

The Problem of the Panelled Room: Part 3 (19/06/91)

Karen Yu

“So how’s the investigation been going?” asked Charlie as we approached my Austin Metro. It was mid-afternoon on Wednesday 19th June, and I was hoping to get out of London and on the road to White Gate before the London rush hour ground everything to a standstill.

“Bad,” I answered. “Then worse. But now—” I thought for a second as I rooted for my keys “—better. Maybe.” I had called Charlie far too late the previous Friday night with a request that we return the Hungry Corpse to Andrew Paris’ home as soon as possible. Once the anthropologist was convinced I was neither drunk nor joking (or both), he informed me that Wednesday afternoon was his next free slot at the Social Sciences department at the university where he worked.

“You shaved off your moustache,” I observed, unlocking the car boot.

“Oh, yeah,” answered Charlie distantly, one hand automatically reaching up to his upper lip. In his other hand he carried a the infamous mask, carefully wrapped in a dust sheet. He placed it gingerly in the boot.

“And you did break this seat,” I added as I reached over to unlock the passenger door. “But I suppose you’re the one who’s going to have to sit in it, so I’ll let you off.”

“It’s alright if you’re small and compact,” he pothered, lowering himself into the rattling passenger seat with the grace of a newborn wildebeest. The top of his blond bouffant, I noticed, was grazing the roof. “But I don’t think this car was built with people over six foot in mind.”

“What do you drive?”

“I don’t drive.”

“Don’t or can’t?”

Charlie picked at his shirt sleeve for a second. “Can’t.”

The route was familiar to me by now. Eventually the warehouses and garages of London’s outskirts were falling away behind us. Up ahead bloomed bright green farmland, vibrant and springy in the late afternoon sun. We soon found ourselves back in the world of laneways and bypaths. Ancient Land Rovers lolloped over the potholes. Horses rattled their wealthy owners along the roads with a dopey indifference to the line of cars accumulating behind them.

“So what made you decide to return the mask all of a sudden?” enquired Charlie as we crawled behind a pungent tractor.

I followed a bee as it bounced lazily along the windscreen. “You didn’t seem to like the idea of having the Hungry Corpse in your office now that the police are investigating, that’s all. So I thought I should help you out,” I offered magnanimously.

A glimmer of scepticism sharpened his normally placid blue eyes. “And your newfound desire to help me has nothing to do with that new lead you mentioned on the phone?”

“New lead?” I echoed innocently. A breeze flung the bee over a hedgerow. “Which road do we need to turn down? Is it Heath Lane? Heather Lane?”

"I had to give a statement," Charlie abruptly confessed. "To the police." From the strains of panic and violation in his voice you'd have thought the police strip searched him as well.

"We all did, Charlie. That's how police investigations work."

He chewed his thumb for a moment. "But I didn't tell them about the mask – about taking it last Tuesday. That's a crime, isn't it?"

"It's only a crime if you withhold information which could lead to a prosecution," I informed him. "And we took that mask days after the shooting happened. So unless the police plan to arrest the Hungry Corpse for attempted murder, I think you'll be fine." I glanced across at him. "I didn't tell them either, if that makes you feel better."

"But what if someone else *did* mention it?" he babbled. "What – what if they arrest me?"

I rolled my eyes as I changed gear. "In that case the worst that could happen would be two years in prison. But that's not going to happen—"

Too late. I'd already killed him. His pudgy face was as white as a ghost, his eyes as glassy as a corpse's. Even his vanilla ice cream hair looked a shade whiter. "Two years – in – prison?" he mouthed. "I could be imprisoned for two years? All because I agreed to help you with your stupid investigation?"

"You called me, remember?" I growled. "It was *your* stupid theory that *I* agreed to help you with. And, like I said, it's not going to happen. You're not going to get arrested for borrowing a glorified wall hanging." The slightest blush of colour returned to his deathly face. "Are you always this scared?" I asked, not for the first time.

"Around you, yes."

I almost didn't notice the blue and white police tape barring the entrance to White Gate's long and bumpy drive, braking just in time to avoid snapping it in two with my car. "Ah, crap," I breathed. "I was worried this might be the case." Squinting ahead to house, I could make out a red-faced policeman squinting back at us. He began pacing our way.

"He's looking at us!" hissed a revived Charlie, now trying to slither his entire body into the footwell and out of sight.

I began to drive off gently. "So we're just a pair of rubberneckers, that's all."

Charlie – who, I feel I should inform you, recently celebrated his thirtieth birthday – waited until the house and its red-faced policeman were out of sight before breathing again. "Now what?" he panted.

"Hungry?"

Charlie pushed his oversized glasses back up his nose. "Sorry?"

"Didn't Brian mention that there was a pub in the village?" I explained, slowing to read an old black and white fingerpost. "Let's see if it does any food. I'm starving." I looked again at the giant baby beside me. "They might even a kid's menu for you."

