

JAMES  
HERBERT

ASH

MACMILLAN

*Pont D'Alma tunnel, Paris*  
*31 August 1997*  
*12.59 a.m.*

As her life ebbed away in the crumpled Mercedes she thought of her two sons.

*Who would take care of them? Who would guide them through their early years?*

*Not their father. Oh God, not him and all he stood for. How could their lives be normal?*

Now her mind, along with her flesh, was becoming cold. She could feel herself drifting away, far, far away from this ruined metal shell that entrapped and hurt her body so.

She was aware, vaguely, of incessant bright flashes, a gabble of shocked, greedy voices – the last sounds she would ever hear – as closure softened her remaining moments in this intrusive world.

Even as her life faded, her final concerns returned to those of the living. Her two sons – who would be there for them?

For the briefest of moments, their images followed her into the painless, velvet void, but then they were gone, leaving her to wonder for a second if in death she would find the soul of the barely born child she had lost.

Oblivion took her just as hands reached in to help.

## PART ONE: THE JOURNEY

*PRESENT DAY*

# 1

The untidy little man peered out from the bookshop's window display, squinting to sharpen his vision.

He was watching the doors of the huge grey building that housed the BBC World Service offices and studios: those doors were in constant use, drawing in and disgorging a ceaseless stream of visitors and staff. The mark was still inside, but Cedric Twigg was patient as always, comfortable in his assumed role of book browser in the Kingsway WHSmith, pretending to be interested in the lofty novel he held in his hands. He had idled here for the last twenty minutes, having arrived half an hour earlier, picking up a hardback here and there to peruse its contents, replacing each volume, then choosing another.

The phoney shelf cruising had led him from the back of the store to the large plate-glass windows overlooking the busy street beyond and from where he chose a final volume entitled *Flat Earth News*, which he opened and brought up close to his face as if absorbed.

But every few minutes he would gaze distractedly through the windows as if considering the text while, in truth, he was contemplating the impressive edifice of the Aldwych building at the end of the broad and bustling Kingsway. There was another entrance/exit in the discreet courtyard at the back of Bush House, but he had an associate covering that. A call to Twigg's Samsung would inform him if their mark had left the building that way.

His pretended attention returned to the book again and he turned a page, appearing to be engrossed in its warnings about the world's news media.

Twigg was a fastidious individual who had once enjoyed the subterfuge involved in surveillance and tracking, learning the mark's habits and regularly visited haunts. But these days he found the chase less agreeable; the long stakeouts tedious, the satisfaction coming only with the final dispatch.

Small in stature and unremarkable in appearance – he could reasonably have been taken for a poorly paid accounts clerk on his lunch break – which suited his role perfectly. Although Twigg appeared commonplace, his unblinking grey-eyed stare could be quite unsettling if directed your way. And although his shoulders were narrow, they were strong and capable of exerting great force through his deceptively dainty hands. With a pot-belly recently beginning to swell over his belt buckle, the assumed image was complete.

Now the mobile phone in his trouser pocket vibrated against his upper thigh, its ringtone switched off; he reached for it. The tiny screen showed the caller's code name – Kincade – and Twigg thumbed the accept key.

'Mark leaving the building now,' the thin excitable voice of his apprentice blurted. 'Rear exit, heading up the Strand. Alone.'

'Right.' Twigg broke the connection and slid the neat little instrument back into his pocket. He returned the book to its shelf and made his way out of the store.

He walked quickly along the pavement, almost invisible among the lunchtime throng, making his way towards the even busier Strand, searching ahead for his prey. He only caught the attention of one person, a pretty young office worker on her way to have lunch with a friend, and that was only because he reminded her of someone as he strode purposefully towards her. She couldn't quite place the name, but the little man in his old-fashioned raincoat looked like the creepy actor who was in all those slasher movies a few years back. What *was* his name?

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Then he'd passed her and the moment was gone. Now what puzzled her was why the little man with freaky eyes was carrying a furred umbrella under his arm on such a chilly but bright, cloudless day.

## 2

Lucy Duncan looked up from her receptionist's desk as the heavy, black-painted entrance door was pushed open, allowing cold air to impinge on the comfortable warmth of the lobby.

