Cthulhushire

The Spectral Guardian

By Stephen J Dutton



Cthulhushire

The Spectral Guardian

By Stephen J Dutton BEng (hons) BSc (hons)

Michael takes Prudence to visit his father's home where he can teach her to use a shotgun properly. While there they are told about a series of local deaths going back many years that they decide to investigate. This leads them to a mysterious ruin that turns out to be protected by something terrible...

Cthulhushire available to download at:
http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm

Copyright notice:
Original characters and story copyright Stephen J Dutton 2024

1.

Michael Lester sat behind the wheel of his Range Rover and watched the woman walking up the pathway on the other side of the road to ring the bell of the house she was approaching. The door was answered by another young woman who then looked towards Michael and waved at him. Smiling he waved back before she disappeared for a moment only to reappear with a bag over her shoulder and dragging a small wheeled suitcase behind her. Closing the door behind her, she then joined the woman who had rung the doorbell as they both walked back along the path and then crossed the road to reach the Range Rover. Glancing back at the house Michael noticed another woman looking out from one of the windows.
“Hi Michael.” the woman who had just come from the house said as she opened the door behind his seat.
“Hi Prudence.” he replied as she loaded her bags into the back seat and pushed them across so that she could climb in herself.
While she was doing this the other woman walked around to the other side of the vehicle and got in through the front passenger door.
“There you go Michael, you can avoid Prudence’s scary housemate.” she said.
“She’s watching us through the upper window now.” Michael commented.
“Really?” the woman replied and she leant over to look. Then when she saw the woman looking out of the house she waved to her.
“Emma don’t, please.” Michael said.
“Trust me, you don’t want Jane getting her claws into him. Especially not now that you’re engaged.” Prudence said from the back seat, “Talking of which, let me see. Michael wouldn’t show it to me before he gave it to you and you didn’t post a picture online.”
Emma then took off the glove she was wearing on her left hand and held it out with the palm downwards. This enabled Prudence to see the diamond ring she wore on her ring finger and she smiled.
“So what do you think?” Emma asked.
“Oh my God I’m so jealous. That is beautiful.” Prudence replied, “Are you sure it’s okay me coming with you this weekend?”
“It’s fine.” Michael replied as he started to drive off, “You need to learn to shoot and the colonel's place is the best place to do it without having people asking awkward questions.”
“You’re not going to be telling your father any of your monster stories are you?” Emma said, looking out of the side window as she spoke.
“He’s bound to ask about my work and I can’t tell him about specific clients.” Michael pointed out and Emma sighed.
“He’ll think you’re crazy.” she said. Then she glanced over her shoulder to the back seat and added, “Do you know much about Mike’s father Prudence?”
“Only that he was a colonel in the army.” Prudence responded.
“Yes and sometimes when you’re talking to him he acts like he still is.” Emma said.
“He’s not that bad Emma.” Michael commented.
“He had your sister’s kids stand in a line at attention to get their Christmas gifts Mike.” Emma reminded him.
“He just wanted them to calm down while he handed them out.” Michael said.
“I just don’t think he’s the sort of man who wants to hear about lizard people, magical dogs or walking trees.” Emma said.
“Trust me, those are nothing compared to some of the things in the letters my editor has been passing on to me.” Prudence said, referring to her temporary position with the local Wellslaw newspaper, investigating the strange events that local residents claimed to have witnessed.
“Perhaps you shouldn’t talk about getting letters from crazy people either.” Emma added, “Remember that you’re asking this man to lend you a shotgun.”

The drive from Wellslaw to the home of Michael’s father in the countryside close to the nearby town of Makesfield took just under an hour along a variety of largely narrow and winding roads and when Michael turned into the driveway Prudence stared out of the window at the building. The house was large and obviously old but well maintained. There was a separate garage but this appeared to be of more modern construction and as well as whatever vehicles were inside this building there was another car parked on the gravelled area directly in front of the main house.
“Looks like your sister is here.” Emma said when she saw the car and Michael nodded.
“I told her that we’d be visiting and I think she wanted to see us.” he replied before he brought the Range Rover to a halt behind the other car. Then as he, Prudence and Emma were getting out of the car the front door to the house opened and a pair of figures emerged. One of them was a blond woman who looked a

similar age to Michael while the other was a much older man. Significantly both of them bore a strong resemblance to Michael.
“Hi dad. Hi Alice.” he said.
“Michael it’s good to see you,” his father responded, smiling and then turning towards Emma, “and of course my future daughter in law.” he added.
“I suppose now I get to call you dad.” Emma replied, walking up to Michael’s father and the pair embraced briefly, “Hi Alice.” she added before they too embraced for a moment.
“Emma, congratulations.” Alice said.
“You must be Prudence.” Michael’s father said, walking towards the Range Rover where Prudence was taking her bags from the back seat while Michael unloaded his from the boot.
“Colonel Lester.” Prudence replied and she held out her hand.
“Oh please young lady, call me Robert. I only expected my subordinates in the army to call me colonel.” Michael’s father told her.
“Only your subordinates? I seem to remember having to call you colonel a few times.” Michael commented.
“Same here.” Alice added.
“That was just when you misbehaved.” Robert said.
“Then I’ll remember to be on my best behaviour.” Prudence said and Robert smiled again.
“Come on inside. Michael can bring the bags.” he said and as he turned around Michael glared at him. Robert then led the three women into the house while Michael stared to pick up the various bags he, Prudence and Emma had brought with them. These were largely small but the wheels on the suitcases were of limited use on the gravel surface so Michael still picked these up to get them into the house, leaving them in the hallway while he returned to the car to collect two other bags that were not like the others. Each of these was several feet long, narrow and tapered and with slings so he could carry them over his shoulders as he walked back into the house, locking the Range Rover by remote control.

“This house is as wonderful inside as out.” Prudence said when she was shown into the large living room.
“Thank you. I was fortunate enough to inherit it from my father who made some very wise investments.” Robert replied, “Now can I offer you ladies something to drink with your lunch? Non-alcoholic of course since we’ll be handling shotguns this afternoon.”
“Tea if you have it please.” Prudence replied.
“Well that depends on what sort of tea you’d like.” Robert said.
“Oh my housemate makes this stuff that tastes a bit like raspberries. Do you have something like that?” Prudence said.
“He has whatever they put in supermarket own brand tea bags.” Alice said.
“The area may have outstanding views but the opportunity to buy exotic food and drink is somewhat limited.” Robert added.
“Then any tea will be fine thank you.” Prudence said.
“Same here thanks.” Emma added.
“Very good, the kettle is already boiling so I’ll go and pour us a pot.” Robert said before he turned to leave the room.
“So how long have you been working with my brother Prudence?” Alice asked as she sat down.
“Oh a few months.” Prudence answered.
“And do you like it?” Alice said.
“I’ve got to admit that it’s not quite what I was expecting but I’d be lying if I didn’t say that some of the cases have been unbelievable.” Prudence said.
“You can say that again. I don’t believe half of what Mike’s told me.” Emma commented before Robert returned with a tray on which sat a teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl and several cups.
“Here we go. Help yourselves. Once Michael is done with your luggage we can have lunch.” he said, setting the tray down on the table.
“Prudence was just telling us about working with Michael.” Alice said, reaching out for one of the cups.
“Ah yes, private investigation. An unusual career choice I thought, especially when he showed so much promise in the army. Even if he did have the occasional problem with being given orders.”
“Yes, he told me he didn’t like carrying out the orders of politicians.” Prudence said.
“Ignoring orders because you don’t like the person giving them is not a luxury available in the military.” Robert said, “So I know why Michael became a private investigator. What made you become his assistant?”
“A lack of money. I trained as a journalist but couldn’t find a job in that area so I started applying for whatever jobs were available and I saw an ad from Michael. I applied and he took me on right away. A woman asked us to find out what her husband was up to and we found out he was actually a-” Prudence began before she noticed Emma suddenly glaring at her. Emma had heard the tale of how the woman’s husband had already been dead, killed by a reptile that had then taken on his appearance and life but had dismissed it utterly, “-a

really nasty person. He ran off when we confronted him." Prudence continued, omitting any mention of being held at gunpoint by a lizard person, "I have managed to get some work with the local paper as well though."
"Oh really? What do you do?" Robert asked.
"I have an occasional column that follows up letters the editor gets that would otherwise be ignored." Prudence told him, again omitting the exact nature of the letters
"Dad do you want these putting in the cabinet?" Michael said as he appeared in the doorway with the two shotgun cases in his hands.
"For now yes. I'll come and unlock it for you and then we can bring lunch in." Robert replied.
"I hope you didn't go to too much bother." Emma said.
"Oh Alice and I just made some sandwiches and such. What we don't eat now we'll take with us." Robert said.
"Will you be joining us as well Alice?" Emma added, looking at Michael's sister but she shook her head.
"No, I need to be going after lunch. Besides I've never been into the whole shooting thing much myself." she replied.
"Really?" Prudence commented "I'm excited to try it."

2.

A wooden post about a metre tall was hammered into the ground by Michael in the field where the group was to carry out their shoot and Robert then balanced one of the clay discs to be used as targets on top of it. There had been more than enough room in the Range Rover for Michael, his father, Prudence and Emma along with all of the equipment and four shotguns so Michael picked one of the weapons up, opened it to show that it was unloaded and handed it to Prudence.
“There you go Prudence.” he said as he and Michael made their way back to where she and Emma stood by the Range Rover, “We’ll let you try shooting a few like that before we expect you to hit a moving target.”
“Thanks. So which gun will I be using?” Prudence responded and she looked at the four long cases in the back of the Range Rover.
“This one. It used to belong to my late wife so it hasn’t been fired in a while but I’ve made sure that it’s good to go.” Robert said as he opened one of the cases and slid the shotgun it contained from inside. Then he opened the breech and looked inside before he handed it to Emma, “Emma my dear could you go through the basics on handling and firing a gun? Let her fire it a couple of times before seeing if she can hit the clay. Michael and I will be setting up the trap.”
“Sure.” Emma replied as she took the gun from Robert and while she led Prudence away from the car he and Michael unloaded the trap and a box of clays.
The trap and clays were also carried a short distance from the Range Rover until Robert came to a halt.
“This should do.” he said as he put down the box of clays and Michael set down the trap before he began to unfold it to get it set up.
“It looks like a good day for a shoot. Very clear.” he said, unfolding the legs of the trap.
“Yes very clear. Certainly a lot clearer than your motivation.” Robert said softly and Michael frowned.
“My motivation for what? For marrying Emma? Dad we’ve been seeing one another for a while now and you’ve never said a thing before.” he replied, also keeping his voice low.
“No, not Emma. This Prudence.” Robert said.
“What about her? She’s been a useful assistant.”
“I’m sure she is. She seems intelligent as well as charming, but why bring her here? Oh I know you both said that she just wants to try clay pigeon shooting but it all seems very rushed. You know I have that twenty bore shotgun that would be much more comfortable for her to use on a first go but you insisted that she start right away on a twelve bore. Why are you in such a hurry for her to learn to use a weapon?” Robert said.
“I jut thought it might be useful. I’ve noticed an increase in the number of cases involving-” Michael began.
“Lizard people?” Robert interrupted and Michael’s eyes widened.
“Where did you hear about that?” he asked.
“You told Alice and she mentioned it to me. She thought you were joking but she did mention it to me.” Robert explained and Michael stared at him for a few moments.
“Are you seriously saying that you believe in the idea of lizard people?” he said.
“Are you saying that you think you’ve really seen one here in England?” Robert responded and Michael frowned when he noticed the qualifying part of his father’s question.
“In England? What’s special about England?” he said.
“Perhaps we should wait until after we’re done here to discuss this Michael. If nothing else I’d rather be able to sit down while we talk about monsters.” Robert said.
“Ear defenders on. We’re firing.” Emma then called out and both Michael and Robert put on the ear defenders they were both carrying with them. Shortly after this there was the sound of a shotgun discharging as Prudence fired her gun for the first time and this was followed by a squeal. Michael was facing directly away from where Prudence and Emma stood and he flinched.
“The recoil just knocked Prudence over didn’t it?” he said and his father nodded.
“Perhaps a twenty bore would have been a better start.” he replied.

Robert maintained a small study in his home and when the group returned from their afternoon’s shooting he gathered them in this room once the guns and equipment had been properly packed away. This was the only room in the house that displayed any reminders of Robert’s time in the army with numerous objects mounted on the walls and shelves. Many of these were just photographs taken on various deployments but there was also a flag that bore the colours of his regiment and a number of objects that looked to have been taken as souvenirs from a variety of places.
“Tell me about this lizard person you saw.” Robert said as he sat down behind his desk.
“Seriously? You believe they really saw a lizard person?” Emma responded, “It was just a guy in a mask. Isn’t that what the police said?”

