

Gentle Reader,

This is a murder mystery. So there has to be a murder. But you will be mightily relieved to hear that all the gory detail is in the prologue. Thereafter, there will be no need to grit your teeth, or clutch your pearls, or whatever you do under extreme stress.

Phil



Prologue

Staunch the bleeding?! That was easier said than done. He couldn't get the tea towel pushed tight enough into the wound. He tried to pull the scissors out. The tea towel was soaked through bright red with frothy blood. *Useless with scissors in the way. Not a chance!* He knew they had to come out, now! The top scissor blade were lodged between the fourth and fifth ribs just to the left of the sternum, the bottom blade between the third and fourth. Right up to the bright orange handles. Holding the wound open.

He knelt down, grasped the scissors in his right hand and pulled. His fingers slid off the handles, slippery with blood. He grasped the scissors again, wrapped his left hand over his right. A white knuckle hold like a vice. Panicking. He worked the scissors back and forth. Grating of metal on bone. His mouth filled with bile. Still they stayed wedged tight.

Upstairs a door slammed shut. It didn't register.

He stood, panting, his mind frantically working. He placed his foot on the chest, bent double, seized the scissors and heaved. The blades shifted slightly unleashing a fresh spurt of blood that splashed his shoe. Heaved again more forcefully, shaking now with the effort.

He never heard the feet running down the stairs. Nor the sound of gasping for air. Nor the handle turn. So focussed on trying to staunch the wound. So much blood. He never heard the fist beating the door, nor the kitchen door rattling in the frame. Then the door frame splintered and broke as the door flew open. With a roar, a figure charged into the room. Strong, some muscle running to fat, but still able to send him flying with a single blow to the face. His head struck the edge of the worktop. He tasted his own blood now. Semi-conscious he crawled to the back door. Instinctively. The assailant was knelt over the body, screaming like a madman. Simultaneously, they both scrambled to their feet. His eyes weren't focussing properly. He threw open the back door, ran down the back steps

two at a time, only just staying upright. Stumbled, turned his ankle at the bottom. A crashing descent of the steps echoed behind him. Never slowing he ran across the back lawn. Just catching the unrolled garden hose. The pursuer was gaining. He partially recovered, vaulted the flower bed, twisting as he landed on the drive, his balance askew. The corner of the garden shed caught the left side of his head. His knees went. Gravel on the ground hit the other side. A second's pause. Then white hot anger landed in a kneeling position on the small of his back.

Pain in the kidneys took his breath away. Then the beating began. Alternate sides of the head. The man knew what he was doing. To kill with a head blow, it is best to beat the human brain sideways. Each blow hurt less and less. Relentless, repeated, retribution. Now it seemed the blows were happening to someone else. Far, far away. Then everything, the pain, the sounds, the smell, all faded to a silent blackness.

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Chapter 1

Somewhere. Now.

To be honest, I am surprised to wake up at all. I blink. It makes no difference. The air is black and heavy. I can't move. I can hear a beating sound, although my face and head are numb. It feels like I'm buried in sand. Although I seem to have very little feeling at all. The sense that I have been absent for weeks weighs me down. It takes me a while to come fully awake. My eyes are gradually adjusting to the darkness. I can see a bit, and move a bit now. The paralysis of sleep is slowly receding.

I'm in a small room echoing with a dull nightmare reverberation. Flat on my back on a bed. I turn my head side to side. The room is unfamiliar. The plain walls are an unassuming shade of mid-grey, no decor, no window. Featureless. Just a bed and a small en-suite. The room is clean. No smell of bleach or urine. I draw comfort from the ambiance of clinical sterility. I hate dirt and clutter. Not a prison then. It feels emotionally cold. As if nothing ever happens here. Not a hospital either. But certainly not home. The ceiling is blurred.

I struggle to sit up. There's no pain, but I'm weak as a newborn lamb. I sit on the bed for a while until my head clears a bit, and then clinging to the bedhead, slowly stand up.

Maybe it is a low budget motel. The kind where you have to ask for an extra pillow. And one tiny bar of soap is the sum total of the toiletries provided. My thoughts start to collect themselves. Why don't I have a headache? And what's this beating? My eyes don't seem to focus properly.

I'm disconcerted by the lack of detail anywhere. There's nothing to suggest where I am.

I'm a logical thinker. If anybody can work it out, I can. The flooring is plain and flat.

There's some faded spots of doubtful staining. The ceiling seems way too far off and hazy.

Which is disorienting. Opposite the bed, the door is plain flat, painted the same apathetic grey as the walls. Aluminium handle, no keyhole.

The beating sound is getting more urgent. Then I realise someone is knocking to come in. I let go of the bedhead. And immediately slide to the floor. The knocking continues. It is impossible for me to get up again, so I start to crawl towards the door.

A voice from outside calls, 'Take your time.' Sounds like sarcasm? I make it to the door, reach up and rotate the handle. It opens and a man walks in. He looks down at me, helpless on the floor. Grinning, unconcerned, he reaches down, puts a hand under each armpit and hoists me vertical. He's about an inch taller than me, but he's wide. Extending from broad shoulders, his arms are like a normal person's thighs. We navigate across the room like a couple of ballroom dancers. And somehow he moves like a dancer - quickly, easily, elegantly. He stands me by the bedhead again.

'So, alive and kicking! Feeling better?' His voice is friendly enough. He's dressed like a junior doctor.

I have a ton of questions, but I can only shake my head. Very carefully! And even then the room rotates and impels me sideways. He steadies me.

His grade two haircut and beard suggest a restrained menace, but the effect is belied by the expression on his face. His mouth is smiling. His eyes look amused. His face lights up the room.

'Are you hungry? Thirsty?'

I think for a moment. I'm neither, but my throat is dry and foul.

'You want some water?'

I nod. He wraps my fingers round the bedhead. Then in one smooth movement, he turns and leaves the room. Dazed, I stare around. I wonder what is outside the door. What kind

of place is this? Weakly, I struggle round the room, making sure to keep holding on to the walls until I reach the door. I open it and lean out, holding the door frame for support. I'm staring down a corridor which seems to run for ever in both directions. I contemplate exploration, but exhaustion makes the decision. I manoeuvre my way back to the bed.

Within a couple of minutes he reappears with a jug of water and a glass. Pouring the glass full, he passes it to me. I can't detect any flavour at all. It doesn't taste like tap water, or bottled water, or mineral water. I've never eaten or drunk anything that is so completely tasteless. But it's fine because the foul taste is gone now. Strangely, I really don't want to swallow it, so I put the glass to my lips again and covertly discharge!

He notices of course, because he's watching me closely. 'Well done! Good decision.' He has a grin as if we have shared a joke between us.

'So first things first, Nicholas. You have -'

'Nick', I cut in.

'I'm sorry. Okay. Just to put you in the picture, Nick,' he continues 'you have sustained some significant damage which we will be treating during your stay with us. You will be with us for a while.'

I can see he's anxious to reassure me.

'No need to be concerned. There's no permanent damage that we can't fix, provided you respond well to the treatment.' He does air quotes when he says "treatment". I don't know what to make of that.

'And we have every reason to believe you will,' he continues. 'Respond well. To the treatment'.

Air quotes again.

The entire pronouncement has been delivered with the assurance of a professional who

has done this many times before.

'What exactly is wrong with me?' Tentatively I feel my elbows and knees and press my fingers into my temples. No soreness that I can detect. I'm surprised that I appear to be essentially undamaged. Apart from the complete exhaustion, I can't detect any tenderness, not even around my head. I recall the severe beating. Maybe I've been unconscious for days? Weeks even?

I notice my hand holding the glass is shaking and I've spilt some water on the floor. I look around. There's nowhere to put the glass down. No bedside table.

He sees my dilemma and reaches out to take the glass from me.

'We won't know your exact condition until we have done a fair amount of diagnostic work. But you're in the best place.'

'We've done some testing while you've been asleep, and there's some lab work still to complete.' He continues smoothly. His voice is soothing, and his smile is reassuring. 'Plus we need to keep you under observation for a couple of days before we can be sure of the diagnosis. Once that is done, we need to schedule some treatment sessions.'

'What?' My mind is spinning too fast now.

'Treatment sessions. Nothing out of the ordinary. It's completely routine here.'

'And where exactly is here?' There's not a single clue in the room to indicate where I am. I can't even look out of a window. I don't even know if it's night or day.

'Just be assured you're in the best place right now, Nick, for the treatment you are probably going to need.' he says.

I guess he can see from my blank expression that I have no idea what he is talking about.

'We have got to go through the previous events that brought you here, so that we can get some work done, almost certainly make some changes, if you're willing, and then make

some decisions going forward.'

I'm thinking, what changes? Work? What do you mean?' I say, 'Uh?'

'Let's not jump ahead. It's better to be shown than told.'

Now I find my voice. And I've thought of something logical to say. 'I'm okay. I'm fine. What changes? I just want to be discharged, or released, or whatever. At least I want to know where I am!'

'Don't worry about that. You only need to know that all the staff members here are completely committed to your best interests.' He nods his head in time with the last few words.

I clearly should be very worried about that. It sound like corporate bs, but his smile radiates sincerity. Suddenly I weaken and have to sit down again. His face immediately registers concern, and he comes and sits beside me. He throws one hefty arm around my shoulders, and squeezes. He is evidently made of concrete. Sensing my discomfort, he slides off the bed and kneels at my feet.

'You're fine. For all the time you're with us, I'll be here if you need me. '

There's scores of words that could describe how I feel, and "fine" isn't one of them. But he seems solid and grounded. I evidently come across uncertain, because his reassuring smile for a stranger slowly morphs into the kind of grin shared by co-conspirators.

'We'll be fine, you and me. You'll see.'

He's waiting for me to respond, but although my thoughts are travelling at speed, nothing coherent is landing now. He is like no-one I ever met, but he is not altogether unfamiliar.

The silence stretches between us. I feel awkward, but he's leaning back against the wall, hands in pockets, for all the world looking completely relaxed.

'Okay' he says, 'Why don't you talk a bit about your family?'

Chapter 2

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Fifty years ago, Kingsheath in West Dorset had much to attract visitors. The main street, bordered by wide verges, ran gently downhill and crossed the small stream via a single width bridge. Pretty cottages, mostly thatched, lined both sides of the road, giving the village an unpretentious charm. In midsummer, it could only be described as chocolate box, classical English country gardens looking their best, before submitting to the indignities of genuine country sourced manure and double digging. Long front paths with plots either side would contain a riotous mixture of flowers and vegetables. Lupins and gladioli lording it over onions and carrots. Dahlias and hollyhocks towering above cauliflower and cabbage.

But five decades of cheap foreign holidays, insensitive town planning, privatised utilities and inadequate local government funding had produced a proliferation of charity shops, wheely bins potholes, and an ugly concrete bridge crossing the sullen polluted stream.

The sound of something almost like the wedding march drifted down the road from the village chapel. Evidently the ancient foot-pumped church organ had survived the ravages of time. Almost.

The chapel, dominated inside by uncompromising cold stone and dark wood, was now simply the stage for the flower girl.

Turning his head slightly, Nick's eyes were drawn to Freya as she walked slowly down the aisle. Not a pretty girl, but beautiful in his eyes. Sixteen, the age when the unlucky are clumsy, with acne, dandruff and antisocial emotions. Freya albeit clumsy, had clear skin, long shining hair, and usually a surfeit of happiness. But now she was tense, clutching the purple freesias that he had put into her hands minutes earlier. Way too tightly - strangling

the poor things. And she was breathing fast - but everyone there knew this was a big moment for her. She slowed, then stopped for a moment, looking around anxiously.

She caught sight of Nick in the front row, and relief flooded her face. A huge smile now, and all those watching were swept into her happiness in the instant. Seeing their warmth, she completed her journey and gratefully sat in the second row.

Nick twisted round and mouthed a 'well done'. Freya lip-read and responded with an audible 'I did it!' The congregation, gracious for the occasion, smiled indulgently. Some tipped their heads on one side and exchanged what-a-sweetie glances across the church. Nick seeing their faces, felt annoyance swirl into his mind. He suspected that Freya with her sometimes uncanny awareness, would know she was being patronised.

Melissa, cast a glance left and saw the daggers drawn in her son's eyes. Her slightly tilted head and lifted eyebrows semaphored the question. Nick replied with closed eyes and a momentary shake of the head. *It's nothing.*

He had never seen his mother look so beautiful. Serene, elegant! Calm as well. Almost as if she was actually enjoying the occasion. Valium and ibuprofen had obviously been invited to the small family wedding. The unassuming chapel was relatively full compared to the usual Sunday congregation. Each of the four window ledges down both sides of the building contained a vase of purple hydrangea, lilac stocks and some unidentifiable greenery. These, plus Freya's hand tied bouquet of freesias, and Melissa's round bouquet of purple, mauve and cream silk roses were the florist's heroic response to the much reduced budget available, once the venue was decided. Even so, the battle of floral fragrance versus old pew varnish was fought valiantly, but as is often the case, creativity lost out to tradition.

Jeffrey had wanted something much grander at Kingsheath golf club. They had a beautiful wedding venue there. It exuded refined sophistication. For weddings, they dressed the

chairs in heavy cream cotton, which contrasted beautifully with the exquisite dark African wood floor. Huge windows on the west side graced the venue ensuring evening guests could watch the sun setting across the perfect rolling green lawn. This descended to the glass lake, so called because its sheltered location resulted in reliably photogenic reflections of the hills and trees bounding the course.

But Melissa had insisted on this little place, with its cracked vinyl chairs, and its twin evangelical slogans over the doors, 'God is love' and 'God is light'. The allowed budget had shrunk considerably, immediately Melissa had got her way for once, insisting that a wedding is 'about people not Hollywood'.

Jeffrey managed the money, because Jeffrey was a self made man. His considered intelligence was reserved for making money. For all other aspects of his life, he relied on prejudice. He was also a party animal who believed he was far more witty when he was drunk. He liked nice clothes, and pretty women. He considered that Melissa had a pretty face and was in great shape for her age. He could surely make something of her. Shame about Nick who clearly hated him. And the girl. Real shame about the girl. Why did Melissa let it happen? Obviously, she had no idea. But Jeffrey was confident he could make a go of it. His own son Kai, had been a pain in the neck, hadn't he, until he was taken firmly in hand. Now he did what he was told.

The youth in question was at the graceless age of 17, made more loutish by the experience of parental abuse, the addiction of cannabis, and a vocabulary exclusively comprising grunts and obscenities. He was intelligent, so he would grow out of it, Melissa had assured herself. Evidently she believed that God could work miracles. And with Kai, he would need to! Sat in the front row next to Nick, he picked at his bitten fingernails. One was bleeding, and every now and then, he would suck his finger. Then he would nudge Nick and deliberately smear it on the non-absorbent vinyl seat cushion.

Nick deliberately looked to the front, and tried to concentrate on the ceremony.

'Do you, Jeffrey Turnham, take Melissa Grange to be your lawful wedded wife?'

Try as he might, Kai invaded his thoughts. Why did he have to be subjected to this kind of clingy inadequate aggression every day? Not infrequently Nick snapped and reduced Kai to tears with a barbed missive aimed at one of Kai's tender scar sites. The latest one was, 'Explain to me, little boy, why your mother didn't drown you at birth.' The result was always the same. The thug disappeared and the oversized little boy with trembling lower lip emerged in floods of tears. And Nick would feel like something you scrape off your shoe. So he stayed the course, heard the vows, sang the hymns, suffered the organ wheeze, and waited for it all to end. Enough for him was for his mother and his sister to enjoy it.

Chapter 3

Somewhere. Now.

I can't remember him going, or me falling asleep. Hopefully they happened in that order. I must have been flat out. I gather my strength and sit up. There's no sign of him now anyway. The empty water glass is gone. I drag my legs slowly across the bed, and put my feet on the floor. I stand up, and a wave of tiredness washes over me. The exhaustion stills me. I stare straight ahead, unable to move a muscle. Just standing requires all my energy. Grey shading starts to encroach on my visual field - it had happened to me before and I'd Googled it. Acute tiredness causing peripheral vision loss. The grey slowly spreads inwards across my field of vision.

Now there are no boundaries, the bed has faded, just as if I am engulfed in monochromatic mid-grey. Looking down I see nothing. Literally nothing. There is no floor. It is as if the floor is glass above a mid-grey infinite abyss. I feel the panic rising in my throat. Keep calm! What's going on? My heartbeat is pounding through my body, so I'm evidently still alive.

Suddenly the escalating anxiety tightens my throat, and my breath comes in gasps.

Then I notice a movement underneath me. Leaning forward, I can see a perfect reflection of myself below. I appear to be supported, standing on the heels of my inverted doppelganger. I look around for a point of reference. Finding none, I lose my balance and stagger forward. The reflection moves simultaneously and our feet contact again.

I must be stood on a mirror. It's the only explanation I can imagine. I'm rigid with fear, my fingernails biting into my palms, just trying to stay upright. But the surface I am standing on seems to move slightly with me - it actually feels like the upturned soles of someone else's feet.

My mind is screaming in my head. A torrent of thoughts argue with each other.

On impulse then, I bend down and touch the surface I'm standing on. It feels soft, yielding, like I am touching a real finger. I use my nail, and scratching the reflected nail feels hard.

I kneel down then and close my eyes, trying to shut out the insanity. After a minute or two, cramp forces me to straighten my left leg. I open my eyes and look around, hoping the nightmare below me will go away. The greyness appears as a fog with depth, and ephemeral wisps of darker grey with a just discernable tint.

But when I look down again, I realise I am nose to nose with my reflection. Closer, closer. Our noses touch. The contact is soft.

Then I notice the eyes. Bemused with one eyebrow raised. It isn't me. Not a reflection anyway. My heart begins to race as the figure below me takes on a reality of his own. He mimics my appearance and movements precisely, apart from subtle details of the eyes.

Shuddering waves of terror begin rolling over me. I shut my eyes again, this time for longer, until the terror subsides a little. I tell myself that I can absolutely do this!! Do what? What can I do? I force myself to breathe slowly, remind myself that I am still alive, and that there is no threat, no pain, only mental anguish.

I stare down again, and try to speak, but my mouth is dry. It comes out as a croak. 'Who are you?' The face mouths the same words without sound. I try to stand but topple over because there is no familiar frame of reference. I crouch for a while and try to control the rising panic. Slowly I get to my feet. I'm not dizzy exactly, just unmoored.

Then the strangest thing - I get a bistable perception flip. Nothing has changed in my visual field but I can tell now that I am the one that is upside down. I'm directly underneath the heels of my doppelganger. He moves just as I move. My copy copies me meticulously.

With no sensation of solid ground, I now seem to be standing upside down beneath him, mirroring every move he makes. I feel as if I'm disconnected from everything apart from this clone. Detached from physical and mental reality. It is utterly surreal.

We exchange glances. Puzzled I look back into his eyes and our shared gaze locks. Then as I watch, a malevolence passes across his face. A brief derisive smile, then he shakes his head, as if reproving a hopeless case.

And the trembling starts again. My chest goes tight. I can feel my throat constricting. I have to get out. Or get up, or on top. I fall over and stare down into my own eyes looking straight back up. The danger now seems so obvious. I am fighting with all my energy to stand, and get away from this man.

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Without warning, he disappears, and I feel like I'm falling. The grey abyss beneath me darkens to an abyss of dread. I'm falling faster. I can't breathe.

And suddenly, I'm awake, hyper-aware of my thudding heartbeat. I'm back in the room with plain walls and no windows. Thankfully a solid floor. The episode slowly fades as dreams always do.

There's a businesslike rap on the door.

I get out of bed, intending to walk across the room, but the feeling of everything being the wrong way up has persisted. My legs have collapsed. So I struggle to my feet. Leaning on the wall, I make it somehow to door. I open it. My muscle-bound minder/doctor walks in, and helps me back to the bedside. He sees I'm shaking, so he helps me sit down.

He looks ridiculous because he's carrying a clipboard in one huge hand, and a pen in the other. He looks abashed and says, 'Actually I don't really need these. I just thought it may put your mind at rest! You know, something familiar.' He sits down on the floor and leans

against the wall. He puts the clipboard and pen on the floor beside him. All his movements seem effortless. And everything about him is so together. He doesn't repeat himself, never corrects himself, doesn't pause for thought. He seems to have a strange ability to accurately sense the speed at which I absorb what he is saying, and continues at the very instant I am ready to hear what he is going to say next.

'How about we talk a bit more about your family.' he says gently. His eyes rest on me, looking at the frightened child inside.

'No! No, stop, wait a minute.' It has come out wrong, a bit harsh, and for a moment I worry that I've offended him. 'I just want to talk to you about a dream I just had.'

His eyes spark with interest. 'Go on.' I recount the dream as best I can, but as it often is with dreams, I seem to be filling in details, and connecting impressions with narrative that might not have initially been there. 'Most of it is hazy,' I say.

I can feel myself getting flushed in the face but I have to say it. 'I've got this abiding sense since I woke up of being hidden, almost like I'm underneath someone's heels.' It sounds stupid.

'So it's started,' he says. He's thinking out loud. It isn't helping me much.

'What has?'

'It's called a pivotal mental episode. It occurs in some circumstances under extreme stress. It can be invoked by such substances as ayahuasca.' It's like he's lecturing a roomful of medical students.

'The mind takes advantage of a spontaneous hyper-plastic state of the brain to undertake some deep rapid learning. You know, Archimedes in the bath, Paul on the Damascus road, Watson's spiral staircase dream.'

I'm not following, but try to look as if I understand. I know about Archimedes and Paul.

They had some kind of revelation, where everything suddenly became clear I think.

'In your case, it will be primed over years by chronic stress, and then triggered by an episode of acute fear. It's very very common here. All our clients have it to some degree or another. In fact our programme depends on it. Most of the symptoms should fade in a week or so.'

He's talking on and on as if I'm following. I get the bit about stress. I let him continue because I'm dog tired.

'... but of course with hallucinogens, the serotonin 2A receptor can be taken over by the psychedelic ...'

Then he stops, shrugs, grins and says, 'Oh, I'm sorry. I'm on another planet aren't I? I guess you don't need the detail!'

I shake my head.

'Just make sure we talk about it, when it happens again.' Then his face clears. He looks past me and smiles. 'Oh, of course.' Like he's been stupid. He snaps his fingers. 'Got it now.'

Then he looks at me and says, 'Don't forget ... hidden under the heel.'

I look around. Everything seems straightforward, apart from this uncanny feeling of being out of sight and kind of capsized.

But he's a man on a mission. 'Now talk to me a bit about your mother and father.'

'Stepfather!' I reply automatically.

'Of course.' He smiles encouragingly.

Chapter 4

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Jeffrey's house was set among woodland on Harbour View Drive. The private well maintained road was just twenty minutes walk from Kingsheath centre. The neighbouring properties could just be glimpsed through the trees a couple of hundred yards or so in either direction.

Jeffrey pulled onto the drive, thumbed the remote for the garage door, and slowly drove up to the house. He had always loved that delicious crunching sound that gravel makes underneath moving car tyres. The iron gates rolled quietly, obediently closing behind him and the courtesy floodlights faded up to full brightness.

Jeffrey had worked assiduously for years amassing sufficient credit to fund an architect designed house at this eminently desirable location on the Purbeck peninsula. And now he had arrived. He was, he told his friends, "fat and happy". Vanity constrained him to clarify that he was only "fat" metaphorically.

The gleaming sapele double front doors let onto a circular atrium hall giving access to the downstairs rooms. The wide curving staircase rose to the semi-circular top landing balcony.

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Melissa and her kids had been in his house three weeks now. Melissa's end terrace had another two and a half months to run on the lease, but the agent had been happy enough to take possession and organise house clearance to clean up the dump. Most of her stuff had been transferred into boxes in the outhouse. More of it should have gone to the tip really, but sentiment won out over practicality.

It didn't really matter because Jeffrey had plenty of room. Although the large double

garage was taken up with his car and his motor bike, the outhouse was three quarters empty, and perfectly dry. People forget about stuff after a while and then it can be quietly disposed of.

He stood in the entrance hall and watched her for a moment through the French doors. She was sat at the kitchen table using her laptop. *Why does she always dress so drab. She has no idea!* He opened one door quietly, stepped through, then closed it behind him with a click. She jumped at the sound, then twisted round to look at him and smiled uncertainly.

He crossed the kitchen, stood behind her, and wrapped his arms around her. 'My beautiful wife! Had a good day?'

She tensed at his touch. 'Yes, fine. I'm gradually getting to know where things are here.'

'Plenty of time for that, my love.'

'I've got a problem with this laptop though.' she leaned forward, moving away from him. 'I can't seem to log into email.'

Jeffrey rested his hands on her shoulders, 'That's no problem. It's because I've set up a new address for us both.'

'Really?' Melissa's voice sharpened with irritation. 'Why?'

Jeffrey squeezed her shoulders. 'Calm down. We've now got jeffreyandmelissa@gmail.com'.

He twisted the laptop round from under her hands, and logged in. 'Look, I've set up an autoforward from your previous address so you won't miss anything.' Several emails were sat in the inbox waiting to be read.

'Anyway, don't worry about that. What did you get up to today, my love?'

'Still lots of unpacking, sorting out. I did sit in the garden for a while this afternoon,' she relaxed a little.

Jeffrey smiled, 'Good for you. How about lunch?' His voice was smooth, casual.

'I had lunch' she dropped her voice, 'with Celia.'

'Celia?' He spoke her name as if questioning his wife's sanity.

He walked round and sat down opposite her. He looked across impassive, unmoving, eyebrows raised questioningly. He held her gaze, his never wavering. She broke first, looking down as she twisted her fingers together.

'Okay', he said, with a slight tilt of the head, as if reluctantly granting permission.

He looked up to see Freya standing at the door, silent, watching him, studying his face.

'Freya!' Jeffrey knew the girl had some problem with her ears, so usually he spoke extra loudly. Because she seemed to have problems understanding whatever he told her, Jeffrey had taken to using short sentences with very clear simple instructions.

'Freya, come in the lounge.' Jeffrey winked at Melissa, and put his finger to his lips.

In the lounge he lowered his voice. 'Freya listen. We're going shopping for some clothes for Mum. You can come, and help us choose. Make sure that when I pick some clothes out, you tell her how lovely they look. Can you do that?'

Freya's face showed no sign of comprehension. She said nothing. Simply looked up at Jeffrey, seemingly searching his face for some insight into what he might want.

'Freya. At the shops, when I pick some clothes for Mum, tell her that they are lovely, and that you really want her to buy them. I may buy you something as well if you're good.'

Freya tilted her head to one side. Steady eye contact accompanied a questioning frown. She tapped her forehead with a middle finger.

Jeffrey grunted in frustration. He couldn't tell whether she struggling to understand, or whether she hadn't heard. He took one ear, and spoke loudly right into it. 'Just say you like

the clothes, child.'

Freya looked annoyed and her eyes started to brim.

'Oh for goodness sake!' Jeffrey glared at the child. She stood shaking her head, staring at the carpet.

Jeffrey walked back into the kitchen. Melissa looked puzzled. 'What was that all about?'

'That's our nice surprise.' Jeffrey talked loudly trying to distract from the sound of footsteps running upstairs.

'What up with her?'

'Oh nothing. She just wants to keep our surprise a secret.'

Chapter 5

Dorchester, Purbeck.

Melissa leaned back in the chair and studied the plate. White, with a gold edge, it had the coffee shop name in the centre, "Perk You Up". The plate was empty but for a few chocolate brownie crumbs. She looked across at Jeffrey. 'So what are we celebrating?'

He had thought about how to handle this, so he was ready. He tapped the side of his nose, then twisted round and waved at the waitress. 'Can we have the bill, my dear?' He turned back to Melissa with a half smile. 'We are buying you some clothes today.'

'I don't need new clothes. Where did you get this idea from?' Melissa's eyes narrowed.

'It's fine.' Jeffrey said lightly. Melissa's mouth compressed to a thin line. 'Your taste in clothes has just got in a bit of a rut!' he said. 'You're my wife now. We can afford some nicer stuff.'

A few days previously, Jeffrey's overactive imagination had transported him to dinner at the golf club, and he was entering the dining room there with his trophy wife on his arm. She was wearing an elegant long dress, and heels, perfumed and graceful. She easily outclassed every other wife. When he had returned to reality, he had considered what a waste it was to have a pretty wife in dowdy clothes, and after some thought, realised that he had to do something about it.

Now it looked like she was going to dig her heels in. Thankfully, the painful silence of standoff was broken by the waitress presenting the bill and a card machine. He paid, then grasped his wife's hand and led her out of the coffee shop.

Freya followed along behind. She could see from Melissa's face, even before they left the coffee shop, that her mother had already given in. She had been watching Jeffrey since they left home. Clearly he intended to overrule her mother again.

Jeffrey walked purposefully down the high street, and turned into a small boutique shop. The owner was about Melissa's age, but dressed like a teenager - tight jeans, bare midriff, tattooed forearm. She had an attractive face spoiled somewhat by bleached hair that was thin and too long.

'Hey there! How can I help you today? Looking for anything special?'

Melissa said 'No.' Jeffrey said 'Yes.' The assistant smiled at them both. 'Okay, I'll let you two fight it out!'

There followed a vigorous discussion, the volume restrained by clenched teeth, about jeans, then a similar debate about a long dress. Melissa held her own for a surprisingly long time. Finally Jeffrey tried bribery. 'Here's the deal ... if you agree to get the dress, I'll buy a necklace for you to wear with it.' Melissa could see that Jeffrey was not going to let it go. Her mouth set into a hard line. She was head down, silent for a moment, resentful.

'Man looks on the outward appearance. God looks on the heart.' she said primly, lifting her chin. For a moment she looked straight into his eyes challenging him.

'You're not the virgin Mary, Melissa! You're not married to God! You're married to me, and I am a man, in case you hadn't noticed!' Jeffrey had a way with words. He walked across to the checkout and indicated that he wanted to buy the jeans and the dress.

Freya was watching the assistant with interest to see her reaction. Jeffrey interrupted her pondering. 'What do you think Freya? Do you think Mum will look nice in that dress, with a new silver necklace?'

The dress spoke of expensive understated elegance. To Freya it looked beautiful, and she loved the idea of seeing her mother in it. She couldn't really understand why Melissa was objecting. The whole process of buying pretty clothes was so exciting. And Mum would look lovely. She smiled. Seeing Freya's reaction, Melissa relented. 'Fine! But that's enough for today!'

'Not so fast', said Jeffrey. 'I have to buy a gift for my other beautiful girl now'. He took a t-shirt to the assistant. The front showed a prancing horse of improbable colours rendered in glitter. 'Can I have one of these in her size' he asked, pointing at Freya.

Melissa's thoughts drifted back to her first husband. Tom had been kind, and somewhat over-eager to please. The combination had attracted her throughout their courtship, and early married life. However, her patience had eventually been drained by Freya's difficulties, and Nick's rebellious teenage, and she found Tom somewhat wearying. Towards the end of their marriage she entertained ungracious thoughts about a lack of backbone.

That was what had attracted her to Jeffrey - a man who knew his own mind, who could take control. Melissa was just beginning to see the downsides.

---oOo---

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

As evening approached, back home she began preparing the evening meal. Jeffrey picked up the shopping bags and walked quietly upstairs. He hung up the new dress in her wardrobe. Then he removed two of her older dresses.

A week later, Melissa was looking for her beige dress, round collar, small flowers. Not in the wardrobe. She drew a blank with the washing basket, and the ironing pile. Her suspicions grew as she registered the additional disappearance of her very comfortable favourite blue dress. When she discovered both had been relegated to the outhouse, she could feel the anger rising. What right did he have to decide what she wore? Who did he think he was?

Just over two hours elapsed between the discovery and Jeffrey's return from work. She had rehearsed the opening volley of the required confrontation plus several cutting comebacks in anticipation of Jeffrey's protests.

The actual event did not follow any of her imagined dry run scenarios. Jeffrey gave as good as he got. He also had a louder voice, he was more verbally adept, he was practiced in the art of appearing to lose control to create real fear. He cut through Melissa's rationale by force of interruption and verbal threat. She had never experienced a no-holds-barred argument between adults before, and the more she backtracked, the more aggressive Jeffrey's onslaught became. She was an ungrateful bitch, a disagreeable old woman, a manipulative bitter wife from a previous failure of a marriage.

Jeffrey walked to the front door, turned around to deliver a final missive before sweeping out of the house. 'Think about what I've said! You're not little miss perfect, you're not who you think you are.'

And all the things he said she was, burned into her for hours. Long after the tears in her eyes and the pain in her throat had settled as acid in her stomach.

It was a quarter to one in the morning when he returned. Lying awake she heard his tread on the stairs, rolled over and feigned sleep. She felt his weight settle on the bed, his hand on her shoulder. She heard his voice, hoarse and broken. 'I'm so sorry, my darling. You mean everything to me. I should never had said those things.' Then the sound of choking tears. She had never experienced a man crying like that, and compassion and guilt in equal measure washed over her as she saw the fight from a new perspective.

'It's okay. It's okay.' She had no idea what else to say.

'I'm going to lose you, I know.'

'No, I love you, I'm not going anywhere.' She felt in control now, and much better.

He undressed, got into bed, they kissed, he rolled over and went to sleep, she lay awake eyes wide, thinking.

And the dresses stayed in the outhouse.

Chapter 6

Somewhere. Now.

He's told me his name is Eri. But I still don't know whether he is a triage nurse, a psychologist, or even a detective. I don't know if what is going to happen is a therapy session, or a pre-trial murder enquiry.

I'm not sure what to say about my stepfather. In my mind he is painted in lines of thick black felt pen, the strokes are strong, determined, confident, uncompromising, threatening. It's just that expressing it is going to sound childish and resentful.

After struggling for a while, I simply say what I feel. 'He's a control freak. And he's a bully.'

'Who does he bully? You?'

'Yes, everyone he can.'

'Your mother?' asks Eri.

'Everyone! He totally dominates the house. Yes, my mother. Especially her, like she's a project, or a possession, not a person.'

'How about Kai?'

I stop before answering. I have not been able to get my head around their relationship at all. 'They hardly ever interact. Kai avoids him at all costs. I do know that Kai is completely terrified of him.'

'Okay, what about Freya?'

It occurs to me then, that my stepfather doesn't really control Freya, like he does everyone else. I hadn't noted that before. I'm trying to work out the dynamics of how they interrelate, but it doesn't seem to fit their individual characters. I can see the pieces in my mind, but they don't work together, and they are giving me a headache. Eri can see I'm

struggling.

'Don't worry', he says smiling 'we'll come back to Freya later maybe. I can consult with some other staff members who will be able to shed some light on Freya for us.'

I'm starting to feel more nervous now. I can't shake this feeling that the room and us in it, and everything I can see seems inverted. Though not exactly. Maybe sloped sideways. It's hard to tell. There is just a wrongness about the place. I had expected questions about my health, where I might hurt and by how much on a scale of one to ten. This is looking more like a legal investigation of some kind.

I really want to know whether this is a ward, or a cell, or a hotel room. I'm getting tired now.

I ask again, 'Where am I? And who are you?'

'Just chill, Nick. I'd love to tell you. But I can't. Not yet anyway.'

All this is doing my head in. I'm definitely lacking stamina. I take a deep breath and it comes back out as a big sigh.

'You need a rest? And you probably want me to go? But I think you don't really want to be left alone again, so we'll do something else.'

He's right. I wonder how he knows. He seems to have this ability to be completely in tune with how I feel. As I reflect on that, I realise since I've been talking to Eri, the alarm I felt a few moments ago at the top of my awareness has receded a bit, but there's still a dark layer of dread sitting at the bottom. Still twisting my gut.

'Let's talk about something else,' he says. 'Football? Films?' he pauses. I look puzzled.

'What?!'

'Opera? Ballet?'

'I don't know anything about any of those things,' I say.

'Ah, no! I'm guessing you want to talk about music,' he says, 'or ink blots!' He laughs out loud. 'Ignore that! I couldn't resist,' he adds apologetically.

Okay, this is definitely not an interrogation. Maybe psychotherapy then. I shake my head to clear it. 'What are we doing?' I say .

Eri spreads his hands, and looks straight at me. His gentle intelligent eyes see right into me. I don't have a clue what he's going to say, but I think I'm going to believe him.

'We're doing justice.' he says.

I laugh nervously. But whatever he wants to do is going to happen anyway. 'Go on!' I say.

'So I want to talk about music. What sort of music do you like?'

That's an easy question for me. My musical taste is a bit narrow. 'I like trance.'

'Anything else?'

'Well I suffered piano lessons for four years, but no, just trance,' I reply.

Eri leans back, looks at me with a serious face. 'Oh, Nick, Nick! Just trance?! Seriously not eclectic then!'

I think I decide that Eri is not a detective. Unless he's the good half of good cop / bad cop.

Suddenly 'Adagio for Strings' is playing. And Eri is grinning again. I've danced to this so many times. I love the piece. If I had any energy at all, I be up and dancing now. But I know I can let it take my mind anyway. I'm so tired I have to stay sat, and my thoughts are overcast with repressed dread, but my foot is automatically banging the floor 130 beats per minute. That's actually vivace, not adagio, but no matter. There's this ridiculously long build up of the fast four beats, over and over. The rhythm inexorably drags me in and my heart is starting to dance. On and on it goes, demanding I match the tempo. The same beat

over and over, until I seem to feel the whole cosmos pulsing in time. And Eri is loving it! He's up and somehow making some dance moves I have never seen - incredibly fast. Such a big guy, and moving like a mongoose, there and back with some beats, doubling the rhythm. We are both in it now, enveloped in the pulse reverberating through us. We are together. And waiting. Because trance makes you wait for resolution. How long can the build up last. Come on! Come on! We're both grinning and banging our heads. We can feel it now. We're both tight, tense, tuned, ready for the release.

And here it comes, bursting over our heads with soaring synthetic sounds, as the beat dissolves into a continuous gorgeous multicoloured harmonic progression through 2nds and 4ths, finally releasing us into a resolved major chord. I'm carried free for a couple of minutes before the fear drags me back.

The music fades away.

We exchange glances. Eri has sat down now in the chair now. He says, 'I prefer jazz!'

Is it a wind-up? No, he looks serious.

'I love Chopin.' He starts to talk about Sibelius, then moves on to Bach's genius counter melodies. He's away on another planet again.

'Stop!' I say. The uncertainty puts an edge of irritation in my voice. 'Why are we talking about music?'

Eri slowly settles back to ground. He takes a big breath.

'Alright, let's go back to trance. Though of course jazz does it better.'

I realise that I don't remember Eri bringing a chair in. But he's sat there opposite me, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, with interlaced fingers, looking intently at me.

'What?' I'm still completely lost about where we are going.

'Take Adagio,' he says, 'first it establishes a context ... a structure where everyone knows

where the beat will land, and what the melody will do. The structure does three things. It provides security because you know what is likely to come next. Then it enables us to be in sync together. Finally, it helps us to be happy together because those around us are having a good time. But crucially, what it doesn't do is satisfy. That's important. The structure at this point creates a tension where you know something far better is coming. The trance beat is simple and engages you fundamentally, but emotionally you are led to a place where you are crying out for something more, and not simply something more cerebral.'

Eri pauses. I let what he's said sink in. I've never really thought about trance like that, but he's right.

'Trance is like family, Nick. Structure so that you can grow together, but ultimately showing itself to be insufficient for complete resolution.'

I think about my family, with its manipulation, and disappointment, and violence, and hatred, and a despair drowns me. And suddenly I'm sinking in uncertainty. I'm hurting and confused and hopeless. I struggle, but it's no good. I've fallen into the black dread at the bottom. My breath is jerking in and out of my body. I force myself to stop sobbing. I wait until the shaking stops. 'It's nothing like my family, Eri,' I whisper.

He reaches out towards me, takes both my hands in his, and engages me face to face. His gaze is so intense, I can only see his eyes, but they tell me he's smiling. I know he can see the tears streaming down my cheeks, but I don't care.

'The thing is Nick, the music is still playing,' he says.

'I know you think you've suffered enough, but we are going to talk about jazz now!'

It's a deliberately weak joke. He's clever. He knows just how to lift my mind away from despair. I give him a watery smile, and wipe both my eyes with the backs of my hands. This can't be therapy. Therapists are supposed to listen while you do the talking, aren't they?

'With jazz,' he continues 'first you get the structure, then the insecurity, then the resolution'.

Despite my fear and confusion, I'm intrigued. 'Why insecurity?'

'Well, trance music gives you a build-up, right? Which provides both structure and frustration, which then can only be relieved by some kind of resolution. In jazz, those two are separated. The structure is the normal rules of harmonic progression and simple rhythm that all music lovers are familiar with. The frustration in trance is replaced in jazz with the insecurity of discord, often fourths or ninths. And the insecurity demands resolution. Take the piece 'Corcovado'. Eri raises his eyebrows enquiringly.

I happen to be familiar with Corcovado because my room-mate at university came from Latin America, and he used to play it all the time.

'So Corcovado, for instance is played in a major key,' Eri continues, 'but it doesn't show up until the final three notes are played. The structure and insecurity is there throughout because everyone knows what chord we are finally aiming at, and it sounds like a phantom throughout all the discords.'

'Good music is all about creating a longing for some perfection that you know must exist, evidenced by the imperfect incompleteness of the initial sounds, and then providing a resolution.'

Eri stops speaking and sits back. Slowly the memory of my own experience combines with the quiet clarity of his words, and (to change the metaphor) the light comes on.

I think I know what he's talking about.

'It's life isn't it?', I say.

'No, Nick, it's justice.'

I'm disappointed because I thought me and Eri were getting somewhere. But I see him sat

there completely composed, almost nonchalant, while I'm struggling to think straight. I'm the one that's been through the wringer. It feels like that game "Twister", where you contort yourself to try to accommodate the other players' moves.

'What? No!' I'm aware I sound irritated. 'You've been describing how we develop, how our societies evolve. It's not about justice!'

Eri raises his eyebrows as if he's surprised. He doesn't contradict me, but leans forward with a regretful smile. For all his clever words, his expression is simple, artless even. He's hard to read, but it's absurd to believe he isn't genuine.

'Let's talk about your mother,' he says.

Psychotherapy then!

My mother. It all comes back. The horror darkens my mind. Fear churns my stomach. I'm trying to control my breathing somehow. I haven't recalled the end of everything that matters since waking up here, and I don't want to. I'm seeing a downhill path, steep, treacherous, dark. I'm not confident I can keep my footing. And I can't come back. I suggest a detour.

'No, I want to tell you more about my step-father.'

Chapter 7

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Jeffrey scanned the in-box. Two emails from Melissa's church, and one from Celia, all redirected from Melissa's old email address. What to do? He didn't like Melissa's church. They believed they owned her. The leadership team wanted to meet him. No doubt wanted to groom him for donations. Prior to the wedding, he had been required to attend church to reduce Melissa's discomfort. He promised himself he would attend only twice, and he kept his promise. Melissa had convinced herself that he was on the verge of converting. It was against the church rules to marry an unbeliever. Jeffrey thought that the church had too many rules. He had suffered one service led by a man whose title of "Senior Pastor" insufficiently emphasised his senility. The sermon was entitled "Rules for Holy Living". And the following week, he had endured a second sermon entitled "One Way Jesus" given by the smooth faced vacuously happy "Youth Pastor" who was too young to have even the most tenuous grasp on the complexities of life. Jeffrey couldn't stand being preached at.

He opened the first email. It was the church notices for the coming week. Various meetings, senior's lunch club, housegroups in homes, advance notice of a Christening. Plus a thought for the week by someone he didn't know.

He opened the second email. It was a request for helpers to wash up at the old people's lunch. Don't worry, there was a dishwasher! Cedric would be there to explain the switch on and off procedure. There was an attachment to the second email - rota.docx. Jeffrey pressed the delete button.

He opened the email from Celia. Evidently Celia hosted a housegroup and was pressurising Melissa to continue coming. He hit 'Reply' and typed

Hi Celia,

Sorry I won't be coming to housegroup any more. Now that I am married, I think it is better to build bridges with my husband at home. He is not particularly interested in church as you know, and he would rather I did not attend. I think it is a good compromise if I attend on Sunday, and discontinue housegroup. Sorry about that, but scripture does say I should obey my husband.

Jeffrey wasn't sure how to sign off, so just appended the name 'Melissa', pressed 'Send' and hoped it would do. He then deleted both the incoming message and the copy of the sent message.

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Jeffrey pressed the bellpush and moved one step closer to the front door. The door opened after some internal discussion with the cat, and Celia appeared. He was so close that she had to take a step back to maintain her personal space. She smiled uncertainly when she saw her visitor.

'Hello, it's Jeffrey Turnham isn't it?'

His eyes raked down to her feet and back up to establish a fixed eye contact. She looked in her mid-50s. Her grey hair had a youthful graduated bob cut, expensively styled with blonde highlights and darker lowlights. She was wearing a dark grey oversize quarter zip sweatshirt with yellow piping and matching straight leg joggers. And trainers. Expensive trainers. She was rather flushed in the face.

'Sorry, I've just done 30 minutes on the running machine,' she said. Her clandestine half smile was deliberately intended to imply common cause between the two of them.

Anything to establish some point of contact with this man that she had heard quite a lot about already.

Jeffrey waited a few seconds. Sufficient to drain any notion of joint working out of the encounter. Enough to establish the alpha male. His expression was cool, blank eyes, no responsive smile. 'Yes, that's right. Mrs Ferguson? You know Melissa, my wife.'

'Please, call me Celia. Oh yes, we go back a long way ... we were both kids in the church

youth group.' Celia responded. She continued bravely nodding enthusiastically. 'Do you want to come in?'

'Just for a minute or two'.

Jeffrey followed Celia into the lounge. She sat on the settee and gestured for him to sit down.

'No, I won't be staying long,' Jeffrey said, and remained standing. Celia's face fell slightly and she seemed unsure what to say. She stood up again. A wave of mild annoyance momentarily crossed her face as she acknowledged that this man had made her feel awkward in her own lounge. Jeffrey watched her reaction, and smiled.

'I want to talk to you about Melissa.' Jeffrey had carefully prepared his words and had two different approaches available depending on his impression of Celia. He waited, face impassive, enjoying the increasing tension which accompanied the silence. When he had the measure of Celia, he continued.

'Apparently she has felt increasingly uncomfortable about attending your house meeting. She mentioned something to do with her 'witness at home', whatever that means.'

'Oh, what a pity. She has been really part of the group here ever since we started. We shall miss her.'

'Well, I've told her she can come whenever she likes, but she tells me her first duty is to her children and to my son Kai ... to bring us together as a family.'

Jeffrey knew what Celia's response would be - confusion and reluctant acceptance without resistance.

'Of course, Jeffrey. It's just a shame.'

Jeffrey's smile didn't reach his narrowed eyes. He nodded his head as he spoke as if reassuring a small child. 'Celia.' He said her name as if it were that of a communicable

pathogen, 'Please don't worry. I want her to keep in touch with her old friends just as much as you do. I'll make sure you see us both on Sundays.'

There was a brief pause. 'And that's it, really,' Jeffrey said concluding the discussion.

'Oh, alright.' she replied tightly.