David Ash, unshaven and weary-looking, hurried through, the front door slowly closing of its own accord behind him. He strode towards the desk, making for the carpeted staircase. As usual, he ignored the building's claustrophobically small lift, preferring to take the stairs to the first floor where Kate McCarrick's office was located.

He managed a brief smile at Lucy, but the smile didn't quite make it to his eyes.

'You're late, David,' the receptionist scolded him lightly. 'The meeting started twenty minutes ago.'

Lucy watched as Ash climbed the stairs, two at a time, and gave an inward sigh. Such an attractive man, with his thick, tousled dark hair, flecked slightly with grey, and his deep blue but ever-melancholy eyes. This morning his chin was stubbled. Somehow it made him look sexier, though usually she preferred her men clean-shaven.

Lucy had replaced the previous receptionist called Jenny, who had left 'to have babies', although staying on an extra month to show Lucy the ropes and how to deal with some of the more questionable – and often distraught – phone calls that sometimes came through. Jenny had told her that Ash had been through some difficult times over the past few years, with two particularly unfortunate cases that appeared to weigh



heavily on him. Perhaps they still did: he always seemed to be so downcast. Or 'brooding' might be more apt.

The phone rang as David Ash disappeared up the stairs and Lucy quickly picked up the receiver.

'Psychical Research Institute. How may I help you?'

Ash reached the first-floor landing and paused to take a breath. The meeting with Kate and the prospective client had been due to start at 9.30 a.m., and he, as Lucy had already told him, was late. If only he could sleep peacefully at night in the darkness of his room. If only the nightmares that always culminated in his eyes snapping open, his body in a sweat, would stop. Dawn was always a relief. Only then could he sink into oblivion in the knowledge that he was safe now that the night terrors had expunged themselves.

Kate McCarrick's office door was closed and he knocked before entering.

Kate, who was head of the Psychical Research Institute, looked past the shoulder of the person seated across the desk from her. She frowned slightly.

'Sorry I'm late,' Ash apologized both to Kate and the trim, dark-suited man, who had turned in his chair to appraise the new arrival. His expression was neutral.

'David, this is Simon Maseby. Simon . . .' her hand indicated Ash. 'David Ash, the investigator we were just discussing.'

Ash raised his eyebrows at Kate as Maseby rose and extended a hand towards him. He was a short, smartly dressed man, somewhere in his forties, his dark hair slicked back from his forehead, his chin clean-shaven (unlike his own, Ash thought), and his eyes were a very pale shade of green in his fresh roundish race.

'You've had some interesting times, Mr Ash,' Maseby said with a faint smile.

Again the parapsychologist glanced at Kate, who gave him

a slight but reassuring nod of her head. He shook the proffered hand, which was dry and firm to the touch.

'I've just filled in your background a little for Simon,' Kate said. 'Your experiences are of great interest to him.'

Maseby sat, eyes on Ash, a hint of curiosity and – no, not humour, Ash decided, but a kind of bemusement in his expression.

'So you believe in the supernatural, Mr Maseby,' Ash asked as he took the other chair facing Kate McCarrick's desk.

'Well now, that's a difficult question to answer.' Maseby crossed his legs, and Ash saw that the dark-suited man's shoes were polished to perfection, his grey socks made from some silky material. 'I have to say that I haven't given such, er, such things much thought in the past.'

'But now you have, for some reason.'

'Quite. For the moment, let's say that my eyes have been opened to what I would have thought unbelievable only a short time ago.'

'Shall I explain, Simon?' Kate leaned forward on her crowded desk, at one side of which was a computer screen and keyboard. Bookshelves were filled with studies on psychic phenomena and the paranormal, with titles such as *The Vertical Plane*, *Telluric Energy*, *Radiotelethesis* and *Genius Loci*. Grey, chest-high filing cabinets overflowing with case-history folders took up one side of the room. Two tall windows behind Kate's desk overlooked the busy city street below.

Maseby acquiesced with a bow of his head. He smiled at Ash, wrinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes.

But before Kate could begin, Ash jumped in with a question. 'Can I ask you something, Mr Maseby?'

