

The Secrets of Moorvale Asylum

Sarah Starr

Chapter 1

London: Summer 1948.

Doctor Silver finished his rounds and prepared to leave the asylum. The good weather had lightened his mood and with rolled shirtsleeves he took off his tie and unbuttoned his collar. It was Friday and Alec had the whole weekend ahead. It was his turn for a bath, just as well in this week's heat, he thought. Briefcase in hand he signalled goodbye to Charge Nurse Stanley and left by a rear door. It was not his usual exit, but he needed a break in routine. In the grounds he welcomed the fresh air and savoured the sweet flowering shrubs. He passed alongside the laundry and on through the courtyard where nothing ever grew. Here the ground was hard and dull between scattered paving and not even a weed ventured up through the sparse soil.

Alec crossed this sterile patch and felt strangely relieved when his feet found some grass. But as he exited the east wall door a laugh turned his head. It seemed to travel from the courtyard, but was more likely coming from the wash house. Only a few patients ventured the grounds even in good weather, and Alec didn't encourage it in case of possible escapes. He closed the east door and made for the station. Tonight, Mrs Gee would be up to collect the rent and it was bound to be fish and chips for supper. With this in mind he developed a positive spring in his gait.

He strode past the tall gates of Moorvale Asylum and along the adjoining road. Ahead, the windows of The Mermaid glinted in the sun, winking at him. He slowed the pace, thought although unlike him, he might stop for a drink. His mouth was so dry there seemed little choice in the matter. Behind the pub he saw smog forming, shape-shifting masses that floated and wound down the road. He caught his breath and spluttered. Alec picked up his step towards the pub. But the smog gained momentum and swirled across his path like some abhorrent manifestation.

All at once he was surrounded by the sticky fug. He started to cough. Then up into his mind came his wife, how her lungs had become diseased, crippled. As if her arms were binding him he felt his chest contract. Anxiety and panic reared into

his throat. Instinctively he felt for his pipe in his trouser pocket. He let his slim fingers slide over the polished wood.

Involuntarily his thoughts switched to a crazed patient. She needed fierce treatment, but her hair was the same as his wife's and on the few occasions she had looked at him he was certain she had Ivy's eyes. In the smog Alec thought he detected their faces, rising and falling only to eventually form as one. The heat was pressing down relentlessly, pushing him towards The Mermaid.

He stumbled into the pub holding his throat. He managed to order a pint of bitter, and sat at a corner table before imbibing. The portly landlord was clearing glasses from a nearby table. He looked up and said, 'Evening Governor, nothing like a beer to quench a thirst.'

'Good evening,' Alec said in a weak voice. 'The smog's coming down out there.' He took another gulp of the precious liquid.

'In that case you're best off in here.' the landlord said. He set down the glasses. 'Not seen you before,' he said, and Alec pretended he had stumbled across the place by accident.

'We are a bit out of the way,' the landlord continued, 'I wonder sometimes if folks are nervous of the asylum.'

'Oh yes, perhaps,' Alec glanced down at his briefcase, almost ashamed he worked there.

'Some terrible things happened in that place,' piped the landlady's voice from behind the bar. She didn't look up from wiping the beer pumps. The landlord flicked a bar towel over his shoulder and turned to Alec.

'Missus is right about that Gov, and as it happens I'm a bit of an expert on the subject.'

'Oh?' Slightly intrigued, Alec moved towards the edge of his seat.

'I'll give you an example. Let me see, I'll bet you didn't know it was a workhouse before it became an asylum.'

'Well -,' Alec began.

'Maurice, don't forget the mild has blown.' the landlady interrupted.

'Oh bother, I'll just have to change the barrel.'

The landlord disappeared behind the bar for a while. Alec knew little about Moorvale's history. He stood up to take a look at some pictures on the walls. They showed the asylum's same stately entrance but years past, with several grubby looking children looking sadly into the camera. The beer was taking effect and Alec's knees began to feel light and spongy. The landlord returned and spent some time boring him with figures and dates, but Alec was unable to digest the specifics. He had no interest in how many orphans and poor had lived there. But he agreed to join the landlord in a whisky, hoping it might obliterate the face of the female patient still visible in his mind.

'Do drop in any time you're passing,' the landlord said as Alec left, 'I've got plenty more information where that came from.' He gathered up his towel and began to hum cheerfully as he cleared the empty glasses.

Alec turned into the street but felt groggy before the foul air hit his lungs. Clouds had blotted out the sun and suddenly he felt chilled. He was angry with himself for staying so long at The Mermaid, annoyed at having drunk so much on an empty stomach. His legs were like jelly and it was difficult to walk sensibly. Now bizarre thoughts stabbed his mind. He remembered the war and how he had tried to believe in it. But he had lost everything because of it, his house and his wife, as well as his private practice. When he eventually finished active duty, there was no home fire waiting for *him*. Now all he could do was hope for promotion at the asylum, but with only a few months under his belt he realised it was imperative to first prove his worth.

