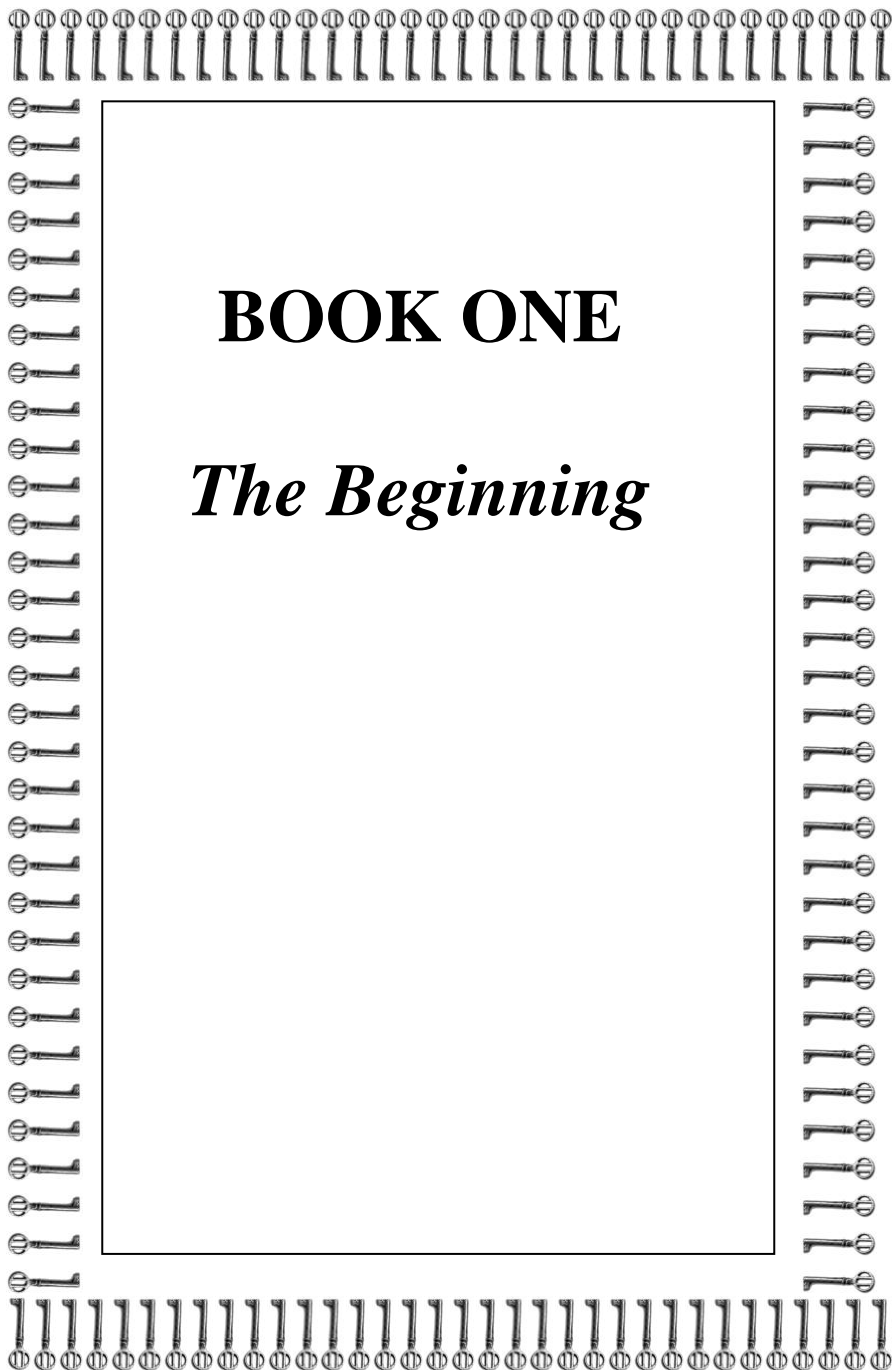
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BOOK ONE

The Beginning

A decorative border resembling a spiral-bound notebook, with metal rings visible along the top, bottom, and sides of the page.

Part One

Dreams

*I had a dream, which was not all
a dream*

Byron
Darkness

*..... we will eat our meal in
fear, and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible
dreams
That shake us nightly.*

Shakespeare
Macbeth

I



SLEEPING BADLY

STEPHEN SAUNDERS looked inquiringly at his doctor, who shook his head and shrugged.

"There are no other symptoms?"

"Only the tiredness....." murmured Saunders.

"Well, of course." The doctor sounded faintly irritated, but let the sentence trail into silence. He and Saunders had known each other for several years.

"And you are sure nothing is worrying you?"

It was the turn of Saunders to shake his head. He had answered this question before.

"I can find nothing actually wrong," said the doctor.

"I suppose I should be pleased," returned Saunders drily. "Nevertheless, I can't sleep. It's been over a week now, and I slept no more than a couple of hours on any one of those nights. It's affecting my work."

The doctor stared at him silently.

"Come on, Jim. You can't tell me that's normal."

"No." The doctor sighed, and pulled a pad of blank prescription forms towards him. "I suppose we might try a sleeping tablet for the moment, but I think you ought to have a check-up at the hospital. I'll make an appointment for you." He started to scribble out the prescription, then paused to glance up at Saunders. A telephone shrilled somewhere outside the surgery, and then abruptly stopped.

