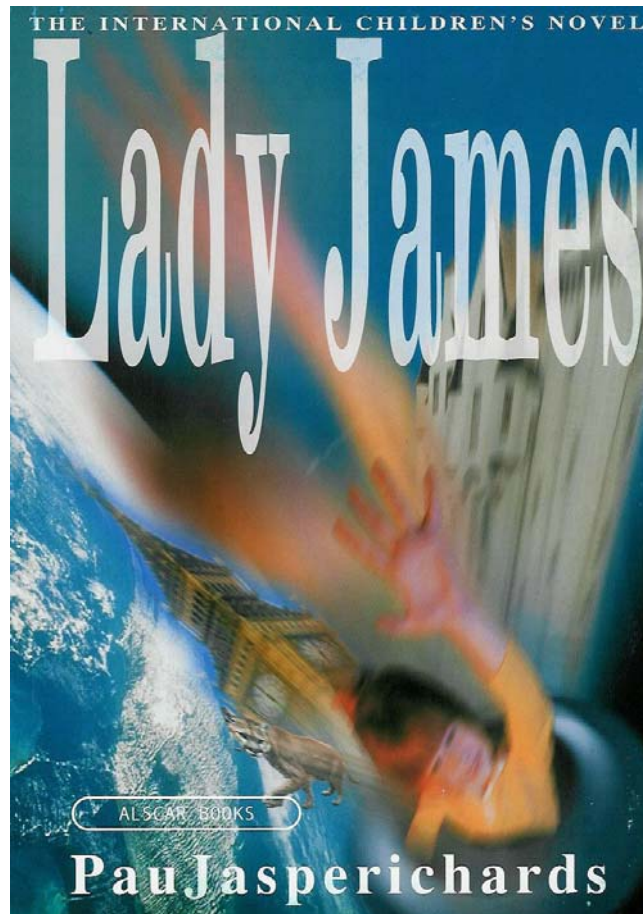


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## Chapter One

### Midnight Drama

Jade secretly peered around the top banister, with her nightgown trailing across the landing. She had been woken at midnight by the haunting sounds of moving furniture and muffled voices, which were becoming louder by the second.

"But I know he's there, he's still inside!" wailed Grandma, crouching over the lounge floorboards - a shiny saw sparkled from within her gripping hand.

Jade curiously leaned forward to discover what Grandma was doing beneath her mother's shadow, but only the painting of a young man, hanging over the mantelpiece, was visible, and he eerily stared at the two grown-ups, squabbling over his peculiar disappearance: It was a portrait of Grandfather and the only object not to be stacked sky-high in one corner!

"Stop it," pleaded Mother, stamping her foot whiskers away from Grandma's beavering hands. "We all saw and we all agreed: NEVER, NEVER, NEVER!" she boomed, causing the picture to smash to the ground.

Silence rocked the ramshackled room, only the thud of Jade's stampeding heart appeared to fill the air: she had always lived with her mother in Grandma's crumbling terrace, but nothing like this had ever happened before!

Grandma, with wavy, grey hair, uncut since Grandfather's mysterious death over fifty years ago, was eventually coaxed to her weary feet. The front room carpet was quietly rolled back across the rotting floor boards and the furniture meticulously replaced, but not before Jade spotted a trap door, secured by an ageing padlock!

Mother gently eased the hacksaw from Grandma's hand; "The key, the memory, the whole appalling tragedy was never to be spoken of - so why bring back the heartache?" she cried.

Grandma reluctantly wrenched the remains of a letter from the lining of the picture.

"It's the council, they're demolishing the house, the whole row, next week, to erect a shopping centre!" she spluttered between loud trumpeting blows on her spotted handkerchief. Grandma had rented the house, with Grandfather, over half a century ago and had pledged never to leave.

"Cavendish Row! But they can't - it's the oldest row of terraced houses in Matlock and not without proper notice. I'll organise a demonstration and..." Suddenly Mother stopped, her fighting spirit rapidly evaporating. Grandma's head remained sheepishly lowered; she had known - for a long while - it was obvious.

Jade, dazed by her midnight insight, toppled from the landing, head over heels, skull against oak, collapsing into an unconscious heap at the foot of the staircase

\* \* \* \*

"Don't move; you're going to be just fine," insisted her mother, with a loving smile.

Jade motionlessly focused her eyes around what appeared to be a hospital ward.

"A bit of concussion: that's all," she added reassuringly, holding Jade's hand firmly. Grandma, clothed in her usual, fading, black widow frock and spider webbed stockings, performed a large circular wave from the end of the bed.