It was all her fault he reasoned, Ivy's own fragility that had caused her disease and downfall. If only she'd been born stronger of more robust stock. If she were here now he wouldn't be reduced to this lowered, even confused state. Damn the woman, he said under his breath, and damn the patient at the asylum with Ivy's hair.

The mist thinned and darkened before him, a thick grey mantle that clung to drab factories and broken ruins. Then from the well of his mind bobbed Ivy's dress, the red one she had worn when they first met, and which still hung in his wardrobe. It had matched her ruby lipstick and had looked sensational with her thick hair and dark eyes. It had clung to her contours and flared up as she walked, revealing

her wonderful legs. More than anything, at this very moment he needed the smog to lift and allow some colour into his life.

He'd missed the next bus so walked with numbed feet to Barnet station. On the train to Burnt Oak he dozed off into a stupor. When he awoke all he could see from the window was the grime brown of London, above which hung the damp bleak sky.

Juliette had woken, and now waited patiently in the hospital bed. She had no idea when she had been admitted to the ward, but did remember she'd pleaded endlessly to be released. It was only in the past few weeks they had restrained her. Staff told her it was because she had become far too disruptive, that this would make her better. Her body was cold and wet from the frozen sheets they wrapped her in; pulled so tight it was impossible even to wriggle her toes. It was their way of torturing her, she felt. These indefinite sessions would surely freeze her to death, but on no account could she leave this world before she found her baby.

More than life itself, she needed to find her child. Her only child had been taken straight out of her arms. It had happened some time ago, but now time had ceased to exist. She struggled to recall who stole her but the hazed outline of a uniform was all she saw. Juliette feared she must really be dead. Only one other thought was as distressing. That if her baby were somehow alive, surely it was now impossible they would recognise each other. Tears fell from her eyes and ran down her temples as she blinked. *Please let her be alive*, she whispered.

Weeks had passed and all this time she remained dulled with drugs. Now lashed to the bed with heavy leather straps, Juliette was tired. She tried to turn her body, but the restraints cut into her wrists and ankles, making even the smallest movement painful. Like a mad woman she began to laugh in small hiccups. It was too ridiculous to hold her down like this, as if she had the strength to flee. She strained her neck left to see the neighbouring bed but could only make out a pile of blankets, the lump beneath moving to a rhythmic snore. Slowly her head turned right, and she saw a grey-haired woman approach her bed. The woman was holding a doll in her arms; she rocked it gently like a real child. She was singing

very softly to it and Juliette craned to see more. The woman saw Juliette staring and scurried away to the other side of the ward.

She wanted to scream out, but all attempts dried in her throat. She slumped once more against the sodden pillow. She should have regretted hitting out at the staff, the turning point being when she bit one of them. But she no longer cared, only believing that escape though improbable had to be her main objective. She struggled to move again as if forgetting the straps prevented this. Even twisting from side to side her bonds remained tight. She was utterly and completely trapped. Her limbs ached and her skin stung where the straps rubbed. She lay still for a while in the sodden sheets and her eyes glazed over once again.

She could see her own little Anna; how beautiful she had been. Somewhere in her past she knew there had been a war. That was surely when her baby perished, so why did her heart insist otherwise? Juliette shivered as a sickly fit entered her body. The shivers were replaced by gentle shaking and soon these became violent contortions. A nurse walked slowly to the foot of the bed. He strolled up to her and waved a pot before her misted eyes.

'Down the hatch.' He pressed the pills into her cracked mouth and forced water on top of them. Her eyelids fluttered and her throat gagged on the medication.

Another captor: Yet another guard.

Juliette spluttered and retched but eventually swallowed the tablets. She fell into a sporadic half sleep, only surfacing into consciousness when the convulsions threw her against the leather straps.

At the table in his room Alec Silver wrote to Ivy. The effects of the booze had mostly worn off, but since leaving the pub he'd been plagued by his wife. He could see her face and almost hear the way she used to call him *Allie*, raising her voice as she did so. When their house was bombed in the blitz Ivy had miraculously escaped death. Out with her sister, she spent the rest of the night in an air-raid shelter. Alec filled his pipe with tobacco and carefully lit it up. There seemed little point in being sentimental about her now she was really dying, even as good as dead. Her doctors had told him just that, in a letter sent just days ago. During the war she'd contracted tuberculosis and later had most of a lung removed. The

surgeons said they only operated because she was still young enough to have children, but Alec hadn't been consulted. Afterwards her condition deteriorated. She was left to end her life in a Kent sanatorium while he waited patiently for the news of her passing.

