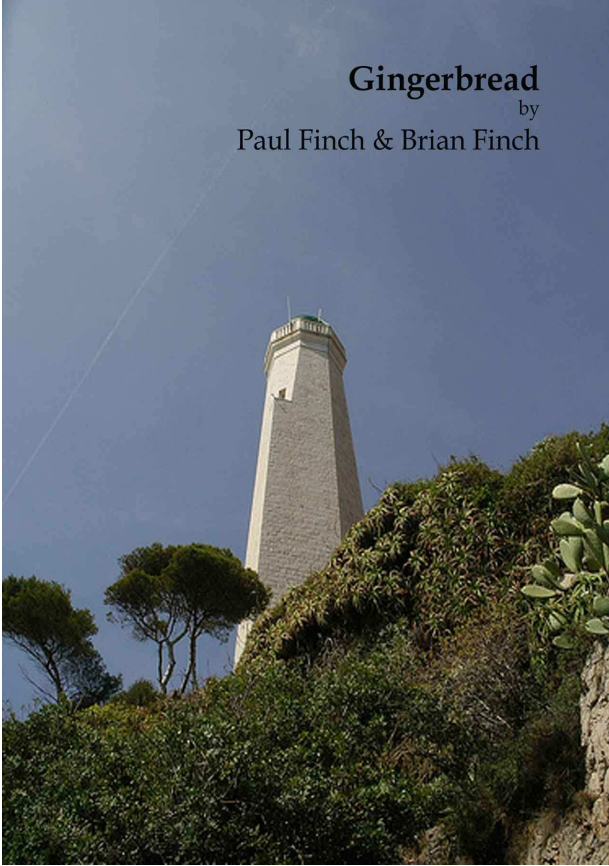


**Gingerbread**  
by  
Paul Finch & Brian Finch



First Published in 2008 by Pendragon Press

This PDF E-dition Published in 2009 by Pendragon Press

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## GINGERBREAD

Paul Finch *and* Brian Finch

**I**t was in the chic harbour of St. Jean where Janey first set eyes on Tim. She was hosing down the deck on Monsieur Lombard's forty-foot motor-cruiser, when she suddenly glanced up and spotted him parked at the end of the jetty in a beaten-up old beach-buggy. He was watching her with a predatory smile.

She was irritated rather than embarrassed, but still felt a little exposed in her skimpy black two-piece. She pushed back her tawny locks, and continued hosing. Three months spent hitch-hiking had tanned and firmed up her already shapely figure, making her very noticeable. Not that this excused the cheeky young guy's brazen behaviour. Janey looked up again. He had now climbed from his buggy and was approaching along the jetty: idly, feigning interest in the boats moored there. She appraised him quickly: blonde himself, and curly-haired; reasonably fit in a stocky, athletic-sort of way; probably not much older than she was, twenty-two or twenty-three; clad in flip-flops, baggy shorts and a string-vest, with a straw Stetson to shield his head from the scorching August sun.

Janey lifted her shades as he loafed casually up. "Something I can help you with?" she asked.

"Woah!" He seemed pleasantly surprised. "American! You're a long way from home?"

As she'd suspected, he was English. Up close, she noticed that he had very blue eyes. He wasn't unfanciable. But he still wasn't particularly welcome. "I said is there something I can help you with?"

He shrugged. “Just admiring the scenery.”

“Oh, please ...”

“Sorry,” he said hurriedly. “That was cheap of me.” This time his smile didn’t seem quite so predatory. “The name’s Tim, Tim Maxwell. I live near here. You’re on holiday I presume?”

“Sort of,” she replied.

“Nice boat.”

“Wish I could say it was mine.” She started winding the hose in.

“Don’t tell me ... you’re working your way through the vacation?”

“Well you got me all figured out.” She turned her back on him.

His smile faded. “Hey, I can’t take a hint. Maybe I’ll see you round.”

He made to leave, but Janey wasn’t rude by nature and she instantly regretted her curtness. “Listen ... I’m sorry.”

He stopped, turned.

“I don’t mean to be ignorant,” she added. “It’s just that for the last month I’ve been working for a guy who thinks that for thirty euros a week, he can put his hands on whatever he can see. I’m getting quietly pissed.”

Tim smiled again, this time sympathetically. “Why quietly?”

“Because I’m broke, and he isn’t. It’s that simple.”

“Well I’m not broke either, and I don’t believe in putting my hands anywhere they aren’t wanted.”

Janey eyed him warily. “You offering me a job or something?”

“Maybe. First I thought I might buy you breakfast?”

Had he said anything else she might have continued to give him the brush-off, but cool as she was about strangers and their sexual ambitions, at least one meal a day was something of a necessity, even on as tight a budget as hers. Surely, even in the south of France, you couldn’t get exploited over breakfast? She laid down the hose-pipe, grabbed up her sarong, and, a few minutes later, had allowed Tim to drive her round the harbour to a small pavement café, its smartly-set tables nestling in the shade of interwoven vine-leaves. He chivalrously pulled a chair out for her, then called the *garçon* and ordered a pot of drinking-chocolate and some hot buttered croissants.

Hungry though she was, Janey ate only delicately. Tim didn't seem hungry at all. He sat back and watched her. "Course, in England, getting pissed means getting drunk," he finally said. "I can't imagine you're the type to do *that* quietly."

"Haven't had much practice of late," Janey replied truthfully.

"Maybe there's something we can do about that?"

She looked him over again, taking in his shabby shorts and vest, his worn-out flip-flops. "Do you really live round here?"

"Certainly do."

She didn't want to say out loud that St. Jean and its neighbouring Beaulieu and Villefranche-sur-Mer were basically a millionaires' playground, and that Tim looked like something the tide had brought in, but it was difficult not to imply it. "It's just ... you don't seem right to me."

He laughed. "This is the Riviera. We don't dress up for anything down here."

Like his smile, Tim's laugh was infectious. Janey decided she liked him before she'd even finished her first croissant.

"So," he said, "what do you think of it?"

The villa was built in the hacienda style; whitewashed stucco and red roof-tiles, black wrought-iron frames on the shuttered windows. There was a neat little garden in front of it, filled with poplars and small, twisted cork-oaks, and a crushed-gravel path leading up to its white beech-wood door. It was accessible by one of those narrow dusty lanes so typical of the rural Mediterranean, in this case lined with gorse and honeysuckle and sloping precariously down to the jagged grey rocks and glimmering blue waters of the *Cote d'Azur*. The 'Villa Tamara', as it was called, was the last habitation before the water's edge, and built into the cliff-side as if on stilts. Its wide, white-stone esplanade directly overlooked the sea, and was complete with marble balustrades and a huge, rectangular swimming-pool. Even from the top of the lane – a parking-area beside the picturesque Cap-Ferat lighthouse – the luxury of the villa was amazing; it looked positively Roman.

"You own this?" Janey said.

"My own little palace."

“You’re not kidding.”

“Like a closer look?” he asked, setting off down the lane.

“Are you serious? You bet!”

A few moments later, he’d shown her through the front gate and ushered her along the path, and was now opening the door. Janey noticed immediately that he didn’t use a key.

She hesitated before entering. “You got family here, or something?”

Tim shook his head. “Just me, I’m afraid.”

“And you don’t keep your door locked?”

“Crime’s not a problem round here. But if someone did decide to get in, they’d only break a window. We don’t generally bother.”

“You’re pulling my chain, right?”

He grinned, then went inside. “You Americans ... your trouble is, back home you’re besieged by crime. You see it everywhere you look.”

Janey followed him in. The villa’s interior was cool, but filled with brilliant daylight.

“A recent report on CNN said that, in relative terms, Britain’s crime-rate is at least as bad as the USA’s,” she commented.

“Yeah, but I don’t live in Britain.”

Janey halted on the edge of a spacious lounge-come-dining room. It was tasteful in the extreme, the furniture sparse but elegant, the floor smoothly tiled, the walls of whitewashed plaster inlaid with Mediterranean frescoes: dolphins and Greek, sea-going maidens.

“How come?” she asked, surveying the handsome decor.

“Home come what?” He unbolted a pair of glazed doors and pushed them open.

Beyond them lay a veranda, complete with recliners and flower-boxes nodding with lustrous pink blooms. From there, a spiral stairway led down to the esplanade. Up this close, the glinting blue sea was so vast it seemed to fill every room.

“How come you don’t live in Britain?” she asked, awe-stricken by the simple beauty of the place.

“I don’t need to,” Tim said, walking out onto the balcony. “I’m rich. As you’ve probably guessed.”

She followed him outside, and stood by the flower-boxes. A bumble bee moved drunkenly from blossom to blossom. “Well ... yeah. I’d sort of noticed,” she said. “But the truth is, when I first saw you, I figured you were just some bum trying to make a move on me. Either that or a drugs dealer.”

He glanced sidelong at her. “Bet you’re still wondering about the latter?”

“It *had* crossed my mind.”

He grinned. “Don’t be embarrassed, you wouldn’t be the first person to make that mistake.” He led her down the stair to the pool-side, where tables and chairs in white wrought-iron sheltered under parasols. “No, this wealth’s inherited. My mum and dad were killed in a road-crash when I was seventeen.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it was six years ago. Anyway, my dad was a big name in conglomerates, and he left a stockpile of cash and property. I’ve never needed to work since.”

“At the end of the day, I don’t suppose that’s much consolation?”

Momentarily his eyes clouded. “No, it isn’t. But ...” and he brightened again, “life goes on. What can I get you to drink?”

“What are *you* having?” she asked.

“How about a bucks-fizz? A *real* bucks-fizz: chilled champers and fresh orange juice!”

“Sounds great.”

He left her by the balustrade as he went back indoors through another pair of French-windows. These connected to a ground-floor bar; a 1970s fad perhaps, which indicated the age of the property, though this one was pleasant enough, with a counter of polished oak, a row of wicker-work stools arranged in front of it, and shelves at the back that were positively stacked with bottles of spirits. Tim slipped behind the counter and bent down out of sight. Janey, meanwhile, looked out to sea – it rippled serenely, a wavering haze beating up off it, obscuring the distant outline of Nice on the far side of the bay. Closer in, along the shore, rocks and submerged reefs glittered green and turquoise beneath the lapping waves. Two bronzed men, in thongs and goggles, were diving from a small

dinghy. Janey replaced her shades and raised her face to the sun, letting the heat soak through her. The climate in this part of Europe was probably the most pleasant she'd so far come across. England she'd found pretty but cool, Spain hot but barren ... southern France, however, Provence in particular, seemed to be all things to all men: green, scenic and luxuriously warm.

"Here we go," said Tim, re-appearing. He carried two tall glasses and a pitcher brimming with bright yellow liquor. Champagne bubbles fizzed and popped between the slices of orange and jostling ice-cubs. He placed the glasses on top of the balustrade, and poured out two generous measures.

Janey watched him carefully. "So what's this job you're offering?"

"Housekeeper."

That surprised her. "To work *here*?"

"Where else?"

"You haven't already got a housekeeper?"

"Well, there was a local woman who used to cook and clean for me. But she left a few months ago."

"Any particular reason?"

He shrugged. "Not really."

"I ought to warn you," Janey said, "I don't know much about housekeeping."

He handed her a glass. "It's not like we're running a country mansion. All you'd really have to do is keep your eye on the place, sweep up now and then, dust."

"Cook?"

Again, he shrugged. "If you wanted to. I can cook, myself, but the odd three-course meal now and then wouldn't go amiss."