"I'm not blind," Jade joked, with a painful grin.

"You're so lucky not to have broken any bones..."

"It's a miracle," interrupted Grandma, "Sleepwalking, I bet."

"Yes," Jade dizzily confirmed, relieved to have been handed an excuse.

"Told you," said Grandma smugly, "Now fetch me a drink. It's my turn to talk to Jade." Mother stretched puzzlingly out of her bedside chair: Jade had never sleepwalked before.

"Now," insisted Grandma, stealing her warmed seat. Mother suspiciously departed triggering Grandma to edge forward and inquire; "What did you see?"

Jade, taken by surprise, replied, "Everything."

Grandma uncomfortably leaned back to consider her response. A slight nervous twitch suddenly turned into a manipulating smile. "I need your help, but it's a big secret."

Jade nodded frantically, made speechless by the honour.

I need to open that trapdoor, before the house is demolished - to rescue your grandfather," she announced in a hypnotic whisper.

Jade's face whitened as she uttered, "You want me to recover Grandfather's skeleton!"

"No; he's still alive, I have heard his voice at night and the howls of..."

"Grandma, leave this room immediately!" Mother furiously demanded, throwing a vase of flowers all over her head. Grandma stubbornly tightened her grip on the armchair, as daffodils sprouted from her hair.

"Now!" screamed Mother, firing on all cylinders as she lunged, like a leopard, at Grandma's neck! Grandma, old but very determined, fought for her right to speak, and like fighting tom-cats, they tossed to and fro, tumbling to the ground in a web of upset.

Jade quietly slipped out of the bed and rescued her clothes from the wardrobe: she wasn't staying to watch this dreadful spectacle.

"Nurse!" Jade called down the dimly-lit corridor. "Grandma's had a bad dream and she's now attacking my mum," she mischievously lied. The nurse instantly smacked the panic button summoning doctors and nurses from all directions, who descended upon the room like a tribe of crusading warriors.

"I have her," panted a nurse, tugging at Grandma's leg, but still the women fought.

"Out of the way!" ordered a doctor, before thoughtlessly spiking Grandma's leg with a syringe full of sedative.

Grandma loosened her grip on Mother's hair as she swayed towards unconsciousness.

"Quick, lift her back into the bed," continued the doctor, while a nurse gently helped Jade's mother to her feet.

"But, but, but my daughter was in that bed," Jade's mother argued, but the hospital was so busy they had all disappeared!

Jade, unnoticed, calmly weaved her way out of the hospital, helped by the trailing commotion.

"Jade!" suddenly shouted a surprised voice from the hospital waiting room. Jade impulsively ducked behind a wheel chair. "It is you," continued the lady, peering over the chair, holding a bunch of flowers in one hand and her son in the other. "Hi Aunty," replied Jade as the flowers were lovingly plunged into her face.

"These are for you," explained Aunty Mavis. Jade stood up and accepted them with a begrudging smile - she had been expecting chocolates.

"What's going on?" asked Aunty Mavis, realizing Jade should be in bed.

"There has been a change of plan," Jade announced, who was always quick to spin a yarn if it would get her out of trouble.

"They've said I can go, because Grandma needs my bed – Mother wants me to go home with you while she looks after Grandma."

"Grandma's ill!" panicked Aunty, taking a swig of whisky from her silver casket.

"Just tired," Jade quietly reassured her, before forcibly guiding Aunty and her son, Peter, to their waiting car.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The story**

Aunty Mavis tucked Jade snugly into the spare bed, alongside Peter's. She often slept here; Peter and Jade were cousin pals.

"Who would like a bed-time story?" asked Aunty Mavis, who always told the most fantastic tales.

"Yes please," begged Peter, crouching forward with anticipation.

Jade, tired and exhausted, shook her head and was about to say 'No' when the final piece of the night's mysterious events slotted into place.

Aunty Mavis had once told them a fairy tale about two girls and their father's journey through a bolted trapdoor. But the tale must have been true, Jade thought, because Aunty and her mother would both have been young girls, living in Grandma's house, when Grandfather clambered in!

Jade began to shiver: in the past she had hidden under the covers, too frightened to listen, with her fingers rammed into both ears, and missed most of the ending - but this time she was determined to hear every single detail.

"Aunty," she began, "tell us the story about the man-eating monster under the bolted trapdoor."

Aunty Mavis thought for a moment before answering, "But that is a special story for Halloween."

"Please," pestered the children, in a whining partnership, as it was also Peter's favourite story. "Ok then, but don't tell anyone I told you this horrible tale, not even your mother, Jade. It's a secret story, a sad story..." whispered Aunty Mavis as a tear trickled from behind her saucer-sized glasses.