'Of course.' Maseby glanced enquiringly at Kate.

She anticipated Ash's question. 'David is always interested in why a prospective client should choose this particular institute and not one of the equally respected organizations such as The Spiritualist Association or The College of Psychic Studies.'

'It's very simple,' said Maseby, his patronizing smile begin-

ning to irritate Ash. ‘Katie and I go way back. We met when we were students up at Oxford, she at St Hilda’s College and I at Magdalen. All the colleges hold a weekly “formal hall” – a dinner for students to which guests from other colleges are invited. At that time, St Hilda’s was an all-female establishment, so the girls there were particularly keen to welcome young men to their social evenings. That was how I met Kate, and we became firm friends – of the platonic kind, I might add.’

‘Okay. I just wondered.’ Ash looked across the desk at Kate McCarrick, who smiled back, giving nothing away. She guessed Ash suspected that she and Maseby had been lovers in the past despite her old friend’s comment to the contrary.

In fact, she and Simon had slept together only once when they were students, both quickly deciding they were not suited to a drawn-out affair. Even then, Simon was a little too much in love with himself to sustain an equal partnership.

Maseby continued to answer Ash’s question. ‘Kate and I have kept in touch over the years and I admit, while I couldn’t quite accept the strange profession she’d chosen, I’ve always had high regard for her intellect. When events that could only be described as paranormal began to occur in an establishment with which I’m associated, she was the first person I thought of turning to. Ghosts and hauntings are not something I’ve experienced before.’

Kate took over from him. ‘Simon represents a group of influential people who have an interest in a particular Scottish castle.’

Ash caught the sharp glance Maseby suddenly gave Kate so he dug deeper. ‘And who are these influential people?’

‘That really doesn’t matter at this point,’ Maseby all but snapped back. ‘All you need to know is that the castle is currently having problems that are unaccountable.’

‘Hauntings?’

‘We think so.’

Kate spoke up again; she knew David had lost none of his surface cynicism, despite the shocking experiences he’d

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suffered over the past few years. It was his way of testing potential clients: he never wasted time on neurotics with over-imaginative and often misguided claims of supernatural activity. 'Comraich Castle is used as a kind of, well, a kind of sanitarium. Would you call it that, Simon?'

'I'd prefer to say it's a retreat.'

'A religious retreat?' asked Ash.

Maseby gave a sharp bark of derision. 'No, it has nothing to do with religion, even though one of our residents was an archbishop in his better years. When his mind wasn't so addled.'

'It's a mental institution?' Ash refrained from calling it an asylum.

'As I said, we refer to it as a retreat.'

'But a retreat from what?' Ash persisted.

'From the world, Mr Ash,' Maseby said simply. His smile this time was thin-lipped.

### 3

Maseby spoke to Kate McCarrick. ‘Perhaps from this moment on we should have Mr Ash’s assurance that whatever else we discuss this morning will not be mentioned beyond these four walls.’

‘All our cases are confidential, you know that, Simon.’

‘Mr Ash?’ There was something hard in Maseby’s stare.

Ash gave a shrug. ‘It’s fine by me. Victims of haunting often demand the utmost discretion.’

‘Kate tells me you have had a drink problem.’ It was bluntly put and, to Ash, irrelevant. He frowned at his employer, who had the grace to look apologetic.

‘Simon needs to have every confidence in you before engaging the Institute,’ she explained. ‘I’ve told him your drinking is no longer an issue.’

‘Vodka, wasn’t it?’ Maseby enquired, his face a mask of indifference. Ash knew he was probing, looking for weakness.

‘Kate’s right – I’ve given up the vodka.’

‘Then I hope there’ll be no relapse during this assignment,’ the other man said grimly. ‘I have to answer for any mistakes, so I must be sure of you.’

‘I haven’t tasted a drop of the stuff for over a year now. But I’d still like to know who it is *you* answer to.’

‘As I explained, that’s irrelevant for the moment. However, I *can* tell you that it’s an alliance of like-minded and extremely wealthy individuals. People of influence, as Kate has already informed you.’