He sampled his bucks-fizz, and smiled blissfully. Janey considered the position. Just about everyone in Europe spoke English these days, but there was something less foreign about the English themselves ... at least, from an American viewpoint. Okay, their famous quiet reserve was often seen as stuffy back in the States, but once you got to know them, they were a polite, respectful sort of bunch, who tended to stay calm in a crisis. It certainly wouldn't hurt to take a part-time job here.

"What sort of pay are you offering?" she asked.

“Ah, now that’s something we’d have to discuss.”

“Ah!”

“No, I think you’d find it quite acceptable,” he said hastily. “I hadn’t thought about it, really. You’d be living here at the villa, if that’s any enticement, using all the facilities: the pool, the sauna, the bar.”

To Janey, who’d spent most of her nights in Europe crashed-out in her sleeping bag on beaches, this was the best news she’d heard all day. Of course, it wouldn’t do to get over-enthusiastic about the offer.

“Suppose I didn’t want to live here?” she asked.

Tim frowned thoughtfully. “Now there we’d have a problem. You see, one thing I really *do* want is someone to live on the site; you know, look after the place while I’m not here.”

“I thought you said crime didn’t worry you?”

This seemed to catch him on the hop, but eventually he shook his head. “It’s not crime as such, it’s the general upkeep. I hate it when a house feels un-lived-in.”

“I assume I’d have my own bedroom?”

“Sure. I’m asking you to be my housekeeper, nothing more.” He gave this some consideration, then added: “Course, if you chose to laze about on the sundeck, looking amazing, it would only add to my pleasure. But that’s as far as it goes.” Their glasses came together with a clink. “Do we have a deal?”

“Let me think about it,” Janey said, taking a long sip ... and in that same instant, gagging and grimacing and spitting the liquid out. “*God, what did you put in that?*”

Tim gazed at her, perplexed. “Orange and champagne, like I said.”

She looked at the drink in her hand, aghast. It had tasted warm and foetid, salty even, like sweat or urine, or worse. She held it out to him with a shaking hand. “You try it.”

He took it warily, and sniffed before tasting. Neither test backfired on him. He rolled the drink around his mouth, then swallowed easily. “Seems okay.”

“You’ve got to be joking!”

He shrugged helplessly. “Mine’s okay too. They both came from the same jug.”

“Are you pulling some kind of stunt?”

Now he looked hurt. “Not at all, God’s honest truth.” He held her glass up to the light. “Maybe the rim’s dirty, or something?”

“Charming.”

He tried to smile. “Hey, I told you I needed a housekeeper. Shall I get you another?”

“Er ... no thanks.”

“It’ll be okay, I’m sure.”

“No thanks.”

Curious, he took another sip from her glass, then tried his own. Clearly neither seemed unpleasant to him, and, shaking his head, he carried both drinks back into the bar. Janey watched him uncertainly. Once she’d got talking to him, he’d seemed a nice, uncomplicated sort of guy. Now she was less convinced. She’d been hearing a lot recently about new kinds of drugs, which certain shitheels were using to spike girls’ drinks so they could carry out date-rapes. This thing however hadn’t been chemical; more stagnant, biological ... something you’d expect to find in a toilet bowl. That thought, alone, induced a shudder.

She glanced after Tim again. He was behind the bar, in the process of pouring the two drinks away, though he sampled them both once more before he did, in each case taking a hefty gulp. That seemed to scotch the rape-drug theory. Still, there was a mystery here. Janey strode to the edge of the swimming pool. It was just over six feet in the deep-end, and beautifully tiled in sapphire and aqua-marine. The water was clear as crystal, and when she dipped her toe in it, just the right temperature. Aside from the business with the drink, the place was perfect: a made-to-order holiday idyll.

“Checking I’m not breeding piranhas, as well?” Tim said, as he reappeared.

“I’ve got to say, this is a truly gorgeous house.”

He seemed surprised. “That nasty little incident hasn’t put you off too much?”

She shrugged, not completely sure herself. "I should warn you, I'll only be able to take the job for a few weeks. I have to be back in the States late-September."

"Let me guess, New York?"

"New Jersey."

"You've got to be back at college?"

"That's right."

He sighed wistfully. "Wish I was."

"You're kidding ... when you've got this place?"

"Don't be fooled, it can get pretty bleak here in the winter."

"Not like Jersey, I'll bet."

"Possibly not." Suddenly he smiled and clapped his hands together. "Anyway, how about we rustle up some grub?"

"Doesn't seem so long since breakfast."

"We'll barbecue," he said. "It'll take forty minutes at least for the coals to warm up."

But actually, it took a lot longer than that.

The initial problem was that Tim couldn't find the freezer-chest. He searched high and low in the villa's kitchen, which was handsomely appointed with stone surfaces and pristine woodwork, but which seemed to conceal the object of his interest very effectively. He opened every cabinet and cupboard, and even glanced under the sink. Then it suddenly struck him that there was a utility room connecting the kitchen to an exterior wash-house, and that this was where the refrigeration facilities were located.

"How long did you say you've lived here?" Janey wondered, as he went through the various items of frozen meat in the chest, and finally selected two hefty pieces of steak.

He gave her an awkward smile. "I told a little lie, I must admit. My housekeeper only actually left a few days ago. And the truth is, well, I don't do a lot of cooking, myself."

Janey nodded, having suspected something like this. Tim grinned again as they made their way back through to the kitchen. He was clearly trying to make light of it, but the girl couldn't help wondering if there were any other little lies he'd told her.

The barbecue was built-in: constructed from smooth, honey-coloured brick and located at the eastern side of the esplanade, just

in front of the balustrade but sheltered by a low cedar tree. The day was still hot and dry, with little or no wind, so the conditions were ideal. Tim took a sack of charcoal briquettes from the storage space, laid them out on a sheet of foil underneath the metal grille, drenched them with lighter-fuel from a small plastic bottle, and attempted to light them.

But they simply wouldn't take. Laughing, he dug further into the storage area, found a block of fire-starter, broke it up into crumbs and scattered them among the briquettes. Bewilderingly though, even the fire-starter wouldn't take.

Twenty minutes of such frustration passed, until Tim found himself running out of matches. All this time, of course, the two steaks had been defrosting on a slab in the kitchen, where Janey had been going through the racks of herbs and spices with the intention of whipping up what she always called her "special barbecue sauce". She'd also discovered some salad, which she'd planned to clean and toss. However, as Tim's attempts to light the barbecue met with progressively greater defeat, she finally got distracted from this and came outside to join him.

"Something wrong with the coals maybe?" she wondered.

"Dunno. Never had this trouble before."

Janey contemplated the thick cakes of charcoal. "Back home, mom always favours sticks rather than bricks. Sticks burn faster, she says."

"She could be right. Well, we can carry on doing this all day, or we can give up and go and cook inside." Tim glanced overhead, to where a dull cloud-cover had stolen up unnoticed. The heat remained intense, but there was now a sullen, yellowish light. "Getting a bit overcast anyway. Might be a storm coming."

Janey agreed, and in fact, within five minutes of them taking the operation indoors and laying the succulent steaks on the gas-powered grille in the kitchen, there was a distant rumble of thunder and a flicker of lightning far out over the sea. As premature darkness descended, Tim flicked the various lamps on and told Janey to relax while he got on with the cooking. She insisted on helping, at least in preparing her sauce and the salad, but a short while after that, she was able to wander back through into the lounge, switch on the

gigantic television set and go to the satellite channels, where a variety of English-language shows were available. Idly, she sought out one of the twenty-four-hour news stations, and settled down on the sofa.

The current bulletin was concerned with the latest crisis involving Iraq. President Bush, with the unwavering support of Prime Minister Blair, was issuing further warnings that unless Saddam Hussein made immediate moves to disarm his stockpile of WMD, a major military response was guaranteed. This wasn't exactly a revelation to Janey. Ever since September the previous year, and the destruction of the World Trade Centre, the USA had been gearing up for confrontation in the Middle East, particularly in those parts of it where terrorists were known to find succour and finance. Afghanistan had been dealt with first; now it was the old enemy, Iraq's turn. She watched the sixty-inch screen for a few moments longer. On it, special forces were on manoeuvres in some obscure desert location, their sand-coloured fatigues melding with the arid landscape. The tanks they had with them had been disguised in the same way. There was still talk of a possible peaceful solution, the reporter said, but all this looked very ominous.

She glanced through into the kitchen, where Tim was buttering bread rolls. "Do you think there'll be a war?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Don't know. That sort of stuff doesn't really interest me."

"Doesn't interest you?" She was amazed. Granted, as a student of Political Science, this sort of thing might hold a greater fascination for her than it would for many others, but even so. "How can a war, which your own country will probably be involved in, not interest you?"

Tim came to the door. His expression was genuinely indifferent. "What do I owe my country?" he eventually said. "What do I owe anyone?"

Janey was even more surprised. "You may not owe anyone anything as such, but you're not exactly struggling to get by."

That, at least, seemed to strike a note with him. He mused on it, as if his impressive wealth was something he'd temporarily forgotten. "Well, maybe." And then he smiled. "Perhaps that's

something else you can be while you're here – my conscience.” And he went back into the kitchen, whistling to himself.

Janey stared after him, bemused. Yet again, she'd found reservations about her new host and employer. A guy who had to hire in a conscience?; that wasn't a particularly pleasant thought. But then again, maybe it was bullshit? Maybe, in actual fact, he was typical of that college crowd she was so familiar with: rich kids, who stood to get even richer once their parents died, yet who affected a 'working-class hero' persona, presumably because they felt there was greater street-cred attached to it? That was more likely the case, she finally decided. And if that was the worst of his foibles, she could live with it. At least for the time-being.

The storm that evening was astonishing.

The thunder rolled overhead, like a barrage of cannon-fire. At any moment, from any point in the graphite-black sky, bolts of energy would zig-zag down into a dark and raging sea, which rose to such peaks that the distant fairy-lights of Nice were utterly hidden. The rain was torrential, thrashing against the villa with unrelenting force. The poplars and cork-oaks swung wildly back and forth, tossed and buffeted. The swimming pool overflowed, and soon the entire esplanade was inches deep.

Not that Tim and Janey were outdoors to witness this. They chanced the veranda for a moment or two, just to get a taste of it, but soon found themselves retreating inside, laughing, their clothes and hair wringing. They elected to sit out the rest of the storm at the dining-table, though with every crack of thunder and fork of lightning over the bay, the American girl couldn't help glancing out through the streaming windows into a tumult the like of which she'd never expected in a region as supposedly placid as southern Europe. In actual fact, it was a wonder to her that the villa wasn't awash indoors as well as out. It had presumably been designed and constructed to suit Provence's gentle climate; she'd noticed roll-up steel security-shutters on all the larger windows, but much of the exterior was tile and plaster-work, which surely would prove fragile in particularly tempestuous conditions. If that *was* the case, however, Tim didn't seem overly concerned. He was relaxed and convivial,

playing the perfect host all the way through dinner. He laid the table, opened two bottles of claret, and once their steaks and salads were served, only tucked into his own when he was sure Janey had everything she needed. He also proved an amiable conversationalist, making regular funny jokes and listening with apparently sincere interest to her own stories. After the main course, he produced a caramel cheesecake, which he'd left thawing, and they ate one or two delicious slices each, before he told her to go and settle in the lounge while he prepared some coffee and cognacs.