When Jeffrey had left, he had a clear opinion of Celia. And she had some very clear views on Jeffrey.

---oOo---

Jeffrey opened the wardrobe door. He saw the blue dress immediately. It had been brought back in from the outhouse. He felt the anger surge hot and uncontrolled in his chest. He clenched his jaw so hard that his head trembled, and the subsequent relaxation was excruciating. But at least he had contained his anger and remained quiet.

It must have been Melissa of course. She was trying to hang on to clothes that he had explicitly said should be discarded. He riffled through the remaining clothes, selecting two more dresses. Laying them flat on the floor, he carefully made three long vertical cuts from hem to waistline in each dress, and rehung them in the wardrobe.

The anger washed out of him, to be replaced with a purging catharsis. He felt much much better. He went down to the kitchen, put some ice into a glass, and poured himself a whisky. Then he walked into the lounge and switched on the TV.

---oOo---

Melissa opened the wardrobe. She was astonished to find her blue dress destroyed. As she took it out, it almost fell apart leaving just the wire hanger in her hand. She knew immediately what had happened. She turned to find Jeffrey stood just inside the closed bedroom door, his hands behind his back.

'This is what happens when you go back on our agreement.' He spoke as if reproving a

child.

'What?'

'We agreed this blue dress should be binned, and you retrieved it and put it back in the wardrobe, and you knew full well that I didn't want you to be wearing it. I told you it was old, and dowdy, and we could afford better clothes for you now.'

Melissa turned back to the wardrobe and was stunned to see two more ruined dresses.

'But, oh no, you still want to carry on wearing this rubbish. Why can't you ...'

Jeffrey stopped speaking when the blow on the face connected. The rage Melissa felt had turned her hand into a fist. She didn't even feel the hanger wire twist in her palm. She swung at him with all her strength and connected with his cheekbone. The wire scraped a pathway narrowly missing his eye.

He howled in fury and grabbed her by the neck with both hands. She staggered backwards crashing into the bedroom wall opposite the door. He pushed his face into hers, held her there for a moment. Then taking a deep breath, spoke enunciating each word separately.

'Don't you ever disrespect me again.' With each word his hands tightened on her throat.

She struggled and tried to knee him in the groin, but she was fading fast. He saw her eyes close, and loosened his grip. A hard slap on the face brought her round, and she stared with terrified eyes at him. The wound below his eye ran red into the corner of his mouth, and he spat the blood at her, full in the face. He released his grip and she dropped to the floor.

'What's going on in there?' Nick's voice carried through the locked door.

'We're having a row, Nicolas, do you want to be part of it?' Jeffrey attempted humour.

'It sounded like a fight.' Nick voice was tight with worry.

'No, it's nothing. It's just some furniture got involved. Just a mistake.'

Jeffrey walked across to Melissa who was crouched on the floor, shaking. He gripped her shoulder and squeezed. 'It's okay, Nick, we're ... we're fine,' she faltered.

'Good girl.' Jeffrey said quietly.

Jeffrey led Melissa into the en-suite, and stood her in front of the mirror. He stood behind her. Looking at his reflection, for a moment she tasted the sweet relish of vengeance satisfied as she contemplated the angry weal down the side of his face. But the sight of his narrowed eyes and mocking smile drowned any enjoyment in a fresh wave of self pity.

'Wives, obey your husbands. That's in your bible isn't it? Let's fetch it and read it together.'

Jeffrey went to her bedside, retrieved the bible and pushed it into her hands. 'Find it.'

Melissa turned the pages and found one of the few verses that Jeffrey loved. 'Read it!'

She had read these words often, but never directly in this context. The confusion of previous teaching combined with the memory of her reaction. Commonly accepted wisdom struggled against badly interpreted revelation and lost. A weight of bitter guilt settled in her gut bringing tears to her eyes.

'I'm so sorry. I should never have hit you.'

'So, what are we going to tell Nick about this then?' Jeffrey indicated the angry weal down the side of his face. Melissa shook her head in despair.

'You are going to have to tell a lie, aren't you. Tell him I had to go away on business for a day. I'm not sleeping in the house with you tonight anyway.'

Chapter 8

Somewhere. Now.

'I know I heard a row, and something crashed against the wall, but my stepfather went away on business and didn't reappear for a couple of days. Mum was very quiet for several days after that, so I know she was upset about the row. I suspect he hit her, but I couldn't see any bruises anywhere.'

Eri listens to my account. I don't have any proof or even any solid evidence.

'And how did she seem when your stepfather got back?'

'She was just withdrawn. I think she was just beginning to become a bit wary of him.'

'Wary?'

'He's a big bloke, you know. And he gets drunk sometimes, and then he doesn't mind using his fists.'

'Do you think he hit your mother?'

'I don't know for sure. But I think so. I can't work it out.'

Eri switches tack. 'How about you. Did he ever hit you?'

I look at him. His expression is cool, not unfriendly but indecipherable. I don't want to recall it. I wonder if he knows anyway? Perhaps not.

'My ... my stepfather ...'.

Half finished, my words hang in the air.

Eri reaches forward, and gently puts his enormous hand on my forearm. 'Sorry, Nick, but this is going to help, even though it hurts.' Eri leans back breaking the contact.

So maybe he does know, I think to myself. Okay, then. I take a couple of deep breaths.

'Yes, he did. My stepfather did hit me.' My voice is high like a child's, and shaking, 'Just out of the blue.'

Eri can see I'm not together. 'I know this is all pretty harrowing for you. But just tell me what you can. We have to go over all this stuff multiple times anyway.'

I'm not happy about hearing that, and my face must have shown it, because Eri hastened to reassure me.

'Nick, the thing is that over time, you remember more things, different things. And not only that, your interpretation of things changes as your perspective gets modified by what you come to know in the process.'

I'm not sure what Eri is getting at. 'What?' I say.

Eri smiles, 'It's just that when something happens that you haven't experienced before, you interpret it by all the things you've seen previously. So, for example, that's why this place seems rather strange -'

As he's speaking, it occurs to me that being in a place where everything is sloping severely sideways is more than 'rather strange'.

Eri continues, '- so things are not actually as they seem, because your perception is framing things wrongly at the moment.'

As he says this, I lean right over to my left and turn my head on it's side. But now I'm just looking at a semi-inverted room upside down. There's no sense of it being the right way up. I give up, sit up straight, and I guess I look miserable.

'Nick, don't stress about it. Let's have a bit of a break. I'll leave you in peace for half an hour or so. Have a lie down. It helps the wrong-way-up thing, I gather'.

So that's what I do. Eri disappears off somewhere, and I lie back on the bed. It seems to work actually. The room just seems properly horizontal where it should be and the feeling

recedes. I relax. Quite a lot. After what seems like about ten minutes, Eri comes in and announces that I've had forty.

'We need to push on,' he says, 'We've got a bit of a serious conversation scheduled now.'

I'm relaxed, resigned. I sit up. Tipped sideways again, but I ignore it. 'What do you want to know?'

'Well we were talking about you being hit by Jeffrey.'

'Yes.'

'What circumstances led to him hitting you?'

I shake my head, breathe in deeply again, and then let out a sigh. I can feel anxiety gripping my guts, so I clench my teeth. Eri waits, watching me carefully. I shake my head and wait until I've got my equilibrium. After maybe 20 seconds I say, almost under my breath, 'Freya'.

Chapter 9

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Williams syndrome affects around one in ten thousand people. Chromosome 7 contains approximately 1000 genes. But during conception the accidental deletion of just 28 of these causes a number of physical alterations in the baby. The elasticity of skin and organ tissue is reduced, as the production of the protein elastin is compromised, affecting a large variety of physical functions. But equally as concerning are the changes in the structure of the brain - specifically the amygdala and the orbital-frontal regions. Collectively referred to as the social brain, these parts are crucial in managing trust, emotion and empathy.

Consequently, Freya even as a baby fixated on faces very strongly. She would frequently cry if she observed a face that was sad - and would settle quickly if a face looked contented. She was not disturbed if picked up by a stranger in the absence of a parent, so long as the face was happy. This preoccupation with emotions discerned through close observation of the face, developed strongly throughout her childhood, resulting in an extended vocabulary of words relating to the way people feel.

Nick had done significant internet research on this genetic condition. He had rapidly absorbed the popular science descriptions, and the various national health service information pages. He had dug into the university research, much of which was beyond him, but as a result knew in detail the limits of Freya's mental development, her likely prognosis, the health risks, the daily management of her condition, and he filled the gaps in her care that were beyond Melissa.

Freya was not a pretty girl, but the usual symptomatic chubby face, upturned nose and flattened nose bridge were not greatly accentuated, and the jaw misalignment was minimal. Her almost constant radiant smile made her face attractive.

By the time she reached 14, Williams Syndrome had given Freya the gift of readily rejoicing with those who laugh and weeping with those who mourn.

Sadly the gift was marred by the inability to distrust people. Or even properly to perceive meanness, insults, snubs or humiliation. She, like many suffering from Williams Syndrome, fully expected everyone to be on the side of the angels.

---oOo---

Kai was not an angel.

Kai was a disappointment. His father had taught him that from an early age. Jeffrey yearned for a son who would be a man's man, someone who could look after himself, play golf, or darts, or pool, ideally a best buddy who could drink him under the table. But Kai was small, weak and often sickly.

Jeffrey had believed that children are a blank slate upon which any character can be drawn, and was irritated to discover that his attempts at toughening Kai up only resulted in inadequacy and paranoia. By the age of 17, when Kai had not developed a desire for golf, darts, excessive drinking or fighting, Jeffrey suspected he was gay.

When Kai turned to cannabis, he became withdrawn, lazy and detached. He stopped washing. He sat for hours at his computer without speaking or moving. Jeffrey had no interest in monitoring his internet usage, and probably would have not objected if he had. Kai's interest in girls was internalised into frustration and bitter self pity. He became involved in a group of young men, all older than himself, who termed themselves 'incel'. Kai was indeed involuntarily celibate.

The group mostly railed against the injustice of their plight, blaming society and the selfishness of women for their failure to form romantic relationships with the opposite sex.

---oOo---

Freya was the only girl that had smiled at Kai in the last 12 months. He noticed that she was an actual girl for the first time one Saturday. And she smiled at him on the Sunday. During the following week they chatted at mealtimes. Freya was happy to spend time with Kai when others seemed to lack patience with him. He invited her up to his room and showed her the multiplayer internet game that he played, and she was amazed at the realism of the graphics.

Kai's own roller-coaster of adolescent emotions frustrated him. He wasn't stupid. But some days everything seemed black. Computer gaming was good though.

Freya was nice. When he was down, whether he said anything or not, she would often come and sit by him. And when the game was exciting, she enjoyed it too, even though he couldn't work out whether she understood the scoring system.

She spoke rarely, and Kai found it hard to interpret her silences. He never knew whether she was contemplating what he had just said, or was confused by it. He was often surprised though by her comments - she seemed to understand him better than he understood himself.

Melissa was pleased that they appeared to have become good friends, but Nick could still recall the unsettling experience of teenage testosterone and was altogether more cynical.

One evening there was a particularly bloody battle involving Kai's troops surrounding and attacking Kang and Rhino. It was hard fought and Freya had difficulty following who was advancing, and who was retreating. But when both monsters had been successfully slain by Kai's troops, and the reward jewels collected, Kai let out a happy shriek of triumph, and Freya caught up in the excitement gave him a hug.

None of this was witnessed by anyone, but a few days later, Nick was disturbed to see Kai leading Freya upstairs for the games session, holding her hand.

The following day Jeffrey and Kai were in the kitchen getting food from the fridge. Jeffrey had noticed that his adolescent son was showing an increased interest in Freya.

'You fancy her son?'

Kai's grunt was not a denial, and Jeffrey was delighted that maybe Kai wasn't gay after all.

'Go for it! Just keep your head down kid,' he said.

'Go for what?' Nick stepped through from the dining room where Melissa was sat.

'Nothing.'

'And why does he have to -' Nick was cut off mid-sentence.

'Don't worry Nicholas,' Jeffrey said, 'none of your business.'

Kai's face reddened, and he turned away to go upstairs.

Nick stepped to block Kai's exit, and put his hand on the centre of his chest. Kai shuffled his feet and looked at his father.

'Don't you touch my kid.' Jeffrey's menacing whisper was slow and controlled.

Nick didn't move. He kept his hand on Kai's chest preventing him from leaving. Jeffrey's eyes flared with rage. Nick knew he had crossed a line with his step-father, but the stakes were too high for him to walk away.

Nick never even saw the blow coming that landed squarely in his solar plexus. Without time to tighten his stomach muscles reflexively, the air was knocked from his lungs, the shock wave rippled from his aorta and the radiating nerves and ganglia generated convulsive pain.

He doubled over and gasped for air. Jeffrey bent down to whisper in Nick's ear.

'None. Of. Your. Business.'

Chapter 10

Somewhere. Now.

Explaining all this to Eri has left me fretful. I'm worrying about Freya still and how she is. I ask Eri, but he assures me that she is in good hands being cared for. But after spending an hour or so reliving the stress of the Kai - Freya situation, I'm exhausted. Eri sees I need to get some sleep and we call it a day.

Eri stands up, picks up the clipboard and pen and goes to the door. He turns and tosses them onto the chair. 'I'll leave these with you' he says.

I crawl into bed, and I'm immediately uncomfortable. After only twenty minutes or so, my mind is still describing circles, going round endlessly. And each loop brings me the sour cocktail of past regret and future fear. My pillow is too hot. I flip it over to find the cool side, which relieves me for a few minutes. There's too much adrenaline circulating to allow me to fall asleep.

But eventually I guess I do, because I find myself frantically crawling across the kitchen, with someone screaming. Just as before, I clip the kitchen door handle with the side of my head. But this time it's different. There's no pain because I'm wearing a motorcycle helmet. I'm back down on the kitchen floor just like before. But now I've got the impression that the room has shrunk. It's gone small. The appliances all still fit because they have all shrunk. As have I. Then I'm out across the lawn, running. But the garden is like something created in a model village. And I'm a tiny person running for my life. I crash down onto the drive, and now the blows come again to the side of my head, back and forth. My head is jerking from side to side, but there's no pain, just a crash with each blow. This time, I'm calm. I'm safe with this helmet on. I'm convinced nothing bad can happen. The overriding thought is that I'm safe because I'm small inside this small helmet.

But then my leg begins to go numb, and after a few more blows, my neck twists and the numbness becomes hot needles. It feels like my foot and toes are on fire. I need to get up, but only one leg is listening to my brain. The other is now completely paralysed.

I wake up.

I'm shaking. My bed cover is twisted around my leg. I struggle to sit up, but the effort is too much. I collapse back and clumsily straighten the cover. But my leg is still being stabbed by hot daggers of pain. I'm never going to sleep tonight.

I wake up.

Again.

I'm confused now about whether I only dreamt my bed cover was twisted around my leg. But somehow my bed cover is twisted again. Both the pillow and cover are damp. But I feel different. I can hear movement outside in the corridor, so maybe it is morning and somehow I've slept through the night.

There's a knock on the door, and I sit up. 'Wait a minute.' I get out of bed. It occurs to me that I can stand up today! The room still partially feels inverted. I'm disoriented because as I properly come to, the room feels small as well. I struggle into the t-shirt and jeans I wore yesterday. I sit for a second to see if the shrunken feeling will go away. It doesn't.

'Okay', I say.

'You have to open it', says Eri through the door. I walk carefully across the room and turn the latch. The door swings open.

I stare at him. Something peculiar is still happening to my perception. How to explain it? I'll just put it out there because it is going to sound crazy anyway.

Eri is huge. He's somehow massively big, and I'm tiny. And it feels this way, even though I'm standing next to him and we are almost eye to eye. He's actually only a bit taller than

me.

He must have noticed me gawping, because he said, 'You seem small, don't you?'

'What is it? It's mad.'

'You're just having flash-forwards as your mind is picking up then dropping the new frame of reference.'

I narrow my eyes and shake my head, 'What are you talking about?'

'Okay, listen carefully and I can probably put your mind at rest. When the scale of things begin to look unfamiliar, it's because your mind has accommodated our enormous frame of reference. So people that don't yet belong here have this feeling of being miniscule ... like insects, while those that do belong here -'

'Hang on,' I cut in, 'I absolutely don't have any desire to belong here! There's no books, not even a ...' I've lost the word, 'that electronic thing that showed pictures, the news and stuff.'

'TV.'

'Yes, not even a TV.'

'That's fine,' he says, 'but understand that this expanded frame contains not just this place, so you're not stuck here forever.'

'So what other places does it contain?'

'I can't explain it adequately. It's ineffable.'

'It's what?'

'Come on, English is your first language! Ineffable. I can't explain it.'

'You can't tell me what ineffable means?'

Eri laughs out loud, and shakes his head in faux resignation, 'No the definition of ineffable

is "I can't explain it." That's what the word means! Unutterable. Transcendental.'

'Ah yes, my mind is now perfectly at rest!?' I say.

Eri grins widely, enjoying my sarcasm. I think he sees it as progress. 'Excellent' he says, doing the one kilowatt smile, 'so glad you're a bit stronger. And you dressed fast today! Well done!' He's shaking his head, deliberately patronising in a jokey way.

But at least today I can walk. That would feel like progress if only this weird perception thing would go away. I remind myself that I've had a severe beating to the head, and there's almost certainly some brain swelling.

Then suddenly it dawns on me that I've worn the same clothes now for three days. And I haven't washed. I proved last night that I sweat, but I don't smell. Then I register the fact that I've neither eaten nor drunk, nor used the en-suite toilet.

I turn to Eri and ask him straight out, 'Are you feeding me or medicating me via a drip at night?'

Eri's smile fades a little. 'I'm not going to answer that,' he says.

'Why not?'

'Because it will just provoke a ton more questions.'

'Listen, I have a right to know what -'

'Trust me, Nick' he cuts in. 'All in good time.'

'But I need -'

'No.' Eri is speaking quieter than usual. 'I will tell you but not yet.'

I believe him, although it's obvious they must be hooking me up to something during the night. Perhaps that explains the dreams. I'm hoping the dreams and the spatial illusions are a side effect of some drug therapy I'm probably on.

'How about you tell me about the dream,' Eri says before I have a chance to protest again.

'Ah, so I dreamt, did I?'

'Yes.'

'How do you know?'

Eri grabs my shoulders in his huge hands, and effortlessly spins me round. 'Look at the state of your bed!'

Yes okay, so it's not ESP. The bed tells a story. The damp patch of sweat on the under-sheet hasn't dried out yet. The pillow is flat at one end and puffed up at the other, and the bed cover is only tucked in at the bottom now, and twisted up like a rope.

I gather my thoughts. The dream is still crystal clear in my mind. But in fragments. I need to get it in the right order. Eri settles in the chair, and watches me.

'I dreamed about the attack.'

'Which one?'

'The last one I remember.' I swallow nervously. I don't want to relive it again.

'Go on, take your time. Only tell me the details you want to.'

I sit down on the bed. 'Do you know what happened?' I ask?

Eri nods slowly, smiling at me. 'We've been able to pretty much work out what went on.'

'Okay,' I say. I'm relieved because I would rather avoid recalling the detail. When I do that it feels like something foul is clogging my brain.

'But the dream was a bit different to the reality.'

Eri cuts in. 'Different from'.

I stop short. I'm stressed about having to share my traumatic dream and he's pedantically

picking up my grammar. Really?

Then I realise he's monitoring and managing my mental state again. How does he do that? He's deliberately lightening the mood, distracting me with alternative emotions to relieve my distress at the telling.

'Okay then, different from what happened. I was wearing a crash helmet in the dream. And I was being beaten around the head but it didn't hurt. And everything felt really small. And then I think my leg got tangled in the sheet, and changed the dream a bit.' I'm not very coherent.

'And now I feel really small here as well. And you look ... no, you feel huge to me, the bed -'

But Eri interrupts me. Something's occurred to him, 'Oh yes. Got it, of course. A crash helmet.' His face looks satisfied, and he's ready to move on.

I can't figure out his thought processes at all. And I remember I don't know what he is, or where I am, or why I'm here. And why am I not hungry! He must be a doctor, I'm probably getting hallucinatory drugs via a drip, so it's got to be therapy, hasn't it?

It's as if he can see what I'm thinking. Because he says, 'I already told you, Nick,' he pauses for effect, 'it's justice!'

Chapter 11

Portland Prison, Purbeck. Earlier.

There had been a difference of opinion between the two tables at the far end of the Jailhouse Cafe. It had involved an unpaid debt. Voices had been raised, and someone had been punched, and then a table was unceremoniously upturned, all of which detracted not a whit from the dining experience of the other guests. The debt was a 200 pack of duty free cigarettes, that had been paid for and not delivered.

The plates and the glasses were all plastic, as was the cutlery. So apart from a split lip and a small measure of humiliation, there was no actual damage.

Darren Fletcher cleared the table and wiped it off with a disposable dishcloth which had remained undisposed of for over two months. Originally yellow, it was a mottled grey. He was happy for the work experience. Unlike the vast majority of the 508 men incarcerated in HMP Portland who had not grasped the opportunity to be gainfully employed.

Two more weeks! He had done the crime, and almost done the time. On many previous occasions he had managed to avoid the time, while benefiting from the crime. He had thought his career was charmed until his latest escapade. While exiting the premises, with a full swag bag, he had fallen over the occasional table displaying a large china dog. Then followed concussion, confusion and vomiting resulting from accelerated contact with the corner of the stone fireplace in the lounge. It had been his first experience of being a guest of His Majesty, and he intended it to be the last. He hadn't enjoyed sharing the accommodation with Whitey.

Darren was 21 years older than Whitey. They didn't share the same values. Nor the same vocabulary much of the time. No pride in the work, Darren thought ruefully. And Whitey called him 'Daz', which was bearable from a contemporary, but not from a whipper-

snapper.

He quite enjoyed the table wipedown phase. He could do it at his own pace, and it gave him time to think, without having to listen to Whitey's whinging. If you'd have told him three years previously that he was considering going straight, he would have laughed. Or maybe not. Maybe he was just getting into character for the parole board. The meeting yesterday with the Offender Manager seemed to be positive. In the first year, he'd learned so much! Finding your place in the hierarchy. Brawling. Checking the screws. Dealing drugs. Then he'd calculated he'd be almost fifty by the time he was released unless he behaved. He'd stayed out of trouble for the last couple of years. There had only been a couple of interventions during his stay - mostly related to what they termed 'managing difficult emotions'.

Most of the house guests were in their twenties. Booking time in the gym was difficult. But he had stayed fit. He ran and lifted weights on alternate days. He wore shorts all year round.

---oOo---

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

As usual there was a tranche of junk emails. Every day it was the same. It seemed to Celia that any donation to a charity, any lapse of contract, be it insurance, phone, TV or utilities, any purchase from any shop, any pending delivery, in fact almost any interaction at all with the computer triggered another series of emails. Celia had not yet learned the joys of the autofilter-to-trash function. And that meant it took twenty minutes before Celia finally arrived at an email that actually said something useful.

Hi Celia, there's a possibility that the police want to use the church hall for a Restorative Justice case (I've put a link at the bottom of the email if you want to know how it works.) Wednesday week 2.00 to 4.00. Can you do tea/coffee at the end of the session, and then locking up when everybody leaves? Thanks Rick the Vic (!)

She hit 'Reply'.

Hi Rick, yes that's fine. I haven't done it before. Is that all they need? I guess you'll confirm if it goes ahead? Cheers. Celia

She hit 'Send'. Then 'Compose'.

Hi Melissa, not seen you in a while. How are you. Perhaps we can get together again for coffee sometime? I'm fairly free next week. Lots of love. Celia

'Send'.

Melissa hadn't replied to the last three messages.

Chapter 12

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

'Get real, Mum, open your eyes.' Nick was shouting now. 'It is risky Freya being in Kai's bedroom.'

'Keep your voice down, Nicky.' Melissa was pleading now, distressed at the thought of what Nick was implying. 'Okay, I just don't want to cause trouble with Jeffrey.'

'I don't care about Jeffrey. He doesn't care about me.' Melissa looked at him woebegone.

'Or you!' Nick added.

'Stop it, that's enough!' She glared at him, defensive, furious.

'It's only enough, Mum, if you can finally see what's going on! Think about Freya. She's vulnerable. And she's a child. And she thinks Kai is her friend.'

Melissa put her head down for a moment. Nick waited.

Melissa shook her head.

'What?' Nick clenched his teeth and growled in frustration.

'You know scripture tells us always to think the best about people,' Melissa responded, 'whatever is good, think about these things!'

Nick exhaled noisily in exasperation. 'Mum, you can't just wish the world a better place. Kai is bad news. You know that.'

Melissa paused, then raised her head and looked him in the eye, with all the confidence of the moral high ground. 'I'm not having that.' she said firmly. 'I'm not judging Kai. I'm not writing him off ...'

'Mum! Stop!' Nick was running out of rope. 'I will not allow Freya to be in Kai's bedroom

with the door closed. That door stays open. Open! D'you hear? And if I'm not in the house and I find out they're in the bedroom together unsupervised, it won't just be Jeffrey giving you grief.' Nick stamped out of the room and slammed the door.

---oOo---

Kai opened an incognito window on the browser, and joined the incel group. Scrolling down the previous conversation, he could see that seven members of the 24 strong group were online.

'Hi.' he typed.

Tsk responded with 'wb Kai', the slang welcome back greeting. Gnew, another member, replied with 'Hi' and followed it up with 'ykpc?' (you keeping parents clueless?)

There followed some banal expletive ridden interchange of views regarding women, until Kai shared his longings concerning Freya. He had hoped that there would be some encouragement and possibly respect from the men in the group. Instead, all he got was cynical put-downs, pessimistic predictions and unkind insults mostly expressed in acronyms incomprehensible to parents.

He logged out without comment. He'd show them.

---oOo---

Freya liked it when Mum kissed her. It reminded her that she was loved. And she liked her brother Nick giving her a hug from time to time. It made her happy.

She wasn't so sure about Kai. He was still nice though. He played cool games on the computer. They were exciting. But she didn't like the strange sweet smell in his bedroom. Sometimes he got really tired and just fell asleep, and other times he got giggly and stupid. She preferred it when he was giggly.

She wasn't sure about him hugging and kissing her. He had started to do that and she

didn't know why.

And he always said it was their secret. She shouldn't tell anyone, not even Mum. Strange - Mum never kept her kisses a secret, and Nick never kept his hugs a secret.

Freya could tell immediately what kind of mood Kai was in. He was often anxious, sometimes paranoid, usually grumpy, and never carefree. She knew that Kai was unhappy much of the time, and she wanted to hug him, and make him feel better. But there was something wrong that she couldn't quite understand.

She knew that Kai wasn't loved like she was. Jeffrey was often unkind, and Kai would run upstairs and creep into his bedroom and cry. Freya could read the sadness in his face as clearly as she could see the disdain in Jeffrey's.

Chapter 13

Portland Prison, Purbeck.

The prison officer crossed the cobbled yard, turned into Benbow, nodded to the security staff, and made his way onto the main wing. He stopped halfway down at a cell on the right. 'Fletcher! Simon Berringer wants to see you about your parole.'

Darren rolled off the bed and crossed the cell, as the door was being unlocked. 'Okay, boss,' he said with possibly an edge of mockery in his voice.

Mr Simon Berringer stood looking out of the window as Darren crossed the yard. He was five years off retirement and worn out. Ground down by years of managing confrontation with difficult people. But he had done a good job and liked to think that he was respected.

He sat at his desk and waited for the tap on the door.

'Enter,' he said.

'Take a seat, Darren.' He gestured to a nearby chair facing his desk.

'Sure.' Darren sat, leaned back and rested one ankle on the other knee.

Berringer had taken Darren's case as the offender manager, responsible for the transition from jail to parole, assessing possible pathways to reintegration and evaluating risks.

Darren was an unusual man. Obviously intelligent, because he'd managed to avoid prison for so long despite being the main suspect in a number of burglaries. There were on record 27 cold cases with a distinct modus operandi. The offender always wore a stocking mask for anonymity, latex gloves and barrier clothing for forensic sterility. He always carried a baseball bat. He specialised in burglary. His threats to home owners were graphic and terrifying, but he had never actually used the bat on them. When Darren was apprehended, his final adventure had ticked all those boxes. So confident was he of the precautions he had taken previously in his career, that he steadfastly refused to admit

anything about any cold cases.

The risk assessment was particularly perplexing. Berringer had read all of the cold cases thought to bear Darren's circumstantially metaphorical fingerprints. In every single case, there had been no actual violence against victims. In just a couple of cases, the perpetrator appeared to have completely lost his temper and trashed the property with the baseball bat, while the traumatised householders watched.

'Darren,' Berringer began. He paused, reconsidered his opening line, and then went with, 'You're a bit of a tricky one, Darren.'

Darren smiled, widening his eyes as if enjoying a game.

'But,' continued Berringer, 'you're not as smart as you think.'

Berringer passed an A4 sheet across the desk. Darren scanned his eyes down a list of 26 of his previous transgressions that he wouldn't claim, plus two that he couldn't. He tossed the sheet back across the desk. The momentary mouth with downturned corners, eyebrow raise and shoulder shrug rendered words unnecessary.

'I know.' It was a statement. Berringer waited a beat, rested his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers, 'and you know I know.'

Darren said nothing.

'Right, to business. It's a bit unusual but Gerald and Barbara Griffiths have learned that your parole hearing is imminent. And they have asked that you consider restorative justice.'

Darren shook his head in puzzlement, 'What?'

'Not come across it before?'

'Not a clue.'

'Well, restorative justice is a process that tries to repair some of the harm done to victims of a crime. Usually it happens much earlier than this. But whatever. It enables perpetrators like yourself to recognise and take responsibility for what you have done. It gives criminals,' Berringer leaned heavily on the word, 'criminals ... a chance to redeem themselves, to make recompense. In your case, for example, the hope is that in understanding that your actions have not only dispossessed your victims but have also affected them emotionally, you will be more disinclined to offend in the future. It also means that the Griffiths regain a sense of control over what happened, which gives them a positive sense of closure.'

'Fair enough,' Darren said.

'What does that mean?'

'It means ... um, it means I'll do it if you like.'

'It's not if I like, Darren. This is not about me. Go away. Think about what you've done to this elderly couple. Think about what it may have cost them to offer this as a way forward. Then decide. But in your case, I recommend it.'

'Alright. Why in my case?'

'Darren,' the older man said with a patient expression as if explaining to a halfwit, 'burglary is a young man's game. In five years time, you won't be wanting to be getting through windows, or legging it down the road. Tripping over tables, Darren? What's that about?'

Darren had the good grace to look embarrassed.

'See, already you're not so steady on your pins!'

'Knock it off!' Darren retorted.

'Fine. I'll give you two days to decide. The Griffiths want to know if you're up for it.'

Darren's case was the subject of a brief preliminary meeting prior to the parole board. Simon Berringer was reviewing the circumstances of the burglary with respect to the future risk of reoffending.

'He's not specifically targeted older householders,' Berringer said.

'No,' replied Stokes, the parole board chair, 'but the use of the bat to threaten was planned, as you can see from his previous alleged offences.'

'But obviously we can't take that into consideration.'

'No, true. But there is definitely a high degree of intimidation.

'Yes, but the bat wasn't actually used, of course.'

Stokes referred to the original court transcript. 'No, that's right. The sentencing was based on culpability at level B, and harm at category 2.'

'Absolutely, hence six years.'

'I was surprised to be honest. There were aggravating factors ... face covering, weapon carried, crime committed in the home.'

'Yes, but then there's exemplary conduct in prison to be taken into account,' replied Berringer.

'And there's a RJ proposal you say?'

'Yes, the victims, the Griffiths, have requested it.'

Stokes looked surprised, 'Bit late isn't it?'

'Yes, but the Griffiths are still stuck with what happened and they think this will help them and him.'

'And what's Fletcher's response?'

'He told me this morning that he is keen for it to happen.'

Stokes gave a grim smile, and shook his head, 'Fine, let's request a report from RJ back into the board. If they agree, then that's fine. I suppose Darren thinks it might affect the parole hearing!'

'He knows, but he's hoping!'

'Well it won't! It's too early. But if it keeps him out of trouble, then the review will view it favourably.'

Chapter 14

Somewhere. Now.

The next night, I have the dream again. But the details have changed. It starts with me pulling at the scissors, then the realisation that I can't get them out. Then I'm aware that I've cut my hands on the blade, and I'm bleeding. It's worse now though because I think I know what's coming. Sure enough the door crashes open, and I get knocked flat. Then I'm crawling to the back door. I try to stand, but I'm too weak. I push the back door open and crawl through. But it can't be because the back door opens inwards of course. Illogically I'm down on all fours moving slowly across the hall, towards the bottom of the stairs.

The hall ceiling light fades from bright white to a sullen yellow, then goes dark. I'm in the dark now. I can't see my hands in front of my face. I'm dizzy, I can't stand up. Frantically I keep scrambling on hands and knees. I can't see the floor, but it feels like stones from the garden are cutting into my knees. Then I hear two careful footsteps on the treads of the staircase. Then silence. I freeze. I breathe in, and I'm rigid with fear, motionless. Black dread wraps around me like a death shroud. Another tread. That's number three. My eyes are slowly adjusting to the dark. Another tread. It creaks this time. That's the bottom step. I'm as still as stone. And fragile. I think I imagine that I can see my pursuer. But evidently I can't be seen. He walks right past me, almost brushing my arm with his foot. I can hear my heart pattering in my chest. There's a creak as the kitchen door swings open momentarily. For half a second I see a silhouette, only a yard or two away. The door swings shut and it's totally dark.

I quietly breathe out.

I'm invisible.

I wait as my pulse rate settles a bit. I'm breathing normally. And I'm aware that everything

is okay. But I'm too weak to move. I slowly lower my face and rest my forehead on the carpet. My limbs give way. I'm face down.

This time it is not a panicky awakening. The room is light. It must be morning.

My rising this time is rather more circumspect. With my face in the pillow, closed eyes still seeing nothing, I mentally prepare myself for another upturned, extremely small day. I attempt to sit up. It takes a huge effort. I carefully open my eyes. The room feels maybe ten percent more natural, but I feel frail.

With great effort, I find my clothes. They still smell fresh. I have to get to the bottom of that. Maybe the laundry gets completely done - washed, dried and ironed - while I'm asleep.

I pick up the clipboard and pen that Eri left. Perhaps it would be good to start making some notes. Everything is so surreal. I feel disconnected, detached, lost somehow. There's nothing familiar in my day that I can hold onto. I can only think in circles.

So I gratefully sit down, and write the first verse of Kipling's Elephant poem, that I learned in Primary School.

*I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.*

Okay. What? Don't know the answer to that.

Why? Don't know the answer to that.

When? Ah - I know that. ...since the attack.

How? Don't know the answer to that.

Where? Nope!

Who? Nope!

So ... that didn't really help much. I have another go. I turn over the top sheet and reclip it to the board, and write a number 1 on the top line, and the question upmost in my mind.

1. *What is this about - therapy or investigation? Justice?*

I then add the other questions that have been milling around in my mind, constantly pushing and shoving for attention.

2. *Why am I being kept here?*

3. *Why does Eri talk about all the stuff he does?*

4. *How are they feeding me without me knowing?*

5. *How are my clothes being cleaned every night?*

6. *Where am I??????*

Frustrated I have appended six question marks. I've been pressing the pen way too hard, and the final question mark tore through the paper. But I carry on.

7. *Who is Eri - doctor, police investigator?*

8. *Can he be trusted? Sorry Rudyard, not one of your men!*

Then I add one more.

9. *Why haven't I tried to escape?*

I reflect on the list a bit. This is better. I'm getting organised. I can do this. I look at number 9. I don't know! Why haven't I?

I set down the clipboard and pen on the chair, walk across to the door, and open it. I lean out again into the corridor, with my feet still in my room. My room? The room!

It still extends seemingly forever in both directions.

Looking left, in the far distance on the left hand side, I can see another door. I step out and walk maybe 50 metres down the corridor. I glance further along the corridor and I'm surprised to see that I'm no closer to the door in the distance. I walk another 50 metres or

so and it's just the same. The door seems to be moving away from me as fast as I approach it. I look back and that is when I realise that I can't identify my own room, I start to panic. I hurry back and I am relieved to find my door still ajar. Once I am back in the room with the door closed I am annoyed to find that I relax and feel reassured.

'Home, sweet home', I tell myself. Sarcasm domesticates the peculiar situation somewhat.

I draw a line through my existing number nine and below it I write

9. Why am I dreaming?

Another question that's been flying about unacknowledged finally settles and I make that number ten.

10. How can I know whether I am dreaming? Am I dreaming now?

I hear Eri's signature tap. I cringe at the thought of Eri reading my questions. I tuck the clipboard under the bed cover before I let him in.

Eri is his usual genuine solicitous self, and seems pleased that I have more energy each day. But the dreaming question is getting increasingly uptight in my head, and is insisting on getting out. It seems the most fundamental one in the list, and maybe holds the key to the others.

'Okay, Nick, tell me then!' Eri seems to know that I have dreamed again. I don't know how this time, because my bed is tidy, and the cover is pretty straight.

He wants to hear it. As I tell it this time, I realise the dream is rather less eventful, but as soon as I get to the part where I'm hiding in the hall, Eri says 'Okay, that's fine'. He seems to know that nothing much is going to happen after that. So ... peculiar!

'I have a question' I say.

'Only one?' There's one eyebrow raised, and the smile has a tease in it.

'For now!'

'Go on.'

'How do I know when I am dreaming?' I pause. Eri says nothing, but he is taking me seriously, so I continue. 'Am I dreaming now?'

Eri's reply surprises me. 'Well you can't know. There's various techniques touted by lucid dreaming enthusiasts. Pinching yourself and suchlike. But it's all nonsense. None of it works.'

'I can't know? Really?' I say.

'Well to be precise, when you're not dreaming you can tell that you're not dreaming, but when you are dreaming you can't tell whether you are dreaming or not.' Eri tips his head on one side, gives an apologetic smile and spreads his empty hands. 'Don't worry about it!'

I am rather shocked by his dismissive attitude. 'Surely it is important to know what is real and what's not?'

Eri shakes his head slightly, and lifts his eyebrows with a knowing smile that implies I am a naive simpleton. 'More important to know what is true and what's not! he replies.

Eri then launches into the reasons why it is impossible to determine reality. You can skip this bit if you like.

'Nick, your brain receives not pictures, nor sounds, nor tastes, nor feeling, nor balance from your body. It only receives chemical impulses from your nerves. All that experience of reality is totally constructed by your brain. The entire world that you think you experience is actually all inside your head.' He pauses.

I am trying to get what he has said inside my head, but I'm not good at recursive thinking.

Eri reads my face, sighs, and carries on regardless. 'And when you dream, your brain is off the lead ... reliably constructing the authentic experience of apparent reality while you

actually sleep.'

I think I get it.

He continues, 'But let me say this. This environment, this room, this bed is not a dream, because your brain is not constructing it. But it is like a dream, because it is constructed.'

He stops when he sees my bewilderment.

'Okaaaay', I stretch out the word because I'm still thinking. I don't want him to carry on yet. At last it seems he's opening up. Constructed?

'So it's not actually real?' I ask.

'Don't worry about whether it's real. What's important is that it's true.'

'And how can I be sure that it's true?'

'Only by trusting us ... trusting me. We know it is true because we are constructing it.

Constructing it for you. You need a context to recover, and this is it. Think of it a bit like a medically induced coma.'

It seems like the best explanation I am going to get, and given the attack and my head injury, I can kind of believe the story.

I'm still curious though. 'So do I need to be fed in this coma?'

Eri's response, at least this time, is precise. 'No. You don't need food.' He pauses. 'And actually you don't need a bed. Nor a room. Neither do you need clothes. But don't worry! You are decent. Kinda!' He flashes his eyebrows up and down. He is enjoying deliberately disconcerting me.

'I'm not worried about that! What concerns me is whether I'm real or whether you're constructing me as well!' I say, only half joking.

'Well, check out the backs of your hands. That's the measure of how well you know

something isn't it!

I turn my hands over and check them out. I have to say they look a little different. Just the skin tone is a bit lighter, and the pattern of hairs looks a bit strange.

'Actually,' I pause and look up at Eri, 'I can't really tell about my hands. They look a bit different somehow. But mostly I care about my thoughts ... whether they're my own. Are you constructing those as well?'

Eri laughs. 'No, no. What would be the point of that?'

'So what is the point of all this?'

'The point of the construction is to give you an environment in which the process of justice can work,' he replies.

And there's that mention of justice again. Every time I think I'm beginning to understand that this is therapy, he pitches me the justice angle.

I give up thinking about that. Suddenly I have an idea. 'Can you prove to me that the environment is constructed?'

Eri replies, 'I can do, but I would rather not. It is too unsettling.'

'Please, go on.' I insist. 'Please, it will help me.'

'Just a tiny, tiny thing then. Anything more is unwise.' Eri takes the clipboard out from under the bed cover. I don't know how he knew it was there. He looks at me and shrugs apologetically. He lays the pen on the clipboard. And waits.

'What?' I say.

The pen disappears. It's gone. Just gone.

'Oh.' I say.

The pen reappears. I pick it up. It's an ordinary pen.

'So this is a dream,' I say.

'No, it's like a dream'.

I'm still lost. 'So what parts of this are not a dream?'

Eri grins and shoots back, 'You think, therefore you are!' then he sees I'm not in the mood for games, so replies carefully. 'What you should have asked is, "what parts are not constructed?" Okay. My words. Your thoughts.' He stops.

It seems an awfully short list. The significance of what he didn't say slowly surfaces. He could have said, 'Me and you' but he didn't. I don't know what to think. I'm obviously a bit brain damaged, and they are somehow fooling my brain so that I can recover. Fair enough.

That comment about justice is still bugging me though.

But Eri doesn't give me time to dwell on it.

'Anyway Nick,' he says 'this is all very interesting, but we need to push on.' He rubs his hands together briskly. 'We have a lot to cover.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, we haven't chatted about your mother yet,' he pauses. Then lets me off the hook.

'Nor your stepbrother.'

'I'd rather talk about Kai than my mother,' I say.

'Give me your impression of him.'

'Well, there's not much to say really. He's a closed book. A loner. All he wants to do is wind me up.' I try to think of something positive to say. 'He's bright enough when he's not stoned, but he's just not a nice person.'

'Not good at relationships then,' Eri suggests.

'Kai has never had a positive role model. He's been dragged up so it's not really surprising.'

Eri face clouds over, and his eyes sadden. 'Does he have any friends?'

'No, basically, he's horrible, like his father. He's a loser.'

'Sounds like you've written him off, Nick?'

I don't understand the comment. It seems a weird thing to say.

'I can't do much about him now can I?' I reply.

Chapter 15

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Kai shouldered his school bag and set out. He had waited for the downpour to ease. The black clouds was passing over, contracting into the east, and the sky above his head had lightened a little. The rain was spitting into the puddles in the gutter. The next deluge was already visible in the distance though.

He only had to walk four blocks and he calculated that he could make it before the heavy rain resumed. Ideally he should run. But running would be insufficiently cool, so he just lengthened his stride a little and hoped.

He passed the run down parade of shops which constituted the village centre. The estate agent sold houses that no-one under 35 could afford. Next was a vacant lot where a bank used to provide various services, now available on the internet. He passed the charity shop that raised money to finance a local food bank. Then the Chinese takeaway renowned for swamping all their food in a salty white glue of unknown chemical composition.

Kai crossed by the stone pillar that memorialised the dead from various wars in which his generation had no interest. The wind kicked up a little. The raindrops got bigger. He put his head down, and upped the pace. A passing SUV sprayed his legs with dirty water.

Great!

Eyes on the pavement avoiding the puddles, he collided heavily with Lisa, who was stepping out of the doorway of the Stop'NShop convenience store that sold brightly coloured vapes to the schoolkids.

Lisa was solid. Unmoving. A natural leader. Slow moving but quick witted and acid tongued. She could detect weaknesses and sensitivities like a hyena smells blood.

'So it's little Kai ... why aren't you looking where you're going, little Kai?' Lisa had not had

a good day at school. Wednesday was PE. Lisa disliked Wednesdays.

Wednesdays always put Lisa in a foul mood.

The remainder of the pack tumbled out after her. Talking loudly as if everyone longed to hear the conversation of adolescents. Shrieking at some shared joke. Pushing each other. Instinctively, they formed a ring around Kai.

The pack exchanged glances, bright with excitement at the prospect of a ritual humiliation.

Kai looked behind him. He registered Abi. She was pretty. Pale skin and red hair. Freckles. She was in his year group. Out of his league. So he had never spoken to her. Wanted to. Couldn't pluck up courage though. Maybe she knew. He lowered his eyes. Embarrassed.

Emma to his left with short dark hair. Arms folded, skirt waistband rolled up to reveal legs more functional than decorative. Staring. Issuing the challenge.

Bella to his right, slender with long dark hair, thin face. Her cheeks sunk in as she sucked on a blackberry vape.

Madison behind him giggling. Either her or Abi swung her school bag and caught Kai in the kidneys. He stumbled forward off balance. Emma swung her substantial right leg, and her foot connected at speed with the back of Kai's left knee. He staggered towards her, and she stepped back as he fell to the ground.

Kai sat dazed, one hand still holding his bag, the other on the ground, fingers splayed. Which Emma then stepped on.

'Oh, poor little Kai. Shall we kiss him better?!' Abi stood over him, staring down shaking her head in mock sympathy.

Lisa was enjoying the joke. 'No, he's not into girls, are you Kai?'

'Certainly not you!' Kai's face twisted with rage as he scowled at Lisa. Her kick was more

reactive than calculated, and caught Kai in the ribcage. He hunched down onto the pavement in pain. Winded.

It was already dawning on the pack that they had gone too far, by the time the shopkeeper came out and gave them a mouthful. They straggled away down the street still hooting and grinning.

Kai was hauled to his feet. Seeing that sympathy would only compound his humiliation, the shopkeeper pushed a chocolate bar into his hand and said, 'Just go home, Kai.'

---oOo---

Jeffrey had seen it all. He was stood at the back of the shop buying lottery tickets. He had watched the girls taunting Kai. He had hoped that the kid would stand up for himself. But predictably, no. Some chance! Why was he so pathetic? But even Kai wouldn't want to be rescued from a bunch of girls by his father. Jeffrey waited. The kid had to learn.

So Jeffrey helped Kai learn later that evening. The lesson was conducted in Kai's bedroom. The takeaway points were the enumerated consequences of being a coward and a let-down. Condescension. Disgrace. Scorn. Contempt. It was quite a long lesson.

---oOo---

Freya was up in her room. She heard it all. Jeffrey's raised voice recounted the details of the roughing up. By girls! Poor Kai. She could feel just what he was going through. She physically flinched as Jeffrey recalled the blows, demanding to know why Kai had not retaliated. Now Jeffrey had gone downstairs stomping on every step. She could hear Kai crying, in his bedroom.

She could feel the pain in her throat and eyes. She waited a couple of seconds, then wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. She shook her head impatiently, then cracked open her bedroom door. She crept out onto the landing. She stood outside Kai's room, afraid to

go in, but agonising at the thought of him crying alone.