The timber-framed Stag and Pheasant dutifully made itself known as we pootled into the minikin village. We stepped out onto the dusty moonscape of a car park and gratefully stretched our legs. It was one of those beautiful summer evenings when the air is thick and golden as if suffused with honey. Somewhere close by a horse clopped, but otherwise the village was still. Everything seemed so peaceful and dozy I almost forgot why we were here.

Inside it proved to be a quintessential country pub. Horse brasses glittered dimly through the smoke. Accented laughter filled the various nooks. People stared as I entered. Doing my best to avoid the sullen glares (what is it about pubs that instils such an oppressive curiosity in its patrons?) I found a small table between a bloated couple on the edge of bickering and a solitary old man eating salted peanuts with monomaniacal absorption.

“So,” ventured Charlie, settling into his creaking wooden chair, “why are you suddenly so keen to return the mask? I mean,” he continued, cutting short another innocent display on my part, “what’s the real reason? Why now? It’s been over a week since I faxed you.” I peered at the menu on a chalkboard behind him. “Alright. Since you feel so bad about calling my journalism stupid earlier, and since you insist on apologising by buying me a glass of the house white, I’ll tell you what I know.” Charlie nodded seriously. “Before we can solve this mystery,” I began, folding my arms, “we need to ask ourselves one crucial question: where’s my wine?”

A few minutes later Dr Woolham padded back with a glass of wine and a pint of beer, a look of intense concentration on his face. I could tell he was secretly pleased when he reached the table without a spillage.

“OK, let’s think about this,” I said. “What are we trying to work out here?”

“How Andrew Paris was shot,” came the succinct reply.

“True. But that’s just the how. And the how is only ever part of a mystery. Remember: every story has a who, what, when, where, why and how. Now, we know what happened, when it happened—” I counted the points off on my fingers “—and where it happened. So we still need to know who did this and why they did it.”

Charlie rubbed his chin. “I hope you’re not expecting me to answer these questions. We all know what became of my theory.”

“Let’s not think about the mechanics of spiriting in and out of the panelled room for a moment. Take a step back and look at the whole picture. What’s this whole affair been about? Who’s been at the centre of it the entire time?” Charlie’s ponderous shrug had an air of helplessness to it.

I leaned in. “John Paris.”

“John – ?”

“I’ve been so hung up on what happened the other week that I’d all but forgotten *why* we were invited to White Gate in the first place: to discuss John’s death. All this came about because Lisa got in touch with me to explain her belief that her dad was somehow killed by the Hungry Corpse. That’s what triggered Andrew to set up his so-called experiment. That’s why he invited me and you and Brian to White Gate.” I took a sip of wine. “And do you know what the strangest thing about this affair is? Lisa was right from the very beginning.”

Charlie’s pint glass froze an inch from his lips. He eyed me warily. “What do you mean?”

“John Paris didn’t kill himself in 1973. He was murdered.”

The clatter of the pub filled the silence at our table. Half a puzzled grin sat lopsidedly on Charlie's face; part of him seemed to be waiting for a punchline. "He was – murdered?"

"Not by that mask, though," I continued. "Something much more human." I reached into my backpack and handed him John's letter. "I present to you the missing piece of the puzzle. Without this we would never have worked out what was really going on at White Gate. Have a read."

The bloated couple to my left were still bickering about one thing or another – something to do with the guttering and a man called Richard. They had the ruddiness of people who spent their days outdoors and their evenings intoxicated. To my right the old man continued to nibble at his salted peanuts. I was amazed that there were any still left to eat. In front of me, Charlie read the letter with a puzzled frown. When he handed it back to me he looked troubled. "John kicked Andrew out the house?" he queried, pulling a face as if those words had an unpleasant taste. "He wrote him out of his will?" I nodded solemnly. "Then – then why did Andrew inherit everything when John died? Why does he still live in White Gate?"

"Because John never had a chance to make those changes," I replied, emphasising my words with jabs of the letter. "Because this letter was never sent. Because –"

"Scampi?"

I looked up, startled, at the barmaid who had materialised by our table. How long had she been there? The scampi, it turned out, was for Charlie. I, meanwhile, had splurged on the Stag and Pheasant signature pie, which, judging by the size of the thing, contained at least one of each of those animals. Had this part of the world moved on from nouvelle cuisine, I wondered, or had it not yet heard of it?

"Because," I continued, once the barmaid had vanished, "John Paris was murdered before any of that could happen. By none other than his own brother: Andrew Paris."

Charlie's worried frown deepened. "You can be sure of that from just this letter?"

"But it isn't just the letter. John very clearly writes that he told Andrew about his plans to get back together with Evelyn. And that—" I now produced Andrew's fax from my backpack "—directly contradicts what Andrew told me when he invited me to White Gate."

"People seem to be sending you a lot of letters lately."

"Don't get me started," I complained. "Who'd have thought people would be so epistolary in the nineties?" I scanned Andrew's fax. "Here we are – this is what he told me back in May: 'Lisa seems to think, in that romantic way of hers, that John and Evelyn were going to reconcile, and maybe that she and her mother would move back to White Gate. I'm afraid that was never going to be the case. John was always a stubborn man, and once he made a decision he stuck to it, even if it caused him pain. I haven't told Lisa for fear of upsetting her, but the simple fact of the matter is that John had no plans to get back together with Evelyn.'" I threw the fax onto the table in grim triumph. "There we have it: proof that Andrew's been lying to us from the start."

