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*Short Stories*

**THE MOTH TRAP**

**A STEP ASIDE**

*Ghost Hunter Series*

**THE NOVICE GHOST HUNTER**

**A MATTER OF FAITH**

**OF GODS AND GHOSTS**

**Authors Website**

**[www.martinjbest.com](http://www.martinjbest.com)**

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# **GHOST HUNTER: BLOOD TIES**



## CHAPTER ONE

Sir Quentin Chandler, Knight Commander of The Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George, is dying. His ninety-two-year-old body is failing rapidly, but, mercifully, his mind is clear. His grandson, Charles, sits on the edge of the bed, looking anxious. There is no-one else left to care now, Quentin muses. A car crash took his only offspring Frederick, and daughter-in-law Helen, from him two years previously. His wife, as with most things in their life together, had insisted on being first, having died some six years ago. There were a couple of distant cousins, but he hadn't heard from them in decades.

"Is there anything I can do, Grandfather?" Charles asks for the umpteenth time.

"No," replies the old man patiently, his voice barely more than a whisper, "just keep me company."

"How do you feel?" Charles can't think of anything else to say.

Quentin tries to laugh, but coughs feebly instead. Charles quickly holds a glass to his lips, and Quentin sips a little of the cool water.

"I'd rather have a scotch," Quentin whispers when the glass is removed. He manages a smile.

Charles smiles back. "I doubt that the doctor would approve."

Quentin nods, philosophically. "Probably not." Something is changing in his body, he can feel it. Not painful, but a portent of the inevitable. Disquieted, he tries to reach out and take Charles' hand, but his arm remains stubbornly immobile. He tries to speak, but is unsure whether the words have left his mind.

Sensing a change, Charles reaches out, and takes his grandfather's hand. "I'm here, Grandfather."

Quentin's world is shrinking. His field of vision is reduced to Charles' face, and even that appears as if obscured by mist. He can no longer feel his body at all; no longer has any use for it. Charles' lips move, but no sound reaches him. The mist that distorts his vision thickens and darkens until all is black.

Quentin is not unhappy, he knows that his time is finished. He is about to drift gently into oblivion, when a final thought occurs to him. There was something that he had meant to tell Charles! But he is unable to remember what it was, and now it is too late. Sir Quentin Chandler lets the thought slip away, and shortly after follows it into nothingness.



As a former senior member of the Diplomatic Service, and a Knight of the Realm, Quentin's funeral, conducted near his home in Henley-on-Thames, was a dignified, if sparsely attended, ceremony. Besides Charles, his wife Isabelle, and their daughter Seraphina, two representatives from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office were present to pay their respects. Afterwards, the two civil servants solemnly shook hands with the vicar and the family, then departed, their duty satisfactorily fulfilled. Charles took his family to lunch at a nearby hotel, and broached a subject that had been on his mind since Quentin's death.

"When the estate's settled," he said, after they had finished their meal, "how would you both feel if I gave up work?"

Isabelle looked at him, surprise turning to concern. "Would we be able to afford it?" She came from a French family who had once been wealthy. Her father had gambled away a veritable fortune in the casinos of St Tropez and Monte Carlo, spiralled down into alcoholism, and finally disappeared altogether. Isabelle and her mother had been forced to live off the grudging charity of other family members, until Isabelle had met and married Charles. Her mother remained in France, and now lived permanently with her older sister. "Is your grandfather's legacy that large?"

Charles nodded. "It'll take time to complete the probate process, but even after inheritance tax there'll be enough left for us to live very comfortably." He looked at her. "And don't forget that there's the money I inherited when my parents passed away."

Isabelle looked dubious. "Will this new way of life pay for holidays? A new car every year? Sera's schooling?"

Charles sighed. He loved his wife, but wondered, not for the first time, whether she loved him or the lifestyle he provided. "I've thought about that, and yes, we'd be able to carry on the same." He turned his attention to their thirteen-year-old daughter. "Any thoughts Sera?"

"It sounds nice, Dad," she answered, looking shyly at him, "you not having to go to work."

"I think so." Charles smiled back at her.

"I was hoping that we could maybe buy a better house," Isabelle commented, looking away from the table, "but I suppose that'll be out of the question now."

Charles swallowed his irritation, and thought carefully before speaking. "If we were to move away from Ebbsfleet, we could buy a bigger house. Potentially even make money."

"I'm not moving to some nasty terraced house," Isabelle said indignantly, "in some squalid area full of unemployed people and immigrants!"

With an effort, Charles contained himself: Isabelle had never done a day's paid work in her life; and she was French! "I'm not suggesting that," he said as mildly as he could. "There are beautiful areas in the country where we could buy a better house, and still make a profit."

"Hmm." Isabelle looked unconvinced. "Where, for instance?"

Charles thought frantically. "Oh, I don't know, somewhere in Devon perhaps? The English Riviera?"