"I wouldn't have come if I hadn't needed some help," said Saunders quietly.

The doctor sighed again, but nodded. He completed the prescription and handed it across. "One just before you go to bed each night, if you think you need it. Only one, mind. And keep the bottle somewhere other than the bedroom. Don't put it by the side of

the bed." He caught Saunders' faint smile. "Oh," he said brusquely, "I know: you're the clear-thinking sort. You're not going to make a mistake. But even so....."

"..... better safe than sorry?" asked Saunders.

"Exactly," said the doctor. "Now clear out and make room for those who really need me."

Saunders stood up and started for the door, and just before he got there the same thought struck them both.

"Oh....." he began, turning.

"I'll send you a card with the hospital appointment on it," broke in the doctor. "It'll be in about a fortnight or three weeks, I should think."

"Thanks." Saunders turned back towards the door.

"Look after yourself," said the doctor absently.

Outside, Saunders stood for a moment at the entrance to the surgery, buttoning up his coat. The early evening sky was heavy with rain, although so far the day had managed to keep dry. A chill wind blew across the street, gusting out from side turnings as if lying in wait there for unwary pedestrians. The wind pushed thick clouds away from the hills, out across the woodlands east of the town. Saunders remembered how, many years ago, his grandmother had told him that bad weather always came from the hills. He had a sudden vision of the small, white-haired old lady - at least, she seemed small now, in memory, while she had appeared large and forbidding when he had been a child. He saw her waving a hand at the distant hills, speaking but not looking at him, grimacing at black clouds rolling towards the town. In his mind she turned to look at him and even now, thirty years later, his heart jumped at the steely glint in her eyes.

Then she was gone, but the clouds remained, and the freshening wind. Saunders nodded to himself as he thrust his hands in his pockets and started up the street. She had been right. Bad weather did always seem to come from the direction of the hills.

A miniature whirlwind danced by the door of the combined chemist and newsagent, drawing up dead leaves to form uncertain patterns in the air. It battered against the window, but the inside of the shop was bright and calm. Saunders handed over his prescription and browsed through a shelf of paperbacks while he was waiting for it to be filled. His professional admiration stirred as he saw one book

entitled *How I Did It*, and he felt compelled to reach out to learn what it was the author had done. It was put out of his mind, however, by the return of the pharmacist. He paid what seemed to him to be an absurdly high fee, pocketed the tablets, and started home.

The sky was growing darker by the minute, and he wondered if he had let himself in for a drenching. Perhaps he should have used the car after all, but it was only a mile and a half, and he had hoped that the fresh air would help him to sleep. He bent his back as he started up the slope which led to the driveway, thinking that although the wind had helped him down to the village, it was making his return journey far more difficult.

He turned left through tall gates just as a few warning drops of rain began to fall. Gravel crunched under his feet, and trees on either side rustled and hissed in the rising wind. The rain stopped, as if giving him a last chance to get home quickly, but the sky darkened still further. He lengthened his stride so that he almost ran down the long curve of the driveway.

At last he came to the place where trees gave way to grass and the house came into view. He had left one or two lights shining out against the approaching storm, but most of the house was shrouded in darkness. That was especially true of the north turret wing, which he seldom used, and which was so dark that it was almost impossible to see against the black backdrop of the hills.

2

Saunders paused. Again memories from his childhood rushed to assault him. A separate, analytical part of his mind thought *that's been happening more and more just lately*, but truth to tell, the past always intruded when he came upon this view of the house. The prospect of an imminent drenching was forgotten as his thoughts flew back to the first time he had seen it, so many years ago.

He had come up on the train with his two sisters. Porter had met them at the station, of course - Porter of the gravelly voice and forbidding appearance, who had terrified them for days until they had discovered his delight in practical jokes. After that, they had engaged in many joint ventures which often involved covering up for one another.

Porter drove the old car. Grandfather Mae, almost inevitably, had been away on one of his academic conferences, so Grandmother

Mae herself had come out to meet them. She rode in the passenger seat. Saunders vividly remembered being crammed in the back with his two sisters. They had driven up in the middle of another storm, he recalled. The rain had been hammering down on the car roof, and the sky was black. But when they came upon the old house, a flare of lightning had illuminated the scene in violent white, imprinting it upon his memory.

Nearly all the lights in the house had been shining - beacons against the storm. He particularly remembered a light high in the old turret, where Mrs Porter had been preparing a room for the girls. He could still hear the tyres grinding on gravel, the reverberating echoes of thunder, and Grandmother Mae, in her thin, high voice, remarking that she hoped the weather would be better for them on the following day.

3

Water splashed onto his unprotected head as it began to rain in earnest. Shaken from his recollections, he dashed the last few yards to the front door and fumbled hastily for his key. No Mrs Porter to let him in now: he lived alone in the old house. The porch gave little protection against the swirling wind, and he was soaked by the time he managed to get inside. He avoided looking at the unlit entrance to the north wing and went upstairs to change.

The house was enormous, really far too large for his bachelor requirements, but it had belonged to the family for many generations and he was disinclined to sell it. His married sisters would have been able to make better use of the spacious rooms and extensive grounds - especially Mary, who had two children - but they had both settled down with their husbands in different parts of the country. When Grandmother Mae had died, Saunders had been the only one either able or willing to move to the wilds of Scotland. After eight years he was still not sure whether or not he regretted it.