Charlie chewed thoughtfully for a second before swallowing. "But that doesn't prove that Andrew *killed* John, Karen. It just proves he lied about John's plans."

I skewered some chips with my fork. "It's not a smoking gun, I'll grant you. But what else can we conclude from this? John's letter is even dated 25th October 1973 – that's the

very day he supposedly shot himself. And yet when you read it, topping himself seems like it was the last thing on his mind. If anything, he writes as if he's discovered a new lease of life. 'I cannot wait to see you soon'? Now—" I paused instinctively as the peanut connoisseur rose from his seat and ambled to the bar "—it's not impossible that John wrote this letter and then shot himself. Stranger things have happened. But I find that hard to believe."

"And you think it's more likely that Andrew killed him?"

My voice was little more than a whisper by this point. "Put yourself in Andrew's shoes. It's the early 1970s. You're the brother of the rich and famous explorer John Paris — only you don't get to share in any of those riches or fame. Sure, John lets you tag along on his adventures, but in return you have plan his trips, book his flights, carry his bags. And he never even gives you any credit. You've read John Paris' account of finding the Hungry Corpse, right?" Charlie nodded. "Didn't anything about it strike you as odd?" "You mean besides the fact it's anthropological nonsense?"

I shook my head. "Remember, both John and Andrew went to New Caledonia. There are photos of them together that were taken on that trip. So why is it that Andrew *never appears* in the book? Not once. And if you read any of John's other books it's the same — when they went to the Sahara, the Arctic, wherever. Andrew doesn't get so much as a mention. It's as if he didn't exist."

"Why would John do that?"

I shrugged. "I guess he didn't like the thought of sharing the spotlight. It's like Andrew said: John was a showman. He let everyone else do the heavy lifting — literally — and took all the credit." My attention was diverted by the return of our solitary neighbour, who ambled back to his table with another pint and — I swear to God — another packet of salted peanuts. I turned back to Charlie and the matter at hand. "By 1973 Andrew had just celebrated his 34th birthday, and it's fair to say that life wasn't heading in the direction he'd hoped for: stuck in his brother's house, renting a bedroom off him, all so he can work as his anonymous underling. I think it's safe to say he was unhappy. I've certainly never seen him smiling in any photos from around this time."

"Then, in April of that year things begin to look up all of a sudden. John and Evelyn separate and Evelyn leaves for California, taking Lisa with her. John, in a fit of pique, writes Evelyn out of his will, substituting Andrew in her place. Andrew can't believe his luck — it must have seemed like his years of dogged service to his brother were finally paying off. Much of John's wealth — including White Gate — would now fall to him. For the next few months he might have even have permitted himself to look towards the future with optimism.

"Just as suddenly, however, everything starts to fall apart. In October John announces that he intends to get back together with Evelyn. Not only is he reinstating Evelyn in his will, he's also kicking Andrew out of the house. For whatever reason it seems like Andrew and Evelyn never got on, and I get the feeling that Andrew's departure from White Gate was one of Evelyn's conditions.

"It's little wonder Andrew took the news badly, as John mentions in his letter. He had dangled hope and opportunity before his brother only to snatch it away." I paused for a moment. "John's announcement changed the game for Andrew. Previously, all he had to do was wait and his brother's wealth would eventually be his. Now, however, he would have to

act if he wanted John's fortune. And he would have to act fast. John would change the will any day now."

Once again I rummaged around my backpack, this time retrieving the 14th May edition of *Witness*. "For the next few days Andrew had everything to gain – and nothing to lose – from John's untimely death. He practically spelled it out for me the first time I met him." I flicked through the pages to find my original interview with Andrew. "Here: 'John's death changed everything ... It seems terrible to say, but I probably wouldn't have done half the stuff I have were he still alive ... Then, aged 34, I was suddenly handed a new lease of life. I had the means to do whatever I wanted.'" I looked at Charlie with wide eyes. "The only way he could have made it clearer was by confessing to the murder."

"So he killed John and made it look like a suicide?"

"Exactly." Between you and me I'd hoped for a slightly more rapturous reception from Charlie for this deduction of mine. Why wasn't he applauding? Or gasping? Or both? Instead he simply sat there, blinking behind his wire-framed glasses. Then, slowly, wearily, he shook his big blond head. "No," he eventually said. "Sorry Karen, that can't work. It's impossible. Again." He shifted in his creaky chair. "Andrew couldn't have murdered John. John Paris was found shot inside a locked room with a gun in his hand. Andrew *discovered* the body, remember. He and Brian had to break in to get to him. It could only have been suicide."

