

My Father's Demon.

My Father's Demon

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My Father's Demon.

For my kindred spirits,
Bryn Morris and Jackie Reiter,
for their unflagging support and enthusiasm,
and for my sister Lisa Williams,
who will always be my compass, my touchstone, my best friend.

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My Father's Demon.

Prologue

On a chill January night, my father disappeared. He left our home in Kensington with few belongings – a change of clothes, his razor and shaving foam, and a sepia-toned portrait of my mother taken before my birth. Her hair is pinned fashionably at the crown and strewn with lilies. She wears a lacy white dress buttoned to the collar. She is smiling, unaware that her short life is about to end.

His study was tidy, the door unlocked. The crimson rug with the white border of waddling geese, the rows of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* standing to attention on their shelves, the writing desk with its assortment of glass paperweights I had so loved as a child – all were in their proper places. There was no letter to allay my fears, or to account for the terror that had held him in its fist during his fever. It was as if he had simply stepped out into the thick London fog and melted into the darkness like a ghost.

Inspector Telford arrived shortly after eight. He perched uncomfortably on the edge of his seat, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief that he produced from the pocket of his waistcoat with a magician's flourish. The questions began then; questions about my father, his routine, his character, and our life together, which was the only life I had ever known. All the while the Inspector fidgeted in his chair, crossing one foot over the other, the fingers of his left hand drumming impatiently against his thigh until I felt I would go mad with it. I permitted my mind to wander for a while, his words washing over me like a river on rocks. And I thought, how will such a man find my father and bring him safely home? I could no longer believe that any one of us was truly safe. Not after what I had seen.

I remember the aroma of Mrs McClune's steak and kidney pie drifting down the hallway from the kitchen. I remember the stifling warmth in the parlour from the fire, the tongues of flame writhing like tortured souls in the grate. And I remember Bess toying with the edges of her apron, her chin trembling as Inspector Telford's words wrapped around my heart like a noose.

These details will be forever etched upon my memory. On that day, the safe and comfortable life I knew was irrevocably changed, and my quest for the truth about my father and the secrets hidden from me since the day of my birth began.

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Part One

The Journal

1.

Inspector Telford took the cup Bess offered him and sat down in Father's armchair. A tall, heavy-set man with a greyish pallor to his skin, he carried himself with an air of weary resignation, as if his visit to my father's house was simply one more irritation to bear before his long day drew to a close. Afterwards, I realised this impression was one the Inspector cultivated deliberately, for while he raised the cup to his lips and wrinkled his nose distastefully at the scent of Bess's camomile tea, his sharp eyes never left my face.

"You will understand that I must ask these questions," he said. "Under the circumstances – that is, when someone goes missing as Dr Collins has – it is vital to have as much information to hand as soon as possible. You do understand?"

"Perfectly, Inspector." With a trembling hand, I returned my cup to the saucer on my lap.

"Very good," he said, opening his notebook and producing a pencil from his pocket. "Shall we begin?" He glanced over at Bess standing behind my chair. "I do not think we shall require the servants for this."

"On the contrary, Inspector," I said. "Bess has been with us since she was thirteen. I would prefer her to be present for this conversation."

Telford raised his bushy grey eyebrows in surprise, then shrugged. "Of course, whatever you wish. Perhaps you would like to sit, Bess?"

"Thank you, sir." Bess drew a stool close to my chair. I felt a great desire to reach for her hand and press her pale fingers to my lips. Instead I watched her from the corners of my eyes instead and waited for the Inspector to begin.

He stared down at his notebook for a long moment, as if he expected to find the answers he sought on its blank pages. Then he cleared his throat.

"When was the last time you saw Dr Collins?"

"Two days ago. Father always leaves the house at half past seven," I said. "He returns for his dinner at one before returning to his practice on Stockley Road. It was a day like any other."

I sipped my tea again, fixing my eyes on a point just above Telford's head, conscious of Bess holding her breath at my side. The lie seemed to burn in my ears, but Telford simply nodded and scribbled something in his notebook.

"And you have recently returned from Cambridge?"

"Yes, I am studying medicine there."

There was a long pause, in which only the crackling of the flames could be heard in the hushed room. The inspector looked up from his notebook. "An interesting pursuit," he remarked.

"I hope to take a degree as soon as possible."

"I see." Telford crossed his legs and leaned back in the armchair. "And you have been home for three weeks?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, during this time, did you notice anything odd or different about your father's behaviour? Was he worried by anything? Did he seem his usual self?"

Bess shifted on the stool.

"Father was the same as always," I replied. "He was glad to have me home. We are very close, you see, so I am sure that, if there had been something troubling him, he would have confided in me."

"Yes, I am sure," the Inspector mused. "And did Dr Collins have any financial

concerns, if you will pardon the question?" A thin blue vein pulsed beneath the skin at his temple like a tiny heartbeat. I felt again the shrewd power concealed behind his calm eyes.

"To the best of my knowledge, Father was not troubled about money," I replied. "He paid for my university courses and accommodation in Cambridge and believed it to be money well spent. We recently discussed going abroad for the summer to Italy as well."

My lies buzzed in my head like a swarm of angry wasps. It was a dangerous game of chess I played with one accustomed to sniffing out concealments and half-truths, but the memory of Father's warning held me firm.

"How very nice," Telford said, his eyes wandering to Bess. He paused. "You will forgive me for asking this, but did Dr Collins have any rivals, anyone who would not wish him well perhaps?"

"Do you mean enemies?" I exclaimed. "Father is a decent, well-respected man! I cannot imagine that anyone would wish him ill."

"Of course," Telford said smoothly. "But when someone as regular and predictable as your father goes missing, we cannot rule out any possibility." He smoothed a wrinkle from his grey flannel trousers and flicked back through his notebook. "Now I have the notes from Constables Murphy and Peterson, but I do have one last question," His eyes narrowed. "Had you quarrelled at all with Dr Collins?"

I rose to my feet, taking a breath to steady my nerves. Bess slipped off her stool and stood up quickly too, the cotton of her black dress brushing against my arm.

"My father and I are exceptionally close," I said, blinking the wetness from my eyes. "We have never quarrelled or even once raised our voices to each other. It is inconceivable that he would leave this house bearing any grudge against me."

