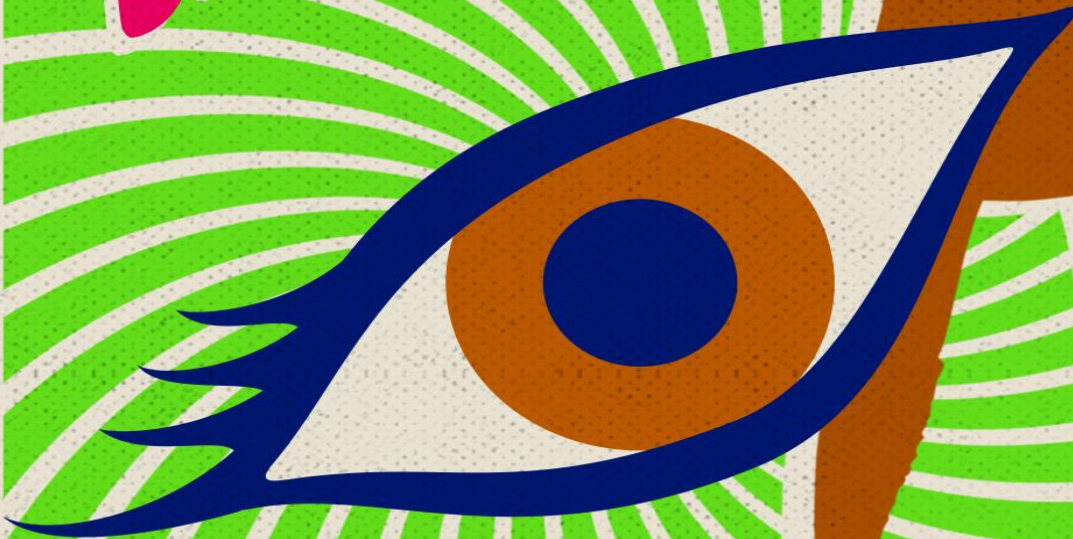


MYSTERY LADY

PAUL MARRS



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Episode One

My name is Dodie Golightly and I am a murderer.

Murder is my profession. I am a writer of stories, a composer of riddles and a setter of puzzles. I create characters in order to do dreadful things to them. / am a 'woman of mystery'.

Wherever I go, I seem to be beset by mysteries. They follow me about. Timothy Bold says that I simply imagine this. He says that, if anything, I deliberately seek out danger and mayhem. He accuses me of bringing these things on myself. But then, what would Timothy Bold know? He's got his head filled with dolly birds and pop music and the ridiculous clothes he wears. He's all about external fripperies, and I tell him so. But he just shrugs and gives a carefree laugh.

'Better superficial than morbid, Dodie,' he says.

Am I morbid? Just because I spend much of my life thinking about murder? Deep down I have come to believe that life is really all about death. That's all there really is to the world – the inevitability of everyone's demise and the various gruesome ways in which it can come about.

That was something that struck me quite forcibly during that recent affair I investigated to do with the poisonings at the Women's Institute in Cheadle Hulme. Strychnine in the raspberry jam. I rather enjoyed solving that one.

Yes, I suppose all my preoccupations are quite morbid, actually.

Good thing that, when I'm in company, I can keep up such a jolly front. I can cover up my darker thoughts and pretend

to be simply stylish, sharp, witty and sleek: an adventurous lady investigator with a sports car and a loyal but slightly ditzy assistant.

Cassandra is very sweet but she was changed forever by something that happened at a book launch last year. It was in the revolving restaurant at the new Post Office Tower in London, and I don't think she'll ever be the same. Not that she even really understands what went on. But that's Cassandra for you.

I live in the North of England, in the city of Manchester, hidden away in the leafy suburbs of Heaton Moor, behind tall hedges and red brick walls. Mostly I sit at home in a turret of my little house. It's quite an eccentrically designed house, rather like a small castle. My turret looks out on swaying trees, spectacular in autumn, when our story begins, and it's the perfect place for me to work.

I'm very lucky because mostly I get to stay at home, which is lovely. I have my books and my tastefully curated objets and my cats – Agatha and Edgar – and I have no one to disturb me or clutter up my home or get in my way. Apart from Cassandra, of course, or my showbizzy best friend Timothy... but they are both good and try not to bother me much.

The night our story begins was one of those nights when I found I had to leave my home and be more sociable. I couldn't simply sit around in my silk wrap and turban, playing records and hatching plots.

That night it was Timothy's debut as a presenter on a TV teen pop show. He was going to be the host of 'Smashing Tunes' and I was being roped in as moral support. I had to wear something 'groovy and hip' – his words – and dance energetically in the studio for the cameras. I had to look as if I was enjoying every moment and, if it wasn't too much trouble, I had to scream myself hoarse at the pop stars, too.

It really wasn't my kind of thing.

‘Oooh, I can’t wait,’ said Cassandra, as we surveyed my wardrobe together. ‘Look, I’m already done up.’

She was indeed. She was in a lime green, bell-shaped mini dress with knee-high white plastic boots. Her hair was strawberry blonde and backcombed into a vast heap. The thing about her particular condition, it seemed, was that she could get away with wearing just about anything. It was a shame that not everyone could appreciate her transformation.

She made a few suggestions about what I ought to wear that night. Most of what I had was rather too classy for prancing about to pop music. We settled on a midnight blue cat suit with golden embroidered details. It would look fab with my dark hair.

‘Just look at us!’ sighed Cassie, when we were all ready and heading out to the Jag. ‘He won’t know what’s hit him!’ Then, clambering into the passenger seat, she was overcome by a fleeting sadness. ‘And yet, somehow, he always behaves as if I don’t exist.’