Kate spoke. 'So let's move on and tell David of the strange – and terrifying – incidents that are happening at Comraich. You already know I have absolute trust in him.'

Maseby acknowledged the firmness of his old friend's tone with a small nod of his head. 'Well now,' he said briskly, turning round in his seat to face Ash more easily. 'The organization I represent owns a large but necessarily remote castle in Scotland. Its residents are only accepted on the understanding that no outsider can ever know its precise location, not even the people who have placed them there and pay their fees. I should add that those fees are extremely high, with a harsh financial penalty for betrayal of trust.'

'Betrayal?' Ash was surprised. It seemed a potent word to use.

'You'll understand after you've countersigned the contract drawn up between myself and Kate. The Institute would be liable should you break our agreement.'

'It would wipe us out,' Kate told Ash grimly.

'Then why take it on? Why risk everything?' Ash stared at Kate.

It was Maseby who answered him. 'Because the reward for success would mean that the Psychological Research Institute would never be under financial pressure again.'

For a second or two, Ash was lost for words.

'It's true, David,' Kate said. 'You know our cash flow has always been borderline, but if we accept this contract and are successful we'll be secure for a long time to come. Trust me on this.'

Ash hesitated before expressing his thoughts. 'And if we're not successful with this case, if we're unable to discover the root cause of these alleged hauntings?'

His question was directed at Kate, but it was Maseby who responded. 'You haven't yet heard the nature of the phenomena.'

'True. But from what you imply you could need a spiritualist rather than a research team.'

‘There’ll be no team, David,’ Kate informed him. ‘It’s just you initially; no one else will be involved at this stage.’

‘A castle will be impossible for one person to cover.’

Maseby leaned forward in his seat as if to speak conspiratorially to Ash, his voice almost hushed. ‘Unfortunately, the more outsiders invited there, the higher the risk of exposure. Comraich Castle is intentionally private and I reaffirm, even its location must remain secret. Strangers are never allowed inside the grounds, not even tradesmen.’

Ash was perplexed. ‘How can you keep that kind of landmark secret? How about the locals – they must be aware of its existence?’

‘Oh, they know Comraich is there all right, but they have no idea of its purpose. We encourage them to believe it’s been turned into a private and very expensive health spa. In some ways it is just that. As for tradesmen and deliveries of any kind, there is a dropping-off point at the estate’s boundary. Mr Ash, once you’re there, you’ll appreciate its need for secrecy.’

The parapsychologist shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Absent-mindedly, he fingered the short scar on his cheek.

‘David, again, you must trust me,’ Kate urged. ‘I chose you because you’ve always worked best alone.’ *And you also have some psychic ability, even though you won’t admit it to yourself,* she thought. ‘Let’s not be modest, you are the Institute’s leading, as well as the most experienced, investigator.’

‘But I can’t handle the latest technology on my own. Monitors, cameras, capacity-change recorders, anemometers, ventimeters, air meters, CCTV – the list goes on and—’

‘We already have a closed-circuit television facility,’ Maseby interrupted, ‘and, of course, a monitoring area with full-time security observation.’

‘Besides, David, yours will only be a preliminary investigation,’ added Kate.

‘But a castle? There have got to be so many rooms, corridors, underground chambers, halls and passageways, not to mention *secret* passageways. I can’t cover them all.’

‘That isn’t being asked of you, Mr Ash. First we need to establish if Comraich is – and as a sceptic myself, it’s difficult for me to say this – truly being haunted, and that whatever’s happening is not just some weird but accountable phenomena. No doubt you remember in 2008 when there were twenty or more suicides of young people, all around the area of Bridgend in Wales within weeks of each other. Nobody has explained the catalyst for such tragic self-inflicted deaths. I’ve also heard that one schoolgirl fainting can cause others around them to faint.’

Ash frowned. ‘If you think there’s a kind of collective hysteria among your castle residents, then maybe it’s not a parapsychologist you need, but a psychologist.’

‘We already have one and she is as perplexed as everybody else. If we can agree to the terms of the contract, you’ll meet her on the plane tomorrow.’

‘I’d have to fly to Scotland? I could easily drive or take the train.’