“Actually we saw more than one.” Prudence said.
“Most of them were smaller and appeared more primitive. I think they are native to the area whereas the larger one came from Australia.” Michael added and Emma groaned.
“I can’t believe I’m hearing this again.” Emma said.
“Tell me, was this creature seen near any graveyards?” Robert asked.
“Not that we saw. It seemed more interested in contacting the primitive creatures living in the woods near Elder Edge and collecting exotic objects.” Michael answered.
“Why did you ask if it went near a graveyard?” Prudence added.
“Not long after I was promoted to captain I was posted to Kenya to help train their army. While we were operating in a remote area we were approached the leaders of a local village who said someone had been desecrating their graveyard and taking the bodies. They asked for our help in finding out who was responsible. It seemed like it was a good way to train the Kenyans in protecting an area so we agreed. We deployed where we could watch the graveyard and waited to see who would come along to steal any more bodies.” Robert explained.
“Are you saying that a lizard person was grave robbing?” Emma said.
“No the grave robbing we witnessed was carried out by human beings, or at least they had been once. When we revealed our presence to challenge them we discovered that the bodies were being dug up by the reanimated bodies of people whose graves had already been opened. The lizard man was the one controlling them. It managed to escape but a local elder who knew about these things had created something he said could destroy the reanimated corpses. He called it a fetch stick.” Robert said and he looked at a wall where what looked like a short spear had been mounted.
“That’s it?” Michael said, “I always just thought it was something you bought from some market stall.”
“Yes, I was given it in gratitude for helping them.” Robert said.
“What did the army have to say about all of this?” Emma asked and Robert smiled.
“Emma do you really think anyone was going to tell them what we really saw?” he said, “The lizard person was able to get away, using the reanimated corpses to slow us down so we didn’t have any proof of anything out of the ordinary. We just told our superiors that we’d encountered a group of grave robbers who fled when we intervened. We got a dressing down for getting involved in something that wasn’t really any of our business but that was it. The spear, or fetch stick, whatever you want to call it was just regarded as a souvenir and the army didn’t care. After that I just put the whole incident out of my mind, right up until Alice told me that you said you’d seen something similar. I thought that may have been why you brought Prudence here with you this weekend, to investigate the woods.”
“The woods?” Michael commented.
“You came here on one of your monster hunts?” Emma added.
“No, I don’t know anything about the woods around here.” Michael told her and then both he and Prudence looked at his father.
“What’s so special about the woods around here?” Prudence said.
“Some people say that they’re haunted by something. A number of people over the years have been reporting seeing an apparition or creature in them and there have been a few deaths.” Robert said.
“What sort of deaths?” Michael asked as he and Prudence exchanged glances again, “We’re not the police so we can’t really investigate serious crimes.”
“As far as I know almost all of them have been considered accidents or suicides.” Robert replied.
“Almost?” Prudence commented.
“At least one news report mentioned an animal attack and since there aren’t any wild animals in Britain that will attack and maul a human being to death it would have to have been a large domestic dog. I suppose the police would have been trying to find the owner of a dog that could have killed someone.” Robert said.
“It certainly sounds interesting. What do you think Prudence?” Michael said.
“Wait a minute Mike, are you seriously considering going out into the woods where people have been killed because of some ghost story?” Emma asked.
“I doubt the editor of the Wellslaw paper would accept a column about it but now I know about these stories I have to know what’s behind them.” Prudence replied and Michael smiled.
“Same here. If it is connected to some of the things we’ve seen around Wellslaw then every bit of knowledge could come in useful.” he said. Then he looked at Emma and added, “Prudence and I could come back another time to-”
“No it’s fine Mike.” Emma interrupted with a sigh, “If you want to waste your time wandering around the woods then who am I to argue. There is one condition though.”
“Name it.” Michael said.
“I’m coming with you. You obviously need someone around to show you how there’s nothing in these monster stories of yours.” Emma told him.
“So when do we go?” Prudence asked and Michel looked out through the window of the study.

“Well it looks like it’s getting dark so I don’t think it’s a good idea to go right away. The last time we went wandering around in the woods at night we were attacked by a hoard of lizard people after all. I think going in daylight would be safer.”
“Yes I wouldn’t want to ignore the locals’ warning about staying on the road and watching out for the moon.” Emma commented sarcastically.
“Perhaps I should see what I can find out about the deaths.” Prudence suggested and Michael nodded.
“Good idea.” he replied.
“I may be able to help with that.” Robert said, “I didn’t consider any of the stories significant when I saw them in the paper so I didn’t keep them, but I can tell you where I saw the reports.”
“Thanks. That will speed things up.” Prudence said, “Do you have Wi-Fi that I could connect to?”

Fetching her laptop computer from the bedroom she had been allotted, Prudence set it up on the living room table and turned it on.
“I have that map.” Robert said as he entered the room with a large map that he had already partially unfolded.
“Thanks dad.” Michael replied and Robert sat down beside him and placed the map on the table, sliding it so that it did not cover Prudence’s keyboard.
The map was an ordinary Ordnance Survey map of the area around the house and it showed a large wooded area nearby. There were also several footpaths marked that passed through it.
“This is the area where the deaths happened.” Robert said, moving his finger in a rough circle.
“I think I’ve found the list of incidents.” Prudence added and then she frowned.
“What’s wrong?” Michael asked.
“There are a lot of results here.” she answered.
“I must have heard of at least a dozen incidents over the years.” Robert said but Prudence shook her head.
“No, there are more than that. Way more. My search has come back with results from more places than just the local paper.” she said.
“So someone else has been keeping track of these events?” Michael commented.
“It’s the internet Mike. People make pages for everything.” Emma said from where she sat leaning back in a chair with a glass of wine in her hand and watching the others carrying out their research.
“There’s a page here that has a summary that says these woods have been the centre of strange events and deaths going back to the mid sixteen hundreds.” Prudence said.
“That’s around the time of the Civil War.” Robert pointed out.
“Do you think that’s significant?” Prudence said.
“It could be. “Michael replied.
“From what I know there were a number of battles in the county.” Robert added.
“Oh now this is interesting.” Prudence added, “There was a witch.”
“Like Harriet?” Michael asked as Prudence followed the link provided to details of the witch. The Harriet he meant was a pagan witch who lived close to Wellslaw and had a significant library of occult material.
“Not unless Harriet has been holding out on us.” Prudence answered, “According to this she was accused of affecting local crops as well as the weather. Oh she was also supposed to talk to rats. Harriet’s never mentioned being able to do that.”
“So you don’t think that some local farmer just decided to blame some poor old woman for the fact that his crop failed?” Emma said.
“It’s possible.” Michael replied.
“Well all of the strange reports began after the witch disappeared.” Prudence said.
“Disappeared?” Robert commented and Prudence nodded.
“Yes. It says here that a group went to arrest her but found her cottage empty. A search was organised but no sign of her was ever found.” she said.
“Does it give a name?” Michael said.
“Hang on.” Prudence said and she scrolled through the page of text she was looking at until she found what he wanted, “Yes, there’s a name. Mary Anne Stone. Born sixteen twenty-two and disappeared in sixteen fifty-four.”
“Hardly an old hag then.” Emma said.
“No, far from it.” Michael said as he took his mobile phone from his pocket.
“Who are you going to call?” Robert asked.
“Ghostbusters?” Emma commented then when Michael glared at her for a moment she added, “Sorry, go ahead.”
“I’m going to give Harriet a ring. Maybe she’ll have something about this Mary Anne Stone in her library. Witches must talk to one another so maybe there was someone back then who knew her and wrote something about her.” Michael said. He had Harriet’s number stored in his phone and he quickly pressed the dial option before switching on the speaker and setting the phone down on the table.

“Hello Michael?” Harriet’s voice said when she answered.
“Harriet we’ve come across a bit of a mystery and we were thinking you may be able to help.” Michael told her.
“Go on, I’ll see what I can do.” Harriet responded and Michael looked at Prudence.
“Harriet we’ve found a reference to a woman from the Makesfield area who was accused of being a witch in the seventeenth century called Mary Anne Stone. She disappeared in sixteen fifty-four right when she was about to be arrested. Do you know anything about her?” Prudence said.
“Well sixteen fifty-four is before my time but I can look the name up. I have diaries of witches going back further than that. How soon do you need the information?” Harriet said.
“We’re planning on investigating the woods where she was supposed to live tomorrow morning.” Michael said, “We could do with having any information before then.”
“Okay I’ll see what I can do but I’m not promising anything.” Harriet replied.
“Thanks Harriet, your help is appreciated. Bye.” Michael said before he hung up, “Okay so that’s that covered. What about all the events that are the reason for the area’s reputation?”
“This website looks pretty good, it looks like it’s got links to detailed articles for everything in the list.” Prudence replied as she returned to the summary page of the website she had been looking at and she clicked on the first of the links, “Yes, this gives a full description.” she added, nodding.
“So what does it say?” Robert asked.
“It mentions someone trying to move into the witch’s home after she vanished.” Prudence answered.
“Seems normal enough. If there was home that no-one was living in then sooner or later someone would try to take it for themselves.” Emma commented.
“It says here they claimed that the place was haunted by the devil.” Prudence added.
“Well that’s more unusual.” Michael said and he looked at Emma before adding, “Would your bank give a mortgage for a house that was possessed by the devil?”
“If I thought an applicant was claiming to be visited by the devil I wouldn’t approve them for an overdraft, let alone a mortgage.” she responded.
“The locals must have taken the claims seriously because it says here that they attempted an exorcism.” Prudence said as she read on but then she frowned, “Wow.” she added.
“What happened Prudence?” Michael said.
“There was a brief storm during the exorcism. The quote here says ‘great gusts of wind assailed the priest and the candles that had been lit were upturned so that they caused a blaze that burned the cottage to the ground’.” Prudence said, reading directly from the website.
“So the weather was bad and there was an accident. That doesn’t sound very paranormal to me.” Emma said.
“That’s just the start though.” Prudence said as she returned to the index page and started to look down the list that had very brief descriptions of every strange event and sighting that was said to have taken place in the area, “How about a man mauled by what was believed to be a bear a few years after the cottage burned down?”
Emma shrugged.
“Maybe he was attacked by an animal.” she suggested.
“Bears had been extinct in the wild in Britain for hundreds of years by that time Emma.” Robert pointed out.
“Then we have more sightings of what have been described as ghosts, demons or the devil again.” Prudence continued.
“All where that cottage was?” Michael asked.
“Hold on, the summary doesn’t say.” Prudence responded and she started to check the individual reports, “No, there are maps that show the sightings taking place in various locations.” she added.
“Perhaps it would help to mark them on this map.” Robert said and he rotated the Ordnance Survey map so that it was the right way up to Prudence.
“Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to ruin it.” she replied.
“It’s just a map. I can get another.” Robert told her and she smiled as he handed her a pencil.
“Thanks.” she said.
Prudence then began to mark crosses on the map, copying their locations from the information presented on the website and although these were spread out over a number of locations it soon became apparent that they were confined to a relatively small area to the south of the forest.
“All those look to be within a couple of miles of one another.” Robert commented, “That can’t be a coincidence.”
“What about the witch’s cottage? Where was that?” Michael added.
Prudence returned to the page about the disappearance of Mary Anne Stone and the attempted exorcism and checked the map that accompanied the article. Instead of immediately marking the location of the cottage on the map though she looked at Michael and smiled.

“You’re going to love this.” she said before she marked the cross at the centre of the cluster already marked on the map.
“So every one of these incidents happened within about a mile of where the witch used to live.” Michael said and he smiled back at Prudence, “I think we just found a good starting point for our search tomorrow.”

3.

When Michael and Emma got into bed they slid towards one another.
“Are you sure you’re okay with heading out into the woods tomorrow?” Michael asked.
“Yes Mike I’m fine. Seriously.” Emma replied, “You need me there.”
“Prudence and I have checked out things like this before. We know what we’re doing.” Michael said.
“That’s exactly why you need me there with you Mike. You and Prudence are so wrapped up in these stories that you can’t see what’s really going on.” Emma said and he smiled.
“And what if we can prove to you that everything we’ve been saying is true Emma? That there is more going on in the world than can be explained?” he said.
“Mike there is no way that’s going to happen.” Emma responded.
“Just bear with me for a moment Emma. What if you see something that you can’t explain, will you admit to it?” Michael said and Emma sighed.
“Okay I suppose if I saw something that really couldn’t be explained then I’d have to admit that the supernatural exists.” she said and then a moment later she added, “But don’t think I’m letting you invite lizard people to our wedding. It’s homo sapiens only. Agreed?”
“Agreed.” Michael responded and as he leaned in to kiss Emma he reached out with one arm to turn out the light that was positioned beside the bed.

Although the nearest point of the Makesfield Forest was just a short walk from Robert’s house, this was the western edge and the strange sightings and events had all taken place within a relatively localised area to the south so Michael drove Prudence and Emma there in the Range Rover.
“Here we go.” he said as he pulled over and brought the car to a stop.
“That’s interesting.” Prudence commented as she looked ahead and saw a single standing stone set into the ground just off the road. This stone was obviously not a natural feature of the landscape, it had been carved into a regular shape with tall, rectangular sides and a flat, square top.
“It’s just a stone. It must have been there hundreds of years. If there was anything unnatural about it don’t you think someone would have noticed it by now?” Emma said.
“It still can’t hurt to take a look at it.” Michael replied as he opened the car door and got out.
Prudence and Emma both got out of the Range Rover as well and together the three of them walked towards the stone. As they got closer they saw that each side of the stone featured a carving of a cross and both Michael and Prudence began to inspect these closely.
“So do you see anything unusual about them?” Emma asked, “Because to me they look like pretty ordinary crucifixes to me.”
“They do to me as well.” Michael agreed.
“Perhaps someone put it here to ward off whatever’s in the forest.” Prudence suggested.
“Or maybe not.” Michael said as he glanced down at where the stone met the ground and he pressed down on the grass right by the base of the stone before crouching down to take a closer look at it.
“What is it?” Prudence asked.
“I think there are more markings down here but there’s too much dirt to make them out properly. I need to get a better look.” Michael replied and he got up and headed back to the Range Rover. Walking around behind the vehicle he opened the boot and grabbed hold of one of the holdalls it held. Opening this as well he took out a pouch that held a compact folding shovel and after closing the boot again he took this back to the standing stone.
“Mike what are you doing?” Emma said when he crouched down again and began to use the shovel to scrape at the ground beside the stone.
“Clearing some of the dirt that’s built up. Keep watch, I don’t want anyone to accuse me of trying to dig up the stone.” Michael replied.
“Oh of course not.” Emma muttered.
As he dug away at the base of the stone Michael saw that there were indeed a number of small carvings set into it and he set the shovel down to take out his phone so that he could photograph some of them.
“Take a look at this.” he said as he stood up again and Prudence moved beside him to look at the screen of his phone while he zoomed in on one of the carvings in particular, “Look familiar to you?”
“The Elder Sign.” Prudence said, nodding her head when she saw the five pointed star design of the carving.
“The what sign?” Emma asked.
“The Elder Sign, it’s some sort of symbol that can be used to disrupt the power of supernatural creatures or spells.” Michael said and then he looked around before he added, “Though I’m not sure what good it would do down there. Other than make the stone itself useless for spell casting or rituals.”