Telford pocketed his pencil and notebook and heaved his large frame from the chair with a sigh. "Forgive me. I was not implying otherwise. It is simply a matter of procedure, you understand."

Silently, I cursed the man for the way in which he peered into my eyes, searching for a stray emotion, a careless gesture, a moment's hesitation that he would pounce upon like a hound. But before he could speak again, Bess stepped forward and took his empty cup. "Will that be all, sir?" she said, lowering her eyes respectfully. "I'll be fetching your coat then."

Telford cast his eyes over her. His teeth were very long and yellow and, as Bess left the room, his eyes followed the twitch of her skirts in a manner I did not care for.

"I understand this must be a very trying time for you," he said, turning to me again. "Please be assured we will do everything we can to find Dr Collins. And now I must wish you a pleasant evening, or as pleasant as it can be under the circumstances."

He hesitated, his eyes once more finding mine and holding their gaze. "Of course, I must impress upon you how important it is that we are kept fully informed. Any news at all, you understand?"

"I understand, Inspector," I murmured. "Thank you for your already considerable efforts. I am sure your men are doing everything they can."

Grateful to be able to turn my back on him at last, I moved closer to the fire, listening to the sound of his footsteps cross the parlour floor and tap down the corridor. "Mind how you go, sir; it's a fearful cold night," Bess said. The Inspector

mumbled an incoherent reply. The front door closed behind him with a gentle click. A moment later, Bess appeared in the parlour doorway, hurrying to the fireplace to seize my hands in hers.

"Oh, Bess," I whispered, pulling her into my arms. We stood together before the flames, her heart racing against mine like a frightened bird's. I pressed my face against her curls. As orange as the flames they were, with the scent of the apple soap I had brought back from Cambridge for her.

"Did he believe us, George?" Bess said softly. "I was afraid he wouldn't leave."

"We have done nothing wrong, Bess."

"What if Dr Collins is in terrible trouble?" she said, gripping my waist tightly and looking up at me with eyes like bright water. "I think we should've told the truth. I don't believe I can go on with this much longer. Mrs McClune knows I'm holding something back."

Standing there in the firelight, she looked so lovely, so sad that my heart twisted inside me. What if she was right? Was I wrong to keep the events of the past week from the police and the steely-eyed Inspector? Was I wrong to keep my suspicions a secret?

The fear must have been visible on my face for Bess tightened her arms around me again and held me close to her. "Forgive me, George, I didn't mean it," she whispered, her breath hot against my ear, her fingers softly stroking the back of my neck. "It'll be all right, dearest. It'll be all right."

Six nights earlier, I had found Father in his study sipping brandy from a crystal tumbler and scribbling in his journal. The hour was late; the fire was low in the grate and a wintry chill clung to the shadowed corners of the room. Outside, raindrops crawled across the windows. The fir trees waved their dark green branches back and forth against the glass, creating shadows in the candlelit room that chased and consumed the light.

Father blinked several times, as if he barely recognised his only child entering the room. Then he smiled and the shadows from his face lifted. He pulled his spectacles off, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, and ushered me into the seat opposite him with a wave of his hand.

"George, what are you doing up so late?"

"I could not sleep," I said. In truth, I had been lying awake, wondering how I was going to return to Cambridge in a month and leave Bess for a second time. I wondered how much Father knew, if he even guessed the depth of my feelings for her. It was the one divide between us, the one truth left unspoken.

I expected him to remind me that my nose was constantly in my books and that it would do me good to take in some fresh air, but for once he refrained from gentle lecturing. Instead he nodded wearily, as if he understood too well that the blessed realm of sleep is for those who have nothing to hide.

"I quite understand," he said. "There is never enough time. I cannot bear to waste it with sleep."

Shadows like smudged ink ringed his eyes. He rubbed the back of his neck with a grimace and replaced his spectacles on his nose again. "Of course one must succumb to the body's demands eventually, but there is always more to do."

"What is so important that it cannot wait until tomorrow?"

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Father smiled and reached across the desk for my hand. "Dear George, you are so like your mother. Have I ever told you that you have your mother's eyes?"

"A hundred times," I said. "Perhaps a thousand."

"Yes, yes." He patted my hand fondly. "And you were always such a stubborn child."

"With such a stubborn father," I retorted. "A father who sits up all night writing when he should be asleep. What would your patients say, if they could see you now?"

Father chuckled. "I think some might decide to visit another practice."

"Exactly. You cannot concern yourself with the health of others when you neglect your own. Come now; finish and get some sleep."

Father's eyes strayed back to the journal that lay between us.

I sighed and released his hand. "Very well, continue your scribbles but do not come crying to me about fatigue and headaches and all the rest."

"Dear George, you have my solemn word that I will not come crying to you," Father promised. We smiled at each other and I stood up and walked to the door.

"George?" Father said. The pen in his left hand hovered uncertainly over the journal.

"Yes, Father?"

"You do know that if something were to happen to me, you would be well taken care of, don't you? Mr Scott delivered my papers to Samuel, Rathbone and Hawley in Pimlico last week."

I moved back into the room, feeling suddenly alarmed. "What are you talking about? What do you mean, if something were to happen to you?"

Again that vague expression stole across his features, as if he had lost his train of thought. "There is nothing to be worried about; it is simply a precaution," he said slowly. "Forgive me for being insensitive. It is just that, as one grows older, one wants to ensure that one's loved ones are well provided for. I have been remiss in not updating my will earlier. You will be twenty-one in a month, George, very nearly a grown-up, and I..." he sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I am a sentimental old fool."

"Father, are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," he said. He left his chair, stepping around his cluttered desk to embrace me as he had done so often when I was younger and prone to night terrors. The familiar scent of shaving cream and snuff settled around me like an old, familiar cloak.

"I am very proud of you, George," he said.

"And I am proud of you, you stubborn old man," I said, lifting my head from his shoulder. "But if I find you here in the morning, still writing in that wretched book, there will be trouble. Goodnight, Father."

"Goodnight, George."