It was a bit of a dream, Janey decided, as she made herself comfortable; almost too good to be true. Of course it was important to remember that the following morning, when her duties as housekeeper commenced, she would have a lot of clearing up to do in the wake of the storm. Mind, that didn't seem an especially high price to pay for such luxury. Which – she being a typically cynical New Jersey girl – begged the question: what *would* the price be? The *real* price?

“That drink we had earlier,” she said, when Tim had collapsed into the armchair opposite. “The one that tasted yuk? You din ...” After so much red wine, it was an effort not to slur her words. “You didn't spike it with something? Tell me the truth now.”

Tim shook his head in mock-outrage. “No way.”

“It's just that, well, in the dump where I grew up, thiz ... things like this just don't happen, you know.” She fixed him with a searching, mildly drunken stare. “I mean, this place is unbelievable. It's perfect. It's just the sort of place I'd like to spend the rest of my vacation in, and all for free. But this doesn't happen, does it? Not without some kind of catch.”

Again he shook his head. “There's no catch, I promise. And I'm sorry if things haven't always been pleasant for you back home.”

“Hey, I don't mean to say I got dragged up in some slum!” she retorted. “No, that isn't it. But ... well, my pop died when I was six. After that it was just me and mom. I mean, we missed him, of course, and we never had much dough, but it was a happy enough time. Then Ralph came along.”

“Ralph?”

Janey pulled a face. “Mom’s new squeeze. If you could call him that. ‘Crater-face’, I call him. And his breath! Ugh!”

“I’m not sure if I want to hear this,” Tim said warily

He seemed discomfited by the abrupt turn in the conversation. It struck Janey that he might suddenly be wondering who and what he’d invited into his home; after all, what was she, apart from some scantily-clad chick he’d met in a harbour; some chick who’d now hinted that she had a history? When you had nothing to do but enjoy yourself, the last thing you really wanted was an emotional wreck sheltering under your roof.

She made an effort to wave his worries aside. “No, no, he didn’t have a go with me. Nothing like me. Besides, I was seventeen-eighteen when he hooked up with us. Not as if I was a kid. But, me and him ... well, we just didn’t get along. Never have.” She sighed. “It’s one of the main reasons I’m out here. Home during vacation-time is ... let’s just call it a no-go zone.”

Tim considered this. “I know what you mean. Parents should be a key fixture in all our lives. Most of the time, they are. Then suddenly they’re not there for you any more. That’s a pretty hard thing to bounce back from.”

Janey gave him smile that she hoped wasn’t too tiddly or girlish. “We’re two of a kind, don’t you think? Two little kids, both lost.”

He smiled back, pleasantly. He really was quite a dish, she decided. “Perhaps that’s why I homed in on you,” he said. “Strength in numbers.”

“I like that. We’re going to take on the world together, is that it?”

Tim made an expansive gesture. “Why not? With your looks and my money, who can stop us?”

“One thing at a time first, though, huh.” She waved a cautionary finger. “I mean first, we’ve gotta see if we can stand living in the same house together just for one month.”

He nodded soberly. “That is true.”

“In the mean-time,” and she struggled to her feet, “I gotta hit the sack. I mean, I’m out of it, man.”

He crossed the lounge to help her. “I can see.”

He assisted her along the passage to her bedroom, which she’d already seen earlier, having dumped her bag there, and found basic

but beautiful: the Grecian frescoes extended into all the sleeping quarters, this one included; the flooring was of a creamy ceramic tile, and the furniture and wardrobe finished off in varnished maple-wood. On the low ceiling, the brass blades of an electric fan turned lazily, chopping the air just sufficiently to prevent the Mediterranean night becoming too humid. In case that failed, the room had its own en-suite bathroom, accessible by sliding wooden panels. Like virtually everything else about the villa, it was all immensely to Janey's satisfaction. She couldn't fault a thing.

Equally pleasing was Tim's gentlemanly behaviour when they reached the room. Instead of escorting her inside, and then insisting on helping her undress "because she was clearly incapable of doing it, herself" – as, several years before, one overly optimistic and ultimately disappointed beau had attempted to do – he left her at the door and told her that he'd see her tomorrow. If she needed anything, his was the room at the end of the passage. She mustn't feel she needed to get up early in the morning, he said. It would be her first day, so she should lie in and leave breakfast to him; a magnanimous gesture that seemed to go far beyond the bounds of common courtesy. He didn't even make an effort to kiss her goodnight, and when she closed the door behind her and found herself alone, Janey felt a curious mixture of elation and bewilderment.

She wasn't quite as drunk as she'd been making out. She'd had plenty all night, and was tipsy, but she was also firmly in control and determined to stay that way. This was basically still a test, a test for Tim. All right, he seemed genuinely okay, but that might be an act. There were outstanding questions after all: the funny-tasting drink, the lost freezer-chest, the 'working-class hero' crap. Not every piece of this puzzle fitted together yet, and if, at the end of the day, he was just another shallow hustler who'd enticed her here purely because he'd noticed her bod, and fancied using and abusing it for the rest of the summer, then she wouldn't hesitate to take a long hike. So far, she had to admit, it looked promising, but the apparent privacy he'd granted her might be part of some subtle seduction technique, so she wasn't off her guard yet.

Not that she wasn't mightily relieved to be out of that sleeping bag. She stretched and yawned, then checked out the bed, on which she found the mattress firm and the linen clean and fresh. Perfect, again. It was always possible, she supposed, as she stripped off, that she'd simply landed on her feet here, and that for once in her life everything would be above-board.

She took a rolled-up towel and a bottle of shampoo from her bag, then moved through into the bathroom, which was tastefully tiled in peach. The shower cubicle occupied one corner. Its walls were of clear but solid perspex, and, again, decorated with impressionistic images of nymphs and dolphins. Janey stepped into it, closed the door and turned to face the control panel. This was made from brass, and shone brightly as though recently polished. When she pushed its lever to 'Start', a hot spray was directed from above. The girl let it cascade over her, massaging her tired muscles and thoroughly rinsing out her hair before applying a handful of shampoo to it.

In the process of this, she just happened to glance upwards, at the shower-head. For a moment, through blurred vision, she fancied an old cloth or flannel had been folded and draped over it. Then she saw the flannel move. Slightly, as though tensing.

Janey blinked, wiped the rushing water from her eyes.

It wasn't a flannel.

It was a spider.

Perhaps the largest spider she had ever seen. Easily the span of her hand – eight inches or more across, with a bloated body and a huge spread of quivering legs – so large, in fact, that its covering of thick, coffee-brown bristles was clearly visible. Moreover, now that the water was running and the shower-head vibrating, it was clinging only precariously to its perch, ten inches or so above her. Directly above her ...

In a frantic, knee-jerk reaction, Janey threw herself at the perspex door, intending to bullock her way out into the bathroom. But, for some reason, the door held fast. She threw herself at it again, but still it held. Horrified, disoriented, wondering crazily if she'd forgotten which side the door was on, she gazed wildly upwards. The hanging lump of horror was still there, but in the steam and

condensation it was fast becoming dislodged. It looked ready to drop.

Then the lights went out.

Complete darkness resulted.

Janey screamed madly and started banging at the door, but it wouldn't budge. And all the while the water poured onto her, beating on her head and shoulders, running in rivulets down her back, over her face and breasts. She imagined something scurrying along with it, rapid pin-prick footfalls scampering across her flesh. She covered her head and eyes, tried to keep her mouth closed for fear that the thing would seek shelter inside it, though at length that was impossible, for in this black tumult of steam and scalding rain, in this blind, upright coffin where there was simply no room to move let alone escape, all you could really do was shriek and shriek and shriek.

She didn't know how long she was in there for, sightless, petrified, at one point hunkered down, cowering in a corner but then jumping up again, trying to force an exit, beating her hands on sweating perspex 'til they were raw and bloody, but it seemed like an eternity.

And then, suddenly, there was light.

At first, it came broken and misted through the fog and the rain and the whorling patterns of nymphs, but then there was a click and a loud *bang*, as the shower door was wrenched open, and the light shone full into her face. In a frenzy of squeals, Janey sprang out towards it, but tripped as she left the cubicle. The next thing she knew, she was toppling headlong into oblivion.

When Janey woke up again, it was a hideous shock to find that she was still naked and still in pitch-darkness. On top of that, she was alone and rather cold. Then it struck her that she was lying on her back – by the feel of it, on her own bed – and that some damp material, probably her towel, had been laid across her.

She began to shift about, feeling at the wall and the pillow, to confirm her whereabouts, when a light suddenly came bobbing in through the open door to the passage. It was Tim, clad only in his baggy shorts, but carrying an electric torch. It was a great relief to

see him, but the horror of the previous few moments didn't stay buried in the back of her mind for long.

"Oh my God," she stammered as it all came rushing back, "*oh my God!*"

"Whoa, whoa," he said. "It's all right. You just fainted."

"Fainted?" Janey replied, shivering violently. "But what's going on? Where are the lights?"

"That's okay too. It's just a power-out."

"A power-out?"

Tim nodded, then listened; thunder could still be heard, though it sounded farther away now. "Probably something to do with the storm," he said, grinning. "Wasn't a good time to get caught in one, I suppose, while you were in the shower. But, hell, look on the bright side. At least I couldn't see too much while I covered you up."

But all Janey could think about now was that diabolical *thing*. In fact, she sat bolt-upright when she recalled it, scarcely concerned that the towel had dropped, exposing her breasts. "That creature!" she said with shaking voice. "*Oh God almighty!*"

Even Tim, who'd stood there entranced by the sudden eyeful he was getting, was broken out of his reverie when she said this. "Creature? What creature?"

"A spider. There was this spider in the shower." Hurriedly, she started wrapping the towel around herself. "Jesus Christ, I've never seen one so big."

Tim went into the bathroom with his torch, but he was only gone a moment. When he returned, he shook his head solemnly. "It isn't there now. Perhaps it got washed down the waste-pipe?"

Janey snorted. "Are you kidding? That God-damned thing wouldn't have fitted down the waste-pipe. *Oh Christ ... it's not on me or anything, is it?*"

She jumped to her feet, twisting and turning, looking frantically over either shoulder, and again, only just managing to cover her modesty.

Tim watched, fascinated. Eventually though, he had to shake his head. "Not that I can see. And I don't suppose you want me to give you a closer inspection."

“Will you quit trying to be funny! I almost had a heart-attack in there!”

“It certainly sobered you up,” he observed.

Janey now glanced around the room. “It must be in here somewhere. Jesus H ... *my bedroom!*”

Systematically, Tim shone the torch into every corner. Nothing came to light, however. “You know, I appreciate you had a scare and all, but at the end of the day, it is *only* a spider,” he finally said.

“You didn’t see it.”

“No. And I’m not likely to, I suppose, as long as the power’s out.”

And that, in itself, was an ugly thought, even without the presence of the spider; that they could be stuck in this villa all night in the pitch dark.

“Can’t you fix it?” Janey asked.

Tim shrugged, in that rather indecisive manner that she was fast becoming irritated with. “How?”

“Check the fuses, at least.”

“Ah, bit of a problem there.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know where the fuse-box is either?”

Briefly he looked evasive, then: “I’m not really sure it’s anything to do with the fuses. Power’s probably out all along the coast. I went outside a minute ago and looked up at the lighthouse. It had gone out up there for a while, before the emergency generators kicked in. Nothing to do with the fuses, I reckon.”

“I see,” Janey replied, wondering how it was that, if he’d just been outside – where it was still lashing with rain – he wasn’t at least a little bit damp.

But before she could ask him this, the lights came on again. Apparently of their own accord. Tim turned a beaming smile on her. “There we are. Told you.”