Maseby shook his head. ‘You’ll go by jet from London City Airport. It isn’t a long journey, an hour or so. You’ll join Dr Wyatt, our resident psychologist, who is accompanying a new client to Comraich. Interestingly, Dr Wyatt practised psychiatry before psychology, the former being how she gained her MD.’

Ash was unwilling to debate the point. ‘So you have two for the price of one.’

‘No, no. We also have a resident psychiatrist at Comraich. A Dr Singh.’

‘The people you represent *must* be wealthy, especially if they have their own jet.’

‘I thought I’d made that clear.’

‘Freemasons?’ It was a wild guess that was met with disdain. The next guess was even wilder. ‘The Illuminati?’

‘No,’ Maseby said brusquely, ignoring the investigator’s deliberate facetiousness. ‘You’ll receive more information when it’s considered necessary. And of course, the first thing you must do is sign both the confidentiality agreement and the



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contract between the Institute and Maseby Associates on behalf of Comraich Castle.'

'You didn't mention there were two contracts.'

'Yes, the Institute's and also your own personal agreement.'

Kate intervened. 'I think it's time you told David exactly what has happened at Comraich so far. Then he can either accept the assignment or walk away. Agreed? David, if you decline, you can never tell anyone of this meeting.'

'We hope you will come on board, Mr Ash.'

Mystified but intrigued, Ash nodded in acquiescence and Kate breathed a sigh of relief. Despite her recommendation to Maseby, she hadn't been sure that David Ash had truly recovered his nerve.

## 4

Maseby now shifted his chair so that he could look straight into Ash's eyes without the discomfort of twisting his body.

'Apparently it started a couple of months ago,' he began, 'around the end of July or beginning of August, or so I'm told. One of my duties is to visit Comraich Castle at certain intervals just to see how it's running, to note any problems, sometimes to accompany new clients, get them settled in – that sort of thing. Problems are generally minor, but with others I need to spend a week or so up there.'

Kate leaned back in her seat, her eyes flitting between Ash and Maseby, but mostly her attention staying with the former; having already heard Maseby's account, she was now interested in Ash's reaction to it.

Maseby continued. 'It was after supper, late enough for the castle lights to be switched on. As was customary, many of our guests had gathered in one of the larger rooms used as a lounge area, where they could relax with a coffee, or brandy. It's all part of the service. There was nothing amiss, and although it was summer, a fire had been lit in the room's big open hearth. In a place as huge as Comraich, with stonework and wooden beams dating back to the fourteenth century, there are always draughts coming from somewhere. I think there were twenty or thirty guests and staff in the room at that time and everything appeared normal enough, but some of the residents started complaining about the chill that had set in.

'The staff were perplexed. Despite the roaring fire and heat

from the radiators, which are always left on whatever the season, the place really was cold and becoming colder by the minute – and it was still summertime, remember. In fact, everybody there could see the vapour of their own breath, that’s how cold it was. Then all the lights slowly began to dim; apparently it was the same in every hall and passageway where there were ceiling and wall lights. Soon, the castle was almost in darkness.’

‘Do you have a back-up generator for when the power supply from the main grid goes down?’ Ash enquired.

‘There are more than one, in fact, for different areas of the castle, and they’re always set to kick in automatically whenever there’s a power failure.’

‘Then maybe you need a qualified electrician.’

‘David . . .’ Kate warned.

Maseby smiled coldly. ‘Besides a psychologist, we have top-rated electricians *and* engineers at our disposal. We also have a doctor, two general surgeons – specialist surgeons can always be flown in – several nurses, both male and female, an estate general manager and several wardens . . . I could go on, but is it necessary?’

Ash shook his head.

‘In any case, an electrician wasn’t required. In a matter of moments, the lights came back on.’

‘And the heating?’

‘Yes, everything was normal again.’

‘You said the room also had a fireplace as well as hot radiators. What happened to the fire?’

‘Ah. The fire itself somehow lost its heat; the flames died even though it was stacked with burning logs and coal. It still shimmered, but gave out no heat. When the lights returned, so did the flames. It was very disconcerting for everyone, both clients and resident staff. But worse for the clients in the special unit below.’