Bittersweet tears gathered as he thought about the little time they'd shared, but more so because he no longer cared about her. It was intolerable for him to keep hoping she would pull through, rally round and find the strength from somewhere to recover. What he needed was to close the door on her life so he could begin a new one for himself. He was a man with a man's needs, after all. After his de-mob fortune had brought him to Gentleman's Row, to this house of meagre comfort, and from here he could, and he would build a new future for himself.

He rose and strode over to the bed, opened his bedside drawer and took out a freshly laundered handkerchief. Then, for reassurance he supposed, he opened the wardrobe and gazed at her red dress. He'd promised after her recovery she could wear it home. Hidden behind it hung the shirt from his old rally days. He reached out and found the cloth, feeling it black as coal between his slim fingers. Dark as midnight, he still believed it to symbolise a clean beginning for all of society. For years he'd imagined a nation free of disease, from weakness and especially free of *bad blood*. He closed the wardrobe door, and a small piece of the dress got caught up in the draught. Also like blood, he thought. Or like Ivy's flesh, now tainted and ruined with illness.

Alec washed at the small basin in the corner of his room, pulled his braces onto his shoulders and stretched a cricket sweater over his head. Soon Mrs Gee would be up for the rent, and it wouldn't do to let standards slip. Six months ago, when he'd moved in he had thought what a come down it was to live here. He and Ivy had enjoyed the luxury of a detached house in Edgware before the Luftwaffe flattened it to the ground. At the time he was on active duty and only learned about it weeks later when Ivy wrote.

A rap at the door startled him. Seconds later Mrs Gee entered with her cash box.

'It's only me, doctor,' she said, rattling the box slightly, 'I'll bet you're glad it's the weekend. You came in a little later tonight. Supper's in five minutes time.'

'Thank you, Mrs Gee,' Alec replied, 'I always look forward to Fridays' meal.'

Mrs Gee's lips produced a crimson rim around even teeth. 'I'm very pleased to hear you say so, I'm sure.'

Her words were slightly simpered, and Alec watched as she patted a curl of russet hair into place. She opened the cash box and wordlessly he passed over the weeks' rent, as if the process of her taking money from a doctor was slightly beneath him. Mrs Gee checked her wristwatch.

'If only everyone was as organised as you are, I can't tell you how much it would help. Well, I must get on, see you at supper.'

Chapter 2

The rain kept Lena inside, but she had her favourite toys, a scraggy rag-doll and a battered teddy bear. Rag-doll Tess had just performed a triple back-somersault and had landed on Teddy's shoulders, but Lena made his legs collapse and they ended up in a heap on her bedspread. She took her glasses off and tried them on Teddy, then replaced them on herself. Lena was bored and wanted to go out to play, even though the children in her road didn't like her much. Usually she could coax their friendship with sweets, having a fair supply from her parent's shop. She had no siblings but felt less special because of it, as if it were somehow her fault.

Lena started downstairs, not for the shop, but the parlour and kitchen. Before she reached the bottom stair she heard her mother's voice.

'I don't know what's wrong with her,' Lena heard from the parlour, 'she spends so much time mooning about in the back yard.'

'She'll snap out of it when school starts back,' the other voice said, 'My Alfie is just the same. These school holidays are far too long, and they're at that awkward age, that's what I think.'

'Lena's nearly ten and she's always been difficult.' her mother replied.

'Take my advice and give her something to do. I send Alfie on errands all the time. It keeps him out of mischief.' Lena recognised the lilting Irish accent of Mrs Scattergood. A scraped chair leg sent Lena darting back upstairs.

Next day Lena joined her father behind the shop counter. Usually in bad humour, he cheered up when certain customers came in. On these occasions Lena was sent away so he could talk business. Now she helped him by putting quarter-pound weights of sweets into paper bags, twisting the tops over so none could escape.

'You can help me sort out the stockroom this morning, Mother says you need something to do.' he said, looking at Lena through glasses similar to hers.

'Can I go out to play afterwards?'

'I don't see why not,' he said, and Lena smiled before she realised he hadn't answered her question. But that afternoon, for the second time that week, Lena

was allowed to go and play. The sun was shining, and housewives stood around smoking and chatting in doorways. Children sat on kerbs, playing marbles or just poking about in the gutter. Her pockets full with candy twists and sweet cigarettes, Lena skipped along the road to meet her playmates.

'Look, its Lena,' Horace shouted, 'hey come with us!' He ran off calling back, 'There's something we want to show you!' Nancy and June caught her arms in a tight grip.

'You're going to like this,' Nancy said, her eyes dropping to Lena's candy-filled pockets.

