

The darkness outside the window told Judith Cox it was time to call it a day. She glanced at her watch. Six thirty. Yes, definitely home time. Not that there was much of a home to go to, but at least it was away from here.

She took off her half moon glasses and rubbed her eyes wearily. The throbbing in her temples had increased and she felt utterly exhausted. Low blood sugar hadn't helped. She eyed the untouched tuna salad sandwich, the corners of the wholegrain bread curling up as if in protest at being abandoned. A lunch forgotten and ignored thanks to her workload and the deadlines set by Davies.

Davies. God, at times she felt like she was in a Dickens novel. The office was small and cramped, the inevitable result of modifying a section of the older part of the college for business use. At times it felt like the roof was conspiring with the walls to close in on her and crush her. And if they failed, Davies could do the job just as effectively.

Hard to believe that he'd been such a gentlemen at her interview for the post of Bursar's Secretary. She glanced at the calendar, noting the date. Good grief, was it really only two months ago? It felt like years. Davies had smiled apologetically as he took her to the top of J stairway, the autumn leaves following them in on the chill October breeze. *Not an ideal working environment, I'm afraid. But your duties will be much lighter than those employed in the main College Office.* That should have been a blessing. With no Praelector or Dean in the Fellowship, the traditional duties of Senior College members were spread unevenly – and it was the admin staff who shouldered most of the burden. She

herself was employed to provide secretarial support to the Bursar, handle incoming calls and the filing.

That soon changed. Over the following weeks it became clear to her just how much work she was expected to do. The Bursar was hardly ever in the office, but each morning an email would be waiting for her, listing her duties for the day. And they weren't just the usual secretarial chores. Invoices were to be queried, spreadsheets updated, cashbooks reconciled. All Souls queried every single invoice it received, holding off payment for as long as possible, finding any excuse to demand a credit note or a full refund. This morning was a classic example, Judith being ordered to withhold payment to a catering supplies firm because of the wrong type of flour delivered to the kitchens – even though it had been the Catering Office who had messed the order up.

It hadn't taken long for Simon Davies to show his true colours. The smiling, friendly gentleman at her interview, the one who had sympathetically listened to her harrowing life story and assured her that she would receive nothing but full support and co-operation from the Fellows and the admin team, was a brutal taskmaster. The workload increased, the deadlines were tighter – and she was expected to stay behind to cope. Last week she'd refused to stay behind to complete a mailshot for the college alumni, the annual invitation to the Founder's Feast. It had brought Davies out in a rage. He'd slammed his coffee mug down on her desk, leant over and shouted in her face.

*Why d'you think you're being paid so well? Did you really think you'd just be doing the odd bit of filing and answering the telephone? For Heaven's sake,*

*woman, if you can't cope you can bloody well leave and let me find someone more capable!*

She shuddered at the memory as she shut the PC down and turned off the monitor. She felt a hard ball rise in her throat, obstructing her breathing. The tears would follow soon. The psychiatrist had told her that she had to give in to them, never suppress them. They were healing tears.

But it was hard. When the tears began she was instantly transported back to the school reception. The same shuddering, wracking cries, the sensation of the world spinning out of control. She was convinced it would happen again, despite the advice the bereavement councillor and God knew how many support groups had given her.

She glanced out of the narrow window, saw the cold full moon rising in the sky. *I could've told him what to do with his bloody job. Why didn't I?*

She took her coat from the hook on the door and pulled it on. The face in the moon sneered at her, as contemptuous and knowing as Davies' had been when he'd laughed in her face.

*Go on, then! Walk out, see if you can find anything better. How long has it been since you've had a full time job, Ms Cox? How many of your job applications and CVs have been binned because of your admittance of mental health problems? Just be grateful this college has given you a chance that no other company would...or ever will!*

The tears rolled freely down her cheeks now. She had come along so well, had made such progress. No one who was unaware of her past illness would

ever have suspected that the strong, forthright personality emanating from the diminutive middle-aged frame was a painfully built construction. Even she had sometimes forgotten. The clinical psychiatrist who regularly assessed her had been impressed by the strength of character. No longer weak and self-effacing, now more confident and prepared to stand her ground, fight her corner...and with a few harsh sentences that strength had evaporated, dissolving in the acid of the Bursar's words.