‘Below?’

‘Some of our medical facilities extend to the castle’s

basement area. A long time ago, these rooms were cells – *oubliettes*, they used to be called – but of course now they’ve been converted into very comfortable suites.’

‘Okay.’ The word was drawn out, as if Ash were considering the information. ‘So for one night the castle had a blackout. Obviously, there’s something more you want to tell me.’

‘Oh, believe me, Mr Ash, there’s much more to be told. I want to proceed with the incidents in the order they transpired.’

Noting that her investigator still looked worse for wear, Kate broke in, turning to the prospective client first. ‘I’m sure you’d like more coffee, Simon.’

Ash guessed the coffee was really meant for him. Did he honestly look that bad this morning?

Maseby declined the offer, but Ash nodded his head gratefully. ‘Yeah, I could use a refresher. You know I’m not at my best this time of day.’

He meant the last remark as a self-deprecatory comment, but Kate didn’t smile. Instead, she pushed a button on the desk’s intercom and spoke to her secretary.

What Ash really needed was a cigarette, but ridiculously that would be illegal now that smoking in offices, restaurants, pubs and theatres was banned. The lack left him a little shaky at times. Like now, even though he’d made the decision that tomorrow he would give them up.

Releasing the button, Kate said to her old friend, ‘Please continue, Simon.’

Maseby’s appraising eyes suggested he knew the coffee was a lifebelt thrown to this unshaven, tousle-haired individual she claimed was the Institute’s best psychic investigator. But Kate really wouldn’t have recommended Ash if she had any doubts about his ability.

‘Now we think,’ Maseby said as he gave a small tug at the trouser leg stretched too tightly over his knee, ‘that was the beginning of it all. You see, the same thing happened over the following two nights, even though the castle’s electri-

cal circuits had been tested and the generators checked. No malfunctions were found in any of the systems.

‘Three nights in all, Mr Ash. Now tell me nothing unnatural is going on at Comraich.’

Ash gave him a humourless grin of repentance. ‘You’re right. If it happened three nights running, then I’d be concerned.’

‘And on the third night, a terrible stench came with the darkness, as if the air itself had been contaminated. Some of the guests, as well as members of staff, became nauseous because of it. Even when the lights returned and the fires regained their heat, the putrid odour lingered so that windows had to be opened to let the sea wind sweep through and cleanse the place of its stench.’

‘I admit, it’s puzzling,’ commented Ash, ‘but it isn’t necessarily proof of a haunting.’

The office’s side door opened and a young man entered carrying a tray bearing two cups and saucers, a tiny jug of milk and a cafetière. He gave Ash a quick nod hello and settled the tray on Kate’s desk where she’d cleared a space.

‘Thank you, Tom.’ She passed the used cups to her PA and he left the room, heeling the connecting door shut behind him.

Ash gratefully accepted his coffee and burned his top lip taking a sip too soon. Nevertheless, he took another sip, the heat and caffeine working its way into his system. He picked up from where the conversation had left off. ‘I assume the castle drains were inspected as well as the electrical circuits?’

Maseby was emphatic. ‘Everything that could be checked *was* checked. No fault was found in either utility. There was nothing to explain the stench, and the castle’s wiring was functioning properly.’

He lowered his voice, controlling his sudden exasperation. The investigator was meant to pose questions and hopefully *rationalize* what he heard. When neither happened, Maseby ploughed on. ‘I was called up to Comraich and I witnessed the next incident myself.’

Ash froze with his cup halfway to his lips. He was interested in hearing Maseby's personal viewpoint on what was happening in the Scottish castle and whether or not it could be defined as a 'haunting'.

Kate studied Ash's face, waiting for some kind of reaction. But, as always, the investigator gave nothing away.