Once changed into dry clothes, he spent the evening in his usual quiet fashion - or at least, as quiet as was possible in the middle of a violent storm. He cooked and ate a leisurely meal, listening to thunder approaching from the hills, and afterwards, as he sat down at his desk, the first fork of lightning bathed the study in electric white. The subsequent thunder pealed directly overhead, and fiercer rain lashed against the curtained windows. More lightning flared almost

immediately, and for the next half an hour the house was engulfed in the heart of the storm as it crashed blindly through the night sky, grinding out over the village and then the woodlands beyond.

Saunders worked as best he could, and gradually the worst of the storm grumbled into the distance. He became absorbed, and it was well after eleven when he looked up with a start, realising that he had been writing for several hours. The rain had stopped, but a strong wind still beat upon the window: otherwise the study, indeed the entire house, was silent. He put down his pen and sat back. It was time to make a decision.

His gaze rested on the door of the study, and his thoughts turned to that other door in the north wing. It was made of thick, solid oak and was inlaid with heavy metal, and as it happened also opened into a study, one that had been used many years ago by old Grandfather Mae. When was it he had thought the door had opened? Four nights ago? Saunders let his gaze drift downwards until he could see the bottle of tablets and glass of water by the side of his desk.

For two or three nights, he had slept badly. Every time he had closed his eyes, he had felt compelled to open them again in order to look warily around the room, especially at the door. The third night had been the darkest and he had left the curtains open so that the faint wash of starshine could at least outline the shape of furniture and corners of the room. He had not wanted consciously to admit to his state of mind by leaving on a light, but he knew it nonetheless. He was afraid.

On each of those nights he had lain awake wrestling with the problem. Why was he afraid? There was nothing to be afraid of, he reasoned. There were no odd noises - there had been none in all the time he had spent at the house. Nothing had happened in that eight years, he told himself, so why should anything happen now? What could happen that should make him apprehensive, anyway? His reasoning had told him that he should close his eyes and go to sleep, but he had remained awake, and inexplicably frightened.

On the fourth night he had managed to doze off in the early hours of the morning, but came awake with a start, sure that some noise had disturbed him. He had cast back in his mind, and thought he remembered a single bang, coming from the general direction of the north wing. His throat had gone dry as he realised that the noise

exactly matched the sound of the heavy door closing on the old study, a sound he had not heard for many years.

These thoughts had passed through his mind in the instant after waking, and then he had looked quickly at the door to his own room. He had been irrationally relieved to see that it was still closed and everything in the room was as it should be. Had he really heard the door to the old study? He had listened intently, trembling with tension, terrified at the thought of hearing another unexpected noise, but the night had remained silent. He lay awake until sunlight streamed through his window, hearing nothing and seeing nothing, and then finally had slept until almost noon. Later that day he had advanced cautiously into the old turret wing, and had found the study door closed and locked as it had always been.

He glanced up sharply as the wind found its way through some tiny gap and moved the curtains. His heart jumped. That helped him to make up his mind - he had had enough of lying awake for no reason, feeling frightened at night and a fool by day. He unscrewed the top of the bottle and shook out one tablet, and stared at it sitting innocently in his hand. Then he smiled wryly, toasted the empty air, and washed down the pill with a swallow of lukewarm water.

II



THE PAINTING

THE SCHOOLTEACHER stared in amazement at the picture in front of her. It showed an odd creature with the legs of a man but the body and head of a dog, and in the background was a vast array of what looked like matchsticks.

"Whose is that?"

The teacher started. A colleague had come up behind her and was also looking down at the picture.

"Sarah Walters'," she said. "It's weird, isn't it?"

"Sarah Walters?" exclaimed her colleague incredulously. "From the first year?"

"She's good," replied the teacher absently. "She keeps producing things like this..... d'you see how she's painted pupils in the eyes so that they seem to be staring out at you?"

Her colleague studied the picture and shivered. He did not care for the scene at all, especially the colouring. The sky was a pale brown, the earth a dark grey, and the curiously real dog creature was white, except for a tinge of red on the paws which passed for hands.

"I don't like it. It's too good for a first year."

"She says she dreams her pictures," said the art teacher.

"Look at the size of those teeth!"

"All the better to eat you with," laughed the teacher, and put the picture to one side.

III



STORIES OUT OF SCHOOL

MARY RICHARDS shook her head in disbelief at the sight of her two sons standing - or rather dripping - just inside the back door. Their faces were covered in mud, but enough of their expressions were visible to make it clear that they thought they had been caught out.

"What have you been doing?" demanded their mother.

"Er..... I fell in a puddle," explained young Michael.

"And I went to pull him out," added Philip.

His mother continued to stare, and Philip thought that perhaps this explanation was not as complete as it might be.

"I sort of fell on top of Michael, and we both rolled over. We got muddy," he finished lamely. He refrained from adding that they had been trying to sneak in unobserved, in case his mother took that the wrong way.

"Tubby Meadows fell in too," added Michael helpfully, as if this might somehow dilute the storm to come. It did, though not in the way he expected. Mary Richards had a vision of her neighbours' portly son dripping into that well-scrubbed house and - rather uncharitably - thought that it would take as much mud to cover him as it would two normal sized boys. She almost giggled, but then looked sternly at Michael and Philip.