“Spell casting or rituals?” Emma repeated.
“We used one to destroy an altar.” Prudence told her.
All of a sudden Michael’s phone began to ring and Harriet’s name appeared on the screen.
“Hello Harriet.” he said, switching the phone to speaker mode as he answered.
“Michael I’ve been looking for information on that witch you asked about.” Harriet told him.
“Did you find anything?” Michael asked.
“I think so.” Harriet answered, “I found a letter written from another witch living in the area to another member of her coven. It was a warning about someone she believed was practising the black arts. Unfortunately there’s no date on the letter so I can’t tell exactly when it was written but it gives the name of Mary Stone and it says that she lived in the woods near Makesfield. Does that sound like the woman you’re interested in?”
“Yes it does.” Michael said, “Is there any mention of what happened to her?”
“No, there’s just the one letter and from the way it’s written I’d say that she was very much alive and living openly at the time. If she did just go into hiding then this letter doesn’t mention it.” Harriet said.
“Hi Harriet, it’s Prudence. What about what she was accused of doing? Is there any information about that?” Prudence said.
“Hi Prudence.” Harriet replied, “I’m sorry but all the letter says is that Mary Stone was practising the black arts. That means she must have been doing things that were causing people harm. What’s your interest in her anyway?”
“Mike and Prudence think that she or her ghost has spent the last three hundred and fifty years just hanging around here in the woods and attacking people.” Emma said.
“Who’s that?” Harriet responded and Michael smiled.
“That’s Emma, my fiance. She’s come along to look after us and prove that the supernatural doesn’t exist.” he said.
“In that case when she learns the truth have her drop by my place. She can read up on witches to her heart’s content.” Harriet and Emma frowned as Michael looked at her.
“Harriet I’m sure she’d love that. Thanks for the information.” he said.
“Watch yourself out there Michael. Most magic decays over time but if a spell can last for hundreds of years it must be very powerful and that makes it dangerous.” Harriet warned him.
“Thanks for the warning. We’ll be careful.” Prudence said.
“Yes thanks Harriet. We’ll let you know if we do find anything. Bye.” Michael added.
“Bye Michael.” Harriet responded and then she hung up.
“Mike there is no way I’m wasting my time reading through the library of a witch.” Emma said but Michael continued to smile at her.
“We’ll see.” he said before he turned to Prudence, “So shall we get our gear from the car?” he added and she smiled back at him.
“I thought you’d never ask.” she said.
The two holdalls in the back of the Range Rover held a collection of items that Michael and Prudence could require during their activities as private investigators. Some of these items were mundane things such as a change of clothes and wellington boots but given that they were already dressed for walking through the woods they left these in the holdalls and instead moved on to some of the other items that they contained. Chief among these were a pair of walkie-talkies that Michael took out and after checking the charge on their batteries he handed one to Prudence.
“Thanks.” she said as she took it and clipped it into her pocket.
Both Michael and Prudence then took off their coats before taking a pair of armoured vests from the holdalls. These were surplus police issue body armour that would offer good protection from bladed weapons but were light enough that they would not slow either of the investigators down. There was a certain amount of bulk to the vests though and when Michael and Prudence put their coats back on over them it was possible to see them.
“You don’t think that carrying those will look suspicious?” Emma commented when both Michael and Prudence took large metal bodied torches from their holdalls. She knew that both of them were carrying more compact torches as well but the larger ones made effective clubs in an emergency.
“Don’t worry I’ve got room in this.” Michael replied, reaching for a rucksack that had food and water for the day inside it. He then put the two torches as well as the folded shovel inside this and slung it over one shoulder, “Okay, shall we go? Oh and Emma if anything does happen you keep behind me and Prudence, you’re the only one without any armour.”
“Mike I really don’t think that that is going to be an issue.” Emma said as they set off.
There was a path leading into the forest close by and the trio headed towards this, starting to follow it through the trees.
“Does this lead all the way to this cottage then?” Emma asked and Prudence reached into her pocket to take out a notebook.

“No but I made some notes on how to find what’s left of it after it burned down. There’s a large pond somewhere on the right of this. The remains of the cottage are somewhere on the edge of this.”
“Then I suppose we keep an eye out for a pond.” Michael said.
The path through the forest looked well maintained, with very little debris and the number and type of tracks in the ground suggested that it was well used by both walkers and cyclists. As the trio continued along the path they stepped to one side as a couple of middle aged joggers came heading towards them from the opposite direction and Emma watched as they continued on their way after issuing a brief ‘thank you’.
“Aren’t you going to ask them if they’ve seen any ghosts?” she asked.
“The lack of panic suggests they haven’t.” Michael replied before Prudence came to a sudden halt.
“Look over there.” she said and she pointed off the path through the trees to where sunlight was obviously reflecting off water.
“A pond. Let’s go and check it out shall we?” Michael commented and he and Prudence immediately stepped off the path and began to walk between the trees. On the other hand Emma hesitated and when he realised that she was not following Michael paused and looked around, “Emma what’s wrong?”
“You’re not afraid are you?” Prudence added and Emma frowned.
“Of course not. I just don’t think wandering around off the path is necessarily a good idea.” she said before she started to follow the other two away from the path.
“Well nothing looks out of the ordinary here to me.” Michael said as he looked around again and then he continued on his way towards the pond.
The forest’s trees extended all the way to the edge of the pond, leaving no clearing around the banks when the trio reached it. The water itself was murky and thick with weed. Being a still body of water there was nowhere for any debris to be carried to if it fell into the water and so over time this debris had built up and, if the process was left to continue eventually the pond would disappear as it became entirely filled.
“What’s that smell?” Emma said, raising her hand to cover her nose and mouth.
“Rotting plant material I think.” Michael told her.
“Do you think anything’s living in here?” Prudence asked.
“It’s hard to say. I suppose there could be few fish and I’m sure that it’s a haven for insect larvae and amphibians though I doubt there’s anything especially large.” Michael replied, “Did any of those reports of sightings and attacks mention this pond?”
“Actually, yes.” Prudence said as she took out her notebook in which she had written down some of the details of the various strange events that had taken place in the woods over the centuries. Looking through this she smiled as she found the entry she was looking for, “Here we go. In eighteen oh-six the body of a drowned man was found floating at the edge of the water. He had suffered a blow to his head and it was believed that he was knocked unconscious before falling in and drowning.”
“So a man was attacked and his attacker threw him into the water to try to hide the evidence of his crime.” Emma said.
“There is also an earlier account.” Prudence continued, “In seventeen eighty-one a man described how something tried to pull him into the water. Three other men nearby heard his screams and came to help, at which point whatever it was that was attacking him let him go.”
“Do those reports say exactly where the attacks took place?” Michael added but Prudence shook her head.
“No. The first one only says that the body was found in the pond and the other doesn’t mention where the attack took place either.” Prudence said.
“It’s interesting that whatever tried to drag the man into the water retreated when more people turned up to help. That suggests that we could be safe as long as we stick together.” Michael said.
“That’s great but where do we go from here?” Emma asked.
“We know that the cottage was on the bank of this pond somewhere so I suggest we try circling around until we find it.” Michael said, surveying as much of the ground immediately around the pond as he could but he saw no indications of any structures among the trees.
“So left or right?” Prudence added and Michael immediately pointed to his right.
“That way.” he said.
The trio made their way around the pond cautiously, staying away from the edge. Both Michael and Prudence were wary of anything that may be lurking within the water and Michael took the time to repeatedly check the surface of the pond for any disturbance in the water that would indicate a large creature moving around in it.
“Is it me or is it getting colder?” Prudence asked suddenly and Michael paused to consider the temperature. Although it had not been a particularly warm day when they had set off it had been reasonably mild compared to the previous two days.
“Yes it is.” he replied.
“It’s November. Of course it’s cold.” Emma pointed out.
“Let’s see what the weather reports have to say then.” Michael said, taking out his phone but he quickly saw

that he had no signal in this part of the forest, “I’ve no signal.” he added and Prudence checked her phone as well.
“Same here. No signal.” she said and both of them looked at Emma, who sighed as she took put her phone to check the signal.
“No signal either.” she said, “Obviously this part of the forest doesn’t get reception.”
“There was a mast close to where we parked. I saw it.” Michael pointed out, “We can’t have come so far that we’re out of range. Something else must be blocking the signal.”
“Witchcraft?” Emma asked.
“I wouldn’t know. This may just be a dead spot but I wouldn’t want to rule out anything unusual.” Michael answered and then he began to move again, continuing around the edge of the pond.

4.

The temperature continued to drop as the trio continued walking around the pond and the soon found that they could see their breath in front of their faces as they exhaled.
“It can’t have got this cold so fast.” Prudence said.
“Didn’t you say that Mary Ann Stone was accused of manipulating the weather?” Michael commented and Prudence nodded.
“Yes, affecting the weather and there was also the issue of the sudden strong wind when the exorcism was attempted at her cottage.” she replied.
“So now it’s a dead witch making it cold? Or do you think she’s still alive after three hundred and fifty years?” Emma said.
“The lizard man who took the place of Harold Farrow had survived for millions of years inside his sarcophagus.” Michael said.
“Do you think Mary Anne Stone could have been a lizard person as well?” Prudence suggested.
“There’s no way of knowing but from the way the one who killed and impersonated Harold Farrow spoke he got his sarcophagus from someone who wasn’t part of his civilisation.” Michael said before he suddenly held up his hand for the group to halt.
“What is it?” Prudence asked.
“Look there. There’s something sticking up out of the ground.” Michael responded and he pointed ahead of them to where a small stack of rocks could be seen protruding from the ground. The manner in which these were stacked was far too neat and regular for it to be accidental and the stones had the appearance of a small section of ruined wall.
“Our witch’s cottage perhaps?” Prudence said.
“Well it’s not exactly gingerbread but it’s as good an idea as any.” Michael said and he began to creep closer, looking around the forest for any signs of activity. As he neared the stones he noticed that they were bound together by mortar of some kind, proving that the stones were not a natural formation, “These stones have been fixed together, they’re definitely part of a wall.”
“Burned to the ground.” Prudence said, remembering what she had read about the supposed exorcism that was attempted in the cottage.
It was Emma that first noticed something moving in the undergrowth though and she let out a brief scream that made both Michael and Prudence stop and look around.
“What did you see?” Michael asked.
“Don’t worry Mike it was just a rat. It caught me by surprise.” Emma answered.
“How big?” Michael said and Emma held up her hands about two feet apart.
“That including the tail I think.” she said.
“That is a big rat.” Michael commented.
“Rat? I’ve seen dogs smaller than that.” Prudence added.
“You know I once read somewhere that in theory there is no genetic reason why a rat couldn’t grow to the size of a sheep.” Michael said.
“Oh great. Just what I wanted to hear.” Prudence said, looking around nervously for the rat that Emma said that she had seen. Seeing no signs of movement though she then turned her attention back to the remains of the stone wall and saw that Michael was now standing beside it and examining the ground, “See anything?”
“No.” Michael replied, shaking his head, “So much dirt has built up around this wall that it’s impossible to tell the difference between what was the inside and the outside of the cottage.” then he looked up and added, “What I need is another piece of the- A-ha!”
“What?” Emma said.
“Another piece of wall.” Michael said, easily stepping over what remained of the wall by his feet and walking several paces until he reached a line of stones in the ground that were barely visible among the dirt and vegetation, “Like this.” he said and he turned around, “So if this was one wall of the cottage and that was also a wall then that means I’m now standing where the inside of the cottage once was.”
“Talking of inside is this going to take much longer. It’s getting even colder out here.” Emma said, folding her arms to try and keep warmer, “Not all of us have those bullet proof vests on to help keep us warm.”
“This shouldn’t take long. I just want to get an idea of whether there’s anything left here of interest.” Michael said before all of a sudden the large rat that Emma has seen burst out from the undergrowth and dashed past her feet. As soon as the creature appeared and Emma realised that it was heading for her she took a step backwards. In the process of trying to retreat away from the rat she caught her foot on a root and tripped, falling backwards. She was able to break her fall with her hands but as she did so the rat ran past

and scratched her leg with its claws. Sharp enough to break through the fabric of her jeans, the attack drew blood and Emma gasped.
Michael immediately ran over to where Emma lay and kicked at the rat as it was already scurrying off into the undergrowth again. As the creature fled though Emma noticed that the shape of its head looked wrong, being flat instead of pointed and to her horror it looked around at her just before disappearing under a bush and stared at her with an almost human face.
“Are you okay?” he asked.
“It just stings.” Emma told him, looking down at the wound.
“How bad is it?” Prudence added, looking around for any more signs of the rat.
“It doesn’t look deep but I think we should get it cleaned and dressed. There’s a first aid kit in the car.” Michael replied before he helped Emma back to her feet, “Can you walk?” he asked her and she nodded.
“I think so. Like I said, it only stings.” she answered.
“Then let’s go. Lean on me just in case.” Michael told her and they began to walk back towards the path.

Despite Emma telling Michael that her injury was not serious he continued to support her all the way back to the Range Rover where Emma rested against the side while Michael opened the boot and took out the first aid kit.
“You’d better take a seat while I look at this.” he told her and he opened the front passenger door so that she could sit down on the side of the seat with her legs hanging out of the open door.
“So much for these jeans.” she said as Michael took a pair of scissors from the first aid kit and began to cut the leg of her jeans up to where the rat-like creature had scratched her.
“I think the rat took care of them already.” Prudence commented.
“At least they weren’t new.” Emma added and then she suddenly winced as Michael wiped the wound with antiseptic.
“It barely scratched the skin.” he said, returning to the first aid kit for a dressing, “I think it’ll be fine but we should keep an eye on it just in case it gets infected.”
“I’ll be fine as soon as we’re out of here Mike.” Emma replied and Michael looked her in the face.
“What’s wrong Emma?” he said, “This is just a scratch.”
“Can we just go?” Emma said.
“When you tell me what’s wrong, yes.” Michael told her and she sighed.
“The rat.” she said.
“What about it?” Prudence commented, “Apart from it being huge?”
Emma did not respond for some time and Michael frowned.
“Emma what aren’t you telling me?” he said.
“The rat looked at me Mike and it wasn’t a rat. It was a person.” she said suddenly and Michael and Prudence looked at one another in surprise.
“What do you mean it was a person? I saw it.” Michael said.
“You only saw it from behind Mike. When it turned to look at me I saw its face and it looked human. It wasn’t a rat at all, it was something else. What was it?”
“I’m sorry Emma, I’ve no idea.” Michael said.
“Do you think John would know?” Prudence suggested and Michel nodded.
“Give him a try.” he said and Prudence reached for her mobile phone.
“Oh look, I’ve got a signal here.” she commented as she searched for his number.
John Midland was a retired university professor in Wellslaw who understood a number of ancient languages, including one that the book entitled the Necronomicon that Michael and Prudence had taken from the serpent person they had encountered was written in. They had initially taken it to him just for a translation but since then he had been eagerly researching the mythos that it described.
“Hello Prudence.” John’s voice said as he answered.
“Hi John, I’m afraid I’m ringing for your help again.” Prudence told him.
“Oh don’t worry about that. What can I do for you?” John replied.
“Michael and I are by Makesfield Forest with his fiance Emma. She was just attacked by something that looked like a large rat but it had the face of a human being. Can you tell us anything about it?” Prudence said.
“Not off the top of my head but leave it with me. I’ll see what I can find for you.” John said.
“Okay I’ll speak to you later.” Prudence said and then she hung up, “He’s going to see what he can find.” she added, looking at Michael and Emma.
“Then we should be going. We’ll get Emma back to my dad’s and check the wound again.” Michael replied.

About half way through the drive back to Robert’s house there was the sound of the song ‘Dear Prudence’ by The Beatles as Prudence’s phone began to ring and she saw John Midland’s name on the screen.