"Or a murder so clever that for two decades everyone thought it was suicide." Charlie looked unconvinced. "Think about it," I pressed, jabbing my fork at him for emphasis. "Doesn't the very fact that Andrew discovered the body strike you as a bit too convenient? Think back to Brian's account of the night of John's death – the one he told us at Andrew's dinner party. He and Andrew leave White Gate to come to this pub around eight in the evening. They've both just seen John walk into the panelled room, so we know that he was still alive at this point. Then, a minute or two after leaving the house, Andrew claims to have forgotten his keys, giving him the excuse he needs to head back to White Gate. Brian, you recall, doesn't head back with him, but waits where he is. And the next thing he knows is the sound of a gunshot coming from the direction of the house."

"Andrew claims he was knocking on the front door when he heard the gun go off. But for those three crucial minutes before the gunshot we only have his word to go on. And if he's already lied to us about John's plans, who's to say he hasn't been lying to us about this too? If Andrew did in fact have his keys on him, he could have entered the house, shot John and got out again all before Brian returned. There would have been no witnesses."

Charlie rubbed his creased brow. "The timing does seem suspicious," he conceded. "But that hardly seems enough to accuse someone of murder. What if he really did forget his keys? What if the timing really was just a coincidence?"

"But if that were the case then how do we explain Andrew's behaviour at the dinner party?" I asked.

Charlie looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you think it was strange that Andrew was so insistent on John's death being a suicide? How he kept returning to that point again and again? At the time I assumed that he was simply trying to counteract Lisa's superstition. But now, having read John's letter, I think

we know the real reason: by convincing us that John killed himself, he was proving that he couldn't possibly have killed John. He was trying to clear his own name.

"I don't think any of us, with the exception of Jared, were taken in by Lisa's theory. Particularly after you and Andrew demolished the myth of the Hungry Corpse. But that didn't mean her supernatural beliefs were harmless. Her insistence that her dad would never have killed himself was dangerous for Andrew because it risked inviting us to look again at his brother's death. And maybe this time we'd uncover evidence suggesting foul play was involved."

Charlie pulled an uncertain face. "So you think that Andrew's stunt of spending the night in the panelled room was purely to convince us that John's death couldn't have been murder? It had nothing to do with the mask at all?" I nodded. "But if Andrew was so concerned about proving his innocence," continued Charlie, "how do you explain the existence of John's letter? Why would Andrew keep an incriminating piece of evidence lying round his house for the better part of two decades?"

"Clearly he must not have known about it," I answered. "Otherwise he'd have destroyed it. When he killed John he must not have known that John had already written a letter to Evelyn about his plan to change the will. John must have put it in one of his desk drawers after writing it."

"And it stayed there undetected for almost two decades?"

I looked out across the pub while I considered the question. The patrons, now they had stopped staring at me, seemed relaxed and jolly. Surely they knew about Andrew? Didn't it bother them? Some of them must have known him personally. "It must have," I answered. "Remember, Andrew told us that he hardly ever went in the panelled room – not surprising given what must have happened there. And if he didn't know that John had written an incriminating letter, why would he search for it?"

Charlie thought for a second. "But – but if this letter could lay hidden for so long then how come you found it so easily?"

I'd thought about this as well. "Think back to the night Andrew was shot. The panelled room had been torn apart by someone: books pulled from the shelves, desk drawers yanked open, papers thrown to the floor. John's letter must have been among those hurled across the room. Then, a few days later, someone else – Jared, Lisa, Brian? – piled all those papers onto John's desk when they started tidying up the mess in there. That's where I found the letter."

With a raucous scrape of chair legs the bloated couple heaved themselves upright. The woman, a deep port-red tinge to her cheeks, unexpectedly leaned into our conversation. She was one of those women who seemed to exist in a permanent state of fluster, a life of flapping hands and exasperated expressions. "Have you heard the news?" she asked.

"Sorry?"

"I couldn't help overhearing you two talking about Andrew Paris," she explained with no trace of apology. "Did you hear the news about him?"

"You mean the news that he was shot?" I asked. The woman nodded eagerly.

"Mary, leave those people alone," called her husband, already at the door.

“Terrible,” she continued, her eyes darting excitedly between me and Charlie. “Just terrible. Nigel and I live down Hare Lane, right at the back of Andrew’s property. When I saw that ambulance heading to White Gate the other week I just knew something bad had happened to him.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Mary, we’re leaving now.”

“Did you know Andrew had a brother?” she persisted in a whisper that was somehow louder than her normal speaking voice. “John was his name. Tall man. Very handsome. He also shot himself in White Gate. In the very same room as Andrew, as a matter of fact. Must be ten, fifteen years ago now. That’s how I knew something was wrong when I saw the ambulance.” She shook her head with gelatinous trepidation. “God knows what goes on in that house.”

“Mary!”

Mary rolled her eyes theatrically. “Husbands, hey?”

“Oh, no, Charlie’s not my—”

“Well, goodbye!” And off she trotted.

“She doesn’t seem to think it was murder,” smiled Charlie, finishing his pint.

“She also thinks we’re married,” I murmured, watching her wobble out the door. “I wouldn’t put too much faith in her deductions.”