“Hmmm,” she said, opting to give him the benefit of the doubt.

At least now, they could look around for the arachnid invader properly. The girl went into the bathroom to put her bikini back on, then they searched the bedroom together, at first cautiously, as though expecting to uncover the horrific thing at any time, but as the minutes dragged by with increasing frustration and abandon.

“No sign of it at all,” Tim eventually said, standing up from where he’d been kneeling to peer under the bed.

Janey had to agree. “Do you have many poisonous spiders here in Europe?”

He made a vague gesture. “Dunno. I saw a TV programme once that said we’ve now got black widows, thanks to exports from your country, but hell, they’re not *too* dangerous, are they? Plus, they’re only small. If this one was big ...”

“It was *big*, believe me.”

“Well it’s well hidden, if it is.”

“In which case I’m not sleeping in this room,” she said firmly. “No way.”

And only then did it strike her that perhaps she was behaving rather imperiously, considering that she was only here as the hired-help. She glanced round at her employer, then sheepishly mouthed an apology. He seemed amused rather than annoyed, mouthing back that it was okay.

“I don’t suppose you’d mind if I crashed on your sofa tonight?” she asked. “I mean, I guess it’s not the done thing really, but just ’til we resolve this situation?”

“It won’t be as comfortable as the bed. But it’s up to you.”

Janey grabbed her things. “Show me the way. Discomfort, I can live with.”

It wasn’t actually *that* uncomfortable, and once she’d settled down, Janey slid into the unconsciousness of sleep fairly quickly. More quickly than she at first realised, because things then started happening in that spacious lounge-come-dining room, which she would only later learn were dreams.

To begin with, from where she lay, she could see clear through the rain-beaded windows, over the balcony and far out to sea, which roiled and roared, and was still struck repeatedly by downwards-thrusting spears of lightning. When these came, which was frequent, they would throw a brilliant electric-blue light all the way through the villa, illuminating even the most shadowy spaces. Nothing unpleasant was revealed during these moments, but as they continued – coming in a virtual procession – Janey gradually became

aware of a door in the corner of the room, which she had not until now noticed. It stood in an out-of-the-way place, half hidden between a bureau and a tall cactus in an earthenware pot. It was closed, but made from a single sheet of heavy, frosted glass, and its handle, which – in the way of all dreams – she could identify quite easily, even though it was at least fifteen feet away from her, was cut from something like pure silver, and carved into the ferocious head of a dragon.

Whatever that room was – for somehow, Janey was quite convinced the doorway led to a room, and wasn't just some closet or emergency exit – each flash of lightning reflected inside it, showing the blurred outlines of what looked like solid pieces of furniture. It showed something else too: the shape of a man moving round. Could it be Tim? No, of course it couldn't. Tim was in bed. Initially, this didn't frighten her, or even worry her. But all that changed a short while later when the quilt she was sleeping under, slipped off the sofa and went rustling to the floor.

And alerted the man to her presence.

Janey lay very still, holding her breath, as the figure of that man, bulky and terribly distorted through the warped glass, came right up to it from the other side. Apparently, he was listening intently. Then, with a horrible grating of metal, the dragon-headed handle began to turn. Slowly, ponderously, the great slab of glass opened inwards. Moonlight fell out through the widening gap, and with it, a monstrous black shadow ...

Janey woke.

Partially, she woke. She was in a half-daze for several moments, the nightmare fading sluggishly into the back of her mind, until she wasn't sure exactly what it had been. In any case, mellow sunlight was now filtering into her bleary vision, and she could hear the twitter of birds. This was no time for mulling over half-forgotten night-terrors.

She sat up, yawned and looked around. The room was much as she remembered it, with several items of crockery and cutlery still on view from last night. The French-windows were now open however, and Tim was visible out on the veranda, sitting at one of the tables. As before, he was clad only in his threadbare vest, baggy shorts and

worn flip-flops. Something smelled good, however. Something smelled *very* good.

Yawning again and stretching, Janey rose from the sofa and went outside to greet him. The first thing that struck her was how calm the sea now lay. It rippled serenely, and was almost impossible to associate with the mountainous waves and explosions of foam that she'd witnessed the evening before. In fact, the storm, itself, was little more than a hazy memory. Cicadas could be heard in the vegetation, butterflies flitted past. A golden sun was still low in the pebble-blue sky, but, across the bay, Nice was clearly visible again: in the fine pink tinge of the morn, it looked ancient and exotic, a Middle-Eastern city perhaps, Petra or old Jerusalem.

Janey went to the balcony rail to take in the view. When she turned, Tim was smiling up at her. He'd clearly driven down to Beaulieu, because he'd picked up an English daily. This hadn't prevented him keeping his word and preparing a superb breakfast, however. A tray of toast, eggs, coffee and croissants awaited her.

"Wow," she said, sitting down. "This looks fantastic." She couldn't remember the last time she'd woken up to any kind of breakfast, let alone a spread like this. "Tastes fantastic too," she added.

Tim folded his paper. "I've been in your room again, but there's no sign of any spider."

She waved all that aside. "Don't worry about it." Then her cheeks flushed red. "I'm really sorry I caused such a fuss."

He shrugged. "Forget it. New place, first night. And not exactly a quiet one."

"Yeah," she said, suddenly remembering that she had duties here, and instantly standing up. "Did the storm do much damage?"

"Not a great deal, as I can see."

She moved back to the railing and glanced down. And it was true what he said; despite the ferocity of last night's elemental assault, very little was out of place. One of the sun-loungers had been tossed over, but nothing appeared to be broken. The stone and tile-work was still intact and already bone-dry. If anything, the main result seemed to be a scattering of leaves. A few of them floated in the otherwise crystal-clear swimming pool, while several heaps had

gathered in the corners of the esplanade. Yet again, as she stood there, Janey was reminded how easy her time could be here. If this was the worst the weather could do, then this so-called job was going to be a doddle. Having said that, it was perhaps time she got on with it.

While Tim moved to the sports section of his newspaper, Janey cleared away the breakfast things and then the remnants of the previous evening's meal. After that, she thought she'd search around for a brush or rake with which to take care of the leaves. It was while she was doing this that she spotted the door between the bureau and the potted cactus. It stopped her in her tracks. Half-memories of the strange dream flooded back. Not that this door was the same one she'd pictured whilst asleep. This one was made of solid wood; rather plain wood in fact, compared to the rest of the villa's décor, and she wondered if *this* might be the reason why she hadn't really noticed it before.

A closet, she decided. Definitely a closet.

She made her way round to the side of the house, where in a small timber shed, she found some garden implements. She then commenced a vigorous sweep-up, which occupied the next couple of hours. There'd been a greater spillage of leaves than she'd previously thought, but it wasn't a major problem. She found a roll of PVC bags under the sink in the kitchen, and these she was able to fill with dead leaves, then carry, one by one, around to the front gate, where two plastic dustbins waited. On this landward side of the villa, where there was a greater proportion of foliage, the damage was more visible: one or two smaller shrubs had been uprooted, a few flowers denuded of petals, several snapped branches left hanging by threads of bark. But it was still a relatively simple job, and Janey hummed to herself as she bustled back and forth, raking up, dumping more and more compost into the bins by the gate.

That was when she spotted the mailman. At least, she assumed he was the mailman: a young French guy, squat, deeply sun-tanned, clad in blue shorts and a blue, short-sleeved shirt. He was carrying a heavy sack and was just in the process of sliding two bulky brown envelopes into the white mailbox next to the gate. He nodded to her, smiled, then set off back up the lane to the road.

Janey raked a few more leaves off the path, then approached the mailbox. There was a hatch in the back of it. She opened it and took the packages out. They were addressed to this villa – ‘Villa Tamara’, as it said on the gate – but marked for the attention of someone called ‘M. Reveillac’.

She stood there confused, wondering if she should perhaps hurry up the path after the mailman, but then decided that this was the correct address and that ‘M. Reveillac’ might have something to do with the place after all. So thinking, she went back inside, where Tim was surfing the satellite channels.

“I know you’ve already been out once today, but we could do with making a trip to the nearest mini-mart or something,” she said. “We’re right out of bread and milk. I’d do it myself, I know that’s what I’m here for, but I haven’t got a car.”

He glanced up. “No problem, I’ll go in a few minutes. Can never find anything of interest at this time of day, anyway.”

The channel he’d finally selected was playing a forgotten episode from some appallingly-dressed 1970s detective show. Tim might not have found it interesting, but neither was he making a move away from it. At least, not yet.

“These have arrived,” Janey said, handing him the two packages. “Not sure what you want me to do with them.”

Tim took the items – almost unwillingly, she thought – and glanced down at them. He seemed at least as nonplussed as she was.

“Reveillac? Might that be the guy your dad bought the place from?” the girl eventually asked.

He shrugged. “Yeah ... well, I mean, could be. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

Tim pulled an irritated face, as if the whole thing was too much trouble. “Even if it is, I wouldn’t know where to find him. Anyway, it’s easily sorted.”

He dug around in his pocket, produced a felt-pen, and scribbled across the front of the envelopes: ‘Not known at this address.’

Then he handed them back to Janey, and smiled. “Why don’t you just go and shove them in the post-box again? There’re a lot of holiday homes around here, so the postmen check every so often to

make sure the mail's being collected. If it isn't, they just take it back and deal with it in some central depot."

She nodded. "Okay, fine. But you don't think it might be better if you wrote that message in French? I mean, so the sorting-office guys'll understand it?"

Tim scratched his cheek. Again, he looked vaguely irritated. "It probably would be, but I don't know what it is in French."

"You don't speak the local lingo?"

"Only a smattering." And he went back to watching the TV.

"Let me get this straight," she said, "you live here in France, yet you don't speak French?"

"That's true," he replied, determinedly getting engrossed in the crappy old cop-show.

"Isn't that rather pompous?"

He glanced up at her again. "It's rather British. Though I suppose that could be one and the same thing to an American, I'm not sure."

"You make a lot of quips instead of providing answers, Tim."

"Maybe I'm wondering why I'm being required to provide answers in the first place. Especially to you. I mean, you're only an employee here."

And, again – as she had done the previous night – Janey wondered if she was overstepping the mark. Tim clearly didn't respond well to interrogation, and maybe that was understandable. This was *his* house after all, and though she had a token job to justify her presence here, he'd invited her in, shared his food and drink with her, and was even proposing to pay her a salary that would take care of her for the rest of the summer. Doubtless he'd originally been motivated by her looks and figure, but he hadn't made a move on her thus far, so she could hardly complain about that. Yet here she was, putting him on the spot.

"I'll fix us some lunch in an hour or so," she said, hoping to brighten the mood.

He grunted in response.

"Okay ... well, I've got a few things to do first."

His eyes remained locked on the screen, but he nodded.

Ten minutes later, Janey was raking the side-lawn when she saw Tim slope up the steps to the front gate, his flip-flops slapping the sun-warmed concrete. Seconds later, he'd vanished up the hill to the parking-area. He'd neither looked at her, nor said a word. She could have kicked herself. There was she was again "with that New Jersey mouth", as Ralph had once said; pissing people off who were only trying to be kind, behaving as if everyone she met was conspiring against her.

She wondered, not for the first time, if this self-defeating toughness she had was down to her upbringing; the result of growing up without a loving dad, with a mom who'd had to work all the time to make up the shortfall, and then with someone she couldn't relate to at all, like Ralph. But hey, other folks endured a lot worse and came out of it totally unscathed. It hurt Janey to consider it, but Ralph might once've been right when he'd called her "a spoilt princess, who'd gone for nothing all her life, except a firm hand".