As I left him for the second time that evening, a strange thing occurred. I cannot explain why my eyes suddenly came to rest upon the journal lying open on the desk. Its pages were yellow in the dim candlelight and a silky, emerald-coloured ribbon rested between them on the inside spine; but these small details were not the cause of my puzzlement. Upon entering the study, I had been sure that Father was writing in the journal, filling its pages with his elegant script. It was an evening ritual he had observed for as long as I could remember; indeed, such a prolific diarist was he that we sometimes joked about his works one day rivalling those of the great Pepys. And yet, on this night, my eyes had deceived me. The journal could not

belong to Father. The tiny words that filled its gold-edged pages were written in a stranger's hand.

The following morning, I finished breakfast and busied myself with a newspaper at the table as I waited for Father to join me. From the kitchen, I could hear Mrs McClune scolding poor Bess. "What's gotten into you, lassie? Look at you, moonin' around with eyes as big as saucers. Wake up, girl, or you'll feel the back o' my hand!"

When Bess scurried into the dining room to collect the breakfast things, I caught her hand and pressed it to my heart. She looked harried and half-asleep. "Can you not put your tray down, Bess, and sit with me awhile?" I murmured, brushing her copper hair from her eyes. But she shook her head, turned quickly away and slipped back into the kitchen as the familiar tread of Father's steps sounded in the corridor.

"There you are," I said, looking up as he entered the dining room. "I was about to send Mr Scott to wake you. It's nearly seven." I caught my breath sharply. "Father!"

My father took his place at the opposite side of the table. A bruise like a great dark cloud covered his left eye, the skin around it mottled and swollen, and small, angry marks circled his throat like a necklace. There was a tension on his face as if each breath caused him pain. "Father, what on earth is wrong?" I said, alarmed at the sight of his chest rising and falling as he struggled for breath.

"Oh, George," he said with a rueful smile. "Do you see what this foolish old man has done now?"

"But you were perfectly well when I left you last night. What have you done, Father? Just look at you!"

Father sighed and shook his head. "After you retired, I decided to do some spring-cleaning. Mr Scott had left the stepladder in the study so I thought I might have a jolly time battling spider webs. That was before I managed to bring half a shelf of books down on my silly old head. I am amazed you all slept through it."

You cannot possibly go to work like this," I said briskly. "Mrs McClune, please come here at once. Father has hurt himself!"

In an instant, our housekeeper was in the room, leaning close to Father to peer at him with an expression of horror on her lined face. "My goodness, sir, what've you gone and done?"

"Now, now, Mrs McClune, there is no harm done," Father began.

"No harm done! Well, that's a funny way of explainin' those dreadful bruises, sir. Sit right there while Bess goes for Dr Henry. I know you'll be thinkin' of your own patients, sir, but you'll be no use to 'em until we get you mended up. Where is that girl? Bess, go directly to Dr Henry and bring 'im straight here."

"You are forgetting that I am a doctor myself," Father said weakly.

"That may well be, sir, but all the same... Now sit here with George and I'll fetch you a nice strong cup of tea," she said, shuffling back into the kitchen.

I studied Father's injuries with a steady eye. "Tell me again what happened. You said a shelf came loose?"

"Not exactly," Father replied, reaching for a newspaper. "A few books came down. That is all."

"And they hit you in the face?"

"Yes, rather unfortunate." Behind the strained smile, something furtive prickled at the corners of my father's eyes. I had never seen that expression on his face before.

"They hit you in the throat also. Does that not seem strange to you?"

"I suppose it does," Father conceded. "But it all happened so quickly. One minute, there I was on the ladder, and the next I was peeling myself off the floor beneath an eiderdown of books. You must not worry Mr Scott about them. I replaced them all myself."

"You climbed back on the ladder and put the books back on the shelf?"

"I did." Father turned the newspaper over to squint at the crossword puzzle on the back page. "It was after all my own silly fault. I should know better than to clamber around in the wee hours of the morning destroying the homes of innocent spiders." He smiled. "Dear George, do not look so worried."

I was certain he had never lied to me before. Why did he do so now?

When Dr Henry arrived, I left him alone with Father and stepped quickly down the corridor to the study. Bess had dusted the shelves the previous day, I recalled, and polished the dark oak tallboy, the mantelpiece and my father's desk. There was nothing out of place and no sign of a disturbance, but Father was keeping something from me. Of that, I was certain.

After Dr Henry had finished his examinations and prescribed a sleeping draught for Father and two days uninterrupted rest, I accompanied him to the parlour. My father's old friend looked at me uncertainly as I closed the parlour door behind us and I saw not a little of my own anxiety on his whiskered face.

"Dr Henry, I am concerned about my father," I said.

The old man rubbed his chin, his head bobbing up and down like an apple in a barrel of water. "I can understand that. Benjamin is very lucky not to have a concussion, George. I would ask that you ensure he rests and does not succeed in convincing our trustworthy Mrs McClune or your good self that he is well enough to attend to his patients today."

"He will not be going anywhere," I replied. "But there is something I wish to ask you." I hesitated. "It is somewhat delicate."

Dr Henry placed a kind hand on my arm. "Come, George, I have known you since you were a tiny babe. I do hope there is nothing you could not speak to me about." His watery eyes blinked softly and an encouraging smile appeared on his old face.

"Very well," I continued. "But this is truly a difficult thing for me to say. I have never doubted Father before..."

"Go on," he said, a worried frown replacing the smile on his face.

"I am not sure I believe Father's story about the stepladder and the books in the study." I said softly.

Dr Henry's face darkened. "I see."

"I have, as you know, very limited medical knowledge, having studied for just a few months. However, I am fairly certain that such a bruise could only be caused by considerable force."

"I see," Dr Henry said again.

"Furthermore, I believe the weight of a book – or several books in fact – would be insufficient to cause the bruises on Father's neck. Instead... well, this will sound foolish, but Father's injuries look almost as if they were caused by an assailant. The bruises seem to me like a set of fingerprints, as if someone had applied a very great

pressure there.”

Dr Henry drew a breath.

“They are the type of bruises you would have, if you were involved in a struggle,” I said, realising from the expression on the doctor's face that my suspicions were correct. But who in the world would wish Father harm?

“Can you confirm this for me?” I prompted. “I feel it is only right that I should have all the facts before I speak to Father about it.”

Dr Henry's expression was grim. “George, I would have said nothing; but you are right. The marks upon Benjamin's neck do seem to be fingerprints, although he refuses to tell me how they came to be there.”