Isabelle's eyes lit up. "The Riviera?"

"The English Riviera," Charles corrected her. "It's three towns along the South Devon coast." He looked at Sera. "I went there a couple of times with my parents when I was young."

"Are there nice beaches?" Sera asked.

"Yes, there are," Charles replied with growing enthusiasm. "We used to stay in a place called Torquay, and I remember it having lovely beaches." The more he thought about it, the better it sounded. "If you travel inland, there's Dartmoor National Park, and all sorts of interesting places to visit."

"It sounds good. Don't you think so Mum?"

Isabelle sniffed. "It sounds all right, I suppose."

"It would be nice to put some distance between us and London," Charles said.

"Oh very well." Isabelle gave in with bad grace. "But don't think I'm moving to some backwater!"



Eight months later, in early April, they were in Torquay. They had bought a beautiful detached house in a select cul-de-sac on the outskirts of the town. Isabelle, despite her initial misgivings, was absolutely enamoured with the new property. She had insisted that some minor changes be made, and that it had to be redecorated, but otherwise, she was uncharacteristically satisfied. The family had quickly learnt their way around the new area, discovering that the local facilities were equally as good as those that they had left behind. Seraphina had started at a private school in the nearby town of Teignmouth, and was making new friends. Isabelle, a lapsed Catholic, but still a committed Christian, had become involved with the high Anglican church of St Mary the Virgin in nearby St Marychurch. This particular church had been suggested by her former vicar, as it fell under the auspices of the Holy See of Ebbsfleet. Charles had embraced his new freedom, and for the time being at least, was

content to spend his time exploring the local area on foot. Their new house gave him easy access to the South West Coast Path and the John Musgrove Heritage Trail, and Charles was taking full advantage of the situation. He hadn't walked so much in years, and was seriously considering buying a dog to accompany him on his lengthening expeditions.

One wet Tuesday morning, Charles had decided to stay indoors. Sera was at school, and Isabelle had travelled to the cathedral city of Exeter on a shopping trip with some new acquaintances from a local health spa. Charles was sitting comfortably on an antique leather armchair, reading the first novel of Gavin Lyall's Major Maxim series. The chair had been his grandfather's favourite, and was one of several high-quality items that they had assimilated from Quentin's house. Charles had been reading for about forty minutes when he began to feel uneasy. The feeling intensified to a degree where he was having difficulty concentrating. After reading the same paragraph for the third time, he put the book face down on the arm of the chair and tried to identify what was bothering him. He certainly wasn't worrying about anything. In fact, since they had moved, he had never felt less stressed. So, by process of elimination, the feeling must have an external source.

Charles was a rational, down to earth character, so he began to look for a mundane explanation. The ambient temperature was perfectly equitable, so he discounted that. He knew that infrasound, anything below 20hz, could have strange effects, but it seemed unlikely. He was somewhat familiar with the phenomena, as there had been an incident involving it in an office at the building where he had worked. The occupant of the office had constantly complained that his colleagues were aggravating him by creeping into the office and darting out again: a claim that was strenuously denied. The matter was finally resolved when a visitor to the office spotted a paper clip vibrating on the desk. A specialist was called, and the cause of the vibration was traced to a cracked blade in the ceiling fan. As it rotated, it generated infrasound at a pitch which resonated with the liquid in the man's eye, causing him to see what he believed to be a figure at the edge of his vision. Charles prowled around the room, placing his hands on various surfaces to see if he could detect any vibration that might be a symptom of it. There was nothing. As he stood, pondering his next move, he realised that the feeling had passed. Shaking his head, he returned to the chair, picked up the book, and dismissed the event from his mind.

A little after six o'clock, the family were seated in the dining room, eating their evening meal. Isabelle was an accomplished chef, and enjoyed cooking: if she didn't have to wash up. She was regaling Sera with her list of purchases that day, when she became aware that her daughter wasn't paying attention.

"Am I boring you, Seraphina?" she asked acidly.

Sera started. “No Mum, not at all.”

“Then why aren’t you paying attention?”

“I am,” Sera answered hesitantly. “At least I was. I don’t know why, but all of a sudden I feel a bit odd.”

Isabelle was instantly concerned. She put down her cutlery, leaned over and placed a hand on Sera’s forehead. “Do you have a headache?”

“No Mum. I don’t feel ill. I just feel, strange.”

Isabelle withdrew her hand. “You don’t feel hot.” She looked thoughtfully at Sera. “Did you eat your lunch?”

“Yes Mum.”

“Define strange.” Charles was reminded of his earlier experience.

“I don’t know, sort of, uncomfortable.” She pushed a lock of dark hair over her ear. “Almost like someone’s watching me.” She glanced behind her. “That’s funny, it’s gone now!”