She tapped on the door. One quiet tap. No response. Just the sound of weeping.

Jeffrey's voice came echoing up the stairs. 'Quit howling, Kai, or I'll be up there.' A protest from Melissa. An angry response downstairs.

Just sobbing now. Another quiet tap. One more tap.

Kai flung open the door. His dismay instantly changed to agitation and he shoved Freya backwards. He had a bruise on his face, his eyes were puffy and his hand was bleeding. 'Go away. Leave me alone!' The door slammed shut.

Chapter 16

Somewhere. Now.

I look at Eri. He looks disappointed with me. Maybe I was a bit unpleasant about Kai. But as things turned out, I was right, wasn't I? There's quite a lot of other things I could say about Kai, but I don't want to get into that now. Or ever.

Eri gets up, walks over to the bed. It groans a bit as he sits down. I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of him.

'We don't write anybody off here, Nick.' he says. He speaks in such an extraordinarily gentle voice for such a big bloke.

'It's all too late, Eri.'

'It's never too late.' He stops and sits there, like he's listening. 'Well I had scheduled today to finally talk about your Mother. But actually I think we need to clear the decks a bit first.'

I don't know whether to be relieved or afraid. I can't bring myself to even think about her. But what's Eri going to do now?

He gets up off the bed and walks across to the other side of the room. He puts his thumbs in his lapels like a cartoon college lecturer, and fixes me with his attentive gaze.

'First of all, what's the score with your perception, Nick?'

I look around, assessing the room. I lift my arms, roll my shoulders. 'On a scale of one to ten? Tilted bad at the moment, almost upside down. It's a nine -', Eri laughs. I don't think he expected the stats, 'weakness is a two, and your hugeness is an eight.'

'Sorry, what does a one mean on weakness?'

'One means fragile like a ninety year old.'

'Alright, it's good to track these things. Now, what do you know about theology, Nick?'

'What?' I never expected that.

'Theology. What do you know about it?'

I laugh, 'Not much.'

'How about cosmology? You ever looked at that?'

'Can't say I have, no! Where are we -'

Eri cuts in. 'How about particle physics?'

'No, Eri!' I say, patiently. 'I studied microbiology at Manchester uni, and came out with a 2:2'.

'Hmmm.' Eri thinks for a while. 'Okay, lets go back to music. Do you play anything?'

'I tried the guitar for a few weeks, but it hurt my fingers too much.'

'No, that's fine. You know about harmonics?' He looks at me expectantly, hoping.

I'm sorry to disappoint him. 'Maybe. Don't know really.'

'No matter. I'll explain it in simple terms! You know when you pluck a guitar string right in the centre, you get a clean simple sound.'

'Oh yes, it's called the first harmonic isn't it.'

'Yes. With the first harmonic, the string has maximum waggle in the middle, and it gives the lowest note.' Eri tilts his head enquiringly to make sure I'm following. I nod. 'Now do you know how to pluck the string to get the second harmonic?'

I shake my head. 'No, don't think so.'

'It's easy, you rest your finger on the centre of the string, just lightly. So that it doesn't waggle there. And you pluck the string a quarter of the way along. You ever done that?' Eri mimes classical-air-guitar if there is such a thing.

'No, but I've seen guitarists do it when they're tuning up.'

'Yes, what you get then is a note an octave higher. And that's because it's damped ... stationary in the centre, and has max waggle a quarter, and three quarters of the way along.'

'Max waggle! Is that a technical term?' I ask.

Eri ignores my levity. 'Listen. Then you rest your finger one third of the way along the string, and pluck it one sixth of the way along. That gives you -'

'- The third harmonic', I'm catching on.

'You get the idea.'

'Where are we going with this?' I seem to ask this question a lot.

'We're nearly there. The current theory of particle physics now considers that the individual particles that make up the universe, electrons, neutrons, gravitons, protons, etc. are actually all simply harmonics on strings. I say simply. The maths is difficult for ... well it's difficult. Fundamental physicists call it 'string theory'. The physical universe all comes down to vibrations on strings. But there is still a problem with the initial trigger that caused the vibrations to start given that nothing existed in the beginning.'

'Oh, I have heard of string theory.'

'Now, what do you know about mythology?'

Bit of a non sequitur there. I look blank and shake my head.

Eri hurries on, 'Okay, so pretty much most ancient myths are agreed on one common thing ... the spoken word. So for example, Marduk spoke and shaped the world. As did Enki.'

I've never heard of them. I'm still looking blank, but now with a slight frown.

'And Atum and Ptah ... they both spoke to bring the cosmos into being.' He sees my frown, 'Egyptian gods!' he says. 'And the Nasadiya Sukta tells us that the divine being spoke order into chaos. And the Hebrews have the I-am saying, "Let there be light". And Hesiod's Theogony talks about the gods speaking existence into the void.'

Eri's ticking them off on his fingers now, 'So that's Babylonians, Sumerians, Egyptians, Hindus, Hebrews and Greeks! Of course the Norse gods buck the trend by creating the cosmos out of the chopped up body of one of their enemies. But what do you expect from those guys!!'

I don't know where Eri is going with this so I say, 'And..?'

He's very patient! He continues, 'A god's voice could be thought of as those initial vibrations that literally brought matter into being. Of course they hadn't invented string theory back then, so the vibrations are described in the story as speech, but they did literally result in the physical cosmos.'

Before I have time to absorb the significance of what Eri has said, he's moving on.

'Now what do you know about the multiverse?'

'The what?'

'The multiverse ... the currently favoured best idea about how the universe is balanced so finely for humanity to live in?'

'No, I don't know anything about that.'

'Okay, very simply, the chances of the universe existing in this state which allows stars, to have planets and planets to have life are proven to be so astronomically small that they could only occur at random if an infinite number of universes came into being at the time of the big bang. That way, there would have to be one that was perfect for life.'

I haven't followed because he talks too fast in this lecturer mode. 'Can you say that again,'

I ask, 'a bit slower?'

He repeats the same words. Same speed, but with gaps between the phrases.

'How can you prove something like that?' I ask.

'You can't really.'

'Sounds like a crazy idea!'

'Yes, well it's hotly disputed. But the maths works, and it's the best that cosmologists have got so far! Because they want to discount an intelligent creator, that's where they end up! An infinite number of parallel universes! But we don't need to worry about that right now.'

I'm struggling to take all this in. Eri continues.

'I just wanted you to know that this may seem crazy, but your own cosmologists -'

I cut him short. '- My own cosmologists?'

'Sorry,' he continues unperturbed, 'but cosmologists have accepted the idea that parallel universes can exist.' He stops and sits down.

He looks at me, with eyebrows raised as if I am supposed to realise something.

He leans back in the chair and crosses one ankle over the other knee. 'Anything?' he says.

I shake my head. After a while it becomes clear that he's going to have to spell it out.

'You could say ... we are in a parallel universe, Nick.'

I'm sat on the bed.

Eri is sat at a table that wasn't there at the start of the conversation. He is smiling and slowly nodding. Watching me to see my reaction.

I go over in my mind all that's happened so far. The room. The conversations. The

dreams. No injuries. Eri walking in every day. Day? I don't know.

I'm silent. My mind tries to reinterpret the last few days. It's ludicrous. I'm dreaming. Or hallucinating. But I'm rationally analysing. I seem to be much smaller than usual, and weak. In an inverted room, not hungry, with a disappearing pen on an infinitely long corridor.

I'm drifting unattached. I have almost nothing to hold on to. Just my thoughts and Eri's words. All the rest is constructed. The answer to Kipling's 'where' question is still nowhere in sight.

Eri stands up. He can see I'm fearful. He walks over and gives me a hug. He's big and solid and reliable. He seems trustworthy. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'I'll take care of you.'

Chapter 17

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Anne Wyndham stood five feet nothing in her stockinged feet, hence the three inch heels with half inch platforms. Gerald Griffiths was tall, thin, bespectacled and intelligent. Twenty years earlier, he had been very tall, but cartilage shrinking and poor posture reduced him to a mere five feet ten.

His wife Barbara was rather shorter, a lot wider, less intellectual but more sensitive. As was her usual entertainment, she was watching the power dynamics in their three way conversation. Who did Anne respect the most? The female or the male? The intellectual or the people person? But Anne was giving nothing away, addressing them equally, and switching eye contact from one to the other at calculatedly regular intervals.

Barbara and husband Gerald had decided earlier to present a united front despite Gerald's disquiet.

It had taken around five minutes for Anne to detect the unspoken difference of opinion.

'So Gerald, just talk a bit about your concerns regarding this approach of restorative justice.'

He didn't reply immediately. Then thoughtfully, 'Well I'm worried that Barbara's expectations -'

Barbara chipped in '- hopes'.

'Okay, Barbara's hopes are going to be dashed and,' he turned to address his wife, 'it's going to hurt you again.'

She tilted her head accepting the possibility.

'I don't want to continue if there's any chance that he will hurt you again,' Gerald clarified.

'Gerald,' Anne gently said, 'do you think it's worth trying?'

'I don't think you understand.' Gerald drew a deep breath. 'This man had a baseball bat. We were terrified. And I'm not yet convinced that we aren't putting ourselves in danger by doing this. We're going to be living in the same town once this is all over!'

'I'm sorry Gerald. And you Barbara. It's part of my job to assess that kind of risk. After I've spoken to Mr Fletcher, I will have a better idea whether we can continue with restorative justice.'

'So we're in your hands?' Barbara responded.

'Yes, you are.'

Gerald sighed then paused for a second or two. 'Honestly?' He slowly shook his head, 'I don't think there's a cat in hell's chance of it achieving anything.'

'But is it worth trying?'

He shrugged as if his wife had already decided. 'It looks like we're going to give it our best shot.'

Anne nodded approvingly.

'But leaving aside physical violence now,' Gerald continued, 'what are the chances Barbara will suffer even more mental trauma, and have another three months of not sleeping well? Do these sessions ever go wrong ... get out of control?'

Anne laid a reassuring hand on Gerald's arm, and looked him in the face. 'Not when I'm in charge.'

'And what are you hoping to get out of it?' she continued.

'Me?' Gerald pondered for a few seconds, 'I'm just wanting Barbara to get some closure I suppose.'

Anne turned to Barbara, 'And how about you, have you thought about how this might affect you?'

She considered her reply for a few seconds. 'Hmm -' she paused, 'not in any great depth, really.'

She glanced at Gerald to see his reaction. 'I do know that it could go wrong of course,' she continued, 'he's obviously quite complicated and a bit unpredictable.'

'Indeed,' Gerald agreed.

'And if he reacts badly,' she drew in her breath sharply, 'really badly, I mean, then it's hard to say how it will affect me.'

'Well there's no guarantees, of course.' Anne trailed off, leaving Barbara space to continue.

'To be honest,' I've given more thought to the effect on Mr Fletcher.'

She looked at Gerald, and seeing him about to protest, hurried on. 'All these sorts of people, like Mr Fletcher, who has made a mess of his life ... ,' she frowned and looked at Gerald, 'at one time he was a small boy with his life ahead of him, hoping for the best.'

'Well, while it is true you are creating the possibility of a good closure,' Anne replied, 'you must recognise that you are also exposing yourself to the risk of further emotional trauma.'

'I do know that,' Barbara spoke quietly but firmly, 'but perhaps I am just hoping it won't make matters worse,' she admitted.

'Well, often in cases like this, the crime victims feel completely disempowered, and so my first goal usually is that an honest face to face meeting will level the playing field. The loss of control, experienced during this type of offence, leaves a sense of inadequacy and weakness, which can stoke fear and resentment. I want you both to be able to let go of those kinds of feelings.' Anne checked their faces for unspoken assent, then continued without waiting. 'Obviously you are aware that Mr Fletcher will return and be living here

in Kingsheath, so any inadvertent meeting within the common public space may provoke an emotional reaction of some kind. Hence my second goal will be that you still feel comfortable in this community, and that your reaction will not be distressingly negative.'

Both Barbara and Gerald were nodding, albeit with serious faces.

'Now are you hoping for any reparation,' Anne asked.

'What do you mean ... payment?' Gerald's eyes narrowed questioningly.

'No, not financial reparation. Are you hoping that he will offer anything as a sign of his regret over the incident?'

'I still don't know what you mean.'

'Well, I had a case last year where the offender offered to mow someone's lawn because he could see they were old and would appreciate that. It dropped off after one season, but that was sufficient.'

Gerald and Barbara had not considered anything like this, which would involve Darren coming back to their property. They exchanged glances.

'We really don't know,' Barbara replied with a shrug, 'we'll have to get back to you on that.'

---oOo---

One hour later, Anne was still at her desk. She leaned back in the office chair, dropped her head back, face up and relaxed her neck muscles. Reaching over her shoulders with both hands, she massaged her shoulder and neck for a few minutes. Then checked her watch. She walked into the office kitchenette and poured a cup of coffee from the filter jug. This was number three so far today. Incredible, she thought, that humanity had survived at least 200,000 years without coffee!

'He's here!' Her secretary poked her head into the kitchenette.

'No peace from the wicked,' Anne replied. She had a selection of personal Bible misquotes deployed usually for her own amusement. That, plus a passion for justice was all that remained from her lapsed Catholicism.

---oOo---

'So Mr Fletcher, thanks for coming in today. It will probably be a shortish meeting, just to run through a few bits. Okay?'

'I guess.'

'Take a seat. Coffee?'

'Sounds good.'

'Lynn, a coffee for Mr Fletcher please. Thanks!'

They exchanged the usual English pleasantries for a few minutes. Essential initial components of a difficult meeting. Her technique with offenders, ex or otherwise, was to try to find common ground. The weather was always a reliable topic.

Once coffee had arrived, Anne swiftly and smoothly changed gear.

'Now Mr Fletcher, we need to agree some objectives out of this meeting with Mr and Mrs Griffiths.'

'I suppose so.'

'First of all then, since you will be living locally, we need to reset their view of you, so that when you meet in the street, it doesn't spoil their day. And if this meeting can achieve that, so that you can simply both smile and walk past each other, that will be an achievement.'

'If you say so.' Darren gave a small shrug.

Anne frowned, narrowed her eyes and locked them to his.

'Mr Fletcher, so far you have responded with "I guess", "I suppose so" and "If you say so." '

Darren could see from her face that he'd somehow screwed up already.

'It's very good that you have agreed on this restorative justice process,' she said, 'I applaud you for that.'

Darren relaxed a little. He cleared his throat nervously to fill the momentary silence.

'But,' she continued after a pause, 'if the vibes they get from you are I-didn't-want-to-be-here or I'm-doing-you-a-favour, then it is best not to have the meeting at all.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not used to this,' Darren shifted uncomfortably in his chair, then stood up, 'maybe we should can it?'

Anne looked at him coolly for a moment. She had a significant range of psychological weapons in her armoury, which she deployed with frightening proficiency. She first chose preparatory flattery ...

'No, let's not do that. You've previously made the decision, and today made the effort to come.'

... followed by the conditional insult (implied) ...

'If you bottle out now, I mean, what kind of man are you?'

... and finally, the appeal to pride.

'Don't you want to show you are better than that?'

Darren sat back down. Anne smiled. Of course, crocodiles smile too.

'What did your daughter think about you being in prison?'

'Why do you want to know about that?'

'I want to get a picture in my mind of how the relationships worked within your friends and family. That will help me to make a judgement about whether this programme is going to help your victims.'

Darren didn't respond immediately. He looked as if he was struggling with something. He returned his gaze to Anne, swallowed a couple of times, then tried to continue, 'She ...'. He fell silent.

'Take your time,' Anne said gently.

Darren shook his head and sighed. 'My daughter is just a kid. She ... she should never have seen me in there. But she came.'

He pulled himself upright in the chair, and cleared his throat, 'She was shocked when she realised what I'd done. And frightened. Really frightened.'

Darren suddenly lowered his head, and put his face in his hands. His shoulders were shaking.

'Don't worry, Mr Fletcher,' Anne said gently, 'we can wait a few moments'.

Darren stayed, head bowed, breathing heavily. Then slowly, he raised his head and scanned the room, like a creature sensing danger.

'Why was she frightened?' Anne asked the question lightly, just as if she was asking the time of day.

'I lose it sometimes.' His voice was barely audible.

'Lose what, Mr Fletcher?'

'My temper,' Darren's forehead was shiny with sweat, 'and she knew I'd had the bat.'

'But you didn't use the bat, did you?'

'No ...' Darren wiped his palms on his trousers, then continued, 'but I had ...', Darren faltered again, then after another sigh, 'I had used it. At home.'

Anne kept her gaze steady on Darren. The air was heavy and the room was still.

'Not on her!' Darren was suddenly agitated now. 'Not on anyone. I just smashed some

ornaments. I got angry.'

Anne decided it was time to dial down the pressure. 'I don't want to think the worst of you, Mr Fletcher, and I'm very grateful that you have been honest with me. It's to your credit. So well done.'

Darren was wiping his eyes.

'I've just got just a few more questions before we finish up here,' she said with more emotional detachment than she felt.

'Firstly,' she continued, 'have you ever hit anyone with a baseball bat?'

'No, never, never!' Darren shot back, 'I never would.'

'And,' Anne was remorseless, 'have you ever hit anyone in a rage, with your fists?'

Darren hid his mouth in his hands for a moment. 'Yes.' His voice was low, defiant, 'hasn't every man?'

'And have you ever badly injured anyone?'

Darren's glanced round the room, then he whispered 'No.' But his eyes said he had.

Anne let the untruth hang in the air for a painfully long time, watching Darren closely.

Then efficient as ever, she came to her conclusion and moved on.

'So, thinking now about Mr and Mrs Griffiths,' she continued, 'resetting their view of you will involve them understanding more about you.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you had a difficult childhood, didn't you.'

'You don't know anything about that!'

'Very little,' she conceded tilting her head down, 'but we know sufficient from your foster care records and your youth offending behaviour that life was pretty harsh. As a child,

through no fault of your own, Mr Fletcher, you drew the short straw!

Darren looked offended, 'I made my decisions.'

'Absolutely, you're responsible. Well done for taking ownership.' She paused to check whether he was back onside. He wasn't. His arms were crossed, hands tightened into fists buried in his armpits.

'And I agree, no way is this a time to be coming up with whiny excuses.' She could see Darren relaxing slightly.

'But it will help the Griffiths if you can be a bit open about some of the struggles you've had,' she said.

Darren ran his fingers through his hair, thinking. 'Really?'

'Yes.' She paused, watching his reaction.

He looked at her expectantly. She was still as stone with narrowed eyes that locked with his. He held her gaze for a moment, then knew that she saw right through him.

'And Mr Fletcher, ' his gaze dropped, '... don't play games!'

Anne stood up and walked across to a filing cabinet. She opened the second drawer down, pulled out a cream folder and extracted a sheet of paper. She walked across to Darren and passed it to him.

'This will help you prepare for the meeting with Mr and Mrs Griffiths.'

It was a simple to-do list. Darren scanned the first paragraph, then moved to the first thing to do.

It appeared he would have to discuss the consequences of the offence. Followed by agreeing

on how the offenders should repair the harm they have caused the victims.

Anne reached across and gave Darren a business card. 'Here's my email, and my phone number. Let me know in a couple of days how you are getting on with the prep.'

She leaned back, and smiled again at Darren. Then she held both hands out, palms inward, fingers spread, to indicate they were done.

'Okay?'

Chapter 18

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

At the top of the high street was a run down pet shop that sold cheap toys, harnesses, leads, and feeding bowls mainly for dogs and cats. The front window was cluttered with a seemingly random collection of packets of food for a wide variety of animals. Business was seeping away month by month to the corporate out of town 'Pets For Us'. Next door, the newsagent/tobacconist was going the same way, undercut by the out of town superstore and news on the internet. The door bottom rail and weatherbar were showing signs of rot. The small evangelical chapel which had done so much to frame Melissa's childhood was next to that, set back slightly from the building line. The peeling paint on the blue noticeboard promoting Sunday services in gold lettering told a similar story. Losing market share to 'The Riverside', a large student church with an upbeat minister and an inspiring worship band that met on the trading estate. Consumerism, apathy and a reputation for irrelevance accelerated the chapel's downturn.

Bucking the trend and further down the high street, the "Perk You Up" coffee shop had so far fended off the corporates. The interior was stylish, the ambiance was friendly, the coffee was good and the staff were local. At a table for two, in the most secluded corner at the back sat Melissa twisting her napkin between her fingers.

Celia opposite, was frowning and shaking her head. 'I'm concerned about you, Melissa.' she spoke gently looking across the table. 'We've been friends since the year dot. You can tell me what's wrong.'

'No, it's nothing.'

'It's not nothing. I know you. We haven't had coffee for ages.'

'I'm busy now.' Melissa, eyes down, scooped some of the foam from the top of her latte

with her teaspoon.

'Just tell me, Melissa. You trust me don't you? Tell me. It'll be okay.' Celia reached across placing her hand atop Melissa's.

Melissa pulled it free, and brushed the back of her hand across her eyes. She looked up and nodded. 'Of course. But it's not anything you can help with.'

'Just talking to me will help. We've always faced difficult things together. Even if I can't actually do anything. At least I'll be able to pray intelligently.'

Melissa raised her head. Celia watched a tear run down each cheek. Melissa thought for a moment, then loosened her silk scarf. She turned her head slowly to the left. The purple bruise that ran around her neck clearly showed the finger grip.

A wave of anger washed the positive optimism from Celia's face. 'Jeffrey?' she said.

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Well it wasn't going to be Nick or Freya.'

'It's my own fault. I'm just not coping with this marriage. He expects me to be this glamorous trophy wife, and I'm not. And I'm never going to be. I will always be me ... plain and boring.' Melissa replied.

'Melissa! You're not plain or boring.'

'He's got such horrible friends, who are all loudmouthed and competitive. And their wives are catty and cheap.' Melissa's hands were clenched tight, fingernails biting into her palms. She tightened her scarf and put her head down.

Celia sat still for a moment, slowly shaking her head.

'None of that explains why you have bruises round your neck though,' she said quietly.

'Does it?'

Melissa shook her head. She took a deep breath and let it out shakily, head in hands, shoulders down. Forlorn misery was written all over her. 'We had an argument about clothes. It turned into a fight.'

Celia was aghast. 'No, what a proper fight?'

'Well it didn't last long.'

'But he tried to strangle you? Melissa, this is really serious.'

'He was just really angry with me. And he reacted badly.'

'When was this?'

'Four days ago. Monday.'

'And has he hit you since?'

'Well, pushed me,' admitted Melissa 'and I fell. Against the fridge'.

Celia's voice, still low, had a new edge. 'This can't go on, Melissa.'

'So just tell me your practical suggestion!' Melissa's voice was all bitter sarcasm.

'I don't know. I just know it can't continue. And I'll come and tell him, if you won't!'

Celia was breathing hard. Her eyes glittered with suppressed rage.

'No! No, no.' Melissa's voice raised in alarm. Several in the coffee shop looked round. 'No, you can't. Don't interfere.' She stood up, eyes wide, her mouth working in fear. 'Don't get involved.'

'Melissa!?' Celia called after her as she hurried out of the coffee shop, then turned and ran down the High Street.

---oOo---

'Problems?' Jeffrey was stood at the front door as Melissa cut across the front lawn.

She shook her head and attempted to push him aside and walk past him. He pulled her into the hallway and closed the front door. He spun her round and backed her up against the wall.

'That was uncalled for. Where's your manners?' He raised his hand.

Melissa flinched and half turned away as best she could.

'Are you afraid of me?'

No reply. Melissa stood stock-still, alert, heart pounding.

'Where have you been?' Jeffrey's voice was level, and controlled. He put his face close to hers.

'Coffee.' Her voice was low and shaky.

'You've been with that Celia woman, haven't you.'

'No.'

'Don't lie. I know you have.'

Melissa looked up at Jeffrey, face white, eyes pleading, silently begging to be released.

'Tell me.' he demanded.

'Yes.'

Jeffrey gripped Melissa's head in both hands, and tilted her face up to his.

'You don't need to be afraid of me.' he said very slowly and quietly.

'You just need..' voice getting louder

'..to do..' shouting now

'..what you are told!' he screamed in her face.

Melissa burst into tears. Jeffrey pushed her away, and she ran upstairs wailing like a child.

---oOo---

Melissa sat on the bed, the door locked.

Slowly her sobbing subsided, and her breathing returned to normal. She stood up. Walked to the en-suite. She ran the cold tap and held a face flannel beneath the flow. She carefully wrung it out and wiped her face with it.

The coolness settled her emotions and balance returned.

She sat on the bed twisting her fingers as if to straighten out her mind.

'I've really screwed up.' she whispered. Words from an ancient letter written centuries ago drifted into her mind, "Can light and darkness be friends?"

'But I'm not light. And he's not darkness all the time! But I should never have married him. I can't pretend it was a mistake. I did it deliberately.' A chaotic mob of honest mistakes and bad choices ran riot in her mind. Clamouring to be heard. Demanding recognition. Defying resolution.

'I can't carry on with him. But I can't leave him either can I?' Melissa knew that her life was a tangled mess, but nobody could fix it. There was no way forward.

For a brief moment, the impression crossed her mind of a pair of hands slowly untangling threads and skilfully reworking them together. As she watched, the hands flipped the fabric so that the confusing tangle of crossed threads on the underside were no longer seen, to show instead an embroidered picture. Melissa shook her head. She hadn't seen what the picture represented, but she knew it was beautiful.

---oOo---

Jeffrey walked to the drinks cabinet, and poured himself a conciliatory straight double. He had had a very difficult day. The woman had deliberately been to see that Celia, who was only going to stir up trouble. Why didn't the bitch just do what she was told, wear the nice

clothes he had bought her, enjoy the places he took her, and behave properly in front of his friends.

He sat frowning on the settee and opened the laptop. He logged in to email, and finding Celia's last message, he selected the menu item "Filter messages like this" and chose "Delete on receipt". That at least was one problem out of the way.

Last night she had deliberately tried to show him up by sulking when they were in the golf club bar. He and his friends and their wives were all having a good time. But she apparently couldn't. Oh no! Of course not. His friends were not good enough for her. She wanted her holy churchy chums.

She never wanted to go out for the night but then she complained when he went out on his own. Every one of his friend's wives were more fun than she was. Definitely. Especially Gloria. Gloria enjoyed a drink. Why couldn't Melissa enjoy a drink like everybody else?

But he would change her. He knew he could. He had never failed yet. Apart from Kai, and that didn't count. Teenagers were always stroppy. And antisocial.

Jeffrey looked at the whisky glass. It was empty. He would have another. On the rocks though this time. To slow himself down a bit.

Jeffrey oscillated between misplaced pride in his own persona and self pity because things were not going the way he planned. In the end, he stopped drinking because he was too far gone to undo the cap on the whisky bottle. Which annoyed him. He fell asleep on the sofa, muttering to himself occasionally.

This to Melissa's relief. Because Jeffrey dead drunk was less dangerous than Jeffrey tanked up. Sober, he used his words and his fists. Tanked up, he didn't bother with words.

---oOo---

There followed one of Jeffrey's less successful days. Beginning at 4.30am, he first loudly

reclaimed the entire bed and summarily evicted Melissa. He slept fitfully until awaking at 6.15am in a foul temper, with a throbbing headache, and a throat like the bottom of a birdcage. He stumbled to the bathroom, nauseous and retching. To his credit, he managed to reach the hand basin. Things generally went downhill from thereon. Melissa stayed out of the house, while Jeffrey journeyed from mental and physical pain, through self pity, anger and frustration, and on into fear and guilt. Then finding himself in desolation, loneliness and self-loathing, he succumbed to the call of the bottle at around noon. Thus reenergised, he manfully fought his way back into complaint, accusation, recrimination, and projection of all his faults onto others, mostly Melissa.

Anyone familiar with Jeffrey's behaviour and attitude would have been happy to witness his misery. The motivation for such enjoyment would be justified as karma, or comeuppance, but whatever you call it, it would be vengeance.

Melissa wanted vengeance. Oh yes! Deep down. Wanted it so much. It was too deep to be detected by her church friends, or her son or daughter. Buried too deep for its bitterness to be detected even by her own prayer times, when she spoke words sweet as honey. Every now and then, the flowers of vengeance showed above the surface in notions of delicious retribution. Often as a result of discussion with Nick. He was all for Jeffrey getting his just desserts. Shocked then by her own gritted teeth, Melissa pruned the desire with repentance and prayer, and quoted Jesus' words to Nick - 'love your enemy, refuse eye-for-eye vengeance'. But nevertheless the desire for retribution was allowed to live on, quietly spreading its roots deeper and wider.

Chapter 19

Somewhere. Now.

'So,' Eri says, 'we really must talk about your mother.'

I know I can't avoid it for ever. And Eri is evidently trying to follow some sort of rehabilitation programme to get me ... where? ... I don't know. I decide to just go with the flow.

'Every second or third day she's apparently walked into a door, or fallen over in the garden, or burnt herself on a casserole dish. He's abusing her,' I say. 'There's no other word for it.'

Eri nodded. 'Who are we talking about?'

I can hardly bear to say his name. 'Jeffrey'.

I've got to the point where I despise him. A man beating up a woman, just for the pleasure of control. I can see Eri is waiting for me to elaborate. Mum is so weak! It makes me furious. She should just walk out on him.

'And it's getting worse,' I say, 'first it was just the occasional insult, but now he's on her case all the time. And he's hitting her, or pushing her, or worse every other day now.'

As I talk about it, I realise we have drifted into this really risky situation.

'Sometimes he gets half drunk. Everybody has to get out of his way. But whatever happens, when he's had three or four drinks, everything is Mum's fault.'

My mind goes back to when Jeffrey punched me in the gut. It took me days to get over the physical pain, and I never got my confidence back with him.

'He's dangerous. And vindictive if he doesn't get his own way. Kai is terrified of him. I told you didn't I?'

'Yes, you mentioned that before.'

'He needs a taste of his own medicine.' I spit the words out. The more I think about the way he treats my mother ... It's really getting to me. 'I loathe the man'.

Eri looks at me quizzically. 'Medicine? What do you mean?' He seems genuinely confused.

'He needs some of his own medicine,' I say. 'He can dish it out. I bet he can't take it.'

'You mean he needs some violence done to him? Literally?' Eri raises his eyebrows as if in disbelief.

'Yes, of course. He needs to know what it feels like. He deserves it.' I can feel myself getting worked up about it.

But Eri is flat calm. 'So do you think that if someone hits him, really hurts him, then that will change his attitude and he'll become a better man?'

I'm getting intensely angry now. I can feel the burning rage roiling in my guts. Why is Eri defending him? 'No, of course not. He's never going to become a better man!'

'Then why are you proposing that as a solution?' Eri speaks quietly. He's being reasonable and gentle and absolutely bloody annoying.

'It's not a solution!' I'm shouting now, exasperated. I'm just about holding this seething storm in. 'It's what he deserves. He needs to get what he deserves.'

Something is changing. I'm struggling to see clearly. I look around, puzzled. It is kind of cloudy, a bit dark. The curious thing is that Eri is still crystal clear. He says, 'Is that right? Go on.'

Why can't Eri see it? Through gritted teeth I say, 'Listen, he's a swine! Isn't it obvious that if he's allowed to carry on, he's going to destroy my mother.'

Eri gets up off the chair, and walks across the room, and as he gets closer, he gets brighter against the darkening room. He kneels down by my feet. This improbably huge man. The brightness is intensifying around him. He is so brilliant now I can hardly look down at his

face. He waits a few seconds while my breathing settles a little. Then he looks up at me quietly, and takes my hands in his.

'Nick,' he says, 'you can't carry all this. You have to start letting it go.'

I could be honest, but I go cold at the thought.

Eri continues, 'that's why you are here. That's why I'm with you.' He gently squeezes my hands for emphasis.

And suddenly, I'm shivering. And sinking. I can feel his hands holding mine, and it seems he is my only link to the way back. The room goes profoundly still. My legs are trembling. Suddenly I feel the knees landing in my back as I'm face down in the garden. The final memory of excruciating pain being beaten around the head floods into my mind. Then it all connects with Eri's surreal 'parallel universe' comment. I have woken up in a nightmare. I'm gasping, I can't get enough air. I'm breathing too fast. I'm dizzy.

'Nick!' Eri shakes me by the shoulders. He's pretty rough. But I'm hyperventilating now. The excess oxygen is numbing and curling my fingers, and turning my hands into talons. Dark dread is surging through my mind. Eri shakes me again, really hard. He's deliberately gripping my shoulders really hard. It really hurts. He keeps shaking.

I yelp with pain. 'Stop it!' But the pain in my shoulders has distracted me from the panic.

'That's better,' he says 'be calm. Breathe in. Count to three with me. One, two, three.'

I squeeze down the terror threatening to drown me.

Eri is still calm. His words are firm and slow. 'Breathe out. One, two, three. Keep going. Just settle down.'

I look at him, I'm still terrified, but not panicking now. The brightness has faded, the room is back to normal. But I'm shaking, and there's sweat running down my face. 'Is this an afterlife?' I ask.

Eri doesn't reply.

'Well, is it?' I demand.

Eri pats the air with both hands, gesturing me to slow down. He smiles reassuringly. 'Look Nick,' he says 'there's something you have to do now. The time is right.'

There's a laptop computer on the table. It's reassuring familiar. This is clearly not an afterlife after all! But it wasn't there before. Weird. But I settle a bit. It's booting up.

There's a message on-screen saying 'System Updating. Do not switch off your computer.'
This is absolutely definitely not an afterlife!

Eri continues before I have a chance to ask any more questions. 'Use the laptop to do some dream research.'

'What?' What does he mean. I obviously appear hesitant, because he decides to spell it out.

'The three dreams ... remember? Being under the heel. Being hidden in the hall. Being safe in the helmet.'

I'm not stupid. Heel, hall, helmet. The alliteration is obvious now. 'Okay'. Maybe I can find out about this unsettling perception issue. Although the off balance tilting thing is not going away exactly, at least it is starting to feel a little bit normal. Although actually, the room is still far too big in comparison with me. And I'm still really weak.

Eri releases my hands, and stands up to go.

'Stay,' I say.

'You don't need me for the research.' Eri walks smoothly across the room and the door closes behind him.

---oOo---

The computer has booted, and a browser is connected to the internet. I sit down on the

chair that Eri uses and click about a bit on the screen. The only application loaded is the browser.

I realise I now have the opportunity to check out where I am. The laptop can detect the IP address for sure, even if there's no GPS or mobile signal. But there's no location services installed on the machine. I don't know how else to find out. I try Google maps on the browser and get a 404 'page not found' error message.

Aha, how about the 'date and time' setting. I should at least be able to determine what time zone I'm in. No! There's no access to the control panels.

How about email? No. Social media? No, they all error with 404. WhatThreeWords? No. I fiddle about for another ten minutes or so trying to think of some way to work out where we are, but have to give up.

Into the browser address bar I type 'etymology heel'.

There's just one hit. Strange. Usually there's hundreds, thousands even. But it's a good hit anyway.

Old English hēle, hǣla, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch hiel, Old Norse hæll

I read on. I learn that the Old English derivative word is probably helan ("to conceal, cover, hide"). That possibly is related to the Proto-Germanic helanan (to conceal, stash, receive stolen goods). It's all to do with hiding, or being hidden. So it seems the heel is that part of the foot which is hidden.

Then I type 'etymology hall'. Again, just one hit.

Old English heall, of Germanic origin; related to German halle, Dutch hal, Norwegian and Swedish hall

More digging and I turn up the information about heall. It appears to have been a space covered with a roof, a communal shelter. Often provided by the tribal chief. Hmmm. I sit and think for a while. I'm a bit stumped. So try to envisage it in my mind. Probably no

walls. Just a roof held up on stakes. Then I realise I'm a bit slow. Of course, it's a roof which covers. Which hides people from the weather.

Then I type 'etymology helmet'. One hit again. This browser is strange. After a second the page displays the one hit.

Late Middle English helm, from the Old French, diminutive of helme, also from the Old High German helan 'to conceal'

Got it straight away. So the helmet hides the head.

I sit back. They all derive from the idea of something hidden or concealed. What am I supposed to understand from that? I'm missing something.

I repeat the words out loud. 'heel ... helan ... hall ... haelle ... helanan ... helmet ... helan'

Click! So I'm an idiot!

Then I type 'etymology hell'. One hit again.

Old English hel, hell, of Germanic origin ...

I read on. It's connected to the Dutch word hel and the German word Hölle, and it originates from Indo-European. It means to cover or hide.

I type 'when was old English spoken'. It seems it spans 700 years from the 5th century onwards. So the word hell originally meant 'a hidden place' or 'a place to hide'.

I do a few searches on the major world religions and I'm surprised to find that many of them, whether we are talking about Islam, Baha'i, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, or Christianity, all have at least similar ideas - either permanent or temporary, but usually a place for purifying or punishing. Buddhists and Hindus consider it a place of rebirth, and Sikhs a state of mind. None of them seem to have the idea of a place to hide.

I do know that the bible talks about hell a lot, so I do some more internet searches.

It turns out that in the original Hebrew writings, hell is a place called sheol, which means a

hidden place underground. And how about this - everybody without exception goes there, good and bad, rich and poor. Everybody! I never heard that before.

Then I read that the Greeks had a name for a hidden place underground. It was called hades. And when the old Hebrew writings were translated into Greek, they used the word 'hades'. So when they translated the old Hebrew and the old Greek into English they used the word hell.

I'm connecting the dots. The distraction of the study has subdued the fear that swamped me. I'm in a hidden unsettling place. The ancients called it sheol, hades or hell.

Is this an afterlife? Maybe? But a laptop in an afterlife? The very idea is laughable. And a small laugh bubbles up through my brain and comes out as a giggle. It continues longer than I'd like and it's disconcertingly uncontrolled. I turn to examine the laptop again. It's no longer there. Everything else is unchanged.

A frantic voice in my head tries to re-establish some sanity.

Don't be ridiculous. Hell? There's no fire! No torture! No devil!

It turns into a kind of debate. But scientists say that parallel universes almost certainly exist.

Hell? Nah!

This could easily be a parallel universe.

Okay. Parallel universe, maybe. But hell is nonsense.

But there's often scientific truth in stuff that sounds like nonsensical folklore.

I do a mental double-take. I can hardly believe I'm actually trying to debate rationally with myself about this. As if it's real. I want to talk to Eri about it. And speak of the devil, in he walks. Only he's clearly not the devil is he?

'So what do you think?' Eri grins as if this whole thing is some kind of reality TV game.

I'm just in confusion. Conflicted. I don't want to be naively gullible. Nor unreasonably sceptical. 'I have no clue!' I say.

'I disagree. You have plenty of clues. The pen, the laptop, the table, the corridor, the lack of hunger, your own misperceptions. There's clues everywhere.'

'But none of it is real. Only a day or so ago, you ...'

'My words. Your thoughts. That's real,' Eri cuts in.

'Granted.'

And immediately, something drops like a soft black tepid silent blanket. Sensory deprivation. I'm jolted back into fear. I gasp but there's no sound. My heart must be pounding. Only it isn't. I can't detect my body, my surroundings. I can't see, or feel anything. No body awareness. The only thing I can do is think. All I am is thoughts.

'See.' Eri says.

I want to say, "Is there really just your voice and my thoughts?", but I make no sound. I have no voice.

'Correct,' Eri replies 'except for me it's vice versa. I can hear your thoughts, but not my own voice.'

I'm still afraid, but less so now. At least there is some consistency to this weird experience.

Eri continues. 'So just unwind for a few minutes. Relax into these conditions.'

Eri's voice continues. Reassuring me. Everything floats. His words flow past me. I just let go. My mind feels smooth as warm cream. Tangles are slowly unravelling themselves. Soon everything will be untwisted. Loose. Restful. Rest -

'Wake up!' Eri's voice cuts through.

I have fallen asleep I suppose. But I'm still in the black softness of silent balm. I am at peace. Resting. I relinquish my dependence on a physical body.

'That'll do. Enough for now anyway.' Eri's words arrive and a moment later, everything is back. The room, the bed, Eri's reassuring smile, my own body, my voice, everything. Sadly including the perception problems.

'So what's all this,' I ask.

'Constructed.'

'Why?' I shake my head, puzzled. 'Why do I need it?'

'Because there is work to do, and you would just fall asleep.'

'What work?'

'I've got some information about Freya for you, but talk to me a bit about your mother's relationship with her.'

Chapter 20

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Freya reached under the bed. She pulled out the carrier bag that Melissa had given her. She took out the clear plastic wallet of coloured pens. Then she withdrew the other item, "The Mindfulness Colouring Book". She opened her bedroom door and called down the stairs. 'I'm ready. Are you coming?'

'Yes, darling, on my way.' The tension sounded in Melissa's voice.

She had been on a knife edge for two days. First a day of background bickering with Jeffrey. Then a noisy spat in the evening. The unresolved argument surfaced at the family breakfast table the following day. Melissa feared that Jeffrey would escalate to physical persuasion once they were alone. And she suspected that Freya was becoming aware of their disintegrating relationship. Added to that, she knew she somehow had to broach the discussion concerning Kai. Hence the planned joint colouring session. In the conservatory. Neutral territory.

'Which picture do you like, Mum?' Freya said opening the book at the first page.

'Not that one, go on, I'll stop you when I see the one I like best.'

'I know which one you'll want anyway.'

'Let's see if you do. How do you know?' Melissa said.

'I know what you like. You like birds.'

'Are there any birds?'

'Yes.'

'That one!' Melissa pointed to a hummingbird hovering by a flower.

'No, there's one you'll like better.' Freya continued turning the pages, while Melissa

considered which she preferred.

'That's the one,' Melissa said.

Freya had already stopped at the picture of an eagle soaring high above a mountaintop. 'I knew it,' she said, pointing to the page corner turned down. Freya's face showed smug delight. Melissa was surprised to find she smiled without trying.

They chose a pen each and started. Melissa usually enjoyed colouring. It was restful and absorbing. But not today. Her mind was continually twisting round situations that needed sorting out. If only! They discussed all manner of things - people, places, animals, music. But after a while Melissa knew that she would have to move the conversation on to Kai.

She took a deep breath and said, 'Can we just talk about Kai for a few minutes?'

Freya looked up at Melissa. A mother's love was written clear on her face for all to see. But Freya's also saw the underlying veiled shame and regret. 'Alright,' she said, 'if we can talk about you and Daddy!'

'No, I don't think that's appropriate, darling.'

'Then I won't talk about Kai.'

They sat looking at each other, seemingly at an impasse. A single tear slid down Melissa's cheek, landing on the eagle's wing. She reached out and took Freya's hand. 'Alright. What about me and Daddy?'

She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead with her fingers. 'I know he's mean to you.'

Melissa waited, stock-still, anxious about what Freya might say next.

'I know Daddy always wants to tell you what to do,' Freya said, 'and -'

Melissa froze, dreading what was coming.

'- I know he shouts. I know he drinks too much.'

Melissa let out the breath she had been unaware of holding.

'And I know why,' Freya concluded.

Freya's mother shook her head doubtfully, and looked Freya in the eye, 'You can't know why, darling.'

'I do.' Freya held her gaze as she spoke firmly. 'It is because he is frightened.'

Melissa was taken by surprise. She had assumed the motivation was simply selfishness.

How could Freya know that he was frightened? she thought.

'What is he frightened of, Freya?'

'I don't know that! But he is frightened.'

'I can't do anything about that, can I?' Melissa spread her hands, palms up.

'I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. Have we finished with colouring?' Freya had evidently said her piece, and was in a hurry to conclude.

'If you like, darling.'

'Can I go then?' Freya stood up, about to leave the room.

'No, Freya, we need to talk about Kai now.'

'I don't want to. I can't tell you anything,' Freya's voice wobbled, 'I've promised to keep it secret.'

Melissa's pulse went up a notch. 'I need to know what's happening, Freya. It's important.'

'I can't!' Freya wailed, 'I promised.'

'Alright, darling. You don't have to tell me anything. I'll just ask some questions and you can answer yes or no.'

Freya looked doubtful, 'Just yes or no?'

'That's right.' Melissa reassured her.

Melissa paused just long enough to give Freya time to refuse. Taking silence as consent she rapidly pressed on.

'Has Kai ever touched you?'

Freya looked puzzled, 'what do you mean? Of course he's touched me!'

'Where has he touched you?'

Freya looked upset and remained silent.

Melissa sighed. 'Has he touched your ...' she paused, 'your hand.'

'Yes! Of course.'

'Has he touched your face or head?'

Freya thought for a moment, then decided that a kiss counted as a touch, 'Yes.'

Melissa was squirming inside. This was so painful, but she couldn't think of any other way to determine what risk Kai might pose.

'Has he touched your body?'

'Yes.'

'How? Like in a hug?'

'Yes'

'Any other way?'

'No.'

Melissa relaxed slightly. 'Has he touched your legs?'

'Once.'

'Where?'

Freya placed her hand just above her knee.

'Has he touched you anywhere else? Think carefully.'

'No, Mum.'

Melissa thought for a moment. Rehearsed it in her head. It sounded stupid but she didn't know how else to guide Freya, and limit Kai.

'Listen to me, Freya. Kai can touch your hand, but not hold onto it. Kai is not allowed to touch your legs at all. Nor your body. Kai can't hug you unless he hugs someone else first. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Mum.' Freya looked serious.

'And I will say the same to Kai as well so that he understands,' Melissa continued.

'I don't like secrets like that anyway,' Freya looked relieved.

'Shall we do some more colouring now?' Melissa asked calmly, hiding the turmoil inside.

'Yes. I'll pick this time.'

---oOo---

Pick your battle. Well this is it! Melissa knew it would be unpleasant, so had decided to do it when Freya was out of the house. And it could possibly be violent, so do it when Nick was on hand. Although she couldn't decide whether that was wise or not. Maybe Nick could be in the next room under instruction not to come in unless absolutely necessary. Pick your battle. Well, it picked me.

---oOo---

Melissa gave Jeffrey a three sentence rundown of her conversation with Freya. Jeffrey came back with a heated defence involving mountains and molehills. Jeffrey started to boil when he saw that Melissa was not backing down. He walked across the room to emphasise the

sanity of his argument. Nick walked into the room, and stood by Melissa, with his arms folded, and thunder on his face. Jeffrey's anger threatened to explode in red mist, but with a supreme effort, he squeezed it back down into his abdomen. Fists clenched, jaw set, he turned, left the room and stamped upstairs. Someone had to suffer.

'Kai!' Jeffrey burst into the bedroom, strode across the room and dragged him to his feet. There followed a graphic description of what kind of child Kai was, and what was expected of him in the future, all framed within a stream of colourful invective. There may have been a slap. Melissa and Nick heard a wail from Kai, followed by the sound of Jeffrey dragging Kai down the stairs, 'I'll set him straight!', then the slamming of the front door, and silence.

Melissa turned to Nick in horror. But he was already across the room, then heading upstairs.