A sudden image of the journal formed in my mind: the emerald ribbon marking Father's place, the unfamiliar writing that swirled across the stiff pages from margin to margin that had filled me with a strange unease.

“Thank you, Dr Henry,” I said. “That is all I wished to know.”

Little good came of my conversation with Father. At first, I attempted to coax the truth from him, but when my efforts were met with an obstinate silence, I let my temper run freely until we found ourselves at a tense and sullen impasse. I did not believe his tale about the books, but I could not bring myself to openly accuse my father of lying to me. Looking back on that day now, how I wish I had braved his anger and forced him to tell me all.

On Dr Henry's orders, my father had been sent to bed. He lay on his back with his arms at his sides, his eyes fixed sulkily on the ceiling and the corners of his mouth pulled down in an unhappy grimace. I could not remember the last time he had been ill or confined to his bed and the silence that settled between us made me feel helplessly miserable. He seemed older, frailer than ever before. When had the silver appeared in his coal-black hair? When had the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes begun to trace their sly, spidery way across his dear face? Why had I not noticed them before?

“You are working too hard,” I said finally. “Promise me that you will rest for a few days before you return to the practice. You must make a full recovery before I can allow you to return to work.”

Father turned his head on the pillow towards me. His dark eyes glittered with annoyance. “Allow me?” he said. “Who is the father here and who is the child? Tell me, George, when did you become the head of this household?”

“I am the head of this household until you are on your feet again,” I said firmly. “I will have no arguments, Father. For once, you will do as you are told!”

We studied each other for a long moment and then Father coughed and laughed softly. Relieved, I reached for his hand and squeezed his fingers. “Very well, George,” Father said with a tired smile. “I will rest as you command. Please tell Mrs McClune that I will have my luncheon at two o'clock today. I know it is later than usual, but my appetite has quite deserted me.” He gave my wrist a pat and turned on his side, closing his eyes.

Bess was waiting for me outside Father's door. “There is something you should see,” she whispered, leading me along the corridor past the parlour and the kitchen to the study. Going to the window, she pushed back the heavy drapes, permitting the weak wintry sunshine to reach hesitantly into the room. “Look,” she

said, pointing to the fireplace behind me.

I will never forget that sight. Etched in coal across the stone and along the wooden shelves that stood to the right of the fireplace, the strange markings chased each other in a confusing spiral that seemed to have no beginning or end. They rippled back and forth across the walls in a giddy dance, the work of an artist desperate or mad. For a moment I could not breathe. "There's more," Bess said fearfully.

Leading me to the window, she pushed the drapes aside to reveal the broken latch. "Someone was here last night, George," she said, putting a hand over her mouth as if to press the words back between her lips.

I shivered, looking back at the markings over the hearth. Were they words or letters? Who had drawn them there and for what purpose? I thought again of the writing in my father's journal, of the disquiet in his expression, the bruises on his throat.

"Who else has been in this room?"

"No one," Bess said shakily. "I came in here myself to make sure the stepladder wasn't broken."

"Where is it?"

"It isn't here, George."

I bent down to trace one of the charcoal marks on the hearth with my finger. "Perhaps Mr Scott has removed it."

"No, he hasn't. I checked with him. And the lock, George; it's been forced from the outside. You can see quite clearly where the metal's been cut."

I turned to her, fixing her with a hard look. "Bessie, are you implying that a mysterious stranger climbed in through the window, drew a series of archaic scribbles across the fireplace and disappeared?"

"I don't know." Bess twisted her hands awkwardly. "It doesn't seem very likely, does it?"

I cleared my throat. "No, it does not. Now, I want these awful marks removed."

Suddenly Bess's expression changed. With a startled cry, she stepped backwards, knocking a paperweight from Father's desk. A shrill gasp caught in my own throat and I turned quickly to see what had her so.

Clutching the doorframe, clad in nothing but his gown with his feet bare upon the cold tiles, stood Father. His eyes were wide, his lips trembling with emotion.

"Please," he said weakly. "Please, George, you must not touch them."

"What on earth are you doing out of bed?" I exclaimed.

Father's hands tightened around the study door. "You must not wipe them away, George. They are the only protection, the only way of... being safe... you must not."

It was all I could not to turn from the terror in his eyes. I caught him in my arms before he could fall.

"Mr Scott, Mr Scott," Bess screamed, running to help me bear Father's weight.

"Do not let her touch them, George," Father groaned.

Staggering against each other in a grotesque dance, Bess and I struggled to hold Father upright. "It is all right, Father," I soothed, as Mr Scott's running footsteps sounded in the corridor. "It is all right."

"You do not understand, George," he whimpered, staring at me with wild, unfocussed eyes. "He is here."

He is here.

I lay stroking Bess's hair, pressed against her in her narrow bed. High in the attic, she slept like a little bird in a nest, her skin as pale as the moonlight seeping into the room from the small window. Outside, London waited for the dawn; for people and carriages to throng her streets, for newspaper boys to shout their wares from her corners, for a pale sun to rise like a giant globe over the meandering Thames.

Unable to sleep, I had climbed the stairs to Bess's garret. There we had talked long into the night until we had fallen asleep in each other's arms. A stray dog on the street woke me some hours later and so I lay there, listening to the rhythmic sound of Bess's breathing and watching the patterns the moonlight made upon the bare walls.

Soon after Mr Scott had carried him back to his room, Father's condition had deteriorated.

"I will send for Dr Henry, Father," I had said.

"No, George." Father clutched at my hand and held it so tightly I felt sure the bones would break in two. "No one must come to the house."

"Why?" I demanded. "Because of those markings in the study? There was an intruder here last night, Father. The only sensible thing to do is to send for the police and I will do so as soon as I have summoned Dr Henry."

"No," Father moaned. "No, you must not, George. No one must know. Promise me. Promise me!"

"Hush, Father, all right, I promise," I said, desperate to ease his troubled spirits.

He did not speak again. Closing his eyes, he fell back upon the bed, his hand trembling in mine, where it remained until Mrs McClune sent me to bed with reassurances that she would wake me, if there was a change for the worse.