“Perhaps your blood sugar level’s low,” Isabelle suggested. “Do you feel tired?”

“No, Mum. I keep telling you: I feel fine. It’s completely gone now.” She smiled brightly at Isabelle. “What else did you buy?”

Charles finished his dinner in thoughtful silence. He had decided that it wasn’t prudent to mention his earlier experience, but Seraphina’s account bothered him. After the meal was cleared away, Charles and Isabelle retired to the sitting room with glasses of wine to watch television, whilst Sera went to work on her homework in her bedroom. The evening passed without further incident, and, when the ten o’clock news finished, they went to bed. After her shopping trip, Isabelle was quickly asleep, but Charles sat up reading his book until he could no longer focus on the print. He marked the page, put the book down on his bedside cabinet, and switched off the light. For a few minutes, he mulled over his and Sera’s experiences, deciding that there had to be a reasonable explanation. He yawned, and was soon asleep.

The following morning, Charles awoke abruptly. Isabelle moaned softly, and turned over. He sat up, and looked around the bedroom, his mind awash with disturbing images that were rapidly dissipating. Vainly, he tried to focus his concentration on them, but they sinuously eluded his mental grasp. All but one. The image of a man’s face. He would have been distinguished looking, had his expression not been one of unreasoning rage. Charles didn’t immediately recognise him, but there was something tantalisingly familiar about his features. Charles got out of bed, put on his dressing gown and slippers, then went downstairs. In the sitting room, he pulled open the bottom drawer of a chest, and took out three photo albums that had belonged to his grandfather. In the second album, he found the photo that he was looking for. It was a monochrome picture of Quentin, aged about thirty, smoking a

cigarette whilst sitting cross-legged on top of a large capstan aboard a sail boat. Charles removed the photo from the album, and walked over to the window to study it. The photo was old, and the focus wasn't particularly sharp, but his grandfather's face was a close match to the face in his dream. He replaced the photo in the album, put all three away, then went through to the kitchen and made coffee. He was still cogitating at the breakfast bar when Isabelle joined him. She looked dishevelled in her dressing gown, at odds with her usually immaculate appearance.

"Are you all right?" Charles asked her.

"I didn't sleep very well." She poured herself a mug of coffee.

"Bad dreams?"

She looked at him suspiciously. "How did you know?"

"Me too."

Isabelle sat down beside him, nursing her coffee. "What did you dream about?"

"I can't remember." Charles rubbed his forehead in frustration. "All I know is that I woke up feeling frightened."

Isabelle gave him a calculating look. "And you can't remember what the dream was?"

"No. Do you remember yours?"

She shook her head. "Not really. It was, unpleasant, that's all." She sipped her coffee. "It was just a dream," she said dismissively. "Probably something stuck in my mind from the news."

"Perhaps you're right," Charles reluctantly agreed, knowing that she wasn't. He let the subject drop. "Are you doing anything today?"

"I'm playing tennis this morning, if it stays dry. Then having lunch with some of the ladies from the club. You'll have to take Sera to school and pick her up again."

Charles nodded, resigned to his subordinate rôle. Now that he wasn't working, Isabelle had no qualms about taking advantage of his free time.

Isabelle finished her coffee. She stood up, leaving the empty mug on the breakfast bar, and glanced at the clock. "I'm going to take a shower. Will you wake Sera up, please?" Without waiting for an answer, she left the kitchen.

Charles sighed, and finished his coffee. He put both dirty mugs into the dishwasher, then made his way upstairs. He went into the family bathroom and relieved himself before making his way to Sera's bedroom. He paused outside the door, always a little uncomfortable about entering his teenage daughter's domain, then composed himself, and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He steeled himself, and entered the room, crossing the floor cautiously, avoiding discarded items of clothing. He pulled the curtains open, revealing a cloudy but dry day. Sera didn't stir.

“Sera,” he called quietly. “It’s time to get up.”

There was no reaction.

“Sera,” he called in a louder voice. “Time to get up!”

A muffled groan came from the bed. “Just ten more minutes Dad! Please!”

“No,” said Charles firmly. “You don’t want to be late for school.”

“Aww, all right,” grumbled Sera, reluctantly throwing back the duvet. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking half asleep.

“I’m driving you today.”

“Just for a change,” Sera said sarcastically, rubbing her eyes. “What’s mum doing today then?”

“Playing tennis this morning, then having lunch with some friends.”

Sera grunted as she jammed her feet into a worn pair of slippers.

“I’ll see you downstairs.” Charles hastily exited.

He went to the master bedroom to get dressed. Isabelle was seated at her dressing table, drying her hair.

“Is Seraphina up?” she asked, raising her voice over the sound of the hairdryer.

Charles nodded. “She’s up, but I’m not sure that she’s awake.”

Isabelle switched off the hairdryer, and began brushing her long, almost black hair. “Now you’re learning what I’ve had to deal with every day when you’d gone off to work.”