Aunty Mavis dimmed the light and greased back her long black hair, like a vampire, before beginning the fable in a grisly, ghastly voice:

"Once upon a time there were two sisters who lived with their mother and father in an old Victorian house, still lit by candles and warmed by a coal fire.

One day, during the Second World War, their father heard a strange, howling noise under the living room floor. It sounded like a frightened, trapped animal. The two sisters begged their father to launch a rescue attempt. Reluctantly he agreed to investigate, removing the furniture and rolling back the fraying carpet. To their astonishment, under a strange layer of sand, was a trap door, sunk into the floor, secured with a keyholeless padlock!

Father excitedly fetched a hacksaw and began to saw the pad-lock off, but Mother became nervous and told him to stop. It was padlocked for a reason, she had argued. The sisters were convinced it had been locked to keep a treasure hoard safe: an idea that made Father search even harder!

At last the pad-lock was wrenched apart and the eager family gathered around as the door, with its rusty hinges, was gradually forced open. "Pass me a candle," ordered Father, before cautiously probing inside. It was no good: the room was too big and the candle too dim to illuminate the cellar. He needed to climb down the flimsy ladder, down into the padlocked room!" growled Aunty Mavis, menacingly.

Peter dived under the bed covers.

"Stop that and listen!" Jade demanded, "We're not babies any more," she sneered; convinced Peter should also hear every single word spoken.

"Quite right," agreed Aunty Mavis, "I shall continue..."

Father peered from side to side, one hand holding the candle, the other the ladder. 'The room's furnished!' he suddenly yelled. Two single beds lined the wall, a dressing table and a double wardrobe stood opposite, while children's toys lay abandoned - scattered across the carpeted floor - but there was no sign of life.

Father stepped off the ladder and gingerly edged across the room, crouching for a moment to pick a china doll up off the floor. It was Victorian, covered in dust, but in immaculate condition. The elder sister feverishly called for it. He threw it up; she caught it and never let it go."

"Is that the doll in your glass cabinet Auntie Mavis?" Jade inquired. Auntie, taken by surprise, refused to answer and instantly ordered Jade to stop interrupting, otherwise she would not finish the story.

"Now then, as I was saying: Father threw up the doll and then wandered towards the dressing table. A thick layer of dust covered it and everything upon it. An old, brown photograph, leaning against the mirror, caught Father's eye. He lifted it up and wiped it clean, revealing a large family, dressed in old-fashioned clothes: a mother, a father and seven children! Two of whom, it became apparent, had slept in the cellar!

Father searched the room for clues as to why the door had been bolted and from where the strange noises had originated, but the elder sister Mavis became impatient: she wanted the photo and all the other disbanding toys! So, when her Mother was not looking, she catapulted down the ladder.

'Get back up,' ranted her mother, but it was too late, she was already at the bottom, snatching the photograph from her father's palm.

'Don't worry, mother, she'll be safe with me,' insisted father, but little did he know!

Father's candle formed dancing shadows on the horse-and-carriage wallpapered walls which entranced the girl, but the pattern on the ceiling was different: it appeared to partially vanish into a hole. Mavis was just about to ask her father why there wasn't any sign of the hole in the living room floor, when an enormous, brown, blubbery creature, the size of a killer whale, squeezed out of the hole and landed, with a squelchy thud, on top of Father's head! The girl screamed as the creature spread out a pair of flapping wings and began to circle Father's flattened body. Mavis scrambled onto the ladder and frantically climbed as the brown monster popped out an even browner tongue and scooped father up! With a sniggering laugh, it flew back into the hole, carrying Father, like a large sausage snack!

And from that dreadful day the room has always been padlocked," concluded Auntie Mavis, wrapping a black lace shawl across her mournful face.

There was a short, respectful silence, before Jade fired an array of investigative questions:

"When the brown monster carried Father away, was he dead?"

"Obviously," replied Auntie, reassuringly.

"But why didn't they try to find out? And who decided to lock the door for good?" Jade continued to quiz.

Aunty nervously twitched her eyebrows - the questions were making her feel uncomfortable. Eventually, without any thought for the consequences, she answered, "Father."

"But you said Father was dead." insisted Jade, who's detective mind was spinning with confusion.

"Well he was almost dead - when the monster lifted him up he regained consciousness and screamed: 'Bolt the door, and save yourselves!' After that he vanished through the hole to be eaten alive," Aunty explained in a faltering voice. "Now fall to sleep before the sun rises," she demanded, holding back an avalanche of tears, as she quickly left the room.