I hopped into the driver’s seat and gunned the engine. Honestly, I didn’t know what to say to Cassie when she said that.

‘Smashing Tunes’ was broadcast from a one-time church in Manchester. A deconsecrated church might seem like funny place to film a pop show, but Timothy had explained that it was because it had a lovely large floor space and wonderful acoustics. It just seemed a bit sacrilegious to me, but this is the Sixties, isn’t it? We’re living in a different age now. The old order is being overturned. Everything is upside down and, mostly, that’s all for the best. A lot of bad attitudes and prejudices are being examined and opportunities are opening up for everyone. Everything is changing so fast. Being an old-fashioned girl at heart – though a fabulously trendy one – I do wonder if we aren’t moving along *too* fast sometimes...

'Is this the place..? It must be!' cried Cassandra as we encountered heavy traffic on the long, broad stretch of Dickinson Road.

There was a crowd of local kids hanging around the dark vans outside. The vans clearly belonged to the television company, and perhaps the pop stars, too. Young girls in cardigans and boys in anoraks or leather jackets were gathered excitedly, hoping for a glimpse of a famous face.

I parked in a side street and popped on my sunglasses, even though it was nearly dark.

'You do look glam, Dodie,' Cassandra told me. 'I don't know why Timothy doesn't beg you to run away with him.'

My jaw dropped open. 'What? Why would you say that?'

'Oh, come on. You two were made for each other!'

'We've known each other since the first day at Betty Street Infants,' I protested. 'We played in the Wendy House and that's the closest I ever want to get to playing Mams and Dads with Timothy Bold, thank you. He's a sweetheart and I love him to bits, but you're wrong, Cassie. There's no chance of romance between us. Just the thought of it is upsetting!'

By now we were passing through the rabble of spectators. Cassie was still nattering on. 'Upsetting? But he's so lovely! He's a gorgeous-looking fella!'

She wasn't wrong, but Tim was much more like a younger, dafter, and, at times, slightly irksome brother. I tried to explain this to Cassandra yet again.

Away from the milling crowds and the busy technicians, we met the daft lad himself, inside his tiny and rather chilly dressing room.

'Goodness, are you really wearing that?' I asked him.

It was a regency frock coat and a frilled shirt apparently made out of ten pound notes. His hair had been teased into a meringue even more elaborate than Cassie's.

'It's how the producer wants me to look,' he grinned. 'Just a little bit outrageous.'

He looked just a little bit *nervous* to me. 'Come on, Tim. Don't be scared. This is everything you ever dreamed of. All those years you've spent building up to this! Hospital Radio. Local Radio. Pirate Radio. National Radio. The Breakfast Show. And now television! This is your moment of glory, at last!'

He looked sheepish. 'I know. I've just got this queer feeling... that something is going to happen. Something is going to go wrong. Someone's going to get electrocuted or say something rude live on air, or I'm going to forget my words or freeze or something...'

'Nothing bad is going to happen...' I tried to reassure him.

'I just have a feeling that there's something... nasty on its way,' he shivered.

I gave him a huge hug. 'You do look a nana in that get-up, sweetie.'

Cassandra told him: 'Well, I think you look very dashing and handsome, Timothy.'

But, as ever, Timothy looked straight through her.

Then the director came bustling in with a script and notes. He was fierce and businesslike. It was almost time for the show.

Cassandra and I went to our place in the crowd on the church's dance floor and we stayed there all evening .

We had a lovely time!

And everything went swimmingly.

Timothy didn't slip up once and, from what I could tell, the camera loved him. He was funny and spontaneous and handsome as anything.

Nothing nasty happened that night.

Silly old Timothy. I scoffed at him - what the devil did he think was going to happen?

CASSANDRA:

Hello, there, I'm Cassandra. Dodie's indispensable assistant. I get her from A to B and all points in between.

So, here we are actually on 'Smashing Tunes'! Actually on the telly! There's not much space for dancing. Those cameras come thundering across the floor and everyone has to scatter. All the kids they've let in are stomping about and jabbing their elbows and wagging their heads like crazy. The music thunders out of speakers and all the old foundation stones of the church are vibrating with the beat.

We dance to Mervin and his Mop-heads. Gary and the Gonks. And then there's a slow song by the classy Glaswegian songstress, Brenda Soobie, who stands under a spotlight in a lovely purple gown.

Ooh, the whole thing's gorgeous. It feels like the centre of the universe here.

And doesn't Dodie look happy and carefree? However, I know that's not the case. She's very deep, is my friend and employer, Dodie. She might look serenely beautiful on the outside, but sometimes her mind is far away, working on puzzles much too strange and obscure for me to even imagine.

It's while we're dancing to the new number by Peter and Penelope that a thought strikes me out of nowhere.

Dodie's letter! I've been carrying it around in my handbag for three days!

How could I be so silly?

She frowns at me as I start rummaging around in my handbag in the middle of the song.

'What are you doing?' she hisses.

Then I've got it. It's a letter on very fancy, creamy paper. Very expensive. It's direct from a classy publisher in Bloomsbury, London: Mephistopheles and Company.

Dodie takes it from me with a frown, never once losing the beat as she shimmies and shakes to the up-tempo chorus. She scans the page and her eyes light up. 'Oh, hurray!' she shouts out. 'How marvelous!'

Several of our fellow dancers glance over at her, wondering what's going on.

She grabs my elbow and we wriggle through the crowd, away from the glare of the television cameras, into an obscure nook of the church.