“I’m not complaining.”

Isabelle put down the brush, and turned to face him. “Good. It won’t hurt you to take a turn at running around after her.”

“I wasn’t deliberately avoiding it before,” said Charles, becoming annoyed. “One of us had to go to work and earn the money.”

Isabelle knew that she had overstepped the mark, and tried to defuse the tension. “I know that, Charlie.” She smiled gently, meeting his gaze with her deep brown eyes. “And I appreciate it. I didn’t mean to sound bitchy.”

“OK, forget it.” With an effort, Charles forced his irritation down. “I’m going to get dressed and have some breakfast. Would you like something?”

“Just some toast, please,” Isabelle replied briskly, her moment of contrition over. She pulled her hair into a ponytail, then stood up and headed for the wardrobe to select her outfit.

Charles dressed quickly and left the bedroom. He went to Sera’s bedroom door and listened for a moment. He could hear the shower running, so he assumed that she was making progress, and forbore from offering any further encouragement. In the kitchen, he made a fresh pot of coffee, and sat quietly for a couple of minutes trying to organise his thoughts. Hearing the bedroom door close, he put two slices of bread into the toaster ready for Isabelle’s breakfast. She appeared shortly afterwards, so

he pushed the lever down on the toaster, then poured them both a mug of coffee.

“Thank-you.” Isabelle took her coffee and sat at the breakfast bar. She glanced up at the clock. “Will my toast take long? I need to leave soon.”

“No, it won’t be long.” Charles stood next to the toaster, ready to butter the slices of bread as soon as they appeared. He felt somehow unsettled, and was keen to speed Isabelle on her way before she noticed, and inevitably commented on, his discomfiture. As if responding to his need for haste, the toast popped up. Charles snatched the hot bread from the machine, buttered it, put it on a plate, and set it before his wife.

“Thank-you.” Isabelle didn’t look up. She was writing a text message on her phone. She finished, stood up, and picked up a slice of toast. “I’ve got to go now. I’ve said that I’m on my way.” She leaned forward and pecked him on the cheek. “Make sure that Sera’s on time for school, and I’ll be back to make dinner.”

“Have a good day.” Charles sat down, and absently helped himself to the remaining slice of toast. Sera came in wearing her school uniform, dragging her bag along the floor behind her. Charles glanced at the clock: it was just after ten to eight. “Do you want some breakfast, princess? You’ve just about got time.”

Sera left her bag by the door, walked to a cupboard, opened it, and peered in. “I’ll have some cereal,” she said, extracting a box.

Charles was on his feet again. “Get yourself a bowl and spoon, I’ll fetch the milk.”

Shortly afterwards, Charles managed to herd Sera out of the kitchen to the garage and into his Jaguar. He waited until the automatic double door had fully opened, before starting the powerful engine and pulling out. Charles had owned the car for several years, and was rather attached to it. Isabelle, however, believed that changing her convertible Mercedes every year was an essential symbol of her status, and steadfastly kept doing it despite his tacit disapproval. Charles drove slowly down the cul-de-sac, and stopped at the junction with the Teignmouth road. The morning traffic was becoming heavier, although nothing like as bad as he had formerly been accustomed to. He waited patiently at the junction until a gap presented itself, then accelerated quickly across the road and headed for Teignmouth. They drove in silence for several minutes: Charles concentrating on navigating the winding road; Sera engrossed with her phone.

“Can Alison come and stay this weekend?” Sera asked, lowering her phone.

“I don’t see why not. But you’ll have to check with mum before you make any firm arrangements.”

"I'll text her now."

"I should leave it 'til later. She'll be playing tennis by now."

Sera harrumphed. "She's always out doing something."

Charles laughed. "I know, but that's your mum: always busy."

"But it's not fair on you. She always does what she wants and expects you to do the things that don't fit in with her plans."

Charles sighed. "Now Sera, it's not as bad as that." Regardless of his personal opinions, he wasn't about to side with Sera against Isabelle.

"Yes, it is," Sera insisted. "Why does mum think that she can do what she likes?"

Charles sighed again. Isabelle's shortcomings had become a staple of Sera's conversation with him lately. "It's the life that your mum's used to leading," he replied patiently, "and, to be fair, she looked after you full-time until you started school. After that, she always took you to school and picked you up because I was working."

"Hmm." Sera was temporarily mollified.

Charles took advantage of the lull, and quickly changed the subject. "Have you had any more, funny feelings in the house?"

That focussed Sera's attention away from Isabelle's deficiencies. "You mean like last night at dinner?"

Charles nodded. "Exactly that."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious, that's all," he answered too quickly.

Sera glanced at him suspiciously, looking uncannily like her mother for a moment. "Do you think that there's something wrong with me?" She paused. "Like mum did."