Jade feverishly slipped out of her bed and perched, wide-eyed, next to Peter's.

"I have something to tell you - it's a big secret and I need your help."

Peter nodded half-heartedly: 'It's another of her mischievous plans,' he thought, with an eye-closing yawn.

"It's been a very strange night and it all started when I saw Grandma trying to sever a padlock off a trapdoor in the living room..." Jade began

Peter listened doubtfully to her account of the night's happenings and their connection with Aunty Mavis' story, until sleepily concluding, "So you think Grandma's right and that Grandfather is still alive?!"

"Yes."

"But how?" asked Peter, not convinced and generally uninterested.

"Magic! It's everywhere down there: the hole, the flying monster and the continuing noises," she argued, waving her finger like a wizard's wand.

Peter thought for a moment, then drifted off to sleep, much to Jade's annoyance! The children's short slumber was abruptly broken, at first light, by Jade's anxious mother bursting into the bedroom.

"Jade, what happened?" her mother fretted. Jade quickly concocted another tale about losing her memory, which her Mother swallowed quicker than a tot of Scotch!

"Now up you get - we're going home."

Jade flung on a pile of crumpled clothes and cat-licked her face, before following everyone down to the hallway.

"Thank you, Aunty, for looking after me," said Jade with a polite smile. "Could Peter stay at my house tonight?" she added, with a devious stare at the Victorian doll and the ageing brown photograph in Auntie's glass cabinet.

Peter shook his head in a vain attempt to avoid the offer.

"Of course he can," agreed Aunty Mavis, eager for a night out on the town.



## Chapter 3

### The other side

Peter reluctantly arrived on Jade's doorstep; unhappy at the thought of what scheme his cousin was forming.

"Now don't be silly - go inside," insisted Aunty Mavis. "You always end up enjoying yourself," she persisted, with a forceful shove through the opening door.

"I'm ready when you are Mavis," Jade's mother called, through a thickly-plastered face of age enhancing make-up and sticky, false eyelashes, all of which made it almost impossible for her to see, as Peter was dumped in the lounge next to Jade's innocently smiling face.

"Bed at nine and straight to sleep," she instructed, with a knowing stare at her daughter.

"We'll be at the pub if you need us," Aunty revealed, as the front door was swiftly shut, signalling Jade's mad scramble to set about adventuring!

"What are you doing?" Peter panicked, as Jade dragged the furniture across the room, but he had no need to ask, and Jade's simple reply, "You know," did nothing to reassure him.

"But won't Grandma hear us?" Peter worried, desperate for any excuse.

"No, she's still in hospital!" Jade laughed wickedly. "But her hacksaw isn't," she giggled, as it slid out of her tracksuit pocket, and, with the removal of the carpet, chimed against the tarnished pad-lock. With quick, sharp strokes Jade drove the blade fearlessly across the metal loop. The catch suddenly sliced apart and dangled free in her waving hand.

"Now the party can begin!" she announced, with a lopsided grin at Peter, but to her surprise Peter was smiling too! He was as impatient as Jade to unseal the trapdoor!

"I thought you were scared," mumbled Jade, nervously.

"Oh yes, I am, but I'm not the one going down there - you are! And I don't believe you will," he challenged, but that was like showing a red rag to a bull. In a flash of madness Jade scrambled down the rickety ladder into the dark pit below, blindly feeling each step of the way.

"My torch!" Jade suddenly remembered, once her leading foot had touched the ground, "I've left it behind." Peter glanced around the upturned room: the torch lay marooned on the abandoned sofa.

"Hold on I'll throw it down." he replied.

"No you might break it - bring it down."

"No way," insisted Peter, who began to scour the room for something to help lower it.

"Hurry up I'm.... cold," lied Jade, with thoughts of climbing back up and forgetting the whole episode!

Peter tugged a ream of wool off a pair of knitting needles and tied one end to the torch, before slowly unravelling the purple yarn. The torch glided down the faint shaft of light cast by the lounge lamp, like a bait on the end of a fisherman's line.

Jade stretched out an impatient arm to collect the torch. With a flick of the switch, it was on, illuminating half the cellar at a stroke: horse-and-carriage wallpaper encircled the room, toys lay abandoned, a bed unmade. "It's the same room!" Jade instantly roared in horror. Her terrifying screams echoed relentlessly around the enclosed cellar, forcing Peter to plug his ears with his fingers. 'Yes, it was the same room as in his mother's story,' thought Peter, 'but that didn't mean the rest was true.'