She sniffed, wiped her tears away with the cuff of her coat. That attack wasn't just uncalled for, it was callous, cruel. Davies had listened with such sympathy and understanding at her interview, shaking his head sadly as she relayed the details of her descent into clinical depression and mental illness after her marriage collapsed. He'd clucked his tongue at the history of Steve Cox and his womanising, angered by the lack of love and respect for the woman who had supported him during his frequent bouts of unemployment with her pittance of a school secretary's wages. The Bursar had been as kind and concerned as the psychiatrist who had charted her inevitable decline towards nervous breakdown.

She had blamed herself in so many ways. And not just for the miscarriage. She had sought solace in food, all too aware of Steve's dwindling regard and physical interest. Cakes, crisps and chocolate created a vicious circle, the weight she put on turning him away from her even more. Her bouts of weeping, her lack of interest in the things she used to enjoy, the increasing self-loathing. Her psychiatrist had pointed out the fact that Steve was the only man she had ever had a serious relationship with, her shyness making her nervous around men

ever since her school days. It was only to be expected that she would feel despair as the only man she had ever loved grew distant. And not just distant. Contemptuous...even hateful. As though he blamed her for the loss of their child.

And then that hateful evening. Parents' evening. Collapsing on the front desk in the school as the hallway filled up with proud and anxious parents. Mothers *and* fathers, husbands *and* wives. Working together for their children. Concerned or optimistic about the future. Anxious or hopeful of their offspring's talents and potential. Families. Mutually respectful. Mutually loving.

The despair had exploded in her like a bursting dam wall. The tears and racking sobs at what she would never have with Steve had broken her, the pain she had bottled up for all those years coming through with a vengeance, a malevolent genie free at last and hellbent on destroying the hated vessel that had imprisoned it for so long. She didn't remember the ambulance arriving, the sedatives, the first night in Fulbourn hospital.

But she remembered the treatment, the confidence building therapy. Painful, slow, but it changed her life. It made her see how she had been her own worst enemy, how she had punished herself for things beyond her control. That had taken time. The support groups had enabled her to come to terms with, if not get over, the miscarriage and in the meantime Steve left, seemingly pleased that her illness had given him an opportunity to leave guilt-free.

All for the best, she told herself again. But always hard at a time when families should be together. Her first Christmas alone.

*Thank you...Judith. And have a Merry Christmas.* That strange, skin headed deliveryman was only one in the college to wish her Merry Christmas. The tears had almost come then. But why burden him with her problems? He seemed to have enough on his own plate without worrying about her. He had looked concerned, though. Sympathetic.

Not a man to get on the wrong side of, though. She smiled at the memory of the stand off between the deliveryman and her boss. The only time she had seen Simon Davies at a loss for words and actually scared. Perhaps it might make the Bursar treat her a little better in the future.

*I should coco,* she thought sadly. She glanced at the printed CV on her desk, the one sent by the recruitment agency, and remembered she had to pass that to Cassell in the kitchens on her way out. Employing the St Neots girl would be his decision. She shuddered. As bad as Davies was, at least she didn't have to work with Cassell. That man gave her the creeps. She hoped that this Jennifer Callaby was made of stronger stuff than she was.

She picked it up, shouldered her bag and switched off the lights. Darkness reclaimed the Bursar's office. Even the moon had disappeared, moving to shine on another dark section of the college.

She made her way down the narrow staircase, her shoes throwing sharp echoes around the silent stone walls. She gripped the banister tightly, her fingernails gouging into the wood. *Damn it, when are they going to replace the lighting in here? This is an accident waiting to happen...*

She froze suddenly, aware that she was no longer alone. Around the darkened corner of the lower flight of stairs she could hear footsteps steadily approaching. A man's footsteps.

The bulk of the figure was huge and imposing in the darkened stairway, the porch light from the open door leading to Old Court casting shadows that loomed upwards, a dark forewarning of the man approaching.

The Bursar looked upwards towards her, a strange expression on his face. It might have been down to the gloom in the dimly lit stairwell, but Judith Cox instinctively knew it was something else. Simon Davies had something clutched in his right hand, something that rustled and made sharp crinkling noises.

She took a sudden step backwards as he advanced and raised the thing towards her. Her mouth opened. The CV dropped from her hand, landing in a flurry of paper on the stone steps as the scream left her lips.

Judith Cox stared dully at the cellophane wrapped package the Bursar was holding up to her. She almost laughed. The forthright thrust, the stabbing motion Davies had made had almost made her scream and the Bursar looked just as startled as she felt. Only now could she see that the bouquet of flowers wasn't a weapon.