"No, no, not at all," Charles said hastily. "I just wondered if it had happened again." He felt that he should justify his interest. "You see, a similar thing happened to me earlier in the day."

Sera looked at him, genuine curiosity in her eyes. "What happened?"

Charles didn't answer immediately. He slowed the car down to negotiate the near hairpin bend that marked the approach to Shaldon Bridge which crossed the River Teign. Once they were on the bridge, he resumed the conversation. "Like you, I felt uncomfortable. I didn't feel that someone was watching me, exactly; more like there was someone I couldn't see in the room."

"What did you do?" Sera was fascinated.

"I looked for a logical cause. By the time I'd finished doing that, the feeling had gone."

"And did you find one? A logical cause, I mean."

"No. But that doesn't mean that there wasn't one."

“Do you think that it’s important, Dad? It was just a funny feeling.”

“Probably not. As you say, it was just a funny feeling. Perhaps it’s our minds getting used to the extra space in the new house.” He changed the subject again. “Who’s Alison then?”

Seraphina’s explanation lasted until they arrived outside the school, and in all honesty, Charles was little the wiser. Sera leaned across and kissed him on the cheek.

“Bye Dad.” She opened the car door and began to get out, dragging her bag behind her. “See you later.”

“Have a good day, princess.”

“You too.” She shut the door, and without looking back, hurried towards a group of girls who were gathered by the gate.

Charles watched her until she went into the school grounds with her companions. When she was gone, he smiled ruefully, and set off for home. As he drove, he mentally chastised himself for mentioning his odd experience to Sera. As she had said, it was just a funny feeling, and Charles was determined to rationalise it as such. It was certainly not something that he would normally let bother him. But then there was his dream. He couldn’t escape the fact that the face he remembered bore a striking resemblance to his grandfather. Which raised another problem: obviously he had never known his grandfather as a younger man. For a moment, he let his thoughts take a direction that he had so far studiously avoided. What if his grandfather was trying to contact him from beyond the grave? He had been close to Quentin for his whole life, so it seemed logical that if the old man was going to contact anybody, it would be him. But why? Charles had no idea. He deliberately curtailed that train of thought. Perhaps his grandfather’s death had affected him more profoundly than he realised. He didn’t believe in the supernatural, and had never heard or seen any evidence to make him think otherwise. When he arrived back at the house, he was going to look for a sensible, logical explanation. Reassured by his return to mundane reasoning, Charles settled back in the comfortable seat and enjoyed the drive home.

Back at the house, Charles made a cup of coffee. He sat at the breakfast bar and thought about what he should do. Part of him felt that he was overreacting to what amounted to no more than a mildly uncomfortable feeling and an unpleasant dream. Perhaps now that he wasn’t working, he was unconsciously finding ways to fill his time. He shook his head. Whatever the true motivation, he had an intuitive conviction that it was important to find out what was going on. Leaving his coffee half finished, Charles wandered into the sitting room and looked about. The room appeared as it always did. He began to walk slowly around, touching the various items of furniture, resting his hands against the walls. He had to admit that he had no real idea of

what he was looking for, or how to find it. Charles paused, and looked out into the garden. He felt vaguely foolish, wasting his time on what was almost inevitably a wild goose chase when he could be out walking in the fresh air. He was about to go and put on his walking boots and coat, when the uneasy feeling suddenly enveloped him. Startled, he turned quickly and looked around the room. There was nothing out of the ordinary. He took two steps away from the French windows and stopped, straining his senses for any clue as to the cause of his anxiety. Then he became aware of a faint sound. It was indistinct, but Charles was sure that he could hear whispering.

An involuntary shudder ran up Charles' spine, and his mouth went dry as he desperately tried to rationalise the sound. Perhaps Sera had left her radio playing upstairs? No, he was certain that it was in the room with him. Perhaps it was coming from a gas or water pipe in the floor or in a wall? He pulled himself together, and slowly began another tour of the room, trying to pinpoint the source. Although the difference in volume was slight, the mysterious sound seemed to be emanating from the vicinity of the fireplace. He placed an ear against the wall and listened. Almost immediately, he snatched his head away, and stood slack-jawed, staring at the wall in utter disbelief. As his ear had met the wall, the whisper clarified into one sibilant word: 'Charles.' Charles' already strained composure snapped. He turned and ran from the room, not stopping until he reached the back door in the kitchen. He was poised to turn the handle, when his mind began to work again. He forced himself to withdraw his hand, and turned back to face the kitchen. Perspiration had broken out on his forehead, and he unconsciously wiped it away. There had to be a rational explanation! With a mighty effort, he sat at the breakfast bar, and took a sip of coffee. The cold bitter liquid went some way towards calming him. Charles took a deep breath, and reran the event in his mind.