She got determinedly on with the garden, keen to try and make up for things, thinking that if she could get the place really spick and span by the time Tim returned, the tension might ease. The trouble was that there was actually very little now left to do. Half a morning's work had removed all traces of the previous night's storm, and when she went indoors, to see what duties she could attend to there, she was again disappointed. For all his apparent indolence, Tim certainly kept a neat and tidy house. She moved from room to room – smoothing out imaginary wrinkles in the rugs, making only the most finicky adjustments to ornaments – when she suddenly spotted the door again, the one between the cactus and the bureau.

In the absence of having anything else to do, she strode up to it. As housekeeper, she supposed she ought to know where and *what* everything was, but even so, she eyed the door carefully before attempting to open it. Not that there was anything particularly sinister about it. It certainly didn't bear any similarity to the bizarre door in her dream. The grotesque silver handle was no more in evidence than the thick, frosted glass; in fact, all there was was a lever, with an ordinary, everyday keyhole beneath it. Like she'd said, almost certainly a closet. On top of that, it was probably locked.

But it wasn't.

Janey was genuinely surprised when the door creaked open to her touch.

Even more so, when it revealed a room-sized space on the other side.

She hesitated before going in, for the space was in semi-darkness and had a doleful, rather oppressive atmosphere, though this was possibly due to the closed shutters on its single narrow window. At length she entered. As rooms went, it wasn't especially large. In all probability, at the time of the villa's construction, it had been intended for storage or some such humble thing, but more recently had been converted into a study. It was dominated by a large desk made from a dark, shiny wood that was either teak or mahogany. Even to Janey's untrained eye, this was an impressive item of furniture; the pillars of its legs were fabulously carved with entwined animals, the desktop itself inlaid with smooth, brown leather. There was also a swivel-chair; this too was upholstered in brown leather. It had high back, plush arm-rests and rode on four iron casters, all of which had been exquisitely fashioned into Gothic ornaments.

With the exception of the western wall, which contained the shuttered window, the room was entirely surrounded by bookshelves, all of which were crammed to bursting. Janey approached them. One or two curious titles caught her eye straight away: *Fire And Life*; *Hidden Meanings of the Apocalypse*; *Beast Lore*, though many others were in foreign languages, Latin or Greek. As one, the books seemed to be incredibly old, the colours of their cloth or leather spines largely faded to black or grey, though some gold-leaf was still on view, along with metal clasps and wooden bindings. It would have made a handsome collection, had it not resided under an odious coating of dust and given off a faint smell of decay.

Thinking to air the room out, Janey lifted the glass panel in the window, then pushed open the shutters, allowing in sunlight and fresh air. She turned back to the books, then, after short deliberation, took one down and examined it. It was called *Diabolique*, and it had been written by someone called Nikolai de Pelagi. Beneath the title, there was an illustration, the fine detail of

which had faded to foggy oblivion, though Janey was sure she could make out what looked like a pair of twisted goat-horns in the midst of a circle formed by glyphs. She flipped it open, and saw a date of imprint: '1471'.

"Well, hello there," said a rich, resonant voice.

Janey started, then whirled around, expecting to find someone in the study behind her. But when she looked, the room and its doorway were empty. She turned further, now scared as well as shocked ... and discovered a man outside the window, smiling in at her.

He was perhaps in his mid-sixties, though he'd aged well. A head of thick white hair contrasted sharply with his nut-brown suntan and sparkling blue eyes. The girl was fleetingly reminded of an elderly but still handsome film star; James Mason perhaps, or Douglas Fairbanks Junior. He had a broad, almost youthful physique and wore a brightly-coloured, short-sleeved Hawaiian-style shirt, which showed muscular arms and, at his throat, a gold pendant on a neck-chain.

"I, oh ... you startled me," she finally stammered.

He didn't immediately reply, but continued to smile. It wasn't especially pleasant, she thought; rather intense. His sapphire-blue eyes were quite penetrating. "What an adorable house you have here," he finally said.

He was English. Officer-class English, by the sounds of it, but not in some twittish, Bertie Wooster-type way. He had a stolid self-confidence about him, and spoke quietly but with a fierce, leonine undertone.

"Er, thank-you," Janey replied. Now that she was getting over her surprise, she was beginning to wonder what he was doing here in the garden. Security might be lax on the French Riviera, but uninvited intrusion was still classed as trespassing, wasn't it? "Thank-you very much. Only, it's not mine. You'll be wanting Mr. Maxwell?"

"Mr. Maxwell?"

"The owner."

"Oh, the owner." His smile broadened. "Yes, actually, I was. I've heard he's planning to sell."

“To sell?” She could only shake her head. “I don’t think so. Well, of course, I don’t know ... I only work here. But he hasn’t mentioned anything about selling to me.”

The man pursed his lips. “It could be that I’m mistaken, of course.”

“Would you like to wait for him, maybe? He’s due back any time now.”

The stranger shook his head, then started to back away. “No, no. You’re very kind, but thank you, no. I’ve obviously made a mistake. Sorry to have troubled you.”

And without another word, he turned and made his way back up the path towards the front gate. Janey stared after him. In addition to his beach-shirt, he wore white slacks and deck-shoes, and moved with an easy, nimble grace. Before leaving, he stopped by the mailbox, opened the hatch and took out the two redirected packages. He studied them, laughed a little, as though amused by something, then tucked them under his arm and set off up the lane.

As at breakfast-time, they ate lunch *al fresco*.

When Tim got back from the *supermarche*, he’d thrown off his sulk and was back to sweetness and light again. In addition to the milk and the bread, he’d also bought a jar of olives and a block of feta cheese. They prepared it together, broke open a vintage Burgundy, then sat out by the pool, basking in the glorious mid-day sun.

“You were right, by the way,” Janey finally said. “Someone came to collect those letters.”

“Told you they would,” Tim replied, apparently unconcerned who.

Janey thought such indifference odd, but continued with her lunch. After the annoyance she’d caused that morning, there didn’t seem much future in pursuing mysteries. And at the end of the day, what did it have to do with her anyway? She didn’t know who the caller had been. He might be a neighbour for all she was aware. Whatever, it seemed safest to move the conversation onto easier ground, at least for the time being.

“So, how long’ve you been into the occult?” she asked.

Tim glanced up from under the brim of his Stetson. “Uh?”

She stuck a thumb over her shoulder. “The study. It’s packed with the stuff.”

“Really? News to me.”

Janey couldn’t contain her surprise at that. “News to you? How come?”

He took a bite of bread and cheese. “It was my dad’s study. I never really went in there.”

“Your pop was into conglomerates *and* the occult?”

It was always possible she supposed, but as a combination of interests, it didn’t sound too likely. Of course, that didn’t mean it wasn’t true, and now Tim was looking at her again, his expression deadpan.

Hurriedly, she held her hand up. “I know, I’m sorry. I’m asking too many questions.”

He waved the apology aside. “Forget it, it’s all right. I suppose it’s perfectly normal you’d be interested by it. I’m not, though. Dad found that stuff here when he bought the place, as I recall. I don’t know how keen on it he was, but he never really mentioned it to me. Not that he ever mentioned much.” He shook his head. “I ought to get round to chucking it all out eventually. It’s not as if it’s any use.”

Janey raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t just throw it away. Some of those books look valuable.”

“You think so?”

“Well, one’s got a fifteenth century publication-date. That’s got to be worth something, hasn’t it? The rest look at least as old. If not older.”

“Wow,” he said. “I’d never have known that.”

They ate the rest of their meal in thoughtful silence, and after they’d finished, Janey commenced clearing the pots away, while Tim sat by the pool for a few minutes, before rising and ambling off into the house. About ten minutes later, with the kitchen tidy again and the dishwasher rumbling to itself, Janey came back out to the pool armed with a towel and a tube of lotion. She laid the items down, stripped off her sarong and made herself comfortable on one of the loungers. The moment she lay back, however, Tim appeared on the veranda above.

She propped herself up on one elbow and lifted her shades. "I've finished everything there is to do at present," she said. "Is it okay if I catch some sun for an hour? Thought I might take a little swim afterwards, as well?"

"Yeah ... sure, no problem."

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Er, yeah." For a moment he was awkward, uncomfortable. "Look, Dad's old study. There wasn't a key or anything, was there? Only, I can't get in."

She shook her head. "No. It was unlocked. And I certainly didn't lock it when I came out. Why, you leave something in there?"

"No. I just fancied having a look at some of those books you mentioned. The ones you thought might be worth something."

"I'm no expert, of course."

"It's not that important, anyway." He made a dismissive gesture. "Like I said, never been bothered with all that cranky stuff."

And he drifted out of sight again. Janey peered up at the balcony, mildly puzzled, then rolled sideways on the lounge, reached for the lotion and squeezed a blob of it into her palm. Only by chance did she glance at the swimming pool as she was doing this.

Her scream rang long and loud across the house.

A second later, Tim came clattering down the spiral stair, almost tripping on his flip-flops. When he reached her, she was standing by the water's edge, shivering with a mixture of fright and bewilderment.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What's the matter?"

Janey shook her head. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have screamed like that, but look at the pool. Look at it!"

Tim did, and drew back in revulsion. "*Jesus!*"

From corner to corner, a thick, greenish scum floated on the surface. But that wasn't the worst part of it. The apparent pollution extended below as well; in next to no time, the entire body of water seemed to have clouded up until it was the colour and consistency of pea-soup. Streaks of solid, ropy filth were suspended in it at various levels, like living organisms.

"What do you think?" Janey asked "A backed-up drain or something?"

“I hope not,” Tim replied.

“The storm? That’s got to have played hell with the local plumbing.”

“Maybe. But it was okay earlier on.” He looked round at her, perplexed. “We sat here and had lunch, for Christ’s sake!”

“Whatever,” she shook her head, “you’ve got to do something about this. It’s a serious health hazard.”

He nodded glumly.

“I’ll check the filtering system,” she said. “You call the pool-people, yeah?”

“Sorry, what?”

“The pool-people. You *do* have pool-people on call for when this sort of thing happens?”

“Er, yeah. Of course.”

And, rather half-heartedly, it seemed, he lurched away to the spiral stairway, and made his way back up it. Janey, meanwhile, strode around the pool, to where a steel trapdoor was set into the tiles. She opened it, and found a wooden ladder leading down into a rectangular pit, which was about seven feet deep and finished off in smooth concrete. She clambered hurriedly down, and to one side, found a control-panel displaying a variety of instruments – buttons, levers, pressure gauge-type things. A small coloured chart – for ‘Chlorine and Toxicity levels’ – was attached to the wall, alongside a sheaf of dog-eared ‘Emergency Notes’. Rather than poke about blindly, the girl took the notes from their hook and flipped through them to see if anything made sense. As she did, her shoulder came into contact with what looked like a plastic valve. She didn’t bump against it hard, she’d didn’t even lean on it ... in truth, what contact there was, was minimal. But the valve cracked across its base all the same, and broke away. And the next thing Janey knew, water was gushing out from it and pooling around her feet.

“Shit!”

She rounded on the control-panel again, hurriedly running her eyes across the various labels. One or two things – ‘Alkalinity Check’, ‘Gallorage Count’ – all seemed to speak for themselves, but what use were they in this situation? And all the while, of course, the water was rising. Quite rapidly. In fact, less than a minute had

passed, and it was already half way up her shins. And it was cold too. Janey's logic gave way to something like panic. She began stabbing buttons at random, pulling levers, turning dials. But it made no difference. The water continued to pour into the pit, and, if anything, it was coming faster now, harder, frothing around her knees.