The third incarnation of Rhino was hopping on the computer screen looking frustrated that the fun had been abruptly suspended. Nick minimised the game, and opened the default browser. The internet browsing history before today was already deleted. Kai was evidently careful. But today's web activity was still listed, including the earlier access to the social media site Reddit. Nick clicked on the history link, and the password manager logged him in. Seeing that Kai was part of several chat groups, he opened the most recent, and scrolled back through today's conversations. There was a lot of talk about how women only wanted to be wooed by the best looking men, and how unfair that was. The conversation though didn't use the verb 'woo', and to be accurate, didn't use the word 'women' very often either.

Scrolling down to a time about an hour previous, Nick was concerned to see Kai asking for advice as to how to seduce Freya. (Another euphemism.) The request was followed by a stream of mockery, ranging from unkind to degrading. Occasionally there was an attempt

at serious advice, most along the lines of 'Don't worry. No means yes.' or 'You're entitled to take what you want.'

Seriously concerned now, Nick went back to history, deleted his Reddit visit, closed the browser and left the room.

Returning to the lounge, he found Melissa nervously twisting her hands as she thought about the future. She looked up as he entered. He described what he had read, albeit sanitised for her.

'We have to tell Jeffrey,' anxiety laced Melissa's voice.

'If he hasn't killed Kai already!' Nick responded.

Melissa's face was clouded with fear. 'I have to find out from Kai what Jeffrey said.' Her forefinger emphatically tapped the table as if to reinforce her authority, 'and I am going to tell him what he can and can't do around Freya.'

---oOo---

Melissa waited until Jeffrey was out of the house. She needed to get geared up. She dreaded confrontation. She walked purposefully up the stairs, deliberately stomping on every tread. She wouldn't give in. Not this time.

She knocked on Kai's door. No response. She knocked again, louder this time. Still no response. So she started a steady beat on the door, not loud, but sufficiently annoying. She heard the key turning in the lock, then the door was flung open.

'What?' Kai leaned forward against the door frame, glowering. Arms crossed, all attitude.

Melissa ignored him, walked past him into the room.

He turned. 'I never said -'.

She cut across him, 'Be quiet.'

Sensing real trouble, Kai back-pedalled fast, 'Take it easy, I just -'

Stepping forward she pushed her face into his, 'Listen!'

Then she read aloud from a piece of paper a circumscribed definition of acceptable behaviour when interacting with Freya. Which she then slammed down on the desk. Not giving him a chance to react, she spun him through ninety degrees, and grasped him firmly by the back of the neck, pushing his head forward and down, so that his nose was almost touching the paper. 'Read it!' she ordered, 'aloud!'

Nick walked in behind her. 'Mum! No.' he said, 'He's had enough already from Jeffrey.'

Looking at Kai, she saw that he was shaking. She released her grip. 'Sorry,' she muttered, then glared at Kai, 'but read it! I mean it!'

She grabbed the paper and thrust it into Kai's hand, and stalked out of the room.

Chapter 21

Somewhere. Now.

I'd wandered off-topic a bit. I could feel an infestation spreading inside me - all the situations I needed to worry about, jostling for attention and demanding headspace. As soon as I had neutralised one, the next would pop up.

Unloading onto Eri is definitely helping. He is a good listener. And the perception stuff is improving. As it occurs to me, I look around and do a mental stocktake. The tilting is only six out of ten, so I don't feel nauseous. I feel very small but not tiny. And I'm getting marginally stronger.

Eri gently tries to get me back on track. 'So how do they get on, Freya and your Mum?'

'They need each other,' I say. I look at Eri to see whether he understands me.

He nods once and keeps eye contact. 'That's not surprising.'

'No, it's not. Freya has been a full time job until just a couple of years ago. She home schooled her for a while when she thought the school staff weren't performing. She's got me to do a lot of research on the web. She's hassled the doctor's surgery, and the specialists at St Mary's. And Children's Services.' I breathe hard. 'And she's been a star as far as personal care, support, encouragement is concerned. Freya has been totally dependent on Mum. And she's Mum's *raison d'etre* now.'

'No problems between them with any of that?'

'No. The only concern I ever had was that Mum was often overprotective, and Freya got frustrated by that. Mum watches her like a hawk.'

'Probably more like a mother hen,' Eri smiles, 'and what about the process of planning for a more independent future for her?'

'Yes, though I think Mum is realistic about that. She knows she's not going to be around for ever.' I realise what I've said.

Eri catches my change of expression. 'It's okay Nick. You can't change a thing by worrying now.'

'Is it okay? Tell me Freya's not still at risk!'

'We're all at risk, Nick. Freedom and risk are two sides of the same coin,' Eri continues evenly, 'but specifically, yes, Freya is still at risk.'

'I thought so. It's just been a really intense situation, and trying to manage Kai - he's devious, that kid. Mum could never see it though.'

'Why do you say that ... about your mother, I mean.'

It's painful and uncomfortable to talk about it, but I go through the details about how even after Mum really laid the law down with Kai, I still caught him up to something with Freya. I happened to walk across the top landing and Kai's bedroom door was open and he just moved away from her very quickly. And he looked guilty. That was just the first time. A couple of days later, I heard her protesting, and then his bedroom door opened, and she ran into her room upset. I don't know what happened exactly, but Freya said he was making her feel uncomfortable, and wouldn't stop.

Eri is nodding while I'm telling him this. If he knows anything about it, and for some reason I have a feeling he does, then I reckon my suspicions are correct.

'Of course, Freya's only a kid, and she's just too trusting,' I add.

'Yes, and sadly she's not realistic about trustworthiness,' Eri says.

---oOo---

Chapter 22

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

He woke up in a bad mood. Lasts night's weed was too strong. The panic attack was unexpected. And scary. Kai had thought when Melissa came on the scene that she would protect him from his father's brutality. But it seems she had turned against him as well.

Things had quietened down after the wedding. He had thought life was going to be better. Dad had toned down the drinking. He didn't notice Kai so much. That was preferable. But after a couple of months, things had slowly reverted to normal. Dad's normal coercion. Which was all about what he wanted. Deciding everything. Interfering. Smacking him about.

In frustration, Kai kicked the bed leg. His big toe stubbed badly. He sat, stomach churning with the pain. Gradually it faded. With nothing else to do, he limped over to his games machine. Powered it up.

There was an update available to apply. He might as well. The game had got boring now. He hoped there was some upgraded levels and better equipment. There wasn't. It was mostly a speed-up and bug fix update. Annoyed, he switched the machine off, got up and quietly crossed the landing.

'Freya, you in there?' Kai tapped on her door.

She opened the door, she said 'Oh, it's you'.

Kai grinned. 'You wanna play a game?'

'What sort of game?'

'On the computer. I'll let you pick if you like.'

'I suppose so. Hang on,' she retreated inside and closed the door. She sat in her room for a

moment thinking. Do I really want to do this? To be fair, she had nothing to do, and would like to play a game, but Kai was getting pushy. Sighing, she got up and opened the door. Maybe it would be fun.

'Okay, what are we playing? Not boring stuff. No shooting people. What else have you got?'

'Some legacy stuff is out now. D'you know Tetris.'

Freya turned her mouth down and shook her head, 'No, never heard of it.'

'You know. You must have seen it. Falling blocks you have to twist round and slot in at the bottom.'

'Sounds utterly brilliant.' Freya's blank face, lifted eyebrows and hooded eyes proclaimed scorn.

Kai's face fell, 'Well, I have -'

She burst out laughing, 'I'm winding you up!'

His face brightened, 'Great.' He loaded the game and set it running. He started to play. He wasn't very good. Deliberately, he said, so she could get a hang of the game. She didn't believe him, but was pleased to have a go herself. There were more blocks than she expected, and more advice from Kai than she wanted. But she didn't do too bad. 58,240.

'Your go,' she said handing over the mouse. She stood up.

'You're fine. Sit down. I'll stay here,' he said, leaning across her.

He was much better at it than her. The blocks span and slid into place, filled lines and dissolved. Faster now, the blocks came down, and the score went up. Finally the screen began to fill with incomplete lines. When the end finally came, the score stood at 322,480.

Freya was amazed. Kai turned to her and grinned. He liked impressing her. He liked her

smile. He liked everything about her. He liked that their arms were touching.

She pulled away and high-fived him, 'Can I have another go?'

'You want another go? It depends,' he said, looking at her face. He rested his hand on her leg.

'No, Kai,' she slapped his hand off, 'you're not supposed to.'

'Come on.'

'No.'

'Why not.'

'I've told you why not. Mum said no.'

'Step-mum.'

'My mum!'

'But,' he reached out his hand and stroked her face, 'you're pretty.'

Freya hesitated, uncertain how to react. He was annoying now.

He put his hand round her neck to pull her face to his.

'Men like that,' Kai continued.

She struggled to pull back but he was too strong. She could smell the sickly sweetness on his breath. Her face twisted with revulsion.

'No Kai! Stop it!' her voice got louder.

'I said men like this - '

She snapped, 'You're not a man though, just a stupid kid!'

In disgust, he pushed her away, 'You're the kid!'

The door swung partly open, and Nick's head appeared.

'Problems?' he looked at Kai, then at Freya.

'It's nothing,' she said, then stood up, and pushed past him out of the room.

Nick stared at Kai, eyebrows raised, as if awaiting an explanation.

'You heard her. Just Tetris,' he said, pointing at the screen.

'It better be!' Nick clenched his fist. 'You'd better do what we say, Kai,' then he turned on his heel and closed the door.

---oO---

Chapter 23

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

Anne Wyndham was blessed with a pragmatic determination to remain upbeat in the face of daunting challenges. And her boundless energy, sharp eyes and perpetual smile had reliably delivered. With a first class degree in law, with options in psychology from Oxford, she had served misfits, unfortunates, addicts and thugs for ten years in the police force (when force was respectable), followed by ten in the CPS. A brief experiment with retirement was succeeded by over a decade as a restorative justice facilitator, in which role her analytical, incisive mind liked nothing better than planning a route through the unpredictable minefield of human interaction.

'Welcome,' she said, scanning the anxious faces in the room.

The chairs were arranged in a non-threatening circle falsely implying the process regarded each attendee as having equal status. Anne deployed her welcoming smile plus a subtext expression to each in turn.

Fiona Griffiths sitting with a brittle nervous cheerfulness alongside her parents received an unspoken 'thank you'. Gerald despite continually shifting his gaze to avoid eye contact with anyone at all caught the 'well done' look. Barbara, gripping her handbag for security got the 'I'm on your side' expression. Lynn, Anne's colleague from Admin, sitting to their right got an approving nod. And Darren got the raised eyebrow smile from which he deduced he ought to sit up straight and uncross his legs.

Anne had already had a one-to-one meeting with each attendee previously, ensuring that all had understood the process, and had consented to attend and abide by the rules.

'Lynn, would you close the door for us?'

Anne then began the proceedings by introducing herself, and continued to give them a

brief reminder of the protocol of the conference. It was evidently going to be her conference run her way. 'As you know, my first task today to give each of you who was involved in this incident the chance to tell the group what the consequences have been for you ... how you have been affected emotionally, physically, financially.' She scanned the room again looking for nods of agreement, deploying the schoolmistressy raised eyebrows.

'My second task is to help us gain agreement regarding how the offender,' she turned to Darren, 'in this case, Mr Fletcher, should attempt to repair some of the harm he has caused. I should make it clear that Mr Fletcher has agreed that he wishes that to happen. And of course, each of you has consented to this process.'

Once again, Anne's gaze swept the room like a wartime searchlight seeking out any as yet unlaunched missiles.

'Good!' she said briskly, 'Let's start with you, Mr Fletcher. Perhaps you could start us off by talking about the consequences for you of the offence.'

'Well, erm ...' Darren paused, quickly quickly realising that he was well outside his comfort zone, 'prison ... Portland.' He stopped.

'And?' Anne said, her voice creating an expectation that it would be helpful to have more detail.

Darren shrugged.

'How did it affect you day to day, Mr Fletcher?'

'It was alright I suppose. I worked in the cafe a lot to get away from my cell mate. He was not a mate though.'

'Were you lonely in prison? How did you get on with the other prisoners?'

'I was alright. But most of the prisoners on my block were headbangers. Half of them couldn't read!' Darren rolled his eyes dismissively.

'While you were in prison, did your family visit?'

'My daughter came to see me about once a month. She's fifteen.' Darren's voice was getting quieter as he spoke. 'My ex didn't want to know, and anyway she has custody of our son, so he never came. I didn't want him to come anyway. I'd rather he didn't know at all.'

'And what about your parents? Or wider family. Do you have family living around here?'

Darren didn't respond immediately. He looked first at Barbara, then at Gerald.

'My mother's dead.' Darren said bluntly, then took a deep breath, and stared defiantly around the room, 'and unfortunately my father isn't.'

Darren folded his arms and leaned back. No-one spoke. The silence stretched uncomfortably between them. Gerald and Barbara exchanged glances.

'He was always down on me. Don't think he ever wanted me - said I'd never amount to anything,' Darren said with a scowl. 'Well, I showed him didn't I!' Darren laughed bitterly.

'So your childhood wasn't a happy one, I take it?,' Anne continued smoothly.

'Happy? Dunno really! It was okay. Bad times and good times.'

'And what age did you leave school?'

'Sixteen ... officially!'

'Did you get a job after that?'

'I worked in the chippie for Flipper.'

'Sorry ... Flipper?' Anne allowed an expression of bafflement to justify the question.

'It's what everyone calls the boss ... the old guy that runs it. But I didn't like him, so I left.

I've done a bunch of jobs since then ... all temp work. Did some gardening.'

Anne nodded encouragingly.

Darren was thankful to be talking about anything other than the crime, 'Bit of window cleaning. Never anything in an office. Call centres. I couldn't stand that, not proper work is it? Computers and stuff.' Darren sniffed, his mouth turned down at the corners - seemingly scornful of office work in general, 'Did a bit of delivery work.'

'And how did you find that?' Anne asked.

Darren rolled his eyes, and gave a half-hearted smile, 'It was the worst job ever. Four minutes to get to the next delivery. One and a half minutes to make the drop. Everything timed to the second, apart from going for a wee. That's not necessary apparently.'

Anne frowned sympathetically and shook her head. 'It is outrageous,' she acknowledged, 'but thanks for that Mr Fletcher.' She tilted her head and smiled at Darren, 'It's helpful for Mr and Mrs Griffiths to get a picture of your life.'

Anne smiled around the circle, then turned her face to the Griffiths. 'Mrs Griffiths,' she began, 'perhaps you can start, but do chip in, Mr Griffiths, when you want to. Tell us a bit about your family, the house, what you like about living here, anything really that you think will help us get to know you both a little.'

'Well,' Barbara frowned, 'we've lived in the house for ... how many years, Gerald?'

Gerald came back straightaway, '24 years.'

Barbara paused, her face was pale and she was breathing too fast. She seemed to be recalling the events of the day, and reliving the stress.

'Do you have children locally, Barbara?' Anne cut in smoothly, casual as if they were chatting over coffee.

Barbara relaxed a little, 'Yes, one of our children is local. He's married with two little ones. Our other child is up in Basingstoke ...'

Anne smiled as Barbara continued on about their relationships with grandchildren - their

schooling, and their hobbies. It was evident that Darren was listening.

'And do you and your husband get involved in anything in the community, Mrs Griffiths?' Anne could see that Barbara was breathing a little easier.

Gerald was still evidently very stressed, avoiding eye contact, tight jaw.

Barbara, it seemed, was involved in several courses with U3A, and had a group of friends in the local book club.

'I do yoga as well, but I can't persuade him to join me,' Barbara glanced at Gerald, 'can I!'

Gerald was slowly settling in. He smiled at Barbara. 'No, dear.'

Anne flicked her eyebrows and managed to exchange a conspiratorial smile with Gerald.

She was slowly building the group rapport.

'Really, Mr Griffiths, I'm surprised you're not into yoga,' Anne grinned broadly at him, 'so what do you get up to?'

'Well, I'm the treasurer for Macmillan locally. And a few other charities. Plus my baby in the garage that I'm restoring.'

'Go on.'

'A Jaguar Mark 2. It's the Daimler V8 version. Beautiful.' Gerald's face relaxed as he recalled happy times spent underneath the engine, covered in oil fighting with intransigent nuts.'

'Ah yes! Morse's car,' Anne remarked before bringing Darren into the play, 'Got any hobbies, Mr Fletcher?'

Darren looked up, surprised that he was being included. 'Not really,' he paused, reconsidered, 'well, I go fishing.'

'River or sea,' Anne paused, 'or both?' If there was ever such a thing as renaissance woman,

it was Anne Wyndham.

'Only river fishing. Don't have a boat, or any friends who have one, and off the end of the pier is no good really.'

'The licences for river fishing aren't cheap either are they,' Anne replied.

'Oh no, certainly not!' Darren replied, perhaps too enthusiastically, vigorously shaking his head.

Anne suspected that licences were not always available or obtained for some of Darren's fishing trips. She caught his eye, smiled with raised eyebrows and he dropped his gaze. Gotcha! 'Why don't we break for coffee?' she said.

---oOo---

During the coffee break, Darren was stood apart from Barbara, Gerald and Fiona. Following the plan, Lynn tag-teamed with Anne, engaging Darren in conversation so that her boss could talk with the Griffiths confidentially. Then they swapped so that Anne could check where Darren was in the process. The whole thing was done such practiced ease that neither Darren nor the Griffiths gave it a thought. Everybody knew that the second half was going to be difficult. Anne had quietly determined what each individual's thoughts were regarding first name terms from here on. She wasn't surprised to find that only Barbara was in favour.

---oOo---

The coffee break had felt all too short. Anne was pleased to see that Darren had spoken to Barbara and Gerald for a minute or two, which augured well.

'Let's resume,' Anne smiled as the group settled back down. 'Now we are going to move on to talk about the attempted burglary, so I would ask each of you to be understanding as far as possible regarding the use of words. We will be talking about disappointments and

hopes and no doubt referring to feelings, some of which may still be unresolved.' Anne paused briefly to send a reassuring smile around the circle.

'If the session can continue as amicably as it has been so far, then I'm sure we will all get the most out of it. But if you feel your emotions beginning to rise, I would ask you to just indicate that to me. So, if you would like to just have a one minute break ...' at this point Anne held up one finger, '... just to collect yourself before continuing to speak, then let me know. And if you want to take say a three minute break from speaking ...', Anne held up three fingers, '... just to listen for a while, again let me know.'

Anne spent a couple more minutes reminding Darren and the Griffiths that this meeting was a result of their decision to explore a fresh start through restorative justice. She congratulated them on getting this far, and then opened the conversation.

'Mr Fletcher,' Anne turned towards Darren with a considerate expression, 'do start us off by helping us understand why you tried to steal from Mr and Mrs Griffiths.'

Darren was not surprised by her directness. She had warned him previously that she wouldn't pull any punches. He had prepared for this moment. He had his story lined up. He took a deep breath and began.

'It was for my daughter's school trip. The class were to do some coasteering on the Jurassic Coast.'

Everyone apart from Anne looked blank.

'It's exploring along the coastline ... really in and out the sea, over rocks, cliffs and stuff. You have to hire everything ... wetsuit, hard hat, gloves. And it's led by professionals, so it costs loads.'

Barbara leaned forward and nodded. Gerald was motionless, silent.

'We were only about forty quid short, and the deadline was a couple of days away,' Darren

continued. 'I've been a hopeless dad and I'd promised her she could go. I just needed to get forty quid cash. That's all I wanted.'

Gerald narrowed his eyes and slowly shook his head. It was impossible to tell whether he was sympathetic to Darren's plight or despairing at his idiocy.

"But something went wrong?" Anne suggested.

'Yes, I tripped over the table. And as luck would have it -'

'Something went wrong before that though, didn't it?' she interjected.

Darren looked puzzled, 'What do you mean?'

'You were found in possession of goods worth more than forty pounds,' Anne let the facts do the work, 'How much, Mr Fletcher?'

Darren coloured up, shamefaced, 'I think a couple of hundred.'

'Do you recall the exact amount?'

Darren clearly recalled the exact amount at £380, as defined within the court documentation. 'Not really,' he muttered.

Anne let the untruth hover in the silent air for around twenty seconds. Which seemed like forever to Darren. His chair was suddenly inexplicably uncomfortable, and he needed to scratch somewhere. To make matters worse, he found he had acquired a tickly throat which needed clearing. Several times.

'Not really?' Anne repeated. She waited. In control as always. Like she was holding a hand grenade.

Darren took a breath, cleared his throat for the third time, 'I think it was three hundred and something ...'

Anne kept smiling at him for two seconds, then slowly raised her eyebrows, and tilted her

head questioningly to the right. Darren could almost see her pulling the pin out.

He waved the white flag, 'Maybe £380 ...'

Anne cut in, 'So given you only needed £40 ...' She trailed off into the power of silence.

'Yes, I got greedy. They had so much expensive stuff. And I needed it more than they did.'

'So you thought it was alright to take it. I understand.' Anne knew she was walking a wire with Darren. And if he got too twitchy, she would lose him. 'And do you still think that now?'

'No,' Darren closed his eyes, 'no ... um, no I don't.' He straightened his back, looked at Gerald then at Barbara.

'Mr Fletcher,' Anne moved swiftly to close the point, 'what can you say today to Mr and Mrs Griffiths concerning the £40 you felt you needed, and the £340 that you just wanted.'

Darren crossed his arms and looked defensive. Anne thought for a moment, *He's closing down*, then said, 'Let me just leave that with you for two minutes, and I'll come back to you.'

'Mrs Griffiths,' she turned to face Barbara, 'do you and your husband give to charity at all?'

Barbara recalled a discussion at their initial meeting with Anne about charitable giving, which at the time seemed to be just polite conversation. 'Yes, we have done.'

'We've twinned our en-suite with a toilet in Burkina Faso,' Gerald said.

'That's a charity that builds toilets in third world countries, and you get a photo of the toilet that your money has built,' Barbara added, 'and we usually put a couple of tins in the supermarket foodbank box.'

'Then there's Ishaan. We are sponsoring him through senior school,' Gerald said in a quiet voice.

'And how much is that,' Anne asked.

'Twelve pounds a month.' Gerald replied.

" 'Scuse me.' Darren cut in. 'Okay, I needed the £40. But,' he turned to face Gerald and Barbara, 'I didn't actually need the £340.'

He paused, took a deep breath, 'I'm sorry,' he said in a thin voice.

Darren was shaking a little. Neither Gerald nor Barbara knew how to respond. Anne did.

'Thank you, Mr Fletcher. That is a step forward. There are probably quite a few more steps, but the first one is the hardest.'

Chapter 24

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

Melissa wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck. There was no avoiding the ice cold misty rain floating in the winter air. Her mood matched the weather. Jeffrey was in a permanent bad mood these days. Every evening was a torment - waiting for an outburst of unpredictable anger at some inconsequential transgression. So it was good to get out of Jeffrey's house, to try to reclaim some part of the day as her own. Passing the church, she noticed three cars in the car park. The lights on in the kitchen beckoned her in. She hesitated. *Is it really worth the risk?*

For a moment, she saw what she thought she had become - a stupid worthless timid little mouse. That moment of clarity was followed in the next instant by self loathing, and rebellious reckless anger. Completely out of character, she swore under her breath, and strode across the road, and walked into the church.

She stopped at the kitchen doorway. Her friend, back to her, was rummaging in the fridge. She paused for a moment. Her anger leached away as quickly as it had appeared, leaving a residue of bitter sadness.

'Hi Celia!' Melissa said in a low voice. 'What's going on today then?'

Celia, still holding a half full milk bottle in one hand, and an empty jug in the other, looked up. Her face lit up. 'Melissa! Good to see you! How are you?'

'Not good really! But at least I'm out of the house.'

'Same old, same old then?'

Celia crossed the kitchen and wrapped her arms around her friend, her delight showing genuine friendship.

'Well, Jeffrey's a nightmare, but at least he's having to work really long hours ... early mornings, late evenings ... so I have had a few quiet evenings -' Melissa extricated herself from Celia's hug and took a step back. 'which is a whole lot better than being ... shouted at,' she added.

'Do you want a coffee?' Celia was shaking biscuits out of a packet onto a plate. 'I'm serving coffee in about 30 minutes anyway, but we can have one now.'

'Yes, I'll have an oatmilk latte please!' Despite her circumstances, Melissa was still trying.

Celia chuckled, 'Funny girl! All we have today is a cow instant, or black!'

'White, no sugar for me then. Who's in?'

'It's an RJ session. Started about an hour ago, just about another thirty minutes to run.'

'Ah yes. We've seen about three of those this year haven't we.' Melissa lowered her voice,

'Do we know who it is?'

Celia tapped the side of her nose with her forefinger.

'Go on,' Melissa wheedled, 'I could easily just hang around outside until they come out anyway, if I really wanted to know.'

'Okay,' Celia conceded. 'It's the Griffiths ... they were burgled, well it must be six or seven years ago now.'

'Aha! And the guy that did it?'

'Yes, he's in there too. You might remember him from the court case ... it's Darren Fletcher. Do you know him? Bit of a loner really.'

Melissa shook her head.

'He's served four and a half years in Portland,' Celia continued, 'first offence apparently.'

She handed Melissa the coffee, 'There you go, instant with cow, Madam.'

A trace of a smile flashed across Melissa's face. 'Is he local?'

'Yes, divorced, lives with his daughter, she's almost twenty now, but I gather he's desperate to find a job otherwise they are going to be evicted.' Celia broke off and checked the time, 'I need to get the proper coffee brewing, sorry.'

---oOo---

Anne was addressing Barbara and Gerald. 'Can you first of all give us some insight into how the crime affected you both, and what you felt at the time.'

Fiona rested her hand on her father's forearm. Barbara glanced at Gerald, then settled her gaze on Darren. After briefly meeting her eyes, he dropped his eyes and stared at the floor.

'It was frightening at the time, and unsettling for months afterwards. We felt violated, didn't we,' she looked at Gerald again.

It seemed a small shudder ran through him. He nodded and said, 'Horrible. It was horrible'. Then fell silent. He seemed to be curling up into himself, like a hedgehog about to be run over.

'We have raised our children in that house,' Barbara explained, 'and for us it was filled with good memories. It took a long time for the memory of that awful day to fade. It's still there of course, if we think about it, but at least now, we are more able to put it out of our minds.'

'Barbara, I know this is going to be difficult, but could you describe the events of the day from your perspective?' Anne had chosen a specific strategy. She wanted to ensure the process was grounded in reality, and confronting the unpleasantness was a necessary part of the healing process.

'We'd been in bed about half an hour. At around half eleven, Gerald heard him downstairs. We had no idea what to do. I was in favour of just lying low, but Gerald was

having none of it. I told him he was an idiot to go downstairs, but he insisted. Five minutes later he came back up, walked back into the bedroom, followed by Mr Fletcher, who was holding a baseball bat. We were threatened - ' Barbara paused, then continued, '- he threatened us with the bat, and said he would put us both in hospital if we so much as squeaked.'

She looked at Gerald for a moment, then said, 'Gerald nearly ended up in hospital anyway ... he got really bad chest pains and could hardly move.'

Anne said, 'And what did you feel at that moment?'

Barbara resumed the story, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. 'At the time, I was quite calm. I was more concerned about Gerald. I could see that Mr Fletcher was frightened, and I understood that was dangerous of course. So I asked Mr Fletcher what his name was, just to make some kind of human connection.'

At this point, Darren was pale-faced and staring fixedly at Barbara, his hands gripping the sides of the chair.

'He assumed I was trying to find out his identity, and he lost his temper. He started shouting, and smashing the bat down onto the duvet cover. He didn't do any actual damage but it was terrifying.'

Anne looked across at Darren to see his reaction, but as soon as she turned his way, he dropped his eyes to the floor, and apparently disengaged.

'Gerald asked him what he wanted,' Barbara said, 'didn't you Gerald?'

Gerald simply nodded. Fiona squeezed his arm. He looked at her and gave an uncertain smile.

'And what did he want, Barbara?' Anne prompted.

'He just said "Money!" He took Gerald's wallet, and both our phones, and told us to stay

in the bedroom, not move or go downstairs for half an hour. And he hit the bed with the baseball bat again a few times, and repeated the bit about putting us in hospital.'

Barbara took a deep breath. She was shaking a little, and her gaze had been on Darren to see his reaction. She looked at Anne to check she was okay to continue.

'You're doing really well. If you think you can carry on, please do, but we can take a break if this is too stressful.'

'No, I want to get it over with now I've started. He went downstairs and we could hear him going through the bureau and the kitchen drawers. Then it went quiet for a bit and we thought he'd gone. Then after about five minutes, there was this terrible crash from downstairs. We were both kind of frozen. Then it was really quiet. We listened but there wasn't a sound. Gerald wanted to go downstairs then, but I said we had to wait for thirty minutes. So we did. Just sat there on the bed.'

Barbara stopped speaking. She was staring at Darren, but evidently her thoughts were far away.

'So what happened when you finally went downstairs?' Anne said gently.

'We found him,' Gerald broke in grimly, 'lying on the lounge floor.'

'Unconscious!' Barbara interjected.

'He was bleeding from the head, and was out cold. His bag was full of our stuff, so I got my phone back and called the police, and the ambulance.' Gerald finished the story.

'So, Gerald,' Anne turned to him, 'tell us about how you felt while all this was going on.'

Gerald had no need to think about the answer. He had lived with it for years, and now it was as fresh as yesterday. 'I thought he was going to kill us. He was completely out of control. I don't like to admit it, but I was terrified for myself, and incandescent with rage that I couldn't protect Barbara.'

Gerald stopped speaking, bowed his head and swallowed a few times. When he looked up, tears had run down his cheeks.

Fiona put her arm around him and looked angrily at Anne. 'Is this really necessary? What good is it going to do?' She turned to look at Darren for a moment, who was staring wide-eyed around the room like a trapped animal. Then an expression of disgust twisted her face, and she burst out, 'He's just a piece ...'

'Stop!' Anne commanded.

Gerald turned to Fiona, 'Listen love, we've decided to go through this, because we can't carry on being resentful or afraid or confused. We don't want to put you through this. It's really kind of you to support us, but it's harder for you to watch than it is for us to actually ... you know ... do it!'

Fiona raised her eyebrows and shook her head, breathing out heavily.

Barbara stood up. Anne watched her walk to Fiona and put her arm around her.

'Darling, it's okay... We chose to do this.'

'It's madness,' Fiona replied and slumped in the chair, a picture of hopelessness.

Anne looked across at Darren. He looked shrunken, head down, doubled over gripping his stomach with both arms, breathing with great sobbing gasps.

---oOo---

'How long do you think they will go on for?' It seemed to Melissa that the RJ conference must have significantly overrun.

'Well, they are running over about twenty minutes so far, but they do seem to be nearly at the end,' Celia replied.

At that moment Lynn popped her head around the kitchen door.

She looked at Celia, and rolled her eyes to the ceiling, 'Phew!'

'Bit of a marathon,' she said, 'but we'll be done in about ten minutes, so bring the second lot of coffee in then, if you would?'

Chapter 25

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

Two weeks had passed since the conference. Two more weeks of misery. Melissa looked around.

The children's play area in the park had seen better days. Teenagers had run up the slide the wrong way denting the steel. One of the swing chains was broken. The seat hung vertically from the other. The roundabout hardly moved and shrieked in protest if a child insisted on riding. Melissa had sat carefully on the bench, because some of the screws were protruding, and the wood was rotting.

The uncared-for play area reflected her self pitying mood. She used to bring Nick here twenty years ago, and Freya here ten years ago. Happy days. Life was easy then. Money was sufficient. Her time was her own. She could go where she wanted, meet friends in the coffee shop, do what she wanted.

I used to be able to just choose what I did! It was so different now. Nick and Jeffrey at odds. And Kai's predatory thoughts about Freya. And she was trapped. In the cage made by Jeffrey. Her life circumscribed by stupid rules. Every day, do's and don'ts. And he would punish her for the least transgression. She was sitting because her feet still hurt from the last whipping.

Jeffrey was cunning. He would make her lie face down on the bed and then beat the soles of her bare feet with a strap. No-one could see the marks then. And Melissa would be stuck in the house for two or three days at a time, unable to walk.

Yes, she thought, looking around at the broken neglected playpark equipment. Just about sums me up.

She put her head in her hands, and closed her eyes. Her feet throbbed, her stomach

churned and her mind silently screamed as the mask slipped away, and hot tears wet her cheeks and choked her throat.

She sensed someone sitting beside her. An arm came around her shoulders.

'Hey, Melissa, come on.' Celia murmured quietly.

She half turned on the seat and fell apart in Celia's arms. Her self control collapsed as her sobs became a distressed howl of anguish. Anxiety, rage, resentment, disappointment became a tsunami of turmoil.

Celia just held on tight, 'I spotted you walking past the coffee shop'.

'I hate him.' She was clenching her teeth so hard, they hurt.

'You probably have to leave him.'

'I can't. I need him. I don't even have a house now. Jeffrey controls the money.'

'There are places where you would be safe.'

'What about Freya? She's vulnerable, and she's at risk now. I don't -'

'Freya?' Celia interrupted. 'At risk? What do you mean?'

'Nothing. I shouldn't have said -' Melissa flustered now, tried to backpedal. 'It's nothing really.'

'At risk isn't nothing, Melissa! Not with Freya. If she's -'

'It's just that I can't throw her life up in the air. No, Celia, this is me now.' Melissa hurried on not giving Celia a chance to question her further. 'Jeffrey is my husband. I have to live with this mess. What else can I do?'

Celia pulled back and looked into Melissa's despairing face for a second before she succumbed to a second wave of sobbing.

'Okay, well then. Get some professional help. And pray. Then talk to him.' Celia pulled

Melissa back into the hug. She was weeping too now.

Melissa crying and shaking her head, suddenly went rigid, and pulled back. 'I have to go. Jeffrey will be coming home. What is the time?'

Celia pulled out her phone. 'Twenty past five.'

'I have to go. I have to go.' Melissa said in alarm. 'He might be home already.'

Celia released the panicking woman, and watched as she limped away.

---oOo---

The front door had opened very quietly. That was unusual. Nick was sat at his desk in his bedroom. He stopped his reading. Listened carefully. He just caught the soft latch click of the door closing. The next thing that Nick heard was Jeffrey's voice. 'Where have you been?' Faux friendly, but undercurrented with threat.

He didn't catch Melissa's reply. Evidently neither did Jeffrey.

'Speak up Melissa, or are you too ashamed to tell me?'

Her voice trembled, only just audible to Nick. 'The play park.'

'Why?'

'I just wanted some fresh air, Jeffrey.'

'Alone?'

Nick strained to hear, but there was only silence. Then the sound of a slap.

Followed by Jeffrey's voice. Low and controlled. A deliberate pause between each word.

'Don't lie to me'.

Nick got up and went to the bedroom door. He stopped and put his ear close to the panel.

He couldn't make out what his mother was saying.

Then contemptuously, 'Come on, little Christian, turn the other cheek.'

A pause, then 'No, I thought not! You don't really believe that stuff anyway.'

Nick heard his mother cry out something, then the sound of Jeffrey stamping up the stairs. He waited. Jeffrey went into the bathroom. Nick eased open the bedroom door and quietly went downstairs.

Melissa had retreated to the kitchen. Her hands were in the sink. She was washing a stem glass. Over and over. Hearing Nick enter, she turned very slightly. He could see her eyes were puffy.

He walked across the kitchen, took the glass from her shaking hand and put it onto the draining board. He led her across and sat her at the kitchen table. He took the chair opposite her. The side of her face that she had tried to hide was bright red. She sat silent, with eyes downcast.

'I'm going to make him so sorry,' Nick spoke with a quiet precision repressing the simmering rage inside. 'I don't know how yet. But it's coming. He deserves it, and he's going to get it.'

'No, Nick.' Melissa, eyes downcast, shook her head.

'Yes, Mum, we have to fight back somehow.' His voice rose in protest. 'You can't just roll over every time.'

'But it is true that he forbade me to see Celia.'

'Does that make it your fault? No! You can see who you like. Why do you let him think he's got the right to order you around?'

Melissa stood up and went back to the sink. 'I don't want to talk about it.'

'Well we're going to.' Nick hammered a clenched fist on the table in frustration.

'I said, we're not talking about it!' Melissa's voice trembled. Her eyes filled with tears.

Nick softened. 'Mum, listen to me. There has to be a way forward which doesn't involve Jeffrey abusing you.'

Melissa stiffened in anger. 'He's not abusing me. Don't be ridiculous!'

'He's hitting you. That's abuse. He's pushing you around. That's abuse. He's insulting you. Tha -'

'Alright, alright! But you need to understand something Nick. Come.' Melissa walked into the lounge. Nick followed.

She went to the coffee table and took her bible from the shelf beneath. She opened it and found what she was looking for. 'I say I live by this book. Or try anyway! What does that say?'

She twisted the book round, but kept her finger on the page below some words.

Nick read the words, ' "But I say to you, if someone strikes you on the cheek -" that's ridiculous. You can't live like that! I heard what Jeffrey said anyway'

'Granted it might be hyperbole to make a point,' Melissa turned the bible round and found another reference. 'You know this one, Nick. Everybody does.'

Nick looked at the reference. He knew it. 'I don't need to read it!'

'Read it!' Melissa commanded.

'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

'That's right,' Melissa nodded. She went on, 'And let me tell you, Jesus meant those words. That's the deal. I have to forgive or I can't be sure of being forgiven, and I need to be forgiven because I'm not a good person.'

Her voice wobbled. She took a deep breath. Then turned to another page.

'He told a story Nick, about a man who was forgiven a huge debt, who then refused to forgive someone else. When the orig - '

Nick interrupted. 'Yes. I know the story. He didn't forgive so he got chopped up into pieces.'

'No, not chopped up, put in prison until he could pay it all back!' Melissa replied. She twisted the book around again, pointing at a line of text. She looked at him with eyebrows raised.

Reluctantly Nick read the line, "This is how your heavenly father will treat you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

'Look,' Melissa put the bible down and turned to face Nick. She took a deep breath, then sighed and looked down to avoid his gaze. Barely audible, she murmured, 'I say I try to live by this book. But I don't obey my husband. I don't turn the other cheek, neither literally nor metaphorically. And I cannot find it in myself to forgive him.'

She turned away and sat down at the table.

'I don't even want to find it in my heart to forgive him.'

'Mum,' Nick said 'you're overthinking all this. Why don't you listen to people who really love you.'

'I am. I'm listening to God. He has -'

'Are you? Really?' Nick cut in. 'Or are you just listening to your church leader, and then picking the bits of the bible that you think applies to you.'

Melissa was losing patience. 'Sorry Nick, I can't discuss this with you.' She walked out of the lounge.

Chapter 26

Somewhere. Now.

Eri is looking puzzled.

'The issue is that Jeffrey just wants his own way all the time. Over every little detail. I've said it before ... he's a control freak.' I am trying to get Eri to appreciate how horrible Jeffrey is. How loathsome he is. The revulsion is feeding on itself. Vile is the word ...

'Stop!' Eri startles me.

And I remember that Eri hears my thoughts. The only reality here for me is my thoughts and Eri's words.

'The more you dwell on his faults, the more real your hatred becomes. And the more your mind ignores anything good he might do.'

I laugh then - bitterly. Jeffrey is ruining my mother's life.

'You, Eri, say this is all about justice. Shouldn't you reap what you sow? Shouldn't Jeffrey get what's coming to him?' We are eye to eye, I'm intense, agitated. Eri is, as ever, cool.

Eri waits. He steadily meets my gaze. 'Let's talk about justice, Nick,' he says.

I realise I need to calm down.

Eri continues, 'How would you define justice?'

'Justice?' I take a few seconds to collect my thoughts. 'Justice ensures that people are accountable for what they have done.'

Eri nods encouragingly. 'Go on.'

'And once that account is considered, there must be a proportionate punishment.'

'Why?'

'Why!! Because they deserve it.'

Eri holds up one of his huge hands, thumb out. 'Okay, number one, retribution. Any other reasons?'

'Yes, so they won't do it again.'

Eri flicks his forefinger up. 'Yes, number two, deterrence. Any more?'

'As a warning to others? To maintain social control?'

Eri adds his middle finger. 'Okay, messaging. Is that it?'

I'm nearly out of ideas. 'No, how about when the perpetrator is dangerous ... imprisonment to protect the public'.

Eri extends his ring finger, 'Protection. Any more, or is that it?'

'That's it,' I say, 'I'm out of ideas.'

Eri paces up and down like a university lecturer, 'So retribution, deterrence, messaging, protection,' then he turns to face me, 'so let's take them in reverse order.'

I almost ask a sarcastic question about whether we need to know this for the exam. But Eri is so evidently a good bloke that I'm ashamed I even considered it.

'Number four. My question is, is it necessary to inflict pain in order to protect the public?'

I consider that for a while.

Eri interrupts my thoughts. 'Think zoos. Tigers for example.'

I see what he's getting at, 'No, the facilities need to be secure, but I suppose pain is not necessary.'

'Good! Number three, is it right to inflict pain on someone for no other reason than sending a message to society?'

'Not if that's the only reason.'

'Then number three, messaging cannot be used as a reason to inflict pain.'

Eri raises his eyebrows looking for acquiescence. I nod.

'Number two. If there are equally successful alternative ways to deter bad behaviour, is it right to continue to inflict pain.'

Reluctantly, I shake my head, 'No, I guess not.' Then I add, 'Provided there are ... equally good ways I mean.'

Eri bows his head graciously, 'Proviso accepted. Now number one. Is it necessary to inflict pain to achieve retribution?'

I've got him here, 'Yes, absolutely. The pain should equal the pain that was originally caused.' I smile triumphantly. Eri may have dismissed the others, but he's stuck with this last one.

But Eri continues without pause. 'So when you talk about justice, what you really mean is retribution.'

'Yes, I suppose so. The punishment must fit the crime.' I say.

'Vengeance?'

'Yes, the punishment must - '

'Retaliation?' Eri cuts across me.

'Well, if you want to call it that.'

'There's lots of thing we could call it,' Eri says sadly, shaking his head, 'getting your own back, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, tit for tat, someone getting a dose of their own medicine, getting their comeuppance, karma!'

I sit still. I'm not sure what Eri wants from me.

Seeing my stillness, he continues, 'Vengeance! We get to see it all from here. But one thing we never call it ... is justice.'

'So you're telling me,' I begin, but realise I'm not sure how to continue, 'what are you telling me?'

'I don't really want to tell you anything,' Eri smiles, 'I'm just planting a few seeds into what hopefully is fertile ground. How's your perception by the way?'

It seems the discussion about justice, or should I say vengeance, is over for now. I do my usual stocktake. Strange! I can easily detect the off balance sloped feeling on the margins. But it's not really uncomfortable. It must be a five now on the scale of one to ten. Everything feels a little bit diminished, and I feel just tired all the time rather than constantly frail.

Chapter 27

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

The puddle was getting bigger. The shower had finished for now, but the ground was saturated. It was shaping up to be the wettest autumn winter season in years. The gulleys were blocked with half rotted leaves from the two huge oaks across the street. Jeffrey had phoned the council four times in the last two weeks. The road and pavement was covered with black leaf mould slime. The council had reassured him that there was no real cause for concern since the water had not yet entered the showroom.

Jeffrey checked his watch. Five past four, and already it was dark and cold and wet. The JB30 double decker was due in four minutes time. It ran throughout the day once an hour, last bus was 8.45pm. The wind three nights earlier had deposited another blanket of leaves to replenish those previously rotted.

On days when the sun was shining and the sky was blue, there were twenty three sparkling cars on the forecourt of Jeffrey's Cars. All with plush interiors, smelling of new-car-spray, tyres painted black, boasting excellent service histories. And it was so strangely lucky that the customer could choose any vehicle, and it would always be the one with a reliable engine, that was previously owned from new, by an old lady without a dog or cat who didn't smoke (the customer would laugh at the amusing ambiguity at this point).

Most days of the year, Jeffrey would be taking a delivery of ten more cars, and he needed the showroom space tomorrow, and consequently was able to give an excellent price on the chosen vehicle. This situation was only applicable today, and very unusual, and the customer really should purchase immediately when they were fortunate enough to be the one customer in a thousand who was in the right place at the right time.

But the dark air was filled with winter damp. There were few prospects and no sales today.

The JB30 bus came through at 35mph as usual. The twelve and a half tons of double decker projected most of the puddle water and a good proportion of well rotted leaf mould high in the air, arcing across the pavement and double-coating the paintwork of twenty three decidedly already-unsparkly cars.

None of which would have bothered Jeffrey at all were it not for the fact that his illegal immigrant sub-minimum-wage lackey had gone to Manchester to live with his brother.

Returning to the showroom forecourt at 9.00pm every evening and washing cars for an hour or so in the cold and wind and rain was not putting Jeffrey in the best of moods.

Melissa heard the front door slam as Jeffrey finally got home. He looked woebegone - exhausted, shivering, wet and very grubby. He stomped across the entrance hall, then turned to see his own muddy footprints across the carpet. He swore to himself, slipped his shoes off, and continued into the lounge.

'I can't take much more of this! It's ridiculous, when is this foul weather going to stop?'

Melissa stood up, 'Do you want a towel?' she suggested.

'No, I need a drink,' he went to the drinks cabinet, picked out a bottle of whisky and a tumbler.

'Let me get you some ice,' Melissa was anxious to get Jeffrey less stressed.

He met her eyes, and smiled approvingly. He remembered what had attracted him to her three years previously - her clear skin, high cheek bones and beautiful smooth long hair gave her an air of sophistication. Her slim figure was enhanced by her naturally elegant posture. She looked tired though. And downhearted.

'Thanks,' he replied, 'that would be good.'

'Any luck with finding a replacement car valet?'

Jeffrey shook his head, and poured himself a generous measure of scotch, 'Not so far.'

Looks like I'll be doing it all over again next week. Any idea of the weather forecast?'

Melissa shrugged, 'I'll have a look'. She consulted her phone. 'Looks like it's going to be even wetter next week. High wind with at least ... let's see,' she scrolled through the days, 'at least 3 hours of rain most days.'

Jeffrey rolled his eyes, upended the glass, and placed it on the coffee table. He made to go upstairs to get showered and changed.

Melissa looked at Jeffrey. She appeared to be contemplating something. 'I have an idea,' she said.

Jeffrey turned and raised his eyebrows questioningly, 'An idea?'

'Yes,' she responded, 'I may have found someone.'

Jeffrey frowned. He didn't like being blindsided to people that Melissa met or knew about. His mouth made a thin line across his face as his jaw began to work in suppressed agitation. But he held his tongue and waited.

So then Melissa spoke to him about Darren whose prison record guaranteed multiple job rejections, Darren who was desperate for work because he was going to be evicted, and Jeffrey knew that if Darren shaped up, then he was destined, at least until early February, to valet twenty three filthy cars at 1.00pm and at 9.00pm every day. He could start a one month trial immediately and would not, of course, require minimum wage.

---oOo---

Darren turned out to be good at valeting cars. The majority needed only power washing to get the leaf sludge off the bodywork. Around five or six vehicles each day needed a full valet having been test driven by people with muddy shoes. The midday clean was easy enough. It was the late evening clean which was usually unpleasant, tiring and frustrating.