'I'm so sorry, Dodie. I've been meaning to give you this for days. It arrived at the end of last week.'

She waves away my words, scanning the contents of the letter again. 'They want to see me. The editorial director, Mr Henry Duke, wants me to come to his London office for a meeting... the day after tomorrow!'

Now I feel really awful. We're only just in time. Suppose I'd not remembered about the letter till after the suggested meeting? She might have missed her chance with this prestigious publisher.

'Mephistopheles and Company, Cassandra...!' Dodie gasps. 'Just think! Imagine being published by a company like that!'

I share her excitement. Her career is one of my biggest concerns. I want her to do well. She so deserves it.

'We're on our way, Cassie!' she smiles. 'This is the start of something exciting and big, I think!'

The Peter and Penelope duet finishes and we all applaud wildly. Then our lovely Timothy is back in the spotlight, giving the rundown to the chart's top ten singles.

And before we know it, 'Smashing Tunes' is over.

The show finishes with a rousing, up-tempo Motown number and glitter falling from the rafters as we all dance ourselves dizzy until the cameras stop rolling and the floor manager tells us that we're no longer live on air. Everyone gives themselves a huge round of applause.

'Well, that was quite good, wasn't it?' Dodie says, as we fight through the surging crowd towards Timothy's dressing room. 'And didn't he do a good job?'

But we find Timothy in his tiny dressing room just about on the verge of tears.

‘Whatever’s the matter?’ Dodie rushes to him.

‘I was just awful,’ he sobs.

‘You’re always like this!’ she laughs. ‘I remember you having this reaction after our junior school nativity play when you were the Angel Gabriel. And you were fabulous then, too.’

He shakes his head despairingly. ‘No, no, they’ll never ask me again, and I’ll be a laughing stock in show business.’

‘Rubbish!’ Dodie scoffs. ‘You, my lovely, are going to be a huge, huge star.’

And then she offers to take him out for a celebratory slap-up meal. ‘At the Taj Mahal!’

This perks him up.

It takes him quite some time to change into slightly less outrageous clothes, and then to say his farewells to all the crew and the pop stars. Everyone congratulates him on his expert hosting of the show, but he modestly shrugs off their compliments. . He’s so vulnerable, really.

We open the church doors and step out into the dark night. It’s chilly and the street is filled with fans and policemen and waiting vehicles. Timothy signs a few autographs, then Dodie drags us off in the direction of her Jaguar.

She loves a good curry, does Dodie, and she knows just where to get one here in Manchester.

DODIE:

All through the poppadums and sundries we were talking about Timmy’s show. We considered every single moment from every conceivable angle, and I reassured him that I had never witnessed a finer hour of pop TV – or any other kind of TV – in all my life. Then the bhajis arrived and I was wondering if it would be rude to change the subject and break into my own news now?

The Taj Mahal's owner, genial Uncle Sayeed, brought us beer and extra little treats and he clapped Timothy on the back, offering hearty congratulations.

Timothy was glowing with pride and hot spices by now.

Cassie leaned across to whisper at me: 'Tell him your news. Tell him about London tomorrow.'

And so I did.

His eyes gleamed. 'Dodie, that's brilliant! You're actually going to be in 'The Horrible Book of Terror'..?'

I smile and nod. 'Volume Number 27. Edited by the infamous Fox Soames.'

'Oh my God,' Timothy stared at me. 'Do you remember, Dodie? When we used to bunk off from school on summer afternoons and go and sit in the long grass on the waste ground by the Secret Lake and read out those stories to each other? We'd scare each other half daft...'

I laughed at the memory, and I was so glad he brought it up. Timothy more than anyone else understood what having a story accepted for this annual anthology meant to me.

I told him that wasn't all. The publisher himself had requested a meeting with me - in two days' time.

'Face to face?' asked Timothy. 'Is that usual?'

I shrugged. 'I've no idea. Perhaps they want more from me than just one story? I've no idea! But one thing's for certain - I'm going to travel down tomorrow and make that meeting in Bloomsbury and find out!'

Now Uncle Sayeed and his immaculate waiting staff were heading our way with steaming silver platters of pink pilau rice and all kinds of wonderfully fragrant dishes.

Timothy said: 'Oh, do you know what? I have to be in London for the weekend anyway. I'm on another show on Friday night. Just as a guest this time. Why don't I come with you on the train? We can make a lovely trip of it, Dodie?'

To me that sounded like a splendid idea.

Cassandra said that she fully approved of the plan, too, as she wafted about dreamily, breathing in the mingled scents

of the curries and mooning over Timothy...

I liked to be properly organised. None of this last minute nonsense for me. A leisurely journey to London with my friends and dinner somewhere fancy tomorrow evening would suit me fine. Then I'd be all rested and fresh for my meeting with the Chief Editor at Mephistopheles and Company the following morning.

As I lay in bed late on Wednesday night a breeze ruffled in from the swaying trees of Heaton Moor. Mephistopheles & Co were the best publisher of all. Back in the 1920s they published the mystery tales of Lady Lucrezia Noggins. Nowadays they were having a huge success with the strange adventure stories of Oswald Arthur. I would be in very esteemed company if I managed to sell a whole book to them.

Perhaps this short story of mine was a foot in the door...

Though it was a very strange story indeed... I was surprised anyone wanted to buy it. I only sent it in on a whim. It was, perhaps, the most phantasmagorical thing I had ever written... and certainly the most personal and heartfelt. Perhaps that is why it had caught the attention of the editor, Fox Soames. Underneath the macabre surface, perhaps he had detected a note of authenticity..?