'What is it?' she said, trying to wriggle free.

'It's a secret, and you've got to be blindfolded.' June said, crushing Lena's plaits with a headscarf.

'Do I have to?'

'Of course you have to and stop squirming,' Nancy said, 'we had to go blindfold on *our* first visit.'

Dragged along, Lena felt her shoes scuffing on the asphalt road and knew she would be in trouble later over it. 'Don't go so fast,' she pleaded. It felt like an age before they stopped, when Lena felt herself being pushed against what felt like a low bar.

'Where are we?' she said in a small voice.

'You'll soon see. Are you ready?'

'Yes.'

The blindfold was whipped off, and Lena screamed. She was perched at the edge of a huge crater, and all that prevented her falling was a flimsy fence. She could see right to the bottom of the pit. Here the tip of a metal casing was sticking up and out of some water.

'Blimey it's a bomb!' She gasped, pushing her glasses back into place. She had seen bomb sites before, but none had been this enormous.

'Oh well done, brain-box,' Horace said. Nancy and June giggled, while Lena moved nervously away from the edge.

'Well, what do you think of it?' June said.

'It's really scary.' Lena regarded her friends with a mixture of anxiety and fresh admiration.

'Now you've got to take us somewhere even more exciting than this.' June eyed Lena with superior contempt. 'Do you think you can do it?'

'I'll try,' Lena said, 'I mean I'm sure I can.'

'You'd better,' Horace said, 'don't forget we're your only friends. If you don't do it, we'll never play with you again.'

'So there,' Nancy added, 'no matter how many sweets you bring.'

Lena nodded, and her eyes began to sting but she fought back the tears. Lamely she followed them through the streets, all the way home.

It was nearly time for Ellen's return from the asylum, where she scrubbed all day at Moorvale's laundry house. Gloria had been shopping in Cockfosters and also visited the local library. She'd bought the usual small basket of bread, rice and vegetables although she had saved enough coupons to buy some end scraps of ham. It had been a lovely day and perhaps because of recent rain the trees were showing a plump canopy of green. The market had been busy and the costermongers more jovial than usual. Gloria arrived home to the room she shared with her sister and made some soup with the vegetables and ham. She added more rice to the meal. It would help to bulk the soup out.

Life was meagre now their mother had died. Meals worlds away from the rich, varied fare they'd enjoyed in Jamaica. After the war nobody cared how their father had fought for Britain, or that he died while on active duty. Perhaps the colour of their skin made it not matter, as if somehow the pain of his loss could be less because of it. Now just her and Ellen, they must do the best they could. Her sister was employed but it was proving impossible for Gloria to find a job. She took in a bit of mending and was quite skilled at clothing alterations, but this work paid little, forcing them to live hand-to-mouth.

Every week Gloria visited the Labour Exchange and scoured the library papers for jobs, but when people met her they showed no further interest. It was evident work was scarce because of the amount of people who lined up with her. Most of them were men. Some of them called her names and others made her join the back of the line. She would pray quietly that someone, anyone, would give her a chance. The papers occasionally advertised for private work, so Gloria looked every day except Sundays. On that day the sisters attended the Pentecostal Church for the morning and evening service. Here they worshipped happily, and were able to sing with all the might of their faith. Although this was inspiring, sometimes Gloria's lungs were fit to burst.

She glanced over the shabby room before she gave the pot a stir. The sisters had managed to get digs even though most properties displayed notices that said: '*No Irish, No Blacks, No dogs.*' When their mother was alive they had better accommodation but when she went into hospital the girls were told to find other lodgings. They shared the bed, which stood against one wall, while any cooking had to be done over a small electric ring. An open fire provided the only heat and Gloria spent many hours collecting twigs and scraps of wood for it from the cemetery where her mother was buried.

A chest of drawers served as a table and a store for the few clothes they had, while extra linen was stowed in the trunk they had carried all their possessions in from Jamaica. A large bowl, jug and block of soap on the chest were used for washing themselves, and any cooking utensils. The privy and tin bath outside were shared between the twenty tenants of the block, named Plantation House. Gloria laughed to herself whenever she said it aloud. It was as if she and Ellen were still bound in servitude to the colonies. A picture of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane hung on the wall above the bed. It had belonged to their mother, and was the most prized of the few possessions they had. Gloria looked at the picture, hardly visible now in the dimming light, and gave thanks to God for the roof over her head.

'Where are we going today?' As usual Lena was eager to prove her worth and arrived with a supply of candies.

'It's your turn to take *us* somewhere.' June said, folding her arms and sighing the way her elder sister probably did. 'Don't you remember?'