'On this occasion,' Maseby was continuing, 'the castle's CEO, Sir Victor Haelstrom, and I were in his ground-floor office when we heard a terrible racket coming from next door, where his secretarial staff are. It sounded like somebody was trying to wreck the place. There were bangs and crashes and one of the women was screaming. We rushed through the connecting door and we both ducked instinctively as a chair came flying towards our heads. Fortunately it missed, but the sight that we came upon was alarming to say the least. The three typists and Sir Victor's PA – it was she who was screaming – were huddled together in a corner of the room, while the general manager Andrew Derriman was sprawled on the floor, blood spilling from a wound to his head. He was trying to rise but every time he was on one knee, a heavy piece of furniture skimmed across the room as though purposely aimed at him. He was knocked down again and again. Furthermore there were some black orbs flying around the room. Where they came from we're not sure. They're not part of the office furniture.'

Kate and Ash glanced at each other.

'Paintings and photographs were dropping from the walls as if caused by a seismic shock. A computer on another desk kept switching itself on and off, even though its plug had been yanked from the wall socket. The fax machine was spewing out plain paper and, even when emptied, the mechanical process continued. It was the same with the copier, light constantly flashing on and off.'

'Poltergeists?' Ash aimed the suggestion at Kate, who shook her head.

'There's more to tell,' she said quietly.

Maseby took his cue. 'I stayed on at Comraich for a further week, just to be around should there be any more incidents. There weren't. Everything became normal again, so I left, only to be called back the very next week. The lights had begun dimming again, but this time it was different.'

'In what way?' Ash enquired.

'This time the lights, having almost faded to darkness, suddenly grew bright, then brighter, until it was impossible to look at them for more than a split second. In less than a minute the lights radiated so much power that the bulbs began to pop, showering the people below with fragments of hot glass.'

Ash frowned. 'Anyone badly hurt?'

'Some of the clients and a couple of maids suffered minor cuts to their faces, but no one was seriously injured. It was a miracle no one was blinded; they had instinctively closed their eyes when the bulbs exploded.'

'I've already suggested to Simon,' said Kate, 'that it might be a paranormal storm, with so many bizarre episodes happening one after the other.'

'Possibly. But what instigated it if that were the case?' Ash looked to Maseby for an answer.

'I have no idea, and I'm surprised you'd think I would know. Nothing's changed at Comraich Castle recently, and there haven't been any new guests for quite some time.' He avoided Ash's eyes. 'Except for one,' he finished quietly.

'Has anyone – residents or staff – witnessed manifestations of any kind, aside from those that you've mentioned?'

'Ghosts, you mean.'

'Not necessarily. It could be anything from a floating mist inside the building to noises, banging, knocking, tapping, voices. Hazy, or even solid, figures that suddenly appear and then disappear, or pass through walls, or float up or down rooms or corridors. Shouts, screams. Disembodied hands, heads, and torsos. There can be any manner of anomalous

disturbances created by other-worldly influences. But what I really want to know is, has anybody at Comraich Castle actually encountered the spirit of someone supposedly dead?’

Maseby considered the question for a few moments. ‘It seems not,’ he said at last. ‘But I myself have definitely felt cold spots, especially in the rooms and passageways beneath the castle.’

‘Old dungeons?’

‘As I told you before, old dungeons converted into comfortable quarters for some of our guests. We also have medical facilities down there.’

Ash regarded him curiously.

Maseby explained. ‘Several of our guests are not quite sound of mind, and we tend to keep them apart from our other residents. But getting back to the point: yes, I have experienced so-called cold spots in areas below ground and that doesn’t surprise me, because the castle is built on top of a promontory over the sea, and there is supposed to be a network of tunnels leading down to caves on the shoreline.’

‘Okay, so that’s easily explained. There can be any number of reasons for cold zones in the main part of buildings. A lot of structures, particularly *ancient* ones, and especially stone-built castles, have perfectly natural cold spots caused by draughts through the cracks in the masonry, or poor joints and crooked doors, gaps in the flooring, bricked-up chimneys or those still open, worn woodwork around windows, and leaky roofs. The list goes on.’

‘I understand that. But in one or two, there . . .’ Maseby considered his own words. ‘Well, there is a . . .’ Now he shook his head, a pragmatist searching for a way to describe the improbable. ‘I suppose you might call it an “atmosphere”.’

‘A presence?’ Kate prompted.

‘I’m not sure. Something even more intangible than that. It left me feeling very uneasy, you know, like icy spiders’ legs down the spine.’