Charlie put down his glass and folded his arms. “OK then. Convince me. If Andrew murdered John, how did he do it? How did he get in and out of that room and shoot John?”

I fidgeted with a beer mat. “Well, that’s the thing. I don’t know *how* he did it, exactly.”

“You don’t know?” despaired Charlie, pulling a similar face to the one he must have worn when he found out that Father Christmas wasn’t real. “I thought this monologue was your grand reveal?”

“I was kind of thinking that too,” I admitted, looking up from the beer mat. “But the solution hasn’t come to me just yet.” I sat up straight. “But it will. It has to. We’re going to return to White gate and solve this thing tonight. Before I lose my mind.” I glanced at the darkening windows. “In fact, we should probably get a move on. Thanks for dinner.”

The evening had relaxed into one of those intoxicating dusks that occasional bless summer. The world fell quiet, calm. Not even a horse clopped. All around us the warm smell of the ground and grass rose up like a sigh to meet the deepening sky, where the first star of the night winked bashfully at us. In the distance hunched the curious silhouette of White Gate, its towers and turrets bristling like a giant hedgehog.

“So, what’s the plan?” asked Charlie as I opened my car boot. There lay the Hungry Corpse, bound and gagged in its dust sheet like a kidnap victim. The sight of it like that made me feel uneasy somehow. “Please tell me you have a plan this time.”

I waited for Charlie to take the mask and closed the boot. “Well, we’re not going to go marching up the driveway, that’s for sure. Just in case that policeman is still there.”

“So – ?” he pressed, holding the mask tenderly in his arms as if it were his baby.

“So let’s try the back door,” I offered, locking the car and setting off through the blue twilight.

“And how are we going to get to the back door?” persisted Charlie as he caught up with me.

“Remember what our new friend Mary told us just now? There’s a road that leads around the back of the White Gate grounds. What was it called? Hare Lane?”

It was indeed. Just beyond the crumbling church and village green a half-forgotten road carved a path through the brambles and sycamores towards the giant hedgehog. The greening road sign told us it was Hare Lane.

Charlie threw me a curious look as we made our way down it. There was an intelligence and humour to those blue eyes. Were he not such a milquetoast I might have noticed sooner. “Do you really expect to solve it tonight?” he asked. “What makes you so sure?”

Was he impressed or incredulous? It was hard to tell in this light. “You don’t seem to have much confidence in me.”

“Well–” he considered his words “–there are still quite a few holes in your hypothesis.”

“That’s because you’re calling it a hypothesis,” I replied. “Theory sounds far less flimsy.”

“Call it what you like, but unless you can explain *how* Andrew managed to shoot John no one’s going to listen to you. Even John’s letter, by itself, isn’t proof that Andrew did it.” Charlie looked up at the cloudless sky, glowing like stained glass in between the leaves and branches crisscrossing over us. “And we haven’t even discussed what happened to Andrew the other week.”

A bird darted out silently in front of us. “So let’s discuss it,” I said. “On Saturday 1st June, just before midnight, Andrew locked himself into the panelled room. Ostensibly to prove that the Hungry Corpse had no sinister powers, but actually to try and throw us off the scent of John’s murder. Anyway, about an hour into his experiment he’s shot. The gun that was used was already in the panelled room earlier that night. The door and windows were locked from the inside, and there are no other ways in or out of that room. And yet we know Andrew didn’t shoot himself. Correct so far?”

“Correct. So far.”

“My guess is that someone not only got wise to the fact that Andrew killed John, but also worked out how he did it. And they decided to turn the tables. Andrew, after all, gave them the perfect opportunity to recreate the trick by voluntarily locking himself up in John’s old study for the night. The recreation didn’t quite go to plan – Andrew survived, for one thing – but it was a decent effort.”

Somewhere close by a solitary blackbird pondered the hush of dusk. “So someone else has already solved the mystery of walking through walls?” asked Charlie, shifting the weight of the mask in his arms.

“No need to rub it in my face.”

“But at least that means it *can* be solved, right?”

I looked up at him. It was the first piece of encouragement he'd given me. "Right. You're right. Let's think about this. The gun had to be more than four feet away from him so as not to get any residue on him. That leaves us with two possible explanations: either Andrew managed to prop up the gun somewhere in the study and pull the trigger remotely, or someone else fired that gun. And don't forget the various clues we found around the house."

"Clues? What like?"

"For starters, we need to talk about those gardening gloves."

"Sorry?"

"Those two gardening gloves on the lawn that night. Didn't you notice them?" His slack-jawed silence suggested not. "When we were outside with Lisa heading to the windows of the panelled room – there was a pair of old gardening gloves lying on the lawn. I only saw them because Lisa happened to shine her torch over them."

"I think you might be looking into this too much," came Charlie's cautious reply. "What's suspicious about a pair of gardening gloves in a garden?"

"It's suspicious when the garden is as overgrown as White Gate's. You've must remember those grounds? I don't think anyone's been tending to that place in a long time. Now, I'm not saying they definitely mean something," I added, sensing I was losing him, "but I think it's curious at the very least."