Some ten minutes later, having replayed the memory so many times that it had lost its' impact, Charles returned to the sitting room. He had almost convinced himself that he had imagined, or misinterpreted, the whole thing. He stood in the doorway, listening intently: the sound had gone. He tentatively stepped fully into the room, and faced the fireplace. He could hear nothing, feel nothing. Charles walked slowly to the fireplace, and reluctantly pressed his ear to the wall beside the mantelpiece. The expensive wallpaper felt warm against his flesh, but he barely registered the fact. It was the whisper that he was seeking: simultaneously hoping and dreading to hear it. He couldn't hear anything. Charles straightened up, looked at the wall for a moment, then reached out and tapped it with his knuckles. It felt and sounded solid. Feeling somewhat frustrated, Charles continued sounding along the length of the wall, carefully avoiding the ornaments on the mantelpiece.

Although he knew that the chimney ran vertically behind the mid-section of the wall, he could hear no variation in the tone of his rapping. By the time he reached the corner of the room, his fear had been replaced by irritation.

Charles stood with his hands on his hips, lips pursed, and considered the situation. Either there was a rational explanation, or he was losing his mind. He refused to even contemplate the latter. Like his father, he had been a Home Office civil servant for all his working life, an occupation that required down to earth reasoning. His thought process was logical, ordered, and, if he was honest, unimaginative. That left him with finding a rational explanation. Determined to do just that, Charles retreated to the kitchen, made himself a pot of coffee, and spent the remainder of the morning trawling the internet for a possible solution.

By lunchtime, he had found several more plausible possibilities: musical ear, a variant of subjective tinnitus that could manifest as an intelligible voice; the fear cage, an abnormally high concentration of electromagnetic fields caused by excessive or faulty wiring; and his original theory, infrasound. Charles pondered the three theories as he made himself a chicken sandwich. He quickly discounted musical ear, as he had never experienced a problem with his hearing, and didn't suffer from any of the symptoms that accompanied it. The fear cage theory interested him, although the science was rather nebulous. The alleged symptoms, unease, paranoia, and hallucinations, fitted in with both his and Sera's experiences. However, in addition to the general survey, he had insisted that a thorough electrical inspection be carried out on the house, and had a certificate of electrical safety to prove it. He put that theory to one side as an option for later review. That left him with infrasound.

Charles sat at the breakfast bar to eat his lunch. The infrasound theory was his favourite, as it could have a natural cause. Wind blowing around the outside of the house was a potential culprit. But it didn't really explain the whispering. He shook his head. The problem was beyond his ability to solve. He would have to bring in someone who knew what they were doing. Although she had admitted to having a nightmare, he didn't want to involve Isabelle, as it was doubtful that she would take his concerns seriously. So where could he find someone to help him? It seemed unlikely that he would find what he was looking for in the directory of local tradesmen. No, he knew who to ask: his former boss, and close friend of his father, Sir Stephen Pilkington. In the fulfilment of his office, Sir Stephen was often involved in the more clandestine assemblies of senior Home Office officials. If anyone knew who could provide the help Charles needed, it was Sir Stephen. Charles finished his lunch, and picked up his phone. He scrolled through the contacts until he reached Sir Stephen, and, without giving himself time to reconsider, dialled. The ringing tone sounded twice before the call was answered.

“Pilkington.”

“Good afternoon Sir Stephen, it’s Charles Chandler.”

“Charles m’boy! How the devil are you?”

“I’m well sir, thank-you. How are you?”

“Old age galloping on apace. Shouldn’t grumble, but I will anyway!” He laughed. “How’s that wife of yours? And young Seraphina?”

“They’re doing nicely, thank-you sir.”

“Good, good.” He paused. “I have the distinct impression that this isn’t a social call.”

Charles laughed nervously. “Not exactly, sir. I would appreciate your help with a rather delicate matter.”

“Of course, Charles. If it’s within my power to give. Tell me what’s troubling you.”

Charles explained his predicament, emphasising that he believed that there was a logical explanation.

“That does sound a bit rum,” Sir Stephen said thoughtfully. “I can understand why you’re concerned.” He suddenly changed the subject. “This place in Devon that you’ve bought, where exactly is it?”

“On the outskirts of a town called Torquay.”

“Anywhere near a place called Watcombe Woods?”

“Yes, actually. They’re not accessible from here, but the woods are at the end of our road.”

“Interesting. You’re aware of what happened there at the end of last year?”\*

Charles thought for a moment. “Do you know I’d quite forgotten about that. We were on holiday when it happened, so I only really remember the court cases being in the news.”

“The reason I mention it, is that at the beginning of the police investigation, an epistle came down from a very lofty place, instructing us to authorise the immediate creation of a new Special Advisor with full Home Office authority. We were completely unfamiliar with this individual, and more than a little sceptical, but subsequent reports from senior police officers showed that his rôle was crucial to solving the case. The gentleman in question lives in Torquay,” Sir Stephen paused meaningfully, “and I would suggest that his, unusual skill set, is just what you’re looking for.”