He lowered his eyes and swallowed. And she could see then that it wasn't just her reaction that had made him so ill at ease. This was a man who was not used to giving flowers to a woman, or perhaps any demonstration of affection. She couldn't recall him ever saying he was married. Neither had she ever noticed a ring on his finger.

“I’m sorry Ms Cox...Judith. I didn’t mean to frighten you like that. But I won’t be here tomorrow, so I knew this was the only time I would be able to speak to you before...” His words trailed off. His eyes met hers and she saw genuine concern in them. And something else, something she had never seen from Steve.

Guilt and shame.

“I’ve thought a lot about the things I said to you today. They were terrible things, words that should never have been said.” He gestured again with the flowers, the cellophane crinkling as he offered them to her. More slowly this time. “Not much of an apology, but...”

She took the gift with still shaking hands and inspected them. She still felt on edge, her heart racing. One eye on the flowers, one on the Bursar.

Roses and chrysanthemums. A festive, winter collection. Nothing extravagant but that didn’t matter. The gesture was something.

Davies straightened himself and let out a deep breath.

“I feel awkward talking to you in the dark like this.” A weak smile. “Shall we go into the office?”

She nodded and stepped aside to allow him to lead the way.

In the office he sat down in his swivel chair and gestured for her to take the seat opposite. She placed the bouquet on her own desk, next to Callaby’s CV.

He sat hunched over the desk, hands cradled, eyes still reluctant to meet hers fully. Finally he looked up, fiddling with the knot of his tie.



“Flowers don’t say enough, Judith. And I’m not sure words will be enough either. I can only start with a full and sincere apology. I’m really, really sorry Judith.”

She said nothing.

Davies rubbed his eyes. She saw now how red they were, how pale he looked. He was not sleeping well – if at all.

“I’ve been under a lot of strain the past few weeks.” He attempted a smile, and now she saw his Tudor beard had flecks of grey that she hadn’t noticed previously. “I know you feel that I’ve left you to take care of all my duties, but believe me I’m doing more work than you think. And it’s taking its toll on me.

“I’m not excusing myself. I just hope you’ll accept that my behaviour and my treatment of you has been...out of character. You’re an excellent worker, Judith. I hope you don’t feel the urge to move on, find alternative employment.”

“How could I?” she replied dryly. “What with all my CVs and applications being binned by other companies reluctant to give me the generous chance that the college has. Your words, Bursar.”

He winced at her response. “I’m dreadfully sorry. I cannot apologise enough. We have sincerely undervalued you, Judith. That will change, I assure you. As soon as my immediate tasks are finished I will ensure that the College Council completely reviews your contract. A substantial salary increase, a lessening of the workload...I’m not making false promises, nor am I stringing you along. I’m asking you to bear with us through a very difficult time.”

Judith narrowed her eyes. She'd never imagined that the day would end like this. He seemed sincere and genuinely apologetic. And yet...

*Why the sudden turnaround? Why's he so anxious for me to stay?*

"Is there something else you want to tell me, Mr Davies?"

He sighed and glanced at the bouquet resting on her desk. "This is a difficult time for All Souls, Judith. The first anniversary of that terrible night...it's cast a pall over the Feast. Nerves are frayed, particularly those of us who were there that night. And it made us realise the common misconceptions society has about madn – mental illness."

She sat back in the chair, arms folding. *Yes, this is the real reason.* No longer afraid of her boss, the self-built strength, the forthright personality she had constructed for herself after the breakdown, was returning. She glowered at him and he lowered his gaze, staring at the toner cartridge on his desk. He fiddled with the Granta Office Supplies label as he spoke.

"We have to show an example. All Souls has been the centre of one...unbalanced individual's actions, and the media has been quick to condemn, to label unthinkingly. But I've been thinking..." he looked up. "Since you've been with us, Judith, have you seen or heard anything unusual?"

*Oh, for God's sake.* "Let me guess," she said, tight lipped. "Are you asking if I have seen the visions that Franklin's son said he'd seen? Heard the whispers that told him to burn the Great Hall? Are you implying that just because I spent some time inside a mental hospital that I'm as insane as he is – as he *still* is?"