She gave up. What the hell? Let the pool-man come and sort it out. That was what he was paid for. She turned to the ladder and began to climb up it ... and was half-deafened by a huge metallic *CLANG* as the trapdoor was slammed down overhead.

Blackness swamped her.

Janey hung where she was, part way up the ladder. "Tim?" she shouted, stunned. "Tim, is that you?"

There was no reply. The trapdoor – only visible now by thin cracks of light around its rim – stayed shut. What the hell? Didn't he know she was down here?

"Tim?" she shouted again, but still there was no response.

Of course he knew. He *had* to know, she'd told him.

"You childish little ..." she began, and she scurried up the rest of the ladder. "This isn't funny, damn it!" she said, and she punched hard at the trapdoor, intending to show her displeasure by banging it open on the poolside.

But the trapdoor wouldn't budge.

It gave slightly, but less than a centimetre, as if some enormous weight was holding it down from the other side.

Janey's spine went cold. "Tim?" she breathed.

The churning water rose past her ankles.

"Tim!" Janey screamed. "Jesus Christ, what are you doing?"

There was still no response. She shoved hard at the trap. It stayed in place. Desperately, she clambered a few rungs higher, laying her head to one side and bringing her shoulder against the cold steel, but it wouldn't lift. Gasping, she threw everything she had at it. To no avail.

The water had now reached her knees.

To her horror, she realised that if she jumped back down, and tried to work at the controls, it would already be up to her waist, maybe higher.

Panic gave way to complete hysteria.

*"Tim ... God damn it, let me out of here!"*

And then a terrible, chilling thought: suppose this had nothing to do with Tim? Suppose there'd been a catch or lock on the trapdoor and it had caught by accident, and Tim was nowhere near, on the phone upstairs in the villa, completely out of earshot?

The terror of that was almost mind-numbing.

She went at the trapdoor like a crazed thing, flaying her fingertips, breaking her nails. But still it resisted her. Shrieking herself hoarse, Janey pushed against it with the top of her head, thrusting upwards with every muscle in her body until suddenly, terrifyingly, she heard a loud *CRACK* ... and the ladder shifted slightly.

"Jesus, no!" she jabbered, hanging desperately onto the rungs, begging them not to give way.

The water had now risen to her thighs. Below her, the control-panel had vanished. The girl tried to reassure herself that it wouldn't keep rising like this, that it couldn't, that once it had reached the same level as the swimming pool it would stop. But no! That wouldn't happen. It all depended on the pressure in the extractors. If some mechanised filter-system was pumping the waste-water out, it would just keep going and going and going, until it burst the trapdoor open ... and what state would *she* be in by then?

*"Tim!"* she screamed, hammering at the underside of the trap until her knuckles split. *"Tim, please ..."*

The water was now swirling around her waist. She climbed another rung higher, having to bend forwards to accommodate herself in the small breathing-space that was left. Her shoulders and the back of her skull were pressing against the trapdoor, but the tide was rising inexorably. It was now past her breasts, was less than an inch below her face, and it was crashing, roaring, filling her ears with the sounds of an ocean. In seconds she'd be underneath it. This couldn't be happening, surely to God, not here, not now ...

*And then light. Flooding down from above.*

Light ... air ... survival ...

There was no reason why the trapdoor should suddenly have opened. No reason at all. But Janey didn't care, she didn't question,

she just hurled herself upwards, knocking it out of her way, and even then not stopping, reaching up and up, almost for the sun itself. Then collapsing hard on the hot, dry tiles of the pool-side.

Tim could only stand there, puzzled. "There you are," he said. "What's the ..."

"What the hell are you trying to pull?" she demanded, jumping up to confront him.

"What?" He looked genuinely taken aback.

"What did you do, you asshole?"

"What do you mean?"

She pointed a shaking finger down at the pit. The water inside it was now receding, as though gurgling away down a stone throat. But Janey barely noticed that. "You must've been holding that thing," she said, kicking at the trapdoor. She hunkered swiftly down and checked it. "I knew it, I knew it! There's no catch, no lock, nothing." She leaped back to her feet. "What did you do, stand on it?"

He shook his head, bewildered. "I wasn't standing on it. I was in the house ..."

"What took you so God-damned long to get here then?"

"Jesus, will you give me a break!" He was starting to grow irate, himself. "I was looking for the number of the pool-company, like you asked me to. I'm sorry if you got stuck, but, you know, accidents happen."

Janey stared at him, her shoulders still heaving. In truth, she wasn't sure what to believe. She didn't know Tim terribly well, but, from what she'd seen, she couldn't imagine him doing something as evil or as stupid as this. He looked deeply upset by the mere accusation.

"This would've been *some* accident," she finally said. "I'd like to have seen you try and explain it to the cops." Still fuming, she turned to glance at the pool ... and froze. "*What the hell! I don't believe this!*"

Tim followed her gaze, and was stumped for words.

They stood side-by-side in front of a stretch of water that was now in pristine condition; glittering blue, aqua-marine, crystal clear right down to its still, cool depths.

“Whatever you did down there,” Tim finally said, “it was obviously the right thing.”

Janey shook her head. “Don’t talk horseshit, Tim. I didn’t do this. It’s like someone’s just changed the entire water supply.”

“They couldn’t have done. Not in the last ten minutes.”

“Exactly. This place is getting freakier by the second.”

“What do you mean ‘freakier?’”

She rounded on him. “What do you mean ‘what do I mean?’? You haven’t noticed? The foul-up with the drinks, the great grand-daddy of all spiders, the guy who walks off with *your* mail, the God-damned swimming pool! What’s going on here, Tim?”

He shrugged. “Nothing’s going on. At least, nothing I’m aware of.”

She set off around the pool. Tim doggedly followed. “Who exactly did your family buy this house from?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Some guy.”

“He wasn’t a late middle-aged English guy by any chance? White hair, good-looking.”

“I never really saw him.”

“You’ve got a real talent for missing what’s right under your nose, you know that.”

“Look ... I was over in England, okay.”

A moment later they were back inside and on the upper level. The door to the study stood closed before them.

“So what are we doing now?” Tim asked.

“Taking another look,” Janey replied.

“Well you’ll have to force your way in, I couldn’t ...”

The room opened to her touch.

Janey glanced round at him. “Doors have a habit of locking and unlocking when it suits them, in this house, don’t they?”

Tim looked perplexed. “I swear I couldn’t get in there. Must’ve got jammed, or something.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, and she went inside.

The moment they entered, however, there was something different about the room. The same atmosphere of scholarly neglect

pervaded, there was the same feel of dust and stillness. But now there was a smell as well, or rather a fragrance. It was rich, earthen.

“Pipe-tobacco,” Janey said. “Goddamn it, that’s pipe-tobacco.”

“Hardly surprising,” Tim replied. “Look!” And he indicated the desk-top, where a pipe now sat in an ashtray.

“That wasn’t there when I was in here earlier!”

“It must’ve been.”

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t.”

Tim picked the pipe up. He fingered its bowl.

“Is it warm?” Janey asked.

He shook his head. “Stone cold.”

“So how come we can still smell it?”

“Tobacco smoke lingers. You know that, surely?”

“Except that it wasn’t lingering when I was in here before.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You mean like the pipe wasn’t here, either? *This* pipe?” And he held it up for her closer inspection.

Briefly, the possibility that she could be wrong crossed Janey’s mind; that she’d let a few curious events run all out of proportion, and was now descending into some sort of neurosis. But *no!* These events hadn’t just been curious; they’d been weird, creepy, horrible. And they’d got worse, steadily worse, until she’d almost ended up getting killed. No, she wasn’t imagining any of this. This was real. Definitely real.

She made a move to the desk, pulling out the swivel chair.

“What next?” Tim asked.

She sat herself down. “We’re going to try and find something out about this guy. Let’s start with the drawers.”

“You think we should?” he said uneasily.

She gave him a withering glance. “Tim, it’s *your* desk.”

“Well, yeah.” He hadn’t seemed prepared for that response. “But ... oh shit, what harm can it do?”

She nodded and tried the handle of the topmost drawer. She’d half expected it to be locked, but it slid open easily, and the instant it did, the spider shot out of it.

Like a bullet from a gun.

Legs pin-wheeling, the monstrous arachnid spun up out of the dark interior and landed in the very middle of the desktop, splayed

out to maximum breadth, which was at least the size of a large man's fully spread hand.

Janey gave a squeal, and shoved her chair backwards. Tim, also reacting instinctively, flung the pipe at the hideous thing. He missed, but only by millimetres, the pipe bouncing off the desktop and smashing. The spider then went scuttling off in a blur of speed. A split-second later, it had leaped from the desk and exited the study by the still-open door.

"Look, it's just a spider!" Tim protested from the doorway to her room.

Janey thrust the last of her belongings into her bag. "It's one spider too many. I'm out of here."

"Janey, this is crazy."

She brushed past him. "No crazier than you are, pretending none of this is happening."

Wearily, he followed her down the passage to the lounge. "There's probably a perfectly logical explanation behind all of it."

"Such as?"

There was a second, then he shrugged helplessly.

"Exactly," she said, throwing her bag over her shoulder and holding out her hand. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll have my wages."

Tim looked startled. "Your wages?"

"I've done the best part of a day's work for you. That's worth something, isn't it?"

"Er, well yeah, I suppose." But he made no move ... either to a drawer somewhere, where he might keep cash, or to a hidden safe. He didn't even try to take anything from his pockets. Instead, very awkwardly, he shifted about on his flip-flop-clad feet. Suddenly, he couldn't meet her gaze.

"You're not going to pay me, are you?" she said slowly.

"It's just that I haven't got any readies on me at present. I'll need to go to the bank."

Janey hung her head, her eyes suddenly brimming with tears of frustration. Even if this was true – which she seriously doubted – it was already past five o'clock. No bank would be open at this hour,

which meant, at the very least, that she'd have to spend another night here.

"You son of a bitch," she mumbled to herself. Then she finally snapped: "You God-damned son of a bitch!" And she stormed away to the front door.

"Janey, wait," he said, following.

"What is it? Did I just not deliver the service you were hoping for?"

"If you're intent on going, let me at least give you a lift into Beaulieu. It's forty minutes' walk and if you set out now it'll be dark before you get there."

She opened the door. "What difference will that make? Without any money, I won't be able to stay anywhere even if I arrive safely."

"You can still stay here."

He seemed earnest enough about that, but Janey was adamant: "Tim, I wouldn't stay here for a thousand dollars a day."

"Let me give you a ride round the bay to Nice, then," he offered. "There are cheap hostels there for backpackers, and there's a rail link. A good one."

He seemed sincere enough in his desire to help, though this was almost certainly to avoid having to fork out any cash. Not for the first time, Janey caught a glimpse of how people who are exceptionally rich not only manage to achieve that status, but also how they retain it. Still, under the circumstances, a lift to Nice *was* desirable.

"Couldn't hurt, I suppose," she said, standing by the open door.

He nodded, a little relieved. "Let me go and get my trainers first." He kicked his flip-flops off. "Can't drive all the way there in those."

She pointedly made no reply, just waited.

Tim lurched away down the passage towards the bedrooms. Janey glanced again across the lounge-dining area of the villa, then out over the veranda to the sea, now the colour of wine in the failing afternoon light. She thought how deceptively beautiful it was: however optimistic you were in life, no matter how fortuitous events seemed to be, stuff like this only ever came with a catch. A big catch.