“It’s John.” she said before answering the phone, turning on the speaker so Michael and Emma could both here as well, “Hi John.” she said in greeting.
“Prudence I’ve been looking through the Necronomicon and the notes from Harriet’s library and I think I’ve found something.” John said.
“That’s great.” Prudence replied, “So what was that thing?”
“As far as I can tell they are just called ‘rat-things’. They are created through some sort of magic from a fresh corpse. The spell transfers the person’s spirit or soul into the body of a rat-thing. The creature then acts as a servant of some kind.” John explained.
“John, did you find anything about what happens if one attacks you? Is there anything special we should do?” Michael asked.
“You mean will a bite or scratch turn someone into a rat-thing themselves?” John said and Emma’s eyes widened at the thought of being turned into a creature like the one that had attacked her, “No, as far as I can tell being bitten or scratched by a rat-thing is no more dangerous than being attacked by an ordinary large rat. I can’t guarantee that the wound won’t become infected though so you may want to keep an eye out for that.”
“That’s a relief.” Emma said.
“Okay so what about killing them? What’s the best way to do it?” Michael said.
“As far as I can tell they are no more difficult to kill than ordinary rats. Obviously they’re larger than most but they can be hurt and killed in the same way as any other ordinary creature.” John told him.
“A pity we can’t just go back with a shotgun then. That would make short work of that thing.” Michael said.
“Are you really thinking about going back there?” Emma said.
“It’s obvious that something is going on there and I want to know what.” Michael responded.
“Do you think it was created by Mary Anne Stone?” Prudence asked him.
“Who’s Mary Anne Stone?” John added.
“A witch that lived in the sixteen hundreds. Emma was attacked where we found the remains of her cottage.” Michael told him.
“Did she leave any notes behind?” John said, always anxious to gain more material for his research.
“All we saw were a few stones that had been walls.” Michael said, “If we do find anything though we’ll be sure to let you know.”
“Excellent, thank you. I’ll be waiting to hear from you.” John said.
“Okay John. We’ll speak to you later. Bye.” Prudence added and she hung up, “So does anyone have any good ideas for squishing a rat?” she then said, looking at Michael and Emma.

5.

“What happened?” Robert asked when he saw Michael helping Emma from the Range Rover.
“She was attacked by something that looked like a rat but wasn’t.” Prudence told him as she got out of the vehicle as well.
“Attacked?” Robert said and Michael nodded.
“There is definitely something strange going on out there in the woods.” he said.
“Then come on inside and we’ll take a look at that wound.” Robert added, waving the others into the house. Once inside they made their way to the kitchen where Emma sat down while Robert went to fetch a first aid kit. This was little different to the kit that Michael kept in the Range Rover but replacing the dressing and re-cleaning the wound at least gave the others the chance to inspect it more closely.
“Well at least the bleeding seems to have stopped.” Michael said, looking at the clotted blood that had collected over the scratches inflicted by the rat-thing, “An hour’s not much time to start seeing signs of infection but the fact that the blood clotted shows promise.”
“So tell me exactly what happened.” Robert said as Michael then began to apply a fresh dressing to Emma’s wound.
“That thing came running out of the bushes and attacked me, that’s what.” Emma replied.
“We found the cottage where Mary Anne Stone lived.” Michael said.
“Or at least what was left of it.” Prudence added, “Plus it got very cold.”
“But only around the remains of the cottage. Did you notice that it was warmer again when we got back to the car?” Michael pointed out.
“That’s right. I wasn’t thinking about it at the time.” Prudence said as a smile spread across her face.
“What do you mean by that?” Robert said.
“It’s possible that something was causing the temperature around the cottage to fall unnaturally.” Michael told him, “It was much colder around it than further away.”
“The cold didn’t seem to bother that creature though.” Emma commented, frowning.
“Emma spotted it moving about but we just thought it was a regular rat.” Prudence said.
“We were right by a pond so it seemed like the sort of place you’d find one.” Michael added, “Then it suddenly charged and as she stepped back-”
“I tripped and landed flat on my ass. That’s when it did this.” Emma interrupted and she pointed to the wound on her leg.
“But you said it wasn’t a rat, so what was it?” Robert said.
“It had a human face. I saw it.” Emma told him.
“We were able to speak with someone who has access to information about the supernatural creatures we’ve encountered.” Michael added.
“That woman you spoke to last night? Harriet?” Robert responded.
“No, this isn’t really her field. We found a book that was written in ancient Greek and the man we took it to for a translation has been going through it.” Michael said.
“He told us that the creature is just called a ‘rat-thing’ and they are created by some sort of spell.” Prudence added.
“You know how ridiculous that sounds don’t you? Robert said.
“I saw the thing myself. It wasn’t a rat.” Emma replied sternly.
“Oh I’m not denying what you saw at all but I think we should keep this between us.” Robert said.
“My editor only pays me to write about the strange things in the letters he gets sent, not random creatures in the woods.” Prudence said.
“We also found some markings on the standing stone that could be related. One of them was a form of warding sign that is meant to make things useless for various rituals.” Michael said, “Hopefully we’ll find out more when we go back out there.”
“You’re going back?” Robert commented.
“Of course. We still have plenty of daylight left and now that we know about that rat-thing I’m sure we can deal with it.” Michael said.
“Mike I can’t.” Emma said and he smiled at her.
“Don’t worry about it. Prudence and I will deal with everything.” he said.
“Compared to the tree monster and the lizard man with the gun a creature the size of a rat, even a big rat isn’t much to worry about.” Prudence said.
“I do have one point to make.” Robert added.
“What’s that dad?” Michael asked.

“You may be able to handle one of those creatures but what if there are more? Rats tend to live in packs so what if these rat-things do as well?” Robert pointed out and Michael and Prudence looked at one another.
“That’s a good point.” Michael said, “I was thinking that our torches and my entrenching tool would be enough but if there’s a pack of those things out there then we may need more than that.”
“A shotgun’s looking like a better idea all the time.” Prudence commented.
“Agreed, but it would take only one person to see us and call the police to have us both arrested.” Michael replied.
“Torches might be a good idea though.” Robert said.
“We have those.” Prudence reminded him.
“No, not the modern sort. Burning torches.” Robert responded.
“You mean fire, don’t you?” Michael said and Robert nodded.
“Have you ever heard of a creature that wasn’t afraid of burning to death?” he said.
“There should be plenty of wood available around the cottage to make them from.” Michael said, “We just need to take some strips of cloth to wrap around the wood and some fuel to soak them in. Then we should have ourselves a pair of burning torches.”
“Are burning torches a good idea in the woods?” Emma said.
“The area didn’t seem particularly dry when we were there.” Michael commented, “I doubt we’ll be starting any forest fires.”
“Plus I like the idea of having them to help keep us warm.” Prudence added, “It really was pretty cold out there.”

6.

It was well into the afternoon when Michael parked the Range Rover close to the standing stone and he and Prudence got out. Taking their equipment from the back of the car they headed back to the footpath and followed it until they saw the pond through the trees.
“Okay let’s see what we can find.” Michael said as he began to look for suitable pieces of wood to make the torches from.
“What about this?” Prudence asked, reaching down and lifting up one end of a branch that had fallen to the ground. This was about an inch and a half in diameter and about six feet long and Michael smiled when he saw it.
“Perfect.” he said, walking over to her side.
Taking the branch from Prudence he put his foot on one end before bending it sharply to remove a short length from one end and then broke the rest in half to produce two shorter lengths that he and Prudence could use for torches. The wood was slightly damp so it would not easily burn but that suited Michael perfectly. Reaching into his rucksack he took out a roll of bandages and wrapped the end of one in them before passing it to Prudence.
“Hold this.” he told her before repeating the process with the second piece of the branch and he handed this to her as well. While Prudence held the two torches Michael took out a can of lighter fluid and tipped some over each of the wrapped ends to make them easier to light when he took out his lighter.
“Think these will do the trick?” Prudence said as she stood holding the two burning torches.
“I don’t see why not. As you said, at least they may help keep us warm if the temperature drops again.” Michael replied. Then he took his metal torch from his rucksack before taking one of the burning torches from Prudence, “Okay let’s go.”
With the burning torches in one hand and the metal torches in the other Michael and Prudence followed the same route around the pond they had taken earlier towards the ruins of the witch’s cottage, both of them watching the undergrowth for any signs of the rat-thing making a reappearance.
“Do you think it’s still here?” Prudence said.
“Where else would it go? All the strange goings on are centred on this place so this has to be the hub.” Michael replied.
“Michael have you considered that even a swarm of those rat-things couldn’t do some of the things the stories say have happened around here?” Prudence commented.
“It does seem likely that there’s something else out here doesn’t it?” Michael agreed, “And I suspect that it’s going to be bigger than a rat.”
Unlike the first time they approached the remains of the cottage there was no noticeable drop in temperature as they got closer and initially at least there were no signs of movement to indicate the presence of the rat-thing that had attacked Emma.
“Here we are. Now what?” Prudence said when they reached the remains of the cottage and they both stopped.
“I guess we take a look around.” Michael replied, “Either that rat-thing was here out of habit or there’s something around here that it wants to be close to.”
“I wonder how smart it is?” Prudence commented as she and Michael walked in different directions, searching the ground for anything that stood out, “Do you think the human head makes it as smart as a person or is it more of an animal like a rat?”
“I don’t know and I’m not sure I’d like to try running one through a maze after some cheese just to find out.” Michael replied, “I think it’s best to be cautious though and assume that it’s as smart as we are.”
“Then it could be planning a trap.” Prudence said, coming to a sudden halt and Michael stopped as well.
“I think we should stick together. Just in case.” he said and Prudence nodded as he walked towards her, closing the gap between them to less than an arm’s length so that they could offer immediate help to one another if either of them was attacked.
“Is that another piece of wall do you think?” Prudence asked and she pointed at a piece of stone sticking up out of the ground with the heavy torch she was carrying as a club.
“Yes, well spotted.” Michael replied and he quickly looked around at the other two small sections of wall that they had found, “I think that puts us right about in the centre of where Mary Anne’s cottage stood.”
“Do you think that’s significant?” Prudence said.
“Maybe. Three centuries of dirt isn’t helping though.” Michael said and he used the heel of his boot to scrape at the ground, “Here, take hold of this.” he added, holding out the burning torch he held.
“Hold on.” Prudence replied as she put her modern torch down to free up a hand, “What are you planning?” she asked when she took hold of the second burning torch and stood there with one in each hand.

“Mary Anne may not have had dirt floors when she lived here.” Michael pointed out as he put his own modern torch down as well, “All of this could have just built up since then and the original floor could still be underneath. I’m going to dig and see what I can find.”
Taking his entrenching tool from its pouch Michael unfolded it and began to prod at the dirt covered ground, trying to gauge how deep the layer of dirt went.
“Anything?” Prudence asked.
“I think so. There seems to be something pretty solid under here about an inch or two down.” he answered and then he thrust the tip of the entrenching tool into the ground deep enough that there was the sound of metal scraping on stone. He then began to shovel earth from the ground, piling it up beside him as he cleared an area large enough for the layer of level stone underneath to become visible. The stone was not a single piece though, instead there was a straight line where two adjacent pieces of stone met and fitted together neatly. This alone indicated that the stone was not natural.
“There is a stone floor.” Prudence said when she saw this and Michael nodded as he stood up.
“I’m going to have to clear some more of it. Maybe there’ll be something on it that will tell us something.” he said but before he could continue to dig there was a rustling sound from the undergrowth that made both Michael and Prudence to turn towards it, “I’ll take this again.” he added and he took one of the burning torches back from Prudence.
“The rat-thing?” Prudence said softy.
“It seems likely.” Michael replied while he searched for the source of the sound.
All of a sudden there was a shrieking sound and the rat-thing leapt from a nearby tree. The relatively small creature had chosen the place from where it launched its attack carefully, positioning itself above the two investigators and waiting for them to both be facing away from it before leaping down and landing on Prudence’s back. The creature dug its claws into her to hang on while also trying to sink its teeth into her but the armoured vest that she wore beneath her coat was too thick and tough for it to be able to get through. Prudence still felt the impact of the rat-thing as well as its weight on her back as it clung onto her though and she let out a scream.
“Get it off me!” she cried out and Michael spun around to look.
The rat-thing was easy to spot as it hung onto Prudence’s back and Michael raised his entrenching tool.
“Hold still.” he told Prudence before he swung the tool at her back with the blade angled so that the rear surface would strike the rat-thing. This guaranteed that even if the creature attacking Prudence leapt out of the way he would not injure his assistant. The rat-thing did not attempt to move though and the entrenching tool struck it cleanly. Hitting the rat-thing with the flat side of the entrenching tool meant that the force of the blow was spread out over a wider area but Michael’s blow was still strong enough to knock the rat-thing from Prudence’s back and it squealed as it fell to the ground. Michael then thrust his burning torch towards the creature and it fled from the flames, disappearing back into the undergrowth, “Are you okay?” Michael asked Prudence.
“Fine.” she said, “Apart from you hitting me in the back.”
“It was the easiest way to get that thing off you.” Michael replied.
“It’s okay. These stab vests really work, don’t they?” Prudence said and Michael smiled.
“Why else do you think I wanted you to get one?” he said,” Now let’s see where that rat-thing went. It ran over here and went under that bush.” he added and he pointed with the entrenching tool.
Prudence nodded and bent down to pick up her metal torch while Michael advanced cautiously on the bush he had seen the rat-thing scurry under. Then he swung the entrenching tool at the bush, this time using the serrated edge to hack at it. The edge of the tool was sharp and strong enough to cut through the thinner branches of the bushes but even as the vegetation was thinned out the rat-thing remained out of sight until there was a rustling from close by and both Michael and Prudence turned to investigate. The two investigators were just in time to see the creature rush from the bushes and charge at Prudence again. This time though she was able to defend herself and before the rat-thing was able to reach her, swinging the burning torch towards it. This caused the rat-thing to come to a halt before it came close enough to be burned and the creature rose itself up on its hind legs and let out a hiss from from the mouth that was set into the hideous mockery of a human face that it possessed before it turned and ran back into the undergrowth.
“This could be a problem.” Michael said and Prudence frowned.
“Why?” she asked.
“Because that wasn’t the same creature I knocked off your back. That one had grey in its fur and the one that just hissed at us didn’t.” Michael told her.
“So we could be surrounded by them.” Prudence said, looking all around for any signs of more of the rat-things.
“I doubt there are very many of them. If there were then I’d have expected them to have just rushed us all at once. They must think we’re a threat.” Michael said as he hunted for any more of the creatures as well.
“So are we just going to wait here for them to attack?” Prudence said and Michael considered their next move.