Gradually I dropped off to sleep, thoughts of my career whirling round my head. As I lay tangled in my satin sheets the insistent thumping of all those 'Smashing Tunes' was still ringing in my ears and I reflected upon an almost perfect evening...

Next thing I knew there was light flooding into the room and Cassandra was bustling about, packing an overnight bag for me. There was a cup of hot coffee on my nightstand and she was calling my name.

'Goodness, Cassie. You're not my housemaid. You don't have to go to all this trouble.'

She was trying to fold a negligee and bundling stockings. 'Oh, it doesn't matter. I like helping. It's not much bother.'

I'm very grateful to you, Dodie. Who else but you would give me a job?'

'What?' I sat up in bed, alarmed by her tone. 'What's the matter, dearest?'

A small squeak of anguish escaped from my amanuensis. 'It's just...' she began, and wrung a very expensive silk blouse between her fists until it looked like a rag. 'I'm pretty hopeless, aren't I? As a secretary or as anything, really? I never quite get things right. Like these train times I found. I scribbled them all down in my pad, and I can't even read my own scrawl.'

'That doesn't matter, Cassie,' I told her. 'The thing you have to learn about life is that everything becomes so much simpler if you simply behave as if nothing really matters.'

'Really?' she looked sceptical.

'Well, of course,' I said, hopping towards my en suite bathroom. 'You must never let the world at large see what it is you care about. And then it can't be taken away from you.'

I left this thought with her as I plunged into my shower: a delicious, frothing, perfumed torrent that quickly sluiced away the fug of my slumbers.

When I emerged I found that not only had the dear girl packed my case, she had laid out the most exquisitely chosen travelling outfit. A lemon two-piece with a dinky hat.

We met Timothy at WH Smith on the platform at Piccadilly. The daft boy had gone to extreme lengths to ensure he wasn't recognised by members of the public. He was in a huge overcoat, scarf and hat, with a comically large pair of dark sunglasses hiding most of his face. He looked like an idiot as he perused the papers.

For the first time, I really considered the idea that my friend was becoming a famous person. That day he was much better known than he was the day before.

‘Hopefully we can nab a compartment to ourselves,’ I told him. ‘And so you won’t be bothered by your many fans.’

He nodded solemnly. ‘I’ve bought us some licorice allsorts.’ Also, I noticed, all the papers, so he could read reviews of his performance last night.

As we left the newsagent and drifted towards Platform Ten, Cassie looked perplexed. ‘That was strange at the ticket counter. Why do we only need tickets for you two?’

‘Oh, it’s a special offer. Writers’ assistants travel free this month. Isn’t that great?’

We were only just in time. Tearing down the long concourse under the iron girders of the curving roof. The noise everywhere of departures and welcomes, whistles and dashing footsteps.

There’s something I love about setting off on a journey...

CASSANDRA:

What we don’t know at this point, though, is that this journey is more than a quick jaunt to London for a meeting. This journey is going to go on and on. It’s going to turn into a dangerous quest, this one.

But as we set off from Manchester Piccadilly on that bright October morning, we have absolutely no inkling of this.

Which is just as well.

Ahh, I look back on myself that day and I think – Cassandra, you had no idea what was in store. You had no idea about anything at that point. You didn’t know anything at all, did you?

All around us, others were boarding the train to London, and finding their compartments and getting themselves comfy.

Everyone looked perfectly normal and respectable.

And so, once Dodie and the handsome Timothy are settled into their compartment, and he has divested himself of

some of his layers of disguise, I drift along the corridors with the ostensible excuse of finding the dining compartment. Though I daren't trust myself carrying tea things back to the others. Have I mentioned yet how terribly clumsy I am? I always seem to drop simply everything...

I had a little walk up and down the length of the train to stretch my legs once we were underway and I peeped through windows and had a good nose around. I'm a very curious person and Dodie says it's one of the things she values about my being her assistant. I quite often notice things that she has been oblivious to.

And it's while I'm on this little reconnaissance mission that I see a very strange pair of travelers indeed.

They are a few doors down from our compartment. They're shut in together but they aren't a pair, if you see what I mean. She is a very large lady with a vast shelf of a bust and very long, delicate fingers. Her hair is in a bun and she is wearing a tweed suit. Very businesslike, like a gigantic, drab old bird, pecking at the pile of papers in her lap. She's working on the train, making marks on a vast typescript with a blue pencil.

The man sitting opposite her is staring furiously at every move she makes. When I look into his face I recoil at once. He has blue-purple lips like old bits of liver, shiny and wet. He has a skinny black moustache under a scarlet hooked nose. He's gurning at the large lady and blazing his eyes. A very skinny man in a business suit. Very smart. He even has a silver-headed cane with him. The woman in tweed isn't paying him one jot of attention, but surely she can't be unaware of him?

I open the compartment door and slip in, but neither occupant pays me the slightest attention.

DODIE:

We were perhaps halfway on our journey to London and Timothy was slumped against the window, fast asleep, which meant that I could speak openly with my assistant.

‘Oh, look how sweet he looks,’ Cassie sighed. ‘All rumpled in his blue velvet, like a little lord. And he’s still got glitter in his hair from last night, too...’

‘Never mind him,’ I heard myself turn rather snappish. ‘What was going on, that was so sinister Cassie?’

Cassandra focused her wits and described the man of gaunt, almost cadaverous aspect in the pin stripe suit. He had been staring rather alarmingly at the large, tweedy women as she worked on her manuscript. The lady seemed to be vaguely aware of his presence, but was determinedly paying him no heed. She was being staunch and brave, Cassie thought, because she couldn’t have been unaware of the waves of sheer evilness that the man was giving off.