Horace jumped up as some older, larger boys appeared at the end of the street. Nancy ran past Lena and shouted, 'Quick, run! It's Nobby Clarke's gang!' They disappeared in a cloud of dust but as she turned to bolt Lena's escape was cut off by the coalman's horse. Trotting across her path, she was delayed further by a mother pushing a pram along the narrow pavement. Suddenly the gang surrounded her.

'Oi, you're the kid from the sweetshop aren't you? Lena Crumbe!' One of them shouted.

'What a stupid name.' the largest boy said slowly, 'you should be as tiny as a breadcrumb but you're as fat as a house!'

'Ha! Ha! Ha!' they roared. 'Lena Crumbe, with a big fat bum!'

'I'm a sugar crumb, so there.' Lena piped up, not knowing where this foolish reply might land her. She squinted at them through her glasses.

'Is that what your precious mummy told you?' A different boy sneered, poking her in the shoulder. She looked down momentarily before summoning up a streak of courage.

'I'd rather be a sugar crumb than a maggot crumb,' and taking her chance to break free, started to run, adding 'like you!' She watched in terror as the biggest boy's face exploded in anger.

'Get her!' he bellowed, and immediately all four of them gave chase. Although tubby, Lena was a good runner, and knew all the side streets and alleyways. She soon outpaced them and gave them the slip past bombed out buildings and the newer footings of tenement blocks. She stopped briefly to rest in a doorway and heard the boys' metal heel caps in the distance. They were probably only one street away. She lunged into the road and ran as fast as her legs would take her. This was faster than she had ever run before, even on sports day. The wind made her plaits fly out while her arms pumped by her sides like pistons. She had never been so frightened, or so exhilarated.

But soon she was running into unknown territory, into places she knew nothing about. Eventually she reached a long-flinted wall. Barbed wire ran along the top of it and into the distance. Then she noticed a wooden door set into the wall. An old man was approaching from the opposite direction. Lena hesitated and pulled up her socks. She needed to hide, or the gang would find her. Crossing the road, the man ignored Lena and entered by the wall door. Seconds later Lena tried the handle. It swung open and she darted inside, slamming the door shut. She hid by the wall among shrubs and tall grass. Soon she heard the familiar clack of heels. They seemed to stop alarmingly close to her hiding place, on the other side of the wall.

'We've lost her!' a voice exclaimed, puffing between words.

'Little brat!' said another, 'I'd like to box her ears.'

'You can't do that to a girl, stupid.' said a higher, squeaky voice.

'Why not?'

'Hey, you know where we are don't you?' the squeaky voice said.

'Looks like a prison to me,' the first voice suggested.

'It's the nut-house dumb boy; the loony bin,' squeaky voice corrected, 'hey, maybe she lives here.' Laughter exploded on the other side of the wall and unseen, Lena poked her tongue out.

She crouched in the bushes a long time before moving. Having eaten all the sweets, she was sleepy in the afternoon sun. Suddenly she was yawning and realised she was waking up from a nap. Her legs ached and her feet burned from the long run and she wanted her bedroom. Dusk was replacing the daylight when Lena hurried to the door. There was no doubt she would be in big trouble if she was late for tea. The thought of tea-time, even with plain sandwiches and dry cake, made her mouth water.

But as she twisted the handle a terrible realisation hit home. The door was locked. She turned away and tried not to cry. The wall might have other doors, she reasoned, and began to walk along it in search of an exit. She passed under tall trees and through lower, unkempt shrubs. Her legs were stung by nettles and her

socks caught on brambles. No nearer to finding a way out, she sank to her knees and wept.

But through her sobs she detected a whisper, like the soft caress of a breeze. Lena wiped her eyes and looked up. Before her was a leafy glade. A mist swirled around it, while sparkled figures darted to and fro. Slowly she approached. Immediately Lena felt aglow as the lighted bodies danced towards her. Lena knew beyond doubt what she saw, and her heart leapt in wonder as her tears were gently wiped away.

Chapter 3

Ellen had hardly spoken since her arrival home. After supper she brought out a fur foot and held it up before the fire. Gloria gasped when she realised what it was.

'What are you doing with Mama's lucky paw?' she said.

'I've seen ghosts, sis. I got to have protection.'

Gloria had listened to similar accounts from her sister, but days later Ellen would always say it had just been her imagination. But tonight she seemed different, truly frightened. Gloria could see that much in her eyes.

'Tell me what happened.' she said. Ellen put down the stuffed paw and took Gloria's hands.

'Something odd is going on,' she paused as she looked nervously about the room, 'strange things, not of this world.' Gloria rolled her eyes, and gazed at the paw before replying. She knew Ellen liked to exaggerate.

'At the asylum?'

Ellen looked straight past her sister. 'I've seen it. I seen these little people - one of them bit me.'

Gloria got up from her stool and started to clear away the supper things. There was enough soup left for one more meal.