“They stayed hidden until I started digging.” he pointed out and slowly he edged towards the area of exposed stone floor before bending down and shovelling some more dirt away from it to widen the hole. As soon as he started doing this a rat-thing spring from its hiding place and charged towards him before leaping at his face. Michael was prepared for something like this though and he brought up the entrenching tool as the creature flew through the air. The path of the tool caused the serrated edge of the blade to slash across the rat-thing’s stomach. The rat-thing was also knocked away from Michael by the blow and it fell to the ground with a shriek close by with its stomach split wide open. The force of landing spilled some of the creature’s insides out over the ground and it lay there writhing in agony for a few moments until Michael brought his entrenching tool down on its neck as hard as he could. This blow was almost enough to decapitate the rat-thing and it proved to be immediately fatal, bringing its struggles to a permanent halt.
“Michael is that one we’ve seen before or another one?” Prudence asked, glancing at the bloody mess on the ground and wincing at the sight.
“I think it’s the one that was on your back. We know there’s at least one more around but that could be it.” Michael replied.
“Or there could be a dozen more.” Prudence pointed out.
“Let’s see shall we?” Michael said and he held out his burning torch towards her, “You cover me and I’ll get digging again.”
Prudence nodded but instead of setting her more modern torch down on the ground this time she tucked it back under her coat before taking the burning torch from Michael. She then stood over him as he continued to use the entrenching tool to remove the dirt covering the stone floor. This had the desired effect once again and not one, but two rat-things came charging from the undergrowth.
The creatures came from two different directions and Prudence looked back and forth between them.
“Michael.” she said.
“Go right.” he told her and as she turned to face the rat-thing rushing at her from her right he turned towards the other and raised the entrenching tool again in readiness to strike. Seeing this the rat-thing turned aside but Michael lunged at the creature and brought the tool down, only to miss by a narrow margin. The rat-thing then turned back towards him and leapt at his face. Michael blocked the creature with his arm and it grabbed hold of him, preparing to bite down on him. However, before the rat thing’s teeth could pierce Michael’s coat he stabbed it in the side with the tip of the entrenching tool and it dropped to the ground. Rather than strike with the entrenching tool again Michael jumped back to his feet and stamped his foot down on the rat-thing’s head. This produced a ‘crunch’ as the tiny creature’s skull was crushed and it died instantly.
While Michael was fighting off one of the rat-things Prudence was able to focus on the other and she waved one of the two burning torches at it while she kept the other held high. The rat-thing was caught off guard by an unexpected jab and the burning end of torch was pressed against its back long enough for its fur to catch light. Immediately the rat-thing let out a shriek of pain and it turned towards the pond, seeking to extinguish the flames by immersing itself in the water. The rat-thing moved quickly and Prudence was not able to catch it, however the creature’s path took it past Michael and he kicked it as hard as he could. This then sent it rolling back towards Prudence who struck it the burning torch again. With the rat-thing’s fur already burning the flames from the torch had no further effect but the impact of the torch was enough to first stun the creature and then break its ribs with the second follow up blow.
“I think you got it. Well done.” Michael said as he looked down at the dying creature.
“Do you think we should keep one of the bodies?” Prudence suggested.
“I’d say yes but I’m not really sure what we’d do with it. Besides I don’t think the colonel would be too happy if we come back with a bag of roadkill. Get photos though, as many as you can.” Michael replied and he took back one of the burning torches, “I’m going to find out what’s so special about this floor.”
While Prudence took out her mobile phone and began to us its camera to take photographs of the three dead rat-things Michael returned to where he had been digging. He placed the burning torch down on the pile of loose earth so that could continue to burn without risking the flames spreading despite the damp. Then he continued with the task of clearing the dirt that covered the stone floor. The small size of the entrenching tool limited how quickly he could do this but he continued anyway, hoping that he would find something that would give him a better idea of where to focus his efforts.
He found this when he came across a scratch in the surface of one of the floor stones. As he cleared more earth beside this he saw that it was more than just a random irregularity of the stone and that there was a larger pattern present.
“I think there’s something down here.” he said.
“Something alive?” Prudence asked.
“No, I mean some sort of carving on the floor.” Michael answered and Prudence walked over to see for herself, “Get some pictures.” he told her and she began to photograph the stone while Michael continued to work at uncovering it.
“What is that?” Prudence said as more of the carving was revealed beneath the dirt.

“I think it’s some kind of star chart. Look, that’s the Orion constellation.” Michael replied and he pointed to one of the patterns engraved into the stone.
“I wonder what the person who moved in after Mary Anne vanished thought of that?” Prudence said.
“Perhaps trying to mess with it is what made them think the cottage was possessed by the Devil.” Michael suggested. Then he noticed that there was an irregularity to one edge of the stone that resulted in the gap between it and the adjacent stone being wider, “Now that’s interesting.” he commented.
“What is?” Prudence said.
“I think this stone is meant to be lifted. That gap is for a tool to pry it up.” Michael told her.
“Can that little shovel of yours do it?” Prudence suggested and Michael smiled at her.
“Let’s find out.” he said.
Michael worked as quickly as he could to uncover the engraved stone, revealing more markings that included more recognisable constellations that Prudence promptly photographed. Michael then used the edge of the entrenching tool to scrape around the side of the stone, doing his best to clear the dirt that had become trapped in the gaps surrounding it. After this he pushed the tip of the tool into the wider part of the gap and looked at Prudence again.
“Are you recording this?” he asked and she quickly switched her phone’s camera to video mode.
“Try it.” she said, nodding and Michael pulled back on the handle of the entrenching tool, lifting the side of the stone up slightly but visibly.
“Does this look like somewhere someone would hide something to you?” Michael commented and Prudence smiled.
“Kind of, yes.” she said and Michael used the entrenching tool to pry the edge of the stone higher until he could get his hand under it and he lifted the stone to peer underneath.
“Prudence take a look at this.” he said, pushing the stone out of the way entirely to reveal a set of wooden steps that led down into an underground chamber of some sort.
“A hidden cellar.” Prudence commented and Michael smiled at her.
“Possibly hidden and undisturbed since the seventeenth century.” he said.

7.

The two investigators extinguished the burning torches and left them on the pile of dug out earth, opting instead to rely on the more constant and less hazardous illumination provided by their more modern torches as they descended the steps. They held these above their shoulders at the end where the LEDs were mounted so that they could easily use them as weapons, swinging the battery end at an opponent. Michael went first, walking down the steps slowly so he could test their strength as he put his weight on them. Although they creaked slightly under the pressure they did not break and Michael continued to descend.
“What’s down there?” Prudence said as she followed Michael into the darkness.
“A cellar, just as we thought.” he said, “But I don’t think this was used just for storing wine.” he added as he reached the bottom of the steps and he shone his torch around as he studied the contents of the secret chamber.
Despite having been abandoned for centuries the underground part of the cottage had survived intact, with the stone cover to the staircase providing an adequate seal to keep out the elements while unlike the structure above ground the stone walls had remained intact. The only evidence that the cellar was not being fully maintained were the cobwebs that hung from several of the wooden beams across the ceiling. The spiders that had created these were long dead but some of their webs had been able to survive in the sheltered environment of the cellar.
It was immediately obvious that even if the authorities of mid-seventeenth century England had not already had enough reasons to label Mary Anne Stone a witch then just one look at the contents of this cellar would have done the trick. The walls were covered in strange writing and symbols that resembled the markings Michael and Prudence had witnessed painted on the room of a house where all of the occupants had been killed by creatures that had hunted them through time. In addition to the painted symbols on the walls there were shelves stacked with clay jars that still bore labels that identified their contents. Some held simple chemicals that would have been available at the time whereas others apparently contained the ground up bones or other body parts of animals while a pestle and mortar rested on a bench that would have allowed any of these substances to be mixed in together.
“If she wasn’t a witch then she was a regular chemist.” Prudence commented when she saw this as well.
“I’ve never met a chemist who had a pack of rats with human faces hanging around his laboratory.” Michael responded before he turned his torch towards another wall and the beam of light revealed something that looked like it could have come out of a fairy story.
A large cauldron was positioned in an alcove on top of a stone lined pit that was clearly intended to hold fuel that could be burned to heat the contents of the cauldron. In the ceiling above the cauldron there was a hole that looked like it was supposed to be a chimney to allow smoke to escape but the lack of light shining through it indicated that it was blocked at some point, helping to keep the cellar sealed against the elements. Walking closer to the cauldron Michael shone his torch into it but was not surprised to see that it was empty.
“All we’re missing now is a broomstick and a pointed hat.” Prudence said.
“Get photos of everything again.” Michael told her, “We’ll see what Harriet has to say about all this.
“What if she wants to see it for herself?” Prudence asked.
“When we’re done here we’ll replace the stone and cover it with earth again. Then we’ll mark the spot so we can find it easily just in case we ever need to come back.” Michael said.
“Michael look.” Prudence added as she turned her torch towards another wall where there was another set of shelves. The spacing of these varied, with the lower shelves being wider apart than those above and this allowed the bottom shelf to house a wooden chest while numerous small statues were lined up on the ones above. Most of these statues were carved from wood or cast from metal but there was one that was larger than the others that looked to have been sculpted from clay.
It was the wooden chest that caught the attention of Michael and Prudence the most though and the pair walked towards it, shining their torches straight at it.
“Now I wonder what could be in there.” Michael said and he crouched down in front of the chest to try and open it. However, when he tried to lift the lid he found it stuck fast, “It’s locked.”
“Perhaps there’s a key around here somewhere.” Prudence said and she turned around, using her torch to search for somewhere that a key might be kept.
“Maybe it’s under one of these things.” Michael suggested as he stood up and he began to search under the various statues above the chest.
“What do you think those are for?” Prudence said, glancing back over her shoulder at the statues.
“Hopefully Harriet will be able to tell us. I suppose they could be idols to be worshipped but they could be supposed to represent people Mary Anne was casting spells on.” Michael replied.

“You mean like voodoo dolls?” Prudence said.
“Sort of. Of course I’m just guessing. Harriet’s our expert on all things witchcraft related.” Michael said.
“Maybe there’s a key in one of these pots.” Prudence then suggested and she walked across the underground chamber to the shelf of jars. One at a time she then removed the lids from these and shone her torch into them to inspect the contents. As far as Prudence could tell though the jars held exactly what their labels suggested they did, either fine powders or coarser grains but there were no indications of a key either in the jars or fixed to the underside of the lid.
“I don’t think Mary Anne kept a key down here. She may have just kept one with her.” Michael pointed out and Prudence sighed.
“And no-one has seen her in three hundred and fifty years.” she said. Then she added, “Do you think you can pick the lock instead?”
“Maybe, it is a pretty old lock so it can’t be that tough to crack. I’ll give it a try.” Michael said and while he crouched in front of the chest Prudence returned to stand beside him, “Could you shine your torch on this? I could do with using both hands. Oh and a hair pin would be useful.”
Prudence reached up into her hair and removed a wire pin that she handed to Michael. Setting his torch down on the floor of the underground chamber he then straightened out this pin, bending just a short section at the end which he carefully inserted into the chest’s keyhole.
Both investigators remained silent as Michael turned the bent hair pin and this enabled them to hear the sudden but soft creaking sound from behind them as weight was put on the stairs leading back up to the remains of the cottage. Both of them turned around quickly to see what had cased this and Prudence shone her torch straight at the steps. However, neither of them could see anything, there was nothing on the steps that could have caused the sound.
This did not stop another creaking sound coming from the same direction though.
“That definitely came from over there.” Michel said, picking up his own torch again and getting to his feet. Holding the torch over his shoulder so that he could easily swing it like a club he advanced towards the bottom of the steps.
All of a sudden something struck him in the chest. The surplus police issue stab vest stopped the blow from breaking his ribs but it was still strong enough to lift him up and hurl him across the room towards the shelf of jars containing the powders and granules. Smashing into the base of this, Michael caused the shelves to topple over and the various jars came tumbling down on top of him. The impact of the jars on the stone floor caused a number of them to break open while the others lost their lids and spilled their contents over him and across the floor.
“Michael!” Prudence exclaimed and she started to rush towards him. However, before she had even made it even half way the invisible force struck her as well and she was thrown back towards the other set of shelves. In the process she dropped her torch and it rolled across the floor out of reach.
Although dazed, Michael regained his senses and looked around for their attacker. At first he saw nothing but then he noticed a footprint appear in the mix of powders spread across the floor. Looking around he quickly located his torch and he reached out to grab it. Then he swung it as hard as he could towards the footprint. Despite not being able to see what was attacking him and Prudence, Michael still felt it when the aluminium body of the torch hit something. This was accompanied by an inhuman shriek and the sound of something heavy hitting the floor. It was then that a roughly humanoid shape began to take form where the creature had fallen. Even in the dim light of the underground chamber it was possible to see that this creature was not human though. Had it being standing upright it would have been significantly over six feet tall and it had black, blubbery flesh. More concerning to Michael though were the large pincers it possessed in place of hands and the large fangs that were visible inside its mouth.
The creature turned its head towards Michael and let out a hiss before it swung a pincer towards him and he rolled out of reach just in time. He swung the torch at the monstrous creature now that it was visible but it was able to retreat as he advanced and his attack missed by a significant margin. The creature then began to rise to its feet, its gaze focused on Michael and Prudence saw an opportunity. Charging towards the creature she swung her own torch like a club in the way Michael had told her to. The blow was aimed for the creature’s head and there was a dull ‘thunk’ sound as the metal cased torch struck its skull. Even though Prudence was not particularly strong the blow would have been enough to disable any ordinary assailant for at least a short time but all that it appeared to do to the creature was anger it and it suddenly turned to glare in her direction, snarling and letting out a low growling sound.
Standing up straight in the underground chamber, the creature barely fit without its head touching the ceiling and it towered over Prudence who just stared at it in terror for a few moments. The creature then drew back one of its pincered arms to strike but before it could launch its attack Michael dived at it from behind and grabbed hold of the arm, preventing the creature from making its attack.
“Prudence, get back.” he called out and this snapped her back to her senses.
Prudence stepped back while the creature focused on trying to shake Michael loose and by the time it was able to get free of him she was already out of reach. With Michael as the closest target now the creature