Charlie measure his words. "OK then. So what are the other clues?"

"The smashed wine glass in the dining room," I replied. "And the infamous bullet in the skirting board."

"And what do these clues suggest to you – as in, how Andrew was shot?"

I kicked a pebble. "Well, they don't. They don't suggest anything to me. They're all so random; they all seem to point in different directions."

A silence followed. "Propping the gun up sounds possible?" ventured Charlie. "Andrew could have wedged the gun between two books on one of the bookcases?" "And how did he fire it?"

He considered for a moment. "A long stick?"

My look was unimpressed. "When we found Andrew that night I don't recall him holding onto a ten-foot barge pole."

"OK, OK. How about— maybe a string tied to the trigger? And the string's attached to a weight, so when Andrew drops the weight it pulls on the string – which pulls on the trigger – which fires the gun?"

"It's not impossible," I granted, "which is actually pretty good going compared to some of the other explanations people have suggested. But, Charlie, *why* would Andrew Paris do this to himself? Why would he lock himself in a room and set up some intricate system of weights and strings in order to shoot himself from a distance? What's he achieving by this?"

"Well, it makes him look like the victim, right?" suggested Charlie. "Because it looks like he couldn't have shot himself. So maybe it's to make us think of him as a victim rather than a culprit? So we wouldn't connect him with John's death?"

I shook my head. "But that's exactly what did happen. If Andrew hadn't been shot we wouldn't be here right now." Charlie's shoulders slumped a little. "If he didn't want anyone

looking into his brother's death then surely the simplest thing to do would have been to emerge unscathed from the panelled room in the morning? That was his stated plan, after all. And I doubt whether any of us would have given John's death serious consideration had that happened." A waft of honeysuckle drifted past. "The more I think about this, the more I think it must have been someone else who fired that gun.

Now it was Charlie's turn to quiz me. "But how could anyone have done that?"

Good question. I related Brian's theory; it sounded less compelling on second airing, I had to admit.

"But Jared was outside the—"

"I know, I know," I snapped. "It obviously wasn't Jared. I know that now." I heard myself sigh. "But, try as I might, I just can't picture Andrew shooting himself. That doesn't make any more sense to me."

It was nearly night now. A few more stars peeked out of the inky blue sky above us. I patted the torch in my pocket for reassurance.

"If you think someone must have shot him, I don't suppose you've given any thought as to *who* it might have been?" wondered Charlie, discomfort creeping back into his voice.

"Because if Andrew's shooting was an attempt to recreate John's murder, as you say, surely it stands to figure that whoever attempted it knew the details of John's death well?" I

looked at him but said nothing. The silhouette of White Gate was close by now. "And besides Andrew that only leaves us with one person," he continued cautiously.

"The person who was close by when Andrew shot John. The person who's had the best part of two decades to think over what he saw that night." He didn't dare say the name on his lips.

"You look worried," I commented. The land to our left must be the back of White Gate.

Charlie uttered a single, hollow laugh. "Yes, Karen, I'm worried. This guy has already tried to kill once, and now we're snooping around in the hopes of unmasking him?" His voice had become a little hoarse. "What if – what if he tries to shoot us too?"

I paused, hands on hips, looking at the trees and shrubs to the left of the lane.

"Charlie, you'll just have to believe me when I say that our phantom gunman poses no threat to us," I said, still looking for a way into the grounds. No obvious entrance. I turned back to face him. "I promise you that, Charlie. I'm not going ask you to do anything that might put you in danger. But it's up to you whether you choose to believe me or not."

Charlie bit his lip, a battle between bravery and self-preservation raging across his rounded features. "OK," he decided. "If you promise, I trust you." He nodded to the bundle in his arms. "Let's get this over with."

I reached for my torch and aimed its beam at the thickets crowding the edge of the lane. Beyond them stood a crumbling brick wall delineating the edge of White Gate's grounds. Despite its disrepair it was still high, and as we waded towards it through the undergrowth – which turned out to be a particularly vindictive patch of brambles – it seemed to rise up above us. Well, me, at any rate. Heights have always been a problem for me – not for any fear or vertigo they induce, but for the simple matter of scaling them.

"Charlie," I concluded grimly, "you're going to have to give me a leg up."

The Charlie of a week ago would, I suspected, have protested the idea. The worldweary, battle-scarred, bramble-scratched veteran beside me this evening, however,

accepted his fate with stoic resignation. “How do you want to do this?” he sighed, running a hand through his wayward hair.

I’ll spare you the details of how we did it. Suffice to say it was nothing like how I had wanted to do it. Parts of the operation reminded me of those clips of animal births you accidentally catch on wildlife documentaries. Certainly, there was something elephantine to Charlie’s final thumping descent into the dock leaves, a landing cumbersome enough to startle a family of wood pigeons from a nearby beech, who clapped away in a flustered mix of shock and embarrassment at our efforts.