‘Did he say anything to her?’

‘Not a word, while I was there. He just made one horrible, long hissing noise at her, like a coiled snake. And his hand lashed out like a claw to touch the manuscript on her lap. Well, then she suddenly came to life, and snatched that pile of papers away from him, clutching it to her huge bosom. She stared at the man and he hissed again.’

‘All a bit peculiar,’ I mused.

‘He was definitely up to no good,’ Cassandra said decisively. She might be dithery sometimes, but I’ve come to trust her instincts.

‘And then you’ll never guess what happened next, Dodie.’

‘Go on.’

‘The rather large lady set her parcel of papers aside and suddenly reached out with both hands, taking the skinny man by surprise. He had time to squawk once before she seized him. And proceeded to throttle him, and pummel him, and squash him face-first into her massive bosom.’

‘What?!’

‘She was up on her feet and stamping on him. She yanked his arms and legs around like she was going to pull them off. By the end of it he was sobbing and begging for mercy...’

I stared at her, aghast. She continued.

‘Whatever that manuscript was, she was prepared to defend it with her life. The man wriggled and fought to escape, but then suddenly he stopped struggling. He turned his head and he looked me right in the eye. He licked those liverish lips with a bright red tongue. His eyes boggled at me horribly. And suddenly I was really scared. I had to get out of there. And so I dashed out and I hurried straight back here. I don’t know whether he escaped or she killed him and chucked him out of the moving window.’

She was tired now from having re-enacted the scene. ‘Oh, he deserved everything he got I’m sure. He’d been carrying on in such a sinister manner towards her. I’m glad the old dear fettled him, but still... it did make me feel a bit peculiar... Dodie, do you think we should tell the conductor or something?’

‘I’m sure if it’s anything important, we’ll read about it in the papers tomorrow,’ I mused. Sometimes Cassie had a habit of exaggerating things. She’d probably witnessed a far less melodramatic scene than the one she described...

Now she was back to staring at Timmy as he dozed, his hairdo flattened against the window.

‘Did he tell you any more about the show he’s appearing in tomorrow night?’

I flicked through the Listener Magazine. ‘Oh, a little. It sounds very silly. A panel game show or something. He’s replacing a famous puppeteer, I believe and has to perform a magic trick of some kind.’

‘He’s getting really famous,’ Cassie simpered. ‘This is at BBC Television Centre, is it?’

‘We can go along and be in the audience, if we like.’

She shivered. ‘Ooh, I’d love to. I loved being on ‘Smashing Tunes’, didn’t you? The only thing wrong with it was that it

went out live. We never had time run home and watch ourselves on the box.'

'I didn't really want to watch myself dancing,' I laughed.

'But you looked fabulous!' she assured me.

'Oh, probably,' I tell her. 'But I bet I looked a right 'nana, bopping away like that. Now, let me have half an hour's peace while I write in my journal. I've not had a chance to scribble anything down today, and if I don't, I shall have an awful headache later...'

It was only a couple of hours later we were in a taxi zooming our way towards Chelsea and the fancy little mews flat Timothy had recently bought himself. Two bedrooms and rooms painted in chocolate, salmon and midnight blue. Antiques bought by the quarter tonne, tastefully arranged by a designer person he'd hired. Instant taste and splendor. I was impressed.

He hurriedly changed into a cable knit polo neck in tangerine wool with mustard yellow slacks and popped open a bottle of Veuve Clicquot.

'I'm not drinking tonight,' Cassandra shrugged. 'I'm working, really.'

Oh, the bubbles were silvery and wonderful. 'Are you sure I'm not cramping your style, staying in your spare room?' I asked him. 'I could easily get a hotel?'

'Are you kidding?' he laughed. 'I couldn't bear it if you were in the capital and you didn't come to stay with me. I get so lonely when you're not near to tease and humiliate me, Dodie Golightly.'

'I don't do anything of the sort!' I gasped. 'I just keep you on the straight and narrow, and prevent your head from getting too big.'

'Cheers!' He made us both drink to that.

Cassandra drifted about the flat mulishly, looking a bit put out.

'I have dinner plans for this evening,' Timothy announced. 'For both of us. My treat.'

My tummy rumbled at the very thought. All we'd had on the train was a corned beef sandwich.

He rushed to the phone in the hallway to book us a table. Cassie sloped over and whispered at me: 'Good job I hardly eat anything at all, isn't it?'

'Oh, Cassie. You can come with us. Timmy won't... er... mind.'

She shook her head. 'I don't think I'd be very welcome. Also, I've just been having a poke around in his bedroom...'

'What? You shouldn't!'

'And guess what I found on his bedside table?'

'I shudder to think. Cassandra, you must really control this rampant inquisitiveness of yours...'

'It was a small velveteen padded box. The kind that rings are kept in.'

I put down my glass and stared at her very hard. 'No!'

'I had a peek inside. Very fancy. Lots of carats. Lots of sparkle.'

'Oh, God, no!' I gave a tiny, silent scream.

'I don't know what you're complaining about.'

'Yes, you do,' I snapped. 'You know he's not the one for me. Oh crikey. Do you think he's going to bring the ring to dinner tonight?'

'Well,' said Cassie heavily. 'I don't think he's taking it to Mordor, put it that way.'

'Cassie, what should I do?'

'Let him down gently. And then push him in my direction. Let him see that I even exist.' She sighed hopelessly. 'But mostly - try not to break the poor lad's heart. He's not as tough and brash as he likes to seem.'