"It's an absolute disgrace! What were you thinking of, going near puddles with your best school clothes on? I should have thought....." She gestured in annoyance. "Oh, never mind. You'd better take those clothes off down here, or the whole house will need cleaning. Come on, hurry up! Then go and get clean upstairs!"

She watched as the two boys obediently stripped off and scampered up the stairs, relieved to have got away with only a scolding. Then she started to sort the clothes ready for washing. Not

for the first time, she wished her husband was home. Two months ago, it had all seemed a good idea: he would take the temporary post in Geneva and earn substantially more over that period, while she would stay and look after the boys rather than go through the bother of uprooting the whole family. She had been sure she could cope. Now, after only three weeks, she felt as though she was living on her nerves, and in spite of being exhausted every night, was even sleeping badly.

She turned on the washing machine and set about preparing the evening meal.

"Mummy! Graham wasn't at school today."

Graham? Which of their friends was Graham?

"Oh yes?" she said absently. "Why was that?"

"He had to go to a funeral," said Michael importantly, and received a dig from his brother's elbow.

"Funeral, you mean. Not funnel."

Michael stuck out his lower lip but decided not to argue the point. His mother looked up with sudden interest. Of course - Graham was Meg Hutchinson's little boy from three or four doors down the road.

"It was his grandfather who died," continued Michael, and received another dig in the ribs.

"Great-grandfather, you mean," corrected Philip.

"That's what I said," said Michael.

"Oh no, it wasn't."

"Yes it was!"

"That's very sad," interrupted their mother.

"Yes," said Philip. "Graham said he always got him chocolate soldiers at Christmas. We had one once, didn't we, Michael? Half each."

Michael, his face a study of resentment, failed to respond.

"How did you find out about it?" asked their mother.

"Miss Kelly told us in assembly," said Philip. "We said prayers. Then we went to class and Graham wasn't there, so we knew it was true."

Mary Richards smiled inwardly. It seemed that Philip even doubted the word of the headmistress in assembly. Perhaps he should have been named Thomas too, like his father.

"We had to draw pictures, didn't we, Michael?" Yet another dig in the ribs caused Michael, as usual, to flail out angrily. Next second both boys were rolling on the floor, hitting at each other.

"Michael! Philip!" Mary Richards heard a shrill note of hysteria in her voice and found herself wondering in a detached fashion what she would do if her sons ignored her. Fortunately Michael quickly regained his temper and Philip - also as usual - was more than ready to back away from conflict with his younger brother.

"I will not have this sort of behaviour in the house!" For emphasis, she banged down a saucepan she had been holding and water slopped out onto the table. Michael giggled, and she glared at him.

"Do you understand?" she demanded. Michael immediately stuck out his lower lip again and glanced at his brother.

"Philip keeps poking me," he whined.

"I do not!"

"You do!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Mary Richards covered her eyes and shook her head wearily. "Just be quiet and sit up at the table. I don't want to hear another word."

The boys climbed onto their chairs and for a few minutes sat in silence while their mother busied herself with the cooking. Slowly the tension in the room drained away and at last Philip could wait no longer.

"Can I tell you about our pictures, mummy?"

She sighed. "Go on, then. What did you draw?"

"Mr Bateman said we had to draw our great-grandfather. He said did any of us remember our great-grandfather, but none of us did."

"I did," said Michael unexpectedly.

"Don't be silly," said Mary Richards.

"Well, I drew Grandfather," continued Philip. "Mr Bateman won't know, will he?"

"What do you mean?" asked his mother, puzzled.

"He won't know I cheated, will he?" said Philip anxiously. "I didn't know what Great-grandfather looked like, and I couldn't imagine him like Mr Bateman said, so I drew Grandfather instead."

Mary Richards reflected that if Philip's drawing ran true to form, then it really did not matter who he had used as a model. "I expect it'll be all right," she said reassuringly.

"Well, I remember Great-grandfather, so I drew him," said Michael proudly.

"You can't have!" scoffed Philip. "He died years and years ago, before we were born!"

"I'm afraid he's right," said Mary Richards gently. "Neither of you ever saw Grandfather Mae, who was the last of your great-grandfathers to be alive. Even I only remember him a little bit."

"But you told us lots of stories about him!" cried Michael.

"That's not the same," said Philip. "Just because....."

Michael's eyes were bright with tears. "But I do remember him," he wailed. "He had white hair and lived in a cave....."

Mary Richards's heart stood still.

"Don't be daft," said Philip. "You know he didn't live in a cave. He lived in Uncle Stephen's house. How could he have lived in a cave?"

"..... and he had a pointed hat," carried on Michael as if there had been no interruption. "He did! He did! Didn't he, mummy?"

Mary Richards, white-faced, was staring at her young son. Memories of her own childhood assailed her. "What makes you think he lived in a cave?" she asked faintly.

"I saw him! Sitting in front of a fire....."

" - you've been dreaming - " scorned Philip.

"..... had white hair and black clothes....."

Mary Richards gripped the edge of the table fiercely. How did Michael know these things? She concentrated on not showing her unease to the boys, and tried to smile down at them.

"Yes, you must have been dreaming," she said, and found herself remembering her own sleepless nights. Suddenly it was the brightly-lit kitchen which seemed unreal, while her dreamscapes and memories took on solid substance. Michael's few words had turned the normal world upside down. How *could* he have known?