It was with a similar mix of feelings that Charlie and I continued towards White Gate. The fading light added to the sense of abandonment that haunted the overgrown grounds. Long ago, in John’s day maybe, this had been cultivated garden; under the absent custodianship of Andrew, however, it had become indistinguishable from the woods that ringed the village. I very nearly plunged into a long-forgotten pond, its paved edging almost lost beneath the creeping weeds.

The trees and shrubs soon thinned, and White Gate once again reared before us like a recurring dream. We had arrived at the edge of the lawn where, two weeks earlier, I dislocated all 350 joints in my body trying to keep up with Lisa’s yoga routine. “No lights are on,” I observed, nodding towards the house. “That’s good.” There was a brittleness to my casual tone, I noticed. People did keep getting shot in this house, after all.

With conspicuous stealth Charlie stumbled across the lawn after me. The back door was locked. Had we checked the front door we would have found it locked also. Once again I approached the twin windows of the panelled room. The window on the left, the one Lisa had plunged that stone through, had a square of cardboard taped over the broken pane. I could barely make out the gloomy outlines of the room within. “Hold this torch,” I commanded, fishing for the Stanley knife in my backpack.

“So we really are breaking and entering this time?” asked Charlie, taking the torch with a furtive glance across the garden.

“I thought you’d be used to it by now,” I grinned back as I jammed the Stanley knife through the cardboard. “If we’re going to work out what went on in this room we’re going to have to get inside. Besides, this pane’s already broke—”

It’s like remembering where your keys are. Suddenly the solution is there in your mind, so clear and complete you think it must have always been there and you only had to remember it. For a moment the sights and sounds of the summer dusk dimmed. I was vaguely aware of someone muttering something to themselves. I think it was me.

With a dazed shake of my head I remembered Charlie was still standing next to me. His expression was even more lost than normal. “Don’t you see?” I blurted out, forgetting that I needed to keep my voice down. “Andrew wasn’t talking about pain at all when we found him!” I could have kicked myself. “He was telling us – Christ, he was *showing* us – how the whole trick had been pulled off!” I think at this point I did physically kick myself. “If only I hadn’t been so panicked that night and actually stopped to listen to what he was saying.”

Charlie peered into the panelled room. “So what are you telling me? The shooter got in and out through the windows?” His big body deflated in defeat. “But they were both latched from the inside. We’ve been over this a thousand times.”

“No,” I replied, “no, no, not that. Think about it! The gardening gloves – the smashed glass – the French windows. It all makes sense! It finally makes sense!” I took a deep breath. The feeling of victory was as electrifying as when I got Helen to tell me how the cup and ball trick worked. Maybe better, even. I looked into Charlie’s bemused blue eyes. “Let’s get inside and I’ll explain.”

Charlie resumed torch duties as I sliced through the cardboard. It fell silently onto the wooden floor of the study. Reaching inside, I groped for the latch. The sash lifted easily and we made our way back into the panelled room. Even knowing what I now did, an involuntary shiver ran up my spine as I once again clambered through that window. It reminded me a little too clearly of that night.

“Should we turn a light on?” asked Charlie, a little out of breath. His entrance through the window made me think of wildlife documentaries again.

“Best not,” I murmured, shining the torch around the room. “Don’t want to draw attention to ourselves. Just in case someone happens to notice.” The panelled room looked unchanged from our last visit. There was the blood-stained shag rug. There was John’s chair and desk, the pile of books and papers already coated in a fine layer of dust. And there – I swung the torch beam back towards the windows – was the blank space above the fireplace where the Hungry Corpse should be. A single sturdy hook stuck out from the wall. I held the torch in place while Charlie unwrapped the mask and approached the fireplace. With a gentleness that seemed odd coming from such a big man he lifted the mask and carefully rested it on the hook. The house was silent. Slowly he moved his hands away and stepped back. The Hungry Corpse once again reigned over the panelled room.

I let the torchlight linger on its face for a moment. In the dusty beam its features looked even more brutal than I remembered. The screaming mouth had the same look of frozen horror you see on those desiccated mummies archaeologists occasionally dig out of the Sahara. The hooked nose curved to a murderous point. Even now its mother-of-pearl eyes glinted viciously at us from their deep gouge-like sockets. “I suppose I can understand why people keep instilling it with sinister powers,” I said. “Even though it’s–”

A noise cut off whatever I was going to say. A heavy, solid noise. Clunk and scrape. “It’s just the wind,” I dismissed, although I noticed my heart was beating a little faster. “I heard that same sound when we stayed here overnight.”

“Karen,” said Charlie, his face colourless in the torchlight, “there is no wind.”

I took a breath. “It could have been anything,” I replied, slipping off my backpack and placing it on the desk. “I’m going to take a look.”

I placed my hand on the doorknob and turned it as silently as possible. Unlocked, thankfully. I stepped out into the hall, now sunk in darkness; Charlie, I noticed with some relief, had chosen to come with me rather than be left alone. Together we made our way across the parquet flooring. The grandfather clock ticked heavily in the gloom. Wherever I shone the feeble light of the torch White Gate’s many artefacts glittered and glowed – the Arabic scimitars – the waist-high geode – the bottled witch. Why, I cursed, did Andrew Paris live in a house of horrors?