I could not bear the cold stiff sheets of my own bed and so I made my way to Bess's, curling my body around hers and rousing her slowly until sleep abandoned her and she responded to my passions eagerly with her own. Afterwards, she lay stroking my back gently until the worst of my fears had subsided. But now my mind was active again, searching for answers to explain my father's perplexing behaviour.

He is here.

Father had always been a practical man. He had filled my hungry mind with the knowledge of scientific discovery and wondrous inventions, of the miracles of medicine and technology and the ceaseless quest of man to learn and build and strive for all he was worth. So from where did this fear come? What drove him to seek protection in strange symbols scrawled upon the walls? And what had he meant when he had spoken those terrible words, their memory chilling me to the core?

He is here.

I closed my eyes, pressing my face against Bess's neck and willing myself to sleep once more. When Father was well enough to speak with clarity, I would ask him again about the bruises and the broken window and the marks on the fireplace. I would not rest until I had the truth.

The house creaked around us and settled itself again for the night. I knew that downstairs Mrs McClune dozed in an armchair by Father's bed like the faithful friend she was, that Mr Scott snored gently in his room under the stairs, and that Bess and

My Father's Demon.

I were safe together like two field mice in a nest of grass. On the landing, the grandfather clock measured each second with a soft tick. My feet slipped into the cool space at the bottom of the bed. A lock of Bess's hair tickled my nose. Her nightgown tangled around my legs like a torn sail, and in the dreams that danced behind my eyelids, I heard the rush of waves.

But something was rousing me, dragging me back from the depths of sleep like a fish to the surface of a pool. Slowly, slowly, I ascended until I sat upright in the bed, my hand on my heart. Bess's fingers gripped my wrist. Her voice was groggy with sleep. "What was that?" she gasped.

A second scream pierced the stillness, a scream of such horror and distress that I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck. I leapt from the bed. "George," Bess cried, but I paid her no heed and rushed from the room and down the stairs as fast as I could.

At the bottom of the stairs stood Mr Scott, supporting the housekeeper on a strong arm. Mrs McClune's long, grey hair hung across her face and she wept into her nightgown as if her heart would break, clutching at Mr Scott as if she were adrift on an angry tide and he her last salvation.

"What is it?" I stumbled on the last few steps and had to clutch the banister to save myself from falling. "What has happened?"

"See for yourself!" The housekeeper pointed to my father's room with a shaking hand. My eyes met with Mr Scott's, who gazed at me with a helpless expression and shook his head. I left them huddled together and stepped across the threshold into Father's room.

The bedcovers lay crumpled on the floor. The open window banged dully against the wall in the breeze and, through the glass, I could see the moon floating on a bed of dark silver-edged clouds. No candle burned upon the bureau, no gas lamp lit the shadowed corners, but I needed no light to see what had wrung Mrs McClune's screams from her like water from a rag. On all four walls, from ceiling to skirting board, the charcoal symbols chased each other around and around the room like a serpent swallowing its own tail. Of Father, there was no sign.

2.

Several hours before Inspector Telford's visit, a package arrived. I now know that Father had posted it to me on the day before his disappearance to ensure it was not discovered when the house was searched. At the time, I gave it a cursory glance, placed it on the coffee table in the parlour and turned my attention to more pressing matters.

I was determined to honour my father's wishes. I had resolved to say nothing of his strange behaviour to the police. A small measure of his fear had infected me; I could feel its oily taste on my tongue, its chill in the pit of my stomach. Tell no one, Father had said. And like a dutiful child, I obeyed.

Briskly, I ordered Bess and Mrs McClune to remove the markings from Father's room and the study. They set about this task with great enthusiasm, each eager to return our home to its proper state. Bess fetched the scouring brushes from the laundry and climbed Mr Scott's stepladder to scrub at the charcoal as if her life depended on it, but Mrs McClune soon tired, wiping shakily at the skirting boards with her wet rag, until, seeing that she was quite undone by it all, I ordered her to rest.

We waited for the housekeeper to leave the room. Then placing her rag on the ladder and straightening her cap, Bess said, "What do you think has happened, George?" When I did not reply, she turned to me and placed a hand in mine, gazing up at me with her clear, steady eyes. "George," she said softly.

"I cannot begin to say."

Bess frowned. "Do you think someone's blackmailing Dr Collins?"

"For what reason?"

She shook her head. "I don't know." She wiped her forearm across her brow and directed her frown at the ceiling above her. "How do you suppose these runes got all the way around the room like this?"

I dropped my rag. It fluttered like a pennant to the floor. "Runes?" I said. "Why do you call them that?"

Bess retrieved the rag from the floor and stood turning it thoughtfully in her hands. "I didn't want to say anything before, but I've been thinking about this. Dr Collins warned us not to scrub these away. He said that they were protecting us somehow." She looked anxiously at me. "Well, what if he was right? At home, some of the country folk still use charms and runes. Most people think it all nonsense now of course, but the old ones still believe it."

I watched Bess's eyes moving slowly backwards and forwards across the ceiling, following the eerie script above our heads. She had come to us from over the Irish Sea. Perhaps she knew more of these things than I did.

"Do you believe in runes, Bess?"

She shrugged. "If you put them there yourself and you truly believe they will protect you, who's to say they can't? Perhaps they will, if you believe strongly enough."

We were quiet. I could not say it. I did not want to say it. It frightened me.

"I can believe that Father made the marks in the study," I said slowly. "But I cannot believe that a sick man was able to haul himself out of bed and climb the walls to scratch them from the ceiling to the floor. There is simply no earthly way Father could climb that high; and even if he did so using the ladder here, how could he have failed to wake Mrs McClune?"

Bess shivered. "We must tell the police, George."

I shook my head. "No. I care nothing for my own reputation as well you know, but I care a great deal of what the world thinks about Father. Besides, I promised him I would not."

"Why?" Bess said helplessly. "Surely he wouldn't fear the police?"

"I do not know."

Bess did something then that I had never seen her do before. She made the sign of the cross in front of us both and put her arms around me. "I'm afraid," she said, pressing her lips to my neck so that I could feel her words seeping into my skin. "You won't go back to Cambridge, will you? Not until Dr Collins comes home."

"My poor darling," I said. Her eyes were so green, eyes in which lay all that was good and kind and precious in the world. "I am not going anywhere. I will find Father and that will be the end of it, Bess. I promise."