"Of course Grandfather Mae never lived in a cave," she added, keeping her smile fixed in place. There, that was half true, and ought to satisfy the boys. But the question kept hammering at her: *how* could he have known? It was strange, unnerving. In the back of her mind she knew that she was more than just uneasy.

She was frightened.

IV



THE OLD STUDY BY NIGHT

PAMELA WALTERS opened her eyes and looked at the glowing dial of her digital clock. It was twenty minutes past two. She stared blankly at the figures and tried to think whether anything in particular had woken her up. As she did so, another minute passed and the clock flickered as it adjusted itself accordingly. Pamela pressed a hand to her eyes and lay back on the pillow. Her heart was beating at an uncomfortable rate and she clenched her fists to stop them from trembling.

It had happened again. Four nights in a row she had woken up at twenty minutes past two, and she had a vague suspicion that it may have happened on other, earlier nights, before she had realised what was going on. Not that she really knew what *was* going on. She just knew that she kept waking up at the same time in the middle of the night, with her heart racing and her throat dry with fear.

Beside her, James slept on, untroubled. At breakfast she had tried to tell him what was happening and how it worried her, but he had just laughed.

"You've got into a habit," he had said. "You woke up at the same time on a couple of occasions. "

"Why?"

He had shrugged.

"How should I know? Coincidence, perhaps. Anyway, your brain has got into the habit of waking up at that time. There's nothing more to it than that. What else could it be?"

Pamela sighed in the darkness. What else, indeed? She had read a book once which described how a grisly murder had left its mark on a house, so that future occupants always woke up at the time the crime had been committed. In spite of her misgivings, she smiled. James had bought their home from the builders only four years ago,

so that explanation scarcely applied. Perhaps she should go to her doctor and talk to him, although quite what he could make of the problem was hard to say.

The red light flickered again, and her eyes began to close.

"Mrs Walters, you are suffering from what is known as waking up at the same time every nightitus. Here, let me show you." The doctor produced a book which was larger than his desk and heaved open its cover. Pamela tried to back away, but the black cover arced above her, then came down on top of her with terrific speed, pushing her towards the ground, making her smaller and smaller, and leaving her somewhere which was totally dark.

She whimpered in her sleep.

At first, it seemed that there was nothing in the darkness, but then she noticed that there was, after all, a faint radiance high and to the left. When she concentrated, it resolved itself into a wash of starlight which shimmered as tree branches dipped and swayed not far away. There was some other reason why the starlight was blurred. She refocused her vision and saw with a shock that iron bars were spaced across the radiance, closer than the trees.

This was a curious sort of dream. What she was looking at seemed so real, not like the fleeting images of a dream at all. Not like the doctor and his enormously heavy book.....

Now she could see why the radiance was so high up - she was in a room which had bars across its windows, and she was much smaller than usual, only about four feet tall. Not far away stood an indeterminate piece of furniture which was higher than her head, and part of the window, she noticed, was blocked out by a cupboard or something which was even bigger. For some reason she thought to herself: this is not just like being *small*, this is like being *young*.

The temperature in the bedroom started to drop and, unknown to both of them, James and Pamela's breath condensed into mist in the darkness.

Her vision was growing clearer every second. She could see now that there was ice rimed around the edge of the window, further confusing the path of the starshine, and the branch outside was loaded with snow. Every time it dipped past the window it cast shadows across the floor of the room, and she noticed suddenly that the floor was coated with dust. She took a step forward and almost collided with an armchair. Odd: that was what Grandfather Mae had

done all those years ago when he had returned after he was dead. He had bumped into an armchair and woken her up, and so had been discovered. In front of her, the armchair reared up into the darkness, a deep black patch in the recess of the night. A tiny, panicky thought was born in the back of her mind. This was the same armchair, and it was in the same eery room - Grandfather Mae's old study.

She whimpered again in her sleep and nestled up to James for warmth and comfort. The temperature was dropping fast now; the inside of the window was running with moisture -

- and she could hear it dripping onto the floor, as well as the cold wind sighing against the panes. Now and then a twig from the branch outside rasped against the wall, and the sound it made came to her ears as if it was a long, long way away. She reached out to touch the back of the armchair and it was cold and dusty. It smelt of age. She could just make out the shape of the heavy door, inlaid with metal panels, over to her right, and beside it stood the cupboard on which they had spotted the carved box so many years ago. A kind of resigned dread came over her. She *was* in the old study, and something was going to happen. This was a horrible dream.

It occurred to her that Stephen might be able to help - he must be in the house somewhere. With a stirring of hope she started to turn towards the massive door, only to find that she was unable to move. It was as if her feet had frozen into the dust, and her outstretched hand onto the chair. The fleeting hope left her. On reflection it was obvious that Stephen would not be able to help. He would not even know she was there, as she was only dreaming. Only dreaming. She clung to that thought and was reassured but then, in the manner of dreams, she knew that there was something else in the study with her. Something, not someone. She did not know how she knew, but she felt a sickening lurch of fear and tried desperately to turn her head.

The temperature in the bedroom had steadied some ten degrees below the level in the rest of the house. Pamela started to moan deep in her throat, and James responded by throwing an arm around her shoulders. He was still asleep. The red light of the bedside clock flickered and danced in the unnaturally cold air. Its figures had somehow slipped back and now stood again at twenty-one minutes past two.