Davies shook his head frantically, eyes bulging. "No Judith, that's not – "

“Let’s get one thing clear.” She stood up suddenly, her diminutive frame for once filling the room, making the Bursar’s hefty frame seem small and insignificant as he cowered from her. “I suffered from clinical depression which led to a nervous breakdown. It is *totally* different to what Jason Franklin is afflicted with. I never had ghostly visions, heard strange voices telling me to destroy things. What I went through could happen to anyone. No-one thinks it’ll happen to them until it does.” Fluorescent light reflected off her half moon glasses as she moved her head closer to his. She could see now just how tired and drawn his eyes were. “I’m glad you feel guilty about your earlier comments, but I still find it sad that you think all mental illness are one and the same. But that’s your problem - ”

A thought struck her, cutting her off in mid sentence. Tired, drawn eyes – but also fearful. And not just fear of her anger. She knew now why Simon Davies had been losing sleep.

“My God. You’ve seen something, haven’t you?”

The Bursar gave a weary nod. “Two nights ago, when I left the Master’s Lodge. Passing the walls of the chapel, I heard...whisperings.”

“Whisperings.”

“Judith, there was no one around. I was on my own, and yet I heard voices. Horrible voices, saying terrible, evil things. I was scared, terrified. And...” he closed his eyes, rubbed the stubble above the bearded jawline in a despairing fashion. “They were voices I knew. People I – I had known.”

“*Had* known,” she repeated hollowly, all anger evaporating from her as what he was implying hit home. Voices of the dead. “What were they saying?”

He gave a muffled sob. His lips parted, his index fingernail poking a gap in his teeth to stifle any more cries. Finally he took his hand away and replied.

“Things I can’t possibly repeat. Just thinking about them now makes me want to scream. These...voices were describing horrific acts of violence, told of people screaming in agony.” He looked up at her with haunted eyes. “Screaming in agony long after they had left their bodies and the thing that was destroying them.”

The walls and ceiling of the Bursar’s office were no longer conspiring to close in and crush Judith Cox. They were moving far away. Instead the floor was threatening to take her. She grabbed the armrest of the chair, pulling it towards her. She sank into it gratefully.

“And you...have you told anyone?”

Davies shook his head. “I haven’t told a soul. Except you.”

Judith took a deep breath. “Worried they’ll think you’re mad, Bursar? Far better to ask if someone with a proven track record of loopiness has experienced it.” She regretted the harsh words instantly. The man was clearly frightened, disturbed and doubting his own sanity. He needed a friend.

Judith knew all too well how he felt.

“Mr Davies, I’ve seen nothing out of the ordinary. Don’t forget, I only see the porter’s lodge, this room and the car park. My diet keeps me from the buttery.” She patted her slowly slimming stomach. “I wish it didn’t, the food there

smells wonderful. But I think it's a worthy sacrifice..." Self-esteem was a lot easier to regain when you had weight under control, she felt. "You said you were working too hard, Mr Davies. And with the anniversary, the Feast approaching...is it possible that the events have been playing on an overtired mind? It must be easy to think you're hearing voices, especially after what happened to young Franklin and the attention it received."

"Auto suggestion. Perhaps. But it felt so real, so concrete..."

She didn't know what to say. She turned to her desk and picked up the bouquet. She pulled it towards her, hugging it.

Davies saw the gesture and smiled sadly. "I think you'll need to put those in water pretty soon." He saw the CV, revealed now the flowers had been lifted.

"That's from the St Neots girl, yes?" he stood up slowly, visibly forcing himself to be professional, in control once more. "I have some more work to be doing here, so I'll take that to Mr Cassell. I know you don't like going near him."

Judith smiled appreciatively. "Thank you, Mr Davies...Simon."

Davies flicked through the two stapled sheets of A4 paper. "Truth to tell, Judith, I don't like going near him either. None of us do. Not a pleasant man at all. But...a master of his craft. Like Franklin, a necessary evil." He frowned at his words, as if a new thought had struck him.

"Pay no attention to me, Judith. Please, think about what we've discussed. I won't be seeing you until the New Year, I believe? Have a Merry Christmas, Judith."

She smiled in appreciation, wished him the same, and stood up. She closed the door behind her and left with the flowers under her arm.

The moon painted the frost bound lawns of the Old Court with cold silver, but as she stared up at it she felt it was no longer mocking her. Now the night was filled with promise and new potential. Two Merry Christmases and her boss confiding in her. Perhaps things could improve for her at last.

She hitched her bag over her shoulder and strode purposefully down the cobbled path towards the porter's lodge, walking quickly to keep warm. The cold was biting, tearing right through her heavy overcoat as though it wasn't there. She shivered, her body shaking and causing the wrapping of the bouquet to rustle.