And shortly after we had banished the runes from the two rooms, the police arrived.

After Inspector Telford's visit, I decided that the four of us should take our supper together. The idea so shocked poor Mrs McClune that I instantly regretted the idea. And yet, given the distressing turn of events over the past few days, I felt a deep reluctance at the prospect of sitting alone in the parlour with only my thoughts to keep me company. My mood darkened as the autumn evening drew in. At my insistence, the table was set for four.

Mr Scott and Bess were the first to join me, along with Mrs McClune's steak and kidney pie, but the housekeeper herself kept us waiting for some time. When she did consent to join us finally, she did so with an agonised expression on her face, and would only agree to Bess serving her after I had consumed half the food on my plate.

I have never understood the divide between the classes. To my mind, it is as harmful as the barrier between men and women and brings no happiness to anyone; but Mrs McClune's discomfort at the table was so acute that I soon gave up any attempt at conversation. A sombre mood hung over us all. Even Bess seemed ill at ease. I resolved to allay our fears, although the ache in my heart was so great, my failure seemed certain.

"I know the three of you are deeply concerned about my dear father," I began. "But Inspector Telford has assured me that he and his men will do everything possible to find him and bring him safely home."

I felt Bess's leg brush against mine beneath the table. Slowly I slipped my right hand to her thigh, where her fingers waited to curl around mine.

"In the meantime, we must not fall apart. It would not do for Father to return and see us overcome by worry and grief. He was obviously unwell to disappear so suddenly and with no explanation, but I am sure one exists and will be made known to us upon his return."

Mr Scott placed his fork down beside his plate and rubbed his patchy grey beard. "If I may say so, your bravery is quite commendable, young George. If the good doctor was here to see you, well, I'm sure he'd be right proud."

I looked gratefully at my father's valet, who had first joined our household when I was a child of six. "Thank you, Mr Scott. I believe Father would be proud of all

of us. The last two days have been deeply trying, but I am certain that all will be well."

In truth, I was certain of no such thing. Despite replaying recent events in my mind until I could scarcely think straight, I was unable to explain how Father had come by his bruises, or how the runes had been made. More importantly, the question of why plagued me. Why was my father so afraid, and of whom? I had lied to the police to protect his reputation, but what if my instincts had only served to protect the one who meant him harm?

He is here.

We fell silent again after my little speech. When I suggested retiring early, the relief on Mrs McClune's face was painfully apparent and she leapt up and at once began to clear the half-eaten meal from the table.

After Mr Scott and Mrs McClune had retired to their rooms, I slipped up the stairs to the landing where Bess waited for me. She stood next to the grandfather clock, looking out the arch-shaped window into the cold dark. The hot brick for her bed rested in a metal dustpan at her feet next to a jug of water and a box of candles. She rubbed her eyes wearily, but, at the sound of my footsteps, she glided across the landing towards me with a warm smile.

"Will you come?" she said.

"Later. I want to go through Father's papers again."

Bess sighed. "You've done that a dozen times. If there was any clue..."

I put a finger to her lips. "I may have missed something. Go to sleep. I will be with you when you wake."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

I watched her walk up the darkened staircase and waited until I heard the door to her room on the landing above click shut. Then I made my way back down the stairs, along the corridor to Father's study.

As a child, my favourite game had been hide and seek and I would happily play it with Father for hours. When he tired of squeezing himself into small spaces, he would instead hide the magnifying glass from me and I would rush from room to room searching for it. It felt as if I lived those moments anew as I pulled open drawers and drew books from their shelves, rifling through their pages. I searched for a letter, a scrap of paper, anything that Bess and Mr Scott could have overlooked. Anything to shed light on what my dear father had run from.

I had not troubled to light the gas lamps in the study and so my search took place in candlelight. A soft rain drummed upon the windowpane, reminding me of the last time I had seen Father writing at his desk late at night. It was not difficult to imagine him wandering the darkened city like a lonely wraith, starting at every sound as he crept fearfully from door to door.

He is here.

Suddenly, I recalled the package delivered that morning. Taking up a candle, I left the study and made my way along the corridor to the parlour. The door opened silently. I stepped inside, flinching at the shadows the candlelight cast upon the walls, but there was nothing amiss; no runes weaving their way above the hearth or sinister shapes in the corners, just the package resting on the side table beside a vase of yellow roses. I retrieved it and returned to the study and Father's desk where I found a pair of scissors to cut the string, noting the Charing Cross postmark on the paper as I did so. And then the wrapping fell away and I drew a sharp breath as I realised what I held in my hands.

My Father's Demon.

Flicking through its pages, I recognised Father's precise, flowing hand. There was no sign of the strange writing I had glimpsed in the study that night, but I could see that several pages had been torn from the journal's centre. I opened the front cover and a white envelope slipped to the floor. I picked it up and unfolded the single sheet of thick paper. Laying it flat upon the desk, I drew the candle closer and began to read.

Dearest George,

Forgive me for the anguish I have caused you. If there had been a way of forewarning you, be assured I would have done so, however, my circumstances were too uncertain to risk delaying my departure a moment longer, and I did not dare to leave the journal where other hands than yours would surely find it.

Before you begin, I must warn you that they will visit the house very soon led by a man named Luria. You will be tempted to trust him, but I beg you, do not. You must not reveal this journal to another soul; the words within its pages are for your eyes only.

I have written as fully as I can of the truth about our family and the terrible burden we carry with our name. I only hope you can find it in your heart to forgive the silence I have kept since your birth. I have wanted only to protect you and shield you from harm. You are, and always will be, the greatest achievement of my life, and of more comfort to me than you can ever know. If I fail in my task, dear George, I hope these words will help you to remember,

Your loving Father

I sagged into an armchair, my heart thundering like a great drum in my ears. My belief was confirmed; Father was not a tired and overworked doctor whose mind had been weakened by illness and strain as Inspector Telford and the police assumed. On the contrary, his disappearance was no accident but a planned exit from our safe and ordinary life in Kensington. Beneath my hand rested his journal. In its pages, I was sure to find the answers I sought.