Jeffrey stayed with him for the first week, during which he installed a lockable steel storage

box to the left of the showroom. At the start of week two, Jeffrey handed Darren a ring with two keys. On the Monday morning, Darren transferred fluids, cloths, and brushes, power-vac to the lockable box, and he unlocked the jet-washer. Within one more week, Jeffrey was relying on Darren for keeping the cars and the forecourt clean, plus the showroom floor. He also was useful in obtaining decent coffee when Jeffrey needed it. By the end of the first month, Jeffrey was regularly getting home on time and staying dry. So he decided Darren was staying. New Years Eve, they finished up early at 3.00pm, with a celebratory drink.

---oOo---

January's weather was not an improvement. But the cars were sparkling most of the time displayed on a jet-washed forecourt. Inside the showroom, Jeffrey's desk was back and centre. Immediately to the left was a 1996 DeLorean Alpha. It looked spectacular. A gleaming purple bird with gullwings reaching for the sky, a pinstripe running the length of the car. The soft leather interior with reclinable bucket seats in spotless cream with purple piping, backlit led dashboard, and electric everything screamed conspicuous 90s hedonism.

But it was all lipstick on a pig. The bonnet was kept closed, the engine seized, the suspension rotten, the gullwings welded into position, the electrics non-functional.

To the right of the desk would be Jeffrey's 'car of the month'. Today, contrasting nicely with the DeLorean, it was an almost new Land Rover Defender in Coniston Green. A proper man's car provided proper men included those whose idea of challenging terrain were the speed bumps outside school. Men who needed all 540kg of load capacity to bring the shopping home from Waitrose. Men who needed the rugged reliability to be able to do the school run twice a day. And men who might be called on to invade a small third world country when duty called.

The showroom door slid open with a hiss. Darren moved carefully across the faux marble floor to Jeffrey's desk. He was carrying a small tray with a cup of coffee and a small plate of Italian biscuits in one hand and a folded red top newspaper and a copy of Autocar in the other. He placed them side by side on the desktop.

Jeffrey glanced up from his paperwork. 'Thanks, Darren. Where's yours?'

'Mine's out the back Mr Turnham.'

'Bring it in if you like today ... it's raining again isn't it?' Jeffrey peered out of the front showroom window.

'Yes, and windy. Thanks. I will.'

Darren returned with his mug of coffee and settled into one of the customer chairs in front of the desk, 'Bit quiet again?'

'The weather is keeping people away, and the post Christmas silly season.'

'I guess it's normally busier than this then?'

Jeffrey scanned the almost deserted high street, as the wind blew the rain in sheets onto the showroom windows.

He turned to Darren and grinned wolfishly, 'Would I be able to afford my lavish lifestyle if every day was like today?'

'So when's the best time of year for sales, Mr Turnham?'

'It used to be Spring, early Summer, but it's all SUVs now, and demand for those peaks in the Autumn.'

'So how many cars would you sell in September then, Mr Turnham?'

'A good September ... ten a week. But that goes down to five a week in the quiet months now.'

Darren had already calculated the average markup per car, so the total profit figure came easily into his head, 'Woah,' he said, his face show admiration, 'but I guess you have to subtract the lease on this place.'

Jeffrey signalled Darren to come closer with an up-nod, then he shook his head slowly, 'No lease, Darren, I own this place.' Jeffrey paused as if considering his next few words, 'And I own another down in Swanage.' He smiled, evidently very pleased with himself, basking in Darren's admiration.

---oOo---

Chapter 28

Somewhere. Now.

I find I need to talk about Kai. I know why. I rush in before I lose my nerve.

'Now Kai,' my stomach lurches, I swallow hard and wait a few seconds, then go on, 'he was totally out of control.'

'Do you mean,' asks Eri, 'that you tried to control what Kai did?'

There's a pause. Either Eri is playing a game to make a point, or he's confused. That's unlikely. He seems to have had his finger on the pulse so far.

'And yet,' he continues, 'you don't want Jeffrey to control what your mother does?'

'My mother is an adult. Kai was a child.'

'Seventeen.'

'He was smoking weed, he needed taking in hand.'

'I mean, control doesn't work on a seventeen year old. And it shouldn't be your first choice method anyway.'

Now it's my turn to look puzzled.

Eri continues, 'But I understand the attraction of control. Intellectually anyway. Do you?'

I think about Kai pressurising Freya. 'In my case,' I'm speaking slowly appearing to explain carefully, but really I'm giving myself time to think, 'in my case, I was desperate to stop Kai and control would have been the fastest way.'

I am hoping I haven't given anything away.

It seems not. Eri is cool. 'And yet control is the most ineffective,' Eri concludes, 'because control is an external constraint rather than an internal change.' Eri's detachment grates a

bit.

'Well I didn't think there was enough time for that!' I'm getting annoyed now, so I decide to spell it out for Eri. 'Look, two or three evenings before -', I pause.

I'm aware that I'm slowly getting drawn back into the hole of black dread. I'm breathing hard. I hope I can take it a bit at a time. Maybe. Eri is here. He is still cool and controlled, but perhaps that's what I need. He's smiling encouragement. I try again.

'A few evenings beforehand,' I think he understands, 'you know, I was in the lounge. On the settee. Kai was in the armchair across from me. The TV was on. I don't know what he was watching. Anyway, Freya appeared, and just walked through the lounge into the kitchen. And Kai stopped looking at the TV. He watched her walk through. I didn't like that.'

Eri is leaning towards me, listening carefully. He's not smiling now.

'I just didn't like the way he watched her. I don't know, it was weird,' I'm seeing it again in my mind as I describe it. 'He was ... kind of predatory.'

'Yes.' Eri gets it.

'And then she walked back through, and on up the stairs. And Kai watched her all the way.' Even as I say this, I can feel the turmoil starting to twist my guts. My mind runs ahead and it all surges back in stark horror.

'That's why I had to control him.'

'But you couldn't.'

'No.'

Eri can see I am really struggling, so he says, 'That's enough for now, Nick.'

Eri changes tack, 'It might help if I tell you Jeffrey doesn't do it for fun.'

'No?'

'No. He's scared. He's been scared ever since his life went out of control as a child.'

'Yes?'

'Not unlike Kai actually!'

'You know about Jeffrey's childhood?' I ask.

'I know enough. With Jeffrey, it's risk reduction to surround himself with people he can control.'

'If he's that screwed up, then he's had it, hasn't he?'

'Had it?'

'Yes. He's irretrievable.'

Eri looks serious, like he's about to deliver something seminal. 'No-one's irretrievable. Not Jeffrey. Not Kai. Not you. And love works. Control doesn't.'

The scepticism is written all over my face. I slowly shake my head, 'Not a chance!'

'Of course,' says Eri slowly, 'our definitions of love may not be quite the same!'

'No?'

'Actually, Nick, you have the homeopathic definition!'

'What do you mean?'

'Diluted to one part in a hundred thousand!'

---oOo---

Suddenly, I decide I'm ready. Previously, it has all been unthinkable. But I reckon Eri has an inkling of what happened anyway. I've been carrying this constant suppressed anxiety and I just want rid of it. I'm tired. Every morning waking up to it over again. The sudden

overwhelming desire to let it all out is irresistible.

'I want to tell you now,' I look at Eri. He smiles. My throat tightens and I can feel the tears coming.

'Take your time,' he says.

'I was in the back garden getting the leaves off the lawn. I know Mum and Freya and Kai were all indoors. I think Jeffrey was in the garage cleaning the car. The hose was lying across the lawn.' Even to me, my voice sounds thin and shaky. I wipe my palms on my knees. And take a deep breath. 'I heard a scream, and some shouting. Some crashes coming from the kitchen. I dropped the rake and just ran -'

Eri's slow voice, serious, cuts through my panic, 'Slow down a bit Nick, there's plenty of time.' I can't look at Eri though. I have to get through this before I lose my nerve.

'- to the back door. By the time I got there I could hear Freya screaming.' As I am recounting it, I'm feeling the terror all over again, tightening across my chest and making it hard to breathe.

'I pushed the door open -', I stopped. Appalled. I can't see Eri now, or the room I'm in. I can see the scene in the kitchen. Freya is making a horrible hysterical wailing noise. Kai is lying on the floor on his back. His eyes are wide open. He's not moving. Mum is crouched over him struggling with something. I realise then that I've been sitting, silently rocking, eyes glazed staring into the distance.

'Calm down, Nick, keep going. You're doing well so far. It's okay.' At the sound of Eri's voice, I'm back in the room. He continues, 'So you opened the door. What then?'

I describe the tableau of horror as best I can, then continue. 'Mum noticed me then, and she stood up. I saw ...' I take a very deep, very shaky breath, 'I saw the front of Kai's shirt was bright red. And on the kitchen floor. I looked at Mum. Her hands were covered with

blood. She had a tea towel ... Then I looked at Kai again -', I stopped speaking for a moment, brought both my hands to my face and eyes, as if I could stop myself seeing the horror.

'What were you going to say about Kai?' Eri gently nudges me forward.

Even in the midst of this trauma of telling, I realise Eri doesn't need to know every detail. Nevertheless, I have to say, 'There was ... a pair of scissors stuck in his chest where the blood was pumping out. Mum said something like "I can't stop the bleeding". Then she registered Freya's howling, and she passed me the tea towel, and said "Get the scissors out, and stuff the tea towel in the wound" .

As I'm telling it, I can feel again the stickiness of the blood soaked tea towel. The next thing I can remember is me kneeling on the floor struggling with the scissors. Mum said, "Lock the door" then she grabbed Freya and dragged her out of the room to calm her down. And clean her up. They both had blood on them. I try to describe it as best I can to Eri, but I'm choking up with the memory.

I carry on, everything is trembling and shaking, my breathing, my voice, my hands.

'The next thing I recall is a huge crash, and then being knocked across the kitchen. Someone kicked my head I think. I slowly came to, but I couldn't see properly. My eyes were blurry. I think someone was crouching over Kai. I don't know why. I knew I had to get out. I crawled to the back door, just about managed to stand up, and ran. I suppose it was adrenalin.'

I look at Eri. I'm breathing really fast, but I can't get enough air.

I can tell Eri feels really upset. His eyes are wide, and he's looking serious, 'You're nearly there Nick, keep going.'

'Well, there's not much more to tell really. I made it across the lawn and fell on the drive.

Then whoever it was landed on me, and started beating me round the head. And that's as much as I can remember.'

I stop. We look at each other. I'm shaking. My chest is hurting my heart is beating so hard. Eri shifts across to sit next to me on the bed. He puts his arm around me and says, 'I'm here Nick. We are going to get through this.'

---oOo---

Chapter 29

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Usually the police will arrive first.

But Sean was a biker. He always had been. A paid up HOG member. His friends had been told that he wished his final journey to be in a black Harley sidecar hearse. That day might arrive sooner than expected, because Sean was a speed freak. He loved his job. Paramedic first responder riding a Honda ST1100, with just over 100bhp taking him to 60 within 4 seconds of the lights turning green. Not as wicked as his own ride but still a sweet machine.

Tom and Callum's ride had two and a half times the power, and the 112mph speed limiter had been removed. But the Volvo V90 kerb weight was just under seven times heavier than the Honda. Consequently, it reached 60 from a standing start in a sluggardly 6.8 seconds.

Which meant Sean arrived first.

Emergency protocol was that the police should first declare the property clear, before paramedics put themselves at risk of attack. But Sean could see a woman screaming in the garden. She was standing over a figure who was lying face down on the grass. He stripped off his leathers, put on latex gloves, a coverall and blue fabric overshoes, then ran across the grass and asked the woman, 'What's his name?'

'Nick,' Melissa replied. Her face was almost as white as Sean's coverall. Concerned she was going to keel over, he asked her to go and sit down in the conservatory. She refused.

No time to argue. Kneeling down to look into his face, Sean said, 'Nick, can you hear me?' No response. He ran the process that paramedics use worldwide. Within minutes he had assessed Airway (open), Breathing (none), Circulation (heartbeat irregular and very weak). He had ascertained the cause as severe trauma to the head. He ran his fingers down the spine. Satisfied, he flipped the body, cut the shirt from waist to neck, and applied the

defibrillator pads. He sat back on his heels for a moment, watching as the defibrillator began.

Tom ran across the lawn and stood by Sean waiting for the right time to interrupt. 'The property's clear,' Tom said, 'and an extremely serious injury to an adult male in the house.' 'Yes?'

'Yes,' Tom nodded, 'is this one stable?'

'Not yet,' Sean clipped a pulse oximeter onto Nick's left hand middle finger, 'but you take over chest compressions, and I'll check out the other guy.'

The aorta is the body's main artery leaving the heart. A litre of blood passes through every five seconds. A typical adult male has around five litres of blood. One of the scissor blades had missed the aorta by just over a centimetre. The other had made a tiny puncture wound just over two millimetres long. But the blood pressure within the aorta was still sufficient to eject frightening amounts of blood. Had the scissors been left in place, the speed of blood loss would have been massively reduced. However, the process of removing the scissors had increased the size of the wound to around seven millimetres, and then left an open hole. Kai had lost two litres in just under three minutes. His heart had stopped at that point. Following death a further quarter litre had seeped out.

Two and a quarter litres of blood makes a big splash. Sean took one look and knew. Nevertheless, he went through the checks, because he was a professional. Within two minutes he was stepping back into the garden to attend to Nick.

The ambulance arrived, parked on the drive, adding a third blue light to disseminate the gravity of the situation to the neighbours.

Very quickly, Kai's death was confirmed, and the ambulance crew had moved Nick into

the vehicle. On losing sight of him, Melissa went into an immediate panic attack, and was inconsolable and hyperventilating.

Sean took her hand, and only then noticed the lacerations. He led her across to the back door of the vehicle. 'You can go in,' he said.

The head paramedic saw her wide glassy eyes, her accelerated breathing rate and impaired balance, sat her down in the ambulance and administered Midazolam to prevent seizure.

---oOo---

Callum, meanwhile, was checking on the other occupants of the house. He found Freya hysterical in her room. She had blood on her clothes and she was shaking and crying but evidently not at risk. He found Jeffrey, blood smeared on his face, hands and shirt, hunched in one of the wicker chairs in the conservatory.

'Are you okay? Injured at all?'

'Just this.' Jeffrey mumbled, he slowly dragged his left trouser-leg up to expose a stab wound about 4 inches above the ankle. It had soaked his sock, and was still pulsing bright red blood.

Recognising another artery wound, Callum immediately laid Jeffrey flat, elevated the limb and rested Jeffrey's foot on the wicker chair. 'Stay still. You need medical attention on that.'

---oOo---

'Grim!' Callum was sat back in the squad car.

'Oh, foul! And I'm not sure Nick is going to make it either.'

'Okay, where are we? Let's run through it.' Callum ticked the number 1 off with his forefinger, 'Interview ... that's only Freya. All the others are under medical protocols.'

'Freya!' Tom smacked the armrest in frustration. 'Where's the FLO? They must be on their way.'

Tom opened the car door, 'We can't leave the girl on her own. I'll go.'

'We need them here now. Where are they?' With so many casualties, at a complex crime scene, Callum could feel the situation slipping away.

'Family liaison is Danielle something. I've not met her before,' Tom screwed his eyes up thinking, 'Danielle Easton. I think she's out of Dorchester? Maybe Salisbury. But I have to go.'

Tom ran back into the house to find Freya.

Callum shook his head, 'It's a nightmare,' he said to himself. His mind reached back to another murder case, twelve years earlier. Arguably as bad, maybe worse. But he had been younger then. More gung-ho. And still it had taken him a while to stop dwelling on what he had seen. How long would this one take to clear?

Had he done everything. He forced his thoughts back to the crime scene procedure that he had used scores of times before. But there was a complexity here that was nagging at the edges of his awareness.

Callum extended his thumb. Number two ... Examine. He didn't want to attract the scorn of the crime scene investigator team if he missed anything.

Number three ... Photograph. The CSI forensic photographer would be here hopefully within the hour to record the settings, and the crime scene detail.

Then Sketch and Process. He looked at his hand with all five fingers extended. Think! What am I missing? He clenched the open hand as if trying to grasp the elusive connections.

He jumped as Tom rapped on the window. 'Danielle's up there with the girl now.'

'How is she?'

'Freya? In a bad way. Talking rubbish at the moment. Danielle will settle her down.'

'Okay.'

'And covered in blood, but no injuries.'

'Well, CSIs will be here within thirty minutes. Then at least she can get herself cleaned up. Still, it's going to be a long shift.'

---oOo---

Freya was curled up on her bed like a foetus. She had wanted to get out of the clothes she was wearing, because of the blood. Danielle was crouched sitting on her heels, at eye level with Freya. She was keen to understand what had happened first. Her wide eyes lent a childlike, approachable, but perpetually somewhat surprised expression. It was a persona that had served her well in extracting information from reluctant witnesses and perpetrators alike.

Danielle sat down on the bed carefully, 'What happened Freya?'

'I don't know. I don't know.' Traces of dried blood on her cheeks were smeared as tears ran down Freya's face. She curled tighter as if trying to protect herself from the ongoing trauma of the recent memory of the attack.

'Who attacked you?'

'I don't know who it was!' Freya's voice rose to a wail.

'Was it a man? Or a woman?'

'I didn't see. I don't know!' Freya spoke jerkily in between sobs. She was rapidly declining into hysterical panic. Her eyes darted around the room.

'Okay Freya. You're safe now here with me. Just take some slow deep breaths while I

count.' Danielle's voice was smooth and low. Her face was reassuringly friendly.

'I do need to ask you some questions, Freya?' she went on. 'Did this person attack you or just the others?'

'No, he didn't attack me. Not me.' Freya was drawing short sharp breaths.

'Stay calm, Freya,' Danielle made sure Freya could see her smile, 'so he didn't attack you?'

Freya stroked her forehead. 'No,' she murmured.

'But it was a man? The attacker was a man?'

'I don't know. Yes.' Freya shook her head, 'I don't really know'.

'But he didn't touch you?'

'No, he never came near me.'

Danielle pointed to the patch of crimson on Freya's dress, 'Whose blood is this?'

Freya's face was twitching with fear, her breathing still ragged, 'I don't know. Kai's I think? I don't know.'

'Okay, don't worry, you're doing really well, Freya.'

'I want to get out of these clothes. I want to have a bath.' Freya looked imploringly at Danielle.

'You can soon, but we just need to wait a few minutes more for our crime scene investigation team to get here.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just that they will want to do a test with you to make sure you are all fine.'

Freya stared at Danielle for a moment, then said, 'I don't need a swab test.'

Danielle narrowed her eyes, puzzled that Freya had been so specific.

'No! I said he never touched me. He never touched me.' Freya repeated it over and over, then started to hyperventilate, her eyes widening and her panic rising again.

'Calm down, Freya,' Danielle said firmly, 'you are out of danger. Now breathe in time with my counting.' Danielle slowed her speech down as she counted, 'One ... and two ... and three ... and-'

She was interrupted by a tap on the door, and a young man popped his head in, 'CSI. What's the score, here?'

'All fine, no permission for a swab, but it seems unnecessary. ... Keep in time Freya. ... One ... and two ... keep going like that.'

'Are you certain?' the young man said.

'Yes, she says he never touched her. Shall I bag the clothes?'

'No, I'd rather bag them.' he said as he stepped into the room. He unrolled a plastic sheet on the floor. 'Just get her to take them off and put them on the sheet. Get her to roll each item up separately.'

'She wants a bath,' Danielle said.

'Fine. Given there's no permission, it makes no difference.'

---oOo---

After twenty minutes or so, Freya emerged from the bathroom shivering and pale dressed in clean clothes. Danielle took her downstairs into the lounge.

'Would you like a drink Freya?'

Freya shook her head. She looked Danielle in the face for a moment, then murmured, 'Thank you for looking after me.'

'It's my job, Freya.'

'But you care about people,' Freya declared, 'that's good.'

'Do you feel up to chatting a bit more about what happened?'

Freya nodded. Danielle had already taken the opportunity to make some brief notes while Freya was bathing. She preferred to chat first and record later.

However Freya had nothing new to add. It seems either her mind had attempted to wipe the memory, or she had simply been too panicked to note anything of value.

Chapter 30

Dorchester County Hospital.

The young man was drumming his fingers impatiently on the A&E reception desk.

'I need to see them now. Are they together?' He held out his FLO Ident card.

The elderly clerk had vast experience of impatient demanding visitors. She signalled her infinite tolerance by raising both eyebrows and smiling sweetly. 'We only have a limited number of rooms, dear.'

'Which room are they in?'

'Interview room IR2.'

The Family Liaison Officer relaxed very slightly. 'Alright. Fine. But I need to join them as soon as is consistent with medical protocol.'

The clerk gave no sign of having heard, apart from an almost imperceptible tilt of her head, as she continued to stare at her computer screen.

The FLO stood for a moment at the desk, until it was clear that the clerk had no further need of him. He sighed and walked across the room and sat in one of the orange plastic chairs. His radio crackled and he hurriedly turned the volume down. He exchanged a few sentences and then stood up and returned to the desk. Despite the clerks detached demeanour, she was in fact determining the current status of treatment. She rattled a little longer on the keyboard and then looked up, fixed his gaze and nodded.

'The lady, Mrs Turnham, is now able to be discharged, but we will have to keep the gentleman, Mr Turnham in for observation. But you can now see them both.'

'Still in IR2?'

The clerk gave a single nod, and returned to typing.

---oOo---

The doctor had just left. Jeffrey stared around the room. It looked just like many other hospital rooms - clinically clean walls and floor, plastic chairs, aluminium and plastic trolleys, hand sanitiser. A jumble of electronic equipment on a side table. The doors that opened both ways with a large metal panel at the bottom showing a smear of scratch lines coinciding with the height of sundry protruding parts of wheeled beds, and trolleys of equipment.

He walked around, glanced out of the window, checked the contents of the table. Melissa was sat mute on an orange plastic chair. Her face was white, and the tears were streaming down her cheeks. She was still wringing her hands. Jeffrey was pacing the floor. He looked at Melissa, worried by her evident fear. A large bruise was slowly darkening on her neck.

Jeffrey moved across the room and stood in front of her. He bent down until their faces were level. Then he took her face firmly in both hands and kissed her. He moved his face away just enough for them to be nose to nose. He looked into her eyes. She breathed in, and sighed.

'It's okay,' he said.

She made to speak but he immediately kissed her again.

He then moved his head to one side, but retained his two hand hold keeping her head still. Jeffrey tilted his head slightly to the left, then gently turned Melissa's head. He gave her another kiss.

He raised his eyebrows. She lifted her chin. He gently turned her head a little more, and rolled his eyes to the left. He put a finger under her chin and tipped her head back a fraction.

Then he kissed her right cheek, and whispered, 'Come on!' in her ear. His voice was low as

he held her still for a moment longer.

'So,' Jeffrey continued, 'can you describe him?'

Melissa shook her head and sobbed.

'You were in the kitchen with him. You must be able to give a description!'

'Wait,' she looked up at Jeffrey pleadingly.

'Okay. In a minute then.' He took her hand and gently said, 'Just hang in there'.

They both sat motionless for a few minutes trying to digest what had happened.

'So,' Jeffrey said softly, 'we need to get on. What did he look like?'

Melissa sat thinking for a while. 'Middle aged, medium height, about my height.' She paused.

Jeffrey nodded encouragingly.

'Maybe,' she swallowed a couple of times, 'a bit taller. Perhaps not middle aged. Thirty-five? I don't know really.'

'Impossible to tell with the stocking mask,' Jeffrey agreed, 'What did he say?'

'Nothing.'

'He never spoke at all?'

'No,' she frowned, looked into the distance, trying to bring this man back into her mind, 'he was quite muscly ... strong arms.'

'Anything else?'

'Long hair. Well, longish as far as I could see. Dark hair.'

Jeffrey nodded. 'Okay. All I can add is that he is brutal with a knife, and he can run pretty fast. After he ran out the kitchen, I tried to follow him up the lane, but no chance with

this.' Jeffrey pointed to his shin, now wrapped in heavy bandage.

'Oh ... clothes!' Melissa interrupted, 'as far as I can recall, he had some dirty work trousers on, and an old g-'.
'

The door swung open and a man entered. He projected a gravitas beyond his youth. Smiling graciously, he introduced himself.

'I'm your Family Liaison Officer. My name is Stuart.'

Both Jeffrey and Melissa nodded.

'My role here is to make sure you are getting all the reassurance you need, and to support you both through the process,' he continued. 'Just to say that -'

'How's Nick? Is he ... Is he okay? What are the doctors saying?' Melissa stumbled not daring to ask what she desperately wanted to know.

Stuart turned to Melissa with a serious face, 'I have just been speaking to the doctor. Nick is stable but critical, and is being transferred to the major trauma unit at Southampton General. The ambulance left around ten minutes ago. For the next 24 hours Mrs Turnham, I will be keeping you up to date with the -'.

'How's Freya? Is someone with her?' Melissa cut across him again.

Stuart smiled reassuringly. 'I was speaking to a colleague only two minutes ago. Freya is settled and comfortable at home. My colleague, Danielle is with her to make sure she doesn't get distressed in your absence.'

'I need to get home to be with her. I'll take a taxi, Jeffrey, as soon as I'm done here,' Melissa looked to Jeffrey for approval.

Jeffrey shook his head, 'I think you should stay here with me for a while longer.'

Stuart cut in smoothly and took control. 'What is going to happen is this. One of my

colleagues will take Mrs Turnham,' he looked at Melissa and smiled, 'straight back to your home so that Freya will have one of you with her.'

'Since you,' he turned his gaze to Jeffrey, 'Mr Turnham cannot be discharged at least until tomorrow, you and I can have a chat now while your wife is taken home.'

Stuart's tone of voice indicated that none of this was in any way negotiable.

Jeffrey looked at Melissa. She returned his gaze with a weak smile.

'Can I have a few moments alone with my husband?'

Stuart shook his head, 'I'm very sorry, but that is not possible. But I'm quite happy to wait if there are some arrangements that you need to discuss before you go.'

'Er -,' Melissa looked disconcerted.

'I can call you, darling.' Jeffrey cut in.

A look of relief briefly flashed across Melissa's face, quickly disappearing as Stuart responded.

'I'm afraid any kind of communication between witnesses will need to be mediated for at least 24 hours.'

Jeffrey's eyes widened for a moment, and Melissa shook her head with a slight frown.

Seeing he had to explain a little, Stuart said, 'We do prefer witnesses to give their own version of events.'

'Yes, of course, that makes sense,' Jeffrey responded.

'In fact,' continued Stuart, 'I have already collected your phones from the hospital staff, and they will have to stay in our possession for a while. In any event like this, it is absolutely standard procedure. I'm really sorry if it inconveniences you in any way, but my role as your Family Liaison Officer is to do everything we can in these difficult

circumstances to avoid further distress.'

---oOo---

Within ten minutes, Melissa had been discharged and was sitting mute in the rear seat of the police car, as Stuart turned out of the hospital car park.

He engaged Melissa briefly in the rear view mirror, 'We'll arrange for you to stay in a hotel until such time as we have investigated the crime scene, of course'.

Melissa put her head in her hands. Stuart could hear her quietly crying.

'Don't worry,' he said in a tender voice, 'you will have Freya with you, and we will keep a Family Liaison Officer there with you all the time, at least for the next day or so.'

Stuart could hear the squeaking of the seat springs as Melissa rocked back and forth in agitation.

---oOo---

'Yes, a stocking mask,' Jeffrey said, 'I couldn't make out his face at all. And he was wearing a beanie hat, so it's impossible to say anything about his hair.'

Jeffrey was sat at a table. Tired and pale, he looked as if he had aged ten years in the last 24 hours. Opposite him sat the Detective Constable Faheem Idris. Atop the table were some leather gloves, a tablet and a digital recorder, which was displaying a single green light.

The DC nodded, 'Okay, and height? How tall was he would you say?'

'Just a bit shorter than me ... around five eight?'

'And how old would you say he was?'

'That's difficult because of the mask. He seemed about forty I suppose.'

'What makes you say forty rather than thirty if you couldn't see his face or hair?'

'He had a bit of that middle-aged spread. I don't know really.' Jeffrey sighed and ran his

fingers through his hair.

The interview ran on until the DC had asked about every aspect of the man's appearance multiple times. Then he moved on to the burglary itself.

'Are you aware of anything that was taken?'

'I've hardly had any time to check what was taken, but he took a small bag with him. I did go upstairs later to check Melissa's jewellery box. It was open and on the dressing table. He had taken the rings. And some earrings.'

'Did you previously take a photo?'

Jeffrey thought for a moment, 'Actually we did. For insurance. I'd forgotten that. They're in the bureau. Melissa can dig them out.'

'Anything else?'

'No, the only thing is -', Jeffrey was interrupted by a polite tap on the door. Immediately, a man popped his head in and said, 'CSI.'

The DC lifted his eyebrows and nodded his head to indicate that it was okay to enter. The CSI man took two fingerprints from each of Jeffrey's fingers on a handheld scanner and uploaded them to the UK National Fingerprint Bureau. 'To eliminate you from enquiries,' he had said to Jeffrey apologetically. He left. Total time eight minutes.

Jeffrey was flagging but the DC pushed on. There was a lot to get through before memories faded, and he wanted to move on to the exact sequence of events.

'I was out working in the garage,' Jeffrey sat up with an effort, 'I'm currently prepping some signage to be repainted for the business. I was using the power sander, and when I switched it off, I could hear someone screaming.'

'What time was this?'

'Around twelve.' Jeffrey paused, 'No wait, Frankie Rae Purbeck Lunchtime show had been playing for about ten minutes, so it would have been about ten past twelve. It's the twelve to two show.'

The DC picked up the tablet, swiped the passcode, and laid it back on the table top.

'Could you touch on here where you were. Then it'll drop a pin.'

Jeffrey leaned forward and considered the zoomed in satellite photograph of the house. 'I was here. Here's the garage,' Jeffrey touched the screen and a pin with the number 1 appeared.

The DC touched the mike icon and said, 'Initial location of Mr Turnham. 12:10pm'.

'Okay, carry on.'

'It sounded like Melissa but maybe a bit higher. It could have been Freya. Anyway I ran out of the garage -'

'Front door or side door?' cut in the DC.

'Out the side door, which lets onto the lawn, and I could see the guy beating Nick, who was lying face down in the garden.'

'Where was he lying?' The DC gestured towards the tablet.

Jeffrey dropped pin 2. The DC voice labelled it 'Location of Nicholas Grange and of perpetrator'.

'I ran across the lawn, the guy was so busy beating up Nick he never heard me. Just as I reached him, he spotted me and hit me low down in the leg. Then he jumped up and ran across to the fence about here -'

Jeffrey made to drop another pin and looked to the DC. He nodded.

'He jumped the fence and ran off down the lane this way.'

The DC drew an arrow on the tablet.

'I tried to follow but then realised he'd stabbed me in the leg.'

The DC amended the second label to include the stabbing, 'So the whole encounter would have been, what, ten minutes?'

'Not even that, more like three to five.'

'Fine, so what did you do then?'

'I ran back to Nick and checked his breathing, but then I heard screams from the kitchen. I ran into the house. Melissa and Freya were screaming -', Jeffrey took one really deep breath, held it trembling for a second, then let it out, 'and Kai on the floor.'

His face suddenly crumpled and he gasped great sobs, his shoulders shaking. He doubled over, head in his hands as if he was physically trying to hold himself together.

'Let's take a break.' The DC switched off the recorder. 'D'you want a cuppa?'

Jeffrey nodded into his lap, unable to raise his head.

Chapter 31

Dorchester.

Stuart had placed the recorder, the tablet and a digital camera on the table top in room 422 of the Premier Inn in Pope Street. At the far end of the corridor on the fourth floor, the only directly adjacent room was 420, and Freya was booked in there.

Stuart was listening as Melissa told her story. She had seen the man enter the kitchen. She had been afraid, but knowing she had to protect the children had given her courage. She had challenged him and told him to leave. But then Kai had tried to tackle the man, and that's when the man grabbed the scissors off the worktop and stabbed him in the chest. Melissa had grabbed the large kitchen knife for defence, but the man had left the kitchen via the internal door. She dropped the knife on the floor. She didn't know where he went in the house. Kai had collapsed then, on the floor.

Melissa was extremely wound up, the words cascading in a torrent. Stuart encouraged her to slow down but she found it impossible.

She had tried to staunch the bleeding by using a rolled tea towel. The scissors kept getting in the way. She had tried to remove the scissors but they were stuck. Nick had then entered the kitchen from the garden. She had told Nick what to do, and taken Freya upstairs and barricaded themselves in Freya's bedroom. That was all she could say until she had heard Jeffrey shouting that it was safe. She had left Freya and come down into the garden where she found Jeffrey kneeling by Nick on the drive.

Melissa then said she thought she remembered that Jeffrey had popped his head into the kitchen while she and Freya were screaming, and then she had gone upstairs. But then she declared that she couldn't really remember the sequence, because she was so stressed out.

Her description of the attacker was vague in the extreme, and all over the place.

Nevertheless, Stuart noted everything she said, and asked the necessary clarification questions as best he could and created a map record on the tablet for reference.

Stuart considered that this could have been a burglary gone wrong, but the level of violence was unusual. Consequently, a police officer was stationed in the corridor for the night.

At around 07.30pm, a woman from CSI arrived to take fingerprints. She left at twenty three minutes later. Just before 8.40pm the on-watch police officer tapped on the door of room 422 with latest news of Nick. He had regained consciousness momentarily but had relapsed into a coma. He was stable and in good hands.

Freya was unwilling to be left alone in the room until the police officer had assure her she would be sitting in the chair outside her door. Freya asked if the 'corridor woman' would stay there all night. Assured that she would, she agreed to sleep in the room alone. Actually neither Melissa nor Freya were to sleep very much anyway.

---oOo---

Dorchester Hospital.

The DC took the mugs and put them down by the door, 'Are you okay to carry on now?'

Jeffrey looked up. His face was grey and lined. His eyes were rheumy and red. He looked exhausted.

'Good!' the DC said briskly, 'lets crack on for another ten minutes or so, then I guess we'll be done here, and you can have a rest.'

He switched on the recorder and sat back, 'So you've just walked into the kitchen, and seen the situation. What did you do then?'

'I checked on Kai. He had no pulse,' Jeffrey paused and let out a slow breath, 'I tried CPR.'

'And how long did you continue with that.'

'I only did two or three pushes. The first time I pushed his chest it seemed to work, but the second time, there was -', Jeffrey stopped.

'More bleeding?'

'Loads. And every time I did a ... you know, a compression, there was so much blood. He was gone. I knew that.'

'How did you know that?'

'No pulse. No breathing. He'd lost so much blood.'

'So what then?'

'I noticed my leg was bleeding badly. He'd obviously hit an artery, because it was bright red. But when I stood up, I felt off balance. I nearly passed out. I knew that was risky, so I went into the conservatory to sit down.'

'How long did you stay there?'

'Until your man found me ... one of the police guys. He laid me down and told me to wait for a medic.'

At that moment one of the doctors came in to check on Jeffrey. Seeing Jeffrey haggard and pale, he turned to the DC.

'How long have you been with Mr Turnham?'

The DC realised he was going to be turned out, 'Around an hour. I probably should let him rest now.'

'Yes, probably!' The tone of voice was tinged with just enough sarcasm to establish his authority.

'I have a meeting to get to anyway,' the DC replied. Then he left, evidently outranked.

Dorset Police HQ.

The first meeting of the Major Crime Investigation Team began at 10.45pm. It was planned to run for around two hours. The initial interviews with Freya, Melissa and Jeffrey had been transcribed and cross referenced. There were no contradictions between them because only Jeffrey's account had been in any way definitive. Freya's had been vague, and Melissa's inconsistent. Meanwhile forensic officers were still investigating under halogen lights at the crime scene. They were still going through the house, combing the garden, searching in the lane. At 11.27pm someone mentioned that Darren Fletcher worked for Jeffrey Turnham as a cleaner, and it was agreed that he should be called in for interview.

---oOo---

Poole Hospital.

At 00.18am, the ward doors burst open and the first two member of the crash team raced in. Within seconds, there were five medics around the bed. They worked almost as one organism. The synchronised precision of ten hands reconfiguring the application of instrumentation while noting the patient's response was almost balletic. But exquisitely executed professionalism is oftentimes outclassed in the critical neurological trauma facility of Southampton General by the physical limits of the structure of the brain. Severe trauma often causes brain swelling which can result in loss of oxygen, and subsequently death. In Nick's case, the tearing of nerve fibres and subsequent haemorrhages within the brain stem itself fatally disrupted the heart and lung functions.

The team members straightened up around the bed.

The question was asked. The glances were exchanged. And the assents were given. All within four minutes of their arrival.

Dorset Police HQ.

The DCI notified the Major Crime Investigation Team meeting that they were investigating a double murder at 00.33am. They were just over 12 hours through the critically important first 24 hours.

---oOo---

Dorchester.

The police officer seated in the Premier Inn fourth floor corridor heard Freya begin to cry just after 03.00am. She had already been notified of Nick's death. Freya's crying became louder and she became hysterical at which point, Melissa exited room 422 and insisted on entering room 420 to comfort Freya. She was accompanied by the police officer. There was hugging and shushing, but no conversation. Freya settled back down, Melissa returned to her room, and the police officer to her uncomfortable corridor chair. She had decided not to notify Melissa of Nick's death until the morning.

---oOo---

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

It was 05.30am when the police asked Darren to come in for questioning. Although he did not have a great circle of friends, he was aware of the rumours in the village. And being somewhat familiar with their modus operandi, he was already dressed when they arrived. He was, after all, on probation.

---oOo---

Dorset Police HQ.

The forensic laboratory delivered three reports at 06.18am. The first related to the scissors. They were Fiskars for general use. One triangular pointed blade, one curved end pointed blade, 21 cm long. Right handed with ergonomic handles. All the fingerprints found on the handles belonged to family members. No other fingerprints were found.

The second report was concerning the kitchen knife. It was made from one piece of stainless steel by Global, with a 20cm blade. Recommended by the Daily Telegraph. The handle being steel should have taken fingerprints well, but the surface was dimpled with 2mm holes. Nevertheless, the only fingerprints found were those of Melissa.

The third report was an overview of fingerprints found around the house. There was nothing startling, although three fingerprints had not yet been identified.

Swanage, Purbeck.

DC Faheem Idris unlocked the front door and let Darren into the damp echoing emptiness of the Swanage police station. Built in 1899, the police station in Swanage was state of the art in Victorian times. Designed beautifully and built solidly from local stone when the government was flush with empire money, it now cost a fortune to heat, was impossible to wire for networked computers, provided inadequate parking, and was hideously expensive to maintain. Consequently, it was targeted for ultimate closure. But still used from time to time for interviews.

They made their way through the short corridor, past the iron barred cells, and Faheem set up in the only usable conference room. It contained a table and two hard upright chairs. An extension lead from the corridor trailed under the door providing power for the voice recorder.

'We want to talk about yesterday morning. Why did you do it, Darren?'

Darren looked unsettled at first, but he took a couple of breaths, his mouth tightened, he pulled his chair a little closer, then rested his elbows on the table, and rested his chin on his fists. He looked steadily at the DC Faheem Idris and lifted his eyebrows. Said nothing. Mocking.

'I asked you a question. Why did you do it?'

Darren frowned then replied, 'Because I was tired.'

'What do you mean, you were tired.'

'You know, tired ... when you want to sleep but it's during the day, so you can't really.'

Faheem furrowed his brow in irritation, 'Don't play games, Darren, I'm not in the mood.'

'I did it, because I was tired,' Darren repeated slowly, 'moreover I do it most Sunday mornings.'

'What did you do?'

'I sat in a chair in my bedsit and did most of the puzzles in the i newspaper.'

'You didn't. We know you didn't.'

Darren gave a small smile, 'Really?' He was as certain as he could be that the man was bluffing.

'Have you ever been to the house of Jeffrey Turnham, Darren?'

Darren tipped his head from side to side a few times, as if the process of sorting one's thoughts requires mechanical sieving. 'Yes,' he answered finally.

'When was the last time?'

'Only been once.'

'When was that?'

'Some time ago, not sure.'

'Try to remember.'

'Early Jan?'

'Really?' said sarcastically, 'we know you're lying.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes.'

'In which case, perhaps you can tell me what I should have said.'

'You've been to Jeffrey's house more than once, haven't you?'

'I already said, I have been there,' Darren slowed down for emphasis, 'Only. Once.'

'Don't believe you.'

Darren was certain at this point that the DC had no evidence. He was circling too much and not pushing hard enough.

'Only once,' Darren paused, then smiled mischievously, 'without my latex gloves, that is!'

Faheem gritted his teeth, muttered something under his breath and very nearly lost it, clenching his fist as if to crash it down onto the table. It remained suspended in the air, and Faheem slowly lowered his hand, fingers spread onto the tabletop.

'Only once,' Darren repeated slowly, raising his eyebrows with wide eyes as if speaking politely to a halfwit, 'unless of course you can prove me wrong.'

'Don't push it Darren. You're on probation. I do not need much to have you back inside.'

The DC leaned towards the recorder, 'Interview terminated 06.50am.'

---oOo---

Dorchester.

Whether continental or cooked, the Premier Inn breakfast is normally considered even more delicious for being funded by the tax payer. But Melissa skipped breakfast although she did take Freya down for some toast. They were joined by the 'corridor woman'.

Twenty minutes later the three of them returned to room 422. Melissa was questioned regarding other people who could have been in the house in the previous four weeks.

'We are finding other people's fingerprints, and we need to eliminate them from our enquiries,' explained the police officer.

'Not many,' Melissa reflected that Jeffrey rarely had visitors, and usually they were his friends or business associates. She didn't know their names. She confessed that she had seen Celia during the day at the house when Jeffrey was at work, but no-one else. Delivery men of course at the front door, but no-one else indoors.

---oOo---

Corridor woman passed the name "Celia Ferguson" to the CSI team. They also received three other names of visitors to the house, from Stuart at the hospital. All were fingerprinted within the hour, and the bureau returned the update by 11.15am.

By 11.35am, the reports from doorbell cams, and street cameras had been collated for the block of roads around Fletcher's bedsit and the streets surrounding the Turnham's property.

---oOo---

Dorset Police HQ.

The Major Crime Investigation Team 24 Hour meeting was supposed to kick off at 12.30pm. At 12.25pm only the admin clerk was present. Then the CSIs, Greg who had taken most of the photographs at the crime scene, plus Chris and Samantha who had

coordinated the search and taken fingerprints, made it in on time. Danielle and Stuart were seconded temporarily since they had led several interviews and they were just a minute late, swiftly followed by the surveillance lead Helen. DCI Peter Barclay, the lead investigator strode in four minutes overdue and called order. He had the excess energy and the gravelly voice of a man with too much repressed testosterone. Despite being in his early fifties, he had the large ears of an old man. Those appendages, plus love of drama and his magnificent eyebrows equipped him perfectly for the stage, and it was known that he routinely appeared as the arch villain in the annual East Dorset Pantomime. Although secretly he aspired to greater things.

The psychological profiler, Tim, quietly snuck in while everyone was settling down.

Peter was sat on the desktop at the front of the situation room. 'Good work so far,' he said scanning the room and nodding to each team member, 'but nothing to go on yet. Let's take a look at the timeline. Faheem?'

The interview information had been collated into a single timeline which looked reasonable. Faheem talked the team through the information, pausing from time to time to answer questions. Then Greg showed several photographs of the kitchen, and the garden, plus one of trodden down undergrowth down the lane. Those who had interviewed were asked to add their impressions to augment the written report.

There was some debate about Darren, with disappointment that he appeared to be impervious to pressure. He had no alibi and was very much in the frame.

They then briefly reviewed the camera report, but that showed nothing of interest. The crime scene was not covered by any cameras, and while the neighbours had doorbell cams, the lane was not covered at all.

Peter stood up and walked across to the board and tapped the timeline, 'I'm not happy we've got this right. This is almost on Turnham's word alone. His wife and daughter are all

over the shop. Let's try to nail this down. Samantha, no surprise but you're leading the team. Danielle, re-interview Freya please. Stuart, again go through it again with Mrs Turnham. And Tim,' Peter looked across at the profiler, 'we're going to need some detailed work on this one I think.'

Soon after that the meeting wound up.

'Helen?' Peter beckoned across the room as people were leaving. She could guess what he was going to say.

Chapter 32

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

Wilf was 66, a lifelong bachelor, and his life ran on rails, completely and predictably controlled. Every day was the same. Rise at 7.30am, breakfast at 8.00am, lunch at 1.00pm, dinner at 6.00pm, bed at 9.00pm.

Each week was the same. Every day in the morning he walked to the convenience store to collect the Telegraph. In the afternoons on Mondays, it was the supermarket was for green groceries, Tuesdays non green groceries, Wednesdays bread etc, Thursdays cleaning items. There was no supermarket trip on Fridays, but there was an evening walk to the Fish and Chip Shop, which included eight circuits of the car park. On Saturdays he went to the flower shop. On Sundays he took the flowers to the graveyard where his mother was buried.

Each day required 4500 steps on the cheap pedometer he had bought. The Telegraph trip clocked 1200 steps, the afternoon walk clocked 2700 steps, and he knew steps around the house added at least another 600 steps.

The early morning collection of his lodger Darren at 05.30am had not pleased Wilf. He found himself eating breakfast at 06.45. He arrived at the convenience store before the papers had been unpacked. He tried to get the day back in sync by sitting still in an armchair from 10.45am until 01.15pm but the toilet breaks were all at the wrong times.

All the sitting around gave Wilf enough time to think about the future with Darren the probationer, as lodger. He decided it was too complex and dangerous to manage. When Darren returned he gave him until Friday to leave, and refunded his weeks rent ex gratia.

Darren didn't want any trouble, but he was exceedingly angry. And his legendary temper got away from him for about 15 very awkward minutes in Wilf's lounge. Fortunately, the

baseball bat stayed up in the bedroom. There was though some finger jabbing in Wilf's face.

By the end of the week Darren was desperate. It seemed the entire village knew he had been questioned regarding Nick and Kai's murder, and no-one was able to offer accommodation. So without a job, and without a place to live, Darren was homeless. All he had was a sleeping bag roll, a mobile phone and several changes of clothes in his rucksack. And that was the very day when the Met Office forecast a week of subzero daytime temperatures with worst case lows of -9 centigrade at night.

---oOo---

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

The social media chatter began with a single post. Misspelt but effective.

"Daren Fletcher on probation. Interviewed too do with murder. Coincidence?"

Within 24 hours, the ether was buzzing with evidence of his temper and probable guilt, and speculation concerning his whereabouts. The court of public opinion sat, found him guilty and the sentencing debate began.

He couldn't enter any shops, nor use public transport. In fact he had to disappear. He opted for a temporary off-grid existence under canvas. It seemed less trouble that way, and although he thought he had performed pretty well, he wanted to avoid another police interrogation.

Chapter 33

Somewhere. Now.

It feels like I have woken up late, but of course I've got no way of knowing. I felt completely wiped out after yesterday - recalling it all, and then going through it with Eri. I feel better this morning though having told him.

I don't wait long before he arrives. He leans round the door and says, 'Hold on a few minutes if you can, I need to check on someone else.' I nod. He disappears.