“Are you able to let me have his contact details, Sir Stephen?”

“Strictly speaking, no. But I hardly think that you’re going to be a security risk. Give me a moment.”

Charles’ call was put on hold. He waited patiently, barely hearing the appalling music. This was just what he had hoped for. With luck, he could have the whole business sorted out, and Isabelle none the wiser. His thoughts were interrupted as Sir Stephen returned.

“Have you pen and paper?”

“Yes sir.”

Sir Stephen gave Charles the name, address, and telephone number of the enigmatic Special Advisor. “I hope that he’s what you’re looking for. If there’s anything else that I can do for you, don’t hesitate to contact me.” He paused. “Although, I hope that the next time we speak it’s to arrange dinner!”

Charles laughed. “So do I sir! I would like that very much. I’m extremely grateful for your help.”

“You’re welcome, of course. Well, I must get on. Take care of yourself m’boy.”

“And you, Sir Stephen.”

“Goodbye Charles.”

“Goodbye.” Charles sat holding his phone for a long moment, then added the new information to his contacts list. He tore the note into tiny pieces, and distributed the pieces between the household bin and the food recycling caddy. It was information that he no longer had any right to, and he felt obliged to safeguard it. Now that he had the man’s details, he was apprehensive about contacting him. Perhaps he could find some background information from the internet? He opened a search engine on his tablet, and typed in the man’s name: Malachi Hunter. The first two results were a website and a Facebook page. The website was for a local business: ‘Hunter’s Landscaping and Garden Services.’ Charles browsed the beautifully presented site, and found a photograph of Malachi Hunter, a brawny, intelligent looking man, alongside a brief biography. Had Charles needed a landscape gardener, Mr Hunter appeared to be a shrewd choice. He was well qualified, experienced, and the photos of his completed projects captivating: but there was no mention of the talents that Charles required. He moved on to the Facebook page. Again, it represented Mr Hunter’s business rather than the man himself.

Charles sat back and thought about it. It seemed unlikely that there were two Malachi Hunters in Torquay, so this must be his man. Obviously, a one-off employment as a Home Office Special Advisor didn’t constitute a career, so probably Mr Hunter was a landscape gardener by profession, and a, whatever he was, in his own time. Reassured by his reasoning, Charles decided to contact Hunter after taking Sera to school the following day: taking for granted that Isabelle would be away from the house.

The afternoon passed quietly without repetition of Charles’ earlier experience. He set off at three o’clock to fetch Sera, which allowed him ample time to complete the journey and find a parking space close to the school entrance. As he waited for his daughter, he thought again about what he would do the next day. His hope was that Hunter would be available to come

and inspect the house straight away. If Isabelle, and Sera, were to remain in ignorance of his visit it would have to be during the daytime. Realistically, Charles supposed, it was more likely that the man would be working during the day. Well, there was little point in speculating. He would telephone Hunter in the morning and take it from there. Charles' reverie was interrupted by the front passenger door opening.

"Hi Dad!"

"Hello princess. Good day?"

"All right." She pulled a face. "I've got loads of homework."

"That's what I like to hear!"

"Dad!"

Charles chuckled. "Let's take you home. I bet you can't wait to make a start!"

"Yeah, right."

They drove along the winding coast road, Sera chattering amiably about her day. Back at the house, she disappeared up to her room with a vague assurance that she would make a start on her homework. Charles made himself a coffee, and retired to the sitting room to read. Now that he had a plan, his apprehension had lessened somewhat. He had barely settled into the leather armchair when Sera entered the room, carrying an armful of books.

"Oh! You're in here."

Charles smiled. "There's plenty of room for both of us."

Sera looked uncertain. "I suppose so."

"I promise not to distract you." When she didn't reply, he said: "I thought you were going to work in your bedroom."

"I was," she replied hesitantly. "Then I just, wanted to come down here." She looked confused. "I don't really know why."

Before Charles could pursue the matter further, he heard the door from the garage open and close: Isabelle was home. A few moments later, she entered the room.

"Hello! What are you two doing?"

"Sera's just come down to do her homework. I was reading."

"I've had a very pleasant day. I won my tennis match, and we had lunch at an excellent little restaurant." She looked from Charles to Sera, waiting for a response.

"Well done," Charles said as enthusiastically as he could manage. "What did you have to eat?"

Isabelle sat down and treated Charles to a detailed description of her lunch. Sera quietly left the room. When Isabelle had finished, she stood up. "I'm going to take a shower."

"What were you planning on having for dinner?"

“We didn’t eat until quite late, so I’m not hungry. Perhaps you’d like to order a takeaway for you and Sera?” She turned to leave the room.

Charles forced down his annoyance. “Have you plans for tomorrow?”