Wrapping my arms close around both journal and letter, I stood up, lifted the candle and made my way to the door. And as I did so, a sound came from outside the window. I could not be sure what it was that I had heard, only that when it sounded again I clutched the journal even more tightly to me. Mr Scott had repaired the window's broken latch the day before. Mrs McClune had drawn the curtains that evening as she usually did, and yet a sliver of light, too bright for any moon, was shining through the gap between them.

I pressed my back against the wall. My eyes struggled to adjust to the light outside, which grew brighter for a moment, and then suddenly disappeared. The cough – for indeed the sound had been a muffled cough, the kind that escapes your lips only after a long battle to suppress it has been lost – came again. Someone was outside the window.

He is here.

But what good what it do me to cower in the shadows while my enemy stole into the house? Would I be struck dumb with fear while he murdered us in our beds? Would I permit him to walk up the stairs to where Bess lay patiently waiting for me, his bloodied hands trailing along the banister?

I stepped forward. Seizing the curtain in one hand, I tore it back from the window and found myself staring into a lantern's piercing glow. But I was not the only one who drew a breath at the sight of a face pressed against the glass. For a fleeting

second, we seemed to hold fast to each other like two sides of the same reflection trapped in a looking glass, until the intruder fell back from the window. Twisting away from me, he dropped the lantern and careered down the little alley that wound through the garden and separated my father's property from the terrace next door.

I thrust the window open boldly. "You there," I shouted. "Stop at once!"

His shoes struck the cobbles, his hair streaming behind him like a black scarf, but just before he reached the corner of the street that would conceal him from my view, he halted and looked back. In the dim light, I could see that he was dressed in trousers, a waistcoat and coat with no hat, that his hair was long and loose, and his eyes... It was as if my limbs had turned to ice. I could not move, nor could I feel the warm breath rushing from my body and billowing around me in the chill air. The moment lengthened – a moment in which the stranger and I stared into each other's eyes, memorising the details of each other's face as if it were a lover's. Finally, as abruptly as he had come, he turned and melted into the night.

I stood at the window for some time before I permitted myself to shut the window and draw the curtains. I collapsed into Father's chair, where I remained for several minutes until my limbs ceased to shake. Of what had just occurred I was certain: my unexpected presence in the study had prevented the stranger from gaining entry to the house, but something in the way he had slowed beneath the gas light and turned back suggested I had foiled no ordinary robbery. I reached for the journal again and held it protectively to my chest.

Suddenly an inky shadow materialised in the doorway and floated towards me in a billowing white gown.

"George?" Bess whispered.

"God in Heaven, Bess! What are you doing creeping around in the dark?"

Bess drew closer, shivering in the cold room. Her feet were bare. She wrapped her arms around herself, hugging what little warmth remained to her. "I couldn't sleep without you."

"I was looking for something." Fear sharpened my tone. I felt absurdly angry to find myself so afraid, by Bess in the darkness, as if I were no more than a child.

Bess toyed with her thick red plait. "Don't be unhappy with me. We looked all over this room, George. There's nothing here now."

"You are wrong, dear," I said. "I will show you."

With the candle held out in front of me to banish the darkness, which seemed thicker and more menacing since my encounter at the window, I led Bess from the study and across the corridor to my room. At my writing desk, I shared the flame from my candle with several others and a rosy orange glow filled the room. Behind me, Bess shut the door and sat down upon the four-poster bed. "What is it?" she said, no longer whispering now that we were safely inside my room.

I thought suddenly of Father's letter. *You must not reveal this journal to another soul...* But Bess was not another soul; she was a part of my own. If Father knew the depth of my love for her, he would not ask me to keep my discovery a secret.

"The package that was delivered this morning... It was from Father, Bess."

Her eyes widened.

"I know; I can scarcely believe it myself. And there is a letter too – look!"

I moved to her side and put Father's letter into her hands. She read slowly, her lips shaping the words as I had taught her. When she looked up at me, her cheeks were flushed.

"What does it mean? This part..." Her fingers traced the lines of handwriting

until she found the words she sought. "*I have written as fully as I can of the truth about our family and the terrible burden we carry with our name,*" she read. "What truth? Your father is Dr Benjamin Collins, the kindest doctor in the world, and you're my darling George, clever and far braver than anyone I know. I have lived here with you for six years. Surely if there was something wrong, I would know it."

"As would I, but there is more."

Briefly, I described my encounter with the stranger at the window.

"I'll wake Mr Scott at once," she said urgently "He'll know what to do."

"No! No one is to know about the letter or the journal, or what I saw tonight," I commanded. "You must swear to me you will keep it secret. Father's life could depend on it."

"George, we can't keep this a secret!" The brightness in Bess's eyes spilled over. I reached out to catch her tears upon my fingers, but she pulled angrily away. "You promised your father, but he was ill. He wouldn't hold this against you."

With one finger against her lips, I halted the flow of her words. "If you breathe a word of this, Bess," I said, "I shall never forgive you."

She raised her hands to cover her face and I knew I had won. She would not tell. I had drawn forth her deepest fears and silenced her with them.

We were quiet for a little while, my words turning over in our minds until Bess lowered her hands and opened the cover of the journal that lay upon the bed.

"What will you do?" she whispered.

"I will read it from the first page to the last and then I will find Father." I could not look at her. "Bess, I did not mean to speak so unkindly..."

Her voice was thick with tears. "You mustn't leave me, George. Promise that you won't leave me."

"I promise, I promise," I said, my hands and mouth desperate to undo the hurt I had caused her. The journal fell to the floor, where it remained long after we had fallen into an exhausted slumber in each other's arms.

21 December, 1899
Kensington, London

My dearest George,

All you know about me, all you have believed me to be, is an untruth. I beg you to reserve judgement until I have given you all the facts, for what you will read here is the truth, the truth I had hoped to shield you from, the truth from which I have run these many years.

I was born in 1839 in my grandfather's home in the Portuguese city of Oporto. My parents' names were – or perhaps by some slender chance still are, for I have no way of knowing whether they are alive or dead – Abraham and Sara ben Maimon. The name Collins – like much of the history I created for myself when I arrived in England – is a fiction. Benjamin Collins was born Binyamin ben Maimon on a sultry day in May; five years after the Battle of Asseiceira brought the Civil War to a decisive close. My mother told me that I emerged from her womb in silence that day and only the repeated and vigorous slapping I received at the hands of her nurse Célia forced the first indignant cry from my lips.