'You know what I think?' she said, 'I think you been in that place too long.' She bit into her lips as she washed the dishes.

'But I saw them, just like I see you, right beside a gravestone.' She whistled slowly through her teeth. 'Silas Tench.' she said, her eyes glistening, 'That was the name on the tomb.'

Gloria nodded. 'Alright then, suppose you did see them, what can we do about it? We're not meant to meddle with ghosts.'

Ellen's eyes dropped. 'I want you to help send them away with Mama's paw.' She held the charm between trembling fingers.

Gloria crossed herself. 'But it's a sin to do such things!'

'We've got to do it.' Ellen said bluntly, 'Or I can't go back there. Then we'll have no money and we will starve.'

Gloria thought about this and felt guilty for her small contribution. She realised Ellen worked her fingers to the bone washing and scrubbing five days a week, with minimal help to heave the linen and clothes in and out of huge vats. Full of boiling water, they stood as tall as Ellen herself.

'Alright, I'll do it,' Gloria said eventually, 'but you promise me to stay away from them graves. It ain't natural.'

'I promise,' Ellen agreed. They held hands and dropped the rabbit's paw onto the grate. The flames licked over the dismembered foot, and the smell of burned fur muddied the room.

'In the name of all that is Holy,' Gloria said, 'let the little ghost people be gone.'

'Amen.' Ellen added.

Together they watched the small fire crackle and spit, growing brighter and stronger until they could see the rabbit's paw no more.

Alec finished his morning rounds just in time for the appointment with his superior. In the administration block he paused outside a door marked *Superintendent, Mr J. Marsh*. Alec gave three precise taps on the door.

'Come in,' called a voice from within. Alec entered and sat opposite the heavy desk.

'You wanted to see me Jeremy?'

Marsh leant back with a sigh. 'Yes, thank you Alec. I've had a letter from a Dr Warren; I believe you might know of him?'

'Oh yes, Bunny was a year above me at Medical School.' Alec rummaged in his jacket pocket and fished out his pipe. 'He practices psychiatry for the War Office, I believe.' Marsh nodded affirmation and took the opportunity to ignite a cigarette himself. The two men puffed on the tobacco for a while.

'We'd all like to think the war was over and done with,' Marsh began, unaware of Alec's inattention. 'But Dr Warren wants me to admit three servicemen. He describes them as severely disturbed.' Here, Alec's eyebrows lifted. 'They've been working out their time in Egypt with an engineering detail but while out there all three became erratic in behaviour. When they finally got back to England, things really went downhill.'

'Some men can't take the heat,' Alec said, 'and its nothing but sand and scorpions out there.'

'Enough to drive anyone mad, I should think.' Marsh agreed. 'However, Doctor Warren thinks it's some sort of delayed shock.'

'Shell shock? What, all of them?' Alec shot Marsh a look of exasperation.

'Well, all three were part of a crack squad, but they got captured and put into one of those hideous concentration camps.'

'Oh.' Alec sat back in his chair. 'Do we know anything else?'

'Well, it's all a bit hush-hush. What they were involved in was and remains, Top Secret.'

Alec rested his pipe lightly on his knee, recalled briefly his submarine days, of being torpedoed and trapped inside the metal lozenge. Now he smelled the raw fear of his men. He lowered his eyes and puffed guiltily on the pipe.

'You see,' Marsh continued, 'these chaps aren't like the usual cases we get. Their symptoms are subtle but nonetheless corrosive. They're in military hospital at the moment, been there for a week or so. Doctor Warren was called in to do the psychiatric assessment.'

'Such cases can respond with shock treatment.' Alec stated brightly, 'I should like to try them on a course of insulin shock therapy.' Marsh frowned and blew out a long line of smoke.

'I'm afraid I don't share your enthusiasm for shock treatment,' he said, 'take that León girl for instance, I'm sure her memory is becoming worse. No, I feel they will need different, more active treatment.'

'Such as P.T.?' Alec offered, with a slight hint of sarcasm.

'Well, that sort of thing, yes.' Marsh stubbed out his cigarette in the marble ashtray on his blotter. 'But I'm sure, and Doctor Warren has also indicated this, that they will need some sort of project to do. Something positive but also physically demanding they can work on together.'

It was morning when the door was finally opened. Lena had been awake most of the night, and now she flew into the street and started to run. The grounds-man on his way out did not see her leave. By the time she arrived home her clothes were drenched with sweat and she was beyond exhaustion. The local bobby greeted her in the sweetshop as she barged through the door.

'Well, well,' the officer said, the shop bell still tinkling, 'we were all very worried about you, young lady. Where have you been?'