And then there was a *CRASH*, accompanied by the sort of scream Janey had never heard any adult make before.

She threw her bag down and dashed up the corridor, turning left into Tim's bedroom. He was prone on the floor, and writhing in pain. He'd been on his hands and knees, digging in one of the lower compartments of the wardrobe. His right arm was still in there, only now it appeared to be trapped by the wardrobe's sliding door, which had somehow closed on it. How that was possible the girl just couldn't see, but this was no pretence. Tim's face was red and contorted; saliva oozed through his gritted teeth.

"Don't just stand there," he gasped. "It's cutting my sodding arm off."

Janey was baffled. It was impossible that this door, an inanimate object, could have closed of its own accord – it wasn't on a spring or counterweight that she could see, or even constructed at an angle or on a slope.

"Janey ... please!" Tim stammered, his voice cracking.

She dropped to her knees beside him. There was sufficient space for her to fit her fingers around the edge of the sliding door and try to pull it backwards, but when she did that, she found there was no give in it. It was as though it had locked itself, as though its runners had jammed. She tested her entire weight against it, but it still didn't shift. If anything, it was pushing *against* her, and now the flesh on Tim's arm was discolouring, turning from white to blue to black.

"*God!*" he howled. "Break it down! Get an axe or something ..."

"An axe?"

"Anything ..."

Janey jumped to her feet, and scrambled back down the passage. She dashed into the kitchen and sorted frantically through its various utensils. The closest thing to an axe that she found was a cleaver. It was designed for chopping meat, but it had a heavy blade and a sharp edge. She grabbed it and hurried back.

Tim's mouth was now clamped shut, his eyes bulging in their sockets. The trapped part of his arm seemed to be flattening under the pressure. Panicking, Janey surveyed the wardrobe door. What did she do, just hack at it? Just attempt to cut it to pieces, however long that took? She drew the blade back to launch a blind attack,

and in that same moment, as though unprepared to sustain any damage, the wardrobe released its prisoner.

It was like a spell had suddenly broken. One minute, the door was rammed up against the twisted limb, the next it relaxed backwards a couple of inches, allowing the casualty to yank his extremity free.

Janey threw the cleaver on the bed, and hurried to tend to the injury. She helped Tim up, then led him out into the passage and down towards the lounge, which was now filled with dying sunlight. He whimpered every inch of the way, and when they got in there and she sat him on the sofa, she saw the reason why. From mid-section, his forearm hung at a grisly angle. It was supported only by muscle and tissue, and by Tim's other hand, with which he was gingerly cradling it.

"God, Tim, that's broken," she said. She glanced around uneasily, particularly into the passage to the bedrooms. "Listen, we should both get out of here."

Despite his pain, he pulled away from her, moving defiantly along the sofa. "And blow the chance of the easiest summer we've ever had?"

She stared at him, nonplussed. "What are you talking about?"

He gave her a frank, irritable look. "Jesus Christ, Janey, isn't it obvious? *This isn't my house.*" He paused, then added: "I found it."

"You found it?" She thought she'd misheard.

He hung his head, fleetingly drained of energy. When he looked up at her again, though, a new expression had appeared. This was no longer the likeable, easy-going guy-who-has-everything. A darker personality was peering out, someone colder, harder, more opportunistic. "I thought I'd bum around France for a few months," he explained. "Earn just enough to get by. And like I say, I found it."

"Tim ... what are you telling me?"

"I'm telling you I'm not rich, okay!" His voice rose. "I'm not rich, and I never have been!"

"Your father wasn't in conglomerates?"

He barked with laughter. "The last time I saw my father, he was in prison. For about the umpteenth time."

Janey almost felt faint. “And your mom?”

“My mum?” He shrugged bitterly. “Floating off on a river of gin.” But on the subject of his mother, his anger seemed to abate a little. “Wasn’t always the case with her. But I suppose the more you get pissed the easier life looks. She learned that while I was growing up; it became her only refuge. Come summer this year – the summer of my twenty-first birthday, no less – I’d had just about enough of it. I quit my job, for what it was worth. Bonus only tele-sales. Jesus, you think this is a nightmare, you want to try *that!* I quit my job, grabbed my passport and came over here. And I wasn’t going back ’til I absolutely had to.”

He shook his head as the memories took over. “For the first time in my life I was doing exactly what I wanted. I had the only person I’ve ever got on with for company, myself, and the only thing I own of any value, my car.”

“But how the God-damned hell did you end up here?”

Now Janey too was becoming angry: being grossly misled was one thing, but being misled to the extent that you’d put your life and liberty in danger, was another altogether. Briefly, even her fear of the villa and what it might contain was forgotten.

He shrugged again. “I drove here. Doing bits of work along the way. Thing is, the car wasn’t really up to much. I’ve had it a few years and it’s knackered. I’d planned to sell it if all else failed, maybe get just enough cash to get home with again. But it conked out on me up there, near the lighthouse. I had a go at fixing the engine, but it was no dice. Especially without tools.”

He cringed as his arm lanced fire through him. “I ... *ah, fuck!* I went to the lighthouse to see if they could help, but the bloody thing’s automated. So I wandered down here, and found the house, the ‘Villa Tamara’. And it was just like this, just like it is now. Wide open, nobody around.” He gave her an earnest look. “All that booze, all that food. Under the circumstances, can you blame me?”

“Can I blame you?” Janey felt like hitting him. “Are you nuts or simple, or what? Didn’t it enter your head that the owner could’ve returned at any time?”

“So what? I’d have scarpered. Let’s see ’em try and catch me!”

“But Tim, this is somebody else’s property!”

“Don’t start getting judgmental on me! I didn’t come here with the intention of stealing. I wanted help, that was all. I even hung around, waiting to see if someone would turn up. But they never did. I slept the first night in the bloody garden. Still no-one came. After that, I thought ‘bollocks to it’, and moved in. Makes me a squatter, I suppose. Big deal, I’m not the first.”

She began pacing up and down, wondering how much of a criminal she’d inadvertently become over the last two days. “I just don’t believe this!”

“They must be a bunch of weirdoes, anyway.” He rose to his feet, still cradling his arm. “Look at this place, it’s stacked to the ceiling with goodies ... and it gets left open? I mean, anyone could’ve come along and helped themselves.”

“So what?”

“What do you mean ‘so what’? Doesn’t it tell you something about them?” He struggled to explain: “Look, if they’re so rich that they can afford to leave a place like this unlocked, they deserve whatever they get.”

“Oh, now who’s being judgmental?”

“It’s not as if they *needed* the wine and cognac we’ve been drinking, is it? And, at the end of the day, at least we’ve been maintaining the place for them, looking after it while there’s no-one else here.”

Janey stopped her pacing. She glanced warily around. Long evening shadows were filtering into the villa from all sides. “I’m not sure there is no-one else here,” she said slowly.

“Oh, don’t start with this crap again.”

“How can you say that after what’s just happened!”

“I caught my arm in the wardrobe door. It was an accident.”

“Tim ... wardrobe doors don’t slam shut on their own.”

“Look, there’s nobody else here, except us. And we’re going to stay here for as long as we can, and have a damn good time. And I’ll tell you why: because we deserve it!” He strode up to her, his face hot, dripping with sweat. “I’ve heard your life-story, now you’ve heard mine. And perhaps we’re not so different. We’ve never had anything, either of us ... until now. So this isn’t a chance that I, for one, am going to pass up lightly.”

There was a taut silence, then the girl pushed past him, making for the front door. “Well you’ll be doing it on your own.”

“You’re mad, Janey,” he said after her. “Walking off into the night without a penny to your name, in a foreign land, with no job and only the clothes you’re standing up in. Me, I’m staying right here, and I’m going to take and take and take, until I can’t take any more.”

And just as he said that, there was movement from behind them. They both turned instinctively, and were stunned to see the steel security-shutters over the French-windows to the veranda descending, apparently of their own volition. It wasn’t just the French-windows, though. There was a deafening clatter of gears and runners, and the security-shutters began to fall on every other window as well, at phenomenal speed.

Janey found herself staring in disbelief at one of the crank-handles; it was turning with such force that it had actually started to smoke. “Until you can’t take any more?” she whispered. “That might be sooner than you think ... *Tim, we’re being locked in!*”

It suddenly struck him too that on all sides possible avenues of escape were being shut off. Perhaps the shock of this overwhelmed him, or maybe the defiance he’d shown shortly before had only been superficial, a wafer-thin bravado designed to kid himself and impress the girl. Either way, he needed no second telling now. He dashed in pursuit of Janey, as she raced for the front door. As they reached it, it swung violently closed, but Janey met it with her shoulder, and though the collision knocked the wind out of her, the heavy piece of wood bounced backwards, just allowing them sufficient space and time to get out past it.

Once outside, however, Tim’s injury began to prove an encumbrance. He was clutching his arm to his chest, and seemed almost dizzy with the effort he was making. Janey had to grab him by his good elbow and steer him along the path, even letting him lean on her as they mounted the steps to the front gate. She half-expected this to swing closed in front of them as well, but it stayed open, and the next thing they were staggering up the dusty lane towards the parking-area.

It was a moment of such blind, sweat-soaked terror, that the stunning coastal scenery was lost on them: Nice was a distant lacework of hazy lights, the sea streaked with flame from the setting sun, the overarching sky a smoky sprawl of orange and indigo. They saw none of it, but stumbled on up the path. At the top, the beach-buggy was waiting, which, after everything else that had happened, was a surprise and a relief. They clambered hurriedly in, Janey taking the wheel, Tim slotting into the front-passenger seat. He handed her the key, which, thankfully, was still in his shorts pocket, then slumped back with a groan.

She tried to reassure him: “As soon as we’re away from here, we’ll get you to hospital.”

He nodded.

She knocked the handbrake off, shoved the key into the ignition and turned it.

And, almost predictably, nothing happened.

She tried again, but though the key turned smoothly, there wasn’t so much as a click from the engine. “What the hell’s with this thing?” she muttered.

Tim leaned over to look. “You’re sure you’re doing it right?”

“Of course I’m doing it right! We might drive on the other side of the road from you back home, but I *have* got a license.”

He flopped back into his seat. “This is like it was before. When I first got here. It just stopped working. I couldn’t find out why.”

“Tim!” she snapped. “You’ve been driving around in the freaking thing all the time I’ve been with you!”

“I know. But once I got settled in the house, it seemed to sort itself out again.”

“And that didn’t tell you anything?”

“Having trouble?” someone suddenly asked.

The couple looked around, shocked. They hadn’t heard anyone creep up on them, but it didn’t surprise Janey to now see the elderly gent she’d met before – the handsome, white-haired Englishman in the colourful Hawaiian shirt. He was standing directly beside the car on Tim’s side, smiling at them; in fact, he was positively *beaming*, like the proverbial cat who’d got the cream.

Tim hadn't met the fellow yet, and thinking him someone who might be able to help, sat up. "Oh, er, hi. Yeah. We can't get our car to start."

"I see." The man considered this, then said: "Perhaps you'd like to come down to the house? We can call a mechanic."

"The house?" Tim was momentarily perplexed, then the colour drained from his face. "You mean the 'Villa Tamara'?"

The man was still smiling. "You know that's what I mean."

"It's yours then?" Janey asked.

The man looked at her. "I think you suspected that when you first met me, miss."

"Now listen," Tim began, "we don't want any trouble here."