These are small details I must relay in order to explain the circumstances in

which I grew up. You must keep an open mind, George, for what you will read will shake every belief you hold. It is also imperative that you find no blame in my story; I cannot blame my parents for what they were, nor can I pass responsibility for the events that came later onto their frail shoulders. Yes, for they were frail; looking back as the future approaches me all too quickly, I see how vulnerable they were in the small world they had fought so hard to make their own.

My grandparents on both my mother's and my father's sides arrived in Oporto from Spain in 1798. The families were friends and shared a common bond like many of those who fled from hardship and oppression. Before deciding to build their new lives in Oporto, they stopped in Lisbon for several weeks. It was here the children visited the grand cathedral and they, along with their parents, knelt before the Christ and accepted the wafer that signified his torn flesh into their mouths. The families were united in their belief – and in their deception. There was nothing to distinguish them from the pious Catholics, whose customs they absorbed and emulated as if their lives depended on it, but, equally, there was nothing that would prevent them from cleaving to their true faith, albeit in secret and under cover of darkness.

One of my earliest memories is of my grandfather's jewellery shop established in Oporto's busy commercial centre. Shortly after my birth, both of my mother's parents passed away and so I loved my remaining grandparents with all my heart and hated to be apart from them. One of my favourite pastimes was to help my grandfather in his shop. When I was especially well behaved, he would unlock the glass cabinet beneath the counter and let me admire the diamond rings in their little fur boxes. They were grand rings meant for grand ladies, he told me, and I was always slightly afraid when I handled them and slightly relieved when he took them from me and locked them away in the cabinet again.

Behind a curtain that separated the front of the shop from my grandfather's little office was a large, wooden wardrobe, in which his customers would hang their coats and leave their walking sticks. It was here that I learned the first of my family's secrets when I was but a few years old.

My memories of that day are still vivid; I remember my surprise when my grandfather pushed the wardrobe aside to reveal a doorway. He lifted me into his arms and we went through the door and down a flight of steep, narrow steps into the darkness below. I was too afraid to cry out – I remember being terrified of the dark as a boy – but as we descended, a light appeared, gradually growing brighter until I could see quite clearly into the room below. My father was there, and my mother with my three surviving sisters, along with several of our friends and neighbours. They were Catholics no more, each one able for a short and precious time to be as he truly was: a Jew amongst his own people with whom his secret was safe.

After this, I accompanied my family into the cellar every Friday evening to welcome the Sabbath bride. The men cradled the books they read from with all the love a grand lady would show for one of my grandfather's diamonds. Their songs were slow and mournful and made my blood shiver in a delicious way. The conversos – for that is what the true Catholics called us – had lived this way for centuries. Many Jews turned from their faith and found solace in a new one; others could not wait to rid themselves of a label that forever branded them an outsider. But others, like my own family, risked the comfortable lives they created to remain true to the faith of their mothers and fathers. In this way, the seed of what I am about to tell you was passed from them to me.

I sometimes wonder if it was my family's success at blending into their environment – much as that wonderful creature the chameleon does – that led me to

adopt a similar outlook upon my arrival in England. My grandfather wore a crucifix around his neck, which he would often take out from his collar and kiss. His customers knew him by his converso name, Phillip Santos Costalinas. How could the men and women who frequented his shop have known that in the deep reaches of the night the good Santos Costalinas studied ancient texts by candlelight and sang in the tongue of those exiles from the Promised Land? How could they see in their affable servant the rabbi who swayed beneath his prayer shawl? In short, they could not. His disguise fit snugly around him like a second skin.

Perhaps it is easier for our people than others to do this; we who have been much maligned, driven away by fear and superstition wherever we go. Benjamin Collins became a refuge for me as Santos Costalinas was for my grandfather. The only aspect of my life that is not, and could never be a part of this deception, is my love for you, George, and for your dear mother whose absence I mourn every day.

I digress. My life was happy and full, my parents, although strict, kept me fed and clothed and my father took a keen interest in my studies. He taught me how to read and write long before I attended school. My grandfather taught me to do the same in Hebrew. By the time I was seven years old, I could add, subtract, multiply and divide, speak fluent Portuguese and Spanish, and had determined to become an adventurer and explore the unknown lands in my grandfather's stories. It was at that tender age that the one I fear first spoke to me and, from that moment, nothing was ever the same.

Dear George, I think of you now as I write these words. I am an old man and I fear the dark with each passing day. I know what lies in wait for me there. I cannot write any more tonight. I will continue in the morning when the sunlight falls across these pages, when I can pretend for just a moment that all is well.

I read the first pages of my father's journal early in the morning after Bess had risen and gone to lay the fire in the parlour. His words sat like a great stone in my chest, anchoring me to the bed. I could scarcely believe them and yet I knew their truth with a certainty I was unable to explain.

Father was a *converso*, a secret Jew. In my mind, a little boy sat hunched in a dark cellar, whispering the ancient rites of his unlucky tribe. Why had he kept his past from me? Why had he not practised his faith when it was safe to do so? I threw off the bed covers and planted my feet firmly upon the floor. I would not find the answers in my own head; they were in the journal, which I now slipped carefully beneath my mattress.

From the kitchen, I could hear the scraping of china and cutlery. Pulling my robe from its hook on the door, I wrapped it around myself and stepped out into the corridor. I would eat and return to my room. The journal was a nugget of gold. I would devour it and then I would know.

"George!"

Bess pushed me backwards into the bedroom.

"What is it?"

"You mustn't go out there," she said, breathing heavily as if she had come running from the farthest reaches of the house.

I tightened the belt on my robe and edged past her. The corridor was empty.

"Whatever is wrong?"

My Father's Demon.

"There are men here," Bess said, biting her bottom lip. "A group of men."

"Do you mean the police?"

"They're not policemen."

Bess hesitated. The expression on her face sent a fresh wave of fear coursing down my back. "The one who gave Mrs McClune his card is a Mr Luria," she blurted out. "He asked for a Miss Georgina Collins and said he must see you straight away. Oh George, it's just as your father's letter said! What are we going to do?"