'Is that her?' Lena heard her mother's voice from the parlour. She came into the shop and slapped Lena round the back of her thighs. Her daughter winced.

'Whatever were you playing at?' Mrs Crumbe bellowed. 'I suppose you think it's funny, staying out all night while we were worried sick.'

'I was locked in,' Lena began, flinching as her mother again raised her hand.

'That'll do Marcia.' Lena saw her father enter the room.

'I'll be on my way then,' the policeman said, 'I can see she's back and not too much the worst for wear.' The little bell on the shop door tinkled again as he left. Lena wished he would stay and prevent whatever harm her mother might be planning to inflict on her.

'You,' her mother pointed a crooked finger, 'come with me.' Lena shot an anguished look towards her father, but he turned away to refill a sweet container.

At four o'clock Lena was put to bed. She was allowed no food, and given just a small beaker of water. She waited for her mother to tuck her in, but she never came. Her scalp hurt where the scissors had hacked at her hair, and she covered her face with dimpled hands when she remembered cruel words. Perhaps she was an evil child, she wasn't really sure. Her mother had pulled at her hair before cutting it off. Her thick plaits landed on the floor and her mother had kicked them

away. Tears streamed from Lena's eyes because no one would ever play with her now she was truly hideous.

A thunderstorm had been gathering all day. Keeping her toys close Lena heard the rain lash against the window. It was all Nobby Clarke's fault, she tried to explain. If she had any victory to celebrate at all it was that she had amazingly outwitted him and his gang. But she was more scared of him than before. Now he would really be out to get her. Lena was also unsure about returning to the asylum. Not because of what she had seen, but because of getting trapped there.

They had been so beautiful, fine beings with gossamer wings and delicate features. They had spoken to her, but she wasn't about to tell. She buried her face in the pillow and whispered, 'Mother cut my hair off, but I never told on you.' And then she fell into a fitful sleep, full of rain and wind and the soft, kind voices of the beautiful visions at Moorvale.

Juliette was heavily sedated to prevent her struggle against the restraints. She strained to remain conscious but was forced back into half-sleep. The sheets were dry, but she had endured hours immersed in freezing water. Now she was so cold her mind had frozen in time, a time when she was running for her life. She was moving fast, sliding downhill through fir trees and over huge mounds of white, pristine snow. Through and past deep ravines and mountain ranges, trying to keep out of sight and ever moving. And all the while in the near silence they remained on her tail.

Gunmen - getting closer now.

Through marshmallow valleys her skis sped faster, shivered across the vast white ocean. Like a bird she took to the air and flew over passes, down alpine slopes. She was sure she knew this route, she remembered it, but how had it happened, who was she running from?

'Juliette, wake up!' A voice demanded. She prised her eyes open and saw Alec Silver's face. She was in a different room, one she had been in before that held pain and suffocation. 'The doctor's here to see you.' The same voice snapped beside her.

'Hello Juliette,' Alec's words seethed. He leaned over the bed frame and looked into her bleary eyes. Unable to focus, she slurred a response. Alec addressed the nurse. 'Let me see her medicine chart.' Nurse Stanley duly passed it over. 'I'm going to reduce some drugs,' he said, 'I need her more alert to assess any improvement. Is this her last lot?'

'Two more to go,' Stanley stated, 'this is her third.'

'We will go ahead.' Alec said firmly. 'I want to finish the whole course. She's still having the baths and wet sheets daily?'

'Yes doctor.'

'Good. Gag her please, while I apply the electrodes.'

Juliette struggled as Nurse Stanley forced a rubber bar between her teeth. She felt white-hot pokers on her temples and unbearable pain as the electric current tore through her skull. Her body convulsed, thrashing and whipping against the straps. Stanley shot a look at Alec as he removed the electrodes.

'That was longer than usual, doctor.' he said.

'I'm quite aware of that nurse.' Alec snapped. Juliette's head had fallen to one side. Her temples were scorched and raw from the force of the current. Saliva dribbled from the side of her mouth.

'I'll get her straight back to the ward.' Stanley said.

'And keep the restraints loose,' Alec ordered. Stanley nodded comprehension.

That evening Alec dropped into The Mermaid. He thought how Stanley had been almost insubordinate in his outburst and wondered if he should report him. He was tired of this arrogance in people who thought they knew better than him, first Marsh had criticised his judgement and now Stanley. He ordered a pint of bitter from the landlady and asked after her husband.

'He's having a bit of a lie down,' she said, 'before the darts match tonight, ere, you ought to come along.' He offered his excuses but half decided he might go.

Maybe he could persuade Mrs Gee to join him; that would get the residents talking, not that they needed much encouragement. How he was changing his habits. In the past few weeks he had altered his routine several times, taking different routes on his way back to Gentleman's Row, and even omitting some nights to pay homage to his secret black shirt. Now forgetting to light his pipe, he drained the glass and made for the station.