Still she struggled to move, although part of her mind wondered whether standing motionless might in fact be her safest course. This is only a dream, she kept telling herself, but her terror mounted until she found herself trying to scream. Her eyes switched from door to armchair to window and back again, seeking movement, wanting to know what was so terrifying and yet afraid of finding out. The branch swept past the window again, shadow-shifting, and her heart jumped. She heard what she thought at first was the scratch of twigs on the wall, but then the sound carried on and on, moving closer. It was something sniffing, snuffling, searching her out. It was something big. She could hear it moving now, shuffling heavily behind her. Only a dream, her mind clamoured, but suddenly she was not so sure. With a tremendous effort of will she pulled away from the armchair and turned her head. The sniffing noise was almost upon her. It was starting to sound more like the beginnings of a snarl. Terrified, she opened her mouth and screamed and screamed, and a blinding flash of light illuminated the old study for a moment.....

..... and the door crashed open. Sarah stood there, shivering in her nightdress.

"Jesus, it's cold," mumbled James, waking up at last. "What's going on?"

Sarah stepped forward into the bedroom. Her shadow loomed up on the wardrobe facing the door.

V



WONDERFUL TREES

SHE WAS in a dark world where fires burned on distant horizons. Earlier, when she had gone to sleep, she had known that she would come to this place, but she was not afraid. It was her night-time place, full of strange creatures which she could draw the next day, if she could remember them well enough. She drifted in the wind at the level of the treetops, and the rustling leaves talked to her.

"Sarah, Sarah, Saaarahhh....."

She dropped lower so that she could hear the whispered words, ignoring furtive movement in the blackness beneath the branches.

"Did you ever see, Sarah: did you ever see the battle?"

"No, I never did," replied Sarah, "but you are wonderful trees."

"We are the whispering woods," sighed the trees. "We speak in the wind. Sarah, you must find out about the battle, else how will you know who to serve?"

Sarah stroked a branch of the tallest tree as she drifted past. Ahead she could see a dark line heralding the end of the wood. "Why should I serve anyone?" she asked innocently. "Who is my master here?"

"Ahhh....." murmured the leaves. "A wise question, Sarah."

"Am I not free to come and go as I please?" pursued Sarah, wondering how it was that she spoke so easily in such a strange fashion.

"There are some who would not have it so," hushed the trees. "The White Beast....."

"That?" scorned Sarah. The edge of the wood flew past underneath and the leaves whispered behind her.

"The battle, Sarahhhhhh - then you will know....."

VI



UNDER THE GROUND

STEPHEN SAUNDERS lay naked under a sheet pulled neatly to his chin. His hands were folded on his chest. A man in a white coat of some sort stood by the side of the bed, looking down at him. On closer inspection it turned out to be the doctor, who had a reproving expression on his face. Saunders continued to stare up at him, feeling his own gaze to be fixed and glassy.

"Warned you to be careful, old boy, didn't I?" said the doctor. "Only one each night, if you felt you needed it. Well, you didn't listen and now we'll have to put you in the ground."

I'm not dead, protested Saunders.

"Be quiet," ordered the doctor. "Of course you are. Why else would we be burying you?" Smiling cheerfully, he leaned forward and pulled the sheet over Saunders' face.

You can't -

"I said be quiet," interrupted the doctor brusquely, his voice sounding odd as it filtered through the sheet. "Come on, lads: let's not wait until he's completely stiff."

Saunders felt strong hands grip him at ankles and shoulders. He was lifted smoothly, and his body swung off the bed in the direction where the doctor had been standing. His body? Saunders supposed he was dreaming, but he did not like the feel of his cold limbs and the sheet draped damply around him like an ill-fitting shroud.

"That's it, bung him in," came the cheery voice of the doctor. "He always wanted to get some sleep - he'll get plenty down there!"

Someone gave a hoarse chuckle at this sally. Saunders felt himself being lowered and abruptly he was inside something which touched him at each shoulder. It became much darker. The hands which had been gripping him relaxed and let go.

Wait, he attempted, knowing what was to come, and suspecting that it was inevitable. He heard something scrape on the ground as it was lifted, and then all light was cut off as the same something was dropped into place with a thud. Nobody answered his despairing call. Instead there were a few desultory knocks as they fixed the coffin lid in place, and then he felt everything being lowered still further.

Damn the doctor, thought Saunders. Why couldn't he have taken the trouble to find out whether he was still alive?

The coffin landed at the bottom of the grave with a heavier thud, and clods of earth began to rain down on the lid. They made a terrific battering noise, but he could just hear disjointed voices from far above, presumably from the funeral service.

- just a dream -

He wondered where he was being buried. It must be somewhere local, because otherwise Jim would not have been in attendance. St Peter's, down in the village? Possibly, but in life he had been no church-goer, and he had never seen eye to eye with Reverend Willoughby. A trickle of unease threaded its way into his thoughts. Surely old Willers would not have refused him entry, just because of a few heated words? Surely no-one could be that cruel?

By now the grave had been filled and the voices of the mourners were inaudible, if indeed there was anyone still up there. He hoped rather spitefully that it had rained during the funeral. It didn't seem fair that they could all walk off and he had to stay behind, trapped under six feet of cloying earth. At least they could be drenched and thoroughly miserable. There would not be many of them, anyway - only his sisters, and their children, and possibly their husbands if they could spare the time to go to the funeral of their rather uninteresting brother-in-law.