We tiptoed towards the front of the house. The front door was still bolted from the inside, although I was no longer sure if that was good or bad news. “It could have been

anything,” I repeated, looking back at Charlie. “It’s just a creaky house.” Only the next noise wasn’t a creak but a thump, a loud thump, and it was close by. I managed to unfreeze my limbs and drag Charlie into the dining room.

“Does your promise that no harm will come to us still stand?” he whispered, standing beside me behind the dining room door.

I shushed him with my free hand as I fumbled to turn the torch off. “This wasn’t part of my plan,” I admitted. “Just stay still and be quiet.” Someone (something?) was in the house with us, that was all. There were a thousand reasons why someone might be here.

But were there? This was a crime scene, after all. And the noises continued. Shuffling, stumbling. Things moving.

From behind the dining room door I squinted through the blackness to the front door: still bolted. And the back door, I recalled uneasily, was also locked. “Let’s be reasonable,” I said, more to myself than Charlie. “The front and back doors are locked. It’s just me and you in the house.” And the Hungry Corpse, we both thought. I shook my head. “Anything else is nonsense.” Again, more to myself.

Charlie spied the French windows running along the far wall of the dining room. “We could leave through these?” he suggested with thinly veiled desperation.

“My backpack,” I remembered with a flash of despair. “I left it in the panelled room. It’s got John’s letter in it. We can’t leave it.”

With hitherto untapped reserves of courage Charlie restrained himself from diving straight through the French windows and scampering back to the safety of my Austin Metro. Instead he shut his eyes tight, pressed his lips thin, and nodded as if it were the signal for his execution.

We edged back across the hall and back to the panelled room. I peered into the treacle-thick darkness, almost hoping to find a source for the noise, but there was nothing here other than the Hungry Corpse.

“Where’s your bag?” came Charlie’s hoarse whisper from the centre of the room. His bulky silhouette blocked out one of the windows.

“On the desk,” I replied, groping my way to that end of the study. Arms outstretched, my fingers connected with John’s desk. I could feel the smooth lacquered wood. What I couldn’t feel was my bag. “It’s not here,” I breathed.

“What?” squeaked Charlie.

“My bag,” I explained, grabbing the torch. “I left it here. It’s gone.” The torchlight confirmed my fears. The bag had vanished.

Another thump.

I spun to face the Hungry Corpse. *Very bad spirit*, I heard Samson quiver. Thump. *A darkness festered inside it*, chimed Lisa’s past lives through the mystic channels. Thump. *The chaos from beyond the stars*, murmured John from the feverish depths of the New Caledonian night.

Thump.

This is absurd, I thought, my light shining onto the mask. There’s a logical explanation for everything. It’s just a mask. *Nothing more than breadfruit wood and hair*, concurred Andrew, his icy gaze unimpressed with the way my hands shook. Thump.

“It’s just a mask,” I echoed aloud, looking directly into its glassy eyes. “It’s just a mask.” There was an edge of anger in my voice now. “It’s just—”

The door swung open. I whirled to face it, unsure whether I was about to fight or fly for my life. As it turned out I did neither, but stood there, frozen, as Brian Docherty shuffled into the room.

He looked tired. The zip of his acrylic jacket, I noticed, was stuck half-way. “I really ought to call the police,” he opened, shining a torch of his own at me and Charlie. “Breaking and entering and all.”

“Brian,” I panted. How long had my chest been heaving like this? “How – how did you get in here?”

“Legally.” He fished a small brass key out of his pocket and held it up to the torch beam. “I still have a back door key to this place. When I saw your torchlight in the house I thought I’d better take a look. I, uh, I hope I didn’t scare you.”

Scare me? You nearly gave me a heart attack, I felt like yelling at him, conscious that I had enough adrenaline thumping through my veins to rip his head clean off. Deep breath. “You just made us jump, that’s all,” I managed to say, hoping he couldn’t see my pulse fluttering in my neck.

Brian’s grey eyes glanced towards the sash window. “I take it you came in that way?” I nodded. He shook his head wearily. “I knew I should have put something more than cardboard over it. So—” he flicked the light switch “—what the hell are you two doing here?”

I squinted against the light. It felt rough against the back of my eyes. “We know what happened to Andrew, Brian. We know how it was done.” I reconnected with those grey eyes. “And who did it.”

“Well, you do,” I heard Charlie mumble. “You never actually told me.”

Brian’s expression softened just a little. He let out a sigh and rubbed his face. There were bags under his eyes, I observed. “Is this yours?” he asked, retrieving my backpack from the hall. “I found it in here.” With deliberate incuriosity I took it from him. Still zipped up. “You know, I was kind of hoping I’d find you two here,” Brian continued.

“What do you mean?” I asked, surprised by his remark. John’s letter was still in my bag.

Brian looked at us. “I’ve just heard from the hospital, as it happens. Andrew’s awake. He’s talking.”