Isabelle paused, and half turned back. “I’ll be out all day. Suzanne, my friend from the tennis club, and I are going to the shopping village at Street.”

“Where’s that? I haven’t heard of it.”

“It’s near Glastonbury, in Somerset. I’ll be back late, so you and Sera will have to fend for yourselves.”

“That’s fine.” Charles was relieved that Isabelle would be out of the way. “No problem at all.”

Isabelle looked at him suspiciously for a moment. “Good, thank-you.” She left the room.

Charles leaned back in the chair and smiled. The plan was coming together nicely. His smile faded; taking for granted that Hunter would be available tomorrow. When he spoke to the man, he would stress his Home Office connection and hope that it carried some weight. As he had already told himself, there was no profit in speculating. He deliberately put the matter from his thoughts, and went to ask Sera what she fancied for her dinner.

The evening passed uneventfully. Isabelle went to bed early, and Sera retired to her bedroom as soon as the Chinese food was finished: leaving Charles alone downstairs. He tidied up, and settled himself in the kitchen with his tablet and a glass of wine. He opened a search engine, and paused. What was he going to look for? Then he had it: Watcombe Woods. A search immediately produced what he was looking for. He carefully read through several local and national newspaper articles chronicling the events that occurred towards the end of the previous year. Charles sat up, and took a sip of his wine. There was only one mention of a Home Office expert in the occult being attached to the case, which, although he wasn’t named and didn’t appear in court, had to be Malachi Hunter. Charles rested his chin on his hand, and reviewed what he had learned.

On Saturday the seventh of November, an eighteen-year-old girl called Lauren Brown was abducted in Torquay, and horrifically murdered in Watcombe Woods by a group of five occultists led by police sergeant Thomas Ackermann. During the ceremony, the apparent purpose of which was to summon a Celtic or Pagan God named Camulos, one of the other men involved had died of heart failure. Two of the group were apprehended the following day, but Ackermann and his girlfriend evaded capture and went on to recruit three more women to their cause. They returned to Watcombe Woods several days later, taking a female police officer hostage at knifepoint. Ultimately, a tactical police unit stormed the site, rescued the hostage, and detained the remaining offenders: except Ackermann, who

escaped into the sea. He had later robbed and murdered his wife, and was still at large.

Charles paused to drink more of his wine. The trial of the group was quite sensational. Most of the accused sensibly downplayed the occult element of their crimes. However, one of the original group, a man called Adrian Horwell, stuck to his story that Camulos had answered their summons, and was responsible for killing Brown. Surprisingly, Camulos' presence at the scene was corroborated by the policewoman hostage, who claimed that some of her injuries were caused by him. Charles shook his head. To him, it seemed more likely that drugs were involved, and that the unfortunate hostage had been the unwitting recipient of a hallucinogenic. Although, he was forced to concede, none of the evidence directly linked any of the defendants to Brown's gruesome murder, and none of them were charged with it. The newspapers had made a connection to the unsolved murders of a couple in Shiphay, also in Torquay, where an identical cause of death was reported.

Charles shook his head. He couldn't bring himself to seriously consider that a supernatural being had executed three people. It was just too fantastic! Perhaps he would ask Mr Hunter when he met him. Charles glanced up at the clock: it was after eleven, he really ought to go to bed. He switched off the tablet, finished his wine, and set off on his customary tour to ensure that all the doors were locked, turning off the lights as he went. His last stop was the French windows in the sitting room. At the threshold, he hesitated. There was sufficient ambient light that he could navigate across the room without switching on the lamp. He didn't give himself time to think about it, walking deliberately over to the windows, and testing the handles. Confident that all was secure, he turned, and headed back to the door. He was halfway across the room, when something interrupted the light. Curious, Charles turned back, then froze. A dark figure was crossing in front of the French window. Charles watched in utter disbelief as it passed the window, merged with the shadows, and was gone. He froze, too scared to move, then backed stiffly out of the room, and closed the door. In the hall, his control faltered, and he involuntarily sank to the floor. His pulse was racing, his heart hammering, his body slick with cold sweat. He felt dizzy and nauseous.

After several minutes, Charles felt able to regain his feet. He looked at the closed door, and shuddered. He was frantically trying to find a conventional explanation for what he had seen, but his own eyes were compelling witnesses. This was not something that he could explain away. He had to face the fact that it was beyond his comprehension; not to mention his ability to deal with. Carefully he made his way upstairs, undressed, and slid under the covers, where he spent the remainder of the night staring into the darkness.

The following day, tired and pensive, he rose early, and went mechanically through the motions of the morning routine. If Isabelle noticed his distracted state, she made no mention of it, and set off early for her day out. Sera was more concerned, but he made an effort, and was able to reassure her. Finally, he was home alone again. With a trembling hand, he dialled Mr Hunter's number and waited anxiously for an answer.