Oh, Timothy, I think, as he returned from making our reservation, looking all keen and eager in his tangerine sweater. I've known you so long and we've been good friends nearly all of our lives. Why start messing about now

with something as dull and conventional as the idea of getting hitched?

Of course Cassandra came with us to the restaurant.

Knightsbridge. French. A tiny bistro twinkling with lights and ersatz Left Bank charm. There was even an old gent playing the accordion. Onions and bushels of herbs hanging from the ceilings. Cassandra wasn't impressed. For some reason she had an aversion to haute cuisine. She couldn't remember why, but I could. I wasn't about to enlighten her.

'It just makes me shudder,' she said. 'Like a goose stepped on my grave... A horribly fattened goose.'

'Sit with us,' I whispered to her. 'Maybe it'll stop Timmy trying out any of the sexy stuff.'

She joined me on the banquette opposite Timothy. He'd booked a table big enough for four, though goodness knows why. Maybe he wanted space enough around us so that no-one would overhear his proposal, I suddenly thought in horror.

The candlelight was so beautiful. It made us feel like we really were sitting in Paris, in a tiny little bistro, far away from all our worries and cares.

More bubbly, more chatter.

Timothy, resplendent in a suit swirling with Bridget Riley designs, expounded on his agent's ideas for his future career. It all sounded rather exhausting and ambitious to me.

Despite the threat of a possibly imminent proposition I was feeling quite relaxed.

'You just watch,' Cassandra muttered in my ear as I cracked the glaze on my cr me br lee. 'When he gets back from having a word with the manager, it'll be lovey-dovey time. You'll see.'

I glared at her.

But then I saw that her eyes had widened in surprise. 'Oh!' she gasped. 'Look who's just come in!'

There was a breath of frosty October air sweeping into the bistro just then as the door slammed shut behind a rather bulky lady in a hat and tweed cape. She was staring with great urgency into the candlelit gloom.

‘Who is it?’ I asked Cassandra.

‘It’s the lady from the train,’ she frowned. ‘And look! For some reason, she’s heading towards us!’

Helen Spedding was an expert with an eye like an eagle. She was a freelance copyeditor now, but once she had been a spy she told us. She’d been in France during the war working with the women of the Resistance and she’d got herself into and back out of some dreadful scrapes.

‘Does that surprise you, my dears?’ she said now, guffawing loudly over the cognac the management had brought her. She studied both Timothy and I intently as she sat at our table, hugging a brown paper parcel to her vast bosom.

Timothy looked piqued that she’d barreled into our private bubble and interrupted our tete-a-tete. I was quite relieved, to be honest. I was glad we had a distraction before he could start whipping out any unwarranted bits of jewellery.

‘I’ve had some wonderful adventures in my time,’ the old lady sighed, dipping an elegant finger into the crème anglaise left in Tim’s dessert dish. ‘I know you look at me now and see a bumbling old trout, but my point is, I’m not easily scared. It’s not very easy for anyone to put the wind up me.’

‘I can imagine,’ said Timothy.

She beamed at him. ‘Oh, I saw your television debut last night, young man. Very good. But you needn’t shout so much. You tend to sound slightly shrill when excited.’

Tim blushed. ‘You watch ‘Smashing Tunes’, Miss Spedding?’

‘I like to keep up with the happening sounds,’ she said gruffly. ‘I’m very with-it, you know. I go to a great many

underground dancing and drinking clubs at the weekend and one has to know all the correct groovy moves.'

My best friend looked at Helen Spedding then raised his eyebrows at me. I, however, was most impressed by her. I thought she cut a very dashing figure in her tweed cape and her tiny, feathered hat. Her ancient face was like a crinkled map of all the many countries she'd had adventures in.

I cut in: 'Miss Spedding, you haven't explained why you urgently need to speak to us this evening.'

'Oh yes, my dear. I am so sorry for wedging myself into your romantic meal...'

'It isn't romantic,' I assured her.

'Well,' she went on. 'The fact is, I have been following you for a little while. All the way from Manchester, in fact. I was on the same train as you and your companion here this afternoon.'

I nodded at this. 'I know that,' I told her .

'Ah yes,' said Helen, draining her cognac and gesturing for more by waving the heavy balloon glass above her head. 'I was attacked! In First Class! Can you imagine it? What the devil ever happened to standards, eh? And no guard came to check what was going on. All the muffled thuds and crashes and screams of pain. No one popped their head round to see that I was okay!'

'Who attacked you?' I asked.

'An enemy agent,' she said mysteriously. 'A skinny malinky kind of fella who thought he could put the willies up me. Well, I've dealt with worse than him before. I soon sent him packing. But the point is - whoever sent him won't stop there. There'll be others. And worse. And it isn't just me they'll be after.'

By now Timothy was looking cross. No one had paid him any attention for ages and he couldn't quite follow what this old dear was telling us. 'Look, what is all this? It's like the plot from some kind of silly thriller...'

Helen Spedding shot him a glance. 'I do hope you're not going to be an idiot, Mr Bold. You seemed rather more intelligent on the tellybox, somehow...'

'Tim will be all right,' I told her quickly. 'But explain to me, please. Why was this man attacking you? What was he after?'

Her face became dark and cunning. 'Isn't it obvious?' She glanced down at her hefty lap and the parcel still resting there. 'It was this. This parcel contains a manuscript. I've been copy-editing it in a secret location for the past fortnight. When I took this job on for Mephistopheles and Company I never realized that it would end up with me being in fear for my life.'

I gasped. Next to me, in the shadowy light of the bistro, Cassandra gasped too.