Alec heard himself grunt and woke up. He'd missed Burnt Oak. The train was now at Edgware, the end of the line and where he had lived with Ivy. He rubbed his eyes, ran long fingers through now lank hair. This meant getting the bus back down the Edgware Road to make it in time for supper. He blamed the female patient over the beer and unexpectedly, fury pumped into his chest. He sprang from the seat and ran full pelt to the bus stop.

Gloria passed the sweetshop on her way to meet Ellen. The shop had bright window displays and a shiny doorstep. Gloria had applied for a job. Her mood was buoyant now they'd sent the ghosts away and also felt Ellen was calmer. She just prayed this employer would give her a position. Ellen's pay was meagre, but they had a bag of sweets now and then. With careful housekeeping Gloria afforded visits to the Turkish Baths. Important she insisted, to help Ellen's aching back.

In this place the girls leapt back to the heat of Kingston Town, how they had left it behind to come all the way to Great Britain. They remembered the long crossing and their mother's excitement, looking forward to a new world and all it promised to offer. They had said farewell to their family, not knowing if they would ever see them again. How they had all wept. Knowing that without a man it would be hard in all respects. When these thoughts assaulted Gloria she prayed for help from her God.

Ellen told Gloria about a Russian masseuse who had sparse conversation but did a good job. The steam-room reminded her of the laundry and how much she hated the work. It would kill her in the end, Gloria feared. In the heated rooms both sisters relaxed while knotted muscles released. Then for a time Gloria's anxiety dispersed. Like the steam that pumped into the baths, and through escape vents onto the street, seeping and mingling with the cold London smog.

Gloria picked up her step. Ellen would be waiting, and she didn't like to be late. The usual supper of soup and toast would have to satisfy tonight. On pay day she planned to buy more meat. But as she passed by it, the sweetshop window beckoned. She took a closer look. One window displayed pipes, cigars and cigarettes. But behind another glass, jars of candies shone out all colours of the rainbow. Gloria suddenly entered the shop. Behind the counter a rounded man wore spectacles, a white apron and a little white hat. As the bell rang he looked up. Suspiciously, he eyed her as one might observe a dangerous animal.

'Now then,' he said, 'I hope you know what you want because I'm just about to close up.'

Gloria pointed to a jar of liquorice comforts and said, 'A small bag of those please.'

The proprietor weighed out the sweets and poured them into a paper bag. 'That's a penny halfpenny. And I need your coupon book.'

She took the bag, thanked him and left the shop. The door was quickly locked behind her. She glanced back and noticed his grim expression. At least he hadn't shouted at her as others sometimes did. She tried a liquorice comfort. The flavour was warm, dark and exotic. At once it reminded her of home, but she needed to save the rest as a special surprise for Ellen.

On the outskirts of Barnet she passed by the bomb site. This was only curious as it was the deepest crater in London. There were plenty of smaller sites dotted throughout the locality. She'd heard two men talking at the edge of it when she first arrived in the locality. The hole was fenced off roughly to prevent kids from climbing in, the men said. They also discussed the possibility of the bomb half buried at the bottom, one day exploding.

The hole frightened her. It spoke of hatred, of destruction and death. It came from the very war that had killed her dear Papa. It was the gateway to the underworld and to the devil. She would never willingly look into it and risk her own soul's ruin. She crossed herself and hurried away from it. Ellen was waiting.

Lena slipped past the parlour door and dodged upstairs to the bathroom. She didn't want to be caught by her mother who was, even after a week still angry

and volatile. Lena didn't care it was something of a privilege to have a bathroom. Her father said it was because they lived behind and above the shop so there was not enough room for it outside. In any case that space was commandeered for his stock room. Lena could only remember this home although with her mother she'd been evacuated as a baby. She had never been taken into the City. Lena decided against asking to see the Tower of London for her next birthday.

The shop-front spanned the corner plot of Mill Road and South Street. Also on the ground floor were the kitchen and the parlour where visitors were entertained. Upstairs the bathroom divided Lena's bedroom and her parents' room, where her father sat and added-up the day's takings and ration coupons. Outside as well as the stockroom was a small backyard. Here washing was hung out to dry and an Anderson shelter was used as a tool shed.

Sometimes Lena hid there from both parents. She rubbed her head and glanced in the bathroom mirror. Her hair had grown a little. Even so she dreaded going back to school in such a condition. Carefully she opened the wall cabinet and took out the nail scissors. In her room she had collected some old wallpaper scraps and a small piece of pink sugar paper. She found some tissue paper and a length of string in her toy-box, and placed them on the bed with the other things.

Gently humming to herself she began to create.