It was totally quiet and completely dark. Saunders felt pleased that he was not prone to claustrophobia, although the prospect of staying where he was for - what? the whole of eternity? - did not exactly make him happy. To start off with there was the worry of what would happen to his body as time passed, and apart from that, there was nothing to do. There was also that other worry which he had almost considered earlier, but again he suppressed it.

Perhaps he could go to sleep. That could be interesting: perhaps he could dream within a dream. He realised that the black nothingness of the coffin was after all beginning to prey on his

nerves. It was just as well he was only dreaming and would wake up soon, although the smell of damp earth was so strong that he felt sure it would linger even in his waking hours. It was strange to think that, while he was lying here confined in a coffin deep underground, he was really lying in his bed with the night wind breathing through uncurtained windows. He was not buried alive, he thought, only buried asleep.

What was that? Something slithered or scratched on the outside of the coffin, and had it been possible he would have gasped with fright. An insect? He hoped so, but it sounded altogether too heavy and deliberate. Unbidden, the worry about *where* they had buried him returned. Surely they had not put him in the old family plot, beside the remains of Saunders stretching back for decades? That was an eery place, overgrown and unvisited. His literary mind thought: to be buried there was most certainly not the last thing he wanted.

Again. And again. There was definitely something scratching on the outside of the coffin. Sounds of shifting earth hissed only a few inches away, and gradually he became aware of an insistent whisper.

"Stephen? Oh, Stephen? You're here, then: you've joined us at last. Stephen? Only wait a little while. Wood is only wood and death will find a way. We are coming. Stephen?"

- *No* -

"You *can* hear us, then?" The scraping noises became louder, more purposeful. Saunders imagined busy, bony fingers trailing tattered ribbons of flesh, clawing at the casket. "Only wait a little while, and we will find a way."

He struggled to move, to fling off the clammy folds of the bedsheet shroud. Fear of the unspeakable horror scraping so close gave him strength, and he thrust all of his will into one intention - to wake up. The sheet seemed damper

- *I am not in this coffin*, he thought

.... and he pushed his arm upwards, out of the bed. The sheet was sticky with sweat and had wrapped itself around his face. No wonder he had dreamed such an awful dream.

He sat up and felt cool night air bite against his skin, and shivered. The room was almost completely dark, except for one distant corner

which was illuminated by a shaft of moonlight. He stared at that for a moment, wondering why it reminded him of something, then lay back again and yawned. He felt curiously light-headed, presumably because he had taken that sleeping pill.

Something scratched at the door.

He froze, his heart hammering. *I imagined that. It's in my mind. I.....*

Something bumped at the door and he sat up, trembling violently. The door handle began to turn. *This is insane. It must be a trick of the moonlight and if I look closely I will see that nothing has changed.*

He blinked, but the door handle turned inexorably and the door creaked open. A thin, bony arm dressed in an ancient black suit came into view, and a figure pressed into the ever-widening space. Saunders suddenly remembered what the moonlight brought to mind.

"So it's you," he whispered, half to himself. The lanky figure lurched forward, and Saunders shuddered as he saw what the passage of years had wrought.

"H -h -h- h," wrenched the apparition from its drooling mouth, and in its crusted eyes was a look of desperate pleading.

VII



IN THE MAGIC PLACE

AFTER THE children had finally settled down, she decided that she had had enough for one day and would go to bed as well. She certainly needed the sleep. During the day she was constantly worn out looking after Philip and Michael, and for the last week or so she had been sleeping very poorly at night. Perhaps she was overtired and should go to the doctor for a tonic. She turned off the light and lay down wearily with one arm resting across her eyes. The trouble was, there was a half-formed suspicion in the back of her mind that something was happening which no doctor would understand or even accept.

She sighed and wriggled into a more comfortable position.

There was no point in trying to avoid the issue: Michael apparently knew more about Grandfather Mae than he had ever been told. He could only have found out from Grandfather himself, but the old man had been dead for more than thirty years.

Mary squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think clearly.

What had really happened all those years ago? Had she and Stephen and Pamela really met Grandfather in a strange place, or had they only been playing? If it had all been a game, then it was certainly odd that she had imagined Grandfather Mae living in a cave. That was what young Michael had said. White hair and black clothes and living in a cave - just as she had imagined (or had seen?) in her own childhood.

There he was now, a tall man striding across a square of grass, with Grandmother Mae hanging onto his arm, almost running to keep up.

What about Michael's pointed hat? Well, even that fitted in some ways, thought Mary drowsily. It was peculiar that Grandfather was such a young man, walking purposefully in the sun, and

Grandmother was so old. *She* was the one with white hair and black clothes.

Mary slept. She danced ahead of her grandparents, daring them to catch her, and then slipped through a small gap into the magic place. She knew immediately that it was the magic place, because the hills folded inwards around and above her, and the shining sun was still. Grandfather might be able to follow her, but she knew that Grandmother could not, because she had never been there. For some reason the thought of Grandfather coming after her was rather scary, so she danced on further into the magic place, through the lush grass and into a wood which was warm and sleepy in the summer sun.

She danced for hours and hours, occasionally skipping across a narrow path, and once leaping over a stream which she knew was icy cold in spite of the sun, though she did not know how she knew. Evening did not encroach. It was a happy, timeless afternoon and she felt familiar and safe. No other beings disturbed her. Even the wind breathed gently to reassure her.