I was filled with an amazing sense of foreboding. I was feeling excited, too, as we all watched Miss Spedding clear a little space on our tablecloth and thump the parcel down. With slightly trembling hands, she untied the string and opened up the brown paper to reveal a thick wodge of typescript held together by rubber bands.

THE HORRIBLE BOOK OF TERROR

VOLUME 27

Edited by Fox Soames

'I knew it,' I breathed. 'Somehow I just knew it.'

'This book,' said Helen Spedding in a lower, more tremulous voice. 'Somehow this book has... enemies. How can a book have enemies..? But it does. And it isn't even a book yet. It's not printed. It's not even fully assembled yet. It's just a pile of paper with my corrections in blue pencil. This is the only copy of the whole book as yet in existence. I

am about to deliver it tomorrow, to the offices of Mephistopheles and Company in Bloomsbury.'

The old lady was trembling more violently now, as the manager brought her more brandy and she downed it in two thirsty slurps.

She was much more frightened than she wanted to appear.

'Somebody has... a grudge against this book,' she said. 'I'm not sure why. I have read the whole thing. All the stories. And yes... they are horrible. They are ghastly beyond belief. They might even be said to flirt with dark ideas and notions of awfulness... but who would go so far as to attack a book..?'

Timothy and I glanced at each other. His eyes were asking me what on earth I was doing, getting mixed in with a bunch like this. For myself I was thrilled. This was just the kind of stuff I loved.

Miss Spedding was becoming more and more depleted by the minute. Her initial robust presence had dwindled into a mere shadow of what she was. I could see I needed to take charge.

'Look here, where are you living?' I asked.

'A little North Yorkshire village called Ramificashun, just south of Pickering. I've been hiding out there, doing my copy editing and living at my sister Edna's cottage. But that's been spooky enough, to be honest. They've been having some funny do's there with sudden deaths and unexplained whatsits, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if it wasn't connected to this business of the book.'

'I see,' I said. 'Well. Why don't you go straight back there, as soon as you can? And why don't I take this manuscript off your hands? I could deliver it to the offices of Mephistopheles and Company myself, tomorrow, when I go for my meeting with the Chief Editor. I'm sure it's no skin off his nose who actually brings the thing to his desk.'

Helen Spedding brightened. 'Oh, well. That would be most kind of you. Not that I'm scared or anything... It's just...'

I completed her sentence, 'It's just you hoped that I might shorten your visit to London for you.'

'There's a sleeper train to York leaving in thirty-five minutes. I could make it back for breakfast and see that Edna is safe.'

I took hold of the heavy parcel of manuscript. 'Miss Spedding, I will guard this with my life and see that it gets to where it needs to.'

'Bless you, my dear,' she said. And ordered another brandy.

CASSANDRA:

I am getting very nasty vibes from that ream of typescript. All the way back to Timmy's flat I try to warn Dodie about what she's letting herself in for.

'Nonsense,' she hisses at me, out of the corner of her mouth.

To his credit, Timmy is saying many of the same things I am.

'Look, if there are peculiar, dangerous people after this book, why put yourself in the firing line? Why help out an old dame you've never even met before?'

Dodie frowns heavily at him. 'Timothy Bold! I'd have thought better of you! You saw how frightened she was, underneath all that bluster and bravado. What's wrong with wanting to help a stranger?'

As we walk along those fancy, immaculate streets he falls back a little, muttering to himself. Ever since we left the bistro he's been in a funny mood. I think it's all to do with having his romantic triste crashed by that old lady. But I was sitting there, wasn't I? It was hardly a romantic meal for two in the first place.

I try to reason with Dodie: 'You never saw the horrible chap in the train compartment. The one attacking Miss Spedding. If you've got types like him on your trail you won't be very pleased.'

'Oh, I can deal with funny types,' scoffs Dodie.

But all the way through the quaint alleys and mews I'm keeping a watchful eye on dark doorways and corners. What if someone was to jump out on us? We should have taken a taxi. I'm sure Timmy would be next to no use in a brawl...

Now he's saying to her, 'You just wanted to see the whole manuscript, didn't you? You wanted an early look at this book with your story in it.'

Dodie blushes. 'Can you blame me? The novelty hasn't worn off yet. The idea of being in The Horrible Book of Terror!' she chuckles at her own vanity.

Then the two of them go off reminiscing again about how they'd slip out of Dodie's house when they were kids in Manchester. They'd steal away with a stash of her stepfather's lurid paperbacks and they'd go and lie in the long grass and the sun on the secret lake and read together. It was really a pond of industrial waste, overgrown and hidden behind a demolished factory, but it was their private paradise. They'd take turns to read out scary stories to each other until the shadows grew long and it was time to creep home...

This is a past they share that's well before my time. I lag behind, left out of all this, wishing I had something to contribute, but really, I'm just an employee, aren't I? I'm part of the gang, but only as long as I'm useful...

Oh, these are gloomy thoughts, Cassandra. I tell myself to buck up and think myself lucky to be involved in such glamorous lives! I could be back in the typing pool, couldn't I? I could be sticking stamps on envelopes and going nowhere.

Now, here I am, staying in the fancy pad of a swinging TV star.

Once back indoors, Dodie flings herself down on a strawberry-pink chaise longue and Timmy goes off to fetch a nightcap for them both.

I perch next to Dodie and sigh. 'He hasn't said where I should sleep.'

'Ah,' she smiles. 'You can bunk in with me, dearest. Of course you can.'