The man chuckled. "Why should there be any trouble? I'm merely extending my invitation."

"Invitation?" Janey said.

The man looked at her again. "To enjoy my hospitality. You accepted it before. Why should you turn it down now?"

"Perhaps, at the time, we didn't know what your hospitality would involve," Tim replied.

The man pursed his lips. "Let me assure you ... you still don't."

"Yeah well, we never will," Janey said, snatching the keys from the ignition. She opened her door. "We're walking away from here, and you're not stopping us."

"Oh, I won't stop you. Of course not."

Janey indicated to Tim that they should climb out and go the rest of the way on foot. Tim nodded.

"My servant might, though," the man added.

They glanced sharply round.

His smile broadened and deepened; became toothier, spookier. "Don't look so surprised. You know him. You've been getting slowly acquainted with him over the last two days. Only a small household demon. A watch-dog, if you like. Nothing too ferocious, but quite efficient in his way. Marvellous sense-of-humour, he has. And a huge appetite." The man's eyes seemed to twinkle. "And that's where *you* come in."

As though responding to some unspoken command, the beach-buggy's engine rumbled to life. Tim went bolt-upright in his seat.

Janey – who only had one leg out of the car – grabbed instinctively at the steering-wheel, then gazed down in disbelief at the ignition-key, which was still in her hand. When she stared up at the man again, she was too bewildered to speak. Still, he smiled at her. Then he took a step backwards, and the vehicle threw itself into gear and began reversing at frightening speed. Tim fell sideways and cried out in agony. Janey dragged her leg back in and slammed the door closed, to avoid being thrown out.

With a roar of exhaust and a spewing of dust and gravel from its tyres, the beach-buggy backed up perhaps fifteen yards, came to an abrupt halt, which jarred both passengers again, changed gear and then sped forwards, screeching around the parking-area in a wide circle, and blasting its way down the narrow lane towards the villa.

The low rock walls to either side were vanquished by the car's front wings. Headlight clusters exploded, the vehicle's bodywork was torn in strips from the chassis beneath. Despite this, they thundered downhill at horrific speed. The lane was steep, and beyond the villa, led only to jagged rocks and the lapping waves of the Med.

The buggy's brakes were applied as though on a hair-trigger response, however.

The car came to a grinding halt directly beside the front gate. Again, both passengers were hurled forwards, the windscreen splintering in a spider-web where Tim's head struck it. Janey was thrown onto the steering-wheel, which, thankfully, was cushioned with sponge-rubber, though even then the central column hit her in the chest like a mailed fist. Stunned, hunched with pain, she eventually looked up and through the gate, towards the villa's front door, which now stood open again.

"It's most rude for guests to leave before the final course is served," said a voice.

She turned, incredulous that Reveillac could have made his way down the track and caught up with them so quickly. He was still smiling and relaxed, but now he'd produced a gun – an automatic pistol, by the looks of it – and was carefully training it on her. "Into the house, the pair of you."

Janey glanced round at Tim. One of his temples was sliced open and bleeding freely, but he had come round sufficiently to understand the peril of their situation. "What the hell's going on here?" he demanded.

Reveillac's triumphant smile faded a little; cold steel lay just beneath it. "Hoboes who won't be missed are in no position to ask questions. Now do as say."

Groggy but stubborn, Tim shook his head. "I'm not going back in there."

"Move."

"No way!"

"Tim, let's just do what he says," Janey interrupted, placing a hand on his shoulder, and giving him a close, expressive glance, which she hoped he'd construe as meaning 'play along'. He met her eyeball to eyeball, then hung his head.

"Okay. Just don't shoot us, mister."

Reveillac watched in silence as the twosome climbed from their respective sides of the buggy. He'd made sure he was close enough to detect any false moves; in fact, he was only about two yards from Janey, his finger still tight on the trigger. When she'd got out, she turned and glared at him. "You're wrong about us being hoboes. And we *will* be missed."

"It doesn't really matter," he replied.

"It matters to us," she said, edging nearer to him.

He cocked the pistol. "Whatever you're thinking of trying, I really wouldn't advise it."

Janey stopped in her tracks. The muzzle was aimed squarely at her chest. And from this range, he couldn't very well miss. Unless ...

"I'm not thinking of trying anything," she said. "*Except this!*"

And she threw the car-key at him.

Launched it from the hip, with a flick of her wrist.

As such, it was a weak and clumsy shot, but the key, which was actually a bunch of three keys on a ring, spun forcefully through the air, glinting in the reddish sunlight. In the half-second before it hit Reveillac in the face, he averted his eyes. The gun went off, but Janey had already used the diversion to duck out of the way, and

now, with a short, hoarse scream to Tim, was racing down the track towards the sea.

Tim stumbled in pursuit, blood streaming from his brow.

It was perhaps sixty yards to the water's edge, which was nothing more at this point on the Cap Ferat coast than a small, concrete picnic area set amid shoals of tooth-like rocks. They hared down towards it all the same, knowing they couldn't outpace a bullet but hoping against hope that even someone as patently mad as Reveillac wouldn't keep shooting at them in an open place like this; there were still likely to be snorkellers and sun-worshippers around.

What they didn't expect was for the beach-buggy to return to life.

With a wild revving of its engine, like the ululation of some deranged predatory beast, it came hurtling after them. Janey didn't need to glance back over her shoulder to see that, yet again, it was driverless.

"Tim, run!" she screamed. "Get to the water."

Tim, alongside her but wheezing with agony, nodded frantically, the sweat spraying from his frenzied blonde curls. And then he tripped.

With a strangled cry, he sprawled headlong into the dust and stones, his entire weight slamming down on top of his broken arm.

Despite the hulk of mangled metal bearing towards them, its engine yowling, Janey stopped and turned, only to find her friend in white-out pain. His eyes rolled blindly as he lay squirming. His arm was now twisted out of shape entirely; in fact, the hand and wrist had turned as though on a pivot. Shards of shattered bone had pierced the skin. Of course, now was not the time for compassion. "Get up, you son of a bitch!" she shouted. "Get up for God's sake!"

Somehow or other, Tim obeyed. Though his head was clearly swimming, though blood spurted from his mouth where he had bitten through his lip, he managed to scramble back to his feet.

Janey peered back towards the car. It was gaining on them, though not with ease. This lane had never been meant for mechanised vehicles, and all manner of rubble and torn-up vegetation was now tumbling and cascading in front of it, slowing it down. It bounced and clattered on the ruts and boulders, yet, at the end of the day it *was* a beach-buggy, so it still came on. It was

perhaps only fifteen yards away. They staggered off again. The concrete picnic area was close ahead; they might reach that, but then what? Beyond that, there was another ten yards of razor-ridged rocks, which they'd have to pick their way over before the water became deep enough to escape into, and when they tried to do that, wouldn't the thing just plough on after them?

And then Tim fell again, collapsing into the dust like a man without bones.

He scarcely seemed to know what was happening any more. Bloodied and dirtied, half-demented with pain, he'd only gone over on his ankle, but was now so wrapped in delirium that he seemed incapable of getting up again. Janey staggered back to him, this time grabbing him by the vest and trying to drag him sideways, out of the way, for their pursuer was less than ten yards distant ... nine ... eight ... seven ...

Smoke billowed from it. With its gashed-open frontage all jagged blades of bodywork and broken, hissing innards, it was like a demonic mouth descending on them.

... six ... five ... four ... three ...

The heat poured off it in waves.

... two ...

And with an echoing *CLUNK*, it cut out.

Just like that.

As though its power supply had been nipped at the source.

The car continued downhill – its own momentum ensured that – but now it was rolling rather than driving, and as more branches snagged at it, and the ragged shreds of rubber that had once served as its tyres caught up in the thorns and cacti, it began to slow down dramatically.

Janey was kneeling beside Tim as she watched it veer unsteadily past, then trundle off-track into a dense tangle of oreganum, where it finally came to a halt. Seconds then went by as the dust settled around it. Oily smoke hung in the air, and there was a faint odour of fuel and blistered chrome. But that was all.

The girl stared at the wreck, dumbfounded. She wasn't sure that this was the end of it; that some further twist in Reveillac's scheme

didn't still await them. So fearing, she glanced back up the lane towards him.

He stood there, outside the gate to his house, watching. Making no attempt to approach.

And then she noticed something else. Directly beside the spot where Tim had fallen, on the other side of the track from where the beach-buggy now sat, two pieces of dried driftwood, both about three feet in length, had been propped up against each other to form a primitive roof. Beneath them was a small statuette, so weathered that it was scarcely identifiable, though something about the veil it wore and the fact that its hands were joined in prayer, not to mention the many flowers and Catholic rosaries that adorned it, suggested the Virgin Mary. It was a shrine, Janey realised – one of those simple, crude shrines still popular in rural parts of France, even in this Godless twenty-first century.

Often, they were erected to mark the spots of fatal road-accidents, though this, of course, was a long way from any major auto-route. Perhaps it had been constructed here as a memorial to some other kind of tragedy – something to do with the sea maybe?

Then again, perhaps it had another purpose altogether?

The girl glanced round to where Mr. Reveillac was still standing watching her. From what now looked distinctly like 'a safe distance'.

A moment passed, then he turned and went into his villa, closing the door behind him.

oOo

*GINGERBREAD came from an idea that was initially my father's. We were on holiday in the south of France, way back in the 1970s. We'd rented a fantastic villa at Cap Ferat, and were enjoying a very lazy, very sun-drenched fortnight. During the course of this, my dad and I began to devise a ghost story. At first it wasn't intentional. We just started supposing that the villa might be haunted, and played around with possible situations, mainly as an amusement. However, my father - Brian Finch, a distinguished television playwright -was so taken with this concept that, when we returned home, he began serious development work. At*

length, probably because supernatural stuff was always a hard sell to TV execs, he removed the ghostly elements altogether and wrote an intense 'real world' thriller called *A WALK IN THE DARK*. It eventually screened in 1982 as part of the celebrated *SATURDAY NIGHT THRILLER* series, and starred Denis Quilley.

Many years later, when I myself had begun to dabble with serious writing, he casually mentioned that he still had the outline for the original ghost story and wondered if I fancied turning it into something. I eagerly accepted. When I read it, I was astonished at how different it was from *A WALK IN THE DARK*, which was a different tale altogether, though I suppose that says more about the amazing transformation process that occurs in the development of modern TV drama than it does about the average author's willingness to chop and change. Anyway, the novella you find printed here was the final result. I didn't follow my dad's outline slavishly, though so much of his original idea still features that I was determined it should carry both our by-lines.

As my father died last year, at the tragically early age of 70, it remains the only piece of work that he and I ever collaborated on, and for that reason alone I'll treasure it more than any other.

Paul Finch is a former police officer and journalist, now turned full time writer. He first cut his literary teeth penning episodes of the British TV crime drama, *THE BILL*, but has also written extensively in the field of animation, contributing numerous scripts to various children's television shows. However, he is probably best known for his work in horror.

To date, he's had eight books and nearly 300 stories and novellas published on both sides of the Atlantic. His first collection, *AFTERSHOCKS*, won the British Fantasy Award in 2002, while he won the award again in 2007 for his novella, *KID*. Later in 2007, he won the International Horror Guild Award for his mid-length story, *THE OLD NORTH ROAD*. He is currently working on the scripts for two movie adaptations of his own stories, *CAPE WRATH* and *LORE OF THE JUNGLE*, both of which are due to go into production early in 2009.

Paul lives in Lancashire, northern England, with his wife Cathy and his children, Eleanor and Harry.

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