'Just a feeling, though,' said Ash. 'You didn't actually see anything odd, anything out of place?'

Maseby bit down on his lower lip like a child thinking on a problem. 'No. No I didn't. But others have.'

Both Kate and Ash straightened a little, as if suddenly more alert.

'You didn't tell me, Simon,' Kate reproved him.

'I was about to when Mr Ash arrived. Besides, I haven't given it much credence. The eyewitness is – how should I put it? – uh, a less than reliable witness at present.'

'In what way?' Ash enquired.

'If I'm to answer that, I must remind you yet again that this is all highly confidential.'

Although intrigued by the man's caution, Ash nodded agreement. 'That's already understood.'

'I mentioned Comraich has lower-level units for certain guests who necessarily have to be segregated from the rest of the residents for a while. Their mental state is too delicate to have them mix with others in the castle. It was one such confined person who claimed to have been visited by a ghost in his room for several nights running.'

'If by less than reliable you mean this person is insane, he might even be seeing pink elephants dancing on the ceiling.'

Maseby made it clear from his expression that he didn't appreciate the flippancy, even though Ash hadn't meant his comment to be taken that way. If someone was crazy, then obviously they might imagine crazy things.

'Can you let me have his name for my notes?' Ash reached for the microcassette player he always kept handy in his jacket pocket. 'And can I record this conversation?'

Maseby seemed to bridle, as if both requests were an impertinence.

'There will be no record of our conversation. Even if you accept the assignment – which I gather you will by those two questions – nothing is to be put down on tape.'

'I'll need to use it when I begin my investigation.'

'I understand that. But Kate and I have agreed all such recordings will be the property of the organization I represent. That will also include written reports.'

Ash stared at Kate in amazement, as if she'd made a false promise to this irritating friend of hers.

'Simon is correct,' she concurred. 'We won't even keep a written report for our own files.'

'But that can't be right,' Ash protested. 'It's not what the Institute is about.'

'Must we go through all this again?' Maseby had directed his impatience towards Kate.

She sighed. Before Ash's arrival, the meeting with Simon had stalled precisely on this point. The Institute documented *every* investigation, whether successful or not, but her old friend had eventually persuaded her that this must be an exception, and with further revelations she understood why. Besides, the reward for the venture, satisfactory or not, really was *too* good to be dismissed.

She addressed her senior investigator, her voice as firm as her expression. 'David, once the investigation is underway you'll understand why the secrecy. I can assure you, when you visit Comraich Castle, you'll be told everything you need to know. Isn't that right, Simon?'

Ash wondered why Kate appeared to need further assurances from Maseby.

'Absolutely.' Maseby tentatively clasped his hands together as if a deal had already been struck.

Slipping the microcassette player back into his pocket, Ash gave a short nod of his head. 'All right, no names for now and all notes and reports to be handed over to you, Mr Maseby.'

'Please, call me Simon.' The smart-suited consultant seemed satisfied.

Ash didn't accept the familiarity. 'So, Mr Maseby, this unnamed guest kept in the rooms below ground claims he saw a ghost several nights running?'

‘That’s right.’

‘And he still maintains it’s true. I assume he was thoroughly questioned after each occasion?’

‘He was indeed.’

‘Obviously I’ll have to talk to him myself.’

‘Unfortunately, he is no longer capable of answering questions.’

Once more Ash raised his eyebrows. His next question was deliberately blunt. ‘He’s out of his head? Have these alleged hauntings tipped him over the edge or was he already insane?’

‘It’s even more serious than that,’ the reply came back instantly. ‘The poor man has been physically injured and is now in a catatonic state of shock.’

‘Are you saying he has self-harmed?’ asked Kate. She and Ash had shared glances.

‘If only it were that simple.’ Maseby slowly shook his head as if from sadness. ‘His injuries are not of his own making. There’s the mystery, you see.’

He held up a hand, palm forward, to ward off further questions. ‘Let me elucidate – *if* I can.’

Ash leaned back in his chair and said nothing. Kate, too, kept silent.

Maseby’s voice was sombre as he began to explain.