Someone else? I thought I was the only person here! I think Eri said this whole place was a construction for my benefit, and only my thoughts and his words were real.

Then Eri comes back in.

'Eri, are there other people here?' I ask. I watch his mental struggle. He seems to be deciding how to respond.

'No, the room, the corridor, it's just to give you a familiar context.'

'Then how can you be going to check up on someone else?'

Eri wrinkles his forehead as if he doesn't understand the question.

I decide to try again, 'If this place is an illusion so that my mind can feel comfortable while you do your therapy stuff -' Eri smiles at this, but I ignore him and continue, '- your therapy stuff, then how can you be checking on other people while you're here?'

'Nick, do you think I only exist in this construction? I'm only showing up when I'm needed. The rest of the time, I'm in other places.'

'Other constructions?'

'Sometimes yes, but not always.'

Actually, I decide I can't be bothered. It's all too complicated, and probably not significant. Something else is bugging me though, 'Does everybody get their own construction?'

'No, not necessarily. But throughout history there have always been odd people who took a different route. Enoch, Swedenborg, Ching Hai, Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, any of these familiar?'

One name brings back Sunday School memories, but I can't recall any details. 'So what happens to everybody else then?' I ask.

'You remember the dark balm?'

'Yes, you mean when I nearly fell asleep?'

'That's right. The spirits of most people are suspended in the dark balm until the awakening. Not that different from sleeping really. No sense of the passing of time, usually no memory of dreaming.'

'So what's this awakening?'

'Well it's expressed in various ways. Zoroastrians refer to a three day winter of intense dark and cold. Mayans talk about the serpent eating his own tail. And you're probably familiar with the idea that a loud trumpet blast will wake up the dead.'

'Are you telling me that any of that the winter or the serpent or the trumpet business is literally what's going to happen?'

'No.'

'What then?'

'Let's just say that the cosmic triumph of the moment of awakening is constructed into a trumpet blast for some, maybe a Mexican wave for others. It's whatever makes sense to each individual. So that's a prediction of a physical metaphor.' Eri folds his hands and

looks pleased with himself.

I'm lost, so I say, 'What about the rest? Am I going to come back to life.'

'Yes, but -'

'Don't confuse me,' I interrupt him because he's just going to make things complicated.

'Along with everybody that ever died?'

'Yes, but -'

'That's fine then,' I say.

Then another thought occurs to me, 'Why am I special?'

'I can't tell you.'

'There seems to be quite a lot you can't tell me!'

'That's because knowing anything more complicated depends on already knowing things that are simpler. Knowing is additive. At each stage, it has to be revelation then response. See the path then walk the path. Exposure then experience.'

'Alright, I get it.'

But Eri is on a roll, 'The times table then differential calculus then Fourier transforms.' He is enjoying this. 'Shortcrust pastry then choux then puff then filo. How about planting then pruning then grafting.'

'I get it! Knowledge is incremental. So there's stuff I can't know yet.'

'And Nick ... for every grain of sand you do know, there's a worldfuls of geology that you don't.'

He stops. Finally!

We look at each other. I'm stunned. And a bit insecure. Eri is relaxed as usual.

Eri tips his head sideways, raises his eyebrows and telegraphs what-can-you-do. 'That is why it is so sad, pointless and destructive when people argue about stuff that matters not a jot and about which they know almost nothing.'

For the first time ever, Eri is getting a bit worked up.

'Oh right,' I say. I'm taken aback a bit.

'Especially about God's character! If you are going to have the temerity to talk about the nature of God, you'd better be absolutely certain in your own mind that you are right. And you're best not just believing what someone else has told you. There's only one reliable way to understand God ...' Eri pauses to make sure I'm still interested.

I'm not that bothered though, and Eri realises that. I've probably disappointed him, but I've got bigger fish to fry.

'Look,' he says visibly calming down, 'in all cultures and religions, God has always been tamed and domesticated for the in-crowd, and weaponised and repackaged for the out-crowd, so as to fall in line with the agenda of every man and his dog. Humanity should stick to what they have personally been shown!'

'So if we can only know what we've been shown, what have I been shown then?'

Eri's eyes light up and he does this massive smile at me. He takes a deep breath and then it just pours out of him like an accelerating torrent, 'The expression of the divine ... the word if you like ... incarnated specifically so that the world could be certain that he is full of grace and truth, filled with compassion for all he has made, forgiving innumerable times, a shepherd, a king, a brother, an unfailing friend -'. Eri breaks off, still looking at me he says, 'and he's determined Nick to make you just the same.'

It stops me in my tracks. It's too much. I never heard that from my mother. It always seemed to be about rules. I'm silent for a few moments. The thought of radical personal

transformation as a real possibility is staggering.

But then I begin to think about what I'm like. It probably wouldn't work with me! So then I ask, 'Does this divine know everything about me? Everything?'

'Everything that is required is known.'

I ponder this for a while. I'm conscious that there is so much about almost everything that I am realising I don't know. And there are endless questions rolling around my mind, but before I have a chance to think twice, the question which has been just waiting to escape my subconscious for weeks slices through my head and comes out of my mouth.

'Eri, do you know who killed me?'

Chapter 34

Dorset Police HQ. Earlier.

DCI Peter Barclay had convened the meeting, but wasn't planning to come. He was reading reports with a bunch of conflicting evidence, and just wanted to get the agreed view of his CSIs.

The small room was equipped with seating for eight, and a conference table with default VPN connection over Wi-Fi, plus a 51" flat-screen on the wall for screen-casting laptops, tablets or phones.

The three CSIs on the team, Greg, Chris and Samantha were present, plus the two FLOs Danielle and Stuart. DC Faheem Idris completed the line-up.

'So Peter wants an agreed timeline, and a single view on how things went down!' Sam smiled with one eyebrow raised, as she typed the meeting objective on her laptop. It appeared as a title on the wall screen. She liked the role of team leader, and for the most part, did it well. She was mostly all about the data. Collection, analysis, hypothesis. But this was her biggest case to date. She was smart enough to know she had to rely on other people's strengths, and was pleased to have Chris and Danielle on board for what she thought of as the soft stuff.

'Fine, how hard can it be?' Greg grinned, 'so where do we start?'

Sam sobered a little, 'let's start with conflicts in the interviews, and try to iron them out first.'

'I got almost nothing out of Fletcher,' Faheem face reflected frustrated defeat at the memory, 'so it's not worth starting with him.'

The others made various sympathetic faces. Faheem was known to be fiercely intelligent, if on occasions somewhat volatile.

'We should start with Jeffrey shouldn't we? He appears to be the only halfway reliable witness we've got,' Sam put in.

'Alright,' Faheem responded. 'Looking at the other interview notes,' Faheem nodded at the FLOs in recognition of their work, 'only Jeffrey gave us any absolute times. The others gave us estimated periods, so let me put up his timeline.'

The wall screen showed a list of events annotated with times. Jeffrey's were the default times in black, and Melissa and Freya's input on intervals were flagged in red.

'As you can see, Mrs Turnham and Freya don't really contradict Turnham's timeline, but that's largely because they were so vague. I'm not convinced we can really do better than this.'

Murmured assent rippled round the room, and the timeline agenda item was closed.

'So, what next?' Chris spoke only because he felt he ought to. He was a quiet thinker, best relating one to one.

'This.' Sam indicated the wall screen as the timeline disappeared, replaced by the words, "Description of the Perpetrator".

'Right,' Faheem said, 'I don't want to assume, but probably we should start with Jeffrey again, and then compare the others against that?'

'That's fine,' Danielle said. Stuart nodded.

'So, here's the essentials.' Nodding towards the wall screen, Faheem directed the meeting to the list of new bullet points. 'Let's go through them.'

Faheem ticked off the numbered points on his fingers as he read down the list, 'Stocking mask. Beanie hat. Impossible to say anything about the hair. Five foot eight. Forty years old or thereabouts. Middle age spread. Strong ... possibly body builder.'

Sam nodded, 'Thanks Faheem. Okay Stuart? You interviewed Mrs Turnham twice. What

you got?'

'What I've got is a bit unusual,' Stuart began. He shrugged his shoulders, 'Before I put the bullet points up, I have to say that the first time I spoke with her, she seemed to be completely confused about what she'd seen, and I got the impression she was afraid, maybe in case she told us something that wasn't true. So that first time, she was just completely vague. I literally got nothing. But when I went back, I think she must have been thinking about it in the interim, because she was much more lucid, and pretty coherent. So anyway -', Stuart nodded towards the screen.

'As you can see,' Stuart said, 'not bad.'

'How long after the attack did you take her first statement,' asked Faheem.

'Let's see,' Stuart referred to the timeline. 'Around two and a half hours.'

'That could explain it.'

'Maybe, anyway,' continued Stuart, 'here they are. Five foot seven. About thirty five. Strong arms. Long dark hair. Dirty work trousers. Stocking mask.'

They sat looking at the two lists for a few minutes. 'Any thoughts?' Sam said.

'Well what strikes me is she doesn't mention the beanie hat, and that's pretty hard to miss. And -' Chris was looking for inconsistencies.

'Yes, but ...' Greg paused, shaking his head knowingly, 'you know what witnesses are like. Give me a camera any day. Is there really no cam evidence?'

'No,' Sam replied.

Chris waited until they'd finished bemoaning the failure of the various cameras in the area, then said, 'To continue, they disagree on the hair. Jeffrey says it's impossible to say anything about that because of the stocking mask, but Melissa says he had long dark hair.'

'It's down to witnesses unreliable, isn't it? The camera never lies.'

'Greg!' Faheem frowned at him, 'Yes, witnesses are unreliable, but these days camera's lie all the time!'

'Let's get Freya's view up there,' Sam wanted to move the meeting forward.

'Here's my list,' Danielle waited a second then the third set of bullets appeared on the wall screen.

'Wow!' Greg sat back, raised both hands palms forward, fingers spread.

'Exactly,' Danielle murmured, while the others were equally surprised.

'How old is she?' Faheem cut in.

'Fifteen.'

'And she's got William's Syndrome, yes?'

'That's right.'

'Well that explains points two, three, four and five.'

'Why's that?' Greg cut in.

'She's an empath.'

'A what?'

'An empath is someone who focusses on other people's inner feelings, and is able to identify them by reading microexpressions in the people's faces,' Faheem explained.

'Okay, hence two to five ... tentative, scared, shaking, finally absolutely terrified at what he'd done.' Danielle wanted to get to leading the discussion at this point, 'You could have said, Faheem that people with Williams Syndrome tend to have extended vocabularies to express feelings.'

'Like eskimos and snow then,' Greg interjected. Sam and Danielle exchanged momentary eye-rolls. Sam reminded herself that Greg was excellent at photography.

'So, number one,' Danielle said, her smooth voice acquiring a slight edge, 'About Kai's height, which puts the perp at five feet four inches. And numbers six through ten, old, dark hair, big nose, blue eyes, very strong.'

'So what is consistent in that lot?' Sam said.

'Dark hair, strong' Danielle shot back, 'that's all!'

'And what is extra and not inconsistent?'

'Big nose, blue eyes.'

'And inconsistent?'

'Height and age.'

'To be fair,' Sam smiled around the room, 'forty might be old if you're only fifteen!' She was rewarded with rueful sighs and chuckles.

'How tall is Freya,' Faheem asked thoughtfully.

Danielle consulted her notes, 'Five foot three.'

'So that's an interesting error. Does she have learning difficulties?'

'Mildly. Anyway, that's Freya.'

Just as Danielle finished speaking, DCI Peter Barclay entered, walked to the front, turned his back on the group and contemplated the wall screen.

'Where are we, Sam?' he asked keeping his eyes on the bullet points.

'Nowhere yet, sir. Next thing is to compare this lot with Darren.'

He swivelled around to face her, clicked his fingers a few times, contemplating how to

proceed. 'Then find some coffee,' he demanded, 'we'll take a ten minute break.'

---oOo---

Because the DCI was at heart a people person, the coffee break ran to twelve minutes. He quickly established control.

'Let's get Darren up there then.'

Faheem pasted Darren's information onto the shared screen cast document.

He stood up, 'Okay, there it is.'

Peter ran his eye critically down the list.

Darren

Caucasian Male

Age: 47

Fitness: Good, muscular.

Height: 5'9"

Hair: Medium length mid brown, clean shaven

Eye colour: Grey

Distinguishing marks: "Mum" tattoo left side of neck. 5cm scar outside left thigh.

South London accent.

No vehicle.

He narrowed his eyes, looking for correlations, 'Not bad,' he said, 'Age is a bit adrift, but everything else fits pretty well. I'm discounting most of Freya's description.'

Peter evidently wanted to avoid an inconclusive meeting.

'So what do you think?' Sam wanted more detail of Peter's thought process, so she could cross-check it.

'I think it's Darren.'

'There's a couple of details which we can't get to fit though,' Faheem shot back.

'What's that?' Peter barked.

'Jeffrey says in his testimony that he was stabbed in the leg, he attempted to chase the perpetrator, then checked back with Nick before entering the kitchen,' Sam explained.

'So?'

'So we know the perpetrator hit an artery. It doesn't seem possible that we found none of Jeffrey's blood where Nick was found.'

'Okay. What else?'

'Why did the perpetrator use scissors, when he had a knife?'

'Yes, that is strange. Have we found the knife that Jeffrey was stabbed with?'

'No,' Sam shook her head, 'not yet.'

'Have we been able to assess the murder weapon blade size from the wound?'

'No, the hospital had to stitch it and pack it with antibiotics, so we never had that option.'

'Right, let's keep on the detail, and pull Fletcher back in for another chat,' Peter stood up to conclude in a stage voice, 'and that necessary end will come when it will come.' He even did the twirly hand flourish which brings down the curtain.

Chapter 35

Somewhere. Now.

Eri looks a bit disappointed. Maybe he was just about to do an altar call! But he shifts in the chair, and looks at me evenly. I'm still. It's like I'm frozen, balanced between what I was and what I will be, but inside my head, my mind is hopping from one foot to the other.

'Well,' I say, 'who was it?'

He smiles and shakes his head regretfully, 'You're not ready for this.'

I absolutely feel ready so I'm a bit rude to him, and demand he gives me a name.

But Eri says, 'Before we go there, you need to get some clarity on our interpretive frame of reference here. Otherwise we'll simply be misunderstanding each other.'

I'm loath to delay, but it's clear Eri has some stuff he wants me to hear. So although I'm a bit nettled, I say somewhat ungraciously, 'Okay, go on then.' I stare at him, so he knows I am not going to wait for long.

Eri stands up to address the invisible lecture hall again, then pauses. He closes his eyes for a second, then opens them and takes a long look at me. He smiles, moves across and sits alongside me.

'The basis of everything...' he pauses for emphasis, 'and I mean everything is love.'

I must look sceptical, because he underlines it.

'You won't understand anything if you don't understand love. The problem is that almost all the love you have experienced has been weak, unfocussed and twisted. You guys grow up immersed in a totally inadequate understanding of love. It's a continuum of course, with weak love at one end, and strong love at the other.'

I'm not really following, and that must be evident from my frown, because Eri realises he

needs to spell it out a bit.

'The human understanding of love is mostly incredibly weak. It's washed out. Inadequate! You've got to remember ... weak love is transactional.' He emphasises the last four words by gently thumping the desk with his fist.

'That makes it conditional,' he continues. 'With weak love, for any that's given, there's a requirement that the lover will get something back. Some physical need whether it's sexual or aesthetic will have to be satisfied. Or some mental attraction fulfilled, maybe the alignment of shared or complimentary mental skills. Perhaps some emotional thirst is going to need to be quenched, whether it's support for dependence or security or whatever. It's a deal,' Eri places a hand at each end of the desk.

He lifts one hand and brings it down. 'It's a transaction,' he says, and he brings the other hand down.

'There's an assumed expectation of quid pro quo. And people eventually stop loving if they are not getting enough quo for their quid.'

'Yeah, I've got that,' I say, 'although you make it sound pretty clinical.'

'Yes,' Eri acknowledged, 'but I'm just giving you my perspective.'

'And strong love?' I prompt.

'Well the first thing to say is that strong love is absolutely always in every sense unconditional. So it's not a transaction,' Eri asserts.

Something inside me confirms what Eri has said. Although I've never thought about love's unconditionality, Eri's assertion beds down comfortably among what I assume must be my best thoughts.

'That means ...' Eri holds up a forefinger to start ticking off the takeaway points, '...that strong love is able to love the unlovely. It is not disheartened by flaws or imperfections. It

is committed to forgive, determined to perfect the one who is loved, and it has this ability to navigate the conflicts on the way.'

I get that. It sounds idealistic but it's attractive and logical.

Eri continues, 'Okay, let's move on. Just like Pasteur had to put bacteria and viruses at the centre of his interpretational framework before he could understand disease, you Nick have to put strong love at the centre of yours to understand life which is fulfilled, healthy and deeply satisfying.'

I'm following what he's saying, but I have no idea what the implications are! So I say, 'I assume there's some reason why you've gone through all this stuff?'

Eri looks pleased at the question, and he comes straight back.

'Absolutely! Strong love,' he cups his hands in front of him as if he's holding it, 'is in the centre of the frame.' And he opens his arms wide with his palms out and fingers spread and slowly turns a circle, as if we are encapsulated in a glass sphere.

'So within this frame, what does forgiveness look like?' he asks.

I shake my head and shrug, because I'm sure he's already got the ideal answer. There's a moment's silence, and it looks like he's going to push me.

'Does it depend on the offender saying sorry?'

I shake my head again. No shrug, because he knows I know the answer.

'Does it depend on how bad the offence is?'

'No,' I say in a small voice.

'Does it depend on the offender offering to make amends?'

I sigh, smile at him and shake my head. It's obvious now where this is leading.

'Does it depend on being able to work out some set of excuses or reasons why the offender

behaved badly?'

'No.' I'm thinking, let's just get through this.

'Does it run out of steam if the offender reoffends?'

I shake my head. I hope he's finished, because truth to tell, I'm a bit fed up with this level of exposure, 'Okay, okay. What does it do then?'

'Right,' Eri rubs his hands. I can see he's coming up for the big finish. 'Forgiveness, in this framework of strong love, is of course unconditional, so not stymied by anything. It's never ends, so you may have to forgive the same person every day of your life. It's willing to be misunderstood as weakness, or sycophancy.' Eri's voice is rising as he gets more excited.

'And,' he pauses for effect, 'forgiveness inevitably leads to healing.'

That gets me. Because I know that I'm still hurting. And I'm reacting badly. And healing sounds good.

Eri hasn't quite finished, 'But the one goal of forgiveness is reconciliation, because within this frame, love is everything.'

It's a bit like being back at school. I have a feeling I'm going to be tested on this later.

Chapter 36

Dorset Police HQ. Earlier.

Faheem drummed his fingertips on the desktop in frustration. Fletcher had been released on police bail, and it should have been easy to bring him back in. But Faheem had spent half a day finding Fletcher. He'd been kicked out of his bedsit and had gone to ground. He had tracked him down buying a bag of porridge and a carton of semiskimmed milk in the Stop'NShop. Faheem hadn't been able to determine where he was living now, despite considerable pressure. And when he had finally got Fletcher in for questioning, it had lasted all of twenty minutes. Fletcher had been very angry in a quiet controlled way and simply refused to stay longer unless he was charged. It seemed Faheem had met his intellectual match.

Listening again to the recording of the second interview with Fletcher, Faheem concluded there was nothing there. No hint, no crack, no hesitation. Just a convenient fantasy story. He claimed to have been at home unwitnessed, while two murders were committed.

Where to go from here? Faheem massaged his temples with his fingertips.

He pulled the videos from the few relevant cams on screen. Three from doorbells in the Turnham's road, and three from Dorchester General Hospital. In the past, he would have had to manually run them through at double speed initially, then if he spotted anything interesting, freeze and single step them. Now with intelligent video frame matching, Artificial Intelligence did the tedious work for him, skipping the sections where there was no human movement visible. All too quickly, he had dismissed the doorbell cams. Just a postman wheeling a Royal Mail buggy, a white van woman delivering what looked like a rolled curtain track, and two young teenagers playing with a derestricted electric scooter in the road. Evidently the perpetrator had used the bridle way to arrive and leave.

He was about to give up, but thought while he was in the video directory, he would check the hospital ones. He checked the overhead cam at the entrance to the hospital. Without face recognition built in, he was forced to use the double speed manual method, as people were arriving and leaving constantly. He saw both Melissa and Jeffrey brought in, but couldn't determine which of the arrivals was Nick. He then watched the video from the Reception Desk cam. No-one of interest there. Then he pulled up the video from IR2.

It was monochrome and distorted but it covered the entire room. Jeffrey looked around, limped about a bit, across to the window, back to the table and stood next to Melissa. She was crying. Jeffrey crossed the room, turned and went back to his wife. She was evidently distraught. Jeffrey comforted her, kissed her several times, holding her face tenderly in his hands. He whispered, 'Come on, Melissa', encouragingly in her ear. Then they engaged in a discussion about the perpetrator. It came across clearly from the mike. Faheem checked what he heard against the transcript. It all matched. He stopped the video at the point where Stuart entered the room. Nothing there.

Faheem was frustrated. He checked the transcript of their conversation against the descriptions of the perpetrator from their interviews, just to see whether anything additional would indict Darren. Again, he turned up nothing.

He leaned back in the chair and let his mind wander through the entire scenario, hoping his subconscious would flag up some incident that he'd missed. He let the timelines flow through, narrated in his head by the scene of crime accounts. Nothing.

Tim came in carrying coffee. Faheem surfaced and gave a tired smile, 'Aha, that's what I need!'

'Stay there, I'll get you one.'

'No, I need to stretch my legs.'

Faheem followed Tim out of the room and across to the small kitchen.

'Have you got anything more to add to Darren's profile,' Faheem asked.

'Nothing that stands up to scrutiny.'

'This guy is so slippery. Why can't we find anything on him?'

Tim blew his lips out, then shook his head, frowning, 'Do you want me to give you the gut stuff that I've got?'

'Yes, I'll take anything!'

'Darren is a bright guy, but this burglary went very wrong.' Tim handed Faheem the coffee. 'He lost his rag, and we know from the cases that we haven't yet been able to pin on him that he can be extremely violent. So he cannot have been operating completely logically during the violent phase, nor afterwards for at least 15 minutes.'

'Okay,' Faheem said slowly, 'so I need to check that specific period in the timeline for every detail.'

'Yes, I'd say so.'

They walked back into the office and sat down at Faheem's desk.

'Do you want to hear about the victims?' Tim asked.

'I guess so.'

'Right, Freya.' Tim paused to collect his thoughts, 'It's my view that she could possibly have given us a more coherent testimony, but I could be wrong. She absolutely is not stupid, but she does have some learning difficulties.'

'Okay. How about Jeffrey?'

'Ah now, Jeffrey is rumoured to be not a nice man, although he's charming to his customers. He maybe has a drink problem.'

'Alright, Well what about Melissa?'

'Nothing bad to say about her really. From what I can tell, what you see is what you get.'

Faheem looked glum and his fingers started drumming the desk again.

'Mind you,' Tim added, 'they say she's scared of Jeffrey.'

'What do you mean?'

'She's scared of Jeffrey. He says "jump" and she says "how high"! That's what they say anyway.'

Tim put his empty cup down on the desk.

'I'll wash it in a minute,' offered Faheem.

'Thanks.' Tim smiled and sat down at his own desk across the office.

Something didn't fit. Faheem restarted the IR2 video. What was it? Watched the conversation between Jeffrey and Melissa again. He mused the timelines again. So, she's scared of him?

He almost heard it click. Though it was more of a thump in his head! He opened his eyes wide and sat up. At no time had Jeffrey been seen to check up on Melissa when he was injured and she was hysterical. There had been no contact between them. Even if he was not nice, and she was afraid of him, that was strange after the horror that they had seen.

Then the second shoe dropped. The exchange in IR2. Really? Just what was their relationship? Maybe not tender. But passion always has two faces. Anger? Threats? Desire? But really, tenderness?

Faheem cued up the IR2 video for a third time. As Jeffrey paced the room, Faheem watched Melissa. She looked afraid. As Jeffrey turned away from her, her hands clenched, her eyes narrowed, her jaw set, her lips thinned. As Jeffrey turned back, Melissa wiped the expression off her face.

'Maybe she hates him?' Faheem thought aloud.

'What?' Tim looked up from his desk.

'Maybe she hates him!' Faheem repeated. He turned his attention back to the screen as Tim wandered back over.

Jeffrey was holding Melissa's face in both hands.

'It could be tender. It could be control,' Tim murmured. 'Then he kisses her.'

Faheem ran the video on half speed, 'Look! She's just about to say something.'

'And he kisses her to shut her up.' Tim sat alongside Faheem, 'Then what does he say?'

Faheem consulted the transcript, 'Come on Melissa'.

They wound the video back. Sure enough that is what it sounded like.

Tim shook his head, 'Stochastics?'

'Maybe,' replied Faheem. He clipped the conversation audio out of the video. He accessed the central server and ran the audio processor to suppress the background noise. He saved the enhanced audio file back to his laptop. Clicked "Play". Heard the first seven seconds. Pressed "Stop".

Faheem sat back and frowned.

'What did he say,' Tim leaned in to hear it again.

'He said,' Faheem paused until it had played again.

'Camera, Melissa'

---oOo---

'Who wants to kick off?' the lead investigator, Peter, was stood at the front. He looked around at the assembled CSIs. They had been joined by Tim the profiler. 'Who's got

anything?'

'I'll start if you like,' Sam said.

'Go.' Peter nodded and folded his arms.

'Well, as we know, the scissors have got almost everyone's fingerprints on as far as we can tell. Some of them are smeared. Some are faded. But it looks like the scissors didn't get washed very often.' Sam paused. Greg lifted his eyebrows and shook his head disapprovingly.

Peter cleared his throat. Everyone knew this indicated that she'd better stick to the essentials, because Peter had an extremely full diary.

'Sadly no fingerprints from Darren,' Sam hurried on, 'but he would have been gloved up anyway.'

Peter opened his eyes wide and nodded.

'But the thing is,' she continued, 'that none of us can come up with a reason why the perp would use scissors, when we know for a fact that he had a knife ... the one that he used on Jeffery.'

'And of course, we also have the problem that none of Jeffrey's blood was found on Nick,' Peter added.

Tim and Faheem exchanged sidelong glances. Pressing his lips together and nodding, Tim telegraphed, "Gotcha".

'Thanks, Sam. Who's next?' Peter looked around at the group.

'We've got this.' Faheem pulled the IR2 video up on the wall screen. The sound had all been enhanced, and was crystal clear. 'When I press Play,' Faheem wagged his forefinger, 'Listen. Carefully.'

He pressed Play.

They watched the preliminaries, then the first two words came across as clear as a bell.

"Camera, Melissa."

Faheem pressed Stop.

There was silence. Outside a car pulled away, and in the distance, as usual, a dog barked.

You could hear a pin drop as the pieces came together in their minds.

'I think,' said Peter, 'maybe this wasn't an outside job.'

Chapter 37

Somewhere. Now.

'I can't wait any longer Eri. Who was it?'

He narrows his eyes as if he's trying to work out how I will react.

'I hope you're a bit further along now, Nick,' he says.

'Please,' I have to know now. And it's obvious he knows already. Although how, I don't know. But I'm not backing down.

'Nick,' Eri swallows, then in a flat quiet voice he says, 'It was your step-father.'

Momentarily I'm numb. Then I'm awash in great waves of black mud. They are folding in over my head and there's nothing underneath me. And acid is churning inside me until it fills the back of my throat.

And yet it's not a surprise. Somehow it fits, although how anyone can have that capacity for evil surprises me. But before I have a chance to be repelled by it, somehow it spirals around me, twisting until it has me entwined in rage. I'm clenching my fists so hard, the muscles in my fingers are shrieking. It's a tourniquet cutting off my breathing, and shutting down my perception. The space is closing in around me.

'Jeffrey!' I snarl an obscenity.

'Look at me.' Eri's interjection is accompanied by significant pain in both my arms.

I shriek like a girl, 'Let go!'

'Look at me,' he repeats, tightening his grip.

It's a command I can't ignore. Mostly because Eri has pinioned me. My arms are straight down by my sides and there is a huge hand gripping each of my upper arms. He has lifted me vertically with no apparent effort so that my feet are off the floor, and we are nose to

nose.

'Now you have a choice,' he says, stern eyes confronting my anger.

'You're hurting me,' It comes out as a whimper.

'Only to stop you damaging yourself.'

He lowers me to the floor but keeps his grip on my arms. It still hurts but I'm glad because I'm suddenly nauseous. The room is dark and tilting violently, and that weird feeling of being insignificant in a room that is too large has come back.

'You have a choice now,' Eri says urgently right in my face.

And now everything is fully upside down. And then I sense my malevolent doppelganger all too close. And above me.

'Nick!' Eri is talking to me again, but I can't get hold of the words he is saying. It's like he's speaking in a foreign tongue. In this disoriented room, where down is up, an ancient wisdom comes to me as a cardinal compass point, "May forgiveness cleave my chains, just as I unshackle those I have ensnared."

A new certainty sweeps over me. I can't. I cannot forgive him. It's not in me. Even if I wanted to. And suddenly Eri is brightening. My eyes hurt so much now I have to close them. The light is getting through my eyelids, and suddenly it goes dark. I open my eyes. Eri is gone. The room is clouded with grey.

And I am left with pain in both upper arms, plus the memory of Jeffrey's solar plexus punch and my own desire for retribution. And rancid saliva in my throat. And malevolence.

---oOo---

Shakily I cross the room and sit on the bed. I do all the usual things, count to ten, take controlled deep breaths slowly. I hold myself still for, I don't know, maybe ten minutes.

And it's effective. The venomous hatred is slowly subsiding. I can breathe again. I'm not aware of my clone as a separate creature now, but I sense that he remains.

Eri walks back in. He looks around. The room is definitely nearly fully inverted. It makes me feel ill to move. Malevolence is out of sight, but not out of mind. The weird dark bright thing has faded.

'Are you alright?'

I feel like a small child, a disappointment. I shake my head. Then I stop as the saliva goes thick in my mouth. Shaking my head is not a good idea.

Eri waits, and the only sound in the room is me breathing too quickly. 'Do you want to talk?' he says.

'Well, I don't want to be preached at!' It's like the words were spoken by somebody else with my voice. I don't know why I feel so snappy with him.

Eri ignores my pushback, 'How are your senses?'

Right now I'm not interested in sympathy, so I say, 'Fine.'

I can see Eri knows I'm lying, so I grudgingly add 'The wrong way up and small.'

'Nick, in your microbiology degree, did you ever look at methods of research?' Eri asks.

I only just about register what he says. But I'm used to Eri's non-sequiturs now so I just cast my mind back - I vaguely recall a couple of lectures about it. I shake my head, 'Nothing is coming to mind.'

'Alright. I'll keep this brief.' Eri has dropped into teacher mode - he's standing as if addressing a roomful of students in a lecture hall - where emotional sulks have no place. I feel a bit ashamed.

'When researching-' Eri breaks off, looks at me and says, 'Pick a famous researcher!'

I'm not listening though. I'm struck by Eri's ability to navigate my emotions.

'Pick a famous researcher,' he repeats a little slower.

'Louis Pasteur' I murmur. What does it matter who I choose?

Eri's eyebrows lift, he smiles and says, 'Ah yes! I might have guessed.'

'Clever guy!' he continues, 'you would pick him of course.'

Eri detaches from me and restarts his lecture to the imagined masses. 'Every researcher obtaining novel information must attempt to synthesize some coherent modus operandi. And -' at this point, Eri's gaze swings my way, '- and be explicitly aware of his interpretive framework.'

'But here's the dilemma,' Eri remembers he's talking to me, 'the gotcha is that if he just continues to accept or even consider inexplicable things in the same way that everybody else does, he won't move forward in his understanding.'

I have no idea why Eri is bringing all this up. I'm sitting still but inside, my stomach is still slowly churning reactive rage into considered retribution.

Eri continues, apparently oblivious, 'And in Pasteur's day, disease was inexplicable. It seemed random. People had embraced divine displeasure, and black magic, and all sorts of nonsense. So nobody could make any progress in the field. Then Pasteur made the link between disease and tiny creatures that no-one could see. That then was his new interpretive framework.'

Eri slows down so I don't miss the point. 'His. New. Interpretive. Framework.'

Apparently Eri thinks I understand because he continues, 'All his experiments, all his analysis of results, all his reading of previous cases were to be viewed in that frame,' Eri makes sure I'm still listening before carrying on, 'which now included tiny creatures ... bacteria and viruses.'

'What's this got to do with anything?' I sound irritated.

'Well, your sense that the scale of things in this room is expanded somehow. Your mind is dominated by things that are powerless and unimportant. But you're cowed by them. And there are things that truly are a really big deal. But your mind is minimising them, squeezing them away in some corner because it thinks you can safely ignore them.'

'I'm not ignoring anything.'

'Nick, it's completely subconscious. The human brain receives so much information that it is constantly having to ignore 99% of it, otherwise you could never get through the day.'

I've heard that before, so I have to accept that I can be fooled by my own brain.

'Much of our conversation is to familiarise you with the true reference frame so that you can interpret what is happening correctly. And every so often, your mind stops resisting the process and momentarily you have a correct view on this stuff.'

I understand that. But I don't want to hear another morality lecture, so I say, 'Alright. I get that.'

'And your sense that everything here right now is not balanced or level? -' Eri pauses for confirmation. I nod.

'So it all seems upside down. But how about if everything here is actually,' Eri pauses again for emphasis, 'is actually the right way up?'

'Is it?' I ask.

'Yes.'

'So I only feel comfortable when things are the unbalanced, tilted sideways?'

'Look, parts of the framework you have grown up with Nick, are out of kilter. Principally at the moment, your concept of justice. So whenever you hear the word justice, you

understand almost the opposite of what we would call justice. It's like your interpretation is upside down. The tilt perception is part of the construction to help you keep track of how you are changing your views.'

Chapter 38

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Dawn came at 7.40am. But within 15 minutes the sky blackened and the rain began. By 8.15am it was heavy, and forming puddles again in the lane. Melissa and Jeffrey sat at the breakfast table, Freya had not yet surfaced. The triple rap on the front door startled them.

It was Jeffrey who went. His leg was still bandaged but he seemed to be walking a little easier. There was one officer stood on his doorstep, and two stood behind him. There were three squad cars parked in the lane.

'Good morning Mr Turnham. I'm DCI Barclay.' Peter flapped open his ID wallet and held it towards Jeffrey. 'We have a warrant to search the house, and while that is happening, I would appreciate it if you and your wife would accompany me. We would like to ask you a few more questions.'

Jeffrey looked puzzled, 'I thought you'd finished in the house?'

Peter ignored the comment, 'We have a Family Liaison Officer here to sit with Freya while you are with us probably for a few hours.' Danielle stepped forward and smiled at Melissa, who had joined Jeffrey in the hallway.

Jeffrey was about to protest at the inconvenience, but Danielle stepped past him into the house and took Melissa's arm, 'Could you call Freya for me please, Mrs Turnham?'

Peter took a step back and indicated the waiting squad car. 'If you don't mind?' he said briskly.

---oOo---

The search team was eight officers, including the three CSIs. Initially they stayed together to search the garden. The squad car containing Melissa and Jeffrey was driven away. Chris

took a look at the sky. He turned to the Sam and the others, 'Come on then. Let's just do it first. The rain is set in for the day. It'll only get wetter.'

The team formed up in a crawl line at the west end of the garden, and began the fingertip search. The concentration required as they slowly progressed face down and the cold winter rain on the grass only enhanced the team spirit, evidenced by the usual banter.

'I love this bit of the job!'

'Oh yeah. Of all the many enjoyable aspects of police work, this is the best!'

'So glad I'm not in the office writing court reports!'

'Anybody got anything yet?'

'Just squashed a slug.'

It truly was the only way to get through it. After an hour and a half, they had crawled the entire garden and found nothing of interest. They made their way into the garage and stripped off the waterproofs and changed boots. They reconvened in the hallway, then split into four teams of two to search the downstairs, the upstairs, the loft and the garage.

After only 30 minutes someone called a halt. They gathered in the lounge. Sam was stood under one of the uplighters on the wall. 'Neither of them worked,' she said, 'because this one had the bulb removed, and the other bulb was unscrewed.' She pointed to some fingerprints on the chrome shell of one of the uplighters. 'I found something.' She held out one hand, palm up. On it sat a tiny silver earring back.

Chris pulled the folded plastic wallet of insurance photos from his pocket and looked at the earrings photo. He grinned. He held his mobile above Sam's outstretched palm.

Within two minutes DCI Peter Barclay's mobile pinged the photograph on the screen accompanied by the word 'Bingo!' It was another gotcha moment. 'All we've got to do is find the rest!'

Dorset Police HQ.

Faheem pressed the record button, while Tim and Chris observed behind the one-way.

'Interview started 08:55am. Present Mrs Melissa Turnham, DC Faheem Idris, DCI Peter Barclay.'

'Mrs Turnham, this won't take very long. But first ...'

Peter then proceeded to caution Melissa, and to offer a solicitor and/or the required legal advice. Then he continued, 'just a couple of things to clear up. Firstly this ...' Peter slid an A4 print of the earring back laid on Sam's palm. 'This was found in one of your lounge uplighters. Any idea how it got there?'

Melissa was already pale. For at least ten seconds, she was frozen, as still as a Sphinx. Then she shook her head, eyes downcast, 'I don't know.'

'And it appears to belong to these earrings,' Peter slid another A4 photo across the table.

Melissa looked at the photo that she herself had retrieved from the bureau only a couple of days earlier, 'I don't think so,' she said in a thin, slightly shaky voice, 'I have quite a few spare backs.'

'Spare backs would normally be small plastic disks.'

'I have some silver spares too.'

Peter slid two more A4 photos across the desk, 'Mobile phone cameras are extraordinarily good aren't they?'

In both, the earring back was almost full A4 size. All the tiny scratches across the silver could be seen. The precise spirals on the clip ends were crystal clear. The two were self evidently the same earring back.

Peter retrieved the four A4 photos and swivelled his laptop so that it faced Melissa. 'I could ask you again, how did it get there, but perhaps it would speed us along if I show you this.' He played the seven second IR2 video clip.

The words, "Camera. Melissa." hung in the air.

Melissa said nothing. She sat eyes down, twisting her hands together. Peter leaned back coolly in his chair. 'That wasn't a discussion. That wasn't a recollection. It was an unplanned performance,' he stated. There was a finality in his tone that unnerved Melissa.

---oOo---

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

The house and garage search did not take as long as you would expect. The two CSIs who had drawn the short straw and been assigned the loft, sorrowfully surveyed the accumulated excess of unneeded purchases which typify the consumer culture.

Cardboard boxes misshapen by the damp, rolled carpets, bin bags of clothes, unwanted toys, old computers covered the entire loft space.

The younger CSI opened the first box. It was half filled with innumerable Lego bricks. He turned to his older colleague with an aggrieved eye roll.

'Watch and learn lad!'

He walked to the huge cold water tank, lifted the cover and peered in. 'Aha,' he murmured, dipped his arm in, withdrew it holding a sandwich bag tied tightly at the top.

'How did you know?' asked the younger.

'Seen it before, son!'

---oOo---

Dorset Police HQ.

Peter's mobile pinged for a second time. He looked at the screen, looked up and smiled around the room.

He turned to Melissa with a faux smile, 'You'll be pleased to hear your jewellery has just been found in the loft, Mrs Turnham.'

The smile faded. His mouth set in a grim line and his eyes were cold, 'Now. Stop. Wasting. Our. Time.'

She raised her pale face for the first time since the start of the meeting. 'It was Jeffrey,' she blurted. She was breathing fast, 'He said to hide the jewellery.'

'I don't care about the jewellery. Why did he kill Kai?'

'He didn't kill Kai!'

'Who did, Mrs Turnham?'

'I don't know.'

'Who did, Mrs Turnham?'

'I've told you,' her voice rose to a wail, 'I don't know.'

'Who killed Nick, Mrs Turnham?'

Melissa sat rigid, silent, teeth clenched. The a wave of rage swept across her face. 'Jeffrey! Jeffrey killed my Nick.' She burst into tears, the gasps and desperate sobs shaking her body.

'Thank you,' Peter said, 'let's take ten minutes. Do you need a rest break, Mrs Turnham?'

She shook her head.

He turned to the recorder, 'Interview terminated, 10.05am'. He stood, picked up the recorder and left followed by the others, leaving Melissa alone.

Jeffrey had been sat alone for just over an hour. Waiting. Wondering. Worrying.

The observers looked through the one-way glass.

Jeffrey stood and paced the floor for a couple of minutes. Then sat down again. He was blinking fast, breathing fast, but thinking slow. The panic had got a hold on him, and he had no idea how to control it.

'He's bricking it.' Tim said.

'Yes! Excellent. And we are going to leave him for another hour and stay on the case with his missus.' Peter replied.

'How do we play this now?' Chris wondered aloud.

'It's fine,' Peter breathed and slowly nodded his head.

'She's on the run,' Chris murmured, 'methinks the lady did protest too much!'

Peter's mouth set in a straight line. He shot Chris a reproving glance, put his forefinger to his lips and shook his head. But there was a twinkle in his eye. 'We'll get it.'

'And Kai?'

'We'll get it.'

---oOo---

They returned to the room each carrying a coffee.

'Are you sure you wouldn't like a coffee or tea, Mrs Turnham?' Peter's tone might have carried minute shades of sommelier obsequiousness.

She shook her head. Peter poured her a fresh glass of water and pushed it across the table. He nodded to Faheem.

'Mrs Turnham ... Melissa ... can I call you Melissa?' Faheem's voice was all sympathy and tenderness.

Melissa looked up, haggard and turned her head slowly towards Faheem. 'Whatever,' she said.

'Melissa, you're in a difficult position here. We have your husband telling our staff all about what happened and so we absolutely will know if you try to lead us astray. Your best strategy now would be to come completely clean and help us determine how this has all gone so badly wrong. Would you do that?'

Melissa nodded dumbly, her eyes glazed. She swallowed a couple of times and looked across at Faheem. There was a quiet few seconds as he held her gaze. His head was tipped to one side and he kept a regretful smile on his face.

'Just tell us all about it Melissa. How did this all start?' Faheem's voice was low, even and friendly.

Melissa sat for a moment, looking around at Faheem, then Peter, and finally the recorder. Her shoulders dropped, her head went down, and she murmured, 'Yes.'

She continued haltingly, 'They had an argument ... Jeffrey hit Nick ... he ran out into the garden and ... and he tripped. Jeffrey jumped on my ... on my son ... ' she put her face in her hands and wept for two or three minutes. The others waited in quietness for her to regain her equilibrium.

She stopped crying. She lifted her head. Her face was a mask of hatred. 'He killed Nick,' she took a shaky breath. 'He beat him to death,' another breath, 'in the garden.'

'And the two of you cooked up a story to protect him,' murmured Faheem.

'It was Jeffrey's idea.'

'I don't doubt. But let me get this straight. Your husband has beaten your son, who you love, to death ...' Faheem paused and let the statement hang in the air, 'and you agree to protect him with a made up story!'

Melissa nodded, unable to entrust herself to speech.

'Why on earth would you do that?'

She sat motionless, frowning, too many thoughts stumbling through her mind.

'Why would I do that?' she repeated, buying herself some time.

Faheem waited. He knew the power of silence.

Melissa appeared to conflicted.

The silence hung heavy in the air, and the moment stretched to five, ten, fifteen seconds.

Melissa was breathing heavily and rocking slightly backwards and forwards in the chair.

'Melissa. Why?'

Melissa put both hands flat down on the table. She appeared to have made up her mind.

'The thing is,' she said then closed her eyes, 'Nick was responsible for Kai's death, and Jeffrey found out.'

'How did he find out?' Faheem wanted to keep the conversation flowing.

'He walked in as Nick hit Kai,' she replied. 'And Jeffrey made up the story, because he knew he would be the number one suspect, because Nick was holding scissors. The scissors ... the scissors went into his chest. He just -'

'Slow down, Melissa,' Faheem cut in, 'let's stick with Jeffrey. How did Jeffrey kill Nick?'

'I told you, he jumped on him, then he hit him over and over and over with his fists. He just kept hitting him,' she moaned, 'Over and over.'

'So now tell us a bit about Kai. How did Nick kill Kai?'

'I told you, with scissors.'

'Yes, but describe what he did.'

'I don't know what he did. I wasn't in the room. I came in with Freya and Nick had stabbed Kai ... by mistake.'

'So you didn't actually see the punch with the scissors?'

'No, but there was only Nick and Kai in the room so it must have been him. He did it because -'

'I'm not interested in the "why",' Faheem interrupted, 'I want to know about the "how".'

'I told you already.'

'How did you and Freya end up with blood on you both?'

'Nick panicked. When we came in, he grabbed us both and said, "What am I gonna do, Mum? He's dying!"'

'Alright, Melissa, so now tell me why ... Why he did it.'

'They never got on. Kai used to wind Nick up, and he was very nasty. And stupid. They had an argument about something. I don't know what. They were shouting. Then Nick said that he hit him, but he had scissors in his hand.'

'So is it your view that Nick did not want to kill Kai?'

'Of course not! He just hit him really, and he happened to have scissors in his hands.'

Melissa was rapidly reaching exhaustion. The interrogation had lasted almost two hours. Peter leaned forward and asked, 'Would you like to take another refreshment break, Mrs Turnham?'

She nodded wearily.

Chapter 39

Dorset Police HQ.

'Who?' demanded Jeffrey, 'Tell me who!'

Jeffrey leaned across the table and smacked it with his palm. Bang!

'I'm not at liberty to tell you who, Mr Turnham, but this witness has stated that you were seen attacking Nicholas Grange.' Peter's stony gaze wavered not a millimetre.

Jeffrey bridled, 'Whoever it is, they're lying!'

'While we are on the topic of telling lies,' Peter continued in a low, dangerous voice, 'perhaps you can explain this to me?'

He pushed the photograph of the wet plastic bag of missing jewellery across the table.

'This was found in your loft, Mr Turnham. Do you know where? In your cold water tank. Personally I find it rather strange that this should be hidden in the very place where drug dealers hide their bags of cocaine.'

Jeffrey remained silent, eyes down on the damning photograph.

Peter continued speaking, 'And I find it strange that a burglar should take the trouble to rush up into your loft, and hide the valuables in your cold tank, carefully wrapped in a plastic bag. Not only that, Mr Turnham, but for some reason your burglar left one of the earring backs in one of your lounge uplighters.' Then louder and slower, 'Which it transpires carried your fingerprints in profusion.'

Jeffrey's face was pasty, eyes blinking, breaths jerky.

'There was a burglar,' he mumbled defiantly.

'Ah yes, the enigmatic burglar!' Peter's verbal "Tai Otoshi" judo move followed swiftly.

'And you were able to give us an excellent description. Thank you! In fact both you and

your wife were unusually and reliably consistent. Far more often, we are faced with differing accounts from witnesses. But then I suppose we were fortunate in that you were able to conspire ...' Peter trailed off into silence.