A flash of white in the corner of her eye made her stop. She turned, stared at the centre of the Court. Next to the barricaded burial pit for tomorrow's boar, the fountain's jet of icy water stopped. She glanced at her watch. Eight o'clock. Strange, the fountain was shut down at nine every night. The white vapour of shimmering droplets hung in the air like a fading spectre before vanishing completely.

There was something else, just behind the fountain. And now the water pump of the fountain had shut down she could see more clearly what was behind it.

There were four of them. Two in front, two behind, four points of a perfect square. Moving slowly and purposefully, the tall slender frames hidden by the

billowing white robes that fluttered and rippled impossibly in the still, breezeless air.

The faces were hidden by heavy hoods of the same material, but by the shape and formation of the fabric she could see that the heads were down turned. Concentrating on the lawn and each measured step they took, mindful of the great weight they carried on their cradled shoulders.

A heavy structure made of thick, dark wood. Some kind of stretcher – it had to be, she told herself, to carry that shrouded figure that lay on top, peaceful and serene in death.

The bag slipped from her shoulder. It wasn't a stretcher. It was a bier.

A funeral procession.

A procession headed right for her. A white clad quartet that seemed unaware of the stone fountain that lay between them and herself. A quartet that passed through the obstacle as though it wasn't even there.

Onwards they came, passing over the lawns and heading for the cobbled pathway on which she stood, immobile, rooted to the spot with astonishment. Five yards separated them. Then four. Three.

Now she could see movement in the shrouded figure they bore to her. The folds of the silken material twitched and ruffled, the object they carried awakening. Or returning to life.

The bearers of the bier halted abruptly, aware of the movement of their cargo. The bodies straightened, towering over her. The heads raised.

As one, they turned inward; the free arms of the two on the left moving upwards and across, pulling the sheet away from the body on the bier. The hoods fell from their faces.

The faces turned back to stare at her, the fleshless mouths each bearing a hideous grin. White, skeletal grins that were luminescent in the cold moonlight. Empty eye sockets that the bright moon couldn't illuminate, pits of utter darkness that stared impossibly into her own eyes.

It wasn't the four skulls that made her scream with horror. It was the figure they were carrying to God knew what final, unhallowed resting place.

The skin of the diminutive, naked figure was pale and waxy in the moonlight. She writhed soundlessly in agony as she clutched the swelling in her belly. Long, sweaty tangles of mousy brown hair snaked obscenely over the edge of the bier as the head thrashed from side to side, uttering screams that could not be heard, only remembered. Judith remembered well.

The swelling in the woman's belly shifted, moving downwards. She arched her body upwards, as if offering herself to the heavens, and the thing within slipped smoothly from the lips of her bared vagina in a glistening array of black fluid and grey tissue. A soft, shapeless lump of ravaged flesh that the woman picked up and held to her, crushing it to her breasts. And now came weeping that was just as soundless as the screaming, but more terrible.

Because there was even more agony in this. The mental and emotional anguish of a life lost before it could be fully created and given to the world, far outweighing the physical agony of an aborted childbirth.



Judith stared at herself on the bier, felt herself going back in time to that terrible day when she had lost her baby and began the slide towards breakdown. The skeletal pallbearers stared sightlessly at her, mocking her with their burden. *Her* burden.

A voice. A gentle but firm grip on her shoulder. She turned slowly, unable to tear her eyes from the grief stricken woman on the bier who was staring back at her with pain an accusation, as if she was blaming Judith for the loss of her child.

Blaming herself...

"It wasn't my fault!" she screamed. "I didn't want it to happen!"

"What's wrong? Wanted what to happen?" The face Judith was screaming into looked at her with concern, the smooth Edinburgh accented voice filling with alarm.

John Franklin tightened his grip on both of her shoulders. She blinked, took in huge gulping breaths of cold night air that ravaged her lungs. She heard a hissing sound, a watery gushing noise that could have been blood pouring from the ravaged foetus. She turned, looked back to where the funeral procession was standing.

The ornamental fountain had come back on. Its cold jet of water was the only moving thing on the lawns.

"Ms Cox, whatever's wrong?"

Judith stared, uncomprehending, into Franklin's eyes. Looked back again at the fountain. Turned and buried her head into the porter's chest.

She felt his muscular arms fold around her, a strong hand stroking her head. "Easy now. Easy, now..."

She stood like that for a long time as the tears wrenched themselves from her, another fountain on the cold and lifeless lawns of the Old Court.

Franklin looked up to the solitary light in the window of the Bursar's office. Davies stared back at him, his face blank and expressionless.