After a long while she came to the edge of the wood. Stretching for as far as she could see was a vast expanse of grass which sloped up and up until it disappeared into the never-ending glare of the sun. Far away she could see a small figure moving through the grass and she was going to surprise him by coming up from behind.

The wind ruffled the long grass and she lost sight of her quarry. She felt no tiredness. She ran on in the direction where she had last seen the distant figure, sure that she would soon come upon him.

Mary rolled on to her other side and a stray beam of light momentarily flitted across her eyes. For an instant, the giant shape of a hunting bird, wider than the sky, stooped above her and she cowered down, afraid. Then it was gone and she found herself at the foot of a cliff, looking across to the mouth of a cave. Grandfather stood at the entrance, and in front of him sat two small boys. It was, inexplicably, dusk. Michael was staring, fascinated, at the spindly figure of Grandfather Mae, but Philip was looking out over jumbled rocks, as if searching for a distant horizon. Nothing moved for long minutes, not even the wind. Then Grandfather Mae slowly looked up towards Mary. He half lifted a hand in acknowledgement: then the scene was obliterated by darkness.

Mary awoke, and found tears in her eyes, and felt an immense sadness.

VIII



ABOVE THE MULTITUDE

THE GIANT fire raged up into the sky, sending showers of sparks into the night. Some landed on hard ground and sputtered into blackness, but most fell among the shifting multitude which carpeted the ground. A dim murmur of animal snarls underpinned the roaring of the fire, punctuated now and then by a sharp yelp as an ember found a sensitive mark. Most of the multitude slept. Away in the black distance was the pin-prick of another fire, and all of the space in between was crammed with tightly-packed bodies. High above, stars twinkled in a clear sky, and anywhere far from the fires was layered in frost.

Sarah drifted overhead and considered the multitude. She could see that some of the shapes were regular, human, but others appeared to be in the form of half man, half animal. All were indistinct in the darkness. Somehow Sarah understood that this tremendous gathering must be an army, but she was immune, floating serenely, and beneath her the army rested.

At last she came upon the second fire and it too trailed sheets of dancing sparks into the air. The press of bodies lay as close as possible to the flames without singeing skin or fur, apart from a circular area below Sarah which was occupied by a single being. She looked down dispassionately as she passed by, and the creature - a huge half-canine beast - prowled restlessly as if sensing another, alien presence.

The circular area was almost behind her when she heard the first thin scream. Puzzled, she looked back and down, and saw that the beast had stopped prowling. Now it was stalking slowly, searching. Its fur shone. Sarah strained her eyes and finally made out another figure separate from the sleeping throng, tiny and difficult to see even with the help of the firelight. Until that moment she had merely

drifted along on the wind, but now she became aware of control. She halted and spiralled gently back towards the space by the raging flames.

Another scream forced itself from the second separate figure, which Sarah could now make out as being human. It seemed to be frozen motionless, one arm outstretched. The white beast was casting about only yards behind and even as Sarah watched, it sank onto its haunches and prepared to spring. The human figure finally managed to turn its head this way and that - it was clearly terrified, and Sarah felt an answering bolt of fear. Just as the beast launched itself she exercised more control, shouting in a voice she scarcely recognised as her own -

"Do not! I command!"

- and at the same time the human figure screamed again, a high note passing on the wind. The fire exploded whitely from within, and then.....

And then Sarah awoke, wondering at the same time where she was and what she had been dreaming. Then she heard her mother crying out. Quickly she went out into the hall and pushed open a door, shivering in a sudden blast of cold. Her father spoke in a bewildered voice.

Sarah stepped into the room and as she did so the face of her parents' alarm clock shattered, showering plastic splinters onto the floor. The sharp crack sounded dead in the freezing air, and her mother started awake.

Sarah took another step forward.

"Did you have a bad dream too, mummy?" she said.

IX



THE OLD STUDY BY DAY

RELUCTANTLY, SAUNDERS entered the corridor leading into the north wing, walking cautiously through the gloom which prevailed even on such a bright day. He carried a large key in one hand. Before very long he came upon the massive study door and paused for a moment, looking nervously in front of him, where he could see the narrow entrance to the turret stairs, and behind, to the reassuring brightness of the main hall. Then, before he could change his mind, he unlocked the door and pushed it open.

He had expected it to be stiff and awkward, but the door swung noiselessly, effortlessly, and the interior of the study quickly came into view. Morning sunlight filtered obliquely between the bars over the windows, swathing the room in zebra patterns of shade and light. He swallowed and stepped forward, remembering a night thirty years ago more vividly than those more recent. The desk was still there, as were the table, armchair and cupboard. Nothing had changed.

He was about to take another step forward when he saw something which chilled his blood. The dust had been disturbed. Logic told him that it could not be so. The windows were not only closed, but barred, and the door had been locked - but the evidence could not be ignored. The dust was scuffed, and at least one footprint was clearly visible.

Saunders shook his head violently and backed out of the doorway, knocking into the frame in his haste. He slammed the door shut, wincing as the heavy sound reverberated through the house, and turned the key. He wished he had never found the courage to investigate the old study. It was the last straw in a string of events which were turning his life into a waking nightmare.

He walked quickly back to the main part of the house, tightened nerves jangling at every step. He knew exactly what he had to do.

Quickly, he ran up the stairs to his own study and with a hand that was still shaking, picked up the telephone.