Peter then directed a beatific smile at Jeffrey, which was then swept away by a sarcastic expression of faux concern. He continued, 'Conspire! Such an unpleasant word! Let us say you were able to collaborate with your wife regarding this unusual burglar's appearance. Am I being fair, Mr Turnham?'

Tim, looking through the one-way glass said testily, 'For pity's sake, get on with it man!

Sam grinned, 'He just loves it when he's winning, I'm afraid.'

'It's like he's auditioning for the Royal Shakespeare.'

'Don't be a spoilsport, let him have his fun!'

Jeffrey was now gazing at the wall screen, where the IR2 video was loading. Peter pressed Play. The clip showed Jeffrey kissing Melissa, along with the words, "Camera, Melissa!"

'I beat him up, but I didn't ... I didn't kill him,' Jeffrey realised it sounded ridiculous as soon as it left his mouth.

Peter shook his head and rolled his eyes. 'He died, Mr Turnham.'

'Listen! I was out of my mind with anger. He'd just bloody stabbed my son with scissors. I saw it with my own eyes. I never meant to kill him, just hit him once or twice. It was just bad luck.'

'Thank you for clarifying that point. I'd like to remind you that you are under caution, and that you are entitled to a solicitor before I ask my final question today', Peter said.

At this point Jeffrey realised that he had already said far too much, 'I'm not saying another word.' Jeffrey swallowed several times and twisted his face as if in pain.

'That's fine Mr Turnham, you don't have to say anything at all if you wish, but perhaps I'll ask my final question anyway. You may change your mind.'

Jeffrey narrowed his eyes, watching like a trapped rat.

Tim and Sam held their breath.

'Can you confirm that you witnessed Nick Grange stabbing your son Kai with a pair of scissors?'

Tim whispered, 'He shoots'

Jeffrey drew a breath, 'Absolutely yes! The ...'

Sam and Tim never heard the rest. They turned to each other, and high-fiving said together, 'He scores!'

Peter sat back in his chair, blew out his cheeks for a second, and said in a tired voice, 'Mr Jeffrey Turnham, I am arresting you for the murder of Nicholas Grange'

---oOo---

'I just need at least half an hour,' Peter said, 'we'll cross check with Mrs Turnham after lunch.'

'Do you want us observing?' Sam asked, 'Happy to do it again.'

'No, you take a break. Then we have the usual fifty pages of paperwork on this. I'll use Faheem.'

'Murder or manslaughter?'

'We haven't got "intent" yet, just do the preliminary stuff. Let's see what Mrs has to say.'

Tim, can you review the video, update the profile?'

'Yeah,' Tim said, 'but ... lunch first!'

---oOo---

An hour and a half later, they were back in the room. Melissa had been reminded of the caution, and she had again declined a solicitor.

'He hit me you know,' she said bitterly, 'for anything. Always hitting me.'

'Go on.' Peter watched her carefully.

She suddenly stood up and took off one shoe and walked round the table to Peter. He shook his head, puzzled.

'Look,' she said turning her back on him, and lifted her foot into his lap so that he could see the underside. Peter looked down. He took a deep breath. The sole had five raw weals across the instep. 'This is what pimps do to prostitutes!' she cried in fury. '... to keep them under control.'

Peter nodded to Faheem.

'Melissa,' Faheem sighed, 'I'm sorry. Do please sit back down.'

'I'm his wife!' she said, her voice breaking. She sat back down, put her face in her hands and wept, 'Oh, Nick. My Nick.' After a minute, she looked up and took a deep shaky breath.

'Give me a minute,' Peter said, stood, and left the room. Faheem leaned forward to the recorder and noted his leaving. A few moments later, Peter returned with Danielle.

She walked across to where Melissa was sitting. She crouched on her haunches so that she was eyes level with her. 'Melissa, if you like I can stay with you while we go through this. And any time you want to stop, just let me know.'

Melissa sniffed and nodded, mute.

Danielle smiled reassuringly, 'We are here to help you. I'm still assigned to be your contact if you need anything, and if you want help with issues of domestic violence, or absolutely anything else which troubles you, I can refer you to one of our victim support schemes.'

Alright?'

Danielle stood and went to sit on the seat in the corner.

Melissa seemed to have collected herself. She looked directly at Peter, 'I didn't want Nick's name blackened. Rumours in the village that he was a murderer. It was a mistake.' She turned to Faheem, 'I'm his mother.'

Faheem held her gaze for a moment, waiting, giving her space to continue.

'We had a huge row immediately after ... after he'd beaten Nick. Neither of us were calm. It was terrifying, Jeffrey was so agitated. He said we should blame it on a burglary. I said "No". She stopped, mentally exhausted.

'What did he say?' Faheem said quietly.

'He didn't say anything. He just hit me. He tried to hit me in the chest, but I ducked and he hit my throat', Melissa removed her neckscarf. The bruise on her neck was now a dull dark orange. No-one said anything for a moment.

'Oh Melissa.' Danielle murmured in the corner.

'I'm okay,' she said, 'And that ... and that is why I agreed to Jeffrey's stupid story of a burglary.'

Chapter 40

Somewhere. Now.

It's obvious that Eri is referring to my instinct that retribution is an essential element of justice. Then an old story from the Sunday School that Mum made me attend just pops into my mind.

'Wait a minute -'

A little smile develops on Eri's face, and he looks at me expectantly.

'- do you believe this Jesus character told the truth?'

Eri simply nods and smiles.

I continue, 'There's that story about the faithless servant who was violent with the other servants when the master was away. And then the master came back, and ...' I pause because this is my piece de resistance, 'chopped him in pieces and then beat him up. And Jesus says immediately "That's what my Father will do to you unless ...' I trail off because I'm not sure of the end bit. 'Unless you forgive your brother.'" I think.'

Eri is silent for a moment. I sit waiting and the room is still. He is unsmiling now.

'Well, you've mixed up two stories there, Nick, but I understand what you're getting at. Let's take the second one. The servant owed the master a ton of money. The master cancelled the debt. The servant ran into someone who owed him a bit of money, and had him thrown in jail. The master was angry at this reaction, and he put the servant in jail until he was able to pay the debt.'

'Yeah, that's the one,' I say.

'And Jesus says right at the end, "And this is how my heavenly Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."'

'Exactly!' I say firmly. A bombproof case for the rightness of retribution.

Eri eyes me with a serious expression, 'But look at the context, Nick. This is Jesus trying to illustrate the importance of forgiveness. After all, it was triggered by Peter asking how many times he had to forgive someone ... would seven times do?'

'Right.' I think I'm hoping that Eri doesn't win this one, but there's part of me that wants to be contradicted.

'And Jesus says "490 times". Basically, the more we are forgiven, the more we must forgive.' Eri's face is paler than usual, and he looks somehow more vulnerable.

'Yes, but the parable clearly says if we are vengeful, then -' I pause for a moment, '- this God will be vengeful with us. And although it's a parable, that last bit is an explanation of the parable, so you can't wriggle out of that!'

Eri is looking really upset now - not like his usual persona at all. I realise that for him, this is not an academic argument. This isn't what I wanted.

'Nick,' he says quietly, 'there are two paths. On the first path, you accept forgiveness and then in gratitude, return it to others. On the second path, you ignore God's forgiveness, and you hold on to vengeance, and then ...' Eri stops and breathes in and out slowly. He walks across and wraps his arms around me, 'then you have to live the parable.'

Eri takes a jerking breath in, then he sniffs. He's squeezing me too tight. I know he's crying. I can feel his sobs shaking his body. And mine. He holds me like he'll never let me go.

'The thing is Nick,' he whispers, 'you're on the second path. You wished Kai dead, and you won't forgive Jeffrey.'

And in that moment, I know it's real. And true. But I still don't know what it means.

Chapter 41

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

Melissa woke with a start. Thunderous banging on the back door. Seemed like someone trying to break it down. It never stopped. Just continual crashing. Then smashing glass. Melissa choked back a scream, as Freya came tumbling into her bedroom.

'What's happening, Mum?'

'I don't know, darling.'

'Do something!' she shrieked.

Melissa grabbed her mobile from the bedside table. Pounding footsteps came up the stairs. The door burst open. Darren rushed in. Wild eyed, dirty, he crashed the baseball bat down onto the bedspread. Melissa screamed then, loud and hysterical.

'Shut up,' Darren growled, grabbing the mobile. He looked at Melissa with hatred, then flung it on the floor and stamped on it. 'Do you know how cold it is outside?'

Melissa, white faced and mute. Almost frozen with fear. The tiniest shake of the head.

'Minus six! I'm sleeping in this house from now on!'

He turned and left. Slammed the door behind him. Terrifying ferocity. He reappeared just twenty seconds later with Freya's mobile in his hand, flung it to the floor, and destroyed that too with his boot. Then disappeared.

Melissa tried desperately to think of a way to alert someone to the danger. She knew that Darren would hear if they left the room, and neither mobile was working. They sat close to each other on the bed.

'You don't need to worry, Freya, you're completely safe here with me.'

Freya stared for a moment into her mother's face. She knew that Melissa felt totally

vulnerable, but for some reason was not afraid for herself. 'You're afraid for me, Mum, aren't you?'

Melissa wrapped her arm around Freya's shoulders. She couldn't reply. She had no idea what Darren was capable of. She spent the next hour and a half trying to distract her daughter by chatting about everything and anything. Freya had only been calm for about fifteen minutes, when Darren came back into the bedroom, ranting about how he had spent night after night in the freezing cold, how he had lost everything, including his chance to stay out of prison, all because Melissa had lied about a burglar being responsible. 'But he doesn't exist, does he?' shouted Darren directly into Melissa's face.

She shrank back in horror.

He looked gaunt. His breath stank and she could tell he was right on the edge of losing control. His fist was white knuckled around the bat. His teeth clenched, as he was shook with anger or cold. It was impossible to tell which. Barely holding it together.

Melissa stayed rigid, afraid to move or make a sound. Freya had gone under the bed cover, and was trembling and clutching her mother's leg.

Much to their relief, he left the room, slamming the door again in a rage.

They passed the next three hours whispering to each other. There was no possibility of sleeping. At 6.15am Darren came back in, tore back the cover from the bed, and gripped Melissa's arm twisting it painfully.

He jabbed Freya in the back with his finger, 'You! Stay here. Don't contact anyone! Hear me?'

He stared at her with eyes bright with rage, face twisting in agitation. She nodded her head just once. 'I mean it. Don't talk to anyone, and if you're lucky, I'll bring your Mum back in a few days!'

And with that, he dragged Melissa out of bed, and said, 'Get your clothes, we're leaving.'

---oOo---

The brambles tore at Melissa's face and hair as they scrambled through the wet semi-frozen undergrowth.

'Where are we going?' she quavered.

Darren gave a short bitter laugh, 'My house!'

The ground underfoot was uneven and frozen solid. Darren had evidently lost his way in the darkness, because they were pushing their way through dense waist high bracken and briars tangled in amongst the trees. Demonstrably not a backwoodsman nor an avid hiker, Darren seemed to be trying to forge a path through with his baseball bat.

After forty minutes or so of ankle-turning bramble-snagging snail's pace, they came out to a narrow beaten track, continuing through the undergrowth. Finally, after another ten minutes they emerged onto the heath. The sun was just up over the horizon, casting long weak shadows as they stumbled out onto the glistening purple heather. The vegetation was soaked with dew, and the ground here was soft and waterlogged. They walked on for what seemed to Melissa to be over an hour, before they came to a copse on the leeward side of a steep hill. Darren pushed his way back into the brambles and ducking under low branches dragged Melissa forcefully behind him. Their clothes were drenched, and both were shivering.

'Welcome home!' Darren said, his face twisting in sarcasm. His rage had been cooled by the effort of walking, and now he was left with a hopeless bitterness.

Melissa looked in horror at the small two person tent, and the remains of a campfire, set in a tiny clearing, surrounded by dripping leaves and thorns, with damp earth underfoot.

The remains of what must have been Darren's evening meal was a dirty spoon and an

empty baked bean can.

---oOo---

It rained from 2.30 until 4.00 in the afternoon, and Melissa had reluctantly agreed to get into the tent with Darren, rather than get soaked again. They sat in silence the entire time. Darren displayed his intense dislike every now and then by wrinkling his face with evident distaste, glaring and shaking his head slowly. As soon as the rain lessened, Melissa scrambled out just to get away from him.

Towards the end of the afternoon, as the sun began to dip below the treetop line on the hill opposite, Melissa began to wonder whether they were going to eat at all. She was sitting on a split open bin bag. All day, Darren had only given her water from a large plastic container in an evidently unwashed mug. He emerged from the tent with two small tins of baked beans. He threw one down onto the ground by her side, and then retreated back into the tent.

It took some time to open the ring pull can because her fingers were numb with cold. Once she had got it open, she realised Darren was using the only spoon he had. Within less than a minute, Darren threw the spoon out to her. She contemplated sharing the unwashed spoon, and decided to try to tip the beans into her mouth directly. Less than half came out of the can, and after shaking it in frustration for a while, hunger drove her to pick the spoon off the ground, and use it to finish off the beans.

---oOo---

She didn't sleep much that night, despite being exhausted. The temperature plunged again to minus five, and the tent was so small that when the wind rattled outside, the frozen canvas slapped against her face. Fearful for herself and for Freya, she kept feeling the panic rising in her chest. She tried to recall the poem "Desiderata", but her mind went blank after the first two lines - "Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace

there may be in silence". Then silence punctuated only by the sound of Darren's ragged breathing, and the occasional animal shuffling outside reminded her that no help was coming any time soon.

Then she tried Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want", but got hung up on her very obvious want of food and safety and warmth. But in the end, the familiarity of the words, and the reassuring regularity of the poetic phrases, plus the fact that she had heard that the author had written the poem in remarkably similar circumstances to hers did comfort her somewhat. She fell into a fitful sleep shortly after dispatching a short prayer for Freya.

---oOo---

The next night they still had not returned. Freya facing the prospect of a full night alone had believed she wouldn't sleep, but she did. As soon as the sun began to set, she had turned on every light in the house. Worn out with worrying throughout the whole day, she had made a hot water bottle and taken it to bed. Hiding, under the covers, she was asleep within a few minutes.

When she woke it was 2.15 on the bedroom clock. All the fear and worry came crashing down onto her as soon as she recalled her situation. Too frightened to leave the bedroom, she hunkered down and tried to sleep. She saw 2.30, and 2.45, and 3.00, and still her mind rehearsed all the things that could be happening to her mother. At 3.15 the moon rose and cast a gentle light onto the picture on the wall. It was a farmer being followed by two sheepdogs. She glimpsed the faint light through half closed eyes. She sat up in bed hugging her knees to keep warm. The border collies looked friendly - they almost appeared to be smiling. As she watched, their eyes seemed alive. She knew it was only a picture. But as she lay back down, she recalled her Granny telling her that their names were Goodness and Mercy.

---oOo---

At 5.00 Melissa woke stiff with cold, and aching in every joint. She could tell that Darren was suffering similarly. He was groaning every time he rolled over. The ground was hard and cold. They were laid on a cheap foam bedroll just a couple of inches thick. They could feel every stone, every ridge in the ground. Melissa was certain she must be covered in bruises.

By 5.15 she could stand it no longer, and struggled up and out of the tent. Darren had quietened back down. How long is he going to keep me here? she asked herself. She hoped this was just an emotional spur of the moment thing rather than a planned abduction. She doubted she could survive many more nights in the cold. How long has he been out here, she wondered. At least several days already, judging by the number of baked bean tins discarded in the undergrowth.

Melissa watched as the sun appeared over the horizon. It occurred to her then that she must be facing south. At that moment, she realised that irrespective of the direction of Kingsheath, the road running from Corfe Castle to Steeple must lie no more than two kilometres north. She quietly moved a few steps away from the tent and looked closely at the wall of undergrowth surrounding the clearing. Which way, she thought, aware of the need for complete silence. She had managed to move into the thicket past the first two bushes when she stepped on some very soft ground and one foot sank in. She lost her balance, stretched out her hand and grasped a handful of foliage. The briar ripped her palm badly as she fell, and she could not prevent her cry of pain.

Within seconds, Darren was out of the tent and crashing through to reach her. He found her lying among the thorns bleeding badly. He dragged her roughly back to the small clearing, and pushed her back into the tent.

'You'll go back when I say so!' Darren's eyes were bright, his face close. He struck the mud

close to her feet with the bat to emphasise each word.

Melissa kept her eyes to the ground, not wishing to antagonise him.

'Understand?' he demanded. He pushed her by the shoulder. She nodded mutely, her eyes wide.

---oOo---

Celia stopped at the gate, eyes searching for signs of life. She glimpsed someone at an upstairs window. She waved. Whoever it was quickly turned away and disappeared. Melissa had stopped replying to her emails weeks ago, and had avoided meeting. Whenever they passed in the street, Melissa had hurried away, eyes downcast.

Surely now Melissa would want to see her. Her husband was detained and had been refused bail. Her son and stepson were both dead. She only had Freya now.

Celia was conflicted. Arguing with herself. Should she offer her help. Avoid any awkwardness. At least be some company. Let sleeping dogs lie... She was halfway up the front path before she realised her feet had made the decision already.

Freya came to the door. Her face was pale, and she was shaking. Celia could see she had been crying.

'Is Mum around, Freya?'

Eyes downcast, Freya wouldn't look Celia in the face. She shook her head.

'Is she out shopping in the village?'

Another silent shake.

Celia moved forward a little and smiled at Freya, 'Can I come in for a moment,' she said.

Freya looked confused. She frowned and blinked a few times as if she was trying to come to a decision. She was about to shake her head again, when Celia stepped forward and took

her hand.

'Please, Freya.'

The girl stepped aside and Celia took that as permission.

At first Freya hardly wanted to say a word, but she could tell that Celia was genuinely concerned for her. Conflicted as she was, Freya made only guarded responses to Celia's gentle questioning. They spoke together for almost an hour, but it became clear to Celia that Freya wasn't going to open up about where Melissa was. Finally Celia said, 'Please get Mum to call me when she gets home?'

Freya nodded and seemed relieved to be left alone.

---oOo---

The sun set as a pale white glow in an ice blue sky. The temperature dropped to well below zero, and Melissa, hand swollen and throbbing, crawled into the tent. Darren sat outside for another half an hour, then turned in.

Chapter 42

Dorset Police HQ.

The team were back in the small conference room having spent two full days pulling together the case file for the case review. That had gone well, and as far as the Super was concerned, the case was pretty much wrapped up, and all that remained was the small matter of a ton of paperwork for the Crown Prosecution Service. They had a confession on record from Jeffrey. And even better, he had stated that he witnessed the murder of Kai by Nick.

'Thoughts?' Peter said, looking around the table.

'It's a slam dunk, sir,' Greg said. He was tipping his chair up on the back legs, and looking relaxed.

Sam nodded. 'Well, it's come together faster than I expected to be honest.' She turned to Faheem, 'What do you think?'

'Well, Turnham's confession is conclusive. But -' he hesitated and looked at Tim, 'I dunno. I'm not so sure about Nick.'

Peter looked at Faheem, with an irritated expression, 'A bit late to start going wobbly on Nick, isn't it!' He turned to Tim with an exaggerated sigh, 'Let's have another look at the latest on Nicks' profile then.'

Tim passed a couple of A4 sheets stapled together across the table to Peter, then handed a few copies around to the others.

Peter looked at the first page which was a number of boxes interconnected with colour lines of various thickness. 'Tim, you'll have to talk us through this, you know.'

Tim nodded to the wall screen which showed the diagram on page one, and pointed to the

centre box. 'This is Nick's genogram. I've omitted the biological relationships, and I'm just showing the emotional connections. The green lines are positive, the red ones negative. The thicker the line, the stronger the attachment. So for example, Nick to Freya is a strong positive connection, Nick to Jeffrey is strong negative, etc. Everyone got that? Tim looked around the group.

'How can Nick's emotional connection to Jeffrey be as strong as his connection to Freya? She's his sister!' Peter asked.

'It's because although Nick's connection with Freya is familial, it is positive, whereas with Jeffrey it's negative. And negative connections become stronger than positive ones because they are more critical to survival,' Tim replied. 'But we are more concerned here with Nick's connection to Kai.'

Tim clicked the thick red line connecting the two, and a commentary box appeared on screen. 'You can find this in the second para on page two,' he said. 'Understand this is a profile constructed from the interviews, plus passing comments, rumour, etc, so not much of this is absolutely certain. As you can see,' he continued, 'although the relationship had become mildly adversarial, there was no record of violence.'

'But ...' Sam paused, a doubtful frown on her face, 'no-one is saying Nick intended to stab Kai. Melissa said he just punched him.'

Tim folded his arms and shook his head, 'But Nick was a very controlled guy. From what I can see, he was managing a whole bunch of very negative emotions quite successfully. And a punch ...' Tim hesitated for a moment.

Faheem cut in, '- one sufficient to drive two blades of a pair of scissors through the ribcage would have been a helluva punch.'

'Do we need to make this complicated?' Greg asked. 'It's pretty clear Nick is on for Kai's murder.'

'You were just as certain it was Fletcher less than two weeks ago,' Sam gently reminded him.

A look of annoyance crossed Greg's face, 'Nick's mother and stepfather both say it was him. We only need one guy to hang this on, and he's not exactly going to sue us if we're wrong is he!?'

Faheem looked uncomfortable and Sam shuffled in her seat. 'Let's keep it objective guys.' Peter said.

Greg dialled back a bit to regain some credibility, 'Unless there's a very good reason, why doubt Jeffrey when he says he saw Nick stab Kai? And we've got his prints on the scissors, for goodness sake!'

'Unless Jeffrey was protecting one of the others?' Faheem replied.

'Not likely,' said Greg, 'why would he protect the person who had just stabbed his son?'

'Right,' Peter's voice was firm, 'we'll progress the final reports. That will take us at least another three or four weeks to get the ducks in a row, and if during that time anything looks significantly out of line, we'll reconsider. In the meantime, we need to issue a press release. Sam,' he looked across at her, 'can you sit down with Media Liaison and draft it.

There's already rumours anyway around Kingsheath that the burglar doesn't exist.

Basically, we have to let the public know that they are quite safe, and that we have arrested someone for murder, and we are not looking for anyone else. Kill the burglar story.'

---oOo---

Jeffrey's case had been referred to the Crown Prosecution Service for pre-charge advice.

The CPS had confirmed no further evidence was required. The threshold for charging was easily passed. Court file preparation began in earnest. The team were faced with a tight deadline for the first hearing, and the required disclosure of evidence was finally made to

Jeffrey's defence lawyer. There was a small but not insignificant amount of paperwork to be completed in order to close the case regarding the murder of Kai, but since there was no immediate pressure, this had been slid across to the back burner, which fortunately appeared to have almost infinite capacity.

---oOo---

'Where on earth is the Ratcliffe file,' Ingrid thought as she surveyed the piles of folders scattered across her desk. She had been looking at it only 15 minutes earlier. She sighed, knowing that she was slowly sinking under the volume of work. 'Khan,' she called across the lab to the young pathology student, 'we need to spend some time doing a bit of a tidy-up.'

The student put down the samples that he had been cataloguing, and walked across to Ingrid's desk. 'Alright, where shall we start?'

Ingrid stacked the papers and folders into a single pile, 'Maybe start with this lot!' she said, and passed them to Khan.

Khan took them back to the lab table, and spent some time sorting them into the correct folders. Several A4 digital photographs had dropped out loose. He held up one that caught his eye, 'What's the story here, Ingrid?' He took it across and laid it back down in front of her.

'Wait a minute,' she looked a little closer at the photo, 'Ah yes, this is the Turnham case. Why do you ask?'

'I was just wondering what this is.' Khan traced his finger along a short very faint curved line across the photograph.

'I concluded it's just an artefact on the photo.'

'Hmmm,' Khan tilted his head and squinted, 'I'm not sure. Do we have any other photos

of this side of the skull?'

Ingrid pulled three photos out of one of the folders, checked them and passed one to Khan. 'It's a different angle, but still the same side with the bruising.'

'Well it's not obvious there's anything on this one. I'll take a look though. Is that alright?'

Khan asked recalling that the original job had been tidying up the files.

'Sure, have a quick look. But maybe file the loose papers first?' she said. She had a soft spot for the young man. He was of average ability but had an excellent work ethic, and was unusually keen.

Fifteen minutes later he returned with three more colour enhanced copies of the second photo. 'It's there too,' he said, pointing to the curved greener line on red tinted view. 'And you can see the curve is in the plane of the skull, so it is actually part of the injury.'

Ingrid looked closely, annoyed with herself that she had missed it. The enhancement made it easier for her to see, but it was still only just detectable. 'Wait,' she said, pleased that she may be able to redeem herself, 'There's a kind of L shape here as well.'

---oOo---

It was Faheem that first looked at the addendum to the coroner's report on Kai Turnham. It highlighted a previously missed soft tissue compression across the side of the skull in the shape of a curved line, and another in an L shape. The cause of death was unchanged.

As luck would have it, Faheem had the required combination of mathematical awareness, plus culinary experience, plus intense curiosity to deduce the explanation.

Since the curve on the skull tightened at one end, Faheem assumed it would extrapolate to a closed ellipse, presumably heavy, probably metal, of around ten by seven inches. He then considered what kind of object might meet that description which is found in a kitchen, and came up with the obvious answer. Just 9 minutes of internet searching produced a

picture of the Signature Cast Iron 27cm Oval Shallow Casserole having the words "Le Creuset" cast into the base. It came with side handles, which one assumes enables easy arms-length swinging.

---oOo---

'We've got a problem, sir,' Sam said, in answer to Peter's raised eyebrow. She briefly outlined the implications of the coroner's addendum.

Peter sighed and shook his head. 'Sadly we are bound in shallows and in miseries,' he quoted quietly. He widened his eyes and fixed Sam with a glare, 'I could believe that Nicholas Grange stabbed Kai with scissors by mistake ... just about! But I don't believe he inadvertently did it after knocking him senseless with a cast iron casserole. Let's find it.'

---oOo---

Kingsheath, Purbeck.

'So, we know it's nowhere in the kitchen,' Sam spoke quietly looking around at the open cupboards.

The kitchen door was closed. Freya was in the lounge, and had told her that Melissa was apparently out in town somewhere. Freya had been informed that a final search for items of interest would have to take place prior to submission to the CPS of Jeffrey's casefile.

Faheem was looking out of the window at the Turnham's garden, 'I reckon someone buried it, or dumped it off site.' He too spoke in a low voice.

'Yes, I'm not really expecting to find it in the house now.'

'Let's check outside then ... a casserole should give a helluva beep!'

They rapidly gridded the front garden, and completed sweeping with the metal detectors in around 30 minutes. They had found quite a few bottle caps, several fencing nails and the remains of a rusty trowel.

'This time, how about we start furthest from the house?' Faheem said, as they walked around to the back garden.

'May as well,' Sam agreed.

The furthest 15 metres of the garden was behind a low box hedge. Part of it was kept as a long grass area for wildlife, and the remainder was dug over with the remains of last season's vegetable crop. None of it was easily visible from the house.

The casserole was located within three minutes, close to the back fence, buried about 18 inches down. On closer inspection, it was evident that it had not been washed since last use, still showing traces of meat juice. Faheem smiled as Sam dropped it into an evidence bag.

Chapter 43

Somewhere. Now.

'I didn't want him to be dead,' I protest.

Eri's expression is as serious as I have ever seen. 'What did Kai think about some of the things you said to him?'

'I don't know, do I? But I never wanted him to be dead!' I'm conscious that I'm avoiding Eri's steady gaze.

Eri quietly repeats some words I had all but forgotten - "Explain to me, little boy, why your mother didn't drown you at birth."

Shame washes over me. I hang my head. I have forgotten many of the things I used to say to Kai when he got on my nerves, but now I can see that they consistently expressed a wish that Kai didn't exist. And I recall struggling with the scissors. I taste the bile rise up in the back of my throat. Then I get a grip on myself and count out the tension. I look up.

Eri is motionless, watching me, like a statue that can never be moved. 'What kind of person are you, Nick?' he asks.

I shake my head, puzzled. I genuinely don't know what he's asking.

'Do you always tell the truth, Nick?'

Surely there isn't a person on the planet that can claim that? I don't think I ever wanted Kai actually dead!

Before I have a chance to react, Eri says, 'I guess you've read where Jesus said if you call your brother a fool, you are in danger of the fire of Gehenna'.

I'd heard the words before. But I realise I'd never even come close to believing they might be true. Not anyway in the sense that it affects what might happen to me. But I'm finding

myself thinking all kinds of crazy things now. Is it true? The fire of Gehenna? I mean, come on, I tell myself, the days are long gone when infallible tradition defined truth for us. Educated people deduce truth by thinking rationally about their actual experience. Don't they? But thinking about Kai is making me intensely uncomfortable. I realise Eri is quietly waiting.

'But,' I say, trying to change track, 'even Jesus deliberately misled people didn't he?'

Eri raises his eyebrows and turns his head quizzically, evidently requiring examples. So I search my Sunday School memories for stories that I was supposed to just accept without question, and apply some of my post-enlightenment rationale.

Finally I dig one up, 'Didn't he say, "Demolish this temple and raise it in three days"?''

'And?'

'And halfway through the sentence, Jesus started referring to a different definition of the word "temple",' I say triumphantly.

Eri smiles and concedes the point.

'So he's misleading them.' I continue, 'Obviously they-'

'Actually,' Eri interrupts, 'he is switching the context to lead them from one topic to another in a way that gets them thinking. Jesus' problem with those religious leaders is that they were locked into tradition, and he specifically wanted them to observe the evidence that was going to show up shortly, and then struggle with a rationalisation for that seemingly crazy event.'

Suddenly I see the Jesus' words from a different angle. 'Do you mean that -'

Eri interrupts again. I immediately realise that he knows what I was going to say. And sure enough ...

'I mean that Jesus was pushing for the enlightenment 1800 years early. While the religious

leaders in the 18th century hated any distrust of authoritative tradition and revelation, what Jesus was doing a couple of millennia earlier was to push the leaders of his day towards that approach of empirical experience and rational logic! He was always asking questions. "What do you think? Which one was the neighbour? How many times?" Constantly driving people to look and see and think and decide.'

Eri pauses, then looks me in the eye, 'So, Nick ... how do we come by truth ... simply believing what someone else says, or by personally examining the evidence?'

Eri knows what happened to Kai. I am sure he does. I don't know how he can, but all the signs point towards Eri having a firm grip on reality.

Chapter 44

Purbeck. Earlier.

It was the third night. At just past two o'clock in the morning, they were both awakened by an animal scuffling just outside the tent. The shivers turned to great shudders as the frozen air bit at them from every angle. Melissa was concerned to see Darren's hands were blue with cold, and the fingers were completely white. She rolled closer and held his hands in hers. His eyes half opened and he tried to thank her, but his teeth were chattering too much.

By five fifteen they were both half awake and more uncomfortable than they would have believed possible. The frost was thick on the ground, and they took some time to get in a seated position. Everything was slow. Everything hurt. Their voices were slurred as they spoke.

Melissa pulled her fingers through her hair. It was matted and tangled. With no change of clothes and no place to wash, she felt filthy. She was astonished to realise how homeless people survived in the winter.

Both Darren and Melissa were very aware that there were just five cans of baked beans, and about two litres of water left. In the darkness, Melissa felt Darren push a can of beans into her hand. Then she listened as Darren struggled with another of the ring-pull cans. He was getting increasingly frustrated but managed to open it after ten minutes or so. By the time he had finished eating the beans, dawn was breaking and he passed Melissa the teaspoon. She took it without hesitation. But try as she might, she couldn't open her can. The injured hand was badly swollen, and there was no possibility of gripping the can adequately. She struggled for around five minutes and knew that it was hopeless.

In anger she flung the can away and growled in frustration. Not having eaten a proper

meal for almost four days, she was feeling faint. She lay down in the tent and sobbed.

Darren retrieved the can from the undergrowth, and after another frustrating battle with numb fingers, managed to get it half open. He passed it across to Melissa. She managed a weak smile, and he nodded in response.

They watched the sun rise weak and watery in the ice blue winter sky.

As it became lighter, Melissa could see that Darren was suffering. Both forefingers on each hand were white. His lips were blue. His eyes unfocussed. And Melissa knew they couldn't carry on.

Melissa took Darren's hands in hers, 'Darren, we have to go back. We can't survive out here.'

He shook his head stubbornly.

'You know it's true.'

He looked down at her hands - one pale and wet and cold, the other swollen and red and hot. He shook his head sadly. 'We can't,' he mumbled, his voice hopeless.

It took over an hour for Melissa to collect up the handful of Darren's belongings.

She sat opposite him, listless and spent, on the split bin bag, 'Now what?' she said quietly.

Chapter 45

Dorset Police HQ.

Sam clicked on the attachment link in the email from the Fingerprint Bureau. The report was brief. The casserole bore fingerprints only on the handle. They all belonged to one person, and that was Mrs M Turnham. There was a further email from the police laboratory indicating that the substances on the surface of the casserole included blood, which matched to Kai Turnham - plus traces of cooked minced beef with chilli.

---oOo---

Peter looked weary. He had just finished the case review meeting with the Superintendent. It had been difficult. It wasn't good news that Kai's murder which had been solved and put to bed, had woken up screaming and was demanding immediate attention. Peter was instructed to sort it.

He called the CSI team together, 'We have to get her in again. And the husband.' He sighed loudly and spread both hands palms upward, 'What else can we do?'

'We'll get to it, sir', Sam replied.

'Well, the sooner the better,' Peter squeezed a clenched fist in frustration.

Faheem shook his head sadly, 'Well, we did know they have both lied to us repeatedly, even under pressure, so -'

'So make sure it doesn't happen again!' Peter snapped.

The CSIs exchanged glances. Peter glared around the room waiting

'Yes, sir!' they said, almost in chorus.

---oOo---

Sam and Chris interviewed Jeffrey. He appeared to be genuinely astonished when

presented with information about the casserole. He had no explanation for it being buried in the garden. The only information that he added was that on the day preceding Kai's murder, he had indeed eaten chilli con carne for lunch, and it was not unusual for the dishwasher to be loaded the following morning.

'Is he lying?' Chris asked, once they had wrapped up.

Sam looked dejected. 'If he is, he's very good.'

'Well he's had quite a lot of practice!'

'I honestly can't tell.' Sam admitted, 'If that was the first time I had met him, I'd say he's straight up.'

Chapter 46

Purbeck.

'... nowhere to go,' Darren said, his voice dull.

'I know.'

'You go ... you ... back home.'

'Will you come with me?' Melissa asked.

'No. Just go!' Darren began to get angry.

'Come with me Darren, I can't find my way back,' she pleaded.

'Only to ... to the edge.'

Melissa shook her head in bewilderment, 'To the edge?'

'Edge of ... the village.' Darren's head sagged down onto his chest.

She knew they were both exhausted. 'Come on,' she said, hauling herself to her feet, 'we won't last another night out here.'

With Darren's muttered instructions and Melissa's hungry confusion, they took several hours of wandering before they arrived back at the edge of the village. Reluctant to risk being seen down the lane, Melissa opted for the back fence. Slowly and painfully, she climbed over and into her garden.

Darren stood on the other side. 'I'm going back.' He swayed slightly and grabbed the fence post for balance.

'Don't be ridiculous. You'll come in. Freya will cook us something.'

Darren looked at the warm yellow light streaming out of the kitchen window. He looked back for a moment at the monochrome scene of dripping trees and cold wet leaves

underfoot. The prospect of food and warmth made the decision. Darren dragged himself over the fence and into the back garden and together they made their way to the back door.

---oOo---

Kingsheath. Purbeck.

Freya flung her arms around Melissa, then quickly drew back.

'Ugh, Mum you smell really bad!'

Melissa smiled, 'Thanks, darling!'

Freya had tears in her eyes as she smiled at Melissa. Then noticing Darren, thin, wild, filthy, like a feral dog, she recoiled in disgust. 'No! Not him! He's not coming in.'

'Don't worry, he's going straight in the bath!' Without ceremony, she pulled Darren inside and led him upstairs into the bathroom. She switched on the wall heater, and turned on the hot tap to fill the bath.

'Don't come down for half an hour, I'll put some of Jeffrey's clothes outside the door.' she said, passing him a bathrobe. Walking back downstairs she called over her shoulder, 'We'll have a fry up, so don't be any longer.'

Darren shook his head, and smiled for the first time in several days.

Freya was waiting for Melissa at the bottom of the stairs, 'What are you doing? He shouldn't be in here!'

Melissa reached out and held Freya's hands in hers, 'Darling, let's do breakfast, and then we'll have a chat in the lounge.'

Freya shook her head, 'He's crazy ... and he's filthy!'

'Well after the bath, he'll be clean!'

'He'll still be crazy!'

'Okay, Freya, here's the deal. I'll have a conversation with him in the lounge. I want you to listen in, because you're very good at working out what people are like and what they are feeling. Then ...' Melissa spoke very quietly and seriously for a little longer to Freya.

Alarm flared in Freya's eyes. She was about to protest, but caught sight of her mother's expression. Peaceful. Tranquil. Determined.

Freya looked uncertainly at her mother, 'I'll see. I'm not sure. I don't like it.'

'Oh Freya,' Melissa's eyes brightened with unshed tears, 'no-one likes any of this.'

Freya wrapped her arms around her mother, but neither of them trusted themselves to speak for a moment. They broke apart and Melissa said, 'Now, who's making breakfast?'

'Not you Mum, you're washing, not cooking!' Freya said, pushing her towards the downstairs wet room. 'I know what you need ... bacon, eggs, toast, beans -'

Melissa turned and shook her head, 'Uh uh! No beans!'

---oOo---

The all day breakfast table was clear and Melissa and Darren were in the lounge. Melissa had turned the thermostat up to 23 and was luxuriating in the warmth and enjoying the comfort of the settee. Darren looked uncertain, in unfamiliar clothes, sat on the edge of the armchair, avoiding eye contact.

Freya had loaded the dishwasher and was finishing up wiping the worktop. She could hear her mother talking to that man in the lounge.

'What now then?' he asked warily.

'What do you mean?' Melissa replied.

'You gonna report me?' He was blunt now, wanting to get to the answer.

'No, I don't think so.'

'Only if you did, I'd go back to Portland Prison.'

'Yes, you would.'

For a moment they fell silent. Each regarded the other. Both were trying to cope with the present amidst the trauma of the recent past, their unspoken words heavy in the air.

Freya sidled up to the lounge door. She could see Darren's reflection in the window glass. He seemed tense, as if he was waiting for something.

'So what do you want?' Darren demanded.

'Just to straighten out a couple of things. Firstly -'

Darren interrupted her, 'I can't give you money to keep quiet.'

Freya listening carefully, subconsciously registered how quickly he was speaking, and knew he was agitated.

'I don't want anything, Darren.'

'You know, I only did it to give you a taste of your own medicine.'

'Well you certainly did that!' A fleeting smile brushed across Melissa's face replaced by a regretful sigh.

Freya moved a little closer and could see Darren shifting uncomfortably in the chair.

'I'm sorry about your hand, that was bad.'

'Yes, it's pretty painful.'

Freya went in sat opposite Darren, next to her mother. She stared at him for a few seconds, then dropped her gaze.

Melissa tentatively moved her arm and felt the swollen gland in her armpit. 'It'll probably

need antibiotics from the surgery,' she continued, 'I'll ring them shortly.'

Between them lay common ground that should be crossed, but sincerity remained unspoken for fear that the words would sound shallow and self-serving.

Melissa stood up and walked to the window. She stared out at the remains of the frost, and watched the ice on the leaves melting, dripping in the weak sunshine. She turned to face Freya and silently posed the question with widened eyes and lifted brows. Freya answered with a shrug and a gentle smile. Melissa turned to Darren.

'Darren, until you find another place to live ...' she paused and her face lit up with an open unaffected smile, '... you should stay here.'

Freya looked at Darren and saw faint hope wrapped in disbelief.

'Why on earth would you offer that?' Darren shook his head, baffled by the suggestion.

Melissa waited a beat before answering. She took a deep breath, 'Because if the village knows you are staying here, they'll know I trust you. And they'll figure out you're definitely innocent.' Melissa's face became serious, concerned, 'And it will speed up the process of you finding alternative accommodation. Besides, where else would you go?'

For a moment, no-one spoke as Darren tried to settle his mind sufficiently to seriously consider what the offer implied.

'And where is your daughter currently living?' Melissa continued.

'Sasha? She's sofa surfing.'

Melissa looked puzzled.

'Staying at different friend's houses. Sleeping on their sofa.' Darren explained.

'She must stay here too, of course. It's a big house.' Melissa lifted both hands, palms up and looked side to side, indicating the offer was only reasonable. 'Please say yes.'

Freya could see Melissa's unshed tears, and longing. She turned to Darren cautiously. She saw the uncertainty in his face, but there was something else there she wasn't expecting.

Darren looked at Freya. She was evidently still a little wary of him.

'I'm sorry Freya, I really am. I know I scared you badly, but -'

'- You were scared too,' she interrupted.

'Yes, I was. Scared and angry. But it wasn't you that made me homeless.'

'That was me. Jeffrey's story.' Melissa's voice was low, and shaky, 'Our story.' She corrected herself.

'Yes, that was you, and I wanted to get my own back, but it doesn't help, does it?'

'No. It's just more misunderstanding and escalation. So this is better. Stay here.' Melissa was pleading.

'You don't even know me,' Darren retorted.

'You know,' Melissa responded, 'someone once told me I should be listening to those who really care about me. Well now,' she sat down and crossed her arms, 'I am.'

They were interrupted by a knock at the front door. Melissa went to see who it was.

After a few moments Darren turned to Freya. 'I am truly sorry,' he said.

She brought her fingers to her forehead partially hiding her face, and replied, 'Are you?'

It was such a simple artless question, posed so sincerely, by someone who seemed to see through him. He stopped. 'Am I?' he asked himself. His mind went back to his own daughter, a similar age to Freya, and he knew that she could be her. And he was. Truly sorry.

'Yes. I am.'

They ran out of things to say. But the silence was easier. Darren was a little more settled,

content for the moment to be warm and comfortable, and Freya watched him. He was easy to read.

Melissa had been gone a long time. When she came back into the room she was with Celia. She was smiling but her eyes were worried. 'The police are here. They want me to go back with them for another interview.' she said. 'So I've asked Celia to sit with you both until I get back.'

Chapter 47

Dorset Police HQ.

'So Mrs Turnham.' Faheem paused, elbows on the table, fingers interlocked, a grim smile on his face, the words were deliberate, and slow, 'Just tell us again precisely how Kai was killed.'

The cold slug of dread that Melissa had been carrying ever since that day, grew heavy in her gut. She looked from Faheem to Peter then back to Faheem. She took a deep breath, and looked at the voice recorder's glowing green light.

'Just as I said before.' Her head bowed, her voice, low and tremulous, lacked all credibility.

'Oh.' Somehow Faheem injected disbelief and surprise into the one syllable. He waited.

Melissa looked up. The silence stretched for five, eight, twelve seconds before she broke. 'It was Nick. He -'

'He didn't use this ...' Faheem cut in, sliding a photograph of the casserole across the table.

Melissa shrank back into the chair, mute, visibly shivering.

'... but you did.' finished Faheem.

Melissa put her head in her hands, and took several jerky deep breaths, finally gasping, 'I ... I had to!'

'Why?'

'Kai was attacking ... Kai was attacking Nick. They were fighting and I thought Nick was going to get badly hurt.'

'Mrs Turnham, are you expecting me to believe that your son, who is ...' Faheem consulted his notes, ' ... four inches taller and almost two stone heavier, was at risk, fighting with Kai!?'

Peter was sat quietly in his chair, arms folded, fixing Melissa with an unrelenting stare.

Melissa looked at Faheem sadly and shook her head slowly, 'You don't understand anything.'

'What don't I understand?'

'Kai was ... could be evil. He intended to damage Nick. Nick was only trying to stop him.'

'Strange then that Kai ended up stabbed, isn't it?' Faheem said levelly.

'I've already told you, that was a mistake.'

Faheem let out a frustrated sigh. Peter, unfolded his arms, stood and began to walk slowly backwards and forwards as he spoke.

'So let me get this clear in my mind, Mrs Turnham. You saw Kai attacking Nicholas, you grabbed this casserole,' Peter tapped the photograph several times with a bony forefinger, 'you then swung this cast iron casserole striking Kai on the side of the head, and Nick then punched him, inadvertently forgetting he was holding a pair of scissors?' Peter's voice rose in disbelief.

'No, Mrs Turnham, that isn't what happened,' he continued. He stood and walked to Melissa's side of the table. Looking down at her, he said quietly, 'That isn't what happened at all.' He leaned down, 'Is it?'

Melissa sat still as stone, seemingly trying to avoid speaking at all. The only tiny movement was one hand frantically picking a bleeding fingernail.

Peter walked quietly back to his seat, looked across at Faheem and tilted his head imperceptibly towards the terrified woman.

Faheem's voice was warm. 'Melissa,' he breathed, 'we will absolutely find out what happened. And we would much rather it came from you. It will work in your favour if you help us at this stage.'

She looked up at Faheem's warm brown eyes and his friendly face. She watched him for a few seconds, then transferred her gaze to Peter. Her shoulders relaxed a little and she appeared to be almost calm.

'I killed him,' she said, in a flat monotone.

'How-'

'Wait,' she said. She sat collecting her thoughts then began.

'Kai was all wrong. Not his own fault I suppose. Because of course Jeffrey had been violent with him for years. He beat him up several times since we got married. He only understood rejection and violence, even as a child, I imagine.'

'Melis-' Faheem began, but Peter cut him off with a wave. There was a few moments of quiet as they waited for Melissa to resume.

'I don't know why he attacked Nick. He used to deliberately wind Nick up. And Nick would slap him down. They fought occasionally ... physically I mean. I was afraid for Nick, and I ...' At this point, Melissa's eyes filled with tears, and she swallowed several times. Once she had regained her composure, she carried on.

'I began to hate him. He and his father were ruining my life, and now they were beginning to ruin Nick's life too. I just lost my temper. I hit him with the casserole, he went down. I just lost it completely. Nick screamed at me to stop, but I grabbed the scissors ... I was so angry ... and I stabbed him. That's it.'

Faheem watched the voice recorder green light glowing.

He leaned forward, 'Just one thing, Melissa. The knife on the kitchen floor ... it had only your fingerprints on it. You must have dropped it. Why did you not use the knife rather than a pair of kitchen scissors?'

Melissa looked up sharply at Faheem. 'I was holding the knife, but just before I used it, I

thought I could make it look like an accident. So I grabbed the scissors instead. After all, no-one would intentionally use scissors to kill someone with, would they?'

Faheem frowned and looked across at DCI Peter Barclay. Peter raised his eyebrows, 'Fine, let's leave it there for now. I'll finish up here.'

Faheem turned to leave, smiling at Sam and Chris knowing they were watching behind the one-way glass.

Chapter 48

Somewhere. Now.

I know Eri is trying to help me, but I'm feeling less and less confident of my ability to understand anything. Maybe that's part of the therapy! Or his quest for justice - whatever that means.