turned its attention back to him and it slashed at him with a pincer. This cut through the front of his coat but once again he was saved by the armoured vest he had on underneath it and the creature hissed in frustration before something struck it on the back of its head
“Hey! Over here!” Prudence yelled as she got another of the small statues from the shelf and hurled it at the creature.
Growling again, the creature advanced towards Prudence and swatted aside the metal statue she hurled at it next. Before it could reach Prudence though the creature was tackled from behind as Michael dived into it and when he landed on top of it he aimed several rapid blows at it with his torch. The creature was able to parry most of these with its arm though and instead of hitting it in the face he ended up largely just striking one of its pincers. Them the creature struck back, hitting the side of Michael’s head with the blunt back of a pincers and knocking him sideways. This gave the creature the time to get to its feet but before it could launch another attack on Michael Prudence hurled a metal statue at it to try and distract it again. This move worked and the creature turned towards her before charging at her with its pincers held out in front of it. Prudence tried to dive out of the creature’s path but she was not quite fast enough and the creature was still able to grab hold of her by her arm. She let out a scream as the creature tightened its grip and the pincer dug into her flesh but she stopped when it used its second pincer to grab her by the throat. For a moment Prudence thought that the creature was about to decapitate her with its pincer but all of a sudden Michael charged at it again and brought his torch down on the arm that was gripping her neck, causing the creature to release grip on her entirely.
Michael then ducked as the creature swung a pincer towards him and it passed over his head. This gave him the chance to aim a jab at the creature’s abdomen, hoping that it would have a similar disabling effect as if he had struck a human being in the same way. The blow had only a limited effect though, causing the creature to back away but not disabling it entirely. Even though it remained standing and mobile the creature was showing obvious signs of injury, appearing more sluggish as it stared at Michael. The brief fight had also taken something of a toll on Michael and Prudence though and they just stared back at the creature.
“What is it?” Prudence whispered.
“I don’t know but I’m guessing that this is responsible for all the ghost stories and deaths over the years.” Michael replied before the creature let out a hiss that was followed by a roar and it started to advance again. Prudence instinctively reached out for another of the statues on the shelf and this time the first one that came to hand was the one sculpted from clay, raising it up above her head ready to throw at the creature. The moment she did this though the creature froze and stared at her.
“What’s it doing now?” Prudence said.
“I think that statue is significant. Whatever you do, don’t let go of it.” Michael said and Prudence nodded.
“Don’t worry, I won’t.” she said, “But what do we do now?”
“You keep hold of that statue. I’m going to grab that chest before we get out of here.” Michael said and Prudence gave another nod.
“Okay do it.” she said.
Michael reached down and picked the chest up by one of the handles present on each end, keeping the other hand free for his torch.
“I’ve got it. Let’s get out of here.” Michael told Prudence and the pair of them began to back away from the creature, heading for the steps leading back to the surface. While they moved the creature remained stationary, staring at them while they retreated.
When the two investigators had disappeared from sight the creature straightened up and a moment later it suddenly became invisible once more.

8.

“Back to the car.” Michael said as soon as he and Prudence were standing in the forest once more.
“What about the hole?” Prudence asked, looking at the hole that led down to the hidden cellar.
“We don’t have time to get that stone back in place and we don’t know if it would even stop that creature. We need to leave.” Michael answered as he also glanced back down at the hole. Then he looked up again and he and Prudence began to move, heading back towards the path as fast as they could.
Once on the path the two investigators continued to run, heading back to where the Range Rover was parked. Michael did not bother to open the back of the car so that he and Prudence could return their torches and armoured vests to the bags kept in there. Instead he just unlocked the car using his remote key fob so that he and Prudence could climb into the front seats before tossing their torches along with the chest and the statue onto the back seat. Michael started the engine as quickly as he could and put his foot down on the accelerator, getting back onto the road and turning in the direction of his father’s house.
As they started to drive away both Michael and Prudence repeatedly checked behind them to see if there were any signs of pursuit, either by the creature they had seen or something else that may have been lurking in the forest.
“Okay so now what?” Prudence asked when they had gone just over a mile along the road.
“Now we get back to my dad’s. First I want to see how Emma is and then I want to find out what’s inside this chest. It felt pretty heavy so there must be something in there.” Michael answered.
“And what do we do about that thing? It may want this stuff back and we don’t know what it is.” Prudence pointed out.
“I’m hoping that there’ll be something inside that chest that could tell us. Failing that then maybe John could.” Michael said.
“He did know about the rat-things.” Prudence commented.
“Exactly and if that fails then we can always try Harriet as well.” Michael added before he focused on the road ahead, driving towards his father’s house as quickly as he could.

When Michael turned the Range Rover into the drive of his father’s house he got about half way up it before the front door opened and he saw his father appear. It was starting to get dark and light from inside the house shone out from around Robert making him easy to spot.
“He’s got a shotgun.” Michael commented when he noticed the weapon tucked under his father’s arm.
“Do you thing something’s happened?” Prudence asked.
“Let’s find out.” Michael answered as he drove the rest of the way to the house and brought the car to a halt,
“Dad, what’s wrong?” he said as he opened the car door and got out. He could see that his father was holding his shotgun with the breech open but a round in each chamber so that he could rapidly bring the weapon into use.
“It’s just a precaution.” Robert responded, “Emma is still somewhat unsettled by what happened to you earlier.”
“Is she okay?” Michael said.
“She’s shaken but her injury doesn’t seem to be causing her any trouble.” Robert told him.
“Perhaps we should get this stuff inside and find out what’s in that chest.” Prudence suggested as she also got out of the Range Rover with the clay statue in her hand.
“What’s that?” Robert asked.
“Something we found under the cottage.” Prudence replied while Michael was getting the wooden chest out of the Range Rover as well.
“That looks interesting. Bring it into my study.” Robert said when he saw this and he beckoned for Michael and Prudence to enter the house.
“Emma we’re back.” Michael called out from the hallway and Emma appeared from the lounge.
“Oh Michael thank God you’re okay.” she said.
“We’re fine.” Michael replied as she embraced him. Then she noticed the damage to the armoured vest under his coat, “What happened?” she said, frowning and Michael looked at Prudence.
“There was something else out there.” Prudence commented, “Something a lot bigger than the rat-things.”
“So there were more than one of those things?” Robert commented and Prudence nodded.
“I’ve got some photos of what was left of them.” she said.
“Then come into the study and we’ll take a look at them.” Robert said.
Entering the study, Robert unloaded the shotgun and stood the weapon in the corner of the room before he sat down. At the same time Michael and Prudence set down the statue and wooden chest on the desk before Prudence took out her mobile phone and brought up a photograph of one of the dead rat-things.

“Here, this is one of the rat-things.” she said and Robert winced as he looked at the image.
“Very nasty.” he said, “That face really does look human doesn’t it? So how many were there?”
“Three. They attacked us while I was digging up the ground within the ruins of the cottage. That’s where we found the entrance to the cellar.” Michael said.
“And I take it that that is where you found these.” Robert said as he picked up the clay statue and looked at it, frowning as he studied it closely, “Do you have any idea what this is?”
“There aren’t any obvious markings.” Prudence said.
“So I see. The level of detail is somewhat crude as well.” Robert responded and he set the statue down again before looking at the chest, “What about this?” he asked.
“It’s heavy so there’s obviously something in it and the lock suggests that they are valuable.” Michael said.
“Did you find a key?” Emma said and Michael shook his head.
“No, we tried looking but we didn’t find anything. I gave picking it a try but we were interrupted before I could get it open.” he said.
“Do you think the chest itself is valuable?” Robert said.
“I don’t think so. I was thinking of just drilling out the lock.” Michael said.
“A good idea,” Robert said, “and while you’re getting the drill I think I had better put this gun away.”
When Michael and Robert left the room Prudence looked at Emma.
“Is your leg okay?” she asked and Emma nodded.
“I think so.” Emma replied rubbing her leg where it had been scratched, “Just the thought of those creatures is freaking me out though.”
Prudence smiled.
“Trust me, those things are nothing. Hit them with a torch or a shovel and they die easily. The thing we saw in the cellar was worse.” she said.
“What was it?” Emma said.
“I wish I knew. When we could see it it had a vaguely human shape but its forearms were just giant pincers. For a moment I thought it was going to rip my head clean off. Hopefully there’ll be something inside that chest that will tell us.” Prudence said before Michael re-entered the study with a pair of plastic cases. One of these held Robert’s drill while the other contained a large selection of bits.
“Okay, let’s get this thing open.” Michael said and he started by opening the box of bits.
“How big a hole are you going to drill?” Prudence asked him.
“I’ll use the biggest bit that will fit in the keyhole,” he replied, “and I’ll set the drill to only drill in about an inch. Hopefully that will be enough to destroy the lock without actually damaging any of the contents.” he added just as he found a drill bit that just about fit into the keyhole of the chest. Then he took the drill from its case and fitted the bit, pushing it down until only about an inch of the thread protruded from the front, thus limiting how deep he could drill.
“Ah you’ve got the drill ready.” Robert said as he also returned to the study.
“Yes. Could you hold this for me?” Michael replied and Robert walked over to him before taking hold of the wooden chest, holding it down on the desk while Michael inserted the tip of the drill bit into the keyhole.
“Here goes nothing.” he said before he activated the drill.
The metal of the lock was not hardened in any way and in just seconds the drill had gone in as deeply as it could. Michael then withdrew the drill and looked at Robert who smiled back at him.
“Let’s see what we have shall we?” he said and then he lifted the lid of the chest.
With the lock destroyed from the inside the lid of the chest lifted open easily to reveal the contents that had been undisturbed for more than three centuries and everyone present looked at it with interest.
“Paper?” Emma commented.
“I think it’s a manuscript.” Prudence said and she reached into the chest to remove a bundle of paper.
The bundle was bound together with string at one side as if it was a book and the top sheet had just a title.

FACES OF NYARLATHOTEP

“Near – Nigh -” Prudence said as she tried to pronounce the final word.
“There’s more underneath.” Michael said, reaching into the chest where there were more sheets of paper. Unlike the manuscript these sheets were all loose and as Michael browsed through them he saw that they appeared to have been used to make a variety of notes and diagrams, “Look familiar?” he said, holding up one of the sheets of paper to show the others the sketch of a humanoid creature possessing large pincers in place of it hands that he had found.
“That’s what attacked us in the hidden cellar. The thing that was guarding this chest.” Prudence replied, nodding her head.
“Does it say what it was?” Emma asked and Michael looked at the notes scrawled around the sketch.
“There are a couple of words that could be it.” he said, “I see ‘guardian’ and ‘spectral hunter’.”
“What about the book and the other papers? What are they about?” Robert asked.
“I can’t even pronounce the title.” Prudence said, flipping through the pages of the book. Each page appeared handwritten, “This looks like English though.”

“Same here.” Michael added and he passed one of the loose sheets to Prudence, “Does the handwriting look the same?” he asked and she held the sheet beside a page of the book.
“No.” she said, shaking her head, “This manuscript is much neater.”
“So what are you going to do with all this?” Emma asked.
“I think John has to see it. Some of what’s here could help him make sense of the Necronomicon and the notes he got from Harriet.” Michael said.
“We should call him.” Prudence suggested, “Now we have ideas of what that other creature might be maybe he can tell us what to do about it.”
Michael took out his mobile phone and quickly selected John’s number, turning on the speaker before putting it down on the desk so everyone could hear.
“Hello.” John’s voice said as he answered his phone.
“John it’s Michael, I’ve got you on speaker so Prudence and the others can as well.” Michael told him.
“Others?” John commented.
“Yes, my father and Emma my fiance.” Michael replied.
“Oh okay. What can I do for you?” John asked.
“Prudence and I went back to the woods.” Michael said.
“Did you see the rat-thing again?” John said before Michael could explain what happened.
“Three of them.” Prudence answered, “I have pictures of what was left of them after we pulverised them.”
“Excellent. Can you send them to me?” John said.
“Sure.” Prudence replied.
“We did some digging around the ruins of the cottage and found the entrance to a hidden cellar.” Michael began to explain, “It looked like some kind of laboratory.”
“That sounds like something that would be worth seeing.” John said.
“Maybe not now. It got pretty smashed up.” Michael said, “There was a set of shelves filled with all sorts of powders in jars but they got spilled when I was thrown into them.”
“Thrown? Thrown by what?” John asked.
“Something bigger than a rat-thing.” Michael answered, “It started out invisible but after I managed to knock it over it became visible. It looked vaguely humanoid but its forearms were pincers.”
“It might be called a guardian or a spectral-hunter.” Prudence added.
“What makes you say that?” John said.
“We were able to get away with a chest full of papers plus a manuscript.” Michael said, “Among these was a sketch of the creature that used those terms.”
“A manuscript? Does it have a title?” John responded.
“It does but I don’t know what it is.” Prudence told him, “It starts ‘Faces of’ and then the final word is spelt N-Y-A-R-”
“Nyarlathotep?” John interrupted.
“I suppose you could say it that way yes. Does that mean something to you?” Prudence replied.
“Yes, the name occurs numerous times in the Necronomicon. He seems to be very important.” John told her.
“It’s a name? What sort of name is that?” Emma commented.
“Nyarlathotep is a god of sorts.” John responded, “He is supposed to act as a messenger for a larger pantheon. According to the Necronomicon he can take on any one of a thousand different forms, at least one of which is that of a human while the others are more monstrous. He seems to be associated with spreading insanity more than physical destruction but he is also referred to as a powerful being not to be trifled with.”
“Could that thing in the picture you said you saw by this Nyarlathotep?” Emma said.
“Trust me, if you’d met and fought Nyarlathotep then you’d be dead.” John said, “As well as the Necronomicon, his name appears in some of the documents Harriet had in her library. From what I can tell his worship is relatively common compared to many of the other beings I’ve come across.”
“So Mary Anne Stone worshipped this Nyarlathotep.” Prudence commented.
“Do either of the terms we found mean anything?” Michael asked, “Given that this thing seems to have killed people over the years I’d like to be able to do something about it.”
“Mike you can’t be serious about going out there again.” Emma exclaimed when she heard this.
“I rather think that he is.” Robert commented.
“I’ve not come across anything that I think would help you in the resources I have available. What about the papers you’ve found? How soon can you get them to me?” John said.
“I can probably drop them by tomorrow.” Michael told him.
“Excellent. In the mean time I’ll take a look for any information I can find on this spectral hunter or guardian. I’ll call you if I find anything.” John said.
“Thanks John. I’ll speak to you later.” Michael replied and he leaned forward to hang up the phone.
“That was interesting.” Robert commented, “I thought you may have believed in some supernatural explanation for what’s happened in the forest but I didn’t think I’d be hearing about pagan gods.”
“John did say that we weren’t dealing with Nyarlathotep himself.” Prudence pointed out.