'Thanks,' I smile, and she notices my despondent mood at last. 'It's nothing,' I assure her. 'Just sometimes... I wonder where my life is headed. I tag around after you and – don't get me wrong – it's lovely... but I don't have much independence, do I? I don't have much life of my own. And really, I'm not much cop as an assistant, am I?'

Dodie looks shocked. 'Cassandra, don't ever let me hear you say such a thing again! How dare you be so hard on yourself?!'

I smile at her, spirits lifting a tiny amount. 'Really?'

'Who was it saw Miss Spedding having a dust-up with the skinny malinky man? Who was it knew all about that before we even met the old woman?'

'Me, I guess...'

'You're always in the right place at the right time to pick up just the right clue, Cassie. It's a kind of marvelous genius you have.'

I can't help beaming at this. 'Really? Do you think so?'

'I know so.'

Timmy comes swanning back in with two little glasses of honey-coloured liqueur. He's in a blue satin dressing gown and looks very dashing.

He hands Dodie a glass and I make my excuses and head for the bathroom.

In the living room he starts doing exactly what Dodie's been slightly dreading all day.

Wooing her. With knobs on.

When I drift back from the bathroom I hover in the doorway, earwigging.

He's got the ring out, evidently, because he's saying: 'I'm really going places. I really am. I don't want to sound boastful or anything...'

'Oh, you don't,' Dodie says. 'If anything, you're too modest, Timmy. Anyone else in your position would be shouting it from the rooftops. They'd be whooping it up. And look at you - taking me for a quiet little dinner. It's very lovely and modest.'

'I just want to be with you, alone,' he says, dropping his voice.

'That's not as easy as it seems,' she tells him.

'Of course it is! We're young! We've known each other all our lives. And... I'm afraid I've always taken you for granted, Dodie. I thought you'd always be there by my side. And it's only recently that I've started... started looking at you... through the eyes of love...'

She sets down her glass and there's a pause then. I can hear her gasping. At first I think she's having a funny turn, or the hiccups.

'Don't laugh!' says Timothy Bold. 'Why are you laughing? Stop it!'

'I'm sorry, Tim. I'm really sorry. You were being so lovely and romantic. But you were being so serious, too! Your face looked so funny! I've never seen you look like that before!'

She starts laughing again. Timmy gets up off his knee and he sounds sulky. 'Now I feel a bit silly.'

I would, too, if I was in his position. She's still laughing at him.

'Timmy, I'm so sorry. But I just can't take any of this seriously. It's just not us, is it?'

He sounds like a little kid suddenly. 'Isn't it?'

'Of course it isn't. You're not romantically interested in me at all, you big fool. You would just like to be, that's all. Because we'd look fabulous together in your new life as a rising star. You'd like to be seen about town with me. And it suits your mood to fancy yourself in love...'

‘That’s not it at all...!’ He sounds really upset when he shouts this.

‘And it’s fine,’ Dodie says. ‘I don’t mind being your date at these kinds of red carpet do’s. I don’t mind hanging out at one or two groovy night-spots with you, when required, but neither of us have to tie ourselves down, do we? We don’t have to go round pretending to be in love, and all that dreary stuff, do we?’

I hear him sigh very deeply. ‘Of course not. I... I was only play-acting, Dodie. Of course I was. I thought it would amuse you, dearest...’

She laughs again. A gay little tinkle from the chaise longue.

Oh, Dodie, I think. That heart of yours. It seems so cold sometimes.

Then I go off to the room that I’m to share with her. Suddenly I’m ever so tired.

CASSANDRA:

I have the most frightening dream.

It doesn’t last very long, but it’s extremely vivid.

It concerns Helen Spedding. I seem to be following her in my mind as she returns to Yorkshire on the train.

I feel like I’m floating along on the astral plane.

The old lady is looking haunted and fearful. She sits up sleepless all night aboard the sleeper train. Her eyes dart about, as if she fears she might be attacked at any moment.

Outside there’s a blizzard raging over the endless dark moors. Snow flurries past and the train slows now and then and she starts to worry it might stop altogether. Are there even any other passengers on this train she caught at York? What if she was the only one? What if she alone was here: easy pickings for the elements and unseen assailants?

Even though she doesn't have the manuscript with her anymore she feels no different. It's as if the paper had a strange smell that won't leave her shopping bag. A stink of grave mould or mildew, perhaps? It's all over her fingers from her working on every line and writing notes everywhere...

The stories are inside my head now, she thinks, because I read them. The Horrible Book of Terror Volume 27 is inside of me...

She shudders and tries to get a grip of herself. Don't be silly, old girl. You're tougher than this.

And, eventually, the train pulls into her station. Ramificashun: a tiny halt before it peters off to Scarborough and the coast.

Just a couple of miles of snowy lanes to traverse and then she'll be at the safety of her sister's cottage.

It's too early to call for a taxi. She can walk it, even though dawn's not yet come over the hill.

She sets off firmly, determined not to scare herself any further with her wild imaginings.

But it's dark and terrifying. The overhead branches try to snag her. Brambles seem to whip out from the hedgerow to snare her back. The frozen snow creaks treacherously underfoot.

And then... there's some disturbance in the air. Something swooping down out of the dark masses of cloud. Is it... a huge bat? An owl?

Helen Spedding gives an involuntary cry. She covers her mouth to stop herself screaming. She drops her overnight bag.

She glimpses bright, faceted eyes glaring at her from the jagged branches above. She catches slights of wide, voluptuous wings. They are indigo and silken. The silent wings and furry antennae of a gigantic moth woman...

As the creature swoops softly once more towards her, the copy editor screams at the top of her voice... and the