He evidently wants me to examine the evidence - my personal experience - and then deduce the truth from it. But at the same time, he's telling me I'm not equipped to do it! My frame of reference is all wrong apparently. My priorities are upside down. The way I measure things is inadequate. My thoughts are manipulated by my own subconscious prejudices. And I've got a malevolent clone inside me. So my nice tidy post enlightenment thinking has run out of road.

I frown at Eri and complain, 'Look, nothing I see here is even real ... it's all constructed for my benefit. So much for evidence! My mind just can't get a grip on anything now. Earlier I was doubting what's true, what's real. In my mind. Now I'm doubting ...' I struggle to explain what I mean. I close my eyes. 'Now I'm not just doubting ... in my mind. I'm doubting in my gut. It's visceral. I can't find anything to hold on to.' I'm annoyed that I sound so lame!

He looks pleased. 'Good, now we're getting somewhere,' he declares.

Before I get my sarcastic reply out, he says, 'And here's why I say that. Just earlier you admitted to yourself that you're upside down, inadequate, manipulated and prone to bad influence. You're aware! Do you know what that means?'

I shake my head, waiting. He's gonna tell me anyway.

'It means you're already a lot less screwed up. Less tilted, inadequate, manipulated and prone than you were.'

'Am I?'

'Yes, you're nearly there actually.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because your thinking is so disrupted now that you're in that hyper-plastic state of the brain we talked about earlier. Ready for some deep rapid learning.'

And instantly two things shift position in my mind. It's like jigsaw pieces that were previously jammed in have been squeezed out, and now I think I can see they must fit somewhere else. Two pieces. One urgent and one important. And I didn't actually decide to say anything. The urgent one just came out of my mouth.

'She said, "I've killed him." Then she said, "stop the bleeding!" But I couldn't.' I look at Eri, horrified.

'Melissa?'

'Yes, she killed him.'

Chapter 49

Kingsheath, Purbeck. Earlier.

'Who's looking after Freya then?' Danielle asked as they pulled into the gates of Jeffrey's house.

'Apparently, a woman from her church is house sitting. Celia Ferguson,' Sam replied.

It was Celia that answered the door, and showed them into the kitchen. Sam expected to see Freya at home, but it was Darren she spotted seated in the lounge.

'Why is he here,' she asked quietly.

Celia telegraphed her incomprehension with briefly widened eyes and a shrug, and replied in a quiet voice, 'At Melissa's invitation! I honestly haven't had time to get to the bottom of it.'

'And Freya?'

'Up in her bedroom.'

'Well, as you know,' Sam continued, 'we'll use the kitchen here for the reconstruction, so perhaps you could fetch Freya for us?'

The kitchen was no longer a crime scene nor was it being pulled apart by investigators. It looked very different from their last visit.

It exuded timeless quality. No bright shiny super high gloss surfaces here - the cabinetry was evidently custom built using English light oak, with traditional detailing and solid brass handles. A deep red Aga provided the main cooking area at the far end opposite the back door. The other appliances were integrated to avoid their convenient efficient modernity spoiling the ambiance. Brass dome pendant lights set the tone while hidden undercabinet lighting did the heavy lifting. The worktop was black Italian granite, the

floor was wide oak boards polished to a mirror finish. Equipping the kitchen with a teppanyaki grill indicated that Jeffrey was possibly a culinary enthusiast, but more likely simply status signalling.

The only thing preventing the kitchen being a featured article in an upmarket aspirational homes and gardens magazine was the array of splashed bloodstains across two of the light oak cabinet doors.

While they were waiting, Sam laid a pair of orange handled scissors alongside the knife block on the worktop opposite the kitchen sink. She added an eight layer corrugated cardboard oval with handles, which was the size of the casserole. Faheem placed some plates and cutlery into the washing up bowl and after grappling for a while with the pull out hose spray attachment, filled it with warm water.

Freya stepped quietly into the kitchen. She looked like a renaissance portrait - serious, white faced, hair waterfaling off her shoulders. Celia led her over to the table in the centre of the room where the others were sat. The only one spare chair.

'Sit here by me Freya, and we'll have a chat about what we're going to do,' Danielle patted the seat.

Freya stood awkwardly for a moment, then sat down. Celia stood at her side looking uncertain.

'As you know, Mrs Ferguson, you will need to stay throughout the reconstruction, as an independent adult ensuring Freya's rights under law.' Sam said. 'I'm sure Freya will be fine. She knows Danielle well now.'

Sam turned, 'don't you Freya... But,' she returned her gaze to Celia, 'I will have to ask that Mr Fletcher leaves the premises in order to ensure he is out of earshot for the next hour or so.'

'Okay, I'll pass that on,' she replied, leaning over and kissing the top of Freya's head, 'Be back soon, darling, don't worry.'

Given the raw sensitivity of grief, the team introduced the plan for the reconstruction to Freya very gently. Once she had understood how it would be done, and why it was helpful, Sam passed across to Danielle the list of names and parts.

'So Sam here will play the part of Kai,' Danielle explained. Freya looked across at Sam. 'I can ... read ...' she said, her voice broke.

Danielle nodded and passed her the paper. She slowly scanned down the list.

Sam plays Kai

Danielle plays Melissa

Faheem plays Nick

Freya plays Freya

She looked at Faheem, fear in her eyes, tears on her cheeks. He held her gaze and smiled gently.

'Alright.' She was as ready as she was ever going to be.

They waited a few moments for Celia to return. Then 'So, Freya,' Danielle took the lead, 'where was Nick when Kai entered the kitchen?'

'Washing up.' Faheem took his place.

'And where were you?'

Freya stood up. She walked across and stood by the Aga. 'Here,' she said.

'And your mother wasn't in the room yet?'

'That's right.' Danielle moved to the door into the hall and said, 'So let's say I'm not in the room yet.' She paused for a moment, tapped the door and said 'So first, Kai comes in this

door?'

'Yes.'

'And what did he do?'

'He walked across and started to argue with Nick.' Sam walked across towards Faheem.

'What did Nick do?'

'Ignored him.'

'He carried on washing up?'

'Yes.'

'What were they arguing about?'

Freya hesitated for a beat, then said, 'Me.'

'What about you?'

'About the video games. Nick didn't like them.'

'Then what happened?'

Freya closed her eyes trying to construct the scene in her mind, 'Kai got angry and punched Nick in the back.'

'Whereabouts? Come across and show us on Faheem's back.'

She walked across and laid her hand midway down Faheem's spine.

'Then what?'

'Kai punched him over and over. He just stood there.' Sam feigned the punches.

'When did your mother come in?'

'Nick was shouting by this time. Mum came in after he'd shouted about five times.'

'What did he shout?'

' "Stop, Kai" - mostly.'

'And where were you all this time?'

'I was still here at the end of the kitchen. I was saying "Stop" as well, but he wouldn't.'

'Alright, carry on. What next?'

'Then Kai punched Nick lower down,' Freya walked across and indicated Faheem's right kidney. 'He really hurt Nick that time. Nick doubled over, but Kai didn't stop. He saw how ... how he could really hurt Nick, and just ...' Freya inhaled sharply, '... and just kept kept punching him in the same place. Mum was screaming at him. She was ... was frightened ... really frightened' Freya was crying now as she was talking, sobbing, gasping.

'Screaming to ... to stop but he wouldn't. So she hit him.'

'How did she hit him, Freya?'

'With the casserole.'

'So,' Danielle said slowly, 'I want you to watch me now, Freya, and make sure I do exactly what your mother did.' She picked up the cardboard casserole by one handle and moved towards Sam.

'No. Not like that. She picked it up with both hands.'

'Well done Freya, both hands then.' The team already knew the casserole was far too heavy to be grabbed and swung in one movement, with one hand.

Danielle picked the cardboard shape up with a hand on each end, then gripped it by one end in her right hand, swung it and hit Sam on the right side of the head.

'Is that right?'

'Yes. Then she dropped the casserole ... ,' Danielle dropped the cardboard shape.

'Then she picked the knife out of the knife block ... ,'

'Which hand did she use?'

'I don't know. Right hand I think.'

Danielle nodded, half turned, reached round and slid a knife out of the block on the worktop behind her. She knew Melissa was right handed.

'Tell me, Freya, had Kai fallen down or was he still standing?'

Freya looked uncertain. She thought for a moment, narrowed her eyes and said 'He was still standing up ... Yes, definitely.'

'Okay, then what did your mother do?'

'She dropped the knife, and grabbed the scissors.'

'Where were they? Here by the knife block?'

'Yes.'

'Where are they normally kept?'

'In the drawer by the sink, but usually they don't get put away,' Freya said quickly. 'They are all over the house half the time.'

'So what did she do then?'

'She moved across and stabbed Kai in the chest.' Freya stopped for a moment, took a deep breath and shook her head.

'How did she do that? Come and show me,' Danielle said.

Freya walked across and looked at the scissors. She hesitated and looked at Danielle pleadingly. Her hand shook as she reached for the scissors.

'Actually, let's just pretend you've got the scissors in your hand,' Danielle said.

Freya mimed holding the scissors in her right hand, crossed the kitchen and placing a hand on Sam's right shoulder, pulled her away from Faheem. Sam twisted and staggered back in a clumsy attempted slow motion, and Freya thumped her softly in the chest. Sam froze in position.

'Did Kai fall then?' asked Danielle quietly.

'Yes,' Freya nodded miserably. 'Can I sit down now?'

They resumed their places at the table.

'Are you quite sure that is how it happened, Freya?' Sam took over the questioning.

'I think so.'

'So Kai definitely didn't fall until he was stabbed with the scissors?'

'No.'

'And your mother pulled him around by the shoulder with her left hand, before stabbing him with the scissors in her right hand?'

'Yes.'

Sam exchanged glances with Faheem. He turned his mouth down, with eyebrows raised questioningly. Sam made a small smile while a frown creased her forehead.

Freya looked at them both, eyes moving from one to the other, 'Why do you think I'm lying?'

'We don't,' Sam said quickly, 'but we want to make sure we get it right.'

'I'm not lying,' Freya repeated.

'It's fine, Freya,' Sam smoothed her down. 'You've done really well.'

---oOo---

'So you're staying here?!' Celia's voice rose to a squeak.

She placed two cups of coffee onto the conservatory table. Darren worried that Freya might overhear. He frowned, and patted the air in a keep-your-voice-down gesture.

'Shhh. She's only upstairs. Yes, I'm staying here. And she's invited Sasha too.' His voice was flat calm. His own initial astonishment at Melissa's proposal had settled into a quiet gratitude.

'Why?'

'I'm currently homeless, Sasha's sofa surfing and she's got this big empty house,' he protested.

'But it looks pretty weird, what with her husband in prison and everything.'

'Look, I declined,' Darren responded. 'Pretty forcefully, actually! But she wasn't having it. And it's tough to walk out of warm house when the forecast is in single figures.'

'Well, I'm planning to stay overnight with Freya, so I suppose it's okay for now,' Celia gaze drifted out to the garden, unseeing and unhappy.

Darren didn't reply. A resigned smile momentarily touched his face as he leaned back in his chair.

Celia looked thoughtfully at Darren, 'She's a good woman, you know. Don't take advantage.'

Darren let out a frustrated sigh, 'Listen! You and the whole village knows that she and her husband ...' Darren pressed his lips together, looked away and shook his head.

'What?'

'She did something to me by mistake. I did something to get back at her, and it turned out really dreadful. We've forgiven each other.'

'I know, but -'

'You don't know!' Darren cut in, 'It's finished. All dealt with now.'

'Really?' Celia looked sideways, disbelievingly at Darren.

'Now, can we just drink our coffee?' Darren's tone was respectful and emollient, 'You kindly made it, so ... I want to enjoy it.'

Chapter 50

Somewhere. Now.

That second jigsaw piece is so clear now. I can see where it fits, and I like the finished picture. But previously when I've discussed anything with Eri before, somehow he's tied me in knots.

I mull over my previous discussion with him. As I recall, he persuaded me that it isn't right to inflict pain on someone to deter his possible future bad behaviour. What was the next point? Ah, yes! It isn't right to inflict pain on someone to deter someone else's bad behaviour. And finally, it isn't necessary to inflict pain to keep the public safe. That's the first three. So number four was retribution.

Yes! Eye for eye.

And what has dropped into place in my mind is that God did exactly that to Jesus when he was crucified. Inflicted pain on him as a substitute for humanity, because humanity had inflicted pain on God. There it is. The perfect justification for retribution.

I'm ready.

Eri has been sat quietly looking at me. I can sense that he knows what I am about to say, so I just wait for him to say it for me.

And he does! 'You want to talk about the cross?'

I used to find it extremely annoying that he's always a step ahead. Now it doesn't bother me so much. He is, after all, a friend now.

I say, 'Yes!'

And I know I may as well jump straight in, so I say 'My mother believes that Jesus took our punishment on the cross. That what Jesus went through was really the punishment for

our sins.'

'Well, I'm not going to argue with you,' Eri replies.

'You're not?'

'No, but I will ask you some questions just so you can make sure you're thinking straight.'

I subconsciously note that the word "you" occurred three times in that comment.

'Ready?' he asks quietly.

It's perfectly obvious that I'm nowhere near ready. 'Yes.' I reply.

Eri takes a couple of breaths, and puffs them out, like he's going to start running.

'When the soldiers put a purple robe on him, and mocked him for ostensibly calling himself the King of the Jews, was that God's doing? Was God mocking him?' Eri pauses.

I don't have time to absorb the question before Eri asks another.

'When they then stripped him naked and dragged him through the streets for public humiliation, was that God's doing? Is dehumanising a man God's way of punishing?'

And again, hardly time to take a breath before the next unanswerable question.

'When they beat his back with leather and sharpened bone, and stripped the skin from his back, was this the way God's justice worked?'

Eri is like a machine gun now. I just can't stop him.

'And did God dream up crucifixion so that he could punish him? Was it his idea?'

Eri's voice is breaking. He takes a deep shuddering breath, and pushes on.

'And did God push the jagged metal through his wrists and ankles?'

Eri is weeping now. He can hardly get the words out.

'And did ... did ... did God incite the crowd to laugh ... laugh at his agony?'

'Is this what God's justice looks like?' Eri cries, 'Is it?'

I don't know.

It can't be, can it? Not all that petty, childish, selfish, arrogant, foul cruelty. When I look at it like that, it can't be.

Eri is sat on the floor, his head in his hands. He is shaking, sniffing, wiping his eyes frantically, trying to get on an even keel. I walk across and sit down beside him. I reach up and put my arm across his broad shoulders. He turns his face to me with a watery smile.

'Why are you so upset?' I ask. 'Is it the retelling?'

Mutely, Eri shakes his head. 'No,' he murmurs.

'Then why?'

'Because that ... because your mother should ever have been ... was ever taught that ..'

He falls silent. It dawns on me that Eri has skin in the game. How, I don't know.

---oOo---

We sit for a while. Together. I keep my arm in place across his shoulders, and rest my head against his arm. Is it selfish of me that it feels really wonderful to be able to comfort Eri?

Then another thought occurs.

'Wait,' I say, 'the retribution for sin wasn't the physical agony then. It was that the Father turned his face away ... you know ... "why have you forsaken me".'

He turns his head. We are face to face now, up close. His face is sad, but his deep brown eyes are always warm, like drinking chocolate. He whispers, 'And yet a few moments later, Jesus says to his Father, "Into your hands, I commit my spirit".'

Eri carries on talking, almost too quietly for me to hear. I don't really know what he's saying, but it sounds like he's quoting stuff from the Old Testament. I hear the final

sentence though because Eri looks directly at me, and slows his speech right down, so there's no missing it.

'He has not hidden his face from me, but has heard when I cried to Him.' Eri pauses, then says, 'Psalm 22.'

I don't really know Psalm 22. I do know Psalm 23 of course. And I recall I had a girlfriend once who told me Psalm 22, 23 and 24 were the Sinner's Cross, the Shepherd's Crook, and the Saviour's Crown.

And as I'm remembering, I realise I like that. A simple alliteration that encompasses everything.

---oOo---

Eri breaks into my musing, 'I have some more questions for you, Nick.'

'Is there any justice system in any nation on earth that would allow a man to take the punishment of another? Would that be understood as true justice? Or appropriate retribution?'

This time, Eri waits for me to actually answer. Well I know it's not true in the UK. And no, I don't know of any country where that would be considered legal or moral. But I say, 'No, but someone can pay off someone else's debt in a court of law. That's allowed.'

Eri looks up. There's a tiny smile. The sparkle is coming back in his eyes - like he knows he's got me. 'That's not retribution. That's restoration! And we'll have restoration ...' he brightens, shaking his head approvingly, '... yeah! Restoration from anywhere we can get it.'

Eri rubs his hands. He's back on an even keel now.

'Right here's your last and final question.'

I can't help but grin. Evidently I'm a very long way from having seen all of Eri's persona,

certainly not this quiz show host mode.

Too late I recall that Eri hears my thoughts. So he continues, 'the final question ... for the big money prize!'

He sobers. 'Okay, serious question.' He holds my gaze, and taps his finger on the table in time with the words. 'Under what circumstances, in your experience, will one man commonly take the punishment for another.'

I'm thinking.

Eri interrupts my thoughts, 'And the answer by the way, is not "Justice"!'

A different thought drifts in and lodges like a dandelion seed in my brain at the exact same instant that that tiny smile returns to Eri's face.

The seed grows. And as it grows, the truth flowers.

Quietly prompting he repeats the question, 'Under what circumstances will one man take the punishment for another?'

'A father ... who loves his son,' I concede defeat. I surrender. 'A mother who loves her daughter.'

Eri has won again.

'No, Nick, you've won. You see, other people's opinions became your opinion. And opinions progressively disguise themselves as truth, until they have you fully deceived.'

And the smile spreads across Eri's face. And the truth spreads into my mind, just as a great cloud of seed clocks spread and drift on the breeze on dandelion day.

And I see retribution for what it is. Vindictive pain for pain. Vengeful wrong for wrong. Vendettas of anguish for anguish. A never ending cycle of eye-for-eye dehumanisation.

And I understand what inevitably happens when a man who turns the other cheek meets a

world addicted to retribution. A world that he loves, just as a lover loves.

And the room fades. And the dark gentle blanket of soft silence descends. The balm envelops me completely. And the last thing I recall is feeling as if I am drifting in truth.

Chapter 51

Dorset Police HQ.

She took the scissors in her right hand, fingers clenched around the handles, and stabbed into the chest a third time. She laid down the scissors, and examined the third hole. It was single again, about three inches deep. She frowned and shook her head.

Carefully she held the scissors in her right hand again, this time with the blades upwards and open about a centimetre. It was immediately clear that the scissors were the wrong way up for stabbing. She reversed her hold. The ergonomically shaped handles were impossible upside down, and meant it was difficult to keep the blades apart. She swung and stabbed again. Checked the hole. Single. One inch deep.

She placed the scissors in the same position as before, but put her middle finger in between the handles. No. No way. The stabbing action with any kind of force would close the blades and the handles could take her finger off.

'See what I mean?' Faheem said. They were stood side by side staring at the shaped bag of ballistic gelatin overlaid with silicone rubber skin. Five holes by Faheem. Three holes by Sam. If Faheem was irritated that Sam was evidently more accurate, he didn't show it.

'How on earth ...' Sam shook her head, 'How did she do it?' She turned to Faheem, and detected a very faint smile on his face.

She drooped her eyelids and shook her head, 'You know, don't you?'

Faheem grinned and flipped the chest bag to the other side. There in the centre was a perfect double hole, four inches deep.

'It was a two handed strike,' he said.

'Thanks, Sam,' Tim took the warrant and speed read the summary page, then made his way to the holding cells.

He flicked open the viewing panel and watched Melissa for a few moments. One never knew quite how prisoners would react. After all, she was facing a possible murder charge, and there was no indication that she had previously been implicated in any kind of violence.

The psychological profile indicated that she might be reasonably self possessed but Melissa was sat huddled in one corner, motionless, trance like with glazed eyes, gently and very slightly rocking in time with her breathing. She was a grey shadow, pallid and fading.

'Mrs Turnham,' Tim said as he entered. Startled, she looked up guiltily, as if she could have committed further crimes even in the cell.

'Mrs Turnham, I've come to inform you that in light of the seriousness of the alleged crime, we have been granted a warrant to hold you for the full 96 hours, before we are required to charge you.'

Melissa made no reply, simply lifted her chin in a slow acknowledgement.

'In light of the extended time, I need to reassure you that we will check on your well-being throughout the next couple of days and nights. If there is anything you need, please do ask and we will do our best to support you.'

'Thank you.' Melissa was barely audible.

'One other thing. I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that Danielle, the Family Liaison Officer supporting your daughter Freya, has suggested that she bring her in to see you for what we call a supervised contact session.'

Melissa didn't reply straightaway. She looked around at the small cell, the bars on the window, the plain bare walls, the four foot bed with it's thin mattress. 'Would it ... be in

here?' She couldn't stop her voice wavering.

'We would prefer to find a bigger room for a contact session,' Tim replied.

'I don't know.'

Tim smiled and narrowed his eyes sympathetically, 'I think Freya needs to see you.'

Melissa let out a sigh, then looked down at her hands. Nothing moved for a few moments.

'Alright.'

'Good,' Tim said, suddenly businesslike. 'We'll set to and arrange that. It will be tomorrow now.'

---oOo---

Tim had not got to his desk before Faheem called across, 'How is she?'

'Pretty fragile, but she's agreed.'

'Good.' Faheem was pleased. 'And look at this.' He pointed to the cell security camera feed.

The computer screen was frozen, zoomed in onto the open notepad. The brittle scrawl confirmed Melissa's vulnerability.

*Memory is a tumour that cannot be
excised.*

*And like chemotherapy, denial can only
sicken.*

The squad car pulled up. Freya seated in the back was taking short sharp breaths. Danielle walked across to the car and opened the rear door, 'Come on, it's okay.' She smiled reassuringly. They walked the ten steps to the large entrance doors of the Police Headquarters.

As they entered the building, Freya's eyes darted in all directions, as if even at this late stage she could make her escape.

'You want to see your mother don't you?' Danielle reminded her.

Freya, pale and wide eyed, nodded her head slightly.

They walked through several corridors and stopped at a security door. Danielle touched the keypad and pushed through. All the doors on this corridor had shuttered viewing panels. They stopped at the third door. Danielle flicked the panel open and stood to one side so that Freya could see.

Melissa was curled up on the bed, eyes staring, hair in disarray. Freya watched her mother's face for a few moments. She could see she was afraid even before she noticed Melissa's trembling fingers picking at the blanket.

Danielle tapped on the door and closed the viewing panel. She unlocked the door and walked in. Freya stood anxiously on the threshold watching her mother. Melissa, startled, cried, 'Oh no, not in here! The visit's not in here! We can't -'

'I'm sorry Mrs Turnham, but there are no other rooms available right now,' Danielle interjected. 'But this will be fine. Freya, take a seat.'

Danielle indicated the one chair, 'I'll bring a couple more in so that we can be comfortable.'

She immediately left the cell, locking the door behind her.

Melissa made to get up, but struggled. Freya flew across the cell and wrapped her arms around her mother.

'I didn't want you to see me in this room, darling,' Melissa murmured stroking her hair.

'What's going to happen to you, Mummy?'

'Shhh! Don't worry.'

'I am worried. Are you going to be sent to prison?' Freya demanded, her voice rising in

dismay.

Danielle opened the door and brought two chairs in. She put one by Melissa, and placed the other in the corner, and sat on it.

'Well, will you?' Freya spoke in an urgent whisper.

'We'll just have to see what the judge says, my love.' Melissa couldn't stop her voice wavering.

Freya sat up and looked at her mother, a searching gaze face to face. 'You're frightened.' she said accusingly.

'I'm sorry, Freya, the judge will be fair.'

Freya shook her head frantically, 'No, no he won't! He will send you to prison.'

Melissa leaned across and took Freya in her arms. 'Darling,' she whispered in her ear, 'God will make a way.'

Freya struggled but Melissa held her tight. After a while, Freya calmed a little and sat back.

'So is Celia taking care of things at home?' Melissa knew that whatever she said, she could never normalise this surreal meeting. She also knew for Freya's sake, she had to try.

Freya nodded dumbly, looking woebegone.

'And has Sasha arrived yet?' Melissa persisted.

Freya shook her head painfully slowly, eyes watching the floor. Then continued the most trying moments the mother and daughter had ever shared, burying past trauma, present anguish and future fear in the forced triviality of small talk.

Finally, Melissa pushed a scrap of paper into Freya's hand. She nodded to Danielle.

'Have you had enough time, Mrs Turnham? Freya?'

They both looked mute, unhappy waiting for the other to speak. After a few seconds,

Melissa kissed Freya on the cheek, then said, 'Yes, we're done here. Look after her won't you?'

'Of course.' Danielle replied slowly and carefully.

They left, locking the cell door behind them.

Melissa leaned back in the chair, drained. She let out a long trembling breath. She was far too old.

---oOo---

'Danielle?' Freya said, as they got back into the squad car.

'Yes, Freya?'

'There's some things that we didn't get right.' She was speaking so softly, Danielle only just caught her words.

'What do you mean?'

Freya was frowning and speaking almost to herself, 'I don't know,' she murmured. 'It's nothing.'

'Okay,' Danielle said easily. 'You can always call me if you need to. You have my number already.' She paused, 'One thing though, can I see the piece of paper your mother gave you?'

Freya took it from her pocket and held it out for Danielle to read -

*He will make a way,
like a roadway in a wilderness*

'That's fine,' she said.

---oOo---

The sun dipped just below the tree line. The muted purple grey dusk crept across the garden, darkening the window. Freya sat on her bed, the paper crumpling in her hand. She

tried to pray, but had no idea what she should be saying. Unhappiness and confusion competed for attention. She had hoped that praying would bring her some peace of mind, but all she had was a cacophony of conflicting thoughts. Bone weary from the stress of the day, she lay back on her bed and tried to shut out the whirlwind in her head demanding to be heard.

---oOo---

Danielle had only just got into the office. It was just after 8.15am. Her desk phone rang. She looked across at her colleagues, already at work, and raised her eyes to the ceiling tiles. She picked up the phone.

Freya's voice. She sounded tense. Urgent. 'Danielle? Could we run the reconstruction again?'

'Sorry ... the reconstruction? You want to do it again?' Danielle switched on speakerphone.

'Yes.' Freya said.

'Why?'

'Just some things that we ... that we got wrong last time,' Freya voice sounded uncertain, evasive.

'It will have to be today, Freya!'

'Yes?'

Danielle looked across the office to Faheem and Sam. They both nodded and Sam tapped her wristwatch.

'But we can't arrange another reconstruction back at your house, Freya.'

'Why not?' demanded Freya, her voice tight and tense.

'There is not enough time -'

'Why not?' Freya cut in.

'- because within seven hours,' Danielle consulted her watch, 'no, six hours, we have to either charge your mother or release her.'

Sam tapped her desk with her forefinger, and gave Danielle a thumbs-up.

'We'll do it here, Freya. I'll send a car.'

Chapter 52

Dorset Police HQ.

The centre of the conference room was cleared of furniture and the floor was taped and labelled. Sink. Cooker. Island unit. Back door.

'Too many loose ends!' declared Faheem surveying the preparations for the reconstruction, 'But, who knows, we might get lucky!'

'We certainly need a break,' Sam replied, 'otherwise we'll -'

She broke off as Danielle led Celia and Freya in. The girl looked white faced but composed.

Sam allowed a sympathetic smile to cross her face, then said, 'Thanks for coming back in Freya, Celia. Hopefully this will help us to get a more accurate picture of what happened.'

Freya's face flashed a small bleak smile to no one, and then she looked across at Sam uncertainly.

Sam held her gaze, 'Just a quick reminder. The roles will be the same as before, I'll be Kai, Faheem is Nick and Danielle will be your mother.'

'Celia, perhaps best if you take a seat across there?' Sam indicated the tables and chairs pushed together along the side of the room.

'So then,' Sam continued, addressing the group, 'Melissa by the internal door, Nick by the sink, Kai -'

'Actually,' Freya cut in, her voice strained and thin, 'Nick was ... um ... Nick was not there.'

Time stopped for a beat. Sam tipped her head on one side questioningly, 'Okay, where was Nick to start with?'

She exchanged glances with Faheem, whose face was unreadable.

'Nick was outside ...' Freya's voice faltered for a moment, '... outside the kitchen to start with.'

'Alright,' Sam replied evenly, 'and Kai?'

Freya nodded as Sam walked across closer to the sink.

'And your mother is in the right place,' Sam said, gesturing to where Danielle was stood.

'Yes.' Freya murmured. Then she held her breath, and clenched her teeth, as if she could stop herself from saying anything further. They waited for her to resume. Freya's jaw muscles worked, and she was blinking furiously. The silence got louder until it was intolerable. Then she frowned, and settled. 'Yes,' she repeated slowly, 'and I'm here.'

Freya slowly walked across the kitchen layout, and positioned herself by the sink, and mimed washing up. She was breathing too fast, audibly now.

Sam began to speak, 'So what -'.

'He was going to ... to force me,' Freya cut in, her voice sharp and anguished.

Celia's gasp could be heard across the conference room.

'Going to force you to -'

'Rape me.' Freya spun around to face Sam. 'He was going to ...' Freya dropped her head and hid her face in her hands, '... rape me. Kai.' Freya's voice fragmented into retching sobs.

Sam caught Faheem's eye. He was making the cut-throat hand swipe. She nodded.

'Freya, we are just going to sit down and talk about this, rather than go through the reconstruction right now,' she said, beckoning Danielle with her eyes.

Freya slowly raised her head, 'I'm so sorry,' she whispered.

Danielle took her arm and led her off to one of the side tables.

'It's okay, Freya. We're going to break for a few minutes,' she said reassuringly.

---oOo---

It was around twenty minutes before they had access to an interview room. Sam was already seated when Danielle brought Celia and Freya in. Sam started the recorder, and in a gentle voice, cautioned Freya, reminding her of her right to a solicitor. As before, she declined.

Celia frowned, 'You should have a solicitor Freya.'

'But I'm only going to say what happened.'

'I know, but a solicitor can advise you if the questions get too difficult.'

'I don't need one.'

'I'm sorry, Freya,' Celia said firmly, 'I am going to insist. ... Can I insist?' she asked turning to Sam.

Sam shook her head, 'Not if Freya is deemed to be capable of making -'

Freya cut in, '- it's alright. If Celia says we have to have one, then we do ... have to have one.'

Celia smiled at Freya, 'Thank you, well done.'

They waited while the duty solicitor was called, and then Sam continued. 'Just to say that everything said here today is confidential. It isn't spoken about casually, nor circulated other than for the purposes of the investigation.' Sam looked around at the other three.

They waited a few more minutes and the solicitor joined them.

'So, Freya, you want to tell us what happened.' Sam suggested, 'You say Kai was going to rape you. What makes you say that?'

'Well, Kai had been talking about sex for the last few weeks before then,' Freya began. 'And

I knew he wanted it a couple of months before that. I could tell, just by the way he looked at me.'

'What do you mean?' Sam asked.

Freya looked at Sam for a moment, then said, 'I know you know what I mean.' She looked at Celia and Danielle. 'You all know what I mean.'

A bleak smile momentarily shadowed Sam's face, 'So what happened that day which was different?'

'I was alone in the kitchen washing up. Kai came in and started touching me. I turned around and he grabbed me. He pushed me up against the sink and his hands were everywhere. He said, "I'll have you now." But Mum had come in and heard him say that. She could see what was happening. I panicked. I grabbed the scissors that were behind me by the sink, and I stabbed him.'

Freya's eyes were wide with fear. She shook her head violently saying, 'I never meant him to die. I didn't think. I just grabbed them and hit him. I never wanted him to die.' She leaned down onto the table and cried again. 'He shouldn't have died. He should have left me alone.'

Sam waited a couple of minutes. Freya became a little calmer, straightened up and looked Sam in the face again.

'Just to be clear, Freya, could you show us how you grabbed the scissors?' Sam slid a pair of primary school round-ended plastic scissors across the table.

Freya stood up, reached behind her with her left hand, brought the scissors round to the front of her body, grasped them in both hands, one handle in each, raised them above her head, and swung them down.

'Thank you, Freya.' Sam murmured, 'So what happened then?'

'Mum had hit him with a pan, and he fell down. There was so much blood. I couldn't believe it.'

Freya paused for a moment to collect herself. Now that she had started, she was finding it difficult to stop.

'Mum tried to pull the scissors out. I was just watching. She couldn't get them out. She grabbed a knife out of the block, and tried to use it as a lever, but then put it down on the floor. I said let me try, and I went to pick up the knife, but she shouted at me to get back. Nick came in, and Mum told him to get the scissors out, and stop the bleeding with a towel.'

Freya was breathing really fast now. Danielle could see she was starting to hyperventilate with stress, so she indicated "calm down" with two hands spread face down. Sam nodded.

'Take your time Freya. Just tell it at your own speed. There's no hurry.' Sam's voice was even, slow and smooth.

'Freya, could I just ask, did your mother say anything to Nick about the knife ... the one on the kitchen floor?'

'She shouted at him to not touch it. To leave it alone.'

Sam nodded.

Freya took a couple of unnecessary deep breaths and continued. 'Mum grabbed me and took me upstairs. That's all I know.'

'But did your mother speak to you about it all later?'

'Not much, we just had one conversation, and after that, she refused to talk about it.'

'Only one conversation?! Really?' Sam couldn't hide her surprise.

'Well, Jeffrey spoke to me and Mum afterwards, telling us what to say to the police, that a

burglar had done it. He said that we would all go to prison unless we could make them believe it was someone else. We knew he was right.'

'So did you talk to your mother about what Jeffrey had said?'

'No, I tried to ask her about it, but she just said Jeffrey was right. But I could see she didn't believe that.'

'So what conversation did you have with your mother then? When did that happen?'

'It was after we thought you didn't believe about the burglar any more. Mummy said that she would take the blame. She said she probably killed Kai anyway with the pan before he bled too much.'

'And what did you think?'

'I knew she was lying.'

'Lying about what?' Sam asked.

'About her killing Kai. I knew the scissors killed him. So I got angry with her and started shouting. I said she was a liar. She started to cry, and I said sorry.'

Sam waited. She knew there was more to come when Freya was ready to continue. So she simply said 'Yes,' and sat quietly.

Freya continued in a subdued voice, 'So I asked her why she wasn't telling the truth. She said she was going to take the blame anyway. She was going to say that -', Freya's voice was wobbling. She forced the words out. 'She was going to say that she killed him with the scissors.'

Freya stopped. She wiped her eyes with her hands, then wiped her hands on her dress.

There was a few moments of silence. They waited, aware that they were hearing the truth at last.

'What did you say then, Freya?'

'I asked her why she would do that.'

'And what did your mother say?'

Freya looked around the group, the agony written clearly in her face, 'She said "Because I love you"'. Freya's eyes filled with tears and she slowly shook her head in hopeless woe.

Chapter 53

Several months later

Jeffrey was brought to trial, charged with involuntary manslaughter. He was found guilty of manslaughter by unlawful or dangerous act, and given a custodial sentence of fourteen years. He was released on parole after eleven years. The marriage to Melissa broke down irretrievably and they divorced fourteen months after his release.

---oOo---

Melissa was brought to trial, charged with assault and perverting the cause of justice. She was found innocent of the former on the grounds of defending another person and the action was considered proportionate. She was found guilty on the latter and given a community order sentence as a result of mitigating factors - coercion, domestic abuse, and the unsophisticated nature of the conduct.

---oOo---

Freya was brought to trial, charged with involuntary manslaughter. Evidence fully supporting her statements regarding Kai's avowed intentions were found on his computer. She was found not guilty by means of the defence of "Automatism - acting without conscious control due to external factors such as extreme stress or trauma" and was released.

Epilogue

The Second Death

I surface slowly. I have that indefinable feeling of having slept late. As I open my eyes, I fully expect to be in my bedroom at home, because my body feels so familiar. I'm not though. I'm laying on the ground. It's soft. Not uncomfortable. I pull myself up to sit cross legged with my hands on my knees. I can't see anyone else. About five yards in front of me, the ground gently slopes down and away out of sight. There's a swirling wispy fog with dense dark blue patches which cuts the visibility to about twenty yards. Curious, I stretch a hand out into one of the patches. Then it strikes me. It's my hand! These are my hands. They're mine ... as I remember them from Kingsheath days. And I've got that oversleeping muzzy head. And that twinge in my lower back that I used to get at home from time to time.

"Adagio for Strings" is playing inside my mind. It's going through the long build up. It's my favourite. I know every phrase. We get to the part where it is about to resolve beautifully in interwoven multicoloured harmonies. Then it fades. I can't hear anything now. But Eri's words come into my head, "You're on a different path, Nick." And it occurs to me then that "Adagio" must be my trumpet blast.

In the far distance a lone point of painfully intense white light glimmers like the early evening star. I glance around and see a pale shadow is being cast behind me. I cannot see any other lights. Incredible! How can that be?

---oOo---

I have a prickling sense that I am being watched. That my reactions are under scrutiny. Then an old memory floods into my mind. My first sight of baby Freya. Happiness rises and then seeps away, replaced by the sharp recollection of her first diagnosis. Fear.

Uncertainty. The serious expression on the doctor's face. It all fades and is immediately replaced with a horrible argument with my dad when he caught me smoking at 13. It declines as my childish jealousy of Freya comes into focus. I'm six years old and pinching her in the cot. My awareness is being washed by memories, one after the other, as a beach is washed by breakers. Incessant. Unbidden. Each engulfing me as the previous memory ebbs. Yet how I responded back then to each experience now stays with me lingering on. And the darkening portrayal of the villain which is emerging has an uncomfortable familiarity.

But there is parallel narrative being told. For each event, my mind is crafting a methodical justification, a coherent rationale, and a credible defence. And in this version, I am cast as the hero. The only character truly anchored in my reality. In this version, vice becomes virtue. There is no spite, greed, sloth, pride or envy in this tale. The hero is clad in justice, balance, confidence and aspiration. And this too is a familiar telling.

Formative moments from the past continue to break like surf into my awareness until I am mentally exhausted. In the end I tell it I've had enough. I beg it to stop. And it does. Turns off like a switch. But the contradictory hero-villain remains, a whispered bickering backstory.

---oOo---

The swirling blue mist thins momentarily and a low floodplain becomes dimly visible. I get to my feet, wanting to walk, to distract from introspection. One step forward, and immediately I can see a path stretching away for about ten yards.

The distant gleam of light draws me. I descend the slight incline. The ground softens the farther I venture. I'm now stood close to the rushes fringing the flat expanse of marshland. The surface is slick with mud. Curious, I edge forward until my toes just begin to sink.

Immediately, I can hear the shared resonance of countless voices sweeping across the plain.

It is an effortless soaring melody of unknown words in some lyrical tongue. Somehow my mind resolves it all to a repeating invitation of love - "Come!"

Coincident with each entreaty, the sky lightens momentarily and I can see two or three others at a great distance out on the plain. Two seem to be moving slowly. The third has sunk to his waist and is waving desperately.

I am conflicted at the edge. The hero says turn back. The villain says press on. The light beckons me. The mud repels me. I am on the point of retreating when I hear, among the voices, one that is familiar. Freya is singing a counter melody, "Come", and I find my body has made the decision. I have taken three strides, the ground has yielded and I am ankle deep in slime.

The distant light is bigger and brighter now. Encouraged I take three more steps forward and find myself sinking fast. The mud is up to my waist. I feel heavy and sluggish. I cannot tell whether the feeling is outside or in, so aware am I of the very real selfishness that has controlled my life to date. It clings as closely as the mire. I'm up to my chest. Now there is nothing firm beneath my feet. They are flailing wildly, seeking solid ground. The shame of the past thrown up by the surf earlier is now back stronger.

My feet locate a small sunken shelf of rock and I haul myself out of the mud a little way. The light in the distance is taking some form. My eyes can see a man standing in the brightness. Just then, I am overcome by anger at my predicament, and resentment for being misjudged. Some woman a few yards away is sinking fast and cries for help. My first reaction is to think myself lucky to not be her. Then I'm shocked to find that I don't really care about her at all. And it occurs to me that all the shame I felt over the past is a worthless waste of energy. I shouldn't care. But I do care. I'm torn about how to feel. And I realise that the radiant man is watching as bit by bit, he reclaims the kindness that previously he entrusted to me. I had done very little with it. I had simply assumed it as part

of me. But it was only ever his.

My revulsion grows at the lack of my own grace. Will there be anything good left of me, once he has taken back what is his? How much did I nurture for growth? How much did I spend on myself? I am astonished at how much of my good character was not actually mine. How different my life would have been if I had only set myself on one side, and used that gift of goodness for others!

The inner debate has become ill tempered. The hero in me is strongly defending my bad behaviour while the villain is saddened at the horror of it. The hero is outraged at what he sees as the theft of his own good character. Meanwhile the villain faces the same confrontation with loss, but catches whispers of prospective gain.

---oOo---

Despite my fear, I take another look at the man of light. The way he stands and watches. He reminds me of a judge, or a king. There are traces of good friends. Something about him is redolent of my father. And of Eri. He reminds me of Eri. And a wounded animal comes to mind.

The light is brighter, the closer I get. But I feel like I'm being torn in pieces. Then I make out the features of his face.

It is Eri.

His arms are stretched out with longing and love. And that's the problem. If I get any closer he is going to take me apart.

The hero inside is screaming at me now to get away. He threatens me with agony if I go forward. He's my doppelganger. The malevolent one that has been hiding in me for so long. He is destined for destruction and he knows it. But what am I saying? He is me, part of me. Part of me is him. My understanding of who I am is drifting out of reach. The

familiar components of what I am - they are dislocating, shifting.

My hero still has the authority to cling to self pity, resentment and pride, and if I let him, he will choose to succumb. But I see clearly now so many parts of me are parasitic.

Invisible threads of subtle selfishness have woven themselves into the structure of my identity. In response to every hurt, I have built defences to protect my ego, repelling even the slightest critique. I have tolerated blind spots and habits established in childhood, and nurtured my mild self-congratulation in adolescence, until I was able to narrate a personal storyline in which I was always, always the hero.

And I am carrying this malevolent hero. He is dragging me down. Barring a miracle the weight of him will drown me in this mud. But the more I want rid of him, the more I want to hold on to him, because so much of him is still part of me. The agony, the regret is unbearable. How can I let him go, when I have spent a lifetime cherishing him.

But then I see Eri's face, shining like the sun in the sky. And he is so, so good. I want him. I want to be like him. I want to know him. Then as I force my stinging aching eyes to look, there grows in me an exquisite painful longing for that which I see. But I know for certain that that kind of beauty could never manifest in the person that I am, tainted by the neverending whispered me-me-me of my hero self.

The stabs of accusing memory are accumulating in my head. The bitter taste of self-loathing is sharp in my throat. It is too much. I'm dog tired. The mud is thick. I'm getting nowhere. The closer I get to Eri, the more I perceive his torrent of selfless love, the more I realise I have yet to relinquish. I stop. The pain lessens a little.

I turn around. I should say that I had had morphine once, for a broken leg, and honestly? ... as the needle went in, the agony washed out of me in an instant. And that is exactly what happens when I take that backward step. The pain is gone, but ahead I see only empty wastelands of hopelessness stretching to the horizon. And it is ever darker.

Then I recall Eri's talk to me about the structure and the insecurity setting me up for a desire for resolution. And I understand why music.

And then the music begins again, the song of love. Voices of those I love. I hear Freya. And Eri. Singing in a beautiful language I don't yet understand. But I'm lifted by the crescendo ... "Come!"

Then I see him clearly. I know who Eri is!

The Love.

That never fails.

That perseveres.

That always hopes.

That will not let me go.

And I know this agony is not retribution. This tearing apart is not vengeance. There is no reprisal here. This is restoration. This is justice.

And I see him clearly. I know who Eri is!

The Lamb.

That was slain.

That carries away all sin.

That was led to the slaughter.

That was without blemish or defect.

That is worthy to receive all praise, all honour, all glory.

Love. Slain. Not in retribution to satisfy some inverted concept of justice. But the lamb voluntarily giving up self, and choosing to carry the evil of others and be wrapped in their

death. Then that choosing, that very submission triggering all the force of the divine paradox. Choice and its strange consequence.

And I understand then that he is offering to carry me through that selfsame choosing.

Choose to be last, be first. Choose to be least, be greatest. Choose death to self, be truly alive. Choose others, be chosen.

While the One who is Slain Love is suffering my choosing with me. Sharing my consequence with me. Love motivating the action, just as it motivated my mother to attempt to rescue Freya.

So I determine then to get to him whatever the cost. I'm still so afraid. Afraid of abandoning so much of myself. But as I begin to move towards him again, those cancerous accretions of self-elevation are slowly exposed.

I am at the river now. The mid point of the floodplain. Moving forward, the pain is intense. Just as the power of the sun is focussed by a lens down to a point spot, this is the place where the love of Eri is strongest. He has been here. He has prayed here. He has died here. Many times. Every time carrying someone through.

I am now at my most abhorrent. Out of shape, lumpy, grotesque. I am twisted and stumbling. My stomach is churning. Ankles and knees weak. Skin ravaged by the journey. I can hardly stand. But I know this is where the hero I have nurtured will be finally severed. There will be no sedative.

I stare for a moment at the water, and then put my foot in.

---oOo---

Interlude

Gaza 2023

The orthopaedic surgeon, Hany Bsaiso, readied himself for the operation. A tank shell had destroyed the girl's right leg below the knee. There was no anaesthetic. There was diseased tissue to be cut away. There was no sedative. There was an amputation to be completed. She needed it. The surgeon had known her all her life. He looked at her and loved her. Because the girl was his family. And there was no choice. No question. Compelled by his own compassion, he had to do it.

---oOo---

Epilogue ... continued

The Second Death

I crawl out of the river. That was indescribably painful. And long! There were screaming tantrums. And clinging, pleading and threatening. The hero is gone though. The malevolent doppelganger is cut away. Excised like a tumour. In my mind is infinite sadness - all the acts of love throughout my earth life sit alongside my responses of rejection and complacency. I see myself in a new light. Smaller, weaker, childish, foolish, fragile, unknowing, uncaring now that the siren song of self deceit is finally silenced. And it is hardly bearable.

I feel so small. To be fair, most of what I was has gone forever. Now I am almost transparent. And so fragile. Ephemeral is the word. As if the slightest gust would carry me away. Before I was real, but now I am true.

Eri is real. He is the word spoken. The man anointed. The I-am-will-save-you. I understand now why he felt like concrete! He is so solid, the root of all rationale, the rock, the foundation.

And the more apparent my frail character, my precarious status, the more desperate is my desire for a connection to that divine Logos.

I see now my self narrative was empty lies. That story is erased.

And I sense the Word is beginning to write a new story in my flesh, my blood, my bones. And new stories are being written on this side of the river every moment, as I see now so many others walking together towards the foot of the mountains.

I look down and there at my feet, thrusting up through the grass are a clutch of snowdrops. Even as I watch, and walk, my way ahead is whitening with petals.

And then I am gifted with a childhood memory - one early morning, stepping from the

front door, just as the ice-blue sun rises across an overnight snowfall, and breathing in the quietness of a world transformed.