“How can you be so calm?” Emma said suddenly, “We were attacked by those rat creatures and then you were attacked by some monster with giant claws that can make itself invisible.”
“Emma it’s okay. The rat-things are dead and we left that other creature in the woods. Once John can tell us how to deal with it we’ll make sure that it never gets the chance to harm anyone again.” Michael said.
“We dealt with the tree monster after all and that was way bigger than the thing we saw in the cellar.” Prudence added, referring to the massive creature that she and Michael had encountered when investigating the death of cattle from a local farmer’s herd.
“The security light just came on.” Emma said unexpected, looking towards the study’s window where the increasing darkness outside the house had just been illuminated by one of the motion sensing security lights fitted to Robert’s house.
“It’s probably just a fox or something.” Robert said as both he and Michael got to their feet and walked across the room to look outside. With the added illumination from the security light they were able to see out into the front garden and as far as the road running past the house quite easily. However, a few seconds later the security light timed out and the exterior of the house was plunged into darkness again.
“I didn’t see anything out there.” Michael said.
“Neither did I.” Robert added and he closed the curtains.
“Every one of the mysterious sightings, attacks and deaths occurred within about a mile radius of Mary Anne’s cottage. How far from there are we?” Prudence said.
“In a straight line about eight mile’s I’d say.” Michael replied and Prudence smiled.
“There you go Emma, we’re way too far away.” Prudence said but Emma did not appear convinced by this.
“So what are we going to do now?” she asked.
“Well I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m hungry so how about we have some dinner?” Robert suggested.

9.

When the group entered the kitchen they were just in time to see the rear security light come on outside but nothing that could have triggered it was visible on the lawn behind the house.
“That’s unusual.” Robert commented, “I’ve seen plenty of animals trigger those lights before but it’s easy to see them when they come on.”
“It’s one of those things from the wood isn’t it? It followed you back here.” Emma added.
“I’ll go and take a look.” Michael said but Emma grabbed him by the arm.
“Mike, no. It could be dangerous.” she said.
“I’ll be just fine. I’m only going to stand just outside the door. I’m not going all the way down the garden.” Michael said, walking over to the back door and unlocking it. Then he took a single step through the doorway to stand right outside and he looked around the back garden. He did this just as the security light timed out and turned off, its sensor unable to detect Michael where he was standing. This made it difficult for Michael to see anything while he waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness but then a moment later the light suddenly came back on as something moved within the sensor’s field of view. However, as Michael looked around he could see nothing that might have done this and there were no signs of movement in the vegetation that might be concealing anything from him.
“What’s out there Mike?” Emma asked from inside the house.
“I don’t see anything.” he replied before stepping backwards to re-enter the house and closed the door as soon as he could, not leaving any room for anything to get past him into the house.
“Then what triggered the light?” Emma asked.
“There must be something in the bushes.” Michael answered, “I think I scared it when I stepped outside so it stopped and then it ran off and triggered the light again.” then he placed a hand on his trouser pocket and added, “Oh damn. I left my phone in the study. I’m just going to go and fetch it. I wouldn’t want to miss John if he calls.”
“Good point. My phone is still on the desk as well.” Prudence added as Michael was walking back across the kitchen and she darted after him. Once they were in the hallway she looked back over her shoulder and when she was sure that Emma was not present she placed a hand on Michael’s shoulder, “Okay what’s really going on?” she whispered to him, “I saw you pick up your phone.”
“Likewise.” Michael replied softly.
“There is something outside isn’t there?” Prudence asked.
“I think so, yes. Do you remember those cameras we set up in the antiques store?” Michael answered and Prudence nodded.
“You mean the ones that didn’t work because they couldn’t pick up the lizard man?” she said.
“Exactly. He was cold blooded so the infrared sensors didn’t pick him up. Sensors like the ones used to trigger security lights.” Michael replied.
“So if something triggered the security lights then why didn’t you see it?” Prudence said.
“Because it was invisible to us but not to the infrared sensors. It had to be warm blooded and at least the size of a fox or dog.” Michael told her.
“Invisible? You mean that thing from the cellar? But how did it get here?” Prudence asked.
“I don’t know.” Michael answered, “Maybe it can keep up with a car and it just followed us or maybe there’s something about that chest or statue that it can sense from a significant distance.”
“So if we give that stuff to John it will go after him?” Prudence said.
“If it can follow anything from the chest or the statue then yes. Which means we have to find a way to deal with it tonight. I’d just rather not spook Emma any further than she already is.” Michael said and Prudence nodded.
“Okay I get it. So what’s your idea?” she asked.
“Well those notes and that book are in English so I thought we’d start by reading them. We’ll just take them back to the kitchen with us and browse at our leisure without making it too obvious why we’re doing it.” Michael told her.

Returning to the kitchen with the contents of the chest Michael and Prudence found Robert in the process of frying bacon on the stove while Emma was removing toast from the toaster.
I know it’s unconventional to have bacon sandwiches for dinner but it was the easiest thing I could think of.” Robert said as he glanced towards them. Then when he noticed the papers they carried he frowned, “What are they for?” he asked.
“We just thought it would be worth seeing if there was anything interesting in here.” Michael answered.

“Not at the table Michael. We can go through them in my study after we’ve eaten.” Robert sad, “Now get some plates, your bacon is ready.”
It was as the group was sitting down at the kitchen table that they heard a crashing sound from outside and they all turned towards the window. With the security light off it was much darker outside than in the kitchen and this made seeing anything outside difficult but Robert knew immediately what the source of the sound was.
“That came from the garage.” he said, “It sounded like someone trying to break in.”
“Wait while I get my vest. I’m going to go out and take a look.” Michael said as he got to his feet.
“Is it that thing?” Emma said.
“Let’s not jump to conclusions. I’ll just put on my vest and grab my flash light from the car and then I’ll find out.” Michael told her.
“Should I come too?” Prudence asked.
“No, you wait inside with Emma and dad.” Michael replied.
He then hurried to the study where his stab vest was leant against a wall and despite the damage to it he put it on. Then as he left the room he found the others waiting for him in the hallway.
“I’ll let you out the front door.” Robert said.
“Thanks.” Michael replied.
“Are you really sure it’s safe to go outside Mike?” Emma said as Michel and Robert walked to the front door.
“I’ll be fine. I’m not going far.” Michael reassured her a Robert was opening the front door but as soon as he looked outside he saw that something was wrong. Looking at the Range Rover it was easy to see that both of the tyres on the side facing the house were flat and from the way that the car was not leaning over it indicated that the tyres on the other side were also flat.
“I think someone didn’t want us driving away.” Michael commented before he darted the short distance to the Range Rover and opened it so he could retrieve his flash light and in the process he triggered the front security light, illuminating the front garden. Now that there was a significant amount of light to see by it was easy to see that the tyres of the Range Rover had been slashed and Michael could not help but remember the large pincers that the creature he and Prudence had encountered in the cellar possessed. He said nothing more about this though and instead opened the Range Rover to grab the torch he had placed on the back seat. Holding this over his shoulder again he made his way towards the garage where his father kept his own car and he checked for any signs of damage to the structure. Moving around the side of the building he saw that the side access door was ajar and that instead of simply opening it with the handle this had been smashed off to leave a hole through the door. Michael could not hear any movement from inside the garage but he was still cautious as he pulled the door open wider so he could shine his torch inside.
He saw that Robert’s car was still present but like Michael’s Range Rover the tyres had been crudely slashed to deflate them and effectively immobilise it. It was clear to Michael that the aim was to prevent any of the occupants of the house from leaving and he shone the torch around the interior of the garage just in case the creature was lurking anywhere inside in its visible state. When he saw nothing though he turned around again before he rushed back to the Range Rover to fetch Prudence’s torch before returning to the front door of the house where Prudence, Emma and Robert were waiting.
“The tyres on both cars have been slashed.” he told his father as he handed Prudence her torch.
“How would that thing know to do that?” Emma said nervously.
“If it’s anything like the lizard person we encountered then it could be at least as smart as we are.” Prudence told her.
“We have to call for help.” Emma said, “The police-”
“The police are useless. They won’t believe anything we say.” Michael interrupted.
“Then we have to get out of here somehow. Call a taxi or something.” Emma said.
“If we bring anyone here then we’ll just put them in danger too.” Prudence pointed out.
“Then what are we supposed to do?” Emma asked.
“I think perhaps we should try calling John again.” Michael suggested, “Right now anything he could suggest could be helpful.”
“What about the shotguns?” Prudence said.
“I’m sure we could convince the police that we were shooting at foxes if anyone called them but I don’t like the idea of shooting at a target that is invisible.” Robert said.
“My dad’s right. Shooting at a target we can’t see is a recipe for disaster and the guns are too long for us to use if it gets too close, which is highly likely if it’s invisible.” Michael added.
“Then it looks like I’m finally going to have the excuse to use the fetch stick that’s been hanging on my wall for forty years.” Robert said.
“You’re really going to use that thing?” Michael said, frowning.
“Can you think of a better idea?” Robert replied.
“Frankly, no and if it is some sort of monster killing weapon then maybe it’s just what we need.” Michael commented.

10.

“We should start by making sure that every door and window is locked.” Michael said when the front door was locked and bolted.
“Yes Michael, I do know how to prepare a defensive position.” Robert replied.
“Sorry, I’m not used to working with people with a military background any more dad.” Michael said. Then he looked at Prudence and added, “Perhaps you should go through the notes we found and see if you can get in touch with John again while my dad and I make sure that everywhere is locked up.”
“Sure.” Prudence said, nodding in agreement.
“What about me Mike?” Emma asked.
“Just stay with Prudence in the study.” Michael told her.
“My bedroom would probably be a better idea.” Robert said, “It’s upstairs so it’s more defensible and there’s an en suite bathroom if it’s needed.”
“Yes of course.” Michael said, knowing that being on the ground floor of the house meant that the study was much easier to break into than an upstairs room that would require an intruder to scale the outside all to reach the window, “Emma can you help her move all the notes there?”
“You’d better take the kettle as well. Plus whatever we’ll need to prepare enough food and drink for the four of us until at least morning.” Robert added.
“This is just to give me something to do isn’t it? Emma said before she looked at Prudence, “Come on.” she added and the two women headed back towards the kitchen where the notes from the cellar were currently along with the other provisions the group would need.
While Prudence and Emma were gathering these items from the kitchen Michael and Robert began to go round each room in turn to make sure than all of the windows and doors were securely closed and locked. The damage done to the garage door and car tyres indicated that the creature outside would be able to force its way inside anyway but doing so would create enough noise to alert the occupants of the house to where it had chosen to make its entry and allow them to respond.
“So how would you rate our chances Michael?” Robert asked as they were fitting the locks to the windows in the living room.
“I’m not sure. Prudence and I were about able to hold our own against the lizard people near Elder Edge and the more advanced one we encountered was scared off by the police.” Michael replied.
“Sounds like the creature my men and I encountered in Kenya then.” Robert commented.
“Then the thing that supposedly travelled through time to kill its victims was something that we never saw before it returned to its own time and John found us a way to deal with the last creature we encountered. If he hadn’t then there’s no way we could have done anything to stop the cult using it. Hopefully he’ll come up with an easy way to stop what we’re dealing with now.” Michael continued.
“And if he doesn’t?” Robert asked and Michael paused for a moment before he responded.
“When the creature became visible I got the feeling that Prudence and I were able to hurt it. It even reacted when she was throwing small statues at it. My guess is that it can be killed using what weapons we have available even without breaking out the shotguns but if it stays invisible then it could just stay out reach until its ready to strike.” Michael said before there was the sound of breaking glass.
“That came from the kitchen.” Robert said and the pair of them rushed from the lounge to the kitchen to investigate. There they found Prudence crouched down with a dustpan and brush while she cleaned up the remains of a smashed milk bottle.
“What happened?” Michael asked and Prudence looked up and smiled at him.
“Would you believe it just slipped out of my hand?” she said.
“We thought making a couple of flasks of tea would be a good idea as well as taking the kettle.” Emma added.
“Actually that does sound like a good idea.” Robert said.
“Okay but try to be careful. We thought that thing had broken in already.” Michael said before the security light behind the house came on again and Emma gasped.
“It’s that thing isn’t it?” she exclaimed.
“No this time it really is a fox, look.” Robert told her and he pointed through a window to where a fox could be seen moving across the back lawn, completely oblivious to what was going on in the house.
“We’ve got some time yet then but we should get a move on. Stopping us from leaving is one thing but I doubt that that creature out there is going to wait forever.” Michael said.
“Mike what if it’s already inside the house?” Emma asked and Michael smiled.
“Don’t worry about that Emma.” he said, “We know that it was outside when we heard it breaking into the garage and the only doors that we’ve opened since then have been blocked by at least some of us. The creature is too big to have slipped past while invisible so it has to still be out there somewhere. We should

hurry though, the sooner the house is secure and we're in a good position the easier it will be for us to hold it off."
"There are just a few window locks left for us to check downstairs. Then we can do the upstairs." Robert said and Michael nodded.
"Okay let's go." he replied.