Suddenly the torchlight mysteriously flashed across the room then flickered out, followed by the fading of Jade's echoing screams.

"Stop mucking around and switch the torch back on," ordered Peter, furiously - but nothing happened, not even one of Jade's famous, stubborn replies. "If you don't stop trying to scare me I'll shut the trap door and lock you in until your mother comes back," he warned, but still there was no answer.

"I hate you," screamed Peter, frightened and very angry. He stuck his head further in, desperate to see his cousin, but the more he strained his eyes, the less he saw. The room was growing darker and browner - a slimy brown! A huge, slathering tongue suddenly slithered against his face! Peter dived behind the sofa as though a bolt of lightning had blasted through his body. But it was too late. The brown monster instinctively squeezed through the trapdoor and onward, towards the quivering sounds of Peter's terrorized body.

"GULP," went the monster, as he scooped Peter up, like a pea on a spoon! In an instant the monster backtracked, swooping down the cellar and through the hole in the ceiling!

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wake up," whispered Jade into Peter's gooey ear.

Peter snorted loudly as he awoke, confused and very slimy! "Who are you? Where are we?"

"It's me stupid, but I don't know where we are," Jade answered. Peter drowsily raised his head to scan their surroundings: it was a small, stone

walled chamber, windowless and slightly refrigerated. The only furnishing was a large, mangled, smelly blanket, which Peter and Jade had the misfortune to be lying on!

"We're prisoners!" Peter screamed, draining the blood from his rosy cheeks.

"But what about the open entrance behind you?" Jade questioned, staring at a stone archway.

"It's a trap," he insisted.

"That it maybe, but I'm not staying in here," she announced, with her usual determined stride into the unknown.

"Slow down, what about the monster?" Peter warned.

"What monster?" asked Jade, curiously.

"The one that brought us both here," he trembled, his teeth clattering and his knobby knees knocking together at the very thought.

"I didn't see any monster. One minute I was screaming 'it's the same room' and the next - I was lying next to you."

Peter was deeply concerned, but Jade wasn't giving him any chance to discuss the issue; she was already marching down a long, sandstone corridor adjacent to the chamber. Four shorter passageways crossed its path, but Jade's interest was fixed on a wooden staircase at the far end.

"It's very bare around here," she muttered. "Our house must be just up these steps," she decided, but to her surprise there was yet another lengthy corridor, only this one radiated warmth, sounds, and even mouth-watering smells, which grew more intense with each hesitant step.

"Aren't you going to try some of these doors?" asked Peter, who continued to scurry behind. Sturdy oak doors lined the barren, stone corridor, appearing very inviting - almost asking to be opened, Peter thought, but he was determined not to lose his fearless cousin.

"Shush," Jade ordered, stooping to her knees, with a flapping hand movement, which instructed Peter to follow suit. He silently crawled along side and whispered, "What's going on?" But he had only to look and listen - there was a balcony of some sort ahead and he could hear the sounds of people arguing below!

The children crawled cautiously forward, barely daring to breathe, until their heads peered through the wooden banister into the great hall below. Their eyes traced with fascination the path of a steel chain, suspended from the ceiling, to a grand chandelier formed of wood, bronze and a dozen illuminating candles. Directly below shuffled two old people, around an oval, oak table, playing some sort of word game. But before the children had had a chance to view the rest of the room, the brown monster, who was lounging beside the roaring fire, caught sight of their glaring faces and impulsively jetted towards them, like a cat pouncing on a pair of stranded mice!

"Quick - RUN!" screamed Jade. They both leapt to their feet and bolted back along the corridor. The monster excitedly took chase, flying over the balcony and onward.

Jade hurtled towards the stairs, hastily followed by Peter, as the monster swooped menacingly closer. Suddenly the creature cranked open its gigantic, hollow mouth and gobbled Peter whole, to the total horror of Jade!

"Give him back," she demanded, as she charged at the monster, beating it on his nose with her clenched fist. The monster gave out a loud muzzling yelp and spat Peter back out onto the hard floor. "Now don't you ever do that again!" cried a very angry Jade. The monster whimpered, like a naughty dog, before nervously passing Jade to escape down the stairs.

"Let's follow it," she decided. Peter, who was still dazed, was plucked from the ground and wrestled down the stairs in another of Jade's ill-thought-out plans.

The monster shot along the lower corridors, turning sharply at every corner in a desperate attempt to lose his pursuers, before painfully ramming through an oak door. The children heard the smash of the opening door ahead and slowed their pace. With some thoughtful hesitation, they inched their heads into the room.

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