Prudence and Emma took the basic provisions up to Robert's bedroom and stacked them on a chest of drawers before they returned to the kitchen for the notes recovered from the hidden cellar.
"We should get that statue as well." Prudence said when she had placed these on a bedside table.
"What for?" Emma asked and Prudence shrugged.
"I don't know." she replied, "But it can't hurt to have it, can it? I'll go and get it, you can stay here."
"No wait, aren't we supposed to stick together?" Emma said.
"I suppose so. Come on then." Prudence said before the pair of them headed back downstairs and into Robert's study where the strange clay statue was still on the desk beside the open chest.
"What about that?" Emma said, pointing to the chest when Prudence picked up the statue, "If we could need anything they shouldn't we bring that as well?"
"Good point." Prudence said and she placed the statue inside the chest before closing the lid and picking it up. As she turned around though she noticed a light from the other side of the curtains, indicating that something had just triggered the security light in front of the house, "Down!" she hissed and both she and Emma ducked, crouching as low as they could.
"It's outside isn't it?" Emma whispered and Prudence nodded.
"I think so." she said, wishing that she had not left her torch in the bedroom. Then she looked at the wall where the spear-like weapon Robert had called a fetch stick had been hung only to see that he had already removed it as he said he would, "Move slowly towards the door and keep low. It may not be interested in breaking in yet but if it can see the light then it may have figured out that someone's in here." she told Emma and she nodded in return.
Pushing the wooden chest ahead of her, Prudence began to crawl towards the door and Emma followed close behind her. As soon as she made it to the hallway Prudence got back to her feet and waited for Emma to catch up with her.
"Should we turn the light out?" Emma suggested and she moved her hand to the nearby light switch.
"No. That would give us away easily. Let's just get back to the bedroom." Prudence replied and then she hurried towards the nearby staircase. Once again Emma followed her and the two women made their way back to the bedroom as quickly as they could.
"Is that everything now?" Emma asked while Prudence set the chest and the statue it contained down on the bedside table where she had already put all of the notes.
"Just one more thing Emma, I want my laptop. It's just in my room though so I'll be back in a moment, okay?" Prudence said and Emma nodded.
"Fine." she said but as Prudence made her way to the bedroom she had been given for her stay Emma moved to the doorway of Robert's bedroom so she could watch, limiting the time that Prudence spent out of sight to less than a minute as she quickly retrieved the laptop computer before returning to the landing.
Then as she was coming back towards Emma, Michael and Robert appeared from another of the rooms with Robert carrying the fetch stick.
"Got everything?" Michael asked.
"I have now." Prudence answered, "With this we can at least go on line even if John and Harriet can't help us."
"Good. We've left lights on all over the house so that thing outside won't be able to figure out our location from which lights are off or on." Michael said.
"It was outside the front of the house. It triggered the light." Emma commented.
"We saw the light while we were getting the chest and the statue from the study. I don't know if it realised were in there but we got what we wanted and brought them back here." Prudence added.
"Then since we have everything we need perhaps we should withdraw to the bedroom." Robert suggested and all four of them went into the bedroom before he closed the door behind him, "I'm afraid the lock doesn't work." he said.
"The door to the garage was just smashed open. I doubt a lock would keep that thing out for more than a second or two." Michael said as he sat on the side of the bed. Prudence and Emma then sat beside him while Robert instead sat on a chair that he took from the corner.
"So what do we do while we wait?" Emma said.
"First I think we should try finding out what John may have found." Michael said, taking out his mobile phone and placing another call to John. With the phone on speaker mode he held it out in front of him
"Hello Michael. How are things there?" John's voice said when he answered the phone.

“Right now we’re holed up in my father’s house and that creature is lurking outside. It’s disabled our cars so we aren’t going anywhere. We’re hoping that you’ve found something that could help us.” Michael told him.
“I’m afraid I’ve not found anything in the Necronomicon about them but I did find a sketch of a humanoid figure with pincers in place of hands. The description on the back refers to the creature as a spectral hunter and I says that it could become invisible. It also says that the creature seemed tied to a particular area. How close are you to where you discovered it?”
“Roughly eight miles. Much further away than any of the previous sightings or attacks took place.” Michael said.
“How do we kill it?” Emma said suddenly.
“I’m afraid I can’t tell you yet.” John said, “The sketch and description I found doesn’t say if the particular spectral hunter it is about was killed. There is a suggestion that it is another artificial creation, just like the rat-things.” he continued.
“So Mary Anne Stone could have created it.” Prudence said, “I wonder why she didn’t use it to protect her from the mob though?”
“I can’t say with the limited information that I have available here. I’m hoping that there could be more in the material you’ve managed to recover. I need it as soon as you can get it to me.” John said.
“Well as we’ve pointed out we can’t leave right now John.” Michael said.
“Of course I’m sorry. What if I came to you? Give me the address and I’ll come right over.” John said.
“No.” Michael told him, “That would only put you in danger.”
“It’s a risk I’m willing to take. Besides what other option do you have?” John said.
“He’s right Mike.” Emma commented.
“Perhaps we should wait until morning.” Robert suggested, “In daylight he might have a better chance of getting here. Then he can take us from here along with the papers.”
“If it can become invisible does it matter if it’s daytime or not? Why not have him come right away?” Emma asked.
“Even with the security lights to rely on I’d rather move from the house to a car in daylight.” Robert said, “Plus it will be easier to approach the house safely during the day than needing headlights.”
“Then shall we say that you’ll call me at ten tomorrow morning with an update? If you need help then I can drive over then.” John suggested.
“Agreed.” Michael said, “In the meantime we’ll see if we can find anything in the notes or online that could help. Speak to you later.”
“So we’re going to be here all night?” Emma asked as Michael hung up the phone and he nodded.
“I’m afraid so but we don’t really have any other options.” he said. Then he looked at Prudence and added, “We’ll go through what we found at the cottage. Can you look online again and see if there is any more information about anything that happened in the forest since Mary Anne Stone vanished?”
“You think that someone else may have discovered a way to deal with the spectral hunter?” Prudence asked, nodding.
“But if someone knew how to kill it wouldn’t they have done it already?” Emma pointed out.
“Not necessarily. It could have been able to escape before being killed.” Robert suggested, “Or there could have been more than one originally.”
“How do we know there’s only one now?” Emma asked when she heard this.
“There was more than one rat-thing and they all attacked us when we trying to get into the cellar. If there was another spectral hunter then wouldn’t it have done the same?” Prudence replied.
“I’d expect it to, yes. More significantly we’ve only seen one security light come on at once. I think we can be certain that we’re dealing with just a single creature.” Michael added.
“So what about these notes then?” Robert asked, “Do you need me to read through anything?”
“Here.” Michael replied, leaning to where the notes recovered from the hidden cellar had been placed by Prudence. Picking these up he then handed the bound manuscript to his father, “Try taking a look through this. See if you can find anything to do with spectral hunters.”
“Is there an index?” Robert commented, smiling as he accepted the manuscript.
“I don’t think so.” Michael said.
“I noticed a few pictures when I glanced through it though.” Prudence said, “You might want to look for one of something vaguely human but with lots of fangs and pincers for hands.”
“I’ll do that.” Robert said before he began to turn through the pages of the manuscript.
“And that leaves these notes for us Emma.” Michael said, separating the loose sheets of notes into two roughly equal piles and he handed one of these to her.

11.

“I’m not sure whether I would describe this as bad fiction or lunacy.” Robert commented as he read through the manuscript Michael had given him, “This refers to the Nyarlathotep character as ‘The Crawling Chaos’ and I don’t think that that is limited to the atrocious handwriting.”
“So nothing about spectral hunters yet?” Michael asked and Robert shook his head.
“No. Most of the drawings in here appear to be maps and star charts explaining the best ways to contact this Nyarlathotep but there’s absolutely nothing that appears relevant to our current situation.”
“Same here.” Emma added, lifting the papers she had held, “These seem mainly concerned with the uses of local plants and animal parts. It’s a witch’s cookbook.”
Prudence was about to add in her own lack of progress with her internet search when they heard the sound of glass breaking downstairs.
“What was that?” Emma said.
“It sounded like a window.” Robert replied.
“It’s in the house isn’t it?” Emma said and Michael nodded.
“I think so.” he said.
“Are you sure we shouldn’t get the shotguns?” Emma suggested and Michael and Robert exchanged glances.
“They are rather cumbersome to be used inside,” Robert pointed out, “and if it’s invisible then aiming safely would be an issue. Not to mention that firing a shotgun inside would be difficult to explain to the police if the neighbours hear.”
“Then I think we should get ready for it. It might not know exactly where we are but it’s going to find us eventually.” Michael said.
“So how do we do this?” Prudence asked.
“You and Emma stay back. Dad and I will guard the door.” Michael told her and he picked up his torch before making his way towards the bedroom door. Robert also picked up the fetch stick and followed him, “Stick behind me dad. Remember I’ve got this vest.” Michael added, referring to the stab vest he still wore.
“Of course. If you say so.” Robert responded.
The two men then positioned themselves beside the door out of the bedroom, with Michael standing just in front of his father and both of them held their weapons at the ready. Meanwhile Prudence and Emma remained further back. Prudence also held her torch at the ready to use as a club while Emma stood behind her.
All four stood silently as they waited for the spectral hunter they were certain was in the house with them. For a time there were no sounds from the other side of the door until a soft creaking was heard and Robert smiled.
“Thank God for that creaky floorboard. It must be at the top of the stairs” Robert whispered, “Should we take a look?”
“No.” Michael replied,, shaking his head, “If it’s invisible we wouldn’t see anything anyway.”
All of a sudden there was a scraping sound from the other side of the bedroom door as something was dragged down it.
“It’s outside.” Emma said.
“I only want what is mine.” a rasping voice called out from the landing and Michael looked at his father and then Prudence.
“You never said it spoke.” Robert said.
“It didn’t the last time we met it.” Michael commented.
“You took that which does not belong to you from my home.” the voice from the other side of the door said.
“It’s home?” Prudence said, “Does that mean-”
“That Mary Anne Stone didn’t just disappear, she turned into that thing.” Michael said.
“Return what you stole and I will leave you in peace mortals.” the spectral hunter rasped from the landing.
“Listen to it.” Emma said.
“No, I don’t like the idea of that.” Michael replied.
“Why not?” Emma asked.
“It’s already killed people. If it’s so keen to get those papers back then that suggests to me that there really is something in them that threatens it.” Michael explained.
The handle of the bedroom door then began to turn and Michael, Prudence and Robert all braced themselves. All of a sudden the door flew open but nothing was visible on the other side. Guessing that the spectral hunter was in fact standing right outside the doorway Michael lunged forwards and swung his torch.

This produced a ‘thunk’ sound as it struck something and a moment later the spectral hunter materialised right in front of Michael.
Robert immediately jabbed at the spectral hunter with his fetch stick, aiming to impale the creature but despite having been struck by Michael’s torch the thing that had been Mary Anne Stone was able to dodge his attack and it swiped at him with a pincer. This attack struck him on the side of his head and he dropped the fetch stick, stumbled and fell through the doorway into the landing.
“Dad!” Michael exclaimed, concerned for his father.
As he was momentarily distracted the spectral hunter took a swipe at Michael again but he was able to leap back out of reach just in time.
As the spectral hunter moved to follow Michael, Prudence charged at it to try and distract it.
“Get away from him you bitch!” she yelled as she raised her torch but the spectral hunter dodged as she swung it and struck as she passed. The blow from the pincer was stopped by Prudence’s armoured vest but the force of the blow still caused her to stumble and she fell through the open doorway as well. Before either she or Robert could pick themselves up and come back into the bedroom though the spectral hunter slammed the door shut and wedged a foot against the bottom of it to prevent it from being opened again.
Michael charged at the spectral hunter again and swung his torch at it. In response the creature brought up one of its pincers and used it to parry the blow, knocking it from Michael’s hand. When the torch hit the floor it rolled away and instead of chasing after it he quickly bent down to pick up Robert’ dropped fetch stick. Clutching the spear-like weapon in both hands he stabbed at the spectral hunter. Although unable to move out of the way without allowing Prudence and Robert to get back into the bedroom the spectral hunter was able to react fast to enough to lean out of the way and then grab hold of the fetch stick to prevent Michael from turning it towards the creature and attempting another attack.
As Michael and the spectral hunter wrestled for control of the fetch stick Prudence and Robert banged on the door from the outside as they tried to get back into the bedroom and Emma just stared in horror at the hideous creature. Recovering her senses she looked around for anything that she could use as a weapon but the only thing she could see that was not fixed down in some way was the clay statue from the cottage cellar. Grabbing hold of this Emma raised it up over her head and all of a sudden the spectral hunter turned its head towards her and let out a growl. The spectral hunter did not move though, instead it kept its grip on the fetch stick to prevent Michael from attacking while leaving its foot wedged against the door.
“That is not yours.” the spectral hunter told Emma, “Return it.”
It suddenly occurred to Michael that he had seen the spectral hunter react like this once before, suddenly freezing in place. That had been in the hidden cellar when Prudence had taken hold of the statue while she was attacking the spectral hunter by hurling things at it.
“Break it!” he shouted and Emma stared at him, “Break it now!”
“No!” the spectral hunter called out, letting go of the fetch stick and diving towards Emma. However, she was much too far away for the creature to reach her with a single bound and she was able to hurl the clay statue to the floor. Then just as the door burst open again to let Prudence and Robert back into the bedroom she brought her foot down on the statue, smashing it into tiny fragments.
The spectral hunter immediately let out an inhuman shriek before it tuned into a cloud of foul smelling smoke that rapidly dispersed, leaving no trace that the creature had ever existed.
“What happened?” Prudence asked and Michael looked at Emma and smiled.
“Emma destroyed the statue and killed the spectral hunter.” he answered.
“How did you know that would work?” Robert said.
“I remembered that it didn’t attack in the cellar under Mary Anne’s cottage when Prudence grabbed the clay statue. It froze again when Emma grabbed it and I figured that the spectral hunter was worried that it could be damaged.” Michael explained.
“So it’s over?” Emma said and Michael nodded.
“Yes Emma, it’s over.” he told her.

Michael looked at the clock beside his bed when he was awoken by the sound of his mobile phone ringing before he looked at the phone itself. Seeing that it was just after three in the morning he groaned.
“This had better be important.” he said out loud as he reached for the phone and looked at the screen. He frowned for a moment when he saw Emma’s name and picture being shown on it and he quickly lifted it to the side of his head as he accepted the call, “Emma, it’s three in the morning. Are you okay?” he asked, concerned that she would only disturb him at this time if it was an emergency.
“Mike I’m sorry but I couldn’t do this any other way.” Emma responded and from the tone of her voice Michael could tell that she was upset.
“Emma what’s wrong?” Michael asked, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and sitting up.
“I can’t stay Mike. I’ve seen the world you live in now and it terrifies me. Those creatures you see shouldn’t exist outside of horror films and stories meant to scare children but now I know that they’re real and I don’t want to live every day of the rest of my life wondering whether you’ve finally met one that you couldn’t beat.

That thing in Makesfield Forest had been killing people for hundreds of years and it scares me to think that you could be the next body found somewhere. That's why I'm leaving Wellslaw. I'm leaving you Mike, I'm sorry but I have to."
"What? Wait no Emma we can discuss this. Where are you right now? I'll come and-" Michael began.
"No Mike I can't see you. If I do then you might get me to change my mind and all that will mean is I'll just end up leaving you later on when it will hurt us both even more." Emma interrupted.
"Emma if it means so much for you I'll give up investigating the paranormal. I'll even give up private investigations entirely if that's what it takes." Michael said.
"No you won't Mike. I can't ask you to give up your life for me but I can't spend my life afraid for you. I have to leave and I'm never coming back. I've left the ring in your mail box and I'm never coming back." Emma said before there was the sound of a car door being closed. This seemed to echo slightly and a thought suddenly occurred to Michael, "Please don't try and find me." Emma added before Michael heard the sound of an engine both over the phone line and from outside his apartment building and he realised that Emma had been right outside all along.
"No wait Emma." he said as he leapt to his feet and ran to the window but Emma hung up the call. Pulling back the curtain Michael was just in time to see a car with an illuminated taxi sign on its roof driving away, taking Emma out of his life forever.